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Article abstract

This article analyses Michelangelo Antonioni’s *Blow-Up* (1966). The author argues that the film offers a fully-developed theory of photography, one that is consistent with Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology and which emphasizes the embodiedness and situatedness of ‘Operator’ and ‘Spectator’. However, one key element of this theory resides in the recognition that these two ‘agents’ can never coincide.

# "A Past Which Has Never Been a Present". Cinema and Photography in *Blow-Up* by Michelangelo Antonioni

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## 1. Michelangelo Antonioni – Theorist of Photography

Among the various films that represent the 'photographic act', *Blow-Up* occupies a privileged place. In this essay, I will investigate two main ideas with regards to the film. The first: *Blow-Up* not only depicts the process of taking a photo, as well as those of darkroom processing and printing, but also offers a theory of photography. This last is not expressed verbally, but mainly through the 'expressive resources' of the film's audiovisual narrative, which does not make it any less coherent or complete (Aumont 1996 and 2002). The second: the film's photographic theory gives the subject's body a key role. In this it constitutes a phenomenological theory of sorts<sup>1</sup>.

I will illustrate these two ideas by analysing the film's long central sequence in which the main character develops and examines the photos he has taken in a London park.<sup>2</sup>

In the introduction to the published screenplay, which he adapted from the short story "Las Babas del Diablo", by Julio Cortàzar (1959), Antonioni makes a short but significant statement:

I was not so much interested in the events as in the *technical aspects* of photography. I discarded the plot and wrote a new one in which *the equipment itself* assumed a different weight and significance. (Huss 1971: 5 [Italics added by the author])

By telling us how he eschewed narrative for the "technical aspects" of photography, Antonioni carefully points to the theory of photography embodied in his film. This can be discerned in the transformations he brought to Cortàzar's story. If one compares the short story with the

film<sup>3</sup>, one can see that the actions connected to the development and the enlargement of the photos, which are only hinted at by Cortázar, become central for Antonioni. The short story is constructed like a diptych (with a break between the two parts that is clearly indicated by a white space on the page). The taking of only one picture in the first part is balanced in the second by its 'coming to life' like a film image<sup>4</sup>. The film, on the other hand, is built as a triptych, articulating three moments: the taking of the pictures, their development and enlargement and, finally, an investigation into the reality they reveal. These are three moments in which the successive phases of the pictures' development and the subsequent discovery of a murdered body occupy a central position<sup>5</sup>. In this plot sequencing, we must look for those particular technical aspects of photography which interested Antonioni and which point to the core of his theory of photography.

## 2. The Photographer as Operator and Spectator

In the film's central section, the photographer develops pictures which he shot earlier in a park and then enlarges and hangs them in a room in his studio. In doing so, he gradually discovers that a crime has been committed not so much directly in front of his eyes, but in front of his lens.

If we apply the concepts introduced by Barthes (1980) to this film sequence, we can detect a *fracture between the photographer as Operator and the same person as Spectator*. Such a division creates particular connotations in the film. The photographer as Operator is represented at the beginning of the film as occupying a powerful, almost arrogant position. The photographic act appears as an imperious gesture of control over the visible, one that appropriates the 'real' and takes control of the 'look'.<sup>6</sup> In the first park sequence, however, the Operator loses this control. While taking the picture, he misses the decisive event of the scene (the murder) and his own *hubris* condemns him to blindness ("What did you see in that park?" Ron asks him toward the end of the film. "Nothing" answers the photographer). To reveal such a failure on the part of the Operator is also to reveal the true nature of the photographer himself. Yet, in becoming a Spectator of his own photographs he discovers a new power of seeing. However, this also implies a new *hubris* and therefore a further impasse.

In the end, the photographer in *Blow-Up* is not entirely unlike Oedipus before learning the tragic nature of his destiny: both are overconfident bearers of an epistemology based on visibility and are thus condemned to self-blindness (Milner 1991: 67-83)<sup>7</sup>. Adopting the Barthesian conceptual pairing of Operator-Spectator allows us to understand this tragic division that the character undergoes.

