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By J. Hoberman

The fifties were the real high spot for the US ("when things were going on"), and you can still feel the nostalgia for those years, for the ecstasy of power, when power held power. In the seventies power was still there, but the spell was broken. That was orgy time (war, sex, Manson, Woodstock). Today the orgy is over.

—Jean Baudrillard, *America* (1986).

Dated from the moment it had its world premiere at the Coronet Theater, 25 years ago next month, Michelangelo Antonioni's *Blow-Up* was the first commercial release to represent the Orgy—zombie hedonism, street theater, micro-minis, body-paint, sitars, napalm, group-grope, amoral affluence, the brief confluence of Youthquake, Pop Art, the British Invasion, the widespread feeling that Tomorrow Never Knows.

Not simply a fashion statement or the movie that inspired 10,000 photographers, *Blow-Up* was actually supposed to mean something. People argued over it and it was widely overinterpreted because in part it blatantly proposed that movies and reality were in your head. As absurd zeitgeist fodder, *Blow-Up* was surpassed by *The Trip* within six months. Still, with its lugubrious pot party and kinky fashion craziness, sublimated camera sex and dissolute rock club, *Blow-Up* introduced the Hollywood set pieces for the next five years—and beyond. (The mime who haunts Woody Allen in *Scenes From a Mall* may not even be the last remnant of *Blow-Up* consciousness.)

Appropriately, the industry that would pillage *Blow-Up* initially took it as a slap in the face. Reporting on the movie's Hollywood preview (held the night before Walt Disney died), critic Arthur Knight observed that the audience seemed to hate what they saw—"almost as if Antonioni had insulted them personally. . . . Famous directors, writers and producers buzzed from group to group, drink in hand, asking each other what the picture was all about, and shrugging humorously when an immediate answer was not forthcoming. Obviously, the feeling was that both they and Metro had been had by an Italian upstart who had made his film deliberately obscure as a kind of spiteful, anti-Hollywood joke." *Variety's* reviewer, who attended the same screening, considered *Blow-Up* "a bust."

In the late '50s (when power held power), Americans were increasingly exposed to the European and Japanese art cinema. Bergman, Fellini, Kurosawa, Wajda, Resnais were taken seriously—in part, but not entirely, because foreign films were sexually much franker than American ones. Still, the distribution of these films—including a relative blockbuster like Fellini's *La Dolce Vita*—was restricted to large cities and college towns. *Variety* actually predicted less for *Blow-Up*: Because distributor MGM refused to cut sexually explicit material, the best it could hope for was "the most select of

selected situations. . . . Even with the liberalized Code it goes far beyond the limits of good taste."

