One question we have return to again and again in this course is “what even is reality” “what is really real?”

And we’ve seen multiple approaches to this question:

In the case of a movie like Mulholland Drive or Vertigo we have our own reality as viewers of the film, the daylight reality of the story, the ambiguous quasi-reality of dream sequences – which in Mulholland Drive takes up so much of the film that it is pretty unclear what is reality within the film and what is not – and in fact maybe the importance of distinguishing between reality and imagination or dreams falls away – so that we are cast into a strange, uncanny space between waking life and dreams. Another approach to levels of reality in cinema that we’ve encountered is the practice of non-diegetic music, which in films like Vertigo, functions as a subconscious level of narrative for the characters, but also connects directly to our own reality as viewers in the way it connects us at the level of emotion.

We’ve seen an interesting formulation of this question in film theory – in the distinction between formalism and realism – what is more realistic, films where the story seems to unfold in a realistic, or naturalistic way, where the techniques that produce the story are made transparent – OR films where the REAL techniques used to create the illusion of reality are brought to the foreground? So that in the case of the defamiliarizing use of Montage in the early work of Sergei Eisenstein – we might be awoken to the REAL social political and economic relationships that shape our assumptions about the world – and that this might lead us to start questioning the social-political-economic-& artistic status quo.

And even beyond the imitations of reality or the smashing of illusions that cinema offers up to us, we’ve seen the idea that maybe even our very experience of everyday reality is not REALLY real – in the work of thinkers and artists like Kant, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and John Cage – we’ve seen a variety of different approaches to this question = the idea that maybe our bodies and brains structure the world in a way that makes it seem to make more sense than it actually does – or perhaps that there is a fundamental difference between experiencing the world in its fullness and that attempts to understand reality necessarily distort it – **AND PRIOR TO THIS** the idea there is a fundamental distinction between how the world appears to us and how it actually is in itself – a distinction between appearance and TRUE REALITY.

[SLIDE 2]

Now this idea - that there is a distinction between how we see things and how they actually are goes all the way back to the earliest recorded writings of human civilization – but just to take two examples from Greek philosophy from before the time of Socrates we might pose the question like this:

“how is it possible that we experience the world in terms change and yet we ALSO AT THE SAME TIME experience the world in terms of stasis and stability: on the one hand we experience the world as being in a constant state of flux: –birth – death - growth – decay – the changing of the seasons – the change of night into day – and most basically of all the change associated with motion itself – and yet we ALSO AT THE SAME TIME experience the world in terms of continuity – of individual things that somehow “keep their identity” even though they are changing :

On one account – associated with the pre-socratic philosopher Heraclitus -- we might LOOK at a river and think – well -- from moment to moment the water is rushing past: old water is replaced by new water – so then why should we think of it as remaining the same river? Perhaps true reality amounts to constant change or motion – and the continuity or stability we attribute to things – the fact that we talk about the identities of things as somehow persisting through time – perhaps this is just amounts to an abstraction - an illusion.

Alternatively we might consult, another pre-socratic – Parmenides, who points us in the opposite direction. Perhaps motion and change are just illusions. From this school of thought we arrive at a strange paradox: Let’s say we’re watching a race between a tortoise and the Greek hero Achilles 🡪 since the tortoise is so slow we’ll give it a head start: but consider this: in order for Achilles to win the race he would have to overtake the tortoise 🡪 to do this he would first have to cover half the distance between himself and the tortoise 🡪 then he would have to cover halfway between the remaining distance -> and halfway between THAT distance and so on ad infinitum -> the gap between Achilles and the tortoise is infinitely divisible so that he should never be able to overtake the tortoise. From this it might occur to us even though it LOOKS like Achilles won the race if we THINK about it we will realize that this is just an illusion – that motion is not REALLY real.

And so underlying these two conceptions of true reality – we once again see the tension between experience and understanding. On the one hand we have an empirical approach: what you see is what you get and since what we actually SEE is change, motion, flux that the only thing that’s real is change itself - that everything else amounts to an abstraction an illusion. This moves us in the direction of pure experience.

