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## The Poiesis of Reality-Perception Making Sense of the Digital Media Regime through Cinema

**Abstract:** This essay takes up a question as old as human thought itself: What is reality? But rather than returning to Aristotle or Habermas, it places, with Kappelhoff and Luhmann, the relation between media and human perception of reality at the center of the argument. If there is no way of knowing the world other than through media, and media are a major element in constituting a shared sense of reality, then the processes of perceiving audiovisual media in the digital age demand closer analysis. Building on Müller and Kappelhoff's concept of the *cinematic metaphor*, the essay argues that human perception of reality is not only rooted in image-based thinking but also unfolds affectively as a networked process grounded in our media consumption. Through an analysis of *Tenet* and the example of climate change, this essay aims to show how films constitute a particular reality that is rather felt than understood.

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## 1. What is Reality?

*Crowds being only capable of thinking in images are only to be impressed by images. It is only images that terrify or attract them and become motives of action.<sup>1</sup>*

The question of what reality is seems quite simple to answer when I look outside my window, hear the birds sing, and feel a slight pain in my neck from sitting too long at the computer. From this everyday perspective, reality feels very tangible and, well, real. But can we understand this corporeal perception as reality? Or could it be that this immediate interpretation of what is real misleads our minds in the understanding of reality? There is ample evidence that concepts such as truth, facts, and reality are far less stable and self-evident than their everyday usage might suggest, as the question of what reality is has long been a central leitmotif in the history of Western philosophy. One important position on the fragility of human perception of reality is Friedrich Nietzsche's reflection on truth in his *Essay On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense*.

Was ist also Wahrheit? Ein bewegliches Heer von Metaphern, Metonymien, Anthropomorphismen kurz eine Summe von menschlichen Relationen, die, poetisch und rhetorisch gesteigert, übertragen, geschmückt wurden, und die nach langem Gebrauche einem Volke fest, canonisch und verbindlich dünken: die Wahrheiten sind Illusionen, von denen man vergessen hat, dass sie welche sind, Metaphern, die abgenutzt und sinnlich kraftlos geworden sind [...].<sup>2</sup>

What Nietzsche says about truth applies equally to our perception of reality itself. As human beings, we have no possibility of immediate access to reality. Perception is always filtered through "the mobile army of metaphors", which is based in language as well as historically, culturally and socially built frameworks of referring to a reality that is assumed to be objective. Similarly, Kroupin et al. found that Indigenous and Western participants recognized different shapes in the *coffer illusion* graphic. Whereas Western participants predominantly perceived rectangular shapes—most likely because they have been socialized into and remained immersed in a world structured through rectangular screens, architecture etc.—Indigenous participants recognized the circular structures of the graphic. This suggests that even basic visual perception may be culturally shaped.<sup>3</sup> This supports the conclusion that a commonly shared reality needs to be

<sup>1</sup> Le Bon 2017 [1895]: 69, translated by the author from the German edition.

<sup>2</sup> Nietzsche 2015 [1873]: 15.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Kroupin et al. 2025.

understood as a process of agreement that has been discursively made among members of a society but that is as subtle and fragile as Nietzsche's metaphors.<sup>4</sup>

Not only in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century philosophy were metaphors theorized as a core element of human perception of truth or reality, but George Lakoff and Mark Johnson also formulated the *Conceptual Metaphor Theory* in the field of cognitive science, based on the idea of metaphor as a structuring element in perceiving, thinking and navigating the world.<sup>5</sup> This essay will return to Lakoff and Johnson later, but for now, their approach of connecting reality and metaphors, which could also be framed as *Sprachbilder* (i.e. verbal or linguistic images), allows us to look at another approach to how to make sense of reality. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century Henri Bergson seeks to counter the discursive dominance of science of that time by arguing that—without knowing anything about the world other than his immediate corporeal experience—all he can say is that he is surrounded by perceived or unperceived *images*.<sup>6</sup> Perceived images would encompass the material world accessible through vision or touch, while unperceived images would include memories, dreams, thoughts, and other emergent mental or affective phenomena. This distinction makes clear that Bergson doesn't speak about images as representations or depictions of a given reality, but as the building blocks of reality itself. They form a system by reacting and interacting with one another according to what Bergson calls the laws of nature.<sup>7</sup> This way, he clarifies that he does not offer an esoteric understanding of reality, but rather a different perspective on reality than his scientific contemporaries that takes the affective capacities of the human body and mind into account.<sup>8</sup> From the work of Nietzsche, Bergson and Lakoff/Johnson, we can infer that human thinking and perception of reality unfold through metaphors and thus through images. Gilles Deleuze builds on Bergson's image-ontology and develops it into a cinematic ontology, arguing that reality itself is organized by the same logic as cinema. According to this philosophy, film is not merely an artistic form of expression, but a model for the structure of reality itself. Film reveals that reality is not a static state but consists of constantly moving images that unfold within a schema of perception, affect, and action. Deleuze even argues that the universe itself can be understood as a kind of film:

