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"See you in the next life"—playing with time in sci-fi movies: *Source Code*, *Edge of Tomorrow*, *Tenet*

Abstract: In the logic of computer-generated worlds, this article proposes a look at films in which the protagonists try to overcome a tribulation or challenge by systematically returning to the past, moving not only in space but also in time. This can be seen as unreliable narration, as the viewer cannot predict what will happen next, since the scripts of these films work in a logic of their own, defying the dynamics of a classic narrative. *Source Code* (Duncan Jones, 2011), *Edge of Tomorrow* (Doug Liman, 2014), and *Tenet* (Christopher Nolan, 2020) present stories that rely on this medium's ability to play with space and time for their very appeal, being similar in many ways to video games. To better understand all mental processes spectators undergo while watching this kind of stories, we look at how they use narrative conventions to create the feeling of a video game where space and time can be collapsed into one, and where boundaries are pushed for greater freedom. At the same time, within just a decade (2010s), we can identify an important evolution of this type of cinema, which automatically entails a development of the degree of narrative complexity and of its own rules that audiences are able to grasp. *Source Code* repeats a short period—8 minutes; *Edge of Tomorrow* spans several hours—about a day; and *Tenet* wanders through several days, back and forth, denying the protagonist a chance to repeat an event if he is killed, but giving him the opportunity to return in the midst of defining moments for the success of his mission.

Keywords: Sci-fi cinema, unreliable narration, time travel, video game logic.

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EKPHRASIS, 2/2024

Artificial Intelligence and the Politics of Imagination
pp. 97–113

DOI: 10.24193/ekphrasis.32.6
Published First Online: December 19, 2024

Introduction

Humankind has created artificial intelligence—in its past and present forms, increasingly refined, ever closer to giving us the feeling that the sky is the limit (or that we can even touch what's above it)—and it has influenced it back. Just as in *Terminator* (1984), the AI has now returned to haunt and dominate humanity. And to shape the way we think, to give us the idea that we can live according to other coordinates than the linear and settled, traditional ones of the past. A life that begins to seem fluid, endless, with infinite possibilities. A life that we come to believe we can relive, refine, sprinkled with moments we can return to. It's about breaking down barriers and understanding life as a kind of virtual game, where we come to feel that we are no longer material, but that we can extend our corporeality and our minds in vast directions. Of course, this is not yet the case, we still have a perishable, fragile, tender body, but this does not mean that there is not this tendency towards a reality-fantasy/imagination symbiosis, which would indeed allow us to live according to the coordinates of a video game, in which we could, for example, relive a day over and over again until we were satisfied with its outcome—just as we replay a mission in video games.

This article intends to embark on a process of explaining how certain science fiction films operate in their own logic in relation to the passage of time, through time travel—which is a product of human imagination. Their narrative approach links to the idea of unreliable narration, where things do not happen linearly and predictably, but rather have a dynamic that can propose its own rules and therefore it requires some kind of manual or guide in understanding them. Within just a decade (2010s), we can identify an important evolution of this type of cinema, which automatically entails a development of the degree of narrative complexity and of its own rules that audiences are able to grasp. We take on the following hypothesis: that this type of sci-fi movies manages to evolve in a short period of time, going from a sub-genre poor in numbers and narrative structures, to an increasingly popular sub-genre, which is beginning to build and keep a loyal audience, interested in being surprised and in watching productions at the meeting point of cinema and video game logic. To prove this idea, we will discuss three films that—having been produced a few years apart—are increasingly complex and interested in experimenting with how time and its passage are presented on screen. The films we will be looking at follow a tradition that began generations ago with productions such as *Back to the Future* (Robert Zemeckis, 1985) and *Groundhog Day* (Harold Ramis, 1993). These are precursors (cult films) released at a time when this sub-genre was sporadically represented, especially compared to the amount produced in this last decade. Now, such approaches are becoming more and more popular and cinema (especially American mainstream one) is refining this narrative formula: *Source Code* (Duncan Jones, 2011), *Edge of Tomorrow* (Doug Liman, 2014), and *Tenet* (Christopher Nolan, 2020) present stories that rely on this medium's ability to play with space and time for their very

appeal. *Source Code* repeats a short period—8 minutes; *Edge of Tomorrow* spans several hours—about a day; and *Tenet* wanders through several days, back and forth, denying the protagonist the chance to repeat an event if he is killed, but giving him the opportunity to return in the midst of defining moments for the success of his mission.

