

On Antonioni: Blowup, The Devil's Spittle

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When "Blowup" was released in 1967, it evoked a storm of discussion and criticism. Opinions concerning the film were highly polarized. Many critics regarded the film as a classic, although, like many members of the audience, they felt they were grasping at something quite elusive. Others, quite frankly, called the film "phony." One commentator collected examples of negative views of the film. Richard Goldstein of "The Village Voice," for example, called the movie, "The Screw-up," attacking it from the point of view of the older generation failing to come to terms with a younger one. Pauline Kael criticized Antonioni for not catching the humor, fervor, and astonishing speed in youth's rejection of older values. One critic, Wilfred Sheed, was described as being ruthlessly contemptuous of the film and Judith Crist complained that Antonioni "let a good story get away." A dramatic report came from Arthur Knight. Writing in "Film Heritage," he tells of his first view of "Blowup." It was a special preview offered to members of the industry. He says, "They hated it. It was almost as if Antonioni had insulted them personally by making a picture that departed so radically from conventional story patterns and techniques. Famous directors, writers and producers went from group to group, drink in hand, asking each other what the film was all about and shrugging humourously when an immediate answer was not forthcoming."

Even more favorably inclined critics were baffled by the film. Did it deal with reality versus illusion? Memory as against fantasy? The mod scene of the sixties in London? Had the photographer actually witnessed and recorded a murder? Or was the entire story a figment of his imagination? To others, "Blowup" represented an autobiographical testament by Antonioni of the photographer-filmmaker as an artist. As one critic, Scott, said, "Antonioni makes a personal statement as an artist. He is at one with Hemmings, who is the photographer. Intelligent, aloof, objective, technically expert, sometimes exploitative, and sometimes even worried by those who get into the viewfinder of his character."

Since we are indeed discussing character and possibly the character of the main protagonist in the film, it may serve as a good point of departure for a psychoanalytic interpretation of the film. We get our first glimpse of the hero in the company of a group of derelicts as he emerges early in a London morning from a flophouse. He had spent the night in a dormitory surreptitiously taking pictures of these men for a book he is preparing on what seems to be primarily the seamy side of London life. We get a different view of his identity as he enters a magnificent Rolls Royce convertible and drives off to his studio where, in reality, he is a very successful commercial fashion photographer. For all of his success, however, the hero seems detached and alienated, quietly hostile, and seemingly without feeling. The clue to his character is suggested by his attitude toward women. Throughout the film, attractive women keep offering themselves to him but he turns them away with an indifference that borders on contempt. His very photographic technique conveys this. He brings the models, in the opening sequence, into hard focus, revealing all that is callous, callow, and stupid in their features. And he makes us share with him

contempt for these people. He emphasizes the absence of all genuine eroticism in these women, whose skinniness is akin to the rigidity of dead bodies and the pale makeup contributes to a sense of loss of individuality.

But the photographer himself is by no means anything but a paragon of duplicity. He is a spy acting as a bum. He is a voyeur. He pretends he has a wife and children, and then changes every bit of his story. He cheats Vanessa Redgrave out of the film she had come to get. He is a creature of uncertain sexuality, stifled by the beautiful women who are passive and evasive while they offer themselves to him. He is characterized by one critic as "febrile, autocratic, capricious, and, outside of the illusory, professional world of which he is a master, he is completely at a loss in the real world.

None of the principal women in the film, it turns out, is trustworthy. Back at his studio, he poses a famous model. As one observer describes it, "as the phallic muzzle of his camera nudges towards the girl, who lies prone before it, Hemmings caresses her with his voice, 'better, easy, good, that's it, more of it, come on now, come on,' as she in turn is shown responding with more warmth to his direction." And, of course, he manifestly eroticizes the situation by kissing her. After the pictures have been taken, he stalks off abruptly, exhausted, leaving the aroused model stretched out on the studio floor. As we later learn, she lied to him about her plans for the weekend.

In the next sequence, he photographs a group of four models with automatic professionalism, commanding them and manipulating them as if they were animals, or inanimate objects. Since we have just seen the film, I will spare a recapitulation of the plot, although in retelling it, certain highlights illuminate the patterns advanced in the film.

What I propose to do is discuss the film by applying familiar psychoanalytic technique and principles. In a paper on "The Psychoanalytic Process and Creativity," Beres demonstrated that the manner in which a patient organizes and arranges his associations into meaningful configurations, with symbolic and metaphoric implications, resembles the intuitive work of the creative artist. In both instances, the patient and the artist have an audience in mind. They bring to the fore the material derived as a result of the dynamic effect of persistent unconscious fantasies. In trying to interpret this film, the criteria employed are those of similarity, repetition, and confluence of theme, as they are organized by coherence and consistency of the data.

