

Antonioni's Photographer: Doubting Thomas or Peeping Tom? *Blow-Up* as Post-Neorealist Parody

It has been more than forty years since the release of Michelangelo Antonioni's 1966 classic *Blow-Up* engendered a massive amount of intellectual and artistic attention. The scholarship on the film is extensive and it seems that no survey of Italian film would be complete without at very least a few paragraphs devoted to the question of what *Blow-Up* was trying to do or say. While there is some agreement that the film probably addresses the relationship between the artist and his creation and or the nature of reality and the quest for truth, there was very little criticism devoted to the question of what precisely, in terms of genre, Antonioni had created.¹ Looking back at several decades of criticism with fresh eyes, it seems that perhaps the reviewers (even those who had alerted us to the possibility that the film was a metaphor,) like Antonioni's photographer, have missed something that was right before their eyes; that is, that the film is ultimately an intricate exercise in multi-level parody.² In this article then I will examine how Antonioni crafts such parody and argue that *Blow-up* relies on two complementary traditions, the Gospel story of Doubting Thomas and the folkloric figure of Peeping Tom, to underline modernity's break with the past and the crisis of faith it has engendered. Concomitantly, I propose that Antonioni uses the figure of the photographer not to mock the dilemmas figured by a skeptical apostle and a repressed voyeur, but rather to point out the inability of the modern photographer or filmmaker to deal genuinely or adequately with either dilemma. In this latter aspect, I suggest that Antonioni has also created a meta-parody in which his use of hagiographical and popular traditions is itself a parody of the Neorealist tradition intended to further emphasize the modern filmmaker's break with Neorealism's belief that truth was knowable and reality capable of filmic representation, even if not always at the literal level of the narrative.

Blow-Up's synopsis is well known and need not be repeated here.³ Two scenes in particular, however, bear mentioning and provide a good starting point from which to explore how Antonioni goes about crafting his multi-layered parody. Let us consider first then the scene

in which Thomas returns to the park without his camera to see if there is indeed a body hidden in the bushes. In a moment that is highly suggestive of a possible affinity between Antonioni's photographer and the doubting disciple, Thomas reaches out to touch the body, to confirm what he sees. When he returns the next day with his camera, however, the body is gone, raising the question of whether in fact it was ever really there. Thomas' doubt was not assuaged by his touching; rather, his trust in his own senses has, seemingly, been dealt a serious blow. Moreover, it is not the first such blow nor will it be the last. Throughout the film, as Thomas wonders about the reality of what he has seen or photographed or imagined, the tenuous nature of what constitutes reality is continually undermined by a series of seemingly random encounters; two of which seem particularly pertinent to his own conundrum. The first is a brief conversation with Verushka, the model he was photographing earlier in the film. Her deadpan assertion that she *is* in Paris (although Thomas is quite certain they are both at a London party) suggests solipsistically that each of the film's characters creates his or her own reality. The second, an encounter with a group of mummies that closes the film, reiterates the same possibility and encapsulates the dilemma that hounds Thomas. The mummies playing tennis with an imaginary ball urge Thomas to pick up that which he cannot see when the "ball" is hit out of bounds and "lands" at his feet. We the viewers are tempted to assume that there is no ball and that Thomas is just playing, pretending to see. At the same time, however, we also wonder if Thomas has abandoned his physical senses as purveyors of truth, given how unreliable they seem to have become. As Thomas stoops to retrieve and throw the imaginary ball, a crane shot pulls away from him and he disappears from our view. If, as James S. Williams has suggested, all of Antonioni's works may be regarded as essays on the relations between reality and its perception, (52) here then we see the crux of the debate. Now invisible, Thomas has become to the audience what the man in the thicket was to Thomas, as we ask ourselves, was he ever really there? Is Thomas any less real now that we cannot see him than when he was but light flickering on a movie screen? The viewer's doubt echoes the photographer's doubt and the clever viewer will be reminded of the disciple who could not believe in a risen Christ unless he had himself put his fingers in his

ANTONIONI'S PHOTOGRAPHER

teacher's wounds. The typological affinity between the two doubting Thomases thus creates the basis of a parodic construct through which Antonioni challenges the viewer's faith in the truth of the creator's filmic construct. At the same time, Antonioni uses this affinity to remind us of another tradition, the Neorealist tradition from which he and modernity have become estranged.

Indeed it is *Blow-Up's* use of characters typologically connected to hagiographical and popular traditions to create a polysemous narrative that forges the most obvious link to the classics of Italian Neorealism and thus to Antonioni's earliest artistic formation.⁴ In *Rome Open City* (1945) Roberto Rossellini, for example, relied on name play and iconography, devices common to medieval hagiographical narratives, to create an allegorical level of meaning in his documentary-style drama about partisans in Rome during the Nazi occupation. The characters' names, in particular, Giovanni Episcopo and Pietro Pellegrini, together with a scene in which the captured partisans are taken towards the Palazzo della Civiltà, Mussolini's new coliseum, created a typological affinity between the partisans and Christian martyrs being persecuted by a pagan empire. This typological affinity⁵ thus elucidated the "true" meaning of the struggle against Fascism. That the *partigiani* are to be regarded as the lambs of God is underlined when Nazi officers shoot two sheep inside a restaurant. Although the moment does not advance the literal narrative it serves, as do many of the hagiographical allusions, as an interpretive key, alerting the viewer to an underlying layer of significance at odds with the alleged objectivity of the Neorealist camera.

Similarly, the hapless Antonio of Vittorio De Sica's *Ladri di Biciclette* (1948) recalls the saint renowned for finding lost things and, combined with De Sica's branding the lost bicycle "*fides*," transforms an ostensibly political film into a parable not only about the search for the means of making a living, but also about the quest to recover one's lost faith. The film's polysemy asserts that Antonio is a failure only in the nominally "real world," that is, the literal narrative of the film. When, in the final moments of the film, his son Bruno grabs Antonio's hand, the audience is certain that what was lost has been found and that Antonio's search has been successful even if he has not recovered his bicycle. Further, the closing shot underlines the affinities between

Bruno and Christ that De Sica has been hinting at throughout the film: Bruno the Christ figure has equally recovered his lost lamb. (The observant viewer will recall that De Sica alluded to Antonio as a lost lamb in a seemingly random yet obviously significant panning shot of a poster advertising “lana (wool) di Sant’Antonio.” Just as a movie poster of Rita Hayworth first alerted the viewer to the inherent artifice of the literal layer of De Sica’s project, so too does another poster direct us to the existence of another layer of significance.)

