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Version: Accepted Version

Book Section:
Tubaly, S (2024) Absurdist Cinema, Television, and Adaptations around the World. In: Bennett, M.Y., (ed.) The Routledge Companion to Absurdist Literature. Routledge Literature Companions. Routledge. ISBN: 9781003422730.

https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003422730-55

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Absurdist Cinema, Television, and Adaptations around the World

The absurd is sometimes thought of as a passing literary, theatrical, and philosophical phenomenon. For instance, it may be considered a short-lived reaction to the "tragigrotesque nature of the universe" as it was experienced in the wake of World War II (Cornwell 2006: 144). However, this perception of absurdism as a transient philosophical and artistic expression overlooks two important factors. Firstly, manifestations of absurdist thought and art appeared as early as the nineteenth century, long before World War II.[1] Secondly, the absurd has been so successfully ingrained in contemporary arts and pop culture that it has become impossible to discern it as an independent movement or school of thought. This cultural assimilation has not only included techniques and aesthetic forms employed by those writers who have been deemed absurdist. We can also identify artistic depictions of the metaphysics of the absurd: works that seem to be inspired by the absurd's unfading reflection on certain tensions inherent in the human condition, even when no explicit references to absurdist sources are made.

The absurd, Michael Bennett (2015: 21, 23) observes, is "all around, even in unexpected corners," and far beyond its recognizable literary and theatrical frameworks. This includes what may be termed the cinema and television of the absurd (to paraphrase the title of Martin Esslin's classic). The absurdist scholar would be able to suggest the existence of absurdist elements—aesthetic forms as well as notions—in films across all genres, from psychological drama, thriller, and comedy to fantasy and science fiction. This would be most obvious in the numerous film and television adaptations of novels and plays that have been commonly grouped as absurdist. But, perhaps even more significantly, absurdist techniques and notions seem to have been incorporated into the works of a great many auteurs, both dead and living. These auteurs have either made films

that invite absurdist readings or have become fully identified with a type of filmmaking that an absurdist reader would be inclined to consider absurdist.

If that is indeed the case, why have scholars of film philosophy been almost completely disinclined to consider absurdism as a beneficial reading of films? Thus far, efforts to reveal and establish the interconnections between cinema and the absurd have been scarce. Among the few attempts, we find Alan Woolfolk's exploration of Albert Camus's absurdism in film noir (Woolfolk 2006) and in the science fiction film *Alphaville* (Woolfolk 2009).[2] This general disinterest becomes even more evident when we juxtapose it with the immense attention that scholars have devoted to existentialism in cinema (e.g., Pamerleau 2009; Boulé and McCaffrey 2014). Since the dissimilitude between existentialism and absurdism is often blurred—overlooking Camus's (2005: 8, 27) insistence on perceiving the absurd as a critical response to existentialism—some film interpretations intermix the two.

There are at least two good reasons for the absurd's problematic status among film scholars. The first is that the so-called absurdist movement, as Bennett (2015: 2, 4, 7) has demonstrated, consists of disparate philosophers, playwrights, and novelists who have been labeled as absurdist even though they have not thought of themselves as defenders of any philosophical or artistic credo. The clear exception has been Camus, whose *Myth of Sisyphus* consciously laid the foundations of a self-aware philosophical (or anti-philosophical) absurdist perspective and approach to life, which derived from his critique of the existentialist views of his predecessors. Another reason for the lack of enthusiasm about the notion of absurdist cinema may be related to Camus's importance as a philosopher, which, unlike his literary stature, has been disparaged even by scholars still interested in him (Golomb 2005: 119). Jacob Golomb (ibid., 119, 141) suggests that Camus is at least partially responsible for this, as he refuted his association with existentialism

and preferred the descriptive side of phenomenology to well-grounded argumentation. Interestingly, even Camus agreed with his critics' dim view of his philosophical reasoning (Zaretsky 2013: 48).

Nevertheless, Camus's absurdist project—which primarily consisted of his "three absurds" and later *The Rebel*[3]—was never intended to establish an argument-based, pure philosophy. Camus's absurdism is, in fact, a protest against philosophy's incompetence in the face of the most basic human cry (Aronson 2021). But, as I shall show later, this should make Camus's absurdist perspective even more relevant to film analysis, exactly because this cry can only be properly heard on the border that separates and unites philosophy and art.

Three forms of absurdism in film and television

The first thing that we discover when we begin to explore the terrain of absurdist cinema and television is that it is not unidimensional. Whereas certain manifestations of absurdism are explicit and straightforward, some are implicit and suggestive. Thus, there are at least three main expressions that should be considered.

