

# THE PHILOSOPHY OF TV NOIR

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## ***NOIR ET BLANC IN COLOR: EXISTENTIALISM AND MIAMI VICE***

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Crockett: It's just the waiting, I hate the waiting, I feel like a character in a Beckett play.

Tubbs: Since when do you know Beckett?

Crockett: Charlie Beckett, down at the corner shoeshine. He writes plays on the side.

—Sonny Crockett and Ricardo Tubbs, *Miami Vice*

The connections between existentialism and TV noir are shown by the way the concepts of alienation, absurdity, existential freedom and choice—expressed with such fluency in novels, short stories, essays, and plays by thinkers associated with the existentialist movement—appear among the central themes of the classics of film noir and their television counterparts.<sup>1</sup> Of course, there are disputes about the nature of existentialism that were not resolved by the existentialists themselves in their own time, and I shall not attempt to settle them here. “Sartre resisted identification with existentialism as an intellectual fashion,” writes historian George Cotkin in *Existential America*, “believing that his ideas would be diminished through such commodification.” Sartre himself said in 1960, “I do not like to talk about existentialism. To name it and to define it is to wrap it up and tie the knot.”<sup>2</sup> Indeed, those who read Sartre’s popular exposition of existentialist doctrines, “Existentialism Is a Humanism,” in the hope that he was going to untie the string on the package of existentialist thought were quick to discover that he had left them with another knot instead.

Nevertheless, there is sufficient unity in the existentialist movement to

permit us to identify its salient themes. Existentialist thought is not limited to the phenomena of alienation, absurdity, dread, and death. It also gives scope to the possibility of creative engagement with existential crises. Sartre's idea that we are condemned to be free gives rise not only to anguish over the weight of taking personal responsibility for ourselves and our actions but also to the exhilarating prospect of attaining authentic existence and rising to a higher level of being. "For human reality," Sartre writes in *Being and Nothingness*, "to be is to choose oneself," thereby expressing an outlook on personal autonomy at odds with that doom-laden determinism so widespread in film noir.<sup>3</sup> As we shall see, the alienated protagonists of TV noir take from existentialism this generalized sense of the contingency of things and the ways in which life can go unpredictably off-course, but they also take a sense of engagement in the name of individual freedom.

The writing of the existentialists combines philosophical abstraction with an immersion in the immediacies of human experience. This endows their work with a novelistic attention to detail that mitigates the vague, metaphysical detachment. Once one has read them, one never feels the same about the ordinariness of life and commonplace things, in much the way that film noir exploits the dark underside of quotidian life. The work of the existentialists, written out of the depths of their (often conflicted) personalities, gives *Miami Vice* philosophical significance when we interpret the program against this background. For the way personality is woven into the fabric of existentialist thought is reflected in the master theme of the show itself. Consider the alienation Sonny Crockett (Don Johnson) must endure as he lives an undercover existence, with its pressures on personal identity and the unresolved conflicts of moral responsibility that arise while he masquerades as a denizen of the criminal demimonde. The undercover cop must negotiate a world of assumed, and therefore precarious, identities and tenuous loyalties, a world where his unmasking is tantamount to his death. Crockett's existential backstory is continuous with that of many of those central characters of film noir who attempt (and often fail) to achieve personal transformation in which their fractured, fragmented identities are rendered whole, their selves unified.

### **Amphetamine Theatre**

Greater Miami is an unexpected setting for a TV noir series. In the early episodes of *Miami Vice*, which are shot in a glossy array of pinks, whites,

turquoises, and mint greens, the stylish location photography reflects a warm, sunny, and opulent atmosphere, hardly what one would expect to find in noir. In fact, *Miami Vice's* use of color is one of the most striking breaks with TV noir of the *Dragnet*, *Naked City*, and *Fugitive* variety. As Nicholas Christopher observes in connection with color films noirs of the classic period, "It is the noir elements . . . that demand colors: the wild swings in the characters' emotional lives, their intense sexual energy, and the violence rippling all around them."<sup>4</sup> When one combines sophisticated lighting changes with the impact of color, "the possibilities of expression grow exponentially with regard to character delineation and imagery development." Although Christopher is in fact describing the 1958 film *Party Girl* (Nicholas Ray), his account could just as easily apply to *Miami Vice*, especially when he adds that "background colors are used to reveal and open out the characters' inner emotional states, to tint the fault lines of their shifting relationships, and to define the director's intentions rather than simply to ornament the scene of action."<sup>5</sup>

Michael Mann, the executive producer of *Miami Vice*, told an interviewer that his first reaction to seeing Miami was "Wow! What fabulous locations! My second reaction was, 'That can't be Miami.' My third reaction was, 'If that really is Miami, let me see more.'" And the noir significance of his two stars, Don Johnson and Philip Michael Thomas, was not lost on Mann. "We loved the way a dark star and a blonde star played off each other—visually, it's very exciting."<sup>6</sup> *Noir et blanc* in color.

The signal achievement of *Miami Vice* is to have conveyed a noir sensibility despite its representation of metropolitan space as, in the words of the poet Morgen Kapner, an "amphetamine theatre," a highly colored, brightly lit zone of fast-paced activity. In addition to upscale locations such as Key Biscayne, Coral Gables, and Coconut Grove, episodes often included downscale sites like Gino's Wine Garden, the Deuce Bar, and the Gayety, a Miami Beach burlesque theater dating from the 1950s. These low-end venues went against the grain of *Miami Vice's* deceptively stunning South Florida locales and served to consolidate the image of the debased lives of the drug users, strippers, pimps, prostitutes, con artists, shady lawyers, and corrupt officials with whom the Vice Division dealt.

