

Kansas State University Libraries

New Prairie Press

Kansas State University Undergraduate
Research Conference

Spring 2019

Argument For The Absurd

John Dotterweich

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/ksuugradresearch>



Part of the [Philosophy of Mind Commons](#), [Social Psychology Commons](#), [Social Psychology and Interaction Commons](#), and the [Theory and Philosophy Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 License](#)

Recommended Citation

Dotterweich, John (2019). "Argument For The Absurd," *Kansas State University Undergraduate Research Conference*. <https://newprairiepress.org/ksuugradresearch/2019/panels2/6>

This Event is brought to you for free and open access by the Conferences at New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in Kansas State University Undergraduate Research Conference by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cads@k-state.edu.

An Argument for the Absurd

Swogger Scholarship Paper

By

Jack Dotterweich

Today's world is fast paced and filled with cutting edge technology that joins us together in ways we would have never thought possible. This is advantage is not all that it seems, however. As we become increasingly connected, our ability to have authentic experiences has seemingly diminished. Novels like M.T. Anderson's *Feed* (2002) warn us of the dangers of commercial influence on our lives and technology's perpetuation of that danger. Anderson's concerns parallel those of Guy Debord, who wrote *The Society of the Spectacle* in 1967. Both authors present bleak outlooks on consumerism, technology and authenticity. The concerns found in these works can be alleviated through an exploration of absurdism as presented in Albert Camus's *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942). To combat inauthenticity and the despair that accompanies it, we must embrace aspects of society that we find individually dissatisfying. Doing so will allow us to achieve happier and more fulfilling lives.

Feed is a dystopian novel that explores adolescent life in a world full of corporate power, advanced technology, and consumerism. The book takes place in the near future in a world where technology and corporate greed have led to societal upheaval and environmental degradation. Most people have a "feed", a device that allows people to access Internet sites and other services mentally. Titus, the protagonist, is on a trip with his friends when his feed is hacked and cannot access its services, something he has built his entire life around. Violet, one of Titus's friends, is unable to get her feed totally repaired, which causes it to deteriorate and negatively affect her health. Violet then introduces Titus to the idea of rebelling against the feed by taking interest in unrelated products revealing no pattern from which a consumer profile could be made. As Violet's condition worsens, her family is unable to pay for her medical expenses and petitions to Feedtech's Corporation. Their petition gets denied because Violet is deemed a "poor investment" due to her prior rebelliousness. Violet's condition worsens, and her eventual

death leaves Titus shaken as he copes with the grief of her passing. Titus tries to continue Violet's ideas of "rebellion", but quickly reverts to his old ways and conforms to society and the feed

In *Feed*, we see that the characters' lives are dominated by technology. While there are many examples of technological advancements in the novel, the most notable is the feed, which is integrated into the brains of the characters. This allows for instant access to the Internet, texting, and corporate interests. Anderson novel puts technological advances like the feed in a negative light. His novel critiques our obsession with modern technology and our ever increasing fetishization of consumerism. Through his characters, Anderson shows how instant-access Internet takes away from authentic human experience and that the commercialization of modern society has invaded all parts of our lives leading to separation from authenticity. The principals described by Anderson in *Feed* reflect the ideas of Guy Debord.

In his well known work [*The Society of the Spectacle \(1967\)*](#), Debord describes how images and the economy have replaced authentic experiences and that our consumer-driven society is overly saturated with advertisements, pop culture, and appearance: This he describes as the Spectacle. Debord argues that inventions like the television has changed the way we interact with others creating a "social relation among people, mediated by images." (Debord, 4). Our relationships and interactions with others have become mediated by the images we see on television or other consumable media which in turn creates shallow, [inauthentic experiences](#) or the Spectacle. In addition, the neo-liberal economy has become such a big part of life that it has pervaded all parts previously thought to be separate from the economic activity. His critique of the capitalistic economy resembles Karl Marx's ideas about wealth and commodities (Marx, 26). When the market dictates how you conduct yourself, *being* becomes having. The clothes you

wear, the car you drive, the house you live in suddenly define who you are and the things you own end up owning [you](#). Even rebellion from the Spectacle is commodified. Debord says, “This reflects the simple fact that dissatisfaction itself became a commodity as soon as economic abundance could extend production to the processing of such raw materials.” (Debord, 59). Buying a punk rock tee shirt doesn’t make you a rebel but shows that you “fight” against the system through the buying and owning of the merchandise which corrupts the message the tee shirt attempts to give. While Debord lived in a time where the advent of extreme consumerism and marketing was beginning to take form, his work is even more relevant today. Debord’s essays can be applied to *Feed* and the world we live in by looking at the influence technology and consumerism has on our daily life.

