

Time between storytelling and story-following: a cognitive and affective view of Christopher Nolan's *Dunkirk* (2017) and *Tenet* (2020)

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Abstract: The works of Christopher Nolan, besides achieving commercial success and critical acclaim, are often singled out for their remarkable preoccupation with time. His innovative representation of time, its passage and impact, is reflected in his intransigent manipulation of temporality in his narratives. As his structures grew significantly more experimental and challenging over the years, his concern with the questions of memory, identity, conflict and existence at large grew more profound. In *Dunkirk* (2017), timelines, taking place in distinct spaces, converge forming a singular war-survival experience that pulls the viewer into the individual and communal intricacies of the past. In *Tenet* (2020), time is inverted to save humanity from a war that is worse than a nuclear holocaust. The future in such a film becomes both the enemy and the ally. The present paper closely examines the two narratives in an attempt to comprehend how the manipulation of time, as a storytelling mechanism, functions to stimulate rich aesthetic experiences. Relying on David Bordwell's conceptualization of the viewer's activity, the analyses follow the stories' unfolding through various cues and constraints that trigger a set of cognitive and affective experiences. Both films are carefully made to ensure that the spectator develops a distinct viewing experience in which different schemata are conjured, modified and redrawn. In addition to their compelling intellectual demands, the works allow for a deep emotional involvement that strikes a balanced rhythm between fulfilment, excitement and a sense of urgency.

Keywords: *affective; cognitive; story-following; storytelling; time; viewer; David Bordwell; Christopher Nolan.*



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Humanity's measurement of itself has often depended on time: as a currency, as a distance, as an arrow or as an orbit. Man's capacity to create notions and tools, surrounding time and regulating its use, stands as a proof of his inherent willingness to survive both time and space. His tendency to invent stories about different times and lands, on the other hand, stands as a proof of an unquenchable thirst to be timeless and unbounded. From parallel universes, to wonderlands and from secret passages to advanced machines, literary and filmic speculations have attempted to construct alternative worlds transporting the reader/viewer, across various genres, to discover different faces of reality. Among the contemporary works that have remarkably defied the standard conception of time, as ordered and linear, are Christopher Nolan's. Written and directed by one of the most iconic filmmakers of the twenty-first century, the works have garnered the respect and appreciation of many critics and moviegoers for reasons that stretch far beyond idiosyncratic technique or popular appeal. In *Dunkirk* (2017) and *Tenet* (2020), Nolan manipulates time to an extreme extent to tell stories about the past and the future respectively while eying the present. In so doing, the aim, as the director has often stated, is to invite the spectator to be part of a certain aesthetic experience rather than passively consume an easily digestible content. Hence, the present paper closely examines Nolan's manipulation of time, as a storytelling mechanism, to stimulate a cognitive and affective story-following.

Concern with humanity and change, through ages, eras and states of consciousness, continues to inspire Nolan's writing endowing it with an unmistakable existential allure. At a time when speed and portability may function as constraints upon creative endeavors, the *author* does not shy away from challenging his audience with artworks that 'run against the clock'. In turn, spectators single out his films with a keen attention and a great deal of enthusiasm. Though not always too (gullibly) admiring, most viewers and critics note the films' outright ability to trigger puzzled reactions and open interpretations. This is often linked to their complex, sometimes unintelligible, narrative structures. Unconventional storytelling has almost become the director's signature ever since his successful psychological thriller *Memento* (2000). Over the years, more innovations with plot and timeline were experimented with, inspired by diverse influences from science, music and philosophy. From an unsettling experience of time as a ceaseless continuity in *Insomnia* (2002), to a time-shifting leap into the interiorities of a dreaming state in *Inception* (2010), and eventually to a cosmic race saving life in *Interstellar* (2014), time monitors all actions and intentions in Nolan's cinematic universe. Moreover, his preoccupation with large-scale change is manifested in his intransigent focus on war. In *Dunkirk*, he retells the story of evacuating the defeated British troops from a French shore during World War II. In *Tenet*, he foretells the story of a temporal war (World War III) waged by future generations on a nuclear-loaded present. In *Oppenheimer*, he tells the story of the man behind the invention of the atomic bomb that, supposedly, ended World War II and launched a cold race for armament. His 'obsession' with narrative time matches such a thematic continuum as time is bent forward, backwards and in circular motion. Arguably, this plays a major role in creating the complex rhythm of his works demanding multileveled viewership.

