The texture of the age: Digital construction of unbounded Space in *Birdman* (Iñárritu 2014)

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Abstract

Like some of Alejandro González Iñárritu's previous films, *Birdman* (Iñárritu 2014) is an exploration of the place of individuals in the midst of various global forces, in this case, technological, social and cultural globalization. The film's most relevant formal feature, the digitally created 'long take', also partakes of the director's well-known penchant for technological and formal experimentation when telling a story. In *Birdman*, cinematic form is closely related to its thematic concerns, particularly the impact of technology on global processes. This article explores the confluence between form – digital cinema – and content in *Birdman*. It looks at the global virtual space created by the internet and

social networks and how they affect our sense of being in the world. To this end, the film exploits the possibilities and connotations of the apparently uninterrupted single take that comprises most of the duration of the film and of the composited, digital-realistic space thus created.

In February 2015, *Birdman or (The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance)* (Iñárritu 2014) became the first film shot entirely digitally to win the Academy Award for Best Picture. The movie, which had garnered a total of nine nominations for the Academy Awards, also won Best Director, Best Original Screenplay and Best Cinematography. 'I don't think we could have done this movie a year or two years ago' (2014, n.pag.), says *Birdman*'s D. P. Emmanuel Lubezki in relation to the two Arri Alexa cameras that allowed him to film handheld for long shooting periods without interruptions. The result of the new digital technology that Lubezki is referring to here is the apparently uninterrupted single take that comprises most of the duration of the film. This 'uninterrupted' single take was created digitally by assembling various shots – both Lubezki and Iñárritu have been evasive about the exact number (Oppenheimer 2014 56; D'Addario 2014). Therefore, as with other contemporary films, what we have is not so

much a long take as the digitally created impression of a long take. Lubezki, working for the first time on a feature with Iñárritu, had already established himself not only as a privileged practitioner of digital technology but, more specifically, as a cinematographer of the long take, whether analogic or digital, particularly in his films with Alfonso Cuarón *Y tu mamá también* /*And Your Mom Too* (Cuarón 2001), *Children of Men* (Cuarón 2006) and *Gravity* (Cuarón 2013) (see Isaacs 2016).

Like some of Iñárritu's previous films, *Birdman* is an exploration of the place of individuals in the midst of global forces. In *Birdman*, these global forces are not the power of 'random fate' or the unexpected connections between otherwise unrelated individuals (as was the case in the director's multi-protagonist films *Amores perros* [Iñárritu, 2000], *21 Grams* [Iñárritu 2003] and *Babel* [Iñárritu 2006]) (Azcona 2009: 25–46 and *passim*, Tierney 2009: 107; Deleyto and Azcona 2010: 19–31), but everyday globalization at the level of technology, social relations and culture. The film's most relevant formal feature, the digitally created 'long take', also partakes of the director's well-known penchant for technological and formal experimentation when telling a story: the use of bleach-bypass in *21 Grams*, of different film stocks for each of the four interrelated stories in *Babel*, of two aspect ratios in *Biutiful* (Deleyto and Azcona 2010; Azcona 2015) and of almost exclusively 'natural' light in *The Revenant* (Iñárritu 2015). As was the case in these other films, in *Birdman* cinematic form is closely related to its thematic concerns, particularly the impact of technology on global processes. In this article, we examine the confluence between form – digital cinema – and content in *Birdman*. We look at the film's articulation of the global virtual space created by the

internet and social networks and how they affect our sense of being in the world through what we may or may not want to call the rhetorical figure of the 'long take'.

Digital cinema and the 'long take'

