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What Is the Metaphysical Screen?

Artistic Form, Content, and Philosophy

Early in Terrence Malick's film *The Thin Red Line* (1998), Private Witt (Jim Caviezel) is speaking to First Sergeant Edward Welsh (Sean Penn). Witt has been AWOL, and was only recently discovered and imprisoned aboard a troop carrier ship. The two men are speaking of existential and metaphysical things—of death and possibly life thereafter and of what constitutes a man. With grizzled demeanor and clipped speech, Welsh insists that a man is nothing in this world, and that "there ain't no world but this one." Witt, with a faraway certainty, disagrees: "I've seen another world," he claims.

What is the significance of the sorts of worlds we see onscreen in films and television programs, and how are they constructed both on their own terms and in relation to reality? What answers can spectators glean in response to these questions by paying close attention to the metaphysical screen—understood as the ways in which the story-worlds of film and television are constructed artistically through form and content, rendering metaphysical ideas such as free will, personal identity, and goodness in different ways? I suggest that the spectator's aesthetic experience of certain films and television programs can be sensitive to the artistic exploration and transformation of the world

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of ordinary experience, and as a result, experiences of the metaphysical screen provide opportunities to rethink, refine, and contemplate anew our assumptions regarding selfhood and the nature of the world. Across the accumulated experiences of a range of films and television programs, spectators can become attuned to the ways in which certain concepts are explored in different and even contradictory ways: we are not given easy answers or solutions to philosophical problems; rather, cinematic and televisual art can examine such concepts and provide us with new ways of thinking about them in light of our experience with their artistic presentation.

There is a cluster of ideas that organize this chapter and the chapters that follow: the interplay of form and content, aesthetic experience, aesthetic cognitivism, mimesis, and film and television worlds. I will work through each of these in turn and discuss how they help in understanding our spectatorial experience of the metaphysical screen in terms of the questions outlined earlier regarding the ways in which film and television worlds artistically refigure the world of ordinary experience, and what might be gained from our experience of such worlds. First, though, a more detailed understanding of metaphysics and how it relates to the present concerns is necessary so as to outline the aspects of film and television I will explore later.

Metaphysics in Film and Television

Defining metaphysics in a way that is sensitive to the shifts in focus and meaning across its history is a difficult task. For Stephen Mumford, the topics of metaphysics cannot be observed in the way we observe ordinary, physical objects, but they can be abstracted from such objects (2012, 107). In this sense, Mumford's account shares a characteristic feature of Peter van Inwagen's understanding of metaphysics, in that it "attempts to get behind appearances and . . . tell the ultimate truth about things" (2014, 4). Van Inwagen, however, goes further still and suggests that metaphysics attempts to answer three sets of questions about the world. The first regards the world itself: What are its features, what is it like, and what does it (the world) contain? (4). The second regards reasons for the world's existence: Why does the world exist in the manner it does, and why does it exist at all? (4). The third regards humankind's relation to the world:

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What is the nature of this relation, and how do we understand the place of humankind's existence in the world? (4). The account of the metaphysical screen I develop throughout this book—anchored as it is in concepts such as causality and free will, goodness, qualia, and personal identity—tends toward the first and third sets of questions.

My interest in the artistic exploration of metaphysical concepts in film and television has several motivations. First, while the metaphysics *of* film (and less so, television) has generated a great deal of literature—addressing questions of the nature (ontology) of film and moving images, for example—sorely lacking is a systematic consideration of metaphysical concepts *through* films and television programs and why this consideration might be significant to our understanding of such concepts, as well as to better establishing the importance of art and experience to our understanding of philosophical ideas. Second, work that has been conducted at the intersection of film and ethics has fruitfully examined the ways that films can illuminate ethical concerns in a distinctive way as well as the way in which philosophical ethics can enhance and deepen our understanding of the spectatorial experience of films and of the films themselves (e.g., Sinnerbrink 2015; Stadler 2008b; Choi and Frey 2013). With this in mind, the account of the metaphysical screen I offer here acts as the kernel of what can develop into something akin to that of cinema and ethics scholarship.

