

**THE ABSURD AND FILM  
FROM THE EXISTENTIAL MOMENT TO METAPHYSICAL REVOLT**

**RYAN E. ARTRIP**

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**TIMOTHY W. LUKE, CHAIR  
SCOTT G. NELSON  
STEVEN J. DASKAL**

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**ABSTRACT**

In recent cinematic history, films have often expressed through the experiences of characters an 'existential moment' in which fundamental assumptions about life are questioned and potentially rendered meaningless. The purpose of this project is to follow two accounts of this expressed moment in the 1999 films *American Beauty* and *Fight Club*, understanding them as such through particular readings of the philosophical articulations of Albert Camus. I analyze the social climates of liberalism and consumerism that might account for these expressions of discontent and anxiety at the same time I evaluate the validity of existential thought in the contemporary social world. Ultimately, I question what kinds of political qualms absurdity might render, using film experience as a venue to understand and evaluate these questions.

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**INTRODUCTION:  
THE ABSURD AND FILM**

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Our fundamental delusion today is not to believe in what is only a fiction and take fictions too seriously. It's on the contrary—not to take fictions seriously enough... We need the excuse of a fiction to stage what we truly are.

Slavoj Žižek, *The Pervert's Guide to Cinema*

The 'existential moment' might be defined as an individual awakening to the personal limitations of human consciousness—a realization of an indifferent collective world and an insignificant existence within that social world. In its most popular contemporary expressions, it is a fiction—a condensed experience narrated into an epiphanic realization of one's condition, whatever we might imagine this condition to be. They are often abbreviated, characterized by sudden radical changes in worldview and lifestyle. These expressions of 'existential crisis' are what I analyze in the following pages with a reading of the two 1999 films, *American Beauty* and *Fight Club* alongside the various philosophical-political and literary works of Albert Camus.

In general, these and other cinematic fictions ought to be explored in terms of their decentred, or at least pluralistic nature. While conscious intentions of the writer or director of any given film deserve attention, we must also consider the film to be an amalgamation of contingencies of many individuals and circumstances, whether the individual actions and choices are conscious or not. Each actor, casting director, set designer, and key wardrobe also have both the capacity for visions as

well as a long list of experiences that might subconsciously incline them toward certain portrayals of any given aspect of a film. Because we can no longer point to an author, we cannot ask the question of film: “What does this mean?” This question only applies to a world where truth is whole and attainable—a world of a fiction intentionally created by a man in the image of God. That being said, I offer my own interpretive vision for each film. I am not concerned with intentions of the films but rather, what can be better understood by the situations of the characters in these films and their expressed experiences. I employ Camus’s work as a “system of propositions ... in order to pick out relevant cues in the film, organize them into significant patterns, and arrive at an interpretation.”<sup>1</sup> That being said, I do not look toward my interpretations as inherent meanings intentionally created in the films.

So what might we ask of film if not its inherent meaning? Plenty, I think. The task is not to mine these two films for any sort of holistic truth of the human condition or social reality. Rather, it is to look for representations, narrations, and expressions of Camus’s logic of the Absurd wherein the existential moment is so important. The purpose of such an analysis is simply to evaluate these expressions as expressions (not objective truth) and explore what subjective qualms of the modern condition they might represent, particularly as experiences of contemporary consumer culture. Camus helps us understand the films and the films help us understand Camus; putting them in conversation with one another hopefully points us in the direction of better understanding our existential social condition.

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<sup>1</sup> DAVID BORDWELL, *MAKING MEANING* (NY: NEWMARKET PRESS, 1999), 4

For some time, two important theoretical paradigms have dominated American cinema studies: Lacanian psychoanalysis and neo-Marxism.<sup>2</sup> Both perspectives, and any species of a combination of the two, seek theorization of the subject in terms of inner (psychoanalysis) and outer (Marxism) understandings of the complexities of social formation, often purposefully leaving out aspects of individual experience within the decentred social world. This is not to say, however, that experience—the primary notion concerning this work—has not played a role in film analysis in the recent past. Before the influence of these dominating approaches to film, an experience-driven paradigm of film studies was dominant. As Vivian Sobchack premises her book, writing about ‘experience’ is a “lonely and suspect enterprise. First, ‘experience’ seems a mushy, soft, term—a remainder (and reminder) of the sloppy liberal humanism that retrospectively characterized cinema studies before it was informed by ... structuralism and semiotics.”<sup>3</sup> She looks toward phenomenology not as a way to expose universality and concrete structures, but rather as a way to, through film, express her own “existential particularity.”<sup>4</sup> The phenomenology of film, in this case anyway, is an expression against the constraints of the dominating paradigms. She does not argue against the validity of these existing paradigms, but rather sees them as restrictive of her own interpretive visions.

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<sup>2</sup> VIVIAN SOBCHACK, *THE ADDRESS OF THE EYE: A PHENOMENOLOGY OF FILM EXPERIENCE* (PRINCETON: PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS, 1992), XIII

<sup>3</sup> *IBID.*, XIV

<sup>4</sup> *IBID.*, XV

Phenomenology as a descriptive method puts description of experience at its forefront. Based on the idea that experience is plural, it allows for interpretive visions conveyed through film experience.<sup>5</sup> Although a minority in film theory, phenomenology has on rare occasion found in it a home. As Shaw writes on film, “phenomenology is a perfect conduit, as it is a philosophy very much concerned with the constitution of consciousness—the intentionality that comprises the subject/object correlation.”<sup>6</sup> His argument is that phenomenology is a way of philosophically formalizing the film experience—something already intuitively understood. In other words, when I watch a film, I experience a film and that experience is intuitive to me. The phenomenology of film formalizes that experience philosophically. “Phenomenology has the pedagogic advantage of formalizing the process of discovery, the intuitional ‘seeing’ which is natural to trained artists and philosophers but which is often difficult to teach to students,”<sup>7</sup> echoes Peritore in terms of its pedagogical advantages. Phenomenology provides us with a rich account of experience—something that the existing paradigms of film theory/analysis arguably do not do a great job of.

The approach of this work is not one of phenomenology, but rather it borrows from the phenomenological importance of experience. My task is not to critique existing paradigms in film analysis, nor is it to adopt a phenomenological attitude,

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<sup>5</sup> TIMOTHY CORRIGAN & P. WHITE, *THE FILM EXPERIENCE: AN INTRODUCTION* (NY: BEDFORD/ST MARTINS, 2004)

<sup>6</sup> SPENCER SHAW, *FILM CONSCIOUSNESS: FROM PHENOMENOLOGY TO DELEUZE* (JEFFERSON, NORTH CAROLINA: MCFARLAND AND COMPANY, INC., PUBLISHERS, 2008), 3

<sup>7</sup> N. PATRICK PERITOR, "DESCRIPTIVE PHENOMENOLOGY AND FILM: AN INTRODUCTION." *JOURNAL OF THE UNIVERSITY FILM ASSOCIATION* (XXIX, NO. 1 1977: 3-6), 3

but rather to look at these films interpretively and ask what kind of expressions they offer to political conversations. Most importantly, I look at the common expression of the experience of the ‘existential moment’. Through the imagined experience of each character as well as my experience of immersing myself in the films, I offer a detailed analysis of alternative ways of looking at film as well as asking political questions about consumer society and revolt. I also borrow from the phenomenological approach to film the pluralist notion that there are many truths and through our perceptions, we ought to seek to reveal these truths that cannot be reduced and revealed through logic.<sup>8</sup>

For the purposes of this work, the best way to understand cinematic expressions is to see them as expressions of absurdity and the absurd condition of the modern human. That being said, it is important to define what is meant by absurdity. The quotidian usage of the word ‘absurd’ implies that something is ridiculous or nonsensical. When we say ‘that’s absurd!’ we mock something for its inconsistency with a presumed reality. That is to say, we use the word absurd almost synonymously with ‘stupid’ or ‘against common sense’. Although related to the common usage, the philosophical sense of the word ought to be interpreted as a much denser way of describing certain aspects of the modern human condition. Studying the absurd provides a way to study the modern human’s thirst to know things, to understand things, and ultimately to conquer things. It also sheds light

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<sup>8</sup> DUDLEY ANDREW, *THE MAJOR FILM THEORIES: AN INTRODUCTION* (NY: OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 1976), 244



on the rejection of these urges and desires, arguably present at the edge of modernity (and in these films).

The absurd ought to be understood first and foremost as a feeling of insignificance in the world. To feel absurdity is to feel the smallness of the self. There is nothing in the world that requires me to care about it. Likewise, there is nothing in the things I care about that demand care from me. One day, everyone I know and everything I value will have died. And my death, as sure as I am that it will happen, is as foreign to me as the world before I was born. At some point, not even a memory of me as an individual will remain. The world, indifferent to my very existence, will continue without me. Everything I know and value will eventually cease to be. I will be nothing and because of this, I am nothing. I am humbled, if not paralyzed, by the world's indifference towards me. The realization that one's care for things means nothing inherent or permanent ends in a sensibility of meaninglessness and profound insignificance for the individual.

The absurd peaks its head into almost every facet of both films. Take for instance the protagonist of *American Beauty*, Lester Burnham who is awakened to what we might assume is some kind of more 'authentic' way to live. In this newfound authenticity, he realizes his insignificance in the world. Likewise, the unnamed protagonist of *Fight Club* is forced by his alter ego into a realization of his blatant mortality. Both characters are essentially tied up in a conflict between the world and themselves. While the former film exposes mostly the personal

dimensions of solitary absurdity, the latter exposes the more political dimensions of absurdity.<sup>9</sup>

*The Myth of Sisyphus* is a landmark essay in which Camus concerns himself primarily with the absurd in relation to the question of suicide. As he sees it, absurdity is made evident through a *feeling* that arises from the recognition of an irrational world by a discerning human being. In his words, the inherent confrontation between man's "wild longing for clarity" and the seemingly irrational world is known as the feeling of the absurd.<sup>10</sup> The feeling of the absurd, however, is not the concept itself. Rather, "It lays the foundations for it..."<sup>11</sup> It is the experience of this feeling and what it reveals about our mortal condition that Camus is concerned with. Analyzing the experience of absurdity allows him to avoid truth claims for the existence of absurdity itself. Camus does not claim that the world is absurd or without meaning, but instead explicates the feeling of the possibility that it is so. Because Camus is concerned with the lived experience of absurdity, he focuses on the feeling of absurdity as a basis for the concept itself.

The feeling of absurdity is simply recognition of the denseness of the world, Camus says in one section.<sup>12</sup> It is a perception of strangeness and irreducibility: when the 'rational' actor finds himself/herself unable to reduce the world to an explainable unitary *whole*. For example, if I stare for too long at a cup of water and

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<sup>9</sup> THIS IS NOT TO SAY THE POLITICAL IS ABSENT FROM *AMERICAN BEAUTY*.

<sup>10</sup> ALBERT CAMUS, *THE MYTH OF SISYPHUS AND OTHER ESSAYS* (NY: VINTAGE INTERNATIONAL, 1991), 21

<sup>11</sup> *IBID.*, 28

<sup>12</sup> *IBID.*, 14

contemplate it too deeply, the cup may appear to lose its ‘cupness’. It becomes very strange to me. If I shed it of its human attributes such as its drinkability, its contents, the way it is held and other culturally defined ways of seeing it as a cup, what is left is a vague and irreducible object. The cup becomes itself again, beyond human capacity. It becomes completely inhuman and I realize it always was. This realization is of course dependent on whether I conceptually question the cup in the first place. The feeling of its foreign nature alone, however, is enough to inspire Camus’ thought; and it is arguably the most important aspect of his notion of absurdity.

For Camus, the feeling of absurdity is the world becoming itself again; it suddenly appears inhuman and in this feeling, the human becomes insignificant.<sup>13</sup> He writes, “understanding the world for a man is reducing it to the human, stamping it with his seal.”<sup>14</sup> When one cannot do this, he fails to think of himself as understanding the world. If this Cartesian subject realizes the inhumanness and irrationality of the world around him, or at least his utter and futile inability to make sense of it, a profound change in consciousness may occur. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus wants to document this change of consciousness and examine its potential consequences. This documentation provides a rich background on which to read the two films.

Camus’s overarching question is whether one can or ought to go on living in light of one’s contemplation or recognition of the purposelessness of life. The essay’s

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<sup>13</sup> **IBID.**

<sup>14</sup> **IBID., 17**

utmost concern is whether absurdity dictates its own escape. In other words, if I recognize the potential absurdity of the world and become statically conscious of the discord between my being and the world, can I live with that knowledge? Can I live with the inability to ever really ‘know’ the world in the rational-scientific sense? More importantly, what would it even mean to live with this knowledge? Camus speaks about escaping absurdity in terms of two options: evasive hope and suicide. Camus asks, “(...) how far is one to go to elude nothing?”<sup>15</sup>

The section in *Sisyphus* concerning the former of the two options is a reflection of Camus’s frustrations with the thinkers that came before him—the predecessors of his absurdism.<sup>16</sup> He refers to them as a group of thinkers related by their common nostalgia—a group taking positions “around a privileged and bitter moment in which hope has no further place...”<sup>17</sup> One can imagine that the nostalgia he refers to is the nostalgia of hope; it is not the nostalgia of a time when the world made sense, but instead when it felt as if it *could*. Once missing, one longs for that hope. In some implicit sense, Camus, like these other thinkers, articulates a common disillusionment with the enlightenment ideas of certainty and objectivity. He is in disagreement with these other thinkers, however. They all accept the death of hope in a similar sense that he does but always manage to pull something hopeful out of hope’s absence. They always attempt to transcend the absurd, finding *something* to be a derivative of *nothing*. His predecessors and

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<sup>15</sup> **IBID., 16**

<sup>16</sup> **CAMUS CRITIQUES JASPERS, CHESTOV, KIERKEGAARD, AND HUSSERL.**

<sup>17</sup> **IBID., 27**

contemporaries alike “deify” the absurd, remaining unfaithful to its ‘commandments’.<sup>18</sup> “The absurd is essentially a divorce,” he says.<sup>19</sup> It is a frustrated incompatibility between “the mind that desires and the world that disappoints...”<sup>20</sup> It lies not in man or the world alone, but in their conflict. To see it as any more than this conflict is to see it as just another illusion.

