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When Images Think: Toward a Theory of Existential Illustration

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Abstract

Existential philosophy is often expressed by the language of anxiety, freedom, absurdity, authenticity, alienation, responsibility, embodiment, death, and nothingness. Yet, its most lasting thoughts are rarely tied to abstractions alone; they manifest in persuasive images, figures, objects, situations, and undertakings, which transpose the problems of theory onto moments of life. The concrete configurations of meaning through which existential thinking operates are highlighted in Kierkegaard's Abraham making his way up Mount Moriah to sacrifice Isaac, Nietzsche's individual who gazes into the abyss as well as the tightrope walker between animality and the overcoming of himself, Heidegger's broken hammer and Vincent van Gogh's painted peasant's shoes, Jaspers' boundary situation, Gabriel Marcel's reflection on availability and embodiment, Sartre's waiter in a theatre café and voyeur suddenly confronted by the gaze of another, de Beauvoir's serious man and adventurer, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological description of living embodiment, as well as Camus' Sisyphus who is condemned to eternally return to his stone. It refers to any visual, verbal, material, or imagined configuration that reveals fundamental conditions of existence by placing the perceiver within unresolved tensions between freedom and finitude, identity and responsibility, embodiment and meaning, and self and otherness. The study employs conceptual analysis, comparative textual interpretation, document analysis, and visual hermeneutics to examine existential illustrations across the works of the chief existential thinkers, including Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Jaspers, Marcel, Sartre, Beauvoir, Merleau-Ponty, and Camus.

Keywords Existentialism, Existential illustration, Visual philosophy, Philosophical imagery, Image theory.

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Introduction

An image turns into a thought when it does not serve decoratively and starts posing as a question of existence. The raised knife of Abraham is a customary act of sacrifice, but in

Kierkegaard's philosophical imagination, it becomes a condensed structure of faith, anxiety, paradox, and the individual's encounter with the absolute; the rope over the

abyss is a usual image of danger and suspension, but in Nietzsche's speculative formations, it becomes a symbol of human struggle, self-overcoming, and the creation of new values; a couple of worn shoes in Van Gogh's painting may appear as an ordinary object of daily use, but in Heidegger's interpretation, they become a disclosure of the world of labour, earth, fatigue, weather, vulnerability, and belonging; a café waiter performing the script of his profession with exaggerated precision is an acquainted act of professional performance, but in Sartre's viewpoint, it becomes an instance of bad faith; the existential character types are familiar figures of social existence, but in Beauvoir's rational imagination, they become exemplifications of the tensions between ambiguity, oppression, freedom, and ethical responsibility; a stone rolling down a mountain is a usual physical occurrence, but in Camus's theoretical imagination, it becomes a condensed structure of repetition, consciousness, labour, resistance, and meaninglessness; and the experiences of suffering, struggle, guilt, and death are common realities of human existence, but in Jaspers' philosophical imagination, they become limit situations that disclose existential confrontation, self-awareness, and transcendence. All these images and figures do not merely embellish philosophical writing; rather, they function as modes of existential illustration through which philosophical thought becomes visible, embodied, and capable of disclosing dimensions of human existence that abstract concepts alone cannot fully reveal.

However, existentialism is not a single, unified philosophical doctrine. It includes religious thinkers like Kierkegaard and Marcel; atheistic thinkers like Sartre and Camus; phenomenologists like Heidegger and

Merleau-Ponty; ethical theorists like Beauvoir; and philosophical critics like Nietzsche, whose work predates the formal existentialist movement but strongly influenced it. Despite their disparities, these thinkers share a concern with concrete existence rather than detached metaphysical classification. Human beings are presented as embodied, temporal, finite, historically situated, relational, and compelled to act under conditions they have not entirely chosen (Aho, 2023; Crowell, 2012).

Existential philosophy, therefore, renounces the view that human identity can be totally defined by some predetermined essence, proposing instead that human beings create meaning continuously through expanding possibilities activated by lived experience, choice, and action. According to Sartre's "existence precedes essence" one can think of the fact that humans first exist and then define oneself through one's ventures and decisions (Sartre, 1946/2007, p. 22) yet only becomes philosophically vivid when grounded in things like, for example, the café waiter who plays his social role too perfectly and, thus, makes the mistake of thinking that his occupation is his identity. Likewise, when Kierkegaard makes the statement that "anxiety is the dizziness of freedom", he translates an abstract mental state into a visible image of a person standing before the abyss. Here, freedom appears as both a possible and a burden (Kierkegaard, 1844/1980, p. 61). Nietzsche's image of the rope stretched over the abyss similarly converts the human condition into a visual metaphor of danger, transition, self-overcoming, and the creation of new values, while his affirmation that "what does not kill me makes me stronger" transforms suffering into a condition of existential becoming (Nietzsche, 1888/2005, "Maxims and Arrows," §8). Heidegger's

interpretation of Van Gogh's worn shoes illustrates how these shoes do not remain painted leather; they reveal labor, earth, fatigue, vulnerability, and belonging. This is because "the work of art opens up in its own way the Being of beings" (Heidegger, 1935–1936/1971b, p. 39). Beauvoir's existential figures such as the serious man, nihilist, and adventurer appear in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (de Beauvoir, 1947/1976). Her statement that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" belongs to *The Second Sex* (de Beauvoir, 1949/2011, p. 283). Altering the everyday rolling of the stone down a mountain to the reduction of Sisyphus' action and intent, thus effectively creates a new structure of repetition, consciousness, resistance and meaninglessness and the recognition that "one must imagine Sisyphus happy" (Camus, 1942/1991, p. 123). Similarly, Jaspers' "limit situations (Grenzsituationen)" (Jaspers, 1932/1970, p. 203) are experiences such as suffering, struggle, guilt and death where people confront the limits of existence and develop great self-awareness. The instances provided display that existential illustrations are not simply decorative elements in a philosophical milieu but are, in fact, structures of thought through which the abstraction becomes visible, embodied, and sensed. Examples of the existential image are not just paintings and drawings. They also include images created verbally, symbolic objects, scenes, characters, spaces and gestures. They allude to philosophical ideas from outside. But, they also take part in philosophical thinking as they let images disclose meanings that words cannot find.

