[SLIDE 1]

As I mentioned in the last lecture, I mentioned that Stanley Kubrick, and Arthur c Clarke, the primary author of the book the movie is based on were influenced by some of Nietzsche’s ideas in the preparatory stages of the film. Many people have pointed out that the theme from 2001 – Also Sprach Zarathustra, is a clue to some of the resonances the movie has with the eponymous novel by Nietzsche. In particular they point out the way the film seems to involve the idea of transcendence of the human condition through technology. But as I will show in this lecture this is in reality a misreading of what Nietzsche has to say about our capacities as creative individuals to transcend the tragic senselessness of existence. But I think that Kubrick’s approach to the idea is not a simple matter of getting Nietzsche wrong – on the contrary, in 2001 Kubrick is really engaged in a sort of creative misreading of Nietzsche – a reading that is both vivid and epic but that also raises important questions about how we should understand what Nietzsche is telling us. I also mentioned that the Birth of Tragedy is in many ways a better fit for looking at how elements of the movie intersect with some of Nietzsche’s ideas about art and our experience of the world.

[SLIDE 2]

In particular, what Nietzsche calls the Dionysian and Apollonian elements in art – the elements of unified chaos and expressive power, on the one hand; and the elements of distinctness and clarity, order and rational understanding on the other. and beyond this, there are the questions of whether the point of an artwork is to be meaningful, and whether or not the world fundamentally makes sense at all.

So how does the movie employ the twin elements of the Dionysian and the Apollonian?

Stylistically the Movie is mysterious, inscrutable, leaving many viewers bewildered, or as Rock Hudson reportedly said after walking out of the premiere screening “what the hell did I just watch” At the same time its execution is extremely precise – there’s a sharpness to the editing, the extensive use of hard cuts, the clarity of visual matches – including quite possibly the most famous match cut in cinematic history – the cut from the bone to the satellite – the minimalist mise-en-scene – now we know where apple got the idea for the ipad – but also in terms of narrative; there’s a minimum of dialogue --  there is certainly not more information on screen than one needs to tell the story – if anything there’s not enough information.— This synthesis of clarity and opaqueness sort of reminds me of the panels that were sent out with the Pioneer spacecraft in the seventies –

[SLIDE 3]

that panel that served as an attempt to use symbols to communicate something about life on earth - in case extra terrestrials ever found it - but of course this is a very human-centered thing to do - hy should we think that our symbols are universal? What if the aliens had totally different perceptual faculties - maybe they see energy or something - or maybe their minds are totally different so that they don’t group the world into the same categories that we humans do.

In reality, the mixture of opaqueness and clarity in 2001 has, for me, the effect of discovering an alien spacecraft that uses really precise symbols to convey some meaning that we humans could never possibly understand.

[SLIDE 4]

Or consider the Monolith: is it unified like the Dionysian element - in a sense yes - its internal structure could not be more unified it’s just a single substance - is it apollonian? - is it individuated? Yes the way it stands out from its surroundings so drastically - what is this solid block doing in the middle of prehistoric Africa?

[SLIDE 5]

But also - it is cut so precisely - it is a precise rectangle - and the precision of the monolith’s edges matches the precision of the hard cut from the shot of the monolith with the eclipse in the background to the shot of the apes back in their habitat trying to survive amidst the bones of some predator’s kill.

But also, think about the music in this scene - does it combine the Dionysian and Apollonian impulses? The music, by György Ligeti is an example of a sound mass - I’m sure you can tell why: how easy is it to make out the individual melodies that everyone is singing? Nietzsche talks at length about the Dionysian element in Wagner’s music - but in reality Wagner’s music is relatively clear - there’s always memorable and singable melody in Wagner - but in Ligeti you get Dionysian chaos, Dionysian unity to the nth degree.

[pause for music]

But also consider whether the music here is diegetic or non-diegetic. When the scene starts we hear what sounds like flies buzzing in the background - but gradually this buzzing starts to sound like weird disembodied voices - moon-watcher the head ape, goes fittingly ape ***shit*** trying to wake up his tribe — cut to the monolith - now is the music emanating from the monolith? I mean it’s probably not like a big stereo system or something, but the music does seem to fit the monolith in a really uncanny way - almost as though it's being transmitted telepathically into the minds of the apes and into us as well.

[pause for music]

Now, In the book version of 2001, which was released at the same time as the movie, it’s revealed that the monolith is in fact an alien technology that can transmit a sort of higher awareness into the hominids that come into contact with it. In the case of the apes this involves a leap to a new evolutionary stage - for dave bowman it involves a leap into a higher, transcendent form of consciousness. And I think the film plays with this idea of telepathy and transcendent consciousness in a really interesting way - through audio-visual montage.

