

John Marmysz (2017) *Cinematic Nihilism: Encounters, Confrontations, Overcomings*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 224 pp.

The philosophical definition of nihilism is the belief that nothing in the world has a real existence or intrinsic value, in the process painting a particular image of pessimistic skepticism towards life. Through this understanding, nihilism is often considered as something that should be challenged rather than embraced. John Marmysz's collection of essays on cinema, however, approaches the concept of nihilism from an optimistic vantage point that is maintained throughout. His nine essays are divided into three parts that consider Encounters, Confrontations and Overcomings of nihilism through a mainstream filmography. This work contributes to a growing amount of work on cinematic nihilism by academics such as Kevin L. Stoehr (2006) and Darren Ambrose (2013). Distinguishing his work from these authors, Marmysz contributes something new to the field through his advocacy that nihilism need not be a negative thing, but can instead be a tool for philosophical and positive self-awareness.

From the outset Marmysz contends that cinema is a nihilistic medium because of its nature to distract audiences with illusions. He reminds the reader of cinema's kinship to Plato's Cave, asserting how film uncouples onlookers from reality. Because of this separation between reality and illusion, Marmysz claims that literature on nihilism often comes from the standpoint of seeking to overcome it (as per Ambrose). Rather than conform to this trend, the author begins his investigation by asserting how this separation between reality and illusion can be used as a space to reflect upon one's own place in the world as an ongoing and incomplete construction of identity.

In his introduction, Marmysz weaves together some preliminary definitions of nihilism through the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger. His analysis of each enables him to conclude that nihilism is an inherently human phenomenon that shapes existence and motivates us to participate in the world. In particular, Marmysz draws attention to the nihilistic gap between humans and their ideals, accentuating this void as a positive force that pushes humans to strive towards their goals.

Marmysz uses this existential approach to draw similarities with cinema, asserting how the medium also consists of a separation between the viewer and a depicted onscreen reality. Although he recognises scholarly debate on how film aspires to close down such distance through phenomenological camerawork and editing techniques, Marmysz observes that it is the transient nature of film that helps set the viewer

apart from it. For Marmysz, the nihilism of film (like life) can be considered a positive experience because of its partitioning chasm; for it is in the void where films express their power.

The motif that “it’s only a movie” affords the spectator to gaze and contemplate its dramatised reality from a safe distance. As Marmysz contends, cinemagoers encounter a type of Nietzschean passive and active nihilism as they passively accept and buy into an illusion, yet actively reap entertainment and education from the experience. This affirmative framework sets the tone throughout Marmysz’s book, as each chapter explores the positivity of nihilistic thinking in different ways through a popular range of film titles and case studies.

Part 1: Encounters explores the nihilism of God, country and the human body in three distinct chapters. It begins by comparing three sacrificial films set in Scotland: *The Wicker Man* (Robin Hardy, UK, 1973), *Breaking the Waves* (Lars von Trier, Denmark/Sweden/France/Netherlands/Norway/Iceland/Spain, 1996) and *Neds* (Peter Mullan, UK/France/Italy, 2010). Each film is underpinned by one of Nietzsche’s three stages of sacrificial behaviour. This breaks down as the sacrifice of a human to a god, the sacrifice of one’s own instinct to a god, and the sacrifice of God Himself. In his analysis, Marmysz concludes that the nihilistic sacrifice of God is arguably the purest of the three, primarily because it does not bargain for anything in return. In the case of *Neds*, such freedom enables its violent protagonist of his own free will to choose humanity.

The backdrop of Scotland carries over into a debate of geographical nihilism in the second chapter, where Marmysz considers the screen representation of the country as a type of non-place. Traditionally rich and exotic in mythology, Scotland in recent years has seen a growing number of films that use the land as a blank canvas or what he calls a “nowhere in particular”. Films such as *Perfect Sense* (David Mackenzie, UK/Sweden/Denmark/Ireland, 2011) and *Under the Skin* (Jonathan Glazer, UK/USA/Switzerland/Poland, 2013) acknowledge Scotland as a setting, but do not use the place as a contributing factor to the narrative. Other films such as *The Dark Knight Rises* (Christopher Nolan, UK/USA, 2012) and *World War Z* (Marc Forster, USA, 2013), meanwhile, use the Scottish location as a stand-in for other cities or places, which conducts a type of nihilistic sacrifice of the land. In doing so, the Scottish terrain is simultaneously concealed and revealed in new and innovative ways.