However, there is a distinctive challenge to any attempt to examine metaphysics through or in films and television programs. As articulated earlier, the ultimate concerns of metaphysics are abstract. Looking to film for ethical insight, for example, does not necessarily pose the same potential issues as looking to film for metaphysical insight, given the ways in which screen narratives can problematize or illustrate ethical quandaries. However, as Mumford notes, while metaphysics is "concerned with the world, [it] is not so much concerned with that part of it that can be observed" (2012, 100). Metaphysical concepts cannot necessarily be observed as such; however, we can observe their effects, or at least contemplate their effects and reason back to the abstract concepts themselves. The aesthetic experience of works of the metaphysical screen affords spectators the opportunity to rethink, or contemplate, metaphysical concepts in light of their artistic exploration in certain films and television programs, thereby potentially informing our understanding of how these concepts function in

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the ordinary world. Therefore, it is precisely because of the abstract nature of metaphysics that the metaphysical screen is philosophically significant, in that it narratively and stylistically explores metaphysical concepts such as those mentioned earlier.

These concerns have been given expression in an earlier work addressing a different art form: T. S. Eliot's consideration of metaphysical poetry, notably the works of seventeenth-century English poets John Donne, Andrew Marvell, and Richard Crashaw. Eliot argues that metaphysical poetry is "that which occurs when an idea, or what is only ordinarily apprehensible as an intellectual statement, is translated in sensible form; so that the world of sense is actually enlarged" (1993, 53–54) and "[so] that it elevates sense for a moment to regions ordinarily attainable only by abstract thought" (55). Two relevant points present themselves. First, given that metaphysical concepts are being artistically transformed into narrative art, to expect such concepts to be presented as they are in a philosophical argument or proposition would be misguided. Because the so-called realm of ideas is given, on the metaphysical screen, an artistic life, any philosophical significance drawn out through a spectator's aesthetic experience relies on treating those works as artworks rather than philosophical propositions. Second, and implied in Eliot's comments, is a certain understanding regarding the inseparability of form and content.

Arthur C. Danto suggests that with art, "if you can answer two questions—these questions really were articulated by Hegel—what's it about—what's the content—and how does it embody the content, you've probably gone as far as anybody knows how to go" (2014, 26). Murray Smith extends Danto's insights into the domain of film: in adopting Danto's understanding of Hegel's definition of art—"the sensuous embodiment of the idea"—Smith notes that this "is a way of recognizing the ideational content of art, while insisting upon the difference between art and philosophy" (2016,193). As Smith suggests, the difference between Hegel and Danto in the consideration of art and its relation to philosophy is that whereas Hegel emphasizes their differences, Danto looks to highlight what is shared. Smith, therefore, rightly looks to correct the balance and acknowledge "both the ideas and their 'sensuous embodiment' in works of film art" (193) as a means of addressing the relation, specifically, between film and philosophy. (I will return to this question later.)

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The understanding of form and content that I adopt here is one advanced by Katherine Thomson-Jones. She suggests that the "thesis of inseparability states that (1) it is impossible to have the same content in two different forms; and (2) it is impossible to have the same form in two different contents" (2005, 375). She identifies three central accounts of form and content: "the container account, the functional account, and the semantic account" (377). The container account understands form as container and content as that which is contained; the functional account identifies "form independently from content as the function of the artwork"; the semantic account designates content as the meaning of a work, and form as the means by which that meaning is expressed or presented: "the way meaning is made manifest" (377). As Thomson-Jones notes, "In its application to our understanding of representational art, the thesis of inseparability invokes the semantic account of form and content" (377). This is the version I develop here.

Thomson-Jones (2005) claims that "a work's treatment of its subject constitutes a certain perspective on, attitude toward, or interpretation of that subject" (381). In the case of the metaphysical screen, it is not just that metaphysical concepts are artistically explored but that part of the exploration involves the expression of particular perspectives on, attitudes toward, or interpretations of metaphysical concepts. Therefore, to take the following chapter as an example, one way in which films and television programs artistically explore the metaphysical concepts of free will and causality is through different narrative forms—such as forking-path narratives, time-travel narratives, and what I term spatially convergent narratives (among others). In works that adopt such narratives, I identify free will and causality as the unifying metaphysical concept. However, in the artistic transformation of the concepts of free will and causality into different narrative forms, they thus present different perspectives on, attitudes toward, or interpretations of those concepts.

The significance of our aesthetic experience with such works now becomes clearer. Thomson-Jones suggests that "insofar as aesthetic experience involves attention to form, appreciation of an artwork *qua* art may involve appreciation of its perspective, attitude, or interpretation of an aspect of human experience" (2005, 381). In an aesthetic experience with a work of the metaphysical screen that

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adopts a certain perspective on, attitude toward, or interpretation of free will and causality, spectators will be attentive to the formal properties of these works and thus have the opportunity through such experience to contemplate how free will and causality function in the ordinary world, in light of their aesthetic experience with the work. As Noël Carroll notes, "Attending with understanding to the formal, and/or otherwise aesthetic and/or expressive properties of an artwork are examples of aesthetic experience" (2012,173). Therefore, an aesthetic experience in the context of this book will be one where the spectator is attentive to the ways in which the formal, expressive, and aesthetic features of an artwork are artistically exploring particular metaphysical concepts. For André Bazin, "As good a way as any towards understanding what a film is trying to say to us is to know how it is saying it" (2010, 98). An aesthetic experience is one where the spectator is attentive to the inseparability of form and content.

