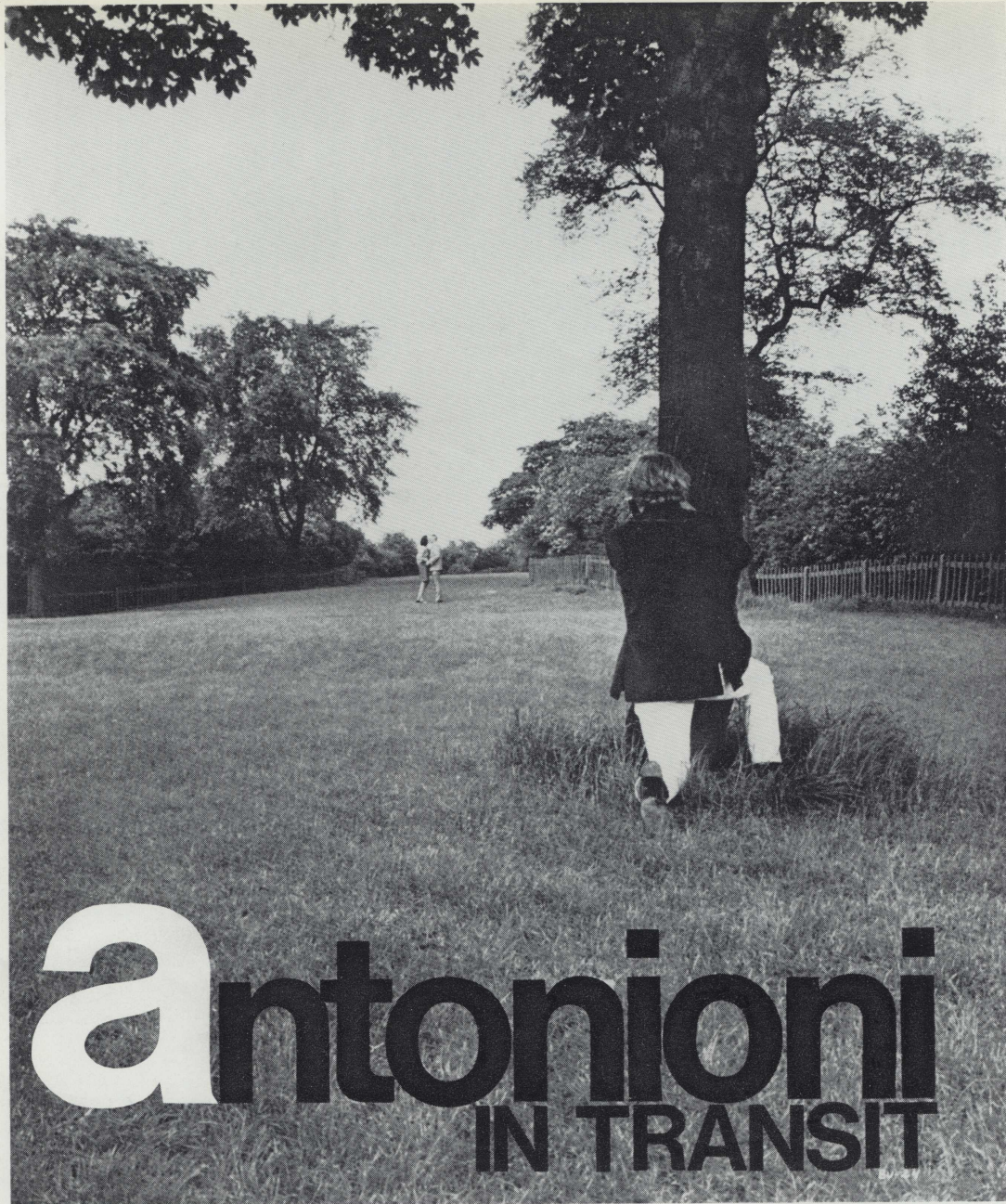


SIGHT AND SOUND

SUMMER 1967 * 4'6 1\$





antonioni

IN TRANSIT

"BLOW-UP".

