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ABSURDITY IS A DISTINCT AESTHETIC CATEGORY

A THESIS

PRESENTED FOR THE

MASTER OF ARTS

PHILOSOPHY DEGREE

THE UNIVERSITY OF MISSISSIPPI

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MAY 2021

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ABSTRACT

Absurdity is the sudden discomfort caused by direct awareness of your being conscious and your relation to reality. Camus' absurdist philosophy refers to the conflict between the human desire for inherent meaning in reality and the incomprehensible and irrational nature of the universe. Facing absurdity requires confronting the absurd feeling through introspective awareness of this tension. Otherwise, you are overcome by it, succumbing to a lack of mindfulness and avoidance of the confrontation. Absurdity, especially in its aesthetic dimension, has not received the sustained attention it deserves. In this paper, I argue that due to the sustained relevance of the absurd in philosophical literature, artistic movements, digital media, and everyday aesthetic experiences, absurdity should be understood as a distinctive aesthetic category in its own right. I survey absurdity within 20th century philosophical thought and traditional artistic movements. I additionally contend that new media art has reignited interest in absurdist aesthetics in present society. This serves to highlight that absurdity is an aesthetic reaction that can be found both in art and in everyday experiences.

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I.1 INTRODUCTION: THE ABSURD IN AESTHETICS

Absurdist elements have been prevalent in artistic movements through time. Additionally, philosophers with differing theoretical commitments reflected on the absurd, including Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre, Søren Kierkegaard, and Arthur Schopenhauer. Despite shared elements of absurdity in artistic movements and philosophical theories, absurdity has yet to be commonly recognized in philosophical literature as an independent aesthetic category. We need a separate aesthetic category to denote the type of response invoked by absurdist characteristics that do not line up with those of other aesthetic categories seen in artistic and philosophical literature. Absurdity, in a way, is the opposite of dissociation. It is the sudden discomfort caused by direct awareness of your being conscious and your relation to reality. Aesthetic reactions to the absurd must be worked out through a cognitive episode, where you must confront this absurd feeling, or you are overcome by it, which causes avoidance of the confrontation. For Camus, the absurd denotes a relation of tension between humanity's inherent desire to obtain meaning and order in reality and the inability to derive such answers. Sartre clarifies that Camus uses the absurd to denote two types of absurdity. The definition Camus gives references primary absurdity, which is a constant relation existing between humanity's desire for reason and reality's incomprehensibility. Camus also uses absurdity in a secondary sense, where we are directly aware of the overlying primary absurdity and can reflect on it. The secondary sense accounts for the absurd in the realm of aesthetics. In discussion of absurdity in aesthetics, I use "the absurd"

and “absurdity” interchangeably. “Absurdism” refers to Camus’ philosophical theory of the absurd; therefore I do not use the term in reference to aesthetic theories, reactions, or experiences. I argue that absurdity is a distinct aesthetic category, relevant both in art and everyday experiences.

In the first section, I discuss how absurdist art has shifted through history. While elements of the absurd are associated with artistic movements developed during the 20th century, absurdist elements are seen in art dating significantly further back in history. Then, I summarize previous philosophical literature about absurdist theories and absurdist art, primarily focusing on 20th century European philosophy. In the second section, I point out that the absurd has increased relevance in contemporary society, partially caused by digital technology. While I argue that digital technology has caused us to disengage from physical reality, I contend that New Media Art is one means by which we aim to relieve this disengagement by connecting with others digitally. Lastly, I list the elements of absurdity that are relevant both in reactions to art and everyday experiences. Having an aesthetic reaction to the absurd involves affective components, where the feelings of tragedy and humor must work in conjunction. It additionally requires conceptual components, where introspective awareness allows us to fully engage in the experience of absurdity and work through it. These elements serve to distinguish absurdity from other categories of aesthetic experiences.

I.2 HISTORY OF ABSURDIST ART

Typically, historians pinpoint Dadaism as the first art movement expressing absurdist elements, which developed between 1916 and 1922 in Zurich and New York simultaneously.¹ Dadaism adopted elements from previous art movements that began at the turn of the 19th century, such as Cubism's collage techniques, Futurism's "flair for self-publicity," and the bold colorization and linear distortion of German Expressionism.²

While absurdism became a popular topic of discussion in philosophy and a theme in artistic movements during the 20th century, absurdist elements have been present in art as far back as the Prehistoric era. For example, petroglyphs combine incongruous features of animals and humans. Likewise, Medieval illuminated manuscripts combine incongruous elements of animals and humans, depicting what is described in literature as the "monstrous." While some monstrous Medieval art appears grotesque and horrifying, John Morreall, a philosopher of humor, writes that the artist's intention may not be to invoke a reaction to horror, threat, or violence. He suggests that the artist's intended response to the incongruity depicted could be one of humor.³ The monstrous depictions represent the inherent fear people have of death and show that people can temporarily set aside this fear through a distanced appreciation of it, making light of death through humor. Only when the humorous aspects of the art object overpower the tragic

¹ Stephen Farthing, ed., *Art: The Whole Story* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2021), 410.

² Stephen Farthing, ed., *Art: The Whole Story*, 411.

³ Dirk Kloosterboer, "Monstrous Art," *Anthropozoologica* 22 (1995): 23-28.

or the horrific elements can this fear be set aside.

To clarify, I am not contesting that Prehistoric or Medieval art are examples of absurdist art. However, I am suggesting that the combination of humor and the tragic or grotesque could be an aesthetic theme throughout various forms and periods of art. This type of incongruity is worth exploring in connection with other aesthetic theories and artistic movements.