The first, most accessible source is film and television adaptations of plays (the so-called "theater of the absurd"), novels, and short stories written by playwrights and authors commonly labeled absurdist. Surprisingly, while this category should have been the primary representation of absurdism in cinema and television, the overwhelming majority of these adaptations have been quite negligible in terms of impact. Works such as Luchino Visconti's *The Stranger* (1967), Rudolf Noelte's *The Castle* (1968), Tom O'Horgan's *Rhinoceros* (1974), Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* (1990), Michael Lindsay-Hogg's *Waiting for Godot* (2001), and Chris

Swanton's *Metamorphosis* (2012) seem to have left critics and viewers mostly unimpressed. Watching these films, one may wonder whether cinema has any added value in terms of its ability to manifest the absurdist universe envisioned by the original writers. Samuel Beckett, who was known for his resistance to having his *Waiting for Godot* adapted for film and television, declared after watching the BBC's 1961 version with his close friends: "My play wasn't written for this box. My play was written for *small* men locked in a *big* space. Here you're all too big for the place" (Knowlson 2014: 488). This definition alone—"*Small* men locked in a *big* space"—captures much of the essence of absurdity.

Among the more successful adaptations—at least in the sense of their ability to extend the absurdist experience by utilizing cinematic techniques unavailable to novelists and playwrights—we can think of Orson Welles's *The Trial* (1962), whose Kafkaesque vision initially polarized reviewers but has been reevaluated in later decades,[4] and Richard Ayoade's *The Double* (2013), which is based on Dostoevsky's novel. In these cases, the film adaptations have created all-inclusive oppressive environments, both social and metaphysical, in ways that seem to transcend some of the limits of the theater or the novel. These two examples demonstrate the usefulness of the cinematic vision for the absurd, in that film strives to create symbolic and imaginative representations of the world that remain believable and consonant with our actual human experience in order to enable us to reveal something we have not noticed before or to "make sense of it in a different and helpful way" (Baggini 2018).

The two other expressions of absurdism in cinema and television fall into a broader category in which the absurd serves as a potential and beneficial reading of numerous films. This category is a far more open field of experimentation than the first, more obvious one. It would be worthwhile to briefly discuss this category, prior to the subtler differentiation between the two

expressions. The films explored under this category may be construed as containing absurdist materials, or at the very least as a source of inspiration for the absurdist reader. None of these films make explicit references to either absurdist literature or absurdist philosophy, nor did their makers have even implicit intentions of engaging in dialogue with the absurd.[5] Nevertheless, while it would be completely unjustified to classify these works as absurdist, this category may provide us with a wide open space in which an absurdist reading allows for a bidirectional process of mutually informing critical comparison: certain aspects of the films are brought more sharply into view when they are analyzed in the light of the absurd, while the absurd is illuminated—and some of its limitations are exposed—when it is brought into dialogue with these films.

This category, as previously mentioned, should be divided into two distinct expressions of the absurd. First, there are films that depict explicitly absurd situations—absurd in the literary sense of ridiculous or completely unreasonable—using techniques and aesthetic forms that may be reminiscent of those of the theater of the absurd. Consider, for example, Mel Brooks's *The Twelve Chairs* (1970), Federico Fellini's *Amarcord* (1973), David Lynch's *Eraserhead* (1977), Terry Gilliam's *Brazil*, David Cronenberg's *Naked Lunch* (1991), Peter Weir's *The Truman Show* (1998), Hayao Miyazaki's *Spirited Away* (2003), Charlie Kaufman's *Synecdoche, New York* (2008), Yorgos Lanthimos's *The Lobster* (2015), and Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert's *Everything, Everywhere, All At Once* (2022). These works and many, many others can be thought of as films that show some affinity with absurdist writers and playwrights. Their techniques may often be similar to those that Esslin identified in absurdist plays:[6] dreamlike or even nightmarish plots and settings, fragmented narratives, absence of either beginning or end, unresolved puzzles that leave viewers hanging, incoherent interactions, gestures, and language, and sudden or bizarre metamorphosis of the protagonists. These contradictions, as Bennett (2015: 17) points out in his

discussion of absurdist theater, ultimately prompt the viewer to make sense not only of the films but also of their own life.

