

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Characters in Michelangelo Antonioni's Films

THOMAS (in *Blow-Up*) Disagreeable

Character 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.