

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## **BLOW UP** 1967

Michelangelo Antonioni

### OVERVIEW

*Blow Up* was Antonioni's first English-language film and the first made outside his native Italy. The original idea came from a producer who read about a real-life photographer, David Bailey, a working-class boy who made it big in the glitzy world of London fashion photography. At the same time, Antonioni himself had been inspired by a short story of Argentinian writer Julio Cortazar, called 'The Devil's Drool' ('Las Babas del Diablo'), which contains the central theme of a photographer who enlarges his photos to discover that he has captured something more sinister than was first apparent. Commenting on his film, the director said that the photographer 'wants to see something more closely. But when he enlarges the object, it breaks up and disappears. So there's a moment when one grasps reality, but the next moment it eludes us. This is roughly the meaning of *Blow Up*.' As many commentators have noted, the film is also a response to the famous Zapruder film, a home-movie made of the assassination of President Kennedy in 1963, and studied endlessly by the Warren Commission and others attempting to determine what really happened on that day in Dallas, Texas. *Blow Up* won the Grand Prize at Cannes in 1967.

### SYNOPSIS

This film follows a day and a morning in the life of Thomas, a fashion-magazine photographer in London, who happens to take photos of a couple in a park. When the woman demands he hand over the negative, he refuses. But when he enlarges the photos, he thinks he sees a man with a gun lurking among the trees and also a dead body on the ground. Trying but failing to contact the woman, he goes to the park that night and sees the body. But when he returns to his studio, he finds that the photographic evidence has been stolen. When he goes back to the park in the morning, the body has vanished.

### PEOPLE

Thomas	Thomas is a fashion-magazine photographer.
Woman	An unnamed woman is photographed by Thomas in a park.
Ron	Ron is Thomas' agent.

### SCENES

*Undercover* A truck with dozens of young revellers careens through the streets of east London. They jump out and run around in masks, creating carnivalesque chaos. That colourful and riotous scene is followed by a black-and-white documentary style scene of lean and desperate men filing out of a homeless shelter. Among them is shaggy-haired Thomas, who has been undercover to take photographs for a book.

*Photo shoot* Thomas slips away from those men, whom he has been photographing and runs around a corner, where jumps into his expensive car. He drives to his well-equipped studio and finds Veruschka (the real-life model) waiting for him. Now clean-shaven, Thomas breezes in, blows her a kiss and starts to shoot her in stylishly sexy poses for a fashion magazine. The energetic interaction between photographer and model mimics sexual intercourse, with Thomas practically thrusting his camera into her.

*Searching* Sated by his near-orgiastic experience, Thomas rests before doing another shoot with a group of young fashion models, whom he orders around with impatience and arrogance. Fed up, he walks away leaving the shoot unfinished and goes into a nearby apartment, where a painter friend has a studio. As he leaves, two teenage girls ask him to photograph them, but he brushes them aside and drives to an antiques shop, where he searches for something he doesn't know and doesn't find.

*Encounters* Wandering into the park across the street, he secretly takes pictures of two lovers kissing. Noticing him, the woman chases him and tries to snatch his camera. Thomas suggests that he should photograph her in his studio, but she makes no reply. Returning to the antiques shop, he buys a steamship propeller blade. Back on the road, he uses a car-radio system to tell a friend that he thinks he can buy the 'junk shop' at a good price. Over lunch, Thomas discusses his new book with his agent and notices a man watching him through the window. He goes outside, but the man vanishes.

*Flirting and lying* As he opens the door to his studio, the woman from the park races up and asks for the photographs. Inside, he says he needs them for his book, and she reveals that she wants them to avoid 'more disaster' in her private life. He flirts with her, saying she would be a good model and directs her in a pretend shoot. She attempts to run off with his camera, but he has anticipated that and blocks her exit. She strips off her blouse and offers herself in return for the photos. 'Get dressed,' he says. 'I'll give you the negatives.' Just as they are about to make love, a man brings the ship propeller to his studio. When she leaves, he gives her the wrong roll of film, and she gives him a false telephone number.

