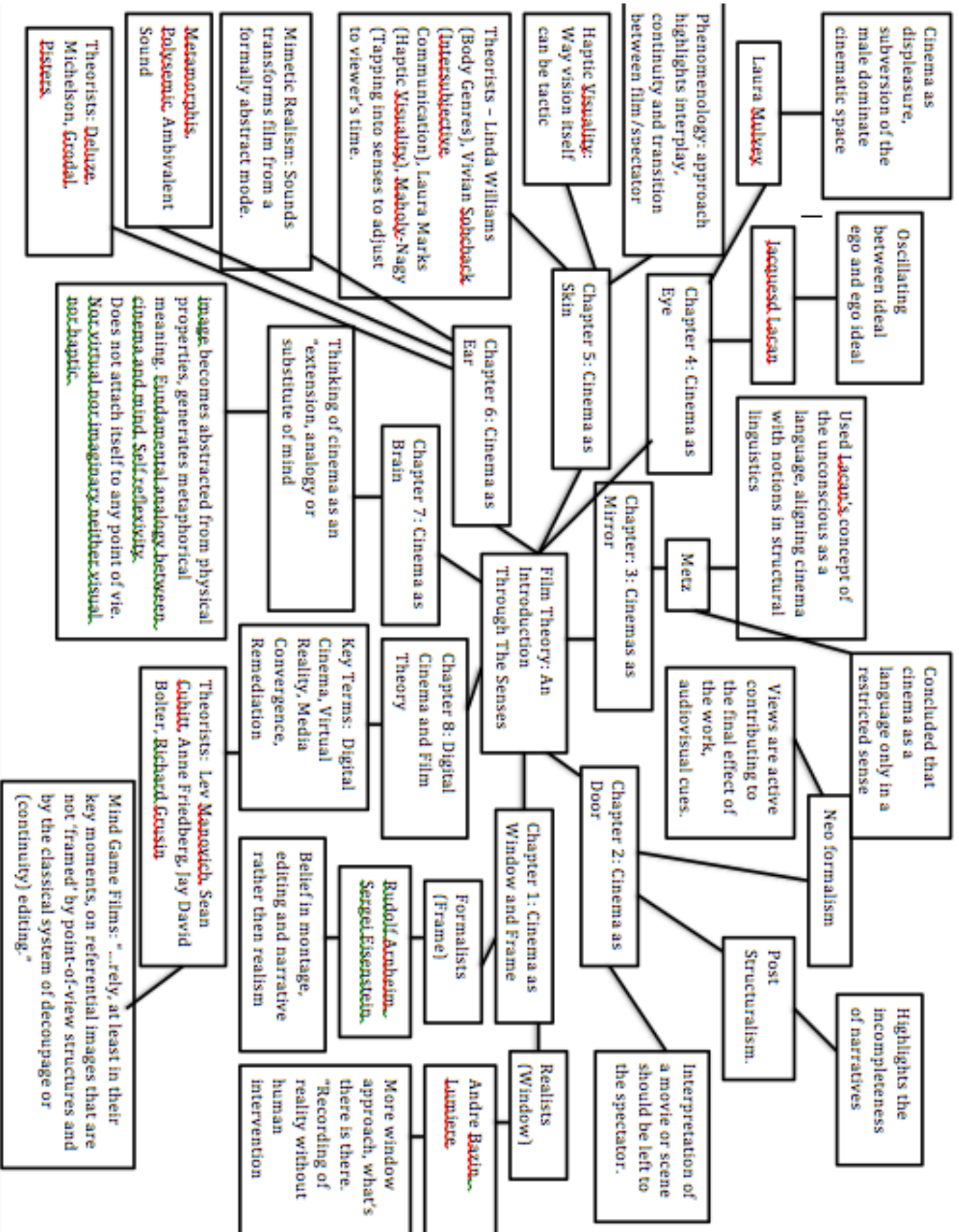


INTENSIFIED CONTINUITY – FOR NOW

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Intensified Continuity – For Now

It cannot be disputed that contemporary cinema has diverged and changed over the years in the realm of visual style. David Bordwell presents the idea of American cinema moving towards this kind of “intensified continuity,” that deepens certain techniques in cinema that have already been established in the past. The arrival of intensified continuity has brought about the ability for filmmakers to get closer to telling their ideal narratives to the audience. However, most American films might be moving in the direction of creating their own visual style that encompasses the basis of intensified continuity, but not quite playing by the same rules. The 2014 film, *Birdman* is a great example of this in which it suggests the term is fluid while using free ranging cameras and excluding of rapid editing for an original style that helps the narrative as a whole.

David Bordwell in his essay “Intensified Continuity” writes about how Hollywood films have not drastically altered since the days of classic Hollywood. Many modern films contain the same elements from the studio days, “today’s films generally adhere to the principles of classical filmmaking.”¹ These devices used aren’t completely brand new, they have just become more notable recently and merged into a kind of visual

¹ David Bordwell, “Intensified Continuity: Visual Style in Contemporary American Film,” *Film Quarterly* 55, no. 3 (2002): 16.

style that we are familiar with currently. This visual style only amps up the continuity that were rooted in the era of silent film. Bordwell claims that with this change in style, the average amount of shots has increased, the framing of shots have become closer, there's a use of more drastic focal lengths and more movement from the camera rather than just stationary shots. These stylistic change spur from the development of new technology, craft practices, and institutional circumstances, which Bordwell explains is what led it to becoming the dominant style of American mass-audience films today.² Although these are a major part of modern cinema, much of these characteristics that Bordwell believes is embedded in intensified continuity has been dealt with in such a way that provides us with insight that a film can go off on it's own tangent of what this new visual style is.

