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# A Case for Psychoanalytic Visual *Dispositif*? *Birdman* after the “Cinematographic Capture”

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**Abstract:** This paper investigates how the notion of “superhero” in popular imagination, evident in the multiple live-action adaptations of Detective Comic’s and Marvel Cinematic Universe’s comic book heroes for their commercial value, has been debunked by Alejandro Inarritu’s 2014 *Birdman*. While the aforementioned dream factories affirm the fantasmatic “flight” inherent to these cinematic creations, especially symbolised by the aviating capacities of most of their superheroes, it is Inarritu’s *Birdman*, although not commercially comparable, that is theoretically significant here: the “flight” motif paradoxically gestures to the “capture” that is the very cinematic essence. Working with some key psychoanalytic theorists of the apparatus and later the suture, I shall argue that the messianic in this film, embodied by the male lead, whose waning career is resurrected from oblivion given Keaton’s subsequent work acknowledgement despite his Oscar nonsuccess, is revealed by this author to be ultimately the cinematographic apparatus that gives us Baudry’s transcendental subject, a concept arguably bound to his cinematic effect, a term with epistemological import. This paper will also redirect attention to the *interpretative* liberation associated with “flight”, insisting that Baudry’s discussion of the cinematic *dispositif* is among the first to address the real, albeit with an emphasis on intelligibility, so that release from what I call the “cinematic capture”, a term that Todd McGowan defines as “uncritical subjectivity”, can be enacted. This thesis asserts that *Birdman*, proposed here as a case for psychoanalytic film theory, unintentionally exposes the traumatic real within the imaginary because of cinematic capture, thus leading to this discussion of the gaze, identification, narration, control and desire. In addition, it will appraise what Baudry calls the “knowledge effect” by responding to the following inquiries that encapsulate the critical stake here. How can one call this effect “knowledge” when the “subjective” of the transcendental subject becomes more pronounced with the other title of Baudry’s apparatus theory, which is suture theory? What can one say about the “reality effect” of the apparatus theory in an age of digitisation the emphasis of which is virtuality and, last but not least, can one argue that Inarritu’s *Birdman* is an illustrative intervention of the digitised post-cinematic?

**Keywords:** Psychoanalytic Film Theory, the Psychoanalytic Triad of the Imaginary, Symbolic and the Real, the Cinematographic Apparatus, Superhero, *Birdman*, Alejandro Inarritu

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## Introduction

This paper theoretically investigates how an analysis of popular culture spectatorship yields thoughts on Jacques Derrida's phrase "the messianic without messianism" in *Specters of Marx* (1993), the self-sacrificial hero that is other than the messiah as religiously prophesized. Derrida's messianic is an ethical response to contemporary political and economic crises; its religious undertones is reworked here to address the notion of "superhero" in popular imagination, evident in the multiple live-action adaptations of the comic book heroes of Detective Comics and Marvel Cinematic Universes for their commercial value. With qualification, This address also notes that not all comic book franchises are valued for their Hollywood commercialism; some comic book adaptations are self-aware, positioning themselves external to the hegemony of the tinseltown blockbuster. DC's or Marvel's recent box-office earnings attest to the financial successes of its serialized film franchises. While these dream factories are premised on the "flight" motif inherent to cinematic creations, especially symbolized by the aviating capacities of some superheroes, it is Alejandro Inarritu's 2014 *Birdman*, although not commercially comparable, which is theoretically significant here: the "flight" motif paradoxically gestures to the capture that is the very essence of the cinematic. Besides the commercial successes of the comic book heroes, Inarritu's filmic spoof ruptures the heroic aspect of comic superheroes and brings to the fore not only the earth-bound actor who plays the character but also how the concept of the heroic can only be understood in and through the anti-heroic.

James Driscoll's (2016) critical review of Todd McGowan's psychoanalytic film theory is crucial to an understanding of the manner in which audience participation is invited via an affective filmic involvement. He cites McGowan's "attribution to Jean-Louis Baudry that '[i]n the cinema, one can gain a sense of identity through the act of seeing heroic figures on the screen, I see Sandra Bullock or Denzel Washington acting in a specific way, and I model myself on them.'" (2016: 106). Whereas McGowan indicates the imaginary identification activated by the image: how we "model" ourselves on our favorite characters in action, Driscoll's ironic remark emphasizes the complexity of Baudry's exposition of how the filmic mechanism pulls the spectator's attention into the filmic object in and through *the medium as the social link, a socialization brought forth by the screened object, using the ideological interpellation inherent to the belief systems of communities*. However, this sociality is not an intersubjective person-to-person connection; it signals the manipulation of the imaginary dimension of the spectator's psyche by filmic creators for psychic immersion. One can only state that, after reading Driscoll's review, the successes of the superhero genre testify to the psychologically immaturity of those who find it appealing.

Driscoll attempts to retrieve psychoanalysis for clinical practice, which, according to him, is meant to be a psychic aid for the analysand. The analyst is to cure the analysand via a transference of his or her desire for the lost object onto a new object as substitution. This provides the necessary ontological support, without which the analysand's psyche may disintegrate, thereby his recommendation of not trivializing this psychic remedy by using it to analyze film. With hindsight, this "modelling" of iconic heroes because they are physically beautiful, muscular, amazing in action et cetera only reinforces the mundaneness of our everyday lives, resulting in an inverse negative identification that Driscoll explains as alienation in his psychoanalytic reading of Stanley Kubrick's 1971 *The Clockwork Orange*. It is the same with the consumption of "superhero" comics or films, live action or otherwise. Rather than psychic healing, this emotional negativity, which makes us more conscious of our physical inadequacies, can be used by the commercial machinery for economic reasons: to psychically render the urbanites conducive to suggestive promptings that will increase commodification. On the other hand, Tim Groves's "Entranced: Affective Mimesis and

Cinematic Identification” (2006) provides a cognitive account of how structures of affect are activated so that some kind of mirroring occurs, leading to recognition, perception and construction. *This paper, in an endeavour to be impartial, states clearly that the successes of the DC or Marvel franchises indicate both the psychic strength and weakness of our imaginary capacity.* But it is the weakness of the imaginary in the Lacanian triadic formula that opens us to ideological manipulation and, in this age of cyberspace, online deception.