*Blow-ups* He makes enlargements of the photos of the woman with her lover in the park and studies them closely. He notices that she is looking anxiously at another person (not Thomas) hiding in the trees with a gun. He calls the number she gave him, but it's not hers. He calls his agent and claims that his photos saved the life of the man he photographed with the woman. The two teenage girls knock on his door and the three of them engage in wild sexual play, without intercourse. Realising that he needs to study the enlargements again, he orders the girls to leave without taking any photos.

*Dead body* Examining the enlargements, he makes out a body lying under a bush and assume he is the man with the woman in the park. He must have been killed by the man in the bush while Thomas was arguing with the woman. After nightfall, he returns to the park and sees the dead body, but when he goes back to get his camera, he finds it torn apart. All the photos have been stolen, except for one blurry enlargement of the body. When he tells his painter friend's girlfriend, she tells him to call the police. Instead, he calls his agent.

*No answers* Driving through town to see his agent, he notices the woman going into a club and tries to follow her but stumbles into a rock concert and then wanders into a marijuana house party, where he finds his agent and Veruschka stoned. Unable to convince his agent that they should go to the park for the body, Thomas also gets stoned. He never finds the woman.

*Tennis* Waking in the morning, Thomas goes by himself to the park but the body is gone. Thomas watches a mimed tennis match with mime onlookers. When the pretend tennis ball lands outside the fence, he fetches it and throws it back to the players.

## THEMES

### 1. *Reality vs Appearance*

*transience* Whether we view this film as a quirky murder mystery, a philosophical reflection on perception or a study of one man's loneliness, an important feature in all these interpretations is the transient nature of experience. Of course, cinema itself is a series of fleeting images, but Antonioni has emphasised that transient quality in every aspect of this film: in the click-click of Thomas' camera, in the fluctuations of fashion and even in the unsettled life of the homeless men whom he also photographs. The photographs at the centre of the story are stills, but even they are not permanent: they, too, vanish. Sexual attraction and sexual desire float through several scenes, but they never take hold. The final fade away is the film's signature.

*unreliable evidence* Within this transient world, the film examines various kinds of unreliable evidence. Photography itself functions as a symbol of the treachery of our visual experience. An enlargement is a distortion of an already partial reality. Thomas learns that he cannot rely on his photographs to present what is true. Other people appear and disappear, often wearing some kind of disguise. We also have deception in the form of the wrong roll of film given by Thomas to the woman and the false telephone number that she gives him. The world of fashion photography, which Thomas

inhabits, is all about surface distortion and fake emotion. Photography and fashion equate to a doubly deceptive profession for Thomas. Maybe, he, too is unreliable. Maybe he did not, after all, witness a murder in the park.

*enlargements* The central scene that illustrates this theme of unreliability is the long sequence during which Thomas blows up his photos from the park and studies them. Like a police crime investigation, he tacks up the photos on a wall to examine them more easily and in a group. Using a large magnifying glass, he notices that the woman is looking at something in the background of one of the photos. He enlarges that part of the photo to reveal a man holding a gun among the trees. At first, he had described those photos in the park as peaceful and serene, a nice contrast with the bleak photos of the homeless men. Now, he thinks he has prevented a murder by taking photographs of the lovers. An hour later, though, after blowing up more photos, he sees something lying at the edge of the trees. It is grainy and the face is unidentifiable, but it looks like a body. He stares and stares, steps back to get a different perspective and finally goes to the park to confirm that it is a lifeless body. Twice he has been mistaken about what he photographed. What he thought was a love scene turned into a potential crime scene and then into a murder scene. The long scene of examining the enlargements in his studio is a piece of pure cinema—no dialogue, almost no sound, only the movements and facial expressions of someone looking at images. But we cannot trust our sense perceptions any more than we can trust the camera.

