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Rick, Morty, and Absurdism: The Millennial Allure of Dark Humor

by Kim Koltun

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the millennial generation's appeal to dark and absurdist forms of humor, using the show Rick and Morty as a primary example. I first establish my definition of Absurdism—based on Nagel and Camus—and how Rick and Morty qualifies as an Absurdist work. I then go on to outline the popularity of the show among millennial audiences and explore its allure. There are three important sociological contexts to this explanation: the contrast between upbringing and reality, expedited modernity, and rapidly changing information structures. These set the stage for a distinctive style of humor that materialized as a means of comprehending the absurdities of life. I finish the paper with a section on how Nagel and Camus posit we respond to absurdity and how Rick and Morty and its millennial viewers reflect Absurdist philosophy.

“If sub specie aeternitatis there is no reason to believe that anything matters, then that doesn't matter either, and we can approach our absurd lives with irony instead of heroism or despair”—Thomas Nagel¹

“Nobody exists on purpose, nobody belongs anywhere, everybody's going to die. Come watch TV”—Morty Smith²

Humor serves as a significant tool to navigate the complexities, trends, and anxieties of American society. Judith Y. Lee, the editor of *Studies in American Humor*, touches on the relevance of looking at humor through an

1 Thomas Nagel, “The Absurd,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 68, no. 20 (1971): 727.

2 *Rick and Morty*, Season 1, episode 8, “Rixty Minutes,” directed by Bryan Newton and Pete Michels, aired 17 March 2014 on Adult Swim, Hulu.

academic lens: “Americans’ addiction to humor and scholars’ interest have not abated in the 21st century. Indeed, the rise of cable television and the Internet, the global reach of American media, and the role of humor in contemporary politics and economics...make humor as central as ever to the study of American life.”³ The Internet is now a huge part of American life, particularly within the millennial generation. According to a Pew Research Center 2013 study, social media usage for people aged 18 to 29 increased by 1,000 percent in the previous eight years.⁴ Unique approaches to humor have emerged as a large segment of this millennial media engagement, particularly with respect to absurdist, ironic, and dark brands of comedy.⁵ The generational enchantment with deprecating humor and the entertainment that reproduces it may serve as a window into the significant sociohistorical trends affecting millennials.

One television show that embodies this millennial form of dark humor and is largely impactful across digital platforms is *Rick and Morty*, an Adult Swim animated comedy. Justin Roiland and Dan Harmon’s *Rick and Morty*, once just the center of a cult following, has become a powerhouse television franchise in recent years. The Internet Movie Database (IMDB) ranked it as the 7th best show of all time as of 2017.⁶ Much of the show’s popularity can be attributed to its millennial viewers. One million people between the

3 Judith Y. Lee, “Enter Laughing: American Humor *Studies in the Spirit of Our Times*,” *Studies in American Humor*, new series 3, no. 28 (2013): 3.

4 Maeve Duggan and Aaron Smith, “Social Media Update 2013,” *Pew Research Center*, (2013) accessed 31 October, 2017. <http://www.pewinternet.org/2013/12/30/social-media-update-2013/#>.

5 Elizabeth Bruenig, “Why is millennial humor so weird?” *The Washington Post*, 11 August 2017, accessed 5 December 2017 at https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/why-is-millennial-humor-so-weird/2017/08/11/64af9cae-7dd5-11e7-83c7-5bd5460f0d7e_story.html?utm_term=.fe478557ee7f.

6 IMDB. “Top Rated TV Shows.” (2017) Accessed 31 October, 2017. <http://www.imdb.com/chart/toptv/>.

ages of 18 and 49 watched the season three premiere⁷ and many influential online media outlets have referred to it as “Millennials’ Favorite TV show”⁸ and the “No. 1 TV Comedy Among Millennials.”⁹ The purpose of my research is to examine the philosophical significance of absurdist humor in *Rick and Morty* and to explore why this brand of humor resonates so deeply within the millennial cohort.

Rick and Morty is an adult animated show about the adventures of Rick—a twisted, cynical, genius scientist—and Morty—his naïve and insecure grandson. It explores, and often trivializes, traditional science fiction tropes using clever and dark humor, with the fundamental example being the perverse spin on *Back to the Future*’s Doc and Marty character dynamic. However, science fiction is not the only topic that this show trivializes. *Rick and Morty* is full of rich references to existential and absurdist philosophy, which are consistently used to satirize and belittle traditional social constructs such as the institutions of marriage, family, religion, and government.

There is much debate surrounding Absurdism, which began as a branch of existentialism. For the purpose of this paper, I will primarily focus on the interpretations of Albert Camus and Thomas Nagel. Camus, within the context of World War II and it’s pointless trauma, became the first philosopher to conceptualize absurdity in the particular meaning it has for us today.¹⁰

7 Lexi Kennell. “Rick and Morty’ fan base flourishes as millennials continue to embrace dark humor.” *The Pitt News*. September 4, 2017. Accessed October 23, 2017. <https://pittnews.com/article/121801/arts-and-entertainment/rick-and-morty-fan-base-flourishes-as-millennials-continue-to-embrace-dark-humor/>.

8 Tom Huddleston Jr. “Why Adult Swim’s ‘Rick and Morty’ Is Millennials’ favorite TV Show.” *Fortune* (2017) Accessed 31 October 2017. <http://fortune.com/2017/09/30/why-adult-swims-rick-and-morty-is-millennials-favorite-tv-show/>.

9 Josef Adalian. “*Rick and Morty* Is Now the No. 1 TV Comedy Among Millennials.” *Vulture*. (2017) Accessed 31 October 2017. <http://www.vulture.com/2017/10/rick-and-morty-is-now-the-no-1-tv-comedy-among-millennials.html>.

10 David Sherman. “The Absurd.” In *Camus*. Oxford, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008: 22.

Camus defines the absurd as the “divorce between the mind that desires and the world that disappoints.”¹¹ Nagel is a prominent American philosopher who explored Absurdism in the 1970s while trying to navigate the philosophical implications of modern science. Nagel describes the condition of absurdity as “the collision between the seriousness with which we take our lives and the perpetual possibility of regarding everything about which we are serious as arbitrary, or open to doubt.”¹² Camus and Nagel agree on the basic premise of Absurdism in most respects, in that nothing inherently matters and the search for meaning is futile. There is, however, divergence when it comes to how one should approach the absurdity that is life, which I explore at the end of the paper. *Rick and Morty* repeatedly mirrors these philosophical ideals through its use of situational and dialogue-based irony.

