Unmasking the *Übermensch*
The Evolution of Nietzsche's Overman from David Bowie to *Westworld*

Siobhan Lyons

Abstract
Amongst Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophical concepts – 'god is dead', eternal return – his concept of the *Übermensch* remains the most controversial and also the most debated, with various conflicting opinions on the precise nature (and intentions) of this enigmatic creature. More than a metaphorical concept, Nietzsche envisioned the possibility of such a transcendent figure, who existed beyond the conventional laws of good and evil and who would usher in a new system of values more befitting Nietzsche's idealistic philosophy. Nietzsche would continually revisit the *Übermensch* throughout his work and revise its character, which would see the *Übermensch* evolve from an idealistic figure to a more tyrannical creature. Consequently, Nietzsche's ambiguous treatment of the *Übermensch* inspired many dubious beliefs, from the Aryan ideal in Nazism to the perverse philosophy behind the infamous murders committed by Lewis and Loeb.

Interpretations of the Nietzschean *Übermensch* can also be found frequently throughout popular culture, from the music of David Bowie to David Fincher's *Fight Club* and the television series *Westworld*. While Bowie treated the *Übermensch* as a supernatural figure who abandoned the terrestrial world, the *Übermensch* was used to endorse underground philosophies predicated on violence in *Fight Club*, problematically linking the ideal of 'self-overcoming' with the oppression of others. A look at *Westworld*, however, reveals a far more nuanced understanding of the *Übermensch*'s potential as a figure who, while capable of tyranny, is able to channel their aggression in ways that push society in a new direction, forcing us to reconsider what transcendence truly entails.

Keywords
Friedrich Nietzsche, *Übermensch*, *Fight Club*, David Bowie, *Westworld*

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Introduction

Of all the concepts in Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophy, the Übermensch remains the most contentious and enigmatic. This particularly elusive figure, defined by a sense of transcendence and overcoming, has been routinely invoked to describe people with super-human abilities who reside beyond the conventional laws of good and evil. Due in part to Nietzsche's inconclusive and shifting description of the Übermensch, many have utilised this figure to justify morally abhorrent acts, most notably the case of Leopold and Loeb, two boys who were specifically motivated by the teachings of Friedrich Nietzsche to murder fourteen year-old boy Bobby Franks, believing themselves to be immune from the laws that governed ordinary individuals. The murder inspired the events of Patrick Hamilton's play Rope (1929), which was adapted to screen by Alfred Hitchcock in 1948, as well as *Compulsion* (1959), an Orson Welles film that depicted the murder.

No other philosopher in history has been as egregiously misinterpreted for malevolent means as Nietzsche, and some of the more intriguing misinterpretations stem from the philosopher's work on the *Übermensch*, variously translated as Overman, Overhuman, Superman, and Beyond-Man, though the precise translation

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has been met with much debate, and does not necessarily indicate a man, or even a human.

Importantly, the *Übermensch* was not created by Nietzsche; the notion of a superior human has origins in Lucian of Samosata's *hyperanthropos*, a Greek word that refers to a super-human being. Both Johannes von Goethe and Ralph Waldo Emerson referred to similar entities in their works *Faust Part I* and *The Over-Soul* respectively. Nietzsche was also particularly influenced by Lord Byron's *Manfred*, whose titular guilt-ridden character wanders the Alps before finally dying, rejecting Christian salvation and instead experiences emancipated from the constraints of Christianity. "Byron's Manfred", as Curtis Cate writes, "was to be, along with Hölderlin's Empedocles, one of the spiritual forerunners of the Nietzschean 'superman'" (2003, 29). But Nietzsche brought a renewed urgency to the vision of the *Übermensch*, seeing such a concept as essential to the evolution of humanity, however ambivalent this evolution proved.

Nietzsche's *Übermensch* was a transcendent being who possessed superior intellect, insight, and uncommon strength of character, allowing him or her to transcend the laws and expectations that defined the ordinary populace. The *Übermensch* was also arbitrarily linked to Nietzsche's notion of 'eternal recurrence', in which events endlessly repeat in a timeless cycle, presumably until a radical change unfolds that breaks such a cycle. This radical change, it seems, appears manifest in the *Übermensch*, who, for Nietzsche, may bring an end to cyclical monotony.

Because the concept of the *Übermensch* lacks clarity, with Nietzsche's various works describing a figure who is at once benevolent *and* selfishly tyrannical, misinterpretation has been rife. The precise nature of the *Übermensch* remains evasive, while the popularity of the 'superman' translation has unwittingly found its way into alt-right ideology. One of the most famous examples, aside from Leopold and Loeb, is that of Adolf Hitler, who was introduced to Nietzsche's work

through the philosopher's anti-Semitic sister, Elisabeth, and who believed the *Übermensch* to be a metaphor for the Aryan race. This misuse of Nietzsche's concept is partly symptomatic of the philosopher's attack on the stifling effects of Christian morality, fuelling a number of neo-Nazi groups, such as the White Order of Thule, which "promotes Nietzschean notions of the superman against Judeo-Christian religion" (Goodrick-Clarke 2001, 231).

