

Research on Gnosticism in Cinema

Zihuan Zhou^{1,a,*}

¹University of California Davis, Davis, 95616, CA

a. hhzzhou@ucdavis.edu

*corresponding author

Abstract: Gnosticism regards the material world as an illusion generated by a god triggering existential questions in movie storylines. This research explores the current cinematic use of Gnostic concepts of their depiction to dig into filmmaking's reactions to topics of knowledge, spiritual duality, and ancient belief mechanisms. The study focuses on how movies adopt ideas to change audiences' reality viewpoints frequently instructing characters on trips to disclose realities and individual cultivation similar to the Gnostic route. By exploring the movies with these topics, the research offers an understanding of Gnosticism's approach to forming storytelling approaches and thematic diversity in cinema. Meanwhile, this paper takes into account viewer responses and wider philosophical dialogues triggered by films in its analysis, as well as reflecting on the influences of these Gnostic-stimulated narratives on movie tendencies. The research lays a foundation for an investigation into factors in movie and their association with current audiences primarily knowing the intersection between ancient wisdom and modern artistic expressions.

Keywords: Gnosticism, cinema, movie, religion, Hollywood.

1. Introduction

The ancient doctrine of Gnosticism explores the concept that the world is covered with illusions and that real enlightenment beyond these surface illusions. Gnosticism argues that in a universe where a creator controls the physical realm, the real divine nature is housed in a higher spiritual realm. This opinion believes that existence implies greater reality. The concept of gnosticism also exerts a significant effect on contemporary cinema. Films frequently act as contemporary-day prophecies, grasping the truth of philosophy through characters. The "discovered not always hidden truth" has been a recurring theme in many movies. Humanity's lasting pursuit of reality in life conforming to the Gnostic faith is reflected in these cinematic works. Through integrating ideas, directors and storytellers' field of cinema welcomes audiences to the worlds that arouse thoughts and frequently disobey conventional insight into truth. The topic of Gnosticism's awakening strikes a chord under this background, where characters face the concept that their viewpoints might belong to a hallucination. Changed trips instructing characters toward Gnostic redemption free from the limitations of physical existence itself are frequently sparked by these revelations.

The study is designed to explore the subtle relationship between Gnosticism and film making art, and to analyze the means by which movies symbolically convey timeless concepts to provide a platform for audiences to reflect on spirituality, truth, and self-discovery. By delving into the themes of Gnosticism in various cinematic gems, this paper seeks to uncover the reason that this philosophy

continues to captivate and challenge filmmakers and movie enthusiasts alike as they navigate perceptions of reality and pursue deeper truths. Through this investigation, this research will highlight how Gnosticism has enduringly influenced the storytelling landscape of cinema, shaping both the creation and interpretation of masterpieces.

2. Gnostics in films

2.1. Understanding of Gnostics

In order to have a basic knowledge of the Gnostic portrayed in the Movie, one must navigate the delicate balance between the creator's intention and the audience's interpretation. The main method of culturally or historically based film criticism is the empirical study of the audience's reaction to a movie. However, materialistic criticism borders on the affective fallacy, and therefore Wilson emphasizes that the relationship between the film and the audience involves the way in which the Gnostic viewpoint is presented in the film [1]. Wilson's insight touches upon this complexity, along with empirical studies of audience reactions may provide valuable data. This is particularly relevant when discussing Gnostic notions such as Maya or the illusion of the material world. Films that incorporate Gnostic principles often invite viewers into a labyrinth of symbolic storytelling where the demarcation between reality and illusion is blurred.

2.2. In films

Understanding the importance of this concept is key when analyzing movies such as '*The Matrix*', in which the idea of reality serves as a motif that prompts viewers to reflect on the nature of their own perceptions, possibly sparking various insightful and individual discoveries. The movie *Anderson's World of Office Cubicles* has a sickly, green-hued quality and a sense of being watched. The protagonist's encounter with Morpheus (Laurence Fishburne) is a moment of enlightenment offered in the form of the red pill, which is a gateway to special knowledge. By taking the pill, Anderson is reborn from the false reality, both figuratively (he receives the name Neo, meaning new) and literally [2]. The movie directly depicts the theme of Gnosticism through this episode, while also highlighting the importance of narrative logic in the movie.

