

The Photographic Analogy in Cortazar's "Blow-up"

Although Cortazar treats photography or cinematography in a number of his short stories such as "We Love Glenda So Much," "Stopping Place," "Press Clippings," "Bad Timing," and "Epilogue to a Story," to name those in which the issues are raised with the greatest degree of complexity, he gives his finest and most complete statement about the relationship between the art of the short story and photography in "Blow-up".

In "Blow-up" the narrator-storyteller-translator is conflated with the photographer in the character of the hybrid Chilean-Frenchman Roberto Michel. Here, in this text that clearly represents Cortazar's most cogent metacommentary on the art of the short story, the story itself gradually develops before our eyes and is, to an important degree, cosubstantial with the snapshot taken by Michel on the Isle Saint-Louis. What most commentators on the text seem to have overlooked is the degree to which literary embellishment commingles with photographic enlargement to produce the story. The enlargement of the photograph of the boy and woman on the island, itself blown up to enormously powerful proportions in Antonioni's film version, echoes the sequence of "narrative blow-ups" of the event that comprise the bulk of the story: "The negative was so good that he made an enlargement; the enlargement was so good that he made one very much larger, almost the size of a poster" (Blow-up" 110-11). Cortazar problematizes the issue of the status of the event by proliferating visual and literary versions of the principal scene. In addition to the recounting of the ultimately unlocatable "original scene", Cortazar explores various written versions of it that differ in degrees of descriptive detail and interpretive interpolation: the many distinct possible photographic framings of the scene; Michel's verbal and nonverbal memories of the event; and, finally, his fantastic interaction with the poster-size version of the image that comes to life. The scene is, of course, in constant transformation, but narrative can only render it in successive snapshots as Michel's interpretation of it evolves. At first he sees a "couple", then a boy with his mother. The mother evolves into a "blond" and the boy into a boy "so nervous, like a young colt or a hare" and then into a boy that was "afraid", "standing as if(he) were on the edge of fight, holding(himself)back in a final, pitiful decorum" (104). The scene begins to take on a "disquieting aura", and Michel suspects that by taking a photo, he will "reconstitute things in their true stupidity" (107). At this moment he sees the man in the car though only later will he guess his role in the sordid affair. We move, therefore, from a love scene, to a prostitute's seduction, to overtones of homosexuality and pedophilia. With each interpolation he makes in his recounting, Michel increasingly realizes that he is "guilty of making literature, of indulging in fabricated unrealities" (109). The narrator provides a long "digression" on the boy's thoroughly respectable home life, provides several possible "endings" to this uncomfortable scene, endings that become more and more depraved as the prose becomes increasingly lurid: "closing my eyes, if I did in fact close my eyes, I set the scene: the teasing kisses, the woman mildly repelling the hands which were trying to undress her, like in novels, on a bed that would have a lilac-colored comforter, on the other hand she taking off his clothes, plainly mother and son under a milky yellow light"(108). Michel's "guilty" fictions are both simultaneous with and supplemental to his shocked seeing. After developing the photograph and tacking up the enlargement on the wall, these fictions are subject to competition and revision by other forms of re-presentation: memory ("that gloomy operation of comparing the memory with the gone

reality; a frozen memory, like any photo, where nothing is missing, not even, and especially, nothingness, the true solidifier of the scene"[111]) and his delirious rewritings of the event, first with himself cast as hero who saves the boy by taking a photo and then as impotent witness whose presence had perhaps precipitated the horrible reality.

Just as Roberto Michel is a self-conscious photographer (he constantly refers to the technical aspects of his craft: "light without the diaphragm aperture of 1/250sec."; "aperture at sixteen"; "the enlargement of 32x28"), the narrator of "Blow-up" explores each of the conventional techniques of the short story (narrative voice and person, point of view, development of character and plot, the setting, or temporal and spatial coordinates of the story) in an almost pedagogical manner. The opening five paragraphs of the story use the various verbal or nominal forms of the verb "contar" (to tell a story) an astonishing 22 times. Michel's camera is, perhaps not coincidentally, a "contax". In these paragraphs and throughout the story, Cortazar foregrounds the problems of communication through narrative by flaunting the absurdity of narrative conventions. Narrative voice nervously flickers back and forth between first and third person as Roberto Michel, the translator, struggles with how to translate lived experience into narrative. Literature itself is on trial as an esthetic form removed from the category of truth: "It'll never be known how this has to be told, in the first person or in the second, using the third person plural or continually inventing modes that will serve for nothing"(100). The narrator claims to be reliable ("I'm not trying to fool anybody"[100]) but constantly discredits his own choice of words, superimposing as in a double exposure, the artificiality of the scene of writing upon the difficulties of recounting the events on the isle. Michel's ramblings about the work of writing are filled with self-doubt. He is, in fact, continually distracted even as he writes, breaking into his narrative of the past to record the pigeons and clouds at present outside his windows. He dreams of an unmediated form of representation that would rely neither on the contax camera nor on the Remington typewriter, but acknowledges its impossibility. His so thoroughly hybrid nature, designated by the international character and the double forenames of his name (Roberto Michel), is somewhat schizophrenic, problematizing conventional notions of the narrator as identifiable subject and making it difficult even to construe a coherent conception of narrative as voice.