Slavoj Žižek, too, states in “Jacques Lacan’s Four Discourses” (2006) the interdependence of cultural studies and clinical practice: the latter fails when it ignores the socio-historical dimension of the psychoanalytic treatment. In line with Žižek’s exposition and agreeing with Driscoll’s premise, this cultural analysis starts by suggesting that *psychoanalytic film theory can increase our awareness of the social ills of hegemonic commercialism.* The cultural benefits are demonstrated in how this analytical approach yields apperceptions of the ideological underpinnings of not only institutional or bureaucratic functioning but also the disadvantages of global commercial bureaucratization. McGowan’s psychoanalytic take on films shows us how one can achieve liberation by overcoming the real on the side of the imaginary, the impasse that escapes symbolization, which intrudes into the individual’s psychic functioning. The final scenes of *Birdman* show a male protagonist whose reconciliation with his family helps him to move past his psychic blockage, an obstacle that Jacques Lacan attributes to *the effect* of the Imaginary as explained in the chapter “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Pyschanalytic Experience” (2006) and into the Symbolic, the social reality as we know it with its laws and conventions. Furthermore, McGowan’s *The Real Gaze* (2007) attends to what I call the “cinematic capture” when he speaks of the psychic immersion that some films promote. This, of course, implies that the psychoanalytic import for those who study or analyze films has to do with what is uncovered with the removal of the imaginary overlay, the blankness of the screen itself that gives the viewer imaginary space. I shall examine the validity of Driscoll’s negative comment of psychoanalytic film theory: how psychoanalysis when taken out of its clinical context and used as an approach for film analysis becomes shaky. This reworking of the discursive approach, which traces the theoretical shifts from Baudry’s apparatus theory (1974) to the 1970s screen theory to the suture theory of late twentieth century and coupled with McGowan’s innovative reading of the cinematic gaze, owes much to Thomas Elsaesser’s advice (2011) to examine more closely the theory of the apparatus. A word of caution to those who think that psychoanalysis is trendy; psychoanalysis as a theory is premised on failure, albeit not only the failure that McGowan describes in *The Real Gaze*, which actually supports my thesis that *any attempt to theorize film viewing must begin with the premise of heterogeneity*, a theoretical premise illustrated by the ambiguous filmic conclusion of Inarritu’s *Birdman*. The failure is due to the fact that what ails the individual psychically has to do with an unarticulated desire; the analysand must work through *her own psychic trauma herself* for the narrative band-aid the psychic wound necessitates.

*Birdman*, labelled a modern classic because it cinematically exposes the fundamental failure of the Other, causes psychic discomfit rather than the maternal comfort of which Baudry speaks in “The Apparatus”, wherein the film nurtures psychically the regressive longings of the individual. Its critical strength is found in how it unveils the fantasmatic leanings of our psyche and ironically demolishes them without being overtly tragic. More importantly, its ambiguous ending sparks off more cineaste speculations, which I insist counter Vadim Rizor’s five points of contention in his critical review of *Birdman*’s (2014) sustained long shot, crucial as a cinematographic device. Rizor’s critique is brought to the fore as an inverse aid to my thesis that Emmanuel Lubezki’s fluid cinematography reinforces the “thematic purpose” of *Birdman*: its attempt to present the Real within the Imaginary as chaotic material reality. Second, Rizor focuses on what the film characters have in common, which he attributes to *Birdman*’s go-to-

phrase “you are an asshole” which exposes their vile imperfections. This, moreover, is in accordance to Lacan’s Hegelian take in *Seminar I* (1953-54) on the master/slave dialectic with the master as an idiotic asshole enjoying the slave’s labor. Third, Rizer enquires into Thomson’s staging of Raymond Carver’s play, thematically crucial because of what Lacan says about the stupid dimension of “love”. Fourth, besides prompting a caustic snigger from the knowing spectator, the intertextual importance of the citation from Roland Barthes’s *Mythologies* comes to the fore when a celebrity reviewer at the interview scene asks if the aforementioned semiotician is an Avenger and, lastly, the reason for *Birdman* as a credible alternative to Hollywood’s “superhero” narratives despite Rizer’s rather disgruntled review.

Because of the contemporary emphasis on the digital production of the post-cinematic, in line with the virtual and, thereby, psychoanalytically the imaginary, this paper addresses topographically the Lacanian real within the imaginary, rendered visually in Jacques-Alain Miller’s diagram, which Inarritu’s *Birdman* arguably demonstrates. I shall define briefly the three terms of the psychoanalytic triad, detailed mostly in Lacan’s *Ecrits* and *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, before we proceed further. The Imaginary designates the ego formation of the mirror stage wherein maternal care is most crucial with the Symbolic as the Name-of-the-Father coming in at some point to collapse the Oedipal complex so that desire for the mother becomes repressed as the child enters society. Lacan works with Saussurean semiotics to introduce his version of the psychoanalytic treatment of the symptoms arising from the unconscious, coupling it with the metonymic and metaphoric movements of the Freudian psychoanalytic field. The Real, by far the most intriguing term, designates material reality for the earlier Lacan as well as the later Lacanian excess that escapes symbolization.

Working with Christian Metz’s imaginary signifier (1991) and Jean-Louis Baudry’s 1974-1975 “Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus” and his more important 1986 “The Apparatus: Metapsychological Approaches to the Impressions of Reality in Cinema”, I shall examine, in particular, the cinematographic achievements of Inarritu’s film and assert that the messianic in this film, although fronted by the male lead, is revealed ultimately to be the cinematic apparatus that gives us what Baudry calls “the transcendental subject”, a concept suggesting movement and meaning and arguably bound to his “cinematic effect” or “impression of reality”, making Lacan’s early discourse on the real as material reality exceptionally significant. This theoretical assertion has to do with how the cinematographic apparatus aids in the imaginary cut that slices through the real, giving the viewer not only the visual narrative but also the analyst a symbolic reading at a different level. This paper also redirects attention to *the interpretative liberation* figured by the “flight” motif, proposing that Baudry’s cinematic *dispositif* is among the first to address theoretically the real, albeit with an emphasis on intelligibility, which McGowan appears to have elided in *The Real Gaze*, so that my espousal of the release from what I call the “cinematic capture”, a term that McGowan defines as “uncritical subjectivity”, can be found. This classical film narrative apparatus, which Constance Penley (1989) rather ironically classifies as similar to “the bachelor-machine” of Marcel Duchamp in *The Future of an Illusion*, gives us the former’s omnipotent subject that liberates us in and through our reading processes. This thesis asserts that *Birdman*, as a case for psychoanalytic film theory, unintentionally exposes the traumatic real within the imaginary of the cinematic capture, thus leading to this discourse of the gaze, identification, narration, control and desire. In addition, it appraises what Baudry calls the “knowledge effect” in “Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus” by responding to the following inquiries. On what premise can one call this effect “knowledge” and how does the “subjective” of the transcendental subject attain this when the other title of Baudry’s apparatus theory is suture theory? A preliminary response will indicate the semantic bind between the semiotic and the cinematographic, especially with the argument I pose in a different essay entitled “Aesthetic(s) Moves” (2014) that cinematography can be read as “writing-in-movement”. This

