

Gnosticism in the cinema

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Many cultural streams of the modern era have been called gnostic: anarchism and revolutionary doctrines as an attack on an imprisoning social order, a faith in techniques of knowledge that reveal the hidden truths of the world (e.g. Freudian psychoanalysis), esotericism, including an increasingly specialized science that seems esoteric to all but a few in the field of study, and a widespread feeling of distrust of the received authorities. If we look widely enough the term seems to be applied to anything and everything. Principally this is because the factors just mentioned are so formative of the modern era that something smacking of gnosticism does seem to turn up everywhere. But a term that means everything means nothing. Then, there is simple mistaken analysis. For example, an influential interpreter of culture Eric Voegelin (1901 - 1985) confused gnosticism and hermeticism. Both are esoteric, but hermeticism is world affirming; while it sees a duality between the material world and an ideal or heavenly one, it looks for the keys to the connect the two in order to better dominate the material side. We also have to be aware of the abuses of easy labelling. For interpreters of cultural phenomena gnosticism is a handy term for all those new influences that cause a mysterious disturbance to one's comfortable sense of the fitness of familiar things. In polemics "gnostic" is the ready term of

thoughtless dismissal. The man I have seen use it the most to condemn opposing views is also the man most often dismissed as a gnostic by his own critics.

This state of confusion is best remedied by an examination of specific examples of cultural gnosticism. By a review of two fairly recent and popular films and of two older ones that have attained to the status of film classics, I hope to achieve three things: to make clear the basic ideas of gnosticism and their appeal, to distinguish how modern gnosticism differs from the ancient kind, and to show, through the example of film, the ubiquity of these ideas in culture today.

Two popular gnostic films

Modern gnosticism is more a cultural mood than a formalized religion. It is a way of experiencing and responding to the human condition. Two films made close together in both time (1998-1999) and place (Australia) give clear expression to this gnostic mood. In the second of these, *The Matrix*, the initial film of a trilogy, the gnosticism is self-advertising and so is often noted in commentary on the film. What has been missed in this commentary is how *The Matrix* expresses the modern variety of gnosticism, which differs from the ancient form. The earlier film, *Dark City*, how-

ever, not only is a better movie but also a clearer gnostic vision.

In *Dark City*, written and directed by Alex Proyas, human experimental subjects are kept in an artificial city. Their memories have been wiped and new memories are implanted to create such individual identities and purposes as the experiments require. These experiments, as is the city itself, are controlled by aliens attempting to understand human individuality and purpose. The human subjects have no idea that they are in an experiment, or that their identities are regularly re-created by modifying their memories.

A man, John Murdock, has or acquires the ability like that of the aliens of direct mental control of the machinery that produces the environment of the city. But for that ability to be used to make a difference he must first learn that his supposed self-knowledge is a delusion implanted to control him, and he must learn his true nature and condition. Only then can he take control of the city and make it serve human, not alien, purposes.

The Matrix, by Andy and Larry Wachowski, is named after the computer-generated integrated neural network that ties together all the people in the world and conveys to them a completely illusory computer generated experience. In this case it is man's own creation, artificial intelligence, which instead of serving him has created a world of robotics that has rebelled against man, taken control of the world and reduced man to an energy source, living in pods and being fed false experience. Some few gifted people somehow have the power to free themselves and then in turn save others, delivering man from entrapment in a delusion imposed on him to make him serve the purposes of others. In this mission they are opposed by security programs oper-

ating within the context of the Matrix itself that are known as Agents.



A baby inserted into the Matrix.

Operating outside the matrix are some free people who travel in hoverships, fight against robots and invade the Matrix. The ship in the story is commanded by a man named Morpheus (a symbolic name: the god of sleep).

These films are not science fiction adventure stories, but rather they advertise their own nature as visionary tales calling for human self-liberation from delusion.

Both films start their principle action in hotel rooms, suggesting that the characters are visitors, not at home in the world. In *Dark City* the film opens with the principle character, John Murdock, waking up in a bath. The film critic Roger Ebert, in the commentary track on the DVD release, mentions the discovery by film buffs that the room number is 614, and that John 6:14 reads, "When the people saw the signs that he had done, they said, This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world." *The Matrix* picks up on this use of door number codes. The number on the hotel room door at the movie opening is 303. The room contains the character Trinity. (This room is also used for the film's climactic

scene.) We next meet Thomas Anderson, who goes by the name Neo, inside apartment 101 and the film revolves around the question of whether he is The One, who was predicted to come to save humanity from the neural network in which it is trapped. Knowing that the door numbers are significant, and also that *The Matrix* delights in quotations from other films, we notice that 101 is a reference to the first gospel, Matthew, and also the text beginning at 10:1 within that gospel:

And he called to him his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every disease and every affliction. The names of the twelve apostles are these: first, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James the son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him.

The reference to casting out the unclean spirits, i.e. the Agents, is clear as well as the appearance of brothers Tank and Dozer the “real children of Zion” (born outside the Matrix) in Morpheus’s crew, and also the important role of another crew member as a traitor and Judas figure. Thomas Anderson, as both the saviour (the son of man, from the Greek noun root *andros-*, man) and as doubting Thomas, has trouble believing in himself.

As for room 303, the third gospel, Luke, has no thirtieth chapter, but Luke 3:3 speaks of the appearance of John who goes ahead to proclaim the one who is coming, and the Trinity character in the movie seeks out and believes in Thomas Anderson as The One.

