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The Sheltering Sky – Existentialism & Disorganized Attachment

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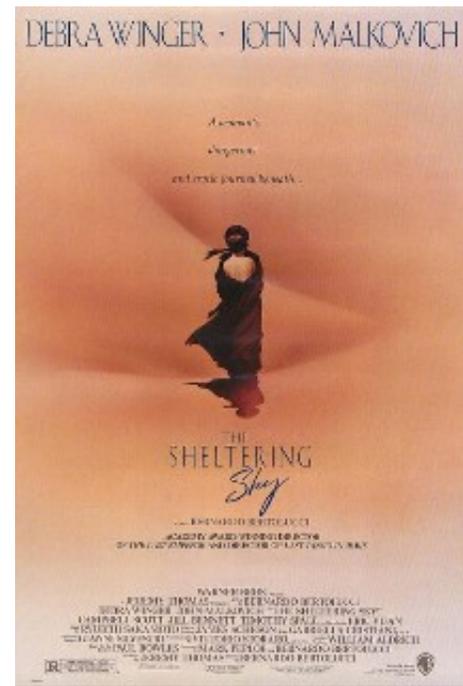
Betty Kershner, PhD. is a Registered Psychologist specializing in both adults and children, from infancy onward, and recently moved her office to West Toronto. She has worked with and consulted in a wide range of settings and is familiar with many types of concerns and solutions. She is able to offer assessments and treatment. Please Contact her here.

Why does Kit leave? Why does she take the hand of an exotic stranger and climb onto the back of Belquassim's camel, going off with him into the unknown? And why does she flee again, after being devastated and then rescued from hospital,

failing to seek safety or to learn to conform after what most of us would see as a colossal mistake made in the throes of harrowing grief? Having amply demonstrated her inability to take care of herself, why does she ferret off, as if locked on target, and avoid Tunner, who would be only too happy to idolize and idealize her? These are some of the questions that press themselves upon us, while events press upon our protagonists, as we watch *The Sheltering Sky*.

The Sheltering Sky

First, the existentialist background. Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Sheltering Sky* is the 1990 film version of the 1949 book by that name, by Paul Bowles. Bertolucci, consistent with his personal convictions, put his own Marxist spin on it in places. It is a story of alienation. Bowles, the author of the book, was an American expatriate existentialist, part of the philosophic and literary circle in Paris following wartime Nazi occupation that included Sartre and Camus among many others. Existentialism became extremely fashionable at the end of WWII re-asserting, as it did, the importance of human individuality, choice and freedom that had been so acutely threatened by Fascism. Existentialism is a search for, one might say a hunger and an appetite for, meaning. Simone de Beauvoir described existentialism as the first media postwar craze.



Theatrical release poster *

In *existentialism*, the individual has the sole responsibility to create meaning in one's own life and to live that life passionately and sincerely, authentically, in spite of despair, angst, absurdity, alienation and boredom. Existentialism does not view itself as an abstract philosophy based on ideas and rationality. It sees meaning as arising from the concrete, practical circumstances of one's history and situation –

and the choices that one makes within that specific context.

Existentialism views existence as inherently pointless. The individual is defined by the meaning that they have chosen to create, by their values and their actions. It is their freedom, and their responsibility. Angst arises from the dread of that freedom and responsibility. It is the sense of standing on the edge of a cliff and being afraid not only that you might fall, but also that you might throw yourself off: that there is nothing predetermined holding you back. You have the freedom to destroy yourself.

Angst arises from the dread of that freedom and responsibility.

To lead an authentic life in existentialism, one must make choices. One must not capitulate to the randomness of chance.

The world can achieve a sense of objective reality through shared experience with another person who sees it in the same way and construes similar meaning. Loss of that other person can lead to loss of any sense of understanding the world. Without them, the world and the self can revert to absurdity. Everything can break down. Then, one is confronted with the unreality of what one had thought was real. In existentialism, despair is the truly human condition because one is constantly vulnerable to having one's world break down, to face the naked meaninglessness of life, the chaos held back by the sheltering sky. The results can be devastating.

An Existentialist Reading

Now, I turn to an existentialist reading of *The Sheltering Sky*, which was written unabashedly from that point of view. The story follows three wealthy Americans, portrayed by John Malkovich, Debra Winger, and Campbell Scott, the son of George C. Scott, who take themselves further and further from the civilization that they know and the meaning that they have rejected, into absence of meaning and values, death and madness. Port and Kit, married ten years, set off to break their boredom, escape from a fashionable life in New York that they consider empty, and attempt to rekindle their relationship. They are accompanied by Tunner, who is enamored of Kit and who will follow where they go and pretty much do what they do, but there are limits for Tunner that do not exist for Port and Kit. The three label themselves for us. Port is a traveler; he may never return, and he does not return. Tunner is a tourist; he will go home. Kit is half and half. More to the point, our tourist Tunner is ready to observe a new and different world view as an outsider, while sticking within his own world view. Our “traveler” Port abandons his past understanding and is ready to embrace a way of life and a view of reality that is something altogether different.

