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ARTICLE

Laughing About and With the Absurd in Twentieth-Century German Literature: With a Focus on Kurt Kusenberg

Albrecht Classen

University of Arizona, 1200 E University Blvd, Tucson, AZ 85721, United States

ABSTRACT

Since the early twentieth century, intellectuals, artists, writers, and philosophers across the board have realized that humanity is increasingly losing its grip on its own existence in many different terms. Neither rationality nor reality seems to make all that much sense any longer. Catastrophic experiences in various wars, in the Holodomor, Holocaust, and a long series of other genocidal campaigns across the world, and now the virtually certain prospect that we humans are causing global warming and hence threaten to destroy the foundation of our existence here on earth increasingly indicate that the traditional rational framework is fraying at its seams and threatens to undermine the core of our existence. Since the early twentieth century, we have observed the growth of absurdity as a new mode of expression. Whereas scholarship has so far focused mostly on such famous writers as Franz Kafka, Albert Camus, or Jean-Paul Sartre, this article introduces a different approach to absurdity through the lens of satire and the grotesque, intriguingly represented by the German author of short stories, Kurt Kusenberg. As much as he made his audience smile, if not even laugh about the absurd conditions in ordinary human situations, basically their own, he deftly, though subtly, indicated that for him as well absurdity had become the norm of human life. Yet there is no way to combat it, as the author suggests; instead, mocking absurdity offers healthy, productive alternatives beyond traditional efforts to operate with a rational epistemology and to laugh about absurdity itself.

Keywords: Absurdity; Twentieth-Century German Literature; Franz Kafka; Kurt Kusenberg; Irrationality; Irrationality; Laughter; Satire; Grotesque

*CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Albrecht Classen, University of Arizona, 1200 E University Blvd, Tucson, AZ 85721, United States; aclassen@arizona.edu

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1. Introduction

As much as we might try to hold on to the notion that our world is ruled by rationality and reason, logic and meaningfulness, the conditions as they have emerged and taken hold of modern society since the early twentieth century or so make it ever more difficult to believe in this assumption. Artists have responded to this realization by developing, for instance, the styles of dadaism, symbolism, fauvism, surrealism, cubism, and modernism (abstract art). Writers have also demonstrated considerable sensitivity regarding the increasingly absurd existence, as they observed it, with the individual lost or taken prisoner in an ever more confounding world dominated by total bureaucracy, global corporations, now often enjoying the status of personhood, military and economic structures where democracy, individual freedom, justice, and the rule of law all lose their traditional status and relevance on a daily basis. Resorting to the concept of absurdity has been one of the most effective strategies for modern and post-modern writers, if not the only meaningful one, as represented most famously by Franz Kafka, to come to terms with this new irrational, illogical, and alienating conditions increasingly determining humanity [1]. More recent and highly acclaimed absurd writers are Thornton Wilder, Haruki Murakami, Maccio Capatonda, Osamu Dazai, or Terry Pratchett [2]. For a useful overview, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Absurdist_fiction.

The present paper re-introduces one of the most delightful and yet mostly neglected absurd prose author, Kurt Kusenberg, whose large number of short stories address satirically and also very insightfully the absurdity of our ordinary lives. Like in the stained-glass windows by Marc Chagall (1887–1985) or the paintings by Paul Klee (1879–1940), for Kusenberg, reality is not a stable entity completely determined by rationality and common sense. The writer enjoys the freedom to play with illogical conditions and presents a world that is, at times, rather upside down and not fully comprehensible; it is, as we can read in the foreword of Kusenberg's collection of a selected group of stories (1971), "skurrile Prosa" (bizarre prose). However, and this might have been one of the major reasons why literary scholarship has so far paid little respect to Kusenberg, instead of resorting to an apocalyptic perspective signaling that the individual faces an existential crisis and might not recover its independence and sense of selfhood in the context of modern industrialization, robotization, bureaucratization, and other far-reaching developments, as most other absurd authors emphasized, he simply viewed this absurdity as an occasion to make fun of our overly serious, rational, and maybe also subservient worldview.

2. The Concept of the Absurd: Theoretical and Methodological Reflections

But let us first gain a solid grasp of absurdity, a notion that reality is not to be trusted, that rationality is not a reliable tool of intellectual operation, and that the individual does not really enjoy independence, freedom, justice, and inalienable rights. 'Absurd' means that our rational categories are no longer employable or useful in our engagement with the political, economic, or simply material conditions. As R. Fabian notes, the meaning of the absurd consists of transgressing the limits of the discursively operation rational mind, as in the common phrase of proving that a claim is invalid, to take it "ad absurdum" [3]. The absurd exposes the inherent contradiction to the rational perception. The Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855) commonly equated the 'absurd' with the 'paradox,' seeing it as an expression of the impossibility to make sense out of any mental or material condition. In his theological reflection, Christ's birth was a paradox because He, being the power of eternity, was born in the body of a time-bound human being. Both Lev Shestov (1866–1938) and Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) already engaged deeply with the absurd. The latter criticized, for instance, the mindless believer who might say: "credo quia absurdum est" (I believe because it is absurd), whereas the real corrollary would have to be: "credo quia absurdus sum" (I believe because I am absurd) [3].