Birdman or (The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance) by filmmaker Alejandro G. Iñárritu is an interesting case when it comes to Bordwell's definition of intensified continuity and the modern American film. It does something that most films in this new millennium haven't even attempted to try. With the movie filmed to look like one continuous shot it takes a different stance narratively without the fast cuts we know to be synonymous with cinema today. Bordwell does make a note that a major distinguishing mark of off Hollywood directors is a greater average shot length, but *Birdman* is much more than just that.³ It demonstrates this merger of long takes along with what Bordwell defines to be typical to intensified continuity. He of course also references how there have been films to do this previously, but it is not as common of what is happening in most mass-market cinema. The celebration of rapid editing in media incites filmmakers

² Ibid.

³ Ibid, 21.

to fear that long takes are now out of sync with the audience, but what it truly displays is a more realistic look into the narrative.⁴ The *Birdman* style is not something to be overlooked; it could be very well become more widespread as time goes on do to its competence to expand the film's content.

There have been discrepancies concerning how many exact cuts there were in the film, but regardless it is undisputable that the film plays around with much longer takes than what is now considered the normality. The cinematographer, Emmanuel "Chivo" Lubezki stated that the longest take in the film lasts about 15 minutes while a majority of them are in the 10-minute range.⁵ "In 1999 and 2000, the ASL of a typical film in any genre was likely to run three to six seconds."⁶ Even in the studio era of Hollywood most films had an average shot length of eight to eleven seconds, something that today would be considered a long take, "a movie built primarily out of prolonged shots is very rare in today's Hollywood."⁷ Having these very lengthy shots provides more time for reaction and insight from the characters. Amos Vogel write that long shots have come to represent, "creative cinema, offering immediacy, authenticity, and a sense of physical participation which the immobile camera could not match."⁸ The intent behind *Birdman* was to make the entirety of the film look like a single take; something that they hoped would provide a more realistic approach to filmmaking as "we live our lives with no

⁴ Ibid, 23.

⁵ Carolyn Giardina, "Oscars: *Birdman* Cinematographer Reveals Secrets Behind Movie's Ingenious "Single Shot" Look," *The Hollywood Reporter*, December 30, 2014, accessed on March 17, 2017

⁶ Bordwell, 17.

⁷ Ibid, 24.

⁸ Amos Vogel, *Film as Subversive Art* (New York: Random House, 1974)

editing.”⁹ This is the same kind of idea that theorist André Bazin believed in as far as editing and montage goes.¹⁰ He doesn’t completely dispute the form, but felt that the camera is meant to be there to reflect the actuality of life. The visual style of *Birdman* coincides with these ideals with the minimal use of cutting and there is however human intervention with the movement of cameras, but the goal was to have the feeling present as if *Birdman* is just life happening.

Birdman although does not utilize the stylistic tactic of rapid editing, is able to capture a similar idea using the aspect of a free-ranging camera. The reason why the film was so successful using only multiple lengthy shots was due to the ability to use mobile cameras to track the characters within the narrative. Every shot that was to be done had to be mapped out beforehand designing each shot first with a handheld camera and then folding it over into a steadicam.¹¹ Bordwell includes a free-ranging camera as a popular mainstay of cinema that contributes to the general idea of intensified continuity, that camera’s are moving more and more. “The shot pursuing one or two characters down corridors, through room after room, indoors and outdoors and back again, has become ubiquitous.”¹² Tracking a character does not only help the audience identify themselves with them, but it creates a sense of intimacy and urgency. The reason *Birdman* works so well is because using the combination of a lack of rapid editing we are able to track the characters for an extended period of time. Unlike some films, with *Birdman* none of the camera movement is unmotivated, it all has a purpose in telling the story. We also get a

⁹ Giardina.

¹⁰ Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener, *Film Theory: An Introduction Through the Senses* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

¹¹ “*Birdman* – An Interview with Steadicam Operator Chris Haarhoff,” *Sound & Picture*, November 25, 2014, accessed on March 17, 2017

¹² Bordwell, 20.

view of the entirety of the cast, it isn't restricted at all due to the lengthy shots, it's almost as though the audience acts as a fly on the wall, but don't feel distant from the actual characters.

About halfway through the film there is a segment where the main character's daughter and his costar are on the rooftop of the theater where their play is being held. The daughter – Sam – heads down the stairs while costar – Mike – follows. The camera follows Sam's path as if we are Mike, directly behind her. She stops at the catwalks of the theater, above the stage and looks out on the backstage area and where the sets are, the camera follows suit. Mike then comes into frame once again, and as the talk the camera moves to an angle where we can see both of them from the shoulders up. It almost feels comforting to be able to just view the two of them conversing, rather than rapid shots going from over the shoulder to over the other shoulder. It gives us a way to look at something the way we do in everyday life, displaying a kind of verisimilitude that isn't present nowadays. The characters soon begin kissing up in the catwalks and lay on the floor, the camera travels over the ledge of the catwalk down to the stage where the other characters are – done all in a simultaneous take. It continues to push-in on our protagonist who is located downstage center, the camera never shaky from its lengthy journey. Having the complete mobility of the camera and longer takes gives viewers the sense that they are controlling the direction in which they look and watch the film.

Bordwell's move to define the direction that American cinema has gone in is an eloquent beginning, but with a film like *Birdman* it is simply not so black and white. Many films intended for mass audience consumption do stick to Bordwell's outline of intensified continuity, but critically acclaimed films such as *La La Land* are inheriting

Birdman like qualities including an exuberant use of free range cameras and depletion of rapid editing. With this in mind it brings into question if intensified continuity will continue to be the dominant force in American cinema or if something more malleable will take its place. This form gives films the ability to be a high-concept film without incoherent narrative and stylistic fragmentation even expanding the story and further diving into the content of the art form.

Word Count: 1,583

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