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Cultural entrepreneurship in fashion: Insights from an existentialist reading of *Emily in Paris*

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ARTICLE HISTORY

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ABSTRACT

The Netflix rom-com series *Emily in Paris* revolves around Emily Cooper, who has been assigned by her Chicago-based employer to work for Savoir, a subsidiary marketing agency in Paris. In this paper, *Emily in Paris* is approached as a showcase of cultural entrepreneurship, and the existentialist reading of the series reveals a distinct symbolic universe that harbours the characters' existential conundrums as they organize themselves and others in the course of their everyday lives. The revelation of this symbolic universe, it is argued, adds to the conversation about cultural entrepreneurship issues of power/resistance, management hierarchies, and technology.

KEYWORDS

Sartre; existentialism; organization theory; *Emily in Paris*; top-down management; power; resistance; technology

Introduction

The Netflix rom-com series *Emily in Paris* has attracted attention for its lavish portrayal of Parisian life. In focus is young American Emily Cooper, who has been assigned by her Chicago-based employer to work for Savoir, a subsidiary marketing agency in Paris; and the story revolves around Emily's experiences with a world of haute couture, exclusive perfumes, fantastic food and sparkling champagnes. Trying to blend in, Emily dresses in the latest and exquisite fashion and becomes a notable influencer – just as Lily Collins, who plays the leading part in the series, has become something of a style icon, following in the steps of Audrey Hepburn.

Research on the TV series has mainly been about cultural clashes in the workplace, capitalising on stale stereotypes of American and French ways of (business) life (see for instance Pratt, 2023; Harrod, 2023), and about gender relations and women stereotypes (see for instance Sádaba et al, 2023; Kaftal, 2024). *Emily in Paris*, we argue, could also be approached as being about cultural

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entrepreneurship – or, put slightly differently, and more to the point, about "*initiatives within the art and cultural sector that aim to establish new forms of organized practices*" (see Ericsson, 2023, p. 2; for the practice perspective on entrepreneurship here adopted, see also Gartner (1989), Steyaert & Katz (2004), and Steyaert & Hjorth (2007)). In Emily's dealings with both her boss and colleagues at Savoir and her clients, such as the eccentric fashion designer Pierre Cadault, his flamboyant rival Grégory Elliott Duprée, and Antoine Lambert, the sturdy CEO of the perfumer Maison Lavaux, the TV series simply appears as something of a showcase of the precariousness of initiating and establishing new forms of organized practices both inside and in-between organisations.

Emily in Paris in this regard comes through as a field representation of how characters of different (dis)positions struggle to appropriate cultural capital and convert it into economic capital (Bourdieu, 1984; 1988). To date, such struggles are well described, problematised, and theorised in research conversations on entrepreneurship in the field of culture (see Leadbeater & Oakley, 1999; Lounsbury & Glynn, 2000; Ellmeier, 2003; Hjorth, 2007; Lange, 2009; Scherdin & Zander, 2011; Scott, 2012; Ericsson, 2018). In this paper, however, the initiatives to establish new forms of organized practices in *Emily in Paris* will be problematized from an existentialist point of view.

The reason for turning to existentialism is twofold. Firstly, the plot in the series is overtly existentialist, almost on the brink of being naïve, as Emily learns French through the Sartrean philosophical catchphrase "*not choosing is still a choice*"; visits the Café de Flore, the very epicentre of existentialism in the 1940s and 1950s through its clientele consisting of, among others, Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and Albert Camus; and experiences vertigo of freedom as she stands in front of the possibilities of an unknown future to come. Covertly, however, an existentialist reading of *Emily in Paris* reveals a profound symbolic universe that seems to efficiently harbour the characters' existential conundrums as they organise themselves in constant relation to others. The revelation of this symbolic universe, we argue, contributes to the conversation about entrepreneurs in the cultural fields and the multi-faceted challenges these characters face in practice. In this regard, we adhere to those researchers who employ fictitious empirical material to advance the understanding of organisational realities, criticise and perhaps even destabilise ingrained practices and notions (see, for instance, Czarniawska-Joerges & de Monthoux, 1994/2005; Hassard & Holliday, 1998; Rhodes & Pullen, 2012; Buzzanell & D'Enbeau, 2014). This research practice seems to be gaining in popularity, not the least amongst scholars in the field of entrepreneurship. Recent readings of entrepreneurship in popular fiction include, for example, TV series such as *The Wire* (Adamo, 2023) and *La Reina del Sur* (Llamas-Rodriguez, 2021).

Secondly, a turn towards existentialism contributes a conceptual framework that could be used to cast new light on organisational phenomena, such as cultural entrepreneurship. On an overarching level, existentialism opens up a space for reflection in which conflicts, contradictions, dilemmas, and ambiguities are not perceived as problems to be solved or managed, but as fundamental aspects of what it means to exist as a human being. Such a space is conspicuous by its absence within entrepreneurship theory, and so is the use of existentialist concepts such as freedom, responsibility, and angst (to name but a few of the most well-known) (see, however, Goldsby & Mathews, 2015; Torrès et al, 2022). On a more specific level, a close reading of some of Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialist writings also brings about a novel perspective on entrepreneurship seen as initiatives to establish new forms of organised practices. In this regard, Peter Fleming (2022) has meritoriously drawn attention to 'the lost organisation theory' found in Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1960/2004) and the exciting future research avenues this theory prompts. In this article, we intend to traverse these research avenues.

