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Sucker Punch

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Sucker Punch

Abstract

This is a review of *Sucker Punch* (2011).

The new Zack Snyder film, *Sucker Punch* (2011), joins a spate of movies interested in the role of ‘mind’ in generating reality. In keeping with the new post-modern idealism (see, for example, *The Matrix* and *Inception*), *Sucker Punch* suggests that the mind is the key to understanding reality, perhaps even generating it completely. Snyder (dir. *300* and *Watchmen*) again works ‘movie magic’ in pulling off another Baudrillardian ‘murder’ of reality. The movie is ‘hyper-real,’ drawing indiscriminately upon any iconic song or archetypal image useful and available, without regard for the limits of ordinary time or space. (Science fiction and fantasy fans will certainly recognize the mimetic recycling of symbols and icons.) Consequently the movie is dreamily stunning, a sensualist’s feast, and it is at times philosophically and psychologically provocative. Practically begging for a psychoanalysis, *Sucker Punch* peers into our unconscious potentials for hope in the face of intractable fate and brute tragedy. Like a trinity of Russian nesting dolls, the movie tells its protagonist’s story on three fascinating levels: the level of tragic reality, the level of hallucinatory denial, and the level of fantasy-based empowerment (i.e. a ‘compensation’ fantasy). Therefore, *Sucker Punch* is a story, within a story, within yet another story.

The first and most tragic level of the narrative introduces an abused young girl who tries to protect a younger sibling from a stepfather’s sexual advances. In a tragic accident, our protagonist, nicknamed ‘Baby Doll’ (Emily Browning) fires a

shaky gun at the abuser, accidentally killing her sister. Conjuring the ghost of Foucault (author of *Madness and Civilization*), Baby Doll is unwillingly committed to an insane asylum and scheduled for an ‘under-the table’ lobotomy in the hopes of permanently covering the stepfather’s history of abuse. Just as the lobotomist’s spike is about to punch into the girl’s brain, a second hallucinatory level of mind-reality is triggered, presumably as a mental defense.

In the denial-hallucination, our protagonist becomes an orphan taken to ‘The Club’ by another ‘abusive father,’ a corrupt Catholic priest who has been involved in her social case. Here at the desperate margins of society, she is to begin her career as a dancer and call girl. Baby Doll is befriended by four other dancers, called Blondie (Vanessa Hudgens), Amber (Jamie Chung), Sweet Pea (Abbie Cornish), and her sister Rocket (Jena Malone). When asked to dance for the first time, it becomes apparent that Baby Doll is a mesmerizing erotic dancer. Not only does Baby Doll go into a trance state when she dances, but men become entranced by her, which allows the four other dancers to pick-pocket the items they will need to escape from the ‘The Club:’ a map (of the facility), a fire (which will automatically trigger and open the doors), a knife (as a weapon), and a key (to open any remaining doors).

Baby Doll’s dance-trances trigger the final and most fantasy laden levels of the film, where she and the other dancers transform into a team of gun-slinging and

sword-swinging super-heroines. In this empowerment fantasy, the girls are sent on a series of four impossible missions to acquire the items that will lead to their freedom (i.e. fantasy items that correspond to the map, fire, knife, and key). They fight samurai, Nazis, Zombies, robots, dragons, orcs and every incarnation of evil Snyder can conjure, but the girls are unstoppable.

Here is where the movie will become frustrating for some moviegoers. The key characters, items, and events have echoes and traces at each of the three levels of the nested story. Not all moviegoers will appreciate the effort of keeping up with each discreet storyline and their multiple implications. However, the puzzle-like nature of the film will certainly captivate many.

That said, there are several important religious elements in the film. First, there are hints of a yin/yang-like struggle as the plots unfold. The abusive father figures (e.g., the abusive step-father; the club-owner, named Blue (Oscar Isaac), etc.) are balanced by powerful maternal figures, like the asylum's psychiatrist, Vera Gorski (Carla Gugino), who symbolically transforms into the girls' dance instructor in the brothel hallucination. The sex, aggression, and abuse of the males starkly contrast with the solidarity, sacrifice, and courage of the films tragic heroines. Second, the themes of self-sacrifice and fate are woven beautifully, if predictably, into the ethos of the film. For example, just as Sweet Pea and Baby Doll make their escape from The Club (the other girls do not survive the escape), it

becomes clear at the last moment that Baby Doll will need to sacrifice herself as a distraction so that Sweet Pea can go free, alone. Armed with the knowledge that her fate has already been written, Baby Doll sacrifices her own freedom for Sweet Pea's. In the final moment of sacrificial acceptance, Baby Doll comes to terms with her place in the story. She says, "You go on. That's how we win. ... This was never my story."

Thirdly and most obviously, the opening and closing lines of the movie are a reflective narration on the nature of 'angels.' "Everyone has an angel," we learn, but "they're not here to fight our battles, but to whisper from our hearts. ... They speak through any character we can imagine. They will shout through demons if they have to." These angels are not 'out there' somewhere, but subjectively within. The most prominent of these 'angels' first appears in the movie as a monkish and oriental Wise Man (Scott Glenn) who gives to Baby Doll her first weapons, a handgun and a sword. (The homage to Buddhist monasticism and idealism is intentional and appropriate.) These beginning reflections are echoed in the final scenes when Baby Doll is finally lobotomized. As she enters her final and eternal trance, the narrator challenges the audience with a series of probing questions and a final reflection: "Who is it that chooses our steps, drives us mad, or crowns us with victory? Who teaches us to laugh at lies, why we live, or what we'll

die to defend?” ... The answers lie always within the self. “... You do!” the narrator exclaims. “You have all the weapons you need. Now, fight!”

In sum, *Sucker Punch* challenges its audience to think about the mind’s role in shaping reality and to reflect on our own choices. For those in despair, the fighting message will be timely. However, the film is not as successful a challenge to our ordinary assumptions about reality as other films in the genre. At times, the philosophical idealism and depth psychology at the heart of the story seems merely the excuse for the eye-popping action scenes and stunning special effects. Even so, for those of us who love riddles that enlighten, *Sucker Punch* is an excellent fix! Like the Chinese koan of ‘the butterfly who dreamed it was a man,’ *Sucker Punch* challenges us to contemplate the role of the mind in leading us into delusion, and ultimately through delusion, to greater enlightenment and selflessness. In this film, the merely ordinary is murdered, and transfigured in the mind! We, too, are to be ‘sucker punched’ to enlightenment!