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Posted on [October 18, 2014](#)[December 2, 2014](#) by [Keith Uhlich](#)

Birdman, Gone Girl, and American Horror Story: Freak Show

Some words of introduction: This is a weekly column, with time off for good behavior (i.e. holidays) or inevitability (i.e. death—let's stave that off as long as we can). The subject is motion pictures, by which I mean theatrical releases, streaming titles, television series, gallery installations, YouTube videos, etc. Essentially: Anything filmed with a camera for narrative or non-narrative purposes and presented via whatever platform for wider consumption, be it an audience of one or one billion. Coverage is dictated by the unique and, hopefully, wide-reaching interests of your not-so-humble columnist. Expect to see thoughts (not necessarily organized, never the final word) on the major new releases and zeitgeist flatterers of any given week, situated alongside older and/or obscure titles that warrant a fresh look. Let us assume that every work of art under discussion—whatever, wherever and whenever it hails from—has the potential to be “new.”

For one of my earliest professional gigs, I wrote in my accompanying bio that I didn't believe criticism was about “convincing.” I still believe this. I'm not here to change your mind, devalue your perspective or ruin your Rotten Tomatoes score, though if you well and truly care about those ripe red vs. sour green emojis, this probably isn't a column for you. (Pace Robert Christgau, however, I'd probably still have lunch with you.) Instead, I'd rather you use my words and thoughts as a sounding board for your own. Let them rattle around in your noggin—argue them, reject them, accept them, dismiss them, etc, ad nauseum—and hopefully, on the other side of it all, you'll have attained that sense of “uplift” that the great film critics Manny Farber and Patricia Patterson list as the final precept in their essential collection *Negative Space*.

Uplift: That's all I can hope to do and, on that front, I live to serve. So let's begin, shall we?

I have a general dislike of the work of cowriter-director Alejandro González Iñárritu, who most recently helmed the portentous blood-in-piss non-masterwork *Biutiful* (2010). He hasn't traded in his skull-trepanning monotony with *Birdman or (The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance)* (opened October 17th), so much as transposed it to a different, hysterical register. There are frenzied monologues in this movie (Michael Keaton and Emma Stone—playing washed-up actor father and recovering drug-addict daughter—deliver two of my soul baring, spittle-flecked favorites, one of them beside a prominently placed bottle of Stella Artois™) that aren't so much about the words as the performative rhythms. I hesitate to call them “jazzy,” even though Iñárritu invites the comparison with an inventive drum score by Antonio Sánchez that is twice revealed to have a diegetic source. Truthfully, I think Iñárritu's grasp of jazz is, like most things in his movies, a cursory means to an end, and for once I happen to dig both means *and* end.

A backstage melodrama and a slamming-doors farce with (knowing) delusions of grandeur, *Birdman* hates people but loves performance. Keaton's

movie star-turned-Manhattan theater thespian Riggan Thomson is the central point in a microcosmos of assholes, his paranoia, sexual hangups, and general idiocy affecting all around him as the opening night of his multihyphenate Raymond Carver adaptation approaches. In a different context (hell, in any other Iñárritu film) I'd probably be offended by the rampant and sketchy displays of misanthropy and misogyny, not to mention what reads, at a casual glance, as the sincere if slapsticky redemption of a motherfucker among motherfuckers. I'm going to assume, however, that Iñárritu knew what he was doing when he and cinematographer Emmanuel Lubezki (who I'd watch photograph cracks in the sidewalk—and I bet he has for Malick) decided to film *Birdman* in what appears, for most of the runtime, to be a single, uninterrupted take.

