

The Sock of Sisyphus:  
Using Absurdism to Reflect Society and the Individual

"I'm not a concept, Joel. I'm just a fucked up girl who's looking for my own piece of mind. I'm not perfect."

"I can't see anything that I don't like about you."

"But you will!"

"I can't."

"But you will, you know? You will think of things, and I'll get bored with you and feel trapped because that's what happens with me."

Joel shrugs.

"Okay."

Clementine pauses.

"Okay."

That's how Charlie Kaufman's screenplay for *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004) ends. An entire film that is based on a machine that erases memories and that is literally set in those dreams that are being erased ends with two people in a simple hallway saying "okay" to a relationship they know will fail. In a conversation with the magazine *Vulture*, Kaufman had this to say:

"What if someone got a note saying they were erased from somebody's brain? I didn't want to do the normal go-to thing, which would have been a thriller of some sort. I wanted to do something about relationships, and when I was writing it, I'd feel like I was having to pay too much attention to the science-fiction element of it. I didn't want that to get in the way of the exploration of what a relationship actually looks like in people's heads."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Sternberg, Adam. "In Conversation: Charlie Kaufman." *Vulture*. New York Media, 2016. Web.

Despite having only seven films in his filmography, (only two of which he actually directed), Kaufman's absurdist voice has come to be so distinctive as to create its own subgenre of film described as being Kaufman-esque. While there are plenty of other filmmakers just as unique (who will be just important later in this essay), it's Kaufman's humanity hidden under layers and layers of postmodern weirdness that truly defines his voice. In other words, Kaufman gets people. Even (and especially) when they're puppets.

Consequently, beginning this paper with Kaufman is important because that's where my thesis began for me. While I didn't know go into my thesis knowing exactly what I wanted to do, I did know enough that I wanted it to be connected to Kaufman. Yet, if my thesis was to be connected with him, I also wanted it to be connected with the other filmmakers that I'm most passionate about. Bearing this in mind, I started widening my focus on these other absurd filmmakers, which included David Lynch, the Coen Brothers, Yorgos Lanthimos, and even a few people who were more performance artist than filmmaker such as Kyle Mooney, Nathan Fielder, and TJ Miller. In considering all of these artists and authors, I began to focus them through the same lens as Kaufman in that I was looking at how they each used their respective style of absurdism to put forth their own commentary on our humanity and our society. Just as Kaufman used his surreal and self-reflexive style to grapple with our relationships, I found that each of these fellow absurdist were making their own genuine and important observations on humanity even if it was just as piled under postmodern irony. Or in Nathan Fielder's case, piled under poo-flavored froyo. And so this is how my thesis started: Using the voices of these absurdist, I wanted to find my own voice and hope that it was pretty absurd too.

Before I worked any further on my thesis about absurdism, however, I thought it would be smart to research a little more about the actual philosophy of absurdism, a thought that ended up leading to the bottom of a very large mountain. With his 1942 philosophical essay, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, French author and philosopher Albert Camus became the first to officially identify and

define absurdism. He begins the essay by writing, “There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide.”<sup>2</sup> To paraphrase the rest of the essay, one might say that Camus is arguing, “Life is meaningless, so either kill yourself or accept its meaninglessness and laugh.”

To make this point, Camus obviously (considering it’s the title) uses the myth of Sisyphus in which Sisyphus had been condemned to eternally roll a boulder up a mountain every day only for it to inevitably roll back down every night. Using this myth, Camus then examined it in order to understand why Sisyphus simply didn’t kill himself and end this unendingly futile punishment. To justify Sisyphus’ predicament, Camus wrote, “One must imagine Sisyphus happy,” meaning that the only reason why Sisyphus hadn’t killed himself yet, must be that he had accepted the absurdity of his situation and grown to be content with it. While Camus’ essay is much more comprehensive than this simplification, it is this idea that I found to be most relevant to my thesis. Upon simply returning to the ending of *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, a viewer cannot help but make the connection between Sisyphus and Joel and Clementine’s relationship. Although they know that their relationship has fallen apart before and most likely will fall apart again, the two of them simply say, “Okay,” thereby choosing to be content with the absurdity of their relationship as well as the entire concept of love as a whole. While I won’t be the one to judge whether my final scripts depict the philosophy of absurdism as faithfully as this scene *Eternal Sunshine*, I will say that Camus’ argument was important throughout my process, so it was important for me to research him as much as I did.

