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Photography and the Death of the Author in Julio Cortázar's "Blow-Up"

Michael Röösli

For over a century, photography was torn between conflicting discourses that strove to inscribe the medium into the realm of representation – either that of an outside world or of the artistic vision of the photographer. The 1960s witnessed the beginnings of a renegotiation of authority and the agencies involved in the reading process in various fields, including literature and photography. My paper approaches this major change through Jonathan Crary's attempt to historicize the notion of the beholder in *Techniques of the Observer* (1990) and through the framework of the "death of the author," which finds its most emphatic voices in Roland Barthes' essay of the same name (1968) and Michel Foucault's "What is an Author?" (1969). These theoretical works will be read against Julio Cortázar's short story "Blow-Up" (1959) which declared the death of the author almost a decade before Barthes' provocative manifesto was published. I will show that "Blow-Up" exploits the ambiguous status of the photographic medium and uses it as a catalyst in the destabilization of its own literary authority. By proposing a new aesthetic that accommodates both the literary and pictorial text, it furthermore levels the path for photography towards a potentially artistic medium.

Photography has been and still is considered a highly realistic means of representing people, their surrounding world, and the manifold interactions among them. The medium seems to offer a twin assurance of authority: that what is depicted was in fact there, and that the photographer witnessed it with his or her own eyes. Nevertheless, the past few decades have borne witness to dissenting voices, both in and out of academia, that have seriously questioned the veracity of photographic images in newspapers, news reports and documentaries. The hypothesis of this paper is that, in the 1960s, the ability of the photograph to represent reality with a minimum of mediation was destabilized by a new aware-

ness of the medium's inherent indeterminacy. This process of questioning the authority of the image, however, was not restricted to theoretical discussions of photography, but was apparent in other media such as literature, and led to a considerable reorganization of the notions of art, the artist, and the reader or spectator. Julio Cortázar's short story "Blow-Up" is considered here not so much as an agent in this debate, but as a symptom that is situated at the point where photographic and literary production intersect in the destabilization of their respective claims to authority.

In order to contextualize the inherent ambiguity of the photographic image between reference and authority on the one hand and openness to a multiplicity of readings on the other, it is useful at this point to turn to Jonathan Crary's *Techniques of the Observer*. Tracing the history of scopic economies between beholder and environment, he covers a period ranging from the sixteenth century to 1839, the moment when photography, in the form of Daguerre and Niépce's daguerreotype in France and Talbot's calotype in England, became a topic of public discussion. Crary establishes a succession of paradigms with respect to the status of the observer, which largely reflect Michel Foucault's epistemes in *The Order of Things*. He exemplifies such changes in perception by analyzing instruments like the camera obscura and the stereoscope. These were both developed for scientific purposes, but rapidly came to be sold as public entertainment devices, thus entering general cultural awareness.

The first stage Crary highlights is the passage from the pre-Renaissance episteme, in which nature mirrors itself in manifold analogies and waits to be decoded, to that of physical optics, which he identifies as the dominant paradigm from the late sixteenth to the end of the eighteenth century. He argues that the camera obscura radically modified the concept of the status of the observer: not only did it institute an optical regime which separated the image from the object, but it also disembodied vision by rendering its subject autonomous (literally isolating and enclosing it in a dark room). Crary further argues that both Locke and Descartes used the camera obscura as a model for human understanding. The device thus stood for two centuries as a model of how observation leads to truthful inferences, and inaugurated a distinction between the knowing subject and the external world.

The detachment of the individual subject from the object of scrutiny, combined with the single viewpoint that the camera obscura offers, sug-

gests an analogy between this optical device and the divine eye. Crary states that

> [t]he aperture of the camera obscura corresponds to a single, mathematically definable point, from which the world can be logically deduced by a progressive accumulation and combination of signs. It is a device embodying man's position between God and the world. Founded on laws of nature (optics) but extrapolated to a plane outside of nature, the camera obscura provides a vantage point onto the world analogous to the eye of God. (48)

Of course this notion has to be qualified in the sense that unlike the omnipresent God, the beholder can only be in one place at a time.

In Crary's account, the status of this observer underwent a radical shift in the eighteenth century, which culminated shortly before the public appearance of photography. Over this period, scientific research increasingly focused on the capacities and failures of the human eye, namely through studies of afterimages, peripheral vision, binocular vision and thresholds of attention. The ensuing new paradigm of physiological optics removed the detached observer of the camera obscura from his or her neutral and transparent position. The stereoscope, for instance, relocates the composition and perception of the image inside the human body.