On Morpheus’s ship, the Nebuchadnezzar, there is a plaque designating it as Mark III,

No. 11, made in 2069. Mark 3:11 states: “And whenever the unclean spirits saw him, they fell down before him and cried out, You are the Son of God.” Nebuchadnezzar was the king who while out walking on the roof of his palace said: “Is not this great Babylon, which I have built by my mighty power as a royal residence and for the glory of my majesty?” and as punishment for his arrogance lost his reason and lived like a beast for “seven periods of time” to learn humility before God. Similarly, Morpheus says that with the creation artificial intelligence “all of mankind was united in celebration. We marvelled at our own magnificence as we gave birth to AI”, but humanity was imprisoned in the delusion of the Matrix—lost their reason—by the race of machines deriving from AI.

Finally, from the date 2069, the twentieth book in the Bible (in the common Protestant arrangement), Proverbs, chapter 6 verse 9 reads: “How long will you lie there, O sluggard? When will you arise from your sleep?” Not only is sleep a common metaphor in gnostic literature for the human condition, but when we first meet Thomas Anderson in the film he is asleep. The first words addressed to him are: “Wake up, Neo.” (Neo means new, reflecting the gnostic appropriation of the Christian new birth idea.)

Neo is then told to “follow the white rabbit”. This is not only a clue within the film narrative, but refers to Alice in Wonderland, which recurs as a symbol of being caught in a mad world. But it also is a reference to the Jefferson Airplane song *White Rabbit* which uses Alice in Wonderland as a metaphor for mind-altering drug experiences. “One pill makes you larger, And one pill makes you small.” The trail of the white rabbit leads Neo to the situation where he actually has to choose between taking two pills. Metaphor loops back to narrative.

In short, the makers of *The Matrix* trowel on the symbolism thickly, using not only numerical codes but visual imagery, the names of the characters and quotations from film and other pop media to advertise the film as having a religious message.

These movies are an expression of a particular form of gnosticism, modern gnosticism. The term “gnosticism” itself is frequently misused. Because the meaning of the Greek word behind it is “knowledge”, any religious view which holds people to the responsible use of reason is falsely called gnostic, especially by experience focused preachers, and their ilk. We noted earlier that gnosticism also is sometimes confused with hermeticism. But gnosticism designates a definite diagnosis of the human predicament, its cause, and the solution.

Varieties of gnosticism and similar beliefs

For ancient gnosticism the universe consisted of a transcendent being, who somehow gave rise to further beings, and to the material world that these lower beings in turn created. The creation of the material world was never intended by the transcendent god, nor did the lower beings who made it understand the good above them, and so the creation turned out evil. Somehow something from the transcendent god became trapped in the material creation, and this divine element is man’s inner self or spirit, which is alienated from its true home while trapped in material existence.

Salvation for the gnostic is to awaken the inner self to its true nature and enable it to return to the divine source. Both the awakening and the return require knowledge, or in Greek *gnosis*, hence the name *gnosticism*.

Gnosticism, however, involves several implausibilities or conceptual difficulties. The first of these is how being originating from the good could end up evil. This is accounted for in three ways. First, there is emanation. The good god did not create the world, nor command its creation, nor perhaps even know about it at first. This was done at several removes. The good god gives rise to lower beings, who in turn produce others, who do not have direct experience of the transcendent god. The number of intermediate spheres of being between the god and the world might be three, or seven, or even 360, depending on how elaborate and esoteric is the variety of gnosticism that posits them. Other than some thinning out of being, there is no change of quality that would explain evil, so this explanation seems to be mainly obfuscation. This idea that evil is some sort of lack of being persisted for along time in Western thought, though today it seems to be confined to Thomists.

The second explanation of the origin of the evil creation is through some corruption of the immediate creator powers who are under the influence of ignorance, jealousy (if they become aware of a greater being above them and want to demonstrate their own independent power by creation) or passion. But this elevates the problem of the origin of evil from the material world to the one above it that made it, and the evil there also has an origin that must be explained.

The final type of explanation is mythology, usually involving sexual metaphors with abstractions such as Wisdom, Thought and the like being personified and described as consorting with each other and giving rise to further beings. Because mythology substitutes narrative for theoretical description, it somewhat relieves the pressure to produce a rational explanation.

The second implausibility of gnosticism is that it is difficult to account for how parts of the good become trapped in the material world, the point farthest from the transcendent god. Here the explanation tends to be wholly mythological, when the transcendent god somehow involves himself with a lower creature and imparts divine life to it, and then the creators of the material world bind this divine life to the material order out of malice.

The third implausibility is how this divine life is able to return to its divine source by means of receiving some information. Here is where a saviour figure plays a role. This saviour does one or two things. First he descends to the material world and awakens the divine being, informing it of its true nature and place in the transcendent realm. Secondly, the saviour may also serve as a model exemplifying how this divine nature is to ascend back to the god.

The problem here is that this divine nature is our inner selves, something more inward than the soul itself. Informed of his true divine identity the gnostic may be awakened to his trapped and alienated condition, but how does he leave the material behind and ascend back to god as an actual individual? And if the divine is trapped in matter, how does the knowledge that it is trapped release the trap?

This is where gnosticism found an essential idea in Christianity. Christianity taught that by spiritual union with the Christ one is reborn as a new creature. Here was the idea of a decisive break with the old order of being through a rebirth that the gnostic yearned for. The gnostic then looked at the Christian gospels as a mythological literature of which he knew the inner hidden meaning, that of a saviour from beyond the world who comes, gives secret knowledge to those able to receive it, shows how to leave behind the mate-

rial nature, and imparts the ability through a new birth that is appropriated inwardly.

The final implausibility is something like the problem of Buddhism. Just what is this spirit that is to escape back to the divine and be saved? Anything that is definite and identifiable is an accretion from a lower realm and is to be left behind during the ascent back to the divine. In what sense, then, is it I who am saved in the end? Once the divine spark is free, is there any me left?

