

**THE POWER OF IMAGES: OSCAR WILDE AND MICHELANGELO ANTONIONI
REVISITED**

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REVISITADOS**

**EL PODER DE LAS IMÁGENES: OSCAR WILDE Y MICHELANGELO
ANTONIONI REVISITADOS**

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ABSTRACT

What senses can we make of works by Oscar Wilde and Michelangelo Antonioni in contemporary times, when the fast-paced rhythm of cyberspace and hypermodern society demands even greater awareness and consciousness of our existence than, perhaps, at the times of the first publications of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in 1890 and 1891, as much as the premiere of the film *Blow-Up* in 1966 and its release in 1967? We intend to show how both narratives read uncommittedly to literary criticism in the context of health humanization proposed by the Laboratory of Humanities (hereafter referred to as Labhum) at the Federal University of São Paulo opened transcultural possibilities for the better understanding of hypermodernity.

Keywords: Hipermodernity. Transculturality. Portraits. Subjectivity. Humanization.

RESUMO

Que sentidos podemos atribuir às obras de Oscar Wilde e Michelangelo Antonioni na contemporaneidade, quando o ritmo acelerado do ciberespaço e da sociedade hipermoderna exige uma consciência e atenção ainda maiores sobre nossa existência do que, talvez, na época das primeiras publicações de *The Picture of Dorian Gray* em 1890 e 1891, assim como da estreia do filme *Blow-Up* em 1966 e de seu lançamento em 1967? Pretendemos mostrar como ambas as narrativas, lidas sem compromisso com a crítica literária no contexto da humanização em saúde proposta pelo Laboratório de Humanidades (doravante denominado Labhum) da Universidade Federal de São Paulo, abriam possibilidades transculturais para uma melhor compreensão da hipermodernidade.

Palavras-chave: Hipermodernidade. Transculturalidade. Retratos. Subjetividade. Humanização.

RESUMEN

¿Qué sentidos podemos atribuir a las obras de Oscar Wilde y Michelangelo Antonioni en los tiempos contemporáneos, cuando el ritmo acelerado del ciberespacio y de la sociedad hipermoderna exige una conciencia y atención aún mayores sobre nuestra existencia que, quizá, en los momentos de las primeras publicaciones de *The Picture of Dorian Gray* en 1890

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y 1891, así como del estreno de la película *Blow-Up* en 1966 y su lanzamiento en 1967? Pretendemos mostrar cómo ambas narrativas, leídas sin compromiso con la crítica literaria en el contexto de la humanización en salud propuesta por el Laboratorio de Humanidades (en adelante Labhum) de la Universidad Federal de São Paulo, abrieron posibilidades transculturales para una mejor comprensión de la hipermodernidad.

Palabras clave: Hipermodernidad. Transculturalidad. Retratos. Subjetividad. Humanización.



1 INTRODUCTION

In its work of promoting reflection on humanization in healthcare, the Laboratory of Humanities, developed by the Center for History and Philosophy of Health Sciences at the Federal University of São Paulo (Bittar, Souza, Gallian, 2013; et Gallian, Lima, De Benedetto, Guzman, 2014) recently selected the novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in dialogue with the film *Blow-Up* as the core of its discussions within a group composed of undergraduate and graduate students in the fields of health sciences.

Readings beyond literary criticisms allowed participants to articulate the relationship between their own lived experiences as human beings working in the health sector and the portraits that gradually emerged through the reading of *The Picture...* and in dialogue with *Blow-up*. The immediate identification of the most striking features of the main characters—namely, Dorian Gray himself, Basil Hallward, and Lord Henry Wotton in the novel and Thomas, the photographer interpreted by David Hemmings in the film *Blow-up*—led the participants to relate these human types and their roles on the stage of human dynamics, regardless of any historical period or, rather, beyond any of them, thus allowing a cultural transposition of the aesthetic experience from the late 19th century, when the novel was published in two versions (1890 and 1891) along with the 1960's and early 1970's European experiences to today 2025 in the Brazilian Portuguese context of each one of the Labhum individual's experiences.

Another relevant aspect was the interartistic dialogue, that is, the convergence between the reading of Wilde's novel and Antonioni's film. In both, the notion of the portrait as a

metonym of human individuality, subjectivity and experience prevailed: it is in the portrait that the marks of life lie—the very marks that would have aged Dorian, had it not been for the pact made with the devil; it is in the portrait that the lines of expression are etched, framing either life itself or what one chooses to show of it, as in the case of the models that are the photographer's object in the film, the driving force behind the film narrative adapted from Julio Cortázar's short-story "Las Babas del Diablo" (1959); it is in portraits that we deposit our best moments and memories, as much as the usages of images in social media nowadays. The portraits of the models, immortalized or discovered by the photographer—as in the case of the photograph pointing to a crime—are memory maps or, at least, routes back to identification(s) (Hall, 1998) just as in the painted portrait by Basil, a vain attempt to eternalize the very subject of the painting, Dorian Gray and his awesome beauty. In all of

these cases, the search for essence amid that which is transient and what may be enduring involves a more or less humanized gaze— that of both the reader and the viewer, of the healthcare practitioner responsible for treatment and, at the same time, a full individual with subjective and circular experiences.