The very moment the absurd is transformed into “eternity’s springboard,” as Camus puts it, it ceases to exist.<sup>21</sup> For Camus, the absurd is a *true* conflict and a man must live with his own truths.<sup>22</sup> Thus, Camus must find a way to live with absurdity. Extracting hope or any other conceptual attitude that permits false relief of the anguish of the absurd is to transform the absurd into something it is not; this is to evade it rather than face it. Camus proposes we look it in the eyes.

To stay true to the dictates of absurdity and to live as an ‘absurd man’, one must *not hope* to transcend absurdity. One must become an absurd hero and be what he is: absurd. Camus’s absurd hero is the Greek Sisyphus, a man condemned by the gods to push a stone up a hill for eternity, only to watch it fall back down and start over, again and again. For Camus, the interesting part of the myth is what he imagines to be Sisyphus’s conscious pause as the stone rolls back down the hill.

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<sup>18</sup> THE WORD ‘COMMANDMENT’ APPLIED TO THE CONCEPT OF ABSURDITY MAY SEEM A BIT OUT OF PLACE (OR CONTRADICTIONARY) FOR CAMUS, A THINKER WHO (UNLIKE SARTRE AND HEIDEGGER) FORMALLY REFUSED TO SYSTEMATIZE HIS PHILOSOPHY. CAMUS IS SIMPLY ARGUING THE QUASI-RATIONAL POINT THAT THESE OTHER THINKERS BETRAY THE LIFE OF THE ABSURD. *IBID.*, 32-34.

<sup>19</sup> *IBID.*, 30

<sup>20</sup> *IBID.*, 50

<sup>21</sup> *IBID.*, 35

<sup>22</sup> *IBID.*, 31

Moreover, Camus is concerned with Sisyphus's hour-long trip of contemplation back down the hill to meet the object of his eternal damnation once more. He writes, "If this myth is tragic, that is because the hero is conscious. Where would his torture be, indeed, if at every step the hope of succeeding upheld him?"<sup>23</sup> In this instant, hope becomes not only a concept inconsistent with the absurd, but also and perhaps more importantly a *harmful* attitude. Hope not only causes the human being to falsely evade the absurd, it also leads to tragedy and unhappiness. Absurdity and happiness, he says, are "two sons of the same earth. They are inseparable."<sup>24</sup> Although Camus does not fully explicate what he means by this, he makes apparent that he thinks happiness can come from the recognition of absurdity and vice versa.

Camus goes on to say that Sisyphus's "fate belongs to him," and that "His rock is his thing."<sup>25</sup> Here, Camus promotes a certain privileged ownership of one's own life and suggests that happiness might be found in such ownership. But make no mistake, it is not a call for radical freedom. Rather, Camus suggests we find happiness in the absurd and ownership in our own situatedness within it.<sup>26</sup> In conclusion of the piece, he eloquently writes, "The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy."<sup>27</sup> To be an

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<sup>23</sup> **IBID., 121**

<sup>24</sup> **IBID., 122**

<sup>25</sup> **IBID., 123**

<sup>26</sup> **THIS IS PERHAPS ONE OF THE MOST FASCINATING FACETS OF CAMUS' THOUGHT. IN MANY WAYS, IT SETS HIM APART FROM HIS CONTEMPORARIES. SARTRE'S EARLIER WORK LARGELY SERVES AS EXPOSITIONS ON RADICAL HUMAN FREEDOM, WHICH PERHAPS FALL SHORT OF FULFILLING THE CONDITIONS OF THE ABSURD.**

<sup>27</sup> **IBID., 123**

absurd hero, one must not transcend the meaninglessness of his wretched little life; one must only live it.

Trying to understand Sisyphus in terms of his politicality is difficult, however. After all, Sisyphus appears anti-political. It would seem he could only serve as a metaphor for the absurd condition, not as an example of a practically and socially lived absurd life. Camus realizes this in his later, more political writing concerned with solidarity and revolt.

Solidarity is in many ways Camus's answer to the problem of Sisyphus. Herein, the subject of a meaningless world where no inherent morality exists can be meaningful only in terms of the collective—the solidarity of humanity. Whereas the Sisyphusian hero is heroic because of his accordance with the absurd, the hero in revolt is heroic because he refuses to accept the senselessness of suffering; yet his conflict with a meaningless world itself results in the absurd condition. Sisyphus never tries to make sense of his suffering; the rebel, on the other hand, must make sense of the suffering of humanity.

If we accept that Camus's thought can be temporally classified in terms of his solitary philosophy of *Sisyphus* and *The Stranger*<sup>28</sup> versus his politico-philosophical expositions of *The Rebel*<sup>29</sup> and *The Plague*,<sup>30</sup> it is important to understand the two as irreconcilable. In other words, we ought not look toward Camus in terms of his consistency or inconsistency, but rather the value of his ideas alone. Although they

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<sup>28</sup> ALBERT CAMUS, *THE STRANGER* (NY: VINTAGE INTERNATIONAL, 1988)

<sup>29</sup> ALBERT CAMUS, *THE REBEL* (NY: VINTAGE INTERNATIONAL, 1991)

<sup>30</sup> ALBERT CAMUS, *THE PLAGUE* (NY: VINTAGE INTERNATIONAL, 1991)

follow a same sort of logic of absurdity, the two sides of Camus come to radically different conclusions in terms of ethics and how one ought to live.

This division helps topically organize the following two chapters. The first chapter is concerned with the logic of Camus's absurdity that ends in death (and thus the end of absurdity itself). Once the Sisyphusian subject meets his inevitable death, the story is over. This is made evident through *American Beauty*. However, the world continues without him. This fact is what makes the absurd so important politically. What I mean by this is that if a human accepts his/her insignificance and experiences the feeling of the absurd in some profound sense, there is at least the ultimate resolve of death. If humanity or any collective group, for that matter, accepts its insignificance, however, there is no such (at least imaginable) resolve; the tragedy continues through the ages. I think this is why revolt is so important to the later Camus. The understanding that the world continues beyond my consciousness is implicit in any sensibility of revolt—in any idea that is 'worth dying for'. To be sure, revolt accepts a truth of the inherent value of humanity in spite of the perceived meaninglessness of the individual. Camus finds something very profound about this affirmation of not only individual life, but also collective human life.

That being said, there are three main topics of inquiry that coincide with the following two chapters. The first chapter concerns mainly the naïveté of death expressed by the suburbanites of *American Beauty*. It serves to briefly document the situational differences in existential experience between the apex of French



existentialism and the present. None of the characters of *American Beauty* think of death in the way that Camus thinks of death. Death is not constantly present, but the feeling of the absurd, not unrelated to the feeling of *beauty*, is. These characters are not 'existentialists' by any means, but they present a very unique existential condition that is worth talking about. Beauty, rather than absurdity, might be the overarching topic of the film but as we will see, Camus thinks the two are of the same vein. The purpose of this chapter is in part to establish an argument for the continued relevancy of absurd thought in contemporary society. Most importantly though, it serves to document existential experience in an individual or, as I will argue, Sisyphusian way. The expressions of the film set the stage for important political questions. If the condition of the characters of *American Beauty* is indeed our condition, how do we come to terms with it socially? Will we be nihilists in bored idleness or absurdists in metaphysical revolt? Or, as we will see in *Fight Club*, will we be nihilists in blind physical revolt? And most importantly, what exactly does revolt entail? This is the ultimate question to be treated in the second chapter. But first, we must try to understand what revolt means in 1999 as opposed to 1942. We do this by way of asking what is initiating these expressions of absurd revolt?

Through film analysis, the second chapter maps out a way we might ask this question. It regards consumerism as a catalyst of absurd experience. Both films seem to express manifestations of absurdity that are profoundly political in the sense that they appear, at least in part, as a reaction to consumerism and the 'love

of things'. *American Beauty's* protagonist rejects his wife's material obsessions as part of his awakening, but is unable to ever really find a non-material way of expressing his rejection. In some sense, his options for finding authenticity are limited by the society in which he lives. He can never really escape the citadel of the suburb except through his demise. His uphill Sisyphean struggle ultimately ends in tragedy. But even then, he is metaphorically comforted by his knowledge of the absurd's resting place. In death, the conflict is finally over.

In *Fight Club* however, a much darker side of the absurdist rejection of consumerism is revealed. The protagonist is put in a similar situation, ultimately being forced by his alter ego to reject his life of material obsession. As the story unfolds, he realizes piece by piece his insignificance in the world. Where this rejection of normative standards seems to end, however, is terrorism. The question then becomes, how can an individual live in this mode of 'authenticity' without condoning terrorism against the forces of inauthentic constitution, e.g., the perpetuators of consumerism? *Fight Club* follows the logic of absurdity to the presumed 'end', but is it absurdity or nihilism that motivates the terrorism of Tyler Durden? The final scene is one of violence against the corporation, leaving the audience with a feeling of ambiguity of morality.

This project is not exactly an attempt to understand ourselves through film, as Žižek's quote opening this chapter might mislead. Rather, it is the question of what film suggests about our condition and our social situations, if read the right way. These films speak, just as Camus continues to speak, as if they are trying to

reveal things about our humanness—our collective condition or, at the very least, our historical situation. Whether we understand their stage as a representation of something wholly ‘real’ is, psychoanalysis aside, a leap of faith. The contents of the film judged as expressions deserve interpretation and exploration if only for the richness revealed in their analyses. If we buy into the dictates of absurdity, holistic sense of the human condition can never be made. If we buy at all into the notion of Camusian revolt, however, all we can do is continue to try.

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## CHAPTER 1: AMERICAN ABSURDITY

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No doubt it may be questioned if enlightenment can indeed be negative: to say enlightenment is to say light, and absurdity is opacity itself, it is the contrary of what gives light. If there is any light in it, it can only come from myself, in so far as it is a self which is set up in opposition to reality...

Gabriel Marcel, *The Philosophy of Existentialism*

### SITUATING BEAUTY AND THE ABSURD

Although he is not explicit about their relationship, Camus's absurdity is intimately linked to his understanding of beauty. He best articulates the realization of existential anxiety in the face of the absurd when describing the beauty of nature in *Sisyphus*. He says, "At the heart of all beauty lies something inhuman, and these hills, the softness of the sky, the outline of these trees at this very minute lose the illusory meaning with which we had clothed them, henceforth more remote than a lost paradise."<sup>31</sup> The realization of beauty then is also a vague recognition of unfamiliarity. It is a recognition of inhumanness, although rarely articulated that way in everyday life. Recognizing beauty as the inhuman, in other words, is also recognizing one's inability to reduce the world to the human. In that sense, the recognition of beauty and the absurd are deeply similar.

Camus aligns beauty with absurdity in a very peculiar way earlier in the essay as well. He says, "Great feelings take with them their own universe... a

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<sup>31</sup> CAMUS, *SISYPHUS*, 14

universe of jealousy, of ambition, of selfishness, or of generosity. A universe—in other words, a metaphysic and an attitude of mind.”<sup>32</sup> He refers to these examples as ‘specialized feelings’, the nature of which, he cryptically writes, is even truer for emotions constituted by indeterminacy that arise from beauty and absurdity. He speaks to a human recognition of inherent contradiction—feelings of the world as “vague and ‘definite’, as remote and as ‘present’...” and claims these emotions are “furnished” by beauty or “aroused” by absurdity.<sup>33</sup>

This terminology becomes more interesting when we examine the implications of the two descriptors. *Furnished* implies a process in which less intellectual work is being done. Realizing the beauty of something may also be realizing the inhuman and previously illusioned character of it, yes, but insofar as it is not articulated as such, it is not the same as realizing the absurd character of something. The feeling of the absurd *arouses* a sense of something. The latter implies more of an intellectual backbone calling for *thoughtful* (if not philosophical or phenomenological) examination. The former implies a more universal feeling of *experience*, inherent in man although never fully articulated by the description of beauty alone. One may say that the feeling of beauty could lead to an articulation of absurdity. In that sense, the two are intimately related.

