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All Eyes in Swinging London: Antonioni's *Blow-Up* and the Maze of Violence

ABSTRACT: Antonioni's *Blow-Up*, released in late 1966, is usually taken, on the one hand, to represent (celebratingly and scandalously) the youth culture of Swinging London and, on the other, the problems of (tenuous) relation between reality and its representation (the main protagonist thinks he discovers a murder by analysing photographs he has taken). Although most critics have attempted to link these two levels by means of some existential metaphor (most often: the main protagonist who represents the image-crazed youth of Swinging London encounters its biggest taboo, death, which is unrepresentable to boot), the paper proposes a more literal and political interpretation arguing that the abstraction of blurry grain of silver halide into which the image of the corpse finally dissolves in a series of photographic blow-ups is a way of representing something which also cannot have a proper image: the all-pervasive but no longer perceptible low-key everyday violence which constitutes the propelling force of the supposedly emancipated "swinging" lifestyle.

KEYWORDS: Antonioni, violence, photography, transcendence

Appearing on screen in late 1966, *Blow-Up* was Antonioni's first English-language film made for a big American studio (MGM) and released in the USA "to first-run theatres, thus becoming the first European import to compete openly with Hollywood fare on American screens."¹ Unex-

1 Murray Pomerance, *Michelangelo Red Antonioni Blue: Eight Reflections on Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 237; the sentence continues:

pectedly for some (but evidently not for MGM executives), it became a big commercial success and also a *cause célèbre* for cinematic and cultural criticism. Yet, although a wide range of critics, philosophers, and anthropologists felt compelled to say something about it, the interpretations one comes across are strangely similar, even if they happen to be contradictory. They usually follow two related routes and differ from each other mainly in emphasis the main protagonist is given: he is treated as an exemplary case of the youthful and professionally successful “mod” London or more individually as an artist (or what by the 1960s was left of such figure) and thus the director’s representative to a certain extent. Obviously, both approaches are not discontinuous, which some critics demonstrate by superimposing the latter upon the former: the protagonist is at first presented as a typical narcissistic representative of his milieu (he is a successful fashion photographer working with supermodels and driving a Rolls-Royce), yet an unexpected encounter with death causes an identity crisis and his initiation into matters epistemological and existential, whose result is his formation into an individual and an artist.²

As already noted, interpretations pursuing this royal way may be and often are contradictory, but what they have in common is emphasis on the same motifs which are usually organised into a series of binary oppositions. The series supposedly begins right at the very beginning of the film in the opening credits: we see wide expanse of a lawn in long shot upon which letters are superimposed after a while. Within the body of the letters we can spot a female model posing on the roof of a building, who is being looked at and photographed from below by a group of people. The colours of the fashion show are radically different from the “natural” green of the lawn: they are highly “synthetic” and fluorescent. This opening is said to set the scene and develop throughout the film as the opposition between the life of fashionable, affluent, and youthful

“*Blow-Up* had netted more than twenty million dollars worldwide by the end of the decade and has taken in more than six million dollars in video rentals in addition.”

2 The most interesting example of this approach is the chapter devoted to *Blow-Up* in William Arrowsmith’s *Antonioni: The Poet of Images*, ed. Ted Perry (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

mod London, which is restless, flashy, and noisy; and the quiet of the park to which the lawn belongs and which the photographer enters on impulse later in the film (impulses are also supposed to be “natural”). The literal peace of the park is, of course, also an answer to a nebulous yearning of the photographer’s world, which is a restless milieu in which everybody wants “to try something else,” as the young owner of the antiques shop the photographer wants to buy, who dreams of escaping to Nepal (“Nepal is full of antiques,” counters the photographer) or Morocco, supposedly to live an imaginary “quiet,” that is, more “natural” and therefore fulfilling life. Moreover, within the symbolically loaded scenery of the park, we encounter another facet (or perhaps the core) of this fantasy: in the idyllic circumstances the photographer comes across what looks like an idyllically sentimental relationship, which he photographs on the sly in order to put it into his photographic book about to be published.

This is, therefore, the first commonplace about *Blow-Up*: the fantasy of the natural (“peace and quiet” obviously stand for balance and contentment) is contrasted with the modern civilised as represented generally by the mod London getting high on “sex, drugs and rock’n’roll” (other pop culture developments like fashion photography included), and in particular by the photographer who is successful and narcissistic, who treats everybody as a means to his ends and who is, therefore, free of all attachments, which allows him to have protean abilities to adapt himself to whatever the moment demands in order not to “lose his cool.”

