

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Birdman: The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance (2014)

Alejandro González Iñárritu

OVERVIEW

Birdman or (The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance) was deliberately designed as an art film in order to explore the intersections of hallucination, madness, ambition, and quirky dreaming. The idea was developed by Alejandro González Iñárritu who wrote the script, but also developed the concept of merging together a cinema veritee / reality program and the superhero genre. *Birdman* is, in many ways, a send-up of the superhero film genre, and a barbed commentary on the genre's popularity in contemporary culture, and all the attendant consequences. As in the superhero genre, the hero can be a rather pedestrian Everyman before a tragic accident or twist of fate imbues him with superpowers. It is good to note here that there are female superheroes, but they tend to follow a different trajectory, and analyzing the subversion of the male superhero in *Birdman* is more effective when compared with the genre.

But, *Birdman* is more than a subversion of the superhero genre. Iñárritu creates a film that also reflects a kind of secular syncretism, in that the Mesoamerican use of masks and rituals tied to specific animals and their animal spirits and attributes brings another dimension to the hero's journey. The hero's quest to connect with the animal gods / spirits of Mesoamerican religion, and the need to find a spiritual foundation in his barren contemporary world is one that resonates with audiences. It is a powerful statement because instead of marginalizing Mesoamerican mask rituals and the religious practices involving animal spirits, the film places it at its conceptual center. It is done in a subtle manner, which makes it very difficult to relegate the Mesoamerican elements to an "Other" category (which is generally what happens in big budget films – the "Other" is considered "exotic" and thus marginalized or reduced to a touristic or entertaining spectacle).

In the final analysis, *Birdman* asks challenging questions: Are comeback films possible in a world where no one believes any genre at all? What happens to the "comeback" archetype / genre when all genres have been exploded like black helicopters confronted by a massively grotesque birdman superhero?

The pace of the film is rapid, and the tension intensified by the pounding jazz drumming, which reinforces the Mesoamerican culture underpinnings as it is an echo of Mesoamerican ritual and tradition, namely the drumming circles. The film places the audience in a process of "becoming" – and the stakes are high.

It's not just about a "comeback" as a film hero, but also about the journey to transformation into a being with the attributes represented by specific animal spirits. Mesoamerican spirit animals included the jaguar, the turtle, deer, the snake, and more, each with its set of attributes. The film itself can be seen as an extended ceremony in which the protagonist sheds his limited, mortal self and takes on the attributes of his chosen animal spirit, a bird resembling the powerful falcon.

CHARACTERS

Riggan Thomson	Washed out actor famous for superhero roles
Sam Thomson	Riggan's daughter
Jake	Riggan's best friend and lawyer
Laura Alburn	Riggan's girlfriend
Mike Shiner	Talented but troubled method actor

Tabitha Dickinson	Influential theater critic
Sylvia	Riggan's ex-wife
Lesley Truman	Broadway debutante

THE STORY

Out of the Ashes: Riggan Thomson was formerly famous for his role as a superhero named Birdman in a trilogy popular in the 1990s. His career has collapsed since then, and he would like to emulate another bird, the phoenix, and rise, victorious, from the ashes.

Voices and Visualizations: Riggan is tortured by voices that taunt him and by visions of himself performing feats of levitation and telekinesis. While the typical interpretation of this would be that Riggan is suffering from schizoaffective disorder, an alternative explanation would be that he is in tune with his animal spirit (the bird – a falcon? condor?) and is readying himself for a ritual of transformation in which he takes on those attributes.

Story within a Story: Ironically, Riggan has chosen a path to career restoration that is the antithesis of the superhero genre. He's directing a Broadway play based on Raymond Carver's very depressing short story, "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love," which is essentially about ordinary people sinking deeper and deeper into alcoholism and toxic personal relationships. A knowledgeable audience member will recognize this fact immediately, and see the ironic commentary: if you want to fail in life, hook yourself up with Raymond Carver. If you want to fly and transform, look to other genres and traditions, namely the SuperHero genre and the Mesoamerican traditions of acquiring the attributes of the animal spirits.

