

Ways of Perceiving, Curation Essay

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1598 WORDS

Tutor - Martin Bush

The exhibition I have curated will feature seven pieces of work from three different mediums and four different creative visions. The exhibition will focus on works that feature a form of meta-narrative understanding of their own medium – which is a form of expression common in post-modernism – for example, if a character or icon within the work is made keenly aware of the fact that they are not real or a part of a piece of art. The exhibition features two films so it will take place within the Chapter Arts Centre, which is a contemporary venue targeting films. This will allow the two films to be with installations of famous post-modern work from René Magritte and Marcel Duchamp to help convey a timeline of surrealism and post-modernism.

The exhibition will utilise the venue's gallery as well as its accompanying theatre room to show both the physical works of Magritte and accompanying advertising posters, as well as the films within the theatre. The venue could advertise the exhibition through showing the films in its normal billing and scheduling.

The intention of the exhibition is to provide another outlook for these massively popular works and perhaps provide a reflection to themselves as well as exemplify their brilliant analysis of their futures.



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 2

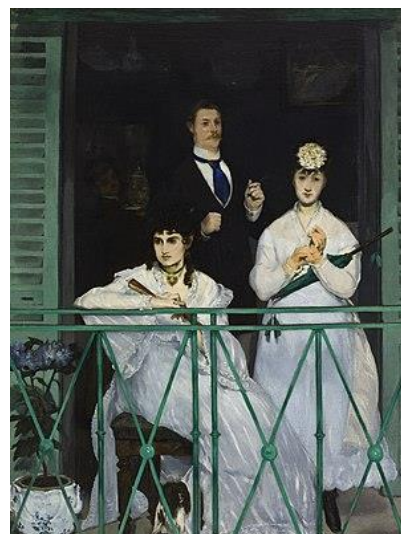


Figure 4

Three pieces of work by Belgian surrealism artist René Magritte will be physically featured within the gallery – *Son of Man* (1964), *The Balcony* (1950) and *The Treachery of Images* (1929). This should serve as a light and easy introduction to the concept of meta-narrative in order to contextualise the ahead pieces.

The Treachery of Images, as the “most iconic artworks of the surrealist movement,” should be featured first. The piece would accompany a physical wood pipe with text saying ‘c’est une pipe’ instead of a description of the piece’s meaning, allowing audiences to pick up on the context themselves.

The Balcony should feature afterwards and will accompany the piece it directly references to (*The Balcony* by *Edouard Manet*, 1868, figure 4). The two pieces have nearly a hundred years between, so Magritte’s piece shows the subjects in coffins as if the subjects were mortal, they would likely be dead by now. The dates (as well as the original artists’ names) should be included with the piece to help convey the meaning.

Son of Man would be the last of Magritte’s work featured – a piece that Magritte says has “visible meaning that is hidden and visible meaning that is present [1].” This piece more-so completes the collection of popular Magritte paintings and its meta-narrative is much more subtle. It is a self-portrait that Magritte uses another subject to block the face, effectively nullifying the ‘portrait’ aspect. However, a character is conveyed through the hiding of his face.



Figure 3

Famous post-modern piece known as the Fountain by Marcel Duchamp (figure 5, 1917) would end the physical pieces (although the piece would be surrounded by the three posters of the other pieces) and would be put upon a pedestal. This piece may not know what it is – it is a urinal – but the artist *and the exhibition* has designated it worthy of its position, which will hopefully allow audience members to beyond the physical object and toward the surrounding context. The intention is to recreate the twentieth century art movements that spawned greater understanding of what *makes* art.

Following the exhibition would feature three opportunities to watch films and analysis. Two films will be featured – Alejandro González's *Birdman or the Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance* (2014) and Peter Weir's *The Truman Show* (1998). These two films reflect their contemporary popular culture and the zeitgeists that surround them – for *Birdman* it is the dominating popularity of superhero films and for *The Truman Show* it is the exploitation of real people by television studios to create reality television. We live in a time where both these zeitgeists remain popular and can offer some reflection to us as a society and the spectacles we seek in our media. As someone greatly interested in filmmaking and film analysis, I wanted to include two great films that I feel best utilise its casting and filming to create subtle reflections on both society and their own medium.

Birdman features Michael Keaton's character *Riggan Thompson*, an actor who previously portrayed a popular superhero character who is now attempting to adapt a short story to Broadway. The film follows the series of events that leads to the character's on-stage suicide attempt, with conflicts with the stage actors and crew members surrounding Riggan as he attempts to 'create something important' through his adaptation. His drive to create a piece of work that help break from the legacy of his work as *Birdman*, the superhero he portrayed, consumes him as critics (namely Lindsay Duncan's character) remind him of his 'hack' past and that he is just playing pretend as an artist truly creating *art*.

