Hierarchy of Expressive Culture in *Birdman*

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A B S T R A C T

Despite the accolades that it has received, *Birdman* or (*The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance*) has not been thoroughly studied in the academic sphere. This research attempts to examine the hierarchy of expressive culture portrayed in the screenplay of *Birdman* using Lawrence W. Levine's theory (1988) of cultural hierarchy. A sociological approach by Swingewood & Laurenson (1972) is applied to see the work's relation to the society. Firstly there is highbrow/lowbrow categorization, followed by an analysis of the challenges to the hierarchy; each process includes comparison between the findings and the reality in the present-day American society to see their resemblance.

Keywords: *Expressive Culture, Film, Hierarchy, Highbrow/Lowbrow Dichotomy, Theatre.*

INTRODUCTION

Birdman or (*The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance*) (2014), or *Birdman* for short, is an Oscar-winning psychological drama/comedy film directed by Alejandro González Iñárritu. It narrates a comeback story of a fictional washed-up Hollywood actor named Riggan Thompson as he makes his way into the theatre business, while at the same time battling with his common sense since the role that he used to play has been internalized in himself, represented by the Birdman's voice in his head and the constant "appearance" of Birdman around him.

Since Birdman was recently released at the end of 2014, there have not been many thorough studies about it. Most researchers and critics wrote about it in the form of articles published in newspapers and magazines.

Smith (2014), for instance, wrote an article on an online magazine called *Smash Cut Magazine*. He says that in the story, there is a scene where the Birdman character gives a rather snide comment on the audience for their love of explosions and superhero movies. Smith argues

that such notion is rooted in the classification set in the present American culture. Smith's interpretation of the story contributes as a supporting argument for this paper. Even though his article is not classified as scholarly, his argument is considered adequate.

Another article by O'Keeffe (2014) published in *The Atlantic* discusses the hostility between two characters in the film, Riggan Thompson and Tabitha Dickinson. Tabitha Dickinson is a theatre critic who undermines Thompson's theatre debut even before she sees the preview. O'Keeffe relates this matter to the real-life condition of the present-day Broadway, which is now more money-oriented.

Another article is "Birdman and the Intoxicating Alchemy of Cinema" by Brown (2015). Unlike the previous two articles, this one highlights the capacity of cinema to shift between reality and fantasy and to attract the society.

Brody (2015) reviews the film in general. It covers a range of things, from the cast' acting, the long take used in the film, and not to mention the film-versus-theatre dichotomy. Brody criticises that the issue of film-versus-theatre is unoriginal.

Since this article is a review, it is understandable that Brody criticises the film's treatment on this issue instead of discussing more about the issue itself.

Similarly, Thompson & Bordwell (2015) also address the film-versus-theatre issue. According to them, "The eternal Hollywood/Broadway opposition is sharpened in the light of new entertainment trends." They also assert that the duality in the film is not only about film versus theatre, but also the young versus the elders, and the East Coast versus West Coast values.

The present research seeks to contribute to the academic sphere by analysing the work. The analysis of this paper is limited to the textual material of the work and its social context. As a result, the analysis is focused on the script, so the technical elements of the film—for example, *mise-en-scene*, shots, and acting—are disregarded.

In regards to the topic, the paper focuses on the hierarchy of expressive culture in the script of *Birdman* and how it resembles the present society. The paper adopts the theory of cultural hierarchy proposed by Levine (1998). In his book, Levine analyzes the emergence and changes in the hierarchy of expressive culture based on how Americans have perceived them from time to time.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study adopts a sociological approach to analyze the movie script. Theorists of sociological approach agree that "literature is a social product, and thoughts and feelings found in literature are conditioned and shaped by the cultural life created by the society" (Jadhav, 2014: 658). Among the many theorists of sociology in literature is Swingewood (Jadhav, 2014). According to Jadhav (2014) Swingwood's "sociological approach to the study of literature is developed in the social and cultural context" (p. 4). Swinge-wood & Laurenson (1972) argue that sociology and literature complement each other in understanding the society (p. 13). They further argue:

> As with sociology, literature too is pre-eminently concerned with man's social world, his adaptation to it, and

his desire to change it. Thus the novel, as the major literary genre of industrial society, can be seen as a faithful attempt to re-create the social world of man's relation with his family, with politics, with the State; it delineates too his riles within the family and other institutions, the conflicts and tensions between groups and social classes (p. 12).

