

Article

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From *Memento* to *Tenet*: Christopher Nolan Between Postmodern Absurdity and the Fatigue of the Overindulgent Director



Tenet (2020)

The broader context surrounding Hollywood's 2020 release of *Tenet*, along with the massive resources mobilized to promote it as a symbolic relaunch of the cinematic industry during the initial easing of COVID-era restrictions, reflected—more than anything else—a prevailing marketing trend gaining momentum among the decision-makers of the world's most powerful cultural apparatus. This trend rested on two central assumptions: first, the continued recycling of the belief that big-budget productions constitute the primary hallmark of “quality” cinema capable of drawing mass audiences; and second, the reinforcement of a dominant aesthetic formula in action cinema—whether shaped by the spectacle-driven conventions of

“Marvel movies” or imbued with a veneer of highbrow sophistication—as the principal vehicle for achieving commercial and critical success in the Hollywood model.

Yet, it is difficult to fully comprehend what *Tenet* represents in terms of Christopher Nolan's evolving cinematic thought, aesthetic style, and public reception without situating it within the broader trajectory of his career. Any serious assessment of the film must consider its relationship to Nolan's earlier work, particularly the formative stages of his directorial path marked by the unexpected critical and commercial success of *Memento* (2000). While his debut feature *Following* (1998) was notable for demonstrating his technical ingenuity and resourceful visual

storytelling—realized on a shoestring budget of merely \$6,000—it was *Memento* that propelled Nolan to international recognition, solidifying Hollywood’s confidence in his ability to transform formally ambitious cinema into a profitable enterprise (with a \$9 million budget generating over \$40 million in returns).



Memento (2000)

This article traces the broader trajectory of Christopher Nolan’s cinematic career, with particular attention to the points of convergence and contradiction between *Memento* and *Tenet*. It aims to illuminate the ideological configurations embedded within mainstream cinema of the late 2010s and early 2020s, as refracted through Nolan’s evolving aesthetic and narrative strategies. The analysis begins by examining the industrial context of *Tenet*—its production, marketing, distribution, and critical reception—before turning to a general overview of the film’s visual structure and narrative form. This is followed by a theoretical assessment of the ideological frameworks the film appears to align with, whether explicitly or implicitly. To situate *Tenet* within Nolan’s broader intellectual and

cinematic project, the article stages a comparative “confrontation” with *Memento* (and, to a lesser extent, selected other films), with the goal of tracing the shifting aesthetic tendencies that have shaped the ideological expressions of Nolan’s work from its early stages to the present.

1) The Framework of the Film’s Production and Reception

As previously noted, the planning, production, and promotional strategies surrounding *Tenet* were inextricably tied to Hollywood’s attempt to issue a symbolic and emphatic declaration of its return to theatrical exhibition following the widespread industry shutdown caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The media’s focus on Warner Bros.—the film’s producer—and its reported \$225 million production budget, coupled with an expansive and transcontinental marketing campaign and a synchronized release in over forty-two countries, all signaled a deliberate strategy to reignite audience attendance after the prolonged slump that began in late 2019 (D’Alessandro; Mendelson “Tenet Marketing”).

Christopher Nolan’s name played a central role in this endeavor. Few filmmakers have come to embody the commercial and aesthetic ambitions of Hollywood as powerfully as Nolan, whose oeuvre includes some of the highest-grossing and most widely discussed films of the past two decades. From *Batman Begins* (2005) and *The Dark Knight* (2008) to *Inception* (2010), *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012), *Interstellar* (2014), and *Dunkirk* (2017), Nolan’s films have collectively earned over \$4.6 billion at the global box office, against combined production costs

estimated at approximately \$1.155 billion—exclusive of marketing and distribution expenditures (Box Office Mojo; Rubin).