will, in turn, alters how one approaches the material dimension of the sign, the signifier. It then takes us to the “reality effect” of the apparatus theory, which arguably interrupts the virtual emphasis of digitisation. Lastly, can one argue that Inarritu’s *Birdman* is an illustrative intervention of the digitised post-cinematic?

### The Psychoanalytic Theorists’ Toolbox of Semiosis

The relevance of Christian Metz’s linguistic conception of cinema (1991) to an analysis of *Birdman* becomes evident with the visual dimension of the title sequence. It functions like the “tissue sample”, Lacan’s “piece of flesh”, that Jacques-Alain Miller touches upon in the drive as speech published in *Umbr(a)* (1997). Describing this piece of flesh as the drive metaphorically invokes the messianic as the embodiment of the spirit, the mirror images of the ego ideal transformed into the ideal ego, Birdman as Thomson at the filmic beginning and Thomson as Birdman by the filmic end. Raymond Carver’s “Late Fragment” is used in the title sequence, which only appears momentarily: “And did you get what you wanted from this life, even so? I did. And what did you want? To call myself beloved, to feel myself beloved on the earth”. The creativity of the opening sequence centers on the slow appearance of letters followed by the disappearance of the previous ones, paradoxically recalling invisibility even as the cinematic essence is that of the visible. The word made flesh, more precisely, the rotting flesh of an aging actor sums up what drives the entire human race, the *objet petit a*, which has no actual existence but takes on the various guises of the demand for love, the articulation of need and the combination of the two that leads to desire. To Miller, “[d]esire is as such full of identifications” (1997, 19). The manifest text of *Birdman* dramatizes Driscoll’s concept of “negative” identification in “Reification and Alienated Form in *A Clockwork Orange*” (2016). Revolving around Thomson’s faded career which he hopes to give a dramatic boost by staging Carver’s “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love”, Thomson hears Birdman’s voice taunting him about his aged appearance, his failing career, his broken family. These delusional episodes are instances of Birdman’s aggressiveness, psychoanalytically termed “aggressivity”, and symptomatic of narcissism. Here, what we have is the messianic image turned into the obscene father of the superego, threatening Thomson’s reality with disintegration and fragmentation. By writing a film on the production process of Carver’s play, Inarritu and his writers (un)wittingly provide intellectual access to the various psychic symptoms found within the hypocritical and self-obsessed world of Broadway or the commercial machinery of Hollywood comic book superheroes, with their perennial and excessive preoccupations with youth, beauty and money.

*Birdman*’s filmic body discloses the obverse of the invocatory as drive, the appellation to which Althusser (1970) refers as well as the latter’s exposure of the ideological state apparatuses; instead we are shown loud excesses, the cause of which is the lack of affirmation: Thomson, after reading a nondescript review of his preview performance, has a fist fight with “ponsy” Shiner that turns into a hysterical catfight; Samantha Thomson puts her father down with “you don’t matter, get used to it”; people burst into Thomson’s studio; neurotic Lesley shouts and throws a hair dryer at Shiner and Thomson or his alter ego acts out, one using telekinesis whereas the other actual physical strength to throw furniture and accessories against the wall. On one hand, it is histrionics without the Oedipal drama, one recalling Macbeth’s words, “full of sound and fury, signifying nothing”. On the other, one is reminded of the Icarus complex that results in a hubristic fall. The Icarus complex is pertinent not only to our proclivity to take flight from our real world problems, but interpretatively more relevant to human desire and ambition. These qualities inadvertently invite the intrusion of the real that ruptures the imaginary in Miller’s diagram, which topographically maps the psychic area where trauma

occurs. However, cinematographically, *Birdman*'s flight metaphor alludes to its predominant cinematic style, a question of form and very much in line with what Baudry acerbically states in "The Apparatus": "That the real in Plato's text is at an equal distance from or in a homologous relationship to the 'intelligibly real' – the world of Ideas – and 'reality-subject' – 'the impression of reality' produced by the apparatus in the cave would moreover be sufficient to make us aware of the real meaning of the world of Ideas and of the field of desire on which it has been built..." (1986, 696-697). Baudry's commentary is psychically telling on at least two levels: first, the propensity for illusions that *homo sapiens* have and, second, without the structuration given by the cinematic *dispositif*, one will not have a narrative nor a film of which to speak. In fact, Baudry's "knowledge effect" complements Lacan's conception of the two epistemological dimensions of psychoanalysis: the knowledge of the imaginary, a reflexive misrecognition that paradoxically promotes the psychic unity of an individual, and, in the case of psychoanalyzing film, film unity, whereby the knowledge of the symbolic becomes prioritized, a reflecting type of analysis motivating psychic transference, one leading to the ego formation whereas the other the subject. Thus, it is the substantive of the earlier Lacanian real that incites the endeavour to know which, in turn, presupposes the intellectual organisation required in such an attempt.

