

Blow-Up: In the Details

By [David Forgacs](#)

ON FILM / ESSAYS — MAR 28, 2017

<https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/4478-blow-up-in-the-details>



B*low-Up* was the first of three films Michelangelo

Antonioni made outside Italy under a contract with producer Carlo Ponti at MGM, and it was the most successful of his career, both commercially and critically. It won the Palme d'Or at Cannes in 1967, and many critics saw it as a refreshing change in pace and style for a director whose preceding work they had considered artistically important but “difficult.” Robin Wood wrote in 1968 that “its freshness and vivacity make one look forward to his future work with an eagerness one would scarcely have anticipated in the days of *La notte* and *L’eclisse*.”

Wood's eagerness was not to be sustained. Antonioni's next film, *Zabriskie Point* (1970), disappointed him as well as most other critics. *The Passenger* (1975), the last film in Antonioni's MGM contract, starring Jack Nicholson and Maria Schneider, partly redeemed his reputation, but neither it nor any of his other films would have the impact or popular appeal of *Blow-Up*. The initial project of a film about a London photographer had actually originated with Ponti. In 1964, he read a magazine article by Francis Wyndham about three new London photographers of working-class origin, and he hatched the idea for a film in which one of them, David Bailey, would play himself. It was only when Bailey turned down the offer that Ponti involved Antonioni, who was developing an idea for a film of his own about a photographer. It was "inspired," as the opening credits of *Blow-Up* tell us, by a short story by the Argentinian writer Julio Cortázar. Cortázar's "Las babas del diablo" ("The Devil's Drool") had been published in a Spanish-language collection in 1959, and Antonioni read it in a 1965 Italian translation. It tells of one Roberto Michel, a professional translator living in Paris, who goes for a walk one Sunday with his camera and sees and photographs a teenage boy he believes is being seduced by an older woman on a bank of the Seine. The woman notices Michel and demands he give her the roll of film, but he refuses. He is satisfied that his intervention has saved the boy, who runs away. Later, however, after enlarging one of the pictures and pinning it to his wall, Michel notices that the boy is looking anxiously at someone outside the frame, a man whose role he had not understood originally but that he now believes to have been central to a plot to capture the boy and lead him to an unspecified "awakening in hell."

Antonioni relocated the action from Paris to London, where a professional photographer (David Hemmings)

sees a young woman (Vanessa Redgrave) and an older man (Ronan O'Casey) in a park and furtively takes a series of pictures of them. The central characters are never named in the film, although in Antonioni's story treatment and in the published English screenplay the photographer and the woman are called Thomas and Jane. Unlike Cortázar's Michel—who as a translator, we are told, is “guilty of making literature, of indulging in fabricated unrealities,” and repeatedly projects his own interpretations and fantasies onto what he sees—Antonioni's photographer uses his camera simply to capture images of the scene in front of him, framing the couple from different angles within the setting of the park but not interpreting their actions or suspecting a dark motive. Indeed, he tells his agent, Ron (Peter Bowles), when he joins him for lunch, that the scene he has just photographed is “very peaceful, very still” and will make a perfect ending to his photo book, the rest of which is “pretty violent.” It is only later, when he enlarges and connects details between the photographs, details too small or too hidden to be noticed when he took them, that he constructs a meaning for the scene. And what he constructs, like a detective or forensic scientist, with ruler and magnifying glass, is a murder.

Unlike in Cortázar's story, too, where Michel's viewing of a single enlarged photograph occurs toward the end and contains a sort of final epiphany, in *Blow-Up*, the two sequences of the processing and examination of the photographs are its structural center. Antonioni had sent an early treatment for the film to the writer Italo Calvino, inviting him to collaborate on the screenplay. Calvino declined, but he encouraged Antonioni, in a letter of September 1965, to expand the part about the discovery of the crime through the photographs in order to “create the sense of a search for a mystery.” And indeed, in the first of these sequences, which lasts a full eleven minutes, the sense of a search for a mystery takes

over, aided by the absence of dialogue, apart from one brief telephone call, and of music. The jazz music by Herbie Hancock, which we heard on records played in the studio during earlier fashion shoots and in the woman's visit, is noticeably absent. The examination of the photographs becomes wholly engrossing, both for the photographer and for us, the audience. After the first sequence of the enlargements, the photographer believes his presence in the park prevented a murder, but after the second, he discovers it did not. That discovery precipitates a change in the plot and also in the character, throwing him off balance.

