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# How To Attain Liberation From a False World? The Gnostic Myth of Sophia in *Dark City* (1998)

## **Abstract**

In the second half of the 20th century, a fascinating revival of ancient Gnostic ideas in American popular culture could be observed. One of the major streams through which Gnostic ideas are transmitted is Hollywood cinema. Many works that emerged at the end of 1990s can be viewed through the ideas of ancient Gnostic systems: *The Truman Show* (1998), *The Thirteenth Floor* (1999), *The Others* (2001), *Vanilla Sky* (2001) or *The Matrix* trilogy (1999-2003).

In this article, the author analyses *Dark City* (1998) and demonstrates that the story depicted in the film is heavily indebted to the Gnostic myth of Sophia. He bases his inquiry on the newest research results in Gnostic Studies in order to highlight the importance of definitional problems within the field and how carefully the concept of “Gnosticism” should be applied to popular culture studies.

## **Keywords**

Gnosticism, Hollywood, Gnosis, Western esotericism, neo-noir, science-fiction

## **Author Notes**

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## **Introduction**

In the last three decades many Hollywood films have disclosed themes that can be viewed in the light of ancient Gnosticism. Several authors have rightly identified films such as *The Truman Show* (1998), *Pleasantville* (1998), *Vanilla Sky* (2001) or *The Matrix* trilogy (1999-2003) as “Gnostic.”<sup>1</sup> In this paper, I provide a close reading of an understudied film directed by Alex Proyas, *Dark City* (1998),<sup>2</sup> through the Gnostic myth of Sophia (Gr. Wisdom). Although one could also deliver a Neo-Platonic or Christian interpretation of Proyas’ work, I shall limit myself only to Gnosticism. First of all, I find the interpretative context of Gnosticism far more efficient in explaining various meanings of *Dark City* than previously mentioned. It is also due to the fact that in the light of ancient Gnostic thought, no thorough examination of Proyas’ work has been offered yet.<sup>3</sup>

## **What is Gnosticism?**

In contemporary Gnostic Studies the notion of Gnosticism is understood not as a historical unity that can be defined by a clear set of characteristics but rather as a theoretical term.<sup>4</sup> For nearly two thousand years scholars had had no access to original “Gnostic” texts. They had to base their inquiry on the works of Church Fathers who distorted the meaning of teachings of various groups and persons they studied in the early Christian era. Amid them Saint Irenaeus of Lyons had the greatest influence. He called all of the Christian groups he

attacked adherents of false gnosis (Gr. “knowledge,” “investigation,” “insight”). Although Irenaeus was aware of the great diversity of groups he described, his account was very inaccurate. In 1945 near Nag Hammadi a great number of the so-called “Gnostic” scriptures were discovered. Scholars started to revise the concept of Gnosticism, which was the product of modern scholarship,<sup>5</sup> and it soon became apparent that it was too narrow to encompass the enormous diversity of ideas, myths, practices and rituals expressed in the original texts. After the emergence of ground-breaking critical works of Michael A. Williams<sup>6</sup> and Karen L. King,<sup>7</sup> in which they argued for abandoning the idea of Gnosticism due to its inadequacy in the light of the discovered materials, several counterpropositions have been suggested.<sup>8</sup> Most of them are embedded in the typological approach which offers a set of characteristics that group certain texts and ideas together. Their authors do not use the idea of “Gnosticism” or “Gnostic religion” referring to a single phenomenon. It rather serves as an interpretive or heuristic category to lump together thinkers and texts for closer scrutiny and comparison.<sup>9</sup>

I will base my inquiry of *Dark City* on the typology formulated by Roelof van den Broek.<sup>10</sup> In his account, “Gnosticism” or rather “Gnostic religion” is understood as a phenomenon that flourished in great myths of the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> century which spread across the Middle East and Roman Empire up to the Far East. Van den Broek enumerates the most typical features of Gnosticism that involve myths in which:

(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 actualized and celebrated in rituals that are performed within the gnostic community.<sup>11</sup>

Systems of Gnostic religion can be divided into two groups. In the first one, there is a dominant idea of radical dualism between two opposing principles of light and darkness. In Manichaeism, some Mandaean texts and three-principle systems, it is said that when darkness encountered light it resulted in the creation of the world with evil within. Most of the Gnostic systems, however, are monistic in the sense that they posit one divine transcendent principle from which everything begins. It is absolutely good but during a series of emanations an evil comes into being. Thus we can speak about a certain dualistic tendency within this type of gnosis and it can be found in Classic (Sethian) Gnosticism, Basilidian<sup>12</sup> or Valentinian gnosis.

For van den Broek, the set of traits he provides is the core of Gnostic religion which in his account stipulates a “radical” or “mythological” form of ancient gnosis.<sup>13</sup> It is expressed in the great systems of the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> century, e.g. Sethianism or Valentinianism. Therefore, the Dutch scholar avoids using the notion of Gnosticism. In this article, I shall understand the category of Gnosticism in a narrow sense, i.e. as a mythological form of ancient gnosis that van den Broek suggests.<sup>14</sup> I will consider as “Gnostic” the ideas and people that

fit into van den Broek's category of mythological gnosis. For instance, I name Sethians "Gnostic" who spoke about themselves as "Gnostics," but also Valentinians, although in a narrower sense they should not be called such.<sup>15</sup>

### **The myth of Sophia**

One of the realizations of radical gnosis of its monistic type is the myth about Sophia's fall (who can be also identified with "Word", "Logos," "Wisdom," or "Achamoth," depending on the Gnostic writing), a divine being who causes disruption within the celestial sphere, which leads to the creation of the world. Despite differences between numerous texts that express this myth, for instance *Zostrianus* (NHC VIII, 1) or *Tripartite Tractate* (NHC I, 5), they share a common set of traits.<sup>16</sup> Most frequently, these scriptures start from the description of the heavenly world in which the unknowable God (also called in other texts "Bythos", "Father" or "Monad") resides. He comprises the original, metaphysical unity from which lesser beings emanate. However, they should not be viewed as distinctive, independent entities but symbolic manifestations of the Father. Aeons, altogether with God, comprise a divine sphere: Pleroma. The creation of the world is brought by a flaw, error, passion or ignorance of the lowest entity, Sophia. In the most popular versions of the myth, her fall is caused by her need for understanding the greatness of God or because she wanted to produce something on her own, without the permission of her spouse or the Father. In the aftermath, she gives birth to a malign, ignorant being called

