Metaphysics and the Moving Image: Paradise Exposed, by Trevor Mowchun, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2023, 280 pp., $120.00 (hardback), ISBN: 9781474493901

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At the beginning of *Metaphysics and the Moving Image: Paradise Exposed*, Trevor Mowchun characterizes philosophical metaphysics "as the idealistic and often systematic pursuit of essences or absolutes, the grasping of which would give us 'truth,' at long last" (1). By the time we reach Friedrich Nietzsche at the end of the nineteenth century, however, the history of Western philosophical metaphysics, which had sought through thought "a mirror for the objective representation of immutable truth" (72), comes up empty-handed, discovering instead that it is in fact impossible to extract the "absolute from the flow and flux" (1), that "generating any absolute once and for all" (1) had merely been a philosopher's dream. How might we respond to the end of *this* metaphysics? What might a *transformed* metaphysics look like? And, what has cinema to do with it?

Mowchun's tantalizing thesis is that cinema (as represented especially by Robert Bresson, Andrei Tarkovsky, Terrence Malick, and Béla Tarr) serves, in part, as a metaphysical consolation for philosophy's own frustrated aspirations. The failure of the quest for an absolute, for certainty and truth, initiates a shift from philosophy's pursuit of the *discovery* of unvarnished reality by way of discursive thinking to cinema's *creation* of such truth by way of imagistic showing. For at the very same time that philosophical metaphysics was forced to come to terms with its own demise, the urge to grasp the world as a whole and in itself was renewed, albeit in transformed fashion, through the emergence of cinema. As Mowchun puts it, "the world as the image of God fades away, cinema as the world in its own image intercedes, reenchanting the world by appealing not to a creator but rather to the creativity inherent within life itself" (3). For in reply to the death of God and the end of metaphysics, cinema says, "'I am the *rebirth* of the world in its own image; paradise exposed'" (2). What does this nineteenth-century coincidence between the death of God and the birth of film entail? What are we to make of the fact that the end of metaphysics and the death of God have given birth to cinema, to the world viewed without God?

Mowchun, for his part, in this respect follows Stanley Cavell, for whom "the moving image becomes the primal actor, or enactor, of a clandestine and uncanny revelation" (39). By reversing the "tide of subject-oriented mastery" (75), "metaphysical film" (45), contends Mowchun, reveals the world pristinely, allowing us for the first time to view it as if it were unseen, a "cinematic viewlessness" (65), an "image of the world made by the world, the world's self-portrait" (77), thereby permitting us to "grasp the ungraspable" (62). (At least to some extent, or certainly more so, anyway, than the discursive and linguistic practice of rationalistic philosophy had permitted us to do so previously.) Although the end of metaphysics for philosophy involves the project of complete and perfect knowledge being "stripped from our hands" (75), cinema is the consummation of realism, inasmuch as it affords us "a total image of the world in the form of the world in its own image" (77). But if "the death of God and the birth of film, the end of metaphysics and the rise of ontology, automatism, and photo-realism in classical film theory are decisively and inextricably linked in time" (76), where does that leave philosophy, film, and film-philosophy today? Mowchun's study aims to answer that question, by examining the various dimensions of this compensatory substitution from philosophical to cinematic metaphysics.

In its "philosophical arrogance" (55), traditional metaphysics aspired to grasp the world in itself, yet only found itself locked within its own conceptual, linguistic, and ideological appearances. As Mowchun says, its "ultimate province is language and not the world" (12). If, however, as Cavell contends, "cinematic projection becomes a world projection" (78), it thereby fulfills, as André Bazin

likewise contends, the metaphysical goal of grasping the world as a whole through cinema's own "innate propensity towards realism" (77). It does so partly through *epoché*, modifying our mundane, habitual relation to the world. Viewing a film is in this respect a phenomenological experience, for rather than remaining in a state of "practical absorption *in* the world [in which] the world itself, the being of things, is entirely missed" (32), a film, as a work of art, "can excise a thing from the roar and flux of functionality" (23). The metaphysics of cinema, which is able to "rattle the cage of consciousness" (175), can reawaken us to the world in itself, so long, of course, as we do not succumb to the "autopilot stupor of habitual movie consciousness" (171).

Mowchun's study turns its attention to three directors, Tarkovsky, Bresson, and Malick, whose films are in their own ways metaphysical, insofar as they all reveal the world in its own image. Mowchun accordingly quotes with approval Tarkovsky's own statement in his book *Sculpting in Time*, in which the latter says that cinema's ambition is "'to bring the real world to the audience, the world as it actually is'" (167) on screen, by disclosing, as Mowchun says, "the muscles and tendons of a pre-linguistic awareness" (167). This return to prelinguistic, antepredicative experience of which Tarkovsky speaks, a dimension of the perceived world that will be familiar to readers of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, is at work in Malick. In *Days of Heaven* (1978), for instance, the world on screen, the world through the cinematic image, that is to say, the world viewed as if it were unseen by us, resists "the illusion of a world that is nothing more than an extension of our self-image" (91). Because Malick invites us to "view the world in its own image, to let beings be" (88), it heals "our estrangement from Being" (87). Here film, the "*mechanical artform*" (105), unveils the world as it would be seen if it were still unseen—put differently, the automatism of film serves as a "specter of grace and paradise exposed" (107). In turn, Mowchun turns his attention to the automatism of film.

