

Introduction of Michelangelo Antonioni's *Blow-Up*

Remarks of Michael A. McRobbie

President, Indiana University

Indiana University Cinema

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7:00 p.m.

1. INTRODUCTION

Thank you, Jon (Vickers).

It is always a great pleasure to be here at the IU Cinema, truly one of the cultural gems of the Bloomington campus, and one of the nation's finest arthouse cinemas—not just in the view of thousands of us who frequent it regularly, but also in the opinion of such legends of the cinema as Meryl Streep and Glenn Close. Since its opening in 2011, the Cinema has hosted more than 200 prominent filmmakers and scholars, including Ms. Streep, Ms. Close, and many others. Ms. Close, of course, has been a very generous donor to Indiana University, giving us her costume collection, assembled over her long and distinguished career.

The cinema has been used by over 200 departments, institutes, and centers in support of their academic programs and research. And more than 2,500 public events have been hosted here in the last eight years, more than 1,200 of which have been free of charge.

The staff of the Cinema, led by Jon Vickers, has done an outstanding job, not only in bringing highly innovative programming to the Cinema, but also in making this a warm, welcoming, and hugely popular place where members of the university and surrounding community can engage more deeply with film. I want to commend all of them for their superb work.

As Jon mentioned, last year a number of IU colleagues and friends endowed a fund in my name to support the President's Choice film series. I was greatly honored to receive this recognition, not to mentioned surprised, not only because of my love of film and its power to inspire, but also because I am immensely proud of the success of the IU Cinema and its contributions to the presentation and study of film.

I am delighted to be here tonight, then, to say a few words about the films I have selected as part of this semester's President's Choice Series, "Late Antonioni," which features the three last major works of the acclaimed Italian filmmaker Michelangelo Antonioni, and to introduce the first film in the series—*Blow-Up*.

2. THE PRESIDENT'S CHOICE SERIES: LATE ANTONIONI

Antonioni was regarded as one of the finest European art cinema directors, in the same company with Ingmar Bergman and Federico Fellini. He is certainly one of my favorites.

As the Harvard Film Archive described his career: "Antonioni set out to explore the ambiguities of a suddenly alienated and dislocated Italy, not simply through his oblique style of narrative and characters, nor through any overt political messaging, but instead by tearing asunder the traditional boundaries of cinematic narrative..."¹

Antonioni first made a name for himself as the director of a number of well-received feature films in the 1950s.

But Antonioni firmly established himself as a serious auteur with *L'Avventura*, which premiered at Cannes in 1960. The film was such a radical departure from traditional

¹ "The Mysteries of Michelangelo Antonioni," Harvard Film Archive, October 5-December 14, 2012. Web, Accessed August 20, 2018, URL: <http://hcl.harvard.edu/hfa/films/2012octdec/antonioni.html>.

cinematic narrative that the screening provoked laughter and catcalls. The next day, however, critics signed a joint protest at the rude reception the film had received, calling it the best movie screened at Cannes. It was screened a second time, after which it received a special Jury Prize for its contribution toward the search for a new cinematic language.

L'Avventura was the first film of a trilogy that brilliantly and unsettlingly portrayed alienation and the discontents of modernity. It was followed by *La Notte* in 1961, and *L'Eclisse* in 1962. I chose all three of these films to be screened during the IU Cinema's opening semester in 2011. Film critic David Thompson called these films "[arguably the most beautiful black and white \(trilogy\) the cinema would ever offer.](#)"²

The three films I have selected to be part of this President's Choice series can also be considered a trilogy. They were produced by Carlo Ponti, who contracted a trio of English-language films to be directed by Antonioni and to be released by MGM.

Blow-Up, the film you are about to see, was the first of these.

In September, the Cinema will screen the second of the three films Antonioni made for MGM, *Zabriskie Point*, which was released in 1970. The story takes its cue from the widespread political unrest prevalent on university campuses in the late 1960s and the conflict between the counter culture and the "establishment." It was the only film Antonioni shot completely in America. Much of it was filmed around Los Angeles, and it is also renowned for its stunning shots of Death Valley and the California and Nevada deserts.

In December, the Cinema will screen the third of Antonioni's MGM films, 1975's *The Passenger*, which starred Jack Nicholson and the late Maria Schneider. Nicholson plays David Locke, a disillusioned journalist documenting the civil war in Chad. Locke takes

² David Thompson, "The Desperate and the Beautiful," *The Guardian*, July 31, 2007.

on the identity of a man he had befriended—a man roughly his age, weight, and height—who has died at the hotel where they were staying. The film was nominated for the Palme d'Or at the 1975 Cannes Film Festival, the highest prize awarded at this festival. IU alumnus David Anspaugh, who went on to direct the great sports films *Hoosiers* and *Rudy*, appeared in *The Passenger*, and became friends with Nicholson on the set. Nicholson actually wrote a letter of recommendation for him to the USC film school. Mr. Anspaugh will be here in December to help introduce the screening.

