

Post 3

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The Performatist Challenge (More Fun than Dumping a Bucket of Ice Water over Your Head)

One of the fun things about performatism is that you can use it to actually predict what will be in new works of literature, film, or art. In my last two posts, I took a look at posthistorical criticism. This sort of criticism suggests we focus on abstractly connected “singularities” (Jameson) or “uneven, tentative local shifts” (Hoberek) in literary and cultural development. Critics of this kind usually use the modern and postmodern past as the main source of orientation, and they like to explain works of literature, film, and art by referring to the vast field of historical, economic, social and political influences outside of them. Confronted by significant aberrations from postmodern norms, posthistorical critics will either: a) reject these as trite or reactionary; b) try to reconcile them at all costs with existing poststructuralist concepts; c) explain them by referring to sociological, economic, or political causes outside of the arts or d) simply ignore them. Because posthistorical criticism is in a constant state of denial, it isn’t able to develop a positive outlook on cultural change.

Performatism, by contrast, offers a clear-cut categorical opposition between old and new and a positive perspective on how contemporary arts and letters are developing. And, it doesn’t try to offer armchair explanations of art, film, or literature by tapping into social science disciplines that the critic knows something (but not a whole lot) about.

Obviously, just offering up a clear-cut opposition isn’t proof that the distinction between postmodernism and performatism really exists. That’s where the **Performatist Challenge** comes in. It asks you to take the criteria I’ve developed for performatism and apply them to any artistically ambitious movie, book, or drama that you’ve recently seen or read. These criteria (juxtaposed with their postmodern opposites) are as follows:

Performatism	Postmodernism
<p>1. Monism. Performatist works offer signs, situations, and characters that project unity. Signs tend to be simple and instantly understandable, situations are static or closed, and characters tend to have a single strong character trait that makes it easy for us to identify with them. Often, a single reconciliatory theme may dominate. The reader/viewer is encouraged to identify intuitively with these unified fields.</p>	<p>1. Pluralism. Postmodernism offer signs, situations, and characters that break up unity. Signs proliferate and deceive, situations dissolve and fluctuate, and we often find it difficult or impossible to identify with characters because they, too, dissolve and fluctuate. The savvy reader/viewer reacts to this by developing an ironic awareness of how instable signs, meanings, and subjectivity really are.</p>
<p>2. Double Framing (narrative closure). Performatist narratives use strategies that reinforce the unified impressions and identifications found in the story line. I can't list all these strategies here, but in their strongest form they force water-tight plot resolutions upon us and close the text for the reader/viewer, who is made to identify not only with unified characters or situations, but also with the unified gesture of the work as a whole.</p>	<p>2. Opening the narrative Postmodern narratives use a great variety of strategies (which I can't even begin to list here) to undermine any feeling of closure in a work. Closure is absolutely taboo because it leads to "totalization" and, by implication, to totalitarianism, oppression, phallogocentrism, victimization etc. Postmodern narratives strongly reinforce the feelings of irony and irreducible plurality developed in the story line.</p>
<p>3. Authoriality. In performatist works we get a strong feeling that an author is imposing his- or herself upon the reader/viewer to reinforce the monist devices and narrative double framing noted above.</p>	<p>3. Anti-authoriality Postmodernism (famously) tries to kill off the author by creating ironic conundrums that make it more or less impossible to establish a fast-and-firm authorial position.</p>