In the next section, we outline existentialism's overarching tenets as well as Sartre's lost organisation theory, as depicted by Peter Fleming (2022). Our methodological considerations ensue, followed by our reading of *Emily in Paris* and the revelation of the TV series' existentialist universe. In the concluding discussion section, we outline how this universe enrichens the conversation about cultural entrepreneurship seen as initiatives within the art and cultural sector aiming at establishing new forms of organized practices.

Existentialism and organisation theory

Existentialism is often, with sweeping references to Jean-Paul Sartre (1943/2018), described by the catch-phrase "*we are our choices*", and many home in on existential philosophy as a matter of choices, mundane and pivotal, but nonetheless choices, that have consequences for our lives (Aho, 2020). To reduce existentialism to only a matter of making individual choices, and problematising the existential consequences thereof, would however be to pick only one thread from the intricate fabric that constitutes existentialism – and it would be to discard the array of intersected assumptions and ideas that need to be considered to grasp the existentialist meaning behind "*we are our choices*".

First of all, "*we are our choices*" breaks with the essentialist assumption that human beings have some sort of essence, an inner nature, and that this essence determines the human condition. It is the other way around, existentialists argue: existence precedes essence (for a discussion see Aho, 2020; Webber, 2018). Human beings are not only free to create their existential conditions, but they are also capable of doing so in and through their consciousness. And, simultaneously, as they create themselves by merely existing, they create the meaning and values they ascribe to themselves. In this regard, "*we are our choices*" also breaks with the assumption that there are essential meanings or values in the world that precede human existence. To the existentialist, the human being is thrown into a world devoid of essential meanings but is free to fill it with meaning. However, exercising this freedom becomes absurd as one senses the precariousness of human existence, being on its own in a meaningless world (see e.g., Sartre, 1943/2018; de Beauvoir 1947/2018).

Secondly, the individual freedom to choose, implied by "*we are our choices*", is not unconditional. It is limited by facticity, that is, all the things that present themselves as 'given' to us, be it part of our culturally shared and mediated life-world or be it part of our subjective past in terms of previously made choices that affect our life trajectory into the future (see Sartre, 1943/2018). Existentialists do, however, tend to acknowledge the ability of humans to transcend the facticity; "*we are our choices*" in this regard rests on the assumption that humans are free and capable of forging their existence beyond the facticity. This in turn means that individuals are forced to actively confront life's many alternatives, its complex dilemmas and ambiguities – and to make active choices that may have life-changing consequences (see Aho, 2020).

Thirdly, the freedom of making active choices that might alter one's course in life entails the possibility of always choosing and acting otherwise. Existentialists therefore emphasise that individual freedom always is coupled with responsibility – for our choices, for our lives, and for our future (see Aho, 2020). And in this sense, the freedom of human existence produces a fundamental angst, anxiety or anguish (see (Aho, 2020).

In the perspective of the assumptions residing behind the catchphrase "*we are our choices*", existentialism can lead in many different directions. One could, for instance, following Sartre (1943/2003) and de Beauvoir (1947/2018) focus on the non-essentialist mode of being, and refrain from searching for universal knowledge claims. One could, in line with Kierkegaard (Thielst, 1995), direct one's interest towards the human endeavour of creating a meaningful life; or one could follow in the footsteps of Camus (1947/2002) through the absurdness of life. Or one could turn to Bakewell (2016, p. 5), and acknowledge that existentialism embraces all walks of life in the sense that it is a philosophy about "*expectation, tiredness, apprehensiveness, excitement, a walk up the hill, the passion for a desired lover, the revulsion of an unwanted one, Parisian gardens, the cold autumn sea at Le Havre, the feeling of sitting on overstuffed upholstery, […] the thrill of a boxing match, a film, a jazz song, a glimpse of two strangers meeting under a street lamp.*"

Sartre's lost Organisation Theory

Given the basic assumptions of existentialism, and Bakewell's (2016) way of outlining what existential philosophy could potentially be about, it is somewhat puzzling that existentialism has not attracted more attention amongst organisation scholars. Maybe, Peter Fleming (2022, p. 2) speculates, existentialism (and its leading figure, Jean-Paul Sartre) has been deemed "*too exotic*"; maybe, the Foucauldian turn simply outmanoeuvred existentialism; and maybe, the fact that Sartre (and many of his existentialist fellows) advocated revolutionary violence all have something to do with the absence of existentialism within organisation theory. Nevertheless, argues Fleming (ibid.), existentialism, specifically Sartre's writings, offers the potential to explore organisations. Instead of delving deeply into what can be outlined as Sartre's most central work, Being and Nothingness (Sartre, 1943/2003), Fleming, however, turns to Sartre's unfinished, and highly intricate work, *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (Sartre, 1960/2004 and 2006).