Another commonplace about the film is also related to the idyllic scene in the park. What was shot by the photographer as the representation of peace turns out to be the scene of murder featuring the photographed couple and a photographic trace of the murderer hiding in the bushes. The photographer is taken by the natural beauty of the scene (both in its natural (light) and human (love) aspects³) but when he later develops and inspects the photographs, in order to find out why the photographed woman is so desperate to retrieve the negative from him, he finds out—in a series of blow-ups of the pictures—that what he took for an amorous scene was probably a plot involving the woman and

3 “The light was very beautiful in the park this morning,” he says later.

the man in the bushes to have her “lover” killed. Hence we encounter a master of illusion (fashion photographer) who, because he knows how it works, considers himself above it (in fact he thinks he contests it⁴), but who turns out to be a paragon of naïvety when it comes to the issue of reality. Therefore, the “deeper” level of the murder story (a surface lure to the audience) is supposed to present us with the problem of epistemological uncertainty, which finds its narrative incarnation in the disappearance of the evidence of the crime (the photographs get stolen and the body is no longer in the park the following morning) and results in inconclusiveness of the film (the murder story is not solved).

In this approach, the basic level of meaning—the moral uncertainty of the world in which the difference between good and evil no longer seems to be clear (a theme relatively popular even in the Hollywood cinema of the 1960s and the main source of *Blow-Up*’s mass appeal: “lax” behaviour on screen)—is interpreted as being reinforced by a more rarefied level introducing doubt about the possibility of reaching the truthful image of reality located beyond self-serving pop cultural illusions. Moreover, the theme of uncertainty seems to be clinched with an ambiguous ending. In the morning, a group of revellers, their faces painted white⁵—whom we saw at the beginning of the film (the previous morning) noisily descend on the West End scrounging money from passers-by—appears in the park, from which the dead body disappeared, and performs an imitation of a game of tennis playing with an imaginary ball. The photographer observes them amused and when the players pretend the ball has just gone over the fence separating the court from the rest of the park and mutely ask him with their eyes and gestures to retrieve it, after a moment of hesitation he trots towards the imaginary

4 “But even with beautiful girls, you look at them, and that’s that. That’s why they always end up by... And I’m stuck with them all day long,” he says to the woman from the park when she comes visit. But more explicitly to Ron, his editor: “I hate those bloody bitches.”

5 Arrowsmith is the most ingenious critic in identifying the revellers: “Everywhere in Europe matriculating freshmen, usually at the end of March, celebrate Rag-week, *la festa delle matricole*. Dressed in costumes akin to those of *comedia dell’arte*, they run about the streets performing improvised games and tricks, cadging money for charity” (108).

ball and pretends to throw it back over the fence and into the court. While some critics take the scene to have a “positive” meaning (the photographer as an individual against the faceless society of make-believe) and others a “negative” one (the photographer joining the make-believe and disappearing as a subject),⁶ both interpretations converge in emphasising social origin of values and epistemological standards, which, being constructs of the society, are mutable, that is, unstable.⁷

Matters, however, seem to be more complicated than what a series of binary notions can suggest and we can start unravelling them by returning to the incipient opposition between nature and (mod) culture. There is something really strange in such a hoary coupling applied to the period in which western (post)modernity started to articulate its critical self-knowledge by, among other things, posing the natural reality as always already lost and claiming that it is only with the loss of nature that the very idea of nature itself (as the lost thing) is constructed. In this context, it is interesting to see that there are some critics who, although they are prepared to follow the nature versus culture interpretive route, seem to feel somehow uneasy about it, which gets articulated in a really peculiar way. They have a problem with the greenness of the grass in the park: while Arrowsmith claims that “the trouble with English grass is that it is *too* green,” Brunette sees it as “sickly looking.”⁸ Yet the point that the grass is either too green or not green enough just covers a more important one: this strange “denaturalisation” has an obvious source—“nature” is in fact the battle cry of the culture these critics take to represent the hyper-artificial. The dominant injunction of the mod world of *Blow-Up* is “Be natural!” In other words: do not follow artificial (constraining) rules; remain true to yourself and act on

6 While Arrowsmith, for instance, allows for the photographer’s individuation from the crowd in the final sequence, Freccero, working generally with the same motifs found in the film, interprets it as the artist’s ultimate defeat and collapse into conformity. John Freccero, “*Blow-Up: From the Word to the Image*,” in *Focus on Blow-Up*, ed. Roy Huss (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1971), 127.

7 For example: Peter Brunette, *The Films of Michelangelo Antonioni* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 117.

8 Arrowsmith, *Antonioni*, 107; Brunette, *The Films of Michelangelo Antonioni*, 115.

impulse. This is most obviously demonstrated by the plot line and the construction of the main character of the film: as it is often noted, his life consists of isolated episodes (impulsive acts) which do not add up to any consistent image.⁹ I already mentioned the desire to be elsewhere (Nepal, Morocco, off London) which is omnipresent in the film and which stands for a fantasy of a different, more natural, that is, “fulfilling” way of life.¹⁰ Moreover, on a semi-humorous or ironic level the very image of the expanse of (suspiciously looking) grass brings to mind one of the crucial objects in the film, that is, “grass,” “pot,” or marijuana, whose purpose is also to make one “natural,” that is, more “spontaneous” and less “inhibited.” Finally, the uselessness of natural/artificial opposition is additionally and conclusively confirmed when the natural image itself visits the photographer’s studio (where he also lives¹¹). When the girl met in the park appears at his door to demand the negatives again, the photographer asks her in and, after observing her for a while, marvels at her *natural* gift for *modelling*: “You’ve got it. [...] Not many girls can stand as well as that.” He imagines her acting spontaneously or instinctively, differently from the affected behaviour of the nameless models the photographer worked with in the morning. Thus, the distinction between nature and culture (artifice) collapses: in order to reach the summit of artificiality (to be an ideal fashion model), you have to be artificial “naturally.”

