

Spring 2018

Conceptions of Nietzsche in Popular Film and Television

Jeffrey Willicut

University of South Carolina - Columbia

Director of Thesis: Dr. Anne Pollok

Second Reader: Dr. John Ceballes

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/senior_theses



Part of the [Comparative Philosophy Commons](#), [Other Film and Media Studies Commons](#), and the [Other Philosophy Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Willicut, Jeffrey, "Conceptions of Nietzsche in Popular Film and Television" (2018). *Senior Theses*. 248.
https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/senior_theses/248

This Thesis is brought to you by the Honors College at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Senior Theses by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact digres@mailbox.sc.edu.

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	2
Misrepresentation After Death.....	5
Nietzsche as a Fascist.....	9
Nietzsche as a Nihilist.....	14
Nietzsche Respected.....	20
Conclusions.....	23

Conceptions of Nietzsche in American Film and Television

Jeffrey Willicut

I. Introduction

There are few faces or names in the field of philosophy more recognizable than Friedrich Nietzsche's. His cartoonish, bushy mustache and stern, unwelcoming brow appear in posters on the walls of angsty teens, in the street art and murals of trendy and upcoming urban neighborhoods, and even in the punishingly glossy pages of every high school history textbook. More recognizable still are his ideas, which have found their way into the ears or eyes of just about everyone in the Western world, whether they know it or not. His concept of the Übermensch, or his notion that God is dead, and that we killed him have grown to practically be caricatures of philosophical thought, and to influence greatly how Americans view Europeans and European philosophers specifically. Yet for all of the appearances Nietzsche makes in the collective consciousness of Western world, he remains horribly misunderstood and constantly misrepresented. The consistent inaccurate portrayals of Nietzsche and his ideas stem from several important factors, some intentional and some unintentional. The modern misconceptions of Nietzsche's ideas boil down to attempts to reinterpret his work in a more fundamentally American light, misunderstandings of his ideas based on historical factors, and in some cases an oversimplification of his persona and body of work in order to fit a narrative or stereotype. Most importantly though, many works of film and television make no use of their own particular medium in order to convey their Nietzschean message, which is crucial to not only encapsulating, but also developing his ideas.

Allusions to Nietzsche generally come in two forms. A work will either reference him specifically or introduce and examine concepts originally created by him. It would seem initially like references to the man and his work would be simple and much easier to get right. Upon a cursory examination though, it appears that when Nietzsche's name is brought up in a work of popular fiction, his philosophy is about to be misinterpreted. He is often portrayed and discussed as some type of atheistic nihilist, and quotations and summarizations of his work are usually introduced to assert something about the meaninglessness of a given situation. From *Little Miss Sunshine* to *The Sopranos*, characters young and old often allude to the pointlessness of life, and they try to use Nietzsche as support. Even more upsettingly, Nietzsche's philosophy remains very closely tied to fascism and hedonistic rampages. Both of these representations are gross misinterpretations of not only his philosophy, but also his biography.

Nietzsche is also referenced less directly. There are many films and television shows that explicitly center around Nietzschean concepts. While these works are subject to many of the same failings; they are generally a great deal more faithful to the source material than those that just throw out references. Still, the conceptual examinations of Nietzsche that exist in today's pop culture landscape subject Nietzsche to the same fate. His ideas are brought up and tossed around, but the core of their meaning is often lost, and instead a bastardized form of the original idea is presented to an audience that (generally) does not know the difference.

While the origins of these misunderstandings are difficult to know for sure, there are several factors that clearly play into the constant cultural struggle for fair representation of Nietzschean ideas. He has always been viewed as a controversial but persuasive figure, and as such a full representation and examination of his ideas would be a deep challenge to the audience's core beliefs about morality and truth. In America especially, Nietzsche's ideas would

venture beyond challenging, they would be considered an attack. There is also the fact that Nietzsche's ideas cover concepts of morality, truth, language and much more, and representing him fully and accurately is a nearly impossible task. Nietzsche's tendency to express his ideas via aphorisms is another factor that leads to his consistent misrepresentation. He has so many punchy, powerful passages, that it is understandable for people to be interested but ultimately confused. Exposing someone to the idea that "God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him"¹ without a great deal of further explanation will inevitably lead to confusion and misunderstanding. Even more common than those two though are issues of historical misrepresentation and deliberate reinterpretation on the part of the creator. Luckily, there are a few exceptions to this rule.

