

Case Study

Kurt Kusenberg and the Realization that We Live in an Absurd World. Comic Relief in a Hopeless Situation: The Rediscovery of a Major German Literary Voice

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Abstract

Literary scholarship is deeply familiar with the work by the German-Czech writer Franz Kafka and some of his French contemporaries and successors, such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Samuel Beckett, Eugène Ionesco, Albert Camus, Saul Bellow, Donald Barthelme, and Cormac McCarthy, all of whom addressed the absurdity of modern life. Their messages about the loss of meaning and rationality reverberate with us today maybe even more than ever. The very willingness to acknowledge that life can be absurd represents the first step in coming to terms with it more constructively and without falling into despair. The next step would be to find this absurdity rather laughable, but none of those famous authors revealed any sense of humor. However, the German author Kurt Kusenberg (1904–1983), today mostly forgotten, was bold enough to take the proverbial bull by the horn and to write scores of highly entertaining, though in essence rather troubling short stories that undermine all our notion of meaningful reality and yet invite us to laugh about this realization. This laughter proves to be not deconstructive, as we would expect from absurd literature, but reconstructive, reminding us of the relativity of our world ruled by contingency.

Keywords: Absurd literature; Kurt Kusenberg; Literary laughter; German absurd literature; Rediscovery of a forgotten literary voice; Non-canonical literature

INTRODUCTION

One of the most influential contemporary authors in world literature proves to be Haruki Murakami (b. 1949), who has dazzled his audiences with many satirical, but mostly absurd narratives in which he developed at times rather bizarre concepts of the world and human society. He drew much inspiration from European literature, especially from Franz Kafka, Gustave Flaubert, Charles Dickens, Kurt Vonnegut, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Richard Brautigan, and Jack Kerouac, and he can be identified as the major representative of Japanese magical realism and surrealism (see, for instance, Faris and Nonaka 2020). There is a lot of whimsicalness in Murakami's work, which apparently deeply appeals to readers across the world. Obviously, if we take his texts, or the famous stained-glass windows by Marc Chagall (1887–1985), as indicative of a fundamental paradigm shift, humanity is currently losing its traditional, or at least assumed, grip on reality because robotization, computerization, and mechanization take over our world, best captured by the emergence of Artificial Intelligence. Absurd literature and art have creatively responded to those challenges, whether with a good effect or not, which remains to be evaluated in the future.

However, we would be misinformed if we believed that this transformation of our existence has begun only recently since, say, ca. 2010. Instead, the entire twentieth century was already in the midst of major paradigm shifts the results of which we simply feel much more intensively today than before. Both Kafka and Satre, and then also Murakami, were sensors of those new forces that are now impacting the entire world more intensively than we might have expected (Bennett 2015). Embracing absurdity as their epistemological lens, these authors indicated clear-sightedly the radical transformation of the modern world, although they did not yet know the onslaught of the computer with its all-encompassing algorithmic power. We pay greatest respect to their literary endeavors particularly because of their prescient sensitivities, just as the Expressionist poets and artists in the early twentieth century tragically foresaw the imminent danger of WWI and the collapse of their world. When we acknowledge these literary accomplishments, we gain a very strong argument to explain and defend literature as an essential medium for any individual who wants to comprehend his/her life within an increasingly bewildering environment. By the same token, the fourteenth-century crisis, for instance, was powerfully grasped, discussed, and challenged by late medieval poets such as William Langland or Christine de Pizan. The same applies to Baroque writers, or the poets of the Storm and Stress period. Good literature, to put it bluntly, communicates with us, provides us with a forum for critical analysis, and serves as a sounding board for an individual within human society. Simply imitative literature that aims at plain entertainment (pulp fiction) has certainly its own function for the wider readership (*mimesis*), but the ultimate purpose of life is to live to the best of one's abilities, to which a literary text promises to contribute critically by shedding light on the essential issues, on the potentials available to everyone, and on the intricacies of human existence as such. Absurdity, however, surrounds us, maybe today more than ever before, so it makes good sense that Murakami enjoys such a global success as a writer (Bennett 2024; Hoffmann 2024; Castelli 2026).

A FORGOTTEN VOICE IN ABSURD LITERATURE

Oddly, a major contributor to absurdist literature, though with a humorous twist, the German author Kurt Kusenberg, has remained almost completely forgotten (for one major exception, see Pearson 1991). Some of his short stories have been used in textbooks, such as “Nihilit” (<https://www.k-faktor.com/unsinn/nihilit2.htm>), and students continue to enjoy the refreshing nonsensical concept outlined in this text. But otherwise, Kusenberg’s name is basically a non-entity and yet deserves to be uncovered, as this short study will amply demonstrate (for an earlier examination, see Dickens 1988; Classen 2025). He was quite respected throughout his life, both as a book editor for the Rowohlt publishing house and as an author on his own right. He regularly created short stories that continue to pique our interests and make us wonder about our own lives, especially because things simply do not always operate the way as they are supposed to.

