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Immanent Frames: Postsecular Cinema between Malick and von Trier

Abstract

This is a book review of John Caruana and Mark Cauchi, eds., *Immanent Frames: Postsecular Cinema between Malick and von Trier*.

Author Notes

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Caruana, John and Cauchi, Mark (eds.). *Immanent Frames: Postsecular Cinema between Malick and von Trier*. New York: SUNY Press, 2018.

Film has become a privileged medium to reconsider the value of religion in our daily lives. The various chapters of *Immanent Frames: Postsecular Cinema between Malick and von Trier*, edited by John Caruana and Mark Cauchi, are aimed at discerning this value through the analysis of recent films that approach religious issues in a way that the authors term “postsecular.” As put in the introduction, the postsecular view stems from a confrontation with previous secular perspectives which seem no longer capable to offer a reliable anchoring for our existence; this view “seeks to dissipate the false aura that enshrouds the various ideologies of epistemological certainty” (8). In the end, the postsecular view holds that the uncritical acceptance of the Enlightenment ideals of objective knowledge turns out to be damaging, since it neglects some essential human attitudes such as belief or trust.

These concerns, which might well be confined to the sphere of conceptual philosophy, can also be traced in some films — released in the last two decades — that invite the viewer to participate in a challenging experience, whereby her notions of the world or God (among many others) are put into question. This book signals the year 2011, in which Terrence Malick’s *The Tree of Life* and Lars von Trier’s *Melancholia* were released within days of each other, as a milestone that rendered visible a certain tendency that was already present in works of other filmmakers. In fact, these two films constitute the focus of the first section of the book, which takes them as confronting poles of the wide spectrum of postsecular cinema. The apparent opposition between Malick’s otherworldly perspective and von Trier’s nihilism is turned by the first chapters into “a complex dialectical relationship between transcendence and immanence” as Robert Sinnerbrink writes (31). The second section of the book unfolds some thorough analyses of films that could be aptly classified within the boundaries of Malick and von Trier, including works of Chantal Akerman, John Michael McDonagh, Denys Arcand and

the Dardenne brothers. In line with French film theorist André Bazin, a common thread that runs through the texts is the endeavor of their authors to convey the various ways in which these films embody the “spiritual and ethical vocation of cinema” (9). Finally, the last section of the book contains two long interviews with filmmaker Luc Dardenne and with philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy. Arguably, the purpose of including these interviews is to offer a first-person approach to the issues that have been previously addressed from a more academic viewpoint. When Luc Dardenne says, “I am only speaking for myself” (254), he is implicitly affirming that the religious sphere is inextricably bound to the innermost dimension of the self.

Along with Bazin, *Immanent Frames* privileges the voice of two other film-thinkers: Stanley Cavell and Gilles Deleuze. In this respect, it is remarkable that many chapters of this book eschew the typical ideas from these three authors in order to present less known ones. This is the case of Steven Rybin’s chapter on *The Tree of Life*, which draws upon Bazin’s concern “with the inevitable abstraction of reality introduced through the film image” (92) — by means of which human consciousness slips into the screened world — in lieu of insisting on his claim about the preservation of reality through cinema. Similarly, Russel J. A. Kilbourn’s text studies Denys Arcand’s *Les invasions barbares/The Barbarian Invasions* (2003) in the light of Bazin’s concept of “accursed film” (*film maudit*), noting how an apparently profane (and provocative) film can dismantle the simplistic dichotomy of the sacred and the profane. With regard to Cavell, the chapter by William Rothman retrieves his ideas on film’s capacity to recreate the world’s presence so as to discern whether the films of Chantal Akerman are facing the viewer with a Godless world or, rather, with a world where God is present, but in hiding. Commenting on the Jewish idea of the concealment of God’s face (See Exodus 33:18-23), Rothman asserts that many films by Akerman have a religious aura, “affording the spectator an ineffable and inexplicable satisfaction, as if in these very frames, God’s face is hidden” (166). Lastly, some of Deleuze’s insights can also be found in this book

— though not as many as in other akin works, where the prominence given to the French philosopher is perhaps excessive. John Caruana’s analysis of *The Tree of Life* presents a thoughtful comparison between Deleuze’s idea of belief and Kierkegaard’s idea of faith. Both thinkers note how the attitude of belief or faith lies on uncertainty; it needs to leave aside any worldly securities (i.e. the need for complete control) to recover the world “in a different and more meaningful way” (82).

As seen in the foregoing lines, the question of the world is one of the most recurrent throughout the book. “Whether we are Christians or atheists, [...] we need reasons to believe in this world,” states Deleuze in *Cinema II: The Time-Image*.¹ In contrast with the secular approach to the world, guided by an illusory certainty, the postsecular relationship with the world requires openness and trust. It is a relationship based on an affective connection that involves the whole human person, and not so much on a mere cognitive connection. Hence, the world remains a mystery one has to approach in a way similar to a face-to-face encounter with another human being. This idea of a face-to-face encounter with the world is very much present in the cited chapter by Rothman on Chantal Akerman — “But a film cannot put us in a face-to-face relationship with the world we are facing unless the projected world [...] has a face” (160). Perhaps the hidden face of God? The question of the world also runs through the chapters by Rybin on *The Tree of Life* and Mark Cauchi on von Trier’s *Melancholia*. The former insists on the film’s abandonment of “secular realism,” that is, “the idea of a world of self-sufficient independent ontological entities” (92), in favor of “a transcendental elsewhere, a spiritual world of plenitude” (102). The latter formulates the unsettling question on what meaning would be left in a world where God has died, as Nietzsche famously announced in his madman parable.

