

## Existential Films Full results

Supplementary material for Mick Cooper's *Existential psychotherapy and counselling: Contributions to a pluralistic practice* (Sage, 2015), Appendix.

One of the great strengths of existential philosophy is that it stretches far beyond psychotherapy and counselling; into art, literature and many other forms of popular culture. This means that there are many – including films, novels and songs that convey the key messages of existentialism. These may be useful for trainees of existential therapy, and also as recommendations for clients to deepen an understanding of this way of seeing the world.

In order to identify the most helpful resources, an online survey was conducted in the summer of 2014 to identify the key existential films, books and novels. Invites were sent out via email to existential training institutes and societies, and through social media. Participants were invited to nominate up to three of each art media that 'most strongly communicate the core messages of existentialism'.

In total, 119 people took part in the survey (i.e., gave one or more response). Approximately half were female ( $n = 57$ ) and half were male ( $n = 56$ ), with one of other gender. The average age was 47 years old (range 26–89). The participants were primarily distributed across the UK ( $n = 37$ ), continental Europe ( $n = 34$ ), North America ( $n = 24$ ), Australia ( $n = 15$ ) and Asia ( $n = 6$ ). Around 90% of the respondents were either qualified therapists ( $n = 78$ ) or in training ( $n = 26$ ). Of these, around two-thirds ( $n = 69$ ) considered themselves existential therapists, and one third ( $n = 32$ ) did not.

There were 304 nominations for the key existential film. The following table gives the films that were nominated by the respondents, in order of how frequently they were nominated and then by title. Comments from participants are also given for each film. Where participants gave similar comments for more than one film, the comments are only presented with the first film.

Very many thanks to everyone who participated in this survey.

Title (nominations)	Comment
Groundhog Day (9)	The story of a man who needs a lot of repetition before he learns the lessons he needs to learn - he begins to care about people and as a result he is very cared about; it gives hope that anyone can change./ Deals with Nietzsche's eternal return as well as what it is to have a meaningful life and how we relate to others./ Humorous observation of existential perplexity.
The Matrix (9)	How do we 'cover' reality, and how can we 'un-cover' it via phenomenological methods?/ Invites us to be observers of our paradigms and in so doing be in a state of consciousness that transcends paradigm./ Rabbit holes, determinism vs free will, ignorance versus knowledge...I could go on./ Connects to the concerns of existentialism---especially death, isolation, and freedom with responsibility./ Modern look at life and death issues and themes of meaningfulness and meaninglessness./ Felt connected me to something I had either thought about or challenged others about in life./ Raises major questions centring around issues of identity, values, responsibility, choice and knowledge. Key existential questions which we wrestle with constantly. /How the truth or reality is totally different to what we feel and perceive to be real./ Addresses the questions: who we are? What is the world? And - what are the relationships between the two of them?
Harold and Maude (5)	Love transcending boundaries and the willingness to open up to life without allowing anything to become an anchor, but look at it lovingly and with humour./ A classic that epitomizes meaning of life in the context of, and in contrast to, the presence of death; it does this with great humour and depth./ Makes death funny and ridiculous, and really emphasises the positive side of having freedom to choose./ (The loudness of life and) the quietness of the death./
I Heart Huckabees (5)	All about existentialism with existential detectives trying to help people figure out their meaning./ Demonstrates the struggle between existential thought and post-modernism./ Great existential comedy – fun, relevant, smart; makes existentialism topical for today.
Into the Wild (5)	Great movie about self-discovery and forgiveness and intimacy./ A story about existential loneliness and the dilemma between being an individual and belonging to a community.
Being There (4)	Chance (the Gardener) appears and then exists. Lives, largely misconstrued by others and then ceases to exist./ Expresses the basic premise of Heidegger's <i>Being and Time</i> ./ Is just so brilliant. Chance represents the absurdity of existence and is the blank canvas for all around him to attribute status and meaning.
Three Colours: Blue (4)	Negotiates both literally and symbolically existential issues of freedom, equality and brotherhood and sisterhood but also other big issues of love, death and meaning. Great film that has moved me and provided me with 'anchors' in my life.
American Beauty (3)	Celebrates the inevitability of the ageing process and the poetry that is hidden its innate tragedy and apparent meaninglessness. It finds meaning in meaninglessness.
Dead Poets Society (3)	Very moving and touches in me this existential sense.\ Most amazing, touching and inspiring film ever made. Believe in yourself and become the person you are!
Fight Club (3)	As confusing as the viewer initially finds this story, Fight Club is excruciatingly existential - in its themes and in the reactions it calls forth. There is the confusion of identity between the 'everyman' played by Edward Norton and Tyler Durden played by Brad Pitt. Are they two people? Or are they expressions of an internal conflict? This confusion exists in the film and in the viewer too. And it's uncomfortable, I remember fidgeting the entire way through this and almost throwing my hands in the air in later scenes. It's also about submission and dominance, authenticity and inauthenticity and the costs of both. It captures the polarities of human existence with our aiming for the our values but descending into the dark side too - clambering in rubbish dumps, inhabiting dirty living spaces while scrubbing up to wait on tables in expensive restaurants. The interweaving of these polarities is evident in all aspects of the story.
Good Will Hunting (3)	Presents a story about woundedness and resilience, redemption, meaning, and finitude. It presents also a humanistic or existential facilitator./ Has a wonderful therapy scene and again it shows how hard it can be to be vulnerable - this movie reminds you not to make assumptions and how much depth a person can have even though you might not think so from looking on the outside (e.g. the character played by Ben Affleck who accepts that Matt Damon's character won't be staying and yet this is okay). It is as though he helps him along his journey. I feel tearful as I am writing this.
Ikiru (3)	Deals with death and how it can change your life./ Deals with issues of life and death, identity, existential angst, choice, and authenticity.

