



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Beyond Godot: Modern Absurdities And The Crisis Of Meaning In Contemporary Television

Akanksha Saini

Student

Amity Institute of English Studies and Research
Amity University, Uttar Pradesh, India

Abstract

What if all this chaos of everyday lives were not a harbinger of despair but rather a doorway to deeper self-discovery? From Beckett's portrayal of meaninglessness in *Waiting for Godot* to the self-aware cynicism of *Fleabag* and the never-ending loops of *Russian Doll*, absurdism has been ever-changing and constantly taking on new forms. Which is no longer limited to the stage but can be seen in contemporary storytelling, blending dark humor with self-aware narration to mirror the challenges of the present world. This paper aims to explore how absurdism has transformed from being a bleak narrative of post-war theatre into a multidisciplinary exploration of personal identity, trauma, and the fractured nature of reality. Together, these series merge absurdity with personal narratives, feminist ideas, and psychological depth. By tracing absurdism from its theatrical beginnings to its modern forms, this paper shows the present relevance of absurdism in contemporary times. In an era where meaning is often hard to find, absurdity not only reveals chaos but also offers a way to organize it.

Keywords

Absurdism, Existentialism, Contemporary Television, Fourth-Wall Breaking, Female Empowerment, Dark Humor, Time Loop, Existent, Hyperconnectivity, Healing, Nihilism, Sociocultural Issues, Meaninglessness, Psychological Complexity, Social Media.

Introduction

Absurdism as a concept in literature and philosophy arose in the 20th century as an answer to the sense of disillusionment born of wars, continually shifting societal patterns, and declining traditional belief patterns. Existential thought underlies absurdism, as it attempts to cope with humanity's desire to seek meaning and the universe's indifference to it. Sam Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1953) represented Theatre of the Absurd, where meaning in reality was elusive, time was suspended, and people are trapped in an endless cycle of waiting. Like many absurdist plays of mid-20th century origin, the drama reflects the post-war existential desperation into literature and philosophy, emphasizing communication breakdown, senseless human endeavor, and absurdity of existence as such.

But absurdism was not limited to post-war existential despair or even theatrical performances only. As cultural storytelling evolved, so too did absurdist themes as presented in media. Today, absurdism broke away from its classical origin on stage to permeate television storytelling where it interacts with personal identity, trauma, and psychological complexity. Not restricted by their counterparts, newer absurdist shows are not limited to giving audiences a senseless, chaotic world but instead apply absurdity as a conduit to access deeper sociocultural and psychological issues.

On television today, shows such as *Fleabag* (2016–2019) and *Russian Doll* (2019–present) redefine absurdism as a blend of dark humor, self-referential storytelling, and feminisms. The shows surpass boulevard-classical absurdisms in its sense of desperation and nihilism, tackling themes of personal discovery, existential crises, and personal change. *Fleabag*, for example, breaches the fourth wall with self-conscious detachment characteristic of absurdist stage plays, while *Russian Doll* uses Beckettian cyclical loops of repetition but bends them into a highly personal journey towards healing and self-acceptance.

Through analyzing the development of absurdism from its post-war beginnings through its modern manifestations, this essay discusses how new absurdist television transcends bleakness as a reflection of crisis of existence and reaches a more complex exploration of identity, trauma, and self-consciousness. Through doing so, these shows provide an innovative new approach to how people deal with the fractured nature of reality today by utilizing absurdity not only as a vehicle with which to portray crisis of existence but also as a medium for self-discovery and change.

Absurdism: From Theatre to Television

The roots of absurdism in drama and literature run deeply into the philosophical questions posed by thinkers like Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre. Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942) proposed existence as absurd and of human beings as needing to cope with meaninglessness yet refusing to be put in despair. For him, while the universe is devoid of meaning, human beings can still find meaning in their lives despite the absurdity of it all. The type of existentialism put forth by Jean-Paul Sartre took this idea further, framing human beings as condemned to freedom, having to create their own sense of self in a world without preordained meaning.

These philosophical strands were important in shaping mid-20th-century dramatists of the absurd, like Samuel Beckett, Eugène Ionesco, and Harold Pinter, who translated these existential questions into theatrical representation. Their plays overturned traditional storytelling conventions, delivering narratives in which communication breaks down, reason bends in on itself, and characters are forever caught in loops of ambiguity and repetition. Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1953), Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano* (1950), and Pinter's *The Birthday Party* (1957) make use of the disjointed and chaotic nature of human existence to confront audiences with the absurd through disconnected speech, senseless occurrences, and situations that defy resolution.