Following this initial dive into the theoretical definition of absurdism, however, I realized that I would need more absurdist texts to analyze, so I did what FTT majors do best: watch movies, TV, and plays. Beginning with the films I viewed, a few of the most important ones (not counting Kaufman’s) that I viewed specifically for this project were Luis Bunuel’s *The Exterminating Angel* (1962), Jacque Rivette’s *Celine and Julie Go Boating* (1974), and Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinhert’s *Swiss Army Man* (2016). *The Exterminating Angel* is most important because it actually

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<sup>2</sup> Camus, Albert, Justin O'Brien, and James Woods. *The Myth of Sisyphus*. London: Penguin, 2013. Print.

provided me with the premise of *Privilege!* in that I was interested in exploring the grotesque degradation of a wealthy man when faced with a situation he's not accustomed to. As for *Celine and Julie Go Boating*, I liked the idea of the two protagonists entering into a story within their story and interacting within it, a concept which I tied into *Being Darren*. While I was not expecting for it to be as relevant to this project, *Swiss Army Man* was most influential on *The Life and Death of Mickey the Milkman* even though I had first written it before see *Swiss Army Man*. It was in revisions, however, where I sought to tap into a similar balance of grossness, whimsy, and heart that I believe *Swiss Army Man* captured so well.

Moving on to television, David Lynch's *Twin Peaks* was by far one of the most important influences on this thesis and while I didn't end up channeling the same themes or tone of the show, it was always in the back of my head while writing. In fact, one of the best parts of watching *Twin Peaks* was seeing its influence on all of my favorite movies and TV that have come out since, so even if the rest of this project had turned out to be a huge failure, I would've at least had that. Another significant show that I viewed for this thesis was Andy Daly's *Review* in which Daly plays a "reviewer of life" who hosts a review show that eventually destroys everything in his life. I really liked this concept of the thing that you love and work hardest for being the same thing that kills you, and so I made it a central theme of *Mickey the Milkman*. A third show (which was similar to *Swiss Army Man* in that I first watched it not expecting it to be as relevant as it was) is Donald Glover's *Atlanta*. Centering the show around three friends living and hustling in Atlanta, Glover peppers in small bits of surrealism and weirdness that brilliantly elevate what would otherwise have still been a perfectly intimate character study. Thus, this show and its tone ended up being hugely influential on both *Being Darren* and *Mickey the Milkman* as the former connected with *Atlanta's* mix of very personal character material and bits of surrealism, and as I revised the latter in light of *Atlanta's* use of episodic vignettes, especially with their larger political and social commentaries.

Most importantly of all, theatre ended up playing a large role in my thesis to the point that I had actually considered changing the creative portion of my thesis into a play or at least a staged reading. Luckily for my sanity, I quickly realized I had next to no experience in theatre, and ended up keeping the original plan of writing in the screenplay format. Nevertheless, the theatre texts that I did interrogate (in this case, read) came to be just as or possibly even more crucial to my final scripts as any of the film and television that I viewed. Considering its held up as the defining absurdist play, Samuel Beckett's *Waiting For Godot* was important for many reasons, but most of all for its faithful interpretation of Camus' philosophy:

E: "Why don't we hang ourselves?"

V: "With what?"

E: "You haven't got a bit of rope?"

V: "No."

E: "Then we can't."

Silence.

While I wouldn't say my scripts dealt with exactly the same themes as Beckett's play, I wouldn't discount the impact that *Waiting For Godot* (1953) had on them simply because of how historically influential the play is (similar to *Twin Peaks*). If anything, I tried to capture a similar quick back-and-forth rhythm to a few of the dialogue scenes, particularly in *Being Darren*. On the other hand, Eugene Ionesco's plays *Rhinoceros* (1959) and *The Bald Soprano* (1950) were deeply instrumental in my scripts as I adopted *Rhinoceros'* motif of grotesquely large animalistic symbolism in all three films, and as I attempted to add moments (especially in *Being Darren* and *Mickey the Milkman*) that echoed *The Bald Soprano's* chaos and confusion.

