

Serpa examines how the film Birdman blurs the line between fact and fiction, forcing its viewers to question their certainty about what is real. Her review highlights several conventions of this genre, crafting vivid representations of pivotal scenes and drawing on outside research to inform her analysis. (Instructor: Beth Machlan)

BIRDMAN: REALITY TAKES FLIGHT

Gabriela Serpa

Riggan Thomson is standing on the ledge of a New York City building! His expression is unsettling, his eyes trance-like, unwavering. His body takes up the whole screen as the audience in the movie theater watches him skeptically, chewing on their popcorn a little more slowly, leaning a little farther out of their seats with curiosity. Will he jump? While street horns blare and onlookers yell in what appears to be the normal soundscape of New York City, we see a tremor begin in Riggan's jaw. We don't know what's happening. Neither the on- nor off-screen audiences of the spectacle know what to expect. A bodiless voice in the movie asks: "Hey, is this for real or are you shooting a film?" (*Birdman*). "A film!" answers Riggan, but we aren't convinced. After an hour and a half of sitting through Alejandro Iñárritu's 2014 movie *Birdman*, the question of "is this for real or are you shooting a film?" doesn't come as a shock. Instead, it vocalizes the central problem invoked by the film itself: what is real, and what is fiction?

Michael Keaton plays Riggan Thomson, a washed-out celebrity made famous by his blockbuster role as the superhero Birdman. At the time the film begins, more than ten years have passed since the climax of Riggan's career, and he is haunted by his past, unable to move on from the remnants of Birdman's fame. In a desperate attempt to reclaim his name and reputation as an actor, he stages a Broadway production of Raymond Carver's "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love," with himself in the lead role. But Riggan's road to redemption isn't easy. Mike Shiner, the gifted actor

starring alongside Riggan, is constantly combative, and theater critic Tabitha is determined to foil Riggan's efforts. These prove to be only some of the problems he encounters before opening night. Perhaps his biggest challenge is letting go of his superhero alter ego. Riggan literally cannot stop being Birdman when alone; at times, he has superpowers, levitates, shatters mirrors, and moves things with the power of his mind. He is often pictured having conversations with a man in a bird costume who we can only assume to be a younger version of himself as Birdman.

To make matters worse, in the midst of the flying, the levitating, and the superpowers, Riggan is painfully unsuccessful in being happy. He isn't an attentive parent to his daughter, Sam (Emma Stone), avoids his girlfriend, and drinks himself into despicable states. Riggan Thomson is a self-destructing man, who, in a desperate attempt to nurture his own vanity, brings to light the complicated nature of the human ego. Nonetheless, this quality combined with his ability to fly—or his belief that he can—generates the feeling that nothing is real. Flying has to be fiction—at least, that's what we tell ourselves. Throughout the whole movie, time and time again, we don't know what to think and are forced to reconsider our notions of fiction and reality to figure it out.

Riggan also has a lot to figure out when, after a drunken night of self-loathing, he wakes up on the steps of a walk-up building in Manhattan, disoriented and dirty, his head resting on a garbage bag. He turns around and cringes as a bodiless voice starts to taunt him. The camera zooms and swivels around him to show us that the voice belongs to Birdman, who is close to Riggan's ear, agitatedly reminding him, "You're bigger than life. You save people from their boring, miserable lives" (*Birdman*). As this occurs, we see a day like any other in the background; that is, until Riggan snaps his fingers and Birdman flies up, a missile is launched onto a car, a SWAT team invades the scene, helicopters begin to circle the area, and Birdman fires a laser at a giant metallic bird perched on top of a building. The chaos disappears as fast as it came. What did we just see? There was no shift in the camera, no filter, no sign to indicate that what occurred was a figment of Riggan's imagination. But people can't fly, and this movie isn't about superheroes, so he must have imagined everything. Right?

