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Neo-gnosticism at the movies

Abstract

A number of American films released in the mid/late 1990s drew on, or have been discussed in the context of, gnosticism—a loose, imprecise umbrella term usually applied to a number of heterodox early Christian literary traditions. The Matrix is the most famous of this group of films, which also includes such films as Pleasantville, Dark City, The Truman Show, and Thirteenth Floor. This curious trend would not have been possible had it not been for the emergence of gnosticism in mainstream culture generally; as well, gnosticism's emphasis on the spectacular, constructed and ultimately illusory nature of apparent reality became especially relevant and compelling in the context of the digital revolution taking place at that time.

However, the gnosticism that was reborn in late 20th century North American culture differed significantly from the traditions of Late Antiquity on which it drew: in its modern rediscovery or reinvention, “gnosticism” came to mean something that was in many ways more hopeful, more life-affirming, and ultimately more humanistic in its rebirth than in its original form—indeed, something akin to ancient Hermetic thought. In this presentation, I will discuss the wave of “gnosticized” movies of this period, putting them in dialogue with the modern rediscovery of gnosticism and using them as a way of capturing the changes that gnosticism underwent as it emerged into the modern world from its centuries of hibernation. As I will argue, these films—and the ways in which they have been received—present us with a clear view of how this reinvented gnosticism, this revived and adapted ancient heresy, works in a modern context and in dialogue with modern needs.

Keywords

gnosticism, Hollywood

Author Notes

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Introduction

In this paper, I will be discussing a group of movies that appeared in the mid- to late 1990s, including *The 13th Floor*, *The Truman Show*, *Dark City*, and the most famous of them all, *The Matrix*.¹ These movies have all been linked in some way to gnosticism² by a variety of scholars and in popular sources,³ and I will be arguing, first, that their appearance must be seen in relation to the growing presence of gnosticism (or at least a version of gnosticism) in popular culture in the 1980s and 1990s (see below), and, second, that in its rebirth into a new context, ideas about gnosticism underwent some significant changes involving understandings of human empowerment and autonomy.

Before I begin, I should note that my approach to gnosticism in the movies is very different from that of Wilson,⁴ who literally wrote the (or, at least, a) book on the topic. His approach to gnosticism is to see it as arising from the way that a movie challenges the idea of a distinct aesthetic realm. The gnostic film, as he discusses it, is an ambiguous and challenging work of art, one showing paradoxes and contradictions that are intended to call its status as a separate world into question, and then, through that questioning, to lead the viewer to some form of transcendence, as with the shattering of the aesthetic borders, strange magic can flow into our quotidian world. As he puts it, “the cinematic flight from empirical reality might open to an alternative reality beyond consciousness. The reveries of the popular screen could bloom into dreams of eternities beyond reason. The images overwhelming the individual mind could well usher one to a collective unconsciousness, a shared panorama of symbols.”⁵ My goals here, for better or for worse, are very different from his, and indeed considerably more blunt and simplistic: my concern is simply to note the presence of gnostic myth in these films, and to note as well a striking way in which that myth is recast.

What is gnosticism?

First of all, of course, I need to define what I will be using the term to mean. As has been pointed out,⁶ it is a modern term that has been used in a variety of ways, and that often carries considerable baggage, baggage that can ultimately be traced back to the aggressive polemics of early Christian heresiologists. There is currently no universally accepted definition of the term, and it was not widely used in Antiquity in the sense in which we use it today. To judge from the extant evidence, not all of the texts and people currently understood as “gnostic” would have referred to themselves as such (it is not used in the primary sources, and not always used in heresiological literature), or been referred to as such by others. On the other hand, “gnostic” could be applied in contexts that have little or nothing to do with what we call “gnosticism,” but rather simply referred to “knowledge that was not merely practical”; it could also be used, as Clement of Alexandria uses it, to refer to “an ideal Christian,” without necessarily having overtones of the modern understanding.⁷ Given this, and given that the modern sense of “gnostic” or “gnosticism” arises from contexts of polemics, propaganda, and intra-Christian debates, we need to clearly indicate what work we want this word to do, if we use it at all.

