

ITAL 4550 Italian Cinema and Literature

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Is Seeing Believing?

How reality in cinema is defined or left to the imagination of the viewer

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## **Is seeing believing?**

### **How reality in cinema is defined or left to the imagination of the viewer.**

"Come in close. Closer. Because the more you think you see, the easier it will be to fool you. Because what is seeing? You're looking but what you're really doing is filtering, interpreting, searching for meaning. My job: to take that most precious of gifts you give me - your attention - and use it against you." [Now You See Me, Leterrier, 2013]

This quote perfectly defines the themes shown in Antonioni's 1966 film *Blow Up*. Taking reality as we, the viewers, the audience, see it and twisting it to force us to doubt what he, the director, has shown us. In the film, we follow the story of a photographer, who uses his lens and camera as his way of perceiving reality and it is through this lens that he mediates his relationship with the world around him, with the models he photographs, and with the story that unfolds. The main event of the film is after photographing a seemingly intimate moment between a couple in a park, upon developing the images, the photographer notices something in one of the images. Upon further inspection and blowing up the image, he determines that he has captured what appears to be a murder scene. When he goes to investigate, he finds the body of the victim. However, this is where the director begins to play with the minds of the viewer as the photographer tries to tell those around him what he has seen, the people around him simply brush off the idea. Finally, the photographer returns to the scene of the crime and the body is gone, as if nothing had ever happened. It is then that the photographer sullenly wanders the park, coming across a crowd of mimes playing imaginary tennis. The imaginary ball is accidentally hit over the fence and the people motion for the photographer to throw it back to them. Here is where the director solidifies that we as viewers can never be sure of what we have seen as the photographer tosses his camera aside, retrieves the imaginary ball, and tosses it back to the mime players. You could not hear the sounds of tennis before, but as the photographer has now stepped into the veil between reality and imagination, you can hear the sounds of tennis as if they were real.

I chose to open this analysis with the opening line of the 2013 film *Now You See Me* as I feel that it perfectly embodies the goal of Antonioni with this film in trying to show the viewer that film as an art or as a media is simply a way of perceiving reality, but it is not reality itself. Through the film, Antonioni is trying to convey the idea that reality cannot be defined by our simple terms of what is real and what isn't real as what makes something real cannot be defined. It begs the question of is something real because we can see it or does being able to see it make it real, similar to the concept of Schrödinger's Cat, the idea that a cat is both alive and dead because it is in a box in which we cannot see. We cannot know the reality of the cat because we cannot see it and therefore, Schrödinger proposes that in our reality the cat is both alive and dead

simultaneously. This same concept of what is real and what isn't is examined throughout the history of film. In the final escape scene in *Now You See Me*, it appears to everyone watching that the Four Horsemen are jumping off the building, but in reality, it's a hologram to distract the FBI, allowing the group to evade police. The whole concept of the film is expanding on the idea that you cannot trust what you see on the scene as the film follows the story of a group of street magicians. However, throughout the film, the director plays with the viewer by doing the one thing magicians never do, revealing their tricks. The viewers are shown, through flashbacks and montages, how the group pulled off their tricks, thus further bending the reality of the film and what the viewer believes and blurring the line between reality and magic. This concept goes hand in hand with the final scene of *Blow Up* as we, as the viewers, are clearly shown that the people playing tennis are mimes and the game is imaginary, however, as the photographer discards the means through which he defines his reality and through which he understands reality, his camera, and joins the game by tossing the imaginary ball back to them, he becomes part of their (the mimes) reality and is now able to hear the sounds of the game as the viewer is as well, now that we have become part of a new reality.

The cinematic idea of bending reality and the reality of the viewer might have first been introduced by Antonioni in *Blow Up*, but filmmakers have taken this concept and expanded it to horizons Antonioni could have only imagined. The concept that the viewer pretends that cinema is reality when in truth, as Antonioni cleverly points out, it is simply a projection of what we think reality is.

"It's funny how the colors of the real world only seem really real when you see them on a screen" [*A Clockwork Orange*, Kubrick, 1972]

This quote masterfully reveals the depth of cinema as an art form and as a key to unlocking reality, while cinema might be a projection of what we think is real, we have to look into ourselves to truly understand the concept of "real".