The central, apparently uninterrupted single take in *Birdman* lasts, by our count, 97'36" and takes up most of the duration of the film (apart from two brief shots at the beginning, a montage sequence of twelve shots that lasts less than one minute after the central part, and a much shorter but still very visible long take of 8'23" which is also the last shot of the film before a fade out to black and the final credits). During these 97 minutes, we follow the male protagonist, former Hollywood superhero Riggan Thomson (Michael Keaton), his daughter Sam (Emma Stone) and the other characters of the film in and around the St. James's Theater on Broadway, where Riggan is directing and starring in a theatrical adaptation of Raymond Carver's short story 'What We Talk about When We Talk about Love' (1981). Lubezki's constantly mobile handheld camera follows the characters from dressing rooms to stage, along the narrow corridors of the old theatre and, occasionally, onto the streets outside. The film often uses classical strategies associated with long takes to avoid cuts, moving, for example, from one character to another as they cross paths, or abandoning one and careering along a corridor to focus on another. These choreographies evoke the long takes of Iñárritu's declared models Max Ophüls and Robert Altman (D'Addario 2014), as well as many other classical instances. Whereas these classical long takes reveal, in Bazin's famous formulation, a 'faith in reality' ([1950, 1952, 1955] 1967: 24) and in the integrity of the event (Gibbs and Pye 2017: 2), as well as a continuity of real space and time, strange things happen in *Birdman*.

For instance, when Leslie knocks on Riggan's door to tell him that her partner, the egotistical Broadway actor Mike Shiner (Edward Norton), is available for the role because he has just been fired from another production, Jake (Zach Galifianakis), the producer of the play, is exultant at the news. Jake leaves the room to call Mike's agent, and the camera follows him through one of the theatre's corridors and down the staircase that leads to the stage. There, he tells one of the operators to turn off the lights because they have a rehearsal that night. The camera leaves Jack behind, pans to the left and Mike is seen already onstage, musing aloud about the great actors who have previously walked on that stage. Riggan enters the screen from the left and thanks Mike for being there 'on such short notice', a comment that can be read literally since it has taken Mike less than 30 seconds of screen time (in a continuous shot) to set foot on the stage of the St. James Theater. Similarly, after Sam's existential monologue on the night of the first premiere (in which she tells her father that he should come to terms with the fact that his existence, like everybody else's, is futile and no Broadway production is going to change that), Riggan leaves the room and some off-screen music starts to play. The character's look to the right is followed by a camera movement that takes us directly to the stage, where Riggan's girlfriend is performing on the night of the second premiere, in front of a real audience. Next to her, Mike and Leslie are getting ready for the motel scene, and we hear Riggan, now playing Mel, wearing a wig and with a gun in his hand, insistently knocking on the door. As in the previous example, instead of 'real' time, what the continuous shot brings about is a temporal ellipsis (of approximately 24 hours in this second case). Later on, we see Sam and Mike kissing in the wings above the stage. At the same time, a rehearsal is going on underneath them: we first hear the actors' voices off-screen, then

the camera tilts down to reveal the actors on the stage, one of whom is Mike. In instances such as these, the continuity of the uninterrupted shot does not generate the faith in reality celebrated by Bazin. The world of *Birdman*, in which the illusion of continuous space freely manipulates real time, has a different ontological nature, one which we might describe as 'inner' or 'digital'.

Rather than convey real space and time, *Birdman* ruptures real space and time continuity, paradoxically, through continuity. The film constructs its own temporal frame out of the combination of the continuity of the long take and the manipulations of invisible digital compositions; and, more importantly, its own continuous space. This space includes not only the inside of the theatre and the real Manhattan, but also the space of the Carver-based play and the protagonist's inner world, which seems to be controlled by Riggan's Birdman and energized by his magical superpowers. Birdman can will a stage lamp to fall on Ralph (Jeremy Shamos), a mediocre fellow actor he wants to get rid of; he can wreak havoc inside Riggan's dressing room or in the streets of Manhattan and he can certainly fly. Not only is this a space that shows no dividing lines between fictional levels, between the real and the fantastic or between outer and inner realities, but the film visibly incorporates the virtual space of the internet and social networks. Television and computer screens, Skype, YouTube and Twitter feature prominently throughout the film, as Sam tries to persuade her father of the power of social networks in global societies, while Riggan's missteps have a way of immediately going viral. In a sense, Riggan's flight above Manhattan may be seen as a metaphor for his painful process of learning to surf the net. When, at the end of the second long take, Sam looks off-screen from the window of her father's hospital room in horror (thinking

that her father has just jumped to his death) and then is delighted to see (we presume) that

he has, instead, taken flight again, we may, metaphorically, interpret Sam's expression as

satisfaction that he has finally learned to embrace the virtual space of technological

globalization. In general, Riggan's supernatural powers may be linked, indirectly, to the

perception of empowerment that contemporary people may sometimes feel in the face of

technological advances, even if this feeling is inevitably accompanied by anxiety, as it is

in the case of Riggan and his personal struggles. The boundary between social networks

and the protagonist's fantasy world is particularly porous in *Birdman*. The continuity

between ontological levels enabled, even forced, by the 'long take' facilitates this

porosity. In sum, this is a cinematic continuity that conveys a *Weltanschauung*.

