

Tenet (film)

Tenet is a 2020 science fiction action thriller film written and directed by Christopher Nolan, who also produced it with his wife Emma Thomas. A co-production between the United Kingdom and the United States, it stars John David Washington, Robert Pattinson, Elizabeth Debicki, Dimple Kapadia, Michael Caine, and Kenneth Branagh. The film follows a former CIA agent who is recruited into a secret organization, tasked with tracing the origin of objects that are traveling backwards through time and their connection to an attack from the future to the present. Nolan continued his relationship with Warner Bros. and his production company Syncopy for the film's production and distribution.

Nolan took over five years to write the screenplay after deliberating about *Tenet*'s central ideas for more than a decade. Pre-production began in late 2018, casting took place in March 2019, and principal photography lasted six months, from May to November, in Denmark, Estonia, India, Italy, Norway, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Cinematographer Hoyte van Hoytema shot on 65 mm film and IMAX. After delays due to the COVID-19 pandemic, *Tenet* was released in the United Kingdom on August 26, 2020, and in the United States on September 3, 2020, in IMAX, 35 mm, and 70 mm.

Tenet was the first Hollywood tent-pole to open in theaters during the pandemic and grossed \$365 million worldwide on a \$200 million budget, making it the fifth-highest-grossing film of 2020 despite struggling to break-even. The film divided critics, but was nominated for two awards at the 93rd Academy Awards, winning Best Visual Effects, and received other accolades.

Plot

On a date referred to as "the 14th", the Protagonist leads a covert CIA extraction during a staged terrorist siege at an Opera House in Kyiv. He is saved from KORD forces by an unknown operative wearing a red trinket. The Protagonist retrieves an artifact but his team is captured and tortured. He swallows a suicide pill but wakes up to find it was a fake; a test that only he has passed. He is recruited by "Tenet", a secretive organization

Tenet



Theatrical release poster

Directed by	<u>Christopher Nolan</u>
Written by	<u>Christopher Nolan</u>
Produced by	<u>Emma Thomas</u> <u>Christopher Nolan</u>
Starring	<u>John David Washington</u> <u>Robert Pattinson</u> <u>Elizabeth Debicki</u> <u>Dimple Kapadia</u> <u>Michael Caine</u> <u>Kenneth Branagh</u>
Cinematography	<u>Hoyte van Hoytema</u>
Edited by	<u>Jennifer Lame</u>
Music by	<u>Ludwig Göransson</u>
Production company	<u>Syncopy</u>
Distributed by	<u>Warner Bros. Pictures</u>

that briefs him on objects with "inverted" entropy that move backward through time. With his handler Neil, he traces them to Priya Singh, an arms dealer in Mumbai.

Priya reveals that she is a member of Tenet and the man who inverted her bullets, Russian oligarch Andrei Sator, is communicating with the future. Sator's estranged wife Kat Barton is an art appraiser who authenticated a forged Goya by her friend Arepo, which Sator purchased to blackmail her. To get Kat's help, the Protagonist and Neil try to steal the Goya from Sator's freeport facility at Oslo Airport but are thwarted by two masked men who emerge from either side of a machine. In Mumbai, Priya explains it was a "turnstile", a device that inverts entropy. The two men were the same person, traveling in opposite directions in time. She reveals that Sator sabotaged his CIA team but KORD got the artifact, plutonium-241.

Release dates	August 26, 2020 (United Kingdom) September 3, 2020 (United States)
Running time	150 minutes
Countries	United Kingdom United States
Language	English
Budget	\$205 million ^[1]
Box office	\$365.9 million ^[2]

Unaware of his failure to steal the Goya, Kat introduces the Protagonist to Sator in Italy, who plans to kill him until he mentions Kyiv. When he saves Sator's life after Kat tries to drown him, they cooperate to intercept the plutonium. The Protagonist and Neil steal the artifact in Tallinn but are ambushed by an inverted Sator holding Kat hostage. The Protagonist hides the artifact and rescues Kat. However, they are recaptured and taken to another freeport in Tallinn, where the inverted Sator interrogates them for the location of the artifact, eventually shooting Kat with an inverted bullet. Tenet troops led by Commander Ives arrive, but Sator escapes via a turnstile. To save Kat's life, they all invert themselves. The inverted Protagonist drives back to the ambush to retrieve the artifact but encounters Sator, who takes it.

