

# Existensial Crisis Through Conflicts in Iñárritu's "Birdman" or The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance

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## ABSTRACT

This paper aims to explore the existential crisis through conflicts in Alejandro González Iñárritu's film, *Birdman* or *(The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance)* (2014). The film won numerous awards including the prestigious Academy Awards in 2015. Iñárritu is dubbed as the most successful Mexican director with his other notable films such as *Amores Perros* (2000), *21 Grams* (2003), *Babel* (2006), and *The Revenant* (2015). This paper borrows Sartre's existentialist theory to reveal the conflicts that the protagonist, Riggan Thomson, experiences. The discussion on the film cinematography is also done to show how the film visually depicts and emphasizes the existential crisis through the conflicts. The findings reveal that the main cause of Thomson's conflicts is his ambition to have a meaningful life and define his existence. All his conflicts, both internal and social, show that Thomson first exists as a "Birdman" that does not reflect who he is as a human being. Thus, the conflicts become a part of his journey to find his essence and to free himself from the shadow of the Birdman.

**Keywords:** existentialism, Sartre, *Birdman*, film studies, conflicts

## INTRODUCTION

*Birdman* is a unique and incredible film that won four Academy Awards for Best Director, Best Original Screenplay, Best Cinematography, and most importantly Best Motion Picture of the Year in 2015. It also received more than 200 other nominations and featured on over 168 Top Ten Lists (Fuller, 2015). *Birdman* was made to look like it was unusually shot in one continuous sequence almost for the whole film. This film not only has extraordinary storytelling but also shows a remarkable breakthrough in the editing process.

*Birdman* was directed by Alejandro González Iñárritu who is the most well-known Mexican director in the film industry. He has made six feature films so far in his career which have resulted in awards and nominations. His 2006 film, *Babel*, puts him as the first Mexican director to be nominated for the Academy Award in the Best Director category. Later, he won the Academy Awards in the same category for *Birdman* (2014) and *The Revenant* (2015). He is also the first Mexican director to be nominated for the Directors Guild of America Award for Outstanding Directing. Iñárritu along with two other Mexican filmmakers, Guillermo del Toro, and Alfonso Cuarón, have been known as The Three Amigos. They are considered as the pioneers of introducing the New Mexican Cinema to Hollywood. "They stood out by bringing new ideas to the silver screen . . . adds a new flavor to the American movie potpourri . . . They also push the limits of technology, the limits of photography, and the limits of storytelling" (Grilo, 2015). Looking at his achievements in filmmaking and contributions to the world of cinema shows that Iñárritu's works are exceptional.

*Birdman* was a big leap in Iñárritu's career as he made a left turn into comedy (Papish). Although this film is unlike his other films which have a more serious tone, this film still brings an interesting and powerful story. The story deals with the struggle of finding one's meaning in life. Iñárritu stated that this film is made to entertain the masses and as a tool of personal expression (Papish, 2015). *Birdman* focuses on the struggle of the protagonist, Riggan Thomson, to have a meaningful life. In most of the scenes, the film shows the protagonist trying to convince people that making a Broadway play is the

right decision, but people around him seem to have different ideas and convince him to do the opposite. As a result, conflicts happen.

The conflicts discussion that is related to the existential crisis has never been done before, thus it makes this article the first to do so. In 2018, a paper discusses the hierarchy of expressive culture in *Birdman* that is related to the highbrow/lowbrow dichotomy in which theatre is put higher in the hierarchy than film (Sarahtika & Saktiningrum, 2018). Another study looks at the film through Barthes' theory of myth. The writers suggest that the film applies some myths in its narrative (Tahir, Hamzah Mohamed; Anuar, 2020). In 2017, Walton (2017) discusses the film from a philosophical point of view of Deleuze and other thinkers and concluded that the film "...gestures towards potentially infinite yet invisible conjunctions of film, body, space, and movement...". The film has also been discussed through a semiotic approach to reveal the film's multi-perspective cinematography (Vahreza & Jasjfi, 2020). In another paper, the film is seen from the perspective of psychoanalysis which investigates, "...how the notion of 'superhero' in popular imagination..." has been debunked by Alejandro Iñárritu's 2014 *Birdman*" (Goh, 2021). Some undergraduate theses have also taken the film as the research object. In one of them, the film is compared with Kurosawa's *Akira* in the context of intertextuality (Gufron, 2021). In another thesis, the film is discussed through a linguistic approach in which the thesis focuses on the ellipsis found in the film (Sandi, 2017). Another thesis focuses on the individuation process of the protagonist (Adanni, 2019). A recent article on *Birdman*, "...explores the confluence between form—digital cinema—and content in *Birdman*" (Celestino & Azcona, 2021).

