

Situations

by

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Abstract

Situations is a short film that explores what it means to be human in an increasingly abstract world. The film draws on ideas from the French existentialists' notion of universal human freedom, and places this freedom in a cold and empty contemporary postmodern world inspired by recent scholarship.

Aesthetically, *Situations* builds on a visual style appropriated from an analysis of the similarities between Japanese and Scandinavian cinema – the film attempts to tell the story through long takes and wide shots, where the characters are observed in their situations rather than followed by narrative decisions.

Keywords: Scandinavian cinema; Japanese cinema; Experimental narrative cinema; Existentialism

for all my friends and family

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Defence Statement

Introduction

Situations is a narrative film about two characters who are trying to make sense of their current existential situations. Henrik is an investment advisor who doesn't understand the stock market and Ikuko is a newly arrived resident in her new city. The film observes the characters in a day of their lives as they are working towards coming to peace with ambition and solitude. The film utilizes long takes and a slow pace in order for the spectator to contemplate and identify with the locations and atmospheres of the individual scenes, and not just focus on the characters.

Although I consider myself an interdisciplinary artist, my work often lands within the category of time-based media. My practice comprises narrative films, video/sound installations and music compositions. During my MFA studies, my narrative work and installations have moved closer to each other. I like the way the spectator engages with a looped work in a gallery, where one might stumble upon it anywhere in its time cycle. In a movie theatre, however, the experience of the work from a set beginning and end entails many interesting artistic (especially narrative) choices. A video installation can hence afford a more ambiguous approach while a narrative film requires a more formal structure.

With *Situations* I have attempted to fuse the strengths of both styles of presentation, the specificity of a narrative film and the ambiguity of video installations. The relatively long, static and observational nature of the shots have been carried over from my video installations, while the story structure and dialogue are typical of my narrative work. The film also uses a cyclical form in its depiction of morning, daytime and evening, which is typical of my installations – such as *Moon*, which is a five-minute loop of an entire moon cycle that occurs above the city.

The aesthetics of the film can be placed between realism and formalism; an expressionist style filmed on location, rather than in a set-dressed soundstage. The formalist tendencies provide a constructed, even unnatural, sense of the film. The film's universe is sparse, which is reflected both in the settings and in the characters' interactions that are often direct and self-absorbing. But the film's exterior environments have a natural and even mundane quality, which were inspired by a more realist approach. This was a challenge, as the clean lines and minimalist set dressing required many locations to be either stripped down or created from scratch in empty locations. A few scenes also needed to be digitally cleaned up in the post-production stage through compositing software, to achieve the minimalist *mise-en-scène*.

Due to the heavy preparations and the very small and alternating crews for each set, I decided to spread out the shoot sporadically over three months. The production ran from March to May in 2016. Sometimes I had help from a medium-sized crew, and for some scenes we were just a few: myself, the producer (Nathan Zeitner) and cinematographer (Ericsson Chu), along with the actors of the particular scene. A reason for the constant change in crews was purely a matter of availability – and the reality of an ultra-low budget film. I saw the challenge as an exploration of the possibility to continue independent filmmaking after graduation, with the smallest means possible.

Themes of *Situations*

As the title suggests, the film attempts to depict the situations of its characters, set in an unnatural and socially cold world. The name alludes to Jean-Paul Sartre's idea of a 'theatre of situations', a term that describes fiction's function of depicting the human condition: "Sartre's insistence that words are freely interpreted as signifying a reality that is not contained in a word itself ultimately establishes the importance of focusing on the situation within which words are chosen" (Darnell 95). Michelle R. Darnell appropriates the term to cinema, and theorizes a 'film of situations': "If it is adopted, then, because of its ability to display in more complexity the situation of persons, film may be well suited to show the 'true event' of human existence" (Darnell 101). The appropriated term, as I have argued in the essay "Japan and Scandinavia Under the Emptiness of the Moon", comes with some inherited problems. Darnell applies it on a narrative level in her analysis of *Lost*

in Translation, an application that I argue does not utilize the moving image component of film, since it could just as well be applied to the written document of the screenplay.¹ 'Film of situations' becomes much more interesting when it's applied to the visual and temporal plane of film. When I started to conceptualize my ideas of *Situations* I wanted to work on a level where the visual, aural and temporal qualities of the medium trumped the narrative arch. I started to think in terms of individual scenes rather than story beats. This is a new approach for me which I will explore further in my future work.

Existentialism and the approach of 'film of situations' was a starting point for the concept of the film. However, I was interested in applying the existentialists' ideas of the universal human freedom to a more contemporary philosophy of the postmodern world we inhabit today. According to Sartre and the existentialists, a human being first exists, then defines herself: "existence precedes essence" (Sartre 22). Our human freedom stems from our ability to make choices that define us. No divine force is there to help or guide us, hence this freedom comes to the individual with full responsibility, towards herself and towards all mankind – or as stated by Sartre, we are "condemned to be free" (29)². A human being who does not realize this profound responsibility is lying to himself – whether it is "by making determinist excuses" or by insisting that their "existence is necessary" – and is acting in 'bad faith', and can "be judged only by the grounds of strict authenticity" (Sartre 49).