According to Brunette, the setting up of binary oppositions at the beginning of *Blow-Up* as the key for the viewer to the rest of the film

9 The photographer is only the most obvious example of the general condition which “afflicts” even minor characters (the teenyboppers are scared of the photographer, but a moment later they cavort happily with him on the mauve seamless background paper). The most flagrant example of this is, of course, the pot party where Ron is not even able to remember what has just been said to him.

10 Characteristically, there is one exception to this rule in the film, the exception which confirms the fantasy status of “going elsewhere.” The supermodel Verushka, who is met at the pot party by the photographer and asked by him “Weren’t you supposed to be in Paris?” answers “I am in Paris.” Because her job is to be every day in a different place, she knows that whether in Paris, London or Morocco a pot party is always the same.

11 This is yet another example that the main strategy of the film is dissolving rather than reinforcing binary oppositions.

does not end with the credits (nature/culture) but is continued by juxtaposing the revellers causing a bit of harmless confusion among new skyscrapers—prosperous London of finance and media—with the homeless leaving Camberwell Reception Centre (later called “doss house” by the photographer).¹² At first sight, the montage does look like an opposition or a provocative collision of images, and that the revellers belong to the scintillating world of the photographer is additionally confirmed by a shot in which, after they are given money by the photographer, whose Rolls-Royce they stop, they run away, and what can be seen in the background, which so far has been hidden behind them, is a figure of a homeless man walking down the street. Yet such a non-problematic contrast is undermined by the fact that, earlier on, one of the men emerging in the morning from the shelter looks around and, when everybody is gone, trots up the street and jumps into a Rolls-Royce parked there. This is of course our first encounter with the photographer in the film and supposedly an introduction of yet another binary opposition: between reality (the photographer is rich) and illusion (he pretended to be homeless to photograph the destitute in the doss house).

The status of the doss house in the film and in the photographer's world is in fact quite ambiguous. Although the opposition between the mod and the destitute London is essentially an example of political antagonism, in the film it is not the source of any “insight” but of photographic “material,” that is “art.” That the doss house is peripheral in all possible meanings of the world is emphasised by its “topographical” lack of contiguity with the photographer's world which spreads all over the fashionable London (including the park as one of its fantasy spaces): it is an empty and depressing morning landscape of dirty brick and desolate nature represented by one stunted tree. But as the doss house guests reappear in the film transformed into aesthetic photographic objects, which the fashionable London can accommodate or even enjoy, political antagonism, which is impossible to repress without some residue, reappears in a more “fashionable” form within the “beautiful districts.” Returning home in his fancy car from the lunch with his editor, the photographer comes across an anti-war or

12 Brunette, *The Films of Michelangelo Antonioni*, 110.

anti-atomic bomb demonstration bearing placards saying: “Go Away!” “Not this!” “Not our lads” “Stop the war” and most interestingly “No No No,” as well as “On On On.” While the episode adds another level of meaning to the title of the film (atomic bomb explosion), one may note that this potentially ominous narrative thread is treated rather lightly and that it transposes an internal antagonism into an external one (international conflict). Moreover, some of the placards strangely echo the social and existential problems mentioned earlier (everybody wants to go away, would rather have something else than this). And of course this is rather fitting because, if one were to imagine which world the demonstration belongs to, there is no doubt that it is an extension of the photographer’s and the revellers’ domain, which is emphasised by the photographers treating the demonstrators (and the revellers too) in a friendly manner (unlike virtually everybody in the film). Hence this supposedly political theme is thoroughly depoliticised starting on the most basic level of contradictory and therefore neutralised signifier (no-on) and ending with contextualisation of the demonstrators as yet another group of revellers.