This type of film should be distinguished from typical comedy movies. While all comedy movies derive their comic power from the presentation of absurd (sometimes hilariously absurd) situations, the tension between our familiar reality and their playfully exaggerated or nonsensical form is primarily designed to make us laugh. In this way, comedies pacify our anxieties and uplift our mood (Zamir 2014: 190). On the other hand, films that may be construed as absurdist tend to present the very same tension between expectation and reality in tragicomic ways, that is, ways that leave us uncertain whether we should laugh or cry (Bennett 2015: 10, 19). Rather than pacifying our anxieties, the situations are ultimately poignant and disconcerting reflections of tensions and anxieties in our life.

The other absurdist expression in this category, and the third and last in my general classification, are films that may be understood as capturing absurdist metaphysical tensions and exploring ways of coping with these tensions. This subcategory usually avoids presenting explicit absurd situations and, more broadly, utilizing recognizable absurdist storytelling and technique. These films are committed to Aristotelian plotlines, including exposition and backstory, and their narratives are coherent, consisting of beginning, middle, and end. Even when the circumstances are strange, as in the case of science fiction and fantasy films of this type, these circumstances are approached with profound sincerity and intelligibility. Thus, there is nothing obvious about perceiving them as candidates for absurdist interpretation.

What makes these films pertinent to absurdist readings is the earnest way in which their narratives and visions present collisions between humans and the silent universe—humans coming up against the insurmountable limits of existence, or, in Camus's (2005: 9) words, "absurd walls."

In these collisions, individuals strive to find answers where there are none, and thus the universe's silence throws them back on themselves, compelling them to find their own answers and to make their own choices, however distorted or self-created. Oftentimes, these struggles are metaphysical to a degree that the viewer may feel that what is truly portrayed on screen is a representation and extension of humans' inner life and mind rather than an external drama.

Among these films, we can think of Akira Kurosawa's *Ikiru* (1952), Federico Fellini's *Nights of Cabiria* (1957), Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), *Solaris* (Andrei Tarkovsky, 1972, and Steven Soderbergh, 2002), Woody Allen's *Crimes and Misdemeanors* (1989), Robert Zemeckis's *Contact* (1997), Steven Spielberg's *A.I. Artificial Intelligence* (2001), Alfonso Cuarón's *Gravity* (2013), Spike Jonze's *Her* (2013), Alexander Payne's *Nebraska* (2014), Christopher Nolan's *Interstellar* (2014), Denis Villeneuve's *Arrival* (2016), and David Lowery's *A Ghost Story* (2017) and *The Green Knight* (2021). In television, perhaps the greatest drama about people coming face-to-face with the indifferent and unresponsive universe and seeking to respond to their predicament in myriad forms is *The Leftovers* (2014–2017) by Damon Lindelof and Tom Perrotta.

Film philosophy and the absurd

Broadly speaking, it may be suggested that nearly every meaningful film that aspires to say something significant about the human condition could be fruitfully explored through the absurdist lens.[7] In the end, the absurd is not only a philosophy but also a straightforward description of certain undeniable tensions easily identifiable in everyone's lives. Of course, asserting that any group of films have a common theme is highly contestable.[8] But there is no reason to refrain from

pointing out that certain frictions philosophically known as absurdist can be persistently identified in a large number of films, even without regarding these frictions as their main or exclusive themes. These frictions may be brought to light by employing absurdist interpretation—most usefully, as will be explained below, Camus's conception of the absurd.

Nowadays, with the flourishing of the field of film philosophy, the perception of film as a source of philosophical inquiry has become quite common (Sanders 2009: 1; Litch 2010: 2). Some scholars, such as Stephen Mulhall (2016: 3–10) and David Sorfa (2016: 3), promote a provocative approach that refuses to employ films as mere reflections of existing theories and chooses to regard them as active participants in the making of philosophy that expand philosophy beyond the reach of formal arguments.[9] More modest approaches suggest that films may provoke philosophical thinking and both echo and develop philosophical ideas (Sanders 2009: 1). Nevertheless, most scholars of film philosophy would agree that films may be understood as philosophical exercises (Mulhall 2016: 4), an extended form of the philosophical thought experiment. But when we place the philosophy of the absurd next to meaningful films, we may come to realize that the films' fictional thought experiments are sometimes even *more* successful in conveying the challenge of absurdity and in testing possible responses to it than any abstract philosophy could ever be.