Despite the massive publicity campaign that accompanied *Tenet*'s release, however, the film's commercial performance proved underwhelming. By August 2021, its total box office revenue had only marginally exceeded \$364 million. When assessed against cumulative production, marketing, and distribution costs—estimated to have reached or exceeded \$400 million—the film's financial returns were, at best, tepid (Lang and Donnelly). While distributors and trade publications frequently attributed this shortfall to COVID-related hesitancy (a plausible factor, particularly given the continued closure of key markets such as New York and Los Angeles), other dynamics were also at play (Whitten; Siegel).

Chief among these was the widening gap between promotional hype and audience reception. After months of ubiquitous, multi-platform advertising, the momentum of public discourse—especially on social media—began to shift against the film's narrative complexity. A recurring critique emerged: *Tenet* was “difficult to understand.” This sentiment, amplified during its opening week and repeated across mainstream and digital platforms, likely contributed to audience disengagement and muted box office traction (Sharf; Scott). In this context, one is compelled to ask: what precisely occurred within the cinematic “puzzle” Nolan constructed? And did the film ultimately fail to satisfy viewers' expectations for narrative coherence, thematic clarity, or emotional accessibility?

2) The Critical Reception of the *Tenet*

The response to *Tenet*—particularly in North America—was mixed. On one hand, most film critics in major and widely read publications (*Rolling Stone*, *Empire*, *Variety*, *USA Today*, *The New York Times*, *Hollywood Outsider*, *Toronto Star*, *Entertainment Weekly*, *The Hollywood Reporter*, and others) expressed optimism about the film's potential to fulfill its intended economic and “cinematic” role—that is, to help revive the buzz and activity of in-person cinema. According to these critics, the main draw lay in the film's action scenes, which were praised for their strength, intelligence, and creativity and for maintaining viewers' attention throughout its two-and-a-half-hour runtime. Many of these journalists described *Tenet* as massive, daring, astonishing, and technically brilliant.

Other critics, however, were far less enthusiastic. A number of commentators focused on the difficulty—or even the impossibility—of understanding the story and grasping its details. Several critics pointed to the film's emotional “coldness” in its treatment of both main and secondary characters, a sentiment echoed in reviews from the *New York Post* (Saitz), *The New Yorker* (Brody), *The Boston Globe* (Allen), *Vanity Fair* (Zacharek), *Chicago Tribune* (Phillips), and *Slant Magazine* (Gonzalez). One of the most striking observations came from critic Christina Newland in *New York Magazine*, who likened *Tenet* to a locked puzzle box “empty of any content” (Newland). Meanwhile, journalist Tom Degens of *Ciné-Fu* compared the film to NASA's famously wasteful initiative of spending millions to develop a pen that could

write in space—“while Soviet cosmonauts simply used pencils” (Degens).

On the level of academic discourse, a number of scholars similarly viewed *Tenet* as a testament to Nolan’s ongoing experimentation with cinematic temporality and narrative structure. In *Film Quarterly*, Girish Shambu highlighted Nolan’s ability to produce “spectacles of time” that challenge traditional cinematic form and spectatorship, arguing that *Tenet* extends Nolan’s concern with the embodied cognition of time through action (“Christopher Nolan’s Temporality” 2021). In a similar vein, Vivian Sobchack’s phenomenological approach to cinematic embodiment resonates with academic readings of *Tenet* as an “experience film,” in which comprehension is deprioritized in favor of sensory immersion—a hallmark of what Timothy Corrigan terms “the essayistic blockbuster” (Corrigan 2011).

Some media industry analysts, such as Ramon Lobato and Amanda Lotz, have commented on *Tenet*’s unique positioning as a transmedia and post-pandemic “event film,” arguing that its high-concept temporality and IMAX-centered visuality function as a calculated bid to sustain theatrical prestige amid the growing dominance of streaming platforms (Lobato 2020; Lotz 2021). Within this context, *Tenet*’s intricate structure is read less as a radical narrative innovation and more as a strategic marker of “auteurist prestige” commodified for an era of digital excess and franchise fatigue.