Such neutralisation of the political is far from accidental, because the world we are presented with has moved “beyond” political meanings. The fate of the photographs taken during the night at the doss house may serve as an example here. The photographer brings these newly developed prints to the lunch with his editor, where they peruse the content of the photographer’s photo-book to be published. These are the photographs of the destitute and downtrodden. Some critics see this as another, more compassionate and therefore “authentic” side of the photographer, a sign of “bad conscience” or thirst for truth as an antidote to the world of illusion exploited by him in his fashion career. But the fact that the photos are being arranged into a sequence during a tasty meal between sips of beer means not only that their content makes no impression on the arrangers, but also that the arrangement is being made for the prosperous to be looked at in similar circumstances: the book is prepared for their coffee tables to add some spice or thrill to their easy-going life.¹³ Because the poor and the violence present in

13 Arrowsmith, *Antonioni*, 111.

their lives are turned into aesthetic objects, there is hardly any difference between the fashion photography we have seen in the film and the destitute photographed here—both kinds of pictures aim at maximisation of surface effect at first eye-contact, which is perhaps most visible in the photographs of butchers splattered all over with blood in front of “Home killed” announcement. That this is the most disposable kind of “social-realism,” which does not have anything to do with internal conflict or the feeling of guilt, is emphasised by the photographer’s decision to end the book with the photos of the couple in the park (they are “very peaceful, very still”). “Yeah, that’s best. Rings truer,” says Ron to this sentimental ending aiming at fake “humanism,” with his instinctive understanding of the truth of the market.

That the book is supposed to end with such “reconciling” image reminds one of what a number of commentators on photography have repeated: that the photographic perception of the world creates a false reality in which everything is reconcilable. The primary untruth of photography is not that it creates an artificial world of fantasy (like fashion), whose artificiality is obvious enough (nobody believes commercials), but that its technical veracity (the photographed object must have been present in front of the lens, it left its trace on the photographic film¹⁴) creates a fake image of reality by replacing it. Photography takes fragments of reality out of the context which gives them meaning, and therefore makes them mute. When the meaning disappears the image becomes neutralised and it can be easily manipulated by being inserted in a different narrative, a different framework. Moreover, while reality is contradictory (there are mutually exclusive things, there are conflicting meanings/narrations which cannot be reconciled), in a photographic representation of it everything can exist side by side with no conflict: the world becomes a collection of indifferent (decontextualised) fragments. And, finally, there is no end to it because a fragmentary collection like that can be infinitely expanded.¹⁵ Taking into consideration that the

14 This is of course true only of pre-digital photographic image of the world to which *Blow-Up* belongs.

15 The contents of this paragraph are by now familiar statements in critical thinking about photography whose most eloquent examples are perhaps Susan

1960s was precisely the decade when (at least in Europe) photography and other visual media made all other representations of reality subservient to their purposes (the leading motif of postmodern theories), the universal repression of the reality by its image sanctioned the non-contradiction principle as the new foundation of the world.

In the world of *Blow-Up*, images, objects, even language get neutralised in this way. Whether it is a propeller in the antiques shop (where it is probably the most modern and streamlined thing standing out against the colonial loot of more or less exotic objects coming from various territories of the former British Empire) with which the photographer does not really know what to do in his studio, or a piece of a broken guitar for which he dives fervently into the crowd of fans but then, after escaping from the club with his trophy, throws it away, the objects have attracting power in one isolated context but lose it completely in another one, which one enters by just turning a corner. Also in language, the principle of contradiction no longer seems to operate: "This is a public place. Everyone has the right to be left in peace," says the girl infuriated by the photographer in the park. And when she comes to retrieve the negatives, he treats her to a story about his "wife": "It's my wife. [...] She isn't my wife, really. We just have some kids. No. No kids. [...] She's easy to live with. No, she's isn't. That's why I don't live with her." Critics often connect the final disappearance of the corpse from the park with the vanishing of the body of the photographer from the last shot of the film, and they try to make sense of this parallelism, but, in a sense, it is the wife's body which is the first to disappear¹⁶ and it is desubstantialised into nonsense: meaningless phrases, contradictory fragments of sentences, free-floating particles of language.

This substitution for and fragmentation of the world brings us back to the most critically celebrated narrative thread in the film: the photographic murder story. By blowing up the photographs of the couple in

Sontag's *On Photography* (London: Penguin, 1979) and John Berger's essay inspired by Sontag's book entitled "Uses of Photography," in his *About Looking* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980).

16 Admittedly, we never see her and therefore there is no certainty that she exists, but the phone call which is supposed to be hers is an answer to an earlier call by the photographer from the phone booth outside his studio which we do hear.

the park the photographer at first notices that the woman, while being embraced by the man, looks attentively into the bushes; so he blows up the fragment of greenery she seems to stare at and finds at first a face of a man, then his hand with a gun. After a moment of elation (he thinks he prevented murder), which is interrupted or perhaps expanded by sexual exploits with unexpected teenage guests (yet another example of narrative discontinuity), he notices something suspicious in the final photographs taken in the park and with more blow-ups he discovers the upper part of what is presumably the corpse of the formerly photographed "boyfriend."

We already related the usual critical take on this story which emphasises epistemological uncertainty. Reality is elusive: one photographs what one takes to be an amorous scene; one blows it up, and it turns out to be a scene of murder; one blows it up further and the scene disappears transforming itself in an abstract pattern of silver halide grains with which a photographic film is covered. In this context, a fragment of an interview with Antonioni is often quoted:

We know that under the revealed image there is another one which is more faithful to reality, and under this one there is yet another, and again another under this last one, down to the true image of that absolute, mysterious reality that nobody will ever see. Or perhaps, not until the decomposition of every image, of every reality.

