

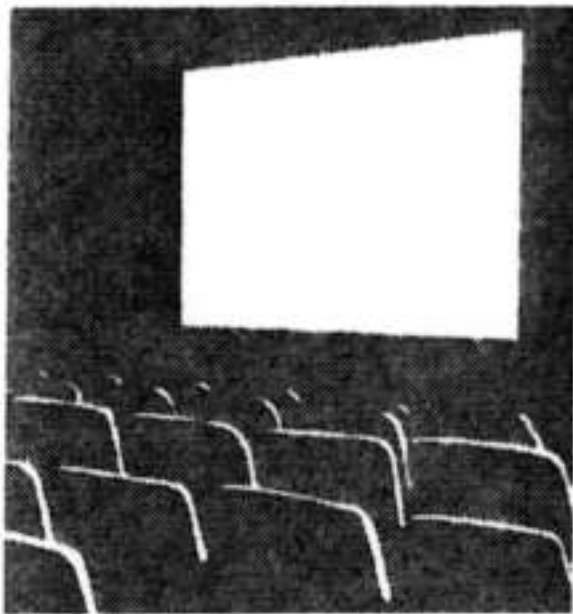
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# Existential Despair in Antonioni's 'The Passenger'

When I was 5 years old my kindergarten class, for whatever reason, took a field trip to the home of one of my classmates. Too young to have any notion of the local geography, I had no idea where the house was located. It was only when I stepped out the back door of the boy's house into his backyard that I recognized the yellow playhouse and battered metal

## MOVING PICTURES



By JUSTIN DeFREITAS



Jack Nicholson plays a journalist adrift in North Africa in *The Passenger*.

slide and realized that this was the house directly behind my own. I peeked through a hole in the fence and saw my own backyard: the lawn, the patio, the rusted swingset, the family dog sniffing about in the tall grass, the soccer ball under a tree where I had left it the day before.

It was a disconcerting experience to look back in on my life from another vantage point. For the first time I realized that to the boy who lived behind me, *I* was the boy who lived behind *him*. Thus I had to face the uncomfortable truth that I was not the center of the universe, but just one little boy from one family in one house in one neighborhood in a world of other little boys and families and houses and neighborhoods.

It was a revelation for which I was not quite ready. But, being 5, I soldiered on.

This notion of moving outward in order to look back in is the central theme of Michelangelo Antonioni's *The Passenger*, in both content and form, though the protagonist's epiphanies are hardly as simple or as benign. The film screens at 8:50 p.m. Friday as part of Pacific Film Archive's ongoing retrospective of the

modernist director's career.

*The Passenger* stars Jack Nicholson, in one of his finest performances, as David Locke, an American journalist abroad who seizes an unforeseen opportunity to shed his life and identity in exchange for the life of Robertson, an acquaintance who has just died. Locke leaves behind a wife, a reputation, a home, everything, to take on the life of a man he barely knows. Using the man's datebook to meet his appointments, Locke gradually unravels clues as to the life and identity of the man he has become, finding himself in more than a bit of trouble along the way.

We get a hint as to the catalyst of this adventure in the form of documentary footage of the journalist at work. In the clip, Locke, during an interview, hands over his camera at the request of his subject, who then casts the camera's gaze back at Locke and begins to question the questioner. The tables are turned, and Locke, squirming before the lens, has nothing to say. He has unexpectedly been given a glimpse of himself—his first, it seems, and just for a moment—and has no answer for what he sees. He grimaces in discomfort, looks about nervously,

### THE PASSENGER (1975)

Screening at 8:50 p.m. Friday as part of "Modernist Master: Michelangelo Antonioni," a retrospective of the director's career running through April 22 at Pacific Film Archive. \$4-\$8. 2575 Bancroft Way. 642-5249. [www.bampfa.berkeley.edu](http://www.bampfa.berkeley.edu).

then reaches forward to take the camera back, suggesting that he is fundamentally ill-equipped to deal with the truth with which he has been presented.

How much more resilient the 5-year-old who faces such a revelation, for he is unencumbered by the lifetime of assumptions and psychic inertia built up by the 35-year-old—a series of elaborate constructions each of which must be re-examined. The child's epiphany is at least rooted in a sense of place; he sees a yard and a house, a family within the house and the house within a neighborhood—while Locke looks inward and finds nothing at all, or at least nothing he recognizes.

Thus he takes the opportunity to adopt

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## Existential Despair in Antonioni's 'Passenger'

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a new identity, to shed the dead skin of a life through which he has been sleepwalking and to usurp the life and identity of a dead man, to become a passenger on the road of another man's narrative. The journey is both alluring and dangerous; Locke, as Robertson, picks up a young lover, negotiates with underworld thugs, and cruises scenic byways as he works his way across Europe.

The closing sequence is a tour de force, a demonstration of bravura filmmaking for which the groundwork has been carefully laid over the preceding two hours. In a single, unbroken shot, Antonioni again employs the out-and-in motif, with Locke lying down on a hotel bed and turning away as the camera begins an extremely slow tracking movement toward the window. The movement and ambient sounds of the street draw our attention outside: Locke's lover walks away, then returns; a boy throws stones; a trumpet sounds; cars pass by, stop, and move on; the two thugs arrive, and one walks toward the girl. All the while the camera steadily pushes forward until, just before it passes through the window, it pans slightly to the right to catch the faint reflection of the second thug entering the room, drawing his gun and using the rumbling of a passing car to mask the shot that kills Locke.

The camera continues outward and into the street, following the arrival of the police and Locke's estranged wife. And as she enters the hotel, the camera, still in one unbroken shot, turns back toward the building and pushes again toward the window, looking back in as she and the girl and the police enter the room. "I never knew him," she says, when asked if she recognizes the man on the bed. "Yes," says the girl, when the question is put to her. And Antonioni has left us with something of a metaphysical quandary.

Who is this man? Is it Locke? Is it Robertson? Is it either, or is it anyone at all? Antonioni has forced us to look back in on our assumptions and re-examine the man we have come to know over the course of the film. Yet by the time the camera has made its journey outward, wheeled around and turned back in on itself, reality has shifted; Locke has ceased to exist. For that very act of introspection and the self-consciousness it requires permanently alters the man, the child or the moviegoer who experiences it, and in that long, lingering single shot, the film itself takes on the slow-motion processing of that self-awareness, stretching to contain not just action, but the mental processing of that action—the self-conscious preview, experience, re-play and analysis of its every facet.

*The Passenger* is perhaps Antonioni's masterpiece, the most successful merging of his patient, contemplative style and his somewhat grim world view, coalescing in the most tantalizingly inconclusive of conclusions. It is the dark side of rationalism: It is not "I think, therefore I am," but "I think too much, therefore I cease to exist."