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## The Blow-Up: Sorting Things Out

CHARLES THOMAS SAMUELS

For an esoteric director, Michelangelo Antonioni inspired surprising publicity when *Blow-Up* opened at New York's Coronet Theatre. Spoken in English, produced by a big American company, *Blow-Up* became "copy" for columnists who had formerly ignored the dour Italian and his art-house masterpieces. Now much was heard of the absence of Monica Vitti (Antonioni's favorite leading lady) and of the artistic consequences of that fact. With each passing interview, new parts of London were added to the list of those actually painted by Antonioni in his search for expressive color. While to Rex Reed, who sketched the

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director in poison ink for the Sunday *Times*, Antonioni's zeal was mere arrogance; to M. G. M., it was integrity. When the director refused to make deletions required for a Production Code seal, the studio staunchly supported him. Yet when the flap subsided, M. G. M. hid behind its subsidiary, Premier Productions, declining to acknowledge its sponsorship so as to avoid offending those Catholics who had wanted the film banned. In his review, Bosley Crowther voiced concern lest the publicity attract the wrong audience. But while saving *Blow-Up* from the prurient, Crowther invited another Philistine response: the film was a mystery; he would not unveil its plot.

That Antonioni might have a plot to reveal was as novel an idea as that he might attract the masses. But soon the Coronet Theatre seemed as crowded as the Music



Hall. To make matters more confusing, *Blow-Up* was admired by Crowther and Judith Crist, *Time* and the *Saturday Review*, but disliked by many reviewers for more intellectual journals. Several of the latter split off from the New York Film Critics just in time to give *Blow-Up* the annual prize bestowed by their more conventional colleagues on *A Man for All Seasons*, but the most influential members of the new group (Brendan Gill, Pauline Kael and John Simon) all disparaged the film.

Before long, Crowther's restrained synopsis turned into a joke. A few critics now denied that *Blow-Up* had a plot; others denied that it articulated a meaning. William Zinsser (in *Look*) provided an appropriate apex for the controversy by proclaiming *Blow-Up*—along with *The Homecoming* and Andrew Wyeth!—an example of art meant not to be understood but only experienced.

Were *Blow-Up* less significant and Antonioni less revolutionary, the imbroglio I have sketched would merely support Dwight Macdonald's warning about cults in collision. But because Antonioni has done more to define cinema than probably any director since Eisenstein, the criticism afforded *Blow-Up* tells a good deal about current consideration of the art.

Some critics, notably Stanley Kauffmann and Ian Cameron, have accurately described Antonioni's effort to disentangle cinema from theater, but they have not perceived the radical lengths to which he has gone. Every important director, from popular artists like Hitchcock to serious auteurs like Kurosawa and Bergman, has exploited cinema's unique ability both to imprison the spectator in the lens's grip and to free him through speed and scope of movement; but Antonioni stands alone in making the visual image his fundamental mode of expression. He does not tell a story; he presents gestures and tableaux. He does not explore characters; he moves figures through a landscape. Yet, although his films are filled with things to look at, he does not shoot scenery.

To begin with: plot. Antonioni's plots

are really antiplots, since his characters are chronically unable to engage in productive action. Thus, in *L'Avventura*, Claudia and Sandro cannot truly search for his lost fiancée because they cannot truly care whether she is found. In *La Notte*, the unhappily married protagonists accomplish nothing in their long, eventful day, while the lovers' appointment in *Eclipse* is never, so far as we can tell, kept. Giuliana, of *Red Desert*, performs the one significant act in Antonioni, but that is only a spiritual adjustment to the modern world. Plot suspense is utterly avoided; our desire for knowledge focuses on character.

But not on character as unique personage, with determinant past and significant future. Antonioni's people are simply what we see, which is why they are always defined by dead-end jobs. Sandro, once an architect, is now an appraiser; while Giovanni, in *La Notte*, is a writer who doubts the possibility of another book. The sensitive heroine of *Eclipse* is doomed to the soulless and the secondhand: her lover works for the stock exchange, while she translates for a living. Even Giuliana has a depleting job, that of full-time neurotic. Unlike characters in other works that are similarly focused, Antonioni's do not develop. Their stories show them assuming a role—Claudia becoming Sandro's lover—or understanding the roles they have always played—Sandro facing his emptiness.

Since Antonioni's characters do not really engage in action and do not radically change, their inward fixity calls for a new kind of film movement. Whereas most directors move your eye across the surface of the action, Antonioni tries to move your eye into its depths. For most directors, a close-up represents, as it were, the locus of event and dialogue. In Antonioni, events occur behind faces, which express themselves not in dialogue but in gesture: a flick of the eye, a grimace. Antonioni's close-ups must be "read." Furthermore, whereas most directors bombard the spectator with images or hurl him through space, Antonioni holds his eye in front of carefully composed scenes.

This last characteristic is the heart of



Antonioni's method. A director who emphasizes action will photograph the background as an agent; as, for example, Hitchcock photographs the windshield wipers of Janet Leigh's car in *Psycho*: normal servants turned by the plot into menacing blades. A director who explores character will arrange the background into an "objective correlative"; as, for example, Fellini does in *8½*. Antonioni handles decor in neither way. In his films, the background does not enhance or reflect the foreground but rather interacts with and interprets it.

