
Cosmic Prison Break: From Gnostic Movies to Conspiracist Cosmology

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Abstract: The article thematically and structurally analyses a group of films usually designated as “gnostic films”. These films share a common ideology as they postulate the existence of two worlds – one illusory and the other true. The hero must escape the false world and reach the true one. As the majority of gnostic films appeared at the turn of the millennium, the article also suggests what contributed to the emergence of these films. As the cosmology of the films bears a close similarity to the cosmology of conspiracy theories, the emergence of the films is shown to be a part of the sociocultural development of the conspiracist mindset entering the mainstream. In the 1990s, conspiracism was out of the closet and gained popularity, but it was not yet perceived as an imminent societal threat and therefore was not a taboo for Hollywood filmmakers. The 1990s were also the decade of a unipolar world order where the absence of an inimical Other engendered anxiety about the system itself, which is reflected in the analysed films.

Keywords: conspiracy theory; mythology; gnosticism; gnostic myth; gnostic film; cinema; demiurgos

Abstrakt: Článek tematicky a strukturálně analyzuje skupinu filmů, které se obvykle označují jako „gnostické filmy“. Tyto filmy mají společnou ideologii, neboť postulují existenci dvou světů – jednoho iluzorního a druhého pravého. Hrdina musí uniknout z falešného světa a dosáhnout toho pravého. Vzhledem k tomu, že většina gnostických filmů se objevila na přelomu tisíciletí, nabízí článek také odpověď na otázku, co přispělo ke vzniku těchto filmů. Vzhledem k tomu, že kosmologie těchto filmů je velmi podobná kosmologii konspiračních teorií, ukazuje se, že vznik těchto filmů je součástí sociokulturního vývoje, kdy se konspirační myšlení dostává do kulturního mainstreamu. V devadesátých letech 20. století konspirace opouští okrajovou pozici a získávají na popularitě, ale ještě nejsou vnímány jako bezprostřední společenská hrozba, a proto nebyly pro hollywoodské filmaře tabu. Devadesátá léta byla také dekadou unipolárního uspořádání světa, kdy absence nepřátelského Jiného vyvolávala úzkost ze systému samotného, což se odráží v analyzovaných filmech.

Klíčová slova: konspirační teorie; mytologie; gnóze, gnostický mýtus; gnostický film; kinematografie; demiurg

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Introduction

The year was 1998. I was a first-year student at Charles University's Religious Studies Department, reading voraciously – outside of the standard curriculum – the texts of ancient Gnostic traditions. The texts of the Nag Hammadi corpus – especially *The Apocryphon of John*, *Tripartite Tractate* and *Gospel of Truth* – perfectly suited my youthful contrarian intellectual tastes. I was fascinated by a cosmology where the God of the Bible is cast as a villain and where the world is seen not as a positive reality to be happily inhabited but as a prison to escape.

A worldview of this sort was attractive to me not only because I was strongly critical of “the System” (i.e. the world of the grown-ups I was entering). It was also quite understandable for me because of the experience of living under the communist regime in my childhood. My father was a dissident and a political prisoner¹ (he was the one who introduced me to Gnosticism), and my earliest experience with school and the state was a feeling of alienation and suspicion: The world did not seem to be a good place, even if the cheerful parades, the TV, and the newspapers were trying to tell us otherwise. It was an oppressive system, and it looked like only a few people were bright enough to understand its true nature and even fewer were brave enough to stand up and resist it.

As I was absorbed by the study of Gnosticism ten years after the Velvet Revolution, a very strange thing was happening at the same time: A surprising number of new Hollywood movies seemed to be filled with Gnostic ideas and motifs – the avalanche started with *The Truman Show* (1998), *Dark City* (1998), and *Pleasantville* (1998) and was followed the next year by *The Matrix* (1999), *The Thirteenth Floor* (1999), and *eXistenZ* (1999). The movies technically had no connection: their styles, directors and producers had nothing in common, only their cosmologies were surprisingly similar.

All of these movies directly or indirectly questioned the nature of everyday reality, and most of them told stories about an “awakening” from an illusory world and an escape into higher reality. My reaction to this coincidence was almost paranoid: Is it just my fascination with the topic that means I tend to see it everywhere? Or are the people in Hollywood also reading up on Gnosticism? Is the whole world turning Gnostic? The answer to the last question soon turned out to be negative: In the following years, several more films of this type appeared, but eventually, the wave would be over.

I didn't know what to do with the topic at that time, so I let it be. Many years passed, and I spent my time researching historical religious traditions unconnected to Gnosticism, but in recent years, I was brought back to the issue. My research into the theory of myth² led me to the contemporary phenomenon of conspiracy theories and the cultural background of conspiracist imagination, where the same movies I had noticed twenty years ago suddenly reappeared again:

¹ “Jan Kozák” [online], *Memory of Nations*, accessed July 2022, available online at <https://www.memoryofnations.eu/en/kozak-jan-1951>.

² JAN A. KOZÁK, *Monomytus: Synetické Pojednání o Teorii Mýtu*, Praha: Malvern, 2021.

Conspiracy theorists are thus not so much trying to discover the underlying forces of nature but aim to uncover the hidden forces that control society. Herein lies personal salvation. This is often illustrated in the milieu by reference to films like *The Truman Show* (dir. Peter Weir, 1999), *ExistenZ* (dir. David Kronenberg, 1999), or, most often, *The Matrix* (dir. Wachowski and Wachowski, 1999) where the protagonist hacker, Neo, discovers that everyday reality is in fact a virtual reality constructed by artificially intelligent robots (...).³

At this point, my old questions about “gnostic movies” returned to me, accompanied by several new questions: what is the connection between the gnostic-like imagination of Hollywood filmmakers and postmodern conspiracy culture? Could this connection explain the sudden appearance of a wave of these movies? The present article is an attempt to deal with these questions. I want to explore the relationship between Gnostic (or gnostic, see below) cosmology in Hollywood and conspiracy culture with the aim of shedding more light on both. The phenomenon of conspiracy theories has become particularly prominent in the last decades, and it is important to investigate its sources and interplay with popular culture.

With this, I conclude the introduction, which is consciously written in a personal and subjective style as I believe in “scholarship with a human face” where the subjectivity is not hidden behind a façade of impersonal presentation, but where motivations and personal attitude are admitted and openly stated at the outset of the text.

Gnostic Movies at the Turn of the Millenium

The conspicuous emergence of films with similar gnostic-like cosmology was not a mirage of mine. As other scholars have noted, the label “Gnostic” (or “gnostic”) has been attributed to them, and the last 20 years have seen an ongoing discussion on the topic.

The pool of the included films circles around the same titles with a slight variation: Eric G. Wilson (2006) devoted a whole monograph on Gnosticism in contemporary cinema⁴ and mentioned *Vanilla Sky* (2001), *The Thirteenth Floor* (1999), *eXistenZ* (1999), *Dark City* (1998), and *Pleasantville* (1998), while Fryderyk Kwiatkowski, who wrote a series of articles on the topic, named *The Truman Show*, *Dark City*, *The Thirteenth Floor*, *The Others* (2001), *Waking Life* (2001), *Vanilla Sky* (2001), and *The Matrix trilogy* (1999–2003).⁵

³ STEF AUPERS and JARON HARAMBAM, “Rational Enchantments: Conspiracy Theory between Secular Scepticism and Spiritual Salvation”, in Asbjørn Dyrendal, David G. Robertson, and Egil Asprem (eds.), *Handbook of Conspiracy Theory and Contemporary Religion*, Leiden: Brill 2018, p. 61.

⁴ ERIC G. WILSON, *Secret Cinema: Gnostic Vision in Film*, New York: Continuum 2006, p. 5.

⁵ FRYDERYK KWIATKOWSKI, “How To Attain Liberation From a False World? The Gnostic Myth of Sophia in *Dark City* (1998)”, *Journal of Religion and Film* 21 (1, 2017): p. 1.

Even scholars who do not use the label “Gnostic/gnostic” (typically film theorists not interested in the religious or mythological angle) still perceive a clear similarity of some sort among these films and tend to group them together – e.g. G. Christopher Williams, who lists *The Truman Show*, *Pleasantville*, *Dark City*, *The Thirteenth Floor* and *eXistenZ*,⁶ or Simone Knox, who discusses *The Thirteen Floor*, *Dark City*, *eXistenZ*, *Pleasantville*, *The Truman Show* and *The Matrix*, seeing a preoccupation with the relationship between representation and reality as the common feature of these films.⁷

Before addressing the label of “Gnostic/gnostic” in cinema, the selection criteria, and an overview of the selected films, let us illustrate what kind of narratives we are investigating by looking closer at the prototypical representative of the group – *The Truman Show* (1998, dir. Peter Weir):

The film tells the story of Truman Burbank (played by Jim Carrey), an ordinary clerk who lives with his wife, Meryl, in the town of Seahaven. Seahaven “is a suburban paradise with an almost surreal, 1950s everything-is-right-with-the-world quality. But its postcard exterior masks something strangely amiss.”⁸ Everybody around Truman is overly cheerful, and his wife has a strange habit of endorsing and recommending various products (like a brand of cocoa or a kitchen appliance) while looking past Truman into the corner of the room. Things start to unravel when one day, Truman witnesses a large lamp-like fixture falling from the sky and crashing on the street in front of his house. When he comes to investigate, he finds the label “Sirius (9 Canis Major)” on the lamp.

