

ILLUSIVE REALITY IN CORTÁZAR'S "LAS BABAS DEL DIABLO" AND ANTONIONI'S *BLOW-UP*

It goes without saying that many of Julio Cortázar's writings have to do with the ambiguous and illusive nature of any "true" reality. In fact, Cortázar himself would probably agree with the assessment that "it goes without saying," owing to the fact that he often explored in his fiction a crisis in language and literature in which discourse fails to convey reality and actually distorts any intended message. Scholars have lauded Cortázar's complicated narrative structures and points of view, and students have for years, after struggling mightily with the Byzantine twists and turns of the Argentine's plots, marveled at his evocative portrayals of how fantasy and dream are just as real, perhaps more so, than their perceived reality. It is not, however, the intent here to attempt to improve upon the superb body of extant criticism on Cortázar's existential queries, his questioning of reality, or his concerns with linguistic subversion. Instead, the goal here is to demonstrate how the theme of illusive reality as registered in Cortázar's story "Las babas del diablo," published in 1959, contributed to one of his famous readers, Italian film director Michelangelo Antonioni, realizing a marvelous thematic depiction of "reality found" in his 1966 film *Blow-Up*.

While Antonioni credits Cortázar's story as the basis for his film, the number of changes that the director made to the plot would make it seem more appropriate to consider "Las babas del diablo" the inspiration for *Blow-Up* rather than its basis. Antonioni's reading of the story provided him the framework around which to construct his film, but while the story is replete with a questioning of reality and an illusive truth, the film ultimately, in the final scene, offers a glimpse of what is perhaps the only "true" reality: that in which the individual believes and participates. In brief, both the author and the director are concerned with reality; Cortázar's narrative questioning leads to Antonioni's answers.

The famous opening lines of "Las babas del diablo" serve to anticipate the struggle that Cortázar's protagonist, Michel, will experience in his endeavor to communicate his experience to others. The story begins:

Nunca se sabrá cómo hay que contar esto, si en primera persona o en segunda, usando la tercera del plural o inventando continuamente formas que no servirán de nada.¹

¹ Julio Cortázar, "Las babas del diablo", *Las armas secretas*, Buenos Aires, Sudamericana, 1968; p. 77.

With this opening sentence, Cortázar establishes the problem of point of view that is so important in much of his work. The narrative switches leave the reader confused and bewildered as to what is the truth and what is fabrication or imagination. This very postmodern technique of confusing point of view underlines a concern with subjectivity in the defining of any reality; point of view is seen to be what gives reality its identity and what makes it communicable, in some fashion, to others. Cortázar emphasizes the ambiguity of how reality is translated, however, throughout his story and even in the title; the phenomenon described by the expression "Las babas del diablo" may also be referred to as "*hilos de la virgen*."²

In discussing "Las babas del diablo" in his article "*Blow-Up: The Form of an Esthetic Itinerary*," David I. Grossvogel states that the story is:

primarily a tale about the impossibility of *telling* and about the frustration of *seeing* – twin expressions of the ontological dilemma that defines man, for Cortázar, as an irreducible separateness that recognizes similarly hermetic presences, [...], without being able to *assimilate* them through either perception (sight) or definition (telling).³

Grossvogel reads the story as a treatise, of sorts, on how mankind's attempts to categorize and translate his reality are doomed to failure, but that in that failure is to be found an almost reassuring sense that the endeavor to transcend the restrictions of language and ontology at least conveys an understanding of the problem. It is this endeavor that seems to have most impressed Antonioni and inspired his own artistic approach to the issue.

