

film to approach the no-man's-land between cinema and metacinema. "Il provino" clearly foreshadows the meditation on the relation between art and reality that is *Blow-Up*.

BLOW-UP: QUESTIONING THE SCENE, QUESTIONING THE SEEN

I always mistrust everything which I see, which an image shows me, because I imagine what is beyond it. And what is beyond an image cannot be known. (Antonioni, from the "Introduction" to Technically Sweet)

Blow-Up (1967) was Antonioni's first international film, and it was also his most commercially successful one. It was the first of a three-picture contract with Carlo Ponti for MGM. That affiliation guaranteed widespread distribution, so that suddenly thousands of moviegoers who might otherwise never have heard of Antonioni came to know his name. It is also the only one of his films that can be described as exciting. That is what made it appealing to the mass audience, to the great surprise of MGM's management and others in the film industry.² The fact that the murder is not solved, that the body and ultimately the protagonist himself disappear apparently did not distress as many viewers as the industry had feared.

Thomas (David Hemmings) is a highly successful young London fashion photographer. At the same time, he is working on a book of art photographs about life in London. As the film begins, we see him leaving a doss house (British for flophouse), where he has taken some photographs for his book. Driving his Rolls Royce home, he bumps into a group of mimes, apparently celebrating Rag Week. At his studio, he begins a normal morning's work, first with the model Verushka (whom he arouses into a suitably erotic mood), then with a group of models dressed in outlandish high-fashion costumes. He abandons them in the middle of the session and drives to an antique shop, which his agent is negotiating for. The owner is out, and her elderly assistant refuses to let him buy anything or even to look at the merchandise. While waiting for the owner to return, he wanders into a nearby park, where he sees a couple dallying—a young woman and an older, gray-haired man. The Girl (Vanessa Redgrave) seems to be pulling the Man into a clearing. Thomas quickly takes a number of photographs. The Girl sees him, rushes over to demand the roll; he refuses. Later she appears at his studio, still clamoring for the film. He gives her another roll and develops the film. By making a series of enlargements, he is able to discern the figure of a man with a gun in a nearby copse. He calls his friend to tell him that he has saved the Man's life, but he is distracted by two aspiring teenage models at the door, with whom he has a casual orgy. Returning to his blowups, he discovers that the Man's head can be seen at the bottom of a tree. He

first time in the film he has forgotten his camera. Back at his studio, he discovers that the prints and negatives have been stolen. When he returns to the park, the body, too, has disappeared. In the last sequence, we see him watching the mimes play a game of tennis without ball or racket. In the very last shot, he, too, disappears from the screen.

Blow-Up was inspired by a short story by the Argentinian writer Julio Cortázar, "Las babas del diablo," translated as "Blow-Up"³ (though literally it means "devil's drool," a Spanish idiom equivalent to "a close shave"). Narrated alternately and indeterminately in the first and third person, the story recounts an adventure in the life of one Roberto Michel, a Chilean translator and amateur photographer who lives in Paris. Cortázar's story is superficially quite different from the film. One Sunday Michel photographs a weathered blond embracing an adolescent boy. The woman furiously demands the negative. The boy slips off "like a gossamer filament of angel-spit in the morning air. But filaments of angel-spittle are also called devil-spit." At that point, a man in a gray hat appears; he had been sitting in a nearby car reading a newspaper. Several days later, Michel develops the photos and hangs a blowup of the shot of the woman and the boy on the wall, occasionally looking at it as he works. At first he feels satisfied that he helped the boy to escape. But then the images in the blowup start to move: the trees tremble, the woman caresses the boy's cheek, the boy looks suspiciously at the car where the man in the gray hat sits, the man comes up and looks at them "disgusted and demanding." Suddenly Michel realizes that what is about to happen will be worse than he imagined: the woman is seducing the boy only for the man's sake, and the boy is going to agree to a homosexual encounter for money. Michel feels that he himself has begun moving toward them; he enters the picture. The man, who is now looking at him, looms closer and closer until he seems only "a lump that blotted out the island." Michel bursts into tears. In the final paragraph, he lies in his room, looking at the sky through "a very clean, clear rectangle tacked up with pins on the wall of [his] room."

Summarizing the story is not easy, and interpreting it is even more difficult. It is a very open text. My own interpretation is that Michel suffers a schizophrenic episode, probably in response to homosexual conflicts of his own. (Projection, here made literal in the blow-up-become-holographic-movie, is a standard symptom of schizophrenia.)⁴ But the problems that Thomas faces seem existential rather than psychiatric. Antonioni has said that the only thing he really borrowed from Cortázar's story was the idea of a crime discovered by making a photographic enlargement. That is not quite true: There are some other similarities: the photograph is taken surreptitiously of a couple meeting illicitly; the partners are of markedly disparate ages; the woman is enraged and tries to prevent the picture or pictures from being developed; the photographer does the developing himself; the photographer discovers that things are worse than he had originally thought or imagined (and they continually get worse); the blowup or blowups finally disappear, and the photographer suffers as a result (Michel is rendered catatonic; Thomas literally disappears).⁵

THEMES, OLD AND NEW

But it is true enough that the thematic preoccupations of the film are different from those of the story. Some are familiarly Antonionian. Distraction is one. In *Blow-Up*, distraction is no longer simply a bad habit: it has become a way of life.