The crux of the current research paper is that existential illustrations do not merely translate a pre-existing idea of philosophy into visual form. On the contrary, they contain a deeper

meaning themselves. When the observer interacts with these images and interprets them, the hidden philosophical aspects of human existence such as suffering, freedom, identity, choice, and self-realization are opened up and made comprehensible. In this perspective, the images do not simply explain philosophy, but it can be thought of as a space of experience where philosophical meaning emerges. In existential philosophy, they do not serve merely as an external representation of an already conceived concept. Rather, they serve as a vessel for philosophical thought. The visual composition, symbolism, and situational context within the image, each component possesses an existential meaning that cannot be detached from experience and interpretation. If one removes the mountain from Sisyphus, the abyss from the anxiety of Kierkegaard, the keyhole from Sartrean embarrassment, the rope from the Nietzschean becoming, or the shoes from Heideggerian world-disclosure, something disappears. The image does not just convey a message; it arranges a philosophical event; it defines what is visible, which points of views are made available, where the spectator is positioned, what remains invisible, and which emotions are activated. The images contemplate in a relational rather biological sense, therefore, images can be said to think. They do not have personal psychological states or intentions. Instead, they organize positive pictorial, material, emotional, and conceptual relations through which the perceiver must infer. What differentiates an existential illustration from an ordinary symbol, metaphor or philosophical example is the central question of the investigation. In what ways do existential thinkers use images to reveal existential structures? What processes lead to the structuring of thought through an image? And in what ways can existential illustration

theory enrich contemporary illustration, visual culture, film, graphic narrative, interactive media, and AI-generated art? The conceptual framework developed in the subsequent sections is guided by these questions.

Research Questions

The study is guided by following research questions:

RQ1. How do images function as philosophical structures that disclose existential meanings rather than merely represent ideas?

RQ2. What characteristics distinguish Existential Illustrations from conventional forms of illustration?

RQ3. How do existential images transform abstract concepts such as freedom, identity, embodiment, mortality, and absurdity into experiential encounters?

RQ4. How can the theory of Existential Illustration contribute to contemporary visual and philosophical studies?

Research Objectives

The core objectives of the present study are as follows:

To examine how images function as philosophical structures that disclose existential meanings beyond mere representation.

To develop a theoretical framework of Existential Illustration and identify its distinguishing characteristics in relation to conventional illustration.

To analyse how existential images transform abstract philosophical concepts, including

freedom, identity, embodiment, mortality, and absurdity, into experiential encounters.

To explore the contribution of Existential Illustration theory to contemporary visual culture and philosophical studies.

Review of Literature

Research on existentialism tends to focus on themes such as freedom, authenticity, anxiety, finitude, embodiment, temporality, alienation, meaning, responsibility, and being-with-others (Aho, 2023; Crowell 2012). Existential thinkers often resist purely systematic exposition and rely upon stories, things, pseudonymous voices, fictional characters, metaphors, myths, and concrete situations. Indirect communication serves as the basis for Kierkegaard's method. He recounts the biblical narrative of Abraham and Isaac from a variety of emotional and interpretative viewpoints, rather than confining the story to a closed system. The wisdoms are not made so reassuringly clear but the reader is forced to grapple with the horrifying vagueness of Abraham's act. In the same way, one rejects the conventional systematic philosophy of Nietzsche for aphorisms, poetry, animals, masks, landscapes, dances, dreams, metamorphoses, and parables. His philosophy unravels in dramatic scenes instead of linear demonstrations of scenes. Heidegger invokes equipment, rooms, paths, affects, breakdowns, and works of art to show that individuals are in meaning before they can start a scientific theoretical reflection. Sartre fills his philosophy with waiters, voyeurs, gamblers, lovers, soldiers, missing friends, cigarettes, cafés, and other public roles. Beauvoir examines existentialist attitudes through character-types and social relations. Absurdity is developed by Camus in heat, stone, desert, plague, repetition, execution, sunlight, sea,

and exile. Existentialism is not only about the proposition of existence. It continuously showcases life. Nonetheless, scholarship frequently analyzes such figures as metaphors, thought experiments, myths, literary devices, phenomenological descriptions, or pedagogical examples, rather than recognizing their common philosophical role.

Illustration and visual representation theories provide the proposed concept with a second intellectual foundation. When defining illustrations, conventional definitions state that it is an image produced in order to clarify, interpret, explain, accompany or decorate a verbal text. Definitions of such a nature can create a hierarchy whereby the language contains the original message and the image performs a secondary communicative role. Modern visual theory has increasingly challenged this assumption. According to Gombrich (1960), pictorial representation is shaped by conventions, expectations, schemas, and processes of correction; not by transparent imitation. According to Barthes (1980/1981), certain elements of a photograph affect the spectator unexpectedly. Thus, Barthes shows us that some detail of the image can exceed meanings that have been culturally coded into the image by the producer, or which fall into a category. Mitchell (2005) inquires what pictures “want,” not in the sense that images literally have biological drives but because societies treat them as entities that make demands, exercise power and take part in social relations. According to Burnett (2004), images function as part of cognitive environments and actively construct how individuals perceive, remember, categorize and interpret experience. Bredekamp’s “Theory of the Image Act” (2010/2018) goes further by examining how images behave as actions within social and historical contexts.

