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UWM Post Article

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Boyhood Review (2014)

Life moves too fast and we always find ourselves asking where the time went. The constant fleeting nature of our human existence beginning from the time we were a child to the time we move into adulthood feels like a blur to all of us. Director Richard Linklater understood this as many of his experimental films like *Slacker*, *Waking Life* and his *Before* Trilogy explore the ideas of memory, philosophy, destiny, consciousness and the nature of real-time. His touching *Sunrise* trilogy followed the romance of two strangers through a period of three 9 year gaps, exploring the many different phases of love. Of course we saw such similar aging formulas before with *The Up* series, the children in *Harry Potter*, Satyajit Ray's *Apu Trilogy* and François Truffaut's *Adventures of Antoine Doinel*. And yet with *Boyhood* (2014) Linklater decides to take such aesthetics to a new experimental level, filming one 3 hour epic while courageously shooting with the same reoccurring cast and crew for a few weeks every year for 12 years. In many ways one can look at *Boyhood* as Linklater's magnum opus and his final bookend to his continuous fascination with the passage of time and its correlation with compressed screen-time within cinema and real-time within life.

There was an immediate amount of buzz and publicity surrounding the production of the film, especially when much of the public discovered the unorthodox and groundbreaking aspect

of the filmmaking. There was also an equal amount of uncertainty and concern because of the great risks and challenges involved in funding such an ambitious and unfamiliar production.

What if Ellar Coltrane grew up to be a terrible actor? What if he or any of the supporting cast had succumbed to an unfortunate death or decided for whatever reason not to be a part of the film anymore? (According to Linklater his daughter Lorelei lost interest in the project just after a couple of years but ultimately decided to finish it.) Understandably the studios had a right to get concerned as there was an innumerable amount of things that could have easily gone wrong which would have led Linklater to scrap the entire project. Well, fortunately nothing like that happened and *Boyhood* in the end turned out exceptionally well.

It's not just the technical chronological achievements that *Boyhood* has to offer, because if that were the case the film could have turned out to be simply a forgetful gimmick. Linklater also creates a well-crafted coming of age story seen through the perspective of a boy named Mason Evans Jr. (Ellar Coltrane). We literally watch Mason grow up before our very eyes as the story spans through 12 years of his life between the ages of 6 to 18. The story essentially becomes a nostalgic time capsule presenting a documentary like aspect which can be compared to reminiscing through old photo albums, except these photos we are witnessing are moving pictures. The film's opening camera shot is directly upon a young 6 year old Mason as he is lying on his back on the grass outside his school, all the while Coldplay's *Yellow* is heard on the soundtrack. We are first introduced to Mason and his older sister Samantha (Lorelei Linklater) while the two of them are living with their single mother Olivia (Patricia Arquette) in a tiny cramped home. Olivia is struggling to make ends meet to take care of her two children while Mason's father Mason Sr. (Ethan Hawke) isn't currently in the children's lives as he has traveled to Alaska in search of work.

Throughout the next several years we witness Olivia in search of love which unfortunately leads to a series of dysfunctional relationships with men who are clearly not good enough for her. Eventually Mason Sr. returns and does his best to be a constant presence in his children's lives. Boyhood becomes a chronological timeline of various snapshots that follow Mason Jr's journey as we witness his tribulations with puberty, romance and heartbreak, while also sharing moments like birthday and graduation celebrations, weekend trips in the country with his father and his experimentation with pot and alcohol. These simplistic, touching and poignant moments and the many in between become transcendent for us while the spanning years become almost seamless. They're no yearly captions to inform us the passing of time or what year we are currently in. Instead Linklater presents a series of subtle hints whether it's the changes in Mason's height or hair style, the deepening of his voice, the use of a popular song on the soundtrack, someone discussing their views of politicians and the current war in Iraq or the evolving changes in technology and videogames.

The film's title and choice of the lead protagonist has been criticized for unthinkingly being sexist and suggesting that it is a clearly a man's world. But when looking closer at the film it is just as much Olivia's spiritual growth and self-discovery as it is Mason's. We witness Olivia marry and divorce two ex-husbands who clearly suffer from drinking problems and watch her make a courageous decision to enroll back into college while simultaneously working a full-time job and raising a family. Because of the powerful performance by Patricia Arquette Olivia's journey slowly takes her from a financially struggling and desperate mother to a strong, independent, educated woman. In many ways I can see the title of this movie being called Motherhood as the obstacles and challenges Olivia overcomes are clearly much more dramatic

and emotional than anyone else's in the story. Patricia Arquette is undoubtedly the heart of the entire picture and she undeniably deserves an Oscar nomination for her performance.

Many moviegoers who come away from *Boyhood* expecting artificial melodrama, thrilling story revelations or an ending which conveniently ties up all loose ends, maybe severely disappointed. *Boyhood* is meant to capture the mundane, simplistic routine of everyday life and it is that familiar ordinariness which makes it one of the best films of the year. Like life, many stories are left unfinished and Mason's ending is poetically left open for ambiguity. I always have found the small subtle moments within the movies those moments I cherish the most. Some of the most memorable stories in cinema have become instant classics purely because of their powerful simplicities presenting an authentic honesty and truth that most people can identify with. (The stories in Italian neorealism immediately come to mind). The most powerful sequence in *Boyhood* occurs near the end of the story as Mason now 18 years old is about to leave for college and enter a new self-discovering chapter of his life. Olivia suddenly breaks down and cries, now feeling that she has nothing left since all her children are grown up and gone. "I knew this day would come. I just thought it would have been better," she tells him. *Boyhood* is essentially about the constant passage of time because when the end ultimately arrives at our very own door, we realize it's all over much too quickly.