The transposition of times and spaces/geographies make evident the classic hue of both narratives (the novel and the film) at stake, once transculturality goes beyond the frontiers of time and space, working as an ideal approach for comparativisms and artistic and/or critical readings. Moreover, it helps us understand contemporaneity once characters, their features, attitudes, and behaviors are paralleled, such as found in all comments elaborated along the Labhum meetings as well as their outcome, as we shall partially see here later.

In order for us to better comprehend such transcultural approach in practice, let us first contextualize the hipermodern *zeitgeist* which has been the basis of departure for most participants to engage in our activities at the Labhum.

The term “hypermodernity” was coined by the contemporary philosopher Gilles Lipovetsky (2005) in order to explain our human condition that followed post-modernity in its praise of progress and reason, which justifies the fast-paced rhythm in all (or nearly all) human activities: people’s time, our usage of technology, consumerism, and individualism as stated by Zygmunt Bauman (2000). Most probably, the latter finds direct connection with that which is central in both narratives here dealt with: the individual as central figure in the (mis)understanding of humanism. Dorian Gray, as metonym of aestheticism, materializes hedonism, as much as the photographer Thomas in his egocentric activities as such. Aestheticism is best comprehended as artificialism, once it inverts many matters of common sense, some of which, even moral ones. Indeed, aestheticism, for instance, defines art as superior to nature and it believes that the latter copies the former. The same applies to the senses as being higher than the intellect or that which is shallow, better than whatever else is profound; feeling, superior to reason. Therefore, masks are seen as more authentic than one’s own individuality, one of the reasons why portraits are so relevant during Decadentism and throughout the XIX century (Mutran, 2002).

Once social and subjective lives in hypermodernity are marked by the overwhelmingly digital rhythm of ephemeral experiences and intensified movements of change that lead to the lack of deep, personal bonds, creating (and, with pardon to the irony, endlessly recreating) the illusion of perfection in all that is human becomes central to some sense(s) of – or, rather,



lack of them? - belonging(s). After all, being human is making mistakes, having faults, failing to be perfect. However, hypermodern societies have promoted the increase of practices that refer to “well-being“, which in their turn, promulgate individualism and individuality at their extreme. The explicit side-effect of it is loneliness, which is the same we see happening with Dorian Gray and Thomas. The former, as a never-ageing man, is unable to follow new generations as part of them; the latter, disconnected to all those who surround him. Lipovetsky points out to consumerism as the immediate (and, unfortunate) hipermodern reply to the matter of loneliness. Unable to establish real human bonds, people rely on materialism, attaching their beings to having(s).

Thus, the convergent factor between Wilde’s novel, Antonioni’s film and our daily, contemporary lives lie precisely there in the hedonism of portraits, photos, images and stories as they unfold but the naive, aesthetic experience of one (or two) stage(s) of life – bearing in mind the seven phases of life as described in Jacques’ monologue in the play *MacBeth* by William Shakespeare, “All the world’s a stage of life”⁴ . Furthermore, it reveals our need for masks, particularly in the social media nowadays, the virtual space of (“perfect”) existence, where “the true self“ is shown, complying to matters of individual “well-being“: being free, loved, praised, recognized as a social being, amongst other universally recognized feelings of belonging.

Therefore, while the aesthetic experience of both Dorian and Thomas particularly evolve from hedonism and the need to express personal identities associated with vital eternity, contemporary exposure in social media relates to it as much as masks are concerned. For they provide individuals with senses of reality in spite of being simulacra, thus, covering the world’s participants in their “best” features, as they enable individuals to reply to the hypermodern demands of extreme production, allowing them with senses of belonging in societies that are dehumanized of errors, faults or mistakes, at the same time

⁴ All the world’s a stage,/And all the men and women merely players;/They have their exits and their entrances;/And one man in his time plays many parts,/ His acts being seven ages. At first the infant,/ Mewling and puking in the nurse’s arms;/And then the whining school-boy, with his satchel/ And shining morning face, creeping like snail/ Unwillingly to school. And then the lover, / Sighing like furnace, with a woeful ballad/ Made to his mistress’ eyebrow. Then a soldier,/ Full of strange oaths, and bearded like the pard,/ Jealous in honour, sudden and quick in quarrel,/ Seeking the bubble reputation/ Even in the cannon’s mouth. And then the justice,/ In fair round belly with good capon lin’d,/ fith eyes severe and beard of formal cut,/ Full of wise saws and modern instances;/ And so he plays his part. The sixth age shifts/ Into the lean and slipper’d pantaloan./ With spectacles on nose and pouch on side;/ His youthful hose, well sav’d, a world too wide/ For his shrunk shank; and his big manly voice,/ Turning again toward childish treble, pipes/ And whistles in his sound. Last scene of all,/ That ends this strange eventful history,/ Is second childishness and mere oblivion;/ Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything. (W.Shakespeare. *As You Like It*. Act II Scene VII Line 139),

that they promise everlasting happiness – as is the case of the term “well-being”, even broadly applied to Health Sciences.

