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Albert Camus, Metaphysical Revolt, Gnosticism and Modern Cinema

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Abstract

In *The Rebel* (1951) Albert Camus assigns ancient Gnosticism an important place in the history of human revolt. In his interpretation, Gnostics incarnate the spirit of proud rebellion and protest against a God deemed responsible for human suffering and death. For Camus these are the roots of metaphysical rebellion in Western history that, beginning in the eighteenth century, culminated in the fascist and socialist utopian experiments in the twentieth century. After assessing Camus's view of Gnosticism, this article claims that modern cinema shows the impact of *The Rebel* on the way several recent films conceive of their rebellious protagonists. The controlled character of the revolts they promote shows that modern cinema follows Gnosticism in their analysis both the modern sentiments of alienation in contemporary society and the ways to break free in order to attain a life worthy of its name.

Keywords

Gnostic revolt – Camus – metaphysical rebellion – *The Rebel* – modern cinema

1 Gnostic Non-Conformism

Modern receptions of ancient Gnosticism tend to highlight Gnostic non-conformism, especially admiring the alleged gnostic freedom of mind, and revolt against standard values and norms. Depending on the scholar, Gnostic revolt has been seen as directed towards either world rulers in general, or Judaism and the God of the Old Testament in particular.¹ It has been considered as

¹ See Camus 1951; Kippenberg 1979; Elsas 1990.

inverting ancient patterns of knowledge transmission, rejecting the standard cultural values of ancient society, representing a protest exegesis, and rejecting ancient philosophy or else upsetting contemporary ethics.² Such an understanding of ancient Gnosticism presents Gnostics as anarchists avant la lettre, as rebels who romantically rejected the yoke of a life of alienation, governed by suffering and limited by death.

Readers of Michael Williams's *Rethinking Gnosticism* will surely trace this analysis back to Hans Jonas's *The Gnostic Religion*. Indeed, William's opinion is that it was mainly due to the enormous impact of Jonas's influential work that the view of the so-called Gnostic "protest exegesis" dominated the study of ancient Gnosticism in the second half of the twentieth century.³ Besides following the mark of Jonas's influence on Kurt Rudolph, Ioan Couliano, Peter Nagel, Giovanni Filoramo and Claudio Giannotto, and Birger Pearson, however, Williams also engages in a far-reaching study to demonstrate that such a "spirit of revolt" cannot, strictly speaking, be found in the texts, at least not in the majority of them, and should therefore be abandoned as a Gnostic characteristic *par excellence*.⁴

Although I do not intend to revisit Williams's exhaustive and learned analysis here, two observations stand out. First, this conception of Gnosticism seems to predate Jonas and appears in different authors of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, notably Albert Camus. Second, despite the whole array of arguments against it, it remains a fact that readers from the Romantic period onwards interpreted ancient Gnosticism in this way. And I assume I do not need to emphasize that, whenever conveniently controlled by the limits of the text—in the words of Umberto Eco the so-called *intentio operis*—readers are always right in their interpretations.⁵ From William Blake to Carl Gustav Jung and Jorge Luis Borges through Byron, and Baudelaire, if not always explicitly, Gnosis incarnates the spirit of non-conformism and revolt, and, in some cases, even of a rebellion against a God deemed responsible for the creation of a world of suffering and death.⁶

2 Knowledge transmission: Stroumsa 2006; see now *contra* Roig Lanzillotta 2018b. Cultural values: DeConick 2016. Protest exegesis: Jonas 2001 (1952) 91–92; Rudolph 1987, 292–293; Pearson 1990, 37, 172, 176; Couliano 1992, 121.

3 Williams 1996, 54–55, in reference to Jonas 2001, 91–92 and 216–23.

4 Williams 1996, 55–79.

5 Eco et al. 1992.

6 Jung 1923, 410: "In Gnosticism we see man's unconscious psychology in full flower, almost per verse [*sic*] in its luxuriance; it contained the very thing that most strongly resisted the regula fidei, that Promethean and creative spirit which will bow only to the individual soul and to no collective ruling. Although in crude form, we find in Gnosticism what was lacking in the centuries that followed: a belief in the efficacy of individual revelation and individual

This is also the case with Albert Camus, who, in *The Rebel* (1951), assigns ancient Gnosticism an important place in the history of human revolt. After assessing Camus's view of Gnosticism and his understanding of the role it plays in the ancient roots of the metaphysical rebellion in Western history, I will claim that modern cinema shows the impact of Camus's *The Rebel* in the way several recent films conceive of their rebellious protagonists. On the one hand, Camus's approach provides an interesting pattern for modern cinema to analyze both the modern sentiments of alienation in contemporary society and the ways to break free in order to attain a life worthy of its name. On the other, in presenting the hero-rebel's fight against the injustice and suffering of his life, these movies interestingly follow the same solution to the problem of theodicy that, according to Camus, Gnosticism envisaged.

With this scope in mind, my contribution offers a brief overview of modern approaches to the Gnostic revolt (section 2). It examines how Camus understood ancient Gnosticism and why he attributes it an important role in the genesis of what he calls "metaphysical rebellion" (sections 3–6). My essay evaluates the relevance of Camus's views for the way modern cinema conceives of the fight of various rebels in their revolt against the oppressive realities in which they live (sections 7–15). The last section (16) includes some concluding remarks.

2 Modern Scholars on the Gnostic Revolt

As has been pointed out, the Gnostic attitude towards Scripture often attracts modern readers due to it visibly subversive, rebellious, "unorthodox" character. To begin with, the creator of this world, responsible for its imperfections and much suffering, is sometimes identified as the God of Genesis. Characters and scenes that in biblical narratives are normally positive turn out to be negative; and negative ones, positive.⁷ Things traditionally conceived of as crucial errors, notably original sin, are not only seen in a positive light but might even determine salvation, such as is the case with eating from the tree of knowledge. According to Jonas's classic description:

knowledge. This belief was rooted in the proud feeling of man's affinity with the gods, subject to no human law, and so overmastering that it may even subdue the gods by the sheer power of Gnosis." On Borges, see now Roig Lanzillotta 2018a. For Byron, see *Cain. A Mystery*, Act II, scene 2; for Baudelaire, "Élévation", *Fleurs du mal*.

