

An In-Depth Examination of the Intersection Between Existentialist Philosophy and Contemporary Artistic Expression in Painting

Byun JAEHEE

Dankook University, 152, Jukjyon-ro, Suji-gu, Yougin-si, Gyeonggi-do 16890,
Republic of Korea

Gong ZHIQUN

Dankook University, 152, Jukjyon-ro, Suji-gu, Yougin-si, Gyeonggi-do 16890,
Republic of Korea

Email: gongzhiquan1995@163.com

Abstract: Artistic painting, as a form of art, has the ability to directly touch the senses and emotions of viewers through imagery, colors, composition, and the creative expression of artists. Existentialist thought emphasizes individual freedom, independence, subjective consciousness, as well as profound reflection on human existence. Within this context, artistic painting becomes an expressive and explorative form of art, providing a platform for artists and viewers to engage in a dialogue with their own states of existence. This paper aims to investigate how existentialist thought confers meaning and value to artistic painting, as well as its focus on the solitude and isolation experienced in existence.

Keywords: Existentialism; Artistic Painting; Philosophy

1. INTRODUCTION

The development of existentialist thought can be traced back to the late 19th and early 20th centuries in Europe, originating in the field of philosophy and later infiltrating literature, art and other fields. The embryonic form of existentialism can be traced back to the ideas of Danish philosopher Kierkegaard and German philosopher Nietzsche. Kierkegaard paid attention to the issue of individual existence and belief and put forward the view that "existence is a choice", while Nietzsche emphasized individual freedom and willpower and questioned traditional values and morality. The contribution of French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre pushed existentialism to its climax. In *Being and Nothingness*, he expounded the dilemma of human existence and the importance of free will. He believed that human existence is free, but it is also faced with responsibility and loneliness, put forward the concept of "existence takes precedence over essence", and stressed that each individual needs to define the meaning of his own existence through independent actions.

Later, existentialism was further developed and disseminated through literary, theatrical, and artistic expression, with writers such as Camus and Sorens and artists such as Edward Menke and Francis Bacon conveying thoughts on the loneliness, meaninglessness, and free will of existence through their works (BILECENOGLU & ÇELİK, 2021).

2. FIRST, THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN EXISTENTIALISM AND ART PAINTING

2.1. Explain the core concepts and philosophical foundations of existentialist thought.

Existentialism is an important school of European philosophy in the 20th century, which emphasizes individual freedom, responsibility and the meaning of existence. It has exerted a profound influence in the fields of philosophy, literature, art and social science. The core concepts and philosophical foundations of existentialism can be summarized as an analysis and interpretation of human existence that goes beyond the abstract and objective views of traditional philosophy. Existentialism holds that the individual's existence comes first, not determined by abstract universal laws or external forces, and that each person is a unique, free individual who is responsible for making choices independently. Existentialist philosophers emphasize the importance of free will, believing that human freedom determines people's behavior and the meaning of life, and individual free will enables them to make active choices and bear the consequences and responsibilities brought by choices (Biesta, 2014). Another central concept of existentialism is the loneliness and meaninglessness of existence, and existentialist philosophers believe that humans experience loneliness and isolation in existence. Everyone's existence is unique and cannot be fully understood and shared. At the same time, people are also faced with the sense of meaninglessness and nothingness of existence, so individuals need to find the meaning of existence on the basis of self-consciousness and give value and purpose to their lives (West, 2008). Existentialist philosophy also emphasizes the importance of direct experience and authenticity of reality, and believes that people should face reality, face the dilemma and pain of life, rather than escape or deny it. Through direct experience of the existence of reality, individuals can better understand themselves and the world, and discover the meaning of life from it. The core concepts and philosophical basis of existentialism are shown in Table 1 below.