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We learn at the outset that Port does not recognize any ties to place or past. He does not care if he does or does not return. He does not acknowledge home or history as having any meaning for him. This is a failure from an existentialist point of view. Within existentialism, Port is free to give whatever meaning he chooses to his past. But it is a failure of responsibility and a mark of inauthenticity if he does not give it any meaning at all. Our narrator, the author Bowles himself, emphasizes this lest we miss it, telling us that Port and Kit do not understand that time passes and does not return: it is limited. They act as though time does not matter, but it does. Time carries them through a series of events. Without their active choice, those events have no meaning and their life is inauthentic.

We first meet our trio as they emerge from the ship that has brought them across the Atlantic. Porters carry their extensive baggage, just as Port does on a metaphorical level for Kit. In a play on words, Port's name points both to the shelter that he offers Kit in her existential storm and the packaging, containing and carrying of what they together hold dear and essential in their lives: that much of meaning that they have created together.

Tunner, their companion, tags along like a one-ton anchor weighing them down to a less intellectualized, less abstract and more practical view of reality. Later, Port cuts Tunner loose and he and Kit are unbound, drifting without anchor into dangerous waters and oblivion. Disembarking from the boat, Tunner pronounces, "Terra Firma". But this is a delusion according to existentialism, a mistaken belief that the world is solid and possesses inherent meaning. We shall see this comforting illusion stripped away, layer-by-layer, as they journey on.

"It takes energy to invest life with meaning and at present this energy was lacking"

Port will not allow himself to be defined by others and he will not do the job himself. He does not admit to any profession or any attachment to a place of residence. He admits only to being married to Kit. Only in their relationship has he created any meaning for himself. In his quest for freedom, he denies his past, while

admitting only that he once composed music. We see that music speaks to Port, but he does not acknowledge it. He smiles begrudgingly or mockingly at Kit's declaration to the border official that he is a composer. He emphatically has no plan for what he is going to do or where he is going. His plan is to have no plan. He embraces random chance. While he is an existentialist hero, at least in Kit's eyes, recognizing and embracing the harshness and despair caused by the absurdity of life, he fails to take the responsibility that comes with that freedom from predestination: the responsibility to create his own meaning. In the novel, Bowles writes of Port, "It takes energy to invest life with meaning and at present this energy was lacking".

The African Sahara is a striking metaphor for a universe that is overwhelming in its vastness and emptiness: a place that absorbs you in its physicality but is without inherent meaning, offering the opportunity to imagine and create, which neither Port nor Kit do.

Kit is less committed to existential emptiness than is Port. She does not quite feel up to the task. Unlike Port, who can live without meaning and seems to feel most comfortable that way; who, according to Kit, could live alone, without her, Kit is far from comfortable. She actively runs away from any choice, even whether to choose the train that she is afraid of or the car ride with the “monsters”. She does not want to make decisions. She does not want to hear a word of philosophy from Tunner or even about Port’s dream, which she fears contains some ill omen. She is afraid of any kind of potential meaning. When Port asks her why she has said that she does not trust Tunner, that her words must mean something, Kit tell Port, “Of course it means something.” But she shuts the door in Port’s questioning face and does not want to even think about what she herself might mean.

the meaningless of life is something that she believes is true but is afraid of. She does not accept the challenge to create meaning.

Meaning is not a responsibility that Kit wants in any shape or form. For Kit, the meaningless of life is something that she believes is true but is afraid of. She does not accept the challenge to create meaning. She leaves it blank, unformed, inchoate. Meaninglessness threatens to break through at any moment for her, and Kit indulges in her phobias, superstitions, alcohol and sex to try to evade it. She tries to really believe that

nothing matters. She tries not to realize that she wants a more ordinary life, one that is stabilized in a location and might even give her children along with a husband who will share her bedroom and know and tell her if she snores. We see her look longingly if briefly at children, enjoying their company. She smiles at the boy

shinning her shoes in the café and delights in the antics of the boy to whom she gives her helmet on the caravan. After her sexual encounter with Belqassim, we see her play dreamily with an empty child's swing, a Madonna smile on her face.