Numerous episodes of *Miami Vice* are philosophically textured and darkly toned, offering a wealth of interpretive possibilities along existentialist lines. The pervasive traits of the human condition—the absurdity of human existence, the anguish of individual choice, the dreadful weight of radical freedom, the permanent possibility of death that sets a limit to one's aspira-

tions and achievements—are indicative of an existentialist subtext that can be found throughout the five seasons of *Miami Vice*. These traits also reflect the affinity of the series for themes found in film noir from the outset: a concern with the dilemmas and paradoxes of freedom and personal identity; the central issue of troubled pasts; alienation, rootlessness, and angst in the character formation of the protagonist; and the essentially combative nature of human relationships, especially when they involve encounters with the femme fatale. The association of existentialist themes with those found in TV noir is not coincidental, for noir television embodies an outlook on life in which the themes of alienation, absurdity, meaninglessness, and nihilism are foregrounded.<sup>7</sup>

### Points on a Compass of Cultural Reference

The criminal adventures with whom Crockett and Tubbs must contend are largely rootless and self-chosen, lacking an essential tie to tradition, family, or community. But the irony of *Miami Vice* is that this is also the existential profile of Crockett and Tubbs themselves. Consider some of the most pertinent details: Tubbs's brother is shot to death, in flashback, in the series pilot, and it is not until season 5 that Crockett mentions his father, and then only to describe the way the elder Crockett taught the young Sonny how to shoot pool while Hank Williams played on the jukebox. Late in the fifth season, the episode "Jack of All Trades" gives us a comic look at Crockett's larceny-prone cousin, Jack (David Andrews). With these exceptions, the backstories of the two principal characters make scarce mention of parents, grandparents, siblings, aunts or uncles.<sup>8</sup>

In the series pilot, Sonny's estranged wife, Caroline (Belinda Montgomery) tells him, "You get high on the action," and this remark presages the breakup of their marriage. By the fifth episode of season 1, their divorce is final. The remaining 106 episodes depict his and Tubbs's romantic relationships and encounters as a shambles. Between them, they are involved with the daughter of the cocaine dealer responsible for the death of Tubbs's brother ("Return of Calderone"), a gambling addict who is murdered by a racketeer ("One-Eyed Jack"), a femme fatale who murders her accountant boyfriend ("The Great McCarthy"), a rogue cop ("Rites of Passage," "Prodigal Son"), a femme fatale with a homicidal boyfriend ("Definitely Miami"), a flight attendant who overdoses on the cocaine she has smuggled into the country ("Yankee Dollar"), a French Interpol agent who is in reality an assassin for a

sinister organization ("French Twist"), a drug-addicted physician ("Theresa"), the proprietor of an escort service/prostitution ring ("By Hooker by Crook"), the wife of a drug kingpin ("To Have and to Hold"). These dysfunctional relationships and romances are not entirely coincidental. Crockett and Tubbs are unmoored from social structures that would provide them with access to anyone but prostitutes, drug addicts, and assorted hustlers and players. Nevertheless, Crockett, for one, comes to realize that he must take personal responsibility for some of his poor choices and prolonged adolescence in which, as his wife had told him, "You get high on the action."

None of the principal characters seems to have much interaction in the world of ideas, art, or culture generally. Even Castillo's familiarity with the cultures of Southeast Asia and China and Tubbs's ability to pass, very briefly, as an art collector, do not go against this general point.<sup>9</sup> In one episode, Larry Zito (John Diehl) is shown reading a paperback copy of *Miami Blues*, by pulp-noir cult figure Charles Willeford, and Gina is shown at the beach with a copy of Robert Bolt's play *A Man for All Seasons*. Stan Switek (Michael Talbot) is a devoted Elvis fan, and Switek and Zito are shown enjoying cartoons on television in numerous episodes.<sup>10</sup> Sonny has a prized collection of Buddy Holly LPs and his musical tastes run to Waylon Jennings, Jimmy Buffet, and Dicky Betts, rather than jazz, pop, rock, or classical, judging from the selection of tapes on board the *St. Vitus Dance*. Both Crockett and Tubbs are aware of the theater of the absurd playwright Samuel Beckett, per the exchange in the episode "Definitely Miami" (from which I have taken my epigraph). Bolt, Buddy, Buffet, Beckett, Betts: these points on a compass of cultural reference demarcate a highly circumscribed region. Our culturally undernourished protagonists are alienated from a dimension of thought and emotion that might have grounded them in a sense of the self that in the present instance seems lost. The principals' complacency and lack of cultural awareness abets the impoverishment of their relationships and affairs. Their neglected or diminished exposure to art, literature, and philosophy deprives them of sources of enrichment and, in the end, fulfillment in life. In a very real sense, Crockett's existential crisis is in part a reflection of the cultural vacuum from which he has sprung.

### Life Lessons and Death Sentences

An episode from season 1, bearing the title of Jean-Paul Sartre's play *No Exit*, registers an early encounter with existentialist themes and gives some

indication of the philosophical orientation of later episodes. Bruce Willis is Tony Amato, an international arms merchant trying to sell a shipment of stolen stinger missiles to undercover vice detective Ricardo Tubbs. This draws the attention of the FBI, as Crockett and Tubbs discover when the bureau threatens to take over their operation. Once the detectives convince the Feds that they have already placed listening devices throughout Amato's house and installed taps on his phones, the two law enforcement agencies agree to join forces in a common cause.