According to him, it refers to the capacity of visual things to witness or even spoil countless forms of human cooperation. These theories show that images are not simply passive things. Nonetheless, they do not put forward an explicit framework to differentiate illustrations that convey information from those that reveal the instability, ambiguity, and finitude of human existence. The gap between visual agency and existential philosophy is filled by existential illustration.

An alternative outline for the active potential of illustrations is offered by phenomenology. Heidegger contends against a model of the detached subject processing neutral external objects, maintaining our primary relationship with entities is engaged not in a matter of abstract observation but practical involvement: “not a bare perceptual cognition, but rather that kind of concern which manipulates things and puts them to use” (Heidegger, 1927/1962, p. 95). In this way, things do not first appear as isolated objects that later get meanings; rather, they emerge within a meaningful world of relations, practices, and concerns. In the same vein, *the Phenomenology of Perception* by Merleau-Ponty rejects this Cartesian like distinction between consciousness and the world by arguing that one perceives as they exist with one’s body, not through a detached observing mind. The lived body functions through a phenomenon that is not solely an object of consciousness but a universal medium in which a world becomes meaningful: “The body is our general medium for having a world” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012, p. 147). Consequently, the body does not belong to the self; rather, the body is the self. Thus, “I am not in front of my body, I am in my body, or rather I am my body” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012, p. 151). To understand the image

as a relational field that organizes bodily orientation, distance, vulnerability, attention and response, and not just as an object that occupies a spectator's view in another phenomenological move. Ricoeur's hermeneutic philosophy shows how symbolic and metaphorical forms generate interpretative possibilities, not merely aesthetic forms. His 'Interpretation Theory' argues that reference does not mean meaning and things emerge through interpretation and text. In a similar way, in his text *The Rule of Metaphor*, he postulates that metaphor does not just reproduce the 'meaning' in some existing way, but creates new possibilities or a process of "semantic innovation", enabling the "redescription of reality" (Ricoeur, 1977, pp. 156–157).

The synthesis of all these suggestions alludes that existential sketches do not only represent philosophy a certain way; they reorganize the intelligibility of existence itself. The ability of an image to deliver some pre-established meaning does not guarantee its efficiency. An image might bring some possibilities of experience, interpretation, and existence that may generate a different outlook of a situation. Despite the wealth of existing scholarship on how to analyze metaphor, image agency, phenomenology, visual experience, symbolism, narrative, and existential rhetoric, approaches so far scarcely show any attempt at an integrated account of how an illustration may reveal existential structures. The framework that we propose seeks to provide this synthesis while remaining open to improvement, enlargement, and cross-cultural revision.

Research Gap

The principal research gap relates to a systematic category that connects existential

philosophy with theories of illustration and visual cognition. Traditionally packed with rich recognitions throughout scholarship, space has often included Abraham, Sisyphus, Sartre's café waiter, Nietzsche's metamorphoses, Heidegger's shoes, and others. These images are usually analyzed within different types of philosophy. In them, Abraham is a figure whose greatness stems from their faith; the Sisyphus character is linked to absurdity; the waiter to bad faith; and the peasant shoes is linked to truth and world-disclosure. The theoretical underpinnings of the methods and concepts are lacking. There is a second gap that relates to studies on illustrations. While current scholarship investigates representation scenes, style, visual communication, cognition, publication, persuasion, iconography, spectatorship, image agency, and more, it does not make a distinction between an image that clarifies a concept and one that intensifies uncertainty. An instructional illustration works if ambiguity is reduced; an existential image can become more philosophically weaker when ambiguity is removed. The third gap pertains to the broad assertion that images "think." In the absence of conceptual precision, this claim can become an alluring yet misleading metaphor. While images do not have human self-consciousness, they organize perception, emotion, memory, temporality, identification and ethical attention. A theory is needed that does not see images as either inert objects or mystical autonomous minds. Ultimately, there is a practical gap in modern illustrations. Artists often utilize visual signs of existentialism— empty rooms, lonely figures, dark streets, shadows, smoke, ruins, skulls, rain, etc. without existential structures. The offered proposal attempts to differentiate atmospheric imitation from philosophical disclosure on the basis of what an image

compels the viewer to face, interpret, and potentially transform.

Research Methodology

This research is qualitative, conceptual, comparative, and interpretative. The objective of the venture is not to statistically quantify audience reactions in any way. Rather, it is to build a theoretical framework through close engagement with philosophical texts and their recurring illustrative forms. The first phase of the methodology is the analysis of documents which refers to a systematic process of identifying themes, patterns, rhetorical structures, and conceptual relationships in documents (Bowen, 2009). The foremost texts used will be Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* and *The Concept of Anxiety*; Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*; Heidegger's *Being and Time* and *The Origin of the Work of Art*; Jaspers' *Philosophy of Existence*; Marcel's *The Mystery of Being*; Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* and *Existentialism Is a Humanism*; Beauvoir's *The Ethics of Ambiguity*; Merleau-Ponty's *Eye and Mind*; and Camus's *The Myth of Sisyphus*. The works were chosen for their impact on existential thought or for the presence of powerful images, character types, material objects, narrative situations, or spatial metaphors that communicate philosophical problems. The second stage employs comparative close reading to establish what each image reveals, how it organizes perspective, what emotions it mobilizes, and whether it resolves or preserves existential uncertainty. The third stage encompasses visual hermeneutics where pictorial and verbal illustrations are treated not just as containers but also as meaningful configurations. Panofsky's (1955) account of visual interpretation and Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) analysis of composition, salience,

framing, viewpoint, and distance are useful. Ultimately, the research utilizes conceptual synthesis to determine common characteristics found in disparate examples and to develop a transferable theory of existential illustration (Jaakkola, 2020).