Beauty is an important limb of the absurd if we consider it to be a particular lived expression/manifestation of the feeling of absurdity. When Martin Esslin writes of the ‘Theatre of the Absurd’ rather than philosophy of absurdity throughout

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<sup>32</sup> **IBID., 10**

<sup>33</sup> **IBID.**

the 1940's, 50's and 60's (referring mostly to Sartre and Camus), he makes an important distinction between drama-as-art and philosophy-as-articulation. Esslin refers to the inner conflict of absurdity when he writes, "This is an inner contradiction that the dramatists of the Absurd are trying, by instinct and intuition rather than by conscious effort, to overcome and resolve."<sup>34</sup> If we consider Camus's philosophical essays to be conscious efforts and this movement in theatre, for example, to be part of a more intuitive and unconscious expressive endeavor, then we might also consider contemporary film, *American Beauty* in particular, to be an unconscious expression of coming to terms with absurdity as conflict.

In placing beauty and absurdity side-by-side, Camus implies not so much they are perfectly synonymous, but that they can lead to the same awakening of consciousness. Beauty *furnishes* and the feeling of absurdity *arouses* these human emotions that lead to a realization of the potentiality of one's existence as absurd. Perhaps what Camus is implicitly saying here is that the notion of the absurd is very weighty and burdened by philosophical concepts and terminology. If one strips the thinker of his terminology, the feeling he describes may still exist. Is this to become the feeling of beauty? Or at least, is the feeling able to be expressed vis-à-vis beauty?

Camus notes that, "At any streetcorner the feeling of absurdity can strike any man in the face."<sup>35</sup> Camus's allusion to everydayness through the imagery of

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<sup>34</sup> MARTIN ESSLIN, *THE THEATRE OF THE ABSURD* (NY: VINTAGE BOOKS, 2001), 25

<sup>35</sup> *IBID.*, 10-11

the streetcorner suggests that he mentions beauty for its degree of ‘universality’<sup>36</sup> and practicality. To some degree, this is a way of recognizing that one does not have to be a reader of philosophy to feel what he describes. In a sense, he extends the feeling of absurdity beyond the philosopher through beauty. The absurd can be experienced not only through contemplation but also through the acts of taking care in everyday life, i.e., the act of living.

#### AMERICAN ABSURDITY

The feeling of the beautiful as the absurd is an overarching theme diversely articulated through each of the characters of *American Beauty*. The film announces itself with an overhead camera slowly descending into a ‘perfect’ suburban landscape. The narrating protagonist, Lester Burnham (played by Kevin Spacey), tells us that within a year, he will be dead.<sup>37</sup> From the onset, we know that death is immanent. One is left with a strong feeling of impending doom that creates for the film a similar sensibility that Camus concerns himself with.

We first see Lester experiencing a numbing depression. Dissatisfied with his mindless job, abusive marriage, and deteriorated relationship with his daughter, he develops a ‘nothing to lose’ attitude at the onset of realizing his sexual desire for his daughter’s youthful high school friend, Angela Hayes. He realizes absurdity through his perception of her beauty. Throughout the film, he continually expresses a Camusian nostalgia for hope. Referring to his younger years of summers flipping

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<sup>36</sup> THIS IS NOT TO SAY THAT DIFFERENT PEOPLE FROM DIFFERENT CULTURES AND SITUATIONS ATTACH THE SAME MEANING TO BEAUTY. IT IS TO SAY, HOWEVER, THAT THE FOUNDATION OF THIS PARTICULAR FEELING, WHETHER REFERRED TO AS BEAUTY OR SOMETHING ELSE, IS EVIDENCE FOR THE ABSURD.

<sup>37</sup> ALAN BALL, *AMERICAN BEAUTY: THE SHOOTING SCRIPT* (NY: NEWMARKET PRESS, 1999), 1

burgers for a living and having his ‘whole life ahead of him’, his character indicates a desire to return to a more hopeful time where he could once imagine accord between the world and himself.<sup>38</sup> He never realizes this hope again, even through the dignified and clever resignation from his job and the securing of a new position in fast food. He begins smoking marijuana sold by the neighbor, working out (for Angela), and joyfully refusing to fill his life with the ordinary suburban meaning that was once assigned to it—the meaning of consumerism, social conformity, and proper professional-personal *structure*. He gives up the job, the marriage, and the nuclear family. Lester becomes absurdist in the sense that he becomes “an ordinary guy with nothing to lose.”<sup>39</sup> In a beautiful display of radical contingency and the failures of rationality expressed by Camus, Lester eventually dies (as promised) by the gun of his neighbor, Col. Frank Fitts, USMC.

Before his murderous act, Frank also undergoes a profound transition resulting from the recognition of the absurd. Prior to an upset involving his son, Ricky, he embodies a fundamentally structured and disciplined mode of being. With a particular sense of logic and rationality, Frank’s character is one who has pieced together his masculine and militaristic understanding of the world. He finds meaning in rigid social constructions, saying things like “there are rules in life” and “you need structure, you need discipline” to his son.<sup>40</sup> At one point in the film, he is beating Ricky relentlessly and stops only when Ricky mentions his girlfriend,

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<sup>38</sup> **IBID., 47**

<sup>39</sup> **IBID., 50**

<sup>40</sup> **IBID., 66**



implicitly demonstrating his fear that Ricky is a homosexual. There is an oddly proud yet stern look in Frank's eyes following the halt of the beating. As the original script intended, Frank appears "suddenly, deeply shamed."<sup>41</sup> He continues to live by his unchallenged worldview; it makes sense for him but it is apparent that some unhappiness and discontent lie just below the surface.

Through a series of coincidental events, Frank pieces together the misunderstanding that Ricky and Lester are having a homosexual affair with one another. Here especially, Frank's character serves as a metaphor for the failures of rationality expressed with the recognition of the absurd. Ultimately, he breaks. The emotional upset of his son's (false) confession of homosexuality leads him to his own sort of existential crisis. When the imagined accord between him and the world is broken and his structures of meaning are profoundly challenged, he ceases to exist in a comfortable suburban setting. In a desperate attempt to redefine his identity and to find meaning in his condition, he approaches Lester as a homosexual himself; Frank tries to kiss him and is rejected. In the end, this (in some way, we should assume) drives Frank to kill Lester. Perhaps what drove him to murder was Frank's desperate attempt to discern meaning from a world that was so suddenly stripped of it. Frank becomes a certain kind of nihilist. In his extraordinary loss of meaning, murder loses its weight. His nihilism justifies murder in its justification of nothing. If one believes in nothing, then one can no longer negate murder.

Another facet of the film that serves as an articulation of absurdity is Lester's relationship with his wife, Carolyn. Her character is self-absorbed in her position

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<sup>41</sup> *IBID.*, 65

as a real estate agent. Through most of the film, she is apparently incapable of having the same sort of existential questioning of life as her husband. As Camus might interpret her, Carolyn experiences the anxiety of her existence in the mere sense of a being “lost in the world and its diversions.” She experiences anxiety as a “brief, fleeting fear,” *not* in the profound sense that Lester does.<sup>42</sup> This is particularly evident in the scene where she finds herself unable to secure the selling of a house she had formerly convinced herself she would sell. She has an emotional breakdown, unable to accept her personal failure and inability to do the very thing by which she assigns her life some kind of meaning.<sup>43</sup> Her unquestioning marriage to her career and the material world forcefully wedges itself between her and Lester.

At one point in the film, Lester tries to reconcile their marriage. Following a dramatic dialogue, he seems to have finally reached her and awakened the same nostalgia in her that he finds in himself. Lester approaches her sexually with a midday beer still in his hand. Just as each character appears to become absorbed in their reawakened passions, all at once Carolyn stops Lester’s advances in fear that his beer will spill on the couch. “It’s just a couch!” he says, “This isn’t life. This is just stuff. And it’s become more important to you than living.”<sup>44</sup> Carolyn is the antithesis of Lester’s awakening to the absurd. This is Lester’s last attempt. For

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<sup>42</sup> CAMUS, *SISYPHUS*, 24

<sup>43</sup> BALL, *AMERICAN BEAUTY*, 14

<sup>44</sup> *IBID.*, 69

the remainder of the film, he lives quite secluded in his own absurdity and she in her love affair with the material world.

Even considering that Lester's actions and life changes are often made in the name of a nostalgic hope that Camus despises, he may still be understood as approaching a version of Camus's absurd hero—a suburban Sisyphus. Perhaps it is not that Lester is able to find something in his own wretched condition that gives him the will to transcend it and continue life; it is that he accepts his life for what it is and that is enough for him. He makes some trivial changes to his life but we do not see him transform in any transcendental sense. For example, we do not see him direct his career toward any sort of higher meaning; he starts flipping burgers. We do not see Lester become hopeful of life, only content with a more authentic and simpler way of living without the hope of meaning and clarity. To some degree Lester reclaims a freedom in his loss of hope, albeit a vacuous freedom to be nothing. His stone is the burger and the grill, in an overly simplified way of looking at his character. In a sense though, he becomes as content as Camus's vision of Sisyphus.

With Sophocles's Oedipus, Camus also finds a great acceptance of the absurd that is strikingly similar to some of Lester's final postmortem comments. Camus quotes Oedipus's statement, "I conclude that all is well." He writes, "and that remark is sacred. It echoes in the wild and limited universe of man. It teaches that

all is not, has not been, exhausted.”<sup>45</sup> Camus says that Sisyphus too concludes that all is well. Finding this happiness in consistency with the absurd is to find heroism.

Following his death, Lester’s narration completes the film: “I guess I could be pretty pissed off about what happened to me... but it’s hard to stay mad when there’s so much beauty in the world. Sometimes I feel like I’m seeing it all at once and it’s too much. My heart fills up like a balloon that’s about to burst.” The scene returns to the suburban landscape where we were first introduced to Lester. This time, the camera ascends from the suburb to the heavens. “...and then I remember to relax,” Lester says, “and stop trying to hold on to it. And then it flows through me like rain and I can’t feel anything but gratitude for every single moment of my *stupid little life*.”<sup>46</sup> Even though the imagery of ascent and the fact that he speaks from beyond the grave suggests a spiritual conclusion to the film, his words do not. Lester tells us that (his) life is small and implies that it is absurd. When he stops trying to hold on to the overwhelming beauty he experiences—the undeniable urge to ‘make things fit’ and understand the world—he experiences happiness. Indeed for Lester too, all is well.

#### CONTEMPORARY EXPERIENCE OF THE ABSURD

To further conceptualize the relevancy of the absurd to more contemporary contexts, we ought to examine the character of Ricky. Like Lester, Ricky acquaints us with an understanding of absurdity through his experience and articulation of beauty. In one well-recognized scene, he is sitting in his dark room with Jane,

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<sup>45</sup> CAMUS, *SISYPHUS*, 122

<sup>46</sup> BALL, *AMERICAN BEAUTY*, 100 [EMPHASIS ADDED]

Lester's daughter, showing her a video that he calls "the most beautiful thing I've ever filmed," which turns out to be a video of a plastic bag blowing in the wind.<sup>47</sup> With the image of the plastic bag, one is at first reminded of the inhumanness that Camus associates with beauty. Ricky assigns the image of the otherwise inanimate ballerina as beautiful.

He says in an almost trembling voice, "this was the day that I realized there was this entire life behind things, and this incredibly benevolent force that wanted me to know there was no reason to be afraid. Ever. The video is a poor excuse, I know... but it helps me remember. I need to remember. Sometimes there's so much beauty in the world... I feel like I can't take it. And my heart is just going to cave in."<sup>48</sup> Without the amendments to the speech added by Lester at the end of the film, Ricky's explanation could be considered quite anti-Camus. His sensibility is not one of recognizing the absurdity of the bag, but instead he assigns it a human character. What is beautiful to him, in fact, is what he falsely sees as the *humanness* of the bag. Taking his explanation quite literally, he sees some sort of force behind the bag. Ricky takes the inhumanness or, in a sense, the nothingness of the plastic bag and makes it into something. Like the existential thinkers Camus finds logically fallacious, he deifies the absurd. What he sees and articulates is beauty, but what makes him feel as if his heart might cave in—the feeling that the beauty of the world is *just too much*—is none other than the overwhelming feeling of absurdity.

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<sup>47</sup> **IBID.**, 60

<sup>48</sup> **IBID.**

In a scene just minutes before the screening of the plastic bag, Ricky and Jane are walking home with one another when they see a funeral procession. “Is that a funeral?” she asks. “Yeah.” “Have you ever known anybody who died?” he asks. “No, have you?” “No. But I did see this homeless woman who froze to death once. Just laying there on the sidewalk. She looked really sad.” There is a silence in the conversation as the two teenagers walk onto the sidewalk and stop to watch the procession of mourners drive by. Once they pass, Ricky says to Jane, “I got that homeless woman on videotape.” “Why would you film that?” she asks him. “Because it was amazing.” When she questions him further he says to her, “When you see something like that, it’s like God is looking right at you, just for a second. And if you’re careful, you can look right back.” “And what do you see?” she asks. “Beauty.”<sup>49</sup> In this scene, the sheltered suburban character of the two naïve teens is revealed. Neither has experienced an observation of death except at an impersonal distance. The weight of Ricky’s feeling of beauty cannot be articulated in terms of the absurd. He feels something heavy on his heart, but is unable to articulate it in any sort of philosophical terms because they do not exist to him yet. Instead, he deifies the absurdity of the dead homeless woman by describing the experience with a simile of the presence of God.

