**Lecture note 1: Introduction - What does it mean to be human?**

      This first lecture starts with this question: What does it mean to be human? It’s a question we will constantly ask in the next five weeks. What does it mean to be human? It seems easy to answer. Someone would say the human has consciousness and intentionality, whereas non-human doesn’t. However, once we observe animals around us - no matter they are the pets that live with us as family members, the animals being fed and reproduced for food, or the wild animals that sometimes invades human’s habitat or being invaded by human - we find that animals also have consciousness and intentionality that we very often neglect or ignore. There are also many debates about whether machines have consciousness and intentionality or not. We feel like threatened when we see machines and robots have some kind of intention beyond human’s control. Sonny, the robot who dreams in Issac Asimov’s short story, “I, Robot” (Issac Asimov 1950; film adoption in 2014), is a very good example for the uncontrollable artificial intelligence consciousness and intentionality. Plants also have a certain kind of consciousness and intentionality, even though it is not easily graspable to us. They show their intentions in leaning towards sunshine and growing together in a certain pattern for survival (and for beauty, as botanist Robin Kimmerer says). The claim that only human has consciousness and intentionality is, then, gradually weaken. It seems that human constructs the concepts of “consciousness” and “intentionality” to differentiate themselves from others and to tautologically credit themselves as human and thus being able to be in charge of decision making and logical thinking.

      Someone claims that human is the only being that is able to communicate through language. While this claim is true, we need to question the background setting of this claim. We clearly know that communication cannot be achieved with *only* language. It is a process of an assemblage of interconnection that eye contact, touching, smelling, gestures and body movements, and the other non-human beings and things in the surrounding, so on and so forth, are all involved. Language offers us convenience and affinity. Language also segregates and alienates us. Language separates us from the non-human beings and things and the human others that are considered not speaking specific languages properly and therefore not-fully-human. In other words, language is at the same time a tool of humanization *and*dehumanization. Frantz Fanon’s Black Skin, White Masks explores in depth the aspect of dehumanization in our understanding and practice of language.

      Someone says that human is the only being that has both Reason and emotion. Human is able to control his own emotion with Reason. The well-known origin of modern philosophy - “I think therefore I am” written by Rene Descartes, implies that human has the ability to doubt everything except but one thing, which is, the fact that he doubts. In Descartes’ theorization, the fact that he doubts proves that he, as a human being, has a mind given by God. The mind gives him the ability to think, the ability that no other being has. In addition, the Cartesian dualism that conceptually separates the immaterial mind and the material body came into form. The material body connects to the external world, whereas the immaterial mind connects to God. The mind of Reason has the ability to control the body and the external environment. As we find how thoroughly Cartesian dualism permeates our daily thinking, we are also aware of the danger of it. Imagine this situation: you are having an argument with a person. Suddenly, that person gave up reasoning and communicating with you and simply criticizes you that you are being too emotional. What does it mean? Isn’t it implying that you have a weak mind that is not fully able to control your emotion or body? Isn’t it also very often implying that you are not well-educated, well-cultured, modernized, or civilized? Where, then, is the boundary of the definition of human that this criticism is setting?

      Someone argues that scientifically speaking, the human being is the most evolved because he has the ability to walk upright. We have to be cautious with why the label of “being the most evolved” is so easily placed. Why a certain way of using body can easily lead to the idea of being the most evolved in comparison to other ways of using the body? Human beings do not have the tentacles like octopi, ultrasound body technology like dolphins, and wings like birds and flyable dinosaurs. The idea of evolution in this sense is somehow utterly limited and anthropocentric. Another example: when the European conquerors arrived the Americas in the early colonial period, they categorized the indigenous people as animals because these people swim in the ways that the Europeans would not do back then. How we use our bodies is always deeply involved in how we define what it means to be properly human.

      There are still so many traits being widely used in setting the boundary of human - reading ability, intellectuality, religion (which very often discredits the idea of spirituality as not human enough), economics, gender system, so on and so forth. However, our task in thinking with science fictions is to break the boundary of human. When we stand at the human’s position, the definitions of human and non-human and the boundary of human seem all making sense. But when we stand at the non-human’s position - the positions of the animal, plant, alien, machine, cyborg, monster, ghost, and last but not least, the dehumanized human others - how does human look like? How do these boundaries look like? Are they still conceptually effective? Or are they blurry? Let’s be playful with the visions in perceiving this world. Don’t think of ourselves as always human. Once we learn how to empathize with the non-human and even change our position into theirs, we can also change our visions. And science fiction, amazingly, provides us with a platform to travel to non-human’s worlds.