Whether or not human character changed in a particular month in 1910, the depiction of human subjectivity certainly changed radically from earlier epochs. Investigations of human behavior and motivation by modern thinkers such as Darwin, Marx, Freud, and Husserl repositioned the role of the self in an increasingly complex universe. As a result, twentieth-century fiction, painting, sculpture, and later cinema redefined *la condition humaine*. As the nature of the individual self became problematized in the modern world, creative artists began to “ambiguat[e]” the human beings represented in their works, thereby rendering more accurately that diachronically changing psyche. In this “art-imitates-life” sense, then, modernism can be seen as a new realism, the realism of our times, so to speak—at least in regard to the representation of human subjectivity.

The Modernist Character/The Modernist Actor

Whereas the epic hero of the classical age represented and stood in for a collectivity, a nation or a people, and formed part of a meaningful and cohesive (albeit closed) world, the modern, “open” pro-

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On or about December 1910, human character changed. . . . And when human relations change, there is at the same time a change in religion, conduct, politics, and literature.

*Virginia Woolf*
tagonist (or even antihero) is a more solitary subjectivity, who often stands in opposition to the natural or social universe of the fiction. Such “open” characters—what Lucien Goldmann (following Georg Lukács) called “problematical heroes”—became the staples of twentieth-century literature and film. Divorced or alienated from both their social situations and themselves, their inner lives and personal identities could no longer be assumed from their Serlean “speech acts” or outward behavioral tropes. Indeed, the unidimensional, easily knowable character (ethos) in the traditional Aristotelian model, whose external actions (pratton) were assumed to be congruent with his or her internal being—in that the inner life “motivated” outer action and, conversely, outer behavior was “explained” by inmost psychological motives—gave way to more indeterminate, less unified ciphers whose emotional lives and thought processes were ambiguous, if not polysemic.

While Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, William Faulkner, and other modern novelists attempted to apprehend the new subjectivity through a stream-of-consciousness style, modern cinematic auteurs had to develop neoteric ways to depict the internal lives of characters, since the medium they were working in was characterized by such a strong objective surface. As Thomas Elsaesser put it, “If the cinema is a projection of vision, then it cannot also be one of consciousness” [7]. Because of its indexical and iconic nature, most filmmakers forswore internal monologue in favor of a phenomenological presentation and observation of the outer world. This latter approach—what I would dub monologue extérieur—is most evident in the nouveau roman school of French literature and in the école du regard cinemas of Robert Bresson, Alain Resnais, and Alain Robbe-Grillet (Tomasulo, “Intentionality of Consciousness” 58–62).

In this discursive mode of character representation, the great characterological events (the peripateia) of the Greek drama give way to the modernist minutiae of quotidian existence, the sheer facticity of human being. Although this branch of the modernist school often eschews traditional depth psychology (the basis of much Method acting), the melodramatic “mugging” and stentorian performance style of the stage, the declamatory, “hammy” pantomimes of the silent cinema, and the “psychological realism” inherent in the verisimilar and naturalistic performance codes of the classical Hollywood cinema, it is attentive to “geography” and to the cinematic means by which character can be articulated. In modernist cinema, then, ontology and cinematography become
psychology. In this sense, the objects of perception (by the character and the filmmaker) define consciousness through an assumed existential intentionality; in short (and in French), *chosisme* (thing-ness) implies *choisisme* (choice).

Although Michelangelo Antonioni is not the most extreme film director to use the Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt*, or “Alienation effect” (Godard, Fassbinder, Resnais, and Straub clearly use the “A-effect” more than Antonioni), his films tend to play down psychological convention and call self-conscious attention to the fiction, by “baring the device” and thereby exposing the means of production of meaning-production. Nonetheless, in Antonioni’s oeuvre, even a moderate use of Brechtian or Pirandellian formalist devices is enough to renegotiate and/or problematize the habitual “identification-effect” that spectators have come to expect from mainstream cinematic fiction.

Certainly, all film directors shape the performances of their actors by utilizing wardrobe, hairstyle, and props. What sets Antonioni apart is that he relies equally on mise-en-scène, découpage, camera angles, color, lighting, set design, sound track articulations, music, and pared-down performances to construct his singular cinematic language of characterization. As he once put it, “Only one person fuses in his mind the various elements involved in a film . . . the director. The actor is one of those elements, and sometimes not even the most important” (qtd. in Billard 8). More naturalistic film directors exploit the theatrical codes of their actors’ facial expressions, gestures, and dialogue to effectuate audience understanding and empathy. In contrast, Antonioni uses a cinematic syntax that problematizes such clarity. The viewer is thus presented with a paradoxical modernist morphology, one that ultimately underplays his characters’ individuality and “personality.” Indeed, the Antonioni character is often just a small part of a larger visual and social field, a “figure in a landscape” as Ted Perry called it (3).

By foregrounding the background, Antonioni redefines the nature of film dramaturgy—and the nature of cinematic performance. Just as Tomlinson observes about Bresson in chapter 3, Antonioni “systematically downplays the importance of the human figure, generally rendering it the equal of environment.” Whereas the Aristotelian drama was defined as “character is destiny,” Antonioni’s teleology of character might be called “environment is destiny,” in that an empty mise-en-scène often defines the hollow plight and circumstances of his protagonists. As such,
Antonioni seems to follow Jean Renoir’s realist prescription: “One starts with the environment to arrive at the self” (171).

Of course, although Antonioni transcends many of the tenets of the Italian neorealist school from which he emerged and its reliance on physiognomy, he retains an interest in human beings, their social roles, and their interactions. As he once put it, “Film has always been for me, conflict. A man, a woman: drama” [Tomasulo, “Life Is Inconclusive” 62]. Thus, both the auteur and the spectator are involved in an ambiguous push-pull, “approach-avoidance“ relationship with the people in an Antonioni film. His protagonists often stand condemned sub specie aeternitatis, yet their pathetic plights elicit sympathy; their situations and their sufferings are presented from an aloof and distanced perspective, but their confused feelings and perceptions are evident. As such, the filmmaker provides a context that, in effect, denies viewers the luxury of a single-faceted response but that does not negate the moral reality of their individual choices and predicaments. On the one hand, his characters may be viewed as abstractions—Contemporary Woman or Bourgeois Man—without individual identities; on the other hand, they can be judged, albeit without the mitigating emotional baggage of empathy and identification. In this sort of cinematic universe, Antonioni’s actors tend to be embodied themes rather than flesh-and-blood people.

In such a universe, in which screen acting is only one part of a directorial language system, characters can be both external and internal, real and symbolic, actantes et personnages {to use Roland Barthes’s distinction}. This “mixed use” is especially relevant to a discussion of film performance, given both the resolute indexicality of the motion picture apparatus and the filmmaker’s and performers’ assumed need to express the private emotional lives of the characters.