In his first important film, *L'Avventura*, the two main female characters are established by the simplest visual means: Anna, who has dark hair and scowls a great deal, represents withdrawal from society to which blond, always smiling Claudia is innocently attracted. In the film's second scene, Anna leaves Claudia inspecting a Roman square while she deliberately stages a test of her love for Sandro. As we watch Anna's face disgustedly receiving Sandro's caress, we see the nullity of their relationship and, since we shall later see the faces of Sandro and Claudia turning in the same erotic dance, we preview the essential anonymity of relationships in this world.

That Claudia is destined to replace her, Anna realizes when, with a smirk, she forces Claudia to wear her blouse in the subsequent yachting scene. This image must come back to our minds when, at Taormina, Claudia playfully dons a black wig, accepting a life in which identities may so easily be changed. In the film's last scene, when Claudia is herself replaced by a common whore, she has no moral force left from which to condemn the fickle Sandro. Now totally sophisticated, she can only join him in a gesture of resignation at their common incapacity for commitment.

The plot, or aborted action, of *L'Avventura* advances by means of visual analogies and small appearances; Antonioni can spend seconds shooting Claudia as she sits exhaustedly in the train station where she hopes to escape Sandro's tempting importunities. Above her head, in this actionless scene, are some pictures of madonnas. The moment's meaning is a contrast be-

tween the despair registered on Claudia's face and the serenity in the pictures. This is how Antonioni's decor interacts with and interprets the characters.

It also helps to establish the significance of their behavior through visual symbols and allusions, like the modernist devices of *The Waste Land* or *The Magic Mountain*, that realize Antonioni's modernist themes: lovelessness, paralysis of will, loss of faith. Fundamentally, *L'Avventura* contains an implied parallel with the *Odyssey*, which mostly took place in the same Sicilian locale, and which provides the Western mind with its definitive image of adventure and search. The point of the comparison, of course, is that the modern quest, indifferent to its object, must turn inward. Thus Antonioni fills the background with symbols of former validity to point up their debasement in the modern world. I will cite only a few examples. Patrizia, the yacht's owner, works a jigsaw puzzle of a classic scene while the playboy Raimondo fondles her breast in a gesture that is "unreproved, if undesired." On the island, while searching for Anna, the modern Romans find an ancient amphora, and after some humorously uncomprehending guesses about its possible function, Raimondo carelessly lets it fall. The *carabinieri* to whom Sandro goes at Messina are housed in a baroque palace before whose splendid marble walls they have set up ugly wooden slabs to form an office.

Throughout the island sequence, Antonioni is careful to train his cameras on the rocks so that the humans are always seen entering large barren areas, as if they come too late and too punily to dominate the alien landscape. For their humanity has been wrecked by a cultural debacle in which, as in much modern literature, a debilitated pursuit of pleasure competes with activities that had traditionally nurtured the soul. This theme, which gives the meager events their large significance, permeates the film. On the church tower at Noto, for example, when Sandro asks Claudia to marry him, she refuses a proposal so lightly made by ringing the bells which actualize attunement. The Sicilian men



milling about Claudia with sidewise lust are visually counterpointed by the choir-boys marching in orderly sexlessness from the cathedral. The Sicilian journey progresses through a culture in ruins (symbolized by the succession of church towers progressively abandoned and incomplete—one without a bell), coming to rest at Taormina, haunt of the rich, before a shattered building of which all that remains is a ruined tower and a fragment of facade.

Because *L'Avventura* shows an unformed girl realizing her latent sophistication, it comes closer than any of Antonioni's films to presenting a character in transition. Although we know little about Claudia (except that she was born poor), we can sympathize with her decline. Thus *L'Avventura*, Antonioniesque though it be, is moving in a conventional way. The later films are more representational in their enactment of cultural malaise, their characters are more fully symbolic, and their effect is more sensory and intellectual.

In *L'Avventura*, although hints exist only to demonstrate the deterioration that is modern worldliness, we learn something not only of Claudia's but of Sandro's past. Once a creator of buildings, Sandro now merely measures their cost. When he vindictively spills ink on the young boy's sketch of the cathedral at Noto, the personal and public meanings of Sandro's behavior merge; he is both a success reacting against lost innocence and modern man reacting against lost faith. In *La Notte*, we do not know why Giovanni can no longer write; the personal drama now merely illustrates the public meaning of a day that begins with the death of an intellectual and ends at an industrialist's party. Similarly, we do not know why Giovanni and Lydia have fallen out of love. Their unhappiness is not explained; it is merely displayed.

To establish Lydia's feelings, for example, Antonioni shoots the famous walking scene in which Lydia's state of mind is revealed through her reactions to a postman eating a sandwich, some fighting youths, a man firing off rockets, *et cetera*. Stopped clocks and flaking walls suggest the era's sickness; later, at the party, An-

tonioni achieves one of his best visual symbols of deterioration by showing the industrialist's cat staring fixedly at a Roman portrait bust. "Maybe he's waiting for him to wake up," the millionaire's wife announces. "Try and figure cats out." When Giovanni takes Lydia to a night club, they witness the erotic dance of two splendid Negroes; but the act turns out to be acrobatic, concluding when the female manages to get her legs around a glass of water. Milan's sterility is highlighted at the party which becomes vital only when a rainstorm strikes.

