



THE EMPIRE MASTERPIECE

Blow-Up

MICHELANGELO ANTONIONI'S
PEERLESS PICTURE

WORDS ADAM SMITH

BY THE MID-1960s, Michelangelo Antonioni had established himself as one of the titans of international cinema. A loose trilogy — *L'Avventura* (1960), *La Notte* (1961) and *L'Eclisse* (1962) — had minted his style: languid, unapologetically intellectual examinations of modern discontent, disconnection and (triple-word score) *ennui*, shot in pellucid black and white, usually involving middle-class types wandering through modernist architecture in search of *meaning*. They were the epitome of '60s arthouse: flicks that had cinematic beatniks knowingly namechecking Sartre and Camus while secretly pondering a new set of bongos.

But with *Blow-Up*, his first English-language film and only his second shot in colour, Antonioni shifted his, ahem, focus, at least a little. Here was what looked at least like a thriller, an audience-friendly murder-mystery. A high-rolling London photographer, albeit one suffering from the trademark Antonioni existential anxieties, snaps a few pictures of a couple in a wooded park. Developing them later, he becomes convinced that he has witnessed a murder, a suspicion that only grows when the woman in question turns up and agitatedly demands the negatives.

All the apparatus of the classic Hitchcockian noir is in place: a crime, a *femme fatale*, and a looming sense of danger. But *Blow-Up* refuses to behave, to deliver the resolution or answers to which audiences were accustomed. The woman vanishes, the body vanishes, the *pictures* vanish. The reassuring comforts of genre seep out of the movie, snatched away, leaving our hapless protagonist, and the audience, bewildered and unmoored. The mysteries that *Blow-Up* intends to probe are, it turns out, much more interesting, and universal, than a mere corpse in a cove.

Blow-Up has its origins in a three-picture deal with MGM cut for Antonioni by Italian mega-producer Carlo Ponti, a former partner of Dino De Laurentiis, who had also produced *Doctor Zhivago* for the Hollywood studio. For the first, Antonioni looked to a short story by Argentinian writer Julio Cortázar about a translator who believes he has photographed a kidnapping. Switching the action to London, and introducing the apparent murder, Antonioni



first offered Sean Connery the role of the perplexed photographer (a character clearly at least influenced by socialite snapper David Bailey), but he rejected it when Antonioni refused to send him a completed screenplay. Antonioni moved on to Terence Stamp, who departed the production at the last minute. A good thing, it turned out, since his final choice was a masterstroke. David Hemmings, later to have an uneven film career and at that time a relatively unknown stage actor, has the perfect face; that of a slightly ruined choirboy (he had in fact been a noted boy soprano), simultaneously alive, slightly debauched and terminally bored.

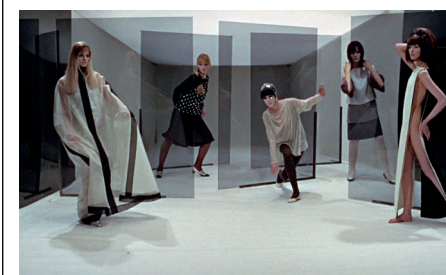
Antonioni filled out his cast with figures who were as much signifiers of the times as the Dralon furnishings. Vanessa Redgrave — alert, nervy, mysterious — is perfect as the might-be-a-*femme fatale*. A young Peter Bowles, not yet straitjacketed into telly toff-roles, is laid back as Thomas' occasionally stoned agent. Supermodel-*du-jour* Veruschka gets a turn pretty much playing herself. (Further period-appropriate casting included girl-about-town Janet Street-Porter gyrating half-arsedly in a club and, yes, that's Geoffrey from *Rainbow* as a delivery man.)

Antonioni suffuses the whole film with a hallucinatory, fever-dream feel. The terraced houses that Thomas roars past in his Roller are an eye-burning red, the grass in the park where he may or may not photograph a murder was dyed a lush, slightly unnatural shade of green, while over it a (deliberately) unreadable neon sign flickers mysteriously, like something that has arrived out of a David Lynch movie from the future.