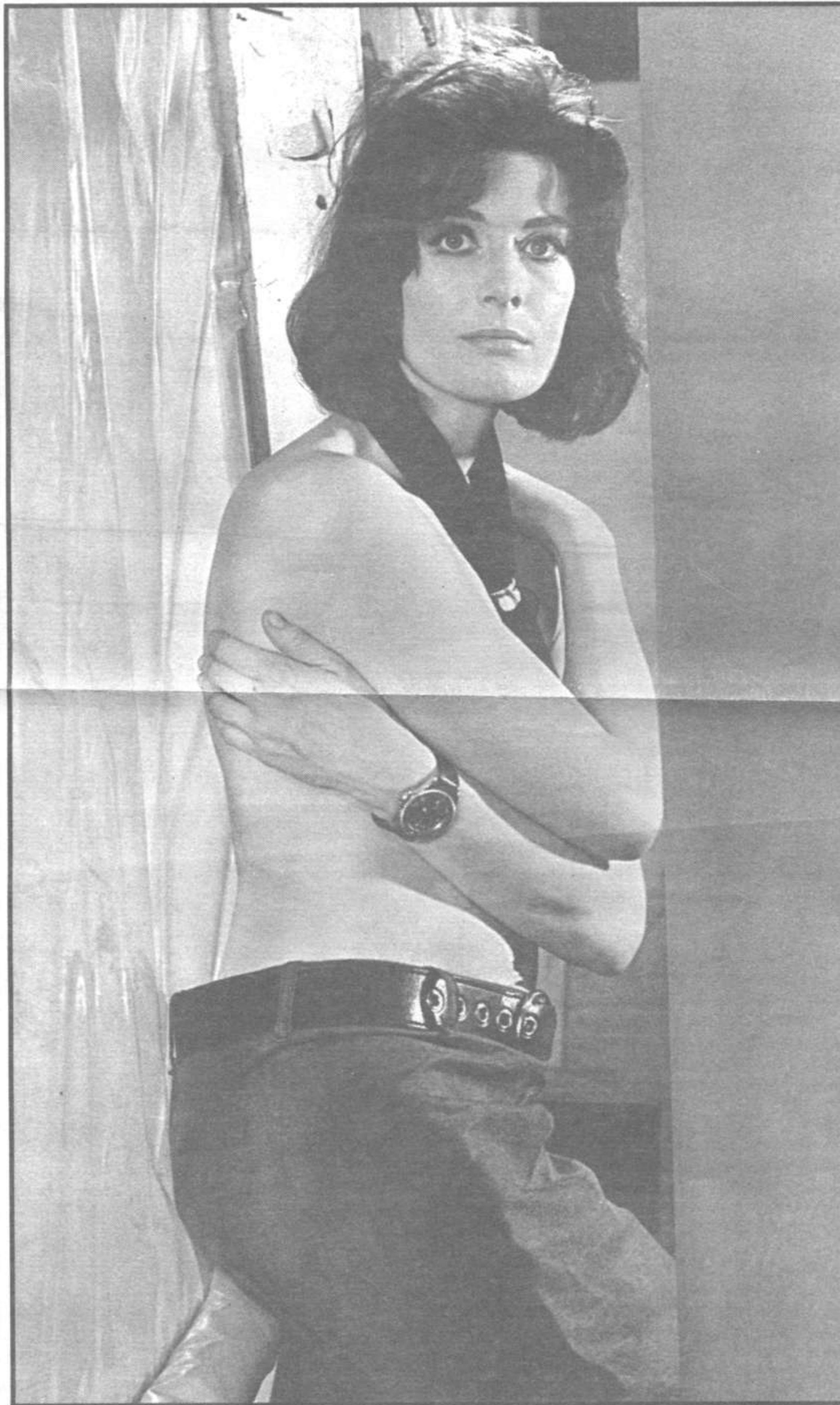
Instead, *Blow-Up*, which was produced by Italians but made in English, was the first Euro-art film to have a mass success. That it was also the first movie released without the imprimatur of the Motion Picture Association of

America's newly revised, soon to be obsolete, code and was further condemned by the National Catholic Office only added to its notoriety. Several scenes were objectionable—most upsetting, it was said, that in which fashion photographer David Hemmings cavorts around his studio with two naked teeny-boppers. (You can

see the shorter one, Jane Birkin, gnawing her cuticles these days as the artist's wife in *La Belle Noiseuse*). The sequence is the Orgy in miniature. It opens with a dream of consumption as the two would-be models try on a closet full of dresses, proceeds through a moment of abandon and a bit of ecstatic destruction to climax in

Blow-Up at 25

After the Orgy



Vanessa Redgrave undone in Antonioni's *Blow-Up*

confused boredom.

Released through a corporate front, *Blow-Up* had its world premiere a week before Christmas. We could probably date the end of the underground underground to that winter—which also saw Warhol's *Chelsea Girls* open in an uptown movie house after three months of screenings at the Filmmakers Cinematheque. (Other listings: the Mothers of Invention in their New York debut at the Balloon Farm on St. Marks Place, the Fugs held over at the Players Theater on MacDougal Street, Timothy Leary back at the hall that would become the Fillmore East.) The ads for Truffaut's *Fahrenheit 451* bragged that it was "getting the most hip audiences in town!" Not for long.

Blow-Up's first-week grosses were a "wow" \$30,000; by the second week, they were up 50 per cent. Within a month, everyone in America was in on the scene. The *Voice* published two reviews—Andrew Sarris's rave ("a mod masterpiece") and Richard Goldstein's pan ("a lack of understanding that can only be called Parental"). *Blow-Up* opened as strongly in L.A., Washington, and Boston as it did in New York, while a *Life* picture spread covered the "naked romps" that had cost the movie its MPAA seal. With smug wonderment, the French journal *Positif* reported that it was "not unusual to see Americans

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freezing in line for over an hour before getting into the movie house" to see *Blow-Up*. I remember waiting outside the Coronet myself, a college freshman home for vacation, arguing with some equally crazed classmate (now a screenwriter) that *Jules and Jim* was a thousand times better than *The Silence*. After the movie, he triumphantly caught me in the lobby: "It doesn't matter if *Jules and Jim* or *The Silence* is better—this is the greatest movie ever made!"

