

# Writing as Existential Resistance: The Doctor, Narrative Gaze, and Cyclical Despair in Krasznahorkai's *Sátántangó*

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This article reframes the doctor's obsessive writing as a form of existential resistance, arguing that narrative gaze functions not as withdrawal but as a paradoxical assertion of agency within Krasznahorkai's cyclical world. Drawing on Sartre's theories of "Hell is other people" and the "Gaze", this essay argues that by refusing to establish genuine relationships with others, the doctor resists social oppression while simultaneously wallowing in self-alienation and extreme solitude. Furthermore, drawing on Nietzsche's idea of the creative power of life, this essay explains that the doctor's act of recording is not only a form of rebellion against the absurd world but also a creative practice through which he seeks meaning amid despair. The doctor's existence shows "the cycle of hope and despair", revealing an individual's existential courage when confronts with nothingness amid collapsing order. This study aims to propose a new interpretive approach for the philosophical interpretation of *Sátántangó*.

*Keywords:* Krasznahorkai, *Sátántangó*, narrative gaze, existential resistance, writing and agency, cyclical temporality

## Introduction

Current research on *Sátántangó*, both domestically and internationally, primarily analyzes the novel through Dystopia and Utopia themes (Xin Jing Bao, 2017; Chaoxing Discover System, n.d.; Aravindan & Mishra, 2025; Liu, 2009; Gyorgyey, 1995; Nawotka, n.d.; Nawotka, 2025), the political awakening of Eastern European nations, postmodernism, and Post-realism (Sun, 2023). And some critics have focused on its narrative technique of the time loop and have spoken highly of its redemptive nature, characterizing it as a "redemptive story".

In response to doctor's behavior, Zsadányi Edit offers an innovative interpretation from the perspective of narrative theory. It posits that the doctor actually serves as the embodiment of the author—not only documenting the villagers' actions but also constructing the narrative framework (Edit, 1999). The doctor resists not merely the collapse of narrative but also the very existence of *Sátántangó* as a work, echoing its themes of despair and hope (Liu, 2009)<sup>0</sup>. While existing scholarship has extensively examined *Sátántangó* through Dystopian politics and cyclical temporality, the doctor's writing has largely been read either as narrative device or authorial surrogate. What remains underexplored is how writing itself operates as an existential practice under conditions of social collapse. Thus, this essay will examine the doctor's mode of existence in *Sátántangó* through an existentialist lens.

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## **Isolation and Gaze—The Doctor’s Self-Marginalization**

### **“Hell Is the Other People”—Sartre’s Other Theory and the Doctor’s Dilemma**

The world of *Sátántangó* exhibits an Existentialist tendency. The author uses metaphor to imply that values like Humanism, Fairness, and Integrity may have already eroded. The villagers’ deceit and Illimias’s betrayals amplify the darkness and sinfulness of human nature, precisely affirming the notion that “the world is absurd”.

Sartre articulates his Other theory, exploring the individual’s predicament within social relations. In the text, the conflicts in interpersonal relationships dragged the doctor into a hellish situation. At his home, “The doctor ignored the unbearable smell as he did everything else that did not directly impinge on his observation post” (Krasznahorkai, 2012, p. 91)<sup>0</sup>. While observing and recording, the doctor confined himself to a room with the light perpetually on, compulsively maintaining the order of the environment around him.

The meticulously ordered interior materializes what Sartre describes as the internalization of the Other’s gaze: the doctor disciplines himself as though constantly observed. The perpetually lit room, the terrifying external world, and the unalterable seating arrangement—these spatial constraints imposed an inescapable pressure, stifling any possibility of development and change.

### **Reversal of Gaze: From the Gazed-Upon to the Observer**

Sartre has closely linked the act of gazing with his existentialist reflections. He supposes that the Gaze, as a fundamental mode of interaction between the self and the other in society, plays a unique role in awakening one’s awareness of existence. To resolve this tension and achieve a state of being-itself, one must engage in the act of the Gaze.

Gaze is not merely an act of looking at others, but also the demonstration of power. When an individual is objectified by the gaze, they may redirect their gaze back toward the Other in attempt to restore and maintain their own subjectivity, thereby forming a cyclical power dynamic between the Other and the self. In *Sátántangó*, the doctor attempts to reclaim his subjectivity through the act of recording: “He observed everything meticulously and continuously ‘recorded’ all that he witnessed, sparing no effort and leaving no detail, however trivial, unnoticed” (Krasznahorkai, 2012, p. 94).

By transforming the recording into a form of Gaze, he created what could be described as a mad Observation system. This system represents the doctor’s resistance to the oppressive alienation of his environment—an attempt to achieve self-redemption through the reversal of Gaze, thereby breaking through the isolation and boundaries imposed by reality. Moreover, the power of the counter-gaze proves particularly crucial in existential struggles for dominance. Further negating the Other through gazing, the doctor reclaims his for-itselfness, realizing that the self need not depend on others, thereby regaining the impetus and possibility to reconstruct his own world.