Technological globalization is, then, not only part of the film's subject matter but,

through digital technology, it is inscribed in its very form.

The evolution of the long take from the photographic to the digital image may

explain some of the dimensions of its use in *Birdman*. In their introduction to *The Long

Take: Critical Approaches*, John Gibbs and Douglas Pye argue that traditional long takes

share a belief in the cinematic image as an index of the pro-filmic event, but CGI breaks

that indexical association: digital images do not capture a reality but, rather, *mimic* the

traditional relationship between the camera and its subject, thus changing the ontology of

the image (2017: 9–10). As Rodowick puts it, digital technology gives us 'something that

looks like photography' but is not photography (2007: 98). Similarly, for William Brown,

the digital loses its indexical link to reality since objects that were absent in the pro-filmic

event can appear in the image (2013: 23). David Fleming and William Brown call our

attention to the anachronistic use that digital cinema makes of its own potential, which it

devotes mostly to imitating twentieth-century narrative cinema forms. Such would be the case of most digital long takes, which, for them, are largely analogic long takes achieved digitally (2015: 100). Thus, the long take becomes not the mark of excess that it was in analogic times when it disrupted classical continuity through its refusal to cut (Isaacs 2016: 476), but only the empty reproduction of an anachronistic form.

At the same time, however, the long take's co-optation of the consolidated meanings of the old form highlights a feature of the new technology: what Fleming and Brown, following Gilles Deleuze, call its gaseous quality: 'the free-form movement through digital time and space is marked by a conspicuous lack of cuts, and replaced by a continuous flowing mode of spatial and temporal duration' (2015: 95). In gaseous digital cinema, '*all space* is (inter)connected' (Brown 2013: 43, emphasis added). This is a new type of spatial realism because it manages to capture the continuity of real space that analogue cinema was forced to constantly disrupt through a grammar based on the shot and the cut (Brown 2013: 47). This continuity of space is, perhaps paradoxically, achieved through what Isaacs describes as 'an awareness of digitality's fundamental discretization', that is, of the fact that the digital image is made out of an assortment of discrete units – the pixels. This is what Lev Manovich has explained as the shift from analogue montage to digital compositing, in which elements from various sources are put together to create a single object, a seamless whole (Isaacs 2016: 479; Manovich 2001: 143). Rather than cuts between shots, digital cinema, gives us, 'smooth space' (Shaviro 2010: 77), fulfilling its full potential and also its chief claim to realism: the delivery of continuous space (Brown 2013: 43).

Theorists of the digital have argued that neither of the terms 'long take' nor 'shot' accurately convey how digital cinema works. Rodowick, referring to the single-take film *Russian Ark* (Sokurov 2002), argues that the traditional integrity of the analogue shot is replaced in digital cinema by compositing or 'spatial' montage. *Russian Ark* is not a shot because it is a 'highly composited artefact'. Writing about the same film, Stephen Prince suggests that, since editing is no longer necessary in digital cinema, the long take loses its identity as a shot. Without the boundary of the cut there is no essence of the shot; without the contrast with the editing sequence the power of the long take as an alternative also disappears (Rodowick 2007: 174; Prince n.d.). Unlike *Russian Ark*, *Birdman* uses editing to splice together shots that were filmed separately and then digitally makes the joints invisible, much like Hitchcock had done with analogue technology in *Rope* (Hitchcock 1948). Compositing in this film is not exactly an alternative to editing but an adjunct to it. Yet, as in *Russian Ark*, what we see is continuous space and time even though they are not real space or chronological time but a different type of spatiality and temporality, both enabled by digital technology and recognizable through our familiarity with it. Prince describes the absence of editing boundaries in *Russian Ark* through the term 'unbounded shot' (n.d.), which for him might be a preferable term to long take. In *Birdman* such boundaries still exist, even if they are digitally 'cleaned up'. Therefore, digitally created space is perhaps best described as 'unbounded space', a term that captures both the limitless possibilities and potential combinations of digital compositing and the contemporary experience of the material world outside the cinema, a world that films like *Birdman* materialize in as a digital construct (Isaacs 2016: 481, 484). In other words, digital technology is not only realistic because it can deliver continuous space but