On the other hand we have a rational approach a motion away from experience toward pure understanding. This approach basically says – don’t be deceived by how things look! If you think deeply about it you’ll realize that change is just an illusion – that truth is eternal and unchanging and in fact if we want to say anything about the world at all – our words and concepts of the things they refer have to have some consistency – if there were no consistency at all if every time we made a sound it meant something different – and if every time we try to hold a concept in our heads the meaning changed – the world would just be one blooming buzzing confusion. So if we’re interested in TRUTH then we have to reject the idea that the only thing that’s true is change.

This difference is captured in the traditional distinction between becoming and being –

Change is a continuous process of **becoming** something different – an acorn becomes a sapling which becomes a tree which if it’s chopped down - becomes wood which becomes a house which after a while succumbs to the forces of time and nature and starts to break down.

**Being** just means that a thing’s identity persists through time – I am still the same person even though I used to be an infant and then a toddler then a teenager and at some point I’ll grow old and die – but of course we even have the sense that after our deaths we remain the same person in the memories of other people – or even a result of the eternality of the soul.

Now the thing about both these approaches is that if you follow them all the way down you – in the direction of pure experience or pure understanding- you end up in a spot where any sort of communication (or even thinking – or even awareness of our experiences) becomes impossible.

A moment ago I said that if the only truth of reality is change – then you can’t have any

consistency – which would mean that language would be impossible and no one could understand any one else – and in fact it wouldn’t even make sense to talk about different unities like people with consistent minds or identities – and so it wouldn’t make sense to even talk about distinct experiences at all – we would just be caught up in a chaotic flow from moment to moment - and what you end up with is an abyss of silence and meaninglessness – absolute fission.

But on the other hand if you take the other approach – if the only truth of reality is that it is unchanging then language would be impossible you wouldn’t be able to move from one sound to the next – in fact nothing could ever come into existence or go out of existence – both being and non-being would be absolutely unified – and since this unity could never be separated into distinct parts – because that would involve change – this means that all distinctions that we use to make sense of the world would collapse into an absolute singularity -

the most you could say about reality would be “being is” but of course you wouldn’t even be able to say that because that presupposes a change from one word to the next and a distinction between being and a property of being – that it is – so then you could really only say being – but even that would be a distinction between being and its articulation and so the only thing you could say would be ………..

and so you arrive at another abyss of silence and meaninglessness – absolute fusion--like a black hole that sucks everything into an undifferentiated singularity.

And so in either case - going to one extreme or the other - the search for absolute truth completely destroys the possibility for us to say anything about the world or to have any specific knowledge about it. And really the distinction here comes down to appearance and action on one hand and pure thought on the other: one way to see the problem is to compare people who act without thinking – there’s no consistency or order to what they do – vs. people who think but never act – where they fall victim to a debilitating stasis. And we are surrounded by abysses of silence and meaninglessness on either side of us – this is where Plato and Aristotle come in – Each attempts in their own way to forge a bridge between these abysses – the abyss of pure appearance on one side and the abyss of pure thought on the other. The abyss of pure experience and the abyss of pure understanding.

[SLIDE 2]

Now usually, Plato’s thinking is considered to be more in sympathy with the idea that true reality is static and unchanging, and that the world as it appears to us is false, an in fact is nothing more than a lie - a delusion that can only lead us away from the truth. And there is a good reason for this – in one of his most influential works – and in fact quite possibly the most influential book in western history – the republic - Plato tells us that in a perfect utopian society there would be no poets or artists at all – that poetry and art would effectively be banned. But as I hoe to show - this is an incomplete picture of what Plato actually has to say to us – and the idea that Plato hated art is based on a fundamental misunderstanding.

But let’s start with why Plato was critical of poetry and art. Now – just by way of terminology – it’s important to realize that in Athenian culture of Plato’s time – there were not the same sort of distinctions between forms of art, music, dram, poetry, painting that we have today – when Plato and Aristotle talk about poetry they’re really talking about POESIS – and poesis just literally means making – so that poets are makers – and so these places we now call maker spaces - we could just as well call poetry spaces – poesis just means creative activity – making – and I will use poetry interchangeably with our more contemporary idea of art.