The Inner Birdman Voice: Riggan has an inner voice that becomes stronger during the film. It is deeply critical of his desire to have a comeback with the Raymond Carver film. At best, the film would be critically acclaimed for following the naturalism in the style of Emile Zola, as in *L'Assommoir*, a brutally realistic depiction of alcoholism and poverty. At worst, immersing himself in such topics will lead to a negative transformation, rather than the glorious condor-spirit that Riggan aspires to. The New York theatre world prefers the existentialist nihilism to fantasy and self-actualization, however. Riggan should listen to his inner Birdman. Birdman tells Riggan, "You are Birdman! You can fly! Don't become someone from "What We Talk About When We Talk about Love." It will kill you"

Circle of Friends: Jake is Riggan's best friend. He's also his attorney and the producer of the play, "What We Talk About." Jake is supportive, but is often caught in triangles. For example, Riggan's girlfriend is acting in the play, and Riggan's daughter, Sam, is working as his assistant.

Struggles with his Daughter: Riggan is trying to reconnect with his daughter, Sam. However, she has resentment and is deeply skeptical, partly because she blames him for her descent into drug addiction, and partly because she fears him because she sees the surface manifestations of his inner struggle between Birdman and the voices of the New York theatre community, who value nihilistic naturalism over what they consider to be shallow, pop-culture of the masses.

Broadway Debutante: Lesley is playing the lead in Riggan's production. She is opinionated and desperately wants the play to be her gateway into fame and future roles on Broadway. She loves method acting and recommends her boyfriend, the volatile and temperamental method actor, Mike Shiner.

Behind the Scenes Fireworks: Replacing Ralph with the narcissistic Method Actor Mike Shiner not only results in horrific behavior on the stage, but also triggers arguments off stage. It does not help that his girlfriend and debutante, Lesley is equally self-absorbed. In the meantime, the producer warns that their bickering will hamper the show and if they get bad reviews, they're done for.

Sam Relapses and She Clashes with Riggan: Riggan finds Sam with marijuana and accuses her of not trying hard enough with her recovery and sabotaging herself. Sam criticizes Riggan and his decision to produce the play, which she claims is for his own vanity. In that sense she echoes Birdman's voice criticizing Riggan, now with more insistency than ever.

Locked out & the Times Square Underpants Scene: Stressed before having to go back on stage, Riggan accidentally locks himself outside as his robe belt gets stuck in a fire exit door. In a fortuitous stroke of luck, he has a window he can open. The downside is that he has to run through Times Square in his boxers. It's fortuitous in two ways: First, he is able to find a way back into the theatre and as he does so, cameras capture his mad dash in his boxers, and the video goes viral; Second, Further, there is a quirky visual allusion to Captain Underpants, the comic strip character who is a small boy who imagines himself to be a superhero, as he fashions a towel into a cape and runs around in his underpants.

Theatre Critic Encounter: After his performance, Riggan is feeling slightly optimistic and he stops by a bar. Unfortunately, he decides to speak with an influential theatre critic, Tabitha Dickinson. Tabitha was not the least bit impressed with Mike Shiner's over-the-top method acting / on-stage assault a la "theatre of cruelty" and further, she hates Riggan just on principle, for having been a Hollywood star now presuming to conquer Broadway. She vows to ruin the show with negative reviews.

Binge: Stunned by the critic's vitriol and the existential threat she presented to their dreams and ambitions for the play, Riggan buys a bottle of whiskey, guzzles the whole thing, and passes out. When he comes to, he is on the stoop outside his apartment, and he has a tremendous hangover.

Birdman Comes Alive: Riggan has a tremendous hangover after drinking whiskey, but must walk to the theatre. As he walks, he hears Birdman talking next to him. He looks up and sees that Birdman is now visible. "Walk away from the play! Just walk away. It's time for Birdman 4," says Birdman. An action film sequence plays out, and it electrifies the audience, who love a spectacle. Riggan flies through the streets of Manhattan. He is Birdman!

