

# *Gnosticism in Hollywood: From European Academia to American Popular Culture*

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## **Thesis abstract**

In the twentieth century, Western intellectuals increasingly incorporated the notion of Gnosticism into debates on the condition of modernity. This project traces the historical development of these discussions, with particular attention to their transfer from prewar Europe to postwar America by looking at the works of three thinkers – Hans Jonas, Carl G. Jung, and Eric Voegelin.

Utilizing a critical approach to historiography, chapters one to four show how Jonas, Jung, and Voegelin conceptualized Gnosticism and employed it as an interpretive tool to analyze tendencies in modernity they considered dangerous, such as nihilism, disenchantment, and secularization. At the same time, they reconstruct how American writers indebted to their work, such as Philip K. Dick, Harold Bloom, and Joseph Campbell, appropriated their ideas to describe new issues and phenomena, ranging from the counterculture of the 1960s, New Age movement, to Hollywood cinema. This part of the thesis argues that, on the one hand, the discussed European and American authors contributed to speculative thought on the condition of Western culture; on the other, however, they unwittingly essentialized and ahistoricized Gnosticism and modernity due to their overreliance on phenomenological and hermeneutic approaches.

In response to this problem, chapter five constructs an “intertextual-cognitive” framework, offering a new model based on intertextuality theories and concepts adopted from cognitive psychology to provide a methodologically sounder foundation for advancing Gnosticism and modernity debates. The chapter argues that studying Gnosticism and modernity as intertexts and understanding their relations in terms of cognitive processes, makes it possible to avoid their essentialization and ahistoricization. After evaluating the theoretical advantages of this approach, the author calls to reframe the discourse on Gnosticism and modernity as a history of receptions, viewed in the context of identity formation.

Chapter six introduces a group of seven millennial Hollywood movies, *The Truman Show*, *Jacob's Ladder*, *Dark City*, *Pleasantville*, *The Matrix*, *The Matrix Reloaded*, and *The Matrix Revolutions*, and places them in the context of studies dedicated to “mind-game films,” a category referring to a trend of complex narratives in contemporary audiovisual storytelling. Building on the secondary literature dedicated to this phenomenon, the chapter reveals the films’ generic points of contact with the discourse on Gnosticism and modernity taking into account their formal, thematic, and phenomenological aspects from a film studies perspective. Applying the terminology of neoformalism, chapters seven to eleven are dedicated to the analysis of each of film through the prism of the conceptions of Gnosticism of Jonas, Jung, and Voegelin. The chapters show the extent to which these movies are indebted to the three thinkers in their philosophical speculation on alarming tendencies in late modernity, such as conspiracy thinking, fragmentation, and the erosion of privacy. The author of the thesis argues that, crucially, all the films examined seem to propose that the adoption of an ethical-spiritual worldview they promote can help overcome the recognized hazards of modern life.

Overall, the thesis contributes to the fields of history of philosophy, religious studies, and film studies by defending three key arguments: (1) in twentieth-century Euro-American intellectual discourse on the condition of modernity, Gnosticism was utilized as a diagnostic category to redefine normative boundaries of Western culture’s identity; (2) the debates can be effectively progressed within the methodological framework of reception history; (3) the examined mind-game films contributed to the discourse on the condition of modernity, diagnosing the crisis of Western culture and utilizing Gnosticism as an instrument to overcome it, through audiovisual means of artistic expression.



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