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## Adaptation as In-depth Dialogue. The Cortázar-Antonioni case reconsidered.

"It's about time for a High Commissioner of the Republic of Letters to decree a coherent terminology." (G.Genette)

As all adaptations are born in dialogue, our title may sound as a pleonasm. Nevertheless, in spite of the powerful existing adaptation-machinery allocating specific categories to 'cases', one may still end up stranded somewhere in between, halfway between a rigorously differentiated category and the 'no-adaptation' file, in a situation for which no label is as yet available. The question discussed in the following pages deals with such a borderline case of adaptation and with its potential implications for adaptation studies at large. The fields involved are film and literature and the case, well known to the cognizant audience, is that of Michelangelo Antonioni's cinematographic reading and rendering of a short story by Julio Cortázar, as presented in his 1966 movie *Blow-Up*. From the outset the case was upset by some incongruity: on the one hand, the limited interest, almost indifference, shown, both on the author's and the director's side, on whether or not adaptation took place, and on the other hand, the sheer volume and intensity of academic interest taken in it. Phlegmatism on one side was well compensated by an impassioned debate on the other. We will argue that adaptation in this case operates on a 'deep' level, where fundamental questions are raised concerning mimesis and the impact of the eye of the beholder on the representational process. Moreover, the fact that, in this case, in contrast with the overwhelming majority of other cases, adaptation would occur well beneath the 'surface' of both 'texts', that is to say beneath the level where fiction has its actors moving from one episode to another, be it in the narrative or on screen, may well turn the Cortázar-Antonioni chapter into a potential new paradigm for adaptation studies. Since most issues related to the specific case were abundantly discussed in the literature, we can focus on aspects of the 'deeper'<sup>1</sup> interaction involved.

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<sup>1</sup> We use 'deep' and 'surface' within brackets as these terms refer to the distinction, commonly made between two levels in language related research,

Many unusual characteristics greatly enhance the adaptation case under scrutiny. The volatile course of the respective titles involved is one of the singularities. As a matter of fact, titles, in this case, ought to be considered an adaptation within the adaptation. The initial title of Cortázar's short story is *Las Babas del Diablo*, literally meaning the "drooling" of the Devil. The image, as it is actually used in the story, indicates a pack of threads, imbued with drops of moisture, as visible in the morning sunlight until it dissolves in the rising temperature or is swept away by the wind. In other words, Cortázar's title points to a metaphor for a natural phenomenon that, as we will see, acts itself as a metaphor for a crucial feature of the story: the imperceptible disappearance of a character. Cortázar's story was published in 1959 as one of the five novellas collected under the title *Las armas secretas*. It is the story of a writer-translator-photographer dramatically coming to terms with the unstable substance of characters as soon as they are caught on paper or on screen. In his Random House-Pantheon Books translation of 1963, the one Antonioni came across, Cortázar's imaginative translator, Paul Blackburn, a poet himself and knowledgeable about Romance languages, switched the title to *Blow-Up*. Not a predictable, nor innocent, adjustment. The metaphorical "devil's drool" aims at symbolizing the sudden disappearance from the scene, of a young man, his flight going unnoticed to the bystanders, as though it were indeed the mere unraveling in the air of some "filaments of angel-spittle [...] also called devil-spit" (Cortázar

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such as linguistics, semiotics and, indeed, literary studies. An elementary case in linguistics is that of a person performing a certain action, which can trigger a proposition in the active or the passive voice, the actual voice selected being the 'surface' appearance of the initial state of affairs to be uttered in the language, one way or another. Including the larger field of semiotics, other 'languages' can join the game, as sign and body language, or music. Deep and surface levels are, basically, metaphors for what is supposed to 'precede' the actual utterance, mentally or with reference to a different theoretical model. Once beyond simple utterances, in the domain of entire sentences and composed texts, especially in the field of highly constructed literary artifacts, the distinction between deep and surface levels gets fuzzier, as anyone knows trying to articulate the deep structure of a Shakespearean sonnet. Nevertheless, even in front of complex states of affair as usually displayed in literature and film, the distinction remains useful as a tool for modelling in front of cultural artifacts traditionally resisting such efforts, as the following pages, hopefully, will show.