Core concept	Explain	Philosophical basis
beingness	Each person is a unique and free individual and is responsible for making choices independently	Kant and Nietzsche
The loneliness and meaninglessness of existence	Human beings experience loneliness and isolation throughout their existence	Heidegger, Sartre

Table 1 Core concepts and philosophical foundations of existentialism

2.2. Explore the influence and inspiration of existentialism on art painting

Existentialism emphasizes the free will and uniqueness of individuals, which inspires artists' impulse to express themselves and unique perspectives in creation. Artists demonstrate their unique existence by choosing the subject matter, style and expression mode of painting, break through the restrictions of traditional aesthetics, and pursue the freedom of individual creativity and expression (Dowden, 1995). Existentialism emphasizes the importance of facing reality and authenticity, which influences artists' creation methods and theme selection. Through observing and depicting the real world, artists show the dilemma, contradiction and pain in human existence, so that viewers can directly experience these feelings of existence (Blenkinsop, 2004). For example, Edward Hopper's works depict the sense of loneliness and helplessness in modern urban life with the theme of solitude and silence. *A Room in New York* conveys the sense of meaninglessness and loneliness in human existence, and triggers the viewer's thinking and resonance on life (Priyadharshini et al., 2022). Henry Spencer Moore's sculptures express the exploration and respect of human existence, create sculptures with organic form and flow, and convey the continuity, relevance and connection of human existence with nature through these works. The "Releaning image series" and other works trigger the viewer's reflection on existence.

2.3. The views of philosophers and artists

Following the existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, who believed that each person is the creator of his own existence and should bear the consequences of his choices, (Han & Cheng, 2021) Francis Bacon said, "My aim is to convey the limits of human existence through images, not to describe the world through them." In addition, Simone de Beauvoir emphasized the existence and free will of women, and artist Frida Kahlo's works embodied Beauvoir's views, expressing the complexity and autonomy of women's existence through self-portraits and works exploring

female identity, and showing women's power and desire for free choice, such as *Abortion in Detroit* and *Two Fridas*. Existentialism also inspires artists to pursue the meaning and value of existence in creation. The works of artist Andrew Wise reflect this pursuit. *Christina's World* depicts Christina, a young girl with childhood poliomyelitis, showing her loneliness, desire and powerlessness. In the picture, Christina sits on a field of grass, her body thin, her arms barely supporting her body, and her eyes are focused on the house in the distance, suggesting her desire to belong and search for the unknown, her posture and expression suggest that her observation and experience of the world are physically limited and socially isolated. The elements and atmosphere in the picture further strengthen the expressive force of the work. The house in the background and the surrounding scenery all present a quiet and quiet atmosphere, creating an atmosphere of isolation and isolation, emphasizing Christina's separation from the outside world and loneliness. The tone of the picture is dominated by dull taupe, creating a sad and melancholy mood. "Christina's World" brings the viewer into Christina's inner world through delicate painting techniques and careful composition. The sense of loneliness and powerlessness in the painting is not only a depiction of Christina's individual experience, but also a universal theme that strikes a chord with the viewer, profoundly conveying human vulnerability and existential helplessness. As a concrete image, Christina has become a representative of the weak, the marginalized and the socially isolated, triggering the reflection on human nature and the call for social care (Jung, 1969).

3. FREE WILL AND INDIVIDUAL EXPRESSION

3.1. Analyze the importance of existentialism to individual free will

Artists pursue the expression of free will in painting creation, are not bound by traditional aesthetic norms, dare to challenge conventions, break boundaries, and pursue personalized expression (Pedersen, 2018). For example, French painter Paul Cezanne is an important presence in modern painting (Ryan & Deepak, 2022). Through his bold treatment of color, form and perspective, he demonstrated individual creativity and freedom of expression, broke the traditional rules of painting, highlighted the independence of color blocks and brushstrokes, and expressed the desire for free expression. "Monte Saint-Victor" and "Fruit and Kettle on the Table" show the pursuit of individual creativity and free will. Vincent Van Gogh, a Dutch painter, expressed his inner emotions and subjective consciousness through bright colors and exaggerated brushstrokes, and depicted his inner

world and feelings of existence in a freeway. His works *Starry Night* and *Sunflowers*, etc., both reflected the expression of individual free will and triggered viewers' in-depth thinking about emotions and existence (He, 2020; Jeong, 2022; Saha et al., 2022).