Another movie that depicts the idea of Gnostics in their plot with the famous '*The Truman Show*', the film can be interpreted as embodying Gnostic elements through its portrayal of Truman's life as a fabricated reality controlled by an omnipotent creator. Truman was this ignorant character whose life was controlled by a director. The director acts as a father figure in his explanation as he tries to convince Truman not to leave the world he has created for him. The concept of this movie, while exaggerated, comments on the voyeuristic nature of reality television and the potential dangers of a society that is watched and pursues entertainment at all costs. The movie challenges us to question the line between reality and fiction, urging us to examine the ethical issues and consequences that such manipulation raises [3]. The film cleverly uses its plot and characters to delve into themes of reality, freedom, and the human condition, reflecting on the nature of the world and perceptions of it.

3. Specific Reflection on Films

One of the key elements in exploring areas related to the theme of the movie is the protagonist's transformation from unawareness to understanding, a key point that is very much represented in movies such as *The Truman Show*. The protagonist Truman's life is revealed as a choreographed reality show, and his evolution reflects his quest for knowledge as he moves from being uninformed to being acutely aware of his controlled existence. And uncovering the nature of his reality drives him towards seeking authenticity and personal freedom, symbolizing the awakening of the spirit to

truth. *The Truman Show's* "reality" is really spun by producers dictating the happenings of Truman's contained world. Christof is the megalomaniac creator of *the Truman Show*, with an authoritarian eye that oversees everything, and his power is illustrated with his demand to 'cue the sun' [4]. In addition, the Protagonist's Journey from ignorance to knowledge symbolizes Gnosis in film often utilizes visual metaphors to depict this enlightenment. For example, the famous film that presents the idea of Gnostic is the movie 'Inception' released in 2010. This revolutionary film depicts the profound exploration between reality and dream. The movie revolves around Dom Cobb, a thief who delves into the depths of the subconscious to either steal or plant ideas, a technique referred to as 'inception'. This exploration through dream realms not only tests the characters grasp on what is real but also prompts viewers to reconsider their own perception of the world. The ambiguity about whether my perceived realities are indeed real is a topic of ongoing debate within the philosophy literature on epistemology and philosophy of mind. A classic thought experiment in this realm is the brain in a vat [5]. The symbolic representations of dream worlds and the methods to explore them, like the spinning top and physically impossible buildings, act as symbols for the ideas of deception and the quest.

Another perfect example of gnosticism embedded in the film industry is '*Dark City*', which was released in 1998. This film establishes a profound example of Gnostic themes in cinema. Especially through the protagonist's journey from ignorance to knowledge and the symbolic representation of gnosis within the film, John Murdoch, the protagonist, wakes up in a controlling city without any memory. The city is ruled by a group called the Strangers, who have the power to change reality. Throughout the story, Murdoch's focus is on figuring out who he really is while discovering truths about the city and its people. His search for answers is fueled by his desire to grasp his existence and break free from the strangers' control. This parallels the quest for knowledge as Murdoch strives to break out of the reality forced upon him and achieve a spiritual awakening. His transformation from ignorance to enlightenment symbolizes the Gnostic belief in the soul's ability to rise above constraints through gaining wisdom [6].

4. Gnostics and Directors

The pervasive influence of Gnosticism in cinema can be traced through the visionary lenses of several renowned directors, whose films often dissect the intricate relationship between perceived reality and hidden truths.

4.1. Director David Lynch

With films such as *Mulholland Drive*, acclaimed director David Lynch has established a narrative style that envelops the viewer in dreamlike scenes and surreal realities. A similar idea to the '*The Matrix*' series of hallucinations and quest for deeper understanding embodying Gnostic concepts as well as '*The Truman Show*'. '*Mulholland Drive*' also embodied Gnostic concepts of illusion and the quest for deeper understanding. And most of the concerns relate to the feedback keywords and mental processes of scratching your head, confusion, brainstorming, comprehension, and acceptance after viewing '*Mulholland Drive*' for the first time. The concerns interviewed indicated that they could only accept the movie they saw as an unadulterated miracle [7]. In the film, the Hollywood setting acts as this deceptive world where dreams and reality blur and reflect the Gnostic pursuit of deeper truths hidden beneath the world's illusions. Lynch uses this setting to explore the disillusionment and identity crises of his characters through embodying the Gnostic struggle for enlightenment and escape from worldly deceptions.