I argue that the explanation for *Rick and Morty*'s absurdist appeal to millennials transcends the sole purpose of entertainment. There are many socio-historical phenomena that can explain why millennials would be drawn to this escapist brand of comedy. Millennials have grown up in a world that promised them everything but neglected to deliver. According to the Pew Research Center study in 2014, millennials are the “first in the modern era to have higher levels of student loan debt, poverty and unemployment, and lower levels of wealth and personal income than their two immediate predecessor generations.”¹³ On top of this economic instability, millennials also experience institutional uncertainty at unprecedented levels.¹⁴ Millennials have exhibited lower involvement and trust in traditional

11 Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus, and Other Essays*, Translated by Justin O'Brien, New York: Vintage Books, 1991, Translation originally published by Alfred A. Knopf, 1955, published in France as *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* by Librairie Gallimard (1942): 17.

12 Thomas Nagel, “The Absurd,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 68, no. 20 (1971): 718.

13 Pew Research Center, “Millennials in Adulthood,” (2014) accessed 31 October 2017, <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2014/03/07/millennials-in-adulthood/>.

14 Ibid: Millennials have reached “at (or near) the highest levels of political and religious disaffiliation recorded in the quarter-century polling these topics”

institutions such as religion, marriage, and politics.¹⁵ Compound this with the chaotic and anxiety-inducing nature of the Information Era¹⁶ that they have grown up in, and one starts to see the negative psychological effects of it all, as much research has shown.¹⁷ The absurdist humor of *Rick and Morty* provides the millennial generation with a much-needed trivialization of all the stressful factors in their lives. Instead of trying endlessly to find meaning in it all, *Rick and Morty's* philosophy encourages disenchanting youth to respond to that which they cannot change with irony, laughter, and a sense of absurdity.

Rick and Morty as an Absurd Work

Devoid of meaning

The pointlessness of the search for meaning in the context of a silent, apathetic universe is inherent to Absurdist philosophy and the works influenced by it. Camus emphasizes two certainties of the human condition, the “appetite for the absolute and for unity and the impossibility of reducing this world to a rational and reasonable principle,” both of which are irreconcilable.¹⁸ He goes on to discuss philosophical temptations that people find on their mental path to the absurd: “History is not lacking in either religions or prophets, even without gods. [Man] is asked to leap. All he

15 Ibid.

16 Characterized by rapid technological changes starting in the 1990s. Also known as Computer Age or Digital Age. Ushistory.org, “Living in the Information Age,” *US History Online Textbook*, Accessed 15 February 2018, <http://www.ushistory.org/us/60d.asp>.

17 Darcy Gruttadaro and Dana Crudo. “College Students Speak: A Survey Report on Mental Health.” *NAMI*. (2012) Accessed 31 October 2017. https://www.nami.org/About-NAMI/Publications-Reports/Survey-Reports/College-Students-Speak_A-Survey-Report-on-Mental-H.pdf; American College Health Association. “American College Health Association-National College Health Assessment II.” (2014) Accessed 31 October 2017. http://www.acha-ncha.org/docs/ACHA-NCHA-II_ReferenceGroup_ExecutiveSummary_Spring2014.pdf.

18 Albert Camus: 6.

can reply is that he doesn't fully understand."¹⁹ The condition of absurdity is omnipresent regardless of theological affiliation; however, it is all the more obvious when that leap of faith is made. *Rick and Morty* capitalizes on the incongruity of these religious gambles using satire, one of the best examples being the episode "Get Schwifty." In this episode, an alien entity visits earth in the form of a huge head in the sky. The arrival of the head interferes with Earth's gravity, causing global environmental disasters. The town is disheveled and as the local Pastor is attempting to retain faith, the principal of the high school interjects:

Hi, Principal Vagina. The name's real, possibly Scandinavian. I'm just gonna come out and make this pitch. The old gods are dead. Fuck all previous existing religions. All hail the one true god, the giant head in the sky. [Pastor Bob tries to object] Bob, Bob, I get it. But unless this [holding up cross necklace] can beat that [pointing to the giant head in the sky]. What have you done for me lately? So if you wanna excuse me, I'm going out on the sidewalk and dropping my knees and pledging my eternal soul to the thing that literally controls the weather!²⁰

The town ends up forming the cult of Headism with rules based on loose interpretations of verbal and nonverbal gestures made by the head. Meanwhile, Rick recognizes what is actually happening. The truth of the head is perhaps the most absurd part of this all: it is an intergalactic reality television show called *Planet Music* in which planets compete to make the catchiest song, and planets that are disqualified get disintegrated. Rick and Morty end up saving the day with the song "Get Schwifty," instigating Headism's sheepish disbanding.²¹ "Get Schwifty" highlights the illogical ambiguity of faith and the uncertain interpretations that accompany it. As Camus puts

19 Albert Camus: 18.

20 *Rick and Morty*, Season 2, episode 5, "Get Schwifty," directed by Wes Archer and Pete Michels, aired 23 August 2015 on Adult Swim, Hulu.