Vice intercepts a call from Tony's wife, Rita, as she sets up a meeting with a hit man to arrange to have Tony killed. She feels trapped in an abusive and demoralizing marriage and needs to find a way out. Her plight is dramatically illustrated when Tony, enraged, pushes her fully clothed into their swimming pool because he thinks she's inappropriately dressed for a party that calls for formal wear. He is mistaken, of course, but nothing stands in the way of his getting what he wants. Rita's repeated pleas for a divorce are met by Tony's declaration: "That will *never happen!*" Her attempt to hire a lawyer has already led to an assault on the lawyer's wife, and Tony threatens to do the same to their child. "And he would do it," Rita affirms to Crockett who, posing as the hit man, keeps the appointment. After identifying himself as a police officer, Crockett asks for Rita's cooperation in buying some time as he and Tubbs work with the FBI to set up a sting operation that, Crockett promises Rita, will put Tony away for good and Rita out of harm's way. Nothing must appear out of the ordinary, he tells her, while he and the Feds set things up.

Although the sting is a success and Tony is arrested, the pervasive apprehension running through "No Exit" culminates in a memorable closing scene on the steps of the Dade County Courthouse where officials from yet another federal agency intervene with a court order mandating Tony's release. At that moment, Castillo, Crockett, and Tubbs learn that Amato is on the end of a conduit that supplies certain factions with arms and that he operates with the consent of the federal government. "I got the *juice*," Tony boasts just as Rita arrives to witness Tony's release. "You're letting him go?" she asks, incredulously, as we cut to three reaction shots: first, Tony's startled expression as Rita points a gun at him at point-blank range; then Rita, desperate and determined to go through with the shooting; and finally Crockett as he lunges at Rita, his look of anguish caught in freeze-frame as his cry of "No!" and the sound of the gunshot reverberate on the soundtrack and close out the episode.

What is so clearly in evidence here is Sartre's grim view that human relationships are essentially conflict-laden struggles for control. This is not just a highly contingent and variable feature of many affairs, relationships, and marriages, according to Sartre. Rather, it stems from the very structure of that consciousness in terms of which we inevitably relate to others. The oppositional forces of what Sartre terms being-in-itself and being-for-itself give rise to an inherent conflict in human relationships. Given that conscious, self-aware beings, or *êtres-pour-soi* (beings-for-themselves), are bound to see others as *êtres-en-soi* (beings-in-themselves), to be manipulated and controlled, or to become beings-in-themselves for control by the other, the only possibilities in human relationships are sadism, masochism, or indifference. "From these structures there is no exit," writes the philosopher Arthur C. Danto, echoing Sartre's most famous phrase—"hell is other people"—"and the dividing line between hell and ordinary daily life is not there to be drawn; other people are hell in and out of any specific inferno."<sup>11</sup>

### Existential Errors

The "No Exit" episode of *Miami Vice* can be seen as an application of not only Sartre's depressingly negative account of human relationships but also his familiar formula: recognize life's absurdity, accept responsibility for who you are and what you do, and then take action. On closer examination, however, the Sartrean notion of action has some not altogether harmless implications. For one thing, there is the slippery slope from the fervor of revolt to the endorsement of violent action as an existential blow against oppression. This makes Sartre's position all the more applicable to Rita, who, we are led to believe, has no exit from her oppressive and degrading marriage and must end it by taking Tony's life. As Sartre's notorious introduction to Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* makes plain, a bullet in the body of an oppressor is a Sartrean-sanctioned blow for freedom. "Killing a European is killing two birds with one stone," he writes, "eliminating in one go oppressor and oppressed: leaving one man dead and the other man free."<sup>12</sup> In contrast with the moderation of his fellow existentialist Albert Camus, "Sartre made a fetish of violence," in the words of the philosopher Ronald Aronson, "deeming it necessary for human liberation and social change without calculating its costs."<sup>13</sup>

It may be no accident that Sartre wrote a biography of the writer and criminal Jean Genet. In his rejection of middle-class lifestyles and values,

the thief and sexual transgressor Genet exemplified the Sartrean hero. But the association between Sartrean existentialism and violence runs deeper, as a glance at historian George Cotkin's discussion of novelist and essayist Norman Mailer's existential hipster will confirm. This "rebel psychopath who acknowledges and lives under the sign of death" is described by Mailer as beating in the brains of a fifty-year-old candy-store keeper and is said by Mailer to have "courage of a sort . . . for one murders not only a weak fifty-year-old man but an institution as well, one violates private property, one enters into a new relationship with the police and introduces a dangerous element into one's life. The hoodlum is therefore daring the unknown, and so no matter how brutal the act, is not altogether cowardly."<sup>14</sup> Elsewhere, Mailer writes that "a murderer in the moment of his murder could feel a sense of beauty and perfection as complete as the transport of the saint." The theme of the liberating power of murder is never far from Mailer's fiction, as in *The Deer Park* and *The American Dream*.<sup>15</sup>

Hazel E. Barnes, who translated Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* and who is perhaps Sartre's best known American acolyte, called Mailer's account "nihilistic fulfillment" and claimed that such ideas were "contrary to that of any writer associated with existentialism."<sup>16</sup> But Barnes is forgetful and far too kind, as the example of Sartre's introduction to Fanon's book confirms. There is also the German existentialist Martin Heidegger's enthusiastic support of the Third Reich and the French existentialist Simone de Beauvoir's defense of the Marquis de Sade, from whom the term "sadism" comes, titled *Must We Burn Sade?* Beauvoir writes: "Sade's merit lies not only in his having proclaimed aloud what everyone admits with shame to himself, but in the fact that he did not simply resign himself. He chose cruelty rather than indifference."<sup>17</sup> But note the fallacy of false alternatives, as if Sade's only options were cruelty and indifference. Note also that Sade left victims in his wake, a fact that must not be ignored in an assessment of his "merit."

