In The last lecture we talked about Freud’s concept of the death Drive as an element in narrative. Another –perhaps more controversial way that some people talk about this idea is not really about narrative, but that the death Drive seems to involve this deep-seated desire for self destruction and even destruction of the world. Way we’ve talked about it so far has been relatively optimistic, the idea that pain can be meaningful as long as it fits into a meaningful narrative, but as we move into the work of Friedrich Nietzsche start watching some other films like 2001 and elephant by Gus van Sandt, we’ll encounter the idea that maybe a work of art, a piece of music, a movie doesn’t have to make sense, doesn’t have to be meaningful at all, maybe the point of a work of art is not to transform pain into pleasure but just to express or even to take delight in meaninglessness itself. And so one other way to read the Freud’s idea of the death drive, which is perhaps less constructive or optimistic, is that there seems to be this strange desire that we have for self-destruction perhaps for its own sake. Now I should point out that Freud is explicit that this is not about suicidal tendencies – except in pathological cases – cases where the death Drive cannot be brought under control, but that it involves this deep-seated experience pain for its own sake – you know when I was a kid oh I don’t know maybe 10, 11,12 so I guess puberty age –I used to freak myself out

You know I would walk across the bridge and I would look down at the water below and think, you know I could throw myself off this bridge if I wanted to---and that idea really freaked me out, and it was kind of pleasurable I guess, but not because I really wanted to throw myself off the bridge, maybe there was just something about the fact that I had the power to throw myself off the bridge if I wanted to it seemed kind of exhilarating but also really really freaky. And so there seemed to be this connection between Power and freedom, this weird sort of attraction to death. And So these ideas of the connections between power and freedom desire and death I think are things that many of us have encountered in our lives, Music things that crop up again and again in vertigo

So we talked about this idea of obsessively returning to a source of trauma, and vertigo is very much oriented around this idea.

There seems to be an almost obsessive use of a certain motif in the film, the motif of a spiral – this motif stands in for the phenomenon of vertigo itself, a feeling of dizziness brought on by Scotty’s fear of heights, but we see and here spirals all over the place in the movie, there is the animated spiral and a title sequence the curl in Carlotta’s hair that is hair matched by the curl in Madeline’s hair the strange sort of cat and mouse Low speed car chase between Scotty and Madeline where they seemed to be driving in circles, but there also seems to be something cyclical about the narrative the way that there’s a strong sense of déjà vu throughout the film there are all sorts of symmetries repetitions images of narrative elements so that it feels a sense like the story moving in circles as well: so the symmetries including use of animation and the title sequence in the nightmare the wave Image of the following man Scotty’s nightmare is then repeated at the end of the movie Scotty rocks out onto the ledge of the belltower with his arms out assuming the pose of the falling man. The symmetries and repetitions, and narrative circles in the Movie are far too numerous to mention here but you can find plenty is YouTube videos and scholarly articles that hunt them out. In fact, the more one looks for spirals the more one finds them, so that you almost started to get the feeling that maybe you’re imagining Spirals, everywhere you look, and I think this is intentional there’s this obsessive preoccupation with spirals, it seems to be right on the verge of insanity or maybe well past the verge—and the something really interesting here about the way the film seems to be playing with the idea of organic unity---if you’re remembering a Beethoven symphony one of the things I said was that it’s considered to be so unified so organic because everything that happens in the symphony is based on a small seed of a motive – in the case of the ninth Symphony it was the interval of the fifth in the case of the fifth Symphony it’s dadadaduuuuuh. But when you listen to a Beethoven symphony with This Constant repetition of a motive like that there’s a very strong sense in which it seems almost obsessive or compulsive---monomaniacal----as if the entire world can be reduced to a single idea. And so it’s interesting the way that that sort of Unity or consistency in an organic artwork when you look at it from a slightly different perspective seems to exhibit the structure of the conspiracy theory, you know internal music sometimes the fifth is just a fifth, but in Beethoven’s ninth all of the fifths are connected related in this huge architectonic structure --- and so it sort of like the way conspiracy theorist sees connections where they may not actually exist---this seems to be something neurotic about the way a Beethoven symphony unifies every single, seemingly insignificant moment. And of course one of the things I said about the consistency between the part and the whole in a Beethoven symphony, is that it’s often taken to be a mark of rationality, that we can make sense of the part in terms of the big picture, the motive makes sense in its relationship to the whole plan of the symphony. But in Vertigo we have this situation where the logic of maximizing this kind of motivic unity, is put in a context where we can where we can see that reason in some sense becomes insanity.

