Blowup, Film Theory, and the Logic of Realism

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1. Introduction

Film poses a unique problem for aesthetics by virtue of its historical novelty. Considering the broad overlap between film and more traditional arts such as narrative and drama, we might question whether a separate aesthetic theory for film is really necessary. But a theory of film is required to the extent that film can be justified as a distinct aesthetic mode. Formally, cinema can be identified fairly simply as the display of moving images upon a screen. Aesthetically, the question is considerably more complicated. Aesthetics, of course, is centrally concerned with questions of form, but it also involves our reception of those forms, which introduces an anthropological dimension.

Eric Gans, following André Bazin, has linked the invention of film to the desire for realism(1)—a notoriously problematic term in aesthetics. My goal is to try to understand the logic of realism, which I agree with Gans is central to film aesthetics. In order to do so, it will be necessary to begin with the most basic question of visual images, considering the distinction between the visual and verbal, as well the role of perception in meaning. I then move to the more historically specific question of photographic and film images. Finally, I examine the problem of film realism as exemplified in Michelangelo Antonioni's film *Blowup*.

2. Image and Word

Film, like painting, is essentially visual in nature. Historically, of course, almost all films are accompanied by sound, even so-called silent films. But it's possible to

have a film without sound, while a film without images is by definition not a film at all. How do images mean, and what is the aesthetic of the image? Within the context of human culture, an image is a sign or signifier (I use the two terms synonymously) and can be approached in semiotic terms. Understood thus, the relevant distinction is between the visual image and the word, the figural and the linguistic. What are the significant differences between visual and verbal signs? This seemingly obvious distinction proves surprisingly difficult to pin down.

The most immediate difference between words and images is that images physically resemble that to which they refer, while words do not. C.S. Peirce classifies signs as iconic, indexical, and symbolic ("Logic as Semiotic"). The iconic sign appears to be "natural," to have a relationship with its referent which is instinctively understood. Signs in airports and international locations therefore often use line drawings rather than words. The symbolic sign, on the other hand, bears a purely conventional relationship to its referent. Terrence Deacon, the biological anthropologist, develops Peirce's distinction in a sophisticated way, arguing for the radical difference between animal communication systems and human language (59-101). For Deacon, what distinguishes the symbolic from the iconic is not simply the lack of physical resemblance between sign and referent, but rather the way that the meaning of a symbolic sign depends upon its relationship to the larger language system—which is why teaching chimpanzees language proves to be so difficult and time-consuming. It's the classic hermeneutic problem: in order to understand individual signs, one must understand the system of signs; but one can learn the system only through the interpretation of individual instances. The brain of a child, Deacon points out, is uniquely adapted to resolving this difficulty; or rather, language is uniquely adapted to human ontogeny (102-142).

Deacon argues that symbolic reference is qualitatively different from iconic or indexical reference, a claim that would seem to support a primary distinction between words and images, insofar as images are iconic while words are symbolic. But there are significant exceptions here. Words may be directly mimetic, as in the case of onomatopoeia, words that imitate sounds. And not all images are mimetic; even an iconic image may have symbolic aspects that are conventional and require knowledge of cultural codes. An iconic sign, therefore, may be simultaneously symbolic. Furthermore, Deacon points out, the same sign can sometimes be interpreted as iconic, indexical, or symbolic depending upon the context.

At the originary scene, Gans hypothesizes that the first sign is linguistic: a gesture, perhaps accompanied by a word.(2) As a gesture, it may have had an indexical or mimetic dimension, as with American Sign Language, which is symbolic but can sometimes be interpreted iconically or indexically by non-speakers. Formally, the first sign begins as an indexical gesture of appropriation, but when aborted it is

then intended and recognized in a revolutionary way. The revolution is in the intention and interpretation, rather than the form as such.

Gans associates iconic signs with what he calls the imperative form of culture, in which figural representations (e.g., an image or a mask) are used within a ritual context to summon the presence of the sacred being (*End of Culture* 112-120). On the evolution of signs, he writes,

the formal ostensive sign that represents the central object in its presence is inadequate to substitute for it in a reproduction of the scene. The absent object is "supplemented" by material elements that reproduce something of the sensuous effect of the originary crisis. The temporal-peripheral elements of music and dance recreate, as Girard has remarked, the rhythm of the*agon*, the "fearful symmetry" of the potential conflict that must be deferred. Ritual also includes synchronic representation of the central being itself in drawing, mask, statue. However formalized, these are material figures, not pure signs. They are, to use C. S. Peirce's term, *iconic*, resembling their referent in more or less detail. (*Chronicles* #86)

Iconic and indexical signs in ritual are not *purely* symbolic. Music, dance, and miming recreate the effects of mimetic crisis and resolution, inducing a more or less conditioned response. The linguistic sign, on the other hand, is not an imitation but a representation, a deferral of the mimetic tendencies of indexical signs.(3)

At the same time, however, we must recognize that the iconic and indexical signs of ritual are essentially cultural; bird songs or mating dances, for example, are another category altogether, instinctual rather than conscious/intentional in the human sense. Moreover, the "material figures" of ritual are sacred, the salient feature of human language. Significantly, the first clear tokens of human culture are iconic (*and* symbolic) figures such as the cave paintings. All human signs, whether figural or linguistic, are symbolic.

The broad overlap between the iconic, indexical, and symbolic in human culture, right from its origin, leads to the conclusion that the difference between images and words, the figural and the linguistic, is one of degree rather than kind. We must remember that all signs have a figural dimension (what Derrida calls the materiality of the signifier), as well as a linguistic or symbolic dimension. The distinction is historical rather than essential or originary, and must be approached as such.

3. Theory of the Image in Western Culture

The historic association of images with illusion or deceit in Western culture goes back to the Hebrew religious and Greek philosophical traditions. In the Hebrew tradition, the second commandment forbids "graven images" of God or any of his

creatures. Biblical scholars inform us that this prohibition is meant to prohibit the use of physical images in worship and thus distinguish the Hebrew religion. But there are many apparently anthropomorphic descriptions of God in the Hebrew Bible, and we may well ask how they are different from “graven images.” Why are verbal representations of God acceptable while visual or graven images are not?

