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Kwiatkowski, Fryderyk

Published in:

Gnosis: Journal of Gnostic Studies

DOI:

[10.1163/2451859X-12340094](https://doi.org/10.1163/2451859X-12340094)

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:

2020

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Kwiatkowski, F. (2020). Eric Voegelin and Gnostic Hollywood: Cinematic Portrayals of the Immanentization of the Eschaton in *Dark City* (1998) and *Pleasantville* (1998). *Gnosis: Journal of Gnostic Studies*, 5(2), 220-242. <https://doi.org/10.1163/2451859X-12340094>

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Eric Voegelin and Gnostic Hollywood: Cinematic Portrayals of the Immanentization of the Eschaton in *Dark City* (1998) and *Pleasantville* (1998)

Fryderyk Kwiatkowski

Jagiellonian University, University of Groningen

f.kwiatkowski@rug.nl

Abstract

In the first part of the paper, I will provide an overview of Eric Voegelin's early thesis about Gnosis which he formulated in *The New Science of Politics* (1952) and *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism* (1968). A special attention will be paid to the idea of the immanentization of the eschaton which remains in the center of his argument. In the second part of the paper, I will analyze two Hollywood films in the light of Voegelin's thesis: *Dark City* (1998) and *Pleasantville* (1998). Firstly, I will argue that the main characters depicted in the films can be classified as Gnostics in Voegelin's sense. Secondly, I will demonstrate that their revolutionary acts reflect the idea of the immanentization of the eschaton.

Keywords

Gnosticism – Hollywood – Eric Voegelin – immanentization – eschaton – Nag Hammadi

1 Gnostics in Hollywood

Imagine an illusionary world governed by imperfect yet unattainable figures.* Because of them, everyone is unknowingly suffering. There are few people, however, who realize the situation. They want to take some action. They want

* An earlier version of this paper was delivered at the “Gnostic America Conference,” 28–31 March, 2018, Rice University, Houston.

to start a revolution, overthrow flawed rulers and make the world a better place. This is a story of the main characters portrayed in *Dark City* (1998) and *Pleasantville* (1998).¹ Produced in the same year, both films focus on the motif of nostalgia toward aestheticized past, explore the tension between utopian and dystopian possibilities, and depict the urban landscape as a hostile dynamic force.² They also introduce and problematize many stereotypical Gnostic traits, such as the dualistic nature of reality, the entrapment in a prison world, or the figure of redeemer who acquires saving knowledge.³ In my treatment of these films, I will examine their Gnostic meanings as well but in contrast to previous studies I wish to follow an unexplored interpretative avenue. By focusing on Eric Voegelin's early thesis about Gnosis in the first part of the paper, I will show how his philosophical theory can be fruitfully applied to study the films.⁴ In the pages that follow, I will not try to argue that the authors of *Dark City* or *Pleasantville* were directly inspired by Voegelin's thought, nor ask whether his ideas have been transmitted to Hollywood and how. Rather, I intend to show that the films express vital components constituting the core of his thought and through filmic means creatively use them to actively engage in the discussion on the relationship between Gnosticism and modernity.

2 Gnostic Revolution according to Eric Voegelin

Eric Voegelin is most often characterized as a philosopher of politics, history, or consciousness, and among American conservative intellectuals acquired the reputation of the most influential thinker in the twentieth century. The recognition of Voegelin's work among American intellectuals has grown progressively during his lifetime and after his death in 1985. Needless to say, several research centers devoted to the study Voegelin's thought have been established (e.g. the "Eric Voegelin Institute" at the Louisiana State University, the "Centre of Eric Voegelin Studies" at the Ghent University),

1 *Dark City*: Proyas 1998. *Pleasantville*: Ross 1998.

2 See Moylan 2000; Aichele 2002; Tryon 2003; Jacobs 2009; Daskalakis 2012; Coon 2013; Smicek 2014a.

3 See Wilson 2006a; 2006b; DeConick 2016; Kwiatkowski 2017.

4 Scholars have used various ways of describing Voegelin's approach to Gnosticism throughout his career, for instance "Gnosticism thesis," see Vondung 1997, 119; "Gnosis thesis," see Henningsen 2000, 16; "gnostic thesis of modernity," see Levy 2002, 5; or "the early version of Voegelin's Gnosis-thesis," Riedl 2012, 80. I shall use the latter's expression since Riedl's discussion of Voegelin's argument by and large refers to the same original sources as discussed in this paper.

academic associations (e.g. the “Eric Voegelin Society”), and two major archive collections: one is located in the “Hoover Institution Archives” at the Stanford University, the other is affiliated to the University of Munich, which later gave rise to the center “Voegelin-Zentrum für Politik, Kultur und Religion.” Under the direction of the “Eric Voegelin Institute” and the general editorship of Ellis Sandoz, the University of Missouri Press published a complete 34 volumes of the *Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*.⁵ In addition, the journal *Political Science Reviewer* devoted two volumes solely to the works of Eric Voegelin (respectively vol. 27 and 34).

After emigrating to the United States in 1938, Voegelin focused on studying spiritual revolts and thinkers who played an important role in the formative period of modernity, such as Joachim of Flora or Jean Bodin. According to Voegelin, they transferred ideas stemming from Gnosticism, the movement which he identified as a phenomenon responsible for the crisis in Western culture and the development of totalitarianism. His diagnosis of modernity, as the Gnostic age, is considered the most famous and controversial aspect of his work. As we shall see, it is not only because he does not demonstrate a historical transmission of ideas typically associated with Gnosticism but also because they cannot be included into his understanding of the term which predominantly signifies immanentist eschatologies and their secular variants.