When Port dies, Kit's fragile belief in the world as solid and her sense of her place in it and her own identity collapse. We see her put on Port's jacket, trying to keep him with her and retain some sense of how he saw her, of who she is. He was her mirror. We see her finger her wedding ring as she sits beside but not with Belqassim, and mourn. As Port lies dying, Kit is in denial. She sobs that she is so glad that Port has come back. She thinks that he is better and does not recognize that this is his last interaction with her. Her panic is not for Port: it is for herself. There was no-one to talk to and she was alone. She thought that she would go crazy. She believes that she cannot live without Port to give her a sense of reality. As she had told Tunner, Kit does not believe that she should be alive or that she has what it takes on her own.

The sky breaks for Kit with Port's death, there is no longer any sheltering.

The sky breaks for Kit with Port's death, there is no longer any sheltering. Kit is confronted with the enormity behind the sky, existence without meaning, absurdity that she cannot withstand. She puts on Port's jacket, packs her notebook, shuts the door behind her, does not look back, and goes off. In a

daze, acting without rhyme or reason, she accepts random chance, joining the first caravan that happens by. Her Sheik of the Desert, her Rudolph Valentino, smiles charmingly, and she is captivated. For the flash of a second, in the midst of her mourning, she is ready for romance. She chooses to reject reason and embrace absurdity.

Kit actually begins to create shared meaning with Belqassim, in a way that she

could not with Port. She allows herself to be soothed and seduced. She appears content after sex with Belqassim, certainly more so than after sex with Port. Belqassim approaches Kit as if she were a baby. He teaches her language, plays with her toes, and smiles with delight while seeming to play a game like hide and seek with his and her head cloths. When he looks at her and makes love to her, Kit relaxes. She seems to feel validated by his gaze and contact, rather than obliterated by Port's negations. Belqassim wants Kit. He falls head over heels for her, walking backwards in front of the camel. There is a sense of possibility in their mutual gaze and play.

Kit behaves like a child. She cuts out paper designs from her notebook, using them to decorate the room like hanging a child's drawings on a refrigerator. I stopped the tape again and again but could read only a little of what Kit had written on her pages. Much of it looked like the kind of scribbling from someone who is only just learning how to write, with ill-formed letters of different sizes, mostly in print. She wrote about Belqassim going away on a trip. She asked if she could come back. She asked if she was BLUE, written in large letters. I believe that the "blue" referred to the blue colouring on the hands of Belqassim and all his women, including Kit, and on her face; as well as emotionally 'blue". I wonder if she was asking herself if she could come back to a sense of herself, to feel again a sense of identity, to be aware of her own emotions, as one of Belqassim's women, as if she were being reincarnate in a new person.

But his wives would not have it, or her. They expel Kit, who is lost now not only in a desert but among indifferent or hostile inhabitants. She tries to pay for food with French money, it is all she has, trying to assert her old sense of reality now that the new has rejected her, but they will have none of it. She can be neither her old nor her new self. She is nothing. She cannot breath and collapses in a panic attack.

When we see Kit next, in hospital, she has been traumatized. She does not speak and is barely responsive to what is going on around her. Leaving the taxi in front of the Grand Hotel, where she has been taken by the attachee from the embassy, she wanders into the café where she was a lifetime ago with Port.

“Am I lost?” she asks the narrator, with a smile. “Yes”, he answers. To Bowles, the narrator in the film and the author of the story, we are all lost. It is just that only some of us know it. “Lost”, is where Kit feels at home.

To Bowles, the narrator in the film and the author of the story, we are all lost. It is just that only some of us know it.

Attachment Theory Interpretation

I will turn now to another interpretation of the film, based on attachment theory. In this interpretation, the hunger in the film is for relationship. Nowadays, in certain branches of psychology, it is all about relationships.

Attachment theory, like Existentialism, was jump-started in reaction to World War II. It grew out of research and observation with displaced children. Attachment is a basic human need, hard-wired in by evolution. We come to it as part of the animal kingdom. In the wild, survival of the young is more likely if they have the protection of an older, stronger more capable figure, usually a parent. If a lion comes along looking for a meal from among a herd of gazelle, the infant gazelle that stays close to its mother stands a better chance, while the sick or old are picked off instead. If that young one were left on its own, it would be easy prey. To survive, the young must learn which way to turn in times of danger, and they must turn there quickly and efficiently.

Attachment is a two-way street. In humans, new parents tend to respond favourably to the “cuteness” of their infant, which they find endearing. In the normal course of events, parents find their infants compelling. They pay attention to them; they form a bond.

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Secure attachment occurs when an infant or youngster can take for granted that her special adult will be there for her: will provide not only food, shelter and protection but, in times of stress, will do what is needed and will offer comfort. The attachment figure will make the child feel safe and cared for. The youngster learns to run to the adult when feeling threatened. They learn which way to turn. That is the

strategy that secure youngsters develop for times of stress: to turn to the attachment figure.

