The Lighthouse and Monochromatic Isolation: Aesthetic Confinement through Sartre's Existential Gaze

المنارة والعزلة أحادية اللون: الإحتباس الجمالي من خلال نظرة سارتر الوجودية

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Résumé:

This study examines how Robert Eggers's film *The Lighthouse* (2019) resorts to black and white palette, restrictive framing, and light effects to portray issues of human existence. Relying on Jean Paul Sartre's concept of existential gaze and aesthetic analysis, the paper demonstrates how Eggers's film could capture the way gaze exchange is not only apt to exhibit power dynamics in human dialogues, but also to externalise the way an individual lives in isolation and reaches self-consciousness and definition through others' looks and observation. This process extends to modern life experiences of being isolated and observed in digital platforms.

Mots clés : Monochromatic Aesthetic; Isolation; Existential Gaze; Identity; Confinement; Digital Connectivity.

الملخص:

يدرس هذه البحث كيف يعتمد فيلم **روبرت إيجرز** "**المنارة**" (2019) على لوحة أحادية اللون وإطار تصويري مُقيد ومُؤثرات الإضاءة لصياغة مسائل وُجودية للبشر. بالاعتماد على مفهوم النظرة الوُجودية ل**جون بول سارتر** وتحليل جمالي، تُظهر هذه الورقة البحثية كيف استطاع فيلم **إيجرز** أن يلتقط قدرة النظرة ليس فقط على استظهار ديناميكيات السُلطة في الحوارات بين البشر وإنما قابليتها لكشف مدى عزلة واكتساب الفرد لوعيه الذاتي من خلال نظرة الآخر له وكذا توصله لتعريف ذاته. هذه العملية تمتد لتجارب الحياة الحديثة حيث يعيش الإنسان في عُزلة تحت وطأة الملاحظة والمراقبة في مختلف منصات التواصل الرقمية.

كلمات مفتاحية: جمالية أحادية اللون؛ الاحتباس؛ النظرة الوجودية؛ العزلة؛ التواصل الرقمي.

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INTRODUCTION:

Gothic elements find their way into *The Lighthouse (2019)*, as an adaptation of Edgar Allen Poe's unfinished story of the same title. As Hoffman (2004) observes, Poe's literature served as an Aladin cave for many writers. Eggers, therefore, could be added to the list of artists who accessed such cave. He built upon the merely two pages of available text, making them the barebones of his film (Kurland, 2020). The opening scene is marked with a desolate tone. It brings forth two men who appear tired and tense. They sit around a wooden table in a remarkably old tower, filled with an atmosphere of mistrust. A flickering oil lamp takes the centre of the frame in black and white colouring, while the shadows shift heavily on the walls. Through narrow framing at 1.19:1 aspect ratio, a sense of confinement is associated with the storm blowing outside the building. The aesthetic choices of Robert Egger render the 1890s tale of the lighthouse a timely rendition of human experiences of disconnection today. Modern life is fundamentally revolving around connectivity, namely digital means of communication and interaction. Social media, with its diverse platforms, displays a sense of gathering and closeness, while handing over intimate details into monitoring systems. Yet, many feel a sense of isolation and alienation. Technology prevails in our daily lives, and instead of bringing people together, it causes them to sink into a feeling of loneliness and loss. Human thinking is eclipsed by a deep sense of noise and distortion. It is in this context that *The Lighthouse* captures the human condition through its restrained visual style. Tight framing, lack of colours, harsh lighting are all aesthetic elements that contribute to evoking psychological bareness. It is assumed that this visual approach reveals the fragility of self and autonomy in a seemingly connected society, a view accentuated by Jean Paul Sartre's concept of the existential gaze. In *Being and Nothingness* (1943/2003),

Sartre posits that the gaze is a moment in which another person's look at one tells the latter who he is. Not only does such a gaze provide a sense of the self, but it also prescribes a given role and hence limits one's freedom. This idea could be reversed where a power shift occurs. For instance, Dorfman (2016) demonstrates that a prisoner could realise his upper hand over his imprisoner as he looks at the fear in the latter's eyes. Nonetheless, within the process of look exchange, a struggle arises as the other's perception diffuses power or fear over the sense of self. Dolezal (2012) joins the two perspectives on power supremacy and views that Sartre's idea is not straightforward, but it is about intersubjectivity and self-consciousness that happen with the process of looking to one another. In *The Lighthouse,* a powerful exchange of gaze between Winslow and Wake demonstrates another dimension of resistance to the other's domination. Sharma and Barua (2017) associate the idea of domination with the Hegelian discussion of the master-slave dichotomy. For them, Sartre built on that and pushed further the exploration into vision and visibility. For this, the personification of the mentioned characters by Robert Pattinson and Willem Dafoe exhibits iconic visible representation of unease meeting and commanding presence. In a way, through mutual scrutiny, this is a transcendent reflection of Sartre's idea that goes beyond the definition of the self to the assertion of independence. Visually, the film renders such moment of entrapment by translating each glance into colourless bareness and confined shots. This paper attempts to examine how these seemingly limitations of visual expression create a feeling of mental isolation. More importantly, it deals with the way Sartre's theory explains the power dynamics at play and raises the question on how these elements reflect human experience in a digitally saturated society.