Therefore, it is believed that this sociological approach is applicable in this research because the object of the research is the hierarchy of expressive culture in the *Birdman* movie script and its relation to the present condition in the United States.

More specifically, this study adopts the theory of cultural hierarchy proposed by Levine (1988). Levine tackled the development of various forms of expressive culture—such as theatre, opera, music, photography, movies, and fine arts—-in the United States beginning from the 19th century. Levine claims that the "process of divorcing popular entertainment from the legitimate stage, which had been gradually at work throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, came to fruition in the twentieth" (1988, p. 936). In his book, Levine analyzes the emergence and changes in the hierarchy of expressive culture based on how Americans have perceived them from time to time.

Although there is no clear definition of "expressive culture" provided by Levine, in the present article, it is defined as "processes, emotions, and ideas bound within the social production of aesthetic forms and performances in everyday life. It is a way to embody culture and express culture through sensory experiences such as dance, music, literature, visual media, and theater" (Burstein, 2014, p. 132). The forms of expressive culture are distinguished in a vertical manner by the society, which results in a hierarchy.

Levine (1988) divides expressive culture into a dichotomy: "highbrow" and "lowbrow". He also uses other terms, such as "Elite" and "mass/popular" culture, also "high" and "low"

culture. The emergence of the terms can be traced back to late 19th century:

> "Highbrow," first used in the 1880s to describe intellectual or aesthetic superiority and "lowbrow", first used shortly after 1900 to mean someone or something neither "highly intellectual" or "aesthetically refined", were derived from the phrenological terms "highbrowed" and "lowbrowed" which were prominently featured in the nineteenth-century practice of determining racial types and intelligence by measuring cranial shapes and capacities (Levine, 1988, pp. 2550-2552).

Building from that explanation, along with other descriptions in Levine's book, a number of criteria have been compiled for of each category. Highbrows consist of forms which are aesthetically and intellectually refined (Levine, 198, pp. 2550-2552, 2616, 2622), and enjoyed by the elites or people who are highly educated (Levine, 1988, p. 398). Among the expressive forms classified as highbrows are the theatre, opera, symphonic music, and fine arts (Levine 1988, p. 972). In contrast, lowbrows refer to the popular culture. Lowbrows are the forms having questionable artistic merit (Levine, 1988, p. 390). The forms considered as lowbrows are "the blues, jazz or jazz-derived music, musical comedy, photography, comic strips, movies, radio, popular comedians" (Levine, 1988, p. 2675). Additionally, it is also a matter of accessibility. In the 19th century, forms of high culture were initially popular, yet they became less accessible at the turn of the 20th century, so the popular audience consume the expressive forms which are "barred from high culture" (Levine, 1988, p. 2675). In short, both highbrows and lowbrows have their own set of expressive forms categorized based on the intellectual and aesthetic qualities, the consumers, and the accessibility.

Recent developments have led to controversies regarding the concept of cultural hierarchy itself. Distinctions between cultural products are now considered outdated. The terms such as high art/low art or highbrow/lowbrow were used in cultural criticism only until mid-1960s (Tyson, 2006, p. 296). Such distinctions have not been maintained since the rise of postmodernism (Cuddon, 2013, p. 386), which obliterates the "high/low art distinctions" (McEntee, 2014, p. 2). Levine himself states that culture is a dynamic process (1988, p. 2885). There is always a difficulty to define a precise hierarchy (1988, p. 2574) since high and popular culture have influenced each other and renewed themselves (1988, p. 2702). However, Levine adds that even if the hierarchy of expressive culture is no longer dominant, it continues to be present in every discussion of culture (1998, p. 2889). As a result, it is still relevant to apply the theories of cultural hierarchy to analyze Birdman, not because whether or not it is still true that expressive forms are stratified, but in order to analyze the distinctions that are made evident in Birdman.

Thus, Levine's theory is applied here to identify how the hierarchy of expressive culture is portrayed in *Birdman* and to the challenges to the determined hierarchy afterwards and relates them to the reflection of the situation in the United States.