21 *Ibid.*

it, the evidence of the absurd exists within “[our] nostalgia for unity, this fragmented universe and the contradiction that binds them together.”²² *Rick and Morty’s* use of cosmic horror, which challenges the notion that humanity is at the center of the cosmos, allows the show to play with themes of God or the universe as a looming, anonymous presence that is indifferent towards us—a central basis of Absurdism. Dan Harmon, a co-creator of the show, comments on this theme: “That is a fun thing for me, the idea that we have gods, we search for meaning, and we think of that as the highest thought we can have...Like [American mythologist Joseph] Campbell calls God an impersonal cosmic force, that’s the most terrifying thing about it, it doesn’t give a fuck about you.”²³

Trivializing What Matters Most

In the face of this universal deafening silence, many people attempt to escape individual existential concerns by joining a larger cause—such as religion, work, or government—or placing faith in a traditional value—like love or family. Nagel does not exclude these larger purposes in his Absurdist critique:

One is supposed to behold and partake of the glory of God, for example, in a way in which chickens do not share in the glory of coq au vin. The same is true of service to a state, a movement, or a revolution. People can come to feel, when they are part of something bigger, that it is part of them too. They worry less about what is peculiar to themselves, but identify enough with the larger enterprise to find their role in it fulfilling. However, any such larger purpose can be put in doubt in the same way that the aims of an individual life can be, and for the same reasons.²⁴

22 Albert Camus: 17.

23 Adult Swim, “The Search For Meaning | Rick and Morty | Adult Swim,” video, 3:06, 23 June 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=de2grEPn7rg>. (Interview with co-creator Dan Harmon).

24 Thomas Nagel: 721.

Higher establishments and the traditions accompanying them are vulnerable to the same criticisms of individuals in an absurd world. When Morty asks Rick for help with the science-fair, Jerry (Rick's son-in-law) objects with a twinge of insecurity, "Well, I mean, traditionally science-fairs are a father-son thing." This prompts Rick to retort, "Well, scientifically, traditions are an idiot thing."²⁵ Traditions are comforting for what Absurdist see as philosophically weak-minded people. Rick, and the show in general, make it a point to deconstruct the conventional values that allow most people to sleep at night. In the pilot, Rick expresses his doubts about the institution of education to his son-in-law:

I'll tell you how I feel about school, Jerry. It's a waste of time. Bunch of people runnin' around bumpin' into each other, got a guy up front says "2 + 2," and the people in the back say, "4." Then the bell rings and they give you a carton of milk and a piece of paper that says you can go take a dump or somethin'. I mean, it's not a place for smart people, Jerry. I know that's not a popular opinion, but that's my two cents on the issue.²⁶

The education system is a fundamental element to the social construction of our society. While education provides the youth—among others—with a higher purpose, both Absurdist philosophy and Rick reject the legitimate presence of one. Since its conception, the educational establishment has functioned as a means of indoctrinating and reproducing the presence of authority. Sociologist Phillip Jackson identified this phenomenon as the *hidden curriculum*, "that covert pattern of socialization which prepares students to function in the existing workplace and in other social/political

25 *Rick and Morty*, Season 1, episode 9, "Something Ricked This Way Comes," directed by John Rice and Pete Michels, aired 24 March 2014 on Adult Swim, Hulu.

26 *Rick and Morty*, Season 1, episode 1, "Pilot," directed by Justin Roiland, aired 2 December 2013 on Adult Swim, Hulu

spheres.”²⁷ In addition to the explicit content within the education curriculum, there is an overarching narrative that streamlines students into society by legitimizing “limited and partial standards of knowing as unquestioned truths,” such as the status quo power structure, capitalist economy, and U.S. political system.²⁸ From this standpoint, the show’s indictment of the education system reaches much further into society’s framework.

Rick and Morty refuses to accept any of these deep-rooted bodies of power. The episode “Close Rick-counters of the Rick Kind,” introduces the Council of Ricks, a governing body of Ricks from alternate dimensions. When they bring in the original Rick, accusing him of crimes against the council, he yells to them: “I’m the Rick, and so were the rest of you before you formed this stupid alliance. You wanted to be safe from the government, so you became a stupid government. That makes every Rick here less Rick than me.”²⁹ Rick holds disdain for any institution, even one consisting completely of infinite versions of himself.

On another level, there is the institution of marriage and the belief in love, both of which are deeply-embedded values that operate as substitutes for purpose. Rick holds nothing sacred:

Listen Morty, I hate to break it to you, but what people call “love” is just a chemical reaction that compels animals to breed. It hits hard, Morty, then it slowly fades, leaving you stranded in a failing marriage. I did it. Your parents are gonna do it. Break the cycle, Morty. Rise above. Focus on science.³⁰

27 Henry A. Giroux and Anthony N. Penna, “Social Education in the Classroom: The Dynamic of the Hidden Curriculum,” *Theory and Research in Social Education*, 7 (1), 1979: iii.

28 Ibid, 22.

29 *Rick and Morty*, Season 1, episode 10, “Close Rick-counters of the Rick Kind,” directed by Stephen Sandoval, aired 7 April 2014 on Adult Swim, Hulu.

30 *Rick and Morty*, Season 1, episode 9, “Rick Potion #9,” directed by Stephen Sandoval, aired 27 January 2014 on Adult Swim, Hulu.

This quote may seem hopeless, and that's because it is. Hope is philosophical suicide to Camus, who asserts that people who make leaps of faith "deify what crushes them and find reason to hope in what impoverishes them."³¹ This means that holding faith in any higher purpose that materialized under the shadow that the death of God³² left on our society would go against Absurdist philosophy. Rick knows this and subscribes to it—well, subscribes to it loosely with little care for rhyme or reason, as any true Absurdist would. In one episode Jerry is jealous of his wife Beth's coworker, so Rick makes a sexual joke about it to get under his skin. Summer yells out, "Grandpa, so gross! You're talking about my mom." Rick comes back, "Well, she's my daughter, Summer. I outrank you—or family means nothing, in which case don't play that card."³³ No matter the argumentative avenue Rick takes as he fumbles around cultural tenets, one philosophy always holds true: nothing matters either way.

Pull the Rug Right Out From Under You

To drive home the Absurdist point that searching for meaning is pointless, *Rick and Morty* constantly lures in the audience by flirting with the possibility of purpose, just to pull the rug right out from under them. Camus makes this human tendency clear: "But what is absurd is the confrontation of this irrational and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart. The absurd depends as much on man as on the world...This is all I can discern clearly in this measureless universe where my adventure takes place."³⁴ And within that context is where Rick and Morty's adventures just begin. Starting in the pilot episode, Rick takes Morty to another

31 Albert Camus: 11.

32 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*: "The Parable of the Madman (1882, 1887). 125; Walter Kaufmann ed. (New York: Vintage, 1964): 181-2. "'Whither is God? ...I will tell you. *We have killed him* -- you and I. All of us are his murderers...What after all are these churches now if they are not the tombs and sepulchers of God?"

