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## Secularism and Silent Films

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## Secularism and Silent Films

### Abstract

This is a review of two books: Phillip Maciak, *The Disappearing Christ: Secularism in the Silent Era* (Columbia University Press, 2019), and Terry Lindvall, *Souls for Sale: Rupert Hughes and the Novel Hollywood Religion* (Cascade Books, 2021)

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### Author Notes

Elijah Siegler is Professor of Religious Studies at the College of Charleston. He is the co-author of *Dream Trippers: Global Daoism and the Predicament of Modern Culture* (2017) and the editor of *Coen: Framing Religion in Amoral Order* (2016). He is currently working on a monograph about spirituality in Asheville.

**Maciak, Phillip, *The Disappearing Christ: Secularism in the Silent Era* (Columbia University Press, 2019)**

**Lindvall, Terry, *Souls for Sale: Rupert Hughes and the Novel Hollywood Religion* (Cascade Books, 2021)**

Early cinema has its hooks in us. It always has had—from *Singin' in the Rain* (1952) to *The Artist* (2011), films depicting the silent-era Hollywood lodge themselves in our popular and critical consciousness. More recently, younger filmmakers are wrestling with the moral, mythic, and theological dimensions of the silent film era, which is a real gift to those of us in the subfield of “Religion and Film.” Take two theatrical releases from 2022: Jordan Peele's third feature, *Nope* and Damian Chazelle's fourth, *Babylon*. The former is a contemporary horror/sci-fi/western about something hiding in the clouds above a horse ranch but contains many references to silent cinema.<sup>1</sup> The latter is a comic/horror/epic retelling of myths of 1920s Hollywood in the form of a *roman à clef*.<sup>2</sup>

Both films are about spectacle, and how it can eat us alive—slightly more literally in *Nope*'s case, and both directly probe the origin of the relationship between religion and film. Is film a “new religion?” If so, is it a better or worse form of religion? Does film give us a new way to look at religion? Is film sacred or secular? Two recent books about religion in the silent cinema era also answer these questions, but in very different ways.

*Souls for Sale* by Terry Lindvall is a charming monograph, but clocking in at barely 100 pages, it reads more like an extended essay, and could have almost been published as an article in this journal. (Were it fiction, it would be called a novella.) Lindvall tells the story of Rupert Hughes (1872-1956), who was unfamiliar to me, as he likely is to most readers. He led a most interesting life—the uncle of eccentric billionaire Howard Hughes, prolific author, including of collections of popular songs, a well-received three-volume biography of George Washington, and numerous

stories that were turned into silent films. He was later involved with conservative politics, including collaborating with Congress' House Un-American Activities Committee in the 1950s. Hughes may be forgotten today, but in his day, he was as well-known a Hollywood figure as Buster Keaton, Harold Lloyd, and Will Rogers, as Lindvall demonstrates by reprinting an illustration caricaturing all four figures from a 1921 issue of *Vanity Fair* (64).

Lindvall shapes Hughes' life into the story of how “an atheist author challenged this identity of the religious nation [...] when he penned a subversive novel and then directed it as a motion picture to challenge the faithful with a vision of a dynamic new religion of Hollywood” (2). Lindvall places this story in the context of “how much American Christianity was becoming a consumer religion” (4), with which he begins in his first chapter with the popular Christian fiction of the 19<sup>th</sup> century—such well-known tomes as Lew Wallace's *Ben-Hur* (1880) and Charles M. Sheldon's *In His Steps* (1896). Lindvall also connects these novels with the early, moralistic westerns of silent screen stars Bronco Billy and William S. Hart.

At the end of the first chapter and for the whole of the second, Lindvall turns his attention to what he aptly calls “virtuous cinema,” when “moral and religious narratives, from melodramas to westerns, filled the movie screens of the 1910s” (19). Historians of American religion will be tickled to learn that Billy Sunday was a fan of movies and a pal to movie stars.

Chapter Three focuses on the tension between Christian modernists and liberals who saw film as a form of uplift, and religious conservatives who saw “the new medium as a path to the ‘House of the harlot’ and a ‘gate to hell’” (32). The opinions of the latter received support through early Hollywood scandals (such as actor Roscoe “Fatty” Arbuckle, who was tried for rape and manslaughter). Into this mix comes at last Rupert Hughes himself, whose Yale education moved him away from Christian belief, and whose essay “The Art of Moving Picture Composition”

(1923) defending the artistic worthiness of film puts him into the “modernist” camp. Hughes decamped for Hollywood, partially at the urging of Samuel Goldwyn, “eventually founding the Hollywood Writers Club” (52).