METHODS

The method of research in this paper is a library research. The primary data is the script of *Birdman*. Furthermore, the secondary data, such as journal articles, books, newspaper articles, and magazine articles, are taken from the library to support the analysis.

In line with the sociological approach, the research applies the methods proposed by Swingewood & Laurenson (1972), which attempt to see how literary work documents the real society. The "documentary aspect of literature" was chosen as literature is a "mirror to the age" (Swingewood & Laurenson, 1972, p. 13). The method sees the work as a reflection of the social and cultural problems of reality, and it is the researchers' job to interpret the imaginary characters in the story and relate them to the pertaining reality.

It should be highlighted that a close reading was employed to interpret the content of the script. After such a method was applied, the a

categorization was then made of the content of the literary work based on the theory. Then the analysis begins, which involves incorporation of the secondary data. The analysis is not only focused on the hierarchy of expressive culture in Birdman, but also the challenges to the hierarchy. After the analysis is conducted, there are findings which answer the objectives of the research. As the final step, the researchers draw conclusion based on the result of the analysis.

THE SOCIAL CONTEXT AND PRODUCTION OF BIRDMAN

In order to observe to what extent *Birdman* represents the real condition of the society in the United States, the development of the relevant forms of expressive culture, i.e., theatre and film, was examined.

Theatre

In the 19th century, the theatre belonged to all classes of the society. Even though the seats of the theatres were divided based on social classes, the theatre united all classes under one roof. As Levine points out, "All observers agree that nineteenth-century theater housed under one roof a microcosm of American society" (1988, p. 316). In addition, the theatre was "frequented by all sorts of people old and young, rich and poor, masters and servants, papists and puritans, wise men etc., churchmen and statesmen" (Levine, 1988, p. 310). In the theatre, the society was more "relaxed" because they were allowed to "act out themselves with much less inner and outer restraint than prevailed in society" (Levine, 1988, p. 813). Therefore, in the 19th century, theatre was a unifying space for the society since all classes could gather and enjoy the same form of entertainment.

Surprisingly, there was a gradual change at the turn of the 20th century, causing theatre to be more exclusive to the elites. It is clear that theatre became categorized as highbrow in the 20th century. As Levine asserts, theatre—as a matter of fact also other forms of expressive culture such as opera—has changed from popular culture to "polite" culture (1988, p. 684).

At the present time, theatre in the United States remains a high culture yet commerciality, which is supposed to be a characteristic of the popular culture, is also found in its production. There have been complaints why the Broadway producers have not created new projects. These are triggered by the fact that current performances revolve around movie adaptations and Broadway revivals in order for theatre to succeed commercially (O'Keeffee, 2014). O'Keeffee further explains in his article published on *The Atlantic* that "much like how Hollywood prefers reboots and sequels to original material, Broadway knows that known properties will, on the whole, perform better at the box office" (2014). He also mentions that the portrayal of Tabitha Dickinson as the harsh critic on *Birdman* is relevant because she does not support the present commercial system of theatre, especially with the arrival of an ex-movie star to adapt a short story for the stage, which makes theatre more commercial. Since she cannot rage against the system, she rages against Riggan instead (O'Keeffee, 2014). Therefore, no matter how much theatre as high culture values intellectualism and aesthetics above money, it still seeks to gain profit just like any other performances, and this fact causes conflict within the world of theatre itself.

Film

Film, or motion-picture, started out as spectacle, which was mere visuals without a narrative. "The first films, made in the United States in the 1890s by the motion picture company founded by Thomas Alva Edison, the great inventor, were of vaudeville and circus acts" (Wexman, 2010, p. 1). There was no feature-length films yet, so the duration was ten minutes at the maximum. The films focused on the appeal of the visuals, as Wexman said that they were "to strive for the "artistic", to use materials and models from older arts" (2010, p. 3).

