

From Bad Faith to Authenticity: A Sartrean Reading of Living (2022)

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the transformation of the character Mr. Williams in Oliver Hermanus' film *Living* (2022) through Jean-Paul Sartre's philosophy of existentialism, focusing on how his behavior before being convicted of illness reflects the concept of Bad Faith and how his terminal illness leads him to Authenticity. This descriptive qualitative research makes dialogues, actions, and narrative events in film as data, which is analyzed through the Interactive Model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014) with the stages of reduction, presentation, and drawing data conclusions. The results of the study showed that Bad Faith Williams before being sentenced was a coordinated condition at the personal, institutional, and domestic levels, as seen through her office routine, handling citizen petitions, renaming her condition by a colleague, and her household silence. His journey to Authenticity is then revealed through five stages: a diagnosis that erases the illusion of infinite time, a failed escape that results in an unfinished act of self-expression, the disclosure of his condition to someone outside of his or her social role, an ongoing civic project, and a death that completes a once-delayed self-expression. The discussion places these findings in Sartre's concept of seriality as well as previous research, arguing that Williams's Bad Faith is structural, while its authenticity is determined by the ownership of freely taken choices, not by the direction of those choices.

Keywords: existentialism, Bad Faith, Authenticity, Sartre, film analysis

INTRODUCTION

Existentialist philosophy has long found narrative cinema a natural medium for its concerns, since film renders interiority visible through action and image rather than through direct assertion (Pamerleau, 2009). Jean-Paul Sartre's concept of Bad Faith, a sustained self-deception in which a person treats a chosen role as though it were a fixed nature, has proven especially productive for such analysis, and Pamerleau (2020) argues that this productivity extends to the experience of film spectatorship itself, not only to the characters a film depicts. Oliver Hermanus's *Living* (2022), a British remake of Akira Kurosawa's *Ikiru* (1952) adapted by Nobel laureate Kazuo Ishiguro, offers an unusually sustained case for this kind of analysis. Its protagonist, Mr. Williams, is a senior clerk in a mid-century London county council whose emotional reticence and procedural exactness find a specific historical resonance in the public service ethos of the British civil service of that period, a culture of restraint and correctness Horton (2006) documents as a genuine institutional pattern rather than mere dramatic exaggeration. Williams receives a diagnosis of terminal stomach cancer near the film's opening and, across the months that follow, moves from a life organized almost entirely around institutional routine toward a freely chosen act of civic construction, a playground built for children he will never meet. The film's own title supplies its central provocation: that the difference between merely existing and living, in the fuller sense the narrative eventually grants its protagonist, is not a matter of circumstance but of a choice repeatedly made or repeatedly deferred.

Several previous studies have applied Sartre's existentialist framework productively to other films, and each supplies a point of comparison this research draws upon. Pramudya (2024) traces

an imposed, corporately manufactured identity in *Blade Runner 2049*, in which the replicant K must recognize that even a manufactured essence can be exceeded by choice. Valentina, Savitri, and Qomariana (2025) examine characters in *Final Destination 5* who confront death as a sudden, external violence offering no interval for reflection. Oktavianti, Farlina, and Djohar (2022) locate Bad Faith in *The Worst Person in the World* not in an excess of fixed commitment but in an excess of possibility, a protagonist paralyzed by the abundance of options before her. Pastrana (2023) documents a post-diagnosis turn toward open hedonistic rebellion in *The Professor*. Dwiyantri (2025) reads Arthur Fleck's violent self-assertion in *Joker* as an authentic, if destructive, rejection of an indifferent social order. Binasir (2024), finally, finds an already-authentic relation to routine in *Perfect Days*, whose protagonist exercises freedom within an unbroken daily structure rather than by escaping it. Each of these six studies examines Bad Faith or Authenticity within a single film considered largely on its own terms. What remains comparatively unexamined, and what this research addresses, is a single case in which the same protagonist's Bad Faith and his subsequent Authenticity are both fully documented in narrative sequence, allowing the transition between the two conditions, and not merely the separate presence of either, to be traced scene by scene.

