

## **The Clouds Astonished**

*Gnostic Themes in Popular Cinema*

By FP.

When asked why the hero of the “Truman Show,” doesn’t realise that he is the only real person in a fictional town populated with actors, the director of the show responds, “We accept the reality that is presented to us.” This is a common theme of the heretical belief systems grouped together as Gnosticism, which flourished shortly before the advent of Christianity. Gnostics also believed on the whole that we live in a created fiction, from which only knowledge can set us free. In the “Matrix,” a character is asked;

“Have you ever had a dream, Neo, that you were so sure was real? What if you were unable to wake from that dream, Neo? How would you know the difference between the dream world and the real world?”

The writer Philip K Dick, who was greatly influenced by his studies of Gnosticism and his own mystical experiences, described in his story “The Adjustment Team<sup>i</sup>,” the work of a group of beings who, when humans sleep, rearrange the reality around them. Although there is a thin line between paranoia and enquiry, these visions point to a deeper structure than that which is apparent, and that vision has more recently been transferred to cinema. This Gnostic examination of our experience has certainly proved a fertile ground for cinema, which in itself is a construction of alternative realities – a fact not lost of some on the more self-referential or ironic pieces of work recently.

That many modern films deal with a post-apocalyptic world is certainly rooted in Christian and Gnostic teachings. Whether the world ends by flood, famine, meteor strike, plague or nuclear war, we can see the disaster movie writ large in early Gnostic descriptions;

“And this shall come at the day of judgement upon them that have fallen away from faith in God and that have committed sin: Floods (cataracts) of fire shall be let loose; and darkness and obscurity shall come up and clothe and veil the whole world and the waters shall be changed and turned into coals of fire and all that is in them shall burn, and the sea shall become fire. Under the heaven shall be a sharp fire that cannot be quenched and floweth to fulfil the judgement of wrath. And the stars shall fly in pieces by flames of fire, as if they had not been created and the powers (firmaments) of the heaven shall pass away for lack of water and shall be as though they had not been. And the lightnings of heaven shall be no more, and by their enchantment they shall affright the world (probably: The heaven shall turn to lightning and the lightnings thereof shall affright the world. The spirits also of the dead bodies shall be like unto them (the lightnings?) and shall become fire at the commandment of God.

And so soon as the whole creation dissolveth, the men that are in the east shall flee unto the west, unto the east; they that are in the south shall flee to the north, and they that are in the south. And in all places shall the wrath of a fearful fire overtake them and an unquenchable flame driving them shall bring them unto the judgement of wrath, unto the stream of unquenchable fire that floweth, flaming with fire, and when the waves thereof part themselves one from another, burning, there shall be a great gnashing of teeth among the children of men<sup>ii</sup>.”

One overtly Gnostic film is “Dark City,” a brooding and stylised story dealing with a hero who slowly discovers his world is the construction of alien beings who, again, as humans sleep, rebuild the world to suit their own experiment. This even includes manufacturing personalities and histories for the humans caught in this trap. The scene where everyone other than the hero suddenly falls asleep, and he races down a dark street surrounded by sleeping bodies, screaming “Wake up! Wake up!” is a situation familiar to all those who have engaged in the work of enquiry. Gnostics believed that our human state was sleeping, and that direct experience and enquiry would awaken us to our true state and position.

The advent of Virtual Reality interfaces between our own perception and computer-generated worlds has given other means of expressing the Gnostic concern. The “Matrix” deals with humans caught in a reality constructed by computers, and their awakening and escape. In much the same way as there is one “hero with a thousand faces” engaged on a journey to slay the monster and return to his home triumphant throughout common myth, there is another archetypal mystical theme, that of sudden insight forcing discovery of truth and hence escape from illusion.

