

# A Study of Spatio-temporal Movies And Their Epochal Representations Based on “Agenda Setting Theory”

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**Abstract:** In the late twentieth century, the technological changes of intelligence, informatisation, and electrification renewed people’s spatio-temporal experiences and triggered changes in spatio-temporal phenomena. The dimensions of human spatio-temporal narratives continue to expand, and narratives about the virtual, the cosmic, and the reversal of time and space proliferate. Spatio-temporal cinema, which takes the power of technology as the driving force of imagination, plays an important role in the shaping of these typical spatio-temporal imaginaries. This paper takes Christopher Nolan’s spatio-temporal films as the main samples of the study, in order to explore the main logic of various types of “supra-temporal” narratives. This paper will not only explore the logic of “supra-temporal” narratives, but also the logic of “spatialised” narratives. However, whether in the multiple “supra-temporal” narratives of space-time films or the “spatialised” narratives of historical dramas, both of them are based on the theory of “agenda-setting”, and through the latent representations of the times, they have touched upon and conveyed the profound spiritual crises of mankind and explored the possibilities of and made breakthroughs in their own development.

**Keywords:** spatio-temporal compression; spatio-temporal narratives; postmodernism; spatio-temporal cinema; agenda-setting

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## 1. The Importance of Film Agenda Setting for Value Dissemination and Self-Examination

Media cultivates culture, subtly shifting values and prompting introspection. It transmits cultural norms, making them standards for communication. McCombs defines agenda-setting as media selecting and highlighting content to capture public attention. Prominent media aspects gain importance in the audience’s perception, resonating and offering a comprehensive view.

Film plots serve as agenda-setting systems, intertwining ideology, values, and narrative logic. They create emotional and ideological experiences. “Agenda-setting” operates across cognitive, attitudinal, and action levels. Cinema’s agenda-setting raises pertinent issues, guiding audience thoughts. By leveraging societal concerns, films construct conflicts, enhancing value communication and marketing by immersing viewers. Space-time films establish immersive environments, fostering mental imagery. Leveraging film and TV’s “agenda-setting” function shapes unique images, disseminating values and encouraging self-reflection. Creative content aligns with contemporary views, serving dual purposes.

## 2. Spatio-temporal compression: spatial representation in postmodernist film and television aesthetics

### 2.1 David Harvey’s theory of “spatio-temporal compression”

“Spatio-temporal compression,” a concept by David Harvey, explains how capitalism maximizes surplus value in less time. Postmodern capitalism adjusts space and redistributes it.

This concept reveals modernity and post-modernity fracturing space and time’s meaning. Travel time shrinks, and space becomes a “global village,” intertwining us. This duality challenges perception, sparking social and cultural reactions. Capitalist modernity and post-modernity bring these aspects closer, impacting culture and politics.<sup>[1]</sup>

### 2.2 Dialectical relationship between space and image

Harvey argues that aesthetics surpass ethics, images overshadow narratives, and impermanence and division outweigh eternal truths and unity. This reflects the intertwining of mimetic images in daily life, obscuring originality, labor, and social relations. This postmodern

view borrows from Baudrillard and Foucault, employing “mimesis” and “multiple symbiotic subjects.”

In spatio-temporal films, images form a virtual world, blurring scientific and moral judgments, challenging traditional space-time concepts. Media construct reality with ideological tendencies, reflecting technology preferences. Each medium imparts value and enhances senses or values. Technologies shape ideas and views. Technology’s impact alters our understanding. This concept highlights the role of the medium in conveying information. Images project intricate meanings, reshaping narratives. The image’s “transcendental space-time” disrupts social order, offering new creative space.

### **3. The Folding of Space: Nolan’s “Hyperspace” Narrative Setting**

Science fiction cinema is a representative example of a postmodernist view of space, characterised by hyperspace. Nolan’s time-space film series has generated a strong sense of “salvation” in this genre, where the aftermath of “space-time compression” is that the world sometimes appears to be intrinsically collapsing towards us. The root cause of this “collapse” is the omnipresent “uncertainty”, the inability to find one’s own position in the world’s coordinate system, the inability to form valid opinions, and the fact that all perceptions and thoughts seem to be the product of one’s own shadow. In this paper, we will analyse how Nolan embedded the general theme of the times and the strong sense of “rescue” in his films based on the “collapse” scene in Nolan’s films, and based on the agenda-setting theory.

