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ABSTRACT

In 1977, John C. Merrill, a mass communication scholar, found that many scholars believed that the sixties movement of new journalism is in some way related to existentialism. To find this out, a study identified six main themes of the philosophy of existentialism (as espoused by Jean-Paul Sartre) and looked for the presence of these themes in the works of two "new journalists." Twenty-eight pieces of writing by Gay Talese and Norman Mailer that appeared in "Esquire" from 1962 to 1968 were analyzed for the presence of the themes of: individual subjectivity as the starting point; absurdity or meaninglessness of the world; revolt against existing values; social reform; authenticity and individuality of person; and freedom and responsibility. Results indicated that four of the six themes of existentialism appeared in their work, but that the two most important themes (freedom and responsibility, and absurdity of the world) are neglected. However, the treatment of these themes frequently consisted of loose use of existential jargon. Findings suggest that existentialism had only a superficial influence on new journalism, and that the influence may have been a reflection of the general intellectual climate of the 1960s rather than a result on the journalists' understanding of the philosophy. (Fifty-two notes are included, and 54 references are attached.) (RS)

Existentialism In New Journalism

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EXISTENTIALISM IN NEW JOURNALISM

ABSTRACT

John C. Merrill in 1977 while writing "Existential Journalism" found that many scholars believed that the '60s movement of new journalism is in some way related to existentialism. As no explicit parallels have ever been drawn between the two, this finding suggests the question whether existentialism influenced new journalism in any way.

To find this out, six main themes of this philosophy, as espoused by Jean-Paul Sartre, were identified. The study then looks for the presence of these themes in the 1962-'68 Esquire works of two new journalists, Gay Talese and Norman Mailer.

The presence of four of the six themes of existentialism in their works suggests some influence. However, the treatment of these themes frequently consists of a loose use of the existential jargon. The shallow treatment of the four themes, coupled with the neglect of the two most important themes of existentialism, leads to the conclusion that existentialism had only a superficial influence on the movement. Moreover, even this influence may have come about indirectly and may simply be a reflection of the general intellectual climate of the '60s rather than a result of the journalists' understanding of the philosophy.

INTRODUCTION:

The 1960s were a period of political and social unrest in America. Student revolts were the order of the day and a new youth-culture, characterized by the rejection of the established order, seemed to be emerging. In politics it was manifested by the spread of the cults of Castro, Guevara and Mao, figures who were anathema to the older generation which had participated in the Second World War. In the socio-cultural realm it was manifested by the immersion of the youth in cults of drug taking and Eastern mysticism.[1]

According to Hazel Barnes, a professor and social critic, the rejection of the established order represented not only a general discontent with the way of life that had become typical of society at that time but also a search for new values. The foundation stone of this revolt against society was the belief in the right to choose one's own style of life.[2]

The popular culture of the '60s exhibited a dramatic surge of interest in self-actualization and development. In fact the cultural shift toward accenting the good of the self, as opposed to that of the group, led Christopher Lasch, an observer, to conclude that we are witnessing a "culture of narcissism."[3]

Several social commentators have attributed the overriding importance placed on the individual by these counter-cultural movements, among other reasons, to the influence of existentialism.

Existentialism is a philosophy which developed in Europe in the 19th and 20th centuries. Although thinkers as diverse as the deeply religious Kierkegaard and the atheistic Nietzsche have been associated with this philosophy, one feature shared by all of them is their perfervid individualism.

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[1]James Jupp, "The Discontents of Youth," in Protest and Discontent, Bernard Crick and William A. Robinson, eds., (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1970), pp. 67-70.

[2]Hazel E. Barnes, An Existentialist Ethics, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967), p. 151.

[3]Joseph A. Kotarba and Andrea Fontana, eds., The Existential Self in Society, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), pp. 222-223.

Another commonality among the various existentialists was their refusal to belong to any school of thought. They repudiated the adequacy of existing bodies of beliefs, especially of the likes of the Hegelian system. And they were markedly dissatisfied with traditional philosophy as superficial, academic and remote from life.[4] The radicals of the '60s, Barnes has pointed out, shared this concern of the existentialists. In fact, she says:

> "It is in their opposition to working closely within the framework of any existing ideology that I find the New Radicals most truly existential."[5]