To give a plot summary of either the story or the film is made very difficult by the fact that the narrative destabilization in "Las babas del diablo" and the confused actions and motivations of the protagonist in *Blow-Up* create doubt in the mind of the reader/viewer as to the validity or importance of any given event or statement. The basics of the story, however, are that Roberto Michel, a photographer and translator in Paris, takes a photograph of a boy and a woman. The boy flees after Michel takes the photo, and Michel then surmises that the woman was attempting to seduce the boy. Later, upon enlarging the photo, Michel comes to believe (he actually thinks that he sees), that the woman was trying to entice the young boy for a perhaps depraved older man who was waiting in a car. Michel is amazed at the difference between the reality he saw and the reality in the photograph (which he also sees). Struck by the fact that he might have saved the boy by taking the photograph and interrupting the sordid reality, Michel relates his story to the reader while admitting the

² See Bittini for an excellent comparison of the story and the film. Bittini finds many differences between the two, among them the loss of the original ambiguity of the story's title when translated to English as "Blow-Up."

³ David Grossvogel, "*Blow-Up: The Forms of an Esthetic Itinerary*," in Jaime Alazraki, (ed.), *Critical Essays on Julio Cortázar*, New York, G.K. Hall & Co., 1999; p. 145.

inadequacies of any supposed verisimilitude with what happened or even with what he saw.

In the film *Blow-Up*, Antonioni changes the scene from Paris to London and changes the protagonist's name to Thomas. Like Michel in the story, Thomas is a photographer, but a professional who does portfolios for film stars and other projects. Thomas takes a photo of a man and a woman embracing in a park, interrupting with his camera what was perhaps a clandestine meeting, and is then asked by the woman to relinquish his film. He does not, and in enlarging his photo he believes that he is able to discern a dead body in the background of his shot. He goes to the park and finds the body (the viewer is not sure if this is "real" or not), but then later is unable to confirm the body's existence on film or in "reality."

There is obviously much more to both the story and the film than these summaries would indicate, but the cursory outline of the storylines is sufficient to identify that both communicate a concern with how the imposition of a framework, the photograph frame in this case, alters reality and creates a new one. As Brent MacLaine writes in his article "Sleuths in the Darkroom,"

Roberto Michel, when he takes a photograph of the characters in the park, freezes events into an interpretation that belies the reality of those events.⁴

The same, of course, could be said of Thomas and his photograph in *Blow-Up*, and reality is clearly seen as being subject to alteration and perhaps manipulation simply by its susceptibility to the whims of human perception and the tyranny of representation.

In "Las babas del diablo," Roberto Michel professes an understanding of just how ambiguous or changeable reality can be. His frustrations with the act of telling, as registered in the opening of the story, his penchant for repeated examination of events after their occurrence (something that ultimately changes the nature of the events, to his way of seeing), and his confessions to doubts about his own place in time all indicate that for him reality is illusive. Cortázar underlines this point by interrupting the narrative and subverting Michel's "truth" with parenthetical commentary that questions the validity of Michel's story. The technique of intertwining first—and third—person narration also points to the importance of how an event is told in defining that event. Michel is aware of the falsity of perception and communication, however, so the interruption of his narrative really only serves to emphasize the doubts he has already expressed:

⁴ Brent MacLaine, "Sleuths in the Darkroom: Photographer-Detectives and Postmodern Narrative," *Journal of Popular Culture*, 33.3(1999), 79-94; p. 89.

Creo que sé mirar, si es que algo sé, y que todo mirar rezuma falsedad, porque es lo que nos arroja más afuera de nosotros mismos, sin la menor garantía, en tanto que oler, o (pero Michel se bifurca fácilmente, no hay que dejarlo que declame a gusto).⁵

Roberto Michel feels a great need to tell his story. However, just as Cortázar has conveyed in so much of his work, any telling is simply a falsified version of what is being told; reality is illusive to the writer or teller because he or she cannot experience what it is to actually be the reality described.⁶ David Grossvogel writes that:

the artist can neither tell as he knows he must, nor can he accept *not* to tell, or tell inadequately. He must possess through words (if he is a writer) the objects of his world [...], but the words have an opacity equal to his own ontological encapsulation: he cannot *be* the other and therefore cannot *tell* what that other is, and the failure of telling extends to his inability to tell in its fullest the failure of telling.⁷