3. BLOW-UP

The film you are about to see tonight, *Blow-Up*, was released in North America in 1966 and in Europe in 1967. It was inspired by a short story by Argentine expatriate Julio Cortázar.

Shot in London, with a British cast, *Blow-Up* was Antonioni's first English-language feature. It is a collage of the "swinging London" of the 60s. Antonioni was nominated for Academy Awards for Best Director and Best Screenplay for the film.

It stars David Hemmings in his first major film role as the photographer (who has no name in the film, but who is called Thomas in the script). The character is a composite of a number of British fashion and portrait photographers of the 60s, including John Cowan, whose London studio was one of the main sets for the film. Cowan's playful, dynamic shooting style also served as inspiration for the character's unconventional approach.

Blow-Up was also the first major film role for Vanessa Redgrave, who gives a wonderful performance as a woman (also unnamed in the film, but called Jane in the script), whom Hemming's character photographs in a park in the company of an older man. Only later does the photographer come to believe that he has photographed a murder, and his

efforts to blow up the photographs to reveal further evidence comprise the central structure of the film. I remember as an undergraduate discussing this film in a class on the “Aesthetics of Film,” where the professor described it as being about appearance and reality and how the senses are an imperfect foundation for knowledge of the world. What is appearance and what is reality in the movie is left unresolved.

The score for *Blow-Up*—created by the great jazz musician, Herbie Hancock—mirrors the film’s backdrop of 1960s London. Having lived through this time, I can tell you it is very evocative. He recorded the soundtrack in New York with a number of great jazz musicians, including the legendary Indianapolis-born trumpeter, Freddie Hubbard.

Antonioni was also a fan of The Who, and, in particular, of how Pete Townshend would regularly smash his guitar at the end of a performance, and he wanted the band in the film. That did not work out, but you will see a performance by the then lineup of The Yardbirds, featuring Jimmy Page who would form Led Zeppelin less than two years later, and with Jeff Beck taking on Townshend’s guitar-smashing duties. You might also briefly spot a pre-Monty Python Michael Palin in the crowd watching the band.

Antonioni’s bold and refined use of light and color gives *Blow-Up* a striking visual impact. Of course, the fashion of 60s London was inherently colorful, but Antonioni also ordered entire sections of London to be touched up to match his vision. He had grass painted because it wasn’t the right shade of green. Local roads were painted black. It was even reported that he had the pigeons dyed so they would be the right shade.³ In one of his earliest reviews for the *Chicago Sun-Times*, Roger Ebert wrote of the film in 1967: “Rarely has color been put on film with more skill.”⁴

Blow-Up also helped liberate Hollywood from what has been called its “puritanical prurience.”⁵ MGM did not gain approval for the film under the MPAA Production Code,

³ “Michelangelo Antonioni” *The Telegraph*, July 30, 2007

⁴ Roger Ebert, “David Hemmings, Ready for his ‘Blow-Up,’” *The Chicago Sun-Times*, February 26, 1967.

⁵ Richard Corliss, “When Antonioni Blew Up the Movies,” *TIME*, August 5, 2007.

popularly known as the Hays Code, so they released it through a subsidiary distributor. This was the first time an MPAA member company released a film that did not have an approval certificate. *Blow-Up* was shown widely in theaters in North America and achieved great commercial and critical success, grossing more than \$20 million worldwide by the end of the 1960s (about \$120 million in today's dollars). While the Hays Code was already waning, the success of *Blow-Up* contributed in a major way to the code's revision, and eventual collapse.

And while audience's standards have changed since the film was made, even today some viewers may find certain scenes in *Blow-Up*—such as an early scene in which Thomas's encounter with two young models teeters on the brink between playful flirtation and aggressive violence—unsettling to watch.

Film scholar Roy Huss writes that *Blow-Up* succeeds because it is built on three ingredients that have always been intrinsic to the art of film. "These are," he writes, "the ease and gracefulness with which it treats the real world as malleable, while seeming to faithfully document it; the success with which it spatializes time and abstract thought; and the degree to which it is able to enlist the (viewer's) detached-but-involved interest."⁶

With that, perhaps I have piqued your "detached-but-involved interest", so please enjoy Michelangelo Antonioni's 1966 masterpiece, *Blow-Up*.

⁶ Roy Huss, Introduction to *Focus on Blow-Up*, (Prentice Hall, Inc., 1971), 3.