“Demiurge”<sup>17</sup> (also known as “Yaldabaoth,” “Saklas” or “Samael”).<sup>18</sup> He creates human beings as well as the material world, a place of death, terror, and suffering. Demiurge has almost absolute control over the cosmos, which is sustained by “archons,” i.e. his servants. They keep mankind in ignorance about their true origins. However, Sophia manages to put a celestial element, called a “divine spark” or *pneuma*, into human beings in order to reinstate the primordial unity. It is restored due to the activity of God’s emissary, a Redeemer, who can be also understood as one of his manifestations. Gnostics identified him with many figures, most commonly with Seth or Jesus Christ. Redeemer descends into the material world to enlighten people about the true nature of reality, Sophia’s fall and the illusory dimension of Demiurge’s world. Through his intervention people who obtain this knowledge will be saved. When all divine sparks return to their heavenly home, namely to Pleroma, the original unity will be restored and the material world destroyed.

This description shows only the most important features of the so-called Gnostic myth which many scholars believe to be fully expressed in the *Apocryphon of John* (NHC II, 1; III, 1; IV, 1; and BG 2), an early Sethian text. Gnostic scriptures that contain the story about Sophia’s fall differ in many details, although for the purposes of my examination of *Dark City* I will not delineate differences between them. My point is to show that the story depicted in the film can be read through the myth of Sophia’s fall, understood as a general scheme, and also other themes expressed in Gnostic writings that fit into the category of monistic mythological gnosis.

### **Dark city as a realm of Demiurge**

*Dark City* presents the story of alien creatures called “Strangers” who imprisoned humans inside an artificially created world through their mental superpowers. They are in pursuit of an answer to the question whether the human soul is merely a collection of memories or whether it is something that exceeds experiential comprehension. They think that finding the essence of human nature will extend their lives and eventually save their race. Through supernatural abilities, Strangers reorganize the city’s landscape, erase memories of people whom they entrapped and give them new ones every day. People who live in the dark city are not aware of being part of this appalling experiment. These humans cannot act freely, think skeptically or escape due to the presence of the gruesome Strangers. However, the main character, John Murdoch, wakes up in an amnesiac state during the cyclical process carried out by Strangers. Although they put every single person in the city to sleep to replace their memories, John resisted their psychic powers for unknown reasons. He discovers a corpse of a woman, cruelly murdered in some kind of a ritual, and flees from the place where he woke up. Some time later, he learns his name, encounters his wife Emma and tries to unravel whether he was the murderer. Meanwhile, Inspector Frank Bumstead is looking for him. He suspects John to be responsible for a series of murders that were committed in the city. Strangers are also chasing Murdoch, who discovers he also possesses mental powers and is resistant to theirs. Eventually, John is captured by Bumstead, who



acknowledges he is innocent. They encounter Dr. Daniel Schreber, a psychiatrist who works for Strangers, but decides to betray them and help John. The former tells them about the aliens, the experiment they conduct and the false reality in which they have lived. Dr. Schreber enables John to unfold his psychic abilities so that he can defeat the Strangers and liberate the city.

In *Dark City*, the world of Demiurge is symbolized by the eponymous dark city (see Image 1).<sup>19</sup> It is an artificially built micro-universe separated from space by a wall and magnetic field surrounded by dark water which floats in the cosmos. In the light of Gnostic thought, it resembles the split between the material world ruled by Demiurge and the transcendent divine realm. The division between truth and falsehood is also suggested by the fact that all the memories of the city dwellers are constantly re-invented.



Image 1. Demiurge's world in *Dark City*

Alien creatures can be viewed as archons (Image 2) since they sustain people in ignorance about the world and, obviously, they are not willing to

reveal the goal of their actions or let anyone flee from their world.<sup>20</sup> It is also confirmed as the plot develops when Strangers, after noticing that John is resistant to their powers, try to capture him.



Image 2. Strangers as Gnostic Archons.



Image 3. Mr. Book as Gnostic Demiurge.

The most distinguishable of the aliens is Mr. Book who can be viewed as a personification of Demiurge (Image 3). Firstly, he possesses the greatest

psychic powers among them, and secondly, they follow his orders without any shadow of doubt.

According to Einar Thomassen in the *Apocryphon of John* Yaldabaoth does not stand above the other seven rulers (archons) but rather they should be regarded as his manifestations.<sup>21</sup> Thomassen's interpretation corresponds with the image of aliens in *Dark City*. All of them, including Mr. Book, share one psychic mind and they can be seen as physical appearances of one demiurgical being.

### **The motif of imprisonment in the illusory world**

In Gnostic writings, one can find metaphorical use of language for describing the confinement of humans in the realm ruled by Demiurge: numbness, intoxication (of the world), sleep, drunkenness or oblivion (about human origins). In *Dark City*, Strangers stop time every midnight and, by using their supernatural psychic abilities, they instantly put all the dwellers to sleep. For Strangers, this facilitates the process of deleting memories from people's minds. We can set up a strong connection between the metaphorical language used in Gnostic writings and the condition of humans pictured in *Dark City*. Their metaphysical situation can be described by using Gnostic metaphors. Every midnight, the inhabitants of the city become numb and asleep, unaware of the false reality around them. Moreover, the process of replacing humans' memories can be interpreted as a means of keeping them in the state of oblivion.

Strangers prevent them from remembering their past and learning the nature of the world that encompasses them.

The cruel experiment conducted by Strangers can be also viewed in the light of a Sethian belief, expressed for instance in the *Apocryphon of John*, about the reincarnation of human souls. This idea might suggest the endless process of imprisonment of the ignorant souls. A parallel view can be noticed in *Dark City*. Every day people have to start their lives from the beginning, since Strangers repeatedly endue imprisoned people with new identities. Therefore, we might say they undergo a symbolic death over and over again. This is in line with the message of *Tripartite Tractate*, in which death is understood as ignorance. A similar idea is present in the *Gospel of Truth* (NHC I, 3). In this text, ignorance is regarded as non-existent, thus suffering and horrors we experience also do not exist. What counts is the knowledge about God which unveils the illusory dimension of earthly reality. Relating this view to the film, John's concerns whether he is a murderer or not are unimportant because they are based on false premises. Only knowledge about the true nature of the world around him matters, namely knowledge about the dark city and the idea that stays behind it.