If the adult is not dependable or not very competent, the child is in a bad situation and must develop another strategy to deal with danger. If the adult does not care or does not stick around, then the child must learn somehow to try to take care of itself. They put their effort into that, in an organized manner. They develop a strategy to do things on their own, to depend on themselves.

In *Disorganized Attachment*, there is no organized strategy for the child to respond to threat, no coherent procedure to follow when in danger, for turning to their attachment

In *Disorganized Attachment*, there is no organized strategy for the child to respond to threat, no coherent procedure to follow when in danger, for turning to their attachment figure or depending only on themselves. Children in this type of relationship do not know what to do for safety and comfort. For example, if a parent is sometimes loving and other times abusive, the child

figure or depending only on themselves. Children in this type of relationship do not know what to do for safety and comfort.

does not know when it is safe to turn to them. The parent may be the one who frightens the child. The child wants to go to the parent for comfort and protection, but the parent is the source of danger. In research, we see that children in this type of situation tend to freeze, or to behave in a disorganized manner.

The child does not know what to do. They stand stock-still or they go one way and then the other, making no progress in any direction. They are unable to develop a successful strategy to use when they are threatened. They try to approach a relationship but then they retreat from it. Their strategy is incoherent, disorganized.

A small child knows that he does not yet have what it takes on his own, what is needed to survive. He will feel the weight of existence and his vulnerability within it. He will feel terrifyingly alone. It is overwhelming, vast, empty, desolate and threatening.

When Kit and Port go to Africa, they hope that somehow the trip will enable them to reconnect with each other, but they do not know how to do it. Neither one of them has a coherent strategy. They love and want each other but do not know how to establish or maintain a secure attachment. They are stressed and threatened by the increasing disintegration of their marriage. The stress heightens the need to do something, but they are more apt to do something counter-productive rather than helpful. Each turns to infidelity, seeking relationship but going in a direction away from the one that they really want. They are disorganized.

Port knows how to talk in foreign languages, but he does not know how to talk in the language of intimacy. Kit is skilled at bluntly stopping conversation. They care for each other at a deep level that they do not understand and cannot articulate. Port tries to tell Kit his dream. She does not want to hear the words because she

already knows the meaning. She is distressed when Port says that he was telling the dream to Tunner as much as to her; Port has used his dream to open his feelings to Kit, but then has refused to acknowledge their special bond and has withdrawn by saying that Tunner was his target as much as she was. Port has approached and then withdrawn from their intimacy, in classic Disorganized style. Later, Port tries to get Kit to accompany him on a walk or at least to talk to him but she refuses and he leaves, angry. He goes to a prostitute. Port and Kit take turns trying and rebuffing, approaching and withdrawing. Their attempts to reach each other do not succeed. She goes out on the balcony after he storms out but he does not turn around to look until after she has given up and retreated back inside.

A Disorganized attachment style can be overcome in years of treatment or in the course of a long-term, secure relationship such as a satisfying marriage. Port and Kit mirrored the same problem. They were not able one to help the other. Perhaps Belqassim could have helped Kit, had she remained. She might have morphed into a happy tribal wife. But this was not to be. Ejected, put out on her own in an unfamiliar, harsh and threatening environment, Kit has no strategy and does not know where to turn in her distress. She lacks internal resources and has not internalized a belief that someone really could be there for her and available to her. When Tunner comes back into her life, she rejects him and turns away, retreating from a prospect of security with someone who cannot understand her disorganization and malaise; cannot connect with who she really is. She is happy as she confides in our narrator, admitting yes, she is lost. That is where she is familiar and where she expects to be: in the eye of the storm, facing annihilation. Lost and alone is where she feels that she is real: a compulsive repetition of the inability to connect.

A Disorganized attachment style can be overcome in years of treatment

Some evidence suggests that the author, Bowles, may have been familiar with the experience of disorganized attachment, writing that state of mind into his narrative.

According to family legend, Paul Bowles' father tried to kill his newborn son by leaving him exposed on a window ledge during a snowstorm. Whether or not this story is true, Bowles believed it. Bowles senior was a cold and domineering parent, opposed to any form of play or entertainment. He was feared both by his son and his wife. Such warmth as the younger Bowles received came from his mother, who read to him. Bowles later attributed his desire to write to the authors he heard in his childhood, especially Poe. He certainly retained Poe's melancholy and dread.

Bowles married, after which both he and his wife continued to lead their sexual lives outside the marriage with same-sex partners. After his wife died, Bowles remained alone in his home in Tangiers. He received many visitors and gave many interviews. Asked about his social life in 1988, at age 78, he replied, "I don't know what a social life is...My social life is restricted to those who serve me and give me meals, and those who want to interview me."

As you can see, the movie is open to a variety of interpretations. It is richly full of symbols and suggestions. I invite your insights, interpretations and questions.

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