Another commentator, writing in the December, 1969, issue of the Time magazine noted that the intellectual climate of the decade was Dionysian rather than Appollonian.[6] These are dichotomous tendencies toward emotion on the one hand and reason on the other which were identified by Nietzsche in The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music. He named them after the Greek Gods Apollo, who is symbolic of reason, beauty, order and wisdom and Dionysus, represents a free and unfettered spirit, intuition, and irrationality. The superiority of Dionysus over Apollo, or, in other words, feelings over reason, was later accepted by existential philosophers like Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus and became the hallmark of their philosophy. The existential intellectual climate of the '60s had repercussions on various disciplines in that it led to a reevaluation of accepted ideas, norms and values. In sociology it led to the initiation of a movement with a renewed interest in the concept of self and, in fact, resulted in the development of "existential sociology."[7]

In journalism it has been assumed by some that the '60s movement of new journalism is in some way related to existentialism. In 1977, John C. Merrill, a mass communication scholar, while

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[4]Walter Kaufmann, Existentialism from Dostoevsky and Sartre, (New York: New American Library, 1975, p. 11-12.

[5]Barnes, The Existentialist Ethics, pp. 205-206.

[6]As quoted in Ayn Rand's The New Left: The Anti Industrial Revolution, (New York: Signet, 1971), pp. 82-83.

[7]Joseph A. Kotarba, The Existential Self in Society, p. 222.

writing a book on what an ideal, ethical journalist, which he called the "existential" journalist, should be like, circulated a questionnaire to journalists and journalism professors asking them what meaning they attached with the term "existential journalism." In the ensuing responses he found the names of several new journalists as being exemplified as "existential journalists." This led him to conclude, with some puzzlement, that the term "existential journalism" is nebulously connected with "New Journalism"[8] in the minds of many respondents.[9]

Merrill's perplexity is understandable because no explicit parallels had ever been drawn between new journalism and existentialism. On the other hand, however, new journalism is generally considered to be a product of the radical events of the 1960s. Jay Jensen, a professor of journalism, has noted that historically new journalism is clearly tied to the turmoil, the rebellion and the counter-cultural movements of the 1960s.[10] Therefore it is plausible that at least to the extent existentialism impacted the political and intellectual climate of that decade, it also had some impact on new journalism.

However whether existentialism influenced new journalism can be inferred only from a deeper examination of the philosophy and identification of its most important themes and then examining what place they have in the works of new journalists.

This study will take an in-depth look at the philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre, the French existentialist philosopher, who died in the decade after the new journalism was born. Sartre is

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[8]The term New Journalism is an umbrella term which encompasses several different trends. Charles C. Flippen in an article, in a book edited by him called Liberating the Media: The New Journalism (Washington D.C.: Acropolis Books Ltd, 1974), identifies six trends which are variously referred to as New Journalism. These include Literary Journalism, Advocacy Journalism, Underground Journalism, Democracy in the Newsroom, Public Access and Precision Journalism. However, the term New Journalism in this paper refers to what Flippen's calls Literary Journalism and which by others has been called the "new nonficition." It is marked by a personalized form of reporting, often using the literary devices of fiction writing.

[9]John C. Merrill, Existential Journalism, (New York: Hastings House, 1977), pp. 38-39.

[10]Jay Jensen, "The New Journalism in Historical Perspective," in Liberating the Media: The New Journalism, Charles A Flippen, ed., (Washington, D.C.: Acropolis Books Ltd., 1974), p. 26.

generally considered the high priest of existential philosophy and received sharply critical publicity for his iconoclastic views. This, according to one scholar, made him the idol of rebellious youth.[11] Other than Sartre's relative contemporaniety with the '60s, another reason why he is an appropriate choice for this study is that he studied under Husserl and Heidegger who laid the groundwork for existential philosophy and phenomenology. Sartre drew from their, and other existentialists, works to draw an elaborate theory of consciousness and freedom. Thus Sartre's philosophy pulls together the various themes of existentialism and is a comprehensive treatise of existentialism as developed by his predecessors.

SARTRE'S EXISTENTIAL THOUGHT:

Subjectivity as the Starting Point of Existential Philosophy

It was mentioned earlier that existentialism developed in revolt to other philosophies. More specifically, they rejected the classical philosophers preoccupation with discovering the "true" nature of man. Plato had postulated a transcendental world in which existed a perfect Form of every entity including man. Thus he envisioned a Perfect Man as it would exist in the world of Forms. Aristotle, on the other hand, rejected the existence of a "higher" world, and held that reality inhered in particular things. He held that form consisted of those peculiar properties which made a thing what it is. The peculiar quality of man is his rationality and therefore he defined man as a rational being.