Marsha Kinder

AFTER RED DESERT many people claimed that Antonioni had reached a dead end, that he was obsessed with the same theme in all his films and probably would never be able to break from its confined path. Then came *Blow-Up*, which seems to be a radical departure both in theme and technique. Yet upon closer examination, I think we can find that although *Blow-Up* may move in a new direction, the road it follows definitely leads from the earlier films. Perhaps the three most obvious differences are these. Antonioni no longer focuses on the inner life of his characters or on emotional relationships, but is primarily concerned with contemporary art. His central

character is no longer Monica Vitti playing a sensitive, suffering female, but an energetic David Hemmings playing a successful photographer in tune with the modern scene. The pace is no longer exceedingly slow with long lingering shots—but rapid, almost breathless.

The four films before *Blow-Up* (*L'Avventura*, 1959; *La Notte*, 1960; *L'Eclisse*, 1962; *Deserto Rosso*, 1964) do develop a single dominant theme—a sense of loss in the realm of emotions and personal relationships. Antonioni was concerned with the emergence of a new kind of personal relationship, for which most people are unprepared emotionally.

because their education, upbringing and culture have aroused a set of expectations which are difficult to reject yet no longer fulfilled in a modern world dominated by business and science. I do not mean to suggest that Antonioni's attitude is simply a nostalgic longing for the 'good old days'; it's more complex than that. He does not imply that the new world is totally negative, but recognises it has many important values—the power necessary for man to master his environment; an efficiency which may improve his lot by wiping out hunger, poverty and physical pain; and the creation of a pure, abstract beauty. Yet despite these values, he also suggests that this world poses a real threat because it implies the loss of other values—of long-term personal relationships, of the uniqueness of the individual. Thus, he presents us with a clash between two incompatible value systems, which is essentially a tragic view.

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Since Antonioni is primarily concerned with the influence of external conditions on the interior life of his characters, he had to use the right kind of character who could reveal these effects. His solution was to focus on a woman as the central character, and her relations with a less sensitive man. In an interview, he once said: "I think that reality can be filtered better through women's psychologies. They are more instinctive, more sincere." This sounds very much like Henry James' explanation of why he usually chose a woman for his centre of consciousness, and James was also concerned with an interior view. But perhaps a more important reason is that the woman is the one for whom the older values are most important; a stable love for husband and children is usually the centre of a woman's life. She is the one for whom the changes are most threatening, for she must find a completely new role in the new world. Moreover, the feminine principle is most closely identified with the values of the past that are being lost—sensitivity to human feeling, intuition, and instinctiveness. Once Antonioni shifted his focus of attention away from the interior life of his characters, he was no longer restricted to a female central character.

I do not mean to imply that the four films do not show any development: they definitely treat this main theme in different ways. For one thing, there is a growing recognition of and emphasis on the values of the new world: they are almost absent from *L'Avventura*, clearly present in *La Notte* and *L'Eclisse*, and receive considerable attention in *Red Desert*. Also, there are important differences in the central characters played by Monica Vitti. Claudia in *L'Avventura* begins naively with a belief in the old values, but painfully gains an understanding of the loss. Yet at the end she tries to maintain as much human contact as possible and settles for the limited relationship with Sandro in an attempt to compensate for the loss. In contrast, Valentina in *La Notte* knows about the loss from the beginning and is unwilling to settle for the limited relationship. Instead she remains emotionally detached yet longing for the impossible. Like Valentina, Vittoria in *L'Eclisse* also knows about the loss from the beginning, yet like Claudia she is willing to accept a limited relationship but without fooling herself that it is compensating for the loss. Although this gives her superior understanding and makes her the most stable and realistic of all the central characters, she does not have a capacity for feeling that is superior to Piero's as Claudia's was superior to Sandro's.

Giuliana of *Red Desert* also has the awareness of the loss from the beginning, but without the willingness to accept the limited relationship. In her case, the awareness leads to selfish narcissism and a psychological breakdown. She is struggling, not for awareness like Claudia, but for the ability to accept the new world—for some kind of reconciliation, which she finally achieves. Yet all of these characters would ideally like

to have the same thing: either the old type of relationship, which is no longer possible, or complete emotional independence, which would enable them to live in the modern world without pain. That is what Vittoria means when she tells Piero, "I wish I didn't love you . . . or that I loved you more." It also explains Giuliana's contradictory fantasies of having either everyone who ever loved her to be around her like a wall, or the complete emotional freedom expressed in her story of the young girl alone on the island who is caressed by the sand, sea and rocks. Anna and Valentina actually strive for such independence.