Absurdist elements gained popularity in art in the 20th century in the Western world, partially due to the impact of World War I and II on philosophical thought and artistic expression. The post-industrialized, disordered, and uncertain societal shifts caused by World War II further provoked some philosophers and artists to revolt against social and institutional traditions. During this time, many artists and philosophers were either attempting to escape occupied France or simply carrying on with quotidian life despite the severe abnormalities of current events.

René Magritte often captured absurdity through juxtaposing ordinary objects in his Surrealist paintings. For example, in his 1945 painting, "Rape," the woman's facial features are replaced with the torso and pelvis of a naked woman. The juxtaposition of the facial features with nudity is strikingly grotesque yet humorous. The meaning behind the painting is tragic. There are two distinct tragic elements in "Rape." First, Magritte highlights the way women are consistently sexualized in society by men and social conditioning. Second, the painting is a reference to his mother, who committed suicide when he was 14. He was present when her body was found in the River Sambre. Her nightgown was tangled around her face, and her body was naked.⁴ Surrealism differs from Dadaism in that Surrealism intends to illogically juxtapose

⁴ Rape, 1945 by René Magritte," René Magritte Biography, Paintings, and Quotes, accessed April 15, 2021,

ordinary objects to invoke a psychological reaction, particularly of the subconscious mind. On the other hand, Dadaism intends to depict the illogical and meaninglessness in mockery of social and artistic standards. However, both have shared absurdist elements in juxtaposing illogical objects that often highlight tragedy and incongruous humor.

Aside from paintings, absurdist elements in early 20th-century art also made a mark in film, photography, plays, and literature. Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí used jolting, lustful, and nonsensical imagery in their 1929 film *Un Chien Andalou*. In one scene, a woman's eye is cut with a blade, but suddenly the blade becomes a thin cloud drifting softly over the moon. However, some philosophers during the Mid-20th century, such as Simone de Beauvoir, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Albert Camus, thought of film as an inferior form of artistic expression.

In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus asserts that literature was the foremost intellectual and artistically valuable means to express the absurd condition of humanity. He contends that “great” novel writers are those who can express their philosophical views through narrative description rather than overt explanation. Camus points out Dostoevsky's novels as intellectually and aesthetically “great” because Dostoevsky captures the monotonous and tragic circumstances of everyday life with incongruous humor that strikes the reader as absurd. Camus' *The Stranger* often describes monotonous events with jolting internal dialogue to create a juxtaposition with reality's mundane nature while rejecting the reader's expectation with such experiences. For example, Meursault says to a chaplain, “I had only a little time left and I didn't want to waste it on God.”⁵

<https://www.renemagritte.org/rape.jsp>.

⁵ Albert Camus, *The Stranger*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1954), 114.

Similar to Camus' view on novels, in "Philosophy and Literature," Simone de Beauvoir claims that novels as a narrative art form express philosophical approaches to the world better than forms of philosophy that give intellectual reconstruction or formula of the philosopher's experience.⁶ Unlike novels alone or philosophy alone, metaphysical novels grasp "human events in relation to the totality of the world," in a way that no other mode of expression can.⁷

Sam Beckett, the father of absurdist theatre, uses disunity in time, place, and language while mixing comic and tragic elements. Marcel Arbeit writes how comic narratives allow us to mix comedy and tragedy to "emphasize the fact of mortality and the futility of human strivings." Arbeit also notes that happy circumstances often contain tragedy, while tragic events often contain joy.⁸ These absurdist themes can strike the audience as mundane and nonsensical, yet profound in their message. In Beckett's 1949 play (first performed in 1953), *Waiting for Godot*, two characters exchange conversation, arguments, and play games while waiting for Godot, highlighting the monotony of human existence while waiting for something or someone who may never arrive.⁹ Martin Esslin points out that "what happens on the stage transcends, and often contradicts, the words spoken by the characters."¹⁰ The "discursive logic" of dialogues often lack meaningful sentences and are replaced by clichés or the "poetic logic of association or assonance."¹¹

⁶ Simone de Beauvoir, "Literature and Metaphysics," in *Philosophical Writings*, ed. Margaret A. Simons (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 270.

⁷ Simone de Beauvoir, "Literature and Metaphysics," 276.

⁸ Marcel Arbeit, "Desperate and Happy in the Disharmonious World: Lewis Nordan and the Absurd," *The Mississippi Quarterly* 60, no. 4 (2007): 635-660.

⁹ Chris Power, "An Introduction to *Waiting for Godot*," The British Library, last modified May 26, 2017, <https://www.bl.uk/20th-century-literature/articles/an-introduction-to-waiting-for-godot#>.

¹⁰ Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, 2nd ed., (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), 26.

¹¹ Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, 396.

I.3 THEORIES OF THE ABSURD: KIERKEGAARD, CAMUS, AND SARTRE

Moving towards philosophical theories of absurdity, I first give a brief overview of absurdism and Camus' theory of art. Then, I draw on Sartre's critique of Camus' view and offer further comments. I argue that ultimately, Sartre's existentialist aesthetics has a better account of absurdism in aesthetics. Camus lays groundwork for the subject. However, it is not sufficiently developed to maintain his claim that absurdist art is the only art with aesthetic value or the only category of art worth making. Additionally, due to Camus' claim that absurdist art is the only category of art in general, it is not adequately developed to support my claim that absurdism is an aesthetic category distinct from other aesthetic categories.

Søren Kierkegaard, attributed as the father of existentialism, wrote about the absurdity of human existence in his 1846 *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* and his 1849 *Journals and Notebooks*. For Kierkegaard, "The absurd is a category, the negative criterion, of the divine or the relationship to the divine. When the believer has faith, the absurd is not the absurd- faith transforms it, but in every weak moment it is again more or less absurd to him."¹² Kierkegaard's early ideas of existentialism and absurdism inspired later existentialist philosophers in the early 20th-century.