We could at this point express this division in terms of a clear opposition between two irreconcilably different epistemological models.

On the one hand, there is the presence and the physical intervention of the Operator organizing the world around him by reproducing it in photographic form. On the other hand, there is the pure gaze of the Spectator, whose position is allegedly less determined by material constraints. The photographic theory of *Blow-Up* could therefore be described as based on the opposition between the material processes of the Operator and the unrestrained gaze of the Spectator. Yet this hypothesis may compromise our ability to discern certain key aspects of Antonioni's photographic theory, much as the Operator in *Blow-Up* overlooks several crucial details of the world around him while presuming to capture it photographically.

### 3. The Photographer as Eductor

As it happens, the idea that the photographer becomes a pure Spectator of his own work is incorrect. In fact, the photographer, even when looking over his prints, never entirely ceases to 'operate'. Indeed, he continues to do so when he undertakes the work traditionally left to photographers' assistants: *development and printing*. From the beginning of the sequence, Antonioni shows with documentary-like accuracy the processes of picture development and printing: the self-confident gestures of the character, initially indolent, then nervous and quick; his expert and attentive handling of the apparatus and the negative; the symphony of background noises (as always very accurate in Antonioni). The soundtrack captures the lapping of liquids, the leafing through of papers, as well as various wooden or metallic clicks, steps and silences. In short, Antonioni manages to fully capture the very particular forms of interaction among machines, surfaces, substances, lights, sounds, and gestures that all come together in giving birth to a photographic image<sup>8</sup>.

The photographer is therefore not only the Operator, or author of the photos, but has also become an intermediate figure between the latter and the Spectator. We could therefore call him the *Eductor*<sup>9</sup>, *i.e.* someone who delivers the image and presents it for public visibility: a sort of shepherd or better yet, midwife, of photography. Indicative of this concept is the series of actions by which the photographic print is raised from the developing tray, observed, and again bathed into liquid, as if to emphasise the birth and baptism which signal its apparition into the social world. If the Operator is a gatherer of images, then the Eductor appears as a *bricoleur*, in the sense attributed to the term by Lévi-Strauss, *i.e.* someone who uses a heritage of already picked objects, selects one, and reworks it in such a way as to create new connections and meanings, using his own hand, eye, and spirit<sup>10</sup>.

### 4. The Photographer as Body

The opposition between the Operator and the Spectator therefore

needs to be reformulated; the Spectator comes to a revelation that tragically separates him from the Operator through the work of the Eductor. It might seem, however, that some aspects of that opposition are now transferred to the Eductor-Spectator pair. The Eductor appears to be granted access to the technical and material aspects of the operation (*i.e.* the 'photographic equipment'), while the Spectator seems to benefit from a pure gaze. This notion, however, also needs to be discarded. In fact, a deeper analysis shows that *the Spectator cannot in any way be reduced to a disembodied gaze.*

There are at least three fundamental reasons why the Spectator's gaze can be said to be both *embodied* and *situated* within a spatial environment and/or physical context. In the first place, the Eductor and Spectator often work synergistically, using particular devices such as the white pencil that allows highlighting in some areas of a photo, and above all, the use of a magnifying glass to inspect the quality of the print but also to see what it can reveal to the gaze.

Secondly, the Spectator's gaze is always accompanied by an action. In Antonioni's film, the subject moves closer to and/or further away from the photos; he touches the pictures to follow various sight lines; he gives rhythm with his fingers: such actions are not superfluous, but are, rather, the core of a process required for the interpretation of the photos.

Finally, the path created by the gaze of the Spectator is determined by the concrete physical structure of the space, within which the photographs are exhibited. The studio thus represents a perspective box<sup>11</sup>, and the pictures and blow-ups are displayed in a sequence on its walls to emphasizing both the box's linearity and its angularity. For example, two images — the blow-up of the woman looking out of the frame and the image of the fence and of a hand holding a gun, share a relationship of sorts, resulting from their being placed perpendicularly on the studio's wall<sup>12</sup>.

