Against the Beat.
Music, Dance and the Image in
Michelangelo Antonioni's *Blow-Up*

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> Editing is similar to dancing – the finished film
> is a kind of crystallized dance.[1]

Antonioni's *Blow-Up* (1966) is neither a music nor a dance film. Dance, theater
and music do, however, play a prominent role in the richly faceted panorama of
mid-sixties Swinging London, which the film unfurls.[2] This is especially the case
if we define dance in a less restrictive and more broad and open way, the way re-
cent dance theory does[3] – not least as a reaction to the radical artistic advances of
choreographers such as Pina Bausch, Susanne Linke and Johann Kresnik since
the mid-seventies. Dance *is* – or, depending on the point of view, *can be* – simp-

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1   Cf. Walter Murch: *Ein Lidschlag, ein Schnitt. Die Kunst der Filmmontage* (2004).
    I am indebted to Ulrike Schilfert, Berlin for suggesting the motto.

2   From the vast amount of literature, I only wish to list those general titles that were the
    most helpful for this essay: Sandra Wake: *Blow-Up. A Film by Michelangelo
    Antonioni* (1971), Roy Huss: *Focus on Blow-Up* (1971), Roland Barthes, Jean-Luc
    Godard, Wolfgang Jacobsen a.o. *Michelangelo Antonioni* (= Reihe Film Nr. 31)
    (1984), Ted Perry and Rene Prieto: *Michelangelo Antonioni. A Guide to References
    and Resources* (1986), Bernhard Kock: *Michelangelo Antonionis Bilderwelt. Eine
    phänomenologische Studie* (1994), Peter Brunette: *The Films of Michelangelo Anto-
    nioni* (1998), Uwe Müller: *Der intime Realismus des Michelangelo Antonioni* (2004).

3   See also the motto of the Dance Congress 2009 (Kampnagel Hamburg): "No Step
    Without Movement".

ly anything, which, in an everyday or artistic act of reflection from the perspective of theatrical representation, focuses on a moving or immobile body.

In his movie – which takes place in the milieu of a fashion, i.e. 'body' photographer, Antonioni not only reflects the differences and rivalry between the central media of photography and film, but also simultaneously gives center stage (marginally) to the visual arts and (centrally) to the performing arts, thus adding multiple dimensions to the general discussion of the subject of image and movements – moving images and movements of the body on film, especially in terms of a conditioning of the gaze and perception.

<p style="text-align:center">I.</p>

To begin with I will quickly summarize the plot to then present in detail a number of select episodes in which theatrical dance play a central role.[4] *Blow-Up* is about a young, very successful fashion photographer, who has tired of the world of glamour and thus occupies himself with a documentary reportage in his spare time – a project meant to culminate in a socio-critical photo book about the British metropolis (illustration 1). The planned book is largely finished; Thomas, the hero's name according to the script, has taken his second-to-last pictures last night in a doss house. The last photos – a scene of lovers in a park – are shot the next morning on precisely the same Saturday in June, of which the film now tells the tale (illustration 2).

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4   There are 11 dance/theater/performance-related scenes altogether (central scenes are written in italics): 1. *Introductory credits* – dancer, audience and photographer [music]; 2. *Opening* – drive-in/appearance of the pantomimes [sound, atmosphere]; 3. *Photo shooting* – I and II with Verushka [music]; 4. Dance of the models (warming up) [music in the background]; 5. *Models on stage* – photo shooting I and II [music]; 6. Thomas' jump in the park/jump [without music/ sound]; 7. The lovers swaying in the park [with a parallel pan of the camera in a swinging motion]; 8. *Against the beat* (the girl/Jane); 9. *Struggle and strip scene* (the blonde/the brunette plus photographer as an audience member, later participant) [screenplay: "I'll put you in a ring together…"]; 10. *Yardbirds concert* – frozen/liberated public [music]; 11. *Pantomimes' tennis game* (appearance and disappearance of the hero) [without music/sound]; see also: decelerated, 'paralyzed' movement of stoned people (party guests) [slow motion]; dead man in the park; classical dance figure made of porcelain in the antique shop.