For Camus, existence itself has no inherent meaning, with no divine creator to confide in,

¹² Søren Kierkegaard, *Journals and Papers*, Volume 3, ed. Howard V. Hong (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1975), 7.

catching humanity in a paradox between our conscious impulse to ask questions about reality and the impossibility of obtaining answers to such questions. The absurd “denotes a relation of tension or disproportion” between the incomprehensibility of reality and the insatiable human desire to derive objective meaning, reason, and clarity in it.¹³ Under his view, the only thing that can bond humanity and the world together is the momentary confrontation of this absurdity, which occurs when we are directly aware of it. Camus says, “There can be no absurd outside the human mind,” because absurdity is what makes us unique as a species.¹⁴ It is a uniquely human characteristic to search for inherent meaning, despite the fact that it does not exist.

In the chapter of *The Myth of Sisyphus* titled “Absurd Creation Philosophy and Fiction,” Camus gives his theory of the value of art. It is essential to note that it is an area of contention in philosophical literature whether Camus intended to provide a tenable independent aesthetic theory in this work. Camus never calls it a theory of the value of art, as he does not think that art can have inherent value, but only that artistic creation and appreciation offers us the type of awareness necessary to overcome our absurd condition. Therefore, this work could be interpreted as how he conceptualizes artistic creation, primarily in works of fiction, to support his view that living in awareness of and revolt against absurdity is the only life worth living.

In chapter four, Camus gives an allegory of the absurd through the Greek Myth of Sisyphus. Sisyphus loves life so much that he disobeys the Gods to get more time on Earth after he dies. As punishment, Sisyphus is condemned to an eternity of rolling a boulder up a mountain. His only reprieve is when the boulder slides down from the peak, and he walks back down to the

¹³ Thomas Pözlzer, “Camus on the Value of Art.” *Philosophia* 48, (2019): 365–376. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11406-019-00078-4>.

¹⁴ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, (New York: Vintage International 1955), 31.

plain. Camus writes that:

The workman of today works every day in his life at the same tasks, and this fate is no less absurd. However, it is tragic only at the rare moments when it becomes conscious. Sisyphus knows the whole extent of his wretched condition: it is what he thinks of during his descent. The lucidity that was to constitute his torture at the same time crowns his victory.¹⁵

Sisyphus is aware of his fate, while most of humanity still foolishly searches for a purpose that is never to be found. Sisyphus is aware that his efforts will never be rewarded. Camus ends his essay by saying, “One must imagine Sisyphus happy.”¹⁶ By this, he means that because Sisyphus is aware of his fate, he has some degree of freedom.

We often go through mundane motions of daily life, never quite knowing what we are living for, and do not often reflect that we do not know what we are living for. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus writes:

Rising, streetcar, four hours in the office or the factory, meal, streetcar, four hours of work, meal, sleep, and Monday Tuesday Wednesday Thursday Friday and Saturday according to the same rhythm...but one day the “why” arises... and everything begins in that weariness tinged with amazement.¹⁷

Having lucid awareness of the lack of meaning and reason in metaphysical reality is only the first step to overcoming the despair of human futility. The second step is to respond to this confrontation with an attitude of revolt and rebellion. Rebellion under this view can be described as “a pre-emptive defense against the alienation which would otherwise result from humanity’s absurd condition” by continuing to live despite it and living in awareness of the absurd condition.¹⁸ An absurd person living in revolt lets go of value, hope, ambition, and does not

¹⁵ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 121.

¹⁶ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 123.

¹⁷ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 13.

¹⁸ Guy Bennett-Hunter, “Absurd Creation: An Existential View of Art?,” *Philosophical Frontiers* 4, no. 1 (2009): 47-56.

succumb to suicide. Instead, the absurd person should continue to live in lucid awareness that value, hope, and ambitions have no real meaning.

Camus thinks artistic creation helps us attain lucid awareness, stating that to create is to live doubly because it “makes one more disciplined, more lucid, and more patient.”¹⁹

Additionally, practicing artistic creation can be considered a “rebellion against absurdity, in other words, as a rebellion against reality.”²⁰ Camus compares thought and creation often, stating, “A profound thought is in a constant state of becoming; it adopts the experience of life and assumes its shape. Likewise, a man’s soul creation is strengthened in its successive and multiple aspects: his works.”²¹ While art itself cannot have value, it can have extrinsic value if it allows the artist or observer of the art to become aware of the human condition and adopt an attitude of revolt against it.

In Sartre’s critical exegesis of Camus’ *The Stranger* and *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Sartre clarifies that Camus uses two senses or meanings of the word absurd. It is used first in a primary sense, where absurdity is a “state of fact” contained in the human condition pertaining to the unintelligible nature of reality that humanity desperately and fruitlessly seeks to make sense of, which Camus says results in feelings of alienation.²² Guy Bennett-Hunter writes that “Primary Absurdity is experienced as the alienation of subject from object, of man from the world.”²³ Absurdity is also used in a secondary sense, which occurs when a person experiences a lucid

¹⁹ Thomas Pözlner, “Camus on the Value of Art.”

²⁰ Guy Bennett-Hunter, “Absurd Creation: An Existential View of Art?,” 49.

²¹ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 114.

²² Jean-Paul Sartre, “An Explication of The Stranger,” in *Existentialism is a Humanism*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1947), 73-98.

