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# Climbing a ladder to heaven. Gnostic vision of the world in *Jacob's Ladder* (1990)

## **Abstract**

Contemporary film-makers quite willingly employ motifs typical of various gnostic trends. The author shows that ancient gnosticism is a treasury of motifs and a source of aesthetical and narrative strategies present in contemporary cinema. The article treats *Jacob's Ladder* (1990, dir. Adrian Lyne) which is analyzed through Gnostic beliefs. In the author's opinion, this film can be treated as a model where the gnostic thought has been presented in a coherent and systematic manner.

## **Keywords**

gnosis, gnosticism, spirituality, mind-game films, puzzle films

## **Author Notes**

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Ancient Gnosticism constitutes an alternative and capacious world view which can help explain numerous meanings present in many texts of popular culture, e.g., comic books, computer games and films. However, it must be clearly emphasized that the presence of Gnosticism in popular culture is not evident and one may not necessarily find direct references to signs and symbols typical of its systemic manifestations. A Gnostic world view is more often hidden in the deep structure of many of its examples.

I intend to treat the story presented in *Jacob's Ladder* as an allegory of the difficult process of a soul entering a transcendent world as understood in the perspective of Gnostic thought.<sup>1</sup> I will base this interpretation on a textual analysis of the film and an observed convergence of the nature of certain motifs, narratological strategies, and the function and meaning of Gnostic ideas as they are represented in the film.

## **Gnosticism**

What is the phenomenon called Gnosticism? This notion is quite vague, which is why it has been frequently criticized<sup>2</sup> and no satisfactory and cohesive definition has been derived up to this day. Despite the difficulties related to this term, it is still being used by many scholars. Gnosticism is usually defined as a syncretic religious movement of late antiquity which flourished particularly in the second and third centuries C.E. across the Middle East. In some cases

Gnosticism took systemic forms, e.g. Sethianism, often depicting a dualistic vision of the world expressed in the language of anti-cosmic and anti-somatic theology. However, in the case of Gnosticism, one cannot speak of a normative interpretation of this phenomenon. It resembles a mosaic picture of various schools of thought and approaches, which to a different degree draw on older religions, e.g. Iranian or Jewish. It could be argued that Gnostic systems “prey on” already existent traditions, appropriating their message to their own world view.

Before I elaborate on how I am going to employ the term “Gnosticism” in this article, I have to add an important methodological remark. I think that in many texts of popular culture, especially in Hollywood films, the image of Gnosticism is depicted in the essentialist way. For this reason, I will present rather a typological definition of Gnosticism, whose most accomplished practitioner was Hans Jonas, to put the accent on the ideas which are commonly linked with this movement.

One of the vital elements which many Gnostic systems share is dualism both on the ontological level and on the cosmological one. It comes down to the main contrast between God – together with the spiritual world – and lower in the hierarchy Demiurge, the creator of the cosmos. The latter figure controls the material reality with servant-guards, so called “archons.” God did not create the world, neither does he rule it nor stands in any relation to the Creation. Human beings live in a reality ruled by Demiurge and archons due to the primal sin which had been committed in Pleroma – the place where God lives. The aim of

Demiurge is to prevent people from entering the transcendent sphere, because without them Demiurge's world would become extinguished. The material reality is described as evil and false, since it was created as a result of ignorance. In many Gnostic texts, Demiurge believes there is no other God and knows nothing about the existence of Pleroma.

In all kinds of Gnosticism one can find an important term "gnosis" which means "knowledge, investigation." On the one hand, it should be identified with taking in a certain truth, which emanates from a sacred and secret teaching. On the other hand, *gnosis* can be translated as "insight" and it means a process whose integral part is intuitive cognition based on revelation. For Gnostics, knowledge about oneself is intertwined with discovering one's destination, understanding the essence of human nature and, last but not least, getting to know God himself.<sup>3</sup> Kurt Rudolph emphasizes that Gnosticism is founded on the esoteric knowledge, because only the chosen ones are predestined to receive it:

The intellectual knowledge of the teaching which is offered as revealed wisdom has here a direct religious significance since it is at the same time understood as otherworldly and is the basis for the process of redemption. A man who possesses "Gnosis" is for that reason a redeemed man: (...) "He who in this manner shall have Gnosis knows whence he is come and whither he goes. He knows like someone who was drunk and has become sober from his drunkenness and, restored again to himself, has again set his own in order." The ignorant man in contrast is one who is a prey to forgetfulness and annihilation; he has no firm foundation.<sup>4</sup>

Enlightened persons base their views on internal experience – they have a feeling that the reality in which they exist is an illusion, and that is why the word “knowledge” not “belief” is used here. *Gnosis* given by the redeemer uncovers the cosmic plot whose subject is humankind. It tells the Gnostic myth, presenting the way in which the Divine Spark was imprisoned and showing how a Gnostic can be freed after death and united with God.<sup>5</sup>

**“He who fights monsters should see to it that he himself does not become a monster”<sup>6</sup>**

*Jacob’s Ladder* tells the story of the eponymous Jacob (Tim Robbins), who works at a post office in New York, in spite of the fact that he has a Ph.D. degree in philosophy. We learn that the character is a Vietnam War veteran and he most probably suffers from posttraumatic stress disorder. One of the symptoms he displayed is the ability to see demons. Seeking psychiatric help, he attempts to explain their presence. Besides, the character has considerable difficulties telling the difference between real life and dream as he constantly wakes up in alternative worlds. In one of those alternative realities, he enters into a relationship with Jezebel (Elizabeth Peña) after divorcing his wife. In the other world, he is married to Sarah (Patricia Kalember) who bore him three children. He had married her before taking part in the Vietnam War.