This gnostic message was taught through a variety of myths and parables that clothed gnostic ideas in a gripping and persuasive literary form. What a gnostic movie must do is replace the role of mythology in the ancient world with an analogous narrative of entrapment, enlightenment and rescue. We no longer live in the ancient world, however, and the gnostic universe cannot seem real to us, so modern gnosticism must take a new form. But there is a transitional stage that came first in popular culture, and that is existentialism.

The two things are very similar. Han Jonas in his major study of gnosticism tells us:

When, many years ago, I turned to the study of Gnosticism, I found that the viewpoints, the optics as it were, which I had acquired in the school of Heidegger, enabled me to see aspects of gnostic thought that had been missed before. And I was increasingly struck by the familiarity of the seemingly utterly strange.¹

With the rise of the modern point of view, something of the ancient sense of abandonment in the world had come back. Like the gnostic living in the Roman Empire, modern

1. Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, Second edition, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963) p. 320.

man feels that the world around him is not friendly to him. Not asking to be born, he has been thrust into an existence in a mechanical universe that has no values, interests or goals. It is indifferent to what man may want, nor does it confer any meaning to man's choices or achievements. Impersonal physics only guarantees that such achievements will be obliterated, whether in the short or long term. Thus an existentialist such as Sartre would describe man as a "useless passion", for man does have all the longings for purpose, affirmation and cosmic value that the Christian era promised; it is just that there can be no external basis for them.

For the existentialist all man has is his freedom to do with as he likes during his short existence. But to invent some transcendent god who affirms man is for the existentialist "bad faith" and, inconsistently, the one great sin that can be committed. (Why shouldn't people deceive themselves, after all, if it makes them feel better? Why can't they use their freedom that way as much as any other?)

In existentialism, however, there is also a big difference from gnosticism.

There is no overlooking one cardinal difference between the gnostic and the existential dualism: Gnostic man is thrown into an antagonistic, anti-divine, and therefore anti-human nature, modern man into an indifferent one. Only the latter case represents the absolute vacuum, the really bottomless pit. In the gnostic conception the hostile, the demonic, is still anthropomorphic, familiar even in its foreignness, and the content itself gives direction to existence... Not even this antagonistic quality is granted to the indifferent nature of modern science, and

from that nature no direction at all can be elicited.¹

The gnostic despaired of this world that imprisoned and hated him, but he thought that there was an escape. He thought that he himself was a bit of divine being, and that the world hated him just because it recognized him as greater than it. He could despise the physical world and plan to escape from it to return to his own proper home. For the existentialist the experience of being in the world feels like the gnostic's experience of being abandoned, ground down, frustrated and trapped. But there is no divine source that he fell from and can go back to, and there are no imprisoning demonic powers to fight, only the indifferent universe and man in it with his absurd passions.

This makes modern nihilism infinitely more radical and more desperate than gnostic nihilism ever could be for all its panic terror of the world and its defiant contempt of its laws. That nature does not care, one way or the other, is the true abyss. That only man cares, in his finitude facing nothing but death, alone with his contingency and the objective meaninglessness of his projecting meanings, is a truly unprecedented situation.²

Not that existentialists were consistent; that they were often Nazis or communists shows their inability to avoid what they called "bad faith". Why?

Gnostic dualism, fantastic as it was, was at least self-consistent. The idea of a demonic nature against which the self is pitted, makes sense. But what about an

1. Jonas, pp. 338-339.

2. Jonas, p. 339.

indifferent nature which nevertheless contains in its midst that to which its own being does make a difference? ¹

Few can completely resign themselves to this. The others require a program that promises a greater fulfilment. Some impulses along these lines have been evident for more than 200 years. Marxism, for example, proposed to take hold of the world and remake it as a utopia fit for man. In doing to it showed both the destructive hatred of the world that inspires the gnostic combined with a similar desire to reach the static utopian rest. But as a modern movement, it had to achieve both the destruction and the recreation in the same physical world, which is the only reality, resulting in a continuous process of simultaneous building and destruction of the same thing, which went nowhere.

We can now understand modern gnosticism. It is like existentialism, but with an even more heightened religious awareness and sense man's frustration over the lack of the place in the cosmos he would like to occupy. But the modern gnostic will not accept the existentialist's resignation to a forlorn freedom. Instead he wants to reform the universe into something worthy of himself. Because of the inconsistencies of the existentialists there is not in practice a firm boundary between existentialism and modern gnosticism.

National Socialism was another attempt at a modern gnostic program. Since those days the gnostic impulse has often been expressed in science fiction and in critical theory. It is in literature and now in film that we can examine experiments in these perspectives, without going through the millions of fatalities that the political gnostic programs incur.

1. Jonas, p. 339.

Gnosticism, ancient and modern, has a social context. It is a religion for the middle class, urban people with enough leisure for a hobby religion, but attracting few true intellectuals. It appeals to people who are in a large alienating society, which they feel is run by others in the interests of others, and in which they do not feel themselves to be genuine participants. In the ancient world this mood came about when the polis, the city state in which the citizens exercised power face to face with peers with known interests, was replaced by empire. In the modern world the context is the society run by bureaucrats and professional politicians who spout ideology and catch phrases and never campaign for office in terms of their true intentions. (One could say analogous things of the big institutions of religion, commerce and even education.)

Gnosticism also has a style. There is an interest in the esoteric, and a tendency to embellishment and overcomplication, along with an inventiveness that constantly produces new versions and rival sects. We have seen some of that in *The Matrix* where many hints, symbols with multiple references, and images are used that only would be noticed by someone going over the film looking for them. They don't, in other words, function in a normal cinematic viewing of the film, but are there for a type of film hobbyist who searches them out. This is part of the gnostic aesthetic. (Arthur C. Clarke remarked: "If you understand 2001 on the first viewing, we will have failed.")

The burst of gnostic cinema in recent years shows that we are at a moment when such parables speak to the popular mind (just as in the preceding two decades the wholesale takeover of many university literature departments by Nazi literary theorists, i.e. deconstructionists, shows the appeal of modern gnosticism to the academic mind).

