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Subjective Identity Takes Flight:

Magical Realism in *Birdman*

Kelly Kramer

Despite the fact that it won the Oscar for Best Picture in 2014, *Birdman* still tends to fly under the radar of many. *Birdman* is one of those pieces of art made about, and for, other artists, as it is both a satirical mockery of the low-brow superhero blockbuster, as well as a salute to the cultural power and influence of such films. Indeed, it is probably the closest a superhero movie will ever come to winning an Oscar in this day and age. However, it is not so much a film about superheroes as a careful examination of how superheroes have infiltrated our more “serious” art forms, like the theater and, of course, Oscar-winning dramas. In this film, the protagonist Riggan is a washed-up superhero blockbuster star, who, ironically, is played by Michael Keaton of *Batman* fame. After retiring from the superhero business, he decides to try his hand at some “real” art by staging a theater production of a work by Raymond Carver. He is haunted by hallucinations, or visions, of Birdman, the exaggerated superhero he used to play. As the play gets closer to opening night, every possible thing goes wrong, yet it all comes together in the end; and it is the ending of the film, specifically, that is most deserving of analysis. Film critics have assumed that is their job to determine what really happened in *Birdman*, to decipher the filmmaker’s code and explain away the absurd elements involving the character Birdman. In essence, most critics will say that Riggan was depressed by his failure to produce a worthwhile show and committed suicide. This paper will contest that reading by arguing that a true magical realist interpretation eschews any possibility of a simplistic explanation for what really happens in the end.

Throughout the film, Riggan displays super powers that may or not be real, which has led film critics to label these fanciful moments as magical realism, without a clear foundation of what magical realism is, or its place in literary history. As a basic literary definition, taken from the viewpoints of many scholars, the magical realism mode of storytelling is real-world stories, told realistically, with a matter-of-fact inclusion of certain fantastical, surprising, almost unbelievable elements. It is not a realistic telling of a fantasy story or anything to do with a creation of a secondary world. Rather, the story's fantastical, absurd, impossible elements are handled so realistically that they make the reader believe these elements are actually part of our world. Alejo Carpentier, an important Latin American theorist, wrote it was "not a realism to be transfigured by the 'supplement' of a magical perspective but a reality which is already in and of itself magical or fantastic" (191). The *Encyclopedia Britannica* defines it as "a chiefly Latin-American narrative strategy that is characterized by the matter-of-fact inclusion of fantastic or mythical elements into seemingly realistic fiction." In essence, magical realist works have an unexplained, paradoxical view of reality, where absurd things do really happen without any in-world or in-story explanation for them.

The most famous magical realist works are from the region where Carpentier and significantly Inñárritu, trace their roots: Latin America. Likewise, Nobel Laureate Gabriel Garcia Marquez also hails from Latin America, and his work *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is arguably the most renowned work of magical realism. The category also includes works like Morrison's *Beloved*, Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, Murakami's *1Q84*, and Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*, among others.

Before *Birdman* or *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, another important contributor to this way of telling stories, Jorge Luis Borges, influenced all the writers of the Latin American

Boom—when Latin American literature, along with magical realism, received international recognition—even though he was writing before its real heyday. Therefore, it is no surprise that Borges actually makes a cameo on screen in *Birdman*: one character can be seen in a tanning bed, holding his English translation of *Labyrinths* with its characteristic checkered black and white cover. In essence, Borges' fiction uses art to explain the many conflicting possibilities of life, just as *Birdman* employs the literary technique of magical realism in this film to deal with the conflicting viewpoints regarding Riggan's alleged powers. Thus, because of the overall agreement of film critics, his cultural background in the home of magical realism, and his deliberate inclusion of a proto-magical realist writer, Borges, we can be sure that such a reading of the film is not only appropriate, but necessary. To that end, an examination of key moments in the film in light of a thorough and informed view of magical realism brings into focus the film's commentary on the false dichotomy between the real and the absurd, and how a firm belief, involving personal risk, is necessary to find out what is real.

From the outset of the film, the protagonist Riggan has some sort of telekinetic powers, and these abilities point us to our magical realist interpretation. Riggan seems able to push objects toward or away from him with a gesture. In fact, during a rehearsal, he tells his agent, "I'd be a lot better if I could get Ralph [an unfortunate cast member] to stop acting," and, immediately, a stage light falls and hits Ralph in the head, knocking him unconscious. Riggan then tells his agent, "That wasn't an accident. I made it happen." Whether or not the audience believes it, Riggan claims to have supernatural powers from the opening of the film.

