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PL 101 B

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Honors Philosophy Term Paper

 When I was a child, my mother used practical, cliché sayings to correct my behavior. Her favorites were, “Patience is a virtue”, “Treat others as you wish to be treated”, and “Honesty is the Best Policy.” As a four year old, I found little value in patience and treating others nicely to get their toys came as no obstacle for me. However, the last rule I struggled with for a long time, and one I continue to struggle with. So, as I have tried and tried to contemplate the writing of this paper, I had to be honest with myself: I had no idea what in the world I was going to write about. The concepts, namely existentialism and postmodernism, are so vast that they are almost impossible to classify. I tried over and over to formulate thesis after thesis to no avail. That’s when it hit me: existentialism and postmodernism are not hypothetical formulations about a God above or below, but rather, views to formulate life around. Existentialism is about taking the leap to live an active life, while postmodernism rejects any universal truth for the acceptance of the individual. I finally realized that this paper was not intended to describe the characteristics of any movie, philosopher, or dreamer, but rather, to apply existentialism and postmodernism to my active, waking life.

 However, a task of abandoning my views to look through the rose colored lens of other philosophies came as a bit of a cold-water shock to me because after I really thought about it, I am one of the most apathetic beings living in one of the most apathetic ages to exist. In a world of 6.6 billion people, the age of the individual is gone. There will always be a statistic waiting around the corner, just begging to categorize, segregate, and stratify my entire being. Although such a view submits itself to realism, it also accepts drastic depression into one’s life. To avoid such depression, I attempted to make myself an individual and established a dialogue about myself: My name is Sarah Doering. I’m of average intelligence, average beauty, and average wit. I abandoned faith because faith abandoned me and I’d rather be open to everything than tied down to something. My life is speckled with genuine experience, but overwhelmed in vanilla nothingness. My life has a plan, so I might as well just keep living as I do. I believe no thought is original, so someone else is bound to come up with the next big “it” before I do. I let language rule my life because its easy to manipulate. I’m a moderate in politics because I don’t think its reasonable to chose a side. I love to sleep because I love to dream, and dreaming reminds me that I still have a chance to actually live and experience originality. I have yet to really make any impression in the world, so I allow myself to become submerged in the white, fluffy pillow of the ever-expanding apathy and inactivity that rules my life. And, all I really want is to live a fulfilled life, but I just don’t know how to do it. Looking at such a long list makes me contemplate why I didn’t just jump from apathy to suicide, but that’s unreasonable. However, through this dialogue, I realized I was already accepting one philosophy into my life subconsciously: postmodernism.

According to James Sire in his book, *The Universe Next Door*, Sire describes postmodernism as the belief that all truth is out of reach in the human capacity, so all we can do is describe pragmatic truths to base our lives around (219). When I was younger, a classmate challenged me to find one absolute truth, and I could think of nothing. We resolved that there was only one promised truth: there is certainty in nothing. Postmodernism, with its root in the absence of universal application, echoes my juvenile hypothesis. I am merely floating through life, creating my truths as I experience, and as Sire states, transferring “knowing” to “meaning” (218). However, such a proposition came only to fruition in my mind when introduced to one of the biggest floaters, quite literally, to which I have been acquainted: the main character in Richard Linklater’s, *Waking Life*.

“Every minute (is) a different show,” proclaims a character from the film, “Now, I may not understand it. I may not even necessarily agree with it. But I’ll tell you what, I accept it and just sort of glide along”(Linklater). In essence, the film can be described through this quote: the main character, an unnamed 20-something, glides through streams of thought unaware if they are manifestations of his conscious or unconscious life. Named “Wiley” unofficially by Linklater after the actor who plays him, Wiley’s presence is always in the scenes, but is not really central to them: in a majority of the scenes, he is either absent from the scene entirely or just listening to discussion. Although it seems counterintuitive to feature a mute main character, the lack of dialogue from Wiley emphasizes the continuous strain of consciousness. As stated by Wiley nearly three-fourths of the way into the film, “Most of the people I’ve been encountering…and most of the things that I would wanna say, it’s like they kind of say it for me and almost at my cue. It’s like, complete unto itself.” The genius of the film lies exactly in Wiley’s sentiment: each scene presents the audience with a complete philosophical thought, not presenting answers, but asking questions. Certainly, the idea of a philosophical ramble for an hour and a half could seem a bit dreary, but luckily, the ideas are presented just as creatively as the film itself. Through a process called rotoscoping, 30 animators were invited to draw over the live footage to create their own scenes of art (Kehr). Bob Sabiston, the pioneer behind the software, assigned the scenes to artists depending on the realism that Linklater wanted to convey in the scene (Kehr). If the audience becomes bored or confused with one perspective or scene, another scene is right around the corner presented in an entirely new fashion. Thus, the film is postmodern in its very creation: rather than submitting to one overwhelming metanarrative, Linklater presents a beautiful tapestry of moving philosophical thought, allowing the viewer to pick and chose to create his or her individual view.