Illustration 1: A scene from the homeless shelter[5]

Illustration 2: Scene in the park

While the pictures from the shelter depict social misery via images of 'deformed' male bodies, the photos of the park emphasize the idyll of mankind and nature. But the idyll is a delusion. As our hero will discover upon examining his photos more closely, death lurks in its wake (*Et in Arcadia ego*). Thomas sees himself compelled to study more intensely what on the surface seems to be no more than innocent photos, after the young woman/Jane, who he had photographed unasked with her lover apparently *in flagranti delicto*, confronts him and insists with all her might that he hand over the photos. However, Thomas does not yield and insists on his right to documentation. Back at the studio, he

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5 All film stills are taken from the *Blow-Up* DVD published in the *Cinemathek* edition of the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Munich 2005.

immediately tries to unravel the secret by quickly developing and analyzing the pictures. By blowing the pictures up and comparing the individual photos in a complicated procedure, he believes to have come across a murder case. In the thick of the bushes, he first recognizes the murderer's shape, then his weapon, and then, in the last picture of the series, a dead man lying on the ground. However, the crime case immediately vanishes again into thin air, as first the photos, then the young woman and, in the end, even the corpse disappears. Just one single photo, a highly magnified detail of the corpse under the bush, remains with Thomas. But the coarse-grained image doesn't suffice to document a murder; only someone versed in 'reading clouds' could identify the profile of a lying form. In the end, the photographer is left behind perplex with a photo in his hands that proves nothing of what he had witnessed by recording it on camera during the day and thought to have seen deep into the night.

Opening credits or 'All the world's a stage'

The stage and its concept of presentation are elementary motifs in the film, which it exploits in its ambitious forays into a theory of the image and of art. In the opening credits (illustration 3) the viewer peers through a lattice of letters onto a scene in which a young woman in a bikini is dancing on the roof of a shed observed by a diffuse group of onlookers and photographed by a wildly gesticulating man in the foreground. Bit by bit, the camera zooms in on the dancer, so that her face is finally revealed in close-up in the empty spaces between the individual letters and occasionally her eyes looks out of this kaleidoscopically fragmented window or mirror towards the audience.[6] The images and words fit together in so far as that the movement behind the text, with its presentation and study of the female body, announces one of the main topics of the film. In addition, the dolly shot of the camera in the dance scene and the parallel zooming out of the BLOW-UP text block causes the title itself to be cinematically explicated. *Blow-up*, so the message of this composition of words and image in the introductory credits, means magnifying and viewing something up close. However, the

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6 The interaction shown here between text and images is reminiscent of figure alphabets from the Late Middle Ages in which the surfaces of the letters are adorned with figures and even small scenes, as if to suffuse the mute letters with life (cf. Debes 1968). But it is different from the many cases in which medieval calligraphy and miniature painting consciously forewent bringing the written word and the image embedded in its shape into direct association; a biblical text could thus easily be accompanied by profane drolleries.

viewer, who would like to read *and* peer through the letters at the same time to see what precisely is being shown, is quickly overwhelmed. Either he concentrates on the words and reads, or he directs his attention towards the action and thus ignores the list of names. The direct superposition of stationary writing and moving images as well as the film-in-film modus provide the viewer with a initial borderline media experience, making it clear from the onset that it can sometimes be difficult to decipher interfering optical information.[7] The seemingly exhibitionistic dance scene, witnessed as if through a keyhole, simultaneously exposes a first theatrical situation complete with audience and photojournalist.

Illustration 3: 'Dance scene' in the opening credits

II.

The film's actual beginning also creates a theatrical situation. The opening is dedicated to a performance of mimes. The first take is of a loud and wildly gesticulating group of young people who, like clowns, are wearing colorful clothes and white make-up and carry donation boxes in their hands. They arrive in a convertible four-by-four on an empty square between high-rises[8], turn a few

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7 Script as a signifier and image will continue to play a role in the numerous advertising signs throughout the course of the film.