As the "other narrator" in "Las babas del diablo" indicates, "Michel es culpable de literatura, de fabricaciones irreales."⁸ Also guilty of this, but well aware of it, is Cortázar. That reality has to remain illusive for the teller is understood by the author, but it does not prohibit him from presenting a vivid questioning of how reality is, in general, perceived and accepted. When Michel takes the photograph in the park and slices a fragment of reality out of what he was witnessing, he changes that reality at the time, and then also afterwards when he interprets the enlargements. The reader is left wondering if reality can be "real" at all if it can't be adequately or truly experienced, perceived or communicated. In concluding his article "Estructura, tiempo y fantasía en 'Las babas del diablo,'" José Ortega emphasizes the gap between what is and what is told, and that Cortázar illuminates not reality, but that reality is altered by illumination and thus made illusive:

La dificultad de establecer relaciones recíprocas entre el plano de la realidad exterior y la dimensión fantástica explica la ambigüedad que caracteriza a este relato. Pero la fantasía opera dialécticamente entre lo real y lo posible posibilitando la aprehensión de ese devenir que escapa a la función representativa del lenguaje.⁹

The intent of the present study is to illustrate how Michelangelo Antonioni takes Cortázar's ontological questioning a step further in *Blow-Up*, particularly in the final scene of the film. As mentioned, "Las babas del diablo" served

⁵ Julio Cortázar, *op. cit.*; p. 83.

⁶ Grossvogel writes very eloquently on this issue as he makes the point that Michel's concerns and doubts in the story very directly reflect Cortázar's issues as a writer.

⁷ David Grossvogel, *op. cit.*; p. 147.

⁸ Julio Cortázar, *op. cit.*; p. 89.

⁹ José Ortega, "Estructura, tiempo y fantasía en 'Las babas del diablo'", *Cuadernos Hispanoamericanos*, 364/366(1980), 407-413; p. 413.

more as inspiration for the film than as a foundation or basis in storyline, Antonioni himself explained:

The idea for "Blow-Up" came to me while reading a short story by Julio Cortázar. I was not so much interested in the events as in the technical aspects of photography. I discarded the plot and wrote a new one in which the equipment itself assumed a different weight and significance.¹⁰

The changes Antonioni made, especially in the final scene, provide a measure of satisfaction for those in pursuit of some grasp of reality.

While the film and the story both deal with how reality is falsely translated, at the end of Antonioni's film there is a scene that transmits a glimpse of Antonioni's true conception of reality; an answer to Cortázar's questioning, in a sense. This scene involves Thomas interacting with a group of clown-like mimes engaged in a game of tennis without tennis balls or rackets. At first simply amused by the silliness of the game, Thomas becomes gradually enthralled by the "action." When finally an imaginary ball is hit over the fence and into the adjacent field, Thomas is encouraged to retrieve the "ball" and throw it back to the players. This he does, effectively joining the game, and the film ends with the sound of a tennis ball bouncing on the court as the result of Thomas' having thrown it.¹¹

Critics have interpreted this scene in many different ways, but it is clear that reality and fantasy mix here. What was purely make-believe for Thomas becomes reality when he participates; once he throws the ball back over the fence he is no longer an outsider looking in, so he can experience the reality. What Cortázar so masterfully elucidates in his fiction is that reality and fantasy are really the same thing depending on point-of-view. In the film, Thomas changes point-of-view and as a result converts what was "false," for him, into something real, again, for him. Bittini expands on this idea and even includes the viewer:

Thomas's participation in the game confirms his belonging to this world. The fact that Thomas and we start hearing the sound of a ball means that we are all living in this world.¹²

Both Cortázar's Michel and Antonioni's Thomas try to capture reality by means of photography; they both fail. Both Cortázar and Antonioni, being modern thinkers and aware of postmodern thought, engage in artistic representation of ontological angst. As MacLaine puts it, they understand "the violence

¹⁰ David Grossvogel, *op. cit.*: p. 147.