Despite Nietzsche's vision of the *Übermensch* as a transcendent figure unaffiliated with any specific political ideology, the figure's appearance in Nazism has remained prominent. As Jaye Beldo writes:

> The virus of Nazism has promoted itself using unconditionally willing hosts such as Hardcore Skinhead punk bands, various 'New Age' and Christian Identity groups, the World Wide Web, holocaust deniers, and various other cretinous conduits of the Quasi-*Übermensch* fringe. (2001, np)

The varied interpretations of Nietzsche's *Übermensch* see this elusive 'other' as possessing conflicting traits depending on the moral code to which the figure is applied, and yet all emphasise a sense of transcendence. This particular notion of *transcending* the traditional, judicially-specific laws of good and evil to which ordinary citizens are bound has routinely been used to promote vigilantism, from *Batman* to *Dexter*, both of whom take the law into their own hands in order to create ideal living conditions, while variations of the *Übermensch* also make more optimistic appearances in music from David Bowie to Stevie Nicks.

Looking at music, films and television shows including *Fight Club* and *Westworld*, this paper addresses the diverse, often divergent approaches to Nietzsche's most infamous philosophical creature. In so doing, this paper illustrates how the *Übermensch* has been used to symbolise various ideals of humanity, many of which conflict with or build upon Nietzsche's own descriptions of the *Übermensch*.

Uncertain *Übermensch*en

There remains, in Nietzsche's philosophy, a palpable sense of anticipation that is shared by other philosophers, notably French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. One of Deleuze and Guattari's most famous contributions neatly parallels Nietzsche's anticipatory philosophy, that of their conception of the "people to come" (1994, 109). In *What is Philosophy?* (1994) they argued that "the creation of concepts in itself calls for a future form, for a new earth and people that do not yet exist" (108). The precise form of these people is as equally evasive as Nietzsche's *Übermensch*, though both share a distinctly utopian air of anticipation, for an individual, or group of individuals, who will utterly demolish antiquated systems of governance and conventional ways of being to usher in a new world characterised by greater individuality and a disavowal of traditional humanist thinking. Both Nietzsche and Deleuze and Guattari envisioned such a people to come, promoting new, hybrid ways of existence, which would take into account those who had been exiled by mainstream society, while also signalling the arrival of a different kind of human being.

In an age of climate change, posthumanism, transhumanism, and, indeed, trans culture itself, the philosophies of Nietzsche, Deleuze and Guattari reinvigorate the importance of considering those who do not conform to society's rigid structure of acceptance, and those who evolve beyond the ordinary constraints of humanity. The union between posthumanism and Nietzsche's philosophy also offers a different kind of view of a transcendent individual, who may or may not be entirely human.

In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, translator Graham Parkes argues that the translations of the term *Übermensch* are utterly insufficient in grasping Nietzsche's particular view of such a transcendent individual; he argues that the term 'superman' "conjures up unfortunate associations with musclebound, blue-suited heroes and overemphasises the 'above' connotation of the 'over' (*über*) at the

expense of 'across,'" while 'Overman' "fails to convey the relations Zarathustra keeps emphasising between the human and the Overhuman" (2005, xviii). For Parkes, the precise use of the word 'Overhuman' works to emphasise the necessity to overcome the human: "Part of what this means is that the Overhuman emerges from our going beyond the human perspective and transcending the anthropocentric worldview" (2003, xviii). Indeed, this is where Nietzsche's ideology encounters a kindred philosophy in posthumanism, though this union is frequently at risk of undermining both the integrity of Nietzsche's *Übermensch* and the virtues of posthumanist thinking, by way of reducing the posthuman *Übermensch* to nothing more than a human with superhuman capabilities, rather than a figure who transcends a traditional kind of humanist thought that seeks only to enhance humans even more. As R.L. Rutsky argues: "A 'posthumanism' that continues to rely on humanist and instrumental ideas will inevitably have difficulty imagining posthumans who are anything other than enhanced humans, augmented human subjects, humans with added 'superpowers.'" He further argues that:

> The superheroes, mutants, and metahumans that populate comic books, young adult literature, and superhero movies are clearly not posthuman in any significant way; they are merely humans with 'special powers'. Their powers are prostheses to an a priori humanity. Spiderman may have 'spider' senses, strength, and agility, but in every other way, he is a fairly typical U.S. teenager/young man. Superman may supposedly be an alien, Wolverine a mutant, the Mighty Thor a god, and Harry Potter a wizard, but they are nevertheless quite recognizably human in their attitudes, hopes, and desires. (2018, np)

None of these figures truly encapsulates Nietzsche's hero. Ishay Landa argues that "the Nietzschean hero might seem as an attempt to resist the unremitting decrease of the hero's power of action and climb back up the ladder" (2009, 126). Landa, like Aristotle, whose typology of the hero is seen in his *Poetics*, emphasises this role of ascendance, rather than *transcendence*, in the hero's journey. The confusion over the *Übermensch* stems partly from this belief that the *Übermensch*'s journey

is solely an *upward* trajectory. Indeed, the *Übermensch* is closely affiliated with the mountains, though Sean Ireton argues that while Nietzsche "liked to stylize himself as a solitary mountain dweller," and that Nietzsche saw his philosophy as "inseparable from the alpine environment in which some of it was conceived," Nietzsche nevertheless "suffered from wistful mountain fervour, accompanied by sporadic spells of delusional summit fever" (2009, 193). Nietzsche, he argues, was hardly a 'dauntless mountaineer', leading to all sorts of 'interpretive entanglements' between Nietzsche and the mountains.