Critique of Dialectical Reason is largely a political project in which Sartre, at great length, attempts to conjoin existential philosophy and historical materialism. Listening in on the contemporary debates at the time, Sartre claims that issues of agency such as voluntarism and the freedom of individual choice are being neglected, and he argues that this neglect has resulted in overly deterministic understandings of social phenomenon. Sartre's project is therefore to resurrect the Marxist idea of a dialectic between agency and structure, paying equal attention to both. To achieve this, he first picks up Marx's notion of praxis, which acknowledges the transcendental character of human agency through which people not only can reflect upon and oppose, but also move beyond, seemingly institutional orders and reified social conditions. Secondly, he directs his attention to a phenomenon that he asserts expresses praxis in its purest form: the fused group, as the translator calls it in Volume One (Sartre, 1960/2004), or the group-in-fusion, as another translator in Volume Two (Sartre, 2006) conceptualises it.

To understand the meaning Sartre inscribes into the concept of group-in-fusion, one needs to follow an intricate line of reasoning that derives from a distinct existentialist postulate: the pure praxis of the group-in-fusion is initiated and developed by collectives that reject being regulated by objectivated structures (i.e., structures that are socially constructed but experienced by actors as being objective) under which agency is made impotent. Such structures Sartre labels practico-inert, "*a government of man by worked matter strictly proportionate to the government of inanimate matter by man*" (Sartre, 1960/2004, p. 458).

The practico-inert structures create a very specific milieu and co-existence in which individuals are perceived, and perceive themselves, as being interchangeable, with no volition, and with no sense of a common objective or goal. Each individual acts in isolation and out of pure self-interest, and there is consequently no room for solidarity, reciprocity or altruism. Instead of fostering cooperation and concerted action, practico-inert structures give rise to devastating alienation and other types of unintended consequences that offset the mere possibility of reaching an end state, a finality, subjectively embraced by the individual. These unintended consequences

Sartre conceptualises in terms of counter-finalities, and these are assumed to be largely amplified by the technology at hand (Sartre, 1960/2004, p. 90).

In this regard, Sartre (1960/2004, p. 262) identifies serialization as being an integral part of the practico-inert structures, and he argues that passivity and alienation are triggered when individuals are ordered as numbers in an ordinal series, and when they are treated, and treating themselves, accordingly as abstract, discrete, and interchangeable entities. His prime example is the bus queue, where the queueing individuals together form a series, ordered by temporality, that is, their place in the queue is based on their time of arrival at the bus stop. The passengers are complete strangers to one another and, as such, they are interchangeable. If one passenger for whatever reason leaves the queue, no questions will be asked, the next in line will simply take a step forward, and so will all the others waiting behind. This fact means that it does not matter who is in the line – and no one takes a concrete interest in the other. As a passenger, I am only guided by my self-interest – to arrive where I am headed on time – and I am disinterested in my fellow passengers' intentions or objectives. In this sense, we might very well have the same individual goal, but there is no common mission or goal that binds us together. The seriality thus produces "*an empty form of sociality*" (Fleming, 2020, p. 4).

As a collective, the queue is regulated by the practico-inert structure in terms of the transportation system: the bus, the bus driver, the timetable, and so on. Over this structure, the individual has little power and control. If the bus is late or if there are changes in the timetable, there is simply nothing to do about it. On the one hand, it seems pointless to raise a complaint or to organise the other passengers in a joint protest against the structure; on the other hand, however tempting it might be for an individual to leave the queue as a protest, this will only make the individual late for work – at the same time as the vacancy in the queue is filled by someone else. "*Within a series*", Fleming (2020, p. 5) concludes, "*resistance seems futile*."

Serializations of collectives of this kind is in a sense the very emblem of modernity. It is the blueprint for the modern state apparatus as well as for the modern corporation's assembly lines and piece rate systems, and its accompanying processes of mass distribution and mass consumption. Sartre (1960/2004, p. 272) suggests that modernity's dominant institutions simply thrive upon the practico-inert. Citizens, workers, and consumers are kept at bay; as serialised objects everyone knows their place – and they neither possess the powers to oppose being objectified nor have the fortune to refrain from objectifying others. Despite its alienating effects, modernity's dominant institutions simply encourage serialization.

Not all of modernity's serializations of collectives, however, are equally troublesome from an existentialist perspective. The most troublesome ones are to be found whenever there are scarce resources, as when supply exceeds demand in the job market. In such a context, a factory worker on the assembly line faces a precarious situation: not only is the work in itself, by design, a small cog in the machinery, devoid of power, control and meaning, but there is also the imminent threat of being replaced by someone else, and the anxieties associated with such a threat.

It is against this backdrop of serialization that the concept of group-in-fusion acquires its raison d'être: A group-in-fusion is a collective that breaks free from the serialization that is keeping the individuals in the collective at bay. Together, the individuals of the collective negate the very rationality of the seriality: instead of promoting self-interest, the communal interest is promoted; instead of focusing upon the regulation of individuals, freedom for all is in focus; and instead of inertia, movement. The impetus for breaking free from the yokes of serialization is, according to Sartre, some sort of crisis, a "*conjunction of historical circumstances*" (Satre, 1960/2004, p. 401), in which resistance is deemed to be a more viable option than passively remaining in the series. A common interest is recognised as well as the potentiality of a common praxis, and eventually, a sense of fearlessness develops amongst the serialised objects that pushes them into becoming a union of concrete, non-replaceable human subjects.