Metz's take on the imaginary signifier is clearly premised on montage and how this editing technique represents cinematic potency. He describes "[m]ontage as supreme ordering" because it is how montage is used that gives to filmic sense. Baudry's citation of Pudovkin's conception of montage "as the art of assembling pieces of film, shot separately, in such a way as to give the spectator the impression of continuous movement" illustrates the director's "ingenious manipulation" of images. While Metz debates whether film is a language or a language system, one based on the dissection of the film to visual or aural units as signifiers and the shot arrangements as significates, a sort of cinematic language that resemble the "linguistics of speech", an issue evinces when one examines his broad use of filmic speech. One cannot simply make equivalent the "sequential arrangement" of filmic components to linguistics despite the fact that Metz calls it "cinematographic syntax". Even as he questions whether film is *langue* or *parole*, a linguistic system or a specific language use, the section, "A non-system language: film narrativity", intervenes in his discussion of the semiotic import of cinematography with the various genres of film as "the spectacle's formula" (1977, 139), indicating that "cinema is only in theory an art of images" (1977, 140). Perhaps the point missed by Metz here is this: this "art of images" is *the silent crux* from which the story-telling begins; it expresses without talking. It also lends the potential to mask an opaque gap within the cinematic image, an invisible lacuna upon which McGowan's *The Real Gaze* is founded.

Structurally, the film is surrealistic without using montage as the key technique of filming. The only montage use is when there are documentary frame insertions: the introductory and multiple scenes of a diving meteorite; the repeated images of sea birds soaring and settling on the islets of a tributary, montage shots of natural phenomena. To quote the film critic found in *Birdman*, Tabitha Dickson, it is the "superrealism" of the long take or continuous shot that, albeit with quite a few visual jolts of the handheld camera, glides along the inner corridors of the theatre leading to its exterior, St. James Square, which then lifts to the sky and dives when Inarritu decides that both Thomson and the audience have to return to reality per se that gives to Baudry's "impressions of reality". This means that what the audience experiences is not the usual filmic continuity; in fact, this heightened use of the long take, reminiscent of Bazin's recommendation that film ought to lay bare the verisimilitude of reality, challenges Hollywood intensified continuity editing. Besides the ironic character portrayals or the unsettling stylistics, the few disjunctive frame insertions further disrupt filmic immersion and, just when one thinks that Edward Norton caricaturizes Mike Shiner as the self-enamored, pretentious thespian, he has some authentic moments with Sam Thomson or Tabitha Dickson. Instead of intensifying

psychic absorption, this film uses cinematography to waylay filmic suture so that the film exposes the ideological abuses of commercial blockbusters, which use *filmic suture for financial reasons*. Taking center-stage, Inarritu's innovative cinematography brings mental release from the filmic capture of Hollywood continuity editing since it auto-reflexively critiques itself. Invoked is the desire for intellectual liberation, one akin to the desire of the analyst, the subject supposed to know, for she is the one endowed with the analytic capacity. Inviting the analysand to speak is the analyst's way of encouraging what Lacan calls "the pass", the Freudian transference from one signifier to the next. The analyst may not really know what ails the analysand psychically but the ethics of psychoanalysis insists that she pushes the analysand's remembrance of a truth her very own. This articulation is not the truth as fact; neither is it the truth as experienced. It is the truth of the analysand's unconscious: a narrative that the analysand enunciates so that the gaping trauma becomes covered by a "tissue sample", the logic of the signifier as the messianic.

This, in turn, calls to question the concept of reality in the phrase "virtual reality". The reality mentioned is obviously taken and reassembled from "objective" reality; a simulation that requires a higher degree of the suspension of disbelief than live-action films. The phrase "cinematographic specificity", used in both Metz's (1991) and Baudry's (1974-75) discourses and read in relation to the Lacanian "unique truth" indicates *something particularly imprinted* in each of us. Thus one cannot simply equate cinematography with speech owing to the fact that the organising dimension of speech is aural whereas that of cinematography is imagistic, which, in fact, takes the specificity of the individual filmic sense of the viewing subject, the subjective point of view, to that of the "transcendental subject" of the omniscient view point, comparable to the shift from the mirror function of ego formation to the multifocal reading manifested by the gliding eye of the camera that eventually results in cinematic effacement, correlating to Baudry's focus on "objective reality" which will be elaborated in the next section.

Metz's characterizing of film as "expressive" is prodigious given that my focus is on the "expressiveness" of the other "systems of signification" which he lists in his footnote, systems that constitute that filmic organisation at the level of codification: "cultural, social, stylistic, perceptual, etc." (1977, 162), the other of Baudry's mention of "the other scene" in "The Apparatus". Notwithstanding Metz's emphasis on speech, the immediacy of the image is definitely more impressionistic, and thereby more psychically powerful, than the aural sign even if Baudry notes that it is easier to evade the image than the sound. It calls to attention how film is an arrangement of images, corresponding to Baudry's description of our ego as „a sum of images", testifying to how film owes its existence to cinematography. According to Oxford Etymology Dictionary, "cinematography", which began its use in 1910, is Greek in origin, with the word-forming element "graph" derived from "graphos", signifying "writing". Thus cinematograph is that which writes, marks or describes, i.e. an instrument for recording. Noting that the webpage on Lacanian psychoanalysis has no entry on psychoanalysis and critical thought, I shall approach what knowledge is in relation to psychoanalysis: how the film analyst analyses the structural dimension of the film so as to go beyond the merely imaginary, the sense-making processes invoked by narrative and analysis, *the recognizing of the organisational aspect of the film's composition as a manner of being attentive to the symbolic in its relation to the real, the muteness of which attests strangely to its organic nature*.

This, paradoxically, points to how the commercialism of DC or Marvel Cinematic Universe can be undermined by redirecting focus to psychological implications of Baudry's "impression of reality". The word "imprint" that "impression of reality" brings to mind is key to psychological conditioning, reinforcing the visual dimension of the printed word. *Birdman* interrupts the continuity editing with another film technique that points to the true significance of "seamless reality", a post-production digital technique that DC or Marvel franchises promote, making the animated versions representative of what we call virtual reality in the digital age.

By demonstrating the hidden “real” of filmic creations: the psychic symptoms manifested in the chaotic and histrionic human interactions along the corridors of the backstage of the theatre, *Birdman theatrically satirizes* the superhero fantasy; it also alerts us to the dangers of delusion when the camera pans to Thomson found at the edge of a building about to dive. In other words, when the real is concealed to a great extent by the imaginary, it becomes unsettling and possibly traumatizing once exposed. The cinematic filter, on the other hand, is uncovered by the theatre within the film, an intensified performativity that oddly enhances the constative dimension of *Birdman*, the film as a cinematic frame as well as the *objet petit a*. This narrative or genre interruption becomes heightened by Thomson’s television giving us news of Ironman’s blockbuster status, subsequently eliciting a satirical response from his alter ego.