²³ Guy Bennett-Hunter, “Absurd Creation: An Existential View of Art?,” 49.

awareness of primary absurdity.²⁴ However, neither Camus nor Sartre contends that there are two concepts of the absurd, but instead that the absurd is ingrained within the human condition, and sometimes we are directly aware of it.²⁵

While Camus lays the groundwork for thinking about absurdist art, I would like to discuss the opposition between Camus and Sartre and other points of contention in Camus' view. First, for Sartre, humanity is condemned to freedom. In fact, he believes that artistic creation is an expression of human freedom. Humanity is the only form of life that can decide what it should be, as we have no fixed nature. On behalf of humanity's lack of an explicit inherent nature as a species, humans are not only free to decide their fundamental values and meaning, but we necessarily must do so. The way to find meaning in life is through metaphysical inquiry and artistic creation.²⁶ For Sartre, as we act upon the world, our consciousness reveals what matters to us on a subjective level, even without us being directly aware of it. When we create art, we are willingly arranging and formalizing the meaning we impose upon the object. Then, we can share that perspective with others when they view our artistic creations.

First, I agree with Sartre's conception that the absurdity of life requires us to find personal meaning and genuine value in that personal meaning. Sartre also considers how physical and societal constrictions play a role in how much freedom we can obtain on an individual level. We have no control of the family we are born in, the society we are born in, and the physical ailments we may develop. While we have a degree of freedom to overcome physical

²⁴ Sartre does not define it as secondary absurdity, but philosophers such as Guy Bennett-Hunter and Thomas Pözlner have adopted the name.

²⁵ Guy Bennett-Hunter, "Absurd Creation: An Existential View of Art?," 47.

²⁶ Jean-Philippe Deranty, "Existentialist Aesthetics," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, last modified March 4, 2019, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aesthetics-existentialist/>.

and societal limitations that we live under, there is only so much we are free to do as individuals if we do not have the support of society. Often, the contrasts between the freedom we wish to have over our lives and the freedom we can obtain are a source of absurdity and alienation.

Second, Camus' view on life's inherent meaninglessness focuses too heavily on metaphysical incomprehensibility. Not having a metaphysical explanation for human existence does not justify that human life entirely lacks meaning. As Sartre points out, this does not stop us from self-generating genuine meaning in life on an individual level. So, to find purpose in human existence, we have to set aside lingering metaphysical questions. Other things in nature have distinctive teleological functions that are consistent throughout their species. Humanity's degree of consciousness makes it so that we do not necessarily have a consistent, or at least a knowably consistent, teleological function. As a whole, humanity's function is to support each other within social realms for survival. Beyond mere survival, as individuals, our teleological ends differ because our cognitive states vary vastly, making us value different types of things. This variety offers us a degree of freedom over our condition. Unlike animals whose functions are predetermined, our rationality gives us a degree of choice. We find meaning in these things because they contribute positive value to our lives. As I point out in the third section, creation is a means to relieving this existential angst while also bringing us closer to an understanding of humanity's role in a world over which we lack control.

Third, Camus' view pertains to his claim that the only valid art form is absurd art created by artists who create it in an absurdist frame of mind. For both the art perceiver and the artist, the lucid awareness of their absurd condition brings a degree of value, not to the art itself. In his criticism of Camus' theory of the value of art, Thomas Pözlner writes that promoting an absurd

existence is not sufficient for something to be considered an artistic creation. Suppose Camus' theory of art is interpreted as a stand-alone theory of artistic value. In that case, Camus' necessity claim stating that for art to be valuable, it must promote an absurd existence is too stringent to be plausible. I agree with Pözlner that other types of aesthetic qualities and artistic representations (such as architecture) have artistic value and purposiveness outside of bringing awareness of primary absurdity.

Memorials and monuments invoke aesthetic reactions in commemoration and respect for an influential person or historical event. The symbolization of memorials or monuments does not point out the absurdity of the person or event. Instead, it delineates the importance of remembrance. If the purpose of the creation were to invoke absurd reactions, it would disrespect the person or people involved. By virtue of that, the monument or memorial would be entirely unnecessary and take on a new aesthetic role. Art in museums, such as some pieces in the Louvre, can also invoke aesthetic appreciation towards the importance of historical events. Sometimes art serves a function that carries out the temporal nature of events and keeps the memory alive for future generations to appreciate and honor. Aesthetic reactions to absurdity have an important place among the aesthetic categories. Although, it is not the only aesthetic category, nor does it carry a higher degree of aesthetic value on the list of categories.

II.1 NEW MEDIA ART

Current absurdist artists share the anti-art world sentiments that the Dadaists held. British street artist Banksy revolts against art's value being determined by media attention, elitism, and material value. His art involves elements of both conceptual art and performance art. In the former, the idea behind the art is more imperative to its aesthetic value than the final art object produced. In the latter, the artist's action and its relationship with the audience bring aesthetic value to the art produced. For example, he anonymously creates art on building walls, where it could easily be destroyed or painted over. He celebrates the temporality involved in making his art challenging to preserve or resell. In 2018, his 2006 stencil art produced with spray paint, titled "Girl With a Balloon," sold for 1.4 million dollars at an auction house.²⁷ Once the painting sold, it spontaneously self-destructed by shredding itself.²⁸ Though the stunt was contentious, it was applauded by the media, raising the piece's original value. Similar to famous Dadaists, and despite his anti-art sentiments, Banksy is benefitting from the attention. He sells multi-million dollar pieces to private collectors to fund his street-art stunts while also controlling the prices of art sold in public auctions.

There is a new form of absurdist art that calls attention to anti-art sentiments that do not

²⁷ Steph Rodney, "Banksy's shredded painting stunt was viral performance art. But who was really trolling who?," NBC News, last modified October 18, 2018. <https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/banksy-s-shredded-painting-stunt-was-viral-performance-art-who-ncna921426>.