In *Situations*, I have positioned Sartre's notion of freedom in Frederic Jameson's bleak observations of late capitalism – where incomprehensible 'financial instruments' such as derivatives (bets on bets) form what Jameson, inspired by Marx, calls 'fictitious securities' (117 - 118). Henrik, the investment advisor, has come to terms with his untalented endeavor to help his clients navigate the stock market. He admits to his client that the stock market is just too ambiguous for him to grasp. He is a victim of Jameson's notion of late capitalism and cannot fathom the incomprehensible 'financial instruments' of his time. After losing his clients' money he capitulates to art collecting, where he

¹ For a more in-depth explanation and the term's relationship to film please see Appendix A.

² My point here is not go too deep into the path of atheistic existentialism, but rather to provide a framework which these ideas rely upon. What is important to the existentialists is that the condemned freedom which stems from no higher, divine, order is the source for the individual's "anguish", "despair" and "abandonment" – all key interests for the existentialists (Sartre 25).

becomes subjected to poor investment advice himself, when he invests in an abstract painting.

The film also borrows ideas from organizational theorist Mats Alvesson and Danish psychiatrist Svend Brinkmann's analyses of the contemporary society. The backdrop of the film is a world inspired by Alvesson's study *The Triumph of Emptiness*, in which he raises concerns about the increasing tendencies towards grandiosity and illusion-tricks that often stand on "ambiguous and shaky grounds", present in today's affluent societies (27). Alvesson states that "The common factor in the management of many organizations, as well as individuals, is an attempt to associate oneself with the grandiose—and ignore the trivial aspects" (150). As an age crisis hits him on the brink of his thirtieth birthday, Henrik realizes that he is terrible at what he does; he cannot live up to his fine title of 'investment advisor', a position he got from some training and a little help from his more successful father. In order to find his own meaning, he attempts to collect abstract art, something he jumps into without any knowledge. The character of the artist that Henrik encounters later isn't very talented either, but through the proper 'illusion-trick' of an eccentric genius he manages to do well in his business to sell his art to new, inexperienced art collectors.

The film is also influenced by Brinkmann's anti-self help book *Stand Still* (my own translation), in which he opposes the current culture of life coaching, self-help and the urge to follow gut feelings, which often uses strategies that attempt to place the individual in a positive centre of her social surroundings. According to Brinkmann this "is not only absurd, it also has damaging consequences to human relationships since other humans quickly get reduced to tools in the individual's quest for success instead of following our ethical duty of becoming goals in ourselves" (my own translation, 136 - 137). The world that constitutes *Situations* is inhabited by many creatures that are on a constant quest for self-improvement, mostly evident in the lost hiker and Henrik. Ikuko is new to the city, but also to the universe in which the film takes place, and hence we witness the broken social interactions first-hand through her.

The characters who exist in the universe of *Situations* are self-centered and are looking for meaning through empty endeavors without reflecting on the larger questions –

according to Sartre, they could be described as living their lives in 'bad faith'. The exception would be Ikuko, who still upholds a standard of authenticity; she listens to the records she collects. Henrik, on the contrary, buys a painting without knowing if he likes it or not; he just follows the artist's advice. He attempts to solve his existential problems quickly by jumping into a new venture that is supposed to give him meaning, rather than finding a solution by reflecting on his issues. The hiker, with his shiny new bulky equipment, is more concerned about being right than finding his mountain. He asks for directions, but only to confirm that his own directions are correct.

A recurring theme of collecting appears throughout the film. Ikuko collects records while Henrik starts collecting art. The collecting is an attempt for the characters to hold on to something material in a world that is becoming increasingly abstract for them. Henrik cannot comprehend the abstract quality of the stock market and instead invests in an abstract painting – which he thinks is good art just because it's abstract. Ikuko's collecting of records is much less ambiguous: we see her listening and enjoying her newly acquired records and thus they have a real value for her.

Components of *Situations*

I will here reflect upon the individual aesthetic elements that culminate in the complete film. The film's topics and themes were anchored from the beginning, but as the production progressed, many new ideas were organically formed.

The screenplay of *Situations* was written with a strong emphasis on the individual scenes, rather than the story itself. The scenes were treated as short stories told through a larger context and not as building blocks of an overarching story. This allowed for the film to take its more observational tone while being less predictive as no scenes have a clear follow-up. The observational quality is supposed to function as a mediator between the formalist and realist structures of the film. Many scenes start before the scenes' actions; we see Ikuko enjoying the view of a mountain or listening to records, we see Henrik's wife preparing a meal. The mundane aspect of observing someone is rooted in the realist spectrum of the film. However, the static camera and two-dimensional framing work on a more formalist level – it references its own construction, unlike many realist or

neo-realist films that often make use of fluid camera movements that give glimpses of the 'real' world outside its own construction. Furthermore, I tried to stay away from tried and tested narrative formulas, and instead attempted to create a more open narrative, where the filmic world occupies as much space as the characters.