At the most basic level, the sort of attention that is necessary for experiencing a film or television program aesthetically is reflected in the fact that, while there is much that is shared between contemporary television and film, one needs to be sensitive to the differences between these art forms too. The recent trend in television scholarship to adopt an aesthetic approach that favors detailed consideration of the formal characteristics of television certainly informs treating it alongside film, though one notable difference is in the narrative form of film and television. Ted Nannicelli identifies a key distinguishing feature between film and television as that of "temporal prolongation" that "carries with it connotations of a temporally unfolding, yet organically unified structure" (2016, 65). Alongside temporal prolongation there is also the feature of interruption. Television series, even in the contemporary age of Netflix and other streaming services that do not need to work around advertising breaks within episodes, still maintain a formal structure of episodes and seasons. Both features—temporal prolongation and interruption—are characteristic of television and generate a different sort of experience than that of films, which are, in general, temporally shorter though uninterrupted in terms of narrative form.

There is an authorial point worth briefly touching on here: other medium-specific features (such as screen size and sound technology) will likely dictate the sorts of aesthetic decisions filmmakers and showrunners will make in creating their works. (Television pro-

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grams will potentially limit extreme long shots and will design sound around the technological capacities of televisions, for example.) The convergence of media and the breakdown of expected normative viewing conditions further complicate the ways in which films and television programs remain separate mediums. Without discounting these important technological developments and their influence on the aesthetic features of films and television programs, my approach with regard to the works considered in this book emphasizes the medium-specific features as they are embodied in the work, rather than the ways that the constraints of each medium will influence the artistic decisions made by creators.

How, then, can the particulars of television's narrative form be put to productive use, and how does this shape television's use of form and content to artistically explore metaphysical concepts? Krzysztof Kieślowski's television program *Dekalog* (1989–1990) offers an instructive example. Although the narrative does not develop in a linear sense from episode to episode, and two of the episodes were made into films (the episodes have been referred to as "TV films" or something similar), the program was made for Polish television and involves a narrative form that uses both interruption and prolongation (though its complex and unique take on the latter is not as straightforward as that of more standard television programs). Its structure could even be seen as a precursor to the limited series and compendium series that have proliferated in contemporary television.

As we might expect given the title of the program, many analyses of it seek to establish the magnitude of the connection to the Ten Commandments (Kickasola 2004, 162–163). Writing about the program, Fr. Marek Lis suggests that "*Dekalog* is not a series (meaning a collection of dramatic episodes featuring a closed group of characters) but a cycle, which . . . does not form a continuous fictional story but consists of films devoted to different themes" (2016, 21). As mentioned, while temporal prolongation is not present in the typical sense—in the manner of a linear development of story across episodes and subsequently seasons—it is still important to consider *Dekalog* as a whole work. This is in part demanded by the narrative form of the work, which, regardless of how strident we find the connection between commandments and episodes, is relational. Each episode informs the other, perhaps not as spectators of television might expect—such as through the introduction and resolution of plots within an episode,

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with a larger arc unifying a season, or through the use of the prolonged narrative form of television to gradually and deeply develop a set of characters. Instead, *Dekalog* uses the interruption and prolongation of television's narrative form to develop more subtle connections across episodes. There is still a story present—one that accumulates through smaller stories that are unrelated in the conventional sense, but, in fact, are related when considered in terms of the program's metaphysical preoccupations. Like the form of the Ten Commandments that motivated *Dekalog*, each individual episode can be taken as an isolated and freestanding part, but to appreciate the significance of the work is to take each part in consideration of every other part—to examine the work as a whole. In this sense, attention to the prolongation and interruption present in the program's narrative form is necessary for understanding how *Dekalog* explores metaphysical concepts.

The overarching metaphysical concern of the program regards the nature of one's being in the world, which is drawn out in each episode through a moral confrontation experienced by the central character(s) of that episode. However, these are not separate worlds, so to speak—they are different pockets of the same world. The largely stable setting of an apartment block in which many of the characters live means that they make brief appearances in some of the episodes. The setting combined with the ordinary and unremarkable intersection of characters from different episodes helps to establish the coherence and unity of the world as it is developed throughout the entire program. Furthermore, the presence of the same actor (Artur Basciś) who plays different background characters in most of the episodes of *Dekalog* further establishes a connection across episodes, inviting spectators to maintain an appreciative balance between individual episodes and the program as a whole, unified work.