However, the film isn’t just postmodern in its plot structure: the entire film follows Wiley as he doubts his existence, his reason, and his environment. For example, Wiley’s first entry into the film, what shapes up to be the assumed “reality” as the film develops, he meets three people: a beautiful woman seated in the train station, a man driving a “boat car”, and the passenger of said “boat car”. Later in the movie, he runs into the man who drove the boat car, who has turned into a gas-station attendant, who quickly denies both that he has ever met Wiley and that he has a boat car. Later, he runs into the passenger of the boat car, who denies Wiley saying, “I’m not saying you don’t know what you’re talking about, but I don’t know what you’re talking about” (Linklater). Although Wiley is certain that these men are the same men that he encountered earlier in the film, they deny their presence in his life. On the other hand, a woman who insists that she was the woman in the train station approaches Wiley, but Wiley does not recognize her. The deception that Wiley encounters through language is one of the biggest aspects of postmodernism. Sire writes that language is merely a creation of man to assert power and deceive; language carries no absolute truth (224). However, here also lies one of the biggest contradictions that postmodernism creates: how can postmodernism assert itself as the answer to the world’s problems when not only does it use language to communicate, but it also relies on human beings to interpret language to understand its theories? Thus, postmodernism is an interesting way to view certain aspects of humanity rather than compromising an entire worldview. The film does not submit to all aspects of postmodernism, but does rely very heavily on the idea that no metanarrative can provide absolute truth.

Perhaps the biggest distrust in reason comes as the plot unwraps the idea that Wiley might be dead. The beginning of the film begins with Wiley getting hit with a car, bending down to read a note random note that reads, “Look to Your Right” (Linklater). Such an oddly specific and random note procures thought in the audience’s mind if the established reality really is reality, but the notion of death is further explored in the movie as it develops. In a scene between Wiley and the “Social Lubricator of the Dream World”, they discuss some characteristics of lucid dreams, including the idea that we cannot read small print, tell time, or switch the lights off in our dreams (Linklater). As the scenes develop, Wiley attempts to read the time but becomes only more frustrated as each time he wakes up from what he thought was his dream, he can’t tell the time. Then, when he goes to watch TV, Wiley confronts a bevy of images to suggest a walk into the next step of his life, including the image of a woman who suggests that life and death are wrapped in dreams and that “after death, your conscious life would continue in a dream body but that…you could never wake up” (Linklater). The pinnacle of Wiley’s realization comes when he completely realizes his awareness that he is dreaming: he is talking to dead people, the woman on TV hints at death, and he really begins to think that he is dead. However, the audience receives no complete answer, as the final scene features Wiley rising into oblivion, mimicking the opening scene. Thus, the audience, like the postmodernist, learns to distrust the view of the creator in favor for their own, cultivated reasoning.

