Camera Obscura or Mobile Eye? Spectatorship, Interpretation and Ambiguity in Blow Up and The Well

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In this paper I want to explore the dual theories of spectatorship and positionality, that is, a spectator’s relation to the moving image especially in terms of how he/she is positioned by those images. My doctoral research investigates the phenomenon and processes of translation between different expressive mediums – specifically novel to film adaptations produced in Australia. Therefore, an investigation of the process of interpreting is integral to the discussion. Exploring theories of spectatorship and visuality is useful in the following ways:

• the criticism of film adaptations usually follow claims that the film version changes the meaning of the original narrative by either rearranging the plot, excluding important events or characters, presenting an aesthetic that is completely contrary to the ‘public and preferred’ reading, inviting closure in the story and so on. My argument is that there are many and varied formulations of the above, and although, as Wolfgang Iser points out, a literary text does plot guidelines for particular interpretations, there is no such thing as completely fixed meanings, even though attempts are made to privilege certain meanings by dominant agents of culture such as academics and journalists. Individual readers make meaning by referring back and forth from their own experiences, mental pictures, understandings, to the contexts written about by journalists and analysed by academics.

• visuality in the cinema is part of its expressive apparatus, hence the way that the story is told and the various ways of seeing that it dictates is important to both the notions that the narrative transforms into another object and the interpretation of that narrative is varied.

Michelangelo Antonioni’s 1966 film Blow Up has absolutely nothing to do with Samantha Lang and Mandy Walker’s 1998 Australian film of Elizabeth Jolley’s novel The Well. However, I intend to discuss their contrasting ‘motifs’ of cinematography. The thematic preoccupation in Antonioni’s film of artistic creation and perception in Blow Up lends itself to a study of not only the photographic object but also the position of the viewer/voyeur – the notion that many photographs or artistic images dictate a site from which the spectator must interpret.

Blow Up is loosely based on a short story by Argentinian writer Julio Cortàzar, “Las babas del diablo” translated as “The devil’s drool”. In contrast, The Well, a closer adaptation of Elizabeth Jolley’s novel of the same name, attempts to replot Jolley’s celebrated use of metafiction in cinematic terms. I am using each film to identify different aspects of vision and visuality, Blow Up being implicit within the narrative, and The Well being part of the cinematic apparatus.

Theories Of Spectatorship
Theories of vision and visuality have undergone many changes in the last twenty years. In the 1970s and 1980s the privileged model was termed the ‘classical’ model emphasised by writers such as Laura Mulvey, Christian Metz and Jean Baudry, among others. In “Visual
Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”, Mulvey’s thesis was that the traditional Hollywood cinema always privileged a certain type of viewer – that of the male voyeur, both seemingly powerful in his gaze upon the framed female body, and subject to his vision, subjugated. This notion re-enforced John Berger’s thesis around about the same time which was applied to the history of Western visual art. In Ways of Seeing, Berger proposed that the hypothetical spectator of a painting of a female nude, nominally male, is constructed within the apparatus (to use a cinema term) of the visual image itself. What he calls the “principal protagonist” is the fully clothed male spectator, not painted on the canvas but implicit to its meaning. This notion could be applied to Velazquez’ painting Las Meninas in which the implied spectators are reflected in a mirror on the far wall of the perspective. The spectators are positioned in the figures of the king and queen of Spain who watch their daughter’s portrait being painted.

I’m sketching in these theories because they assign to visuality a part in the evolution of Western idealism. Jean Baudry has likened spectators to the disembodied, immobile prisoners of Plato’s cave, who see the illusory world projected on the far wall, but are deluded in seeing “representation as perception”. As Jonathan Crary points out, many works on the subject of photography begin with the philosophical term brought about by the camera obscura. Metz and Baudry’s image of the disembodied spectator, making meaning from a single and unified point within the camera box, or Plato’s cave, is useful here. Crary refers back to Locke and Descartes as major figures in generating the conception of the human mind as having an inner eye in which perceptions and ideas pass before it, a little like the mind enclosed in a darkened space knowing the external world by an apparent ‘objective truth’. This was embodied by the camera obscura. The position of “the spectator” here is idealised, not fixed in an historical or temporal space but closed in a dark box, universalised and homogenised. Baudry’s notion was that the “cinematic apparatus represents the culmination of the Western philosophical tradition of a transcendental idealist subject” (Williams, 5).

