

Blow-Up — Blows Up the Reality

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Blow-Up (1966) directed by Michelangelo Antonioni, has been recognized as a masterpiece in world film history. This paper will investigate how *Blow-Up*, this very open text, in the sense of cinematic language constructing meanings as well as an illocutionary act with a word-to-world direction of fit and focus on the representation of the post-WWII Western societies, including the youth subculture in 1960s, the living experiences under urbanization and modernization. Furthermore, Antonioni demonstrated how can filmmaking become a vehicle for proposing a philosophical question on the reality which is still a puzzle to human being over the past half-century and come up with the reflexivity on his career and the media representations he always works on. Antonioni is making his reflexivity and doubting the authenticity of the reproduction and representation of images throughout the film. Instead of regarding camera as the 'all-seeing' device that objectively captured the traces of reality, the director criticized that neither the camera nor the photographic enlargement can enable the seeing of truth. Finally, the profound ending scene would be further analyzed in this paper. The disappearance of corpse and the mock tennis game can be interpreted as the other face of reality. Hence, the reality of human experiences is the coexistence of illusion and presence, and a matter of being and nothingness.

Keywords: Blow-Up, Michelangelo Antonioni, Films studies, Media representation, Reflexivity, Modernism

Blow-Up (1966) was directed by Michelangelo Antonioni as his first international film and the most commercially successful one with \$20million box office at that time. Apart from a well-known Italian filmmaker, Antonioni is also a recognized Avant-grade artist in contemporary film industries. However, his talents didn't receive a mass public support in that golden age of New Hollywood. He once said that his films had always been tremendous commercial failures and himself was considered as a cold director, a sophistic director, and intellectual director by the producers in a television interview in 1980.[1]

Antonioni's film style development implicitly reveals his perception, struggling and reflections on being a director and the relations with the world stage by stage. He begun with the documentary *People of the Po Valley* completed in 1947 focusing on the hardships and problems the ordinary suffering from in his own country. Three years later, he directed his first feature film, *Story of a Love Affair*, tackling with the "crisis of emotions and of moral values" through the Italian bourgeois society. With *Red Desert* (1964), he then switched the focus to the picturing of characters and landscapes. Started from the mid-1960s, Antonioni commenced with more ambitious and inspiring productions

exploring and questioning the cultures and societies[2]; while *Blow-Up* was created in this period and come along with the remarkable success in both commercial and artistic aspects. The emergence of *Blow-Up* is not only a milestone of Antonioni's career that attracted widespread attention to his films, but also causes reverberations in the film industry.

Blow-Up was inspired by the short story "Las babas del diablo" (translated as "Blow-Up") written by the Argentinian writer Julio Cortázar. The idea of a crime discovered by making an enlargement of photograph in the short story was then borrowed as the main story line of the film. The protagonist, Thomas (David Hemmings) is a successful young fashion photographer, at the same time working for a documentary book about life in London. One day, he wanders into a park and takes several photographs of a couple dating—a young woman with an old man. The film reaches a climax when Thomas makes the photographic enlargement on those pictures taken in the park and he believes that he has accidentally captured a murder. However, it's ended with an unresolved mystery that Thomas once sees and touches the corpse but it disappears few hours later when he returns to the murder scene with the camera. Ironically, there's no evidence for what Thomas believes. The only thing left is a doubt on the nature of reality, on what we used to believe in.

Antonioni's films are worth watching and inspiring for the spectators to rethink on those people take for granted, especially the cultural and social phenomenon. In this paper, I would like to investigate how *Blow-Up*, this very open text, in the sense of cinematic language constructing meanings as well as an illocutionary act with a word-to-world direction of fit[3], and focus on the representation of the post-WWII Western societies. Then, I will explore how can filmmaking become a vehicle for proposing a philosophical question on the reality which is still a puzzle to human being over the past half-century and come up with the reflexivity on his career and the media representations he always works on. *Blow-Up* is hence far beyond our ordinary concepts of film for entertainments, but exits as a remarkable artwork that transcend the ravages of time.



Figure 1: *Blow Up* by bswise is licensed under [CC BY-NC-ND 2.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.0/).

Representation of the post-WWII Western Societies

'I hope nobody's going to say that Blow-Up is a typically English film. All the same time, I hope nobody's going to say it's Italian, either.'[4]

Although *Blow-Up* was intentionally filmed in London, Antonioni never wanted to make a film about London.[5] What being represented are closely related to other western countries since they were experiencing the rapid cultural and social changes under the influences of globalization, industrialized capitalism and urbanizations after the WWII. Though the Great Britain did have its significant role in the post war period, the shared experiences in western societies cannot be neglected, including the Mod subculture and a sense of distraction under urbanization and modernization.