These are films in which the protagonists try to overcome a tribulation or challenge by systematically returning to the past, moving not only in space but also in time. From this point of view, we find a shift in the narrative paradigm, from a traditional cinematic narrative—"a spatio-temporally unified, enclosed, fixed, autonomous, linear diegesis" (Elsaesser 7)—to

> mind-game films [which] create a new film-spectator contract via unreliable narrators, the multiple timelines, unusual point of view structures, unmarked flashbacks, problems in focalization and perspectivism, unexpected causal reversals and narrative loops and the insistence on temporality as a separate dimension of consciousness and identity, the play on non-linear sequence or inverted causality, on chance and contingency, on synchronicity and simultaneity and their effects on characters, agency, and human relations (Elsaesser 7).

So why do the characters go back in time? They want to fix *something*. They are not happy with the present because they were wrong in the past, and this can happen on a personal and/or universal level; they are trying to erase an individual trauma or prevent a global disaster. Because we live in the post-truth era—where we can no longer be sure of anything, where we no longer know what is true and what is false, where there are no longer clear values that stand the test of time, but everything becomes questionable and debatable—, films fall in line with this *trend* and thus end up presenting unreliable worlds and narratives. But it is not just the narrator who is unreliable; it is our memory, which works in favor of personal imagination and desire.

This paradigm change means that "the focus of inquiry shifts from 'what happens' to the 'how and when'" (Elsaesser 29). This mutation entails a new type of narrative approach based on "unreliable narration", seen as "the mind-game's default value [in which the viewer] knows or has learnt the rules of the game: the narration is assumed to be laying false trails, playing tricks, taking us not only on but for a ride" (Elsaesser 40). In this new situation, the characters travel back in time to perform some actions to rectify a negative circumstance: "repeat, rewind, replay, repair, rescue, restore, regret and redeem" (Elsaesser 138).

In this context, "a small group of recent films (mainly science fiction blockbusters) combines narrative with a digital—or, more specifically, a videogame—logic" (Buckland *Narrative and Narration* 105). This is where the idea of going back to, revisiting, or reliving moments through film comes in—the idea of a videogame, where you have more lives and more chances to pass the level to succeed. Buckland systematizes the rules of this virtual environment, rules which we can also operate with when discussing films made in the post-

modern paradigm of unreliable narrative:

> 1. In-game tutorial level; 2. Serialized repetition of actions (to accumulate points and master the rules); 3. Multiple levels of adventure; 4. Space-time warps; 5. Magical transformations and disguises; 6. Immediate rewards and punishment (which act as feedback loops); 7. Pace; 8. Interactivity; 9. The game's environment can be open or closed, linear or nonlinear; 10. The game needs to remain balanced; 11. Some games consist of a foldback story structure; 12. In role-playing games, players can usually choose or customize their avatar; 13. The avatar possesses a series of resources and entities; 14. Typical gaming skills a player needs are strategy and tactics; 15. Most games (unintentionally) have an exploit; 16. Many games include a sandbox mode. (Buckland *Narrative* 107)

In this type of films, the characters are aware of their special situation: that they can replay a moment by either resetting the day or traveling back in time. It is a dialectical and (self) referential exercise whereby the creative team unconventionally breaks the fourth wall and opens a direct dialog with the audience. Because the particularity of the logic and rules of this type or genre of film is unique, a kind of *tutorial* appears at the beginning, explaining the rules of the *game*—sorry, of the *film*:

> *The Matrix* (1999), for example, consists of tutorial levels, as Neo learns (and bends) the rules in the matrix, the film's game world. Videogames are organized around the serialized repetition of actions for several reasons, including the accumulation of points and the opportunity to master the rules of the game. Players are keen to refine their newly acquired gameplay competence by applying and testing it in similar but more difficult levels (which keeps the game in balance). (Buckland *Narrative* 107)

Nowadays, a film based on time travel no longer must explain itself at the beginning and can skip the whole *tutorial* part, just as various narrative devices are more easily understood and accepted by viewers, who can thus grasp stories that are increasingly complicated on a narrative level. Film as a medium is able to manipulate on sight because the viewer is already accustomed to various narrative formulas in which everyday logic—the logic of nature—can always be countered.

Time travel can involve altering important aspects of the protagonists' lives. For example, in *The Flash* (Andy Muschietti, 2023), we can see what can happen if we *play* with the past, according to the schematic *grandfather paradox* theory. The end of the film seems to restore order, only for Barry Allen (The Flash) to notice that some aspects of his biography that he thinks he has managed not to alter have changed after all. Wanting to rectify the great trauma of his childhood—the death of his mother, which he eventually forces himself to

come to terms with—Barry feels relieved. Nothing has changed, and so he has avoided a great imbalance on Earth. Only when he walks out of an office building and meets Batman in civilian clothes, he understands what he did: the Batman played by Ben Affleck is no longer played by Affleck, but by George Clooney.[1] This narrative freedom comes as a crowning glory to the growing popularity of the time travel narrative device in mainstream cinema. Today's most expensive films use it and thus popularize it to such an extent that its logic becomes common knowledge.