At the start of the third act of the film the reality breaks apart as Riggan's surrounding New York City neighbourhood is bombarded by explosions and special effects, also fully visually revealing the voice in his head that is Birdman. Birdman tells Riggan to scrap the 'pretentious' work he has been doing to do the fourth film in the Birdman series instead. It presents the conflict within Riggan's head that dominates most of us artists in a capitalistic society – should we continue to express ourselves in an artful way or should we sell our souls for profit? It is a comment that can be shared by the director González and Michael Keaton – who is famous for portraying Batman in two successful Tim Burton films in the late 80s and early 90s. Whenever a smaller indie filmmaker/director creates a successful low-budget project, it is common that they are brought in to create a huge blockbuster for an exceptionally higher pay: it has happened to Josh Trank (*Chronicle* to *Fantastic Four*) and David F Samberg (*Annabelle* to *Shazam!*), where sometimes the film can be picked apart from the director's original vision.[2]

The Truman Show features Jim Carrey's character as the titular Truman Burbank, a man who has been documented on reality television his whole life without his knowledge. He becomes aware of his surroundings and its fabrication and leads an attempt to escape. His whole life is centred around him – where every person, whether substantial or not, exists on payroll to keep up this façade that he leads a normal life.

The Truman Show can act as a metaphor for enlightenment of one's surroundings. Though one may argue that the world is not as fabricated as much as the massive television set that is the fake island of Truman's home, it can be a correlation to our real world's lies. New love interests are 'written' into the show and traumas are created into Truman's psyche (such as his father being lost at sea, prompting his fear of the ocean and water) in order to keep him both an entertaining watch and to keep him in belief of his very fake surroundings. We do not see what Truman's life is like outside of the set, but we can infer our own experience and desires into our own enlightenment.

Both *Birdman* and *The Truman Show* have metanarrative to help sell the films' ideas – you need to be aware of certain aspects of the actors, the current culture and filmmaking to be able to fully enjoy what it has to offer the audience. Metanarrative is a post-modernist theory in literature and refers to a narrative *about* narratives, offering speculation through audience members

understanding of their surroundings. *Birdman* is a narrative about both the narratives we conjure in our heads and the modern works that dominate our consuming media (superhero movies), and *The Truman Show* is a narrative about our consumption of reality television (with our separation of the art subject and the actual person) and the falsehoods of consumerism. If you did not live through or know of the dehumanising world of reality television of the late nineties it is more difficult to reflect on what you consume as an audience member.

Similarly, it is much more difficult to associate with a successful actor such as Riggan in *Birdman*, as a non-successful non-actor – but we can empathise with his ‘voice in his head’ and his surrounding peers not understanding his complications. Protagonists often feel like they are the voice of reason in film and the surrounding characters seem to be enveloped in either a basic non-complicated persona or ridiculousness that detracts any relatability to them (see Amy Ryan’s character as Riggan’s ex-wife and Edward Norton’s ridiculous Broadway actor), which often creates this idea that the ‘voice in your head’ is a unique trait to a protagonist. If you peer into the psyche of all the characters and the conflicting thoughts you have it would make an incoherent narrative thread, so it would be unrealistic to sell the idea that we all struggle with a condescending voice in our head.

We can, however, slot Michael Keaton as a surrogate – we know Keaton portrayed a similarly bird-like character in his time and we can ask the question, does he also feel the same way? This knowledge helps sell the film’s ideas.

The intention of the exhibition is for folks to be introduced to the idea of using your knowledge and surroundings to seek the meta or grand narrative of a piece of media to seek to know more of themselves and hopefully seeing Magritte and Duchamp’s famous pieces before seeing the two classic films will help this.

Bibliography

1. Torczyner, H. 1979. "*Magritte: Ideas and Images*". Published by Harry N. Abrams. p. 172.
2. Masters, K. 2015. "'Fantastic Four' Blame Game: Fox, Director Josh Trank Square Off Over On-Set 'Chaos'." The Hollywood Reporter. Available at <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/fantastic-four-blame-game-fox-814764>

Figures

1. *The Treachery of Image*, Rene Magritte
2. *The Balcony*, Rene Magritte
3. *Son of Man*, Rene Magritte
4. *The Balcony*, Edouard Monet
5. *Fountain*, Marcel Duchamp