1968, 109). Such is the not only metaphorical, but meta-fictional meaning of the title: the fragile condition and ephemeral existence, inherent in fiction, into which a story inevitably projects its imaginary characters<sup>2</sup>. It is worth observing, along the same lines, that the very last images of Antonioni's film offer a neat visual rendering of the deep-rooted fragility of fictional characters. Walking away from the scene the photographer has his body literally dissolved in the green surroundings of the meadow he is marching on<sup>3</sup>. Adopting the new title, *Blow-Up*, thus entails a clear shift from a general metaphor for fictional insubstantiality towards a much more plot-related focus, photographically speaking as well. Such a new focus also implies the quest for precision and the need for knowledge, if not truth, as eventually obtained by 'blowing up' a picture. 'Blowing up' or enlarging a picture eventually allows for the disclosure of new information concerning the actual content of the scene shot in the past, information the photographer was unaware of while shooting. The new title shifts the metafictional focus from the uncertain status of characters - where are they? where did they go? - to the truth conditions of their existence - are they there or not? Through the initial metaphor of "fibers" of drool - however unappetizing -, indicating an evanescent substance, Cortázar is referring to the almost immaterial way in which, in his story, characters appear and disappear. Moreover, his characters' inconsistency is unrelated to the specific mediatic environment in which they are caught. They come and go indifferently in the

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<sup>2</sup> For Chatman (Chatman 1985, 139) the idiomatic expression 'babas del diablo' means 'a close shave', which might well be its meaning in colloquial Spanish, but does not correspond to the connotated meaning as clearly used and developed by Cortázar.

<sup>3</sup> Antonioni's published script makes clear the director's intention of having the main character's leaving the screen expressed visually through a meta-filmic analogy with dissolution: "Thomas is erased from the scene and the titles THE END and then BLOW-UP are superimposed on the green expanse of the field." (Antonioni 1971, 116) The analogy of erasure explains, in hindsight, the similar, though reversed, approach taken for the film credits displayed in the initial frames. Names and attributions all appear as small 'lettered' windows, within a "green expanse of [a] field", similar to the one mentioned with respect to the film's ending. 'Through' the transparent letters, 'behind' the screen, glimpses are caught of a fashion photoshoot in full swing. In other words: in the same manner the medium gives access to the fictional world it is itself making up, its characters, its conditional tenants, that is to say, living under its terms, can be wiped off the screen a any moment.

viewer of his camera, in the photographer-narrator's memory, truthful or inventive, or during the photographer-observer's watching and examining the image in his studio, when the photo is tacked on the wall. As the object of the photographer's scrutiny is not the original photo, but its enlargement, and thereafter the series of ever more 'blown up' pictures, the growing nonphysicality of these characters, surfacing and dematerializing without leaving any trace, becomes their main characteristic. They remain disembodied beyond the specificity of the succeeding frames, screens or windows, enclosed territories of the eye and of the mind. In other words: the metaphor signifying dissolution, the original "drooling", loaded with meaning, is what actually got lost in translation as far as the title is concerned. In Antonioni's film substantiality, literally, fades away as soon as the enlargement starts. This orchestrated impression of substantiality dissolving in its opposite is precisely, in our mind, the gateway to understanding what adaptation in this case means and at what level it occurs. Antonioni's attention was eventually caught by the 'photographic' connotation of a title like *Blow-Up*. He almost certainly was unaware of the symbolic resonance produced by the original Spanish title, namely the unsubstantial status of human characters thrown on a screen through photochemistry. One is led to suppose, on the contrary, that the filmmaker must have been struck by the crucial connection, established in Cortázar's plot, between the apparent substantiality of everything that is shown on a screen or on photographic paper, on the one hand, and the factual and irrefutable status of transience and unsubstantiality, on the other hand, of any object or human being caught by a camera's lens. This awareness on Antonioni's part is, of course, not dependent on whatever title the story might have carried. So the least one can say is that the journey from *Las Babas* to *Blow-Up* is far from unrelated to the very content of the story that inspired the film. It is time now to look beyond the title.

