

## Article

# A Foreshortened Future and the Trauma of a Dying Earth in Christopher Nolan's *Tenet*

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**Abstract:** An experience of anxiety is caused by the anticipation of unseen future events, especially in the context of ecological trauma, where the prospect of a world without humans in the distant future is often portrayed through mediated cinematic memories. As a result of anthropological intervention on our planet, it is feared that humanity will cease to exist unless steps are taken to prevent it. Furthermore, as climate change intensifies, humans are left with more questions regarding their future. One recent film that addresses this issue is Christopher Nolan's *Tenet* (2020). The film explores the concept of a dying Earth in the future, whose inhabitants seek help from the past to restore the planet's balance by reversing entropy. Despite failing to provide any remedy by revealing 'What's happened happened', a viewpoint that Christopher Nolan, as an auteur, has already presented in his previous film *Interstellar* (2014), the film leaves the audience with the question, what is the purpose of projecting an unseen trauma? By evaluating the events that contributed to the image of a crumbling Earth in the film, this paper seeks to examine the concept of future trauma as an indication of post-traumatic stress disorder while simultaneously exploring it as a film that acknowledges Nolan's own anxiety over the decline of a medium he cherishes.

**Keywords:** ecological trauma; future trauma; entropy; *Interstellar*; post-traumatic stress disorder

## 1. Introduction

With every film Christopher Nolan has made over the years, he has established a reputation as a craftsman adept at creating a distinctive style of filmmaking. A simple Internet search for his name may reveal his preference for film over digital (Giardina 2022), his commitment to the theatrical experience (Coyle 2021), and his interest in exploring nonlinear narrative structures (Mottram 2020), giving him a reputation as a filmmaker who "incorporates philosophical ideas into films in which suspense, action and even violence feature quite prominently" (Goh 2022).

In addition to the craft with which Nolan narrates his films, another important interconnection is the aspect of the trauma he explores from one film to the next. Since the beginning of his filmmaking career, with the short film *Doodlebug* (1997), he has focused on the forces arising from or beyond human control that bear traumatic effects. In Nolan's first feature film, *Following* (1998), he weaves a story that challenges the audience to comprehend the discontinuous episodic timeline along with the protagonist's incapacity to comprehend what has been happening to him (Joy 2020, Intro). Even in a film such as *The Prestige* (2006), where the characters do not explicitly appear to exhibit symptoms of a traumatic disorder, the film emphasizes the psychological trauma experienced by the two protagonists, Robert Angier (Hugh Jackman) and Alfred Borden (Christian Bale), who are determined to outwit each other (Pheasant-Kelly 2015, p. 100). In addition to being an enigmatic film, his second feature *Memento* (2000), became an essential source for trauma theory research (Thomas 2003). Aside from that, prior to his acclaimed *Inception* (2010), which remains etched with the question of whether the final scene was actually a dream or not, and also as an extension of the previous films involving a protagonist haunted by traumas in his dream (Brasse 2014), he helmed arguably one of the most iconic and celebrated characters when it comes



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to the study of trauma in fandom, Batman (Brody 2007), which he subsequently directed into three successful films. Several elements of the Batman films and *Inception* could be seen in Nolan's 2002 film *Insomnia*. While Walter Finch (Robbin Williams) embodies the chaos of the Joker and finds affinity with the protagonist Will Dormer (Al Pacino), Mark Fisher (2011) describes Dormer as being the anti-Cobb, whose inability to sleep, which translates into his inability to dream, causes him to collapse into a "terrifying epistemological void" (p. 39).

In his 2014 film, *Interstellar*, Nolan fully engages Kubrick's philosophy of expressing how humanity should not end on Earth but expand its consciousness beyond. The film presents the chronic anxieties of climate catastrophe, described by E. Ann Kaplan as "trauma as 'dystopia of the spirit'" (Kaplan 2016, p. 10), and examines the cosmic story through the experience of a father who is worried about saving his children from a dying planet. With his next venture, Nolan explores his passion project *Dunkirk* (2017), which examines a cultural memory of a one-of-a-kind war story, depicting the effects of war by placing the audience at the center of the action the characters are observing. However, unlike other war films, this film does not rely on graphic violence or gore to convey its message. Instead, it depends on a "clean mess" that portrays "war as essentially *unnatural*" with "highly wrought scenes that make violence palpable as the negative or implicit potential of obsessively organized images" (Puckett 2020).