L'univers matériel, le plan d'immanence, est l'agencement machinique des images-mouvement. Il y a là une extraordinaire avancée de Bergson : c'est l'univers comme cinéma en soi, un métacinéma, et qui implique sur le cinéma lui-

<sup>4</sup> The concept of a commonly shared reality that grounds this argument can be found in Kappelhoff 2018: 171–184.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Lakoff/Johnson 1980: 3–6.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Bergson 1965 [1896]: 10.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. *ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Cf. *ibid.*: 10–11.

même une tout autre vue que celle que Bergson proposait dans sa critique explicite.<sup>9</sup>

For Deleuze, this represents Bergson's decisive insight: the universe operates as cinema itself. Conceiving of the universe as a meta-cinema makes it possible to grasp a logic in which cinema does not represent an external world but instead reveals the cinematic structure of reality. Just as a film actualizes selected sections of reality through framing and montage, our perception continuously selects images from the flow of the universe. In both cases, a sensory-motor schema emerges: we walk in the forest, *see* the wild boar, *feel* fear, and *decide* on flight or freeze—a process that manifests in the same way in the cinema of the Deleuzian *movement-image*.

With this, Deleuze demonstrates that cinema does not represent or depict an assumed a priori reality but makes visible the logic of our perception and agency inside the structure of our world. With this understanding, the main hypothesis of this essay becomes clear: reality is not simply pre-given but produced in the process of perception. If film is not merely a representation but a model of reality-constitution, then our own perception might be theorized as a cinematic process.

## 2. The Reality of Audiovisual Images

„Was wir über unsere Gesellschaft, ja über die Welt, in der wir leben, wissen, wissen wir durch die Massenmedien.“<sup>10</sup> Niklas Luhmann argues that all we know about the world is mediated through some sort of media, thereby establishing the epistemic entanglement between media and our perception of reality. Reality therefore exhibits two complications: first, as earlier mentioned, the process of making sense of the world itself and second—following Luhmann—the fact that we wouldn't have any knowledge about the world except what our bodies immediately experience. In this logic, even hearing a story or news from another person would have to be considered a medial process. Following this thought, it seems to be crucial, especially in times of media revolutions, to reflect anew on our understanding of how media operate and how they are entangled with the construction of a societally shared reality.<sup>11</sup> Building on Nietzsche, Bergson and Deleuze, the idea of reality as a network of images and metaphors emerging from an affectively grounded process of perception could be enlightening for this endeavor and resonates strongly with the theoretical framework of the research group *Cinopoetics* (2015-2024) at the Freie Universität Berlin around Hermann

<sup>9</sup> Deleuze 1983: 87–88.

<sup>10</sup> Luhmann 2017 [1995]: 9.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Kappelhoff 2018: 4–6.

Kappelhoff. This group developed a model that explains the perception and understanding of audiovisual images as a process that can be understood as *cinematic metaphorization*, grounded in the affective resonance following the spatio-temporal unfolding of the audiovisual image.<sup>12</sup> This process has been theorized by Kappelhoff as *poiesis of film-viewing*.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, the theory of the poiesis of film-viewing connects phenomenological and philosophical approaches to film theory. Kappelhoff argues that film is neither a sign system that requires decoding nor simply a narration that receives visual enhancement, thus, film does not function as a mere representation of reality that we comprehend through its resemblance to everyday perception. Instead, the poiesis of film-viewing suggests that viewers are actively involved in the process of film perception through their affective entanglement in the *poetic making* of the film.<sup>14</sup> Rather than simply consuming audiovisual images, viewers participate in generating the very film they experience. This means that what we understand as cinema emerges only through the processes of reception, while the film as *movement-image* comes into being through this active engagement. According to the poiesis of film-viewing, films create a specific mode of experience that is linked to the process of watching the movie. This mode can be understood as an instantaneous emergence of a reality, which is commonly shared in the moment of film viewing, based on the poetics of the film. Cinematic movement-images emerge from the interweaving of moving images with the dynamics of a receiving body.<sup>15</sup> The movement-image is the result of the affectively grounded experience of the film, while the moving image is simply the audiovisual artifact materializing on the screen. This reveals a co-production between the viewers' embodied experience and the moving images on screen or monitor. With this understanding of film perception, cinema cannot be considered a pure medial representation of an a priori reality.<sup>16</sup> In essence, the theory of the poiesis of film-viewing states that the process of viewing films constitutes a distinctive perceptual mode based on the poetics of the film that allows the spectators to experience a reality that would have been inaccessible outside the reception of the audiovisual image.