This is another of the movie's many "performances," and it's the leveling factor: It feels as if we're watching one empyrean consciousness hopscotching between fleshly hosts. In a scene already argued to death by many of my colleagues, Riggan confronts the icy *New York Times* critic, Tabitha (Lindsay Duncan), who plans to pan his play sight unseen. He spits out a self-righteous diatribe that, like so much in the movie, sounds pompously profound in the moment, but quickly curdles because the long-take aesthetic allows us to see the real-time aftermath. (Riggan's face sinks from exhaustion while Tabitha, hilariously stoic to this point, malevolently smirks and sticks unfailingly to her guns.) To those still offended by the seeming sour grapes portrayal of a critic, I pass on this circuitous bit of bitchery from Henry James—written in his preface to the revised edition of *The Portrait of a Lady*—as an example of the enduringly tendentious relationship between creator and commentator (artists both):

"That reduces to imbecility the vain critic's quarrel, so often, with one's subject, when he hasn't the wit to accept it. Will he point out then which other it should properly have been? — his office being, essentially *to* point out."

It is to Iñárritu's credit that no one leaves this strange, abrasive film with his or her dignity intact. Everyone is in some way a fool, and nonsensical, though they seem to be making sense. Appropriate for a movie that represents the known universe as morse-code hyphens on a roll of toilet paper, though I wasn't fully on board until Iñárritu and Lubezki's coup de cinema referenced the coup de théâtre that closes Fritz Lang's *Spies*, with a *Sin City* twist. Even Riggan's seeming redemption is complicated in the film's final shot by the multifaceted expression on one character's face—at once "Rock on!" and "Fuck off!" to which I can only return a hearty grin and a firmly extended middle finger.

Gone Girl

I suppose I must mention David Fincher's squawking-points-memo *Gone Girl* (opened October 3rd), if only to say that it plays to me as a humorless artist's failed attempt at making a funny. I can't say I wasn't compelled, but many is the scene where I longed for Paul Verhoeven or Brian De Palma's wackadoo tonal perversity over Fincher's propulsive yet studied classicism—a roller coaster moving only and ever in a rigid straight line. I'm always happy to have a new Trent Reznor-Atticus Ross score (the main reason this NIN-head looks forward to new Fincher movies) and all the actors do as well as they can with Gillian Flynn's very silly (non)-murder mystery-cum-marital dissection. I'm especially happy to see Kim Dickens (a personal favorite since *Deadwood*) commanding the screen as the cop who becomes the thorn in the side of beleaguered dudebro Ben Affleck. Why *Gone Girl* is inspiring any substantive discussion is beyond me (as usual with recent Fincher, it seems to be taking place in an alien galaxy populated with Stepford people). But then this is a movie in which one of the biggest figures of fun is a horndog aesthete with a swinging-dick Proust obsession, so perhaps it's best to leave that particular cultural subset to their own plate of vegetables.

American Horror Story: Freak Show

Finally, some (cautious) praise for the fourth season of the ever-oddball pastiche that is *American Horror Story* (Wednesdays at 10pm on FX), of which two of thirteen episodes have aired. Subtitled *Freak Show*, it immediately trumps the mediocre third season, *Coven*, by reducing the ADD tics unique to cocreator Ryan Murphy (especially the Cuisinart cutting) and going full split-screen and dutch-angle baroque. Also by having cerulean-blue-suited star Jessica Lange (still mining comet-sized chunks of pathos from the self-consciously campy hag horror) cover David Bowie's "Life on Mars" in a thick German accent as glitter rains and a full-freak orchestra plays. Every season of this show starts somewhere deep in the heart of Crazy Town, but *Freak Show*, which ostensibly takes place in the 1950s, is already well past the point where sanity could ever be restored. (A literally two-headed Sarah Paulson crooning Fiona Apple's "Criminal" while a dwarf surfs a mosh pit? Sure, why not?) My favorite character thus far is the psycho clown Twisty (John Carroll Lynch)—frighteningly introduced in broad daylight *en hommage* to Fincher's *Zodiac*—who adorably offers up a severed head as a plaything to two of his prisoners. But I'm equally delighted to watch the collision of divas Lange, Angela Bassett (as a three-breasted hermaphrodite), Kathy Bates (as a Milwaukee-accented bearded lady) and Frances Conroy (as a coddling society mother) who Murphy and his writers continue to treat—for better and for worse—like red-meat-devouring sirens.

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