This first “crack”, the fallen “star”, is soon followed by stranger happenings and the situation culminates in Truman’s discovery of the fact that everybody around him (including his wife and his best friend) is an actor and his whole world is just a giant movie set – literally: Seahaven is covered by an enormous dome where an artificial sun, moon and stars revolve as it was imagined in medieval times. Miniaturised cameras are everywhere, including parks, beaches, mirrors, and buttons on clothing. It is not a suburban paradise but a prison covered by thousands of all-seeing eyes. Truman’s authenticity (conditioned by the fact that he never learns about the true nature of his situation) is the fundamental value here. Billions of people pay the showrunners to watch Truman’s everyday life precisely because he is ignorant of the fact that he is being observed.

The showrunner and director, Christof, the author of the whole spectacle, resides inside the artificial moon and directs all things around Truman, including the weather conditions (sunshine and rain, lightning and thunder), reminding us of God in the popular imagination. Nevertheless, Christof is only a God of the show, not of the real world outside the dome. Even if he controls everything on the set, he does not control Truman – the True Man. Christof can only strive to manipulate Truman so that he remains in his

⁶ CHRISTOPHER G. WILLIAMS, “Mastering the Real: Trinity as the ‘Real’ Hero of The Matrix”, *Film Criticism* 27 (3, 2003).

⁷ SIMONE KNOX, “Reading ‘The Truman Show’ Inside Out”, *Film Criticism* 35 (1, 2010): p. 1.

⁸ RANDALL VERARDE, “Suspicion, the Seed of Awakening: The Truman Show as Gnostic Fairy Tale”, *The San Francisco Jung Institute Library Journal* 19 (1, 2000): p. 38.

original ignorance and never “wakes up”, but he does not control his will and actions (in contrast to the actors, who follow the director’s instructions).

Against the will of the showrunner, Truman discovers the true nature of his world and decides to escape it. He overcomes his fear of the deep sea and sails away from his hometown on a boat. To his surprise, the boat eventually hits the outer wall of the studio with sky and clouds painted on it (fig. 1). He finds the escape hatch with the word “EXIT” written on it and leaves his prison, never to return (fig. 2).



Fig. 1: Truman hits the wall of his prison; *The Truman Show* 1998.



Fig. 2: Truman bows to the audience and leaves the Truman Show through the exit door; *The Truman Show* 1998.

The film is multi-layered and cannot be easily reduced to one line of thought. It clearly reacts to the boom of reality shows, which became globally popular during the 1990s, it also reflects on the spread of surveillance cameras in public spaces, and expresses millennial anxieties concerning the impact of mass media.⁹ The world Truman inhabits exudes a specific “Stepford Wives” atmosphere, suggesting a certain resonance between the 1950s (“We won World War II and now live a perfect cheerful life”) and the 1990s (“We won the Cold War and now live a perfect cheerful life”), in both cases suggesting that under the bright cover, there is some fundamental falseness or deception. These influences and ideas (and many more) enter the frame but do not make up the story’s core.¹⁰

The story itself is a story of a man living in ignorance inside a gigantic prison designed and ruled by a God-like person. The protagonist’s journey is primarily a journey of discovering the true nature of his world, followed by a successful prison-break attempt. He wakes up, finds a way to see through the illusion and leaves the domain where he was kept without his consent. These features led me and other scholars to connect *The Truman Show* with the Gnostic myth.¹¹ Let us make clear what is meant by the term.

What is meant by “Gnostic/gnostic”?

The problem of the label has been discussed extensively – best summarised by Kwiatkowski in a paper wholly devoted to the issue of the concept of “Gnosticism” in Fiction Studies.¹² There is a risk in using the label “Gnostic” in too vague a sense, which is well illustrated by Kwiatkowski’s quotation of Ioan P. Culianu:

Once I believed that Gnosticism was a well-defined phenomenon belonging to the religious history of Late Antiquity (...). I was to learn soon, however, that I was a naïf indeed. Not only Gnosis was gnostic, but the catholic authors were gnostic, the neoplatonic too. Reformation was gnostic, Communism was gnostic, Nazism was gnostic, liberalism,

⁹ KNOX, “Reading The Truman Show Inside Out”, p. 1.

¹⁰ The difference between various then-relevant themes and the gnostic nature of the story is best illustrated by contrasting *The Truman Show* to *edTV* (1999) a film from the same time period which has overall the same theme: the protagonist of the film is the center of a reality show. While *edTV* reflects on the same „current affairs“ of the era, namely the tabloid exploitative nature of reality shows, the central structure of the story is completely different. It lacks the philosophical and mythological dimension and while it also ends with the protagonist escaping the reality show, the result is not imbued with the meaning of salvation as in the *Truman Show*.

¹¹ “Like Truman, the first Gnostics decided that the time had come to get some answers. Like Truman, the answers they sought could not be found within the chaos of their world, a universe that seemed constructed to deceive them at every turn. What they sought was reality beyond the door in the sky, at the top of the celestial dome, beyond whatever cunning simulation this world might be.” APRIL DECORNICK, *The Gnostic New Age: How a Countercultural Spirituality Revolutionized Religion from Antiquity to Today*, New York: Columbia University Press 2016, p. 53.

¹² FRYDERYK KWIATKOWSKI, “About the Concept of “Gnosticism” in Fiction Studies”, *CLCWeb* 18 (3, 2016), p. 1–8.

existentialism and psychoanalysis were gnostic too, modern biology was gnostic, Blake, Yeats, Kafka, Rilke, Proust, Joyce, Musil, Hesse and Thomas Mann were gnostic. From very authoritative interpreters of Gnosis, I learned further that science is gnostic and superstition is gnostic; power, counter-power and lack of power are gnostic; left is gnostic and right is gnostic; Hegel is gnostic and Marx is gnostic; Freud is gnostic and Jung is gnostic; all things and their opposite are equally gnostic.¹³

To prevent problems of this kind,¹⁴ I will define what I mean by the term “Gnostic” and/or “gnostic” for the purpose of this article. As already could be noticed, I intend to distinguish Gnostic with the capital “G” and gnostic without it. By Gnostic, I understand a phenomenon linked directly to (or clearly genetically derived from) the historical Gnosticism, a diverse religious movement flourishing in the 2nd and 3rd century AD in the area of the Middle East and the Roman Empire, even spreading into the Far East in the form of Manichaeism. Roelof van der Broek succinctly summarises the Gnostic cosmology:¹⁵

(1) A distinction is made between the highest, unknown God and the imperfect or plainly evil creator-god, who is often identified with the God of the Bible; (2) this is often connected with an extensive description of the divine world (Pleroma), from which the essential core of human beings derives, and of disastrous “fall” of a divine being (Sophia, “Wisdom”), in this upper world; (3) as a result, humankind has become entrapped in the earthly condition of oblivion and death, from which it is saved by the revelation of gnosis by one or more heavenly messengers; (4) salvation is often actualised and celebrated in rituals that are performed within the gnostic community.¹⁶

While it is important to be aware of the basic features of the mythology pertaining to historical Gnosticism, it will not be that useful for our purposes as most of the

¹³ IOAN P. CULIANU, “The Gnostic Revenge: Gnosticism and Romantic Literature”, in *Religionstheorie Und Politische Theologie*, München: Wilhelm Fink 1984, p. 290–91.

¹⁴ An example of a too vague definition can be nicely illustrated by Lanzillotta, who ends up including some films that seem randomly chosen based on too few relevant features; LAUTARO ROIG LANZILLOTTA, “Albert Camus, Metaphysical Revolt, Gnosticism and Modern Cinema”, *Gnosis: Journal of Gnostic Studies* 5 (1, 2020): p. 45–70.

¹⁵ It is important to highlight here that since the publication of seminal works of MICHAEL A. WILLIAMS, *Rethinking “Gnosticism”: An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1996, and KAREN KING, *What is Gnosticism?*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press 2005, many specialists contest the existence of Gnosticism as a historical phenomenon. For more in-depth overview of the current usage of the term I refer the reader to GRANT ADAMSON, “Gnosticism Disputed: Major Debates in the Field”, in April D. DeConick (ed.), *Religion: Secret Religion*, Farmington Hills: Macmillan Reference US (2016): p. 39–54, and DYLAN M. BURNS, “Gnosticism, gnostics, and gnosis”, in GARRY W. TROMPF, GUNNER B. MIKKELSEN, and JAY JOHNSTON (ed.), *The Gnostic World*, Boca Raton, FL: Routledge 2018, p. 9–25. I use the Van den Broek characterization here just as a heuristic tool for establishing working prototype for comparisons, nothing more.

¹⁶ ROELOF VAN DEN BROEK, *Gnostic Religion in Antiquity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2013, p. 10.