Because *Dark City* is a much better movie at the visionary level than *The Matrix* (even if *The Matrix* excels as an adventure thriller) it will be our example of how the modern gnostic myth works. When John Murdock awakens in a bath in a hotel room with his memory erased he does not know who he is or why he is there. In fact he is part of a new phase in the experiment by the aliens to learn the relationship between memory and individuality. They were to have given him the memories of a serial killer (via an injection) and want to know whether he will consequently behave as a serial killer. But somehow John Murdock has become resistant, and wakes up while the memory imprint is incomplete.

This reflects a key gnostic question. If the real self is divine, and from beyond this world, then the identity of that self cannot consist of events or facts of existence in this world or memories of them. The aliens, who are dying out from some collective *ennui*, are searching for what Dr. Scheber, the aliens' human assistant, calls "the soul" which is individual identity. The aliens, who have a collective memory, think the key is in memory or the use of memory.



The Dark City

But all these memories were extracted and collected by the aliens when the first human subjects were brought into the experiment,

and have been swapped around, inserted and deleted ever since. The memories do not, in the *Dark City*, belong to any character in particular. In fact, they give a deceptive identity to whoever has them, and are part of the imprisonment in the experiment.

A police detective has been hunting Murdock, but when Murdock, free from many of the false memories and with help from Dr. Scheber, begins to realize his true situation as part of an experiment, he persuades the detective to join him in his search for the truth.

John Murdock's search is also a process of learning what sort of truth to search for. He has to learn to give up the search for the missing memories, as they were never his, and do not tell who he is. First, he proves to himself that he is not a serial killer: "I have lost my mind, but whoever I am, I'm still me, and I'm not a killer."

But is that because the memories of a serial killer were never implanted in him? The aliens, in order to hunt for Murdock in the city, implant one of their members with the memories that were to have been given to Murdock. This alien does become the serial killer that Murdock was projected to be. The identity of the aliens, then, does consist in their memories. They have no soul. In gnostic terms, the demonic powers who control this world are of it and they do not have that portion of divinity which man, with his origin beyond this world, does possess.

At one point John and the police detective interrogate Dr. Scheber.

"You say they brought us here. From where?"

Dr. Schreber: "I'm sorry. I don't remember. None of us remember that. What we

once were. What we might have been. Somewhere else.”

...

“There is nothing else, John. There is nothing beyond this city. The only place home exists is in your head.”

Here we have the two parts of gnosticism. In the first statement the fact that man was taken from his true home and imprisoned in an alien world by hostile powers mirrors what the ancient gnostics believed about man’s forgotten divine origin. For the ancient gnostic this is real, and salvation is a return to this origin. For the modern gnostic, this is not real, in that there is no god or world beyond this one, but human experience nevertheless feels as though this were true.

The second statement is what the modern existentialist and gnostic believes in contrast to the ancient gnostic who believed in escape. But the modern gnostic instead believes in taking hold of the situation and creating a world worthy of man.

In the film the aliens control everything by a telepathic link to huge machines that create the physical reality of the Dark City. This process they call “tuning”. “Somehow” John Murdock also has developed the ability to tune. He takes control of the machines from the aliens.

Dr. Schreber wonders what he will do with this power.

Dr. Schreber: “What are you going to do now, John?”

“I’m going to fix things. You told me I had the power, didn’t you? I can make these machines do anything I want. Make this world anything I want it to be. Just so long as I concentrate hard enough.”

Murdock sets about remoulding the city in a way that serves human purposes. It is no longer a dark city but a city of light.

Murdock also has a final encounter with one of the aliens who also wants to know what he will do with his power. Murdock tells the aliens why he thinks they failed.

“Do you want to know what it is about us that makes us human? Well, you are not going to find it in here [points to forehead]. You went looking in the wrong place.”

There is, then, a secret to humanity: the soul. But it is not found in the memories—the facts of personal history. What is the secret?

Since the film is a gnostic parable we can revisit within the film the four implausibilities we noticed in gnosticism.

How can being that originated from the good, as some extension or generation from that good being, become evil? In the movie this is not a problem, if one is prepared to accept the existence of aliens. They appear in the universe with their own purposes and there is no intelligent source beyond them. As with modern gnosticism, there is no divine origin or primordial innocence that we or they fell from. What is a problem is the sense we have that things are not right with the world. Why do we feel like prisoners? The film does not have to explain this, it need only show the characters discovering these feelings. But how does modern gnosticism identify what is this good that man needs since it has no previous existence or defining norm? Why is it salvation that we need, and not drugs or therapy? What form of life should the salvation take? Is it to live a varied but brief life in which each gives according to his ability and receives according to his need? Is

it to take a place as part of a master race? Perhaps nothing less than immortality will do, but then, With what should that immortal life occupy itself? The film does have to face the question, What sort of world should John Murdock create for a people who don't know their past or place of origin, and will have to find some sort of purpose for themselves?

At one point in the film, one of the aliens finds John's wife Emma and tells her:

- We will give you some more pretty things soon, Anna.
- I'm not Anna.
- You will be soon. Yes.

How is what Murdock is able to do through his control of the machines essentially different from giving the people of Dark City some more pretty things? The film merely ends with the suggestion that Murdock is not inclined to impose his will on the others.