## 5. The Photographer as Subject of the Return

The hypothesis formulated above (the opposition between the Operator and Spectator in terms of operational processes versus pure gaze) has turned out to be groundless for two reasons. Firstly, the Eductor slips in between the pair; secondly, the Spectator's gaze is embodied and situated in the expository space of the pictures. How can we, at this point, formulate the relationship between the Operator and Spectator that is expressed in *Blow-Up*? The sequence we are analyzing is rich with suggestions; to grasp them we must shift from the *énoncé* to the *énonciation*, and analyse the forms of the *mise-en-discours* present in the sequence. An initial clue comes from a pair of frames in the first part of the sequence, when the photographer initially lays out the first two pictures of the park in his studio.

The second picture of the couple in the clearing, hanging from one of the studio beams is seen from behind. The photographer looks from across the room at the image and his shadow, initially projected on the lower left side of the image of the couple, advances towards its centre until it fully covers the couple, at which point it fluctuates indeterminately and then shifts to the right. The next shot is a reverse angle that shows the photographer in front of the image; his shadow, on the left side of the picture, is projected again. In the first shot the Spectator's shadow appears over the photographic image until it occupies the centre and erases the visible presence of the original subjects (the image of the couple becomes invisible for a moment). The complex theoretical significance of this passage cannot go unnoticed. Above all, the Spectator appears in it as a body engaged in a physical relationship with the photographic print. In fact, the shadow testifies to this somatic relationship of placement and movement. The same shadow also reveals another aspect in accordance with the previous point: through his own shadow the Spectator adheres to the surface of the image, and through a sort of osmosis he penetrates it (in the sense of the "aesthetic junction" discussed by Landowsky 2004: 105-137), until he himself takes on some of the qualities of the photographic image. The use of colour is revealing and, in fact, the photographer character is present here under the form of a pearlish-gray shadow, perfectly inscribed in the black and white system of the photographs. This is all the more significant since, historically, photography is a direct descendant of *skiagraphia*, the ancient art of shadow painting (Stoichita 1997).

This segment alludes to two themes of motion, namely that of "passing" and "returning". Through the physical relationship with the images in the studio space, the Spectator accesses the original scene of the clearing, in which he took part as Operator. The two returns to the park that occur later in the film are established and anticipated by the "return" to the clearing that the photographer initiates by looking at the images.

An additional fact confirms this interpretation. Several times the pictures that the photographer looks at are shown by Antonioni through pan shots and zooms, which act as subjective views that simulate the character's sensory-motor and cognitive relation to the photographs. He momentarily disappears from the scene, but his presence is incorporated into the camera's gaze and movement. This transition is fully conveyed in the revealing micro-segment that allows the photographer and we, the audience, to understand what 'truly' happened in the park (a faceless killer, hidden behind a bush, shot the partner of the mysterious woman, with her complicity). The action is reconstructed through the physical display and montage of the photographs, in a sequencing that simulates the physical movements and understanding of the photographer. At the end of the segment, he is shown lying by the side of the last picture introduced in this series, as if he had physically undergone the journey

through the pictures that the Spectator has just made with his eyes. Furthermore, noises which were already present in the initial segment from the park, such as the sound of tree foliage rustling in the wind, surreptitiously creep onto the soundtrack<sup>13</sup>. The use of sound is crucial here: *the translation of the sensory-motor relationship between the photographer and the pictures he hangs in his studio works its way into the mise-en-scène of the photographer's return to the park, at which point he is no longer an Operator, but truly a Spectator.*

What does this return of the Spectator through the footsteps of the Operator imply?