What is fascinating about this type of cinema based on the repetition of an event? We will answer with a brief personal explanation. Sometimes, when we watch a football match, we wish we were there so we could control what the players are doing on the pitch. We point at the TV, we get involved, and we feel we see the bigger picture more clearly than the coaches and players. To satisfy this urge, at least partially, we transfer these drives to the PlayStation console, where we can actually manage virtual copies of the players we see on screen—who, after all, are still optical copies of those playing or performing, somewhere thousands of miles away, in the flesh. So we start the video game because we are not *satisfied* with the *way* the players move in the real game, and we want to *intervene* to make them move the way we think would be better. Film as a medium doesn't give us that possibility, but what it does do is, after presenting us with the main narrative and the way the event unfolds, it can skip some of the boring moments of a sports game (like in football when teams cancel each other out, and goals aren't scored, or when spectacular phases aren't achieved) and offer multiple variations (with multiple resolutions) of the exciting events only. Where the film loses in that respect, as the viewer cannot intervene, it gains in this ability to jump back in time and dive into the fire of the moment.

The same is happening in this new world (order): we want absolute control of what we see and do—or, at least, to have the illusion of controlling everything. To save time, we do several things at once: we develop the ability to grasp or feel an event very quickly; we understand (and accept) instantaneously the rules or codes by which a process unfolds.

> This new film-spectator contract expresses changes brought about by contemporary control societies, in which individuals need to adapt to a new social order that is under continual surveillance and constant change, which requires cognitive

1 Also, in the middle of the story, the character of Batman is played by Michael Keaton, who starred in a previous instalment of this superhero universe. So, three Batmen in one film, as there have been several Spider-Men in the film *Spider-Man: No Way Home* (Jon Watts, 2021), where the newer Spider-Man, played by Tom Holland, meets those from past instalments—played by Andrew Garfield and Tobey Maguire. The three of them must fight villains also played by actors from past series: Max Dillon/Electro (Jamie Foxx), Norman Osborn/Green Goblin (Willem Dafoe), Otto Octavius/Doc Ock (Alfred Molina), etc.

> skills such as multi-tasking and parallel processing, and where data is organized nonlinearly in databases and networks. (Elsaesser 7)

To better understand all these mental processes, we will look at these three films that use this narrative convention to create the feeling of a video game, where space and time are collapsed in this postmodern way, and where boundaries are pushed in such a manner that greater freedom is achieved. Sure, there are still boundaries and restrictions (one cannot get rid of them completely) but they come more slowly. Through repetition—which helps the viewer become more familiar with the space and the moment—the protagonist(s) can *surpass the level*.

Source Code—a trailblazer

"Regret is the time traveler's energy bar." (Elsaesser 64)

Source Code's story revolves around Captain Colter Stevens (played by Jake Gyllenhaal), a U.S. Army helicopter pilot who wakes up in the body of another man on a Chicago commuter train. He is disoriented and confused until he realizes he is part of a government experiment called Source Code. This program allows him to relive the last eight minutes of another person's life, specifically the eight minutes leading up to a terrorist bombing of a train. His mission is to identify the bomber, prevent the explosion, and gather information to avoid a larger threat. He repeats these eight minutes over and over, trying to piece together the puzzle. Colter's mission is simple. He must eliminate the danger on the train. As he delves deeper into the mission, he also forms a connection with one of the passengers, Christina Warren (played by Michelle Monaghan).

> The film therefore replicates a role-playing game—it uses an avatar to represent the player (in this instance, Colter) within the game world. The train carriage is a game environment to the extent that Colter enters it on eight occasions via an avatar, and he needs to perform in there a series of tasks. It is a closed space with limited freedom of movement. (Buckland *Narrative* 112)

Source Code is important because it came at a time when this sub-genre started to gain traction with the public and thus paved the way for even bigger budget productions, some of which were mentioned in the introduction.

> With a budget of $32 million, *Source Code* is a prime example of how, by 2010/2011, complex narratives were absorbed into mainstream filmmaking. Its number two in domestic box office ranking on its opening weekend in the United States is a telltale

> sign of how nonlinear storytelling had become commercially viable, even though it did not replace traditional narratives. (Littschwager 145)

In terms of story structure in *Source Code*, "the pace increases from one repetition to the next—the editing is more elliptical, and Colter becomes more frantic, because he is working against a deadline." (Buckland *Narrative* 112). That is what happens with all these films: first, the main event is presented in more detail, then more condensed, and new situations are added to keep the pressure of the *mission* high. The film explores themes of time, identity, and the consequences of one's actions. As the story unfolds, it becomes a race against time to stop the terrorist attack and potentially alter the past.