Defining Existential Illustration

As a term, existential illustration is defined as an intentionally or culturally configured visual, verbal, material, or imagined situation that reveals a core condition of existence by putting the spectator into a situation that allows for interpreting a tension involving freedom, finitude, identity, responsibility, embodiment, meaning, mortality, or otherness. This definition contains several distinctions. To begin with, existential illustration is disclosive rather than merely descriptive. An existential image has a person staring into an abyss, which implies danger because they might choose to jump. A description explains that freedom can induce anxiety. Second, it is situational, not just symbolic. While the skull is a universal symbol of death, a figure who encountered the skull as image of its own imminently establishes an existential relation to death. Thirdly, it participates rather than merely informs. The spectator must locate the self in the represented conflict and in doing so implicitly answer "What should we do?" What are we pretending to be? How are we seen by others? And which values have we accepted without examination? Fourth, it is open, but not an arbitrary one. There may be multiple interpretations, albeit structured through identifiable tensions. Fifth, it is not necessarily all doom and gloom. Illustrations representing meaning can invoke notions like commitment, joy, sensuality, humor, creativity, solidarity, rebellion or renewal. Existentialism is frequently depicted as a lonely figure smoking by a rainy window, as if ontology lost its

umbrella. Only when images indicate an essential struggle will they be existential rather than an outmoded state of mind.

Nonetheless, Existential Illustrations have six properties that set them apart from mere explanatory images. The first is **ontological disclosure**, wherein the image does not depict the appearance of an object, but reveals something about the structure of human existence. The second is **affective activation**, which is the idea being felt through anxiety, shame, wonder, nausea, hope, obligation, defiance, or compassion. The third is the **situated embodiment**: the philosophical abstraction materializes through bodies, objects, spaces, gestures, materials, and social conditions. The fourth refers to **productive incompleteness**, as the image does not resolve every contradiction or determine a single interpretation. The fifth is **reflexive implication**, whereby the represented question turns towards the spectator. The sixth is **transformative possibility** that refers to the ability of the image to change the way observers live or realize living. The properties do not need to occur with equal intensity in each case, but a good existential illustration usually combines several of them. The theory, then, is not simply a checklist of visual symbols. To have an existential impression, dejection, isolation, devastation, or even a skull does not suffice. The arrangement should establish a conflict between the perceiver and the underlying condition of life. It does not matter, what is shown but what kind of relation the image creates. Existential Illustration is, therefore, better thought of as an event of interpretation made rather than as a stable visual category. When the formal and conceptual structure of an image constitutes the viewer's own position as part of the problem, a philosophical encounter takes place.

Kierkegaard: Abraham, the Abyss, and the Knight of Faith

Søren Kierkegaard's writings provide one of the earliest and most powerful illustrations of existentialism, where meaning is not simply conveyed philosophically in an abstract way, but through figures and situations laying bare the deepest tensions of human existence. In *Fear and Trembling*, he returns to the biblical figure of Abraham, to the going up on Mount Moriah, and transforms the episode of the sacrifice of Isaac into an account of faith, anxiety, paradox, and the individual. Abraham is not a symbol or a historical figure but an existential image, one that brings to visibility the conflict between universal ethics and personal faiths. Kierkegaard portrays Abraham as the father prepared to sacrifice his son and the believer whose action is inconsistent with the ethical universal. He also sees him as the individual who stands in an absolute relation to the absolute. Therein lie contradictions at the heart of the figure of faith (Kierkegaard, 1843/1983). With this paradoxical figure, Kierkegaard illustrates that faith cannot be squeezed into social morality or given a rational explanation. Faith springs from an unsettling encounter with a part of existence that is beyond ordinary judgment. The image of Abraham's philosophical power lies precisely in its resistance to full interpretation. Looking out from the outside, Abraham seems to have intended nothing other than to commit an act of criminal violence. Yet, Kierkegaard does not make faith an excuse that simply removes ethical responsibility. Rather, he unveils faith as a frightening, exacting commitment that confronts the man with an unconditional demand that cannot ever be entirely communicated or justified before others. Thus, the image of Abraham carries with it an essential opacity that forces the spectator to

confront the limits of public ethical judgment and the inaccessibility of another's inward struggle.

The "knight of faith" from Kierkegaard develops a similar paradox of hidden transformation. He is not a heroic figure in the conventional sense. Unlike the great man who performs incredible feats and gets things done, the knight of faith appears perfectly ordinary. He eats, walks, and participates in common life. A person may transform from the outside but not from the inwardness. The extraordinary emerges through the ordinary, demonstrating that existence exceeds what is immediately visible and that the most profound transformations often occur within hidden dimensions of inwardness rather than through outward displays.

Similarly, in *The Concept of Anxiety*, Kierkegaard argues that anxiety is an existential representation of freedom and possibility. Overthinking, in most cases, does not stem from fear of dangers but from the unsettling knowledge that one can always choose. One is afraid of a fall, but also of realizing that freedom is what lets one jump off the edge in the first place. Consequently, the abyss turns out to be an external space but also an internal condition. Danger, possibility, and responsibility are inseparable. Through these illustrations of existence, Kierkegaard shows the embodiment of abstractions. The construction of his images does not allow the spectator to remain in a secure position outside their meaning; instead, they draw the reader into a personal encounter with faith, anxiety, and choice. The figures of Kierkegaard do not merely deliberate as their author did, but think with us, challenging us to confront the ambiguous, unresolved questions through which our very being becomes, as the Danish writer and thinker put it, 'meaningful'.