Confession to Sylvia: Back at the theatre, Riggan continues to act antithetically to what Birdman would have him do. His self-destructiveness extends to his behavior as he acts erratically and then, out of nowhere, confesses to his ex-wife, Sylvia, that he tried to drown himself in the ocean after she caught him in an affair.

Choosing Carver over Birdman – the prop gun: The combination of Iowa School realism and naturalism (as expressed as Method Acting) should not, in theory, have a pernicious effect on the actors. But, it seems to affect them and they enact in real life the fiction depicted in the play.

Prop Gun. Riggan tells his ex-wife about his inner Birdman voice, but she ignores it. After Sylvia wishes him luck and leaves the room, Riggan picks up a real gun, instead of the prop gun, for the final scene in which his character commits suicide. Where the protagonist in Carver's story kills himself, Riggan shoots himself in the head on stage. The play receives a standing ovation as Tabitha stands and leaves. Then, they realize he really shot himself.

Super-Realism? Riggan wakes up in a hospital the next day. His face is covered in a mask of bandages where his nose has been surgically reconstructed after he shoots himself during the botched suicide. Sylvia is worried about Riggan. However, Jake cannot contain his excitement because the play will run for a long time because Tabitha published a glowing review acclaiming the play, which called the suicide attempt a new art, "super-realism," and just what American theater needed.

Fame. What does it do for you? Sam visits with flowers, which Riggan cannot smell, and takes a picture of him to share with the skyrocketing number of followers on the Twitter account she has

created for him. While she steps outside to find a vase, Riggan goes into the bathroom, removes the bandages revealing his swollen new nose, and scatologically says goodbye to Birdman, seen seated on the toilet.

Final flight. Fascinated by the birds flying outside his room, Riggan opens the window, looks up at them, and then climbs out onto the ledge. Sam returns and finds the room is empty. She runs to the window and looks to the ground, worried that Riggan leaped to his death. But, then she looks up to the sky. She smiles.

THEMES

Heroic Archetypes Break Down in the Postmodern World: The superhero archetype from the 1940s and 1950s is an empty caricature of itself in the 21st century. It is a self-reflective image that simply refers back to itself like an endless hall of mirrors, and there is no way to find the actual deeds and presence of a physical superhero. However, the internal superhero is an inner voice and an inner vision. It ultimately cannot transform the individual into a person who can fly and perform heroic feats.

What is a Hero? The “Hero” is nowhere to be found in Birdman, except in the long expired concept of a comic-book heroic figure. The only physical manifestation of a “hero” in the theatre is in Raymond Carver’s play being enacted by Riggan. The hero commits suicide on stage.

Mental Illness: Riggan hears Birdman and even sees a physical apparition. He is also easily distracted and seems to be in the grip of obsessions. We seem to be seeing the rapid onset of schizophrenia or a kind of fugue state. At the same time, he is immersed in themes of mental illness (alcoholism and depression) in the theatrical adaptation of Raymond Carver’s “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love.”

“Realism” in Literature is Actually a Caricature: Raymond Carver’s work, a representative of the Iowa School brand of realism, is known for developing realism to an extreme level. The “super-realism” magnifies aspects of real life to the point that the small part fills one’s entire consciousness. What Birdman suggests about this approach is that in magnifying and focusing in on a particular aspect of realism is actually a grotesque distortion and it ultimately leads to confusion, discord, and self-destruction.

Success Ultimately Kills: Riggan’s self-destructive acts give him a huge following on Twitter. When he shot himself onstage, his popularity skyrocketed, whereas when he focused on being the best possible actor he could be, he was essentially invisible. His final flight out the window is an ironic acknowledgment of how he has been goaded on by his social media followers to continue the spectacle of self-destruction. This aspect reminds one of Kafka’s novella, “The Hunger Artist.”