Thus even in its earnest effort to present reality, Italian Neorealism could not restrict itself to the bare literal. Moreover, its dirty little secret was that the reality it purported to present was, in many cases, the product of artifice. In *The Bicycle Thief*, as in *Rome Open City*, the effect of watching real life was the result of De Sica’s intentional manipulation of the *mise-en-scène* and highly orchestrated camera work. Masterful in its artifice, De Sica’s film is brilliant precisely because it hides its artifice so well. To adapt a famous bit of Dante criticism;⁶ the greatest fiction of *The Bicycle Thief* is that it is not fiction. The verisimilitude of film is such, however, that it can make anything look real even when it is the result of artful fabrication and manipulation. Real truth, on the other hand, the Neorealists tell us, is locatable within the deeper allegorical level to which the literal continually if only subtly, alerts us.⁷

Federico Fellini, who collaborated with Rossellini on *Rome Open City*, not surprisingly spent much of his career exploring the tension between these two layers. Exploiting the filmmaker’s ability to photograph the seemingly real, Fellini’s films continually expose the artifice inherent even in the so-called documentary and encourage the viewer to doubt the “truth” of the literal level. Fellini broaches the issue in *The White Sheik* (1952) (which was developed from a story written by Antonioni) but it is in *La Dolce Vita* (1960) where Fellini confronts directly what John Freccero has called the “extraordinary means the medium provides in order to lie”⁸ (120). In *La Dolce Vita*, when Fellini films photographers photographing the movie star Silvia’s arrival in Rome, he also films them re-filming her arrival so as to produce a more dramatic shot of the moment. The viewer is thus sensitized to the tension between the original and a copy or between truth and its representation. The question then is whether it is

ANTONIONI'S PHOTOGRAPHER

reasonable to believe anything this manipulator presents as literal truth. Perhaps just as significantly, however, Fellini's act of photographing the act of photographing, at the same time also raises the issue of the filmmaker's meta-filmic role in creating this artifice.

As in *Rome Open City* and *The Bicycle Thief*, in *La Dolce Vita*, a putative resolution emerges from a series of veiled biblical and hagiographical references and the names of several key characters that alert us not only to the artifice of what we are watching but also to the truth contained within the lie. Like a carnival mask then, this lie, this artifice both conceals and reveals and *La Dolce Vita* is gradually understood as a literal narrative that purports to be true but which also contains a truer allegorical meaning. The closing shot of Marcello fading into the background tells us that the literal is but artifice and that the allegorical level is where one finds the truth. Marcello, however, while cognizant of the constructed nature of the world of the publicist and paparazzi, cannot or will not see the veiled meaning that lies within. Accordingly, the fish that he and his fellow revelers find on the beach, dead for three days, will not be resurrected. In contrast to De Sica's symbol of faith, the bicycle named *fides*, Fellini's fish loses its semiotic potential and is reified, for the protagonist fails to see what lies beyond, hiding himself behind dark glasses.⁹ Such is the situation of Antonioni's photographer who, like St. Paul, at first sees the literal but does not see in full and then later sees but like St. Thomas, doubts. In this way *Blow-Up* not only gives nod to Antonioni's own artistic formation but also to the hermeneutics underlying much of the Italian Neorealist project.

Given the number of affinities that critics have observed between *Blow-Up*¹⁰ and Fellini's works it seems legitimate to resituate it within that same allegorical tradition that informs not only Fellini's films but also those of De Sica and Rossellini. The most obvious link to the tradition is signaled by the name play Antonioni employs in identifying the photographer as Thomas.¹¹ Although the photographer's name is not used in the film, the screenplay is clear that the photographer is named Thomas. Moreover, Antonioni refers to the character as Thomas in interviews both during the filming of *Blow-Up* and afterwards. But even if the character were not so named, his obvious connection to the disciple who would not believe in the

resurrection until he had put his finger in the wound is emphasized in the scene in which the photographer returns to the park without his camera to touch the body. The photographer's doubt is reinforced when he returns – in typical Fellini style – at daybreak, with his camera for “proof” of the body, only to find that it is not there.

There are other subtle indications in the photographer's body language that equally suggest he might be linked to the figure of Doubting Thomas. During the encounter with Jane in his studio / apartment, when Thomas offers her a cigarette, his arm is positioned in a manner exceptionally evocative of Andrea del Verrocchio's St. Thomas in Florence's Orsanmichele.¹² It is of course, highly likely that Antonioni had seen this sculpture but even if he had not, Verrocchio's depiction of the moment in which Thomas extends his hand to feel the wound of Christ, is certainly not original in its iconography¹³ and Antonioni may have had any number of representations of Thomas in mind as he moved his characters around the set. The possibility of Antonioni's absorption of the image to lend meaning to his photographer is intriguing. One can only wish that someone had asked Antonioni about the photographer's name during the many interviews concerning the film, for it is difficult to imagine it is mere coincidence especially given the hagiographical tradition that attends the figure of Thomas. In the *Golden Legend*, for example, Jacobus de Voragine describes Thomas as an architect who was “very skillful in the art.” Laurie Taylor-Mitchell expands on this and suggests that it was Thomas' role as an artist, “involved with manipulating tangible materials” that so aptly connected the figure of Thomas to his demand for physical evidence of the resurrection. (608)

There is a further semiological aspect of the Thomas legend that is equally suggestive of a link between Antonioni's photographer and the Gospel tradition. The Apostle's act of probing the wounds of Christ, of physically inserting his body (or part thereof) into that of another, is ripe with almost unfathomable symbolism. For the purpose of this essay, though, it is enough to recall that Thomas, Antonioni's photographer not only seeks to touch the body he finds in the bushes, but is also constantly engaged in the act of gazing upon it (by means of his blow-ups) and others, an act that Roland Barthes has associated with *punctum*, or probing. Indeed Thomas' gazing is accentuated and