Some scholars have argued that in the *Apocryphon of John* the idea of reincarnation does not have a pessimistic overtone.<sup>22</sup> It rather gives hope to the people who did not attain salvation. It is due to the elected souls who obtained knowledge of God. They serve as guardians for the ignorant ones and enable them to escape further reincarnations.<sup>23</sup> In my view, the role of such an elected

soul in *Dark City* is played by two characters. Above all, it is Dr. Schreber. Since he works for the Strangers, his memories are not removed every day and he helps John gain knowledge about the world around him as well as develop his psychic abilities. Dr. Schreber can be regarded as a guardian soul who helps the main character gain knowledge and escape the illusory realm created by aliens. Having said that, John can be also viewed as an elected soul. After achieving knowledge about himself and the world, John beats the Strangers and liberates all humans in the city.

### **Light versus darkness**

In many Gnostic texts, Demiurge's realm – similarly to the idea of imprisonment – is depicted through metaphorical, portrait-like language. It is often described as a world of darkness, evil, falsehood or a prison. Contrarily, knowledge, Pleroma, truth or heavenly beings are linked with light and life. For instance, in the *Apocryphon of John* we find a passage where Pronoia, which can be regarded as a manifestation of Sophia, speaks about her descent to the world of Demiurge:

Yet a third time I traveled –  
I who am the light that exists within the light,  
I the memory of the forethought –  
So that I might enter the midst of the darkness and the  
interior of Hades.<sup>24</sup>

The symbolic use of darkness and light is also present in *Dark City*. The artificial world created by Strangers is shrouded in darkness from its very beginnings (Image 4).



Image 4. The dark city in the night

Moreover, they wear black coats and hats. John's observation is symptomatic when he begins to notice that the world around him is illusory. In one scene he asks inspector Bumstead when was the last time he saw sunlight: "When was the last time you remember seeing it? (...) I mean like yesterday? Last week? When? Can you come up with a single memory? You can't, can you?" Later, John finds out that Strangers detest light. This explains why the city is full of darkness. In Gnostic literature, darkness means also ignorance or forgetfulness.<sup>25</sup> These terms can be also applied to describe the condition of residents who remain in the city because they are not aware of the falsity of their lives.

In Gnostic writings, the symbolic meaning of darkness is closely intertwined with the idea of awakening from sleep or a bad dream. It is understood as a process of emerging from ignorance. This theme is also displayed in *Dark City*. The first time John is introduced to the viewers, he wakes up from a dream without remembering his past or even his name. This can be viewed as a symbolic scene of his starting point for learning about his identity, achieving knowledge about the false reality around him and eventually attaining liberation from it. In the light of other Gnostic themes in *Dark City*, John's first awakening can be fruitfully interpreted as a Gnostic motif.<sup>26</sup> It can be found for example in the *Gospel of Truth*:

Such are those who have cast off lack of acquaintance from themselves like sleep, considering it to be nothing. Neither do they consider its other products to be real things. Rather, they put them away like a dream in the night, and deem acquaintance with the father to be the light. That is how each person acted while being without acquaintance: as though asleep. And the person who has acquaintance is like one who has awakened. And good for the person who returns and awakens! And blessed is the one who has opened the eyes of the blind!<sup>27</sup>

Not only is the dark city plunged into darkness for the whole time, but it is also surrounded by dark water. In several Gnostic writings, water is linked with darkness and matter. This is especially apparent in the *Apocryphon of John* in which Demiurge, who is pictured as Old Testament God, produces flood which is allegorically read as an attempt to cover humankind with darkness: "For it (the ruler) had brought darkness down over all the earth."<sup>28</sup>

In the context of the connection between darkness and matter it is also worth mentioning Irenaeus's testimony about the Gnostic sect called "Ophites" (because they were believed to worship the serpent, Gr. *ophis*).<sup>29</sup> According to Irenaeus they considered an unformed matter as abyss, chaos and water. Sufficient to say, John's first awakening in the film takes place in a bathtub full of water.

### **Redeemer**

In Gnosticism, Redeemer gives people a redemptive gnosis. In the context of Gnostic thought, the meaning of gnosis has a twofold understanding. On the one hand, it refers to the religious truth which comes from the Gnostic doctrine based on revelation. It is destined only for the few who are worthy and able to keep its core secret. Hence, Gnosticism comprises one of the first esoteric currents in Western culture.<sup>30</sup> On the other hand, gnosis can be also translated as an "insight" – a process through which one gets self-cognition. Since ancient gnosis had a religious significance, it entailed knowledge about human nature, its origins, destiny and finally God himself. True knowledge about oneself is tantamount to the knowledge of God. Let me illustrate it with some examples from the texts. In *Book of Thomas* (NHC II, 7)<sup>31</sup> we find the following fragment:

For those who have not known themselves have not been acquainted with anything. But those who have only known themselves have also received acquaintance with the depth of entirety.<sup>32</sup>



And another excerpt from the *Gospel of Truth*:

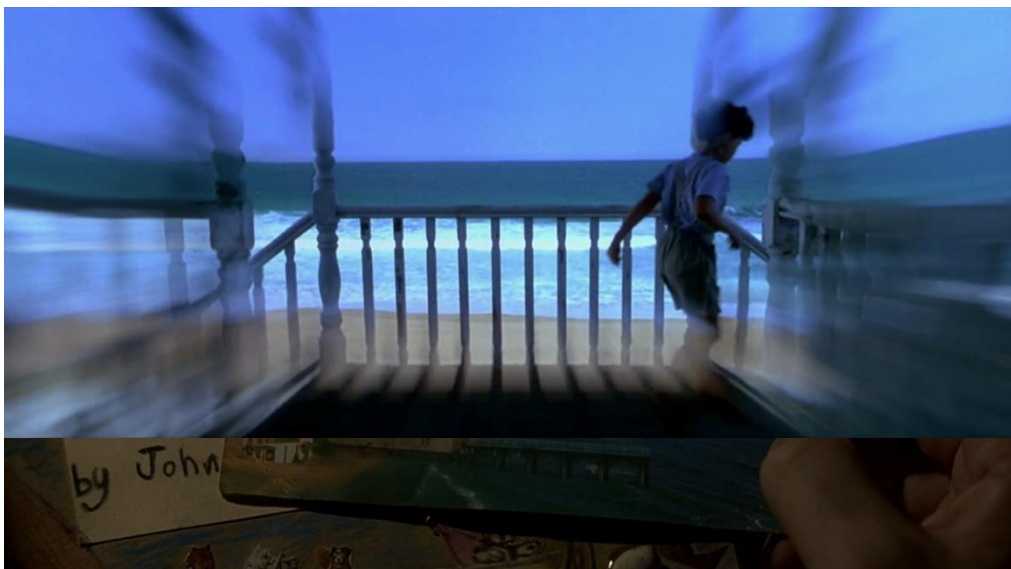
Those who gain acquaintance in this way know whence they have come and whither they will go; they know in the manner of a man who, after having been intoxicated, has recovered from his intoxication: having returned to himself, he has caused his own to stand at rest.<sup>33</sup>

This special type of knowledge brings liberation from the fallen world of Demiurge. It has a transformative effect since salvation is primarily understood as a return to the origins of mankind, namely God.