As we learn many times through Kusenberg’s narratives, life itself is not simply controlled by us as people; instead, we face many different forces that make themselves known at time, and they disappear at another time. But it is never fully clear who those forces might be and what they intend to do with us. Kusenberg, however, was not a religious writer, and he did not follow any ideological perspective. Instead, he can be identified as an independent and free thinker who was inspired by many different literary and historical traditions and played with them at liberty to expose the absurdity of our existence (Kusenberg 1969; for an English translation of a selection of his texts, see now Kusenberg 2026).

In 1954, the author published the following statement upon his worldview as a writer: “When someone is looking for a sense in my stories, then that is his/her business; I have not injected a sense. There is, however, the possibility that sense entered the texts without me knowing about it. As far as I know by looking around in the world: there is no sense anywhere” (my trans., xviii). Nevertheless, even though from a negative perspective, Kusenberg projected a universe where things operated in some concrete fashion, though often very differently from what we would expect today (Durzak 1984).

In “A Certain Room” (1948), for instance, a man called Payk has discovered that mighty forces are hidden in a special room in the house of an acquaintance of his. Although that room is opened up only rarely to spare it for festive events (“Die gute Stube”), its owner, a Mr. Klose, does not know anything about these conditions. Mysteriously, outside of the house someone pegs notes on a fence that announce the consequences of any actions in that room, but no person is ever seen posting those notes. Payk pretends for a long time to pursue wedding plans with Klose’s daughter, which grants him, even though only occasionally, access to that room. In the course of time, he manages to identify what the effects are when one turns, moves, or simply touches an object: “reworked the clock – a plague of locusts in Thailand; carpet brushed – coup d’état in Argentina; left window open – increase of sunspots” (37). Payk makes it to his sport to investigate all and everything that happens in the world because of the objects in the room and can thus map an outline of how everything is connected in the world. In a way, we recognize here a literary application of the Chaos Theory, with the slight difference that all events happening anywhere on earth are triggered by some accidental action in that room.

Unfortunately, Klose realizes at some point that Payk has no interest in his daughter and actually lives with a rich and fat widow. Assuming that Payk only intends to realize his desire for erotic

variety, he bans him from his house. This thus blocks the protagonist from continuing with his research, but eventually he finds an ignorant and foolish substitute who continues to be welcome as a guest in Klose's house. Carefully, Payk instructs him to move certain objects in that particular room when an occasion arises. There is, for instance, an ash tray, and the effect of dropping the ash from a cigarette into it is: "the mayor of Bayonne had sprained his elbow" (38). As helpful as this piece of information proves to be, Payk also has to realize that even minutiae can have a deep impact far away in the world. In other words, his work has barely scratched the surface, and to comprehend everything controlled by the objects in that room, he would need much more time and many more opportunities.

However, when his middleman eventually lights the candle on the right side of the piano, this turns out to be decisive. The middleman can do this only during a short period when Klose has briefly left the room, but there are at first no consequences. When the host then returns and the guest quenches the candle to hide what he had done, a new note appears on the fence announcing: "Dousing the candle on the right – Mr. Payk has died" (39). Klose, in his frugality, had not allowed the middleman to light the candle since it was full daylight and there was no reason to use the candle at that time. Nevertheless, the outcome for Payk is deadly, without him knowing the consequences because he himself is the victim.

Of course, the entire assumption upon which this story is predicated is nothing short of absurd, but there are significant implications for us as people because the narrator suggests that virtually everything is somehow connected with everything else, although the system behind it remains obscure. It is also not clear at all why all these mysteries become apparent just in this one room and who might be the writer of those notes. We are simply left baffled, and the author refuses to engage us any further, denying us any understanding of the condition described here. Of course, ultimately it does not matter either for Payk or for Klose, not to speak of the middleman. The former only gains a hunch of what might be going on in that fateful room and dies as soon as he himself happens to be the object of some forces determining his life. Klose, on the other hand and his entire family are completely ignorant and do not care one iota about what might be special about this room. On the contrary, the more Klose tries to preserve this room in its pristine condition, the more he remains in the dark about the special forces crisscrossing that room.

Destiny, life and death, otherworlds, and individual happiness prove to be the overarching topics pursued by Kusenbergs, although he regularly pursued different angles and perspectives exploring the more or less same themes relevant in human existence. In "The Naked Man" (1951), for instance, we learn of a kind man who helps out homeless who has no clothing on and is in danger of freezing to death during the winter months. The protagonist, out of the kindness of his heart, takes him in, provides him with everything a person might need, and this as a simple act of charity. At that time, the entire town thrives on speculations with flowers, and the formerly naked man participates in this business and is lucky enough to get rich very quickly. The protagonist, on the other hand, fails repeatedly in his speculations and becomes very impoverished. When he asks the foreigner for a loan, he is rudely rejected and only receives an emergency coin. The protagonist uses it to buy some obscure seeds and is lucky in discovering a very rare species. Although he would have almost starved to death during the period until his flowers have bloomed, he then achieves unforeseen triumphs and regains all his previous wealth, and more.