Images are both ostensive and mimetic, and thus seemingly more sacred and dangerous. Iconic and indexical signs are associated with ritual and magic. The Hebrew rejection of images is thus a rejection of superstition and sacrifice in favor of a more broadly ethical form of religion. In historical terms, the Mosaic revelation, including the second commandment, enabled and expressed the liberation of the Hebrews from Egypt and its cultus.(4) As a temporarily nomadic people, the Hebrews had a practical interest in minimizing their attachment to specific buildings, locations, statues, or images. The word, after all, is more easily reproduced than the physical image or thing, a principle which is the economic basis of all language.

The second commandment derives from the revelation at the burning bush. When Moses asks God for his name, God replies simply, “I AM THAT I AM” (Ex. 3.14).(5) This sentence reveals God as transcendent, not tied to any physical location, manifestation, sign, or even name, thus justifying the second commandment. God is utterly free in absolute terms, and specifically in regard to our conceptions and expectations of him. God’s statement is a tautology, a repetition of the simple statement, “I am.” God continues, “Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you.” God in effect refuses to name himself, asserting simply that the bare fact of his existence should suffice for our curiosity about his identity (notwithstanding his concession to practical human needs by subsequently naming himself as “The Lord [Yahweh] God of your fathers” [Ex. 3.15]). In semiotic terms, the Mosaic revelation implies a problem with the very idea of referential meaning, primarily in regard to God but by extension with all signs (which, by our hypothesis of the origin, derived from the first sign, the name of God). God exists indubitably, but cannot be named or represented. Meaning is not only or primarily referential, because signs (both images and words) are never fully adequate to their transcendent meaning. This revelation has far-reaching implications; in Gans’s words, “it provides the ethical principle that will eventually permit the emergence of modern social systems” (*Science and Faith* 60). The scenic center of the ritual order is emptied out of figures (typically controlled by a priestly hierarchy), allowing a subversive freedom for those on the periphery. Of course, in practice, Judaism was and remains a deeply ritualized religion. The prophetic tradition and then Christianity are the main bearers of Mosaic iconoclasm. Meaning, in this tradition, is primarily social and ethical (and thus flexible, determined by contingent human needs) rather than fixed by law and ritual.

In the originary hypothesis, the sign ostensively refers to the central object, an appetitive object such as the slain body of a large mammal. The central object, however, is already the center of everyone's mimetic attention; so more specifically, the sign *reveals* the significance of the object for the community: its sacral status, its inaccessibility to appropriation. Neither the sign nor the central object by itself is enough to generate the meaning, which is a function of the actual event. (Members of the nascent human community not present at the originary scene would presumably have to learn the sign through the ritual re-enactment of the event.) The central object is ultimately inadequate to its spiritual meaning. This lack is what both enables and motivates the sparagmos. There is a significant disjunction between what we perceive, the material object, and the meaning; in the Mosaic revelation this distinction becomes another version of the sacred-profane dichotomy. Material figures of God are blasphemous and must be rejected, in some cases destroyed, in order to reveal transcendent meaning. Even the name of God, Yahweh, is regarded as too sacred to pronounce or fully spell out.

Physical perception, essential for survival, evolved for millions of years before the birth of language. The capacity for linguistic understanding, essential for the survival of the human community, is the newcomer in evolutionary terms (which is why we need such big brains, otherwise anomalous). Perception and understanding are in tension, insofar as perception by itself doesn't lead to meaning, yet is its necessary ground. Wittgenstein points out that it's possible to *see* the world differently (193e). But in that case, *we* change, not the world. Meaning is not an objective "picture" of facts but a social phenomenon. Ultimately, perception is governed by understanding, and not the other way around.

My analysis suggests that the anthropological significance of the second commandment is grounded not on the distinction between visual and verbal signs, but rather between physical signs and transcendent meaning. It's more or less an accident of history that this originary opposition tends to be expressed in terms of image-versus-word. The word, by virtue of its physical difference from its referent, resists the idolatrous tendency to collapse meaning and reference.

In his conversion on the road to Damascus, Paul hears a voice, a *word*, which he recognizes as Christ, while he is physically blinded by a divine light. His physical blinding is the necessary condition for his spiritual insight that Christ is the Lord. Paul, in effect, was focused on the scandalous *appearance* of the crucified Jesus, which blinded him to the transcendent meaning, the resurrected Christ. In his letters and preaching, Paul constantly calls attention to this dichotomy, sometimes at the expense of Jesus's ethical teachings.

The persistent danger of idolatry reflects the compelling nature of desire, which

attaches itself to physical incarnations and thereby seeks a final answer to the problem of transcendence. The cross presents a semiotic model in which the sign is destroyed along with the attached desires in order to reveal or create a transcendent meaning that remains beyond direct perception and immediate desire.

My analysis of the visual-verbal distinction also largely applies to the philosophical tradition from Plato to Descartes and beyond. The flickering images in Plato's allegory of the cave can be contrasted to the Socratic verbal dialectic which leads to truth. Likewise for Descartes reason is a more reliable guide than the senses. But as with Hebrew iconoclasm, the underlying problem is semiotic, the relationship between sign and meaning. From a religious perspective this gap can be overcome only through faith. For philosophers, reason is the answer, although the history of philosophy is the gradual recognition of the limits of metaphysics, that is, its own limitations. Derrida, at the end of this tradition, arrives at the claim that Judaism begins with, that the sign is never adequate to its meaning.

As we have seen, images are often seen as threatening in the Western tradition because they are ostensive and thus closer to the sacred. But the ostensive nature of the image applies to all art. The meaning of an artwork is its effect, not its argument. Art is revelatory rather than declarative; it doesn't "argue" in the same sense as metaphysics or make "truth" claims. Even when an artwork, such as a novel, includes characters that make philosophical arguments, their significance must be analyzed in terms of reception.