Secular Syncretism between Mesoamerican spirit animals and the superhero genre: By wearing the mask of a bird and by donning the costume, he takes on attributes of animal spirits. In this way, he is echoing the practice of the Mesoamericans (namely, the Maya, Toltecs, Olmecs, and Aztecs) in going through elaborate rituals accompanied by drumming (here, echoed in the soundtrack), with the goal of being able to take on the attributes of the specific animals or animal spirits.

Method Acting Is Absurd: In a scene that hilariously mocks the entire concept of method acting and demonstrates how destructive the practice can be to the actor and all those around her / him, Mike Shiner gets so far into the morally depraved character he is acting in the wretched “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love,” that he goes into a rage when he discovers it’s water, not gin, in his glass, literally tries to have real sex with the actress while on stage, claims the prop gun is “too artificial” and ruins the scene. Method acting can be seen as the antithesis of

the Mesoamerican animal spirit transformation. If anything, it is a practice that blocks any progress toward positive transformation.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS:

Riggan Thomson: Riggan Thomson is half-man, half-bird already. He's well on his way to the transformation that the pounding drumbeat of the soundtrack and the mocking, taunting inner voice are pushing him to be. The best days of his life, and his identity-making sojourns occurred a good 20 years back, when he was a Hollywood SuperHero, the Birdman. Now, he has succumbed to the tired mediocrity of reality, where he thinks he will achieve dignified success. However, he does not realize that realism and naturalism are genres that destroy, while fantasy lifts up and transforms. With one foot in the real world, and another foot in an idealized projection of reality, it is no wonder that Riggan has a hard time with his ex-wife, daughter, director, and others.

Faded Celebrity: Riggan achieved great fame and celebrity twenty years earlier as a super-hero, Birdman, in a film franchise produced in Hollywood. But, at the time of the story, Riggan has been forgotten. He wants to be taken seriously and does not want to reprise his film role. For that reason, he focuses on New York.

Reality is a Construct: The dictum, "reality is a construct," is something one generally hears in conjunction with postmodernism and also the social construction of reality, which is to say that society (and its hegemonic forces) and also the individual human will are the forces that construct reality.

Secular syncretism – the quest for transformation: Riggan is a throwback. He is an atavistic projection of the way that MesoAmerican spirit-warriors and transformational forces were before all changed, and modernity took hold. His way of looking at the world reflects the MesoAmerican rites and rituals of the Olmecs, Maya, Toltecs, and Aztecs, and his preferred spirit-guide and animal is a bird – a giant, powerful bird – an eagle or falcon. In Riggan, we see the merging of two spiritual traditions – the Mesoamerican religious ceremonies, and a secular spirituality of the Superhero genre. Iñárritu is bold in declaring the Superhero genre a spiritual text – a living document – but he is completely right. When the Catholics came to the Americas, they synthesized their saints, holy days, traditions, and creeds and blended them with the existing ones. Iñárritu illustrates the same process as Birdman comes to Broadway. However, Broadway and the self-destructiveness illustrated in the theatrical adaptation of Raymond Carver's naturalism pluck Birdman's feathers and clips his wings.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are the primary attributes of a superhero in a Hollywood blockbuster based on a superhero character from a comic book or graphic novel? What makes them heroic? Use a scene in the film to support your points.
2. In what way is the protagonist in the Broadway adaptation of Raymond Carver's "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love" the antithesis of a Hollywood superhero? Why is the Carver protagonist not even an anti-hero?
3. Describe how Inárritu makes a biting critique of method acting. What is method acting and how is it parodied? What is the film suggesting about the relationship between method acting and an overarching nihilism in society, beginning with human relationships?
4. Explain why and how Riggan's mishaps "went viral" on social media (his half-naked run down Broadway; shooting his nose off on stage), and the film's gallows commentary about the "value" of fame in social media.