Significant to psychoanalytic film theory is Metz’s exposition on the “reconstructed model” of reality, an assemblage of images, which is quite different from the documentary film that merely films the event as reproduction. With Barthes, he argues that fiction film can only be called reconstruction and not reproduction because it does not merely copy “the concrete aspect of the original object; it is neither poiesis nor pseudo-physis, but simulation, a product of *techne*. That is to say: the result of a manipulation. As the structural skeleton of the object made into a second object, it remains a kind of prosthesis” (1977, 135-6). This distinction between film as reproduction or film as reconstruction ties in with what Baudry describes as “perception” or “representation” in “The Apparatus”: “perception”, a word used in art history to define visual interpretation, attests to the subjective viewing of art objects, the reconstruction aspect of films, whereas “representation” is more in line with Metz’s discussion of reproduction. It is when an individual mistakes the reconstructed model as the reproduced one, perception confused with representation, that delusion reigns.

Returning to the above discussion of “genre”, the intertextual reference to Barthes’s quote from *Mythologies*: “[t]he cultural work done in the past by gods and epic sagas is now done by laundry-detergent commercials and comic strip characters” informs us that “genre” is the key to comprehending the self-consciousness of *Birdman*; instead of placing the Hollywood superhero genre on a pedestal, the film ridicules it by revealing the human and all too human Thomson behind the superhuman mask. Not only is the film a film about theatre which, of course, comes from a play, in this case, written by Carver; it is also about how the three- or five-act structure has made a transition from plays to theatre performances to films. *Birdman*, although considered an alternative to mainstream films, is still constructed in accordance to the Aristotelian structure. However, this supposed reproduction can be considered “reconstruction”, despite its docu-drama stylistics, an artistic instance of Baudry’s “work as a process of transformation”, the much-needed Lacanian symbolic realization for psychic healing. This reminds me of Bert Olivier’s word, “orthopaedic”, psychoanalytically mentioned in his “Lacan’s Subject” (2004), which is, of course, *techne* as prosthesis and, in *Birdman*, prosthesis as *object cause*, coming to life because of its high stakes: *the protagonist’s love for himself psychically transferred to his love for the art object*, the theatrical production that he has *invested so heavily*. The character arc can be rendered as the half-circular projection of self-obsession to a psychic entrancement by the substitutive object, Lacan’s vector drawn from *jouissance* to castration, symbolized by Thomson’s loss of his nose. This cultural analysis of *Birdman* bears witness to the fact that psychoanalytic film theory may not be that “shaky” after all.

Metz’s footnote xx elaborates the semiotic *emphasis* for psychoanalytic film theory as the “double articulation” of film. The subject of enunciation here is the film discussed and the subject enunciating is the film’s expressiveness, which is a split cine-subject symbolized by not just Thomson and his alter ego, Birdman, but also Thomson and Shiner, the egotistical narcissist. The women are also fractured signifiers of good and bad mothers or lovers. Moreover, Metz’s five levels of codification signal why a semiotic reading is necessary: first, how



perception depends on *the structural play of space and time*; second, “recognition and identification of the visual and audio objects” within the filmic diegesis; third, the “symbolisms and connotations” that accompany the cultural reading; fourth, the narrative structures and five, “*the set of properly cinematographic systems that, in a specific type of discourse, organize the diverse elements furnished to the spectator by the four preceding instances*” (emphasis mine, 1977, 162). Examining closely its structuration, the symbolisms and connotations of the film are refracted initially so as to interweave later to configure a psychic labyrinth, evident in the multiple character parallels as well as the intertextual allusions. If this film is superrealistic, Baudry’s “more real than the real”, it is “filmic reality” unfolded by the camera transitioning to the “social” reality of Times Square with Thomson’s fans using social media to send recordings to each other of the actor’s semi-naked, frenzied rush to his next theatrical appearance. One can place Metz in Baudry’s camp because he describes the narrative flow as “...the course of real events refracted through an ideological point of view” (1977, 136), thus signaling the elemental extraction of the apparatus from objective reality in order to create the filmic reality. In a film that uses in a sustained manner the long shot, what Metz states in the following citation is crucial: “...they fall back on what is called, for better or worse, the ‘tracking shot’ (and which implies nothing other than a *noncodified mobility of the camera, a movement that is truly free*) where traditional film syntaxes distinguish between rear and forward ‘dolly,’ ‘pan,’ ‘tilt,’ etc” (ibid). Quoting Metz aids my response to Rizzor’s point one of contention. The long take cinematographically corresponds to the “escape” theme of this film, which, ironically, means nothing unless understood in relation to the cinematic capture of Hollywood blockbusters, McGowan’s cinema of integration. When the noncodified mobility of the camera gives to a truly free motion, the filming technique of *Birdman* visually illustrates cinematographic emancipation by way of filmic sensibility to cinematic sense, albeit one founded upon “the unexpected virtue of ignorance” promoted by the dream screen and analogous to the imaginary release for which Thomson longs and he supposedly achieves as Birdman. It is the playful cinematographic structure of this film, not the narrative configuration, that adds to the connotative richness of the film.

Of import to my thoughts on the realism of one-take filming is the reiteration of words such as “real”, “reality”, and “truth” or phrases with these words in *Birdman*, for instance when Birdman tells Thomson after the latter has met with his wife, arguably the only rational and psychically stable character in the film, that he ought to have taken the offer of a “reality show” on his family, perhaps a snide, underhanded jab at reality television programmes not only says a lot about the overlaps between appearance and reality; the superrealistic nature of this film *psychoanalytically theorizes* what Baudry call “more real than the real”, signaling again the omnipotence of the camera’s eye. Social reality, which goes under the intersection of the imaginary and the symbolic in Lacanian psychoanalytic schema, can be considered now as constructed artificially through the use of the various communicative channels, an ontological state encapsulated by Marshall McLuhan’s “the medium is the message”. While not disavowing social media because of its convenience and usefulness, reality per se is definitely more complicated than what is communicated through these devices. *Birdman*, in its dalliance with what Lacan calls “a real of non-sense”, cited in Miller’s the drive as speech, unintentionally reveals the constructed nature of the Symbolic, evident in how Thomson, as a failed symbolic figure, cannot control his actors, crew or family members.