Sartre, and other existentialists, rejected both these approaches and held that the proper starting point for philosophy was the subjective existence of man, or the existence of the human person as lived from within, and not an external reality. As the subjectivity of every person is determined by his

[11]Norman N. Greene, Jean-Paul Sartre: The Existentialist Ethic, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1961), p. 3.

or her experiences, each person is unique and it is spurious to talk about the universal nature of man.[12] Moreover, Sartre rejected the existence of a transcendental world or God and with it the concept that individual man is the realization of a divine intelligence.[13] If there is no universal nature of man and if God does not exist then, according to Sartre, there is no predetermined essence of man. In fact man is free to make whatever he wants of himself or, in other words, choose his essence. This lead Sartre to formulate the fundamental existential principle that "existence precedes essence." In Sartre's own words, this means that:

> "[F]irst of all, man exists, turns up, appears on the scene, and, only afterwards, defines himself. If man, as the existentialist conceives him, is indefinable, it is because at first he is nothing. Only afterwards will he be something, and he himself will have made what he will be."[14]

Freedom, Anguish and Responsibility

By formulating the priority of existence over essence, existentialism liberated the individual from all deterministic principles. For if existence really does precede essence, there is no explaining things away by reference to a fixed and given human nature. And if God does not exist, then there are no values or commands to which an individual can turn to legitimize his conduct. In effect, existentialism declares that man alone is responsible for his actions.[15]

According to Sartre when an individual realizes the true nature of his freedom he is filled with anguish for two reasons. First, he understands that the fact of his existence is beyond reason or explanation. Thus Sartre's character in his first novel declares:

"Everything is purposeless, this garden, this town and myself... this life which is

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[12]John Wild, Existence and the World of Freedom, (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1963), pp. 19-21.

[13]Jean-Paul Sartre, Existentialism and Human Emotions, (New York: Philosophical Library, 1957), p. 14.

[14]Ibid., p. 15.

[15]Ibid., p. 22-23.

given to me -- given for nothing."[16]

This meaninglessness or "absurdity" of the world fills man with "nausea." And this, in turn, gives birth to the feeling of anguish in him.

The other reason why man experiences anguish is that along with the awareness of his freedom comes the realization of his sole responsibility for his own existence. Moreover, a person is not only responsible for his individual existence but also that of the rest of mankind. For, Sartre maintains, if there is no one ideal of man to which everyone can strive then every time a person acts or chooses he is creating an image of man as he thinks it ought to be.[17] Thus every act of man has a universal value. And in choosing for himself, an individual chooses for everyone.

However, if the world is absurd would not a person, steeped in anguish with no standard of right or wrong to guide his actions, give in to a dangerous quietism or inaction?

Sartre proposes a theory of motivation to answer this question. According to this theory, which he calls the fundamental desire theory, man must refuse absurdity because it fills him with nausea. From the moment man becomes aware of the meaninglessness of the world and his own existence he is moved by a desire to give meaning to the world or, as Sartre puts it, "the desire to be God." This desire is fundamental to all men. The world itself takes meaning in the light of this desire although man, in his moments of nausea, realizes that the world is absurd apart from his projects.[18] This process of ordering the world is inherently subjective as the source of the value which a person attaches to a particular project is his individual consciousness and its perception of the immediate world around it, which the existentialists call the life-world.

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[16] As translated by Greene from Sartre's La Nausee, in Jean-Paul Sartre, p. 25.

[17] Sartre, Existentialism and Human Emotions, p. 17.

[18] Sartre, Existentialism and Human Emotions, pp. 60-67.

Feelings as the Source of Values

It can be argued at this point that in ordering the immediate world around him which, as even Sartre admits, is given to him, an individual will be restricted in the choices he makes. For won't he have to act in accordance with circumstances, which he is not responsible for creating, but with which he is faced?

Sartre maintains that to affirm this view would reduce freedom to environmental determination which he considers to be contrary to the human condition. He contends that an individual is always responsible for the situation in which he finds himself because "the very worst disadvantages or the worst threats which can endanger my person have meaning only in and through my project." It is therefore senseless to complain since the person himself and nothing foreign has decided what he feels, what he lives for and what he is.[19]

However, if there are no abstract principles in accordance with which a person may choose his values then what grounds does he have for developing his own hierarchy of values or, as Sartre would put it, how would he order the world?

Sartre denies that reason is an adequate guide for the selection of values. Using reason as the basis for selecting values would imply an a-priori standard of right and wrong which, according to Sartre, does not exist. Moreover, Sartre, like all existentialists, believes that reason has the potential of distorting reality. When one is faced with a choice, the appropriate guide to action is one's instincts or feelings. Depending on one's strength of feelings one chooses to act in one way over another. In choosing a particular action one confers value on that action over the other. Thus in choosing his actions a person also develops his hierarchy of values and thereby his essence. Therefore an individual's essence is nothing other than the sum total of his actions.[20]

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[19]Sartre, Existentialism and Human Emotions, pp. 52-53.