*disappearances* If appearances are unreliable in the film, the opposite, or disappearances, are common. Thomas' photographic evidence disappears, the dead body disappears and he himself disappears (at the very end). But an equally significant vanishing is that of the woman in the park. She is there with her lover, and then in the photographs, but when Thomas needs to find her, to confirm his suspicions of what he captured in the photos, she is elusive. He catches sight of her entering a club while he driving through town. He stops and looks again, but someone passes in front of her and he loses her. Parking, he gets out and searches, hurrying down an alley and into a rock band performance. She's gone and he never finds her again. The figure who is so central to the story, to the mystery of the murder, has disappeared.

*disguises* Fakery, pretense and other versions of the unreliable also occur in an early sequence. The mime artists who ride on the jeep have their faces painted like circus clowns. Abandoning the jeep, they run past a pair of nuns on the street and then approach a guard in a 19<sup>th</sup>-century army uniform. Then, we see Thomas himself flee from the homeless shelter and emerge in a fancy car. Everyone is wearing some kind of disguise. We don't really know who they are. We cannot rely on outer appearances. Some of the revelers wear bright costumes, the nuns are in pristine white and the guard in fire-engine red. Only the desperate men, filmed in washed out colours as they file out of the homeless shelter, are what they seem to be.

*chaos* The revelers also introduce another aspect of the disjointed world in the film: chaos. A jeep full of mime artists, with painted faces, rolls through the deserted streets of central London. The young men and women shout, scream and make a racket by banging on pots and pans. The jeep stops, they pile out and run amuck in the streets near the Bank of England. In short, it is pandemonium in the centre of the staid financial district. They are, or at least resemble, anarchist demonstrators who create chaos not in support of a particular cause (that's too bourgeois) but for the sake of it. It's the anti-anti movement, which seeks to undermine our sense of normality, our need for stability and our mistaken belief that permanence protects us from life's vagaries.

*tennis game* The same group reappears in the final scene of the mimed tennis game. Now, their movements are more choreographed, stylised and deliberate, but still unpredictable. Like the opening scene, this closing scene dramatises a lack of solidity. Anything can happen, things are ephemeral. As with the erratic raucous display in the beginning, their actions have no lasting presence. The scene highlights the absence of essential things, the tennis racquets and ball, which is emphasised when a player gestures to Thomas to fetch the non-existent ball that has flown over the high fence around the court. At first, Thomas is confused, but then he plays his part in the pretense, retrieves the ball and tosses it back over the fence. The game is resumed, but Thomas, now a tiny figure viewed from a high aerial shot, walks away. Everything is either absent or disappears. Nothing lasts. All is transient.

## 2. Relationships

*Thomas the loner* The transient nature of the world shown in the film is dramatised also in the relationships that Thomas forms, or fails to form. He first appears with a group of homeless men, from whom he separates immediately. He then has an intense photo shot with a famous model, but shows no emotional attachment to her. Likewise, his relationship with the woman in the park edges toward intimacy, but he backs away at the critical moment. Thomas appears to be more emotionally interested in the girlfriend of his painter friend, but again, despite, some hints, nothing is established. None of his relationships has substance. All are temporary.

*Thomas and the groupies* The flimsy nature of Thomas' relationships is best illustrated in the 'groupie sex scene.' Two teenage girls, who want to be fashion models, arrive at Thomas' studio just after all his photos have been stolen. Distraught, he finds the wannabes a pleasant distraction. While he's on the telephone, the girls dress themselves in models' clothes found on a rack. Thomas finds one of them half-naked and pursues her. Soon the other girl runs into them and they all fall to the ground, tearing off their clothes, pulling hair and squealing. There is no lust, only laughing. The whole scene is, again, anarchic, wild and directionless. There is a hint of sexual predation on his part, and a suggestion of sexual pleasure on theirs, but there is nothing permanent, and certainly no real sex, only fast-moving and shifting bodies. Again, everything is transient.