To un-invert, the Protagonist travels back in time to the freeport in Oslo, fights his past self, and enters the turnstile, followed by Neil and a healing Kat. In Oslo, Priya tells him Sator now has all nine pieces of the "Algorithm", a device that future antagonists need to invert the entropy of the world and destroy its past. She planned for Sator to get the artifact to reveal the other eight pieces in preparing his dead drop. Recalling an earlier conversation with Sir Michael Crosby, the Protagonist realizes it is a nuclear hypocenter detonated on "the 14th" in Sator's hometown of Stalsk-12.

On a Tenet ship traveling back to "the 14th", Kat reveals Sator has terminal cancer and is omnicidal. They work out that after the Kyiv opera house siege on "the 14th", Sator returns to a family vacation in Vietnam to commit suicide, sending the dead drop coordinates to the future via a dead man's switch.

Arriving at "the 14th", Kat poses as her past self in Vietnam to keep Sator alive until the Tenet forces in Stalsk-12 recover the Algorithm. They use a "temporal pincer movement", with both non-inverted and inverted troops making a diversionary attack so the Protagonist and Ives can steal the Algorithm before detonation. Sator's henchman Volkov traps them in the hypocenter. Calling from Vietnam, Sator explains the antagonists are trying to escape the effects of climate change. As Volkov is about to execute the Protagonist, an inverted soldier with a red trinket appears and sacrifices himself, enabling the Protagonist and Ives to escape with the Algorithm just as the hypocenter detonates, which is also just when Kat kills Sator.

As they break up the Algorithm to hide it, the Protagonist sees the red trinket on Neil's bag. Neil reveals he was recruited in his past by a future Protagonist, and they have known each other for a long time. He must now return to the recent timeline in which an inverted Neil dies. In a final scene in London, Priya plans to

kill Kat, given her knowledge. Realizing that he created Tenet, the Protagonist kills Priya first, watching Kat leave with her son.

Cast

- John David Washington as the "Protagonist", a CIA operative, later revealed as the founder of Tenet^{[3][4]}
- Robert Pattinson as Neil, the Protagonist's handler, later revealed as a long-term associate of the Protagonist^[4]
- Elizabeth Debicki as Katherine "Kat" Barton, niece of Sir Fredrick Barton, art appraiser, and Sator's estranged wife^{[4][5]}
- Dimple Kapadia as Priya Singh,^[4] an Indian arms trafficker, and also a member of Tenet^[6]
- Michael Caine as Sir Michael Crosby, a British intelligence officer, and contact of Priya Singh, who picked up an explosion in the Russian closed city of Stalsk-12 on the 14th^[7]
- Kenneth Branagh as Andrei Sator,^[8] a British-domiciled Russian oligarch from the fictional Soviet-era closed city of Stalsk-12, who is communicating with the future^{[9][10]}
- Martin Donovan as Fay, the Protagonist's CIA boss^[6]
- Fiona Dourif as Wheeler, leader of the Tenet Blue Team^[11]
- Yuri Kolokolnikov as Volkov, Sator's bodyguard^[12]
- Himesh Patel as Mahir,^[13] a fixer hired by Neil^[11]
- Clémence Poésy as Barbara,^{[14][15]} a Tenet scientist^[4]
- Aaron Taylor-Johnson as Ives,^[16] a Tenet military commander who rescues the Protagonist, Neil and Kat in Tallinn^[17]

Also appearing are Jefferson Hall, the "Well-Dressed Man", who the Protagonist tries to rescue (with the artifact) at the fictional Kyiv opera house; Andrew Howard as [Kyiv] Driver, who sabotages the CIA's Kyiv operation and tortures the Protagonist; Wes Chatham as SWAT 3, a member of the Protagonist's covert CIA team in Kyiv; Denzil Smith as Sanjay Singh, Priya's husband;^[18] Jeremy Theobald as the steward at Sir Michael Crosby's club; Laurie Shepherd as Max, Kat and Sator's only son; Jack Cutmore-Scott as Klaus, an employee at Sator's Rotas freepoint in Oslo; Josh Stewart as the voice of a Tenet agent in Mumbai; and Sean Avery as the lead soldier on the Red Team.