It's a Wonderful Life (3)	Attitude is the primary component in determining the quality of life.
Life is Beautiful (3)	
Melancholia (3)	Just miserably./ Key challenges of the human condition, not merely local or idiosyncratic problems. As such they challenge each of us to negotiate the great problems of living (existing) such as freedom and limitation, our smallness (fragility) and our greatness (boldness, capacity to transcend), our isolation and our interpersonal connections, and the problems of meaninglessness and meaning/awe.
One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest (3)	Bespeaks deep humanity and courage and has a foundation in literature (1962 novel).
Persona (3)	Deals with the construction of personality and existence and how we develop or design our own understanding of a reality.
The King's Speech (3)	
The Seventh Seal (3)	All about death and running away from it./ Deals with looking death (the grim reaper) straight in the eye, it covers a variety of issues.
The Tree of Life (3)	
Wild Strawberries (3)	Deals with dealing with the meaninglessness of life, trying to be open even if it is meaningless, choosing in the face of despair, and faith. / Addresses the notion of regret in the face of a misspent youth and inauthentic life.
2001: A Space Odyssey (2)	
As it is in Heaven (2)	Competing with authenticity & longing for freedom.
Avatar (2)	
Babette's Feast (2)	The meaning and joy of encounter./ Deals with the corporeal.
Citizen Kane (2)	Deals with the illusion of life's pursuits: first of the main character and then also the media pursuit to find the woman called 'rosebud' which of course leads to a solid brick wall end, the truth being totally different.
Cloud Atlas (2)	Spans time, past to future, and depicts core themes that run through lifetimes. It also plays with gender and racial identity across lifetimes suggesting the ways in which one creates, struggle with and maintains values in various life situations. / Great interpretation of time, being and consequences.
Crash (2)	Themes of perception and mis-perception, relativity of truth, the non-essential subject./ Does a beautiful job of illustrating the complexities of the human condition. Those who initially seem to be being built up to being heroes show their villainous side and vice versa. It's very honest.
Das Boot (2)	
Existenz (2)	Addresses the importance and unavoidable given of relatedness and death and the primary and essential being-in-world of Dasein. Addresses these themes with clever insightful metaphors and real-life drama/situations.
Hannah and her sisters (2)	
Le Concert (2)	A film about transgenerational trauma/healing.
Life of Pi (2)	Explores the human condition at a very raw level.
Ordinary People (2)	This does a beautiful job of showing the process of therapy and the honesty of it. It is not a simple resolution, but rather a process where Conrad, as he heals, goes through periods where things appear worse. In the end, it really shows the therapy relationship, as a very real relationship, is key for healing.
Pan's Labyrinth (2)	
Requiem for a Dream (2)	Demonstrates the existential vacuum as expressed by Viktor Frankl and the flight from anxiety as described by Eric Fromm and Rollo May.