## **Writing and Creation: The Will to Exist and the Illusion of Self**

### **The Symbolic Significance of Closed Writing**

According to Kristeva, an “intertextuality” exists among written texts, achieved through the rewriting and re-connection of pre-existing texts (Ge, 2025). Bergson placed great emphasis on the idea that creation is initiated by human beings, viewing writing as essentially an act of “remembrance”—a proactive retrieval of the past (Guo, 2024)<sup>0</sup>. Writers throughout history have recognized this conscious act of writing and employed it in their works

to highlight characters and themes. Through writing, they generate resistance against the systemic, cultural, and catastrophic forms of forgetting, thereby achieving self-redemption.

In the doctor's writing process, he regards writing as an auxiliary tool for himself to preserve memory and resist oblivion. The doctor insists that the daily recorded movements constitute a repetitive pattern, while Kierkegaard distinguishes between "remembrance" and "repetition". In his work *Repetition*, he argues that remembrance is a passive process of looking backward, while repetition involves not only integrating past experiences into the present state, but also gaining new insights and transformations (Liu, 2017). Nietzsche proposes the concept of "long-lasting will". Doctor's behavior achieves what may be called true memory through an active, persistent act of not forgetting, directed toward social morality, responsibility.

### **The Collapse of Language, Time, and Existence**

In the final chapter "The Circle Closes" of *Sátántangó*, the doctor, with trembling fingers, begins writing the opening of the story in the deserted village. The echoing bell sounds at both the beginning and end forming a closed loop. At this point, the doctor transcends his role as a mere chronicler to become the narrator of the story, achieving a shift in perspective and a transformation of spatial layers. Through his distinctive "tango" narrative structure, László reveals the embedded framework of the story is that the doctor is the creator of the entire narrative. All actions, including his own, are those of created characters.

According to Zsadányi, the meta-intervention at the novel's conclusion and the doctor's narrative act form a structure of displacement. A second reading of this structure situates the doctor's reporting within a context where such writing has already been prefigured by a higher-order narrative. At this point, readers may feel deceived, having been led to believe that the characters authored their own destinies. This illusion is exposed when the work draws attention to its own fictionality. Here, the doctor's writing—resistant to obliteration and posited as a possible narrative stance—is already pre-inscribed by the writing perceived in the first reading, echoing the cyclical temporality and deconstructive qualities of language characteristic of Krasznahorkai's fiction.

## **Anxiety and Hope: The Absurd Order and the Rebirth of Self**

### **The Philosophical Dimension of Existential Anxiety**

In *Sátántangó*, the doctor's writing behavior is accompanied by severe, even pathological, anxiety. Since returning home from the town's hospital, he has experienced an increasingly suffocating anxiety. This state of suffering persists until the end of the narrative. How can the nature of his anxiety be interpreted from an existentialist perspective, and what underlies the causes of such anxiety?

The essence of the doctor's anxiety lies in the awakening of his own existence. As he witnesses people fleeing famine and the world's evils and despair, his sense of being feels threatened and negated, giving rise to anxiety. In Tillich's theoretical framework, the awareness of the threefold threat manifests as three forms of anxiety: anxiety about fate and death, anxiety about emptiness and loss of meaning, and anxiety about guilt and condemnation (Tillich, 1984). Among these, the unpredictability of death perpetually situates human existence under the shadow of its possibility. While fate is contingent, death remains inevitable. Within the immediacy of present existence, individuals inevitably develop an apprehension toward death—that is, anxiety regarding fate and mortality. Thus, he realized that his insignificance was bravely against the ravages of death and fate. Humanity's eventual destruction is inevitable with the passage of time. Therefore, he chose to confront this decay through the act of preserving his own memories.

## Despair and Hope

Sartre provided significant supplements to his work “Being and Nothingness”, addressing the humanistic implications of Existentialism and asserting that hope is always present in modes of action (Sartre, 2012). In essence, “Existentialist Humanism” builds upon the premise that “existence precedes essence”: Humans possess absolute freedom, and their actions and choices define their being. Since human choices create personal values, individuals must consequently assume full responsibility for themselves (Sartre, 2012).

Responsibility constitutes a core concept in Existentialism—human beings cannot evade it, and from this arises his definition of despair: Despair is not the antithesis of hope. Despair is the belief that my fundamental project cannot be realized; thus there exists in human reality an essential conviction of failure. This represents Sartre’s elaboration on the concept of despair.

## Conclusion

Behind *Sátántangó* there not only exists László’s political metaphor about utopia and dystopia, but it also reflects his contemplation on the absurdity of the world and the fundamental nature of humanity. By reading writing as existential resistance rather than narrative function alone, this article contributes to current debates on Krasznahorkai by re-centering agency within narrative stagnation. Although László often depicts black humor and apocalyptic horror, he created the character of the doctor and, through a clever narrative structure and storytelling techniques, offers people a way to preserve and redeem themselves amid disaster—hope always exists in action and through action.

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