Considering how trauma plays a significant role in Christopher Nolan's films, Stuart Joy makes the following insightful observation in his book *The Traumatic Screen*:

Trauma haunts the cinema of Christopher Nolan. Beginning with his short film *Doodlebug* (1997) and ending with *Dunkirk* (2017), films strive to articulate and understand the complexities of trauma. His recurring interest in aligning us with characters who have been traumatized and his repeated return to stories that involve loss thematically anchors each of his films in the experience of trauma. But beyond this, trauma is also explored through our own relationship to his films which frequently feature complex timelines that demand and even reward multiple viewings. These intricate narrative puzzles encourage us to return to them in such a way that emulates the cognitive shifts of traumatic memory—just as those who have undergone a traumatic experience must remember the past in the hope of moving forward, we too must recall our experience if we are to understand what we have seen. (Joy 2020, Intro)

Joy's observations are also evident in Nolan's recent film, *Tenet*, released in 2020. One of the factors contributing to the complexity and special nature of this film is the fact that it was one of the first films to be released in theatres during the peak of COVID-19. In addition, Warner Bros. studio's bloodied red logo in the opening sequence symbolized the mood of the tough times where collective trauma was being experienced all over the world in unison. In a way, this film signifies Nolan's dedication to the theatrical experience and his return to the themes of his previous films while adding additional layers of narrative complexity. Keeping with the themes of climate catastrophe and the dying Earth that he explores in *Interstellar*, he adheres closely to the complexity of the story he develops with *Memento*, *Inception* and *Interstellar*. However, *Tenet* distinguishes itself from *Interstellar* in its iteration of a climatic disaster because the events depicted in the latter are placed in a dystopian future. In contrast, the events of *Tenet* occur in the present, where the future attempts to communicate with the present due to the climate trauma it is experiencing.

This brings us to the purpose of this paper: Can future trauma be experienced in the present, as *Tenet* attempts to investigate? To explore this question and more, the article is divided into two sections, followed by a conclusion. In the following section, we will examine the film's narrative style by focusing on future narration (FN) rather than merely presenting it as a future memory. Further to this, in a subsequent section, a few key scenes will be analyzed to shed light on the concept of future trauma.

## 2. The Futuristic Narration of *Tenet* and the Trauma of Quantum Cinema

*Tenet* is the embodiment of everything Christopher Nolan's films stand for. It is indeed an attempt at creating a Bond-like spy thriller with a temporal twist. In the film, a secret organization from the future called Tenet is working to defend the past from the attacks of the future. The title of the film, as well as the film itself, is a palindrome, i.e., it reads the same forwards or backwards.

The film opens on "the 14th" at the Kyiv Opera House, where a group of terrorists attempts to acquire plutonium-241, a plan that is foiled by the Protagonist (John David Washington). The terrorists capture him during the operation, after which he is tortured brutally, leading him to swallow a cyanide pill to avoid further suffering. As he awakens in a hospital, an agent informs him that he has been granted a second chance at life because of his loyalty to the operation and for not divulging the secrets of his allies. While he appears dead on paper, he is now to work for a much greater cause as his duties cross national boundaries, helping to prevent World War III. Following a period of recuperation, he is introduced to a scientist who explains how certain objects are being discovered whose entropy has been reversed, causing them to travel back in time. This is being performed by the future, which is sending these objects back in time for an unknown purpose. Consequently, the logic of the film suggests, if a simple machine's entropy, such as a bullet, could be reversed, then that could be carried out for anything, resulting in catastrophic consequences.