Therefore, abstract cinema would have its reason for existing.¹⁷

But the director's comment does not really seem to fit what happens in the film, because the photographer's pursuit of truth, as it develops in *Blow-Up*, does not have much to do with depth. Although, by blowing up, he finds photographic traces which were too small to be noticed at first, the photographer very quickly gets to the level of disintegration of the image (abstract dots) beyond which one cannot go. The process shows as the characteristic feature of photography what we have already noted:

17 Michelangelo Antonioni, *The Architecture of Vision: Writings and Interviews on Cinema* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2008), 63.

a photography represents a fact (the object was incontrovertibly there) but not a truth. In order to find the truth, that is, the meaning of the fact (what happened) the photographer does not move deeper *into* the frame but *beyond* the frame. In other words, he has to (re)construct the story, create a narrative, introduce the element of time.¹⁸ This is precisely what he does in the most celebrated sequence of the film: he arranges his photographs into a sequence. In other words, he makes a “film” out of them, complete with some tricks of the cinematic trade, including eye-line match and close-up (a photograph of the woman who stares at the bushes—cut—a photograph of what she sees there: a man—cut—a close-up on what he holds in his hand: a gun).

Yet there *is* perhaps some truth retrievable from the disintegration of photographic reality into the abstract pattern of dots, if we relate it to other cases in which this kind of abstraction appears in *Blow-Up*. An obvious clue here is a comment by Patricia, the wife or girlfriend of Bill, the painter. Regarding the biggest blow-up of the corpse in the park in which the body is on the brink of decomposing into an abstraction, she says: “It looks like one of Bill’s paintings.” We saw two pictures by Bill at the beginning of the film: one is not really an abstraction, it looks rather like a cubist inspired work from which a human figure is slowly emerging. Bill says: “That must be five or six years old. They don’t mean anything when I do them. Just a mess. Afterwards I find something to hold on to, like [he points] that leg. Then it sorts itself out and adds up. It’s like finding a clue in a detective story.” Another picture he shows to the photographer is still in the state of “a mess”: a chaos of monochromatic dots on a white canvas. As many critics have noted, the remark comparing a painting to a detective story constitutes an additional link between Bill’s painting and the photographer’s pictures (and death). It is usually interpreted as pointing to the common problematic that various arts (including of course cinema—the photographer is supposed to represent Antonioni in this context) have to grapple with: primarily the elusive nature of reality and the search for its truth. Without going further into this direction, which, for reasons discussed above (photography replaces reality), I consider unfruitful, one can observe that

18 Berger, “Uses of Photography,” 51.

Patricia's comment is not exactly correct: although the mess of dots she sees on the blown-up photograph reminds her of Bill's paintings, for the painter a mess is the initial state of his paintings, which he later develops into something recognisable (a human figure in the painting we saw), while the "abstract" photograph is the end-product of exactly the opposite process: from the love affair through the murder story to a mess.¹⁹ This is actually a commonplace: painting synthesises, while photography analyses—both technically and intellectually they do not have too much in common. But perhaps they have something in common within the framework of the film, something different than futile search for reality.

Do the abstract dots encountered in *Blow-Up* present to us the zero-level of meaning? Although I think that Bill's comment about painting as a detective story is largely a red herring used to confuse the critics, the painter is not a useless character in the film. On the contrary, his paintings give us an important clue. Not when he delivers his witticism about detective stories, however, but precisely at a moment when everybody's attention is diverted from them by what constitutes the commercial allure of the film. For the second and last time we see Bill's painting (or at least something that looks like Bill's painting) towards the end of the film, when the photographer visits the couple, having returned from the park in which he found the corpse of the man he photographed in the morning. The photographer enters their apartment through the open door and finds the couple making love. We observe them with him for a while and then, at the moment of sexual climax, the camera starts to pan down the red blanket with which they are covered until it reaches its end, and what we see is some blue-gray background densely and irregularly covered with multicoloured little flecks or dots. At first it looks as if it is a carpet, but with the passing of the sexual climax (heard on the soundtrack) the dots gradually become less and less dense. Finally, the

19 The opposition here works also on the aesthetic level. The painter's mess is aesthetically least appealing, while the final painting appeals the most. The photograph of the love scene contains appealing human characters, beautiful light and scenery; the blow ups which show the murder story are less satisfying: they are dark and blurry; and the final abstraction is just a mess.

camera stops and after a cut we see the couple “subsiding.” Thus, “almost didactically,” the abstract pattern of dots is connected with something quite difficult to represent, which at the same time is a crucial component of the world that is shown in the film: intensity (sex, drugs, and rock’n’roll are only some ways of pursuing it).