also because our reality in a global world is a mediated reality, one that we perceive mostly indirectly through a multiplicity of screens and digital composites As Shaviro emphatically puts it, in our world nothing is direct or unmediated and nothing exists outside the media sphere (2010: 104); or, as Vivian Sobchack asserts, 'we are all part of a moving-image culture, and we live cinematic and electronic lives' (2016: 89).

From Shakespeare to the Hollywood superhero (and beyond)

The initial location of the film's action enhances the quality of its unbounded space. The St. James Theater's reduced dimensions and what we might call its traditional materiality are soon contradicted by the proliferation of ontological, psychological and fictional levels as well as by the deployment of multiple screens and mediated spaces. The constant erasure of boundaries between these spaces, media and forms of representation expands the world of the Broadway theatre exponentially in a way that reminds us of our everyday experience. We are physically located in limited spaces but constantly surrounded by internet terminals that connect us in a mediated but smooth way with other spaces (both close and distant, real and fantastic) and temporalities. The details and texture of this complex amalgam are evident in a particular segment of the film.

It is the night before the play's premiere and things are not going well for Riggan. Distressed after he has bungled the last dress rehearsal, bankrupt, threatened with a court case and distraught after seeing Sam furtively making out with his nemesis Mike backstage, Riggan is handed the *coup de grace* by Tabitha Dickinson (Lindsay Duncan), the influential *New York Times* critic, who promises to 'kill the play' in her review. To the sound of gloomy, slightly dissonant string music, Riggan walks into the streets of Manhattan followed by a mobile camera. The reflection of the neon lights occasionally

hits Riggan's face and gives him the otherworldly cinematic appearance with which we have become familiar in the films of contemporary city directors, from Martin Scorsese to Michael Mann.

The soundtrack soon incorporates another sound, first distant, almost indistinct, but gradually louder and clearer: the words of the 'Tomorrow' soliloquy from *Macbeth*, uttered in a harrowing voice by an unseen actor performing on the street somewhere off-screen, a momentary substitute for Birdman's Hollywoodian imprecations. In the play, this speech represents the Shakespearean hero's nadir, the most nihilistic moment in the endless night that is the Bard's Scottish tragedy. Its function here – the broken declamatory voice and the string music thrown in for good measure – is to spell out Riggan's symbolic descent into hell. The modern hero is heading for the liquor store to purchase a bottle of whisky as the soliloquy grows more distinct. As he enters the establishment, we hear the line 'all our yesterdays have lighted fools / The way to dusty death', and see a multicoloured set of lights hanging from the ceiling in the shape of an archway, as if giving access to a different world that realizes the Shakespearean verse.

The camera figures Riggan as the 'lighted fool', his professional career and personal trajectory are now part of 'all our yesterdays', and 'dusty death' (insignificance and oblivion) is what the hero seems to be most afraid of. At the same time, the cheap lights evoke the type of bowdlerization of 'real culture' that Hollywood cinema has been accused of in the film, most recently and scathingly by Dickinson. Percolated through this artificial threshold, it is Shakespeare's turn to be cheapened. Yet, at the same time,

the sight is wondrous. The digital screen becomes a fitting visual translation of the allure of those gorgeous glimmerings that mislead us into convincing ourselves that our endeavours in this world are significant, eternal – not so much cheapened Shakespeare as digital wonder. As Riggan walks out of the establishment, drinking thirstily from his bottle, the Shakespearean actor materializes in the frame, finishing his tale 'told by an idiot, full of sound and fury /Signifying nothing'. Again, Macbeth's lines evoke Riggan's predicament, but also the film and its multi-medial and digital pyrotechnics self-deprecatingly and sarcastically suggest not just the hero's but also the movie's own emptiness. Through its sustained use of irony and its special brand of comedy, which we do not have time to develop here, *Birdman* celebrates its own artistic brilliance even as it summarily ridicules its self-importance. Irony and comedy become a smooth channel to convey the texture and the spectators' experience of the digital world in which we live, mongrel, alluring and confusing.