In the following essay these tendencies to misconstrue Nietzsche's philosophy will be examined within a number of works where either he, his ideas, or both make appearances. Specifically, I will examine first films and television shows that portray Nietzsche as a fascist, and then those that present him as a nihilist. Nietzsche's unfair historical representation will also be examined. Ultimately, the root issue seems to be an attempt to treat Nietzsche's idea solely through dialogue in mediums like television and film where so much more is available. Generally, films and shows that attempt only a dialectic reference only get the idea half right, or in some cases get it completely backwards. Weaving Nietzschean ideas into the narrative structure of the work, however, proves to be very effective. Not only does this provide more nuance to the idea being presented, but it also makes the very presentation of the idea more

¹ Nietzsche, Friedrich, and Bernard Williams. *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in German Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*. Aphorism #125 Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

Nietzschean and justifies representing his ideas at all. The mistakes will be examined first, followed by the successes.

Finally, a consideration should be given to whether Nietzsche ought to be discussed in popular culture at all. He did say himself, “I obviously do everything to be “hard to understand” myself.”² His lack of desire for a following does not preclude his being followed though, and his ideas, if they can be represented accurately, ought to be able to be discussed to as wide an audience as will accept them. As will be discussed later, huge films with large budgets and immense popularity are capable of expressing his ideas, and as such there should be no barrier between the public and his work. This examination is not to say the Nietzsche’s ideas *can’t* be published accurately to a wide audience, but rather that they usually aren’t and why.

II. Misrepresentation after Death

Many of the misconceptions surrounding Nietzsche and Nietzschean philosophy are rooted in the fact that his ideas are unfairly coupled with the ideas of the Nazi party and with the actions of the Third Reich. In many ways the Nazis can be seen as the first to misinterpret Nietzsche in popular culture. Many of his ideas were horribly twisted and misconstrued in order to fit the Nazi worldview, and even more of the supposedly Nietzschean ideals being espoused by Hitler and his comrades’ ideas were simply not Nietzsche’s at all.

Nietzsche died very young. He was only 44 when the syphilis that he contracted earlier in his life started to rot away his brain, turning him first insane and then eventually invalid.³ During his decline his sister, Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche stayed with him to care for him. While

² Nietzsche, Friedrich Nietzsche Friedrich Wilhelm. Beyond Good and Evil. Place of Publication Not Identified: Filiquarian Pub., 2007. p. 295

³ Kaufmann, Walter (1974). Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist. Princeton University Press. p. 67

she was there she also took it upon herself to review and compile his notes in order to posthumously publish his final work. Unfortunately, Elisabeth was an anti-Semite and would go on to join the Nazi party with gusto. In accordance with her own ideals she took great liberties with what was in Nietzsche's notes, and added and subtracted things based on her worldview, not Nietzsche's.⁴ She added in several anti-Semitic notions and introduced a pro-fascist undertone to a lot of his initial concepts. There was much of the time where she was only working with Nietzsche's outlines, and as such was free to add a great deal of her own thought to what would eventually get published. She also subtracted things like Aphorism 35 of *The Antichrist*, a rewrite of a Bible passage, in an attempt to limit the damage Nietzsche could do to Christianity.⁵

The resulting work, *The Will to Power*, which was published in 1901, several years after Nietzsche's death has been highly criticized as a deeply flawed collection of Nietzsche's work. It was discovered in the 1960's that the volume of Nietzsche's unpublished notes and outlines was far greater than initially believed, and that the order and content of *The Will to Power* manuscript were both wildly unfaithful to the notes that Nietzsche left behind. The two researchers responsible for the initial discovery, Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari, have called Elisabeth's version of the story a "forgery" and have published an extensive historiography on the contents and intentions of Nietzsche's unpublished works.⁶ In fact, it is clear based on Nietzsche's notes from a few months before his health initially deteriorated, that he had no intention of even publishing a book with the title *The Will to Power*. By the summer

⁴ Greer, Scott. "Carol Diethe. Nietzsche's Sister and the Will to Power: A Biography of Elisabeth Forster-Nietzsche. Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2003. p. 320

⁵ Montinari, Mazzino. *The 'Will to Power' Does Not Exist*.

⁶ Mazzino Montinari, *Nietzsche-studien: Internationales Jahrbuch Für Die Nietzsche-Forschung*, 1974. p. 192

of 1888 he had moved on to titling his next work *Attempt at a Revaluation of All Values*, which was eventually made the subtitle of the work in the 1968 translation.⁷

Unfortunately, the damage had already been done. Nietzsche's already easily misunderstood work had been further muddled by his sister's ignorance or maliciousness, and the Nazi party took advantage of that. Nietzsche's concept of the "Übermensch" was among the first things co-opted by the Nazis. Hitler was fond of referring to each and every pure-blooded German as an Übermensch, and he introduced the term "Untermensch" ("unter" generally being the opposite of "über") as a way to categorize those he viewed as inferior.⁸