Thomas never finishes anything: even at the two most critical moments in the film, when he tries to tell Ron about his grisly discovery, he gets completely sidetracked, first by the sexual romp with the two teenagers, then by an intricate series of events in which distractions interrupt distractions. On his way to persuade Ron to help him photograph the body, he is distracted by a glimpse of the Girl; jumping out of his car, he misses her, hears some muffled rock music, enters a rock music club (in front of the door, a sign bears an amusing pun: Keep Clear).

Inside, he joins an audience watching the Yardbirds, gets caught in a mad scramble for a piece of the guitar that one of the musicians breaks because his amplifier will not work properly. Finally, he arrives at Ron's party, only to find his friend thoroughly stoned. Marijuana is famous for its ability to impair short-term memory. It is not only instrumental to the plot but symptomatic of the prevailing state of mind among the characters. Ron and his friends have found the ultimate—because psychedelically guaranteed—distraction. Looking at Thomas, the befuddled Ron asks, "What's the matter with him?" And then, "What did you see in that park?" To which Thomas wearily replies, "Nothing."

Thomas's response not only indulges Ron's condition, but, more profoundly, it represents the inability of the mod individual, indeed of the whole subculture, to get anything of consequence done. This is not meant in a traditional moral sense: the point is not that Thomas failed to call the police but that he failed to photograph the murder even for his own purposes. He, too, gets stoned. (As Bob Dylan's song puts it, "Everybody must get stoned.")

In Antonioni's earlier films, the characters were unable to convey their feelings to each other at an emotional level, but they could at least communicate superficially. In *Blow-Up*, people cannot do even that; they seem to forget from one moment to the next what has just been said. As a critic commented, "This is a world that cannot negotiate or sustain social interaction." Patricia, wife of the painter Bill, Thomas's neighbor, comes into Thomas's studio just as he discovers that his studio has been rifled. He wants to talk about the murder, and she wants to talk about some kind of trouble she is having, but they cannot stick to either topic. It is as if the ordinary rules of conversation no longer held. The two are so preoccupied that they are unable to respond appropriately to each other's speech acts. The interchange is a tissue of non sequiturs: Patricia asks Thomas if he is looking for something. He answers by skipping to her problem: "Do you ever think of leaving him?" She says she doesn't think so, to which he responds that he saw a man killed that morning. Patricia asks how it happened. He answers, "I don't know, I didn't see." To this blatant self-contradiction, Patricia merely responds,

"You didn't see." The intonation makes it sound not like another question ("What do you mean, you didn't see?") but rather like a sad confirmation of the paradoxical nature of things. She asks, "Shouldn't you call the police?" perhaps trying to be helpful in a world in which things can no longer be taken for granted. But Thomas, riding his own obsessive hobbyhorse, only nods toward the blowup: "That's the body." At this Patricia succumbs to esthetic distraction: "It looks like one of Bill's paintings." Then she returns to her own problem: "Will you help me? I don't know what to do." "What is it?" asks Thomas, a bit irritatedly. But as he waits for her answer, she looks at the photograph again and says, "I wonder why they shot him," and absently wanders off.

Along with distraction, characters express that familiar Antonionian need to get away from it all. Veruska "goes to Paris" by getting stoned at Ron's party. The woman who owns the antique shop (where Hawaiian music fills the air) longs to escape to Nepal, but when she learns that Nepal is "all antiques," she says she will settle for Morocco. Thomas himself admits to Ron that he wants to get away from London and its "bloody bitches," but the best he can do is to buy a mere synecdoche of flight, an antique wooden propeller. And the mimes represent some ultimate escape: handling the world by treating it as if it were imaginary.

There are also instances of the old-versus-new theme. Thomas's interest in buying an antique shop resembles motifs that we have encountered as far back as *L'Avventura*: Raimondo carelessly drops an amphora, a baroque palace houses a police station, and so on. The old man who works at the shop senses the superficiality of Thomas's interest in antiques and refuses to sell him anything. And he is right: Thomas sees the shop only as a way to turn a neat profit on campy nostalgia.

In *Blow-Up* personal relations have become so attenuated that they have practically vanished. Thomas's wife or girlfriend never appears, has no name; we are not even sure she exists. All we know is that he requests somebody on the pay phone to call him back at his studio in a few minutes. We presume that it is she who calls when he gives the receiver to the Girl. But who can be sure?

So far, I have offered interpretations of Thomas's apparent helplessness that would relate this film to Antonioni's previous concerns. However, the central thematic of *Blow-Up* strikes me as quite new. For the first time, Antonioni directly engages the question of art and in particular its links to illusion and our very capacity to see. As he told Moravia, "To see or not to see is the question." And in the "Preface" to *Technically Sweet*, he says, "In [*Blow-Up*] I said that I do not know what reality is. Reality escapes us, changes constantly, when we believe we have grasped it, the situation is already otherwise. . . . The photographer in *Blow-Up*, who is not a philosopher, wants to see things more closely. But he discovers that, in enlarging too much, the object itself decomposes and disappears. Thus there is an instant in which reality comes forth, but then immediately thereafter it vanishes."⁸ It is no longer merely our emotions but now our very perceptions that are called into question. Hence Antonioni's choice of artist as protagonist suggests a clearly a fortiori argument: if even professional eyes cannot master appearances, how can the rest of us assume that seeing is believing?

