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Michelangelo Antonioni's *Blow-Up* as Abstract Art Theory

Abstract: As is well known, *Blow-Up* (1966) directed by Michelangelo Antonioni is based on Julio Cortázar's short story; "Las babas del diablo" (1959). In literary terms, it is very difficult to find similarities between both works, except in their outlines. Many critics, therefore, thought *Blow-Up* was Antonioni's own film with no special connection with "Las babas del diablo". But we should focus on the common outlines of the two. Both deal with 'vision'. The change of seeing through a viewfinder to seeing through a photographic print gives the protagonists a daydream-like experience.

Cortázar was not only a writer but also an amateur photographer, and Antonioni a film director. If both auteurs reveal their interest in 'vision' in their works, we can say that Antonioni follows Cortázar regarding this theme and further develops it through his use of abstract paintings. Antonioni was concerned with differences between the vision of the naked eye and photographic vision, and with similarities between the photographic vision and abstract painting. So, what is Antonioni's understanding of vision?

I think there is a key to resolve this question in *Blow-Up* itself. One can focus on not only the change of the protagonist's behavior in following the story's development, but also on photographs, abstract paintings, and landscape paintings that appear in the film. Then we would find the possibility that Antonioni thinks photographs and pointillist paintings are based on the same principle; the retinal mesh-like structure.

Keywords: Michelangelo Antonioni; *Blow-Up*; abstract painting; photograph; perspective painting; theory of vision.

Introduction

Near the end of *Blow-Up* (1966), there is a scene where the painter's lover says to the hero "It looks like one of Bill's paintings" while viewing an exaggeratedly blown-up blot from a photograph that the photographer thinks shows a dead body (Figure 1). In general, we can understand that this scene signifies "existential loneliness",¹ as

¹ As the hero and the woman don't communicate very well in *Blow-Up*, Antonioni's films characterize the alienation of man in the modern world.

other scenes from Antonioni's existentialist films show. But we can also think that her words literally show the similarities between the texture of Bill's Pollock-like abstract paintings² (Figure 2) and that of the blown-up photographs.³ If so, what did Antonioni want to express by the words she used? There is a key to resolve this question in *Blow-Up* itself. When we focus on the photographs, abstract paintings, landscape paintings, that appear in *Blow-Up*, we will be able to find the possibilities that Antonioni has a unique thought that photography and pointillist abstract paintings are similar in visual forms.

'The rays of light' and 'the line of sight'

As is well known, *Blow-Up* is based on "Las babas del diablo" (1959) written by Julio Cortázar (1914–1984).⁴ In literary terms, it is very difficult to find similarities between both works, except in their basic outlines. Many critics, therefore, thought *Blow-Up* was Antonioni's own concept with no special connection with its source⁵ and that both had different themes; "Las babas del diablo" is a fantasy story, but *Blow-Up* is an existentialistic one.⁶ But we should focus more on the similarities of the two outlines. Peeping at a couple, taking pictures of them, the women looking back at the heroes, quarrels between the heroes and the women, photographs that reveal crimes, and inexplicable endings. As you can see, both storylines are almost the same, even though both stories give us completely different impressions.

Let us try to examine these similarities in more detail. When both heroes originally see the couples, they see them either with their naked eyes or through their camera viewfinders. On the other hand, at home, they see the couples again in photographs. Thus, both heroes' ways of observing things change, and these changes help the development of these stories. Then, how different are both visions? In "Short History of Photography" (1931), Walter Benjamin (1892–1940) explains the difference between naked-eye vision and photographic vision: "For it is another nature which speaks to the camera rather than to the eye: 'other' above all in the sense that a space informed by human consciousness gives way to a space informed by the unconscious."⁷

According to Benjamin's words, the reason why the heroes have a nightmarish and daydream-like experience is that the photographs show many details repressed in

² They are Ian Stephenson's paintings that was borrowed for *Blow-Up*.

³ The hero's blow-ups from the park were photographed by Don McCullin, a British photojournalist recognized for his war photography.