In 1893 the famous sociologist Émile Durkheim (1858–1917) proposed an alternative term, 'anomie' for those cases when the individual suffers from a loss of social cohesion and meaning finding him/herself suddenly within an alienating context from which there is no outlet, a true aporia. The consequent result might be, in the worst-case scenario, suicide [4,5]. Hence, anomie would constitute

the utter loss of rationality and logical operations and the realization, whether correctly or not, that the world we live in is entirely lacking significance or purpose. When there is no meaning in all we do, or are not allowed to do, when an anonymous bureaucracy commands completely and forces the individual into complete submission without any explanation, then this appears to be absurd. We have today become accustomed to call a situation Kafkaesque when it seemsinsane, completely irrational, completely maddening, etc. Alternatively, we could also identify it asutterly absurd, not making any sense within the framework of our ontological existence [6]. Indeed, there have been many horrendous events during the twentieth century, for example, WWI, WWII, the Holodomor, the Holocaust, and, unbelievably, subsequent wars all over the world leading to genocides (Iraq, Somalia, Myanmar, China, Ukraine, Tigray, etc.), the danger of a nuclear war that could destroy the entire earth, but also the rise of epidemics such as COVID-19 in recent years. All these have made people feel completely helpless, insane, and abandoned on a global level, so it appears to be quite understandable that writers, artists, composers, and philosophers suddenly describe their existence as being nothing but absurd.

Having lost our 'innocence' as humanity, confronting the possibility that there does not seem to be a just God, or an ultimate purpose of life, our *telos*, when ethics, morality, and political principles are utterly undermined by elusive capitalist powers or have become irrelevant as arbitrary and chaotic in the hand of an irresponsible, perhaps even criminal, dictatorial government, when people hence act irrationally and without the guidance of reason, or when we have to face the fact that the world's population deliberately or ignorantly destroys the very earth we live in – basically a suicidal approach – we experience the feeling of being caught in or stuck in absurdity [7]. The twenty-first century has witnessed profound changes in religiosity. While Christianity is apparently losing millions of adherents, Islam is growing in leaps and bounds. But for many Westerners, who have turned to secularism and hence lack any religious sentiments, there are many times situations that would be best described as meaningless, abstruse, arbitrary, and hence as absurd because there is no Creator, no God, no ultimate origin, and hence no meaning or purpose apart from materialist intentions (food, shelter, entertainment). However, such an existential crisis seems to have occurred occasionally in older periods as well, when we consider the extraordinary case of the Middle High German verse narrative, Der Stricker's *Pfaffe Amîs* (ca. 1220). As I have argued recently, the protagonist pretends to be a trustworthy ecclesiastic, and yet ultimately he badly harms innocent people, getting them tortured and robbed out of their money so that he himself can continue with his practice of extreme hospitality and generosity [8]. The Christian ideals are thereby instrumentalized for monetary gains, and those then serve to secure God's grace, which by itself amounts to absurdity. However, Der Stricker does not seem to attack either the Church or the worldly authorities, as much as the protagonist ridicules his superiors. Nevertheless, the Priest Amîs superficially resorts to effective, but ultimately absurd strategies to pursue his personal goals. Even though the concept of the absurd was not ever discussed explictly in the Middle Ages, a critical reading exposes, after all, a strong streak of the absurd as pursued by Der Stricker. Oddly enough, he concludes his text with a sense of hope for God's grace and the protagonist's individual happiness and even sanctity, whereas his victims in Constantinople, certainly good Christians (Orthodox) are left behind destroyed both mentally and physically. There is no other way but to identify Amîs as a rather uncanny figure who undermines, already in the thirteenth century, basic principles of the human community depriving some of the objects of his evil strategies with meaning and purpose. They just do no longer understand their world which has plunged into the absurd.

Major modern playwrights such as Samuel Beckett (1906–1989), Arthur Adamov (1908–1970), and Eugène Ionesco (1909–1994) were in the vanguard of placing their desperate protagonists on a stage where they can no longer figure out the purpose of their existence and are forced to confront a world of meaninglessness, without purpose, goals, and objectives, such as in Beckett's iconic and highly representative *Waiting for Godot* (first performance in 1953). Typical questions have hence been: Is there a God, why do we exist here in the first place, what happens after our death and what could be the purpose of our lives [9,10]? The infinite, useless, and hopeless waiting for Godot – certainly an anonymous, powerful, but totally elusive figure – continues until today, yet, at least according to Beckett, he

seems never to arrive or to live to his promise. Franz Kafka reflected on this very issue in virtually of his texts, whether in *The Trial, Amerika*, or the famous "Before the Law." Albert Camus utilized the fictional Greek figure of Sisyphus to illustrate the frailty and absurdity of all human efforts and endeavors within the modern contexts because despite all our struggles to build up and construct our lives, the result tends to be despondency, hopelessness, and lack of meaning [11,12]. Although the concept of absurdity go back in some way to philosophy developed in the late nineteenth century (Arthur Schopenhauer), we undoubtedly observe the rise of new crises and profound troubles in philosophy, the arts, literature, religion, and also psychology during the twentieth century when the post-modern world had to deal increasingly with the post-human, the take-over by AI, the robotization of our existence and hence with the realization that we as people might not be necessary in the first place and could or should be eliminated from the earth as its most toxic and destructive enemy [13].