The story line of this film is developed through a series of themes explicitly depicting couples making love and being interrupted in the act of making love. There are several derivative representations of what is known in psychoanalysis as the "primal scene." For example, the photographer observes the couple in the park and his presence breaks up their idyll. He begins to make love to the lady in the park and they are interrupted by the arrival of the propeller. When he becomes aware that he has witnessed a murder and feels he must share his awareness with somebody, the photographer comes upon the artist and his wife having sexual relations. I assume it is his wife; she may be his mistress. The frenzied spectacle of the rock concert, which terminates in the orgiastic dismemberment of the chief musician's instruments, and the intrusion into the pot party where our hero finds his friends with his model, all are substitute representations of the primal scene, representations familiar in analytic work in the form of screen memories or recurrent dreams. Also included in this list is the scene of the sexual romp

between the photographer and two would-be models. This particular variation of the primal scene is so arranged that no one is excluded. The theme of invasion of privacy runs throughout the film. People are walking in and out of everybody's apartments and there is a moment of supreme irony in the park when Vanessa Redgrave says to him, in effect, this is a public part; I'm entitled to my privacy.

We can see then that, accordingly, in "Blowup," Antonioni has transcended the temporal limitations of London, the mod scene and its alienation and vapidness. In "Blowup," Antonioni has given aesthetic elaboration and symbolic expression to a universal psychological theme, the fantasies and effects of the primal scene experience.

Before proceeding, I would like to underscore ever as briefly a number of sequelae that have not been sufficiently emphasized in the literature on the primal scene. We are well acquainted with the sadomasochistic concept, the necessity to repeat its relationship with voyeurism, but there are a few others that I would like to emphasize in connection with this film.

The first of these is the deep sense of narcissistic mortification, the wounding of self-esteem which is experienced by the child. It leads to a conviction that he is unloved and unlovable. He feels excluded and betrayed. In both boys and girls this feeling of oedipal defeat is connected with the idea of anatomical inferiority, leading to a persistent sense of disparaging one's own body and attractiveness. It also leads to grandiose exhibitionistic wishes of a compensatory nature and is accompanied usually by fantasies of stealing the paternal phallus and, in the case of little girls, the wish to have a most beautiful body, like the mother's. A further corollary of this response is the narcissistic rage which it engenders. This leads to the second reaction which I would like to stress, namely, the impulse to wreak vengeance on one or both of the betraying parents; the regressive wish for vengeance may take many forms. In addition to fantasies of murder, the most prominent form of vengeance is the tendency to demean and to humiliate the betraying love object. The repetitive enactments of the primal scene which have been alluded to many times in the literature can be seen in two different ways. In many instances in which the individual brings about a repetition of the primal scene, he casts himself in the role of witness. In such situations, there is the actual or the implied intent to break up, to interrupt, to discomfort the couples making love. There are also those vengeful repetitions in which the individual, traumatized by the primal scene, causes others to be witness to his sexual activities. The unconscious import of this behavior is connected with the wish to humiliate and demean. Its purpose is to make the betraying parents experience the same sense of humiliation, exclusion and betrayal that the child experiences in the original scene but, in these repetitions, the role of the parent has now been assigned to some other individual, spouse, child, lover, and so forth. This form of revenge takes the form of reversing the roles. A parent, both parents or their representatives are placed in the position of the humiliated and injured observers of the patient's sexual activity. In many dreams, stage performances or spectacles in general are employed to represent a disguised memory or wish connected with the primal scene. It is frequently an important theme in the analysis of photographers, playwrights, movie directors, et cetera.

With these formulations in mind, let us return to our key insight of Hemmings, the photographer. He is a spy who has lost faith in women. They may pursue him, but he scorns them because he judges them all as betrayers. The model who made overtures to him turns out in the end to be in the company of his friend, caught up in a lie about going to Paris. The lady in the park has set up

her middle-aged friend to be killed. The teeny boppers are ready to give themselves sexually in order to advance their careers. The wife or mistress of the good friend and neighbor, the artist, leaves the bed and offers herself to the photographer. But he will have none of her. He really will have none of all of them. He wreaks vengeance on the mother of the primal scene, in the person of these curious surrogates, by his indifference, his betrayal and his disappointing them. He has only contempt for all of them.