²⁸ Banksy intended for the painting to completely shred, but the shredder malfunctioned.

draw the attention of the elitist art world. New media art is an umbrella term encompassing art forms produced by digital technologies that started being developed in the 1950s. New media art forms include visual art, digital art, computer animation, computer graphics, video games, interactive art technology, 3-D printing, and Internet art.

The absurdist form of media art I describe in this section is sometimes termed neo-Dadaism, but it is not yet agreed upon in philosophical literature or the art world whether this type of aesthetic expression qualifies as art. For this paper, I describe this type of artistic creation and expression as one form of new media art because it relies on digital technology for creation and redistribution. I discuss three types of absurdity found through new media in the following section. I discuss intentionally absurd Internet memes, intentionally absurd media posts, and unintentionally absurd media posts.

II.2 ABSURDITY IN INTERNET MEMES AND MEDIA

Internet art uses the Internet for production, distribution, and as a medium uniting people for its consumption. Within the category of Internet art falls Internet memes. The word meme is defined as a cultural means of spreading information through ideas, behaviors, or style. It is derived from the Greek word *mimeme*, which means to imitate, and the word *gene* in English, essentially defining a meme as a cultural gene. Absurdist Internet memes are one subset of many types shared on social media platforms. Absurdist memes have become a form of communication and expression especially popular with Millennials and Generation Z. The point is to express the incongruity and tragedy through dark humor that makes light of the absurdity that lingers over our everyday interactions with the world.

Marcel Arbeit points out that absurdity is often connected to the “seeming exhaustion of language,” writing that “utterances tend to become mere phrases and clichés, and even individual words are deprived of meaning.”²⁹ Internet memes often play on this exhaustion of language. Memes encompass a combination of meanings that could not as quickly be expressed through mere explanation, written language, or imagery. Individuals can produce a meme to express their reactions to absurdity and share it with others on the Internet. It serves to be consumed and understood by the cultural context or social group.

²⁹ Marcel Arbeit, “Desperate and Happy in the Disharmonious World: Lewis Nordan and the Absurd,” 640.

Similar to Camus' belief that philosophical ideas should be described and not explained, Internet memes do not implicitly state the intended message. Viewers within the intended social context can interpret the author's intention. One popular meme originates from a six-panel comic. It shows a drawing of a smiling, wide-eyed dog wearing a top hat, sitting in front of a table with a coffee mug on it, surrounded by flames, with the bottom text reading, "This is fine." A further example uses a blurry picture of a grimacing cat with the text, "Father, I crave serotonin." The purpose of absurdist memes is to capture feelings of isolation, depression, anxiety, suicidal ideations, human futility, and current events, which unite people over shared alienating problems. They make light of issues that are typically viewed as inappropriate to talk about during daily conversations.

Some meme formats genuinely try to capture human existence's utter meaninglessness by featuring nonsensical texts or texts about going into the void over a nonsensical image of a floating head in space. One reads, "yall mind if i embrace Platonic Solids?," and another reads, "You may only consume 3 beans, no more, they will know if you consume more." While some argue that it is a waste of time to consume this type of media others argue that absurdist memes are cathartic. Absurdist memes take the mundane, temporal nature of human existence and introduce a way to communicate and laugh about it as a culture. The experience of consuming this type of absurd creation involves defiance to utter meaninglessness and offers a temporary antidote to hopelessness.

Like previous absurdist art movements, absurdist new media art captures the futility of human existence. However, it captures a new type of absurdist element brought by the increased use of digital technology in daily life. Absurdist new media art often layers absurdist elements to

allude to the hyper-digitalization of society. The message is not a reference to the source of the visual content. One does not necessarily need to know the episodes of Spongebob to understand the meme. It creates a connection through the absurd layering of images, sounds, and words to refer to a particular type of psychological state shared about modern society's digital nature.

Absurdist new media art that is visually engaging expresses a type of shared psychological state, particularly with Millennials and Generation Z, and how their memories and experiences are so mediated by digital technology, rather than engagement with the physical world around us. Camus suggests one reprieve from the tragedy of human nature is “to open up to the beauty of nature and partake in it, abandoning oneself in privileged moments of hedonistic communion with wild environments, such as the rugged Algerian landscape or the Mediterranean, or in eroticism.”³⁰ Part of the increased prevalence of absurdity today is caused by digital technology disengaging us from the physical world. In the 20th century, a source of absurdity was caused by industrialization and the divorce between humanity and nature. Currently, we have disengagement caused by the divorce of humanity with nature, layered with humanity's disengagement from the tangible, physical world.

³⁰ Sarah Bakewell, *At the Existentialist Café: Freedom, Being, and Apricot Cocktails with Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Albert Camus, Martin Heidegger, Karl Jaspers, Edmund Husserl, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Others* (New York: Other Press, LLC, 2016), 150.

II.3 INTENTIONALITY AND UNINTENTIONALITY IN ABSURD MEDIA

In the previous two sections, I established that sharing isolating absurd reactions about the human condition is a way to unite people. In the examples included, the content is intentionally absurd. In this section, I compare absurdity in new media that is not intended to strike the viewer with absurdity. Incongruous dark humor is prevalent on social media posts and is recognized as starting around 2008. Weird Twitter uses juxtapositions, non-sequiturs, deliberate violation of causal reasoning, and intentional grammar and spelling mistakes. For example, @dril posted on October 11, 2012, “BOSS TELLS ME I CAN KISS MY FERRETS AT WORK, BUT NO OPEN MOUTH. I PUNCH THE FLOOR SO HARD HIS SCREEN SAVER DEACTIVATES.” On September 27, 2011, @UtilityLimb posted, “i’m not racist, but *cranes neck to see if anyone’s around. keeps craning. head unscrews entirely. out of the hole pour jewels & mysteries*.”

