

Essay/Personal Reflection

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“The absurd man thus catches sight of a burning and frigid, transparent and limited universe in which nothing is possible but everything is given, and beyond which all is collapse and nothingness. He can then decide to accept such a universe and draw from it his strength, his refusal to hope, and the unyielding evidence of a life without consolation.”

(Camus 1955, 52)

The problem, absurdity

A glance from near and far reveals an absurd world. This is what Camus is describing in the first sentence of his epigraph.

What is absurdity? It has two meanings albeit related.

One is a casual throwaway line meaning the item is both a lost cause and ridiculous to boot. For example, the dying man asked his broker for a Life Insurance policy. Frequently this form of absurdity is used as a humorous tool.

The second is specific and significant. This meaning of absurdity involves an awareness that the world does not make sense. It refers to a feeling of partial detachment or disconnection from the world, although cognition is preserved. One sees oneself as a stranger. It is not depersonalization since perception and identity are intact. It is not necessarily unpleasant, and occasionally, it leads to a deeper understanding of your life.

Absurdity in this second sense reflects one's understanding that the world will never make sense because the nature of the beast is nonsensical. There will never be a solution to knowing the future. Although mankind can edit his own DNA with CRISPR-Cas, he still kills animals for food, defecates, and procreates despite knowing he will suffer and die. Notwithstanding all this, just before the end we ask, so what was that all about? Or more bizarrely, we desperately despite all evidence to the contrary want to live. This is our absurd reality.

Thus, a question life is asking of us is: how can I live with absurdity and yet avoid despair, ennui, meaninglessness, anger, loneliness, bewilderment, and panic?

Some people find surrealistic paintings apropos. Take Magritte's, *The Lovers* (Magritte 1928). To kiss a beloved behind veils describes the impossibility of ever knowing reality truly. Love is forever an illusion. That I can never know what my lover feels and all my feelings are only my own self-gratification. How awful. Detached. How absurd. A magnificent painting.

Or literature. In Douglas Adams' *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (Adams 1979), the spaceship, *Heart of Gold*, uses an “Improbability Drive” engine to travel through hyperspace by using probability “to arrive at random locations throughout the universe.” Delightfully perverse, absurd, ridiculous, and humorous.

The “Improbability Drive” resembles our first meaning of the word absurdity but carries the message of the second. Adams' trilogy in five parts “sic” imparts the message that the world itself is perverse, absurd, and not amenable to human comprehension. Adams' absurd images help us to live with Camus' cold, burning, unfeeling, incomprehensible world.

Religion and faith are other ways we create a culture to tackle the absurd. In the Jewish religion, all males over the age of 13 are commanded to put on phylacteries every day except Sabbath and Holydays. Phylactery is from an ancient Greek word meaning “security post” and later “amulet” or “charm.” Phylacteries are mysterious. As is the Christian rite of Holy Communion which takes the sacramental bread and wine as the transubstantiation of Christ's flesh and blood. *Mysterium tremendum*.

René Magritte knocked the nail on the head when he observed: “Art evokes the mystery, without which the world would not exist” (Magritte 2022)

How does “evoking” mystery (surrealistic art, music, writing, and religious rituals) help us to make sense of this absurd world?

Therapy of an absurd culture

Absurdity is a truth, albeit complex and paradoxical. Take the sacred colors of the Hawthorn football club; the fanaticism feted on La Marseillaise; and Maori tattoos, and indeed love, as examples of irrational if not absurd behavior.

The question to Magritte is: how does absurd culture function as an antidote to the absurdity of life? Absurd culture deliberately portrays life to look unreal and dislocated, via an image, word, or sound. How does accepting mystery enable us to exist in this absurd world?

Social anthropologists posit that culture provides us with meaning in life and helps to manage the fear of death. Let us assume that the angst of modern man is little different from 5000 years ago. And although our culture has dramatically evolved from 5000 years ago, we assume that culture continues to serve the same function.

Our hypothesis is that absurd cultural icons enable us to live more peaceably with the absurdity of life. Furthermore, we propose that this algorithm is strikingly similar to magic that 19th-century anthropologists unveiled in preindustrial cultures. This is not surprising since the questions asked are universal: how do we make sense of this world and how do we control the fear of death?

James Frazer in “The Golden Bough” described and theorized about “primitive” cultures that were being uncovered in the 19th century of exploration. In particular, he wrote about magical practices (Frazer 1890, 54).

While these magical practices might seem uncouth and unsophisticated today, they serve the same function via a similar mechanism as Magritte’s “mystery of art.”

According to Frazer magic is founded on two principles of thought. The first is that “like produces like, or that an effect resembles its cause.” A classic example Frazer gave was of hunters who rubbed their legs with a dead snake to protect themselves from being bitten by snake while hunting. The second, “that things which have once been in contact with each other, continue to act on each other at a distance after the physical contact has been severed” is exemplified by stabbing the footprint in the sand of an enemy in order to cause him to limp. In both mechanisms, we can see parallels with modern-day superstition.

Frazer suggested two psychosocial functions these principles of magical thinking fulfilled:

1. to explain life by creating meaningful symbols and
2. to provide a sense of control in life.

Frazer provided a fascinating overarching analysis of magical thinking: “It is therefore a truism, almost a tautology, to say that all magic is necessarily false and barren; for were it ever to

become true and fruitful, it would no longer be magic but science” (Frazer 1890, 219).

Conclusion

Magritte suggested that mystery creates the world. He used painting as his wand, specifically surrealism. Absurdity in all its forms – art, writing, religion, music, and ancient magic – is also mysterious. I think Magritte meant that by using art consciously – of any persuasion – to face the mysterious enables us to accept the absurd world unshrouded by neurosis (Wein 2018). To this we can add Einstein’s observation: “The most beautiful experience we can have is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion that stands at the cradle of true art and true science” (Einstein 2022).

We note that in contemplating the mysterious we create unusual, unreal, strange, absurd, surreal, and abstract objects – including the higher branches of mathematics and theoretical physics.

Frazer’s Aboriginal who stabbed a sandy footprint of an enemy in an effort to lame him was absurd. As are phylacteries, the Sacrament, quantum mechanics, Dr. Who’s TARDIS, and the Heart of Gold’s Infinite Probability Drive.

Absurd culture is one response to absurdity and fear, the meaningless and the mysterious. Like a vaccine, like-against-like, absurd culture reduces absurd angst. Absurd culture creates meaning in this world, thereby palliating the terror of nothingness and hoping to retain a measure of control of our daily lives.

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