Production

Writing and pre-production

Writer and director Christopher Nolan conceived the ideas behind *Tenet* over the course of twenty years,^[19] but began working on the script in 2014.^[20] The title, as well as being a palindrome, is an allusion to the Sator Square.^{[21][22]} Inspired by a feeling about how he imagined Sergio Leone made *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1968),^[19] Nolan avoided watching any spy films that might influence him while making *Tenet*, instead relying upon his memories.^[23]

The science-fiction aspect of the film revolves around the ability to reverse the entropy of things and people, resulting in time reversibility.^[24] While the film does refer to real concepts from physics, among them annihilation,^{[25][26]} the second law of thermodynamics, Maxwell's demon, the grandfather paradox, and Feynman and Wheeler's Absorber Theory, Nolan stated that "we're not going to make any case for this

being scientifically accurate".^[24] Commenting on the scientific aspects of writing the script, he stated: "I think the scientific method is the best tool we have for analyzing and understanding the world around us ... I've been very inspired by working with great scientists like Kip Thorne, who I worked with on Interstellar, who also helped me out with some early analysis of the ideas I wanted to explore to do with time and quantum physics on Tenet, although I promised him I wasn't going to bandy his name around as if there was some kind of scientific reality to Tenet. It's a very different kettle of fish to Interstellar."^[27]



Writer, director and co-producer Christopher Nolan

For both the production and the distribution of the film, which had an estimated budget of \$200 million, Nolan continued his relationship with Warner Bros. and his production company Syncopy.^[28] Nolan and production designer Nathan Crowley traveled to scout for locations in February and April 2019. Disappointed with the Royal Swedish Opera as a potential stand-in for the Kyiv Opera House, Crowley instead chose the Linnahall, which fit his affinity for Brutalist architecture.^[29] The production decided to film at the National Liberal Club after management at Sotheby's refused to participate, at Cannon Hall after Thornhill Primary School in Islington and Channing School were deemed unsatisfactory, and at Shree Vardhan Tower after it was determined that security at the Antilia was too high to film there.^[30]

Casting



The film's cast includes John David Washington, Robert Pattinson, Elizabeth Debicki, Dimple Kapadia, Michael Caine and Kenneth Branagh.

Washington, Pattinson, and Debicki were cast in March 2019.^{[31][32]} Each of them were only permitted to read the screenplay while locked in a room.^{[9][19][33]} Nolan chose Washington based on his performance in BlacKkKlansman (2018).^[34] Washington kept diaries in which he expanded the Protagonist's backstory.^[35] Pattinson took some of Neil's mannerisms from political journalist and author Christopher Hitchens.^[36] Kat was originally going to be an older woman, but Debicki's appearance in Widows (2018) convinced the filmmakers otherwise.^[4]

The casting of Dimple Kapadia, Aaron Taylor-Johnson, Clémence Poésy, Michael Caine, and Kenneth Branagh was announced as filming started.^[37] Kapadia's screen test was put together by director Homi Adajania while working on his 2020 film *Angrezi Medium*.^[38] Caine was only given the pages from the script that included what was filmed on his one day of work.^[39] Branagh rescheduled production on his own directorial venture *Death on the Nile* (2022) to take his part, claiming to have studied the manuscript more times than any other in his career.^[40] Himesh Patel joined the production in August.^[41] Martin Donovan's inclusion was revealed in the first trailer for the film.^[42]

Design and special effects

Special effects supervisor Scott R. Fisher watched World War II films and documentaries to find reference points for the film that were based in reality.^[43] Prop prototypes were often 3D printed. Costume designer Jeffrey Kurland and his team cut and stitched the clothing for the film in the United States, manufacturing it for the main cast and thousands of extras.^[44] Production designer Nathan Crowley ordered around thirty military wristwatches from Hamilton Watch Company, each analog with a digital countdown.^[45]