However, reactions to absurdity can be raised by social media posts that unironically contain uses of language. Senator Chuck Grassley’s Twitter posts are an example of unintended absurdity. On February 26, 2012, he tweeted, “The govt food police came around to local school said “no catchup” so kids bring their own catchup. What’s accomplished? Too much govt?” February 13, 2012, he tweeted, “I now h v an iphone.” Grassley has posted multiple tweets conveying frustration about History Channel’s lack of history. In one of such tweets from On February 19, 2012, he expresses, “Just turned to history channel. No history. I used to get

history. Why do we have such a channel when it doesn't do history." The byproduct of this type of media is based on interpretation rather than the creator's intention. The difference between Weird Twitter and Chuck Grassley's tweets brings us to distinguish between absurdist art and everyday experiences of the absurd, which I will discuss in the following section. However, the absurdity of new media art and conceptually absurd media posts is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, we feel disengaged from the tangible world, which increases the relevance of absurdity. On the other hand, sharing similar thoughts about absurdity can be cathartic because knowing that other people share in these absurdist reactions is validating. Finding incongruous humor with others in these experiences relieves elements of tragedy brought on by isolation and hopelessness.

Perhaps one appeal of indulging in new media art is that it isn't a demanding form of aesthetic experience or appreciation. In both production and consumption, it is a form of relief offered that we can do between the demands of our everyday tasks. Our lives are so demanding and exhausting that we often do not have the time to disengage from the things that take us away from genuinely appreciating the beauty that nature offers or things that bring us pleasure. Tying into the relief we feel when engaging with absurdist new media art, for Schopenhauer, aesthetic creation and appreciation offers temporary relief from the suffering brought about by humanity's inherent condition and lack of understanding about the inherent nature of reality.

In summary, now that we are increasingly disengaged from natural and physical reality, I contend that sharing new media art allows us to abandon feelings of isolation and hopelessness through a shared consciousness within online communities. Online communities unify users to bond over society's lack of reason and control we feel over our human condition. New media art

allows us to temporarily alleviate the hopelessness felt about human existence and even gives us the ability to experience natural phenomena through pictures, videos, and audio without the chore of leaving our home. So, the disengagement with physical reality is not of the kind that it is entirely negative. It does, however, cause disassociation with physical reality when we are overly engaged with it.

III ABSURDITY AS AN EVERYDAY AESTHETIC

As previously mentioned, contemporary society is disconnected from the natural and physical environment due to our reliance on social institutions and digital technology. I now turn my attention to characterizing the kind of aesthetic experiences these phenomena generate. Before discussing absurdity as an everyday aesthetic, defining everyday aesthetic experiences in a broader sense is essential. In *Art as Experience*, John Dewey maintains that a satisfactory aesthetic theory should emphasize the human experience of the work of art rather than the physical features of the art object. Under Dewey's view, art is an experience, while the actual work of art is what a product does. Art objects, especially fine art, are isolated from typical daily interactions with the world. Hence, we need an aesthetic theory that captures how ordinary experiences in everyday life add value to our aesthetic perceptions. People live multi-faceted lives, where our aesthetic perceptions are influenced by cultural, natural, and social factors. Everyday activities can give rise to aesthetic reactions, such as eating a meal, taking a walk, watching a movie, reading a newspaper, and communicating with a coworker. Everyday aesthetics denote these types of aesthetic experiences that are not categorized under the aesthetics of traditional art.

In particular, I am interested in exploring everyday aesthetic reactions caused by absurdity. When I use the phrase "aesthetic reaction," I am referencing the positive or negative thoughts and feelings initiated by an object or concept, where the experience either consciously

or unconsciously influences our perception of phenomenal reality. I argue that because absurdist elements are present in some artistic creations, aesthetic reactions, and everyday aesthetic experiences, absurdity is justified as its own aesthetic category. In this section, I first discuss the affective aspect of an absurd experience, which involves a conjunction of incongruous humor and despair. Second, I deliberate on the cognitive component of the absurd, which requires introspective awareness of the phenomena or concept experienced. Third, I argue that absurdist artists and creators must use the affective components of incongruous humor and tragedy, paired with the cognitive component of introspective awareness, in order to produce absurd creations. Two critical affective reactions are working in conjunction when experiencing absurdity. First, it involves a degree of tragedy or despair.³¹ Second, it involves a degree of incongruous humor.

James Beattie describes incongruous humor as:

Two or more inconsistent, unsuitable, or incongruous parts or circumstances, considered as united in one complex object or assemblage, as acquiring a sort of mutual relation from the peculiar manner in which the mind takes notice of them.³²

While Beattie is the first philosopher to describe this particular type of humor as the incongruous theory of humor, he is not the first philosopher to point out that the unexpected presented in a particular way can trigger laughter. For example, in the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle describes setting an audience up for a particular expectation and then violating it as one way a speaker can make the audience laugh. He additionally states that a similar reaction can be attained by a play on words or spelling.³³

³¹ I hesitate to use the term horror, because I find this word to indicate a strong reaction. However, it perhaps can involve a degree of shock.

³² James Beattie, "Essay on Laughter and Ludicrous Composition," in *Essays* 3rd ed., (London, 1779), 320.

³³ John Morreall, "Philosophy of Humor," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, last modified August 20, 2020, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/humor/>.