In the course of his investigation, the Protagonist is led to Mumbai, where he is joined by Neil (Robert Pattinson). A second Tenet operative, Priya, points him to the Anglo-Russian oligarch Andrei Sator (Kenneth Branagh) who has bought perfectly normal bullets from her but reversed their entropy. In the investigation, the Protagonist tries to lure Sator's wife Kat (Elizabeth Debicki), who hates her husband, to aid him in obtaining a meeting with Sator to understand what his actual plan is and how he communicates with the future. In the events that follow, it is revealed that Sator does not seek plutonium-241, but a weapon more powerful than this, namely the Algorithm, which, when detonated with the nuclear weapon, would result in the reverse of the entropy of the planet, ultimately resulting in the annihilation of everything. Using the knowledge he gains in the present, Sator uses a machine called Turnstile. This temporal pincer reverses the entropy of anything that passes through it, allowing him to travel back in time. Upon receiving the design of the machine, Sator has been instructed by the future to find the missing pieces of the Algorithm and detonate them to reverse the entropy of the past, thus improving the future. The Algorithm was invented in the future by a female scientist who became afraid that its use would lead to the extinction of humanity. As a result, she divides it into nine pieces and hides it by sending it back in time.

The film addresses the "grandfather paradox" (see [Lewis 1976](#) for an understanding of the grandfather paradox) concerning whether destroying the past will harm the future. According to Neil, it does not matter since the future believes it is so and is therefore seeking to destroy the past. Apparently, it appears that the future is willing to destroy the past, as explained by Sator in the climax, since the climate catastrophe has reached a point where they (the future generation) believe that their only means of survival is to alter the past by reversing its entropy, which shall restore normalcy to the future.

Midway through the film, the Protagonist and his allies travel back in time to the day of "the 14th", when everything began. The Protagonist believes that the hypocenter of the action would be Sator's hometown, Stalask-12, where the Algorithm would be activated by detonating it. To achieve the goal, everything will be carried out as planned by Sator, with the sole purpose of snatching the Algorithm before detonation, killing Sator to prevent him from escaping, and travelling back to the past to manipulate the events with his knowledge, tricking the former Sator to continue to search for the Algorithm.

In the final conversation between Neil and the Protagonist, it becomes apparent that the whole scheme of saving the past has been designed by the future Protagonist. He has sent Neil from the future to help the past Protagonist put the pieces of every puzzle exactly

where they belong to make Sator continue hunting for the components of the Algorithm, only to be snatched away in the final moments. Thus, the entire film can be viewed as a temporal pincer, similar to the subtext of *Inception*'s deep layer of dreams, where a minute in the real world is equal to an age in the dream world as one progresses deeper into the dream. Thus, as it turns out, what the audience see is only the culmination of a lengthy temporal pincer sequence.<sup>1</sup>

As a result, the film follows what Gerard Genette describes as “anticipation, or temporal prolepsis”, or what is referred to as the “plot of predestination” (Genette 1980, p. 67). Prolepsis is described by Genette as a less frequent narrative technique than analepsis, in which a narrator describes future events out of turn. However, the future events in this film are not presented “out of turn”, although some characters occasionally speculate about what may have happened in the future.<sup>2</sup> Instead, the film plays out the sequences in the present before the characters move into the past with the knowledge of the present, which is now the future, and act accordingly owing to that knowledge of the future in the past. Consequently, what is depicted in the film is a series of events occurring in the present that is witnessed again as the past, while simultaneously being the future. As Ives, one of the characters in this film, warns the protagonist to refrain from joining the mission if he is incapable of stopping “thinking in linear terms” (31:00–30:54), the same is true for the audience—they must suspend their notion of understanding time in linear terms during this film’s viewing.

Observing events for the first time and then returning to them again creates “interactive prolepses”, resulting in habit formation. Genette argues that when one witnesses the inaugural value of an event intensely for the first time, it “is at the same time always (already) a last time—if only because it is forever the last to have the first, and after it, inevitably, the sway of repetition and habit begins” (Genette 1980, p. 72). A similar insight is provided by Gilles Deleuze as to how our behavior is directly related to our memories, such that the past is derived from the present and becomes a habit in the future. In his words, “memory could never evoke and report the past if it had not already been constituted at the moment when the past was still present, hence in an aim behavior: it is the present that we make a memory, in order to make use of it in the future when the present will be past” (Deleuze 1989, p. 52).