Based on this framework, Christina Schmitt illustrates compellingly how audiovisual media is linked to Lakoff/Johnson's early approach of metaphor: "*The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another.*"<sup>17</sup> According to Schmitt, this understanding of metaphor is informative for

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Kappelhoff 2018, Müller/Kappelhoff 2018, Schmitt 2020.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Kappelhoff 2018: 11–38.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. *ibid.*: 13.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. *ibid.*: 31.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. *ibid.*: 29.

<sup>17</sup> Lakoff/Johnson 1980: 5.

the processes that happen during the poiesis of film-viewing. In this sense, metaphor is not a rhetorical figure but the very foundation of perceiving audiovisual images.<sup>18</sup> What Schmitt calls *cinematic metaphorizing* is at its core “*metaphoric meaning-making*”<sup>19</sup>, leaning on the early concept of Lakoff and Johnson. In other words, we can say that films bring forth a specific type of metaphor grounded in the affective resonance produced by the poetics of the audiovisual artifact in its spatio-temporal unfolding. This reinforces the understanding that an audiovisual clip—regardless of it being a fictional film, a news piece or a TikTok—cannot be understood as a representation of a pre-given reality, places, characters or stories. Even a news report is first and foremost a poetic product that is being perceived through cinematic metaphorization, hence it lets the spectators experience distinct information through the audiovisual images, constituting a specific reality in the moment of viewing. Only then is it possible to interpret in what sense the report is telling a story about reality. But it is always based and brought forth through the affective unfolding of the aesthetic composition and can never be understood without paying attention to this dimension of the audiovisual image. With this framework, it becomes clear that medial reality cannot simply be reduced to narrative content or linguistic signs. Rather, it is affective modulations, rhythmic structures, and perceptual processes that first shape and bring forth the experience of medial reality. This way we can productively reconnect the principle of cinematic metaphorization with Nietzsche’s “army of metaphors” and with Deleuze’s and Bergson’s conception of the universe as images in a constant movement of *becoming*.

### 3. The Cinematic Metaphor as Cinematic Rhizome

#### 3.1 The Cinematic Metaphor vs. Cinematic Metaphorization

The idea of cinematic metaphorizing expressed by Schmitt is closely linked to the theory of the *cinematic metaphor*<sup>20</sup> developed by Cornelia Müller and Hermann Kappelhoff—yet it articulates a distinct conceptual focus within the same theoretical framework. While the process of cinematic metaphorization—or, in other words, the poiesis of film-viewing—constitutes one core aspect of the cinematic metaphor, another key dimension concerns the way audiovisual images are themselves structured through cinematic metaphors. In turn, cinematic metaphors constitute more than just a process of cinematic meaning-making, as they emerge through specific aesthetic constellations in the course of the temporal

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Schmitt 2020: 11–14.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.: 14.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Müller/Kappelhoff 2018.

unfolding of the audiovisual image. This means that we can understand the “cinematic metaphor as emergent from the poiesis of film-viewing.”<sup>21</sup> What emerges from this process can then be grasped as the structural characteristic of the cinematic metaphor. Müller and Kappelhoff thus “conceive of metaphors as multidimensional experiential gestalts.”<sup>22</sup> Even if neither cinematic metaphorization nor the cinematic metaphor can be understood as a “creative-poetic or rhetorical figure”<sup>23</sup>, both manifest through the audiovisual artifacts and their poetics as an experiential gestalt. Consequently, Müller and Kappelhoff’s

film analytical studies suggest that metaphorical conceptualizations in audiovisual images cannot be grasped as static entities that can be described according to the formula ‘A is B’. Rather, they should be understood as networks of interlocking figurative interactions that can extend over the entirety of a film, video, etc. as a dynamic process.<sup>24</sup>