This research is guided by two questions: how does Mr. Williams's behavior before his diagnosis reflect Sartre's concept of Bad Faith, and how does his subsequent terminal illness lead him to move toward Authenticity? Existing scholarly engagement with the film itself remains limited largely to reviews and brief notice: Sloane (2023) situates *Living* within Kazuo Ishiguro's broader, still underexamined body of screen work, observing that themes of service, sacrifice, and self-deception recur across his scripts, while Abrams (2024), writing from a medical-humanities perspective, reads the film as a model for confronting mortality without addressing the specifically Sartrean philosophical architecture this research develops. This research's scope is deliberately narrow, a single protagonist examined through Sartre's framework alone rather than through a comparative theoretical lens, a choice that allows the analysis to trace the transition between Bad Faith and Authenticity with a level of textual detail a broader comparative study could not sustain. Theoretically, this research aims to demonstrate that a Sartrean reading of narrative film can keep its interpretive claims answerable to a recurring pattern of textual evidence across multiple scenes, rather than resting on an isolated symbolic detail. Practically, it aims to show that the alternative to institutional self-erasure, the condition Williams's pre-diagnosis life exemplifies, need not be dramatic in order to be genuine. The following section sets out Sartre's theoretical framework in the specific terms applied later to Williams's case; the third section describes the method by which the film was analyzed; and the fourth section presents the results and the discussion that answers the two questions above.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Sartre's existentialism begins from the premise that existence precedes essence: a person is not born with a fixed nature but comes, gradually, to define one through the actions he undertakes (Sartre, 2007). Bad Faith (*mauvaise foi*) names the sustained self-deception by which a person instead treats an assumed social role as though it were such a fixed nature, in order to escape the anguish that accompanies free choice (Sartre, 1956). This self-deception, on Sartre's own account, is rarely a single decision; it is a manner of choosing repeated so often that it ceases to feel like choosing at all. Eshleman (2008) extends this account by arguing that Bad Faith is necessarily social, more easily sustained when the people around a person tacitly cooperate in treating him as the fixed role he claims to be, while Santoni (2020) emphasizes that character and disposition play a real part in Bad Faith without either determining a person's choices outright. Fleming

(2022), reading Sartre's later concept of seriality, shows that institutions sustain Bad Faith at the collective level by rendering their members interchangeable, so that no single departure from established procedure can register as a meaningful refusal, since another occupant of the same role will simply complete the action the first declined.

Facticity names the brute, unchosen facts that constitute a person's situation, including, in the most demanding case, the fact of his own mortality; Transcendence names the complementary capacity to project a future beyond those facts rather than being wholly determined by them. Buben (2022) argues that it is precisely this facticity, including the facticity of death, that allows a life to generate meaning at all, since an existence without any limit would lack the finitude a choice requires in order to matter. A person exercises freedom, on Sartre's account, by choosing how to relate to an unavoidable facticity rather than by escaping it, though this freedom brings with it anguish, since no external authority remains available to absolve the person of responsibility for the choice he makes (Sartre, 1956; Akinbode, 2023). Siegler (2022) extends this account of freedom into the practical domain, examining how Sartre's philosophy treats its concrete exercise through institutions and instruments rather than as an abstract capacity alone. Authenticity, finally, is the achievement, never permanent and always renewable, of acting from this freedom rather than fleeing it. Sartre (2007) treats authenticity as a choice that carries universal significance, since in choosing for himself a person simultaneously proposes a model of human possibility that others may recognize and respond to; Soewandi and Wijanarko (2021) apply this same principle to the contemporary problem of self-presentation, arguing that an authentic self is incompatible with a persona maintained chiefly for how it will be perceived by others. Together, these five concepts, existence preceding essence, Bad Faith, facticity and transcendence, freedom and anguish, and Authenticity, supply the framework applied to Mr. Williams's trajectory in the results below; the first documents his life so long as he acts against the premise that existence precedes essence, treating an assigned role as a fixed nature, and the second documents his return to it, culminating in an act that defines his own essence freely.