The existence of silent narrative films, such as *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) and those starring Charlie Chaplin, was considered an achievement, and film was regarded as having a high degree of aesthetics. The cause of this was that silent film

was "primarily a cinema of performance" (Fluck, 1994, p. 56). There was no soundtrack available, so "the communication of meaning depended heavily on melodramatic gestures, facial expressions, acrobatic effects, or on overpowering visual strategies" (Fluck, 1994, p. 56). Moreover, Fluck adds that this performative mode containing "high degree of artistic self-consciousness" of the silent film enabled it not only to gain popularity, but also reputation among the intellectuals as a new and "lively" art (1994, p. 56).

However, the perception that film was high culture diminished after the introduction of sound. The popularity of cinema increased, yet "the high esteem among intellectuals disappeared almost completely, so that the Hollywood film after 1930 became a much maligned object of scorn" (Fluck, 1994, p. 56).

Films being regarded as low culture, especially Hollywood films, continued until the advent of postmodernism after the 1960s. Postmodernism had blurred the distinctions between highbrow and lowbrow, which was caused by the mixture of diverse styles in the works (Cuddon, 2013, p. 386; McEntee, 2014, p. 2; Fluck, 1994, p. 63). Postmodern films were not entirely distinct from the previous kind. They adopted certain elements of narrative structure, such as subject formation, memory and storytelling, and intensity; but they also invented elements of their own, such as transgression and self-consciousness (McEntee, 2014, p. 2). Examples of postmodern films are *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) and *Goodfellas* (1998), among many. As a result, ever since the emergence of post-modernism, the highbrow/lowbrow hierarchy appeared to have been less strict.

The hierarchy of expressive culture remains present nonetheless. With the rise of blockbuster films beginning from the 1970s and the invention of Computer-Generated Imagery (CGI) techno-logy in the 1980s, the commerciality of film production has become more visible. In addition, superhero films, which are typically blockbusters, also came into existence from the 1970s, advancing after CGI was introduced. The phenomena invoked a hierarchy *within* the cinema, as there are people who regarded blockbusters, especially superhero films, as having a lower position in the hierarchy of expressive culture.

Superhero films have been judged as lowbrow, in the artistic and academic field. According to Caulfield (2015), Simon Pegg, actor of *Star Trek* film adaptations, *Shaun of the Dead*, and *Hot Fuzz,* thinks that "movie fans have become "infantilized" by Hollywood's glut of lowbrow fare" (Caulfield, 2015). Even Stuart Moore, co-author of the Marvel book entitled *The Art of Thor: The Dark World*, admits that comic-book films have "low culture trappings" when he explains the making of the pertaining film adaptation, *Thor: The Dark World,* on BBC (Schou, 2014).

Background of *Birdman*'s Production

Criticising superhero films initially was not the reason why Iñárritu, *Birdman*'s director and one of its writers, developed *Birdman* in the first place. The creation of *Birdman* initially was inspired by the directors' own experiences instead of aiming the film as a critique. Based on the interviews, Iñárritu has shown disdain towards superhero films despite admitting to have received an offer to direct a superhero film (Fleming Jr., 2014). Iñárritu argues that such films "are ruining things in a lot of ways" because of his personal experience where his son once told him that the Transformers film was amazing without being able to tell him what it was about (Fear, 2014). In another interview, however, he justifies this by saying, "I think there's nothing wrong with being fixated on superheroes when you are 7 years old, but I think there's a disease in not growing up" (Fleming Jr., 2014). He then clarifies his argument to sound more neutral by saying that there are good and bad superhero films, and it is undeniable that film historically started out as a spectacle. It can be inferred that superhero films are more suitable for children instead of the whole popular audience since the films accentuate spectacles rather than narratives.

In addition, Iñárritu implies a hierarchy where superhero films are "cultural genocide" compared to films about human beings and

human flaws, as the former are more commercial and has less quality than the latter. He argues,

> I always see them [superheroes] as killing people because they do not believe in what you believe, or they are not being who you want them to be. I hate that, and don't respond to those characters. They have been poison, this <u>cultural genocide</u>, because the audience is so overexposed to plot and explosions and shit that doesn't mean nothing about the experience of being human. (Fleming Jr., 2014)

He complains that generations today prefer to see the flawless superheroes, which to him are "delusional" instead of films about human flaws and possibilities, and he goes on to say that "humans seem to be now no longer subject to analysis and observation, and we cannot see ourselves in films because we feel so bad about ourselves" (Mears, 2015). Furthermore, he adds that the cause of the superhero films taking over the cinema is because of commercial reasons since superhero films as blockbusters produce more money than others (Fleming Jr., 2014). What can be drawn from Iñárritu's argument is that superhero films give negative impacts to culture as they overexpose violence and explosions without observing much about human experiences, and that the materialistic film business are fixated on producing superhero films so that the room for other, more humanistic, films are taken up.