Bresson's filmmaking is seen as championing such an automatic approach. Rather than an actor who performs, Bresson prefers models who pose; hence his famous instruction to his films' models: "don't think!" (135). Through "automatic acting" (124), as it were, Bresson's models "display their being by coming to presence as opposed to delivering a performance … the models must not act, they must not think as actors think about playing a role; they must *be*—not another being or their own being, not anybody but *nobody*" (134). On one hand, cinema is therefore unlike the theater—instead of playing a role, or putting on a performance, the actor, or rather, the model, must become unconscious of any such attempt at performativity, and rather must be entirely natural. "What better way," so Mowchun continues, "to enter a state of grace than by losing oneself, shedding layers of consciousness, whittling the ego down to a humble nub" (145). On the other hand, because the "Bressonian model is an attempt to make a puppet out of a human being" (154), cinema of this kind is "conditioned by theatricality, spectacle" (135). At any rate, Bresson's elision of his film's models' inner life is meant to depersonalize the world, to unveil something about the world that withstands and resists any human attempt to tame it.

This involves a shift from the human world to nature. But how is it possible to film nature, or to make a film *about* nature, to tell a *story* about nature, without thereby lapsing into the very all-too-human narrativity and theatricality such metaphysical cinema aims to subvert? Is what Bazin calls the "*dramaturgy* of Nature" (164) simply an oxymoron? Mowchun turns again to Malick, this time to *The Thin Red Line* (1998). Malick's World War Two film leads us to ask: "What is being done to nature when its aestheticzation prompts a shift from mere beauty to a deeper profoundity?" (163). The film shows us a world that is "dangerously sublime rather than innocuously beautiful" (180), for it "renders insignificant the very war it labors to accurately reconstruct and, by extension, the storytelling conventions of the war genre" (166), all with an eye to letting "the world happen or let nature take its course" (169). Said otherwise, Malick's metaphysical cinema aims to free the world from the "authority of consciousness" (171).

Whereas Malick's enigmatic image of the world leaves sufficient ambiguity to allow for the possibility that one might interpret "the book of nature" as not entirely God-forsaken, Mowchun concludes his study with a discussion of Tarr's *The Turin Horse* (2011), a film inspired by the apocryphal story of Nietzsche's collapse after encountering the whipped horse, and a film that very much epitomizes Nietzsche's conception of the death of God. Mowchun writes, "Beginning after the end of Nietzsche's philosophical work, in the wake of his mental breakdown in 1889 and before his death in 1900, hence beginning before the birth of cinema (1896) and after the death of God (1882), *The Turin Horse* imagines the birth of film *before* film-as-such and *after* philosophy's dismantling of metaphysic and reevaluation of all values. It imagines the world as it was before 'the world in its own image' and after 'the world in the image of God.' It therefore imagines the world '*as it is*.'" (212). Evacuating any residual haven for the supersensible or absolute, Tarr gives us a vision of the world that is solely sensible, completely devoid of God, what Mowchun characterizes as an "ecstatic yet precarious emancipation from the absolute" (216), in which the film's events unfold across a week culminating in the "the sixth day of decreation" (227). "In Tarr's vision," says Mowchun, "the end of metaphysics gives way to the cinematic dawning and redistribution of life in the luminous materiality of things" (215). We have reached the end of metaphysics in philosophy to the return of metaphysics in film—from the world seen as God's creation to now one made in its own image without God. And in the wake of the death of God, of any absolute truth or meaning, what humans do is *create* meaning. Tarr's own Nietzchean study of Nietzche's vision of the death of God therefore suggests that movies themselves are to be used to construct a view of reality in light of the world's lack of any absolute meaning.

We accordingly have come full-circle by the end of Mowchun's study, having begun with a statement of Nietzsche's death of God and now ending with an analysis of a film that cinematically reckons with what that death signifies for the very practice of cinema itself. Mowchun, for his own part, finds a measure of hope in the bleak situation: "May the death of God find new life as pure light—light before being, or the being of light—a light without source—cinematic sorcery" (227). Like Cavell, who had seen cinema as coming from below, as a form of magic and the occult, Mowchun sees the audiovisual camera as being a kind of wand: "It makes the world appear and disappear, leaving it to the filmmaker to remake it and decide: what kind of world?" (229). What, then, "are these cinematic gazes looking for?" (163). Paradoxically, they are seeking the "view from nowhere," the world as it is in itself, abandoned to itself without God.

In conclusion, I should simply like to note that one may doubt that the end of metaphysics truly entails the death of God. Just as the first philosopher that Mowchun mentions in his study is Nietzsche, and the first director Malick, so too let us conclude with a final word on Nietzsche and Malick here. Rather than seeing cinema as a fundamentally demiurgic medium that *à la* Tarr attempts to make the world appear on its own, from out of nothing, as it were, we might see the disclosive light of cinema as capable of revealing God's presence that itself can be known through the things that are visible. Malick's own films (particularly the deeply-theological "weightless trilogy") might be seen as the most illustrative cases in point. In recent studies on Malick that appeal to the work of phenomenologists such as Jean-Louis Chrétien, Michel Henry, Jean-Yves Lacoste, and Jean-Luc Marion, film-philosophers like John Caruana, James Lorenz, and Joel Mayward see the end of metaphysics in philosophy as entailing, not the death of God, but rather the "death of the death of God." On this Christian theological view of things (which happens to be my own), the gift of cinema would in this respect be no different than any other gift we enjoy in this life—"Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning" (James 1:17).

Although I happen to disagree strongly with Mowchun's central contention that the end of metaphysics in philosophy must mean taking the death of God for granted, *Metaphysics and the Moving Image: Paradise Exposed* is no doubt a remarkably engrossing, admirably passionate, and refreshingly idiosyncratic meditation on film and philosophy that gives much to think.