The adaptation case examined here is specific, but its specificity ought not to eclipse its more general implications. One of these implications is that interesting adaptations sometimes occur on a 'deep' level, a level less readily available than the one on which 'surface' interactions take place between texts, such as, for

example, translations<sup>4</sup> or mere plot remakes. Paradoxically, also, sequentiality plays a minor role in cases of 'deep' interaction between texts. Typically, when B is an adaptation of A, B follows A in time. In matters of adaptation anteriority is king, even if anteriority does not necessarily entail higher quality. Adaptor B might well respond to higher aesthetic standards than adapted A. The Cortázar-Antonioni case, however, seems to leave the priority principle unconsidered. Between the two 'texts' involved ripples run in either direction, back and forth. Antonioni's reading of *Las babas* picks up certain features, on one hand, whereas, on the other hand, Cortázar's later comment on the film underlines, as we will see, how an enhanced interpretation of his own story was unlocked by his 'reading' the movie. What happens here is essential to this type of 'deep' adaptation<sup>5</sup>. What really matters is that both texts draw on a common sub-text or paradigm of sub-texts raising the same point, that point being that fiction, be it literary or cinematographic, inevitably turns characters into ghosts. The literary paradigm of such bidirectional influence, as we know, was magnificently illustrated in one of Borges' *Ficciones: Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote*. Borges explicitly does not want Menard 'replacing' - 'adapting' - the Quijote in a 'modern' environment. Menard does not 'copy' the Quijote either. Menard *re-writes* not more than two chapters of the Quijote - such an excruciating, time consuming activity it is -, enriching them with the interpretive depth accumulated in three centuries of a literary classic's life. Menard's B is, in a sense, a 'perfect' adaptation. It is also true, however, that ending up as identical to A, Menard's B similarly illustrates the incongruity of the notion itself of 'perfect adaptation'.

What should be understood by a 'deep level' adaptation? We all more or less share the view that texts, in whatever medium or language they come to us, do so, really, within a ramified web of connected texts. Texts are isolated entities only at the surface and at eye's sight. The fact that texts rarely walk alone has

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<sup>4</sup> With the notable exception of 'deep' translations such as Blackburn's in the case of *Las Babas del diablo*.

<sup>5</sup> The impact being felt on both sides is similar to what (Hutcheon 2013, 116) nicely refers to as "the doubled pleasure of the palimpsest". For audiences engaging with B, the reading of A is part of their approach of B, and vice versa.

been intensely studied, as we know, by literary theorists such as, among others, Kristeva, Barthes, Lévi-Strauss, with respect to intertextuality, semiology, anthropology, and indeed also by quite a few adaptation theorists. But ramification does not, *ipso facto*, indicate where precisely the grafting takes place, on what level the branches of the ramified ensemble connect between one text and the other. With the help of the Antonioni-Cortázar case we would like to argue that connection can sometimes, interestingly, be established on such a 'deep' level as the one corresponding to the very 'roots' of both texts. On that level, characters, plot, sentences, single shots or questions of cinematography are still very much in the making. There, more general and abstract issues about mimesis, representation and fictional status of reality, are conceived. And so the question comes to the forward: on what level are we and what are the rules governing it? The most reassuring answer would be, in our feeling: hermeneutics. If it is true, in other words, that within the framework of plain adaptation one text may seamlessly develop into another, transmitting plot or the protagonist's name and drama, it is not less true, in our opinion, within a less familiar framework, that one text can communicate to another the central hermeneutical 'question' it carries in its heart, without, also, the latter adopting the former's specific actions, settings or names. On that very level, adaptation studies connect with hermeneutics. On that level, also, Antonioni's film docks into the very question touched upon by *Las Babas*, that is to say the mimetical *crux* at the heart of fiction itself<sup>6</sup>.

The Antonioni-Cortázar case is a complex one and hence it is safe not to dispense with some down to earth information. The *Blow-Up* dvd on sale at the moment of writing these lines<sup>7</sup> did not mention on its cover any link with Cortázar's short story. Credits on the initial frames parsimoniously indicate, instead of the traditional formula "based on", that the film was "inspired by a short story by

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<sup>6</sup> Yuri Lotman offered some highly relevant insights from this point of view. The Russian semiologist was the first to point to *Blow-Up* as a primeval "meta-semiotic text", in which "cinema [begins] to be aware of itself as a sign system and to consciously make use of this property." (Lotman 1976, 104)

<sup>7</sup> *Blow-Up*, diretto da Michelangelo Antonioni, Golem Video, 2015. On the back of the cover: "[...] Soggetto e sceneggiatura di Michelangelo Antonioni [...]".