ANTONIONI'S PHOTOGRAPHER

exaggerated in the early scenes of the film where Thomas is “probing” the model Verushka with his enormous camera. It bears noting as well that the image of the supine emaciated Verushka,¹⁴ with her arms outstretched, cannot but help remind the viewer of a crucified figure.¹⁵

Significantly, the vast majority of criticism ignores the association of Thomas the photographer with doubting Thomas. In a 1967 review of the film, Carey Harrison makes only a passing reference to the name play, stating with regard to the ending of the film: “the Thomas once so sure he could interpret what was real, confesses himself a doubting Thomas, a humble ignorant Thomas” (41). Jean Clair’s article “The Road to Damascus” allows for an allegorical interpretation, but in his allusion to the conversion of Paul¹⁶ he fails to note the more obvious connection to Thomas the Apostle. One expects that the failure to make the connection lies with the critical formation of the critics commenting on Antonioni.¹⁷ While they often recognize the need or potential for a deeper more allegorical meaning, there is little recourse to the methodology commonly used by scholars of medieval art and literature. In contrast, John Freccero, a renowned Dantist, renders a more satisfying interpretation of *Blow-Up*, as he connects the hermeneutics of Antonioni’s project to the medieval literary tradition that preceded him.¹⁸ Specifically, Freccero’s recognition of the metaphoric relationship between the film’s director and the protagonist invites us to see Antonioni’s project as akin to that of the *Divine Comedy*,¹⁹ in which the protagonist is a metaphor for the author, and the allegorical meaning of the protagonist/author’s experience, as depicted in the literal narrative, is explicated through the use of typology.

Freccero’s recognition of *Blow-Up*’s consistent inclusion of medieval and Renaissance artistic traditions,²⁰ also urges us to adopt such a methodology as a means of deciphering the film’s allegorical sense. Identifying a number of imbedded images²¹ Freccero allows the viewer to see others, and to see the affinities between Antonioni’s characters and the types they represent. Antonioni thus, like the mummings, compels us to see something we did not at first see, a quest that is encouraged by Thomas’ friend the painter who suggests that there may be parts in his work that are not immediately recognizable but which will emerge at some point. What Antonioni is doing then

seems akin to what his predecessors were doing with Antonio Ricci and Pietro Pellegrini.²² While the vast majority of film critics and scholars may not have immediately seen Doubting Thomas, Freccero's approach to Antonioni's hermeneutics justifies us finding him.

At the same time, this signifying strategy serves not only to illuminate the allegorical level of meaning but also to link *Blow Up* to its Neorealist antecedents as the character of Thomas serves as more than a mere nod to Antonioni's Neorealist past. A closer look at the character suggests that Antonioni, in addition to using typology to explicate the allegorical significance of Thomas has also relied on it to create a parodic relationship between the modern photographer and the gospel figure which in turn, desacralizes the Neorealist project and its attempts at truth-telling.

Antonioni's Thomas in his dual-layered significance functions then as a parody not only of the biblical Thomas, as a cynical postmodern version of a gospel story emphasizing the emptiness of and the impossibility for truth in a world that is moderated and mediated through technology, but also of an entire genre. Had our photographer been a simple evocation of Thomas he would have been satisfied with touching the body and we would have been reminded how much more blessed he would have been had he believed without seeing. Instead, the photographer's doubt is amplified and the super modern Thomas' belief that he might know through his camera is mocked. In that moment so too is the viewer's faith in verisimilitude and indeed, in the recorded image, ridiculed.²³

If *Blow-Up* is in fact a parody, it would not be the first time that the Thomas figure has been used parodically to address the issue of trust. Roy Peter Clark has argued compellingly that Geoffrey Chaucer's "Summoner's Tale" is an "elaborate parody of biblical and iconographic representations" of Thomas and the Pentecost. This is not to say that Antonioni has consciously or unconsciously borrowed from Chaucer in his creation of Thomas the photographer but rather to suggest that St. Thomas is a figure that lends himself easily to parody. Indeed, applying Clark's methodology to characterize *Blow-Up* as a "sacred parody" renders a more satisfying interpretation of the director's project than has previously been offered. Clark's proposition that in "The Summoner's Tale," Thomas' probing of the wounds of

ANTONIONI'S PHOTOGRAPHER

Christ is parodied and inverted by the insertion of the Friar's "probing" hand into Thomas' buttocks, provides not only a model through which to interpret Antonioni's Thomas²⁴ but it also points to still another medieval literary tradition contained in the character of Thomas the photographer. Just as we can imagine the probing of Thomas' camera as a parody or perversion of St. Thomas' gesture as recounted in the Gospels, we can equally see the probing of the camera as typologically linked to voyeurism and the apocryphal figure of Peeping Tom.

By setting the film in England, a country detached physically and spiritually from Italian culture, Antonioni can emphasize Thomas' detachment,²⁵ but he also provides an appropriate background into which to insert an allegorical figure associated with English tradition.²⁶ The seventeenth century tale of the Peeping Tom who was struck blind (or dead in some versions) when he gazed upon Lady Godiva²⁷ constitutes a cautionary tale about the dangers of excessive voyeurism and in particular, the transgressive gaze, both of which in the modern era have been linked to photography.²⁸ In *Blow-Up* our photographer is engaged almost constantly in voyeurism. He separates seeing from believing and relegates watching to a purely sensory pleasure that bears no spiritual fruit, just as its sexual pleasure bears no offspring. The sterility of his seeking is attested to by Thomas himself who states that although he was once married he has no children. Indeed, Thomas' life is a continual exercise in spiritual, physical and technological onanism. In his work he produces only likenesses and facsimiles but nothing new. He is ultimately barren and his lack of familial ties only emphasizes this state of artificiality in which genuine human intercourse is impossible. As Charles Thomas Samuels observes, "The photographer, a creature of work and pleasure but of no inner force or loyalty, is simply unable to involve himself in life. He watches it, manipulates it; but ... has no sense of life's purpose"(18).²⁹

Although Thomas' voyeurism strongly likens him to the Peeping Tom tradition, his affinity to another filmic character, the *Peeping Tom* of the 1960 film by director Michael Powell,³⁰ provides perhaps the most persuasive evidence that Antonioni intended his viewers to make the connection to his photographer, or at the very least had *Peeping Tom* in mind when he created this character. Indeed the films have too much in common for one to suggest that similarities

between it and Antonioni's film are merely coincidental. The use of the camera as a phallus and as a tool of sexual aggression is perceptible in both films as the camera substitutes for the gaze and, in a Barthesian sense, as an instrument of intrusion. Significantly the photographer in *Peeping Tom*, like Antonioni's Thomas is rarely without his camera – there is only one occasion on which he leaves home without it. When he sees a couple kissing, however, he immediately reaches for the camera, confirming the camera's substitution for the gaze.³¹ Thomas' watching, i.e. his vision, sadly, is akin to the kind of sight that Fellini's Marcello has elected. It discerns the object but not its meaning.