### **Baudry’s Apparatus Unveiling of the Gaze**

Baudry’s “The Apparatus” examines the role of cinema in producing subject effects by comparing it to the psychic apparatus described in Freud’s *Interpretation of Dreams*.

Metapsychologizing film, he privileges the cinematic image, given that visual representation takes precedence in and through the optical apparatus, the *camera obscura*, which was invented at about the same time as the birth of Western science, with focus going from objective reality to that of subjective reality. Citing Baudry's "The Apparatus" renders obvious the concept of desire in psychoanalysis. This desire for womblike comforts is a concept linked to the gaze as conventionally defined: "[w]e can thus propose that the allegory of the cave is the text of a signifier of desire that haunts the invention of cinema and the history of its invention" (1986, 697). This section examines the role that desire plays in the technological progress of media productions, resulting in epochal as well as paradigm shifts; as Baudry explains: "...their existence (the instruments of visual communication) has at its origin a psychical source equivalent to the one which stimulated the invention of cinema" (ibid). Though Freud replaces the optical metaphor with the "mystic writing pad", apposite in its metaphorical nature to my proposition that "belief" (which Miller describes as *the menage a trois* of truth, meaning and fiction) to which Baudry alludes must take into account not only of the Lacanian triadic structure but also the Freudian conscious, preconscious and unconscious systems. Filmic essence resides precisely where the imaginary coincides with the symbolic, comparable to what we call reality per se, the *topos* where the systematization of belief takes place with no actual guarantee of truth, thus explaining how primary ego construction occurs and why it shifts with later identifications.

Significant to this discussion on film is Baudry's description of how the primary and the secondary identifications work in their constructions of the ideal ego and the ego ideal. The ideal ego, a construction occurring at the primary level, is premised on a misrecognized mirror reflection of wholeness: the mirror image is the *figurative stand in* for the child, further reassured by the maternal caregiver. During the secondary stage, wherein the formative scene for the subject of the symbolic is both substitutive and synecdochic, the image of perfection stands in place as the signifier for personal identification. Psychoanalytic film theory informs us that the play of reflection concerns not the mirroring of reality but that of images even as film provides "impressions of reality". Filmic identification focuses on the relations between the subject and the camera. According to Baudry, "[u]ltimately, the forms of narrative, the contents of the image, are of little importance so long as an identification remains possible" (1974, 45). The following citation is important to the understanding of Baudry's take on the boundedness of film identification; filmic mirroring, to him is closed with "no exchange, no circulation, no communication with any outside" (1974, 44), indicating the finiteness of ego construction even as the subjective point of vision is a point of fixity, given the determining significance achieved in the individual's identity construction. But the later Lacan places emphasis more on the ego ideal, the construction governed by the symbolic order. Crucial to this secondary process of identification is the individual placing himself at this point of perfection looking upon himself as "subject". Birdman's voice functions as this symbolic process. Producing Carver's play not only permits another opportunity to reinvigorate his acting career; it also reminds him of why he embarked on an acting career, a regressive move symbolized by the napkin with Carver's acknowledgement, what Žižek calls the *objet cause*. It is this double identification, first, through the imaginary order for "the imaginary integration of the self" (1974, 45), before it passes to the symbolic order that prompts the ego to pursue "the ideal vision" forever missed even if it never were.

Still Cartesian in its inclination, Baudry privileges the "eye" as the "active center" and the "origin of meaning" (1974, 40), illustrating how the eye of the camera records the narrative as it unfolds whereas the eye of the human subject, which is beside it, watches the narrative as it is communicated. Just before he closes his essay, he refers to the "I" that has an imaginary function, quoting Lacan that "that it is to this unreachable image in the mirror that the specular image gives its garments" (1974, 45). Calling this "new mode of representation", which is the

normalized traditional perspective used by the Renaissance painters, *perspectiva artificialis*, Baudry reveals the instrumental use of the visual apparatus, by virtue of its corresponding progress with scientific development. It makes the reality captured by the film appear transparent or neutral, albeit true for some documentary films is not true for fiction films. It is objective reality as raw materials that is “always worked upon, elaborated, selected” (1974, 42) by the filmic apparatus, its hegemonic significance concealed by the normative appearance of plot development. Once ordered to make narrative sense, ideological capture occurs with the audience’s psychic submergence, which also explains the reason for Baudry’s likening of the projector, the darkened room and the screen to Plato’s cave (1974, 45); the enchainment of the prisoner “demonstrate[s], reveal[s] and make[s] understood what sort of illusion underlies our direct contact with the real, would imagine or resort to an apparatus that doesn’t merely evoke, but quite precisely describes in its mode of operation the cinematographic apparatus and the spectator’s place in relation to it” (1986, 693). Captivated by the shadows cast on the wall by the firelight, an individual prisoner will not be inclined to think for himself and, as a result, has no self-awareness. This scene of primal regression signals the subject’s passive positioning that McGowan also describes in his discussion on how the viewing subject relinquishes conscious control when engrossed by filmic images. While discussing the “inherent mobility of the cinematic mechanism”, Baudry unwittingly and subtly undermines his side-by-side positioning of the human eye and the eye of the camera: “[t]o seize movement is to become movement, to follow a trajectory is to become a trajectory, to choose a direction is to have the possibility of choosing one, to determine a meaning is to give oneself a meaning” (1974, 43), an ontological passage that appropriately poetizes and privileges the camerawork of *Birdman*, transiting from subjectivity to objectivity, an objectivity Sean Cubitt’s “Suture” (2014) calls the “omni-voyant gaze” of the filmic apparatus.