Rocky (2)	
Solaris (2)	
Sophie's Choice (2)	All about authenticity, Choices and death
Stalker (2)	
The Best Offer (2)	
The Diving Bell and the Butterfly (2)	Takes the viewer into the an individual struggle with existing.
The Great Beauty (2)	
The Meaning of Life (2)	
The Nights of Cabiria (2)	Presents a story that deals with a difficult life and the decisions that a woman takes. It deals also with hope./ A woman's journey as a prostitute who dreams of a saviour, whether religious or in a man, and discovers that there are no saviours, and that the true salvation is finding the potency and vitality in those rare present moments when our eyes are opened as a result of giving up our fantasies of rescue in a world in which there is not rescue.
The Searchers (2)	
The Shawshank Redemption (2)	It's about values, which we gain being thrown in this world. Although things happen in our lives, these circumstances are conditions of our life. What do we do, when we are facing cruelty, injustice and are powerless to do something? Do we become animals or do we search for impossible ways to survive, to gain confidence in life and people and to set us free (By the way, the main character got his freedom only then, when he stopped to assert his right to it).
The Truman Show (2)	A moving tale - JOYFUL, ANGRY, SAD and SCARY - that's life!
The Way (2)	Confrontation with death.
Up (2)	Deals with death and bereavement.
Weekend (2)	Beautifully addresses existential limitations, and the capacity for connection that is unleashed when those limitations are accepted, but also challenges the false limitations that people construct through fear./ Plain existential conversation just after love making.
A Long Way to Freedom	
A Ma Soeur	
A Serious Man	A life of questions with no answers.
About Time	Shows the importance of the here-and-now approach and even though it is about time travelling and changing the past, it also has consequences. Clients could learn the importance of living in the present from this film.
Adaptation	Amazing because it explores fantasy versus reality, change versus stagnation, and loss of wonder. The question that strikes me is whether or not one can write about and appreciate something in its pure form and catch interest in others without imposing sensationalism or change upon others to garner their attention to that piece of art. It uses Hollywood as the template.
Adjustment Bureau	Do I make the decisions in my life or are they made for me? Is being persistent worth it and to what extend?
Akira	
Amour	Competing with death and intimacy.
An Eternity and a Day	

Andrei Rublev	
Annie Hall	
Another Earth	
Another Year	
Apocalypto	A classic example of what Jean Paul Sartre meant when he said: Freedom is what you do with what's been done to you. The protagonist changes from being a playful, irresponsible, and practical joker to a leader and unbeatable adversary when he was faced with death of not only himself but his whole tribe.
As it is in Heaven	
Asylum	An excellent insight into mental illness and alternative care in the 70s. It is a great deconstruction of psychopathology, and raises excellent questions about exactly where the madness lies!
Au Revoir Les Enfants	
Autumn Sonata	
Badlands	
Being John Malkovich	
Ben Hur	
Big Fish	Themes of perception and mis-perception, relativity of truth, the non-essential subject.
Big Wednesday	Facing existence anxiously but with resolve. Facing the full force of nature, knowing it is more powerful than man, but still dreaming that it can be overcome, and eventually accepting that it is better to move with it.
Blade Runner	
Buck	Shows the deepest essentials that move people on their path they have to find through their lives.
Casablanca	
Cast Away	
Changing Lanes	
Clockwork Orange	
Cool and Crazy	
Days of Heaven	
Dead Man Walking	Amazing movie about being able to accept all parts of yourself through the positive regard of another.
Departures	How do we cope with death?
Dersu Uzala	An odd and deeply powerful and moving film about the collision between the industrialising "new world" of the early railways (in Russia) meeting the almost nomadic world of the freezing countryside of Dersu Uzala himself. It's about life, death, "nature" and our uneasy relationship with it in an industrial and post-industrial (cyber?) world but it speaks (to me) of the transcendent need to connect with another human being. Not sure if that's existentialist but it is for me!
Die Kinder des Monsieur Mathieu	