Now there are many other spirals in the movie I haven’t mentioned yet for instance the opening music sounds kind of like a spiral PLAY IT

There’s also the music in the low speed car chase – which is based on that asymmetrical scale I talked about in the harmony lecture – and if you remember one of the things I said is that because all the notes equally close to their adjacent notes it doesn’t really sound like we arrive anywhere, but are just sort of floating, moving around in circles.

And of course music deals with spirals all the time – the fact that when I go up any scale, I start on the tonic and arrive on the octave, which in some sense is the place that I began.

Vertigo Theme | Love Theme

Now let’s talk about that weird scene where scotty is following mdleines car and it seems like they’re going in circles – there are a lot of really cool things about this scene one thing is the way the relations of power seem to be swapped back and forth car chase

Who’s in control?

But also the music seems to be oscillating between Love and Death

Two chords

Add in Tristan

Tristan – love

Tristan – death

Tristan – Cmajor / triumph – hints apt: c minor

Pyrrhic victory

The whole project is doomed to failure

Because scotty is missing some very important element in attempt to find love.

This brings us to Noel Carol’s article about the film. Carol asks if Vertigo is considered to be a great film, and yet the story is so far fetched, the suspense is undercut by the fact that Judy reveals everything in the letter she writes long before the end of the movie, if Hitchcock takes the steam out of all these things that make up a typical mystery, then what’s so great about the movie.

He uses this as an opportunity to talk about the way the film deals with the tension between two ways we think about love, which he calls the property view, and the history view of love. That we often think of love in terms of the properties of this sort of person we want to be with but that real love involves having a shared history with another person.

And I think Carroll is on to something here. You know there’s something very similar to the way online dating platforms allow you to specify the properties of an ideal partner – from physical characteristics to cultural background - down to the kinds of music you like, or whatever. As though love is just a matter of putting together a bunch of characteristics – the way Scotty tries to assemble a perfect partner out of Judy – but not a matter of having a shared history for better or worse of shared elation but also of meaningful pain, a shared history of meaningful successes and failures. On the canvas site there’s a short video from an interview with Slavoj Zizeck – the clown prince of media studies, although I think is sudden fame and celebrity has waned recently – but in any case Zizeck talks about how there’s something kind of sad about the current state of romantic love in the world today – he talks about it in terms of how before you fall in love with someone you might be going along, maybe checking all the boxes for material success – good education / good grades, check, good job, check – or maybe you go out partying with friends or have the occasional romantic fling – and then suddenly someone comes into your life that causes a complete rupture in your experience of the world – now this sort of rupture of shock is really disconcerting – it can be painful even, not just because of how insecure we might feel when someone or something comes into our lives and disrupts what we think we know about the world, disrupts the familiarity and regularity of our everyday lives, but also in the case of this kind of romantic experience we really desire to be with this other person. And just as we’ve seen with Freud and Aristotle that this sort of rupture, this meaningful pain in our lives is one thing that makes our lives worthwhile, just as we’ve seen with Schopenhauer and Wagner that desire, longing, suffering itself is a huge part of what it is to be alive – the sort of experience Zizeck is talking about here – is a hugely important part of the full experience of love.

Another way to put this is – if you remember what I said about how the point of a story or piece of music is not to find the most efficient way to get from point A to point B – but that a narrative has to have a certain magnitude – there’s something about how things like online dating seem to act as a way to find love without all the hassle of going through a shared history for better or worse. And he says it’s really interesting that in English and French we have the phrase to fall in love – the fall is that element in the narrative of our lives where pain is transformed into pleasure. And so in Vertigo , quite literally, Scotty doesn’t want to fall in love with Judy – he wants the love without the fall.

Another thing we might take from the Noell Carrol article involves the question about whether there’s something unethical in the way that Scotty is treating Judy. Scotty doesn’t seem too interested in Judy’s feelings or interests – for instance when he asks her to dye her hair blonde and she balks at his suggestion – he says “c’mon it can’t matter to you!” Judy seems expendable to Scotty – he is basically using her – perhaps to get sexual satisfaction, to get a sense of mastery or power over his own life, but he is not respecting her autonomy as a human being. Now this brings us back to Kant – you remember how I said that for kant ethics and aesthetic are deeply connected?