<p>4. Theism. In theological terms, performatist works tend to have a theist cast. This means that they tend to broach the question of whether some single Higher Force is behind things. The world is structured in such a way that this Higher Force provides some kind of hope. As a rule, though, performatist works are secular in character and not a return to old-time religion.</p>	<p>4. Deism. Postmodern works tend to be structured like gnostic or cabalistic texts. God is thought of as an infinitely receding First Cause that emits signs which can be endlessly interpreted but ultimately never be traced back to their origin. The First Cause is usually conceived of as being indifferent or downright evil, and the world appears as a gigantic trap from which there is no escape.</p>
<p>5. Mimesis and Intuition. Performatist works disdain discourse, which breaks up closure and dissolves narrative and thematic unity. Communication takes place instead through mimesis (imitation of others or providing a model for others to imitate) and through intuition, which works spontaneously and has a strong visual and sensual element.</p>	<p>5. Discourse. Postmodernist texts emphasize discourse, which is to say language with a social purpose. Since these social purposes are always outside of the text (in a context), discourse works to break open or undermine any form of unity or closure as well as any direct, sensual experience of reality or a direct imitation of someone else.</p>
<p>6. Ethics of Perpetration. Because performatist works empower characters and enable them to act, this means they tend to step on other people's toes or worse. This leads to ethical problems resulting from otherwise positive acts of perpetration. Performatist ethics are also a counter-reaction to the postmodern emphasis on passive resistance and the endless, intellectualized critique of power relations.</p>	<p>6. Victimary Ethics. Postmodern ethics are a reaction to modern disasters like World War II, the Holocaust, the Gulag, Hiroshima, and colonialism. This type of ethics favors passive, voiceless, peripheral victims over active, dominant, centralized perpetrators. Resistance to these otherwise all-powerful perpetrators is made possible through irony, skepticism, performative play-acting, intellectual critique, and similar strategies.</p>

<p>7. Belief. Performatism works by causing us to believe using formal, aesthetic means (<i>per formam</i>, through form). Hence the term performatism. If you finish a performatist work you will have the feeling that you have been forced to believe in something that you are deeply skeptical about.</p>	<p>7. Irony and Skepticism Postmodernism works by creating ironic skepticism towards pretty much everything. If you finish a postmodern work you will have the feeling of being disillusioned about things that you may previously have deeply believed in.</p>
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Carrying out the performatist challenge means you have to accept these basic binary oppositions. If you have a higher degree in literature or cultural studies you may have a lot of trouble doing this, since everything you have learned in the course of your studies has told you that the items listed on the left side of the column are either a) bad; b) illusory; c) trivial or d) immediately reducible to the positions on the right side of the column. If you can manage to overcome this postmodern or poststructuralist mindset, you'll have a chance to grasp what is going on in contemporary culture in a positive way. And the odds of you finding the traits on the left column as opposed to the ones on the right are pretty good. Most novels and the overwhelming majority of films made in the last ten years will fall firmly on the left-hand side.

I can give an idea of how the performatist challenge works by applying it myself in a quick-and-dirty way to the last film I saw in a movie theater. The film in question is Alejandro Iñárritu's Oscar-winning *Birdman*. Since I've only seen the movie once (and in German at that) this is not exactly a definitive scholarly analysis. However, it should help to make the basic point about what we can expect today in ambitious mainstream cultural productions. Also, it's a good opportunity to provide a more nuanced take on the relatively rigid oppositions outlined above.

In terms of genre, *Birdman* operates on several levels. First, it is a satirical film about a theater production which is in turn a dramatization of the Raymond Carver short story "What We Talk about when We Talk about Love." This takes place against the background of human conflicts among the actors and their friends and relatives. These "real" conflicts tend to get mixed up with the staged, artificial conflicts, although it is ultimately always possible to keep them apart. Secondly, the movie belongs to the sub-genre of what are sometimes called mind-f@k films. Mind-f@k films (*Fight Club*, *Donny Darko*, *Close Your Eyes*, *Vanilla Sky*, *Shutter Island* etc.) cause us to identify strongly with a character who either seems normal and turns out insane or who

seems insane and turns out normal. What is what in these films is always revealed at the very last moment and causes us to completely revise our interpretation of the film up to then.

The basic plot of the movie concerns an aging actor, Riggan Thomson, who is best known for his role as a schlocky superhero named Birdman. To revive his career and achieve artistic prestige, Riggan wants to put on a serious Broadway production dramatizing the “dirty realism” of Raymond Carver, the American short-story writer who is sometimes identified with a turn away from high American postmodernism of the Kurt-Vonnegut/Donald-Barthelme variety. Everything keeps going wrong with the production, and Riggan, who thinks he has supernatural powers, is barely able to ward off catastrophe during the rehearsals. On top of this there are personal conflicts with a girlfriend faking pregnancy, a daughter just out of rehab, an aggressive fellow actor, and a skeptical ex-wife.