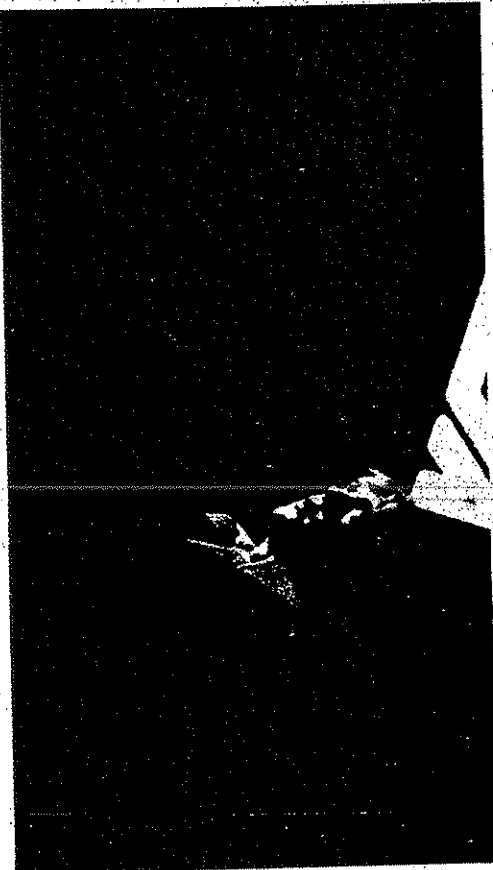
THE BLOWUPS

Art can never be more than illusion. The ambiguity of visual appearance in *Blowup* is illustrated in many details: the transparent plastic panels behind which the models pose; the political placards that read *on* or *no*, depending on how they are held; the random splatter "action" style of Bill's paintings; his wife's peekaboo



Frame 97

205



Frame 98

fishnet dress; the not quite comprehensible neon sign above the park. In Thomas's own disappearance at the very end, which Antonioni has called his "autograph," the theme of visual ambiguity transcends the mere story and enters the very structure of the discourse.

But it is the blowup sequence itself that most brilliantly advances the theme. We are confronted with no less than three orders of phenomena: the events themselves, that is, our own perception of what occurred out there in the park; the photographic prints and blowups of details of these prints that Thomas makes in his studio; and the crime that he reconstructs from the photographs. These phenomena are worth close inspection, but they are complicated, and we will require labels to keep them straight.

Let us number the actual events that we can see for ourselves:

1. The Man and the Girl climbing a wooded slope;
2. The Girl pulling the Man into a clearing in the park, her back sportively bent and her laughter clearly audible;
3. Another view of the couple, now farther into the clearing;
4. The couple embracing;
5. The couple separating and the Girl walking around looking into various corners of the park;
6. The Girl drawing the Man under a tree opposite the copse where (we later learn) the gunman hides;
7. The couple seen from closer in and laterally, no longer from Thomas's point of view, then the Girl running toward him in the deep background;
8. The Girl, at the top of the stairway, holding her hand in front of her face as if to ward off the photograph and shouting at Thomas to stop;



Frame 99

9. The Girl rushing back to the clearing;
10. The Girl standing momentarily under a tree, then continuing to run away from Thomas and the movie camera until she disappears beyond the copse.¹²

Now if we list the photographs that Thomas develops and hangs while still wet on his studio walls in the order in which they appear in the movie, we have the left-to-right narrative array that Thomas finally constructs (except for one rear-negative taken with Thomas's Nikon. But some are double blowups, that is, they are blowups of certain details of the original blowups, which Thomas photographs again in his studio. In fact, the most crucial photo is a triple blowup. An interesting additional twist is that sometimes what we see has been enlarged not by Thomas but by Antonioni's movie camera, closing in on a photo. These enlargements sometimes coincide with Thomas's moving in physically on the blowups, but in a few instances they are not so easy to explain. It is as if the movie camera at times wants to discover the crime on its own, even as it shows us how Thomas did so. It implicates us first in the discovery of the crime, then in Thomas's inability to do anything about it.

Here is the first series of Thomas's blowups. To keep them separate from the actual events, let us use letters:

- (a) The Girl pulling the Man, her back bent as if ardently;
- (b) The couple kissing, the Man's back to the camera;
- (c) A secondary blowup of the couple's faces in (b) confirming that the Girl looks, indeed, very anxious about something she sees in the copse;



Frame 100



Frame 101



Figure 102

- (d) A secondary blowup, very grainy in texture, of another sector of (b): the piece of corpse at which the Girl is staring; a fence runs along the base, and at first glance there is nothing more discernible above the fence than blotches of black, gray, and white.
- (e) The Girl holding her hand in front of her face (corresponding to actual event 8);
- (f) A secondary blowup of the Girl's first glimpse of Thomas.
- (g) A secondary blowup of the Girl biting her fingernail and the Man looking perturbed, obviously because they now understand what Thomas has been doing;
- (h) A secondary blowup of the Man alone looking at the Girl and Thomas.

SEARCH FOR TEXT

I have described these photographs as forming a narrative array, a "textualization" or "entexting" of what would otherwise be a random group of photographs. Indeed, much of the film can be seen as an account of the artist's effort to textualize a puzzling experience. In this instance, the text is narrative, though other types—lyric, exposition, description, to name only three—are possible. Narration is both the readiest and the most dramatic way of explaining an otherwise incomprehensible group of events.¹³ Though photographers, like painters, generally concentrate on single pictures that say "everything," Thomas likes to work with sequences. The fact that Thomas narrativizes the park sequence recalls Antonioni's other exploration of the process of making visual narrative, *L'innocenza menzogna*. Thomas's work also resembles that of making a narrative movie in that it is a kind of storyboard. Thomas's efforts obviously relate in some important way to Antonioni's own labors as a maker of feature films.¹⁴