Distant Voices, Still Lives	
Du Levande	Absurdity of existence - humour and pain.
Eat Pray Love	An autobiography by Elizabeth Gilbert (2006) that shows a woman's journey to find herself with the help of mindfulness. This novel was made into a film with Julia Roberts. Clients who do not want to read books might want to watch the film.
Empire of the Sun	Explores the human condition at a very raw level.
Eraserhead	
Examined Life	A fantastic depiction of some brilliant philosophical ideas that are brought to life in an entirely different context. It really is an excellent educational tool.
Fargo	Deals with existential issues in clever and unobtrusive ways. Broad appeal; not just for art film literati.
Frankenstein	
Frozen	Trusting in love helps to heal and find a constructive way of life.
Ghost	
Gone with the Wind	
Gravity	A pure rush of adrenalin. The idea that in the end, beyond connection, there is only you and your capacity to respond to your circumstance. Gravity is breathtakingly beautiful and highlights how insignificant we are, in a cool way!
Harvie Krumpet	What does life mean and how do we find meaning in life?
Her	
Hereafter	Deals with some of the main topics of existentialism: (Basic) Trust, belief (also in yourself), decisions, faith, finiteness, meaning. Key questions are: What happens after we die? How does that affect our actual lives?
Highlander	
I Origins	
In America	I love this film so much. It's about life and death, love and innocence. It's about a young Irish family who have just emigrated from Ireland to NYC and the recent death of their son. It's a story of hardship too as they struggle with living and finding work in NYC. They take a chance on trusting their neighbour who turns out to be their saviour in many ways. Through his death they get to grieve for their own son.
Inception	Delves into a person's life and by picking the right moment when a phenomenon took place and changing that moment, it thus changes our world view and that person's existence.
Invictus	
Kes	
La Dolce Vita	Deals with living an authentic life versus choosing a life of comfort or pleasure and ultimately making the wrong choice.
Ladybird, Ladybird	
Le Havre	
Le Vie en Rose	A movie about authenticity. About how to resist anything in your life following your inner will, or voice. And even without a "happy end", there is no promise of that from existence, but your choice is whether to live your life, or a life which is good for others.
Leaving Las Vegas	

Lord Of The Flies	
Lord of the Rings	
Lost in Translation	
Magnolia	Has a sense of sadness and life destiny throughout.
Man of Steel	Considers choice and predetermination.
Manhattan	
Momo	Explains the importance of the here-and-now and to enjoy every moment as it is.
Mr Roberts	
My Life as a Dog	Shows adolescence crisis.
Nanook of the North	A way of life is captured on film, sincerely and charmingly enacted by the very people who lived it. Flaherty is not fighting against the idea that he is giving us "objective reality." Implicit in the film is that there is a Western view, but the Inuit and their way of life is respected and portrayed with care and as true to the "old ways" as is possible for the times.
Napoleon Dynamite	Deals with existential issues in clever and unobtrusive ways.
Nostalgia	
Now Voyager	
Of Gods and Men	
On Golden Pond	
On The Beach	True to the existential milieu of their times.
Passion of Mind	
Pay it Forward	Shows that we can connect with the world around us and that is what transforms us and others: finding and giving meaning to life, transcendence, connecting with others. One of the most touching movies I know. It made me think about my own attitude towards life and I have adopted the message for my own life. I use it in therapy with my patients and it's been received very well.
Philomena	
Pulp Fiction	
Rashomon	The story is told from the point of view of the criminal, the woman, the woodcutter (who discovered the body of the husband), and from the point of view of the husband's ghost, who communicates through a witch or shaman. As these various narratives unfold it is clear that there are four very different versions of the same events, with each one telling the story to emphasize their own importance and justify their actions.
Revolutionary Road	
Rivers and Tides	
Rocky II	
Ruby Sparks	Deals with the Sartre/de Beauvoir tensions about being-for-others, fixing people and ourselves, etc.
Rushmore	