In Gnostic writings, Redeemer usually shares knowledge through a myth that explains the essence of the divine realm, the origins of evil, the creation of the material world and how humans have become entrapped in it. According to van den Broek, what distinguishes radical ancient gnosis from its later expressions in Western culture is that their adherents produced intricate and often artificially composed mythologies.<sup>34</sup> They used them as a tool for representing the experience of gnosis in a non-discursive way.<sup>35</sup>

In *Dark City*, Dr. Schreber can be seen as a figure of Sophia, Christ<sup>36</sup> or more generally the Redeemer. The difference between Sophia and Redeemer is that in many Gnostic texts and systems the former occupies an intermediate position between God and the creation. On the one hand, she is a fallen being. It is because of her action that the universe was created and evil introduced into it. On the other hand, Sophia gives light and salvation to the elected humans. For instance, in the *Apocryphon of John* she descends three times as Pronoia into the world and provides life-giving baptism.<sup>37</sup>

Similarly to Sophia, Dr. Schreber plays a mediating role between the corrupted world ruled by Strangers and people imprisoned in the city.<sup>38</sup> On the one hand, he collaborates with aliens because he is forced to assist them in finding the essence of a human soul. Dr. Schreber is partly guilty for the creation of the false reality. Every midnight, he switches memories between people when they remain unconscious. This recalls another motif expressed in many Gnostic texts because Demiurge along with his servants makes both material and psychic aspects of humans. Something similar can be said about the work of Dr. Schreber, since he is responsible for creating the psychic dimension of imprisoned people in the dark city. On the other hand, Dr. Schreber secretly helps John to discover his true identity and defeat Strangers. The former inserted into him a false memory from childhood that was supposed to take place on a sunny day at Shell Beach (Images 5 and 6).





Images 5 and 6. John's false memories from childhood

This memory leads John to seek knowledge about himself and the world around him. Schreber's intervention can be also explained by using Gnostic categories. In the *Apocryphon of John*, the first man, Adam, became alive only through the breath of Demiurge, who blew a part of his spirit into his face. However, the world-creator was not aware that his life-giving element he passed into Adam's body was inherited from Sophia. For this reason, Adam became alive but also came into possession of a divine spark. The memory from Shell Beach that Dr. Schreber gave to John might be viewed as Sophia's spark that enabled him to find out about the true nature of the dark city.

Just like Demiurge, who did not realize he had given Adam a divine element that would lead him to liberation, the aliens were not aware of the secret deed of Dr. Schreber either. Furthermore, we can establish a link between John's fabricated memory and the Gnostic idea of recollection of one's divine

provenance. Firstly, his memories of childhood can be understood as a metaphorical way of representing his roots, namely events that shaped his identity, and more generally, the place of his origins. Secondly, the symbolic use of darkness and light also plays a key role. What is striking for John is that the events he remembers took place during daytime, although the city is plunged into never-ending darkness. Since in Gnosticism light means knowledge, Pleroma or truth, his recollection can be referred to the idea of a divine spark given to him by Dr. Schreber-Sophia.

In the *Apocryphon of John*, when forces of darkness realize that Adam is stronger and has more insight compared to them, they throw him into matter. This corresponds with the viewpoint of Valentinus, who Clement of Alexandria presumably cites in his *Stromata* in the idea that “terror fell on the angels at this creature (Adam – F.K.), because he uttered things greater than proceeded from his formation, by reason of the being in him who had invisibly communicated a germ of the supernal essence (...).”<sup>39</sup> This view is strikingly similar to the reaction of the Strangers, after noticing that John gained superpowers that exceeded theirs. On the one hand, they were driven by fear of his abilities and wanted to capture him. On the other, the Strangers were fascinated by John because his soul gave them hope for survival. Since they can be partly viewed as humans creators, particularly their personalities, their interest in John is parallel to what Demiurge says in the *Apocryphon of John*:

“Come, let us make a human being after the image of god and after our images, so that the human being’s image might serve as a light for us.”<sup>40</sup>

Dr. Schreber, despite playing the role of Gnostic Sophia, fulfills an important function of a Redeemer. He reveals the story of creation of the dark city to John: why Strangers brought people to this illusory place, what is the reason for their experiment, why they cannot tolerate light and what is their ultimate goal. The elaboration Dr. Schreber gives him can be understood as a mythical story that Redeemer passes down to the Gnostic. As van den Broek outlines, various Gnostic myths, which comprise an expression of gnosis, share a common set of traits:

A description of the perfect divine world, an explanation of the origin of evil and of the material world in which people are imprisoned and the activity of one or more saviour figures who enlighten the clouded understanding of the human being through gnosis and thus save him or her from the powers of darkness.<sup>41</sup>

One can notice that in the scene when Dr. Schreber unveils the history of the dark city Inspector Bumstead asks:

-You say they brought us here. From where?  
-I'm sorry. I don't remember. None of us remembers that...

Thus Dr. Schreber's account lacks a crucial point present in Gnostic myths: a description of the place of human origins. Although we can find many links with Gnostic concepts in *Dark City*, there is no representation of Pleroma or any transcendent power.