In one particularly interesting scene a couple, played by Ethan Hawke and Julie Delpy, are sitting in bed, jostling with the idea of a constant stream of consciousness shared with all human beings. Hawke provides an addition to their discussion by sharing a study done with a group of people based on their ability to do crossword puzzles. First, the subjects were given new crossword puzzles and asked to complete them. Then, without their knowledge, they were given day-old crosswords to complete that had already been answered by other people and their efficiency for completing the crosswords rose drastically. Hawke suggests that, “Once the answers are out there, people can just pick them up. It’s like we’re all telepathically sharing our experiences” (Linklater). Although such a wild idea seems strange, I completely support the idea of an interwoven thought process between all of humanity. For example, I came to my friend once with this idea for a movie I’d had in a dream: what if two people could erase their memories entirely but manage to fall back into the same lives they’d had before? I was completely enamored by the idea when my friend stopped me point blank to tell that my concept had already been made and was an award winning film entitled *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*. I was completely shocked, genuinely and completely in awe of the fact that I had no notion of the film before but had managed to dream up the exact same concept. I was disappointed that the film had been made, and even more so, the notion that I had shared consciousness without even realizing it led me down an even drearier path: I began to believe that no thought was original. After hearing Hawke’s words, however, my idea began to change. The idea isn’t that we are unoriginal human beings, but that we are incredibly receptive beings. To look at it in another aspect: if I am in conversation with someone and he or she is silent while I dominate the conversation (which, regrettably, I tend to do), I cannot penetrate the individual’s mind frame because I have no sense of their own individual identity. However, if he or she answers a question, presenting some new thought I have never explored before, I am likely to absorb that knowledge into my own mindset to share with others. The thought may not be revolutionary, but, as soon as it becomes of access to me, it also becomes accessible to my friend group, and like some pyramid scheme, it will eventually effect a large group of people assuming that the original idea had staying power. Thus, having such a large framework of ideas can be overwhelming, but the truly original person does not look at the outline with negativity, but rather, with possibility. Although my dream failed to produce an original movie plot in the past instance, I still acknowledge dreaming to be one of the most personal and original forms of expression to date. However, how is it possible to take an inactive state of imagination and turn it into a real possibility?

Herein lies the concept of existentialism. As discussed by a philosophy professor early on in the film, the key to living a passionate, realized life lies in taking responsibility for one’s own self, a major idea proposed by existentialism (Linklater). People are not constructs, asserts the professors, basing the self off of an abstraction, but rather, we are beings with concrete and consequential responsibility for the world. “It might be true that there are six billion people in the world and counting,” says the professor, “Nevertheless, what you do makes a difference…we should never write ourselves off and see ourselves as the victim of various choices. It’s always our decision who we are” (Linklater). Despite the fact that there are so many people in the world presenting so many new streams of consciousness, the competition should not be met with hostility. Rather, a bevy of new ideas and choices are now available to us, and with choices comes freedom, and with freedom comes the realization of living in the moment to create in an active life.

However, the idea of living in the moment is something I’ve struggled with for a large majority of my life. After all, we are a society where “living actively” means communicating on a cell phone, capturing every waking moment of our lives by a digital image, and fitting our entire life’s progress into the matter of 150 characters for our wittiest Twitter update yet. However, at what expense have these things come to compensate for actual human interaction? A cell phone can attempt to recreate the idea of someone’s presence and instantly brings us closer, but really, nothing can compare with legitimate human interaction. Similarly, can we really capture our lives through a photographic lens? In *Waking Life*, two characters discuss an incredibly postmodern theory proposed by Benedict Arnold about aging, in which we have to connect ourselves to say, a baby picture, through a story (Linklater). For example, I take my own baby picture from 1992. Although the image in the picture was once me, I am no longer the image: thus, I have to manipulate my current reality to procure a believable story in order to connect the two. Benedict Arnold’s theory, however, applies to a tangible image. Comparatively, we live in a digital age, where genuine photographs are replaced with online albums and are made of pixels instead of ink. To connect us to something tangible through fiction is one point, but to connect ourselves to something as abstract as “pixels” delves into the impossible (unless of course, we submit to a completely scientific view of ourselves made up of nothing but carbon molecules and formulas, in which to view ourselves as digital numbers makes more sense). Plus, if we are always attempting to capture all of life’s moments, doesn’t that limit our actual interaction with the world by, quite literally, seeing the world through a lens? By far the most absurd notion of the digital age of “meaning and active living” to date is the idea of Twitter, which not only suggests that one, our lives are simple enough to be summarized into a few characters sent off to a faceless public, but also, that the faceless public gives a damn. After all, how can we really be interested in someone else’s life when we are so busy updating about our own?