Julio Cortazar". Such a restraint is in contrast, not only with the tradition of meticulous crediting in the film business, but also with the impressive bulk of attention dedicated to the comparison between story and film in newspapers, magazines and academic journals alike. Also worth observing is the fact that at no point any rumours were spread about 'issues', legal or personal, between the artists. On the contrary. Both artists were well-established personalities within their respective fields when Antonioni came across Cortázar's short story. If anything, their limited exchange on the matter was always courteous, but distant. Let us remind that Antonioni had become famous, among an exclusive body of followers, for such almost plot-less films as *Il Grido*, *L'avventura*, *La notte*, *L'eclisse*, produced in the late fifties and the early sixties. All these films had put on screen lonely and desperate Italians gazing over large landscapes without saying very much *à propos* at their multiple cocktail parties. Inner circle *Nouvelle vague* gossip in France had occasionally mimicked the director's name as "Antoni-ennui". But then came *Blow Up* in 1966, a huge commercial success. Nudity and sex were certainly co-responsible for such enduring media attention. The adaptation-question eventually was brought into the picture later, from the early seventies on, when academia and scholarly journals took on the issue. Some thirty articles were published on the subject between 1970 and the early nineties. At that point, the relevance of the case had become twofold. On the one hand, very detailed analyses of the specifics of this special case of 'adaptation/non-adaptation' were suggested; on the other hand, the notion itself of adaptation, its definition and the criteria put forward to achieve it, came to the forefront. Although a majority of journal articles concluded that there was no ground for a sound inspirational basis, Antonioni did provoke some intense soul-searching among adaptationists. Nevertheless, the question why Antonioni had felt obliged to pay and actually had paid generous royalties to Cortázar largely remained a mystery.

Before making an attempt to unravel at least part of the mystery and take up again the question of where and how *Blow-Up* may still have 'docked' into *Las Babas*, a little *résumé* and discussion of both partners in this borderline case of adaptation is certainly useful.



In *The Devil's Drool* a professional translator, also a photographer, Roberto Michel, is taking pictures in Paris on a sunny Sunday morning in autumn, without any specific purpose other than to randomly shoot 'picturesque' images on a sunny Sunday in Paris. On the Saint-Louis Island he catches sight of an adolescent in conversation with a somewhat older woman, apparently trying to seduce him. At that point the photographer's intention slowly shifts from the picturesque surroundings towards the human beings showing up in the viewer. No sooner the shot is taken and the angered woman asks for the roll, while the boy imperceptibly drops out of sight, his drifting compared to the disappearance of a "flimsy thread of devil-spit" (Cortázar 1968, 109), as already indicated. Back in his room and several days later, instead of paying more attention to the superb pictures of Paris he had shot, Michel, for reasons unclear to himself, sets off enlarging the one photo with the couple - "the only one which interested him" (Ib., 111). Facing the photo tacked on the wall, seated at his desk, in front of his typewriter, putting pressure on his memory, oscillating between his dry juridical translation and the scrutinizing of the photo, Cortázar's protagonist starts to drift into fantastic territory. The leaves on the tree above the couple are suddenly set in motion, the woman's hands gesticulate, the typewriter is pushed on the floor. The reader is confronted with a mimetic rupture point of the story where fictional levels collapse into each other. By now, the photographer-translator-narrator has himself become part of a moving picture, his new time and space frame corresponding to the original one in the restored past. A third person then steps into the widened picture from outside the frame, a man that was standing there all the time and is now part of the action. Thanks to the enlarged photo, the man's reflexion is caught as a mirrored image in the boy's eye. But the man's presence, unnoticed until then, is also revealed, immaterially and through 'influential' energy, so to speak, in the woman's "vicarious" (Ib., 113) gesturing<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> The 'vicariousness' of the woman's gestures is an important filmic suggestion as well. A similar triangular communication is picked up by Antonioni. Wandering at night next to his friend's painting studio, the photographer watches the latter making love to his wife. Viewing is central to the whole episode. The photographer's presence is not noticed by his friend, but his wife seeks to catch the visitor's gaze and keeps eye-contact for a while. In a