In this new field of subjective, corporeal vision, photography emerges as an anomaly. Why would a medium such as the stereoscope, which reproduces the sense of depth of the picture, be replaced by the plain photograph? For Crary, one of the reasons is that the composite, synthetic nature of the stereoscopic image constituted a menace to the independent subject of the camera obscura (133-6). Devices such as the phenakistiscope and the stereoscope may indeed have thrilled the public with the open display of an optical illusion, but the idea of the body as the locus of vision constituted a serious threat to the reliability of sight. In short, although photography emerged during the paradigm of physiological optics, it preserved or rather revived the illusions of referentiality and incorporeal, objective vision, which were the defining characteristics of the camera obscura paradigm. The ambiguous status of the photographic medium has precipitated debate from its beginnings in the 1830s until after the mid-twentieth century, often centering on the photograph's relation to the real or its highly questionable status as art.[1]

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[1] In *Burning with Desire*, Geoffrey Batchen discusses numerous sources by what he terms proto-photographers. These are not mentioned here because the emphasis of the pres-

After all, what kind of art work would be allowed as evidence in court?

My hypothesis is that, in the 1960s, these debates took a new turn when theories concerning the relation between the artist, the work of art and its reader experienced a radical twist. In order to approach this paradigm shift, I would like to juxtapose the end of the photographer's god-like status with the advent of a notion that created upheaval in the literary community (the shockwaves can still be felt today): the death of the author.

Roland Barthes coined this term in his 1968 essay of the same name, and Michel Foucault addressed the issue in "What is an Author?" published in the following year. Both essays concede that questioning the notion of "an author" was by no means new. What *was* new, however, were the radical suggestions these two continental theorists made. Unlike the New Criticism, which bracketed the author as a methodological strategy for reading and interpreting the text, Barthes and Foucault sought to kill the author entirely. Critical voices (among them Seán Burke in his book *The Death and Return of the Author*) argue that both Foucault and Barthes were unable, in their later writings, to entirely bypass the author. One may embrace or shun the radical propositions of Barthes and Foucault (who both proclaim no less than the death of the Descartean *cogito*), but one cannot ignore that something happened in the 1960s that had an impact on the way in which art and the relationship between the reader/viewer and the artist are conceived. If Barthes and Foucault were not the first to question this relationship, theirs were strong and influential voices, and provided an enduring theoretical basis for this line of questioning.

I suggest that photography could be assimilated to the realm of art only once the destabilization of the author had risen to the surface of cultural consciousness. My primary example in this endeavor is Julio Cortázar's "Blow-Up," originally published under the title "Las Babas del Diablo" in *Las Armas Secretas* (1959).[2] My reading of the short story in the theoretical framework provided by the death of the author will show that the story's publication a decade before Barthes' and Foucault's essays suggests that a certain cultural mechanism was at work in the 1960s. The short story exploits the obscure contradictions inherent

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ent discussion is on the reception of the photograph in its public appearance and use, and not the discursive structures which gave rise to a desire for photography many decades prior to the 1830s.

[2] Michelangelo Antonioni's film *Blowup* is a loose adaptation of the text.

in the reception of the photographic medium in order to reassess the notion of its own literary authorship.

The protagonist of Cortázar's short story is Roberto Michel, a French-Chilean translator and amateur photographer living in Paris. He is the narrator and fictional writer of the text, in which he reflects on an event he has been unable to assimilate. He gives an account of a Sunday morning walk during which he notices an adolescent boy and a much older woman on an island on the Seine. Puzzled by their difference in age in what looks like a seduction scene, he pauses to watch them. However, the situation remains unclear, and before they leave, Michel takes their picture. At the click of his shutter release, they become aware of him: the boy runs away, while the woman is highly distressed, and a strange man who apparently witnessed the scene from his parked car joins her to argue with Michel and unsuccessfully ask him to hand over his roll of film. Several days after the incident, the protagonist develops this film and for no apparent reason enlarges the image of the couple twice. The photograph starts to demand more and more of his attention, as if begging for a closure to its story, without which it will continue to haunt him. As this closure continues to elude Michel, the scene in the photograph literally starts moving, turns three-dimensional, and includes the photographer. Meanwhile, his understanding of the scene has turned into a sexual abuse scenario, in which the woman was seducing the boy for the man in the car. In this uncanny re-enactment of the event, Michel finally takes the place of the boy, so that the latter can once more escape. After this climactic moment, the photograph changes again, now only showing clouds passing by, as if the poster-size picture were a window.