Under current conditions which we now call the Anthropocene because humans have turned into the greatest danger for the Earth itself, writers and philosophers have therefore embraced a global epistemology influenced by the notion of absurdity because the futility of all our efforts defies even the best idealism by environmentalists, green politicians, and youth protesters [14]. When neither any of the major world religions nor the governments in East or West, when neither any ideology nor any scientific concept appears to be applicable and meaningful in trying to preserve or sustain our natural existence, the individual might even give up and simply accept that absurdity rules, especially in face of a possibly imminent takeover by Artificial Intelligence (AI) that threatens to choke our creativity, independence, rationality, and meaningfulness [15].

Approaching this phenomenon from a slightly different perspective, some people perceive their life conditions as determined by absurdity. Despite the best efforts to create a decent life, to work toward one's career, to live out our dreams or ambitions, or to preserve the natural environment, nothing might have any effect or might not lead to the desired outcome. Hence people in the post-modern world might simply give up, shrug their shoulders, despair, or identify all existence as being determined by idiocy or absurdity, whatever social groups such as "The Last Generation" might advocate for so vehemently. Considering the global growth of bureaucracy, for instance, people in the post-human era often feel quite justifiably that they exist in a Kafkaesque context where nothing functions as it is supposed to do and the legal system and the bureaucracy operate only for their own sake, to the utter disregard of the human individual and his/her need, neglecting all ethical and moral principles, and so also religious values and ideals. Not surprisingly, then absurdity seems to be the principle by which all life operates [16,17]. We ourselves as individuals and as members of fraying communities are absurd actors on an empty or irrelevant stage.

According to famous philosopher Thomas Nagel, "In ordinary life a situation is absurd when it includes a conspicuous discrepancy between pretension or aspiration and reality" [18]. Moreover, as he adds: "The sense that life as a whole is absurd arises when we perceive, perhaps dimly, an inflated pretension or aspiration which is inseparable from the continuation of human life and which makes its absurdity inescapable, short of escape from life itself" (718). To come to terms with the phenomenon of absurdity requires, as Nagel underscores, to comprehend that human life is determined by anonymous forces with no empathy at all, completely self-relying and basically enslaving people for their own purposes: "And that is the main condition of absurdity – the dragooning of an unconvinced transcendent consciousness into the service of an immanent, limited enterprise like a human life" (726). Would it be possible that animals have any sense of the absurd? People, however, determined by their free will, rationality, intellectual comprehension, when they examine their own lives from the outside, become rather very liable of feeling a sense of absurdity (727) because we seem to march wilfully toward our own abyss although we know about the danger brought upon by ourselves. Tragically, when the sense of absurdity begins to overpower us, a grave danger emerges that we might simply abandon all attempts to be actively involved in creating a meaningful and productive life, to work toward the improvement of our society and environment, certainly a critical problem many scholars and scientists have dealt with already for decades [19].

Maybe surprisingly, in a variety of literary genres developed already in the Middle Ages, the absurd has always emerged and made its impact felt, defying the framework

of rationality and material reality, such as in the jest narrative (*Schwank*), the religious-legendary narrative (*Legende*), the fairy tale (*Märchen*), historico-mythical narratives (*Sagen*), and also in proverbs (*Sprichwörter*) [20]. In other words, humanity has always faced the threat against rationality as the dominant principle of operation, but for a long time, at least until the late twentieth century, religions have served in the critical function of offering at least a sense of meaning for the individual in his/her relationship with transcendental powers. In secular society, that intellectual and spiritual safety net is no longer in place, and the individual might hence easily fall through the holes in that woven construct of reality.

According to Albert Camus (1913–1960), the absurd emerges when the human being raises questions about the world which then, however, remains quiet and refuses to answer. For Sartre, the absurdity of all existence is experienced through disgust and boredom. In other words, the clash between the claim by the individual to establish a rational explanation of the world and its very impossibility results in the realization that our human existence is absurd. As he observed sensibly, the absurd has become the dominant experience of our own time. It is, briefly defined, "the confrontation between ourselves – with our demands for rationality and justice – and an 'indifferent universe'" [21]. As his famous work *Sisyphus* indicates, we as human beings are condemned to be like him, "an exemplar of the human condition, struggling hopelessly and pointlessly to achieve something" (Solomon 1995/1999, 116; see now the contributions to Sharpe, Kałuża, and Francev, ed., 2020) [21,22].

Whether our lives today are really absurd and meaningless depends, of course, on many individual perspectives, conditions, and relationships, but we can certainly recognize that since the early twentieth century, human existence has been hit by serious questions that have not yet found any reasonable and constructive answers, if there are any. To be sure, we no longer understand really why we are here on earth, what the purpose of our existence might be, and what determines our lives within a multiplicity of forces. And, in light of the new role played by Artificial Intelligence, for instance, even some of the central human functions such as creativity, inventiveness, and reflections, are at risk of being taken over by machines, which makes us wonder why we still exist here on earth [23–25].