3.2. To explore the expression and function of free will in art painting

Free will is embodied in painting as the personalization of the artist's approach and style, which is shaped by his personal experience, aesthetic perception and creativity (Tajeddini & Mueller, 2019). Van Gogh had experienced many emotional setbacks and loneliness, repeatedly frustrated in love, repeatedly suffered rejection and lovelessness, and his heart was tortured. Van Gogh's development in the field of painting encountered many difficulties and criticisms, few people understood and accepted his artistic style, Van Gogh's works were not widely recognized during his lifetime, and few works were sold. It is these experiences that shape his artistic style and creative method, expressing inner conflicts and sufferings with strong emotions and exaggerated brushstrokes. His works are full of dynamic energy and emotional tension, and use vivid colors and distorted forms to convey personal subjective consciousness and emotional experience. *Starry Night* is one of Van Gogh's most famous works and is currently in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. "*Starry Night*" is mainly in a strong blue tone, and the whole canvas is full of golden stars. The sky in the picture forms a vortex, as if the infinity of the universe, and also symbolizes Van Gogh's inner chaos and emotional fluctuations. The village under the starry sky is outlined in a simplified form, which forms a strong contrast with the sky. Through the use of exaggerated colors and forms, Van Gogh conveyed a unique perception and emotional experience of the natural landscape, projecting inner emotions onto the canvas to create a sense of transcendence. The strong blue color in *Starry Night* gives people a quiet and heavy feeling, but the twinkling of stars injects a hint of vitality and vitality into the picture. This intense contrast and contradictory emotional experience reflects the conflicts and contradictions in Van Gogh's heart, expresses his desire for natural beauty and existence, and also reveals his exploration and reflection on loneliness and inner world.

4. EXISTENTIAL LONELINESS AND ISOLATION

4.1. Explore the existential thought's concern for the loneliness and isolation of existence.

In existentialist philosophy, feelings of loneliness and isolation are seen as fundamental features of human existence, and art, especially fine art painting,

becomes a way to express and explore this sense of loneliness and isolation. The existentialist philosopher Nietzsche emphasized the importance of loneliness and believed that when an individual faces inevitable loneliness, he needs to create his own existence meaning through his own strength and will. As an art form to express the inner existence of an individual, fine art painting can transform loneliness and isolation into visual images and symbols. To explore and convey the loneliness of human beings in existence (Chen & Tang, 2022). Through the use of visual elements such as color, line, shape and composition, artists create images with unique atmosphere and emotions, such images can be a person walking alone, a lonely room, or an isolated individual, etc., and vividly present the loneliness and isolation that human beings feel in existence. When facing these paintings, the lonely images and scenes in the works inspire the viewers' inner emotional resonance, and they can find the emotional experience that is similar to their own loneliness in the works of art (Davide et al., 2021). The viewers can deeply think about their own loneliness and isolation in existence, and how to face these dilemmas. In addition, existentialism also pays attention to the impact of loneliness and isolation on an individual's free will and choice, which makes an individual face the dilemma of autonomy and choice (Lu, 2016). In art painting, the artist expresses the individual's sense of loneliness and isolation, and presents the choices and efforts made by the individual in this predicament. This expression inspires the audience to think about the freedom of choice in their own existence, and realize that in the face of loneliness and isolation, it is still possible to give meaning to existence through independent actions and decisions. The relationship between loneliness and isolation in existential philosophy and artistic painting is shown in Figure 1 below.

