

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).

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.

The Production and Reception of the film in Context

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. Although the film did not ultimately achieve major commercial success in comparison with some of Nolan’s previous films, its initial box office performance was framed within the industry at the time as a tentative validation of theatrical resilience. As Steven Zeitchik observed, that while the opening box office numbers were not overwhelming, they did indeed “offer a rebuttal of sorts to the many pundits — and rival studios — who said releasing a major film during the third-quarter of 2020 was unwise.” This was seen by Zeitchik as noteworthy and impressive because it occurred in the wake of the epidemic shutdown when “many studios have moved films to 2021 or to on-demand platforms” (Zeitchik).

Rebecca Rubin of *Variety* was also optimistic that as the first major test of cinematic releases since the beginning of the epidemic, *Tenet* essentially was bold in getting a feel of how people would be willing to return to the movies during a global health crisis. Rubin continued, that “without much competition in terms of new Hollywood tentpoles, *Tenet* will steadily draw crowds for weeks to come” (Rubin).

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 had, by the time *Tenet* was released, collectively earned over \$2.7 billion at the global box office (Fink et al.).

In the end, and 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 only slightly exceeded \$365 million. While this is largely attributed to COVID-related hesitancy, there were indeed other factors at play.

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 audience response emerged: *Tenet* was “difficult to understand.” This sentiment, was amplified during its opening week and was repeated across mainstream and digital platforms such as IMDB and Rotten Tomatoes.

But what audiences seemed to express, was actually echoed earlier by many film critics. While these critics acknowledged the film’s technological sophistication, and the intensity and originality of its action sequences, several reviewers anticipated a more ambivalent audience response.

Brian Palermo, for instance, questioned whether viewers would sustain engagement with the film’s narrative momentum, suggesting that “a surprising number of people will open the door and jump out of this moving race car (look, another palindrome!) before it crosses the finish line, exhausted by a story that doesn’t make sense even as it’s

trying to explain itself to you” (Palermo). Similarly, Christina Newland of *Vulture* argues that the film’s conspiracy narrative “moves in concentric circles and curlicues—in a sense, inverting itself— [so that] what was a novelty at the outset becomes more and more of a drag,” further noting that “time travel paradoxes, quantum physics, and ‘temporal pincer movements’ are explained in increasingly dull expository scenes ... causing audience confusion to bleed into indifference and finally into boredom” (Newland). In a comparable vein, Nicholas Fonseca contends that *Tenet* “tries to run out so many [ideas] at once that it risks audience disengagement” (Fonseca).



Memento (2000)

While appreciating the film’s broader “fabric” in relation to how technology shapes modern life, Ben Flanagan of *Slant Magazine* argues that the film’s “action sequences do busily go about working out Nolan’s ideological fixations, without actually driving character or plot forward.” He concludes that “the show that’s made of such inversions comes to feel like watching a snake eat its own tail” (Flanagan). Meanwhile, Tom Duggins of *CineVue* offers a more satirical critique, comparing the film to NASA’s

famously expensive attempt to develop a pen that could write in space—“while Soviet cosmonauts simply used pencils” (Duggins). 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?

A Puzzle with no End?

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.

Nolan’s Journey 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. *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.

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.

***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.

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.

It is quite known that most dominant strands of postmodern thought express deep skepticism toward historical inquiry, teleological critique, and collective memory. These domains are often and characteristically dismissed as vestiges of totalizing ideological projects—relics of a modernist desire for coherence and meaning. In contrast to such ‘Totalizing’ projects, postmodernism tends to valorize fragmentation, discontinuity, and the dismissal or eclectically adopting older or earlier stylistic and formalistic trends as elements that are subjects for aesthetic “play”, deconstruction, and recombination as both methodology and worldview.

This postmodernist thrust 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.

However, and unlike the dominant ethos of ironic detachment that characterized much postmodern art, Christopher Nolan’s second film *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.

The film seems to speak of the collective disorientation as a phenomenon 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.

***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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