Following this, we can understand the cinematic metaphor as a *networked* structure unfolding in a dynamic process that “emerges from an affective temporal parcours that viewers go through when watching a film”<sup>25</sup> and is grounded in the movement-image. This perspective allows us to slightly reframe the concept of the cinematic metaphor in order to draw a clearer distinction between these two aspects: one referring to the *process* of cinematic metaphorization, and the other to its structural and gestaltic manifestations in audiovisual images. While the terminology of the cinematic metaphorization is, in my view, very productive to describe the process of perceiving and understanding audiovisual images, I recognize frictional moments in the framing of the structural dimension of the cinematic metaphor. Because of the similarity of the terms, it is difficult to differentiate the process and the structural manifestation, which is nevertheless meaningful for theoretical and analytic work. Another difficulty lies in the paradox of metaphor being commonly understood as a rhetorical figure, while the cinematic metaphor is situated within the philosophical discourse of metaphorology. Even in Müller and Kappelhoff’s book, it remains unclear whether this distinction is fully sustained, as the terminology sometimes seems to blur the boundaries between process and structure. And lastly, the term metaphor has a long and deep-rooted tradition in many academic fields. Although the argumentation for the cinematic metaphor being a specific kind of metaphor is well established by Müller and Kappelhoff, I anticipate difficulties in using the terminology in further academic work without addressing why the cinematic

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.: 19.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.: 49.

<sup>23</sup> Schmitt 2020: 20, translated by the author.

<sup>24</sup> Müller/Kappelhoff 2018: 47.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.: 7.

metaphor is not actually a metaphor in the traditional sense. While their insights remain valuable, the ambiguity in their metaphor terminology limits the ease with which the theory can be applied for analyzing these networked structures of audiovisual images. What is needed—and what I propose with the concept of the *cinematic rhizome*<sup>26</sup>—is an extension that can account for the dynamic cinematic poetic network that is linked to the affective parcours the spectator goes through in the process of film-viewing, which brings forth specific audiovisual experiential gestalts. The concept of the cinematic rhizome aims to provide this analytical framework.

### 3.2 Cinematic Rhizome

To make the theoretical and analytical concepts by Müller and Kappelhoff more productive for my own approach, I propose to conceptualize the temporally unfolding structure they describe as the cinematic rhizome. I consider this framing useful as the concept of the rhizome, theorized by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, shares structural similarities with the cinematic metaphor: a *heterarchical*<sup>27</sup>, networked organization, unfolding in a dynamic process of *becoming* that is closely linked to affective intensities that can manifest in *plateaus* or just keep their virtual qualities.<sup>28</sup> Audiovisual images and whole films show similar dynamics in terms of virtual intensities that are intertwined with specific aesthetic visual and narrative manifestations, which are embedded in the networked affective parcours of the whole. These intensities can be understood as affects or even clusters of affects. For reasons of clarity, a short definition of what I understand as *affect* is needed. I summarize affect, emotion, and feeling under the umbrella term ‘sensations’, though affect requires special consideration. I understand emotions as bodily reactions to events or perceptions of an external or internal reality that can manifest as feelings only through a process of interpretation. Emotions and feelings can thus be framed as sensations without qualifying them further.<sup>29</sup> In contrast to emotions and feelings, however, affect is not necessarily embodied. It can be understood as a pre-subjective intensity that emerges and circulates between animate or inanimate bodies.<sup>30</sup> Affects are

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Deleuze/Guattari 1980: 9–37.

