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## Life in the Multiverse: Bringing Chaos Out of Order?

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## Life in the Multiverse: Bringing Chaos Out of Order?

### Abstract

This paper was given as the opening keynote address at the International Conference on Religion and Film at Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, the Netherlands, on June 8, 2022, and is here presented in that form.

My thanks go to those who organized the conference for Vrije Universiteit, notably Professor Johan Roeland and Miranda van Holland.

### Keywords

Marvel, Multiverse, Donald Trump, January 6 Insurrection, Epistemology, War films, American Exceptionalism, White Evangelicalism

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### Author Notes

John Lyden is the Department Chair and Blizek Professor of Religious Studies at University of Nebraska Omaha. He has been the Editor of the *Journal of Religion & Film* since 2011. He is the author of *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals* (NYU Press), and the editor of the *Routledge Companion to Religion and Film* and co-editor (with Eric Michael Mazur) of the *Routledge Companion to Religion and Popular Culture*. He also co-edited, with Ken Derry, *The Myth Awakens: Canon Conservatism, and Fan Reception of Star Wars* (Wipf and Stock 2018).

## **Prelude: Epistemology**

On October 28, 2021, Mark Zuckerberg announced that FaceBook was to be rebranded as Meta: a reference to the Metaverse, which he defined as “an embodied internet where you’re in the experience, not just looking at it.”<sup>1</sup> Rather than interacting in the physical world, you can “teleport instantly as a hologram” to any location for work or play in a virtual environment of avatars that exist and can interface digitally, even defying the laws of physics by floating or flying, taking imaginary forms and altering them at will. Essentially, we can create our own realities, and Zuckerberg promotes this as a utopian future that opens up endless opportunities—and of course, profits for his company.

In truth, this virtual reality technology has existed for some time, and all that Zuckerberg is selling is a platform to access it. But the real irony is that he does not seem to realize that the term and the concept of the Metaverse comes from dystopian science fiction, where it has long been predicted not as a platform that allows people to defy time, space, and matter, but one which prevents people from interacting in the physical world, even forgetting their actual bodies in a preference for imaginary ones. Neil Stephenson first used the term in his 1992 novel *Snow Crash*,<sup>2</sup> but the idea that people are living in a computer simulation predates that, and the idea that we are being deceived about the true nature of reality was suggested as far back as Plato,<sup>3</sup> and revisited famously by Rene Descartes in the notion of an “evil demon” who may be deceiving us about the true nature of reality.<sup>4</sup> Of course, in the world of film this concept was made most popular by the *Matrix* films, in which Artificial Intelligence enslaves human beings as a power source, strapping them into pods in which their brains are attached to cables that channel false sensory data that convinces them that they live in a late-capitalist 1990s world as opposed to being unconscious and physically isolated in rather uncomfortable looking life support devices. The story of those films

is one of rebellion against the machines that have dehumanized people and denied them a true experience of reality.

Why then is the Metaverse being marketed as an attractive option at this point? Is there something appealing about being able to create and live in your own reality—perhaps choosing when if ever to interact with other beings? Is the external world irrelevant in the digital age, as we exist in our own subjective, solipsistic universes?

I should warn you that I wrote my Ph.D. dissertation many years ago on epistemology, and in particular on the influence of Immanuel Kant on Karl Barth. And although it has been over 30 years and it may look as if I research and write about totally different things now concerning the worlds of film, media, and popular culture, I am still basically a Kantian in epistemological matters. By this I mean that I subscribe to critical realism, which I would define as the view that there is in fact a reality independent of us, but that we can never know it as it is in itself, as our perception and understanding of it is affected not only by the structures of our minds by which we access it (as Kant pointed out), but also by the influences of our psycho-social environment, shaped as we are by the attitudes, beliefs, values, and prejudices which we acquire through our experiences. Naïve realism, the belief that we can know reality as it truly is, is more or less dead in our postmodern age, and rightfully so, as most of us know that we do *always* see the world through our own perspectives and shaped by our own assumptions.