With few exceptions (the explicit last scene or some excessive business at the party), *La Notte* dramatizes its insights subtly. But the film is impure. As if frightened by its increased abstractness, Antonioni relies too heavily on dialogue to clarify his points; and, as we might expect from an artist who thinks with his eyes, the dialogue is banal.

*Eclipse* is more abstract than *La Notte*, heightening its emphasis on meaningful gesture and replacing dialogue, as often as possible, with expressive natural sound. Vittoria, the heroine, is even less explained than Giovanni and Lydia. We never learn why she has broken off her first affair or why she takes up with Piero. Although she has a job, it is minimally emblematic, whereas the jobs of Sandro and Giovanni represent obvious spiritual problems. Vittoria is created almost exclusively through what she does. She constantly fusses with flowers or disports herself with the primitive and the natural. These meanings come together when Vittoria is fascinated by one of the men who is wiped out by the stock market slide. Whereas the other investors sweat and fan themselves furiously, rush around, or, like Vittoria's mother, blasphemously turn religion to the service of Mammon, this man exits calmly. Vittoria follows him to a café, where he orders a drink and writes intently on a piece of paper. When he leaves, dropping the paper behind him, she retrieves it. It is covered with flowers. She is delighted. This is the moment before she begins her affair with Piero.



Living in a sterile modern world, Vittoria seeks escape on an airplane ride above the clouds, as well as through love. When down to earth in Piero's arms, however, she learns that people nowadays care only for things. The liveliest, noisiest scenes in *Eclipse* take place at the stock exchange (significantly, built in the ruins of a Roman temple), where men sweatingly pursue goods that truly excite them. But, try as they may to stir it, the air cannot cool their agitated bodies. Only above the clouds, or in one small moment when the Exchange halts out of respect for a deceased broker, does the air quicken; during that unique respite from noise in the ruined temple, a large overhead fan, like a propeller, whirs freely.

Setting aside *Red Desert* for the moment, this brief survey of Antonioni's films should suggest the atmosphere of *Blow-Up*. Yet faced with a murder witnessed by a photographer, Bosley Crowther inevitably recalled the Hitchcock of *Rear Window*, and this utterly misleading comparison has been perpetuated by many critics. In fact, the antiplot of *Blow-Up* is *vero Antonioni*.\*

\* The Julio Cortázar short story on which *Blow-Up* is loosely based considers a question only hinted at in the film: does art have metaphysical and moral power over reality? Cortázar's hero is an amateur photographer but a professional translator, and the first part of his story is a characteristic dissertation on the difficulty of representing life in words.

The main event is the hero's encounter with a young boy and an older, blond woman in the square of an island in the Seine. Thinking he witnesses an act of sexual initiation, he takes a photograph. But when the woman asks that it be returned, an older man, who had been watching the scene from a car, interrupts their altercation. During the argument, the boy escapes, convincing the translator that, despite his meddling, "taking the photo had been a good act." When he returns home and blows up the photograph, however, he concludes that the older woman was apparently seducing the boy for the man. Revolted by what he has witnessed, 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.

Antonioni's transformations are nearly total: the ages of the couple are reversed, she becomes dark-haired, the scene takes place in a garden rather than a square, seduction becomes murder. More important, the art theme is made peripheral (by

Like *L'Avventura*, *Blow-Up* concerns the search for something that is never found. As in *La Notte*, the peripatetic hero fails to accomplish anything. Like the other protagonists, the photographer is the embodiment of a role, although here he is so fully defined by his function that he is not even named. As in Antonioni's other films, the climax is reached when the protagonist comes to face his own impotence. There is even a concluding disappearance that recalls the absence of Vittoria and Piero from the last minutes of *Eclipse*: as the camera slowly draws away from the photographer, he slowly diminishes in size, an effect made more significant when Antonioni literally causes him to vanish before "the end."

The events in *Blow-Up* dramatize the same theme one finds in Antonioni's other films. The photographer, a creature of work and pleasure but of no inner force or loyalty, is unable to involve himself in life. He watches it, manipulates it; but, like all of Antonioni's male characters, he has no sense of life's purpose. Thus, when faced with a challenge, he cannot decisively act. Unable to transcend himself, except through ultimate confrontation with his soul, he represents modern paralysis.

Most reviewers have denied that this or any other theme is apparent in *Blow-Up*, while those few who believed that Antonioni was up to something were either uncertain or wrong, I think, about what it was. Since Antonioni demands closer attention than even professional film watchers are likely to be familiar with, and since reviewers usually have the sketchiest knowledge of a serious director's canon, the errors are not surprising. But what are we to make of the critical misconceptions perpetrated by John Simon?

introducing a literal artist as a foil to the commercial, mechanical photographer), while Antonioni focuses on the social context that he invents for the episode. I can think of no better way to illustrate the profoundly social orientation of Antonioni.