RESEARCH METHODS

This research uses a descriptive qualitative design, a choice appropriate to a research problem centered on the meaning a single, richly developed character assigns to his own experience rather than on measurable variables (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The primary data are the dialogues, actions, and narrative events in *Living* (2022) that depict Mr. Williams's routine, his diagnosis, and his subsequent transformation; supporting data include Sartre's own texts and the previous studies discussed above. Data were collected through repeated viewing of the film, verification of specific scenes against its dialogue and subtitles, and categorization of each verified instance according to the Sartrean concept it most directly illustrates. These categorized instances were then analyzed using the Interactive Model's three-stage process (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). Data reduction applied a deductive coding framework drawn exclusively from Sartrean existentialism, isolating instances of self-deception and institutional compliance under the code of Bad Faith and instances of psychological turmoil under the code of Anguish. Data display then organized these reduced instances into two coordinated clusters, one for each research question: Bad Faith instances formed four evidentiary groups, the institutional routine, the petition, Margaret Harris's naming of his condition, and the domestic silence, presented as Finding 1; Facticity, Anguish, and Authenticity instances formed five further groups, the diagnosis, Worthing, the disclosure, the playground, and Williams's death, presented as Finding 2. Conclusion drawing and verification retained an interpretive claim only where it was supported by a pattern of evidence recurring across more than one scene rather than a single incidental

detail, with each resulting conclusion further checked against the previous studies reviewed above and relevant Sartre scholarship, validated throughout by methodological triangulation (Denzin, 2012).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results: Bad Faith Before Diagnosis

Williams's pre-diagnosis Bad Faith is documented across four coordinated bodies of evidence rather than as a single trait localized in one scene. At the personal level, his office routine, the same silent train commute shared with identically dressed colleagues, the same precise transfer of files between an in-tray and an out-tray, constitutes a working day organized so thoroughly around repeatable procedure that no single moment within it requires him to act as a free individual; his outward register remains uniform across unrelated provocations, itself evidence that the blankness is structural rather than circumstantial. At the institutional level, when a group of mothers led by a Mrs. Smith brings a petition asking that a derelict, waterlogged site be cleared and turned into a children's playground, Williams receives it with correct but entirely impersonal courtesy and directs it to the Parks Department; the file is then passed from department to department until it returns, unresolved, to Williams's own desk, a collective refusal for which no single officer can be identified as responsible.

At a third, retrospective level, a former colleague, Margaret Harris, tells Williams over lunch that she and others in the department privately called him "Mr. Zombie," a label Williams does not dispute and instead calls, after a pause, "quite appropriate," evidence that his Bad Faith is not an original trait but an accumulated one. At the domestic level, Williams lives with his adult son Michael and Michael's wife Fiona in a household that is materially comfortable and, in every scene the film shows, emotionally silent; the couple's concern for him is quietly colored by their own economic stake in his eventual estate, a fact the film allows the viewer to infer rather than states outright. On the evening of his diagnosis, Williams asks Michael to stay and talk, a request Michael's visible confusion marks as unusual, and Michael declines. The result is a household in which a dying man cannot bring himself to say so, not because any one member forbids it, but because none of the three has built, over years, the kind of relation in which it could be said.