### **Attainment of gnosis**

In *Dark City*, the scene when John achieves gnosis was depicted in a very interesting way. It is when Strangers force Dr. Schreber to insert their collective

memories into Murdoch's mind, believing they could possess his extraordinary power. The psychiatrist betrays them by imprinting him with fabricated recollections which unfold his mental abilities. Viewers watch rapidly changing memories from Murdoch's perspective, mostly taking place in sunlight, in which Dr. Schreber is also present. The latter teaches him how to develop his psychic abilities in order to defeat Strangers. Moreover, Dr. Schreber passes him knowledge about the underground machine that strengthens their powers. This short sequence, when images inserted by Dr. Schreber reach John's consciousness, represents his attainment of gnosis.<sup>42</sup> Murdoch's highly subjective point of view, suggested by blurred frame outlines and swiftly changing images, resembles the inner perspective of a Gnostic who receives revelation from a divine being. In Gnosticism this spiritual insight is not something that one can obtain on his or her own. It is due to the extraterrestrial intervention; it comes from a divine being, an emissary of God. As I suggested earlier, Dr. Schreber can be viewed as such an entity; Sophia or a Redeemer figure who enlightens John with knowledge. The former, appearing in Murdoch's mind, says that he gives him "a lifetime of knowledge in a single syringe." In the aftermath John wakes up as a new man with skills which allow him to defeat the Strangers. The following fragment from the *Apocryphon of John* suits the scene perfectly: "O listener, arise from heavy sleep."<sup>43</sup> And another one from the *Gospel of Truth*: "Jesus Christ shed light upon those who were, because of forgetfulness, in darkness."<sup>44</sup> In addition, while John's mind

was downloading data with fabricated memories, Dr. Schreber kept saying the word “remember” to him.

This sequence read through a passage from a Valentinian text, *Tripartite Tractate*, can be seen slightly different:

even the Son himself, who has the position of redeemer of the Totality, [needed] redemption as well, – he who had become man, – since he gave himself for each thing which we need, we in the flesh, who are his Church. Now, when he first received redemption from the word which had descended upon him, all the rest received redemption from him, namely those who had taken him to themselves. For those who received the one who had received (redemption) also received what was in him.<sup>45</sup>

In this fragment John in *Dark City* can be viewed as Son, that is Jesus Christ. He needs redemption in order to save the chosen ones and he received it from Logos (who serves parallel function to Sophia in other Gnostic writings) who would be Dr. Schreber.

We can establish another link between the theme of gaining self-knowledge in *Dark City* and the meaning of gnosis in ancient writings. In late Antiquity gnosis was believed to have a transformative character because knowledge of the self equals knowledge of God. Therefore, achievement of gnosis was seen as a promise of deification, or rather, the return to God. Similar understanding of self-knowledge can be observed in the film. After John received knowledge about the Strangers’ machine, he underwent transformation which enabled him to possess God-like abilities. In the aftermath he defeats aliens, liberates imprisoned people, rearranges the city’s landscape and brings light into it.

In Gnostic texts, the world of matter usually consists of several spheres. The soul which received gnosis has to ascend through all of the hierarchically ordered worlds in order to reach Pleroma. However, the passages to the higher spheres are guarded by hostile demons or angels. They can let the soul move on only if it knows the right passwords, possesses “seals” or casts magic spells.<sup>46</sup> The confrontation between John and the Strangers echoes the Gnostic motif of liberation from the world of Demiurge. The protagonist, similarly to the Gnostic soul, encounters guardians of the illusory world in order to escape from it. John’s psychic abilities can be also seen as magic spells he casts to beat Strangers.

### **Gnosticism reinterpreted**

There is, however, an important difference between the liberation motif in *Dark City* and its meaning in Gnostic texts. In Gnosticism, liberation has a strictly religious dimension. It equates salvation with merging with God. In *Dark City*, John’s victory over the Strangers does not lead him to God.<sup>47</sup> Rather, he liberates from the inauthentic illusory world controlled by hidden forces in which there is no place for freedom and self-determination. The evil that controlled John was the result of his being a subject of an experiment of which he was not aware. Therefore, similarly to ancient Gnostics, he quests for truth, although it is not defined in religious terms. In *Dark City* there is no equivalent of God or Pleroma. John’s Gnostic enlightenment, given by Dr. Schreber, refers



to the worldly – not transcendent – reality. The existence of such a super terrestrial realm in *Dark City* cannot be completely rejected though. There is still a hypothetical possibility that mankind's provenance is of some higher world. This interpretation can be based on Dr. Schreber's statement in which he remarks that no one remembers from where aliens took humans to the dark city. Because no one knows how John developed his psychic abilities that surpass even those of the Strangers, it could be said that the human race originated from a transcendent sphere through which John gained God-like powers. If that were the case, one should add that the connection between the inhabitants of the dark city and this higher world unfortunately had been broken. It is not accessible anymore and humans are left on their own. Nevertheless, the film itself does not provide any further suggestions that some celestial sphere might exist and the people had ever any relation to it.

Therefore, we should note limitations on the use of Gnostic categories in the examination of *Dark City*. There is a huge difference between the meaning of truth in Gnosticism and how this idea is suggested in *Dark City*. For Gnostics, truth comes from the higher world, whose existence is confirmed through revelation. In the film, however, the content of John's "Gnostic" insight is fabricated. It is as illusory as the dark city itself. It is only a technology invented by Dr. Schreber in order to enhance John's psychic abilities. We could say that in *Dark City* the division between truth and falsehood is based only on the personal conviction of Dr. Schreber and John. Unlike Gnostics, they do not have any metaphysical signpost or transcendent sphere which could serve as the basis

for their assessment. The new, better world, which John is willing to build after he defeats the Strangers, will not be more genuine than the dark city. Therefore, I must agree with Eric G. Wilson who writes: “If one dwells in a dirty city, one is likely to suspect that something is wrong with the constitution of the cosmos. But if one plays on a sun-soaked beach, one is prone to believe that he has reached paradise, that all is right with the world. The beach, though, is illusory as well, one man’s psychic projection. To take this shore for reality is to dwell in another man’s dreams.”<sup>48</sup>

It is clear that the story presented in *Dark City* can be viewed through many ideas expressed in Nag Hammadi texts. It seems that the whole scenario of the film could have been based on the Gnostic myth of Sophia, including the most popular Gnostic traits: the idea of sleep, opposition of darkness and light or the idea of redemptive gnosis. Therefore, the obvious question arises for film historians; to what extent were the authors of the film influenced by ancient Gnostics? It is truly striking that there is no evidence that the screenwriters David S. Goyer or Lem Dobbs or even the director of the film, Alex Proyas, had been acquainted with Gnostic thought before they wrote the script and made the film.