In the first section of the film, the viewers can see Jacob fighting on the front line in Vietnam. Awaiting the enemy, soldiers suddenly start shooting

indiscriminately, and going into convulsions, they fall to the ground. Jake, trying to hide away in the forest, is unexpectedly injured with an enemy's bayonet. His injuries are severe. At this point, Jacob wakes up on the subway and the horrific war pictures seem to be only nightmares, nothing but figments of his imagination. As Jake gets off the subway, he notices a sleeping man with a tail. Minutes later, he can see ominous silhouettes of men in the windows of the subway train which passes him by. Those gruesome pictures are a foreshadowing of demons to come, which will haunt the main character of the film. In the sequence described above, the metaphor of Jacob in an existential trap is completed with the information about closed gates leading to the exit from the subway station.

As the plot develops, it seems that the demons which Jacob can see are actually real. Demons are the creatures which want to lead the character's soul into a transcendent world. At the end, the viewers are informed that the events connected with the war in Vietnam are in the domain of the real world. Jacob's life in New York, which was presented as if it happened after the war, was false. It was only Jake's hallucination, who, badly injured in Vietnam, was immersed in an illusion on his deathbed.

The subway scene, interpreted in the context of the whole film, abounds in Gnostic motifs. Jacob's presence in the mental universe can be understood as a metaphor of man's confinement in the world ruled and controlled by Demiurge. The motif of Jacob's awakening from a dream is a sign of it. It recurs throughout the film and signals Jake's travels between the make believe worlds.

For ancient Gnostics, the metaphor of awakening meant acquiring the knowledge about the illusory nature of the earthly world. Gaining it is crucial to salvation. In *Jacob's Ladder* one can observe the reverse of the sense of the above mentioned motif. Multiple awakenings of the protagonist symbolize his entanglement with the realities which he unconsciously projects. Jake's first awakening is covered in darkness, and a major part of the film is made using low-key lighting. The grim atmosphere of *Jacob's Ladder* can be primarily experienced in the scenes where Jacobs struggles with archons. The powers of Demiurge are embodied by the demons haunting the protagonist or by the representatives of the government secret service. The latter travel in a black limousine and wear dark clothes. The horrifying activities of the demons are also covered in darkness, e.g., in the scene where the demons torture Jacob in the hospital. In Gnosticism, the motif of darkness has a symbolic meaning, because it was used to describe the world of Demiurge and the human ignorance concerning the illusory nature of their reality.

While travelling by subway, Jacob reads an advertisement on the subway carriage's wall: "New York may be a crazy town, but you'll never die of boredom. Enjoy!" The motif of entertainment recurs both in the film and in the perspective of Gnostic thought and it can be read as Demiurge's attempt to keep man in the material world. Another advertisement read by Jacob says: "Hell. That's what life can be, doing drugs (...)." In the broader context the information about drugs refers to enslaving the senses. Moreover, the advertisement is also a prediction that Jacob's life in New York will be like hell on earth. This is

mostly related to the cruel things done by the demons and secret agents. *Mise-en-scène* of the city suggests as well that the place where Jacob lives is hell. The streets are filthy, and the people on the subway have their faces covered; some of them even possess inhuman body parts or change into monsters.<sup>7</sup> What is more, later on in the film, Jacob is reading Dante's *Inferno* and books about magic and Satanism. Due to his suffering, the mental worlds functioning as a kind of hell are in close relationship with the material world described by Gnostics. Furthermore, the world ruled by the Demiurge's Gnostics is understood as a system of oppression. Matter was created by powers hostile to God who haunt men who initially do not have an ability to free themselves. To describe it, Gnostics would use terms such as: "darkness," "death," "deception," or "villainy" On the one hand, these words adequately describe the illusory status of Jacob's mental worlds; on the other hand, they correspond to the visual aspect of the film.

In the world of Demiurge, archons, his servants, maintain the *status quo*. In the film, they are represented by the government secret service and demons (images 1, 2 and 3).



Image 1



Image 2



Image 3

The task of Demiurge's servants is to keep man in the state of "drunkenness," so that they can control one's soul. As Epiphanius wrote, it is food indispensable for archons, which gives them the strength to live.<sup>8</sup> In *Jacob's Ladder* the aim of the government secret service and demons is to constantly convince the protagonist that he is a Vietnam war veteran and he really does live in New York. Among Jacob's relatives, Jezebel<sup>9</sup> turns out to be a demon as well since she tries to stop him from discovering the truth. On the one hand, his lover allures him with bodily pleasures, on the other, she encourages him to have fun.