The connection between art and intense experience is rather obvious, but what is the link between intensity and death within the framework of the film?²⁰ One may note that the corpse, found by the photographer at first in his studio as an image and then as an object in the park, is for him just dead weight. Although he reconstructed how the murder happened, he knows nothing else about it, about its reasons and consequences. For him it is just an outcome of inexplicable (blind, abstract) violence. Moreover, even if confrontation with the corpse as the effect of an unexpected intervention of unfamiliar force seems to shake the photographer out of his usual “cool,” for the viewer this is definitely not the first image of violence in the film, because what one may call “low-key impersonal everyday violence” is omnipresent in the world of *Blow-Up*. From the moment the photographer appears in his studio (having returned from the doss house) he is shown as an out-and-out aggressive narcissist treating everybody (mostly women, but this is the world of fashion photography) as an object which can be manipulated and exploited for his purposes or to fit the whim of the moment (the models, the woman from the park, the teenyboppers, etc.). Moreover, his role in the film is not to serve as some especially obnoxious case, he is just a representative of his world as we can gather watching the behaviour of other people he comes across and who belong to this milieu (the supermodel Verushka, Ron, the girl from the park, etc). Perhaps the most illuminating example of this pattern of behaviour can be seen at the Yardbirds concert where the photographer finds himself while trying to follow the girl from the park he has noticed in the street some time after his photographs were stolen. As usual the photographer forgets the purpose of his being there and “spontaneously” dives into the crowd to

20 Because Antonioni is not a Hollywood film maker and the photographer is not Hannibal Lecter, we can safely disregard the fin-de-siècle cliché that murder might be a source of intense aesthetic emotions.

retrieve a piece of Jeff Beck's broken guitar. But more important is what Beck demonstrates by breaking his guitar to pieces: gratuitous destruction (violence) which is taken for spontaneous behaviour and which is therefore imagined as self-affirming and even rebellious.²¹ The logic behind omnipresence of such "habit" is rather obvious: in the world in which conflict has been repressed and everything is reconcilable, where everything can be replaced with anything else, the only measure of intensity is violence.²² Therefore, when the photographer blows up the image from the park and gets to the point when the corpse disintegrates into an abstract pattern of dots, he reaches the level of the figuratively unrepresentable but omnipresent substance of his reality: sheer substance of violence.

Thus, we are presented with the last²³ and perhaps unexpected meaning of the title *Blow-Up*: the world of struggle was blown up to bits by photography (which was only the first one of the techniques of "simulacra") and in this kind of pulverisation conflict disappeared—it disintegrated into easy-going life in which there is no contradiction between fashion house and doss house. This world, the world of mod London (but not everybody lives in this world) is smooth, modern, luxurious, free (there are no permanent rules), and "cool," but the flip side of this world is free-floating everyday violence which permeates everything. In the world in which there seems to be no place for it (which denies and disowns it), violence not only becomes omnipresent—it is no longer recognised as violence because it becomes *a way of life*. And if the corpse in the park (or rather its accidental photographic trace) is the privileged image in which such violence materialises visually, we can say that its vanishing from the park before it could be "properly" photographed is something more or something different than what it is usually taken to be by the critics: Antonioni's typical abandonment

21 A clear parallel with the photographer's "I hate those bloody bitches"—the models are among his "instruments."

22 This is visible even in the photographer's "social-realist" work: the photographs must be violent, that is, immediately shocking because for him it is the only measure of their "truth."

23 We have already mentioned blown-up photos, blown-up egos, and the atomic bomb.

of the popular cinema narrative perpetrated in order to frustrate the audience and make it think. The disappearance of the dead body is in fact entirely consistent with the ontological status in the world of what the corpse comes to figure: it has to disappear because its presence has nothing to do with the particularity of the park²⁴ or the particularity of the photographed couple.²⁵ What it materialises (pure violence) is everywhere, it infects the entire reality presented to us in the film but remains invisible to its characters.

However, this is perhaps not yet the whole story, because as the film seems to begin twice (the revellers, the doss house),²⁶ it also seems to have two endings: the disappearance of the corpse and the reappearance of the revellers. We have already mentioned the contradictory couple of interpretations of this celebrated second ending, but, whatever value we may attach to them, there is an important problem here. As a number of perspicacious critics noted, if we take the revellers to stand for the society and its socially constructed values/meanings, they are completely unnecessary, because these thematics have already been fully explored in the film.²⁷ But does the scene really repeats the meanings we have already

24 Some interpretations connect the meaning of the corpse with the park as the image of idyllic nature: "It is only later that he discovers, with the retrospective gaze of the artist interpreting his own work, that he has in fact portrayed not the embrace of lovers, but the death of an older man. In short, the fact of death which he had been seeking to evade. Had he seen Poussin or read Panofsky, he would have known that this disillusionment awaits all attempts at pastoral evasion: 'Et in Arcadia ego.' Death resides even in Arcady" (Freccero, 120–21).

25 It was a stroke of genius on Antonioni's part that he reduced the subplot of the couple to the stub we have in the final version of the film. In the original script the "murder story" involved a more developed narrative of the triangle (the middle-aged man, the young woman and her young lover) (Pomerance, 262).

