

## Notes on Existentialism and La Jetee

### Existentialism

The doctrine that existence takes precedence over essence and holding that man is totally free and responsible for his acts. This responsibility is the source of dread and anguish that encompass mankind.

- *Webster's New World Dictionary, Second College Edition*; William Collins Publishers, Inc.; Cleveland, Ohio; 1979

A philosophy that emphasizes the uniqueness and isolation of the individual experience in a hostile or indifferent universe, regards human existence as unexplainable, and stresses freedom of choice and responsibility for the consequences of one's acts.

- *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, Third Edition* © 1992 by Houghton Mifflin Company. Electronic version licensed from INSO Corporation.

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*Existentialism* is a philosophical movement which emphasizes on individual existence, freedom, and choice.

There are several philosophical positions all related to existential philosophy but the main identifiable common proposition, is that existence precedes essence. By this, existentialism states that man exists and in that existence man defines himself and the world in his own subjectivity, and wanders between choice, freedom, and existential angst.

The first philosopher to use the term was **Soren Kierkegaard** (1813 - 1855), who reacted against systematic rational philosophy, specially Hegel, and grasped the notion of a truth inside of the evolving self.

Deriving from this stress on existence there are other main subjects and images that have been developed by the existentialists.

#### **Becoming a Being (existential ontology):**

We are what we can become. Ours is a process, and our becoming is our ontic possibility of becoming. Human existence is a project, in which past and present are subordinate to future, is the main residence of our existence, because it is the north of our projection of ourselves. "Human existence cannot have a relationship with being unless it remains in the midst of nothingness." (**M. Heidegger** - was ist metaphysik?).

#### **Nothingness**

Nothingness appears in existentialism, as the placeholder of the possibility. The

awareness of anything in the world that is not my own existence (which by the way, cannot be held in consciousness without being nihilized) is an awareness of nothingness, that is, what I, this existence am not and in some cases I could become.

### **Absurd**

We arrive from nothingness to absurd at the moment that we ask for a meaning after we have become aware of the other (through the prior explained negation). Absurd is a leit motiv in existentialism, specially in **Sartre** and **Camus**. It is sometimes possible to overcome absurd, with absurd itself, as **Camus** says in The Myth of Sisyphus: "The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy."

### **Ethics / Subjectivity / Good faith**

Our view of the world is enough to become Truth, because it is based on our facts. What we do with this truth, depends on our good or bad faith, that is, the ability to act as if in our act the entire mankind would be represented. That is enough to prove an act as an ethical one.

### **Choice**

We always have a choice. Existentialism does not stand for any kind of determinism except the one that determines our individual facts (existence) We choose, and in choosing (in good or bad faith) we define ourselves. Choice is a definition of an existence in the world, towards an object outside of itself. Choice is all that we have, without confirmation of our act; we never know what was right to choose. The doubt of our acts, together with the contingency of existence, leads to

### **Angst**

The main characteristic of existence itself, when we face our contingency, and the absurdity of our acts and choices:  
For Heidegger, it is that through which fear becomes possible. For **Kierkegaard** is a desire for what one fears. For **Sartre**, it is the immediate consequence of facing the possibility of nothingness.

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## **The Existential Lexicon**

**Absurdism** - The belief nothing can explain or rationalize human existence. There is no answer to "Why am I?" Human beings exist in a meaningless, irrational universe and that any search for order by them will bring them into direct conflict with this universe.

**Agnosticism** - The uncertain beliefs of many existentialists, agnostics claim one cannot prove or disprove the existence of a deity. Existential agnostics tend to

claim they do not care if there is or is not a supreme deity.

**Anarchy** - Absence of any form of political authority. Most existentialists consider all individuals equal politically. Notice political equality is not equated with any other form of measure. Inequities are inevitable, but existentialists believe politics should not produce these differences. Anarchy is not chaos, but the result of social evolution.

**Amoral** - To reject the ethical system of a community; to develop an independent ethical system. Do not confuse "amoral" in existentialism for "without morality." Much like anarchy, the concept is misunderstood and misapplied to existentialists.

**Atheism** - Possessing no belief in an omnipotent deity, or finding no need to ponder the existence of a deity. For some, atheism implies the denial a deity exists, as opposed to non-belief. Existential atheism is an active debate, not to be confused with agnosticism.

**Authentic** - To be true. If something is "authentic" it is exactly as named or described. According to some thinkers, nothing is authentic. Because people evolve and alter their essence, people cannot be authentic for more than an instant, frozen in time.

**Bad Faith** - A lie, especially to the self. The extreme example cited by existentialists is, "I was only following orders." Any denial of free will is an example of bad faith.

**Dialectic** - Process associated with **Hegel** of discovering truth by stating a thesis, developing a contradictory antithesis, and combining and resolving them into a coherent synthesis. The Marxian process of change through the conflict of opposing forces, whereby a given contradiction is characterized by a primary and a secondary aspect, the secondary succumbing to the primary, which is then transformed into an aspect of a new contradiction.

**Epistemology** - A branch of philosophy dedicated to scientific studies the nature of knowledge, its presuppositions and foundations, and its extent and validity.