<sup>27</sup> A heterarchy is a “form of management or rule in which any unit can govern or be governed by others, depending on circumstances, and, hence, no one unit dominates the rest. Authority within a heterarchy is distributed. A heterarchy possesses a flexible structure made up of interdependent units, and the relationships between those units are characterized by multiple intricate linkages that create circular paths rather than hierarchical ones.”; Miura 2014.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Colman 2010: 232–235.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Kappelhoff 2016: 116–117.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Deleuze 1983, Massumi 2021 [2002], Slaby/Mühlhoff 2019.

therefore fundamentally *virtual* in the Deleuzian sense. They are intensities in the mode of becoming until they manifest as something stable and purely embodied or interpretable.<sup>31</sup> Affects are thus circulating energies with a particular quality or potential that can *actualize* into interpretable emotions or feelings in the process of perceiving and feeling.<sup>32</sup>

Consistent with that logic, virtual dynamics of the audiovisual image can be understood as *cinematic intensities*, while actualizations in the poetics of the film could be called *cinematic singularities* on the micro-level, and macro- and meso-level structures emerge as *cinematic plateaus*. But the theoretical mechanics of the cinematic metaphor still apply. The cinematic rhizome with its intensities, singularities, and plateaus still emerges from the process of cinematic metaphorization based on the affective parcours the film provides in order to allow the spectator a particular experience in the film's terms. Therefore, film can give the spectator access to experiences of a reality that would otherwise not be possible. This emergent reality cannot be understood purely rationally, but as an assemblage of multidimensional experiential gestalts taking the form of the cinematic rhizome. The goal of reframing the concept of the cinematic metaphor toward the cinematic rhizome was not purely theoretical. Following Deleuze's philosophical approach of doing philosophy with film, we can take on a unique perspective on reality by thinking through cinema. Viewing *Tenet* through the lens of the cinematic rhizome might allow us a deeper insight into the logic of contemporary media and reality regimes, dominated by algorithmically driven platforms like TikTok, YouTube, or Instagram.

### 3.3 The Cinematic Rhizome in *Tenet* (2020)

*Tenet* seems to be a film that resists easy comprehension or the usual strategies for understanding a film, such as making sense of the plot or of character relations and developments. In his article "Tenet, Climate Change, and the Misdirection of Interpretation: Or, Does Christopher Nolan Not Know Who the Bad Guys Are?" Ben Roth reflects that—just as the title suggests—one does not really know what the film is about, nor is it entirely clear who the 'good guys' and 'bad guys' are.<sup>33</sup> Thus, *Tenet* does indeed give us intellectual challenges that remind us of older films by Nolan, namely *Memento* (2000) or *Inception* (2010), which could be put in the category of *mind-game films*.<sup>34</sup> Thomas Elsaesser introduced the concept of mind-game films, defining them as films that present apparently realistic worlds but ultimately oblige spectators to "retroactively revise the premises and

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Deleuze 1985: 92–105.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Deleuze 1983: 125–130.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Roth 2022.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Elsaesser 2018.

assumptions about the reality status of the world depicted” because the films turn “out to consist of several parallel, disjunctive and potentially incompatible universes” or “feature multiple timelines, either quite separate from each other, or connected by inverted figure-of-eight loops in the manner of a Möbius strip.”<sup>35</sup> According to Elsaesser, this leads to an elevated cognitive engagement with the film:

Meaning-making for the audience of a mind-game film is not simply ‘following the story’, but poses several kinds of challenges: to become actively engaged, and to sort out apparent inconsistencies, while trusting the film and its makers to be nonetheless in good faith – by introducing new ‘rules of the game’, and thus disorienting or deceiving the spectator for a higher purpose: or at the very least, doing so in the name of the game. A mind-game film can encourage an audience to entertain hypotheses that turn out to be false, or remain unproven even at the end.<sup>36</sup>

One can argue that the viewing of a mind-game film is thus a pleasurable experience for the audience through the interactive dimension of playing a game with the film and its makers. The film becomes a riddle that can be solved through diligent and oftentimes iterative receptions of the movie. While most of the other key elements of mind-game films that Elsaesser describes fit very well to *Tenet*—namely a precarious temporality, elevated complexity, dissolving causalities or radical ambiguities—the cognitive engagement and puzzle-solving dimension characteristic of mind-game films appears absent. *Tenet* seems to be a film that shows the “verisimilitude” Elsaesser speaks of, in a way that the spectators initially experience the film as a classical spy thriller with elements of science-fiction but as the instability of the diegetic reality becomes apparent, they are not being provided with the necessary tools to navigate the complexity. But how does this tension manifest concretely in the film?

*Tenet* tells the story of an agent known only as the Protagonist. He is recruited by a secret organization called *Tenet* to prevent a temporal World War III. As it turns out, future generations have developed a technology that allows them to invert objects and people in time and thereby send them backwards into the past. The Russian oligarch Andrei Sator functions as the mediator between future and present, attempting to destroy the contemporary world with an inverted weapon, as a last attempt to avert the climate catastrophe. Together with other agents and Sator’s wife Kat, the Protagonist eventually succeeds in preventing the disaster.