People embrace the technology that makes their lives easier, and with our globalized world and fast-paced technological turnover, they strive to stay ahead of the curve so that they remain connected. With our commodified world and consumer culture, we are pressured to participate by buying commodities that keep us relevant to others. The Internet and cell phones have made the exploration of the far reaches of our known world without going anywhere possible. Social media has allowed us to consume each other’s lives without actually being with other people. These developments create the grounds on which the Spectacle is formed. To Debord, “Everything that was directly lived has receded into a representation.” (Debord, 1). In other words, everything that what once directly experienced by humans has become an illusion of an authentic experience. If the Spectacle is the presentation of authentic experience, then technology and social media are catalysts of the Spectacle. Rather than experience things directly, it is far easier to browse through social media and see things that we would like to do. Relationships are mediated through images, which replace authentic communion and in turn

disconnect us while maintaining the feeling of connectedness. This creates a culture where people live inauthentically in order to participate at all while at the same time it is not necessary for people to vigorously participate. But even shallow participation requires resources. Someone who owns a flip phone cannot hope to keep pace with someone who has all the modern functions of an iPhone. Someone who keeps up with sports, entertainment, and their friends through hand-held technology is going to have a much easier time navigating the world over someone who has a flip phone. Violet learns that participation in technology and connectedness are necessary to remain relevant in a society that ardently values indirect involvement. Rejection of technology not only alienates you from others but can make you an outcast in the eyes of society. Violet learns the hard way that it is better for you to just accept participation as a necessity rather than a luxury you can choose. Anderson seeks to argue that at our current pace of advancement, we will see a future where participation is not only necessary but so interwoven in our society that it will be inescapable.

Feed's themes resemble those found in Debord's work that the Spectacle has allowed us to feel connected to everything while at the same time being disconnected from authentic experience. For a person to participate in a society caught in the Spectacle, they need to make concessions to their beliefs about technology. Following reality T.V, pop culture, or sports allows you to communicate with others that follow the same T.V, pop culture, or sports that you do. This allows you to not only relate to other humans socially but to remain relevant to them as well. Human interactions are what allow us to have meaningful connections in our lives. To rob ourselves of those connections prevents us from living fulfilling existences. While it may be a positive thing to reject technology, it does not do much good if no one else thinks the same way.

Why try to relate to anything if it's not going to mean much anyhow? The Spectacle creates an environment where disingenuous actions thrive and relating to others through this can be a seemingly pointless exercise. Realizing that there is a distinct lack of meaning in the things we do and the struggle to find meaning where none exists is called Absurdity. From *Feed* and our own experiences it can be said that absurdity is an integral part of our lives and the .

What connects *Feed* and *The Society of the Spectacle* to a meaningful existence can be found in the ideals of Absurdism introduced by Albert Camus. His experiences in France during German occupation in WWII and the horrors that emerged from it were formative to his development of Absurdism. Camus defined absurdity as the struggle to find inherent value and meaning in life and an inability to find any due to the actual lack of any meaning or value. Not everyone agrees with Camus and many believe that life does have intrinsic meaning. But if Camus is right and our universe has no intrinsic meaning we are led to the absurd. Once you realize the absurdity of the world we live in, you cannot go back. This "undermining" leads Camus to the belief that suicide is a viable option and in fact a reasonable response: "There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide (Camus, 1, 6). From this perspective there is a profound absence of meaning in life and that the needless suffering and agitation of daily life is simply not worth it. However, Camus argues in *The Myth of Sisyphus* that there is another alternative. It is imperative for those who have encountered the absurd to know that to cope with the meaninglessness of the universe they must take no stock in illusions or religion. They must embrace that they alone have control of their fate (Camus, 128). Since the absurd takes away all intrinsic meaning in our universe, illusions like religion have no effect on dispelling the absurd and do not offer solace in the face of meaninglessness. Camus uses the myth of Sisyphus to highlight his philosophy and create an answer to coping with absurdity.

