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Michael Keaton as an Existential Figure: an unraveling of the Narrative Frameworks and Aesthetic Theories in Iñárritu's *Birdman*

“Popularity is just the slutty little cousin of prestige,” stage actor Mike Shiner (Edward Norton) scoffs at the washed-up film star Riggan Riggan (Michael Keaton) as they walk together through New York's theatre district. Shiner's rejoinder encapsulates an attitude held by the socialite artists who exclude Riggan from their high art sphere throughout the narrative of Alejandro González Iñárritu's *Birdman, or, (The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance)*. The 2014 film, a meta-commentary about performance, art, and celebrity, follows Riggan in his desperate attempt to re-enter the limelight through an adaptation of a Raymond Carver story for the Broadway stage. Most commentary on the film (journalistic rather than academic) is occupied with the iconography associated with *Birdman*'s actors, most notably Michael Keaton. The film's unique cinematography, which is edited to create the illusion of a single-shot throughout the entire 114 minute play time, also bears mention in almost every critical account. Most commentators find the film unique and entertaining, yet not completely satisfactory; either they find its quirks gimmicky, its special effects overdone, or its ending predictable. Critics comment that these shortcomings mirror the very faults of the entertainment industry which *Birdman* seems to criticize:

Birdman wants to be perpetually perched – ready to fly off in any direction at any moment. The problem is that the rhythm, camerawork and acting of the film are all so pitch-perfect as to hide the fact that the message has worn thin by the end and the film and risks becoming precisely what it was so intent on avoiding – namely, flat and

predictable. (Fairfax, Daniel “The Ashes of Gramsci: A Conversation about the 52nd New York Film Festival”)
Fairfax’s description of *Birdman* as a bird “perpetually perched— ready to fly off in any direction at any moment” describes an instability that pervades the narrative, yet *Birdman*’s technical proficiency does not upend the film’s message; *Birdman* does not portray instability as a driving force, but rather as an element of the entertainment industry’s intricate system of performance, celebrity, and identity. Though many of the characters within *Birdman* exhibit schizophrenic qualities and appear “ready to fly off in any direction at any moment,” the physical world within the film is not at the mercy of chaos. The exquisite camera work and careful pacing of *Birdman* create a realistic setting in which we can explore the profound instability of its characters, primarily Riggan Riggan (Michael Keaton), who finds himself in an unusual position within the arts and entertainment sphere.

Because Michael Keaton’s star persona parallels his character, Riggan Riggan, *Birdman* contains three narratives, framed within one another like nesting dolls: Raymond Carver’s “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love,” within *Birdman*’s main narrative drama, within the real-world iconography of its actors, particularly Keaton. The legacy of the fictional, never-explicated *Birdman* trilogy itself haunts the film just as Birdman haunts Riggan (Keaton). The multiple framed narratives interact with one another in ways that disrupt the division between reality and fiction; the parallel of Keaton’s *Batman* stint with Riggan’s past role as the fictional *Birdman* further confuses this division, rendering the boundaries of *Birdman* itself amorphous. This complex, topological layering of narrative superimposes multiple aesthetic theories upon one another and brings them into dialogue through characters who represent these various theories. These interactions superimpose not only high and low artistic attitudes, but also present the history of aesthetic and cultural sensibility contemporaneously rather than chronologically,

due to interactions among characters who belong to different generations. Though many of the characters within *Birdman* could be said to represent either a specific aesthetic theory or a specific moment in cultural sensibility, Riggan himself is caught in a unique bind. The actor famous for his role in the near-forgotten (fictional) *Birdman* trilogy wishes to reinvigorate his reputation by writing, directing, and starring in his own play; yet, the high art world shuns him as a sell-out and even less redeemable than this, the members of this world perceive Riggan as a non-authentic artist by very virtue of his previous participation in cinema.

To assert that film acting is a non-authentic art form is a bold claim, one that sounds preposterous in our present society which has embraced film as an established art form. However, as a relatively new technology, film found disdain in the eyes of 20th century aesthetic theorists, most notably Marxist cultural critic Walter Benjamin. In his 1936 essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Benjamin discusses the ramifications of technological advances upon the production and distribution of art. At the time of writing, photography and film were new artistic forms that revolutionized art and entertainment. Because the material conditions surrounding the production of photography and film eliminate what Benjamin terms the “aura” of art, he asserts that they simply transmute the original subject rather than comprise a genuine, authoritative art object themselves. Benjamin defines the aura as the material presence and legacy of an artistic object; the artwork’s authenticity is the culmination of how long it has existed, its history, and the thought that the artist shaped it with his or her own hands. A spectator must travel to a specific artwork in order to experience its aura, whereas a photograph or a film is made to be reproduced ad infinitum, sold, and distributed to the masses.

Benjamin argues that photography and most notably, film, are methods of mechanical reproduction that cannot claim authenticity as artistic objects themselves, but rather as

reproductions that appropriate the aesthetic beauty of their original subjects. Photography and film imbue their reproduction with new significance through a nuanced representation of the original object. These media are capable of producing artworks, yet Benjamin is careful to state that the mechanical reproduction always cheapens the original artwork or object because these art forms, in essence, are created only to be reproduced. As a member of the Frankfurt school of thought, which included Theodor Adorno as well, Benjamin would argue that these mass-produced and distributed forms of entertainment serve to distract and soothe proletariat, blue-collar workers from the deplorable conditions of their lives rather than to inspire the awe and original beauty of a “true” piece of artwork.¹