So: In this paper, I will be using it to refer to modern understandings of a collection of intellectual and literary traditions from late antiquity expressed in a variety of heterodox early Christian writings,⁸ many of which are found among the 4th century collection of codices discovered near Nag Hammadi in Egypt. As the Nag Hammadi texts are discussed without exception by every modern scholar writing on gnosticism, and are invoked as well in popular discussions, it is safe to say that whatever we understand gnosticism to be, the Nag Hammadi texts are taken to be paradigmatic expressions of it. For this reason, I will draw my examples of what moderns understand gnosticism to be from them.

As a lowest common denominator, we could say that elements of writings described as “gnostic” go further in directions associated with work ascribed to John and Paul in the New Testament: many of these writings present the understanding of Christ as an emissary from a higher realm who is sent down here to awaken some or all of humanity and make them realize that they really belong in the higher realm, rather than the lower realm. It is true that these ideas are characteristic of Christianity generally: what makes the Nag Hammadi and similar writings distinct is that in their views the lower realm tends to include both the earth and some or all of the heavens, and that the ruler of the lower realm is a figure that for convenience we can refer to as the Demiurge, who is linked to the creating and ruling god of the Hebrew Bible, Jehovah, and is seen as being at least ignorant and fallible, if not actually malevolent.

From the point of view of many of the texts that have been called “gnostic,” there are elements of the higher realms trapped down here, trapped spirits comprising some or all of humanity, and they are kept captive through ignorance caused by forgetfulness: they do not realize that they are from a higher level and that they have fallen into this lower one. By themselves, they cannot break through this; however, they can have revelatory experiences that show them how things really are. These revelations are brought by an emissary from the higher realms who descends to liberate those trapped below. Thus for example in the *Apocalypse of Paul* from Nag Hammadi codex V, set at the beginning of Paul’s apostolic career, he meets a Spirit who orders him to awaken his mind and realize his true nature; the *Apocalypse of Adam*, from the same codex but from a very different literary tradition, begins by showing us how Adam and Eve, incarnated in the lower world, fell into ignorance of the higher realities, to be awakened by emissaries sent from these higher realms. Receiving enlightenment enables one to eventually escape the Demiurge and escape his realm, returning post-mortem to the higher realm; as the *Treatise on the*

Resurrection from codex I makes clear, even after enlightenment, one must still linger in this world until death: “Now if we are manifest in this world wearing him [Christ], we are that one’s beams, and we are embraced by him until our setting, that is to say, our death in this life.”

This higher realm is often described as the truly real place; the lower realm is ontologically less valid, fundamentally illusory in some sense. It is subject to change and creation and recreation, whereas the upper level is based on unchanging first principles. The lower realm is dreamlike: as the *Gospel of Truth* puts it, for those who are unenlightened, it is “as if they were fast asleep and found themselves a prey to nightmares ... this continues until those experiencing all these dreams wake up.”⁹

From late Antiquity to the modern world

Our knowledge of these currents of thought, which have come to be described as ancient gnosticism, derives from various Christian primary sources - many of which are found in the Nag Hammadi collection of codices - and from secondary sources, almost always aggressively polemical, found in the works of such early Christian heresiologists as Irenaeus, Epiphanius, and Tertullian. Our extant primary and secondary sources for gnosticism as described above show that it arose in Christian contexts in the 2nd century CE, one of many branches of Christianity at that time; it seems to have been more or less put down by the end of the 4th century, as the versions of Christianity that would come to be known as "orthodox" or "c/Catholic" established themselves and gained power. But although ancient gnosticism disappeared from view, the ideas identified with gnosticism itself have never disappeared entirely. Gnosticism re-emerges in North American and European popular culture in the mid-19th century, where it fit into the contemporary religious expansion, aided by a rediscovery of “Oriental” religious traditions, a widespread interest in

esoteric and experiential religion, the translation and dissemination of religious writings including several codices of gnostic writings, and overall a “mystical” turn to American religion.¹⁰ Theosophy takes a particular interest in it, with noted Theosophist G. R. S. Meade even translating and commenting on ancient gnostic works.¹¹ Thus, the rediscovery of gnosticism in the modern world is tied in with the rise of what Catherine Albanese has referred to as the “metaphysical” form of American religiosity (as distinct from the evangelical or denominational)—and we’ll be returning to this later.