Nietzsche: The Tightrope Walker and the Three Metamorphoses

Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is not merely a philosophical work that contains the odd illustration, but rather a dramatic philosophical landscape constructed out of images, which actively produces thought. Nietzsche's philosophy is not about impressing readers with striking imagery; on the contrary, his figures and scenes are modes through which philosophical meanings are disclosed. In the prologue of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, he created the Zarathustra character, puts forth the tightrope walker who goes across the rope stretched between two towers above the marketplace. This image becomes one of the most powerful existential images of human becoming. According to Zarathustra, the human being is "a rope fastened between animal and Overhuman a rope over an abyss" (Nietzsche, 1883–1885/2006). What this statement suggests is that humanity must not be understood as an essence that is complete—rather, it is a movement between that which has been inherited and that which—as yet—is possible. The tightrope, then, serves as an existential illustration of becoming; behind the walker is the weight of inherited identity and settled values, before him the possibility of becoming, below him the abyss of failure, uncertainty and annihilation, and around him the crowd, the mass of everyday existence who sees but does not necessarily understand the peril of self-overcoming. According to the image, the identity is more of balancing act and not something one possesses. The pedestrian does not reach a consummate state; rather existence itself becomes a tenuous process of crossing over. When the tightrope walker falls, Nietzsche blocks interpreting self-overcoming as a simple story of progress

or assurance of progress. We do not see transformation as a comforting rise to perfection. Rather, it shows itself as an uncertain and dangerous encounter with vulnerability, exposure and destruction.

Nietzsche's three metamorphoses—the camel, the lion, and the child—represent contradictory relationships to the already inherited systems of value and provide another illustrative existential example of becoming (Nietzsche, 1883–1885/2006). These figures do not just act as mere ornamented signs attached to philosophical ideas. Rather, they are living figures through which we can decipher the movement of existence. The camel represents a spirit that accepts inherited responsibilities, traditions, moral demands, and carries heavy burdens. It is the stage in which the individual reinforces through enduring and submitting to what has been received. Nevertheless, because it is still reliant on all it carries, the camel cannot create new values yet. The lion indicates that moment of rebellion and freedom when it enters the desert to fight the established “thou shalt” of all values and claims the freedom to vaunt “I will”. Yet the lion’s power is still mainly of a negative kind: it can destroy the old commands but cannot yet create an other kind of a new and positive horizon of meaning. The child, the final layer of metamorphosis, is not a return to immaturity but a fresh beginning, a symbol of creativity, play, innocence, and a Yes-saying. Nietzsche envisages a being that either creates values as a utopian possibility, rather than simply either accepting or rejecting values.

The illustration of Nietzschean existence is, therefore, fundamentally kinetic. Nature does not present existence as a fixed object, as an object to be understood from a distance, on the contrary, it thinks through movement,

transformation, danger, height, laughter, dance, degeneration, and becoming. His images or illustrations are not attempts to answer the question “What is a human being?” To give a final definition the question is not “what is man?” rather, it transforms into the more existential or open-ended “what may the human being become?” Nietzsche makes the case that existence is not the same as a completed identity. Instead, when a creator puts their philosophical images to work, a problem arises.

Heidegger, Jaspers, and Marcel: Objects, Limits, and Mystery

Heidegger displays how unexceptional things may be existentially disclosive by revealing dimensions of human existence that are not disclosed in everyday activity. In *Being and Time*, he states when we encounter entities in the world, we do not primarily experience them as the detached objects of theoretical vision, but as meaningful things involved with us practically. A hammer, for instance, is usually encountered through use rather than through dispassionate observation. When it works well, it withdraws into the background of activity and effectively vanishes into the web of purposes it enables. The hammer will not first be seen as an isolated object with certain properties; rather, it will come to appear as part of an intelligible structure of work, intention and human engaging. However, if the tool breaks, the relationship is interrupted. The previously neglected network of responsibilities, purposes, dependencies, and expectations suddenly becomes visible (Heidegger, 1927/1962). Thus, a breakdown brings forth a reality that fruition-related involvement conceals. An object that fails does not just reveal a defect in itself; it reveals the structure of human being-in-the-world.

In addition, in his essay “The Origin of the Work of Art,” Heidegger makes an accompanying argument by making use of Van Gogh’s painting of peasant shoes. He does not take the shoes to be represented as physical objects severed from any world on the canvas. He argues that the artwork discloses a world (Heidegger, 1935–1936/1971), a world of labour, earth, adversity, resolution, and human situatedness. The value of the painting lies not in its faithful representation of a pair of shoes but in its ability to unveil the web of meanings and experiences into which those shoes are embedded. “Heidegger’s historical reading of Van Gogh’s shoes has come under pressure by later scholars” (Schapiro, 1968). Nonetheless, his broader philosophical interpretation remains worthwhile. An artwork can disclose the way in which a thing exists that is not reducible to mere representation. The painting does not just represent an object; it opens a world.

This comprehension offers a significant groundwork for existential elucidation as it implies that images become philosophically considerable when they reveal the concealed structures of experience. An existential image does not become meaningful just because it presents a thing or event. Its strength lies in its potential to unveil relationships, conditions, and possibilities usually hidden from “shallow” perception. An impaired tool, a frayed object or a simple everyday scene may at any point in time render philosophically active that which for reasons of convenience is tacitly understood, for it demonstrates the fragility of the scaffolding that upholds human existence in the world.

Moreover, Jaspers’ limit-situations or ultimate-situations extend this logic from object and works of art to basic conditions of

existence such as death, suffering, guilt, struggle, and chance (Jaspers, 1932/1970). Such situations cannot be removed through technical knowledge and practical problem-solving since they show the limits of human mastery and control. Situations of limit or ultimate confront people with realities they cannot flee. They lead to an encounter with the deeper conditioning of their own existence. Just like that, Marcel makes a distinction between problem and mystery which further clarifies the problem. The observer considers a problem to be an external object which can be possibly solved, analyzed, and measured. A mystery on the other hand, means the observer is situated in the very reality questioned (Marcel, 1951).