1. Background and Theoretical Framework:

Cinema as a form of artistic expression resorts not only to a close representation of reality but also to bareness in style to evoke hidden aspects of human experience. *The Lighthouse* is no exception to this, as it

draws on a specific tradition of black and white filming. Like early German Expressionism, this approach moves away from colours to rely heavily on shapes, light, and mood. In modern cinema, this choice of expression marks itself as one focused on emotions rather than realism. For *The Lighthouse*, the absence of colours and limitations of framing work together to engender a feeling of restriction and confinement, mirroring the characters' physical and mental states of restraint and struggle. As seen in Fig. 1, this style ascribes to an art tradition that highlights confinement and timelessness. The keepers, therefore, could be perceived as alien to each other and to the outside world.

Fig. 1. The opening scene of *The Lighthouse*



Source: (Eggers, 2019, 00:01:54)

In particular, Jean Paul Sartre's idea on the existential gaze justifies the director's aesthetic choice. In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre follows the way one's sense of self transforms under the gaze of another person. He suggests that such a look and perception force one to adhere to a certain definition of oneself that is limited by that very perception. The fact of being seen serves as a restriction shaped by the observer. For Sartre, such human interaction is fundamental to our lives. It evokes uneasiness and challenges one's control over their own existence. In film art, the exchange of gazes is central not only to characters in their dialogues but also to audiences in theatres. This empowers cinema with the faculty of revealing power dynamics and struggles over self-definition.

In today's world, Sartre's idea is even better seen as individuals live

under perpetual condition of monitoring. Everyone feels controlled and observed in the digital world of connectivity, whether through communication devices or social media platforms. A simple post on the latter shows how much one can feel that his words, pictures, videos, and actions are observed and criticised. Also, such data is being used by tech giants to influence and direct social behaviour. While such means of social connectivity claim their willingness to connect people, the fact is that everyone creates different personas only to retreat into isolation to escape the watching eyes. Therefore, online visibility does not necessarily reflect genuine understanding, but it results in the contradiction of being surrounded by many yet feeling loneliness. One's life becomes a mirror to what others see and perceive, an image that limits and orient self-definition. In *The Lighthouse*, loneliness is portrayed as the keepers distance themselves physically and remain connected to the outside world through the light signals they diffuse. Light, thus, finds ways to be a decisive and deep form of expression, especially in the monochromatic style of the film.

2. Aesthetic Analysis of The Lighthouse (2019):

Eggers's transcendent visual choices demonstrate a deep concern over human experience. The selection of black and white palette puts aside the superfluous emotional details and gets into the deep and stark reality of the house's keepers. From the very beginning of the film, the two protagonists, Winslow and Wake, are portrayed against a foggy grey frame at sea, where waters and sky merge together to take the same colour for shaky and ambiguous atmosphere. The effect is fostered by the relentless waves and wind blowing sounds, as illustrated in the following figure:

Fig. 2. Foggy grey initial maritime frame



Source: (Eggers, 2019, 00:01:20)

This monochrome approach accentuates the coldness, non-conviviality of the landscape, and its detachment from the reality outside the island. Besides the effect on the setting, the characters also receive a conception that they are cut-off from society with a sense of alienation and shrinking existence. To make this idea even more alarming, their actions at the tower are portrayed as repetitive with no passion. Yet, the bareness of colours brings forth some details that otherwise fall behind focus. Samples of these include the strain in their faces, the raindrops on their coats, and the cracks in the walls. Such physical descriptions position the film as a portrayal of human struggles that sneak from the inner psychological world to the outside bodily world. The audience also experiences this sense of struggle and receives the feeling of detachment faced in the modern world of apparent digital connectivity yet emotional bareness. Separation from society is, therefore, a primal focus of the film and its monochromatic style, revealing the intent to explore the pressures under which humans struggle to reach self-consciousness.