Schopenhauer states:

In every case, laughter results from nothing but the suddenly perceived incongruity between a concept and the real object that had been thought through it in some relation; and laughter itself is just the expression of this incongruity... All laughter therefore is occasioned by a paradoxical, and hence unexpected, subsumption, it matters not whether this is expressed in words or deeds.³⁴

Under Schopenhauer's view, humor arises when we group a sensory perception with an abstract concept that we perceive as having similar or the same properties, and then we are struck by inconsistency.³⁵ When this conflict arises between what is seen and what is thought, the perception is always correct and not subject to error. "The victory of knowledge of perception over thought affords us pleasure" because perception is the medium of the present moment, part of animal nature, and is "attended with no exertion."³⁶

For absurdity to be an aesthetic reaction, the tragic must not overpower the humor brought on by the incongruous humor. Typically the tragedy conceived is diminished or resolved by the incongruity of the humor. The object of perception does not itself have to have elements of tragedy for the experience to cause absurd reactions. Often, the tragic aspect of it is merely conceptually present in the mind of the perceiver.

For example, when I drive in a developed part of town, glimpsing at Walmart, Chili's, Wendy's, Belk, etc., it strikes me as absurd. These stores and restaurants were constructed for convenience, and ideally, enjoyment. However, in my introspective episode, I reflect on the probability of the people working feeling miserable and underpaid. Then, I perceive the probability of the customers feeling underwhelmed by their experience there, exhausted from

³⁴ Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation* Vol. 1, (Courier Corporation, 2012), Sec. 13.

³⁵ John Morreall, "Philosophy of Humor."

³⁶ Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, 8.

their own lives.

The tragedy is not present in the form of the stores and restaurants themselves.³⁷ The tragic element is caused by the introspective episode projected about them. The humor is incongruous in that restaurants and retail stores were developed for convenience and enjoyment, yet I feel neither of the two when I go to these places. In my experiences of absurdity, I find it strikingly absurd that humanity had the choice to construct modern society in the way it is, yet society is built in such a way that the majority of people I communicate with are miserable living in it. I can enjoy the absurdity because the tragic aspect does not overpower the comical incongruity of the situation. However, if I had a Chili's waitress crying to me after spilling a tray of drinks, I might not be able to laugh about it until later.

Second, there is an essential cognitive role in absurd aesthetic experiences. To appreciate the absurdity in concepts or objects, we are required to have introspective awareness. I use the term introspective awareness rather than Camus' phrase lucid awareness because I want to emphasize that part of the aesthetic pleasure of absurd experiences is derived from the thought episode we have due to experiencing absurdity. We are presented with an absurd object or concept, and then we become aware that we are aware of the absurdity experienced. Hence, we are not only undergoing the affective components just discussed in the first point, but we are also mindful of them in such a way that we reflect on them. This section describes the role that introspective awareness plays in making us more cognizant of phenomenal reality and challenges our inherent desire for control.

³⁷ It is not impossible for tragedy to be present in the form in this situation. For example, one of the lights on the store name might be flickering or falling off, which would add absurdist elements in the physical object itself.

Our active awareness is often diminished during daily tasks because we are habituated to thoughtlessly completing much of what we do. For example, when walking the same path to work every day, our mind is habituated to that pattern, and it takes minimal mindful awareness to take ourselves there. The mind tends to drift to thoughts unrelated to what is in front of us. Then, say you look at the ground and see a gleaming butter knife on the sidewalk. That ordinary object in an unordinary place, in terms of where we typically see butter knives. It calls our attention because they are not associated with one another. The experience in itself is mundane, the objects are familiar, and the rupture in the association is unfamiliar. You might feel despair over the fact that such a dull event struck your attention. However, recognizing absurd situations that momentarily halt our thought patterns and actions is pleasant because it turns our mechanical motions towards a mindful cognitive state.

Introspective awareness about the absurd makes us reflect on the type of control we desire to have over our lives as individuals and the power we wish to obtain over our external environment. Developing general aesthetic tastes gives value and pleasure to us because it allows us to have, or at least feel like we have, that type of control. Aesthetic taste allows us to represent particular things about ourselves. For example, the way we decorate our domiciles, how we dress, the picture we set as our lock screen, and the music we listen to contain some degree of meaning to us. The choices we have in developing our aesthetic interests give us a sense of purpose and a degree of freedom. On the other hand, absurdist aesthetic experiences challenge our innate desire to control our external environment. A cognitive function plays out where we must not succumb to the inherent desire for meaning, control, or reason behind the phenomenal reality presented to us at the moment of the absurd experience.

To clarify, I do not mean that we have a complete lack of control. We do have a degree of control over our actions, passions, and desires. However, we do not have complete control over how the outside world impacts our inner desires, goals, passions, etc. We do not have control over extending past our limited perception of phenomenal reality to understand the underlying nature of reality itself. Trying to overcome or accept the lack of power or meaning goes against the inherent desires embedded in human rationality.

Moving to the last point, artistic creation pairs the affective components of absurdity listed in section one and the introspective awareness described in section two. It allows us to express the tragic, humorous incongruity we feel about human existence as a whole or in particular aspects. Additionally, it gives us introspective awareness of absurdity, which we can exert onto the world to alleviate the hopelessness it brings. Sharing our creations with others creates a unity that diminishes feelings of isolation because it bonds us in shared sentiments about the absurdity of human existence.

Similar to Camus' view that creative action requires lucid awareness of the absurd condition, Schopenhauer points out that creative activity demands the artist's complete attention. For Schopenhauer, will-suppressed aesthetic contemplation or aesthetic experience brings us temporary relief from suffering inflicted by our human condition, as we can never have a complete understanding of reality in itself.³⁸ Artistic creation and appreciation are the most direct ways of experiencing the world as it really is. Schopenhauer claims that genius is "the capacity for heightened contemplation of objects themselves," which gives us "the ability to leave entirely

³⁸ Dale Jacquette, ed., "Schopenhauer's Metaphysics of Appearance and Will in the Philosophy of Art," in *Philosophy and the Arts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 1-36.

out of sight our own interest, our willing, and our aims.”³⁹ When we observe works of art, we are observing the genius of the artist and seeing the world through the artist’s eyes.⁴⁰ Artistic creation firsthand allows us to isolate particular moments in phenomenal reality in the way we perceive it.