Riggan stops to look at the actor, who now easily abandons his part, looks back at the hero and pleadingly asks him: 'Is that too much? I was just trying to give you a range', repeating the exact words uttered by Ralph at the beginning of the film, just before being knocked out cold by a falling lamp.

Figure 3: Repeated platitudes and heroic superpowers (*Birdman*).

This is one of many metacinematic moments in *Birdman*, and it reinforces the expressionistic dimension of the cinematic space. The street actor, like the neon lights and the sounds of Manhattan, the dark music and the tragic soliloquy, are all ambiguously cued now as products of the hero's tortured imagination, working together to express the depth of his despair as well as calling into question the film's illusion of reality.

Conversely, the moment also conveys the power of the hero of the digital age: since the unnamed aspiring actor is not otherwise identified as a figment of Riggan's imagination, his presence can also be understood as a physical presence, within the general ontological ambiguity exhibited by the film. In this case, the fact that he is made to repeat Ralph's earlier words can also be explained as a product of Riggan's supernatural powers, an interpretation which is consistent with what we have seen before and with what we will see, in its most spectacular form, later in the film. One could also argue that the repeated lines are evidence of the film's unbounded space: both the inside of the St. James's Theater and a nearby street are simultaneously real spaces in the film's physical world, part of the psychological space of the protagonist's tortured mind and continuous expressions of digital realism on display. This uncertainty, or the simultaneity of incompatible spaces, is one more articulation of the film's lack of respect for ontological boundaries, and of its belief that this is part of the contemporary experience.

A few seconds later, Riggan collapses in a drunken stupor on a heap of rubbish on the pavement, the image reminding us this time of another tragic Shakespearean hero, Lear, the dispossessed king, lying raving on a heath in the middle of a storm. This collapse anticipates the ending of the play-within-the-film, the most theatrical space in the movie, an image of metaphorical death visualized for us as if on a stage. The type of continuity constructed by Iñárritu and Lubezki here rejects such neat endings, however. Riggan's evening walk ends in utter dejection, a visit to the underworld aptly represented by the heap of Broadway waste, but the next CGI trick leads us, after a few screen seconds, straight to the next morning.

A new day and renewed energy are accompanied by a change in the soundtrack, first to a livelier and then to a more celebratory melody. The fallen hero picks himself up, dusts himself off and, egged on once again by his Hollywood alter ego – now visible for the first time –, resumes his walk as the Shakespearean night of the soul is replaced by Hollywood superhero pyrotechnics. With a click of his fingers, Riggan conjures up a spectacular blockbuster action scene around him, complete with explosions, battle scenes, military helicopters and horrific monsters – a tongue-in-cheek paroxysm of CGI wonders and compositing, followed by a Superman- or Birdman-like flight over the roofs and streets of Manhattan.

Figures 4–6: Hollywood visits Broadway… with a bang (*Birdman*).

For the first time, Riggan unambiguously succumbs to his cinematic alter-ego's exhortations: 'So you're not a great actor. Who cares? You're much more than that. You tower over these other theater douchebags. You're a movie star, man. You're a global force. Don't you get it?' Like the first time we saw him inside his dressing room levitating, or when he moved and shattered objects with a movement of his eyes, dejection makes Riggan powerful. The helicopters and threatening monsters he has just visualized seem to be an eruption from an anguished mind – the deeper the crisis, the greater his power. As if to confirm the extent of his power, Riggan now starts to levitate for the second time, but this time he does not stay a few centimetres above the ground but rather soars above the streets to first perch on a roof and then fly over Manhattan.