In exposing these applications of the thought of some existentialist philosophers, I am employing the methodological principle that philosophical beliefs can be undermined by our responses to their consequences. The idea here is that existentialist beliefs have normative implications or consequences that people may find impossible to accept. When that happens, the belief has to be modified so that it no longer carries the unacceptable implication, or it must be abandoned. Ironically, this is itself the underlying rationale of the existentialists' own view that one cannot (or should not) isolate morality from conduct. Of course, our responses themselves are open to modification,

revision, and rejection. For example, one who believes, as Sartre apparently did, that the Soviet Union was a necessary bulwark against U.S. imperialism and capitalism may be able to modify his or her response to Stalin's totalitarian practices so that he or she no longer finds them unacceptable. Nevertheless, one's beliefs should accommodate as many of one's responses as possible, a goal that may be impossible to achieve, given the implications of existentialist beliefs.<sup>18</sup>

This problem with Sartre's existentialism as a guide to commitment and action is not the only difficulty with his approach: there is also a weakness in his account of authenticity. It would be one thing for Sartre to maintain that the authentic self is the autonomous self and to characterize autonomy in terms of those values and commitments that are freely chosen by the well-informed individual who is open to criticism about them. But Sartre is far too influenced by the European romanticism of Kierkegaard and Heidegger to be altogether content with this way of thinking about authenticity. When Sartre speaks of the choice of life-constituting principles by which the individual guides his or her conduct, he leaves little room for the self-reflection that comes with choosing in a way that is free, well-informed, and responsive to criticism. Authenticity for Sartre remains an amorphous and largely nonrational response to the various demands a person must face in the often arduous task of living.

### Miami Masquerade

We learn the extent of Crockett's difficulties reconciling his true self with his undercover identity, Sonny Burnett, in an early episode from the first season, "Heart of Darkness."<sup>19</sup> Arthur Lawson (Ed O'Neill), an undercover FBI agent, has infiltrated the operation of a Miami porn dealer, Sam Kovics (Paul Hecht). Lawson has succeeded in penetrating the small, tight-knit outfit because he identifies so completely with his undercover persona, Artie Rollins, that he becomes indispensable to Kovics's criminal activities. He stops filing reports with the bureau and moves out of the apartment in which they had set him up and takes up residence in a luxury waterfront condo. This leads some in the bureau to suspect that Lawson may have gone over to the other side and provides the basis for the otherwise somber episode's running joke: the FBI agents checking up on Lawson are named Doyle and Russo, the surnames of the Gene Hackman and Roy Schneider characters in *The French Connection* (William Friedkin, 1971).

Lawson also breaks off contact with his wife. In the scene at a fancy restaurant where Crockett and Tubbs, posing as out-of-town porn-theater owners, break bread with Kovics, an attractive blond is at Lawson's side. He has indeed put his mundane married life on hold to embrace an existence of money, sex, and crime. The putative reason for this dramatic change, the one he gives Crockett and Tubbs when he discovers that they are vice cops, is his compelling undercover mission: "I'm on an investigation here! If I make a strategic decision to cut corners, to throw the book away, it's my decision, 'cause it's me out here and nobody else." But we begin to suspect that Lawson likes the life he has begun to live and that his extreme measures and undercover intrigues are attempts to create meaning in his life, a realization he confesses when, near the end of the episode, he tells the vice detectives: "I don't know if I can go back to my wife and that life. It's like I've been riding an adrenaline high, all that money and all those women. And after a while, all of the things that went before, it got like a . . . it's like a . . . I don't know?"

The changes Lawson is undergoing and the way he now feels about his wife and *that life* can be explained by reference to his realization of existential freedom: Lawson has come to accept that he is condemned to be free and must take responsibility for his choices. This realization, in turn, is a source of anxiety. He seems unprepared to either wholly accept or totally reject the drives and desires he has kept suppressed as Arthur Lawson but expresses through the persona of Artie Rollins. In part, this is a reflection of the typical noir notion of the far-reaching effects of the past: the conventional norms of bourgeois morality by which Lawson has defined himself and guided his life are difficult to simply abandon, sustained as they are by the forces of habit and convention, even as they break up when he recognizes the dreadful freedom of existential choice.

There is, in fact, more than one such existential recognition going on in "Heart of Darkness," since Crockett's understanding of what the conflicted undercover agent is going through is based on a profound identification with him. His identification is a reflection of his own ambivalent attitude toward the masquerade that he, Crockett, must play out as Sonny Burnett. Crockett sees not only Artie but also himself, and he understands and empathizes with the estranged agent's anxiety, since he, too, is at war with himself.

A midnight drug deal between the vice detectives and Kovics goes awry, and the vice detectives' covers are blown. Kovics (who is unaware that he is an undercover agent) orders Artie to kill the pair, but instead Artie comes

to their rescue and then proceeds to execute Kovics and his bodyguard. Motivated by a flawed commitment to the ideals of law enforcement, Lawson, the typical noir protagonist, knows that he is compromised beyond redemption. His masquerade, his casting off of the bourgeois life of the law enforcement officer and his embrace of a fantasy life, in fact has been a flight from authenticity. As he is taken into custody for debriefing, an overlapping sound track, George Benson's "This Masquerade," extends into the next scene, inside the Blue Dolphin Lounge, where Crockett and Tubbs are having a drink and trying to decompress after the evening's harrowing events. The ensuing dialogue complements the theme of the soundtrack lyrics: the need to perpetually choose one's identity and the risk of being trapped inside the roles dictated by one's multiple masquerades, which reflects the moral ambiguity of the noir universe.

Crockett: You know those mirrors at amusement parks, the ones that warp everything out of whack? I feel like I've been staring at myself in one for the past three days.

Tubbs: It's not a reflection of you, Sonny. It's the job. I don't see how you've been doing it as long as you've been doing it.

Crockett: Neither do I. You gotta be a little nuts.

While at the bar, the pair is informed that during a break from his three-hour debriefing, Lawson called his wife, then went into the men's room, where he hung himself. And so the episode ends as the haunting lyric of "This Masquerade" makes its ironic commentary on the overwhelming of the tormented FBI agent by his own masquerade. "Heart of Darkness" is thus an existentialist morality play about the challenge of living authentically and the costs of the failure to do so.