What is this “hidden or disguised truth in idealism” that Baudry states in “The Apparatus”? The disguised truth in idealism is *the founding technics* that the imaginary overlays, the apparatus testifying to how reality as represented by the symbolic is ordered in and through social conventions and codes, which otherwise can turn out to be meaningless. This sublimating passage from one scene to the other is a displacement that permits access from one place to another (1986, 693): the other scene of the individual’s psyche, the gaze of the Other. It is movement from the spectator’s unconscious system to the conscious one in the process of attaining meaning. This corresponds to the analyst position, the one who supposedly knows, in relation to the analysand’s speech so that an acknowledgement of her or his own truth can be effected. Read in relation to the film, this movement is not an emergence normatively understood; it is more the descending movement of the camera as it optically lands on the reality of the ground: the traffic chaos of New York city, the masses of urbanites, the neon lights along the streets. It is as if the material base of the apparatus, after having to take the violence enacted upon it by our noetic designs, decides to avenge itself by showing us the unpalatable side of humanity as it swoops down on the throngs of people jostling, transport vehicles steaming or the massive concrete jungle of the metropolis bustling. As Baudry states: filmic motion can counter the “single perspective for the image projected” by photography. This happens when the multiplicity of viewpoints enabled by cinematography oppose the subjective viewpoint of the viewer, creating what Lacan alludes to as a stain in the mirror and the later psychoanalytic thinkers call the “gaze”. However, the illusion of continuity, dependent on Baudry’s “persistence of vision”, is a condition that rests upon differential erasure, providing a ground for identification. Any filmic disruption, in the form of a visible cut or an actor refusing to be in character, discloses the invisible hand that gives it signifying synthesis, the cinematographic apparatus. *Birdman* exposes all the above with the extensive use of the tracking shot, which ingenuously lays bare the inherent discontinuity and signifying disjuncture. Thus Lubezki’s apparently free-wheeling cinematography counters the assumption that the audience is

absorbed by the narrative flow given by continuity editing, one premised on continuity, direction and movement. Meaning is only ever achieved by the *perceptual* “relations between points and a curve in geometry”, a visual communication that filmic psychoanalysis intuits. Lacanian psychoanalysis, besides being used as a form of clinical practice, is undoubtedly imbued with an epistemological side. This is made evident in the chapter, “The rat in the maze”, found within Lacan’s *Seminar XX*, which not only suggests our capacity to be psychologically reconditioned; there is the implication that, in certain circumstances, *the individual has to resist psychic manipulation*.

### Miller’s Deadlock of Sexuation

Miller’s “The Drive as Speech” refers to Lacan’s infamous line on the deadlock of sexuation. It gives him the opportunity to speak of *our relation* to failure at “the *specifically sexual level*” (1997, 15), a structural negativity in lieu of the temporal deferral that accompanies the acquisition of language. This access to phallic *jouissance* is through partial drives, the scopic drive in one’s look or the oral drive in one’s speech, as demonstrated by Lacan’s large vector that moves from *jouissance* to castration, a vector linked by the demonstrably phallic function of the drive, located beyond the pleasure principle. Man, with his privileged relation to the phallus, apparently does not enter the sign of castration since his phallus is his fundamental idiocy; woman, in her castrated state, seeks to attain the phallus in and through her child. This is clearly evident in *Birdman* when Thomson’s partner announces that she with child, eliciting his negative reaction whose concern, at that point, is his theatrical production, seeing the infant’s imminent arrival as an obstacle to his desire. Man’s relation to the phallus is described as fullness whereas the woman’s relation to it is one of loss. This structuration of the difference between genders, a fundamental distinction that leads to a sexual impasse in their interactions has other implications besides sexual desire; it expresses a fundamental alienation within any societal interrelation, thus necessitating a conjoining prosthesis.

What is of utmost significance is this: *the universal value of the castration complex is regulated meaning*. Miller insists that it is not the model of *jouissance* that is important nor the fact that the phallus has become a signifier. It is the non-relationality of the phallic signifier; when it becomes purely subjective and unrestrained, it does not have a dialogue with the Other. Miller states that “...the primary status of *jouissance* is not sexual. Its status is phallic” (1997: 20). Thus what the phallus represents is crucial. When it does not relate to the Other, it leads to some kind of fixation; phallic *jouissance*, in Marxian terminology, is “objectification” for one’s gain in fullness. What this fullness is can be seen in the master’s discourse: the master’s stupid enjoyment of the fruits of the slave’s knowhow. According to Miller’s playful description, this *solitariness* of phallic *jouissance* that results in fixation shifts to the “*solidarity of jouissance*” that reduces the other sex to a mere image or signifier. It is like being in love with one’s idea of a woman rather than being in love with the actual woman. Miller mentions that feminism is one of the resisting instances to such sexual reduction: “women are against this reduction to a sexual object” (1997: 21). While this writer is not professedly feministic, she is against such reductive male-female, male-male or female-female interactions. There is in actual fact no solidarity only solitariness because “[i]t gives rise to the reduction of the Other as a sexual object” (1997: 21). This phallic *jouissance*, the word is used here multiple times because there is no word in English that provides a precise translation, poses difficulty to the Other because it prevents authentic intersubjective relationship.

Miller addresses the title of his chapter by posing the question: who speaks when one speaks of the unconscious? Using “blahblahblah” to indicate the non-sensical chatter of the unconscious, which come from an other scene; in the case of *Birdman*, the meaningless

pandemonium does come from the other scene, the backstage. The “who” that speaks is the “it” of the Other, the “obscure zone” (1997: 23), a domain that one occasionally intuits but cannot know exactly. The nothingness that Lacan calls “a real” in the imaginary is another word for chaos, the obverse of “the real” in the symbolic that signifies the natural order. This real within the imaginary produces effects that can be traumatic in the privileged schema of communication. The lesson learnt regarding the drive as speech is the fact that there is no “dialogue” between the heterosexual two and, in line with the aforementioned, neither is there actual “dialogue” between desire and the object of that desire. *Birdman* demonstrates this deadlock of sexuation not only by showing us the many failed heterosexual relations: while the woman seeks the Other, as in seeking affirmation from the Other by being that which the Other desires, the man seeks to be alone in his fullness (1997: 23); this description of failure also applies to Thomson’s relation to his theatrical production, a relation inadvertently vulnerable to frustration, betrayal and defeat.