In the film, special effects give a comic-book feel to the action, freezing events or altering the speed of objects in the same scene, which also reinforces the notion of a plastic – constructed – reality which the characters learn to manipulate, achieving what to others seem like super-human or magical powers. Compare the scenes in the movie to a typical description of Gnostic illumination :

“At the hour of the Nativity, as Joseph looked up into the air, 'I saw', he says, 'the clouds astonished, and the fowls of the air stopping in the midst of their flight....And I beheld the sheep dispersed...and yet the sheep stood still; and I looked into a river, and saw the kids with their mouths close to the water, and touching it, but they did not drink<sup>iii</sup>.”



The matrix in which our virtual reality is constructed can also be seen as the human brain, which has recently been discovered to construct a plastic representation of reality even if not receiving feedback from its environment. An example of which is that of phantom limbs which are felt even though the physical limb is no longer present. That the environment is a mental construction was realised by Gnostics and shamans who altered their perceptions and mental maps by the use of mystical techniques, such as meditation, prayer, and physical inducements such as fasting and dance.

In the “Truman Show,” these issues are brought together as well as reflecting on consumerism, soap drama, and media manipulation. The first hint the hero gets that something is amiss is when a lighting device falls from the sky and lands next to him. That it is a light is obviously significant, and follows the doctrine of illuminism, which describes insight, accompanied by the experience of bright light or whiteness. Later, Truman proves his condition to his actress-wife by predicting the order in which pedestrians and vehicles pass his house, which is in a loop. Again, this reminds us of Gurdjieff, who encouraged self-observation to become aware of habitual patterns playing out around us in a “world of robots,” and the stress of this constant recognition would provide a shock to awaken us to our sleeping condition. The last scene of the Truman Show involves a staircase, which as a symbol of ascension we will return to later.

The films already mentioned deal with fictional environments, which have given the characters dwelling within them a false notion of reality. Oftentimes, this is because the true state of the world is incomprehensible or frightening and has been hidden from the characters for that reason. The whole is also a parallel to our growth from childhood to maturity, where we come to understand the social environment and take our responsibilities within it. One Philip K Dick story, “Time Out of Joint<sup>iv</sup>,” has a character in a fictional world that habitually plays a crossword game. We learn as the story progresses that the real world is at war, and the character is the only person on one side who is capable of calculating targets for weapons to target. Because of the stress this responsibility would generate, he has been brainwashed and inserted into a fictional environment, which correlates to the real world in such a way as to get his targeting from his crossword game. Other Gnostic schools of thought certainly teach that reality is beyond fear, and that fear must be faced to gain truth. Equally, such initiatory systems often have a doctrine of correlation or “sympathy,” where events in one world map to another; “As above, so below,” and in the same way the crossword puzzle holds meaning in another world, so do our daily actions reflect and inform the real world.

Other films deal with the inner aspect of the personality being constructed or in some way fictional. In the Kabbalah, which integrated Gnostic teachings, such an idea is conveyed by the Klippoth, ‘husks,’ or ‘shells’ of thought which separate us from divine reality. “Total Recall” took one aspect of Philip K. Dick’s story “We can Remember It for you Wholesale<sup>v</sup>,” when it gave a fictional identity to its main character, whose real identity is uncovered towards the end of the work, but is then overcome by the “redeemed” fictional character. Changes made in personality are a little like replacing one part of an old car engine with a brand new component; quite often this has the effect of putting additional strain on the surrounding components, and then these start to malfunction. Films show this as characters having flashbacks and visions - those working on self-development will recognise it as the spiritual supermarket approach, when someone working on fixing one part of themselves either suffers breakdowns in other areas of their lives, or has to go onto yet another therapy or devotion to repair other issues brought out by the first fix. All work should be holistic and take into account the total matrix as an integrated system, where all is connected.

