

What Is Postsecular Cinema?

An Introduction

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WITHIN DAYS OF EACH OTHER in May 2011, two arresting films were released—Terrence Malick’s *The Tree of Life* and Lars von Trier’s *Melancholia*—that struck many viewers as forming a complementary dyad despite their seemingly opposite orientations. One film presents us with images of the world’s origin, while the other film narrates the world’s end; one lifts significant parts of its dialogue directly from the religious pages of the Bible, Augustine, and Kierkegaard, while the other seems to dramatize an atheistic, Nietzschean parable; one implores the viewer to see something beyond the immanence of the world, the other insists that there is nothing beyond it. Despite taking these apparently opposite tacks, *The Tree of Life* and *Melancholia* are nevertheless united in the way they challenge the Enlightenment narrative that has dominated Western thought for the last four centuries. In particular, they powerfully exemplify what in recent philosophy and critical theory has come to be called the “postsecular” condition. *The Tree of Life* and *Melancholia* can be conceived as two ends of a spectrum that characterizes postsecularism today. The loss of confidence in the supposed certainty of reason and the neutrality of secularism finds numerous articulations, ranging from the thoughtful meditation on faith in *The Tree of Life* to the non-triumphalist atheism of *Melancholia*. Indeed, over the last few years, a host of other films and filmmakers have staked out positions within the range delimited by the Malick and von Trier films.

The notion of postsecular cinema is quite elastic. The term captures the work of those filmmakers whose films explicitly hover over that grey

zone that dissolves the strict boundaries that are often established between belief and unbelief. Malick and von Trier in this sense are truly exemplary. Other critically acclaimed filmmakers who have consistently staked out this region include Dietrich Brüggemann, the Dardenne brothers, Amos Gitai, Carlos Reygadas, Abbas Kiarostami, Bruno Dumont, Ulrich Seidl, Albert Serra, Béla Tarr, and Apichatpong Weerasethakul. But beyond these are filmmakers who might not necessarily immediately come to mind but who nevertheless have directed works that merit the title of postsecular cinema. These include the likes of relatively newer filmmakers such as John Michael McDonagh and Jessica Hausner, but also more established ones like Denys Arcand, Jean-Luc Godard, Alejandro González Iñárritu, Chantal Akerman, Claire Denis, Ermanno Olmi, as well as Martin Scorsese and Paul Schrader. While the scope of this present collection is focused on films from the last two decades, we certainly would not want to forget to at least mention the work of earlier generations of filmmakers for whom the label postsecular cinema would not be a stretch: Robert Bresson, Roberto Rossellini, Ingmar Bergman, Andrei Tarkovsky, and Krzysztof Kieślowski are but a few of the obvious figures that come to mind in this regard.

Because this diverse body of work calls into question the ideas of the secular and the religious that have been so common in modern culture, the idea of postsecular cinema does not sit easily within the dominant strands of film theory today. Where early film theory was attuned to questions of spirituality alongside its more secular concerns, as Sarah Cooper has so helpfully reminded us,¹ the discipline progressively undertook a kind of self-disenchantment, purging from itself the resources by which it could address films that raise such questions. With films that took up religious themes—like those of Bresson, for example—the most critics were often able to say with this purged discourse was little more than that a film was “religious” or it was not, without much capacity to investigate what is meant by “religious,” how the latter appears cinematically, or what it means that the religious does appear cinematically.² Because the ideas of the religious and the secular that we operate with today emerged in Enlightenment thought, and because the body of films we are referring to and conceiving as postsecular adopts a critical and reflective stance toward those entrenched ideas of the secular and the religious, the theorization of postsecular cinema requires adopting a more philosophical approach to film, as found in the discourse of film-philosophy.³ The latter invites us to think more deeply about the nature of filmic experience, in particular what distinctive features cinema brings to bear on some of the basic problems of human existence. It is no exaggeration to say that the three most influential figures for this new mode of thinking about

film are André Bazin, Gilles Deleuze, and Stanley Cavell. One of the features that unites them is a shared preoccupation with the problem of belief. Surely, it is noteworthy that all three—the French Catholic, the Nietzschean atheist, and the secular Jew—consider belief as one of the critical keys to understanding the nature of film experience as well as life in general.⁴ In their eyes, a proper understanding of belief is imperative for both diagnosing and addressing the malaise of modernity. While expressing no desire to turn back the clock to some imagined idyllic time before the modern period, they nevertheless share the view that modernity inaugurated a form of thinking and being that has given rise to a whole host of deleterious problems, including a debilitating skepticism, disconnectedness, and an equally harmful, overreaching effort to overcome these symptoms—all of which Nietzsche described as part and parcel of the predicament of nihilism that plagues our age.

The renewal of belief that one finds in Bazin, Deleuze, and Cavell, can be understood as undercutting the conventional distinctions that the modern world has established between belief and unbelief, religion and secularism. Beyond these rigidly artificial dichotomies lies an understanding of belief that goes to the very heart of human experience. This is the belief that the postsecular once again makes possible. Before we examine what is meant by such belief, a few more words are in order concerning the postsecular itself. For the Enlightenment story about secularism is, from our perspective, one of the last major obstacles for a genuine renewal of the modern project. This is the lesson taught to us not only by those philosophers and film-thinkers who are grappling with these related questions, but also with the filmmakers who are the focus of this study.