The image seems to naturalize, which is why theories of ideology, whether Marxist or psychoanalytic, typically use visual metaphors. Ironically, a parallel philosophical tradition uses visual metaphors to describe truth, as for example with Heidegger's *aletheia*, unveiling, taken from Plato—a metaphor which works well with art, if not metaphysics.

Art, in contrast to philosophy, openly admits its fictional status. Didactic theories of art insist on the value of illusion as a more or less necessary pathway to truth. The Romantics sought to overcome the dichotomy between appearance and reality with a symbol whose appearance takes on a mysterious depth, a *schöner Schein* or "beautiful semblance." Art reveals a higher truth that is inaccessible to literal representation. Philosophers such as Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Derrida place a whole new value on art. For them, a sign that openly admits its fictional status is more honest and therefore "true."

4. Realism and Empiricism

Realism can be traced back to ancient and medieval comedy on the one hand and the New Testament on the other. Comedy, however, fails to treat ordinary people seriously, and the New Testament relies on supernatural elements. The drama of Marlowe and Shakespeare represents a quantum leap forward in realism, although lower class people are still typically comic characters. The decisive influence on the development of modern realism is undoubtedly the Protestant Reformation. Each individual, in his or her relationship to God, became worthy of serious literary representation, and spiritual autobiographies by figures such as Bunyan provided an important model for early English novelists.(6)

Equally important, especially for film realism, is the empirical tradition: Bacon, Locke, and Hume, leading into logical positivism. These philosophers claim that experience is the surest guide to truth, which they insist on demystifying in referential terms, things we can actually point to in the world. Locke and Hume reverse the whole philosophical tradition up to that point by turning to that which previous philosophers found so dangerous and deceptive: the senses. Empiricism contradicts the ancient hostility towards images and appearances, but it operates by the same logic. The underlying problem is still the relationship between the sign and meaning. The attack on appearances in the Platonic dialogues reflects the understanding that meaning transcends appearances. Plato's optimism is that through a dialectical process of abstraction we can pierce through those mimetic appearances to an ideal reality. In empiricism, this same iconoclastic skepticism towards appearances is applied to Plato's *eidos*. To get at meaning, we need to go back to material reality, to which our senses are a more or less reliable guide. Existing words and concepts are a faulty superstructure built upon the ground of physical reality. In its most rigorous forms, empiricism denies the reality of the sacred. Empiricism is a kind of semiotic literalism, a reaction to the medieval tendency towards allegory. Signs must refer to empirical reality or they are not really meaningful.

Modern literary realism, as it's usually defined, begins with the novel. As with empiricism, one of the primary characteristics is fidelity to experiential reality, especially contemporaneous social reality, that is, the rapidly evolving free market. And again as with empiricism, realism defines itself in opposition to the past, in this case, romance or allegory.

Novelistic realism is a highly self-conscious mode: it reflects upon its own authority and its audience. The author commonly addresses the audience in asides and prefaces, anticipating their objections and reactions. This self-consciousness expresses its theoretical or anthropological dimension: the attempt to understand

the question of meaning in order to liberate itself from the remnants of the medieval cosmos, tied to ritual structures of hierarchy and sacrifice, and to find new models of meaning more appropriate to a market society. This attempt parallels in empiricism the construction of scenes of human origin by Hobbes and Locke.

In practice, narrative realism is an investigation of the role of desire in human relations. In the modern period, desire is liberated from the old ritual and hierarchical structures. A market society, as Adam Smith recognized, incorporates the dynamic but dangerous power of desire as a constructive force, instead of trying to suppress it, as in traditional societies. Because the market runs on desire, it becomes necessary to understand desire, which often means critiquing and demystifying it. Girard's theory of mimetic desire, of course, grew out of his analysis of the realistic novel. At the same time, the examination of desire in the novel is not just a theoretical question, but also a practical one of succeeding in a market society.

5. Photographic and Film Realism

On the one hand, photographs are the most mimetic of all representations, the most faithful to our physical perception of the world. Yet on the other, photography appears the least mimetic in the Girardian sense: there is no one who imitates reality, no one who mediates between our self and the reality represented. Bazin comments,

> No matter how skillful the painter, his work was always in fee to an inescapable subjectivity. The fact that a human hand intervened cast a shadow of a doubt over the image. (12)
>
> For the first time [with photography], between the originating object and its reproduction there intervenes only the instrumentality of a nonliving agent. For the first time an image of the world is formed automatically, without the creative intervention of man. (13)

The photograph is an indexical sign, a physical impression of reality like a fossil or a relic, and, as such, not obviously a sign at all; it seems almost to collapse into perception. To borrow Matthew Schneider's words, the photograph fulfills "what we might call the originary imperative to minimize representational deferral, to transcend the sign and become the thing itself" (*Chronicles* #132). The photograph seemingly removes the (mimetic) mediator and achieves the objectivity of a "natural sign."

For Bazin, eliminating the intervention of "a human hand" is simply a fortuitous development in the psychological impulse towards realism. But as Gans recognizes

insightfully, the exclusion of the mediator is the primary motivation. He writes,

> the horizon of realism . . . is not to reproduce the "real," the phenomenal stuff of human experience, with utmost accuracy, but to do so *independently of human desire.* This realist horizon defines the heroic tale of the high-cultural artist who learns painstakingly to copy the nuances of appearance by deferring or "sublimating" his own desiring relationship to the object. (*Chronicles* #86)

> The unspoken motivation behind the nineteenth-century drive to reproduce sound and image is the desire to liberate representation from the triangular relationship with the Other-Subject. (*Chronicles* #228)

Underlying realism and empiricism is the realization that signs and their associated concepts are mediated, conditioned by desire and resentment; hence the skepticism of realism, the attempt to get at what is real. Minimizing the distortions of desire expresses the iconoclastic, desacralizing thrust of realism: do away with false romantic dreams. Represent the truth, no matter how distasteful or sordid.