3. Kurt Kusenberg

While scholars interested in the aspect of absurdity have so far focused mostly on writers such as Franz Kafka, Albert Camus, or Jean-Paul Satre, it comes as a surprise that a true master of comic absurdity, the author of a large number of absurd short stories, Kurt Kusenberg, has so far hardly attracted any attention. The style of his narratives proves to be light, elegant, entertaining, and somewhat old-fashioned for the twentieth century. However, he enjoyed tremendous popularity at his time and obviously understood well how to address critical issues in human life that make us as readers question our own reality. The absurd appears everywhere in Kusenberg's texts, but the author does not push it explicitly into our face and allows us, instead, to recognize it behind the screen of comic, unusual, amazing, astounding, and puzzling facts. In the practically only monograph ever dedicated to Kusenberg, Jean E. Pearson comments that "Kusenberg's fiction opens the door to a world surprisingly out of the ordinary. Causality and the familiar physical laws that govern time, space, and matter do not function predictably in most Kusenberg stories" [26]. She notes that the author projects a "capricious universe ruled by chance and the unexpected" (2). Quite some time ago, Martin Gregor-Dellin already sensed correctly that Kusenberg pursued the effort to expose the absurd nature of our reality today [27]. Pearson felt a strong need to defend the author who was, as she opines, not simply a literary entertainer, but a storyteller who was able "to greet absurdity with a cheerful spirit, thereby transforming potentially terrifying senseless into amusing and harmless nonsense" (2). Scholarship, however, has not demonstrated much interest in Kusenberg because he refrained from political statements, did not voice any comments on the Nazis, did not criticize post-war German society, and was not involved in any social or public movements since the 1950s and 1960s [28].

Although most standard literary history have ignored Kusenberg, we really can place him next to some of the literary giants of the twentieth century. He was not so negative as most of them, whether we think of Kafka, Camus, Sartre, or others, but the absurdity of most of his short stories pushed a significant wedge into the false veil most

people believe to be reality. Even though Kusenberg often resorts to typical elements of fantasy literature, dream-like scenarios, and folk narratives about ordinary situations in the lives of many different kinds of people, he proves to have been a highly successful analyst and critic of rationality-driven arguments, uncovering thereby profound elements of the absurd.

4. Biography and His Works

Kurt Kusenberg (1904–1983) was born in Gothenburg, Sweden on June 24, 1904. His parents were Carl Kusenberg (1871–1957) and his wife Emilie (Emmy), née Behre (1877–1941), and he lived during his young years, due to his father's job as the business representative/manager of a British textile company, both in Gothenburg and in Lisbon, Portugal, With the outbreak of WWI, the family returned to Germany and settled in Wiesbaden, but only to move on to Bühl in southern Germany near Baden-Baden, where Kusenberg graduated from the Gymnasium (Secondary School preparing for College) in 1922 with his "Abitur." He studied at the universities of Munich, Berlin, and Freiburg i.Br. and received his doctorate in art history in 1928 on the Florentine artist Rosso (1495–1540). During those years of graduate studies, he went on extensive travels through France, Italy, Spain, and England. Afterwards, he was employed as an art critic for the magazine *Weltkunst* and then for the *Vossische Zeitung* (newspaper) from 1933 to 1934, when the Nazis shut it down. Between 1935 and 1943 he was the deputy chief editor of the journal *Koralle*. Then he was drafted and served in the Second World War, after which he ended up briefly in an American Prisoner of War Camp. Subsequently, he became an independent writer, and in 1958 he was appointed as editor of the biographical book series *rowohlts monographie*. This series comprised a total of 300 volumes when he died in Hamburg on October 3, 1983. Kusenberg enjoys the claim of having discovered in 1935 the remarkable cartoonist Erich Ohser (1903–1944; pseudonym E. O. Plauen) who produced the famous satirical picture stories of *Vater und Sohn* (Father and Son) and was persecuted by the Nazis. He also introduced the French caricaturists Raymond Peynet, Jean Effel, and Albert Dubout, the Swedish caricaturist Oscar Jacobsson, and the American caricaturists Charles Adams and James Thurber to the German audience, providing meaningful introductions to their works. Kusenberg also translated Jacques Prévert's chansons from French to German.

When he published his *Gesammelte Erzählungen* (1969; Collected Short Stories) [29], Kusenberg emphasized that he reviewed his works carefully and chose only one hundred short stories; the remaining two or three dozens he left out because he no longer identified with them and felt that they were too Romantic, emotional, and not sophisticated enough. The list of separate collections of his short stories, often characterized by their grotesque nature, is long, almost all of them published by Rowohlt in Reinbek near Hamburg: 1940: *La Botella und andere seltsame Geschichten*, 1942: *Der blaue Traum und andere sonderbare Geschichten*; 1948: *Herr Crispin reitet aus und andere Erzählungen*; 1951: *Die Sonnenblumen und andere merkwürdige Geschichten*; 1954: *Mal was andres! Eine Auswahl seltsamer Geschichten*; 1955: *Wein auf Lebenszeit und andere kuriose Geschichten*; 1956: *„Mal was anderes." Phantastische Erzählungen*; 1956: *Wo ist Onkel Bertram? Geschichten*; 1956: Lob des Bettes. Geschichten; 1958: *Das vergessene Leben*; 1960: *Nicht zu glauben. Auswahl kurioser Geschichten*; 1960: *Im falschen Zug und andere wunderliche Geschichten*; 1964: *Zwischen unten und oben und andere Geschichten*; 1972: *Man kann nie wissen Auswahl merkwürdiger Geschichten*; 1974: *Heiter bis tückisch 13 Geschichten*; 1984: *Ein schönes Hochzeitsfest 35 Erzählungen*; 1998: *Zwist unter Zauberern. Erzählungen*; 2004: *Wein auf Lebenszeit. Die schönsten Geschichten*. Kusenberg also published essays, audio-books, translations, and art-historical studies [30].