A central theme of the film is that the characters, including the Protagonist, Neil, and Ives, attempt to design the recurrence of “iterative prolepses”, i.e., sequence events in the order in which they are expected to take place. This requires them to prevent Sator, who is attempting to break the cycle by knowing his future through living it in the present and then going back in time to alter it with the knowledge he has gained. As a result, the events are repeated as part of a perpetual, iterative process in which both the characters and the audience relive them repeatedly. Essentially, the characters end up performing the same act frequently, as if suffering from a “performative prolepsis.” In contrast to what Genette refers to as “iterative prolepsis”, Mark Currie describes it as “performative prolepsis”, which is defined as “an imagined future which produces the present, and a present which, thus, produced, produces the future. As such, it is the most common relation of the present to the future, the one which pertains in repetition” (Currie 2007, p. 44). The performative prolepsis begets the future by “envisaging it”, thus transforming the “possible” into the “actual” (ibid.). This is achieved through a range of “modes and moods” that are scaled between “hope” and “fear” (ibid.).

*Tenet* oscillates between these elements of hope and fear, both of which are crucial when dealing with trauma issues related to futurity, which will be discussed in more detail in the following section. This film takes a different approach when it comes to dealing with the subject of the traumatic anticipations of futuristic events. A significant difference between this film and other films that depict such anticipated futures through the “reprogramming of popular memory” (Foucault 2011, p. 253) is that this film emphasizes futuristic narratives (FNs) rather than merely futuristic memories. It is typical for films illustrating proleptic memory to depict the future in the same way as the past as if they have

already taken place. *Interstellar* is also a part of such narratives. However, *Tenet* is concerned with “nodes”, which are fundamental to FNs. As a result, the audience experiences two types of futures: one that lies far ahead, the unknown abyss that is communicating with the past—a future never explicitly depicted on screen—and the other, a future that is created by the present, which is made manifest in the screenplay when the characters travel into the past. The Future is always a possibility that becomes an actuality when it arrives and becomes the present.

Consequently, Nolan diverts from the Future in order to focus instead on the future(s) that deal with human choices in the present and how those choices play into the possibilities of that far-fetched horizon’s course. Nolan accomplishes this by moving from depicting futuristic memories as they have already occurred to depicting futuristic narratives that, similarly to Schrödinger’s cat, are determined by the choices made. “FNs are *multi-linear*” (Bode 2013, p. 17), according to Christoph Bode, with “at least one nodal situation” (ibid. p. 16). A node is “a situation that allows for more than one continuation” (ibid.), and *Tenet* adheres strictly to this principle, with the characters returning to nodal situations in the film only to explore an alternate route to future outcomes. Essentially, the process is similar to a director returning to the editing table to fix the narrative and achieve the desired outcome, i.e., the “plot of predestination.”

In light of this, it is essential to emphasize that *Tenet*, similarly to Nolan’s most influential films, is implicitly about cinema. Considering that Nolan is an avid proponent of shooting on photographic film rather than digital (see Macnab 2017), the film comes as a reconciliation of an artist who acknowledges the decay of the art he so dearly loves and attempts to come to terms with it. Nevertheless, this acceptance is not without resistance, coupled with efforts to slow its degeneration. Interestingly, the Algorithm contains nine layers that are inferred to be indicative of the color negative film’s nine layers (see *Is 35 mm Still Made?* 2022).<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, when individuals reverse their entropy by passing through the temporal pincer, what they experience is uncanny Earth, which is the same as our planet but radically different. According to Jennifer Fay, this aspect of uncanniness that cinema produces, especially old celluloid, can be called Eaarth (a term she borrows from environmentalist Bill McKibben). An additional “a” in the planet’s name signifies cinema’s ability to bring unfamiliarity with notions to our planet to an unusual degree by making “the familiar world strange to us by transcribing the dimensionalities of experience into celluloid, transforming and temporally transporting humans and the natural world into an unhomely image” (Fay 2018, p. 3).