7 On the nature of this revisionist approach, see Luttikhuizen 2006.

Instead of taking over the value-system of the traditional myth, it [scil. Gnostic allegory] proves the deeper “knowledge” by reversing the roles of good and evil, sublime and base, blest and accursed, found in the original. It tries, not to demonstrate agreement, but to shock by blatantly subverting the meaning of the most firmly established, and preferably also the most revered, elements of the tradition.⁸

As Williams rightly remarks, most scholars of the second half of the twentieth century followed Jonas’s view of “protest exegesis.”⁹ However, it is the rebellious tone behind this type of allegory he discovered that interests us here, since it reflects a new sensibility, a new set of values that would upset ancient theology: The world of death and suffering we live in cannot be the product of a good God.

Adolf von Harnack had already described Marcion’s interpretation of the God of the Old Testament, and his demanding ethics, as “not only a protest against matter and flesh, but also a protest against the God of the world and of the Law, which indicates how he wished his fall and his end.”¹⁰ In the wake of Jonas, however, Kurt Rudolph extended it to Gnosticism in general, interpreting the protest more in socio-political than in existential terms, as envisaged by Harnack. Indeed in his view, among the ancient expressions of social protest, ancient “Gnosis was without doubt the most radical voice in this circle” with its rejection of the moral tradition and the visible world of government (including the supernatural).¹¹ Rudolph even saw ancient Gnosis “as an ideology of the dependent petty bourgeoisie, which, however, feels itself called to freedom on the ideological-religious plane.”¹² Also according to Giovanni Filoramo, “violent protest and rebellion against the rulers of this world” were therefore the two basic characteristics of ancient Gnosis, something that, according to Hans Kippenberg, should be explained from a socio-political perspective, since it clearly reflects that, unlike other ancient protest movements, the ancient Gnostic worldview knew no legitimate order or power.¹³ Christoph Elsas in the

8 Jonas 2001, 92.

9 See the views by Rudolph, Couliano, Pearson, Filoramo and Giannotto, and Peter Nagel in the following section.

10 Harnack (1921, 187) writes, “nicht nur ein Protest gegen die Materie und das Fleisch, sondern auch ein Protest gegen den Gott der Welt und des Gesetzes. Er bezeichnet den gewollten Abfall und Austritt.”

11 Rudolph 1987, 292.

12 Rudolph 1987, 292.

13 Filoramo 1990, xiii. Kippenberg 1979, 219–20.

same line posited that this Gnostic attitude might have its origin in a radical opposition to the Roman imperial cult.¹⁴

More recently, scholars have also emphasized the epistemological side of the revolutionary change that Gnostic esotericism supposes, when compared to knowledge transmission in the ancient world. Placed on the “fringes” of first-century Judaism, and more specifically in Jewish apocalypticism, Gnostic esotericism is, according to Guy Stroumsa, radically different from the Greek, since it was concerned not with the *arcana naturae* but with the *arcana dei*.¹⁵ Furthermore, Roelof van den Broek sees echoes of this radical change in the evolution of the term “gnosis,” which, from describing (only) “rational knowledge,” allegedly came to mean “knowledge of the divine world and the true nature of things.”¹⁶

Differently, April D. DeConick, in a series of recent works, adopts a more integral approach to Gnostic non-conformism. Instead of favoring one of the perspectives, she sees Gnostics operating on the margins of the conventional religions “with a countercultural perspective that upset and overturned everything from traditional theology, cosmogony, cosmology, anthropology, hermeneutics, scripture, religious practices, and lifestyle choices.”¹⁷ It is precisely this Gnostic spirit that captivated Albert Camus, beginning when he was a young man.

3 Albert Camus and the Gnostic Revolt

Despite being overlooked by most of the specialized scholarly literature, fascination for ancient Gnosticism accompanied Albert Camus throughout his life.¹⁸ Interest in Gnosticism already appears in the thesis he writes to achieve the title of *diplôme d'études supérieures* in 1936, under the title *Early Christian*

14 Elsas 1990.

15 Stroumsa 1995; 1996; 2006. See, however, Roig Lanzillotta 2018b.

16 van den Broek 2013, 2.

17 DeConick 2016, 7; DeConick 2013.

18 The *Cambridge Companion to Albert Camus*, edited by Edward Hughes (2007), for example does not even mention the word Gnosticism or Marcion one single time. Foley (2008) does not mention the term either; Sherman (2009), does not include gnosis or Gnosticism in the analysis of Camus's thought in *The Rebel*; also Strigley (2011) obviates the theme generally referring to role of “Christianity” but obviating the clear difference Camus establishes between the solution to the problem of theodicy by both Gnosticism and (orthodox) Christianity.

Metaphysics and Neoplatonism.¹⁹ And, expectably, the themes dealt with in it turn up again in his analysis of the excesses of modernity in 1951, in *The Rebel*. In his *Tree of Gnosis* Ioan Couliano even recognizes in the titles of Camus's major works, such as *Exile and Kingdom*, *The Stranger*, *The Fall*, the constant use of Gnostic dualistic metaphors.²⁰ Eric Voegelin, in turn, sees in Camus's intellectual enterprise a quasi-Gnostic experience of catharsis in his answer to modern loss of reality, which "in our time is not only registered by revolutionary violence, noisy propaganda, bloody executions, indifferent complacency, or dull apathy. It is also experienced and suffered as loss."²¹ His description of the situation that Camus intended to counteract is more than clear:

The awareness of suffering a shadowy life, however, is the low point of turning around, the periagoge, from where the ascent from the cave to the light can begin. Our time is characterized not only by extreme losses of reality but also by efforts to fill the form of reality again with the reality of existential tension. The indications—and more than indications—of this movement are the insights into the nature of the second reality, the grotesque and imbecility of this time, into the fraud of systems and intellectual swindle, into the *ersatz* character of images of reality without reality, with their origin in the refusal to apperceive reality.²²

In this sense, Camus's *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942) and *The Rebel* should be seen, according to Voegelin, as first and second phases in the ascent from the cave (of modern nihilism) to the light of new values, respectively, which might even have led him to the third phase of freedom of creation, if his untimely death had not frustrated his meditative progress:²³

Let us add to this list a reference to Albert Camus, whose work is a prototype of existential catharsis. *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942) is still governed by an experience of the absurdity of existence that comes from the area of Dostoevsky's psychology of the revolutionary. Suicide appears as the only possible response to absurdity. In *The Rebel* (1951) Camus accomplished a second phase of the ascent, as he accepts the endurance in uncertainty

19 Thanks to his thesis, roughly comparable to an American master's thesis, Albert Camus received his *diplôme d'études supérieures*, which made him eligible to take the examinations for the *aggregation*.