Ironically, then, the photograph seems more sacred than other forms of representation to theoreticians like Bazin. He writes,

> Only the impassive lens, stripping its object of all those ways of seeing it, those piled-up preconceptions, that spiritual dust and grime with which my eyes have covered it, is able to present it in all its virginal purity to my attention and consequently to my love. (15)

Stripping off the "spiritual dust and grime," "all those ways of seeing it," doesn't demystify the object but actually reveals its heretofore hidden sacrality. Roland Barthes describes the photograph in similar terms. The photograph, for him, presents an undeniable reality; it "is indifferent to all intermediaries: it does not invent; it is authentication itself. . . . Every photograph is a certificate of presence" (86). Barthes contrasts the photograph with writing, which is unable to give him that certainty: "It [writing] is the misfortune of language not able to authenticate itself" (85).

Walter Benjamin, in contrast, argues that mechanical reproduction strips away the quasi-sacred aura of the art object. But Gans points out,

> Walter Benjamin's famous discussion of the loss of *aura* misses the essential point that the *mechanical reproduction* of the referent's own trace is the direct heir to the sacred aura of the object itself. Because it preserves a trace of its object, a photograph has *more* aura than a painting. (*Chronicles* #86)

What the photograph doesn't reveal, however, is how and why the object became sacred in the first place. Rather, the photo pays homage to what it reproduces.

Gans argues that because the technology of photography is based on a mechanical impression of reality, it has a fundamentally different aesthetic from traditional arts like painting, which contrast the sign-image with "an imaginary reality wholly dependent on it" (*Chronicles* #86). While the invention of photography impacts the development of modern painting, it "cannot occupy the same esthetic terrain," since they function in different ways. Film, on the other hand, introduces a temporal dimension that leads inevitably into narrative, which does create an imaginary world. Film thus competes, successfully, with literature and drama. The narrative possibilities of film allow for the exploration of anthropological issues such as desire and the sign. Film develops a realistic narrative mode comparable to the novel, in a form which, as spectacle, tends towards popular, mass art.(7)

How can we reconcile the two contradictory impulses of realism: iconoclastic yet sacralizing? The unifying element is the question of meaning, which realism wants to understand (and hence critique) as well as answer, in the sense of providing meaning. The critical rejection of romance and idealism may itself provide a kind of catharsis. But demystification sometimes takes the form of parody or quotation, which is often more affectionate and nostalgic than critical. Realism may also pay respectful homage to the sacrificial reality of the past (e.g., Carl Dreyer's *Joan of Arc*) while also critiquing the society which sanctions such sacrifice (see Gans, *Chronicles* #228). Realist works often represent new mechanisms of transcendence appropriate to a market society, for example the rags to riches story, in which hard work and intelligence provide the road to success in a society open to talent. Of course, realism has a tendency to collapse back into melodrama or comedy; Dickens is a good example here. To a large extent, the limits of realism are the limits of art itself, which can never fully theorize its own workings without ceasing to be art and turning into theory. The most developed and self-conscious form of realism explores its own limits and deconstructs its own aesthetic, as with *Blowup*, which, in doing so, enacts the passage to a modernist and postmodernist aesthetic.

6. *Blowup*

Michelangelo Antonioni's film classic *Blowup* consciously addresses the fundamental problem of realism, the relationship between sign and meaning.(8) The film works on two main levels, as narrative and as a theoretical reflection upon the epistemology of film. Antonioni began making films like *Il Grido* within the Italian neorealist film tradition, but he then made his name with modernist/postmodernist works like *L'Avventura* and *Blowup*. In an essay from 1964, he writes,

> During the post war period there was a great need for truth, and it seemed possible to photograph it from street corners. Today, neorealism is obsolete, in the sense that we aspire more and more to create our own reality. This criterion is even applied to film of a documentary character and to newsreels, most of which are produced according to a preconceived idea. Not cinema in the service of reality, but reality in the service of cinema.
>
> There is the same tendency in feature films. I have the impression that the essential thing is to give a film an almost allegorical tone. This means that every person moves in an ideal direction, which is irrationally in agreement with everyone else's direction, until a meaning is formed that *also* includes the story being told, but that goes beyond it in intensity and freedom of solutions. (62-63)

Here and in his other writings, Antonioni suggests that meaning is discovered in the creative process rather than being determined by a preformed authorial intentionality. The mimesis of empirical reality is subordinated to a collaborative process involving the audience and actors. Modernism follows realism in questioning the role of the artist as the origin of meaning, reflecting the larger problem of cultural authority in market society. Gans comments,

> The realist esthetic includes for the first time a critical model of its implied audience, whose situation with respect to the scene of representation it attempts to redefine . . . . The esthetic experience of the work becomes a critique of universal cultural assumptions such as the mediating narrator or the formal self-substantiality of the painted universe. (*Originary Thinking* 179)

To say, as does Balzac, "All is true!" disclaims the author's responsibility and shifts the problem of authority onto reality. Antonioni, however, suggests that empirical reality is not an unproblematic ground for meaning because the "facts" always stand in need of interpretation, which he recognizes as a creative, collaborative process.

Antonioni never abandons his commitment to realism, however. In an interview from 1969, he laments that most American directors do not "say what they really believe," preferring instead "to manipulate cinema" and use "facile effects" (316). Furthermore, he says,

> if someone creative wants to help himself, then he should look outside, go down into the street and mingle with other people. It's the only way to grasp the essence of truth, to make films that have that flavor of truth, which cinema needs today more than in the past. (317)

The concern with the "flavor of truth" demonstrates his engagement with a

specifically human reality. Because of his artistic commitments, Antonioni is a natural figure for examining the transition from realist to modernist film aesthetics.

Blowup was released in 1966 and is set in the youthful “mod” scene of 1960’s London, complete with sex, drugs, and rock ‘n’ roll. The protagonist is a London fashion photographer (named Thomas in the script) who by chance takes some photographs of an unknown couple in a park. When he blows up the photographs later, he becomes convinced that he photographed the murder of the man in the couple. The plot concerns his finally inconclusive attempts to determine what actually happened in the park. The photographer is a figure for the artist in a postmodern commercialized world.