Yet *Blow-Up* is not a conventional murder mystery. It never reveals the murderer's identity or motive. The body of the victim, which the photographer sees and touches when he returns to the park at night, lit ostensibly by an eerie and illegible neon sign (which Antonioni had specially constructed for the film), has disappeared by the next morning, leaving only grass. Nearly all his photographic evidence was removed too, that same night, when his studio was ransacked. Instead of offering a solution to the mystery, the film goes somewhere else: toward a mimed game of tennis in the park, with the camera following an invisible ball but showing only grass; the photographer joining in the mime; and a final shot where the photographer himself, filmed from a high crane, dissolves away and again we see only grass.

Blow-Up was not the first project on which Antonioni had worked in London or in English. In 1952, he shot part of the final episode of his film *I vinti*, about a murder on an open piece of land, in the city. But when he went back in 1965 to visit Monica Vitti on the set of Joseph Losey's *Modesty Blaise*, he found London completely changed. It was in the middle of what he would describe as a "revolution in matters of life, custom, and morality" led by a young generation of artists, fashion designers, and musicians, and it had a

thriving photography scene. As he worked on *Blow-Up*, he became involved with this cultural milieu, just as he would four years later with the American student movement and the Black Panthers when he filmed *Zabriskie Point*. Critics often noted that Antonioni was projecting his own vision onto these foreign places, but the encounters worked in the other direction too. He was open and receptive to these new places and the people in them, and this affected the style and rhythm of his filmmaking.

While he was in London preparing for *Blow-Up*, Antonioni was taken by Clare Peploe to see an adaptation of Dylan Thomas's *Adventures in the Skin Trade* at a small theater in Hampstead, and he was captivated by the performance of the twenty-four-year-old David Hemmings, whom he promptly cast for the lead, replacing his initial choice, Terence Stamp, who had played opposite Vitti in *Modesty Blaise*. He made contact with the Royal Court Theatre—where Hemmings had made his stage debut—then London's leading experimental theater, and in that way found the writer of the film's crisp and witty English dialogue, the controversial playwright Edward Bond, as well as mime teacher Claude Chagrin, who, with her husband, Julian, performs the film's final tennis game, and actor John Castle, who plays Bill, the photographer's painter neighbor. He was introduced to artists such as the abstract painter Ian Stephenson, who made the paintings seen in Bill's studio, and to the Chelsea School of Art. He was taken to a Pink Floyd and Soft Machine concert at the Roundhouse, tried to get the Who for the club scene with the guitar smashing but settled instead for the Yardbirds, and filmed the band's scene at MGM-British Studios at Elstree, in a reconstruction of the Ricky-Tick club.

Always highly attentive to built environments, Antonioni was also fascinated by the new London architecture, and he captured it both in the opening

shots of the brutalist Economist Plaza (Alison and Peter Smithson, 1964), around which the students collecting donations for Rag Week circle in a Land Rover, and in those of the six tower blocks (1961–62) at London Wall, seen later in front of the photographer's car. Just as Antonioni had manipulated the colors of the landscape of *Red Desert* (1964) by having his assistants spray-paint the ground, the trees, and the fruit on a vendor's barrow, here he altered some of the colors of London, having houses in the driving scenes painted bright colors, the road a darker gray, the grass in the park a stronger green and adding a white picket fence around it. The film also captured, and reinforced in its production and costume design, the new British cool: the men's and women's hairstyles, the models' makeup and dresses, designed for the film by Jocelyn Rickards, the green cord jacket and white Levi's worn by David Hemmings. And it was erotic, from the scene where Hemmings straddles the model Veruschka in her side-slit dress to the nude romp with the two aspiring models, played by a young Jane Birkin and Gillian Hills—a scene Antonioni said he would never have been permitted to shoot in Catholic Italy at that time.

For all these reasons, the film remains a vivid portrait of London at the moment when it was shot: the spring and summer of 1966. But it is not an uncritical portrait. The London of homeless men in a hostel and of working-class districts like Peckham, Brixton, and Stockwell is shown in the opening scenes and as the photographer drives in his Rolls-Royce convertible equipped with car phone. He scouts an antique shop in an up-and-coming area in order to bid to purchase it on behalf of a wealthy client. The London shown in *Blow-Up* was not just the center of a new youth culture but also the global hub of finance capital and the site of private housing developments that were keeping whole groups of poorer citizens on the margins. Some of them are seen in the pictures the photographer shows Ron in his mock-up

