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Cinema, Religion, and Secularism:
In a Roundabout or an Intersection?

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Review on Mark Cauchi's Cinema and Secularism. Bloomsbury Publishing. 2023.

The relationship between cinema and secularism has long been a forum for debates on the visibility, even the co-existence of religion, the secular, and cinema; thus, to coincide in one sphere that would be detectable in both study fields, religion studies, and film studies.

The assumption that film is secular is derived from the seemingly inevitable conclusions on the secularization thesis that is related to modernism. Hence the way cultures and societies touch upon secularism once they are in touch with modernism as Philip Maciak argues in his book *Disappearance of Christ*. Furthermore, on the same supposition, in one of the early works on the scholarship of cinema and secularism, Sophie Sunderland observes that it is rare for secularism to be an organizing trope in film, which highlights a neglect of the secular in the contemporary study of film as Mark Cauchi suggests. Regarding the assumption mentioned above, Cauchi addresses the problem of the missing secular and that it affects how scholars understand and perceive the study of film in a meta-reflective mode. Moreover, to expand on scholars' understanding of the missing secular matter, Cauchi offers a valuable argument on the secularist gaze by utilizing Laura Mulvey's analysis of Hollywood and the scopophilic gaze as well as female sexuality in *Through the Olive Trees* (1994). He argues that the scopophilic gaze in film not only objectifies women but also shapes how audiences interact with the world, thereby influencing secular viewpoints. By linking the pleasure derived from cinematic viewing to secular ways of understanding, Cauchi proposes that the visual experience of cinema can lead viewers away from religious or spiritual interpretations of reality.

Cauchi shifts then to how religion studies stand with cinema and secularism where he elaborates on the issue of situating religion and the secular. He raises questions in relation to Conrad Ostwalt's *Secular Steeples: Popular Culture and Religious Imagination,* along the lines of "what does secularity consist in?" and "what makes cinema secular?" (9). Cauchi raises such questions for Ostwalt's provocative remarks such as religion being a part of the secular world and religion being a "secular cultural form." The above-mentioned questions and remarks that Cauchi highlights beg the question of whether cinema, religion, and secularism are in a loop, or if they intersect. Thus, what is the dynamic of either case? *Cinema and Secularism* is a treat to those who are questioning where cinema is situated among religion and secularism. Indeed, Cauchi and the contributors take on the mission to investigate and explore the relationship between cinema and secularism on a global level, where they analyze several vital cinematic spheres from various cultures and religions in a thematically coherent structure in which diverse outlooks share the same primary questioning of the matter. They fulfil this investigation through multifaceted analytic scopes in a crossroad of multiple study fields such as film studies, religion studies, philosophy, cultural studies, and so forth.

Cinema and Secularism indeed thrives due to its structure, which is crucial for the conversation that the book brings upon its readers. Cauchi clarifies at the beginning of the book that the conversation on cinema and the secular in film studies must go beyond "the Anglo and Western European worlds" (29). Therefore, the book is coherently structured and based on three sections where the chapters in each section share a theme that helps reach the principal thesis while being involved with national cinematic spheres from around the globe such as Indian, Middle Eastern, and African cinemas. The first section is titled "Is Cinema Secular? Genealogy, Theory, Philosophy." The section starts with Cauchi's own chapter on secularist film studies and the occlusion of the secular. In his chapter, Cauchi sets the tone of the section by arguing that the unchallenged secularist perspective inherent in film studies stands as the obstacle to question secularism in cinema while considering the hybridity of secularism and religion. Arguably, secularism at its core is not always attentive to the act of enchantment, as presumed in the case of arts such as film. Hence, secularism and religion hold values of disenchantment and enchantment, respectively. Based on Max Weber, intellectualization translates to disenchanting the world by using means that are not magical *per se* (in the sense that intellectualization, disenchantment, and secularism are somewhat equal). Nonetheless, Cauchi argues that a critical reason behind film studies' blindness towards the secular is the lack of adequately acknowledging the hybridization of the secular and religion in relation to cinema. Utilizing Bruno Latour's theory of modernity, Cauchi establishes that with the separation and purifying the secular and the religious, they rather entangle and intertwine, hence hybridize. Furthermore, on modernity and its resemblance in secularity, John Caruana follows with his chapter on Deleuze's time-image. Caruana claims that Classical cinema has helped shape the "human-centered subjectivity" in replacing sovereignty, thus, what modernity supposedly sets up cinema for (81). He also points out that Deleuze's time-image offers an alternative to the prevailing secular ideology, an alternative to liberate us from the "ideological secularism" in which modernity presumably fails, giving his argument that time-image emphasizes the need to trust reality (66). The first section of the book ends with the third chapter titled "The Secular as Sacred, Cinema and Buddhist Ritual," where Francisca Cho argues that secularism is a religious category in Buddhist contexts and that cinema is "a ritual experience" which enables the non-religious and non-Buddhist to experience one's sense of the world (88).