“gnostic films” are not direct descendants of Gnosticism. Some indirect influence cannot be ruled out – one of the science fiction writers who had (posthumously) an enormous effect on Hollywood was Philip K. Dick.¹⁷ Dick admired Gnosticism, read the source texts and academic literature on the topic, and even quoted Nag Hammadi texts in his novel *Valis*.¹⁸ However, he was rather unique in this respect, and this kind of direct inspiration was not present when it comes to the writers of the core group of the “gnostic films” (even the Wachowskis, the authors of *The Matrix*, do not mention Gnosticism explicitly and instead point to Christianity, Platonism, and postmodern philosophy).¹⁹

The writers and directors are also usually very eager to boast their direct inspirations and influences in their work: In the *Matrix*, the names of the characters illustrate this clearly: Thomas Anderson (“Son of Man”), Morpheus, Trinity, and Zion point to the Bible and Greek mythology. On the other hand, we find no Sophia, Yaldabaoth, or Pleroma (i.e. Gnostic names and notions) there, not even a hint that the authors may have used Gnosticism as a direct source of inspiration.

For the purposes of the present analysis, I, therefore, offer another label, gnostic, with lowercase “g”. Here the focus is not on the links to historical Gnosticism, but it is rather a typological tool devised for comparisons between cosmologies. Features like number (2) (“extensive descriptions of the Pleroma”) from van der Broek’s summary above are of no use in this case because while lengthy descriptions of the divine world and the enumeration of the Aions (the perfect entities contained within the Pleroma) are staple elements of Gnostic tractates, they are never present in contemporary gnostic films. For obvious reasons: gnostic films are entertaining stories about a singular protagonist or a small group of protagonists, while Gnostic tractates are religious texts dealing with cosmogony, eschatology, soteriology, ritual etc. Another feature central to Gnosticism but absent in the films is the importance of the stark opposition of material and spiritual realms. The body and the bodily reality are a prison, while only our spirit (*pneuma*) can be lifted out of it and liberated. This element also cannot be found in the films, at least partially for purely practical reasons: invisible spiritual realms and realities cannot be portrayed as relatable for a mainstream viewer.

Moreover, to portray the spiritual dimension through verbal exposition goes against the movie-making maxim “show, don’t tell”. We must go beyond features dictated by the genre, style, and sensibilities of a historical era and grasp the core

¹⁷ The number of film and TV adaptations of Philip K. Dick’s novels and short stories is striking, beating all the classics of SF (Isaac Asimov, Robert A. Heinlein, Arthur C. Clarke). The problem of illusion and reality is a staple theme in PKD’s work.

¹⁸ MICHAEL KALER, “Neo-Gnosticism at the Movies”, *Journal of Religion and Film* 22 (3, 2018): p. 6.

¹⁹ “In an online chat with viewers of the DVD, the Wachowskis acknowledged that the Buddhist references in the film are purposeful. However, when asked ‘Have you ever been told that the *Matrix* has Gnostic overtones?’, they gave a tantalizingly ambiguous reply: ‘Do you consider that to be a good thing?’” FRANCES FLANNERY-DAILEY and RACHEL L. WAGNER, “Wake up! Gnosticism and Buddhism in the *Matrix*”, *Journal of Religion & Film* 5 (2, 2016): p. 24.

elements that characterise the common cosmology. I propose these fundamental features:

- 1) There are **two worlds**, one is true (and hierarchically higher, primary), and one is false (and hierarchically lower, secondary).
- 2) Ordinary people (including the protagonist of the narrative) live in the **secondary world** and are initially **ignorant** of it.
- 3) Ordinary life is based on a fundamental **illusion or deception**.
- 4) The false world functions like a **prison**.
- 5) There is a Demiurge, or more generally **Powers, Archons**, who created and control the false world, and keep people in **ignorance**.
- 6) People are **exploited** by the Powers.
- 7) The Powers are either **malevolent, deficient, immoral, illegitimate, or ignorant**.
- 8) The moment of **waking up** from the illusion of the false world is a crucial turning point.
- 9) It is possible to **cross over** from the false world into the true one and escape the prison.
- 10) There is a **small group** of those who know the Truth, who have woken up – the **Liberators, Gnostics**.
- 11) These are somehow connected to the real world outside or even **come directly from it**. They are the **bearers of the knowledge** of the real state of things and want to make this knowledge known to all people.
- 12) There are **agents of the Archons** who oppose the Liberators (and the protagonist).

In this abstract form, the characterisation contains some overlapping features with Platonism or even Buddhism, the main characterising differences being 1) the active role of the Demiurge/Archons and 2) their negative valuation – it is their fault and their doing that people live in the prison of the false world. The figure of the Demiurge can also be found in Platonism (and Neoplatonism), but it is in Gnosticism where the Demiurge is cast in a mostly negative light,²⁰ thus solving the problem of the origin of evil in the world (*theodicea*). While Buddhism also contains the motif of awakening (*bodhi*) from illusion (*māyā*), in Gnosticism this illusion is viewed as having been created malevolently, and people are kept in it, not because of their own inherent ignorance (Buddhist *avidyā*), but because it is the Demiurge's evil plan.

²⁰ It should be noted that the word “Demiurge” is not very common in the Nag Hammadi scriptures. It mostly lacks negative connotations; see EINAR THOMASSEN, “The Platonic and the Gnostic ‘Demiurge,’” in SØREN GIVERSEN et al. (ed.), *Apocryphon Severini: Presented to Søren Giversen*, Aarhus: Aarhus University Press 1993, p. 226–44. It seems that the main reason the term “Demiurge” is associated with the evil and monstrous ruler of the material realm comes from the texts of the Church Fathers, Neo-Platonists, and modern scholars who used this term to refer primarily to Sethian images of the world creator.

Gnosticism thus offers a much more dualistic and dramatic setting, where the state of the ordinary world is a product of Demiurge's evil intention (or his tragic deficiency).

The Selected Films

As already mentioned, the candidates for the category are offered by many commenters – not only by the scholars cited above but also by compilers of IMDB film lists²¹ and various bloggers.²² Some commenters suggest up to 80 films in this category but admit that they also include items with just “a slight glint of Gnosticism”.²³

In the following analysis, I will include only films that contain at least half of the 12 features listed above.²⁴ There is only one feature which I consider essential and indispensable, namely the fact that the protagonist has to begin their story in the false world and in ignorance and has to learn the truth during the storyline. Narratives where the protagonist starts in the real world and travels into the false world will be excluded from this analysis as they lack the crucial moment of *metanoia*, the transformative experience based on liberating knowledge.²⁵

For this reason, I exclude some films that are usually seen as belonging to the group. Among those are:

- 1) *Pleasantville* (1998). The film contains several motifs similar to the rest of the group, e.g. the structure of the two worlds (monochrome Pleasantville vs our reality); Pleasantville has a limited size, and its citizens are unaware that anything exists outside of their town, as all roads circle back with no escape. However, the pair of protagonists enter the virtual world from the outside and thus don't undergo the crucial experience of “waking up”.²⁶

²¹ RAPIDCEREB, “Gnostic movies” [online], *IMDB.com*, 20.1.2021, accessed June 2022, available online at <https://www.imdb.com/list/ls050422304/>.

²² MIGUEL ROMERO, “Take the Red Popcorn: Gnosticism in Cinema” [online], *Mysterious Universe*, 27.10.2014, accessed June 2022, available online at <https://mysteriousuniverse.org/2014/10/take-the-red-popcorn-gnosticism-in-cinema/>; JEREMYCROW, „Top 10 Gnostic Themed Movies“ [online], *Steemit*, 8.2.2017, accessed June 2022, available online at <https://steemit.com/philosophy/@jeremycrow/top-10-gnostic-themed-movies>.

²³ RAPIDCEREB, “Gnostic movies”, <https://www.imdb.com/list/ls050422304/>.

²⁴ I created the pool of candidate films by using all the suggestions mentioned in the academic and internet sources referred to in this article and additionally, I used the portal BestSimilar (<https://bestsimilar.com/>) that offers a selection of similar films to any chosen title based on a number of styles and plot distinctive features.

²⁵ One of the films included in the selection (*The Village*, 2004) contains an ambivalent version of the “waking up” moment – the heroine, who is blind, never finds out the true nature of things. Only we, the viewers, undergo the transformatory experience.

²⁶ Pleasantville is admittedly a film on the border of the category. I decided to adhere to the formal criterion of the protagonists beginning the story in the „upper world“. However, there are other valid perspectives: “The protagonists know from the outset about the illusory nature of the fictional town. However, due to exposure to new experiences and events in their lives while inside Pleasantville they acquire new knowledge and undergo an inner transformation – similarly as other denizens. So, one could argue that in a sense they ‘wake up’ but in a slightly different way than, say, Neo, who is ignorant of his entrapped condition.” (FRYDERYK KWIATKOWSKI, personal

2) *eXistenZ* (1999). While the film operates with the concept of virtual worlds (even more than one layer of them) and contains a series of twists where the protagonists learn that what they thought was reality is, in fact, a virtual reality, its cosmological and narrative structure is different from the rest of the group. There is no journey towards freedom from illusion, and the film ends in an atmosphere of complete uncertainty about what is real and what is fake.