⁴ The title of "Las babas del diablo" (1959) was changed into "Blow-Up" in the translation in English.

⁵ Cf. Peter Brunette, *The Films of Michelangelo Antonioni*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 109, 172.

⁶ Cf. David I. Grossvogel, "Blow-Up: The Forms of an Esthetic Itinerary," *Diacritics* 11, 3 (Fall 1972): 49–54.

⁷ Walter Benjamin, "Little History of Photography," in *Selected Writings* Vol. 2, 1927–1934, trans. Michael W. Livingstone and others, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 510.

the unconscious. So, when the heroes see the photographs, the details therein stimulate both heroes' 'unconscious', and they have nightmarish experiences. Thus, Benjamin's speculation is very adequate to analyze both works. They certainly have the same theme; the difference between naked-eye vision and photographic vision. But unfortunately, it is not enough to explain the connection between photographs and abstract paintings, which *Blow-Up* shows. So, to think about it, we start off by reconsidering the visual perception from today's understanding of the function of the eye. Here are a pair of phrases we should be careful of; 'the rays of light' and 'the line of sight'. It is most simply explained as follows:

'The rays of light' are radiations that emit from the surface of an object. They pass through the pupil to the retina. Then the image is formed on the retina (Figure 3). We ordinarily think this 'retinal image' is our vision. But this idea is partially wrong because the photoreceptor cells are not evenly distributed on the retina. As they are gathered in the center of the retina, the eye can capture clearly only the center of our field of vision. So, our eye must always be moving, even while focusing on various points within our eyesight. By doing so, we put together psychologically and physiologically a number of tiny images that the eye captures moment by moment, to construct the whole of the visual field.

When we think this way, we can imagine that a straight line goes from the eye to the object we are looking at. This imaginary line is a so-called 'line of sight'. The 'line of sight' is an imaginary straight line along which an observer looks. When we are looking at an object, this imaginary line traces the individual rays of light back to their origins. Thus, eye movement replaces the rays of light with the line of sight, while picking up only important rays for the viewer (Figure 4). So, the eye is an organ that 'captures' the actual rays of light and 'emits' the imaginary line of sight. Even though we think that we are seeing the retinal image moment by moment, in fact, our vision is the geometrically-imperfect analogue of the retinal image constructed over a period of time. But we don't notice this.⁸

By the way, this also holds true for the differences between drawing paintings and the way we see them. Consider the famous images drawn by Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519) and Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528), which show a similar device for drawing in perspective (Figures 5 and 6). We think that their images explain the following things: First, the impression that real objects leave on the retina is the same as the cross-cutting of the visual pyramid.⁹ Second, in perspective, the scene we see is seen with a single and immobile eye.¹⁰ But these things are only a hypothesis of Renaissance thinkers. Imagine how to draw with Leonardo's and Dürer's devices. Indeed, the eye stays in the same position. But the eye itself is always moving. When drawing by using

⁸ Cf. Robert Snowden, Peter Thompson and Tom Troscianko, *Basic Vision* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 6.

⁹ Leonardo da Vinci, *Notebooks*, selected by Irma Richter, ed. with an Introduction and Notes by Thereza Wells (New York: Oxford University Press, [1952], 2008), 115.

¹⁰ Erwin Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, trans. Christopher S. Wood (New York: Zoon Books, 1997), 29.

these devices, the line of sight is always moving to catch every point of the surface. At the same time, we put together these points on the canvas to make up the intersection of a visual pyramid. But when viewers see a painting drawn in perspective, they regard it as a scene captured in a moment. We can also see here the differences between 'rays of light' and 'line of sight'. In fact, this opposition of directions in vision has been questioned for centuries.¹¹ Alberti (1404–1472) says, in his *On Painting* (1435): "Indeed, among the ancients, there was a considerable dispute as to whether these rays emerge from the surface or from the eye. This truly difficult question, which is quite without value for our purposes, may here be set aside."¹²

As Alberti didn't distinguish opposite directions when an observer looked at an object, he could ignore the movement of the line of sight, and this made him think that the retinal image is captured in an instant and represents our true naked-eye vision. But by distinguishing 'the rays of light' and 'the line of sight', we can think more clearly 'how the vision is formed' and 'how we have interpreted the vision or misunderstood it' as I said above. Now, let's compare anew the various visions in *Blow-Up* by using the concepts of 'rays of light' and 'line of sight'.