How do we conceive of the postsecular and why are the films discussed in this collection helpful for mapping out this new intellectual and cultural landscape? The first thing that needs to be said about the postsecular is that it is not a return to some pre-secular or religious social and cultural condition. Habermas wisely cuts off that possibility when he writes sensibly that a “‘post-secular’ society must at some point have been in a ‘secular’ condition.”⁵ This claim means that a postsecular condition retains something of the secular within it. As Hent de Vries writes in an essay on Habermas, “[p]ostsecularism is secularism *all the way down*.”⁶ What makes it different from secularism and therefore *post-secular*, however, is that this is a secular condition that has undergone a “change in consciousness” about its own secularity, as Habermas says.⁷ It is, de Vries concludes, a “self-reflective and self-critical secularism.”⁸ Thus, postsecularism refers, as Charles Taylor observes, to an epoch in which “the hegemony of the mainstream narrative of secularization will

be more and more challenged.”⁹ In homology with the classic definition of postmodernism given by Lyotard—that it is an “incredulity toward metanarratives”—we could thus say that postsecularism is an incredulity toward the secularist narrative.¹⁰

The dominant understanding of secular narrative within the modern West—a rigidly *secular* understanding of the secular—is what Taylor calls a “subtraction story,” because it represents secularization as a process of “sloughing off,” as he likes to put it, false religious shells to reveal the true human kernel waiting beneath.¹¹ For example, in modern philosophy and political theory, the effort to overcome religious political authority was undertaken by imagining human beings in a state of nature stripped of any socially acquired attributes, revealing the “true” individual beneath. Such a *negative* conception of the secular as merely the *non*-religious fails to grasp in *positive* terms how modern secularity is, in fact, a wholly new, even if historically generated, experiential framework, and, consequently, this negative interpretation can only produce a very thin description of it.

To overcome the poverty of the subtraction narrative of secularization, and thus to offer a postsecular account, Taylor argues that we must give up seeing the advent of the secular age simply as the result of a negative movement which uncovers what has been there all along; instead, he argues, we must regard it as the outcome of a *positive* development, as the establishment of a new worldview, condition, or framework. In the story Taylor tells, dimensions of our religious past, in which the world was enchanted, in fact initiate and carry out the process of gradually creating the disenchanting worldview of the secular age, what he calls the “immanent frame.”

As a frame or framework, the immanent frame is *not* a consciously held belief or theory, but rather the implicit horizon within which our beliefs, ideas, theories, practices, and values take shape and acquire their intelligibility. It is what Taylor variously describes as the “sensed context,” “background,” and “social imaginary” that in fact conditions our lived experience in the secular age. So, for example, while I may consciously come to the conclusion that my current life path is unfulfilling, the *background* or *framework* of such a consciously held idea is that “fulfillment” is a worthy value, that *my* individual path can be differentiated from the social and cosmological order, that *different paths* are available to one, and that the *self is complex* enough to be living one way while desiring another one—deep assumptions that have not been held by previous societies.

Taylor describes this frame as immanent because in the secular age, he argues, our lives are played out within interwoven natural, social, and ethical orders that are (1) impersonal, meaning that there are no deities, spirits, or other supernatural forces determining them, and (2)

self-sufficient, meaning that they “can be fully explained in their own terms and don’t need to be conceived as dependent on anything outside, on the ‘supernatural’ or the ‘transcendent.’”¹² This non-dependence on the transcendent, however, should not be confused with a total denial of it or with a default atheism. To a certain sensibility, the immanent frame can appear to lead toward a total denial of transcendence. Indeed, entire perspectives have come to be in the secular age—perspectives Taylor calls “closed world systems,” such as naturalism, scientism, or the New Atheism of Richard Dawkins and company—which take it as given and obvious that there is no transcendence. But, in fact, Taylor argues, the immanent frame is the background framework for *all* modern experience—for those sensibilities open to transcendence and those closed to it—because, in itself, it is neither. As such, while parts of the modern world can be experienced and thought of in terms of a “closed world system,” there is nothing about the immanent frame that forecloses the possibility of living it—to use a phrase from William James that Taylor enthusiastically embraces—as an “open space,” in which we “can actually feel some of the force of each opposing position.” In point of fact, experiencing the world as an open space—where “you can feel the winds pulling you, now to belief, now to unbelief”¹³—represents, for Taylor a “fuller, experiential sense.”¹⁴ This latter position does not in any way prohibit us from taking a stand one way or the other on what Paul Tillich famously describes as “matters of ultimate concern.” Indeed, we must, and that is precisely what the predicament of belief requires us to do: to make the leap of committing ourselves. Nevertheless, according to this way of thinking about belief, we are beseeched to remain open to the possibility of revising our stances. Thought of in this way, modernity, at its best, demands of each of us to resist the seduction of certainty.

In their own unique ways, the films that are foregrounded in this collection thus satisfy the demand to inhabit the postsecular open space. These films provocatively challenge—at the aesthetic, cognitive, affective, and philosophical levels—a number of simplistic dichotomies that currently dominate popular culture, as well as the world of ideas. In this regard, these films are in fact examples of what André Bazin calls “accursed films” (*films maudits*), a concept taken up directly in this volume in chapters by Catherine Wheatley and Russel Kilbourn. Accursed films are misunderstood and even scorned by audiences and critics because they do not sit easily within accepted normative frameworks. Not insignificantly for our collection, the film that Bazin singles out as the “prototype” of the accursed film—Augusto Genina’s *Heaven Over the Marshes* (1949), which is taken up here in a chapter by Russel Kilbourn—is deemed to be so because it will “likely upset both Christians and non-believers alike.”¹⁵

This supposedly religious film thwarts its viewers' expectations by daring to depict "the total transcendence of grace" through "the very nature of its characters, story, and events" as well as by way of "ambiguous signs that can all be explained in quite natural terms," that is, through its realism or, we could say, its immanence or even secularity. Postsecular films are thus accursed in an exemplary sense: by unsettling accepted norms of modernity, they can and often do provoke a flurry of all-too-expected secularist and religious responses. Speaking unreflectively from their own narrowly secularist or religious points of view, many critics react according to all too predictable scripts, giving us one-sided assessments that fail to engage with their contrasting viewpoint. In the cases of *The Tree of Life* and *Melancholia*, critics typically either castigate the former for being "too Christian" or praise it for things besides its Christianity, while the latter is denounced or hailed as "nihilistic" and "godless." Such reactions merely reflect the secular-religious dichotomy characteristic of the so-called "culture wars" of our age rather than engage in a critical examination of it, as postsecular films demand of us. What these reactions often reveal is the unease we experience in not knowing how to classify the representation of a worldview that does not fit neatly into the limited set of categories handed over to us by the prevailing discourse.