If love really consists in treating people as ends in themselves not just as means to our own self-interested ends

You can also see this in relation to Amazon warehouse employess, or corporate sweatshop factories 🡪 if the workers are used only as a means of acquiring wealth for the top 1% or whatever, without regard to their own value as human beings, Kant would say that they are being treated unethically

One of the things that makes sexual harassment and sexual assault so terrible is the way they reduce a full autonomous human being to an object – when we talk about objectifying women for instance, this is what we’re talking about – these forms of abuse reduce another person to an object but they also treat that person as a means to an end, not as ends in themselves 🡪 and in the case of abuse this means using the person to gratify an appetite for power, for sexual gratification, and so on. But to love another person is to treat that person not as a means to one of our ends, but as ends in themselves, as valuable on their own terms, as autonomous individuals 🡪

Now this raises the question, in contrast to what Wagner has to tell us about the transcendence of sexual love, the question arises about whether romantic or sexual love is even possible, even a coherent idea 🡪 For one thing, there always seems to be an element of objectification in sexual attraction – the fact for instance that physical appearance seems to matter so much – but also, if love is really about treating people as ends in themselves and respecting the value that every human has for their own sake – and if sexual love is possible then -- why should it seem so weird if say a 20-year old is only sexually attracted to 80 year-olds, or vice versa? This sort of tension is at the heart of movies like Harold and Maude, if you’ve ever seen that but I think most of us would probably think – yeah there’s something weird about that. But if love involves treating people as ends in themselves, and sexual love is a coherent idea, WHY should it be weird? I think Kant would say it’s weird because sexual or romantic love is NOT a coherent idea. That there’s an important distinction between sex and love – now this may all seem rather abstruse, but I think it’s really a very intuitive idea, and in fact we make this distinction all the time in our lives, in fact it’s a distinction that’s very important for us – when we talk about the difference between loving someone and being IN love with them. But if there’s a meaningful difference between love and being in love, what does this difference amount to? And I think what Kant would say – and this brings us back to the question – “what is REALLY real” – it brings us back to the idea that there is a distinction between the way the world really is in itself and how the world appears to us – I suppose What kant would say here is that in romantic or sexual love, being in love with someone, we are only paying attention to the way the other person appears to us, how they seem to us – in true love, we see through to the true nature of the other person as a valuable autonomous individual, who commands our respect.

[[defending romance: what about the question of specificity in romantic love (the feeling as Zizeck says of – oh my god I’ve been waiting my whole life for you?  One thing about love the idea that love involves seeing through to the other persons true nature their autonomy, is that kant thinks that autonomy, beacause of its relation to rationality, autonomy is universal, autonomy is something that everyone shares in. And if this is the case, then love based on recognition of autonomy must be general – a sort of love for all humanity, but in romantic love there’s an important element of specificity : I only want that specific person, and I want them to only want me.

And in fact this is the cause of much heartbreak in any romance. And so this Kantian notion of love seems to be missing out on something really important about romantic love, in fact it almost seems to treat romantic love like its pathological – and of course it should come as no surprise that kant , like numerous philosophers, was a life long bachelor. Now this idea of romantically desiring one unique person, and wanting them to uniquely desire you, plays out in an interesting way in Vertigo, for Scotty – it’s pathological he tries to force Judy to become his unique vision of love, and doesn’t really seem to care if she loves him back -- but for Judy she simply wants Scotty to love her as the unique individual that she is.]]

But another thing is that romantic love always seems to be basically self-interested or even narcissistic – the way that when we idolize a romantic love interest, the object of our romantic desires, we basically reflect our own values and ideas on to them, we remake them in our own image –

Now, I can’t speak for everybody, but just as an example from my own experience

You know you fall in love with someone, they’re great, they’re the best thing that ever happened to you, and then you find out that they’re a smoker – and this is something that you find deeply disappointing, but at least for me, it’s not that It’s disappointing because I care about the possible health effects for them, not just because of that – but rather it feels like a kind of betrayal – like there’s this rupture in my idea that they are just how I want them to be. I assumed they were just like me, – but this was just a narcissistic projection of myself on to this other person.

And so we have this question about whether there’s something inherently self-interested or narcissistic about romantic and sexual love – whether its really love at all.

Now this tension between self-interest and treating *people* as ends in themselves on an ethical level can give us a lot of insight into how we approach a movie like Vertigo, but not just by looking at the things the characters do to each other. Now you also might remember that Noel Carol starts his article by asking if Vertigo is considered to be a great film, and yet the story is so far fetched, the suspense is undercut by the fact that Judy reveals everything in the letter she writes long before the end of the movie, etc.

if Hitchcock takes the steam out of all the things that make up a good mystery, then what’s so great about this movie? Carol’s idea is that those things are just there so the movie can focus on the relationship between scotty and judy, but there’s another way to look at this.

