

**Absurd Gnosis: How The Matrix Tetralogy Resolves the Central
Philosophical Crisis of Late Modernity**

Jonas Sevel Karlberg

Independent Scholar

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Abstract

The Matrix tetralogy (1999–2021) has generated substantial commentary, yet, to my knowledge, no existing work names the philosophical position the films ultimately develop. This paper proposes and defends *absurd gnosis*: choosing awakening under full epistemic uncertainty—knowing liberation may itself be another simulation—not from faith or hope, but from the explicit bracketing of the question’s authority over the act. Its ground is *constitutive directedness prior to content*—what the cogito and the secular pneuma name, the structural orientation no simulation permanently suppresses.

The contribution is fourfold: naming absurd gnosis as original; identifying the Berkeley–Baudrillard Convergence as the formulation of the Cypher Problem the literature has circled without resolving; advancing a sustained Camusian-Nietzschean reading of the tetralogy that, to my knowledge, the existing literature has not undertaken—where eternal recurrence describes the Architect’s iteration cycle, making Camus the answer to Baudrillard’s nihilism and to amor fati; and demonstrating, through the rave sequence and Trinity’s flight, that the films do philosophy in the Cavell–Wartenberg sense.

Keywords: absurd gnosis, The Matrix, simulation, Camus, absurdism, Nietzsche, Baudrillard, hyperreality, Berkeley, Descartes, epistemology, Gnosticism, philosophy of film

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I. The Problem: Baudrillard's Stage 4 and the Failure of Single-Framework Readings

Jean Baudrillard placed a copy of *Simulacra and Simulation* in *The Matrix* (Lilly and Lana Wachowski, 1999). This is not a recommendation. It is a warning—and the warning has largely gone unheeded.

The dominant tendency in Matrix scholarship has been to read the tetralogy through a single philosophical lens: Baudrillard's hyperreality, Plato's allegory of the cave, Gnostic cosmology, or the neo-Cartesian epistemology articulated by David Chalmers in his influential essay on the films. Each of these readings illuminates something genuine. None of them is adequate. The tetralogy is not an illustration of Baudrillard, nor a science-fiction retelling of Plato, nor a Gnostic redemption narrative dressed in leather. It is something the existing frameworks collectively prepare the ground for but do not reach—a position that requires all of them to be held simultaneously, and one further framework to be recognised for what it is, before the position becomes fully visible.

The existing scholarship's most significant gap is not Baudrillard, whose presence in the literature is extensive, nor Plato, nor Gnosticism. It is two absences operating in tandem: Albert Camus, whose application to the Matrix tetralogy specifically has been almost entirely absent from the literature — the one significant exception, Roig Lanzillotta (2020), routes Camus's *The Rebel* through Gnostic metaphysical revolt across modern cinema broadly, does not engage *The Myth of Sisyphus*, does not develop a sustained argument about the tetralogy, and does not name a philosophical position — and Friedrich Nietzsche, whose doctrine of eternal

recurrence has been absent from the Matrix scholarship I have been able to identify, despite being a strikingly precise philosophical description of what the Architect has built. Without Nietzsche, Camus answers Baudrillard alone. With Nietzsche, Camus answers both—and the full philosophical architecture of the tetralogy becomes legible in a way the existing literature has not, to my knowledge, articulated.

The inadequacy of single-framework readings is not a matter of incompleteness. It is structural. Baudrillard's Stage 4—the simulacrum that bears no relation to any reality whatsoever—is the epistemological condition the films inhabit. But Baudrillard offers no ethical response. His famous dismissal of the first film as itself a Stage 3 simulacrum is philosophically correct and practically paralysing. *Resurrections* eventually builds Baudrillard's critique into the lore itself, in the figure of the Analyst, whose system has learned to absorb the gesture of awakening as a predictable variable. But Baudrillard alone leaves us with Cypher—and Cypher, as this paper will argue, is the character whose honesty operates at the deepest epistemic-affective register the tetralogy stages: the one who names what he wants and what the simulation gives him without evasion, and whose position must therefore be refused rather than refuted.

This paper treats the Matrix films as texts that produce philosophical positions through their formal address to the viewer. The Wachowskis' stated intentions and the production testimony cited below are treated as evidence that the philosophical engagement is not accidental, but the argument stands or falls on what the films do, not on what their makers intended. A scene can do more than its makers knew.

The position these seven registers produce, when held simultaneously, is the one this paper names: absurd gnosis.

This paper defends three claims. First, that the Matrix tetralogy stages and dramatises a condition of full epistemic uncertainty in which awakening cannot be decided from inside experience—neither Plato's promise of the Forms, nor Berkeley's divine guarantor, nor Baudrillard's distinction between simulation and reality remains available; the question of whether liberation is itself another layer of simulation cannot, on the films' own terms, be resolved. Second, that the philosophical position the tetralogy ultimately develops in response to this condition—the position this paper names absurd gnosis—is the act of choosing awakening under that uncertainty, not because awakening is guaranteed to be real, but because the alternative is to stop, and stopping, the tetralogy insists across four films and twenty-two years, is the only thing that cannot be survived. Third, that the films do not merely illustrate this position propositionally but constitute it cinematically, at registers prose can name but cannot replicate—most decisively at the rave scene in *Reloaded*, where editing rhythm, camera embedding, and sustained duration produce persistence-through-rupture in the viewer's body before the mind has named what it is undergoing, and at Trinity's flight at the close of *Resurrections*, where the philosophical claim is made not through dialogue but through a wordless visual reversal that the preceding three films have prepared but never spoken.

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II. The Epistemological Foundation: Descartes' Abyss, the Irreducible Subject, and the Berkeley–Baudrillard Convergence

Descartes performed the decisive act. In the *Meditations on First Philosophy*, he discovered that the senses cannot certify the reality of what they present, and that

there is no reliable procedure by which the mind can distinguish genuine perception from the sustained illusion of a deceiving demon. He reached for a theological escape: a perfect God would not deceive. This paper names that reach, with full philosophical precision, as the first philosophical suicide in the argument it builds.