There is no simple linearity in terms of 'cause and effect' that dictates the transition from serialization to group-in-fusion. One can neither predict the emergence of a group-in-fusion nor its materialization – nor identify any leader or followers. It is a matter of spontaneous concerted action by sovereign equals, and it simply happens when it happens. In terms of how group-in-fusions are structured there are, however, some common features, according to Sartre (1960/2004, p. 378). In contrast to the practico-inert structures which decrease the individuals' freedom and power as the number of objects in the series increases, the individuals' freedom and power in the group-in-fusion increase as more people join the protest; groups-in-fusion are characterised by a 'we' mediated by ternary (or trilateral) relations through which an individual's praxis constitutes every other individual's praxis as well as the praxis of the group-in-fusion; and authority is dispersed amongst the members of the group-in-fusion so that everyone has the capacity to both give and take orders.

Once a group-in-fusion has materialised, it represents an opening into an unknown future. Sartre (1960/2004, p. 446 ff), however, sketches the typical trajectory the group-in-fusion might follow, if it survives the initial spark of protest and uprising, and manages to develop some formal structure in terms of pledges or statutes. The pledged group and the statuary group are nothing but transitionary states towards organisations (or rather: organised groups) that are both formal and in-fusion, and that may develop if the praxis is not corrupted by centralised power, impersonal authority or top-down hierarchies. If so, the organisation fails, and turns into an institution populated by once-free subjects who voluntarily served a common good, but now have turned into serialised objects forced to obey an impersonal power structure's will and orders. And if so, there are (once again) good motives for the mobilization of a group-in-fusion: The protest against the practico-inert continues in a Sisyphus-like manner.

Methodological considerations

In hindsight, the very idea to use the TV series *Emily in Paris* to explore cultural entrepreneurship from an existentialist perspective appears to us as a serendipitous concoction of preunderstandings and fortuitous events. One of us was working on a thesis project on corporate governance with the intent to confront the research field's essential assumptions with existentialist ones, whereas the other of us, besides supervising said thesis project, was forming a research group on art, culture, and entrepreneurship when two things occurred at the same time: We both happened to read Peter Fleming's article on *Sartre's Lost Organisation Theory*, and one of us happened to binge watch *Emily in Paris*. As we started to discuss Fleming's article, one thing led to another in an abductive manner: our horizons fused (Gadamer, 1975) and our intentionality became directed towards existentialist aspects of *Emily in Paris*.

Once we had formulated the overarching research idea, to offer insights into the conversation on cultural entrepreneurship by proffering an existentialist interpretation of *Emily in Paris*, we decided that we each watch all of the thirty released episodes with our subjective consciousness actively tuned in on existentialist aspects. The intention was to identify events, scores or themes that appear to be meaningful or sensitizing (Blumer, 1953) from an existentialist perspective. For one of us, watching the series took the form of prima vista, for the other re-watching the whole series with, so to speak, 'fresh eyes', entailed putting all things within brackets that otherwise would be interesting for a viewer with a 'natural attitude' such as plot, narrative and drama.

To assist us in the work of identifying existentialist meaningful themes, events and scores, we created a protocol consisting of an array of different existentialist concepts, some of which were of a general kind (i.e., freedom, responsibility, and angst) and some of which were taken from Peter Fleming's (2020) article on Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (i.e. seriality, fused groups, and statuary groups). This protocol helped us record and categorise, for each episode in the series, our experiences of the possibility of creating a fruitful conversation between our theoretical framework and the empirical material at hand. It also helped us keep track of existentialist themes recurring throughout a season, even extending into the following seasons. If anything, this approach to the empirical material resembles carrying out a semi-structured interview, as it, metaphorically speaking, enabled us to ask theoretically informed questions of the material.

After having watched the first three seasons of the TV series independently (season 4 aired during the fall of 2024 after our paper had been submitted for publication), we compared our respective subjective categorizations and interpretations. On the one hand, we found them largely to overlap, indicating a high degree of intersubjectivity between us; on the other hand, we found some divergent readings of the material, resulting in somewhat differing categorizations and interpretations. These differences prompted conversations between us, not to close the interpretative gap between us, but to develop a deeper understanding of the ambiguities and subtleties of our categorizations and interpretations as well as the empirical material. These conversations also forced us to engage actively in theoretical work; talking about our empirical experiences with the use of the theoretical concepts, playing around with different interpretations, and engaging in what Wright C. Mills (1959) once labelled "*sociological imagination*".

In the following section, our theoretical categorizations and interpretation have been interwoven with the presentation of the series' narrative.

An American in Paris

Emily in Paris opens in media res; the American marketing company the Gilbert Group has acquired the French luxury marketing agency Savoir and is about to send one of its managers, Madeline Wheeler, to Paris to assist in the merger process. However, Madeline turns out to be pregnant and needs to be replaced. Madeline's protégé, Emily Cooper, is therefore offered the opportunity to go to Paris, and she chooses to accept, even though her boyfriend is very sceptical about it – and even though she barely speaks a word of French.