Several scholarly publications are dedicated to Nolan's works and their distinctive

temporality. In *The Nolan Variations* (2020), Tom Shone quotes Nolan describing his fight with time as “trying to break the tyranny of the projector, which is the ultimate linearity” (81). Such a struggle, both in scriptwriting and direction, is reflected in most of his films that are often regarded as games or puzzles for the mind. In “About Time Too” (2015), Jacqueline Furby discusses the director’s twisting of linear chronology. She asserts that his interest in different modes of time travel is exemplary of modern temporality which is seen as “a site and symptom of a dystopian movement towards a more fast-paced life and work” (248). To illustrate such a point, she analyzes *Interstellar* as a work that expands the boundaries of narrative time in order to negotiate the idea of loss, parental and planetary, from a multidimensional perspective (253). In fact, *Interstellar* is regarded by many scholars as marking Nolan’s decisive shift towards an overt contemplation of time and its impact on individual and collective destinies.

Similarly, Todd McGowan (2023) discusses Nolan’s emphasis on “the malleability of the past” through analyzing *Tenet*’s portrayal of the future’s “retroactive” relation to the politics of the present (79). From a psychological rather than a political standpoint, Fran Pheasant-Kelly (2023) studies *Dunkirk* and *Inception* arguing that in such films “trauma is inevitably interwoven with space and time, generating what is termed [as] “trauma chronotope” (63). Time in such scenarios, she continues, is “distorted and quantified in terms of survival rather than chronicity” (63). In a similar vein, but in different terms, Stuart Joy (2020) refers to the trauma in *Dunkirk* as a combination between individual memories of survival and a collective sense of nostalgia that has, through time, culminated in a national identity (*Traumatic Screen* 15).

Philosophical considerations have equally triggered a set of commentaries. Particularly, Tom Brislin, in “Time, Ethics, and the Films of Christopher Nolan” (2016), addresses the following question: “when time is skewed, does the flow of ethics likewise bend and reshape?” (199). His examination of five films yields the conclusion that, albeit implicitly, Nolan’s characters tend to transcend temporal and spatial determinants sacrificing identity, memory, freedom and even existence for the sake of a “universal unconditional love” (208). Likewise, Robbie B.H Goh (2022) pondering on the morality of characters in *The Dark Knight* trilogy, *Dunkirk* and *Tenet*, suggests that they display a “moral mitigation” that is scarcely manifested in earlier works. He argues that while Nolan does not deny “the fraught and contingent nature of moral action” in the deceitful and self-interested societies depicted, he nonetheless does not stifle “glimpses of sacrifice and atonement that are arguably a qualified postmodern version of heroism” (*Filmmaker and Philosopher* 146). Nolan’s interest in time and temporality and their influence on perceptions of reality and moral choices has been noted and approached from a variety of perspectives. However, further examination is needed to comprehend how time functions, in such works, as a stimulant of a more engaged viewership especially that Nolan has often explicitly suggested, in interviews, that his works are meant to be immensely felt and experienced rather than strictly deciphered (Berman n. pg.; Coyle n. pg.).