Now, in order to get a good sense of why Plato was so critical of art we’ll need to wrap our heads around his Theory of Forms. One way to approach this theory is through an allegory that Plato – through the character of Socrates – presents in book VII of the Republic. THE **Allegory of the Cave**

[SLIDE 3]

Socrates asks us to imagine a cave where prisoners that have been chained up since birth – they have never been able to move and are even chained at the neck so that all they have ever seen are shadows projected onto a wall in front of them (almost like they’re in some weird S&M movie theater).

Behind the prisoners is a fire and beyond the fire are REAL people going about their business. Though the prisoners think they see the real world –in fact they only see shadows of reality and only hear the echoes that bounce off the wall in front of them. Now imagine that one of the prisoners is set free – what would they do? Socrates says that Only with pain and discomfort would they get up turn around and head toward the light – even to the world outside the cave. At first the prisoners eyes would hurt – the glare of the sun would be too intense but gradually the prisoner would begin to clearly see the world as it actually is – but if the prisoner were to return to the cave to tell the other prisoners about what she had seen she would fumble around in the darkness and the other prisoners would think that she is simply confused and can’t see plainly at all. Socrates thinks that this describes our normal experience of the world – what we experience amounts to (MIMESIS) a mere shadow - a mere imitation of true reality and pretty defective imitation at that. But if we go through the painful experience of thinking clearly we will begin to glimpse true reality itself.

But what does it mean to say that the world we experience is just a defective imitation of true reality. Well, I think it will start to become clear if you take a look at this

[SLIDE 4]

What is this thing? Yeah – it’s a triangle – it’s not a trick question

Although – it’s not a very good triangle – in fact it’s not even really a triangle at all.

After all a triangle is a shape with 3 straight sides, the angles of which add up to 180 deg. In fact that’s literally the definition of a triangle.

But if you look closely at this “triangle “not only are the sides not straight but the angles won’t add up to 180 precisely because the lines aren’t straight. But not only that we don’t even know how many sides this shape has – because there’s a gap between some of the lines. And of course the at the level of pixels – this shape is really made of squares – and even those squares are made of discrete points of light with gaps between them…and on and on…

So in fact this is not a triangle at all. Pretty far from it

But now ask yourself – why is it that we see this as an imperfect triangle rather than a perfect example of whatever this shape actually is?

What Plato would say here is that appearances deceive us – we think that we “see” a triangle, but the more we think about it the more we realize it isn’t a triangle at all, at least not a perfect triangle – but in order to realize *this* – we must have some idea of what a perfect triangle actually is, it must be some kind of triangle that we see not with the eyes, but with the mind. This is the Form of the triangle – the absolutely perfect ideal of the triangle that is separate from the imperfect triangle that we see before us. And it’s interesting that we could never actually draw a perfect triangle, because anytime we instantiate it physically either with pixels or ink – there will always be gaps in the lines – gaps between the atoms – gaps between the pixels. In fact whenever we talk about geometric forms we’re talking about things that can’t be instantiated physically - what is a geometric point? Location without dimension. What is a geometric line? Extension without width or height – in other words things that don’t exist – at least not physically – but they do exist in another world – the eternal world of forms – the world of pure mind.

And so, whenever we see triangles in the world these are fake triangles – the true and perfect triangles are not in the physical world at all but in the disembodies - heavenly world of the forms – the world of pure spirit, the world of the mind.

Now what’s interesting about this is that Plato thinks that we are not really like those prisoners that were chained up since birth. Because we are born with the ability to think about things like the perfect triangle even if it takes some work to remember how to do that. He thinks this is because the human soul is the perfect eternal form of each person – and that our souls begin in the world of forms but descend into our physical bodies when we are born – but because of this we still have an idea of the world of perfect forms floating around in our heads – we just have to remember how to access it. And it’s interesting to consider this in relation to geometry and mathematics – how are the eternal truths of pure mathematics discovered except through a process of laborious mental retrieval whereby we recover what our minds have always been capable of.

