

Improvisation and *Birdman*; or, the Unexpected Virtue of Irony¹

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Leading up to the 87th Academy Awards, reporters launched a critique on the Oscars for only nominating white actors. Headlines included *The Huffington Post*'s "Why It Should Bother Everyone That The Oscars Are So White," *The Guardian*'s "Oscars whitewash: why have 2015's red carpets been so overwhelmingly white?", *TIME* magazine's "Almost All The Oscar Nominees Are White," and *US Magazine*'s "Oscars 2015 Nominations: Only White Actors Received Academy Award Nods and the Internet Is Outraged," to name a few. *The International Business Times* went so far as to provide an infographic in their piece, "Oscars 2015 Infographic: How White Are the 87th Academy Awards?" Even Oscar host of that year, Neil Patrick Harris, remarked upon this racism early on in the show by making the following joke: "Today we honor Hollywood's best and whitest. Sorry, brightest" (qtd. in THR staff). It is ironic in itself that Alejandro González Iñárritu's satire of Hollywood, superhero culture, and the unbearable whiteness that proliferates them went on to win best director, best cinematography, best screenplay, and best picture, but there is a further irony embedded in a film that mocks its white cast's desperate efforts to receive recognition, often labelling them "children" for this selfish desire. As Samantha, daughter to Riggan (*Birdman*'s antihero), puts it to her father in her wonderful monologue lambasting the egotism of celebrity culture: Riggan is adapting Raymond Carver's work for the stage "for 1000 old, rich, white people" in a desperate effort to regain publicity after his fifteen minutes of fame in the early '90s when he played the superhero Birdman. As Samantha puts it, Riggan is "not doing this for art," he is doing it for himself. And yet the one-take cinematic adventure that director Iñárritu takes us on suggests that Riggan is an improviser. Eddie Provost suggests that "[r]isk and doubt are two crucial tools for the improvising musician," and both Riggan and his fellow actor Mike Shiner (a famous New York theatre actor who despises Hollywood) remind the esteemed and feared theatre critic Tabitha Dickinson that Riggan is risking everything in order to pull off this production (355). He also continually doubts himself, leading him to speak on an ongoing basis with the specter of Birdman, which he calls the "mental formation" that formed out his role as Birdman. If Riggan is risking everything and doubting himself, then why does the film criticize him for wanting to control his surroundings and his image?

Improvisation is not necessarily a liberating, extemporaneous act; one's intentions and habits also contribute to our understanding of the process. Daniel Fischlin provides a viable explanation for this distinction that helps us to comprehend the difference between Riggan's risk taking and improvisation. He elucidates:

improvisatory utterances cannot be reduced to the standard tropes of spontaneity, freedom, and virtuosity (technical freedom). If anything these tropes have for far too long limited how we think of improvisation as a cultural practice, vested in tired notions that are largely male-centered, technique-centered, and dominated by the supposed primacy of the individual (as the centre-point of all institutional, philosophical, and cultural values)—all largely driven by the questionable ideologies that lie behind such assumptions. (3)

Riggan is a product of this western cultural engine that Fischlin describes, but so are Dickinson, Shiner, and others who either want to have power, authority, and control; to achieve a sense of legacy and longevity; or to be told: "you're beautiful, you're talented, and I'm lucky to have you," a line that is repeated from actor to actor in order to quell their communal lack of "self-respect." Ironically Riggan is also obsessed with gaining approval and recognition despite ostensibly having posted the following message on his dressing room mirror: "A thing is a thing, not what is said of a thing." Although Riggan can read this credo, he cannot believe it. As Riggan's ex-wife puts it, he "confuses admiration for love," and that makes people like Riggan, as his love interest aptly puts it, "gross." These characters lack the ability to see themselves as part of an ecosystem and instead desire to shape their universe individually from the locus of the spotlight. Desiring to see himself and things for what they are rather than what people think they are yet simultaneously coveting attention and validation, Riggan is unable to find the liminal in-between space in which persons and things have their own resonance while resonating with others in a dynamic, ecological environ that is the world. His daughter Samantha resists such male hubris by recognizing the fleeting nature of fame, moving in step with the digital era of social media but recognizing that "like the rest of us," Riggan "doesn't matter" in the grand scheme of the world. Her practice of etching out lines on toilet paper to represent the thousands of years that the

¹ I would like to thank the anonymous reader of this piece for the insightful and valuable suggestions in the report, which have made this a stronger work. On a wider scale, I would like to thank Ajay Heble for the opportunity to work with *Critical Studies in Improvisation* and *Think Pieces*. In a way this work is my culminating improvisation from this work, which has involved engaging with the diverse, fascinating, and inspiring ideas of scholars and practitioners that I have been privileged to read and to help shape over the past two years; I extend my thanks to each and every one of them for helping to facilitate this ecological thought.