8 According to the *World Guide to Movie Locations*, it is the Economist Plaza, West End, "a hidden courtyard immediately north of Ryder Street, off Piccadilly in London's West End", www.movie-locations.com/movies/b/blowup.html (January 30, 2011).

rounds and finally leave their vehicle. In great haste, they dash down a flight of stairs in the direction of the street, where they begin their wild task of collecting donations (illustration 4). This playful scene with 'traveling folk', who operate in public spaces and turn pedestrians into accomplices was not something Antonioni had to invent on his own; instead, he could take inspiration from the *rag week*: a kind of carnival for charity that takes place in London every spring.[9] The protagonists of this event draw attention to themselves by making noise, playing small tricks and simultaneously demanding a donation from the public. All this is already inherently contained in the word *rag*, which means prank, bedlam and shenanigan, but it also means stuff, garbage and trumpery. Thus the name of this bizarre spectacle, which aims at alleviating poverty, is also closely associated with social awareness, as beggars often appear in rags.[10]

Illustration 4: Rag week scene

Antonioni continues this train of thought in the next scene by shifting in an abrupt transition to a scene of homeless people leaving a shelter. Once again, we have a group stepping out onto the street, but in this case in perfect silence and with non-descript clothing and behavior. The contrast is then again emphasized by jumping back from London's Southbank district to the West End and dramaturgically finally cementing the impression by portraying the hero, who has just stepped out of the group of homeless people, as a 'go-between' for both milieus. After having climbed into his Rolls Royce cabriolet close to the shelter, where he spent the night for his reportage, he heads downtown and passes the group of

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9   As well as in other English university towns.

10   See also the beggar behind Thomas' car after dealing with the pantomimes.

mimes, who ask him for a donation. At first, the director lets both scenes run parallel, only to then intertwine them thematically with the same characters. The protagonist returns to his daily life as a successful fashion photographer; he is still wearing his beggar's clothes, but he's already back in his luxury car, which socially places him worlds apart from his previous night's companions. Back in the studio, he gives his beggar's garb to an assistant so that it can be thrown away.

<div align="center">III.</div>

Here super model Verushka, cowering in a corner, has been waiting impatiently for quite some time. In the wink of an eye, the shooting begins and proceeds in two phases: first, with music running, Verushka poses in front of a paper backdrop, facing a fixed camera on a tripod (illustration 5); then Thomas switches cameras (and the music) and a kind of *pas de deux* unfolds between photographer and model. He literally 'gets on top' of her (illustration 6) capturing head and details, instead of her entire body, as he had done previously. Now that the previous distance between them has been overcome, the act of photography becomes something more equivalent to a sexual act, maybe even that of an animal trainer, and in the end it leaves both partners exhausted.

Illustration 5: Photographer and model (Verushka)

Illustration 6: Photographer and model (Verushka)

The film camera confidently follows the events and visibly establishes itself as narrator, as, for example, when it is placed directly behind the photo camera in the Verushka sequence and then moves upward as Thomas enters the frame.

"In this take, the film camera traverses the entire space one full time on a vertical plane; the background hardly changes. Thus the main action in this scene relates to the relationship between the recording apparatuses, and only then to the theatrical act itself." (Schulz 2008: n.p.)

We, as observers, never get to see the pictures that the photographer is taking. One lens dominates the other; precedence is given to the moving image produced by an anonymous and autonomous observer, who presents the scene as an act of dressage.

This ambitious, as well as eccentric version of a photo shoot is answered two scenes later by the routine of a magazine photographer. We see him arranging a group of models into tableaux vivants in order to photograph them – in other words, choreograph them (illustration 7). As a strict dance master, Thomas summons the young women, who have previously been loosening up their bodies to music, and lets them take their places in the prepared set. As Thomas is tired and irritated, and moreover bored by the job, the project has to be interrupted and the models called in again at a later point in time.

Illustration 7: Photographer and models ('birdies')

IV.