The latter part of Benjamin’s essay comprises a series of short vignettes in which he explores the ramifications of this “age of mechanical reproduction” upon film and film actors, contrasting the experience of film acting to stage acting and discussing the viewing experience. Benjamin’s theory, which to us may seem rather elitist, can be found running through *Birdman*’s discourse; most notably, the *New York Times* theatre critic Tabitha Dickinson embodies this aesthetic theory. Mike Shiner, the charismatic yet unruly Broadway actor who steps in to play Riggan’s opposite in the Carver adaptation, also appears to hold these beliefs— such as in his previously mentioned line, “popularity is the slutty little cousin of prestige.” Though Riggan aspires to reinvigorate his artistic reputation by producing a “genuine” stage performance, by adapting a story to which he can relate on a personal level, his participation in the world of

¹ The political and social implications of Benjamin’s aesthetic theory (written in Germany during Adolf Hitler’s tenure as Chancellor) are tied to mass media as a Fascist tool of suppression. In the world of *Birdman*, mass media (such as the corporate *Birdman* franchise) would represent the perversion of art by capitalism. Beyond dismissing Riggan for participating in the creation of what they would consider distasteful art, the inhabitants of New York’s art and culture sphere would dismiss him for participating in such a capitalistic institution as Hollywood.

cinema has tainted his reputation. He is not allowed access to the social sphere necessary to create “art,” or at least art that would be respected by his peers. Riggan’s own ego and personal demons also prevent him from pursuing his artistic endeavor. An exploration of Benjamin’s aesthetic theory as it manifests in *Birdman* will help to reveal Riggan as a character trapped in his cinematic mode of “mechanical reproduction.” He is a figure who participates, unwillingly, in a modern form of artistic production and who cannot return to the prestige of an older, golden age of theatre.

Two other film theorists who write about acting and the phenomenon of stardom will prove helpful in unpacking the aesthetic and performative content of *Birdman*. The first is Stanley Cavell, whose chapter “Audience, Actor, and Star” from his 1971 *The World Viewed* describes the disconnect between an audience’s experience of a film actor’s performance and the actor’s experience of that very same performance. Because characters in a film are intimately tied to the actors who portray them, in a way that characters in a play are not— many men have played Romeo in stage productions of “Romeo and Juliet,” yet only Matthew Broderick has played Ferris Bueller— audiences often conflate the character’s traits with the film actor’s to form a star persona which usually differs from the actual personality of the actor. Richard Dyer speaks to this disconnect and investigates it more fully in his 1979 book, *Stars*, which explicates the ideology of stardom, particularly in film. At many points, Dyer implicitly speaks back to points that Benjamin makes about film actors, such as the isolation of the film actor. Both Cavell and Dyer will help to explore the nuances in the relationships among Riggan’s performances on the Broadway stage, the performance that is his actual life, Keaton’s performance as Riggan, and the identities behind each performance within the film. *Birdman* is a film not only grounded in

cinematic tradition, but consciously aware of this tradition; in this way, an exploration of these theories is especially relevant to unpacking its many layers.²

I will look at *Birdman* in relation to these aesthetic and film/performance theories, moving through its multiple frameworks to unpack the interactions among them and among its characters. Riggan Thomason struggles with entrapment in the world of cinema and embodies the isolation of the film actor which Benjamin, Cavell, and Dyer describe. He attempts to battle this loneliness by participating in an older, more prestigious art form—stage acting—and by adapting a literary short story to the stage—yet his sensibilities are such that he cannot successfully participate in this world. He is caught between old and new, “popularity and prestige,” and cannot fit into either. He produces a more genuine adaptation of Carver’s “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love” through his life than through his play—yet these genuine moments arrive in fits and bursts that Riggan does not intentionally perform but instead enacts in throes of passion or desperation; in contrast, he attempts to micromanage every actor’s movement within his stage performance, a performance that only becomes successful once it becomes improvisational. Riggan cannot unify himself with the world around him. As this tension becomes more and more palpable, it is represented by a cinematic version of insanity that overtakes Riggan whenever he is alone. Though his delusions manifest from the opening scene of the film, when we come upon him deep in meditative levitation, his delusions progress from tranquil to violent as he loses control over himself. *Birdman* represents Riggan’s schizophrenia

² *Birdman* is a remarkably allusive film. Within the film, there are explicit and/or implicit references to Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, William Faulkner’s *The Sound and The Fury*, Gustave Flaubert, Raymond Carver, Roland Barthes, and *Mulholland Drive*, among countless other literary authors, philosophers, and films. I might go so far as to argue that Iñárritu and the other screenwriters consciously had Walter Benjamin and other aesthetic theorists in mind as they were writing.

not clinically, but rather fantastically; these moments imbue the film with magic realism more-so than they do with a disability narrative. Thus the special effects that pervade Riggan's moments of solitude can be read not as literal hallucinations, but rather as disruptions of the film's realism. By disrupting the verisimilitude of *Birdman* itself, the intrusion of Riggan Riggan's star persona upon his personal and professional passions and aspirations is rendered insurmountable and terminal, just as severe mental illness cannot be cured.

Before proceeding to explicate the aesthetic theories implicit within the film, I will first investigate the most outer framework of the film—the world external to *Birdman*. A brief discussion of Michael Keaton's performance and the film's cinematography will reveal that even at its most superficial level, truth in *Birdman* is inherently instable. The most noteworthy elements of this external framework signify the theme of instability that runs throughout its narrative. The first and most noticeable element to the film's external framework is Michael Keaton's role as star. Upon learning of an upcoming film, potential audiences draw conclusions about that film based upon a few factors, perhaps most notably its stars and their associated star personas. Due to Keaton's participation in the *Batman* franchise, the superhero franchise genre frames not only the narrative within *Birdman*, but also possible critical reactions to the film itself. Is the movie a meta-commentary specifically about this genre cycle?³ The superhero trilogy is, after all, perhaps one of the least “artistic” cinematic genres, in that the franchise