Casting actors for a low-budget, independent film is always a challenge. Due to the formalist and abstracted style of my work, I value actors who are willing to work with a more thematic approach than a character-driven one. In casting, I try to strike a conversation about the film's atmosphere and universe, rather than the characters' roles themselves. Often, justifiably so, actors prefer to work with extensive backstories and biographies, but these are tools that I find to confuse the actors for the abstracted, minimalist style I am trying to achieve. Because of this, I look for actors who either know my style and work, or whom I am able to strike an interesting conversation with in the casting session. References to other work are often important in my discussion with actors. But my Scandinavian heritage poses a problem in North America, as our references stem from different cultures. This is why it is crucial for me to choose actors who I find are easy to work and communicate with. Furthermore, the dialogue is written with a specific tone in mind, and is thus quite fragile; if delivered incorrectly it makes little sense. Patience and understanding on set are important as we have to work through plenty of takes to find the right tone for the scene.

The editing started with the creation of a very specific rhythm inspired by the construction of a piece of music, where I imagined each scene representing a measure, or a phrase, of a musical composition. Since most shots were filmed in their entirety as one-takes, it was important to log and keep notes on each take. The advantage of heavy editing is that the best parts of each take can be pieced together. I did not have this luxury, so instead I looked for mood, performance, but above all rhythm when choosing the takes that made it into the final film.

It was important that the long takes didn't become technical gimmicks, but rather served the style and atmosphere of the film. They were also important to create the film's two-dimensional quality that I was seeking to enhance the story's and dialogue's minimalist quality. The abstraction of the space and the dialogue, set in the observational

style, enhances the vacillation between the film's formalism and realism – we observe a rather unnatural and abstracted universe through the mundane. Furthermore, the flat aesthetic style, coupled with the long takes, provides a unity between the rather detached scenes. I wanted a consistent visual and temporal style, to make the jump between each scene and environment less jarring.

There are however two scenes where more conventional editing techniques were employed: the scene in the office and the scene in the artist's studio. The dialogue-driven nature of the scenes demanded the change of angles, and thus they were filmed with this in mind. The scenes were edited with emphasis on how they would rhythmically fit with their surrounding scenes and maintain the harmony with the rest of the film.

When planning the look of the film I decided to work more extensively with natural light than I have in my previous film productions. I wanted the light to come from a specific natural source in each scene, such as a window. Besides being a creative decision, it was a pragmatic one as well: the independent nature of the film dictated limited crews and short shooting schedules, rendering a complex lighting set up unmanageable.

The joy of filmmaking is the collaboration and creative relationships that develop between projects. I have a longstanding relationship with cinematographer Ericsson Chu who knows and understands the style we are working towards. The film's story is visually told using wide shots, which required planning and problem solving. The visual style aids the film's observational quality, but enhances the demands of the locations that had to allow for the camera to be positioned with as much distance from the characters as possible.

The more technical aspects of the film such as sound editing and colour correction involved not only creative work but also, due to the hectic and inconsistent production phase, an extensive amount of fixing problems that were inherited from the shoot. The sound recordings, for example, varied in quality and needed processing with noise reduction. When the sound was edited for a cleaner and more coherent experience I could start the more creative work. I usually prefer to keep up the collaborative spirit into the post-production phase, but I made the decision to do all the work myself to ensure that the film upheld a consistent concept and style.

As previously mentioned, the film's locations and backdrop play a large role, hence I put a great deal of emphasis on the sound design of the backgrounds. Winds, bugs and animals can be heard in the scene at the mountain, while an electric buzz cuts through the silence in the office scene.

Many of the scenes include music, which is a central theme that the film revolves around. This has been part of the project since its inception in the script phase. During editing I created an extensive library of temporary music in order to find the right tone and tempo for each scene that incorporated music. I used these songs as a foundation for composing the film's original score. The music balances between diegetic and non-diegetic in order to fuse with the story's world and the viewer's experience. There is a distinction between the diegetic and non-diegetic music until the art studio scene, where the source of the music becomes ambiguous; it could either be the artist's cheesy soundscape or part of the film's score. The scene is the most stylized and surreal and its score lives on a similar ambiguous level. Ikuko's surroundings consist of a beat-driven electronic soundtrack, including the record she buys and listens to in her apartment. Henrik has no choice over the music he gets subjected to; the music in the art studio is abstract, instrumental and artificial, reflecting the artist himself, while the music his wife is playing at home is trying to force itself as an easy-listening background song.

Conclusion

Situations is the culmination of almost a year's work, from conception to final screening. A creative project that spans this long always presents the challenge of keeping the themes consistent. The theories of Sartre, Alvesson, Brinkmann and Jameson helped the project stay grounded as the film production progressed. When working on a scene, no matter where in the production cycle, it was helpful to be reminded about the function the scene would play in terms of the film's overarching theme.

With *Situations*, I explored how I could incorporate my other artistic disciplines with my narrative film work. I also attempted to incorporate philosophy in my research stage in order to spawn new themes and ideas. I believe these experiments have developed my personal artistic style further. I am happy with the film's conceptual consistency, while it at

the same time, hopefully, is working on some kind of emotional level. I consider the project a starting point for a new direction of my work. The low-budget process and spontaneous production phase have been an important indication of the possibility to continue to work in this model – which in return offers creative freedom.

Any film includes many parts that all form a complete work in the end. *Situations* contains some strong parts and some less strong parts – I have learned by now that it is impossible, as a creator, to like them all. The inherent absurdity of the film's universe reflects well in the absurdity of the many months of effort and pain spent in the act of making it. Working with issues of the human condition I have found a new energy in the purpose of creating fictional situations. Camus once wrote: "Explanation is useless, but the sensation remains and, with it, the constant attractions of a universe inexhaustible in quantity. The place of the work of art can be understood at this point" (95).

