

BLOW UP: *A comparison of scholarly and non-scholarly articles*

This film review essay will compare what scholarly journals and articles argue as opposed to articles written by non-intellectuals for mass audiences. 16 pages long.

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INTRODUCTION

Blow-Up is Antonioni's most commercially successful film because it broke away from his earlier film's long narratives, which looked in depth at the character's psychological traits. Although the film was more successful than his other films it still had a limited amount of appeal for viewers whom were divided on the meaning of the film. Film reviewers and intellectuals all seem to have something different to say about the film because they all argue different sections of the film, sometimes agreeing, which makes a single acceptable and universal meaning to Blow-Up difficult to assess. However, while intellectuals argue over meaning, the largest share of filmgoers, the mass audience, is often left behind.

This essay will attempt to compare what scholarly journals and articles argue as opposed to articles written by non-intellectuals for mass audiences. The biggest dilemma as mentioned above lies in the fact that every reviewer has something different to say which makes it hard to find some common ground amongst all the reviewers. The Journal of Aesthetic Education states that, "it is difficult, if not impossible, to find two readers, or two viewers who concur on what happens earlier in the story or in the film much less come to agreement on what, if anything it all means". In relation to this, one important finding was that non-scholarly and scholarly reviewers exist in two separate secular groups as they don't say the same things, nor do they aim the same audience.

THE MOD SQUAD

Perhaps the first sections of the film with a commonality are the opening and ending sections, featuring a mod squad, which puts into question the meaning of the film. Who better to discuss the meaning of these sections than Antonioni himself who mentions that people are aimless in their drive to reach aimless freedom. Antonioni says that the pursuit of happiness is what counts, which involves freedom from feelings, sexuality and expressions. Visually the sections illustrate this by the uninhibited actions of the mod squad with people screaming wildly while multiple sets of arms and legs hang out of the jeep. The ending of the film also illustrates freedom

because the mod squad demonstrates their radicalism as they engage in a tennis match with an imaginary ball. Ironically such an event would draw a large crowd of on lookers, but didn't which traces the film's limited success with the mass audience.

Melvin Goldstein's article for the Journal of Aesthetic Education describes the mod squad as clowns, which are symbolic in terms of society, politics, and on a personal level. The clowns live on the fringes of society and were paid for being laughed at, they are impotent politically and act because they are naive about power and its uses, and finally, they have distorted personalities and are confused about their sexual identities and hide behind their costumes. These traits also reflect Thomas as he is also naive about the power of photography, lives on the fringes society, and hides behind the camera. George Slover from the Massachusetts Review 9, explains the mod world in a different light saying it aims to create a new order out of sheer willingness to suspend disbelief thus representing a world of rejection. In essence the mod group forms a society within a society. The articles thus far seem to agree on the fact that the mod squad are part of another category or located on the fringes of society. Modern European Filmmakers and the Art of Adaptation mentions that the mod squad symbolizes disorder and misrule and thus reflect the film's entourage as they appear at the beginning and at the end. The mod squad and its representation in the film is one issue that was not mentioned in non-scholarly articles perhaps because of the limited length of the articles. Non-scholarly articles often must provide a synopsis of the film, which leaves them with very little time to go in depth to explain the meaning of the mod squad appearances.

PUBLIC APPEAL

However the non-scholarly articles are more concerned with the average viewer which explains why they will not go into as much depth as the scholarly articles. This being said however the most frequent criticism is that the film is too intellectual for the average viewer to understand. In fact Charles Thomas Samuels in his article "Blow-Up: Sorting Things Out" mentions that many smaller papers like Time and Saturday Review disliked Blow-Up whereas more intellectual papers enjoyed it. For instance Hubert I. Cohen from Cinema Journal mentions that "Most films are to be looked at, Antonioni's inspected unfortunately most reviewers can't see. The fact that the audience can't see is reinforced by Moira Walsh's article stating that, "My greatest sympathy, lies with the movie going public, which has been bombarded for so long by oversimplified slogans from all directions. They are, by and large, ill-equipped to make complicated and informed decisions that are now suddenly demanded of them in the fields of films as in all areas of life".

Walsh is correct in that assessment because no attempt has been made by intellectuals to inform the public, that is, reach out beyond film studies programs and beyond university, on matters of filmmaking. Until they do so, the mass audience will not accommodate intellectuals in terms of understanding film language; rather it will be intellectuals who will have to accommodate the mass audience. Variety magazine states some ironies and metaphoric film elements, "it is doubtful that the general public (anymore than the reviewer) will get the message of this film, shrouded as it is in shadings and symbols, in mysterious mummery and the way-out treatment. Besides, it is the intellectuals who have been trained and are better at adapting to achieve such a goal. Thus far, on completing a film program, no attempt has been made to bridge both spectrums and until questions are and discussions are made, intellectuals will remain a secular group in society with no recourse to get through to

the masses. I tend to believe that, it is not whether a scholarly article illustrates how to see a film or a non-scholarly article simply states what's in the film that is important, but rather how to reach out to the mass audiences. Reaching out to the audiences will assure that the knowledge of films within society gets its chance to grow so that art films will be accepted in the future.