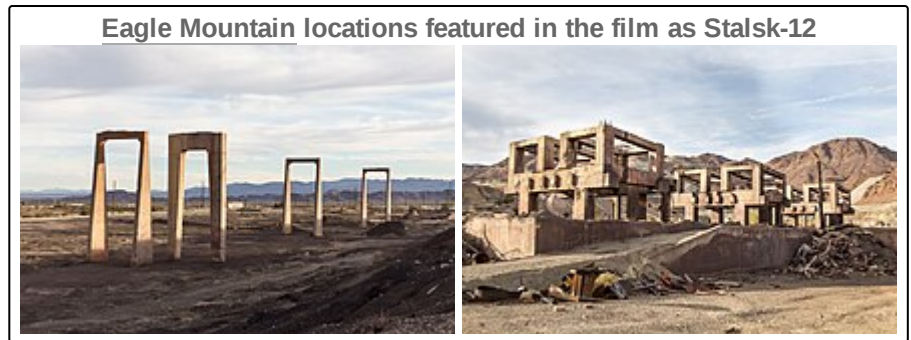
Filming

Principal photography, involving a crew that Pattinson estimated at 500 people,^[36] began on May 22, 2019,^{[37][46]} in a soundstage in Los Angeles,^[47] and eventually incorporated seven countries^[46] —Denmark, Estonia,^[nb 1] India,^[nb 2] Italy, Norway, the United Kingdom, and the United States.^{[50][nb 3]} Filming in Estonia took place in June and July, with the Linnahall, Pärnu Highway (E67), and adjacent streets closed to facilitate the production.^{[51][52]} Kumu Art Museum doubled as the fictional Oslo Freeport.^[53] Barbara's office was built in a former law court, the Tallinn Freeport exterior was at the city docks, and a room at the Hilton Tallinn Park Hotel was also utilized.^[54] Mayor of Tallinn Mihhail Kõlvart expressed concerns about potential disruptions, as the shooting schedule required that the arterial Laagna Road be closed for one month.^[55] A compromise was eventually reached, involving temporary road closures and detours.^{[56][57]}

Scenes were shot on the Amalfi Coast (Italy) and at Cannon Hall (United Kingdom) from July to August,^{[58][59]} and on the roof of the Oslo Opera House, at The Thief hotel (Norway), and in Rødbyhavn at Nysted Wind Farm (Denmark) in early September.^{[53][60][61]} A five-day shoot occurred later that month in Mumbai,^[50] specifically at Breach Candy Hospital, Cafe Mondegar, Colaba Causeway, Colaba Market, Gateway of India, Grant Road, Royal Bombay Yacht Club, and the Taj Mahal Palace Hotel.^{[62][63][64][65]} A restaurant named "Chaand" was erected near the hotel,^[63] but was never used, serving only as an unneeded alternate location.^[50] Forty boats were positioned at the Gateway of India, where the crew rescued a man who had attempted suicide.^[66]



Production proceeded in Los Angeles, where Hawthorne Plaza Shopping Center functioned as the interior set of an icebreaker and a shipping container.^[67] The Victorville Airport was disguised as Oslo, with more than ninety extras involved.^[19] Instead of using miniatures and visual effects



(VFX) for the plane crash sequence, Nolan determined that purchasing a Boeing 747 proved more cost-effective.^[68] In October, filming moved to Eagle Mountain, where an abandoned town had been constructed and hundreds were clothed in military camouflage uniforms.^[9] Over thirty buildings were prefabricated in Los Angeles and shipped to the site. Four Boeing CH-47 Chinooks were loaned out for four days. Outside shots of a tunnel were done in the desert, while the cavernous insides of the Hypocenter were fashioned on Warner Soundstage 16, their largest, with 32,130 square feet.^[69] *Tenet* wrapped on November 12, after 96 days of shooting.^[70]

Director of photography Hoyte van Hoytema employed a combination of 70 mm film and IMAX,^[71] prioritizing Panavision lenses that would best accommodate lower light.^[43] Segments that concerned time inversion were captured in both backward- and forward-mobility and speech.^{[72][73]} To ensure proficiency in handling firearms, Washington and Pattinson attended the Taran Tactical firing range in Simi Valley. They did some of their own stunts. Over one hundred watercraft were recruited for the film, including two F50 catamarans, the superyacht Planet Nine (onto which an Mi-8 helicopter landed), an icebreaker, a cargo tanker, fishing boats, and speedboats.^[74] The windfarm vessel *Iceni Revenge* was utilized for the three months spent filming in Denmark, Estonia, and Italy.^{[75][9]}

Post-production

During filming, sound designer Richard King sent a team to Eagle Mountain to record the Chinooks and Mi-8, and to Southampton to record the F50 catamarans.^[76] Others were hired to capture the aural atmosphere of Oslo, Mumbai, and Tallinn.^[76] King got audio of both live and blank automatic weapon rounds at a gun range in San Francisquito Canyon and rented a runway to test how the vehicles in the film sound.^[77]

