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Film Discussion Group
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Birdman (dir. Alejandro González Iñárritu, 2014)

On Camera

- Riggan: Michael Keaton: *Batman* (89) and *Batman Returns* (92), the same years as Riggan's "Birdman" movies; also *Mr. Mom* (83), *Beetlejuice* (88), etc.
- Sam (daughter): Emma Stone: *Superbad* (07); *The Help* (11); *The Amazing Spider-Man* (12)
- Mike (actor/jerk): Edward Norton: *Primal Fear* (96); *Fight Club* (99); *The Incredible Hulk* (08); often noted as difficult; has rewritten parts of his films: *Frida* (02), etc.
- Lesley (actress): Naomi Watts: *Mulholland Drive* (01); *21 Grams* (03), also with Iñárritu; *King Kong* (05); *The Painted Veil* (06), also as Norton's romantic partner
- Laura (actress): Andrea Riseborough: *Happy-Go-Lucky* (08); Wallis Simpson in *W.E.* (11)
- Jake (lawyer): Zach Galifianakis: the *Hangover* movies (09, 11, 13); *Up in the Air* (09)
- Sylvia (ex-wife): Amy Ryan: *Gone Baby Gone* (07); two-time Tony nominee on Broadway
- Tabitha (critic): Lindsay Duncan: *Le Week-end* (13); two-time Tony winner on Broadway

Off Camera

- Cinematography Emmanuel Lubezki: known for his long, uncut "sequence shots" in *Children of Men* (06), *Gravity* (13); also *Sleepy Hollow* (99), *The Tree of Life* (11)
- Screenplay Alejandro González Iñárritu, Nicolás Giacobone, Alexander Dinelaris, and Armando Bo, most of whom previously collaborated on the *Biutiful* script
- Editing Douglas Crise and Stephen Mirrione: *21 Grams* (03), *Babel* (06) for Iñárritu
- Musical Score: Antonio Sanchez: first film credit; two other composers for non-drum music

Previous features from director Alejandro González Iñárritu

Amores perros (2000) – Three grueling, violent, inter-related stories of lives that cross via one fateful car crash in Mexico City; Oscar-nominated as Best Foreign Language Film; at that time, Mexico's biggest-ever box-office hit; often credited with reviving Mexican cinema

21 Grams (2003) – First film in English (mostly), again about three strangers whose lives get tangled up by one car crash; with Sean Penn, Naomi Watts, Benicio Del Toro, Melissa Leo

Babel (2006) – Another interlocking-stories drama, this time unfolding simultaneously in North Africa, Japan, Los Angeles, and Mexico; Golden Globe winner for Best Picture (Drama)

Biutiful (2010) – Javier Bardem stars as a terminally ill underworld "business man," employing illegal Chinese workers in Barcelona; some magic-realist elements; two Oscar nominations

Iñárritu has also directed many shorts, plus segments of anthology films such as *September 11*.

If you enjoyed *Birdman (or the Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance)*...

Rope (1948) – Alfred Hitchcock's version of the notorious Leopold-Loeb story, and still the most famous attempt to use “disguised” cuts that make several scenes look like continuous shots

All About Eve (1950) – Another multi-character Broadway comedy-drama, with women as the lead trying to extend her legacy (Bette Davis) and the rival with other agendas (Anne Baxter)

Living in Oblivion (1995) – Well-regarded indie comedy about the trials of making a low-budget independent film, including some fantasy elements and a tone not far from *Birdman*'s

All About My Mother (1999) – Another virtuoso, bright-colored, multi-character piece about theater artists with stormy private lives, compulsively returning to old stories (*Streetcar*, *Eve*)

Black Swan (2010) – Beyond the obvious “bird” motif, another film that emerges out of a stage performer's enormous pressures, self-imposed and otherwise, tilting into unreliable narration

Gravity (2013) – Directed by Iñárritu's close collaborator Alfonso Cuarón; also structured around Lubezki's gifts for long, dynamic shots; also dips in and out of isolated character's headspace

Facts about *Birdman* you may appreciate...

Note on the first page how many actors in *Birdman* have been drawn into superhero or fantasy films. Also note that the only actors in the film renowned for work on Broadway are Amy Ryan (as the wife who got fed up) and Lindsay Duncan (as the disillusioned theater critic).

The film is as much a reinvention for Iñárritu as a resuscitation of Keaton. Even as Iñárritu's films have consistently gleaned attention and won major awards, he has had a tougher time with critics, who have bemoaned his heavy dramatics and reliance on multi-strand narratives.

Broad conversation topics...

The “Continuous” Shot: Beyond admiring the stunt for its own sake, how might we see it as *meaningful* to the film's themes and *characterizations*? For example, how does the film's formal hubris echo Riggan's own grandiose gesture with his play? How does it resonate differently for a director mostly known for movies that fussily scramble past, present, and future (*21 Grams*, *Babel*) and/or constantly edit across multiple plotlines (*Amores perros*, *Babel*, etc.)? When did you notice that, despite the continuous shooting, the “scenes” we encounter sometimes happen hours or days after whatever we've just observed?