A very significant turn in the rediscovery of gnosticism is taken in 1934, when Hans Jonas, a student of Heidegger, publishes the first volume of *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist*,¹² bringing gnosticism firmly into his contemporary intellectual context by arguing that it is a manifestation of many of the same feelings and ideas that lead to existentialism. Significantly, in an article¹³ published in 1952 and integrated into subsequent editions of his book, he presents it as a more optimistic version of existentialism, arguing that the gnostics believed that there was a way to escape from the pointlessness and falsity of life as we know it and access transcendence. As we will see, this foreshadows Hollywood’s use of gnosticism.

In 1945, the Nag Hammadi collection was discovered.¹⁴ As eventually assembled, it consists of twelve codices and the remnants of a thirteenth, containing all told roughly fifty texts. Due to a variety of delays, it took thirty years for all of the collection's contents to be translated and made available, but it is at this point that gnosticism really begins to enter the popular sphere—interestingly enough, roughly simultaneously with both LSD and the atomic bomb. This emergence into the popular sphere accelerates in the 1960s and early 1970s (again, as with LSD), and there are a number of aspects to the Nag Hammadi collection and how it was read that makes it fit in to these odd and extravagant times: its texts tend to emphasize experiential aspects of

religion, the collection helps to recreate religious history by giving support for a rethinking of Christian origins, it is explicitly esoteric, its works are defiantly “alternative” from any mainstream Christian point of view, and it is full of striking and “trippy” images and scenes.

By the 1990s, the time at which the movies under discussion were made, gnosticism was perhaps the most public esoteric religious tradition to be found in the West, invoked by numerous influential authors. For the imaginative or rebellious reader, references to it were everywhere. To take just a few examples: Science fiction author Philip K. Dick, by this time (albeit posthumously) well on his way to his current high status in popular culture, had used it in many novels (sometimes even quoting from Nag Hammadi texts, as in chapter 5 of his novel *Valis*) as a rebellious counter-theology, one that teaches about the real underpinnings to the deceptive apparent universe.¹⁵ Scholar Elaine Pagels used it as a proclamation of human potential and mystical liberation, and takes it into the *New York Times* bestseller list with her *The Gnostic Gospels*.¹⁶ The popular and controversial Jesus Seminar drew on it (especially the *Gospel of Thomas*) to reimagine the origins of Christianity and rebuild the figure of the historical Jesus.¹⁷ Music and popular culture theorist Greil Marcus linked it to an underground current of existential rebellion whose most recent manifestation is punk rock.¹⁸ In short, by the 1990s, gnosticism was a term that had currency and that was associated with a sort of punky, revolutionary rethinking of the nature of divine authority: a revolt against heavenly powers, a way for humans to dream of transcending God.

We should pause here for a moment and note the uniqueness of this. I am not aware of any case as odd and striking as this, in which a long dead and deeply radical religious movement sprang back to life centuries after it was thought to be buried. The closest example, perhaps, might be the 20th century reinvention of witchcraft; in like fashion, the reinvented version of gnosticism differs significantly from its ancient incarnations. New monsters for a new context!

Gnostic movies

This mainstreaming of gnosticism both affected the popular zeitgeist, and made it apparent that the zeitgeist was at least somewhat compatible with a version of gnosticism. The question is ultimately of the chicken-and-egg variety, but the upshot is that gnostic ideas were part of the imaginative culture. It is then not surprising that the 1990s saw a crop of movies from the major studios that draw on themes associated with gnosticism, as discussed above.

The best known of these movies is *The Matrix*; among the other movies that have been put into this group and that I will discuss here are *The Truman Show*, *Dark City*, and *The 13th Floor*. All of these films are characterized by the presence of a number of themes that are typically associated with gnosticism, including a) the presence of an imperfect, creative, and obstructionary demiurgic figure, often clearly evoking the Abrahamic God, b) the idea of our world as we know it being an imprisoning structure that traps humanity or part of humanity, c) the presentation of the reception of gnosis by the hero that reveals his true identity and kinship with the higher realms, d) the presence of guerrilla warfare being fought on this level that is related to liberatory incursions from higher level, e) the fundamental unreality or falseness of the lower realms, which are ruled by the demiurge, and f) the idea that the lower realm is made up of forms and structures which, while themselves unreal, are imitations or copies of more authentic archetypes.¹⁹

I suspect that most of these movies are familiar to you, and in any case, detailed plots summaries can be easily found online. Very briefly:

- 1) *The Matrix* tells the story of Thomas Anderson, a.k.a. Neo, who is awoken from his quotidian reality to discover that all that we take to be real is actually a computer generated, virtual reality illusion, the Matrix; humanity is trapped in a false world so that computer

intelligences 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.