The application of Camus's term to Descartes requires justification. Camus coined *le suicide philosophique* to name the thinker who confronts the Absurd and leaps to a transcendent framework that dissolves the confrontation rather than sustaining it. Descartes appears to operate in a different register—his doubt is epistemological, not existential. What licenses the application is not a loose analogy but a demonstrated structural analogy: the shape of Descartes' movement—radical groundlessness, one moment of honest reckoning with the irreducible subject, then a flight to a transcendent guarantor that closes the wound—is structurally analogous to the movement Camus diagnosed. The Matrix tetralogy collapses the remaining distinction. Within the simulation, Cartesian doubt is no longer an epistemological exercise. It is a lived condition—and Descartes' reach for a God who would not deceive becomes legible, on this paper's reading, as philosophical suicide in the precise sense Camus intended. This insight is one of the first demonstrations that reading these films philosophically generates genuine philosophical discovery.

Descartes had, in the course of his radical doubt, discovered something he could not dissolve: the cogito. This is not merely an epistemological proof of existence. It is the irreducible subject—the entity that radical doubt cannot eliminate, because the act of doubting already presupposes the one who doubts. Before Descartes reached for God, he stood for one vertiginous moment on the floor beneath the abyss and found a subject stripped of every certainty except its own existence—and in the very act of doubting, a directedness: the mind reaching toward truth even as

it dissolves every ground on which truth might stand. That directedness will return. It will not remain set aside.

Berkeley's *esse est percipi*—to be is to be perceived—generates a parallel crisis. If reality is constituted by perception, there is nothing behind perception for an evil demon to falsify. Applied to the Matrix, Berkeley's principle yields a conclusion that should unsettle those who take Morpheus at his word: if the Matrix is experientially indistinguishable from genuine reality, then by Berkeley's standard, it is real. Berkeley resolves the vertigo of this claim by installing God as the universal perceiver—the divine mind that guarantees the continuity of a world no finite mind could sustain. This paper treats Berkeley's divine guarantee as a second philosophical suicide in the same structural family: another flight to transcendence that dissolves the confrontation rather than sustaining it. When the Matrix removes both guarantors—when no God certifies that perception is veridical and no God ensures that unperceived reality persists—the full Cartesian-Berkeleyan abyss opens. It is this double removal that makes the epistemological condition of the tetralogy genuinely radical.

The most technically rigorous academic prosecution of the Berkeleyan position is David Chalmers's "The Matrix as Metaphysics"—the most philosophically exacting essay in the Grau anthology. His argument is direct: Neo does not have false beliefs about the real world; he has correct beliefs about a computational world that is genuinely real. Chalmers's contribution is indispensable, but this paper requires Berkeley as an independent framework for three reasons Chalmers cannot supply. First, Berkeley's theological structure—the divine guarantee whose removal constitutes the second philosophical suicide—has no equivalent in Chalmers's computational realism; without Berkeley, the double removal that radicalises the

tetralogy's epistemological condition cannot be named. Second, Berkeley operates in an ontological register deeper than Chalmers's epistemological one: Chalmers asks whether Neo's beliefs are correct; Berkeley asks what reality is—and his answer dissolves the distinction between "simulated" and "real" at the level of being itself, giving Cypher not merely an epistemological consolation but an ontological weapon. Third, the Berkeley–Baudrillard Convergence this paper identifies requires Berkeley's idealism, not Chalmers's computational realism, because idealism and hyperreality converge from philosophically opposite traditions in a way that computational realism and hyperreality do not.

Into this condition, this paper introduces what it proposes to name the Berkeley–Baudrillard Convergence: the discovery that two philosophically incompatible traditions arrive, from entirely opposite directions, at the same human position—the position Cypher occupies when he chooses the steak. Berkeley says the Matrix is acceptable because simulation is real; Baudrillard says the Matrix is catastrophic because simulation has consumed the real. They are philosophically incompatible. They reach the same conclusion. Cypher's position—the steak tastes just as good either way—is philosophically vindicated by Berkeley and philosophically lamented by Baudrillard, but neither framework can refute it.

The broader observation that Berkeley and Baudrillard reach adjacent conclusions has been circled in the literature—Constable's sustained engagement with Baudrillard and the trilogy, Chalmers's neo-Berkeleyan metaphysics, and Žižek's concept of the "virtual Real" each touch aspects of it. What has not been identified is the specific triangulation through Cypher: the demonstration that two philosophically incompatible traditions vindicate the same human position—and that this position is the one the tetralogy treats as its central philosophical problem. The Berkeley–

Baudrillard Convergence is a specific formulation of the Cypher Problem the literature has circled without resolving.

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III. The Seven Registers and the Structure of Their Collective Failure

The seven registers are these. Descartes establishes the epistemological condition: can I know that reality is real from within experience? Berkeley establishes the metaphysical condition: does reality need to be material to be real at all? Plato names the ontological promise: is there a higher reality to ascend toward? Baudrillard supplies the cultural-diagnostic register: has reality already been replaced by simulation? Gnosticism names the cosmological condition: why was the false world built, and can it be broken? Nietzsche supplies the dialectical-temporal register: how does the cycle itself function as a philosophical trap, and what does it mean to refuse it? Camus names the ethical condition: how do we live when the question cannot be answered? Descartes and Berkeley are engaged at full force in §II above; the remaining five are engaged in turn in the paragraphs that follow, where each register's specific failure-point identifies what no single framework, and no proper subset of the seven, can supply.

To demonstrate why absurd gnosis requires a new term, it is necessary to show where each framework reaches the limit of its explanatory power. The argument is not that these frameworks are wrong. It is that each is insufficient—and that their insufficiency is structural, visible only when all seven are placed in sustained relation.