According to the photographer's *post factum* reading of the scene a conjecture is made about a pedophile's attempt to lure a boy into a sexual encounter, the woman acting as go-between. Standing in front of the moving picture, the photographer is enabled now to correct his initial unawareness. He also makes an 'ethical' turn by becoming a photographer-savior, 'armed' with his camera at the ready to 'strike'. The shutterblades of the camera do their job and fly "like a large bird outside the focus [...] in a single swoop in front of the picture" (Ib., 115), catching the man, while his threatening and shouting is silently revealed by his "lifted hands" and a "shaking black tongue". Then the magic of the photo brought to life, of the photographer effectively intervening in the scene and rewriting the past, stops. Roberto Michel resumes his customary activity of watching clouds and birds passing by in front of the window. The translator has returned to his job of 'trans-lating' as literally as possible, that is to say without intervening as the photographer, however phantasmatically, had done. A radical change has occurred, however: his window is now "tacked up with pins on the wall." (ib.) Window and picture have merged. The collapse of fictional levels has become a stable situation.

*The Devil's Drool* is an utterly complex tale. It is part of a long tradition of Latin-American fiction developed in the wake of Borges' metafictional writings, a tradition Cortázar himself greatly contributed to consolidate. Systematic questioning, through fiction, of the mimetic power of fiction itself, while

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stimulating critical reflexion on *Blow-Up*, John Freccero links this episode to a matching scene of voyeurism in Chaucer's *Troilus and Creseyde*. (Freccero 1970, 22) Voyeurism is arguably one aspect of the photographer's alienated sexuality, the latter also emerging in the opening photoshoot with the model. Nevertheless, in the episode under consideration, the photographer is less interested in the woman's gazing than in his friend's painting, spotted in the room. It curiously resembles the dotted surface of his own 'blown up' photo, shot that morning in the park. Both story and film are keen to render strikingly the fractured, triangular articulation in the viewer-viewed relationship. What is seen does not necessarily coincide with what is looked at and a third party - man, painting - may be 'part of the picture' without being in it. Distraction is a key concept here. Both Cortázar's and Antonioni's mastery of their respective media thus explain how readers and spectators may be 'diverted' by what is shown and drawn to look 'beyond' the screen, further and in other directions than the one provided. Antonioni's meta-filmic intention thus closely parallels Cortázar's meta-narrative scope.

resolutely undermining such capacity, is an important aspect of this narrative lineage. Such metafiction multiplies fictional levels, each of which discrediting the next embedded one from the point of view of mimesis. At the end, the complex mechanism, however, also empowers the reach of fiction generally, at the expense of its mimetic ambitions. The outcome of many of these fictions - Borges' *Ficciones*, Cortázar's novel *Rayuela*, among others - is paradox. The absence, however, of any logically acceptable and non-contradictory reading of their tales is considered by these writers as an enfranchisement of fiction, the highest triumph for fiction indeed. *The Devil's Drool* does exactly that. Whatever a hypothetical reality-check might have brought up as to the real nature of the encounter caught on film, or concerning the likely existence of a translator-narrator-photographer, let alone the latter's discoveries in front of the enlarged picture, it never could or would have been more than a conjecture. Within this technique of superposing different levels of representation, the novelty of Cortázar's story consists in pointing at the very medium generally considered most trustworthy: photography. Photographers themselves would probably disagree, even before the age of Photoshop. Nevertheless, photography draws its strength from an incisive veracity appeal, if not claim. Such a claim is the real challenger in Cortázar's tale. According to his argument, narratively phrased into the story, photography is equally incapable of impacting upon reality as any other fiction. The first picture taken in *The Devil's Drool* misses the point: the 'enemy' in the car. The second picture, put in motion, only exists in the photographer's uncontrolled imagination. Mendacity is omnipresent in photography. Roberto Michel knows that "the photographer always work[s] as a permutation [*permutación* in the Spanish text] of his personal way of seeing the world as other than the camera insidiously impose[s] upon it." (Ib., 103) But even outside photography's control and guile, viewing is the most insidious of a man's senses. Smells - Cortázar says - are considerably less deceptive, though hard to reproduce - we have to add - in fiction or in photography.