Notice, too, that whereas Cortázar's hero never discovers whether his "good act" was really effectual, Antonioni's photographer learns that he accomplished nothing. Cortázar's territory is the imagination, where fabulous victories match equally fabulous defeats; Antonioni's world is sadly, unconquerably real.



Simon is, in my opinion, the best American film critic now writing. Expectedly, he was the one critic who saw the need to summarize *Blow-Up*'s events; yet in his exhaustive resumé, he missed the crucial moments. As a result, he determined that Antonioni's theme was Pirandellian, despite the total absence of any metaphysical concern in the director's other work. Together with the common emphasis on Hitchcock, this Pirandellian analogy has done a great deal to obfuscate Antonioni's meaning.

Because the body vanishes, and because the photographer ultimately hears a tennis ball that doesn't exist, some people have thought that Antonioni means us to question the existence of the corpse. Incidental details such as the photographer's initial appearance as a bum who surprisingly enters a Rolls Royce have been cited in support of this interpretation. Yet the point of the first scene is that the photographer *isn't* a bum, that he took part in the doss-house life merely to exploit it for his picture book. The body exists; what is significant is that the photographer didn't realize he'd seen it.

When the narrator enters the park, we see him performing his first spontaneous gesture. Emerging from the antique shop, he notices it and, for no apparent reason, enters. Perhaps he is attracted by the lush greenness, the melodically rustling leaves. Chancing on the love ballet, however, the photographer responds automatically, according to a settled routine. Love, as his agent, Ron, later tells him, would make a "truer" conclusion to his picture book. But when the girl tries to get his film and a young man (apparently the murderer) peers through the restaurant window at his lunch with Ron, the photographer begins to suspect that he has witnessed something less than innocent. After the girl leaves his studio, he blows up the photographs; and it is here, I think, that Simon and every other critic I have read misinterpret the action.

What happens is this: While the photographer is studying the shots, he spies something suspicious in the still of some shrubbery behind a fence. What he does

not see but what the audience does, as Antonioni's lens pans across the row of blow-ups, is the still showing a body. The audience, but not the photographer, knows that a body exists. (When Vanessa Redgrave ran away from the photographer during the park scene, she stopped to look down at the tree, from behind which a head was unmistakably visible.) But the photographer chooses to blow up only the still showing the murderer and his gun. Exulting in what he thinks is a meaningful action, he rushes to the phone to call his agent. "Somebody was trying to kill somebody else," he says, "I saved his life."

That the photographer jumps to this erroneous conclusion despite contrary evidence is logical in view of subtle but clear hints we got earlier of a latent dissatisfaction with his normal mode of behavior. His studio is dominated by photographs of a sky diver and a skin diver, his living room by a shot of camels (recalling a similar photograph in *Eclipse*), and he clearly would like to get away. Vittoria made her frail gesture in a plane; the photographer buys a propeller. Lydia had gone on a solitary walk; the photographer, so far as he knows, takes a stroll in the park. As he tells his agent, "I've gone off London this week. Doesn't do anything for me. I'm fed up with those bloody bitches. Wish I had tons of money, then I'd be free."

Freedom and mastery are cheaply purchased when the photographer allows himself to believe he has saved a man's life. Had he done so, his action would have symbolized a separation from the aimless mod world. What he witnessed, as he believes, was the attempt by a young swinger to murder a gray-haired, older man in a garden. Catching the snake hidden in the bushes, the photographer had preserved the intended victim. The fact of the matter is different.

While on the phone with Ron, he hears a noise at the door. Apparently suspecting the murderer, he opens it surreptitiously; in tumble two teeny-boppers. Although he had previously expressed contempt for these "bloody bitches," he now becomes involved with them. Meanwhile Ron rings



off. When the girls, who have come for some exploitation of their own, begin to undress before a clothes-rack, the photographer seizes the opportunity. An orgy ensues, and here Antonioni works his most audacious trick.\*

While the photographer is romping with the girls (avidly attended by any normal spectator), for perhaps five seconds, in the upper right hand corner of the frame, above the purple paper, we see a man dressed like the murderer, watching them. Antonioni then cuts to the girls as they are pulling on the photographer's clothes, and the photographer, who is sitting up, now notices the shot he had previously overlooked. Much to their chagrin, he ejects the teenyboppers, blows up the fatal still, and learns that he had saved nothing.

However, instead of calling the police, asking for help, or in any way dealing with what he now realizes, he returns to the park to prove that the murder took place (although in calling his agent, he had acted far more precipitately with no more evidence). Back at the park, he sees the body; but behind him he hears a click, as of a gun or camera, and he runs away. Again, he does not go for the police. Instead, he returns to his studio and looks longingly at the propeller, an old part without a plane, lying on a white floor—useless. He then goes to his friend's apartment, where he is shocked to find the wife fixing her attention upon him while having intercourse with her husband.