The way that audio visual-montage basically implants in your brain a meaning that is not actually there in the images / or sound alone - the solid granite-like quality of the monolith together with the pulsating chaotic energy of the music synthesizes an experience of the monolith as static and yet alive - that the monolith is both unified and separated into distinct parts — and for me the experience of the way this meaning arises spontaneously in my mind feels very much like what it would be like for an alien message to be directly inserted telepathically into my brain -

[SLIDE 6]

But Apollo and dionysus are unified in another way in the monolith

The monolith is a technology that simultaneously functions as myth — **It is inscrutable, its parts are irreducible, it is more expressive than explanatory**

we can’t **explain** how the monolith does what it does and so it is magical - but its magic is to impart higher awareness, greater **knowledge** into its receivers.

Here we might again look at what Arthur C. Clarke has to say about it:

**“Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.”**

**It is inscrutable, its parts are irreducible, it is more expressive than explanatory**

And the film plays around with the unity associated with the monolith in other ways too:

Twice in the film -- during the introduction and during the intermission -- we are presented with a black screen - in some original showings of the movie a curtain covered the screen and so the audience was in complete darkness - at these points we have more of that sound mass music by Ligeti - in these moments it is sort of like we are inside the monolith - in unity with it. The way that being in complete darkness makes us lose our sense of the world as a collection separate and distinct objects - the individuation that vision imposes on the world. And in the unity of this darkness we are surrounded by sound masses that pulsate and vibrate around us - this is about as close as we can get to an unmediated experience of what Schopenhauer would call the will or Nietzsche would call the Dionysian.

And these two moments of monolithic unity prepare us for a third. As we know - things come in 3s or as Aristotle says - every story needs a beginning a middle and an end - and so in the final moments of the movie there is another moment of unity with the monolith. But this time it is dave bowman who becomes unified with the monolith. This moment where dave is on his death bed also marks the third time that a hominid has interacted directly with the monolith. The first two times - the interactions were physical the apes and the guys on the moon had to touch the monolith. But in the final moment of unity dave no longer needs to physically interact with the monolith, HE DOES NOT NEED TO TOUCH IT, he has ***transcended*** physicality

[SLIDE 7]

-- in a sense he becomes unified with the monolith at the level of consciousness - and this allows him to ***transcend*** to the next level of being: he becomes that weird floating space fetus, which in the book is referred to as the starchild.

And in this moment of transcendence we have a situation in which there is a complete integration of a user and its technology - in a sense, daves consciousness becomes fused with the higher consciousness of the monolith.

At this moment, just like when the apes acheive a higher awareness - an evolutionary leap -  we once again get the theme from 2001 - Also Sprach Zarathustra.

[pause for music]

[SLIDE 8]

And this again brings us back to Nietzsche, the author of the short novel of the same name. This novel is a very strange little book. It tells the story of the ancient figure of Zarathustra or Zoroaster - the central figure in the ancient persian religion of Zoroastrianism, the world’s oldest continuously practiced religion. The book begins by describing how Zarathustra spends years in solitude on a mountainside and after conversing with the sun decides it is time to descend to the world below - because he loves humanity so much, and he wants to help them ***transcend*** the limitations of their petty conflicts and their mere subsistence living - their unimaginitive ways of experiencing the world and their place in it.

The book mixes philosophy and mysticism, and is told in a series of short little aphorisms, many of which are shorter than a single page (you have 2 of them in your reading). The book uses all sorts of strange allegorical imagery, and seems sort of like Nietzsche’s answer to the book of revelations in the bible - there's an allegory where there’s a tightrope walker at a carnival who is performing for a crowd - then suddenly some weird jester runs on to the rope and starts mocking the tightrope walker’s awkwardness the jester leap frogs over him making him lose his balance - causing him to fall to his death. But one of the central ideas in the book is the concept of the Übermensch - the superhuman. At one point, which you have in your reading, Zarathustra tells us that humanity is like a tight rope between the beast and the Übermensch a rope over an abyss that we hold within ourselves a trace both of brutality and divinity – that we are caught between the earth and the stars – but that the übermensch “shall be the meaning of the earth” – if only we can transcend our human limitations we can make this world divine. The basic idea is that everyone has the power to rise above the typical unreflective unimaginative ways that we go about our lives, but that almost no one ever does this.