photo book, in reality taken by Don McCullin, then age thirty, a documentary photographer who was soon to become one of the best-known war photographers of his generation. McCullin also took the photographs in Maryon Park used for the enlargements in the film. The enigmatic ending of *Blow-Up* may have confused and frustrated some of the film's original audiences, but those who knew Antonioni's earlier work saw in it a similarity to his other films. In *L'avventura* (1960), there is likewise a mystery that is never resolved: the disappearance, during a group excursion to a small island, of Anna (Lea Massari). In *L'eclisse* (1962), the two leads, played by Monica Vitti and Alain Delon, disappear seven minutes before the end, and the film plays out with a wordless montage to music of shots of streets in Rome's EUR district, where they were formerly seen. In both cases, the audience's attention is led away from a linear plot to other stories and empty places. Flat, open spaces are, in many of Antonioni's films, locations for a moment of crisis or a turning point in the story. The empty space of the park in *Blow-Up* belongs to the same family of open and deserted spaces as the windy beach in *Le amiche* (1955), the flatlands of the Po delta in *Il grido* (1957), the island in *L'avventura*, the garden after the party in *La notte* (1961), the square with flagpoles in *L'eclisse*, the jetty in the fog of industrial Ravenna in *Red Desert*, Death Valley in *Zabriskie Point*, the Sahara in *The Passenger*. There is also an echo in *Blow-Up* of an article Antonioni had written in 1963, describing a beach scene he had witnessed in Nice years earlier. The scene—white sky, sand, solitary lifeguard, sound of waves—is suddenly interrupted by a bather's cry and the discovery of the body of a drowned man. Antonioni said that if he were to make a film of this, he would remove the "fact," the discovery of the body, and leave just the extraordinary "state of tension" created by the empty landscape and the sound of the sea.

Blow-Up, too, works by subtraction and by directing the audience's attention toward places and sounds. The sound was recorded live, and the wind in the trees is essential to the atmosphere in the park scenes. During production and editing, Antonioni removed elements that would have drawn spectators more closely into the murder plot and distracted them from the "state of tension" of its central sequences. Both in his original story and in the screenplay—which he wrote with the assistance of Tonino Guerra, who had also worked on Antonioni's four previous films—there was a series of shots near the beginning showing the woman played by Vanessa Redgrave with the older man in a car being tailed by the killer, and there was another scene, after the murder, showing her leaving the park with the killer in his car. They would then have been seen following the photographer and attempting to steal his camera. All that remains of this in the finished film are two fragments. In the first, the photographer and Ron see a fair-haired man in a dark suit staring in at them through a restaurant window. "Someone we know?" Ron asks. The photographer sees the man try to open the trunk of his Rolls-Royce and then walk briskly to his own car. In the second, so brief that most viewers miss it, a gray Rover turns a corner to follow the photographer's Rolls just after a young woman has put her antinuclear protest sign on his backseat. The Rover is being driven by a man in a dark jacket. The woman from the park, recognizable by her checked shirt, is next to him. Ronan O'Casey later claimed that the compressions and ellipses in the murder plot were made because the film had gone over budget. However, given Antonioni's aesthetic prerogatives, it seems unlikely that this was the only reason.

We therefore perhaps need to take literally Antonioni's remark, made to Roger Ebert in 1969, that *Blow-Up* was "not about a murder but about a photographer." All his previous features had charted a transition or crisis in the

central characters' lives, and all of them, apart from *I vinti* and *Il grido*, had centered on women or on couples. *Blow-Up* also charts a crisis, but its central character is now a solo young man, on-screen for nearly the whole film, whose confident and bullying relation to the world begins to crumble when he realizes that his camera has recorded something disturbing of which he was unaware. The film is thus not only about a photographer but also about photography, both as a profession and as a technology. Antonioni became closely involved with the London photography scene as he researched and filmed *Blow-Up*. He sent a questionnaire to a number of professional photographers, to learn how they viewed their work but also to find out about their lifestyles. He shot the studio interiors in John Cowan's actual studio, slightly modified for the film, and David Bailey's boyish good looks and dynamic way of photographing fashion models are echoed in the character played by David Hemmings.