26 Pomerance, *Michelangelo Red Antonioni Blue*, 239.

27 "Much has been made of the clowns' thematic relevance, in that they provide a harbor of illusion for the hero after a fruitless voyage into reality. But precisely this thematic ground provides an even stronger objection to them [...]. Thematically I think that the film is stronger without them, that it makes its points more forcibly. Suppose the picture began with Hemmings coming out of the flophouse with the derelicts, conversing with them, then leaving them and getting into his Rolls. At once it seems more like Antonioni. And suppose it ended (where in fact I thought it was going to end) with the long shot of Hemmings walking away after he has discovered

ingested, yet again hammering them into our heads? Only if we interpret the film in the aforementioned existential-epistemological way in which the critics usually juxtapose the disappearance of the corpse (reality is ungraspable) with the disappearance of the photographer in the last shot.

What if we connect the disappearance in the park to the re-appearance which happens in the same place? Having seen that the body disappeared, the photographer comes across the revellers who play tennis with an invisible ball. This can of course be taken as representing a conventional nature of social reality (in order to play you have to agree to follow the convention, to pretend that the ball exists), but perhaps something else is operating here as well which has bearing on the meaning of the film. The photographer has a camera with him this time (he wanted to photograph the corpse) but it is of no use now: he can photograph “the society,”²⁸ but it is impossible to photograph the invisible ball which animates the players. One may quickly jump here to the conclusion that the ball represents desire, which has been shown in the film as the bane of the mod society chasing after objects which elude them (Nepal, career of a model, freedom in the form of tons of money²⁹), but one has to note that these fantasy scenarios are the result of the already functioning value system of the society, however mutable it may be. In other words, a fantasy scenario propelled by desire always manifests itself in the form of a definite object (e.g. Nepal) which makes sense for a group (e.g. one will be able to lead a balanced life there). This is not what is demonstrated by the game in the park: it is a game which does not make any sense even for its participants and it serves no other purpose than itself. In this sense perhaps it is no accident that the revellers look rather “otherworldly.” Although critics try to locate them realistically and speak about revellers, clowns, students during

that the corpse has been removed. Everything that the subsequent scene supplies would already be there by implication—*everything* — and we would be spared the cloudy symbols of high romance. Again it would be more like Antonioni” (Stanley Kauffmann, “A Year with *Blow-Up*: Some Notes,” in *Focus on Blow-Up*, 75).

28 He has done this in his professional life: the society’s fantasies (fashion) and its “refuse” (the destitute).

29 “I wish I had tons of money. Then I’ll be free,” says the Rolls-Royce driving photographer—yet another example of the non-existence of contradiction.

Rag Week, commedia dell'arte, etc., their white (painted) faces have, in fact, replaced the pallor of the death mask of the “senseless” corpse in the park. But while the dead body was just some enigmatic dead weight one can do nothing with apart from photographing it (but even this turned out to be impossible), the revellers are anything but dead, they are animated by an object which is invisible and which transcends the games of the society we have seen; the society whose idea of itself is “revelry,” but which produced the corpse as its truth.³⁰ It is not accidental that the photographer is the privileged representative of such society: it is a “disillusioned” society which believes only in what can be seen (therefore photographed) and classifies any invisible object as “fiction” (a more learned way of putting it: social construction).³¹ The revellers, however, do not represent this “truth”; in fact, they do not represent any truth at all. What they do is that by repeating the mod world (revelry doubled by revelry), they become its spectral double (another reason for their “otherworldly” appearance), and therefore introduce within it a syncope, its difference from itself, a lack of consistency, a rift incarnated in the impossible object, which is invisible precisely from the point of view of socially constructed reality. They offer this *transcendent* object to the photographer in place of the dead body which disappeared as if to claim that a reality without transcendence is a corpse. Moreover, for the first time in his life the photographer is asked to verify the existence of something which cannot be seen and therefore photographed but which nonetheless animates free action. He has to relinquish the camera to pick up the ball, because he *is* the camera: as many critics noted, his whole contact with the world is mediated by images, by photographs he takes. After the photographer throws the imaginary ball back into the court we no longer see the revellers but only his face which gradually lightens up (smile) as we hear the sound of the non-existent object. It is emphatically not the moment he is *included* into the (social) illusion: we no longer

30 The mod society is of course in the pursuit of the idea of fun, but the fun we see in the film is a rather grim affair: the pleasure trip to the park ends with murder; the people in the club look like mannequins; at the pot party we find Ron on all fours with two joints in his mouth.