³ As it turns out, this genre is just used as a proxy for cinema in general. As one of the most clichéd and highly branded genres, the superhero franchise is a perfect candidate for *Birdman's* purposes— and also, the superhero character is an ideal aesthetic and thematic embodiment of Riggan's ghostly ego. Iñárritu said in an interview: “It's the same story told hundreds of times, each time with more explosions, loudness, and absurdity. I was conscious of that nonsense. That's why I put that bird in there. Who the f— is that? Well, who cares! It looks cool. Exactly!” (D'Addario, Daniel “*Birdman* Director Alejandro González Iñárritu: Alfred Hitchcock's *Rope* Is ‘A Terrible Film’”)

structure is extremely corporate, the films themselves follow rote narrative structure, employ over-the-top special effects, and pander to popular audiences. The parallel between Michael Keaton as *Batman* and Riggan Riggan as *Birdman* seems so blatant that it is nearly trite; many casual spectators and authors of opinion pieces on *Birdman* have speculated that the character of Riggan Riggan is a portrayal of Michael Keaton himself. Yet, Keaton claims that though he found Riggan to be one of the most meaningful roles he has ever played, he does not actually relate to the character. He said in an interview:

The character, Riggan, I play in *Birdman* was a huge challenge. I related less to him than almost every other character I've played, in terms of desperation. There were times in my life when I felt desperate, but it was never about this. It's a fear-based industry, and if you buy into it, you're pretty screwed. (Saavedra, "Michael Keaton Discusses His New Role at the ETC")

The film's initial access point is Keaton's star persona; yet, this access point is a red herring. It does not offer any meaningful insight into the actor himself or into the film's narrative, save for what audiences might read into it independently (and incorrectly). Thus, the most outer narrative framework of *Birdman*, which would appear significant due to the film's self-aware nature, signifies disharmony rather than cohesion. This disharmony between performer and actor is a theme that pervades the inner narrative frameworks of the film as well as its external features.

In addition to the (false) signal that Keaton's biography could provide insight into Riggan's on-screen anxiety (or vice versa), *Birdman* is also a self-aware film by virtue of its cinematography. The film's most notable formalistic feature is its illusion of being filmed in one continuous take; it is not the first film to achieve this feat, yet it is one of a rare few.⁴ Because

⁴ Alfred Hitchcock's 1948 *Rope* was created with the same cinematographic concept, yet because Hitchcock had less advanced technology at his disposal, *Rope* was a much more laborious and difficult cinematic project than *Birdman*. The 2002 *Russian Ark* also utilizes a similar cinematographic effect. (D'Addario, Daniel "Birdman Director Alejandro González Iñárritu: Alfred Hitchcock's *Rope* Is 'A Terrible Film'")

the film required long takes to achieve this continuous effect, the actors had to perform each scene without much room for error. Keaton relates:

And because of the nature of how it was shot, you didn't have the luxury of edits, where you can do 15 takes of that one line from that angle. You had to get it all in one, and be word-perfect, and in the right place physically to accommodate the camera... There were continuous, 10-minute long tracking shots. There was no room for errors. I mean, if you didn't hit your lines or your marks exactly, you had to do it all over again. (Saavedra, "Actor Michael Keaton Discusses His New Role at the ETC")

The experience of acting in *Birdman* required skills normally associated with stage actors, rather than film actors: the ability to sustain a cohesive performance for the duration of an entire scene, rather than producing many refined moments that are later edited together. For spectators of the film, the cinematography constantly points to the film-ness of *Birdman*, reminding over and over of its production rather than lulling its audience into a distracted state of mind. For the actors, though, this cinematographic feature created a uniquely non-cinematic performative experience.

This distinctive cinematography has the effect of not only making more dramatic the disparity between the audience's and the actors' experience of *Birdman*, but it also allows, and requires, its actors to utilize skills normally only associated with stage acting. It will be helpful to compare this distinction with Walter Benjamin's theory on the isolation of the film actor. He writes, "The stage actor identifies himself with the character of his role. The film actor very often is denied this opportunity. His creation is by no means all of a piece; it is composed of many separate performances." (Benjamin, 801) The cinematography of *Birdman* reinstates the cohesive quality of stage acting to film, even allowing us to witness the actors stumble over a word here and there as part of this slightly less refined acting technique. Yet, the actors' cohesive performance and the small flaws that come with it reminds us that the particular performance that we, the audience, witness, is happenstance. Multiple iterations would differ from one

another in many small and maybe even large ways because the actors are human— fallible and subject to varied behavior. The motif of the unstable narrative is highlighted in the vastly different iterations of “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love” that we witness throughout *Birdman*; though the stage actors perform a cohesive narrative, the means by which this narrative occurs changes with each performance. *Birdman*’s single long take is uncharacteristically monolithic for cinema, yet its cohesiveness also points to the arbitrary nuances that comprise a whole performance. First through its acting and second through its cinematography, *Birdman* presents us with instability.

In an online video interview with *At the Movies*, Emma Stone, who plays Sam, Riggan’s daughter, addresses the effect that the cinematographic technique had upon her experience of acting in *Birdman*.

It allowed us to be very free, in the moment, which is a lot like theatre. There was an extensive amount of rehearsal, which leads you to completely letting it all go and just living in it. All the themes which this explores are fascinating, maybe in a highly personal way because it is about the life of an actor, or many different types of actors, and why their way of approaching it is the best... All you hope for as an actor is to have a real experience and to tell the truth. (*At the Movies*, “Birdman or the Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance Interview”)

Though Stone states here that all an actor hopes for “is to have a real experience and to tell the truth,” the external elements of *Birdman*’s acting and cinematography reveal that truth is subjective. What does it mean to have a truthful acting experience? Stone alludes to a classic anxiety of performance: the question of authenticity.