2) *The Truman Show* tells of Truman Burbank, who is the unknowing star of a reality show, *The Truman Show*, designed and ruled over by an autocratic director. Truman eventually discovers this and escapes into the real world.

3) *Dark City* tells of the awakening of John Murdoch, who lives in a city of perpetual night where alien beings alter human memories and even the physical surroundings. Enlightened by the physician Daniel Schreber, who works for and betrays the aliens, Murdoch gains the ability to reshape reality.

4) *The 13th Floor* 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.

I do not mean to suggest that gnosticism is the only interpretive lens that can be usefully applied to these films. The approach that these films take is clearly influenced by other things in addition to gnosticism—for instance, the mainstreaming of science fiction and psychedelia, which open the door to the presentation of radically different and "other" worlds; technical advances that permit the increasingly realistic depictions of these "other" worlds; and intellectual currents,

including aspects of new age thought and what might be called the "digitization" of the world, the idea that reality can be portrayed as, or in fact is, nothing more than information.²⁰ These trends or developments are quite compatible with aspects of the gnostic worldview, and can be seen as mutually reinforcing.

“Gnostic revival”?

It is tempting to think that we see in these movies continuing evidence of the revival of ancient gnosticism, that we are witnesses to the rebirth of an ancient heresy after almost two millennia of subterranean existence. But in fact, this is not the case: rather, we see here something new arising. I say this because there are some key differences between the fundamental messages presented by these movies (and many of the modern recreations of gnosticism) and what we know of ancient gnosticism, having particularly to do with human potential. While the starting situations in these movies is quite comparable to what we see in ancient gnostic texts, their resolutions are strikingly different.

As discussed above, one of the core features of most of the ancient works commonly described as gnostic has to do with the separation of our lower world from the higher realms. As trapped spirits in a fallen world, we cannot independently access transcendence at either end of the redemptive process: a) we cannot wake ourselves up or save ourselves, but rather must be awoken or called by something coming from outside the fallen realm, and b) our awakened or enlightened state does not give us power over the fallen realm, but rather the power to (eventually, usually post-mortem) escape that realm. Thus on the one hand we see in gnostic writings from diverse traditions the absolute necessity of an Awakener or Redeemer, and on the other hand the fact that gnosis will not save us from suffering in this world. This latter point comes out most glaringly in

the many gnostic texts that deal with martyrdom, whether of Christ or of later followers. Whether we look to the depictions of martyrdom in the *Gospel of Philip*, the two *Apocalypses of James*, the *Apocalypse of Peter*, or the *Apocryphon of John*, we never find, for instance, the enlightened figure rising up against the worldly powers and successfully resisting martyrdom. The best that we see is, as in the *Apocalypse of Peter*, a claim that the Jesus being martyred is not the “real” Christ but rather a substitute; however, even in this situation the martyrdom nonetheless takes place, and the powers are not directly challenged in this their world.

By contrast, 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. Both *Dark City* and *The Matrix* end with their hero having gained the power to fundamentally reshape reality, just as the oppressive forces were able to do: the hero becomes an antagonist equal to the demiurgic powers in the lower realm. The hero is thus effectively divinized, and not as a *deus absconditis*; rather, the divine economy is fundamentally changed, ushering in a new era. In *Dark City*, there is a shift from an oppressive divine structure to a humanistic one, in which John Murdock takes control of reality away from the alien forces; in *The Matrix*, the war against the oppressive powers moves into a new phase, where people can confront their oppressors in the lower world and reshape that world, rather than merely anticipating their escape to higher realms.