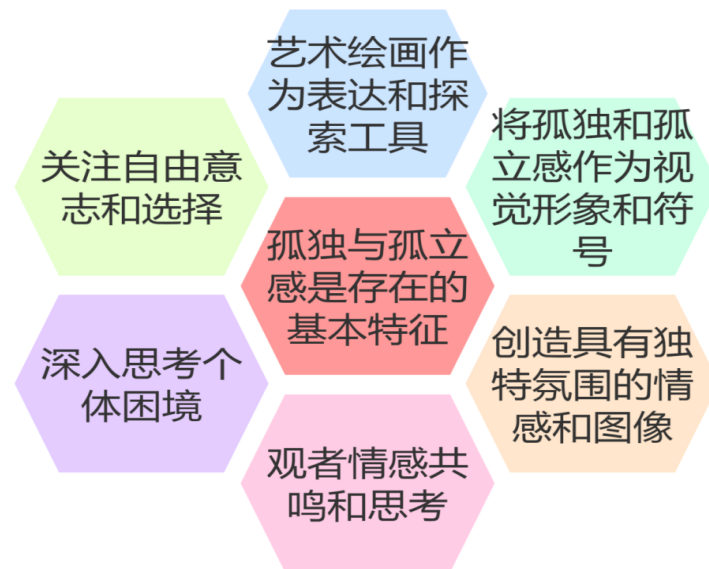


Figure 1. The relationship between loneliness and isolation in existentialist philosophy and artistic painting.

4.2. How does art painting convey the sense of loneliness and isolation

As an art form of visual expression, fine art painting can convey the loneliness and isolation of existence through elements such as image, color and composition, as well as the artist's creative intention and theme selection (Nelson, 2022). *The Night Wanderer* is one of Edward Hopper's most famous works. It depicts several lonely figures in a restaurant in Greenwich Village, New York, brooding at night. Created in 1942, it reflects Hopper's feelings about the gloom and misery of American society at that time. In the center of the painting, a man with his back to the viewer sits alone at the bar. His posture is low, his expression is contemplative, and the whole image reveals a deep sense of loneliness, while on the table to the left of the man, there are two lovers sitting, but they are facing away from each other, no communication, distance from each other, the whole restaurant is full of silence and emptiness, no one interacts, everyone is trapped in their own world. The color in the picture is mainly dark blue, giving people a feeling of depression and gloom, which echoes the emotional atmosphere in real life. The light is very limited, only the weak light from the window illuminates part of the scene, and highlights the lonely and quiet atmosphere. From the perspective of composition, *The Night Traveler* adopts a diagonal composition, the lines of the bar, walls and tables cross each other, forming a tense sense of space. This diagonal composition gives people a sense of instability and disharmony, further emphasizing the isolation and isolation of the characters in the picture, and there is no obvious doorway or exit in the picture. Emphasize the feeling of the characters being trapped in the scene, highlighting the themes of captivity and restriction. The painting "*Night Traveler*" presents the anguish and loneliness of modern urban life. The figures in the painting are isolated from each other, troubled by their own thoughts and emotions, without interaction and communication, reflecting the theme that Hope has always explored, that is, the loneliness and alienation of the individual in modern society, by creating the silence, heavy and restrictive sense in this restaurant. Hope conveys the feeling of oppression and bondage of city life.