Thomas reconstructs the crime in several stages. In the first, he tries to understand what happened simply by connecting photos (a) and (b). But he notes something strange in the Girl's expression in (b), and so (stage two) he makes the secondary blowup of her face (c). Thus (c) functions like a close-up insert in montage; it does not signal the next narrative moment, but (like the close-up on the spy's missing finger in *The Thirty-Nine Steps* or the poisoned cup in *Notorious*) it calls attention to a detail crucial to the plot. Thomas scans (b) for the reason for the Girl's consternation. He traces her eye-line toward the corpse; not finding anything there, he shrugs his shoulders as if to dismiss the matter. But (stage three) he cannot resist trying again. A magnifying glass helps him find a clue in (b), which he marks with a white grease pencil. He blows it up into (d), which contains two suspicious blobs, one above the assassin's face and the gun in his fist. Thomas's moving gaze is communicated by two pans along the studio wall—left to right, then back and left to right again. The repeated movement of the camera is an important signal of Thomas's struggle to textualize (another is counting off the photos on his fingers). The second pan also entails a forward track by the movie camera to convey Thomas's own movement toward the pho-

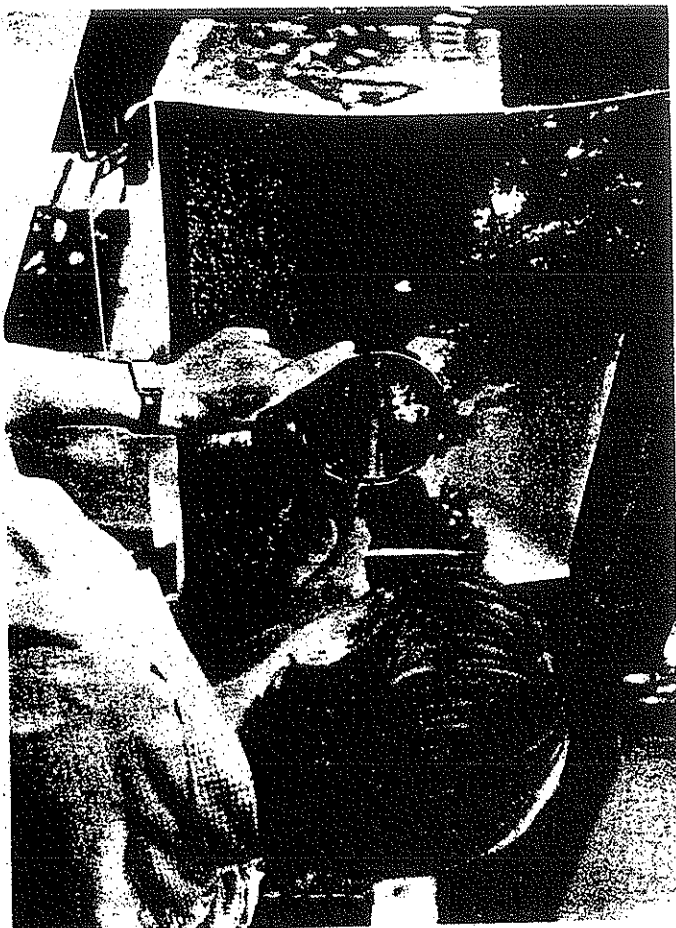


Figure 103

tos. But Antonioni's camera, like Thomas's, goes too close: the gun hand is cut off by the lower edge of the frame, and without it it is impossible to perceive a face. Indeed, Thomas has not understood the blobs: he stands back and rubs his face perplexedly.

Stage four: baffled, Thomas prints all the negatives he has. He hangs four of these, (e) through (h), to the right of those already hung. They are not in the correct story sequence: (e) clearly took place after (f).

Stage five: still baffled, Thomas tries to phone the Girl but discovers that she has given him a false number. He goes back and contemplates the enigmatic blobs in (d). He sees something and runs to the darkroom. There he prints a blowup (i) of a small area of (d): it shows a hand holding a gun. Now we understand why the movie camera close-up had missed the gun in stage three: it was so that Thomas could make the discovery at this later stage. He returns to his narrative array and replaces (e)—clearly out of sequence—with (i), not because (i) temporally follows (d) and precedes (f), but because it is an improved version of the telling montage insert that (d) tried to be. (In a reversal of the close-up on (b) of stage three, (i) deletes the face. But that does not matter: Thomas is excited about the fact of the assassination attempt, not the identity of the would-be assassin.)



Figure 104

emulation of Thomas's inquiry procedure but by straight cuts from one image to another in the sequence to which Thomas has assigned them. It is very much as if Thomas were asserting to himself (and to anyone who cared to look on): "This is what happened out there in the park. The pictures tell the story." And in their immediacy the straight cuts suggest a flashback to the scene itself. Like Antonioni, Thomas is an artist who prefers images to words (notwithstanding Ron's captions to the contrary).¹⁵

Stage six: after the distraction provided by the brief orgy, Thomas returns to (1). He examines the base of the tree and confirms the presence of the corpse by an examination of the same area in (k). Only now does he grasp the full story.