20 Couliano 1992, 251.

21 Voegelin 1990, 171.

22 Voegelin 1990, 171. Italics in the original.

23 Voegelin 1990, 170–72.

about the meaning of life as his burden and seeks to keep the tension free from dogmatic *ersatz* realities, be they theological, metaphysical, or ideological. The third phase of his meditative progressus, of which he hoped to gain the freedom of creation, was shortened by his untimely death.²⁴

4 Jesus's Coup d'Etat

Be that as it may, the fact is that, as mentioned above, in his 1936 master's thesis *Christian Metaphysics and Neoplatonism*, Camus sketches for the first time the theme of Gnostic revolt.²⁵ The thesis's second chapter, devoted to Gnosticism, is organized around four main themes: (1) the problem of evil, (2) redemption, (3) the theory of intermediaries, and (4) the notion of an ineffable God. At the center of his dealing with the problem of evil we find the figure of Basilides. As is also the case with many other authors from the beginning of the twentieth century, Basilides is the representative *par excellence* of ancient Gnosticism.²⁶ His treatment of the notion of redemption, however, mainly focuses on Marcion who, according to Camus, was "not a speculative thinker but a religious genius."²⁷ In his approach we also see the political motivation behind these rebellious tendencies that we saw in some modern approaches to the Gnostic revolt in the first section. Indeed, in Camus's view, unlike Valentinus, who develops his theological dualism as a solution to the problem of evil, Marcion's distinction between God and demiurge arises from his attitude, more political than metaphysical, of radical opposition towards the creator God:

With Marcion, on the contrary, it is the very keen sense of the novelty of Christianity that gave birth to this radical opposition. In this sense, we have been right to speak of a political rather than a metaphysical thought in the work of Marcion.²⁸

24 Voegelin 1990, 171.

25 Camus 2017. Camus's the thesis was translated into English in 2007 with an introduction by Ronald D. Srigley.

26 Basilides also occupied a central place in the analysis of Carl Gustav Jung, who even apocryphally attributed to him his book *The Seven Sermons to the Dead*. Also Jorge Luis Borges devoted a special place to Basilides, and several of his short stories refer to the Gnostic figure. On Borges's reception of Gnosticism, see Roig Lanzillotta 2018a.

27 Camus 2007, 73.

28 Camus 2007, 74.

It is this political attitude that explains, in Camus's view, the central role Christ takes on for Marcion:

He [i.e. Christ] is nothing less than the envoy of the supreme God, sent to combat the wicked God, the creator of the world, and to deliver man from his domination. Jesus accomplished here below a revolutionary mission. If he atoned for our sins, it is through them that he combats the work of the cruel God. *Emancipator as much as Redeemer, he is the instrument of a kind of metaphysical coup d'état.*²⁹

Jesus Christ is not only redeemer of our sins but also a revolutionary figure who intended to destroy the works of the creator. But Camus goes further, since, in his view, Marcion's belligerent attitude towards the creator God is reflected in his notion of morals as well. Governed by an anti-cosmic dualism and hatred for this world and everything in it, Marcion rejects the idea that it could be the product of the good God. His ideal of an ascetic life is therefore a *proud* asceticism, an attitude with which Marcion intended to scorn the gods of this world and reject their domination, rebelling against the Old Testament God's command to "increase and multiply." In Camus's words:

This pessimistic view also has its source in the problem of evil. Marcion considers the world to be wicked but refuses to believe that God can be its author. If his solution revolves around Redemption, it is because he views the role of Christ in a more ambitious manner than the Christians themselves. *It is a matter of nothing less than the complete destruction of creation.*³⁰

Written in the early 1930s, the thesis by the young Camus still owes much to De Faye's *Gnostiques et Gnosticisme*, which probably followed Harnack's study and provided the model for many of Camus's views on Marcion:³¹

Il faut soustraire l'homme au régime actuel.... L'organe de cette révolution, c'est Jésus-Christ. Il vient donc ici-bas pour défaire et détruire l'oeuvre néfaste du créateur, Il n'est pas son fils, il n'a rien de commun avec lui. Il prendra le contre-pied de tout ce qu'a fait le Démon.³²

²⁹ Camus 2007, 74. Emphasis mine.

³⁰ Camus 2007, 75. Emphasis mine.

³¹ De Faye 1925 [1913], 143–88, esp. 160, 163, 165, 169–70.

³² De Faye 1925 [1913], 163. See von Harnack (1921, 186–89, esp. 187), who instead speaks of "Protest." See on the issue Kinzig 2004, 81.

In Camus's view, the "Spirit of Gnosticism ... extending over more than two centuries ... gathers up all the ideas that lingered about in the period in order to form an *outrageous* Christianity.... But that this heresy was Christian we cannot doubt by a certain *raucous* resonance that runs through it."³³

5 Metaphysical Rebellion

It is in *The Rebel* (1951), however, where the French philosopher gives ancient Gnosticism an important place in the history of human revolt in Western history, which culminated in the fascist and socialist utopian experiments of the last century.³⁴ As Eric Voegelin has rightly pointed out, Camus's main goal in *The Rebel* is to analyze and to overcome the confusions and deformations of modernity, in particular modern intellectual and political apocalyptic movements, which Camus calls modern metaphysical and historical rebellion.³⁵ According to David Sherman, in *The Rebel* Camus intended to provide a "response to institutionalized political violence, institutionalized political violence that has the imprimatur of that 'perfect alibi, philosophy, which can be used for any purpose'."³⁶ Camus's description of the rebel in this work very much recalls the Gnostic attitude: The rebel is "a man who says no, but whose refusal does not imply a renunciation." In fact, his "no" also implies a "yes," since the rebel at the same time affirms the existence of a borderline that demarcates the space of his personal integrity, an inner dimension that he deems inalienable.³⁷ The parallelism is even clearer in the following words:

Metaphysical rebellion is the movement by which man protests against his condition and against the whole of creation. *It is metaphysical because it contests the ends of man and of creation.* The slave protests against the condition in which he finds himself within his state of slavery; the

33 Camus 2007, 86. Emphasis mine.

34 Sherman 2009, 138: "The actual title of the book, *L'Homme Révolté*, is not particularly well captured by the translation 'The Rebel,' which more directly corresponds to *Le Rebelle*, a title that Camus clearly chose not to use. Two better translations (and, ostensibly, Camus's point was to play off the ambiguity) are 'Man in Revolt' and 'Revolted Man'.... 'Man in revolt' suggests that the impulse of revolt arises within the individual, and, beyond this, it implies a metaphysical revolt against the human condition (which was also surely Camus's aim), while 'revolted man' suggests a man who is revolted by the cynical misappropriation of this impulse by sociohistorical forces that would turn it against its noble impetus." Grimstad 2002, 108.

35 Voegelin 1990, 170; Srigley 2003, 1.

36 Sherman 2009, 138.

37 Camus 1991, 13.

metaphysical rebel protests against the condition in which *he finds himself as a man*. The rebel slave affirms that there is something in him that will not tolerate the manner in which his master treats him; *the metaphysical rebel declares that he is frustrated by the universe*. For both of them, it is not only a question of pure and simple negation. In both cases, in fact, we find a value judgment in the name of which the rebel refuses to approve the condition in which he finds himself.³⁸

In the strict sense, metaphysical rebellion does not begin until the end of the eighteenth century, but its remote origins go back to ancient Greek thought, which embodied in Prometheus the “noble image of the Rebel and gave us the most perfect myth of the intelligence in revolt.”³⁹ However, the Greeks are never vindictive and their most vehement rebels always remain, according to Camus, faithful to the idea of moderation. Achilles, Antigone, and Oedipus provide good examples of this in the realm of myth insofar as their rebellious attitudes do not imply radical rejections of the whole system but rather lay claim to corrections within it. Metaphysical rebellion is rather “a claim, motivated by the concept of a complete unity, against the *suffering of life and death*, and a protest against the human condition both for its incompleteness, thanks to death, and its wastefulness, thanks to evil.”⁴⁰

In the realm of philosophy, revolt's first timid attempts can be found in Epicurus's uprising against the kingdom of death. According to Camus, Epicurus's attitude, is more one of resigned acceptance than of contemptuous rejection of the human condition, since the fear of death is banished from life: “Death is nothing to us, for good and evil imply the capacity for sensation, and death is the privation of all sentience.”⁴¹ However, despite Camus's disclaimer (below), the fact is Epicurus made serious attempts at freeing humanity from the fear of the gods. Epicurus contested the possibility that any divine power might have interfered in this world, since this would diminish the bliss of their existence: gods do not bother with human things and therefore provide neither reward for nor punishment to human behavior.⁴² Epicurus consequently managed in any case to eliminate both fear and hope from human hearts, allowing in this way worship to recover its original function: contemplation and

38 Camus 1991, 23. My emphasis.

39 Camus 1991, 27.

40 Camus 1991, 24. Emphasis mine.

41 Epicurus, *Letter to Moeneceus*. Translated by Inwood and Gerson 1994, 123.

42 For a nice discussion on Epicurus's gods see Kany-Turpin 2007. On the discussion as to whether Epicurean gods are real, see Konstan 2011 and the bibliography quoted in his footnotes 1–5.

reverence of the divine.⁴³ There is no teleology; no theodicy in a hostile world that is not particularly designed for human beings. There is consequently no providence, fate or Tyche in his world.⁴⁴

Besides the notion of Greek moderation, the most important impediment to the appearance of the metaphysical rebellion in the ancient world was, according to Camus, the lack of the notion of a personal god from whom the rebel could claim a "personal accounting."⁴⁵ In the Greek world there was no hard divide between gods and men, but rather degrees separating them. This notion begins to develop in Lucretius's *De rerum natura*, who consequently transforms Epicurus into the figure of the proud rebel he never was, attributing to the philosopher the liberation of humanity:

When man's life before man's eyes lay foully
prostrate on the ground, crushed beneath the burden of religion,
which showed her face from the region of the skies,
lowering o'er mortals with aspect dire,
it was a man of Greece who for the first time dared
to lift against her a mortal's eyes, and was the first man
with courage enough to set himself against her, in her way.
Him nor talk about the gods nor thunderbolts checked,
nor the skies with their threatening roar; they merely served
the more deeply to fire his soul, so that he was keen, as pioneer,
to break asunder the closures of nature, to open her tightly-jointed gates.
Therefore, the fervid force of his soul won the fray;
he went out beyond, yes, far beyond, the flaming walls of the world
and he traversed the whole illimitable vast,
by the powers of his mind and his heart.
He returned victor, to tell us what can come to be, what cannot,
in what way each thing has limits put into its powers and it.⁴⁶

We will need to wait until Judaism, however, to see the appearance of "the idea of a personal god who has created, and is therefore responsible for,

43 Epicurus, Frag. 386 Usener. See Otto 1963, 42–43.

44 See Epicurus, Frag. 361 Usener; with García Gual 1981, 165–77.

45 Camus 1991, 28: "Only a personal god can be asked by the rebel for a personal accounting. When the personal god begins his reign, rebellion assumes its most resolutely ferocious aspect and pronounces a definitive no."