Thus, the film demonstrates Nolan’s affection for analogue, in which rather than jumping into the past when travelling back in time, the characters undergo the exact same journey in reverse as they wish to arrive in the past. This means that if a character has to travel back one week in the past, then that amount of time has to be spent doing so. Essentially, it is similar to playing back a tape on a VCR or running back the roll on a projector to rewind the film. Although the film can be rolled back, it does not alter the order (unless it has been edited by the director), and the same sequence is repeated. However, the Future in *Tenet* involves the development of new technology—the Algorithm, having evolved from being a “receptor technology (camera) to the effector technology” (Weibel 2003, p. 599).

Peter Weibel discusses the possibility of a future in his article “The Intelligent Image”, that as humanity enters cyberspace, imaging technology will be able to stimulate rather than simply simulate reality. If that occurs, reality will break down as it does in the quantum realm, and people will have the option of choosing the kind of reality they wish to entertain for themselves. As he notes,

... there is something between man and machine, namely technology ... Maybe the world is only an interface: This is expanded cinema and VR technology. The important point is that the border—the interface—is permeable and variable. The border can be extended. Something that is now the environment can be part of the system in the next step. Something that is the system can be the environment

for the sub-system. This means that if I am external observer of one system, I can become part of the system for the next environment, an internal observer for another external observer. Normally, we believe our situation in the real world to be identical with that in classical cinema. We are external observer of the image; our observation has no effect on the image. But we have constructed systems where our observation is part of the system that we observe. Therefore, quantum theory with its effects of observation . . . becomes the role model for the observer-dependent media used in interactive image installations and systems. (ibid. p. 596)

In the film, the turnstile becomes a gateway to the virtual world (cinematic Earth), where the actions caused within that world can disrupt the fabric of the real world. This technology operates on the mechanism of quantum reality, where individuals entering it tend to emerge in two, such as electrons and positrons, moving forward and backwards in time (the film also refers to this aspect as a result of Richard Feynman and John Wheeler's theory of one-electron universe). Through the use of this technology, the Future wishes to reverse the entropy of the past to restore normalcy to the environment. However, a reverse in entropy would lead to singularity, resulting in the end of all things as time moving forward and backward meet. In cinematic terms, this would refer to the convergence of the fictional (Earth) and real-world (Earth), where humanity will fail to distinguish between the two.

### 3. From the Future to the Present: Communicating Ecological Trauma

Can the trauma of the future be experienced in the present? What is the possibility of something that has not yet occurred having its effects felt in the present? There have been catastrophic events of much greater scope in the past; however, in the age of social media, where everything is recorded, nothing escapes archiving. There is a story at the heart of everything that happens. This story could be given narrativity that enables people to evaluate their current disposition in the context of where they envision themselves in the future. The exposure to "new images of trauma on a daily basis" (Kaplan 2008, p. 3) is enough to induce a "prememory" (Beiner 2014), or collective memory, described as "mnemonic premediation" (Erlil 2020), which is rooted in anxieties about the future. The constant exposure to such images, in which something is always hovering over your head, can have a detrimental effect on the psyche, provoking emotional feelings of fear, guilt, and shame, in which "fear is the response to the immediate threat of trauma, while anger, guilt, shame, and sadness are posttraumatic effects" (Amstadter and Vernon 2008, p. 393).

Once again, the question arises, how can one experience emotions such as fear, shame, and guilt when the events have not occurred in reality or may never occur? As a result of watching catastrophic events in the present happening far off, Kaplan (2008) suggests that one may experience "secondary or vicar-arousal" (ibid.) or even "empty empathy" (ibid.), which watching violence through films, television, and videogames could lead to. The experience of witnessing a potential catastrophe may also trigger a "pro-social response" in people, seeking to alter their behavior in a positive direction. It is the third point that requires some attention here. Constant exposure to tragic events worldwide does cause people, most notably young people, to feel concerned about what people in power are doing to the place they call home and the planet to which they feel a deep connection. According to Caroline Hickman, when she interviews children and young people about their perceptions of climate change and biodiversity, many of them express that they "have been frightened for a while" (Hickman 2020, p. 411):