Absurdism has, however, by no means been static in post-war theatre's bleak investigations of existence. With the rise of decidedly absurdist tendencies within contemporary media, and especially television shows, cultural and narrative horizons shifted to utilize many of the themes of absurdism in what has been described as the "absurdist turn." The absurdism of modern television has adopted these modes and reformulated them, preserving the broad concepts around identity, trauma, and self-reflection but using them to engage anxieties and ideologies that have only gained syncopation in recent decades. The likes of *Fleabag* (2016–2019) and *Russian Doll* (2019–present) testify to this evolution, showing that absurdity is no longer simply a nihilistic reflection of existence. Instead, it has been transformed into a vehicle for self-discovery, female empowerment, and psychological exploration. Such self-referential humor, fourth-wall-breaking mechanisms, and cyclical narrative structures mark a major departure in how absurdism functions within the realm of storytelling.

The Self-Aware Absurdism of *Fleabag*

Phoebe Waller-Bridge's *Fleabag* (2016–2019) describes the blend of absurdity and self-awareness, utilizing immediate audience address to fashion an intimate yet distanced investigation into a woman coping with grief, guilt, and meaning-finding. While Beckett's protagonists like Vladimir and Estragon in *Waiting for Godot* passively withstand their absurd existence with few prospects of deliverance, *Fleabag* actively battles against the absurdity of her existence. *Fleabag* vacillates between desperation and rebellion, utilizing humor as both a defense mechanism and an instrument of existential exploration.

One of *Fleabag*'s defining characteristics is its habitual breaking of the fourth wall, a strategy in keeping with the absurdist tradition of subverting traditional storytelling frameworks. Through self-description directly to the viewer, *Fleabag* establishes an impression of control over her story, but this self-consciousness also highlights her entrenched emotional detachment. Her sassy asides and winking responses are a comedic defense mechanism, by which she can temporarily insulate herself against hurt, grief, and self-destruction. But as the season wears on, this tool becomes strained specifically in times of openness, as when the Priest (Andrew Scott) perceives her asides, essentially breaking through the illusion of detachment.

Russian Doll And The Cyclical Absurdity Of Life

While *Fleabag*, after all that leapfrogging over punishing trauma, uses humor and self-awareness to examine existential well-being, *Russian Doll* (2019 present) approaches human absurdism with a literalness in its time loop structure. The series centers on Nadia (Natasha Lyonne), a sarcastic and jaded game developer who inexplicably starts reliving the same day over and over. She dies by all means: accidents, missteps, even random violence, but she always awakens at the same moment, the night of her 36th birthday. This cycle of eternal life addresses the underlying existential dread that the theme of absurdism evokes; indeed, it speaks to Camus' notion of the eternal return, where nothingness becomes absurd and repetitive and ultimately inescapable. The game also toys with the tension between fate and free will, forcing Nadia to square off repeatedly against the same reality without a readily available explanation as to why.

Unlike some of the traditional absurdist figures trapped in meaninglessness, Nadia does not agree to endure her outrageous predicament. Her response is not one of acceptance, however, and she doesn't waste any time on philosophical contemplation, instead flinging herself willy nilly in search of an explanation, part reasoning, part humor, part sheer will. This transition from passive endurance to active interrogation is what distinguishes *Russian Doll* from classical absurdist works such as Beckett's, which often foreground futility and stasis. The absurdist structure of endless repetition becomes a quest for healing and self-acceptance, as Nadia's journey compels her to confront her own traumas, damaged relationships, and self-destructive tendencies.

The series also employs absurdist humor and philosophical exploration, mixing elements of the surreal with psychological depth. The absurdity of Nadia's plight is heightened by the show's irreverent, darkly comic style. You might compare it to the existential humor of *Waiting for Godot* or Brecht's *The Good Person of Szechwan*. But where earlier absurdist works stranded their characters indefinitely in an unresolved existential limbo, *Russian Doll* gives them a more dimensional vision. It recognizes life's irrationality but hints that personal transformation is possible nevertheless. Nadia's ultimate recognition that she needs to face her unavenged trauma and build real connections, especially with Alan (Charlie Barnett), another person who is stuck in a similar loop, also reinforces the show's novel approach to absurdism.

With its cyclical structure, *Russian Doll* shows that absurdity can be more than a comment on meaninglessness; it can also be a vehicle for self-discovery. Absurdism is reinterpreted through a present-day exercise in the series, conceived as a means of psychic and emotional exploration instead of a surrender to life's lack of inherent meaning. By doing so, *Russian Doll* is a bridge between existential despair and personal growth. Even if you find yourself failing to come up with decent answers about our universe, connection and self-awareness can still show you the way.