Nonetheless, there exists a tension in academic discourse. While many studies treated Nolan as a paradigmatic example of the contemporary auteur who merges intellectual ambition with popular appeal

(McGowan 2012; Redmon 2021), a smaller but growing body of critique highlights the limits of Nolan’s formalism and the ideological vacuity that sometimes underlies his spectacular disorientation. In *Camera Obscura*, scholars have questioned whether *Tenet*’s recursive temporalities offer genuine political or philosophical insight, or merely simulate complexity without confronting historical or social content (*Camera Obscura* Editorial Collective 2021). This critique finds resonance in the work of scholars such as Elena Gorfinkel, who challenge the “aesthetic overdetermination” of prestige cinema and its tendency to present narrative fragmentation as a substitute for ideological depth (Gorfinkel 2017).

Thus, while academic reception of *Tenet* has often echoed the mainstream celebration of Nolan’s formal ingenuity, a more nuanced assessment reveals an ambivalence. The film is at once praised for its technical experimentation and critiqued for its narrative opacity, affective coldness, and retreat from historical and political engagement—features increasingly associated with what some critics identify as “post-cinematic spectacle” or the “overindulgent auteur” paradigm.

3) But What Was It About?!

From its opening moments—an extended, high-intensity sequence lasting over ten minutes—*Tenet* thrusts viewers into a sprawling concert hall in Kyiv, Ukraine, the site of a meticulously staged terrorist attack. A heavily armed group storms the venue, where a full orchestra is preparing to perform, and begins executing a brutal assault on everyone present: musicians, audience

members, and security personnel alike. The violence even extends to the instruments themselves, which are shattered by gunfire in an act that borders on sadistic spectacle. Amid the ensuing chaos, a parallel armed unit emerges, engaging the assailants in a protracted gun battle. It is within this layered confrontation that the film introduces its central figure—an unnamed protagonist, referred to only as “The Protagonist” (portrayed by John David Washington). Identified as both a CIA operative and a covert agent embedded within the crisis, he serves as the narrative’s focal point throughout the film.

The decision to leave the protagonist unnamed operates as a deliberate abstraction, signaling the film’s disinterest in conventional psychological characterization or detailed personal backstory. Rather than anchoring the viewer in emotional or moral identification, *Tenet* opts for a symbolic protagonist whose anonymity functions as a narrative device—one that prioritizes kinetic spectacle over interiority. This erasure of subjective depth aligns with the film’s broader aesthetic strategy: a sustained emphasis on dazzling action sequences and conceptual complexity at the expense of emotional grounding or relational development.

Following this intense prologue, the film plunges the viewer into a disorienting world marked by surreal and unpredictable combat scenarios, in which opposing forces engage not only across different geographic locations but also across diverging temporal dimensions. As the narrative unfolds, the viewer is drawn into a continuously shifting, collapsing, and expanding diegetic landscape,

where spatially disconnected settings—Vietnam, Nepal, Siberia, Ukraine, and others—are abruptly interwoven without clear narrative transitions. This fragmented structure destabilizes conventional cinematic geography, creating a sense of simultaneity in which characters occupy the present while exhibiting traces of the past, conveyed through details such as clothing, beverages, and even credit card designs.

The film constructs a fluid, borderless world, where mobility is constant and characters traverse vast distances via cars, yachts, helicopters, and cargo planes—vehicles that become extensions of the film’s relentless momentum. This incessant movement, coupled with rapid editing and minimal narrative exposition, leaves little opportunity for the viewer to orient themselves or process unfolding events. As a result, the audience is often compelled to surrender to the spectacle, relinquishing any expectation of narrative coherence or chronological logic. In doing so, *Tenet* shifts the cinematic experience from interpretive engagement to sensory immersion, privileging audiovisual excess over narrative clarity.