The first strategy can be illustrated with the scene where she ironically answers his question about the reason why subway entrances have been barricaded and about the monsters which he can see. The woman says that,

“Jake, New York is filled with creatures, and lots of stations are closed.” In the meantime, when she says those words, she tries to take off Jacob’s underwear. She wants him to wind down, tempting him to make love. Her actions might be compared to those of an archon. In Gnosticism, sexual love and sensual pleasure were perceived as a special form of trapping man by the world: “He who has cherished the body issued from the error of love, he remains in the darkness erring, suffering in his senses the dispensations of death.”<sup>10</sup>

Jezzie’s second strategy can be observed when Jake skims through occult literature, seeking some explanation of the demons that haunt him. The woman comments on his apathetic behavior in the following way: “You know, you really ought to get out today. You can’t just sit around like this all the time, Jake, it’s not healthy (...). Do something. Go to a movie. Go enjoy yourself. One of us should be having a good time.” Seeing that Jacob won’t react to her words, the protagonist’s lover raises her voice and tries to draw his attention to her. At this point, Jacob notices that she is a demon (image 4) and violently pushes her away.



Image 4

The connection between sensual pleasures and demons can be also observed during the party that Jezzie and Jake attend. When the lovers are dancing, Jacob spots that his partner grows a reptile tail. Jezebel moves it in a lustful manner, and her facial expression becomes demonic. Next, Jacob notices that everybody around him has also turned into demons.

In the perspective of Gnostic mythology which can be found in the *Secret Book of John* the monsters haunting Jacob's mind are Demiurge's powers which control not only his body but also his psyche.<sup>11</sup> According to Gnostics, man's psychic sphere was created by the false God too and this is why it constitutes a den of evil forces. That is why man is both the subject and the object of actions of this kind of powers.<sup>12</sup> In the film, the influence of the demons, both at the physical and psychological level, is perfectly presented in

the scene showing Jacob's arrival at the hospital. Now bedbound Jacob can observe the changing reality. First, he is rushed through dirty rooms and, on his way, he can see deformed and mentally ill people. Next, he reaches some corridors where he notices decomposing bodies covered in blood. At the end of his route, there are only physical and psychical tortures exercised by demons, among which there is also Jezebel. To support the Gnostic interpretation of the tortures inflicted on Jacob by the demons, the Naasenians' beliefs should be referenced. Naasenian Gnostics claimed that human beings become prisoners of the creation produced by their spiritual counterparts (the "inner human"). The former, existing in the material world, suffer because of the demonic powers.<sup>13</sup>

Jake's mental state might also be described in a different way. In some Gnostic texts, e.g., Mandaic, there are excerpts about a material being on the basis of which it is difficult to decide whether they describe an individual or a universal being. Both perspectives intertwine because the world is presented there as a body, and the world as a body is negatively evaluated. In the case of Jacob, who is haunted by demons, it could be argued that the material world designed by Jacob reflects a terrible mental state of the hero. In this context, the protagonist's flashforward is only a hallucination of a dying man who has been severely injured. If one looks at Jacob's story from a Gnostic point of view, it seems to depict man's journey to salvation, which unavoidably means the negation of the earthly sphere of being.

### **Man's spiritual caretaker**

According to Gnostics, man's enslavement can take place only in the physical, earthly dimension. In the spiritual one, s/he belongs to the upper world. A divine element in man – described as “inner” or “real human,” and also as “spirit” (*pneuma*), “soul” or “reason” (*nús*) – can be freed if it receives knowledge about the world and its own fate. *Gnosis* is not given directly by the Father. Even though Gnostics claim that it can have no representations in the world, it influences man's salvation. The revelation is brought by the God's emissary, who is also described as a “redeemer,” “messenger,” or “prophet.”<sup>14</sup> As a result, according to ancient Gnostics, man without external intervention is not capable of finding the way to salvation. It is indispensable to “summon” the emissary, who will “wake” or “disillusion” men by giving *gnosis* to them. The knowledge received by a Gnostic is connected to gaining self-consciousness and recognizing the right position occupied in the world on the metaphysical level.

Chiropractor Louis (Danny Aiello) is a redeemer of the protagonist of *Jacob's Ladder*. He facilitates the freeing of Jake from the chains of the past, which could be understood as the life he led. The memories of Jake's life are intensified on two mental levels, which are his hallucinations. On the one hand, his existence is defined by the family he starts with Sarah. In this context, a very important role was played by his son Gabe (Macaulay Culkin), who died prematurely. Jake feels responsible for the death of his child. He wasn't looking after his son, when the boy unexpectedly ran into the street and unfortunately was hit by a car, as a result of which he died. Jake constantly feels guilty, which

makes it difficult to come to terms with his loss, and, by the same token, difficult to leave the earthly world.

Jake's life is also connected with the family breakdown. We learn that in the past he broke up with Sarah. The second dimension of Jake's hallucinations consists in an intimate bond which he creates with Jezzie. It is hard to say, though, whether this relationship happened in the real world after breaking up with Sarah or if it is the character's fantasy. Still, his relationship with Jezzie differs greatly from the very emotional bond between Jake and his wife and children. The first one is surely much more restricted to the sensual sphere. By the same token, it might be argued that the earthly sphere of being is embodied in his lovers.