In order to follow the narratives’ construction of unique viewing experiences, attuned with their particular structures and concerns, this analysis relies on David Bordwell’s cognitive film theory. In *Narration in the Fiction Film* (1985), the prolific film historian and theorist argues for a close examination of narratives as viewing

experiences seeking to establish a unified meaning. Drawing from a range of cognitive and formalist research, he suggests that a work is to be approached from the spectator's perspective in order to analyze how "narrative comprehension" is achieved. His starting premise is that "a film does not 'position' anybody"; instead it "cues the spectator to execute a definable variety of operations" (Bordwell 29). He explains that sensory stimuli are incomplete and so perceptual judgment is necessarily formed through an active process of framing and fixing hypotheses based on a repertoire of schemata (31). The latter could be derived from knowledge and experiences with everyday or artistic matters. Since the "viewer's activity" centers on the cognitive goal of constructing "a more or less intelligible story", the spectator's aim when watching a narrative film is to "arrange events in temporal sequence" while making sense of other cues such as dialogue, scenery, movement etc (33).

Bordwell refers to various motivations, namely compositional, realistic, transtextual and artistic, that trigger the viewer's formation of schemata that generate a set of hypotheses. The latter are confirmed, refuted or modified along the process of narrative comprehension in a way that commands the viewer's continuous construction of mental images in response to different auditory, visual and verbal triggers. In other words, what stands as a 'barrier' between the spectator and their comprehension of the story is its representation which is liable to achronology, generic unconventionality, and formal or thematic nonconformity. Hence, Bordwell explains, the viewer is tasked with the urgency to comprehend the *fabula* (story) by making successive/simultaneous assumptions and inferences about the *syuzhet* (plot) as the link between the two comprises the logic, time and space of the narrative (51). The outcome of the process resumes in a heightened mental and emotional activity due to the probabilistic nature of narrative as exercising a sort of pressure on the viewer who has to, first, follow the story through attempts to make sense of its representation (within a limited time frame) and, second, face the subsequent disappointments, gratifications, (interrupted or delayed) fulfillments etc. ensuing as such attempts are further cued and constrained (39).

Regarding films that opt for an unconventional storytelling, through fragmented or disordered sequences of events, Bordwell asserts that one must fall back on their "ability to rearrange them according to schemata. But such films run the risk of confusing us" (*Narration* 33). Nolan's works belong to such a category as they are an example of films that not only have "complex time patterns" but also "supply audiences with new schemata [encouraging] them to see the film more than once" (33). With their lack of chronological order and linear causality, such works may often reduce (passive) understanding, yet they in turn stimulate a more engaged stance towards their narration. Arguably, if the film does not correspond to the template schemata, the spectator must adjust their viewing activity to an "armed and active" cognitive process that potentially triggers an affective power (39). Relying on Bordwell's conceptualization of the viewer's activity, the subsequent analysis will shed light on the aesthetic experiences created through time manipulation in *Dunkirk* and *Tenet*.

***Dunkirk*: converging time to survive World War II**

After traveling forward in time to a drought-raided earth in *Interstellar*, the audience travels back, with Nolan, to the time of World War II. *Dunkirk* takes the viewer back in history to relive one of its most memorable episodes. The evacuation of Allied Forces (400.000 soldiers) from Dunkirk, in escape from the approaching German forces, posed a challenge to the British and French Navies by then. It was a challenge to film as well. Different political, historical, and cultural strands could find their way into the story due to its magnitude; however, the writer-director chose to produce a stripped-down piece in which focus is laid on intimate experiences of the struggle for survival. The syuzhet is divided, asymmetrically, between three space-times: one week on the Mole, one day in the Sea, and one hour in the Air. A minimum of dialogue is employed so, to comprehend the fabula, the viewer relies majorly on visual and auditory stimuli.