His creative approach to his craft and his photo art-book project justify viewing him as an artist. But Thomas’s art extends beyond his job to his whole approach to life. Thomas is the artist as capitalist and vice-versa. He spends a lot of time shopping in the film. When he sees his friend’s abstract painting, he immediately wants to buy it. His friend Bill refuses to sell, representing a more idealist attitude toward art that is outmoded. Significantly, the painter’s wife is bored with him and shows interest in Thomas.

He’s also negotiating the purchase of an antique store in a seemingly deserted part of town, but Thomas insightfully notices a homosexual couple walking their dog, and he anticipates that the neighborhood will soon become fashionable, allowing him to sell or develop the property for a substantial profit. He sees a propeller at the antique store and immediately purchases it, realizing its value as a decoration for his studio.

The new economy portrayed in the film is based on style and marketing, not the production of commodities. The worn-out relics of industry have become the target of Thomas’s talent for aestheticizing. Early in the picture, Thomas emerges in disguise from a flophouse where he was surreptitiously taking black & white photographs for his photo book, which will be presumably be a high-brow project establishing his credentials as a serious artist. He photographs the derelicts of working-class life, dispassionately presenting their grotesque bodies as aesthetic spectacle. Nineteenth-century novelistic realism or Italian neo-realism would have represented the lives of such people sympathetically and in-depth, as the victims of industrialization. For postmodernity, industry is somehow not as “real” as marketing, the aesthetic “value-added” that makes the difference between success and failure in an economy which has largely solved the problem of production.

The Sixties represent an important phase in the evolution of market society, a new stage in the liberation of desire. His job involves being at the cutting edge of the

newest market trends. Although he doesn't actually design the clothes that his models wear, he markets these clothes and fashions through his job.

In the modern world, everyone is an artist of his or her own life, and Thomas provides a practical model of how to do so. He aggressively seeks out and creates the newest fashions. The point is not simply to accumulate wealth but to become the object of everyone's desire. The propeller, for example, doesn't have any great resale value, but it says something important about its owner. He's not afraid to take risks and do outrageous things in order to create himself as the glass of fashion. He consciously teaches other characters like Jane (so-called in the script, played by Vanessa Redgrave) how to be "cool." He tells her that she needs to move *against* the beat of the music. In larger terms, this means going against, rejecting the current trend in favor of the upcoming fashion, which is still relatively unknown. One must take chances and go against the grain in order to distinguish oneself in a modern society of liberated desire.

Figure 1: Thomas entering his studio while Verushka, reflected in a pane of glass, waits.

One of the most famous scenes from early in the film is the photo shoot with the real-world model Verushka, which is portrayed as an act of sexual seduction. Photographers commonly manipulate the mood of their subjects, and this is exactly what Thomas is doing here in an over-the-top sixties fashion. Thomas evidently enjoys working with Verushka (in contrast to his other models in the following scene), but he doesn't get personally involved. He makes her wait for over an hour with no apology; he's indifferent to her concerns about missing her flight; and when he has the shots he wants, he turns away from her with indifference. The scene with Verushka demonstrates that Thomas is a master of desire, or at least is regarded as such by himself and his associates; he can manipulate the desire of the model and his audience without any personal investment. Verushka, in contrast, is evidently really caught up in the excitement.

There's no evidence that Thomas feels any real passion for his job as fashion photographer, much less the abstract fashion photographs he produces; on the contrary, he despises the fact that he's forced to prostitute himself to a purely commercial craft. The photo shoot scenes are almost like an assembly line, and the models are dressed and made-up like impersonal masks or objects.

His models represent his audience. It is precisely such young women who would purchase the fashion magazines and the clothing they sell. The two fashion "groupies" who invade his studio are not only intrigued by the photographer himself

and world of high-fashion photography, they also simply want to wear and see themselves in the clothes he has in his studio. Thomas is openly contemptuous of his audience, and they fearfully worship him all the more for it.

The rock concert scene extends the film's investigation of desire. The crowd is strangely still and passive during the concert, more like a film audience than a rock concert audience. When the guitar player "angrily" smashes his guitar (as so many rock stars did deliberately at the end of the show) and throws the neck to the audience, a sudden frenzy ensues in which people are trampled as everyone seeks the object sacralized by contact with the music idol. The photographer is caught in the frenzy like everyone else, demonstrating his susceptibility to mimetic contagion.

He wins the guitar and escapes, but once he is outside, he examines the neck with a critical eye and tosses it away. The neck's appeal was purely mimetic, and thus the film demystifies desire. Between this scene and the murder, Girard could have derived his entire theory of mimetic desire and scapegoating. Just before the rock concert, Thomas walks in on Bill and Patricia having sex in their apartment, but only Patricia sees him. She is evidently bored having sex with her husband (a wedding ring on her left hand is visible in this scene), but when she notices Thomas quietly watching them, she becomes excited and motions for him to stay and watch. Her desire becomes stimulated only when there is a witness to validate her husband's desire for her.(9)

It's unclear exactly what Antonioni's attitude is towards the swinging scene of the film, but Thomas himself is dissatisfied with his life. He complains to Ron, his editor, that he wishes he had "tons of money; then I'd be free," and that's he's sick of the "bloody bitches" that he works with. Thomas's dissatisfaction is to some extent a pose compatible with the image he cultivates, as Ron's comment suggests: "Free to do what? Free like him?" At which point the film cuts to a close-up of one of Thomas's photographs portraying a bleak-looking homeless man. But Thomas is also genuinely disillusioned, having an insight into the seeming emptiness of liberated, "fulfilled" desire.

Patricia offers a mirror image of his disaffection. After making love to her husband, she goes to Thomas's studio and he immediately asks her whether she ever thinks of leaving Bill (in light of her obvious dissatisfaction with him). She replies firmly, "No, I don't think so," leaving the exact nature of her unhappiness with Bill undefined. A minute later, however, she makes an almost inarticulate plea for help: "Will you help me? . . . I don't know what to do." The question is left strangely hanging in their distracted conversation.