God's emissary's task is to awaken man, the aim which is difficult to achieve since Demiurge's powers keep interrupting. Before this crucial moment occurs, Louis rescues his friend from the hospital, which is a dwelling place for demons. Seconds before the chiropractor arrives in the room where Jacob is, the protagonist hears an ominous voice saying: "Dream on." This order should be connected with the motif of soul's forgetfulness about its divine origin. Gnostics illustrate it with allegories such as dream, ecstasy or sexual decay.<sup>15</sup> These pictures describe soul's suffering in the earthly world.

Jake's spiritual caretaker, going through hospital rooms, is told by nurses that he cannot visit the patient. Not paying attention to the resistance of the staff, Louis leads Jacob out of the building. In this context, the choice of words in Mandaean scriptures describing the redeemer's actions in the material world

seem to match perfectly the scene in question: “What has the Stranger done in the house, that he could found himself a party therein?”<sup>16</sup> It must be emphasized that, in Gnostic writings, an emissary, who takes human shape, is not regarded by archons as a threat in the struggle for human souls.<sup>17</sup> This observation might be referred to the relation between Louis and the dark forces haunting Jake. Throughout the film, there are no direct confrontations between the chiropractor and demons since the former are focused only on Jacob. It results from the fact that the God’s emissary remains “invisible” for dark forces.

### **Between good and evil**

According to ancient Gnostics, there are three kinds of people: “the spiritual” (pneumatic), “the psychic”, and the “fleshly” or “earthly” (sarkic). Gnostics are in the first class – they answer positively to an emissary’s “summons.” They are aware of having the divine spark of God and they await salvation shortly after death. The fleshly are the opposite of the pneumatic. They are focused mainly on the physical aspect of existence. Never receiving *gnosis*, they immerse themselves in the illusory world of matter. The category of the psychic describes people who are between the fleshly and the pneumatic. They take responsibility for their actions and nothing determines their choice between good and evil. They are capable of an internal change, following the voice of the God’s emissary or, on the contrary, approaching physical reality. As a result, the psychic are not yet in the group of those who are redeemed. Before they

choose which sphere they want to belong to – worldly or divine – they are first tormented by dilemmas. Jacob is best described by the category of the psychic. When he is at a loss, he seeks Louis's help intuitively, listening to his advice carefully. As the plot develops, though, the viewers never know whether Jake will answer positively to the emissary's summons. It turns out that it is the presence of the demons in his hallucinations which is the original reason why Jacob begins to seek *gnosis* and not – as in certain Gnostic schools – a revelation from a messenger. The above difference can be eliminated by referring to the category of “the psychic.” Being the psychic, Jacob is endowed with the ability to transform. He can answer the emissary's summons or ignore them. As it turns out, Jacob can perceive the world in the way typical of a Gnostic, namely the one which goes beyond rational thinking. He can find in the reality both good elements (the teachings of the God's Emissary) and bad ones (archons).

When the presence of the demons begins to trouble Jacob more and more, he tries to explain their existence. Jake looks for the justification on the level of the psychic world, i.e. New York reality, which is the effect of the deathbed hallucination. In the case of the mental sphere, the monsters are explained as the side effects of Jake's taking unknown drugs during the Vietnam war. In the light of an eschatological vision presented in the film, monsters haunting Jacob turn out to be creatures which want to lead him to the transcendent world. Eventually realizing that demons are the root of all evil, he begins a mundane process of self-purification. Jacob seeks the explanation

(*gnosis*) of his murky visions, which he receives thanks to the teachings of the chiropractor.

His reference to the teachings of medieval mystic Meister Eckhart is critical to obtaining *gnosis* by Jake. Louis informs him that the only part of the soul which suffers in hell is the one hanging onto life. When it hangs desperately onto memories, the angels trying to take the soul to heaven look like demons. Louis, having completed the treatment, asks Jake to stand up. Jake is surprised: “By myself?” He stands up and starts walking unaided. In the context of chiropractic, this scene has a deeper meaning. It suggests that Louis has cured Jake’s soul and that the latter has now achieved spiritual maturity. This is emphasized by the New Age ambient music and the special use of light in the scene. One needs to remember that in Gnosticism darkness refers to the false world of Demiurge and light means *gnosis* and Pleroma. The moment Louis passes Meister Eckhart’s teaching to the protagonist, a spotlight is set on Jacob (image 5).