Nor was he alone. Arthur Knight told his readers he suspected "that future historians will recognize [*Blow-Up*] as important and germinal a film as *Citizen Kane*, *Open City* and *Hiroshima, Mon Amour*—perhaps even more so." The newly organized National Society of Film Critics voted *Blow-Up* the best film of 1966 and Antonioni the best director. (Their hopelessly moldy rivals, the New York Film Critics Circle, dutifully chose *A Man for All Seasons* and its director, Fred Zinnemann.) *Blow-Up* seemed the last word on camera-inflected reality. At least three early reviews connected Antonioni's murder mystery to the Zapruderized confu-

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sion around the Kennedy assassination.

The previous spring, *Time's* cover story on its designated city of the decade had reported Antonioni "prowling the streets of London, looking toward making a film on—of all things—the swinging London scene." Postdating even *Time* by nine months, *Blow-Up* came at the end of a particular cycle of movies celebrating English pop. (Indeed, it followed *Alfie* into the Coronet.) Not surprisingly, British critics attacked the movie as "shallow," "fabricated," and "laughably absurd"—"the adman's tawdry, swinging city" "looking far too much like the colour supplements." Nevertheless, *Blow-Up* won the Palme D'Or at Cannes, got banned in Buenos Aires, and was still playing Drydock Country in mid June when 39-year-old Reverend William B. Glenesk convinced MGM to let him screen it in lieu of a sermon at the Spencer Memorial Church in Brooklyn Heights.

These days *Blow-Up* doesn't even rate a cult (academic or otherwise)—despite its supremely voyeuristic protagonist and its preservation of, as if in amber, the moment's easy affluence, ubiquitous pop, self-consciously casual sex, ostentatious lack of ties, valorization of impulse behavior, all-important put-on, and druggy sense that reality is something individual and subjective, rather than social and objective. *Blow-Up* also offers a fairly extreme and largely uncritical representation of women as objects—an objectification that goes with the canonization of youth. Virtually the only

middle-aged characters in the film are the sad-sack employees of an antique shop and Vanessa Redgrave's murdered lover—quite an embarrassment for a movie as instantly geriatric as this one.

Perhaps the instantly passé *Sgt. Pepper* was the last effusion of Swinging London, with John Lennon's equally heavy "A Day in the Life" a sort of *Blow-Up* précis. *Rape*, a film orchestrated by Lennon and Yoko Ono in late 1968, has intimations of *Blow-Up* as well. An unseen movie crew discovers an attractive woman in a secluded park and hounds her through London for the rest of the day, a product of the Orgy to be sure, albeit well beyond Antonioni in identifying the camera with the controlling male gaze.

With *Blow-Up* relegated to ancient history, the Orgy continued to mutate from the middle America of *Bob & Carol & Ted & Alice* and *Night of the Living Dead* to the revised eternal verities of *Dionysus '69* and *Fellini Satyricon* through the sublimely disastrous *Zabriskie Point* (which, again anticipating Baudrillard, staged the Orgy in Death Valley), Antonioni's hapless successor to *Blow-Up*, and *Myra Breckinridge*, which ridicules the notion of normal love throughout, including a class in "cinema lovemaking" as well as the most desultory of bacchanals. ("Who do you have to screw to get laid around here?" one starlet wails.)

The revisionist Orgy arrives with *Shampoo* (1975), the first periodization of "1968," another Day in the Life featuring a num-



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The blow by blow: *Shampoo* (with Warren Beatty) and *Blow Out* (starring John Travolta) are specimens in a chain begun by *Blow-Up*.

ber of '60s icons—Julie Christie (signifier of Swinging London), Goldie Hawn (her body-painted midriff a staple of *Laugh-In*), and Warren Beatty (a Weatherman *avant le lettre* in *Bonnie and Clyde*). Here, Beatty played a hairdresser. He's an imagemaker to be sure—if several steps down the power-and-hipness ladder from a fashion photographer—a figure identified by *Time* (which titled its review "Blow Dry") as "the last shabby survivor of the age of grooviness."