Another aspect to be discussed is whether the critics depicted in *Birdman*, particularly the character of Tabitha Dickinson, indicate how critics behave in real life. In the story, Tabitha Dickinson shows contempt for Riggan Thomson, thinking that an ex-superhero does not deserve to be on Broadway stage and doubting his abilities to act on stage. This depiction can be an attack towards the critics, or the opposite, which is a form of support towards critics who do not want theatre to be "stained" by Hollywood has-beens.

As stated previously, the characters are a result of Iñárritu's experiences and observation, and the critics are whom he feels mercy for. Regarding the character of Tabitha Dickinson, the creators have slightly different views. Iñárritu

admits that she represents the fear of theatre being stained by commerciality, especially with Riggan's existence as an ex-Hollywood actor seeking to regain his fame (Mears, 2015). However, Iñárritu also agrees that Tabitha Dickinson and other critics in the story are dictators who have "the power to finish a play" (Fleming Jr., 2014). On the other hand, another scriptwriter expresses a rather neutral view about the critics. Alexander Dinelaris, who is not only a scriptwriter but also a New York playwright, states that both Riggan Thomson and Tabitha Dickinson have good arguments. He says that it is right for the critics to consider "the movie business being a place where they are handing each other awards for cartoons and pornography, where they take themselves too seriously and think they can do everything" (Fleming Jr., 2014). He also states that what Riggan says to Tabitha is correct, as she only sits and comments on what he does (Fleming Jr., 2014). Thus, it can be inferred that the scriptwriters of *Birdman* agree that the character's view on the commerciality of Hollywood affecting theatre is true, even though it is not only the critic who has correct judgment.

CULTURAL DICHOTOMY AND CHALLENGES IN *BIRDMAN*

Theatre as Highbrow

Theatre fulfils the criteria of highbrow because it is entitled to high intellectual and aesthetic quality and is enjoyed by the upper-class and well-educated society. Since the materials performed in theatre primarily are philosophically and artistically challenging, it is a serious art that demands adequate educational capacity to be understood. Moreover, stage actors are deemed superior, proven by their skilfulness imposed by the complexity of the performance.

Furthermore, theatre in the United States is enjoyed by the upper-class as they can afford the considerably expensive tickets, which on average had surpassed $100 (Ng, 2014). It is also proven that most of the theatregoers are university-educated, with 45.2% holding advanced education degree, making up only 11.6% of the United States population (The Broadway League, 2016, p. 29).

What triggered this phenomenon was presumably the need for intellectual capacity to understand the content of the shows. As previously discussed, theatre is known for its high intellectual and artistic values in its content, so there is greater demand for high intellectual capacity of the audience in order to enjoy what is performed onstage, including the critics, whose job is to preserve the theatre and determine the legitimacy of its shows and actors. Thus, theatre is highbrow because of its prestige in the performance itself and the people who enjoy it.

Film as Lowbrow

Film is categorized as lowbrow because its content is low in intellectual and aesthetic quality. Film, especially of the superhero genre, lacks of complexity and emphasizes on spectacle instead of quality. Other than the content, it is the generally mediocre film stars and the fact acting in film is considered less significant because there are other contributing elements, such as editing and special effects, which polish film's appeal to the masses. Thus, because the skills are doubted, film stars are not "actors" but merely "celebrities".

The pervading popularity of film further renders film as a tasteless expressive culture. Film is popular for two reasons: affordability and for superhero films, Computer-Generated Imagery (CGI). According to the latest theatrical market statistics provided by Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA), in 2014 the average cinema ticket in the United States cost $8.17 (2014, p. 10), which is affordable to the majority of people. Most of the twenty-five highest grossing films in 2014 were the action-filled ones using CGI, proving Gurevitch's idea of "cinema of transactions"—where cinema is no longer only of attractions focusing on creating spectacle but also "a relationship between audiovisual attraction and promotional reflex" (Gurevitch, 2014, p. 383). That way, film's popularity is worth nothing because neither the content nor the stars are valued by their excellence but earnings instead, thus the popularity is prestige-less. Indeed, film is intentionally profit-oriented, which is why it is considered "low". Therefore, film is lowbrow because of its mediocrity in performance and content, and the quick but shallow popularity.