The final chapter of this section considers the nihilism of the human body as it is objectified through sexual and abject encounters of body horror. With case studies that include *Nymphomaniac* (Lars von Trier, Denmark/Germany/Belgium/UK/France, 2013) and *The Human*

Centipede (First Sequence) (Tom Six, Netherlands, 2009), Marmysz explores the body through Jean-Paul Sartre's framework of a *being-in-itself* and *being-for-itself*. These distinct terms, which signify the difference between a hollow thing and a conscious being, are used interchangeably as a way to reassess bodies that are monstrously reshaped. Marmysz offers the titular creation in *The Human Centipede* as an example of something that is surgically and nihilistically converted from personhood to an objectified thing of disgust or even humour. Here he identifies how initial curiosity and amusement is replaced with pity and fear, indicating a shift from the *in-itself* to the *for-itself*, enabling a more positive reading to emerge from an otherwise abhorrent and nihilistic film.

Part 2: Confrontations follows a similar structure with three more chapters dedicated to violent encounters with nihilism. Here the crux of the argument unfolds, as Marmysz unpacks Nietzsche's exposition of passive and active nihilism as a way to consider the human fight for survival in George A. Romero's series of *Dead* films. The zombie franchise is used metaphorically to consider the death of God and the fractured beings who are left to survive amidst the nothingness. His argument considers the ambiguity of passive and active nihilism, oscillating between sympathy for humans and zombies as the films mature. What begins as an active resistance to nihilism in *Night of the Living Dead* (USA, 1968) evolves into active human cruelty by *Diary of the Dead* (USA, 2007), indicating a shift of purity in favour of the nihilistic and lifeless zombies.

The following chapter in this section turns to Heidegger's concept of authenticity, which is considered through three case studies centering upon skinhead culture. Through an analysis of *Romper Stomper* (Geoffrey Wright, Australia, 1992), *American History X* (Tony Kaye, USA, 1998) and *The Believer* (Henry Bean, USA, 2001), Marmysz considers the struggle of human culture through contentious characters striving to overcome nihilism, alienation and inauthenticity. Through the Heideggerian framework, his treatment of each film (like earlier ones) invites the reader to see past monsters and recognise elements of humanity buried within these deplorable characters.

The final section of Confrontations compares and contrasts modern and postmodern perspectives of nihilism through close readings of *Rollerball* (Norman Jewison, UK/USA, 1975) and its remake (John McTiernan, USA/Germany/Japan, 2002). Here Marmysz considers each film as a shift in American culture, with the former portraying existential alienation through the protagonist's impossible pursuit toward idealism. His reading incorporates elements of Nietzsche's "Superman," as it argues a case for the values of modernism. This is compared with a

postmodern reading of the latter version in which intangible ideals are pragmatically exchanged for attainable goals.

The concluding part of the book contests the notion that in overcoming nihilism something positive is achieved. Here Marmysz challenges this perception and builds upon previous chapters by highlighting how the quest for authenticity and inner self discovery is fraught with danger. He uses *Fight Club* (David Fincher, USA, 1999) as a way to consider an abject sense of self that lurks beneath the surface. Marmysz advances his logic with an absorbing reading of *Avatar* (James Cameron, USA, 2009), in which a cultural overcoming of nihilism leaves the film empathetic towards an impression of fascism. The book ends with an examination of the life and work of Yukio Mishima, the author, filmmaker and nihilist who eventually took his own life by committing *seppuku*. Here Marmysz considers how life is made full through philosophical incompleteness and ongoing activity, emphasising, through Mishima, how any attempt to overcome this is potentially suicidal.

Each chapter comes together as a whole to form an argument that the overcoming of nihilism is not a basis for unequivocal good. Instead the work indicates that nothingness is inherently part of us and should be embraced. The strengths of Marmysz's book come through in his enthusiastic tone and in his accessible content and case studies. The work does not require the reader to be well versed with nihilism firsthand, while simultaneously treating those accustomed to this topic with respect.

However, despite Marmysz's achievement in putting forward an intriguing and accessible collection of case studies, the filmography does often feel too "safe." The author does indeed have new things to say about each film but perhaps misses an opportunity to make his ideas stand out even further by applying them to lesser known titles with less analytical baggage. Furthermore, the absence of a concluding chapter linking all three parts together brings the book to an abrupt end. These minor criticisms aside, *Cinematic Nihilism* is essential reading for film-philosophy scholars or anyone wishing to explore how a nihilistic approach creates positive potential for activity and achievement.

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