With little above necessary information, the viewer is thrust into the battle for retreat. Joining a young soldier, Tommy (Fionn Whitehead), in his discovery of a sweeping view of thousands of soldiers queuing in wait for deliverance under enemy explosives being routinely fired from above. Instantly, the viewer shares the soldiers' sense of discomfort and desolation as the camera dives and tilts mimicking their movement at key moments to evade being a target or to walk through the ebbing-and-tiding sands. Aboard a civilian boat (Moonstone), led by Mr Dawson (Mark Rylance) with the help of two youngsters, the camera cross-cuts to the second location of the story. Starting the journey from the other side of the Channel, the crew sails through risky waters to reach the troops before the enemy surrounds them. The camera elevates above both spaces to picture another struggle being carried by a set of Spitfires. The pilots seem to be doing their best to ensure the mission of deterring enemy aircraft is safely accomplished. Hence, the viewer is introduced to three distinct, initially remotely connected timelines, in which war is experienced differently. What accompanies such a setting is the altering sound of a ticking clock that intensifies, almost instinctively, with the rising events.

The three timelines intersect creating a multi-layered experience for the viewer who minutely follows the plights of the rescued (soldiers), the rescuers (sailors), and the protectors (pilots). The perspective is often constrained, within the limited space of a boat or a cockpit, focusing the spectator's view on the character's situation then and there. In terms of the exposition regarding the war, its plans, and updates, the viewer is almost as ignorant as the soldier who stands for hours long waiting for rescue without any (outer) support such as information or news-bearing. The arbitrariness and random progress on the mole somehow throws the viewers off balance as, initially, they wait for their attempts of escape to succeed. However, they repeatedly fail to board any of the ships and their failure, despite genuine efforts, conveys the spiteful nature of the struggle for survival against both the friend and the foe.

Mirroring the suspenseful staggering of soldiers, combating waves, bullets, and each other, the Fortis team leads a breathtaking race against Luftwaffes (the ME 109 warplanes). The viewer is caught in the suspenseful sequence as fuel must be frequently gauged. Collins (Jack Lowden) involuntarily dives into the sea and Farrier (Tom Hardy) is left alone to face the danger of running out of fuel and time. The Moonstone's crew has less action going on. This soothes the tension for a while, reducing the number of

adrenaline-stimulating schemata, so the viewer can breathe between cuts. However, when they rescue the shivering soldier, this creates an agitated atmosphere introducing to the viewer's perspective another variant of the struggle that evacuated troops face even as they leave the beach. The sense of time running out creeps back again as the shivering soldier (Cillian Murphy) fanatically refuses to go back to Dunkirk putting Mr Dawson's rescue plan in jeopardy. The suspense keeps rising as the boat nears the mole while some of the soldiers are drowning under shots and fire. Hence, the parallel timelines converge in a single fight for survival. Being caught in relatable moments of fear and anticipation, the viewer's mind is continually captivated by the characters' continuous endeavors to find a way out while emotionally he is drawn to sympathize with their helplessness amidst a grandiose historical event.

Tommy and Alex eventually make it to the Moonstone, so the viewer is temporarily relieved and his sympathetic rooting for them is appeased. At this point, the viewer's mind is no longer mobilized to follow the arrangement of actions and gauge the possibility of success or failure. Instead, their attention is almost exclusively concentrated on the feeling of the moment. Anticipating a triumphant resolution by the end, as is stereotypically expected from a similar tale, the viewer is momentarily disappointed at the unceremonious retreat. Alex's and Tommy's sentiments of shame along with some soldiers' anger (towards the Air Force) construct another mental image. The retreat could be easier to understand, in historical terms, yet for the ones who lived through it, it carried a heavy load of emotions that are not always fathomable or discussable.

The viewer shifts from Tommy's exhausted face to Alex's perplexed reactions, to the blind elderly man's soothing (tea and) statement reassuring him that surviving is enough (while touching the faces of soldiers passing by clearly in search of familiar features). Such a shift in perspective, from self-despise to embracing acceptance, is further emphasized through Churchill's discourse. Tommy reads the newspaper redefining, for Alex and the viewer, the event and its significance. This sort of commentary has been blocked throughout the entire narrative, with no intervention from Generals evaluating the state of matter. Moreover, the memory of young George, whose life was lost in a petty manner, is commemorated by his friend in a newspaper calling him a "hero". Hence, such a discourse comes as a cue to bridge the gap between the past experience and its contemporary understanding. In other words, the event unfolds from various (paradoxical) perspectives capturing the authentic and raw experiences of people who are directly involved in it without the intermediary of an overtly politicizing or historicizing dialogue, commentary, exposition etc.