Challenges to the Highbrow/Lowbrow Dichotomy

The Pretence Behind Theatre as Highbrow

It has been illustrated in the previous sections that theatre is considered the real art which gives prominence to presenting and preserving intellectuality and aesthetics through its content, yet if looked closely, the characters and the course of events in *Birdman* prove otherwise. Behind their persistence to defend highbrow expressive culture from being 'contaminated' by Hollywood, it is revealed that they posses some characteristics that they hate.

As for the highbrows who show pretence in their support for theatre, it is Mike who has ulterior motives as Broadway actor. Despite everything he says, he takes part in this play to gain popularity just like Riggan. The difference is that as an established Broadway actor, he can make excuses by saying about theatre's complexity and prestige and insulting Riggan for not being good enough for the stage, but he wants just what Riggan wants. However, it is not suitable for theatre actors to admit that they seek fame. Instead, he does distasteful things to make himself recognisable. Among the things is changing his lines, firstly done in rehearsal to intimidate Riggan and make Riggan aware that Broadway actors are above Hollywood ones (7.19-21). Besides changing lines, Mike also makes a ruckus onstage by having an erection during the final scene of the play to get attention (A21-22.51-53). Mike makes an excuse that he did it because he wanted the acting to be truthful. However, Lesley remarks that Mike may be "Mr. Truth" onstage, yet he is a fraud in real life (24.55). This shows that Mike is directly judged as a person whose actions are inconsistent with his ostentatious words about being in theatre, also that Mike is the one—the actual Broadway actor—who ruins the play's previews instead of Riggan—the victimised Broadway newcomer. Other things Mike does behind his facade in order to gain fame are

mocking Riggan in front of Tabitha and stealing Riggan's background story.

This phenomenon is not new as many stage actors feel threatened by the "invasion" of Hollywood stars in theatre. They are afraid that the Hollywood stars will overshadow them and dominate Broadway. In the wake of the Tony Awards in 2010, Hunter Foster created a Facebook group called "Give the Tonys Back to Broadway!!" because of the number of Hollywood stars on Broadway receiving Tony Award nominees (Jackson, 2011). Jackson also states that the protest arose because film stars already had other prestigious awards such as the Oscars, so the stage performers argued that Tony Awards should be reserved for strictly stage performers (2011). Such phenomenon exposes that Broadway actors actually care about recognition through awards and the idea of "fame" is not reserved for film actors but Broadway actors as well.

In regards to the commerciality of theatre, there are indications that the play Riggan is preparing for is for him and his producer to gain income instead of for art's sake. After Riggan is no longer acting in the Birdman franchise, it is the last resort for them to make money.

Apart from Jake, it is Riggan himself who also takes advantage of theatre for pursuits other than devotion to culture. The reason Riggan arranges this play in the first place is for financial success and the hope that this play will yield the revival of his relevance. He is broke along with Jake, and this play is the last option to make money. Moreover, after being out of Hollywood and receiving many doubtful comments about his worth in Broadway, Riggan seeks to make a name for himself again. An example is when Riggan has stage fright, feeling like he does not belong in the theatre. Jake convinces Riggan by lying that the French ambassador, a Saudi prince and one of his wives, and Martin Scorsese come for the preview. He even brings up that Scorsese is casting for his newest film. The following narration describes, "Riggan smiles. He has forgotten about his existential doubts" (35.74). From the narration, it is seen that what enlivens Riggan is the promise of being recognised by important people. Another evidence is Sam's argument that the Broadway

play is not for art but for the validation that Riggan seeks (20.50) even though previously Riggan claims that he is doing the play because he wants to do some work that means something (20.49-50). Riggan appears to be startled by this, and it is apparently because his daughter's words are true.

