

**Perennial and Timely Existentialism**  
**(A Review of Ștefan Bolea's *Existentialism Today*\*)**

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**Keywords:** existentialism, postmodernism, anxiety, death, authenticity, philosophy of literature, cinematography, art, pessimism, absurdity

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*Author* of four poetry collections, Ștefan Bolea proves his professional vocation as a philosopher by publishing his third philosophical study, *Existentialism Today (Existențialismul astăzi)* (Bucharest: Herg Benet Publishers, 2012). Unlike so many other commentators who lose themselves in the confusion of certain themes and motives, the young author proposes himself a precise purpose and approaches it with well adjusted means. He wants to explain and reconstruct existentialism through its main concepts (p. 13). Therefore, instead of dealing in historical fashion with the genesis of the movement, the main existentialist thinkers or the analysis of some works, the interpreter prefers to take into account three fundamental concepts for existentialist thought: anxiety, death and authenticity. These three are analyzed not only following their metamorphoses in the thinking of the main existentialists (Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Sartre) but also taking into account a postmodern spirit, who has the possibility to test the reliability and resistance of the respective concepts beyond the historical limits of “classical” existentialism.

Another hermeneutic opening the reader owes to Ștefan Bolea is the idea of the appreciation of the special relationship between existentialism and literature. One remembers that in *Either/Or* (1843), Søren Kierkegaard was using the means of fictional prose (masked characters, confessional diary, epic narrative and so on). One century later, Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre, authors with paramount philosophical contributions – the first with *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942) and *The Rebel* (1951), the second with *Being and Nothingness* (1943) and *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1960) – chose to display their philosophical conceptions not only in theoretical texts, but also in prose and theater, artistic fields *par excellence*. I believe that Ștefan Bolea's proven vocation for poetry is an existential and creative factor which brings the author close to the canonic names of existentialism a while after the apotheosis of their fame.

It is, therefore, interesting to follow the research track, because, beyond its letter, one deciphers a passionate personal engagement, not a plain scholastic exercise. For Ștefan Bolea, the testing of existentialism's “endurance” on three

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\* Ștefan Bolea, *Existențialismul astăzi* (Existentialism today) (Bucharest: Herg Benet Publishers, 2012), 344 p., 978-606-8335-41-4.

philosophical directions (the first: Kierkegaard – Nietzsche; the second: Jaspers – Heidegger; the third: Marcel – Sartre – Merleau-Ponty – Camus) belongs to his personal standpoint. Even there might be readers that think some of the analyzed philosophers are not *per se* existentialists – some may argue that Heidegger is a phenomenologist and that Gabriel Marcel is a Neothomist – the nominal series provided by the author are original and represent, themselves, the result of an understanding and ordering process.



**Irina Dumitrașcu Măgurean, *Photogram***  
10,8 cm x 8,5 cm, Polaroid, 2015

Ștefan Bolea's work shows that the great existentialist concepts – the aforementioned three but also others – did not have, *ante* existentialism, a clear and generally accepted categorical statue. The role of the existentialist authors as

concept “ “inventors” turns them not only in creators of philosophical language, but also in propellers of philosophical problematic and descriptors of life situations.

Following Ștefan Bolea’s reading one observes that the conceptual apparatus of existentialism creates a different mapping of life and world. This mapping seems quintessentially modern and contemporary, locating the main authors in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, the suggestive span of terms like anxiety or authenticity allows us to take a step back to the historical premises of pre-existentialist experiences. In this light one can grasp the huge existential value of many medieval and pre-modern paintings like Sebastian Brant’s *The Ship of Fools*, the alienating universes of Hieronymus Bosch, the works of the two Pieter Bruegels, the masterpieces of the mannerist painters and a certain baroque sensibility, including here the modern alchemic and esoteric meditation.

Ștefan Bolea is less interested in his book in the perennity of the existentialist perspective and its appreciation as permanence of man’s relationship to life and world than in the post-historical development of a movement considered dated. In the annexes of the study – positioned here not because they would stand for derivative, facultative or negligible leads but because they would hinder the main discourse of the book – he tests his exegetical track on artistic materials beyond philosophy’s designated perimeter (because philosophy expressed itself for a long time in art’s disguise, a thesis proven by Plato’s or Lucian of Samosata’s dialogues, Erasmus’s essay on folly or Campanella’s or Francis Bacon’s utopias). The young philosopher alludes to the fiction of Chuck Palahniuk and Philip K. Dick and the recent cinematography. Therefore, instinctively or programmatically – but not quite explicitly assumed – he brings in front of the mirror (one might note here that the highly philosophical term of *speculation* derives from *speculum* – Latin for *mirror*) the philosophical and artistic projections, hoping to understand how these two types of vision reflect the existential condition of the contemporary human being. Far from deciding that establishing the human being under the sign of anxiety and death (in search of authenticity) amounts to a hopelessly tragic destiny and a certain condition of perpetual unhappiness – as thinkers like N. Berdiaeff and V. Solovyov believed –, Ștefan Bolea considers that the dialogic attitude, the tense partnership with these values and life perspectives can lead to less predictable and more spiritually profitable answers. The idea is somehow surprising, because it seems to give off an epistemic and existential optimism which has nothing in common with the traditionally gloomy school of existentialism. The absurd of yesteryear seems to fade away in front of the new devices proposed by the meditation of existentialist masters. This absurdity might result from the composed and confusing character of the postmodern experience, which seemed to swallow up all alternatives, chewing up and burning together various stylistic heritages. In a medium configured by the late modernity, the “ “tragic sense of life” fades out while the feeling of absurdity lost its aggressiveness and virulence, creating space for the predictable pattern of existentialist conceptualization.

Ștefan Bolea’s audacity and originality stem from experiments like those, which ensure him, beyond a certain historical priority (“ “Our study is the first in the Romanian cultural space which achieves a reconstruction of existentialism through its concepts”, p. 252) a distinct place in the young Romanian philosophical exegesis.

Based on a PhD thesis defended in February 2012, the book brings in the spotlight a representative of the new generation of the restless partners of ideation, redeeming, partly, the impression that the author of this review has had too many times, namely that some young authors mistake the apprenticeship with spiritual obedience and beating over the old ground. One might hope that after the mastery exercises necessarily presupposed by all PhD theses, Ștefan Bolea will listen even more unconventionally the voice of his calling, endowing our culture with original and personal reflective “free dives”, essential not only for him but also for his generation.