33 *Rick and Morty*, Season 1, episode 9, "Rick Potion #9," directed by Stephen Sandoval, aired 27 January 2014 on Adult Swim, Hulu.

34 Albert Camus: 7.

dimension on a mission for invaluable space seeds. When Morty becomes apprehensive, expressing, “Oh man, Rick. I’m looking around this place, and I’m starting to work up some anxiety about this whole thing.” Rick responds with a compelling and touching speech:

All right, all right, calm down. Listen to me, Morty. I know that new situations can be intimidating. You’re looking around, and it’s all scary and different, but, you know, m-meeting them head on, charging right into them like a bull, that’s how we grow as people. I’m no stranger to scary situations. I deal with them all the time. Now, if you stick with me, Morty, we’re gonna be-

And just then, a giant alien monster appears behind them and Rick screams, “HOLY CRAP, MORTY RUN!!!” As they take off in fear, Rick juxtaposes his previous pep talk, “I’ve never seen that thing before in my life. I don’t even know what the hell it is! We got to get out of here, Morty! It’s gonna kill us! We’re gonna die! We’re gonna die Morty!” And then the scene cuts to black.³⁵ The show allows its viewers to get sentimental with a touching speech from an empathetic grandpa to grandson, just to expose the insincerity immediately thereafter. This instance lays the foundation for absurdities that later peak within the larger narrative of the series.

The broader storyline of the show mirrors this dismissal of purpose, often allowing the audience to impose their own meaning onto the events, just to make the absence of it that much more obvious. The season two finale, “The Wedding Squanchers,” shows Rick’s trademark cynicism shed away to emotional exposure when he gives a speech at his good friend Birdperson’s intergalactic wedding:

35 *Rick and Morty*, Season 1, episode 1, “Pilot,” directed by Justin Roiland, aired 2 December 2013 on Adult Swim, Hulu.

Listen, I'm not the nicest guy in the Universe because I'm the smartest. And being nice is something stupid people do to hedge their bets. Now, I haven't been exactly subtle about how little I trust marriage. I couldn't make it work, and I could turn a black hole into a sun, so at a certain point, you've got to ask yourself what are the odds this is legit and not just some big lie we're all telling ourselves because we're afraid to die alone? Because, you know, that's exactly how we all die ... alone. But ... but ... Here's the thing. Birdperson is my best friend, and if he loves Tammy, well, then I love Tammy, too. To friendship, to love, and to my greatest adventure yet ... opening myself up to others.³⁶

Following Rick's rare vulnerability, the bride Tammy gives a speech where she reveals herself to be an undercover agent with the intergalactic federation. Chaos then ensues: the intergalactic federation raids the wedding and Tammy kills Birdperson, forcing the Smith family to go into hiding outside earth.³⁷ The one time Rick decides to open up in the entire series, the universe punishes him for it. After this, the show no longer confines its general cynicism to Rick's philosophy, but also allows it to play out in its multiverse.³⁸ At the end of the finale, Rick turns himself in to the intergalactic federation, presumably sacrificing himself so that his family could return to normal(ish) lives on an Earth that had just been annexed by the intergalactic federation. This cliffhanger left its audience wondering if Rick actually acted altruistically and what that would mean for the message of the show. This sets the stage for *Rick and Morty* to reinforce itself as an absurdist work using an unlikely—albeit ridiculous—symbol: Szechuan sauce.

36 *Rick and Morty*, Season 2, episode 10, "The Wedding Squanchers," directed by Wes Archer, aired 4 October 2015 on Adult Swim, Hulu.

37 *Ibid.*

38 Analysis inspired by: Jared Bauer, "Rick and Morty: The Philosophy of Szechuan Sauce—Wisecrack Edition." *Wisecrack*, video, 9:56, 3 August 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LXsj_7n4aWY.

After an almost two-year recess, *Rick and Morty* returned with a reverse April fools prank by dropping the season three premiere, “The Rickshank Redemption,” early on April 1, 2017. From the title, one might assume that Rick finds a way out of prison, makes things right on Earth, and genuinely redeems himself as a noble hero. The first two assumptions are correct. The episode begins with an intergalactic federation agent interrogating Rick for scientific secrets inside of his mind. Under the threat of them melting his brain, Rick agrees to visit the memory of the day he invented the interdimensional travel, on the condition that he drives. He makes an unannounced detour to a McDonald’s drive-thru, where Rick first introduces the now infamous Szechuan sauce: “In 1998, they had this promotion for the Disney film ‘Mulan,’ where they—where they—they created a new sauce for the McNuggets called Szechuan sauce, and it’s delicious! And then they got rid of it, and now it’s gone. This is the only place we’re gonna be able to try it, is in my memory.” To which the agent responds, “Rick, you’re doing this while your brain is melting.” Rick then manipulates the agent by taking him to a fabricated origin story in which he invented interdimensional travel to avenge his dead wife. With the counterfeit formula, the agent eagerly reports back to his supervisors, while Rick takes control of the entire prison system and proceeds to escape space prison, topple the intergalactic federation, and return home to his family (prompting Jerry to move out) in godlike fashion. After Rick’s redemptive journey, thought to reveal an inherently meaningful character, he pulls the rug right out from under the audience once again in his now famous Szechuan sauce rant to Morty, where he exposes his grand gesture as a selfish ploy and reveals his true motivation,

I’ll go out and I’ll find some more of that Mulan Szechuan teriyaki dipping sauce, Morty. Because that’s what this is all about, Morty. That’s my one-armed man! I’m not driven by avenging my dead family, Morty! That was fake. I-I-I’m driven by finding that McNugget sauce. I want that Mulan McNugget sauce, Morty! That’s my series arc, Morty. If it takes nine sea-

sons, I want my McNugget dipping sauce, Szechuan sauce, Morty.³⁹

No, the meaning of life is not Szechuan sauce—as tangy and delicious as that would be. The point is that there is no point. When you subscribe to an absurdist philosophy in an absurd world, what’s the difference between motivation by family or motivation by a McDonald’s promotional dipping sauce from ’98? Of all the absurdities on the show, this is the ultimate one. And the audience loved it, pushing the nonsense into real life. There were riots over McDonald’s Szechuan sauce, even prompting an in-depth *New York Times* article on the phenomenon.⁴⁰ Despite the apparent ridiculousness of those riots, there is much more significance to this than a quirky hype.