The films in question desire to show us a way of navigating beyond the tiresome patterns that have until now governed intellectual and public life. The postsecular believer and unbeliever are marked by an acute awareness of the fragility of their own intuitions or what Taylor aptly calls "hunches."¹⁶ This awareness makes possible an exploration of the limits of human existence that are otherwise virtually ignored by other filmmakers including ones we might deem to be "critical" or "alternative." In practical terms this means that a believing filmmaker like Malick examines life from a theologically informed perspective that falls outside what we might normally think of as religious. Malick in this respect challenges not just nonbelievers but also, no doubt, a significant number of believers as well. Likewise, Lars von Trier's increasingly more "atheistic" cinema defies most well-established currents of atheism. In effect, what both filmmakers—and this is why they are quintessentially postsecular—eschew is the magical thinking that characterizes a good deal of religious thinking today but also an uncritical atheism that blindly places its unquestioned faith in the supposed certainty of secular reason. Postsecular thinking seeks to level the playing field in this respect: no one has access to a privileged space that would immunize them from radical contingency, from the permanent unsettling of what Derrida calls *différance*, that is, what makes possible the conditions of our beliefs but also makes impossible a final telling or rendering of those beliefs; the

groundless ground upon which all discourses come to be and, necessarily, will come undone. Despite our vain efforts to find a way out of this predicament that language imposes upon us, we find ourselves thrown back into the exigencies of life and the structural ambiguity of our everyday terms, concepts, and institutional vocabularies. At the limits of language, a region marked by the conditions of possibility and impossibility of what we can think, know, and say, all we have to go on are our intuitions and hunches. In this space, we are made keenly conscious of *both the necessity and utter frailness* of our beliefs. The ethic of postsecular cinema is to call into question the legitimacy of those efforts that seek to install a bulwark between ourselves and the unsettled open space of existence.

To properly understand what is at stake here we need to appreciate how the very idea of belief has undergone a radical transformation from the premodern to the modern world. This need involves being sensitive to the nuances associated with belief as expressed in different contexts. One outcome of the Enlightenment critique of religion was a concerted endeavor to make belief into an ostensibly more robust category. This required rethinking what is meant when we make statements like “I believe in . . .” or “I believe that. . .” In an effort to distance itself from what it perceived to be the superstitious and blind adherence of traditional belief, modern philosophy set about to reestablish belief on firmer ground. Removed from its ordinary, poetic, literary, and spiritual contexts, belief, henceforth, was narrowly reformulated as an epistemological category. As a consequence, for some time now, beliefs—in particular, as conceived in philosophy—are thought of as having propositional content, that is, assumptions and premises about some feature of reality. From the perspective of modern philosophy, the advantage of this new conception of belief is that it makes it possible to validate or invalidate the claims that are associated with certain beliefs. The positivist tradition that came out of the Vienna Circle represents one extreme version of this development. For these philosophers, many beliefs failed the test of reliable knowledge. Not surprisingly, belief as faith was deemed to be nonsense—for the simple reason that its assumptions either failed this test or simply could not be validated one way or another.¹⁷ The positivist reconstruction of belief was wholly discredited by philosophers like William James and the later Wittgenstein. Nevertheless, the positivist bias against faith never completely disappeared. It can still be found in major currents within the social sciences—in particular, psychology and economics. But more generally that bias has survived in the more widespread prejudice that exists in the academy and increasingly even in popular culture toward religion—if we go by the remarkable rise of the New Atheists. The knee-jerk rejection of anything religious goes

hand-in-hand with the Enlightenment myth of the objective certainty of secular reason. This prejudice obscures the fact that even the nonbeliever's position is grounded in axiomatic beliefs. There is no escaping the need to believe in something that we cannot prove beyond doubt. As Taylor puts it: "If you grasp our predicament without ideological distortion, and without blinders, then you see that going one way or another requires what is often called a 'leap of faith.'"¹⁸ The postsecular view therefore seeks to "dissipate the false aura" that enshrouds the various ideologies of epistemological certainty.¹⁹ Opting for the presumed safety of objective knowledge rather than the fragility of belief as faith or trust, which requires a commitment of the heart, the seat of our affective connection to the world, comes at a serious cost. As Taylor observes, the "[m]odern enlightened culture is very theory-oriented. We tend to live in our heads, trusting our disengaged understandings: of experience, of beauty . . . even the ethical."²⁰ This abstraction from the concrete lived world of experience, the fetishizing of objectivity, has translated into a growing erosion of trust and detachment from the environment, community, and even ourselves. Increasingly, we prefer the comfort of our virtual disembodied states—living in our heads—rather than the messiness of the lived, material, enfolded world. This stance—and philosophers as different as Taylor, Cavell, and Deleuze are all on the same page here—is responsible for the spiritual, cultural, and political malaise of our time. As Deleuze bluntly puts it, the "link between [ourselves] and the world is broken."²¹