Theater vs. Film: *Birdman* repeatedly aligns the Broadway stage with artistic integrity and movies with silly, vulgar commercialism—what Tabitha calls “cartoons and pornography.” But beyond its obvious fun with that dichotomy, when or how does the film *challenge* it?

Doubling: Beyond the actors riffing on themselves, which characters mimic traits of the others?

Perspective: Beyond major effects—the explosion of military action on the streets of New York, the hints that Riggan can move things with his mind—what other cues do we get that events in *Birdman* may or may not be “really” happening, or are framed from Riggan's perspective? Which events seemed most dubious? How do these factors inform your reading of the end?

Specific touches worth discussing...

Start and Finish: The only unconcealed cuts in the movie are after the first shot (an almost abstract view of a yellow flame—a bird? a plane? Birdman?—streaking through a gray sky) and after Riggan has shot himself on stage on opening night, leading to a dream montage and finally ending in the hospital room, where the unedited epilogue sequence unfolds. What is at stake in having cuts only *here*? Could we think about the whole film as a loop, as if what Sam is seeing in the final image is something like the airborne flight we see in the opening?

Epigraph: What are some possible interpretations of the opening quotations in relation to what follows?: “And did you get what you wanted from this life even so?” / “Yes, I did.” / “And what was it you wanted?” / “To call myself beloved, to feel myself beloved on this earth.”

Music: From the opening credits, the drums-only instrumentation of *most* of the score becomes obvious. Beyond whether we enjoyed the drumming or not for itself, what *effects* does it have as an artistic choice? How would the film be saying something different if more than one instrument was typically playing at a time? And why jazz drumming, specifically?

Introduction to Riggan: That image of Riggan floating in his dressing room is both an apex of what yoga is supposed to achieve (self-transcendence, manifest as levitation) and a signal that Riggan at his most *spiritual* is also Riggan at his most *psychotic*, paradoxically attaining calm by enlisting restless (imaginary?) superpowers that otherwise produce so much chaos.

Birdman Voice: The first things we hear “Birdman” say—and because Keaton is facing away from us, we can’t see if *he* is saying them—are harsh critiques of the theater: “How did we end up here,” “Smells like balls,” etc. Later, it will sometimes appear that the “Birdman” alter ego wants Riggan and his play to succeed at any cost, even if this means sidelining a bad actor or ending an unwanted pregnancy. At other times, the Birdman alter ego seems to threaten the play with destruction—which seems to echo his anti-theatrical attitude in these opening lines, and augur the climactic shooting incident. How do you reconcile those ideas?

Makeup/Hair: Unless I missed something (twice!), Riggan is not “only” wearing his undies during this opening. He must also be wearing his wig already, because it’s a surprise to us later when he takes it off. What does it mean to you that Riggan relaxes nearly naked but also in partial costume—i.e., that when you strip him bare, he still has a level of disguise?

Technology: The next character we meet is Sam, in a broken-up conversation over Skype. At one level, Riggan’s still “alone” even when he’s technically joined by another person; in fact, dialogues with other people are initially presented to us as sites of anger and confusion. (Even Sam can’t communicate with the florist.) At another level, though Riggan will later pretend naïveté about social media like Facebook and Twitter, he seems fully adept at Skype. Is he gaining something by *seeming* more media-illiterate than he may actually be?

Acting Choice: Rather than have Riggan slink out of the rehearsal room or “act the part” by feigning concern over his co-star being struck by that lighting fixture, Keaton has him stride out cockily—barely disguising his indifference and satisfaction. What does that tell us?

Props: Riggan has a note tucked into his dressing-room mirror: “A thing is a thing, not what is said of that thing.” What does this tell you about him? What does it suggest about the film?

Framing: In refusing edits, *Birdman* can't “oppose” characters who disagree by cutting back and forth between them. Beyond that, though, the film has an interesting relationship to conflict, often including characters who hold *entirely* different motives or investments in a given moment in tight, shared shots. For example, the moment when Naomi Watts and Edward Norton are quite close to each other, and we are pulled close to them, but as she gushes about her dreams of finally being on Broadway, he responds, “Play with my balls.” When else do characters in close quarters seem to occupy completely different realities, so to speak?

Score: Riggan's arrival on stage in the first preview of his play marks, I think, the first time we hear a soaring, string-dominated score quite different from the drums we've been accustomed to. At first, it isn't clear if it's stage music, intended for the play's audience. But then it starts showing up in other moments where Riggan is “seizing the spotlight” or “entering the zone” in his own life—including the final hospital scene. What might this pattern imply?