The most important scene involving Ricky’s character, and perhaps the most important scene of the film, comes near the end. Alarmed by the sound of a gun firing, he and Jane slowly creep down the stairs holding one another closely to see what has occurred. When they arrive, Lester’s body is lifelessly leaned over a table

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<sup>49</sup> *IBID.*, 57

and his blood splattered against the wall, dripping to the floor. Instead of clinging to Jane and giving her comfort as an 'ordinary' boyfriend might do, he slowly approaches the body and kneels before it, revealing it as Lester.

Ricky's expression is utterly blank and emotionless as he looks onto the gruesome scene. He tilts his head slightly as if to get a better look or different perspective. The camera turns to Lester's face. The top of his head is covered in blood, yet a very content expression is made apparent by a slight grin at the edge of his mouth. Ricky tilts his head further to the side as if he is trying to see or understand something in the corpse—this time not at all subtly. He tries to make sense of it. The camera returns yet again to an unchanged expression on Lester's face. When the shot turns again to Ricky, we see his emotionless face give way to a fleeting smile that leaves almost as suddenly as it appears. His head turns again, this time to a more upright position. His eyes flutter and his expression turns to a disappointed surprise as he focuses away from the corpse as if he can no longer bear to look. Ricky is finally stricken with the absurdity of death (and life for that matter). "Wow," he utters. There are no other words for this feeling. No description of beauty and no articulation of experience. He does not reach for a camera to capture the moment, leading us to believe that something in him does not care to remember. It is not beautiful to him in the way that the homeless woman was. His eyes slowly and painfully travel back to the now much harder to look at

image of a dead Lester. As he looks, so does the camera. We see Lester for the last time and hear his final narration.<sup>50</sup>

Perhaps Ricky was just experiencing an overwhelming beauty found in an unexpected place, much like he had with the plastic bag or the dead homeless woman. The DVD commentary of director Sam Mendes would lead us to believe so. Regardless, I would like as an exercise to find something more profound expressed and revealed in this scene. Ricky's emotional display begins as one of contentment and understanding, almost as if he approached the body expecting to find the same beauty as before. There is a curiosity to be found in his statuesque expression. It then briefly changes to amusement and then to an expression of overwhelmed awe. It is a very existential moment for this young suburbanite. Death has finally been faced on a personal and undeniable level, and in such a way that his own mortality must be considered.

Ricky knows of no war, no homelessness, no extraordinary collective human suffering. He never experienced the depths of hell in Auschwitz, Sobibor, or Treblinka. In his life he will never understand the hatred bred into the hearts of the colonized. Ricky will never be forced to face death or the question of suicide in the same way that Camus was. Yet here he is—facing the human reality of mortality. One can imagine he sees himself in that corpse, beautiful or not. Ricky is staring into the abyss. As a great poetic expression of Camus's dictum to face absurdity, he faces that which does not face back. This time, unlike his only other run-in with the dead, he does not see God. His expressions show us that he is

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<sup>50</sup> *IBID.*, 97



penetrated by the absurdity of the big nothing. In this moment, one cannot help but feel sorry for Ricky. The moment he walks into the room of his girlfriend's dead father, the line separating this pampered bourgeois voyeur from the victim of extraordinary suffering becomes blurred, if not altogether erased. Camus's pain is his pain—human pain.

#### WHERE IS THE POLITICAL?

Through a reading of the expressions of *American Beauty*, I have established a foundational basis for understanding absurdity in a more contemporary context. Insofar as we can imagine the characters of *American Beauty* as real, their struggles and experiences are valuable to the types of people they represent, e.g., the modern man, the suburbanite, etc. Absurd thought is applicable to human experience, detached now from its original context. But the experience of the individual is limited when we are trying to understand what is at stake politically and collectively with the absurd. What, if anything, can we learn from Camus's politics? At the very least, what kind of conversations might Camus-as-political produce in the present day?

It is easiest to imagine the character or condition that a sensibility of deadened hope—the sensibility in which absurdism resides—might leave within an individual. What is harder to imagine is this same sensibility applied to a collective. After all, Sisyphus is concerned with his stone and his hill, but not with the torturous cries of his fellow man on other hills, with other stones. This is because they do not exist to him and if they did, his wretched condition restricts

him from mollifying his brothers. Likewise, Lester Burnham does absolutely nothing for the suffering of the world. The two would seem politically sterile.

In *The Rebel*, Camus concerns himself not with suicide but this time with murder. Murder and suicide are, as he sees them, “two aspects of a single system,” the system of nihilism.<sup>51</sup> If choosing to live and not killing oneself implies a valuation of life, then that same valuation must be applied to others and murder can never be logically justified. As we see in the introductory pages of the book, Camus emphasizes the importance of action and inaction. He considers nihilistic inaction—a lack of rebellion and the complacency with one’s condition and the general condition of man—to be accepting of murder.<sup>52</sup> This raises foundational problems with our conception of the absurd hero of Sisyphus. What do we make of Sisyphus’s inaction? Can he maintain the status of hero or does he just become a metaphor of the absurd?

In the universe of Sisyphus, he is indeed a hero. But as I have said, this universe excludes everyone but himself. What is at stake politically if hope is lost for all? If the absurd is realized collectively as nihilism, do we not all become faceless and inhuman? Sisyphus may be an individual-existential hero but cannot be a political hero because he is so radically anti-political, or at least lives in a non-political universe. To some degree, I think, Camus is onto something with his vision of Sisyphus as an individualistic practical and moral model of finding happiness. Camus’s hero lives consistently with absurdity and does not consider hope or any

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<sup>51</sup> CAMUS, *REBEL*, 7

<sup>52</sup> *IBID.*, 5

other transcendence or escape of his absurd condition. I have argued for the consideration that Lester does the same. Because of this absurd way of life, both are validly happy and free from the disappointment and despair that Camus says is consequential of metaphysical hope. Sisyphus is a creatively beautiful yet autistic metaphor of absurdity that politically cannot amount to much. If other agents are introduced into this mythical scenario of his damnation, his heroism seems to vanish. Politically, he cannot carry the same weight of hero. The chapter that follows is in part an attempt to reconcile and understand the politicality of the absurd, as expressed through film.

In examining political concerns of absurdity, we ought to first turn to Camus's interest in rebellion. He finds the life of the rebel, like the life of Sisyphus, to be consistent with a life of absurdity, but in an entirely different way. Although Camus does not give it to us as the substance of the essay in *Sisyphus* (as he does in *The Rebel*), he refers to rebellion and the constant state of revolt as "One of the only coherent philosophical positions..."<sup>53</sup> For Camus, metaphysical rebellion is also consistent with the absurd in an uncanny sort of way. It is the manifestation of the absurd in its truest form: confrontation, tension, and contradiction between the human and the world. He describes this state of permanent tension with the following: "It is a constant confrontation between man and his own obscurity. It is an insistence upon an impossible transparency. It challenges the world anew every second (...) metaphysical revolt extends awareness to the whole of experience. It is

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<sup>53</sup> CAMUS, *SISYPHUS*, 54

not aspiration, for it is devoid of hope. That revolt is the certainty of a crushing fate, without the resignation that ought to accompany it.”<sup>54</sup> The state of metaphysical revolt is essentially also the state of absurdity—the state of a conflict between the self and the world. For Camus, the rebel is an individual that revolts against a larger whole yet remains temporally aware of his own impermanence. Whether it be social structure, a totalitarian regime, or the world’s irrationality, they are all manifest of the same sort of metaphysical rebellion against the void and nihilism. Camus writes, “The rebel does not ask for life, but for reasons for living. He rejects the consequences implied by death. If nothing lasts, then nothing is justified; everything that dies is deprived of meaning. To fight against death amounts to claiming that life has a meaning, to fighting for order and for unity.”<sup>55</sup> Rebellion intends to *make sense* of suffering and to affirm life.

If this admiration for the rebel seems contradictory to Camus’s admiration of Sisyphus, it is because in many ways it is. When we imagine Sisyphus as Camus describes him, he is happy and content with his condition. But the rebel is not happy or content with his condition and this is the very reason he is absurd. Why else would he rebel if not for his discontents? Why else would he demand clarity if not for his lack of it? His discontents are the only evidence for the absurd that he has. He finds no acceptance with his condition and, as he projects his condition and imagines it to be the condition of all men, continues to rebel for clarity in the world, for justice and an understanding of suffering. The rebel values human life through

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<sup>54</sup> **IBID.**

<sup>55</sup> **CAMUS, *REBEL*, 101**

his act of permanent revolt as a choice for life. He affirms the absurd through his conflict and thus he affirms life. Perhaps Sisyphus is a rebel in the sense that he revolts against his condition as *damned* and simply chooses to live its absurdity. But still, it seems an inadequate stretch to compare him to the rebel. Sisyphus does not extend his condition to a larger body as the rebel does. For this reason, it is hard to derive any sort of political value from the myth.

Following Camus's logic of the absurd, both modes of being (Sisyphus and the rebel) fit the commandments that absurdity dictates, but there is a contradictory tension laden in the comparison of the two. This Cartesian tension is between the one and the whole, the self and the structure, the human and humanity, the individual morality and the collective politicality, the self and the world. It is apparent in Camus's writing that he favors the former—the human—to the more social scientific problematics of looking at structures and systems. His analysis is consistently focused on the individual human experience because to some degree, he rejects the notion that an objective understanding of something, in this case formative social forces, can be understood in any coherent and unified way. This leads him to focus on individual experience and, in the spirit of Nietzsche, the legitimacy of creativity. He writes, "The world is divine because the world is inconsequential. That is why art alone, by being equally inconsequential, is capable of grasping it. It is impossible to give a clear account of the world, but art can teach us to reproduce it—just as the world reproduces itself in the course of its eternal

gyrations.”<sup>56</sup> The attempt to understand social forces as accounts of the world therefore is illegitimate for Camus. What is legitimate, however, is the individual’s experience and creativity. If Nietzsche’s project was part of an attempt to destroy all values set by the rule of God in order to create new values, beyond good and evil and (Camus adds) with a human face, then Camus concerns himself primarily with this creation vis-à-vis absurd rebellion.<sup>57</sup>

Camus imagines creativity on a broad level, i.e., the creativity of humanity. But conceiving of the *creative* beyond the level of the individual is a profoundly difficult task that I do not think he is up for. Valuing the creativity of humanity in the wake of God in order to fill the void that His death left behind is a political concept ideally because of its focus on the *collective* of humanity. But how might we imagine this creativity to work? It implies some sort of homogeneity of values, but this too seems repugnant and also potentially as oppressive as the ‘rule of God’. If we cannot imagine political and collective creativity in an unproblematic way, then the only thing to turn to is the individual and a politics or anti-politics of the individual.

Because of his radical focus on the individual, Camus and the thinkers of his tradition (however we define it) have been criticized for their lack of coherent and systematized political theories and conceptions of the state. Sartre’s *Critique of Dialectical Reason*,<sup>58</sup> for instance, could be considered in part a response to Camus’s

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<sup>56</sup> **IBID., 73**

<sup>57</sup> **IBID., 66, 67 FOR A DISCUSSION AND ADORATION OF NIETZSCHE RELEVANT TO THIS TOPIC.**

<sup>58</sup> **JEAN PAUL SARTRE, *CRITIQUE OF DIALECTICAL REASON* (LONDON AND NY: VERSO, 2004)**

focus on the individual. Likewise, the two thinkers' differences in politics are marked as their point of schism.<sup>59</sup> *Critique* gives way to a nuanced Marxian concern of the structural and ultimately finds repugnant the quasi-anarchism that one may say Camus's concerns lead in the direction of. Also for example (but from an entirely different standpoint), Herbert Marcuse once interviewed about Heidegger and existential analysis<sup>60</sup> assaults the notion that it has any relevancy left outside of a Marxian framework.<sup>61</sup> What is missing from Camus's thought (for the thinkers of the Frankfurt School, anyway) is a more profound analysis of *social forces*.

Jeffrey C. Isaac describes Camus's fetish for the individual when he writes that Camus (and Hannah Arendt) tend to "lean heavily on the side of agency at the expense of structure (...) to treat political agency—the exercise of political powers—as expressive or performative more than as strategic, as refusing and breaking free of existing constraints rather than as shaped by the conditions under which it emerges."<sup>62</sup> As he correctly articulates, Camus is not concerned with the epistemology of any sort of mode of being. Camus never takes how, where, why, or even if subjectivity is produced into consideration. Nor does he take the individual's

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<sup>59</sup> THOMAS R. FLYNN, *EXISTENTIALISM: A VERY SHORT INTRODUCTION* (OXFORD: OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2006), 94

<sup>60</sup> EXISTENTIAL ANALYSIS DEFINED AS "THE ANALYSIS OF THE SITUATION OF THE INDIVIDUAL HUMAN BEING" IN HERBERT MARCUSE, *THE ESSENTIAL MARCUSE* (BOSTON: BEACON PRESS, 2007), 127

<sup>61</sup> *IBID.*

<sup>62</sup> JEFFREY C ISAAC, *ARENDT, CAMUS, AND MODERN REBELLION* (NEW HAVEN & LONDON: YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS, 1992), 242

historical/cultural/physical situatedness to be a product of anything but contingency, and for that reason they remain mostly unmentioned.