46 Lucretius, *De rerum natura* 1, 62–79. Translation by Knapp 1922, 655–56.

everything.”⁴⁷ In Camus’s view, we find, in this context, the “simplified view of creation” that rebellion presupposes, a view in which we see the polarization between god and man, the idea of innocence opposed to guilt, the concept of all of history summed up in the struggle between good and evil. Since then, the God of the Old Testament will be primarily responsible for mobilizing the forces of rebellion. It is at this point that Christianity and Gnosticism appear in the picture of the metaphysical revolt; while the role of the former in *The Rebel* has been widely recognized and commented upon by scholarly literature, the latter has received virtually no attention.⁴⁸

6 Responses to the Implacable God: Christianity and Gnosis

Camus, in the first place, assesses Christianity’s attempt to solve the opposition between the implacable God and the human being by proposing the intermediary figure of Christ. In his view, Christ’s intercession in fact came to solve the two major problems that, up until then, preoccupied the rebel: evil and death. His solution consisted, first, in experiencing them both. “The man-god suffers, too—with patience,” Camus affirms, and consequently, “Evil and death can no longer be entirely imputed to Him since He suffers and dies.”⁴⁹ In the words of Ronald Srigley, “Because the Christian God shares fully in the suffering of his creation, the charge that he is unjust is groundless; and because he does so in order to redeem that creation, so too is the charge that he is indifferent.”⁵⁰

A different solution was attempted by Gnosticism. Instead of extending suffering and death to God, Gnosticism introduces an intermediary figure, who is now responsible for creation and exonerates God of the opprobrium of being responsible for human suffering. Given his view of ancient Gnosis as the fruit of Greco-Christian collaboration, Camus sees in it the characteristic traits of mediation attempts, typical of Hellenism. Valentinus’s eons and Basilides’s

47 Camus (1991, 28) writes: “The Greeks never made the human mind into an armed camp, and in this respect we are inferior to them. Rebellion, after all, can only be imagined in terms of opposition to someone. The only thing that gives meaning to human protest is the idea of a personal god who has created, and is therefore responsible for, everything. And so we can say, without being paradoxical, that in the Western World the history of rebellion is inseparable from the history of Christianity.”

48 See, for example, the sixth chapter of Sherman (2009, 136–72), which is devoted to “rebellion”; Foley 2008, 55–86. See, however, Grimstad (2002, 108–110), who pays due attention to Camus.

49 Camus 1991, 32.

50 Srigley 2003, 3.

gods can in fact be considered to have the same aim, which "is to diminish the absurdity of an intimate relationship between suffering humanity and an implacable god."⁵¹ According to Camus:

This is the special role of Marcion's cruel and bellicose second god. This demiurge is responsible for the creation of a finite world and of death. Our duty is to hate him and at the same time to deny everything that he has created, by means of asceticism, to the point of destroying, by sexual abstinence, all creation. This form of asceticism is therefore both proud and rebellious.⁵²

We hear again the chords the young Camus already struck in his *Early Christian Metaphysics*, as we saw earlier. The problems of theodicy are consequently solved in this system by proposing a different "bogeyman," who is deemed responsible for the existence of death and evil. "Marcion simply alters the course of rebellion and directs it toward an inferior god so as to be better able to exalt the superior god. Gnosis, owing to its Greek origins, remains conciliatory and tends to destroy the Judaic heritage in Christianity."⁵³

The Christian and Gnostic solutions to the problem of suffering and death in this world were frustrated by diverse factors, however. As for the former, the progressive rationalization of Christianity denied the divinity of Christ and with it the solution Christianity had provided for the problems of theodicy:

... suffering once more became the lot of man. Jesus profaned is no more than just one more innocent man whom the representatives of the God of Abraham tortured in a spectacular manner. The abyss that separates the master from the slaves opens again and the cry of revolt falls on the deaf ears of a jealous God.⁵⁴

As for the latter, the Church condemned all Gnostic attempts to remove the motives for a metaphysical rebellion and, "by condemning it [them], swelled the ranks of the rebels," which explains in Camus's view the paroxysm of the totalitarian movements of the twentieth century.⁵⁵

⁵¹ Camus 1991, 32.

⁵² Camus 1991, 32.

⁵³ Camus 1991, 33.

⁵⁴ Camus 1991, 34.

⁵⁵ Camus 1991, 33.

7 The Revival of the Gnostic Revolt: Rebels in Modern Cinema

The modern revival in contemporary cinema of diverse rebellious figures revolting against the oppressive realities in which they live shows that, despite all the efforts invested in silencing it, the Gnostic solution to the problem of theodicy has had unexpected success in modern popular culture. Admittedly, the modern revival of Gnosticism in modern cinema has also resuscitated numerous Gnostic motifs and elements: The clash between light and darkness, the divine spark or god in us, the notion of human alienation, life as a dream, introspection and self-knowledge as a means to redemption, are all elements that are powerfully alluring to the modern imagination.⁵⁶ Equally attractive are numerous misconstructions of the Gnostic spirit that have also reached the modern public. This is the case with the notion of conspiracy, of (sexual) libertinism and secret orgies, of human sacrifices. Among all these images, however, the notion of the Gnostic demiurge and the revolt against him has no doubt been the most successful one.

Modern cinema amply attests to this affirmation in so far as Camus's conception of the "Man in Revolt" in *The Rebel* has been unearthed in numerous movies from the turn of the last century. Of the numerous examples available, I will focus on the following cases: *Cube*, *The Truman Show*, *The Matrix*, *Dark City*, and *Snowpiercer*. After providing a preliminary description of the movies and the particular revolt presented in them, I will offer an over-all interpretation that highlights the presence of Camusian elements in the rebellious attitude of the protagonists.

8 *Cube* (1997)

Let us begin with *Cube*, a film in which six strangers awake to discover they are locked up inside an enclosed, cube-shaped room of futuristic design. As has been pointed out, the *Cube*'s allegory depicts "the endless repetitions of a life without meaning, and the horror of knowing no one, no God, no higher being may be at the helm".⁵⁷ None of the characters, nor the spectators by the way, will ever get to know the reason behind their imprisonment or the powers responsible for it. Not unexpectedly, one of the film's taglines states, "Don't Look For A Reason ... Look For A Way Out." And in the same vein, Worth, one of the characters, thinks that if the *Cube* "ever had a purpose, then it got

⁵⁶ See DeConick 2016 for more on this issue.