Nietzsche's concept of the Übermensch was of course something entirely different. Hitler was using it as a racial term, when in reality it was entirely abstract and conceptual. The Übermensch was supposed to be an answer to nihilism more than anything. The Übermensch was not meant to point to any specific person or group of people, but rather to be a theoretical future individual that could discern and create his or her own values based on a love of life and of the physical world. The Übermensch was meant to be a new goal for humanity to center itself around instead of God.⁹ The idea was to promote a positive morality based on improving everyone's existence purely within the physical world. There were never *any* racial connotations attached to the term, and there was certainly no endorsement or even conception of genocide within the term. If anything, it is an anti-Christian term. Much of its purpose was to provide an alternative to Christianity's negative morality [i.e. the "Thou shalt not" morality] by providing an example of positive morality. Shifting the focus of morality to great things that one should do instead of bad things that one should not do was the primary focus of the Übermensch, but this

⁷ Ibid. 194

⁸ Karl Dietrich Bracher, *The German Dictatorship*, 1970, pp. 59-60

⁹ Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm, Clancey Martin, Kathleen M. Higgings, Robert C. Solomon, and George Stade. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2007. p. 61

was not the way the Nazis used it at all. Employing the term as part of a genocidal totalitarian regime is almost the exact opposite of what the concept was initially supposed to represent.

Still, the Nazis were able to co-opt the term with the help of Elisabeth, and they used it to a great extent during the entirety of their terrible reign. They were able to make a convincing case for its use based on the support they got from both Elisabeth and her husband, Bernhard Förster, who was also a well-known anti-Semite and member of the National Socialist organization.¹⁰

Nietzsche's concept of the "will to power" unfortunately suffered the same fate. It is important to note first that Nietzsche's exact conception of the idea is not really known, because he abandoned the book before it was ever finished, and the version that was finally published was heavily doctored by Elisabeth.¹¹ Still, it seems that Nietzsche's original concept was that there is an underpinning to all human behavior that goes beyond a quest for pleasure, truth, or happiness, and is in fact just a quest for power. This power though was mostly meant to be exerted over one's own mind. The ability to free oneself from the constraints of society and establish one's own values and goals was the power that Nietzsche referred to.¹²

The Nazis naturally had a different conception yet again. They used the idea of power being the most fundamental human desire as a justification for the brutal endorsement of social Darwinism.¹³ Hitler believed that this idea endorsed his desire for conquest and empire, and that the Lebensraum he sought for the German people was part of this innate desire for control over

¹⁰ Karl Dietrich Bracher, *The German Dictatorship*, 1970, pp. 60-61

¹¹ Mazzino Montinari, *Nietzsche-studien: Internationales Jahrbuch Für Die Nietzsche-Forschung*, 1974.

¹² Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm, Walter Arnold Kaufmann, and R. J. Hollingdale. *The Will to Power*. New York, NY: Random House, 1967. p. 566

¹³ Golomb, Jacob, and Robert S. Wistrich. *Nietzsche, Godfather of Fascism? on the Uses and Abuses of Philosophy*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2002. p. 6

others. This idea combined with the entirely false Nazi conception of the Übermensch were very significant in their rationalization of the brutal subjugation of peoples that they view as inferior.¹⁴

Nietzsche's use as a tool of the Nazis tainted his reputation a great deal, but a huge amount of work has been done to try to rehabilitate the term Übermensch, and distance his thinking from the endorsements of Nazism that were supplanted into his work by his sister. Still, the words and the ideas are often associated with Nazism and white supremacy.

III. Nietzsche the Fascist in Popular Culture

The conception of Nietzsche's philosophy as fascist in nature is not isolated to Germany in the 1930's and 1940's. Ideas and quotations of his are still improperly applied to this day in popular culture as part of film, television, and literature. There are several examples of characters either purporting to be the Übermensch or implicitly representing an Übermensch, while actually representing a violent, selfish caricature of Nietzsche's idea that would be far more analogous to a fascist than anything Nietzsche ever conceived. The view that Nietzsche is a fascist is however upsettingly prominent and has even featured in Monty Python. The only mention of Nietzsche in their "Philosophers Song" is that, "there's nothing Nietzsche couldn't teach ya about the raising of the wrist" which is a clear reference to the Nazi salute.¹⁵ All of this has roots in the historical issues that have already been discussed, but there are more specific failings in the following works that stem from these works' inability to utilize their medium effectively as a vehicle for their ideas. Instead of using the narrative structure of the film to

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ *Matching the Tie and the Handkerchief*. Performed by Monty Python. The United Kingdom. DVD.

discuss a particular idea, they only reference it through words, and predictably they fall short of adequately explaining dense written ideas in dialogue.