As part of his rejection of enlightenment values of the rational-scientific achievement of ‘objectivity’, Camus opts for a more pluralistic yet individualized sensibility. The later Foucault, for example, rejects this tradition of existential analysis.<sup>63</sup> In his own right, he too rejects a rational-scientific sensibility with his focus on *particulars*. He seeks not to explain mankind or being in any unitary way, but instead tries to focus on social structures. He pursues a more objective rendering of social forces and the ways in which subjects come to desire and work within them. The starting point for Foucault (and many of his contemporaries) is therefore never the individual subject, the approach Camus thought so highly of.

So I ask, can an individualistic-humanistic conception of *the political* be established in any sort of substantial way? What are the dangers of collective absurdity? Within a politics of rebellion, is there a conception of the state or only the negation of the state? In the case of Camus, it would at first appear to be the latter.<sup>64</sup> Within a critique of liberalism, Carl Schmitt writes, “The negation of the political, which is inherent in every consistent individualism, leads necessarily to a political practice of distrust toward all conceivable political forces and forms of state and government, but never produces on its own a positive theory of state,

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<sup>63</sup> SEE MICHEL FOUCAULT, ‘FOUCAULT RESPONDS TO SARTRE’ IN *FOUCAULT LIVE* (NY: SEMIOTEXT(E), 1996)

<sup>64</sup> HIS STATEMENT THAT “THE EVIL OF OUR TIMES” IS THE STATE CAN BE FOUND IN “WHY SPAIN?” IN ALBERT CAMUS, *RESISTANCE, REBELLION, AND DEATH* (NEW YORK: KNOPF, 1960), 78



government, and politics.”<sup>65</sup> Insofar as we consider Camus’s absurdist thought to be individualistic, we cannot imagine him to have a conception of the state. Beyond a critique of the state, at least according to Schmitt, Camus does not have a lot to offer in terms of a political theory of the state or of *governance*.

But perhaps this is what is called for in order to analyze the complexities of contemporary political thought. Isaac writes, “In a world overcome with relativism, banality, and political cynicism—features mirrored in many current academic fashions—it (*the work of Camus and Arendt*) insists that human beings do have a nature, that our condition offers us limits and opportunities, and that it is within our power to constitute forms of political community within which we may experience a sense of individual and collective dignity.”<sup>66</sup> In other words, the dignity of humanism found in Camus may offer lessons for democratic politics. Although Camus might deny the politically strategic elements of his thought, his focus on rebellion and the individual rebel—more broadly, the individual subject—could at the very least offer an empowerment against political cynicism manifested as apathy; it could inspire action. If one is somehow empowered to participate in creating a more dignified political community by a sense of rebellion and a sensibility of absurdity, then Camus’s thought is by no means useless.

The following chapter is not concerned with Camus as a democratic theorist, however. It is concerned with the experience of absurdity within particular political

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<sup>65</sup> CARL SCHMITT, *THE CONCEPT OF THE POLITICAL* (CHICAGO & LONDON: UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS, 1996), 70

<sup>66</sup> ISAAC, *REBELLION*, 257

climates. With the inclusion of *Fight Club*, I analyze the experience of the existential moment within consumerism, something I argue to be largely behind the expressions in these films. From there, I examine the political consequences of expressions of absurdity.

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**CHAPTER 2:**  
**CONSUMERISM AND THE EXPERIENCES OF SOLIDARITY AND REVOLT**

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...There is no inner man, man is in the world, and only in the world does he know himself.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*

**CONSUMERISM AND ITS DISCONTENTS**

Today, the absurd condition is perhaps best revealed through its expressions vis-à-vis consumer culture. The consumer, as a subjectivity formed at least in part by the practice of consumption, might at some point question the ethos of liberalism and thus the practice of consumption itself. Were this to occur, fundamental questions about meaning might surface. If I, as a consumer, understand my life's meaning in terms of the things I possess or desire to possess, or the job I choose in order to possess these things, and suddenly realize the absurdity of such credence, my foundational understanding of meaning has been disrupted. As meaning is stripped from these objects of desire, a certain mood of meaninglessness might occur. The consumer realizes her values are, in a sense, imposed upon her. Nothing about consumer products actually requires her care—they are cold and inhuman. As a natural extension, so is the world. Because liberal ideals now appear arbitrary and radically contingent, the consumer can no longer understand what purpose she has in the world and this makes her anxious. Her purpose was once defined by the accumulation of these things and an imagined fulfillment through them, but what is left in their absence is a void. There is nothing inherent

in the minimalist chic coffee table that ought to make me want it, but rather I realize this desire has been imposed upon me arbitrarily and the mood of anxiety becomes prominent in my life.

The anxieties of liberalism and consumption are not new news, however. As Tim Jackson puts it, “Even in the seventeenth century, Hobbes had noted the pervasive anxiety of a society characterized by unlimited materialist values...”<sup>67</sup> Recent consumer research suggests linkages between materialistic individuals and high levels of insecurity/anxiety. These studies have posited that materialistic people have lower self-esteem<sup>68</sup> and more frequent problems with social anxiety.<sup>69</sup> The studies suggest that materialism and the experience of impending mortality are interrelated. Take for instance the 1999 study of Mandel and Heine in which ‘high status brands’ such as Lexus were more highly favored by subjects exposed to ‘subtle reminders’ of their mortality.<sup>70</sup> The hypothesis in this study is that “subjects who are exposed to material which reminds them of their own impending deaths ... will have a heightened interest in purchasing an item which symbolizes their value

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<sup>67</sup> TIM JACKSON, "LIVE BETTER BY CONSUMING LESS? IS THERE A 'DOUBLE DIVIDEND' IN SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION?" IN *JOURNAL OF INDUSTRIAL ECOLOGY* 9 (NO. 1-2 2005: 19-36), 23

<sup>68</sup> LAN NGUYEN CHAPLIN AND D.R. JOHN, “GROWING UP IN A MATERIAL WORLD: AGE DIFFERENCES IN MATERIALISM IN CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS” IN *JOURNAL OF CONSUMER RESEARCH* 34 (2007: 480-93)

<sup>69</sup> JONATHAN SHROEDER AND S.S. DUGAL “PSYCHOLOGICAL CORRELATES OF THE MATERIALISM CONSTRUCT” IN *JOURNAL OF SOCIAL BEHAVIOR AND PERSONALITY* 10 (NO. 1 1995: 243-53)

<sup>70</sup> NAOMI MANDEL AND S.J. HEINE, “TERROR MANAGEMENT AND MARKETING: HE WHO DIES WITH THE MOST TOYS WINS” IN *ADVANCES IN CONSUMER RESEARCH* 26 (1999, 527-32), 527

within their culture.”<sup>71</sup> Regardless of the role of cultural/social status, this study helps reveal that there might be an important relationship between the love of or desire for material possessions and anxiety (of death). In a related study, it was found that individuals with materialistic values are more likely to have dreams about death.<sup>72</sup>

These experiments, particularly of Mandel and Heine, are grounded in the psychological theory of Terror Management Theory, the origins of which are accredited to Ernest Becker<sup>73</sup> by Rindfleisch, Burroughs, and Wong.<sup>74</sup> They write, “Becker identified the fear of death as a unique and universal aspect of human life due to its potential to induce overwhelming anxiety and threaten our sense of self-esteem.”<sup>75</sup> In avoiding terror or in this case, the anxiety of death, people tend to cling to material objects that they see as ‘high status’. These studies help to understand the anxieties that material desires in liberal society construct and perpetuate

Sheldon Wolin goes so far to say, “anxious man emerges as the creation of liberalism.”<sup>76</sup> He posits human anxiety to be a creation of the individual fears of

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<sup>71</sup> **IBID.**

<sup>72</sup> **TIM KASSER AND V.G. KASSER, “THE DREAMS OF PEOPLE HIGH AND LOW IN MATERIALISM” IN *JOURNAL OF ECONOMIC PSYCHOLOGY* 22 (NO. 6 2001: 693-719)**

<sup>73</sup> **ERNEST BECKER, *THE DENIAL OF DEATH* (NY: FREE PRESS, 1973)**

<sup>74</sup> **ARIC RINDFLEISCH, J.E. BURROUGHS, AND N. WONG, “THE SAFETY OF OBJECTS: MATERIALISM, EXISTENTIAL INSECURITY, AND BRAND CONNECTION” IN *JOURNAL OF CONSUMER RESEARCH* 36 (2009: 1-16), 3**

<sup>75</sup> **IBID.**

<sup>76</sup> **SHELDON WOLIN, *POLITICS AND VISION* (PRINCETON: PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2004), 290**

idleness that occur within a liberal ethos. In the same vein, he writes “Nineteenth-century existentialism ... elevated to a moral and philosophical status what liberalism had experienced as fact.”<sup>77</sup> For Wolin, fear and anxiety (concepts often associated with Camus and other existential thinkers) are hoisted to the top pedestal of the liberal project. Instead of relentless optimistic self-fulfilling action, anxiety of inaction (and I think we ought to extend this to consumption) lay at the heart of what he calls the perception of liberalism as an activist philosophy.<sup>78</sup>

It ought to be asked, however, whether the anxiety of liberalism is the same as the anxiety portrayed through the tradition of existential thought. Existentialism’s expressions of anxiety are contradistinctive from the “fantastical uneasiness” that Locke considers a result of the “itch after honour, power, or riches.”<sup>79</sup> Moreover, it would appear that existential anxiety presents a significantly more substantive condition than Adam Smith’s anxious concern for the mastery of a pocket watch.<sup>80</sup> Consider Camus’s articulation and discussion of Heidegger’s anxiety:

The only reality is “anxiety” in the whole chain of beings. To the man lost in the world and its diversions this anxiety is a brief, fleeting fear. But if that fear becomes conscious of itself, it becomes anguish...  
The consciousness of death is the call of anxiety and “existence then delivers itself its own summons through the intermediary of consciousness.”<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> **IBID.**

<sup>78</sup> **IBID., 282**

<sup>79</sup> **JOHN LOCKE, *AN ESSAY CONCERNING HUMAN UNDERSTANDING* (NY: PENGUIN BOOKS, 1997), 241**

<sup>80</sup> **ADAM SMITH, *THE ESSENTIAL ADAM SMITH* (NY: NORTON & COMPANY, 1986), 119**

<sup>81</sup> **CAMUS, *SISYPHUS*, 25**

If there is any affiliation between liberal anxiety and existential anxiety, it is expressed in this passage. By this account, the anxiety that drives the liberal to act is nothing more than the fear of “man lost in the world and its diversions... a brief, fleeting fear.”

If we consider the existentialist account of anxiety to be one of being-in-the-world—consisting of a more holistic and universalizing sense of our condition grounded in the notion that we are going to die—it might not be so hard to reconcile the two accounts of anxiety. The liberal anxiety has been thought of as one of idleness, inaction, and inefficiency. This only skims the surface of the anxious modern man, however. Beneath the layers of worries about being idle in an economic sense lie deep-seated anxieties about the ultimate idleness: death. When these worries are stripped away, a profound anxiety of insignificance might be revealed. These anxieties are not unconscious from an existential-phenomenological paradigm, but rather unreflected experiences.<sup>82</sup> In other words, they are patterns of one’s conscious experience embedded in the social world. As unarticulated expressions, they cannot be located ‘inside’ one’s self (psychoanalytically speaking) nor ‘outside’ one’s self in a purely objective environment. The Cartesian subject-object distinction deteriorates in a particular way in this paradigm—the concern becomes less dualistic and more contextualistic. The separation of self and world still exists, but neither the self nor world has total independence. For an existential-phenomenologist, the concern is being-in-the-

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<sup>82</sup> CRAIG J. THOMPSON, WILLIAM B. LOCANDER, HOWARD R. POLLIO, *PUTTING CONSUMER EXPERIENCE BACK INTO CONSUMER RESEARCH: THE PHILOSOPHY AND METHOD OF EXISTENTIAL-PHENOMENOLOGY*, 136

world rather than being and the world. Either analyzing the inner-mechanisms of human psychology or the social mechanisms of the social world fall short in their lack of consideration for one another. Through an analysis of being-in-the-world, particularly the contemporary socio-political world in film, we might render a better understanding of consumer culture, borrowing in part from these existential-phenomenological ideas.

Examining the character of Carolyn in *American Beauty* provides a rich context of surface-level anxiety associated with consumerism. Take for instance her obsession with success evident through her infatuation with her career in real estate. Perhaps more than anything, Carolyn seeks to be important. In the face of insignificance, she desires success in her career. She wants to make money in the same fashion that the man she idolizes (and has an intimate affair with) has. Lester tries to make her see life beyond her consumption and, as I discuss in the previous chapter, appears to succeed at first. Her concern for the material couch hinders her spiritual progress and she immediately loses touch with what Lester seems to be trying to communicate—the notion that the material world is not life and loving her material possessions and her striving for self-inflation is not living. For Lester, I think, the act of living is irreducible, especially to any sort of material confines.