[20]Jean-Paul Sartre, "Existentialism is a Humanism," Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre, Walter Kaufman, (New York: New American Library, 1975), pp. 345-369.

Ethical Implications of Sartre's Theory of Existence or Ontology

Critics of existentialism have charged that Sartre's ontology is nihilistic because by denying an a-priori standard of right and wrong it effectively obliterates the validity of all distinctions of moral value. Therefore, say, Hitler's moral code is no better or no worse than that of Mother Teresa's as long as each experienced a suitable strength of feeling before adopting it. Also, since there is no standard of right or wrong, an existentialist has no basis for passing moral judgment and therefore anything goes.

Sartre, however, claims that existentialism is "of all teachings the least scandalous and most austere."[21] He maintains that freedom from supernatural deterministic systems and any absolute moral code instead of making his ontology nihilistic makes it extremely rigorous. It puts the responsibility of all actions on the individual and rules out any possibility of justifications or excuses. Once an individual understands the nature of his freedom, he also understands the nature of his responsibility. He realizes that values are valid only because he has chosen them as valuable. He also realizes that every value that he has chosen has universal validity because he is fashioning the image of man as it ought to be. Therefore, as Kierkegaard said, a man must make choices with great "fear and trembling."[22]

Sartre recognizes a sort of Kantian Categorical Imperative or Christian ethic of "do unto others as you would have them do unto you" as the only rule in selecting values. However, the important distinction in the Kantian-Christian application of this principle and Sartre's application of this and other norms that an individual may adopt is that for Sartre values are not merely rules guiding personal conduct, but commitments to a given state of the world.[23]

The individual consciousness, as Sartre sees it, has two tasks. It has the task of negating, or

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[21]Ibid., p. 347.

[22]Merrill, Existential Journalism, p. 136.

[23]Greene, Jean-Paul Sartre, p. 55.

questioning, existing norms and it also has the task of creating new values. Whether an individual affirms or rejects existing values, he is responsible for them. This applies in the realm of both personal and social ethics. An individual cannot escape responsibility for his society and must work for its improvement as he visualizes it. Since no social state is a-priori worthy or "perfect," all societies are in need of improvement and a social state of static perfection is highly unlikely, if not illusory.[24] And, therefore, according to Sartre, an ethical individual will be a "revolutionary" or at least a "reformist" when a revolutionary situation is lacking.

For Sartre persons who, in whatever way, refuse to accept their freedom and then try and find excuses for themselves in norms and reasoning are "unauthentic," or, as Sartre calls it, in "bad faith."[25]

An authentic person, on the other hand, would always be in the process of defining his essence. As Merrill puts it, as is intrinsic to existentialism, an authentic person would be constantly rebelling against firm rules and societal or collectivized standards [26]. Therefore he would be involved in life and committed to realizing his "transcendentent" goal. In Nietzsche's words, he would be a "yea sayer" to life.

Themes of Existentialism

On the basis of the above discussion of existentialism, the following themes will serve as categories for the analysis of the works of Gay Talese and Norman Mailer:

1) Individual subjectivity as the starting point

2) Absurdity or meaninglessness of the world

3) Revolt against existing values

4) Social reform

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[24]Ibid., p. 56.

[25]Ibid., p. 46-48.

[26]Merrill, Existential Journalism, p. 132.

5) Authenticity and Individuality of person

6) Freedom and Responsibility

A BRIEF BACKGROUND OF NEW JOURNALISM

As mentioned earlier, new journalism was a movement which emerged in the 1960s. Tom Wolfe, considered to be among the pioneers of the movement, says that he realized there was something new going on in journalism in 1962 when he chanced upon an article by Gay Talese called "Joe Louis at Fifty," in Esquire.[27]

Although new journalism encompassed several different trends and approaches to news writing, a common thread in the works of its practitioners was a rejection of the conventional standards of "objective" reporting. They sought to bring to news writing the personal commitment and moral vision frequently found only in fiction.[28] Pervading many of their writings was a posture of subjectivity which allowed for the writer's opinions, ideas and involvement to creep into a journalistic account.[29] This approach, its practitioners argued, enabled them to go beyond facts to the larger reality.

Other features common to the works of new journalists, which, as Wolfe has pointed out, they borrowed from realism in fiction-writing, are scene-by-scene reconstruction of event, full record of dialogue, third-person point of view and detailed descriptions of the characters and environment. These techniques made the writings of new journalists read like complete short stories. To develop the whole story, often the new journalists had to spend days, sometimes weeks, with their subjects. This

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[27]Wolfe, Tom, The New Journalism, (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), p. 10.