Reentering his studio, he discovers that the blowups have been stolen, presumably by the man who entered during the orgy

\* This detail is perhaps a shade too audacious, but there is precedent for it in *L'Avventura*. When Anna disappears, she leaves two books behind her: the Bible and *Tender is the Night*. We get a brief glimpse of the latter, which I presume was meant to hint at Anna's relationship with her father and thus help establish a motive for her disappearance. Thus we have the father's response when Claudia gives him both volumes: "This looks like a good sign. Don't you think so? As far as I'm concerned, anyone who reads the Bible could not have committed an act of impropriety." (This, like all passages from the first three films, is quoted from *Screenplays of Michelangelo Antonioni*. New York, 1963.)

sequence. After a brief, apparently fruitless conversation with his friend's wife, he takes off in his car. While driving, he thinks he sees the murderer's accomplice; but his attempt to chase her degenerates into his meaningless involvement with an absurd experience at a rock 'n roll club. Once again, he has recourse to his agent; but he finds Ron in a marijuana trance, which he soon joins. In the last scene, returning to the park, he discovers that the murderer has made off with the body. He has accomplished nothing.

For he is part of his world. Hiding behind a tree, like the murderer, he shot with a camera what the latter shot with a gun; and he did not save the older man. He is blond, and so is the murderer. For all his aloof contempt, he is as frivolous as the mod clowns who frame his experience. In the last scene, when he hears their "tennis ball," he effectively actualizes the charade existence that they share in common. His final gesture of resignation—like Sandro's tears, Giovanni's loveless copulation, or Piero's and Vittoria's failure to meet—shows clearly that the photographer cannot change.

The actions I have sketched are nearly pantomimed; their larger implications are also established through visual means. As with the carabinieri's office in *L'Avventura*, the first shot in *La Notte* (showing a graceful old building standing in front of Pirelli's glass box), the forbidding sleekness of E.U.R. in *Eclipse*, Antonioni fills the background in *Blow-Up* with examples of tradition being razed to make way for a grey, anonymous wasteland. As the photographer drives through London, the camera pans along the colorful walls of the old city only to be abruptly lost in blank space surrounding a new housing project—all grays and browns. When he visits the antique shop, scouting real estate for his agent, he advises purchase since the neighborhood seems to have attracted homosexuals—those great contemporary buyers of the past. The old caretaker, however, refuses to sell him anything, but the young mod owner is only too anxious to turn the shop into cash for a trip to Nepal, where she hopes to escape



from the antiques. "Nepal is all antiques," the photographer dryly observes.

The modern world, however, seems bent on destroying its traditions. On the wall of the photographer's apartment, an old Roman tablet is overwhelmed by the hallucinatory violence of the modern painting at its side. More important, traditional human pursuits are being drained of their force. Politics is now playacting; a pacifist parade marches by with signs bearing inscriptions like "No," or "On. On. On." or "Go away." Pleasure is narcotizing, whether at the "pot" party or in the rock 'n roll club. Love is unabsorbing, as the photographer learns from his friend's marriage. Art has lost its validity. Murder is ignored.

These last implications are forcefully portrayed in the film's main scenes of human interaction. The first of these scenes shows the photographer visiting his friend Bill, who is a painter. When the hero enters his flat, the painter is standing affectedly before a large canvas. Attempting to engage the photographer's interest, he explains his condition:

They don't mean anything when I do them, just a mess. Afterward, I find something to hang onto [pointing]—like that leg. Then it all sorts itself out; it's like finding a clue in a detective story.

Although we are likely to find Bill rather pretentious, particularly in view of the obviously derivative nature of his painting, the photographer seems unusually impressed. When the painter's wife enters, he tells her that he has wanted to buy one of the canvases. When we see her massaging his neck with obvious interest on her part but mere friendly comfort on his, we know what this oasis of art and domesticity might mean to a man so cynical and frenetic. Later, in his puzzlement concerning the murder, when he turns to them for help, he discovers that the oasis is dry.

In the second important scene, the murderer's accomplice meets the photographer at his studio because he blew his car horn when he reached his street so as to inform the pursuers of his whereabouts. When he tries to calm her, she replies:

"My private life is already in a mess. It would be a disaster—"

P: "So what? Nothing like a little disaster for sorting things out."

Through turning sparse, functional dialogue into a system of verbal echoes, Antonioni achieves the economy of tight verse. Yet he does not sacrifice naturalness. The painter, in an observation appropriate to the scene, had suggested that visual experience is comprehensible only through recollection, during which process it performs the function of a clue that helps to "sort things out." The photographer, in a casual remark to the girl, asserts that the sorting out process is facilitated by disaster. This verbal cross-reference points to the meaning behind the action.

The most subtle use of dialogue occurs in a sequence which has been either ignored or misinterpreted as a sign that Antonioni's theme is failure of communication. When the painter's wife enters his studio, she comes upon a distraught man; he has lost his evidence and his faith in his friends. Although laconically, they do communicate:

P: "Do you ever think of leaving [your husband]?"

W: "No, I don't think so."

P: [Turning away with annoyance] "I saw a man killed this morning."

W: "Where? Was he shot?"

P: "Sort of a park."

W: "Are you sure?"

P: "He's still there."

W: "Who was he?"

P: "Someone."

W: "How did it happen?"

P: "I don't know. I didn't see."