The denouement of the film is surprising (and gimmicky). Riggan, who may or may not have attempted to commit suicide during the premiere and is in the hospital, climbs out the window of the high-rise hospital and presumably falls to his death. His daughter, who discovers the open window, first looks down in dismay but then looks upward and smiles. Riggan has become Birdman.

First of all, there is plenty in the movie that seems postmodern. Within the film, reality and staged reality mix freely, as do filmic reality and real-world reality (Riggan is played by Michael Keaton, an aging actor famous for his 1990s portrayal of Batman, and Edward Norton, as Mike Shiner, has played The Hulk). Also, the film satirizes theatre, social media, film, and critics. The movie parodies digital action-film sequences, portrays actors as obsessive ego-maniacs, and ironically undermines the cheesy realism of Carver’s dramatized story through real breaks in the frame of the play (Riggan gets locked out of the rehearsal, the Edward Norton character gets an erection while on stage, Riggan shoots his nose off in the suicide scene etc.). All this is compatible with postmodern irony and metalepsis (mixing different levels of narration to break up the feeling of narrative unity). If we throw in all of Riggan’s dysfunctional personal relationships with girlfriends, ex-wives, daughters, and colleagues, we have a typical postmodern mess, a world in which nothing can ever go right even if we do our best.

So isn’t the movie really postmodern? There is one major reason that it is not, and that is because of the device that I call double framing. Let’s look more closely at how it works.

Riggan, first of all, has a split personality: he appears to converse with Birdman and thinks he has Birdman’s supernatural powers. At this point, as a schizophrenic unable to tell inside from out, he is a typical postmodern character. The film, by the way, undercuts Riggan’s claim to having magical powers by showing his “supernatural” feats only when he is alone—as soon as

another character enters the scene, the magical feats like levitation and psychokinesis disappear abruptly.

Iñárritu also sets up a formal cinematographic unity around Riggan by using digitized tricks to make the film look as if it were shot in one take (something done before by Alfred Hitchcock in *Rope* with clever manual editing and by Aleksandr Sokurov in *The Russian Ark* using lots of post-production touch-ups). The effect is closer to Sokurov than to Hitchcock: we have the feeling of following Riggan around constantly from day till night, mainly in the narrow corridors of the theater where the play is being produced.

As numerous reviewers have pointed out, this leads to feeling that the film was shot in one take and that we are watching an incredible, indeed almost superhuman job of acting. In any case, we are made to identify with Riggan in a formally very intense, cinematographically unified way. We could call this way of presenting Riggan the *inner frame* of the film. This formally unified frame (as noted above) is thematically ambivalent. Riggan is probably crazy, and though he's well-meaning, he's not very good at relationships. Our identification with him is, correspondingly, split: we may feel for him a little because he's nuts, or because we secretly identify with his superman fantasies, or because his private life is so screwed up, but until the last minute of the movie he's not anything really all that special.

The last scene in the movie, however, changes everything. In this scene, the narration flip-flops, and the person entering the hospital room (Riggan's daughter) confirms with her smile that he has flown away. This "trick" or "gimmick" is what I call the *outer frame*: it reverses the whole logic of the movie up until then and forces us to accept the fact that Riggan has magical powers. Rationally, of course, we *know* he doesn't have magical powers, but there is no way we can "disprove" that he does—the outer narrative frame doesn't allow for any doubt. You may not like the gimmicky ending—*Salon* magazine's Andrew O'Hehir called it a "dopey magic-realist escape valve"—but it is a unified gesture that changes the entire spin of the film. Instead of the story of a screwed-up, half-crazy loser, we have the story of a messed-up artist who not only endures, but who becomes one with the figure he embodies (and in the process also manages to transcend the boundaries of three artistic media—film, literature, and theatre).