The artist discovers the facts by creating a narrative text. But these facts occur in what we know to be a fiction, hence an illusion. Thomas's disappointment, at the end of the film, reminds us that it is he and not "history" that conjures up this particular illusion. As a fashion photographer, Thomas is already something of a prestidigitator, a master of illusion, as we learn by looking at the props in his studio and at the otherwise unmotivated piece of business in which he mystifies the teenage girls by making a coin appear and disappear behind his fingers. Nor is it an accident that he feels kinship with the student mimes: Thomas, like them, masquerades to practice his art—he dons tatty clothes so that he can pass as a bum in a doss house, and he recognizes and appreciates the mimes' art of reducing the world to absurdity by filling real spaces with imaginary objects. Behind them all, of course, is the master illusionist Antonioni, who practices an art that can make an imaginary tennis racket resound against an imaginary ball—and can whisk even the hero into thin air.¹⁶

interpretations. I see in it concern about his own sanity but also rueful resignation about the limits of art's power to interpret. The conclusions that the artist reaches, however concrete his materials, may be mere will-of-the-wisps, of no greater substance than the mines' imaginary tennis rackets and ball, which are the materials of *their* art. And the illusion exists only because the artist allows it to, because he gives it permission, so to speak. Under such circumstances, is it a wonder that the artist becomes so concerned about the possibilities of madness?

In an interview during the making of *Blow-Up*, Antonioni said, "I'm really questioning the nature of reality. This is an essential point to remember about the visual aspects of the film since one of its chief themes is 'to see or not to see properly the true value of things.'" (Notice here surely means "import" or "quality," not "worth" or "price.") The chief inspiration for the story was a technical fact: the more one enlarges a photo, the more obtrusive the grain becomes, until it begins to interfere with the very contours of the objects depicted. Indeed, if one goes too far, the contours seem to disappear in a general atomic welter. The image literally comes apart before one's very eyes. That, of course, is the effect that action painters like Bill desire and achieve by flinging paint at canvases. Hence the importance of Patricia's association of the blowups with her husband's paintings. Scale is everything: the more one enlarges images under a microscope, the less stable they are. Sufficiently enlarged, even the photograph of a rock shows only an amorphous group of particles. Only the effort of the perceiver can hold things together. Bill says that it is "only later," after the painting is finished, that he finds something to "hang on to." "Only later," that is, after the creative hand and eye have done their work. Coherence is always man-made: the universe offers us nothing but chaos. We make what sense of it we can. Again, Antonioni's vision is bleak, but at least it is one that tells us honestly what the artist is up against.

THOMAS'S CHARACTER

More than Antonioni's other protagonists, Thomas is a person without a history. And by ordinary standards he seems less sympathetic than any character since, say, Mommia of *Le amiche*. Some critics have felt literally repelled by him. But that misses the point. Thomas is first and foremost an artist, and the film justifies the ruthlessness he uses to get his pictures on aesthetic if not on moral grounds. (David Hemmings plays the role beautifully, flashing his eyes in eaglelike vigilance.) And, as has been pointed out, Thomas's love of beauty in itself makes him a figure of some dignity. His interest in nature and art is pure and direct. His reaction to the beautiful light in the park is to leap instinctively in "agile, youthful awkward-graceful self-delighting high spirits."¹² His taste is swift and sure: attracted by Bill's latest canvases, he immediately offers to buy it. Even his method of working is not as callous as it may seem if it is looked at from an esthetic point of view. The photographic seduction of Verushka may seem manipulative, but it simply reflects his understanding of what inspires her to give her best performance.

ance. He is not dominating her for the mere sake of domination: rather, his approach to his art is equal in its passionate intensity to the sexual act. If, as a substitute for that act, he ends panting on his knees above her with his camera as if delusional, it is not necessarily some mod perversion but Antonioni's way of showing the intense absorption that art exacts and how it can replace other strong passions like sex. As for his treatment of the models, the "birds," who can deny that his cruelty has its effect, enhancing the chic posturing, the elaborate harlequinade of black and white stripes? Thomas knows what he is doing, and he works hard and attentively, though he has not slept all night. By fashion standards, his compositions are excellent, whatever the price that he and the models pay. And most critics agree that his "orgy" is less evidence of depravity than of childlike amorality. Thomas is no better but also no worse than his times.

RETURN TO DEPTH

In *Blow-Up*, the camera turns away from the flat abstract visual style of the tetralogy and renews its preoccupation with effects of depth. Antonioni said:

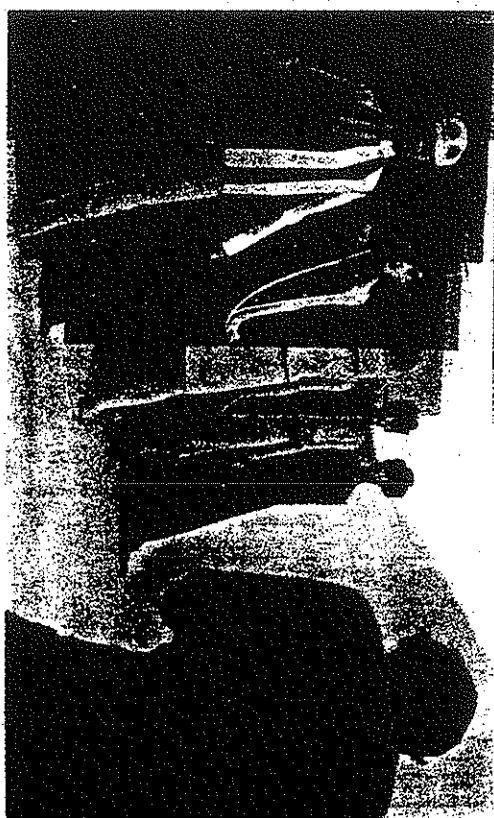
I worked a lot in *Il deserto rosso* with the zoom lens to try and get two-dimensional effects, to diminish the distances between people and objects, make them seem flattened against each other. This time, I'm trying to do something quite different. I've tried to lengthen the perspective, to give the impression of space between people and things.¹³