At the heart of *Blow-Up* is a deep questioning of perception and reality. The photographer believes he may have inadvertently captured evidence of a murder in the background of a photo, but as he enlarges the image, it becomes more abstract and inconclusive. This invites us to read the story in epistemological matters regarding the frontiers between truth and perception or reality and simulacrum, once photographs are the media – and in the case of the novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the portrait is. In both cases, the photographs taken by Thomas in the film and Basil’s painting of Dorian Gray in the novel, there seems to be an almost obsessive search for meaning, as well as an ultimate need for truth, always deferred by the “shadows” that displace the truth(s). Moreover, in our hypermodern, digital era, how do images work as to help us search for reality? Or, yet, is reality only a series of simulacra moments in which the truth is underveiled? Photographs, pictures and paintings are document and illusion. Yet the connection between this idea depicted by both the reading of novel and the watching of the film from the standpoint of each one of the Labhum participants’ subjectivity has opened horizons for awareness of our humanity, weaved in interactions, bonds and relationships in our encounters as well as in the everyday practices of diverse health professionals. We present below some of the participants’ partial reports at the end of the Labhum experience with Wilde’s and Antonioni’s narratives as focus – their names have been changed for fictitious ones in order to preserve their identities. The choices of the excerpts are to do with various topics of interest to us, namely:

- I- Diversity of participants as regards age, professional area in health services and relationships.

“It’s exciting to explore this new reading alongside colleagues of different ages and professions, and to reinterpret art together.” (Ana)

“... the shallow relationships developed by the protagonists [...] are still able to reveal their true essence to just a few people.” (Antonieta)

“... as much as we dislike it, we need to admit that in some ways we may be like them (the characters); we are a bit of Dorian Gray, we are other bits like Thomas in the film and in some aspects we are indeed similar to Lord Henry, Sybill Vane and even the girls being photographed by Thomas. A bit of each, depending on the occasion and with those we are interacting...” (Gabriela)

II- The literary and film narratives in dialogue with contemporary lives and the communication in social media today.

“In the book, I saw Harry as the embodiment of evil — a demon who captivates, a transgressor who fascinates, much like so many influencers today.” (Ana)

“Every day we try to change the perception of what we dislike in our reality, posting photos that make our lives seem less ordinary than they are. Every day we search for ways to conquer time and prolong our appearance of youth.” (Bruna)

III-The power of images and their role in helping us reflect upon reality x fantasy.

Moreover, the search for beauty as pleasure and truth and the use of it as protective disguise against harsh realities

“In both works, the protagonist places more trust in the image than in lived reality—revealing the power, and the danger, of visual perception, while questioning the very notion of reality.” (Lica)

“In the film we have a photographer without scruples, surrounded by young women who are not exactly naïve... A professional in search of the perfect shot, of art, of truth, of the meaning of life (...) the doubt: what is concrete and what is abstract? What is false and what is true?” (Ilan)

IV- The Labhum as relief, a cozy environment against the harsh reality of rational discourse

“I felt I was entering a space of welcome and attentive listening, where the focus was on collective reflection, exchanging perceptions, and questioning our own ways of seeing the world.” (Rodrigo)

“I thought it was really great that the conversations changed many of my initial perceptions and certainly transformed my rereading of the novel and in dialogue with the film this time.” (Ilan)

“My daily life is very scientific, rational, always in a hurry. So, taking a few hours each week to engage in group reflection, to understand feelings, to humanize ourselves, was essential time for me, particularly, with the focus on Wilde and Antonioni.” (Marcela)

“...the whole atmosphere of reading the novel, discussing it in dialogue with the film made me feel part of a collaborative, constructive, and collective learning community.” (Karla)

We understand that the particularized Labhum experience reported here has been able to promote participatory, open discussions on various themes in dialogue with the plural community of students who showed real life connections between the arts (literature and film)

and their own lived experiences in our contemporaneity, as parts of the selected examples above testify.

In this sense, the Labhum has brought forth possibilities of (self)awareness that help health care professionals and academics to assess their own humanized positions as such in relation to whom they are as thorough individuals, i.e., within and beyond their working contexts, facilitating their beings more thoroughly – and not just technically as has been much of the programs under the name of trainings on well-being. The fact that both narratives (the novel and the film) have been discussed in transcultural dialogue – due to the temporal and geographical transpositions, added to the linguistic translation of the novel into Portuguese – has allowed room for Wilde’s and Antonioni’s narratives beyond their critical readings as they have integrated people’s moments of enjoyment in alignment with reflections that may help them go beyond their usual, everyday practices. This certainly reinforces the role of literature and the arts in humanizing processes, particularly, today. Furthermore, it points out to the need to simply read classical literature which entails universal values transculturally. And this has been the case with Oscar Wilde and *The Picture...*

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