Elsaesser states that "what predominates in time travel is: return as alert, return as rescue or return as replay (until you get it right)" (64). But every time *something else* comes up, that does not actually allow the protagonist to resolve the situation as he or she would like.

> As with videogames, he has several attempts at winning, and he dies in the game, which simply takes him back to the beginning. At the same time, he accumulates in-game experience, and chooses different options that the game presents to him. But he has few options and few tasks: his strategy is to find the bomb and identify the bomber. (Buckland *Narrative* 112)

Buckland agrees that—like in a video game—as the story progresses, the task becomes harder: "finding the bomb was quite easy, identifying the bomber much harder" (*Narrative* 113). Indeed, there is an increase in the level of difficulty, but it is not extremely significant. From this point of view, *Source Code* is a bit of a shy pioneer in the sub-genre, as it does not go *all in* but remains at a *lukewarm* or conservative level. So the film is "confined to a limited number of settings" and relies on a discussion of "perception and embodiment" (Littschwager 145–46), in the sense that it invites us to put ourselves in the place of the protagonist, who is given a second chance at life, but through an avatar, because his body has been chopped up while a part of his brain was kept alive with the help of ultra-advanced machines.

While *Source Code* does not have a point system or the tangible rewards that are often finds in video games, it does parallel the experience of playing a video game through its narrative structure, consisting of the protagonist's iterative approach to solving *the problem* and incorporating future strategies by learning from previous attempts. Still, Captain Colter Stevens does receive a form of reward analogous to video game rewards, as Buckland points out: having identified the bomber he is granted the opportunity to phone his father and also to save Christina, one of the passengers from the train (Buckland "Revisting" 162). The reward system applies only to the character, which is directly involved in the fictional universe; the viewers are engaged by a video game narrative structure but without any tangible rewards.

The rewards that viewers get from watching complex films like *Source Code* may not be exclusively hedonistic (relative to entertainment or pleasure) or eudaimonic (thinking through the complexities of life or reaching personal development). Rather, these films speak to viewers' intrinsic psychological needs. The playfulness that complicated films allow for might satisfy some viewers and speak to their yearning for freedom from conventional narratives. Furthermore, these movies could fulfill a fan's demand for relatedness in other ways, like through fan communities that exchange online explanation videos, story summaries, and interpretations. The idea of expertise is crucial to enjoying this kind of movies. Extensive and intricate films captivate audiences by stimulating and amusing their cognitive, analytical, and interpretative abilities, appealing to their intrinsic desire to feel accomplished and competent. (Kiss and Willemsen 61–62)

Films like *Source Code* "raise doubts and questions about reality, knowledge, and personal identity. The protagonists in films as diverse as *Inception*, *The Matrix* (1999), *Moon* (2009), *Open Your Eyes* (1997), *The Thirteenth Floor* (1999), or *The Truman Show* (1998) are commonly immersed in virtual or otherwise artificially created worlds and become aware of this at different points during the course of narrative action" (Littschwager 146). They make us wonder—along with the characters—"which ontological levels of a film's world are real rather than simulated" (Littschwager 146). So, the protagonists are aware of the paradox they are entering and seek to solve the problem(s) to overcome their new condition. For them, it is simultaneously a curse and a blessing because the saving of the community (the situation, the planet, etc.) rests on their shoulders. This can be(come) extremely tricky. By repeating the level over and over again, they can end up on the verge of a mental breakdown, as happens more acutely in *Edge of Tomorrow*.

Being at the first level on the complexity scale, of the three films chosen for this article, *Source Code* has certain limitations and is not extremely complex narratively. The protagonist returns repeatedly in the same eight minutes, as in an early level of a video game. Next, we will see how *Edge of Tomorrow* has a much more imaginative play with the timeline, with time travel, and with the idea of repeated simulation of the same event.

Edge of Tomorrow—again and again

"An enemy that knows the future can't lose."