Antonioni does not offer an easy answer to the problem of the conflict between the two value systems. He seems to accept the new world as inevitable although it means a sacrifice of important values from the past. The only hope seems to be understanding and a sympathetic acceptance of whatever human contact is possible. Understanding alone won't suffice—as Anna, Valentina and Giuliana demonstrate. Nor will an unthinking acceptance—as in the case of Sandro, Giovanni, Piero and Giuliana's husband. The most positive characters must achieve both, as Claudia and Vittoria ultimately do.

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Although these four films focus on how changes in the modern world affect human relationships, they also imply that a similar change is taking place in art. For example, both central male characters in *L'Avventura* and *La Notte*—Sandro and Giovanni—are artists who sold out; and in both cases the loss in artistic power is linked to their failure in a love relationship. The change is also reflected in the examples of modern art that appear in the films—especially architecture. In *La Notte*, *L'Eclisse* and *Red Desert* there are many shots of huge modern buildings, obviously not built on human scale, which deflate the importance of the individual human being while celebrating the power of man's accomplishment. These buildings undeniably have beauty, yet of a particular kind—one that is clean, pure and abstract. For example, the huge radar towers in *Red Desert* are the products of science and technology, yet their design is lovely, delicate and graceful. They almost look like huge geometric webs; but they make the men who are climbing them seem like little spiders, which helps to explain why they are so frightening to Giuliana. The most important point that Antonioni seems to stress is that individuals appear out of place in these buildings or imprisoned by their precise geometric patterns.

I think we can best examine the change in art and its relationship to the theme of emotional loss by focusing on *L'Avventura*. Sandro is an architect who gave up design in order to specialise in making financial estimates. His excuse for selling out is that buildings are no longer built for centuries, but are replaceable like people. The accuracy of this statement is supported by many shots in the film. For example, the opening scene shows modern apartment buildings encroaching on the villa of Anna's father; the villa is as outmoded as his conception of marriage. Later when Sandro and Claudia visit the deserted village, he calls the architecture 'madness'. The entire village has outlived its usefulness and is now like a skeleton or graveyard. It presumably was built for workmen on a job, but when the work was over the village no longer had any use. In the modern world, men go where the work is; they no longer have any roots. Other examples are the buildings being transformed from a means of personal expression or seclusion to a public institution. For example, the police headquarters at Milazzo was once a beautiful villa, a monument of art, a means of personal expression for the builder, who (someone observes) is probably turning over in his grave. Similarly, someone humorously suggests that Montaldo's villa be turned into an insane asylum.



VIEW FROM A WINDOW IN "L'ECLISSE".

The signs of change in art are not limited to architecture. The abstract, dehumanised quality comes out in the scene where Claudia visits the art gallery, while Anna and Sandro are making love. She is more intrigued and delighted by the reactions of the people than by the paintings, which have no relation to human beings. The lack of permanence is also suggested in the scene where they discover the ancient vase on the island. It has lasted for centuries, but as soon as someone from the modern world touches it, it is destroyed. There is also a suggestion that art has become a source of exploitation, a means to an end rather than an end in itself. For example, Goffredo uses his paintings merely to express his sexual desire and as a means of gratifying that desire by seducing his models. In their momentary passion he and Giulia knock over his easel and carelessly destroy the 'art'. Similarly, Gloria (the prostitute who takes Claudia's and Anna's place with Sandro) claims that she is a writer who communicates with the spirits of

Tolstoi and Shakespeare. She reduces art to a cheap publicity trick and exploits it just as she exploits sex: she is a cheap substitute both for art and love. Thus, in this film Antonioni implies that art has undergone three main changes: it is no longer permanent, it is no longer related to human subjects or to the individual, and it has become a source of economic exploitation.