In *The Truman Show*, the hero does not get control over the lower reality; he merely escapes it, as would a “traditional” gnostic hero. Instead, the modern humanistic affirmation in this movie comes through Truman’s enlightenment: rather than needing a redeemer to descend and free him, Truman is able to enlighten himself, to think his own way to the truth, and his escape from the underworld is something he owes solely to his status as a self-actualizing hero. It is true that a

mechanical failure on the Demiurge's part in the form of a plummeting light is what tips him off initially, but this "crack in the cosmic egg"²¹ is not the stereotypical gnostic call from Beyond; rather, it is simply a testament to the imperfection of the Demiurge's world, which Truman interprets on his own. Indeed, at several points in the movie we see people from the real world attempting to illuminate Truman, but these attempts are all frustrated. Truman owes his enlightenment to his own powers of deduction, a most un-gnostic situation.

Of the movies under discussion here, *The 13th Floor* is the most classically gnostic: the hero is rescued and enlightened by higher beings and goes up to the Pleroma. Indeed, it goes further than this by taking up and playing with another gnostic trope. In a number of the gnostic writings from Late Antiquity, the creative forces in the lower realm (whether the Demiurge or in some cases a fallen being from the higher realm, Sophia, or even potentially both) are presented as being imperfect imitators of the real creative activities in the higher realm: they are a cracked mirror reflecting the true course of events. In *The 13th Floor*, too, the spur for the crisis is the attempt in the lower realm to create a virtual reality simulation, thus mirroring on a lower level the creative activity in the higher realms. I do not know if this was a deliberate homage; whether or not it was, it is interesting and impressive.

Thus if we are interested in "real" gnosticism, featuring a more-or-less passive hero who is manipulated by forces beyond their control whether as a slave or as a free, enlightened being, *The 13th Floor* is pretty clearly the movie to watch. However, it was also the least commercially successful of the movies we have discussed. The three biggest sellers of the four all emphasize the agency of their heroes and their ability to take on and overcome the demiurgic powers: in *The Truman Show*, Truman is able to escape the demiurge more or less on his own, while in *Dark City* and *The Matrix* the hero actually gains power over the lower cosmos.

As we have noted, this sort of human power is definitely not characteristic of the ancient gnostic texts: in them, gnosis comes from elsewhere and enables its recipient to escape the lower realm, not take charge of it. Enlightenment provides the passwords to escape the heavenly guardians and make a post-mortem ascent to a higher realm (as in the *Apocalypse of Paul* or the first *Apocalypse of James*, both from Nag Hammadi Codex V) or it provides the assurance that after suffering one will be redeemed in a higher heaven (as in the *Authoritative Discourse* from Nag Hammadi codex VI, cited below) or it reveals that the lower world is just a dream from which one can awaken (as in the *Gospel of Truth*, discussed above). But one does not become a superhero. To take a representative passage from the gnostic *Authoritative Discourse* with regard to the worldly powers:

We have nothing in this world, or else the world's authority that came to be might hold us back ... we have been put to shame in the worlds, but we are not interested in them when they speak ill of us. We ignore them when they curse us ... They go about their business, and we go about in hunger and thirst, looking toward our dwelling-place ... not clinging to the things which have come into being, but withdrawing from them. Our hearts are set on what truly is, and although we are sick, feeble and in pain, there is a great strength hidden within us. Our soul is sick because she dwells in a house of poverty.²²

This is clearly very different from the situation that Neo is in at the end of *The Matrix*, when he is able to defeat an Agent in hand-to-hand combat and also able to fly through the air like Superman.

So what are we to do with this profoundly anachronistic idea of the gnostic becoming enlightened and actually taking over the lower world? From one point of view this is a classically humanist rewriting of the gnostic ideas: it reflects a modern Western view of humanity, more closely aligned to Hermetic or alchemical thought than gnostic, if we want to look for a parallel from Hellenistic Late Antiquity. From another point of view, this is nothing more than magical superhero thinking, the sort of approach that asks, "why shouldn't enlightenment give me magic powers over reality itself?" This sort of thinking re-enchants the very world that gnosticism

disenchanted: the world becomes at least potentially magical again, and both human and universal redemption become works in progress. Once we get control over the magic that rules the world, we can move from a bad situation to a good one and remake the world as we would like it to be.