*woman in the park* The only other key character, the woman in the park, is similarly disconnected in terms of relationships. Although she appears to be emotionally attached to the man in the park, he disappears and she is more concerned with destroying the photos than with his apparent death. She also shows a casual approach to relationships when she coolly offers to exchange sex for the photos. Her whole demeanor, even while taking off her blouse, is one of detachment, rather than desire.

## 3. Quest

Thomas is never without his camera. He is forever in search of photographs, of homeless men, of lovers in the park, of anything that he finds interesting. He has a vision of a photography book, which he discusses with his agent over lunch. He thinks that the 'lovely' photos of the lovers in the park will make a good contrast with the gritty images of the desperate men he spent the night with in a doss house. His 'day job' of taking fashion photos does not hold any real interest for him, aside from making money. Thomas is a serious photographer with a clear vision.

## 4. Leisure

*swinging '60s* Part of the appeal of this now-iconic film is its depiction of 'swinging London' in the 60s. Thomas does put in some hard hours at his studio, but most of the film shows people doing things other than salaried jobs. The lovers stroll in the park. A painter paints in his studio. Teenage girls play at being models. Thomas cruises around town and visits an antiques shop. People play tennis (with a non-existent tennis ball).

*drugs party* The highlight of this world at leisure is the sequence in which Thomas tries to find his agent. He drives his car into the centre of London, where bars and clubs are humming and the pavements are crowded with young people having a good time. As he cruises through the streets, he sees the woman in the park. She looks like she's going into a club, but he loses track of her and searches down alleyways until he stumbles into a rock concert. Still looking for her, he ends up in a drugs party, where his agent and his star model are stoned. He tries to convince his agent to come with him to the park, to look for the body, but his words don't penetrate the haze of marijuana. The music, the drugs, the sense of pleasure—all of it is redolent of that memorable decade.

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

**Thomas** Thomas, who is only once or twice called by name in the film, is a professional photographer, mainly making money as a fashion photographer but also producing a book of art photos. Young, selfish, shallow and arrogant, he stands for the amoral and rudderless generation of the Swinging Sixties in London. He treats his models with contempt and others with mild disinterest. Bored and fed up with life, he appears to have no interest in anyone or anything. Who could blame him, though, given the superficial nature of the fashion world in whose claws he is caught? On the

other hand, he is a talented and dedicated photographer, and he does try to solve the mystery of the body shown in his photographs. That single humane response brings out a hitherto hidden layer of concern for someone else other than himself. He is more a doubting Thomas than a peeping Tom.

*Professional* Thomas uses his camera as a professional instrument, as seen in the scene when he photographs the half-clad Veruschka. Although he shows up late, illustrating his disdain for models in general, he eventually becomes excited, almost orgiastic, as he urges her to adopt ever more provocative poses. She throws back her head, tosses her hair in the air and exposes various parts of her body beneath a skimpy dress. 'Give it me!' he cries. 'C'mon, c'mon! Really give it to me!' The scene could be seen as voyeuristic, except that Thomas remains emotionally detached throughout. Even when he slides down on top of her, in a position that could lead to intercourse, and kisses her, we sense that his goal is to arouse her so that he can get more sensational images. 'Yes! Yes!' he pants at the end, as if he has climaxed, and then slouches sated on the couch. He is exhausted, but his satisfaction is professional, not sexual.

*Voyeur* His voyeurism is illustrated in a later scene, when he photographs the lovers in the park. Strolling along with his camera, he is a predator, a hunter searching for prey. He doesn't find much at first, only a few pigeons, but then he sees a man and woman close together in the near distance. With his face obscured by tree leaves, he takes some shots. On the scent, he jumps over a fence to conceal himself more completely, and fires off more shots. He advances and takes cover behind a tree, then closer behind another tree. When the woman confronts him, he defends himself, saying that he's only doing his job. 'But this is a public place,' she argues. 'Everyone has a right to be left in peace.' Therein lies a contradiction in the accusations against the voyeur. The woman is in a public place, not a private one, such as her home. Thomas hides behind the lens, as a voyeur, but he can't see anything immoral about that.

