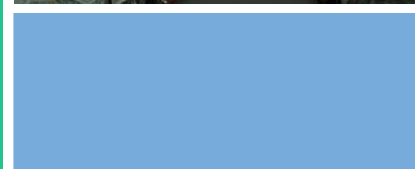
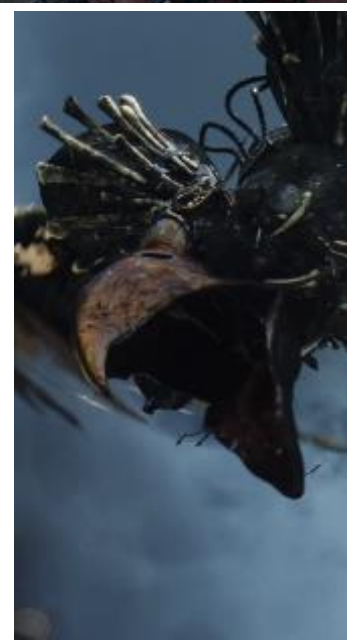
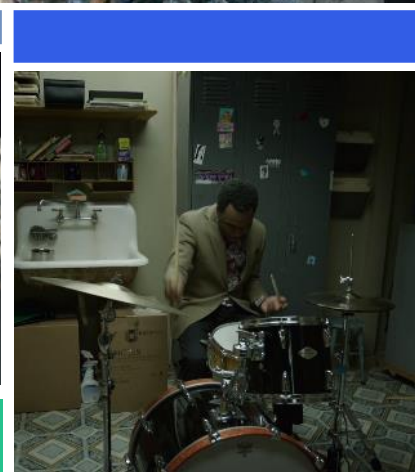
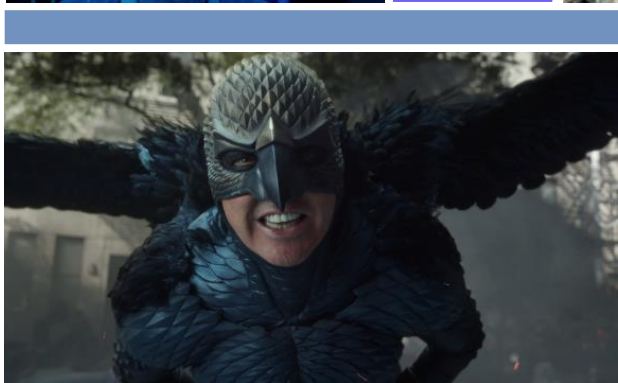
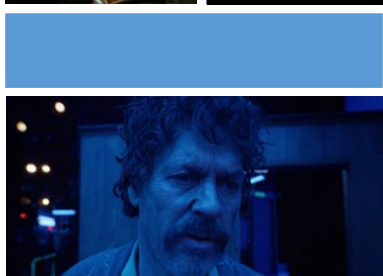
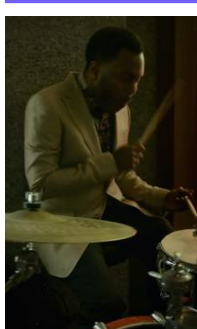


The Unexpected Virtue of Transgression

Sound and Image Relations in *Birdman*

Bachelor thesis
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Introduction

Alejandro Iñárritu's 2014 film *Birdman (or The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance)* tells the story of Riggan Thomson (portrayed by Michael Keaton), a now washed-up Hollywood actor famous for portraying the comic book superhero known as Birdman in the 1990s. In an effort to save what is left of his career, he writes, directs, and stars in his own Broadway adaptation of Raymond Carver's short story "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love". The film chronicles five eventful days in which Riggan stumbles through three preview performances and the official premiere, all while being plagued by his uncooperative star actor Mike Shiner (Edward Norton), strained personal relationships, and a manifestation of his former Birdman-persona.

The film, which was widely praised for largely consisting of a carefully constructed long take, is underscored by an original solo drum soundtrack composed and performed by jazz drummer Antonio Sánchez, as well as several prerecorded classical pieces by various composers. Sadly, critical evaluation of the film's soundtrack was largely overshadowed by its disqualification for the Academy Award for the Best Original Score.¹ However persuasive either side's arguments in that matter, I shall limit myself to here discussing the film only, with particular attention to its use of sound. As Susan Hayward notes in *Cinema Studies: The Key Concepts*, the introduction of sound in cinema allowed for "greater space for social and psychological reality within the narrative".²

Simon Horrocks notes that "[i]t has become something of an ironic cliché [...] that film theory has been largely neglectful of music's significance (and that of sound more generally), concentrating instead on the analysis of cinema's visual construction".³ Claudia Gorbman in turn argues that music in cinema, from a historical perspective, has taken a back seat to the film's diegesis on account of it being nonnarrative and nonrepresentational. As a result, "[t]he spectator tends to be conscious of discourse (elements, including music, that enunciate the story) only insofar as it "transgresses"

¹ Ben Child, "Birdman score ineligible for Oscar," *The Guardian*, last modified December 23, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2014/dec/23/birdman-score-ineligible-for-oscar>.

² Susan Hayward, *Cinema Studies: The Key Concepts* (London: Routledge, 2000), 333.

