

Mediático is delighted to present an inaugural post by [Jeffrey Middents](#), Associate Professor of Literature at American University in Washington, DC, where he teaches transnational film and literature. His previous video essay work has been published in [\[in\]Transition](#). He has also published widely on Latin American cinema including a monograph on Peruvian film culture [Writing National Cinema: Film Journals and Film Culture in Peru](#) (2009) on documentary aesthetics in the work of Chilean filmmaker [Particio Guzmán](#) (2005). His current book project examines [Alfonso Cuarón](#) and transnational auteurism.

Birdman, or (Fragmentary Hopscotch, Not Played Very Often)

by Jeffrey Middents, American University

Julio Cortázar's 1962 novel *Rayuela* (Hopscotch) is said to have influenced much of the work of Mexican director Alejandro González Iñárritu. For the most part, *Hopscotch* has been mentioned by critics in regard to the fragmentation intrinsic to the narrative structure of his first three films: *Amores perros* (2001), *21 Grams* (2003) and *Babel* (2006). For instance, J. Hoberman in his *Village Voice* review of *21 Grams* explicitly states, "The movie's temporal logic is associative rather than structural - closer to chestnuts like Alain Resnais's *Last Year at Marienbad* or the Julio Cortázar novel *Hopscotch* than the recent brainteaser *Memento* and *Irreversible*" (Hoberman 2003). A good portion of this association with the Argentine novelist comes from the filmmaker himself. In an interview with Celestino Deleyto and María del Mar Azcona published in 2010, González Iñárritu says "[S]crambled narratives are quite common in Latin American literature: Julio Cortázar, Jorge Luis Borges, Ernesto Sábato - they are all writers I was really impressed with when I first read them. I guess that navigating between parallel stories is something very common to Latin American literature"

(2010: 129). He cites this influence again as a response to a question about his earlier films in a [2015 interview](#) following the release of *Birdman, or (The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance)*: “in that literature there’s always an exploration of different perspectives, points of view. That style is integrated into the very substance of the story. I was very affected by that idea – to understand the complexity of one single event through the perspectives of many different characters” (Ali 2015). With *Beautiful* (2010), a film where the narrative follows a single character’s perspective in a single city, the associations with *Hopscotch* stops.

Birdman, or (The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance) (2014) introduces what appears to be a narrative departure for Iñárritu: a feature film that appears as a single, uninterrupted take.

¹ The filmmaker claims to be influenced by a different Argentine literary work, specifically Ernesto Sábato’s novel *The Tunnel*: “Everything in there is stream of consciousness with no commas or dots. It’s like a runaway train.” Despite his claim, however, the final shot, as my video essay suggests, supports a connection back to Cortázar’s *Hopscotch* that allows for an examination about the cinematic form itself.

From its release in the early 1960s *Hopscotch* has been considered a fresh departure for the novel as a form, the “paradigm for a revolution in literature,” as Beatriz Sarlo notes in her contribution to Franco Moretti’s vast treatise on *The Novel* – by its blatant fragmentation (2007: 920). Right at the start, Cortázar challenges the very idea of how to even read the book by forcing the reader to choose between two methods outlined in the infamous “Table of Instructions”:

In its own way, this book consists of many books, but two books above all.

The first can be read in a normal fashion and it ends with Chapter 56, at the close of which there are three garish little stars which stand for the words *The End*.

Consequently, the reader may ignore what follows with a clear conscience

The second should be read by beginning with Chapter 73 and then following the sequence indicated at the end of each chapter. (Cortázar 1966) ²

Generally, novels are read linearly, from front to back as a single, uninterrupted text – even as they are broken up into chapters. By subverting this very mode of reading, Cortázar calls attention to the idea of chapters contributing to the fragmented nature of the novel as a form. At the same time, while seemingly granting the reader a choice, the Instructions actually steer the reader into a *very* precisely organized reading. Why, for instance, would anyone ever think to start with chapter 73, or follow it with chapter 1, if not for the suggestion in the Instructions? The fragmentation actually compels the reader to consider the form of the linear narrative itself.

I contend that this experimentation with and exposure of form is what Iñárritu has actually borrowed from his readings of Cortázar and that both this experimentation and exposure are explored in *Birdman* by removing cinema's most basic tool of grammar: the cut. Unlike the novel, cinema *depends* on narrative suturing that occurs over cuts (or other transitions between takes). Most of his earlier works are sharply edited – *Babel* most notably juxtaposes the four storylines in the three locations (Morocco, Mexico and Japan) – to bring meaning to particularly fragmented storylines ³. One can argue, however, that this is merely using the cinematic form the way it is meant to be rendered: D.W. Griffith, Sergei Eisenstein and Lev Kuleshov taught film viewers early on about how to create meaning by putting shots next to one another. By “removing” the cuts, *Birdman* becomes a truly experimental piece that calls attention to how we otherwise read movies in general.