Voegelin’s fascination with Gnosticism was sparked especially by two works: Hans Urs von Balthasar’s introduction to *Adversus Haereses* by Irenaeus of Lyons and Hans Jonas’s first volume of *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist*.⁶ Balthasar’s discussion of the concept of self-redemption and Jonas’s transhistorical understanding of Gnosticism, hermeneutically embedded in existential philosophy, had a particular effect on Voegelin’s early approach.⁷ In the “Preface to the American Edition” of the *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*, Voegelin writes that the problem of the relationship between ancient Gnosis and modern political movements “goes back to the 1930s, when Hans Jonas published his first volume of *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist*.”⁸

Initially, Voegelin formulated his Gnosis-thesis in “Walgreen Lectures” at the University of Chicago in 1951, published as *The New Science of Politics* (1952, hereafter *NSP*). The book was widely discussed in the United States. In March 1953, *Time* magazine published the review of Voegelin’s *NSP*, which

5 Voegelin 1990–2005.

6 Von Balthasar 1943; Jonas 1934.

7 see Voegelin 2000a, 256; Riedl 2012, 81.

8 Voegelin 2000a, 247.

depicted a radical interpretation of his thesis.⁹ Stretching out its main argument, it discussed issues that were being hotly debated at that time, even though the author did not address them in the book: Cold War politics, the McCarthy Committee, or the Korean War. Despite the controversies on the applicability of Voegelin's thesis to interpret these events, it is indisputable that his thoughts have been widely discussed by American intellectuals and reached mainstream too. Meanwhile, he developed his approach further and presented the results of his work in an inaugural lecture "Wissenschaft, Politik und Gnosis" delivered at the University of Munich in 1958, and the article "Ersatz Religion" in 1960.¹⁰ These were translated into English and first published in 1968 in the book entitled *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism* (1968, hereafter *SPG*).

So, how should we understand Gnosticism according to Voegelin? In his view, it expresses a radical dissatisfaction with the organization of the world, which is considered evil and unjust, and aims to provide certainty and meaning to human's life through the acquisition of Gnosis. In Voegelin's interpretation, it is the inner knowledge of the self, its origins, and destiny. Unveiling the whole structure of reality, Gnosis not only reduces existential and spiritual insecurity but it also serves as an instrument of salvation.¹¹ Contrastingly to Jonas, Voegelin argued that Gnosticism did not emerge as an independent movement but it arose within Christianity as one of its inner possibilities. Its key elements were historically transmitted through Medieval sects and Protestant groups, laying the theological foundations of modernity. According to Voegelin's story, the expectations of the early Christian communities oscillated between the belief in the second coming, which would bring the kingdom of God, and the idea of the church understood as the apocalypse of Christ within temporal history.¹² For some Christians, the persecutions and other terrible earthly experiences nourished their hopes in the realization of the heavenly realm within history. The idea of the millennial revolution ending with the governance of Christ on Earth, which was expressed in *The Revelation of Saint John*, transparently expressed such a vision of eschatology in The New Testament.¹³ Voegelin argued that its inclusion into the canon sparked fateful discussions on how to reconcile millenarian hopes with the idea of the church and its purpose.¹⁴ The orthodox church, eventually, followed the conception of Saint Augustine who

9 Anonymous 1953, 33–37.

10 see Voegelin 1959; 1960.

11 Voegelin 1974a, 113–133; 2000a, 276–278.

12 Voegelin 1974a, 108.

13 Voegelin 1974a, 108.

14 Voegelin 1974a, 108.

in his *City of God* proclaimed that the New Jerusalem will come not until one thousand years shall pass and it will continue only in the realm beyond.

Voegelin posited that although early Gnostic thinkers were suppressed, their ideas were developed and transmitted through works of Dionysius Areopagita, Scotus Eriugena, and Joachim of Flora. Although in the primary Medieval sources, which Voegelin could use, one cannot find confirmation for the presence of ideas commonly linked with Gnosticism, it was the scholarly literature informed by heresiological discourse that led him to accept this assumption. In *NSP*, apart from recommending *Adversus Haereses* of Irenaeus of Lyon as the primary source of knowledge about ancient Gnosticism,¹⁵ Voegelin refers to Eugène de Faye and Simone Pétrement, but of special importance here are Henri-Charles Puech's studies on Manichaeism and Hans Söderberg's on Cathars. Both scholars claimed that there was a "continuity" of Gnostic ideas from antiquity into the Middle Ages.¹⁶ Being unable to give any historical proof to support this view, Voegelin resorts to the following evasive statement:

The economy of this lecture does not allow a description of the gnosis of antiquity or of the history of its transmission into the Western Middle Ages; enough to say that at the time gnosis was a living religious culture on which men could fall back.¹⁷