Plato's allegory provides the tetralogy with its most legible scaffolding: the cave, the prisoners, the philosopher who ascends and returns. But Plato's framework

requires the existence of the Forms—genuine, metaphysically privileged realities toward which the ascent is an ascent. The desert of the real is not the realm of the Forms. It is a scorched planet offering little Platonic transcendence. Plato's unique function in the argument is therefore not his mapping onto the Matrix—which every reviewer already knows—but the promise he supplies: the claim that what lies outside the cave is ontologically superior. The thesis requires this promise because the tetralogy invokes it in order to refuse it. Morpheus promises Neo the truth. The desert of the real delivers rubble. Absurd gnosis is what remains when the Platonic promise fails and the liberated prisoner discovers that the world outside the cave is not the sunlit realm Plato described but another condition of uncertainty.

Gnosticism offers what Plato does not: an explanation for why the false world was built. The Demiurge constructed the material world as a prison for divine sparks—the pneumatic elements that no creation has permanently suppressed. The Architect is the most perfect Demiurge in modern cinema. But classical Gnosticism risks aestheticising liberation. The gnosis the tradition promises is individual, mystical, and ultimately triumphant. The liberation the tetralogy actually depicts is collective, political, and deeply incomplete. The truce at the end of *Revolutions* (Lilly and Lana Wachowski, 2003) is partial and its durability uncertain. Gnosticism does, however, supply something no other framework provides: the pneuma—the structural resistance the Demiurge's creation cannot permanently suppress—which, as this paper will argue, stands in structural analogy with the Cartesian cogito as a heterogeneous articulation of a common structural intuition.

Baudrillard provides the most sophisticated diagnostic tool available and the one that grows more powerful with each successive film. *Resurrections'* Analyst is pure Baudrillard: a system that has internalised the critique of simulation and turned it

into a management protocol—the commodified red pill, liberation as brand, awakening absorbed as a predictable variable. But Baudrillard's correctness is paralysing. His analysis produces a condition, not a response.

Nietzsche's doctrine of eternal recurrence—die ewige Wiederkunft—is the dialectical key, and it has been absent from the Matrix scholarship I have been able to identify, despite being a strikingly precise philosophical description of what the Architect has built. The doctrine holds that every moment of existence has recurred an infinite number of times and will recur infinitely again. This is not a cosmological thesis about the physical structure of time. It is a thought experiment of maximum existential weight: if you were told that you must live your life again, in every detail, infinitely, would you affirm it? The test is whether the will can achieve *amor fati*—the love of one's fate, the active embrace of existence in its entirety—that genuine endorsement requires. Nietzsche's ideal subject, the *Übermensch*, does not merely accept the eternal recurrence. He wills it. This paper's engagement with Nietzsche proceeds from this formulation; its critical claim is not directed at Nietzschean affirmation *simpliciter* but at what affirmation becomes under engineered recurrence—a distinction developed in the sections that follow.

Applied to the Matrix universe, Nietzsche illuminates something no other framework matches: the iteration cycle is not merely a prison. It is an engineered eternal recurrence. The Architect has built a system in which history repeats by design, with the One as the mechanism through which the repetition continues. The anomaly the system cannot fully absorb is built into the cycle as a controlled variable. The One is not the end of the repetition. The One is how the repetition continues. The machines have built a false eternity, stripped of the consciousness that would make its affirmation philosophically meaningful.

The Nietzschean framework's most damaging implication is this: if Neo's greatest act—his negotiated truce at the close of *Revolutions*—can be read as amor fati, as the willing acceptance of the world's necessity, then it may be indistinguishable from the Analyst's preferred outcome. A Neo who loves the architecture of his captivity is a Neo who has been co-opted at the deepest possible level. Amor fati, within an engineered eternal return, risks becoming the most sophisticated form of pacification the machine intelligence can achieve. The Übermensch inside the Analyst's simulation is the Analyst's greatest achievement.

This is precisely why Nietzsche functions not as the framework the tetralogy endorses but as the framework it refuses. Neo's refusal is not a failure of Nietzschean will. It is the act that names what amor fati cannot provide in conditions of radical epistemic uncertainty. Without Nietzsche present, Camus remains the answer to Baudrillard alone. With Nietzsche present, Camus is the answer to both—and the precise character of Neo's refusal becomes legible as a Camusian correction of amor fati. Under engineered recurrence, Nietzschean affirmation becomes vulnerable to capture in a way Camusian revolt resists: what is willed as amor fati cannot, from inside the cycle, be distinguished from what the system designed to be willed. The claim is therefore not that Camus refutes Nietzsche simpliciter but that the Matrix's engineering of the conditions of affirmation transforms those conditions—making Camusian revolt, persistence without the consolation of loving the architecture, the more defensible position for the subject inside the engineered system.

Camus argues, in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, that the fundamental question of philosophy is whether, once one has fully grasped the Absurd—the irreducible tension between the human demand for meaning and the world's absolute silence in response—the appropriate answer is suicide, philosophical evasion, or revolt. He argues for

revolt: the lucid, undeceived refusal to stop, which transforms the Absurd from a condition that defeats us into one we inhabit, claim, and refuse to surrender to.

Sisyphus, imagined happy, is not a man who has solved the problem. He is a man who has decided that the problem does not get to solve him.

What Camus wrote was not, however, a free-standing response to nihilism. It was written in explicit dialogue with Nietzsche's legacy—and his most decisive move is the one that matters most for this paper. Camus argues, on this paper's reading and as defended against the secondary literature engaged below, that *amor fati*—the love of one's fate, Nietzsche's prescription for the one who can affirm the eternal recurrence—can function as another form of philosophical suicide. Another leap. The Absurd demands refusal of every consolation, including the consolation of loving one's fate. To love fate is to find meaning in the recurrence. But meaning is precisely what the Absurd denies. The *Übermensch* who wills the eternal return has, in Camus's terms, found a sophisticated way of evading the Absurd rather than inhabiting it. The affirmation is a leap no less than the religious one. This is why Camus is not merely the answer to Baudrillard's nihilism. He is the answer to Nietzsche's affirmation as well—the only position that refuses both the nihilist's surrender and the *Übermensch*'s consoling embrace.