In her analysis of *Dekalog 1*, Vivian Sobchack is concerned not only with this episode but with how Kieślowski's work is emblematic of "the ambiguous nature of the empirically concrete happenstance to which we . . . are always subject" (2004, 85). She continues, suggesting that "as we . . . are materially embodied in the space-time of the world with other objective beings and things, we are engaged in incalculable encounters whose scope and consequences exceed not only our vision but also our agency" (85). In considering *Dekalog 1*, therefore, Sobchack looks to draw out how our concrete embodied existence is not just concrete and embodied but ultimately social and

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ethical. For Sobchack, Kieślowski illustrates through his work that we cannot possibly imagine or speculate on the extent or "scope" of our actions, and this facet of our existence necessarily influences how we understand the ethical dimension of our lives. Sobchack examines the moral dimension of *Dekalog* through the encounters between characters and the effects and consequences of such encounters. However—and in line with the comments offered earlier—in examining the metaphysical dimension of the work, I am interested in extrapolating from such encounters to the concepts that underpin, shape, or inform them.

In the case of *Dekalog*, Sobchack's emphasis is on the limits (or lack of limits) of consequences of action (beyond agency and action), whereas mine is on the metaphysical ground for the characters' being in the world—the metaphysical conditions and qualities of the world, prior to action and agency, that inform, restrict, and make possible the very predicament in which characters find themselves. Therefore, considering *Dekalog* as an example of metaphysical art is not to be ignorant of its central emphasis on the existential dynamics of what it is to be human, or of what it means for a person to exist and be immersed in a world. Furthermore, it is not to suggest a cold, abstract, or overly propositional quality to the program—indeed, Kieślowski's entire body of work, and *Dekalog* in particular, is deeply concerned with the quotidian nuances of human existence. Rather, it is to follow its existential concerns in one of the directions to which they lead—the metaphysical ground of existence, and the nature of one's being in the world.

Across its episodes, *Dekalog* uses the embodied existence and encounters of characters as a way of illustrating and narrativizing concepts such as chance and luck, fatality and determinism and free will. As Paul C. Santilli notes,

> A film director may . . . suggest that there are metaphysical and spiritual depths to the scenes being displayed, offering viewers an occasion to reflect on God, freedom, and the human soul. In this respect, film can be taken as a philosophical act expressing ideas about the ground of phenomena, without pretending to offer a conceptual knowledge of that ground. When we watch a good film, we may experience . . . the evocation of what may be life's "deepest essences." (2006, 148)

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Therefore, we shouldn't expect *Dekalog* to offer a treatise, proposition, or argument regarding metaphysics or a range of metaphysical concepts. Rather, through the artistic exploration of metaphysical concepts within televisual form and content, the program offers the opportunity for a different experience of such concepts.

In *Dekalog 1*, we follow Krzysztof (Henryk Baranowski) and his son Paweł (Wojciech Klata). Krzysztof is enamored with technology and science, and his apartment is regularly aglow from the light of his (for the time period) powerful personal computer. Using the computer, Krzysztof and his son calculate the thickness of the ice of the nearby lake to determine whether it is safe to go ice skating. With the computer's confirmation, and after Krzysztof himself tests the ice, Paweł, upon finding a brand-new pair of ice skates intended as a Christmas gift, is allowed by his father to go skating. Krzysztof does not see his son the next day, and after a frantic and panicked attempt at tracking down his location, watches as what appears to be his son's corpse is pulled from beneath the broken shards of ice that were covering the lake.

This episode is generally attached to the first imperative of the Ten Commandments: "Thou shalt not defy me by making other gods thy own" (or "Thou shalt not have strange gods before me"). It is thus largely understood as a caution against idolatry, which is manifest in the program as the materialist objectives and capacities of technology and science. There is a clear juxtaposition of ideas between Krzysztof—a materialist and atheist—and his sister Irena (Maja Komorowska), who is deeply religious, as well as of their personalities as characters. In an early scene, Paweł asks his father about death, and he answers that it is merely the body's functions ceasing to continue. The boy asks what's left afterward, and his father replies that what a person did remains, as well as the memory of that person, citing various features of physiology and personality that might be particular to an individual. Paweł has a similarly complex conversation with his aunt; however, she prefers to speak of living—that living is a gift and that living is the joy in helping others. The boy asks her what God is, and she replies by hugging him, and saying that God is love—a great big hug.