Edge of Tomorrow is based on the Japanese light novel *All You Need Is Kill* by Hiroshi Sakurazaka. The film is also known as *Live Die Repeat: Edge of Tomorrow* due to its marketing. The story is set in a future where Earth is under attack by an alien race known as the Mimics. Tom Cruise plays the role of Major William 'Bill' Cage, a military public affairs officer with no combat experience. When he is assigned to cover a major military operation against the

Mimics, he finds himself thrust into a battle against the alien invaders. On the battlefront, Cage manages to kill an Alpha Mimic before being killed himself. However, as he dies, he is drenched in the enemy's blood, and this contact with the alien's fluid somehow transfers its time-looping ability to Cage. As a result, he wakes up at the beginning of the same day, reliving the events prior to the battle. He retains his memories of previous iterations, giving him the opportunity to gain experience from his mistakes, improve his combat skills, and develop strategies to fight the Mimics more effectively. Cage soon encounters Rita Vrataski (Emily Blunt), a highly skilled and decorated soldier who once had the same time-loop ability but lost it. Together, they use Cage's unique ability to learn from each iteration of the day, improving their combat skills and strategies, and attempting to find a way to defeat the Mimics and end the war.

At the beginning of the time loop, Cage is inexperienced in combat and confused by the repeated days. As he gains knowledge and skills at each iteration, his perception and understanding of events change, and he becomes more dependable in his actions.

> Balance is a key game design concept. As the game progresses, game play becomes easier because the player gains game experience (if the game becomes too easy, the player becomes bored). To keep the game in balance and to avoid boredom, tasks and challenges must progressively become more difficult. (Buckland *Narrative* 108)

The protagonist tries different approaches and tests different tracks to try to *pass the level*, which initially seems impossible to achieve. Cage repeats the mission so many times that he becomes mentally exhausted. Effectively, he feels he cannot do it anymore. He feels like it is a game (or level) he cannot pass, no matter what he does, no matter how hard he tries.

Living the same day hundreds of times, he finds himself drawn to Rita, whom he gets to know better and better. When the two arrive at a safe house from which they can fly a small plane they find, he discloses to Rita that, whatever he does, "this is as far as you go; no matter what I do... this is as far as you ever make it." How can he save her?

This is an additional *mission* to the ultimate goal of saving the planet. It is also a personal mission, explained in generic terms by Littschwager: "the unfinished business usually has both an external component (the adventure part) and an internal counterpart (a moral crisis in the protagonist)" (138). The hero must choose: does he succeed in the mission, or does he lose Rita? So, he is forced to change strategy to save Rita: he no longer involves her in the mission but decides—making a conscious choice, fraught with the grief of her multiple deaths—to go alone to the final confrontation. This is where the concept of unreliable narration comes in, because all this time, for more than two-thirds of the story, we are led down a false trail: the location of the decisive battle is not actually correct, so Cage reintroduces Rita to the mission because things have changed. Towards the end he loses the ability to reset the day, so we are suddenly back to a more classic action-sci-fi movie, where the protagonists cannot

afford to die because that would automatically entail mission failure.

This romantic relationship between Cage and Rita is important, as it adds an extra layer to the story and certainly appeals to viewers who are not necessarily *drawn to* action-sci-fi movies. This connection is reminiscent of how in *Groundhog Day*, with the help of love, the protagonist can get through the day when he finds himself trapped again and again. Cage and Rita's relationship develops more as a partnership and collaboration during a war against an alien threat. They work together to improve their combat skills and strategize to break the time loop and win the war. A reference to *Groundhog Day* could as well be the female protagonist's first name, which in both films is Rita. The smile on Cage's face in the final scene can be likened to the sense of satisfaction and accomplishment that one might experience when finishing a video game. Cage's smile reflects a mixture of relief, confidence, and the knowledge that he has successfully completed a challenging mission. It is a moment of triumph and a sense of having overcome insurmountable odds. In the context of the film, Cage has gone through countless iterations of the same day, facing life-threatening situations and battles against the Mimics. The smile represents the culmination of all his efforts and the end of the time loop, allowing him to approach the upcoming Mimic invasion with the benefit of his past experiences and Rita's expertise. It is a moment of victory and a sense of *leveling up* in the real world, ready to face new challenges with the knowledge and skills gained from previous attempts.

This degree of interactivity is conditional (Brookey 34). The rules of the game are designed around the final goal. As a result, the game imposes constraints that make success unlikely if the player chooses to ignore or reinterpret them. In other words, players only have freedom within the boundaries that the developers have set up, and the developers can revoke this freedom at any time they see fit. This is precisely where we find Cage. In theory, he has the potential to escape and revert to his cowardly behavior at any given moment. However, in reality, external factors within the story prevent him from doing so. As a soldier, Cage is driven to embody heroism; that is the anticipated role for him, and all circumstances drive him towards that path. Prior to the ultimate showdown with the Omega—similar to a *final boss* in a video game, we discover that Cage has been independently completing undertakings such as familiarizing himself with the members of J Squad. This activity is also aimed at achieving the objective of transforming Cage into a hero. Upon realizing Cage's extensive knowledge about them, J Squad chooses to join him and provide assistance in the ultimate battle. The omission of Cage's completion of the sub-quests is significant as it underscores the significance of his mission by directing the audience's attention solely to Cage's journey towards glory. The way he becomes a military hero is of less importance compared to the undeniable fact that he does indeed become one. Through this approach, the script appears to convey the notion that individuals, regardless of their initial awful nature, have the potential to become heroes within the military.