An existential crisis is defined as, "...a situation in which an individual provokes a storm of dread about the meaning, purpose, or value of life, and is unpleasantly disturbed by a series of thoughts in their lives" (Wangchuk, 2021). This existential crisis is a common phenomenon in human life everywhere. Especially today when the world is plagued by the pandemic when people are forced to rethink their lives. There is a mounting dread, that even though one has a steady job and income, all that could vanish in an instant due to unexpected circumstances. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in early 2022 is another situation that causes an existential crisis, especially for those living in Ukraine. People must always rethink their lives and they no longer can take everything for granted. This existential conflict causes conflict, be it a social or inner conflict. In discussing the existential crisis through conflicts, Sartre's theory is chosen as the instrument to perform the analysis. He believes that people's lives are not definable because they are born without anything. Sartre then gives a more detailed explanation about how he views human existence in general. Sartre states that "existence precedes essence" which means that "...human being exists—are born and are conscious of their lives—before they really 'are' anything. In addition, it means no crucial or necessary ingredient defines what a human being is" (Kinasih, 2021). Existence precedes essence suggests that people are born to this godless universe without anything. Firstly, people are born into this world. Then they become aware of their existence. Later, they act towards something they want, and people are completely free to decide what they want to do or become. People's lives will not be anything until they choose, decide, and act. In other words, the definition of people's existence is the outcome of those decisions and actions that they take. Thus, people's existence in this world is meaningless unless they act towards something they want to do or become. People's actions and efforts are the ones that define their existence. People must be responsible for every action or decision that they make.

## METHODS

This research is interdisciplinary that combines film studies and a philosophical approach. The first step of the research is multiple viewing of the film to collect the required visual data and dialogues related to the conflicts. The visual data and dialogues are those that relate directly to existential conflicts. Secondly, the visual data and dialogues are interpreted and analyzed against Sartre's existentialist theory to reveal the existential conflicts that the protagonist experiences and how the film visualization supports the conflicts. After the analysis, a conclusion is drawn to summarize the findings. The visual data is drawn from the film's cinematography or camerawork: how the camera is placed and moved in relation to the characters; and the film *mise-en-scene* that refers to everything the audience sees within the frame that includes lighting, acting, characters, costumes, props, and dialogues.

This research utilizes Sartre's existentialism theory to understand how the conflicts point to an existential crisis. Sartre is a French novelist, playwright, and exponent of existentialism, which is a philosophy acclaiming the freedom of the individual human being (Desan, 2021). His concept "existence precedes essence" becomes the focus that helps to understand the existential conflicts of the film. Sartre disagrees with the idea that people are born to this world with a definite purpose or meaning. He believes that people's lives are not definable because they are born without anything, and that is the purpose of people to give meaning to their lives. People must take action towards something they want, and they are completely free to decide what they want to do or become. In addition, the result may vary and may or may not be by what the person wants. With this concept in mind, the discussion focuses on how, the character of Riggan Thomas sees himself, what actions he takes and why, and what the consequences of his actions are.

## RESULTS

Riggan Thomson, a fading actor who used to be famous for portraying a comic-book superhero called Birdman, decides to produce an ambitious Broadway play in which he directs and acts. His aim is not only to reclaim his fame but also to prove to people that he is a talented artist and not only an actor for blockbuster films, which refer to films that focus more on commercial success rather than aesthetic value. In the process of doing so, Riggan faces existential conflicts. The first one is an internal conflict between him and the Birdman, which is his delusion. The conflict occurs when Riggan's delusion of Birdman starts talking to Riggan every time he faces problems during the play production. Riggan is constantly told by his delusion of Birdman that his play is not necessary for his life and career. He is also told that he does not have to make people acknowledge his true talent because people want him to be Birdman and nothing else, as seen in the following dialogue: *What are you trying to prove? That you're an artist? Well, you're not! We grossed billions! What're you, ashamed of that? Billions! You could jump right back into that suit if you wanted to. We're not dead . . . You're Birdman. Because without me, all that's left is you a sad, selfish, mediocre actor grasping at the last vestiges of his career* (00:59:54 – 1:01:02).