Other techniques enhance and deepen this exploration, namely the shot style in 1.19:1. No doubt, the nearly square framing of the totality of the film encloses the narrative into tight spaces. Thus, the characters are viewed in a perpetual trap of space where they struggle to find a sense of

existence. Their difficulties are technically viewed through cameras that put them in close quarters. Their faces fill the frame, and the walls press them from all sides. Such angle choice forces the viewer to pay attention to the strained dialogues, an effect that is stressed through the economic lighting by a single lamp on the table or the beacon at the dark shores. As a result to this lighting style, the shadows also play an important role in portraying Sartre's idea of gaze. A scene plays on this feature as Wake takes a higher position at the top of the stair looking downward to Winslow, while his shadow shifts constantly across the room. In a way, this turns their feeling of isolation into a battleground for connection (Gerdesits, 2022). For Turkle (2011), a scene like this engenders a feeling of entrapment in viewers who join the characters in their struggle and in the restrained freedom of thinking about their own selfhood.

The aesthetic choices are imbedded within symbolism to obtain deeper meanings. For instance, the absence of colours is not merely a stylistic sign, but like most of the early cinema, it represents the withering of vitality. In the film, the keepers' humanity withers away with their exile. Despite the decisiveness of Winslow and the commanding resolve of Wake, their personalities are reduced to the greyness of everything that surrounds them. The narrow frame even squeezes them more only to act as a physical and emotional limit. Irony adds to this effect as wide shots put the tower in the open seas, yet the frame crop makes it clear there is no possibility for escape or expanse (Eggers, 2019). At another level, the tower's light which finds no objects to reflect on parallels the lights of modern life's screens which emit light onto audiences, yet each viewer is trapped into isolation. Thus, *The Lighthouse* uses light and even shadows to disclose the cost of human isolation and unravel Sartre's framework on power and loss within others' look impact.

3. Applying Sartre's Gaze to the Film's Aesthetics:

As demonstrated so far, Jean Paul Sartre's core idea on gaze finds grounds in *The Lighthouse* with much convincing effect. In fact, the film

turns a seemingly casual gaze into humans' struggle over identity and control. With more depth, Sartre builds in *Being and Nothingness* a complex framework that clearly associates the effect of gaze with a moving power that takes one outside of his private freedom into the confines of an external definition of the self. Thus, this reflects Sartre's (1943/2003) central irony, where a person becomes both subject and object at the same time.

Fig. 3. The keepers' exchange of stare



Source: (Eggers, 2019, 00:07:16)

As shown in Fig. 3, in *The Lighthouse*, black and white filming excludes superfluous unnecessary details and leaves the facial expressions of characters raw untouched. This adds depth to the power of gaze exchange. Moreover, the tight framing brings them even closer to each other, only to add magnitude of scrutiny. The filmic aesthetics turns Sartre's gaze into a visual reality where both characters battle for dominance or resistance over the process of building or perceiving selfhood. While Wake's look fixes Winslow as a subordinate, the latter's reaction is also a look that defies and challenges. Actually, the process is all about the clash of selfhood consciousness, a phenomenon that we witness all around human

society. This battle is not theirs only; the viewer is called upon to join such conflict and feel the burden of being watched. He can perceive the film as an arena of power dynamics. Light plays a vital role in determining who holds dominance over the other. For this, in one scene, Wake stands at the top of the tower under the sharp light. His shadow casts over Winslow, who stands at the bottom and appears much smaller in size. Receiving the shadow and living under its definition makes him an object, exactly as posited by Sartre. Because of the film's framing, Winslow finds no escape from Wake's gaze, despite his resentment and unease with his situation. To demonstrate the ongoing struggle, a shift of power happens, and this can be understood through the play on the magnitude and angles of light. One scene shows Winslow looking at his rival through a crack in the wall. In his attempt to fix the candle, Wake's face is only half-disclosed under the small amount of light emitted (Gerdesits, 2022). No colours to soften the situation, only black and white that highten the tension. For Turkle (2011), this kind of aesthetics resembles modern social media platforms' way of dealing with personal posts. It is either like or dislike, no grey zones for understanding and closeness. Thus, one is often thinking not through his own beliefs and opinions, but through others' widely accepted views, a fact that reflects upon his own self-determination. As Winslow separates himself, he is actually engaged in a process of unravelling, Sartre calls the existential impact of the gaze. Yet, Winslow finds himself again obliged to sit at the table listening to Wake's wild storytelling. The frame joins them together once again, only to stress the gaze power of confinement. Winslow's rebellion leads nowhere but to a certain determined submission. Constant observation erodes one's private sense of self, as suggested by Turkle (2011). The shift in light and shadows underscores the negotiation of selfhood. This is paralleled by modern life's social media where people negotiate their sense of selfhood as they post publicly, yet they attempt to retreat or escape. The public influence is so powerful that one finds difficulty to challenge. In one of the final scenes in the film, Winslow attempts to climb the tower toward the lamp, only to collapse under the

magnitude of its light rays. In cinematography, such lighting underscores how exposure destroys as much as it reveals reality.