This paper will continue the categorisation of science fiction films that discuss the issue of space and time: a category of works that discuss conscious space and time or virtual space and time, such as *Inception*, *The Matrix*, and *Top Gun*; a category that explores cosmic space and time, such as *2001 A Space Odyssey*, *Star Trek*, and *Wanderlust*; and a category that explores the idea of time and space being looked back on or even rewritten, such as *The Night the Comet Came*, *Ex Destination*, and *Tenet*.<sup>[2]</sup>

#### **3.1 Realism**

Virtual space-time, from the point of view of its presentation style, can also be regarded as a kind of space-time of consciousness. Space-time is no longer an external state, it has the possibility to be associated with human consciousness, that is to say, space-time is gradually no longer a physical concept, and perhaps it will also become a spiritual concept, which also reflects the “anthropomorphic” characteristics of space-time in the post-industrial era. The “realism” emphasises the possibility of virtual existence, exploring the blurring of the edges of reality and virtual consciousness, while the mobility emphasises the shaped and perceivable space-time structure, and space-time breaks the limit of dimensionality, breaking through from uni-dimensional to multi-dimensional direction. “Uncertainty” emphasises the reconstruction and de-absolutisation of the “past” and the “future”, with “rupture” as the underlying logic. As the underlying logic, it highlights the collapse of the postmodern subject’s view of time and space.

In his extremely concise analysis, Weber clarified that goodness and beauty are not harmonious wholes, but rather divided from each other, scientific truth cannot tell us the meaning of the world, cannot lay the foundations of religion or faith, cannot solve the dispute between multiple values, and cannot provide us with a fundamental guide to choosing the ultimate goal of life and political judgement.<sup>[3]</sup> the development of the modern image is a natural path to the “fragmentation of meaning”, which means that both the “old” things of the past and the “old” things of the present are not the same as the “old” things of the past, but the “old” things of the present. By “fragmentation of meaning”, we mean that both the “old” things of the past and the “new” things of today are in a cycle of continuous fragmentation and reorganisation of meaning, with their symbolic values being constantly renewed, and the ideological meanings assigned to them also constantly changing.

The “fragmentation of meaning” of images is, to some extent, an attitude of constant scepticism to explore new possibilities. Because of the flourishing development of technical media such as film, television and short videos, the era we live in has been endowed with one of the most obvious essential characteristics - rupture, which not only broadens people’s access to “scepticism”, but also makes them more open to the “scepticism” of the world. It not only widens the path to “doubt”, but also makes people’s thoughts more diverse and rich in the face of the tendency to “de-absolutise” values, which in fact tends to be essentially the same as the view of “doubt”. However, this is essentially the same as the idea of “scepticism”, because the number of things that people believe in is decreasing, and the number of things that can be tolerated is also becoming more abundant and diversified. Next, we will use the scene in the film “*Inception*” as an example to analyse the

“fragmentation of meaning” in images.

The first analysed is the allegorical scene that highlights the intrusion of the virtual world into the real world.

Paragraph Analysis: In a dimly lit basement, a large group of people lie neatly on a crude iron bed, and pipes flowing with a yellow agent are inserted into the top of their heads, bringing them into a virtual dream world for a long time. This kind of mass production of dreams is quite similar to today’s mediated, digitised and computerised cultural industrial production system. In the film, someone asks the old man guarding the basement, “Do they come here to dream?” The old man replies, “No, they come here to wake up.”

The dream has become reality for them, and reality seems to be the dream. The dream of emptiness and reality are inverted and form a cycle, and in this inversion and repetition, the ability to entangle virtual space-time with real space-time is generated, and the film continues to carry out repeated experiments of “anthropomorphism”, where the virtual is constantly approaching reality, and it keeps on playing a role in the real world while concealing the differences between the real world to the greatest extent possible. This is the premise for the complexity and simulacrum of the internal structure of the virtual time-space, which also reflects one of the characteristics of hyperspace: the coexistence of the real and the virtual.

Next, we analyse the specific plot setting in *Inception*: in the film, the heroine wakes up from her first dream, and the hero mentions: “You need a totem”, the totem is a special setting in the film, which is the exclusive “dream checker” for each person. The totem is a special setting in the film, it is everyone’s exclusive “dream checker”, only when you see your own totem can you make sure you are not in someone else’s dream. This is an extremely ironic and absurd setting. We live in a world that confirms that we need to distinguish between dreams and reality, and while reality has its ups and downs, we need to be even more vigilant in our dreams to prevent others from peeking into our most secret corners. The dreams created in the film seem to have their own logic of operation, but the subtle emotional fluctuations of the dream builder can cause vibrations that are several times more effective. The seemingly reliable environment collapses the next second, waking up and entering the dream alternately, we keep waking up, but it seems that we are never out of the dream. Such an inversion is an extremely realistic reproduction of the predicament of people who have lost their system of value judgement, who are in a deep state of confusion, and who find the will to live by setting a solid goal for themselves.