The Protagonist remains the only character to appear in nearly every scene of the film. Early in the narrative, he begins to notice anomalies in the temporal logic of the world around him: time itself appears to behave irregularly. The “future” emerges not as a linear progression, but as an open zone from which objects, individuals, and even causal relationships can be inverted and projected into the present. In a series of disorienting visual sequences, a bullet pierces a seat before it is fired, a terrorist is killed

while moving backward through space, and a projectile materializes in an untouched chair before reversing course into the barrel of the gun that ostensibly fired it. These temporal inversions are embedded within an unrelenting sequence of explosions, shootouts, and high-speed chases that unfold across multiple spatiotemporal registers—some anchored in the “present,” others operating in reverse from the “future.”

What Nolan only flirted with in *Inception*—a play with dream logic and nonlinear time—becomes in *Tenet* the very scaffolding of the film’s narrative structure. As the story progresses, it becomes increasingly clear that the events depicted have already occurred. The narrative ultimately circles back upon itself, culminating in a finale that loops into its own beginning. The Protagonist, by this point, appears to have been subsumed into an elaborate and opaque network of intelligence operations that exceed his comprehension or agency. At the center of this conspiratorial machinery stands the antagonist: Russian oligarch Andrei Sator (portrayed by Kenneth Branagh), a figure of nihilistic grandeur whose motivations remain ambiguously defined. Whether his apocalyptic drive stems from terminal illness (his pancreatic cancer), sadistic sexual proclivities, possessive jealousy over his wife’s connection to the Protagonist, or some other latent pathology, the film offers no clear psychological or ideological rationale. Sator becomes a cipher—less a fully realized character than a narrative function, emblematic of a broader existential threat whose origins remain abstract.

Sator functions as a conventional iteration of the Western cinematic “villain”—a recognizable figure reminiscent of antagonists from the James Bond franchise—yet notably lacking the ironic flair or psychological complexity that Ian Fleming imbued in his creations. In *Tenet*, Sator operates as an agent of destruction in the present, executing a mission on behalf of opaque forces from the future. His characterization remains hollow, with no fully developed motivation beyond vague gestures toward terminal illness, sadism, or sexual jealousy. Meanwhile, his wife Kat (played by Elizabeth Debicki) is reduced to a narrative device—positioned primarily as a romantic subplot that simultaneously amplifies Sator’s animosity toward the Protagonist and serves to humanize the latter by providing an emotionally charged motivation. However, this subplot ultimately adds little more than sentimental ballast to an already overloaded script, which fails to generate credible dramatic tension outside the visual excess of its relentless action sequences.

The film also employs a series of recurring events viewed from different temporal angles, inviting audiences to contemplate questions of fate, determinism, and free will through the motif of inversion. A particularly illustrative example—a scene in which a plane explodes, then reappears crashing into the same building from another temporal perspective—functions as a visual metaphor for predestination. In this way, *Tenet* positions the protagonist as a subject entangled within overlapping timelines and parallel realities, subtly prompting the viewer to question the very nature of causality and self-determination. Yet despite these thematic

ambitions, the film frequently resorts to excessive exposition—delivered through hurried, jargon-laden dialogue—that disrupts narrative momentum and emotional engagement. This overreliance on explanatory monologue undermines the film’s structural complexity, rendering *Tenet* less a profound meditation on time and agency than a hollow spectacle masquerading as intellectual cinema.

4) From the Fear of Postmodern Disorientation to Celebrating Disorientation

Christopher Nolan’s films, in general, tend to intellectually provoke the viewer, compelling active reflection on the unfolding narrative. His storytelling strategies are rarely straightforward; rather, they demand close attention and interpretive labor. Across much of his oeuvre, Nolan deliberately withholds narrative coherence or resolution, implicitly assigning the viewer a role in reconstructing meaning—filling in gaps, drawing connections, and completing what might be described as the “final punctuation” of the story. This interactive dynamic manifests in various ways: by allowing the audience to infer the protagonist’s moral trajectory (as in the *Batman* trilogy), by immersing them in the unstable consciousness of a character navigating layered dreamscapes and escalating peril (*Inception*), or by presenting a narrative so radically fragmented that only active reassembly reveals its full shape (*Memento*).