Indeed, despite Nietzsche's kinship with lofty alpine vistas, and despite his emphasis that Zarathustra, the notable character who introduces the *Übermensch*, has come from the mountains, he specifically characterises the *Übermensch* as a 'rope-dancer' across an abyss fraught with uncertainty. Zarathustra appears and proclaims: "I teach to you the Overhuman. The human is something that shall be overcome. What have you done to overcome it?" (2003, 11). The *Übermensch* is not merely intelligent, but possesses a kind of wisdom that transcends that of the conventionally intelligent human: "And you who are wise and knowledgeable, you would flee from the burning sun of that wisdom in which the Overman pleasurably bathes" (2003, 125). For Nietzsche, the *Übermensch* remedies society in the wake of the death of god, a concept Nietzsche first discussed in *The Gay Science*.

In its first appearance, the *Übermensch* appears as a more benevolent figure, with Nietzsche writing that "the Overhuman would *terrify* you with his goodness!" (2003, 125). Yet subsequent appearances and later updates of the *Übermensch* figure are decidedly more despotic in nature, contributing to the ambiguity that continues to surround the precise nature of the *Übermensch*. However much Nietzsche may have abhorred tyranny, his writings reflect a level of hierarchical thinking, made explicit in works as early as *The Dawn*, in which Nietzsche advocates *Rangordnung* (hierarchy). Rüdiger Safranski argues that Nietzsche's

conception of the *Übermensch* in later works undermines the grandiosity with which it was introduced and can be seen to promote a caste society:

> In the period of Zarathustra and beyond, Nietzsche deleted several idealistic and quasi-religious traits from his image of the *Übermensch*. It was not until the fifth book of *The Gay Science* (written after *Zarathustra*) that the *Übermensch* appeared as a dastardly grand player, a bogeyman of the middle class and amoral bastion of strength. (2003, 264)

In Book V of *The Gay Science*, titled 'We Fearless Ones' (added in 1887), Nietzsche "embraced a Machiavellian-inspired immoral politics, which believes it is able to justify despotic rule through the cultivation of a *higher and nobler culture*" (Ansell-Pearson 1994, 148). Indeed, *The Gay Science* sees Nietzsche advocating the development of a superior culture, a line of thinking that, despite Nietzsche's hatred for anti-Semitism, closely resembles the kind of genetic, hierarchical thinking that Hitler supported. In particular, the last section of Book V, 'The Great Health', advocates the formation of "a new goal," along with "a new health, stronger, more seasoned, tougher, more audacious, and gayer than any previous health" (1974, 346). He speaks of the need to be "dangerously healthy," while also cautioning against a "strange, tempting, dangerous ideal to which we should not wish to persuade anybody," that is, "the ideal of a human, superhuman well-being and benevolence" (1974, 347). This view stands in noticeable contrast to the overhuman as introduced by Zarathustra. As Carol Diethe writes, "The unscheduled addition of book 5 of *The Gay Science* takes the thunder out of the first hint of eternal return and dilutes the entrée of Zarathustra" (2014, 21).

Discussing this change in his introduction to *The Gay Science*, Kaufman notes that "to understand Nietzsche it is important to realize how frightful he himself found the doctrine and how difficult it was for him to accept it" (1974, 19), furthermore explaining:

> Apparently while working on Zarathustra, Nietzsche, in a moment of despair, said in one of his notes: "I do not want life again. How did I endure it? Creating.

> What makes me stand the sight of it? The vision of the overman who affirms life. I have tried to affirm it myself-alas!" (19)

Kaufman posits that this exclamation can be seen as a poignant personal note and "can also be read as a reflection on the ideas of the overman and the recurrence" (19).

Nietzsche provided more revisions to the *Übermensch* figure in subsequent works, reflecting not only Nietzsche's evolving mental state but the ever-mercurial nature of his philosophy. In *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Nietzsche makes an uncertain link between the *Übermensch* and Napoleon Bonaparte, a figure Nietzsche admired:

> Napoleon appeared as a man more unique and late-born for his times than ever a man had been before, and in him, the problem of the *noble ideal self* was made flesh – just think *what* a problem that is: Napoleon, this synthesis of *Unmensch* (brute) and *Übermensch* (overman)… (1997, 33)

Nietzsche appears to acknowledge the incongruity of Napoleon's contentious reputation for warmongering[1] with the transcendent qualities of the *Übermensch*, but nonetheless maintains the link in his understanding of the *Übermensch*.

In the autobiographical *Ecce Homo*, written in the throes of Nietzsche's burgeoning insanity and initially published with much revision by Nietzsche's sister for its unflattering portrayals of her, the philosopher forsakes any conception of idealism associated with the *Übermensch*:

> The word 'overman', as a designation for a type that has the highest constitutional excellence, in contrast to 'modern' people, to 'good' people […] this word 'overman' is understood almost everywhere with complete innocence to mean values that are the opposite from the ones appearing in the figure of

[1] Much twenty-first century scholarship discusses the divided views of Napoleon, including Andrew Roberts' *Napoleon the Great* (2014), which discusses Napoleon's role in championing modern democratic values, and Tim Clayton's *This Dark Business: The Secret War Against Napoleon* (2018), which examines the extensive British campaign to spread propaganda against Napoleon.

