

Distorted Realities: Existentialism in the Works of Salvador Dali

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Philosophers have many ideas about one's freedom to choose and how the process of making these choices affects a person's freedom. Existentialists believe that it is solely up to the individual, that a person has complete liberty to become who he or she wants to be, and that there is no model to which to conform. The Surrealist painter Salvador Dali incorporates the concept of existentialism in some of his works. In the paintings *The Persistence of Memory*, 1931, and *Accommodations of Desire*, 1929, Dali demonstrates his refusal to conform to an ideal and refers to his paranoiac-critical theory. These existential ideas are directly related to the ideas that Jean-Paul Sartre expresses in his essay, "Existentialism."

Over time, existentialism has come to mean different things as it has become a popular term which is used broadly. In its stricter definition, however, existentialism is limited to two types: Christian and atheistic. Both have in common the belief that "existence precedes essence" or that subjectivity is the point of departure. Existentialism emphasizes the uniqueness and isolation of individual experience. An individual is at first nothing; he makes himself what he wants to be. There is no norm to which to conform; a person is free and responsible for herself. Along with this responsibility, each person is accountable to all of mankind. Our choices create an image of what an individual should be, affirming our values, thereby affecting all people. Sartre expresses this view in his statement, "In choosing myself, I choose man" (89).

Sartre states that humankind will suffer from three emotions: anguish, forlornness, and despair. Anguish is the anxiety of being responsible for all mankind. It is this feeling that helps one to become a good role model for others. "[Anguish] is the very condition of... action" causing individuals to make decisions that directly affect others, thus making each person responsible for all of humanity (Sartre 90). Forlornness is felt because humans must face the consequences of God not existing. In atheistic existentialism, there is no God and thus no preconceived human nature. Dostoevsky said, "If God didn't exist, everything would be possible" (qtd. in Sartre 91). There can be no *a priori* good because there is no perfect being to conceive it; therefore, mankind has no values. Even if there were values, they would be vague. Without a god, humankind is completely free. Sartre explains, "If God does not exist, we find no values or commands to turn to which legitimize our conduct. So, in the bright realm of values, we have no excuse behind us, nor justification before us. We are alone, with no excuses" (91). The final emotion that individuals will suffer is despair. There is only so much that a person has control over; it is not necessary to concern oneself with what is not directly affected by one's own actions. Descartes advises, "Conquer yourself rather than the world" (qtd. in Sartre 93).

The Surrealists used automatism to create their art works. This principle of Surrealism was defined by André Breton as "dictation of thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, and beyond any aesthetic or moral preoccupation" (qtd. in Arnason 288). Surrealists loved the ideas of the unexpected and in their search for meaning, sought randomness, chance, and coincidence. They were "composing without any preconceived subject or structure" (Arnason 288). Without a model to which to conform, the existence of the Surrealists' works preceded their essence, one of the principal ideas of existentialism. Their paintings, which are open to interpretation, can become whatever the viewer decides. It is not until the viewer sees the existing work and contemplates it that it will have meaning.

Salvador Dalí was one of the principal artists of the Surrealist movement. He was heavily influenced by other artists, such as Picasso and de Chirico, and he explored Cubism, Purism, and Neoclassicism early in his career, as well as reading the writings of Freud, which helped to make

sense of the nightmares he suffered as a child. Additionally, Dalí drew from his Catalan culture and the existentialist ideas that were popular in Spain at the turn of the century (Arnason 303-4).

In addition to using automatism to paint as the Surrealists did, Dalí developed his own theoretical method, which he described as “paranoiac-critical”: “the creation of a visionary reality from elements of visions, dreams, memories, and psychological or pathological distortions” (Arnason 304). This method of painting combined different elements that could each represent various objects or ideas; thus, it was left to the viewer to decide their meaning. Dalí himself defined the paranoiac-critical method as a “spontaneous method of irrational knowledge based upon the interpretative-critical association of delirious phenomena” (qtd. in Arnason 305). Dalí also used the *trompe l’oeil* technique to make his fantasy world seem real. He wanted it to be tangible, more so than nature, and he spoke of his paintings as “hand-painted dream photographs” (qtd. in Arnason 304).

He worked as ideas came to him and did not think them out beforehand. *The Persistence of Memory* was painted when Dalí noticed some melting leftover cheese after his dinner guests had left. This observation inspired the idea of representing softness with melting clocks, a form of pictorial metamorphosis, which changes matter from one state into another. He describes this painting as “nothing more than the soft, extravagant, solitary, paranoiac-critical [sic] Camembert cheese of space and time” (qtd. in Arnason 305). It is precisely this focus on the passing of time and his use of biomorphic forms that evoke a dream-like quality. In this state, the viewer is able to understand the essence of the work and determine its meaning.

This same existentialist idea of existence preceding essence can be applied to *Accommodations of Desire*. This work, which is actually a collage, was created to reflect Dalí’s inner world. He took various images from his “dreams” and combined them using his paranoiac-critical method. “He started a painting with the first image that came into his mind and went on from one association to the next, multiplying images of persecution or megalomania like a true paranoiac” (Arnason 304-305). At the time, he was having an affair with a married woman and used the lions’ heads to represent the desire and sexual anxiety that he felt (Arnason 304). Perhaps he also felt remorse for his illicit affair; in the Bible, the devil is compared to a “roaring lion looking for someone to devour” (1 Peter 5:8). The irrational combination of the lions’ heads, stones, swarm of ants, and other figures allows the viewer to enter this dream world and make of it what she wishes.

Jean-Paul Sartre’s existentialist ideas are represented by Salvador Dalí’s *Persistence of Memory* and *Accommodations of Desire* through his refusal to conform and his use of his paranoiac-critical theory. These works are representations both of existence preceding essence and of the freedom of the individual. Dalí often retreats into his dream world in his compositions and invites the viewer to follow him and find meaning in these unsettling psychological fantasies. In *La Femme visible*, Dalí wrote, “I believe the moment is at hand when, by a paranoiac and active advance of the mind, it will be possible (simultaneously with automatism and other passive states) to systematize confusion and thus to help discredit completely the world of reality” (qtd. in Arnason 304).

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