

# Antonioni's Films Studies From the Perspective of Existentialism

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Michelangelo Antonioni is one of the notable Italian movie directors in the 20th century. He put the issue of human survival and the inner world high on his agenda. These concerns were precisely the existentialism in philosophy, which provoked a strong reaction in the world at that time. He relied on his sharp perspective to observe social phenomena and conveyed his thoughts through his movies, thus creating an ideal world characterized by his own thoughts. The existentialism theory he employed also contributed to the development of the film industry, endowing the film with a broader sense of beauty.

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As one of the greatest film directors of the last century, Michelangelo Antonioni is famous for his strong self-style in a unique way of shooting and narrative. His creations boldly broke through the Italian realism style, shaping his own unique style and factoring heavily into the film creations in the later generations. His films were concentrated on the status quo of human survival as well as the real emotional portrayal of people's inner world. He attempted to explore the emotional and moral crisis between people and make research on the value and significance of human survival. The inability of people to adapt to a modernized society, their failure in clearly perceiving their own identity, their lack of faith, and their confusion about their future, as shown in his films, are all issues that existentialism seeks to explore.

## Themes in Antonioni's Films From the Perspective of Existentialism

### Emotional Alienation

The most prominent theme in Antonioni's films is the alienation between people in modern society. The deeper the love between human beings, the farther they will be when they are estranged. This is the alienation of love. But the focus of Antonioni's films is no longer on ordinary people, but on an alienation that transcends beyond the movie, a natural barrier that exists between human beings. He applies metaphorical techniques to embed some features of modernity into his films, creating a detached beauty. His character never realizes his true self in the film but remains in self-isolation and self-abandonment. Antonioni tries to bring people out of such a predicament, breaking free from the alienation between people. Even the individual alone is in a constant struggle against himself, trying to escape from his confinement to the inner world, from the given tragedy of his fate. Silence, sleep, and abstinence are invisible weapons. In the film *La Notte*, for example, Antonioni employed

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restrained narrative techniques. Such objective description of the surroundings is exactly the narrative characteristic of existentialism.

### **Individual Anxiety**

In terms of existentialist, anxiety is typically a form of conflict, a contradiction between non-existence and existence. Anxiety is an instinctive response to threats and pain. It is a psychological state of mind in an emergency, endless and prolonged. Mental patients are the subjects of many Antonioni movies. In real life, he established a rapport with a number of psychiatric hospitals, so he was free to shoot his film. Whenever filming, these mental patients would go crazy and scream, which further inspired the director to unravel the mystery. What kind of trauma struck the minds of these excellent people? Giuliana, the protagonist of the movie *Il Deserto Rosso*, is a woman whose spiritual world is in turmoil. Her family lives in a heavily industrialized city, where the whole city is flooded with pollution. Living in such an environment, people's spiritual world is also deeply polluted. Giuliana's inner world goes barren and her original pure thoughts are lost.

### **Void of Existence**

The emptiness and loneliness of existence is one of the core views of existentialism. In the view of existentialists, people are born to be alone. Even in a social environment, a person is ultimately a lonely individual throughout his life. Life is illusory, and loneliness is the most authentic reflection of existence. People living in society are subjected to the indignities and exclusion of the world every day, causing them to gradually fall into depression, fear and more closed despair. Antonioni discovered this problem in reality. Then, he devoted his life to studying people's inner world and consequently presented their sense of loneliness in society by means of movies. People's lack of faith and collapse of values have not been changed by the rich material life; on the contrary, their loneliness goes deeper. In the movie *Professione: Reporter*, the main character is a journalist named Locke. He suddenly feels that life is very boring during an interview, so he assumes as a recent-deceased tenant staying with him and lives someone else's life. Unexpectedly, it turns out to be true and Locke is shot by someone else. This story appears incredibly ridiculous, but it deeply reflects the sense of loneliness and emptiness in people's inner world.