Jennifer Lame replaced Nolan's long-time editor Lee Smith, who was occupied with 2019's *1917*.^[78] Visual effects supervisor Andy Lockley said the film's VFX shots involved the participation of 300 employees at DNEG.^{[19][79]}

Music

Ludwig Göransson was chosen to compose the film's music after Nolan's frequent collaborator and first choice, Hans Zimmer, turned down the offer in favor of the 2021 film *Dune*.^{[80][81]} Researching retrograde composition led Göransson to generate melodies that would sound the same forward and backward. He experimented with distorted industrial noise and, to represent Sator's irradiated breathing, asked Nolan to tape his own breath in a studio. Göransson produced ten to fifteen minutes of music each week. The first

scoring session was held in November 2019, and sessions continued into early 2020.^[82] During the COVID-19 pandemic, Göransson recorded musicians at their homes.^[9] The *Tenet* soundtrack contains "The Plan", a song by Travis Scott,^[83] which plays over the film's closing credits.^[84]

Marketing

In August 2019, Warner Bros. debuted a forty-second teaser ahead of *Hobbs & Shaw* previews,^[85] which was published online in December.^[86] Yohana Desta of *Vanity Fair* called it an "old-school surprise" and praised Göransson's score,^[87] while Jim Vejvoda of *IGN* described it as "*Inception* with time travel".^[88] Both Vejvoda and *IndieWire*'s Zack Sharf noted the trailer's stylization of the film's title as *TENET* to emphasize the palindromic nature.^{[88][89]} The film's prolog also played in select IMAX theaters before screenings of *Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker*,^[86] which Kyle Kizu of *The Hollywood Reporter* favorably compared to the prolog of Nolan's other films.^[90] The film's logo was altered in May 2020 to remove the inverted stylization due to its similarity with that of a bicycle components manufacturer.^[91] The final trailer was released in August and featured Scott's single.^[92] A *making-of* video was released on August 26.^[12]

The marketing and promotion of the film was significantly hampered due to postponements caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, with executives calculating that each postponement cost Warner Bros. between \$200,000 and \$400,000 in marketing fees.^[93] Eventually, after briefly being held up indefinitely,^[94] Glenn Whipp of the *Los Angeles Times* noted that Warner Bros. did not put *Tenet* on the Academy's streaming platform or send out screeners to awards voters.^[95] Given the large investment in the film, part of its marketing campaign involved dual promotions with the watch manufacturer *Hamilton* and *Fortnite*, both of whom assisted in increasing public awareness of the forthcoming film. *Hamilton* featured Washington wearing the watch and endorsing it in multiple ad campaigns, while *Fortnite* developer Epic Games worked on the pre-release trailer for the film and created an interview with Washington which was featured on multiple video game websites.^[96]

Release

Theatrical

Warner Bros. originally scheduled *Tenet* for a July 17, 2020, release in IMAX, 35 mm, and 70 mm film.^[97] Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it was delayed to July 31,^{[98][99]} and then August 12.^[100] The studio finally arranged for the film to be released in seventy countries, with a run time of 150 minutes, on August 26,^{[101][102][103]} following preview screenings in Australia and South Korea on August 22 and 23.^{[104][105]} The film opened in select cities in the United States on September 3, gradually expanding in the ensuing weeks.^[101] On September 4, it was released in China.^[106] *Tenet* was the first Hollywood *tent-pole* to *launch in theaters* following their prolonged shutdown.^[107] The lack of available movies afforded it more screens per *multiplex* than would otherwise have been possible.^[108]

On March 2, 2021, Warner Bros. announced that, in light of the New York state government allowing film theaters in New York City to re-open on Friday, March 5, following a nearly year-long shutdown (causing theaters in the city to miss out on the film's initial theatrical run), they would be re-releasing *Tenet* at select theaters in the city.^[109] In the Philippines, the film was released on *HBO Go* streaming platform on June 12, 2021, following the year-long indefinite closure of theaters in the country in response of a potential

COVID-19 surge, becoming the last major Asian country to do so.^[110] The film was re-released in theaters for exclusive IMAX screenings in 70 mm formats for an exclusive one-week theatrical window from February 23 to March 1, 2024. It also included footage to promote the release of the studio's then-upcoming film, *Dune: Part Two* (2024).^[111]

Home media

The film was released on 4K Ultra HD, Blu-ray, DVD, and digital download on December 15, 2020.^[112] It was added to HBO Max on May 1, 2021.^[113]