Bazin had already understood how the modern faith in instrumental reason was radically warping our sense of reality. He succinctly summarizes his concern with objectivist ideologies when he notes that "[p]erhaps we have here the particular tragedy of today's world, the raising of a self-deifying social reality to a transcendental state."²² For Bazin, cinema offers us a form of realism that can withstand and correct for the distortions of an ersatz "realism," the one proffered by the various schools and movements of fetishized objectivity. That is why he can say that the "originality of Italian neorealism as compared with the chief schools of realism that preceded it and the Soviet cinema, lies in never making reality the servant of some *a priori* point of view."²³ Much hinges, of course, on what Bazin means by reality here. This part of his legacy, unfortunately, is too frequently short-changed in the literature. Much of the debate around his work has centered on the *ontological* justification of his theory of realism: *does the film apparatus actually capture reality as Bazin so claims; is it truly a window into the world?* This emphasis on the ontological features of his film realism obscures another equally central dimension of his work, namely, its spiritual and humanist motivations. As Robert Sinnerbrink convincingly argues, the upshot of Bazin's realism

is “less epistemological and ontological than moral and aesthetic. It is a quest to explore,” he continues, “the revelatory possibilities of cinematic images; not only their power to reveal reality . . . but also to satisfy our desire for myth.”²⁴ Indeed, what Bazin means by ‘reality’ is not limited to the visible phenomenality of the natural world but also refers to the equally ‘real,’ though invisible, dimension of human existence. That is why he can say of a realist director like De Sica that he “possesses the gift of being able to convey an intense sense of the human presence.”²⁵ If we locate Bazin in terms of postsecular cinema, then what comes to the fore is his vigilant refusal of a predetermined objective template for the world. Instead, what is required, for him, is a faithfulness to what he describes at one point as the “ontological ambiguity of reality.”²⁶ Such faithfulness necessitates a certain attentiveness to the “essence of things, in allowing them first of all to exist for their own sakes, freely; it is in loving them in their singular individuality.”²⁷ The invocation here of a loving attitude is not accidental. Love is a word that Bazin repeatedly deploys in his work. Central to the realist cinema that he embraces is its ability to elicit and to register the transformative force of love. Bazin encourages us to reflect on “how much the cinema owes to a love for living creatures. There is no way of completely understanding the art of Flaherty, Renoir, Vigo, and especially Chaplin unless we try to discover beforehand what particular kind of tenderness, of sensual or sentimental affection, they reflect. In my opinion, the cinema more than any other art is particularly bound up with love.”²⁸ Love, in this context, is but another name for an attitude of openness to the world, trusting in the world without the assurance of an a priori understanding of it.²⁹ It is in this sense also a form of overcoming of the ego and, on a social level, a striving to get beyond ideological partisanship. Those critics who have been narrowly preoccupied with Bazin’s peculiar use of the term “ontology” fail to register his copious comments about the spiritual and ethical vocation of cinema. Perhaps this is because they perceive such comments to be awash in sentimentality and lacking the rigor of those statements concerning the powerful indexical nature of film. However, for Bazin, these are not mutually incompatible. Cinema’s incomparable capacity to register the complex ambiguity of reality makes it, for him, a privileged medium for offering witness to our link to the world.

Cavell makes the *question* of our link to the world the basis of his philosophy—and, for him, this link really is in question or suspension, without being wholly denied. Cavell refers to this questioning of our link to the world by the classic philosophical term “skepticism,” although he uses it more broadly than is typically done. “The name skepticism speaks,” Cavell writes, “of some new, or new realization of, human distance from

the world, or some withdrawal of the world, which philosophy interprets as a limitation in our capacity for knowing the world.”³⁰ To say that in modernity we are distant from the world is not to say that we have no connection to it at all. It is to say, instead, that the connection is not one of fusion, immersion, immediacy or direct access—the latter not unlike the premodern condition of enchanted embeddedness that Taylor describes—and therefore we are not in the position of possessing it with mastery or certainty. Even though Cavell never pursues it at length, it is worth observing for our purposes that he recognizes on several occasions that the emergence of the condition of skepticism is related to modern secularization. Referring to the specific dimension of skepticism called the problem of other minds, he suggests that we understand it “as the trace or scar of the departure of God. This descent, or ascent, of the problem of the other”—a genealogy that would apply equally to skepticism in general—“is the key way I can grasp [one] process of secularization.”³¹ Cavell will argue, not unlike Taylor, that the appropriate response to the secular condition of skepticism is not naturalism, scientism, or even simple atheism, but instead what he calls *acknowledgment*. And despite the fact that Cavell will, in this way *unlike* Taylor, eschew the language of transcendence in discussing acknowledgement in favor of a language of immanence (the ordinary, the body), his idea is in many ways a retrieval of an older, religious understanding of belief—before the latter was defanged by an exaggerated rational standard that was applied to it—as acceptance and trust. As he writes in *Disowning Knowledge*,

When Luther said we cannot know God but must have faith, it is clear enough that the inability he speaks of is a logical one: There is not some comprehensible activity we cannot perform, and equally not some incomprehensible activity we cannot perform. Our relation to God is that of parties to a testament (or refusers of it); and Luther’s logical point is that you do not accept a promise by knowing something about the promisor.³²

Thus, what the human predicament calls on us to do is to acknowledge the limits of what we can know and to adopt an attitude of openness—recall Taylor’s Jamesian “open space”—to what otherwise cannot be mastered by us. We must, for Cavell, resist the temptation of imagining that we can somehow triumph over the uneasiness of not knowing, doubting, and all the other vagaries that befall us as a result of not possessing absolute certainty. This sense of belief as trust is succinctly described in *The Claim of Reason* in an idiom that strongly reverberates with Bazin’s

idea of the love of the filmmaker for the world: “To live in the face of doubt, eyes happily shut, would be to fall in love with the world. For if there is a correct blindness, only love has it. And if you find that you have fallen in love with the world, then you would be ill-advised to offer an argument of its worth.”³³

