Matthew Cipa. *Is Harpo Free? And Other Questions of the Metaphysical Screen*. SUNY Press 2024. 266 pp. $99.00 USD (9781438497358); $34.95 USD (9781438497341).

This work is a contribution to philosophically minded film scholarship that is equal parts film criticism and film studies. This approach is sometimes referred to as "filmosophy" or "film-philosophy". Historically, Stanley Cavell is the key originator of this approach. Others include (farther back in time) Andre Bazin and (more recently) Stephen Mulhall and Daniel Frampton. Grounded in the ontological realism of Bazin, where film and photography are taken to be fundamentally true re-presentations of reality, Cavell's legacy is important because the latter helped to advance the view that films can operate as philosophical exercises in their own right. Cavell was innovative in defending the power of films to contemplate and examine virtue and the good life on a level with the best works of art and literature. This study by Matthew Cipa addresses film and television from the perspective of their capacity to stage reflection on specifically metaphysical issues, under the auspice that scholarship has yet to explore this specific cinematic capacity (3). The primary keyword Cipa develops is "metaphysical screen." This term highlights, in addition to the film screen's capacity to depict narratives involving metaphysical problems, the unique fashions in which film and television can portray metaphysical implications in their narratives (1). On this latter count, Cipa's work is of a piece with scholarship by Robert Sinnerbrink and Daniel Yacovone, where emphasis is placed on the specific aesthetic ways film and television explore different types of human experience, through tools such as style, shot composition, and editing. Cipa's guiding conception of metaphysics takes its cue from Peter Van Inwagen. Metaphysics refers principally to the phenomenon of world, its contents, and the place of human beings in this world (2-3). Likewise of interest here for Cipa is the dimension in which film and television narratives can lend significance for life, by way of the viewer's capacity to appropriate narrative meaning from the film-world and apply it to their own experience in the world. In much of this exploration, Cipa leans on the philosophical account of narrative in the writings of Paul Ricoeur.

The first main chapter examines instances in film and television that stage "complex narratives," that is, narratives involving "the limits and scope of free will, the influence of chance, and the way in which we anticipate causally connected effects of our actions" (31-32). Paradigmatic examples in Cipa's account include instances in these media of narratives that portray storylines with a "forked path" (in which narratives explicitly break in one direction as a result of a single choice or action), "multi-modal" (or multiple possibility) outcomes, and time travel. These are each cinematic tropes in which the work stages disjunctive options of "if this happens, then X", but "if that happens, then Y," often testing counterfactual hypotheses or outcomes. Cipa's goal here is not to adduce a unified perspective on how cinematic media engage these philosophical themes. Instead, it is to illustrate how film and television exhibit various ways of dealing with the metaphysics of cause and effect, causal chains, and free will and determinism, ultimately in a fashion that, they proffer to the viewer ways of reflecting on their own experience (69). In the viewing of these works, "we accumulate a suite of experiences that enable us to consider whether a

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particular metaphysical system artistically explored in a work functions in the world of ordinary experience, or indeed whether it illuminates something of our own sense of free will and causality" (69).

The second principal chapter, entitled "Is Shane Virtuous?", takes up the topics of virtue, violence, and teleology as they are thematized in the American western film genre. As Cipa describes it, numerous films in this genre stage narratives in which moral goodness is countered by situations that call for struggle, and even violence. Cipa writes that westerns are notable for squaring questions of moral goodness with the experience of ordinary people, and similarly, that these films uniquely concretize questions of good and evil in a way that renders salient their implications for life (71-72). The metaphysical component proffered by these works, according to Cipa, centers in their thematization of good conceived as *telos* or moral purpose of life. Cipa leverages from the works selected the cinematically-inflected view that people cannot be absolutely good or always make the choices they would prefer most. But this does not make these people bad; it simply means that achieving good and worthwhile ends sometimes requires moral compromise. Films Cipa analyzes here include (among several others) *The Wild Bunch* (1969), *Shane* (1953), *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valence* (1962), and *High Noon* (1952).