Therefore, his treatment of Gnosticism or, we should rather say, his creative use of the term, is based on the analysis of the High Middle Ages. Voegelin structures his narrative around Joachim of Flora (1135–1202), Christian theologian and mystic, founder of the monastic order of San Giovanni in Fiore.¹⁸ In his view, Joachim developed a progressive vision of history that provided the most important conceptual framework for the development of modern Gnosticism, vastly influencing the structure of its ideological manifestations up to the present day. From a historiographical perspective, Voegelin's understanding of Joachim's eschatology also diverged from what the original sources have to say, as he based his inquiry on secondary literature.¹⁹ Most of the editorial endeavors toward publishing Joachim's main works have been initiated only after Voegelin died in 1985. Matthias Riedl notes that even now the

15 Voegelin 1974a, 126.

16 Rossbach 2005, 105.

17 Voegelin 1974a, 124.

18 On the role which Joachim of Fiore played in Voegelin's early Gnosis-thesis see especially Riedl 2012, 83–92.

19 In *NSP*, Voegelin refers to the following secondary sources concerning the work of Joachim of Flora, see Grundmann 1927; Dempf 1929; Buonaiuti 1930; Taubes 1947; Löwith 1949.

situation is far from being satisfactory—not all of Joachim’s major works can be read in modern critical editions and none of them have been translated into English.²⁰ Bearing this in mind, we can now discuss Voegelin’s reception of Joachim in greater detail.

The mystic conceived of history in three stages—the Father, the Son, and the Spirit—and imagined that with each transition mankind would acquire greater spiritual awareness. Viewing himself as a prophet, Joachim proclaimed that within his lifetime a great leader would come and establish the perfect era on earth, making a shift from the age of the Son to that of the Spirit.²¹ In contrast to the Augustinian conception that entailed eschatological uncertainty and looked toward the fulfillment in the transcendent realm, Joachim’s vision pertained to the speculation on the meaning of history. This, according to Voegelin, was the reason for its success. Ascribing meaning to the temporal dimension, Joachim offered an illusory hope for achieving existential stability within history. Voegelin concludes that his conception exemplifies the first attempt to *immanentize the Christian eschaton*.²² What does this phrase mean? The term “eschaton,” meaning “last,” derives from the Greek *eschaton* (neut. *eschatos*). It was coined in 1935 by the Protestant theologian Charles Harold Dodd (1884–1973). He defined it as “the divinely ordained climax of history.”²³ In Dodd’s interpretation of the New Testament, the kingdom of God is not located in the sphere of expectation but it is already present in experience, though not fully disclosed.²⁴ Voegelin perceived the Christian eschaton in a more orthodox way. Building on Saint Augustine’s *City of God*, he located the state of perfection, i.e., the eschaton, and fulfillment of humankind beyond nature and history.²⁵ Thus, for Voegelin, the “immanentization of the eschaton” describes human endeavors at drawing transcendence into the frames of history.²⁶ In his view, this aim underlies Gnosticism and defines modernity. It should be interpreted as an attempt to overcome existential tension engendered by the Christian faith. Because God does not participate in man’s everyday life and there is no guarantee whether he even exists, Voegelin argues, many individuals who have been brought into the Christian orbit and do not possess spiritual strength to endure such uncertainty seek reassurance

20 See Riedl 2017, 347.

21 Voegelin 1974a, 110–113.

22 Voegelin 1974a, 119.

23 Dodd 1978, 144.

24 See Dodd 1978, 141–145.

25 Voegelin, 1974a, 119–120.

26 Voegelin 1974a, 124.

in the intramundane world.²⁷ Gnostics aim to achieve this by attributing transcendent meaning to temporality and this is precisely what Joachim did in his speculation.²⁸

Voegelin hastens to add that his construction was still connected to Christianity, as it was imbued with its traditional symbols, particularly the idea of Parousia. On the other hand, it provided the aggregate of new concepts which modern thinkers secularized to express their desire for establishing a perfect world within history: the idea of the Third Realm as the perfect age, the prophet envisioning the course of history, the coming of a great leader, and the community of spiritually autonomous individuals. Progressively depriving these symbols of their original meanings, Medieval heretics, Puritan sectarians, and especially modern philosophers such as Schelling, Hegel, Comte, or Marx avowedly turned against Christianity and located the sphere of ultimate meaning in man. Believing in the inevitable success of their projects of worldly salvation, Gnostics attempted to redeem the world from its immanent evils by means of Gnosis. Asserting that this experiential knowledge underlies the expression of various Gnostic symbols, Voegelin assumed that there was a historical continuity from ancient Gnosis through the Medieval speculation of Joachim of Flora, to modern ideologies—exemplified by positivism or psychoanalysis—and political mass movements, such as nationalism, fascism or communism.²⁹

Voegelin synthesized his argument by providing a list of six characteristics that aimed to grasp the transhistorical nature of the Gnostic attitude:³⁰

- (1) Gnostics are dissatisfied with their situation.
- (2) They believe that the imperfections of the world result from its poor organization.
- (3) Gnostics assume that salvation from the evil of the world is possible.
- (4) They claim that from the corrupt world a better one must evolve in a historical process.
- (5) Gnostics believe that this change can be achieved without assistance by transcendent powers.
- (6) Seeing themselves as prophets who have superior knowledge, Gnostics try to create a program to save the world from evil.³¹