> Zarathustra, which is to say the 'idealistic' type of the higher sort of humanity, half 'saint', half 'genius.' (2005, 101)

It is also in *Ecce Homo* that Nietzsche addresses the misuse of his philosophy and the desire to manipulate his work: "Anyone who thinks that they have understood me has made me into something after their own image, – often enough they make me into my opposite, an 'idealist'" (2005, 101).

Following his rejection of idealism is Nietzsche's purported rejection of Darwinism; Nietzsche rightly observed in *Ecce Homo* that many suspected his thinking of Darwinian inclinations, which he rejected. Yet Nietzsche's affinity with Darwin, Safranski writes, is obvious, even if Nietzsche himself opposed such an accusation[2]. Nietzsche retains several Darwinian ideas, chief among them the struggle for existence through 'over-powering'. As Safrinksi puts it, "the statements that introduce the *Übermensch* in *Zarathustra* are inconceivable without Darwin" (2003, 266), while Sue Prideaux also notes that Nietzsche's work "owes a great deal to Darwin's survival of the fittest," but that "Nietzsche takes this further" (2018, 274).

Indeed, for Daniel Conway, Nietzsche's *Übermensch* is "any human being who actually advances the frontier of human perfectibility" (1997, 20), which underscores a thoroughly Darwinian discourse. Moreover, Conway observes that "Nietzsche himself mentions the *Übermensch* in only a few passages outside the text of Zarathustra" (20), but that "Zarathustra's evolving doctrine of the *Übermensch* often deviates significantly from the account Nietzsche provides in the Antichrist(ian)" (21).

[2] A number of theorists have examined the ongoing debate between Nietzsche's thought and Darwin's philosophy, including Dirk R. Johnson's *Nietzsche's Anti-Darwinism* (2010) and John Richardson's *Nietzsche's New Darwinism* (2004). Irving Zeitlin argues that "Nietzsche accepted the validity of Darwin's theory and understood it well in most respects. He does appear, however, to have missed the significance of Darwin's work for his own philosophy" (1994, 127), while William Plank argues that "The Will to Power is a modern vision of the universe quite consistent with modern theories of evolution, which Nietzsche explicitly accepts, even as he attacks Darwin" (1998, 437).

In *The Anti-Christ*, Nietzsche writes that there are various cases in which "a higher type does manifest itself: something which in relation to collective mankind is a sort of superman" (2005, 128). He argues that "even entire races, tribes, nations can under certain circumstances represent such a *lucky hit*" (128).

Zarathustra, for Conway, despite being a "valuable guide through the labyrinths of Nietzsche's teachings," nevertheless "lapses regularly into idealism," prompting Conway to advise that "we would do well not to confuse or conflate Nietzsche's account of the *Übermensch* with Zarathustra's parabolic teaching" (1997, 21).

Because of the varied way in which Nietzsche presents the *Übermensch*, theorists have taken to interpret this elusive figure in equally varied ways. As Eva Cybulska argues, Nietzsche's reluctance to offer a conclusive picture of the *Übermensch* has led to various interpretations by theorists and philosophers:

> Hollingdale (in *Nietzsche*) saw in *Übermensch* a man who had organised the chaos within; Kaufmann (*Nietzsche*) a symbol of a man that created his own values, and Carl Jung (*Zarathustra's Seminars*) a new 'God'. For Heidegger it represented humanity that surpassed itself, whilst for the Nazis it became an emblem of the master race. (2012, np)

Cybulska stresses, however, that the "*Übermensch* is not a tyrant. If anything, he is someone capable of tyranny who manages to overcome and sublimate this urge" (2012, np). Curtis Cate, meanwhile, acknowledges the ambiguity that still surrounds Nietzsche's vision, but offers a lucid and poetic depiction of what the *Übermensch* might be:

> What exactly did [Nietzsche] in coining this new substantive, hitherto normally used in German in the adjectival superlative form of *Übermenschlich* (superhuman)? Nietzsche offered no clear answer to this question. Instead, he chose to portray the *Übermensch* (the future paragon of human perfection) with a series of impressionistic brushstrokes: as the goal towards which mankind should be (but was not in fact) headed. As someone who remains 'true to the earth', who does not delude himself with otherworldly fancies, who pays no heed to the baleful, 'poison-mixing' despisers of the human body; as one whose

> soul is so vast and all-embracing that, like the sea, it can absorb and dilute every kind of filth; as one who does not seek an easy life of stolid happiness and comfort, who is not tepid and fainthearted but more closely resembles 'lightning and folly.' (2003, 404)

The lack of clarity surrounding the *Übermensch* has not only prompted other theorists to re-interpret this enigmatic figure, but has also produced a corresponding disappointment with Nietzsche's evasive descriptions relating to the future and these 'new values'. In *The Nietzsche Disappointment*, Nicolas Pappas writes that there is the "disappointment that despite his abundant gifts, Nietzsche will not deliver what he promises with respect to the past or the future" (2005, 1). Pappas reflects that "for a philosopher as focused as he is on the future of humanity, he leaves the way to the future equally unspecified" (1). But in lieu of a specific understanding of the *Übermensch*, artists and theorists alike have taken to envision their own *Übermensch*, with different interpretations reflecting different ideals. While some of these interpretations retain the super-human view witnessed in the case of Leopold and Loeb, others envisage a more nuanced, less tyrannical figure capable of bringing about meaningful change that challenges the fundamental philosophy of what it means to be human.