**Epoché** - The act of suspending interpretation and judgment in order to better study the actual structure and content of an object or phenomena. A term from phenomenology.

**Essence** - The intrinsic or indispensable properties that serve to characterize or identify something. The inherent, unchanging nature of a thing or class of things. Phenomenology and existentialism aim to observe the essence of objects. In existentialism, one's essence is his or her role in the universe. This essence changes constantly with each decision made.

**Ethics** - In existential works, "ethics" generally refers to a system, a formalized method for determining "right" and "wrong" in any situation. "Morals" are practices dictated by probability, producing a conformity of behavior among a community.

**Existentialism** - The doctrine that among sentient beings, especially humanity, existence takes precedence over essence and holding that man is totally free and responsible for his acts. This responsibility is the source of dread and anguish that encompass mankind.

**Existence** - The state of being, usually in the material, scientific sense. In existentialism, the existence of a person does not define the individual; the individual is defined by his or her actions and thoughts.

**Freedom** - The condition leading to both human accomplishment and anguish.

**Morality** - Doing as the powerful in a society or social system dictate. If one believes in a deity, that deity is the most powerful entity in existence, so its rules must be followed in order to be moral.

**Necessary Being** - The rationalistic explanation of a deity; a being that cannot **not** exist due to the paradox created. Many existentialists have faith, therefore they believe in a being or intellect preceding all other existence.

**Nihilism** - Often viewed as "amoral" by some, nihilism is amoral in the existential sense. Nihilism is the rejection of all distinctions in moral or religious value and a willingness to repudiate all previous theories of morality or religious belief. Politically, nihilism is the belief that destruction of existing political or social institutions is necessary for future improvement.

**Ontology** - The theory of existence; the idea there is a reality.

**Phenomenology** - A movement originated by **Edmund Husserl**, meaning the study of appearances. The study of all possible appearances in human experience, during which considerations of objective reality and of purely subjective response are left out of account. It should be noted Hegel published essays on phenomenology, but Husserl organized a formalized system recognized as the "phenomenological method" of philosophical study.

**Positivism** - The philosophy contending that sense perceptions are the only admissible basis of human knowledge and precise thought. Phenomenology, epistemology, and other schools of thought reflect some positivistic influences.

**Praxis** - An action, as defined by Karl Marx, leading to a definitive chain of events. Existentialists view every decision as a "defining moment" but a praxis represents a revolution in the essence of an individual or community.

**Rationalism** - The theory all events are logically linked.

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*On La Jetee-*

“The frames also convey a documentary message of a past – these are people who once existed and now are dead. This differs from the illusion of motion, which creates a sense of present, of a comforting immediacy – as if these people are not really dead. In addition, a sense of page turning (in the present) in a photo-album (depicting the past) relates to the theme of memory. The attempt to elude time and the use of childhood memory to find the answer to existential angst and to unattainable happiness is a very suggestive cinematic style. The vulnerability of humankind versus the forces of the universe, and the irreversibility of history, is presented frame by frame and leads to the conclusion that the love of a man and a woman separated by time and space is but an unreal and timeless adventure of the soul; although the longing for love is that which made it possible for the protagonist to recapture the past, if only for a moment. The protagonist realizes that he is unable to reject the future, since the future is our own death, which we create with every breath. The stills create this future for him, from the beginning of the film, when the young child sees the dead man – the inevitable turn of fate.”

-- Excerpt from “Future-Past” by Offer Eshel

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"This is the story of a man marked by an image from his childhood." That's the opening (the first voice) of Chris Marker's film. The phrase broaches a story (the hero will travel in time toward that childhood image); the destruction of cities and the devastation of the earth's surface have threatened the very reality of the present and have thus let loose temporal virtualities normally locked up or held captive in the past (the past consisting only of a series of images that have become autonomous, tied to the living only by some affect or trauma). The fiction of *La Jetée* is thus a certain kind of work--whose object is the film's hero--concerning the paradoxes of memory, concerning the inclusion of the past that lives on within the hero as an image, as a secret that the laboratory experiments in the underground camp will try to make him confess. The realization of the confession comes with the death of the hero himself as he relives a moment of his past, as he meets once again the girl whose image has haunted him.

So it's a science-fictional hypothesis that underpins the organization of this film and, with particular emphases (the distance of the narrator, the modesty of the novelist), regulates the metaphysical problems that are then rapidly elaborated into a science-fictional argument in such a way as to render the paradoxes of lived time with the exteriority of an implacable syllogism. That syllogism is what leads the living human to meet his death, a death whose image is his secret.

But why that hypothesis? The originality of Chris Marker's film obviously resides, as has been regularly demonstrated, in the work of the image itself: a framing of the most obscure zones of memory's fragility and unpredictability; and a montage that replicates gaps in recollection. The image itself constitutes an unusual organization of storyline: Marker invents a type of narration that literature cannot often produce. Literature here appears only in the voice of the narrator-commentator: it borrows its script from the narrative mode of a Kafka.

---excerpt from *Jean-Louis Schefe's essay on La Jetee*