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The implications of these changes are developed much further in *Blow-Up*. In this film contemporary art not only lacks permanence, but actually values the moment. This helps to explain why the central character is a photographer rather than an architect, for photography is concerned with capturing the moment. Moreover, contemporary art places a value on something in a particular context. One of the basic justifications of pop art, for example, is that it takes familiar objects and puts them into a new context that gives them a new value. In other words, the value lies not in the object itself, but in its relationship with a specific context. This notion is mocked in the scene where Thomas goes to hear the Yardbirds and gets away with part of the smashed guitar. The fragment, which was so highly valued in that particular situation, is merely a worthless piece of junk once he gets outside into a new context. The importance of context is also implied in his selection of the propeller at the antique shop. It is the one item among all those antiques that is linked with the contemporary world—with technology, with dynamic motion. Once he has it at home in a different context, his excitement is considerably abated.

Secondly, contemporary art not only is abstract and detached from human involvement, but it actually becomes a substitute for such involvements. This is brought out in the comic scene when shooting his model with his camera becomes a substitute for sexual intercourse. Although Thomas claims he would prefer to shoot pictures of real people rather than beautiful models, he shows no greater understanding of the human significance of these photographs. In fact, he uses exactly the same language to describe them that he uses for his fashion photos. When one of these photos leads to the discovery of a murder, he is concerned with it only as it relates to his art—he never thinks of calling the police, or of finding out the motive, or helping to capture the murderers. In fact, he finds that the larger he blows up the pictures and the more distorted and ambiguous they become, the greater variety of interpretation they allow, and this leads him to the discovery of the murder. Thus, interpreting ambiguous art is like solving a mystery, which is almost precisely what his friend Bill had said about his own abstract painting. It is no accident that Patricia (Sarah Miles) points to the similarity between Bill's painting and Thomas's blow-up of the body. This leads to a valuing of ambiguity for its own sake.

Thirdly, the economic exploitation of art is practised not only by the amateur (like Goffredo) or the complete phoney (like Gloria), but by the most competent artists, which implies it has become an accepted part of contemporary art. The commercial photographer and the rock and roll star who are really 'good' are expected to succeed—to make money, to be well received. The stereotype of the artist is no longer an undiscovered genius starving in the garret. Artistic talent and success have become compatible and almost synonymous.

The expanded treatment of these changes leads to two other important implications about contemporary art. It implies that the creative process depends on accident and spontaneity and is really not carefully controlled. For example, Bill suggests that he is not sure of what he is doing while he is painting, that the creative process is marked by confusion; the control comes in after the painting is done and is manifested in the act of interpretation—of finding one little area that

works. Similarly, Thomas takes many shots very rapidly and then goes through the careful process of selecting the one he will use. It is the act of interpreting the pictures taken in the park that arouses all the excitement. The value of spontaneity and accident is also apparent in the scene where the Yardbirds are performing before a passive audience, which suddenly is transformed into a screaming mob when one of the singers 'spontaneously' smashes his guitar. Whether the whole thing was planned and merely appeared spontaneous, is ambiguous; but in either case, spontaneity is clearly valued.

Another characteristic of contemporary art is the confusion between the artist (the creator) and his instrument of creation. This is another example of ambiguity and is linked to the minimising of control that the artist has during the act of creation. This idea is suggested in the mob's reaction to the guitar, and also in the relationship between Thomas and his camera. At one point he contradicts himself by saying he 'saw' the murder, when what he really means is that his camera saw it.

I do not mean to imply that *Blow-Up* is solely about art, but rather that it is the main focus. As in the earlier films, there is a very strong relationship between art and life—and it is not at all clear which imitates which. For example, the valuing of the moment is also suggested by Thomas's extremely short interest span in any subject, by the concern with fashionable clothes, by the conspicuous absence of any long-term relationships, and by the owner of the antique shop who is tired of old things. The detachment is reflected at the marijuana party, where everyone turns on and tunes out. It also is implied in the love triangle between Bill, Patricia and Thomas, which significantly never really develops. She wants to leave Bill and apparently is attracted to Thomas. When she comes to ask him for help, she realises it is useless. There is a simultaneous conversation going on about her situation and the murder he has discovered. If he didn't bother to find out who was killed and why and by whom, then how can she possibly expect him to help her?