5. FOURTH, AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE AND THE MEANING OF EXISTENCE

5.1. Discuss the importance and influence of existentialism on aesthetic experience.

In existentialist philosophy, existence is regarded as the freedom and

independence of the individual, which also runs through the field of art and aesthetics, shaping people's understanding and feeling of beauty. In existentialism, individual freedom and independence are reflected in aesthetic experience, which is not only the perception and appreciation of artistic works, but also the triggering of individual inner emotions, thinking and experience through artistic works, encouraging people to perceive, understand and explore their own existence through aesthetic methods. Existentialist philosopher Eugene Eech believes that art is a kind of questioning and exploration of human existence, and by presenting the predicament, uncertainty and anxiety of existence, it triggers the viewer's thinking, making aesthetic experience a subjective and profound experience, which can trigger individuals to reflect on their own existence and the meaning of human existence. Traditional aesthetic concepts usually emphasize objective beauty and standardized value judgment, while existentialism challenges this concept, holding that aesthetic experience is an individual's subjective experience, and each person's understanding and feeling of beauty is unique and personalized. Therefore, existentialist aesthetics is not limited to traditional aesthetic criteria, but pays more attention to the emotional resonance and inner touch triggered by works. Works of art are not only the presentation of material forms, but also the transmission of emotions and meanings. Existentialist views enable people to understand different types of works of art more open and inclusive, and give them individual and subjective values. Existentialism also reminds people to pay attention to the process of artistic creation and the personal experience of the artist. The work of art is not only a static existence, but the product of the artist expressing his inner world through creation. Existentialism emphasizes the influence of artists' subjective consciousness and personal experience on works, and closely links works of art with the existence of artists. Through works of art, we can not only appreciate and understand the works themselves, but also feel the emotions, thinking and struggles of artists in the creation process.

5.2. Analyze the characteristics and functions of fine art painting as an aesthetic experience.

Through the use of visual elements such as image, line, color and texture, paintings create a unique visual image and sense of space. When appreciating paintings, viewers can directly touch the intention and emotion expressed by artists through visual perception, so that fine art paintings can touch the emotions and imagination of viewers in a direct and strong way. Art painting, as a kind of language, can convey and express

the artist's thoughts, emotions and artistic conception. Artists transform their inner feelings and experiences into visual forms by choosing themes, compositions and colors. When facing paintings, viewers can understand the emotions, thoughts and meanings that artists want to express by interpreting and feeling the visual elements and symbols in the works. Art painting is also characterized by openness and diversity. Artists use different styles, techniques and modes of expression to create a rich variety of painting works, from realism to abstract expressionism, from the contrast of light and shade to the use of colors. The diversity of art painting provides viewers with a broad aesthetic choice and experience. Everyone can interpret and feel the works according to their own aesthetic concepts and personal experience, and give the works different meanings and values. In addition, fine art painting plays an important role in cultural inheritance and social reflection. Paintings bear the memory and reflection of history, culture and society, and record the humanistic features and social changes of different times and regions. Artists express their thoughts on social problems, human existence and human nature through paintings, enabling viewers to think and reflect on the fate and values of mankind through art works. Fine art paintings can transcend the restrictions of language, cross the boundaries of culture and time and space. It provides the audience with a platform for dialogue with history, culture and society.

5.3. How does existentialism give meaning and value to art painting

In the view of existentialism, art painting becomes a medium to express the inner existence of artists and viewers, revealing the complexity and depth of human existence. Existentialist philosopher Jean Paul Sartre proposed the concept of existence and nothingness, believing that the essence of human existence is free, but at the same time it is faced with the inevitable sense of nothingness. Artists try to capture and convey the pain, loneliness, meaninglessness and other emotions and circumstances of individual existence through the process of artistic creation. You can find resonance in the artist's expression and perceive the various difficulties and struggles of your own existence (Ferrari, 2022). In addition, artists express their subjective feelings and thoughts through paintings, showing their unique artistic style and viewpoints. When facing paintings, viewers interpret and feel the works based on their subjective consciousness, and project their personal experience and emotions into the works of art. Such subjective interpretation and experience make fine art painting an individualized and resonant art form. Give deeper meaning and value to the work. In addition, existentialism emphasizes the importance of the autonomy and choice of human existence. Artists express their unique

opinions and personal choices of existence through the selection of subject matter, composition, color, symbols and other elements in creation, while viewers also understand and give meaning to paintings through their independent aesthetic choices. This kind of autonomy has endowed art painting with more abundant and diverse forms of expression, and formed an interactive and dialogue relationship between the viewer and the artist.