One can argue that in many other American films which emerged especially at the threshold of the 21<sup>st</sup> century Gnostic ideas can be found: *The Thirteenth Floor* (1999), *The Others* (2001) or *Waking Life* (2001) to name only a few. It is interesting, however, that the vast majority of their authors – similar to those of *Dark City* – did not consider Gnosticism as an interpretive context

simply because they were not aware of it. These works demand further examination in the light of ancient Gnosticism. This field of research should deal with two central areas. Firstly, which Gnostic ideas in particular were mostly depicted and reinterpreted in Hollywood films in the 1990s and 2000s? And secondly, what cultural functions could they serve for the audience at the time of their release? This issue would be closely connected with the problem of unraveling the roots of the outburst of Gnostic ideas not only in Hollywood but in American fiction of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Gnostic motifs inspired many prominent American authors, for instance Philip K. Dick, Thomas Pynchon, William Gaddis, Cormac McCarthy, and Alan Moore. Therefore, this fascinating phenomenon still awaits further study, especially in regards to the broader cultural meanings of the revival of manifold Gnostic ideas in American popular culture.

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<sup>1</sup> Eric G. Wilson, *Secret Cinema: Gnostic Vision in Film* (New York: Continuum, 2006), VII–70; Fryderyk Kwiatkowski, “Medialna rzeczywistość w ‘Truman Show’ Petera Weira w perspektywie myśli gnostyckiej,” *Collectanea Philologica*, no. special issue (2015): 23–33, doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.18778/1733-0319.S15.03>; Rachel Wagner and Frances Flannery-Dailey, “Wake Up! Worlds of Illusion in Gnosticism, Buddhism and The Matrix Project,” in *Philosophers Explore The Matrix*, ed. Christopher Grau (Oxford University Press, 2005), 258–89; David P. Hunt, “The Sleeper Awakes. Gnosis and Authenticity in The Matrix,” in *Faith, Film and Philosophy: Big Ideas on the Big Screen*, ed. Douglas R. Geivett and James S. Spiegel (Downer’s Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 89–106; Francesco Monico, “White Rabbit on the Moon,” *Technoetic Arts: A Journal of Speculative Research* 4, no. 2 (2006): 141–49; Claudia-Simona Hulpoi, “Unde Malum? The Gnostic Matrix,” *Caietele Echinox* 25 (2013): 205–14; Brian Godawa, “The Matrix: Unloaded Revelations,” accessed December 28, 2015, <http://www.equip.org/article/the-matrix-unloaded-revelations/>.

<sup>2</sup> Scholarly works dedicated to Proyas’s film were mostly concerned with rather obvious topics such as neo-noir film, dystopia, intertextual references to the history of science-fiction or the slippery division between illusion and reality in the age of digitalization, see for instance Sheryl N. Hamilton and Neil Gerlach, “Preserving Self in the City of the Imagination: Georg Simmel and *Dark City*,” *Canadian Review of American Studies* 34, no. 2 (2004): 115–

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34; Maria Daskalakis, "Ideology and the Urban Experience in Alex Proyas' *Dark City*," *Art History Supplement* 2, no. 6 (2012): 5–28, [https://www.academia.edu/3423974/Ideology\\_and\\_the\\_Urban\\_Experience\\_in\\_Alex\\_Proyas\\_Dark\\_City](https://www.academia.edu/3423974/Ideology_and_the_Urban_Experience_in_Alex_Proyas_Dark_City); Andrew Wood, "'Small World': Alex Proyas' *Dark City* and *Omnitopia*," in *Sith, Slayers, Stargates, + Cyborgs. Modern Mythology in the New Millennium*, ed. David Whitt and John Perlich (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), 121–42; Charles Tryon, "Virtual Cities and Stolen Memories: Temporality and the Digital in *Dark City*," *Film Criticism* 28, no. 2 (2003): 42–62, 71; Tim Blackmore, "High on Technology, Low on Memory: Cultural Crisis in *Dark City* and *The Matrix*," *Canadian Review of American Studies* 34, no. 1 (2004): 13–54. The religious dimension of *Dark City* also caught attention of some scholars, see Felipe Real, "The Search for Identity and the Messianic Figure in *Dark City* and *The Matrix*," 2008, [https://www.academia.edu/10009034/The\\_Search\\_for\\_Identity\\_and\\_the\\_Messianic\\_Figure\\_in\\_Dark\\_City\\_and\\_The\\_Matrix\\_](https://www.academia.edu/10009034/The_Search_for_Identity_and_the_Messianic_Figure_in_Dark_City_and_The_Matrix_); Daniel Tripp, "'Wake Up!': Narratives of Masculine Epiphany in Millennial Cinema," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 22, no. 2 (2005): 181–88; Victoria Nelson, *The Secret Life of Puppets* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001), 273–93. Due to the remarkable success of *The Matrix* (1999) by the Wachowskis, researchers pointed out fundamental structural similarities between Proyas's work and the former one including the religious ideas through which one can read both films. It should be added that *Dark City* progressively receives more attention from scholars. Although Proyas presented the bulk of ideas that afterwards were used also in *The Matrix*, his film was not warmly acclaimed at the time of its release because of the immense popularity of the Wachowskis.

<sup>3</sup> Only Eric G. Wilson tried to offer a Gnostic interpretation of *Dark City* in "Gnostic Paranoia in Proyas's *Dark City*," *Literature-Film Quarterly* 34, no. 3 (2006): 232–39; Wilson, *Secret Cinema: Gnostic Vision in Film*, 51–59. However, Wilson's account on *Dark City* can be regarded only as an introductory. The same applies to his book on the affinities between Gnosticism, Alchemy, Kabbalah and Hollywood films. It is due to the methodological inaccuracy and outdated scholarly materials he uses. For instance, he suggests that Alchemy and Kabbalah can be viewed as intellectual inheritors of Gnosticism although he does not clarify in what sense and to what extent this can be justified, see *Ibid.*, 2–3. His understanding remains problematic since scholars of Western esotericism do not treat Alchemy and Kabbalah as historical continuations of Gnosticism, although it is true that they share some common traits. Moreover, Wilson depicts only the most popular Gnostic ideas in the examined films and does not refer to the ongoing discussion in Gnostic Studies on the methodological problems in which definitions of terms "Gnostic" and "Gnosticism" are regarded as highly problematic. His inquiry on the relationship between Gnostic thought and film lacks precision and should be read with caution. Thus, further research on the works he analyses should be undertaken.