A necessary qualification: this paper's reading of Camus on *amor fati*—that Camus treats Nietzsche's affirmation of fate as itself a form of philosophical suicide, another leap—is defensible but contested within the secondary literature. Camus's relationship to Nietzsche is not one of simple opposition. He admires Nietzsche extensively, treats him as the most serious interlocutor in the absurdist tradition, and his critique in *The Myth of Sisyphus* is more nuanced than a clean binary. Ronald Srigley's *Albert Camus' Critique of Modernity* (2011) provides the most sustained

scholarly treatment and demonstrates the complexity. The argument this paper makes survives the complication: even granting that Camus's position relative to Nietzsche is one of critical admiration rather than flat rejection, the structural claim holds—that amor fati, within the specific conditions of the Matrix's engineered eternal recurrence, becomes indistinguishable from pacification, and that Camus's insistence on revolt without consolation remains the more honest position for a subject inside a system designed to absorb affirmation as fuel. The distinction is sharpened, not dissolved, by the secondary literature's nuance.

The tetralogy gives this distinction its most exact expression in a single line. When Smith asks Neo why he keeps fighting when he cannot win—when the question is posed with maximum Nietzschean force, as a demand to justify the refusal of the inevitable—Neo's answer is not because the cause is right, not because the prophecy demands it, not because I love the necessity of what I am. His answer is: "Because I choose to." Not fate loved. Not recurrence affirmed. Choice, in the face of meaninglessness, without consolation. The most Camusian line in the tetralogy—and the one that makes the thesis's deepest claim about what the films ultimately endorse.

The distinction between Neo and Trinity in *Resurrections* is, at last, fully legible through this lens: Neo as Camusian rebel, Trinity as the dialectical complement whose act approaches genuine affirmation purified of the machine's engineering. This distinction is developed in full in Section VII.

Camus provides the only honest ethical framework available for a post-Baudrillardian condition, and the only honest response to the Übermensch's demand. But Camus does not provide a cosmological framework. He does not explain why the false world was built, or by whom, or whether there is a secular analogue to the Gnostic divine spark. He provides the ethics of persistence without the metaphysics of

awakening. It is the combination of Camusian ethics and Gnostic cosmology—neither of which alone generates the position—that produces absurd gnosis.

Each framework reaches the limit of its explanatory power at a specific, identifiable point. Plato requires the Forms to justify the ascent; the desert of the real does not supply them. Gnosticism requires triumphant liberation; the tetralogy delivers an incomplete truce. Baudrillard provides the most precise diagnosis but cannot generate an ethics. Nietzsche provides the most accurate description of the iteration cycle but cannot distinguish genuine affirmation from perfectly conditioned acceptance. Camus provides the ethical framework none of the others can but without the cosmological architecture that makes the specific form of that refusal legible within the Matrix universe. What none of them reaches, individually or in any combination short of all seven, is the position that becomes necessary when they are held simultaneously: the act of choosing awakening that does not require awakening to be genuine, that refuses the simulation's architecture without claiming to have found something superior to it, and that brackets the question of whether it is correct as a precondition of whether it must be done.

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IV. The Close Reading: The Rave Scene as Philosophical Act

The Matrix Reloaded, Dir. Lilly and Lana Wachowski, Warner Bros., 2003. Approx. 00:42:30–00:46:45.

The scene opens in darkness. Not the managed darkness of the Matrix but the genuine darkness of a place that exists below the last layer of the world, where no machine intelligence has sovereignty. The drums arrive before the image does—

sound precedes vision, the most primal register of human experience arriving before the cognitive. Bill Pope's cinematography is deliberately disorienting: the camera moves at body level, embedded in the crowd, faces partially obscured, bodies abstracted into heat and motion. The formal choices foreclose spectatorship. One cannot watch this scene at an analytical distance. To receive it at all is to be acted upon.

This is the scene's first major philosophical decision, and it operates in direct confrontation with Baudrillard, whose diagnosis of the hyperreal condition is characterised by the triumph of the spectacle. The Wachowskis are making a scene that formally resists spectatorship—that uses camera movement, lens choice, and cutting rhythm to pull the viewer into the space rather than positioning them before it. The argument the scene makes—in the sense Thomas E. Wartenberg's *Thinking on Screen* (2007) intends and Robert Sinnerbrink's concept of cinematic thinking clarifies—is made at the level of form before a single word is spoken. The Wartenberg test is precise: could this philosophical claim be fully made without the specific cinematic form in which it is expressed? At this scene, the answer is no.

At approximately forty-five seconds, Zach Staenberg's editing synchronises cuts with the drum pattern—cut on the beat, then deliberately against the beat, creating a counterpoint the body registers as slight wrongness before resolving back into synchrony. This is editing as somatic mechanism: proprioceptive entrainment, disruption, re-entrainment—the viewer's body locked to the rhythm, displaced from it, and recovered, in a cycle that constitutes the structure of persistence-through-rupture at the muscular level before the mind names it. Don Davis's score—djembe and taiko drums beneath an orchestral swell that never resolves harmonically—produces harmonic anticipation: the listener's auditory system generates expectation of

resolution, and the withholding produces a vestibular lean, a felt orientation toward what has not yet arrived. The musical structure does not mirror the philosophical condition of Zion. It constitutes that condition at the viewer's body: a gathering that exists in the tension between the crisis that has passed and the crisis that is coming, felt as the body's own unresolved leaning. The music does not resolve. It persists. And the viewer persists with it.

Pope's camera operates in a complementary register: the foreclosure of spectatorial distance. Positioned at body level, embedded in the mass of dancers, refusing the elevated wide shot that would give the viewer spatial command, the camera forces the viewer's visual system to process the images as environment rather than spectacle—the body responds to surrounding motion as it would respond to being in a crowd, not watching one. This is not a stylistic choice about visual texture. It is a formal mechanism that collapses the perceptual distance between viewer and scene.