The problem raised by Cauchi in his chapter on *Melancholia* introduces another salient concern of this book, namely, the encounter with the other. In fact, Cauchi responds to the

problem of a world without God by appealing — based on the thought of Emmanuel Lévinas — to a form of transcendence that does not derive from a divine realm but from an “ethics of responsibility for others” (115). According to this author, what we learn from the last scenes of *Melancholia* “is that, even if the world is ending, gestures of responsibility matter” (121). Besides, Costica Bradatan takes a step further in his study on the presence of the other in von Trier’s *Dogville* (2003). The mysterious arrival of Grace (a homeless person) in town puts to the test the hospitality of the Dogvillians, who ultimately fail to regard her visit as a lifechanging gift, in a way reminiscent of the parable of Matthew’s gospel: “I was a stranger, and ye took me not in” (Matt 25:43). By interpreting *Dogville* in line both with this gospel passage and with Dostoevsky’s legend of the Grand Inquisitor, Bradatan suggests how the unexpected arrival of a stranger can become either a cause of trouble or the opportunity for inner transformation. Finally, the encounter with the other also lies at the core of the chapters by Charles Warren and Sarah Cooper, focused on two films by the Dardenne brothers: *Rosetta* (1999) and *Deux jours, une nuit/Two Days, One Night* (2014). Once again, the ethics of Lévinas occupies a prominent role in the latter study, as Cooper builds upon one of the film’s most recurrent phrases — “put yourself in my place,” uttered on several occasions by Sandra, the main character — to explain how the face-to-face encounters that articulate the narrative of *Two Days, One Night* acquire a sort of religious meaning. In the Dardennes’ postsecular humanism the journey “becomes one of ethical solidarity, without, however, allowing us to lose sight of one possible etymology of the term ‘religion’ from *religiere*: to bind together, to come together, to make links” (237).

Having made reference to the transcendence opened up by the encounter with the world and with the human other, the obstinate question concerning God’s presence in these films still remains unanswered. This is, presumably, the most controversial question addressed by the chapters of this book. In spite of the differing answers given by these chapters, the majority of

them avoid providing an easy solution, pointing towards a peculiar form of transcendence. Recalling Catherine Wheatley's text on John Michael McDonagh's *Calvary* (2014), one might say that the place of the so-called postsecular transcendence consists of a "broken middle," that is, "a place suspended between immanence and transcendence" (172). Contrary to what it might seem, the proposition of an in-between milieu is not a way of eluding the question of God; rather, it is a way of saying that this question needs to be constantly wrestled with by humans, without ever reaching a definite answer. As put by Wheatley, "faith is a practice: it is the practice of continuing to grapple with the world, realizing that the world is, and always will be, uncertain" (178). In this sense, the chapters of *Immanent Frames* can be seen as different attempts to struggle with the mystery of transcendence as conveyed by recent films. Even in the case of filmmakers that declare themselves to be atheists — e.g. Luc Dardenne, whose testimony is included at the end of the book — there is a sincere yearning of an infinite love of the other that would overcome fear and death once for all, gestured by a poignant use of film language. "I am trying to say that what comes back, what constitutes my nostalgia, is the infinite love of the other which appeased my panic and fear of dying and made me commit to life," declares Luc Dardenne (262).

Immanent Frames stands out as a valuable response to an increasing tendency in recent films to tackle religious issues from an open-ended approach. Without pretending to be "a definitive and exhaustive statement on postsecular cinema" (15), this book contains a range of perspectives that will introduce the reader to various forms of studying the relationship between film and religion within a postsecular context. Although a few of its chapters suffer from an excess of theory that overshadows the subsequent film analysis, most of them manage to attain a proper balance between theory and film. Besides, it is worth noting how some chapters leave the broken middle stance aside to opt in favor of immanent readings of the aforementioned films. Underlying these chapters seems to be the assumption that postsecular cinema is

inherently more prone to immanence than the contrary. In this respect, the insistence of some authors on how postsecular films confront the viewer with radical contingency and with skepticism towards any form of religious belief might sometimes mislead her into a premature option for atheism. While it is true that film cannot elicit religious faith — its force is merely invitational, so to say — it is nevertheless important for the viewer to leave the door open, since “the experience of watching a film can be a conversion, a *metanoia*, a radical shift in perspective,” as put by Colin Heber-Percy in his recent essay on faith and film *Perfect in Weakness*.² Hence, just as a film can dismantle our preconceived notions on immanence and transcendence, so, too, it can become the source of unexpected revelations.

In short, this book will prove an important resource to scholars of religion and film, due to the rich variety of perspectives it encompasses as well as due to the thorough analyses it contains. The latter might turn out to be especially useful, as they could provide clarifying guidelines for those scholars who want to introduce their students into the field of film and religion through the detailed study of a particular oeuvre or filmmaker. Moreover, since the book draws both upon classic and recent works — ranging from André Bazin, Gilles Deleuze and Stanley Cavell to George Toles, Gillian Rose and Jean-Luc Nancy, not to mention the very authors of the chapters — it can well be taken as a sort of companion to this burgeoning academic field.

¹ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema II: The Time Image* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 172.

² Colin Heber-Percy, *Perfect in Weakness* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2019), 8.