W: [Bewildered] "You didn't see?"

P: [Wry grimace] "No."

W: "Shouldn't you call the police?"

P: [Pointing to the one still the murderer didn't take] "That's the body."

W: "Looks like one of Bill's paintings. [Turning to him, helplessly] Will you help me? I don't know what to do. [He doesn't react. She looks at the shot.] What is it? Hmmm. I wonder why they shot him."

P: "I didn't ask."

W: [Looks up at him, smiles sadly, and, after some hesitation, leaves.]



I record this dialogue to show how clearly and economically Antonioni establishes his meaning.\* When the painter's wife comes to his apartment, she hears the photographer's confession of failure and declares her own. Bill's art is no alternative to the destruction symbolized by the murder; his art is another version of it. They can no more deal with their marriage than the photographer can deal with the crime. She can only slink away in compassion for their mutual impotence, leaving him to futile pursuit, marijuana, and his depressing moment of truth.

In *Blow-Up*, as in *Eclipse* and *L'Avventura*'s island sequence, Antonioni achieves his meanings through the use of sound effects as well as speech. When the photographer shoots his model in a parody of intercourse, and when he poses the mannequins, music, as he says, is "noise" to inspire their artificial vitality. When Vanessa Redgrave comes to his apartment, fresh from the murder, he tries to teach her the lesson that music maintains one's "cool." While giving her some "pot," to which she sensuously yields herself, he shows her that really to enjoy it and the taped jazz he is playing, she must hold herself back—draw slowly and keep time against the beat. Before he begins to inspect the blowups, he turns the jazz on. But the music quickly fades when he becomes involved; as he looks deeply into the frames, we hear on the sound track a rustling of leaves.

The incredible greenness of a park that was the ironic setting for murder suggests another of Antonioni's means. When the

\* The dialogue at the "pot" party is equally clear. After great difficulty, the photographer succeeds in getting Ron to listen to his problem:

P: "Someone's been killed."

R: "O.K."

P: "Listen, those pictures I took in the park—  
[No response] I want you to see the corpse.  
We've got to get a shot of it."

R: [Bewildered] "I'm not a photographer."

P: [Bitterly] "I am."

R: [Nonplussed] "What did you see in that park?"

P: [Resignedly] "Nothing." [Ron, who can't focus his eyes well, motions the photographer to follow him. The photographer does. Next scene shows him waking up from the debauch.]

photographer discovers the body's loss, he looks up at the tree, whose leaves now rattle angrily, and sees the leaves as black against a white sky. Like the sound analogies and the verbal cross-references, the color in *Blow-Up* aids comprehension.

The film is composed mainly in four hues: black, white, green and purple. The hero's studio is black and white, as are most of his clothes and those of Vanessa Redgrave. So too are photographs. In fact, the meaning of the event in the park was "as clear as black and white" before he photographed it, which is what makes for significance in his initial failure of perception as well as in his underlying failure to understand the implication of his way of life. The green park was penetrated by evil. Suitably, the door of the photographer's dark room, in which he brings to light the dark deed, is also green. Not, however, until he copulates with the teeny-boppers in a sea of purple does he realize that he did not prevent the crime. Appropriately, the door to the room in which he blows up the fatal still is also purple. One of the teeny-boppers wears purple tights; the other, green.

Colorful though it is, *Blow-Up* seems to be moving toward colorlessness, black and white—almost as if Antonioni were trying to make us face the skull beneath the painted flesh. But that is not what most reviewers have done. That they should, if my reading is correct, have missed the film's meaning so completely is a phenomenon almost as significant as the film itself. What, after all, does their error tell us?

The familiar things are aspects of a fixed condition. As I have said, few reviewers know the director's work; fewer still have sophisticated ideas about film art. Their collective sophistication, if not their intelligence, is modest; when they simulate brilliance, it is only through the perfervid prose we associate with *Time* magazine. I doubt that many serious readers would choose books on the advice of the same sources to which, *faute de mieux*, they are forced to turn for evaluation of films. This much, I think, is sadly inarguable, but not limited to consideration of *avant-garde* film-making in general or Antonioni in particular.



The confusion about Antonioni comes from the unusual demands he makes. Most films are to be looked at; Antonioni's are to be inspected. Decades of film as a commercial form of escapism have atrophied our perception; like all great artists, Antonioni insists that we see anew. Unfortunately, most reviewers can't see. Although many disguised their ineptitude by reporting little of what goes on in *Blow-Up*, distressing errors of fact tend to characterize the more venturesome accounts. Thus one reviewer (Richard Corliss, *National Review*) has the photographer buying an oar, while another (Joseph Morgenstern, *Newsweek*) has the orgy spread out on sky-blue paper. John Simon thinks the painter is unmarried (although Sarah Miles clearly sports a wedding ring) and suggests that the photographer makes eyes at her, whereas the reverse is true. As a result of such errors, he can give no accurate reading of the subplot. John Coleman (*New Statesman*) loftily deems *Blow-Up* a "very superficial film . . . about people reckoned as leading superficial lives"; but since he asserts that the photographer saw the body and the gun after the orgy sequence, Coleman is in no position to call anyone superficial.