Not necessarily. In this scene, our first instinct is to dismiss what we just saw as unreal, but no actual aspect of the movie depicts it as imagined. More often than not, *Birdman*'s audience takes it upon itself to decide the parameters of fiction, but there is no real logic in how we do it other than our own sense of what is conventional. In the real world, we think, people can't fly, so Riggan can't fly. But there he is, right in front of us, flying.

It seems clear to us that Riggan is losing his mind, but there are no visual indications of a break in reality—quite the opposite, actually. Throughout the movie, the use of “the mad tracking shot—a long, rapturously complicated camera move that seems to defy all spatial and temporal logic”—creates the illusion of the film happening in one single shot (Romney). *Birdman*'s director of photography, Emmanuel Lubezki, justifies this choice with the idea that “life is continuing, and maybe not having cuts was going to help immerse the audience in that kind of emotional rhythm” (qtd. in Romney). The cinematography of *Birdman*, in its unprecedented technique and nature, looks to emulate what is real; using one shot means that there is no space to edit things out, to retake or to recreate scenes, because an average day, as Iñárritu puts it, “doesn't feel like a bunch of cuts. It feels like a constant move” (qtd. in Romney).

This honesty aims to make the film emulate the nature of a play, if not of reality. According to Emma Stone, rehearsing “*Birdman* was like theater because . . . everything had to be technically perfect, but then you had to be able to completely let go and play the truth of the scene, versus a choreographed dance. It was like everyone was walking on a tightrope. . . . If anyone hit your rope, everyone fell” (qtd. in D'Alessandro). *The New Yorker*'s Richard Brody calls *Birdman* “an administrative choreography of a most delicate theatrical artifice.” In channeling the medium of theater through its fluid movement and single shot, the camera enables the audience to trust it, to understand it as a living organism that cannot show anything but what is actually happening on stage. Still, when Riggan snaps his fingers and the world behind him is thrown into chaos, the whole situation seems to be a figment of his imagination. The cinematography of *Birdman* promises to show us only what is really going on, but when we pass judgment instead of believing what we see and how it is shown to us,

we choose to believe what we know. What we understand as 'real' limits our ability to believe in imaginative fiction.

With films, it is harder for us to distinguish reality and fiction than it is in theater, where the coexistence of both is natural, if not a given. In an article for the International Federation for Theater Research, Professor Erika Fischer-Lichte notes that when you go to the theater, you witness real people moving around in real spaces in real time. However, "the real time, the duration of the performance, is not identical with the time represented; and the real body of each actor usually signifies the body of another, a stage figure, a character" (84). Reality imposes itself on fiction in the theater. In film, fiction tends to impose itself on reality, because, unless you're watching a documentary, movies that have fictional characters and contain imagined situations are visually set in the real world, in scenarios where fiction invades real places that we can recognize. It is no coincidence, then, that most of *Birdman* takes place either backstage or on the stage of Broadway's St. James Theatre. Adding a story within a story, and a stage within a stage, further disorients us as to what is real and what isn't. Is this fictional reality, or realistic fiction? Having a theater within the movie makes the audience forget, if not lose its grip on, the differences between what is real and what isn't. In film, particularly in *Birdman*, we are uncomfortable accepting fiction and reality as one because movies often show us a world literally identical to our own; for many, accepting reality and fiction as intertwined in the world of a film might signal an acceptance of such a relationship in our daily lives.

But why don't we want to accept the fiction in reality? Why is it that when we go to the movies, despite voluntarily signing up for a fictional experience, we don't always let ourselves get caught up in its imaginative elements? We need to know that the movie we are watching is about superheroes or some other magical thing in order to accept a break in reality. Once we settle on a film as 'being real,' we can't see it as anything but; that would imply that reality and fiction are loosely interchangeable notions, and acknowledging this can be threatening.