“The Game,” with Michael Douglas is probably one of the most interesting portrayals of the work of revelation and escape from material attachment. The character who undergoes the game in question is an archetypal businessman, ruthless and troubled, who is taken through a life-changing experience which attacks all of his attachments. After a death and rebirth sequence, he faces a root problem in his psyche and literally jumps into an abyss, which is a common theme in mystical texts. One particular aspect of self-development which is covered is that where the hero is given various keys or objects at different points in the game, whose use is not obvious until he is in precarious situations and has to use the object. In a similar way, life experiences equip us, books inform us, teachers teach us, but the lessons and resources we pick up may not be of use for many years later. Myths and Fairy Tales also teach the lesson of the unwanted gift or the undiscovered talent. It is true to say that nothing is wasted, and there is a lot of lead collected in our life, heavy, dull and grey, that we come later to turn into just one ounce of gold!

How reality can permeate a fiction is significantly portrayed in the recent “Pleasantville,” which uses a simply but brilliantly executed special effect to examine other issues such as racism and the McCarthy witchhunts. The characters that fall into the black and white soap-opera world of Pleasantville exist as colour, and as they influence others, colour seeps into the world. Again, a common Gnostic theme is that of the illumination of the world by colour;

“29. But do thou become for me a good painter, Lycomedes. Thou hast colours which he giveth thee through me, who painteth all of us for himself, even Jesus, who knoweth the shapes and appearances and postures and dispositions and types of our souls. And the colours wherewith I bid thee paint are these: faith in God, knowledge, godly fear, friendship, communion, meekness, kindness, brotherly love, purity, simplicity, tranquillity, fearlessness, grieflessness, sobriety, and the whole band of colours that painteth the likeness of thy soul<sup>vi</sup>.”

Another angle of Christian teaching, of angels, is dealt with in “City of Angels,” where Angels are depicted walking alongside a blind humanity – only the “dead and delirious,” can see them. They are touchingly portrayed, these angels, in one scene gently touching the heads of a shop keeper and an armed criminal, to get them through the situation they have engendered of their own will. The angels can merely act as messengers linking separate entities for a greater good.



Jacob’s Ladder, which I reviewed in a previous issue of Meridian, has the added Gnostic concept that our attachment to our perceptual world is the main thing holding us back from experiencing the real world. We must “die” in order to release the hold of a fictionally constructed world. Again, this is a fearful thing, as what we value we must learn to release to a truth we cannot at the point of release see; we must have faith, foolishness or have exhausted all other possibilities before we can take such leaps. The final scenes of Jacob’s Ladder, which involve a staircase remind us of the core teachings of Gnostic mysticism, that we may be redeemed and through the suffering of knowledge come to comprehend the truth, for “after all the shadows have departed, thou shalt see that holy fire, that fire that darts and flashes throughout the hidden depths of this universe, hear thou the voice of the fire!”

#### ASTONISHED CLOUDS FILM LIST

- City of Angels, 1998, dir. Brad Silberling, writer Wim Wenders.
- Dark City, 1998, dir. Alex Proyas, writer Alex Proyas.
- Fearless, 1993, dir. Peter Weir, writer Rafael Yglesias.
- Jacobs Ladder, 1990, dir. Adrian Lyne, writer Bruce Joel Rubin.
- Pleasantville, 1998, dir. Gary Ross, writer Gary Ross.
- The Game, 1997, dir. David Fincher, writer John D. Brancato, Michael Ferris (III).
- The Matrix, 1990, dir. Andy & Larry Wachowski.
- The Truman Show, 1998, dir. Peter Weir, writer Andrew Nicol.
- Total Recall, 1990, dir. Paul Verhoeven, writer Philip K. Dick (story) Ronald Shusett.

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- <sup>i</sup> 1953, but reproduced in many collections such as "The Turning Wheel," ISBN 0 340 21829 0
- <sup>ii</sup> Apocalypse of Peter, from "The Apocryphal New Testament" M.R. James-Translation and Notes  
Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924
- <sup>iii</sup> Protevangelion (ascribed to James)
- <sup>iv</sup> ISBN 0 1400 2847 1
- <sup>v</sup> 1966, but reproduced in many collections such as "The Preserving Machine," ISBN 0 330 23363 7
- <sup>vi</sup> Acts of John, from "The Apocryphal New Testament" M.R. James-Translation and Notes Oxford:  
Clarendon Press, 1924