Results: The Movement Toward Authenticity

Williams's diagnosis of terminal stomach cancer does not itself transform his behavior; what it does is remove the assumption of unlimited time on which his Bad Faith had always depended. His first response is to withdraw half his savings, obtain a quantity of sleeping pills, and travel to the seaside town of Worthing, where he falls into conversation with a stranger, Sutherland, and confesses his diagnosis aloud for the first time in the film. He does not go through with taking the pills; he gives them instead to Sutherland and allows himself to be drawn into a night of drinking and diversion. Amid the disorder of that night, moving between bars and a burlesque show, Williams's bowler hat, worn without interruption for three decades, is lost and replaced with a fedora, a small but visible break in what had been an otherwise unbroken sartorial uniformity. The night's emotional center, however, is not this loss but a request Williams makes of a pub pianist: asked if he knows "The Rowan Tree," an old Scottish song tied to his late wife's heritage, he sings along in a voice that holds for the first two verses and then fails him at the mention of his mother, the first unscripted act the film shows him perform, though one he cannot yet complete. Returning to London, Williams develops a friendship with Margaret Harris and, unable to tell his own son, discloses his illness to her directly. This choice of confidante is not incidental: unlike Michael and Fiona, whose relation to Williams is already structured by settled expectations,

including a quiet interest in his estate, Margaret carries no such architecture, and it is this relational openness, rather than any particular virtue on her part, that makes the disclosure possible at all.

This disclosure precedes Williams's decisive turn toward action. He retrieves the mothers' petition from his own in-tray, reads it rather than merely processing it, and spends his remaining weeks confronting the Parks Department and a local councilor directly, refusing the redirection to which he had subjected countless files before it. The playground is eventually built. Williams dies months later, alone, on one of its swings, completing this time, without faltering, the same song he could not finish at Worthing.

Discussion

Read together, the two findings answer the research questions stated in the introduction. Williams's pre-diagnosis Bad Faith, documented across the office routine, the petition, the "Mr. Zombie" label, and the household's silence, is not an individual peculiarity but a structural condition. Fleming's (2022) organizational reading of Sartre's concept of seriality clarifies the mechanism: County Hall sustains this condition by rendering its officers interchangeable, so that no single departure from procedure registers as a meaningful refusal, a point the petition sequence documents with particular clarity. This structural reading is consistent with, and extends, six previous studies of Bad Faith and Authenticity in other films: Pramudya's (2024) replicant K accepts a corporately manufactured identity much as Williams accepts a culturally accumulated one, while Oktavianti and colleagues' (2022) protagonist is paralyzed by an excess of possibility rather than, like Williams, by an excess of fixed commitment, a mirror-image evasion of the same underlying anguish. Valentina and colleagues' (2025) characters, who face death as a sudden violence offering no interval for reflection, sharpen the point by contrast: Williams's slower, privately delivered diagnosis is precisely what makes his later movement toward Authenticity possible at all.

Williams's Authenticity, established through the sequence traced from the diagnosis to the swing, demonstrates that Sartrean authenticity is defined by the ownership of a choice rather than by its content or direction. Read against Pastrana's (2023) study of open rebellion and Dwiyantri's (2025) study of violent self-assertion, both post-diagnosis responses to a comparably constrained existence, nothing internal to Sartre's concept of Authenticity privileges civic construction over rebellion or destruction; what distinguishes Williams is only that his freedom is exercised in service of a need that is not his own. Read against Binasir's (2024) study of an already-authentic relation to routine in *Perfect Days*, the comparison clarifies a distinction this analysis has tried not to overstate on its own: a fixed routine is not, in Sartre's own terms, inherently Bad Faith, since what determines which it remains the subject's relation to the routine rather than its outward form.

Living's relationship to Kurosawa's *Ikiru* (1952), the film it directly remakes, corroborates this conclusion independently: Gordon's (1997) philosophical reading of Watanabe's parallel trajectory locates the same completion of Authenticity in a concrete act outside the self, arrived at through a different film and a different theoretical vocabulary. The epilogue the findings document, Wakeling's brief assertion of himself and County Hall's quiet reversion to its old procedures, is consistent with this reading rather than a loose narrative thread: Sartre's insistence that freedom cannot be transferred from one consciousness to another by example, together with Fleming's (2022) account of institutions relapsing into what Sartre calls petrified practice,

explains why a single authentic act does not by itself dissolve the seriality that produced the condition it interrupted.