The real "hero" of the film is of course not Riggan, but performative art itself. The movie shows how a talented individual transcends not only the crap in his everyday life but also the critical discourses and media influences that are weighing in on him from outside. Most reviewers seem to have understood this, even though several found the ending hokey: *Birdman* has a 93% positive rating on the *Rotten Tomatoes* website. And, of course, the film worked perfectly on a very real performative level: it raked in four Oscars and got Keaton the Golden Globe for his undoubtedly stellar acting performance.

How does the movie line up if we apply the criteria from the Performatist Challenge?

Point 1 (monism vs. pluralism in the story line) at first seems pretty postmodern. The hero doesn't seem to have all his marbles, he's not the world's most likable or stable guy, and he's constantly buffeted by outside influences beyond his control.

Point 2 (double frame vs. narrative openness) goes one-sidedly to the performatist column. The double frame is a game-changer that causes us to completely reevaluate the inner frame and turn Riggan from a loser into an artistic superhero.

Point 3 (authoriality vs. killing off the author) is also one-sidedly performatist. Only a very willful author could set you up for that gimmicky ending. The "author," of course, is the unified organizing force behind the film and not Iñárritu personally, although if you do look at his other movies you'll find that he does something very similar in each one. (Those interested in a performatist analysis of his movie *Babel* should take a look at my article that's coming out soon in a collection of essays called *The Planetary Turn* edited by Christian Moraru and Amy Elias; for the exact source see the [Performatism Bibliography](#)).

Point 4 (theism vs. deism) doesn't play much of a role in the movie, as far as I can tell (I'd have to watch it again though on DVD or read the script to look for God-talk; I saw the movie about a month ago and don't have all the dialogue in my head). Implicit in the movie's ending is however the possibility of some form of artistically mediated transcendence.

Point 5 (mimesis and intuition vs. discourse) tends toward the performatist side because of the way it ascribes acting (i.e., imitating the behavior of others artistically) magical or transcendent powers. Discourse, on the other hand, doesn't come off too well: there's an incredibly nasty theatre critic who writes her reviews without seeing the pieces, and the film makes fun of social media and its primitive voyeurism (as in that by now iconic scene with Michael Keaton running in his underwear through Times Square).

Point 6 (ethics of perpetration vs. ethics of victimization) doesn't appear as a big issue in the film, which is more about aesthetics than ethics. Riggan may (or may not) let a stage light fall on a lousy actor's head, and his daughter spits on

a passerby during a game of “truth or dare,” but as a rule this is a film about performing well rather than doing good or bad. In any case there are mild acts of violence against others by two of the central characters, and Riggan turns out to be a (super)hero rather than a victim.

Point 7 (belief vs. skepticism) goes easily to performatism. The film is in fact nothing more than a giant trap set up to make us believe in its hero. If you are super-critical about this trap, then you can’t take the film seriously because you can’t accept its main formal premise. Like many other performatist works, this one gives you a clear choice: take it or leave it.

If we tally up the results, we see that performatist devices, themes, and strategies dominate one-sidedly over postmodern ones. Of course, postmodern patterns are always clearly visible in the background. However, the reason they are there is not because Iñárritu is pining away with nostalgia for postmodernism, but because he needs its clichés to set up the performatist punchline (until the very end we think that Riggan is just another sad-sack postmodernist hero).

The skeptical reader may still be inclined to ask “so what if a film turns the tables on postmodernism with a cheap trick?” The problem is that this sort of “cheap trick” isn’t a singular event (as Jameson might imagine) or a “tentative local shift” as Hoberek would have it. It’s a device that is singular only in the sense that it surprises us when we watch the movie for the first time. Otherwise, it is everything other than singular: it’s part of a much larger performatist pattern that I—with total confidence—predict will repeat itself in some way in whatever contemporary movie you watch or whatever book you read in the near future. Try it out for yourself and see!