The next chapter, entitled "How Does Julie Grieve? Qualia and the Texture of Subjective Experience" examines films that attempt to portray (and in effect, problematize) the nuances of subjective experience. The goal overall is to highlight some of the specific ways films can communicate the first-person, "what it is like" dimension of subjectivity, through illustrating extreme cases of exploded subjective experience. A paradigm example in Cipa's account is *Blue* (1993), the first film in the "Three Colors" trilogy by Krzysztof Kieślowski. As Cipa describes, this film stages the subjective experience of grief, in its portrayal of a woman who has lost her husband and child in a car accident. With this film and others, of note are the stylistic devices that accentuate the subjective experiences conveyed. In *Blue*, these include visual emphasis on the colour blue and other sensory experiences that serve to convey Julie's grief at her loss. Cipa concludes that through such works, "we are afforded an opportunity to contemplate the general features of that experience in tandem with a particular character's experience of subjective reality" (144). The viewer is thus compelled to examine the portrayal of these experiences alongside parallel experiences in their own life.

The fourth principal chapter takes up film and television works that problematize the concept of personal identity. Of emphasis are works that illustrate the conflict and ambiguity of the questions "Who am I?" or more generally, "Who is anybody?" (146). An illustrative instance Cipa discusses at length is the television series *The Americans* (2013-2018), which portrays the lives of a husband-and-wife couple living a double life as Soviet Russian spies under the guise of ordinary United States citizens. As the series unfolds over multiple seasons, this couple grapples with the juxtaposition of their secret identity and their outward life, struggling to come to terms with how they understand themselves and whether their genetic identity is the one they embrace.

The final main chapter studies films that portray, and in some cases, present the themes of wonder and reflective cinematic contemplation. A core film Cipa discusses here is *Harvey* (1950),

a film in which Elwood Dowd (Jimmy Stewart) plays a mentally wounded man who spends his days talking to an imaginary, human-sized rabbit. In Cipa's reading, Harvey thematizes Elwood's experience of wonder at moments of everyday life. To this end, *Harvey* presents to the viewer "what it is like" to experience wonder and to encounter moments of interest in the mundane (187-91). Other films Cipa analyzes here include *Synecdoche, New York* (2008), and *Paterson* (2016). Similar to *Harvey*, these films thematize the wonder encountered in the everyday and make use of offbeat images and shots, presenting what Cipa labels "cinephiliac" perception, viz. seeing the world through an alternate lens, whereby the film camera both communicates its own visual vocabulary and reflects on the filmmaking process (201). In this chapter, as well as in the Afterword, devoted to what Cipa calls "selection" (i.e. the capacity of films to exemplify notable characters and themes), the general positions are sufficiently argued. However, less clear is how the subject matter carries metaphysical weight or has import for what philosophers traditionally label "metaphysics." A better label for the approach Cipa engages here might be "phenomenological aesthetics."

Cipa's book is a fine contribution to the scholarship, and it excels in the wide variety of films and television series it takes up. Cipa gracefully moves between genres, films, and television series, showing a patient focus on fine details. My main points of criticism involve the implications of the book's title and, in particular, its emphasis on the "metaphysical screen." The book does not actually develop a metaphysics pertaining to the film screen as such, or to the mechanics with which screens do their work. This shortcoming is not a huge problem, but the book's title at least suggests that the work is a contribution to screen studies. Secondly, the book's focus on how film and television stage metaphysical themes comes off as rather random, and in some cases quirky; to this end, I find myself wondering whether the "metaphysical" topics taken up are not simply issues of general philosophical interest. The coverage of cinematic "metaphysics" could afford to be more systematic and cut of one cloth. And as noted above, the subject matter of the final main chapter and the Afterword seem to stretch the definition of what philosophers typically understand as "metaphysical." At a minimum, more development of the framework and definitions would be helpful for this otherwise very rich study.

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