Boseman reminds us that technology has made “childhood” disappear, saying, “By virtue of such wonders as symbols and electronics, our own children know everything that others know, good and bad, all at once. Nothing is mysterious, nothing is awe-inspiring, and nothing can’t be shown in public.”<sup>[4]</sup> Children don’t know the good from the bad, so it doesn’t matter if it’s good or bad, but technology is also making “reality” disappear, and the consequence of the coexistence of the real and the virtual for people is that they lose the ability to distinguish. People don’t know what’s true and what’s false, so they don’t care what’s true and what’s false. They do not have a position, they do not have a set of firm standards for judging values, they do not know where their values, aesthetics and beliefs in life come from, and they do not care where their future will lead them, and they do not have the motivation to make an effort, so society is insensitive in their eyes.

### 3.2 Mobility

The multidimensional universe and space-time portrayed in *Star Trek* has a built-in post-industrial space-time narrative with both fluidity and circularity. The flow of space-time in the film usually breaks through the physical limitations of three or even four dimensions, creating a juxtaposition of different dimensions of space-time. The hero in the film is caught in the space-time created by five-dimensional beings after falling into a black hole, and coexists with his daughter who is in a three-dimensional world, which belongs to this kind of multidimensional coexistence flow. Such a construction can bring an extremely diverse possibility to the narrative of cosmic space-time. If we want to understand the grand background and plot of *Star Trek*, we must return to the two fundamental questions left behind by the film: why does love, as the only fluid substance with a sense of salvation, transcend all dimensions and become the last and only bridge of “certainty” between human beings; what expectations do we place on love? What do we expect from love?

Returning to the topic of modernity, David Harvey argues that “modernity” is ephemeral, fluid and unstable, and that it is totally “unconcerned with its own past, let alone any pre-modern social order”. “. Postmodernism is in fact a search for an eternal existence that overcomes this divisiveness, but it has not been realised; it is just another form of spatial and temporal compression. What he seeks is “some

sense of coherence, some irrefutable 'eternity and immutability' that is thought to lurk in the immense destructive forces of this social change in space and time".<sup>[5]</sup>

Let's talk about the secular issue of death by extension. There is a grand theme in the film *Interstellar Crossing*, in which the creators take "love" as the ultimate emotional theme, believing that "love" is the essence of the flow of emotions through multi-dimensional time and space. But in today's more divisive times, we don't just have to deal with love, we also have to deal with death. In the Middle Ages, people believed in religion, and the traditional gods still blessed the secular people, so people in the Middle World could always find reasonable words of comfort to face death, such as "afterlife", "immortality of the soul", "going to heaven", etc. But in today's world, we need to face not only "love", but also "death". "However, in today's society, where traditional gods no longer work and there is only the present before technological gods, death is seen as an isolated physical event, and more and more people are at a loss when faced with the death of the "other", and they are unable to find words of comfort for both themselves and others. They are unable to find words that will convince them and comfort others at the same time. Instead of the medieval fear of an apocalyptic judgement of the "ego", the essential problem of modern death is closely linked to love, and the focus of death has shifted to the separation of loved ones, with the clear knowledge that there is no afterlife. The shift to the "self" also predisposes people to a growing concern for their own emotions, which underpins the meaning of our lives.

For love in its essence aspires to eternity or immortality. Profound love, along with the rise and fall of life and its withering, condenses the past with the present, brings time together, and generates a richness of meaning. And death is a rupture of finality, dispersing the time that love has brought together, dispersing eternity." Writing and creating art are ways of longing for eternity, so in this way the emphasis on emotion, the dominance of love, and the dynamics of spatial and temporal flow in *Star Trek* are explorations of eternity, with Nolan's strong sense of salvation throughout, in a search for relational existence that supports the meaning of people's lives. Relationships.

