

How Did We End up Here?:
Verisimilitude, Diegesis, and Allusions in *Birdman*

Birdman: Or (The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance) presents a rare and unusual experience of interwoven strands of subjective and objective realities. The film follows a washed up actor as its protagonist, Riggan Thomson (Michael Keaton), attempting to rejuvenate his career with a theatrical adaptation of Raymond Carver's "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love." Several notable actors include Edward Norton (costar in Thomson's play), Zach Galifianakis (Thomson's mover and shaker of a publicist and friend), and Emma Stone (Thomson's daughter). While the talented cast and distinctive cinematography make for an entertaining and complex film, the greatest complexity lies in the film's ending. The last scenes of *Birdman* depict a series of actions that could signify several possible endings for Thomson. The climax of the film is Thomson shooting himself on stage to give as real as a performance as he can. It is after he falls to the ground and the audience tentatively cheers that the film opens to a large number of interpretations. This sequence of dream-like scenes after the applause interrupts the film's continuous-shot, which leaves viewers to question the reality of the film's situation. This interruption shows the final breaking point between Thomson's life and his fantasy sequence before his imagined, ideal ending. The scene of Thomson waking in the hospital is an illusory continuation of the previously uninterrupted duration of the film. This complexity and questioning rests in the film's verisimilitude. The hospital scene can be viewed as imaginary because of the previous instances of questioning reality and the mixing of diegetic elements.

The film's introduction consists of: Carver's "Late Fragment" in the opening credits, a falling object from in the sky, and a nearly subliminal flash of beached jellyfish. The first scene

of the film is of Riggan Thomson levitating meditatively in his underwear. An interior monologue of his (previously star-status) character, Birdman, speaks to him about his poor situation asking, “How did we end up here?” The audience is immediately primed to question the reality in this film. Thomson’s telekinetic “powers” extend to a light fixture falling on a fellow actor during a bad rehearsal. The fact that Thomson claims responsibility for this to his producer and close friend, Brandon (Galifianakis), shows his full belief in these abilities. The inner voice of Birdman claiming, “these people don’t know what you’re capable of” along with the often anger-induced telekinesis throughout the film gives Thomson’s powers caution to hide them. What should set off the audience the most of Thomson’s perception of reality is when these instances happen and when they stop. Thomson often broods over his state in solitude, leaving “truth” to be spoken into his mind by Birdman, and his thoughts to provoke the movement of objects. That is until someone else enters the room. Interruptions shatter the illusion, and we see that Thomson is not supernatural, but that he throws destructive tantrums.

The most pivotal moment of blurred realities from the audience’s perspective is Thomson’s “cab ride” scene. This scene starts with a foreshadowing sight of Thomson on a building’s ledge after a passionate speech from Birdman. “Because next time you screech, it’ll explode in millions of ear drums,” is the final conviction Thomson needs to develop his plan of committing suicide on stage. This brings his “flight” over to the building, causing a commotion below of people wondering if Thomson will jump. Instead, he levitates through the streets, floating over cars with a look of lucidity on his face. The scene ends with Thomson heading into the theatre with new spark in him to show the play critic, Tabitha, something real. The cab driver following behind him asking for his fare is the sticking point of the scene. The detail should finalize the audience’s perspective; Thomson’s abilities have never been real in this movie’s

world. His “flying” over to the theatre was imagined. In reality, Thomson was taking a taxicab the whole time. What brought this imaginary flight in Thomson’s mind were the events of his life coming to a head. Thomson has had all he can in questioning his choices and failing to please everyone, including himself. He sees Tabitha Dickinson (Lindsay Duncan) and ends up confronting this woman who has “the only opinion that matters.” Thomson cannot figure out if he truly believes that. His own dressing room displays a quote: “A thing is a thing, not what is said of that thing.” Despite this peripheral pep-talk he keeps on his mirror, the lashing out against Tabitha’s “labels,” and his inner battles of relevancy, Thomson still strives for the validation in Tabitha’s shining words. Thomson starts thinking of a resolution. After waking up hung-over on the sidewalk, Thomson’s inner voice of Birdman materializes himself as something more than just an interior monologue, but he seemingly manifests himself to physically walk behind Thomson, talking into his ear. His main advice for Thomson’s dilemma is to go back to what made his career so successful: blood and action. Birdman helps Thomson envision a *Birdman* reboot to keep his superhero status in place. Special operations forces, helicopters, a looming robotic bird, and other images of “apocalyptic porn” are embodied in the New York street Thomson walks along. In addition to Birdman making a physical appearance, the morphing of this imagined scene of destruction and the actual setting should be another trigger to the audience to confirm his abilities are in his own mind.