Reception

Box office

As of January 29, 2024, *Tenet* has grossed \$58.5 million in the United States and Canada and \$306.8 million in other territories, for a worldwide total of \$363.7 million.^{[2][1]}

With a production budget of \$200 million,^[114] it is Nolan's most expensive original project.^[115] IndieWire speculated that marketing costs pushed the final sum to \$300–350 million,^[116] though some analysts predicted it would incur lower advertising costs than usual, owing to inexpensive live sports ads.^[117] Box office analyst Jeff Bock estimated the film would need to make \$400–500 million to break even.^[118] In November 2020, rival studios expected the film to lose up to \$100 million, but Warner Bros. insisted losses would not top \$50 million.^[119] Nolan received twenty percent of the film's first-dollar gross.^[120]

The film was projected to make \$25–30 million internationally over its first five days.^[121] In South Korea, pre-sale IMAX tickets sold out, and weekend previews earned \$717,000 from 590 venues.^[105] Another four days in the country yielded \$4.13 million from about 2,200 screens, bringing the cume to \$5.1 million by the end of the week. *Tenet* debuted to \$53 million in forty-one countries, grossing \$7.1 million in the United Kingdom, \$6.7 million in France, and \$4.2 million in Germany.^{[28][122][123]} It made \$58.1 million its second weekend, with China (\$30 million from first showings), the UK (\$13.1 million), France (\$10.7 million), Germany (\$8.7 million), and South Korea (\$8.2 million) as the largest markets.^[124] It made \$30.6 million its third weekend, earning \$16.4 million in the UK, \$13.2 million in France, \$11.4 million in Germany, \$10.3 million in South Korea, and \$10.2 million in China.^[125] The film earned \$11.4 million in its first two weeks in Japan,^[126] and, after opening in India on December 4, 2020,^[127] made about \$1.2 million in its first ten days in the country.^[128] In Estonia, *Tenet* became the highest-grossing film of all time, with a total gross of \$1.2 million.^[129]

In the United States and Canada, with 65% of theaters operating at 25–40% capacity, the film earned \$20.2 million from 2,810 theaters in its first eleven days of release: \$12 million in the U.S., \$2.5 million in Canada, and the rest from previews.^{[123][130]} The second, third, and fourth weekends added \$6.6 million, \$4.6 million, and \$3.3 million, respectively.^{[131][132][133]} *Tenet* remained atop the American box office its fifth weekend with \$2.7 million,^[134] before ceding the number one spot to *The War with Grandpa* its sixth weekend.^[135]

The film's worldwide 2024 IMAX re-release began on February 23, 2024 in 55 IMAX locations, including 12 showing the film in 70mm, opening against the one-week North American engagement of the Dolby Cinema reissue of *Les Misérables* (2012). It grossed \$600,000 globally on its three-day opening weekend

for a per-theater average of more than \$10,000.^[136]

Critical response

Tenet divided critics, with *USA Today*'s Jenna Ryu and the *Los Angeles Times*'s Christi Carras respectively describing the reviews as "mixed" and "all over the place".^{[137][138]} *The Independent*'s Clémence Michallon wrote that the film was perceived as "both entertaining and 'cerebral' by some, but lacking and confusing by others".^[139] Ellise Shafer of *Variety* found that, while some were weary of the film's "metaphysical babble", reviews were "largely positive", with critics overall naming it "a mind-blowing addition to Nolan's already-impressive arsenal".^[140] On review aggregator *Rotten Tomatoes*, 69% of 376 critics gave *Tenet* a positive review, with an average rating of 6.9/10; the website's critical consensus reads: "A visually dazzling puzzle for film lovers to unlock, *Tenet* serves up all the cerebral spectacle audiences expect from a Christopher Nolan production."^[141] On *Metacritic*, the film has a weighted average score of 69 out of 100 based on 50 critics, indicating "generally favorable reviews".^[142] Audiences polled by *CinemaScore* gave the film an average grade of "B" on an A+ to F scale,^[143] and *PostTrak* reported that 80% of those gave the film a positive score, with 65% saying they would recommend it.^[144]