I will now offer an overview of the films with the highest number of “gnostic points” in chronological order. These are the films selected for the analysis (Table 1).²⁷

There are also other significant films from the same period that explore the idea of dreams or virtual reality – and thus attest to the strange fascination with this topic characterising the turn of the millennium – but they lack most of the other features constitutive of the gnostic type. Illustrative examples are *Johnny Mnemonic* (1995), *The Cell* (2000), and *Vanilla Sky* (2001).

On the other hand, some films that do not include virtual reality of any sort and are not usually counted in the “gnostic” group scored surprisingly high (even if not high enough) based on the twelve presented features. Especially *Dogville* (2003) is worth mentioning,²⁸ but also *Gattaca* (1997), *The Game* (1997), and *Cube* (1997).²⁹

There is one special genre (with two specific forms) of films that usually score well regarding the 12 gnostic features. These films have been omitted from the present

communication.) DeCornick also offers strong arguments: “This Gnostic undercurrent frames David and Jennifer as emissaries from the ‘real’ world who come into Pleasantville with a subversive message that awakens the characters in the show and turns them from black-and-white to color. Their awakening is depicted along traditional lines, as eating from the tree of knowledge. Yet this act is not depicted as sinful. It is glorious. It is a Gnostic awakening that conveys the characters from death to life, from black-and-white to color.” APRIL DECORNICK, *The Gnostic New Age: How a Countercultural Spirituality Revolutionized Religion from Antiquity to Today*, New York: Columbia University Press 2016, p. 296.

²⁷ Two films in the group come from different decades than the rest: *They Live* (1988) is ten years older, and *Free Guy* (2021) is twenty years younger than the majority. It would be surprising not to find films with gnostic cosmology outside the 1990s window, but what is significant is their scarcity in other decades.

²⁸ *Dogville* tells the story of Grace (Nicole Kidman), a woman who ends up being stuck in a place called Dogville which seems perfectly fine at first sight, but after some time, the people of Dogville turn out to be creepily inhuman. Grace is abused and exploited by each of them. Ultimately, the inhabitants are ready to sacrifice Grace to her mysterious Boss. It turns out that her Boss is actually her father and that her travel into Dogville was not so much an escape from him as a mission to assess whether the people of Dogville are worthy of living. When the Boss asks her about the outcome, she votes for complete annihilation. Her father then unleashes his agents on the village in an Armageddon-like attack, killing everybody. While the film is usually interpreted through a political or social lens, it can also be read as a story of the innocent Soul entering the demonic sphere of Matter where she has to undergo enormous pain and suffering that will bring her to the understanding that she doesn’t belong there and the realm itself is so corrupt it has to be destroyed. By sheer coincidence, Nicole Kidman played another character, also called Grace, in *The Others* (2001), a film that is even more prominently gnostic.

²⁹ Other remarkable candidates are *Jacob’s Ladder* (1990) – see also FRYDERYK KWIATKOWSKI, “Climbing a ladder to heaven: Gnostic vision of the world in Jacob’s Ladder (1990)”, *Journal of Religion & Film* 19 (2, 2015); *Mr. Nobody* (2009) and *Us* (2019).

	They Live (1988)	Truman Show (1998)	Dark City (1998)	The Matrix (1999)	The Thirteenth Floor (1999)	Virtual Nightmare (2000)	The Others (2001)	The Village (2004)	The Island (2005)	The City of Ember (2008)	Free Guy (2021)
1	?	yes	?	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
2	?	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
3	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
4	yes	yes	yes	yes	?	?	yes	?	yes	yes	?
5	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	spec.	yes	yes	yes	yes
6	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	no	?	yes	yes	yes
7	yes	yes	yes	yes	?	yes	yes	no	yes	yes / no	yes
8	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes (?)	yes	yes	yes
9	no	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	yes	yes	yes	yes
10	yes	yes (?)	yes	yes	no	no	no	no	no	no	yes
11	yes	yes	no (?)	yes	yes	no	yes	no	no	no	yes
12	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	yes	no	no	yes	yes / no	no
score	9+	11+	10+	12	8+	7+	7+	6+	10	8+	10+

analysis as their similarity is based primarily on genre clichés and constraints,³⁰ but they deserve a separate study. These are:

- 1) Classical dystopian fiction with H. G. Wells' *The Time Machine* (1895), Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) and Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1953) – and their manifold film and TV adaptations – being the best known. In the typical case, the hero of these stories also starts in ignorance and has to work through the veil of state propaganda and brainwashing to reach the moment of (at least internal) liberation. In some cases (e.g. in Ira Levin's *This Perfect Day*, 1970), there is even opposition between the Two Worlds – one based on propaganda and one “normal”, where the hero can escape to, join with others of similar mind and return to get rid of the totalitarian system. Examples of films belonging to the category are *Alphaville* (1965), *Logan's Run* (1976), *Brazil* (1985), *Running Man* (1987), and *Equilibrium* (2002), but they are too numerous to be listed here *in toto*.
- 2) Young adult dystopian fiction. The young adult genre has a strong dystopian streak as the young heroes usually struggle against a totalitarian system. As the subgenre is lighter and more optimistic in its outcomes (contrasted to Orwell's or Huxley's novels), the hero and his companions usually defeat the villainous regime and liberate everybody. Typical examples are Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games* (2008, adapted to film 2012), Veronica Roth's *Divergent* (2011, adapted to film 2014), and James Dashner's *The Maze Runner* (2009, adapter to film 2014).³¹

Regarding the problem of selection, we necessarily encounter the issue of fuzzy borders, and an element of subjectivity and interpretation becomes noticeable, especially in the case of films located near the border, i.e. those with around half the “gnostic points”.³² I have clearly shown my selection criteria and reasoning so that my argument can be followed, and any further discussion on the inclusion or exclusion of particular titles is welcome.

The Gnostic Motifs in the Films

Due to the space limitation, it is impossible to give summaries of all ten films here in similar detail as I did with *The Truman Show* above. Fortunately, detailed plot synop-

³⁰ I.e. the genre itself offers a limited range of cosmologies and narrative pathways. Dystopian futures usually imply that the hero will struggle and fight against the regime. It implies the hero is being brainwashed or indoctrinated into believing in the system and that he or she will sooner or later question the propaganda; it implies the scenes of the hero running away or hiding from the regime police, the hero finding kindred spirit(s) ready to join in the resistance etc.

³¹ A number of other young adult dystopian films score high in “gnostic points”, e.g. *The Host* (2013), *The Giver* (2014), *Equals* (2015).

³² Among those close to the group in the number of points but not included are *Zardoz* (1974), *Tron* (1985), *Total Recall* (1990), *Aeon Flux* (2005).



Fig. 3: Nada looks through the sunglasses and sees the real message behind the billboard advertisements; *They Live* 1988.

ses can be easily found online. I will therefore offer just a couple of sentences for each film to provide a basic orientation for those who have not seen them:³³

They Live (1988; dir. John Carpenter) tells the story of Nada, a drifter who one day finds special sunglasses that reveal the true messages in all the media: to stay asleep, consume, reproduce, and conform (fig. 3). In this way he uncovers the true nature of manipulated reality. Thanks to the sunglasses, he also discovers that some people are aliens and that these aliens keep humans in the brainwashed state of capitalist consumerism. The aliens broadcast a signal that keeps people from seeing them and their manipulation. Nada and his companions decide to destroy the source and succeed in the end.³⁴

The Truman Show (1998; dir. by Peter Weir) tells of Truman Burbank, the unknowing star of a reality show named after him, designed and ruled over by an autocratic director. Truman eventually discovers this and escapes into the real world.

Dark City (1998; dir. by Alex Proyas) tells of the awakening of John Murdoch, who lives in a city of perpetual night where alien beings alter human memories in the search for the secret of the human soul. Enlightened by the physician Daniel Schreiber, who works for and betrays the aliens, Murdoch defeats the aliens and gains the ability to reshape reality – his first creation is the sun.

The Matrix (1999; dir. by the Wachowskis) tells the story of Thomas Anderson, a.k.a. Neo, who is awoken from his quotidian reality to discover that all that we take

³³ I follow the example given in Kaler's article and even quote his succinct summaries of *The Matrix*, *The Truman Show*, *Dark City* and *The Thirteenth Floor*, KALER, "Neo-Gnosticism at the Movies", p. 7–8.

³⁴ *They Live* precedes the wave of gnostic films by ten years, yet it contains most features. The system of the Two Worlds is very peculiar here – it is unclear which one is the "real" one. The ordinary reality is physically real, but the monochrome reality is the "true message". What is obvious is the aspect of social critique present explicitly in the movie. It is basically a prototypical conspiracy theory turned into a film narrative.

to be real is actually a computer-generated, virtual reality illusion, the Matrix; humanity is trapped in a false world so that computer intelligence can feed on our vital energies. As it happens, Neo is the foretold Chosen One, and after he is liberated by a freedom fighter called Morpheus and his crew, Neo gains the ability to reshape the Matrix and alter reality.

The Thirteenth Floor (1999; dir. by Josef Rusnak) tells of the creation of a virtual reality world, and we subsequently discover that our own reality is such a world created by the inhabitants of a yet higher real world. At the end of the film, the protagonist is liberated from the lower, unreal world, and his consciousness ascends to live in the real world.