Riggan's reaction to this "coincidence" points to a critical aspect of the film: in this scene and others, violence reveals the truth of who a person is. Indeed, after claiming responsibility for the accident that befell his sub-par lead actor, Riggan remarks to his agent, "The blood coming

out of his ear is the most honest thing he's done so far." A reaction to violence cannot be faked; it shows who one really is. The fact that the film does not pause to discuss the logistics of Riggan's powers, much less debate the reality of whether they exist or not, is striking, though it also points to the proper way to understand this film. The magical realist elements are not the focus; rather, they serve to emphasize the true heart of the film, the relationship between violence and truth.

While Riggan's telekinesis is presented on-screen in several scenes, the most extended portrayal is when Riggan uses his powers to trash his room, in another example of violence set against an apparently supernatural backdrop. When the voice of Birdman taunts him, apparently within his own head, "You are lame, Riggan," Riggan attempts to disprove him by supernaturally wreaking havoc on his room. Without touching anything, desk objects, mirrors, and even the television are smashed. Seconds later, his agent walks in and sees Riggan picking up objects with his hands and throwing them around. This subtle but powerful moment presents two conflicting explanations of Riggan's powers, and yet the film refuses to help the viewer find out which one is real. Like Riggan, the reader does their best to unravel what is really happening. Riggan tells the voice, "This is just a mental formation," as he clings to a non-magical, prosaic reality, assuming that he is having some kind of mental breakdown. Such an explanation would make sense, and fit comfortably within our understanding of the world. One might argue convincingly, and many have, that his agent saw things they really were: Riggan has no special powers. He is just delusional.

Nevertheless, the magical depiction of reality continues when Birdman counters, "I'm not a mental formation: I'm you!" Birdman, the magical side of Riggan's identity, seems determined to convince the flesh-and-bones, real, grounded Riggan that his, or their, powers are real, and

that Riggan really deserves something greater than his current pathetic existence. If Birdman's voice is to be believed, then it is Riggan's agent who just assumes Riggan is throwing objects normally because explaining away is easier than accepting the absurd or supernatural. Again, if Birdman is trustworthy, Riggan is actually being visited by his superhero alter ego as a motivational speaker.

The far-fetched nature of the above explanation is why most critics agree that Riggan's powers are only mental hallucinations. However, one cannot overlook the fact that the film directly anticipates these charges, and presents the two possible explanations, a "magical" and a "real" one fairly, even dispassionately. If the viewer is willing to let go of prejudice against the absurd or magical, the film's presentation seems a little slanted in Birdman's favor. If that is the case, one must ask why the film even bothers to present two clear, conflicting explanations for the wrecked room, and other moments like it. Given the literary background on magical realism, the viewer should know that their role is not to try to explain the magical or supernatural. There is no clear source for it, nor does there exist a good explanation. In short, it is just the way the world is. It is entirely possible for two conflicting or contradictory interpretations to exist, side-by-side, as an apparent paradox.

Birdman's embracing of paradox, then, might appear to be the natural outcropping of the literary world's debt to postmodernism, but it is more than that. To be sure, magical realism has common roots with postmodernism, and deals precisely in the paradox that defines the postmodern. As has been shown, magical realism is a way of seeing the world that is comfortable with the fundamentally unexplainable or contradictory. In *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, Linda Hutcheon concludes her treatment of postmodernism by stating, "In [postmodern stories'] contradictions we may find no answers, but the questions that will make any answering process

even possible are at least starting to be asked” (231). In other words, Hutcheon defines post modernism by its refusal to resolve paradox. Likewise, *Birdman* follows the trend in current filmmaking of asking thoughtful questions while pointing out ways in which pat answers must be rejected.

