

Birdman: An Exercise in Unconventional Remediation and Paratextuality

Alejandro González Iñárritu's ambitious and Oscar winning backstage drama, *Birdman*, has been described as an "impossible" adaptation of Raymond Carver's short story, "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love." In fact, through its use of paratextuality and meta-fiction, the film seems to contemplate remediation as much as it performs it-albeit less overtly than a film such as Spike Jonze's 2002 film adaptation, *Adaptation*-as the line from Bolter and Grusin, "Although each medium promises to reform its predecessors by offering a more immediate or authentic experience, the promise of reform inevitably leads us to become aware of the new medium as a medium," (327) seems to be as much an encapsulation of both the film's themes and the journey of protagonist, Riggan Thomson, as do any distillation of Carver's themes in "Love." I would argue it is no coincidence then that the director engages the language of film, editing, as part of his remediation in such a way that parallels the characters' search for authenticity in performance. The winding, dimly lit spaces backstage, as well as the culture of theatrical residence, remediate visually the near claustrophobic setting of the short story in which the very limited prose is often concerned with light, postures, and the passage of time in ways which are conducive to a deconstruction of social artifice in perhaps the same way spending days in a dark theater while clawing at emotional vulnerability might do.

Bolter and Grusin make passing reference to Derrida and the post-structuralists-or deconstructivists-in their chapter on hypermediacy and remediation. In this way, it seems plausible that the traditional view of adaptation studies may define adaptation in terms of a varying signifier to a consistent signified. However, only in accepting the ambiguity, or as Derrida puts it, "what we take to be meaning is really only the mental trace left behind by the play of signifiers," (Tyson 239) is an adaptation such as *Birdman* possible. Deconstructivism, then, in denial of language as a closed system, places much agency in the vehicle of the reader who, in the case of this film, Iñárritu is functioning as.

Donahue

The director is remediating his own unstable interpretation of the ambiguous “trace of signifiers” that is Carver’s ten-page story in such a way that not only inspires the meta-textual play within the film but also the general framework and motivations of the characters who are staging it.

The paratextual elements of *Birdman* are kaleidoscopic, specifically, as Genette names them, both the public and private epitexts. In a press junket for the film’s release, Iñárritu said “thematically, the short story and the quest of Riggan Thomson are completely attached.” However, as mentioned, the adaptive process for the people behind *Birdman* doesn’t stop at Carver’s language. If, for the post-structuralists, language can never reach the thing which it intends to represent, but rather refer only to the interpreters’ personal associations, Iñárritu and the principal cast, through writing, direction, and performance most of all, are adapting their own trail of associations. The director’s admission to a deep personal connection with the Carver works that precipitates his work on this film is strikingly similar to Riggan’s own relationship to the material; Edward Norton has cultivated a strong reputation as an actor who wrestles creative control of the productions he works on; and, of course, Michael Keaton’s own career timeline and place in the zeitgeist could not be more befitting of the character of Riggan. Even more granularly, the characters of Birdman and Batman, respectively, share the duality experienced by Keaton’s character as adapter and creator, star and family man, director and performer. Perhaps the most interesting adaptive choice on the part of both the fictional and actual director is the choice of Riggan being double cast as both Nick and Ed leaving a project within a project whose feet in both high and low brow culture result in something rife for analysis and over-analysis.

References

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