The second gnostic problem is how, after a distinction of good and evil came into existence, some part of the good entered and became trapped in the evil, that is, how evil became a problem for the good that is primordial and greater than evil. It not a cinematic problem. In the movie we sympathize with the humans, not the aliens, because we are human, and the film is constructed to promote that identification. In this way the the film borrows from ancient gnosticism whose "demonic, is still anthropomorphic, familiar even in its foreignness", as Hans Jonas indicated. Its narrative, however, fits modern gnosticism where there are not separate moments of the origin of evil and a subsequent mixing of good and evil. For modern gnosticism, problem two folds into problem one. With no original separation of being into good and evil they were not subsequently remixed. It is a problem of distinction. As

there is no dualistic past, with distinct origins, how are alternatives today to be separated into good or evil except arbitrarily, particularly as not everyone wants the same thing? There is only the world as it is onto which we project our desires.

The third problem, of how man suddenly awakens and finds the power to save himself, is the great dramatic flaw in *Dark City*. Somehow John Murdock is able to wake up and interrupt the implantation of memories. Somehow he also has the ability to tune. This is also a real problem for modern gnosticism. Reality is deceptive, and deep interpretation is needed to get at the truth. If we are caught in economic determination, all thought and action is conditioned by our relation to the means of production but somehow one man, Karl Marx, broke free of that conditioning and was able to see objectively. If we are caught in psychological determinism, we are conditioned by suppressed desires but somehow one man, Sigmund Freud, broke free of the conditioning and could find the objective truth about the mind. Or perhaps we are conditioned reflexes responding to pain and reward, except for B.F. Skinner, who somehow knows objectively. What is more, the saviour, like John Murdock, must go much further than finding true knowledge. It is not enough to resist the conditioning, he must tune. He must bring in the new world worthy of man. But how, outside a movie, is that done? What is worthy of man anyway?

Finally, there is the problem of the identity of the part to be saved, and of how what is saved is really that I that is trapped in the evil situation. Here the film, being only a film, can play around with interesting ideas. It can suggest that individual identity lies in something other than memories. John is still himself even if he loses his mind, and he still loves Emma even if she has become Anna and

thinks she is meeting him for the first time. It does not have to resolve what “the soul” really is.

For modern gnosticism as a world view with a program of action the problem is acute. Should, as Marxism suggests, the individual be sacrificed for the sake of the future of the species? Is man as such worthwhile, or only superior specimens, or is it certain excellencies, stored up and passed on, such as cultural achievement and not the individuals who made them that must be treasured? Whose cultural achievements? Hey, hey, ho, ho, does western culture got to go, as Jesse Jackson demanded in his campaign against the universities? Or will mankind not be saved until every individual is Superman? If we are to believe the movies, even Superman struggles with problems of identity and purpose as we do. For the past century many have supposed themselves to have answers and have imposed their answers in a very bloody fashion.

Two classic films: *2001: A space odyssey* and *Solyaris*

Of all the great “message” films, Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A space odyssey* had the greatest immediate impact, and already in production forty years ago (released in 1968) it continues to be discussed and admired. Often mentioned for its breakthroughs in production technique and visual brilliance, the film probably deserves even greater credit for other achievements.

As the film opens we are immediately aware that this film is a break with our viewing experience. Kubrick had a story to tell that spanned four million years and hundreds of millions of miles of space. To convey this he imposed on the cinematic expectations of his audience. The screen is kept black for an uncomfortably long time before the MGM logo

briefly appears. There is another long wait for the titles to start. There is no dialogue for the first half hour. When we do get dialogue it is of a dull, banal, bureaucratic type that offended the early critics of the film.

The visuals carry the message and the dialogue is secondary. (Before becoming a film director Kubrick was a still photographer for *Look*, where the picture had to tell the story.) The role of the dialogue is analogous to the place of establishing shots of a typical film; the dialogue sets up and gives context to the visuals. That is not to say that sound is not important. The music, which everyone remembers from the film, clearly matters. But so do the effects that might seem incidental such as breathing sounds.

The very slow pace of the whole movie does three things. It conveys the sense of vast time and vast space in which the events of the film play out. It also intensifies the effect of the high visual and low dialogue presentation, as the audience is forced to pay attention to the pictorial and sound elements that are held for a long time with no verbal upstaging. Finally there is a sort of unease experienced by the viewer whose every expectation of the proper pace of a film is violated and who, trained to equate delay with suspense, consequently strains his attention for some clue about the big thing that he feels must soon happen. Just as the viewer in the theatre is disturbed by how the movie progresses in a way that he does not understand but feels wrong to him, so humanity in the movie is being manipulated by an intelligence beyond it. It takes a daring director to try to do this. Without the unprecedented eye candy that Kubrick’s new production effects offered he could not have succeeded.

Music and drama move at different paces. This is the great weakness of opera where the

two tempos constantly subvert each other. Film solves this primarily by subordinating music to drama: music becomes background, or “effects”. There are moments in film where the pace of music can be accommodated by the ability to use the camera to record interesting visual progressions at the pace of music in a way that does not make the audience feel that one art is being sacrificed to the other. There can be “ballet” episodes as well, in which the subjects (actors, vehicles, etc.) or else of the camera itself can move at a musical pace through a movie set that is potentially as large as the world and not limited by a proscenium arch. This linking of image and music occurs extensively and to great effect in *2001*. We should not see this, however, as a marriage of music and picture because other sections of film unite the slow image to silence or to what one might regard as incidental sound effects in other films (such as breathing in a space suit).

Andrei Tarkovsky’s *Solyaris* also moves at a slow pace, though not nearly so much as *2001*. For one thing it does not have the spectacular visuals to hold the audience, for another its different story does not need it. Even so, its beginning is slow enough to make the audience wonder, especially as it seems completely unlike what one would expect as the content of a science fiction movie.

There are some clear and systematic contrasts between the two films, especially at the beginning. Andrei Tarkovsky saw *2001* at the British embassy, and is said to have found it to be a sterile utopian vision and remarked that he wanted to make his movie as different from it as he could. This, however, is not the explanation for most of the differences between the films. They arise from a fundamentally different conception that Tarkovsky wanted to embody in his film, an approach that had already caused him to depart exten-

sively from the novel by Stanislaw Lem that his script was based on.