Framing: In the first scene when we meet Sylvia, Riggan's ex-wife, she stands at the exact hinge of two mirrors in his dressing room. Possibly this implies that Sylvia falls at the meeting of two different ways Riggan likes to see himself (as father and star? as success and failure?), or that Riggan has sometimes treated Sylvia as a mirror, rather than seeing her for herself.

Dialogue: “You're not Farrah Fawcett, Riggan.” The line itself and Amy Ryan's reading of it leave open two interpretations: “I promise you'd be the headline if you died, Riggan,” and “Honey, you're not even in her league.” Which did you take Sylvia to be saying?

Production Design: That strange ante-room where Sam gets caught with pot while marking up her toilet-paper roll recalls a key set in David Lynch's surrealist cult favorite *Eraserhead*—another sign of fantastical leanings, even in a scene that otherwise stresses very real father-daughter tensions. (Note: Riggan's hospital gown will later look just like Sam's toilet paper.)

Layering: Sam's big roar against her dad's narcissism and the camera's close fixation on her face as she delivers it lend her credibility. But note other inflections in the scene: the way she mixes in childish criticisms (“You don't even have a *Facebook* page!!”) with more mature accusations, or the fact she sports what appears to be a tattoo of Birdman on her shoulder.

Production Design: *Birdman* repeatedly shows that Riggan's play is in a theater located opposite *The Phantom of the Opera*—an admirably successful show, but increasingly an emblem of Broadway's most commercialist, tourist-pandering aspects. It's another way *Birdman* refuses to view Broadway or theater actors as pure symbols of artistic integrity.

Star Texts: Lesley's surprise kiss with brunette costar Laura winks at Naomi Watts' star-making role in *Mulholland Dr.*, where she played an actress who abruptly falls in love with a woman.

Music: No music accompanies Riggan's deceitful speech about how his father used to beat him—one reason why we, like Mike Shiner, may be tricked into believing it as cold truth.

Doubling: In many ways, *Birdman* positions Riggan and Mike as opposites: the veteran vs. the upstart, the movie star vs. the theater disciple, sympathetic vs. self-serving. But beyond large-scale reasons to see them as doubles (doesn't Riggan prioritize his own interests, too?), note the subtle ways the film keeps linking them. Their parallel encounters with Tabitha, the critic, and their odd, shared habit of repeatedly stripping down to their undies are just two.

Sound: Little joke: in the scene where Riggan locks himself out, before he realizes his dilemma, the sound of the stage door shutting has an exaggerated echo, like an airlock in outer space.

Cultural Power: I've heard many different, emphatic opinions about whether the film is overly cruel to Tabitha, the critic, or whether it allows her a credible point of view. We'll debate reasons for each case. It's interesting to me that her second scene—promising to destroy Riggan's play before she's even seen it—directly follows the one where Sam shows Riggan the viral video of his near-naked escapade in Times Square, and says, "Believe it or not, *this* is power." What does *Birdman* think about cultural power? Is it old-fashioned to imagine a theater critic with so much influence? Is it glib to equate viral celebrity with "power"?

Music: Tabitha rattles Riggan enough that it throws the film off the jazz-drumming score and back into its symphonic elements—linked, as I've said, to Riggan's moments of artistic sublimity but also to his moments of greatest self-absorption. When he retreats into that neon-lit liquor store, this music includes a few melodic reminders of famous musical motifs in *The Last Emperor*. It's funny to imagine Riggan seeing himself in such grandiose terms.

In-Jokes: The guy who lures Riggan back off the ledge, when he's despairing whether his play is a terrible folly, is played by much-admired New York playwright, Stephen Adly Guirgis.

Sound: Notice the density and volume of unseen ticking clocks in the scene where Riggan recalls his near-suicide to Sylvia in his dressing room. What are they doing there?

Subtitle: As Galifianakis' character reads Tabitha's rave review, we finally learn why "The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance" is the film's subtitle. What does the phrase mean to you? She praises the play for innovating a brand new style that one might have to call "super-realism." Is that an apt description of the film's style, too? If so, what does that tell us?

Ironies: The grisly denouement of *Birdman* and Riggan's new face seem to embed two jokes about overly committed actors. One concerns the real plastic surgery ("Use Meg Ryan's guy!") by which older actors try to stay in the game, and the elaborate prostheses (Nicole Kidman's nose in *The Hours*, Steve Carell's nose in *Foxcatcher*, etc.) that often assist actors trying to redefine themselves in prestige dramas. The other concerns the extravagant way in which Riggan has seemingly put himself—with Method relentlessness—in the very position of the man his character in the play discusses, badly injured, cooped up in bed, etc.

Two Endings: Riggan and Sam have two different, final "bonding" moments. One culminates in them silently *sharing* a frame, with her head on his chest. The other involves them being *separated*, with Sam awestruck at whatever stunning thing Riggan (or Birdman?) is doing in the sky, accompanied by string-driven music. What's at stake in these two divergent finales?