*Arrogant* Thomas treats his models with utter contempt, calls them bitches and orders them around like naughty children. This is all shown in the first scene in his studio, when, after photographing Veruschka, he turns to a group of models arranged against a white background. 'Hey!' he yells at one. 'No chewing gum!' He clicks once and cries, 'Terrible.' Marching up to one of the posed girls, he says 'How about the leg further forward' and then yanks her limb into place. A moment later, he gets angry and screams at them to 'wake up' and says they're lucky they work for him. Still later, he marches up and down their line like a boot camp sergeant and screams in their faces. He tells them to relax and close their eyes, and keep them closed. As they stand there, silent and static, he leaves the studio. They are no more than mannequins to him.

*Disillusioned* Although Thomas is a successful photographer, with a well-appointed studio and an expensive car, he is not content. He is searching throughout the film. In the antiques shop, for example, he has no idea what he's looking for but he looks. As a photographer, too, he doesn't know what he wants but he searches for it, always carrying his camera with him. His disillusion with life is articulated in a scene when he shows his photographs to his agent over lunch. The black and white images of the old men's sagging bodies in the homeless shelter stand in sharp contrast to the colour images of young nubile models taken in his studio. 'I've gone off London,' he says with a sigh. 'Doesn't do anything for me.' As his agent speaks about the book, Thomas looks at an attractive waitress and says, 'And I'm fed up with those bloody bitches. I wish I had tons of money. Then I'd be free.' Thomas wants to get out of fashion photography, but he doesn't know how. He's trapped, working in an industry saturated with superficiality and where creating a deceptive image is profitable.

*Woman in the Park* The woman in the park is the only other substantial character in the film, and even she has no name and only two scenes. She is young, though perhaps slightly older than Thomas, and willowy with classic English features. Her eyes are her main feature, always twitching, never settling. She is secretive, not revealing her name or her telephone number, and only mentioning a potential 'disaster' in her private life. She has more depth than the other women in the film, the models and teenage girls, who flit in and out. She also seems in a hurry, running up to Thomas in both her scenes and panting for breath. She is an enigma.

*Frightened* The unnamed woman first speaks when she demands that Thomas hand over his photographs of her with her lover in the park. Having watched him from a distance, she races after him when he walks away. 'Stop it!' she cries, 'Give me those pictures. You can't photograph people like that.' When Thomas shows no inclination to comply with her demand, she grabs his camera and

tries to wrestle it away from him, even biting his hand. She is assertive and determined, but she is also frightened. When Thomas says, provocatively, 'Let's not spoil things. We've only just met,' her eyes widen with fear. 'No, we've never met,' she cries. 'You've never seen me.' Then, in a moment of silence, she looks around, searching for the man she had been with. He's not there. She gives a little cry and runs away. Although she seemed to be confident in confronting Thomas, she is not. Thomas is his usual arrogant self, belittling her and making flirtatious comments, but she is vulnerable, her firm exterior undermined by a sense of fear.

*Sly* The only other scene in which she appears take place a few hours later. Thomas is standing at his door, when she races up to him, as she did in the first scene. Again, she wants the photographs, but this time she does not demand. She asks for them. 'How did you find me?' Thomas asks, but she doesn't answer. Instead, with a slight smile she says, 'Do you live here?' Inside the studio, she is nervous but goes along with his flirtatious banter and flattery of her as a fashion model. She gets him to leave the room to get her a glass of water, finds his camera and makes a dash for it. But Thomas is no fool and, having anticipated this, blocks her path. Now, there's only one way to get the photos. 'Why don't you say what you want?' she asks and takes off her blouse. Thomas doesn't fall for that and says he'll give her the photos, but he deliberately gives her the wrong roll of film. She, however, has one more trick up her sleeve. When, in a reversal of roles, Thomas wants to know her telephone number, she gives him a false number. She has the last laugh.



(Thomas and Verushka)



(Thomas and the woman in the park)