Virtual Nightmare (2000; dir. by Michael Pattinson) tells the story of Dale Hunter, an advertisement executive, working on promoting a product called Arora. Then he realises that nobody knows what it actually is. Eventually, he starts seeing glitches in reality and finds out that the colourful everyday life is just a virtual reality projected into human minds covering a weird blank background reality. He and his friend Wendy destroy the computer generating it, but they discover that humans became so accustomed to it that they remain in the simulation even without the computer.

The Others (2001; dir. by Alejandro Amenábar) tells the story of Grace, who lives with her two children in a large house that seems to be haunted. The house is shrouded in a constant fog, and Grace somehow cannot leave the premises. Eventually, she finds out that the strange sounds are not ghosts but real people visiting the manor, while she and her children are the ghosts. It is she who created her own private reality to escape the reality of having murdered her children and subsequently committing suicide.³⁵

The Village (2004; dir. by M. Night Shyamalan) tells the story of Ivy, the blind daughter of a village Elder in a 19th-century setting. Beyond the Village are the Woods, which no villager is allowed to enter. Monsters live there. Eventually, we, as the spectators, find out that it is the Elders who play the Monsters so that the people stay in the Village. The Elders founded the Village as a refuge from the present 21st-century world, which is corrupt and evil in their eyes. Ivy alone is allowed to travel across the Woods into the outside world to bring medicine for her wounded betrothed because, as a blind woman, she never sees the outside.

The Island (2005; dir. by Michael Bay) tells the story of Lincoln, who lives in an underground futuristic habitat with strict rules. The world above ground is a post-apocalyptic wasteland, but there is a paradisiacal Island where those selected by a lottery can reach. Lincoln eventually discovers that it is all a lie, the outside world is fine, and he and his colleagues are clones of rich people, with their bodies used as sources for organ transplants. Lincoln escapes to the outside world and, in the end, helps others to escape too.

³⁵ See also the convincing argumentation in favour of the presence of gnostic cosmology in FRYDERYK KWIATKOWSKI, "The Others (2001) by Alejandro Amenábar in the Light of Valentinian Thought," *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* (6, 2019): 21–10.

The City of Ember (2008; dir. by Gil Kenan; based on a book by Jeanne DuPrau from 2003) tells the story of Doon and Lina, who live in an underground city while the world above is being destroyed by nuclear war. The city slowly crumbles while the Mayor and most people do not want to do anything about it. The protagonists find out that the Builders of the city wanted them to leave after 200 years, which have already passed, and they find their escape route and reach the surface where they – for the first time in their lives – witness a sunrise.

Free Guy (2021; dir. by Shawn Levy) tells the story of Guy, who one day gets his hand on a special pair of glasses used by people around him. The glasses let him join in a game. Eventually, he finds out that his whole world is just an action game called Free City and that he himself is just a programmed character. However, the world of Free City is based on a better original game called Free Life that the author of the action game stole from its designers. In a struggle against the author of Free City, Guy is able to escape it and find the hidden Free Life and bring the other inhabitants of Free City with him.³⁶

As can be seen from the summaries, some elements recur more frequently. One such element is the structure of two worlds. It is worth noticing that the commonality here is not the presence of the motif of virtual reality generated by a computer but a purely structural difference between a “primary” and “secondary” reality:

		Primary World	Secondary World
1	<i>They Live</i>	Our normal world	The invisible signal hiding aliens
2	<i>Truman Show</i>	Our normal world	Inside the Show set
3	<i>Dark City</i>	Cosmos outside	Inside the Dark City
4	<i>The Matrix</i>	Postapocalyptic reality in the future	Virtual reality (simulating the past)
5	<i>The Thirteenth Floor</i>	Our (?) normal world in the future	Virtual reality (simulating the past)
6	<i>Virtual Nightmare</i>	Bleak cardboard reality in the future	Virtual reality (simulating the past)
7	<i>The Others</i>	Our normal world	The ghost reality surrounded by fog
8	<i>The Village</i>	Our normal world	Inside the community (simulating the past, surrounded by wood and wall)
9	<i>The Island</i>	Our normal world in the near future	Inside the habitat
10	<i>The City of Ember</i>	Postapocalyptic reality in the future	Inside the underground city
11	<i>Free Guy</i>	Original VR, “Free Life”	Parasitic VR, “Free City”

³⁶ Free Guy thus contains three dimensions: two virtual and one standard reality. One of the virtual realities (Free City) has the features of the Hysterema (it is an ethically corrupt place filled with violence), while the other (Free Life) of the Pleroma (blissful place). The original creation is the pleromatic Free Life, and the hysterematic Free City is just its corrupted copy. In this sense, it is close to Gnostic cosmology. However, there is also the third reality – the human reality, which created both virtual realities. The film is also peculiar due to its date, twenty years younger than most of the other members of the group.

The secondary reality can be a virtual reality, a film set, a walled habitat, or a dream-like or ghost-like dimension. What all of the various solutions have in common is that they produce something hierarchically lower than the base reality – either a simulation of it or a minuscule subsection of it shaped into a small universe of sorts, a microcosm. In this sense, we get a series of picturesque variations on the Gnostic motif of the secondary creation by the Demiurge.

In contrast to historical Gnostic myths, contemporary gnostic films do not value the primary reality as blissful, good and complete. Quite the contrary: the primary reality is pronouncedly dystopian in several cases. This peculiarity is not something to be glossed over – I believe it hints at a unique (post)modern version of the gnostic cosmology. While the traditional Gnostic cosmology sees the secondary world as a Hysterema (“Lack”, “Need”) and the primary as Pleroma (“Fullness”), the inverted postmodern gnostic imagination sees the secondary world as “Fake Fullness” and the primary world as “Real Lack”.

The “Real Lack” form has two sub-types: 1) a postapocalyptic world, and 2) our normal world (see the table above). What is implied by the existence of the two versions is that they are, in a sense, equivalent. In both cases, we are confronted with the “Desert of the Real” – in the first subtype, the idea is presented in a literal and visual way, and in the second subtype, it is usually expressed in a more subtle, toned-down way. The outside world of *The Village* is real but also filled with injustice and violence. The outside world of *Truman Show* is not a reality show anymore, but it is full of danger and uncertainty. Truman’s exit does not imply a happy ending. Truman escapes, filled with euphoria, and finds his beloved woman who inspired his escape, but the question is: what happens the second day, the third day when the euphoria subsides, and he sobers up? Once he is confronted with the banal conflicts of everyday life and the purposelessness of existence?

There are other variations that contrast with historical Gnosticism. Kaler, for example, notices the fact that “[w]hile the starting situations in these movies are quite comparable to ancient [G]nostic texts, their resolutions are strikingly different,” and adds that in Gnostic texts, “we never find, for instance, the enlightened figure rising up against the worldly power and successfully resisting martyrdom (...) the movies that we are discussing tend to show their protagonists as being more directly, autonomously effective in their battle against the Demiurgic forces in the lower realm.”³⁷

This difference can be explained by the fact that we encounter a hybrid of gnostic myth and the Campbellian hero’s quest in the films. The hero’s quest in its more exalted form contains the motif of apotheosis,³⁸ which we find in, e.g. *The Matrix* or *Dark City*.³⁹

³⁷ KALER, “Neo-Gnosticism at the Movies”, p. 9–10.

³⁸ JOSEPH CAMPBELL, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Novato: New World Library 2008, p. 138.

³⁹ The relationship of the Campbellian hero’s myth (CHM) to gnostic myth (GM) would deserve a separate study. The apparent structural difference is that in the CHM, the hero begins his story in the “normal world”, enters the “sacred world”, and then must return. There is a full circle. While in GM, the hero moves in one way – from the “false world” into the “true world”.

One important factor which plays a role in this change is modern individualism. Our fascination with the hero's myth is based on reading it on a personal psychological level as an emancipatory story of self-development and self-empowerment. Therefore, these films are initiatory narrative structures where we projectively undergo a psychological transformation by identifying with the hero who is subjected to the process.