The narrative – and the way it unfolds during the series' first season – is in many regards existentialist in character. On the one hand, Emily has made a more or less life-changing decision to move to Paris – and now she has not only to live with the consequences of this decision, adapting to the facticity of French culture and Parisian life, but also to question much of the things she has taken for granted about herself and who she thinks she is. Once in Paris, she changes her Instagram username from @emilycooper to @emilyinparis and followers abound as she begins to document her Parisian life in daily posts; she breaks up with her boyfriend who refuses to visit her in Paris, and who does not accept long-distance relationships; she makes new friends both outside and at work; she falls in and out of love; she starts to take French lessons; and step by step – or rather: croissant by croissant – she becomes more and more accustomed to the French culture and way of life. Slowly but surely, she reinvents herself in and through all the choices she makes.

On the other hand, Emily's enculturation process conveys overtly existentialist meanings. These are, for instance, made apparent by one of her colleagues, Luc, who already in the first episode tries to make her understand the difference between the American and the French approach to life: "*Americans, you live to work, we work to live*". Hearing this existential proverb, Emily looks thoughtfully at Luc, and something in her eyes reveals that she is not fully grasping the difference but that it seems to make sense to her, that existence is far more important than the essence of work. Later on in the series, in episode 7, Luc once again, captures the difference between Americans and Frenchmen in existentialist terms, as a response to Emily talking about going to the movies to “*escape life*”: “*Thinking you can escape life is your pro*blem”, he states, and continues: “*You can never escape life. Never*.” In such regards, *Emily in Paris* presents itself as an existentialist rom-com.

Ringarde!

Emily’s reinvention of herself is indeed not an easy task. The facticity of Parisian life and French culture limit her range of choices of action and her existential freedom – and so does her American cultural heritage. For example, as a young American woman she is appalled by Savoir’s male chauvinist clients and sexist marketing campaigns, and she finds it extremely hard to accept the mixing of ‘business and pleasure’ that takes place at Savoir to the extent that it seems to form the very basis of the operations.

Emily’s attempts to refuse to align her choices with the dominant facticity, trying to chisel out her existence beyond the limits of both the American and French cultures, cause her to constantly find herself in Catch-22 situations both in private and at work – and at the intersection of the two domains. She is however not the only one experiencing inescapable dilemmas, contradictions, and ambiguities; it is a mutual process, especially between her and her colleagues. And her sheer presence at Savoir seems to provoke anxiety amongst her colleagues.

This anxiety surfaces already in episode 3 when it becomes apparent that the Gilbert Group’s takeover of Savoir is a hostile one, or at least is interpreted as such by the employees at Savoir. In an early morning video call, Madeline informs Emily that she will send over the “*corporate commandments*” from the Chicago office so that Emily could give “*them an idea of our best practices*”. In a somewhat ironic but joyful tone, Emily responds: “*I’m sure they’ll love to hear those, especially from me*”, foreseeing that the head office’s best practices will not be well received at Savoir, and foreseeing that she, as the messenger, most likely will be killed. It turns out that she is right in both her foresights.

As she arrives at the office with Sylvie, Savoir’s head of operations, whom she met on her way to work, Luc and Julienne confront her with the commandments which are read out aloud with deep resentment. “*Thou shalt always maintain a positive attitude*”; “*Thou shalt be on time*”; “*Thou shalt praise in public and criticize in private*”; and “*Thou shalt avoid workplace romances*”. Luc and Julienne are shaking with anger, whereas Sylvie expresses sheer astonishment. As Emily tries to defend the commandments by quoting yet another commandment, “*Thou shalt remember that we are all a team*”, to which she adds “*And there is no I in team!*”, Sylvie’s astonishment is turned into a malicious smile. “*Well*”, she says, “*the French word for team is équipe. And there’s an I in équipe*”. The scene ends with Luc desperately yelling out at Emily: “*You would like to destroy our French soul!”*

Luc’s and the other employees’ reactions to the corporate commandments, give a perspective to the opening scene of the series, in which Emily is coldly received at Savoir. Sylvie rolls her eyes at Emily’s lack of French, at her American business attitude, and at her naïve focus on “*content*” on social media; and her colleagues ridicule her by refereeing to her as “*la plouc*”, the hick. Although, Emily tries to ‘talk back’, and strongly opposes the outright workplace harassment she is exposed to, the bullying of Emily, as an objectified American business token, continues throughout the first season. For example, in episode 5, Sylvie tells Emily; “*It’s not you personally. It’s everything you stand for. You’re the enemy of luxury, because luxury is defined by sophistication and taste, and not by emilyinparis*”, and then Sylvie forces her to delete her Instagram account. Seeking comfort from her new friend Mindy, Emily desperately addresses the absurdity of her predicament – or in existentialist terms, the technological counter-finalities: “*I’m not sure who I am in this city without emilyinparis!*”