And so if true reality is the world of forms and the world of appearances is a lie then, what place does art have in all of this?

[SLIDE 5]

Well if everything we see in the world as we see it is really just MIMESIS a false imitation of the forms, then art really just amounts to an imitation of an imitation – not only that but the way that art poetry, music, fiction -- focuses on superficial pleasures – fun and games – the superficial beauty of attractive surfaces this actually leads us away from the truth. It makes us focus on fleeting shallow gratification rather than on the eternal and difficult truths of true reality – the truths made available to us by philosophy and pure thought. For Plato art triggers a sort of confirmation bias in us –the things an artwork tells us seems to be true simply because we like what we are being told – it gives us pleasure – but this is can actually lead us away from the truth – this is something we know all too well from the 24-hour cable news cycle. And so a perfect society should have no room for this sort of deception – rather a perfect society should always lead its citizens toward truth and justice. And so Plato’s utopia would cast out the poets, the artists, those who manufacture desire and false pleasure.

Now this seems rather despotic, perhaps – and it *is* – but I think at the very least this is Plato’s testament to how powerful a force art is in our lives – rather than simply tolerating art as something that nobody really cares about or that has no effect on society – Plato is very aware of the real and tangible influence that art has on our experience of life.

But this is an incomplete picture of what Plato has to tell us about art and the beauty of appearances. In fact Plato was one of the great literary minds of his age–as might be apparent just by looking at the reading assignment - Plato is not writing some dry logical treatise – he’s writing dramatic dialogues. And many of his dialogues involve mythic elements. Even in the republic – the dialogue that contains one of the most damning accusations against art – we have The not only the mythic allegory of the cave – but in fact the last large section of the dialogue concerns the myth of Er – which involves the journey of the soul through the afterlife.

And so Plato has a complex and ambiguous relationship to poetry and art in general – And it’s interesting that the Symposium -- one of his dialogues from the same period as the republic -- provides a much different account of the role beauty plays in our efforts to glimpse the true reality of the forms. Beauty for Plato acts as that bridge that spans those two chasms of silence from the beginning of this lecture– the abyss of experience and the abyss of understanding. In the Symposium Plato tells us that the sensuous pleasure we experience in beautiful things can serve as a launching ground into the contemplation of the forms – the contemplation of the world of pure spirit – the contemplation of the mind of God.

We might start out loving and desiring beautiful things: art, poetry, attractive people, beautiful bodies. And though this may arise merely out of a bodily desire to reproduce – the desire to reproduce itself arises from a desire for immortality – and this desire for immortality will in turn lead us to a contemplation of eternity and the pure eternal pleasure of goodness itself.

When we are young we might become attracted to a single person, we might find them physically beautiful – but the love of this one person in turn leads us to recognize the beauty in all people. Even physically unattractive people become beautiful enough to love and cherish – and from this we learn to love the goodness and nobility of humanity itself – this in turn leads us to love the institutions of a just society that fosters the goodness of its people and allows them to flourish – the beauty of justice – the beauty of learning and knowledge-- and at this point we see that there is a greater beauty that transcends the mere physical attractiveness of the first person we fell in love with – step by step beauty reaches like a ladder from that one attractive person through all of human society -- all the way up to the pure and universal form of beauty itself. And beyond this the forms of beauty of truth of justice can all be seen to be mere examples of one supremely loveable thing – the pure form of goodness itself – which, For Plato, is identical to God.

And so we can see that beauty and pleasure – the things that can lead us away from the truth by focusing too much on beautiful surfaces can also lead us to higher truths. For Plato Poetry Art, physical pleasure are a necessary evil to satisfy the appetitive part of soul freeing the rational part of the soul to contemplate the truth of the world of forms.

[[And so we see with Plato something very interesting: the soul – the true form or essence of each and every person -- is a monster - a 3-headed hydra - conglomerate of disparate parts - appetite emotion and reason -- that are in a war with one another.]]

Art is a bridge that spans not only the chasms of silence – pure experience or pure thinking – but also the chasms at the very heart of the human soul.