Matthew A. Sheldon

UWM Post Article

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Birdman or (The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance) Review (2014)

I can remember quite clearly the smoldering and humid summer night of 1992, being only ten years old and anxiously standing in line outside the movie theater for the grand opening of *Batman Returns* with my father. Being a die-hard Batman fan growing up and constantly re-watching and ultimately wearing out my brother's old VHS tape of the original 89 *Batman*, seeing the highly anticipated sequel became one of the great cinematic experiences of my early childhood.

Because of such fond memories, Michael Keaton for me has always been the visual embodiment of Batman, at least nostalgically. So when walking into Alejandro Gonzalez Inarritu's *Birdman or (The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance)*, nothing could have been more amusing than seeing actor and childhood hero Michael Keaton, whose movie success peaked when playing Batman 20 years ago, play an actor who peaked 20 years ago playing Birdman.

Michael Keaton (In a performance that is surely guaranteed to get him Academy Award nomination) plays Riggan Thomas, a washed up movie star who continues to descend into a forgotten pathetic satire of his own former success. Twenty years ago Riggan used to be a household name in the movies, playing a hugely popular super-hero named Birdman. As a fear of being typecast Riggan tries to direct his attention to more dramatic and adult roles, but none of

them successfully pan through. And so in Riggan's final attempt to prove to the public that he is much more than simply a guy in a bird suit, he has adapted a Raymond Carver short story into a play. Not only is Riggan the writer and director of his own adaptation but he is also the main star, and his project is currently in previews for a huge opening on Broadway.

Riggan's cast for his play includes Mike Shiner (Edward Norton) an incredible acting talent who is known to be extremely difficult onset with other actors; Riggan's lover Laura (Andrea Riseborough), who believes she is pregnant with Riggan's child; Lesley (Naomi Watts), an old acting colleague who is finally getting her lifelong wish appearing in a Broadway production; his bitter and aloof daughter Sam (Emma Stone), recently released from rehab and who hangs around backstage; and Brandon (Zach Galifianakis), who is doing what he can to hold this entire odd-ball production together. Lastly there's the merciless theater critic of the New York Times (Lindsay Duncan) patiently waiting for the preview, as she would like nothing better than to ruthlessly destroy their play and immediately get them all booted off Broadway.

Birdman is getting much notoriety for its use on the long take which comes as a breath of fresh air from the usual rapid ADHD editing style that seems to be overrun by most commercial movies nowadays. Many of the actors in numerous interviews have spoke about how each of them had to constantly rehearse every line of dialogue, so they could hit all the right marks to help create the illusion that the audience is actually watching an entire film shot in one long unbroken take.

Even though there have been many films throughout the years that have devoted itself to the challenge of capturing the experience of 'real-time,' whether it was the clever fakery of

Alfred Hitchcock's *Rope* in 1948 or Alexander Sokurov's extravagant *Russian Ark* in 2002; with the aid of the latest digital editing, Inarritu takes the illusion to an entirely different level.

The wild and kinetic wizardry of the cinematography was shot by the brilliant Emmanuel Lubezki who just recently won an Oscar for his work on Alfonso Cuarón's *Gravity*. Lubezki's use of the tracking shot in *Birdman* is quite dazzling as he immediately swoops you in and out through various corridors and narrow staircases, soars you into the high skies over roof-tops and skyscrapers and ultimately ends up leaving you outside and in Time Square along with Riggan who unfortunately is only wearing his underwear.

It's quite obvious with *Birdman* that Inarritu is presenting a sly partial commentary on both America's celebrity-obsessed culture and the current state of the movie industry which seems to be overrun by greedy, vapid, corporate commercialism. The oversaturation of superhero movies is really quite redundant and it seems we are going to be getting about 30 or so more within the next five years.

Inarritu cleverly adds various playful superhero references all throughout *Birdman*, whether it's Riggan quitting the *Birdman* franchise in 1992, the very same year Keaton played Batman in *Batman Returns*; the casting of Edward Norton and Gwen Stacy, both who were major characters in *The Incredible Hulk* and *The Amazing Spiderman*; or the quick references to other real-life actors who starred in successful superhero franchises, like Robert Downey Jr. and Michael Fassbender.

There is even a comedic sequence later on in the film where Inarritu constructs a Michael Bay-like reenactment, presenting a CGI monster attack with all the explosions, quick cuts and mayhem that go along with most modern blockbusters. Inarritu seems to be suggesting that the

mainstream public which allows such big budget films like these to prevail unfortunately causes smaller more artistic projects to fail. Inarritu enjoys gleefully mocking this pivotal moment in film history by contrasting the art of the theater with the art of the cinema all the while presenting all its themes with a comedic, dry, cynical bite.

And yet Birdman doesn't need such cinematic metaphors or pop-culture references to be a truly successful picture. The film stands completely on its own, self-contained, giving us a rich and complex character study on a tainted man's former glory, all the while exploring a harsh comical satire on the inner-workings of the theater, show-business and what it means to be culturally relevant to today's generation. Birdman or (The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance) is one of the very best films of the year and Inarritu's most ambitious and enthralling cinematic achievement since Amores Perros and Babel. I can see this becoming a potential cult-classic many years down the road.