This leads into his novel *Souls for Sale*, which takes up Chapter Four, in which “Hughes appeals to the actor’s vocation of making others happy as the fundamental ethical principle of all life” (42). Chapters Five and Six form a detailed recounting of the novel’s plot, concerning an ingénue named Memory’s adventures in Hollywood. The novel, concludes Lindvall, “would function as a sermon, extolling [Hollywood’s] virtues” (63). A year later, Hughes wrote and directed a feature adaptation of *Souls for Sale*, starring silent screen ingénue Eleanor Boardman, which Lindvall analyzes in Chapter Seven.<sup>3</sup>

Rupert Hughes, for whom “what was destroying the fabric of the American soul was religion, not the movies” (97) makes for a fascinating subject. And specialists in American religion will no doubt delight in encountering familiar figures like the aforementioned Sheldon and Sunday, but also Robert G. Ingersoll and Harry Emerson Fosdick. But I longed for a larger and more theoretical reflection on film and religion.

This criticism certainly does not apply to the second recent book about silent cinema under consideration, *The Disappearing Christ*. If Lindvall’s book is a personal passion project, Maciak’s is the quintessential dissertation-turned-monograph (a five-year process, he says in his acknowledgements (xiii)) and thus heavy on the literature review and methodological apparatus. The theme of this learned book is quite straightforward—it “endeavors to register the progress of secularization by paying attention to films and works of visual culture about the son of God” (4). It does so by focusing “on a broad archive of popular texts—nearly forgotten bestsellers, popular magazines, widely viewed early films now preserved only in archives—alongside more canonical

works and figures” (5). But that description hides the unexpected connections and insightful interventions that Maciak presents on almost every page.

Like Lindvall’s much shorter book, *The Disappearing Christ: Secularism in the Silent Era* begins with the novel *Ben-Hur*; indeed, Maciak uses it a metaphor for his whole thesis: “the disappearance of Christ from the story of *Ben-Hur* is strange, but it is not surprising. Indeed, the narrative of secularization that has undergirded the field of American cultural study until nearly the turn of the 21st century is based in the same kind of perpetual vanishing” (3).

This book is a series of examples of visualizations of Christ, and Maciak analyzes each as a different combination of historic verifiability and personal faith, with both shown as symptoms of secularism. Maciak begins with a vigorous trot through the latest wrinkles on the secularization thesis: he ably summarizes work by Tracy Fessenden, Saba Mahmood, and John Lardas Modern. Maciak also demonstrates admirable familiarity in his Introduction and throughout the book with American studies, film theory, early cinema studies, and the subdiscipline of Religion and Film. He is probably least familiar with the field of American religious history, as evidenced by his erroneous assertion that “spiritualism never became institutionalized (no churches or official creeds)” (62).

Thankfully, this book is *not* a mere chronicle of silent films about Jesus—it’s much more original than that. It “follows historicist accounts of early cinema by considering it a ‘screen practice’ that evolved alongside and even in tension with other screen practices (slide lectures, panoramas, optical toys) as well as works of literature, photography, and visual art throughout the nineteenth century” (6).

Chapter One, as noted, considers *Ben-Hur* as a “work of visual historiography” and then links it to Holy Land tourism (36) and travelogues about the Holy Land (42). Chapter Two focuses

on two artists, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps and F. Holland Day, who imagined Jesus "through feminist and queer lenses, respectively" (25). Phelps published *The Story of Jesus Christ: An Interpretation*, "a non-fictional narration and harmonization of the gospel stories" (56) in 1897 (she is perhaps better known for her 1868 "spiritualist" novel *The Gates Ajar*). Meanwhile, around the same time, Day publishes a series of "more than 200 photographs of himself as Jesus Christ," four of which are reproduced in this volume, and they are truly amazing, uncanny work. Both "conceived of themselves as mediums for the life of Christ" (59) and both represent roads not taken, indeed dead ends, next to the superhighway that is the film industry.

The third chapter "reads the emergence of cinema as the emergence of a truly secular medium" and is the chapter that most directly concerns the "Religion and Film" subfield. It begins with a consideration of the tradition of the German town of Oberammergau putting on the passion play once a decade.<sup>4</sup> Then, Maciak analyzes early passion play films, which he links to "the establishment of spectacular realism, the new media aesthetic of the secular age" (25). "Between 1897 and 1912, the passion play was one of the most popular genres of world cinema," and, argues Maciak, it "mobilized an aesthetic of spectacular realism that thrived on the opposition and ultimate containment of trick and actuality" (99).

Focusing on very early use of what would be called "special effects," essentially stage magic, in passion play films directed by Alice Guy in 1906 and Ferdinand Zucca in 1907, Maciak notes that "each special effect is an opportunity to be absorbed and an opportunity to reflect on that absorption. It is a moment when film renders visible the stabilizing, architectural elements of reality, even in their construction" (122). He also pays attention to the much better-known film *From the Manger to the Cross*, directed by Sidney Olcott in 1912, the first Jesus movie to be shot "on location" in the Middle East, thus recalling the travelogues of Chapter One.