By contrast, *Interstellar* marks a notable departure from Nolan’s signature emphasis on fragmentation as a narrative device. In this film, the director appears more invested in

constructing a spatial and visual universe suffused with surreal, quasi-mystical imagery. Rather than challenging the viewer through structural disorientation alone, *Interstellar* engages affectively—through emotional distance, existential scale, and the portrayal of characters who appear alienated not only from their physical environments but also from the temporal and relational trajectories they inhabit. This affective estrangement deepens the viewer’s emotional ambivalence, complicating their capacity for identification or empathetic investment. As a result, the film’s disorientation is not primarily epistemological but emotional and thematic—less about piecing together a fractured plot than navigating the abstract weight of isolation, loss, and the metaphysical dimensions of time.

With *Tenet*, Nolan intensifies his long-standing engagement with narrative complexity—pushing the dislocation of spatial and temporal coordinates to an extreme and amplifying the viewer’s skepticism toward the film’s internal coherence and thematic legibility—if such legibility can be said to exist at all. In a gesture that appears calculated to further unsettle those viewers still searching for a conventionally structured narrative, Nolan inserts a “platform” scene roughly thirty minutes before the film’s conclusion: a moment in which characters attempt a semi-direct explanation of the preceding events. However, rather than offering clarity, this moment of exposition paradoxically deepens the confusion, layering additional temporal loops and ontological paradoxes onto an already bewildering narrative structure. What, then, is the function of this

disorientation? Does it point toward a deeper philosophical or ideological stance, or is it merely the aestheticized opacity of complexity for its own sake?

Nolan's preoccupation with temporal disjunction and narrative reversal has constituted a defining feature of his cinematic style since his breakthrough second feature, *Memento* (2000). He continues to refine and repurpose this device—albeit in more muted or structurally embedded ways—in *Inception* (2010) and *Dunkirk* (2017), where nonlinear temporality functions as a central mechanism for disorienting the viewer's perception of causality and chronology. In *Dunkirk* in particular, Nolan constructs a fractured diegesis through three overlapping timeframes (land, sea, and air), which are presented in asynchronous relation to one another. This temporal fragmentation unsettles the viewer's ability to situate the depicted events within the historical and geopolitical logic of World War II, instead offering an abstraction of the Dunkirk evacuation that foregrounds affective intensity and visual immediacy over historical specificity.

The result is a cinematic rendering of war as mythic endurance, stripped of political context and reduced to an existential, almost metaphysical meditation on human survival. This aesthetic strategy draws heavily on postmodern stylistic conventions—most notably, the deliberate collapse of temporal and spatial coherence—which, in turn, facilitate an ahistorical framing of the narrative. As Fredric Jameson has argued, one of the hallmarks of postmodern culture is “a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense” where history is replaced by “a series

of pure and unrelated presents in time” (*Postmodernism* 6, 27). *Dunkirk* exemplifies this logic by evacuating ideological depth in favor of immersive spectacle, reconfiguring war not as a product of real political struggle or imperial conflict but as an abstract crisis of endurance.

Similarly, Slavoj Žižek has critiqued the postmodern turn toward depoliticized aestheticism, noting that “the ultimate function of postmodern art is to neutralize the trauma of historical reality by turning it into spectacle” (*Looking Awry* 30). Nolan's stylized treatment of the Dunkirk evacuation operates precisely in this register: by reimagining history through a recursive, fragmented temporality and sensory overload, the film substitutes epistemological confusion and aesthetic grandeur for political engagement. The historical event is thus transformed into a cyclical and universal drama, driven less by structural forces than by an essentialist conception of conflict as a timeless rupture in the human condition.