Earth has existed puts this view of insignificance into a broader perspective, given that we have only inhabited the planet for a small fraction of the time that it has existed. Indeed, we are reminded of the wider cosmos from the outset of the film with a hurling ball of fire descending toward the planet in a scene made up of creatures emerging from the sea as birds descend upon them, matching part of the flash through segment after Riggan attempts suicide onstage near the film's conclusion. The images of descent and ascent that the filmmakers play with revolve around the myth of Icarus, whose name is referred to three times in the movie. Like Icarus, the freedom, risk, and doubt of these characters, principally Riggan, exemplifies a love of the self and grandeur, coupled with a desire for admiration and legacy.

Birdman thus stages the collaboration that Fischlin and Ajay Heble regard as intrinsic to improvisation's ability to build community, but lacks the contingency that they also advocate is equally necessary (23-4). Characters, especially men, in *Birdman*, for instance, consistently believe that they can master time and with it destiny and fame. Shiner proclaims that long after Riggan is gone, "I'm gonna be on that stage, earning my living, bearing my soul, wrestling with complex human emotions...This is my town, and to be honest, most people don't give a shit about you," only to be asked to take a photograph of Riggan with a fan the next second. Shiner's presumption to speak on behalf of the massive collective of the city that is New York is matched at the end of the film with Riggan's lawyer's statement that he "can see the future" based upon his supposition that Riggan has accomplished a feat of genius by creating "super realism" in the act of accidentally shooting off his nose onstage.² His hubris is overthrown when Riggan's wife asks, "So you can see the future?" and proceeds to slap him after he responds in the positive, then adding "Did you see that coming?" These figures operate in an improvisatory manner, but with a singular focus that keeps them from truly enmeshing themselves in the collective, extemporaneous, interconnected, and fraught assemblage of life that is improvisation. The film's irony offers these critiques of masculine bravado to promulgate what Timothy Morton calls the ecological thought, an outlook in which dissonance and dislocation is valued in tandem with a group ethos that expands beyond the individual or even the human. Morton's theory "includes negativity and irony, ugliness and horror. Democracy is well served by irony, because irony insists that there are other points of view we must acknowledge" (17). In his discussion of irony and improvisation, Gary Peters echoes Morton's sentiments when he states that irony "is fascinating because it keeps all dimensions of the aesthetic in play—artist, artwork, art—but as that which is always absent from itself, dislocated and displaced: in play in fact" (70). *Birdman* and its creators do not pronounce an overarching authority, meaning, or purpose, and the film's ironic form disavows the efforts of its artists and their art to aspire to these pinnacles of power.

Riggan is unique in this respect with respect to the film's soundtrack. Compiled by González Iñárritu and featuring the work of jazz drummer Antonio Sánchez, the outstanding score was disqualified from the Oscar competition for intermixing classical symphonies with Sánchez's work, leading the evaluation committee to decide it was not worthy for consideration despite being superb. These classical pieces are tied to Riggan's character and serve as an ironic mockery of Hollywood's formulaic cinema. When Riggan decides to embrace *Birdman* and become him again, the filmmakers create an ironic moment for theatre audiences wherein the film suddenly introduces hyperbolic special effects imagined by Riggan, including a giant monstrous bird, explosions, helicopters, gunfire, and other features that would be at home in a Michael Bay flick. Staring straight into the camera, a hovering *Birdman* addresses the audience when he says, "Look at these people: They love action, not this depressing, philosophical bullshit." This complacency with mainstream culture is accentuated by the introduction of classical music, which Riggan believes he controls, commanding "Music," before he believes he is about to fly from a rooftop—which we then see a cinematic representation of him doing—and then commanding, "Stop the music," at which point a disgruntled cab driver desperately tries to track him down to pay for the bill he is ignorant of because he believes he has flown back to the theatre. These ironic musical cues accentuate that Riggan believes he is the director and lead actor not only of the play that he adapted for the stage but also of the world at large.