Although emotions are usually thought of as highly personal and individual matters, Antonioni’s signature modernist-formalist manner of externalizing and representing inner feelings gives them a wider scope and meaning. The director essentially depicts the dissolute and decadent emotions of an entire class—the bourgeoisie—with all its human failures and foibles. Antonioni’s ideological thematic has portrayed the dialectics of decay of the aristocratic class since the beginning of his career.¹

It is intriguing that Antonioni has described his principle for depicting inner feelings as follows, “Our acts, our gestures, our
words are nothing more than the consequences of our own personal situation in relation to the world around us” (“A Talk with Antonioni” 26). These words are remarkably similar to the words of Karl Marx in Critique of Political Economy: “It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence but, conversely, their social existence that determines their consciousness” (425).

**Being the Part**

A basic tenet of Stanislavskian/Method acting is that the actor is the auteur (Carnicke 80) or, as Tony Barr has said in discussing screen acting, “The actor’s primary function is to communicate ideas and emotion to an audience” (3). However, in the work of Antonioni, as well as some other film directors, the communication of ideas and emotion has become the job of the filmmaker, not the performer. In fact, Michelangelo Antonioni has stated this directly: “Actors feel somewhat uncomfortable with me; they have the feeling that they’ve been excluded from my work. And, as a matter of fact, they have been” (qtd. in Billard 8). This may be because the director also believes that his actors are only one part of a larger composition: “I regard [the performer] as I regard a tree, a wall, or a cloud, that is, as just one element in the overall scene” (“A Talk with Antonioni” 36). This may be why Antonioni has explained his work methods on the set as follows: “The film actor ought not to understand, he ought to be. . . . The director owes the actor no explanations except general ones about the character and the film. It is dangerous to go into details” (Leprohon 101–3).

This essay will focus on the anti-“Methodist,” modernist means by which Antonioni uses actors and performance to convey meaning and character in Blow-Up (1967). This zero-degree acting style is defined as modernist in part because it fits the pattern in modern art that was so succinctly characterized by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe as “less is more.” In fact, in Antonioni’s cinema, all the conventional techniques of the performer’s “instrument” are pared down and minimized: facial expression, gesture, body language and movement, costume, and especially dialogue. Nonetheless, Geoffrey Nowell-Smith is correct to say that “Antonioni’s films can be described as texts written on the body of the actor” (43). This “silent treatment” will be explored below, with particular emphasis on the depictions of sexuality in Blow-Up and the final scene in Maryon Park in London.
Silence Is Golden, but Talk Is Cheap: Blow-Up as Polysemic Performance Text

The very first sequence in Blow-Up establishes a conflict between sound and silence, as Antonioni crosscuts between a group of youthful, energetic, modishly dressed, and noisy Rag Week students who look like “mimes” and a group of older, exhausted, shabbily clad, and quiet derelicts exiting a doss-house. The contrast in colors and pace of the movements of the two juxtaposed groups of performers is stark, and that performance difference is reinforced by the respective editing rhythms. In addition, the students are wearing heavy white pancake makeup on their faces, thereby allying them with some of the film’s fashion models and adding a Brechtian masklike dimension to their appearance. [Although the photographer-protagonist is not made up, his facial expressions are often masklike in their vacuity.] The mimes seem to epitomize the performative—life itself as a performance—in this scene and in the final scene of the film, but the “documentary” aspects of the doss-house scene are undercut because, like the mimes but unbeknownst to the derelicts, Thomas (David Hemmings) is also playing a part. After bidding farewell to his compatriots in poverty, he walks furtively down the street and gets into a Rolls-Royce convertible. Throughout the film, Thomas acts a part—that of the hip, world-weary artist—just as actor David Hemmings limns the role of the brash, sexist studio photographer.

The Rag Week students are not, technically speaking, mimes since their performances are, especially in the opening scene, rather boisterous—kinetically and aurally. They run through the streets and shout exuberantly in the first scene of the film. Their shouts, however, do not communicate much more than their excitement and passion within staid, stiff-upper-lip British society (epitomized by the Royal Guard, African nuns, and other solemn people they pass on the streets). In the opening of the film, the mummers “converse” with Thomas exclusively through gestural synecdoche and other unspoken means. Nonetheless, their shared gazes—their imploring requests for a donation and Thomas’s lackadaisical facial response—establish an ambiguous link between them that causes the photographer to give them some cash at the beginning of the film and to retrieve their invisible tennis ball at the end. Like Antonioni, who uses atypical “wires” to communicate meaning
and character, the mimes use atypical performance channels to convey information about themselves.

At his studio, Thomas whistles (another nonverbal device) to get the attention of his models, his “birds.” When the photographer does speak, he barks out demanding orders (“Have that stuff developed, eh? Right away,” “Get the birds down here, will ya?”) to his assistant, Reg, and is vocally and physically abrupt with everyone he encounters. He keeps Veruschka von Lehndorff (playing herself), one of the world’s leading fashion models, waiting for almost an hour. At the start of that photo session, the photographer gestures with a shrug of his head for Reg to open the blinds and let in some light, not even deigning to speak to the hired help.

Later, at a haute-couture modeling session, Thomas shouts rudely at the anorexic women (“Terrible!” “Put the head up!”), roughly positioning their limbs into static poses, and struts smugly around the set like a military martinet. These interactions establish the photographer as a Marcusean one-dimensional man, a phallic narcissist, an egotistical “control freak.” Hemmings gets to act a bit in this scene, but his performance is just that: a performance— as “prima don” photographer for the benefit of his minions.

**Acting Sexy**

In a famous passage from *Das Kapital*, Karl Marx linked the changing relations of production in his epoch to the libidinal impulse. He diagnosed the capitalist era as follows: “There followed on the birth of mechanization and modern industry . . . a violent encroachment like that of an avalanche in its intensity and its extent. All bounds of morality and nature, of age and sex, of day and night, were broken down. *Capital celebrated its orgies*” [21; emphasis added]. In 1962, Erik Erikson, whose psychoanalytic books were largely responsible for the 1960s (and 1990s) vogue of “identity,” noted that “the patient of early psychoanalysis suffered most under sexual inhibitions which prevented him from [attaining his identity]” [279]. By contrast, the contemporary patient is constrained not by sexual repression but, according to Christopher Lasch, by narcissism. Overtly charming and successful, the modern-day narcissist is socially and sexually promiscuous as a way of avoiding close involvements (Lasch 71–103). As a result, compulsive copulation becomes perfunctory and sterile: no longer a blissful pleasure shared by two (or more) people, but a self-indulgence for solitary monads.
Herbert Marcuse offered a similar diagnosis. He pointed out that images of sexual gratification that had such explosive negative force in Victorian society have been harnessed—in a postindustrial *société de consommation* that no longer needs the cement of sexual taboo—to the service of the status quo and consumerism (“Sex sells”). He called this contemporary phenomenon “repressive desublimation” (72–79).