Stanley Cavell and Richard Dyer both address the fraught relationship between actors and personal identity in their work. Cavell establishes a distinction between this relationship for stage actors and this relationship for film actors, stating that: “On the stage there are two beings, and the being of the characters assaults the being of the actor; the actor survives only by yielding. A

screen performance requires not so much training as planning.” (Cavell, 346) The character identity on-stage subsumes the identity of the actor; because the performance must be sustained without interruption for the duration of the entire performance, the actor must almost literally discard their own identity and become this other personality— a personality often established as a character beyond the actors who have played him or her in various iterations of the same stage play. Conversely, the “planning” required of film acting refers to the technical precision and many takes that are often necessary to get each small moment just right. The film actor does not become the character, but the character becomes the actor; the public often conflates the actor’s star persona and the identity of the characters they play, while the actual personality differs greatly, as Richard Dyer points out.⁵ In light of these identity issues that are associated with acting, when Emma Stone tells us that all an actor wants is to have a real experience and to tell the truth, what is she really saying? Does she imply that the experience of acting in *Birdman*, which was distinctly theatrical rather than cinematic, was a more “truthful” experience than most acting she has done? Does she find that total submission to an established character role is a more authentic experience than that of superimposing her own persona upon a malleable character? The answers to these questions remain open-ended, and chances are that her comment about truth is little more than fluffy interview fodder; yet even as an offhand comment, Stone’s statement reveals that issues of truth and authenticity are often at the tips of actors’ tongues.

To further explore the questions of authenticity associated with acting, it will be helpful to move away from the film’s creation and into its second framework: the world within *Birdman*. Through an exploration of various characters and their interactions with Riggan, who experiences the film’s central existential crisis, we will discover how various attitudes about art

⁵ Dyer also cites Melanie Griffith and Elizabeth Burns in this discussion. (Dyer, 20-21)

and performance shape the film's narrative of instability. Sam, who is the character closest to Riggan by virtue of her being his only blood relative in the film, and also noteworthy by virtue of her status as an outlier among the established theatre socialites, is a great starting point for this investigation.

Within *Birdman*, Emma Stone's character signals that with time, civilization does not come any nearer to "truth," but does, at times, put different conditions upon truth or alter access points to authentic experiences. As the only "Millennial" character in the film, Sam bears the burden of bringing digital space into the film's conversation. In doing so, she becomes representative of the added layer of isolation that the internet brings to social and public interaction. From her first appearance at the beginning of the film, Sam signals the disconnectedness of technology. We see her on Riggan's computer screen while they speak briefly via Skype; though Riggan's room is calm, the screen portrays Sam's chaotic environment. This video chat conveys her setting and mood without the need for empathy on the part of her audience. Spectators and even Riggan, who engages in the conversation, experience the bustling scene around her from the tranquility of a calmer place, and thus cognitively know where she is without having to participate.

SAM

Dad? What kind of--

(Turning to flower salesman.) SHUT UP!!!

(Back to screen.)

What kind of flowers did you say you wanted?

RIGGAN

Alchemillas. Or something soothing that smells nice. Listen I can't—

SAM

It all smells like fucking *Kimchi!*⁶

⁶ There are a couple of racist moments in *Birdman*— just enough that they form a perplexing pattern. Aside from Stone's line about Kimchi, there is the excitable Japanese

RIGGAN

Then whatever looks nice. Anything but roses. *No roses.*

FLOWER SALESMAN

Flowers don't need you to touch! They need you to buy!!!

SAM

(Close into the screen.)

I hate this job. (Iñárritu)

The short exchange between Riggan and Sam includes most of the senses: sight, smell, hearing, and touch. Riggan advises Sam to pick an attractive flower; Sam complains about the strong smell of Kimchi; Sam and Riggan hear one another via Skype; and the flower salesman reprimands Sam for touching the flowers. In a few seconds, we witness a full sensory experience, yet this experience is filtered through a Skype conversation, so that it lacks depth or richness. Neither we nor Riggan can really get a feel for Sam's surroundings, save for the small frame of her camera and the verbal signals that we can hear from her and from the flower salesman. This disjointed conversation provides spectators with a coherent introduction to Sam's character as detached, brusque, and tech-savvy.

Especially relevant to *Birdman* is the phenomena of "going viral" and its effect the potential for fame; after all, Riggan's adaptation of "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love" attains its first big break when a bystander's cell phone video of Riggan running through Time Square in his underwear goes viral on YouTube. Of course, as the film's torch-bearing

journalist who is confused by a conversation among Riggan and two other reporters, who shouts "*Birdman 4? You do Birdman 4?*" Lastly, toward the end of the film, Riggan wakes up on the sidewalk and says to himself, "You get that mongoloid look when you're hung over." Whether these moments are coincidental or not, they did cause controversy for the film. "The line is only to depict the daughter's neurotic character. There is no intention to belittle a certain country or a culture," an official from the company responsible for promoting *Birdman* in South Korea stated. (Hyun-ju, Ock "Birdman's Kimchi Line Sparks Controversy in Korea")

Millennial, Sam is the person who brings this news to Riggan's attention. As a counter-point to the classic, antiquated aesthetic theory of Walter Benjamin, and even to the newer-but-still-established performance theories of Stanley Cavell and Richard Dyer, social media smacks even the most obtuse user across the face with the same questions of identity and performance. In "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Benjamin quotes Pirandello, an Italian dramatist and 1934 Nobel Prize winner for Literature:

'The film actor,' wrote Pirandello, 'feels as if in exile—exiled not only from the stage but also from himself. With a vague sense of discomfort he feels inexplicable emptiness: his body loses its corporeality, it evaporates, it is deprived of reality, life, voice, and the noises caused by his moving about, in order to be changed into a mute image, flickering an instant on the screen, then vanishing into silence... The projector will play with his shadow before the public, and he himself must be content to play before the camera. (qtd. in Benjamin, 800)

Though Benjamin's aesthetic theory and Sam's frenetic Skype conversation hail from two different time periods, this passage from Pirandello accurately describes the experience of speaking to another person via Skype. Though historically bi-polar, Benjamin's essay and the experience of using technology such as Skype or YouTube each portray the isolation that is inherent to performance.