The changing of our idea of vision in *Blow-Up*

In an earlier part of *Blow-Up*, the hero always sees people with his naked eye and through his camera's viewfinder. For example, he takes sneak shots of a dosshouse,¹³ erotic photographs with a model, fashion photographs with a few models, and shots of a couple in a park. In these scenes, his line of sight is like a bullet, imagining the scenes in front of him as he thinks they should be, and his camera's finder helps him to do so.¹⁴ In addition, the scene where the hero tries to buy a landscape painting in an antique shop near the park might show that he sees objects in perspective.¹⁵ But after the hero was looked at by the woman, and later he saw the scene again through the photographs, he starts losing the power of his line of sight and he becomes the object of someone's gaze. In his photographs, he finds the third man with a gun and a dead body of the man who was with the woman. To confirm the fact, he returns to the park again and really finds the dead body. Now his line of sight is not like a bullet. He feels someone's gaze and becomes uneasy. He touches the dead body and runs from the park, scared. What causes this change? It is the 'mesh-like structure' common between photographs and Pollock-like paintings.

¹¹ Cf. David Park, *The Fire within the Eye* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1997).

¹² Leon Battista Alberti, *On Paintings*, trans. Cecil Grayson (London: Penguin Books, 2004), 40.

¹³ The hero dresses as a bum to take shots of the inside of a doss house, later he shows them to his editor, Ron.

¹⁴ He constructs scenes he is looking at, by using his line of sight. This is a reason why he always imagines what he took.

¹⁵ In this scene, we can see some landscapes inside the antique shop and a woman's portrait outside it. In addition, inside the antique shop, we can also see a stereoscope device.

The function of the line of sight that we use to draw in perspective is to aim at and focus on something. So, we can say that seeing in perspective is indeed active and aggressive, and moreover, it is reinforced when looking through a telescope or a viewfinder.¹⁶ On the contrary, we might be able to say that the images captured by the retina and film are very passive for the following reasons. The surface of the film is covered with a network of silver grains, and the surface of the retina is covered with a network of photoreceptor cells. The chemical reaction of the silver grains with light fixes the rays of light on the film, in a similar way the photoreceptor cells change light into electric signals. This mesh-like structure common to both makes it possible for the retina and the film to receive directly the rays of light. In this way, the images captured by the retina and the film are very passive. So, the fact that the hero changes his aggressive attitude into a passive one shows that the hero changes his way of seeing from looking at the scene through the viewfinder to looking at it through the photographs.

Needless to say, the reference to this mesh-like structure of the retina is one of many concepts that brought about abstract painting. Let's remember here pointillist paintings by Georges Seurat (1859–1891). What pointillists wanted was to make the colors of paintings as similar to light as possible and to create as much luminosity as possible in their paintings. So, pointillists juxtaposed dots of complementary colors next to each other on their canvases rather than mixing their pigments on their palettes. As a result, the surface of the canvas is covered by bright dots and emits the light by itself.

By referring not to the geometry of the line of sight, but to the physiological function of the retina, paintings stopped being windows; instead, they started getting closer to being abstract flat planes like the retina. Consequently, the paintings came to resemble veils or curtains with abstract mesh-like patterns. Now that we can see that photographs and pointillist paintings are based on the same principle; the retinal mesh-like structure. In *Blow-Up*, this is emphasized when the exaggerated blown-up photographs are compared to Bill's pointillist paintings. Then Bill's girlfriend says, "It looks like one of Bill's paintings."