These same issues are part and parcel of the cinematic world of Michelangelo Antonioni, particularly his portrayal of the “sexual crisis” of the modern libidinal apparatus (Leprohon 168). In an interview following the release of *Zabriskie Point* (1969), he made his view explicit: “In my other films, I looked upon sex as a *malattia dei sentimenti*, a disease of love” (“A Talk with Antonioni” 40; emphasis added). In addition to his depiction of characters and situations that reflect the “Sick Eros” of our time, Antonioni uses cinematic signifiers to convey the despair of contemporary desire. Although his films are often considered “sexy”—part of an international marketing strategy by European filmmakers who gave the world auteurs and sex in contradistinction to Hollywood’s stars and sexual repression—Antonioni frequently provides a “cold shower” for his viewers and characters by focusing on the sociopolitical determinants of the failures of latter-day lust and love. In particular, his dispassionate, almost clinical, mise-en-scène, découpage, and sound track articulations during actual love scenes and during symbolic sex sequences create the exact opposite effect of Hollywood cinema’s lyrical romantic imagery and music. These Brechtian distanciation devices make it difficult for audiences to identify emotionally with Antonioni’s characters; instead, the spectator views them from the outside. Put another way, Antonioni is interested less in the personal *psychology* of love and sexuality than in the social *phenomenology* of contemporary erotic behavior.

The classical Hollywood cinema’s sexual regime generally involves a narrative trajectory toward marriage as a closural device, a suppression of the erotic impulse, except for the inscription of fetishization of the female body through the agency of the male gaze, and a privatization of emotions, a withdrawal of the couple from the social milieu. This “us-against-them” retreat from the public sphere reflects the more individualistic ethos of American capitalism and American cinema. For Antonioni, even when his damaged subjects find a moment alone, they bring their social baggage with them. Indeed, the dynamic is more “me against you” than “us against them.” And he often uses the sexiopolitics of
narrative space to convey that idea, as in Thomas’s one-on-one ses-

sion with the model Veruschka—a scene that was selected as “the

sexiest scene in film history” by the British journal Premiere in 2003.

When we first see Veruschka, she seems to be seated on the

floor in Thomas’s studio, but when he snaps his finger on a sheet of

Plexiglas, we realize that it is only her reflection. This complex

mise-en-scène suggests the artificial nature of the model’s presence

as well as the photographer’s view of her as insubstantial. The shot

also introduces the “to see or not to see” theme that vision is

ambiguous (Antonioni, Blow Up 14). With jazz music by Herbie

Hancock playing in the background, Thomas—still wearing his torn

and grubby clothes from the flophouse—starts the photo shoot with

a series of standard locked-down camera positions with Veruschka

posed in somewhat stiff, albeit alluring, positions against a backdrop

of feathers, but he eventually shifts to using a handheld camera and

interacting directly with the model. The photographer’s movements

create a decidedly erotic tone, and he even straddles his subject on

the floor of his loft. “Work! Work!” he shouts at her strenuously,

although his behavior is closer to a sexual conquest than to profes-

sional rapport. In the context of a film that minimizes dialogue, his

repeated verbal entreaties—“On your back!” “Go! Go!” “Give it to

me!” “Lovely, yeah!” “Make it come!” “For me, love, for me!”—dis-

play a paroxysmal outburst of ersatz passion that belies the other-

wise “cool” exterior of David Hemmings’s performance.

Antonioni uses the quickened pace of the action and editing,

as well as a sexually charged saxophone recording on the sound

track, to emphasize the sexual simulacrum, but the scene is also

photographed in an unemotional way and clearly shows that the

woman is estranged and unsatisfied by the experience. Indeed, the

camera zoom into her face as she writhes on the floor as if in the

grip of orgasm is an authorial (and male spectatorial) intrusion and

penetration of the woman’s “sexual space.”

At the crescendo of the scene, Thomas screams out his pleas-

ure (“Yes! Yes!”), then nonchalantly dismounts and walks away

from the model. The cut is to a view of Veruschka sprawled out on

the floor as the photographer lies collapsed on the sofa in the back-

ground. A phallic wooden beam appears to emerge from the

woman’s crotch, suggesting the impersonal, “wooden,” and uncon-

summated nature of their make-believe “intercourse” (figure 4.1).

Here, Antonioni replaces dialogue and performance with precise

articulations of the mise-en-scène to reveal Thomas’s career-driven,
locked-up ego. As the director once said, “Often, an actor viewed against a wall or a landscape, seen through a window, is much more eloquent than the line you’ve given him” (qtd. in “Apropos of Eroticism” 162). Indeed, for Antonioni, this use of aesthetic language is the true protagonist of his films, not the traditional hero figure of the classical cinema, who is sublimated and/or derealized beyond recognition in Antonioni’s oeuvre. In a similar way, Antonioni rarely seeks an authentic collaboration with his performers or encourages them to improvise on the set.

Later, in the loft, Thomas has an encounter with Jane (Vanessa Redgrave), the mystery woman from the park. Once again, Antonioni relies on cinematic signifiers rather than performance tropes to convey their ambiguous emotions and motives (figure 4.2). For instance, the “passion” of their meeting is evoked not so much by their actions (she removes her blouse without a word; he casually tosses aside the roll of film) but by the mauve color of the seamless backdrop behind them as they kiss. Before they kissed, the photographer had treated Jane in the only way he knew how to relate to a female—as a model. He wants to see “how she sits,” to move “slowly, slowly, against the beat” with the mood-enhancing music playing on his stereo. In this sense, Thomas orchestrates the scene like a cinema director, indeed, he orchestrates the scene like Michelangelo Antonioni, who in many respects treats his performers like models (if not mannequins).
Of course, Thomas’s fashion milieu could explain some of the wordlessness in the film, since haute-couture models are not usually expected to speak while posing, but his occupation does not account for all the displaced emotional affect. While he is with Jane, Thomas even smokes a cigarette in a sexually suggestive manner (his fingers form a V at his nose as he inhales), but there is no mutual self-surrender here, only cold, egoistic calculation: she wants the incriminating roll of film, and he wants another notch on his belt. And, although their sex takes place offscreen and is interrupted by the delivery of Thomas’s propeller, the similarity between this scene and the modeling session with

4.2. Thomas (David Hemmings) and Jane (Vanessa Redgrave) hardly look at each other, and Jane’s alienating posture is an impediment to intimacy.
Veruschka points out Thomas’s “repetition compulsion” without the need for direct references to it.

Thomas’s repetition compulsion is also evident in another scene, in which he engages in an “orgy” with two adolescent would-be models (Jane Birkin and Gillian Hills). In an earlier scene, Thomas shows the girls a little trick of manual dexterity by deftly rolling a coin back and forth between the fingers of his right hand, suggesting his bodily control and smooth sensuality, but, significantly, the prop he uses is a coin—money—an indication of the cash nexus that intrudes on all of Thomas’s relationships. In a sly bit of acting “business,” Hemmings buttons up one button on his blue shirt, an understated gesture that signals his professional and sexual rejection of the young women.

4.3. The teenyboppers return to Thomas’s studio.
Later that day, the teenyboppers return to Thomas’s studio (figure 4.3). They would like him to photograph them, but instead he removes their clothes and cavorts with them on his seamless backdrop paper. Although at least one critic sees this scene as a sign of the “cool” cameraman’s “humanization” in that he treats the girls as human beings rather than in the manner of a detached professional [Meeker 11], Thomas once again dismisses the teenagers (“Later!”) after having his orgiastic way with them. Hemmings provides insight into the character’s interior life here by cracking an occasional smile during his romp with the teenyboppers, but for the most part, his cool demeanor and rude behavior predominate: he has the girls make coffee for him, thus putting them to work; looks up their skirts as they mount the staircase [a handheld low-angle point-of-view shot leaving no doubt about Thomas’s male gaze and “sexual politics”]; has them remove his shoes like servants; and chases them out after they have serviced him sexually.