Guy Lodge of *Variety* described *Tenet* as a "grandly entertaining, time-slipping spectacle".^[4] *The Guardian* critic Peter Bradshaw felt it was both "madly preposterous" and "amazing cinema".^[145] Kevin Maher of *The Times* awarded the film a full five stars, deeming it "a delightfully convoluted masterpiece".^[146] Robbie Collin of *The Telegraph* likened it to Nolan's *Inception* and praised the "depth, subtlety and wit of Pattinson and Debicki's performances".^[8] In his review for *Rolling Stone*, Peter Travers described the film as "pure, ravishing cinema" and called Washington a "star-in-the-making" who "brings a natural athletic grace to the stunts and hand-to-hand combat".^[147] *The Dispatch*'s Alec Dent found *Tenet* to have "a gloriously innovative storyline with incredible visuals to match".^[148] Mark Daniell of the *Toronto Sun* gave the film four out of four stars, deeming it "the cinematic equivalent of a *Rubik's Cube*".^[149] Richard Roeper of the *Chicago Sun-Times* gave it three and a half out of four stars, praising Debicki's "mesmerizing" portrayal and concluding that "it's the kind of film that reminds us of the magic of the moviegoing experience", despite not reaching "cinematic greatness".^[150] Keith Phipps of *The Ringer* wrote that *Tenet* has the makings of a cult film, with "a failed release due to the pandemic, a muted critical reception, and a twisty narrative that demands multiple viewings".^[151] Director Denis Villeneuve called the film "a masterpiece" and "an incredible cinematic achievement".^[152]

James Berardinelli noted that the film "may be the most challenging of Nolan's films to date" in terms of "the concepts forming the narrative's foundation: backwards-moving entropy, non-linear thinking, temporal paradoxes", but questioned whether its runtime "might prove to be problematic".^[153] He named it the best film of 2020.^[154] Leslie Felperin of *The Hollywood Reporter* felt that Washington was "dashing but a little dull" and that Debicki's performance "adds a color to Nolan's palette, and [she] has persuasive chemistry with Branagh in their joint portrait of a violent, dysfunctional love-hate relationship". She concluded that *Tenet* is "rich in audacity and originality", but lacks "a certain humanity".^[15] Jessica Kiang of *The New York Times* described the film as Nolan's "time-bending" take on *James Bond*, praising the film's cinematography, score, editing, acting, and "immaculately creaseless costumes", while also deeming it a "hugely expensive, blissfully empty spectacle".^[155] *LA Weekly*'s Asher Luberto also highlighted the similarities between *Tenet* and the *James Bond* films, but also felt it was "a daring, surprising and entirely original piece of work, reverent in its spectacle and haunting in its mesmerizing, dreamlike form".^[156]

Branagh's character was described by some critics as a stereotypical Russian villain.^{[157][158]} Christina Newland of Vulture.com called Branagh "silly-accented ... as a Bond-villain-esque Russian mastermind".^[159]

Mike McCahill of IndieWire gave the film a "C−" grade and called it "a humorless disappointment".^[160] Michael Phillips of the Chicago Tribune awarded it two out of four stars, writing that he wished the film "exploited its own ideas more dynamically".^[161] The New York Post's Johnny Oleksinski also gave it two out of four stars, calling it Nolan's most "confusing" work so far, but acknowledged being "swept up by Nolan's incomparable cinematic vision".^[162] Kathleen Sachs of the Chicago Reader gave the film one and a half out of four stars, concluding that Nolan "doesn't show much growth in his most recent self-indulgent work".^[163] Brian Lloyd of Entertainment.ie said poor sound mixing "often" rendered dialog inaudible when viewed on 35 mm film, suggesting viewing the film on Digital Cinema Package files to reduce the problem.^[164] The San Francisco Chronicle's Mick LaSalle also found *Tenet* "difficult to understand", and continued that "even worse, it inspires little desire to understand it".^[165]

Audience reception

Some publications reported that the film got a cult following amongst science fiction enthusiasts and Nolan's fanbase.^{[166][167][168]}

Accolades

Tenet received nominations for Best Production Design and Best Visual Effects at the 93rd Academy Awards, winning the latter.^[169] At the 74th British Academy Film Awards, the film won the Best Special Visual Effects award,^[170] and also won an award in the same category at the 26th Critics' Choice Awards, out of its five nominations.^{[171][172]} It received a nomination for Best Original Score at the 78th Golden Globe Awards.^[173] Other nominations include five Satellite Awards (winning one),^[174] nine Saturn Awards (winning one),^[175] and one Hugo Award nomination.^[176]

Themes and analysis

Tenet's complex plot and character timelines, ambiguities and hidden details have been analyzed, leading to various fan theories and interpretations.^[177]

Palindromes and anadromes



The first-century Latin Sator Square, which inspired the film's title, as well as two character names (Sator and Arepo, the Goya forger), the location of the opening sequence (Opera), and the name of Sator's security company (Rotas).