Because of its inherent objectification and failure to engage in human intercourse, not surprisingly, voyeurism is frequently linked to pornography, which distinguishes itself from eroticism precisely through its objectification and its deconstruction of the whole and corresponding fetishization of parts. The viewer is alerted to this potential in the scenes in which as Seymour Chatman puts it, “the models are ‘halved’ by the screens” (*Investigation* 103). The most obvious manifestation of Thomas' voyeurism is, of course, the pivotal scene in the park that engenders the central narrative thread of the film. Because of the earlier scene with Verushka in which the act of shooting³² substitutes for intercourse, we are already primed to see Thomas and his camera in sexual terms – especially as he engages in a traditional act of voyeurism, watching lovers embrace. Such an act, we must remember, is at its most essential, artifice and although Antonioni may have wished “to discover a genuine eroticism of the object,” his photographer's eroticism takes the form of the simulated sex between photographer and model, labeled by Williams as an “obscene simulacrum” (53).³³ While Williams does not explain why such eroticism is “obscene” it is not illogical to understand that its obscenity is related to its falsity and to its objectification of the subject. The moment thus quickly devolves from erotic to pornographic. As *Peeping Tom*, Thomas has trouble relating to Jane when she comes to his apartment and is more comfortable when he stands on the other side of the beam that visually cuts her in half. We also see that he is fascinated by the broken neck of the guitar following the Yardbirds concert. Thomas continually relates more to the part than the whole even though this rapport quickly fades. He is soon bored with the

ANTONIONI'S PHOTOGRAPHER

guitar neck for in its detachment from the whole its creative potential is also truncated and can amuse for only so long. We see a similar fascination with the propeller that serves no purpose and exists merely as a disjointed part of a whole. In fact, Thomas himself is a study in fragmentation, as Marsha Kinder has observed, noting that what has been seen as a lack of conventional dramatic plot functions as a means of revealing "Thomas's fragmented view of experience which is comprised of separate moments. No episode reaches climax or resolution; no human relationship builds or develops" (86).

The problem Thomas has in seeing the body in the thicket is that he is trying to see a part of a picture, deconstruct it and extract a part of the larger image. But such an exercise cannot yield full understanding and precisely what happened in the park remains a mystery. As David Grossvogel points out, the photographer who has substituted his camera for his own eye cannot truly know his objects for the camera cannot comprehend (50). This cognitive dead-end is signaled as well, typologically, for the natural consequence of the garden setting will be a death or a figural death such as a loss of innocence by means of a revelation of a previously unforeseen evil. Similarly, the illicit romance, typologically linked to the *folle amor* of the medieval courtly love tradition, must equally end in death.³⁴ The literal narrative of the lovers in the park is thus fulfilled allegorically in the death that Thomas believes he has photographed but more specific to our photographer's fate is the blinding and death that result from Peeping Tom's transgressive gaze. In the closing scene of the film Thomas can no longer see; objects are now invisible and he is, for want of a better word, "dead" to the viewers as Antonioni removes him from the screen.

Antonioni's photographer thus has much in common with Fellini's troubled Marcello of *La Dolce Vita* beyond his obvious isolation in the modern world.³⁵ Unwilling to engage in the human experience, Thomas seems to be on a quest to transcend his tawdry surroundings and find a higher calling through his book of black and white photographs. Yet like Marcello, Antonioni's photographer vacillates between the spiritual and the carnal and his inability to perceive meaning beyond that which his senses perceive condemns him to the here and now. In a postmodern version of Dante's *contrappasso*

both Marcello and Thomas seem bound to spend eternity confined to the works they have each created; Marcello with his pen, Thomas with his camera. Marcello, in the final moments of *La Dolce Vita*, fades into the background, his white suit providing no contrast against the white sky of an Italian dawn. Thomas likewise fades from view as Antonioni's crane pulls farther and farther away causing Thomas to disappear into a sea of pixels not unlike the photos he himself produced in his endless series of blow-ups.

As parody, Thomas' affinity to Peeping Tom underlines the contrast between the virtuous Lady Godiva and the amoral women whom Thomas photographs but at the same time emphasizes the common blindness of both voyeurs, itself an allegorical representation of a deeper spiritual blindness. George Slover has suggested that the mod generation, that is, that generation represented in *Blow-Up*, suffers precisely from an inability to move beyond the literal. This generation, he says, has failed to understand the notion of the world as a stage as metaphoric. For Antonioni's photographer and his contemporaries, "the theatre-world equation is no longer metaphor; it is literally so" ("Medium" 768). Accordingly, when the created literal becomes "fact," any allegorical truth that might have been contained therein, is lost. In the context of photography then the camera image is, "in actuality, the representation of an act of seeing." The camera image is at best "*imitatio*" even though it purports to be an unmediated truth or as Slover put it so aptly, "the camera image by its nature conceals its nature" ("Medium" 768).

Here then is where we find the link between the two Thomases figured in Antonioni's photographer: the doubt that requires physical proof to believe and the voyeurism that dislocated the object have in common their reliance on a smaller part of a whole and, more importantly, on a physical act or object that focuses on the literal rather than the allegorical.