In his account that constantly shifts between the first and third person, Michel outlines how he conceived of photography before his unsettling experience with the picture of the couple: "Michel knew that the photographer always worked as a permutation of his personal way of seeing the world as other than the camera insidiously imposed upon it" (117-8). This statement reflects the ambiguity of the photographic medium, caught between its referential illusion in terms of physical optics and its construction by the beholder in the model of physiological optics. Michel distinguishes between what the camera "sees" and what he perceives in the same image. In his essay "The Photographic Message," Roland Barthes calls what the camera captures the *denoted* message of the photograph. In his later work *Camera Lucida*, he renames this term the

"That-has-been" and defines it as "not the *optionally* real thing to which an image or a sign refers but the *necessarily* real thing which has been placed before the lens, without which there would be no photograph" (76, Barthes' emphases). Importantly, this denoted message remains inaccessible to the beholder. The reading process, however, produces a *connoted* message, which renders the image graspable by coding it culturally (Barthes, "The Photographic Message" 17). And exactly here lies the crux of Michel's photographic activity: whereas his "permutation[s] of his personal way of seeing" suggest that he consciously creates what he sees in his mind, for example by projecting architectural, historical and literary associations onto the historical buildings he photographs, he remains convinced that his pictures express or code these various associations, and that they can be decoded by their beholder. Michel vehemently distinguishes his photographic work from that of journalists: "I'm not talking about waylaying the lie like any old reporter, snapping the stupid silhouette of the VIP leaving number 10 Downing Street" (117). Indeed, one can read newspaper photographs easily enough without being familiar with the photographer's biography, but a thorough knowledge of Michel's education is required in order to "decode" his work: his conception of photography embeds the key to his work in the figure of the author, thus requiring his reader to radically embrace the intentional fallacy. He also takes a few spontaneous pictures on his morning walk, but does not even care to develop them later on. He is not an exploratory reader; he immediately discards these snapshots which have not been "coded" properly.

The photograph of the couple on the island differs from Michel's conception of photography in the sense that he cannot catch the "revealing expression, one that [sums] it all up" (123). He is forced to take their picture quickly, lest they walk away and leave him forever in the dark as to what he witnessed that day. In other words, once back at his studio, the amateur photographer finds himself for the first time in the situation of a reader of his own work, without any knowledge about the photographer's intention, and needs to search the picture itself for its meaning. The photograph thus destabilizes his idea of his own authorship. He seems unconsciously to accept the deal that if he manages to find a closure to the story in the picture, his authorial status will be re-established; otherwise, he must completely rethink his mode of artistic production. One might argue that this drive to reassert his authorial position becomes the unconscious driving force for his reading process.

The poster-size picture, its distance from Michel's desk, and his position with respect to the image exactly reproduce the scopic configuration on the island and thus represent his sought-for authorial angle on the scene. In his increasingly absorbing reading process, Michel for the first time becomes aware that language refuses to transparently express and organize his experience, but instead starts to dominate his reading. All his memories of the scene consist of his former tentative readings of innocence, temptation and fear as a result of sexual inexperience in the boy, and the unclassifiable expression of the woman. His meditations are invaded by the various discourses that these narrative fragments employ. Thus, far from expressing his authoritative grasp of the situation, his reading attempt appears as an acting out of cultural practices that constitute the only way to access the witnessed scene and later the photograph. For instance, the association of the boy with innocence in the face of sexual temptation (embodied by the older woman) guides his reading towards the assumption that the boy's leaving was an act of resistance to corruption and thereby pushes the form of the story towards that of a moral tale. Michel's attempt to reconstruct the scene like a detective first creates, then enforces, his conviction that he has witnessed a crime. But all these approaches seem to contradict each other, and after exploring numerous narrative dead-ends, Michel veers towards a religious discourse by declaring himself a Puritan, thus trying to justify his moral version of the story and to force it onto the picture. This means that the perspective he now takes on the scene is far from his original position. Realizing he is completely at the mercy of language for his reading of the scene, he finishes his desperate attempt to express his experience as follows: "In the last analysis, taking that photo had been a good act" (128). Through the act of formulating his wish for closure, he seems to be begging that language might grant it. Needless to say, the attempt remains unsuccessful.

At this point the enlarged photograph on the wall literally starts moving and zooms out in order to include the man from the car, who Michel's reading in the meantime has turned into a sexual predator menacing the boy. In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes argues that photographs which emotionally affect and animate the beholder, and as a result are animated by the latter (20), present an element which pierces the image and its viewer: the *punctum* (27). This disturbing accident or apparent inconsistency in the picture forces the beholder to create a "blind field" for the photograph – the imaginary surroundings from which the frame