To recover from the night's exertions, but also from his work in the studio, Thomas goes out into the park, to go search for an appropriate, i.e., conciliatory and idyllic final image for his book (illustration 2). The park is portrayed as an alternative to the studio on the one hand, and to the city, on the other – a reference to the classical model of *rus in urbe*. Here calm and vast, open spaces abound in place of labyrinthine narrowness and hectic; here the reign of green-in-green nature versus garish color, and instead of angular concrete, meadows and softly rolling hills. It's a humble paradise with a uniformed park attendant and her garbage-collecting spear standing guard at the entrance.[11] As though transformed, Thomas now moves forward in high spirits into the slightly hilly terrain and even jumps into the air like a jaunty child. This physical act clearly breaks with the dominant 'choreographic' mode of the studio.[12] It feels like an act of liberation from the normative and stylized atelier situation. This exuberance is likewise an obeisance to the medium film, which knows how to present the little scene with the young man in the green vest with pleasure – with such happiness,

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11 Antonioni apparently had the white houses in the background especially built, see *World Guide to Movie Locations* (see footnote 8); he also had the asphalt spray-painted grey and the lawn colored green.

12 Incidentally there are numerous photographs showing people jumping on the walls of Thomas' studio.

in fact, that the montage immediately following the scene seems in its technique to imitate the heel-knocking jump. From jump to cut (illustration 8).

Illustration 8: The jump in the park

Similarly, in the next scene, the film camera gently flirts with the swaying lovers that Thomas is observing and taking photos of. With a slight camera pan from left to right and back again, Carlo di Palma's camera once again comments on the scene by accompanying the couple and playing the role of an autonomous teammate, a real co-dancer (see illustration 2).

Later, in the atelier, Thomas has to deal with the woman from the park/Jane, who, no matter what the price, demands that he hand over the photos he took of her and her lover. First he treats her like a model – *deformation professionelle* – and casually rehearses positions and poses with her, later offering her a seat and asking her join him for a drink and a joint. Suddenly aware of the jazz music (Herbie Hancock) coming from the record player, he tells her to stop hectically moving to the rhythm, but to calmly work against it: finally, the young woman willingly obeys his insistent "Slowly, slowly. Against the beat" (illustration 9). Once again the photographer is a kind of choreographer, now also coordinating everyday movements to background music.

Illustration 9: Studio scene 'against the beat'

V.

At first glance, one of the most turbulent scenes in the film – things are all topsy-turvy, so to speak – seems to have nothing to do with dance and theater; neither does music play a role. But it still has an important function in terms of contrasting comparison. Incidentally, it takes place on precisely the same studio floor, on which the models and the super model also had their appearances. And this gives the scene its *tertium comparationis*, providing a contrasting image to the two model sequences mentioned above.

Two young women (Jane Birkin and Gillian Hills) appear unexpectedly at Thomas' studio and want him to photograph them. At first, he sends them away again; later, he lets them enter, but only to make fun of them. The two young women, who both dream of careers as models, use an unobserved moment to take a look at the clothes hanging within easy reach on a stand. Upon Thomas' return, one of the most turbulent (and provocative) film scenes in the movie begins. It features a wild tussle; first, between the two girls and then with the photographer. It is a sequence in which both fashion and photography are forgotten as professions and only naked skin and the erotic struggle between the sexes reign; it ends in a kind of 'battle for the (panty)hose' and thus, in a playful way, references the classic *topos* of the female catfight (illustration 10). Antonioni lets his hero frolic, in the words of the moral authorities and censors of that time, 'excessively and lasciviously' with the two teenagers around the photographer's set, which is usually the backdrop for fashion photos (cf. DVDBeaver.com). It is the only important scene of the film in which the photo camera, which the hero is rarely ever seen without, plays absolutely no role whatsoever. Instead, all is

ruled by the film camera, whose medial demands are met to the maximum with plenty of movement and powerful and fashionable colorfulness. It triumphs in the studio, as photography, its related décor and even the clothes are pushed aside. In an about-face, quite libertine for the times, Antonioni intertwines the most important subjects of the film – photography, fashion, silence – by boiling them down to nothing and, in their place, demonstratively and with relish replacing them with alternatives – the moving image, nudity and screaming. Instead of the photographer, it is now the film director shooting portraits of the two wannabe models, who have intruded into the studio like a Shakespearian *buffo* pair to suspend the existing order of things and ignore customary norms and boundaries – those of photography, as well as those of fashion and the 'measured step'. On the one hand, this scene teaches the audience a lesson on promiscuity and voyeurism; on the other, a lesson about the explosive potential of physical-playful actions based on temperament and an excess of strength, which is wantonly wasted. Here play acts as an alternative to pretended and posed action and takes their place.