These quiet and simple moments of experience offer ways into the metaphysical themes of the episode and the program as a whole. The details of the environments inform the responses—the cool lighting and bare-bones setting of Krzysztof's apartment reflect his

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own being in the world, that of a clinical scientist enamored with technology. The brightness and warm tones of Irena and her softer, familial décor reflect her own being in the world. Furthermore, the difference in setting and aspects of mise-en-scène (including elements of performance such as gesture and dialogue) relate to the thematic concerns of the episode—it makes sense that one aspect of love is expressed through an aunt's hug of her nephew, while a discussion of life that terminates with the body occurs in the cold and dim. The episode, though, complicates the presence of such ideas, as, upon the extraction of Paweł from the lake, both Irena and Krzysztof stand side by side—arriving at the same place, in the same predicament and set of circumstances, with each character potentially reflecting on their own conversations with Paweł (fig. 1.1). Although the adults are certain in their responses to the world up to this point—to the meaning, ground, and conditions of their existence—it is Paweł who perhaps had the most prescience and insight as to the complexity of a person's existence in the world.

Figure 1.1. Irena and Krzysztof stand side by side in *Dekalog 1*. *Source:* Kieślowski, Krzysztof, dir. *Dekalog 1*. 1988. New York: Criterion, 2016. Blu-ray Disc, 1080p HD.

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In an earlier scene, in another discussion with his father, the young boy opines that "I was so glad in the morning when I managed to get that calculation right, and then the pigeon came for the breadcrumbs; but I went shopping and saw a dead dog. I knelt over him, and I said to myself, what good is it? Who needs the information how long it will take Miss Piggy to catch up with Kermit? It doesn't make any sense." While Paweł seems to suggest that science and technology can't answer the questions he poses—that perhaps there isn't an equation to quantify the pleasures of achievement or the humble joys of nature—the warm glow of love promised by his aunt strikes the boy as equally inadequate to account for the cruel and apparently uncaring death of a dog. The nature of one's being in the world that is manifested in the lives of Paweł's two closest companions—be it existence sustained through divine love or the calculability and predictability of measured, scientific empiricism—is challenged by the quotidian experiences of Paweł himself. These ordinary moments of experience pose challenging metaphysical questions that rattle the young boy's certainty regarding the nature of things, and it takes a far greater tragedy than a dead dog to do the same to Krzysztof and Irena. It is through the experiences of the characters in *Dekalog 1*, and through a range of experiences developed across the series, that the program's artistic exploration of metaphysical concepts, such as the nature of one's being in the world, occurs.

Mimesis and the Worlds of Film and Television

Given the conceptual nature of metaphysics, it will bear (in different ways, and depending on a particular work) certain similarities to the ordinary world. The metaphysical screen offers a way to reflect on the mimetic relation between work and world—between the different ways in which a metaphysical concept can be explored onscreen and how we might understand that concept (free will, for example) to work in our own lives. That is, there is cause to consider how we understand films and television programs to possess a connection to the world of ordinary experience while also operating as worlds themselves.

Developing a proper understanding of mimesis is one way in which we can (1) better make a distinction between different works and their unique artistic merits or qualities, and (2) more thoroughly

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understand the relation between the worlds of films and television programs and the reality we inhabit. Paul Ricœur's theory of three-fold mimesis offers an informative approach to answering these questions. For Ricœur, mimesis is a creative invention, rather than a strict replication. Such a theory serves Ricœur's broader interests regarding the narrative nature and understanding of selfhood and the world—that we come to understand our existence primarily through the construction of stories.

Threefold mimesis consists of prefiguration, configuration, and refiguration. Ricœur suggests that the composition of plot (emplotment) is a configuration—a narrativization—of the world of ordinary experience (prefiguration) (1984, 54). The role of configuration is to mediate from one side of the story to the other—from prefiguration to refiguration (65). Refiguration, according to Ricœur, "marks the intersection of the world of the text [film/television program] and the world of the hearer or reader [spectators]" (71). According to the concept of threefold mimesis, there is an inherent connection between the configuration of the world and the world itself—on the metaphysical screen, this connection develops out of the (artistic) configuration of a certain perspective on, attitude toward, or interpretation of a metaphysical concept.