Body parts, like guitar parts taken out of context, have no meaning but what Doubting Thomas, Peeping Tom and our photographer Thomas have all failed to see, is that the underlying meaning to which they are blind, is magically transferable, that the underlying truth, the signified, can be contained in a number of signifiers. It is the narrative context, however, that reveals the meaning

ANTONIONI'S PHOTOGRAPHER

and in the absence of that larger picture is unknowable.³⁶

Our postmodern Thomas sees with his eyes but only believes with his camera. Like the biblical Thomas, Antonioni's photographer cannot trust in the purveyor of the message but rather seeks physical proof. Significantly, in this postmodern world, the camera has replaced Thomas' own senses and we understand now why he seems only to react sexually when he has one in his hands. As Robert Carringer puts it, Thomas "can effectively relate to the world only through his camera" (114). As the film progresses and the failure of technology, the new sensory perception, is exposed, Antonioni reveals the inadequacy of filmic representation and suggests that a more reliable vessel of truth may be one that is unwavering and does not rely on the senses be they St. Thomas' probing finger or Thomas' probing camera. The unreliability of Thomas' photos is revealed not only in the resolution problem but in his perception of a painting done by one of his friends, consisting of unordered spatters in which one can perceive the occasional arm or leg but whose appearance is merely a trick of the eye or light. As the painter himself points out, such resemblances are purely coincidental.³⁷ The question of what constitutes reliable proof thus remains unresolved. Indeed even within the Thomas tradition it is unclear whether or not Thomas actually inserted his finger in the wound for the gospel is ambiguous in that respect.

Like that of Fellini's faded hero, Thomas' own struggle to distinguish between reality and artifice is played out in the contrasts of dark and light, an apt signifier for the distinction between reality and artifice, but as we saw with Marcello, the black suits that so deftly carved his silhouette against convent walls were but a construct, a costume or mask, and his own distinct existence is easily erased by a change of clothing. Similarly, Thomas' own shabby clothes worn in the opening scenes allow him to blend into the reality of the flop house he seeks to chronicle, but his swinging London gear later donned in the true dandy fashion creates the contrast essential to our perception of Thomas as something more than just another east-ender down on his luck.

Color versus black and white then is just another device that Antonioni uses to alert us to the dichotomy inherent and the dilemma personified by the photographer. Indebted to his own Neorealist

formation Antonioni continues to paint “real” reality in black and white or in muted shades while reserving color for flights of fancy.³⁸ The use of color in this paradigm thus immediately signals artifice or at very least, subjectivity.³⁹ In this way Thomas’ color fashion photography is identified with fabrication and his models are equally revealed as creations, figures brought to life by his own perception which we witness when Thomas imposes a sort of stasis on his models telling them to close their eyes when he leaves the room. Freccero refers to this moment as an “indictment of the whole world of graphic inauthenticity” (123) and is indeed the point of the parody.

Here too is where we begin to perceive the meta-parody, that is, that the film itself is a parody of the Neorealist tradition intended to address Antonioni’s own relationship to these issues. To return to Freccero’s take on the film, that is, that the protagonist is a metaphor for the director, then indeed we can see that at his most essential Thomas is the “twin” of Antonioni.⁴⁰ Thomas, an extension and creation of Antonioni, captures with his camera what he thinks is a body, something he did not see with his eyes. Yet even when he has seen with his eyes he still doubts. Neither his eyes nor his camera can satisfy his desire to truly see.

The issue that Thomas confronts was but a harbinger of a later age in which, as Jonathan Dawson has remarked, “even the latest technologies can mislead or betray us. In the computer age, it is this remaining element of ontological uncertainty that still troubles the human observer.” If one cannot rely on a filmed image any more than one perceived through the senses, what use then is the former? This is the question underlying the tennis game played by the mummies who create the impression of a ball and of a game in which Thomas gradually allows himself to participate. That the game is a literal manifestation of some deeper allegorical meaning is strongly suggested as Thomas’ willingness to propagate the artifice suggests that, in contrast to Marcello, he may be able to move beyond the physical senses and “see” beyond that which is filmed. As Thomas admits to the construct and participates in the game, he ceases to be the voyeur and instead becomes the object of the viewer’s voyeurism.

The caprice of film thus exposes the deceptive potential of the sensual experience as the spectator’s act of viewing is also revealed

ANTONIONI'S PHOTOGRAPHER

as make-belief. As spectators, we have no more control over what we see than does Antonioni's Thomas. As Richard Wendorf notes, like Thomas, we have become "merely passive viewers of the scene"⁴¹ (61). Slover sees Thomas' act as mimicking that of our own when we view the camera image, that is, we make believe that what we are looking at is real. Noting that Thomas' act is merely "like an act of faith," he suggests that it is at best "a substitute and a Parody" ("Medium" 770). Though Slover is not explicit in naming the tradition of which it is a parody, the lesson of Doubting Thomas and of our own Thomas is the same. St. Thomas' probing finger was no more an arbiter of truth than was Thomas' probing lens, or Antonioni's all-seeing camera. St. Thomas' probing finger in its reliance of sensory perception is akin to Antonioni's photographer's search for truth in his blow-ups or to our own act of suspending disbelief which constitutes what Slover calls "willful narrowing in the range of human experience" (Meeker 770). Antonioni's photographer, in limiting his experience to the sensual, is a parody of the Apostle's story but it is also a parody of a filmic tradition that sought to convey truth by means of an inherently deceptive medium.

As the camera pulls away from Thomas, the viewer becomes acutely aware of his own existence and of the fact that what we have been witnessing is also a fabrication, a fabrication shaped to give form to an idea, a fact of which Thomas the photographer seemed unaware. As Slover says in commenting on the photo-session with Verushka, for Thomas, "reality" throughout the narrative was what was on film ("Medium" 759). The final shot of *Blow Up* thus recalls the closing shot of *La Dolce Vita* in which the girl on the beach turns to look directly at the camera and to us, the audience. Our gaze is aligned with that of the director revealing that what we have just witnessed is ultimately his creation or, more precisely, his fabrication.⁴² The physical, the created, is, therefore, not only mutable but also ephemeral, to which Thomas' ultimate disappearance attests.⁴³

The photograph, or photography and, by extension, cinema, like the probing finger of a doubting architect or the prolonged gaze of a transgressive voyeur, as Roland Barthes believed, is anything but an affirmation of life but rather a poor substitute for truth.⁴⁴ Indeed the mutable unstable nature of this "truth" is whispered to us by the

neon sign “permutit” near which Thomas sees or thinks he sees Jane. (Peavler 892) Like De Sica, Antonioni manipulates the *mise-en-scène* to point to a deeper meaning and at the same time to expose as illusion what might otherwise seem to the viewer as truthful.⁴⁵ As deictic indices, such signs alert us to the existence of another layer beyond what we see and underline Antonioni’s statement that one of the chief themes of *Blow-Up* is “to see or not to see properly the true value of things” (Antonioni 14). In this sense, St. Thomas’ probing has been revealed as the less valuable faith; as the gospels tell us, how much greater is he who has not seen and yet believed. As the viewer’s eye remains trained on the protagonist until the last moment when Thomas is no longer visible, we wonder if we did indeed see him disappear “into thin air” or whether it is only distance that removes him from our view.