The methodological triangulation this study relies on (Denzin, 2012) is worth making explicit at this point, since it is what allows the two readings above, the structural account of *Bad Faith* and the ownership-based account of Authenticity, to be treated as more than a single researcher's impression. Each interpretive claim advanced here has been checked from at least two independent angles: against a recurring pattern of textual evidence internal to the film itself, and against an external point of comparison, whether a previous study of a different film or a secondary philosophical reading of Sartre's own concepts. Where these angles converge, as with Fleming's (2022) organizational account of seriality and the four previous studies of *Bad Faith* discussed above, the resulting claim is treated as comparatively well supported; where only one angle is available, the claim is stated with correspondingly more caution. This procedure does not eliminate the possibility of alternative readings, but it does make the present reading answerable to more than a single vantage point on the same data.

This study's approach, close textual analysis of a single film organized around Sartre's technical vocabulary, joins a broader field of Sartrean film criticism whose scope Boulé and McCaffrey's (2011) edited volume usefully surveys; the present contribution to that field lies less in any single interpretive claim than in the discipline, applied consistently across both findings, of keeping each claim tethered to a pattern of evidence rather than to an isolated symbolic detail. Theoretically, the analysis demonstrates that such a reading can keep its interpretive claims answerable to a pattern of evidence rather than to an isolated symbolic detail, the same verification standard the Interactive Model sets for its conclusion-drawing stage. Practically, Williams's trajectory offers an account of authentic living that does not require dramatic circumstance to be recognized: the office routine describes a way of living many readers will find familiar, and the playground demonstrates that the alternative to it need not be dramatic to be genuine. *Living's* most demanding suggestion, on the reading developed here, is not that a terminal diagnosis is required to live authentically, but that most of what such a diagnosis removes, the illusion of infinite time, the excuse of institutional deferral, could in principle be set aside without it.

CONCLUSION

This research demonstrates that Mr. Williams's pre-diagnosis *Bad Faith* is a coordinated condition sustained simultaneously at the personal, institutional, and domestic level, rather than an individual trait confined to any one of these contexts. His subsequent Authenticity is reached through a documented sequence rather than a single conversion: a diagnosis that removes the illusion of unlimited time, a failed escape to *Worthing* that clears away easier evasions while yielding one unfinished act of self-expression, a disclosure of his condition to a person outside his usual social roles, a sustained civic project pursued through the very institution that once sustained his *Bad Faith*, and a death that completes, rather than merely repeats, that earlier unfinished expression. Read against six previous studies of existentialism in film, Sartrean *Bad Faith* proves structurally reproducible under comparable institutional pressure regardless of the specific mechanism that produces it, and Sartrean Authenticity is properly defined by the ownership of a freely made choice rather than by whether that choice is directed inward or outward, a conclusion Kurosawa's *Ikiru* independently corroborates through a different film and theoretical vocabulary entirely. This research also contributes a methodological demonstration alongside its interpretive conclusions: that a Sartrean reading of narrative cinema can proceed without asserting philosophical labels over isolated images or props, and can instead keep each

interpretive claim, that the office routine constitutes Bad Faith, that the diagnosis constitutes Facticity, that the playground constitutes Authenticity in action, answerable to a body of behavioral evidence recurring across more than one scene. Practically, Williams's trajectory suggests that the alternative to institutional self-erasure need not be dramatic to be genuine: the office routine documented here describes a way of living many readers will recognize without difficulty, and the playground demonstrates that a different response need not take a dramatic form to be authentic. Future research might extend this analysis by examining *Ikiru* directly with the same method used here, by treating *Living's* secondary characters, Margaret Harris or Wakeling in particular, as Sartrean subjects in their own right, or by conducting an audience-reception study to test whether viewers exposed to Williams's trajectory report the kind of reflection on freedom and responsibility this analysis argues the film is capable of prompting.

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