When the secondary reality is not a virtual reality but a subsection of our material world, it necessarily gives rise to the **habitat motif**. Apart from the three films,⁴⁰ all the rest describe the secondary world as having definite borders that can (or cannot) be breached. This corresponds to the Gnostic *Horos*, the Border between the Pleroma and the Hysterema:

		Border
1	<i>They Live</i>	n/a
2	<i>Truman Show</i>	The wall of the giant studio
3	<i>Dark City</i>	The walls of the City
4	<i>The Matrix</i>	n/a
5	<i>The Thirteenth Floor</i>	The outer limit of the simulation
6	<i>Virtual Nightmare</i>	n/a
7	<i>The Others</i>	The fog around the mansion grounds
8	<i>The Village</i>	The Woods and the Wall
9	<i>The Island</i>	The walls of the underground habitat
10	<i>The City of Ember</i>	The walls of the cave
11	<i>Free Guy</i>	The border of the Free City

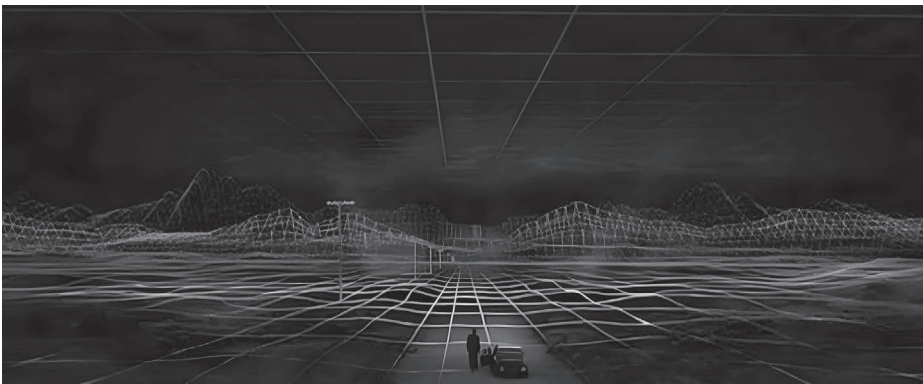


Fig. 4: the hero driving towards the limit of the simulation; *The Thirteenth Floor* 1999.

⁴⁰ *The Matrix* (1999), *Virtual Nightmare* (2000), and *They Live* (1988).

The motif of exploitation of people by the Archons takes on many forms in the films: in *The Matrix*, people are used as batteries for the machines; in *The Island*, people are used as sources for body parts; in *Dark City*, humans are experimental subjects of the aliens etc.

The function of the Archons or Demiurge is performed by various entities in the films, in many cases – characteristically – not wholly human, either aliens or machines:

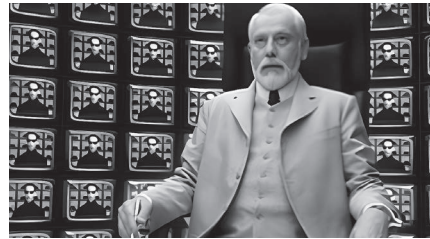
		The Archons/Demiurge
1	<i>They Live</i>	Aliens
2	<i>Truman Show</i>	The Director
3	<i>Dark City</i>	Aliens
4	<i>The Matrix</i>	Machines / The Architect / The Source
5	<i>The Thirteenth Floor</i>	People of the upper world
6	<i>Virtual Nightmare</i>	People themselves
7	<i>The Others</i>	Heroine herself
8	<i>The Village</i>	The Elders
9	<i>The Island</i>	The rich people / The Director
10	<i>The City of Ember</i>	The Builders / The Mayor
11	<i>Free Guy</i>	The architect of the „Free City“

A remarkable transformation of the prototype can be found in *Virtual Nightmare*, where the people created the virtual reality themselves and then became entrapped in it, so they are the unknowing “Archons”. A similar twist is the point of *The Others*, but limited to one person, the protagonist. In the case of *The Village*, the Archons (“the Elders”) are benign – their motivation is to spare themselves and their people the horrors of the outside world, but they use deceit as a means to that end, which casts a shadow on their “benignancy”. Their position is not far from Christof, the showrunner in *The Truman Show*, who also “wants the best” for his actor but effectively imprisons him in his show.

In the case of *The City of Ember*, the function is split: there are the Builders, a long-dead group of founders of the City, figures similar to mythological personages such as Noah, Yima/Jamshid, Manu, or Utnapishtim, who build a device to save the remnants of humanity. Then there is the Mayor, the corrupt heir of the tradition who fulfils the role of the antagonist because he does not want to change the untenable status quo.

There are also prominent motifs found repeatedly in these films, which were not included in our list of 12 features. One such motif could be called the **false promise of the system**. In *The Island*, the people in the habitat are promised the wondrous Island with a blue sky and sea. In *Dark City*, there is a half-forgotten memory of a place called Shell Beach, which many people remember, but nobody knows how to get there. In *The Truman Show*, Truman dreams of travelling to Fiji, but the actors thwart

 The representations of the Demiurge / Archons

The Director Christof (*The Truman Show*)Dr Merrick (*The Island*)Mr Book and the Strangers (*Dark City*)The Architect (*Matrix Reloaded* 2003)

his attempts several times. In *The City of Ember*, the Builders are expected to come and make things right, and in *Virtual Nightmare*, a product called Arora is constantly advertised and eagerly expected, but nobody actually knows what it is.

Another prominent motif reappearing in the selection is **memory manipulation**, amnesia and anamnesis. The world of *Dark City* is wholly based on the issue of remembering: people do not know they have never seen the sunlight because it is implanted in their memories. The hero starts as an amnesiac and receives the transformative knowledge as a memory implant at a crucial moment. In *Virtual Nightmare*, if people start discussions on forbidden topics, they suddenly forget what they were talking about. In this way, the system keeps them in oblivion. In *The Others*, the whole plot is again based on the fact that the protagonist repressed the memory of the “cosmogonic” infanticidal and suicidal crime.

Films, as a visual medium, can explore certain symbolic potentials in greater detail than any prosaic text, and that becomes quite noticeable in the case of another prominent motif – the **boat and birth symbolism**, which are intimately connected. Quite regularly in the selected group of films, the moment of the hero’s awakening (no. 8) or crossing over to the other side (no. 9) is expressed in the form of a boat or boat-like travel and proximity to water.

There are obviously not only structural similarities of plots and cosmologies in the analysed films but also a spontaneous resonance in the visual language and expression. Especially in the case of the “core of the core”, i.e. the films that scored 10 and higher, it seems almost as if they were – in completely different styles and idioms – re-

The representations of the boat/birth symbolism

The final boat ride in *The Truman Show*The final boat ride in *The City of Ember*The final boat ride in *Dark City*Waking up in *The Matrix*

volving around the same neuralgic points. What could explain this resonance? What kind of cultural atmosphere were they responding to?

Why at the Turn of the Millennium?

As these films were independent of each other and most of them were created around the same time, it is obvious they are not remakes of one another and did not directly causally influence each other.⁴¹ They come from different producers and directors and are of very diverse tones, genres and styles. Many original film scripts circulate each year in Hollywood, but only a fraction of them is picked up and survive the Darwinian selection process to be made into a feature film. While it is difficult to know the

⁴¹ Most of them are from the same period, but in the case of *Free Guy* (2021), with its two decades distance from the rest of the group, the inspiration by, e.g. *The Truman Show* or *The Matrix* should not be ruled out. We should expect rather a cultural osmosis than direct inspiration – the ideas popularized by the two famous films from around 2000 have since become public “property”. It is also possible that we will see more films of the gnostic type in the coming decade as the “nostalgia pendulum” (which has an approximate 30 years period) will move from the current 80s nostalgia to the 90s nostalgia, and with it might come remakes and reimaginings of the popcultural products of that era. PATRICK METZGER, “The Nostalgia Pendulum: A Rolling 30-year Cycle of Pop Culture Trends” [online], *The Patterning*, 13.2.2017, accessed June 2022, available online at <https://thepatterning.com/2017/02/13/the-nostalgia-pendulum-a-rolling-30-year-cycle-of-pop-culture-trends/>.

details of the intricate selection process, it is evident that Hollywood cinematography reacts to the overall cultural and historical realities in its own unique way.

In the following, I will suggest one possible reason for the sudden appearance of gnostic movies at the turn of the millennium, but it is important to stress here that the emergence of cultural products of this kind is never a uni-causal issue. Among the usually mentioned factors that open the space for these films are:^{42,43}

- 1) technical advances that permit increasingly realistic depictions of Otherworlds;
- 2) the spread of the Internet into a world-spanning phenomenon;
- 3) first commercial releases of consumer virtual reality headsets;
- 4) 1990s technophobia, particularly the fear of digital media;
- 5) the mainstreaming of science fiction;
- 6) the mainstreaming of psychedelia;
- 7) the mainstreaming of alternative spirituality (“New Age”).

I aim to add to these factors a new one that has not been discussed before and goes beyond the issue of technological advances or vague observations about mainstreaming niche cultural milieus. The question is not only why the films appeared around 2000 but also why they did not persist even if the technical advances and the mainstreaming of the above-mentioned alternative milieus are now even more pronounced than in the 1990s. The virtual world of *Metaverse* seems to be around the corner. The advancements of AI research have been stunning in the last few years, and people are spending enormous amounts of time “hooked” on various social networks that did not even exist in the 1990s – yet there has been no flood of films ringing the gnostic alarm bell and warning us that we live in a fake world of simulacra. Why is that?

Most of the movies were released around the year 2000. With the usual length of movie production being around two years, we can date the production of most of them safely to the second half of the 1990s. This decade is a peculiar period in the history of the West, wedged in between two major moments that changed the world – the end of the Cold War (1991) on the one hand and 9/11 and the beginning of the War on Terror (2001) on the other. The end of the Cold War meant the end of a bipolar world and a brief emergence of a purely unipolar world led by the victorious United States. The optimistic spirit of the 1990s is best expressed by Francis Fukuyama’s *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992).⁴⁴ In the eyes of many Western liberals, history had ended: we arrived at the final form of human organisation, namely liberal democratic consumerist capitalism. We have achieved perfection. We need only double

⁴² I take many of my points from KALER, ‘Neo-Gnosticism at the Movies’, p. 8–9.