31 For instance, the only visible aspect of love is sex, everything else is “discursive fiction.”

see the revellers (“the society”), only the photographer himself, and illusion is something he is a master of anyway. Moreover, he hates both the “bitches” who are used in creating it and the ones for whom it is created, so why would he smile? What he experiences, therefore, must be of a different order: a moment of opening, of transcendence, his realisation that there is another experience of freedom than the one which belongs to his world (“tons of money” and social constructs). For a moment, what he sees is *transfigured* and this is precisely why we cannot see what he sees: for him the world remains the same and, at the same time, it becomes completely different.³² But then the smile fades: he knows that he has to pick up the camera (return to his world) and, after picking it up, he fades from the image. Thus, we are back at the beginning of the film (the same lawn) and the fantasy of this world represented by the image of grass. For us, the grass remains the same but it is also, at the same time, different because we have learned something about it: the image is *potentially* productive. It contains an invisible inconsistency, which manifests itself in the strange feeling that the grass is both too green and not green enough. The ending is thus intentionally ambiguous but not in order to confuse the viewer. The photographer has learned something and so have we, but what will come out of this experience is not known.

32 This transfiguration is inscribed throughout the film on the formal level as the lack of consistency of the look. As a number of formally-minded critics noted, the reality represented in the film is visually constructed in such a way as to foreground a “pure look,” that is, the *difference* between the look of the camera and the look of the main protagonist. Such self-reflexivity on the part of the apparatus is most clearly perceptible when the conventional expectations of the viewer are contradicted or frustrated as in the scene in which the photographer returns to the park in the morning to photograph the corpse which is no longer there: the photographer looks up at something beyond the frame—cut—the shot of moving branches and leaves against the sky, which looks like his point-of-view shot—the camera, without a cut, pans down on him standing motionlessly under the tree and looking ahead (Brunette, 123). This formalist approach, which emphasises self-reflexivity of Antonioni’s film is most interestingly discussed by: Lorenzo Cuccu, *Il discorso dello sguardo: Da “Blow Up” a “Identificazione di una donna”* (Pisa: ETS Editrice, 1990); Marie-Claire Ropars-Wuilleumier “L’espace et le temps dans la narration des années 60: ‘Blow up’ ou le négatif du récit,” in *Michelangelo Antonioni 1966/84*, ed. Lorenzo Cuccu (Rome: Ente Autonomo di Gestione per il Cinema, 1988); Sam Rohdie, *Antonioni* (London: BFI, 1990).

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Sławomir Masłoń

Pożerając oczami „swingujący Londyn”: Powiększenie Antonioniego jako labirynt przemocy

STRESZCZENIE

O *Powiększeniu* Antonioniego, które weszło na ekrany pod koniec 1966 roku, pisze się zwykle, że z jednej strony przedstawia (ekstatycznie i skandalicznie) młodzieżową kulturę „swingującego Londynu”, a z drugiej, że jest traktatem o (wątplych) relacjach pomiędzy rzeczywistością i jej reprezentacją (głównemu bohaterowi wydaje się, że odkrył morderstwo, analizując fotografie, które wcześniej

zrobił). Choć większość krytyków próbuje łączyć te dwa poziomy anegdoty za pomocą egzystencjalnej metafory (najbardziej popularna jest taka: główny bohater, reprezentujący młodą generację, która ma obsesję na punkcie obrazów, napotyka na swej drodze jej największe tabu, śmierć, której nie da się przedstawić), artykuł proponuje mniej górnolotne i bardziej polityczne odczytanie: abstrakcyjny wzór utworzony przez drobinki soli srebra, w który stopniowo przekształca się obraz martwego ciała w serii fotograficznych powiększeń, to sposób na przedstawienie czegoś, co również nie posiada obrazu, a co jest przenikającą wszystko, niedostrzeganą, codzienną przemocą o małym natężeniu, która jest główną siłą napędową rzekomo wyemancypowanego „swingującego” stylu życia.

Sławomir Masłoń

Das „swingende London“ mit Blicken verschlingen: *Blowup* von Antonioni als Labyrinth der Gewalt

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Von dem Antonionis Film *Blowup*, der Ende 1966 in die Kinos gekommen ist, schreibt man in der Regel, dass er einerseits (ekstatisch und skandalös) die jugendliche Kultur des „swingenden Londons“ schildert und andererseits eine Abhandlung über (schwache) Relationen zwischen der Wirklichkeit und deren Repräsentanz (der Protagonist scheint einen Mord entdeckt zu haben als er die früher gemachten Fotografien analysierte) ist. Obwohl die meisten Filmkritiker die beiden Ebenen der Anekdote mittels einer existentiellen Metapher zu verbinden versuchen (die beliebteste lautet: der Protagonist, Vertreter der jungen Generation, die auf Bilder abfährt, trifft auf seinem Wege das größte Tabu der Generation — den Tod, die nicht darstellbar ist), schlägt der Verfasser im vorliegenden Artikel weniger hochtrabende und eher politische Interpretation vor: das Bild von der Leiche, das sich nach einigen Vergrößerungen allmählich in ein abstraktes Muster (dank der Kristalle des Silbernitrats) verwandelt, ist eine Methode, das was kein Bild hat und eine alles durchdringende, unbemerkte, tägliche Gewalt — die die wichtigste Antriebskraft des angeblich emanzipierten Lebensstils im London des „Swinging Sixties“ ist, darzustellen.