Thomas’ disappearance, which Antonioni has called his ‘autograph’ (*Investigation* 103), reveals the presence of the artist and thus links the created to the creator. Freccero suggests that “Thomas is perhaps the portrait of the artist as a young director⁴⁶ and his failure is Antonioni’s subsequent triumph”(119). Indeed it is through parody that this triumph is effected. Antonioni’s Thomas, as a parody of the doubting apostle is equally a parody of the young director. By alerting us to Thomas’ shortcomings, his materialism and his reliance on sensory perception, Antonioni alerts us to his own journey from disciple of Neorealism and its purported objective reality to apostle of a deeper meaning, one that recognizes that film is at best a signifier. If Thomas the photographer is struck blind, like some Dantesque sinner because of his own myopia, then Antonioni, like Dante and Paul before him, will eventually overcome his blindness and point us to a deeper understanding of the allegorical contained within the mutable literal.

But the viewer, now aware of the presence of the master artificer, is thrust himself into the role of doubter and “the effect of unresolved doubts about what we can believe or perceive” is thus heightened. (Cohen 56)⁴⁷ And Thomas is twinned once more, this time with us, the viewers. By twinning us with Thomas, by creating doubt in our minds, Antonioni calls to us as Fellini’s Paola called to Marcello and as Beatrice called to Dante, to challenge the truth of what we see, and to seek instead an understanding of what it might mean. Forty

ANTONIONI'S PHOTOGRAPHER

some years later, Antonioni's work reminds us more than ever that if at first we see through a glass darkly then later, even if some forty years later, we may actually see in full.

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NOTES

¹ Only John Freccero has considered the issue with any notable depth. His conclusions are not inconsistent with the notion of parody but he simply doesn't go that far in his discussion of the film's relationship to the text.

² Linda Hutcheon has argued that this broader sense of parody, i.e. when whole elements of one work are lifted out of their context and reused, not necessarily to be ridiculed, has become prevalent in the 20th century, as artists have sought to connect with the past while registering differences brought by modernity. (50)

³ Robert L. Carringer provides a thorough synopsis of the film but, in brief, it is the story of Thomas, played by David Hemming, a London fashion photographer who spends his nights in London flop houses taking photographs for a book he is working on or in swinging night clubs listening to the hottest groups like the Yardbirds. By day Thomas alternates between mounting skeletal women while photographing them with his very large camera or escaping the monotony of vacuous models by zipping about the city in his fabulous car and stopping to take pictures of whatever strikes his fancy. It is during one of these latter escapades that he happens upon a pair of lovers in a park. He takes their picture and is spotted by the woman, Jane, played by Vanessa Redgrave. Jane chases after Thomas and although she is dreadfully anxious to retrieve the film, Thomas is adamant; the film is his. Curious as to what she is so desperate to recover or hide, Thomas develops the roll and notices that in the thicket near the pair of lovers there appears to be a body. He continues to enlarge or blow up the image in an attempt to see more clearly what remains somewhat ambiguous. However, the resolution of the blown up prints is such that rather than clarify the situation, the larger the image becomes, the more it also become a little more than a series of almost indecipherable blotches and Thomas is left no further ahead in his search for truth. He goes to the site to find that there is indeed a body in the thicket but when he returns the next day with his camera the body is no longer there, raising the question of whether it really was ever there.

⁴ That there should be echoes of the great masters in Antonioni's work is not surprising given that following his arrival in Rome in 1940 the youth Antonioni collaborated with Roberto Rossellini and Enrico Fulchignoni. He collaborated with Rossellini on *Un pilota torna* (1942) that led to a signing of a contract with the production company Scalera. See also Carringer on Antonioni's collaboration with Rossellini (110). Millicent Marcus comments on Antonioni's neorealist formation noting that "ethical commitment of neorealism is still very much alive in him" (206).

⁵ Alan Charity describes this hermeneutic device in his classic work *Events and their Afterlife* (1-3).

⁶ Charles Singleton once remarked “Dante’s fiction is that his fiction is not a fiction” (129).

⁷ *Con.* II.i.3-4.

⁸ Freccero, referring specifically to “Blow-Up,” has noted that the “greatest danger for the film maker consists in the extraordinary means the medium provides in order to lie” (120). In Fellini’s canonical film *La dolce vita*, the director so masterfully recreated the Via Veneto that many believed it was filmed there.

⁹ I explored the Pauline implications of this gesture more thoroughly in an earlier essay “Fellini, Dante and Paul.”

¹⁰ F.A. Macklin observed as early as 1967 with respect to the final vignette of the film “It is as though Antonioni has plunged in to the world of Fellini” (38). Similarly, Jean Clair notes that the earlier scenes of *Blow-Up* remind the moviegoer of “Fellini’s sense of the grotesque” (54).

¹¹ Richard Wendorf ignores the fact that Antonioni has named his creation Thomas (at least in the script) but nonetheless suggests that this “namelessness” urges us to read the characters allegorically (65). It seems that even if the photographer were not named Thomas we might reach the same conclusions as to his allegorical significance, but Antonioni naming his character, even if the others do not refer to him by name strengthens the arguments supported by the obvious affinity to the character in the film *Peeping Tom* and to the hagiographical figure of Thomas.

¹² The image is reproduced in Seymour Chatman’s *Investigation* (101).

¹³ As Laurie Taylor-Mitchell has argued, this work was likely influenced a by an earlier Florentine marble suggesting that the gesture may have had an existing association with the doubting Thomas figure.