### **Evolution of Human Nature**

The evolution of human nature refers to a kind of mutation, a far cry from the characteristics of human nature in the traditional sense and conception. In industrialized societies where material life is abundant, people are keen to pursue all material wealth. In other words, their spirit has been dominated by the material world. In this course, human nature becomes something changed. The city in Antonioni's films is either a monster of steel and concrete, or a deserted place, or a dilapidated street, all of which are his portrayal of reality as well as his vision of the future. And the people in his films are just cold piles of corpse with flesh and blood. In the movie *Zabriskie Point*, fed up with the industrialization, Mark hates the hypocritical preaching of the capitalist society. As a result, he and a group of people begin to study the ideas of Marx in the hope of starting a revolution. When asked his name after being caught in a rebellion against the government, Mark replies that his name is "Marx", which reflects the evolution and alienation of people's inner world in the social environment at that time.

## **Aesthetic Style in Antonioni's Films From the Perspective of Existentialism**

### **Fractured Narrative**

Most of Antonioni's movies do not seem to have a complete narrative structure or continuous storyline. It usually features a fractured narrative without undermining the flow of the story or the expression of the story's

theme. This fracture does not bring the story to a screeching halt; rather, it is an extension of the story, an expansion of space so that the inner world of the characters can be truly reflected. As for the audience, while watching the movie, they relate themselves to the outside world without jumping to premature conclusions as any of the movie's story unfolds.

### **Vivid Connotations of Spatial Architecture**

Existence is not limited to human existence, but also to the existence of objects. The existence of the objective material world is a natural existence, while the existence influenced by human society is a self-made existence, such as the existence of objects in the background of industrial civilization in Antonioni's film. Industrial civilization is created by mankind, and specific objects in this world are deeply influenced by human consciousness. Moreover, the space composed of such objects is deeply affecting people's spiritual world. Lidia, the main character of the movie *La Notte*, walks aimlessly on the street late at night after leaving her husband's party for the release of his latest book. This scene fully shows the loneliness and helplessness of the heroin's inner world. The skyscrapers and flying machines passing by on the street do not arouse any interest in Lydia, who still keeps moving forward. Lidia takes second place to the buildings in this journey, with the buildings rising to become the protagonists of the movie. And the flow of the buildings mirrors the flow of Lidia's inner world. In the movie *Zabriskie Point*, as Mark drives down the highway on a wild ride, the buildings around him become steel mills from the industrial period. Examples are ham and bacon linked to industry as well as stuff of Pacific Metal. Human beings lose themselves in the material world, i.e., they are overwhelmed by materials, which become the real master of this world.

Generally speaking, buildings in movies only serve to enhance the environment or personality. Antonioni, however, adds more flexibility to spatial architecture in his movies. Buildings are given unique meanings from their function as background to their role as substitutes for protagonists. In the movie *Il Deserto Rosso*, the picture is filled with a large number of factories, while people's roles are sidelined. The intention is, obviously, more reflective of the industrialized world in which people live and of the loneliness and emptiness deep within them. The gap between people is also revealed through the distance between buildings.

### **Long Shots Reflecting the Inner World**

Lens language plays an important role in movies. Antonioni is partial to long shot to show the inner world of the characters in his movies. The long shot, as the name suggests, is a long and in-depth shooting of the characters or the movie scene, so that the audience can be truly integrated into the movie environment. The audience manages to communicate with the characters in the movie without any gap through the long shot, which facilitates a deeper understanding of the inner world of the characters and the theme of the movie. *Cronaca di un amore* is one of the best cases in using long shots. Long shot, literally, is an important way of movie realism, which can depict the plot in the movie in a more genuine and natural way, and make the movie more realistic through real-life portrayal. The long shot is a way of using an objective technique that removes the traces of the director's filming and allows the audience to discover certain phenomena in real life from the movie. Such visual correlation and coherence helps the viewer integrate more smoothly into the movie.

### **Dissociation of Scene Scheduling**

Scene scheduling is a specialized technique in filmmaking, or in other words, a technical choreography of actors, art, scenes, and other elements of a film. Dissociation of scene scheduling occurs frequently in Antonioni's films. Do you know that the character's consciousness scheduling is the core of the scene scheduling? The spatial

movement of the movie characters is not designed for the needs of storyline development, but to fully highlight the changes in the inner activities of the characters. The director stands from a calm and objective perspective and brings out the complex emotional entanglements between people. The love between the hero and heroine is both passionate and evasive in the movie *Al di là delle nuvole*; the heroine in *Il Deserto Rosso* wanders in the industrialized city; the heroine walks aimlessly on the street late at night in *La Notte*. The above-mentioned are all applications of scheduling techniques in Antonioni's films. And it is exactly the application of these techniques that can better demonstrate the emptiness and confusion of people's inner world.