Fight Club

“You have to consider the possibility that God does not like you. He never wanted you. In all probability, he hates you. This is not the worst thing that can happen. We don’t need Him. Fuck damnation, man, fuck redemption! If we are God’s unwanted children, so be it!”¹⁶

Fight Club is a 1999 film based on the Chuck Palahniuk novel of the same name. The film centers around a young man played by Edward Norton whose name is never revealed to the audience, but who narrates the story. The narrator is an impotent, unhappy insomniac with no ambitions or desires. After a chance encounter with an eccentric anarchist named Tyler Durden (Brad Pitt), the narrator is propelled into a world of chaos where he acts as one of the heads of a fight club, an all-male organization centered around brutal fistfights. The club eventually grows into much more than that though, and the members of the club form “Project Mayhem” which is essentially a terrorist organization designed to rebel against the mundane and bureaucratic.

Throughout this evolution from rebellion to terrorism, Tyler Durden makes a number of impassioned speeches about the evils of societal constraints, and the desperate need for change and self-determination. The following statements all occur during monologues by Tyler Durden, being given to an audience of shirtless young men awaiting their opportunity to fight each other.

“We’re the middle children of history, man. No purpose or place. We have no Great War. No Great Depression. Our great war is a spiritual war... Our great depression is our lives. We’ve

¹⁶ *Fight Club*. Directed by David Fincher. Performed by Edward Norton and Brad Pitt. United States: 20th Century Fox, 1999. DVD.

all been raised on television to believe that one day we'd all be millionaires, and movie gods, and rock stars, but we won't. We're slowly learning that fact. And we're very, very pissed off."

"It's only after we've lost everything that we're free to do anything."

"Don't deal with this the way those dead people do. Deal with it the way a living person does."

"You're not your job. You're not how much money you have in the bank. You're not the car you drive. You're not the contents of your wallet. You're not your fucking khakis. You're the all-singing, all-dancing crap of the world."¹⁷

All of this *sounds* exactly like what a modern Übermensch would believe, and it is clear that Durden is either trying to be one or is making an attempt at something very similar. The problem is that this is only half of the equation. An Übermensch would not only reject the negative constraints of society, they would also have a positive idea of what *should* be done. Beyond senseless aggression, Durden has no plan. All he knows is what he hates, and he employs chaos and violence to destroy what he hates. This certainly wouldn't disqualify him from being an Übermensch, but it is also not sufficient. His rage and anger serve no purpose in establishing anything. He is a force purely for destruction. He also establishes a strict code of conduct on everyone in Project Mayhem, none of which establish any sort of positive morality.

His reliance on destruction and violence to further his agenda is more fascist than anything. If all it took to be an Übermensch was inciting young men into violence and anger in order to get the world to conform to your viewpoint then Hitler would've been right about his being an Übermensch. The problem is, the constraints of society still weigh on Durden

¹⁷ Ibid

immensely. They are all he talks about and thinks about. He is in no way free from them, and at the end of the film, all he manages to do is get himself killed over it. He also finds no joy in the life he lives. While he does manage to feel more alive, he never frees himself from his obsession with death or his anger with the world. Further, the film concludes with the notion that Durden was wrong the whole time. Everything he does and says is revealed as a cheap manipulation at the end of the film. The new 'society' he was creating was simply just a parody of the one he was fighting so hard to destroy. His new regime replaced individualism with anarchy, but he made no progress in affecting real structural change. He was just a terrorist. Ultimately, even though Durden managed to be free in ways that the average person is not, he also enslaved himself in new ways that the average does not have to deal with.

This type of misinterpretation is what led people to believe that Nietzsche was on Hitler's side. It seems like this sort of maverick who runs counter to what 'everyone else' says and acts against the things he doesn't like ought to be well on his way to being declared an *Übermensch*, but that simply isn't the case. Nietzsche even made it explicit that humans as they exist today are lightyears away from being capable to transcending to *Übermensch* status.¹⁸ Even understanding what an *Übermensch* is only completes small portion of the puzzle. The *Übermensch* is an entirely new evolutionary step for humanity, and a complete change in how we view the world. The change would have to be far more radical than what Durden goes through. Simply collecting a list of complaints about society and attempting to make changes is not what an *Übermensch* would do. Rather, an *Übermensch* would need to be establishing a new, positive morality in place of whatever value system they were shrugging off. It is not

¹⁸ Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm, Clancey Martin, Kathleen M. Higgings, Robert C. Solomon, and George Stade. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2007. p. 118

enough to recognize the constraints society places on people, or even to ignore and attack those constraints, one needs to transcend those constraints and reevaluate what it means to have morality at all.

