

The appearance of Ian Stephenson's paintings In Antonioni's film Blowup

....like finding a clue

The film *Blowup*, made by Michelangelo Antonioni in 1966, could be said to be composed of three layers. The first of these, for which it has perhaps become best known, consists of its glimpses of modern culture and celebrity in 1960's London. Through the medium of cinema the film constructs a milieu of fashion, music, architecture, photography and art. 1

Set within this context the second layer of dramatic intrigue and narrative plot is developed in which a photographer becomes convinced that he has been unwittingly present at the scene of a crime that he then attempts to prove.

Beyond all this however, the third and underlying level of the film concerns images: ways of seeing, understanding and perceiving images. This theme is developed through a contrasting relationship between photography and painting. It is in this dimension that Ian Stephenson's paintings make an indispensable contribution to the film. This short essay is intended to draw attention to some of the ways in which their presence establishes the film's preoccupation with imagination and perception.

Numerous relationships between perception

and different states of mind are invoked in *Blowup*, ranging from exhaustion, hysteria stimulated by a music performance, the effects of drugs, infatuation and also through subjective states of reverie. It is through the absorbing and reflective experience of reverie that Ian Stephenson's paintings provide the thoughtful key to the film.

Seen in this way, his unique paintings perform a role of pivotal significance and actually it is impossible to imagine substituting the work of any of his contemporaries in this context without losing the meaningful heart of the film. The paintings themselves possess an unparalleled intricacy of visual incident and a resulting capacity to "draw in" the viewer. Indeed it seems clear that Antonioni's visit to Stephenson's studio was a determining factor in his conception of the form of the film itself. 2

The vital presence and effect of the paintings is achieved even though the works appear only briefly focussed on two essential scenes, in a film lasting for 1 hour and 45 minutes. The first artist's studio scene is really the defining scene of the film and we see the paintings for just over 1 minute edited as 8 consecutive shots. The second time the paintings appear towards the end of the film we see them, in a musical sense, as something of a reprise, an important restating of an establishing theme.

Remarkably, regardless of the brevity of their appearance on the screen the paintings convey their integrity and come to resonate with all the ambiguities and uncertainties of perception and imagination and underscore all the suggestions of the ambivalence of images that have kept this film a work of continuous interest for almost 40 years.

The mood of what I call the “painting scenes” is like that of two introspective interludes, limbo-like suspensions of the narratives that drive other parts of the film. The painting scenes are pensive and, fleeting though they are, they appear, on reflection in the memory, almost as if in slow motion. The paintings appear to bracket the lengthy photographic darkroom scene in the middle of the film or rather, they act like fulcrums or two hinges in the unfolding of the film as a whole.

The first of the painting scenes occurs after only 15 minutes and involves the painter and the photographer looking at the paintings together. It ends the focus on social documentary photography and fashion photography that dominate the beginning of the film. It is immediately after the first painting scene that the photographer takes the series of photographs of a couple meeting in a London park that become the subject of extremely grainy photographic enlargement or “blowing up” that is the centre of

attention in the film. It is as if the paintings have tuned the photographer's eye to another way of seeing.

In this first painting scene we glimpse paintings in full, in detail, on the wall and in progress on the floor. Like the elaborate darkroom sequence to come, each frame is carefully composed using rectangular subdivisions, cropping and reversals to shift the spectator's point of view in space. The camera moves the spectator's point of view not only in relation to the protagonists but also, most importantly, to the images themselves.

There is a short monologue in which the painter, next to Stephenson's painting *Still Life Abstraction D1, 1957*, says to the photographer:

*They don't mean anything when I do them
Just a mess*

*Afterwards I find something tohang on
to*

Like that - like, like that leg

Then it sorts itself out – and adds up

It's like finding a clue in a detective story

The second of the painting scenes occurs almost exactly an hour later in the last 30 minutes of the film and is more abstract. It follows the blow-up scenes in which the photographer becomes convinced that he has indeed found a clue in his grainy photographic enlargements of the pictures he took in the park. Significantly this second

glimpse of the paintings precedes the discovery by the photographer that all the enlargements and negatives of the photographs taken in the park have been stolen. All, that is, except one.

In this second painting sequence we see paintings twice, firstly Stephenson's *Folding Screen* filling almost exactly half the frame and then a panning close-up of one of the paintings filling the entire picture. There is no dialogue during this but later, on seeing the last remaining intensely grainy blow-up photograph (that may be the evidence in the park that the photographer has been looking for) the Sarah Miles' character says:

Looks like one of Bill's paintings.

The identification of the grain of the photograph with the speckle of Stephenson's paintings is explicit.

Similarly the character played by Sarah Miles seems to be identified with the paintings and she does not appear elsewhere in the film. Her first appearance is actually from behind one of the speckled canvases in a finely patterned dress analogous perhaps to the painting surface and we see her dress framed alongside the painting before we see her face. Conversely, during the second painting scene her face fills the frame just before the entire screen is filled with the surface detail of a painting. The cinema screen itself becomes a grainy field of paint dots in close-up.

In each scene Miles seems unfixed and searching. Her compelling facial expressions that convey this are mirrored by the photographer's face in the perplexing closing sequence of the film, when a silent mimed tennis game, to which he has just "thrown back" an imaginary ball, begins to emanate the sounds of an actual tennis ball being struck. 3

The final image of the film immediately follows this moment. It is one last "grainy field" and underlines Antonioni's preoccupation with surfaces. It is an aerial view of the park in which the photographer is seen as a tiny, solitary figure on a textured expanse of grass that fills the frame. He literally vanishes from this scene an instant before *The End* appears, superimposed onto the grass that still fills the screen. This all-over surface texture can then be recognised as the same ambiguous surface that began the film, as it is incorporated into the opening graphic sequence of the film titles.

In conclusion, what impresses is the realisation that following the fleeting glimpses of his beautiful works, Ian Stephenson's paintings are entirely uncompromised by their inclusion in the film.

They emerge with their integrity intact because they are not there to "dress the set" or act only as a backdrop against which the narrative unfolds. Rather they are there to signify, and what they signify is the film's deepest ambition: to cause us

to reflect on aspects of the nature of visual experience.

David Ward

Footnotes:

1 The opening scene is set around Peter and Alison Smithson's Economist Plaza buildings and the film includes cameo performances by the model Verushka and the group the Yardbirds. The central performances are by leading actors of the day- Vanessa Redgrave, David Hemmings and Sarah Miles. Clothes by contemporary designers appear and the film score is by Herbie Hancock. Extras, some of whom were students at the Architectural Association at the time, included Piers Gough and Janet Street-Porter and there are numerous other references to be identified.

2 New Art Centre exhibition catalogue 2005, p 14

3 The "coming and going" of sound is used a number of times in the film and is very suggestive of what a character might, or might not, be consciously aware of. Note the use of music in the long darkroom sequence and the highly evocative and restless sound of leaves rustling in the wind. This is first heard during the park photography scene and it returns to great effect when the photographer is absorbed in looking at the enlargements of the photographs from that scene.

David Ward 2005

Written from notes used to introduce a screening of Blowup on the opening day of the Ian Stephenson exhibition at the New Art Centre, 10th September 2005.