The plays of Shakespeare and the Hollywood blockbuster are linked in this sequence in complex ways. On the one hand, the most striking display of Riggan/Birdman's powers follows from the hero's night of introspection. In this, Riggan

reminds us of yet another Shakespearean hero, Henry V, whose long scene of soul searching on the eve of Agincourt empowers him to achieve an unlikely victory against the French the next day. In other words, high culture works as the engine of a celebration of cinematic popular culture. Further, Riggan not only conjures up havoc in Manhattan and then flies over the city, reaffirming his superiority over the 'theater douchebags', but the episode also leads to his critical triumph in the premiere of the Carver adaptation. Admittedly, that triumph may also be explained as a consequence of his almost-real-death onstage, something that has little to do with traditional excellence in theatrical performance, but rather with the type of internet fame that rewards not merit but an accidental event. There is cruel irony in the fact that Riggan's adaptation of Carver is simultaneously reverential and sensationalistic. For all his inflated sense of himself as a serious artist, his only additions to the short story are a sex scene and the shooting. Thus, in trying to regain his lost prestige as a 'serious' artist, all Riggan seems to be able to do is fall back on the Hollywood blockbuster tropes of sex and violence, and, once again, it works – even if the audience is a culturally 'superior' Broadway audience. As a whole, the segment conveys the continuum between Shakespeare and Hollywood, with Carver and Broadway in the middle, artistic excellence and spectatorial fun to be found in equal helpings in the most elitist and the most popular forms of entertainment.

On the other hand, the amalgamation of all these forms of entertainment and their simultaneous insertion in the film's unbounded space are also part of the film's ruminations on the nature of the contemporary experience and its perception of reality through the superimposition of multiple screens, democratically bringing together very dissimilar forms of entertainment, or maybe flattening their differences into an

undifferentiated whole. Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin have coined the term remediation to describe the process through which new media, in their aim to capture reality in a radically new way, always incorporate, refashion and repurpose earlier media. As a result, a new medium's promise of transparent immediacy cannot be separated from a more or less self-conscious exacerbation of earlier media. They refer to this constant oscillation between immediacy and hypermediacy (or, as they also put it, transparency and opacity) as the 'double logic of remediation'. In recent times, remediating processes, which they trace back to medieval miniatures and the Renaissance, have become more obvious because of the proliferation of new outlets, platforms and representational methods (1999: 12–14). This formulation can be linked to our previous discussion of digital realism and its relocation in Shaviro's mediasphere, yet the logic of remediation highlights *Birdman*'s collapsing of a multitude of medial references, all made coherent through the digital construction of unbounded space. In other words, at this point it is not so much that the segment analysed above materializes the multiplicity of screens in our contemporary world as that it reproduces our experience of a single reality in the media sphere.

At the end of the brief special-effects extravaganza described above, the reborn superhero descends on the 'real world' and, surrounded by oblivious Manhattanites who go on about their daily business, enters the St. James Theater ready for his evening of triumph. Not only do people around him seem to be blind to his flying feat but, as he disappears through the doors, a cab driver follows him inside, demanding his fare.

Figure 7: Alternate realities (*Birdman*).

Once again it is suggested that Riggan's experience has been another creation of his hyperactive mind, and that he has actually returned to the theatre in a taxi, fantasizing about his own powers during the ride. For the spectator, however, the logical explanation of the event is irrelevant: by now we have learned to ignore the boundaries between ontologically different spaces, just as we have learned to appreciate and enjoy the multi-media feast on offer. Both the superhero's adventure and the cab driver exist in the same smooth, unbounded space of digital cinema. At this climactic moment of sorts, the film has offered an orgy of remediation, amalgamated and flattened into a continuous space. Shortly afterwards, the theatrical performance is over and the unbounded shot finally comes to an end. After a more or less traditional montage sequence – composed of weird fragments that seem to convey the hero's descent into Hades before his 'resurrection' – an ostensible fade out/fade in ushers us into the second 'long take'. In this final section *Birdman* still has time to add more screens to the mix. Together with Tabitha's positive review in the *New York Times*, a television screen, Twitter, Instagram and other social networks definitively sanction the protagonist's success, a new man made of many digital and ontological fragments.

In the midst of Riggan's paroxystic display of his superpowers in the streets of Manhattan, after he starts ascending from the ground, egged on by his Hollywood alter ego, we see Riggan/Keaton perched on the edge of a building, unkempt in his untidy long coat.