[28]John Hollowell, Fact and Fiction: The New Journalism and the Nonfiction Novel, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1977) p. 1.

[29]James E. Murphy, "The New Journalism: A Critical Perspective," Journalism Monographs, May 1974, p. 3.

helped them to communicate the totality of the situation to the reader and not merely the who, where, when, what, why and how of the story. However, despite these similarities, Wolfe notes there were no sacerdotal rules in this new journalism.[30] Thus the writer was free to experiment with new techniques of form and style. This represented, according to Flippen writing in 1974:

> "[A] new freedom to express oneself, a new liberation, a new concern with the individual such as did not exist fifteen years ago."[31]

METHODOLOGY:

As mentioned earlier, the purpose of this paper is to examine whether the key themes of existentialism appear in the writings of some new journalists and thus infer whether or not existentialism influenced new journalism in any way. This study examines the new journalism of Gay Talese and Norman Mailer in Esquire from 1962-'68[32] for evidence of elements of existentialism.

Although the works of new journalists appear in several magazines like the New York Herald Tribune and The Village Voice, Esquire is appropriate for this study because academicians and journalists generally agree that it was the seedbed for the development of new journalism. Dan Wakefield, a journalist, in reference to new journalism says that "special credit must be given to Esquire for leading the way to many of the newer, freer, more imaginative forms of nonfiction."[33] Jay Jensen, a journalism professor, has also noted that Esquire crystallized new journalism in the late

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[30]Wolfe, The New Journalism, p. 33.

[31]Charles C. Flippen, "The New Journalism," in Liberating the Media: The New Journalism, Charles C. Flippen, ed., (Washington, D.C.: Acropolis Books, 1974), p. 10.

[32]The Jan-June 1967 volume of Esquire has been omitted from this study because it could not be located in time for inclusion in this study.

[33]Dan Wakefield, "The Personal Voice and the Impersonal Eye," Atlantic Monthly, June 1966, p. 87.

1950s.[34] Indeed, the first pieces, which fit this genre, of three pioneers of new journalism, namely Tom Wolfe, Gay Talese and Norman Mailer, appeared in Esquire.

Although there is some confusion as to which writers actually do qualify to be called new journalists, it has generally been acknowledged that Talese and Mailer are not only 'bona-fide' new journalists but also among the pioneers of the movement. They were both writing for Esquire in the 1960s.

Most new journalists, according to Michael L. Johnson, a mass media scholar, fall into two broad categories with regard to their careers as journalists: either they are journalists who try to develop a new style or they come to journalistic writing with a sense of urgency about its importance.[35] Mailer and Talese belong to the latter category.

Mailer has been included also because he is a recognized new journalist with genuine social concerns and, more importantly. because he is a self-proclaimed existential. In his book The Armies of the Night, he describes himself as a "radical intellectual, existential philosopher and hard working author."[36]

However, so as not to make the subject of this paper a self-fulfilling prophesy, Talese was also included in this study. Talese has no known existential leanings and therefore will provide a useful comparison with Mailer's works.

The year 1962 has been selected as the starting point for this study because, as mentioned earlier, it was around this time that journalists and scholars noticed that something new was going on in journalism. By 1967, Talese and Mailer had made their most important contributions to Esquire and in 1968 neither of them wrote a single article for the magazine probably because they were

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[34]Jensen, Liberating the Media, p. 19.

[35]Michael L. Johnson, The New Journalism, (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1971), p. 88.

[36]Mailer as quoted by Everette E. Dennis and William A. Rivers in Other Voices: The New Journalism in America, (San Francisco: Canfield Press, 1974), p. 37.

preoccupied with writing novels. Since nothing by either of the authors was found in 1968, that year was taken as the cut-off point.

Only the journalistic, defined here as any nonfiction including reports, columns, editorials, of the two journalists were used in this study. A novel by Norman Mailer was serialized in Esquire during the time period examined. This has not been included in the evaluation of primary sources.

FINDINGS AND RESULTS

General comments about the findings

In all 28 pieces by Gay Talese and Norman Mailer that appeared in Esquire during 1962-'68 were examined. Most of these were several pages long. The only exception was a column called, "The Big Bite," that Norman Mailer wrote for about two years from 1962. This was usually a couple of pages long. There was a great difference, not only in the writing styles of Mailer and Talese, but also in the kinds of stories they did. While Mailer mostly covered events, Talese did personality profiles.