Finally, while it's not represented in FTT's acronym, I found literature to be just as helpful in my research. While Camus himself wrote another one of the defining literary pieces of absurdism, *The Stranger* (1942), I found two other authors just as impactful on my own writing: Franz Kafka

and George Saunders. With his anxiety-driven stories of man's impotence and futility, Kafka should be noted as one of Kaufman's greatest influences. In the *Vulture* interview mentioned above, Kaufman himself says, "When I was reading Kafka as a teenager, I found out that he thought his stories were really funny. At that point, I didn't understand that. But once I'd heard him say it, I started reading them differently, and I saw it, and I loved it."<sup>3</sup> It was this comedy through anxiety that I chose to adopt into my own scripts, most prominently in *Being Darren*. In the same interview (in the same answer in fact), however, Kaufman also cites contemporary short story writer and novelist George Saunders as a favorite of his. Interestingly enough, Kaufman reports that there was a point in time when he was even in line to adapt one of Saunders's short stories with Ben Stiller. The strongest connection between these two voices, and what I tried to tap into with my own scripts, is their comedic whimsy as well as their genuine empathy for characters who they could have easily just made fun of for their ignorance and stupidity.

Considering literature simply as an artform, I also chose to write my screenplays with a relatively more literary voice, particularly with *Privilege!*. While screenplays are usually expected to be written with the intention of only including what is literally seen on screen, I chose to bend this format slight for two reason. On the one hand, while reading Kaufman's own scripts, I appreciated how he implemented his own literary voice in writing these stories, and in keeping with the idea of writing a script in his style, I thought including my own voice would help add to the Kaufmanesque-ness of the scripts. On the other, I decided early on that my goal in writing these scripts was to capture exactly what was in my head as opposed to what would hypothetically be filmed, and so I felt the best way to do this was writing as comprehensively as possible. Nevertheless, in the future, if I were to ever use these professionally, whether to help me get a job or to actually consider filming, I would rewrite the scripts and pull out most of the (for lack of a better word) embellishing voice and directions, thus, making it more adherent to the industry's screenplay format. For now,

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<sup>3</sup> Sternberg, Adam. "In Conversation: Charlie Kaufman." *Vulture*.

however, I like thinking of the directions as the stories' omniscient narrators, which consequently blurs the line between the cinematic and the literary.

Returning to my research, because I had not yet focused my thesis to more than the philosophy of absurdism, while sorting through and viewing all of these texts and plenty more, I began to find myself needing to narrow my focus once again. As such, I started to find three separate lenses through which I could choose to interrogate absurdism more specifically. At the risk of oversimplifying, I would name these three approaches as style, tone, or scope. With style, I could look at the range in which the absurd can be used between most schematic and most impenetrable. In other words, on one side of this range, text such as *Rhinoceros* clearly denote the meaning behind their absurdity (the rhinoceros as Nazis), while on the other, authors such as David Lynch might implement the absurd almost completely arbitrarily in that there's no coherent meaning to it. An example of this style of absurdism would be in *Mulholland Drive* (2001) when Lynch includes the man behind the dumpster with no clear meaning behind it other than to establish the film's nightmarish tone. Speaking of tone, I found that all of these texts also differ greatly depending on the tonality of the absurd in that they vary between the nightmarish and the cerebral.

Staying with the example of *Mulholland Drive*, Lynch establishes his nightmarish tone early on thanks to the man behind the dumpster, and he only expands on this tone as the film continues with imagery and scenes such as the demonic old couple and the dead body. In opposition to this more grotesque tone, other absurdist texts are much more cerebral. Kaufman himself is actually one of the best examples of this as many of his films, while retaining their dreaminess, feel more puzzle-like than nightmarish because of their complexity and large numbers of moving parts. His 2007 film, *Synecdoche, New York*, is a great example of this as it features a full-scale New York City inside of a full-scale New York City inside of another full-scale New York City each of which is populated by actors acting as actors acting as actors acting as the protagonist's friends and family.