5. Quixotic Meaning of Life

Each text by Kusenberg demonstrates a subtle but powerful message concerning the meaning of life, if not of all existence. Many times, we are struck by the absurdity and grotesqueness of his perspectives, but those productively undermine or refract reality and outline that there can be alternative dimensions in our existence. We can credit Kusenberg with commanding an impressive sense of grotesque humor with which he views people's ordinary lives, indicating that there can be very different conditions, powers, or situations than ordinary people might even be able to imagine. As quixotic and absurd his narratives

always prove to be, they powerfully signal the absurdity of human existence in our modern world and humorously indicate that everything might be quite different than we ordinarily assume.

At first sight, this storyteller does not much more than just that, telling stories about curious, capricious, strange, hilarious, but also vexing, morose, confused, and startled individuals. Things happen in his texts that should or should not happen according to the physical laws determining our lives. Our rationality, our very reason is challenged here and we are encouraged to allow the narrative to take us out of the ordinary and to accept that there might be alternative dimensions in that life. The Oxford Professor of Philology and Religion, Max Müller had famously argued in a lecture from 1870 that human beings have at least three faculties, the first a faculty of the senses, the second, the faculty of reason and rationality, and the third one a faculty of faith in the infinite and spirituality [31]. We might as well apply this perspective to our analysis of Kusenberg's narrative because the author urges us to see beyond the material dimension and to perceive that there are more forces in this world than the ordinary person might be able to recognize. By emphasizing the aspect of the absurd, he highlights the existence of different forces in all existence that cannot be identified by our senses or our reason. Although the author plays with the element of the absurd in many different fashions, he reveals, ultimately, a deep realization of inner, perhaps spiritual, certainly not material powers the ordinary person is always subject to and can only try to coordinate with in order to avoid major calamities.

A great example for this phenomenon proves to be the story "Ein gewisses Zimmer" (1948; A Certain Room, in *Gesammelte Erzählungen*) in which a person called Payk discovers that a unique room (parlor) in the house of a distant friend appears to be the center of all global forces, the hub of a universal network. The owner allows access to that room only on festive occasions, but as long as Payk enjoys his hospitality, he can test the secrets of that room. Moving or touching any object has global consequences, just as in chaos theory. Turning of a flower vase regularly causes flooding of the Yellow River in China. Softly pulling the knitted tablecloth brings about a rich yield for the Norwegian fishermen, but pulling it hard creates a strong blizzard in Canada. Payk learns all those secrets through little notes on a bulletin board, a wooden fence, but at some point, he is no longer welcome in the house of his host, so he needs to find an alternative person who is still allowed to visit and to step into that mysterious room touching the objects as instructed. The story ends with that man lighting the right candle standing on the piano, which has, at first, no consequences. However, when that intermediary extinguishes the candle, this brings about Payk's death, as a little note then indicates.

In "Wein auf Lebenszeit" (1952; Wine for Life), an old man, Herr Klontig, seventy-eight years of age enjoys his evenings together with his friend, Herr Rademann, drinking wine out of a large barrel placed in the cellar. Years ago, he had transferred all his property to his son, so when the wine finally runs out, he demands a new barrel, not knowing that he had also given up any authority over his previous wealth. Yet, since these old men had made so much noise during their get-togethers, his son is adamantly opposed and demands that they stop drinking to avoid further social scandals. People have already mocked this pair of old men and ridiculed the entire family as morally suspect.

Undeterred, the old man then decides to 'complain' about the allegedly 'poor quality' of the wine to the wine seller, who has passed away already thirteen years ago. His son, the new wine merchant, friendly welcomes the old man but is rather dismayed to hear that the wine had been bad. Worse even, he cannot believe that it took the drinkers so much time to reach their final judgment. To maintain peace, however, he accommodates his customer but provides him only with a small barrel in return for the large and now empty barrel, which he can actually use quite conveniently. Soon enough, the new wine is about to run out again, so the old man pours a bottle of vinegar into it; thus, he can now 'rightly' complain to the seller about that wine's poor quality. The latter then gets rather irritated, but he provides him with yet another barrel; however, he forces him to taste the wine together with him right away to confirm its quality to settle the case once and for all.

When that wine is consumed, the two old men are at a loss what to do next until the protagonist hits upon the idea that they all should imagine having a big and full barrel in the cellar. They begin to drink the imaginary wine

and get so drunk that they make bad noise all night long. The son and his family are so upset about this scandalous behavior that he purchases another big barrel for his father and his friend because drunkenness based on real wine causes less noise and disturbance than drunkenness based on imaginary wine.

As meaningless or even silly this story seems to be at first sight, it invites extensive discussions about the relationship of the generations, the few remaining joys in old age, the quest for happiness, and also about cunning negotiations and deception in the wine trade, as little as one could accuse the wine merchant of any fault. First of all, the author highlights the ancient-old conflict between the generations criticizing both; the father should not have handed over all his property to his son, who now proves to be dingy and moralizing his father. Second, the old man enjoys his life in retirement because he has his friend and the wine. Third, without the alcoholic inspiration, old age appears miserable, distasteful, boring, and meaningless. Only when the men have turned to their imagination, do they experience extraordinary happiness and cannot find any sleep because they are so extraordinarily joyous and delighted about the pleasantry of the wine.

Finally, the narrator also underscores the common conflict between the family that wants to live by the ordinary standards of society, looking out for their reputation in public, and the old men who have nothing to lose and simply try to find some entertainment because otherwise they are no longer needed and obviously feel despondent and useless.