Thomas evidently has ambitions to do serious art, but presumably he can't make

enough money to survive on projects such as the photo-art book on London he's planning. Thomas is searching for a deeper level of meaning that seems unavailable even (or especially) in a world of liberated desire. The murder in the park that he photographs promises him, and us as audience, a new possibility of meaning. He's finally getting at something that's "real" and meaningful: human violence. But unlike a conventional murder mystery, it's not clear whether a murder has taken place at all.

He encounters a romantic couple in the park purely by chance and decides to take some pictures. During the taking of the photographs, the viewer has no clues that a murder might be taking place. The woman's (Jane) reaction to his photographing them seems exaggerated and desperate, but is explainable if she were trying to cover up adultery, as she claims later.

Figure 2: Thomas at the Park

After he leaves the park and meets his friend in a restaurant, he catches a man spying on him and then trying to open the trunk of his car. The film clearly implies here that the woman has an accomplice, and he is not the man she was kissing in the park. This is hard to explain unless there has been a murder. This same man apparently follows him to his studio and directs the Redgrave character there. In his studio, she again seems strangely desperate and tries to steal his camera with the photos. Then she offers to have sex with him in exchange for the film, another sign of her desperation, although the film suggests that later she is really attracted to him.

He finally gives her a decoy roll of film while secretly keeping the real roll. During his encounter with her, he receives a phone call from an unknown person, which introduces an outrageous and comic series of contradictory statements about the person who is calling and his relationship with her. His behavior here could be seen as a response to the woman's lack of disclosure, but it is also typical of his character, as when he disguises himself as a bum at the flophouse. His sense of identity is not just ironic and performative but cynical and manipulative. There is a certain existential emptiness at his core. He doesn't know who he is or what he really wants, for all his mastery of others' desires.

The scene in which he blows up the photographs galvanizes him in a way that we haven't seen before. He's consumed here by a real desire to know what actually happened in the park. At least one of the blown-up shots seems to demonstrate unambiguously that there was a man with a gun hidden in the bushes at the park, presumably the same man who follows him to his studio and later steals the photos.

We recall as we see this shadowy figure the woman’s insistent leading of the man around the park, pulling on his arm, which could be putting him into position for the murder.

Figure 3: Blow up of hand with gun.

The route to knowledge here is through the photographs. The movie realizes that questions of knowledge are all in the last analysis questions of representation. The supremely realistic photograph is not a transparent representation but rather an actual discovery mode. Blowing up the photographs could be viewed as analogous to using a microscope, simply extending the reach of the senses. But in theoretical terms, the film recognizes the profound truth that representation reveals things that simple perception cannot. The question is not so much what happened, as in a conventional murder mystery, but the relationship between a world of signs and a constructed world of meaning. The photograph is a sign to be interpreted.

Through the blowups he constructs a narrative: first, that he has prevented a murder from taking place, and then, that he was an unknowing witness to a murder. The film thus enacts the historical passage from photography to narrative film. But the narrative, unlike the indexical photographs, has to be constructed, illustrating the specific aesthetic possibilities of film. The photograph, a physical impression of sensual appearances, takes him beyond appearances to an underlying, hidden reality. By itself, the photo-fact is inadequate to its presumed meaning; it must be “blown up” and interpreted to reveal its truth (more on this point below). The fact that murder is given as a token of basic human meaning is significant; the film recognizes on some level the violence that representation originated to ameliorate.

The murder in *Blowup* would be amenable to a Girardian interpretation: behind the seemingly idyllic scene of the park is a violent reality, which is discovered through the serendipitous photographs. Girard might well gloss the seeming ambiguity of the murder as simply a modernist myth that our critical analysis would serve to unmask. As we’ll see, however, the ambiguity surrounding the murder cannot be dismissed that easily.

Figure 4: The dead body

After his blowups reveal what resembles a prone body, he returns to the park at night and discovers what seems to be an actual body, the man with Jane earlier, and he even reaches out and touches it. Some critics take this scene as irrefutable

evidence that a murder has taken place. But the body he finds is very strange looking. The lighting from an electric sign casts a weird blue pallor over everything.(10) There are no overt signs of violence on the rigid body. The eyes are open and stare vacantly up. It looks like a wax doll or rather an actor pretending to be dead, as of course it is on one level, and which is precisely the point, in my view. The deliberately fake looking body suggests that the film is reflecting here upon its own representational mode.

In a sense, this is the ultimate realism, a fiction that more or less openly admits its own fictional status. As in Hitchcock's *Stage Fright* or David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive*, we learn that we cannot trust what we see. It's common to say that *Blowup* problematizes photographic realism; what's interesting to me is how it illustrates the transition from realism to abstract art, especially painting, but also radical works like *Finnegans Wake*.

As he blows up the photos, they become more and more grainy and fragmented; rather than revealing new detail, they seem to decompose into random splotches of black and white. The blowup sequence proves to be the iconoclastic destruction of the image, which is exactly the logic of abstract and expressionist art. The breakdown of the figural in 20th century plastic art reflects an attempt to suggest an underlying, more authentic reality inaccessible to formal representation, or simply to deny that there is any definitive reality to be represented at all.

Figure 5: The only remaining blow up from the park.

After all the prints are stolen, Thomas finds one remaining extreme blowup of the body that the thief left behind inadvertently. He shows it to Patricia, who remarks, "It looks like one of Bill's paintings." Earlier in the film, Bill describes his painting process, pointing to a painting he did in the cubist style:

They don't mean anything when I do them—just a mess. Afterwards I find something to hang onto—like that—like—like . . . that leg . . . . And then it sorts itself out. It adds up. It's like finding a clue in a detective story.

Figure 6: Deciphering a modern painting.