³ Simon Horrocks, "Sound," in *Critical Dictionary of Film and Television Theory*, eds. Roberta E. Pearson & Philip Simpson (London: Routledge, 2001), 293.

or “interrupts” story (that which is enunciated)”.⁴ *Birdman*, as I will argue in this thesis, presents its viewer with several moments when the music, as Gorbman puts it, transgresses or interrupts a leisurely viewing of it.

Italian film scholar Francesco Casetti has argued that images and sounds on a screen engage our senses in such a way that they trigger a comprehension in us of both *what* we are viewing and the very fact *that* we are viewing it. He calls this moment the filmic experience.⁵ I consider this concept to be useful for describing irregular viewing experiences such as those produced by *Birdman*. By ‘irregular’ I mean those films that do not allow us to watch them without a second thought. These are films that in one way or another unsettle us and challenge us to look and listen beyond their surface. Casetti further speaks of a “situation which combines sensory or cognitive ‘excess’ [...] to the ‘recognition’ of what we are exposed to and the fact that we are exposed to it”. The latter, says Casetti, “makes us redefine ourselves and our surroundings”.⁶ That is, in my estimation, the effect of films such as *Birdman*.

The main question I aim to answer is how the relationship between images and sounds in *Birdman (or The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance)* problematizes our viewing experience. In order to answer this question, I have chosen three key scenes from the film to analyze. While *Birdman* no doubt contains more than just these three noteworthy moments with regard to the sound-image construction, I have limited myself to these as I deem them representative of the overall style.

By way of analyzing the organization of sounds and images of a given scene, I will draw upon what French composer and film scholar Michel Chion has termed the ‘masking method’. This method, outlined in *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, involves closely observing a sequence by alternately masking the image or omitting the sound. Each of these components is to be studied independently before being rejoined to examine the finished product again. According to Chion, this method lets you observe each component as it is without it being transformed or disguised by the other.⁷ I have found this method to yield useful results. For each of the three case studies I will further draw upon various other theoretical concepts as outlined below.

With this thesis I aim to connect two smaller areas of film studies, namely those

⁴ Claudia Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music* (London: British Film Institute, 1987), 31.

⁵ Francesco Casetti, “Filmic Experience,” *Screen* 50, no. 1 (2009): 56.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁷ Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 187.

concerning sound and spectatorship. I do so by concentrating on the relationship between sounds and images and the effect that this has on our understanding of the film's narrative. The premise of my argument is that the structuring of sounds and images reflects the film's theme of truth versus fiction. I think the case of *Birdman* legitimates a revaluation of the importance of cinematic sound. While my primary object of interest is the film's use of music, I cannot disregard the importance of sound effects.

This thesis is divided into three chapters, with each one focusing on a particular scene. The first chapter presents an analysis of a scene in which Riggan and his star actor, Mike, argue over an interrupted first preview. For the viewer, the presence of a street musician signals an implausible shift from diegetic music to nondiegetic music. Using Robynn Stilwell's notion of a "fantastical gap" as a middle ground between the diegetic and the nondiegetic realms, I will demonstrate how *Birdman* forces us to adjust our expectations of its fictional truth.

The second chapter provides an analysis of a scene in which the camera traces Riggan's walk from his dressing room to the stage, where the final act of his play is about to begin. Along the way, a second appearance by the street musician again signals an implausible shift between the diegetic and the nondiegetic realms. Building upon the previous analysis, I will illustrate through Michel Chion's understanding of synchronization points how the shift between these worlds is further problematized.

The third chapter presents an analysis of the iconic scene in which Riggan achieves liftoff and flies through the streets of Manhattan. Utilizing Gérard Genette's literary concept of focalization, I will make clear how sounds and music can point to a disparity between the fictional truth and the narrative perspective of a character. Each of these case studies builds upon the previous one, gradually complicating and deepening my argument.

I

Doors and Distance... and a Drummer

This first chapter presents an analysis of a scene that takes place after the first preview of Riggan's play. Riggan, on edge because of his declining fortunes, tries to reason with his egocentric star actor, Mike Shiner. He wants to talk things over, but is confronted with his own inexperience in the theater world. The scene presents arguably the first moment in the film when we as viewers are confronted with both the possibilities of cinematic sound and the problematic implications they present within the story world of *Birdman*. The focus in this analysis is specifically on the distinction between diegetic and nondiegetic sound.

* * *

After a disastrous first preview, disrupted by a drunk and belligerent Mike, Riggan returns to his dressing room. While there, his ex-wife Sylvia pays him a visit. The conversation turns sour when Riggan tells her he is going to sell the house they intended for their daughter Sam. As soon as Sylvia leaves, Birdman starts to taunt Riggan for the choices he has made. Frustrated, Riggan puts on his coat and heads to the street to meet Mike and talk things over with him. On his way to meet Mike, Riggan is informed by stage manager Annie of the deliverance of a tanning bed for Mike (so he can better prepare for his role). Outside, Riggan and Mike engage in a heated conversation before getting coffee at a bar.