Rope (pt. 1)

Alfred Hitchcock's 1948 film *Rope* was based on a play by Patrick Hamilton and featured two highbrow Manhattan socialites, Brandon Shaw and Philip Morgan, murdering a friend of theirs for sport and then seeing how long they could hide the evidence. The film is a tense psychological thriller and it touches on a lot of different important themes, but one of the biggest concepts in the film is superiority. Nietzsche's concept of the Übermensch is actually specifically mentioned as the grounds for their committing the murder.¹⁹

The misconception that presents itself in *Rope* is perhaps even more common than what occurs in *Fight Club*. Both Shaw and Morgan explicitly discuss Nietzsche's concept of "the superman" as they call it, but their discussion entirely misses the point. The only thing the two manage to glean from it is that there are superior beings and inferior beings, and that the inferior beings try to hold back the superior beings with concepts of good and evil. This barebones reading of Nietzsche's work completely misses the point of the Übermensch, and instead simply replaces it with basic intellectual elitism. It is their impression that simply because they are smarter than average (or at least they believe themselves to be so) that morality should no longer apply to them at all. They completely miss the fact that the whole point of the Übermensch is not his or her superiority, but the establishment of a *new* morality that is not defined by a God

¹⁹ *Rope*. Directed by Alfred Hitchcock. Performed by John Dall and James Stewart. United States: Transatlantic Pictures, 1948. DVD.

and is not focused on the negative. While they do not establish any particular negative morality in the film, they also neglect to create any positive framework for assessing their values. All they do is use their supposed superiority as an excuse to kill an innocent person. There is no contemplative structure to their actions.

The characters remain focused on their own superiority throughout the entirety of the film, and they bring up that they are entirely justified in their murdering of a friend simply because of that superiority. When discussing this theory with others Shaw even states at one point that he would execute people for being brainless if he could. In many ways, Shaw makes the same exact arguments that the Nazis did in trying to recruit Nietzsche's ideas to their side, but they both only manage it by ignoring what is truly at the core of his philosophy.

Still, this is what pushes people to believe that Nietzsche was in some way a supporter or progenitor of what would become Nazism. There is a great deal of focus on the fact that the Übermensch would be superior to human beings of today, without any acknowledgement of the fact that the Übermensch is a radical departure from modern man, and that the slight tweaking of certain rules is not nearly enough to justify being called an Übermensch. This again points to the fact that the movie is not able to explore these ideas in any way but dialogue. The characters simply give a brief overview how they think Nietzsche's concept of morality works and then they act on it. The film is not able to utilize its medium to clarify or assert anything about these ideas.

IV. Nietzsche as a Nihilist

Another common misconception that is introduced about Nietzsche in popular media is

that he is a nihilist. His short but famous proclamations about religion, morals, and subjectivity find people assuming his position to be a nihilistic one, even though one could very well argue that it is the exact opposite. Nearly all of Nietzsche's core ideas exist as counters to nihilism. The *Übermensch* is a person who can create their own earthly values without needing an objective source of morals like a god. His 'Death of God' concept is an acknowledgement of the changing nature of society but is not a proclamation of hopelessness in a godless world. Even though his ideas spanning across all of his works fight to combat nihilism, he explicitly stated his opinions on the matter in the eventually corrected and refurbished *Will to Power*, "'I praise, I do not reproach, [nihilism's] arrival. I believe it is one of the greatest crises, a moment of the deepest self-reflection of humanity. Whether man recovers from it, whether he becomes master of this crisis, is a question of his strength!'"²⁰ This is not the most nuanced version of his views on nihilism, but it is the most succinct, and presents the clearest argument that he was not himself a nihilist. References to him as nihilistic are often short and ill-explained, which makes sense given the deeply incorrect nature of those references.

Rope (pt. 2)

Rope also makes the crucial mistake of asserting on Nietzsche's behalf that good and evil do not exist at all, when the reality of Nietzsche's idea is that good and evil are simply too restrictive as concepts, and that binding humanity to a morality focused solely or even centrally on them in an absolute way constrains how we can view the world.²¹ He simply wanted to avoid being subject to the toxic morality of the Christian good-evil dichotomy that shifted the emphasis

²⁰ Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm. *The Will to Power: An Attempted Transvaluation of All Values*. LaVergne, TN: S.n., 2010. Section 585.

²¹ Nietzsche, Friedrich Nietzsche Friedrich Wilhelm. *Beyond Good and Evil*. New York City, NY: Filiquarian Pub., 2007. p. 45

of moral question away from earthly questions. *Beyond Good & Evil* is not a refutation of the existence of the two, it is an examination of humanity's values as a whole, and a consideration of what morality should really mean in the context of a godless world. In fact, he asserts that the abandonment of the current conception of morality would make people better, as they would have no obligation to be selfless, but also no reason to be selfish. He even believes that, "[the collapse of moral truths is] the opposite of what one might expect - not at all sad and gloomy, but much more like a new and barely describable type of light, happiness, relief, amusement, encouragement, dawn."²² This vision of a future without objective morality is quite different from the one that he would have were his philosophy really just a license for "superior beings" to murder on a whim.