Beatty and Robert Towne began working on the script for *Shampoo* in London in 1967; transplanted to L.A., the scenario was suitably domesticated and democratized. The Beatty character is more peripheral to the *real* Orgy of wealth and power than that of Hemmings. Still, thanks to the freeways, the whole city enjoys the same distraction as Antonioni's photographer. (Hawn to Beatty: "You never stop moving, you never go anywhere.") The imaginary tennis courts are restored to Beverly Hills. The scene in which Beatty suggestively blow-dries a client's wet coiffure is an appropriately diminished version of the Veruschka's camera-ravishment in *Blow-Up*. The pot party, replete with strobe lights and "Lucy in the Sky With Diamonds," is here an object of nostalgia. "*Shampoo* is a very uncompromising film, and it's going to cause dissension," Pauline Kael predicted. "People who are living the newer forms of the *Blow-Up* style, or want to, won't like this view of it."

In *Shampoo*, the camera doesn't

make reality, it is reality. Hawn's face is the screen across which the TV flickers—we never know what she is watching (it doesn't matter). Like *Nashville*, which Kael would hail as "an orgy for movie-lovers," *Shampoo* makes a post-Watergate appeal to an audience suspicious of politicians and businessmen, as well as offers a reaction against the '60s. The *Blow-Up* photographer's work is indistinguishable from his leisure; his utopian pad is at once boutique, laboratory, harem, and house beautiful. The *Shampoo* hairdresser's hapless attempt to live as though the day were here is his downfall—he confuses the beauty salon with an artist's studio, mistakes the workplace for a boudoir (and vice versa), pledges

allegiance to the pleasure principle instead of the marketplace.

Shampoo is also a relic—albeit less of Hollywood "1968" than the coked-up heyday of Julia Phillips. Brian De Palma's *Blow Out*, released only six years after *Shampoo*, marks a more drastic change—one associated with the post-*Star Wars* recycling of pop imagery. *Blow Out* begins as a parody of De Palma's previous *Dressed To Kill*—itself a pastiche of *Psycho*—and, dealing as it does with the problematic nature of mechanical reproduction (in Hollywood as in general), goes on to appropriate the premise of *Blow-Up* and transform it. English chic is replaced by American putrefaction. Antonioni's detached fashion photographer is here a mar-

ginal sound technician; swinging London has devolved into seedy Philadelphia. The Orgy is a porn-flick fantasy of a college dorm. By the end, all America is a lurid nightclub.

Disco imagery is implicit in the figure of John Travolta, fresh from the electric dance floor of Bensonhurst's 2001 club. Where Hemmings was the youthful Orgy-master and Beatty a secondary participant, techie Travolta is a hapless passenger—like a helicopter blade, the Orgy swirls dangerously above his head. Although Travolta is rather more repressed and less libidinal than Hemmings, the "innocent" objectification of women in *Blow-Up* here becomes something far more sinister. Women are not simply objects,

they are dismembered objects; freedom is identified with their exploitation and murder. Travolta works for porn-producing Independence Movies; as a serial killer strangles his first victim he gazes up at the sign for the Liberty Day Jubilee; when the heroine is murdered, the Liberty Bell rings out.

More rigorous than Antonioni, De Palma flaunts the specifics of filmmaking, while decrying the state of American cinema. But, of course, *Blow Out* doesn't represent reality, it represents *Blow-Up*. In parodying and/or exposing the original's pretensions, it also criticizes the fashionable illusions of the 1960s. The mod world of 1966 is corroded with the events of the recent past. Everyone is a potential Zapruder: "That stiff on the

stretcher was probably our next president—hell, he had my vote," a hospital orderly observes.

In this overwhelmingly bleak and tawdry film, Watergate, Chappaquidick, the Kennedy assassination, the death of Nelson Rockefeller, the Son of Sam killings are all conjoined in one ultra-paranoid conspiracy. De Palma makes the central crime political and specific rather than vague and existential. What's existential in *Blow Out* is the sense of a total system, ultimately unrepresentable and visible only in the aftermath of its actions. Police, politicians, and TV newsmen—or perhaps, just the TV—create reality. In the post-Orgy dawn, one man's morning after is another's "new morning" in America. ■