### An "I" Exam Is Existential

Another similarity between existentialist fiction and film noir is indicated by a shared narrative strategy. By 1947, Sartre was advocating a literature without the omniscient narration of "all-knowing witnesses" or those who had "a privileged point of view."<sup>20</sup> This approach has its counterpart in one of film noir's most venerable devices, the voice-over narration, particularly in what Andrew Spicer calls its confessional mode.<sup>21</sup> In connection with this narrative device, Spicer observes, "Flashbacks can undermine the apparent



objectivity of the images as they can question the reliability of the narrator"—Sartre's all-knowing witness with his privileged point of view—"whose flashbacks try to make sense of a past that is rendered as strange, threatening, and unfinished." In *Sunset Boulevard* (Billy Wilder, 1950), for example, which features a flashback voice-over narration by a character who is already dead, "although the protagonist appears to be in control of the retelling of the story, it is really the past events that are still controlling him, which he would love to alter if he could."<sup>22</sup> But in this respect, classic film noir's idea of the fatalism that afflicts the noir protagonist reflects a significant dissimilarity to both existentialism and TV noir.<sup>23</sup> The repudiation of classic film noir's determinism is one of the distinguishing characteristics of both existentialist thought and TV noir. Consider the dedication of Fox Mulder and Dana Scully (*The X-Files*), the resolve of Jack Bauer (*24*), the perseverance of Richard Kimble to establish his innocence (*The Fugitive*), the crusading (and clearly obsessive) anticrime campaign of Mike Torello (*Crime Story*), and, as we shall see, Sonny Crockett's commitment to surmount his existential crisis. Everywhere in TV noir we find protagonists who struggle to create meaning in an absurd world out of the resources of their own freedom.

A dramatization of the ideas of existential crisis and recognition and the invocation of existential choice focuses on Crockett late in the series. Several episodes, beginning with "Mirror Image," the last episode of season 4, and continuing in season 5 with "Hostile Takeover," "Redemption in Blood," and "Bad Timing," dramatize the subjective experience of Crockett's commitment to raise himself from the depraved and degraded state into which he has fallen once he has taken on the persona of Sonny Burnett. They depict the way Crockett handles the problem of a self in crisis and the depth of his conviction to work his way through it.

Crockett's existential crisis can be characterized more fully against the backdrop of a family of problems bearing on matters of personal identity. When philosophers address these problems, they are typically concerned with one or more of the following questions: What is it to be a person, as opposed to a nonperson? What are the criteria of personhood? What is it to be the same person over time? But there is a more informal sense of the problem of personal identity where our concern is with the conflicts a person experiences as he or she attempts to come to terms with who he or she is. In this sense, the conflicts Crockett undergoes in the episodes under discussion have a crisis dimension to them.

## Two Existentialist Approaches

Numerous approaches to existential crisis, recognition, and choice can be found among existentialist thinkers, each giving intellectual heft and nuance to the task of achieving (or reclaiming) personal identity. For the sake of comparison, I shall briefly contrast Kierkegaard's religious existentialist approach with Sartre's atheistic existentialism before I discuss the latter at greater length and apply it to Crockett's existential crisis in *Miami Vice*.

Kierkegaard and Sartre know how difficult it is to attain genuine self-knowledge, despite being acute diagnosticians of their own personal infirmities. With their focus on perspective and interpretation, they teach us that it is no easy matter to attain self-knowledge and an understanding of one's own purposes in life. Kierkegaard, with his emphasis on a nonrational leap of faith, and Sartre, with his fundamental decisions of principle that are not themselves rationally grounded, can be interpreted as showing the difficulty (if not the impossibility) of providing an acceptable account of rational agency.<sup>24</sup>

The first approach is embodied in Kierkegaard's idea of a redemptive leap of faith. Kierkegaard distinguishes among the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious modes of life. Because his complex and wide-ranging views resist brief summary, it must suffice to say that the first represents the life of delight in the senses and the second the life of duty. The distinctive character of the third, religious, mode of life is its affirmation of a dimension of living under the aspect of faith, where the individual must make a radical leap, a commitment to an infinite and absolute God who transcends reason and human understanding, a being "objectively uncertain and in the last analysis paradoxical."<sup>25</sup> According to Kierkegaard, the ascendancy from one mode of existence to a higher one is accomplished by individual choice, and he rejects the Hegelian suggestion that these distinct stages on life's way succeed one another in a logically or dialectically necessary fashion.<sup>26</sup>

In several of his plays and novels, Sartre presents us with an existential hero who confronts meaninglessness and death without succumbing to bad faith. In Sartre's atheistic existentialism, meaning or purpose in life is a product of the individual's free choices rather than a divine plan (or anything else with religious grounding). In this connection, Sartre contrasts authentic with inauthentic living and claims, as we have seen, that to be is to choose oneself. His remarks in *Being and Nothingness* and elsewhere

suggest despair and relativism to some, but while Sartre has been reviled (or hailed) on these grounds, he says he sees things differently. Sartre wants to establish that existentialism “is a doctrine of action, and it is only by self-deception, by confusing their own despair with ours that Christians can describe us as without hope.”<sup>27</sup> But against this and similar passages, we must weigh his assertions that man “cannot find anything to depend upon whether within or outside himself,” and that life begins “on the far side of despair.”<sup>28</sup>