Nevertheless, the event is part of the collective memory of the British people (probably similar events occupy a verisimilar position in other nations) and it is deeply embedded with notions of heroism and nationalism. Thus, to strike a balance between the two experiences, the real and the imagined, the narrative cues the viewer to comprehend the complexity of the story without compromising it through an unwarranted sense of sentimentality or superficiality. This is emphasized in the final scene in which Farrier is surrounded by enemy soldiers and the Spitfire is being consumed by flames, while Tommy's voiceover echoes words against surrender. *Dunkirk* thus becomes a universal story of survival, deliverance, sacrifice and acceptance. The cognitive experience, of

rearranging and distinguishing timelines and their distinct spacing, therefore resumes in an emotional experience that is as gratifying as it is alarming to the consciousness.

***Tenet*: inverting time to evade World War III**

In order to comprehend *Tenet*, some or all of it, viewers are faced with a significant challenge. The narrative is structured in an unusual way. While the syuzhet is linear in an achronic way, for time indicators are not precisely provided, the fabula is non-linear. Due to time inversion, the characters are able to move backwards in time while maintaining their presence in (a regular) forward time. Hence, in an attempt to save the future, the Protagonist (John David Washington), Neil (Robert Pattinson) and the rest of the cavalry move in reverse temporal directions often operating within the same spaces and (re)living the same events. The complexity and unconventionality of such a fabula hinders the viewer's story-following even when the storytelling proceeds in an unambiguous style.

The viewer's activity in the case of *Tenet* goes through a set of key turning points each of which contributes to both cuing and constraining their perceptual and cognitive engagement with the story. The viewer is thrust into an Opera (Kyiv), in an opening scene that is uncommented on, and unannounced they join a group of (probably intelligence) agents attempting to rescue (or burgle) an unidentified object before the hands of adversary agents (or terrorists) snatch it. For a moment, the viewer recognizes the familiarity of such syuzhet that revolves around two forces competing undercover to lay hands on a valuable object. Together with the image of an audience being taken hostage and endangered by multiple explosives, a template schemata emerges confirming (temporarily) the hypothesis that the narrative centers on a massive lifesaving mission. One that is done against the pressure of running time (cued with quick escalating auditory effects and timed bombs) However, as the Protagonist is surprised by a bullet being shot backward, the viewer is equally startled at such an unexplained detail. Thus, a search for further information, about the time and mechanisms of such a mission, is stimulated urging the spectator to stay tuned for the necessary exposition to come.

Waking up from a medically induced coma, the Protagonist finds himself facing a new revelation. The previous operation was no more than a test to his capabilities and loyalty (in parallel to the viewer's) before becoming part of *Tenet*. The man explains to the newly recruited member that the word 'tenet' (while interlacing his fingers as a mimetic gesture) opens "the right doors and some of the wrong ones, too." Similarly, the viewer may take the clue that *tenet*, as the center of the palindrome, is a key to opening many cognitive gates (both the right and wrong ones). In other words, the man's assertion foreshadows the viewer's journey to comprehend the narrative as it is fraught with incomplete or unintelligible schemata that function as both guiding and misleading triggers for inferences.