As mentioned briefly in the introduction, Chion proposes what he calls the 'masking method' as a way of observing and analyzing the sound-image structure of a film. Chion implores us to "Screen a given sequence several times, sometimes watching sound and image together, sometimes masking the image, sometimes cutting out the sound".⁸ As I consider relaying the entire process of (re)watching and (re)listening each scene here unnecessary, I shall restrict myself to one definitive reading of each scene. I have chosen to structure these readings as images first and sounds second, before discussing the 'complete' scene. This choice is essentially arbitrary, but provides

⁸ Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 187.

a handle when reading this thesis nonetheless.

A medium close-up shows us Riggan sitting at his dressing table. He takes a sip from a beer bottle and he scratches his head. He gets up, grabs his coat, and leaves the room. When Riggan runs into Annie in the hallway, the frame is balanced, with the two of them each taking up one half of the frame (fig. 1.1). The camera puts Riggan squarely in the middle as he turns right to take the stairs. Upon stepping out into the busy street, we see Mike leaning against the back of a limousine, smoking a cigarette. Riggan gestures him to come with him. A puzzled Mike catches up to him. The camera shows the two walking towards us. Riggan is visibly upset, while Mike reacts laconically, occasionally taking a puff from his cigarette (fig 1.2). At one point, Riggan takes something out of his pocket and throws it somewhere off-screen. The camera sways to the left and briefly lingers on a lone drummer, performing there on a full drum kit (fig. 1.3). The camera turns again to shows us Mike and Riggan, but now from the back. Suddenly, Mike stops and yells at Riggan. People walk by without looking up. As the two resume their way, the camera swerves around them, preceding them once again. The argument continues and both men appear fed up. Mike turns and opens the door of a bar. He gestures to Riggan. The camera moves past Riggan and follows Mike inside.

Even without sound, the image provides enough cues to suggest Riggan's frustration with his situation. The frame is balanced throughout most of the sequence, either with Riggan squarely in the middle or with two characters balancing. From the moment Riggan gets up, there is constant movement, with the camera never more than two or three steps behind or in front of its subjects. Even as characters stand still, the camera is never static. In spite of Riggan's growing frustration and desperation, the framing is balanced and controlled. Let us now listen to the scene acousmatically, without the equally transformative effect of the images.

We hear the first beats of a percussive track. After some final words, Sylvia leaves the room. We hear the click of a door. Birdman's deep, cynical voice begins to taunt Riggan: "We should have done that reality show they offered us, *The Thomsons*." Riggan repeatedly tells him to shut up. We hear a door opening, shortly followed by Annie's hushed voice informing Riggan that a tanning bed is being delivered to the theater. We hear footsteps and rustling. Riggan mutters curses at Mike. The beeping sound of a truck backing up reaches us. A clicking sound is followed by an array of street noises, including the humming of car engines, people yelling unintelligible phrases, and an occasional siren. Riggan's voice sounds demanding. "Let's go. Walk".

Mike responds. “Where are we going?” Riggan sounds irritated, while Mike sounds skeptical. A verbal argument ensues against a background of claxons, unintelligible voices, and the still-present sound of the drums. These sounds fade away as the sequence ends, making way for jazzy piano music and unintelligible conversation.

* * *

Cinematic sound is commonly divided into three categories: speech, music, and noise (or sound effects).⁹ This scene features, in order of appearance, the voices of Sylvia, Birdman, Riggan, Annie, and Mike. Birdman is the only character whose voice we hear that does not make a physical appearance on screen. However, the loudness of his voice does suggest a certain proximity to the camera. The music that underscores the scene is an Antonio Sánchez composition titled “Doors and Distance”. Sound effects are numerous, ranging from minor sounds such as the clicks produced by doors opening and closing and taps produced by walking. Outside, all manner of traffic noises and unintelligible speech create a dense urban soundscape. Speech and music seem to equally dominate the scene’s sound image, with the sound effects providing a realistic-sounding impressions of the surroundings. The street noises, however, are at too low a volume to be considered realistic, automatically directing our attention to the actor’s voices.

Having analyzed the image and the sound separately, it stands to reason that we take a look at the finished product in order to examine their combined impact. Chion argues that sound enriches an image in a certain way so as to create its definitive impression.¹⁰ In other words, what is the added value of sound to the image? First and foremost there are the actors’ voices, which carry verbal expressions. Chion somewhat underplays the importance of the voice by claiming that recording usually focusses on the voice, thus relegating music and sound effects to the role of accompaniment.¹¹ I disagree, since verbal expressions usually contain narrative information regarding story information or the characters’ relationships. Sound effects, then, as is the case here, reflect the fictional environment, thereby in a sense confirming that environment. Finally, the music adds a pronounced sense of rhythm to the proceedings. Given the film’s long take style of filming, the options for creating rhythm

⁹ David Bordwell & Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2014), 273.

¹⁰ Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 5.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 5-6.

are limited to the actors' movements and the music. In this particular scene, the visual rhythm more or less matches the sonic rhythm.

The most notable event in terms of sound and image relations is the presence of the drummer performing on the sidewalk. The music we had been hearing up to that point had been without a physical source in the story world. We would logically have to interpret the music as nondiegetic. When the camera then swerves to the left to show us a physical source, the music has become part of the diegesis. The sonic qualities of the music at the outset do not match those of the music a few moments later. The volume of the music is simply not compatible with the distance the actors have covered, nor is there then any logical explanation for the absence of street noise inside Riggan's dressing room. Hence, we are left to reflect on what we are seeing and hearing.