In each primal scene sequence, one can detect derivatives of typical wishes connected with the primal scene, wishes which are gratified symbolically or directly. In the scene in the park with the middle-aged lover, who would correspond to the father of the primal scene, the old man is killed. The artist's wife leaves her husband and comes to the photographer, so that the artist is the victim in this respect. At the rock concert, Hemmings ends up holding the choice trophy, the musician's instrument—the stiff, elongated guitar bridge. When Hemmings comes back from seeing the corpse in the park, he touches the great big propeller in the same way as he has touched the corpse in the park under the trees. In the sequence with the two would-be models, far from being excluded from a twosome, Hemmings is the center of a threesome, a not uncommon representation of a wish of the primal scene trauma, in which the child hopes to be included in the sexual activity.

In certain respects, "Blowup" may be described as an atypical detective story, an ambiguous whodunit which miscarries and is never solved. Person-Krag wrote about individuals addicted to the reading of mystery stories. The plot of the typical detective tale, she points out, is usually a thinly disguised version of oedipal fantasies. The victim is almost never a sympathetic character. He makes a brief dramatic appearance as a corpse, hold the center of the stage all too briefly, and is then removed. He represents the father of the Oedipus phase. The work of the detective corresponds to the insatiable curiosity of the child regarding the sexual act. "The clues in the story," Pederson-Krag writes, "disconnected, inexplicable, and trifling, represent the child's growing awareness of details never understood, such as the family sleeping arrangements, nocturnal sounds, stains, incomprehensible adult jokes and remarks. The criminal of the detective drama is innocuous until the final page." She concludes that, in real life fantasies, the criminal is the parent towards whom the child's positive feeling had been directed, the one whom the child wishes least of all to imagine participating in this secret crime.

From my own data and clinical experience, this would seem to be only half the tale. Basically, the criminal is the detective himself. This would correspond to the unraveling of the first detective story in history, "Oedipus Rex." Oedipus undertakes an inquiry to discover the murderer of Laius only to reach the conclusion that he himself is the culprit. Pederson-Krag concludes that, becoming the detective, the reader of the mystery stories gratifies his infantile curiosity with impunity, redressing completely the helpless inadequacy and anxious guilt remembered from childhood. However, we could also say, and use "Blowup" as an example, the curious onlooker registering all in his mind, or in this instance, in his camera, has murder in his heart. The camera, far from the passive indifferent recorder of external events, is in this instance, as in many others, an active, aggressive, intrusive instrument. Hemmings, the photographer, stalks the couple in the park. He hides behind a tree and then he hides behind the fence and the bushes, just as the murderer did, and he shoots with his camera as the murderer was shortly to do

with his gun. The phallic quality of the camera has already been noted earlier in this discussion, and of course its powerful force endows the photographer with the narcissistic supplies he needs to replace the mortification of the primal scene comparison with the father. To quote from one of the authors, "this talismanic authority of the camera is nowhere more evident than when it is used as a sexual instrument as in the sequence where Hemmings is first photographing the model. More than an isolated extravagance, the episode establishes a pattern running through all the scenes in which he exhibits strength. His camera, its threats and its promises, confer upon him a mastery over all of his associates. (You know the times that he goes without the camera are the times when he really is weakest.)" The power and the symbol of the phallic instrument represented by the camera is repeated several times in the film in various fantasy elaborations of the primal scene, i.e. the acquisition of the propeller, the anterior appendage of a plane where all the power and thrust reside, and in the acquisition of the bridge of the guitar, the prize trophy from the frenzied spectacle (another primal scene representation) of the rock 'n roll band. A striking and somewhat enigmatic element is added when Hemmings returns to the park to reaffirm his sense of reality, the authenticity of the murder, by viewing the corpse once again. As he does so, he is frightened by a clicking sound, which most viewers of the film interpret as reminiscent of the sound of a camera. This is a dramatic example of retaliation in kind. The instrument that he has used against others has now been turned against him and he flees in terror.

This leads us to the unique feature of the elaboration of the primal scene conflict in the film "Blowup." The film is a parable on the function of memory, of repression of the traumatic primal scene. This theme is first introduced in the sequence in the park where he says, "We've just met," and she says, "Forget you ever met me; we've never met." Then it is introduced in the antique shop with the photographer and the young owner. An antique shop, after all, is a repository of mementos of the past. The owner wants to get away from antiques. She thinks of going to Nepal but the photographer says, "Nepal is full of antiques." In effect, he is telling her she cannot liberate herself from the memories of the past no matter how far away she goes. In the same vein, photographs represent recorded impressions of past events. They are the analogue of memory. The lady in the park asking the photographer for the roll of film, the records of the events he witnessed, is like the mother of the primal scene soothing the shocked child, trying to cajole him into forgetfulness. But so long as he has the film, the living memory is the reproach to the mother for the primal scene.