This almost exactly parallels the process of interpreting the blowups, providing an important comment upon that sequence. In Bill's description, finding the form or meaning is completely arbitrary. There's no intention to put that form into the painting; it emerges by chance as much as from the viewing process as from the

painting process. This suggests that any kind of set meaning we find is purely contingent. The sign bears no necessary relationship to its meaning. All we have are fragments like the random splotches of paint in Bill's paintings, which we can hardly hope to assemble into any coherent whole.(11) The hope of realism, to establish that link through fidelity to empirical truth, is doomed. Anti-figural art thus illustrates the problem that realism is unable to solve. *Blowup*demonstrates how the logic of realism leads inevitably to its own demise.

In an essay from 1964, Antonioni writes,

> 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 no one will ever see. Or perhaps, not until the decomposition of every image, of every reality.
>
> Therefore abstract cinema would have its reason for existing. (63)

This quote nicely illustrates the logic of realism. By going "under the revealed image" one is able to find "another one which is more faithful to reality." Destroying the image to reveal the truth, which is figured as image, a seemingly natural sign, free of human mediation. But the iconoclastic process has no logical stopping point; it continues until it destroys all images, ending in "the decomposition of every image, of every reality," and justifying the turn to abstraction. The meaning of iconoclasm is the process itself, the cathartic and sometimes genuinely progressive destruction of conventional forms. But, at the theoretical level, it begs the central question of meaning as such.

As anthropology, the film denies any definitive originary scene. There are only interpretations of an event which is finally ambiguous, not "real." Representation can't do without interpretation (which is essentially arbitrary because conditioned by desire), and so there is no transparent window onto reality, even with a photograph. The film thus confirms the thesis of deconstruction before deconstruction was widely known in America, even by academics.

Blowup illustrates what is ethically at stake in the postmodern turn. To find the murderer, to settle on one version of events, would necessitate another killing, in terms of the plot imperatives of the detective film. Deferring the revelation of the identity of the murderer allows us to defer that second murder. The claim that meaning is always deferred is on one level a denial of meaning, but on another level it exemplifies the anthropological truth that deferral *is* meaning, and in this movie, the deferral of closure is the deferral of the sacrificial violence that typically ends such a movie.

Postmodernism begins with the revelation of the Holocaust, creating a hyper-awareness of victimization that makes the conventional movie ending seem sacrificial. This is a progressive move in ethical terms for Western society, allowing for important developments like the civil rights movement of the fifties and sixties. But as the film points up, it could also mean letting a murderer go free: thus the necessity for post-millennialism, a recognition of the limits of victimary thought.

One other factor complicates the plot question about the murder. As many critics have noted, the film makes a parallel between the shooter in the park and Thomas, who also shoots in the park. Both of them hide themselves in the bushes at the murder scene, and the shooter is young and blond, physically resembling Thomas. The shooter, therefore, is set up as Thomas's mimetic double or rival, and this holds an important clue to the meaning of the film. Photography, we recall, is the mode of representation that ostensibly eliminates the mediator. But the film suggests that representation always involves human mediation. As his double, the shooter haunts Thomas, spying on him as he eats, following him to his workplace, ransacking his studio, stealing the photographic evidence, and finally disposing of the body, the one seemingly incontrovertible piece of evidence.(12) Before the murder, Thomas has been in charge of virtually every situation in which he finds himself; he demonstrates the mastery of desire. But now he isn't in control, not even of his own photographs, which are stolen by the shooter. In terms of the film's allegory, the artist is not in charge of his own meanings. The desires of the Other intervene. In more literal terms, we could mention the impact of a film director's various collaborators, the cameramen, producers, actors, as well as his professional competitors and audience. The shooter, as mimetic double, illustrates all the ways that Thomas is not in control of his own desires and, therefore, the meaning of his representations or signs, not simply in reception but origin. As Stephen Crane points out in "The Blue Hotel," every murder is the result of a collaboration. Antonioni gives a semiotic spin to this rather Girardian point. It's not so much that Thomas collaborates in the murder or has unconscious murderous (or sexual) desires, although some critics have argued that his lack of public action allows the murderer to go free.(13) It is rather that all representations are mediated by desire, and since no desire is wholly original or self-identical, therefore the meaning of our representations is similarly decentered.

At the ending of the film, Thomas goes back to the park in search of the body again but finds it missing, and thus any evidence that a murder occurred at all. As he wanders on his way home, he encounters the students dressed as mimes that opened the film. Miming, like film, is a visual art. They unload from their car and two of them mime playing a game of tennis at a court surrounded by a high wire fence, while the rest watch the path of the imaginary ball intently. John Freccero notes insightfully that the mimes are associated with magic and sorcery, liminal figures

“who mediate between the world of spirit and the world of matter” (127), between material signifier and spiritual meaning.

Figure 7: The mime group and Thomas.

Thomas watches the imaginary game with detached amusement until they pretend to hit the ball over the fence in his direction, gesturing for him to throw the ball back. This is an ambivalent moment for Thomas. Will he play their game, which seems so empty, especially in the aftermath of the murder? He reluctantly accepts the necessity of fictionality, miming picking up the ball and throwing it back, so that they can continue the game. In effect, Thomas is forced by the events of the film to acknowledge that the meaning he is searching for is, like the ball, a fiction. Even the objectivity of a photograph proves to be a mediated representation whose meaning he cannot control.

The tennis court fence parallels the white picket fence at the park.(14) In the earlier scene, when photographing the couple, he hops over the fence, thus placing himself outside of the “frame” or “scene” of the murder. He positions himself as an impartial and objective recorder of the incident, like a camera itself. Similarly, he finds himself on the outside of the fence at the tennis court, watching a game in which he declines, at first, to participate, holding himself “above the game” as it were. Yet, just as he became sucked into the events at the park, losing control of his perspective and finding himself a participant in events; so, at the tennis court, by the same logic, he enters into the game in contradiction with his general attitude of mimetic detachment. Anthropologically speaking, the significance of the scenic center is never independent of the spectatorship of the periphery. The impact of the desiring imagination of every spectator makes perfectly objective, unmediated representation impossible. Disinterested spectatorship is itself an illusion (and the target of the film’s iconoclasm); there are only more or less conscious degrees of participation.