⁵⁷ Kunkle 2000, 283.

miscommunicated or lost in the shuffle. This is an accident, a forgotten perpetual, public works project." The skeptic tone of Worth's opinion very much recalls the position defended by the *agnostic* Philo in David Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. According to Hume's character, given the world's faulty and imperfect nature, if it "arose from something like a design," it is plausible to think that it "was only the first rude essay of some infant deity, who afterwards abandoned it, ashamed of his lame performance."⁵⁸ As far as the question of who is responsible, the film is also rather mysterious about the identity of the creator of the Cube's fabric. The matter occupies an important dialogue in the film. While Leaven and Holloway evaluate different possibilities, such as aliens, the government, the Pentagon, multinational corporations, and the police, the skeptic Worth states that, in his view, there is no one behind it: "Nobody is in charge. It's a headless blunder operating under the illusion of a master plan. Can you grasp that? Big Brother is not watching you."⁵⁹ As Sheila Kunkle points out:

[I]n the recognition of the headless force of the Cube, and in describing it as "an accident, a forgotten perpetual public works project that's outta control," Worth allows the group to grasp the meaningless "acephalic" character of the Cube. And, it allows us to draw an interesting parallel between the Cube as a headless and forgotten public works project and the "blind insistence" of modern Science, modern political bureaucracies, and the global expansion of Capitalism.⁶⁰

We the viewers unequivocally understand the characters' status as prisoners, since all of them bear names evoking famous prisons: Holloway. Quentin. Worth. Leaven. Rennes. Kazan.⁶¹ Both the lack of purpose for their captivity and the uncertainty about who is responsible for it points to the film's existentialist approach to reality. On the one hand, the world they live in is pointless, meaning that there is no need to look for its purpose. On the other, the lack of *deus ex machina* leaves the characters without a point of reference and, by the same token, without an external sanction for their values. It is precisely

58 Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* v.

59 Berman 2018.

60 Kunkle 2000, 284.

61 Strick 1998; Holloway: HM Prison Holloway, London, England; Quentin: San Quentin State Prison, San Francisco, USA; Worth: the Federal Correctional Institution, Fort Worth, in Texas, USA; Leaven: Penitentiary, Leavenworth, Leavenworth, Kansas; Rennes: The Centre pénitentiaire de Rennes, a women's prison, Brittany, France; Kazan: Psychiatric Prison Hospital in the city of Kazan, Russia.

this *Geworfenheit* or “thrownness,” to use Heidegger’s term, that will open the door to their freedom. It is only by fighting against their alienation that human beings reintroduce some meaning in their lives. And this again recalls us not only the ancient Gnostic attitude, but also Camus’s approach to it in *The Rebel*.

9 The Truman Show (1998)

The approach is somewhat different in *The Truman Show*. The existential undercurrent remains but is now highlighted instead by the presence of both a master plan and a figure responsible for it. In the live broadcast of *The Truman Show* all over the world, Big Brother is really watching you. Indeed ever since his adoption by the TV studios, Truman Burbank’s life has been designed by Christof, the executive producer of the reality show he is part of.⁶² If in *Cube* life was illusory because its lack of purpose and director, here it is illusory precisely because every single aspect of his life at Seahaven is planned in advance and populated by actors.⁶³ At a certain point, however, Truman begins to perceive fractures in his happy and fictitious existence, and suspicion arises.⁶⁴ Strange things begin to happen: a spotlight falls out of the blue; the rain only falls on him; and a radio channel describes his movements.⁶⁵ All this, together with Sylvia’s opening of Truman’s eyes to the fakeness of his life, awakens in him the will to break free from Seahaven, despite attempts by his wife Meryl and his best friend Marlon. As Randall Verarde has pointed out, Sylvia shares traits with the Gnostic Eve:

Like the gnostic Eve, Sylvia is handled forcibly by male actors in an effort to keep her from Truman. When she and Truman finally do meet in the library and go to the beach together, a frightened Sylvia is picked up by an actor claiming to be her father and forced into his car, never to be seen again in Seahaven. But before she is dragged away, she tells Truman the truth. “You think this is real? It’s all for you. A show. The eyes are everywhere. They’re watching you—right now!”⁶⁶

62 DeConick 2016, 51–76.

63 Porton 1998, 48.

64 Verarde 2000.

65 DeConick 2016, 51.

66 Verarde 2000, 46.

The knowledge provided by Sylvia, together with his longing for a different life, contribute to Truman's decision to break free from his present condition. Again, it is Truman's fight for freedom, his determination to leave behind the apparent ease of his life, preferring the unknown beyond the walls of Seahaven, which gives meaning to his individuality.⁶⁷ We the spectators identify ourselves with Truman's existential revolt. Despite the ambiguity surrounding the end of the movie,⁶⁸ with one of the spectators of the reality show, we would like to yell "Go Truman!"⁶⁹ In Truman we playfully see the fulfilment of the Gnostic revolt against a life of servitude and limited by death. Like Marcion, Truman does not direct his rebellion toward the highest but toward the inferior god, Christof, responsible for his suffering.

10 The Matrix (1999)

In the *Matrix*, Neo faces the problem of being imprisoned in a computer simulation program specifically developed by Artificial Intelligence in order to enslave humanity.⁷⁰ In the twenty-first century, intelligent machines rebelled against their human creators. When humans tried to defend themselves by blocking the machines' access to solar energy, the latter retaliated by harvesting the humans' bioelectric power. The machines use the simulation program called the Matrix to keep trapped and pacified the minds of the humans harvested for this purpose. Consequently, the "material" world in which Neo lives is in fact an illusory perception, enhanced and perpetuated by human ignorance. Except for a small group of rebels living in Zion, humanity shares Neo's destiny and remains asleep regarding true life.

One day, however, Neo reads on the screen of his computer the mysterious message: "Wake up, Neo."⁷¹ As a matter of fact, the whole plot of the movie develops out of Neo's attempt to wake up, to break free from the ignorance that keeps him intoxicated and trapped in an illusory world. As Flannery-Diley and Wagner have pointed out:

This succinct phrase encapsulates the plot of the film, as Neo struggles with the problem of being imprisoned in a "material" world that is

⁶⁷ Porton 1998, 49.

⁶⁸ Verarde 2000, 50.