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Appendix A.

Japan and Scandinavia Under the Emptiness of the Moon: Cinematic Existentialism in Two Distant Regions

Introduction

Approaching film and philosophy in one short essay is a challenge. And adding to this is the complexity of a global cinema perspective. However, this essay is not an attempt at finding a specific meaning of certain films, or solving the ambiguity of the medium itself. Nor is it trying to plaster readings “through a lens of a theory” on top of films.

The goal is instead to explore how filmmakers ask the fundamental questions about our condition, or sickness as Kierkegaard would call it, of being living human beings. Because of this I have taken a rather broad approach and focused on the links between philosophy and art, filmmakers across continents, realism and surrealism – rather than studying the small details of the films themselves.

The first question we must ask is: how does philosophy relate to film? It is my belief that there exists no hierarchy between philosophy and art (or religion for that matter). There will be no attempt to prove that a certain filmmaker was inspired by a certain philosopher, or that a certain philosopher was inspired by a filmmaker, but that they all work within the same domain of ontological questions, and can thus be studied together through this universality.

The regions of Scandinavia³ and Japan will be in focus. The shortness of the essay will not allow for a look at all the Scandinavian countries. But the influence and collaboration within the culture of Scandinavia is too great to single any of the individual countries out, even if of course the region has its own national cinemas.

³ I have used the term ‘Scandinavian Cinema’ here as it appears to be the most common term in film theory. It is important to note that when the term is used in a cultural context, it is often fused with the ‘Nordic countries’ and hence it includes Finland, Denmark, Iceland, Norway and Sweden.

Existentialism and Art

In drama and epic, novel and lyrical poem, the poet records individual experiences in their unmitigated subjectivity and thus expands our subjectivity and cracks our horizons. (Kaufmann 235)

In the most general terms, the philosopher and artist work in the same domain of representing the unrepresentable. Furthermore, there is often a dialogue between the work of the artist and philosopher. According to Walter Kaufmann,

Most men, including many philosophers, discuss the truth of beliefs without any clear notion of their meaning—of their many possible meanings. What the poet, however, is supremely interested in and can teach the philosopher is the meaning of thoughts; and where this is ignored, any discussion of truth is likely to degenerate into the most arid scholasticism. The relation between philosopher and poet is not a one-way affair, and least of all does the poet give polished expression to the ideas of the philosopher. As we have seen, no philosopher influenced Goethe half as much as he influenced subsequent philosophy. (234)

Sartre and the majority of the French existentialist movement were particularly aware of the philosophical importance of art and literature. Indeed, it can be argued that the movement brought authors such as Kafka into popularity (Bogaerts 69). Furthermore, Sartre often provided literary analyses himself, as evident in his book *What is Literature?* (published in 1948).

Sartre argues that there is 'being' only through human reality:

It is our presence in the world which multiplies relations. It is we who set up a relationship between this tree and that bit of sky. Thanks to us, that star which has been dead for millennia, that quarter moon, and that dark river are disclosed in the unity of a landscape. [...] But, if we know that we are directors of being, we also know that we are not its producers. If we turn away from this landscape, it will sink back into its dark permanence. (*What is Lit.* 27 - 28)

According to Sartre, the motive of artistic creation is thus “the need of feeling that we are essential in relationship to the world” (*What is Lit.* 28).

A key component in existentialism is the freedom of the human in this world that we inhabit. A person first exists, then defines herself. This is what Sartre means with the

famous expression “existence precedes essence” (*Existentialism* 22). Action is in other words what defines us in this fundamental freedom. Art is a product of this freedom, and its final goal, according to Sartre, is “to recover this world by giving it to be seen as it is, but as if it had its source in human freedom” (*What is Lit.* 43). Furthermore, it can be said that “The writer is urged to try and embrace the human condition in its totality and, in exploring a situation, to unite the specific with the absolute” (Caute xi).

Successful art and culture presents us with a comprehensible image of our condition in relation to the universal. It is a way to navigate through our experiences and view existence comprehensibly, or as Albert Camus said, “Without culture, and the relative freedom it implies, society, even when perfect, is but a jungle. This is why any authentic creation is a gift to the future” (212).

Many of the existentialist thinkers wrote their own fictional books and plays, such as Sartre’s novel *La Nausée* (1938). The fictional works could be argued to open up a way of communication to readers who were not prepared to read heavier philosophical works, such as Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness* (1943).

Working on philosophy in the domain of fiction does indeed have its benefits – it opens up the specific to the universal. We can, for example, look at the early existentialist⁴ work of Søren Kierkegaard – one of the authors who was of great influence for Sartre (Cohen-Solal 6). Even though they appear as pure philosophical texts, the reader must always keep in mind they are written under a pseudonym – a fictional character, such as Johannes De Silentio, that has differing opinions than that of the author Kierkegaard himself. These fictional authors discuss and critique one another and scholars of Kierkegaard still grapple with how to interpret the texts (Marino viii). In this way, it can be argued that Kierkegaard’s work is in-between fiction and non-fiction.