Ambiguity is perhaps the most obvious quality in the film. We find it in the dress of the people on the street, which makes it very difficult to tell the boys from the girls. We see it in Sarah Miles' dress, which purposely makes it ambiguous as to whether she is wearing anything underneath. We see it in the antique shop where the man's face is hidden behind the screen. Or in the scene where Thomas picks Jane (Vanessa Redgrave) out of a crowd. Or in the behaviour of the teenagers, which is a baffling combination of extreme shyness and boldness. And perhaps most obviously, in the neon sign over the park, which Antonioni had constructed to be intentionally ambiguous and which is only momentarily in focus. Thus, as in his earlier films, Antonioni is suggesting that there is a new style of behaviour which is in marked contrast to a more traditional body of values, but his emphasis is on the changes in art rather than in human relationships.

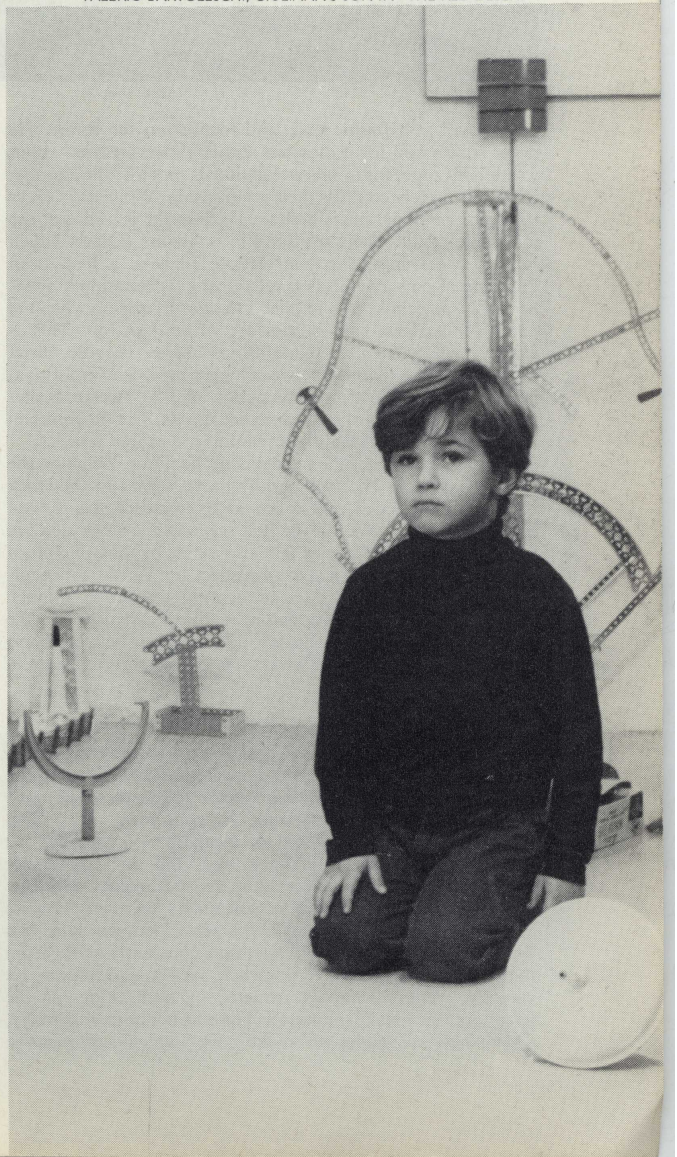
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The important question we should raise is how this shift in focus leads to differences in technique, for any good director uses the formal elements of his film to express the meaning. The answer is obvious with respect to colour; it is no longer used to reflect subjective views of reality and emotional attitudes as it was in *Red Desert*. But I think we can learn more about the changes in *Blow-Up* by focusing on this question with reference to pace and structure. In *Blow-Up* there is a radical change in pace as compared with the earlier films. The only similarity is that it has an important expressive function in both. The pace in the earlier films is generally very slow, and this has the significant function of taking the emphasis away from the action and focusing it instead on the mood or inner feelings of the characters. There are, for example, the long, lingering shots in *La Notte* of Lidia

(Jeanne Moreau) wandering aimlessly at the party or through the streets. Nothing particular happens, but that is precisely the point; it is the slowness of pace that reveals her emotional state. These characters are all looking for something that is missing, but they are not sure what it is or where to find it. The visual images are charged with emotional effects that take time to work on the viewer.

