

Botz-Bornstein, T. and Stamatellos, G. (2018). *Plotinus and the Moving Image*. Philosophy of Film Series. Leiden: Brill. xiv + 250 pp. Filmography and Index, 243-250. ISBN 978-90-04-35703-7.

*Plotinus and the Moving Image* is not simply the first philosophical discussion on Plotinus' philosophy and film theory but rather a true Plotinian attempt to philosophize about cinema. Neoplatonism, as the editors point out in their *Introduction*, has provided relatively little input in film theory, film studies or the philosophy of film. Nevertheless, there are several reasons why Neoplatonism can attract film philosophers. Plotinus' understanding of time and motion, the centrality of the notion of contemplation in his thought, the transcendence of the One and its overcoming of both subjectivism and epistemological objectivism, the tension between the individual and the general, are some of the features that make Plotinian philosophy a valuable source for film studies, according to Botz-Bornstein and Stamatellos. But there seems to be an underlying assumption in many of the works included in the volume, one that was left unmentioned in the *Introduction*, which allows me to read the book as a sound expression of Plotinism.

The volume includes, in the first place, a *Note on the Cover Illustration*, since there appears a still from Tarkovsky's *The Mirror* of which Stamatellos provides an allegorical interpretation framed in Plotinus' hypostatic system (vii). So it is by the book's cover, in this case, that we can catch, at a glimpse, what (and, especially, how) the book approaches its subject, and this first external perception is certainly not disconnected from the ideas contained inside. There follows a *Preface* by Nathan Andersen, the *Notes on Contributors* and the *Introduction*. The central contribution of the volume lays in the twelve chapters, written by specialists on various fields, that delve on several aspects of Plotinus' philosophy which are taken as a standpoint for the analysis of particular films, of cinema in general and of different concepts belonging to film theory.

The first chapter by Botz-Bornstein suggests interesting connections between contemplative or slow cinema and Plotinus' thought. Both are taken by the author as presenting an opposition between contemplation and discursive analysis, as favouring contemplation over action or perception, and as highlighting simplicity. Steve Choe draws in his contribution a number of comparisons between Epstein's notion of *photogénie* and Plotinus' conception of the One. He emphasizes key conceptual similarities and underscores textual coincidences in the way that both ideas have been formulated. Tony Partridge argues in the third paper that the filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky uses Plotinian ideas derived from the Russian Silver Age philosophers Pavel Florensky and Simeon Frank in order to develop a filmic language to speak about the ineffable and to evoke spiritual depth and revelation in his viewers. According to Partridge, Tarkovsky's

filmic depiction of reality reveals a hidden conception of the universe as a work of art and as the spoken words of God. Stephen Clark shows how Gnostic and Neoplatonists in Late Antiquity employed the fascination with shadows, reflections and moving images as a reminder of how far we have fallen from heaven into a spacio-temporal world. Regarding modern cinema, he considers that it provides us with common and shared dreams, industrially fabricated, that we should bother to distinguish from reality. But this modern situation of spectators drawn into the fictional world of films can be allegorically interpreted, he asserts, as stories about our fall into the material world from the noetic realm. Clark suggests, nonetheless, that films and fictions in general, though may both allegorize and exemplify temptation, might also sometimes be a gateway to a better world, beside which ordinary life itself turns out a dream. In a similar vein, Giannis Stamatellos provides an allegorical interpretation of *The Truman Show*, proposing that the film can be understood as a discourse on selfhood, in which the inward journey that the character Truman undertakes can be conceived as the same inward journey that the Plotinian soul experiences in its noetic ascent to the One. Moro Tornese explores an analogous Plotinian theme in order to stress the positive aspect of cinema, not as a source of deceptive delusions, but rather considering film images as “traces” that bear a connection and a similarity to their productive principle. Cinema can be understood, therefore, as a way of experiencing the mysterious side of reality preparing the spectator for the attentive reception of illumination, awakening the soul’s inner vision and awareness of the connectedness and unity of all things.

The second half of the book contains analogous articles. Vincenzo Lomuscio takes up Plotinian thought as an approach to provide a basis for a film theory and to answer fundamental questions about film-being. The author highlights the quest for unity, sense and truth that the spectator, although acknowledging them as illusions, looks in films, and conceives this experience of unity, following Plotinus, as what makes a work of art beautiful. Enrico Terrone correlates in his paper the three basic principles of Plotinus’ metaphysics to what he takes to be the three main components of cinema: film is associated to the One, spectator to Intellect and character to Soul. This correspondence is used in its turn to differentiate between “entertaining movies”, “intellectual films” and “experimental cinema” as three peculiar kinds of filmmaking that match the three levels in the process of ascent in Plotinus’ thought. Daniel Regnier contrasts the non discursive communication involved in Plotinus’ and Tarkovsky’s common attempt to disclose their experiences of the most important realities. The author also underlines their shared effort to provoke wonder in their readers/viewers drawing the soul towards beauty and the good, a process which is also conceived by both as a moral and ethical matter that implies purification. Panayiota Vassilopoulou explores the relation between Plotinus’ thought and the work of Bruce Nauman.

She examines the way in which both engage in a similar problematic concerning the connection between art and self, and between the project of being a self and of being an artist. Michelle Buchberger discusses several parallels between key elements in Plotinus' philosophy and central ideas to the fiction of the British author John Fowles. The novelist and many of his protagonists, concludes Buchberger, attempt to apprehend and articulate the transcendent and universal real moving outside the familiar realm of the material and reflections of the "decorated corpse", a pursuit that she examines and compares with Plotinus' philosophical framework of the different spheres of existence. The last chapter, placed following a Phorphyrian criterion, addresses the question about how can Plotinus' mystical philosophy help us value "the importance of film as an art that allows for the experience of the One and for an understanding of the Other". Malick and Tarkovsky, comments Cameron Barrows, both construct an immanent and mystical form of cinema predicated on the metaphysical rather than the physical, a new conception of film related to Plotinian aesthetics that has, nevertheless, the potential to develop into a new ethics and politics of cinema. The author concludes that film has the ability to ask existential questions in an aesthetic fashion expressing a negative mysticism or theology that implies a loss of the self. This constitutes "the revolutionary power of film to educate the masses across all economic, cultural and social boundaries and divisions" (p. 240).

Our brief survey of the main themes addressed by the contributors to *Plotinus and the Moving Image* allows us to reaffirm our initial assessment of the volume as a true Plotinian attempt to philosophize about cinema. Most of the papers, in fact, analyse cinema in general and several films in particular as an *ánigma*, a Plotinian expression which involves the distinction of different levels of significance in a narrative. The authors point, on the one hand, to a manifest and literal layer in movies and of film art, but they also ponder on the profound symbolic character of cinema, its metaphorical and mystical dimension. This allegoresis of film art which seeks to disclose the hidden *dynamis* that lies behind the perceptible can be acknowledged as a stepping stone to a Plotinian turn in film theory. But if we consider, furthermore, that the enigmatic meaning is even deciphered and articulated in our book from Plotinus' metaphysical standpoint, the theoretical conversion seems to be complete.

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