His remarks do raise the question of whether he understood the substance of Kubrick’s film as a gnostic call for man to remake himself free from nature in order to achieve his destiny. (I am not claiming that Kubrick’s films as a whole should be considered gnostic tracts. But on this topic of ultimate human origins and destiny it is hard to see how he could make a modern film and have it be anything other than gnostic if he wanted to avoid a corny science fiction vision of progress, or not create a western in space, as most directors end up doing.) This could be termed “sterile utopianism”, but so could the wildly rapid and immaculate technological progress projected by *2001*.

Tarkovsky broke with Lem’s novel by placing much of the action on earth. The entire novel takes place at the distant planet Solaris where there is a space station whereas Tarkovsky’s script initially placed two-thirds of the film on earth, although he was forced to recede from the plan somewhat. Nevertheless *Solyaris* opens with an extended sequence of scenes in which Kris Kelvin, the major character, wanders through lush landscapes and around the shores of a pond located in the neighbourhood of the old-fashioned rural house where his father lives.

Tarkovsky, a great Bible reader, opens with his man in the garden. But it is no Eden where man is in harmony with his world. Kelvin seems distant and disengaged. (The actor, Donatas Banionis, came from the stage and required a plot so that he could understand his motivation and “act”. He was very uncomfortable when Tarkovsky would only tell him to walk around and look at things, but this produced the effect Tarkovsky was after.) He is alienated from his world, and as we will see



Tarkovsky: Kris Kelvin as man in nature

from other people and from himself. He is carrying a metal box, which we later learn has filmed records of his past, especially his childhood. These represent the parts of his life that he cannot come to terms with—relationships with people who are lost to him—which is symbolized by their being sealed in the metal box. The problem in the garden, then, is a problem with man himself.



Man in the Garden, complete with mist rising from the ground.



Man's problem is first of all alienation from himself, even in the garden environment. The left and right sides of Kelvin's (Donatas Barnionis) face have different expressions.

Kubrick's 2001 opens millions of years in the past, in a desert, where a group of apes, no longer in a jungle home, is subsisting off the scant vegetation for which they compete with vegetarian species such as tapers, and from insects. These are not today's ape species but



Kubrick's genesis: a beast among the beasts, the ape struggles against a harsh nature to survive.

something like the Australopithecus which anthropologists locate in Africa. This, then, is the ape ancestor of man in the harsh environment in which he learned to hunt and walk upright. Nature is not generous to these apes. Their life is hard and precarious; nor is their status among the species high. Nature's fa-



Nature's elect: the mindless predator

vourite is the carnivore, the beautiful, lithe leopard, who preys equally on the apes as on

vegetarians like zebras. Kubrick shows the leopard attacking and killing an ape who is helpless to defend himself, as well as guarding prey and surveying the landscape with mysterious starlight eyes.

At this point something alien enters the solar system and deposits next to the apes a smooth black monolith that begins to influence their development. This is a clear gnostic element. Something from beyond nature falls into the order of nature and begins to act contrary to nature's order and purpose. The effect on the apes is that they discover the uses of tools as weapons, and this raises them to the level of predator, a power that challenges nature's order.

Tarkovsky's animals are all domestic. In the garden setting Kelvin is greeted by the family dog with which he shows a rapport. In the house there are caged birds. Enjoying the freedom of the grounds is a beautiful horse. The horse in particular is used to foreshadow the structure of the film. We meet the horse

in two contexts. One is the natural setting walking through meadows where he evokes our appreciation for his beauty. But the astronaut Berton comes to visit and brings along his son. We see the boy running in fear from the garage where he thinks he saw a monster.



The horse in nature and as two-headed monster

As the camera enters the garage the horse and his shadow (shot from a low angle) loom like something out of a nightmare. We are presented with the horse in nature as a beautiful thing but the horse located outside of his natural context becomes a menacing figure. This is what Tarkovsky is going to do with his

characters and is the reason why he must begin with a long prologue on earth before showing the special challenges that appear at Solaris.

The theme of man and his tools is central to 2001. (There is a website <http://www.kubrick2001.com/> with a Flash presentation that explains this very well.) Man's mastery of tools allows him to control nature to his advantage. But just at the point when man begins to venture out into the solar system his mastery begins to break down. This is shown in the movie two ways. One is that man in space becomes infant-like, losing control over his tools, having to learn to walk again, eating baby food and even needing potty training. (The web site shows the scenes that make this point.) But also man's major tools become anthropomorphic. Because of his own unsuitability for space he must give to the tools he makes from the materials of nature his own characteristics of mobility, direction, and even intelligence that are necessary for the machines to fill in for him.

The ultimate case of man replacing himself with his own tools in order to function in space is HAL the intelligent computer, which usurps the place of man, taking over control of the mission to Jupiter, and tries to kill off the men, who are no use to HAL and can only be rivals and threats. The sequel to 2001, made without Kubrick, suggests that this was caused by human error—and moral failure—introducing a contradiction into the programming of the innocent computer HAL, but in 2001 itself there is no external cause excusing HAL. As part of nature HAL malfunctions and this malfunction makes him a threat to man.

At this point it becomes clear that man's conflict with nature still exists, only now man must fight nature as it is manifested in the

tools man makes from nature. But the tools are necessary. Without them the natural side of man, his body, cannot work or even exist outside the context of the natural world where nature made man's ape ancestor.

Man's predicament, then, is the gnostic one. He is part of nature and trapped in nature. Yet he is also something from Beyond, for it was the alien monolith that gave him that desire and perhaps the ability to transcend nature, become the dominant actor in the world and even displace nature's chosen favourite the predator beast. But this aspiration in man leads him on to escape this world and explore the cosmos. In doing so he directly confronts the fact that nature is a prison that he carries with him.