I would argue that this rethinking of gnosticism makes it into something that relates to what Catherine Albanese calls “metaphysical” religion, which she presents as a third strand in American religion, along with denominational and evangelical strands.²³ She identifies four characteristic themes of metaphysical religion: 1) A preoccupation with mind and its current or potential powers, 2) a predisposition towards the ancient cosmological theory of a correspondence between worlds (as above, so below), 3) thinking about mind and the correspondence between worlds in terms of energy, and 4) a salvation conceived of as healing power that is directly linked to activity and power on earth, in life. All four of these aspects factor into the distinctive neo-gnostic approach espoused by these movies. Seeing things in this light also helps us to tie the rediscovery of gnosticism into the optimistic, humanistic approach to esoteric religion that we see in a number of late 19th and 20th century contexts, among them the evolutionary mysticism of such thinkers as Richard Bucke, Osho, Michael Murphy, and Sri Aurobindo, and the emphasis on mystical empowerment of the human potential movement and the New Age more generally.

One might well argue that such thinkers—and some of these movies—present a situation that is too good to be true, and in fact simply isn’t true. For instance, in discussing *Dark City*, Fryderyk Kwiatkowski points out that the good world produced by the empowered hero, Murdoch, is still, after all, as illusionary and unstable as the bad world²⁴; further, the actualization of Murdoch’s powers arose because of unreal memories implanted in Murdoch by the enigmatic and morally ambiguous human servant of the demiurgic powers, Schreber. Wilson agrees, noting that *Dark City* “emphasizes the unreality” of even the new, liberated situation of its characters.²⁵ In

short, there is no contact with an ultimate or stable goodness outside of the Dark City context, a point reinforced by Schreber when he says that no one any longer remembers where humanity is from.

Similarly, as Frances Flannery-Dailey and Rachel Wagner note with regard to *The Matrix*, Neo and the other liberators act and work in the Matrix, and there is even the suggestion that the Matrix's origin story, revealed to Neo by Morpheus, might in some way be illusory.²⁶ So in both these cases, the outside world is unobtainable and perhaps not even real; the mutable, multivalent Matrix/Dark City is all there is, and the technologies of the Matrix/Dark City are what are used to give humans power over it. For these movies, it could be argued, we are all living in superhero fantasyland; we all have become members of Peter Pan's crew of Lost Boys, adrift on ontologically unstable seas.

This is a good point, but a question remains: Is this a problem? Certainly when seen from an ancient Christian perspective, or from most traditional religious perspectives, yes, it is a problem. But must it still be a problem when seen from a perspective informed intellectually by the dissolution of stable categories and certainties carried out by psychedelia, postmodernism, and the understanding of mutable information as the real essence of the world? Must it be a problem for those made viscerally aware of the mutability of reality through entheogens and virtual reality, those living in a culture that was increasingly shaped by video games, raves, science fiction, and new forms of spirituality? This is a very different question, and the only sure answer that we can give is that in these movies, as far as I can see, it is not shown as a problem: it is shown as liberation. The message, exciting and blunt and entirely characteristic of the modern world both in its utopianism and in the way that it blurs imagination and claims to absolute reality, is that it's pretty

cool to be a superhero, even if you have to live in a comic book—in fact, maybe that makes it even cooler.

¹ When discussing *The Matrix*, I will only be referring to the first movie of the trilogy. I stand with Erik Davis in finding the other two religiously fascinating for all kinds of reasons (*Nomad Codes: Adventures in Modern Esoterica* Portland: Yeti/VerseChorus Press, 278-286), but they are outside of the time range covered in this article; as well, as Davis points out, they explore different religious territory, with less of a focus specifically on gnosticism.

² Contrary to general scholarly practice, I do not capitalize “gnosticism” because I use it as the description of an intellectual/religious tendency, rather than a specific group. While some in late antiquity may have described themselves as “Gnostics,” a) these groups may not overlap with the modern boundaries of gnosticism, and b) in any case, there is no indication that the authors or readers of the vast majority of texts that would be referred to as “gnostic” in a modern context understood themselves as belonging to a group called “Gnostics”—see on this David Brakke, *The Gnostics: Myth, Ritual and Diversity in Early Christianity*, Cambridge; Harvard University Press, 2011. Just as one can be a member of a democratic party without being a member of the Democratic Party, one can be (and as far as we can tell most gnostic authors and readers were) gnostic without being a Gnostic.