### 3.3 Disorderliness

Disorderliness is a product of its time: following the logic of digital existence - digital aftermath - digital space-time. In the post-industrial era, due to a series of technological changes updating people's spatio-temporal experience and reshaping their spatio-temporal imaginations in the multi-dimensional spatio-temporal narratives of sci-fi films, the mimicry, mobility and uncertainty of the post-industrial era have been pushed to the extreme; virtual worlds have been digitally rune-encoded, and can be dismantled and reconstructed, and their divisiveness has gradually become apparent; the cosmic cycle has presented a strong dynamism; and definitions of the past, the future, and the present are no longer absolute and singular. Definitions of the past, future and present are no longer absolute and homogeneous, and the relationship between them has become more complex, making the moment an important one in which many possibilities are bursting forth, where crisis and vitality coexist.

As Owen Howe puts it, the dominant global system is disintegrating, and the system that once supported Western spiritual life is undergoing upheaval. This transformation has triggered a sense of skepticism and may even give rise to nihilism. Such skepticism eventually affects people's judgment of things, making them realize the unknowability of things. In an era of technological monopoly, people worship and praise technology. When traditional deities fail to protect them, the path to "self-salvation" naturally turns towards technological deities—the concept of "time and space" in the creed is, in fact, a profound metaphor about individuals losing themselves in postmodern space.

What follows is an analysis of the dialogue passages in the film *Tenet* that highlight the thematic setting of the film.

Paragraph Analysis: In the indoor shooting range, the pistol in the hero's hand is not loaded, but the female staff member tells him to just aim, and after the hero fires the gun, the bullets appear in the otherwise empty magazine. To explain this mystery, the female staff member takes out two bullets that are identical in appearance, while one of them is forward and the other runs in the reverse direction. The bullet in the reverse direction was shot from the future to the present. Only when the hero made the gesture of discarding the bullet did it return to him. The hero said, "Everything has a cause and effect." The female staff member returned, "No, that's just our view of time." The hero asked again, "What about free will?" The female staff member replies, "Don't try to understand it, feel it." Pre-existing logic tells us that answers are embedded in cause and effect. Humans desire to understand why events happen. Every result has a cause, and every result becomes the cause of the next result. And so when causes that diverge from one's own experience appear, feelings of doubt and fear begin to spread.

In *On the Evolution of Creation*, Bergson connects cosmic extension with the heterogeneity of time, rather than the homogeneity of space or time. He suggests two possible conceptions of extension, one “free from any mixture” and the other “in which the idea of space is allowed to work surreptitiously”. Pure stretches imply heterogeneity, impure stretches imply “spatialisation of time” or “homogenisation”. Only space is homogeneous, for “space has no extension, not even succession.” [6] We rely on technology to transcend space-time; images illustrate this potential. Future tech will erase past-future boundaries, simplifying time. Our present space is disrupted by temporal disorder, erasing spatial understanding and temporal criterion. This embodies “superspace”: uniformity, akin to “hyperspace,” coexisting homogeneity and heterogeneity.

## 4. Conclusion

In his theory, Weber discussed the dissolution of the transcendental order, labeling it as the “demystification of the world.” Taylor, however, offers an alternate perspective, emphasizing that these orders limit behavior but also provide deep meaning to the world and social life. Taylor suggests orders aren’t just constraints, but the foundation of social structure and behavior, guiding and giving purpose to actions. This positive view reflects humanity’s ongoing quest for balance between order and freedom. Social order becomes a driving force that enriches human behavior. Thus, order and freedom are not dichotomous opposites, but are interdependent and important elements in the shaping of human society, and they work together to maintain the stability and development of society. The world has unveiled its mysterious veil, and no longer appears in front of people with absolute authority. The non-differentiated nature of digitalisation eliminates the “known” and the “mysterious”, and eliminates the “proximity” and “nearness”, “proximity”, “distance” and other dialectical terms, “people no longer have a sense of higher purpose, no longer feel that there is something worth dying for.” How can the word “unprecedented” be used to define the freedom that modern man has gained? How to escape from the unprecedented loss of meaning into which modern man has fallen? This has become a profound dilemma for modern culture.

When we consume media, messages carry intentions and are shaped by specific agendas, not just presenting facts. Time-based films reflect the spirit of their era, exploring spiritual crises and culture. They offer multi-dimensional space-time concepts, aiding human thought. Diverse narratives encapsulate worldviews and emotions, mirroring contemporary struggles. Amid global uniformity, preserving uniqueness is vital. Self-perception is influenced by others, and changing dimensions of time and space provoke inner fear and new existential questions. While no permanent solution exists, continued contemplation resists losing meaning.

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