This drive toward understanding the world and her existence in it through monetary and material gain ultimately leads Carolyn to an empty existence. When she finds Lester's dead body at the end of the film, her reaction is one of utter



despair. She finds herself next to Lester's closet, with nothing to cling to but his clothing. Carolyn collapses into the clothes, hugging them into her breast, desperately seeking to find something in them besides hollow shells that once held the man she loved. The tragedy is that it is too late for her to become 'enlightened' to the inadequacies of a life revolving around material possession and economic status. Through Lester's death, she sees life for what it is: limited, temporary, and immaterial. The clothes, as a metaphor, represent her desperate attempt to hide death. Her pain is not just the mourning of her husband but also the realization of her condition. To better understand the hollow anxieties expressed by early liberal thought versus the anxieties of the existential tradition, we could look toward this scene—Carolyn's anxieties of not succeeding, of monetary idleness and individual insignificance, are trumped by her inability to reconcile death. Arguably, the anxieties are of the same vein. We ought to assume, admittedly in a leap of interpretation, that the anxiety of her being-in-the-world and ultimately her death reorients her consciousness in some profound way.

In the previous chapter, I explored film very generally in terms of particular existential expressions of conditions and situations in-the-world. Through a reading of *American Beauty*, I have described expressions of phenomena that reveal absurdity—the feelings of nothingness, loss of apparent meaning, and the empty experiences of everyday modern life. This chapter moves in a more specific and political direction, looking toward similar expressions in terms of consumerism. While *American Beauty* and *Fight Club*, as I will argue, serve to document the

feeling of absurdity at face value, they can also help us question and perhaps understand better the epistemological concerns of absurdity vis-à-vis the ethos of consumption and the individual experience of revolt. This revolt is articulated through both films' protagonists and their welcoming the experience of 'hitting rock bottom'. Both Lester as an 'ordinary guy with nothing to lose' and Tyler Durden's intentional call to realize the state of a 'nothing to lose' mentality represent a very important experience of metaphysical revolt, documented by Camus and, as I will argue, contemporarily revealed in terms of American consumerism. Because *Fight Club* more explicitly denounces the consumer ethos, it will be the highlighted fiction of this chapter.

#### **FIGHT CLUB AND THE ABSURDITY OF CONSUMERISM**

When Tyler Durden preaches to his Fight Club army, "Listen up, maggots. You are not special. You are not a beautiful or unique snowflake. You are the same decaying organic matter as everything else. We are the all singing, all dancing crap of the world. We are all part of the same compost heap," he is revealing that feelings of insignificance are now tied heavily to the importance of individualistic consumption and material possession. When he calls for recognition that the human being is 'crap', he evokes Camus's insignificance. If one understands his condition as being nothing significant to the world and the things he buys to complete him and feel whole do not actually, he enters crisis. This crisis manifests itself in the unnamed protagonist's/narrator's condition of insomnia.

Sentiments of anti-consumerism are prominent throughout the entire film. From the beginning, the narrator questions retrospectively "what kind of dining set

defines me as a person?” He describes himself as a “slave to the Ikea nesting instinct.” We find him unable to sleep—dissatisfied and numb with the emptiness he is left with despite all of the ‘stuff’ he owns. When he describes the pain of his insomnia to his physician, the physician tells him that if he wants to see real pain he should sit in the testicular cancer group therapy session. It is at this session, using the alias Cornelius, that he first sees the void. An embrace from a stranger allows him to open up and cry—presumably about his condition. He says, “And then something happened. I let go. Lost in oblivion. Dark and silent and complete, I found freedom. Losing all hope was freedom.” From one perspective, he recognizes his absurd condition. He sees oblivion and his own smallness. He understands for once that no god is his choreographer. The narrator’s discontent was bred into him by the promises of liberalism—that he could be anything he wanted to be and he could do this by a valuation of material possessions and a job that afforded them. But when this man finds himself incomplete, he begins developing an alter-ego, Tyler Durden, who drives him toward a more authentic condition.

Tyler, we find out later in the film, is behind the destruction of the protagonist’s apartment. When the narrator first discovers all of his possessions have been destroyed, he is in a sense liberated from his consumption and all of the things that filled his void, but what he is left with is just that—a void. After meeting up with Tyler, the narrator expresses his understanding of material meaning through the example of purchasing a couch. “Whatever else happens,” he

says, “I’ve got that sofa problem handled.” He voices reliance on, if not slavery to, the things that are sold to him. He claims that he was getting “close to being complete.” Tyler replies, “we are consumers. We are byproducts of the lifestyle obsession. Murder, crime, poverty, these things don’t concern me. What concerns me are celebrity magazines, television with 500 channels, some guy’s name on my underwear, Rogaine, Viagra, olestra...” “Martha Stewart,” the protagonist interjects. “Fuck Martha Stuart,” Tyler says. “Martha’s polishing the brass on the Titanic—it’s all goin’ down, man! So fuck off with your sofa units and ... I say never be complete; I say stop being perfect; I say let’s evolve, let the chips fall where they may ... Well you did lose a lot of versatile solutions for modern living ... the things you own, end up owning you.” Tyler, as an expression of an ‘authentic’ lifestyle, wholly rejects consumer culture. He describes the absurdity of caring about the things we care about—magazines, celebrities, and furniture. Why care about these things? Tyler’s authenticity is of a lifestyle independent of modernity’s fictions of completeness— notions that we can fix and complete ourselves through things as extensions of who we are. He recognizes that we cannot find/construct ourselves through the market’s false choices. Tyler represents not only an authentic life, but also a violent rejection of the inauthentic life—a revolt in the metaphysical (and soon to be physical) sense.

Tyler’s violent rejection is a rejection of the narrator’s initial lifestyle. That being said, we should take into account that the narrator works for a large car company. His job is essentially to quantify and calculate death and as a result, he

appears numb to death. Only seeing death in terms of numbers and statistics leaves him empty and unfulfilled—alienated from himself and his fellow human being. “Life insurance,” he remarks, “pays off triple if you die on a business trip.” There is a cold sarcasm in his voice when he expresses things about his job. He never explicitly says he is dissatisfied, but he in no way expresses his fulfillment. Along with his consumption-driven lifestyle, his job at the corporation, like Lester’s, fails his desire to experience happiness. In a scene shortly after Fight Club is founded, the narrator sits in conference room at his workplace. “Efficiency is priority number 1, people,” one of his bosses exclaims. Now there is a sense of apathy from the narrator. The profit that his boss seeks through efficiency has lost all of its meaning. If the end of money is stuff that means nothing, then money, and we ought to assume the efficiency that generates it, is meaningless.

For a period before the founding of fight club, the narrator goes to a variety of group therapy sessions to cure his insomnia. Seeing people close to death allows him to sleep. I think we ought to assume that he feels they bring him closer to death and allow him to feel the seriousness of his temporary condition. Eventually, however, the character of Marla Singer interrupts his therapy habit. She begins showing up to these meetings apparently for very superficial reasons. The narrator says, “Her lie reflected my lie. And suddenly, I felt nothing.” By going to the sessions, he wants to immerse himself in the reality of pain and suffering and the unavoidable meaning within it. Marla prevents this from happening because she reminds him he is a vacuous being and at the end of the day and the end of his life,

nothing he does amounts to anything. “Marla’s philosophy was that she might die at any moment. The tragedy, she said, was that she doesn’t.” Marla, like Tyler, is an embodiment of some degree of nihilism, I think. She is the absurdity that greets the narrator and causes his formerly successful pattern to halt and appear meaningless. The very thing he finds that fulfills him and makes him closer to complete is voided. He realizes, I think, that he is unable to get close to death even through the closeness of the pain and death of others.

The night his apartment is destroyed, the narrator is asked by Tyler to throw a punch at him. “How much can you know about yourself if you’ve never been in a fight? I don’t wanna die without any scars,” Tyler says. Both of these men (this man) are privileged in the same sense that I talked about the suburban naïveté in the previous chapter. They have never really experienced pain and suffering. Perhaps they have actually been shielded from it by their consumptive practices. They are seeking to find truth in themselves through pain—the birth of Fight Club. “You weren’t alive anywhere like you were there,” the narrator says. The club is, in a sense, a manifestation or expression of absurdity. At first, there is no consequence desired of it. “Fight club wasn’t about winning or losing. It wasn’t about words... When the fight was over, nothing was solved. But nothing mattered. Afterwards, we all felt saved.” There is no purpose in Fight Club, and this is why it appears so genuine and authentic to their condition—one of purposelessness. If the condition of a member of fight club is purposelessness, then fight club’s anti-consequentialism is an expression of authenticity of his condition. One day, they all

realize, they will die. The struggle of their lives will amount to an ultimate darkness. The hope of liberalism—which is arguably the hope of productivity and economic ends, is invalidated by the very notion that one day everything will end. If everything ends the same way—in death—then what is the point of their life struggles for material gain? *Fight Club* becomes a revolutionary expression of this. At the same time that it is consistent with the absurd, it is a struggle against it. It is a struggle against existing meaninglessly vis-à-vis the love of material possessions. By the same token, it is an expression of the absurdity of our lives that we ought to come to terms with. These men find a fulfillment in the absurd act of fighting for nothing—a fight without consequence—that they could not find in their menial jobs, their giant televisions, or their furniture.

One night, Tyler releases *Fight Club*'s dictum to an eager and energetic audience:

God damn it—an entire generation pumping gas, waiting tables. Slaves with white collars. Advertising has us chasing cars and clothes, working jobs we hate so we can buy shit we don't need. We're the middle children of history, man. No purpose or place. We have no great war, no great depression. Our great war is a spiritual war. Our great depression is our lives. We've all been raised on television to believe that one day we'd all be millionaires and movie gods and rock stars... but we won't... We're slowly learning that fact. And we're very, very, pissed off.

Tyler shows us that even in the 'middle of history', a boring time to exist with no greater historical cause, no widespread pain and suffering of war, absurdity is present if not universal. Camus speaks of freedom after hope in a similar sense that Tyler does. Camus's hope, however, is a generalized hope of meaning. Tyler's hope is a very specific hope—the hope of liberalism and thus the hope given to one by his (potential) material possessions. The hope that inflated the individual,

driving him toward efficiency and material gain, amounts to nothing but an enslaving mechanism. The consciousness of this reality has profound consequences, as expressed through the formation of Fight Club.

#### HITTING BOTTOM: TOWARDS (META)PHYSICAL REVOLT

In both films, there is an important scene of confrontation between the protagonist and his professional superior. The scenes are strikingly similar: in both, the protagonist is able to trick his boss into paying him for a period of time despite no labor performed. With information of corporate corruption, both characters bribe their bosses into severance packages in moments of redemption. For Lester, it is a way to escape his chains as a “whore for the advertising industry.” For the protagonist of *Fight Club*, it is a way to give Fight Club corporate sponsorship. For both, I think it is a step closer toward hitting bottom—a theme apparent in the films and Camus’s logic of absurdity. It is not difficult to conceptualize work as one of the most important facets of identity in a culture where the answer to the question ‘what do you do?’ is the response of stating one’s job. Removing this work in a reversal of labor exploitation is a big step toward ‘hitting bottom’ of life as we know it—the life of liberal consumer society.

In one scene of *Fight Club*, Tyler applies a chemical burn to the protagonist’s hand. “Stay with the pain, don’t shut this out,” he says. Like others, this scene seems to suggest that some sort of truth of our human condition might be found in pain. As the protagonist tries to use meditation techniques he acquired in group therapy, Tyler’s speech ensues:



This is the greatest moment of your life and you're off somewhere missing it. You have to consider the possibility that God does not like you, he never wanted you, in all probability he hates you... this is not the worst thing that could happen... we don't need him. Fuck damnation, man. Fuck redemption. We are God's unwanted children, so be it! Listen, you can run water over your hand and make it worse or you can use vinegar to neutralize the burn. First you have to give up. First you have to know, not fear, that someday you're gonna die... It's only after we've lost everything that we're free to do anything. Congratulations, you're one step closer to hitting bottom.

With this quote, *Fight Club* echoes many concerns of existential thought—particularly that of Camus. Tyler uses the father experience as a metaphor for God and the possibility of the absence of His guidance and influence. Tyler expresses what the death of God continues to mean in the year 1999. He recreates Nietzsche's creative freedom in God's wake as well as the death of hope present in Camus's writings. The result called for is what is referred to as the condition of hitting bottom.

Eventually, Tyler molds *Fight Club* into 'Project Mayhem'. Members are forced to perform menial labor throughout the house, collectively hitting bottom. In a sense, they are insignificance realized—they stop being individuals. "Sooner or later, we all became what Tyler wanted us to be," the narrator says as 'applicants' wait outside of the house to join. This is when we begin to see the darker side of Tyler's absurdity creep in. They all become docile and neutral sheep, commanded by Tyler's doctrine. This seems opposite to the anger driven metaphysical revolt Tyler calls for in the humble beginning of *Fight Club*. The internal contradiction of absurdity is made evident through the internal contradiction of Tyler's project. The members of the organization have to shave their heads, becoming almost militaristic. After the first official member (excluding the narrator and Tyler

himself) is initiated and clean-shaven, Tyler slaps his head harshly and says, “Space monkey! Ready to sacrifice himself for the greater good.”<sup>83</sup> The monkey serves as a model of insignificance—it is what Tyler thinks the human looks like. It is the less than ideal liberal, ready to be shot into the unintelligible void he knows and can know almost nothing about.