27 Voegelin 1974a, 122.

28 Voegelin 1974a, 119.

29 Voegelin 2000a, 295.

30 Voegelin 2000a, 271.

31 Voegelin 2000a, 297–298.

The first two components are in line with Jonas's early work on Gnosticism which was available to Voegelin. Gnostics pictured by Jonas in *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist* had an utterly pessimistic view on the cosmos and believed that the world was created by an evil, lower being called the Demiurge. They rejected the material world completely, including moral laws and social norms, which in their view represented only a means of strengthening the power of the tyrannical ruler who keeps mankind imprisoned.³² The third and fourth features of Voegelin's characteristics significantly deviate from what Jonas said about Gnosticism. For Jonas, the Gnostic revolution aims not at achieving immanent goals, but at escaping the cosmos into the transcendent sphere:

Gnosis is anything but revolutionary. Since it does not have the world as its goal and is neither directed against a social order of governance (*soziale Herrschaftsordnung*) nor concerned with it, it could even be called "reactionary", insofar as it tries—through its pronounced desistance from the world—to persuade humans to abstain from changing and improving their situation.³³

Building on the radical reinterpretation of Jonas's work, Voegelin envisaged the Gnostic revolution as the key feature of modern ideological and political movements which aim at improving the condition of human beings through the reorganization of the world within the historical process.³⁴ Consequently, Voegelin's understanding of the Gnostic attitude excluded most typical characteristics of ancient Gnosticism—as it was understood by Jonas and other scholars of his time—such as indifference to worldly or social power and radical negation of matter. The fifth and sixth components in Voegelin's model are easily derivable from the previous ones.

3 Three Types of Immanentization

Voegelin's idea of the immanentization of the eschaton synthesizes his understanding of the threats of Gnosticism, and results from his interpretation of the Gnostic revolution as this-worldly. He distinguishes three types of

32 For Jonas's discussion on Gnostics' rejection of the world, defined by "anti-cosmic dualism," and the metaphysical rule of faith by which Demiurge exercises control over his dominion (*heirmamene*) see especially Jonas 1934, 140–210.

33 Jonas 1934, 214; translated by Riedl 2012, 103.

34 Voegelin 1974a, 159–161.

immanentization: *axiological*, *teleological*, and *activist mysticism*.³⁵ In the first variant, which Voegelin found for instance in Thomas More's utopianism, the accent is placed on the anticipated state of perfection but the means through which this is going to be achieved are yet unknown.³⁶ In *axiological* immanentization, the final state is understood negatively, that is when all the evil, suffering, death, and so forth, are eradicated. In the *teleological* type, the importance lies in the movement toward perfection without having a clear idea of how this ideal state will look like in detail. Voegelin recognizes this approach especially in progressivism in which the goal "may consist of no more than the idealization of this or that aspect of the situation, considered valuable by the thinker in question."³⁷ The third form of the immanentization, the *activist mysticism*, is exercised when the state of perfection is to be achieved through a revolutionary act of the complete transformation of human nature into its highest form. This type of immanentization incorporates the first two and Voegelin finds its clearest examples in movements stemming from the work of August Comte and Karl Marx.³⁸ In Voegelin's view, the immanentization can be seen as self-divinization that leads to re-divinization of the world,³⁹ which was de-divinized by Western philosophy and Judeo-Christian tradition after a sacred and profane had been radically separated by Saint Augustine.

Voegelin does not, however, highly value Gnostic enterprises: "[a]ll gnostic movements are involved in the project of abolishing the constitution of being, with its origin in divine, transcendent being, and replacing it with a world-immanent order of being, the perfection of which lies in the realm of human action."⁴⁰ According to Voegelin, God is of a radically different substance than the creation, and thus transcendence and immanence cannot interpenetrate. Divinity is accessible only through faith, not experience, he argues, and for this reason Gnosticism is doomed to failure.⁴¹ Trying to "create the fantasy of a new world,"⁴² Gnostics eventually "killed God." This move has led them to ceaseless fights about whose conception of the perfect society is correct. Voegelin argues that the twentieth century witnessed the bloody harvest of this Gnostic nihilism, reaped especially by the Nazi and communist regimes.

35 Voegelin 1974a, 120–121; 2000a, 299–300.

36 Voegelin 1974a, 121; 2000a, 299.

37 Voegelin 2000a, 299.

38 Voegelin 1974a, 121; 2000a, 300.

39 Voegelin 1974a, 124.

40 Voegelin 2000a, 305.

41 Voegelin 1974a, 120.

42 Voegelin 2000a, 306.

We can now briefly summarize our discussion on Voegelin's philosophical theory. He utilized available scholarly materials on Gnosticism and created a normative category to discredit various modern ideologies (e.g., Hegelianism, psychoanalysis, or scientism) and political movements (e.g., fascism, communism). Despite having no evidence to support his claims, he argued that Gnostic ideas were historically transmitted through the works of people who felt alienated from the world and considered it imperfect and unjust. Moreover, his understanding of Gnosis cannot be reconciled with its most general scholarly sense, advocated by Jonas for example, which refers to the direct knowledge of God that is obtained through revelation. Positing that Gnosticism arose as a response to existential uncertainty that is fostered and sustained by the Augustinian vision of Christianity, Voegelin formulated one of the most controversial theses about theological roots of modernity. It encompassed so many phenomena, movements, and philosophical systems that could hardly be associated with ancient Gnosticism, as it was defined in classical scholarship. That is to say, immanentist eschatologies and their secular reinterpretations are incompatible with the most typical ancient Gnostic ideas, especially the belief in the transcendent God, regarded as the source of values and the ultimate aim of man's spiritual pursuits. Thus, scholars have shown that Voegelin confused Gnosticism with apocalypticism and millenarism, and attached it to Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment enterprises.⁴³