Here we return to a point I made earlier: absurdism is not primarily a philosophy but a pre-philosophical human cry, and thus to be able to both hear and capture this cry, other forms of expression, the various arts in particular, should be called upon. Camus himself could not agree more: his form of absurdism explicitly prefers concrete experience to thought. Even the essay of the absurd, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, deliberately abandons the solid ground of argument in favor of impressions and metaphors, not necessarily due to Camus's philosophical feebleness but as a reflection of his fervent belief that the absurd should first be known and confronted at the

experiential level, as an arbitrary feeling that arises in humans long before it is conceptually established. Indeed, as "an experience to be lived through" (Camus 2013: 8), the absurd unveils a truth that may not even be philosophically justified or handled (Golomb 2005: 123; Zaretsky 2013: 45). It is perhaps for this reason that the novel of the absurd, *The Stranger*, preceded *The Myth*: only after we have come into contact with the feeling that permeates Meursault's life, as much as it permeates our own, can we advance to the essay.

The right order is from art to the "phenomenology of the 'notion of the absurd'" (Golomb 2005: 120–121). Camus demonstrates this approach in his 1938 review of Jean-Paul Sartre's novel *Nausea* and later in *The Myth*, when he describes great novelists as philosophers who have preferred writing in images over reasoned arguments, since they have had more confidence in the "educative message of perceptible appearance" (Camus, quoted in Golomb 2005: 120; Camus 2005: 98).[10] Nevertheless, for Camus, art is not only a more effective describer of life's absurdity but also a major response to our absurdist predicament. As opposed to abstract philosophy, the emotionally engaging images induced by fiction can prompt readers to transcend nihilism and strive toward the rectification of the universe's strangeness (Camus 2005: 99; Camus 2013: 198–203, 207). Esslin (2001: xxi) took yet another step by arguing that the theater of the absurd is more successful in its ability to embody the absurdity of the human condition than any philosophical writing could be: the theater finally united subject matter and form and presented absurdism "in being—that is, in terms of concrete stage images." Nonetheless, cinema's unmatched ability to engender spectacular universes may make it an even better medium for bringing Camus's vision of the human–cosmos relationship into sharp relief.

My emphasis on Camusean metaphysics is intentional. As a philosophical foundation of absurdist readings of films, Camus's conception of the absurd may be more beneficial than those

of his predecessors, such as Søren Kierkegaard and Lev Chestov. Camus's notion of the absurd is a direct response to the metaphysical anxiety and struggle of the modern secular individual, which are also most often depicted in film. Moreover, Camus significantly honed the definition of the absurd by applying a comprehensive negation of what he perceived as the limitations of the existentialists, arguing that they had correctly identified the presence of the absurd but responded poorly to it (Camus 2005: 8, 27). His absurd is an unresolvable Sisyphean tension between longing and limit that must be preserved at all times: the longing for unity and the limit of separation; the longing for tomorrow and the limit of death; the longing for meaning and the inability to find it; the longing for reason and lucidity and the limit of knowing; the longing for rebellion and the limit of a predetermined fate; and the longing for the heights and the limits of circularity and repetitiveness (Tubali 2020a: 10, 40–49).[11]

Since Camus's absurd aims to describe a continuous collision between human expectation and an indifferent universe, it must never be understood as the sheer senselessness of existence and uselessness of human action.[12] In fact, Camus has very little interest in exploring the initial feeling of the absurd that arises in human consciousness as a consequence of a direct encounter with the limits of existence. He is far more eager to establish a philosophy of life based on the correct responses to these untraversable limits. For him, the enclosing walls that surround humans can ideally become the source of absurdist enlightenment and empowerment (Camus 2005: 58), and thus one should be adamant not to betray the limits by falling into the trap of either despair or hope, as he believed the existentialists had done. All of his absurdist works—whether it is *Caligula*, *The Stranger*, *The Myth*, or *The Rebel*—are devoted to assessing the variety of possible responses to the absurd reality. Some responses—like suicide, murder, nihilism, hope of transcendence, and renunciation of the world—are vehemently rejected by him as timid reactions

that allow one to avoid walking the path to its end. Other responses—like non-submissive acceptance, revolt, freedom from all forms of waiting, passion for the present, human solidarity, and art—are commended as pathways toward human flourishing in light of the absurd (Tubali 2020a: 59–71).