In the end, however, I found myself to be most interested in the idea of scope as I began seeing the texts spread across a spectrum ranging between intimate and universal. In other words, on one side of the spectrum, some texts were dealing with the absurdity of ourselves as individuals, while on the other side, I found texts choosing to comment on the absurdities of our society as a whole. As for the former, one of the strongest examples of the absurdity of individuals dates back to Kafka and his short stories. Most well-known of his, *The Metamorphosis* (1915) offers a very intimate glimpse of an individual named Gregor Samsa whose personal and work life has repressed him to the point of turning him into an enormous insect. On the far other side of the spectrum, Yorgos Lanthimos is known for his scathingly absurd social satires. With *The Lobster* (2015), Lanthimos tells the story of a totalitarian state in which single people (like John C. Reilly) are turned into animals if they are unable to find a partner to marry within their allotted time. By emphasizing absurd concepts such as these people's irrational belief that having one thing in common with their partner (i.e. wearing eye-glasses) means that they'll make a suitable married couple, Lanthimos seems to be making larger observations concerning our society's expectations for coupledness. Most importantly, by narrowing my focus on scope, I found that I was actually returning to one of the concepts that spurred me into this thesis: taking a closer look as to how storytellers like Kaufman use the absurd to reflect deeper commentaries on ourselves and our society.

Speaking of my thesis, I eventually came to a point at which I had watched and read enough movies, TV, plays, and books, and at which I accepted that watching and reading any more was just my way procrastinating, so I finally sat down and started writing, but not before coming up with a few prompts. Before anything else, however, I decided that I would write three scripts for short films which would each be located on different parts of the individual versus societal spectrum. From there, I realized that these scripts would be more effective as a series if they shared a few thematic connections among them. Beginning with themes, I chose to emphasize at least three topics in all of them: largeness, forward and backward momentum, and reliving one's life. It's

important to note that while all three of these are present in the three scripts, the degree to which they're present literally as opposed to metaphorically differs across the scripts. For example, while the protagonists of *Privilege!* and *Mickey the Milkman* are physically large, Darren's presence in *Being Darren* grows to be metaphorically larger as he sees more and more of himself at the same time as other characters start looking like him too.

To strengthen the interconnection across the scripts, I also chose to include major and minor plot points which included using a rural location at some point: whether the entire film is set on that rural location (*Mickey the Milkman*) or it's simply mentioned in passing (*Being Darren*). Likewise, all of the scripts at some point or other revolved around large animals (specifically cows and elephants) such as the taxidermied elephant's head at the end of *Privilege!* as well as the entirety of *Mickey the Milkman*. Another important plot point found in all of the scripts is disease, specifically a fictional disease called MCV. As a side note, I'll admit that I thought of this connection among the scripts only two days before my thesis was due which goes to show that I'll probably never stop rewriting these.

Back to the point, though, while Malignant Calcitriatic Virus (MCV) first came about during my initial concept for *Mickey the Milkman*, upon revisiting the three I realized I could do a few things to simultaneously strengthen the concept of this disease as well as each of the three scripts as a whole. First of all, I chose to replace Olivia's cancer in *Being Darren* with MCV on the one hand because of this connection to the other scripts. Even better, however, is that I had been worried about the cheapness of using cancer as a trope, so by giving her MCV (as bad as that sounds) I was able to retain the trauma of her sickness and death, which is so important to the script's story, while putting enough of an original spin on it to feel fresh. I would like to note, however, that MCV is never mentioned in *Being Darren* and instead I hoped to only imply that Olivia suffers from it so as not to feel too expositional or on the nose.

Likewise, with *Privilege!*, by adding the photos of Earl associating himself with MCV awareness and research, I was better able to subtly establish him as a more complex character in that he's still clearly an asshole at least to his servants, while at the same time we see him potentially helping people like Mickey and Olivia. Then again, I hoped there was enough implication of his wealth coming from family inheritance so that we're still forced to question the degree to which he is personally "helping" these people. Consequently, because of this reinforcement of disease and MCV across the scripts, I felt that the MCV which was pre-existing (again, intentionally worded this way) in *Mickey the Milkman* was only further strengthened, especially considering the amount of time and thought I spent making sure that MCV would be thematically consistent enough (albeit purposefully not physically consistent) across the three scripts. This was even more important for me because another one of my earlier fears, other than the cancer trope and Earl's two-dimensionality, was the degree of whimsy and playfulness that came with the idea of "second-hand calcium," which was alleviated ("sick" puns, right? (puncception)) the more that I thought through the nature of the disease and grounded it in this larger world in which these three scripts exist. In *Mickey the Milkman*, I even changed the name from Malignant Calcite Atrophius to Malignant Calcitriatic Virus to give it more of an HIV-ish ring (not a pun, I just like the weird wording of it) to it.