Given that, for Cavell, cinema is a modern phenomenon and, as such, must take place within the condition of skepticism and as a response to it, it would not be surprising if we could discern in Cavell’s account of cinema the same relationship between the secular and the religious that we did above. Cavell is always clear that cinema is a secular art form: coming after the death of God, it is, he says, “profane”³⁴ and a “secular mystery.”³⁵ But, as this last phrase perhaps evokes, “since all the major arts arise in some way out of religion,” Cavell reasons that film, too, must arise out of something in some way religious, and the reason it can be said to so arise is because it arises “out of magic,” “from *below* the world.”³⁶ What Cavell means by this subterranean magic is that the world that film “re-creates” for us on the screen, which is not equivalent to the world itself and so not ontologically on the same par, nevertheless also does not arise from *above* the world, from a God-like power of creation. The wish to have the world re-created is not “a wish for power over creation.”³⁷ The desire in film is, rather, “a wish not to need power, not to have to bear its burdens.”³⁸ Film disburdens viewers of the need for power by re-creating the world “automatically,” that is, without them having to do anything. In viewing the world on a screen, we are absented from that world—displaced, alienated, not present to it. The film screen, he asserts, “screens me from the world it holds,” and “screens that world from me.”³⁹ Because of this distance between world and viewer, Cavell claims that “[f]ilm is a moving image of skepticism.”⁴⁰ It is critical to recognize, however, that this distance from the cinematic world is generated by the viewing of it. By holding the world before us, film thereby withholds the world from us.⁴¹ As such, precisely like acknowledgment—indeed, as an instance of it—film gives us on the screen a kind of access to, across our distance from, the world, even if this access is by consequence not immediate or total. Film, in other words, acknowledges the world’s distance. This distance means that the world is not something of which the film and its viewer can have knowledge. But that means a film’s camera and its viewers relate to the film world as to something transcendent (“the camera must . . . acknowledge . . . its being outside its world”⁴²), not in the Platonic sense of something literally beyond our world (since, as Cavell is clear, a film is clearly *in* and *of* our world), but as something beyond our limits. As such, a film is something that requires of us, as Cavell pointed out about Luther’s conception of

God, a kind of faith or trust.⁴³ But, again, this is not a faith in something literally beyond our world. In this respect, Cavell sympathizes with both Kierkegaard and Nietzsche: the two great demolishers of the phantasmic castles we create with our theoretical enterprises and claims of knowledge. Rather, like Kierkegaard, Cavell too hopes for, as he sees projected in the comedies of remarriage, “a new burden of faith in the authority of one’s everyday experience, one’s experience of the everyday, of earth not of heaven.”⁴⁴ This coming together of the extraordinary and the ordinary in the acknowledgment of film is precisely why Cavell describes film, in an expression we could call postsecular, as a “secular mystery,” since in film there is a “mismatch” and “distance between the *depth* to which an ordinary human life requires expression, and the surface of *ordinary means* through which that life requires expression.”⁴⁵

Likewise, Deleuze announces in *Cinema 2* the end of both dogmatic religious and secularist magical thinking, which he qualifies, following Nietzsche, as expressions of an other-worldly tendency. He reminds us that the desire for other-worldly escape finds a home even within dominant sectors of the modern world, in the unquestioned belief in the salvific power of reason. For Deleuze, a renewed belief involves rejecting the childish belief in a perfect world in favor of a trusting stance in relation to this world of becoming. In an important moment in his discussion on belief in *Cinema 2*, Deleuze suddenly adopts the vocative voice, as if to underscore the urgency of the issue at hand: “Whether we are Christians or atheists, in our universal schizophrenia, *we need reasons to believe in this world.*”⁴⁶ Deleuze’s register is unmistakably postsecular. His direct address to “Christians” and “atheists” completely sidesteps the acrimonious and superficial polemics that flare up around a hopelessly stagnant distinction between the secular and the religious—for instance, in the ongoing “culture wars,” which at least on the political right often means adopting the view that the secular is synonymous with the wholesale rejection of religion, and in the longstanding cynical wariness of religion amongst many academic and intellectual elites. In these futile debates, one or the other side places itself above the contingencies of finite, temporal existence as if to occupy some magical space of certainty. Whether that space is authorized by divine fiat or secular objective reason makes no difference; both represent a flight from *this* world.

Aware that religious dogmatism has already been exposed, Deleuze reserves most of his critical attention in the *Cinema* volumes to the various proxies of ontotheology: Cartesianism, technological utopianism, and communism, in particular. Deleuze unmaskes the pretenses of a secular reason that would have us believe that concepts can withstand the eroding effects of time. In the face of the social and political disasters of the first half

of the twentieth century, the only ethical response to nihilism entails an acknowledgment of paralysis, like the many “seers” that one finds in the postwar films that interest Deleuze, notably, *Europa*’s⁵¹. Paradoxically the affirmation of that paralysis represents also the possibility of reanimating thought. All we can do in this respect is trust in that process of becoming, the capacity for life to renew itself. The process of “un-linking,” the breakdown of “normal perception,” that is, conventional reality, makes one a “seer who finds himself struck by something intolerable in the world, and confronted by something unthinkable in thought.”⁴⁷ We are now faced with having to believe, to wager again, without the safety net of an illusory discourse. The belief that is called for is “not in a different world”—be it the eternal heaven beyond this shadowy universe or the perfect world that an immutable reason offers, as promised by the various utopian ideologies of the last two centuries—“but in a link between man and the world, in love or life. . . .”⁴⁸ In this endeavor, Deleuze does not divide the intellectual players he discusses in terms of believers versus unbelievers, as one might perhaps expect from an atheist. Rather, his postsecular instinct aligns the thinkers that he has in mind according to an even more fundamental distinction: belief/knowledge.

In the history of philosophy, the substitution of belief for knowledge takes place in authors of whom some are still believers, while others carry out an atheistic conversion. Hence the existence of real couples: Pascal—Hume, Kant—Fichte, Kierkegaard—Nietzsche, Lequier—Renouvier. But, even with the believers, belief is not now directed towards another world, it is directed to this world: faith according to Kierkegaard, or even Pascal, restores man and the world to us.⁴⁹

William Connolly pursues the same fertile realignment that Deleuze had begun in his own writing. Connolly adeptly recognizes a convergence here between Taylor and Deleuze—two philosophers who are almost never paired together—on the question of belief, and precisely in the context of an argument for why ours is a postsecular age. While acknowledging that the “starting points of faith from which they proceed differ radically,” there is, nevertheless, he maintains, a “critical difference between thinkers like Deleuze and Taylor,” on the one hand, and on the other, those “who think either that there is no real issue here, that a return to traditional secularism will resolve it, or that it can be resolved only by restoration of universal belief in one God.”⁵⁰ Connolly interprets Deleuze’s reflections concerning cinema’s capacity to give us reasons for believing again as an expression of the same desire that motivates

Taylor to break with the stultifying Enlightenment myth of secularism that carves an unambiguous line between what it takes to be irrational belief—faith—and the supposedly self-evident truth of knowledge that is grounded in reason.