The threat of fiction became very real in 2013, the year that *Birdman* was filmed and produced. The movie's release followed a

series of events that greatly changed how the people of the United States, if not of the world, understood their reality. The Boston Marathon bombings marked the beginning of a new era of terrorism, in which videos of men decapitating innocent people became just another segment of televised news. Meanwhile, Edward Snowden's Wikileaks release of NSA documents in response to "what he described as the systematic surveillance of innocent citizens" by the government shattered whatever illusion Americans had about Internet privacy (Gellman et al.). Terrorist bombings in the places we least expect and the realization that the government is running a technological panopticon to watch our every move are common plot points in movies, but, in 2013, those threats became real for many Americans. Dangers that had once seemed fictional to so many were now real-life worries that made some feel unsafe in their own homes.

2013 was a year that tested the boundaries of safety, and therefore threatened the constraints of reality as many knew it. Many years prior, in the aftermath of 9/11, the expression "like a movie" became a common phrase used by American television newscasters and spectators alike (Rickli). Jonathan Hensleigh, the scriptwriter of *Armageddon*, stated that he was reminded of his film while watching television on September 11. "When it actually happens and you're watching it on CNN, frankly, it gives you the creeps," he admitted (qtd. in Rickli). Steve de Souza, the director of *Die Hard*, went so far as to notice that the image of the terrorist attack looked like one of his movie posters (Rickli). The Boston Marathon Bombing and the rise of ISIS as a powerful political force have created the same kind of discomfort, revealing parallels between real world events and fictional scenarios. When the stuff of fiction becomes real, the break in reality is not only unsettling, but it also usually signifies some kind of shock to the structure of our world. Fischer-Lichte considers that the separate notions of the 'real' and the 'fictional' serve as parameters that dictate our behaviors and actions. Maybe we cling to the distinction between the two because "their destabilization, their collapse, results, on the one hand, in a destabilization of our perception of the world, ourselves and others, and, on the other, in a shattering of the norms and rules that guide our behavior" (Fischer-Lichte 95).

Birdman preys on our fear of reconciling fiction with reality by distorting how we understand both through film. It gives us a camera that appears magical in how it “ebbs and flows like water, soars and swoops like a bird,” but expects us to trust it because the movie is shot in one continuous take (Dargis). It places us in the world of theater within a film to disorient us, and, in doing so, shows us that confusing fiction and reality isn’t always a scary experience. *Birdman* wants to show us how to understand our world in both the contexts of fiction and reality, asking us to reconsider the relationship between the two and come to terms with the possibility that they exist as one.

But, though the movie asks us to acknowledge fiction and reality as not necessarily separate, *Birdman* knows that most of us won’t want to or simply won’t be able to combine both concepts. In the movie’s final scene, we see the camera swerve away from an open window towards the inside of Riggan’s hospital room, where he is recovering after shooting his nose off during a performance of his play. The air has a slightly gray tint to it as Sam walks into the room, looking for him. “Dad?” she murmurs repeatedly as she scrambles to find him. Her eyes lock on the open window for a moment, and her body thrusts itself towards the sill as she looks out and down in shock. There’s something eerie about the drum beat playing in the background, in how it creates a noise oscillating between restrained and unhinged. The camera focuses on Sam looking out the window as her eyes, practically popping out of her head, shift down in desperation. She looks up, a defeated expression on her face, but the drums start beating a little faster, a little louder, and with a little more excitement. Her face slowly bends into a smile of awe as she looks up in surprised satisfaction. Birds call in the background, the screen goes black, and we hear her start to laugh.

Richard Brody thinks that *Birdman* “is an exercise in cinematic half-assedness: it tackles big questions and offers conventional answers,” but this isn’t a movie about solutions; it’s a movie about questions. When Sam looks out the window, she probably sees her dead father’s body below her. Most of us understand her dazed expression and laughter as a mental breakdown in the face of such a horrible scene. She is in denial. But then again, what if we are in denial? *Birdman* could have flown off into the air, and his daughter

could be marveling at the sight of it. The dreamers and the believers could be right. With its final scene, *Birdman* makes us question whether or not our notions of reality are based on what is real or what *feels* real. It forces us to reconsider our position within reality. But, more so, it leaves us with the unsettling realization that we might be living our lives in denial of the unknown. After all, doesn't fiction only stop being real when we refuse to accept it as such?

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