This is where films that may be thought of as containing absurdist elements, films of the third type in particular, become highly relevant: by reading them as vivid thought experiments that test a wide range of responses to many different kinds of absurd universes, one can understand them as an expansion of the discussion inaugurated by Camus in 1942. When films illustrate, whether with a touch of the ridiculous or with complete sincerity, conditions of absurdist friction and various ways of coping with these conditions, their interpretation as such may throw light on the experience of the absurd. Not only can these films demonstrate and reaffirm the absurdist reality, they also develop and challenge our current understanding of it and sometimes even call it into question. Thus, by engaging with these films philosophically, one may come upon new ways of either living with the absurd or transcending it.[13]

Intriguingly, one filmic genre that seems to both expand and question Camus's metaphysics in substantial ways is science fiction film. It may come as a surprise that Camus's purely humanistic philosophy would find its ideal counterpart in filmic thought experiments that imagine traveling far beyond the human perspective in a seemingly escapist spirit. However, there is a general agreement among film philosophers that the philosophical exercises of science fiction film are centered on the nature of human consciousness and existence: the cosmic expanse is ultimately a backdrop against which the interior space and present angst of the human are explored.[14] Consequently, we can easily identify a long list of science fiction films that weave their philosophical tension around the human—and sometimes, other-than-human—longing to know

and to unite, and the limit of the cosmic silence. These include, aside from previously mentioned films, works such as Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982); James Cameron's *The Abyss* (1989); Alex Proyas's *Dark City* (1998); Neill Blomkamp's *District 9* (2009); Duncan Jones's *Moon* (2009); Mark Romanek's *Never Let Me Go* (2010); Lana and Lilly Wachowski's *Cloud Atlas* (2012); Ridley Scott's *Prometheus* (2012); and Alex Garland's *Ex Machina* (2014).

The astonishing beauty of the cosmic landscape depicted by some of these films is at once "inhuman" and "remote," thus accentuating what Martin Buber (2004: 157) describes as the state of being "homeless in infinity." On the other hand, the silence of the universe and the dramatic encounter with extra-human elements, including aliens, clones, and any self-conscious "other," force men and women to turn their gaze to the mirror of the absurd and to consciously choose concrete ways of facing this unavoidable fate. If we consider Avi Sagi's (2012: 12) suggestion that the absurdist predicament has been intensified as a result of the Copernican Revolution, which robbed humans of the feeling that the universe could be their home, we may better understand the reason that filmic visions of cosmic vastness only deepen Beckett's theatrical perception of "*small* men locked in a *big* space."

The last part of this chapter will be devoted to brief analyses of three films, each of which falls into one of the three types of absurdist cinematic expression: Richard Ayoade's (2013) film adaptation of Dostoevsky's *The Double*; the multi-genre science fiction comedy-drama *Everything, Everywhere, All at Once*, by Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert (2022), which brims with absurd situations; and Steven Soderbergh's (2002) version of *Solaris*, which is one example of a film that may be usefully read through the absurdist lens. To demonstrate my point that films may serve as lifelike thought experiments that put our understanding of the absurd reality and our ways of coping with it to the test, I shall center on the choices made by the protagonists.

“There are no answers. Only choices”

Richard Ayoade’s *The Double* is loosely based on the 1846 Dostoevsky novel: the story of the poor clerk Golyadkin whose growing persecution mania, triggered by social pressures and unrequited love, leads him to encounter another man looking exactly like him who appears to be the leader of a conspiracy against him. Dostoevsky’s *The Double* contains several themes that have been commonly associated with so-called absurdist works: a divorce between the individual and their life, sometimes involving a sense of alienation from themselves; an unexplained and terrifying metamorphosis of oneself or one’s surroundings (as found, for instance, in Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* and Ionesco’s *Rhinoceros*); and a society that arbitrarily turns or even plots against the individual (for example, Kafka’s *The Trial* and, to a lesser degree, Camus’s *The Stranger*). These themes, however, may not necessarily be interpreted as frictions that are closely related to a metaphysical human–cosmos collision. In the case of the novel *The Double* and its film adaptation, one should ask whether the bizarre manifestation of the protagonist’s angst is, in actuality, an intense form of social anxiety. The same can be suggested with regard to *The Trial* and its film adaptation, in which the protagonist is abstractly accused of being guilty by an oppressive and indifferent society.[15] In both films, the nightmarish surroundings are a grotesque form of human bureaucracy. This sheds new light on Camus’s statement in *The Rebel* (2013: 246) that we should consider both cosmic and human injustice as parts of our absurdist predicament, since arbitrariness and unreasonableness similarly exist in the human-made world.