Both Kierkegaard and Sartre recognize a distinction between higher and lower stages or modes of living and see the transition from the latter to the former as a way to deal with existential crisis. In this respect, they imply, perhaps not altogether consistently, that certain ways of life are objectively higher than others. This presupposes an objective standard whose truth the individual does not invent but discovers. Both thinkers know that such a standard cannot be derived from our conventional preferences or existing social structures, for we use evaluative concepts to criticize these. Kierkegaard himself was a relentless opponent of the religious practices of his day that passed for Christianity, and Sartre, ever the critic of middle-class lifestyles and values, attacked America for what he took to be its “technological determinism,” capitalist profit-making, and “numbing mass culture.”<sup>29</sup> Sartre’s repudiation of bourgeois outlooks and lifestyles in the name of authenticity are to a considerable extent motivated by myths of absolute freedom and self-invention—which he later came to reject in the name of Marxist collectivist tales that led him, as I have already noted, to endorse violence as a means to an end. Existentialism, at least Sartre’s version of it, seems committed to the view that there is nothing intrinsically valuable about the core principles of Western culture—such as liberty, equality, freedom of speech and belief—and that there are no grounds for thinking that the preference for these over alternative conflicting ones is rationally justified.

For both thinkers, diagnosis is followed by prescription. The crises that occur in the lives of individuals make the transition to a new form of life necessary. But since the higher form of life embodied in living authentically in either Kierkegaard’s or Sartre’s sense is chosen by the individual, the means of resolving existential crises and achieving authenticity are interpretable only on an individual basis.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, for Sartre, as for Kierkegaard before him, the commitment to a way of life is something we must do for ourselves, an individual action that has no objective justification.

### Out of Whose Past?

Film noir protagonists are notoriously reticent, evasive, or opaque about their pasts. In the most extreme cases, the protagonist speaks to us from death in voice-over narration, as in *Sunset Boulevard*, or faces its imminent prospect, as in *D.O.A.* (Rudolph Maté, 1950) The events revealed to us in flashback have already taken place, and there is neither room nor need for the exercise of agency. In other instances—most notoriously *Out of the Past* (Jacques Tourneur, 1947)—whatever the exercise of agency, there is still the sense of the long arm of the past reaching into the present. As numerous noir films from the classic tradition illustrate, failure to engage with the past and the instruction it offers can break apart the unity of the person that is essential to personal identity and moral agency. TV noir in general and *Miami Vice* in particular break with film noir’s fatalist tradition without denying that the past plays a significant role in the formation of the protagonist’s character and his present conflicts.

*Miami Vice* begins in medias res, and by starting in the middle of things *Miami Vice*’s narrative commences in crisis, when Crockett is already burdened by angst from his past, and arcs toward resolution. By his own account, Crockett is insufficiently supportive when his police academy buddy, Mike Orgel, comes to grief because he cannot withstand the career-ending stigma to which his coming out of the closet consigns him. Orgel volunteers for a suicide mission and is killed by a shotgun blast to the chest. Crockett’s former partner, Scott Wheeler (Bill Smitrovich), an FBI agent as the first season begins, is exposed as a source of insider information for Calderone, the very drug dealer responsible for killing Tubbs’s brother and a target of Crockett and Tubbs’s investigation. Crockett’s next partner, Eddie Rivera (Jimmy Smits), is killed by a car bomb explosion in what was supposed to be a routine drug buy. Crockett is separated from his wife, Caroline, and has begun an abortive affair with a coworker, Gina Calabrese (Sandra Santiago), which will blow up in his face. All this is part of Sonny’s history and his burden of grief.

By the time we reach the end of season 4, Crockett’s unassimilated grief for the death of his new wife, Caitlin Davies (Sheena Easton), and his disposition to suppress it, provides the motivation for his ill-starred undercover mission to host a mob summit during which he sustains a severe head injury that causes amnesia and symptoms of dissociative identity disorder.<sup>31</sup> He comes to believe that he *is* his undercover persona, Sonny Burnet, and, as



Burnett, he goes to work for Miguel Manolo, a Columbian crime boss in Fort Lauderdale. Crockett's transformation into Burnett is so thorough and convincing that he becomes an active and trusted participant in the Manolo criminal enterprise.

Thus traumatized, Crockett appears on the scene in season 5 bearing the psychological wounds of the extant damage. But Crockett-as-Burnett is hardly a unified self. He begins increasingly to revisit the narrative of his own past, shown in a series of flashbacks. Although Crockett is driven by his need to reclaim his identity, he is thwarted by Burnett's nihilism, as shown in the criminal acts, including murder, he commits on a regular basis. But as Burnett, he pays a price far worse than suffering the anxieties of nightmares and recurring flashbacks to his former identity as Crockett: he undergoes an inexorable decline into feelings of helplessness, hopelessness, and guilt. For Kierkegaard, this condition prompts the leap of faith and the hope of salvation. But this is no way out for Crockett because a redemptive leap of faith into the salvational embrace of religion is impossible in the resolutely secular world of *Miami Vice*.

In "Bad Timing," the final installment of this multi-episode exploration of his crisis, Crockett submits to psychological counseling and voices aloud the question that Tubbs, Castillo, and Switek have themselves no doubt been thinking about him: "What kind of a person am I?" Early in the episode, Crockett has his first session with the police therapist, where he talks about the stresses and confusions of undercover work in which he is alienated from himself because he is always playing a role and masquerading as someone else. This gives the scene a self-reflexive character because there is a sense in which Don Johnson, the actor who portrays the character Sonny Crockett, is in a similar position with respect to his character as his character, Sonny Crockett, is with respect to Sonny Burnett. It is Don Johnson, after all, who must masquerade as the character Sonny Crockett to ground the masquerade Sonny Crockett suffers from and complains about. When the philosopher Richard A. Gilmore relates a parallel scene in Woody Allen's *Crimes and Misdemeanors* (1989), he invokes Arthur C. Danto's analysis of an artwork as a transformation of the commonplace to explain the self-reflexivity of the film.<sup>32</sup> But I do not want to try to apply Danto's analysis to the case we have here. Instead, I use Sartre's idea of existential recognition to explain Crockett's way of dealing with his existential crisis.