In the end, or for that matter, in the beginning, however, I realized that all three scripts would be best connected if they shared one important plot point. With this in mind, I actually scoured through possible comedy sketch ideas that I had previously thought of and written down, and I ended up landing on one that several people had told me wasn't that funny which would make success that much sweeter.<sup>4</sup> But without further ado, the prompt was:

"A man is unable to take off his sock."

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<sup>4</sup> Editor's note: If Gretchen ever reads this which she probably won't, Tanner is talking about you, Gretchen.

I should note that while this is an important plot point in all three scripts, however, the degree to which the man's inability to take off his sock influences the rest of the film ended up varying among them. For example, in *Privilege!*, Earl's sock becomes the inciting incident in that it causes him to fall which leads to everything else bad that happens to him. On the other hand, in *Mickey the Milkman*, when Mickey can't take off his sock because of his massive foot, it's emphasized more as a symptom of his MCV as opposed to it being the reason for his pilgrimage.

Considering both that I've already spoken of most of the themes and motifs of the scripts in this paper and that actually reading the scripts would be more effective than me talking any more about them, one of the last points I would like to make about them are each of the film's style. As much as I wanted the scripts to feel like an interconnected trilogy, I also felt that playing up their differences, particularly through style and aesthetic, would help make all three that much more effective as both stand-alone stories as well as a series. Beginning with *Privilege!*, before I even began writing, I knew that I wanted to emphasize visuals over dialogue. As I wrote, however, I realized how similar the story was to a silent film and so I began to lean more and more into that genre's aesthetics, going so far as to add a single title card of dialogue. According to this style, *Privilege!* would be filmed in black and white, using a square ratio, and with a slower and more jumpy framerate. As for musical accompaniment, I imagine a small pit orchestra or even a lone piano that both underscores dramatic moments such as the elephant head falling as well as replaces the film's diegetic noise such as Earl's screams when the elephant head falls on him. By the end of the script, I found that the aesthetics strongly echoed two primary authors: silent film's Buster Keaton and Adult Swim's Brett Gelman. Simply put, *Privilege!* is a mix of Buster Keaton's physicality and stunts as well as Brett Gelman's disturbing and gratuitous violence.

Moving on, I wanted *The Life and Death of Mickey the Milkman* to be drastically different in its aesthetics, which eventually translated into making it much more of an epic spectacle. In fact, as I began writing this script, I found myself thinking of it more and more in terms of a biblical epic.

Visually, this means *Mickey the Milkman* would be shot with extreme wide angles in the hopes of highlighting the rural beauty of the farm, while also contrasting this beauty with extreme close-ups of Mickey's grotesque mass of flesh and bone. I would actually attribute this style most closely with John Michael McDonagh's *Calvary* (2014), especially considering how the epic aesthetics support the larger themes of a man undergoing a spiritual journey while knowing that he's going to die. As I mention twice in the script, "Old McDonald" would be an important musical motif throughout the film, but it would usually be played by a full orchestra. To further emphasize the biblical undertones, I also chose to begin the film with a verse from the bible which I think connects perfectly with the film. I also divided the plot into three chapters, which I believe helps to elevate the biblical tone of the script by way of reflexively calling attention to it as a story (or even parable) à la Tarantino. At the same time that I wanted to stress this story's sense of spectacle, however, I also wanted to juxtapose this epicness with grotesque imagery. In order to do this, I started by emphasizing Mickey's monstrous transformation into a mass of flesh and bones over the course the story. I also included plenty of bodily fluids such as vomit, sweat, and blood, and I had Mickey's clean white milkman uniform become dirtier and more spoilt throughout the story. To make this incongruity even more extreme, I would actually consider producing *Mickey the Milkman* in shitty '90s CGI, such as that of early Pixar before they learned how to make human babies not look hideous.

As for *Being Darren*, I picture it as being relatively simple aesthetically so as to spotlight the story and the characters as opposed to the visuals. I would go into more detail but I have decided to end my thesis here.

It's been fun.

I'm done.