Treatment of the six existential themes in their works

(1) Subjectivity:[37]

Both Talese and Mailer deal with subjectivity at two levels: their own and their subjects'. In contrast to the traditional standards of news writing, they make no effort to exclude their own feelings and opinions from the stories. This tendency is more evident in Mailer's works than in those of Talese. All of Mailer's reports are first person accounts and in some of them he is actually one of the main characters, like in his report on the Paterson-Liston boxing match.[38] In this report Mailer freely switches from his own point of view to that of his subject's and thus obliterate the sacred distinction

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[37]There is such an abundance of this theme in their writings that it is futile to list all the stories in which it appears. Instead, some general observations are made here and the most notable examples chosen to illustrate them.

[38]Norman Mailer, "Ten Thousand Words a Minute," Esquire, February 1963, pp. 109-120.

of traditional journalism between fact and opinion, news and editorial. Mailer, instead of trying to get rid of his biases, makes an open admission of them in his reports. For instance, while writing a highly negative piece on Jackie Kennedy's telecast on a tour of the White House, he tells the reader about her denial of an interview to him and his irritation about it while writing the story.[39]

Talese approaches his subjectivity more subtly than Mailer. Unlike Mailer, Talese never makes himself a character in the story and rarely ever writes in first person (only three short pieces out of thirteen written by him were first person accounts). He makes his sympathies evident by giving a slant to the story. In his interview of Floyd Paterson, immediately after the boxer had lost a match against Sonny Liston, Talese dwells on Paterson's "essential" goodness and how it had contributed to his defeat against Liston's ruthlessness.[40]

While dealing with the subjectivity of their subjects, both Mailer and Talese delve behind mere appearances and words and put the person's feelings in context. Mailer does this by probing into the socio-cultural background of the person. Thus Mailer tries and explains Paterson's personality traits and reactions by examining his upbringing and experiences in a poor, black neighborhood.

Talese is particularly famous for probing into the thoughts of his subjects by using the technique of "interior monologue." In several articles he writes at length about the inner thoughts of his subjects -- whether it was the uncommunicative Joe Dimagio refusing to grant an interview [41] or a once-famous Broadway director trying to make a comeback.[42] He seems to be more interested in what the person thought rather than what he did or said.

In dealing with their own and their subjects subjectivity Mailer and Talese show a strong concurrence with existentialism because they abandon the notion of reality as external and embrace

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[39]Norman Mailer, "An Evening With Jackie Kennedy," Esquire, July 1962, pp. 57-61.

[40]Gay Talese, "The Loser," Esquire, March 1964, pp. 65-67, 139-43.

[41]Gay Talese, "The Silent Season of a Hero," Esquire, July 1966, pp.41-45, 112-113.

[42]Gay Talese, "The Soft Psyche of Joshua Logan," Esquire, April 1963, pp. 82-87, 126.

instead the concept of reality as something internal, rooted inside human beings. Thus, in their own way, they both try and find a way inside the person being reported.

(2) Absurdity of the World·

This theme is reflected a couple of times in their works although neither of them really dwells on it. Most notable example in Mailer's work is in his article on Jackie Kennedy's tour of the White House. He says her laughter "revolved around the absurdities of the world" just like that of a soldier's whose fellow trooper got killed crossing an open area because he wanted to change his socks from khakhi to green. In another instance he contemplates on how the intellectual climate of Freudianism and Logical Positivism prevents us from seeing the "existential abyss of dread."[43]

In Talese's stories this theme appears in a short article on a party he attended and he speculates on the "meaninglessness" of this "moment in history."[44]

Neither of the them actually develops this theme in their writings and in all instances it is sort of mentioned in passing -- more for effect rather than as if they realized its existential implications. Thus it is hard to say whether this theme, as reflected in their writings, is an influence of existentialism or it is just something that they say because it sounds profound.

(3) Revolt against society and existing values:

A revolt against existing values is evident in the entire movement of new journalism in that it rejected the conventional standards of reporting and writing and developed a new style. However, their own rejection of existing social values and appreciation of those who do the same is also evident in their works.

The most notable example in Talese's works is his story of a married Italian actress who can't

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[43]Norman Mailer, "The Big Bite," Esquire, October 1963, pp. 50-53.