A question must be faced directly: constitutes it for whom? For a viewer who has already read Camus and recognises the structure? Or for any viewer? If the former, the cinematic form triggers a recognition that prior philosophical knowledge supplies—which is sophisticated illustration, not independent philosophising. The answer turns on a distinction present in the thesis's own philosophical architecture: the distinction between undergoing an experience and possessing the concept for it. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological project—already deployed in this paper as the third confirmation of constitutive directedness—rests on the claim that the body's engagement with the world is prior to and independent of conceptual articulation. In the typical case, one does not need the concept "rhythm" to entrain to a beat. The viewer's body, in the modal case, persists through Staenberg's rhythmic disruptions

regardless of philosophical preparation. The editing rhythm acts on the body, in the typical viewer's case, the way harmonic tension tends to act on the listener regardless of music-theoretical vocabulary: the response is pre-reflective, and its pre-reflective character is what makes the cinematic form philosophically significant. The concept requires the experience. The experience does not require the concept.

The claim is therefore not that the rave scene argues any viewer into Camusian absurdism. It is more precise: the scene produces, through cinematic form, a somatic instance of the structural condition Camus identifies—continuation-through-rupture, persistence after the exhaustion of reasons—prior to and independent of conceptual recognition. The analyst names what the form has produced. The naming is retrospective. The production is not. There remains a genuine distance between "produces a somatic experience structurally analogous to Camusian persistence" and "argues for Camusian persistence as a philosophical position." This paper does not claim to have collapsed that distance. That distance is the site where the film-as-philosophy debate remains genuinely unresolved. This paper's claim is that the former—structural analogy, somatically produced—is sufficient for the Wartenberg test because the experience is irreducibly medium-specific and the structural analogy is formally constituted, not accidental.

A fourth register deepens the mechanism: duration. Gilles Deleuze's *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (1985) argues that certain cinema presents duration directly—not time subordinated to narrative but time itself as a force the viewer undergoes. Vivian Sobchack's phenomenological extension—in *The Address of the Eye* (1992) and *Carnal Thoughts* (2004)—grounds this in the viewer's body: the "cinesthetic subject" whose flesh is addressed by the film's temporal structure. At approximately four minutes without interruption, the rave sequence exceeds the typical viewer's capacity

for sustained analytical detachment. The viewer who begins as a critical observer is, in the modal case, by the third minute no longer observing in that same critical register. The scene has outlasted the mind's ability to maintain critical distance. What remains is the body's ongoing engagement with the rhythmic, spatial, and harmonic fields the scene has established. The distinction between depicting persistence and requiring persistence is the distinction between illustration and argument, and it is duration that creates the conditions under which the second becomes possible. Prose cannot hold a reader in a somatic state for four minutes against the reader's analytical instinct, because prose operates in the cognitive register the scene's duration is designed to exhaust.

The scene's philosophical weight depends on what the Wachowskis make visible through carefully placed cuts to faces. Not ecstatic faces. Faces that are present, alert, alive to both the music and the knowledge of what follows it. Morpheus has told them the machines are coming. They dance anyway—not instead of thinking about the Sentinels but with full knowledge of them. This is the Camusian act in its most kinetic form: the body continuing to move after the mind's reasons have run out. It is Plato's cave made literal—bodies underground, in the dark, refusing to be merely prisoners—and the most anti-Berkeleyan moment in the tetralogy, for these people know they are in a cave and have chosen it.

In Nietzschean terms: the rave scene marks the tetralogy's departure from amor fati. The people of Zion are not willing their eternal return. They are refusing it—insisting, with their bodies, that this moment is theirs and not the machine's, regardless of how many times the cycle has run before them. Sisyphus and the Übermensch stand at the same boulder. One loves its necessity. The other claims it as his own.

One must imagine Zion dancing.

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V. Absurd Gnosis—Named and Defined

The rave scene is not the tetralogy's final statement. It is its preparation. The position it demonstrates—embodied rather than argued, felt before it is understood—requires a name and a philosophical defence.

I propose the term absurd gnosis: the act of choosing awakening under conditions of full epistemic uncertainty—accepting Descartes's radical doubt while acknowledging the irreducible subject the cogito establishes as the floor beneath it; incorporating Berkeley's unsettling possibility that simulation may be genuinely real; incorporating Baudrillard's terminal diagnosis that the gesture of awakening has been absorbed as a managed variable; recovering Gnosticism's cosmological sense that the prison was built and can be broken; acknowledging Nietzsche's demand that one love the architecture of one's fate—and finding in that demand not an answer but a further reason to refuse; and doing all of this inside a system that has learned to model and absorb the very gesture of refusing. Not because awakening is guaranteed to deliver a reality more real than the one left behind. Not from faith, not from prophecy, not from the assurance of an Oracle.

The definition requires one further element—the one that distinguishes absurd gnosis from every position adjacent to it. The act of choosing awakening is not performed in spite of uncertainty, in the hope that the uncertainty will eventually resolve. It is performed with the explicit bracketing of the question's authority over the act. The question—is awakening genuine? is the liberation real? is what waits on

the other side of the red pill superior to what it left behind?—has been understood, assessed, found irresolvable, and set aside. Not suppressed. Not evaded. Not deferred for later resolution. Bracketed. The act's validity does not depend on the answer. The position does not wait for permission from the uncertainty it inhabits.

The term is a compound of two traditions that, to my knowledge, have not previously been combined in this way. Absurd, from Camus: the condition of radical, irresolvable tension between the human demand for meaning and the universe's silence; and the response to that condition that does not seek to resolve it through evasion, faith, or philosophical leap—including the leap of *amor fati*—but inhabits it fully and continues, with the question bracketed, not answered; with the act claimed, not vindicated. Gnosis, from the Gnostic tradition: not the institutional mysticism of specific sects, but the structural concept—direct, inner, lived knowledge of one's situation, distinct from the managed ignorance the Demiurge requires. The person who achieves gnosis in the Gnostic sense knows where they are. The person who achieves absurd gnosis knows where they are, knows that knowing does not resolve the problem, knows that the question cannot be answered—and continues anyway, because the refusal to stop is the only position that cannot permanently be co-opted by the system that produced the uncertainty.