Image 5

Moreover, when Jake visited the chiropractor previously, he pointed out the fact that his friend looks like an angel, “an overgrown Cherub.” Then, Jacob adds, “Anyone ever tell you that?” Louis replies, “You. Every time I see you.” Jacob smiles and says, “You’re a lifesaver, Louis.” Louis answers, “I know.” This dialogue demonstrates the intuitive, inner premonition that Jake has about Louis’s part in his own spiritual wandering.<sup>18</sup>

The above reference to the teachings of Meister Eckhart can be connected to the message of Gnosticism, which can be described as anti-world.<sup>19</sup> Man suffers agony only when s/he ties her/himself to the material world of her/his own free will. The physical reality is a dimension ruled by archons, which devour the corporal and psychological sphere of suffering people. In the context of some Gnostic schools’ eschatology, the torment experienced by

people on their way to salvation is not meaningless. In *The First Revelation of James* Jesus teaches that the soul on the road to Pleroma must inevitably face sufferings inflicted by archons. However, these sufferings are the way to become free. A similar thought is implied in *Jacob's Ladder*, if the story presented in the film can be understood as a Gnostic allegory of the soul's ascension to heaven. Jacob's mental universe is full of dreadful events which become meaningful in the perspective of Gnostic eschatology. The tortures exercised by the demons are a significant stage in Jacob's life, leading to his understanding of the place he has in the world, and eventually, to his salvation.

Many Gnostic texts present in a detailed way the journey of a deceased person's soul. After leaving the illusory reality and heading for Pleroma, it must first go through subsequent spheres, circles or worlds with labyrinthine structure. The passages between them are guarded by cosmic powers hostile to men. The multiplication of realities present in the movie may be associated with this idea. Jacob travels between two worlds: in one of them, he lives with Jezzie and in the other with Sarah. What is more, in Gnostic beliefs and in *Jacob's Ladder* as well, the terror and anguish experienced by people are illusory. They are a result of their ignorance of the metaphysical structure of reality. In *Gospel of Truth*, the ignorance about man's position in the world is described as "nightmare," which can be also related to Jake's existential situation:

Thus it is with those who have cast off ignorance like sleep, they consider it to be of no value, nor do they hold its products to be real, but leave them behind like a dream in the night and regard knowledge of the Father as the dawn. Thus each one acted while in ignorance, as if he was asleep, and thus arrived at knowledge

as if he awoke. Happy the person who comes to himself and wakes up, blessed who has opened the eyes of the blind!<sup>20</sup>

The protagonist's spiritual journey will only end when he becomes aware of his place in the world by means of inner revelation, as if waking up from a bad dream.

### **An awakening**

For ancient Gnostics, an awakening is tantamount to receiving knowledge. The consequence of obtaining *gnosis* is the salvation of man which is one's unity with God. In the cosmological sense, it means the liberation of man from the world of matter and the return to the spiritual world, becoming part of the Father. In the movie, the character's awakening happens in the apartment where he used to live with Sarah and his children. In solitude, Jake recalls Meister Eckhart's doctrines and he can see the images of his past life. Having understood the teachings of the mystic, the character tries to apply them to his current existential situation.<sup>21</sup> On the visual level, the symbol of Jacob's metamorphosis is a subtle change in drawing the picture of reality as Jake is already a Gnostic. The dark room, where he looked inside himself, is illuminated with radiating light (image 6).



Image 6

In the scene of Jacob's illumination, we observe a series of images and memories which might represent *gnosis* acquired by him. The *Allogenes* excerpt below may serve as a good commentary for Jacob's internal transformation: "I saw the light that [surrou]nded me and the good that was in me. I was deified."<sup>22</sup> What happens next is the transformation of the demons haunting Jake – he meets his dead son Gabe surrounded by a golden light. The boy grabs his father's hand and they ascend the stairs, after which the frame is brightened suddenly. In Gnostic writings, one can find excerpts presenting actions of man who received the knowledge. He turns his back on the Demiurge's world, directing his attention towards transcendent reality<sup>23</sup> just like the Gnostic in the *Holy Book of the Great Invisible Spirit*:

Now I know you, I have mixed with the unchangeable.  
I have armed myself with a weapon of light.

I have become light.<sup>24</sup>

Jacob's son appears in the scene mentioned above as a representative of the spiritual sphere. Having attained *gnosis*, Jake follows him heedless of the earthly dimension of his existence. In the Gnostic scriptures, one can find descriptions of the descending of God's emissary, who as a result of his divine powers can force his way to Demiurge's reality. "Breaching" his world, he helps man leave it, which is followed by salvation. The redeemer, apart from summoning, also needs to receive an answer to it.<sup>25</sup> What appears here, then, is an element of an individual human contribution to a redemptive process. In Mandaic texts there is a belief in the presence of the "light-beings." Their task is to help Gnostics, especially when souls return to their proto-source, namely God. This process is described as "soul's ascending". In the above-mentioned scene Gabe can be seen as a light-being who leads his father up the stairs.<sup>26</sup> In the aesthetic sense, the redemption of Jacob is suggested by a sudden brightening of the screen, and it is additionally emphasized by mild, nondiegetic music. After this scene, the viewers learn that Jacob is dead. This sequence also refers to the Gnostic idea of resurrection. According to *Treatise on Resurrection*, only the spiritual (*pneumatic*) part of a man can be resurrected, while the psychic and physical parts die.<sup>27</sup> In the final sequence of the film, the contrast between the physical and spiritual spheres is also emphasized. On the one hand, we watch the "awakened" Jacob who ascends the stairs to heaven. On the other hand, we learn that the physical dimension of his existence is over.<sup>28</sup>