[44]Gay Talese, "The Party's Over," Esquire, December 1967, p. 168.

get a divorce because she is Catholic. Thus she is forced to surreptitiously carry on an affair with a man, whom she loves very much, but can not marry. Talese has written a very sympathetic piece exhibiting the poignancy and tragedy of their situation. He also subtly applauds the couple's efforts and success in beating the system.[45] The theme of individual's revolt against society is also developed in his profile of Joe DiMaggio, Marilyn Monroe's ex-husband, who is desperately trying to guard his privacy from prying eyes after her death. In his profile of Peter O' Toole, hero of Lawrence of Arabia, Talese dwells on the actor's rebellious spirit.[46] He sympathetically presents O'Toole's innocent flouting of puritan sentiments of nuns in school which later led him to rebel against all authoritarian forces, whether they be the Catholic Church or the Navy.

Examples of revolt against existing norms are abundant in Mailer's writings as well. For instance, both in his columns and his stories he voices his own rebellion against American society by elucidating the evils of capitalism, especially its totalitarianism. In architecture, he says, the spread of capitalistic totalitarianism is evident in the plastic similitude of buildings and in the pillage of nature. "The creative mind gave way to the authoritative mind," he claims.[47] In Hollywood, the suppression of creativity is evident in the formalistic nature of the films produced. In fact, in defiance of the crippling conventions of Hollywood film making, Mailer and his friends made an "existential" film which he describes at length in an article.[48] The film was made without a script so that Mailer and his cronies, who were the actors, would have the freedom of inventing the dialogue as they went along. The idea was to get the real life and personality of the actor into the film.

Their own, and their sympathy with those who, revolt against existing values suggests that

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[45]Gay Talese, "Accommodation--Italian Style," Esquire, February 1963, pp. 89-93, 122.

[46]Gay Talese, "O'Toole on the Ould Sod," Esquire, August 1963, pp. 78-80, 324-25.

[47]Norman Mailer, "The Big Bite," Esquire, August 1963, pp. 16-24.

[48]Norman Mailer, "Some Dirt in the Talk: A Candid History of an Existential Movie called Wild 90," Esquire, December 1967, pp. 190-94, 261-69.

both Mailer and Talese seem to revere this theme as a principle. This suggests an existential streak in their writings.

(4) Social Reform:

One cause which is dear to both Mailer and Talese is that of racism and discrimination against blacks. They both seem to realize that American society is at its ugliest on this issue. However, they treat it quite differently and deal with absolutely diverse aspects of the problem.

Two notable pieces of Talese which deal with this issue are about the predominantly black neighborhood of Harlem in downtown Manhattan. Both articles probe the white man's role in alienating the blacks from mainstream society. One article deals with the hypocrisy of the bourgeois whites in patronizing a black club, known for its twist and jazz, in Harlem. His moral indignation is obvious at the whites who visit this black nightclub because they think they are doing something noble whereas they are actually only looking for kicks. Talese is also repulsed at the Negroes pandering of the rich white for their money. Although he does not propose any solutions, it is obvious that he does not believe that true racial integration can be achieved when the two groups continue to consider themselves unequal.[49]

In the other article he deals with the black back-lash against whites. One of the few pieces written in first person, presumably to portray the rough treatment meted to him when he visited Harlem, Talese does not condemn this reverse discrimination. In fact, he appears to get a morbid pleasure at the whites being at the receiving end for a change. And he highlights his own, and other whites guilt in creating the situation in the first place.[50]

Mailer deals with this issue in his report of the Paterson-Liston boxing match, in which two black players are pitched against each other. He brings it up again in his concluding column for

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[49]Gay Talese, "Harlem for Fun," Esquire, September 1962, pp. 135-142.

[50]Gay Talese, "A White Man in Harlem," Esquire, September 1964, p. 123.

First Lady instead of showing "herself to us as she is."

Their respect for the individuality or "essence" of a person is also apparent in their writings. Mailer, as mentioned before, while desiring racial integration wants minority members to retain their cultural identity and uniqueness. Talese in his personality profiles, cherishes the eccentricities of his subjects. In all his profiles he gives a detailed description of the physical characteristics and mannerisms that are unique to the person. Thus, in obvious amusement, he approvingly depicts Frank Sinatra's unpredictable, temperamental nature which left his associates in a perpetual quandary.[53] And in his profile of the middle-aged boxing champion, Joe Louis, he dwells on Louis's constant state of being in the red, financially speaking, because of his tendency to live beyond his means.[54]

(6) Freedom and Responsibility:

Although neither Mailer nor Talese develop the element of responsibility in the existential sense, Mailer gives an existential treatment to freedom in his piece on the movie he made with his friends. He says that just as in real life, an actor is faced on screen with the freedom to choose one style of personality over another. And, in fact, Mailer undertook his movie-venture just to give the actor this kind of freedom in choosing his style and personality without the constraints of a pre-written script. Similarly, in one of his columns, he decries television's encroachment on a compere's freedom in pre-taping all telecasts which do not have a prepared script. With the result that nothing unforseen can ever be aired.[55]

Although Mailer treats freedom to some extent in his writings, he completely overlooks the related tenet of responsibility. And even freedom is not dealt with to the degree one would expect the

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[53]Gay Talese, "Frank Sinatra has a Cold," Esquire, April 1966, pp. 83, 91-98, 152.