Why? Because the whole film turns on the problem of how to capture in a two-dimensional medium that which is out there in reality, that is, in depth. Unlike the hallucination of poor Roberto Michel, Thomas's art is not literally holographic; he clearly understands its limits. And so does his creator: Antonioni is only doing what Thomas might have done if he had had time and the proper equipment (a wide-angle lens on his Nikon that would better grasp the effects of depth—or even a stereoscopic camera). Clearly, with added depth perception, it would have been easier for Thomas to distinguish the outline of the killer from other blotches in the vicinity. (This is a skill practiced by archaeologists and above all by aerial intelligence officers, whose task is to disentangle the forms of guns, tanks, and trucks from the camouflage stripes and colors with which the enemy tries to conceal them. Like Thomas, they compare photographs of a suspicious area taken from different angles and distances to secure a perspective that will enable them to interpret two-dimensional images.) There are telephoto shots in *Blow-Up*, but they are limited to local effects, for example, pushing Thomas and Verushka onto the same plane in the photo seduction sequence or intensifying the sense of crowding among the ugly new skyscrapers of London. But wide-angle camera work predominates in the crucial scenes, emphasizing the fact of intervening space and so its thematic and diegetic importance.

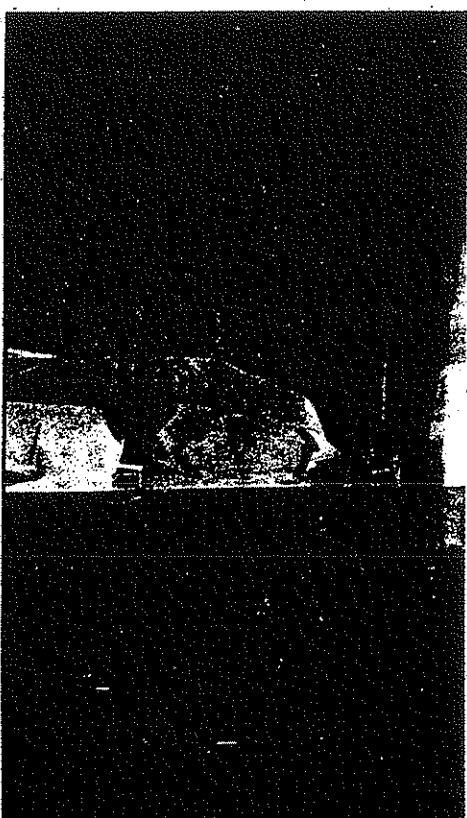
In editing, *Blow-Up* resembles even less the long-take films of the fifties. Right from the beginning, in the interchange between the mines and the bums leaving

the doss house, shots tend to cut from one stationary setup to another, sometimes, as in the sequence with Verushka, in imitation of the snapping of Thomas's still camera. Pans and tilts are brief and modest but for that reason all the more telling; in the sequences in Thomas's studio, each short movement reveals an extraordinary new composition of models and props. Antonioni seems expressly to avoid tracking the characters (for instance, when Thomas pays his visits to his neighbor's studio). When tracking does occur, the emphasis is clear, as when the camera roars off in the Rolls Royce leaving the teenyboppers gasping on the curb at all that wealth and speed, or when it runs with Thomas along the catwalk of his studio to test some new hunch about the blowups, or when it joins him as he looks for the owner of the antique store on his first visit. The camera's reticence really pays off in the park scene. Because it has remained so quiet, it becomes especially eloquent when it does begin to move. Thomas, on the prowl for good shots, scans the landscape. He startles a covey of pigeons, and Antonioni's camera sweeps up gracefully to capture their scattering. Once up in the clearing with Thomas, it makes a very special slow pan—about twenty degrees—first to the right, then back again, to show how he is measuring the couple's behavior for the story it might tell. (Ironically, of course, the movement anticipates the same kind of scanning that he does later in his studio to make sense of the blowups.) In the last sequence, its earlier reticence makes its sudden collaboration with the looping trajectory of the imaginary tennis ball all the eerier, setting us up for Thomas's final disappearance from the screen.

The voyeuristic illusionism of the photographer's profession, hence of the movie itself, is already illustrated in the opening titles. A gyrating model can be seen through spaces cut out of pasteboard and held up against the lens that spell the letters B-L-O-W-U-P. The effect of depth is enhanced in many shots by screening or filtering the characters behind an array of objects—colored feathers, glass panels, spotlights, lighting umbrellas, tripods, architectural beams and poles in Thomas's studio. The smoked glass panels are particularly intriguing; often we cannot tell at what depth, that is, through how many panels, we see models at one end or Thomas at the other. Similarly, both Thomas and the crotchety old clerk in the antique shop are screened by classical busts, figurines, furniture, wrought iron grillwork, and other artifacts. In both sequences, art and its tools are shown as a kind of necessary debris: the clutter is distracting but nonetheless essential. The messy uncertainty of human feelings is similarly reflected in the mazes of Bill's apartment; its inner windows, slats, lattices, mirrors, panels, dividers underline Thomas's perplexity about the relationship between Bill and his wife. One is reminded of the films of Joseph von Sternberg, except that Sternberg's screen decor seems purely ornamental, whereas Antonioni's functions thematically and evocatively of the surface of the mod world. Where the heroines of his films of the tetralogy stood vulnerably against flat unprotective walls, Thomas is typically trapped between layered screens (of his own making) as he pores over the inexhaustible puzzles of visual reality.