In response to the criticism received both from historians of religion and philosophers, Voegelin reformulated his thesis in his later work and conceived Gnosis as "one component in the historical structure of modernity but no more than one," and came to the conclusion that "[o]f equal importance (...) are apocalyptic, neo-Platonism, hermeticism, alchemy, and magic."⁴⁴ In *The Ecumenic Age* (1974), instead of seeing Gnostic ideas as nodes in the historical chain transmitted through literary means, Voegelin viewed them as equivalent expressions of consciousness. Although he introduced new distinctions and terminology, his diagnosis of Gnosticism as a manifestation of the "psychopathological" condition did not change. He continued to argue that its symbolic expressions mirrored the experience of people who tried to abolish insecurities of existence through Gnosis.

Having discussed key elements of Voegelin's early Gnosis-thesis, we can turn to the analysis of *Dark City* and *Pleasantville*. In what follows, I will examine them by applying Voegelin's six characteristics of the Gnostic attitude to show that the main characters in both films function as modern Gnostics.

43 Cf. Nieli 1987, 336; Sebba 1981, 190; Hanegraaff 1998, 33.

44 Voegelin, n.d.

Numbers 1–6 appearing in parentheses inform that the characters analyzed fulfill the corresponding traits of the Gnostic attitude described by Voegelin.

4 Voegelin's Gnosticism in *Dark City*

The fictional world in *Dark City* is artificially constructed by alien creatures called the "Strangers." They conduct a horrible experiment on human beings who remain unknowingly imprisoned within their creation. Every night the aliens rearrange the city's landscape by using supernatural mental powers which are additionally enhanced by a machine secretly placed under the city. While doing so, they make all people unconscious to erase their memories. Forced to assist them, the former psychiatrist Dr. Daniel P. Schreber created technology through which the Strangers conduct the experiment and perpetually change people's identities.⁴⁵ By means of this enterprise, they try to learn whether the human soul consists of something that exceeds experiential understanding. By possessing full knowledge about the nature of the human soul, the Strangers believe that they will be able to save their race, which is on the edge of extinction.

One night, the main character of the film, John Murdoch, suddenly wakes up resisting the procedure initiated by Dr. Schreber. The latter was able to imprint only a few memories of childhood into John's mind, which were set at a non-existent place called "Shell Beach." Shortly after, the Strangers begin to chase John Murdoch. For unexplained reasons, he possesses mental powers which are of the same nature as theirs. As the plot develops, we learn that Dr. Schreber tries to help John defeat the Strangers. He instructs him about his past, explains what is the nature of Dark City, and who the Strangers are.

In the light of Voegelin's definition, Dr. Schreber and John can be named modern Gnostics. They certainly become dissatisfied with their condition in Dark City. Dr. Schreber, from the very beginning, does not accept the aliens' abhorrent deeds, but in order to live he must serve them (1). John's dissatisfaction

45 The name of the character refers to the German judge Daniel Paul Schreber (1842–1911) who was diagnosed with "dementia praecox," later known as paranoid schizophrenia. He described his experiences in a book *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness*, Schreber 2000 (original title *Denkwürdigkeiten eines Nervenkranken* 1903), famously interpreted by Sigmund Freud in the essay "Psycho-Analytic Notes on an Autobiographical Account of a Case of Paranoia (Dementia Paranoides)" [original title "Psychoanalytische Bemerkungen über einen autobiographisch beschriebenen Fall von Paranoia (Dementia Paranoides)"] 1911], see Freud 1958, Niederland 1984. Apart from the character's name and his association with psychiatry, the film makes no further links with historical Schreber.

develops differently. He progressively questions the reality around him which manifests many inconsistencies, cracks, and shortcomings. He notices, for example, that the city never experiences daylight, regardless of the passing time, and no one knows where is Shell Beach, even though his memories inform him that it should be located nearby the city (1). Before discovering his position in the prison world, John asks Dr. Schreber with unconcealed frustration: “What is happening here? Why is everyone asleep? (...) Why can’t I remember anything? What have you done to me? (...) I want some answers now! Who are they [the Strangers]? Why are they trying to kill me?” Having learned that the mysterious people chasing him are the Strangers, John starts to believe that they are responsible for the poor organization of the world (2). When Dr. Schreber realizes that John acquired mental superpowers, he begins to think that the eradication of the evil brought about by the Strangers is possible. By endowing him with knowledge on how to defeat the aliens, Dr. Schreber enhances his extraordinary abilities (3). This clearly shows that both Murdoch and Dr. Schreber assume that their revolution can lead to a successful outcome and the creation of a better world (4). After revealing to John the history of the city, the psychiatrist says: “The world can be what you make it. You have the power to make anything happen ...” These words resemble a fragment from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* by Nietzsche, quoted by Voegelin in *SPG* as exemplary for Gnostic attitude: “What you called ‘the world’ shall be created only by you: it shall be your reason, your image, your will, your love.”⁴⁶ Crucially, Dr. Schreber and John defeat the Strangers through their own effort only, i.e., without any support of transcendent power (5).