It is critical to have a correct understanding of mimesis in order to properly understand this dynamic. As Richard Kearney suggests, "*Mimesis* is not about idealist escapism or servile realism." (2002,131). Instead, "It remakes the world, so to speak, in the light of its potential truths" (131). When we speak of film and television's mimetic properties, or their mimetic representation of the world, it is a misuse of the term—at least on a historically sensitive understanding of mimesis—to do so in reference to whether or not film and television (and representational arts more broadly) replicate reality, or the world, *tout court*. Instead, understanding the mimetic relation of film and television to reality is not so prescriptive. For example, an Italian neorealist film may be more firmly set within our understanding of the ordinary world, whereas a superhero film might take delight in the flaunting of that understanding. However, it is important to note that while the former seems more grounded in the ordinary world than the latter, in both examples the world is still being artistically transformed—mimetically remade—just to varying degrees and in different ways.

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To particularize this in the context of the metaphysical screen, the framework of threefold mimesis helps to explain that in the artistic exploration of metaphysical concepts, it is not a necessary condition that some true statement of, for example, free will and causality is remade in a work, but rather that a particular perspective on, attitude toward, or interpretation of free will and causality is present. This is because the mimetic relation of a work of metaphysical film and television to the world of ordinary experience is not one of replication but one of invention—of development and/or speculation. As Kearney states, "*Mimesis* is 'invention' in the original sense of that term: *invenire* means both to discover *and* to create, that is, to disclose what is already there in the light of what is not yet. . . . It is the power, in short, to re-create actual worlds as possible worlds" (2002, 132). Therefore, I suggest that threefold mimesis helps to show that the artistic exploration of metaphysical concepts introduces a difference between work and world through the configuration of such concepts via the formal capacities of film and television, and it is through this difference that spectators are offered an opportunity to reconsider and contemplate, in light of their aesthetic experience, how said concepts function in the ordinary world.

In an aesthetic experience of the different worlds of the metaphysical screen, there will be an attention to the ways in which they align or differ from our experience of the ordinary world. For Daniel Yacavone, there is a "basic intuition . . . that narrative 'world-making' consists essentially of making imaginary modifications to parts or aspects of genuinely existing reality in ways that are more or less partial and subtle or extensive and obvious. In this view empirical reality . . . always remains the standard for the comprehension of every fictional and imaginary world" (2015, 5). From the perspective of authorship, V. F. Perkins notes that the filmmaker's "aim is to organize the world to the point where it becomes most meaningful but to resist ordering it out of all resemblance to the real world which it attempts to evoke" (1993, 70). Taken together, these observations highlight how, in the first instance, the construction of worlds in film and television in terms of artistic creation and spectatorial comprehension will involve the world of ordinary experience as a kind of at least implied reference point and, in the second case, the ways in which these worlds are constructed require an internal consistency,

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the attention to which allows for a deeper appreciation for the stories that are told within them.

This second point invites consideration of the formal composition of worlds. Ian Garwood notes in his approach to analysis—that of textural analysis—that being sensitive "to the sensuous capacity of cinema . . . might deepen, rather than distract from, or supersede, the viewers' interest in a film as a distinctive fictional world" (2013, 14). One's emphasis on the sensuous and textural elements of a film or television program is not at the expense of narrative and character but considers how such qualities bolster and inform these other aspects. Garwood's comments also allude to the importance of paying attention to the formal construction of works—how all of the different parts come together to make a whole work (world) and are interwoven and related.

Lucy Fife Donaldson also considers the place of texture in terms of a film, noting how it invokes both a "sense of materiality" and "the sense of an overall fabrication, a densely textured world indicating a complex and fully formed fiction, occupied by three-dimensional characters" (2014, 141). The textural composition of film and television involves not just its construction but spectatorial attention to that construction: a sensitivity to how different textural and formal elements are woven together to form an entire narrative world. The disclosure of such a world is not merely a matter of disclosing a story that occurs within it but disclosing the kind of world that makes possible a kind of story (see Bateman 2019).

Belá Tarr's *The Turin Horse* (2011) centers on isolated father-and-daughter farmers whose horse is becoming increasingly uncooperative as it moves toward the end of its life. The film uses a variety of formal elements to reinforce the bleak, punishing quality of the world in which the narrative takes place. The film features black-and-white footage; a haunting and dissonant musical score; an intensity of weather and setting (characterized by the omnipresence of mist and haze, dead and dying foliage, and a seemingly eternal and relentless gale-force wind); the disheveled and run-down home and clothing of the farming family; the gruff and impassive performers and their interaction with the once dependable but now deeply attitudinal horse; the persistent use of low-angle cinematography to render an otherwise ordinary world alien, strange, and unsettled; and the use of long

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takes (the film is composed of twenty of these) so as to manipulate time to reinforce the punishing slog of existence. The opening scene of the film captures many of these elements: as the old farmer leads his cantankerous horse, every movement is met with struggle, with a kind of rebuttal from the natural forces mentioned earlier, from the limitations of his own body, and from the metaphysical conditions of his life (fig. 1.2).