Reflecting back to the society, Hollywood stars—not limited to washed-up stars—often do Broadway shows to boost their popularity and increase their artistic credibility as actors. Through stage performance, they can achieve: "a hit show, positive reviews, and Tony recognition boost the performer's pedigree, and can be parlayed into better roles in Hollywood. In addition, many film actors find stage performance artistically fulfilling" (Bettinson, 2016). In other words, the film stars admit that acting onstage is more artistically demanding and their acting skills are put to test when they do it. Although some of film stars actually originated from theatre, such as Ian McKellen, Patrick Stewart, Bradley Cooper, and Philip Seymour Hoffman; there are also the ones started in television or films, such as Daniel Radcliffe, Julia Roberts, and Emma Stone. The latter, especially the younger ones such as Radcliffe and Stone use theatre as both "training ground and a testing ground" to "hone their performance skills and prove their aptitude" (Bettinson, 2016). Thus, once they do it successfully, they will be recognized to have more artistic credibility and better roles in film will be offered to them. It is undeniable that film stars may have motives regarding career advancement when they decide to do stage performances.

On the other hand, issues about putting money above art is not a novelty in Broadway because it is how producers cope with the escalating production costs. In *Birdman*, Riggan and Jake originated from Hollywood so it is no wonder that they are commercial-minded. As a matter of fact, actual Broadway producers also think about money to make up for the production and reap profits, which is why they hire Hollywood actors for limited-engagement productions, adapt popular films and books or anything familiar enough to the audience (Bettinson, 2016). Besides, Tom Sellar—a critic from *The Village Voice*—states that the audience

do not have "adventurous tastes" and what the producers do is "a marketing consideration above all, not necessarily an artistic one" (Bettinson, 2016). Thus, commerciality is not entirely because of Hollywood invasion, yet it also stems from the financial condition of Broadway itself.

The Negatives Effects of Theatre on Riggan

Film as lowbrow has been judged as 'cultural genocide' and putting earnings above its content, so Riggan's 'migration' to theatre is supposed to be an improvement. However, he keeps receiving snide remarks from his fellow actor and the media. Deep down, no matter how he denies it, he even wants to go back to Hollywood and do another Birdman sequel again because of the pressure he endures in the Broadway world. This indicates that in *Birdman*, theatre fails to shelter everyone who wants to create art for the stage and learn to appreciate the highbrow expressive culture, and the ones who are considered not worthy enough to fit in will receive negative treatment that can affect greatly to them.

If *Birdman* has Tabitha Dickinson, then real-life Broadway has Ben Brantley who determines an actor's worth. Bettinson (2016) explains:

> the prime source of critical power and influence in the American theater is located in The New York Times and its chief drama critic Ben Brantley. Ominously, Brantley has been labeled a "celebrity underminer"—an epithet he refutes. Nevertheless, an unfavorable review by the Times can be devastating to a show's longevity, and it can tarnish a star's esteem. (On the other hand, a positive review from Brantley can be advantageous to the careers of younger stars.)

Other than him, there is Michael Riedel, whose columns pressurise the shows and actors even before showtime (Bettinson, 2016). Clearly the critics have much power to determine a show's success in Broadway, and they appear to be highly sceptical of actors whose skills are not yet proven onstage, which is why they go to great lengths to pressurise the actors.

Other than critics' intimidation, this play has caused Riggan to worsen his already strained relationship with his daughter. Riggan used to be negligent to his daughter because of his past stardom. In the end, however, they appear to reconcile when Riggan is hospitalised despite his injury that he causes to himself during the play. Nevertheless, the proximity of them working in the same place for the play does not cure the father-daughter issues they have had for years by making them closer in the process but creates a larger distance and intensifies the tension between them, and hence puts more burden on Riggan's side.

All of Riggan's problems affect his psychological being to a deeper level, which is marked by the Birdman voice in his head and hallucinations of the Birdman figure. From the beginning the voice speaks to him what seems to be his suppressed desires. The voice later on transforms into a figure of a man dressed in a bird suit from head to toe, which is the figure of Birdman role Riggan played twenty years ago. Besides hearing Birdman's voice, Riggan also has hallucinations of him. Just like the voice that speaks whenever Riggan is having an emotional turmoil, Birdman appears when Riggan is also struggling with emotions or having a problem with his consciousness.