The Millennial Mindset

Who Are They and Why Do They Like Szechuan Satire so Much?

Rick and Morty has become immensely popular in recent years and now enjoys cult status thanks to its dedicated fan base. Much like Szechuan sauce is to Rick, the show’s “one-armed man” driving this hype would appear to be the millennials. One online article framed this surge in engagement: “As it turns out, *Rick and Morty* has basically conquered pop culture in any way that you could measure for a millennial audience.”⁴¹ Internet media outlets featured headlines such as “Why Adult Swim’s ‘Rick and Morty’ is

39 *Rick and Morty*, Season 3, episode 1, “The Rickshank Redemption,” directed by Wes Archer and Juan J. Meza-Leon, aired 1 April 2017 on Adult Swim, adultswim.com.

40 Christina Caron, “Rick and Morty’ Fans Wanted Their Sauce. McDonald’s Underestimated Just How Much,” *New York Times*, 8 October 2017, accessed 16 November 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/08/us/mcdonalds-szechuan-sauce.html?_r=0.

41 Jim Vorel, “Season 3 of *Rick and Morty* Was the #1 Rated Comedy on all of TV,” *Paste Magazine*, 4 October 2017, accessed 15 November 2017, <https://www.pastemagazine.com/articles/2017/10/season-3-of-rick-and-morty-was-the-1-rated-comedy.html>.

Millennials' Favorite TV Show"⁴² and "Rick and Morty is Now the No. 1 Comedy Among Millennials."⁴³ The numbers seem to support these claims: according to stats from Nielson, *Rick and Morty* earned the title of 2017's #1 comedy on all of TV for people aged 18-34.⁴⁴ These are the highest ratings in the network's history. Christina Miller, the president of Cartoon Network and Adult Swim is quoted as saying: "Rick and Morty is truly what a modern day hit looks like across multiple screens and multiple touch points. Dan and Justin have created a world, not just a show, and fans are completely engaged."⁴⁵ What is it about the millennial generation that makes them so receptive to the absurdist humor of *Rick and Morty*?

Millennials consist of American youth born between 1982 and 2000.⁴⁶ As of 2015, the US census estimated their size at 83.1 million people, representing over one quarter of the US population.⁴⁷ Scholars most popularly credit Neil Howe and William Strauss with coining the term 'millennials,' which they have used to associate with growing up in a cultural shift regarding par-

42 Tom Huddleston Jr., "Why Adult Swim's 'Rick and Morty' is Millennials' Favorite TV Show," *Fortune*, 1 October 2017, accessed 15 November 2017, <http://fortune.com/2017/09/30/why-adult-swims-rick-and-morty-is-millennials-favorite-tv-show/>.

43 Josef Adalian, "Rick and Morty Is Now the No. 1 TV Comedy Among Millennials," *Vulture*, 4 October 2017, accessed 15 November 2017, <http://www.vulture.com/2017/10/rick-and-morty-is-now-the-no-1-tv-comedy-among-millennials.html>.

44 Jim Vorel, "Season 3 of Rick and Morty Was the #1 Rated Comedy on all of TV," *Paste Magazine*, 4 October 2017, accessed 15 November 2017, <https://www.pastemagazine.com/articles/2017/10/season-3-of-rick-and-morty-was-the-1-rated-comedy.html>.

45 Denise Petski, "'Rick and Morty' Season 3 Sets Ratings Records For Adult Swim," *Deadline*, 4 October 2017, accessed 15 November 2017, <http://deadline.com/2017/10/rick-and-morty-season-3-ratings-records-key-demos-adult-swim-1202181773/>.

46 US Census Bureau, "Millennials Outnumber Baby Boomers and Are Far More Diverse," Census Bureau Reports, 15 June 2015, accessed 15 November 2017, <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2015/cb15-113.html>.

47 Ibid.

enting norms that favor cocooning and overprotection.⁴⁸ Many socio-historical factors contribute to the unique upbringing of this cohort—factors which have generated some equally unique results. I have narrowed down the explanation of millennial infatuation with *Rick and Morty* and absurdist humor to three important sociological contexts: the contrast between upbringing and reality, expedited modernity, and rapidly changing information structures. All of these set the stage for a distinctive style of humor that materialized as a means of comprehending the absurdities of life.

High Expectations vs. Realities of Modernization and Infobesity

The coddled upbringing of the millennials generally translates to high expectations, in stark contrast to reality. As mentioned above, the millennial generation came into the world as a parenting social experiment of sorts, with a strong emphasis on sheltering. The self-esteem movement had a large impact on this generation's perception of the world. Jean Twenge, a widely published psychologist who specializes in intergenerational studies, described an aspect of this mentality as the “you can be anything you want to be” culture.⁴⁹ One of her studies in 2002 showed that 80% of sophomores in high school expected to graduate from a four-year university, compared to just 59% in 1990, just twelve years before.⁵⁰ Those expectations didn't necessarily pan out for earlier millennials: “In 1999, teens predicted that they would be earning, on average, \$75,000 a year by the time they were 30. The average income of a 30-year-old that year? —\$27,000, or around a third of the teens' aspirations.”⁵¹ As indicated in the introduction, broader statistics reflect this generational let-down: according to the Pew Research Center in 2014, “millennials are the first in modern era to have higher levels of

48 Bruce Horowitz, “After Gen X, Millennials, what should next generation be?” *USA Today*, 4 May 2012, <http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/money/advertising/story/2012-05-03/naming-the-next-generation/54737518/1>.

49 Jean Twenge, *Generation Me* (New York: Free Press, 2006).

50 *Ibid.*, 78.

51 *Ibid.*, 79.

student loan debt, poverty and unemployment, and lower levels of wealth and personal income than their two immediate predecessor generations... had at the same stage of their life cycles.”⁵² Pew Research Center attributed these economic circumstances to impact from the Great Recession of 2008 and the long-term effects of globalization and technological change on the US workforce,⁵³ which leads to the next point: rapid modernization.