The Sopranos

The 7th episode of *The Sopranos*' second season opens with a conversation between Tony Soprano and his son, Anthony Jr. about why he doesn't want to be confirmed. Tony asks Anthony Jr. why he's obsessed with "that no God shit" and Anthony replies, "It's not 'there is no God', it's 'God is dead.' Nietzsche (pronounced "nitch") said that." Later Anthony says the same to his brother, who replies, "Yeah? Well Nietzsche (this time pronounced correctly) ended up talking to his horse." Then the scene ends. That is the full extent of their conversation on the matter.²³ While it is at least refreshing to see the show distinguish between "God is dead" and God not existing at all, the discussion of the matter is so offhandedly dismissed that it might honestly be better had it not been brought up in the first place.

²² Nietzsche, Friedrich, and Bernard Williams. *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in German Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. Aphorism #343

²³ Chase, David, and Todd A. Kessler, writers. "The Sopranos." HBO. February 27, 2000.

Dismissing Nietzsche's confrontation of religion, especially in a context as perfect as a child refusing to be confirmed into the Catholic Church, just because of an illness he contracted later in life is wildly disingenuous and an ad hominem argument. It also makes the entire debate seem superfluous, when in reality it is one of the more compelling points made in one of the most heated debates in human history. The fact that this is perhaps the fairest treatment of Nietzsche's death of God concept in mainstream media is even more disheartening.

Little Miss Sunshine

Little Miss Sunshine is a whacky film from beginning to end, but one of the wackiest aspects of it is that fact that Paul Dano's character, Dwayne Hoover, an emotional teenager, refuses to speak, and he does so because of Friedrich Nietzsche.²⁴ As nonsensical as this seems, the explanation is even stranger. The first time Dwayne meets his Uncle Frank (Steve Carrell), he explains this to him in writing. When asked what it is about Nietzsche that inspired him not to talk, he writes on a notebook, "I hate everyone." This development doesn't even make sense in comparison with any of Nietzsche's established ideas. He can be angry, and there are certain people he loathes, but the core tenants of his philosophy are about enjoying life on earth and living artfully. This scene only plays well because it is part of people's preconceived notions regarding Nietzsche that his philosophy is pessimistic and meaningless, and that these concepts are the favorites of wayward and angsty teenagers.

Both this scene and the scene from *The Sopranos* point to something similar. It is clear that these scenes are meant to be jokes, and as such they play off of some common cultural understanding. Both Dwayne and Anthony Jr. are obviously misunderstanding Nietzsche

²⁴ *Little Miss Sunshine*. By Michael A. Arndt. Produced by Marc Turtletaub. Directed by Valerie Faris and Jonathan Dayton. Performed by Steve Carell, Greg Kinnear, and Toni Collette.

(Anthony Jr. can't even pronounce his name). The joke then is that a lot of people misinterpret and misunderstand Nietzsche. These jokes only work because of how frequently this happens. Still, in both cases the misunderstanding is left alone and no true account of Nietzsche's ideas is ever presented, which is why they have still been classified as misrepresentations.

True Detective

True Detective was lauded as one of the best shows ever created upon the conclusion of its debut season.²⁵ Its writing, cinematography, acting, and story were all brilliant, and one of the major innovations of the show was how it played with time. As part of this the show decided to incorporate an interpretation of Nietzsche's concept of eternal recurrence. This does not seem like a nihilistic idea. If anything, it is one of Nietzsche's most spiritual concepts and has similarities to several different religions like Buddhism and Hinduism. However, the way *True Detective* treats the issue makes it seem like an argument for infinite death and hopelessness.

During a very tense standoff, one of the criminals involved in the brutal murder of a young woman is on his knees outside of his trailer, shirtless, exposing his swastika tattoo and the noose he has tattooed around his neck. As he starts to accept his fate, he begins to mutter, "time is a flat circle." At one point Rustin Cohle (Matthew McConaughey) shouts to him, "What is that, Nietzsche?" and then his partner (Woody Harrelson) shoots the criminal in the head. That quotation weighs heavily on Cohle's mind though, and he brings it up several times when he's being questioned later about the investigation.²⁶ The problem is, Cohle approaches it the wrong way, and ends up with the wrong answer to the question. The whole concept of eternal recurrence is a large reason for his nightmares, his drug use, and his obsession with the case.

²⁵ Pizzolatto, Nic. "True Detective." Metacritic. Accessed April 6, 2018. <http://www.metacritic.com/tv/true-detective>.

²⁶ Pizzolatto, Nic, writer. "True Detective." HBO. February 16, 2014.

While it is a logical potential conclusion of the test for him to personally reject eternal recurrence, it is not ever suggested that the fact that he is horrified by eternal recurrence means that he is living his life incorrectly. Cohle remains the unquestioned protagonist throughout the story, and his relatability is part of what propelled the show to such great heights. The fact that he finds eternal recurrence repulsive, and no one else questions him on it means that the show ends up presenting the exact opposite of Nietzsche's idea, and makes the continued marching of time sound like an oppressive burden, instead of the joyous afterlife that it ought to be.