Despite their different hunches about ultimate matters, Deleuze recognizes that Pascal and Kierkegaard are religious thinkers whose belief—like Nietzsche’s—involves a wager, not in the name of certainty but in risk and exposure to the unknowable. The kind of belief that Bazin, Cavell, and Deleuze have in mind is infused with passion and existential fervor. It is the belief that animates a devout, priestly thinker like Augustine no less than a secular-minded avant-garde figure like Antonin Artaud. What all three film-thinkers teach us is that in many important ways cinema has a special affinity to this primordial belief. It is in this context that we must understand Bazin’s now famous words concerning the “irrational power of the photograph to carry us away in our belief.”⁵¹ For Cavell, the very nature of the cinematic experience raises the specter of skepticism while compelling us to give over our hearts to it even in the absence of epistemological certainty. Likewise, Deleuze, too, expresses a paradox concerning cinema. He recognizes in the shock delivered by the time-image cinema the possibility of reaffirming, as belief rather than knowledge, the “link” that has become severed between ourselves and the world. The pretenses of a self-assured rationality, and its concomitant attachment to the inevitable march of technological and scientific progress, looked very different for artists and filmmakers in particular after the middle of the last century. Likewise, the postsecular filmmakers of our time express a deep dissatisfaction with a secularist view that makes light of belief as trust in the name of a triumphant rationality. Needless to say they have even less patience with any form of religiosity that claims to remove uncertainty from human existence.

As we indicated in the opening of this Introduction, the near-simultaneous appearance in 2011 of Malick’s *The Tree of Life* and von Trier’s *Melancholia* seemed rather auspicious (or portentous), as if they together, although perhaps oppositely, divined something about our current moment. Because the former film appears to affirm so clearly the significance of transcendence whereas the latter seems equally clearly to question it, we have framed these filmmakers somewhat heuristically as poles on a spectrum of postsecular cinema. For this reason, we have organized the volume in two main parts, with part I focused on the two filmmakers—Malick and von Trier—who delimit this spectrum, and part II attending to other filmmakers whose films can be construed to fit within it (Chantal Akerman, Denys Arcand, the Dardenne brothers, John Michael McDonagh). Part III is comprised of two interviews with

significant figures who discuss issues at the core of the volume: Luc Dardenne and Jean-Luc Nancy. The volume is thus focused exclusively on European and North American examples of what is often called, not unproblematically, “art cinema.” Addressing first the regional and cultural focus of this collection, we recognize that this limitation does not reflect the reality of contemporary world cinema. There are a number of filmmakers outside these areas—in Asia, South Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and Central and South America—who have produced work that, we believe, can be fruitfully thought about in terms of postsecularism. But three things prevented expanding the collection into those areas. First, because the collection evolved out of a response to the Malick and von Trier films, and because they seemed to form a complementary range, it made sense for the coherence of the volume to restrict it to films that were responding to the same developments in modern Western culture. Second, we are not deeply enough familiar with these cinemas and their cultural contexts, and did not want to risk making naïve and mistaken decisions about them. Finally, and more practically, the scholars whose work we know to engage or to be compatible with a postsecular perspective are scholars whose focus also tends to be European and North American cinema. As for the second limitation (the focus on “art cinema”), acknowledging that our foregrounding of Malick and von Trier may have influenced the kinds of films our contributors selected, we did not request that scholars exclude mainstream cinema, but it is perhaps not unsurprising and not coincidental that they did. We argued above that the idea of the postsecular emerges out of a reflection on and critique of the dominant self-understanding within secularism. Most films, like most of anything, are not critically reflective on secularity, but rather operate within the dominant ideological undercurrents of mainstream modernity. A film that questions this most deep of modern ideological assumptions is probably bound to take a stand outside of mainstream culture, although perhaps there are cases we have failed to consider. Aware of both of these limitations, this volume does not put itself forward, and should not be taken, as suggesting that it is a definitive and exhaustive statement on postsecular cinema. Our priority was the more modest one of getting the idea of postsecular cinema established. We believe firmly that the chapters included here succeed in fleshing out the idea and justifying the term’s use, and hope the collection as a whole will prompt further work on other filmmakers, films, and cinemas from this perspective.

Opening part I of the volume on the two poles of postsecular cinema, Robert Sinnerbrink reflects on both of the films that prompted this collection. He contends in “Two Ways Through Life: Postsecular Visions in *Melancholia* and *The Tree of Life*” that the two works offer contrasting

cinematic and metaphysical meditations on the apocalyptic theme of the “end of the world.” Both examine the question of a postsecular vision of modernity in which the Enlightenment ideals of progress, scientific mastery, and possessive individualism have lost much of their credibility and motivating power. Both also offer striking image-sequences expressing a poetic disclosure of worlds and an experience of aesthetic-moral sublimity. In this sense, both films are performative demonstrations of the aesthetic and ethical possibilities of cinema in an age of pervasive skepticism and moral restlessness. Yet the depiction and response to the “end of time” which both films offer could not be more different: von Trier’s resolutely tragic vision of an ethical acknowledgment of finitude as the only “rational” aesthetic and moral response to imminent (environmental) catastrophe stands in stark contrast with Malick’s redemptive vision of spiritual reconciliation through love in the face of pervasive cultural nihilism and loss of faith.