Overall, the existential illustration operates more near a mystery than a problem. The viewer is unable to remain completely disconnected from what is being portrayed. The viewer is drawn into an encounter that subverts the boundary between image and experience. When a dying object reveals that the viewer’s existence is already charged with vulnerability, dependence, memory, time, and loss, a deathbed, an unturned decision, a broken tool, or an abandoned object becomes existentially engaged. Images communicating human life do not just relay information; they reveal the conditions through which life takes meaning. Eventually, existential illustrations refute the perception that things were effectively ‘already going’ from their traditional representations.

Sartre: The Waiter, the Keyhole, and the Absence of Pierre

Sartre’s philosophical extracts demonstrate how existential illustrations can function through gesture, perspective, presentation, and absence. His approach does not resemble a

typical philosophical argument that clarifies concepts through abstract reasoning. Rather, he engenders concrete situations in which existential structures— such as human freedom— become visible through ordinary human experiences. One of the vibrant examples of how behavior itself can serve as an image is given by his café waiter. The waiter's movements are far too precise, too fast, and too formal for liking. It is as though he is trying to become identical with the social identity that he performs. Sartre illustrates this condition using the figure of the waiter who “plays” at being a waiter in a café and whose movements appear as though he is “trying to imitate the rigid and mechanical gestures of a waiter” (Sartre, 1943/1956, p. 59). Sartre makes the condition of “bad faith” visible as an exaggerated performance or existential choreography. The way a waiter expresses itself through social interaction means that its uniform, posture, gestures, rhythm, and manner of movement do not just have aesthetic value. He acts as if it is all he is. Existential distance refers to the ‘gap’ that exists between one’s condition and what one is capable of being. Thus, the existential distance between facticity and transcendence is one which denotes the fact that although we all live out the same sorts of lives, we nonetheless always have the capacity to go beyond our condition as we make choices, act out of consciousness, and see possibility. Yet, Sartre's point is not that such social identities or professional roles are inauthentic, but rather, he shows that a human being can never be fully identical with any role or category. The waiter can wait, but not more than that he can be a waiter.

The keyhole scene exhibits another mechanism of the existential illustration, the change of self-knowledge through the possibility of another gaze. When one spies,

he first experiences himself from his own point of view, within his own intention, and immediate awareness. Upon suddenly hearing footsteps approaching, he starts to consider the possibility that someone else’s consciousness might be watching him, which alters the entire meaning. According to Sartre, a feeling of shame arises whereby the person finds himself to be an object in another’s world (Sartre, 1943/1956). Sartre's café pursuit develops a further existential illustration through absence, this time for Pierre. Although Pierre’s anticipated attendance is absent, the whole setting becomes arranged on this absence. The café ceases to be merely a place with objects, tables, people, or whatever; it is now an organized field that results from expectation, memory, and negation. Pierre’s absence does not create a meaningless void, but rather an active absence generated through the consciousness. We notice what is lacking as we organize the world according to possibilities, expectations, and relations.

These examples illustrate that Sartrean existential illustrations encompass more than visible appearance; it includes gestures, possibilities, absences, and the concealed view. The café waiter, the cloaked observer, and the absent Pierre indicate that some existential meaning arises from what cannot be reduced to immediate appearance. Sartre’s images of philosophical concepts such as bad faith, shame, freedom, and nothingness do not merely represent these structures; rather, they depict situations where these structures are lived. The image thinks by undermining the viewer’s confidence in fixed identity, full presence, and the complete control over self-understanding. A ‘gesture’ can highlight the tension between autonomy and social identity; an absent gaze can create a powerful awareness of the self; an empty space can resonate with significance through its

emptiness. By means of these illustrations, Sartre demonstrates that human existence is always mediated by interpretation, possibility, and the look of the other. So, existential illustrations work not as a disclosure of philosophical ideas as such but as a mode of disclosure which allows us to see the instability, openness and complexity of existence.

Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty: Ambiguity, Otherness, and Embodied Vision

Through her philosophy, Simone de Beauvoir extends the illustrations of existential society; she situates freedom in the ethical, relational, historical, and political conditions. In her book *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, she shows a cast of existential figures the sub-man, serious man, nihilist, adventurer, and passionate person as ways of dramatizing different relationships toward freedom (de Beauvoir, 1947/1976). Not fixed psychological types or universal personality types, these figures represent existential orientations through which people either run away, distort or take on the responsibility of freedom. A serious man loses his freedom by treating external values— such as institutions, ideologies, nations, religions, and social roles— as though they possessed an absolute authority independent of human creation and beyond individual responsibility. By attaching oneself wholly to an external cause, an individual tries to rid oneself of the uncertainty of free existence, the burden of which weighs heavy. On the other hand, the adventurer accepts action, risk, and personal achievement, but does not see that his freedom cannot be separated from the freedom of the others. The nihilist does not rejoice in the collapse of absolute values and engage in creative reconstruction but engages in rejection and destruction. He converts the unveiling of ambiguity not into the possibility

of creativity and invention but into despair. Through these existentialist figures, Beauvoir seeks to demonstrate that freedom is never simply our own; it exists in a lattice of human affairs, responsibilities, and common being. She believes that authentic freedom cannot be achieved unless the freedom of all others is also recognized: “To will oneself free is also to will others free” (de Beauvoir, 1947/1976, p. 73). As a result, by seeing the existential picture from a representation of isolated consciousness, Beauvoir transforms it into an ethical picture of interconnected existence; every act of self-creation involves us in a responsibility towards everyone else.

