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BLOW-UP

(PREMIER PRODUCTIONS) Metrocolor 110 Mins.

Cast: Vanessa Redgrave, David Hemmings, Sarah Miles, John Castle, John Birkin, Verushka, Jill Kennington, Peggy Moffit, Rosaleen Murray, Ann Norman, Melanie Hampshire, and The Yardbirds.

Credits: A Carlo Ponti Production; Produced by Carlo Ponti; Directed by Michelangelo Antonioni; Screenplay by Michelangelo Antonioni and Tonino Guerra; Inspired by a story by Julio Cortazar; English dialogue in collaboration with Edward Bond; Photographed by Carlo di Palma; Music by Herbert Hancock.

Michelangelo Antonioni, along with Federico Fellini and Luchino Visconti is generally considered one of Italy's three most important directors. Highly controversial, deplored as much as he is admired, his first major film *L'Avventura*, caused a riot at the Cannes Film Festival in 1960. It opened stateside to mixed reviews, but a large and vocal coterie of admirers hailed it a masterpiece. Rightly so too, as time has since borne out. For along with the French "new wave" films, no other film since Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane* has had as strong and lasting an influence on contemporary cinema. His next film, *La Notte*, the Jeanne Moreau-Marcello Mastroianni starrer, also received mixed reviews when it opened in New York, as did *Eclipse*. These three films are generally regarded as his triology. The similarities in technique and characterizations fully bear that idea out. Each of the women in these films are stronger than their men. Each deal with twentieth-century alienation. And each bear out Antonioni's statement that "eroticism is the disease of our age."

David Hemmings spots a clue in Premier Productions' *Blow-Up*.

With his next film *The Red Desert*, a slightly more successful commercial entry that its predecessors, and also Antonioni's first film in color (and what color!), Antonioni was still concerned somewhat with the same themes. However, the major point made by Antonioni through his leading character, Monica Vitti, was the necessity of adjusting to the demands made on the individual by the cold, mechanized society in which we live. Vitti recovers from a nervous breakdown, and the film—one of Antonioni's first to do so—ends on a hopeful note. Antonioni's latest, *Blow-Up* (also in color), continues the notes sounded in *Red Desert*.

The leading role, played by David Hemmings (*Saint Joan, The Girl Getters*), is that of a successful photographer in contemporary, swinging London. His scene involves high life, low life, teenyboppers, discotheques, pot parties, promiscuity, ban-the-bombers, jazz, groovy pads, mod clothing, homosexuals, modern art, fashion models, fast cars, *et al.* In short, Hemmings is shown as the personification of society's idea of one who's "got it made." As the Vitti character from *Desert* was beginning to become adjusted, Hemmings is an extension of her: he is adjusted. True, he complains somewhat because he isn't "free," but that's more than likely a pose. He is fitted to his world, and it to him.

The film begins with a disheveled Hemmings being released from a shelter for the indigent. As is Antonioni's style, it is much later that the viewer discovers he has been there, merely to take pictures for a book of photographs. From there he goes to his combined studio-home to photograph fashion model, visits a painter friend who lives next door, dismisses two teenbyboppers, and goes to an antique shop he is interested in purchasing. There are a number of shots of Hemmings just riding about London and there are fragments of dialogue about events and characters the viewer hears nothing more about. In general, the audience is merely observing Hemmings as he goes thorough a fairly typical day in his life. (The film only covers a 24-hour period.) There is absolutely no exposition and very little dialogue in the film. All that we need know about him is shown. Antonioni's technique is to allow the viewer to observe the people Hemmings encounters and his reactions to them, and to observe the situations he is thrust into and what he makes of them. Showing, never explaining, merely presenting it all, leavingt it for the attentive viewer to sort out—that is Antonioni's way. *Blow-Up* is that kind of a film. Put another way, in contemporary vernacular, Antonioni merely tells it like it is, baby.