4.2. Lana Wachowski

The Matrix directed by Lana Wachowski, pushes the idea of the Gnostic theme into the mainstream movie industry. The dualistic world depicted in the movie allows humans to be unknowingly trapped in a simulated reality designed by malicious machines. This narrative directly parallels Gnostic beliefs about the soul's imprisonment within a false reality and the potential for liberation through gnosis, or secret knowledge. Jung believed that self-realization and the integration of all elements within the psyche were essential for personal growth. This aligns with the Gnostic emphasis on gaining knowledge and achieving spiritual awakening [8]. This concept aligns closely with Gnostic beliefs about the material world being an illusion crafted by a malevolent demiurge to keep humanity in ignorance. The idea of gnosis is described through the means of escaping this deception, paralleling Neo's journey of awakening within the film.

4.3. Alex Proyas

Director Alex Proyas's *Dark city* offers a themes of memory manipulation and fabricated realities that resonate with the Gnostic notion of a deceptive demiurge manipulating the material world. This is a story about the main characters portrayed in two movies, *Dark City* and *Pleasantville 1*. Both films were made in 1998 and both focus on themes of nostalgia for an aestheticized past. By exploring the tension between utopian and dystopian possibilities, and depict the urban landscape as a hostile dynamic force [9]. Proyas's use of a perpetually dark shifting cityscape serves as a metaphor for the Gnostic belief in the illusory nature of the physical world, which crafted to keep its inhabitants in spiritual ignorance [10].

5. Conclusion

In the course of the analyses on the integration of Gnosticism in cinema from *Dark City* to *The Matrix*, the films have skillfully used Gnostic themes to deepen the narrative power and structure of the films themselves. The worlds depicted in these films directly reflect Gnostic beliefs about the illusory nature of the material world through narratives about how reality as perceived is often a deceptive illusion. In addition, these films depict a world of reality in which what people perceive may not be real, also emphasizing Gnostic beliefs about the deceptive nature of the material world. The study emphasizes how the films effectively capture the essence of the philosophy by showing the characters' transformation from ignorance to wisdom, and narrative shifts that reflect the quest for enlightenment and cognition as well as liberation from worldly illusions. This method of expression has also become one of the common techniques used by many directors in the production of their films, with directors such as David Lynch and Alex Proyas effectively incorporating these bardic themes into their films, thereby influencing the narrative arc of the films and diversifying the visual and thematic elements of their genre. Exploring Gnosticism in the movie demonstrates fear, longing, and the constant quest for meaning. Such elements not only enhance the moviegoing experience, but also reflect reflections on reality, consciousness, and spiritual freedom. The timeless appeal of the themes emphasizes their connection to universal human encounters, ensuring their enduring presence in the world of cinema.

However, this paper has some shortcomings in the process of analysis, such as the lack of sufficient innovation and the relatively small number of references to literature and films. In the future, we will conduct further research and analysis on the related themes by incorporating more film genres and narratives and continuing to focus on social themes.

References

- [1] Wilson, Eric G., "Secret Cinema: Gnostic Film Pt. 1", November 18, 2010, <https://voegelinview.com/secret-cinema-gnostic-film-pt-1/>.
- [2] Kaler, M. (2018). Neo-gnosticism at the movies. *Journal of Religion & Film*, 22(3), 11.
- [3] Pamungkas, A., & Yuskas, B. O. (2024). The Use of Metaphors, Similes, and Personifications in the Truman Show Film. *Bulletin of Science Education*, 4(1), 1-15.
- [4] Maskell, Emily, "The Truman Show: Has a Film Ever Predicted the Future So Accurately?", May 31, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20230531-the-truman-show-has-a-film-ever-predicted-the-future-so-accurately>.
- [5] Baum, S. D., & Thatcher, J. E. (2010). Film review: *Inception*. *Journal of Evolution and Technology*, 21(1), 62-66.
- [6] Kwiatkowski, F. (2017). How to attain liberation from a false world? *The Gnostic myth of Sophia in dark city (1998)*. *The Journal of Religion and Film*, 21(1), 34.
- [7] Goodwin, J. (2014). *The Separate Worlds of David Lynch's Inland Empire*. *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, 31(4), 309-321.
- [8] Flannery-Dailey, F., & Wagner, R. L. (2016). Wake up! Gnosticism and Buddhism in the Matrix. *Journal of Religion & Film*, 5(2), 4.
- [9] Kwiatkowski, F. (2020). Eric Voegelin and Gnostic Hollywood: Cinematic Portrayals of the Immanentization of the Eschaton in *Dark City (1998)* and *Pleasantville (1998)*. *Gnosis: Journal of Gnostic Studies*, 5(2), 220-242.
- [10] Lasch, C. (1992). Gnosticism, ancient and modern: The religion of the future?. *Salmagundi*, (96), 27-42.