The question regularly emerges what truly constitutes reality. The discourse on absurdity here hinges on the realization, whether seriously or facetiously, that people live in a world that is only deceptively firm, concrete, and certain according to the physical laws. However, Kusenberg suggests that there might be many realities, which other writers such as Michael Ende confirmed as well after him – see, for instance, his famous *Die unendliche Geschichte* (1979; for a good introduction, see https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Die_unendliche_Geschichte_(Roman)) [32]. Of course, this is a typical element of literature for children and young readers (see now Kuzminykh 2025 or 2026) [33], but Kusenberg does not simply glide into pure imagination, although at times this might also happen, such as in “Der verschwundene Knabe” (1937; The Disappeared Boy). Instead, his narratives regularly pick up ordinary situations in the lives of adults (at times, also children, but then those are realistically integrated into their families and have to cope with their mundane existence). Considering the time when the latter story was created, with the Nazis completely in control of Germany, there is no surprise that Kusenberg tried his best to hide and to project an alternative existence of art which might be superior to the material reality (Pearson 1992, 63, with a quote from Kusenberg’s study *Mit Bildern Leben* (1955)) [26].

Here, a young boy becomes deeply fascinated by a late medieval Flemish painting depicting a delightful landscape and rural community. In particular, he is intrigued by the local blacksmith who is working on horseshoes. One day, the boy realizes that he could, with only little effort, transport himself into that painted world, which causes him only a small pain. There, he discovers a small community where people pursue happily their jobs, where everyone is good-natured, where he is quietly welcomed by the blacksmith who happily lets him work the bellows. Time passes, the boy learns how to move from his reality into the painting and back again, without anyone in the family noticing what is really going on. One day, however, guests arrive and the special room with the painting, which the boy has occupied, allegedly to work on a secret, is needed. The parents have even had to break open the door since the boy had always locked it, but he is nowhere to be seen because he has forgotten to return to his world back home.

His father, closely inspecting the painting, develops a hunch that the apprentice in the workshop of the blacksmith might be his son, but a friend who is famous as an art historian – Kusenberg himself had studied that subject matter and received his dissertation in that field – rejects this assumption and goes so far as to claim that the image of the apprentice constitutes the focal point of the entire painting and so could not be regarded as a later addition. He dismisses the similarity with the lost child as a random accident (“Welt des Zufalls,” 16; world of chances), but the boy never returns. We thus face an absurd situation, made up by the author, but it reflects, as we might suspect, his effort to transport himself away from the horrors of the Nazi regime into the idyll of late medieval Flanders and the happiness and safety of the rural community.

In "Der Große Wind" (The Great Wind), the protagonist enjoys his life with his wife and three daughters in a palatial residence situated in a narrow valley where they all enjoy a very comfortable, almost luxurious existence [34]. He himself is given into regular drinking of wine which his forefathers had created from their own vineyards. But a mysterious and most furious wind then arrives and destroys absolutely everything, except for him because he had spent time in the wine cellar and thus had been protected. Kusenberg might have thought of a tornado because once the protagonist finally manages to come out of the cellar, absolutely everything is gone, including his family and all neighbors, all houses, farms, animals, trees and other vegetation. He is completely disturbed about this catastrophe and yet then tries to start with a new life. He marries a young woman who like him had survived the impact of the wind in her own wine cellar, and so they both rebuild their existence until two years later, the wind returns, with the same catastrophic impact on the entire community. However, this time, the wind has transported six black women from Africa, two Australian sheep, a cupboard with women's dresses, and a rowing boat, dropping all into that valley.

The protagonist gets almost used to this situation, adapts to the new life with those six women, raising sheep and going fishing. Yet, from then on, the wind returns every year, and each time he loses everything and gains something new. He no longer sheds tears over the losses and becomes curious as to what might happen next in his life because he is regularly the only survivor and has to rebuild his existence with whatever the wind has left behind. This leads to his new sensation of being nothing but a traveler through life and time: "Meine Lust war Reiselust und Neugier darauf, was der nächste Wechsel bringen werde" (149; My obsession was travel fever and curiosity about what the next change might bring). His entire existence has become a constant change and complete unpredictability.

At times, the wind returns people that it had taken before; thus, one day, his original wife appears again, but she is accompanied by a pretty Arabian woman whom the protagonist now prefers over his by then older wife. Fortunately for him, the next year, the wind returns and he stays behind all alone again. All this means for him that he loses any personal attachment and feelings, so when the wind drops some of his children into the valley, he welcomes them, but now without any particular feelings: "ebenso lieb wie gleichgültig" (150; as much loved as irrelevant). Finally, when he has just formed a new marriage with an overweight Mexican woman, the wind stops returning, and the protagonist feels very unhappy with this situation, obviously not particularly impressed by that woman.

The situation depicted here could hardly be more absurd. It suggests that the wind has a mind of its own and plays destiny with him. He learns to distance himself from all emotions and to accept his life as is under any circumstances. There is no stability, and everything depends on complete contingency. Of course, Kusenberg plays with erotic elements, but even those do not matter critically. The wind might be a symbol of the horrendous destruction of Germany during WWII, but the author aims for a more global reflection concerning human life at large. Each time when he loses absolutely everything, something new enters his life, sometimes pleasant, sometimes less so. Neither love for his wife nor love for his children matters. All these people come and go throughout his existence, and there is no stability granted to him until the end when the wind finally seems to stay away from this mysterious valley. This valley at first seemed to be paradise-like and yet then turns out to be nearly a hellish location, as much as the protagonist enjoys the location and does not want to move away from there.