But the other part of critical realism—that there is actually a reality totally independent of us, so our individual solipsistic fantasies may not accurately represent it—this part has been criticized ever since Kant, with the evolution of German idealism that discarded his concept of the “thing in itself” as unnecessary. If we can’t know what reality might be, independent of our knowledge, why posit its existence? The only reality that matters is the one we understand as

existing, that we perceive (for example) unfolding in history (as in Hegel's philosophy), but which is of course shaped by whoever has the power to make that history (as Marx pointed out). In my own view, however, I would hold that the abandonment of a belief in a reality independent of our knowledge effectively opens the floodgates to epistemological nihilism, which we now see demonstrated in the common view that all visions of reality are equally viable, and that therefore people can choose whichever version they desire. This is especially true today not only because we can create Zuckerberg's VR worlds to play in, but because social media (and thanks for that one too, Zuckerberg) has essentially resulted in the complete balkanization of reality into individual fiefdoms governed by whatever standards one chooses. You can believe anything you wish now, as you can select the media that support your views without consulting opposing opinions, which means not only that you can reject the evidence for evolution or climate change, but also the idea that a vaccine might save your life—or, you can believe that it is safe to drink bleach, or hold that Donald Trump won the 2020 Presidential Election, simply because you want to believe it. The film *Don't Look Up* parodies this notion when people refuse to recognize that a comet is going to hit the Earth, with hilarious yet disastrous consequences. The internet has freed the subjectivist demon to work any mischief it chooses. Social scientist Jonathan Haidt has recently argued that social media has weakened the “three major forces that collectively bind together successful democracies: social capital (extensive social networks with high levels of trust), strong institutions, and shared stories.”<sup>5</sup> This is at least one explanation for why politics has been so divisive, in the United States as well as elsewhere.

Now, I know what you are thinking: you thought that this was going to be a fun after dinner talk about multiverse movies, and instead this guy is talking about epistemology and Donald Trump, and it's a real downer, and he hasn't even mentioned the multiverse yet, just the metaverse.

But we are about to unlock that door.

## **I. The Multiverse**

Multiverse movies have definitely become a thing lately. The idea that there may be multiple universes and not just this one is not a new idea, in science fiction or in science. Many physicists believe that the existence of multiple universes is in fact the only way to explain the existence of any universe, for reasons I won't go into, as this is not a physics lecture. Suffice it to say that the possibility that there could be multiple versions of human history, even of our own lives, even multiple versions of ourselves, is not totally ridiculous from a scientific perspective, and this idea has penetrated ever further into filmic realities as well. Certainly, whenever we have time travel in a film, and that's also been around for a while, there is the opportunity to talk about multiple timelines that can be created by going back and making a change in history. The *Terminator* movies have played with this since their inception, which allows them to be not entirely consistent with each other, as multiple timelines exist—and it is only honest to admit that other filmmakers have found the idea advantageous as it allows them somewhat of a free hand with the mythology of their universes, so that (for example) the series of *Star Trek* films that began in 2009 introduced a time-traveling Romulan spaceship that alters history and so gives the opportunity for a series of stories that do not need to agree with any other *Star Trek* stories. The newer *X-Men* films did the same thing when the film *Days of Future Past* (2014) used a time travel device to

rewrite the history of the earlier *X-Men* films. Fans of comics are also well acquainted with these alternate timeline stories, as writers of comics frequently employ this device.

Be that as it may, the allowance of multiverses in popular culture products is not only to allow diverse products and story versions to coexist, but is also (I would opine) a reflection of a general cultural belief that everything is contingent and variable, that there is not a single version of history that is predetermined, and that multiple possibilities for the world exist. This could actually be a hopeful belief, if it prioritizes the role of free will and the ability of individuals to make a difference, which we sometimes can. Not all is fated, it seems, if history is not predetermined but is contingent and variable. “No fate but what we make,” as they say in the *Terminator* films.

But at the same time, this multiplicity of possibilities reflects a postmodern conception that there are no longer any master narratives that can claim absolute hegemony. There was a time where that appeared to be the case, for while there were multiple worldviews, there were those who had enough power—political, cultural, moral, economic, or military—that they could enforce their version of reality on others, and suppress all opposing views. As a Lutheran, I have to point to a particular moment in Reformation history which epitomizes for me the beginnings of modern individualism. Although I am well aware that Martin Luther remained a medieval man in many ways, and that he had no intention of making the individual the standard for truth, his story showcases what may be the first modern example of the effectiveness of an individual challenging the master narrative and hegemony of the Roman Catholic Church. When Luther was examined by Cardinal Cajetan in Augsburg in 1518, he was told that his views on indulgences were wrong because the pope said they were wrong. Luther, however, claimed that popes and councils can err, and asked to be shown how his own view was incorrect, as he believed it to be based on a valid

interpretation of scripture. Cajetan had no interest in convincing Luther, as he only offered him two alternatives: recant, or be brought to Rome for trial. Luther managed to avoid those alternatives by fleeing Augsburg after dark, and so Protestant heterodoxy was born.<sup>6</sup> A hundred opinions on Christianity bloom as a result, leading eventually to the Enlightenment, religious and political revolutions, and the American experiment based (at least ostensibly) on certain values related to individual freedoms. People had disagreed with the Pope before Luther, but usually not with much success: yet in his time, the rise of European nationalism supported political and ideological balkanization and the possibility of multiple religious narratives in Europe rather than one, which led not only to a set of religiously diverse states (in which the ruler set the religion: “whose realm, their religion,” *cujus regio, ejus religio*) but ultimately to the toleration of diverse religious views within a given principality, and indeed the toleration of multiple political and moral views as well.