Other non-scholarly critics argue that sex had a lot to do with *Blow-Up*'s success. The *Playboy* article understandably tells viewers not to be afraid of that it will be long and moody like his older films. In fact the whole article focuses on describing the orgy and the couple in the park and ends by saying "who cares about one stone-cold stiff in the park. Ironically an article of this nature will not inform people about film techniques but it might just get a whole lot of people to go see the film, which would prove to be some kind of beginning. Naturally *Playboy* is a mass audience magazine which was looking out for its own interests in focussing on sex. Stanley Kauffmann in *Film 67/68*, also makes reference that the sexuality in the film contributed to its success in that it was the first film from abroad to have national distribution. Finally and comically on the success and mass appeal of the film, a reviewer with initials H.H. from *Films in Review* went all out in saying that this was a bad film. He states "the story makes no sense, and the film's pointless...disconnected incidents are all borrowed from other directional panderers: Bergman, Fellini, Losey, et al...but if so his acts and thoughts could not possibly be as unbelievable, and uninteresting, as the unorganized dreck Antonioni purveys here". It's comical because the article featured many other criticisms on the same page and all of them were negative. Perhaps it was not Antonioni's film that was so bad but his critical reviewer himself.

THE BLOW-UP SEQUENCE

The *Blow-Up* sequence was perhaps the most mentioned part of the film but for a host of different reasons as mentioned above every reviewer whether scholarly or non-scholarly has something different to say about the sequence. Once again I will begin with words from Antonioni as to what his film is saying "I want to re-create reality in an abstract form...I'm really questioning the nature of reality. This is an essential point to remember about visual aspects of the film, since one of its chief themes is "to see or not to see properly the true value of things"". This statement reflects Thomas's misguided eye, which thinks its seeing a peaceful couple when in reality a murder has taken place.

In contrast *Time Magazine* mentions that all the scenes in the film are fascinating but make very little sense prior to the *blow-up* sequence. The point is well taken because the focus of the film is not made clear prior to the *blow-up* sequence. It has reviewers saying the film is too clever, or its meaning too difficult for the average viewer to comprehend. We see the emphasis on the photographer but we are not certain till the *blow-up* sequence if the focus is on the photographer or photography per say. *Time Magazine* proceeds to explain how the *blow-up* sequence uses photography, with practically no sound, and no explanation, to explain how the camera reveals a plot within itself. *Time Magazine* is not considered a scholarly article but reads into the use of photography because the magazine prides themselves a lot on photography, which is often used to illustrate their cover stories. Therefore *Time Magazine* was praising photography as opposed to the film whereas *Blow-Up: A Film*, Antonioni's writing was praising cinema and film language.

Jean Claire's article from *Positif* comments that "reality is the grainy jumble of black

and white dots on sensitive paper which when blown up yields an abstract diagram". Here this other non-scholarly article is suggesting that reality be found on photographs despite its blurry blown up images. Stanley Kauffmann states that we were discovering in the photograph what was really happening thus intensifying the meaning of the camera. In essence the camera allowed the viewer to be more aware of the crime than the actor. At first he does not realize that a crime has been committed while the viewer is shown the blurred image of a man with a gun. Henry Fernandez supports this analysis as he states that the photographer becomes paralyzed in time while the blow-up comes to life and acts out the narrative. Fernandez points out the importance and power of the photograph which was needed to shed light on reality.

Peter Bondanella perhaps gives the best explanation of the montage sequence and speaks of irony, perception, and vulnerability. He states that photographing a murder is ironic when in fact all you thought you did was photograph a peaceful couple. Irony contributes to Fernandez's statement suggesting Thomas be paralyzed when he himself discovered the irony for himself. Secondly Bondanella states that the blow-up assists and impairs our perception of the object captured because it reveals a murderous plot but impairs our view as more and more connotative detail is lost in the actual image. In other words the meaning is intensified but the image is blurred. Finally the vulnerability of the photograph is open to various interpretations which it may receive. Particularly this is true for both Thomas and the audience, whom were separately evaluating the images as they were being blown up. What the audience had in common with Thomas was that we both changed our interpretations of the same photographs as they were being blown up which illustrates Bondanella's point on photography being vulnerable to the interpretations of people surrounding it. In essence despite the importance of the blow-up sequence many of the non-scholarly articles did not discuss the subject at length because the mass audiences are not known as cinema fans, who seek hidden messages. The mass audience goes to the movies to be entertained, not to decipher meaning from images. The opposite occurs for scholarly articles, which tend to emphasize interpretation too much that the end result yields no answers but a bunch of interpretations of the same film or sequence.

