Cortazar's "Blow-Up"

Among the large number of Latin American writers who have lately gained increasing recognition in the English-Speaking world, perhaps none is more unusual or illusive than the Argentine expatriate Julio Cortazar, who has been living in Paris since 1951 and little by little winning a reputation as the author of uniquely inventive short stories and, more recently, experimental novels (Rayuela, Published in English as Hopscotch).

The example of Cortazar's works which has become best known in the English-speaking world is his short story, "Las babas del diablo", used by Michelangelo Antonioni as the basis of his controversial 1966 film "Blow-Up" and translated into English under this title by Paul Blackburn (End of the Game and Other stories, New York, 1963). In this particular story the fundamental theme is the tension between the intellectual's need to know to analyze the world around him, and essentially deceptive quality of the senses which make this impulse impossible to fulfill.

In order to see this general theme as used in the story, it would be best to begin with a brief Plot-Summary. The Protagonist is Roberto Michel, a Franco-Chilean living in Paris who earns his living as a translator and is an amateur Photographer as well. One afternoon Michel leaves his apartment on a photography expedition and spens some time leisurely strolling and observing the city and the weather, typically late-autumn in its mutability, fluctuating constantly between clouds and Sun. All the while he is continually making informal shots of scenes that catch his attention, observing the constantly-changing clouds, birds and wind until he ends up in a secluded spot on the isolated island in the Seine, where he observes what appear to be the seduction of an adolescent boy by an older woman. He takes a Picture, the boy flees and the woman, annoyed tries to take the film from Michel. An older man, who had been Parked in a car on the edge of the scene, approaches and interrupts. Michel returns to his apartment and, fascinated by the scene, begins the familiar process of making blow-ups and reliving the scene in detail, realizing in the process that what he had witnessed was the opposite of what he had supposed: the beginning of a homosexual seduction rather than a heterosexual one. He immediately begins the attempt to re-construct the scene and remake it according to his own view, or as Samuels says "the Photographer now imaginatively relives the experience, trying to release the boy from the imagined horror just as he had released him from the actual scene."

From this summary, it can be seen that the only real action of the story is the actual taking of the picture and the subsequent blow-ups made by Photographer. The real substance of the story emerges from the mind of the photographer-narrator as we enter his field of perception and share his concerns; and from the imagery incorporated into the story: the camera and photo and the constant references to clouds and birds.

The story begins with a paragraph meditating on the difficulty of communication and the inadequacy of language to express human perceptions:

"It'll never be known how this ..... what the hell"

Thus we feel the need for some mode of expression more dependable the language. The image of "clouds that race" also enters the picture, an image that is expanded into a central symbol of the story as a recurring image of illusive and deceptive visual reality. The Paris setting is used in numerous Cortazar stories, generally as a metaphor for rationalist western civilization, being the capital of a nation which prides itself on logic and reason.

At only one rate the setting in this city accentuates the narrator's need to impose reason and order on existence. the narrator, being an outsider professionally skilled at language can be taken as an alter-ego for the author.

In one of his best known short stories, "Las babas del diablo," ["Blow-Up"] which first appeared in Las armas secretas [Secret-weapons] (1959), the story takes the form of an 'agony'. The writer/photographer, Cortazar/Michel writes/records what seems to be 'reality' though the recording is fledged in questions...

Another image of fluctuating reality is the unreliable weather, with its constantly changing panorama alternating between clouds and sun, and sudden wind. The weather thus heightens the ambiance of mutability, the feeling of being surrounded by an ephemeral, the

and illusive reality which human perception can only partially comprehend.

It is in this ambiance that the episode of the Photo take place, on an island separate from the rest of the city. The island serves the same purpose as the London Park in the film: to set the Photographer and his subject apart almost on a separate dimension of reality. Thus the encounter becomes even less real and takes on a removed and symbolic quality. Throughout the episode the emphasis is on the deceptiveness of the human senses.

At the conclusion of the story, when Michel begins the process of developing the film and reliving the experience, a process familiar to viewers of the film in a slightly different context, Photography begins to take on its most abstract and philosophical quality as a moment of frozen time which lends itself to human examination and manipulation, both physical and intellectual, but which is beyond human power to change. Michel contemplates the scene, detail by detail until he finally realizes the truth of what he had seen. He feels immense frustration at not being able to influence the figures in the photo.

The story reaches its climax when Michel tries to bring the scene to life in his own mind and once again frees the boy, in effect purging himself of his involvement and freeing himself, if not the boy, from any further implication: "For the second time he'd escaped them for the second time I was helping him to escape, returning him to his precarious paradise.... the game was played out."

Michel, purged of his emotion and involvements breaks into tears; a most compassionate and human if futile, resolution. The story closes with an intricate final paragraph which links the blow-up on the wall with the sky as seen from his studio window:

"Now there's a big white cloud.... and a sparrow or two".

The sky seen through the window, with its ceaseless panorama of clouds and birds, acts as a metaphor for the world viewed through a camera lens and closes the story with the imagery employed throughout: images of clouds and birds are

interspersed through the story as images of transitoriness and the impermanence of our visual perceptions and physical world. The window, like the camera lens, is a metaphor for reality as we perceive it: limited and distant. The photographer, or by extension the artist or intellectual observes reality at a distance and must decide for himself his degree of involvement and action. One may say that this preoccupation with involvement, both intellectual and emotional, is the basis of the story. This general theme is also linked to the idea of "figures" which is a basic theme in Cortazar. That is, the idea that an individual's life is connected in ways which we can't understand and which are outside our understanding of space time, to other lives in groups or what he calls "constellations" of beings.