The other man, on the other hand, at first mocks him, rejects the silver coin that had saved the protagonist and tosses it into the crowd, defying fortune. But he soon collapses financially and loses everything again, finding himself on the street as naked as before. This time, when he begs the protagonist for help, the latter refuses and turns away from him, and enjoys from then on a happy life, marrying the formerly rich man's mistress, whereas the naked man has to leave the country. The narrator concludes: "As I have said, locals are helped by the local spirit, and our ancient house gods assist us" (6).

Good and evil are oddly divided, fortune and misfortune operate by their own, and forces undetermined decide on people's lives. In the "Restless Bullet" (1939), an odd event takes place which quickly keeps the entire world excited because a bullet shot from a gun act on its own and begins to circle the globe with incredible speed, shooting through all kinds of objects in its way. People begin to think that a global conspiracy might be at play, but to be sure, "wherever the bullet had passed through, it left unrest and drove the police, at its wit's end, to desperation" (63). Soon enough, mathematicians manage to figure out the bullet's revolution around the globe, and people begin to make a sport out of holding postcards or other objects in the bullet's path. At first those are sold at a high price, but inflation soon sets in. There are positive and negative consequences of the bullet whizzing by, such as assassination attempts achieving their goal when the poor victim is pushed in the bullet's path at the right time. Positive consequences are when a freshly married couple enters into a silly fight over where to place a crystal vase, which then is shattered by the bullet. Only then do the two people realize their foolishness in their fight and embrace other in love once again.

The story concludes when the shooter, who was completely unaware of his own responsibility, happens to be hit by the bullet in his ear lobe. Angry about this attack by an unknown person, he rushes back into the house, fetches his pistol and tries to find the culprit. At that moment, the bullet ends up in the barrel of the pistol, and that's where it belongs without traveling any longer. The narrator remarks rather mysteriously: "You might call it accident or destiny, at any rate, the bullet ended up exactly in the barrel of the pistol where it had originally been before it had embarked on its long journey" (63). No one in the world gains any understanding of this strange bullet, not even the owner of the pistol and his original action know about it. "Until today people wonder what force might have empowered the bullet to mock the laws of nature" (63). Incomprehension rules, the world operates strangely in open defiance of the natural laws, and yet, things ultimately fall into place and everything seems to be alright. This is the epitome of absurdity, but in a mostly harmless and entertaining way. The narrator reflects on people's ordinary reactions to such unnatural phenomena, illustrates how they quickly accommodate to them, and then forget to question what is actually happening. In the last minute, so to speak, the bullet finds its way back into the pistol's barrel, and everything seems to be normal again, but only after all natural principles have been undermined. As entertaining and light-hearted this story might seem, it truly represents a highly unsettling situation which no one knows how to understand or even to control. There are other forces at play people are not aware of and can certainly not influence.

One of the most intriguing stories from Kusenbergs's pen is "Who Are You" in which a man, Mr. Boras, suddenly finds himself completely estranged from his familiar world. After a night of

heavy drinking, neither his dog nor his child, and also not his wife recognizes him any longer and force him to leave the property. The same happens when he tries to visit his friends, who all seem not to know him any longer. The good man is deeply upset and also helpless, and wanders through the streets of his city when he gets to the suburbs where a woman suddenly calls out to him from a window and alerts him to come in because supper is already served, waiting for him. Without much thinking, he enters the house and is welcomed as husband and father, without anyone noticing the unusual situation. Being hungry as he is, the man simply accepts the change as something he could not control anyway and plays his role as expected: “Who cares? he thought, family is family, the most important thing is you have one. I can count it as my good luck that I have been able to slip into one again; before, it looked rather grim” (53). He goes so far as to speculate whether he had only dreamed of his other existence, whereas now he had actually arrived in his own reality.

At that moment, the doorbell rings, and the woman answers, but she has a severe confrontation with a man who falsely pretends, as she insists, to be her husband. After she has chased him away, Boras jumps up and follows him, hands him a piece of paper with his own original address and urges him to go there as fast as possible because otherwise the food would get cold. The next day, he drives by his old house and observes his original wife sitting contently in the garden, next to her ‘husband,’ so everything seems to be in good order, although nothing is truly alright: “With that, Mr. Boras was content as well” (55).