In this section of the article, we tried to demonstrate that *Edge of Tomorrow* is much more complex than *Source Code*, not only in terms of the plethora of events, the number of repetitions and the details we are not shown on screen, but also in terms of the number of characters, situations presented and the narrative stakes. We get really involved in the unfolding of the story and it seems like the options for resolving the combat situation are endless, compared to the rather monotonous repetition of the train bombing.

This narrative complexity is taken to a new level by *Tenet*, where Christopher Nolan not only plays with the logic of time travel and the format of a video game but builds a new concept that describes the entire architecture of the story: Temporal Pincer Maneuver. At the same time, it proposes much more meaningful reflection, with moral, environmental, and political implications. In this respect, the film is not simply a thrill-seeking blockbuster, but can be seen as a multi layered, social manifesto.

Tenet—transgenerational dilemmas

> "I'm *The Protagonist* of this operation!" / "You are *A* protagonist. Did you think you were the only one capable of saving the world?"

The beauty of cinema, of being able to *reverse* the flow of the present-future, as the Lumière brothers did for the first time in *Démolition d'un mur/Demolition of a Wall* (1896), shortly after they invented the tools necessary for the existence of this art, is here exhibited by Nolan, whose film *Tenet* can be seen as a tribute to the masters of early cinema. The gimmick he uses is unique in cinema history so far and ties into the concept Nolan invented for his film, Temporal Pincer Maneuver, according to which characters travel backward in time or experience events in reverse order. In an exchange of words between The Protagonist and a female scientist, a phrase appears followed by a metaphor that explains the whole concept of the script: "Inverted material" and "the detritus of an upcoming war".

In the structure of the story, two teams (Red and Blue) are operating in different temporal directions. The Red Team moves forward in time, while the Blue Team moves backward. They coordinate to gain a strategic advantage in battles. The film explores the intricacies and paradoxes of this time manipulation strategy. *Tenet* familiarizes the audience with its complex time manipulation concept and encourages viewers to actively engage with the film's structure. It is an intellectual exercise and a puzzle that does not follow traditional storytelling conventions, emphasizing that it may require multiple viewings to fully appreciate its complexities. Nolan collaborated closely with physicist Kip Thorne with whom he had collaborated on *Interstellar*. Thorne is a renowned physicist known for his work on astrophysics and gravitational waves, and his involvement contributed to the scientific accuracy and complexity of the time manipulation concepts in *Tenet*.

The Protagonist (played by John David Washington) and Neil (Robert Pattinson) are both members of a secret organization tasked with preventing a global catastrophe involving time-inversion technology. Their mission is to stop a group known as the Tenet organization from using this technology to change the course of history. The Protagonist must navigate the complex world of time inversion and prevent the antagonistic faction led by Sator (played by Kenneth Branagh) from obtaining the algorithm that can destroy the world's timeline.

Wrapped in the form of a very well-made fast paced blockbuster—characterized by overflowing alertness, *Tenet*'s plot is thickened by the political stakes of unseen future leaders wanting to establish a different past/present which would help them survive on a posterior-anterior timeline. The following lines are explanatory in this regard: "But cause comes before effect." / "No, that's just the way we see time."

The planet has been—or is about to be—fatally affected by pollution and global warming. Seen from this perspective, Nolan's film oversees some worrying, if already overused, themes that have gripped the public opinion of this generation. In short, we are talking about the carelessness with which we treat Earth, which robs our descendants of the chance to live. This immoral, unsustainable conduct makes our successors keep their souls light in the face of a possible planetary genocide against the present civilization. They are responding to us with the same coinage of criminal ignorance with which we now operate. The unborn want to live backward, not in the future—which will have become impossible (as in *Interstellar*)—but in the past. But this is a past (perceived by us as the present) that is changed by the disappearance of everything we know (and experience). This is where the grandfather *paradox* arises—it is suggested that this is both possible and impossible, but that is not where the stakes of the story lie anyway.