As Tyler’s soldiers labor around the house, we hear Tyler’s sermon to end all sermons. He preaches insignificance, telling his soldiers how small they are and, as quoted above, how they are the “same decaying organic matter as everything else.” “Tyler built himself an army,” the narrator interrupts. “Why was Tyler building an army?” he asks. “For what purpose? For what greater good? In Tyler we trusted.” Here, the internal conflict/contradiction of existential awakening is revealed. The greater good/purpose is lost on us, but the organizational energy toward this truth—essentially the truth that there is no Truth—is still mobile. Fight Club continues to grow, now as Project Mayhem. The protagonist is a consciousness of questioning. He asks why to every motivation in life, even to the motivations of the man who taught him to question such authority. He accepts Tyler’s dictates of absurdity—that nothing he thought was important truly matters, so why does this? If this unyielding inquiry of meaning leads to an acceptance in the belief in nothing, of nihilism, then what *point* is there in this organization? There was no end point to Fight Club, no political consequences—much like Lester’s individual experience. Project Mayhem, however, presents profound political consequences in its desperate seeking of a political end, a change, a revolt of false consciousness. As these troops

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<sup>83</sup> THE SPACE MONKEY METAPHOR ALSO APPEARS IN THE CHEMICAL BURN SCENE.

assemble around absurdity, they ultimately assemble around nothing. Because there is no point, no end, no intelligible 'greater good' in absurd thought as a rejection of metaphysics, Truth, and externally created meaning through advertising and consumerism, it becomes difficult to construct a political ideal consistent with absurdity. However, Tyler has formulated one such ideal:

In the world I see, you're stalking elk through the damp canyon forests around the ruins of Rockefeller Center. You'll wear leather clothes that will last you the rest of your life. You'll climb the wrist-thick kudzu vines that wrap the Sears Tower. And when you look down, you'll see tiny figures pounding corn and laying strips of venison on the empty carpool lane of some abandoned superhighway.

Tyler's vision is barely palatable given the violent actions necessary for such a vision to be realized. The revolution is often valorized as instant-utopia. Tyler not only rejects this notion, but welcomes chaos and dystopia to an extent, as an 'authentic' political anti-system. The absurd realization as individualistic seems harmless in the case of Lester or the Fight Club prior to political aspirations. But once it is politicized and made evangelical, it becomes very weighty. Fight Club was normatively harmless, expressive and masturbatory when it stayed below ground—a metaphor for not meeting the normative standards of the world—but it now is not.

In one scene, Tyler threatens to cut off the testicles of the police chief if he does not call off the 'rigorous investigation' into the vandalism caused by Fight Club. Here, Tyler keeps not in mind the fact that this man is subject to the same sort of advertising and consumer influence that he is. This might be juxtaposed to a scene earlier in the film where a comparable authority figure, Lou, the owner of the bar that Fight Club met in the basement of, comes into conflict with Tyler. Tyler offers him with an invitation to join Fight Club, but Lou rejects, seeking

compensation for hosting the club. Tyler continues to provoke him into a fight, succeeding and thus suggesting that Lou is already a member. “That’s right, Lou. Get it out... See ya next week,” he says. In this scene, Tyler’s message is one of solidarity and inclusive spirit. In the aforementioned scene, however, Tyler has become politically calculated and cold. His objective becomes not one of expression, but rather preservation of the group, an absurdity in itself. Things become less inclusive as the group becomes more of a political organization. Tyler does not offer this man membership, but instead reifies him into an image of everything the group rejects. The existential awakening continues to develop political problems as Tyler does what is necessary for his political realization.

“Guys, what will you wish you’d done before you die?” Tyler asks two members of Fight Club while driving them and the protagonist in a later scene. “If you were to die right now, how would you feel about your life?” Tyler lets the car drift to the wrong side of the road. “Hitting bottom is not a retreat, its not a weekend seminar. Stop trying to control everything and just let go. Let go!” he yells at the protagonist. Tyler is fully accepting of the radical nature of his so called existential awakening to his condition. Through his loss of hope and meaning, he has found his condition of insignificance. The world does not care about Tyler Durden. God, of course, does not care either. This scene reveals to us that it is easy to think this way, to accept these truths, but it is not easy to live in accordance with them. In other words, it is much easier to buy into Camus’s argument for absurdity than it is to actually live in accordance with it. Hitting bottom is just that—living

with the dictates of absurdity. It is not easy to 'let go', the film tells us. Throughout the film, the protagonist often reverts/digresses back to the ethos of liberal consumer society. He accepts the truths of his own insignificance and lack of inherent meaning, but cannot realize them politically because the stakes are simply too high. Tyler is telling him he cannot have only one foot through the doorway. If he wants to commit to an authentically absurd life, he cannot just retract when it gets too scary or intense. The truly absurd life, in this sense, is one that has no stakes.

In a brutal fight scene just before the 4 (3) men enter the vehicle, the protagonist appears ruthless and unstoppable. The logic of violence that seemed to conjure the absurd has also seemed to develop a mind of its own. As it becomes apparent that he is beating another member of Project Mayhem to death in a fight, the group stops cheering and moves forward with concern and doubt. Even Tyler Durden shows concern on his face. The narrator says, "I felt like putting a bullet between the eyes of every panda that wouldn't screw to save its species. I wanted to open the dump valves on oil tankers and smother all those French beaches I'd never see. I wanted to breathe smoke." If at one time the members of Fight Club thought that the violence of their organization showed them who they are and helped them get closer to death in order to see the truer human—the mortal who bleeds and will die—then this scene sobers them to the realization that they will never know death. They cannot and were naïve to think they could. They cheer for the fight as a metaphor for death, but if the metaphor continues, to death itself that is, they find

it horribly repugnant. They still have not really accepted death, it becomes apparent, and they cannot in the sense they thought they could because they can never truly experience their own death.<sup>84</sup>

Returning to the scene in the car, convinced by Tyler to “let go,” the vehicle wrecks. “I’d never been in a car accident. This must have been what all those people felt like before I’d filed them as statistics in my reports,” the narrator says. If we understand the statistics he refers to as a representation or practice of enlightenment type values embedded in liberal consumerism, we find a kind of revolt different from Tyler’s. Here, the narrator derives a much more humanistic and Camusian solidarity from the accident. Whereas Tyler laughs “We just had a near-life experience,” seeing life, through death, for what it is (much like Carolyn in *American Beauty*), the narrator finds solidarity. Through his painful near-encounter with death, the he is able to think of himself as being in the same condition as those people he used to understand as cold statistics. He finds himself human—tied to his brethren by the simple fact that they will all face the same necessary fate of death. Where Tyler finds a cold freedom, the narrator finds human solidarity. His condition is the condition of all men.

#### FROM THE SOLITARY TO SOLIDARITY

Camus’s *Letters to a German Friend* is a compilation of 4 letters written by Camus to an imaginary German acquaintance.<sup>85</sup> First appearing between 1943 and 1944 in the newspaper *Combat*, their most obvious purpose was to motivate French

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<sup>84</sup> CAMUS, *SISYPHUS*, 15

<sup>85</sup> FOUND IN CAMUS, *RESISTANCE, REBELLION, AND DEATH*

humanism against Nazi occupation.<sup>86</sup> The fourth letter in the series marks a particularly important turn in Camus's thought. Deserving to be quoted at length, he writes:

For a long time we both thought that this world had no ultimate meaning and that consequently we were cheated. I still think so in a way. But I came to different conclusions from the ones you used to talk about, which, for so many years now, you have been trying to introduce into history. I tell myself now that if I had really followed your reasoning, I ought to approve what you are doing ... You never believed in the meaning of this world, and you therefore deduced the idea that everything was equivalent and that good and evil could be defined according to one's wishes. You supposed that in the absence of any human or divine code the only values were those of the animal world—in other words, violence and cunning ... And, to tell the truth, I, believing I thought as you did, saw no valid argument to answer you except a fierce love of justice which, after all, seemed to me as unreasonable as the most sudden passion ...<sup>87</sup>

For Camus, a social force of Nihilism—a belief in nothing that allows a particular political evil evident in Genocide—is at the heart of Nazi totalitarianism and has pervaded throughout Europe.<sup>88</sup> He admits that he once followed the same logic of meaninglessness; arguably, even in his earlier work of *The Myth of Sisyphus*. The logic is one of solitude rather than solidarity—it does not take the collectivity of shared human experience and fate into account. In other words, the nihilist accepts no meaning and the new Camusian accepts only one—that of humanity. Particularly, the meaning of humanity he accepts is a meaning constructed by the search for meaning itself within a keen and frequent individual (and arguably collective) awareness of mortality.

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<sup>86</sup> SHERMAN, CAMUS, 107

<sup>87</sup> CAMUS, *RESISTANCE, REBELLION AND DEATH*, 27

<sup>88</sup> CAMUS REFERS TO A WWII EUROPEAN CLIMATE WHICH NIHILISM PERVADES.

In the last section of the preceding chapter, I discuss briefly the need to evaluate absurdity for both its political value and collective consequences. Camus would now argue the Sisyphean logic of absurdity—the radically individualistic logic that ends in a proclamation that we ought to live authentically absurd—to be impractical and unlivable, to an extent. It is apparent now for Camus that “the absurd is *truly* without logic.”<sup>89</sup> As Sherman remarks, an absurd man trying to live the logic of the absurd is like the “Kantian subject trying to live its existence as a determined being in Newton’s causally determined universe.”<sup>90</sup> This way of life is not sound because trying to live by the dictates of a description of your already determined condition does not make a lot of sense as a practical and lived philosophy. In that sense, the earlier Camus provides a rich phenomenology of absurdity, but nothing close to approaching a political-ethics. As his thought becomes more political, however, he is forced to drop absurdity as a primary political dictum. Later in the letter, he writes the following:

... I merely wanted men to rediscover their solidarity in order to wage war against their revolting fate ... I continue to believe that this world has no ultimate meaning. But I know that something in it has a meaning and that is man, because he is the only creature to insist on having one. This world has at least the truth of man, and our task is to provide its justifications against fate itself. And it has no justification but man; hence he must be saved if we want to save the idea we have of life ...

Camus does, in a sense, maintain the metaphysical assumptions of absurdity evident through the feeling of the absurd, but he does not make them the focus of his political project per se. At the heart of this project is an existential humanism—arguably distinct from a liberal humanism. The existential humanism is part of a

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<sup>89</sup> CAMUS, *NOTEBOOKS: 1942-1951*, 83

<sup>90</sup> SHERMAN, *CAMUS*, 107



desperate attempt of metaphysical revolt—a way of demanding sense and meaning of the world and its people, if only by finding meaning in the very search for it. A liberal humanism might be interpreted as presupposing meaning while the existential humanism ought to be thought of as finding the credence for humanism in the deconstruction of meaning itself. Camus’s politics rely on the absurd in a particularly environmental way in the sense that absurdity is not the central facet. No longer do we see Camus trying to offer a moral philosophy of an authentically absurd life, but rather a moral-political philosophy of human solidarity. Juxtaposed to the solitude of Sisyphus, we now witness Camus’s character Rambert in *The Plague* proclaim “but it may be shameful to be happy by oneself.”<sup>91</sup> Camus’s turn to a philosophy of solidarity ought to be looked at as an exhaustion of, as Sherman puts it, “a solitary response to the modern problem of existential meaning and, ultimately, the Absurd...”<sup>92</sup> The Sisyphusian paradigm, because of its concern with solitude as I argue in the previous chapter, does not seem to fit with any system of political thought. The response to this exhaustion is one of humanism: “The greatest saving one can make in the order of thought is to accept the unintelligibility of the world – and pay attention to man.”<sup>93</sup> So, in a sense, Camus still relies very much on Sisyphusian absurdity in terms of accepting it. However, as a mode of life, Sisyphus does not stand as a political hero. As a theoretical

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<sup>91</sup> CAMUS, *THE PLAGUE*, 209

<sup>92</sup> SHERMAN, *CAMUS*, 106

<sup>93</sup> ALBERT CAMUS, *NOTEBOOKS: 1942-1951* (NY: HARCOURT BRACE JOVANOVICH, 1965), 86 – WRITTEN AROUND THE TIME OF *THE PLAGUE*

principle, Camus accepts the absurd. As a practical one, however, he rejects its dictates.<sup>94</sup> In a letter to Roland Barthes critique of *The Plague*, Camus writes “If there is an evolution from *The Stranger* to *The Plague*, it is in the direction of solidarity and participation.”<sup>95</sup>

Analyzing Camus’s move from the solitary to solidarity, we start to see a Cartesian tension emerge in Camus’s thought. Whereas Descartes separated the subject’s consciousness and his world for methodological purposes, Camus finds consciousness already estranged from the world. As Sherman remarks, “The gap between Camus’s Cartesianism, which begins from consciousness, and the community based on *genuine* solidarity (rather than an expedient social contract or a galvanizing *ressentiment*) may be unbridgeable.”<sup>96</sup> Camus’s political project is largely an attempt to reconcile this importance of community solidarity with an epistemology of consciousness. With a turn from the theoretical to the practical, Camus’s concern with absurdity turns to one of rebellion.<sup>97</sup>

#### SO THIS IS WHAT THE REVOLUTION LOOKS LIKE?

In analyzing the concerns of revolt in *Fight Club* alongside those of Camus’s thought, I first question their real compatibility. Initially, it would appear that the rebellion of Tyler is also the rebellion of Camus. To some degree, they are both concerned with absurdity and their revolt ought to be understood as a result of the

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<sup>94</sup> SHERMAN, *CAMUS*, 112

<sup>95</sup> ALBERT CAMUS, *LYRICAL AND CRITICAL ESSAYS* (NY: VINTAGE BOOKS, 1970), 339

<sup>96</sup> SHERMAN, *CAMUS*, 139

<sup>97</sup> *IBID.*, 140

absurd realization and, I argue, the existential moment. Both characters follow an impulse of not accepting something—for Tyler it is the arbitrary consumerism imposed upon him and for Camus it is the lack of inherent value in the world. The impulse of *Fight Club's* Tyler Durden is comparable to the solitary impulse of Sisyphus in one particularly important way—Tyler does not find solidarity in humanity but only illogical truth in absurdity. He recognizes the dictates of absurdity through his feelings of smallness in the world, but even in his political organization of Project Mayhem, he is unable to find a humanism in the unyielding (il)logic of nihilism. For Tyler, nothing means anything, even the notion that most of us want meaning and live as if there were meanings in things and experiences. His character expresses, I think, the unstoppable and pervasive character of absurdity—the unintelligibility of the world.