Subtle facial expressions and gestural codes also convey volumes in two scenes in which Thomas visits his painter friend Bill (John Castle), who lives next door. When Thomas first visits his neighbor, Bill invites him in with a subtle gesture of his head; once in, Thomas asks Bill if he can purchase one of the artist’s abstract canvases. The painter shakes his head, indicating “no.” Thomas then asks if the artist will give him the painting; again, Bill just shakes his head. This sort of nonverbal communication recurs throughout Blow-Up. Later, Thomas wanders into a “primal scene” [Restivo 113] between Bill and his girlfriend, Patricia [Sarah Miles], who are making love on the floor. The photographer does not look away or leave discreetly; instead, true to his “cool” persona, he observes the scene impassively. The woman looks up at Thomas and reaches her hand toward him in an imploring, albeit ephemeral, manner. She then smiles in an equally fleeting and indecipherable manner. She appears to be neither shocked nor embarrassed by Thomas’s presence or gaze. There is even a hint that she is involved with him, since she goes up to his loft shortly afterward. Indeed, her silent monologue with “peeping” Tom suggests that she is more interested in communicating with him than with the man who is penetrating her.

Given the limited range of emotion evinced, it is difficult to imagine why Antonioni needed to shoot twenty-one takes of this one interaction between Hemmings and Miles [Antonioni, Blow-Up 14]. Maybe, like Stanley Kubrick, Antonioni needed to decondition his performers from reacting with their usual gesticulatory and
vocal exaggerations (see Dennis Bingham’s chapter 10 in this volume), or perhaps, like Bresson, Antonioni used the repeated takes “to suppress intentionality and thus free authenticity” [Tomlinson 370].

One possible explanation for Thomas’s lack of affect in these and other scenes in Blow-Up is that he appears to be a substance abuser; he always seems to be drinking or smoking pot. At a pot party held at the home of his agent, he indulges so indiscriminately that he has to sack out overnight at his agent Ron’s (Peter Bowles) pad. The next morning he has to shake out the cobwebs before proceeding to try to solve the murder mystery, which by now has become the raison d’être of his existence.

“His Master’s Voice”

In classic Hollywood movies, characters often emerge not only from their physical actions but also from their bodies in the form of speech acts. Often, these speech acts can be interpreted through the Barthesian “grain of the voice,” those individual and recognizable characteristics of a performer’s persona manifested in his or her speech patterns [Greta Garbo’s accent, Marlon Brando’s “mumbling,” Marilyn Monroe’s breathiness, Wallace Beery’s raspy drawl]. In Blow-Up, Antonioni’s eschewal of these defining attributes is most evident in David Hemmings’s generally flat and deadpan line readings, creating a character who is not the traditional “strong, silent type” but a more modernist figure: a man without qualities. Indeed, in the parlance of the acting profession, he is a character without subtext. Antonioni’s methods of working with actors are such that “they appear to recite their lines with the monotonous detachment of non-performers who have no involvement with what they are saying” [Scott 88].

There are exceptions to this monotonal vocal pattern, especially at the beginning of Blow-Up when the character’s macho identity is being established. For instance, he is decidedly harsh and loud when he scolds one model for chewing gum (“No chewing gum! Get rid of it! . . . Not on my floor!”), two others for standing in an awkward position (“How about the leg a little further forward!” “You, arm down!”), and them all for not being suitably perky (after a piercing whistle: “Wake up!” “I asked you to smile, eh!”—a remark that visibly startles the model nearest him). Just before leaving the teenyboppers for the first time, he tells one to “get rid of that bag; it’s diabolical,” his voice dripping with professional sarcasm. As these
examples show, Thomas may possess some of the traits attributed to Bresson’s heroes—alienation, stubbornness, automatism, effacement of emotion, and ambiguity—but he clearly does not have the positive aspects of temperament—modesty, shyness, introspection, and nobility—that coexist in the Bressonian “flattened” yet complex protagonist (Tomlinson 366–69).

Hemmings’s face throughout much of the film remains as expressionless and deadpan as his voice. As just one example, when Thomas goes back to the park at night to search for the corpse, he slowly and deliberately approaches the tree where he saw the corpse. The camera tilts down to reveal the dead body. When Thomas kneels down and gently touches the cadaver (like the original “doubting” St. Thomas, who physically had to touch the resurrected Christ before he would believe), the photographer is mute and his face is impassive—as impassive as the dead man’s. Rather than overt movement or dialogue, Antonioni uses faint sound effects—an offscreen dog barking in the distance, the click of a camera shutter (?)—to disclose the fear that the once overconfident Thomas feels. Thomas is equally poker-faced when he stares at the enlargements hung about his loft like the Stations of the Cross. Although Hemmings’s face at this point expresses at most slight curiosity, conveyed by his knitted brow, the shot composition communicates the character’s situation more directly (figure 4.4). Thomas’s face is trapped between two of the blow-ups, which impinge on his “personal space” and occupy most of the frame. As
such, his entrapment by the mystery in the park is presented in a graphic visual manner, rather than through any overt techniques in David Hemmings’s performance.

Although his characters’ faces are often expressionless and they communicate little through dialogue, Antonioni nonetheless puts the viewer in their minds and thoughts. This is often achieved by using an *école du regard* editing strategy. In the above scene, for example, the director shows us what Thomas is successively looking at: consecutive shots of Jane and her older male companion, the man alone near an Edenic tree, a wooden fence, Jane approaching the camera, a telltale shot of what appears to be a man with a pistol in the bushes behind the fence, and then the tree, where, underneath, there appears to be the corpse of the older gentleman. As the frame fills with these shots, Thomas’s general ideation is revealed without the usual trappings of acting. The only hints of a performance in this solo scene are the beads of perspiration that cover Hemmings’s face as he contemplates the pictures, his rubbing gesture across his lips [reminiscent of both Humphrey Bogart’s recurring “tic” and Jean-Paul Belmondo’s homage to Bogie in Jean-Luc Godard’s *Breathless* [1959]], and Hemmings’s hands-on-hips pose, which convey his anxiety and puzzlement. At one point, Hemmings points his finger, suggesting he has had an epiphany, and he rushes into the darkroom to develop more negatives.¹³

In the next scene, one of the most significant “silent” scenes in the film, we watch for more than fifteen minutes as Thomas silently stares at, rephotographs, develops, and enlarges his original shots from the park, until the grain patterns of the crucial images (is it a corpse under the tree? a gun?) become indistinguishable from the abstract-expressionist paintings of Thomas’s neighbor Bill.¹⁴ Although his movements from the studio to the darkroom are determined and brisk, Hemmings’s acting in this extended scene consists mainly of running his fingers nervously through his hair several times and projecting “intense moments of quiet concentration” [Zucker, “Making Friends” 153] as he ponders the images and attempts to organize the shots to tell a coherent story. In doing so, Thomas again plays the role of a film director or editor. As Antonioni cuts from one still to the next, we begin to understand Thomas’s ineffable thought process and the narrative connections he makes between the disparate angles as he follows the eyeline glances of the woman to a wooded area near the fence (figure 4.5).
Hemmings’s performance does not convey the photographer’s exact interpretation of the “montage” until he reveals to his neighbor’s lover, Patricia, that he believes he prevented a murder, a judgment he reconsiders later. As in much of the film, the characters “converse” in this scene but hardly listen to each other and end up talking past each other in a string of non sequiturs:

**Patricia:** Who was he?
**Thomas:** Someone.
**Patricia:** Shouldn’t you call the police?
**Thomas:** [nods toward the photo of the dead man] That’s the body.
**Patricia:** It looks like one of Bill’s paintings. . . . Will you help me? I don’t know what to do.
**Thomas:** What is it? Huh?
Patricia: I wonder why they shot him. . . .
Thomas: I didn’t ask.