In Ayoade’s British adaptation, the poor clerk Golyadkin metamorphoses into the downtrodden Simon James, who is similarly trapped in a human-created absurdist environment: a

claustrophobic setting of offices and other stifling spaces, devoid of daylight, with no actual location outside what language indicates. Simon, always dressed in an oversized suit, is a non-person, unnoticed, unlistened to, and often even unrecognized by anyone around him. In his words, he is permanently outside himself, "like a Pinocchio, a wooden boy." The film demonstrates its primary tension as early as its opening scene: a faceless man enters a train carriage in which only Simon is sitting, and, directly approaching Simon, tells him: "You are in my place." This feeling that one can never take one's own place, as if one has been spat out of one's own life, is reminiscent of Camus's "divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting" (Camus 2005: 5): a reality in which even one's heart is not one's own and the sense of self is "nothing but water slipping through [one's] fingers (ibid., 17).

However, Camus's description of the absurdist relationship between us and ourselves—the stranger who "comes to meet us in a mirror," or the "familiar yet alarming brother" that we encounter in our photographs (Camus 2005: 13)—manifests in *The Double* as the sudden and unexplained emergence of another person who looks identical to Simon James, named James Simon. This inverted order of the name reflects the fact that James Simon is Simon's polar opposite, one who easily attracts attention and affectionate responses. Thus, James Simon seems to represent a universe in which one's expectations are indeed met and satisfied, and he is therefore Pinocchio's fantasy about becoming a "real boy." Nonetheless, we must not forget that in German folklore, the appearance of a spirit double (in German, *doppelgänger*, which translates as "double-goer") in one's life is an indication that one's death is imminent. It is thus not a coincidence that Simon's doppelgänger comes into being soon after an odd incident: while Simon is spying on his admired coworker, Hannah, from his apartment, he sees a man standing above Hannah's apartment spying on him. The man, who is an embodiment of Simon's sense of estrangement and suicidal

wishes, waves to Simon and jumps to his death. Through this act, Simon's nonexistence is fully established. He becomes ghostlike, and James Simon takes over his life, gradually turning into his worst enemy.

Whereas Dostoevsky ends his novel in a hopeless tone—his Golyadkin is finally driven to a madhouse, having seen more and more replicas of himself—Simon, in what may be perceived as a Camusean revolt, refuses to escape the absurdist break between himself and his life by giving in to the seemingly obvious solution of suicide. Although he is clearly unable to transcend the stifling reality that surrounds him, or to have his existence confirmed by the universe, he chooses to make himself a real boy instead by putting an end to this dual existence. Realizing that he shares injuries with his double, Simon handcuffs the sleeping James to his bed and jumps out of the window in a way that could only badly hurt him, thus leaving James to bleed to death. In the closing scene, he victoriously declares that "I'd like to think I am pretty unique."[16]

Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert's *Everything, Everywhere, All at Once*, which generally transcends all familiar genres (in this sense, the title conveys this feature of the work as well), falls into both the second type of film, which employs absurdist techniques and aesthetics, and the third type, which explores challenges that may be ascribed to absurdist discourse. As the latter, the film tests a wide range of responses to the absurd, from nihilism, suicide, and murder to acceptance, revolt, human solidarity, and love, through a comic exploration of the concept of the multiverse.

The film opens with a mirror reflection of a Chinese American family—husband, wife, and daughter—in a happy and playful state. But what is reflected in the mirror is like an alternative reality or a parallel universe, since soon after, the camera moves through the mirror and we are thrust into the family's actual chaotic and conflicted life: marital disintegration, mother–daughter and daughter–father tensions, the stresses of dissatisfying work, and the dread of tax declaration.

Evelyn, the wife and mother, is having a hard time accepting this absurdist limit of eternal repetition, in which the "insane character of that daily agitation" commands us to make the same gestures over and over again (Camus 2005: 4). Coming across a film that depicts a romantic couple dancing, Evelyn drifts into a fantasy about another universe, oblivious to the fact that her husband dances merrily behind her back.

When Evelyn, her husband Waymond, and her father enter the elevator leading to the IRS offices, an assertive and warriorlike version of Waymond from a parallel universe—the version she may have hoped for—takes over his body, telling Evelyn that it is up to her alone to save the entire multiverse from an omnipresent being that cannot be reasoned with and strives to destroy all and everything for no good reason. From this point onward, the film becomes a science fiction saga, as well as a journey into Evelyn's interior, since we learn that every small choice made by Evelyn throughout her life has given rise to another branch of universes, and thus, all that she could become but will never become in this lifetime exists somewhere in the "sea of possibilities." Saving the multiverse is thus no different from rectifying her own little universe. Empowered by Alpha-Waymond, Evelyn, a reluctant antihero, is allowed access to countless parallel selves, but while this is only intended to equip her with unfamiliar powers, she also becomes painfully aware of the way that other choices, including leaving her husband, could have led her to a far better alternative life path.