The fourth chapter “juxtaposes W.E.B. DuBois’ stories and illustrations of a black Christ against the spectral white savior that appears at the end of DW Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation*” (25). Maciak notes that the contemporary reviews of *Birth of a Nation* link it to a notion of “spectacular realism,” but overall, this film has been much analyzed elsewhere from a Religious Studies perspective.<sup>5</sup> More stimulating is Maciak’s brilliant consideration of the “Black Christ Cycle” which “consists of a long series of adaptations of the Christ narrative rooted in a contemporary analogy between Christ’s crucifixion and the lynching that terrorized the Jim Crow South” which were “throughout DuBois’s twenty-four-year editorship of *The Crisis* [...] told again and again, from different perspectives and in different styles, nearly every Christmas” (161). Maciak links this to DuBois’ theory of the “double consciousness” of Black Americans, and to the contemporary phenomenon of lynching and its photographic reproductions, and helpfully he includes reproductions from DuBois’ series and of “lynching postcards.”

The final chapter, dubbed Coda, compares the use of spectacular special effects to represent Jesus’ resurrection in Cecil B DeMille’s 1927 *The King of Kings* to those used in Mel Gibson’s 2004 *The Passion of the Christ*. These are two films I have screened in the classroom many times and I appreciate Maciak’s brief, lucid, and original treatment of each. This is especially praiseworthy in the case of Gibson’s film, considering how much ink has been spilled over this film—Maciak rightly calls it “a canonical text of the contemporary secular age” (190). Maciak focuses on the staging and use of CGI wounds in the final scene and compares its mise-en-scene to a scene from *The Terminator*.<sup>6</sup>

Maciak is upfront about his thesis: “*The Disappearing Christ* contends that the labor of visualizing a modern gospel was—and is—the labor of secularism itself” (26). He ends with an even broader claim: “cinema, as it developed out of the literary and visual cultures of the late



nineteenth century, became a technology of secularism” (176-177). He backs up his claims with a rich, cross-disciplinary array of examples and a firm grasp of theory. I wish, however, that he had also used reception theory. Did early 20<sup>th</sup> century clergy and congregations also see Jesus film and cinema itself as secularizing? I also wish Maciak had cut down a bit on the cultural studies jargon. For example, the words “transhistorically,” “indexical,” “hybridity,” “negotiation,” “signifiers” and “affect” each appear in seven consecutive sentences chosen more or less at random (from the end of page 53 and the top of page 54). But this is not at all to say that Maciak is a bad writer. Quite the contrary! He is just conforming to the expectations of the genre. Maciak also sometimes writes in a more popular genre: e.g., his outstanding essays in *The New Republic*, for which he is the new television critic, or his brilliant cultural criticism in *Los Angeles Review of Books*. I recommend *The Disappearing Christ*, but I recommend Maciak’s shorter works even more highly.

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<sup>1</sup> Most notably to Eadweard Muybridge’s chronophotographic series of a Black jockey riding a horse. See Ben Kenigsberg, “‘Nope,’ Eadweard Muybridge and the Story of ‘The Horse in Motion.’” *New York Times*, July 22, 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/07/22/movies/nope-horse-in-motion-eadweard-muybridge.html>

<sup>2</sup> For an excellent discussion of which fictional character in *Babylon* corresponds to which real-life figure(s), see Marya E. Gates, ‘Babylon’: Meet the Real Old Hollywood Stars Who Inspired the Characters of Damien Chazelle’s Wild Epic,” *IndieWire*, Dec. 21, 2022. <https://www.indiewire.com/gallery/babylon-film-real-people-character-inspirations/>

<sup>3</sup> The complete film of *Souls for Sale* (1923) is available on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TC7x33r9hg8>

<sup>4</sup> Oberammergau is still a subject worthy of cultural analysis. See, for example, Michael Paulson, ‘It’s My Tradition Too’: A Town’s Centuries-Old Passion Play Evolves,” *New York Times*, Aug. 24, 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/24/theater/oberammergau-passion-play.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Including in this journal, most notably Richard Salter, “The Birth of a Nation as American Myth,” *Journal of Religion & Film*, 8:3 (Oct. 2004). <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1675&context=jrf>

<sup>6</sup> *The Passion of the Christ* continues to echo across the contemporary “Film and Religion” landscape. Note Gibson’s redemption arc or lack thereof, and Jim Caviezel, who played Jesus, as star of the 2023 right-wing hit film *Sound of Freedom*, and as QAnon conspiracist.