Although these classical notions of spectatorship are limited in acknowledging alternative viewpoints and a heterogeneous array of viewers, they do point out much about the workings of power and the idea that the hypothetical viewer, perhaps representing the coloniser, or the bourgeoisie or the surveyor, controls, conquers, imprisons the object within the frame by its gaze.

The invention of perspective in visual art is included in this evolution of Western idealism, constituting a ‘way of seeing’ consistent with the terms of the camera obscura. As John Berger contends:

> Perspective makes the single eye the centre of the visible world. Everything converges onto the eye as to the vanishing point of infinity. The visible world is arranged for the spectator as the universe was once thought to be arranged for God.

(Berger, 16)

Berger points out the contradictions in this model of “reality/mimesis”, which posits perception from a God-like position in stressing that the camera eye is dictated by its singular position in space and time, unlike the supposed omniscience of God. Yet perspective was an invention that arose at the time of a growth in scientific knowledge and exploration – the invention of ways of mapping the world through the grid-like measuring devices of latitude and longitude, Da Vinci’s studies of physiology, the growth of more complex structures in engineering and so on. Scientific knowledge was objective knowledge, which has been
conveniently labelled as a “male” perspective especially in relation to the male voyeur gazing at the vulnerable female nude.

The philosophical term of the camera obscura identifies a single eye, and it is not until later in theories of spectatorship, when identifying the body as integral to the process of vision, that binocular (rather than monocular) vision is acknowledged. It acknowledged that each eye sees an image slightly differently. In Techniques of the Observer, Jonathan Crary believes this started to happen with new inventions like the kaleidoscope in the early nineteenth century, when visuality was thought of in terms of fragmentation.

**Blow Up:**
Michelangelo Antonioni’s film *Blow Up* is an example of the delusion of the male spectator, thinking that he can pin down meaning by trying to control and conquer it. In this film, the photographer Thomas takes a photograph of a woman and a man conversing in a park. Something suspicious is occurring. The woman sees him in the distance capturing the event on camera and chases him to obtain the film. Later in the narrative, she visits his studio and uses her sexuality to distract him from the film, hence steal it. Through the woman’s desperation to have the ‘evidence’, generated by his sexual attraction to her, he tries to work out ‘what happened’ by studying the photograph. He re-frames and enlarges it several times, as if a naturalist looking through a microscope at the particles of his object. Ironically, when he enlarges it, the pixels and shapes increase, and the image is virtually abstracted. This is when he begins to notice the shape of a gun, and the shape of a body lying on the ground. At this point Thomas thinks he perceives the evidence, that he has found the answer to his inquiry, but really is deluded in thinking this overblown, abstracted representation is his own perception. Again, we come back to Baudry’s description of the spectators in Plato’s cave.

Critics have emphasised Antonioni’s claims that *Blow Up* is about the relationship of an individual with reality. Hence, reality translates in the photographic mode as an “appearance”, the signifier for murder being in the background – however ambiguously - inside the frame and outside. It is the “cold, calculated” eye of the male voyeur trying to control its contents by pinpointing its meaning, travelling toward a vanishing point which is the elusive resolution. As Antonioni has said, “I came to know reality by photographing it, when I began taking it with the movie camera, a little like in Blow-up” (cited in Brunette, 111). However, as Lino Micciché contends, “The profound truth that [the park] seems to offer ultimately reveals itself as absolutely unknowable, precarious, provisional” (Brunette, 116). In the setting and subsequent photograph of the park and the figures inside it, it seems Antonioni seems to be suggesting that “reality” is an appearance, a construction, one that is impenetrable beyond its surface.

