**Wagner**

And that brings us to Wagner the most epic and primordial Neckbeard in all of history, not just because of his actual neck beard, but in fact I think there's a real connection between Wagner and modern day neckbeards because of how influential he was for the genre of fantasy (and by extension sci fi) - many of the ideas in the Lord of the Rings for instance were influenced by wagners operas. and he was also influential in many of the conventions of cinematic culture that still exist today - we’ve already talked about leitmotiv - but also the majority of film scores from up until the mid 60s or so (including Vertigo) use music that is more or less in wagner’s late romantic style. Wagner was influential in other ways as well, in the convention of dimming the lights in order to immerse the viewer in the spectacle, for instance, but also in the idea that film is really a multimedia art form - it combines visuals with narrative and music in a total work of art (Gesamtkunstwerk in german), a phrase that Wagner coined.

We'll be spending some time in this course with his opera Tristan and Isolde, but you only need to read his program note to the opera to see the connection to schopenhauer

"henceforth no end to the yearning, longing, rapture, and misery of love: world, power, fame, honor, chivalry, loyalty, and friendship, scattered like an insubstantial dream; one thing alone left living: longing, longing unquenchable, desire forever renewing itself, craving and languishing; one sole redemption: death, surcease of being, the sleep that knows no waking”

BUT there is one really important difference between schopenhauers view of the world and wagners view

Schopenhauer argued that what we call love, romantic or erotic love, is only a representation of the will to live, the will to continue the species - the will to procreate. And that the only way out of this is through monk-like asceticism (turning your back on the world) or through disinterested aesthetic contemplation

But for Wagner erotic love is itself a pathway to redemption from the Will, and here we’re not talking abstract love for all humanity, or something like that, but specific and embodied love between two individuals — love that stems from sexuality.

You can think of it like this whenever an organism desires something you could say that it is trying to establish equilibrium between itself and its environment so for instance I'm hungry I feel this agitation in my stomach what do? I eat something! I take part of the world that's outside of me and make it part of me — in a sense establishing equilibrium between myself and my environment. and so, in desire we see this motion towards unity? This is something you see in a harmonic cadence as well - the fulfillment of desire is that moment of unity between the parts where they all come to one note. What about sexual desire? It's the same sort of thing the desire to attain unity with another person the object of desire, also in the desire to unify in the creation of another human being , etc.

So for Wagner, the unity sought in sexual love is the transcendence of the individual, in some sense its the unifying of the will or consciousness of two individuals, the attainment, the consummation of love dispels the illusion of that we are all inherently separate indivuduals, and separate from the world - it reveals the world to be deeply interconnected

Now the opera Tristan & Isolde is a 5-hour long postponement of that sort of unity, a very very long time to wait for desire’s fulfillment

TRISTAN CHORD DEMO

Now the story of Tristan and Isolde is very complicated as you might expect of a five hour long opera but one of the basic ideas is that T & I are starcrossed lovers whose love is forbidden, Isolde is a lady that is betrothed to Tristan’s king, and Tristan is a knight who is supposed to bring Isolde back to this guy so they can get married, but Isolde would rather die, of course she wants to kill tristan too so she arranges for them to drink poison, under the guise of a friendly drink - her maid can’t bear to do this so she switches the poison for a love potion - and they fall in love, anyway in the second act they arrive at the home of Tristan’s king and all hell breaks loose - tristan gets in a fight and is mortally wounded but escapes - in the third act tristan is in his hideout dying of his wounds, isolde finally finds him then the king arrives and says he learned that they drank the love potion and is happy to let tristan and isolde get married and wish them well, but tristan dies of his wounds. Then something strange and remarkable happens Isolde sees Tristan’s ghost, transfigured and immortal,

Isolde sings herself to death - in rapturous contemplation of love’s unity in death

There’s this idea in the opera, which is in some sense a 19th century reformulation of medieval ideas about love, there’s this idea of erotic love as transcendence - so for instance in the genre known as the courtly romance, knight might indulge in erotic desires for a lady, but would never act on it, and there’s this idea that through exposing oneself to bodily desires but denying their fulfillment you reach a sort of spiritual transcendence through self abnegation, denial of the body - like flagellation - the practice where monks would whip themselves.

To get a sense of this You could compare Bernini’s sculpture, 17th century sculpture, The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa - where she seems to be in the midst of a religious vision that is an expression of both chastity and erotic sensuality at the same time. And when you think of the idea of nuns in the Roman catholic church as brides of Christ you might get a sense of how erotic desire and spiritual transcendence are intertwined in the western tradition.

Now if you remember, the two ways that schopenhauer tells us we can escape from the vicissitudes of the will is through turning our backs on the world - becoming monk-like ascetics - or through the experience of an artwork, but Wagner a fundamentally different approach - for Wagner, creative activity is another way to transform the underlying conflict, striving, desiring, of the will into a work of art. That is, rather than simply becoming a hedonist and going with the flow of the will, or turning one’s back on the world, the artist is able to transform the world into something socially useful, something transcendent even. For our next thinker, Sigmund Freud, this sort of activity is not just something artists do, but in a sense each and every one of is engaged in this sort of creative transformation of the world and our experiences all the time, for instance the way the world is transformed in dreams.