### **The Art of Sound and Picture in Antonioni's Films From the Perspective of Existentialism**

#### **Skillful Composition**

Antonioni is not only a famous film director, but also a painter. Under the influence of existentialism at that time, he created films with the delicacy and sensitivity of a painter, and deeply portrayed the loneliness isolation and alienation in human world.

Antonioni devoted his life to making films. Through his movies, audiences see human nature, and think deeply about existence and non-existence. There is no one he admires more than Michelangelo. As a renowned painter, Antonioni aspires to incorporate the perspective of a painter into his movie creations, so that his movies would reach the height of art. As such, his movie compositions employ the exquisite perfection of the art of sculpture and painting. The detailing arguably makes his every movie composition perfect. He shows us an existentialist proposition in *L'avventura*. He transforms the traditional parallel camera position with an abstract metaphorical style. He utilizes a wobbly, unbalanced mode of composition to bring out the imbalance in people's inner world and to portray the disconnection between people. In the movie *La Notte*, buildings are infinitely enlarged while people and the sky are infinitely reduced. On top of that, the distance between people is infinitely widened, but the language is pitifully lacking. This is where the cleverness of the composition allows the viewer to feel the detachment between the people right from the movie screen.

#### **Colors of Motion**

Antonioni's movie images are not static, but in motion. The color of the screen is also endowed with many meanings, helping the director to layout the character relationships and plot well, and allowing the audience to intuitively feel the theme of the movie. For example, simple black and white are the main colors of the movie *La Notte*, because such colors do not draw the audience's attention away too much. The seemingly limiting colors in the film do not affect the integrity of the story's expression at all; on the contrary, they precisely show the characteristics of existentialism. In *Il Deserto Rosso*, the director changes the buildings into red background. Red is also the emotional portrayal and psychological state of the characters in this film. It does not mean passion, but fear and anxiety. The harsh red color makes the audience feel more truly the inner world of the protagonist who longs for relief. In addition, the yellow and green colors in the movie carry connotations of horror and pain, which are also true reflections of the characters' inner world. These strong colors allow the viewer to become better immersed in the world created by the film, and more eager to enter the colorful world and dissect the characters' inner worlds.

#### **Natural Sound**

Antonioni's movie soundtracks are extremely natural, as he mainly wants to portray the true inner world of his characters. Even if the dialog in the movie is short and strong, or there is simply no music or dialog, then long

periods of blankness take its place. Of course, very few movies do have long character dialogues, such as *La signora senza camelia*. Not only does this movie have long character dialogues and rapid-fire speech, but it also has obvious special effects. The accompanying music also appears quite naturally, achieving excellent artistic effects.

Antonioni believes that sound is an important part of life, because the making of a movie also originates from life. Sound is essential in filmmaking. After all, silent movies are out of touch with the times, which fail to reflect the inner world of the characters. That's why, for Antonioni, film and sound combined are the complete art form. Every sound has its own value of existence. Sound and picture are inseparable in a film. As the picture proceeds, sound is also applied to describe the picture. Antonioni, rarely employs movie soundtracks. Instead, he is a lover of natural sounds to express the picture. He reckons that even the dialogues, laughter, and noises of the characters must be emphasized, and that these natural sounds should be put on an equal footing with the music. For instance, in *L'eclisse*, the noisy sounds in the hall show the protagonist's inner irritation and restlessness; in *Professione: Reporter*, the sound of the electric fan humming in the hotel is in stark contrast to the hero's inner breakdown. The effects achieved by these natural sounds are far more intuitive and in-depth than a piece of soundtrack.

### Conclusion

Existentialism is the study of human philosophy, which is a genuine concern for individuals. The industrial age of materialism is the setting in which Antonioni's film takes place. People are lost in such an environment, filled with fear, loneliness, and powerlessness. Antonioni vividly depicts the alienation between people from the perspective of existentialism. In the creation of films, he used unique film structure, narrative methods, and various film techniques for scene scheduling; more importantly, through subtle compositions, colors in motion, and natural sounds, he vividly presents people in the context of industrialization, deeply exploring the meaning of human existence as well as the loneliness of existence.

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