5 Shell Beach and the Idea of the Eschaton

John’s attempt at creating a new world in the image of his false memory of Shell Beach can be viewed as a program or plan on how the idea of the eschaton can be immanentized (6). By means of manifold contrasting elements suggested through narrative and stylistic strategies, the universe of his own making embodies the negative image of Dark City. These features can be grouped together and analyzed by introducing a set of binary oppositions.

The first opposition describes a discrepancy between *light* and *darkness*: Shell Beach, depicted on the bright, colorful postcard found by John, stands in contrast to the gloomy and inimical city shrouded in never-ending night. The atmosphere of idyll, peacefulness, and freedom, which the image evokes,

46 Cited after Voegelin 2000a, 279; Nietzsche 1957, 84.

is achieved by the use of the aesthetics of American 1950s posters and postcards promoting seaside vacations. Another provisional opposition we may construct parallels the previous one and characterizes the battle between *good vs. evil*. Although in John's memory, imprinted by Dr. Schreber, his family home was devoured by fire, he associates Shell Beach with good and stability. Mr. Hand, one of the Strangers, enhances the affinity between good and light by describing the non-existing place in the following way: "So bright there. Brighter times, I guess." The Strangers, through their abhorrent manipulations and experiments on humans, are associated with evil.⁴⁷ Furthermore, compared to the semantic intersection of light and good, evil is linked with darkness, as the Strangers wear black clothes and detest sunlight. The opposition between *knowledge* and *ignorance* describes the antagonistic relationship between John and the Strangers further. For John, Shell Beach functions not only as a specific geographical space but, more importantly, represents the place of his origins and the source of his identity. It stands in opposition to the alien Dark City, where he wakes up completely disoriented and deprived of virtually all memories. The last distinction proposed in this analysis is *inside vs. outside*. Shell Beach is supposed to be located outside the city. On the symbolic level, this suggests that Shell Beach does not belong to the Strangers' dominion.

In Voegelin's terms, John's world-building enterprise exemplifies the *axiological* form of immanentization, as it discloses affinities with Thomas More's concept of utopia. Etymologically, this term is a play on two Greek words: *eu topos*, which means an "ideal place," and *ou topos*, which means "no place."⁴⁸ Firstly, we can agree that John literally builds a non-existent place, Shell Beach. Secondly, this world can be seen as perfect since it is radically opposed to the Strangers' domain. This is suggested through visual means, as the main character's utopia is bathed in golden sunshine. Moreover, in spatial terms, John's Shell Beach can be viewed as a cosmic variation of More's fictional island of utopia, floating in space.

From Voegelin's perspective, John represents a revolutionary Gnostic activist who comes into possession of knowledge and skills by which he wishes to save mankind and create a perfect world, devoid of darkness and evil. Moreover, the film accentuates re-divinization of John and his domain, firstly, by showing that he obtains superhuman skills, which he uses to defeat his opponents and, and secondly, by depicting him as a God-like figure who creates a new world

47 We should note that in the film there is a suggestion that John is not essentially different from the Strangers which blurs the binary oppositions established and maintained in the course of the narrative.

48 Morris and Kross 2009, xxii.

according to his will. In contrast to Voegelin, who does not believe, of course, in the successful realization of Gnostic projects, *Dark City* argues that the creation of a perfect society, designed according to personal beliefs and values, is possible. That said, the film's ending gives room for speculation whether John does not actually become another tyrannical ruler who builds a horrible world that will never experience moonlight.

6 Voegelin's Gnosticism in *Pleasantville*

Filled with lighthearted humor and playful irony, *Pleasantville* significantly differs from gloomy and nightmarish *Dark City*, but it embodies key elements of Voegelin's theory too. The film depicts a story of siblings, David and Jennifer, who are high-school students. One evening, they quarrel about who is going to decide which TV show to watch next. Jennifer prefers to turn on the MTV channel whilst David craves to watch the black and white sitcom from the 1950s called "Pleasantville." It depicts a fictional idyllic little town where basketball players always score points, the rain never falls, and everyone feels good about fulfilling their social roles. During their quarrel, David and Jennifer unwittingly destroy the TV remote control and cannot turn on the set manually anymore. However, the enigmatic TV repairman appears. It turns out that similarly to David, he is a big fan of the "Pleasantville" show and, after discussing with the boy some memorable situations from the sitcom, decides to give him an unusual TV remote control. It turns out that it is a teleportation machine. After using the remote control, David and Jennifer are transferred to the world of "Pleasantville," replacing the fictional siblings, Bud and Mary Sue, the main characters of the show. Soon after, the TV repairman appears on the TV screen in the black and white world. He reveals to the siblings that he was looking for someone who could fit into the Pleasantville and he chose them.

After spending some time in the fictional realm, David and Jennifer realize that it is an unbearable place, governed by repressive practices and narrowly perceived norms of social behavior (1). Broadly speaking, the siblings find the philosophical foundations on which the concept of Pleasantville was built to be morally unacceptable. They recognize that the citizens of Pleasantville cannot think or behave differently from what sitcom creators scripted for them. The fictional siblings' mother, Mrs. Betty Parker, for instance, can think of herself only as a faithful, model housewife. Thus, David and Jennifer identify the impossibility of questioning the established forms of thinking or behaving as morally wrong. They believe that their own condition and that of other denizens of Pleasantville has resulted from the poor organization of the world (2).