Absurdism as a Reflection of Contemporary Society

The emergence of absurdism as a television genre in recent times marks an intensified sense of fragmentation of reality, identity, and meaning, challenges inherent in the digital era. While 20th-century absurdist drama and fiction reacted against the existential ambiguity fueled by war, political upheavals, and deconstruction of religious and social institutions, absurdist storytelling today resonates with a new crisis: the sheer complexity of contemporary times. Amidst a world mediated by social media, hyperconnectivity, and ideological extremism, themes of absurdity are more than relevant today. The challenge of forging connectivity in situations where reality appears as performance, self-doubt dominates all, and reality and manufactured identity blend easily are all issues bothersome to contemporary times.

Fleabag and *Russian Doll* are shows representing these modern anxieties, including protagonists who are not only ensnared in absurd, Sisyphean cycles but are also painfully self-aware of their predicament. *Fleabag*'s breaking of the fourth wall aligns with hyper-consciousness of the digital era, where individuals stage and present versions of self to an invisible public. While Nadia's cycles of death and rebirth are metaphors of the contemporary turmoil of trying and failing to outgrow self-destructive cycles, whether in relationships, mental anguish, or societally imposed norms, the convergence of feminist perspectives and intensely personal narratives sets new absurdism apart from its antecedents.

While Beckett's protagonists are often mere observers of their predicament, contemporary absurdist protagonists take agency over their issues, stating overtly what was performed subtly by Beckett's protagonists as mere observers of their destiny. The wrestling of *Fleabag* with sorrow, guilt, and self-esteem, and Nadia's struggle to come to terms with a traumatic past, relocate absurdity's preoccupation with stagnation of existence towards psychological and emotional change. These shows propose that even if human existence is absurd, striving towards meaning in spite of futility continues to form an intrinsic aspect of human nature.

Redefining absurd themes in terms of individual change, contemporary television recontextualizes the genre in an intimate yet applicable manner to modern issues. Rather than embracing absurdity as inevitable, these

programs take it as a vehicle to challenge individual and collective paradoxes, thereby creating a richer and more dynamic approach to existence against unknown odds.

Conclusion

The transition from post-war absurdist drama to television shows a profound shift in the way that narratives approach existential ambiguity. Where absurdist texts such as *Waiting for Godot* concentrated on the meaninglessness of human existence with cyclical structures and fractured speech, more recent television absurdist works push these ideas in new ways, utilizing them to examine identity, traumatic experience, and inner change.

Fleabag and *Russian Doll* remain faithful to the fundamental preoccupations of absurdism shaking traditional storytelling, emphasizing existential disillusionment, and presenting characters stuck in reiterative cycles. The shows also take absurdism into new territory, however, with new opportunities for self-discovery and emotional maturation. Unlike their stage-based forebears, which typically acquiesced to meaninglessness, these TV shows employ absurdity as a tool to analyze human psychology and social existence. *Fleabag* deploys self-referential jokes and fourth-wall breaches to reveal contradictions of identity and detachment, while *Russian Doll* reimagines the reiterative nature of loops as a metaphor for healing and self-acceptance. Both series approach contemporary concerns with anxieties over connectivity, self-awareness, and existential choice, mapping absurdist storytelling to issues in a digital, hyper-connected world.

Ultimately, absurdism's persistence through various periods and media testifies to its enduring relevance. From Beckett's plays of existential desperation to contemporary protagonists grappling with self-aware absurdity, absurdism remains an enduring narrative instrument. In today's fractured reality, where meaning proves slippery, contemporary absurdist television works not only to portray existential anxiety but to provide a conduit by which to comprehend, traverse, and even transform it.

References

- Beckett, Samuel. *Waiting for Godot*. Grove Press, 1953.
- Brecht, Bertolt. *The Good Person of Szechwan*. Methuen Drama, 1943.
- Camus, Albert. *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Gallimard, 1942.
- Esslin, Martin. *The Theatre of the Absurd*. Anchor Books, 1961.
- Ionesco, Eugène. *The Bald Soprano*. Grove Press, 1950.
- Lyonne, Natasha, Amy Poehler, and Leslye Headland, creators. *Russian Doll*. Netflix, 2019–present.
- Pinter, Harold. *The Birthday Party*. Methuen Drama, 1957.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Being and Nothingness*. Routledge, 1943.
- Taylor-Batty, Mark. *Samuel Beckett's Waiting for Godot: A Reference Guide*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013.
- Waller-Bridge, Phoebe, creator. *Fleabag*. BBC & Amazon Studios, 2016–2019.