Another situation, imbued with both bullying and absurdity, takes place in episode 6, in which Emily, Sylvie and Julienne are to meet the iconic haute couturier, Pierre Cadault. It is a meeting filled with anxiety, not only because it is important for Savoir from a business perspective, but also because Cadault is feared for his moody temperament. Emily is therefore instructed to keep a low profile, which she does. However, at the sight of a charm on Emily’s handbag, Cadault yells “*Ringarde!*” (translated in the series to “*basic bitch*”), rushes out and threatens to terminate his account at Savoir. Emily is blamed for having offended Cadualt, and Sylvie puts Emily in “*quarantine*”. Later on, in episode 10, as Emily’s relationship with Cadault has become even more complicated, partly due to her romantic relationship with Cadault’s nephew Mathieu who is in charge of Cadault’s haute couture line, partly due to Pierre Cadault’s cancellation of his yearly fashion show, Sylvie fires Emily. “*So, now we have a fashion designer without a fashion show which is almost as meaningless, as an American who doesn’t speak French at a Parisian marketing firm*”, Sylvie angrily shouts at Emily, and continues: “*Get out of my office. Clear out your desk. Don’t show your face here ever again.*” Emily is basically nothing but a serialised object.

At the end of season 1, everything is, however, set right at Savoir. The French bureaucracy of getting Emily fired takes its time, and in the meanwhile, Emily proves herself worthy of running the Cadault account. Sylvie thus grants Emily a second chance at Savoir, but now new storms are on their way, as Emily has sex with Gabriel, the boyfriend of one of her best friends, Camille, who also is one of her clients, representing the champagne label Champère. On top of that, Gabriel, who works as a chef, teams up with Antoine Lambert, who not only is the owner of one of Savoir's clients, the perfume company Maison Lavoux, but also has an extramarital affair with Sylvie. And, at the same time, Emily is about to go on a romantic weekend with Mathieu in St Tropez. Serialisation is apparently not restricted to practico-inert structures at work, but is also at work in love relations. Consequently, season 1 ends in true chaos for Emily.

C’est la vie. C’est comme ça!

In the opening of season 2, Emily is frantically running the streets of Paris, on the verge of fainting and almost being hit by a car. In the background, Julietta’s Beach break is playing, with its existentialist lyrics: “*We wanna dance, but are swimming in a black hole*”. When Sylvie gets to know about the dilemmas Emily is facing, she gloatingly summarises the situation: “*Oh, Emily you’re getting more French by the day. ... Focusing on having sex with a client to get your mind off your friend’s boyfriend.*” In the following episode, Sylvie conveys yet another existentialist truth to Emily: “*You’re gonna have to live with the consequences of your infidelity. Emily, c’est la vie. C’est comme ça.*”

From an overall perspective, the following episodes in season 2 turn into a sort of existentialist ‘coming of age’ for Emily – and for many of the other characters. The plot thickens as new characters enter the stage and new complications and dilemmas arise. For example, Emily finds herself falling in love with Alfie, although she is also in love with Gabriel; Gabriel is occupied with establishing his new restaurant, but is overwhelmed by all the decisions he has to make yet at the same time satisfy the will of his investor Antoine Lambert; and Camille, of course, finds out about Gabriel’s affair with Emily, breaks up with Gabriel, and sees to it that Emily is fired from the Champère account.

In episode 7, things become even more complicated, as Melanie re-enters the plot. In a video call between her and Sylvie, a deep rift between them is disclosed. Melanie wants Savoir to market Pelotech, a provider of expensive cycle exercisers, but Sylvie strongly opposes it. “*Just because* *it's expensive, it doesn't mean it's luxury*", she explains. "*You know, I'm sorry, but it's just not a fit for my office*." Melanie's reaction to Sylvie is a blunt exercise of power: "*Your office? Let's table this for now. And in the meantime, I will send you the Gilbert Group's hierarchy of objectives*." "*Please don't*", Sylvie replies before she hangs up the phone. By Sylvie's facial expression, one can tell that she is emotionally shaken by the situation.

A French revolution

In light of Sartre's existentialist framework and his 'lost organisation theory', the situation Sylvie experiences is the outcome of practico-inert structures. Under the Gilbert Group regime, it becomes evident to her that there is little (if any) room for her to act on the things that she finds to be true and/or meaningful; and it becomes crystal clear to her that there is no common ground between the Gilbert Group and the people at Savoir. Alienation is beginning to take hold of her, and it firmly establishes itself in episode 9, as Melanie flies to Paris to make an unannounced "*executive check-in from the Gilbert Group*", as she calls it. Melanie now takes over Sylvie's office and bosses her around, as if to make sure that Sylvie is in no doubt about who is really in charge. And, in conversation with Emily, Melanie reveals that she is considering firing Sylvie. To which, Emily strongly objects, but in vain: Melanie has made her mind up, heads are about to roll.

Sylvie – as well as the other employees at Savoir, including Emily – is now increasingly sensing the consequences of serialization: they are not only deprived of their agency and self-esteem, but they are also constantly reminded of their subordination. A telling scene takes place in episode 10, in which Melanie wants Savoir to try to sign up the fashion designer Grégory Elliot Duprée even though this most likely will make them lose the Pierre Cadault account due to a conflict of interest. Sylvie tries hard to explain to Madeline that "*This is not how we run a company*", but it is like talking to a wall of stone. "*Excusez-moi, Sylvie*", Melanie replies, "*but your company is a subsidiary of an American conglomerate who would like to be in business with two major designers. That's how we run our company.*" Silence follows, and then Sylvie, head down, sighs heavily and says, to everyone's, but Madeline's, dismay: "*I stand corrected*." That is to say, resistance is futile.