Such errors of fact are less important in themselves than as manifestations of a cavalier attitude toward Antonioni's difficult style. More than their mistakes, the arrogance of reviewers is what rankles. Confronted with a famously complex director whose films are widely acknowledged to be important, the journeyman critic, both here and in England, treats *Blow-Up* as if it were indeed a mechanical piece of Hitchcock. Despite museum cults, the emergence of cinema's right to be considered a form of art is notoriously recent. A parallel growth in movie reviewing is long overdue.

Among critics, the sources of confusion is more profound. Misunderstanding *Blow-Up* is not only failure to scrutinize with sufficient care a highly wrought method of expression; it is the consequence of some false, but currently powerful, ideas about the nature of art. Although these ideas are more blatantly damaging with an art form

so ill-defined as cinema, they have their origin in wider cultural presuppositions.

The first of them, to use Norman Podhoretz's phrase, is the demand that art "bring the news." Widespread dissatisfaction with contemporary fiction, lack of interest in poetry, and the inflation of non-fictional forms like the book review all indicate the dominance of this aesthetic program. Thus Norman Mailer's lucubrations attain significance because he styles himself a social prophet, confessional poetry becomes the accepted fashion in verse, and nonfiction, a form defined by what it isn't, now begins to absorb whatever it lacks.

From the neonaturalist perspective, *Blow-Up* is offensive because it manipulates the materials of contemporary London to express not the city but Antonioni's version of modern life. If one can bear the hip language—not unrelated to the ideas—he can see this attitude clearly expressed in Richard Goldstein's article in the *Village Voice*, entitled "The Screw-Up." Condemning a lack of "understanding that can only be called Parental," Goldstein insists that Antonioni misrepresents the swinging Samarkand and derides the film for the expressiveness that—*autres temps, autres mœurs*—would have guaranteed its status as a work of art. Whatever can be said for such documentary emphasis, it easily degenerates into mindless fixation on the up-to-date. That people old enough to know better don't avoid the trap can be seen in Pauline Kael's review, where, amidst a veritable fusillade, she criticizes Antonioni for not catching "the humor and fervor and astonishing speed in youth's rejection of older values." Godard, *si!* Antonioni, *no!*

The other new aesthetic barbarism has quickly filtered down to its rightful level, having been recently promoted, as I have remarked, by the arts editor of *Look*. Given a more respectable formulation by Susan Sontag, Richard Gilman and other less conspicuous gurus, the conception of art as "sensuous form" might seem a useful antidote to excess verisimilitude, but it comes to much the same thing. Like those who wish art to be a form of sociology, the advocates of a "new sensibility" reveal a fatal



affinity for what's "in." Thus Miss Sontag finds that formal heights are scaled by happenings, pornography and science fiction, while critics like Gilman opt for novels (promoted by magazines like the *New Yorker*) in which insouciance becomes art by imitating the era's bafflement. (Collusion between the documentary and noninterpretive definitions of art was nicely indicated by the appearance of Robert Garis's review—which argues that the film is good because it is "exciting to watch"—in *Commentary*.)

One error encourages the sentimental social pieties of some reviewers; the other authorizes their imperception. Thus reviews of *Blow-Up* express outraged social optimism or a kind of aesthetic trance induced by globules of "surface beauty." The skillful creation of symbols for insight—art, in short—becomes an achievement of negligible appeal.

A third aesthetic error (born, in part, out of reaction against the other two), despite a devotion to artistic seriousness, runs the risk of blocking new modes. John Simon is rightly opposed to art without discursive implications or rational validity. In *Hudson Review* pieces concerning Albee, Pinter, and thinkers like McLuhan and N. O. Brown, Simon shows himself a powerful demolition machine for a culture besieged on all sides. But in his splendid assaults, he sometimes finds himself forced backward into old-fashioned demands for situational realism, psychologically valid motivation, and humanistically oriented themes. These requirements should be suspended with considerably less alacrity than most critics now show, but they must be abandoned for those rare cases, like Borges, Beckett or Antonioni, in which authentic art is being produced in a new way. Significantly, Simon is receptive to such art when reviewing books—a further indication that people automatically relax their aesthetics when discussing films.

A similarly based lack of sympathy is detectable in the otherwise laudatory pieces on Antonioni's earlier films that Dwight Macdonald wrote for *Esquire*. Although Macdonald, along with Stanley Kauffmann,

was one of Antonioni's few discerning American champions, he became displeased by the Italian's progressive refusal to motivate his characters. Even Kauffmann was made nervous by the abstractionism of *Eclipse*, although he rejoiced, wrongly as I think, in the colored abstractionism of *Red Desert*.

Still, despite a few hints of retrograde commitment, Simon, Kauffmann and Macdonald are the most sensitive of Antonioni's American critics and the most useful, intelligent film critics of recent times. The fumbling responses of their colleagues remind us that the always thinly staffed legion of competence is now threatened with depopulation. Macdonald has been replaced at *Esquire* by Wilfrid Sheed, while Pauline Kael has taken over from Kauffmann on the *New Republic*. (Fortunately, Kauffmann will review films for the *New American Review*, but only three times a year; and I suspect he will be pressed for space.)