Recently, however, master narratives seem even more dead than usual. And while this may in fact be largely due to social media which has created an effective mechanism for living in your own private world of self-chosen facts, I find popular films reacting to this fact, and expressing some of the anxiety and chaos that surrounds the death of a single worldview to which we all allegedly can appeal. The multiverse makes a central appearance in 2017’s *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse*, produced by Sony rather than Disney and so not part of the Marvel canon. This was an animated feature that includes multiple Spider-people, including Peter Parkers of different ages, a female Peni Parker, Spider-Ham (who is a pig), and Miles Morales, an African American teenager who is the central protagonist. The villain Kingpin has opened a portal between universes in the hopes of resurrecting his dead wife and son by finding a version of them from another universe, but this introduces multiple crossovers, chaos, and destruction such that the device that



created these contacts between the universes must be shut down to save them all. They are allowed to exist in their diverse identities in their diverse universes, as long as they remain separate.

Disney/Marvel then began to develop their own multiverse crossover stories, first with the Disney Plus series *Loki*, released in June and July 2021. This story picks up on the fact that, in the film *Avengers: Endgame* (2019), the god of mischief, Loki, is able to disappear with the tesseract containing one of the Infinity Stones which the Avengers have gone into the past to borrow (in order to resurrect half the population of the universe, which were removed by the genocidal Thanos). This was a timeline created by the intervention in the past of the Avengers from their own future, and in *Endgame* we do not learn what happened to this Loki. In the new series, though, we learn that he is captured by the Time Variance Authority, a multiversal agency that polices the timelines by eliminating variants like Loki that have interfered with the so-called “sacred timeline.” Although variants continue to sprout, the TVA continues to “prune” these variants in order to keep order and prevent the chaos introduced by variants. It turns out that variants of Loki are especially troublesome, and one in particular has been killing TVA agents. Loki agrees to hunt for this other variant, who turns out to be a female called Sylvie who wants to overthrow the TVA. To make a long story short, they join forces to uncover who is behind the throne, and when they do, they discover He Who Remains, a mysterious figure who has kept order in the multiverse by destroying alternate timelines and so reducing the violent conflicts between them. While Loki is convinced that this control serves a valuable purpose in preventing inter-universal war, Sylvie opts for chaos rather than order, killing He Who Remains, which results in a lack of control as the multiverses interact with potentially disastrous results. Thus ended season one.

There was also an animated series on Disney Plus entitled *What If?* which was released online in September and October 2021. This series features an omniscient Watcher, voiced by

Jeffrey Wright, who narrates alternate versions of the Marvel history, such as Peggy Carter rather than Steve Rogers being the first Avenger, T'Challa of Wakanda becoming Star Lord rather than Peter Quill, Thanos being a really nice guy, and the Avengers being infected by a zombie plague. It's great fun for Marvel fans, and the last two episodes introduce the possibility that the all-powerful computer Ultron defeats the Avengers in one universe and then finds a way to go to other universes and bring destruction to them as well. The Watcher has to stop just watching, and recruits a team of Avengers from various universes to intervene and restore order, which they do. Chaos is restrained by force which does not impose one order on all but allows the different versions of reality to co-exist, albeit in mutually exclusive spaces in which they can largely avoid interference with one another.

The live action Marvel theatrically released films first plunged headfirst into the multiverse this past December with *Spider-Man: No Way Home* which featured three Peter Parker Spider-Men, played respectively by the three actors who portrayed him in three different reboots of Spider-Man over the last two decades: Tobey Maguire, Andrew Garfield, and Tom Holland. Their crossover happens when Dr. Strange consents to change history to help the local version of Peter, and the result backfires when different Peters appear as well as the villains they fought in their various movies. Once again, chaos is turned back when Dr. Strange erases all knowledge that Peter Parker is Spider-Man in all the universes, which sends everyone back where they belong. Order is restored, at least temporarily.

*Dr. Strange and the Multiverse of Madness* was released in Spring 2022, and in this film the multiverse is opened up once again, and the potential for destruction of multiple universes again hangs in the balance. Scarlett Witch seeks control of the multiverse in order to perpetuate her own fantasy of a happy family life, and Doctor Strange needs to help to contain the chaos she

unleashes through her own selfish desires. Once again, the universes must avoid contact as much as possible in order to minimize damage to all, although Doctor Strange also risks unleashing more dark forces in his efforts to stop Scarlett Witch.