Figure 8: The world according to Art Cinema (*Birdman*).

Among the multitude of metacinematic references on display in *Birdman*, this image evokes that of actor Bruno Ganz playing angel Damiel in Wim Wenders' *Der*

Himmel über Berlin/*Wings of Desire* (Wenders 1987). The reference is relevant because the older transnational filmmaker is an icon of the type of movie that *Birdman* imagines, one capable of bridging the gap between Shakespeare and the blockbuster – art and *auteur* cinema. The reference harks back to the consolidation of this type of film in the 1970s through figures like Wenders and represents the type of cinema that Iñárritu and Lubezki also represent. Although Iñárritu has previously suggested that Hollywood and art cinema are often antithetical (Deleyto and Azcona 2010: 123; D'Addario 2014), *Birdman* brings them together, the visual and aural rhetoric of the film encompassing both CGI fireworks and art cinema's stylistic excellence. With Riggan perched on the rooftop looking down at Manhattan, Iñárritu and Lubezki insert themselves into an auteur/industry cinema continuum, acquiring the lofty look of the angel overlooking the world down below but immediately joining the fray, becoming a part of the remediated space. What the film is doing with this is perhaps acknowledging that this is an Iñárritu film made in Hollywood, its post-independent US cinema credentials linking it with the art cinema of Wim Wenders and his peers. The film and the filmmakers become, therefore, part of its composited materiality, one more level of its multiple unbounded space.

Riggan's powers, like his crisis, are, as the arc of the sequence moving and then flying through Manhattan underlines, both theatrical and cinematic, both traditional and contemporary: they encompass the power of introspection associated here with various Shakespearean heroes and the power of cinematic illusion, both multicoloured lights and compositing extravaganza. Macbeth and Birdman (like the Batman that Keaton played in *Batman* [Burton 1989] and *Batman Returns* [Burton 1992]) are, like comic books and

Raymond Carver, traditional theatrical reviews and Twitter accounts, viral YouTube videos and dress rehearsals, Hollywood and European art cinema, Hollywood and Broadway stars, part of a multiplying multi-media reality that, rather than replace earlier forms, has, like the cinema when it was born, incorporated them all, according to a logic of remediation accelerated by the fast-changing realities of technological globalization (Bolter and Grusin 1999: 9–15).

The rules of the game

The analysis of a segment from *Birdman* highlights how the discretized, composited, gaseous and digital-realistic quality of unbounded space alters the ontology of the image and requires a different understanding of our relationship with it, but also makes that understanding easier by framing it within the spectator's everyday experience of a multi-media, multi-screen, multi-level, global world. In this composited world, the conflicts addressed by contemporary cinema may not be so different from those we find throughout its previous history: in this case, the crisis of the middle-aged man and the actor's craving for recognition (or, as the fragment from Carver that opens the film puts it, one's desire to feel 'beloved on the earth'). Through its ultramodern gaseous space, the film still describes a traditional narrative arc, in which the hero may or may not learn to accept his place in the world, his ageing process and the specific nature of the type of recognition that the world in which he lives as a human being and an actor can give him. Whether he has learned his lesson or not when Sam looks off-screen and the digital image finally fades out is debatable: the extreme satirical edge of the film both asks us to trust that he has learned and to doubt that he ever will. The film's refusal to follow Sam's gaze and show exactly what she sees leaves the question open. At the same time,

however classical in its narrative construction the film may be, its meanings are inevitably framed within the twenty-first-century experience of living in a digital and highly mediated world.