In a lot of Hitchcock’s movies, he likes to use what he calls McGuffins – elements in the story that seem important to the characters (as hichcock says – maybe it’s the plans to the enemy base, maybe it’s the mystery of the trance that Madeleine seems to be in, it could be anything) it’s part of the content of the film that seems important to the characters

but that aren’t *really* important for the film. Now why would Hitchcock want to bother with all of this?

You might remember that when we looked at the differences between formalism and realism I said that formalism is more concerned with form (no big surprise there) and that realism is more concerned with content. Now one way to look at the idea of the McGuffin is that it operates at the level of content. That is, the McGuffin is just the story of the characters, their concerns, their plans and schemes the things they care about, but as Hitchcock says, these things aren’t really important.

And there’s a sense in which the ridiculousness of the content in vertigo – Gavin Elster’s implausible scheme, the sudden appearance of the nun, the lack of clarity about Scotty’s intentions, particularly in the second half of the film might make us ask what is the point – what is the purpose of this film? The insignificance of what happens in the movie (its content) might lead us to pay attention to other aspects of the film – its cinematography – its use of color (reds and greens and blues predominantly in the case of Vertigo), the use of camera angles, montage, and the way these formal elements create all function together to create an expressive mood, a sense of consistency (even obsessive consistency) and so on. And I think the question – if the story is just a McGuffin , if the story in the case of Vertigo doesn’t make sense, what’s the purpose of the film? This is the right question to ask – if you remember what I said in the lecture about autonomous art and aesthetic experience – I said that according to Kant, when we experience something aesthetically we experience it as without a particular purpose but with a sense of purposiveness – in the case of Vertigo this purposiveness is the way that the use of color, music, lighting, cinematography, etc. all function together to evoke the mood, to allow for an experience of the film in which we can delight in the beauty of these things for their own sake. But there’s not necessarily an external purpose to any of this – it’s not terribly useful for survival

So a McGuffin is really a situation where the content of a film (the things the characters care about) doesn’t really matter – what matters are the underlying formal and expressive relationships of the film – those aspects of a film that are beautiful or interesting for their own sake.

I think we can see this in terms of the question of self-interest as well: Normally when we watch a movie – say a typical Hollywood movie, Avengers or whatever, we pay attention to the content, we talk about movies in terms of what happens in them, what the characters say to each other, we get caught up in problems and struggles the characters face, we might identify or sympathize with certain characters that seem to remind us of ourselves or have similar life circumstances, similar motivations and so on. In some sense we go to the movies to learn about ourselves. Now one way of looking at this is that this really just amounts to a form of narcissism, self interest – just as kant thinks when we look at an apple and think to ourselves – I should eat that, or when we look at a tree and think finally some firewood, or see a nude and think hubba hubba! We’ve failed to experience it aesthetically, if we watch a movie only in terms of its titillating content – action sequences, sex scenes – the elements of content that fulfill our appetites for those things -- we have failed to experience it aesthetically. But this isn’t just about sex and violence – really whenever we watch a movie just for its content, when we identify with characters in order to get ideas about how we should or shouldn’t behave in similar situations, we’re using the movie to teach us how to manipulate the world and the people in it to our benefit. We might think if I make myself look or act like Tony Stark or Arthur Fleck / the Joker, or even if I say I’ll make sure *not* to do the things those people are doing – what we’re doing is using the film in order to get ideas about how to manipulate our situation. Strictly speaking whenever we only pay attention to a movie in terms of its content, we’re using it in a way that is self-interested, and so according to Kant we have not experienced it aesthetically.

And so, I think the McGuffin is Hitchcock’s way of talking about this – sometimes content is not important, and in fact if we pay too much attention to it we will miss out on the movie as a work of art.

Now this idea about content , about how other aspects about movie beyond what the movie is simply about, this idea is something we will see to an even higher degree when we watch 2001 – 2001 is a movie where beyond a certain point nothing “makes sense” and that’s kind of the point of the movie, that the information a movie presents – the story, the interactions of characters, the basic facts that need to communicated so that we can make sense of the story, is perhaps less important than what the movie makes us experience, not understand, but experience. This distinction, between understanding and experience, between explanation and expression is also an extremely important part of what Friedrich Nietzsche has to tell us about the world and our place in it.