Schopenhauer and Camus’ aesthetic theories assert that aesthetic creation is an alienating experience. This is especially true when it comes to the absurd. Aesthetic experiences of the absurd in many circumstances are better experienced in solitude. Dale Jacquette points out that “Schopenhauer is aware of the tension in the artist’s conflicting need for disassociation from and engagement of will, each in the right amount and at the appropriate stage of the creative process.”⁴¹ For Schopenhauer, some aesthetic experiences need to be contemplated in an uninterrupted cognitive process that balances disassociating from and engaging with phenomenal reality.

I agree with Schopenhauer’s view about creation. When others are demanding our attention, it can be challenging to have attentiveness to the object and the introspective awareness to contemplate the absurdity of an experience. The isolation is not necessarily a wholly negative sense of alienation. It reminds us that despite our consistent alienation from the social and natural world, the level of connection and control we desire is unattainable. This then resolves through us gaining awareness that the meaning we impose on the phenomenal world is the closest sense of control we can attain. On the other hand, it is beneficial to share absurd aesthetic experiences and artistic creations. Sharing in the incongruous hilarity and despairing

³⁹ Paul Guyer, “Pleasure and Knowledge in Schopenhauer’s Aesthetics,” in *Schopenhauer, Philosophy, and the Arts*, ed. Dale Jacquette (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 109-132.

⁴⁰ Paul Guyer, “Pleasure and Knowledge in Schopenhauer’s Aesthetics,” 121.

⁴¹ Dale Jacquette, ed., “Schopenhauer’s Metaphysics of Appearance and Will in the Philosophy of Art,” 14.

nature of the human condition validates our feelings of alienation from the social and natural world.

IV ABSURDITY AS AN AESTHETIC CATEGORY

Kant points out the sublime exists entirely in the human mind rather than the object. This is first because under his view, the sublime is formless, and the experience is a byproduct of the cognitive episode we have during an experience of the sublime. The absurd is similar to the sublime in the latter sense, where absurdity is a byproduct of a cognitive episode. Absurdity is a uniquely human concept because this is a type of thought about the world that only humans impose due to our inherent desire for rationality and meaning. The form of an object may strike us as absurd, but an object itself can never be absurd because absurdity is a cognitive reaction to phenomena or concepts. Some identifiable things commonly strike the observer as absurd, but they can only be experienced under the right conditions, which typically involve a degree of solitude and the right kind of cognitive awareness towards the phenomena or situation. Absurdity as an aesthetic experience is not a disinterested aesthetic observation in the way that Kant refers to disinterested objectivity in the beautiful. The absurd is disinterested in that for resolution of it, one must give up the desire to know causation, meaning, or reason behind the phenomena or concept. We must force ourselves to have a level of disinterest that enables us to have a more profound aesthetic and cognitive appreciation.

The last point of discussion for setting absurdity away from other aesthetic categories is that it requires a degree of disunity. Dewey's theory of everyday aesthetics emphasizes aesthetic

experience where unity and order are found in a unified and disorganized world. He writes:

Order cannot but be admirable in a world constantly threatened with disorder—in a world where living creatures can go on living only by taking advantage of whatever order exists about them, incorporating it into themselves. In a world like ours, every living creature that attains sensibility welcomes order with a response of harmonious feeling whenever it finds a congruous order about it.⁴²

Opposing Dewey's view, I believe there are deeply aesthetic experiences to be found between order and chaos. Even moving into a new place when all of your things are in boxes and you're sleeping on an air mattress is a type of aesthetic experience. And in life's most tragic moments are notes of aesthetic value. Although, it is not always found randomly. For example, I could take a shelf off my wall and hang it upside down and superglue the objects on it to also hang upside down. In either case, it is an aesthetic category that takes everyday objects or concepts and is set out of its typical context.

Theodor W. Adorno writes in *Aesthetic Theory*, "The task of a philosophy of art is not so much to explain away the element of incomprehensibility, which speculative philosophy has almost invariably sought to do, but rather to understand the incomprehensibility itself."⁴³

Traditional art attempts to "translate the condition of metaphysical nature of the world into a language of art that would cast meaning aside."⁴⁴ Absurdist art makes the form of the artwork express metaphysical incomprehensibility. It represents the incomprehensible, disordered nature of human existence.

In summation, I have argued that absurdity is a relevant category of aesthetics through its prevalence in art and history through multiple differing artistic movements and philosophical

⁴² John Dewey *Art as Experience*, (New York: Perigee Books, 1954), 14.

⁴³ Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (New York: Continuum, 1997), 347.

⁴⁴ Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 347.

theories. I have shown that absurdism is a popular form of creative expression in new media art through Internet memes and social media platforms. It serves a principal role in contemporary culture, as it unites social groups by revealing shared sentiments about isolating features of human existence. I have discussed that absurdist elements are partially caused by humanity's isolation from the natural and physical world, which has made it an increasingly pressing aesthetic category to discuss. Lastly, I highlighted pertinent elements present in the absurdity of everyday aesthetic experiences, our reactions to such experiences, and in the creation of absurdist art. Experiencing adds subjective value to our lives because it makes us aware of the control we try to impose over phenomenal reality when all we can truly impose is our inward reflections about phenomenal reality. There are still many unresolved issues in this theory, but I hope to have shown that absurdity as an independent aesthetic category warrants further philosophical attention.

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