Robynn Stilwell has argued that the distinction between the diegetic and the nondiegetic takes place in a theoretical realm independent from the screen. The diegetic, as goes without saying, is rooted in what is depicted on screen, i.e. the story world. The nondiegetic, on the other hand, is conceived as "a space behind/beneath the diegetic".¹² Thus, Stilwell arrives at the notion of the "fantastical gap," which he describes as "a transformative space, a superposition, a transition between stable states".¹³ Crossing the fantastical gap is to be thought of as a process (rather than an event) that "calls attention to the act of crossing and therefore reinforces difference [between diegetic and nondiegetic]".¹⁴ *Birdman* does that here by boldly juxtaposing two "versions" of the story world – one in which the music is nondiegetic and another in which the music is diegetic – and seamlessly moving between them.

* * *

The three types of cinematic sound noted earlier are hierarchically structured. The voices in this scene combine to form the dominant layer. Both inside and outside the theater, the actors' voices take prevalence over the music and the sound effects. Especially inside the theater, the latter sound relatively muted. They are heard, as it were, *underneath* the voices and the music. The footsteps and the rustling make no significant contribution to our understanding of the scene; certainly no suggestions are made through those sounds that are not already made through the image. Outside, the

¹² Robynn Stilwell, "The Fantastical Gap between Diegetic and Nondiegetic," in *Beyond the Soundtrack*, ed. by Daniel Goldmark, Lawrence Kramer, and Richard Leppert (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 196.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 200.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 184.

street noises constitute a continuous, denser layer of sound that serves almost as an auditory wallpaper. The music has become part of this soundscape since it is produced in the same environment, but it nevertheless stands out, since we recognize it as a separate category of sound.

Birdman calls attention to its crossing the fantastical gap in a bold, in-your-face way. By blatantly showing us that the music we have been hearing – at least in this scene – has a physical source, we are caught off guard. The seemingly inconsequential presence of the drummer forces us to reconsider what we have come to expect from *Birdman*. It perfectly fits Casetti's notion of the filmic experience, i.e. "both that moment when images (and sounds) on a screen arrogantly engage our senses and also that moment when they trigger a comprehension that concerns, reflexively, what we are viewing and the very fact of viewing it".¹⁵ Yet, rather than confirming our comprehension of what is happening on screen, we are left to reconsider the rules by which *Birdman* plays. Musicians could now be hiding anywhere, as we will indeed see later on in the film.

¹⁵ Francesco Casetti, "Filmic Experience," *Screen* 50, no. 1 (2009): 56.

II

Closing the Gap

This second chapter offers an analysis of the sequence leading up to the film's climactic suicide scene. Having come to terms with how his life choices have turned out, Riggan attempts to take his own life on stage at the opening night of his play. Leading up to that moment is a momentous walk from his dressing room to the stage. The scene is notable for repeating a gag from earlier in the film, which further problematizes the divide between the diegetic and the nondiegetic. The focus in this chapter, however, is on the key points of synchronization.

* * *

It is the opening night of Riggan's stage adaptation of "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love". During the intermission, Sylvia visits Riggan in his dressing room. After she leaves, Riggan changes into his costume for the final scene. Taking with him a real gun instead of his stage prop, he telekinetically opens the door and makes his way to the stage. Once there, he brushes off both Annie, the stage manager, and his make-up artists and enters the final scene of his play, apparently intending to genuinely kill himself (rather than his character) in the final act. We first watch the sequence without the sound.

We are in Riggan's dressing room. A medium close-up shows us Riggan staring at the ground. As he gets up from the table, the camera backs away a little. Riggan puts on his wig and his coat as he moves his lips and tongue in an exaggerated manner. He takes out a gun from behind a basket on a shelf. The camera focuses on his hands as Riggan checks the magazine and puts it back. As he does so, the camera tracks up. Riggan raises his hand and the camera pans to the left, tracking his pointing finger. The door of the dressing room suddenly opens and the camera moves towards the door. In a point-of-view shot the camera glides down the high, narrow hallway (fig. 2.2). From a dark passage on the left, a technician, looking straight into the camera, enters the shot and disappears into a staircase on the right. In an unlit portion of the hallway a little further, the silhouette of an actor crosses from right to left. Near the end of the hallway, the camera pans to the right, showing us a kitchen area where the drummer we saw earlier is performing (fig. 2.3). As the camera backs away, Riggan enters the

shot from the right. He follows the camera as it moves backwards through a corridor leading to the backstage area. A stagehand carrying cables moves in front of Riggan from right to left. Riggan brushes off Annie, who holds a device up in her hands, with a hand gesture and walks over to two makeup artists who spray water on Riggan. Impatiently, he goes over to a door that leads to the set of the play's final scene and, after a brief pause, bangs on the door.

Again, the camera is never static, its movements emphasizing Riggan's actions: taking out the gun from its hiding place; checking the magazine and putting it back; opening the door by pointing at it. As Riggan makes his way to the stage, we even become one with him for a while by adopting his point of view. 'We' then ignore both the technician and the actor by steadily moving forward. By the time the drummer is shown, we no longer see from Riggan's point of view as he steps into the shot. His figure looms as we descend the flight of stairs in the dimly lit hallway (fig. 2.4). The overall dark surroundings make for an ominous ambience. Listening to the scene acousmatically emphasizes the foreboding quality that the music lends to the image.