Sam is not only emblematic of future modes of celebrity and technology in general, but she is also an outlier within the film in that she is not an actor or a critic; in fact, she seems entirely uninterested in theatre and interacts with its denizens on a purely personal, rather than professional, level. Perhaps by virtue of her outsider status, the script endows her with the speech that sums up *Birdman*'s central conflict. One night, after a long day of work on set, Riggan enters a room in which Sam sits, secretly smoking weed. They get into a discussion about the play, and Sam drops her apathetic persona to deliver one of the most angry speeches in the film:

SAM

You had a career before the third comic book movie, before people began to forget who

was inside the bird costume. You're doing a play based on a book that was written 60 years ago, for a thousand rich, old white people whose only real concern is gonna be where they go to have their cake and coffee when it's over. *Nobody gives a shit but you.* And let's face it, Dad, it's not for the sake of art. It's because you just want to feel relevant again. Well, there's a whole world out there where people fight to be relevant every day. And you act like it doesn't even exist! Things are happening in a place that you willfully ignore, a place that has already forgotten you. I mean, who are you? You hate bloggers. You make fun of Twitter. You don't even have a Facebook page. *You're* the one who doesn't exist. You're doing this because you're scared to death, like the rest of us, that you don't matter. And you know what? You're right. You don't. It's *not* important. *You're* not important. Get used to it. (Iñárritu)

After this speech, Riggan is clearly devastated; even the screenplay indicates, “*Silence. Riggan seems devastated, and Sam can see that.*” (Iñárritu) Sam’s criticism packs a heftier punch than the critic, Tabitha Dickinson’s, criticism. Riggan’s devastation results not only because the words come from his daughter, but also because they remind him that he is disengaged not only with antiquated aesthetic, artistic, and cultural principles, but also with future modes of creation.

Despite the centrality of social media to contemporary modes of achieving celebrity, the digital space inserts an additional layer of disjointedness between actor and spectator; unlike film, which removes the aura of the person from stage, the internet removes all semblance of a cohesive human being. It replaces the person with a curated collection of images and words. One of the biggest repercussions of the digital mode of celebrity is a loss of authentic authorship; if every person is their own author and any person can become any other person’s author, then the entire system of author, actor, performer, character, and spectator that theorists such as Benjamin attempt to discuss reaches a crisis point in which these relationships cease to mean anything at all. A discussion on these implications could comprise an entire book, but for the sake of this argument, we can say that Sam as a character in *Birdman* is representative primarily of up and coming modes of identity and performance and that secondarily, she represents the additional layer of isolation that these new modes bring to already confused identities.

Riggan dismisses Sam's virtuosity on the internet in much the same way that the theatre critic, Tabitha Dickinson, and other members of the art elite dismiss Riggan himself, telling her, "[The play is important to me,] maybe not to you, or your cynical playmates whose sole ambition is to end up going viral and who, by the way, will only be remembered as the generation that finally stopped talking to one another." (Iñárritu) Appropriate here is the father/daughter relationship between Riggan and Sam; they don't appear to have much in common, but what they do share is aesthetic and/or cultural displacement. Riggan fails to recognize that his rejection of the internet (and of Sam's competence as a cultural navigator) parallels the failure of the theatre inhabitants to recognize his artistic merit or the validity of film as an art form. Neither character can operate outside their natural artistic or cultural mode of production and consumption. Because both characters are the sole representation of each mode within the film, both experience profound isolation and in doing so, share more in common than meets the eye.

Though Sam is the character in *Birdman* who is most aware of contemporary modes of "relevance," she is detached from the world around her. She signals a disconnect between public identity and private identity that, while not a new phenomenon, only grows more distinct with the advent of the internet. Though she represents this detachment, she also displays tenderness in certain key moments; these moments depart from total isolation, yet they do not depart from technology. The chaotic Skype conversation that Riggan and Sam have at the beginning of the film is mirrored by a quiet moment that they share in his hospital room late in the film. She brings him flowers, the same type he requested at the beginning of the narrative:

SAM
Alchemillas.

(The hint of a smile on Riggan's face.)

SAM

Are you actually smiling? What's so funny?

RIGGAN

I can't smell them.

(A moment until the smiles turn to gentle laughter. She takes out her cell phone and snaps picture of him.)

RIGGAN (CONT'D)

What are you doing?

SAM

I'm posting this picture on your Twitter page. (Iñárritu)

Though the isolating layer of Skype has been removed from their relationship and they now interact in the same physical place, Riggan points out the fact that he still cannot share in his daughter's sensory experiences because now he does not have a nose. Riggan's violent and self-destructive on-stage performance inducts him into this "new world" of sensationalism, social media, and technology; he enters willingly, becoming disoriented in the process— a disorientation symbolized by the loss of a sensory organ. Riggan and his daughter share a pleasant moment— one of their first— and of course, Sam uses the opportunity to connect her father to social media, a contemporary discourse method through which Riggan has a chance at reclaiming his former fame— or dare we say, prestige.

Without beautiful faces, the world of performance would lose one of its most powerful tools and one of its most painful obsessions. Riggan's ultimate performance, in which he shoots himself in the face on stage, is his means of achieving "success," and indeed, what earns him a positive review from Tabitha Dickinson, the hostile *New York Times* theatre reviewer. Riggan reshapes his own face, and in doing so, creates a supremely existential artwork. As Roland Barthes argued in his 1957 essay, "The Face of Garbo," actors have evolved to become existential figures rather than representative symbols. Barthes contrasts Audrey Hepburn with

Greta Garbo, a film star from the early 20th century. Barthes points out that while Hepburn is beautiful, she embodies an individual identity, fallibility, and existential potential; she creates herself. Conversely, Barthes discusses Garbo as an ideal figure representative of womanhood, focusing especially on her flawless face. “The face of Garbo is an Idea. That of Hepburn, an event.” (Barthes, 591) Hepburn’s face is an event because it represents a self-determined individual; similarly, Riggan embodies existentialism to an almost comical extent when he shoots himself in the face. Of course, at the root of existentialism is a belief that there is no essence, or truth, to anything. Thus, the world of *Birdman* contains no stable truth, yet allows its characters to access the tools to create their own essence.