As Crockett confronts the alienation that follows from his need to enact a series of masquerades over the course of his career on the vice squad,

he achieves a moment of existential recognition that reaffirms his identity and, not coincidentally, facilitates the restoration of narrative continuity required for completion of the series. Using the threadlike images of his past as a guide, Crockett traces back his history to the Vice Division, where he shows up one day to confront his past. *Miami Vice* thus can be seen as developing the existentialist theme of the possibility of authenticity in a world of self-deception, which Sartre explored in his play *Dirty Hands*. In this respect, Crockett is like the Sartrean authentic man. As it is worked out in the episode "Redemption in Blood," he puts himself in a life-threatening situation that pits him against a wily and ruthless adversary, Cliff King (Matt Frewer), who has taken over the drug operation that Crockett-as-Burnett once controlled. Knowing that King has entered an alliance with a renegade Mexican military officer to import drugs into the United States, Crockett masquerades as Burnett as he sets out to regain control of the operation and trap King, a man who has already orchestrated several attempts on his life. The choice Sonny makes to enter such an extreme situation is, for the existential protagonist, the resolution of his crisis. In choosing to take such dangerous action, Sonny affirms his authenticity and in the process reclaims his identity. In Sartrean terms, Sonny confronts the anxiety of the dangerous assignment he undertakes, and out of the existential expression of his freedom, he emerges as his authentic self—something, we may recall, that Arthur Lawson, in "Heart of Darkness," was unable to do.

### New Hope for the Living

*Miami Vice* comes to a redemptive ending in the series finale, "Free Fall," when Crockett and Tubbs recognize the limits of their ability to alter political events that have forced their hands. They toss away their badges in a gesture of repudiation and disgust reminiscent of Gary Cooper's sheriff in *High Noon* (Fred Zinnemann, 1952). Of course, the link between drug trafficking and corporate interests already had been disclosed in the second-season two-part episode, "Prodigal Son." In that story, Crockett and Tubbs learn from a New York City banking executive that he and his colleagues in the financial community are not going to let the South American governments default on their massive loans, even if that means ignoring their cocaine exporting activities. But in "Free Fall," we witness a new attitude toward concentrated state power, for the episode seems to confirm the conspiracy among the U.S. government, a Latin American dictator, and the drug cartels. The message

seems clear: an imperial, militaristic, corporatist America, determined to entrench its empire. "There's only two things that count," the high official of an unnamed U.S. federal agency tells Crockett and Tubbs at the episode's end, "American interests and anything that's counter to 'em." Thus, conspiracy and hegemony are identified as the real engines of U.S. policy.

As Crockett and Tubbs grasp the scope of the government's complicity, they understand the dimensions of a corruption they cannot combat. This, too, is a moment of existential recognition, but one that by no means involves a passive acceptance of life's limits, accompanied by disillusion and defeat. It is not, in the words of Alain Silver and Elizabeth Ward, the "resignation to being annihilated by a relentless, deterministic abstraction."<sup>33</sup> As Robert Porfirio writes, "the precipitous slide of existentialism toward nihilism is only halted by its heavy emphasis on man's freedom," and we have seen in connection with the thought of Kierkegaard, Camus, and Sartre that existentialism can accommodate a variety of actions and reactive attitudes toward the human condition, including leaps of faith, rebellion, heroism, and scorn.<sup>34</sup> In a striking display of narrative closure, *Miami Vice* turns back on itself with the same dialogue between Crockett and Tubbs that ended the series pilot. Crockett asks: "Ever consider a career in Southern law enforcement?" Tubbs replies: "Maybe . . . maybe." The final aerial shot is a dramatic expression of their lives, as Crockett and Tubbs drive south, leaving behind five years as partners in the Vice Division with few satisfactions, and head toward an unknown future that their existential choices will help create.

## Notes

I want to thank Aeon J. Skoble for reading and commenting on earlier drafts and for our numerous conversations about *Miami Vice*. I am also grateful to Christen Clemens for her helpful comments on earlier drafts.

1. For a seminal essay on film noir and existentialism, see Robert G. Porfirio, "No Way Out: Existential Motifs in the Film Noir" (1976), reprinted in *Film Noir Reader*, ed. Alain Silver and James Ursini (New York: Limelight, 1996), 77–93.
2. George Cotkin, *Existential America* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 6; Jean-Paul Sartre, *Search for a Method*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), xxxiii.
3. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1966), 538.
4. Nicholas Christopher, *Somewhere in the Night: Film Noir and the American City* (New York: Free Press, 1997), 227.

5. *Ibid.*, 227–28.
6. T. D. Allman, *Miami: City of the Future* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1987), 97.

7. For an early and important discussion of film noir and *Miami Vice*, see Jeremy G. Butler, "Miami Vice: The Legacy of Film Noir" (1985), reprinted in Silver and Ursini, *Film Noir Reader*, 289–305.

8. In this, of course, *Miami Vice* is no exception, since, until fairly recently, it was rather typical for families to enter into the proceedings primarily as objects of ridicule and foils for the principal characters' antics. Some crucial exceptions to this include *The X-Files*, *Millennium*, and *The Sopranos*.

9. Tubbs's conversation with Brenda in "Nobody Lives Forever" indicates some knowledge of architecture ("Now Crockett, he doesn't know the difference between Bauhaus and outhouse"). Nevertheless, he gets it wrong when he tells her he "likes the art deco buildings they're putting up in South Miami." In 1985 art deco hotels were being renovated in South Beach, a place both literally and existentially miles away from the city of South Miami. My thanks to Aeon J. Skoble for reminding me of Tubbs's interest in art and Castillo's knowledge of Southeast Asia.