Later on, in yet another telling scene, Madeline explains her actions to Emily: "*I don't need wilful execs with ten years of bad habits they need to unlearn. I need little mounds of clay that I can mould into the exact team that I want.*" "*Like me?*", Emily asks. "*Exactly. You're my little terminator*", Madeline replies, and orders Emily to make her a cup of tea.

The serialisation and its alienating effects culminate in the closing scenes of episode 10. Savoir gets the account for Grégory Elliot Duprée, but it is at the expense of losing Pierre Cadault as a client. Madeline blames Sylvie for this, but Sylvie dryly states that the only one Madeline has to blame is herself. At this "*insubordination*", Madeline threatens to schedule Sylvie for a 360 review in Chicago, but Sylvie wants otherwise. She resigns, and she takes the whole office with her – except Emily. "Consider it a French revolution", she says, and demonstratively walks away with Luc and Julienne. Emily is shocked, and yells after them: "*Why didn't any of you tell me?*" Sylvie answers: "*This isn't personal, Emily. It's business*."

A group-in-fusion is thus created: Sylvie et al. have fearlessly broken free from the Gilbert Group's practico-inert structures, and now head into an unknown future. Presumably, they have experienced, and framed, the situation as an existential crisis, and deemed it more viable (perhaps even necessary) to proactively confront the crisis, as unionised and concrete subjects rather than passively being suffocated as discrete, abstract, and replaceable objects. For Emily, not being part of the group-in-fusion, "*everything is up in the air*", as she tells Alfie when seeking his comfort. However, out of the blue, Emily receives an iMessage from Sylvie, reading "*Free for lunch?*", and it turns out that Sylvie, Luc, and Julienne want Emily to join their new firm. It also turns out that most of Savoir's clients already have agreed to come along. One of them, Grégory Elliot Duprée, has however one condition: that Emily heads his account. "*He wants you. We want you*", Luc emphasises. In other words, the freedom and power of the individuals in the group-in-fusion will increase if Emily joins them. "*Take your time. Think*", says Sylvie.

In the closing scenes of season 2, Emily is facing some major decisions. On the one hand, she either joins Sylvie et al.'s group-in-fusion, and stays in Paris indefinitely, or carries on as Madeline's terminator, and goes back to the States. On the other hand, she either continues her relationship with Alfie or explores what her interrupted love affair with Gabriel might lead to. "*I used to be so decisive*", she whines over her predicament, talking to Mindy: "*I used to want the things that I should want. And ever since I moved to Paris, my life has just been chaotic and dramatic and complicated. But also incredible and beautiful too*." "*You have a life here*", Mindy replies and goes on to convince Emily to tell Gabriel that she is in love with him. As she is about to do that, however, it turns out that Gabriel and Camille are back together.

In the very last scene, Emily is walking the street of Paris, shaken, and crying. She stops and picks her up her phone, and calls Sylvie: "*I've made my decision*".

Ne pas choisir, c'est encore choisir

The cliff-hanger from season 2, is followed up in season 3's opening scene at the Eiffel Tower: Emily is confronted by both Madeline and Sylvie, and as she shies away from them, she falls off the Tower. It is, of course, a nightmare to symbolise the dilemma she is facing, as well as the existentialist vertigo she experiences in a world of unsolvable dilemmas and unmanageable contradictions. She is simply suffering from the consequences of having said yes to Sylvie's offer, without having the courage to notify Madeline about her choice. She is now working for both the Gilbert Group and the group-in-fusion headed by Sylvie – which in turn opens up new dramas and controversies.

Season 3 in this regard iterates the existentialist plot of the previous seasons, but extends it to also incorporate the intricate processes and dealings associated with the group-in-fusion materialisation and transition into a pledged or a statuary group. Vis-à-vis the group-in-fusion, Emily experiences both ups and downs: in one episode she is fired by Sylvie, in another she is rehired again; and at times it seems as if the group-in-fusion is on its way to erect practico-inert structures with accompanying serialization, alienation, and seeds of its own destruction.

Emily's existentialist coming of age thus continues but is now bolstered by outright lessons in Sartrean philosophy provided by her French teacher. In class, Emily is given the assignment to translate a quote from Sartre – "*Ne pas choisir, c'est encore choisir*", which Emily correctly translates to: "*Not choosing is still choosing*". But she finds herself compelled to ask: "*What does it mean?*" The teacher frowns. "*How to explain existentialism… Have you heard of Sartre?*" Emily nods. "*He believed*", the teacher continues, "*humans are condemned to make choices to define themselves in an absurd world with no rules. Even not choosing has consequences so it's still a choice*." Emily seems to understand, but she cannot refrain from asking: "*How do we know we are making the right one?*" "*To Sartre there was no right or wrong*", the teacher says. "*You simply choose with conviction and live your life*". Emily, with disappointment in her voice, says: "*Well, that's not helpful at all!*" "*No one said existentialism was helpful*", the teacher concludes.