Riggan's delusion of Birdman emphasizes a pointless effort of making a Broadway play because Birdman films have made Riggan famous and rich in the past. If Riggan does not make another Birdman film, he will not be able to regain his career since his existence as Birdman will be gone and forgotten. On the other hand, Riggan believes that his Broadway play is necessary for his life and career. He wants people to acknowledge him as himself and not only as Birdman. Riggan scolds his delusion of Birdman, *"Fuck you! It was billions of flies eat shit every day. So what, does that make it good? . . . You're dead. Stop saying 'we'! There is no 'we'! I'm not fucking you! I'm Riggan fucking Thomson!"* (00:59:58 – 1:00:50). Riggan argues that his career, fame, and wealth for portraying Birdman were meaningless. He wants to regain his career as himself and not Birdman. The conflict is caused by the fact that Riggan faces many difficulties in producing his Broadway play, and he feels pessimistic about it. In addition, what his delusion of Birdman tells him contributes to his pessimism, *"You destroy a genius book with that infantile adaptation. Now you're about to destroy what's left of your career. It's pathetic"* (00:59:10 - 00:59:21). The existence of Riggan's delusion suggests that Riggan faces a dilemma between returning as Birdman which will entertain the masses or making his Broadway play that has more artistic values and means something to himself. Visually, the film emphasizes this internal conflict through the following screenshot:



**Figure 1.** Wide shot of Riggan walks on the street followed by the Birdman figure (1:28:58)  
(Iñárritu, 2014)

The Birdman figure represents Riggan's past which is emphasized by its position behind Riggan. It is following Riggan as a hint that it affects Riggan's present self. The internal conflict is made obvious visually by splitting Riggan's character into two, himself now and himself in the past. The wide-shot type is usually used for establishing the subject's relationship to the environment and elements within it. The use of a wide shot is meant to emphasize that people around Riggan are not aware of the Birdman figure's presence, and it proves that the Birdman is only in his mind.

The visual of the conflict relates to Sartre's existentialism theory. In figure one, there are two characters in the background, a woman on the far left and a man fixing his bike who does not notice Riggan. Sartre says that someone will not be anything until he makes something through his actions and efforts. The screenshot in a way emphasizes how Riggan's life is indeed nothing and meaningless because he has not been able to make something with his actions and efforts. Most people do not know Riggan as himself and only know him as Birdman. Based on Sartre's concept, Riggan first exists as the Birdman, and then he tries to detach himself from it to define himself. It is also visually shown on the film in the following screenshot:



**Figure 2.** A sticker is shown on Riggan's mirror (00:03:19).  
(Iñárritu, 2014)

The screenshot shows a sticker on Riggan's mirror that says, "*a thing is a thing not what is said of that thing*" (00:03:19 – 00:03:23). It refers to Riggan's intention to define who he is and not defined by what everyone has been referring to him as, which is Birdman. A Birdman poster can also be seen on the screenshot hanging on the wall right on top of Riggan's costume for the play. The placement of the two objects can be interpreted as how the Birdman still overshadows and dominates Riggan. Riggan is still known as Birdman, not the ambitious actor, director, or producer that he tries to be. Referring to Sartre's theory, Riggan's existence at this point is defined not by what he wants but by what people see him, as the Birdman.