Illustration 10: The photographer and the two teenage models

VI.

In search of the young woman from the park, who stole the pictures from his studio and who is the only person that can shed some light on the mysterious events, Thomas strays, among other things, into a beat club (Ricky Tick Club), where the Yardbirds are playing. With the exception of a single dancing couple, the audience is standing mysteriously still, almost turned to stone, in front of a stage on which the musicians are playing their song *Stroll On*. An amplifier be-

gins buzzing and one of the two guitarists (Jeff Beck) unsuccessfully tries to fix the problem by repeatedly smashing his instrument against the speaker. Frustrated, he throws his guitar on the floor, destroying it with his hands and feet, then throwing the splintered neck of the guitar into the audience (illustration 11). As if waiting for a sign, the people in the audience suddenly awaken from their stupor and try to take possession of the fragment.[13] Thomas joins the battle just for fun and wins. He quickly leaves the room carrying the trophy. Having arrived out on the street, he casts one last glance at the object he has just won and then simply throws it away. A passerby finds it – this former object of collective desire – and lifts it up, only to likewise immediately let it fall again; for him, it is also just a useless and meaningless thing, a piece of trash.

Illustration 11: In the Ricky Tick Club: the guitar neck flies into the audience

Paradigmatically, this scene demonstrates the 'genesis' and role of a classic fetish. By first presenting the audience as paralyzed and soon afterwards as if electrified, i.e. by shifting from immobility to movement, or even frenzy, Antonioni demonstrates the mechanics of such a magically charged object, which has attained cult status. Only now does that musical energy truly appear to be released, which moments before, for whatever reason, was encapsulated.

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13 Cf. as a prototype for the scene in which the guitar gets destroyed, the spectacular performances and actions of Pete Townshend, member of the rock band The Who, who has destroyed innumerous guitars on stage and has cited, as his intellectual background, Gustav Metzger's auto-destructive art that he encountered at Ealing Art College where Metzger taught. Cf. in general Justin Hoffmann's *Destruktionskunst. Der Mythos der Zerstörung in der Kunst der frühen sechziger Jahre* (1995).

The film audience is at first alienated by the initial, totally atypical immobility of the concertgoers. Why don't they submit to the rhythm of the music and dance? And why are they only then released from their stasis, when offered such a simultaneously concrete and symbolic prize from the stage? Antonioni uses the scene to compare the two spaces of spectatorship: the rock and roll palace on the one hand, and the movie theater, on the other. The immobile music audience represents the spectator in the movie theater, who similarly paralyzed sit in their seats and stare spellbound, as if in a trance, at the hustle and bustle on the screen.

The guitar neck serves as a fetish in the context of the fan club and, beyond that, as a kind of media-theoretical sensor, which seeks to awaken awareness of the audience for itself. In the live concert moment, both public spheres merge – the one *in* as well as the one *in front of* the film; the acoustic irritation that provokes the destruction (and awakens the destructive powers) makes itself known to both public spheres in a similar way. Therefore, the instrument-fetish is also a tool to wake up the film audience. At any rate, what communicates itself to the film audience, when the fetish-meteorite lands among the concertgoers, is not just a disturbing noise, but also a little moment of shock. As music as well as silence play a decisive dramaturgic role in *Blow-Up* on a diegetic, as well as extradiegetic level, this is one comparison among many that easily and by way of association not only explicates and comments on the relationship between paralysis/stasis and life/kinesis in reference to dance, but also in reference to the medium of film and the institution of movie theaters. It is a strategy that the director pursues systematically.