People also talk about feeling depression, despair, frustration, anger, blame and horror at the injustice of environmental destruction, guilt and shame, helplessness and powerlessness. Understanding in the face of such powerful and conflicting feelings defenses can be easily triggered leading people to then feel numb or dissociate. Moments of denial, disavowal and disbelief can occur and then reoccur. (ibid., p. 416)

The plot of *Tenet* also outlines an eco-anxiety concerning how anthropogenic activities are damaging the planet, which will eventually become uninhabitable, potentially causing mass extinctions of species, including humans. The film looks at the visceral image of a future, as Mark Bould puts it in *The Anthropocene Unconscious* (Bould 2021), of envisioning a “world haunted not just by the dead, but by the specter of death” (p. 7).

The film’s motto, as put forward by Neil at the end, “What’s happened happened” (8:36–8:34), suggests a different approach to addressing human errors involving slowing down human exploitation of planetary resources or through geoengineering to remedy environmental shortcomings. There is a conceptual similarity between the film’s philosophy and that of Thomas Nail’s “Kinocene”, a topic that will be discussed in detail later. Nevertheless, in regard to the issue of trauma in the film, there is a gradual progression from personal trauma to ecological anxiety, both of which relate to the future.

At the beginning of the film, the Protagonist is shown consuming the cyanide capsule as the mercenaries capture him during the Kyiv operation. Upon awakening in a hospital, he discovers that the severe mutilations on his body have been repaired. The organization, Tenet, accorded him this medical assistance in gratitude for his commitment not to reveal the identities of his colleagues. In Nolan’s previous films, he uses the same technique where the beginning of the film is set up by having an unreliable narrator guide the audience. The Protagonist in this film exhibits considerable damage due to the torture, and what follows may simply be a hallucination that he imagines he has experienced. Nevertheless, based on the narrative evidence that the film provides and the logic of the film, it is still possible to conclude that the Protagonist undergoes severe trauma while being tortured and nearly dying. Cathy Caruth describes trauma as “an overwhelming experience of sudden, or catastrophic events, in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, and uncontrolled repetitive occurrence of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (Caruth 1991b, p. 181). Based on this definition, the Protagonist exhibits all the characteristics of a traumatizing experience in which the events following the torture result in “repetitive hallucinations” where he replays certain events, repeatedly displaying symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder.

Furthermore, as the Protagonist faces death, despite dying and returning, the experience of assimilating death eludes him. To be precise, survivors of death experience death in a way that postpones the whole experience into the future, thereby maintaining its anticipatory nature; as Caruth points out, “the sense that the survivor doesn’t simply bring back a mastered knowledge of death... the confrontation itself might have that anticipatory quality of not being fully assimilated or known but projected into a future” (Caruth 1991a, p. 162). For this reason, people who have survived traumatic experiences (such as war soldiers) repeat and rehash them, manifesting symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, an issue which Nolan extensively explored in his film *Memento*.<sup>4</sup>

Following this, we find a compulsive nightmarish repetition of events, as seen in the cases of the Protagonist and Sator. In the case of the former, he faces death which is only postponed, while the latter, diagnosed with cancer, is anxious about the possibility of death at any moment. His goal is to control death. To this end, he measures the pulse rate of his body, synchronized with that of the nuclear bomb that is fused with the Algorithm, so that the world should perish with him if the circumstances are out of his control. The Protagonist’s knowledge of the same exacerbates his anxiety concerning the possible harm the future could cause to the world: “we are being attacked by the future, and Sator’s helping” (1:39:18–1:39:09), as Priya explains it. “The sense of responsibility to prevent or repair harm”, notes Kathleen O. Nader, “often becomes intensified under threatening circumstances. Issues of responsibility may consequently become traumatic preoccupation” (Nader 1997, p. 31). There is a clear demonstration of this with the Protagonist, particularly in the Oslo airport scene(s), in which he confronts a man who emerges from the Turnstile, and later in the film, during the reverse entropic movement, when he returns to the same event to discover that it was he who had emerged from the Turnstile. Combined, the entropic and reverse entropic aspects of the Oslo airport scene elicit a mimetic and

antimimetic sense of the Protagonist's traumatic experiences. Mimetic processes involve reliving traumatizing experiences by survivors, as explained by Ruth Leys (2006):