While this is a perfectly accurate synopsis of the film, it hardly succeeds in conveying a real understanding of its true nature. So Roth does have a point in his

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.: 12.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

confusion about the diegetic dynamics of the film. Within the logic of the film's poetics, it is fairly clear that the antagonists are Andrei Sator in coalition with the Future and that the topic of the film is anthropogenic climate change. Yet focusing only on this relation could insinuate that Sator and the Future are the 'good guys' in trying to fight climate change and the Protagonist would work on preserving everything as it is. Apparently, things in *Tenet* are not that simple, which creates the field of tension that suggests its mind-game dimension. Without being able to entirely discard this reading, the question of whether the film is about climate after all can't be answered all that clearly either, as it is being narratively anchored in a single moment only. Shortly before the end, when Sator explains why the future seeks to destroy the present, this is the only explicit reference to anthropogenic climate change: "Because their oceans rose and their rivers ran dry."<sup>37</sup> Consequently, we are dealing with two problems at once in trying to understand the film on a very basic level. But unlike typical mind-game films, even multiple close viewings do not provide clarity, and the tension Roth describes never gets resolved within the film's logic. Speaking from my own reception experience, as someone who watched the film multiple times in various ways, I found neither a puzzle to solve nor the subtle pleasure of deciphering the diegetic reality. The more I understood, the more I paid attention to the details, the more my pleasure of reception in fact decreased. The key to 'understanding' the film might lie in a single line of dialogue rather early in the story. When the Protagonist meets a scientist who tries to explain the logic of temporal inversion, she emphasizes: "Don't try to understand it—feel it."<sup>38</sup> This can be read as implicit advice to fully experience the film without trying to solve it solely cognitively. And precisely this shift from the mode of puzzle-solving to experiencing an affective immersion is why the idea of the cinematic rhizome could shed light on the labyrinth of *Tenet*.

Following the broader methodological concept of Müller and Kappelhoff called *CinMet*<sup>39</sup>—which aims to analyze the affective, temporal and spatial patterns of a film's poetics to determine *metaphorical themes* emerging from its affective parcours—and transferring it to my approach of the cinematic rhizome, we can understand the overarching theme of the film as *anthropogenic climate change*. Climate change is then the core rhizomatic structure that unfolds organically, affectively and temporally throughout the film, without the necessity to be articulated directly through the narrative dimension. In analogy to *CinMet*, the main rhizome can be understood as the main metaphorical theme, which corresponds to what Müller and Kappelhoff call the film's macro-level. The metaphorical sub-themes, found on the meso-level of the film, can be considered in

<sup>37</sup> *Tenet*: 02:11:15–02:11:45.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*: 00:15:15–00:15:45.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Müller/Kappelhoff 2018: 226–247.

the framework of the cinematic rhizome as sub-structures which feed into the main structures of the rhizome. We can understand these sub-structures as *cinematic plateaus* that are clusters or patterns of narrative, aesthetic and affective elements. Where *cinematic singularities* are concrete aesthetic manifestations like specific shots, sounds or movements on the film's micro-level and *cinematic intensities* are the affective qualities and potentials that are being mobilized through these manifestations. Cinematic plateaus can be therefore understood as complexes of various rhizomatic layers themselves, consisting of actual and virtual elements, that constitute recurring patterns, emerging experiential gestalts that feed into the rhizomatic network of the main theme. Two of those cinematic plateaus in *Tenet* are *the fight against oneself* and *the instability of temporality*.

One core affect that keeps circulating throughout the film—emerging from both cinematic plateaus—is the *ontological insecurity*. While Anthony Giddens theorizes *ontological security*<sup>40</sup> as the feeling of being anchored in a stable reality, which is founded in basic trust built mainly through upbringing and childhood experiences, *Tenet* on the other hand renders through its cinematic intensities and singularities a continuous lingering of an affect of unease, that can be qualified as ontological insecurity. In the plateau of the fight against oneself, the film's earlier mentioned ambiguity of 'good' and 'bad' is a grounding cinematic intensity that lets the affective rhizomatic element of ontological insecurity emerge. Even if the film's poetics suggest that the Protagonist and his supporters are the ones to root for, the confusion about the characters keeps consistent, mainly because none of them really go through some form of development. They stay anonymous puppets that follow the lead of the rather acausal intensities of the film. Therefore, it seems impossible to connect or identify with the characters. The Protagonist, for example, does not exceed his schematic role as solely the protagonist. Other characters do have names, but still there is nothing present that helps to affectively engage in their stories. Most of them are just singularities that merge into acausal intensities only serving as affective drivers of motion, but no actualization in empathy or other interpretable feelings. In short: the characters don't help the spectators to anchor themselves in the diegetic reality.