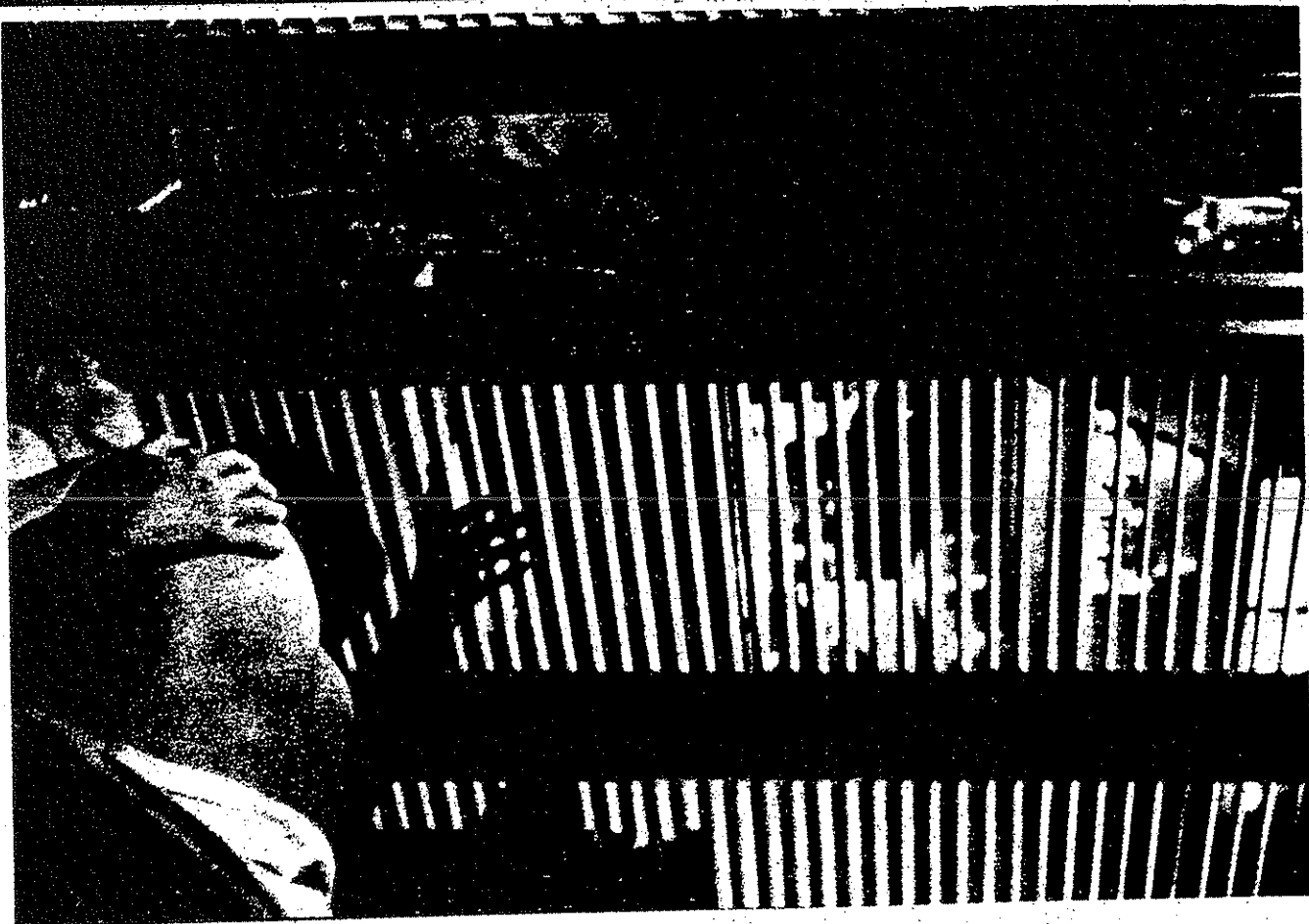


Frame 105



Frame 106

The only editing transition is the straight cut, its crispness often exaggerated by jarring changes in composition. In brief sequences, Antonioni experiments with the jump cut. The sequence with Verushka brilliantly communicates the modern technique of fashion posing, which turns the model into a kind of staccato ballerina. Our understanding of the continuity of her movement is ensured by the soundtrack: a phonograph plays cool jazz. But to remind us that the end product



Frame 107

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Frame 108

is, after all, a still photograph, the editor cuts brusquely and jerkily. The slow dance movements are periodically interrupted; the frozen interval shows us with the finished photograph will look like. The cutting rhythm speeds up as Thomas approaches his climax. In the first, voyeuristic stage, he keeps Yerushka at certain distance; in the second, more active stage, he closes in on her, his movements now matching hers as he calls to her, "Give it to me." Antonioni's camera makes wide, fast movements across their bodies as if it were itself in a state of sexual excitement. At the critical moment—Thomas shouts "Yes!"—the camera zooms in on her as she lies on her back. Afterwards, she lies exhausted, "satisfied," framed by a phallic brace holding up Thomas's ceiling.

A fascinating and characteristic bit of editing at the very beginning of the film also deserves notice. After the titles, the first images are of the mimes cavorting in downtown London. Suddenly, we cut to the bums leaving the doss house. In the first shot, a mime stares offscreen with such fixity that we expect an eye-lit match to the something at which she is staring. Instead, what we see is Thomas talking with bums at the exit gate of the doss house. Since they are not nearby at all since there is no other story relation between the mime and the bums, the effect is a kind of discourse framing: her glance makes her a speechless chorus or commentator on the spectacle of a rich photographer disguising himself to get son pictures and, more generally, on the events in the film as a whole. Physically, she cannot possibly see him; she is not a realistic but a spiritual onlooker. The mat anticipates and explains the whole nonrealistic and ironic function of the sequence of the mimes at the end.