Consequently, the Birdman voice and figure are the manifestations of Riggan's inner desires and emotional conflicts. Since those are restrained, they break out in an unhealthy way that damages Riggan's mental stability. This is another negative effect for Riggan happening while he is struggling in the preparation of his play. Since what the Birdman figure says revolves around ditching the play for Hollywood, it can be interpreted that the hallucinations come from the difficulties Riggan experiences in the theatre business that make him think deep down that Hollywood would treat him better than Broadway. It can be concluded further that the hostilities of theatre to him, added with family issues, financial issues, and existing insecurities have caused him to suffer mentally.

To put it briefly, *Birdman* shows to what extent the pressures of being in theatre affect

someone personally. Some of the problems Riggan experiences have existed before he started the Broadway project but those pre-existing problems are made worse by Riggan's involvement in theatre. Riggan is pressurised by his costars, the critics, his daughter, and himself. Even though the recognition he has desired for is finally achieved in the end from the critics and his daughter, he still hallucinates the Birdman figure and appears to long to be free after seeing the flying birds (55.112). The negative effects of theatre on him do not vanish easily. If taken further, *Birdman* shows the destructive side of theatre as an expressive culture which is so demanding that it causes lasting negatives effects on an ex-Hollywood actor like Riggan. Even if the struggle for a Hollywood star to thrive in Broadway is real, the researchers have not found any cases involving mental damage to the actors, showing that *Birdman* does notalways provide an accurate reflection of reality but occasionally takes one step further.

The Ideas of "Relevance" and Social Media's Influence

To be relevant is to be considered important in the society, and both highbrows and lowbrows have their own ideas of being relevant. *Birdman* shows these upsides and downsides of being a Broadway actor and superhero actor, yet it appears that the relevance of the latter has more longevity and matters more in the media-saturated world, especially with the advent of social media.

Based on that argument, clearly Riggan's fame as a film star is more "relevant" is today's world than Mike's as a stage actor. Even after the Birdman part of Riggan is gone, society's identification of him as Birdman actor still persists. The lasting recognition of Riggan as a Hollywood actor is influenced by cinema's power over the society. It is true that film is popular because it is made to be, yet it also turns out to have more power over society because they currently value more what is shown on their screens. "Cinema's power over society also comes through: theatre might well add gravitas and credibility to a performer, but these days no one at all is anything unless mediated by the screen,

whether that be at the movies or on Twitter." (Brown, 2015). This power is also transmitted by the emergence of social media. They are what makes anything on the screens become ubiquitous. Any songs, pictures, or videos can be viewed and transferred from one's gadget to another using social media. Social media are what makes Mike famous after his erection onstage gets 50,000 views on YouTube (33.68), of which he is proud and what boosts Riggan's fame as he becomes a trending topic after a video of him running around Times Square in his underwear gets 350,000 views (46.89).

In the case of *Birdman*, social media are part of what influences an actor to gain popularity and film to have more power over theatre. As Jackson argues, "The Internet democratizes entertainment, and a stage performer will never receive the same size audience for a Broadway show that another actor will receive for a film or a television series" (2011). A film star's popularity is enhanced by the social media as they are what makes anything on the screen become ubiquitous, which is why film triumphs over theatre in shaping an actor's relevance. In other words, today's actors' relevance in the media-saturated world is determined by how much someone appears on the screens.

CONCLUSION

The highbrow / lowbrow dichotomy manifested in Birdman is constructed of theatre as highbrow and film as lowbrow. The hierarchy may appear as a fixed dichotomy at first glance, yet there are challenges that blur the disctinction: the pretence behind theatre as a highbrow, the negative effects of theatre on the main character, and the ideas of "relevance" and social media's influence. Birdmandoes not take sides yet it arguably criticizes many aspects, such as the way superhero films ruin culture, commerciality of theatre by both sides of Broadway and Hollywood, stage actors' concealed hunger for fame, and critics' scepticism to newcomers in theatre. Accordingly, Birdman intends to show that the hierarchy of expressive culture has not expired in the American society, yet it is not as rigid as it was in the past.

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