A further representation of the same trend is expressed in the scene at the pot party. Here the photographer's collaborator or editor or good friend fills the role of the father of the primal scene. He cannot understand what he takes to be the incoherent babbling of the photographer. He urges him to forget about the body in the park, that is, the nightmare which shook the little boy up, and he tells him instead to take some pot and go to sleep. When the photographer wakes from sleep, he goes back to the park but the evidence is gone. The corpus delicti is not there. This is the final representation of the act of definitive repression which reproduces, of course, the theft of the pictures and of the negatives. It represents the loss of memory, memory which above all, validates for each of us the reality of the present in terms of the consistent memory of the past, the continuity of the individual. This is, perhaps, the most poignant and original aspect of "Blowup"—the search for the memory which cannot be recovered, of which only fragments and hints remain, fragments disconnected and out of context, blown up out of all proportion and

rendered meaningless and unreal by their enormity.

It is this groping search for the meaning of the past that unites the artist in the film with the photographer. The artist says that his abstract paintings are like clues in a detective story and his wife, when she examines the last remaining fragments of the blown up photograph of the murder in the park, casually resembles very much some of our husband-lover's abstract paintings.

This, perhaps, will enable us to understand somewhat the final enigmatic scene with which the film closes. Failing to find the corpse in the park, the photographer has lost the last concrete bit of evidence that can validate his memory and his very reality. The photographer comes upon the clowns in the park. These are unreal, deceiving figures who try to palm off illusion for reality, fantasy for memory, like the comforting deceiving mother in the primal scene. By having him fall into their make-believe (by the way, the picture makes it very clear at their invitation) and ultimately disappearing, the film attests to a gnawing doubt of the traumatized witness to the primal scene, a doubt that grows out of being unable to recapture the essence of his own motivations, a doubt that leads to his alienation and to depersonalization.

Thus, the hero of "Blowup" becomes a kind of 20th Century Everyman. The photographer-hero has witnessed and recorded a traumatic event; his life has been altered thereby but, unfortunately, out of the vast storehouse of his memory, that is, out of all the pictures, he cannot retrieve the one that contains the record of the trauma. Accordingly, he has lost his connection with the past, and has in his hands only a fragment of the experience. Without analysis, his life becomes an endless neurotic quest for a memory he cannot retrieve but one which he also cannot forget. The memory of the event is lost but, in disguised form, it is constantly repeated in the unconsciously determined patterns of his life, his love, and his art.

[The Devil's Spittle](#)

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NOTE: Many years ago, Dr. Arlow entrusted me with a copy of his lecture for future publication. I add my own postscript in response to his insights regarding the primal scene in "Blowup" and the question of analysis. J.A.Stone PhD.

1. Antonioni derived the plot from Cortazar's short story, "The Devil's Spittle."
2. A close reading of the short story reveals a homoerotic dimension repressed by Antonioni and thus overlooked by Arlow.
3. In the story, the photographer observes from afar three figures, a woman, an older man, and a boy.
4. The narrator imagines a maternal but sexualized relation of the boy with the woman, and then, most disturbing, a pederastic relation between the man and the boy,

"The real boss was waiting there, smiling petulantly, already certain of the business; he was not the first to send the woman in the vanguard, to bring him the prisoners manacled with flowers. The rest

of it would be so simple, the car, some house or another, drinks, stimulating engravings, tardy tears, the awakening in hell. And there was nothing I could do, this time I could do absolutely nothing. My strength had been a photograph, that, there, where they were taking their revenge on me, demonstrating clearly what was going to happen. The photo had been taken, the time had run out, gone; we were so far from one another, the abusive act had certainly already taken place, the tears already shed, and the rest conjecture and sorrow."

5. Antonioni thus sanitizes the homosexual and pederastic elements into a more conventional "primal scene" as realized by Arlow's discussion.

6. A corollary might be that it is the boy who commits the imaginary murder of the father figure; and that boy with tousled blond hair is the photographer, no less, reliving this fantasy of a primal seduction by the father with the collusion of the mother.

7. Thus, "Blowup" is a repetition of a primal trauma with the wish for the father's death (and the guilt when it becomes effective through no doing of the boy's own but because of life's passage as in Freud's "Dostoevsky and parricide.")

8. The photographer's indifference to women, his own femininity, his obsessional neurosis, his phallic fetishes all point in the direction of repressed homosexuality, compounded by Antonioni's censorship.

9. The abstract splotches of analogue photography are not resolved by developments in digital technology when it comes to retroactive fantasies, with a homosexual turn, of the primal scene. "This biography was of the boy and of any boy whatsoever . . ."

uploaded: November 13, 2007