4. Linking Aesthetics to Hyper-Connected Isolation:

Eggers (2019) points out that *The Lighthouse* is not confined with the setting of the original tale in 1890s, but it extends to reach modern life and its human concerns. Among these are the sense of isolation and depression almost everyone feels despite the connectivity technology offers. The film resorts to black and white palette and narrow framing to mirror modern life experiences. In one of the rare scenes outside the tower, Winslow's isolation is portrayed through the paradox of him standing on the shore rocks, while the sea stretches all around. Yet, the frame cuts the background to keep a sense of disconnection from society and the world. As explained by Turckle (2011), the perception of the sea as blue may hint at the blue space on social media, where digital platforms and applications appear to connect yet serve to isolate. In this sense, the tower personifies the individual who is digitally connected but without meaningful human contact. The paradox is one of the devices heavily resorted to in *The Lighthouse*, reflecting the tremendous contradictions of the modern life. Light, which often symbolises purity and guidance, serves here as a means of entrapment in that Winslow cannot escape Wake's gaze. He is simply always under scrutiny and observation. Therefore, at a cultural level, the film fosters humans' need for retreat from the lights of public spaces both real and virtual. It is a retreat toward the self, away from massive external forces. Thus, a journey toward the discovery of meaning and existence is directed inward. In a scene that stresses such a search for meaning, Winslow approaches the lamp facing its blinding light, as if he is searching for something. It is a moment of hyper-connectivity that infers the technology-based networks of communication. Yet, another scene brings about a final confrontation where the light makes Winslow collapse as he climbs toward the source of light. It seems he is doomed to fall again toward himself and by consequence to isolation. Thus, the film aesthetically stresses that modern life promises connectivity, but it dramatically entails isolation and self-retreat.

5. Discussion:

The Lighthouse acts like inviting the audience to share a table with two souls trapped by a starkly tight space, living under scrutiny. This is an incarnation of the reality of modern life. The way Wake and Winslow exchange looks under the lamp glow resembles the daily activities of nowadays where people virtually exchange looks through the scrolling posts on their phones. As they get notifications about what they posted, they feel they are watched while there is no one physically around. The idea of gaze, which extends to social arena including virtual ones provides a good platform for understanding Sartre's view on the way selfhood shapes itself under the other's look and observation; however, can this approach be the only explanation of Eggers's intent? Actually, *The Lighthouse* imbeds different layers of meaning that could be explained by other frameworks. For instance, a feminist reading can shed light on the keepers' gender choice and the reasons behind the apparent masculinity. In another direction, a cultural reading can explain how isolation can stretch across borders. Probably an interview with Eggers could dig further into his intentions laid down in his film. At the level of the audience, one can inquire whether they pondered over ideas on selfhood and gaze impact or just watched the film out of curiosity and exploration. Still, this paper justifies its reading of the film based on a tangible reasoning that links the film to current social phenomena, namely digital platforms that clearly exhibit much of the gaze tensions found in the film.

CONCLUSION:

The Lighthouse goes beyond adaptation as it borrows the title from a late nineteenth century tale by Edgar Allan Poe. It represents a serious cinematic inquiry into the current human condition, namely the crisis and struggle of individuals to define themselves in a world of gaze and control. The spread of technology has added different arenas, namely the blue space in which people attempt to manifest their freedoms. Yet, such manifestation

cannot go without a price to pay. Tech giants and social media platforms take the role of the observer who manifests its powers of formation and transformation over users. In a way, this paper argues that observation and control are forms of Sartre's gaze idea. The latter viewed that an individual loses freedom, namely the freedom of perceiving, when he receives scrutinizing looks from the other. A space of look exchange becomes an arena of struggle for self-definition and exhibition of power. What adds intensity to this crisis is confinement and restriction, features that cinema through *The Lighthouse* could assure through aesthetic choices like colour palette, frame size and aspect ratio, and dynamic light-shadow contrast and movement. Eggers's work excludes vitality to the benefit of emotional aridity. In particular, the narrow framing reduces existence to a very tight space that reflects the current human condition where people are physically and emotionally very pressured. The film exposes the dichotomy of connection-disconnection that society manifests today, whether in reality or virtuality. In other words, the film explores how isolation and scrutiny can be at the centre of everyone's daily struggles in the social milieu. Contradictions are well used in the film as the tower beside the sea. Calling to attention is that an open space like the sea is juxtaposed to a tower that serves as a confinement to its dwellers and their lives. Such idea is paralleled with the open spaces of social media that juxtaposes the tight possibilities of privacy and true free expression. Again, the lighthouse, as its name suggests, is supposed to provide illumination. Yet, darkness prevails in much of the film's narrative. All this adds strain to the keepers and viewers' sense of self and autonomy. Contradictions and contrasts serve as an aesthetic choice, one that accentuates the power of film as an art that turns form into an effective means of expression. In conjunction with Sartre's gaze idea, *The Lighthouse*, the film, could provide more illuminations on humans' existential concerns.

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