Before moving on to Antonioni, what ought to be stressed, with respect to *The Devil's Drool* and its potential impact on the director's mind, is the unremitting manipulation of the so-called 'real', whatever the medium through which it is

approached. Characters, churches, railings, clouds and pigeons - or were they sparrows? -, come and go, appear and disappear thanks to the Remington typewriter or the Contax camera, conferring to these items the only substance they are capable to transmit: transience. The only workable escape from the underlying mendacity and plain untruth is the unremitting “permutation” of the medium, be it language or picture, reframing it according to a changing viewpoint. The remedy does not make lies go away, it only makes them visible. The real question thus, concerning Antonioni, ought to be: in what way, along these lines, *Blow up*, might have been “inspired” by the meta-fictional dimension of the short story?

*Blow-up* brings to the screen a series of episodes covering more or less twenty-four hours in a young photographer's life. Thomas is based in London and earns good money in fashion photography, although being tired of its superficiality. He is sincerely interested in a less ephemeral, more genuinely ‘artistic’, use of the medium. We see him crossing the gates of an asylum for homeless people, poorly dressed like them, leaving in the early morning, his camera hidden and wrapped in paper. While the homeless are heading for another day of survival, he walks to his Rolls Royce. In collaboration with a writer, Ron, he is working on a photo-album, the aesthetic and poetic concept of which is only indirectly touched upon in the film. Thomas himself would have the idea of violence at its center, which would make the pictures of the ill-fated human wrecks in the shelter very fitting. While discussing the composition of the book with his co-author Ron, Thomas suggests the central idea of inhumanity to be counterbalanced, as a conclusion for the book, by the pictures taken that morning in a park, expressing peacefulness. Ron agrees: “That’s best. It rings truer.” (Antonioni 1971, 65) As such, a remarkable and paradoxical reaction. How at all would pictures full of peacefulness “ring true[r]” as a conclusion of a book dealing with violence? If anything, they would ring ‘false’. Ron isn’t interested in the way the asylum pictures will be presented in the book. His answer confirms his indifference. Thomas’ own aesthetic aspirations clearly depart from the utter artificiality characterizing fashion photography. Not unlike Michel, he is in search of authenticity, but deeply unsatisfied with the limitations of his medium. The first

episodes of the film, the emblematic photo-session with the accomplished model, the following session with the exhausted models kept waiting for hours, eyes shut<sup>9</sup>, and the pseudo photo-session with the aspiring models ending in a sexual orgy, are all illustrations of the artificiality wedged into that kind of photography. It is significant, in other words, that *Blow-Up* starts with fashion photography presented as a parody of the kind of photography Thomas longs for. To the extent that *Blow up*, as could correctly be argued, is about the 'education' of a photographer, Ron is clearly not the ideal partner. His intention to make things "ring true" only exacerbates the stigma attached to photography as based on appearances. The central element of *Blow up's* plot, Thomas' growing perplexity in front of the enlarged prints of the park, has to be considered in that light. Is a gun visible behind the fence? Is a corpse hidden somewhere amidst a "landscape drinking in its peacefulness" (Antonioni 1971, 51-52), as Antonioni's film-script specifies? Since the matter is possibly one of murder, what appears under the guise of idyllic harmony, might well be the representation of a very violent event. While exploring the park a second time, Thomas does discover a corpse, staring calmly and with open eyes at the sky, almost smiling and as such looking very much alive, much more alive, at any rate, than, for example, the agonizing bodies of the homeless leaving the shelter, pictured on his photos. *Blow up* is sprinkled with often very short shots throwing doubt upon the conviction that one can "thrust one's eyes". The male park keeper reveals himself, at close up, as an androgyne. Rumor also has it that Antonioni would have the grass painted greener for some shots. He did ask the row of white houses visible at the edge of the park, to be repainted, 'whiter than white', so to speak.