When the Protagonist moves to Mumbai, upon discovering that a certain technology is responsible for inverting objects, mainly ammunition, he is joined by Neil as his new assistant. Though a realistically-motivated viewer may question the immediacy and pertinence of such recruitment, a compositional motivation reconciles them with the act as necessary to move the syuzhet forward without dwelling on an

introduction of the character's identity or background. However, as Neil reveals a considerable amount of knowledge about the Protagonist's preferences and an adequate understanding of Quantum notions, though that is not a necessary supposition, the viewer's curiosity is aroused. The character's past and potential role become the subject of the viewer's reckoning. Hence, after being discarded as inconsequential, attention is directed back to such missing details in an attempt to fix an incomplete mental image. Furthermore, the information that the Protagonist receives from Priya (Dimple Kapadia) and Sir Michael Crosby (Michael Caine) remain vague as they only emphasize that Tenet operates as a corporate team working against a so-far-unseen enemy. Therefore, when the Protagonist and Neil plan to break into the Oslo Freeport's vault, the viewer is led to expect a familiarly gratifying action-driven sequence in which the team is most likely capable of succeeding because the plan, as explained, is as sound as it is daring. Such a suspenseful assumption is halfway met because the two find themselves attacked by two other unknowable fighters who suddenly appear from what seems like a rotating door (a turnstile).

No mental image is sufficiently clear at this stage to support a solid hypothesis about the identity of the men or the function of the object from which they appear. Soon enough, while the viewer attempts to make sense of the scene that is still underway, fight ensues between the protagonist and the masked person. The bullets are inverted in the fight and fly in a backward progression. This indicates to the viewer that the story takes place in a territory that is unusual to them. The common conception of time as a line that follows a chronological order and the regular understanding of cause preceding effect are not only instantly challenged but deliberately obliterated. Therefore, the viewer is pushed to employ an alternative logic in order to comprehend the procession of the events. In other words, the viewer is pushed to relinquish a template schemata and embrace the new (*syuzhet's*) logic. In order to do so, the viewer needs first to bridge the gap between their compositional and transtextual assumptions. The viewer's growing sense of disorientation is rightly tended to through a conversation between the Protagonist and Neil regarding what they have just witnessed. The previous scene, unusual as it is, is still too vague to be regarded as a new mental image on which coming ones could be based. The Protagonist informs Neil that there is a temporal war going on. Neil readily demonstrates, as a Master's Degree holder, his understanding of the physical principle (of Feynman and Wheelers) that allows such technology to be performed. He continues, explaining to the average untutored viewer, and reminding the knowledgeable one, that objects' entropies can be inverted through manipulating positrons which are electron backwards in time and so a reverse chronology is achieved. The scientific explanation serves as a much-needed exposition for the benefit of the viewer as it paves the ground for understanding further events that are arguably more intertwined and complex in nature. The rationalization of such an almost oxymoronic notion (reverse chronotopy) forms the basic sustenance for the forthcoming schemata and render it more imaginable.

The Protagonist then travels again to Mumbai to inquire from Priya about the nature of their mission. The viewer's recently-formed schemata, about the function of time, is equally solidified by her providing a broader image of the present war. Her explanation awakens both the Protagonist and the viewer to the gravity of the situation as

time inversion poses a threat that is even worse than the atomic bomb. Despite the magnitude of the quest, such a revelation can bring a sense of relief to the viewer since the goal of the protagonist is now clear. This is also emphasized as the vagueness surrounding the antagonist begins to fade and his figure starts to take a more distinct shape. However, when she asserts that ignorance is the only “ammunition”, her statement foreshadows the continual concealment of information as the viewer continues to see and experience things from the protagonist’s point of view. The next sequence of events succeeds rapidly, challenging the viewer’s grasp on both the concept of time in the narrative and the *syuzhet*, for actions tend to be repeated more than once from different perspectives. Coupled with a rapidly shifting space, a constant sense of disorientation is created delaying the attempt to make a coherent meaning out of the ongoing action. The sequence of the car chase (in Tallinn) is viewed first from the Protagonist’s forward timeline, then from the antagonist’s (Andrei Sator’s) inverted timeline, and then from the Protagonist inverted timeline. The rapidity of the actions, and their repetitive picturing in different motions and from different angles gives the viewer a raw first-hand experience of the limitless potential of time inversion while challenging their grasp on the notion of reverse chronotopy. Visually, the inverted cars, the backward steps and the inverted speech in certain instances create entirely new schemata for the viewer, and so artistic motivation is required to be fully involved in the world of *Tenet*. When Kat (Elizabeth Debicki) is fatally caught by an inverted shot, they go back to the Oslo Freeport. This reveals to the viewer the identity of the two masked men who in a previous scene attacked the Protagonist and Neil. Consequently, the schemata which remained hitherto incomplete and confusing eventually begin to be comprehended. In other words, since the same events are *repeatedly* unfolded, taking a longer duration and frequency, in scenes that are at once successive and simultaneous, the viewer gains the capacity to discern the converging timelines and even develop a proper understanding of the fabula’s logic. The significant mental images, that were hitherto blocked or delayed because of the unconventional nature of time in the narrative, form an artistic solidity allowing the viewer to follow the rest of the story with less cognitive tension.

