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“I’m Trying To Do Something Important”: The Materialist Ideology of *Birdman*

A strong set of values dictate societal expectations and popular discourse. Though these values seem to overshadow any notions that do not agree with them, outliers still remain. It is from the disparate perspectives that the most can be learned, and one film in particular provides a very valuable lesson. Primarily in content but also in form, Alejandro G. Iñárritu’s *Birdman* subtly challenges the dominant value of materialism by means of its main character Riggan’s desperate search for material success, through which he begins to realize the futility of his efforts.

American society has developed a set of standards and expectations that together make up its dominant ideology. These values are largely invisible to Americans because they are unquestioned. They can be seen more clearly when viewing American society objectively. Dr. L. Robert Kohls, Director of International Programs at San Francisco State University, outlines American values in a piece written for foreign visitors to the United States. Among the values he describes are self-help, materialism, and competition. In addition to these values, Dr. Kohls examines the American emphasis on democracy, equality, individualism, and the notion of the American Dream. Together, these values form the dominant ideology of America. Indeed, though they are accepted in America, these values might seem shocking or absurd to someone raised outside the United States.
These perceptions of society are ultimately reflected in films which are, of course, made within one society or another. In turn, films reflect the dominant ideology of that society in some way, either reinforcing or challenging the values of the culture that created them. The film may do so through its content, form, or perhaps both. Film theorist Robin Wood encourages the evaluation of films based on, but not limited to, an examination of the ideology presented in the film. Wood is careful to articulate that “the presence of ideological tensions in a movie… is not in itself a reliable evaluative criterion” (595). Wood further explains that the critical analysis of ideology in film does not depend on whether ideology exists in the film, but how the film presents the ideology. He adds that ideology in film is an amalgamation of the values and assumptions of the society that creates the film, but that these values and assumptions are not “monolithic.” They are, instead, “inherently riddled with hopeless contradictions and unresolvable tensions” (Wood, 594). What Wood describes here is the fact that there are no absolute truths in the ideology a film presents, but it is through the attempt to decipher the deeper message of the film that the ideology is revealed.

Film theorists Jean-Luc Comolli and Jean Narboni effectively summarize the various avenues through which a film deals with ideology in form and content. They propose five categories that describe the role fiction films play in reinforcing or challenging the dominant ideology. According to Comolli and Narboni, category A films essentially reinforce the dominant ideology in both form and content. Because the films blindly play into societal values, they are “unconscious instruments of the ideology which produces them” (Comolli and Narboni, 689). Category B films are just the opposite. They challenge the status quo through their unconventional form as well as
their position on the dominant ideology. Category C films experiment with form but do not explicitly offer commentary on political matters. Category D films are explicitly political, seeking change in some way, but do so through a conventional form. Films that fall under the last of the fiction film categories, category E, are unusual. They deal with familiar subject matter with conventional form and appear to reinforce the dominant ideology. However, moments in the film will reveal otherwise. Category E films offer commentary on the dominant ideology through ambiguous messages. As Comolli and Narboni put it, “An internal criticism is taking place which cracks the film apart at the seams… it is splitting under an internal tension which is simply not there in an ideologically innocuous film” (Comolli and Narboni, 691).

One of the cracks through which commentary often enters a category E film is the ending. In a category A film that reinforces the dominant ideology, the story returns to the status quo as it resolves according to the conventional values of the dominant ideology. When the ending of a film is ambiguous, one may start to decipher the film’s ideology. An ending of this kind does not offer a satisfying resolution. Instead, it presents new information, raising questions about the way the world is presented in the film. Such is the case with Birdman, at the end of which Riggan jumps out the hospital window as his daughter watches in awe. Each viewer must determine whether Riggan is dead on the sidewalk below or is flying in the sky above. However, what is truly effective about the ambiguous ending is its ability to take the focus away from what is happening and shift it to why it is happening. Two facts are quite clear; Riggan’s play was a success after he attempted to kill himself onstage, and Riggan earned the attention and admiration of his daughter by this act. In order to effectively examine
these points in terms of the dominant values, it is crucial to first take a look at Riggan as a character.