¹⁴ It is impossible to resist adding that the name Verushka is a Russian diminutive for Vera, truth in Italian and faith in Russian. Accordingly, her name means either little faith or little truth.

¹⁵ This image is reproduced in Chatman, *Investigation* (101).

¹⁶ It is of course possible to consider the extent to which the conversion of Paul who was blind but later saw things more fully, is an essential element of the photographer’s ontological quest. Indeed Stanley Kauffman reports a conversation with an academic who was convinced that the film was ultimately about “seeing” (72).

¹⁷ Peter Brunette gives a good overview of the critical fortune of Antonioni’s works stating that “early interpreters saw his films as an expression of ‘existential angst’ or ‘alienation.’ He also notes that at the time *Blow-Up* was released films were interpreted like this “because of the period’s interpretive frame” (1).

¹⁸ George Slover, like Freccero (125), recognizes Antonioni’s use of medieval tropes, in this case the medieval literary garden as the setting for the putative murder, observing that Thomas’ camera “has penetrated to ‘reality’; it has revealed the hidden; it has unmasked the corruption in the garden” (*Medium* 755). Slover’s commentary, however, fails to expand upon the purpose of the allusion and accordingly does not provide a unified theory of the purpose of such imagery.

¹⁹ Max Kosloff, albeit tangentially, has also identified affinities between Antonioni’s film and Dante’s artistic projects, stating with respect to Thomas’ London milieu, “It

ANTONIONI'S PHOTOGRAPHER

is as if Dante had been hanging around the world of rock and roll, and found it to have been damned by the emptiness of its enthusiasm, and its pointless extravagances" (62).

²⁰ It is worth noting as well that the photographer Thomas' moment of greatest doubt, in which he returns to the park only to find the body gone, is also highly evocative of another medieval tradition, the trope of *Quem queritis*. In medieval Easter passion plays, when the women come to the tomb and find Christ gone they wonder and are greeted by an angel who asks them "whom do you seek?" Their response is followed by the announcement of the resurrection, the very event that Thomas doubts.

²¹ Freccero, for example, likens the moment when Thomas walks in on his friend and his mistress making love, to the moment in Chaucer's *Troilus and Creseyde* when Pandarus keeps the couple company by retiring to the fireside to read his old romance (125) and the final scene with the tennis players to a similar scene in *Don Quixote* (127).

²² Moreover Freccero's work legitimizes the use of medieval interpretive methods as a means of interpreting Antonioni. "The technical process of the blow-up is obviously the metaphor of the search, no longer dramatized as a neurotic odyssey, but as an experience that the Middle Ages would have called the journey *intra nos*" (123).

²³ That *Blow-Up* should have been made in light of the release of the Zapruder film is not the lynchpin of this argument, but it cannot be ignored. That a mere three years later an entire generation would be asked to believe they had seen a man walk on the moon simply because they had been shown a photograph or film, speaks to the question of whether our trust in the photographic image is justified or whether we are gullible pawns.

²⁴ Slover also allows that there are parodic elements in *Blow Up* although he does not associate them with the Thomas story. Rather he suggests that Antonioni has created a parody of mankind's estrangement as expressed in the book of *Genesis*. He says "Antonioni places the murder in an idyll, in a garden" and asks if "Antonioni is alluding to the garden story in Genesis where likewise is enacted the drama of an irrevocable estrangement." Slover discerns then in *Blow-up* two discrete acts; the primordial act that creates the initial estrangement and a second "saving act" in which the existence of the man is "denied by making believe that his corpse is real only to art, on film." The latter act, Slover says, however, is only a "parody if a saving act: it confirms the initial act by de-ontologizing its consequences" ("Medium" 767).

²⁵ While filming *Blow-Up* Antonioni himself noted the particular English nature of the film. "In the first place, a person like Thomas does not really exist in Italy ... Thomas is about to become entangled in events that are easier to relate to London than to life in Rome or Milan" (qtd. in Huss 7).

²⁶ As Roy Huss notes, "In 'Blow-Up' eroticism occupies a key place. But, often the accent is on a cold, intellectual kind of sensuality. Exhibitionism and voyeurism are especially emphasized" (10).

²⁷ The original tale of Lady Godiva did not include the figure of Peeping Tom. There is a vast body of scholarship on the Godiva tradition. The vast majority of it was published in the 19th and 20th centuries according to Hartland and Kennedy. In most cases, the authors suggest that the Godiva story, though based in historical fact incorporates and crystalizes a broad variety of traditions that punish curiosity and

obsessive gazing with blindness or death. A more recent study by Venetia Newall has even found a potential Baltic parallel for the story. But the point is clear that many traditions have seen voyeurism or obsessive gazing as punishable.

²⁸ In the modern era Roland Barthes has linked the latter explicitly to photography: “Your favorite hero is the one who gazes (photographer or reported). This is dangerous because gazing at something longer than you were asked to ... upsets the established order in whatever form since the extent or the very duration of the gaze is normally controlled by society” (qtd. in Chatman, *Investigation* 100).

²⁹ Jean Clair similarly refers to Thomas’ “professional habit of being a voyeur” (56). Max Kosloff also calls him a voyeur (61).

³⁰ William Johnson includes Peeping Tom in his discussion of black and white but makes no connection between it and *Blow-Up* (“Coming to Terms” 15).

³¹ In contrast to so many of his other films where what Williams has called Antonioni’s obsessive work on decentering and dispersing the gaze” (53). *Blow-Up* is all about the photographer’s efforts to reclaim and control it. Constantly distracted by interruptions such as the “teenyboppers” who insist on him taking their pictures, Thomas finds focus and putative control of his objects through his camera. In this our photographer seems to be a projection of Antonioni himself. Millicent Marcus has commented upon the realignment of the in the context of Antonioni’s *Red Desert*, recalling that moment when Giuliana asks “What should I look at?” (192-193).

³² Filming is easily likened to the sexual act as we see in James Scott’s (93) marvelous description of the scene. Marsha Kinder notes that for Thomas “shooting his model with his camera becomes a substitute for sexual intercourse” (82).

³³ Chatman similarly observes that Thomas and Verushka mimic the courtship and mating rituals of men and women, but the relationship is transitory and fake” (*Investigation* 101).