¹¹ See Knight for an interesting interpretation of this scene. He sees the scene as a questioning of reality rather than as an answer to how reality can be perceived.

¹² Patrizia Bittini, "Film is Stranger than Fiction: From Cortázar's 'Las babas del diablo' to Antonioni's *Blow-Up*," *Romance Languages Annual* 7 (1995), 199-203; p. 203.

done to reality by a reifying art and imagination."¹³ Michel wonders about how anything can ever really be told, and Thomas seems to find no reality in his world other than the superficiality of his friends, his profession, and his approach to life. All of these similarities between the story and the film have been studied and interpreted in many intelligent ways in scholarly criticism. The final scene of the film, however, seems to have escaped the attention given the "larger," ontological, aspects of both the story and film.

To suggest, as some critics do, that Thomas' returning the imaginary tennis ball to the mimes reflects his becoming totally lost in the world of illusion is to miss Antonioni's point.¹⁴ If illusion and reality are ultimately seen to be differentiated only by point-of-view, then Thomas could very well have finally found his reality by participating with the mimes. The protagonist here discovers that he can't observe reality and capture it with a camera or any other device; reality is unique to the moment and must be experienced. Grossvogel explains:

When Thomas returns the imaginary ball to the mimes, in a *participatory* gesture, he has understood that the self-hypnosis of looking for a leg in a non-objective painting or a gun within the black and white blots of a blow-up is sterile.¹⁵

Much like Cortázar blends his protagonist with his narrator and mixes present with past and future in "Las babas del diablo," Antonioni eliminates the hazy line of demarcation between reality and fantasy. Inspired by the post-modern questioning presented in Cortázar's story, Antonioni created an answer out of the problem: if reality is illusive because it can't be truthfully expressed, then the answer is to experience it, believe it, and understand that we all experience our own reality, the only "true" reality that can be experienced. The sound of the tennis ball on the court is the sign that Thomas is participating in a reality; whether or not we choose to participate is up to us, but we hear that reality along with Thomas and are invited, as was he, to believe. We see, in both the story and film, that reality cannot be transmitted in any true sense, and we experience this disappointment along with the protagonist; this disappointment is, then, a reality for us. In his article on image in film, Erwin Koppen essentially sustains this very point when he writes that Michel and Thomas set out to document reality through photography, but learn that:

chasing the tail of "reality" is a fruitless endeavor, although it leads to a kind of self-knowledge. Both heroes are made conscious of the fact that their craving to know, record, and control reality can only be satisfied through the power of their imagination and its artistic potential.¹⁶

¹³ Brent MacLaine, *op. cit.*; p. 89.

¹⁴ See both Grossvogel and Bittini for various interpretations of the mime scene.

¹⁵ David Grossvogel, *op. cit.*; p. 154.

¹⁶ Erwin Koppen, "The Image in Film: On Cortázar's 'Las babas del diablo' and Antonioni's *Blow-Up*", *Yearbook of Comparative and General Literature* 33(1984), 45-48; p. 48.

Michel wonders how he can possibly narrate what he has to tell; he expresses his concerns many times. Thomas learns what Michel seems to know, and that is that one's own reality is exactly that: one's own. Perhaps the best way to summarize both the story and the film, the questions and the answer, is to quote from "Las babas del diablo" and Michel's rambling about truth. Could Michel's clouds and gulls be Thomas' tennis ball?

nadie sabe bien quién es el que verdaderamente está contando, si soy yo o eso que ha ocurrido, o lo que estoy viendo (nubes, y a veces una paloma) o si sencillamente cuento una verdad que es solamente mi verdad, y entonces no es la verdad salvo para mi estómago.¹⁷

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¹⁷ Julio Cortázar, *op. cit.*; p. 79.

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