We hear a door closing. A sigh is followed by rustling. Meanwhile, Riggan's voice is heard repeatedly whispering a vocal exercise: "Twenty little lions laughed at two lofty leopards". A sliding sound is heard, followed by multiple clicking noises. Riggan is heard uttering nonsensical syllables, which are ostensibly part of his ongoing vocal exercises. More vocalizations are heard as a sudden drum roll signals the beginning of Sánchez's composition "Claustrophobia". A male voice is heard saying "Break a leg, Mr. Thomson". Later, we hear a cough that is immediately followed by tinkling noises. We hear Annie faintly saying "blood rig". When she does not get a response, we hear her calling after Riggan. At the last "Hey!" we hear the crackling sound of thunder and rain. Loud bangs on the door and shouting from Riggan (who, judging from his voice, is now in character) mark the end of this scene.

* * *

Throughout the scene we hear, in order of appearance, the voices of Riggan, the technician, and Annie. Noticeably, none of these characters engage in dialogue with one another. The noises that are heard range from clicks produced by Riggan's gun and the rustling of his clothes to footsteps, coughing, and jingling sounds. These sounds do not impact the overall soundscape, but rather serve to accentuate certain actions. The scene is underscored by an Antonio Sánchez composition titled "Claustrophobia". The music arguably adds most value to the scene, since the voices of the characters do not

carry significant information regarding the narrative.

When we rejoin the visual and the auditory components of the scene, we see (and hear) that the scene is predominantly nonverbal. The few vocalizations we do hear – Riggan’s vocal warmup exercise, the technician’s encouragement, and Annie’s appeal to Riggan – get no response from other characters, de-emphasizing their significance. The fact that Riggan’s verbal expressions carry no real meaning, coupled with his unresponsiveness towards his employees, affirm for the viewer that Riggan is in a contemplative state of mind. This is offset against the score, which, like all original music created for the film, consists only of drums and percussion. The clattering sounds suggest quite the opposite of contemplation. Taken together, however, the images and the music suggest inner conflict. The incongruence adds to the ominous feel of the scene, giving the viewer little certainty about what is to come.

The sequence features two key moments when image and sound combine to create a more significant meaning. Such synchronization points (or synch points, for short) have been described by Chion as “salient moment[s] of an audiovisual sequence during which a sound event and a visual event meet in synchrony”.¹⁶ Synch points thus arise when visual phenomena and auditory phenomena occur at the same time. In most films, sounds and images are synchronous, resulting in many synch points. Onscreen conversation between characters and walking accompanied by footsteps are common examples. Of interest to us, however, are those moments when the images and the sounds combine to create a more meaningful effect.¹⁷

The first key moment of synchronization occurs at the beginning of the sequence. Using the telekinetic powers he has displayed throughout the film, Riggan opens the door of his dressing room by raising his arm in its direction. Music starts playing at the moment the door swings open (fig. 2.1). There occurs what Chion has termed *synchresis* – a portmanteau of ‘synchronicity’ and ‘synthesis’ – which he defines as “the spontaneous and irresistible weld produced between a particular auditory phenomenon and visual phenomenon when they occur at the same time”.¹⁸ Chion goes on to note that the sounds and the image do not necessarily have to do with each other. Indeed, the visual phenomenon (i.e. the door opening by itself) and the auditory phenomenon (i.e. the drum beats) are two completely separate events. Neither one

¹⁶ Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 58.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 190.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 63.

causes the other to occur. Yet, both events become more significant precisely because they occur at the same time.

After this moment of simultaneous synchronization, the camera proceeds down the hallway. The second key moment of synchronization occurs when the camera pans to the right to show us, in a similar manner as before, the drummer from the street. His second appearance calls into memory how we had passed through what Stilwell termed the “fantastical gap” between diegetic and nondiegetic sound. More so than before, we are forced to reevaluate how the film presents the diegesis. Whereas before the drummer could have passed for just a street musician, his appearance inside the theater greatly problematizes his character. Both in terms of place and time, the drummer is an anomaly. He is playing in a small kitchen area in a part of the theater not normally accessible to outsiders, on the opening night of a play, no less! Despite all this, Riggan ignores him. The drummer thus appears to be in a diegetic limbo: he is at once inside the story world making music, while at the same time his presence remains unacknowledged.

By the time the drummer is revealed, we have again passed through the “fantastical gap,” from the nondiegetic to the diegetic. Contrary to the drummer’s previous appearance, the change in sound perspective is hardly noticeable, even when listening to the sequence acousmatically. Also unlike the previous appearance, the music recedes back into the realm of the nondiegetic as the camera moves away from him. Despite twice passing through the “fantastical gap,” the volume remains relatively consistent, appearing to be compatible with both the diegetic and the nondiegetic. Much like the physical source that produces it, the music seems caught in a transitory phase, ambiguously floating in and out of the story world.