[54]Gay Talese, "Joe Louis: The King as a Middle Aged Man," Esquire, June 1962, pp. 93-100.

[55]Norman Mailer, "The Big Bite," Esquire, January 1963, p. 65.

Esquire on the Washington peace march.[51] In the Paterson story Mailer, while describing the Negro situation, warns the boxer against acquiring liberal, white values and retain his "psychology of the street." It seems that Mailer although, on one hand, wants blacks and other minorities to be integrated with the rest of society, on the other, he wants them to remain conscious of their differences and retain their unique identity.

Although it can be said that there is nothing uniquely existential about desiring social reform, Talese's and, even more so, Mailer's approach to the black problem has distinct existential dimensions as shall be discussed in the next theme.

(5) Individuality and Authenticity:

Both Mailer and Talese show evidence of revering authenticity and abhorring inauthenticity or, as Sartre would put it, "bad faith." Talese, as mentioned earlier, is particularly critical of the "bad faith" of the whites commitment to the black cause in his Harlem pieces. On the other hand, he seems to recognize and appreciate an individual's honest commitment to any cause whether it be his work or a social issue. In a charming piece on the obituary writer, Alden Whitman, of The New York Times, he applauds Whitman's total commitment and absorption in his work. As if to highlight Whitman's simplicity and authenticity, Talese recalls an incident when Whitman was forced to write the obituary of a Jewish philosopher without adequate notice. Although Whitman managed to piece together the obituary in time, he was far from pleased with it. And the next day when he received congratulatory notes for the piece, he suspected all those who praised it.[52]

Just like Talese, Mailer too decries inauthenticity. He highlights Jackie Kennedy's obvious phoniness in assuming a role which did not fit her personality during her telecast on the tour of the White House. Her mistake, he said, was in trying to imitate the conventionally defined role of the

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[51]Norman Mailer, "The Big Bite," Esquire, December 1963, pp. 22-26.

[52]Gay Talese, "Mr. Bad News," Esquire, February 1966, pp. 89, 114-116.

most fundamental theme of a philosophy to be developed to show a clear influence. In fact, Talese does not touch on either of these important tenets of existentialism.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

From the findings it is evident that four of the six themes of existentialism identified in this study are strongly represented in the works of both Mailer and Talese. These include subjectivity, individual revolt against society and existing norms, social reform and individuality & authenticity. The theme of absurdity of the world is somewhat better developed in Mailer's writings than in those of Talese, although neither really dwells on this theme to a great degree. The most fundamental theme of existentialism -- freedom and responsibility -- is only partly treated in Mailer's writings.

The strong representation of four of the six themes of existentialism suggests that the philosophy influenced the writings of Mailer and Talese at least in terms of the themes they treated in their writings. If Mailer and Talese adequately represent new journalism, as this study believes they do, then it is possible that existentialism to some extent may have contributed to the development of the movement itself. It may be argued that there is nothing uniquely existential about a theme like social reform and therefore its presence in the writings of new journalists cannot be attributed to the influence of the philosophy. However, while it is true that this theme is not uniquely existential, its presence along with that of other themes, especially in the context of the general revolt against societal and other norms evident in their writings, lends credence to the view that existentialism may have played a role in the development of this journalistic movement.

Talese's neglect of some of the important themes of existentialism may stem from his lack of first-hand familiarity with the philosophy. However the presence of some of the themes suggests that he probably imbibed some principles of the philosophy from the prevailing intellectual climate.

Existentialism seems to have influenced Mailer's writings more than those of Talese, no doubt because of the former's familiarity with the philosophy. This is reflected not only in Mailer's somewhat better treatment of the themes of absurdity of the world and freedom but also in his constant

use of existential jargon. Indeed, the word "existential" appears very frequently in his writings as do "anguish," "nausea," and "void." While all this indicates the influence of existentialism, his indiscriminate use of some of these terms makes one suspect whether he actually appreciates their profundity. Coupled with this is his relative neglect of the most fundamental theme of existentialism which is inexplicable for someone claiming familiarity with the subject. Thus, it seems, that although existentialism influenced both Mailer and Talese to a varying extent, the influence was superficial and perhaps simply a consequence of the general intellectual climate.

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