Conclusion

Incidentally, different from 'three-dimensional illusions' drawn in perspective, some kinds of patterns affect us physically and give us 'optical illusions' like a hallucination. Optical Art, which became popular about the same time as *Blow-Up*, was a good example of this. Bridget Riley (b. 1931) is representative of this movement, and her partner between 1960 and 1973, Peter Sedgley (b. 1930) is another abstract painter whose painting appears in *Blow-Up* (Figure 7). Like Optical Art, the patterns of both

¹⁶ The reverse Galilean type is often used for a Range View Finder Camera, and Michel who is a hero in "Las babas del diablo" uses a Contax 1.1.2 with a range finder.

the exaggeratedly blown-up photographs and the abstract paintings with mesh-like structure might also give the hero a day-dream-like experience.

In addition to the reference to Optical art in *Blow-Up*, let me introduce some interesting facts about this connection. About the time when *Blow-Up* was released, Richard Hamilton (1922–2011) was also dealing with this photographic feature for a series of his works. In this series, he kept enlarging a post-card over and over, until there was nothing but dots (Figure 8).¹⁷ And an even more interesting fact is that Hamilton was a teacher of Ian Stephenson (1934–2000) who is the real painter of “Bill’s paintings”. But it seems to me that it was more than a coincidence, because Hamilton was heavily influenced by Marcel Duchamp (1877–1968). As was well known, Duchamp was also interested in psychological and physiological aspect of vision.

From these facts, we might be able to say, the scenes of the hero taking sneak shots and fashion photographs were influenced by Duchamp’s *Large Glass* (1915–1923) or *Etant Donnés* (1946–1966). Looking through a viewfinder and smoked glasses evoke us some Duchamp’s works. In addition, in this film, there is a scene that the hero buys a propeller in an antique shop. This also evokes some of Duchamp’s works; his first ‘readymade’ *Bicycle Wheel* (1913), *Rotary Glass Plate (Precision Optics)* (1920), and *Rotoreliefs* (1935). They are objects that give us a feeling of a rotary motion. When we see them, we experience an optical illusion which sometimes produces vertigo.



Figure 1: “It looks like one of Bill’s paintings”

¹⁷ Richard Hamilton talks about his work to one of the main characters in *Greetings* (1968), directed by Brian de Palma who was also fascinated by *Blow-Up* and adapted *Blow-Out* (1981) from it.



Figure 2: Ian Stephenson's abstract painting in *Blow-Up*

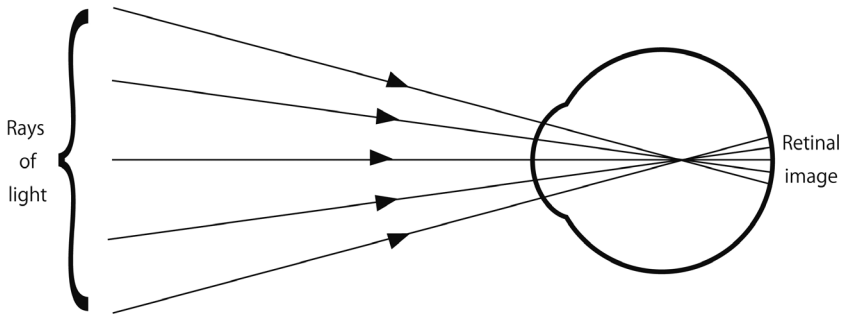


Figure 3: The retinal image (the image on the retina)