Crossing the gap between the diegetic and the nondiegetic is, as Stilwell has argued, an act that calls attention to itself and is never without meaning.¹⁹ Crossing that gap twice in less than one minute, then, is all the more significant. With both the physical source and the music itself residing in between the stable states of the diegetic and the nondiegetic, we may even doubt if “the other side” of the gap is ever reached during this sequence. If the sound does properly cross the gap (twice), we could simply call it as we see it. However, if we argue that the boundaries between the diegetic and the

¹⁹ Robynn Stilwell, “The Fantastical Gap between Diegetic and Nondiegetic,” in *Beyond the Soundtrack*, ed. by Daniel Goldmark, Lawrence Kramer, and Richard Leppert (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 186.

nondiegetic are blurred with the sound only treading in the ambiguous middle space of the “fantastical gap,” we must conclude that the boundaries between the fictional truth of the story world and the expressed world of Riggan are equally blurred. Given the already ambivalent status of the drummer, I am inclined to favor the second interpretation.

* * *

To put all of this in perspective: in a sequence that lasts roughly one minute, we can observe two synch points occurring in different realms, while the music itself seems compatible with either one. The first synch point, for all intents and purposes, takes place in the nondiegetic realm, with the visual and the auditory components coproducing a moment of synchresis. “Locating” the second synch point within these theoretical spaces proves more problematic, however. The physical source that appears responsible for the music is of such ambivalence that we cannot definitively determine the status of the music. The music at this point may still be called background music, albeit visible background music. The film teases us by wading in the ambiguousness of the “fantastical gap” and so calls attention to its own fictionality.

III

Riggan's Flight Scene

In this third and final chapter I will analyze one of the most iconic scenes of the film, in which Riggan Thomson, ultimately famous for portraying the fictional superhero Birdman, lives up to his image by flying. Building upon my analysis in the previous chapter, I discuss this scene, which I christen Riggan's Flight Scene, in conjunction with French literary theorist Gérard Genette's concept of focalization in order to discuss the particular realm that the music in the scene occupies. With this, I intend to shed light on yet another ambiguous turn that sound makes in *Birdman*.

* * *

Having spent the night passed out on someone's doorstep, Riggan wakes up hungover and goes for a walk. Birdman, making his first onscreen appearance in the film, follows Riggan around and scolds him as he blankly walks down the street. A fantastical scene from an imagined *Birdman* sequel follows, leaving Riggan with a determined look on his face. He gently levitates and floats up. The next moment he stands on the ledge of a building, staring into nothingness. A friendly neighbor tries to prevent Riggan from jumping. He initially succeeds, until Riggan turns around, runs back, and jumps off the building. Riggan then proceeds to fly high above the streets of Manhattan only to safely land in front of the theater. Let us start watching the scene from the moment the camera pulls up to Riggan standing on the ledge.

The camera draws close to Riggan, showing us the blank look on his face, and his slightly opened mouth. The camera turns around him, revealing a man with a concerned look on his face cautiously approaching him. The two exchange a few words. Riggan perplexedly looks over his shoulder when the man grabs his arm and helps him down. The two advance toward a ladder at the other side of the roof. The camera follows as if it were an onlooker. Riggan and the man exchange a few more words before Riggan runs off-screen. The camera pans to the left to show Riggan running towards and then jumping off the ledge, his raincoat flapping behind him like a superhero cape. The camera follows him and tilts down. We see Riggan grazing a tree before slowly gaining altitude. He flies off into the distance, circling around a church cupola and flying up to the camera. We see Riggan, arms spread wide, against a cloudy sky. He flies past and

the camera gives us a view as if we were flying behind Riggan, high above the Manhattan streets. He stretches his arms before him and flies through a tunnel and then up and out of sight, seemingly into the sun. A lens flare turns the screen white. As the camera pulls back, the lens flare fades and reveals the outlines of skyscrapers. Riggan calmly descends as the camera pulls further back. He is briefly obscured by the theater's marquee, which advertises his play. Walking towards the theater's entrance, Riggan addresses an usher who seems preoccupied. The camera pans to the left again to show us a taxi driver stepping out of his vehicle at the very spot Riggan landed. He follows Riggan inside.

Now let us listen to this same sequence. We hear a heavy claxon in the distance. A woman's voice yells. "Is this for real or are you shooting a film?" Riggan, sounding hoarse, replies. "A film!" The same woman again. "You people are full of shit!" From the right, we hear a man's voice. "Hey, man, can I help you?" Riggan responds by saying that he is late. He utters the word 'music', at which moment we briefly hear soaring classical music. The music abruptly stops and we hear distant traffic noises again. The man asks, "Are you okay, man?" We hear the shuffling of footsteps. Riggan answers the man, at which point the music starts playing again, but now a quieter section. We hear footsteps and the man calling after Riggan. A claxon sounds before the music reaches the point we heard before. In the distance we hear Riggan making joyful noises. The music soars and we hear the ringing of church bells. The music stops again and now we hear the wind, bird sounds, and distant traffic. Birdman's voice whispers to Riggan. "You see? This is where you belong. Above them all." The music resumes playing, while traffic noises are audible in the background. A voice yells "Hey you!" The wind briefly interrupts the music. While the music soars, we hear a church bell ring once, followed by the sound of pneumatic brakes and cloth flapping in the wind. Later, while the music is still playing, we hear unintelligible conversation. Riggan's voice says "Stop the music" and the music abruptly stops again. A male voice calls out after Riggan, saying he has not been paid. Another male voice asks what he is doing. We hear a thud. We still hear the first male voice speaking as the next musical number starts, indicating the start of the next scene.