Riggan’s self-brutalization is ironically foreshadowed by a reporter’s outrageous suggestion that he engages in extreme methods of facial rejuvenation. This reporter, a flat, female, bimbo typecast, is played against a second reporter, a svelte, bespectacled, pretentious man who quotes Roland Barthes:

GABRIEL

Why does somebody go from playing the lead in a comic book franchise to adapting Raymond Carver for the stage? I mean, as you're probably aware, Barthes said, “The cultural work done in the past by gods and epic sagas is now done by laundry detergent commercials and comic strip characters.” It's a big leap you've taken...

RIGGAN

Well... Absolutely. As you said... that Barthes said... Birdman, like Icarus...

CLARA

Hang on. Who's this Barthes guy? Which Birdman was he in?

GABRIEL

Roland Barthes was a French philosopher, who—

CLARA

Oh. Okay. Sure. Now, is it true you've been injecting yourself with semen from baby pigs? As a method of facial rejuvenation. (Iñárritu)

A (rather disgruntled) journalist criticized this scene by claiming that the Barthes' reference functions only to characterize Gabriel as insufferable; "So now we know: Barthes has no uses in and of himself. He's just a litmus test to demonstrate that two people suck in different ways." (Rizov, Vadim "*Birdman: Five Points of Contention*") I argue that Barthes, instead, serves an allusive purpose, in order to contrast actor as essence from actor as existence. Clara implies that Riggan wishes to return to a fixation upon to face— to inject himself with baby pig semen in order to become essence of man. Instead, Riggan wishes to distinguish himself as an individual. Although the specific material to which Gabriel alludes is Barthes' *Mythology*, "The Face of Garbo" also resonates in this dialogue. The ultimate success of Riggan's performance results from his refusal to lean on theatrical tropes or types, and instead claim existential authorship of identity.

There are moments within *Birdman* in which stage actors lean upon tired or pre-existing theatrical tropes. One such moment comes in a scene shared by the two actresses who perform in Riggan's play, Leslie (Naomi Watts) and Laura (Andrea Riseborough). The two discuss their anxiety about acting and "making it" before they begin to hold each other and make out. After a few moments, Mike Shiner (Edward Norton) interrupts them. Nothing in *Birdman* foreshadows this intimate moment, and after it passes it might as well have never occurred. Why include this scene, which seems superfluous? Admittedly, the female stage actresses within *Birdman* are flat characters; their identities as presented to us revolve entirely around each of their relationships with Riggan Thomson and Mike Shiner. It is difficult to keep track of the various waifish, beautiful actresses and women who float on the periphery of *Birdman*'s main narrative.

James Harvey-Davitt, in an article for *In Media Res*, argues that this moment shared by Leslie and Laura alludes to David Lynch's 2002 *Mulholland Drive*:

As Richard Dyer claimed, all star images are intertextual (1986:3); but the ‘permutation of texts’ (Kristeva, 1980: 36) in Iñárritu’s *Birdman* (2014) is, I think, constitutive of the film’s technical achievement. This is initiated by Keaton’s career as reference point; but these permutations abound. Anxious to attain recognition as an actress, Naomi Watts’s ‘Lesley’ reprises ‘Betty’ (from Lynch’s *Mulholland Drive* [2001]). The surprising, heated moment she shares with co-star ‘Laura’ transports the spectator to ‘Betty’s’ relationship with ‘Diane’ — one of the most iconic lesbian relationships (or perhaps, ‘lezploitations’) in recent cinema history. (Harvey-Davitt, James “Performing Stardom”)

Harvey-Davitt’s point is consistent with the anxiety that Lesley and Laura express earlier in the scene. Lesley tells Laura, “I’m pathetic. You know, I’ve dreamt of being a Broadway actress since I was a little kid. And now I’m here. And I’m not a Broadway actress. I’m still just a little kid. And I keep waiting for someone to tell me I made it.” (Iñárritu) Replace Broadway with Los Angeles, and this line sounds like it could come from an older version of Betty— a character less chipper and optimistic than the young actress who arrives in L.A. to pursue her dream in *Mulholland Drive*. In a moment of self-doubt, Leslie and Laura lean upon the tropes handed to them. Interestingly, though, they assume these cinematic identities in the manner of a stage actor: by becoming Betty and Diane. The actresses’ assumption of cinematic identities could be a result of the pervasiveness of film and mass media, a form frowned upon by many characters within *Birdman*.

The *New York Times* theatre critic, Tabitha Dickinson, is the strongest female performance in *Birdman*, and perhaps the strongest character in the film. She wields great power over most of the other characters through use of her mighty pen, the instrument she uses to make or break performers’ reputations, all while donning a great scowl. Out of all the characters in *Birdman*, Dickinson’s aesthetic sensibilities align with Walter Benjamin’s ideas most closely. She even alludes to the politicization of art in her pre-criticism criticism of Riggan, which she delivers to him when he approaches her at a bar:

I haven't read a word of it, or even seen a preview, but after the opening tomorrow, I'm going to turn in the worst review anybody has ever read. And I'm going to close your play. Would you like to know why? Because I hate you. And everyone you represent. Entitled. Spoiled. Selfish. Children. Blissfully untrained, unversed and unprepared to even attempt real art. Handing each other awards for cartoons and pornography. Measuring your worth in *weekends*. Well, this is the theater, and you don't get to come in here and pretend you can write, direct and act in your own propaganda piece without going through me first. So, break a leg. (Iñárritu)