This desire for experimentation-as-commentary-on-form is expressed within the diegesis of the film itself. *New York Times* critic Tabitha (Lindsey Crouse) threatens to destroy Riggan's (Michael Keaton) play and career. But when he shoots his own nose off, on opening night, both his play and his career receive an unexpected boost. When it is published the morning

after, Tabitha's review, titled "The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance," reveals itself as the source of the film's subtitle and, as such, the key passage that Riggan's wife Sylvia (Amy Ryan) reads aloud references the importance of recognizing and then radicalizing art forms:

[Riggan] Thompson has unwittingly given birth to a new form which can only be described as 'superrealism.' Blood was spilled both literally and metaphorically by artist and audience alike. Real blood: the blood that has been sorely missing from the veins of the American Theater.

In my reading, *Birdman* tips its hat to *Hopscotch* as inspirational source by providing a similar ending: both Cortázar and González Iñárritu "end" their narratives by having the protagonists (Riggan and Oliveira) seemingly jump out windows. In the video essay "*Birdman* (or, Fantasy Hopscotch, Not Played Very Often," which begins this post the last three minutes of the film are accompanied by a voice-over overlaying two passages from *Hopscotch* that explicitly reference the titular game. The second passage (beginning as Riggan steps outside the window) features the entire last paragraph of Chapter 56, the apocryphal chapter which ends with "the garish stars which stand for the words *The End*." Of course, the words that immediately precede the stars in the English translation are "paff the end" (Cortázar 1966: 348-49); the original Spanish ends with "paff se acabó," which has the same meaning but does not quite have the same literary/cinematic connotative ending of "fin."

Throughout the book, however, Oliveira keeps discussing the game of hopscotch as a game in which one obsessively tries to get to heaven. In the video essay, the first passage of the novel read over the last minutes of the film indicates:

the worst part of it is that precisely at that moment, when practically no one has learned how to make the pebble climb up into Heaven, childhood is over all of a sudden and you're into novels, into the anguish of the senseless divine trajectory, into the

speculation about another Heaven that you have to learn how to reach too (Cortázar 1966: 214).

Cortázar, however, offers the reader something outside of the “senseless diving trajectory.” The 99 chapters that physically follow the words “the end” offer another possibility, a narrative that, because it breaks with the form of the novel, also allows for an indefinite conclusion. The “second version,” in fact, ends not in Oliveira’s death, but rather in a narrative loop between two chapters (58 and 131). *Birdman* ends similarly: Riggan is seen going out onto the balcony of his hospital room, but we do not see him fall – and, instead, his daughter Sam (Emma Stone) first looks down in horror, then slowly looks up into the clouds with joyful wonder. Towards the end of a film that has refused to use the most basic element of cinematic grammar, it finally cuts to black and the credits begin — but even then, we hear Sam offer up an incredulous laugh. Can we believe these characters have literally risen above in the air, that they have reached the Cortazarian “heaven”? Do they jump – or do we believe the unbelievable, that they can stay in a limbo transfixed by fiction? [Many have speculated](#) about the meaning of the film’s ending – and neither the director nor his co-screenwriters have [fully answered the questions](#) the ambiguous ending poses – but perhaps a “fantasy hopscotch, not played very often” (214) as I have explained it here, embodies an ending, which is simultaneously also not an ending.

References

Ali, Lorraine. “Q&A: Alejandro G. Iñárritu on directing his own career.” *The Los Angeles Times*. February 3, 2015.

Ananda, Gautum. “Birdman Ending, Explained.” *The Cinemaholic*. April 20, 2015.

Buxton, Ryan. "'Birdman' Screenwriters Discuss the Film's Ambiguous Ending." *Huffington Post*. November 25, 2014.

Cortázar. Julio. *Hopscotch*. Gregory Rabassa, transl. New York: Pantheon Books, 1966.

Cowden, Catarina. "The Birdman Ending: Why That Obscure Final Shot Makes Total Sense." *Cinema Blend*.

Deleyto, Celestino and María de Mar Azcona. *Alejandro González Iñárritu*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010.

Hoberman, J. "Heaven Can Weight." *The Village Voice*. November 18, 2003.

Kendrick, Ben "'Birdman' Ending Explained." *Screen Rant*. April 5, 2015.

Sarlo, Beatriz. "Hopscotch." Linda Phillips, transl. In *The Novel, Volume 2: Forms and Themes*. Franco Moretti, ed. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007. 919-925.

Tierney, Dolores "Alejandro González Iñárritu: Director Without Borders" *New Cinemas: Journal of Contemporary Film* 2010, 7.2, 101-107.

"Variety Artisans: The Seamless Look of 'Birdman.'" *Variety*. November 4, 2014.

1. Let us grant for a moment that this actually is not true: the film actually begins with a

hard cut from what appears to be a falling Icarus figure; there is a fully edited dream-like montage sequence after Riggan (Michael Keaton) shoots himself, returning to the Icarus figure; and it is acknowledged that the uninterrupted takes are actually [a clever digital disguise](#). ↩

2. There is no page reference for the “Table of Instructions” because the frontismatter is not paginated at all. None of it, not even with lower-case Roman numerals. The same is true with the Spanish version of the text. ↩
3. See Dolores Tierney (2009) for an exploration of how editing between different stories in *Amores perros*, *21 Grams* and *Babel* bring meaning to the different stories
↩

Share this:

- [Email](#)
- [Print](#)
- [Twitter](#)
- [Facebook](#)
- [More](#)