Tenet puts forward these theories without scientifically fitting them but uses them more as a pretext to fascinate. First, to fascinate cinematically—by rhythm-montage, by rhythm-idea, by rhythm-thought; then to fascinate structurally—fitting the facts together, seemingly randomly. It is difficult for an untrained eye to extract a clearly stated intention on a first viewing. Nolan's great discovery, his personal trademark, lies not necessarily in *what* he says but in *how* he does it, as Buckland points out in regard to this kind of unreliable narration and video game-like filmmaking: "the success or failure of a film [as] such [...] is determined by the effectiveness of its storytelling" (Buckland *Narrative* viii). This is an especially important idea that *Tenet* upholds: narrative form is the film's strength. The way Nolan mixes and complicates the narrative structure leads to "characters finding themselves inside someone else's dream", or experience[2] and to "non-chronological narration, with unmarked flashbacks that could be flash-forwards (and vice versa)" (Elsaesser 55).

Tenet has a complex and non-linear narrative structure that intentionally obscures and manipulates the viewer's understanding of time and events. This means Nolan incorporates

2 The description is in relation to *Inception*, but it is valid for *Tenet* as well.

the concept of unreliable narration through time inversion, dual protagonists, multiple layers of reality, misleading information, non-linear storytelling, character motivations, and audience engagement.

The use of time-inverted objects and characters leads to sequences where actions occur in reverse, making it challenging to discern cause and effect. Viewers are presented with happenings that do not follow a linear timeline. This can be disorienting and create an unreliable perception of events. Furthermore, The Protagonist and Neil operate with various levels of knowledge and awareness throughout the story, their perspectives and experiences not being always synchronized, which adds to the unreliable nature of the storytelling. At the same time, as a personal trademark, Nolan introduces the concept of multiple layers of reality, which can blur the lines between what is real and what is inverted. This complexity makes it difficult for the audience to discern the objective truth of the narrative. Also, the structure of the story means it jumps back and forth in time, with different characters experiencing events in different orders—this non-linear approach adds to the unreliability of the narration, as the audience must piece together the chronology of events. Moreover, the motivations of the characters are initially unclear, and as the story progresses, the viewers' understanding of these motivations evolves, which contributes to an ever-changing perspective on character dynamics and alliances. *Tenet* encourages active engagement and interpretation from the audience and is meant to be seen more than once. Viewers are required to pay close attention to details and make connections between events, often leading to differing interpretations and discussions about the film's meaning.

Along this discursive line, at one point, the hero of the story questions whether he is the true *protagonist* of this confrontation, if he is running *the operation*. Someone around him would suggest that he is *a* protagonist, *one* of those constructing the narrative. No one knows everything; no one owns the whole picture, because their past—what they *now* know—can be altered at any time, at any moment. It is a world where what you are certain of today can become false or partially false tomorrow.

The fact that this nameless protagonist (he is the generic protagonist; he is the Hero) asks himself this question creates doors and opportunities. Is he or not the true protagonist of the story? Furthermore, what is the story and what is running after? These events are only understood when they are relieved, exactly like in a film. Returning to them provides further details that can change *everything*.

Nolan plays with the possibilities of *storytelling* in the following way: by going back to what has already happened, he turns the major events 180 degrees, giving them another meaning. The film thus ends up telling a story in small pieces that must always be viewed with suspicion. Time becomes manipulable. This lack of existential clarity, the fact that we cannot be sure that what has happened will stay that way forever, is a terrible feeling. A similar idea preoccupied the director two decades ago when he was making *Memento* (2000), proving the consistency in his interests, mannerisms, and ideas. In it, a man (played by Guy

Pearce) lived only in the present because an accident made him suffer from short-term memory loss. He is forced to rely on his ability to materialize the past through photographs, tattoos, and other objects to discover who killed his wife. The point of *Memento* was that one cannot trust anything, that everything must be questioned, and that even what one sees or touches may not be real or may not exist.

> Anyone who has seen *Memento* will remember the film not just for the story but for its equally intricate plot. *Memento* is well known for its two main alternating timelines: one is shot in black and white and progresses in a forward linear order; the other is shot in color and is temporally reversed. That is, although each sequence of the color timeline (with the exception of the opening sequence) moves temporally forward in itself, the sequences follow on from each other in a backward chronological order. (Littschwager 84)

What are we without memory? What are we left with if we cannot remember anything? A frightening thought—but one which, in this changed logic, we would forget over and over again, perhaps not becoming devoured by it only because we would not remember we already had it a thousand times before.

Tenet goes on to ask further questions: What is life without certainty? How can we live with the thought that we cannot even be sure of the past? Memory—the certainty that what we have can no longer be taken away or returned—is our moral support. In the absence of this belief, the pieces of our lives explode, fall apart and tumble. Anguish, madness, a lump in the throat would grow incessantly.