Thomas' education comes to an end in the protracted final episode of the film, the famous tennis game played in silence by the mimes. We recognize these young people, who appeared early on in the film, when they were shown driving around, packed in their Jeep, dressed in rags, some with their faces white-powdered, loudly begging for gifts with their money boxes. Disturbing the city's early morning rush hour, their troublesome, though cheerful presence, strikes a profoundly un-realistic, anti-mimetic, cord right from the start. Other elements

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<sup>9</sup> As though they were inanimate objects of still life photography.

in the opening scenes of the film enhance such downsizing of its realistic ambition through visual 'grafts' from a different universe: the two black nuns in snow-white caps and the ceremoniously parading 'bobby' in an unlikely environment. The meticulous editing of the episode is indicative of the contrasting effect aimed at by Antonioni. The images of the unruly and joyful city-tour alternate with those showing the homeless spreading in gloomy neighborhoods. Thomas is the only one welcoming the carefree company, replying with a smile to their buoyant liveliness. What the film suggests is that Thomas, on his way to his studio for more fashion shoots, is almost tempted to join the party. The final episode eventually takes on a much more serious mood, though not at all depressed. The seriousness is similar to the *gravitas* characteristic of certain rituals. The arrival of the team of youngsters in the park is as noisy as the morning before, but their voices are muted as soon as two of them enter the enclosed tennis court. The only sounds heard are gusts of wind and the players' feet moving on the court's surface. Players and bystanders, now silent, with their faces painted white and emphatically gesturing, are now completely turned into mimes. It is as though cinematics were unloading some of its realistic 'mendacity', one could say, and slowly withdrew that part of its own 'make up'. When Thomas joins the onlookers, at one of the corners of the court, he has already discovered the theft of his roll of shots in the park and the disappearance of the body, without any traces left. Read symbolically - and symbolism seems the right key here given the conspicuously deconstructed reality at this point of the film -, the tennis game is the end game of the film. Thomas' dreamy eyes, half-closed, peering through the wholes of the fence indicate much less the hangover after the pot-party of the night before, than a thorough metamorphosis of his gaze. He is stepping out of the context into a new set of rules, symbolized by the fenced playground setting. His progression is slow but steady, as is the filmic rendering of it. When the girl misses one of the invisible balls tossed at her by her partner she makes an apologizing gesture. Thomas' smiling at the scene is only compassionate, as though still resisting participation and the 'suspension of disbelief'. But at the following miss, when the fictional ball crosses the fence and Thomas is silently, but not less explicitly, invited by the girl to pick it up, his gestures have become straight and

affirmative. From now on he is part of the game and playing according to its rules. From this point on, he convincingly tosses and throws the inexistent ball back into the court. With respect to a modified, permuted, 'reality', the soundtrack now also reproduces the characteristic bouncing back and forth of the ball. Thomas, then, walks away with his camera. His minuscule figure in black and white, caught in the middle of a screen full of grass, slowly and undramatically fades away, both mimetically and photographically speaking.

With respect to the plot, except for the profession of his protagonist, Antonioni draws very little from *The Devil's Drool*. What both narratives have in common, though, is the systematic undermining of mimesis, of the representational ambition of fiction. The path chosen by Cortázar is the fantastic, with the enlarged picture on the wall, including its characters, coming to life again and threatening the photographer-narrator. The narrator of *Blow up* is very much Antonioni behind the camera and the editing desk. His tale, dense with symbolism, is that of a day in the life of a photographer, and his aspiration of escaping artificiality and alienation. What he aspires to, as he makes clear in his conversation with the girl of the park claiming the film roll, the only female in the film with whom an authentic relationship is suggested as possible, is a "little disaster for sorting things out." (Antonioni 1971, 70) But photography, or film, or literature, for that matter, do not grant access to "disasters", to turning reality upside down, to what goes against the odds, literally against the "stars", as the etymology of the word – *dis-astro* – explains. His medium has not that kind of sea change on offer. And that is probably why, at the end, he can only for a short while join the imaginary and playful universe of the mimes and their game. Fictional balls do not belong outside the protective fence of the tennis court and should be thrown in again, as he does<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> Contrary to (Cameron-Wood 1969, 138) the film ending does not imply, in our reading, Thomas' "final surrender" to the rules of the imaginary world staged by the mimes. The rules of their game are valid only within the enclosing fence, the sphere of exception where fictional balls belong. However, the tennis game is the ultimate symbol of the photographer's education. What he has learned is the limited range of his lenses. Not unlike Michel, successful in hitting the third man in his imaginary reconstruction only, Thomas has learned he is not a very effective shot. Moreover, excessively humanizing Thomas, considering new