The different formal elements of the film are woven together for the sake of internal consistency and thus inform the story being told. The world is presented as unforgiving, plodding, difficult, and relentless through form and style in such a way that is internally consistent and that also informs the shape of the story being told within it. Perkins suggests that "To be in a world is to know the partiality of knowledge and the boundedness of vision—to be aware that there is always a bigger picture. To observe a world humanly is to do so from a viewpoint, with angles of vision and points of focus whose selectivity is inflected by the seeing mind" (2020, 275). We witness the world of *The Turin Horse* and any other film or television program of the metaphysical screen in terms of the narratives being

Figure 1.2. Resisting the oppression of existence in *The Turin Horse*. *Source:* Tarr, Béla, and Ágnes Hranitzky, dirs. *The Turin Horse*. 2011. New York: Cinema Guild, 2012. Blu-ray Disc, 1080p HD.

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told in it—there is a selectivity involved in that we are focusing on *this* story and *these* characters rather than any others that may populate the world, or only on others insofar as they intersect with the chosen focus of the work. Moreover, an aesthetic experience with works of the metaphysical screen will be attuned to the internal consistency of the world of a work and its formal and textural composition. Attending to the dynamic between world and narrative—between the nature of the world and how this informs what unfolds within it—replicates somewhat how we can treat the relation of a work's world to the world of ordinary experience, too.

Although not discussed in the same terms, the idea of the actual quality of film and television's mimetic relation to reality is one that has been explored throughout film theoretical history. In developing the neoformalist method of film criticism, informed by the Russian formalists, Kristin Thompson suggests that "the basic function of the artwork is to renew perception through a process called *defamiliarization*" (1981, 32). The assumption is that "our everyday perception becomes habitual and dulled" (32) and that therefore artworks can transform the objects and ideas depicted and explored and renew the spectator's appreciation and understanding of them. Elsewhere, Thompson argues that "art defamiliarizes our habitual perceptions of the everyday world, of ideology . . . of other artworks, and so on by taking material from these sources and transforming them. The transformation takes place through their placement in a new context and their participation in unaccustomed formal patterns" (1988, 11). Following the Russian formalists, Thompson highlights the central place of perception; however, my own point of emphasis is the configuration (that is, the artistic transformation) of aspects of reality—namely metaphysical concepts. What Thompson and I share in approach is an attunement to the philosophical significance of a particular artwork (via, in Thompson's terms, its capacity for defamiliarization) stemming from how the work transforms and remakes the world through the formal capacities of the art forms of film and television. Defamiliarization can occur in an artistically laudable but perhaps less philosophically significant way—for example, how the slowly tracking camera in *The Thin Red Line* parts the long grass of the battlefield; or it can be taken across the entire work in a way that is more experientially and intellectually challenging—*The Thin Red Line*'s questioning of the unseen glory of the world, even in the

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midst of evil, war, and suffering, or *The Turin Horse*'s examination of existential suffering.

Film and television's exploration of reality is delicate and complex. Stanley Cavell suggests that "the poetry of film . . . [is] what it is that happens to figures and objects and places as they are variously molded and displaced by a motion-picture camera and then projected and screened" (2005, 97). The idea of transformation and transfiguration is expressed here, though in different terms. Moreover, implied in Cavell's comments is the notion that the aspects of film and television that establish them as art forms are their formal capacities to configure the world.

For Yacavone, "a cinematic work is not like a mirror of an already illuminated reality . . . but, more appositely, a searchlight in the dark, revealing much that we did not even suspect was present before its beam contacted it" (2015, 250). He also suggests that "thus if cinematic art may convey what is true, it does so through an intervention in, and transformation of, what we ordinarily perceive, think, and believe" (249). Shawn Loht makes a similar claim: following Martin Heidegger, Loht suggests that "it is a defining trait of artworks to reveal truth. This happens in a way that they poetically foster insight into the nature of the world" (2017, 6). What is important to note here is that for both Yacavone and Loht, truth does not refer to the correspondence between a proposition and a certain state of affairs (between mind and reality), but rather *aletheia*, or unconcealment. Both scholars, therefore, develop the type of claims offered by Thompson into a stronger one that proposes film's capacity not so much to reveal something about our dulled and apathetic perception of the world but to reveal, or unconceal, something of the world itself. Given the understanding of mimesis with which I work, I do not adopt Loht and Yacavone's claim wholesale; however, I do retain the "interventionist" capacities of film and television to disrupt our ordinary understanding or experience of features of reality.