In “Having Lived Fast” we learn of a man who lives much faster than anyone else. His wife proves to be a fitting partner, and both thus leave everyone behind. But the fast pace also has its effect on him in terms of his lifespan since his hair turns gray at the age of twenty-five, and at the age of thirty he already dies, with his body falling apart even before it can be burned. His obit appears a day late, which would have been a great disappointment for him if he had experienced it in person. But, as the narrator then concludes: “Since he has died, the minutes crawl along once again according to the measure of sixty seconds” (71). There is no explanation for this extraordinary condition, and we are only alerted to the fact that this man raced through his life at double the speed or more compared to all other people.

Kusenberg also played with the notion of space, such as in “Where is Uncle Bertram,” where the protagonist has to travel far and wide to track down this uncle and thereby goes through all kinds of locations and time zones. As the narrator emphasizes at the end, truth is of no concern, whereas the illusion is all that matters: “the people in Wickenberge would have never believed a word” (95). In “The Great Wind,” a man witnesses a series of terrible storms that sweep everything away from his valley, sparing only him because he always happens to be in the wine cellar when the storm arrives. In the course of time, he loses and wins wives and children, goods and food, and the protagonist enjoys the constant changes in his life, all rather dramatic and highly surprising. The wind hits the valley fourteen times, and the man has to start all over with his life over and over again, and this so extensively that he gets used to it and finds it then rather shocking and boring when the wind does no longer return, which forces him to accept the life conditions as they are and live with them.

In one of his last stories, “Owner of Nothing” (1963), Kusenbergs introduces a rich man who takes good care of all his property but never considers anything as truly belonging to him. But one day, he is visited by a stranger who controls everything he owns, finding it all to be in good order, which underscores the protagonist’s sense of being nothing but a manager of everything. Later, however, during a vacation, he encounters an old man who curtly informs him that things have changed and that he from then on can consider himself as the owner. As if in a dream, he acknowledges this, and indeed takes charge once he has returned home. But as happy as he then feels and is content with his entire existence, he soon hurts himself while working in the garden, gets blood poisoning, and dies on the fifth day (149).

The symbolism of all the figures integrated in this story is almost easy to understand, since the religious allusions are quite obvious. But even here we are confronted with the experience of colliding notions of time and space, and once those become merged, life simply ends. Kusenbergs continued on this note in many other short stories, and we are never quite certain where this ultimately might lead us, just as we are confronted by the absurd in Kafka or Murakami, Satre or Camus.

CONCLUSION

Kusenbergs deserves considerable recognition for his profound sense of the irrational and his questioning of the material and orderly world. We find in him a quirky author who viewed the world through the lens of the absurd. But we are always invited to laugh with him and accept that all our standards and norms are only auxiliary categories to cope with the challenges of this life. Neither time nor space prove to be reliable categories, and the individual protagonists constantly have to cope with different forces that have a deep impact on the main figures without truly revealing themselves. In “The Disappeared Boy” (1957; see Kusenbergs 1959, 11–16), for instance, a boy is so enthralled by a late medieval Flemish painting that he finally manages to move into the idyllic scene and explore that pleasing rural world in all its peacefulness. For quite some time, he moves back and forth between both dimensions, but one day, this trick no longer works and he stays in the genre painting never to be found again in the outside. An art historian who is consulted about the artwork insists that any assumption about a later addition – the boy as the blacksmith’s apprentice – would have to be regarded as utterly false, as absurd, especially because the artist had really designed his work with this apprentice in mind first of all. But there is no explanation for the disappearance of the boy, even though the expert admits a striking similarity with the painted person (16).

Altogether, Kusenbergs thus takes his reader on a wild ride through a world where rationality and logic are no longer trustworthy dimensions and where alternative entities or beings might exist. However, whereas Kafka, for instance, regarded himself as a victim of ferocious, vicious, and destructive psychological forces, Kusenbergs mostly laughed those all off and embraced a world where the protagonist is no longer in control and just passes through without suffering exceedingly. In this sense, we can recognize in Kusenbergs’s short stories remarkable contributions to the genre of absurd literature, primarily determined by humor, quirkiness, irony, and facetious puzzlement, which the protagonist in “The Giant” (1947; Kusenbergs 1959, 120–26), a goldsmith focused on miniature art, has to experience in a rather unsettling way because

he is uncannily surrounded by the force of giantness while working in a lonely castle. There is, simply put, a different and inexplicable reality, and we are invited to embrace it and laugh about our own foolishness not recognizing it easily, if at all. A careful comparison with the work of the Czech author Milan Kundera (1929–2023) might shed more light on Kusenberg and catapult him out of the shadows of the literary annals into the limelight of contemporary absurd literature (cf. Cornwell 2005, though he does not know Kusenberg). The one significant shared element in Murakami's, Kundera's, and Kusenberg's work proves to be the comical perspective because the absurdity of our world forces the individual ultimately to laugh about it all insofar as we can no longer make sense out of our existence.

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