In order to fully understand the implications for the film's theorization of photography, we must analyse the segment in greater detail. If we compare the pictures that the Eductor develops and hangs on the studio's walls and beams (and that allow and lead the return of the Spectator to the place where the Operator had originally taken his photographs) with the images shown earlier in the film by Antonioni when the photographer was in the park, we realize that *not all of the photographic images displayed in the studio correspond to those taken by the Operator in the park.* Some of the photographs are, in fact, "ghost images", evoked by the Eductor, without actually having been taken by the Operator. Consider in particular the following series of pictures. First are the pictures of the fence, from which the gun is shown slightly protruding. The object's frontal position in these photos does not correspond to the photographer's position at the moment he was taking them! It is possible that this corresponds, however, to the woman's position at the time. A second series consists of the photographic sequence in which we see the woman running away from the man she was with, bringing her hand to her mouth, and throwing herself at the photographer to ask him for the film. These pictures are not only taken from a shooting angle inconsistent with the photographer's position at the time, they also show a series of events that could not have been shot by him since at that very moment he was leaving the scene<sup>14</sup>.

When the Spectator goes back to the crime scene, thanks to the work done by the Eductor, he subsequently appears to reunite with the Operator, but this reunion does not actually happen. Returning to the park, does not mean finding oneself again in the same place as before. It means, rather, to experience the impossibility of physically returning to where one had been.

## 6. A Past That Has Never Been a Present

We can at this point summarize what has emerged from the analysis of the central sequence of *Blow-Up*. The sequence presents the photographic act in three phases; each of them implies the presence of a subject and of an embodied and situated relationship between the subject and a scene. Through the snapshots, the Operator transcribes

his own situated relationship with a scene in the film. The Eductor develops the film strips, prints the pictures and exposes them; as a result he brings the images to light, makes them available to the public eye, and gives them form via a medium. He therefore performs a second scene, *viz.*, the "exhibition system" of the pictures<sup>15</sup>. The Spectator benefits from the exhibit prepared by the Eductor, and carries out a sensory-motor experience when looking at the pictures while, at the same time, metaphorically accessing the scene originally documented by the Operator. The fundamental point of the theory developed in *Blow-Up* concerns the return of the Spectator to the scene of the Operator's work by way of the path laid out by the Eductor. Only, this is an impossible return, since the Spectator's promise to find and retrace the Operator's path can only be frustrated. The Operator's steps have in fact been rearranged; the scene is irretrievably other than the original one. This causes a particular feeling of the *uncanny in the return to a scene that is revealed to be other than the original one*<sup>16</sup>.

The results we have reached allow us to verify the two ideas from which we started. In the first place, we can now confirm the idea according to which *Blow-Up* develops a coherent and organic discourse, or theory, on the photographic act, one that articulates the various processes this act implies, the objects it produces, the agents it involves and the experiences that it generates. It is a discourse developed entirely by cinematographic means; that is, through a story and through particular configurations of the moving image accompanied by sound. Furthermore, we can claim that, on account of the particular choices of the filmic *mise-en-discours*, the story of the film's protagonist becomes an *exemplum* of greater significance. It addresses the photographic act in general, as well as the problem of the boundaries between fine art photography and documentary photography, including concerns over the exhibition space of photography and the way it affects the medium (Krauss 1990: 28-49)<sup>17</sup>. As such, *Blow-Up* participates directly in that process of reinvention of the photographic medium that took place at the beginning of the 60s, with the double characterisation of photography as art medium and as theoretical object (Krauss 1999).

Secondly, equally confirmed and substantiated, is the phenomenological notion that the body holds a fundamental role in the way that the subject experiences photographic images. *Blow-Up* treats photography as the interaction between image, medium and body: the film offers concrete anthropological insight into photography and its social manifestation (Belting 2001). The experience of the photographic image is understood here as the production of an event through which the Spectator comes to grasp "*ce que nous voyons, ce qui nous regarde*" (Didi-Huberman 1992 and 2002).