The most effective use of pacing in the four films occurs in *L'Eclisse*, where it is absolutely essential to the film's meaning. The centre of interest is the relationship between Vittoria and Piero, who represent two worlds that move at entirely different speeds; and this difference in pace helps to define each world and its values. Vittoria is a translator and belongs to the world of the humanities; her world moves very slowly, for it is concerned with preserving the values of the past. When she is alone, she moves slowly and follows her interest and curiosity wherever they may lead her without worrying about the time. In contrast, Piero works at the Stock Exchange and belongs to the world of business and finance

VALERIO BARTOLESCHI, GIULIANA'S SON IN "THE RED DESERT".





PARTY SCENE IN "LA NOTTE": MONICA VITTI AS VALENTINA.

that moves at a frantic pace and focuses on the future. He never stands still for a moment and is always worried about wasting his time, for in this world time is money. The contrast in pace definitely controls their relationship. While he is eager to begin the affair, she is hesitant because she is aware of the inevitable result. Their relationship is like an eclipse, which implies two things. First, an eclipse suggests a loss, or a dimming of power; and their relationship is certainly limited. Secondly, an eclipse also implies a temporary period when the paths of two heavenly bodies are in conjunction. This is exactly what human relationships have become—brief moments of togetherness between longer periods of emotional isolation, the temporary conjunction of two human bodies moving in different orbits at different speeds. The difference in pace is an indication that their relationship cannot last.

Antonioni arranges the incidents in the film to heighten the contrast in pace. The two rapidly paced scenes in the stock market are preceded and followed by some of the slowest scenes in the film. Within the first scene at the stock market, there is a moment of silence that also works by the principle of contrast. The silence is a sign of respect for a dead colleague, a human relationship; yet he is only granted a minute. Moreover, this minute accentuates the excitement of the market's normal activity, just as the brief affair between Piero and Vittoria heightens the awareness of their normal state of isolation.

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The rapid pace of *Blow-Up* is well suited to a character who is constantly on the move and concerned with capturing the moment. The pace of the film helps to express Thomas's conception of art and experience. He constantly moves from one context to another and is incapable of focusing his attention on a subject for very long, and this is partially expressed by the rapid succession of visual images. Not one single episode in the film is sustained; there are always interruptions. For example, in the scene between Jane and Thomas at his studio, their attention constantly shifts from their respective goals of getting back the film and finding out why she wants it, and is attracted by such things as the telephone, the music, smoking a cigarette, her posture. Finally, when they are about to make love—which represents a

distraction for Jane, who carelessly throws aside the film that she was so desperately seeking—they are interrupted by the delivery boy bringing the propeller. Another example is the brilliant scene where Thomas is developing the photos taken in the park and reaching various interpretations, which are expressed almost entirely in visual terms. This is the point where Thomas is most engaged by any activity, yet it is also interrupted by a 'phone call and then by the hilarious encounter with the two teenagers. Thus, in this film as in *L'Eclisse*, the pace is essential to the meaning.

If we turn to the structure of *Blow-Up*, we find that it shares similarities with that of the earlier films, but they are used for different functions. The basic structure of all five films is a cyclical pattern comprised of episodes which contain a certain amount of repetition and leave a number of questions unanswered. One way of achieving the cyclical quality is by having every picture begin and end in the morning. In the earlier films the repetitious cycle implies the interchangeability of persons. For example, Claudia replaces the missing Anna in *L'Avventura*. We are never told why she left, but we discover the answer by focusing on Claudia. At the end of the film, Claudia is in Anna's position—she is aware of the limited nature of her relationship with Sandro and of his weakness, but instead of withdrawing like Anna she accepts it. Similarly, in *L'Eclisse* we don't have to see the ending of Vittoria's affair with Piero because we have already seen the break with Riccardo, and presumably it will be just the same. The absence of a conventional dramatic structure also helps to suggest that in these films action is not the main focus and that the central meaning must be found elsewhere.