This scholarly territory is significant when dealing with the metaphysical screen. As I have shown, given what is at stake in metaphysics, nothing could be more philosophically ordinary, and therefore potentially ignored or taken for granted, than metaphysical concepts. The metaphysical screen, therefore, is significant in potentially disrupting our awareness, presumed understanding, or beliefs regarding metaphysical concepts and how they operate in the world

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of ordinary experience, and such disruption occurs through film and television's artistic exploration of such concepts. For Perkins, "The delicate relationship between what is shown and the way of showing, justifies and exalts the movie's mongrel confusion of reportage with narrative and visual art. A single image is made to act both as a recording, to show us what happens, and as an expressive device to heighten the effect and significance of what we see" (1993, 78). The tension between "reportage" and film (and television's) "expressive" properties or functions elegantly describes the mimetic relation film and television have with reality. It is the configurative capacities of both of these art forms that establish their connection to reality—which, for the metaphysical screen, is by means of the inseparability of form and content (a particular perspective on, attitude toward, or interpretation of metaphysical concepts). However, the metaphysical concepts configured on screen, through the formal capacities that establish the very connection in the first place, enable spectators to contemplate or reflect on them in a new light, and potentially shape how spectators understand the nature of these concepts in the world of ordinary experience. The configuration of such concepts introduces a gap between work and world within which the philosophical significance of such works exists.

Philosophical approaches to film and television studies, or scholarship loosely known as "film-philosophy," can add something to this understanding. This is a diverse field, with approaches including the application of a preexisting theoretical or philosophical framework through which to analyze films (adopting a Deleuzian approach to a work, for example), and what has characteristically been the typical approach to understanding the relationship between philosophical thinking and cinema. While one typical approach within the broad field of film-philosophy addresses the question "Can films philosophize?" I suggest that it misses the main thrust of the relationship between film and philosophy. The multisensory and experiential quality of film and television and their formal exploration of reality highlight how an aesthetic experience draws out the philosophical significance of a work precisely because its expressive form is different from that of philosophy. Therefore, to contemplate a film or television program's philosophical significance as one would a propositional argument is to make a category error. What does connect the philosophical significance of a work with the world of philosophy—if we are to understand philosophy

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in a historically sensitive way—is the invocation of wonder about the world. As Robert Sinnerbrink notes, "According to tradition, philosophy begins in wonder. We might add that it usually ends in one of two ways, either in self-assured mastery or in thoughtful perplexity" (2011, 38). Adopting this understanding of philosophy is important because it does not impose certain expectations or constraints on film—it does not consider film in terms of a historically or ideologically stringent view of philosophy—but is open to films and television programs as artworks that can invoke wonder about the world. It is this capacity through which the dialogical quality of the relationship between film and philosophy can be understood. Loht argues that "films operating in the guise of philosophy do their work by occasioning insight in the viewer. And this occasioning would seem to occur because of film's capacity for showing, i.e., visually depicting images and situations that stand to be intellectually challenging or provocative" (2015,180). One aspect of Loht's claim requires development: it is not solely through *showing* (visually) that insight is occasioned in the viewer. Spectators, in experiencing film and television, use multiple senses, and therefore it is not just through the visual aspect of these art forms that they occasion insight but through the totality of image, sound, and invocation of tactile responses too. The metaphysical screen has the capacity to provoke contemplation regarding the nature of reality. Therefore, the formal embodiment of metaphysical content in the sorts of films and television programs I examine illuminates their conceptual (i.e., metaphysical) concerns, and invites spectators to consider these ideas in light of their aesthetic experience with such artworks.

Such a perspective, which establishes the philosophical significance of a work in terms of its artistic features, has some connection to the thesis of aesthetic cognitivism. John Gibson notes that "the question of cognitivism is two-place: it not only calls on us to show that there is something we can learn from art; to be cognitivists about art we *further* have to show that what we claim to have learnt from an artwork is a point, insight, or truth, *that is to be found in the artwork itself*" (2008, 575). Gibson continues, noting that cognitivism "asks us to show that if we acquire knowledge from art, it is because artworks themselves are active and competent players in the pursuit of knowledge" (575). Gibson's comments sit within certain claims I have made to this point—that the content, which I have labeled as philosophical for present purposes though in Gibson's terms is

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