6. CONCLUSION

Through the exploration of the influence and inspiration of existentialism on art painting, it is found that art painting, as an art form, has important significance and value. By expressing the loneliness and isolation of artists and viewers, it conveys the importance of individual free will and choice, as well as the attention of existentialism to aesthetic experience. As an aesthetic experience, art painting can transcend the restrictions of language, cross the boundaries of culture and time and space, and provide viewers with a platform for dialogue with history, culture and society. Through art painting, people can perceive, understand and appreciate the beautiful world created by artists, and have a dialogue with art to enlighten people's hearts and thoughts. Therefore, existentialism has endowed art painting with unique significance and value, making it a thought-provoking and powerful art form.

Reference

- Biesta, G. (2014). From experimentalism to existentialism: Writing in the margins of philosophy of education. In *Leaders in philosophy of education* (pp. 13-30). Brill.
- BILECENOGLU, M., & ÇELİK, T. (2021). Easternmost occurrence of *Didogobius schlieveni* Miller, 1993 (Gobiidae) in the Mediterranean Sea. *FishTaxa*, 19, 1-4.
- Blenkinsop, S. (2004). *Choice, dialogue, and freedom: Towards a philosophy of education based in existentialism*. Harvard University.
- Chen, W., & Tang, X. (2022). Ontological Research on the Category of Being: From the perspective of Heidegger's Existentialism. *Zhejiang Social Sciences*, 06, 105-111+158-159.
- Davide, C., Marcello, A. T., Michele, R., & Miltiadis, K. (2021). Endovascular Treatment of Giant Visceral Aneurysms: An Overview. *Vascular & Endovascular Review*, 4. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.15420/ver.2020.07>
- Dowden, S. D. (1995). *Kafka's castle and the critical imagination* (Vol. 27). Camden House.
- Ferrari, M. (2022). Existential Rehabituations from a Latinx Perspective: On Leah Kalmanson's Cross-Cultural Existentialism. *Philosophy East and West*, 72(1), 268-277. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1353/pew.2022.0014>
- Han, G., & Cheng, Z. (2021). The Affinity Between Existential Philosophy and Realistic Image Expression. The 6th International Conference on Arts, Design and Contemporary Education (ICADCE 2020),

- He, J.-H. (2020). A new proof of the dual optimization problem and its application to the optimal material distribution of SiC/graphene composite. *Reports in Mechanical Engineering*, 1(1), 187-191.
- Jeong, B. (2022). Philosophy as a 'Transformative Practice: A Review of Leah Kalmanson's Cross-Cultural Existentialism. *Philosophy East and West*, 72(1), 258-268. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1353/pew.2022.0013>
- Jung, H. Y. (1969). Confucianism and existentialism: Intersubjectivity as the way of man. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 30(2), 186-202.
- Lu, S. (2016). *The ecological era and classical Chinese naturalism: a case study of Tao Yuanming*. Springer.
- Nelson, E. S. (2022). Existence, Emptiness, and Qi: Leah Kalmanson's Cross-Cultural Existentialism. *Philosophy East and West*, 72(1), 278-289. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1353/pew.2022.0015>
- Pedersen, G. J. (2018). Empathy and Aesthetics: Edvard Munch and the Paradox of Pictorial Thinking. *Kunst og Kultur*, 101(4), 208-223.
- Priyadharshini, P., Mohan, S., & Hassan, A. (2022). A Feministic Discourse of Existentialism in Namita Gokhale's Select Works. *World Journal of English Language*, 12(2), 134-134. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.5430/wjel.v12n2p134>
- Ryan, M. C., & Deepak, S. (2022). A Framework for Developing a Comprehensive Venous Practice. *Vascular & Endovascular Review*, 5. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.15420/ver.2022.06>
- Saha, S., Pal, P., Halder, S., Dhara, K., & Saha, N. (2022). Shark diversity in the Indian Sundarban biosphere. *FishTaxa*, 23, 53-56.
- Tajeddini, K., & Mueller, S. (2019). Moderating effect of environmental dynamism on the relationship between a firm's entrepreneurial orientation and financial performance. *Entrepreneurship Research Journal*, 9(4).
- West, A. (2008). Sartrean existentialism and ethical decision-making in business. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 81, 15-25.