The second section of the book enlarges on culture, politics, and cinema in situating secularism among them. The section takes off with Nikolas Kompridis's chapter analyzing Ousmane Sembene's film, *Moolaade* (2004). Kompridis explores sacred spaces as refuge and political agency. Besides his thorough analysis of the film, he employs Foucault's concept of heterotopia by claiming that Foucault himself would have identified *Moolaadé* as an extraordinary example of heterotopia. This section of the book shifts direction later to the

Cinema in the Middle East where Walid El Khachab provides a rich analysis of viewing cinema as a secularizing medium in the region. Based on Talal Asad, there are two notions of secularism: ontological and political. Khachab highlights that "cinema is ontologically a performance of the secular;" furthermore, the Middle Eastern cinema is an example of cinema that is only able to produce political secularism (144). Khachab uses the Weberian notion of disenchantment to establish two models of cinema in the Middle East: firstly, a cinema of disenchantment that situates religion below rationalism; secondly, a cinema of multiple enchantments that does not "evacuate religion" but rather acknowledges the multiplicity of religions (158). In relation to multifaith, the third chapter of the second section is titled, "The Impossible Possible, Secularism and Hindi Popular Cinema." In this chapter, Sheila J. Nayar argues that India's secularism is actually not to be centered around one established religion but to embrace pluralism of religions given India's divers religious situation. To support her main argument, Nayar quotes Kajiri Jain stating that India blurs, then she erases distinctions between spirit and matter, hence, state and religion. Nayar also underscores that commercial and profit-driven cinema, such as Bollywood, naturally "appeal to the most secularist market," yet in a sense that is religiously pluralistic (165). Furthermore, in the case of Indian cinema, she claims that "defending India's honor" is the utmost wanted redemption in the end (176). This claim is important in understanding the "good" secular film in a sense where the religious protagonist can be replaced by another from a different religion. The last chapter of this section expands on the notion of the observational secular with Kathryn Lofton on religion and documentary film in the U.S.A. Lofton opens with the claim that documentary films poorly address religion with little to no criticism that engages with religion; though, religion has historically been a big part of documentary film. Lofton highlights that the "claims of observational neutrality by Direct Cinema filmmakers" have not been fulfilled due to interventions in the editing which deprives the film from its objectivity to a certain extent (199).

The third and last section of the book is a sophisticated revisit of the notions of enchantment and disenchantment. The section starts with Catherine Wheatley's chapter on the wonder of film. Wheatley explores a mode of "secular enchantment" as Paolo Costa names it; she claims that cinema "offers reassurance" for our mastery of the world yet asks us to acknowledge this mastery (210). Based on Warren Buckland, Wheatley argues that through wonder/speculation the possible becomes believable. From wonder to plant-soul, the next chapter, "Vegetal Life, Plant-Soul: Early British Film" by Sarah Cooper, covers enchantment in regard to vegetal life. Cooper analyzes F. Percy Smith's *The Birth of a Flower* (1910), where she investigates Smith's work in terms of the "tendencies toward the divinization and anthropomorphization of the vegetal" (227). She argues that Smith's film permeates the plant with qualities which are neither wholly secular nor wholly religious.

The last section ends with Robert Sinnerbrink's chapter on the Uncanny Secularity where he delves in David Lynch's *Twin Peaks: The Return* (2017). Sinnerbrink initially claims that Lynch's third series prospers when it comes to "exploring the tension between secularist and post-secularist dimensions." Sinnerbrink further argues that the series' uncanny secularity can be seen as an allegory for our modern cultural and political senses of ethical ambiguity and existential unease.

Overall, *Cinema and Secularism* is an astonishing collection that is rich with diverse perspectives that offer provocative thoughts and remarks on vital subjects such as post-secularism, ontological and political secularism, uncanny secularity, and so forth. Mark Cauchi and the respected contributors shine a light on crucial conversations on cinema and secularism that need to be restudied and reexplored in a stage where the relationship between cinema and secularism is still challenged academically. The book's strongest suit lies in its ability to go far and beyond to touch on the matter globally in various settings. What this critic finds the most enjoyable and comforting about this book is the authors' ability to study the matter as objectively as possible, which bred a well-constructed and well-structured argumentative environment. This book is strongly recommended for those intent on investing and deepening their knowledge and understanding of the scholarship on cinema and its intertwining relation to religion and secularism.