## **II. Living with Chaos**

You may well wonder why these complex and somewhat formulaic tales are so popular right now. I would suggest that we feel that we live in a time of chaos. The pandemic contributed to this in large part, no doubt, but many of these films were already in production before that, and I would argue that the loss of a master narrative has played a major part in our sense of uneasiness as political parties in various nations have become ever more divergent and opposed in absolutist ways. White supremacy and right-wing fascism no long hide their faces but campaign publicly, making strides in elections across Europe and in the United States, and leading to violent attacks on racial, ethnic, or religious minorities. Russia invades Ukraine, producing the first major European war in decades, and increasing the number of worldwide refugees, so that there are now up to 89 million people who have been displaced from their homes, the largest number in history.<sup>7</sup> This number includes those displaced by violence and civil war in Syria, South Sudan, Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere in the last decade. And if this was not enough, climate change is accelerating, destroying life and habitats and introducing drought, fires, floods, every index of a traditional apocalypse. In the face of this, we crave order, and may long for superheroes who can hold back the chaos. Even Loki, god of mischief, is convinced that order is required to restrain chaos, even if other versions of him are not. But are we convinced?

In real life, and in movies, even those who sow chaos usually do so not because they prefer chaos but because they believe that their version of reality is preferable, and will in fact introduce

or impose order on chaos in a desirable way. Chaos ensues precisely because there is no agreement on the master narrative, or the sacred timeline, that should govern our lives, not because chaos is preferred. Witness the insurrection of January 6, 2021, at the US Capitol. How could conservative Americans stage a coup attempt on the center of legislative government, while the election results were in the process of being certified? Don't these people like government, and law and order? Granted, Donald Trump would use any and all means to maintain and seize power,<sup>8</sup> but does it not defy common sense that he was supported in this not only by far-right extremists but by "ordinary" Republicans, who have in large numbers continued to believe that Trump was the actual winner of the election, and that the attack on the Capitol was justified?<sup>9</sup> Typical of this group would be "Elizabeth from Knoxville" who indignantly complained "I got maced" after attempting to enter the capital, and when asked why she did this she answered guilelessly and with some exasperation, "We're storming the Capital, it's a revolution!" This was videorecorded and endlessly parodied online,<sup>10</sup> presumably because of the disconnect between someone who so frankly admitted a desire to participate in a "revolution" who also seemed surprised that she was attacked for doing so. Meanwhile, inside the Senate Chamber from which the legislators had been evacuated, New Yorker reporter Luke Mogelson took video footage of the invaders rifling through the desks of US Senators seeking some evidence that would support their own version of the election results. It is as if they are in an Alfred Hitchcock film, frantically searching for the MacGuffin that will exonerate their hero; but while Hitchcock famously held that the MacGuffin is essentially a non-entity, irrelevant except as a plot device which is arbitrarily chosen by the filmmaker to motivate the characters, these real-life seditionists seem to actually believe that they will find something worthwhile, although they have little grasp of what that might be. One man is temporarily upset when he finds a piece of paper on Senator Ted Cruz's desk: "He was gonna sell us out all along—

look! ‘Objection to counting the electoral votes of the state of Arizona.’ Oh, wait, that’s actually O.K.” Jacob Chansley, the self-professed Q Anon Shaman attired in an amalgam of Pagan Norse and Native American dress, offers a prayer of thanks to God for the police officers who “allowed” them into the building, “to allow us to send a message to all the tyrants, the communists and the globalists that this is our nation, not theirs” and for “allowing the United States to be reborn.” Many of those who entered the capital seem to have no idea what they are supposed to do, when they are unable to find Mike Pence or Nancy Pelosi to kill them: “we might as well set up a government” one proposes.<sup>11</sup>

As ridiculous as much of this sounds, and it is, we cannot make light of an effort to bring violence on elected officials and to overthrow a government. But what is strange is the fact that they do not view themselves as insurrectionists overthrowing the government, but restoring it, taking it back from those who have illegitimately seized it. I have argued today that films can indicate the concerns that are felt in societal life, such as expressing anxieties about the experience of chaos and the loss of a master narrative; I would also note that film stories are used to provide ideological tools for those who wish to address such anxieties, including those who would impose a perceived order on a perceived chaos. The need to make meaning, a religious need, has often taken the form of stories in which chaos gives way to order which shapes it and gives it purpose. In what may be the oldest written creation story, the Babylonian *Enuma Elish*, it is described how the world was created out of the body of the goddess Tiamat once she is killed by the god Marduk, and how humans were created from the blood of her son and consort, Kingu. But Jonathan Z. Smith famously argued that the “Enuma Elish is not simply, or even primarily, a cosmogony. It is preeminently a myth of the establishment of Marduk's kingship”: Smith also argued that the associated Akitu ritual is not a symbolic reenactment of death and resurrection of the king, but a