The critique of narrative point of view is paradoxically both trivialized and empowered by photographic analogy. By altering the story radically once he realizes that the man in the car is "part of the picture," Michel provides us with an all-too-pat lesson on the importance of getting "it all into the view-finder" (109) as a strategy for narrative and photography. Michel's insistence on catching the "decisive moment" in shooting the boy and woman is strongly reminiscent of Cartier- Bresson:

"I . . . waited and watched closely, sure that I would finally catch the revealing expression, one that would sum it all up, life that is rhythmmed by movement but which a stiff image destroys, taking time in cross section, if we do not choose the essential imperceptible fraction of it" (108)

The resonances of Cartier- Bresson we hear here, however, are perhaps less of a deliberate echo than a testimony to how thoroughly we have assimilated his theory as a cardinal principle of photographic technique.

Cortazar's treatment of point of view is revitalized through the photographic analogy toward the end of "Blow-up" when Michel tacks the poster-sized enlargement on his wall:

"It had never occurred to me when we look at a photo from the front, the eyes reproduce exactly the position and the vision of the lens; it's these things that are taken for granted and it never occurs to anyone to think about them. From my chair, with the typewriter directly in front of me, I looked at the photo ten feet away, and then it occurred to me that I had hung it exactly at the point of view of the lens." (111)

Again, a comparison with Cartier- Bresson is instructive:

"During the process of enlarging, it is essential to re-create the values and the mood of the time the picture was taken; or even to modify the print so as to bring it into line with the intentions of the photographer at the moment he shot it. It is necessary also to re-establish the balance which the eye is continually establishing between light and shadow." (50)

In "Blow-up, however, the reproduction of the exact point of view of the photo becomes not just a repetition or reconstitution of the original scene, but rather the vehicle of an opening onto a greater reality, one we conventionally label "fantastic." It functions as the pivotal point upon which the short story turns, allowing the immobility of the photograph and the mobility of the spectator to mutually displaced:

"All at once the order was inverted, they were alive, moving, they were deciding and had decided, they were going to their future; and I on this side, prisoner of another time, in a room on the fifth floor, to not know who they were, that woman, that man, and that boy, to be only the lens of my camera, something fixed, rigid, incapable of intervention." (114)

We have here, on one hand, one of the stock conventions of the fantastic short story (a version of the magic portrait). It is modernized, however, by the substitution of a photograph for the portrait and revitalized to the degree that it plays upon the quintessential realism of photographic representation (to the degree a photograph is an index, a light-sensitive transfer of the real) whereas the drawing or painting is an icon. What does it mean to view a photograph, supposedly an imprint of the real? Cortazar seems to ask. What are the possible outcomes of the interaction of human subject and print? Unlike other photographic critics as a Barthes, who in *Camera Lucida* emphasizes photography's connection to death and to past, or Pierre Bourdieu (89) and Rosalind Krauss (49-56), who note that the most common reaction to photography is a judgment about the identity of the objects or beings pictured, in "Blow-up" the act of viewing a photograph in fact problematizes the response of denominating and does not enchain us to the past, but rather opens onto a terrifyingly virtual future.

"Blow-up" asks as well, how do you tell the story of a photograph? The text is precisely the attempt to tell the story of a photograph: its prehistory, its taking, its subject, its development and enlargement, and its "future". As the readability of my synopsis of the story indicates, in the text the broader framework of narrative causality and chronology is largely respected. But, as I have shown, both the plausibility and the very possibility of storytelling are continually being questioned. Cortazar attacks

Aristotelian notions of narrative as properly structured by the beginning, middle, and end, and, more broadly, a linear conception of temporality. Michel's parenthetical interjection as he tries to write "[r]ight now (what a word, now, what a dumb lie)" (103) is one of many such metacommentaries that point up the problematic time-space coordinates of narration. Narrating with the deictic "now", of course, empties the word's referential meaning: the "now" of the story is neither the "now", of the writing or the reading. In the same paragraph Cortazar uses once again the vehicle of the staircase to conflate temporality and spatiality: "we'd be walking down the staircase in this house as far as Sunday, November 7, just a month back" (101). Here what should be construed as physical descent is realized as temporal regression.

Linear temporality finally collapse at the end of "Blow-up" as we come full circle through the revelation of the structural equivalence of the "very clean, clear rectangle" ("rectangulo purisimo") tacked up on the wall (the poster-sized enlargement, "emptied" of its referential content) to the virgin movie screen, to a window, to the white page awaiting the typewritten words at the story's opening, and to the clear sky, crossed now and then by a cloud or pigeon, now and then by "splotches of rain cracking down. . .like a spell of weeping reversed" (115). The "rectangulo purisimo" is a photographic plate before exposure, potentially both window and mirror: the ultimate postmodern space of representation, sheer frame emptied out and constantly refilled, ready to receive any and all images that appear according to no laws of logic or technological inevitability. Here the photographic image and the story itself so completely coincide, in this insubstantial space that literally enables the production of the story as photograph and the space for its development.

In "Blow-up" Cortazar employs photography, the invention that would become that "false-realism's" most powerful technology, precisely to deconstruct it and to assert the "reality" and the peculiar rationality of the fantastic. This short story uses the photographic analogy to move beyond what meets the (camera's) eye, to show how "todo mirar rezuma falsedad" (every looking oozes with mendacity") ("Blow-up" 104) and to examine what Cortazar once called in an essay on the photographer Frederic Barzaly, "nuestra imperfect manera de mirar" ("our imperfect way of looking") (Territorios 136).