In this manner, the classical music echoes our own associations we have been culled into making between these beautiful symphonies and archetypal cinematic narratives; their affective potential is reduced to a catalyst for full immersion into a suspense of disbelief and thought, commanding obedience to the plot. The diegetic sound of the jazz drummers, who regularly appear in the film, work with the film's drum score to unsettle our conventional cinematic experience. They comment upon the fact that the non-diegetic music of movies (i.e., music that is not visibly present in the film) has become diegetic as a result of our inability to reflect upon its unnatural nature. Fantasy has become common and naturalized whereas liveness has become the new riveting entertainment. The director and composer/drummer (Antonio Sánchez) thus use traditional cinematic music conventions ironically. This purpose is clear from Iñárritu's statement on the classical pieces in the film: "I think all those classical pieces are, in a way, great,

² This point is made all the more ironic by the fact that several scenes in *Birdman* require a suspension of disbelief. The film, too, dependent upon the cinematic technique of a single running cut that is simultaneously real by virtue of its liveness and unbelievable as a result of its sudden leaps in narrative time.

but honestly if I would have put another good classical piece it would have been the same film” (Hammond). What differentiates the jazz drumming from these musical pieces is not only its improvisatory style, but also the filmmakers’ decision to bring the music into the film itself.³ We repeatedly see drummers in *Birdman*: first when Riggan and Shiner leave the theatre to get coffee and Riggan gives a coin to the drummer they pass on the street; next when Riggan speed walks through a drumming band in his underwear around the back of the theatre to re-enter after being locked out when he has a cigarette; and last when he is on his way to the stage to kill himself, he passes by a drummer who is playing backstage.⁴ The first two instances meld with the narrative, for it is not unexpected that we find buskers in city streets, but there is an element of the unexpected and a discomfort that the audience might feel at suddenly realizing that the musician might be *in* the film rather than outside of it. The diegetic becomes the non-diegetic. The film prompts this reaction by raising the volume as the cameras pan to the drummers, making them feel more present from the sensory perspective of the viewer. By the end of the film, the drummer has become an actual character in the narrative who is backstage for no apparent reason, indicating that all along we have been operating in a live space in which each turn is coincidental; this is improvisation and this is life. The drummers’ African-American identities also disrupt the overwhelming whiteness of the film, and by speaking from the margins of the film, their presence comments upon the folly of the white celebrities; their permanence throughout the film—for the drumming rarely ceases—suggests that *Birdman* challenges the hegemony of Hollywood and white America through recourse to improvisation’s radical and fluid recalcitrance to concepts of the individual genius.⁵ In this manner the Academy Awards unwittingly remarked upon their own ignorance by awarding *Birdman* best picture; they remain blind to difference and to the self-absorbed vapidness that informs their very existence.

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³ The techniques Sánchez used vary. The original recordings were “‘too prestine’ for a movie set inside an old Broadway theater,” so he and Iñárritu sought other spaces and effects to create a sound that reflected that atmosphere. He used “a different drum kit that had been detuned and outfitted with vintage heads”; he “took the drums onto the street to experiment with hand-held moving microphones”; and at times he “created new sounds altogether” (Miller).

⁴ The film begins with drums. Their beats function as keys on an invisible typewriter that gradually form the words of the opening quotation from Raymond Carver. The music remains a vibrant part of the film and amplifies during scenes in which characters transition between events, improvising upon and adapting to failures and crises.

⁵ The Mexican identities of composer/drummer Sánchez and director Iñárritu also challenge this egotistical drive. Although the artists work within the engine of Hollywood to articulate this message, they nevertheless question and expose the conventions and contours within which their politics operate. In a similar manner, Iñárritu used his acceptance speech for best director at the Academy Awards to purport racial equality: “I just pray they [Mexicans living in the United States] can be treated with the same dignity and respect as the ones that came before and built this incredible, immigrant nation.”

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