³ See Eric Wilson, *Secret Cinema: Gnostic vision in film* (New York, Continuum: 2006); see also for example <http://mysteriousuniverse.org/2014/10/take-the-red-popcorn-gnosticism-in-cinema/>, <https://steemit.com/philosophy/@jeremycrow/top-10-gnostic-themed-movies>, or the list of “gnostic movies” at imdb: <https://www.imdb.com/list/ls050422304/>

⁴ Wilson, *Secret Cinema*.

⁵ Wilson, 147.

⁶ The debate over the meaning(s) of gnosticism has raged for well over a century at this point; the canonical works in terms of the modern rethinking “gnosticism” are Michael Williams’ *Rethinking “Gnosticism”: An argument for dismantling a dubious category* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999) and Karen King’s *What Is Gnosticism?* (Cambridge: Belknap, 2005).

⁷ Brakke, *The Gnostics*, 29-33.

⁸ There are still some who believe that gnosticism is a pre-Christian and extra-Christian phenomenon: however, the fact remains that our extant primary and secondary sources for gnosticism a) are for the most part explicitly Christian, b) were copied, circulated, and as far as we can tell composed within Christian milieus, and c) date back to the second century CE at the earliest.

⁹ *Gospel of Truth*, Nag Hammadi Codex I, p. 42. Here and below, all translations from Nag Hammadi sources and page references are from Marvin Meyer, ed., *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures: The revised and updated translations of sacred gnostic texts, complete in one volume* (New York: Harper, 2009).

¹⁰ See Catherine Albanese, *America: Religion and Religions* (Belmont: Wadsworth, 3rd edition, 1999), 254 ff.

¹¹ See G. R. S. Mead and the *Gnostic Quest*, ed. Nicholas and Clara Goodrick-Clark, North Atlantic Books, Berkeley, 2005.

¹² Hans Jonas, *Gnosis and the Spirit of Late Antiquity*, Beacon Press, 1958.

¹³ Hans Jonas, “Gnosticism and Modern Nihilism,” *Social Research* 19 (1952):430-452.

¹⁴ There is debate over the precise details of the Nag Hammadi discovery story: see Mark Goodacre, “How reliable is the story of the Nag Hammadi discovery?” in *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 35.4 (2013): 305-332 for discussion as well as references to the canonical narratives of this discovery.

¹⁵ See e.g. his novels *Valis*, *The Divine Invasion*, or *Ubik*. Dick’s most explicit engagements with gnosticism come in the extensive reflective writing he did following a religious awakening in 1974, which he drew on particularly for *Valis*. A selection of his late-night writing, not originally intended for publication, in which he attempted to decipher the meaning of this awakening can be found in *The Exegesis of Philip K. Dick*, ed. Pamela Jackson and Jonathan Lethem (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2011).

¹⁶ Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Vintage, 1989 reissue).

¹⁷ Robert Funk, Roy Hooper, and the Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels: What did Jesus really say?* (New York: Harper, 1996).

¹⁸ Greil Marcus, *Lipstick Traces: A secret history of the 20th century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990).

¹⁹ For a readable presentation of the scholarship on the modern definition of gnosticism, see chapter 2 in Nicola Denzey Lewis, *Introduction to “Gnosticism”: Ancient voices, Christian worlds* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

²⁰ A good contemporary presentation of this can be found in Erik Davis, *Techgnosis: Myth, magic and mysticism in the age of information* (New York: Harmony, 1998).

²¹ Joseph Chilton Pierce, *The Crack in the Cosmic Egg: New constructs of mind and reality* (South Park: Park Street Press, 2002).

²² Nag Hammadi codex VI—Meyer, *Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, p. 385.

²³ Catherine Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

²⁴ Fryderyk Kwiatkowski, "How To Gain Liberation From a False World: The Gnostic myth of Sophia in *Dark City* (1998)," *Journal of Religion & Film* 21:1 (April 2017), Article 34.

²⁵ Wilson, *Secret Cinema*, p. 57.

²⁶ Frances Flannery-Dailey and Rachel L. Wagner, "Wake up! Gnosticism and Buddhism in the Matrix," *Journal of Religion & Film* 5:2 (October 2001), Article 4.

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