There are numerous levels of meaning hidden in this story which powerfully opens up to many discussions once critically examined. The protagonist lived at first drawing from the inheritance his forefathers had left behind, especially the high-quality wines in the cellar. Foolishly, he had trusted the comfort of his material existence until the wind, a highly symbolic function, takes it all away. After having married the second woman and having lost her again, all personal relationships become short-lived and thus somewhat meaningless. He encounters women from all over the world and enjoys their company for some time, and this satisfies him sufficiently. Only when the wind no longer returns and he finds himself stuck with the Mexican woman, does he suddenly feel trapped in his life and would like to return to the constant vicissitude provided by the wind. However, just when he does not like his current situation very much, it becomes crystallized and no longer changes,

which sheds meaningful light on destiny as experienced by the protagonist. Nothing proves to be as it seems to be, and human happiness turns out to be contingent on uncontrollable circumstances.

But according to the story "Ein gewisses Zimmer," also from 1948 (see above), there is a system behind the material dimensions, although humans can only occasionally or by happenstance tap into them. The narrator refuses to offer any explanations and only describes the absurdity of all existence, whether it provides happiness or sorrow. We are invited to read "Der große Wind" both with tears in our eyes out of empathy for the protagonist's constant suffering and with a smile on our face because he quickly learns to accept the philosophical lessons offered by the wind, the evanescence and fleetingness of all material aspects in our lives (many authors have discussed this phenomenon from many different perspectives) [35–38].

The following year, 1949, appeared the deeply troubling and yet jovial short story, "Wer ist man" (Who Are You?), in which Mr. Boras finds himself in the very curious situation that after a night of heavy drinking, no one seems to recognize him any longer. He had slept until eleven o'clock and worries that the alcohol might make him smell differently for the dog who suddenly attacks and even bites him. His wife Martha is extremely angry about the strange man in her garden, and their child also yells at him to get away. Boras is very confused and helpless, but eventually he has to retreat, leaves the garden and turns to the city where he wonders around completely dumbstruck by the fact that his own family would not recognize him. When he tries to find rescue with his friends, those also refuse to acknowledge him and close their doors.

Finally, it dawns upon Boras that "die Gleichheit mit sich selber abhanden gekommen [war]" (Kusenberg, *Gesammelte Erzählungen*, 171; the sameness with himself had been lost). The only explanation for this absurd realization is that he has "aus dem Weltplan herausgerutscht" (ibid. 172; slipped out of the world plan). But he does not know what to do in this most curious situation. He wanders around aimlessly and slowly feels hungry because it is already one o'clock in the afternoon. The new neighborhood looks very similar to his own, and to his surprise, a woman suddenly calls out of a window, telling him to come in, the meal would be already served. In his confusion, he simply accepts this opportunity, sits down, eats, and feels relieved to have found a new home, although the woman and the child are complete strangers to him. "Ach was, dachte er, Familie ist Familie, die Hauptsache bleibt, man hat eine. Ich kann von Glück reden, daß ich wieder untergeschlüpft bin, es sah vorhin trübe aus" (ibid. 172; Oh well, he thought, family is family, the main thing is you have one. I can count it as my luck that I have found a nest again; before, it looked rather miserable).

At that moment, the doorbell rings. The 'wife' opens and encounters a stranger who claims to be the husband. She yells at him and chases the poor man away, who is completely shocked about this treatment because it undermines his own existence and self-confidence. Boras, however, suddenly realizes the actual condition both men find themselves in. He rushes after the stranger and writes down his own address and urges him to go there quickly because the food is already served. Having returned to the dining table, 'his' wife reprimands him for his excessive generosity, but he calms her down with the philosophical insight: "Ich habe nur vorsorglich gespendet. Was heute ihm passiert, kann morgen mir zustoßen" (174; I have only given a donation to be prepared myself. What happens to him today can happen to me tomorrow). The next day, he returns to his old address and sees the couple sitting in the front yard, both apparently happy with their own existence, although everything has changed, with both men having replaced their respective positions. However, both feel content even though it takes them some time to adjust to the new situation.

As Kusenberg indicates many times, our existence here on earth is nothing but contingent, and when we believe to have formed an identity, the strike of fortune or destiny threatens to remove all certainty and stability. This is also addressed in the story "Mal was andres!" (1947; Let's Have Something Else For Once!) which presents a conservative, bourgeois family that leads a rigid and highly structured life according to the norms of their society. We are presented with a married couple and their son and daughter, all being completely obedient to the concepts of polite society. But one day during May, something shocking occurs because the son appears for dinner walking on his hands into the room. During dinner, no one speaks a word, but afterwards, when the parents inquire about his

odd behavior, he simply says the words that form the title of the story.

At first, there is no reaction to be observed, but suddenly, one after the other, everyone begins to display a completely different behavior, acting out silly roles, as if they needed to free themselves from many years of self-imposed restrictions. Each one of them explains his/her actions with the same phrase which the son had voiced, and they laugh openly about the total transformation of their lives by which they transgress all social norms and taboos, acting like undisciplined children, destroying objects, dancing, jumping, and making somersaults. This explosion of their inner feelings then takes a surprising turn because at 9 p.m., a group of acrobats, also consisting of father, mother, son, and daughter, appears before their house announcing their show the next day. The first family makes them the absurd offer to exchange their roles, invites them in, hands all property over to them, exchanges their clothing, and takes on the other family's occupation, playing music, even though, as the narrator adds, as if this comment would make really sense in this set-up, the mother does not quite manage the drums so well (119).