But just at this point man encounters the second monolith. This one is discovered on the moon but it also discovers him. It detects that he is now on his way to achieve his destiny and sends a signal to another sentinel/relay monolith out by Jupiter. This shows that the alien intelligence has anticipated man's predicament. The signal to Jupiter is, in part, a stimulus to man to pursue his quest and to do so away from the location of his place in the natural order. Just as in the gnostic cosmology one must escape through a sequence of spheres leaving behind the various aspects of the material at each level and overcoming each sphere's demon guardian, so man quests to the space station, then the moon, then beyond to Jupiter. Along the way he must battle the sentinel monsters (HAL) of nature that keep him in prison.

For the gnostic mythology to be complete man needs a saviour from beyond. The role of the saviour is to enlighten him to the fact that his body is a trap, that his true origin is from beyond this world and that salvation is to return to the beyond. Further, the role of the

saviour is to show the way. This is what takes place in the final "psychedelic" section of 2001.

Solyaris is not preoccupied by tools but with cultural artifacts. Painting, sculpture, and books are stacked all around. This is true of the house on earth where we find Kris Kelvin prior to his departure for Solaris, but when he reaches the space station at Solaris there is a library stuffed with similar objects and the occupants of the station immediately clutter up their sterile geometric rooms with similar items. Kelvin carries his metal box of films with him as much as he can. These objects, though, are simply there; no one seems to connect to them.



Alienation on earth. Notice the art, some of which reappears in the library on the space station, the domesticated birds, and the metal box on the window sill.

The problem at Solaris is that, while there do not seem to be life forms as such on the planet, the planet itself, or its ocean, seems to be conscious. The planet does not respond to the human presence with more than some mimetic imagery drawn from a pilot who crashes in the ocean, and despite a prolonged study by scientists in an orbiting space station no progress is being made to open up further understanding. The form of intelligence that the planet or ocean has remains mysterious, and for its part the planet has no analogy to

human life as that of individuals beings in a world environment.

Kris Kelvin, a psychologist, is sent to Solaris to make a final decision on whether the scientific mission can serve any further purpose or whether it should be terminated. On his arrival he finds three startling facts. The station is in a very Soviet state of dilapidation and dysfunction, and no one seems concerned with normal maintenance and duties. (We have to at least wonder whether the unnatural, alienating world of life on a space station is a metaphor for socialism.) Secondly, one of the three resident scientists has committed suicide, leaving a somewhat enigmatic video as his final testament to Kelvin. Finally, someone else besides the scientists is on the station but one scientist refuses to explain anything about this to Kelvin and the other locks himself in his lab and won't even see him.



Solaris station falling apart.

It turns out that one of the scientists, grown frustrated with the lack of progress in “Solaristics”, illegally began to bombard the planet’s conscious ocean with X-rays. At this point the planet caused humanoids, physically strong and nearly indestructible, to appear on the station. The humanoids were drawn from the memories or imaginations of the scientists. Attempts to kill them only succeeded temporarily as the damage was repaired and the humanoids returned. Each humanoid is particularly attached to one of the scientists

from whose mind its identity was drawn. They are imperfectly designed, as Solaris does not know the features that happen not to be in the scientist’s consciousness. The humanoids seem to function as observers on behalf of the planet (without being conscious of this) and the planet seems to learn from them in order to make better models. Finally, these humanoids’ own self-identity is drawn from the scientists’ ideas of the people the humanoids represent and their behaviour is often troublesome and even hostile to the respective scientists.

Except for the scientist who committed suicide, who says enigmatically that the problem is not one of madness but of conscience, the two remaining scientists view these humanoids as simply physical phenomena to be experimented on via dissection or any other available laboratory analysis.

On his first night on the station Kelvin gets his own humanoid, who resembles his wife who died a suicide, and Kelvin, having been kept in the dark about what to expect, tries to get rid of her by loading her into a shuttle rocket. The next night a replacement shows up with some improvements based on what the first one had learned. Kelvin decides to call the humanoids “visitors” and treat them as such.

Kelvin uses the films that he brought in his metal box to help his visitor understand more of the person that she thinks she is. She begins to become more human. This is also the first case where the cultural artifacts are actually used for something rather than being carried about or lined up on shelves. The scientists hold a birthday party in the library, which has an orderly arrangement of art, and Kelvin’s “wife” is drawn to this and seems to make the transition to humanity.

In contrast to the library, the living quarters are full of drawings, photographs and the like, but stuck up all over in a disorganized mess. We never get to see whether it is the scientists or the visitors who are responsible for this. Perhaps like the replicants in Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* the visitors have a need to surround themselves with objects that give a tangible support to their implanted identities, or it may be a need, felt by all on the station, to create a sort of world to live in, an intentional contrast by Tarkovsky to the "sterile utopianism" he saw in 2001.

The station scientists have some schemes to finally solve their problems as they see them. One is to encode the brain waves of one of them (they pick Kelvin for this) in X-rays and broadcast a full brain scan to the planet to see whether they can at last get communication through to it. The other is a disintegration machine that can totally vaporize the visitors.

Following the transmission of his brain scan Kelvin goes into a fever and delirium (it is not clear whether or not this is an anticipated side effect of the brain scan). The station scientists take advantage of this state to talk his visitor, who is despondent, into submitting to their vaporization device. Like the horse in the garage man in space is a monster. When Kelvin recovers she is gone and the scientists are pleased with themselves. The visitors never return. The ocean, though, has become very active in response to the X-ray broadcast of the brain scan. It extrudes an island on which can be seen a copy of the country house and grounds where the film started. Kelvin again visits the grounds, which have an eerie stillness (the lucky result of a drop in temperature that froze the pond's surface on the last day of location filming), and he also finds his father in the house and is able to experience a reconciliation that he could never reach with him on earth

But how did Kelvin get down to the planet?