The turn in Camus's thought ought to be at least in part accredited to his inability to reconcile the absurdity of *Sisyphus* with any coherent political ideal—unlike Tyler, who forces a political ideal out of absurdity. The political ideal of Camus's early work is perhaps in part represented by the ideal anarchy of Tyler, which is something that he would vehemently reject later. Trying to entertain political ideals within a paradigm that rejects the meaning of all ideals would be a manifestation of the absurd, in the sense that the absurd is contradiction—but Camus wants to find morality in this void, rather than allow the world to continue in chaos and eventual return to the basic animal 'state of nature', whatever that might look like. Camus writes:

Having lived for a long time without morality, like many men of my generation, and having actually advocated nihilism, although not always knowingly, I then understood that ideas were not only emotionally moving or pleasant-sounding games, and that, on certain occasions, to accept certain thoughts amounted to accepting murder without limits. It was then that I began to reflect upon this contradiction that was consuming us ... I had to try to draw a rule of conduct and perhaps an initial value from the only experience with which I was in agreement, namely, our revolt. Since nothing that was then proposed to us could teach us, [given the nihilism of] our entire political society ... it was therefore precisely at the level of our negation and of our barest and most impoverished revolt that we had to find within ourselves and with others the reasons to survive and struggle against murder.<sup>98</sup>

In the face of nothingness, a void without God, Camus lets not his political project become one of nothingness, absurdity, and a return to 'authenticity' in light of these factors, but rather one of creation of values in a valueless universe. He is unable to draw from any higher authority a code of ethics so his project, being both ethical and political, is to find an ethics in the void. That ethics is based in solidarity and the shared human condition of mortality. In knowing that we will all die, we are bound together. He writes:

In Absurdist experience, suffering is individual. But from the moment when a movement of rebellion begins, suffering is seen as a collective experience. Therefore the first progressive step for a mind overwhelmed by the strangeness of things is to realize that this feeling of strangeness is shared with all men and that human reality, in its entirety, suffers from the distance which separates it from the rest of the universe.<sup>99</sup>

Camus wants to establish a communal ethos through this notion of solidarity in death, despite his fetish for the individual experience.

Tyler's political project, unlike Camus's, is not one of human solidarity in the face of nothingness, but rather a political manifestation of anger resulting in the

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<sup>98</sup> ALBERT CAMUS, "IN DEFENSE OF *THE REBEL*" IN *SARTRE AND CAMUS: A HISTORIC CONFRONTATION* (NY: HUMANITY BOOKS, 2004), 208

<sup>99</sup> CAMUS, *THE REBEL*, 22

attempted establishment of some form of ‘authentic’ anarchy reliant on an imaginary notion of human nature, i.e, a human nature minus civilization. Although his political vision is not one of perfect totalitarianism, there are some apparent similarities between it and Camus’s German nihilist friend. Indeed, the absence of “human or divine code” leaves for Tyler Durden only the most basic violent animalistic authenticity.<sup>100</sup> Tyler seeks to bring out the truths of man’s condition: sans Truth. Ultimately, his way of going about this is something that looks a great deal like terrorism. The destruction of the corporation—known as the perpetrators of false truths via the reinforcement of absurd consumerism—is the path to the realization of his violent political ideal. There is no human solidarity fueling this politics nor is there an ideal of truth; there is only the notion that we must rebel against untruths. Tyler’s political ideals never rest on a vision for society but rather on a critique of civilization and a vision of its de(con)struction. For Camus, we must not rebel against untruths but rather against the truth that gives us a basis for our politicality, commonness and community; we must rebel against the tragedy of our shared mortality. Rebellion must be understood as a “demand [for] order in the midst of chaos, and unity in the very heart of the ephemeral.”<sup>101</sup> Tyler’s rebellion, it would appear, is of an opposite motivation: a demand for chaos in the midst of *false* order, and authentic ephemerality in the

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<sup>100</sup> CAMUS, *RESISTANCE, REBELLION AND DEATH*, 27

<sup>101</sup> CAMUS, *THE REBEL*, 10

heart of a society unified yet also alienated by the basic assumptions of civilization present in liberal and consumer society.

Just as we see the narrator of *Fight Club* revolt his former metaphysical rebellion by going to the police and trying to stop the terrorist act, we see Camus recognize the impossibility of political closure in *The Rebel*. The feeling of the absurd, which Camus still argues is the grounds of our human condition (and I have suggested is the grounds for our modern condition), “counsels a perpetual questioning with respect to our new arrangements. Ultimately, there can never be a genuine sociopolitical closure because, in the face of the Absurd, there can never be a genuine metaphysical closure...”<sup>102</sup> Through this anti-materialist epistemological assumption, Camus’s *The Rebel* presents us with a politics of moderation. His political project is, in this sense, almost visionless. The real Camusian rebel of *Fight Club* then, is not Tyler but rather the narrator (who technically is Tyler, but for purposes of this analysis ought to be considered a separate entity). In a sense, Tyler constantly deconstructs and revolts based on that deconstruction. He revolts against the assumptions and falsehood of consumer society aided by Tyler’s knowledge and logic. But when Tyler’s logic becomes systematic and politically concrete, the narrator uses the same absurd questioning to evaluate it as also meaningless—he is the less obvious rebel, a result of perpetual metaphysical revolt, not the apparent rebel of Tyler Durden.

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<sup>102</sup> SHERMAN, *CAMUS*, 141

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**CONCLUSION:**

**THE ANACHRONISM OF EXISTENTIAL ABSURDITY**

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“That’s quite a lovely Jackson Pollock isn’t it?”

“Yes it is.”

“What does it say to you?”

“It restates the negativeness of the universe: the hideous lonely emptiness of existence. Nothingness. The predicament of man forced to live in a barren godless eternity, like a tiny flame flickering in an immense void with nothing but waste, horror and degradation, forming a useless bleak straightjacket in a black absurd cosmos.”

“What are you doing Saturday night?”

“Committing suicide.”

“What about Friday night?”

Woody Allen, *Play it Again, Sam*

We began by analyzing *American Beauty* through a Sisyphusian lens. An ethics of absurdity seemed to make perfect sense for the character of Lester Burnham. His dissatisfaction, we are led to believe, is in large part the result of his social condition within liberal consumer society. Lester is unhappy with his existence and its inauthenticity. Realizing his insignificance in the world motivated him to a more authentic life. Diagnosed as insignificant, his prescription became his condition—to live authentically small. Rather than continuing his dull and numbed existence or reaching for the stars toward something greater and more significant, he ‘let go’ in a sense, and opened up his life to the absurd.

Likewise, Camus begins his absurd project in terms of an individual ethics in *Sisyphus*. Camus’s theorization and interpretation of the myth of Sisyphus, as I have argued, is an attempt to end with an ethics from the starting line of the feeling

of absurdity—a feeling situated on the stage set by a Judeo-Christian metaphysics and modern enlightenment ethos. Camus falls into a circular deadlock, however. He describes our condition as absurd, evidenced by the feeling of the absurd, and concludes we ought live this absurdity authentically. In other words, we ought to live as we already do. Needless to say, this is an insufficient philosophy, despite its phenomenological richness.

Camus's turn, as I have discussed, is a political one. Dealing with not only the philosophical qualms of basing an ethics—how we ought to be—out of a description of how we already are, but also the collective concerns of what absurdity entails. From this political problem with Camus's thought we moved to *Fight Club's* expressions of such problems. To some degree, I think, the latter film is more complex because of its rich politicality. It is a film of metaphysical revolt. It begins with a deconstruction, arrives at a cure, and revolts against that cure on the basis of additional deconstruction. As the narrator asks what Tyler's purpose is, we can begin to understand why Camus, or any thinker concerned with absurdity, is unable to develop a coherent political ideology or system of thought. Camus's politics then is a politics of instability and moderation. Because the feeling of the absurd invalidates ideas by means of its deconstructive character, any political ideal that begins with absurdity is sure to be invalidated eventually.

At the end of the day, however, Camus was not a very systematic philosopher. His ideas are often inconsistent and arguments unsubstantiated. But as I said at the onset, because Camus's range is so broad, we must look at his ideas



for their independent value. With that in mind, the preceding has been fairly constructive in nature. I have taken two films and read them alongside various philosophical texts of Camus. In so doing, I have put forth an interpretation and vision of absurdity in contemporary life and gone a step further in asking what is at stake politically for the existential moment of the feeling of the absurd.

So where might we go from here? This study opens up many paths for future research. Given the time period of the two films, I think it would be appropriate to reevaluate what role the nihilist impulse has in the present day global climate. I do not think we should be surprised that these two films were produced around the same time—a time, in the U.S. at least, where people felt the comfort of Clinton and the boredom of the middle of history. The fact that the two films were so popular and widely appraised is evidence enough that the expressions within them, particularly that of the existential moment, strike chords with people.<sup>103</sup> In just a short two years, the expressions of terrorist impulse in *Fight Club* might not have been possible. In that sense, the film's historical situatedness before September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 is vital. Is the nihilism, or at least an akin impulse, that Camus thought pervaded Germany (and Europe) continuing, pervading Islamic nations (and the rest of the globe)? A study of this nature would be naïve to consider the two historical situations entirely comparable and would fall short without a detailed comparative analysis of the two, but I think the question of how much they have in common is also important.

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<sup>103</sup> ARGUABLY THESE CHORDS ARE AESTHETIC OR SUPERFICIAL RATHER THAN PHILOSOPHICAL. REGARDLESS, THE PHILOSOPHICAL ASPECTS OF THE FILM AND ITS INFLUENCE SHOULD NOT BE UNDERESTIMATED.

Most importantly, the preceding chapters open up a discussion for the role of experience in political-philosophical thought. *Fight Club* is a two-sided coin, to use a binary metaphor. On one side, we have the existential crisis and its political manifestations and expressions of existential experience within those manifestations. This is the side that I have chosen to elaborate and explore. On the other side, I think, we have a story of the implosion of capitalism. In many ways, the formation of the fictional Fight Club could be and ought to be understood as a proletarian force of revolution. When Tyler says, “Look, the people you are after are the people you depend on. We cook your meals, we haul your trash, we connect your calls, we drive your ambulances. We guard you while you sleep. Do not fuck with us,” he embodies a revolutionary idea of the proletariat. With this in mind, existential experience ought not be looked at as so independent of historical class struggle and social forces. Perhaps existential-phenomenological research can actually help us understand our situatedness in history and its politicality. While existentialism and related thought is arguably a result of Cartesian methodology, it is based in it only as a rejection of it. In other words, through the self and world dichotomy, the discontents that arise present us with an opportunity to readjust and realign how we understand our social and political relations and condition in the world. It takes the immersion in a system to revolt that system. Likewise, it takes paradigm to fathom its rejection.

In a time where discourse tells us that meaninglessness is just one form of meaning, we could easily discern that existentialism—Camus and his brethren—

were historical reactions to the WWII climate of unyielding exposure to death. A dialectical outlook might say that material reality and thought are both separable, perhaps analytically, and inseparable at the same time. Therefore, the notion that existentialism as a popular widespread philosophy could be separate from the historical period in which it is rooted is a hard notion to disagree with and anything short of a claim of (1) universality or (2) an elaborate assertion that we are still within the same historical moment of existentialism seems insufficient. Both of these assertions, however, are difficult to explore within the confines of a project of this size and caliber.

To me, what is important and fascinating to the point of deserving attention, however, is based in the understanding that the consciousness of a post-WWII climate was much different than the consciousness of 1999 or the closer present. The historical situation was entirely different, arguably. As a human that is sure he will die, the canon of existentialism still makes sense to me. Separated from its original context, this type of thought that is characterized by a fascination with death still finds validity maybe not so perfectly politically, but through individual experience in the contemporary world.

So while this project's ambitions do not go so far to reach toward a defense of existential thought, they certainly do hint toward one. As Woody Allen's opening lines demonstrate, existentialism cannot be taken wholly seriously in our climate. The pessimism of a discourse of nothingness and death renders more often than not a politically vacuous tone, and for this reason existentialism should not be taken

religiously. It should, however, get the credit it deserves, so to speak, mainly in terms of its important focus on individual existential experience. Existential thought poses some serious questions about practical life and politics. If revolution is realizable in terms of questioning and rejecting basic assumptions of meaning, the existentialists may have more in common with contemporary thought than was previously considered.

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