Kusenberg considered this story so important that he had a collection of his narratives, published in 1954 and republished until at least 1987, titled with the same one as this story's. Moreover, the cover is illustrated with a scene showing the family, with the son walking on his feet and the daughter having cut open her blouse to reveal some of her breasts. Through the window in the background, we see two people of the other family in their clownish costumes ready to enter the house [39]. The absurdity of this narrative turns into a dadaistic appeal to people to liberate themselves from their traditional social roles only seemingly cast in iron and to enjoy life as children would do. What happens is, as the anonymous commentator remarked, that the writer translates meaning to meaninglessness and then the reverse: "Er ist ein poetischer Magier, der die Gegenwart mit uns durchlitt und sie in traumhaften erzählerischen Gebilden sublimiert" (He is a poetic magician who, like us, had to suffer through our present time and sublimates it through dreamlike narratives). This very phenomenon finds its appropriate expression in the short story "Der Riese" (also from 1947; The Giant) where a craftsman artist is invited to work in a huge castle all by himself. His friend Heinrich had handed over the keys with the warning that the 'giantness' might disturb him.

We never learn what that might be, but the protagonist feels all the time that he is watched by something like a giant. Finally, already pretty much at the end of his nerves, he gets a small dog, which seems to chase the creature away for a while. But one night, a sort of fight erupts, and the little dog returns to the bedroom licking its snout. Even though the 'giant' is gone, the dog then begins to grow into gigantic proportions, which horrifies the artist even further. In fact, the dog then takes on the same behavior as the giant had displayed: "Der Riese, den der Hund verschlungen hatte, wuchs in ihm, und der Riesenhund wurde mir bald ebenso unheimlich wie es der Riese gewesen war" (125; The giant whom the dog had devoured grew in it, and this giant dog soon became as scary for me as the giant had used to be).

Even though Kusenberg situates his story somehow in older times – there is this castle, the protagonist travels via a coach – the universal message proves to be topical for everyone also today. While the artist creates extremely small objects which can only be viewed with a magnifying glass, the huge size of the palace and, even worse, of the invisible giant cause him considerable stress and discomfort. Reality, as we learn both here and in virtually all other Kusenberg stories, represents only one dimension, but there are others. As grotesque as this perspective might seem to be, it confirms the theoretical foundations of the new concept of life embraced by the contemporary dadaists, surrealists, and others regarding a world that has turned into utter absurdity.

Of course, Kusenberg is not to be compared with Kafka, for instance, who pursued much darker concepts of the absurd in his psychologizing narratives and today enjoys global fame despite the deeply disturbing nature of his novels, parables, and other texts. However, we would do an egregious disservice to the former if we simply dismissed him as an entertaining and humorous author of almost silly short stories. Any close analysis demonstrates that Kusenberg, relying on irony, satire, and shock elements, was radically deconstructing the world we live in by exposing new dimensions, forces, powers, and elements that the normal person would never recognize or acknowledge. As Pearson fittingly comments, "He frees himself

to play on his terms with a world that seems to be playing with him by rules he doesn't know or can't make sense of" [34]. But Kusenberg does not, as Pearson then claims, offer narrative therapy for those who are wounded, suffering, and dying of this world, as much empathy the poet might feel for them. Instead, he really explores narratively how to capture a new epistemology hidden behind the absurd, so these stories are not determined by utter nonsense, for instance. Instead, they carry subtle and almost uncanny insights into and about another reality which is neither religiously formed nor physically comprehensible.

Through the aspect of the absurd, this writer achieved a remarkable breakthrough in epistemology, indicating that what we perceive with our senses and comprehend with our reason represents only one aspect, whereas in reality there are many more that might always remain incomprehensible to us. Kusenberg, however, was not a naive storyteller without any understanding of modern science. In fact, both in his story "Die ruhelose Kugel" (1939; The Restless Bullet) and "Nihilit" (1947; Nothingness) he operated with principles of physics and chemistry and has those laws work differently than is usually known and expected. The conclusion consists of a kind of shrugging the shoulders, as reality suddenly proves to be very different from what is commonly perceived. It might even be possible to view Kusenberg's texts through the lens of quantum mechanics because they defy the traditional concepts and project an alternative reality determined by the absurd. In a perhaps surprising perspective, it might prove to be quite insightful to compare this German author with the by now famous Japanese novelist Haruko Murakami, especially if we consider his bestseller *Kafka on the Shore* (2002). Future research will have to probe the intriguing parallels and even similarities in both author's take on the absurd in our daily lives.

6. Conclusions

Whereas Kafka and other twentieth-century poets explored the meaning of the absurd as it emerged at their time, drawing from the realization that all existence was horrible and devastating, the humorist and satirist Kurt Kusenberg pursued a different approach. In his numerous short stories, in which life also appears to be absurd, he highlights the laughable element and thus manages to shrug off the ponderous perspective that life is just absurd. His focus rests on ordinary experiences without major consequences, so it is easy to laugh with him about the perversion of reason and rationality. Yet, as this study has also shown, his short stories also carry profound meanings as to the very nature of the rational and irrational.

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