The internal conflict is resolved when Riggan's play unexpectedly turns out to be a success. People praise him and his play receives good reviews. As Riggan's producer states, *"I can see the future. This play is gonna last forever. It's gonna be in London and Paris. And the studio's gonna call again, we're gonna get some books deals"* (1:45:46 – 1:45:54). His delusional Birdman figure no longer speaks to him. The resolution of this conflict is visually shown in the screenshots below:



**Figure 3.** Riggan and his delusion of Birdman in the bathroom (1:50:02).  
(Iñárritu, 2014)



**Figure 4.** Riggan leaves the bathroom (1:50:02).  
(Iñárritu, 2014)

The screenshots above show the event when Riggan is hospitalized after his failed suicide attempt. Riggan goes to the bathroom and finds his delusion of Birdman sitting on the toilet (see Figure 3). It suggests that the Birdman figure is about to be "flushed away" just like the waste. Riggan finally succeeds to detach himself from his past. The framing shows that Riggan's position is higher and bigger than the Birdman. It emphasizes that his present self is more dominant than his past as Birdman. It is further supported by Riggan's saying *"bye-bye and fuck you"* (1:50:14) to the Birdman figure when he leaves the bathroom without looking back (Figure 4). His gesture emphasizes his determination to move on, as well as underlying the solution to his internal conflict. Sartre's theory that says a person will not be anything until he makes something of himself supports Riggan's eagerness to make a successful Broadway play. Only known as Birdman makes Riggan feel that his life is meaningless. Producing a Broadway play is Riggan's way to make his life meaningful or defined. He wants to be recognized as who he is and by his own.

The second conflict is a social one between Riggan and an actor in his play, Mike Shiner. It occurs when Riggan finds out that Mike Shiner steals his past story. Riggan angrily approaches Mike and repeatedly hits him with a newspaper while Mike is sleeping on a tanning bed (00:55:20 – 00:58:28). The conflict happens because Riggan thinks he deserves to be respected as the producer and director of the play. In addition, Mike had an erection while he has an intimate scene which drives Riggan mad. The dialogue between Riggan and Mike shows the conflict, *"Listen to me! This is my fucking show! I*



*did the work. I raised the money. I arrange the fucking press! . . . You're Mr. natural, Mr. fuck-the-scene-just-stare-at-my-massive-hard-on, right? That's the truth of the moment . . . You don't get hard on my stage unless I tell you to! . . . You nobody spiteful piece of shit!"* (00:55:54 – 00:56:23). Riggan tries to win control over Mike by saying that Mike is nobody and he should not do something unless he allows him to.

On the other hand, Mike disrespects Riggan because he thinks Riggan does not deserve to be responsible for the play. He also does not want to be under Riggan's control. Mike replies to Riggan by saying, *"Your stage? Let me tell you something. This stage has belonged to a lot of great actors, but you're not one of them, pal . . . Nobody? My massive hard-on got 50.000 views on Youtube . . . Why don't you get your wings and your fucking bird suit, man?!"* (00:56:23 – 00:58:05). Mike disrespects Riggan by saying that Riggan does not belong to the Broadway stage since he is not a great actor and should go back to portray Birdman. He also brags about how he is already famous and that he can do whatever he likes.



**Figure 5.** Two-shot of Riggan and Mike, showing Riggan's dominance by being put on the right (00:56:24).  
(Iñárritu, 2014)

The conflict uses the two-shot type to emphasize the two opposing ideas between Riggan and Mike. In the beginning, Riggan's position is on the right (Figure 5). Generally, in a two-shot, the person on the right will 'seem' dominant over the person on the left. The position of the character can be interpreted as a display of Riggan's stronger dominance over Mike which is proven by what Riggan says to Mike, that it is Riggan who raises the money and arranges the press for the show. Yet, there is a dominant color of blue in Figure 5 which may emphasize a dream-like quality. It can mean that Riggan's domination is just a mirage. Although Riggan shows his dominance by stating the fact that he has full control of his play, the play will fall apart if Mike decides to go or quit. That is why later in Figure 6 the position is switched, and the blue color disappears. Mike is on the right side and is more dominant in this scene, which is proven by the dialogue he says to Riggan that Riggan should go back to be Birdman and does not deserve to be on Broadway. He also says to Riggan, *"What are you gonna do? You're going to replace me?!"* (00:58:21 – 00:58:23), while Riggan just walks off and does not reply to anything. It shows that Riggan is powerless because he cannot fire or replace Mike with another actor.