⁴³ A peculiar zeitgeist of the 1990s is mapped and explored (focusing on the crossbreeding of technology, neo-gnosticism and esotericism) in ERIC DAVIS, *TechGnosis: Myth, Magic, and Mysticism in the Age of Information*, Berkeley: North Atlantic Books 2015. The book was originally written in 1998, precisely at the apex of the era.

⁴⁴ FRANCIS FUKUYAMA, *The End of History and the Last Man*, New York: Free Press, 1992, passim.

down on our efforts and straighten up minor imperfections, and we will soon get to the Happy Ending.

The positive ideologues proclaimed the world to be at the “End of History”, but of course, under the projected image of perfection, many problems were brewing. Consumerist capitalism received an enormous boost as the only known alternative to it – Communism – failed and was discredited. An ideological vacuum was left behind after the collapse of the Eastern Bloc. Doubts about the nature of the new historical situation were first noticeable only at the fringes of society – already at the beginning of the 1990s. The phrase “New World Order”, popularised by George H. W. Bush during the Gulf War in 1991, became influential in the conspiracist milieu and slowly gained mainstream currency during the 1990s.⁴⁵ The Gulf War (1990–1991), the Somali Intervention (1992–1995), and the Kosovo War (1998–1999) showed that the gleeful „End of History“ had to be sustained by neocolonial violence. The unsolved contradictions of American neocolonialism finally brought an end to the “End of History” in the form of the 9/11 terrorist attacks of 2001.

The attacks of 9/11 were a human tragedy, but they resolved the geopolitical and cultural disorientation caused by the fact that during the 1990s, there was no symbolic Other against which the Western world could fight. The first Enemy in the new era came to be Islamist terrorism, an invisible network of suicidal rebels motivated by destructive “alien” ideology. In the following decade, this kind of dispersed Other was supplemented and finally superseded by much more concrete Other(s) in the form of the authoritarian states of Russia and China.

In this way, it was possible to escape the disorientation and anxiety of the “End of History” by finding new enemies and new binary oppositions. It is no surprise then that the same period (2008-present) is in Hollywood dominated by blockbusters of the superhero genre where the straightforward duality of the hero versus the villain is again in the foreground while questioning the system itself is out of mind and out of sight.⁴⁶

However, during the 1990s, this escape route (through finding a Villain outside) was not yet available. It was the New World Order itself (welcomed and praised by the globalist establishment), which generated diffused anxiety about its very nature:

⁴⁵ MICHAEL BARKUN, *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America*, Berkeley: University of California Press 2013, p. 40.

⁴⁶ The reason why big-budget films of the 2010s and the current decade are much less subversive, much less varied and original and much more repetitive (remakes, sequels, reboots etc.) is connected to a gradual intensification of trends that value high probability fiscal return rather than experiments: “Hollywood’s déjà vu problem illustrates how many other industries and organizations struggle to resist the temptation of overexploiting successful but fleeting opportunities while under-exploring and not coming up with new ideas and concepts. This is one of the key dilemmas of innovation.” (<https://readysteadycut.com/2022/09/20/why-are-there-so-many-movie-sequels/>) In the 1990s ca 90% of films were original; in 2019, it is only about 50%, the rest being sequels or remakes (<https://digg.com/2020/original-vs-sequel-remake-highest-grossing-movies-percent-age-visualized>).

After the revival of Cold War demonology during the Reagan years, the “New World Order” of the 1990s introduced an insecure paranoia in which there is no longer a single recognisable enemy or, indeed, a clear sense of national identity.⁴⁷

This rising anxiety is well documented in the sphere of conspiracy theories. After all, it is no surprise that it is precisely at the turn of the millennium that seminal academic works on conspiracy theories appear: Peter Knight’s *Conspiracy Culture* (2000),⁴⁸ Jane Parish and Martin Parker’s *The Age of Anxiety* (2001),⁴⁹ Jodi Dean’s *Publicity’s Secret* (2002)⁵⁰ and Michael Barkun’s *A Culture of Conspiracy* (2003).⁵¹ These works could emerge at that point in time precisely because the 1990s saw a massive surge in conspiracism in the USA.

Conspiracism was becoming mainstream at that point, but it was not as ubiquitous as it is today nor seen as an existential threat to society as a whole. Moreover, these scholars, especially Knight and Dean and the scholars in the Parish and Parker collection, read conspiracism in a new, self-reflective way. They understand it as a form of social critique with merit, an approach that has not yet become dominant in academia. It even seems that this “sympathetic” academic approach peaked at the same time as the gnostic movies culminated – exactly at the turn of the millennium.

Conspiracism was „out of the closet“ in the 1990s but not yet a public enemy. It was, therefore, legitimate to produce films like *Conspiracy Theory* (1997; dir. by Richard Donner), *Wag the Dog* (1997; dir. by Barry Levinson), *Men in Black* (1997; dir. by Barry Sonnenfeld) or the television series *The X-Files* (1993-2002; created by Chris Carter). These works freely explored and popularised many conspiracy theories without having to explicitly distance themselves from them – something unthinkable in 2022.

I argue, therefore, that the sudden wave of gnostic films is a phenomenon which can be understood well in the context of the historical development at the time of their creation. These films expressed a peculiar *Zeitgeist* when there was no clear Enemy, and it seemed like humans were standing at the “End of History”. Liberal democratic consumerist capitalism had no alternative, and humanity seemed united under the “New World Order”. While gleeful and optimistic, this historical period produced its own form of anxiety. Gnostic films usually show a happy and optimistic life, which turns out to be an illusion hiding the fact that humans are exploited. Under the apparently harmonious and upbeat veneer, we find dark plots, postapocalyptic realities, and evil puppeteers running the show. The element of social critique (combined with

⁴⁷ PETER KNIGHT, *Conspiracy Culture: From the Kennedy Assassination to the X-Files*, New York and London: Routledge 2000, p. 175.

⁴⁸ PETER KNIGHT, *Conspiracy Culture*, passim.

⁴⁹ JANE PARISH and MARTIN PARKER (eds.), *The Age of Anxiety: Conspiracy Theory and the Human Sciences*, Oxford: Blackwell 2001, passim.

⁵⁰ JODI DEAN, *Publicity’s Secret: How Technoculture Capitalizes on Democracy*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press 2002, passim.

⁵¹ BARKUN, *A Culture of Conspiracy*, passim.

existential themes) is strikingly prominent in gnostic films and is unparalleled in the decades that preceded or followed.⁵²

Gnostic Cosmology and Conspiracy

While some of the analysed films present a vision that closely corresponds to existing conspiracy theories (e.g. *They Live* with its evil aliens ruling the world), most are not conspiracist at first sight. They do not contain conspiracy as an explicit motif (unlike *The X-Files* or films like *Conspiracy Theory*) but share a *cosmology* with the (more developed) conspiracy theories. The 12 features that characterise gnostic films are also applicable as characteristics of conspiracy theories of the type described by Barkun as “superconspiracies”.⁵³

A typical example of a widely successful superconspiracy is David Icke’s “Reptoid hypothesis”, which states that there are hidden shapeshifting reptilian aliens among us who created humans in their present form and feed on negative emotions.⁵⁴ He identified the Moon (and later Saturn) as the source of holographic experiences, broadcast by the reptilians that humanity interprets as reality.

Let us apply the 12 gnostic features to a typical superconspiracy theory:

		Conspiracy theory
1	Two worlds	Behind the everyday world, there is a hidden secret world. The machinations prepared in the secret world explain the contingent happenings in the everyday world.
2	Live in secondary	Ordinary humans know only about the everyday world and think there is nothing behind it.
3	Illusion	Life is based on a fundamental illusion and lie. Things are not what they seem to be. We are being duped by those who have real power.
4	Prison	Ordinary humans live as “sheeple” in a herd.
5	Demiurge	There are powerful entities (conspirators) who created the current world order, are behind important events, and drive history in their desired direction.
6	Exploitation	Humans are exploited by the conspirators.
7	Illegitimacy of Archons	The conspirators (The Illuminati, The Freemasons, The Jewry, The Aliens, etc.) are illegitimate rulers who are either self-imposed and work in secret or are outright evil.

⁵² That does not mean they cannot be found, but they are rarely represented in big-budget feature films. The “traditional” place for this kind of imagination is instead the form of science fiction anthology television series – e.g. *The Outer Limits* (1963–1965; 1995–2001) or *Black Mirror* (2011–2019). Similar ideas can also be found in the *Westworld* TV series (2016), which is based on a film from 1973. The Netflix series *Inside Job* (2021) parodies conspiracy theories in a way that affirms their absurdity and meaninglessness.

⁵³ BARKUN, *A Culture of Conspiracy*, p. 56.

⁵⁴ TYSON LEWIS and RICHARD KAHN, “The Reptoid Hypothesis: Utopian and Dystopian Representational Motifs in David Icke’s Alien Conspiracy Theory”, *Utopian Studies* 16 (1, 2005): p. 51.