Dickinson despises Riggan in principle as an agent of new modes of artistic production—capitalist modes that deprive the artwork of its original aura. Of particular intrigue is her final quip: that Riggan's play is a "propaganda piece," and that Dickinson is a gatekeeper who cannot be circumvented. Benjamin writes, "In other words, the unique value of the 'authentic' work of art has its basis in ritual, the location of its original use value." (Benjamin, 796) Dickinson participates in a ritualistic mode of artistic production. In New York, the physical site of this ritual, plays come and plays go; actors come and actors go; yet Tabitha Dickinson, the physical playhouses that line Broadway, and *The New York Times* remain static and poised to vet each new production as it rolls through the city. Located at the cultural center of the United States and endowed with an influential role at the country's most prestigious newspaper, Dickinson regards herself as the gatekeeper of theatrical performance in America. Riggan creates not only art that she finds beneath her, but art that she finds threatening; he participates in a "lower" art form, but one that has experienced a political shift away from ritual. As a member of cinema, his worth is measured in "weekends—" a disgustingly democratic concept for the tyrannical reviewer to swallow. Dickinson repeats, in heightened language, a sentiment identical to the one Mike Shiner spits at Riggan: "popularity is the slutty little cousin of prestige."⁷

⁷ Mike Shiner's attitude toward theater, performance, and art align nearly identically with those of Walter Benjamin and Tabitha Dickinson. Perhaps this is why he and Dickinson engage in such sparkling rapport when they bump into one another at the bar.

Dickinson's alignment with Benjamin comes not only in her aesthetic sensibility, but also in the literary mode in which she maintains power. Like a philosopher who distributes his or her ideas to the world via the written word and who utilizes critical terminology, Dickinson maintains her iron fist via the terms she puts on the page to describe each performance. Riggan calls her out for this, accusing her of utilizing labels that have no meaning:

RIGGAN

"Callow". A label. "Lackluster". Label. "Marginalia". Sounds like you need penicillin to clear that up. None the less... label. All labels. You're a lazy fucker aren't you?

(Looks one last time at the notebook.)

Epistemological vertigo?

(Tabitha wants to reach for the notebook, but her pride won't let her. Riggan takes a flower from a vase at the center of the table.)

RIGGAN

You know what this is? You don't, do you? You can't even see it if you don't label it. You mistake those sounds in your head for true knowledge. (Iñárritu)

Riggan insults Dickinson by telling her that the "sounds in your head" are not "true knowledge." As the entire world around him would corroborate, "true knowledge" does not exist, although Riggan and those around him will devote their lives to seeking it. The distrust of verbiage that Riggan displays here contrasts the dialogue-driven, philosophically motivated short story that he chooses to adapt into a stage performance. Yet, it parallels his ego, his inner cinematic demon, the Birdman, who later whispers in his ear: "They starve for blood and action, not this artsy-fartsy-philosophical bullshit!"

Ultimately, Riggan has it both ways. He gives the audience the blood that they want to see and somehow pleases Tabitha Dickinson in the process. In a review titled "The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance," Dickinson writes, *"Thompson has unwittingly given birth to a new form that can only be described as supra-realism. Blood was spilled both literally and*

metaphorically by artist and audience alike. Red blood. The blood that has been sorely missing from the veins of the American theatre..." Is this the theatrical equivalent of an "A" for effort? Doubtful— Dickinson did not react sympathetically to the desperation that oozed from Riggan when they met. Does Dickinson genuinely enjoy Riggan's performance? Doubtful— at most, it would have caught her off-guard. Most likely is the case that Dickinson, while devoted to her ritualistic, antiquated method of curating New York City's theatre, also recognizes revolution when she sees it. Although she may disapprove of the sensationalism and fragmentation that Riggan represents as an artist, she also respects that thanks to word-of-mouth and social media, a failure on her part to recognize his performance could result in her undoing. In a gesture of inclusion toward Riggan, Dickinson does her due diligence to maintain her own position as the most savvy and respected theatre critic in New York.

Finally, we reach the innermost framework of *Birdman*: Riggan Thomson's stage adaptation of Raymond Carver's 1981 short story "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love." The story itself is dialogue and character-driven: four characters sit around a table, drinking gin, and reminiscing about past relationships and anecdotes. The most notable stories told during the story are first, the story about Ed, Terri's abusive ex-boyfriend who committed suicide by shooting himself in the head; and second, an elderly couple who was in a bad car accident and, when bandaged from head to foot in the hospital, suffered from depression because they could not turn their heads to see one another. Both of these narrative points become significant to *Birdman* as a whole because Riggan enacts them in his actual life. Yet, before delving into the parallels between Riggan and the characters within the world of this story, let us ask: why does Riggan adapt this untimely Raymond Carver story for the stage?

The dialogue-driven “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love,” while technically simple to adapt, does not lend itself well to the stage due to its contemplative nature. “I’m not sure what to make of the premise that someone’s passion project is a Broadway Carver adaptation: his laconic intensity and clenched states of interior despair don’t seem like natural candidates for big actorly externalization.” (Rizov, Vadim “*Birdman: Five Points of Contention*”) Though Riggan tends toward action-packed performance, such as the explosions of a superhero movie, and he insults Tabitha Dickinson for her professional dependence upon critical terminology, he for some reason dedicates himself to a play that revolves around *talking*. In Riggan’s effort to produce an “honest” play, he forces himself into a dishonest mode of performance, almost like a surly husband who has been told by his wife that they need to “talk more.” Riggan attempts to regain public affection by reigning in the violence and instead talking about talking about love.