It is no wonder that a philosophy that is so based on the human experience considers fiction and art as a rhetorical and dialectical tool. It expands the view of the reader, and the writer: sets them free in the universal. It is through this sort of ‘indirect’

⁴ In the most general sense of the term. The movement did not, of course, exist in his time.

communication the philosophy could be conceptualized in. There have even been attempts at describing existentialism as a literary movement (Flynn 16).

Even if the focus of this essay is that of Sartrean existentialism, the term will be used in a more general, ontological sense. There are of course many influential philosophers and thinkers who have contributed to the collective philosophical term. The two major differences in existentialism are the theistic and atheistic branches. Since this essay will investigate the existentialism present in the films – as opposed to analyzing them *through* existentialism – it would be unfair and inaccurate to apply only a Sartrean atheistic perspective.⁵ The films of Ingmar Bergman and Carl Theodor Dreyer would belong better in the theistic and agnostic branches, while a film like Kurosawa's *Ikiru* (*To Live*, 1952) would fit better in the Sartrean branch of atheistic existentialism. The main factor is that they deal with the human condition, theistically or not. Furthermore, the questioning of being a conscious being includes both schools of thought and I have noticed that many of the existentialist theistic films often become agnostic; hence they could fit in between the two branches of existentialism.

It is also worth mentioning that for Sartre, the question of whether God exists or not is not the question; it would make no difference as “the real problem is not one of his existence; what man needs is to rediscover himself and to comprehend that nothing can save him from himself, not even valid proof of the existence of God” (*Existentialism* 53 - 54).

Although many texts about art and literature can be found in Sartre's body of work, he never really touched on the subject of film. Surprisingly he was creatively involved in film work; writing plenty of screenplays – although few of them would become films. He was even briefly involved in writing for a Hollywood production about Freud, headed by John Huston – Sartre wrote an original script that was allegedly over 800 pages long and he was replaced by Hollywood screenwriters (Boulé and McCaffrey 5).

⁵ Current scholarly work, however, seems to suggest he indeed shared more with Christianity than otherwise believed. There is also a belief that at the end of his life he turned to a more metaphysical universal morality. See for example Kate Kirkpatrick's essay “Sartre: An Augustinian Atheist?” and John H. Gillespie's “Sartre and God: A Spiritual Odyssey?”, *Sartre Studies International* (Vol. 21 Issue 1, 2015) and (Vol. 20, Issue 1, 2014) respectively.

Sartre's scarce philosophical material about film has forced film theorists to apply and adapt his other philosophies about the human condition and literary theory to that of the film medium. It appears that scholars have focused on two directions of his philosophy (especially evident in the book *Existentialism and Contemporary Cinema: A Sartrean Perspective* [2011]): 'the call to freedom' and 'films of situation' (Boulé and McCaffrey 8).

The call to freedom is a way of understanding the films through the actions of the characters, and the responsibility that comes with the human condition of freedom (Boulé and McCaffrey 8-9).

Films of situation, as defined by Michelle R. Darnell looks at the situation people and characters find themselves in as the result of the universal freedom of the human condition (Darnell 95).

From now on, we will look at the latter direction of Sartrean film studies. However, there are some problems that arise when applying this theory to film.

Films of Situation

Situating a character in a narrative context can speak beyond the words on a page. Darnell demonstrates this with her essay "Being – Lost in Translation," where she studies Sofia Coppola's film through the Sartrean perspective of 'Theatre of Situations.' She appropriates this term and his ideas about 'distancing' meanings from language – the idea that "the human situation cannot simply be narrated or explained" (98) but rather has to be experienced⁶ – and suggests that it is possible to develop it into 'film of situations' instead (101). Darnell argues that if the term is "adopted, then because of its ability to display in more complexity the situation of persons, film may well be suited to show the 'true event' of human existence" (101).

The second part of Darnell's essay is dedicated to a reading of *Lost in Translation* (2004) through the appropriated concept of 'film of situation.' I find this reading of the film problematic: the analysis is mostly based on the narrative events that describe the human

⁶ This is rather simplified for the sake of conciseness.

situation. The same reading could in other words have been done on the screenplay that preceded the film, and hence it doesn't take into account the complexity of the moving image. The reading isn't in any way wrong from a narrative perspective, but I would argue it misses the mark of the potential of film. So much more can be interpreted in the film image, such as the *mise-en-scène*, editing, sound track, colour correction. These filmic devices should all be important in a Sartrean existentialist reading of a film.

I will illustrate this with two different cinemas that both share an interest in the human condition, and as I will suggest, portray it similarly: the Japanese and Scandinavian cinemas.

The Cinema of Japan and Scandinavia

The Japanese and Scandinavian cinema culture both started to take shape in the beginning of the 20th century. As in most national cinemas, the early influences came from everywhere as the new global cinematic language started to mature. It is through this maze of influences that I am attempting to find an early relationship between the human experience portrayed in both Scandinavian and Japanese cinemas. I am in no way proposing that both cinemas were less influenced from elsewhere but I am suggesting that throughout history, there has been a dialogue between the studios and directors of these two areas separated by Russia, Mongolia and China.