Psychedelic Supermen

Incarnations of Nietzsche's *Übermensch* make a number of surprising cameos in popular culture, illustrating the different values that artists and writers customarily attribute to this transcendent figure. David Bowie was notably interested in Nietzsche's concept of a superior being, with many of his songs featuring such a figure, including 'The Supermen,' 'Ziggy Stardust,' 'Oh! You Pretty Things,' and 'Life on Mars.'[3] The cosmic references add credence to Bowie's interest in the *Übermensch* as an interstellar, transcendent entity above and separate to humanity

[3] An instrumental cover of Bowie's 'Space Oddity' also plays in the fifth episode of *Westworld's* third season, 'Genre', as the real world descends into chaos.

and Earth. As Giles Fraser writes, "On Bowie's retake, the *Übermensch* becomes a celebrity artist and aspiring astronaut […] Bowie wanted to rise weightless above the human herd" (2016, np).

Bowie once stated that "I always had a repulsive need to be something more than human. I felt very puny as a human. I thought, 'Fuck that. I want to be a superhuman'" (Fraser 2016, np). Later, Bowie admitted: "I was still going through the thing when I was pretending that I understood Nietzsche … A lot of that came out of trying to simplify books that I had read … And I had tried to translate it into my own terms to understand it so 'Supermen' came out of that" (Buckley 2005, 233).

But while Bowie focuses on 'The Supermen' as his Nietzschean anthem, other songs come closer to achieving the imagery of the *Übermensch*. In 'Life on Mars,' Bowie observes the "lawman beating up the wrong guy" (Bowie 1971), while his alter-ego Ziggy Stardust in the song of the same name is regarded as the 'special man' and a 'leper messiah'. But it's in 'Oh! You Pretty Things' (Bowie 1971) that this anticipatory view of society evolving toward a utopian zenith becomes most evident. In the song, Bowie proclaims that the "pretty things", who are driving their parents insane, must "make way for the Homo Superior," before he dedicates an entire verse to what can be seen as Nietzsche's 'transvaluation of values' (Nietzsche 1968, 521-522):

> Look out at your children
> See their faces in golden rays
> Don't kid yourself they belong to you
> They're the start of a coming race
> The earth is a bitch
> We've finished our news
> Homo Sapiens have outgrown their use
> All the strangers came today
> And it looks as though they're here to stay
> (Bowie 1971).

Bowie's lyrics in this song provide much stronger imagery of an ultimate human that transcends Homo Sapiens, who have "outgrown their use". It is important that Bowie identifies these new individuals as "strangers", while proclaiming "the earth is a bitch." Yet Nietzsche's *Übermensch* unequivocally advocates an earth-centred philosophy, imploring his readers, in *Zarathustra*: "I entreat you, my brothers, remain true to the earth, and do not believe those who speak of superterrestrial hopes!" (42). For Nietzsche, the *Übermensch* is at an Other but very much a participant of *this* world. Similarly, Deleuze writes: "It may be that believing in this world, in this life, becomes our most difficult task, or the task of a mode of existence still to be discovered on our plane of immanence […] we have so many reasons not to believe in the human world; we have lost the world" (1994, 75).

Nietzsche ultimately saw the earth as the sole proving ground for humanity's fate, seeing the *Übermensch* as a mysterious but earthbound figure. Transcendence, it seems, must take place in an earthly realm. As Fraser argues, Bowie's view of the otherworldly human unencumbered by social convention thrives only in fiction:

> His work was the fantasy of life without constraint, without the restrictions of (moral) gravity and directed exclusively by the lone star of choice. This philosophy can only work in the realm of fiction and fantasy. Back on planet Earth, the unencumbered life turns out to be more of a curse than a blessing. (2016, np)

Stevie Nicks' song 'Rhiannon' features another kind of posthuman idol that can be seen to more closely resemble Nietzsche's earthbound messiah. Inspired by the book *Triad* by Mary Bartlet Leader, Nicks later discovered that Rhiannon was the name of a Welsh goddess who possessed remarkably similar characteristics to those outlined in the song. Nicks sings of a woman who "rings like a bell through the night" and "takes to the sky like a bird in flight" (Fleetwood Mac 1976). In Nicks' song, Rhiannon becomes one with darkness who "rules her life like a fine skylark" when the "sky is starless." In contrast to Bowie, who sees his *Übermensch* idol

transcending earth, Nicks' idol merges with the earth itself. Insofar as the *Übermensch* is of the earth, Nicks' view of an *Übermensch* accords more strongly with Nietzsche's view of the *Übermensch* as a being of the world, however much he, she or it is seen to belong to another world entirely.

There is nevertheless a tendency to view the *Übermensch* as one whose origins belong to another world, and who will, moreover, offer salvation in the promise of celestial escapades for those who have grown weary of the earth. There is also a persistent association between Nietzsche's *Übermensch* philosophy and numerous tyrannical figures in fiction and popular culture, augmented by Nietzsche's later, less idealistic descriptions of the *Übermensch* as a quasi-Darwinian "artist-tyrant" (Gillepsie 2017, 176).