Yet an even greater painful realization awaits Evelyn when she learns that the destroyer of all worlds, known as Jobu Tupaki, is, in reality, her daughter in this lifetime, Joy. Moreover, she, Evelyn, created this unbridled being by pushing another version of Joy in a parallel universe over the edge, causing her to lose "any belief in objective truth" and to be everywhere but really nowhere. Now, all the different versions of Joy have become a representation of a nihilist response

to what appears to be life's meaninglessness. Jobu Tupaki has conjured a giant bagel, whose hole, just like a black hole, causes everything to collapse in on itself, offering a bittersweet relief from all pain and guilt through the knowing that nothing matters. The film's message seems to be in agreement with Camus's rejection of nihilism as one of the greatest threats to one's universe, despite its liberating capacity to release the individual from absurdist tension. Indeed, even Joy is torn between wishing to be sucked into the black hole and hoping that her mother will show her the way to meaningfulness.

In the end, Evelyn justifies the multiverse's expectation that she will defeat evil by deploying an "even greater good." Refusing to turn to another wrong reaction to absurdity—the solution of murdering Jobu Tupaki—she chases after Joy in multiple universes in order to save both of them from self-destruction. Evelyn comes to realize that fulfilling her potential is not achieved by becoming a multidimensional warrior but rather through her ability to finally settle into this universe and to choose the only life she has. By the end of the film, the viewer discovers together with Evelyn that the very same challenges and upheavals, including "just doing laundry and taxes," can be seen in a completely different light when one finally gives up on all alternative realities and, instead of being mentally everywhere but never here and now, makes the conscious choice of fully embodying one's limited existence. When one unites one's consciousness with absurdist reality, the same fractured reality becomes filled with meaning, since the fact that reality is absurd does not render it meaningless. However, Evelyn's absurdist enlightenment does not end in non-submissive acceptance. She also taps into what Camus (2013: 246) refers to as a "strange form of love": the compassion and sense of solidarity that develop from the recognition that we all share the baffling condition of "moving in circles" in a cruel and silly world, but that precisely

because of that—because none of us have any idea what is happening here—we must stop fighting and be kind.

Lastly, Steven Soderbergh's *Solaris* falls within the category of films that share purely thematic affinities with absurdist works. Soderbergh's intention was to distance himself from Andrei Tarkovsky's acclaimed adaptation (1972) and to remain closer in spirit to Stanisław Lem's 1961 novel. Nevertheless, the storyline is mostly the same. The crew of a space station orbiting the planet Solaris is reportedly experiencing an extraordinary phenomenon whereby none of the astronauts want to return home. Clinical psychologist Chris Kelvin embarks on a solo mission to Solaris in order to make sense of the occurrences and to bring the crew, including his friend Dr. Gibarian, home safely. However, soon after settling into the station and learning about the tragic condition of the surviving crew, Chris also finds himself pulled into the planet's gravitational field. Solaris seems to be a conscious entity that can infiltrate the subconscious of the minds that have come to study it and has the power to transform undigested memories of loss and grief into physical manifestations of deceased loved ones. The planet can be thought of as a representation of Camus's unresponsive universe: it remains unclear why it would create these replicas, and both the novel and the films end in cosmic perplexity. Is it a benevolent gesture, granting humans the opportunity to face their past, or does it do this in order to drive them mad and usurp their powers? And is it possible that Solaris is utterly indifferent and operates in this way with no motive whatsoever? The planet does nothing but quietly mirror human longing and struggle, including the hope for a reason where there is none. Thus, in the gap between the planet's silence and human consciousness, absurd tension arises.

In a sense, Solaris seems to respond to human obsession. In Dr. Gibarian's words, "We don't want other worlds. We want mirrors." Accordingly, the replicas, though tragically self-

conscious, do not possess actual self-existence, since their minds are made of the other person's memories and mental projections: as one surviving crew member, Dr. Gordon, explains, the replicas are nothing but a "mirror that reflects part of your mind." Consequently, not only the humans but also their replicas—including a manifestation of Chris's wife, Rheya, who committed suicide years ago—are caught in the absurdist condition of a self-reflective consciousness whose awakening only compels it to recognize its barriers and finitude (Camus 2005: 47). Trapped in a predetermined reality and inside Chris's memories of her, and unable to communicate with her maker, Solaris, Rheya seeks relief from absurd consciousness by committing suicide once again.