At this, Patricia starts to exit, running her fingers along a string that had held up the pictures. She seems about to say something but instead smiles enigmatically once again at Thomas. Miles’s soft voice, gentle stroking of Thomas’s hair, quiet demeanor, red see-through crochet dress, and expressionless face are all that Antonioni needs to suggest her character’s unrequited passion for the photographer.

The Sounds of Silence

As Ludwig Wittgenstein once said, “Words are also deeds.” This idea has important implications for the cinema. Especially in classical Hollywood cinema, words are often deeds, in that wall-to-wall scripted dialogue is often the predominant device by which dramatic action, narrative significance, and characters’ emotions are conveyed. The transparency of spoken language, at least in “realist” cinema, makes an obvious and overt source of information for least-common-denominator audiences. Most moviegoers would have no difficulty accepting Wittgenstein’s notion.

However, Wittgenstein’s dictum has a corollary: silence is also a deed. In contrast to, say, talkathon Hollywood movies or the films of Eric Rohmer, Antonioni’s cinema is replete with silence, which often becomes the principal agency of communication in a scene. Indeed, the lack of verbal articulation in his films subverts the traditional codes of theatrical and cinematic melodrama, in which characters’ feelings and ideas are expressed ad nauseam through speech (think of My Dinner with André), facial expression (think of almost any Jack Nicholson movie except Antonioni’s The Passenger [1975]), and overt action (think of most genre films that involve a chase, fistfight, dance, combat, pratfalls, and so on). Antonioni’s films exhibit a counterpropensity to those conventional codes of characterization: “My aim is to achieve the suppression of outward physical action . . . and, where possible, eliminate dialogue” (qtd. in Gessner 396).

The near muteness of Antonioni’s characters “speaks” to a “failure t’ communicate” between alienated monads. In blocking his two-shots so that characters are positioned on opposite sides of the screen and not facing each other, the director enables the audience to see all the performers’ facial expressions while also
suggesting that there is a physical and emotional gulf between
them, that they fail to “see eye to eye.” As the filmmaker has said,
“A speech which the actor makes in profile gives a different weight
from one spoken full-face” (“A Talk with Antonioni” 28). It could
also be said that the characters’ silence bespeaks a vacuity, an inner
emptiness, in his “hollow men” (and semihollow women). In the
case of many Antonioni characters, like Gertrude Stein’s Oakland,
“there’s no there there.” To put this another way, many of the peo-
ple in Antonioni’s films are characters without character.

On another level, this “silent treatment” suggests that any
belief in a shared language system that enables human beings to
interact is an illusion. As Wittgenstein also said, “Whereof one can-
not speak, thereof one must be silent” (6.54). Serlean speech acts
may be fine, Antonioni may be trying to tell us, but nonspeech is
also an act in a world of ambiguous language relations and debased
public discourse. Furthermore, as a film artist, the director appears
to give greater emphasis to the mise-en-scène, sound effects, under-
stated gestural codes (what Brecht would call gestes), and music—
leaving the gaps to be filled in by the spectator.

Thus, in Antonioni’s universe, the voicelessness of the charac-
ters signals that words spoken from the screen are no longer the
only way to tell a story or to create a character. Spectators used to
the conventions of the Hollywood cinema therefore go through a
process of defamiliarization as they attempt to understand charac-
ters who hardly communicate in verbal language. The director’s
nearly wordless people become tabula rasa whose quietude requires
a viewer who is highly attentive and projective, one who is willing
to read the visual and sonic fields for clues to characterization. In
addition, the paucity of synch sound detracts the spectator from
another erogenous pleasure of the text: the oral and aural gratifica-
tion of taking in the overheard or eavesdropped conversations of
others.

Having labeled the director’s minimalist audio field as mod-
ernist and equated it with a “less-is-more” aesthetic, there may be
a counterfactual, equally valid argument: Antonioni’s “sounds of
silence” can be construed as a realistic technique. After all, real-life
human beings do not generally converse as much as fictional char-
acters in the movies. The characters’ muteness could therefore be
explained as an essentially realist project of verbal representation.
In this sense, Antonioni’s use of mime is mimetic.

Antonioni’s silences are not dramaturgical pregnant pauses,
those emotionally coded (and emotionally loaded) moments that
interrupt the free flow of chatter so common to Western theatrical traditions; indeed, speech in Antonioni acts as the interruption of the free flow of quiet. If his people are not completely silent, they nonetheless exist in a state psychoanalysis characterizes as parole vide, or empty speech, which has no basic function other than to express the relation that its lack of significance elides—that is, to contribute to an aural vacuum, a void that must be filled by gesture, music, sound effects, or the spectator’s own perusal of the image.

The tendency in Antonioni’s films to break with the traditional aural codes of the classical cinema frustrates the spectator’s desire to hear—what Jacques Lacan calls un pulsion invocante, an invocatory drive, which is dependent on a lack—and breaks the implied unity of the senses for the viewer accustomed to the mind-body conflation of the dominant cinema. The abundance of lip-synchronized dialogue [and broad, ostentatious gestures] in the classical cinema creates an illusion of wholeness and supports the overall strategy of audience identification with a coherent fictional character. As Mary Ann Doane put it, “The sonorous envelope . . . sustains the narcissistic pleasure derived from the image of a certain unity, cohesion, and, hence, an identity grounded by the spectator’s fantasmatric relation to his/her own body” (45).

When Thomas does talk, much of his communication is remote, mediated, and artificial. He uses a car phone repeatedly to convey messages to his agent, his studio, and others, using a code name—Blue 4-3-9—to establish his anonymous identity for the call service. He often gives orders to his models through intermediaries—his Asian woman assistant, for example, or his aide-de-camp, Reg, whom Thomas tells to “get the birds down here, will ya,” and gives a telephone to take down an address of a “bloody junk shop.” He matter-of-factly calls his female subordinate and most women he encounters “love” in the oily British style of the period, but such plastic endearments merely debase the language. He calls one model “Stripes” because of the black-and-white pattern on her costume; no attempt is made to know her as a human being.†

Beyond the individual style of a film actor’s voice, though, the specific words he or she utters are as important to the spectator, who seeks identification with and understanding of the character. The words and expressions of classical cinema (“Frankly, my dear, I don’t give a damn,” “Go ahead, make my day,” “I made him an offer he couldn’t refuse,” “May the Force be with you”) enable viewers to misrecognize their own selves through a process of aural
interpellation. The secondary status of dialogue in Antonioni’s oeuvre is thus equivalent to the removal of the Father, as Language and Law, for the spectator-auditor. The resulting Lacanian “lack” impels the viewer to fill in the gaps with his or her own “inner speech.”