In “Hegel, Malick, and the Postsecular Sublime,” Lambert Zuidervaart makes a case for a postsecular time that unsettles aesthetic categories, and opens new ways to understand their religious roots. The concept of the sublime is a telling example. Zuidervaart aims to articulate a concept of the sublime that illuminates postsecular art. Taking issue with skeptical scholars such as James Elkins, he explores the idea of the sublime in Hegel’s *Aesthetics*. Zuidervaart makes the case for Hegel’s conception of the sublime for contemporary thought and culture. He develops this line of argument in four stages. He first offers a summary of some of the key features of Hegel’s *Aesthetics*. He then examines the potential place for Hegel’s understanding of the sublime in current debates. That analysis then allows him to propose Malick’s *The Tree of Life* as an exemplary instance of postsecular sublime art. He concludes his chapter by suggesting that such art gives us reasons to think that it may be time for us to reconceive the relations among religion, art, and philosophy.

According to John Caruana, the time is ripe to give Kierkegaard his due in relation not only to Malick but also to the broader field of film-philosophy. In “Repetition and Belief: A Kierkegaardian Reading of Malick’s *The Tree of Life*,” Caruana reminds us that along with Heidegger and Wittgenstein, the young Malick, a PhD candidate in philosophy at Oxford, had also planned to write on Kierkegaard. The Danish philosopher, Caruana maintains, represents a neglected resource in the literature on Malick. Kierkegaard’s concept of *repetition* has been a source of major inspiration for two of the most important thinkers of film in the twentieth century: Gilles Deleuze and Stanley Cavell. For both film-philosophers, Kierkegaardian repetition is a critical tool in conceiving of a renewed belief in life. Malick too owes a major debt to Kierkegaard. *The Tree of*

Life is a powerful expression of this reanimated faith in the world. In *The Tree of Life*, Malick makes explicit reference to Kierkegaard's own interpretation of Job. Revisiting certain critical insights from the Book of Job, *The Tree of Life* tells the story of a family's attempts to come to terms with a devastating loss. Focusing on Kierkegaard's notion of repetition sheds light on how belief qua trust, for Malick, has the potential to transfigure what is otherwise a crippling experience of irrecoverable loss.

Steven Rybin also examines the theme of loss in *The Tree of Life*. But, for Rybin, all cinema visits loss. The preserved, indexical reality in the shot, he explains in "Toward and Away from the World: Subjectivity After Loss in *The Tree of Life*," is an abstraction, a slice, of a plenitude of reality lost when cinema cuts an image of the world into the new constructive flow of a film. The abstraction of reality inherent in the creative operations of the film medium parallels secular modernity's own belief in the subject's creative construction of the self. It also parallels secular modernity's disavowal, in some strands of modern and postmodern thinking, of a transcendent plenitude beyond that self. In a postsecular cinematic practice, filmmakers can connect modernity's investment in self-constructed subjectivity with a transcendent world beyond the subject's present reckoning. This world resides, Rybin argues, in an extra-cinematic elsewhere, unable to fully inscribe itself in the contingencies of the profilmic world, and reliant upon the faith and consciousness of the viewer for its existence. Malick explores this on the level of the story, through a mother's loss of a child and the intervention of her acutely melancholic subjectivity into what was formerly her warmly affective bind with the world. Malick's strategy, which is true to the nature of cinema at the same time as it is a highly unique style in his hands, draws us *away from* and *into* the world at once, a poetics of cinema that is affectively marked by the abstracting incursion of loss into the lives of his characters but which also seeks productive, aesthetic use of this loss to reconnect the self with the world.

A similar pattern of drawing us away from and into the world is shown by Mark Cauchi to be a fundamental feature of von Trier's film. In "The Death of God and the Genesis of Worldhood in von Trier's *Melancholia*," Cauchi argues that, even though the film comes across at first as bluntly atheist and nihilist, it in fact works out a more subtle relationship between the death of God and the possibility of worldhood and transcendence. Recognizing that in our contemporary, postmodern, and late capitalist situation the death of God is so internalized as to be no longer resonant, the film sets out, in a neo-modernist gesture, to make that event visible and palpable again. Drawing on Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Deleuze, Cauchi argues that *Melancholia* does this by undertaking

a series of nullifications of various cultural forms of the contemporary secular lifeworld—bourgeois family, capitalism, science and technology, and secularism itself—culminating in the film’s well-known destruction of the world. This neo-modernist effort to disclose the nothingness that underlies our cultural forms is exerted, however, not for ultimately nihilist reasons, but for a neo-Romantic one of clearing space for a new ground of worldhood. Focusing on the relationships of care and responsibility in the film and on the image of precarity and contingency in the “magic cave,” Cauchi shows in dialogue with the Bible and Levinas that this ethical ground generates a world of meaning and value that are not reducible to, and so transcend, the world that is nullified in the film. Thus, rejecting the instinctive and perfunctory secularity of our late capitalist and postmodern condition, *Melancholia* draws upon Modernism, Romanticism, and biblical thought to craft a postsecular vision of worldhood.

In “Notes on Divine Homelessness: A Reading of Lars von Trier’s *Dogville*,” Costica Bradatan also shows how von Trier’s work repudiates a purely secular modernity by turning his attention to an earlier film that also mines the ongoing complex relationship between religion and secular life. For Bradatan, *Dogville* (2003) is as much a theological film as it is philosophical, offering occasions for a series of theological-philosophical reflections on grave topics such as hospitality, homelessness, home, alienation, divine trials, and *Deus ludens*. In Bradatan’s interpretation, *Dogville*’s film narrative is, allegorically, about a homeless divinity that, in the process of searching for shelter and hospitality, is putting humanity to the test. The character Grace is increasingly asserting herself as a cinematic metaphor for an ironic god. As the narrative unfolds, this metaphor becomes more and more evident, culminating in the final scenes, with their numerous visual and textual allusions to Judgment Day. Bradatan shows that both the narrative and the film’s aesthetic vision in *Dogville* are philosophically and theologically loaded in a significant way. He does so by interpreting *Dogville* in the light of two important biblical texts (Job and Matthew 25), and in relation to Dostoevsky’s parable of the Grand Inquisitor. In this way, Bradatan demonstrates that the separation between religion and secularism as defended by the Enlightenment is far from neat and clear-cut. When read through these important texts, *Dogville* reveals the multiplicity of ways that religion and secularity bleed into one another.