The phenomenological root of such a position is clear; not coincidentally, the film has been linked to the philosophy of Heidegger



(Jameson 1992) and Sartre (Casetti 2005). We can better understand Antonioni's intellectual precursors and the originality of his contribution, however, if we compare his approach to the work of Merleau-Ponty. In Antonioni, photography conveys the unbridgeable gap that exists between a direct experience of the world and an experience mediated *a posteriori* by the photographic image. These two experiences, although connected by a common sensory-motor experience, are nevertheless radically different. Therefore photography becomes, in Antonioni's hands, a metaphor for the functioning of perception according to Merleau-Ponty (1962), and it becomes a metaphor for the distance that constitutively separates pure unreflected perception from the reflection that builds upon it.

Hence reflection does not itself grasp its full significance unless it refers to the unreflective fund of experience which it presupposes, upon which it draws, and which constitutes for it a kind of original past, a past which has never been a present. (*Ibid.* 1962: 242)

## Notes

- 1 It is worthwhile observing that my approach to the relationship of cinema and photography places our paper in a position slightly astray from previous discussions concerning the two media. Essays on related topics have usually sought to give an account of 'ontological' differences between them (Wollen 1984; Metz 1985; Bettetini 1991), or else have attempted to analyze the ways in which the reciprocal representations of cinema and photography either imply some form of self-reflexivity (Bellour 2002), or solicit and address a more general theory of the film image as a trace of the real (Dubois 1992; Le Maître 2004). In contradiction, my interest lies in those cases where the expressive resources of cinema serve to embody a theory of photography. My goal is to determine whether filmmaking can contribute something to theoretical debates about photography.
- 2 Let's recall the essential features of the plot. A professional photographer takes some pictures of a couple in a deserted public park. The woman's insistence on having the negative makes him suspicious. In his studio, the photographer develops, prints, enlarges and hangs the pictures in succession, thus finding out that this putative romantic encounter was meant to conceal a murder. The photographer goes back to the park at night and finds the corpse of the man he saw with the woman; in the meantime, someone enters his studio and steals the film and the prints. The following morning, the photographer returns to the park, but the corpse has disappeared.
- 3 The critical literature abounds with comparisons between Cortázar's short story and Antonioni's film as authors debate back and forth the film's fidelity to the novella. The *locus classicus* in this tradition is Fernandez' essay of 1967. This literature is summarized and critically analyzed by Peavler (1979).
- 4 "[...] In the end an enlargement of 32 x 28 looks like a movie screen." (Cortázar 1959: 128)
- 5 The film's title alone directs the viewer's attention towards this sequence, the centrality of which has been pointed out by numerous critics. See in particular Lotman 1973, Ropars-Wuilleumier 1985, Jameson 1992, Cuccu 1997, Canosa 1999, Bernardi 2002: 193-197, Casetti 2005: 248-256. For a synthesis of various interpretative hypotheses, see to Tinazzi 2002: 95-99.