During this scene we hear, in order of appearance, the voices of the woman on the rooftop across the street, Riggan, the concerned neighbor, Birdman, the usher, and finally the taxi driver. The scene is intermittently underscored by excerpts from Sergei Rachmaninov's Symphony No. 2 in E Minor, Op. 27. An urban atmosphere is created

through a soundscape consisting of claxons, car engines, church bells, gusts of wind, and unintelligible voices. Between the music and the voices there is no dominant element throughout the scene. Rather, interactions takes place. Riggan, through his voice, appears in control of the music, which is not heard by any of the other characters. The music stops only when Riggan is distracted, such as when the concerned neighbor grabs his arm, or when Birdman whispers to him.

As with the scene discussed in the previous chapter, the flight scene features several noteworthy instances of synchresis. Standing upon ledge, Riggan utters the word “Music,” seemingly to an invisible orchestra. At his command, the music starts playing, only to pause once Riggan gets distracted. Similarly, at the end of the scene, Riggan orders the unknowing usher to stop the music, at which point the music indeed stops. Again, the visual phenomenon (Riggan saying “music”) and the auditory phenomenon (the subsequent sounding of the music) are separate events, but since they occur simultaneously, we construe the auditory phenomenon as a consequence of, or a reaction to, the visual phenomenon. The fact that Riggan is the only one who is able to hear the music, then, indicates that this event is focalized through his character.

The term ‘focalization’ was first proposed in 1972 by French literary theorist Gérard Genette in order to distinguish between the character whose point of view orients the narrative perspective (the so-called focal character) and the narrator.²⁰ In other words, if the story’s events are focalized through a character, the flow of information may be constrained and shaped differently than when it is presented by a narrator. Manfred Jahn summarizes this as “the submission of (potentially limitless) narrative information to a perspectival filter”.²¹ Genette initially distinguished three types of focalization based on increasing degrees of restriction. Many scholars have since proposed adjustments to Genette’s original conception of focalization, considerably expanding and nuancing focalization theory. So as not to digress, I shall limit myself to discussing David Herman’s mode of hypothetical focalization.

The notion of hypothetical focalization was developed by literary scholar David Herman in order to cover the possibility of focalizing on a character who, for one reason or another, misperceives a significant event in the story.²² Film scholar Henry Bacon

²⁰ Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), 10.

²¹ Manfred Jahn, “Focalization,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative*, ed. David Herman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 94.

²² Henry Bacon, “Making sense of hypothetical focalization in the cinema,” *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 11, no. 3 (2013): 289.

sums up this notion as “a more or less severe mismatch between reference world and expressed world”.²³ Hypothetical focalization, in other words, points to how what may be assumed to be the fictional truth differs from how it is perceived by the focal character. According to Bacon, then, hypothetical focalization is “above all a matter of narrative *indecision* about how things are in the diegetic world”.²⁴ This would explain many diegetic anomalies in *Birdman*. How, for example, can Riggan at one point enter the theater through a corridor that, less than five minutes later, leads to the stage? While some of these anomalies may be dismissed as ways to accommodate the single-shot style of filming, there are some that have a significant implications regarding the film’s narrative.

The mismatch between the reference world and the expressed world is most clearly suggested by the scene’s ending. Having seen Riggan fly through the streets of New York and landing safely back at the theater, the viewer’s surprise at seeing the taxi driver is all the greater. Again, the film appears to have fooled us. The narration focalizes through Riggan, who imagines himself flying (expressed world), while in reality he rides a cab (reference world). After Riggan enters the theater, and thus stops focalizing, the camera stays outside on the streets, leaving the viewer to witness the fictional truth of the situation, which is that, as is strongly suggested, Riggan was put on a cab after being helped off the roof.

Throughout the scene, Riggan is in a world of his own. Shortly before, Birdman persuaded him to show his detractors what he is capable of by ending things with a “grand gesture”. The music Riggan summons seems to fit that intention. When Riggan is grabbed by the arm, the music stops and the mismatch between the reference world and the expressed world is briefly resolved. We can assume that when the music resumes playing – this time without a command from Riggan – the two worlds become mismatched again. We then follow Riggan as he focalizes the subsequent flight through New York. This includes distorting effect of the wind on the music when he flies over an intersection, indicating that we hear what Riggan hears, regardless of whether we believe Riggan is truly flying.

Riggan’s flight scene is perhaps the most fantastical scene in the film. It is also one of the most ambiguous scenes, since its ending undermines the entire prior sequence. With Riggan as the focal character, we are shown his narrative perspective, which,

²³ Idem.

²⁴ Ibid., 290.

given his confused mental state, differs greatly from the fictional truth. The music and sound effects combine to give us an auditory impression of Riggan's perspective, at certain moments revealing the fragility of it. The soaring qualities of the music that underscores the scene perfectly reflect Riggan's state of mind, as he finally 'becomes' the superhero that people expect him to be.

Conclusion

“Is this for real?”

