

**Book Review – *Metaphysics and the Moving Image: “Paradise Exposed”*, by
Trevor Mowchun.**

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Trevor Mowchun’s *Metaphysics and the Moving Image: “Paradise Exposed”* is an illuminating contribution to the fields of film studies within the context of nineteenth and twentieth century Western philosophy, particularly the work of Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger. As both a scholar and filmmaker, Mowchun aims to bridge the gap between philosophy, the philosophy of art and the artform of cinema itself. In the introduction, titled “The Death of God, the Birth of Film and the New Metaphysics”, Mowchun first makes the claim that it is no coincidence that Nietzsche’s attack of metaphysical truth at the end of the nineteenth century occurred in the same breath as the rise of cinema, a medium which records and reflects the ‘true’ world. In addition, Mowchun posits that with the “death of God” (and as a result the death of Western metaphysics), cinema has succeeded philosophy in its ability to represent and engage with metaphysical thought. The rest of the book attempts to build on this over-encompassing argument.

The first chapter, titled ‘Image Breakthrough: Disclosure and Derailment in Painting, Photography and Film’, provides a philosophical backbone to Mowchun’s arguments. First this chapter delves into the struggle and overlap between the philosophies of Heidegger and Nietzsche on art. It then briefly explores philosophies behind painting and photographic art before exploring three influential ontologies within the realm of photographic arts: *Camera Lucida* (Barthes, 1981), *The Ontology of the Photographic Image/The Myth of Total Cinema* (Bazin and Gray, 1960; Bazin, 1967) and *The World Viewed* (Cavell, 1979). These seminal works serve as a basis for the subsequent sections. Mowchun illustrates these philosophies with several case studies. Unlike later analyses in the book that focus on entire films, these studies dissect individual scenes. While this approach broadens the scope of examination, it also arguably leads to underdeveloped case studies, particularly evident for the film *Stalker* (1979) directed by Andrei Tarkovsky. This film is also unique among the other works studied due to its distinct socio-cultural context within the U.S.S.R. While only one scene is studied in the chapter, the entire film engages both narratively and visually with metaphysical philosophy.

Chapter 2, titled ‘The Evolution of the Concept of “World” from Philosophy to Film’, focuses on how film constructs the world in its own image. Mowchun compares this to philosophy as a discipline and argues that philosophy also draws from the universe, representing itself through human thought. Similarly, cinema is concerned with representing the universe, specifically through the film’s mechanical unconsciousness, which allows the world and objects within it to represent themselves in ways that can be alien to the viewer’s perception of the world. The chapter concludes with a critical discussion of Stanley Cavell’s interpretation of Heidegger and its relevance to the world depicted in Terence Malick’s *Days of Heaven* (1978).

Chapter 3, titled ‘Paradise Exposed: Psychic Automatism in Film’, begins with a stream-of-conscious prose piece, a “primer”, based loosely on the idea of grace as actions executed without awkward self-awareness, drawing from Franz Kafka. Mowchun compares this concept of grace to the naturally recording of reality by films through automatism. This argument draws from Kleist’s metaphor of a puppet master moving strings to gracefully simulate a human dancing (Kleist, 1982). In Mowchun’s use of the analogy the filmmaker assumes the role of the puppet-master, using the medium of film to orchestrate an automatic representation of reality. The exploration of grace through automatism is further elucidated through case studies of Robert Bresson’s films, emphasising his directing philosophy and use of amateur actors.

Chapter 4, titled ‘Nature, Whose Death Shines a Light: Exteriority and Overexposure in The Thin Red Line’, revisits Terence Malick’s work, specifically analysing *The Thin Red Line* (1998). This chapter explores how films connect three facets of nature: the human, the natural and the dramatic presence of the natural in a cinematic world. It discusses the representation of nature’s presence in film, its immeasurability, ability to over-encompass life and how it is exposed through metaphor, language and culture. It also highlights the diverse approaches to representing nature in cinema and analyses their emergence in Malick’s film.

The final chapter, Chapter 5, titled, ““Mother, I am Dumb...”: The Reevaluation of Friedrich Nietzsche in *The Turin Horse*’, eschews a formal conclusion. Instead, it briefly considers *The Turin Horse* (2011) by Béla Tarras as a rumination on the book’s opening arguments. This film is seen to reflect the central thesis of the book by cinematically exploring metaphysical philosophy against the backdrop of Nietzsche’s mental decline. The title of the film and its opening text refer to the apocryphal Turin horse which supposedly caused Nietzsche’s mental breakdown after witnessing its brutal treatment. Mowchun contemplates

Nietzsche's assertion that there is no God without the process of belief and suggests that cinema, as a visual marvel, can reaffirm that same belief.

This book conveys passion and an authority on its subjects and the author must be commended for skilfully examining the topics at length. However, despite Mowchun's repeated assertions that the moving image has taken the role of metaphysical thought from the written word, the book falls short in fully justifying cinematic exceptionalism. As a result, the central claim of the book's introduction remains unrealised. It is noteworthy that several of the films analysed are adaptations of literary works, such as *Stalker* and *The Thin Red Line*. A comment on the effect of intertextuality between these films and their sources might have helped to illustrate how exactly can the reader distinguish between metaphysics in cinema from metaphysics in literature. Similarly, despite claims in the introduction of the moving image as a broad concept, even including animated imagery outside of movies (p. 7), the examples given are limited to American and European live-action films, with two of them made by the same director.

These filmmakers covered by the book are all connected in some way. They are inspired by each other and are also influenced by the very philosophers central to Mowchun's core argument. For example, Malik's philosophical background, particularly his study of Heidegger before becoming a filmmaker (Woessner, 2011), and *The Turin Horse*, which draws both from Nietzsche's biography and his philosophy (Steven, 2017), both exemplify the intertwining of philosophy and film making. It is unclear whether these works represent a broader focus on metaphysics in cinema or if they are only specific examples of brilliant filmmakers who draw from philosophy in their own work. Despite these flaws, perhaps a measure of the book's success is how it provides insight into its own filmmaker/author in the same way as some of the cited essays reflect on their own filmmakers/authors. In the spirit of this, a brief reflection or note on the author's experience as a filmmaker would have been appreciated.

Despite some issues with its central thesis, the work accomplishes many of its objectives. Mowchun adeptly illuminates the overlap between philosophy and film studies and makes a significant contribution to the scholarly discourse surrounding Terence Malik's work by Stanley Cavell (1979: 2005). Furthermore, it explores the intricate connections between film, the philosophy of art and metaphysics. Although the author expressed hope that the book be appropriate for a general audience, it is much better suited for those who find themselves, like the author, in the intersection between the disciplines of philosophy and film studies.

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