Millennials grew up in a time of rapid change like no generation had experienced before. Amy Johnson, in her honors thesis for Wellesley College on the millennial generation’s coming-of-age process, summed this idea up well:

While all living generations in the United States are influenced by the reality of the 21st century – a fully modernized society where technology is rapidly advancing, constant communication and connection is expected, and the individual is often prioritized over the community – Millennials have the distinction of coming of age during this era of uncertainty.⁵⁴

In this time of overwhelming modernization, millennials are known to distance themselves from traditional institutions. A 2014 Pew Research Center survey revealed that approximately three in ten millennials don’t affiliate with any religion and that half of them self-describe as politically independent—at (or near) the highest levels of political and religious disaffiliation since Pew Research began polling these topics twenty-five years ago.⁵⁵ They have also observed similar trends in millennials distancing themselves from the institution of marriage.⁵⁶ Modernization is just one of the many dizzying social forces

52 Pew Research Center, “Millennials in Adulthood,” (2014) accessed 31 October 2017, <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2014/03/07/millennials-in-adulthood/>.

53 Pew Research Center, “Millennials in Adulthood,” (2014)

54 Amy Johnson, “Adulthood is Hard: Anxiety and Insecurity in the Millennial Generation’s Coming of Age Process,” (Honors Thesis Collection, Wellesley College, 2017), 6.

55 Pew Research Center, “Millennials in Adulthood,” (2014)

56 Ibid.

characteristic of the twenty-first century. The rapidly growing nature of the information era has further intensified the impact of globalization.

It is difficult to picture within the context of today, but the first incidence of a documented concern with 'information overload' was in 1852 from the annual report of the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, which voiced concerns on the sheer quantity of information,

About twenty thousand volumes ... purporting to be additions to the sum of human knowledge, are published annually; and unless this mass be properly arranged, and the means furnished by which its contents may be ascertained, literature and science will be overwhelmed by their own unwieldy bulk⁵⁷

A person from in 1852 could not even begin to truly fathom what was to come. Some fast facts to compare: more information was created in the past 30 years than in the previous 5,000 years; the number of documents on the Internet doubled from 400 million to 800 million between 1998 and 2000; and, allowing 30 minutes per document, it would take over 20,000 years to read the entire internet.⁵⁸ However, quantity is not the only issue; it is also the diversity of media that contributes to contemporary 'information overload.' Information overload is such a widespread phenomenon in our society, that there are multiple concepts for it, such as information pathologies, infobesity, information avoidance, information anxiety, and library anxiety. One concept I find to be particularly relevant to millennials is *infobesity*, which is used to describe a situation of "information overload, particularly if caused by a diet of information, akin to feasting on fast food."⁵⁹ The information is there and the millennials are definitely consuming it. The Pew

57 David Bawden and Lyn Robinson, "The dark side of information," *Journal of Information Science* 35, no. 2 (2009): 183.

58 *Ibid.*, 184.

59 *Ibid.*, 185.

Research Center referred to millennials as “digital natives,” who are naturally the most avid users of online platforms.⁶⁰ According to a different Pew Research Center study in 2013, social media involvement for people aged 18-29 increased by 1,000 percent in the past eight years.⁶¹ Also in 2013, *The Wall Street Journal* found that, on average, millennials spend 3 hours and 12 minutes everyday engaging with social media.⁶² And, according to Experion Simmons, up to 98 percent of college students are on social media.⁶³ This digital engagement has a dark side, as Johnson puts it:

In the added complexity of the 21st century, individuals must be self-aware and engage with others both in-person and online, are constantly surrounded by excessive stimuli (such as emails, text messages, news reports, and political articles), and are presented with numerous opportunities to self-reflect through social media.... today’s society requires an ability to create and control one’s image both online and in-person.⁶⁴

IPhones, a fundamental part of the millennial identity, serve as an omnipresent reminder of the ever-intensifying mass of information that comes with postmodern society.

Disenchanted Youth: The Sadly Honest Cliché

Overly optimistic (though well-intended) parenting practices intersect with a pessimistic economy, modernization, and a rapidly changing information media environment, leading to anxiety, isolation, and depression. Mental

60 Pew Research Center, “Millennials in Adulthood,” (2014)

61 Lauren Heck, “A generation on edge: A look at millennials and mental health,” Vox, (2015), accessed 15 November 2017, http://www.voxmagazine.com/news/features/a-generation-on-edge-a-look-at-millennials-and-mental/article_533c1384-fe5b-5321-84ae-8070ec158f17.html.

62 Lauren Heck, “A generation on edge: A look at millennials and mental health,”

63 Ibid.

64 Amy Johnson: 11.

health issues are particularly potent in modern college students, all of whom are members of the millennial cohort. Judith Green, director of the Center for Health and Campus Services at Ramapo College, stated, “This generation has grown up with instant access via the internet to everything. This has led to challenges with frustration tolerance and delaying gratification,”⁶⁵ From this, millennials have developed a tendency to hold onto negative emotions, which leads to self-harming behaviors.⁶⁶ A Center of Collegiate Mental Health study used data from 136 institutions in 2017 to find that, of all the students who had sought help, 26% admitted to intentionally hurting themselves and 33.2% had considered suicide—both numbers being higher than those in previous years.⁶⁷ The cross-generational trends show the distinctiveness of this phenomenon: for Americans born before 1915, only 1% to 2% reported a major depressive episode in their lifetimes. As of 2006, that number was estimated between 15 and 20%, with some studies approximating the number closer to 50%.⁶⁸ According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness, more than 5 million college students struggle with mental health, with rates of anxiety and depression in particular skyrocketing in what many call a “crisis of mental health on college campuses.”⁶⁹ It would be hard to argue against the assertion that millennials are disenchanting, which brings up the philosophical dilemma that is how to respond to the absurdities of life.

65 Susan D. James, “Mental Health Problems Rising Among College Students,” *NBC News*, 28 June 2017, accessed 4 December 2017 at <https://www.nbcnews.com/feature/college-game-plan/mental-health-problems-rising-among-college-students-n777286>.