For Gnostics, it is of utmost importance that man gains redemptive knowledge when s/he still has a body.<sup>29</sup> In a different situation, one can still be returned to Demiurge, no matter if they are in the material world or not. In the movie, Jacob attains *gnosis*, still being in the earthly reality. As a result, he can be redeemed. The redemptive knowledge allows Jacob to leave the state of ignorance. In Gnosticism, ignorance means unawareness of the existence of the spiritual reality. It can be shown then that the essence of knowledge as presented in *Jacob's Ladder* reflects the Gnostic world view. In many Gnostic texts, e.g. in *Tripartite Tractate*, one can read about the belief that being has a triple structure corresponding to the three parts of man. There is a spiritual, *pneumatic* aspect (Pleroma), *psychic* (the sphere of Demiurge) and a *material*, physical world. The counterparts of these three spheres can be found in *Jacob's Ladder*. The physical reality is represented by the events in Vietnam, the psychical reality is the mental universe of Jacob, and the pneumatic one is reflected in his self and in Pleroma. The last element refers mainly to the scenes where, thanks to the film's lighting, Jake's redemptive *gnosis* is signaled.

In my opinion, the story presented in *Jacob's Ladder* is the most cohesive reinterpretation of Gnostic beliefs in the history of cinematography. Consequently, it is justified to ask the question whether the film's creators were inspired by Gnostic thought during the realization of the film. The available sources imply a negative answer. I think that to some extent the Gnostic motifs found their place in the film by means of the Buddhist content which is also present there. In the movie, one can find many allusions to *The Tibetan Book of*

*the Dead*,<sup>30</sup> which is also due to the fact that the scriptwriter Bruce Joel Rubin has frequently confirmed his interest in this spiritual tradition.<sup>31</sup> The presence of Gnostic references in the movie may be also indicated by the fact that many scholars find structural similarities between ancient Gnosticism and Buddhism.<sup>32</sup>

*Jacob's Ladder* is an example of contemporary cinema often described as “mind-game films” or “puzzle-films.”<sup>33</sup> One can observe inspirations with Gnostic thought in e.g. *The Truman Show* (1998, dir. Peter Weir),<sup>34</sup> *The Matrix* (1999, dir. Lana and Andy Wachowski)<sup>35</sup> or *The Others* (2001, dir. Alejandro Amenábar), mainly at the level of presented ideas and of the organization of film dramaturgy. I find that the formal structure present in many mind-game films frequently constitutes a matrix for the presentation of Gnostic content, e.g., the unreliable narration or the ontological split of the depicted world into the factual and false reality. Films of this kind ask questions which are characteristic of postmodern fiction, e.g., “How can one distinguish the factual from false reality?” “Are there multiple worlds and how can you know them?” “How can I leave my world?,” etc. These problems are really close to the themes touched upon by Gnostics, even though they were less interested in philosophical issues than in the religious ones. Gnostics tried to answer the question, “how did I come to this world and how can I depart from it?” Therefore, one can wonder to what extent the questions present in postmodern fiction are entangled in religious discourse, and (let's not hesitate to add) in a Gnostic world view.

However, the analysis of mind-game films from the perspective of Gnostic motifs goes beyond the scope of this article. It is an interesting research field not only for film studies but also for philosophy of culture, since through hermeneutic analysis it can be demonstrated that Gnostic threads are found in numerous contemporary Hollywood films. In the broader perspective, by analyzing them, one can discover the sources of an outlook on life which contemporary texts of culture seem to manifest. Even though Gnostic content is not in the foreground, it can constitute its philosophical basis.

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<sup>1</sup> There have been many interpretations of the film so far, among others the Christian one, see Robert Craig, Carrol Fry and Ken Jurkiewicz, "Three Viewers Viewing: A Viewer-Response Symposium on 'Jacob's Ladder'," *Literature/Film Quarterly* 26 (1998): 220-227; Albert J. Bergesen and Andre Greeley, *God in the movies* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2004), 97-102; psychoanalytic, see Craig, Fry and Jurkiewicz, "Three Viewers Viewing...", 227-230 and Buddhist, see Brady DeSanti, William Blizek, "Understanding Jacob's Ladder through The Tibetan Book of the Dead," *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 27 (2015): 45-56.

<sup>2</sup> The most important critique of the terms "Gnosticism," "Gnostic," and "Gnostic religion" is by Michael A. Williams, *Rethinking "Gnosticism." An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category* (Princeton University Press, 1996); see also Karen L. King *What is Gnosticism?* (Harvard University Press, 2003). However, only a few scholars have stopped using those terms, as their avoidance does not lead to a better understanding of the religious movements to which they refer.

<sup>3</sup> For more about the concept of gnosis see Roelof van den Broek, *Gnostic Religion in Antiquity* (Cambridge University Press 2013), 2-4.

<sup>4</sup> See Kurt Rudolph, *Gnosis. The Nature & History of Gnosticism* (San Francisco: Harper & Row 1987), 55-56.