The Big Bang Theory

In Season 5 Episode 7 of *The Big Bang Theory*, the two main characters, Sheldon and Leonard, are discussing what Leonard ought to do about the fact he wants to go out with a new girl, but he doesn't want to break up with his current girlfriend. Sheldon replies, "the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche believed that morality is just a fiction used by the herd of inferior human beings to hold back the few superior men."²⁷

Obviously, this is a gross oversimplification and mischaracterization of Nietzsche's idea, but it hints at what exactly it is that confuses people about how to portray Nietzschean ideas. This explanation is already more technical and longwinded than would be reasonably expected from a sitcom, and it isn't even close to explaining the idea of the Übermensch and his or her relationship to morality, but it does hit on *some* of the main points in his construction of the concept. The problem is, the short and simple version of nearly all of Nietzsche's ideas sounds like nihilism, and it is not until the nuance is explored that the concept switches back to being anti-nihilistic.

²⁷ Lorre, Chuck, writer. "The Big Bang Theory." CBS. October 27, 2011.

“God is dead” sounds atheistic and overwrought. It comes off as a total rejection of the value of religion, and without the full context no one understands that it is a stepping stone on the quest for meaning.

“The will to power” sounds like a full endorsement of hedonism and greed. Its mostly metaphysical application is lost when only the basics can be explored.

Eternal recurrence sounds like a nightmare that would stomp out the enthusiasm of even the strongest people, even though its message is both metaphorical and hopeful.

As shown in this example, a cursory explanation of the Übermensch makes it sound like a rejection of any moral consideration whatsoever, when it is really a call to think about morality in a different light.

More importantly though, the shortcomings of the medium are exposed in these examples. Dialogue alone simply cannot encompass Nietzsche’s philosophical ideas. Even *True Detective*, a show that has been endlessly lauded for its dialogue, and Rustin Cohle, that show’s most articulate character, were unable to accurately display Nietzsche’s idea of eternal recurrence. This is because in order to encapsulate something so complex and nuanced, the complexity and nuance of film must be utilized. The visuals, music, and narrative structure must also be employed in order to adequately respect any dense and philosophical idea, but especially Nietzsche’s given their sensitivity to reversal when misrepresented.

V. Nietzsche Respected

Though it looks bleak, there are a couple of shining examples that represent Nietzsche’s ideas accurately and provocatively. Doubly encouraging is the fact that those works which do in fact do justice to Nietzsche’s concepts are widely renowned and successful. These works do

what the others fail to do; they employ the entirety of the medium's power to convey ideas in order to explain a Nietzschean concept.

The Matrix

The Matrix remains one of the most innovative films ever created, and for good reason. It singlehandedly changed both the action and sci-fi genres, introduced incredibly complex concepts to a wide audience, won 4 Oscars, and made a huge amount of money in the process.²⁸ It also managed one very unique feat, which was the accurate and thoughtful portrayal of an Übermensch.

Neo, a small-time hacker played by Keanu Reeves, gets thrust into an entirely new reality when he finds out that the world he was living in was a simulation all along, and that his actual reality has been taken over by malicious artificial intelligence. He finds out that the best way to combat the machines is to go back inside of the simulated reality (called “the matrix”) and attack the machines that have been left in there to control things. As Neo continues to learn about this new reality he starts to unlock new capabilities and see the simulated world for what it really is. The climax of the film sees Neo transcend the simulation altogether, examine its coded structure, and become able to alter it at will.²⁹

While no explicit references to Nietzsche are made, the parallels are very clear. As Neo begins to recognize the subjectivity of everything within the simulation, he is able to unlock his own capabilities within that subjectivity and become an entirely new type of being. No one else in the matrix, not even the people who know that it is a simulation, are capable of doing what he

²⁸ *The Matrix*. By Bill Pope. Directed by Larry Wachowski and Andy Wachowski. Performed by Keanu Reeves and Laurence Fishburne. United States, 1999.

²⁹ Ibid.

does. The concept of transcendence, the rejection of constraint, and the evolution beyond awareness to action are all present and vital to Neo being able to resolve the story's conflict. He even continually voluntarily reenters the matrix (where he is the *Übermensch*) instead of just accepting his fate in the robot-dominated world. In this way, the whole narrative is set up so that it can better explain the concept of the *Übermensch*. The existence of a simulated reality wherein he is able to explore the capabilities of his own mind allows the audience to understand that this is a new form of being is. The existence of other people with enhanced capabilities within the simulation, who are *not* as unbound as Neo illustrates just how radical this new form of being is, and the existence of an objective reality outside of the simulation where everything is normal provides perspective.