Part II of the volume moves beyond Malick and von Trier, and considers how other films and filmmakers take up these issues in different ways. In “Face to Face with Chantal Akerman,” William Rothman advances the view that Akerman’s cinema raises some profound questions that bear on the second commandment concerning the prohibition of the graven image. Does she like to think she makes her films “in a religious

environment”—a phrase that she herself conjures up? Is a film a kind of image that God commands Jews not to make? As Bazin argues, and Cavell reiterates, film images, unlike paintings, are not made by human hands; on film, the world creates or re-creates itself in its own image. It is *from* such images that Akerman makes her films. Thus, she cannot simply be said to make those images. Whether by making her films she affirms or disavows her identity as a Jew is another question—inseparable from Bazin’s question “What is cinema?”—that she likes to think about, or has to think about, in her films. There is no purer expression of faith in this gospel than *News from Home* (1977), in which every view of a Manhattan street or subway, no matter how dingy and down-on-its-heels the locale, brings to the spectator, miraculously, not only pleasure, but joy.

In “‘There’s No Point in Killing a Bad Priest’: John Michael McDonagh’s *Calvary* and the Broken Middle,” Catherine Wheatley examines that 2014 film in light of this volume’s concerns with postsecularity and what it is to inhabit the space between religion and secularity; the personal and the institutional; faith and cynicism. Concerned with the last days of Catholic priest Father James (Brendan Gleeson), the film contemplates the place of religion in contemporary Ireland, a country hit hard by economic collapse and struggling with revelations of sexual abuse by priests and its institutional covering-up. In this chapter, particular attention is paid to the manner in which the director negotiates between satire and the serious possibility of grace to create a gap in which a genuine ambivalence toward the film’s subject matter can arise. Wheatley connects this gap, the space that is inhabited by both Father James and the film’s spectators, to Gillian Rose’s concept of “the broken middle,” a place suspended between immanence and transcendence. To inhabit the broken middle is to recognize and identify conflicts which are ignored or overlooked and, crucially, to refuse to identify the different positions as “guilty” or “innocent.”

According to Russel Kilbourn’s “The Immortal Thighs of Ines Orsini: The Transcendence of Grace in Denys Arcand’s *The Barbarian Invasions*,” Arcand’s film offers a sophisticated and germane representation of the very notion and condition of the postsecular in the specific example of contemporary Quebecois society—a traditionally predominantly Catholic culture, but one which from the 1960s onward transformed it into one of the most secular regions in the Western world. Contemporary Quebec’s postsecular contradictions are focused in the microcosmic form of a large Montreal hospital in which a man of a certain age lies dying of cancer, surrounded by his estranged family and long-time friends. In the course of the story, which shifts in genre from scathing social satire to sophisticated melodrama, the protagonist, Rémy, recounts to friends his

youthful memories of his first love, the “one who said no,” none other than Santa Maria Goretti, played by “the immortal Ines Orsini” in the 1949 film *Heaven over the Marshes*. Augusto Genina’s neorealist work is the very same film that Bazin singles out as paradigmatic of what he calls an accursed film (see above), that is, a type of film that defies either a conventional religious or strictly secular reading. As such, *The Barbarian Invasions* offers a very powerful instance or opportunity to reflect on the complex contradictions and ambiguities of postsecular life.

One cannot but be struck by the number of recent powerful films that offer to “think” the world in postsecular, or more than secular, terms. And yet, as Charles Warren argues in “Three Immersions,” film has often, if intermittently, offered this alternative in the past. The Dardenne brothers are seen as postsecular artists because of their concern with the unknowable mystery of the human soul, the Other who must be acknowledged. The Other is a fact that confronts us, and also a figure who goes through crucial transformations that cannot be rationally understood, but must be acknowledged. The call for acknowledgment is made to characters we see onscreen and also, significantly, to the film audience. The Dardennes say that they took inspiration in their project from Murnau’s *Sunrise* (1929), and one might think of other great silent films in this regard (Chaplin, and Dreyer, for instance) or Stanley Cavell’s 1930s–40s “Hollywood Melodramas of the Unknown Woman.” A critical point of all Cavell’s work in philosophy and in film study is to distinguish “acknowledgment” and its moral calling from “knowledge,” a rationalist and ultimately futile pursuit when it comes to human beings in their fullness. The Dardennes’ *Rosetta* (1999), moreover, takes one back to Agnès Varda’s *Vagabond* (*Sans toit ni loi*, 1985) and to Robert Bresson’s *Mouchette* (1967), with their challenging portraits and spiritual overtones of outsider young women.

On the postsecular contemporary filmic spectrum that runs in this volume from the meditation on faith of *The Tree of Life* to the atheist vision of *Melancholia*, the cinema of the Dardenne brothers, according to Sarah Cooper, occupies an important place. Their films have long reflected on a Judeo-Christian religious inheritance, bearing traces of biblical narratives and casting them into testing modern-day social, secular settings. Her contribution focuses on the interrogative relation to this religious foundation that is evident in *Deux jours, une nuit* (*Two Days, One Night*) (2014). Sandra (Marion Cotillard), the main protagonist, is declared fit to go back to work in a factory in Seraing, Belgium, after a period of sick leave for depression. However, on the eve of her return, she finds out that the factory management has offered her coworkers a bonus in place of re-employing her. Several times throughout the film, the words,