While *Blow-Up* would subsequently become a founding exhibit in the iconography of Swinging London (Austin Powers draws on it much more greedily than he does 007), Antonioni's camera is alive to the rot and decay under the surface, to the superficiality of the whole raging scene. The paint in Thomas' cavernous studio (where he enacts the film's most famous sequence, an 11-minute *tour de force* in which he endlessly enlarges his photographs in search of clues until they resemble abstract paintings) peels from the walls. The nightclub where he fights over a smashed guitar, only to lose interest in it immediately, has a shabby, temporary feel. The old London of bomb sites and slums is in the



Clockwise from main: Say cheese! David Hemmings — as Thomas — behind the camera; With Vanessa Redgrave as Jane; "Slightly ruined choirboy"; Antonioni creates a fever-dream feel; Supermodel Veruschka.



Alamy, Mary Evans Picture Library

midst of being erased, replaced with the strident brutalism that would define the era before itself becoming reviled. Everything is temporary, set to fall away and reveal... what?

Blow-Up would form the first entry in Antonioni's second trilogy, with *Zabriskie Point* (1970) and *The Passenger* (1975) both in their ways disappointing follow-ups. But *Blow-Up* endures. Its obsessive, anxious mood would bleed into the paranoid political cinema of the 1970s — Pakula's *The Parallax View* (1974) and Pollack's *Three Days Of The Condor* (1975) would both nod to its conspiratorial tone — while Coppola and De Palma would mine it wholesale for *The Conversation* (1974) and *Blow Out* (1981).

But while those films have, to some degree at least, been dated by their contemporary concerns, the irony is that *Blow-Up*, firmly nailed as it is to a specific time and place, has emerged as fundamentally timeless. Above all, it is a mood-piece, a gateway to a kind of dream-cinema. It's a sparking live-rail to that profound, bewitching sense of unease that's unique to a certain kind of movie. It's the ringing phone in *Once Upon A Time In America*; a frightened guy in a diner in Lynch's *Mulholland Drive*.

"We know that underneath the revealed image is another that is more faithful to reality," Antonioni once said, "and beneath this is still another, and again another under this last. And on up to that true image, of the absolute, mysterious reality that nobody will ever see."

"A pile of pretentious crap," declared Mike Leigh. And certainly for some, *Blow-Up*, like the rest of high-octane Antonioni, is an exercise in frustrating navel-gazing. (Bergman, though — generally unimpressed by his Italian colleague — declared it a masterpiece.)

But if it hits you right, *Blow-Up* leaves you, like Thomas, returning again and again to its beguiling, haunting images — pictures that seem to have some meaning that you can't quite yet see — staring at the screen, ever more closely.

BLow-UP IS OUT NOW ON DVD, BLU-RAY AND DIGITAL

FINAL CUT

PICKS OF THE MONTH

CHOSEN BY CHRIS HEWITT



1 THE ROYAL HOTEL

(OUT 5 FEBRUARY, DVD/BR/DIGITAL)

Kitty Green's tale of two backpacking friends who run out of cash in Australia and end up tending bar in a rough Outback pub populated by The Absolute Worst is brilliantly observed and acted by Julia Garner, Jessica Henwick, Toby Wallace and more. Its final shot is indelible.

2 THE CREATOR

(OUT NOW, DVD/BR/DIGITAL/4K)

Gareth Edwards' return to directing, seven years after *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story*, is visually stunning and thought-provoking (even if the plot doesn't always withstand great scrutiny), with an all-timer of a needle drop. Everything in its right place, indeed.

3 THE WAGES OF FEAR

(OUT 5 FEBRUARY, BR)

Henri-Georges Clouzot's classic French thriller about a bunch of reprobates recruited to drive incredibly volatile nitroglycerin over an unimaginably harsh and bumpy terrain remains as tense as it gets. Double-bill with William Friedkin's remake, *Sorcerer*, and kiss your nerves goodbye.

4 PEEPING TOM

(OUT 29 JANUARY, DVD/BR/4K)

The movie whose scabrous reception ridiculously destroyed the career of its director, an Emeric Pressburger-less Michael Powell, *Peeping Tom* — which follows Karlheinz Böhm as he kills a string of women with a modified movie camera — fully deserves its rehabilitation as one of British cinema's cruelest, coldest and, crucially, finest efforts. Feast those peepers.

5 NIGHT OF THE COMET

(OUT 29 JANUARY, DVD/BR)

I first saw Thom Eberhardt's wonderfully weird '80s sci-fi, in which two young LA girls find themselves seemingly the only survivors of a close shave with a comet, on *Moviedrome*, and it's stayed with me since. Funny and frightening, and well worth a close encounter.