In addition, Antonioni uses this etude to draw his audience's attention indirectly to the fundamental opposition of immobility and movement as it is dealt with continually in the comparison of the two different media photography and film. The stationary (black and white) photographic images that the film camera previously paid tribute to via the protagonist's investigative detective work interrupt the familiar continual flow of images by asserting their contrary nature and, like a *freeze frame*, upsetting the film's customary form. This is one of the moments in which the film reflects back on itself – and the audience, awakened from its dream, is called upon to join in this reflection.

VII.

The pantomimes appear both in the first and last scene of the film, as counterparts to the image-obsessed, iconodule hero (illustration 12). While the group is shown in the beginning as participants of the student *rag week*, in the end of the

film, they perform a tennis pantomime (*pas de deux*) on a court in the park, watched attentively not only by the other members of the group, but also by Thomas. Pantomime is a genre that uses gestures to imitate reality. In order to be successful, the performance is forced to appeal to our imagination for its elliptical, deficient images to be completed via association. That this appeal even touches a skeptic like Thomas is somewhat of a theatrical turn and demonstrates a triumph of art and its ability to liberate reality from immediacy and transcend it poetically in an instant of insight. The spectator is needed as collaborator; as is concretely the case for the nameless Thomas. As the imaginary ball suddenly leaves the stage – the playing court – and rolls to the feet of the film's protagonist, he is invited to actively join in (illustration 13). By picking up the ball, he is accepting and legitimizing the rules of a game that in its performances has to make do without tangible objects and tools and be satisfied with silent hints. This departure from concrete material reality and the emphasis on gestural language is a systematic counterpart to the marked object fetishism of photography, which composes everything that openly appears before its camera lens into an image.

Illustration 12: Pantomimes appear in the park

Illustration 13: The photographer and the imaginary tennis ball

In the end, the pantomimes prevail; even the camera follows their make-believe flight paths, simulates them, and – as a last consequence – finally magically lets the hero disappear (illustration 14). Visibility is simultaneously a symptom and a syndrome of an image-obsessed, iconodule world, which has completely lost sight of reality under the flood of images.

Illustration 14: The photographer disappears from the screen

Blow-Up is a film that explicates creative and skeptical thoughts on the subject of the image, the body and media. Its director uses the intermedial, self-referential and historic interdependencies of the visual and performing arts for a fundamental reflection on stationary and moving pictures, the inter-mediality of genres and the theatricality of physical movement.

It is tempting to use the accommodating term of *Gesamtkunstwerk* (total work of art) to categorize Antonioni's film due to how it apostrophizes the many named art forms – but it is far from being a synthesis in terms of a harmonious summary. On the contrary: the differences between the art forms and media are not meant to be smoothed over or overruled, but rather exposed, thus letting the film negotiate contrast and confrontation, as well as the possibility of comparison and the reflection of aesthetic and artistic, and not least of all political boundaries and differences.

In the field of dance studies, Gabriele Brandstetter has pointed out that on a more general level the "perspective on the body, the image and temporal structures in postmodern dance and choreography […] can only be considered in relation to a gaze modeled by photo and film technology" (Brandstetter 2005: 68). Antonioni's film also suggests an inverse point of view. Film and photography can indeed be contemplated in relation to a gaze and events shaped by dance theater by correlating and comparing (and thus not least of all revealing the deficiancies) of motion and immobility, as options of the 'new' technical media, with those of the classical performing arts and their patterns of perception.[14]

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14 This text is closely related to a current research project in preparation by the author and devoted to the media-reflexive aspects of Antonioni's *Blow-Up*; please also see the following essays by the author: *Mode im Bild, Modus des Bildes* (2010), as well as *Der Fetisch und sein (Kunst)Charakter in Michelangelo Anto-nionis 'Blow-Up'* (2010). I would like to thank the participants of the seminar *Blow-Up or Art History and Film* at the Institut für Kunst- und Bildgeschichte of the Humboldt University, Berlin in the summer semester of 2008 for their nu-merous suggestions, in particular Ulrike Schilfert, Florian Unger and Tobias Weißmann.

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FILM

Blow-Up (1966) (UK/IT/USA, D: Michelangelo Antonioni)

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