- 6 For the first aspect, see the sequence of the photographic "rape" of fashion model Verushka, or the fashion shoot with the models-dolls. Brunette (1998: 109-126) has stressed the gender inequalities in these segments. The predatory aspect is also emphasized by the photographer's wish to acquire the antique shop next to the park, which is anticipated by the purchase of an airplane propeller. As far as the second aspect is concerned, observe how a) the photographer twice orders his compliant models to shut their eyes and b) all the shots in this segment originate from his point of view.
- 7 Milner compares Oedipus' path to that of a photographic negative which, in the course of its development, sees its *chiaroscuro* values inverted: "*Cedipe [...], un personnage surexposé*" (1991: 70).
- 8 Such attention to background noises finds its counterpart in the published script (Antonioni 1967: 46-57), where technical operations are accurately described with the appropriate terms (dryer, frosted glass, development tank, internegative film and so on).
- 9 The most appropriate term would be *Elicitor*, which unfortunately does not exist in Latin. The verb *elicere* means "to let out", "to evoke a spirit or a ghost", or "to find out, and trace through an investigation".
- 10 *Blow-Up* seems to fulfill Walter Benjamin's prophecy, which sees the photographer as the "successor of the auguries and of the haruspexes", in a metropolis where "each place [...] is the scene of a crime [and] each passer-by is a criminal [the photographer] whose images function to reveal guilt and to indicate who is guilty" (1931 : 3-4). We could add at this point that augury and haruspex are meant here in the sense that Barthes (1970) gives to them: they correspond to a hermeneutic gesture based on cropping and blowing up the images. This is in fact an act of *bricolage*.
- 11 The prevalence of straight lines in the spatial organization of the studio is pointed out by the woman the photographer met in the park while she visits him.
- 12 Some directing choices emphasize the physical presence of the pictures in the space and the somatic relationship the photographer has to them. For instance, there is a shot/counter-shot structuring whereby the photos which are hung in the studio and a sofa come to occupy, in succession, the same screen surface; in like spirit, the black partition of the white wall recalls the border of the black and white prints.
- 13 We may note the emergence of a double meaning to the film's title. The *Blow-Up* as photographic enlargement makes way for the wind blowing-up the leaves of the park's trees foreshadowing the coming of a storm.
- 14 This discrepancy has already been observed (but not analyzed in any sustained manner and with interpretative results different from mine) by Ropars-Wuilleumier 1985 and by Cuccu 1997. It is a further innovation by Antonioni compared to Cortázar. "From my chair [...] I looked at the photo ten feet away, and then it occurred to me that I had hung it exactly at the point of view of the lens" (Cortázar 1959: 127).
- 15 It may be that the matter is somewhat more complicated. In particular, it needs to be considered that the Eductor assumes a role as Operator in re-photographing the corpse which protrudes from the bush. This recalls a sequence from *La Macchina Ammazzacattivi* by Roberto Rossellini (1948), in which a photographer receives the power to kill characters from his own country, by re-photographing pictures of them which are hanging on a wall. The subjects then die in the same pose that they had assumed in the photograph (Bellour 2002: 117-121).
- 16 The mention of Freud's *uncanny* (*unheimliche*) is doubly significant. In a more immediate way, it is clear that, from the analysis of the scene in the park, something has emerged which was supposed to have remained hidden: a corpse, death, murder, etc. But there is another element, deeply rooted in the original

scene, which has been removed and (literally) thrown out only now to return. Indeed, as we "return" to the park it appears that the scene has been irremediably changed. Spatial coordinates have changed and the photographer can no longer occupy his past position. The narrative mechanism places, therefore, the Operator-Spectator in a situation analogous to an original conviction, which once removed, comes back in the form of anxiety. This is, we believe, the root for the particular form of discontent that lies at the heart of the Spectator's experience.

- 17 Regarding the role of exhibition space in *Blow-Up*, it must be noted that the alternative venue the photographer is contemplating for his work (in the form of a book rather than on the walls of a gallery) fails. Indeed, the book he is preparing and which he intended to finish-off with the photos from the park can never be concluded with those images since they have now been stolen from him.

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## Abstract

This article analyses Michelangelo Antonioni's *Blow-Up* (1966). The author argues that the film offers a fully-developed theory of photography, one that is consistent with Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology and which emphasizes the embodiedness and situatedness of 'Operator' and 'Spectator'. However, one key element of this theory resides in the recognition that these two 'agents' can never coincide.

## Résumé

Dans cet article, l'auteur analyse le film *Blow-Up* (M. Antonioni, 1966) comme un discours théorique sur la photographie compatible avec la phénoménologie de Merleau-Ponty. Selon lui, le film met en lumière le fait que les instances de la photographie, l'Operator et le Spectator, sont des agents incarnés. Ceci dit, la spécificité de cette théorie réside dans l'impossible coïncidence des positions occupées par ces deux agents.

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