When cinema was maturing through its early years, it needed influences from other sources in order to find stories and to invent new narrative modes. Due to the secluded nature of the country in the 19th century, Japanese cinema differed from much of the rest of the world. It had developed its own narrative style in storytelling, and thus the Japanese film branched off in a different direction than many of the Western cinemas (Richie 1). Early Japanese filmmaking was heavily based on traditional tales and dramas of the samurai (Satō 7); this has lingered as a motif up until today. Similarly, many of the early Scandinavian films had themes from its medieval history, which still has remnants in its current film productions. The films of Scandinavia were often influenced by the nations' authors, such as Victor Sjöström's and Mauritz Stiller's adaptations of Selma Lagerlöf in Sweden, and in Japan of Kabuki plays (traditional dramas), such as *Maple Viewing* (1899), the "oldest extant print of a Japanese movie" (Satō 15). However, in the early stages of

film, directors and production houses also globally influenced each other. So it is no surprise that Denmark's successful production company Nordisk Film Kompagni (which was the world's second largest production company in 1910 after Pathé) and world prominent director Carl Theodor Dreyer greatly impacted the world of cinema in its youth (Usai 154 - 155). Indeed, even such a faraway country as Japan was influenced by the cinema of Denmark, amongst other prominent Western cinemas (Satō 32).

I would suggest that throughout Scandinavian and Japanese film history, there has been a symbiosis between directors and styles in the two cultures. An early artistic dialogue can be traced to between Yasujiro Ozu and Dreyer; the clean, minimal interiors in Yasujiro Ozu's work are for example reminiscent of those in Dreyer's work, such as the house in *Ordet* (The Word, 1955).

Later in the careers of Ozu and Dreyer, the second wave of directors with a bond would rise: Akira Kurosawa and Ingmar Bergman. Both directors explored the human condition through similar approaches to filmmaking. Sometimes they would work with dramas set in the historical periods of the samurai or the crusades, such as *Rashomon* (1950), or *The Seventh Seal* (1957), and other times the films would be a critique of the current society. Their affinity for each other's work was outspoken:

Your work deeply touches my heart every time I see it and I have learned a lot from your works and have been encouraged by them. [...] Let us hold out together for the sake of movies. (Excerpts from a letter from Kurosawa to Bergman, congratulating him on his seventieth birthday.) ("Letter to Ingmar Bergman")

Bergman himself called his medieval-themed films, especially *Jungfrukällan* (*The Virgin Spring*, 1960) "a wretched imitation of Kurosawa . . . It was a period in which I surrendered so completely to the Japanese film that I almost became a bit of a samurai myself" (qtd. in Gado 241).

Both directors were also greatly influenced by literature with existentialist roots. Kurosawa's work can be traced to some of Western literature's most prominent writers, Dostoyevsky, Shakespeare, Goethe and Tolstoy (Carr 274)(Simone 3). His most existentialist work *Ikiru* (*To Live*, 1952) has been argued to be "a Japanese translation of Goethe's *Faust*," (Carr 278) and in other essays to carry a relationship with Leo Tolstoy's

novella *The Death of Ivan Ilych* (1886) and Camus's *The Stranger* (1942)(Simone 3)(Gordon 143).

Ikiru is a film about Watanabe, a bureaucrat in post-war Japan, who is diagnosed with stomach cancer, and has only a few months left to live. The film is split into two parts: the first part is about Watanabe trying to find the meaning of life through youthful joy of partying and drinking. The second part takes place during his funeral, where his coworkers reminisce and debate on his final deed: his navigation through the thick bureaucracy to create a sought after neighbourhood park in Tokyo. He indeed managed to get the park made and spends his final night on the swings, singing as the snowflakes trickle down on him. A policeman witnesses to the funeral crowd that the scene was so beautiful that he couldn't bear to bring the man in from the cold and ruin his moment in solitude. The film is interesting in the sense of its atheistic existentialist quality. Watanabe, who is referred to by the emotionless narrator, quite ironically, as the "hero" of the story in the beginning, truly becomes the hero in the end through his own actions. He was never free in the bureaucratic system but his will transcended into his own universal freedom and he was able to push the creation of the park through all the seemingly impossible obstacles in the bureaucratic city office. He also never turned to God, and thus we could look at the film to have qualities of Sartrean atheistic existentialism. In her article, "Goethe and Kurosawa: Faust and the Totality of Human Experience – West and East," Barbara Carr explains the atheism of the scene of Watanabe's final night: "Call Kurosawa's works the view from the Orient or the hard gaze of twentieth century Existentialism, but the vision of joy that snowy night is all there is, and it is enough—it has to be" (279).