By no means am I asserting that technological progress is a negative thing, but rather that it has entirely reshaped our visions of what living an active life means. Not only has technology become apart of what it means to be human, but also it has become an innate part of our identity. The man without a cell phone is considered behind the times, without a computer an oddity, and without a television, an alien to our Western race. Of course, my assertion is not true for all people who lack in these technological “essentials.” However, TVs, cell phones, iPods, and computers have become a staple of human interaction: like Joey Tribiani asked in an episode of the 1990’s sitcom “Friends” to a woman without a TV, “You don’t own a TV? What’s all your furniture pointed at?” (“The”). The question is obviously intended for a comical effect, but it really echoes the ignorance of human beings to legitimate human interaction. Even Wiley Wiggins faces the television to create an underlying narrative of his dreams in *Waking Life*. With all of these indications, is it impossible to isolate our waking identities with the fast paced engrained identity of technology?

A few years ago at a program called the Governor’s School of North Carolina West I came into contact with a French film entitled *La Jetee*, in which director Chris Marker intended to answer my posed question: is it possible to separate our legitimate identities with our conceptions of reality (Cruz)? Rather than dealing with the medium that supposedly captures our reality, Marker went straight to the pixilation of our lives. The post-apocalyptic scenes are captured through stills, and the entirety of the twenty-eight minute film is presented through photographs (Cruz). As beautiful as the still frames may be, the post-apocalyptic film Marker creates is incredibly desolate and depressing: the only way for humanity to survive is to time travel, or, as the narrator states, “to call past and future to the rescue of the present” (Marker). However, to time travel means to go back to previous stages of life as the person you are today, or, in essence, to exist as a paradox. Thus, only the strongest minded dreamers were chosen as experiments, particularly, a man with a strong reoccurring image of a woman he saw as a child (Marker). As the man submits himself to his own created reality, he falls deeper and deeper into a twisted manipulation of his thoughts. Like Wiley Wiggins in *Waking Life*, the man exists in a state without time or plans, connecting and creating his own reality in a postmodern manipulation of language (Marker). For example, when the woman of his dreams asks him about his necklace, the narrator comments that the man “invents an explanation” (Marker). In a similar fashion, Wiley can’t remember his own personal information in *Waking Life*, and when conversing with one of his dream characters about his realization that he is in a dream, he cannot recall his name, address, or mother’s maiden name when she asks him (Linklater). Also like Wiley, the man of *La Jetee* has the misfortune of having to constantly return to his doomed reality, but unlike Wiley, the man suffered in the past, in the present, and in the future. When the man finally makes it through to the future, he requests that the people there who greet him do not treat him with hostility because, “humanity had survived, (and) it could not refuse to its own past the means of its own survival,” so the people grant him enough energy to restore the world, and he returns to the present (Marker). It was not long after that the people of the future began to explore time travel themselves, and after greeting the man again in the future, he requested that he could travel back to the past to be with the woman he so adored. However, when he finally sees her in the image he saw as a child and begins to run to her, a scientist from the experiments is also present, and the man realizes that, “there is no escape out of time, and that that moment he’d been granted to see as a child, and that had obsessed him forever after was the moment of his own death” (Marker).

Certainly, the plot is mindboggling, but at the very core of the film is the truth that it is impossible to live in the past or the future, but rather, we have to accept our current, waking now. The man seeing his own death is depressing, yes, but the notion of living and taking responsibility for living is not. An existentialist theory, to say the least, the idea of *La Jetee* can be summarized in one of my very favorite quotes from *Waking Life* said by Speed Levitch: “the ongoing WOW is happening NOW” (Linklater). Essentially, this quote captures the entirety of the quest for living an active life: to question absolutes like the postmodernist is natural, but, to really live an active life requires an individual to take responsibility for not only one’s actions, but also for one’s presence in the waking world. Like Wiley and the man, I must take my perceptions about my dream world and apply them to my waking reality. Although I may not be able to achieve such a drastic transformation to self-awareness over night, Marker and Linklater have presented me with ideas that cause me to believe the wow really is now.

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