Although Thomas strives for the meaning of that elusive figure in the background, the very nature of Antonioni’s film is that its meanings are multiple and ambiguous. Perhaps the fact that it has been the subject of study by a diverse collective of researchers through the years – from anthropologists to philosophers – indicates the texture of Antonioni’s film.

However, although Thomas’ actions represent this pursuit of objective truth and ultimate knowledge, it is a futile one. The more he travels toward the vanishing point in the picture plane, the more that point *vanishes* – the process of enlarging and re-framing the image blurs the outlines and shapes. They are taken out of context. In her essay “Cinema and the Postmodern Condition”, Anne Friedberg describes the modern subject in terms of the mid-
nineteenth century *flâneur* made famous by Baudelaire and later by Walter Benjamin. The *flâneur* was the male dandy who wandered the arcades in search of spectacle and observation, and Friedberg has extended this notion to the female *flâneuse* who became accepted as part of the bourgeois culture of leisure in the late nineteenth century. Thomas *is* the *flâneur* – he wanders the streets of London in the late 1960s in search of things to photograph, his observations and reverie captured by the mechanical net of his camera. In Friedberg’s reference to the *flâneur* is the analogy of a viewpoint that is not fixed in one, enclosed space, disembodied from the external world as in classical theories of spectatorship, but of an observer’s relation to what he/she sees as virtual, posited along a trajectory, always moving. The camera only captures frozen moments in time.

*Blow Up* alludes to the Hollywood genre of crime fiction: a murder is implied, and the photographer becomes the investigator. The process of slowly uncovering layers, collecting deductions and induction to surmise an answer, the journeyman slowly working towards his destination which is the resolution to the mystery, implies a singular result, one that will close off any variations of meaning. If I can link it back to Plato’s cave and traditional theories of spectatorship and the dominant gaze, then the answer to the mystery becomes the ‘essence’ of that representation which is in this case ‘Thomas’ photographic image. Yet Antonioni is an Italian filmmaker working within the space of European cinema. In *Blow Up* Thomas’ pursuit to find the ‘evidence’ in his image is shown to be futile, that the more he investigates the more the image becomes “illusion”. This is where Antonioni subverts the traditional Hollywood genre.

**The Well:**

Now that we have set up the motif of spectatorship in *Blow Up*, I want to contrast it with the visuality that is identified by Samantha Lang’s and cinematographer Mandy Walker’s *The Well*. I am cautious to conveniently position the role of the spectator within the narrative of *Blow Up* as traditionally masculine and then compare it with the specifically feminine visuality in *The Well* without defining the genre of the latter. Both the film of *The Well* and Elizabeth Jolley’s novel uses the gothic mode in that the texts present narratives of disorientation, isolation and exile, where it is constantly on the threshold between reality and dream. The gothic has been defined as a feminine genre in that we are constantly exposed in glimpses to the dark underscores of the domestic setting. In the novel, Jolley’s gothic is stylised by Hester’s dreams of underground streams, and the haunting lullaby of the Schubert *leider*, but the central chronotype around which suspicion, nightmare and repressed sexuality circles is the well itself. In this place, Hester and Katherine invent fairy tales of trolls, princes and maidens; this is where they dispose of broken crockery and other rejected domestic items. Ultimately, this is where a supposed body, actual object, fictional character or emotional embodiment, is hidden from view after Katherine runs over it with the ute and catches it on its roo-bar.

However *The Well* invites many readings and multiple subject positions depending on the frame one tries to pin around it, as Amanda Nettelbeck stresses:

> The mystery of the well is the premise of various narrative styles enlisted by Jolley in this unsettling and playful text. Not only a narrative of Gothic horror, it is also a novel of psychological exploration, a fairy-tale, a mystery thriller. It is a ‘dark and disturbing parable’, the flyleaf tells us: ‘a detective novel without a detective, a thriller without a conclusion.’”
The introduction of a writer character halfway through the novel who Hester meets at the general store signifies the ambivalent frames of the story. It has been suggested that Samantha Lang’s film, written by Laura Jones, rearranges and excludes certain elements of the narrative to effect a more “closed” meaning. In the film, we see Katherine as the thief, we see the silhouette of a body being heaved down a well, and the presence of the writer external to Katherine and Hester’s lives is excluded. The plot is rearranged so as to give the illusion of some answer to the mystery and this gives Katherine a more sinister role in the action.