After Thomas returns the ball, the camera stays with him in a medium close-up, and we now hear the actual sound of a tennis ball being hit back and forth. The film cuts to a long shot, the theme music rises, and Thomas mysteriously fades out, leaving only an empty field and the end credits. In these final moments of the film, Antonioni directs our attention to the fictional nature of the film we are watching, confirming what he had hinted at earlier with the fake-looking dead body. In doing so, he acknowledges his own inevitable, active presence in the film, and thus the impossibility of the goal of realism, the askesis of the artist’s desiring imagination. Antonioni called Thomas’s vanishing his “autograph” (qtd. in Chatman 145), signaling his presence through Thomas’s disappearance.

Antonioni *reframes* what we have been watching; as the camera pulls back, we ourselves are literally pulled out of the frame of the narrative to the level of the filmmaker, who can add sound effects or fade out characters with ease. Antonioni in effect tips his hand to the audience, asking us to acknowledge our participation, like Thomas, like Antonioni, in what has transpired. Not only does Thomas recognize the fictional nature of the representations he inhabits, and his active role therein, so we too are reminded that Thomas himself and the whole story are a fiction in whose creation we have collaborated.

The ending makes the film into a kind of Möbius strip: the “inside” and the “outside” of the story are joined paradoxically by a twisting of the linear narrative. After the blowup sequence and the nighttime scene in the park, the ending completes the circle of self-reference. The “reality” of the murder is “undecidable,” because the clear distinction, the narrative *frame* that separates fiction and reality, is deliberately twisted upon itself in a *mise en abyme*.

There’s a leveling in postmodernism, an elision of the difference between reality and fiction, which is on the one hand a palpable error, but on the other represents a genuine anthropological recognition of the mediated nature of the sign and its referent, the integral relationship of desire and representation. *Blowup* deconstructs its own claim to realism, not in opposition to realism but as the only logical conclusion to the flawed premises of film realism, that meaning can be found in empirical reality, and that photography offers us an objective record of that reality.

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Notes

1. See *Chronicle* #83. (back)
2. On Gans’s hypothesis of an originary scene, see *Originary Thinking: Elements of Generative Anthropology* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1993), 1-9. (back)

3. See on this point Richard van Oort, “Cognitive Science and the Problem of Representation,” *Poetics Today* 24:2 (Summer 2003): 237-295. (back)
4. See Peter Goldman, “Iconoclasm in the Old and New Testaments,” *Contagion: Journal of Violence, Mimesis, and Culture* 10 (Spring 2003): 83-94; and Herbert N. Schneidau, *Sacred Discontent: The Bible and Western Tradition* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1976). (back)
5. All biblical references are to the King James Version. (back)
6. My account of realism in this paragraph is indebted to Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1953). (back)
7. Gans suggests usefully “that we may characterize film as realistic spectacle” (*Chronicles* #228). (back)
8. Jurij Lotman, in his analysis of the film, begins from the same semiotic starting point. My interpretation, however, was developed independently of Lotman and, except for a few minor points, along divergent lines. Lotman sees Antonioni returning to the Eisensteinian film tradition in *Blowup*. See *Semiotics of Cinema*, trans. Mark E. Suino (Ann Arbor: Dept. of Slavic Languages and Literature/University of Michigan, 1976), 97-105. (back)
9. This scene is an interesting variation of the typical triangular configuration described by Girard, in which a man requires a mediator in order to validate his choice of love object. In the movie, the woman requires a mediator to validate her husband’s love for her. *Blowup* suggests the Lacanian point that our desire is for the desire of the other. Patricia’s desire is mediated through her husband’s desire for her, but her husband’s desire requires mimetic confirmation by Thomas, who, as one more or less aloof to her sexual charms, is able to fulfill that function effectively. The point is not simply that she wishes she were making love to Thomas, but that desire requires a triangular configuration in which one member remains more or less unattainable. Significantly, she rejects without hesitation Thomas’s suggestion that she leave her husband, since that would dissolve the triangle. (back)
10. The sign itself is noteworthy: a couple of letters can be discerned, but they combine into a purely abstract pattern like a logo. The sign is a pure “sign” (Antonioni’s pun, perhaps), but what it signifies, as with the body, we have no idea. Cf. Hubert Meeker, “*Blow-Up,*” *Focus on* Blow-Up, Ed. Roy Huss (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1971), 51. (back)
11. I owe to my colleague Bob Hudson of Brigham Young University the insight that the film is haunted by fragments such as the propeller and the broken guitar. (back)
12. We can’t be certain the man who spies on Thomas as he eats does all these things, but he is certainly the best candidate presented by the film. It is hard to imagine the frantic and distracted Redgrave character having the *sang-froid* to dispose of all the evidence so efficiently. (back)

13. Psychoanalytic critics such as Melvin Goldstein (qtd. in Eberwein 265-66) argue for an Oedipal triangle between Thomas, Jane, and the older man in the park. In this scenario, the shooter in the bushes acts out Thomas's unconscious desire to kill the father-rival. Thomas is thus unable to find and punish the shooter for the same reasons that Hamlet delays in killing Claudius, in Ernest Jones's interpretation of the play. In my view, the film does not support such an interpretation, which would require a more developed relationship between Thomas, Jane, and the older man to become convincing. Antonioni foregrounds issues surrounding art and representation rather than sexual rivalry or aggression. Desire is certainly central, but it's addressed at a more general level. Attempts to locate the entire meaning of the murder plot in the psyche of Thomas as an individual are mistaken. Antonioni's preoccupations are quite explicitly epistemological. Contrasting *Blowup* to *Peeping Tom* or *Rear Window* illustrates how Antonioni has chosen to background the psychosexual, as does his choice to end the film with a scene that addresses fictionality rather than sex or murder. (back)
14. I'm indebted to my colleague Richard van Oort of University of Victoria, British Columbia, for the insight that the two fences parallel each other as the frames of the scenes they enclose. (back)