However, since *Solaris* seems to explore the theme of human rebellion against the limit of death, both Chris's wish to rectify his past and the planet's ability to ceaselessly resurrect the dead prevent Rheya from her hoped-for relief. In an ironic twist on Dylan Thomas's words "And Death shall have no dominion," which are uttered more than once in the film, the planet enables Chris and Rheya to enter a state of absurdist eternity,[17] a type of eternal recurrence in which Rheya is a captive held by Chris's fantasy and in which they seem doomed to repeat past errors. "Trapped here, it's not a life," Rheya tells Chris, to which he replies: "It's what we have."

A phantom of Dr. Gibarian tells Chris that "there are no answers. Only choices." Inspired by this statement, Chris makes the choice to merge himself into Solaris. After Rheya does escape Chris's absurdist eternity by begging Dr. Gordon to eliminate her, and after Gordon and Chris discover that Solaris is only increasing in mass and drawing the station into itself, Gordon flees, whereas Chris remains behind. There, he reunites with a resurrected form of Rheya and is able to be with her in a realm outside life and death, past and future. Is this a bold choice, an absurdist triumph over human limits, or is it a desperate attempt to transcend absurd walls? While all three films place their protagonists in overwhelmingly absurdist realities, Simon and Evelyn clearly

choose to finally enter their reality and imbue it with meaning. But the morally ambiguous ending of *Solaris* leaves us to wonder whether Chris has chosen reality or fantasy. Thus, the film's happy ending arouses the question of whether sometimes, even some forms of escape may be consciously chosen realities in which one can imagine Sisyphus happy.

Endnotes

1. Michael Bennett (2015: 11) suggests that absurdist elements can even be traced in ancient Greek theater.
2. My own contribution to this emerging field can be found in the monograph *Cosmos and Camus* (2020a) and the paper "When the Silent Universe Speaks" (2020b).
3. The creative cycle of Camus's "three absurds" consisted of a play, a novel, and an essay: *Caligula* came first; *The Stranger* followed; and, shortly thereafter, *The Myth of Sisyphus* came into being. Camus's initial intention was to have the works published as a single volume (Foley 2008: 14).
4. See, for instance, Higham (1971: 162).
5. There have been a few exceptions with regard to the makers' intentions. Among them is David Lynch's script for *Eraserhead* (1977), which was strongly influenced by his reading of Kafka's *Metamorphosis* and Nikolai Gogol's 1836 short story *The Nose* (Olson 2008: 54).
6. See Bennett (2015: 5, 6).
7. A similar and justified claim is made by Pamerleau (2009: 2) about existentialism and cinema.
8. As Bennett (2015: 8, 9) has argued more generally in relation to absurdist works.
9. Mulhall and Sorfa's view can be contrasted, for example, with Mary Litch's (2010: 4) approach, which views film as an "effective tool for introducing a philosophical topic."
10. However, Camus did feel compelled to supplement his literary works by writing essays. In his view, whereas art has the power to awaken many people to authentic life, this awakening can only be completed through the elucidation of the implications of the art's philosophy (Golomb 2005: 120–121).
11. In Camusean metaphysics, this tension arises at the meeting point between human consciousness and the cosmic silence. However, scholars like Thomas Nagel (1971: 721–722) and Matthew Bowker (2008: 141) have convincingly demonstrated that the absurd is inherent in the human mind and that it springs from a collision within oneself.
12. As Esslin (2001: xix), for instance, construes it.
13. Pamerleau (2009: 2) also suggests that the concrete portrayals of specific circumstances in films may enable us to assess the accuracy of philosophical descriptions.
14. See, for instance, Sardar and Cubitt (2002: 1); Sanders (2009: 1); Knight and McKnight (2009: 26–27).
15. Orson Welles himself chose to open his adaptation by stating, in his own voice, that Kafka's absurd and surreal world depicts an individual who becomes a "choking victim of society." This interpretation, however, seems limited, since even Welles's adaptation eventually expands the metaphor of the court to a more metaphysical tension between God and the original sinner.
16. This struggle with a Pinocchio-like existence and an encounter with replicas of oneself that leads to a suicidal wish but culminates in Camusean revolt can also be found in Steven Spielberg's *A.I. Artificial Intelligence*.
17. See Thomas Nagel's (1971: 717) convincing thought experiment that refutes Camus's assertion that mortality is a central cause of absurdity, demonstrating that an eternal life would only be "infinitely absurd."

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