Riggan’s struggle to re-invent himself in the shadow of his past success is his defining characteristic. He is focused on self-help, trying whatever he can to make himself better on his own. One may even see some of the Rosebud Syndrome in effect. As Robin Wood writes, “Money isn’t everything; money corrupts; the poor are happier. A very convenient assumption for capitalist ideology; the more oppressed you are, the happier you are…” (Wood, 594). Riggan is searching for happiness despite his material success. His desire for his play to succeed is not a financial one, but rather a need for recognition from his family and for self-actualization.

The family dynamic plays a large role in Riggan’s life, and it manifests itself in a way that subtly undermines dominant values, at least in the context of Riggan’s divorce. Birdman suggests the possibility of a failed relationship that does not need to be rekindled. As Riggan’s ex-wife Sylvia explains to him, “You threw a kitchen knife at me, and one hour later you were telling me how much you loved me. Just because I didn’t like that ridiculous comedy you did with Goldie Hawn didn’t mean I did not love you. But that’s what you always do. You confuse love with admiration.” Through this interaction, it becomes quite evident that Sylvia and Riggan have no intention of getting back together. This is a departure from the expectation to see the maintenance or restoration of the family unit, an expectation that is laid out by the dominant values and conventions of mainstream film. It is a subtle critique of the American value of family, which introduces the idea that Riggan’s happiness cannot come from others or from his work, but only from himself. These small departures from mainstream values, these cracks in
the otherwise well-established facade constructed by the film, are what make *Birdman* such an effective critique of ideology.

As Riggan desperately seeks attention from those around him and goes to extreme lengths to do so, the film’s commentary on materialism becomes quite evident. Riggan focuses on receiving a good review, particularly from esteemed critic Tabitha Dickinson, and the preview shows give him little solace. Once Riggan taps into something beyond his character--something transcendent--and shoots himself on stage, the audience applauds heavily and the positive reviews come pouring in. The absurd level of personal sacrifice required for success are revealed here, as Riggan is in a state of mental anguish, yet it is at this point that the theater critics revere the play. In this instance, the film challenges the American value of material success.

In a film that yields to the dominant ideology, a successful performance would have been an integral part of a satisfying resolution. The material success of a job well done would have been enough to restore the conflict to the status quo. This is not the case in *Birdman*. Between the success of a stage play and the fear of suicide is a gap through which the dominant ideology is tested and another value is revealed. The film presents material success as trivial when compared to the importance of personal growth or happiness. What Riggan is searching for is not a well-reviewed opening, but for meaning in his own life. He is searching for the ability to do what he wants without being weighed down by the world around him. It is worth noting that in the final scene, before Riggan takes off the bandages on his face, the black eye, bruises, and reconstructed nose resemble the mask of Birdman, something that is now ingrained in him. Riggan physically looks more like Birdman. As he jumps out the window and falls...
to certain death or flies in the air above, Riggan’s fulfillment has come to him in a wholly new way—a way that is part of his marrow. What happened after he jumped out the window is not relevant. What is important is Riggan’s complete lack of submission to material desire. The ideological discourse in the film is starkly different from the dominant ideology, in which material success is viewed as one of the greatest accomplishments.

The film communicates this notion through Riggan’s relationship with his daughter Sam as well. In a heated moment, he says to her, “Listen to me. I’m trying to do something important,” to which Sam replies, “This is not important.” Riggan says, “It’s important to me, alright? Maybe not to you or your cynical friends whose only ambition is to go viral, but to me… to me… this is—God. This is my career. This is my chance to do some work that actually means something.” Riggan’s desire to have a fulfilling career may seem to directly feed the dominant ideology. His passion seems to stem from the notion of the American Dream. A deeper analysis reveals some truth. Riggan mocks the people who aspire to go viral, and later goes viral himself after his jog through Times Square in his underpants. He had no intention of going viral when he was making his way back to the theater. It was purely functional. The same can be said of his attempted suicide. He did not see it as the means to achieve a good performance, but as the necessary actions of a depressed
man. It is when he stops trying to find success that he starts to find it. Perhaps this is because the success he stops pursuing is of the material kind, and his search for self-actualization provides the people around him with a taste of something genuine, something they have not seen before.

*Birdman* presents an ideological discourse that grows out of Riggan’s desperation. Though it deals with similar themes and topics as films that yield to the dominant ideology, *Birdman* serves as a reminder of the futility of material success. The harder Riggan works at finding meaning in his work or in others, the more his success is fleeting. However, once he seems to give up his search for the material success that defines and pervades American society, he finds what makes him happy.
Works Cited