**Figure 6.** Mike becomes more dominant by being put on the right side (00:57:15).  
(Iñárritu, 2014)

The relation between the visuals of the conflict and Sartre's theory can be seen from how Riggan has to slightly look up whenever he is arguing with Mike (see Figures 5 and 6). It suggests that Riggan's life is nothing or meaningless compared to Mike's, who is famous as a theatre actor. Sartre says that someone exists and then defines himself afterward. In this conflict, Mike's life is already defined, and he is maintaining it, and the way Riggan has to look up signifies Riggan's effort to achieve a similar position as Mike, who is defined by his talent in acting. Sartre's theory that says someone will not be anything until he makes something with his actions and efforts also supports the cause of Riggan's anger in the conflict which is to make his life meaningful. The fact he is only famous for portraying a superhero in blockbuster films makes Riggan think that his life is nothing or meaningless. To make his life defined or meaningful, Riggan must change people's opinions about him that he is not just Birdman and capable of doing something greater than that. So Riggan worries that if Mike Shiner draws more attention from the people, his efforts in making the Broadway play will be overshadowed by Mike's popularity, and his attempt to make his meaningful will fail.

The next social conflict occurs between Riggan and his daughter, Sam. The conflict occurs when Riggan approaches Sam to say thank you for what she has done in helping him, but Riggan starts to get angry after he realizes there is a smell of marijuana in the room (00:38:06 – 00:39:17). Riggan believes that producing a Broadway play is important to him and his career. He also believes his Broadway play means something to him and a lot of people. The conflict is seen in the following dialogue between Riggan and Sam, *"Look! I'm trying to do something important! It is important to me! OK? Maybe no to you, or your cynical friends whose only ambition is to go viral. But to me? My god. This is my career! It's my chance to finally do a work that means something"* (00:39:29 – 00:39:46). Riggan thinks that producing a Broadway play is important to him because his career depends on it. He also thinks his play is a work of art that means something and not only a temporary sensation.

On the other hand, Sam believes that Riggan's Broadway play is not important to him or his career. She also thinks Riggan's Broadway play does not mean anything to anyone. She replies to Riggan's argument as follows: *That means something to who? You had a career, Dad, before the third comic book movie. Before people started to forget who was inside that bird costume. You are doing a play based on a book written 60 years ago for a thousand rich old white people whose only real concern is gonna be where they go to have their cake and coffee when it's over! Nobody gives a shit but you! . . . You're not doing this for the sake of art. You're doing this because you wanna feel relevant again . . . You're doing this because you're scared to death, like the rest of us, that you don't matter. And you know what? You're right! You don't! It's not important, OK? You're not important! Get used to it!* (00:39:46 – 00:40:49).

Sam argues that Riggan's play is not important because she thinks Riggan does not have to worry about his career since he already had a career in the past. She also thinks that Riggan's purpose of making a Broadway play is not for art, but for making himself famous today.

The conflict occurs because Sam does not like the fact that Riggan prioritizes his play more than being a father to her. Riggan says *"Don't do this to me!"*, when he caught Sam smoking marijuana, and then Sam angrily replies, *"To you?! Oh yeah, you're talking about you? What else is new?"* (00:39:20 – 00:39:24). Sam recently gets out of rehab. Instead of worrying about Sam's well-being, Riggan is more

concerned about how Sam will ruin his Broadway play if she comes back to rehab because Sam works as an assistant in Riggan's play. This conflict is visually shown on the following screenshots:



**Figure 7.** The two-shot shows them opposing each other (00:39:23).  
(Iñárritu, 2014)



**Figure 8.** A Close-up shot of Sam shows her angry look (00:40:34).  
(Iñárritu, 2014).



**Figure 9.** Sam with some crumpled toilet paper (00:38:52).  
(Iñárritu, 2014)

The conflict starts with a two-shot type to emphasize two opposing forces: Riggan and Sam (Figure 7). Later, the shot changes to a close-up shot of Sam who is angry with Riggan (Figure 8). The relation between the visuals of this conflict with Sartre's theory can be seen from the way the scene uses low-key lighting to create a strong contrast between images. The low-key lighting supports the notion that Riggan has not been able to fully define his existence. Some parts of him have not been "exposed", and



in this case, his talent, and his responsibility as a father for Sam. Sartre says that someone's life will not be anything until he makes something through his actions and efforts. Riggan has not been able to show people or Sam that he can create something with his action and efforts and be a good father to his daughter.