“ritual for the rectification of a foreign king” when Babylon was ruled by the Assyrian, Persian, or Seleucid Empires. The king is slapped and pulled by the ears, in this coronation rite, and then insists that he has not harmed Babylon in any way; he is then reconfirmed as King.<sup>12</sup> In this sense, the myth is less about the cosmic creation of the world than the creation of a nation state and the authorization of hegemony: but this is no less an imposition of order upon chaos than creation itself, and this political context perhaps explains better why it was so important to the ancient Babylonians—and is still, to us—to have order: not so much to explain why there is something rather than nothing in the universe, but to explain and rationalize the existing political systems that control our lives. We may feel powerless, but if we can buy into a myth that gives some explanation of why things are as they are, we can find meaning even in a chaotic situation. Or, we will buy into a myth that all will be made new, if we support a new leader who will overthrow the existing order, giving us new meaning and saving us from the chaos we perceive as a danger to our own interests, in the existent order.

### **III. Imposing Order**

White American Evangelical Christianity has proven itself especially susceptible to these sorts of mythic constructions in their embrace of white supremacy and fascism. Among others, this point is made by Kristin Kobes du Mez in *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation*. What I find especially interesting about her book is the fact that she proposes that fictional or seriously fictionalized film heroes—such as those played by John Wayne, who never served in the military and who successfully avoided service during the Second World War—provide the models for the morality of White Evangelical Christians, rather than Jesus.<sup>13</sup>

She also points out the persistence of the 1995 film *Braveheart* as one to which White Evangelicals still appeal<sup>14</sup> for its model of a hero, the Scottish revolutionary William Wallace (played by Mel Gibson, who also directed the film), one who violently and in fact brutally fights for his nation after his wife is murdered by the English because of his refusal to allow her to be raped by an English nobleman through the occupationist practice of *jus prima noctis*—in fact, there is no verified historical record of a wife of William Wallace,<sup>15</sup> so this patriarchal story of a man seeking to protect and revenge “his woman” is in fact a fabrication, as is the notion that Wallace sires the future king of England through an affair with Princess Isabella, wife of Edward II.<sup>16</sup>

This story was retold five years later with a few variations in *The Patriot*, which also stars Gibson (although the film was not directed by him), offering another heavily mythologized story of the reluctant hero who responds to violence against his family and in order to protect them fights against a tyrannical government—again the British, although this time in Revolutionary America rather than in medieval Scotland. The film is loosely based on the story of American Revolutionary Francis Marion (among others), a slaveowner who raped his female slaves and executed freed slaves who worked for the British. Needless to say, those parts of his story are not in the film, which features a slave happily fighting alongside Gibson’s character after he is promised his freedom by the Continental Army. The film also includes an episode in which a British colonel burns a church full of civilians, which never happened, although the Nazis did something similar in 1944 in France.<sup>17</sup> In any case, the villains deserve what they get, in both films, as it is very clear who the good guys are and why their violence is legitimate, however unhistorical these accounts are. Both films remain favorites of White American Evangelicals,<sup>18</sup> as they provide support for their authorizing myth which desires to bring America back to its allegedly Christian roots, and to

“freedom” (so called), by violence as needed. This is their way of finding meaning amidst the chaos.

What I find interesting here—and disturbing—is that films are being used as the mythic material to shape worldviews, including violent ones. Don’t ever think that what we do as scholars of film and religion is just harmless fun, or entertainment for students, even if your colleagues or your tenure committee thinks so. This is important work, analyzing the influence of media on all of us, whether the influence is for good or ill. Popular media, including fictional films, have been an essential tool for the propagation of mythic worldviews from Nazi Anti-Semitism in 1930s Germany, to American Exceptionalism today. Of course, Anti-Semitism was well established in Germany, but early in the sound era of films, the Nazi government formed a Ministry of Propaganda which supported films with messages that were found to be in accord with Nazi values, and this government control of media influenced the theories about “mass culture” that were developed by members of the Frankfurt School (such as Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer) who proposed that popular culture functions to support the dominant ideology and cannot be an effective force for desired social change.<sup>19</sup> While their theories have much to commend them, their view that audiences are largely passive in the face of media was countered by the Birmingham school, especially the theories of Stuart Hall, who held that audiences can make their own meanings out of popular culture products through their own interaction with them, as they can read and “decode” them in accordance with their own values, rather than simply passively accepting the ideology that might have been intended by the filmmakers or even the values implicit in the films’ production.<sup>20</sup>

