

The Cinephile

Shirley Hamburg

1967

Michelangelo Antonioni's *BLOWUP*, to paraphrase Archibald MacLeish, is a film that means more than it is. Even if people are lost souls, as those in the film certainly are, their relationships to one another, to their surroundings, to the work of art in which they figure should be firmly apprehended and made convincing. Instead, the film's meaning is wide-open, so much so that I wonder if the Detroit release did not have sections necessary to the development extracted.

Nevertheless, the essential point of the film seems to be Pirandellian: The real and the imaginary encroach upon each other and become, finally, inseparable. Most obviously so at the film's end; the corpse has vanished as has all evidence of the murder—the very killing has been rendered nonexistent; conversely an illusory tennis game has been willed, believed into existence.

Related to this notion is the interpenetration of opposites, whereby the grave and the trivial, the earnest pursuit and the game, become interchangeable. We see this at the very beginning. The mimes turn out to be collecting for some "worthy" cause, while the shabby young photographer emerging from the flophouse with nothing but a small, grimy parcel unwraps an expensive camera from it and gets into his luxury Rolls Royce.

Or take the session when the young man photographs his luscious model. The foolish business of taking suggestive pictures is converted into, indeed usurps the place of, sexual fulfillment. The girl finally sinks back supine and the man straddles her as he and his camera swoop down for the clicking climax. All along, he rattles off clucking, hectoring, spasmodic verbiage which is the very deverbilized language of intercourse. The girl now falls back on the floor and feebly stirs her limbs to relax them; she is deliciously, narcissistically satisfied. Our hero, all pseudo-passion spent, collapses on a nearby sofa.

Amid all this a twinge of real jealousy occurs: "Who the hell were you with last night?" the photographer asks the girl; she merely smiles, mysteriously, bitchily. She tells him she's off to Paris. Later, he meets her at a pot party and exclaims, "I thought you were in Paris!" She drawls, "I *am* in Paris."

As one's husband makes love to one, one's face clutches that of a lover; illusion and reality, seriousness and play have become identical; all things end by floating into one another. So when our hero looks at his blow-ups of the park scene, the soundtrack rustles with wind-stirred leaves; when he is out inspecting the cadaver, he is frightened by what sounds like the click of a shutter—he may have been transferred to someone else's incriminating film. (Yeah, Antonioni's.) In the studio, strange photographs have their strident aliveness; while people, grotesquely costumed and envired, seen in reflections or through semi-transparencies, become dehumanized and reified before our eyes.

Even more striking is the echo of colors. When the hero is photographing his model, he is dressed in pale colors (blue, beige) she in black, and the flat backdrops are of a dark, brooding blue-green. Against this lowering viridescence, the sexuality of the photography session takes on an even more stylized, artificial look. But when the hero is in the park, shooting the temptress and her victim, his own attire echoes all the colors from the studio session (black jacket, light blue shirt, white trousers), while the surrounding vegetation repeats the same, somewhat lurid blue-green coloration of the backdrop. The cold colors thus juxtaposed create the same kind of elegant detachment

in the studio as in the park, and help to suggest that both photography as lovemaking, and lovemaking as a subject for shooting (with camera or gun) are rather alike: unnatural and unwholesome.

Characteristically, in a world where sensations, colors, sound and the perfume of available flesh take on the function of discourse, the word becomes debased and obsolete. Dialogue becomes a perfunctory caress or a sudden blow. Quite consistently, the film depends to an unprecedented degree on noises and may be the first in which the climactic revelation is a sound: the dull but loud and persistent whacking of a nonexistent tennis ball. So too the lines spoken by the actors are mostly balls of caprice batted about by backhanded drives.

The two basic statements of the film seem to be the painter's comment on his works, "They don't mean anything when I do them, just a mess. Afterward, I find something to hang onto, like that leg. Then it all sorts itself out; its like finding a clue in a detective story"; and the photographer's praise of his undeveloped park pictures, "very peaceful, very still," with which he wants to end his violent book to make it "ring truer."

Life, like art, Antonioni appears to say, can be figured out only a posteriori but we are in for some nasty surprises; the final truth does not ring true, or rather, what rings true isn't the truth.

It is the real that has to become illusory, after all, and the illusory real. When everything is evanescent, wraith-like, superficial only nebulae whirl into other nebulae, atoms into other configurations of atoms. There is nothing for me to make human contact with and become genuinely drawn to. It may all sort itself out in the end, but just what is that initial "it?" Unlike in a detective story, I haven't a clue.

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