Mod: the youth subculture in 1960s

From costumes to soundtracks in *Blow-Up*, the cultural atmosphere of Mod is explicitly portrayed. Mod is the most significant youth subculture in 1960s, began in London and spread throughout the West as part of the Pop movement. The scenes can be easily referred to the Swinging London that indicated the cultural revolution with a new mindset in behavior, lifestyle and morality among the young stylists, artist or musician. For instance, those miniskirts and sharping colored clothing with geometric patterns worn by the models and the white Levis' jeans worn by Thomas, are all significant for the Mods; while the Carnaby Street boutiques, live house and discos are typical of the mid-1960s pop culture in an urbanized and capitalized metropolis. Furthermore, the soundtracks of rock (the Yardbirds "Stroll On") and contemporary jazz (Herbie Hancock) Antonioni selected shows the meticulousness and sensibilities to the milieu as a professional artist and director. As mentioned, Antonioni consciously makes use of different cinematic elements to gives a sense of authenticity and associate with that historical situation.

Meanwhile, the protagonist perfectly fits in this narrative. Such a modish photographer who is born talented, driving a Rolls-Royce, terribly admired and yearned by the young generations.[6] It's plausible to make a linkage between Thomas and the best known and influential photographer of Swinging London, David Bailey who worked for Vogue and directed few documentaries. So, if we move further to the cultural and social context, the protagonist can be considered convincingly representative for the 1960s, an era immersed in liberalism and modernism— *'a life as regulated as a ceremony although he claims to know no other than law but anarchy.'* [7]

Antonioni adopts a relatively neutral or positive stance on the new generations through the media representation, instead of criticizing them that most of the last generation did. This kind of youth-driven cultural revolution can be regarded as a stepping out from the haze of the WWII. Going through the gradual economic recovery in the Western societies with a decade of austerity, they finally come up with a period of optimism and hedonism preferring freedom and excitement. As Antonioni mentioned (1967), the young generation were committed in their own way with love and peace, and those who embraced hatred and slaughter was having no right to judge them.[8]

Distraction: A failure of communication

Apart from the Mod, Antonioni has depicted the other side of the societies in the stage of urbanization and modernization. There's a kind of alienation emerged under that swinging, changing and 'progressive' environment. The metropolitan experiences are much different from the country life that always get along with the same group of people, and that is relatively plain with less materialistic satisfaction. An effective social interaction seems to be hardly sustained, while *Blow-Up* is demonstrating a corresponding way of life as distraction.

Thomas, the protagonist never finishes anything. Started from the very beginning that he comes out from the doss house and decides to go back to his studio, he was distracted by the mimes on the street. Even when he tries to tell Ron his gruesome discovery about the murder, distractions occur. The first time was sidetracked by the sexual romp with the two young ladies while the second one time was interrupted by a model. In the film, distraction frequently happened.

Besides, the most illustrative scene on an invalid communication must be that of Thomas and Patricia, wife of his neighbor, Bill. Thomas wants to talk about the murder when Patricia enters his studio, and she wants to talk about her troubles with her marriage, however, none of them is intending to listen on each other. Patricia appears in the scene and asks Thomas "*Were you looking for something just now?*", but Thomas simply skips the question and asked whether she had ever think of leaving Bill. After her short answer, he soon moved to the topic that he saw a man killed this morning after her short answer. The soulless conversation is then continued for only few minutes without sticking to either topic.

According to Searle (1998), communication is about whether the speaker's intentions can be recognized by the hearer. It is summarized with the three steps of recognizing the utterance meaning, speaker's meaning and his communication intention. In *Blow-Up*, Thomas and Patricia's speech acts are both getting to these conditions, but they still can't communicate even superficially. Antonioni is pushing the question to a further stage and indicates that the hearer's intention to communicate are equally decisive. As none of them are willing or at least pretending to understand each other, they only talk but do not listen. The static dialogues between typify the depriving of a sustainable social interaction along with the rising subjectivity and impacts of distraction. What Antonioni has filmed, is that collective experiences of alienation in the era he lived.

Questioning the Nature of Reality

I'm really questioning the nature of reality. This is an essential point to remember about the visual aspects of the film, since one of its chief themes is "to see or not to see properly the true value of things". [9]

Apart from portraying the post war Western societies, Antonioni is also questioning our conventional perceptions of the world we live in and giving a punch on us. Making the spectators to reflect on the invisible but complex ontology of social reality and the ways of life that we simply take for granted. *Blow-Up* is related to such flashes and perplexities about 'truth'.

Photographic Truth and Reflexivity

Photography has been developed and spread though in Europe since the 19th century with the dominating discourse of positivism. Camera was regarded as the 'all-seeing' device that objectively captured the traces of reality, which can be called the myth of 'photographic truth'. However, is this the 'true value' of photography? Antonioni is thus making his reflexivity and doubting the authenticity of the reproduction and representation of images.

First of all, Antonioni is putting the camera and the photographer, which are fundamental to the visual images productions however are usually and supposed to be off screen, on the screen. He is intentionally conveying this kind of reflexive practices to the spectators, placing "photographic truth" to a problematic position.