During the course of Hemmings' day, he photographs a seemingly affectionate couple in the park. The girl, Vanessa Redgrave, is indignant and demands the film. Hemmings develops the pictures and noticing odd details, begins making blow-ups. As he enlarges the photos, he realizes he has seen a murder committed. He tries calling the girl. He tries contacting the friend with whom he is doing the book. He then gets involved with a gleeful sexual escapade *á trois* with two teenyboopers, then back to the park, where he sees the dead body. Going out to find his friend, he gets involved with a fracas over a broken guitar in a discotheque. He then discovers all the incriminating blow-ups have been stolen from his studio. Upon finding his friend, who is too stoned on pot to care about Hemmings, discovery, Hemmings also gets stoned. The next morning he returns to the park. The body is gone. A group of young people wearing white makeup, who were seen at the beginning of the film, reappear and two of them engage in a tennis match without rackets and without a ball. Antonioni's camera carefully follows the back-and-forth motion of the non-existent ball. The two players gesture to an interested Hemmings to return the ball, which has gone over the fence. Hemmings throws it back. The camera lingers in close-up on his face. Then a long shot of Hemmings walking away, and The End appears on screen.

Some viewers, ever art house sophisticates, are likely to be somewhat confused by the film. Much of its accumulated detail may actually seems gratuitous to some. Antonioni admirers, however, know that the care and skill with which his highly personal films are put together preclude any possibility of accidental business slipping in without a preordained significance on Antonioni's part. Everything in the film serves a purpose: all of it serves to present a portrait of a "characteristic" twentieth-century hero.

A number of advance viewers have expressed concern over the supposedly unresolved nature of the murder. In a conventional film, more would be made of it, but this is the cinema of Antonioni. Like everything else in the film, it has no significance in itself, but only as something for Hemmings to react to. At first he is both intrigued and fascinated by the murder, but the lack of interest shown by his associates, and the fact that he deals mainly in surfaces, prevent his becoming too involved in it. When the body disappears, when Redgrave disappears—shown together with his previously established quality of being carried away by things only for the moment (the sexual escapade, the guitar incident, etc.), the murder eventually faded from his mind. Part of Antonioni's realism is to shown that it is the nature of fragmented, urban life that one constantly encounters little mysteries in daily life. One never knows the outcome of odd, minor incidents which occur during the course of everyone's day. A cry of help one may hear in the middle of the night off in the distance only impinges on one's consciousness briefly, and is then swallowed up in the rush of events. Antonioni has dealt with this frequently. In *L'Avventura*, one of the characters (Lea Massari) occupies the first half of the film and disappears, and the viewer is never told anything further about her. In *La Notte*, Mastroianni is practically raped in a hospital corridor by a pathetic nymphomaniac, and she too is then forgotten.

The particularly poetic ending with the imaginary tennis game ties the film together brilliantly. Hemmings' rapt concentration on a non-existent tennis ball, one that he throws back to the players, points up beautifully all of the film's themes. It shows the hero's talent for entering into the spirit of any and every momentary fancy. Further, it proves his ability to become involved with an imaginary game played by real players, as opposed to futher involvement in a murder which no longer exists, since the proof of its occurrence are gone.

As with all of Antonioni's films, *Blow-Up* is magnificently made. The film's visuals are staggering. Seldom has one seen such exquisite color, breathtaking compositions, and such superb camera movement. The acting is of such perfection, it is beyond praise. Newcomer Herbert Hancock has contributed a musical score that rates with the best ever written for film. Why quibble? *Blow-Up* is this year's best film in almost every category—fully deserving of the highest honors the Academy can bestow on it. As for its commercial potential, there is the growing Antonioni fame, the all-important Vanessa Redgrave lure, the film's investigation of the London scene, its potent sexual content, and the fine reviews it received here in N.Y. A true cinematic masterpiece, the entire industry can be proud of *Blow-Up*. R. B.