Another element of the fight against oneself can be seen in cinematic singularities such as the scenes, where the protagonist literally fights an inverted version of himself.<sup>41</sup> Here, the concrete poetics evoke an affect of unease, as they do three things simultaneously. Firstly, the movements of the inverted person are extremely uncanny, which is being enhanced by the covered face and therefore their unknown identity. Secondly, the spectators are forced to reflect on the possibility of the fight between two persons with different temporalities. Even if the

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Giddens 1991: 41.

<sup>41</sup> *Tenet*: 00:45:00–00:48:00 and 01:41:30–01:44:35.

movements look strange and uncanny, it somehow seems to work. But in fact, it would be impossible. Causality does not apply to this situation, and the inverted person would have no possibility to react—they would have to constantly ‘anticipate’ the actions of the enemy to stage their own movements. And the third layer evoking the affect of unease and consequently ontological insecurity is the context of the story. In the first fight scene, the spectators can’t help but speculate about the identity of the inverted person and their motivations, where they come from and such. In the second scene they are still trying to solve the riddle of temporality, understanding how the different temporal singularities connect and what that tells about the ontology of the diegetic world—which is again almost impossible. These temporal inversions, alongside the plateau of the fight against oneself, exemplify the underlying sense of something being off, which constantly permeates the film. The impossibility of understanding how different temporal layers interact creates the same ontological insecurity that emerges from the earlier mentioned ambiguities. Both plateaus consist of these cinematic singularities and feed aesthetically and affectively into the core affects of unease and ontological insecurity.

To mention another cinematic singularity that feeds into these plateaus is the epic fight scene close to the ending of the movie.<sup>41</sup> Here, we can watch a battle between the ‘good’ guys—though it’s not even clear they are good, since the paramilitary organization belongs to the weapon dealer Priya, who can hardly be framed as such—and Sator’s fighters. There are two teams, one of which is inverted, and they must complete an operation—whose exact goal is also rather difficult to determine—within a time frame of ten minutes. Even though the two ‘good’ teams are marked by a red or blue ribbon around the arm, the scene jumps between both temporalities, making it impossible to follow the exact succession of causalities. Additionally, the fighters of all temporalities and sides look basically the same, which enhances the confusion even further. Especially in the first viewings of the movie it seems impossible to follow each detail in order to understand what is actually happening. All that is tangible is the emergence of cinematic intensities that keep molding the two plateaus and the rhizome of cinematic intensities oscillating between ontological insecurity and unease, which feeds the affective grounding for the main rhizome of climate change.

Now the question remains how these plateaus constitute the cinematic rhizome of climate change, as there are few narrative anchors to support this hypothesis. The core idea is that *Tenet* does not intellectually transmit rational arguments for why climate change is a threat to contemporary or future generations, but that the film generates a sense of the gravitas of climate change by experiencing the film

<sup>41</sup> *Tenet*: 01:55:00–02:19:00.