### McGowan’s Gaze of the Real

McGowan’s psychoanalytic film theory is brought to the fore here with what he calls worldviews, “the four approaches to the gaze”: the cinemas of fantasy, desire, integration and intersection. Cinema of fantasy examines how the gaze visually distorts the filmic field so that the invisible becomes visible. The second type of cinema exposes the spectral absence within the field of visibility as the traumatic real, the vacant, undead gaze of the camera that incites desire. Part three is on integrative films, integration being the conventional productive process since it mirrors the primary process of identification; they “incite desire only to resolve it into a fantasy scenario that provides a screen through which the spectator can experience the gaze without its attendant trauma” (2007, 19). Cinema of intersection reworks the merging of fantasy and desire by “allowing an experience of the gaze without the fantasmatic screen” (2007, 20). Of advantage to this paper is the manner in which McGowan theorizes the real gaze, an approach that critically reconsiders the Althusserian ideological interpellation in light of Lacan’s “knowledge of the Real”. This knowledge accedes to the fact that there will always be a point of impairment in any power structure. The stake of McGowan’s discussion foregrounds how Althusser fails to account for the success that the theorist has in recognizing and conceptualizing the misrecognition underscoring ideological interpellation, especially when all individuals are interpellated successfully. The answer lies in the alternate positioning of the theorist, what McGowan calls “the mode of resistance to ideology rather than the product of ideology” (2007, 173), a positioning at the point of “the real”.

Aligned with the thesis that *Birdman* psychoanalytically theorizes a real within the imaginary is the acknowledgment of *the necessity for the real within the symbolic wherein truth and meaning reside*, which McGowan undeniably states: “[w]ith the emergence of the new Lacanian film theory, the theorist no longer battles against the cinema but becomes cinema’s ally in the struggle to reveal the gaze” (ibid). Cinema of intersection, the filmic genre that tackles the issue of the real, promotes the “alliance between the theorist and the cinema” by “depicting the gaze directly” (2007, 175). Integrative cinema dupes us into believing that there is no absence in the big Other, by virtue of the illusion of autonomy and mastery. The fourth type of cinema shows the “insubstantial status” of the symbolic, traumatizing the subject whose discovery leaves him bereft of fantasmatic support. By enabling this encounter with the Real, the cinema of intersection celebrates *jouissance* as a manner of attending to the real within the Other, which, despite its incompleteness, liberates an individual from any symbolic dependency. McGowan’s exposition of the real as the impossible gestures to how “The Other does not exist” in the following axioms: “one seeks the Other; one seeks all alone” (2007), which correspond

to Miller's conception of the fundamental alienation underpinning any social interaction. *Birdman* inversely affirms McGowan's cinemas of integration and intersection, which separates the world of desire and the world of fantasy only to integrate or intersect these two worlds, because of its open-endedness. *The filmic conclusion as a point of ambiguity exposes the craftiness of the imaginary by showing up the film's status as a film, an artistic product that frees the audience to their subjective musings or the film critic to her objective review.*

We can read the ending of the film as either a dream sequence, a fantasmatic screen, that occurs after Thomson's staged suicide, concluding with his death, or interpret the hospital sequence that follows his attempted suicide on stage as filmic reality. In the second scenario, Thomson succeeds in achieving critical success as well as reconciliation with his estranged family. This intersectional closure, instead of using a dream insertion, works with the lack of what Baudry calls "cinematographic representation" to conclude the film. Cinematic resolution is presented firmly as Miller's "solidarity of *jouissance*" with Thomson achieving accidental success and a smiling Sam watching Thomson take wing out of the window. The audience does not know if Thomson actually jumps to his death. But if he did, the first scenario can be described as an almost failed integrative filmic move that takes his eventual flight as the obviously imaginary redemption. Here, Groves's affirmation of cinematic affect is exemplified by the viewer's perceptual alignment with the protagonist's. However, if cognition is the theoretical stake, the filmic end affirms the *poiesis* of the aviating flow that starts from the silent placeholder of Baudry's "dream screen" and concludes with the analytical passage of motion, direction and purpose quite the contrary to the din from a real within the imaginary.

## Conclusion

Given that the writing of this essay was encouraged by Elsaesser's advice to examine the metaphorical abundance of psychoanalytic film theory, I shall conclude with a word on Elsaesser's "media archaeology", a term that recalls the filmic transition made from analogue to digitisation in "What is Left of the Cinematic Apparatus, or Why We Should Retain (and Return to) It". His genealogical mapping of apparatus theory, which, in the Anglo Saxon world, was called "screen theory", "after the journal that promoted it most actively", and later known as "suture theory", calls attention to the fact that filmic identifications abound owing to the desirous nature of the human individual, an affirmative nod to Miller whose medical metaphor is indicative of the stitching together of open flesh. Elsaesser's archeological endeavour also efficaciously figure (re)mediation as filmic suture that psychoanalysis theorizes. He looks to the "rewriting of the past in light of the future" (2011:33). Reconsidering the post-cinematic here means placing the theoretical emphasis on the real within the symbolic, *a noteworthy reprising of the real* attentive to the material medium that visually or/and aurally projects and organizes besides the physical artifact itself, the things-in-themselves that we may never absolutely know. Notwithstanding, it is also how the real must be acknowledged so that an understanding of the virtual, whether imaginarily or digitized, can be achieved. Both, by the way, can be thought of as extensions of each other. In other words, the real is necessary to how we comprehend the ontological underpinnings of the virtual just as we must approach the expressive with an intuition of the silenced, the Lacanian real external to symbolization. Thus the imaginary that constitutes the ideal-ego, a false completeness based on reifying an image, despite being the source from which all the other ego ideal type of identifications will occur, requires a symbolic intervention of the mother-child dyad, reinforcing the individual's "ideal" facet that sparks off her desire, a maturing process that Lacan insists is ontologically necessary. However, the taint in the mirror, which Inarritu's *Birdman* makes explicit, a result from the suppressed ungovernable instincts of the human race, will return as the repressed, indicating

the unwholesomeness within the imaginary besides the lack of authoritative guarantee. Armed with this knowledge, I shall align myself with McGowan who, in his filmic psychoanalysis, celebrates this symbolic unsettling because it emancipates us from our social dependencies such that our faith in an inherited world of imperfections can be renewed time and again in and through the promise of perfection.

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