We can see the range of unanticipated ways in which decoding can happen by looking once again to *The Matrix*, intended by the filmmakers, the Wachowski sisters, as a metaphor for left-



wing resistance against the dominant social order: after all, Cornel West is actually in two of the movies. But this counter cultural message has been turned on its head by the alt right as they have urged people to “take the red pill,” as characters do in the film to wake up to reality rather than the false images produced by the machines—but in the alt right version of this, this means waking up to the “fact” that white men are under attack and need to be defended from women, Jews, Blacks, Muslims, and immigrants, among others.<sup>21</sup> Their “truth” also includes the QAnon conspiracy theories that fueled the attack on the US capital, such as the notion that a group of Satanic child abusers head the Democratic party, that this group also includes the Pope and the Dalai Lama, and that they kill and eat their victims.<sup>22</sup> Other conspiracy theories include the belief that the murder of 26 people (including 20 children) at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newton, Connecticut in 2012, never happened, and was a phony event staged by gun control advocates in order to force restrictions on gun ownership.<sup>23</sup> The multiverse of media has created some clearly false and truly disturbing beliefs designed simply to safeguard the privilege and power of those who hold them, and it is hard to see how one can challenge such views, based on they are on their own version of the truth without reference to any source that might challenge it.

#### **IV. Deconstructing and Reconstructing Myths**

So, faced with this, what’s a religion and film scholar to do? We can try to expose the illusions and ideologies propounded in films, certainly, and I have grown ever more aware of the need to do so. This past semester I taught a class on Religion, Violence, and Film which included an examination of the myths of sacrifice in war films and how these have operated to sanctify war and the deaths of soldiers in ways that continue to legitimize military interventions that might be largely ineffective or do more harm than good. If one buys into the myths of *American Sniper*,

*Lone Survivor*, or *Black Hawk Down*, for example, one receives a recruitment call for the US military—as these films have often been admitted to function by the US military itself, which has agreed to lend equipment to filmmakers, including vehicles like helicopters to be used in the films, on the condition that they can censor the script, which they then do.<sup>24</sup> Oddly enough, every one of these films traces the history of a conflict in which America arguably *lost* (Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia). In mythologizing sacrifice, however, we give a sacrality to these conflicts that continues to authorize them as valid and noble sacrifices even when we lose. Jon Pahl's 2009 book *Empire of Sacrifice: The Religious Origins of American Violence* maps this dynamic well, including examples of how popular films function as part of this apparatus of legitimizing sacrifice as a means for the maintenance of the American Empire.<sup>25</sup> I would also cite a recent book by Elizabeth Samet, who teaches literature at West Point, the US Army military academy, entitled *Looking for the Good War: American Amnesia and the Violent Pursuit of Happiness*.<sup>26</sup> Here she maps out her thesis on how the valorization of the Second World War, largely through popular films and other media, created an idealized portrait of America as innocent and righteous that has continued, and that this has caused the nation to enter time and again into ill-conceived and unethical wars in the belief that we can do good in these dubious situations. Samet does hold that the Second World War met the criteria for a just war, but that was pretty much the last American war that did so, in her own view. I think the students in my class sometimes felt as if they had taken the red pill, as they became more aware of the ways in which films have manipulated their values and their emotions, as well as the facts. Not all of my students were convinced by this unveiling of the modern mythologies of war, of course, but interestingly, among the more receptive were veterans who had grown critical of US involvement in places like Iraq and Afghanistan. Maybe reality

does still exist, if you can experience a real war, and you can realize that the fake wars of film should not determine your worldview.

I would reiterate then that viewers can and will create their own meanings out of popular culture products if they can exercise agency in their reception, and this can be facilitated by media literacy and critical thinking, which can be learned by those who are receptive to these; they may choose to accept or reject the message they find, or remake and reinvent it—encode it—in accordance with their own values. Of course, this does make for some of that chaos wherein meaning has become subjective, and people can choose to only read or watch the media they wish, or only decode it in the fashion that pleases them. But if we believe that there is a reality out there, then it remains relevant for viewers to not simply imbibe whatever is pleasing to them in the short term, but to look at consequences and how our views affect other people in our intersubjective multiverse. We do not live in our isolated universes like the creatures in the Matrix who exist separate from each other and from the real world, until awakened by the red pill. We are already in a shared world, albeit one we each perceive and approach differently, but which allows for shared agendas and shared purposes and shared meaning-making.