through the dynamic relations of the cinematic rhizome. The two plateaus, with their web of singularities and intensities, constitute this affective grounding which leads to the emergent meaning of the film. Both complexes are linked to affective patterns that can be experienced similarly in the context of the non-filmic dynamics of climate change. The fighting against oneself can be seen in the fact that, in climate change—contrary to the dynamics of public discourse—no truly opposing principles can be determined to be fighting each other, as we all inhabit the same planet and will be suffering the consequences of climate change. Certainly, there will be populations and people who will suffer more than others, but, after all, the dichotomy does not exist. This is the exact same field of tension, unfolding through the plateau in *Tenet*. On the surface there are huge conflicts and depending on the side you're supporting, one can definitively point out 'the other', but after all, this fight is just a battle of narration and intellectualization, as a product of specific modes of perceiving reality. The result in the filmic and non-filmic realities is a strong affect of ontological insecurity, that keeps lingering and modulating perceptions over time. The same can be concluded for the plateau of temporality. Apart from the phantasm of a generational conflict (because there is none—we are all in this together), the temporality of climate change is as obscure and precarious as the temporality of *Tenet*. The temporality of climate change is due to its level of abstraction almost not comprehensible for the human mind. It is simultaneously extremely slow and fast. We are facing a catastrophe in slow motion, while we are already experiencing the consequences of climate change today. The film enables us to understand that we—as a global society—don't need to comprehend every detail of the temporal mechanics of climate change, we only need to understand that it is an immediate threat to human existence. One can argue that the fear of change due to measures against global warming is provoking ontological insecurity while the film makes us understand that the ontological insecurity through climate change itself is what we experience. To summarize, *Tenet* does not represent climate change, it makes the spectators embody the affects of the lingering threats that seem to not reach intellectual consciousness on a broader societal and discursive level. The cinematic rhizome of the film allows us to experience the complex reality of climate change based in the cinematic experience.

#### **4. The Cinematic Rhizome as Model of Reality-Construction**

It has been argued throughout this essay that perception, whether it be of reality or audiovisual media, is less the mere recognition of a stable pre-given construct and more a poietic process of constructing reality, based on the emergence of multidimensional experiential gestalts. Concluding this essay's analysis by drawing once more on Luhmann's claim that all we know about the world is mediated through media, we need to acknowledge that the boundaries between our perception of reality and the media regime are blurrier than we tend to realize

in our day-to-day lives. Thus, it seems important to develop strategies for analyzing how the contemporary media system constitutes realities and consequently influences societal coexistence. As shown in the analysis of *Tenet*, where sense could be made of seemingly disconnected audiovisual elements, the concept of the cinematic rhizome could equally serve as a tool to generate a deeper understanding of the mechanics of social media platforms and their relation to political and societal realities. I believe that we need to shift our analytical focus from isolated clips on TikTok, Instagram, or YouTube toward the networks they constitute. Consequently, these platforms reveal themselves as cinematic rhizomes operating within broader and more fluid contexts that extend beyond individual films. In this logic, individual clips don't function as independent audiovisual units but as cinematic singularities that actualize virtual intensities, feeding into larger cinematic plateaus of discourse that organize collective perception as cinematic rhizomes.

Rather than focusing on isolated viral content or algorithmic manipulation, we can trace how affective plateaus cluster around particular topics, creating what I call *communities of reality*.<sup>42</sup> For instance, the success of authoritarian media presence cannot be understood merely through the analysis of specific content but through mapping how their communications function as cinematic singularities that mobilize intensities of grievance, nostalgia, hate, and hope across multiple platforms. These singularities feed into larger plateaus of nationalist discourse that organize perception not through rational argument but through affective networks. This approach reveals its analytical power when we compare anti-democratic media strategies to democratic communication modes, which still operate according to past-century logics, thereby highlighting the implications for contemporary democratic discourse. Traditional approaches to *post-truth* focus often on fact-checking, media literacy, or algorithmic bias. But if reality construction operates through cinematic rhizomes, then democratic responses must engage at the level of affective medial reality construction itself. This means understanding how democratic political agents could create stronger cinematic rhizomes than authoritarian ones, how democratic institutions could work more effectively on visions of potential realities, and how media education might focus on affective literacy rather than solely fact verification.

<sup>42</sup> I theorize communities of reality as medial emergent rhizomatically unfolding entities that are based on particular epistemic systems which constitute their specific shared reality. The notion of communities of reality offers an alternative to the metaphors of echo chambers and filter bubbles for theorizing heterogeneous epistemic mechanisms. The concept is explored in greater detail in forthcoming publications on heterarchical reality structures and the role of trust in democratic discourse; Cf. Mellin, forthcoming (a) & forthcoming (b).

This returns us to the central thesis of this essay: reality is not pre-given but produced through a poiesis of perception that operates via metaphors, images, or even audiovisual images. In the digital age, platforms like TikTok and Instagram do not merely influence culture or provide entertainment. They participate directly in the poiesis of reality-perception, both for the individual and in the process of negotiating a commonly shared reality. Understanding these mechanisms through the analytical lens of the cinematic rhizome could become a powerful tool, not just for academic analysis but for the practical task of strengthening democratic reality-construction itself.

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