isolates it (57). Michel seems to introduce the man into the picture as the missing element of his story. However, my reading of the text tends to suggest that Michel's *punctum* is not the absence of the alleged male-factor, but his own destabilized authorial position. His narrativization of the photograph unconsciously leads him to the core of his dilemma: either he witnesses the boy's being snatched away in this fictitious reconstruction of the event, thus providing it with a closure and restoring his authorial function of controlling and capturing the event on the island, or he saves the boy, and thereby acknowledges his own presence in the scene, both in the sense of having disrupted the action on the island and of being a corporeal observer, an active creator (as opposed to an objective witness) of the scene. Michel chooses this second possibility, although it leaves the story indeterminate and his authorial status in ruins: he screams into the scene evolving before his eyes at his studio, and by this sign of willful intervention accepts his bodily presence in the photograph. As a result, the picture turns three-dimensional and his body becomes part of it, marking his passage from a transparent observer of Crary's paradigm of physical optics to an embodied creator of the image in the sense of physiological optics. Being part of the picture, he is now noticed by the mysterious woman and the dark man. While the boy escapes, the man approaches Michel angrily and seems to be "wanting to nail [him] onto the air" (130). In the ultimate extension of his moral tale about innocence corrupted, Michel assumes the role of a savior in this climactic moment, sacrificing his authorial self for the boy's escape and the resulting indeterminacy of the scene. The dark man approaches Michel until first he, then his foul black hole of a mouth, takes up the entire space of the image. In a sense, the very product of Michel's narrative activity thus swallows him alive while the nature of the event involving the woman and the boy must remain forever open.

This, of course, is also the moment when Michel sits down to write his story. Interestingly, he alludes to the death of the author nine years before this provocative notion is phrased by Barthes, by announcing in his lengthy apology to the text: "So, I have to write. One of us all has to write, if this is going to be told. Better that it be me who am dead . . . (and I'm alive, I'm not trying to fool anybody. . .)" (115). He finds himself in a liminal state, his body alive but stripped of his authorial self and the understanding of his artistic function. He has no message to transmit in his writing, and expects no psychological liberation from a process of self-expression. He cannot account for his dilemma, but can only

enact the failure of his own reading process. He tries to read and relate his experience in as much detail as possible, as if to permit another reader to complete the task he was incapable of accomplishing himself. Instead of presenting a solution, he delegates the responsibility for closure to the reader of the short story. The interpretation of the text by the implied reader thus comes to parallel Michel's struggle to account for his mysterious snapshot.

The photograph assumes a crucial function in this text. The ambiguity arising from its inscription both in the paradigms of physical and physiological optics is exploited in order to lead the protagonist into an uncomfortable situation, in which he is ultimately forced to let go of the referential illusion, and to surrender his authorial aspirations. The island photograph is not a coded "permutation of his personal way of seeing the world" (117), but casts Michel in the role of a creative reader of an open photographic text whose content does not reflect his authorial control of the decisive moment. As a result, the illusory conflation of the denoted and the connoted message is undone, opening the photographic text to a myriad of possible readings. The situation of the readers of the short story parallels Michel's own reading activity, in the sense that we too gain access to the picture only through a linguistic process of creating *a* (as opposed to *the*) connoted message. This parallelism not only leads the reader to the core of the problem with the camera's authorial angle, but contaminates the medium of the short story itself. In other words, the photograph acts as a catalyst which puts the authorship of the short story into question from an exterior vantage point. Thus the text is not merely self-conscious of its own medium but, by pondering the ambiguity of the photographic image, it succeeds in defining a new aesthetic principle which applies to both media.

The narrator's struggle with constantly shifting pronouns and verb tenses in the text is not the only difficulty he encounters while sitting at his typewriter: his presence on the island, his reading of the resulting photograph back at the studio, and the act of writing his story all coexist simultaneously, and all these stages of his reading mutually contaminate each other. The result is what Barthes later called a writerly text (or *texte scriptible*) in *S/Z*: a multi-dimensional fabric of citations and cultural codes that exist all at once, and can only be organized through the reader's own creative activity. Like the photograph, the text becomes a narrative engine. It does not relate a sequentially organized story, whose meaning arises from authorial guidance, but is an object the constituents

of which are potential starting points for an indefinite number of readings. If this new conception of the artistic text is accepted, the short story pays its debt to photography by paving the latter's entry into the realm of art.

Barthes' new concept of the text in "The Death of the Author," his casting the author in the role of a *scripteur*, or a performing reader, as well as the new and much more active role of the reader him- or herself, can be applied to any text. However, "Blow-Up" not only discusses, but also proposes a new aesthetic of the literary text. This new and open kind of text which does not provide any authorial guidance but launches its writer and reader both into a navigational quest was not a result of Barthes' and Foucault's theories, but had already been approached by many artists before. For instance, Brian Aldiss comments in an interview on Stanley Kubrick's 1968 film *2001: A Space Odyssey*, that the director's way of making the film was to set up a number of what he called "non-submersible units," a kind of force field within which the narrative developed (Harlan, *Stanley Kubrick: A Life in Pictures*). Thus, the text is not endowed with a single authorial message, but rather stages oppositions and conflicts of codes and discourses. The effect of this proceeding was rather radical: *2001* was read as a nihilist manifesto by some of its critics, while it was also projected and received with great acclaim in the Vatican. Antonioni's adaptation of "Blow-Up" in his 1966 film is doubtless another excellent example, and one which (if read with an approach similar to that which I have proposed for the short story) already expounds the problems arising from the radical openness of the text, a notion that continues to haunt the literary world today.

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