[SLIDE 6]

Like Plato, Aristotle is interested in forging a bridge across the twin chasms silence – the chasms of pure experience (appearance) and pure understanding (thinking). And like Plato beauty plays a role in this enterprise, but Aristotle holds art and poetry in much higher esteem than Plato. For one thing – Aristotle thinks that Platos theory that the ideal forms of things exist in some disembodied world of spirit – doesn’t really make sense – Aristotle thinks that the actual objects that we experience in the world contain the forms within them – that objects are composites of form and matter – and to talk about the forms as separable from the objects – as residing in some disembodied heavenly realm is really just to talk abstractly about the things we experience.

And this is important because if the forms are actually part of physical reality then this world, the world we experience, is not false or deceitful at all - as Plato tells us. Rather the physical world is essentially rational – there is a logical consistency and order that is to be found in physical reality itself. Our eyes do not always deceive us – in fact experience & observation can bring us to a greater understanding of the logical structure of the world. And so, For aristotle art, when it’s done well does not lead us away from the truth– art creates a powerful *experience* that at the same time brings about a profound *understanding* of the world.

Art / Poetry / Drama play a major role in Aristotle’s conception of true reality. Where Plato thinks that art is merely derivative, an unreliable copy of the world as it appears to us – which is itself an unreliable copy of the eternal forms – Aristotle thinks that art directly imitates the true, rational essence of the world. Art clarifies the world—it strips away the seeming confusion and chaos of the world and taps directly into the coherent and harmonious structure of Logic shared by both the human mind and reality itself; it

For Aristotle imitation (MIMESIS) is not a sort of confusion or mistake, as Plato sees it. And this is because art isn’t really true or false at all – because it is not a statement about the world as it is, rather art depicts the world as it *should* be – in artistic imitation (MIMESIS), the world is made coherent, ideal, and beautiful. And Aristotle thinks that the love of imitation is an essential part of being fully human; that underlying this love for imitation is a desire for balance, order and unity. Where for Plato, imitation is a lie, for Aristotle imitation is a powerful tool for learning reason Imitation is a source for learning from childhood on – we learn to speak by imitating our parents and language itself constructs a model of reality, a model that makes knowledge possible. Imitation also has ethical implications – it is through modeling the minds of others in our own minds that we become able to sympathize with them and act compassionately

[[SKIP THIS And Aristotle talks about the ways that imitation can render painful or disgusting experiences pleasurable – by establishing an aesthetic distance between us and the painful experience – he talks about the sight of corpses that we might find disturbing in real life and yet when put into an art work become a source of fascination.]]

One way that poetry / imitation / art tap into the true / logical essence of reality is through narrative – the distinction between plot and story

We have seen this distinction many times already – and as I said it is a distinction that goes back to Aristotle.

* story (praxis) the inscrutable haphazard  complexity of the world of experience - one damn thing after another

Plot (muthos) – an orderly and elegant arrangement of praxis that reveals its inner logic and coherence.

How does muthos do this? – by creating strong and vital links between the events of the narrative

In accordance with a convincing sense of necessity, likelihood, and inevitability.

* The story (*praxis*) of a person’s life begins with their birth and ends  with their death and includes all the various incidents, both significant and insignificant, that occur  in between.
* But a plot (*muthos*) that narrates this person’s biography  might focus on a small part of that person’s life when everything  that is most essential to their life reaches a critical point of crisis.  This is what happens in Oedipus Rex – within a single day Oedipus discovers the truth of his life and his true identity and goes from a position of power – to a position of weakness and disgrace in a very short time span.
* The haphazard series of events in a person’s life unfolds in simple chronological order, But a narrative about that life filters out all the random insignificant and contradictory things to reveal the importance and meaning of that person’s life.

Just think about how a typical bio - film includes only those moments of a person’s life that most effectively tell the story- and cuts out everything else. And as I’ve mentioned before In films where the main character is shown first in old age or on their deathbed - in films like Citizen Kane – the plot reveals that the moment of the character's death seems to encapsulate something important something absolutely essential about the meaning of the character's life, it illuminates their story in a way that some random or insignificant event that just happens to be earlier in time may not.