THOMAS'S CHARACTER

Thomas's character was often linked to his camera, as the determining device to illustrate his inner understanding of life. For example Robin Bean from *Films and Filming* states that Thomas observes life through the camera lens without really involving himself in life. Thomas is described as a spectator which provides him with the same role as the audience, that of an onlooker. Both mod squad sequences, the blow-up sequence, the pictures in the park, the model photography shoot, and the rock concert sequence, are all scenes in which Thomas is on the outside looking in therefore Robin Bean's statement is quite justified. Ironically this statement provides a lot of intellectual insight into the subject yet the article is non-scholarly. In fact based on the experiences on this essay non-scholarly article are quite meticulous at getting to the point with one statement. Perhaps this is a better way to reach out to the mass audiences, then to have them read dozens of pages on intellectual interpretations which they probably will not take the time to read. Bosley Crowther's *The New York Times* article describes Thomas's character in this fashion, "Everything about this feral fellow is footloose, arrogant, fierce, signifying a tiger – or an incongruously baby-faced lone wolf – stalking his prey in a society for which he

seems to have no concern, no more feelings or understanding than he has for the equipment and props he impulsively breaks". The statement is describing Thomas as though he was a robot and could not assimilate human feeling. Henry Fernandez stated, as mentioned above, that indeed Thomas was paralyzed while the images literally took over the narrative. The camera becomes the basis for the photographer's apprehension of meaning in the signs of his existence, as stated by an article in *Film Quarterly*. These interpretations describe Thomas as being lifeless with no meaning other than what he encapsulates in his images.

Thomas confuses his own identity with that of the camera falsely believing himself unattached to the observed incident as stated by Marvin D'Lugo from *Film Quarterly*. Another reviewer, Charles Samuels from *American Scholar*, states that plots are anti plots and that Thomas is unable to engage in productive action. Yet another reviewer, John Freccero from *Yale/Theatre 9*, says something different about Thomas, "What makes the Photographer symbolically capable of making that discovery is of course a discovery about himself and one's discovery about himself depends on the construct that one brings to it". The statements demonstrate how three different reviewers, from articles that are both scholarly and non-scholarly, all analyze the same character but have fundamentally different things to say about him.

On the one hand Thomas is described as confusing art and life as he believes himself to be one with the camera and thus unattached to observed incidents. The second reviewer describes Thomas as being unable to engage in productive action, yet discovers the murder and portrays a successful photographer in London, a heart of fashion and high art. The last reviewer suggests that Thomas's discovery, in the blow-up sequence, was dependent on his construct and what knowledge he brought to the photograph which suggests, the opposite to the prior statement, in that Thomas can engage in productive action, as his discovery reflects one. The difficulty arises because all three reviewers are correct in their assessments, but at times there seems to be no discrepancy in agreeing from one article to the next even if we remain in one field scholarly or non-scholarly. Therefore, one is often reduced to comparing various articles in what their meanings or main ideas are while trying to group them up into two groups suggesting they have something in common when evidence suggests the opposite.

Thomas's statement "I am a photographer", according to Marvin D'Lugo suggests, a revealing assumption of personal identification with the technological means of reproducing images, which forces us to consider a series of essential relations and values emanating from the peculiar way in which Thomas looks upon his experience and upon himself". In essence the photographer's experience is crucial in reflecting his beliefs in his works. D'Lugo ends by stating that, through his camera, Thomas comes to realize his previous way of seeing and being and changes his outlook on life. This statement reinforces the fact that Thomas was unable to comprehend life other than through his camera/art, which interpreted life for him and consequently solved some life's problems for him.

Thomas's inability to comprehend is made clear by an article in the *Journal of Aesthetic Education*. It states "Thomas's inability to comprehend what he has witnessed in the park is directly tied to his reliance on the technology of his art, a dilemma that the filmmaker, whose own medium of artistic expression is itself technology, must also face". In essence this just proves the point that Antonioni was trying to make that even a photographer becomes a passive viewer of the scene before him. John Freccero from *Yale/Theatre 3* states that the film is about a series

of photographs about a series of photographs which suggests the importance of watching and observing. This is interesting because it ties into what was by Freccero's statement, "Thomas's gaze transforms the representation of reality into its image, an interpretive act resembling that of the painter". In some instances the articles do focus and agree on certain aspects, as is the case with the previous examples but the articles on a whole all close to different conclusions because they all try to cover the entire film which is problematic for comparisons. The question one has to ask himself is how do you make the "how you watch a film" interesting to a mass audience that has been use to "go watch the film".