<sup>5</sup> According to van den Broek, what distinguishes ancient gnosis from its subsequent expressions in Western culture are complicated, frequently artificially created mythologies, see R. van den Broek, *Gnostic...*, 8. They served as a tool for their authors to express the experience of *gnosis* in a non-discursive manner. However, Gnostics were not a group of apologists of a cohesively defined religion, determined by a codified set of social practices, rituals and ideas. Rather, they were characterized by a "Gnostic mentality" in the expression of religious thoughts in a mythological way, easily adaptable to various philosophical or cultural contexts, see R. van den Broek, *Gnostic...*, 8. This is why van den Broek prefers to use the wider and less theoretically

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loaded term “Gnostic religion” instead of “Gnosticism.” Nonetheless, he points to the fact that many modern scholars still use the category of Gnosticism in a neutral sense, taking into consideration the important critique by Michael A. Williams. In this article, I will also use the notion of Gnosticism in a purely pragmatic context. For more about the essence of ancient gnosis see R. van den Broek *Gnostic...*, 136-137.

<sup>6</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond good and evil* (Fairfield: 1st World Publishing, 2004), 88.

<sup>7</sup> see Craig, Fry and Jurkiewicz, “Three Viewers Viewing...”, 224.

<sup>8</sup> Frank Williams, trans., *The Panarion of Epiphanius of Salamis* (Leiden: Brill 2009), section III, chapter 40 (2,6), 285.

<sup>9</sup> Jake’s lover is given a biblical name Jezebel. In the Old Testament, she appears as the wife of Israeli king Ahab. She convinces the king to worship Baal and Asherah and kill Yahweh’s prophets, see 1 Kings 16: 31–33; 1 Kings 18: 4; 21. In the Christian tradition, Jezebel has become a symbol of false prophets and also of a promiscuous woman without scruples.

<sup>10</sup> Cited in Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001), 73.

<sup>11</sup> *Secret Book (Apocryphon) of John*, Nag Hammadi Codex II (NHC II, 15, 29-19, 10).

<sup>12</sup> Kurt Rudolph, *Gnosis...*, 88.

<sup>13</sup> Hippolytus, *Refutatio omnium haeresium*, ed. Miroslav Marcovich (Berlin, New York: Walter de Gruyter 1986) book V (7-8), 142-154.

<sup>14</sup> It must be emphasized that, depending on the school of Gnosticism, an emissary was identified with various different figures. For example, in Valentianism, Jesus Christ was considered as God’s Emissary, while in Sethianism it was Seth.

<sup>15</sup> Kurt Rudolph, *Gnosis...*, 110-111)

<sup>16</sup> Cited in Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic...*, 72.

<sup>17</sup> *Three forms of First Thought* (NHC XIII, 1, 40, 29-41, 32)

<sup>18</sup> In the Bible story about Jacob after his struggle with his opponent, probably an angel, the latter healed him and blessed him. According to Frye, “in the pivotal scene of the film, which takes place in Louis’s chiropractic office (...) Louis heals Jacob’s back, as the angel repaired the biblical Jacob’s thigh. And as in the Bible, Louis blesses Jacob. But this blessing is advice, the help alluded to in the subway.” The symbolical character of Louis’s profession is worth noticing. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in the US, chiropractice was a culturally marginalized activity whose metaphysical assumptions were viewed as contradictory to Christianity and medicine. The chiropractice founder, Daniel D. Palmer, saw it as a culmination of his spiritual search. He believed that “knowing that our physical and the intellectual progress of Innate (the personified portion of Universal Intelligence) depend upon the proper alignment of the skeletal frame, prenatal as well as postnatal, we feel it is our right and bounden duty to replace any displaced bones, so that the physical and spiritual may enjoy health, happiness and the full fruition of earthly lives.”, David. D. Palmer, *The Chiropractor’s Adjuster: Text-book of the Science, Art and Philosophy of Chiropractic for Students and Practitioners* (Portland Printing House, 1910). This way, a chiropractor’s duty was on the one hand to cure body, and on the other to be a kind of a spiritual leader who takes care of the health of the patient’s soul; see Candy G. Brown, “Chiropractic and Christianity: The Power of Pain to Adjust Cultural Alignments,” *Church*

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*History* 79 (2010): 144-181. I would like to thank Dr. Laura Copier for bringing my attention to the spiritual context of chiropractice in US.

<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, it must be emphasized that the mystic works of Eckhart, grounded in Christian tradition, have little in common with Gnosticism. However, many scholars underline that his philosophy is a significant bridge between Christian and Buddhist thought; see Joseph Politella, "Meister Eckhart and Eastern Wisdom," *Philosophy East and West* 15 (1965): 117-133; Ueda Shizuteru, "Ascent and descent: Zen Buddhism in comparison with Meister Eckhart," *The Eastern Buddhist* 16 (1983): 72-91; Ueda Shizuteru, "Freedom and language in Meister Eckhart and Zen Buddhism. Part One," *The Eastern Buddhist* 23 (1990): 18-59; Ueda Shizuteru, "Freedom and language in Meister Eckhart and Zen Buddhism. Part Two," *The Eastern Buddhist* 24 (1991): 52-80; Stephen Morris, "Buddhism and Christianity: The Common Ground. A Study of the Radical Theologies of Meister Eckhart and Abe Masao," *The Eastern Buddhist* 25 (1992): 89-118; Charlotte Radler, "Losing the Self: Detachment in Meister Eckhart and Its Significance for Buddhist-Christian Dialogue," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 26 (2006): 111-117.