But maybe these films prepare us for this insecurity, if we also consider the phenomenon of cancel culture, whereby certain moments of the past are denied and reinterpreted to suit the ideology of the present. These days in which we live more in the virtual environment, where there is the possibility of radically altering what has already happened or at least of nuancing the perception of what has been consummated: correcting a text published on the Internet (which is impossible in print), restarting a game from the initial level, rewinding audiovisual material, returning faithfully to a past event by means of written or visual documents, etc. Everything can be experienced ad infinitum, and this annihilates the idea of the unique chance. We must ask ourselves if such stretches of imagination are beneficial eventually, or if they can cause mutations in the collective mind, distorting our system of values and leading to a society without horizon and rules, where nothing is certain anymore. A society troubled by too many stories far removed from everyday logic, which could create people no longer adjusted to the real world. Can these films distort perspective to such an extent that they become dangerous to the way we live as a species?

Let us ask ourselves a question: what if we could see a movie once—and only once—as we see a moment in life? How would we watch it? More carefully? Without being distracted

by our phone or tablet screens? We photograph, we film, we try to immortalize moments, to have the chance to return to them, for fear of losing them, of remembering them as faithfully as possible, of getting close to them, but without experiencing them at the very moment they happen; wishing to record and perhaps immortalize distracts us from living them. It is a misunderstood "mummy complex" (Bazin 1960) that alters our experiences. We no longer enjoy the present but try to preserve it out of the conviction that we will return to it. But *yesterday* is swallowed up by *today* and *today* by *tomorrow*, and so on until we lose the past, the present, and the future.

Nolan asks questions about how we now relate to reality, through a filter increasingly mediated by movies, video games and social networks, where everything seems possible and can be reversed. He is proposing an unconventional narrative structure, where both *what* he says and *how* he does it are equally important. His boldness may open up new screenwriting opportunities because *Tenet* proves that there are no limits to imagination regarding time manipulation and video game logic in cinema, which is becoming increasingly immersive. Audiences are willing to accept and understand increasingly bombastic logics, and it is interesting to see where these worlds will ultimately take us.

Conclusion

We live in an age of disasters. Every day, we are bombarded with all the misfortunes of the world in a kind of unifying newsletter: we have access, whether we like it or not, to accidents, deaths, bombings, wars, and beheadings. Our *bubble* is invaded, however much we *filter* it, with these misfortunes. We become immune to calamities; we *consume* them through the *safe* medium of the screen, and we know (or just hope?) that they will not *get out* to affect us. We feel we have unlimited lives, like in a video game that one can reset as many times as he or she wants. We have mediated access to reality, at the same time we wish to isolate ourselves from reality. The inability to accept, or come to terms with, our mortality is filtered in a way by protecting us from the world through technology.

Like video games, film as a medium can be problematic because it gives us the false impression that we can come back at a certain moment, that we are immortal, or that we have more lives to do what we want. It makes us lose track of reality. These films that play with our minds therefore end up being doubly problematic, as they not only present horrors as normal but also induce the idea that any misfortune can be *reversed*, that if we throw ourselves off the roof and die, we are not dead for good because we can always *come back*.

This is exactly what we tried to analyze and understand throughout this article: how this sci-fi sub-genre can influence its public and, furthermore, how it could diversify and develop narratively to keep up with the rising exceptions of its public. At the same time, how it has

developed in line with the audience's ability to comprehend so that, in under a decade, time travel and video game logic-oriented stories have developed solid and complex narrative structures.

If the story in *Source Code* (2011) is relatively simple, with eight short and concise jumps in time—and with a somewhat local stake—, *Edge of Tomorrow* (2014) seeks to go to a higher level: the main event constantly changes, and with it new elements appear in the protagonist's journey; also, the stakes increase: he must succeed, because the fate of humanity depends on it. Ultimately, *Tenet* (2020) not only accepts the bet of a hero saving the planet, but raises these stakes further by the way it relates to passage of time—which can run both ways—and thus plays with the laws of physics, inviting us to dream. Relying on the fact that the audience already understands the rules of this new world created by mainstream cinema, directors like Christopher Nolan allow themselves to complicate things even more and experiment with anomalies such as inverted travel through time.

Film as a medium offers this possibility of going back in time, which is why we as viewers, eager to sometimes escape from reality, accept new rules and conventions of present-day cinema. We want to live the lives of others and push the boundaries we all experience in the real world. We go to the cinema to see what we do not have outside the theatre. Our insatiable appetite for escapist stories attracts a steady rise in their stakes. What works, in terms of narrative complexity, at one point becomes simplistic and irrelevant overnight. This entails a constant pushing of boundaries because film is always about keeping the consumer interested.

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