66 *Ibid.*

67 Ben Locke and Ashley Stauffer, “2016 Annual Report,” *Center for Collegiate Mental Health (CCMH)*, Penn State, (2017), accessed 4 December 2017 at https://sites.psu.edu/ccmh/files/2017/01/2016-Annual-Report-FINAL_2016_01_09-1gc2hj6.pdf.

68 Jean Twenge, *Generation Me* (New York: Free Press, 2006), 105.

69 Dana Crudo and Darcy Gruttadaro, “College Students Speak: A Survey Report on Mental Health,” *NAMI*, (2012), accessed 15 November 2017, https://www.nami.org/About-NAMI/Publications-Reports/Survey-Reports/College-Students-Speak_A-Survey-Report-on-Mental-H.pdf.

Responding to Absurdity

On one of Rick and Morty's adventures, they essentially destroy the entire world. Rick finds a solution that would take things back to normal, "relatively speaking." When Rick and Morty transport to this "solution," Rick responds to Morty's evident panic,

Shut up and listen to me! It's fine. Everything is fine. There's an infinite number of realities, Morty, and in a few dozen of those, I got lucky and turned everything back to normal. I just had to find one of those realities in which we also happen to both die around this time. Now we can just slip into the place of our dead selves in this reality and everything will be fine. We're not skipping a beat, Morty. Now, help me with these bodies.

Morty then asks, shaking, "What about the reality we left behind?" Rick, insightful as ever, alleviates his grandson's anxieties: "What about the reality where Hitler cured cancer, Morty? The answer is don't think about it."⁷⁰ Don't think about it. If the absurdity of life is indeed essential and inescapable, as Camus⁷¹ and Nagel⁷² suggest, what good would incessantly thinking about it do? Overthinking would just add more questions to a cosmically indifferent world. Morty's character progression towards Absurdist recognition and unconcern becomes evident two episodes later, when the parents unintentionally reveal to Summer that she was a regretted prom night accident who thwarted their life dreams. Summer storms upstairs threatening to run away, and Morty follows. The dialogue starts when Morty asks if he can show her something:

70 *Rick and Morty*, Season 1, episode 9, "Rick Potion #9," directed by Stephen Sandoval, aired 27 January 2014 on Adult Swim, Hulu.

71 Albert Camus: 11. "I judge the notion of the absurd to be essential and consider that it can stand as the first of my truths."

72 Thomas Nagel: 718. "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."

Summer: Morty, no offense, but a drawing of me you made when you were 8 isn't gonna make me feel like less of an accident.

Morty: That, out there. That's my grave. [pointing outside the window to the backyard]...On one of our adventures, Rick and I basically destroyed the whole world. So we bailed on that reality, and we came to this one. Because in this one, the world wasn't destroyed. And in this one, we were dead. So we came here, a-a-and we buried ourselves, and we took their place. And every morning, Summer, I eat breakfast, 20 yards away from my own rotting corpse.

Summer: So you're not my brother?

Morty: I'm better than your brother. I'm a version of your brother you can trust when he says, "Don't run." Nobody exists on purpose, nobody belongs anywhere, everybody's gonna die. Come watch TV.

Come watch TV. Don't think about it. Morty adopted Rick's tactful indifference toward the overarching absurdities and relatively petty anxieties of life. Summer directly embraces this attitude later in the episode, too. Jerry asks Summer and Morty which parent they would pick if he and Beth were to split, to which Summer responds, "Doesn't matter." Morty and Summer high five and go back to watching TV.⁷³

The acceptance of absurdity is central to both Camus and Nagel, though they disagree on what comes next. While Camus maintains an alluring combination of scorn and optimism,⁷⁴ Nagel forges a path for the interpretation of Absurdist comedy as a coping mechanism:

73 *Rick and Morty*, Season 1, episode 8, "Rixty Minutes," directed by Bryan Newton and Pete Michels, aired 17 March 2014 on Adult Swim, Hulu.

74 Albert Camus: 23. "There is no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn."

It need not be a matter for agony unless we make it so. Nor need it evoke a defiant contempt of a fate that allows us to feel brave or proud. Such dramatics, even if carried on in private, betray a failure to appreciate the cosmic unimportance of the situation. If sub specie aeternitatis there is no reason to believe that anything matters, then that doesn't matter either, and we can approach our absurd lives with irony instead of heroism or despair.⁷⁵

Rick and Morty embraces the cosmic unimportance of any given situation and utilizes comedic irony anytime the show's mood swings too close to heroism or despair. While racing against time for their lives, Rick yells to Morty, "Quick, Morty, you've got to turn into a car...A long time ago, I implanted you with a subdermal chip that could call upon dormant nanobots in your bloodstream to restructure your anatomy and turn you into a car. Concentrate, Morty. Concentrate and turn into a car, Morty." Just as the screen dramatically pans in on Morty concentrating, Rick cuts in, "Never mind. Here's a taxi. Get in. It's fine."⁷⁶ Although most of the analysis in this paper has focused on the more serious, societal aspects of absurdity, the true beauty of *Rick and Morty* lies in its subtle ironies, of which there are plenty. While this brand of humor comes off as irrelevant and outright dumb to many, the genuine impact of the show's philosophy has a genuine impact on its viewers. Fans of the show and members of the millennial cohort express their feelings online:

From Veronica Faison on The Odyssey:

It sounds cruel and cold, but we've reached the point where we hear bad things happening so often that we are unable to mourn things like we should. Instead of dealing with tragedy head-on, we exploit its

75 Thomas Nagel: 727.

76 *Rick and Morty*, Season 2, episode 6, "The Ricks Must Be Crazy," directed by Dominic Polcino, aired 30 August 2015 on Adult Swim, Hulu.

irony...That's the way we cope with problems. We laugh. We laugh to keep from crying."⁷⁷

From Kelly Benning on Comicverse:

Like the post-WWI world of the Dadas (though obviously less violent), the political world doesn't make a whole lot of sense anymore and the logic and reasoning of the past doesn't seem to apply...Absurdism provided this outlet because it makes the real-life absurdity feel a little more bearable... Millennials identify with absurdist humor because, while teetering on the line towards escapism, the humor does offer a direct criticism of the current state of the world.⁷⁸