<sup>20</sup> *Gospel of Truth*, (NHC I, 29, 32-30, 16).

<sup>21</sup> It is worth reminding here that Jake is a doctor of philosophy. The rational knowledge does not prove useful in his spiritual journey, though. This is even the opposite of the *gnosis* which Jake acquires by means of internal revelation. Due to that, the film suggests that the only method to find truth in the world is through irrational, intuitive knowledge which can be gained by self-knowledge.

<sup>22</sup> *Allogenes*, (NHC XI, 52, 10-12).

<sup>23</sup> Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 37.

<sup>24</sup> *Holy Book of the Great Invisible Spirit*, (NHC III, 66, 27-67, 4).

<sup>25</sup> Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic...*, 78.

<sup>26</sup> The stairs metaphor may be also be interpreted in the perspective of the story of the biblical Jacob. In his dream, he saw angels moving on stairs between earth and heaven, see Genesis 28. Furthermore, according to the chemist, the drug taken by the soldiers in Vietnam was called "Ladder" and was supposed to change them into killing machines. In this context, the ladder metaphor can also mean the descent into the depths of human unconsciousness and the evoking of the most primitive and animal instincts.

<sup>27</sup> *Gospel of Truth*, (NHC I, 46, 21-32).

<sup>28</sup> The narrative core of the film is much more complicated than the Gnostic interpretation suggested by me, since Jacob's hallucinations can be explained as the effect of taking psychoactive substances. As the plot develops, Jacob finds out that US government representatives issued a command to add a drug to soldiers' meals, which would transform them into killing machines in the Vietnam War battlefield. Even though Jacob had no direct access to the world where his body was in the state of agony, the basic principle of Gnosticism can be noticed. At the level of diegesis, thanks to Gnostic self-knowledge, Jacob learns about the fictional status of the surrounding reality, which might have been created by the drug he took. He achieved liberation from the false world only after he interpreted his state through the point of view of the teachings by Louis. Even if it was the drug that created his deathbed hallucinations, the film's ending suggests that there is a relationship between his calm death and the religious knowledge he acquired (one of the soldiers present at the bed of the late Jake states that: "He looks kind of peaceful, the guy. Put up a hell of a fight though").

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<sup>29</sup> Stephan A. Hoeller, *Gnosticism: New Light on the Ancient Tradition of Inner Knowing* (Wheaton: Quest Books, 2002) 21.

<sup>30</sup> Brady DeSanti, William Blizek, "Understanding...", 45-56.

<sup>31</sup> DeSanti, Blizek, "Understanding...", 46.

<sup>32</sup> See James Kennedy, "Buddhist Gnosticism, the system of Basilides," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 0 (1902): 377-415; Edward Conze, "Buddhism and Gnosis," in *The Origins of Gnosticism*, ed. Bianchi Ugo (Leiden: Brill, 1970), 651-677; Stephen Kent, "Valentinian Gnosticism and classical Samkhya: A thematic and structural comparison," *Philosophy East and West* 30 (1980): 241-259; Karen Lang, "Via Negativa in Mahayana Buddhism and Gnosticism," *The Eastern Buddhist* 14 (1981): 43-60; Stephan A. Hoeller, *Gnosticism...*, 180-182.

<sup>33</sup> See Warren Buckland, "Introduction: Puzzle Plots," in *Puzzle Films: Complex Storytelling in Contemporary Cinema*, ed. Warren Buckland (New Jersey: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 1-13; Thomas Elsaesser, "The Mind-Game Film" in *Puzzle Films: Complex Storytelling in Contemporary Cinema*, ed. Warren Buckland (New Jersey: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 13-42.

<sup>34</sup> See Randal Verarde, "Suspicion, the Seed of Awakening: The Truman Show as Gnostic Fairy Tale," *The San Francisco Jung Institute Library Journal* 19 (2000): 37-49.

<sup>35</sup> See Frances Flannery-Dailey, Rachel Wagner, "Wake Up! Worlds of Illusion in Gnosticism, Buddhism and The Matrix Project," in *Philosophers Explore The Matrix*, ed. Grau Christopher (Oxford University Press, 2005), 258-289; Francesco Monico, "White rabbit on the moon," *A Journal of Speculative Research* 4 (2006): 144-149; David P. Hunt, "The Sleeper Awakes. Gnosis and Authenticity in The Matrix," in *Faith, Film and Philosophy: Big Ideas on the Big Screen*, ed. R. Douglass Geivett, James S. Spiegel (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2009): 89-106; Claudia-Simona Hulpoi, "Unde malum? The Gnostic Matrix," *Caietele Echinox* 25 (2013): 205-214; Brian Godawa, "The Matrix: Unloaded Revelations," 2004, accessed August 13, <http://www.equip.org/article/the-matrix-unloaded-revelations/>.

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