Sisyphus, who was doomed to roll a boulder up a mountain for all eternity only to have it roll back down time and time again, must be imagined as happy as he toils at his needless task. This is because in the face of a pointless existence there is no alternative other than to resist it. Camus believes that we need to imagine ourselves, as Sisyphus, stoutly facing meaninglessness. The rejection of distraction as a way out of the Spectacle is key and leads to an understanding that without facing the absurd you will not find happiness in a world surrounded by despair.

In the world of *Feed*, technology serves as the ultimate distraction as the world deteriorates seemingly unnoticed by characters. Preoccupied with their daily lives and the feed, people seem apathetic to the world that is outside what they buy and consume. People are satisfied with their lives despite the world dying around them. For someone who doesn't have the feed, seeing the world falling apart around them and being surrounded by a disinterested people can be a terrifying experience. The despair that follows can be compared to the absurd and how one copes with it. By taking the principles found in Camus' writing, there is a solution to overcoming the spectacle found in our daily life. In *Feed*, Titus explains that with technology and corporate greed comes complacency:

“Of course, everyone is like, da da da, evil corporations, oh they're so bad, we all say that, and we all know they control everything. I mean, it's not great, because who knows what evil shit they're up to. Everyone feels bad about that. But they're the only way to get all this stuff, and it's no good getting pissy about it, because they're still going to control everything whether you like it or not.” (Anderson, 29)

This feeling of helplessness in the wake of forces greater than our own leads us to acceptance of the status quo. The Spectacle emerges when we cope with this complacency through the ownership and presentation of goods and experiences. You might take a skiing trip in Colorado,

but does the experience really matter if you haven't bought a resort shirt and taken the pictures so that others know what you did? The high-end shirt that was in season two years ago doesn't carry the same status as a shirt that was in season this year. For some, the realization that living that lifestyle is unfulfilling is a crippling experience, comparable to the absurd. Eventually, these individuals conclude that the things you own and the pictures you take ultimately do not matter.

Camus teaches us that consciously embracing the Spectacle and its inauthenticity can be a path to meaning and that if it is done for its own sake, it will become meaningful by the participant and made so by the connections made as a result. Seeing that the Spectacle exists and recognizing that its inauthenticity allows us to more fruitfully participate in society and making connections to others, even if they are mediated, allows for one to become happier. The principles found in Camus' philosophy can answer the question of how we can live relatively happily in an inauthentic world. Like Sisyphus, we roll the heavy stone uphill, making concessions to the spectacle, and when it rolls back downhill we cheerfully walk back down, knowing that the concessions made ultimately allow us to interact fruitfully if not completely with others. Choosing to do this is up to the individual.

Works Cited

Anderson, M. T. Feed. Cambridge, MA: Candlewick, 2002. Print.

Camus, Albert. *The Myth of Sisyphus, and Other Essays*. London: H. Hamilton, 1965. Print.

Debord, Guy. *The Society of the Spectacle*. New York: Zone Books, 1994. Print.

Fincher, David, Art Linson, Ceán Chaffin, Ross G. Bell, Jim Ohls, Brad Pitt, Edward Norton, Carter H. Bonham, Loaf Meat, Jared Leto, Jeff Cronenweth, James Raygood, and Chuck Palahniuk. *Fight Club*. Beverly Hills, Calif: Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2000.

Wisecrack. "The Philosophy of Black Mirror – Wisecrack Edition." YouTube, YouTube, 8 July 2017, www.youtube.com/watch?v=R50b5aoYgkM.

Nietzsche, Friedrich W, Walter Kaufmann, R J. Hollingdale, and Friedrich W. Nietzsche. *On the Genealogy of Morals*. , 1989. Print.

Marx, Karl, 1818-1883. *Das Kapital, a Critique of Political Economy*. Chicago :H. Regnery, 1959. Print.