In another instance later in the film, Riggan wanders the streets aimlessly, after he has been promised the worst reviews in history for his play. Birdman appears to him, and tells him, “Let’s go...you’re a movie star, a global force...You save people from their boring, miserable lives.” Birdman urges him to quiet his pathetic role in showbiz “on our own terms, with a grand gesture, sacrifice, flames...” After this latest motivational speech, several absurd things happen that, once again, go without explanation. For one, Riggan snaps his finger and the street is instantly transformed into the set of an action movie. Imagining resuming his old calling, the camera shows us his inner picture of gunshots, explosions, a giant mechanical bird, but then just as quickly reveals the street as normal. This is the one instance where the viewer can be sure that what was seen on screen was definitely not real; it was purely his imagination. Even in this moment of clarity, the viewer has to do the work of piecing together what is real and what is not real from what is shown on screen. The film does not hold the viewer’s hand and lead him to this conclusion, but, at the same time, after a close viewing, there is a correct answer. Complicated, even intentionally obscure storytelling does not mean that the truth is not there, or that it cannot be uncovered by the careful viewer. This moment demonstrates that magical realist stories require much of the viewer; unlike the typical superhero film, the viewer needs to be constantly alert and questioning what is presented on screen.

After this imagined moment designed to encourage Riggan to harken back to his true calling as a superhero, Birdman urges Riggan, “Gravity doesn’t even apply to you.” Next, the

viewer sees Riggan float up into the air, and stand on the roof of a building. Again, there is the phenomenon of the double explanation. At first, it appears that a crowd gathers below the building he lands on because they just saw a man fly up from the street. Then, it is hinted that the crowd is there because they fear Riggan is going to jump and commit suicide. One person even heckles him, "Is this for real, or are you shooting a film?" This question reveals one of the key tensions of the film. Is art, the fictional, incompatible with truth? Both with Riggan's stage play, and in his personal life, things are paradoxically both for real and for the stage. Both the real and the absurd work together to create the meaning of the film; the correct interpretation is not allowing one to explain away the other. This film's portrayal of the essential relatedness, and even dependence, of the real and the unreal is the core of magical realism. Magical realism portrays a world exactly like ours, except with one tiny impossible thing. The viewer is given two possible explanations in order to prolong the mystery, not in order to explain anything. The two explanations, at the very least, serve to convince us to hold off on coming to any definite conclusions before we have all of the information. This suspension of our tendency to look for a satisfactory explanation is absolutely necessary for a reader of magical realism.

After building up enough tension to cause the viewer to feel the risk he is taking if he decides to trust his powers, Riggan jumps off the building, and actually flies around the city. The camera delights in following him around skyscrapers and through tunnels in an enchanting visual representation of magical realism. Again, however, the film provides a double explanation for what was just shown. At first, it shows Riggan actually flying all the way back to his theater, landing on the ground, and walking in the front door. When he lands, there is no car directly behind him. However, just as he enters the door, the camera pans back to the street, where a taxi driver is chasing him down for not paying his fare after dropping him off. In essence, the film

provides a realistic explanation every time something magical happens. However, magical realism insists that the viewer does not need to pick one. Refusing to accept the paradox of magical realism would be reading the film the wrong way. The film deliberately forces the viewer to live uncomfortably with the unresolved unbelievable events. By telling a story with deliberately obscured causes, *Birdman* attempts to get the viewer to acknowledge the limitations of their ability to explain what happen onscreen.

While one main part of *Birdman's* goal is to impose a sort of paradoxical unresolved on the world, the other main theme has to do with how violence, and violent art, reveal the truth about people. On stage in the final act of his play, Riggan's character says, "I spend every moment pretending to be something I'm not...I don't exist." This is of course true of his character in the world of fiction and art, but it is also deeply true of Riggan and his own state of personal disillusionment. Riggan ends the showing by shooting himself with a real gun, as opposed to the intended stage gun, in the head. The audience is shocked by how realistic the violence looks, but they eventually decide it was merely part of the show and clap. Director Alejandro Iñárritu, who won best director for this film and the following year's *The Revenant*, writes, "I think we now live in a culture where violence is considered brave. It's considered cool and entertaining...I come from a very violent city. I have been witness to violence, and I have sometimes been a victim of violence. I can't laugh about violence ... I can't" (Suen 68). Iñárritu's sober perspective about violence, however, does not preclude use of it in his hard. Indeed, although we don't really see it on screen, Riggan shoots off his own nose.

What is the function of this bizarre ending, especially given Iñárritu's sense of the seriousness of violence? At the very least, it brings Riggan's play renown. The highbrow reviewer, in an ironic twist, calls his performance *superrealism*, and it appears it was important

enough to be considered serious art. It appears that she was impressed that the violence *looked* realistic, which is a far cry from thinking it real. The novelty caught her eye, but she never stopped to analyze what real violence on stage would mean. This is clearly a failure on her part as a critic, and perhaps a critique of fans of this movie as well. Viewers cannot just be interested in the interesting techniques of the film, give it a snappy label, and feel proud of themselves for being good critics of high art. Riggan's violence reveals how seriously he is taking this play, and how much he is willing to risk to see it succeed. It may also, again, point to the suicidal tendencies which have been shown at other points throughout the film. Like Riggan's use of violence, *Birdman* is not using magical realism just to be interesting: It is a necessary part of the questions it asks of us. Riggan's onstage violence shocks his viewers, causing them to take him seriously, for once.