In a piece about the technological revolution of the twenty-first century and its effects on social life, Adam Gopnik argues that 'the real gains and losses of the Internet era are to be found not in altered neurons or empathy tests but in the small changes in mood, life, manners, feeling it creates – in the texture of the age' (2011, n.p.). Simon Gottschalk has coined the term 'terminal self' to describe the psychosocial orientations of twenty-first-century individuals in a world where the omnipresence of terminals has blurred the boundaries between online and offline domains: 'by extracting users – mentally, emotionally, socially – from the physical context they occupy, terminal interactivity weakens the grounding forces of these physical contexts, reduces their gravity and solidity, and blurs their distinctive features' (2018: 36). For Gottschalk, rather than a withdrawal from the public realm, these new forms of behaviour appropriate it, changing our social modes of interaction, motivated as we are by instant and short-lived gratification (2018: 36). Terminal interactivity is immersive and provides immediate satisfaction. Yet, the pleasure it provides is ephemeral since, in the terminal world, everything must be regularly updated if it is not to become obsolete. As Sam explains to her father, it is not artistic excellence, talent or originality that counts in the world of the internet, but the immediate response and the number of likes and followers in social networks. With one's self-esteem and sense of self linked to immediate and constant validation, recognition 'has become a daily struggle whose rules are constantly ratcheted up, and waged with the reasonably fatalistic understanding that our

accomplishments can be neither accumulated nor guaranteed currency in the unstable future' (Gottschalk 2018: 64).

With his self-aggrandizing theatrical project, Riggan, frustrated by his own Hollywood fame, is looking for a more traditional type of validation. Dickinson, from her ivory tower, considers herself the guardian of that traditional ritual of the bestowing of recognition on actors. Mike is confident of his power to produce 'true' performances through his hyper-realistic form of method acting. And yet, to a greater or lesser extent, the three of them succumb to the mandates of a digital world in which the rules of the game have changed and traditional validation must coexist with visibility, virality and constant upgrading. 'Forget about The [New York] Times, everyone else has', growls the bird in relation to the tyranny of the moment that characterizes the digital world. We last see Riggan's superhero alter ego, alongside Sam, the most outspoken proponent of the terminal self, sitting dejectedly on the toilet as the actor's new self (maybe) soars to heaven, a seemingly discarded player in Riggan's final triumph. His apparent demise might suggest that his position is finally weakened by the narrative, the world he defends – both mainstream Hollywood's most representative products and the power of social networks – visibly and sardonically left behind. But this is not how the film's irony works. Rather, Birdman celebrates and critiques, simultaneously bringing the spectator closer to and keeping us at a distance from the characters. Traditional forms of validation persist, and new ones are often under attack, but they all become inevitably remediated within the new logic of the terminal/digital world. We may critique this world, and Birdman's comic invectives are unusually violent, but we might as well also get used to it. The Birdman is both the clown and the voice of reason (as in Shakespeare); Riggan is

both a pathetic and sympathetic figure; Mike embodies the best tradition of Broadway, but he is an insufferable caricature of a human being. The Broadway theatre still projects the brilliance of the multicoloured lights of the Shakespearean night, and art cinema still dazzles with the eagle-like depth of its vision, the superhero turned art-cinema angel watching in a sympathetic way over the miseries of the world below, but they are all now doubly framed by the digital world within which they can make sense together, both celebrated and kept at a distance, engulfed by the logic of the terminal world.

'Believe it or not, this is power', says Sam as she shows her father the viral video of him jogging to the theatre in his underwear. In the context of Sam's 'get-rid-of-your-self-obsession' exercise, her defence of the power of social media to lay a claim on reality cannot be anything but ironic given the short time that these new media have been with us. Yet, at the same time, it also suggests that the new technologies, as Sobchack has argued, offer us not only a new way of mediating the world around us but new ways of 'being-in-the-world': digital screens 'solicit and shape our presence to the world, our representation in it, and our sensibilities and responsibilities about it' (2016: 90). *Birdman* explores the impact of communication technology on our sense of self and offers itself as a product of such technology. It suggests that the brave new world of the digital invites and incites us to navigate its gaseous spaces of digital compositing, communication terminals and remediation and, further, that it is a hopeless task to try to escape its power. The film conveys this bleak view through an exploration of the artistic and expressive possibilities of the transition from the analogue to the digital, from the long take to unbounded space. In this sense, *Birdman* is a logical continuation of Iñárritu's earlier films, an attempt to reframe his earlier cinematic explorations within,

literally, a new space. His more recent VR installation *Carne y arena*/*Virtually Present, Physically Invisible* (Iñárritu 2017) (explored in this issue by Catherine Leen) suggests that the exploration is not over.

Acknowledgements

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