Salaam Bombay!	An interesting juxtaposition of multiple others, all struggling to survive on the streets and in the brothels of Mumbai (Bombay).
Samsara	
Séraphine	
Shadowlands	
Simon Birch	
Sliding Doors	
Some Like it Hot	
Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter ... and Spring	The soothing wind through the leaves of a tree.
Stalag 17	
Static	A film about absurdity, trash culture and religion. Ultimately, it is a film about isolation and the desire for meaning and a sense of permanence.
Stay	There was a certain feeling which accompanied watching this film which I might describe as an ache. It is a sudden internal quietness, combined with my stomach sinking, which made me both sad and happy. I associate this feeling with a truly existential film experience. Sam: 'If this is a dream, the whole world is inside it.'
Stranger than Fiction	Are we the authors of our own lives?
Synecdoche, New York	
Tangled	Tangled shows the importance of trusting your own apperception instead of believing anything someone else tells you. Tangled has the power to free herself.
Taxidermia	Weird, wonderful and deeply unsettling exploration of three generations, incorporating sex, food and death.
The Bridges of Madison County	Can you place one love over the other? Do I follow my own needs or social conventions?
The Castle	
The Decalogue	This series of short films struggles with many issues, such as death and loss, in an honest way. Its emphasis on the nonverbal, too, really strikes me.
The Deer Hunter	
The Double	
The Double Life of Veronique	Examines existence and place from a separate and mysterious perspective.
The Elephant Man	
The Fountain	
The Hedgehog	Paloma: 'Planning to die doesn't mean I let myself go like a rotten vegetable. What matters isn't the fact of dying or when you die. It's what you're doing at that precise moment.'
The Hours	It's all about authenticity, Choices and death.
The Iceman Cometh	Deals with people who always live for "tomorrow" instead of taking their lives in their hands. And of course it deals with the ultimate self-delusion to preserve a sense of meaning.



The Island	
The Ister	Best existential river movie on Heidegger and his later works and views on how technology turns the world and us into "standing reserve". Also, made by two crazy aussies, on no budget.
The Lion King	Deals with the circle of life from birth through survival to death.
The Lives of Others	
The Lord of the Rings	The fantasy-weaving response to our human condition.
The Lunchbox	My husband and I had quite a discussion about aging and vulnerability as a result of the movie.
The Magician	In a kind of self-reflexive way it cautions the therapist against behaving as God.
The Master and the Margarita	It's a great example of philosophical dialectics between God and Evil, good and bad, sane and insanity and so on.
The Motorcycle Diaries	
The New World	
The Ninth Configuration	Explores madness and the prospect of true understanding contained within.
The Notebook	
The Passenger	
The Perks of Being a Wallflower	Existential isolation and bonding in adolescence.
The Pianist	All about authenticity, choices and death.
The Royal Tenenbaums	Shows the absurdity of ego, success and failure in the face of death, while at the same time showing their importance in relationships, and highlighting moments of connection as potential for meaning and beauty.
The Sea Inside	
The Seven Samurai	Has existential verities of eating, death, birth, romance/sex, fighting, envy, hatred, jealousy and of different ways of being in the world all handled lightly and with genius.
The Skin I Live In	
The Station Agent	
The Straight Story	
The Time Machine	Childhood favourite -- many philosophical/existential points.
The Wild Bunch	A group of ageing men come to terms with the passing of time and of no longer feeling that they belong.
The Words	The consequences of our choices.
The World According to Garp	Explores the thoroughness of life and the human struggle with this.
They Shoot Horses, Don't They?	
Three Colours: Red	
Three Colours: White	

Tot altijd (Time of My Life)	
Touching the Void	About that moment when, faced with what seems impossible and perilous choices, you must jump into the unknown, when to stay in one place means inevitable death.
Tracks	
True Romance	
Twin peaks	
Under the Skin	
Vertigo	
Waiting for Guffman	
Waking Life	Great existential "animation" type film also features Robert Solomon, one of my favourite existential professors! Now deceased unfortunately.
What Dreams May Come	
What the #\$*! Do We Know!?	
Willow and Wind	The thick silence in the moment that the boy walks with the glass in his arms.
Wings of Desire	What it means to commit to being human.
Winter Light	Bergman was the quintessential filmmaker with regard to addressing the existential questions in life. Winter Light in the capacity of what to do in the face of God's silence when there is so much suffering in life.
Wit	Cancer: being ill and facing life coming to an end.