And so in a narrative, plot presents the events of the story as being causally connected – **necessary** – the events are **likely** to follow in the order they arise – each event propels us into the next moment of the story. Every event leads up to a climax that seems **inevitable** when we look back on the series of events leading up it. Every moment of the plot seems motivated – every event is important – if you take one out the entire narrative collapses -- if you miss 5 minutes you’ll lose the thread. Basically Aristotle is describing what makes a narrative engrossing, what makes it binge-worthy – this is the narratives logic structure – it is the essence of narrative. And to drive the point home he demonstrates these principles with an example we have already seen with Nietzsche: Oedipus Rex by Sophocles. For Aristotle, this play is not an expression or even celebration of the meaninglessness of existence – far from it – Aristotle thinks this tragedy epitomizes the balance order and unity that emerges from the logic of a tightly organized plot. Every event in the play is important - nothing is extraneous – nothing left to chance - there is no filler – and each event propels the narrative to the climactic point where Oedipus recognizes his true identity – but this moment of his discovery is also the moment of his tragic reversal – his vertiginous fall from power and nobility to a state of utter brokenness. And so the plot of Oedipus Rex is incredibly intricate and complex but also incredibly streamlined and precise –the logic of the plot propels the play to its climax and the resolution of the climax flows smoothly out of the logic of the preceding events. For Aristotle Oedipus Rex represents a plot that is perfectly constructed in accordance with necessity likelihood and inevitability.

Now it’s interesting that because Aristotle thinks that a good plot should be so propulsive and tightly constructed – he is highly critical of plays that make use of the technique known as the Deus Ex Machina. Literally, god from the machine, this term describes a practice in certain plays where an actor playing a god would be hoisted up and then lowered into the scene – often completely rupturing the logic of the drama. Quite the god will resolve the conflicts between the characters by simple decree – commanding them to act in a certain way or imparting them with information needed to bring the story to a close. Aristotle hates this technique and thinks it is only used by playwrights that have written themselves into a corner – playwrights that can’t come up with a resolution that flows naturally from the logic of the plot they’ve set up.

But it’s worth noting that Aristotle’s paradigm example of a great dramatist - Sophocles also wrote plays that relied on the Deus Ex Machina. And so it’s interesting to ask why this technique was appealing to playwrights – even really good playwrights like Sophocles. Did even Sophocles write himself into a corner that he couldn’t get out of – or is there another explanation? And I think this question brings us to a stark comparison between Aristotle and Nietzsche:

For Aristotle– the world fundamentally makes sense – true reality is rational - and the rational structure of the human mind and language – corresponds directly to the rational structure of reality itself – there is no unbridgeable gap between the world as it appears to us and the world as it actually is in itself – like we’ve seen with Schopenhauer. And so for Aristotle – the point of narrative is to reveal the rational structure of reality – by establishing a series of events that are propelled by their own internal logic to a climactic point – and then resolve in accordance with this internal logic. And the problem with the Deus ex machine is that it ruptures the internal consistency and continuity that characterizes the flow of logical premises to an inexorable conclusion.

But dramatists like Sophocles that do rely on the Deus Ex machine – seem to be saying there are things in this world that logic can never hope to fully explain or resolve – that the world is not completely explainable in rational terms, that The world seems to be controlled by forces that are outside our capacity for understanding – call it a God, call it fate, or random chance – the unfathomable complexity of the world relentlessly intrudes on our best laid attempts to understand and control it.

In discussion we’ll look at how Aristotle’s ideas about what makes for a good narrative stacks up with films like Elephant or Mulholland Drive – that seem to present challenge to this way of thinking.

We’ll also compare the notion of Platonic Forms – the ideal, perfect (perhaps non-physical) versions of the objects we experience to the use of sound in Once Upon a Time in the West and Mulholland Drive.

And finally we will consider the question what is really real? As posed by Mulholland drive’s interweaving of fantasy – reality - dreams – waking life – the internal reality of narratives and our own experience of reality as spectators.