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# Michelangelo Antonioni's plot development

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Michelangelo Antonioni's *Blow-Up* (1967), the director's first film in English, was an international box-office success. It took a middle-aged Italian outsider to see swinging London clearly and to see it whole, at a time when, as now, the capital was going through extensive redevelopment and modernization. The lead character, an unnamed photographer played by David Hemmings, incarnates some of the period's values: he is shallow, selfish, impulsive and unreflective. He is also, still, the embodiment of mid-century urban cool.

The opening shot, seen behind the stylish credits, is

a high-angle view of an expanse of grass in what we later discover to be a suburban park. That Antonioni had the grass painted a particular shade of green to meet his requirements is significant because *Blow-Up* is as much about painting as it is about photography, and that first shot – which is repeated at the end of the film – is a cinematographic representation of a literal painted landscape.

A recent London screening of *Blow-Up* was introduced by the artist and photographer Rut Blee Luxembourg, Reader in Urban Aesthetics at The Royal College of Art. She began by considering what she sees as the lie at the heart of representation in any medium. Hemmings's character, she pointed out, is presented from the outset as an unreliable narrator, posing as a homeless man to gain access to a South London doss house where he photographs the homeless inmates, making images that would today be regarded as exploitative. We next see him at his studio, straddling and photographing the model Veruschka in a heartless simulacrum of love-making, then bullying a group of listless fashion models. Hemmings's character (never named, but called Thomas in the script) is hard to

pin down – he is talented and clearly successful, but without direction or political affiliation. Bored and impulsive, he appears to have no serious relationship even with his wife, who is mentioned in passing but never appears in the film.

In one sequence, Thomas drives his open-top Rolls Royce through the streets of Westminster, pausing for a moment to allow some anti-nuclear protesters to cross the road. We briefly glimpse, in the distance, a building which is today, by happy coincidence, the site of a permanent public artwork by Blees Luxemburg entitled “Silver Forest”.

Part of a recent redevelopment by Lynch Architects, the western façade of Westminster City Hall features large-scale images of silver birch trees taken by Blees Luxemburg in Beijing and London which, cast in glass-reinforced concrete, form a three-dimensional sculptural relief that is altered subtly as the light changes. Of this work the artist says:

The concept of the forest in the city is about a connection between nature and the urban. The forest introduces ideas about regeneration, finding refuge but also awe and trepidation. This *Silver Forest* is collected together from urban

forests, which are under intense strain, but somehow manage to survive.

A comparable link between nature and the urban is exemplified in several scenes in *Blow-Up* shot in Maryon Park in suburban south London, where Thomas takes photographs of a young woman (Vanessa Redgrave) with an older man who appears to be her lover. She angrily demands the negatives, and he refuses. When he develops the roll of film he is at first intrigued and then obsessed by what appears to be evidence of a murder. In a mesmerizing and justly celebrated sequence he makes a series of enlargements to establish what, if anything, happened in the park. A prompt to our understanding of the process comes earlier in the film, when an abstract Pollock-like painting by the photographer's artist friend is described as a "detective story" whose solution, if there is one, will only emerge when the picture is complete. Images are cryptic, conjectural and alluring – their meaning is contingent.

Blees Luxemburg particularly admires the ingenuity with which Antonioni uses the medium of painting to explore the function of photography. In one panel of her "Silver Forest" there is an apparently discarded sack, an example of what

Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida* calls a *punctum* – something within the image that snags the attention of the viewer, perhaps not the ostensible subject (what Barthes calls the *studium*), but some irrelevant detail, the disruptive presence of which alters the nature of the image and, he says, “changes my reading, so that I am looking at a new photograph, marked in my eyes with a higher value”. Blee Luxemburg uses the German word *tatort* (i.e. a place of action, or a crime scene) to describe the photographic image and that, literally, is what the blow-up in *Blow-Up* appears ambiguously to contain: evidence of a crime.

The photographic image was for Walter Benjamin the site where evidence might be found (although of a social rather than criminal/forensic kind). In his *Small History of Photography* (1931) he calls such evidence the “optical unconscious” of the image, which he defines as the “too much, the excess, the ‘real’ that creeps into the picture, unintended by the photographer”. Thomas locates and navigates the optical unconscious as he obsessively enlarges the images he took in the park, re-photographing them on a large-format camera, gradually revealing a figure in some bushes who appears to be holding a gun, and later what seems

to be a dead body. Paradoxically, the larger the blow-up becomes the less detail emerges, until we arrive at a seemingly random series of black and white blobs similar to the abstract painting seen earlier, at which point pictorial meaning breaks down and – perhaps – a solution is reached.

Released nearly half a century ago, *Blow-Up* remains fresh and urgent in both its theme and its treatment, adding depth to a period often celebrated by nostalgists for its most superficial qualities. Blees Luxemburg's striking large-scale images in Victoria, a recent addition to London's streetscape, are among the best public art currently on view in the capital, offering passers-by aesthetic consolation and an opportunity for spiritual contemplation. Speaking of "Silver Forest" Blees Luxemburg has said: "photography is open-ended and the narrative has to be completed by the viewer". She could equally be describing Antonioni's enigmatic masterpiece.

"Silver Forest" is at Kings Gate, 66-74 Victoria Street, London SW1E 6SQ

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