<sup>4</sup> For a great and short overview of how modern scholarship developed and dismantled the idea of Gnosticism, see David Brakke, *The Gnostics: Myth, Ritual, and Diversity in Early Christianity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010), 19–28.

<sup>5</sup> In 1669 Henry More coined the category of Gnosticism in order to lump together all the heresies that Irenaeus and his continuators condemned.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Allen Williams, *Rethinking "Gnosticism": An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category* (Princeton University Press, 1996), doi:10.1017/CBO9781107415324.004.

<sup>7</sup> Karen L. King, *What Is Gnosticism?* (Cambridge Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003).

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<sup>8</sup> See their overview in Brakke, *The Gnostics: Myth, Ritual, and Diversity in Early Christianity*, 23–28.

<sup>9</sup> Antti Marjanen, “Gnosticism,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies*, ed. Susan Ashbrook Harvey and David G. Hunter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 210.

<sup>10</sup> Roelof van den Broek, *Gnostic Religion in Antiquity* (Cambridge University Press, 2013), 10–12.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>12</sup> Though it is still questioned if Basilides was a Gnostic, see Winrich A. Löhr, “Basilides,” in *Dictionary of Gnosis & Western Esotericism*, ed. Wouter Hanegraaff et al. (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2006), 164–68; Birger A. Pearson, “Basilides the Gnostic,” in *A Companion to Second-Century Christian “Heretics,”* ed. Antti Marjanen and Petri Luomanen (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2005), 1–32.

<sup>13</sup> van den Broek, *Gnostic Religion in Antiquity*, 10–11.

<sup>14</sup> van den Broek’s methodological postulate allows us to speak about less radical currents of ancient gnosis because otherwise “the typical elements of the radical gnostic myth (would – F.K.) become the criteria for determining whether or not a text is gnostic,” see *Ibid.*, 10. He recalls the *Gospel of Thomas* (NHC, II, 2) as an example of a text which includes many Gnostic ideas although it does not contain the myth of creation characteristic of radical form of ancient gnosis, see *Gnostic Religion in Antiquity*, 10. (The abbreviation “F.K.” followed by a word in the brackets within the citation means that I added a subject which is missing in the specific fragment to which I refer.)

<sup>15</sup> See Ismo Dunderberg, “Valentinus and His School,” *Revista Catalana de Teologia* 37, no. 1 (2012): 135, <http://www.raco.cat/index.php/RevistaTeologia/article/view/257804/351195>; Ismo Dunderberg, *Beyond Gnosticism: Myth, Lifestyle, and Society in the School of Valentinus* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 19–20. However, I am aware of the limitations of using such labels as “Sethians” or “Valentinians” because of their connotations with heresy. Nevertheless, I will use them in a neutral sense in an attempt to group together similar ideas, practices and persons depicted in Nag Hammadi texts.

<sup>16</sup> In this paper the concept of the Gnostic myth of Sophia refers chiefly to the idea of the Gnostic myth used for instance by Bentley Layton or David Brakke on the basis of Sethian writings, see Bentley Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures: A New Translation with Annotations and Introductions*, 1st ed. (Garden City N.Y.: Doubleday, 1987), 5–23; Brakke, *The Gnostics: Myth, Ritual, and Diversity in Early Christianity* and also the idea of the Valentinian myth of Sophia, see especially Einar Thomassen, *The Spiritual Seed: The Church of The “Valentinians”* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2006); Dunderberg, *Beyond Gnosticism: Myth, Lifestyle, and Society in the School of Valentinus*. Although Valentinus and his followers radically reinterpreted Sethian writings, the general scheme of Sophia’s fall in their account remains similar. One should remember, however, about noticeable differences, see for instance endnote #17.

<sup>17</sup> One should add that the term “Demiurge” appears very rarely in Nag Hammadi scriptures and it does not have negative connotations, see Einar Thomassen, “The Platonic and the Gnostic ‘Demiurge,’” in *Apocryphon Severini: Presented to Søren Giversen*, ed. Søren Giversen et al. (Aarhus, Denmark: Aarhus University Press, 1993), 226–44. The reason why word “Demiurge” has been associated with malign and demonlike ruler of the material realm

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stems from testimonies of Church Fathers, Neo-Platonists, and modern scholars who used this term by referring it especially to Sethian images of world creator.

<sup>18</sup> It should be noted that not in every Gnostic scripture Demiurge is considered to be entirely evil and malevolent. For some Valentinians, Demiurge occupies an intermediate position between Achamoth (Sophia) and the devil. Demiurge will also achieve salvation when the material world will be destroyed by fire. In other writings we can find evidence that Demiurges were created as good entities but later they devolved and turned against their Father. For more examples of manifold roles played by Demiurge in Gnosticism see Williams, *Rethinking "Gnosticism": An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category*, 98–100.

<sup>19</sup> Wilson states that in Valentinus's system the creation of the world was brought by the stupidity of aeons, the divine powers in Pleroma which belong to God, see Wilson, *Secret Cinema: Gnostic Vision in Film*, 52; Wilson, "Gnostic Paranoia in Proyas's Dark City," 232. Firstly, only very few fragments about which we are certain that were written by Valentinus survived to our times. However, many scholars attribute the authorship of the *Gospel of Truth* to Valentinus as well. Eric G. Wilson makes this assumption but his interpretation that aeons produced the cosmos was not the only one offered in Gnostic Studies. In the *Gospel of Truth* there are no clear references to mythological figures present in other Valentinian writings, such as Demiurge or Sophia. However, the responsible for the creation is "Error," a conscious being. It is described in a way that lead some scholars to the conclusion it represents Demiurge [see Kurt Rudolph, *Gnosis: The Nature and History of Gnosticism* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983), 83–84], Sophia herself [see Harold W. Attridge and George W. MacRae, "The Gospel of Truth," in *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 38; Simone Pétrement, *A Separate God: The Christian Origins of Gnosticism* (San Francisco: Harper, 1988)] or the devil [see Jan Helderman, "Isis as Plane in the Gospel of Truth," in *Gnosis and Gnosticism*, ed. Martin Krause (Leiden: Brill, 1981), 31]. Other scholars disputed that Error personifies any mythological figure from the Gnostic myth [see Robert Haardt, *Gnosis: Character and Testimony* (Leiden: Brill, 1971), 207–208; Bentley Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures: A New Translation with Annotations and Introductions*, 1st ed. (Garden City N.Y.: Doubleday, 1987), 250] and it should be understood rather as a "deficiency" or "lack" [see David Brons, "The Figure of Error in the Gospel of Truth," accessed August 5, 2016, [http://gnosis.org/library/valentinus/Error\\_GTruth.htm](http://gnosis.org/library/valentinus/Error_GTruth.htm)]. Even so, in the *Gospel of Truth* one can establish a link between ignorance (but not stupidity as Wilson claims) of aeons about the Father and the creation of the world. In this view Error is understood as an active psychological force within fallen aeons who "had swerved after accepting error" (NHC, I, 3, 22, 20) and who sinned "in the midst of their error." (NHC, I, 3, 32, 36–37). Citations from all Nag Hammadi scriptures in this article come from translations made by Bentley Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures: A New Translation with Annotations and Introductions*, 1st ed. (Garden City N.Y.: Doubleday, 1987) unless author indicated differently.