Trauma is understood as an experience that immerses the victim in the scene so profoundly that it precludes the kind of specular distance necessary for cognitive knowledge of what has happened. The mimetic theory explains the tendency of traumatized people to compulsively repeat their violent experiences in nightmares or by repetitive forms of acting out, by comparing the traumatic repetition to hypnotic imitation. (p. 139)

Consequently, while the survivor relives moments of trauma repeatedly, they have difficulty achieving the objectivity necessary to assess the events. The Protagonist undergoes this scenario when he is "in the moment" of the event at the Oslo airport, where he is so engrossed in the experience that he perceives them as if they are occurring for the first time (in accordance with the logic of the film, these events must have repeated numerous times to give rise to future). This is where the antimimetic approach comes in. It enables the survivor to observe the event from a distance to assess its consequences. An antimimetic approach can be seen in the reverse entropic event in which the Protagonist is seen attacking another him. While witnessing the attack for the first time shocks him, he is overwhelmed the second time because he understands the actions ahead of time and executes those actions in accordance with his knowledge in an attempt to gain some control over what had transpired. The entire approach, however, represents the guilt notion of the survivor who blames themselves for the tragedy and tries to take a course that might have resulted in a different outcome if they had done something differently.

Therefore, as I argue here, the entire film addresses the larger question, which is also central to the film: What is to be done about the Earth, which is slowly deteriorating due to human activity and may become uninhabitable in a few decades, with no cure in sight? With the ongoing depletion and degradation of our biosphere on a large scale, it is difficult to envisage a future with a positive outlook. As guilt sets in, the thought arises of what could have been done differently, some small contribution on our part, so as to make a better future for everyone. Giant corporations use this sense of guilt to convince consumers to purchase products that claim to be made from refurbished metals, while at the same time mining more minerals for chips in order to meet the demands of these devices. Hence, when Neil says, "what's happened happened", the film, through him, communicates its philosophy that it is futile to dwell on what could have been done.<sup>5</sup> In many ways, this film's philosophy aligns with that of philosopher Thomas Nail's Kinocene.

Rather than describing the current era as the Anthropocene, Thomas Nail identifies it as the Kinocene, emphasizing how the current age reveals the truth about the planet, which has always existed but never been perceived or experienced until now.<sup>6</sup> According to Nail, "We live in an age of movement" (Nail 2019, p. 375), adding:

Life is one of the most efficient maximizers of entropy on Earth, and humans have increased their entropic impact by further burning fossil fuels, overproducing nitrogen fertilizers, removing forests, and increasing net carbon dioxide levels in the atmosphere. Portions of the planet are literally moving more quickly and more unevenly—around axes of gender, race, and class. (ibid.)

Furthermore, he asserts that the increase in movement may have been initiated by humans, "but now the whole planet is producing positive feedback cycles (carbon cycles, nitrogen cycles, etc.) that have lives of their own, whose mobility needs to be acknowledged" (ibid.). As a result of the increased movement of the planetary feedback caused by human activity, it has become possible to observe how our planet has always been in motion. As evidenced by his later films, particularly *Interstellar*, Nolan's vision is one in which humanity grows beyond the horizon of our planet, expanding its consciousness into the universe and understanding its intricate mechanisms. Likewise, *Tenet* presents the idea of humanity from the future guiding the past to reach the point where it is meant to be. "Reality" is referred to in the film as, "an expression of faith in the mechanics of the world, not an excuse to

do nothing" (8:36–8:28). There is an element of nihilism in *Tenet's* philosophy, the adage that we play puppets for our higher masters. Yet, if our world is merely a simulation of reality, what are our options for dealing with the actual consequences of trauma caused by ecological degradation resulting in mass migrations, food shortages, wars, and gender inequality?