And this brings me to my final Multiverse movie. *Everything, Everywhere, All of Once* is a multiverse movie unlike any other, although it clearly relies on and parodies the tropes of multiverse movies as well as Hong Kong martial arts films. Evelyn Wong (played by Michelle Yeoh) is a Chinese immigrant to America who along with her husband owns a laundromat. She has tax troubles, family troubles, she is burdened, and she is not rich: she is, in a word, ordinary. The film is unusual not only in the centrality it gives to Chinese and Chinese American characters—Yeoh has publicly celebrated the fact that she finally has top billing, as a middle-aged Asian woman<sup>27</sup>—but also in the central roles it gives to LGBTQ characters. I don't want to give

the whole movie away, as many of you have probably not had the chance to see it, but I cannot resist pointing to some of the ways in which this movie offers a more hopeful vision of how to live in the multiverse. There is, again, an effort that must be made to save all the universes from chaos and collapse, due to the fact that travel between the universes has been discovered: but in this case, the threat is not that posed by someone who wants to violently impose one particular vision of order on the chaos, but rather the danger of nihilism—that faced with the infinite possibilities that exist for all our lives, all of it will cease to have meaning, as any change that one makes will be countered in another universe in which a different choice is made. So, individual acts are insignificant, from this point of view, as every possible outcome has already happened, somewhere, and so there is no reason to do anything except acquiesce to the chaos. But the response to this nihilism, in the character of Evelyn who finds herself an unlikely hero, is not to give up or to respond with violence but to “fight with kindness” by doing the compassionate thing in every situation that she can. This is shown rather hilariously and poignantly in one scene in particular, which I will not ruin for you, but the film clearly suggests that a hero need not turn to violence but can act in nonviolent ways to defuse conflict and even seek to help those who oppose us: *Love your enemies*. Faced with an infinity of universes, one cannot do everything, the film suggests, but one can act with kindness in each scenario we encounter, and value the relationships and the history that we are given. And the universes do not even remain totally separate, as in most multiverse movies, where an uneasy truce and non-interference is the only solution to chaos—rather, in this film, Evelyn can choose to act in the various universes in diverse ways that support human flourishing for the people in those universes. This may not seem like a totally political message about transforming society or the world, but it does present an alternative to violence as

the way to deal with the chaos, and offers consideration of the interests of others as the ethical framework for interacting with those others.

I do not know if anyone will embark on nonviolent alternatives as the result of seeing this movie, but the fact that it exists and is gaining a following suggests to me that some people are responding to its message. It is a comedy, indeed, but comedies can speak the truth—and the appeal of the film lies in its heart, and its appeal to loving kindness as a model for life. This at least shows that not all films or popular culture products are simply tools for whatever ideology wishes to exploit them, nor must they anesthetize our ability to make ethical decisions, nor do they need to induce a mind numbing nihilism in the face of a multiplicity of worldviews with no seeming objective center—instead, at least some of the time, films can present to us and perhaps inspire in us a desire to live cooperatively, and to create worlds that may challenge us to follow ideals that transcend a narrower vision. I do not want to seem overly sanguine or sentimental about this possibility, but neither do I wish to discard it altogether as the cultured despisers of popular culture often do. Films are one of the forms of media in which we create our visions of what the world can be, and we need to interrogate those visions, reinterpret and remake those visions, and finally live our own carefully chosen visions, if we want to make a better world for all of us. I look forward to hearing as much as humanly possible during the remainder of this conference about the work all of you are doing to understand films better, in light of the project we all share to understand ourselves and our collective future better.

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Zuckerberg, “Founder’s Letter,” October 28, 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Neil Stephenson, *Snow Crash* (New York: Random House, 1992)

<sup>3</sup> In Book VII of Plato’s *Republic*, he develops an allegory of prisoners in a cave who can only see shadows and never the objects that cast them, and how they assume that this is the entire world, refusing even to leave it when freed. This has been interpreted as both a statement about the nature of knowledge and as a political allegory about

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the nature of deception and the unwillingness of people to seek the truth in conditions of oppression, by Hannah Arendt, among others. See Miguel Abensour, "Against the Sovereignty of Philosophy Over Politics: Arendt's Reading of Plato's Cave Allegory," *Social Research* 74:4 (Winter 2007), 955-982.

<sup>4</sup> Rene Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., trans. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1993 [1641]). Descartes uses this thought experiment to first prove the reality of the self which must exist as the subject of consciousness even if all other perceptions are false, and ultimately claims to prove the reality of the world, as he assumes that God would not allow such a demon to deceive us about the nature of reality.

<sup>5</sup> Jonathan Haidt, "Why the Past 10 Years of American Life Have Been Uniquely Stupid," *The Atlantic*, April 11, 2022.