10. See "Everglades," "Return of Calderone, Part 1," and "Made For Each Other" to name only three. In true reductive fashion, males are shown as adolescent, incompetent, criminal, or idiotic. Female principals, on the other hand, are rarely depicted as scheming, superficial, ruthless, or dumb.

11. Arthur C. Danto, *Jean-Paul Sartre* (New York: Viking, 1975), 109. Danto offers a view of Sartre very different in tone and emphasis from the one provided here, describing his life as "a paradigm of commitment and courage as well as of creativity, full of positions taken and fine causes promoted and hideous ones opposed, an articulated and sometimes futile conscience and moral witness against the outrageous twentieth-century history" (ix). The famous phrase is from Sartre's play *No Exit* (*Huis clos*, 1947).

12. Jean-Paul Sartre, preface to *The Wretched of the Earth*, by Frantz Fanon, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove, 1963), lv.

13. Ronald Aronson, *Camus and Sartre* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 224. Camus condemned the use of revolutionary violence in the Algerian war of independence from France, a position Cotkin describes, oxymoronically, as "extreme moderation" (*Existential America*, 233).

14. Cotkin, *Existential America*, 192. The passage is from Norman Mailer, "The White Negro," quoted on page 197.

15. Norman Mailer, *Existential Errands* (New York: Little, Brown, 1972), 210.

16. Hazel E. Barnes, *An Existentialist Ethics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 194; quoted in Cotkin, *Existential America*, 197.

17. This passage from Beauvoir's essay *Must We Burn Sade?* is taken from Stanley Kauffmann, "Excessive Freedom," *New Republic* (May 20, 1992): 22.

18. Jonathan Glover provides a succinct discussion of the scope and limits of moral

- argument in *Causing Death and Saving Lives* (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), chapter 2. For Sartre's Stalinist beliefs, see Cotkin, *Existential America*, chapter 6.
19. I provide a postmodernist interpretation of this episode in "Sunshine Noir: Postmodernism and *Miami Vice*," *The Philosophy of Neo-Noir*, ed. Mark T. Conard (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2007), 190–92. Several additional passages from this essay appear, in paraphrased form, in the present essay.
20. Jean-Paul Sartre, *What Is Literature?* trans. Bernard Frechtman, quoted in James Naremore, *More Than Night: Film Noir and Its Contexts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 24.
21. Andrew Spicer, *Film Noir* (Harlow, England: Pearson Education, 2002), 75ff.
22. *Ibid.*, 76.
23. I defend this point in "Film Noir and the Meaning of Life," in Mark T. Conard, ed., *The Philosophy of Film Noir* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2006), esp. 97–98.
24. My Aristotelian-Kantian approach to this issue is indebted to Jonathan A. Jacobs, who develops an account of rational self-mastery that attempts to accommodate the existentialist emphasis on interpretation and perspective. See his *Virtue and Self-Knowledge* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1989).
25. Patrick Gardiner, *Kierkegaard: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 66–68.
26. *Ibid.*, 52.
27. Jean-Paul Sartre, "Existentialism Is a Humanism," in *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: New American Library, 1975), 369.
28. Sartre quotes from, respectively, "Existentialism Is a Humanism," 353; *Being and Nothingness*, 538; and *The Flies*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (New York: Knopf, 1962).
29. Cotkin, *Existential America*, 114. According to Cotkin, "within a few years of the introduction of existentialism in America, most New York intellectuals had cooled toward existentialism in general and strongly dismissed Sartre and Beauvoir in particular" (110).
30. Gardiner raises a similar difficulty for Kierkegaard's view in *Kierkegaard*, 55.
31. See Jacobs's discussion of the emotion of sadness, *Virtue and Self-Knowledge*, 37. Of course, Jacobs is speaking generally; he is not addressing the dramatization of this phenomenon in *Miami Vice*.
32. Richard A. Gilmore, *Doing Philosophy at the Movies* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 87–88.
33. Alain Silver and Elizabeth Ward, eds., *Film Noir: An Encyclopedic Reference to the American Style*, 3rd ed. (Woodstock, NY: Overlook, 1992), 4.
34. Porfino, "No Way Out," 87. I discuss existentialist reactive attitudes to the human condition in "Film Noir and the Meaning of Life," esp. 101–3.

## 24 AND THE EXISTENTIAL MAN OF REVOLT

*Jennifer L. McMahon*

One does not have to watch Fox's hit series *24* for very long to see the noir elements in it. The focus on crime (namely terrorism), the stunning amount of violence; the cynical air of many of *24*'s lead characters; the presence of several *femmes fatales*, and the stoic resolve of the show's protagonist, Jack Bauer (Kiefer Sutherland) are all suggestive of the noir style. I shall argue specifically that in addition to fitting the profile of the noir protagonist, Jack Bauer is also an example of Albert Camus' existential hero, the man of revolt.

Before turning my attention to Jack Bauer, however, it is first important to establish that *24* is an example of the noir style. For some, *24* may seem more obviously an example of the action genre than of TV noir. Certainly, it bears action trademarks. The plot moves at a blistering pace. Action sequences command a substantial portion of each episode. And of course, the show capitalizes on its audience's interest in violent spectacle: explosions are frequent and sizeable, car chases are commonplace, danger is always imminent, and weapons are ubiquitous and consistently employed. While *24* has action to spare, however, it counts as a TV noir series because it is rendered in the noir style.

### 24 and Noir

While most people are familiar with instances of film noir, it is unlikely that many would be able to offer a succinct definition of it. I shall use the term noir here to refer not only to the classical period (generally recognized as beginning in 1941 with John Huston's *The Maltese Falcon* and ending in 1958