ART, LIFE, & BLOW-UP

Finally there was a lot of mention on photography in relationship to life in general with some comments on the portrayal of London life. The New Yorker was clear in stating that the film represented an unrealistic portrayal of contemporary English life. There seems to be resentment against showing the darker side and fast lanes of London life. There is some validity in that because London was portrayed through one day in the life of a photographer whose life style is literally living on the edge and on the run. The portrayal of London would have been very different had the main character have been a businessman. John Freccero states that "the analysis of London life, which dismayed English audiences, is the image of a world possessed by a kind of madness that seems to blind it to the fundamental fact of death, in art as in life". The problem for English audiences in that the film was a social commentary on the youth and social crisis of the day, which gave London, a bad image. In Films and Filming Robin Bean mentions that Blow-Up does constitute a painful representation of what youth today, who really has no cause of ideals and who question what life is really worth caring about. The mere fact that it is a painful representation suggests that some people are going to be disappointed at its portrayal.

Perhaps because the film was the first to be financially successful abroad had a bigger impact in representing a distant culture to Americans, which lead many English Londoners to dislike the first portrayal of them. Bean claims its innocence by stating that he was only observing life for what it really is. Indeed unemployment and radical changes within society were occurring all over the industrialized world in the sixties which is made most evident in the music scene which went from jazz & big band music to sex, drugs and rock & roll within ten years. Jean Claire from Positif mentions that the film accurately depicted a social crisis of unemployment for adults to watch and focuses his discussion on art and life and illusion and reality. The above quote makes reference to the blow-up sequence of both illusion and reality. Illusion is represented by the blindness of the photographer who is fooled by his own work, while the photograph is neutral in its depiction of reality as it captures a moment but is vulnerable to interpretation.

Indeed the non-scholarly articles focus on every day life issues more efficiently than scholarly articles. Perhaps this is the case because the classes, which have low levels of education, money, and job prospects are more concerned with the prospect of surviving in the future then the higher classes which are rich in money, education, and prospects who have a much more secure future. Thomas never worries about money and works when he wants to or feels like it. Film Intellectuals are often professional students and can afford to indulge in discussion because that is what their career paths are based on whereas the mass have to put in their labor for a living which leaves less time for discussion. Discussion is labor for intellectuals.

Art and life is subject to another discussion on the role of art within everyday life. Marsha Kinder explains art by saying, "contemporary art values the moment and captures the moment. Contemporary art is abstract and detached as explained by the camera becoming a substitute for sexual intercourse. Economic exploitation of art is practiced by amateurs and pros while success means making money, while creativity depends on accident and spontaneity and isn't controlled". She provides her description because she states that the main focus in this film is art and not life which suggests that English audiences were worrying for nothing about the negative portrayal of London. Andrew Sarris agrees by stating that "the focus is on the photographer and what his camera sees. Blow-Up is a statement of the artist not of life, but on art itself as a consuming passion of the artist's life". Non-scholarly articles have a tendency to provide a good straight to the point descriptions of life in reference to this film. The scholarly articles tend to focus more on the language of films and tend to be less direct in their statements almost as though they wanted to keep a certain distance from the mass audience. When one reflects upon this statement, it would be to a secular group's own interest to remain secularized in order to protect their benefits by making acceptance into the group a rarity. There is a certain distance between both sets of articles, which are represented by lower classes or mass audiences at the bottom who don't wish to accommodate, while upper classes at the top refuse to filter down into the lower ranks. Therefore what you have occurring is two secular groups which in their day to day lives may even forget from time to time that another group exists at the opposite end. Finally the comments of James F. Scott sums up the entire process in this paper by saying that, "art fixates and transforms, enlarges and therefore shows us parts of reality which we could never see with an unguided eye". It precisely says that it shows us parts of reality, leaving the rest to us to decipher. We could never see this reality because the masses are directed by unguided eyes, despite the fact that even the guided photographer's eye was misled. Ironically the help of the guided eye is reflective of the process of this essay, as the guided eyes (scholarly) were unable to decipher the meaning of Blow-Up and agreeing on it. The statement begins with "Art" but what if the majority does not understand "Art"? Then what is being fixated, transformed, and enlarged and how can we (masses) see reality? Whose reality are we trying to see?

CONCLUSION

In concluding to this long process, at times frustrating, of comparing articles of scholarly and non-scholarly nature proved to be an almost impossible task. Each reviewer has something different to say about the film, which made it difficult to group articles up into sections. This essay has attempted to make a comparison in Blow-Up using the symbolism of the mod squad, the blow-up sequence, Thomas's character, and the everyday relationship between life and Blow-Up. Finally a comparison between scholars and non-scholars was made to illustrate where these two groups stand in society to make links understanding why the articles were written the way they were, but nonetheless leaving many unanswered questions.

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