

# The Tireless Explorer and Prophet

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Antonioni's prominent work, I remember, was first shown in Hong Kong in 1964. Studio One organized a screening of *La notte* (1961) at the City Hall Theatre. The slow and bored rhythm, indifferent and alienated style, and bold and daring visual compositions that progressed in silent uniformity with occasional outbursts of hysteria haunted the humble viewer that was me. I was overwhelmed by the inexplicable ennui and anxiety that the film showed regarding humanity.

It was not difficult for educated and passionate youth of Hong Kong in the 1960s, like us, to feel the boredom and repression of the era. But honestly, I could hardly comprehend the alienation and indifference in the highly industrialized and commercialized northern Italian city that was fast conquered by materialism in Antonioni's film. Nevertheless, I was drawn to him, probably by the aesthetics and excitement brought by his innovation in form.

The riots that broke out in May 1967, followed by a series of events that put my mind in utter shock, prompted me to reflect upon myself and rethink the meaning of life and work. I began to see European art films, Antonioni's suddenly popular *Blow-up* in particular, in a whole new light. Or I should say, instead of regarding it with pure awe and admiration, I started questioning its value and contemplating its meaning.

I remember *Blow-up* was shown in Hong Kong in June 1967, a time when protests were a daily affair and the cultural sector and media engaged in heated discussions on consequences of the riots and the future of Hong Kong. Antonioni visited the city to promote his film and held a press conference at the Mandarin Oriental which H.C. Li and I, both fans of the director, attended. The event itself was nothing special, but *Blow-up* was quite a challenge. We published our respective reviews in the film section of *The Chinese Student Weekly*, *College life* and *Pan Ku*. Deeply entangled in conflicting love and doubt, I had intense debates with Kam Ping-hing on the film. Looking back, it was all immature manifestations of uncertainty and perplexity caused by the riots.

After seeing *L'avventura* and *L'eclisse* later, I started understanding that Antonioni's content lies in his form. His emotions and thoughts are clearly represented in great details in the looks of characters, their bodies, postures and relations with their environs. A scene of a



**La notte**

person wandering in the street, shots of scenery outside the window and pillow shots of deserted buildings can be loaded with emotional significance. The use of live sound recordings is superb and as inspiring and thought-provoking as passages of silence. The inexplicable feelings that his films convey are unique with the touch of reality and ambiguity of everyday life.

This complete retrospective on Antonioni is a blessing for Hong Kong's film lovers. Antonioni was by all means a prophet in modern cinema. He provided extraordinary and sensitive accounts of estrangement caused by rapidly expanding modern materialism; the consequent disorientation, alienation and exhaustion of love; as well as increasing difficulty in getting hold of the fast-changing reality. Most importantly, he was among the first to devote himself tirelessly to the exploration of these issues that are as pressing as they are timeless, employing his precise and innovative film language, and fully expressing his feelings regarding life in the contemporary society.

Art never ages. In my mind, Antonioni is always the same as he was years ago. Jeanne Moreau and Marcello Mastroianni in *La notte*, Monica Vitti in *L'avventura*, *L'eclisse* and *Red Desert* and David Hemmings and Vanessa Redgrave in *Blow-up*, among others, will always live in the youthful images.

Adapted in February 2009 from a past article from *Michelangelo Antonioni Retrospective*, published by the Hong Kong Arts Centre in 1996

Translated by Carmen Ting

From *Defining Modernity: Michelangelo Antonioni* (Hong Kong International Film Festival Society, 2009)