Riggan’s decision to adapt Carver results from a personal, verbal connection to the author. Years ago, Riggan received a handwritten note from Raymond Carver on a cocktail napkin after acting in a play that the author watched. The note read, “Thank you for an honest performance.” Riggan tells Shiner that this moment inspired his theatrical career. Perhaps Riggan hopes that through pouring himself into an uncharacteristically sentimental performance, a performance for which he refinanced his house in Malibu (a true sign of desperation), he can resuscitate his artistic reputation. Riggan puts more than just his reputation and vacation home at stake, though; he seeks personal validation through art, as Sylvia (Amy Ryan) points out. She tells him, “You always confuse love with admiration.” Perhaps Riggan’s transition from Hollywood to Broadway is a last-ditch effort to save himself from feelings of isolation: an isolation especially pronounced in the film star, who not only faces the disjointed nature of

Benjamin's mechanical reproduction, but who also faces the disorientation that comes with a public star persona.

Riggan initially runs his production of "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love" like a film more than a stage performance, or like a mechanical, impassionate reproduction. Cavell writes: "A screen performance requires not so much training as planning." (Cavell, 346) Riggan plans out each moment of the play, delivering his memorized lines with little passion, buttoned up in a suit. He adapts certain conversations from the short story word-for-word; Mike Shiner vetoes the line, "I'm the wrong person to ask. I didn't even know the man. I've only heard his name mentioned in passing. I wouldn't know. You'd have to know the particulars. But I think what you're saying is that love is an absolute." (Carver) Shiner suggests altering the repetitive line to simply say, "I didn't know the man. But I think what you're saying is that love is an absolute." Riggan lifts the initial version directly from Carver's short story, with no discretion or thought that these disjointed, defensive lines should be delivered organically. During the first preview, Riggan receives polite applause for his tidy performance which is, more or less, a dramatic reading of Raymond Carver's story.

Though Riggan wishes to identify with the dialogue of the story— he wants to talk about love— as rehearsals and iterations of the performance progress, it becomes clear that he identifies with the grisly, anecdotal stories within Carver's tale. Though these moments are told second-hand within the story, Riggan renders the performance ultimately successful by bringing the passion and violence hidden within the story's dialogue to occur on-stage, where it assaults the audience. These passionate, visceral moments occur when Riggan is driven to the end of his rope by desperation, insomnia, and his ever-progressing manic delusions. The play's first big break comes when he marches through the audience in his underwear to deliver his angry lines

during a stormy, climatic scene; though he does not hold the gun which is a vital prop for this scene, he improvises by pointing at Shiner and at various audience members, his fingers folded into a makeshift firearm.

Riggan ultimately performs not Carver's primary, conversational narrative, but the secondary, gruesome narrative that is related by Carver's characters. Riggan embodies Ed, the abusive ex-boyfriend whose demise came when he shot himself in the head. Like, Ed, Riggan shoots himself on-stage. His insanity is ultimately his key to success; his effort to reveal a cohesive, verbalized "inner self" through a constructed performative persona gives way to a truly authentic performance, in which the sensational nature of his cinematic training plays a role. The connection of Riggan to Ed is not arbitrary; when he asks Sylvia why they ever broke up, she responds "Because you threw a kitchen knife at me. And one hour later you were telling me how much you loved me." Yet, for Riggan to achieve an "honest" performance, he reaches across the boundaries of medium, the boundaries of high/low art, and through multiple narrative frameworks to find a character to whom he doesn't even outwardly admit he relates.

Is Riggan's performance only considered honest because it is so visceral?

Unintentionally, he continues to enact Carver's story in his real life, as he lies in the hospital bed with bandages covering his face, leaving only holes for his eyes. This facial bandaging creates not only the illusion of a beak, but also parallels an anecdote told within Carver's story (and secondarily, Riggan's play):

When we were done, we wrapped them in full body casts. The husband was depressed. Even when I told him his wife was gonna pull through, he was still depressed. So, I got up to his mouth hole and asked him, and he told me it was because he couldn't see her through the eye holes. Can you imagine? I'm telling you, the man's heart was breaking because he couldn't turn his goddamn head and see his goddamn wife. (Carver)

Riggan transitions from performing the violence and self-destruction of Ed, to sustaining the bodily trauma of this elderly, married man. Unlike the man, though, Riggan is not in love. He is alone, save for his ego, Birdman, who haunts him throughout the film. Even though at the end of the film, Riggan has achieved success with his play, he cannot be content with this success which resulted from his sensational, public act of self-destruction. The isolation remains.

One of the main questions that any spectator of *Birdman* leaves the theater with is the nature of Riggan's delusions. One psychologist who wrote an article on the film wrote, "Touches of 'magical realism' are not new to most movie-goers these days, but they are usually used in quirky comedy/dramas like *Midnight in Paris* or *Amelie*, not menacing satires." (Dine Young, Skip "Playing with Psychosis in *Birdman*") The film is a comedy, yet not quite light-hearted enough to include an "imaginary friend/ fantasy phantom" character; it is serious, yet not so serious that it treats Riggan's hallucinations with clinical accuracy or concern. I would argue that the pervasiveness of the Birdman in Riggan's psyche is emblematic of his identity as a film actor. The world of cinema has stigmatized Riggan to the extent that he cannot escape his legacy, even (especially) in moments of solitude. An excellent example occurs when he walks through the city streets and is distracted from his contemplation of "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love" not only by the taunting of his Birdman alter-ego, but also by actual explosions, helicopters, and other action-movie tropes that begin to occur around him. He then lifts his arms and begins to fly over the rooftops. Riggan may very well suffer from schizophrenia, yet the analysis of the film in the context of Walter Benjamin leads me to read these delusions as moments of cinematic interruption. The verisimilitude of the theatrical world of *Birdman* is disrupted to reveal Riggan's inability to escape from his identity as a film star. His only option for escape is complete self-destruction: the ultimately existential performative act.

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