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Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance

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Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance

Abstract
"We have within us capacities only hinted at by our capes and birdfeather costumes."

Posting about the central metaphor in the movie "Birdman" from In All Things - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

http://inallthings.org/the-unexpected-virtue-of-ignorance/

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Comments
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Bob De Smith

Even if you have not seen *Birdman* (2014, dir. Alejandro G. Iñárritu), you have heard about its distinctive technique: the film is shot so as to appear to be one continuous take (except for the opening and ending, where the contrasting style stands in bold relief). Director of photography Emmanuel Lubezki, who contributed to the stunning long take which opens *Gravity* (2013, dir. Alfonso Cuarón), has extended that technique here to encompass the entire film. And if you have seen the film, your reaction to this creative choice may fall within a range from disappointment to wild praise. Is the technique a gimmick that commands too much of our attention? For some, this may be the case. It is a sort of one-trick pony: it does not seem like a project that needs to be repeated. And it is distracting, in a sense, but aren’t all entertainments? But if you like cueing in to film form as you watch—and I do—then bating your breath as you watch for the next slick transition may be an important part of your enjoyment of the film. I’ll return to this point.

Now, I’ve only had a chance to see the film once; I’ve bolstered my memory by reading some reviews, but I’m sure I missed a lot. Particularly, I’d like to go back and stop the film at selected frames so that I can read what’s posted on the walls and scan what’s placed in the background. There are, I am sure, secrets to be revealed, on the order of the film’s subtitle (which also serves as my title). Thus for now my responses to the film are tentative, “under correction” as the medieval writer would put it. They aim, however, at exploring how believing viewers might find insight in the film.

So here’s one conclusion: Riggan Thomson (Michael Keaton) is in search of himself. Profound, huh? But bear with me. In one scene, Riggan walks past a street performer who is declaiming Macbeth’s famous lines that begin “Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow.” Macbeth’s conclusion?

*Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.*

That clinched it for me. As Riggan wanders past the actor shouting these lines, we are invited to ask: Is Riggan’s life meaningless? Are our own equally so? Macbeth’s theatrical metaphor (humankind as “a poor player”) is apt here, for the film revolves around the rehearsal and performance of a stage play, directed and performed by Riggan (and others) as he attempts to recover his relevance as an actor. There is much strutting and fretting going on. And as the action weaves in and out of rehearsal, performance, and backstage matters, we realize the various actions are one (and live performance and life itself converge in one compelling moment on stage for Riggan). Could the director be suggesting that art is a means for examining life? Or that the stories we tell and the lives we live can hardly be separated? If so, the fact that we are watching actors present a scene (a Shakespearian device!) reminds us that we are part of the drama as well. We are invited to see ourselves on stage (rather, on screen).

Riggan is haunted? visited? inspired? tempted? (maybe all of these) by the figure of his former persona: the *Birdman* of the title whom Riggan played in a series of successful superhero movies. Must he get this monkey off his back? Or must he make use of his past in some way? One curiously effective aspect of this theme is that we see (though no one else in the film does) Riggan exhibiting genuine super powers—
mostly of levitation. When we first see him, he is suspended in midair, and we see him move objects without touching them. This must be kept in mind at the conclusion of the film, which I will not spoil for anyone. But I wonder if the film isn't suggesting that we have within us capacities only hinted at by our capes and birdfeather costumes. If only Riggan’s ex, his fellow actors (including his recent lover), and his daughter could see—and maybe his daughter does. And if only Riggan could see himself as we get to see him. And maybe we do.

This takes me back to the film’s curious seamlessness—its weaving scene into scene so that it appears to be a single whole. Perhaps this gimmick is actually the film’s powerful central metaphor. Our lives are indeed of a piece: our past, our present; our dreams, our nightmares; our successes and failures; these are a single take. They are connected in ways that we talk about when talk about providence. They are held together by He who has knit us together and scattered the stars for good measure. The film doesn’t take us all the way there: it hints at meaningfulness and coherence and the opportunity to transcend our limitations. We get to fill in the blanks.