On the other hand, Antonius Block, the knight in Bergman's *The Seventh Seal* (1957), doesn't feel that the silence after life is enough, at least not in the beginning of the film. After meeting Death in the film's opening sequence he knows that the end is close. He challenges Death to a game of chess – this buys him time to find evidence of the meaning of life, but all he can find is emptiness. He grapples with the silence of God, but in a similar way to Watanabe in *Ikiru*, he finds that his action in rescuing a travelling acting troupe from the same fate as his gives his life a purpose, and he is more accepting of the darkness that he is heading towards. However, unlike Watanabe, he never feels completely content – even when his time has come he cries out to God: "Out of our

darkness we call to thee, O Lord. O God, have mercy on us, for we are small and frightened and ignorant.” The film has moved from asking theological existentialist questions to become agnostic (although it has agnostic undertones throughout). Charles B. Ketcham suggests that Bergman, who was brought up in a religious Protestant home, with a father who was a pastor, was during the conception of the film himself “intrigued by the vitality, strength, immediateness, courage, and honesty of the [Sartrean atheistic] existentialist claim, but he [was] not ready, at this time, to make a commitment to this approach” (81). Perhaps later in his life and career did he become more Sartrean in his approach. Ketcham suggests “it is obvious that the existentialism which with he [was] most familiar is that of Sartre and Camus” (2). But it has to my knowledge and research never been mentioned by the director himself that he pursued a Sartrean philosophy in his work.⁷

A woman, Yumiko (around thirty), sits next to a window in a dark one-bedroom apartment. She looks out, and she’s in deep thought. It’s a very silent and still scene in Kore-eda Hirokazu’s film *Maborosi* (1995). The scene by itself wouldn’t say so much, except for the depiction of a human in her environment. But in the roughly twenty-minute-long sequence before it, we have followed her happy life with her husband Ikuo and infant Yuichi. The sequence culminates in a visit from the police knocking on her door, asking her to come to the station and identify a man who committed suicide and who they suspect was her husband. The scene where she sits alone, looking out the window, takes place right after she has come home from the station knowing Ikuo will never come back from work.

Film is an effective medium in showing the human situation through images. A simple scene of a woman looking out the window can mean so much – while also speaking so eloquently of the universal human condition. It’s beyond language, and about the silence where one realizes the existential situation we are in; we witness the fragility of life

⁷ In fact, he mentions in an interview: “I’m not at all intellectual. [...] If I’m about to read a qualified intellectual book I have a horrible time reading it, I simply don’t understand what is written. I’m 99 percent emotional...” (Bergman in an interview with Stina Dabrowski, 1986)(My own translation). This sounds to me a rejection of being grouped with a certain philosophical group, such as the existentialists. But it is fair to say he was very interested in the existentialist idea of representing the human condition. However, what complicates things even more is a short article he wrote for a newspaper where he calls “Sartre ‘the Devil’s delegate’” (Bergman in Göteborgs Morgonpost, 1947)(my own translation). However, this is early in Bergman’s career, so it should not be considered his conclusive stance.

through our fellow human beings. The silence of this still, short scene brings to mind a passage by Jeffrey Gordon:

Questions about the meaning of life are often greeted with laughter. The issues are vague, unwieldy, pretentiously overlarge. The person in company who raises them is gently mocked and the merriment continues. But first there is a pause, a hesitation. That silence filled with tension is what interests me. (137)

Hirokazu's work is full of such moments of silence and contemplation. It exemplifies what I would suggest Sartre means with a 'theatre of situation' and, even more so, Darnell's appropriation of a 'film of situations.'

Gordon continues his reflection on life: "I suggest that the problem of life emerges in the dissonance between our natural standpoint toward our lives and the transcendental perspective we can adopt toward them" (138). It is argued by film scholars that the fictional films of Hirokazu continue the tradition of what Paul Schrader calls 'transcendental style,' as he outlines in his 1972 book *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer*. David Desser argues that "Given the major theme of *Maborosi* – overcoming loss and grief – the 'religious' interpretation of Ozu's films put forward by Schrader seems all too appropriate" (278). Another film scholar, Bert Cardullo, also touches on Schrader's term, juxtaposing it with *Maborosi's* realism: "Nakabori [*Maborosi's* cinematographer] and Kore-eda [Hirokazu's] cinematic style could be described not only as realistic, but also as *transcendental*" (48). It is in this mix of transcendental style and quiet realism Hirokazu portrays the existential questions.

[He] seeks to maximize the mystery of earthly existence as it simultaneously attempts to bring human beings as close to the ineffable or unknowable as words, thoughts, sounds, and especially images can take them ... [it is] a style whose function is to express universal holiness or organic wholeness itself, to create a condition of balance among the various forces of an ultimately inscrutable universe whose major questions—about the meaning of life, the existence of God, and the secretiveness of the human heart—can never be answered. (Cardullo 57)

In Hirokazu's following feature film *Wandâfuru raifu* (*After Life*, 1998), he explores the moments that make up a life, and how those moments are remembered. The film takes place in a station where people who have recently passed away go in order to choose a

memory which will then be staged and filmed in a studio. When the filming has been completed the person will move on to eternity, which they will spend with this one short filmed memory. The film's protagonist, Arata, is one of the workers at this station. We later find out that he has been working at different stations like these since his death as a young soldier in the Second World War. He never chose a memory to move on with, and instead lingered in a limbo between life and eternity, working with other people's memories. He soon realizes that his fiancé once passed through his current station. He finds her recorded memory in the archives and discovers that instead of choosing a memory with her husband whom she married after Arata's death, she chose the moment she said farewell to him as he headed out to war. He sits on a bench in the yard of the station and contemplates this. He finally decides that this moment of his, where he sits at the bench realizing that he was important to his fiancé fifty years earlier, is the memory he wants to move on with into eternity. Hirokazu shows how a subtle, still and quiet moment can be just as important as a bigger event in one's life: a transcendental moment where our existence somehow makes sense. This, I suggest, makes Hirokazu a master of 'films of situation.' *After Life*, I would argue is a tribute to the situations we as humans constantly find ourselves in, in our very own reality.