Furthermore, the documentary photobook Thomas and Ron working on and firstly appeared in the film during their first meeting in the restaurant, was another critical object worth mentioning. Antonioni makes the cinematic narrative impressive. The black and white photos with the sense of historical and realistic are given some close-up shots. The poverty-stricken bodies, layabouts, alcoholics and the despair on people's face in the doss house comes to my eyes one by one, clearly. These thus had given me a realist impression that these are the hardships people suffering at that time and the photobook is supposed to record their life and attempts to arouse others' actions with sympathies. However, my illusion is soon negated with Thomas proposing to use the peaceful photo of the couple he'd taken in the park as the ending of the book, which Ron immediately agreed on and said '*That's best. It rings truer*'. Antonioni purposefully indicates, that there's no merely objective truth. Even what we used to considered as reality are socially constructed, constructed by the one who controls the recourses or the ideological apparatus, while some are always categorized as taboo and neutralized, in order to ensure the stability of social structure and power relations. Indeed, visual images can always be deceptive.

In this media era, we are less likely being capable to see the true values of things. Although we are equipped with more and more advanced technologies, we can never be positioned in the God's eye. Thus, 'all-seeing' is impossible to be realized as human is only the mortals being with tons of limitations. It's comprehensible that we have the thirst for seeing things more closely and more accurate. Nevertheless, once the object is enlarging too much, it turns out to be decomposed and disappeared. Neither the camera nor the photographic enlargement can enable the seeing of truth.

The Disappearance of Corpse and the Mock Tennis Game—The Other Face of Reality

The reality of human experiences is the coexistence of illusion and presence, and a matter of being and nothingness. In the contemporary world, we embrace science as rational and expressive. But there are always institutional facts we can hardly explain with the scientific knowledge such as our social system, money and government. They are always about the intervene of mediation such as language, images and social power. The ambiguity of perception is investigated in the film under both modernism and postmodernism context. He didn't take our illusion of experiences and the presence mutually exclusive. In *Blow-Up*, the existence of presence as a direct sensitivity is suggested, like the moment Thomas touches the corpse and the physical contacts among the characters. On the other hand, he proposes a sense of nothingness in our reality which is represented by the mock tennis game, the vanished dead body, the uncertainty with the images captured by Thomas and the photographer himself vanished from the screen at last. Hence, neither

a probe into the interpersonal relationship was put forward, but the relationship between an individual and reality the only theme matters in *Blow-Up*.

Antonioni then creates a profound ending that the photographer knowing how to play with an imaginary ball, which can be treated as a way handling the world. The search for visual truth is sometimes dangerous, it possibly leads to a kind of madness and disorientation like what Thomas had come across. Reality has its fluidity and just appear for an instant. We can never capture the complete picture of it, no matter what we use. Instead of forcibly making everything concrete, why don't we treat it as if it were imaginary? Illusion and nothingness, is also part of the nature of reality.

Conclusion

'Places are important. But Blow-Up's story could have happened anywhere'[10]

Antonioni's *Blow-Up* is definitely a great film transcending the restriction of time and space. That's how the film can tell a story about the past, at the same time closely related to our contemporary world. The cinematic language he used is capable to show a sense of abstractness, trying to present those difficult to be spoken. It's interesting that Antonioni once said that *Blow-Up* is perhaps like Zen, the moment we explained it, we betrayed it. And this reminds me on what Baudrillard has written about the modern media images: 'if they fascinate us so much it is not because they are sites of the production of meaning and representation – this would not be new – it is on the contrary because they are sites of the disappearance of meaning and representation, sites in which we are caught quite apart from any judgement of reality.....'[11] It's impossible to correctly decode every single part of *Blow-Up* since it's only an interpretation. There's should be somethings that only the director himself possesses. But at least, I've seen the mystery of reality, with an appropriate blowup.

Notes

1. Seymour Chatman, Antonioni or, the surface of the world (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985), p.1
2. Michelangelo Antonioni, The Architecture of Vision Writings and Interviews on Cinema (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007) p. 389-390
3. Searle, John R., 'How Language Works: Speech as a Kind of Human Action', Mind, Language and Society. (New York: Basic Books, 1998) p. 135-161
4. A quote by Michelangelo Antonioni said to Sarah Miles and his interpreter while he was filming *Blow-Up*. Michelangelo Antonioni(author), Sandra Wake(ed.), Modern Film Script: *Blow-Up*. (London: Lorrimer Publishing, 1971) p. 15
5. Michelangelo Antonioni, The Architecture of Vision Writings and Interviews on Cinema (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007) p. 90

6. In the scene that Thomas arguing with Jane in the park, there's a dialogue by Thomas 'You know, most girls would pay me to photograph them.'
7. Michelangelo Antonioni(author), Sandra Wake(ed.), *Modern Film Script: Blow-Up*. (London: Lorrimer Publishing, 1971) p. 15
8. Michelangelo Antonioni, *The Architecture of Vision Writings and Interviews on Cinema* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007) p. 150
9. Michelangelo Antonioni(author), Sandra Wake(ed.), *Modern Film Script: Blow-Up*. (London: Lorrimer Publishing, 1971) p. 14
10. Michelangelo Antonioni, *The Architecture of Vision Writings and Interviews on Cinema* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007) p. 298
11. Jean Baudrillard, *The Evil of Demon Images*, (Sydney: University of Sydney, 1988) p.29

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