

Film Review

Flying from Hollywood to Broadway and back

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Unencumbered by any prophetic vision, a man would like to change the world around him, remortgaging his daughter's house to finance his magnum opus. Disappearing to the sky, the man who was once a young wannabe capitalist is becoming an idealist utopian who hates labels, and believes only that that he should celebrate his Broadway success in romantic Hollywood fashion.

The lead character Riggan Thompson (Michael Keaton) is an actor who found success in Hollywood, playing the character of a superhero, the Birdman. His new project is to play the same role on the other side of the nation, on Broadway. When his plan goes adrift, the Hollywood nihilism of his daughter and assistant Sam (Emma Stone), which had seemed unconditional, clearly stands out from the futile lives of the ordinary creatures surrounding them. The rest of the people are depicted as if they have nothing to do with thinking, intellectualism and insight; they are just film extras. And even actor Mike (Edward Norton) is just a pretentious professional performer, a quasi-intellectual who cares for nothing but the reviews of the critics.

This is a movie depicting someone from the elite capitalist community of the west US seeking his salvation, a meaning for his life, on the east coast where New York is symbolized as the capital of the liberal left. There he is called a clown. His Novalis-type daughter with her pseudo-hippy style and noble-savage gestures, for whom no-one matters unless they are visible on social networks, finds her value in numbers of hits or likes. These two included, many characters are portrayed as confused as people really are in the contemporary real world, full of contradiction and far from genuine. But these characters are presented as more stubborn, impulsive, insensitive, or foolish than ephemeral.

Riggan is a character of Adam Smith's who is shown, at first, as a man who like everyone else has a specialised job in a capitalist labor market – until he becomes multi-skilled. In Hollywood, he was the man behind the mask of the Birdman, with no recognizable face of his own, while in Broadway he turns into one of many writer-director-actors, the perfect man. The writer uses this dichotomy to compare the beginning with the end.

To deal with a layered character, the movie has no option but to be mannerist, and the same goes for the underlying philosophy. The simple metaphor of theater as the ultimate truth of life versus movie as reality amalgamated with ersatz reality of the capitalist ideology of fame and wealth which never comes to the state of plausible aggregation mirrors the real world: a supposed social capitalism for the elite.

This movie should be considered as a manifesto of early 21st century pseudo-ism, when late postmodernism still tries to tell us that any flaunting of anything at all might turn out to be that parade

we have been looking for. But immediately the movie's fast-moving sequences, which seem to be the tribute to 15 minutes of fame, show only that we are 15 seconds away from that fame. Only a bullet can take us to that desire of threshold – illustrate the fact that we do not have that much time and because of the nature of the life in this current era, this late post-modernism may survive longer than we initially expected.

Riggan is a postmodern Don Quixote beset with illusions and with no clear target. He has Macbeth's wife in his head, which is his past, and Hamlet's wandering characteristics, only darker and more brutal if he wants to be the new arrogant intellectual. More layers are added when the trace of Schopenhauerian pessimism of his nature is revealed, while the Zen-like aspect of his life is exposed at the very beginning. But his dark side appears when he without demur gets rid of one of his less favorite cast members by a dirty trick. At that exact moment, we recognize that although the writer tries to excuse his character as a type of irony, there can be no salvation imaginable, either for him or for the generation for whom the end justifies the means. And everything gets uglier still when we discover that in this movie, women are marginal to men's lives, as if they are not serious enough to be a part of this masculine life. The exceptions are an always-high hippy, a stupid ex-wife, a stubborn, depressed critic, and an actress whose role is to sexually arouse a man, even in a live theater performance. The masculinized world enables the writer to name the movie *bird-man*. But what perturbs even more is that the various ethnic groups of the USA had died long before Riggan came into this world, had never existed or had not yet been discovered as an important part of American society.

Riggan's avian nature is used as a metaphor for his struggle between being and becoming, a metaphor of the greed for fame and wealth, exploiting everyone around to show that he is the one who is at the heart of life. The truth-or-dare game played by Sam and Mike is as interesting as the conversation between Sam and Riggan about using "dope", which leads Riggan to eventually take a puff to commemorate his gone-with-the-wind adolescence.

The romanticist battle between right and wrong is in its postmodern form, where there is no right or wrong any more, only what helps one move closer to prosperity. The old duality has been complicated by the addition of further layers: prestige versus popularity, Hollywood versus Broadway, technocracy versus meritocracy. Nevertheless putting Hollywood before Broadway seems to be central to the writer's idea, although the movie opens with the poem inscribed on Raymond Carver's tombstone:

*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.

Close to the end, when Riggan is in hospital having shot himself, and no-one knows whether it was by accident or by intention, his producer and best friend shows him the newspaper coverage. "Wasn't it what you wanted"? After a meaningful silence he answers "Yes, it was!", mirroring Carver's poem. Riggan's sense of having "called himself beloved, and felt beloved on the earth" - or in the sky – rings

true. However, his apparent happiness comes from the attention of the media and critics, having the show transferred to London and Paris, and not from a selfless connection with others. If, as the movie claims, popularity is the slutty cousin of prestige, it should also be said that attention is the slutty cousin of love, and nowhere more so than in supposedly post-industrial cultures.