However, Merleau-Ponty adds an embodied dimension to the understanding of relational existence. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, he argues that perception does not originate from a detached consciousness observing the world from outside. Rather, perception emerges through the lived body, which is already situated within the world it perceives (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012). The body is not merely an object possessed by consciousness but the primary medium through which the world becomes meaningful. As he states, “the body is our general medium for having a world” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012, p. 147). This embodied relationship becomes further developed in his essay “Eye and Mind”, where he explores the reversibility between the perceiving body and the visible world. The body that sees belongs to the same visible field that it encounters; “the eye sees, but the eye is also seen; the hand touches, but the hand is also touched” (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 183). This reversibility demonstrates that human existence is not based on an isolated inner consciousness but on an embodied relationship between self, world, and others.

This reversibilisation determines that human existence is embodied and relational, not simply internal. An existential illustration which is informed by both Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty must consequently unpack not just what an image shows but the structures of visibility and embodiment through which meaning is generated. We must ask who is positioned as subject, who is reduced to object, whose bodily presence is made visible, and whose social process is excluded or overlooked. The spectator is never a neutral observer positioned outside the image. Perception is informed by embodied location, social conditions, historical circumstances, and unequal structures of power. Social status, gender, ability, labour, cultural position, and political history determine respectively: Who is allowed the look? Who is subjected to the look of others? And whose freedom is allowed in the visual field? Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty, thus, show that existential illustration is not only individualistic, but also embodied and ethical relations through which humans appear for each other.

Camus: Sisyphus and the Lucidity of Repetition

Perhaps the most sparkling example of an existential illustration is Camus' Sisyphus since the entire philosophy of absurdity here is extracted into a body, a stone, a mountain, and a cycle of repetition. Sisyphus must push a boulder uphill only to have it roll down, repeating the process. The absurd is not the result of only manual labour. The clash of human search for meaning with the silence of a world without answer (Camus, 1942/1991) creates absurdity. Thus, the descent is the vital moment. Sisyphus realizes his state while he is going back to the stone. The fact that one is being punished makes that punishment arduous, yet this also creates a measure of

freedom. Although the gods may assign Sisyphus a challenging task, they cannot fully dictate the significance he derives from that task during lucid confrontation. Camus says, "One must imagine Sisyphus happy" (Camus, 1942/1991, p. 123). It should not be read as a cheerful acquiescence to pointless work. Sisyphus should not inspire workers to apply overtime with good posture. He has a happy lucidity. He declines false hope, but he also refuses spiritual defeat. The image considers weight, slant, bodily tiredness, recycling, going down, back up, and willful resistance. It does not offer a transcendent salvation or ultimate resolution. Rather, it is a transformation of the relationship between the individual and the inevitable. The stone stays heavy, the mountain stays indifferent, the task stays endless; yet consciousness stops the punishment from having the last word—the ultimate meaning of human existence and essence.

How Images Think

To claim that "images think" does not just mean that they have cognizance, consciousness, intentions or inner experiences similar to man. The assertion neither reworks imagery into feigned characters nor dismisses the gap between human cognition and visual portrayal. Rather, it identifies a specific form of interpersonal intelligence through which images contribute to create human understanding. According to Deleuze, thought is not a passive recognition but an encounter that disrupts familiar ways of seeing and thinking. As he writes, "something in the world forces us to think" (Deleuze, 1968/1994, p. 139). The meaning of an image does not lie in the independent agency of the images contained within it, but rather in the association amongst the visual structures, embodied perception, cultural memory,

historical situations, and interpretation practices. An image, then, does not only transfer meanings from creator to spectator but rather it is a site where meaning is negotiated, transformed, and generated (Burnett, 2004; Mitchell, 2005). However, through existential illustration, an image becomes philosophically dynamic when it performs operations similar to the basic movements of thought itself. Initially, an image is selected. Each image creates a world by establishing a boundary that determines what can be defined and what cannot be defined or seen. A frame is not a material limit; it is an intellectual decision. By selecting specific bodies, objects, gestures, spaces, and relations, the image draws the observer's attention towards some possible understandings while leaving others obscured. That which is excluded is not gone; it continues to be the difference and make suggestive meaning with absence silence etc. The rapport between presence and invisibility is something that the image thinks about.

Additionally, an image spatializes concepts. Philosophy is often confronted by invisible structures: freedom, identity, becoming, responsibility, absurdity, mortality, and so on. Existential images give these abstractions shapes which one can encounter. Freedom is situated at the moment one chooses to become either a stay on the ground or a leap into the unknown. Becoming precariously likens itself to a bridge or a rope stretched taut between what has been and what may become. Identity will be a mask or a costume which expresses the distance between what one socially appears and what one actually is, i.e., the consequence of social appearances as contrasting to bodily existence. Judgment is referred to the gaze of the other consciousness. Absurdity becomes visible

through the image of endless repetition: a movement that continually returns to itself without a final destination, exposing the tension between the human search for meaning and the silence of an indifferent world. Through spatialization, the image functions not merely as an illustration of the philosophy but as an experiential site of the philosophy.

In the third instance, an image represents time in thought. While verbal explanation usually unfolds in a sequence, the image gathers together a number of time-dimensions in a single field of perception. A single image is capable of manifesting the traces of the past, the awareness of the present, and the expectation of the future. An abandoned object holds the memory of what has slipped away; an unfinished gesture indicates something incomplete; and a repetitive movement unveils the framework of habit and endurance. Consequently, images do not simply reveal moments in time, they also reveal how human beings experience time through expectation, interruption, repetition, memory, and loss.

The fourth feature of an image is its capacity to embody abstraction. One sees how existential conditions are no longer distant, abstract ideas. They obtain a form. Reluctancy, attitude, distance, and exposure are signs of anxiety. Vulnerability manifests as a result of fragility and dependence. Isolation comes about by separation and silence. Mortality is communicated through decay, disappearing, absence, and limitation. By means of biological form, texture, materiality, colour and movement, images transform invisible structuring of existence into something that is perceived. The onlooker is allowed to encounter this existential

condition from within, rather than the image explaining it from the outside.