What does pass for conversation in Antonioni’s work cannot be properly called dialogue; the latter is too strong a term for such banal pseudo-exchanges, especially since the characters rarely face each other directly while speaking. In addition, the frequency of repetitive phrases and non sequiturs evokes the mood of a Harold Pinter drama, without the obvious wordplay. Thus the solitude of Antonioni’s characters, rather than their interactions, is foregrounded. A case in point is Thomas’s interchange with Jane after the telephone rings in his loft. At first he ignores the persistent sound, but then he suddenly scrambles all over the floor looking for its source. After he locates the telephone and picks up the receiver, he hands it to Jane without a word. The following incoherent exchange ensues:

Jane: Is it for me?
Thomas: It’s my wife.
Jane: Why should I speak to her?
Thomas: Into phone Sorry, love, the bird I’m with won’t talk to you. *He hangs up. To Jane* She isn’t my wife really. We just have some kids. . . . No, no kids. . . . Sometimes, though, it feels as if we had kids. She isn’t beautiful; she’s . . . easy to live with. *Pause* No, she isn’t. That’s why I don’t live with her.

This monologue is emblematic of Antonioni’s redirection of traditional acting paradigms. As described in both classical writing manuals and “Methodist” performance primers, actors need to establish a “backstory,” a life history, of their characters that they can use in developing the delivery of their lines. Thus, in the example above, although Thomas seemingly reveals important information about his personal situation, what he says is so self-contradictory that Jane and the viewers do not know what to believe, thereby undercutting the expository purpose of the conversation. Hemmings’s disinterested performance style contributes to this effect: he follows Jane around the loft as she ducks under ceiling beams and taps her knuckles impatiently on the wood. As he talks, he runs his finger over an Op Art painting, building the tension between him and
Jane but not advancing the backstory one iota. It is as if Thomas’s voiceless gestures and movements override the character “revelations” in his speech, leaving the viewer “in the moment” rather than in the past.

**Prop It Up**

In Antonioni’s cinema, props can take on huge symbolic importance, while at the same time remaining real objects in a phenomenological world of things. Whereas in most films (and plays), actors use props to convey meaning and character and to *enhance* their performances, in *Blow-Up*, props actually *take the place of* performance and communicate directly with the spectator. One instance of a “prop” substituting for performance is the literal prop, or propeller blade, that figures prominently in the antique shop scene and as the coitus interruptus mechanism during Thomas’s sexy scene with Jane in his studio. (It is of some Freudian interest that Thomas drops the propeller while trying to place it in his car.) Similarly, another prop—the broken-off neck of a guitar—serves as a modern castrated phallus when it is prized at a rock concert, where it is thrown out to a frantic crowd, and devalued when Thomas and, a few seconds later, another man, throws the propeller to the street.¹⁶

Props also substitute for performance (or lack thereof) during the scene following the Veruschka photo shoot. Thomas is shaving in his bathroom, presumably having showered and changed into the clothing he wears throughout the rest of the film (straight-legged white jeans, wide black belt, black half-boots, and a light blue shirt—usually seen with the top three buttons left open). As Thomas shaves and confronts his identity in the bathroom mirror, a shelf filled with cologne bottles is visible on screen right. The sheer number of glass props sums up this character, who would rather perfume himself than examine his inmost self, who would rather cover up his sordid soul with fragrant emoluments than confront the emptiness within.

Even more significant, the gallery of phallic icons in *Blow-Up*—from Thomas’s camera lens to the propeller (“I *must* [have it today]! I can’t live without it!”) to the guitar neck to the marijuana joints he smokes with Jane at the beginning of the film and at his agent Ron’s home at the end—symbolize objects that enable the protagonist to escape temporarily from his epistemological ennui and experience a modicum of ersatz pleasure. Ultimately, however, all of the props
provide a cold shower of disturbing disillusionment and detumescence." These phallic objects also provide a phenomenological substitute for Thomas’s lack of emotional affect and true masculinity, and Hemmings’s correspondingly low-key performance.

Hemmings’s flat facial expression throughout *Blow-Up* also needs to be understood in the context of the era in which it was produced. Thus, Hemmings’s flat affect is surely meant to express the sangfroid and *impassibilité* of the 1960s “Mod” lifestyle. In contrast to the “Rockers” of the period, who reveled in passionate displays and working-class violence, the Mods were more concerned with their Carnaby Street fashions and detached decadence. The rock concert scene in the Rikki-Tikk Club epitomizes the use of contradictory sonic articulations to record the tensions both within Thomas and within the British subculture.

The anticipatory sound of a driving rock beat is heard as Thomas approaches the club in search of Jane, whom he spotted on the street; however, when he enters the discotheque, the young patrons are inappropriately silent. They are also rigidly immobile, except for one interracial couple who dances listlessly to the pounding beat and the photographer’s slow movement through the club. Although the youngsters’ clothes are “loud,” we cannot hear their voices. The music and lyrics of the Yardbirds seem to speak for the youngsters, and Jeff Beck’s song even conveys apposite thematic messages from those of the director—“You’re tellin’ me you didn’t see”—helping to fill in the characterological void. But even the song is not communicated properly. A technological failure causes the rock group’s performance to go sour: one of the musicians’ electric guitars malfunctions, producing annoying static on the sound track. This failure of technology to create or improve meaningful rapport between people mirrors the protagonist’s own overreliance on his ineffective camera apparatus.

It is only when the rock performer smashes his obstreperous instrument to bits and hurls the guitar neck out into the statue-like crowd that they react. This direct frontal assault on their zombie-like performances provokes them to shout and scream loudly and to chase after the prop, which ends up in Thomas’s besieged hands. However, the pandemonium and all the impassioned movements of the crowd do not communicate anything more than the mimes’ histrionic excess. They are still dead-in-life characters, like Thomas, who are stirred by ersatz phallic symbols (the propeller, the guitar neck) to move or shout inarticulately but do not share authentic intimacies or joy with their fellow human beings.
The Tennis (End) Game

In a personal interview with me, Antonioni quoted Anton Chekhov: “Give me new endings, and I can reinvent literature!” The director also invoked a realist (as opposed to a formalist) justification for his problematic closures: “Life is inconclusive” (Tomasulo 64). Nonetheless, the antiteleological structures of his narratives call into question the syllogistic progression of the Aristotelian dramatic mythos of narrative continuity and causality, the ancient basis for contemporary master narratives. The open texture of these modernist “stoppings” deny closure within the diegesis and thus throw back to the viewer any Aristotelian raveling and unraveling.