<sup>20</sup> Wilson prefers to conceive Strangers as fallen aeons, see Wilson, "Gnostic Paranoia in Proyas's Dark City," 232. In my opinion this is somewhat inaccurate. In the film aliens are evidently pictured as evil beings whereas in the *Gospel of Truth* – if we accept the interpretation that aeons truly produced an Error – they are merely ignorant. In the *Gospel of Truth* only children of Error are regarded as evil and they can be viewed as archons.

<sup>21</sup> Thomassen, "The Platonic and the Gnostic 'Demiurge,'" 228–29.

<sup>22</sup> Alaistar H. B. Logan, *Gnostic Truth and Christian Heresy: A Study in the History of Gnosticism* (London, New York: T & T Clark International, 2004), 308–9, 313–14; John D. Turner, *Sethian Gnosticism and the Platonic Tradition* (Sainte-Foy, Quebec: Presses de l'Université Laval, 2001), 228; Birger A. Pearson, *Ancient Gnosticism: Traditions and Literature* (Minneapolis MN: Fortress Press, 2007), 68.

- <sup>23</sup> See the dialogue on the destinies of human souls NHC II 25, 16–27, 30; BG 64, 14–71, 2.
- <sup>24</sup> NHC II, 30, 31–31, 1.
- <sup>25</sup> Kurt Rudolph, *Gnosis. The Nature & History of Gnosticism* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), 58.
- <sup>26</sup> Although the symbolic meaning of awakening, regarded as a moment of achieving knowledge about the true nature of reality, is not peculiar to Gnostic writings. It can be also found in early Christian hymn quoted in the Pauline Letter to the Ephesians 5:14: “Sleeper, awake! Rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you” or in other philosophical or religious currents, e.g. in Buddhism.
- <sup>27</sup> NHC I, 29, 32–30, 16.
- <sup>28</sup> NHC II, 1, 29, 15.
- <sup>29</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, I, 30.
- <sup>30</sup> Rudolph, *Gnosis. The Nature & History of Gnosticism*, 55–56; van den Broek, *Gnostic Religion in Antiquity*, 1–13.
- <sup>31</sup> *Book of Thomas* does not represent the radical type of gnosis although it clearly discloses the idea of gnosis that can be found in many late Antique texts.
- <sup>32</sup> NHC II, 138, 16–18.
- <sup>33</sup> NHC I, 22, 13–20.
- <sup>34</sup> van den Broek, *Gnostic Religion in Antiquity*, 8.
- <sup>35</sup> The plenitude of Gnostic myths and many detailed differences between them can be explained by saying that their philosophical consistency was not regarded as the ultimate goal for their authors. They were rather used more as a means of creating a certain image of reality than stipulating it with acute precision. The expression of religious experience, the enlightened vision, was far more important.
- <sup>36</sup> Wilson, “Gnostic Paranoia in Proyas’s Dark City,” 235.
- <sup>37</sup> NHC II, 30, 11–31, 25.
- <sup>38</sup> It might seem that John’s wife could be seen as Gnostic Sophia. However, she does not have any special abilities nor knowledge about the Strangers. Emma, similarly to other people in the city, also remains in ignorance about the false reality around her and she can be perceived as a part of the illusory world from which John progressively extricates himself with the assistance of Dr. Schreber. In my view, only the latter possess traits that define him as Redeemer, which in Gnostic texts is played by various figures, both feminine and masculine. From the narratological perspective, Emma should be regarded as a focal point for the melodramatic strain in the film but in the light of Gnostic interpretation her presence is irrelevant.
- <sup>39</sup> Fragment I in Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata*, II, 36, 14. Translated by William Wilson, from *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 2, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, Arthur Cleveland

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Coxe (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885.). Revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight.

<sup>40</sup> NHC II, 15, 2–5.

<sup>41</sup> van den Broek, *Gnostic Religion in Antiquity*, 26.

<sup>42</sup> Main character's achievement of gnosis was shown in a very similar way in *Jacob's Ladder*. The protagonist gains knowledge about himself through the inner enlightenment which is represented by a series of rapidly changing images of his memories which are depicted from a first-person point of view, see Fryderyk Kwiatkowski, "Climbing a ladder to heaven. Gnostic vision of the world in *Jacob's Ladder* (1990)," *Journal of Religion and Film* 19:2 (2015): 21.

<sup>43</sup> NHC II, 1, 31, 5–7.

<sup>44</sup> NHC I 18, 16-18.

<sup>45</sup> NHC, I, 5, 124, 32–125, 11. Translated by James M. Robinson, from *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, 3rd ed. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 2000).

<sup>46</sup> The motif of ascension through the spheres can be found for example in *Books of Jeu* (Codex Brucianus 1); *Zostrianus*; *Marsanes* (NHC X, 1); *Allogenes* (NHC XI, 3); *Untitled Gnostic Treatise* (Codex Brucianus 2); *Three Steles of Seth* (NHC VII, 5).

<sup>47</sup> In other Hollywood films from the 1990s and 2000s, in which common pattern of Gnostic myth can be reconstructed, the liberation motif also does not have explicitly religious meaning: *The Truman Show* (1998), *Pleasantville* (1998), *The Others* (2001), *Vanilla Sky* (2001) or *The Matrix* trilogy (1998-2003).

<sup>48</sup> Wilson, *Secret Cinema: Gnostic Vision in Film*, 56.

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