The final operation takes place in Stalsk-12: using a “temporal pincer”, two teams cooperate to retrieve the algorithm and ensure that Sator’s planned explosion fails to generate its intended result. While the Russian Oligarch’s actions and motives have remained unknown throughout the narrative, surrounding him with a mysterious aura, his intentions are finally revealed. Kat indicates that he aims to end his life, which is already in terminal state, taking with him the rest of the world. His brief conversation with the Protagonist, as both revert to the same date of the Kyiv Opera incident though in different places, unveils the nature of the temporal war waged by future generations. The schemata that forms the basis of the story is eventually displayed, since the viewer is provided the necessary information to understand that ecological devastation and the boundless will for power may outlive the present, resulting in an unbearable future. So, in a sense, the narrative turns back, full circle, to the beginning of the story in another attempt to save life. At such a point, both the *syuzhet* and the fabula appear clearer and more logical.

At the end, Neil’s (heroic) contribution strikes as a very affective act. The viewer, much as the Protagonist, is moved to tears upon discovering that the unknown soldier,

whose identity is cued but never revealed, who saved his life twice is actually Neil. After a brief feeling of satisfaction at seeing the team of ‘good-guys’ win over the ‘bad-guys’, the viewer faces the bitterness of seeing Neil invert again to take the shot that has previously saved the Protagonist and the mission. This adds to the emotional complexity of the story hinting to the viewer that the narrative, as much as it intrigues cognitive sensibility, it reserves a profound sensitivity. They two part ways, revealing to the viewer another concealed image regarding their actual friendship. Neil was recruited to join *Tenet* in the past by a future Protagonist. So, to him that is the end of a friendship but to the Protagonist it is just the beginning. In a way, the film calls for another viewing in which knowledge about their bond is known. Such a conclusion also unleashes in the viewer’s mind a myriad of emotions and thoughts leading to a variety of interpretations (that are often expressed by fans through various theories about Neil being Max etc). Yet, the point that seems to resonate more than the rest is *Tenet*’s preoccupation with the survival of a generation. What the narrative seems to suggest is that, despite loss and sacrifice, love for one’s child, one’s friend and humanity at large has always saved the world and it will continue to do so timelessly and effortlessly

Conclusion

Time in Christopher Nolan’s works is the rhythm through which his music is heard. The complexity of the narratives, in both *Dunkirk* and *Tenet*, derives from their unconventional timelines. Both stories ponder on war, in the past and future, while touching upon universal and timeless questions of survival (individual and generational), sacrifice and heroism (personal and communal). Such questions are not approached in a straightforward manner; instead a variety of (temporal) perspectives, that are incomplete, concealed, and fragmented, are involved to stimulate the viewer’s attention and secure their interest. In other words, the storytelling holds a certain balance between overpowering and disempowering the spectator’s story-following through a balanced set cues and constraints. As such, their eventual openness to interpretations and the spectators’ continual interest in the works (even after closing credits) is a proof that such aesthetic experiences go beyond the confines of the film’s time to be part of the viewer’s time.

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