8	Waking up	The moment of uncovering the conspiracy. The moment when the blindfold falls from the eyes. The moment of swallowing the “red pill”.
9	Crossing over	<i>n/a (There is no world outside the superconspiracy, so it is not possible to physically escape it; instead, we find eschatological motifs, a collective end of the current era)</i>
10	Liberators	The Researchers uncovered the conspiracy and published books or online posts about it.
11	Outside influence	<i>(Not very common; in the esoteric-flavoured conspiracies, we find the motif of benign extraterrestrials, e.g. from Pleiades)</i>
12	Agents	The world is full of those who either consciously or unconsciously collaborate with the conspirators – e.g. the mainstream media, the politicians etc. They strive to keep people in ignorance and suppress any dissent.

As can be seen from the table, the overlap of the cosmology is high, with 10 out of 12 points. The main difference is the issue of the outside world. While in ancient Gnostic myths and in gnostic films we usually find a clear border between the real and the illusory world, this kind of division does not apply to the conspiracist cosmology. Even if the prototypical superconspiracies have the structure of two worlds – 1) the everyday world and 2) the behind-the-scenes world of the conspirators, they do not produce two neatly divided realms as in fiction or myth. Therefore there is no “outside” to which the awakened people could escape.

The Otherworld of conspiracism is not a Pleroma-like blissful realm or firmer reality free from manipulation – it is the manipulation itself. Therefore, it is a horrifying Real that shapes our everyday reality but fundamentally eludes us. The conspiracists are fascinated by the secrets of the Real, by the meetings of the dark cabal that runs the world, but these can never be wholly uncovered – only hinted at.

While early 20th-century conspiracism produced documents like *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, with a clearly explained agenda, the 1990s and 21st-century conspiracism is of a different type, best expressed by the enigmatic drops of Q, the source of the QAnon conspiracy theory. These two types are referred to by different names, and Peter Knight distinguishes them as “secure paranoia” and “insecure paranoia”,⁵⁵ whereas Jaron Harambam as “modern conspiracies” and “postmodern conspiracies”.⁵⁶ As Kathryn S. Olmsted points out, “[n]o longer were conspiracy theorists chiefly concerned that alien forces were plotting to capture the federal government; instead, they proposed that the federal government itself was the conspirator.”⁵⁷ This twist is quite often expressed in the gnostic film by the hero’s awakening to the understanding that the whole system they live in is the problem, not just some of its parts.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ PETER KNIGHT, *Conspiracy Culture*, p. 4, 175.

⁵⁶ JARON HARAMBAM, *Contemporary Conspiracy Culture: Truth and Knowledge in an Era of Epistemic Instability*, New York and London: Routledge 2020, p. 62.

⁵⁷ KATHRYN S. OLMSTED, *Real Enemies: Conspiracy Theories and American Democracy, World War I to 9/11*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2009, p. 4.

⁵⁸ Most literally is this executed in the *Virtual Nightmare*, where the protagonists discover that not only people themselves created the illusory reality, but they are remaining in it even when the special technology that broadcasted the illusion into human brains is destroyed by the protagonists.

So, while conspiracy theories also make use of the two-world system, it is in the films that we find them as a salient and integral feature. The films tend to produce clearly delineated worlds between which the characters can travel. Travel itself is a crucial narrative instrument in the stories. These and other specificities can be easily explained by the needs of the medium (and genre). Elements like the protagonist, the antagonist, the travel between worlds, the hero's journey, narrative twists and other structural features are essential for building a compelling story but are not obligatory for conspiracist cosmology in its abstract form. Some of the recurrent motifs that characterised many of the gnostic films (e.g. the habitat motif, the borders of the world motif, the watery birth symbolism etc.) will therefore remain limited to the narrative film medium. They are instruments that help the creators materialise the cosmology, to "show it" instead of "telling it".

However, there are also motifs which prominently appeared in the films, although they were not "expected" by the 12 features definition, and can also be found in the conspiracy imagination. One such motif is that of memory manipulation and amnesia, which can be found already before the 1990s in conspiracies regarding UFO abductions and the interaction with the so called "men in black."⁵⁹ But most significantly, we find it in the recent conspiracy theory which claims that small details from the past have been changed, altered, and edited to create a parallel universe.⁶⁰

To sum up, it is important to distinguish between cosmology and motifs. Cosmology is defined by its structure, which can be filled with very diverse content. *The Village* and *Dark City* overlap in their structure (see the table on p. 78) but not much in specific content. The same goes for gnostic films and superconspiracies in general – they share their cosmology. To make matters more complicated, some motifs seem to be concomitant with certain structures – they are easy solutions which allow concise symbolic expression to structural demands. So for example the structural element of "the author(s) of the illusion that captures ordinary humans" tends to attract the solution in the form of either a singular entity (The Director, The Architect, Satan) or a group of powerful entities (The Elders, The Strangers, The Reptilians).

Conclusion

There is an intricate interplay between conspiracist subculture and popculture produced in Hollywood. One of the characteristics of conspiracism is the so called "fact-fiction-reversal", i.e. the belief that ordinary reality as it is presented to us is fake, while fictional works like *The Matrix* tell us important truths: "Conspiracy literature is replete with instances in which manifestly fictional products, such as films and novels, are asserted to be accurate, factual representations of reality."⁶¹

⁵⁹ BARKUN, *A Culture of Conspiracy*, p. 83.

⁶⁰ AARON FRENCH, "The Mandela Effect and New Memory", *Correspondences* 6 (2, 2019): passim.

⁶¹ BARKUN, *A Culture of Conspiracy*, p. 210.

The study of the interplay of conspiracism and works of fiction has its decades long tradition, exemplified by the works of Peter Knight,⁶² Luc Boltanski,⁶³ Lewis and Kahn⁶⁴ and many others. However, gnostic films have not been explored as an important piece of the cultural puzzle in relation to conspiracy theories even if some of the more famous of these films (*The Matrix*, *Truman Show*) are habitually mentioned by most contemporary scholars of conspiracy theories. My aim was therefore to fill in this gap. The goal was not only to introduce the group of gnostic films (and define it in transparent manner), but also to relate it to conspiracism, both typologically and historically.

The common feature is the gnostic (or manichean) nature of both the films and conspiracism in its most developed form, the so-called superconspiracies. Therefore, the list of 12 features turned out to be useful not only as a tool for a polythetic definition of gnostic films, but also as a tool for a comparison with the cosmology of the conspiracy theories.

The group of films selected using the 12 feature tool exhibited also other recurrent commonalities in the form of motifs (i.e. habitat motif etc.). Most of these motifs were limited to the films and were not shared with prototypical superconspiracies as these motifs were emergent entities of the narrative film medium.

One of the most crucial questions discussed was the issue of the sudden emergence of the wave of gnostic films and its later disappearance. I offered a solution based on the specific *Zeitgeist* of the 1990s as a period of unipolar globalised world without direct cultural Enemy where the anxiety turned against the system itself. At the same time 1990s were the time when conspiracy theories were starting to be popular but were not yet a societal taboo. The wave of gnostic films is thus a brief moment in history when gnostic cosmology found expression in overt popcultural medium. Before 1990s gnostic cosmology was hidden in societal fringes like cultic milieu, science fiction fandom or early conspiracism. American filmmakers functioned like cultural amplifiers: they brought the mainstreaming process of gnostic cosmology to completion. After *The Matrix*, *The X-Files* and *The Truman Show*, the majority of Westerners had the template of gnostic cosmology always present in their mind. The notion of “escaping the Matrix” or “taking the Red Pill” is a staple of the majority of conspiracist websites and blogs up until present time.

What happened in the decades that follow the 1990s is the steady growth of conspiracism into a major societal force. As conspiracism rose in prominence and started to be perceived as a serious threat to the establishment and cultural mainstream, its acceptability in Hollywood decreased. That explains the gradual phasing out of explicitly conspiratorial films and TV like *The X-Files* or *Wag the Dog*. Nevertheless, it does not explain the disappearance of gnostic films, some of which don't contain any

⁶² KNIGHT, *Conspiracy Culture*, passim.

⁶³ LUC BOLTANSKI, *Mysteries and Conspiracies: Detective Stories, Spy Novels and the Making of Modern Societies*, Cambridge: Polity Press 2014, passim.

⁶⁴ LEWIS and KAHN, “The Reptoid Hypothesis”, passim.

explicit conspiracy. Here we must go beyond mere outward theme of the film and focus on its implicit cosmology.

The gnostic films, even if they don't contain overt theme of conspiracy, they still – thanks to their cosmology – express the message “don't trust the system”. Why was this message viable for Hollywood filmmakers in the 1990s and is not viable today? Because sending such message would make these creators the allies of the anti-system, “alternative” segment of the population. The core of the issue is the changed position of the intellectual and cultural front – while in 1990s intellectuals and creative people were generally more inclined to be critics of the system, today they defend the system against the looming threat of the conspiracists and other anti-system actors. The wave of gnostic films therefore illustrates this cultural transformation. Today we don't find gnostic films in large numbers precisely because the gnostic torch is now being held in the hands of the numerous anti-system crowds.

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