With regard to where we started in this essay - terminology<sup>11</sup> -, an important reference has still to be made. Many cases of adaptation - and most certainly the one discussed here - illustrate what Gadamer, in his major contribution to hermeneutics, *Wahrheit und Methode*, indicated as "fusion of horizons" or "Horizontverschmelzung". (Gadamer 1975, passim) Until this is achieved the process of understanding is essentially dialogue and negotiation. It is remarkable how consonant this notion is with what is going on in all sorts of adaptation, and specifically in the Cortázar-Antonioni case, where understanding of the deeper concern, underlying *Las Babas*, of its broad "horizon" of thought, led Antonioni to the confrontation, and ultimately "fusion", with the meta-filmic question to put forward. The dialogical practice Antonioni engaged in is at the heart, is the heart of hermeneutical dialogue, negotiating back and forth until an 'agreement' is reached. From this point of view it is also easier to grasp why Borges wants Menard to produce two newly *written*, not copied, chapters of the Quijote, ending up as absolutely identical to the original. Perfect identity expresses Borges' voluntarily climactic and hyperbolic translation of 'fusion'. Menard had read and understood the Quijote too well. Reading - or understanding - and writing are intimate partners<sup>12</sup> of the same process. Writing thus, naturally, proceeds from reading. Such writing as creative reading is what Cortázar envisaged took place between himself and Antonioni. In an interview after the release of *Blow-Up*, Cortázar said:

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guidelines for him to follow in his 'life after', as would be fitting for a protagonist in a cinematic *Bildungsroman*, may not be a fitting solution for someone who is soon to be "erased" from the screen.

<sup>11</sup> Exploring the rich terminological minefield related to adaptation, available labels that would come close to expressing what connects Antonioni to Cortázar and vice versa, could be: "adaptation as connection" (Schober 2013, 89-112) or "transcending 'adaptation'" (Tortajada 2004, 343-357). With respect to Stam's metaphoric typology, Antonioni would probably fit best in the "adaptive model of 'possession'". (Stam-Raengo 2005, 24)

<sup>12</sup> In Genette's *Palimpsestes*, chapter LII (Genette 1982, 294-297) elaborates on the close relationship between reading and writing within the framework of hypertextuality. With respect to the process-side of adaptation, also Hutcheon is keen to stress the creative intertextual engagement of the audience with the adapted work as an essential part of the process (Hutcheon 2013, 116 a.o.).



"I left Antonioni absolutely free to depart from my story and follow his own ghosts; in his search for them he met with some of mine [...] [While watching the movie] there came a moment, during the rustle of foliage as the camera was raised toward the sky above the park and focused on the trembling leaves, when I had the feeling that Antonioni was winking at me, and that we were meeting above or below our differences; [...]" (Peavler 1979, 893)

"Meeting above or below differences" is another absolutely fitting way to translate, almost literally, what hermeneutical dialogue aims at. Writers, as we know, are often brilliant critics of a different sort. The brief shot Cortázar refers to is the one where Thomas discovers the disappearance, or the absence, of the corpse in the park. The grass is absolutely untouched and the wind is rustling uneventfully. The camera follows Thomas' gaze directed toward the swaying leaves above him. Then, before joining the mimes and their play, with a gesture of helpless irritation, Thomas knocks the side of his camera on the very spot where his eyes, his memory or his imagination, had located the corpse. *The Devil's Drool* regularly mentions gusts of wind blowing over Saint-Louis Island, wiping away the "filaments of drool" and together with them the fictional characters, both in the viewer and in the tale. Unsure whether Cortázar's wind may have shifted in Antonioni's direction, we may consider likely that a real hermeneutic encounter between the two took place "above or below the differences".

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