As a novelist and book or theater critic, Wilfrid Sheed has behind him an estimable body of work. As a film critic, he has nothing—either in experience or rumination—a fact that he candidly admitted in his first *Esquire* piece. Despite his avowed respect for Antonioni's other films, his review of *Blow-Up* expresses nearly ruthless contempt. Much of the piece is not about the film at all, concentrating its attention instead (complete with feeble jokes about old musicals that Sheed *does* know) on Rex Reed's interview with Antonioni in the *Times*. The rest of his review repeats Judith Crist's complaint that Antonioni let a good story get away, Richard Goldstein's complaint that Antonioni didn't really capture London, and the blank raving about "surface beauty" that characterizes most other reviews. Finding the symbolism "non-organic" and the ideas banal, Sheed disdains to argue either point.

Such offenses against criticism are compounded in Miss Kael's review by offenses against taste, logic and the reader's patience. In a piece so staggeringly verbose that one cannot, as in Sheed's case, attribute the lack of argument to lack of space, Miss

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Kael serves up that combination of personal exhibitionism, obsession with fashion, and irrelevant inside dope that has become her special ragout. She reviews not the film but the audience.\*

Will *Blow-Up* be taken seriously in 1968 only by the same sort of cultural dichards who are still sending out five-page single-spaced letters on their interpretation of *Marienbad*? (No two are alike, no one interesting.) It has some of the

\* Space limits prevent me from detailing Miss Kael's other vagaries, but I should like to draw attention to her one valid point. Miss Kael accuses Antonioni of secretly loving the mod life he exposes. This brings me to *Red Desert*.

Antonioni's first color film is in most respects identical to its predecessors, although it is less successful. More even than *La Notte*, it employs rather embarrassing dialogue. Also, whereas we can accept the representational function of normal people without needing to know much about them, a sick soul inevitably raises questions of causality which Antonioni is characteristically unable to answer.

More seriously, *Red Desert* is spoiled by a confusion in perspective, and it is here that Pauline Kael's point about *Blow-Up* is relevant. Much of the film seems to indicate that the camera is essentially inseparable from Giuliana's twisted viewpoint. That presumably explains why we see things change color or lose definition as she looks at them. But in addition to several scenes in which she does not appear, there are examples of contradictory focus: in one scene, objects are in soft focus before and behind her, while she is sharp. This technical confusion reveals a deeper thematic uncertainty. Much of the film suggests that Giuliana is sickened by an actually terrifying culture, full of slag heaps, loneliness and exploitation. But since Antonioni is at pains to show that industrial Ravenna is also beautiful (he even paints steam pipes in gay colors), we begin to suspect that Giuliana's inability to adjust is culpable. This would support the apparent optimism of the ending.

*Blow-Up* suggests, for some people, a similar ambivalence. Isn't Antonioni fascinated by the mod scene, which, although empty, is certainly colorful? So far as I can see, people who answer "yes" are confusing their own response to the undeniably exciting materials with the film's theme. (Could Antonioni have convinced us that a film was set in mod London if he had photographed London the way he photographed the Lipari Islands or Milan?) Nevertheless, I think this is an arguable and important question. Were it possible here, I should like to consider the nostalgia for answers that Antonioni shares with most great modern chroniclers of the wasteland.

*Marienbad* appeal: a friend phones for your opinion and when you tell him you didn't much care for it, he says, "You'd better see it again, I was at a swinging party the other night and it's all anybody ever talked about!" (Was there ever a good movie that everybody was talking about?) It probably won't blow over because it also has the *Morgan!-Georgy Girl* appeal; people identify with it so strongly, they get upset if you don't like it—as if you were rejecting not just the movie but *them*. And in a way they're right, because if you don't accept the peculiarly slugged consciousness of *Blow-Up*, you are rejecting something in them. Antonioni's new mixture of suspense with vagueness and confusion seems to have the kind of numbing fascination for them that they associate with art and intellectuality, and they are responding to it as *their* film—and hence as a masterpiece.

Two bad reviews by two irresponsible critics prove little; but when we search for alternatives, the point gets made. There are frequently fewer interesting plays or books in a given season than interesting films. Yet I think the *Blow-Up* controversy suggests how ill-equipped American criticism is to discuss them. With the exception of John Simon, there is, at the moment, no aesthetically sophisticated and informed guide available for the growing audience that seeks enlightenment about films—and Simon writes for only thirty-five thousand readers a dozen times a year in the *New Leader*. Of the journalistic film reviewers, there is scarcely one to be taken seriously. The mass magazines used to employ men like Agee or Macdonald, but such critics have been ill-replaced. Smaller film quarterlies (when they last long enough to be useful) are made up either by film buffs capable, like the *Cahiers du Cinéma* crowd, of ontological analyses of Jerry Lewis, or they bear the same relationship to live film criticism that a philological journal bears to the vital discussion of books.

Artists like Antonioni will continue to progress, unperturbed by widespread ignorance. (Moreover, they will prosper; *Variety* says *Blow-Up* is "k.o.") But scores of interested viewers will be left behind.