³⁴ Freccero notes the presence of the *topos* of “et in Arcadia” in the moment in the park, but he is equally cognizant of the literary link between love and death and its “double-entendre of erotic poetry” (121).

³⁵ Like Thomas, Marcello’s familial ties range from distant to practically non-existent. Other than a troubled encounter with his father, Marcello is alone. Although Marcello’s girlfriend tries desperately to get him to commit to a relationship, he ultimately rejects her desire for domesticity as bestial and states that he has no use for it. Thomas has no wife, no family, and no apparent links to other humans beyond those in the same industry.

³⁶ Slover is close to enunciating this when, in describing Thomas’ relationship to the guitar pieces, he says, “the guitar fragment which the irate musician throws to the audience seemed possessed of incalculable value – witness the intensity of the desire to acquire a piece of it, as if it were the relic of a saint” (*Medium* 760). The guitar, like Thomas’ probing finger, is meaningless to those who have no faith. As Slover puts it, “outside the range in which the make-believe obtains, the object quite loses its meaning” (*Medium* 760).

³⁷ Thomas may also be twinned with the protagonist of Julio Cortázar’s short story “La babas del Diablo” whom Antonioni cites as one of the inspirations for the film (Carringer 113). Cortázar’s translator/amateur photographer Michel is similarly confronted with the “impossibility of telling” and seeks instead to show (Grossvogel

ANTONIONI'S PHOTOGRAPHER

50). As Grossvogel notes, the impossibility of telling, for Antonioni's protagonist, is simply replaced by the "frustration of seeing" when the photographer is unable to fully assimilate sensory perception into actuality (50). Terry J. Peavler provides a thorough overview of the stance taken by a number of critics with the respect to the extent of Cortázar's influence on the significance of *Blow-Up*. We must, however, be careful about relying on Cortázar's short story as an interpretive tool for *Blow-Up*. As Antonioni himself said, while the idea for the story came to him while reading the short story, he "discarded the plot and wrote a new one in which the equipment itself assumed a different weight and significance" (Peavler 897). Indeed most critics see little in common between the two works. Still though, it would be ill advised to take the position that the Cortázar story is irrelevant. Even in Antonioni's "infidelity" (Peavler's word) to Cortázar, there are affinities between the two stories that help us interpret, most notably, the commonality that Terry Peavler points to, that is, the near impossibility in each story, of determining what really happened. Or as Peavler puts it, there is "so much evidence to prove or disprove the reality of almost anything that occurs in either work that the debate could rage in endlessly" (888).

³⁸ We are reminded immediately of Antonioni's stated desire to "paint" a film (Leprohon 100). We recall also that he used a similar dichotomy in his 1964 *Red Desert* in which reality was presented in muted color and the protagonist's dream in Technicolor and where, as William Johnson says: "Antonioni uses colors to represent the ebb and flow of all of her fears" ("Coming to Terms" 18). In *Peeping Tom*, the "everything is in color except the film projected by Mark Lewis, those of him as a child and those taken my Mark himself while killing.

³⁹ As William Johnson notes color is a subjective experience ... the brain's response to a particular wavelength of light emitted, reflected or refracted by the object" ("Coming to Terms" 5).

⁴⁰ Thomas, in the Gospels is referred to as the "Twin" (*John* 11:16, 20:24). Of whom Thomas is a twin is unclear though the Gnostic *Acts of Thomas* (c. 180-230) suggests he is the twin of Christ. Thomas does not only mean twin but can also mean "twofold" or equally, dividing or separating (Clark 166).

⁴¹ Carey Harrison equally noted the shared act stating: "In the little deceptions of the film, Antonioni invites us to share Thomas' downfall as well as observe it" (40). Hubert Meeker notes the sequence is so well done that "we begin to believe in the invisible ball ourselves" (52).

⁴² In a similar vein, George Slover observes that just as Thomas the photographer, "by an act of make believe" has annihilated the body, "denying its existence apart from the film in the final scenes," so too has Antonioni consigned his hero to annihilation (*Medium* 758). Grossvogel seems to hint at this when he suggests that in the last scene Thomas finally sees that the "the artifact ... will no longer be able to yield the ready answers" (54).

⁴³ But the scene could equally be understood as a continuation of the "sacred parody" (Clark's term), discussed above as the hagiographical tradition identified Thomas as the only witness to the assumption of Mary into heaven. In an inversion of the story of Thomas' doubt the other disciplines are skeptical until they see the girdle of Mary – a moment that is often depicted in medieval and renaissance art. In *Blow-Up* Thomas not Mary is assumed into heavens by his maker. While not identifying

the final sequences with the Thomas legend, George Slover characterizes the final sequence as a “parable” (*Medium* 757) thus implicitly recognizing its representative value. Slover’s inability to satisfactorily find the analogy that it creates between it and the events of the larger story may be cured by seeing the entire story as a parody of both the Doubting Thomas and Peeping Tom traditions.

⁴⁴ Wendorf refers to it, in the context of the photographic encounter with Verushka as a “chic but cheap counterfeiting of ‘reality’” (64). Jean Clair says “by converting reality into abstraction... it also falsifies life” (56).

⁴⁵ John Fein has reached a similar conclusion noting that the last scene creates “an atmosphere that amplifies the ambiguities, not of Thomas’ perception but of the spectator’s” (56).

⁴⁶ Freccero has suggested that the relationship between Thomas the photographer Antonioni may be similar to that between Dante and his protagonist/pilgrim (119). (He notes as well that this is a relationship that has also been used by Fellini). According to Freccero, the exercise of *Blow-Up* is at its essence a self-conscious and self-reflexive discourse about discourse, and can therefore be located within a literary tradition in which “the portrait of the artist is his act” (118). Art, as Peavler observes, contains precisely what the artist chooses here resulting in the self-conscious creation of an illusory world”(890). Richard Wendorf recognizes that this view of photography is at odds with Kracauer’s theory of film as enunciated in *The Redemption of Physical Reality* and effectively counters Kracauer’s proposition that photography produces documents of “unquestionable authenticity” (21).

⁴⁷ The final shot equally bears an uncanny resemblance to the crane shot at the end of the *Bicycle Thief*, in which Antonio and Bruno are engulfed by the crowd and are thus made anonymous and invisible.

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