⁶⁹ DeConick 2016, 76.

⁷⁰ DeConick 2016, 19–50.

⁷¹ Blackmore 2004, 19.

actually a computer simulation program created in the distant future by Artificial Intelligence as a means of enslaving humanity, by perpetuating ignorance in the form of an illusory perception called “the matrix.”⁷²

The external call (on the computer), his awakening, and the process of (self-) knowledge that will liberate him from his imprisonment evokes many of the aspects of the ancient Gnostic worldview and the liberation it promoted from the constrictions of a world deemed a pale reflection of the true one.⁷³ Some studies have also approached these aspects from a Buddhist perspective, even if still others prefer a philosophical approach that highlights Plato’s and Descartes’s skepticism.⁷⁴ Most importantly we have Neo, the hero in revolt against his previous life and against those deemed responsible for his servitude. Even if studies on the movie often refer to Neo and his companions as the “rebels,” strikingly not a single one focuses on the attitude of the rebel as such.⁷⁵

11 Dark City (1998)

The call to “wake up” from the slumber in which humans live is also at the center of *Dark City*, the neo-noir science fiction film directed by Alex Proyas.⁷⁶ Oblivious of himself and not knowing where he is, the protagonist awakes in a bathtub beside a female corpse and a knife. As Tim Blackmore points out, “Murdoch awakens naked in a bath, a dribble of blood on his fore-head. (The new umbilical has just been withdrawn.) He is reborn—jittery, cold, disoriented. Probing for his past, he discovers only useless fragments.”⁷⁷ Thanks to a phone call, he is able to escape a group of Strangers who are after him. More importantly, this phone call provides him crucial information for the further development of the action: “You have lost your memory. There was an experiment. Something went wrong. Your memory was erased.” This is the beginning of a process of self-knowledge that will lead him, first, to know who he is; then to realize that he is immune to the Strangers’ control; and, finally, to grasp the illusory nature of the world in which he lives. These steps puts him on the right

⁷² Flannery-Dailey and Wagner 2016, 1.

⁷³ Flannery-Dailey and Wagner 2001, 3–11.

⁷⁴ Knight & McKnight, 2002; Falzon 2006; Bassler 2017.

⁷⁵ Flannery-Dailey and Wagner 2001, 16–21; Falzon 2006, 99–102. See, however, Barton 2006; Blackmore 2004.

⁷⁶ DeConick 2016, 135–61.

⁷⁷ Blackmore 2004, 19.

track to liberation, since they allow him to counteract the Strangers' control in order to escape their domination.⁷⁸

The Kafka-like atmosphere dominates the movie. "Murdoch hides in shadowy rooms and races down dark streets, pursued by police and bald, ashen men clad in long, dark robes."⁷⁹ Besides the eternal night, the continuous refurbishment of the city, the blurring line separating reality from and dream or day-dream, and guilt, we have the sinister group of aliens with psychokinetic powers to manipulate reality who inject newly fabricated memories in the citizens every day. One of the central scenes of the movie properly depicts human captive condition: every night at twelve o'clock all citizens fall asleep in order to allow the refurbishing of the city by the Strangers. The scene has Murdoch going through the streets of the city trying desperately, if uselessly, to awaken his fellow citizens.⁸⁰ Surrounded by the sleeping inhabitants of the city, only John Murdoch seems to have escaped the control of the Strangers and to move at ease in the dark world that they created to imprison humanity. It is against this world of illusion, false memories and artificial darkness that John Murdoch decides to fight. As Gerlach and Hamilton point out, this rejection of the objective material world helps him in the appreciation of spiritual life and in the construction of a true identity that does not slavishly follow the views of others.⁸¹ Most importantly, his determination to free himself and his fellow citizens from the world of darkness in which they are bound will finally conquer the demons who control their lives.

12 Snowpiercer (2013)

The oppression is even more palpable in *Snowpiercer*, since the last humans on the earth are destined to travelling as passengers in a never-stopping train.⁸² The film by Bong Joon-ho is based on the French graphic novel *Le Transperceneige* by Jacques Lob and Jean-Marc Rochette from 1982.⁸³ Due to the catastrophic results of attempts to counteract global warming by means of climate engineering, a new ice age extinguishes nearly all life, except for animals that can

78 Kwiatkowski 2017. For an interesting analysis of this process of self-knowledge as the search for a new identity based on a new spiritual dimension of his existence, see Michael Wilson 2008, 2–3. See also Gerlach and Hamilton 2004.

79 DeConick 2016, 135.

80 Wilson 2006, 234.

81 Gerlach and Hamilton 2004.

82 Grenier and Castiel 2014.

83 Pettigrew 2016.

adapt to low temperatures and the passengers of *Snowpiercer*: “And that would have been that for *homo sapiens* [*sic*], had it not been for the prescience of a single eccentric multi-billionaire—one Wilford (Ed Harris)—who was always sceptical of the global-cooling scheme. He arranged for a remnant of humanity to be preserved aboard a moving train—the *Snowpiercer* of the title—that ceaselessly circles the frozen Earth.”⁸⁴

Constrained to live in the narrow space of the wagons, humans also occupy a predetermined and fixed place in a highly hierarchical and stratified society: while lower social classes occupy the tail wagons of the train, higher ones those closer to the engine. What is worse, children from the lower class are fed and grown with the secret purpose of “feeding” the engine, namely to use them to replace parts of the machinery. A member of the lower-class tail section, Curtis Everett, decides to lead his fellow-passengers in a revolt that will take them from the last cars to the engine. It is from Wilford that Curtis will claim a personal accounting: responsible for the creation of the train and its injustice and suffering, the magnate is also responsible for mobilizing the forces of rebellion. The rebels manage to make their way through the cars; they fight against a group of masked men, modern archons with hatchets who try without success to stop them in their “way up.” After several luxurious cars they get to the classroom-car, where the teacher indoctrinates the pupils praising both Wilford and the “sacred engine.”

After several vicissitudes, Curtis faces Wilford, the demiurge responsible for both the creation of the *Snowpiercer* and for the injustice of its social system and suffering of the passengers. It is only the destruction of the creator and of his oppressive world that can free the rebels from the injustice of their existence. This is precisely what happens at the end of the film.