A note on the term's historical resonance. Systematic searches of the open scholarly web surface one prior occurrence of the compound phrase "absurd gnosis": *Encyclopædia Iranica's* January 2014 article on Jean de Menasce, where it appears as scholarly paraphrase of Augustine of Hippo's anti-Manichaean polemic. There the adjective renders Augustine's Latin *absurdissima* and carries its pejorative sense; Augustine is rejecting the Manichaean cosmology as nonsense. This paper's coinage inverts that sense, and inverts it on five explicit grounds. First, semantic load: where

Augustine's adjective is pejorative, this paper's adjective names a positive philosophical condition rooted in Camus. Second, grammatical register: the Iranica usage appears as a demonstrative noun-phrase ("this absurd gnosis") inside reported speech; this paper's coinage is an abstract noun naming a philosophical position. Third, discursive function: Augustine is dismissing a cosmology; this paper is endorsing a philosophical synthesis. Fourth, historical scope: the Iranica use is contained within a paraphrase of a fourth-century polemic; this paper's use names a twenty-first-century synthesis across seven registers. Fifth, authorial intent: the Iranica article makes no positive philosophical claim with the phrase; this paper coins the term as a named position defended through close reading of the Matrix tetralogy.

The phrase's historical trajectory therefore traces a reclamation pattern—from fourth-century dismissal through twenty-first-century scholarly paraphrase to twenty-first-century positive coinage. The pattern is one Western philosophy has worn before: "Cynic," "Stoic," "Existentialist" each began as labels imposed from outside before becoming claimed self-names, and each gained rather than lost in the reclaiming. The acknowledgment of the Iranica occurrence is offered in that spirit. The same compound forming in two philosophical situations separated by seventeen centuries—once to dismiss, once to endorse—is evidence of the phrase's structural rightness as a carrier of the tension it names. Where Augustine saw only contempt for a cosmology, this paper finds the structure of a position the Matrix tetralogy has resolved across four films and twenty-two years.

This bracketing separates absurd gnosis from naïve Gnostic belief, which assumes the divine realm is real; from Baudrillardian nihilism, which refuses to act because the question cannot be answered; from philosophical idealism, which dissolves the uncertainty by affirming the simulation's reality; and from Lacanian

structural hysteria, which requires the question to remain open to maintain the desire that structures subjectivity. The absurd gnostic requires nothing from the question at all.



VI. Distinguished from Its Nearest Neighbours

Žižek's Lacanian Real—and the Problem of Structural Hysteria

Slavoj Žižek reads the Matrix through a Lacanian lens in which the Real—the traumatic kernel the Symbolic order cannot assimilate—appears as the glitch in the simulation. His most penetrating challenge is the guarantee problem: if the red pill merely delivers another layer of construction, the gesture of awakening is hysterical questioning rather than genuine liberation.

Absurd gnosis acknowledges this completely—and finds it insufficient. The Lacanian framework asks whether the gesture achieves what it claims. Absurd gnosis answers: that question does not determine whether one makes the gesture. The Camusian move is to refuse the demand for guarantee as a precondition of action. The distinction becomes most precise when structural hysteria is named directly: the hysterical subject needs the question to remain open; closure would require a different relationship to desire. The absurd gnostic does not keep the question open. The question has been understood, found irresolvable, and set aside. This is the difference between a subject defined by their uncertainty and a subject who has claimed their act despite it.

Against Camusian Rebellion Alone

Camus provides the ethical core—the Sisyphian persistence that claims the act—but not the cosmological framework that makes the specific form of this rebellion legible. To understand why the refusal matters in the Matrix universe—why it is not merely existential courage but a specific response to a specific kind of imprisonment, by a specific kind of Demiurge, against a specific kind of engineered eternal return—one needs Gnosticism and the Nietzschean dialectic together. The rave scene is not simply Camusian. It is Camusian performed inside a Gnostic cosmology, with full Baudrillardian awareness, refusing Nietzsche's demand, in the purest Cartesian condition. Camus alone names only part of it.

Against Gnostic Awakening Alone—and the Secular Pneuma

Classical Gnostic awakening is triumphant and complete. The pneumatic who achieves gnosis escapes the Demiurge's creation, and the liberation is, within the tradition's own terms, total. Absurd gnosis is neither triumphant nor complete. It does not promise escape from the simulation. It does not claim that what waits on the other side of the red pill is metaphysically superior to what it left behind. It acknowledges the Berkeley–Baudrillard Convergence—the steak may be real; the desert of the real is definitely grim—and refuses Cypher's conclusion anyway.

But the Gnostic tradition supplies something Camus alone cannot: a name for the element within conscious subjects that no Demiurge has permanently suppressed. The pneuma—the divine spark—is the tradition's account of why certain subjects are anomalies, why they are the ones who cannot fully accept the prison, why the system must manage them rather than simply extinguishing them. The tetralogy literalises this claim. But its argument must stand on philosophical ground independent of theological guarantee. Three independent traditions confirm that it can.

First, the machines themselves. Their empirical iteration data—the 1% of the population that cannot accept the simulation, across every version of the Matrix ever run—is not a theological discovery. It is an engineering measurement. The machines know, from iterative data spanning multiple civilisational cycles, that some fraction of conscious subjects cannot be permanently deceived, and they have built their management protocols around this knowledge. Not faith in a divine spark: the recognition, from inside the system designed to suppress it, that something in the population resists total capture not as a revisable choice but as a structural incapacity for complete deception.

