

Christopher Nolan's *Tenet*: The postmodern would-be blockbuster

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21 March 2021

Tenet is a science fiction thriller, written and directed by Christopher Nolan, responsible for *Dunkirk*, *Interstellar*, *Inception*, *Memento* and three Batman films.

The film was shot in 2019, but its release was delayed several times due to the COVID-19 pandemic. *Tenet* was the first major studio film released in movie theaters globally—in August and September 2020—after the pandemic shutdown. It earned some \$363 million, principally outside the US, but was generally considered a commercial failure.

Variety commented in November: “*Tenet* carries a \$200 million price tag, not counting the many millions spent in global marketing fees. Rivals speculate that *Tenet* may lose as much as \$100 million, though insiders at Warner Bros. dispute that number and suggest losses won't exceed \$50 million.”

The film centers on the ability to manipulate time. The events, on a single viewing, are difficult to follow and at times almost incomprehensible. The viewer will determine for him or herself whether retroactively sorting out the “science” in this “science fiction” is worthwhile.

The Protagonist (John David Washington) is a CIA agent of some sort. After a failed anti-terror mission in Kiev, he joins an organization known as Tenet and first becomes aware of the ability of objects to move backward in time. This involves “inversion,” which can “reverse the entropy” of things and people too.

Inversion has various uses. Passing through a “temporal turnstile,” for instance, individuals can go forward or backward in time without disrupting the “normal” flow of time. An automobile races backward down a highway, for example, while every other vehicle proceeds in the ordinary fashion. Characters find themselves on a number of occasions disconcertingly confronting past or future versions of themselves.

As one commentary (in *GQ*) explains “And so an inverted bullet isn't fired by a gun, but instead is caught

by it. Cars seem to drive backward. People who are in inverted time can't breathe air backwards, so they have to carry oxygen machines. If you're in a fire, the flames draw heat away from the body, which means you freeze instead.”

All of this makes a “temporal pincer movement” possible, in which teams can attack an enemy from two directions in *time*.

In any case, the technology has ended up in the hands of a malevolent Russian oligarch, Andrei Sator (Kenneth Branagh), who, we eventually learn, is dying of a terminal disease. Sator apparently has the power, if he manages to assemble all the scattered pieces of the “Algorithm,” the fully weaponized inversion technology, to make everything that ever happened or existed in human history disappear along with him when he goes. The film centers on preventing this from occurring. In other words, there is a super-villain with a potential super-weapon. This is glorified James Bond material.

The Protagonist (this is the character's name) attempts to reach Sator through his wife, Kat (Elizabeth Debicki). He also teams up with Neil (Robert Pattinson), another intelligence agent. The film takes us to various locales, also *à la* Bond movies, including Kiev, Mumbai, London, Oslo, the Amalfi Coast in Italy, Talinn in Estonia, back to Oslo, Vietnam and finally to northern Siberia. Along the way, as he tries to save the world past and present, the Protagonist falls for Kat and tries to rescue her.

Tenet is not an interesting or engaging film. When the furious and confusing action dies down momentarily, the performers struggle to make something meaningful out of the script, which is devoid of psychological or social insight. Some of them have a better time of it than others. Pattinson, who has developed an interesting film presence, fares best. Branagh plays a vile, murderous Russian out of the *New York Times*-CIA playbook.

The film technology at work in *Tenet* is very striking. It

testifies to the ability of present-day cinema to create virtually any image or series of images. However, and this may not be the first occasion on which we have made this point, while technology is powerful and helpful, one also must have something to say.

We have written numerous times about Nolan's films. In fact, five different reviewers have commented on his efforts for the WSWS—and all negatively. Certain themes recur. About *Interstellar* (2014), we wrote, for example, that there was “a banality under the pretentious surface of the film. Nolan seems more interested in the special effects than in the relationship between his characters.” *Inception* (2010), we argued, “merely emphasizes the *unreal* (and unappealing) aspects of contemporary Hollywood filmmaking: (over) cleverness, visual effects as a substitute for real ideas, and evasion of the burning questions of our day.” In *The Dark Knight* (2008), the “filmmakers apparently aspire to say something, but the comic-book adaptation is a limited form and, more to the point, one has to have important experiences and thoughts to say something interesting or enlightening about life.”

In the end, however, it is not so much a matter of criticizing Nolan's filmmaking, which is not very difficult to do. The important issue is to understand and criticize the conditions that produced his filmmaking or made it possible and seek to overcome them.

Nolan, born in 1970, belongs to a generation of British film directors—including Sam Mendes, Jonathan Glazer, Lynne Ramsay, Steve McQueen, Martin McDonagh, Alex Garland, Joe Wright, Ben Wheatley and others—who came of age during the reactionary Thatcher era and for whom, whether they perceive it or not, the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 was a pivotal event.

The latter event in particular, combined with the putrefaction of the trade unions and, in Britain, the Labour Party, ushered in a period of non-committal, socially indifferent filmmaking. The writers and directors did not necessarily all shift dramatically to the right, but they were infused overnight, so to speak, with an absolute terror of being labeled as “political” (except, that is, for “identity politics”) or “social realist” filmmakers.

Ideologically, they developed under the retrograde influence of subjectivist postmodernist conceptions in various strands.

Speaking of his body of films and *Dunkirk* (2017) specifically, Nolan once commented, “They are all about individual experiences, potential contradictions with objective reality, and the film tries very strongly to leave space for the seemingly infinite number of experiences

and stories that would contradict each other or comment on each other in different ways.” It would be wrong, of course, to amalgamate Margaret Thatcher—infamous for saying, “There is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women and there are families”—and Nolan *politically*, but the director's insistence on atomized subjective existence speaks both to social developments in the UK and the manner in which layers of the intelligentsia, intimidated or conquered, have surrendered to reactionary notions.

Two admirers of Nolan, Alec Price and M. Dawson, argue that in his films what emerges “is a portrait of man cast adrift in a world where nothing is certain and reality is often an abstract concept, forever in flux.” For this director, they write, “the only thing in this world that is real is what we decide to accept into our conscience. Actuality is far less important than the way in which we absorb, interpolate and remember, and it is this ‘created reality’ that truly matters.”

In short, according to Price and Dawson, “we choose who we are and what we believe.” Sovereign power “in the Nolan universe belongs to the internalisation of all experience and it is solely in the mind and the heart where any sense of permanency or equilibrium can ever be found.”

In any case, what has been “internalized” is not very rich or rewarding. *Tenet* is tedious and quite conventional. Nolan wants nothing to do with “politics,” but his film comfortably conforms to the requirements of the race- and gender-obsessed upper-middle class. As the film's publicity has been eager to point out, “With an estimated production budget of USD \$205 million, this is the most expensive film ever made to have a person of color as the solo lead.” Moreover, Kat is an abused woman and, as noted, Sator a maniacal Russian. The appropriate boxes have been checked.



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