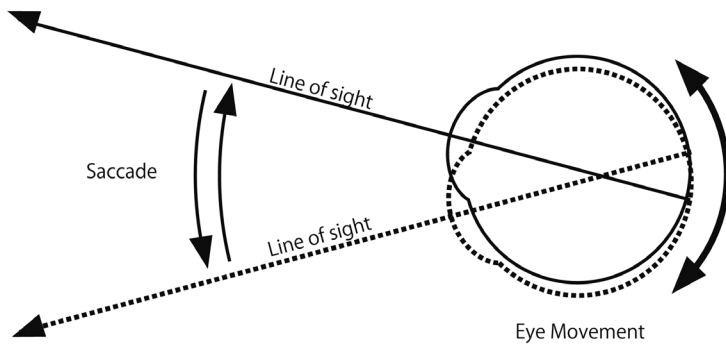


Figure 4: The line of sight and the movement of the eye

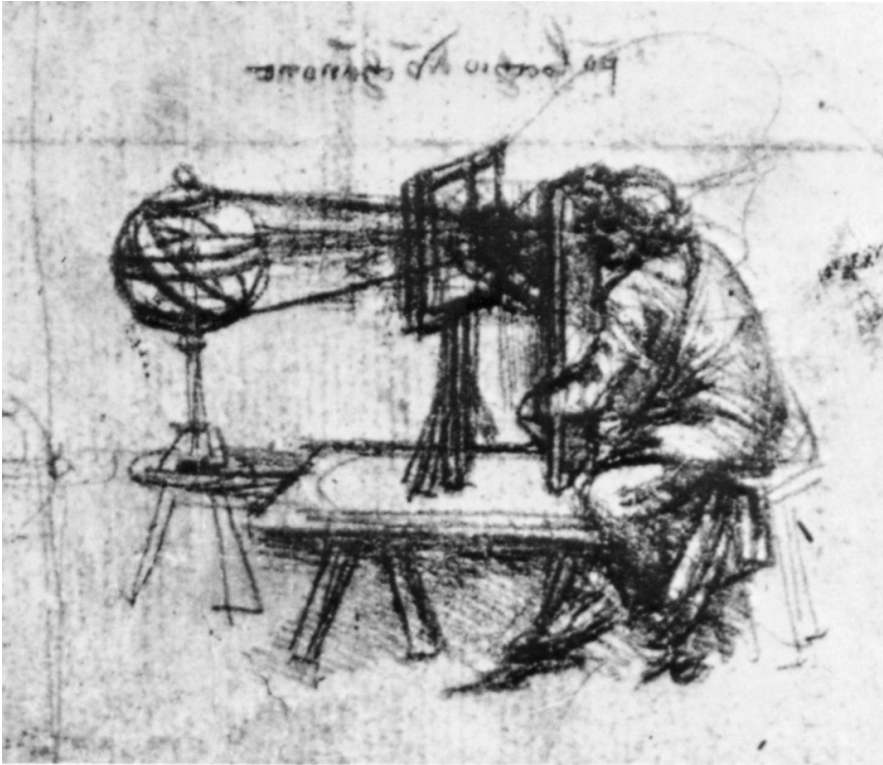


Figure 5: Leonardo da Vinci, *Man using a transparent plane to draw an armillary sphere* (c. 1510)



Figure 6: Albrecht Dürer, *Illustration to the Treatise on Measurement* (1525)



Figure 7: Peter Sedgley, *Circle II* (1965) in *Blow-Up*

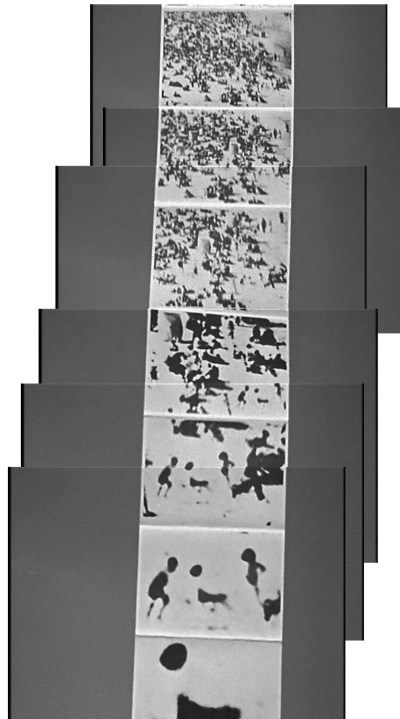


Figure 8: Richard Hamilton's *A Postal Card – For Mother from S.M.S. No. 1* (1968) in *Greetings* (1968) directed by Brian de Palma

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