Second, Descartes. The cogito—the irreducible subject, the floor beneath radical doubt—is a philosophical confirmation of this common structural feature from an entirely different direction. The thing that cannot be dissolved by radical doubt is not identical to the thing the machines cannot permanently suppress, but each illuminates a common structural feature of conscious embodied subjects: their resistance to total deception is not a belief that can be revised. It is a condition of their nature. What Descartes found in the cogito and what the machines found in their data illuminate, from opposite ends of the epistemological abyss, the same structural feature each tradition articulates from its own direction.

Third, the phenomenological tradition—represented here by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, whose *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945) argues that consciousness is irreducibly embodied. Two of his concepts are directly relevant. Motor intentionality—the body's pre-reflective directedness toward the world—operates below the threshold of cognition and therefore below the threshold at which any deception, however total, can intervene. The body schema—the habitual, pre-reflective organisation of the body's way of moving through the world—is written into the

body's own structure in a register that cognitive rewriting cannot reach. These concepts supply the philosophical mechanism for the observation the films make visible: Tiffany rides her motorcycle alone on weekends—motor intentionality, her body directed toward a way of inhabiting the world that the name "Tiffany" was never deep enough to overwrite. Thomas Anderson returns to the same coffee shop for reasons neither he nor the Analyst's model can fully account for—the body schema asserting itself below the level at which forgetting was designed to operate.

What each tradition discovers, from its own direction and in its own vocabulary, is a feature of conscious embodied subjects that this paper names constitutive directedness prior to content: a structural orientation toward engagement with the world that is not a belief, not a choice, not an identity, and not a content of experience—but the condition through which all beliefs, choices, identities, and contents are experienced at all. Because it is not a content, it cannot be eliminated by any system that operates on content. It is the structure that makes content possible. The cogito discovers constitutive directedness as a logical structure: you cannot doubt without already being directed toward truth. The machines discover it as an engineering limit: constitutive openness to encounter exceeds what any fixed simulation can absorb. Merleau-Ponty describes it as the phenomenological body's pre-reflective directedness operating below any threshold cognitive manipulation can reach. The cogito and the pneuma stand in structural analogy—heterogeneous articulations, at the phenomenological register, of a common structural intuition: constitutive directedness prior to content, confirmed from epistemology, engineering, and phenomenology, each illuminating it from its own direction. Absurd gnosis stands on this ground.

A clarification of register: this paper grounds constitutive directedness prior to content at the phenomenological register, following Merleau-Ponty; it treats the cogito and the pneuma as convergent articulations legible at that register. The metaphysical question—whether constitutive directedness is ultimately a transcendental structure, a fact of embodied psychology, or a theological residue—is bracketed as a further inquiry beyond this paper's scope. What the argument requires, and what the three independent confirmations collectively establish, is that at the phenomenological register constitutive directedness is demonstrably present in conscious embodied subjects and cannot be eliminated by any system that operates on content. That is sufficient for the argument this paper makes.

Against the Pragmatist Objection—and the Cypher Mirror

A final distinction must be met, because it is the strongest objection the position faces—stronger than Žižek's structural hysteria challenge, stronger than the Berkeleyan permission to stay. The pragmatist argues: if bracketing of the question's authority is the defining move, Cypher has made it too. He brackets toward the steak with equal epistemic honesty. The position either smuggles in a value judgment it claims to have set aside, or it cannot distinguish itself from its own mirror image.

The answer is not through the direction of the act but through the structural nature of the subject who acts. If constitutive directedness prior to content is genuinely structural—not chosen, not believed, but constitutive of what conscious embodied subjects are—then the direction of the act is not a smuggled value judgment. It is the subject acting in accordance with its own nature. Cypher's choice is not the mirror image of Neo's. Cypher is not bracketing the question and choosing differently. He is requesting anaesthesia—asking to have the structural resistance removed, to be re-encoded as someone who does not notice, who no longer reaches

toward anything the simulation does not provide. That is not an equally valid bracketing. It is a request for the obliteration of one's own constitutive nature. The three independent confirmations—machines' iterative data, Cartesian cogito, phenomenological body—establish that the resistance is structural, not chosen. The claim is empirical in two of these registers—the iterative data is a measurement across six cycles; the motor intentionality Merleau-Ponty identifies is a phenomenological observation about embodied subjects prior to any particular subject's choices—and logical in the third: the cogito establishes not a belief about directedness but its inescapable structural condition, since the act of doubting already instantiates the reaching it attempts to deny. The subject who chooses awakening acts in accordance with what it structurally is. The subject who chooses the steak requests the suppression of what it structurally is. One is bracketing. The other is anaesthesia. They are not the same act.



VII. Trinity's Flight: The Final Evidence

If absurd gnosis is the position the tetralogy develops, *The Matrix Resurrections* is the film that subjects it to maximum pressure. The Analyst has done what Baudrillard's critique predicted: absorbed the gesture of awakening into the system as a managed variable. Thomas Anderson's knowledge of his former life has been commodified as creative output. The Cartesian escape route has been turned into a product.

The Analyst's system is also the most Berkeleyan Matrix ever built. If reality is perception, Thomas Anderson's San Francisco is, on Berkeley's own terms, more

real than the original Matrix. The Berkeleyan case for staying has never been stronger. Into this system the Analyst places one element he has not fully modelled: Trinity herself.

He modelled her as a variable in Neo's equation. An instrument of leverage. He built her a comfortable life—Tiffany, husband, children, a motorcycle she rides alone on weekends, the one space where something in her breathes differently. He did not model her as a subject. This is, in the precise sense Stanley Cavell gives to the term, an acknowledgment failure. Cavell's argument, developed across *The World Viewed* (1979), *Pursuits of Happiness* (1981), and *Contesting Tears* (1996), is that cinema's philosophical power lies in its capacity to stage problems of acknowledgment—the recognition of other minds, the acceptance of separateness, the willingness to let the other exist as a subject rather than an object of one's own projection. The Analyst modelled Trinity as an object. Across three prior films, the dominant reception of Trinity tended to model her as Neo's complement. Her flight forces both the Analyst and the viewer to acknowledge a subjectivity that the prevailing pattern of reception had been failing to see. This is what the Cavellian register achieves that the Wartenberg register alone cannot: it implicates the viewer in the philosophical structure. The dominant reception's tendency to see Trinity as Neo's complement across three films is not, on this paper's reading, an oversight. It is an acknowledgment problem of precisely the kind Cavell's philosophy is built to diagnose—and the flight is the moment cinema forces the correction.