Palindromes (words which are spelled the same forwards and backwards) and anadromes (words which when spelled backwards produce another word) appear throughout the film in various guises. The five-letter words from the palindromic Sator Square appear as names and locations in the film: "Sator" (the Russian oligarch); "Arepo" (the art forger); "Tenet" (the name of the film and the Protagonist's organization); "Opera" (the opening scene takes place at the Kyiv Opera House); and "Rotas" (the name of the security company running Oslo Freeport).^[178] There is a further nod to the word "Tenet" in the film's final battle in which the red and blue teams each have "ten" minutes to carry out their non-inverted ("ten") and inverted ("net") operations in Stalsk-12.^[179] When the Protagonist is being tortured, trains pass by in opposite directions. Ludwig Göransson's score includes melodies that sound the same forward and backward. The film itself is a form of "temporal palindrome", as it ends at the same time as the events of the beginning of the film were taking place, "the 14th".^[180]

Temporal paradoxes and free will

Several characters have complex timelines in the film due to inverting and reverting, notably Neil, the Protagonist, Sator and Kat.^{[181][180][182]} Inversion allows multiple versions of a character to exist simultaneously; for instance, there are five simultaneous Neils (that are known) in the world during the moments of the climactic scene inside the Stalsk-12 hypocenter where he dies (two inverted and one normal on the battlefield, one inverted at the opera siege and one more normal somewhere else in the world who will later meet the Protagonist in Neil's first appearance of the film),^[182] and the implication is that an older future Protagonist is orchestrating the events of the film behind the scenes without ever being seen by the viewer or his past self, in an example of a temporal pincer movement.^[183] Inversion also sets up bootstrap paradoxes, whereby events are caused by themselves in a "chicken or the egg" scenario.^[184]

Free will is a theme in *Tenet*.^[184] There are suggestions that *Tenet*'s universe is deterministic, so what happens (including bootstrap paradoxes) will always happen, and consequently, there is arguably no free will.^[184] One of the film's common refrains, "ignorance is our ammunition", could hint at the illusionist stance that free will does not exist but people should act as if they have free will.^[184] However, the

characters (especially Neil) express uncertainty as to whether history can be altered, and say several times during the film, "what's happened, happened".^[184] Neil's attitude towards free will could be interpreted as compatibilist, whereby free will and determinism are seen as compatible.^[184] Kat is seen as the character who most strongly embodies free will in *Tenet* by choosing to stray from the plan and shoot Sator, at which point she is free from his control.^[185] Kat relays to the Protagonist that when she was returning with Max to Sator's yacht in Vietnam and saw a woman (her future self, unbeknownst to past Kat) diving gracefully off the yacht, she felt jealous of that woman's freedom.^[181] Similarly, there is uncertainty in *Tenet* regarding the grandfather paradox and whether the use of the Algorithm in the future, wiping out the past (the time of the events in *Tenet*), would also wipe out the future.^[186] *Tenet* has been interpreted as a war between past and future.^{[187][181]}

Scientific accuracy

The plot revolves around reversing the entropy of things and people, resulting in time reversibility,^[24] and the film references physics concepts including the second law of thermodynamics, Maxwell's demon, and Feynman and Wheeler's notion of a one-electron universe; nonetheless, Christopher Nolan stated in the film's press notes: "we're not going to make any case for this being scientifically accurate".^[24]

Notes

1. Seven weeks of filming in Estonia came at a cost of €16.5 million;^{[9][48]} Warner Bros. Pictures paid a rebate that was reimbursed at thirty percent.^[48]
2. It took one week to secure the permission to shoot in Mumbai.^[49] The planned schedule was completed in half the time.^[50]
3. *Tenet* went under the working title *Merry Go Round*.^{[19][49]}

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External links

- Official website (<https://www.warnerbros.com/movies/tenet>) 
 - *Tenet* (<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt6723592/>) at IMDb
 - *Tenet* (<https://www.allmovie.com/movie/v718407>) at AllMovie
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