The film's central idea about the camera's ability to record something of which its human operator is unaware was already familiar from modernist writings on photography. In 1927, Siegfried Kracauer wrote, "For the first time, the inert world presents itself in its independence from human beings," and in 1931, Walter Benjamin spoke of photography's "optical unconscious." But *Blow-Up* is strikingly original because it puts the two technologies of still photography and the cinema, and the formats of black and white and color, into dialogue with one another. As the photographer arranges the enlargements on his studio wall, the movie camera follows the movement of his eyes from one to another, "animating" the separate black-and-white images into a narrative sequence, like a film storyboard. This is followed by a series of shots of those same enlargements in which they fill the whole frame, accompanied by the sound of the wind we heard

previously in the park, in effect creating out of the still images a new black-and-white film that reworks the color sequence we saw earlier and assigns a new meaning to it. In the play between the photographs and the color film that contains them, the black-and-white images carry associations of documentary, news, social realism—in short, “the real”—whereas color is associated with the bright world of fashion-magazine photography, “the unreal” of advertising, glamour, the idealized and eroticized female body, consumer culture. Yet at the same time, the film allows us to question that dualism and those relative associations: the photographer’s arrangement of the black-and-white prints is a work of interpretation, involving speculation and imagination, performed from within a colored reality.

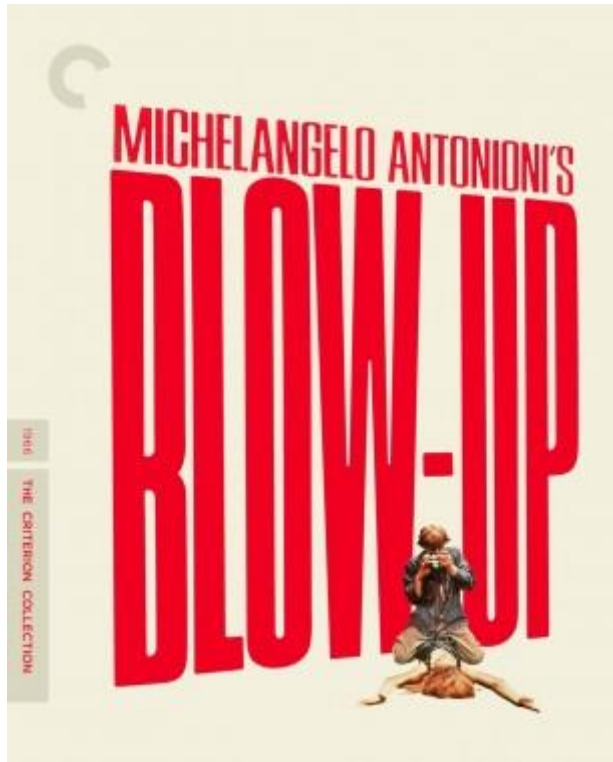
The creation in the middle of *Blow-Up* of a film sequence out of still photographs echoes Chris Marker’s film *La Jetée* (1963), whose story is constructed out of black-and-white stills with a voice-over narration. There is also an allusion to the way the various amateur films and photographs recording John F. Kennedy’s assassination in November 1963 had been blown up, slowed down, and connected in the official investigations of the Warren Commission (1963–64). *Blow-Up* was responding to these contemporary explorations of the relation between photography, film, and memory and of the reliability or otherwise of photographic evidence. While it was in production, Vanessa Redgrave and her then husband, director Tony Richardson, helped finance Emile de Antonio’s film *Rush to Judgment* (1967), a critique of the Warren Commission’s conclusions.

Just as some of the enlarged film frames of the Kennedy assassination yielded ambiguous and indeterminate images, so does the final enlargement made by Antonioni’s photographer. It is this lone image that remains, found wedged between two cabinets, after his

studio is ransacked. In the context of the other photographs in the series, it shows the enlarged head and torso of the corpse, but seen out of that context it can look, as Bill's partner, Patricia (Sarah Miles), says, "like one of Bill's paintings," an abstract image composed of dots and blotches. Antonioni himself had begun painting in the early sixties a series of small semiabstract watercolors on soaked paper called *Le montagne incantate* (*The Enchanted Mountains*), and from the end of the seventies he would photograph and blow them up to larger, more indistinct images of twelve by twenty-four inches or twenty-four by sixty inches. Interviewed about *Blow-Up* by Alberto Moravia in 1967, Antonioni said, "The story is important to me, of course, but more important are the images." Elsewhere, he wrote 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*." These remarks draw attention to an important aspect of the film, but they need not be taken as the last word. *Blow-Up* is indeed about photographic images and the elusiveness of the real, but it is also an exhilarating journey through the London scene of the midsixties—its youth culture, its fashions, its young professionals—and a mystery story that draws us in but offers no solution.

The author would like to thank Francesca Gavioli for access to unpublished script materials for Blow-Up held in the Fondo Michelangelo Antonioni, Gallerie d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, Ferrara, Italy.

RELATED FILMS



Blow-Up

Michelangelo Antonioni