This is not at all the case in *Blow-Up*. Here, the absence of a conventional dramatic plot and the unanswered questions help to reveal Thomas's fragmented view of experience, which is comprised of separate moments. No episode reaches a climax or resolution; no human relationship builds or develops. This structure also implies that Thomas doesn't really care about finding the answers. In *L'Avventura* Claudia at first thought she cared about what happened to Anna, then only pretended to care, and finally had to admit she really didn't and to accept what that implied. But in *Blow-Up* there is no pretence: motives, causes, people simply don't matter to

Thomas. This lack of a conventional plot also helps to express Thomas's conception of art. If an artist assumes that accident and spontaneity play an important role in art and if he values ambiguity, then he is unlikely to have a tightly controlled plot with a resolution that neatly ties together all the loose ends; for such a structure implies that the artist has carefully planned out everything in advance. He avoids the conventional mystery plot.

Yet there is an irony in the structure of *Blow-Up*. Although on first view it seems to be episodic and rather random in order, a closer examination reveals that it does have a rather artificial order. Many of the encounters that Thomas has in the first half of the film (before he meets Jane) are repeated in reverse order in the second half, which makes a neat circular pattern after all. For example, it begins and ends in a morning when Thomas encounters the mime troupe. His next encounter is with the model whom he photographs, and whom he meets again at the party before going to look for the body the next morning. Next, he shoots the grotesque models, whom he refers to as 'birds' and whom he sneaks out on and leaves waiting with their eyes closed; which is paralleled by the scene right before the party where he hears the Yardbirds and their glassy-eyed audience and manages to sneak out with the piece of guitar. After leaving the models, he goes next door to see Bill and his girl friend, a visit which he repeats before the scene with the Yardbirds. Returning from his first visit, he runs into the two teenage girls, who show up later while he is developing the photos before he makes his second visit to Bill. The two central episodes are his two major encounters with Jane—the first meeting in the park is framed by two visits to the antique shop, and the second encounter in his studio is preceded by his stop in the restaurant and terminated by the arrival of the propeller from the antique shop, which links it to the first meeting. The structure, then, is not haphazard, which implies a distance between Thomas's and Antonioni's view of art. I think this distinction can be clarified by a closer examination of the mime troupe, which frames the film.

The art of the mime troupe in the final scene suggests an important contrast with the other examples of art in the film. For one thing, it is not temporary; pantomime is a traditional art form linked to the past, and the imaginary tennis game is a

sustained creation that does build. Secondly, it is an art which requires engagement—not only from the performers, but also from the audience looking on who contribute to the illusion. It also requires the involvement of the camera, which follows the path of the imaginary ball; and finally succeeds in winning the active participation of Thomas, who has been detached throughout the film. He actually retrieves the imaginary ball for them, and has to put down his camera to do it. This act recalls the first interaction between Thomas and the troupe in the opening scene when he contributes money to their cause. Thirdly, the artists in this instance are in control of what they are creating: the illusion of the spontaneous or accidental (that is, when the ball goes over the fence) is obviously controlled; there is no instrument (like a guitar or camera) other than the creators themselves; the ambiguity between illusion and reality is carefully controlled and is based upon a wilful act of imagination that is totally missing from Thomas's conception of art. This is the kind of art that is being replaced in the contemporary world, and its position at the end of the film helps to stress its significance.

I am suggesting, then, that Antonioni is critical of the style he employs in *Blow-Up*. It is not that the style is inherently 'bad', but that it can be used to imply a conception of experience that threatens to destroy values of the past. Yet he demonstrates that he can use it as effectively as his contemporaries. In this film he seems to allude to the styles of others, which was not characteristic of his earlier films—the fast pace of *Lester*, the Hitchcock-like treatment of the murder in the park, the mime troupe which seems to belong in a Fellini film, and even the allusiveness which is so characteristic of Godard. Yet he uses the allusions quite differently by making the borrowed elements peculiarly his own, by making them essential to the meaning of his own film, by putting them in a new context while still retaining and exploiting the context from which they are derived. This is the essence of artistic control, which is so antithetical to Thomas's conception.

Although Antonioni sacrifices the inner exploration of character, which was one of his greatest accomplishments in his earlier films, he does so intentionally in order to achieve a different focus and to develop different implications of his dominant theme. He could not have done so without altering his style.

"BLOW-UP": THOMAS'S SECOND ENCOUNTER, WITH THE STUDENT MIME TROUPE.