This renegotiation of the narrative contract relates to the general problematics of artistic language in the modern world. The endings of Antonioni’s films are independent entities, texts apart from the body of the narrative. Rather than being structured around a single cathartic event (for example, the blinding of Oedipus), Antonioni’s films are cyclical in structure, with little noticeable rise and fall—that is, they are what Paul Schrader has called “a continuous continuation” (33). Despite their modernist configurations, though, many of Antonioni’s endings evince a silence of signification that leaves the spectator with an unfulfilled mania for explanation.

In Blow-Up, the protagonist’s repeated state of silence contributes to the film’s narrative and thematic ambiguity. As a still photographer, Thomas is used to silent work: when he is not shouting at his vapid models or bossing around his staff, he is in the darkroom or working silently in the doss-house. His silence conveys his incivility: he never thanks anyone who helps him. Nonetheless, at the beginning and especially at the end of the film, Thomas and the mimes do communicate with each other, through subtle facial and gestural codes, emphasizing again Antonioni’s refutation of dialogue as the chief mode of characterological portrayal.

At the end of Blow-Up, in the tennis court scene, Antonioni and actor David Hemmings finally communicate something to the viewer. The photographer puts down his ever-present camera (and what a meaningful gesture that is, because Thomas had, up until this point, mainly communicated with others through his camera lens) and moves into close-up as he tosses back an imaginary ball to the mimes. Antonioni holds on Hemmings’s blasé facade while the character experiences a slow series of internal emotions and thoughts that appear to overwhelm him (figure 4.6). This is silent
acting at its most sophisticated best, exemplifying what Béla Belázs called “the silent soliloquy” (63) or, as Angela Dalle Vacche has noted, the “visual ventriloquism” in the cinema of Antonioni, whereby the director “speaks through the actor’s body” (48).

Even before this final moment, Thomas had begun to communicate with the mimes, albeit nonverbally. The students’ overt and mannered gesticulations (the way they play tennis, for instance) and the photographer’s more delicate and lackadaisical responses establish an ambiguous link between them that causes him to cooperate and retrieve the invisible tennis ball. Of course, Antonioni’s autonomous camera also cooperates by following the path of the “ball” as it bounces and finally settles in the grass near Thomas. Here, Antonioni’s camera takes on a performative role in the discourse and actually upstages Hemmings’s material enactment of Thomas’s character.\(^{18}\)

Since a film’s ending is such a privileged site, spectators try to extract some ultimate significance (and signification) from Hemmings’s enigmatic and uncertain expressions and the subtle changes in his countenance. This subdued performance contains the whole psychological and semiotic resolution of the entire film. The offscreen sound of a tennis ball pinging and bouncing (especially since it is gradually podded up on the sound track over the length of the entire shot) may skew the spectator’s interpretation somewhat, but each viewer still comes away with a different meaning from Hemmings’s polysemic articulation. If, as actor Alan Bates

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4.6. Antonioni holds on Thomas’s blasé facade while the character experiences a slow series of internal emotions and thoughts.

Frank P. Tomasulo
suggests, “Thought does register on camera” (qtd. in Barr 42), then we should be able to discern what Thomas is thinking—sans dialogue or overt facial expression.

Much of the critical literature on *Blow-Up* offers conflicting interpretations of the photographer’s final gesture, his retrieval of the mimes’ imaginary tennis ball. Despite many nuances and subtleties, these arguments often boil down to whether the ending is “happy” (the hero has a positive experience with other people and puts down his camera) or “sad” (Thomas surrenders his hold on reality). These value judgments aside, Thomas’s act is indisputably a thoughtful and imaginative leap in the direction of another reality, calling into question much of what came before in the narrative. More judgmental readings presuppose that Thomas (and the spectator) should experience catharsis.

The change in narrative voice is apparent as the character disappears (after first being minimalized by a cut to an overhead long shot) to leave the grass behind for our inspection. Thomas, who had been the center of that final image (and of the whole film), vanishes through a cinematic trick and thus deprives us of a vanishing point; we are left with a flat image with no sense of depth. As such, Antonioni’s art is based on absence, including the absence of overt acting. In *Blow-Up*, there are numerous diegetic absences: the photographer’s disappearance, the corpse’s Fort/Da presence/absence, the stolen blowups, and so on. Indeed, the theft of the incriminating photos denies Thomas the “happy ending” to his book; sounding a bit like a Hollywood producer, in the pub scene Ron had said that a happy ending “rings truer.” The status of the narrative’s closure is thus openly discussed within the narrative.

Thus the erotic and emotional involvement usually associated with plot and characters is, in Antonioni, replaced by an aesthetic appreciation. To momentarily revive the language of semiotics, it is precisely this conflict—the coterminous distinction between the polyvalent language of the images (oriented toward the signifier) and the univocal language of the ideological (oriented toward the signified)—which produces the oft-discussed “ambiguity” of the director’s films. The work of closure, then, in an open-ended film would seem to involve an ideologically inspired passage between two modes of discourse: the poetic and illusive order of film style, which keeps meaning and desire in a state of suspense, versus the cognitive and definite domain of the dialogue, which seeks to fix meaning and to lodge desire in a safe haven. Ultimately, one must distinguish
between the emotional/dramaturgical climax of classical cinema and the other sorts of endings—thematic, chromatic, cinematic, and the like—associated with modernist, formalist films.

Unlike classical cinema, which depends on the device of the memorable tag line of dialogue (“Tomorrow is another day,” “Nobody’s perfect,” “This could be the beginning of a beautiful friendship”), Antonioni most frequently ends his films in silence or with music. His characters’ voices are generally still for several shots, if not several minutes, before the end. Related to this characterological silence is an authorial stance similar to indirect discourse. Like Flaubert, Antonioni affirms a perspective superior to his characters, while simultaneously challenging his viewers to assume that same place.

The director eschews the use of dialogue at the end of Blow-Up as he often does in the final scenes of his films. He often relies on elements of the mise-en-scène: in this case, a chimerical “prop”—an invisible ball—is used to convey character and meaning. Certainly this ball is a Metzian “imaginary signifier” if ever there was one [Metz 18–34]. The imaginary ball also plays a role in the performance of meaning—in this case, the Fort/Da appearance/disappearance of the ball mirrors the appearance/disappearance of the mimes (who appear at both the beginning and the end of the film) and, more important, the appearance/disappearance of the corpse Thomas found in the park. Furthermore, Antonioni uses the camera to accentuate that theme: in the final shot, Thomas himself “disappears” from the screen through the use of a self-reflexive cinematic special effect, a dissolve-out.

Conclusion

Antonioni’s predilection for “No Words,” the slogan painted on the stolen airplane in Zabriskie Point, is part of his postlinguistic cinematic language and nonverbal aesthetic. Performance figures into this equation through the de-emphasis on speech and theatrical gesture throughout Blow-Up, as well as other Antonioni films. In contrast to, say, Federico Fellini, whose histrionic characters use broad, stereotypical Italianate gestures and wear their hearts on their sleeves (and in their dialogue), Antonioni’s actors use a much more limited “palette.” They are part of an overall visual and color design, not just a talking tongue. The last word is Antonioni’s: “Films are always in prose. Why? One could tell a story by images alone, without words, as pure as poetry” [qtd. in Wyndham 13].
NOTES

1. Antonioni expressed his political passion most directly in an interview with the author: “I was so against the bourgeoisie and wanted to say something against it. The aristocrats are sliding into nothingness. They’re disappearing slowly” (Tomasulo, “Life Is Inconclusive” 62).