Under the influence of David and Jennifer, the citizens progressively undergo personal transformations—they start to perceive the world in new ways and experience bursts of emotions hitherto unknown to them. Jennifer introduces her sitcom mother, Betty Parker, to the idea of sex, which opens up for her unexplored desires and feelings. Soon, she falls in love with Mr. Johnson, the owner of a local burger joint. Moreover, Betty discovers that she does not have to fulfill the role of a model housewife anymore. She leaves her husband, George Parker, and starts to act in accordance with her feelings. David's actions also have a profound effect on other inhabitants of the town. After showing to Mr. Johnson a book with modern art, the man discovers a passion for painting. He starts to perceive art as a means for self-expression; it triggers his creativity and broadens his understanding of the world.

The interactions between the siblings and other citizens transform the fictional town on the physical level as well. For example, the books from the local library, previously blank, start to fill up with content, the rain falls for the first time, and, most importantly, the black and white world of Pleasantville progressively becomes colorful. This change concerns not only particular objects but also sitcom characters who begin to act and think beyond mental frames that were originally designed for them. The siblings, by observing alterations in the ontological fabric of the town, begin to believe that it is possible to redeem it (3). Moreover, the brother and sister are soon perceived by the people of Pleasantville as individuals with higher knowledge who can teach them about unexplored, fascinating ways of experiencing the world. Not everyone in the town, however, shares the enthusiasm concerning the changes initiated by David and Jennifer. To impede them, a reactionary faction has been set up headed by the mayor, Big Bob. The officials have proclaimed a new bill by which they try to restore the original order in Pleasantville. The new law aims at repressing the behavior and practices associated with the “colored” people. As a sign of protest, Mr. Johnson and David paint a colorful mural, for which they are arrested and brought to the court. During the trial, David in his defense says: “There are so many things that are so much better. Like silly or sexy or dangerous or brief. And every one of those things is in you all the time if you just have the guts to look for them.” These words not only explain what prompted him to violate the established code of conduct. In Voegelin's sense, they also disclose his Gnostic approach to the world. David's idea of bringing to Pleasantville a new, better one is based on specific assumptions. First, he believes that human nature is far more complex than the citizens of Pleasantville initially thought, and it consists of elements that might not be transparent or easily accessible to one's consciousness. In his view, critical attitude aimed at questioning widely established forms of thinking coupled with the ability for

self-exploration leads to a greater understanding of reality and, consequently, one's own self. David and his sister believe that by practicing this approach a better world can be established in a historical process by means of humans effort only (4, 5).

7 The Colorful World and the Idea of the Eschaton

The manifestation of color marks the coming of a new, better world in Pleasantville. This is evidenced in the scene when David drives a car with his date, Margaret. As they listen to a song of Etta James "At Last," pink-colored leaves start to fall from the trees on the road. The display of pink is shortly followed by the appearance of other colors in the area called "Lover's Lane." After stopping there, David and Margaret see happy young people and couples spending time together. Other colors start to fill the area which is vividly contrasted with black and white parts of the surroundings. Their introduction is depicted as a quasi-epiphanic experience, which is emphasized by extradiegetic nostalgic music. Colors in the scene are linked to emotions, such as love, and evoke associations with ideas of idyll, peacefulness, freedom, and creativity.

In the light of Voegelin's thesis, the progressive implementation of color in the film can be read as the process by which eschaton is immanentized. Color represents the ability to experience the world in new ways and substitutes the idea of perfection. The approach advocated by David and Jennifer can be classified as a *teleological* form of immanentization. Similarly as progressivists, the characters do not specifically know how exactly the perfect world should be imagined, but they clearly identify the original world from which they were transferred as the model for creating a better one. Comparatively to Diderot and D'Alembert, the characters interpret progress as the quantitative and qualitative increase of good.⁴⁹ This is reflected through their endorsement for the new sensual and existential experiences of the citizens.⁵⁰ By utilizing knowledge, the characters improve the condition of the citizens who had remained in the state of ignorance (6). Dwellers of the fictional town undergo a transformation from the fictional characters into real people and the town becomes fully colored. Similarly to John in *Dark City*, David and Jennifer exceed the limits of the enclosed realms in which they were entrapped. Through their actions, Pleasantville becomes connected to the "real" world, which is

49 Voegelin 1974a, 121.

50 Voegelin 1974a, 121.

evidenced by the appearance of images of the Eiffel Tower and Sphinx of Giza in television commercials seen by David.

At the end of the film, Mr. and Mrs. Parker ponder the unknown future they will have to face. What is significant is that they do not treat the feeling of uncertainty as a potential source of anxiety. On the contrary, they look forward to what may happen with laughter and without fear. Thus, the transformed world in which they begin a new life is depicted as a positive experience.

8 Gnostic Revolution Revisited

In both *Dark City* and *Pleasantville*, the understanding of perfection is relativized to the perspective of the main characters. Voegelin's idea of the immanentization of the eschaton describes their attempts at overcoming oppressive worlds. While trying to transform them, the cinematic characters come to greater self-awareness and obtain philosophical foundations for establishing new worlds. In both films, this transition is signaled by the gradual introduction of bright colors. John, in *Dark City*, possesses an image of sunny Shell Beach which serves him as an ideal model for building a utopia. His efforts embody the notion of *axiological* immanentization. David and Jennifer, in *Pleasantville*, by comparing the sitcom world to the real one from which they were unwillingly taken, apply a progressivist understanding of history to transform the black and white dystopia into a place full of color. Their attempts reflect the idea of *teleological* immanentization.