Now I feel as though I need to offer the follow disclaimer: this idea has some darker historical resonances, because of the way it was appropriated in National Socialism. Now I do think that the Nazis distorted Nietasches ideas almost beyond recognition, but I also think that there are certain elements about Nietzsche’s idea where you can see how it could give rise to the horrifying parody the Nazis made out of it. This is what can happen when a complex idea from a complex thinker is simplified, popularized for mass consumption – so that it becomes a slogan – along the lines of “we’re better than you” – rather than the product of an intense self-reflective and self-critical thought process. So in a sense Nietzsche also shares in the blame to a degree for how the Nazis used his ideas – but to say that Nietzsche’s ideas were the seeds for Nazism is to fundamentally misunderstand Nietzsche – not least because of how much the rise of german nationalism disgusted and horrified Nietzsche – and how critical Nietzsche was of the abuse of power and the ways that institutions of authority, religion, the government, the police so on, subjugate people.

But back to Zarathustra and the übermensch. So, what exactly is the übermensch?

[SLIDE 9]

Well let’s start with what it is not. It has nothing to do with the current fad of Transhumanism: if you’ve ever heard of that. Transhumanism basically holds that through advances in technology and increasing integration of technology into our lives and our bodies we will at some point become superhuman. So perhaps you can think of the Google glass that “removes distractions and helps you focus on what’s important” in other words makes your life more efficient - helps you attain a slightly higher level of control or mastery over the world. If anything - Nietzsche would say it’s the other way around that things like the google glass “remove what’s important in life and help you focus on your distractions”

Essentially , the google glass or classical AI approach to technology just extends our physical manipulation of the world and our ability to rationally process information -- but this is not, for Nietzsche, what it means to transcend the limitations of humanity — transcending the human condition is going to require us to embrace the tragic element of existence - not to try to tame it with the gadgets. I think Nietzsche would say that the idea that technology will solve all our problems because it will give us better control over the world is just one more unimaginative and naive approach to our awkward place in a meaningless universe.

For Nietzsche, Really transcendening our awkward situation has to involve a vivid and epic drama in which we come to terms with and even celebrate meaninglessness itself — in a way that enriches our lives. This will involve inventing new values - values that transcend mere understanding and mastery over the world. This has to involve recovering the mythic, the tragic element of life.

Now for Nietzsche the idea is ALSO not to simply return to some sort of ancient superstition or mysticism – to fall unreflectively into the Dionysian Impulse – the willingness to lose yourself in the chaotic elements of art and life, to go with the flow of the senselessness of existence.

[SLIDE 10]

Because to do so ***unreflectively*** is basically to fall into what he refers to as a sort of group-think a sort of herd mentality. In another one of his major works, the Geneology of Morals, Nietzsche refers to this sort of unreflective group think in terms of Herd Morality. The idea is basically this,

You know - Many people go through their lives not really thinking about what values they hold, what they really believe in, instead they just seem to accept the values of the community or society they grow up in, without ever asking themselves WHY they believe WHAT they believe. For instance, quite often people are raised in a religion and grow up never really thinking very deeply about the beliefs their religion is based on - but this is true of atheism as well.

I have a good friend who is a really great musician, but I wouldn’t describe him as being a particularly deep thinker. And at various times in our relationship this has been the source of some annoyance for me — I remember one time I asked him

and he said well at least I’m an atheist, a lot of people are just really irrational and religious and I don’t have to worry about that.

And I was like - yeah, but it’s not like you actively chose to become an atheist - it’s not like your being an atheist is the result of struggling with what it means not to believe in a god. In the way that Schopenhauer or Nietzsche grapple with the horrifying prospect that maybe life really just amounts to nothing. In reality, my friend was born into a family of atheists in a community full of atheists and never really gave it much thought - he just passively accepted atheism - this for Nietzsche is Herd morality and it’s different from actively choosing the senseless chaos of Dionysus as an important element in your life.

And so for Nietzsche to live a fully human life requires us to get past the group-think or herd mentality that we so easily fall into,  requires a re-evalution of values that we grow up with. But even beyond beyond this – to really transcend human limitations requires us not only to choose other preexisting values that society offers us, but to, in a sense, create values ourselves, to forge new values.  For Nietzsche this is really what it means to be an Übermensch.

[SLIDE 11]

Nietzsche talks about this in terms of the transvaluation of values. The act of evaluating the values you grow up with and transforming them into your own deeply ***felt*** values – to determine for yourself what you truly believe in.