The colors of *Blow-Up* are at the opposite end of the spectrum from the hazy colors of *Il deserto rosso*. Chosen as carefully as for a page in *Vogue*, blues, purples, and greens are used to express "cool" London, not only in the bravura

sequence of the models but throughout the film. The subdued color scheme reminds one of the subdued gray tones of the British sequence of *I viri*. Black and white appear more frequently than usual in a color film, not only to suggest "coolness" but to underline and justify the fact that Thomas works in black and white.

The sound track continues to function noncommentatively: contemporary jazz (Herbie Hancock) and rock (the Yardbirds) are used as environmental audibles, on records (the suitable background for models' work, Thomas's way of calming the Girl) and live (in the frenetic rock club sequence). Among the natural sounds, the most noteworthy is the rustling trees. Again, as in *L'eclisse*, they evoke both the realism of a place and its mystery. At the crucial moment of discovery, the trees become audible again in Thomas's studio, making the shot subjective in the classical cinematic sense, since it recalls both Thomas's and our own memories of the park. With his usual restraint, Antonioni resists the temptation to introduce a musical comment to mark the moment when the gun and the gunman in the corpse are discovered.

Blow-Up is a happy instance of a director's making a congenial match with foreign writer, actors, and production people. Antonioni said that from the thematic point of view the events could as easily have occurred in another Western European capital or in New York, but one wonders if the resultant film would have been quite so successful. Given his own affinity for the English scene and that special combination of high civilization and decadence that London shares with Rome, it is hard to imagine a better city. The choice of Southern California for *Zabriskie Point* was to prove less fortunate.

Zabriskie Point and *Chung Kuo Cina*

"America is a mysterious country." —ANTONIONI

Zabriskie Point (1969) opens on a meeting of students debating how to attack the establishment most effectively. Black Panther elements argue immediate violence; white students urge moderation. Mark (Mark Frechette), a loner, says that he is ready to die for the cause but not out of boredom and leaves the room. Then begins an extensive crosscut sequence between the stories of Daria (Daria Halprin) and Mark. At the skyscraper headquarters of Sunnydunes Enterprises, Daria attracts the real estate tycoon Allen (Rod Taylor), who hires her as a secretary. Cut to Mark at the police station requesting permission to see his friend Morty, who has just been arrested in a demonstration. He irritates the policeman and is arrested himself. Mark buys a gun under the pretext that he has to defend his sister against potential black rapists (the gun store owner tells him that if anyone dies in the backyard, the corpse should be dragged inside, since the law permits killing in self-defense). Meanwhile, back at Sunnydunes, the board of directors is watching a television commercial promoting desert vacation homes. Allen tries to reach Daria, who is to take a business trip with him to Phoenix, but she has already left in her ancient Buick. On campus, a police lieutenant demands that students occupying the library come out; four blacks emerge amid tear gas and lie on the ground. A fifth follows, flopping around as if he's trying to put his shirt into his pants. A policeman shouts, "He's got a gun," and another shoots him dead. Mark, seeing everything, reacts "immediately and instinctively." He grabs the pistol that he has hidden in his boot; a shot rings out, and the policeman falls. Mark escapes, calls Morty from a drugstore, and, passing a small airport, is prompted to steal a private airplane, the Lilly 7. Meanwhile, Daria calls Allen from a bar in a small town in the desert. She has stopped there to look up a friend who has taken a group of juvenile delinquent boys out of the city to "de-traumatize" them far from helping Daria the boys—who look to be about eight or ten—ask her for a "piece of ass." Stunned, she flees as they try to grab her. Out on the road, Daria's 1954 Buick meets Mark's newly acquired Lilly 7, and it is love at first sight. He buzzes her as she stops for water; later, when she finds the plane out of gas on a dry lake bed, they drive off together to find some. But on

13 Bertolucci's *The Conformist*: A morals charge

IN *Open City* THERE is a minor character so loathsome and perverse that we do not even stop to consider his motivation in collaborating with the Nazis. He is the Roman police commissioner who strives to outdo even Bergmann, the Gestapo chief, in hunting down Resistance leaders. The character of this super-collaborator little interested Rossellini, who was far more intent on showing the heroics of the partisan Italians—those who stood up to the Nazi threat and even to Nazi torture rather than surrender their freedom and dignity to a tyrannous state. Rossellini's film bespoke a Manichean division of the world into resisters and collaborators, and the latter were without complexity or human interest (with the exception of Marina, whose betrayal was motivated by sentimental, not political, considerations).

It took the Italian cinema twenty-five years to be able to look back at Fascism and war in a more complicated way, to ask what induced Rossellini's police commissioner to condone, if not to abet, authoritarian rule. In *The Conformist*, Bertolucci tells the other story implicit in *Open City*—that of one man's reasons for collaborating with a murderous regime. Where Rossellini's didactic intent in 1945 was to generate a new Italian society based on Resistance ideals, Bertolucci's emphasis suggests a far darker lesson for the viewing public of 1970. The impulse to consider the phenomenon of collaboration—not of resistance—makes *The Conformist* a cautionary tale—one that enjoins us to heed our history lest we relive its worst moments. "That is why I say *The Conformist* is a film on the present," Bertolucci told Marilyn Goldin. "And when I say that I want to make the public