However, the film’s visual aesthetic contradicts this appearance of formulated truths. Mandy Walker chose to insert a blue filter over the lens, enhancing the gothic style. The effect was to visualise a world in between modes of sleeping and waking, a world constantly escaping the control of meaning attempted by the viewer. Whereas Antonioni presents us with a character’s futile attempt to find the answer to the mystery by penetrating beyond the threshold of the image, the visuality proposed by The Well will not allow this. What surfaces from the watery quality of the lens are glimpses, clues, and visual tricks, designed to echo the ambiguity and playfulness in Jolley’s text. The filmmakers limit the sharp clarity of the lens with a blue filter, lending our vision a shortsightedness, where meanings are blurry, ambiguous, weakly defined. The eye can only scan the surface. In scenes leading to the film’s psychological climax, the divide between dream and reality is purposely muddied and we cannot penetrate any meaning beyond the threshold of the screen.

Walker and Lang have stated that their reference points were European painting and the photographs of Bill Henson. Henson is an Australian photographer famous for juxtaposing seemingly ethereal images of street people with exuberant and historical works of western art. Walker cites other influences on her cinematography: Robert Muller (Wenders’ Paris Texas) and photographers Cartier-Bresson, Dorothea Lang and Robert Cappa. The film is described as part of the “New Wave” of Australian filmmakers, and it marks a considerable break from the previous tradition in Australian filmmaking that filmed the landscape with sun-drenched light. If we think of its expressionistic use of cinematography and editing, it hearkens back to a European aesthetic, perhaps more in the tradition of German expressionism than Picnic at Hanging Rock and Sunday Too Far Away. This is largely due to the gothic mode and perhaps one could read it in terms of gender.

In The Well, the West Australian wheat-belt described in Jolley’s novel was filmed in a similar landscape near Cooma in northern NSW. Walker and Lang chose to heighten the film’s sense of an interior landscape and emotion, as Lang claims:

I wanted – even more than situating it in an Australian landscape – to situate it in its own kind of world, a world that was much more like a fable. It is not really a myth, because it doesn’t quite have mythic proportions, but a world represented in a way through Katherine and Hester’s eyes.

The landscape is supposed to reflect, to provide, a metaphor for Hester’s inner world. It is quite isolating and arid, rugged, with those strange boulders, and should really underscore Hester’s character, rather than be in a real place in northern New South Wales.
**Mysteries and Entanglements**

There is a contrast here between the controlling aspect of the male gaze in *Blow Up* and the open-ended visuality in *The Well* which seems constantly on the threshold of the female subconscious. Both Antonioni and Lang have created films that question and unsettle notions of reality and the singular viewpoint. Both films have a mystery at their centre; both entangle the investigator (whether viewer or protagonist) in positions of disorientation, where solutions are fragmentary and never closed. Perhaps the aperture through which the camera focuses is too large for sharply defined and closed interpretations.
Works Cited – Antonioni Paper

Films:

*Blow Up*, fiction film, 1966, Director Michelangelo Antonioni, Producer Carlo Ponti, DOP Carlo di Palma, Screenwriters Michelangelo Antonioni & Tonino Guerra, English dialogue in collaboration with Edward Bond, Major Actors David Hemmings & Vanessa Redgrave

*Visions of Light: The Art of Cinematography*, documentary, 1992, Directors Arnold Glassman, Todd McCarthy & Stuart Samuels, Producers Stuart Samuels & Arnold Glassman, USA, American Film Institute

*The Well*, fiction film, 1998 (?), Director Samantha Lang, Producer Sandra Levy (?), DOP Mandy Walker, Screenwriter Laura Jones, Major Actors Pamela Rabe and Miranda Otto