And this is perhaps the point where the idea of the übermensch starts to intersect with the more dangerous elements of Nazism. Because the transvaluation of values necessarily disrupts the social order. Now, It’s one thing if we try to create our own deeply felt values on a personal level, and in so doing inspire others to do the same, to lead by example -- but when an old social order is disrupted and a new one is imposed on us from above, especially if its a social order like fascism that does not subscribe to quaint ideas about human rights – then this can be an extremely dangerous thing. If people in a position of power just create new values without a painful and critical self-examination of what is right, what is just not only for themselves, but for everybody – then this  does not make our lives better or more free – quite the contrary. And I think that this is an important idea in 2001 as well – the way that the first step towards the übermensch, the first step from ape to starchild is an act of violence.

Now, it’s also really interesting to compare Nietzsche’s idea of the übermensch with the tragic figure of Oedipus.  Is Oedipus a model for us to follow toward transcendence of the human condition.

[SLIDE 12]

Oedipus certainly disrupts the social order (he is an outsider who thinks outside the box to solve the riddle of the sphinx and its precisely through his unorthodox thinking that he rises to become the king of thebes)

Of course Oedipus doesn’t just disrupt the social order - he disrupts the natural order (and not only because he engages in incest, but also because he has the arrogance to pursue the truth at any cost. You can perhaps see some similarity between Oedipus’s thirst for knowledge and the situation in the garden of eden - with the Tree of knowledge - in both cases the quest for complete knowledge, really amounts to a quest for divinity for god-hood. And just as in each case, this quest for knowledge is punished by divine forces - for NIetzsche, our own quest to understand the world ultimately leads to a form of punishment — the recognition that the world is ultimately absurd - it doesn’t make sense.

But there is a major difference between Oedipus and the Ubermensch - the Ubermensch creates new values. And Oedipus, in the end, is merely a tragic figure ---- he does not actively create his own values. At the end of the play he’s unable to rise above the senselessness of his predicament - he’s unable to transform his situation into a new set of values that can serve as a model for others to follow, a new model for how to look at the world. Instead, he goes into exile to preserve the social order, not to create a brave new world. Oedipus is unable to rise above the senselessness of his life – he is caught in the chaos of the Dionysian aspect of life.

So both Transhumanism (the idea that technology will solve all our problems) and tragedy (the idea that the world sucks and we just have to endure it) are not the what it means to achieve the level of the übermensch. The first goes too far in the direction of Apollo, the second goes too far in the direction of Dionysus.

The key to transcendence for Nietzsche is to find a synthesis between these two impulses. And we should not forget that 2001 is a work of science **fiction** – with emphasis on the fiction – that the film involves a synthesis between the rational and technological aspects of science with the mythic dimension of fiction.

But we should also keep in mind that, for Nietzsche, a true synthesis of reason and myth, of Apollo and Dionysus, of science and fiction - is not about once and for all resolving the tension between these two impulses – rather a true synthesis holds each impulse in check, so that neither impulse can completely displace the other – that, in a great work of *art*, these impulses remain in a sort of agitated unity that serves productive for our lives.

And so there’s a fundamental ambiguity in the synthesis of these two impulses and I think you can see this a good example of this ambiguity in the moment of transcendence where dave becomes the star child:

This ambiguity is even more pronounced in the book - the ending of the book connects us to the violence of the earlier scene with the apes - the book uses the same line to describe the experience of both Moonwatcher the ape - and the star child after they each achieve a state of higher awareness” the book tells us “he wasn’t sure what to do next, but he would think of something”

for Moonwatcher the something he thought of was the first case of murder in history, In the film this idea is depicted in the famous jump cut between the bone - the murder weapon and the space satellite - the idea that technological progress emerges from acts of violence -- a sort of sublimation of violence into a socially useful form - and in fact, the original idea was to depict a satellite armed with nuclear weapons, but perhaps Kubrick thought this was too obvious

In any case if there is this connection between Moonwatcher and the starchild at their moments of trascendence, this leads us to ask whether the star child is also a destroyer of worlds? And In fact it’s really ambiguous - in the book the star child returns to earth and sets off a chain of nuclear explosions.

Strangely enough Arthur C Clarke thought that this made it a happy ending - Perhaps the idea being that star child was ridding the earth of all its nuclear weapons — but after constantly encountering readers who thought that this was an act of destruction - Clarke admitted that that is also a possible reading — and this just goes to show that sometimes the intention of the author is only part of the meaning that is in any artwork. And just as we have seen with the way that certain facets of Nietzsches work proved so popular with the Nazis, Sometimes authors are wrong about the things they create.