In the first chapter, I presented an analysis of a scene in which Riggan and Mike engage in a heated dialogue over the importance of previews and celebrity status. The dialogue takes place on a busy street, where Riggan, in an offhand way, tosses a coin at a drummer who happens to be performing there. The onscreen appearance of a musician playing the music we had presumed nondiegetic, disrupts how we had come to view the story world of *Birdman*, up until that point. That moment turned out to be setting the stage for similar disruptions later on in the film, each of which forces us to readjust our expectations.

Chapter I introduced Robynn Stilwell’s notion of the “fantastical gap,” an ambiguous middle space between the diegetic and the nondiegetic, as a way of explaining the process from one state to the other. I elaborated on this in the second chapter by examining a later scene that repeats the gag to greater effect. Focusing on Stilwell’s notion in conjunction with Chion’s synchronization points, allowed for a more in-depth inquiry into the way in which the film utilizes this ambiguous middle ground. Finally, in the third chapter I offered an analysis of Riggan’s flight scene, detailing how the concept of focalization factors into our understanding of what we see and hear.

What we have, then, are three key moments that force us to recontextualize what we have witnessed thus far in the film. We see and hear music traveling from the invisible realm of the nondiegetic to the visible story world, manifested in the mysterious character of a drummer. A similar thing happens later on in the film, but under even less plausible circumstances. We see a man jump off a building, expecting him to fall to his death, but instead we see him fly off while consequently receiving strong hints that it is not what really happened. Whichever way we decide to interpret these events, the film requires us to suspend our disbelief.

This ‘suspension of disbelief’, a widely debated term originating from Romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge, is applicable to film studies as well. M.H. Abrams wrote of the phenomenon, with regard to readers, that the “skilled reader in some fashion suspends his disbelief so as to go along in imagination with express judgments and

doctrines from which he would ordinarily dissent”.²⁵ For a film audience, this is not markedly different. One need not even make the distinction between skilled and unskilled viewers to understand that they would willingly suspend their disbelief in order to accept, for example, that inanimate objects can come to life (e.g. *Toy Story*) or that intergalactic space travel is possible (e.g. *Star Wars*). *Birdman* continually encourages us to adopt a viewing attitude based on the suspension of disbelief.

This brings us to Francesco Casetti’s notion of the filmic experience. Casetti notably speaks of “that moment” when a film engages us, suggesting that a filmic experience, according to him, occurs only once during the viewing of a film. It encompasses, as he says, both an engagement of our senses and a sudden comprehension of “what we are viewing and the very fact of viewing it”.²⁶ Yet a film such as *Birdman* repeatedly triggers our abilities to reflect on what we are viewing, calling into question not only the veracity of what is presented to us, but also our previous judgments. It would seem that an adjustment of Casetti’s definition of the filmic experience is in place. I would suggest that, rather than one single moment, a filmic experience may encompass several moments when images and sounds from the screen engage our senses and consequently create an awareness in us of our relationship to the film.

Such an experience is moderated through our viewing attitude, which need not necessarily be a static one. As my analysis of *Birdman* makes clear, a film can make it difficult for a viewer to become fully immersed in the filmic reality. For this paper, I opted to focus specifically on the sound and image relations. A film’s auditory and visual components may confirm or contradict each other to achieve disrupting effects, which highlight the film’s play with fictionality. Embodied by the characters of Mike Shiner, a method actor for whom veracious acting amounts to the highest truth, and Riggan Thomson, the washed-up Hollywood celebrity who is desperate to save his career by staging a Broadway production, *Birdman* continually poses the question of what is real and what is not. This duality is echoed by the style of filming, which moves seamlessly from real life to theater in a way not dissimilar to staged plays. The question may have been answered in the second half of the film, when the woman on the roof terrace asks Riggan whether he genuinely intends to jump or if he is only shooting a film. Riggan’s answer is plain and simple: “A film!”

²⁵ M.H. Abrams. *Literature and Belief*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), viii.

²⁶ Francesco Casetti, “Filmic Experience,” *Screen* 50, no. 1 (2009): 56.

Images



Figure 1.1 Riggan and Annie balance the frame (Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2014).



Figure 1.2 The balancing of the frame between Riggan and Mike reflects their struggle to gain the upper hand in the argument (Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2014).



Figure 1.3 The sudden appearance of a drummer performing the music we had been hearing up to this point forces us to reflect on what we are seeing and hearing (Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2014).



Figure 2.1 As Riggan telekinetically opens the door of his dressing room, music starts playing (Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2014).



Figure 2.2 As the camera moves through the narrow corridor that leads to the kitchen area, we take on Riggan's point of view (Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2014).



Figure 2.3 The drummer from the earlier scene, sporting the same outfit and playing in the same setup, makes a second appearance near the end of the film, calling into memory the effect he had earlier (Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2014).



Figure 2.4 The frog perspective, combined with the backlighting, gives Riggan’s silhouette a menacing appearance (Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2014).



Figure 3.1 As Riggan utters the word “music”, we hear an excerpt from Sergei Rachmaninov’s Symphony No. 2 In E Minor, Op. 27 (Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2014).



Figure 3.2 The music soars as Riggan flies over the Manhattan rooftops (Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2014).



Figure 3.3 As Riggan flies over an intersection, the wind briefly distorts the music (Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2014).



Figure 3.4 Riggan tells the usher (obscured) to “Stop the music” (Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2014).

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