5) *Memento* as a Novice Reframing of the Postmodern Moment

Nolan's early work, particularly *Memento* (2000), may be understood as a novice yet potent cinematic intervention into the dominant cultural logic of postmodernism—especially as it crystallized in the aftermath of the Cold War. The 1990s witnessed the ascendancy of ideological discourses that proclaimed the “end of history” and “the end of ideology,” signaling the supposed exhaustion of transformative political projects and the consolidation of global capitalism as the inevitable horizon of human development. Within this context,

postmodern culture adopted a tone of ironic detachment and epistemological skepticism, valorizing surface over depth, and fragmentation over synthesis.

Fredric Jameson famously described this cultural formation as a condition of “depthlessness” and historical amnesia, in which cultural production is increasingly characterized by “a series of pure and unrelated presents in time” (*Postmodernism* 27). Artistic innovation, in this schema, became an exercise in referential play, stylistic recycling, and genre hybridity—what Jameson terms “pastiche” rather than parody. While this aesthetic could be formally inventive, it often abandoned critical engagement, substituting meaningful narrative structure for spectacle and collapsing historical consciousness into affective disorientation.

Memento, though emerging squarely within this creative moment, offered a sharp reframing of postmodern assumptions from the position of a relative newcomer to the industry. Rather than indulging in ironic fragmentation for its own sake, the film uses formal disruption as a critical tool to explore the psychological and existential consequences of memory loss, narrative dislocation, and the erosion of coherent subjectivity. Unlike many contemporaneous works that celebrated the dissolution of narrative and moral certainty, *Memento* turns this dissolution into a problem to be confronted rather than a condition to be aesthetically affirmed. The viewer is required not merely to witness fragmentation but to actively engage in reconstructing meaning—a participatory act that implicitly critiques the dominant ethos of narrative nihilism.

In doing so, *Memento* aligns itself with a rare but significant countercurrent within late 20th-century cinema: the desire not simply to deconstruct, but to reassemble. It stages its fragmentation not as an invitation to abandon interpretation, but as a challenge to the viewer’s interpretive faculties. As such, *Memento* may be seen as both a product of and a reaction to the postmodern moment—an early-career intervention that exposes the affective and ethical costs of narrative disintegration.

This reading of *Memento* sets the stage for a broader interrogation of how postmodern cinema, in its more dominant forms, redefined the terms of narrative engagement and the very function of storytelling in contemporary visual culture. It is to that broader terrain that we now turn.

In contrast to the absurdist postmodern “play” that characterizes much of *Tenet* and *Dunkirk*, *Memento* (2000) stands out precisely because Nolan’s use of narrative fragmentation functions not as a celebration of incoherence, but as a rigorous, participatory exercise in reassembly. In *Memento*, disjunction becomes a cognitively and emotionally engaging process, requiring the viewer to reconstruct the obscured story of Leonard Shelby (played by Guy Pearce), a man suffering from short-term memory loss while attempting to solve the mystery of his wife’s murder. Rather than alienating the audience, the film’s fragmentation draws them deeper into the protagonist’s epistemological and existential crisis.

What occurs in *Tenet*—and, to a lesser extent, in *Dunkirk*—represents the inverse of *Memento*’s carefully structured engagement. In these later films, the game of narrative

manipulation is largely emptied of emotional stakes. Human figures become incidental to the spectacle: background props in an elaborate performance of cinematic formalism, where temporal reversals and narrative acrobatics operate as ends in themselves. Characters exist not as psychologically complex individuals but as functional agents moving through hermetically sealed aesthetic systems. As a result, the films abandon the possibility of emotional identification, offering instead a surface-level engagement with abstract notions of time, entropy, and causality.