This conflict is resolved when Riggan apologizes to Sam for not being a good father when he says, "*I was a shitty father, wasn't I?*" to which Sam calmly replies, "*No, you were fine.*" Then after that, Sam continues talking about how Riggan's play becomes viral on the internet, which suggests that Sam becomes supportive of Riggan's play (1:19:29 – 1:20:30). The resolution is visually shown in the following screenshot:



**Figure 10.** The Toilet paper lays out neatly on the table (01:19:08).  
(Iñárritu, 2014)

Figure 7 emphasizes Riggan and Sam's conflict that is symbolized by the crumpled toilet paper on which Sam draws. When their conflict is solved, the toilet paper lays out neatly on the table and is fully drawn (see figure 10). The film frames them being on the same side (left frame) suggests they are no longer arguing. The symbolic meaning of the toilet paper can be connected to the existentialism theory. When they are in conflict, both Sam and Riggan's life is a mess just like the crumpled toilet paper. Sam is missing a good father figure and Riggan is not fulfilling his role as a good father. After their conflict is solved, they are more connected, and their life is 'smoother' just like the neatly laid out toilet paper. Sartre's theory that says someone will not be anything until he makes something through his actions and efforts helps in understanding better where Riggan's obsession comes from. Riggan feels his life is nothing because he is only recognized as Birdman, and he wants to make his life meaningful. Making a Broadway play is Riggan's way to be able to make his life meaningful because it is something that he makes with his actions and efforts. Yet, Riggan forgets that he also has an important part to fill in his life, which is being a father. His life will not be fully meaningful or defined if he does not responsibly act as a father. So, after this conflict is solved and he plays his role as a father to Sam, Riggan's life is more meaningful and complete, not only to himself but also to Sam.

## CONCLUSION

Riggan's existential conflicts analysis shows that the major cause of the conflicts is Riggan's ambition to define his existence and have a meaningful life. It is revealed through Sartre's existentialism theory which believes that people's lives or existence are meaningless. It is up to people themselves to give it meaning by their actions and efforts. All the conflicts, both internal and social, show that Riggan "first exists" as Birdman. In the first conflict, Riggan's delusion of Birdman points out the fact that Riggan is famous for being Birdman in the past, and most people know Riggan as Birdman and nothing else. Riggan's daughter, Sam also mentions that Riggan has a career in the past as Birdman. Mike Shiner points out how Riggan should go back to being Birdman as he used to be, rather than making a Broadway play. From the point of view of Sartre's theory, the conflicts above occur because Riggan

attempts to give meaning to his life and separate himself from the life he has before as the Birdman. He takes action and the responsibility to change his life and it causes conflicts.

Later, Riggan 'encounters himself' which means he realizes his meaningless existence as Birdman. All the conflicts contribute to the fact that being Birdman is indeed meaningless. In the internal conflict, Riggan says to himself that the billions of dollars he makes for portraying Birdman means nothing to him. Sam also says that people have already forgotten him as Birdman. Mike says that Riggan is 'not a great actor' as Birdman. Sartre states that someone's life is nothing until he makes something of himself, or in other words, something through his actions and efforts. Riggan thinks that there is no point in him being alive if he continues living a meaningless life as an actor who is only famous for a comic-book character. Therefore, he decides to define his existence as himself and to be known as a talented actor. His decision and choice to move on from being Birdman and act in a Broadway play which he also produces and directs can be described as his step to 'surge up in the world'. Making a Broadway play requires more talent and effort, rather than portraying Birdman. He holds on to his belief of making a successful Broadway play even though others tell him otherwise.

In the end, Riggan cannot overcome all the obstacles. No matter hard he tries to make a successful Broadway play and define his existence as himself, he still cannot change the way people see him. Recognition plays an important part in his career as an actor. He still cannot achieve the meaningful life that he wants because he will be known as a failure and unable to move on from the fact that people will still know him as Birdman. Yet, the result turns out unexpectedly. As Sartre states that a person could have drawn quite different conclusions from such a series of reverses in one's life. It means the outcome of the choices or decisions that people make towards defining their existence in this life can vary, and there will be "a plurality of possibilities" of the outcome. Sartre's statement applies to Riggan when his suicide attempt in his final act surprisingly helps him define his existence. He successfully defines his existence as a talented and respectable actor.

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