Although in both films the characters' evaluation of the world is private, they wish to create a better world for everyone. This mirrors Voegelin's view, when he writes that the Gnostic "new kingdom will be universal in substance as well as universal in its claim to dominion; it will extend 'to all persons and things universally.' The revolution of the Gnostics has for its aim the monopoly of existential representation."⁵¹ In this light, "modern Gnostics" in *Dark City* and *Pleasantville* can be seen as activist mystics who obtain enough political power to convince others that the world should be reorganized according to their vision. Thus, both films mirror another important aspect of Voegelin's perception of the Gnostic attitude, which in his view is always historically conditioned:

Gnostic thinkers, leaders, and their followers interpret a concrete society and its order as an eschaton; and, in so far as they apply their fallacious

⁵¹ Voegelin 1974a, 150–151.

construction to concrete social problems, they misrepresent the structure of immanent reality. The eschatological interpretation of history results in a false picture of reality; and errors with regard to the structure of reality have practical consequences when the false conception is made the basis of political action. Specifically, the Gnostic fallacy destroys the oldest wisdom of mankind concerning the rhythm of growth and decay which is the fate of all things under the sun.⁵²

From this fragment, one should note, however, a fundamental difference between Voegelin's assessment of Gnosticism and how the films present main characters and evaluate their revolutionary aims. Voegelin did not believe in the successful realization of Gnostic projects. He treated Gnosticism as an expression of a pathological mind, a form of a spiritual derailment, a disease that has led the Western world into a crisis. By contrast, the main characters in *Dark City* and *Pleasantville*, seen as modern Gnostics, achieve their goals and, more importantly, the films depict their endeavors as desirable. Because John, David, and Jennifer are presented as victims of the hostile and deficient rulers, who limit their freedom and imprison them in the flawed worlds, we sympathize with those characters and support their attempts to establish new worlds.

Interestingly, in *Dark City* and *Pleasantville*, the tension between good and evil, right and wrong, positive and negative, immanent and transcendent is mediated through the transformative use of aesthetics of the American everyday life of the 1950s. In *Dark City*, the effect of nostalgia is provoked by the neo-noir aesthetics and architectural space which reflects the urban landscape especially of the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s.⁵³ In *Pleasantville*, it is triggered by a self-conscious use of color together with the suburban situation comedy style of the 1950s.⁵⁴ In this light, both films refer to the discussion that is aimed at reassessing the decade of Dwight Eisenhower. On the one hand, the 1950s are remembered as the utopian-like period that experienced economic growth and offered a clearly perceived set of social rules that gave a sense of existential stability. On the other, the decade has been criticized for limited modes of self-expression, racism, sexual repression, and various forms of societal exclusion. In this context, *Dark City* and *Pleasantville* communicate the idea of the immanentization of the eschaton by challenging nostalgia toward aestheticized past, which is mediated through technology and the sensibility of the 1990s.

52 Voegelin 1974a, 166.

53 See Tryon 2003, Blackmore 2004.

54 On the utopian construction of suburban space in *Pleasantville*, which draws on the American imagination of the 1950s as a Golden Age, see Smicek 2014, 18–31.

Both of these films suggest that Gnosis in Voegelin's sense (i.e., the experiential knowledge of the self) even if it is fabricated or conditioned by external forces (e.g., hidden world rulers: the Strangers) or media producers (the sitcom creators), functions as an instrument of liberation from social evils. Moreover, *Dark City* and *Pleasantville* depict revolution as a necessary step to overthrow unjust systems based on asymmetric power relations and to establish a more inclusive society, even if it involves acts of violence. However, revolutions in these films are initiated and carried out by individuals who are deprived of political power and represent marginalized, repressed, or exploited social groups. Gnosis, for them, as understood by Voegelin, serves not only as a tool for self-discovery and a weapon for bringing about political transformation but also as a means to sustain the new order in which they can develop themselves further.

In light of Voegelin's thought, these films suggest that we already live in the age of Gnostic wars conducted by different factions whose aim is only to improve their political status. In the bright new world created by John in *Dark City*, the Strangers cannot be included, and in the liberal democracy established by David and Jennifer in *Pleasantville* there is no room for radical conservatism embodied by Big Bob. Since, in the postmodern world, there is no stable point of reference for establishing objective values, as both *Dark City* and *Pleasantville* suggest, the attempt to immanentize the eschaton (i.e., to fulfill the myth of progress and realize the promise of salvation from social evils), represents the political goals of suppressed minorities.

Nonetheless, by drawing on Voegelin's thought, both films recontextualize vital elements of his Gnosis-thesis from the domain of political science into the realm of science fiction. They achieve this through narrative and visual means, discursively entwining the idea of social progress, Gnosis, and inner-worldly salvation in particular. In so doing, both films do not merely reproduce Voegelin's understanding of Gnosticism but they creatively use it to their own advantage. While the philosopher asserted that Gnostic revolutions attempt to destroy the world, *Dark City* and *Pleasantville* show that these radical acts are justified when they challenge societal patterns of oppression and marginalization. As a result, both films develop an original philosophical argument in their own distinctive ways and actively engage in the discussion on Gnosticism and modernity.

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