13 **Rebellious Figures and Their Particular Revolt**

In my view, these are prime examples of the modern appeal of both rebellious heroes and the controlled, domesticated nature of their revolts. In their search for justice the rebel's uprising is not all-embracing, but rather concerns the figure responsible for his life's injustice and suffering. As far as the hero is concerned, the six characters of *Cube* incarnate the metaphysical rebel; Truman Burbank in *The Truman Show* is at the same time victim and rebel against mass media abuses; Neo in *The Matrix* embodies a more existential kind of hero; and John Murdoch in *Dark City* or Curtis Everett in *Snowpiercer* are presented

84 Freedman 2016.

as political revolutionary figures. Due to ever-changing reasons, all rebel figures in these movies revolt against their current condition, saying “no” to the existence they were living up to this moment. Like the metaphysical rebel in Camus, this “no,” however, is also a “yes,” since it is the proud affirmation of an inalienable personal integrity. Their revolt is no solipsistic move, either; the hero is frustrated by his condition and the world he lives in, but his revolt also paves the way for the liberation of his colleagues—and, implicitly of course, the audience that identifies with him—showing them at the same time the new values upon which a life worth living should be based.

14 Dark Cosmos

Rejection of the world in which the hero lives up to the moment of his uprise is essential in this revolt. All five films expressively describe the oppressive worlds and realities in which the hero and their fellows are forced to live an unhappy and frustrating life. The endless sequence of cubes, booby traps, and uncertainty in the *Cube*; a fake, artificial life designed by the executive producer of a reality show in *The Truman Show*; an illusory, computer generated reality in *The Matrix*; the dark world in which Murdoch lives formed out of implanted memories; and the oppressive life in the globe-spanning *Snowpiercer* train depict the prison out of which the hero wants to break free together with his fellow prisoners. As is also the case with the inhabitants of Plato's cave, most individuals populating these films tacitly accept their lives without even pondering the possibility of something else or looking for a way out. For them the shadows reflected on the cave's wall *are* reality. Without the hero, they would never realize the vacuity of the second-rate reality in which they live. The hero-rebel provides the point of reference of true reality and allows for the liberation of other humans.

15 The Gnostic Demiurge and Modern Oppressors

But what about the demiurge then? What about the power or powers responsible for keeping humans veiled in ignorance and trapped in a reality that is the pale reflection of true life? Modern demiurges may adopt several disguises: while *Cube* opts for a rather existential approach that identifies neither the demiurge nor his motivations, Christof in *The Truman Show* explores the effects and the dangers of life and mind control by mass media. Intelligent machines in *The Matrix* and the Strangers in *Dark City* manage to exploit humanity and

keep it captive in different ways. Finally, Wilford in *Snowpiercer* is the magnate devoid of principles whose greed not only (symbolically) causes the catastrophe due to global warming, but also is responsible for the suffering and death of the inhabitants of the train.

Beyond their changing faces, and independent of their varying intentions, however, these demiurges are equally responsible for the suffering and death they inflict on their victims, something that always produces the same answer in the protagonists: revolt. “Up to this point he has at least remained silent and has abandoned himself to the form of despair in which a condition is accepted even though it is considered unjust.... But from the moment that the rebel finds his voice—even though he says nothing but ‘no’—he begins to desire and to judge.”⁸⁵

Most important for the theme we are dealing with, however, is ensuring that the larger framework also always remains stable. While in Gnosticism the highest God remains untouched, as he is not liable for human suffering, human revolt is always against an intermediary figure, who is held accountable and is directly responsible for the degraded human condition of his victims. The existence of a transcendent, good God assures in Marcion's myth both the existence of the values and the stability of the frame of reference. In the films I have discussed, the transcendent God is notably absent, but the values and the stability of the frame of reference is assured by us, the spectators, who share both the rebel's notion of justice and injustice and his suspicion that a better world is possible beyond the power and control of the “creator God.” The underlying message of both Gnosticism and all these depictions of human despair is consequently positive: Despite all suffering, pain, and death, there is still hope, since there is a caring God far beyond the world who ensures coherence to reality. And this is precisely the function of Gnostic theodicy and the Gnostic rebel's fight against the Demiurge, according to Albert Camus.

16 Modernity of the Rebel

In my exposition, I have made the case for the relevance of Camus's view of the metaphysical rebel for the concept of the rebel in modern cinema. The central place adopted by the antagonism between oppressed and oppressor shows, I think, that the focus is on the humans in revolt and their existential fight against their condition. The figure of the rebel is presented in different ways,

85 Camus 1991, 24.

just as his opponent adopts different disguises. Whether as a philosophical or spiritual, or else a revolutionary figure, it is the individual contest that appeals to us, since in it the hero creates and establishes the new values that will govern reality after the oppressor is defeated. Even if on an individual level, the hero's fight is not solipsistic, however. Given the rebel's communal dimension, these values are also valid for his colleagues and for us the spectators, since he defends something inalienable in humanity and establishes a border that should not be transgressed: the line that protects our human integrity.

While Pauline Christianity, with its idea of the suffering God, provided a suitable answer to the problem of theodicy in the context of ancient society by making pain and suffering the center of life, the Gnostic, in turn, offers us a much more modern solution. If the former reflects archaic thought and society in which pain and suffering were essential elements, Gnosticism provides a more suitable framework for the hedonistic modern American and European world, in which the presence of suffering and pain has been reduced to the minimum. The success of the myth of the demiurge and the hero revolting against him in modern cinema is, to begin with, due to the controlled rebellions it favors, allowing the destruction of the problem but leaving the larger cultural framework (cosmology, theology, ethics, epistemology) and values untouched. However, it also has the advantage of channeling our frustration and rebellious impulses against different aspects of modern society, which in our view are wrong. The censure of the excesses behind mass media, artificial intelligence, or global climate change reflect very well the fragmented experience of the life of modern spectators, in so far as it assesses partial problems in need of urgent solutions, without challenging more basic structures and worldviews. And this was also, despite the Church Fathers and Plotinus, the optimistic character of the ancient Gnostic solution to the problem of theodicy.

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