Memento, by contrast, anchors its formal experimentation in the thematic core of memory, loss, and the search for meaning. The central dramatic question—what becomes of agency and truth when memory itself is compromised?—grounds the film’s structure and intensifies its emotional resonance. The viewer cannot simply admire the ingenuity of the narrative form; they must become co-investigators, piecing together fragments, inscriptions, and shifting recollections to grasp the unfolding tragedy. Through carefully crafted omissions and nonlinear sequences, Nolan requires the audience to actively reconstruct Leonard’s identity and the contours of his disintegrating world. In doing so, *Memento* achieves what *Tenet* does not: it binds formal innovation to human depth, making the act of narrative reassembly not merely a puzzle, but an ethical and emotional imperative.

Nolan’s *Memento* may be understood as one of the most compelling cinematic expressions of the postmodern condition, especially in the wake of the Soviet Union’s collapse in the early 1990s. That historical

juncture was defined—politically, intellectually, and culturally—by the ascendancy of triumphalist discourses such as “the end of history” (Fukuyama) and “the end of ideology,” which proclaimed the exhaustion of grand narratives and the consolidation of neoliberal capitalism as the unassailable global order. Within this framework, radical systemic transformation was no longer deemed possible; the future was imagined not as rupture or reinvention, but as an indefinite extension of the present—an endless recycling of crises to which societies would adapt, normalize, and eventually naturalize.

Concurrently, dominant strands of postmodern thought expressed deep skepticism toward historical inquiry, teleological critique, and collective memory. These domains were often dismissed as vestiges of totalizing ideological projects—relics of a modernist desire for coherence and meaning. In their place, postmodernism valorized fragmentation, discontinuity, and what Fredric Jameson describes as “the random cannibalization of all the styles of the past” (*Postmodernism* 18), favoring aesthetic “play,” deconstruction, and recombination as both methodology and worldview. This shift found fertile ground in the cultural production of the time, particularly in cinema, where it gave rise to new formal tendencies: genre hybridity, temporal and spatial disjunction, and a persistent referentiality that often displaced substance in favor of style.

Unlike the dominant ethos of ironic detachment that characterized much postmodern art, *Memento* stages a rare countermovement: a turn from deconstruction to reconstruction. Its fragmented narrative

does not merely revel in disorientation; it compels the viewer to participate in the act of reassembly. In this sense, *Memento* channels the anxieties of its historical moment—memory loss, epistemological uncertainty, ontological drift—but refuses to surrender entirely to postmodern nihilism. Instead, it transforms formal disruption into a search for coherence, however futile or tragic, offering a fleeting yet resonant alternative to the aesthetic and ideological fatigue that pervaded the post-Cold War cultural imaginary. Disorientation associated with the rise of collective amnesia in late capitalist society. Its narrative—built around a protagonist suffering from short-term memory loss and attempting to reconstruct a lost history through scattered semiotic clues—mirrors the “a-historical” condition of postmodern memory: a mode of being that drifts from moment to moment without anchoring in a broader chronology.

The tattoos and Polaroid photos annotated with fragmented comments and identifiers serve as metaphors for the disjointed, ephemeral bits of information we constantly consume in today’s media-saturated world—especially via social media platforms. These fragments are of little use in the short or long term unless situated within a wider interpretive framework. Within this cognitive limitation, Leonard Shelby’s fate remains suspended, making him a victim of those who retain memory—and thus control over the narrative—who manipulate him according to frameworks that serve their own interests.

In this light, *Memento* became an emblem of a promising new wave of independent cinema, one capable of capturing

the deeper dimensions of powerlessness that defined the post-Soviet moment. What may have initially appeared as a social or political disorientation in the early 1990s gradually ossified into a chronic condition—one directly or indirectly perpetuated by dominant class structures and ideological tenets like the “end of history” and “end of ideology.” *Memento*, however, offered an alternative vision. Both in its premise and narrative structure, it offered a critical intervention against passive intellectual stasis. It dramatized a solitary and desperate—but ultimately heroic—attempt by a man to resist the cognitive collapse imposed upon him. His effort to piece together the chronology of his own life allowed him to reclaim some semblance of lost human identity, even as he struggled against a predatory world exploiting his epistemological vulnerability.