After so many unresolved questions and deep uncertainty, the film appears to be setting up for an unexpected happy ending. Riggan's play is successful, and he is told that it is going to last forever. His estranged wife comes to visit him in this hospital room, and his often-distant daughter brings him the specific kind of flowers he's been asking for since the beginning of the film. It is even hinted at that he might be able to be a serious actor, and have mass appeal, as his daughter tells him that he has 80,000 Twitter followers since she made him an account. When Riggan is finally left alone in the hotel room, it is clear that his discontentment and lack of purpose is still haunting him. When he looks in the mirror, the bandaging on his nose appears just like the Birdman mask he is supposed to, even destined to, wear. When he peels off the mask, there is another, similar mask of bruising. As he continues to gaze into the mirror, he sees Birdman in the bathroom with him, although when Riggan turns around Birdman does not actually seem to be present. As dramatic music swells, Riggan opens his window and climbs out

to stand on the windowsill, stories above the ground. The screen goes dark, and the viewer is left in the dark as to what happens next.

When his daughter returns to the now-empty hospital room, the film presents with one final double explanation, one it has been building up to the entire film. When his daughter rushes to the open window, she first looks down in horror and panic, and the viewer hears the sound of approaching silence. It appears that Riggan really jumped, and died. Then, she looks up and smiles, and the viewer hears her and Riggan's laughter. Perhaps he really did fly? The standard critical interpretation of the ending is that Riggan committed suicide. It's the only possible, realistic conclusion when someone jumps out of a window. And the film clearly presents the possibility of that, especially given the sound of sirens. The other possibility would be that Riggan actually flies away, taking Birdman's advice to live a different way. Like the viewer, Riggan has spent the entire film trying to figure out if his powers are real, and if Birdman is real, and he apparently comes to believe that it is all real. Notably, he never receives any conclusive proof until he has the faith to actually risk his life on his powers, and, in what is surely not unrelated, make a brutal personal sacrifice in favor of his art. Maybe Riggan rejects the possibility of suicide in favor of flying away and leaving it all behind; maybe the suicide is the means for him to fly away. Regardless, the overall tone and point of the ending is the same: Riggan is a greater man than he appears. He left his unfulfilling career behind on his own terms; he beat it. He embraced his true identity as a superhero.

Keeping in mind that this is a magical realist work of art, it is clear that the ending is not about what really happened. The hard-to-believe, fantastic elements exist for a purpose, even if just to make the viewer question their view of what is possible, but they definitely do not exist merely to be explained away. The absurd and the supernatural can exist alongside the realistic,

creating the thematic meaning of the film out of them both. Herein is the paradox of magical realism: an unresolved question with multiple valid explanations. In a sense, this is to be expected from a postmodern film. However, this film does not deal in paradoxes because truth is unimportant to it. In fact, the core of the film is about what is real, and how we can tell what is real. The reason that Riggan is an actor, in fact the driving force for his entire career, is that he received a note as budding actor thanking him for “an honest performance.” This film deals in paradoxes because the modern world limits itself to the realistic and the natural as the only possibilities, and refuses to even consider the absurd and supernatural.

This film presents costly personal faith as the only road to truth, given Riggan’s violent stage performance, and his disturbingly literal leap of faith at the end. The movie even presents a very specific kind of truth that is worth risking everything to find out: identity as defined by love. It opens with a quote from Raymond Carver: “To call myself beloved, to feel myself beloved on the earth.” Riggan’s whole life is wrapped around the question of knowing who he is and who loves him. At the end, Riggan knows. He knows who he is, what his purpose is, and who loves him. Whether his flight symbolizes his death, or his death symbolizes his escape from soul-crushing showbiz, he has found freedom in being truly himself. And he is only able to experience that freedom by gambling on something beyond his mundane life. Like Riggan, we must accept that the search for truth might cost us, but we need the possibility of the supernatural, the unexpected, co-existing in tension with the ordinary world, to find any sort of meaning for life.

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