The earth-like island in the Solaris ocean.

We have no hint that the planet engages in transporting people. We are not sure, in fact, how literally to take this last sequence. The imagery of the reconciliation on the island is from Rembrandt's *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, which is in The Hermitage in St. Petersburg. This surely is a deliberate response to 2001 which ends with the astronaut Dave reaching out toward the monolith with the gesture of Adam toward God on the Sistine Chapel ceiling. (Both conclusions take place in the same ambiguous "Is this really happening, and where?" context.) The point remains, however. The planet now "gets it". Human beings are part of an environment. They live in a world, and outside of the environment they are made for they are not going to resolve their problems.

2001 ends on just the opposite idea. The Star Child is reborn in the void of space. He is the consciousness of man freed of the limitations of his body imposed by his terrestrial origin. He has escaped from nature which is the only way to defeat nature. 2001, then, is a completely gnostic film. Man arose because of the intervention of the alien intelligence in nature. This is analogous to the divine spark of ancient gnosticism which is trapped in man and is the only thing of real value in him. In the end this spark must be freed from matter,

for this is what salvation is. The triumph of the superman, announced by the repeated theme of Richard Strauss's *Also sprach Zarathustra*, is not only moral but material. His freedom is achieved when a saviour from beyond this natural order enters into it to show man the truth and the way out. This is the function of the sentinel monoliths on the moon and near Jupiter.

Of course this is "science fiction" so there never was an interference by aliens with ancient apes nor are there monoliths awaiting us today. Modern gnosticism can only use fleeting film mythologies to awaken man to his need and call for him to invent a salvation for himself. But what this way forward is no one has yet imagined. *Solyaris* reminds us that this call is a siren's song. Man is part of nature and the attempt to go out of nature only compounds his alienation and makes it impossible for him to engage his solvable problems.

Tarkovsky's *Solyaris*, then, is not simply a non-gnostic film but functions as a critique of gnosticism. The pursuit of gnostic salvation schemes, that is, the hope of solving man's problems by arranging his escape from the nature, the environment or the social order that gnosticism blames for his problems, only makes things worse. Gnostic salvation really makes monsters. Man becomes worse and in new ways while cutting himself off from any genuine salvation.

But neither is *Solyaris* a tract for some type of environmentalism. If leaving nature does not solve man's problems, but makes them unsolvable, putting man in nature does not resolve them either. Man in the garden was already alienated. He acquired his problems there as we see in the long first part of the film. If *Solyaris* does not tell us what man's salvation is it rules out both the gnostic answer and the romantic back to nature thinking so

prevalent at the time these films were produced.

Comparing *The Matrix* and *Dark City* with *2001* we find in the newer films an emphasis on rebellion coming to the foreground in distinction from the almost passive role given to man in *2001*. These are not culturally new elements, however; we have endured two hundred years of revolutionary movements and the 1960s when *2001* was made was a high point of revolutionary enthusiasm.

There is another option for a gnostic movie that is not represented in these films. That is to take the emphasis off creating a new world, as Murdock does in *Dark City*, and focus on the destruction of the imprisoning order, from which act some new better order arises like a phoenix. This idea of creative destruction is not new for it was present in the 19th century Russian nihilists, for example, who held that one should seek to destroy everything because if something is truly good it would survive the cataclysm. Some of this feeling seems to be alive among the mobs of anarchists who riot at all the meetings of the World Trade Organization. In this gnostic option the problem of working though to a new order worthy of man is evaded simply by assuming that it will arise spontaneously from the good that remains after the evil has been destroyed. Films of this time are not common (but perhaps *V for Vendetta* should be seen as one).

There seem to be two reasons. One is that the theme of destruction has already been appropriated by the nuclear apocalypse and similar anti-utopian movies, in which it is associated not with gnostic liberation but with what are often called Mad Max societies after the Australian movies of that name. Thus the genre has already been claimed by an ideology. Films of this type were used to scare people about nuclear war in order to promote disar-

mament and capitulation to Soviet nuclear blackmail. They have also been put into the service of environmentalism.

The other reason for the absence of creative destruction gnostic films is the problem of showing what comes after. Any society born from the ashes of the old would seem headed for a recapitulation of what came before. No one knows how to envision the alternative. Practically speaking the filmmaker either would have to end with his characters walking off into a new dawn, with their future course not defined, or resort to some back to nature romanticism which some part of the audience will accept. This brings us back to our point: representations of gnostic salvation never transcend the level of mythology.

Does this sterility of modern gnosticism suggest anything about future cultural directions? One possibility is for there to be an attempt to recapture an ancient gnostic vision where the mythology was believed, that is, it was taken as a genuine meta-narrative, the basic truth about reality. Against this we must admit the difficulty of bringing back a belief that is really and truly dead. A culture infused with gnosticism may be constrained to merely recycle the gnostic salvation scheme under new guises that temporarily obfuscate its futile unreal character. What really feeds gnosticism, though, is not the coherence of its analysis but its confirmation of the feeling that something is desperately wrong with the world.

The doctrine that the world is seriously deranged is a teaching of Christianity as well. It is the starting point of evangelism. But Christianity's explanation of the problem is not that of gnosticism. For Christianity it is not the case that innocent man, or at least his innocent inner self, has been imprisoned by alien hostile forces but rather that man's

condition is the moral fault of man himself and that this corruption and culpability continue to adhere to man's nature and cannot be cast off as a mere adhesions from the material order. This explanation is offensive to man. Nor does man approve of Christianity's doctrine of salvation, which teaches that information or an example to follow is no good in itself because man cannot contribute to his own salvation but must accept it from outside himself. He prefers the dead end delusions of gnosticism.