#### 4. Conclusions

The film attempts to provide a solution by the time it reaches its climax. Essentially, it is a charade played on the part of giving the impression that something is being done. The film, on its part, concocts that there is a threat more significant than nuclear weapons looming over our heads, namely the Algorithm, which needs to be prevented. To prevent the atomic bomb from firing when fused with the Algorithm, there are two teams of soldiers divided into red and blue groups, one moving forward and the other moving backwards in time to extract the Algorithm from the nuclear weapon, which will go off as planned, thus misleading past Sator into believing everything is going according to plan and he can continue looking for the Algorithm's parts moving forward in time. The big battle scene designed in the Stalask-12 is complicated and confusing regarding who is fighting whom. As if the film's audience were being taken into the extremes of simulation, the entire scene is designed similarly to a video game. On one level, the film appears to achieve the "interactivity" (Smethurst and Craps 2014) of video games, which has proven beneficial in treating trauma issues (see Butler et al. 2020; Collins 2011). Thus, the narrative itself, which shows time moving forward and backwards simultaneously, creates a level of engagement that simply requires more than passive participation on the part of the audience to make sense of it.

In terms of its cathartic nature, *Tenet* can be viewed as a film about the director's acceptance of the gradual demise of the medium he admires and an allegory about the trauma of dying Earth. On many levels, the film illustrates the truth, that geoengineering solutions will not solve the problems we are creating now. In accordance with the film's theme, once something occurs, it occurs, making it more prudent to act now rather than wait until things spiral out of control.

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#### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Col Jung's article "Tenet Plot Explained" (Jung 2020) offers an excellent illustration of how the plot progresses in this film, as well as explaining how the entire film is only the culmination of an extended temporal pincer set by the future Protagonist.
- <sup>2</sup> *Tenet*, at its core, points out the paradox that emerges from the interaction of the spectator/reader with the fictional world, wherein despite knowing that the world is unreal, they nevertheless can't help but believe in its palpability. Several scholars have addressed the notion of the "paradox of fiction", including Kendall L. Walton, who asks "why we do not dismiss novels, films, and plays as "mere fiction" and hence unworthy of serious attention" (Walton 1978, p. 6). In addition, scholars such as Colin Radford and Michael Weston addressed this issue in their article "How can we be moved by the fate of Anna Karenina" (Radford and Weston 1975)? Finally, Noël Carroll, another scholar who has taken part in this debate, elaborated on this theme by exploring "how it is that fictions can have impact on the actual world" (Carroll 1990, p. 60).
- <sup>3</sup> The nine layers of 35mm colour negative film are the Film Base, the Subbing Layer, the Red Light Sensitive Layer, the Green Light Sensitive Layer, the Yellow Filter, the Blue Light Sensitive Layer, the UV Filter, the Protective Layer, and the Visible Light (Exposing Film).
- <sup>4</sup> William G. Little, in his article "Surviving "Memento"" (Little 2005), describes the film as carrying several marks of traumatic experience as shown by the film's protagonist, who displays post-traumatic stress disorder, "a condition whose most striking feature is a compulsion to repeat the trauma, to re-create it through hallucinations, flashbacks, and dreams" (p. 68).

- 5 According to Lance Belluomini (2021), the film adheres to a temporal ontology (a view regarding the nature of time) known as the block universe. Using this viewpoint, the universe is viewed as a giant four-dimensional block in which everything that has ever existed or will exist is gathered together simultaneously. In his discussion of the ideas presented in the film, Belluomini maintains that although everything is fated, that does not constitute an excuse for inaction.
- 6 Thomas Nail's choice of Kinocene over Anthropocene certainly concurs with Mark Bould's notion of using a different terminology from Anthropocene, which places too much emphasis on human dominance. Bould notes in his book *The Anthropocene Unconscious* the proliferation of alternative names to the Anthropocene coined by various scholars that highlight how "changing the name changes the story" (p. 18). Simply changing terminology can result in a significant shift in the way we view the world.

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