2. Actor-director John Cassavetes once told me that he was “a Methodist,” meaning that he subscribed to many of the tenets espoused by Lee Strasberg and the Actors Studio.

3. Many seasoned film actors advise beginners to tone down their performances before the camera. In an educational film about screen acting produced by Carnegie-Mellon University, Academy Award–winning director Ron Howard proffered the following guidance: “In a long shot, act as if you’re on the stage; in a medium shot, take it down a notch; and in a close-up, take it down two notches.” (Needless to say, Opie’s recommendation did not come with a working definition of a “notch.”) Alec Guinness affirmed that it had taken him twenty-five years to learn “to do nothing” when in front of the camera lens (Barr 7), and Michael Caine opined: “If you catch someone ‘acting’ in a movie, that actor is doing something wrong” (Caine 4). Despite this minimalist discourse from mainstream neonaturalist actors, Antonioni’s modernism takes this sort of restraint to an extreme.

4. Angelo Restivo compares the doss-house scene in Blow-Up to the Lumière brothers’ Workers Leaving a Factory (1895), one of the first motion pictures ever screened for an audience (109). That “actualité,” however, should not be held up as an unvarnished exemplar of “the realist impulse” (Restivo 18) because the factory workers were wearing their Sunday-best clothing, were aware of the camera (operated by their employers!), and were exiting a factory (owned by the Lumières) in the middle of the workday—all indications that the film had been set up. Furthermore, the Blow-Up scene involves a British flophouse, not a factory, so the men who emerge represent the lumpenproletariat class rather than proletarian factory workers.


6. This was, of course, the era of the rail-thin British fashion model, with Twiggy and Jean Shrimpton being the most renowned exemplars of the Mod look. The Hemmings character was apparently based on a real-life British fashion photographer, David Bailey, who was notorious for his demanding persona.

7. At least one modernist director, Robert Altman, allows his performers to improvise and even write their own dialogue (see Robert Self’s chapter 5 on Nashville in this volume). In an interview with me, Antonioni responded to my question about Jack Nicholson’s alleged use of improvisational gestures in The Passenger: “They weren’t so spontaneous. I told Nicholson to do that. As for dialogue, it can be completely changed by the lighting scheme of the shot, by the colors, by camera movement” (Tomasulo, “Life Is Inconclusive” 64).
8. One of the most common ways to convey character semes—the proper name—is absent in *Blow-Up*. The two main characters are never identified by name within the diegesis, although their first names—Thomas and Jane—are noted in the film’s published screenplay and in most of the scholarly literature. The very absence of a cognomen provides symbolic inferences, just as it does in the modernist novels of Kafka ([K. in *The Trial*]) or the plays of Samuel Beckett. Since one’s name is often associated with one’s identity (Who are you? John Doe), the failure to provide an appellation suggests a characterological anonymity or veritable nonexistence. It can also be seen as part of Antonioni’s Brechtian strategy to undermine facile audience identification. Finally, this namelessness (also found in *The Passenger* [The Girl], *Il mistero di Oberwald* [The Queen], and *all* the family names in *L’avventura*, *L’eclisse*, *Il deserto rosso*, and *Zabriskie Point*) bespeaks a lack of or loss of personal identity that Antonioni thematizes throughout his work.

By providing extratextual information about the characters’ names through the *Blow-Up* script and interviews, however, the director encourages individual associations that attach to those designations: “doubting” Thomas, “peeping” Tom, or “plain” Jane, all of which have some resonance with the people in *Blow-Up*. In combination, however, Thomas and Jane are sexually charged names to readers of D. H. Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, in which Mellors, the groundskeeper, uses “John Thomas” and “Lady Jane” to designate, respectively, the male and female sex organs. Neither the script nor the film, however, offers a surname for either character (or for any other character in the entire film), thus setting them apart from any roots, traditions, or family ties, and makes them modern tabulae rasae.

9. Another modernist filmmaker who minimizes acting flourishes is Robert Bresson ([see Tomlinson’s chapter 3]), who espouses the use of amateur actors and “automatism” in his book *Notes sur le cinématographe*. Bresson referred to his players as “models” ([Tomlinson 365]).

10. Ron (Peter Bowles) appears to be even more of a pothead than Thomas is. At one point, he is seen with *two* joints in his mouth.

11. The reference here is to Robert Musil’s novel, *The Man without Qualities*.

12. This scene is strongly reminiscent of a doppelgänger sequence in Antonioni’s *The Passenger* in which Locke (Jack Nicholson) discovers a corpse in an adjacent hotel room and stares blankly at the dead man’s face for quite some time. The facial resemblance is uncanny, not only because the other actor’s [Chuck Mulvehill] features are similar to Nicholson’s but also because Nicholson is figuratively “playing dead,” that is, his characterization is of a spiritually dead man. In addition, Antonioni’s framing of the shot—a two-shot close-up—emphasizes the Lacanian “mirror stage” aspects of the scene ([Scott 135]).

13. Another wordless finger gesture occurs in the pub scene, when Thomas meets with his agent, Ron. He stops a passing waiter by grabbing his arm, points to a dish on a plate, and says, “And a pint.” He is thus able
to order his entire lunch by uttering only three words.

14. The connections to the conspiracy theories about the assassination of John F. Kennedy are clear: a gunman possibly hiding behind a fence on a grassy knoll, the failure of a camera (Abraham Zapruder’s 8mm movie apparatus) to answer all the troubling questions, and so on.

15. Even if Thomas were interested in getting to know any of these models, Antonioni’s mise-en-scène and costumes would be prohibitive. The models are first seen behind a black, smoked-Plexiglas screen, thus alienating them from the photographer. In addition, behind-the-scenes images show an assistant using clothespins to make the fashions fit properly on the models’ bodies and hiding the price tags that dangle from the necklines. Like Thomas, these “birds” are revealed to be all surface.

16. This scene takes place at night outside a fashionable dress shop, whose windows are filled with mannequins that resemble both Thomas’s posed fashion models and the stiff, immobile concertgoers.

17. Fredric Jameson has pointed out that after the sex romp with the two teenyboppers, Thomas is drawn to images of death: “Before that episode, [he] thinks he has prevented a murder; after satiety, the well-known link between sex and death causes him to look more closely, and to discover the traces of the corpse” (195).

18. This idea was called to my attention by Cynthia Baron.

19. These two positions are most clearly exemplified in the contradictory interpretations of Arthur Knight and Ian Cameron and Robin Wood. Knight claims: “When the hero joins the game, one has the feeling of a final affirmation, that he is aligning himself with people who are joyfully alive” (5); Cameron and Wood insist that Thomas’s “grasp of objective reality [is] fatally undermined” and that Hemmings’s face “is that of a man near the verge of insanity” (138).

WORKS CONSULTED