<sup>6</sup> For Cajetan's side of the story, see Tommaso de Vio Cajetan, *Cajetan Responds: A Reader in Reformation Controversy*, edited and translated by Jared Wicks (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1978).

<sup>7</sup> UNCHR, Figures at a Glance, accessed July 6, 2022.

<sup>8</sup> This continues to become clearer as the January 6 committee hears testimony. Peter Baker, "New Insights Into Trump's State of Mind on Jan. 6 Chip Away at Doubts," *New York Times*, July 3, 2022.

<sup>9</sup> By June 2022, more Republicans had come to believe that the events of that day constituted a "legitimate protest" rather than a "riot" or "insurrection." In comparing data from a June 2021 survey, Monmouth University concluded that the 33% of Republicans who had said there was an insurrection had reduced to just 13%; the 62% that had called it a riot had reduced to 45%; and while 47% had called it a legitimate protest a year earlier, that number had risen to 61% of Republicans surveyed. "Faith in American System Drops," Monmouth University Polling Institute, July 7, 2022.

<sup>10</sup> "I got maced!" The Original Video (with captions), YouTube, posted Jan. 21, 2021; See also, "I GOT MACED" - The Opera - with Elizabeth from Knoxville - YouTube; "The Mini Musical from Brandon Ethridge, starring Onion Elizabeth at the Capitol Riot," YouTube, posted Jan. 8, 2021.

<sup>11</sup> Luke Mogelson, "A Reporter's Footage from Inside the Capitol's Siege," *The New Yorker* youtube channel, Jan. 17, 2021.

<sup>12</sup> Jonathan Z. Smith, "A Pearl of Great Price and a Cargo of Yams: A Study in Situational Incongruity," *History of Religions* Vol. 16, No. 1 (Aug. 1976), 1-11.

<sup>13</sup> Kristin Kobes du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2020), 10-11, 30-32, 54-59, and passim.

<sup>14</sup> Kristin Kobes du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne*, especially 174, 183, 195-6, 211, 217, 270.

<sup>15</sup> The first reference to a wife is in Blind Harry's poem, "Wallace," which was written at least 150 years after Wallace's death, and contains many clearly fabricated elements. See Anne McKim, ed., *The Wallace: Introduction* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2003).

<sup>16</sup> Bernatroig, "William Wallace's Life and Death. Facts of his Wife, his Child, his Sword, and the Statues," *History Totally Naked*, Jan. 19, 2019.

<sup>17</sup> Hannah Shaw Williams, "The Patriot True Story: What Really Happened In Mel Gibson's Movie," *Screenrant*, July 4, 2021.

<sup>18</sup> Stewart Hoover and Curtis D. Coats, *Does God Make the Man? Media, Religion, and the Crisis of Masculinity* (New York: NYU Press, 2015), 103.

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<sup>19</sup> See, for example, Theodor W. Adorno, *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, ed. J.M. Bernstein (London: Routledge, 1991); Max Horkheimer, *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell and others (New York: Continuum, 2002).

<sup>20</sup> See Stuart Hall, *Essential Essays: Foundations of Cultural Studies & Identity and Diaspora (Stuart Hall: Selected Writings)*, 2 vol., (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).

<sup>21</sup> The idea first appeared in a Reddit forum, largely for expressing hatred and resentment of women. Stephen Marche, "Swallowing the Red Pill: A Journey to the Heart of Modern Misogyny," *The Guardian*, April 14, 2016.

<sup>22</sup> Kevin Roose, "What is QAnon, the Viral Pro-Trump Conspiracy Theory?" *New York Times*, Sept. 3, 2021.

<sup>23</sup> Elizabeth Williamson, *Sandy Hook: An American Tragedy and the Battle for Truth* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2022).

<sup>24</sup> "As Black Hawk Down Director Ridley Scott Is Nominated for An Oscar, An Actor in the Film Speaks Out Against Its Pro-War Message," *Democracynow.org*, Feb. 19, 2002. See also, John C. Lyden, *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: NYU Press, 2019), 244-245.

<sup>25</sup> Jon Pahl, *Empire of Sacrifice: The Religious Origins of American Violence* (New York: NYU Press, 2010), esp. 167-176.

<sup>26</sup> Elizabeth Samet, *Looking for the Good War: American Amnesia and the Violent Pursuit of Happiness*. (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2021).

<sup>27</sup> Paul Chi, "Michelle Yeoh on Her *Everything Everywhere* Moment: 'I'm Not Going to Lie, I've Waited a Long Time for This'," *Vanity Fair*, May 23, 2022.

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