Similarities to Hirokazu's exploration of the human condition through situations can be found in contemporary cinema of Scandinavia as well. Two filmmakers exemplify this: the absurd surreal films of Roy Andersson and the more realistic approach of Ruben Östlund. I will here spend some thought on Roy Andersson, especially his feature film projects since 2000, the *Living Trilogy*.

Man at the bus stop 1: Is it Wednesday today?

Woman at the bus stop 1: Yes.

Man at the bus stop 1: I was certain it was Thursday.

Woman at the bus stop 2: But it's not.

Woman at the bus stop 1: No it's not!

Woman at the bus stop 3: No.

Man at the bus stop 1: But it felt like it was Thursday.

Man at the bus stop 2: You can't feel what a day it is. That's impossible. You have to keep track of that! Yesterday was Tuesday...today it is Wednesday...and tomorrow it's Thursday. If you can't keep track of that chaos will reign.

Woman at the bus stop 2: That's right!

– *A Pigeon Sat on a Branch Reflecting on Existence* (Roy Andersson, 2014)

The scenes in the films of Roy Andersson often take place in our everyday environments. “Andersson claims that the most pressing social and existential questions of our age come into focus in the most trivial, banal, and often absurd, moments of our everyday life” (Lindqvist 207). The characters are often unknown and flat, and fit into the spaces they are in. Andersson truly uses a ‘films of situations’ approach to portray the human condition existentially.

A common theme in *The Living Trilogy* is the struggle of the characters to transcend the banal of the everyday, but the attempts are always in vain and the social surroundings won't tolerate the philosophers or poets. In *Songs from the Second Floor* (2000) Tomas is admitted to the mental hospital while his father exclaims in despair, “He wrote poems, and he became crazy!” In *A Pigeon Sat on a Branch Reflecting on Existence* (2014) the man at the bus stop gets sternly told that you simply “cannot feel what day it is.” Emotion and metaphysics are missing in Andersson's cinematic world, even in the most horrible circumstances. Henri Bergson's quote, “If you want to transform a serious event into a humorous one, then observe the same event (if you can) without emotional involvement,” (qtd. in Gordon 139) comes to mind, especially in the more surreal events, such as the sacrifice of an innocent girl for the benefit of a company in decline in *Songs From the Second Floor*. In his essay, “A Commentary on [Albert Camus's] *The Stranger*,” Sartre touches on the absurd in literature and art: “Death, the irreducible pluralism of truths and of beings, the unintelligibility of reality, chance – these are the core components of the absurd” (*Existentialism* 74 - 75).

Schrader's 'transcendental style' might not be as applicable here as in the case of Hirokazu, but the films carry similar messages and ontological motifs. Furthermore, Andersson's films are spatially and temporally similar. The shots are often static and the mise-en-scène careful. Andersson works with what he calls the 'complex image,' a concept he has developed with theories from André Bazin – where “the components of the image meet and create a superstructure” (Andersson 275). Andersson reasons that

Many advocate that the close-up is most suitable to describe a person's mental state. It is even suggested that that the soul is reflected in the eye. On the contrary, I think that the close-up is quite insufficient. According to me one gets less information about a person the closer you come to him or her. In the end one cannot even distinguish a human eye from that of a cow, or even a dead cow. (275)

In other words, Andersson believes that the room, or the environment, is more important for understanding the characters than the editing technique, and he urges filmmakers not to cut the surroundings to unintelligible pieces (Andersson 275). This, I would suggest, is a shared belief with Hirokazu as well.

Conclusion

Existentialism in film is not only interesting from a philosophical perspective. I have not attempted to prove that the filmmakers I have brought up in this essay were interested in mediating a Sartrean philosophy – but rather to use his philosophy to shed light on filmmakers that similarly deal with the human condition. Deleuze once said that “philosophy, art, and science come into relations of mutual resonance and exchange, but always for internal reasons. [...] So in this sense we really have to see [them] as sorts of separate melodic lines in constant interplay with one another” (125). It is in this interplay where we can find the most interesting, transcendental depiction of our current universal condition.

When the French existentialists discovered the greatness of Kafka, there was an outcry from critics and specialists that the movement did not understand “his work against the background of the German-speaking literary tradition and Prague's intellectual milieu” (Bogaerts 70 - 71). The critique was aimed at the 'true universality' the existentialists

applauded – however, recent scholars have defended Sartre based on later lectures where he clarified his universal reading of Kafka's work (Bogaerts 72).⁸

This essay could undoubtedly receive such criticism, but the foundation of my interest in global cinema is that we can discover that no matter where we live, or what religion we belong to, we all ask the same fundamental, universal and ontological questions. We all, some way or another, have to deal with what Squire Jöns in *The Seventh Seal* calls in despair “the emptiness under the moon.”

⁸ See for example Jo Bogaerts's essay “Sartre, Kafka and the Universality of the Literary Work” (2014).

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Appendix B.

Situations

Creator/Director:

Vilhelm Sundin

Description:

Screening version of *Situations*.

Media Format:

DVD