Interpretively, the film engages deeply with the condition of chronic mental paralysis that mirrors our contemporary ideological environment—especially in how it marginalizes critical and historical thinking. In such a climate, connecting issues together, analyzing causes systematically, or pursuing political and economic critique is often dismissed as irrelevant, impractical, or left only to “experts.” Absurdism—in both thought and practice—becomes the defining framework of how we process the “real.” Any attempt to challenge the dominant order or imagine an alternative is trivialized as futile idealism.

7) *Tenet* and Nolan’s Return of the Absurd

In stark contrast to *Memento*, where fragmentation invites intellectual and emotional engagement, *Tenet* represents a

retreat into a kind of spectacular absurdism in which the interplay of signs, symbols, and temporal reversals becomes an end in itself. Despite its formidable production design, elaborate set pieces, and technically ambitious sequences—such as the literal rewinding of time, backward-flying birds, soldiers “moonwalking” through battlefields, and a full-sized airplane explosion staged in reverse—these images appear strikingly detached from any coherent narrative or emotional substrate. They function as visual set pieces in search of dramatic consequence.

Rather than elucidating plot mechanics, the film’s editing style heightens confusion. The montage does not serve the conventional Hollywood function of clarifying spatial and causal relations, but instead reinforces a persistent opacity. This confusion extends beyond the film’s pseudo-scientific jargon and into its most basic narrative architecture—for instance, the mechanism through which the Protagonist accesses the “inverted” world remains obscure, as do the stakes of his mission. These narrative lacunae deny the viewer the interpretive footholds necessary for emotional investment or epistemological clarity. What remains is Nolan’s signature technical bravado—delivered in full IMAX grandeur—transforming *Tenet* into a celebration of form over substance, of spectacle over meaning.

As a result, the film appears to orbit around its own story rather than inhabiting it. While the ostensible premise involves a race to prevent the annihilation of humanity, the stakes remain abstract and emotionally weightless. We are never invited to understand what this potential destruction means to the Protagonist, nor do we gain

insight into the motivations of his antagonist, the Russian oligarch Sator. Viewers are left not so much to engage with the story as to piece together speculative meanings—yet the film provides little reason to care about these possibilities. What lingers after two and a half hours is not thematic resonance but a procession of dazzling effects, unanchored by coherent narrative or compelling human stakes.

If the tragedy of memory loss in *Memento* symbolized the ideological paralysis of late capitalism—inviting viewers to resist this paralysis through acts of interpretive reconstruction—*Tenet* offers no such provocation. Its narrative disorientation does not challenge the viewer to reassemble meaning; it instead substitutes analysis with astonishment. The driving force of the film becomes the thrill of immersive spectacle—an adrenaline rush akin to that of a high-end video game, magnified by cinematic scale but hollowed out of emotional or political depth.

This shift signals a deeper rupture in the ontology of cinema as a humanist cultural form. Nolan—whose early work exemplified a harmonious convergence of narrative structure, thematic depth, and limited-budget innovation—now appears ensnared by the very machinery of mega-budget filmmaking he once resisted. *Tenet* exemplifies a new form of expensive absurdity: high-concept in style but empty in meaning, dazzling in execution but devoid of soul.

Yet cinema, by its very nature, remains a dynamic and evolving medium—its vitality grounded in its capacity to reimagine expressive form and narrative function. As Martin Scorsese has argued in his widely cited critique of Marvel cinema, the essence

of cinema lies not in spectacle alone, but in its ability to offer revelation—be it artistic, emotional, or spiritual. It must care for the people it portrays, their contradictions, their wounds, their dreams, and their struggles.

Absent that, what remains is not storytelling but spectacle masquerading as meaning—a kind of audiovisual noise that gestures toward profundity while saying very little at all.

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