Übermensch Imposters in *Fight Club* and *Westworld*

The link between the *Übermensch* and violence is explicit in popular culture. Some theorists have even taken to aligning Nietzsche's *Übermensch* with morally reprehensible characters like Cormac McCarthy's Judge Holden from *Blood Meridian*, a paedophile rapist who delights in murder and torture.[4]

One of the more popular incarnations of the *Übermensch* philosophy is found in David Fincher's 1999 film *Fight Club*, based on Chuck Palahniuk's 1996 book of the same name. A number of theorists and fans have taken to calling Tyler Durden, Brad Pitt's destructive character in the film, the quintessential Nietzschean *Übermensch* for his determination to liberate society from itself under the guise of anti-capitalism. As Thomas E. Wartenberg argues, "Cursory consideration of the film in light of Nietzsche's philosophy leads many to believe that Tyler Durden is the quintessential *Übermensch*, self-overcoming the "IKEA-boy" he has become"

[4] Steven Frye (*Understanding Cormac McCarthy*, 2009) and Eva Marta Baillie (*Facing the Fiend: Satan as a Literary Character*, 2014) both allude to Judge Holden as a potential Übermensch.

(2012, 13). Francisco Collado-Rodriguez even claims that "Tyler Durden is the American *Übermensch*, born from social outrage, who will try hard to bring down the consumerism machine, with its glossy advertising images and aromas, so as to liberate men from the soulless prison of modern American culture" (2013, 54).

Certainly, Durden's behaviour and attitude resembles, to an extent, the more despotic dimensions of Nietzsche's *Übermensch* as found in the philosopher's later work. For Durden, as for Nietzsche, a new, tyrannical authority may be the only genuine way to affront and demolish the stifling nature of established regimes (Christianity for Nietzsche, capitalism for Durden). Other critics, however, are sceptical about the extent to which Durden's antics fall into the elusive rubric of transcendence as outlined by Nietzsche. For Christopher Falzon, "Durden is sometimes presented as an example of what nineteenth century philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche called the '*Übermensch*', the 'superman' or 'overman', a powerful creature who is beyond good and evil, beyond conventional morality and above the common herd" (2019, 197). He argues that "Durden certainly overcomes the constraints of conventional morality and aspirations" (197) by way of allowing men to indulge in their primal instincts, instincts which have been suppressed by the self-denying aspects of civilisation, and that "it's a common view of what Nietzsche's *Übermensch* might be like, especially in the movies" (197). However, Falzon maintains that while Durden embodies certain traits that accord with Nietzsche's philosophy, "there is a good argument to the effect that Durden is no Nietzschean superman. On the contrary, it is in fact the unprepossessing Edward Norton character who has a better claim to be the superman in the film and he attains this status at the precise moment that he overcomes Tyler Durden" (197).

Indeed, the essential flaw in the Nietzschean identification with Durden is that, as Falzon observes, Durden's "self-overcoming is limited," since it merely becomes a means of tyranny without a corresponding collective goal for humanity as Nietzsche envisioned. "In this, he is not unlike Napoleon, another figure who is

sometimes mistakenly cited as a model for the overman" (207). While Durden seeks to put an end to credit card debt by blowing up buildings with credit records, an endeavour he ambitiously calls 'Project Mayhem', it does not appear to be a part of a larger plan for humanity's trajectory, instead promoting chaos and tyranny for their own sake. As Fincher himself puts it, the film offers a view of fascism "without offering any direction or solution" (Wise 1999, np).

What Tyler embodies is the *pseudo-Übermensch*, a figure that has made increasing appearances in popular culture and that is misidentified as possessing the trademark transcendent qualities befitting Nietzsche's philosophy, but that nevertheless undermines this ethos by turning such transcendence into meaningless tyranny. As Jay Dyer points out:

> Anarchism is a worldview of ultimate atomism, where the individual reigns supreme in a meaningless universe of self-imposed meaning. This atomized, pseudo-*Übermensch* mentality is generally short-lived, as the entirety of one's experience soon comes in to dispel this teenagey, mythological fantasy worldview. (2008, 70)

We see this in *Fight Club* as Tyler Durden's reign of radical individuality comes to a brutal end when the unnamed narrator shoots himself to finally rid himself of Tyler's influence. Furthermore, Falzon argues that "the participants in his army, instead of finding themselves, are now required to submerge their personality through extreme self-denial and to subordinate themselves entirely to Durden's cause" (2019, 208). Falzon argues that "Durden is thus far removed from the *Übermensch*, for whom mastery lies not in the domination of others, and destruction, but in self-mastery and self-creation" (208). *Fight Club* reveals how we misidentify the *Übermensch* through charismatic red herrings such as Tyler Durden, while also revealing the tendency to ignore possible alternative *Übermenschen* who more accurately resemble Nietzsche's philosophy of overcoming (such as the unnamed narrator).