Arrival

Arrival is a surprising addition to the list of media that have adequately handled Nietzsche. It is not as popular or as successful as *The Matrix*, but it meets the task of handling Nietzsche's complex ideas just as well, except in this case *Arrival* addresses eternal recurrence.

Arrival is the story of an expert linguist, Dr. Louise Banks (Amy Adams), as she is confronted with the seemingly impossible task of interfacing with a recently landed alien species and trying to learn their language.³⁰ The science and the drama of the film are magnificent, but the most significant portion is the transformation Dr. Banks goes through while she learns the alien speech. The beginning of the film is a brief but emotional story of Louise losing her teenage daughter to an unspecified terminal illness. After that the film starts with the landing of the aliens. As she begins to learn the language more scenes of her and her daughter are

³⁰ *Arrival*. By Denis Villeneuve and Eric Heisserer. Performed by Amy Adams, Jeremy Renner, Forest Whitaker, and Michael Stuhlbarg. United States: Sony, 2016. DVD.

interspersed, until eventually it is revealed that the alien language operates in four dimensions, and that understanding it allows you to see time in the same way that the aliens do, non-linearly. It is then uncovered that Louise had actually yet to have her daughter when the aliens arrived, and that all of the memories that she was experiencing as she learned the language and that the audience had been experiencing throughout the film were actually in the future. In the end, even knowing that her daughter would die in her teen years from a terminal blood disorder, Louise elects to have her anyway, and to embrace for a second time all of the love, happiness, and heartbreak that came with each of those moments. In this way she is effectively asked, and correctly answers the question from Nietzsche's demon. She knows beforehand about the pain and the sorrow, as well as the happiness that her life can hold, and she elects to repeat it.

The version of eternal recurrence put forth in *Arrival* is not exactly the same as Nietzsche's since she really only experiences everything twice, but it is presented masterfully, and legitimately puts the audience in the same emotional place that Louise is forced into when she learns the truth. It also captures the essence of Nietzsche's question. Louise understands that both suffering and joy will come to both her and her daughter if she chooses to have her, and Louise chooses to affirm life and deal with the suffering in exchange for experiencing the joy, unlike Rustin Cohle.

VI. Conclusions

Nietzsche is an undeniably popular figure. Both he and his ideas show up all over the pop culture landscape in many different forms. Despite his popularity though, he remains grossly misrepresented. Not only are his ideas not fully explained, they are often explained in a way that makes them sound as though they signify the opposite of their true meaning. It would

appear that there are two things about Nietzsche that make his philosophy uniquely susceptible to misrepresentation.

First are the historical considerations. Thanks to his sister's maliciousness and the Nazi's proclivity for propaganda his ideas have been wrongfully associated with the Third Reich. With the nuance stripped from his thoughts and new words placed in his mouth his arguments begin to sound like manifestos on superiority and power. This correlation, despite being demonstrably false, persists to this day, and taints Nietzsche's ideas in the public consciousness. This is why everyone from Monty Python to HBO is still alright with portraying his ideas next to Nazi salutes and swastikas.

The second is the fact that while certain soundbites of his are very popular and intriguing, the full breadth of his ideas is simply too much to be easily explained. His concepts of the death of God, or the Übermensch, or eternal recurrence are ostentatious. They pique people's interests enough that they remember having heard about it, but the actual conclusions therein are so nuanced and specific that they get left by the wayside. This becomes hugely problematic for Nietzsche because with his ideas, the devil is in the details. The broad concepts often sound dark and nihilistic, but the nuanced presentation turns them into the exact opposite. He combats nihilism by operating within many of the same assumptions as nihilists, but he ends up arguing the opposite point. Unfortunately, the broad concepts still simply sound nihilistic, and without an entire film dedicated to exploring the idea, the nuance simply evaporates, leaving behind an utterly incorrect interpretation of Nietzsche's ideas.

While both of these issues affect the popular conception of Nietzsche, the second is far more prominent and more problematic. Still, there is a crop of media that demonstrate conclusively that it can be done, it simply requires a skillful and nuanced approach to the

presentation of the ideas, and a use of the entirety of the medium's capabilities. Dialogue alone fails to capture the full breadth of the ideas because there simply is not enough time for the characters to say the number of words required to match the volumes of text that Nietzsche wrote. Instead meaning has to be conveyed within the narrative structure, something both *Arrival* and *The Matrix* do extremely well. Ultimately it is this requirement that makes publishing Nietzsche's ideas so important. The only way to do it faithfully is create something new, not to simply repeat his words. Both *Arrival* and *The Matrix* make changes to Nietzsche's ideas in order to express them how they intended, but through those changes they forge something new and far more impactful and contemplative than those works that simply try to parrot Nietzsche's words. This charging into the unknown and establishment of new paradigms is exactly what Nietzsche was getting at when he explained the Übermensch, and in a way, this stylistic treatment of his idea is the most faithful art can be to his philosophy.