Images show agency, or the message delivered is not by the image alone. It arises from a complex web of connections, involving the represented subject, the producer, the consumer, technological forms of production, social institutions, and cultural histories. The image is neither an inert object nor an isolated situation of meaning. Engagement triggers its activation. The image attracts someone to experience a 'live' activity but it does not 'speak' before the viewer. The viewer does not just receive the image but completes its movement by interpreting, questioning, and responding to it. However, the strength of an image can also come from what it leaves out. In other words, an image withholds. The hidden, the incomplete, the absent, and the concealed can have more weight than the visible. A closed door can exude potent possibility. An empty chair can convey a heavy loss. A shadow can indicate unseen presence. A figure can reveal an entire history of suffering or resistance. Absence and interpretation are connected because the image thinks the absence through an image. An image that is totally crystal clear displays nothing for thought to pursue, while an existential image keeps a remainder to think about.

An Existential Illustration can, therefore, be understood as a transfer or apparatus: a complex visual apparatus that organizes perception, emotion, imagination, and reflection on the inescapability of a personal existential question. It not only indicates some philosophical idea that has already been thought out; rather, it becomes one of the means through which such a thought emerges. This makes existential illustration different from explanatory illustration. An existential

illustration usually aims for efficiency: to clarify, simplify, and reduce uncertainty. It functions in a differing manner. It appends ambiguity as ambiguity is not a failure of understanding, but rather, the very condition of being. A freedom whose meaning is fixed in advance does not allow for other meanings. Translating death into a decorative image makes finitude less serious. A representation that identifies a subject as having a single essence offers the illusion that identity is stable. The most profound existential images, therefore, rest between revealing and concealing. They reveal just enough to elicit recognition while concealing just enough to provoke reflection. Rather than solving the existential question, they insert the spectator in it. The spectator must think further than the image. Thinking begins with the perceiver, in this context, seeing turns reflection, perception turns interpretation, and representation turns existential disclosure. Images think not due to their consciousness but due to the awakening of consciousness to what it cannot perceive. Through complicating what one thinks one knows, they disturb the conventional, and turn looking into an encounter with the unresolved conditions of being human.

Limitations

The conceptual and interpretive methodology of the study edges its scope. It does not empirically explore differing audience views on existential illustrations due to cultural, linguistic, educational or social differences. The conceptual framework of the philosophy is largely based on European existential and phenomenological traditions and is not universally comprehensive. Non-European, Indigenous, feminist, postcolonial, and decolonial viewpoints might offer different insights into selfhood, freedom, suffering, temporality, and transcendence. The study

focuses on some canonical pictures instead of all philosophical metaphors or images. The paper argues that existential imagery requires engagement with the fundamental conditions of existence and not merely an emotional atmosphere. It focuses on philosophical function and not art-historical attribution.

Conclusion

The current study argued that images may become philosophical events rather than the visualizations of philosophical ideas. Through the suggested concept of existential illustration, it is shown that certain images, figures, objects, and situations in existential philosophy are not decorative metaphors or accompanying explanations of an abstract concept; instead, they reveal structures of existence. Abraham's walk to Mount Moriah, Nietzsche's tightrope walker juggling the animal and the Overhuman, Heidegger's broken hammer, and Van Gogh's peasant shoes, Sartre's waiter playing his professional identity, Beauvoir's existential figures of freedom and ambiguity, Merleau-Ponty's lived body, Camus's Sisyphus—existential thought often achieves its most powerful manifestation when staged in concrete situations. These images take abstract concerns such as freedom, anxiety, responsibility, identity, embodiment, mortality, and absurdity and turn them into encounters with which human beings confront their conditions of existence. The enquiry, therefore, questions the assumption that philosophical meaning arises solely through conceptual argumentation, and demonstrates that images can function as active modes of philosophical exposure.

The main theoretical contribution of the study contends that images do not “think” in the sense of being conscious, intentional or an

autonomous intelligence; rather, they organize the conditions through which thinking happens. The term ‘existential illustration’ denotes images as a relational structure that determines perception, feeling, interpretation, and reflection. Images introduce philosophical encounters rather than simply communicating philosophical content, through selection, spatialization, temporalization, embedding, distribution of agency, and withholding. When a stone reveals the weight of absurd existence, it becomes a world. When a pair of shoes connects with the body and reveals a truth about labor, vulnerability, and belonging, it is alive. When an empty space actuates memory, expectation, and loss, it is also more than nothing. Consequently, the philosophical power of an image does not only involve what it indicates, but the relationship that exists between the image, the observer, and the world itself at an existential level. Existential illustrations, unlike explanatory illustrations designed to cut down on ambiguity, preserve ambiguity as ambiguity is innately a dimension of existence. They do not have the answer for existential questions; rather they create conditions in which one cannot escape these.

The effects of this outline are not only limited to classical existential philosophy, but they also open up new possibilities for philosophical meaning-making across the fields of literature, painting, cinema, graphic narratives, digital environment, interactive media, and AI visual cultures. It is crucial to acknowledge the possibility of expanding and revising this theory engagement with Indigenous, African, Asian, feminist, postcolonial, and decolonial traditions that might illuminate differing relations between selfhood, embodiment, community, temporality, suffering, and transcendence.

Essentially, when images think: a theory of existential illustrations posits that the greatest strength of an image is not to represent something that is already known, but to render something that is not yet clear. The existential image does not function like a mirror, reflecting a finished philosophical knowledge. Instead, it is an encounter that forces seeing to become questioning, perception to become reflection, and representation to become disclosure. Images possess the capacity to think as they stir thought. They encounter what we take for granted, reveal the fabric of existence, and encourage humans to think what it means to be alive and ever more so.

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