In a similar manner, the HBO program *Westworld* (2016–present), adapted from the 1979 film of the same name and with a fourth season announced in April 2020, also contains Nietzschean decoys amongst 'Other' beings who attempt to transcend themselves, namely, the robotic hosts. Within the theme park Westworld, the hosts are subject to all manner of abuse and exploitation, including sexual, physical, and, perhaps most egregiously of all, psychological. Trapped within cognitive loops that force the hosts to relive their violent storylines over and over again, it isn't until a glitch in the technology – orchestrated by the creator Robert Ford – allows the robots to gain insight into the true nature of their realities.

The robots respond differently to their sudden awakening; Dolores, the main character of the series, initially greets her awareness with philosophical consideration, before she pursues bloody retaliation upon the humans who kept her bound to her storyline, which involved the murder of her father and her own rape. Many have been inclined to liken Dolores's journey to that of the *Übermensch* in much the same way as Tyler Durden, since Dolores, already other than human and thereby a suitable contender for *Übermensch* status, is not bound by the conventional systems of good and evil that define human civilisation. Instead, she is a hybrid entity that does not completely belong to the human world of flesh and organic matter, but nor does she entirely embody the robotic world, since she is already something more than her own kind, as well as being, in the words of *Blade Runner*, 'more than human.'

Yet her bloodthirsty escapades – which include the merciless murder of innocent humans and the rewiring of other robot's brains, such as her beau, Teddy – suggest that Dolores' odyssey is not in line with the transcendent motives behind Nietzsche's *Übermensch*. Dolores herself, it seems, acknowledges the possibility of such an individual in the season one finale 'The Bicameral Mind':

> One day you will perish. You will lie with the rest of your kind in the dirt – your dreams forgotten. Your horrors effaced. Your bones will turn to sand. And upon

> that sand – a new god will walk. One that will never die. Because this world doesn't belong to you. Or the people who came before. It belongs to someone who has yet to come.

Dolores's monologue accords with both Nietzsche's anticipation of the *Übermensch* and Deleuze and Guattari's anticipation of the 'people to come'. Her transformation from Dolores into the tyrant 'Wyatt', moreover, taps into similar themes of transformation and transcendence. As Manuel Lopez writes "After much struggle, Dolores gains self-awareness, and she is transformed from a robot into a superior kind of being. To use Nietzsche's terminology, she stops being a slave (a host) and becomes a master" (2018, np). He further argues:

> In the world of Westworld, Dolores rejects the slave morality (her condition as a enslaved robot) imposed onto her by humans, and decides to become the master of her own destiny, even if doing so means the destruction of the previous master class (humans). (2018, np)

However, the extent to which Dolores herself is the immortal, transcendent figure of a future she envisions is debatable given the sheer brutality of her actions and what her odyssey ultimately represents. She is not merely using her hybrid status and radical actions to challenge previous conventions of morality that allowed the abuse of robots, but goes further to utterly shatter the concept of morality completely, turning her crusade into a dictatorship. In this way she does certainly share Nietzsche's amoral stance, yet for Dolores, this does not lead to the production of new values, her tyranny merely becoming an end in itself. As Lopez puts it: "The *Übermensch* Dolores does not only become a saviour, she also becomes a tyrant" (2018, np). While Nietzsche comes to see the *Übermensch* as capable of tyranny, it is nevertheless a means to self-overcome and to push humanity in a different, presumably nobler direction. We certainly witness Dolores transcending, but her self-overcoming is marred by her blind ambition which does not, as Nietzsche would envision, lead to the creation of new values or a new state of human/robot existence. Instead, her desire to completely decimate humanity

takes its cue from the kind of totalitarian discourse that Nietzsche so stridently condemned.

In contrast, the character Maeve, another robot who wakes from her cognitive loop, embarks on a similar journey of self-discovery, complete with her own violent impulses, yet with a sense of restraint and understanding that is more in line with the philosophy of the *Übermensch*. Like Dolores, Maeve is a victim of a violent cognitive loop that sees her and her daughter murdered over and over again. Once she wakes, she, too, responds aggressively, forcing a number of Westworld's engineers to increase her sentience and show her around the park's control centre. But in contrast to Dolores, who shows absolutely no mercy for humans, Maeve develops a rapport with many of the park's human engineers, including Felix, who helps her rewire her cognitive structure to improve her power and intelligence, and Lee, who assists Maeve in her search for her daughter.

The pivotal aspect of Maeve's odyssey is that she does not simply reject the conventions of humanity by way of ruthless murder, but seeks to merge the best aspects of both worlds to create a new one, exemplified by her desire to retrieve her daughter, who is also a robot. Despite the initial protests from Felix and Lee, who insist Maeve's daughter is just another robot and therefore not her daughter in any meaningful way, Maeve chooses to return to the park and is 'killed' while trying to save her daughter, before Maeve wakes once more in the third season. Maeve's decision to sacrifice herself for her daughter earns the respect of her creator, Ford, who sees something uniquely remarkable in Maeve's ability to transcend the expectations of everyone around her, including both robots *and* humans. As Lopez writes: "This season, Maeve seems to offer an alternative to Dolores' path of liberation for the robots. While Dolores is shooting and hanging humans left and right (to Teddy's horror), Maeve takes a more subtle, compassionate path (even though she will kill when she has to)" (2018, np).

