

ON ANTONIONI'S BLOW UP

At the Movies by Michael Wood

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'I've gone off London this week,' the central character announces in Antonioni's *Blow-Up* (1966), released in a new digital transfer by the Criterion Collection. A local antique dealer wants to get away, to Nepal maybe. When told that Nepal is all antiques, she says she thinks she'll try Morocco. The film itself doesn't seem to share these moods at all, it can't get enough of the 1960s city, with its alleyways, shops, arcades, old red phone booths, a pot-smoking party in Chelsea and a club performance by the Yardbirds that is so authentic it looks like a flimsy parody of itself. Of course the mood of supposed distaste is really part of the city's offbeat attraction, its infectious, self-regarding faith that there is no place like it. In Antonioni's view – or in our view of his view as it appears after fifty years – that London was not so much swinging as dangling and scampering, not sure what it wanted but desperately sure of wanting it. Where else could you leave a flophouse among a parade of derelict old men and, glancing round quickly to make sure you weren't being observed, jump into your open-top Rolls and drive away. I didn't even know there were open-top Rolls-Royces – must have been another part of the 1960s.

Nothing ages as fast as style, and film is a merciless medium. But certain frozen styles have their appeal, and David Hemmings, as Thomas, owner of the Rolls and famous photographer who was in the flophouse collecting images for a book, is as impressively sulky and obtuse as he always was. I don't think I had noticed previously how distracted he is throughout the film, how perfectly he fits the role of the man who can't concentrate on the mystery he thinks he has discovered. There are several remarkable shots where he becomes the sole subject of the movie camera: standing between two prints in his studio, facing us, while the prints show us only their backs; alone in a park, stranded by a high-angle long shot in what feels like a world composed entirely of grass. Antonioni's camera becomes a model of looking, suggesting that Thomas's proud claim to be a photographer – this is his excuse for bullying women and invading privacy – involves a different kind of expertise, not looking but collecting. 'I've got to get a shot of it,' he says of a corpse he has seen, and the phrase might be his motto.

Thomas sees the corpse twice, once in a blur on an enlarged print and once when he goes back to the park where he took the picture. He fails to see it twice too, once when he actually gets the shot and once when he goes back again to see the body – now it's not there. We see a whole murder mystery in a row of prints in Thomas's studio: couple in the park, frightened gaze of the woman, hand with gun in the shrubbery, body on the ground. The allures of swinging London – a glimpse of the frightened woman on a crowded street, a night club, the pot party – keep Thomas busy for a while and by the time he revisits the corpseless park he is beginning to wonder whether he can continue to believe his camera's eye.

Antonioni underlines this doubt in a spectacular closing scene. A group of white-faced student mimes, whom we saw at the beginning of the film packed into a jeep, waving and yelling and apparently collecting funds for rag week, now shows up in the park, and two of them mime a tennis match without any visible ball or racquet, the rest of the students clinging to the netting that surrounds the court and persuasively imitating a crowd watching an actual game. Thomas also watches, and at one point the players pretend to have hit the ball out of the court. They indicate that Thomas should pick it up and return it. He does. Or he goes through the motions. The camera doesn't return to the court and the students vanish like the rest of the film into the realm that only memory can vouch for. We at least have Thomas and the grass to look at, though it's not too long before the words 'The End' take that image from us.

Antonioni said soon after the film's original release that it was about the disappearance of things we thought we knew, which is not quite what the usual critical interpretations of the film said. We thought it was about the elusiveness of reality itself – how do we know what is there and what isn't there? – or the perhaps useless infallibility of the camera. The intriguing question, it now seems, is not what the camera sees but what the camera doesn't see until someone has worked on the negatives. And then it's not the camera that is doing the seeing. It's not, in this film, Thomas either, because he knows only that there is something to see: that's why he is doing the enlarging. And even the full crime story told by the enlarged photos does no more than tell us there was a crime and give us images of the players in the story.

The camera story, in other words, is the exact obverse of the story implied by the mimed tennis game. In the first case the visual facts are present and recorded, in the second the visual facts are absent but treated as present. Is there a way of putting these two perceptions or riddles together?

Antonioni made *Red Desert* (1964) and *Zabriskie Point* (1970) on either side of *Blow-Up*, but we need to go back to films like *La Notte* (1961) and *L'Eclisse* (1962) to get close to the tone of the riddles. Yet in *Blow-Up* there isn't quite the existential ennui that seems to dominate the earlier films. Or rather it is that ennui, modified by the London scene. There is, for example, in Vanessa Redgrave's performance as the woman in the park and part of the murder mystery, an interesting sense of practical worry rather than metaphysical despair, and the film as a whole, while asking 'European' questions about reality and meaning, is marked by the characters' concern about what to do next, as distinct from speculating whether anything is worth doing next, or at all.

What links the camera question with the mimed tennis match is perhaps the film's curious equanimity about both. It's hard to think of them together, but there is no problem about filming both. There would be no problem about narrating both either, in voice or in text, but this only tells us something about representation as distinct from the represented, and leaves aside film's investment in sight and/or sound. We hear the tennis balls we can't see, for example, just as we see the details that only enlargements make possible. We live outside our perceptions, may be one suggestion we take from these phenomena. And another might be that precisely because movies seem to offer us such an overload of information of all sorts, because the information is in certain ways irrefutable, film is the ideal medium for reminding us how short the reach of information is, how much work it leaves for our minds to do. Those mimes aren't really playing tennis but it is really tennis they are miming. And the gun is in the bushes, whoever is holding it and whoever gets shot or caught in a shot.