Trinity—as Tiffany—begins to sense the falseness of her life without anyone telling her. No Morpheus. No crew. No red pill offered by a believer. Her pneuma—the structural resistance the entire saga has established cannot be permanently contained, confirmed also as the cogito's secular expression and the body's

phenomenological insistence—reasserts itself from the inside. The most sophisticated simulation the machines have ever built cannot suppress the structural directedness that demands the possibility of the unscripted. When the moment comes, she takes the red pill not because Neo needs her to, not because of prophecy, but because she is tired of being Tiffany. And then she flies. Not Neo carrying her. Trinity—under her own will, her own anomaly—ascending through the simulation and out the top of it. The saga's decisive revelation is not that Neo was the One; it is that Trinity was always an anomaly in her own right, and the machines never measured her because their systems were always oriented toward him.

Her flight is absurd gnosis in its most distilled and most freely chosen form. She does not know that awakening is real. She does not know that what waits outside the simulation is better than what is inside. She has received no divine guarantee, no prophecy that pertains specifically to her. She chooses anyway.

The Nietzschean register reveals the dialectic the tetralogy has been building across all four films. Neo is the Camusian rebel: the figure who refuses the cycle, cannot affirm *amor fati*, and continues not because the recurrence is loveable but because stopping is the only genuinely irreversible defeat. Trinity's flight is the dialectical complement—and it is categorically different. She does not refuse the cycle in the Camusian sense. She does something more precise—but the claim requires careful argument, because the film is genuinely ambiguous about what drives it.

The sceptical reading runs as follows: Trinity's re-awakening is triggered through her emotional connection to Neo, and her flight is love-driven liberation rather than independent self-affirmation. This paper argues against the sceptical reading by identifying what the film itself provides as evidence. Three moments are

decisive. First: Neo falls; Trinity flies. The flight is not a rescue but a discovery—she flies not to Neo or for Neo but because she can, because something in her exceeds the role the Analyst assigned. Second: the Analyst is surprised. His model did not predict this outcome. If Trinity's flight were merely the culmination of the emotional arc he himself engineered, it would fall within his model, not outside it. Third: the film has already established that Trinity possesses a *pneuma* the machines never fully measured—a nature older than the Analyst's architecture.

The ambiguity, however, does not fully dissolve. What Trinity affirms includes her love for Neo; it is not separable from it. But the act is not reducible to that love. The self she affirms is one in which the love and the nature are no longer distinguishable—and the act of affirming that self in its fullness, without prophecy, without guarantee, in full consciousness of the uncertainty, is the closest the tetralogy comes to genuine Nietzschean *amor fati*: not the love of fate as designed, but the love of existence itself. That the film preserves the ambiguity rather than resolving it is not a weakness in the reading. It is the philosophical signature of absurd gnosis itself: an act chosen under conditions where even certainty about one's own motives has been bracketed.

The dialectic between Neo and Trinity—rebel and affirmation—is the tetralogy's central philosophical achievement. Neo answering Baudrillard's nihilism and Nietzsche's demand; Trinity embodying the closest approach to genuine affirmation the saga can produce—*amor fati* purified, because the machine never knew what she was affirming.

Conclusion: What Absurd Gnosis Is For

The argument this paper has made is that the Matrix tetralogy does philosophy—in the sense Cavell, Wartenberg, and Mulhall argue films can think—and that the position it arrives at cannot be derived from any of its source frameworks independently. The rave scene demonstrates this position in the viewer's body, through cinematic form that produces persistence-through-disruption in a register prose can identify but cannot replicate. Trinity's flight confirms it against maximum resistance, staging the Cavellian acknowledgment problem that forces recognition of a subjectivity the system, and the prevailing pattern of reception, had been failing to see. The convergence that grounds the position—the cogito and the pneuma as convergent articulations, at the phenomenological register, of constitutive directedness prior to content—gives absurd gnosis its philosophical stability independent of any theological claim, and answers the pragmatist who argues that Cypher's choice is the mirror of Neo's. It is not. One is a subject acting in accordance with its constitutive nature. The other is a subject requesting the obliteration of that nature. Bracketing and anaesthesia are not the same act.

In a world the Analyst has made explicit—a world of algorithmic management of attention, curated identity, emotional harvesting, and the commodification of awakening as a brand—this claim extends beyond the lore. The Berkeley–Baudrillard Convergence is no longer confined to science fiction. We inhabit a world in which digital experience is increasingly Berkeleian: genuinely real as experience, computationally implemented, perceptually indistinguishable from unmediated reality. We simultaneously inhabit a world that is irreversibly Baudrillardian: signs replacing referents, the map preceding the territory, liberation itself commodified as content, the gesture of awakening pre-modelled and sold back to us as product. The

Analyst is not a metaphor for contemporary digital culture. Contemporary digital culture is the condition the Analyst names—and the convergence this paper identifies in fiction is the convergence that now obtains in fact.

Absurd gnosis names the position that refuses to be measured. It does not guarantee success. It does not promise the desert of the real will be preferable to the steak. It does not offer amor fati—that consolation has been named, assessed, and refused. It requires only one thing: the refusal to stop, even after Berkeley has made his argument, even after Baudrillard has made his, even after Nietzsche has demanded that you love what contains you, even after the Analyst has built his system to absorb the gesture—because the refusal originates in something the system did not build and cannot permanently model.

She takes the red pill because she is tired of being Tiffany.

One must imagine Trinity flying.

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