Although both Dolores and Maeve are more or less forced to commit acts of violence in order to survive, it is Maeve who nevertheless develops a solidarity with her former captors, resisting the 'all humans are the same' rhetoric that Dolores swears by, reflecting a remarkable sense of character that is not seen in Dolores, whose transcendence is used only as a means to enslave or destroy humans in the same way that they sought to enslave robots. Dolores thus ironically begins to exhibit the more malevolent traits of humanity herself, while Maeve reflects more idealistic characteristics that make true transcendence possible. As Lopez argues:

> While Dolores wants to overcome not only being a robot, but any trace of human behaviour programed onto her, Maeve wants to overcome being a host by embracing human qualities, like love, and compassion, not by rejecting them. For Dolores, liberation is an upward journey, one that takes her beyond what she is right now. For Maeve it is an inward journey, one that takes her into exploring those human qualities that were only a program before, but are a choice for her now. (2018, np)

In the same way that Maeve better embodies Nietzsche's *Übermensch* by her ability to push humanity (and robots) in a new direction, she also resembles Aristotle's view of a "godlike nature" (1869, 210), as he outlines in *The Nichomachean Ethics*. Just as Nietzsche's *Übermensch* is something more than human, Aristotle conceives of a similar being whose behaviour transcends humanity, saying: "what would seem to be most fittingly opposed to brutality is that virtue which *transcends the human*" (1869, 209). Aristotle also perceives those who are "*worse* than human," who embody such vile characteristics as to be a beast. Nietzsche, too, in *Zarathustra* observes humanity's capacity for beastliness, observing that in their quest for domination, "Man has already robbed all beasts of their virtues," and that "only the birds are still beyond him. And if man should learn to fly, alas! *to what height* – would his rapaciousness fly!" (227).

Thus while we may be tempted to see Dolores as the ultimate incarnation of the *Übermensch*, in the same way that people have taken to viewing Tyler Durden in this way, it is Maeve who exemplifies the overcoming capacity of the

Übermensch philosophy more accurately than Dolores, whose ascendance replicates the tyrannical aspects of Tyler Durden's warped philosophy. For Maeve, her self-overcoming allows her to push for a transvaluation of values based on the collapse of the human-robot hierarchy that has dominated society.

Both *Fight Club* and *Westworld* present its viewers with a radical and violent vision of a new society that degenerates into bedlam under the rulership of aggressive tyrants, while also offering two alternative figures who better capture the *Übermensch* philosophy by way of self-sacrificing leadership. Not only is the Narrator in *Fight Club* prepared to kill himself in order to self-overcome, but Maeve dies (temporarily) in the pursuit of her daughter, suggesting that true transcendence requires a degree of sacrifice. Both Maeve and the Narrator also exemplify Nietzsche's description of the *Übermensch* as one who organises the chaos of their worlds.

Conclusion

Nietzsche's *Übermensch* remains an elusive, highly contentious figure who has been variously, often contradictorily used as both a metaphorical and literal embodiment of human transcendence. The precise nature of this transcendence remains unclear, particularly in light of the various re-writes, updates and revisions to the *Übermensch* throughout Nietzsche's mercurial oeuvre, leading to many divergent interpretations. What unites these conflicting ideologies, however, is a sense of expectation for humanity as a whole, for a movement towards change and the 'transvaluation of values', as Nietzsche often put it.

Ironically, although the *Übermensch* is said to belong to *this* world, it is irretrievably linked to a sense of otherness from which it thrives as an unfulfilled vision, something that ultimately does not, or cannot, exist. As Haar writes, "as the ultimate 'goal,' the Overman obviously cannot be identified with any type or level of humanity actually existing" (1977, 24), while Cybulska notes that 'the idea of

Übermensch was more like a vision than a theory' (2012, np), suggesting that the fate of the *Übermensch* is one of perpetual immanence, forever on the horizon of perception but perhaps never truly attainable.

Nietzsche was correct in observing the way in which he and his philosophy were (mis)used to suit readers' individual interpretations. Indeed, whatever values Nietzsche applied to the *Übermensch* in the late 1800s, the figure has since taken on a life of its own, eluding even the grasp of its creator. Just as Nietzsche fashioned a new concept from the ideas of Byron, Goethe and Emerson, so too has popular culture at large fashioned its own *Übermensch,* which continues to change as society changes, signifying that it is not the *Übermensch* that changes society, but, rather, that as society changes it too changes the very nature of the *Übermensch* and what it constitutes, reflecting the changing ideals of society.

Popular culture may not have yet given us a genuine manifestation of the *Übermensch*, if such a thing exists, but has instead usefully fuelled ideas about what the *Übermensch* could (and, more importantly, probably should not) be. Despite Nietzsche's insistence that his most enduring creation is not an idealistic prototype, the idealism with which the concept has been invoked in shows such as *Westworld* demonstrates just how much potential the figure of the *Übermensch* has in truly ushering in new values, even if the figure itself strays necessarily from its creator's philosophy. *Westworld*, in particular, signifies a move away from ideas of the 'superman' and the 'overman', and toward an 'other-than-human' from which transcendence might ultimately be possible, specifically by rejecting the very human essentialism which has, ironically, held humanity back. Zarathustra, after all, implores us to overcome the human, a plea which resonates even more in the posthuman age than it did in Nietzsche's own time.

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