This idea of real and reality as a concept has been built upon and expanded in countless different ways throughout the history of film. There are also countless powerful quotes from these films that I believe truly embody this idea of reality, what is real, and reality is what we make of it, however, I have been given only so many words to explain the concept of reality and how the definition of it is portrayed in film. I think one of my favorite films about reality and how the art of film twists what is real and blurs the lines between reality and art is *The Truman Show*.

"Was nothing real? You were real. That's what made you so good to watch" [*The Truman Show*, Weir, 1998]

This quote beautifully explains the reality of cinema, as while no part of Truman's reality was truly real, he was, and that's what made his reality so good for the show's viewers to watch. It wasn't their reality, but it was his.

As I have previously mentioned, the concept of reality has been expanded, broadened, and redefined by countless films since Antonioni's *Blow Up* and I believe it is that very concept that makes cinema such a powerful art form. For example, the world of Pandora, from the *Avatar* films by legendary director James Cameron, was so striking, beautiful, and separate from our

reality that people became depressed that the reality of the Avatar films did not exist. This is called PADS or Post-Avatar Depression Syndrome and from it, people experience very real, depression-like symptoms. Another example of reality-bending, and for the characters in a particular scene, literally bending, is Inception, a film by another legendary director, Christopher Nolan, in 2010. The entire concept of this film is bending realities as the team of main characters enter the dreamscape of a person's subconscious to accomplish a mission. However, the reality of this dreamscape can be molded to the will of the dreamer and the inception of dreams within dreams within dreams never allows the viewer to truly determine what is real and what isn't.

"Well dreams, they feel real while we're in them, right? It's only when we wake up that we realize how things are actually strange" [Inception, Nolan, 2010]

This quote, I think, defines the concept of the film, however, it speaks of film as a concept as well. As if films are like a dream that we can step into while we watch, that for those brief moments, the reality presented to us by the film we are watching is also our reality and it is only when the film is over, and we step back into our realities that we can see how they truly are.

Additionally, taking this concept of allowing ourselves to see how reality truly is, also allows for the concept of building towards what we want our reality to be. From this idea comes the concept behind the film Blade Runner. The 1982 film by director Ridley Scott leaves us as viewers with the idea that we can build a better future, this concept is carried over from countless films such as the dreary yet hopeful ending of Rome, Open City, or the dark utopian idea of The Giver in which a "better" reality is built. However, this idea of building a better future is openly mocked by Antonioni in his film Blow Up as he makes the clear statement that reality as we perceive it is fake. Reality as a concept is as ambiguous as beauty is in the eye of the beholder or art is defined differently by each person that views it. Reality is as wildly incomprehensible as the concept of abstract art. The whole point of reality is that we don't understand it and we never will. This is what Antonioni is trying to tell us through Blow Up, except instead of using a camera through which we perceive the world, we use the screen, our phones, and the media, all of which distort and warp reality just as Antonioni thought.

Lastly, I would like to expand on this final thought. Just as the photographer used his lens and camera to mediate his relationships, life and subsequently, his reality, we use our phones and social media to mediate our realities. In today's society, there are very few people who don't perceive reality through their devices and the media. This concept has become an insanely powerful tool, that is, unfortunately, abused by those who have learned how to wield it. Influencers convince hundreds of thousands of people around the world to buy things, to do things, to travel places and everything under the sun, to warp their realities into looking like that of the influencers. Most of these people are very sadly met with the harsh truth that nothing you see through this lens of social media is truly real. I think, in today's society, the message of Antonioni's Blow Up, that only once you reject the need to understand reality and even further the need to control reality, are you able to embrace reality as it is. Only once the photographer casts aside his camera, he is able to hear the sounds of the game, only once he rejects trying to understand reality is when he could really become a part of it. Unfortunately, Antonioni was too far ahead of his time for such an idea, I still think his message reigns true if not necessary to today's society. I will leave this idea with another quote from The Truman Show;

"We accept the reality of the world with which we are presented. It's as simple as that" [The Truman Show, Weir, 1998]

This idea that Antonioni challenges in his film *Blow Up*, encouraging if not demanding the viewer to do just the opposite. Don't just accept reality as it is shown to you, it might not be real.

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