And so the story unfolds, with continued focus on the existential tribulations of a more-or-less helpless protagonist, trying to live with the choices she makes as well as the choices she does not make.

Discussion

Based on his reading of Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, Peter Fleming outlines the contours of, as he calls it, "*a distinct Sartrean organization theory*" (2020, p. 8). This theory he conceptualises in terms of three key themes that he sees as "*suggestive*" for organisational scholars: power and resistance, management hierarchies, and technology. We believe it to be fruitful to translate Fleming's key themes into the research field of entrepreneurship, and – based on our existentialist reading of *Emily in Paris* – to sketch some tentative propositions on the phenomenon at hand, namely, cultural entrepreneurship in terms of initiatives within the art and cultural sector aiming at establishing new forms of organized practices.

Our first proposition concerns the power of serialisation and the extreme hardships associated with trying to resist being subjugated under it, and breaking free from its terror. In this regard, Fleming draws attention to the four factors that seems to be necessary requisites in the formation of a group-in-fusion: 1) The situation at hand is, for whatever reason, perceived as unbearable, and this to the extent that any change is judged as more bearable than remaining in status quo; 2) This perception is shared by a collective of individuals; 3) The choice of resistance is an existential one, it entails risking it all – and taking a step into the unknown; and 4) The decision is mediated by "*a social apparatus of communication*", most often kept in secret (Fleming, p. 9). These factors, we propose, not only necessitate, but also characterise the enactment of cultural entrepreneurship.

Our second proposition draws upon Sartre's idea that the adoption of practico-inert structures is a matter of choice – just as the forming of a group-in-fusion is a matter of choice. This idea, argues Fleming (2020, p. 11), invites organisation scholars to consider alternative forms of organising such as self-governance and manager-less organisations, as well as to adumbrate alternative organised futures based on cooperative and dispersed power structures instead of seemingly inevitable top-down management hierarchies. Against this backdrop, and from the perspective of how management hierarchies are represented in *Emily in Paris*, we are inclined to propose two things. Firstly, that cultural entrepreneurship, on the one hand stands in sharp conflict with top-down management hierarchies and on the other thrives upon bottom-up initiatives by creative peers. Secondly, we propose that cultural entrepreneurship should be regarded as a field phenomenon rather than a formal organisational phenomenon. Practico-inert structures, with its processes of serialisation and alienation, simply know no formal boundaries; they reside in and between formal and informal organisations, as well as in and between the public and the private spheres. Cultural entrepreneurship seems to be a virgule phenomenon, that is, something that thrives at the intersection of different domains (see also Ericsson, 2018).

With our third proposition, we pay attention to the counter-finalities produced by the practico-inert structures, and Fleming's observation that modern technology tends to amplify institutions' unintended consequences. Fleming (2020, p. 8) makes reference to Sartre's metaphor, "*Tools turn on their users, transforming them into 'the machine's machine'*", which holds even though the tools are invented to facilitate everyday life. For example, automobiles came into existence to improve mobility, but have contributed to pollution and global warming; and e-mails were invented to ease communication between people, but contribute to information overload, stress and a culture in which employees are expected to be available 24/7 (Fleming, 2020, p. 11-12). In the era of digitalization and digitization, counter-finalities amplified by technology will almost certainly abound, and in this regard, Fleming urges organisation scholars to critically question processes of self-alienation induced by computer use, AI, and so on:

> *A Sartrean organization theory asks what this machine-saturated environment does to people's ontological capacity to learn, emote, create, play and so on. For Sartre, our repeated attempt to be human – perhaps the baseline finality preceding all others – is persistently sabotaged by the tools we use; they end up shaping us instead." (Fleming, 2020, p. 13)*

In the light of *Emily in Paris*, and how Instagram is used by the series' protagonist to both reinvent herself and form a powerful field presence, yet at the same it interferes with the practico-inert structures to the extent that she experiences somewhat of an existential crisis, it is close to hand to propose that technology represents a double-edged sword. On the one hand, technology enables entrepreneurship in culture. On the other hand, it constrains entrepreneurship in culture.

Taken together, our three propositions form a specific existentialist narrative: Entrepreneurship in culture is about forming a group-in-fusion, bottom-up by creative peers in a collective, in reaction to an unbearable situation evoked by alienating practico-inert field structures through which individuals are treated as serialised objects, that is, as abstract, discrete, and interchangeable, both in private and in formal and informal organizations; and it is an existential endeavour both enabled and constrained by technology. To our mind, this narrative contributes to the conversation about cultural entrepreneurship in decisive ways as it weaves agency and structure together in a novel way, fencing off both over-simplistic individual trait perspectives, which most often lead to exaggerated adoration or heroization of the exceptional individual, and structural explanations under which cultural entrepreneurship is seen as a powerless and passive execution of deterministic cause-and-effect relationships. As such, it conveys an emancipatory sense moral – for both aspiring entrepreneurs and researchers in the field of culture.

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