From Sarah Gibb on Medium:

Not quite as angry as Nietzsche but not quite as hopeful as Camus, we experience the same purposelessness that has plagued everyone who has ever lived, but instead of fighting it with intense psychological insight or meditative reasoning we turn towards memes, Netflix, and a variety of other distractions. Comedy is the unsung hero of our age, turning shitty things into shitty jokes, and making everything terrible on the news a little more stomachable. It's from this needed juxtaposition of humor and harsh reality that Adult Swim's hit show, Rick and Morty, was born.⁷⁹

And, lastly, from Christian Zeitler on Study Break:

[The show's message is] a call to ride out the absurd waves of chaos that

77 Veronica Faison, "Dark Humor: A Millennial Coping Measure," *Odyssey*, (2016), accessed 15 November 2017, <https://www.theodysseyonline.com/we-laugh-to-keep-from-crying>.

78 Kelly Benning, "Absurdism and Millennials: A Love Affair," *Comicverse*, (2017), accessed 15 November 2017, <https://comicsverse.com/absurdism-millennial-love-affair/>.

79 Sarah Gibb, "Absurdism, Antimatter, and the Philosophy behind Rick and Morty," *Medium*, 9 June 2017, accessed 15 November 2017, <https://medium.com/@sgibb18/absurdism-antimatter-and-the-philosophy-behind-rick-and-morty-ab16f3bc1a19>.

constitute life by finding things you like, things that entertain you or people that you love. It is a sentiment that finds itself right at home with today's youth and with internet culture in general. Thus, the show has become an anthem for disillusioned young people everywhere.⁸⁰

All of these opinions vaguely mirror the past calls of Absurdism, moments in history when people feel displaced or out of control often produce absurdist expressions, such as Dadaism in response to WWI, or absurdist philosophy like Camus in the wake of WWII, both of which are historical peaks of unforgiving chaos on earth. Philosopher David Sherman wrote on the intellectual responses to historical moments like WWII: "The forms in which the malaise is expressed surely have changed, but the major breakdown in the enlightenment project's non-negotiables (capitalism, the democratic state, and, more generally, the reconciling power of reason itself) has left many with a sense of being adrift."⁸¹ The disorienting sociohistorical context in which millennials grew up reflects these previous institutional breakdowns and has yielded the same disenchanting reaction. The forms of expression have definitely changed, especially with new online platforms, and it is easy to argue that millennials have an overwhelming sense of being adrift. 21st century philosopher Bob Plant asserts this ironic response to absurdity: "[Not to suggest] that laughter provides a solution to – or convenient 'escape' from – the absurd...Acknowledging the appropriateness of laughter does, however, offer a way of living with the experience of absurdity if and when it arises. Perhaps that is as much as we can (seriously) hope for."⁸² Though millennials experience feelings of looming uncertainty, they get to feel and express it together through new forms of communication—for better or for worse. When asked if he agrees with Rick that nothing means anything, co-creator Dan Harmon responded:

80 Christian Zeitler, "Why Millennials Love Rick and Morty," *Study Break*, 12 June 2017, accessed 15 November 2017, <https://studybreaks.com/2017/06/12/rick-and-morty/>.

81 David Sherman, *Camus* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009): 22.

82 Bob Plant, "Absurdity, Incongruity and Laughter," *Philosophy* 84, no. 327 (2009): 134.

No I do not, because the knowledge that nothing matters, while accurate, gets you nowhere. The planet is dying, the sun is exploding, the universe is cooling, nothing's gonna matter, the further back you pull, the more that truth will endure. But, when you zoom in on earth, when you zoom into a family, when you zoom into a human brain and a childhood and an experience, you see all these things that matter. We have this fleeting chance to participate in an illusion called, 'I love my girlfriend' 'I love my dog.' How is that not better? Knowing the truth, which is that nothing matters, can actually save you in those moments. Once you get through that terrifying threshold of accepting that, then every place is the center of the universe and every moment is the most important moment and everything is the meaning of life.⁸³

Though Harmon doesn't identify with Rick's approach to absurdity at its core, he has created through Rick a powerful character and an absurd hero. Camus was the first to conceptualize the absurd hero in his essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Based on the Greek legend, the gods condemned Sisyphus to roll a boulder to the top of a mountain, only to have it fall back down each time, as punishment for disobeying them. To Camus, Sisyphus "is [the absurd hero], as much through his passions as through his torture. His scorn of the gods, his hatred of death, and his passion for life won him that unspeakable penalty in which the whole being is exerted toward accomplishing nothing."⁸⁴ Richard Boyd Hauck, author of *Cheerful Nihilism: Confidence and "The Absurd" in American Humorous Fiction*, explores the unique American take on absurd heroes: "The American absurdist postulates nihilism cheerfully and his cheerfulness automatically counters his nihilism. He knows that laughter is purely arbitrary. Were he to invent a Sisyphus, he would give him a colossal and cosmic sense of humor."⁸⁵

83 Adult Swim, "The Search For Meaning | Rick and Morty | Adult Swim," video, 3:06, 23 June 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=de2grEPn7rg>. (Interview with co-creator Dan Harmon).

84 Albert Camus: 23.

85 Richard Boyd Hauck, *A Cheerful Nihilism: Confidence and "The Absurd" in American Humorous Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1971).

Once one accepts the inescapable nature of absurdity, one must move on, as *Rick and Morty's* millennial audience aims to do. Streamlining with Harmon, even if life is pointless from an Absurdist perspective, that does not rob it of all other adjectives. Camus makes the point that “what counts is not the best living but the most living.”⁸⁶ This is how Rick lives his life. This fictional character’s real effect on a disenchanted generation sets an example that challenges the high expectations for life that they have grown up with. The show, through its trademark dark humor and absurdist perspective, has flourished in an environment of markedly low institutional involvement, chaotic information structures, mental health epidemics, and dizzying changes. Getting to the heart of its millennial appeal, *Rick and Morty* not only reflects the existential concerns of its viewers, but also provides a philosophical framework from which to interpret the disorder that is postmodern America.

86 Albert Camus: 21.

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