An aspect of making his powers so believable was the diegesis of this movie’s world. The diegetic elements, or events, characters, settings, and sounds, of the movie were so parallel to the audience’s own world that it created a sense of authenticity (Geiger and Rutsky). However, much like the film giving the audience Thomson’s direct perspective of experiencing powers, diegetic and non-diegetic elements can mislead the audience as to what is real. An example of a

believable diegetic sound is when Thomson overhears his TV covering celebrity news about Robert Downey Jr.'s role in *Iron Man*. In the audience's world, this actor plays this same role and is covered heavily in the media, making a believable setting. Throughout the entire movie there are sequences of jazz drums that emphasize the movement and mood of scenes, much like soundtracks. This makes it a non-diegetic sound being heard by the audience, and presumably not the characters of the film's world (Geiger and Rutsky). However, a handful of times a drummer appears within the film as the source of the music, making it diegetic, at least in Thomson's mind. The drummer appears during Thomson's most determined or stressed of experiences, priming the audience to think that the physical drummer is imaginary. As Thomson prepares for the last scene, for instance, he passes the drummer with his full drum kit in a nook of the busy and crowded backstage storage. This inclusion of a highly unlikely scenario is exactly meant to divide the real and imagined in Thomson's world as it meshes what could be soundtrack and non-diegetic sound into questionably diegetic sound (Yacavone 22). Other questionable non-diegetic elements include the musical score that is heard by the audience as Thomson is about to "fly" and the *Macbeth* scene. When another man on the roof with Thomson disturbs his inner monologue with Birdman, the inspiring instrumentals are cut off as well. During his walk to the liquor store, an almost oblivious reading of *Macbeth* can be heard as if a subtle but shouting voice-over was added to the soundtrack. The source of this sound is found to be a drifting man, making it diegetic. This confusion of diegetic and non-diegetic elements is purposeful for the audience to feel that Thomson's experience is parallel to their own but is inconsistent with an actual reality. In many opinions on film, anything being diegetic or non-diegetic at all is considered by the mind or perception of both the viewer and the character (Yacavone 37).

The film's dedication to realism does not stop in diegesis. The movie is meant to look as if it were filmed as one continuous shot. The movie takes several cues from the long takes in movies like *Paths of Glory* (1957) or *Goodfellas* (1990) that directed viewers through trenches or kitchens, level with characters. Along with the direct point of view, *Birdman* also uses the more voyeuristic approach as seen in *The Passenger* (1975) or *Panic Room* (2002) that takes the viewer through somewhat impossible spaces to be an omnipresent onlooker. While long shots have been done time and time again, the movie has taken the realistic form of living life continuously, without cuts, into film. The movie has been edited to look completely continuous to capture the urgency and life of Thomson during his play production. This method creates an authentic feeling of observation. The audience gathers the most emotion and experiences from both up close views in following the characters or crane-like pans to express time passing without actually cutting the scenes. Only until Thomson shoots himself is there a discontinuity of the film, putting him in the hospital where he experiences the ideal ending he wanted.

This "happy ending" for Riggan Thomson has been recognized as imagined by the previous use of his "powers." The actual ending is cleverly concealed within the literary illusions of the film. Raymond Carver's "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love," a short story about defining love, is used well to parallel the events in the movie. The most notable play-to-movie reflections are found in the theme of suicide, which foreshadows to the reality of Thomson's ending. When the play's group of characters is talking about love in the kitchen, they mention Terri's past boyfriend, Ed. In Carver's short story, he tries killing himself twice. He survives his gun shot attempt three days before passing in the hospital with Terri by him (Carver, "What We Talk About" 118). Jellyfish interrupted Thomson's first suicide attempt, but it is his second attempt that the foreshadowing is important to. Ed "bungles" his suicide by surviving and

shooting himself in the mouth. The end of Birdman portrays in Thomson's "happy ending" scene that he simply shot his nose instead of killing himself. Ed's problems with being loved mirror Thomson's problems with wanting admiration and relevancy again. The most significant Carver work is much less displayed than the play-adapted short story. In the opening credits of the picture (before a flash of beached jellyfish, an allusion to his first suicide attempt), a quotation appears in sequences with the drumbeats exposing the Carver poem "Late Fragment." The poem reads:

And did you get what
you wanted from this life, even so?
I did.
And what did you want?
To call myself beloved, to feel myself
beloved on the earth. (Carver, "Late" 294)

This poem encompasses the entire reasoning for the complex ending of Thomson's suicide. His death was the cost of getting what he wanted out of life and the validation that came with that resolution. He had wanted to be beloved by his daughter, by Tabitha (the critic), and, in turn, by the world. Circling back to what inspired this resolution were Birdman's tortuous "truth" before his cab ride, which was to revive his career by giving the people what they want: blood and action. Thomson interpreted his only means of delivering this was giving them his real blood with real action. "We have to end it on our terms, with a grand gesture. Flames. Sacrifice. Icarus." These glory-laced words of Birdman heavily suggest suicide to have a legendary death. Icarus may not have intentionally killed himself, but his reference here is intended for the hubris Icarus and Thomson share. Thomson refuses a middle ground after his confrontation with

Tabitha much like Icarus refuses the safe route away from the sun so he can fly like the Gods (Chamberlain 4). The advisory Daedalus in this case being those telling Thomson to stay a has-been or revive the *Birdman* franchise for easy profits.

Birdman's ending is a great representation of the power that film elements have on one's interpretation. Admirable acting and distinctive cinematography are not the only factors swaying the audience. The allusions to Carver's work take the audience through the motives of Thomson's suicide subtly disguised as a play adaptation. Thomson's suicide was the medium for validation he needed after battling with the reality of what it means to be relevant, finding footing in a different world of talent, and finding a happy, Hollywood ending. What makes this so surprising is the agency Thomson gained with killing himself. He created his own reality, as he had throughout the movie, with the ability to create his own ending (Aaron 90). *Birdman's* back and forth diegetic elements and layers of reality mixed with imaginary leave the audience questioning the layered world presented to them, and to wonder if it mirrors their own reality.

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