5. Describe the interaction and interplay between the soundtrack and the presence of masks and bird costumes. What kinds of meanings can be derived from that relationship?

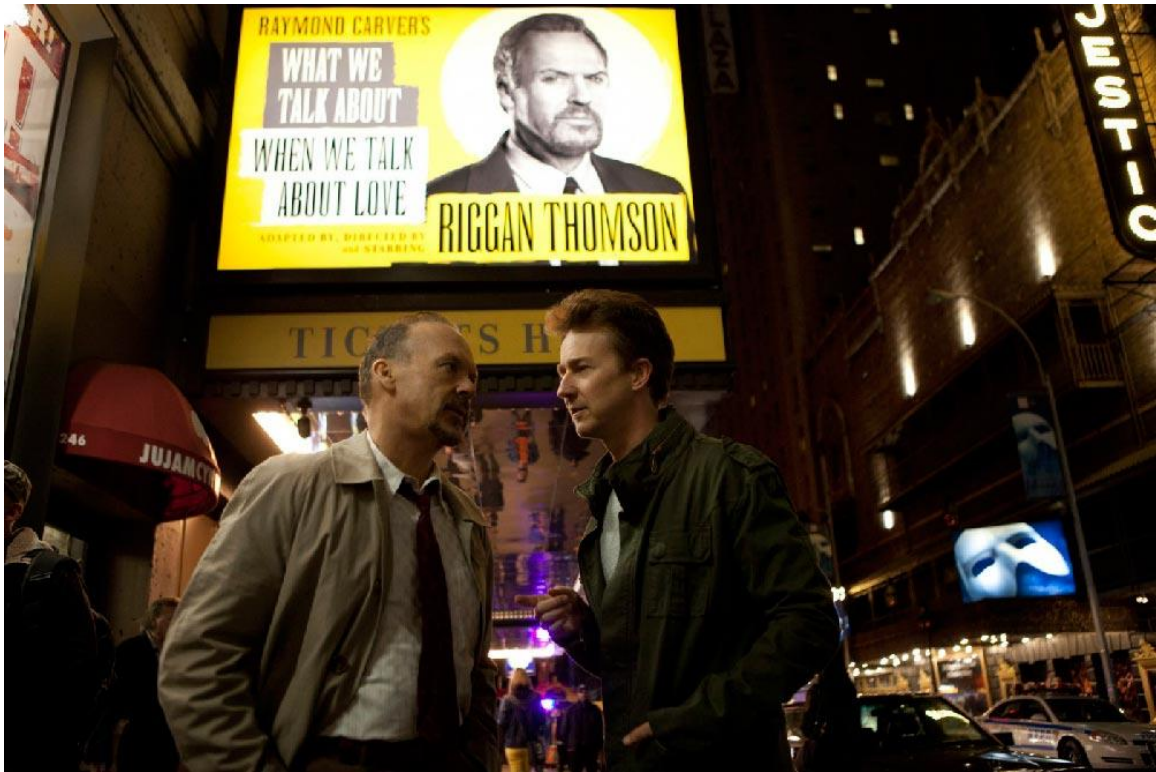
ILLUSTRATIVE SCENES



Birdman becomes visible after Riggan has a crisis in the theatre.



Far from the heights of glory as a Hollywood star of superhero films, Riggan lives in a filthy apartment in New York City and hopes for critical success with an adaptation of Raymond Carver's "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love."



Riggan stands under the marquee in Broadway on opening night. His manager encourages him, and tells him he's on the cusp of success, and that the fact he ran half-naked down the street after locking himself outside his dressing room was actually a positive thing.



Extreme "method acting" carries over into real life. It is causing problems for Riggan because Mike Shiner is assaulting the cast in extreme realism. Jake tells Riggan what he does not want to hear.



Fully transformed into full Birdman mode, Riggan is ready to fly. We do not see his final flight into the unknown. We are simply left to follow the gaze of his daughter who looks skyward where she assumes Riggan (now Birdman) has gone.