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Remembering Alternative Futures
Tom Cruise and the Subtle Revolution of Science Fiction Action Cinema by Mid-2010s

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Abstract

Science fiction has long served as a dynamic platform for examining humanity's future, technological innovation, and profound existential questions. By mid-2010s, the genre of science fiction action cinema had matured into a complex and sophisticated form, merging intellectually ambitious story-telling with visually breathtaking, technologically advanced cinematography, often anchored by compelling performances from prominent actors. During this period, audiences were captivated not only by the sheer entertainment value of such movies, but also by their capacity to provoke deeper contemplation on philosophical and existential themes, particularly concerning humanity's evolving relationship with technology. In a mixed methodological approach (ethnographic description, media discourse analysis, hermeneutic interpretation), this paper examines two recent live action blockbusters within the science fiction category, both featuring Tom Cruise in the lead role – *Oblivion* (2013) and *Edge of Tomorrow* (2014) – which re-define the genre by adopting a philosophy of pragmatic exploration and hands-on experimentation through intricate visual-auditory constructions. In doing so, they challenge the foundational principles which have traditionally underpinned the global cinematic production and distribution model: despite their distinct aesthetic approaches, thematic compositions, and ideological underpinnings, both movies engage critically with themes of individual self-awareness, historical consciousness, and the protagonist's role in his own transformation as a necessary precondition to saving the world. Through the lens of male central characters, these narratives explore the multifaceted process of personal growth against the backdrop of fractured historical events and a progressively eroded sense of identity, purpose, and orientation within the contexts which shaped them. By delving into *Oblivion*'s and *Edge of Tomorrow*'s cinematic mechanisms, the study aims at revealing the ways in which science fiction action movies can serve as blueprints for resilient, liberated individuals – capable of courage, dedication, and compassion as they strive to lead purposeful lives.

Keywords: pragmatic humanism, identity, memory, war and peace, aliens, endangered humanity

1. Introduction: Alternative Futures and the Power of Cinema in Late Modernity

Science fiction has always been a fertile ground for exploring complex ideas about humanity's future, technological advancement, and existential dilemmas. By mid-2010s,

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science fiction action cinema had already evolved into a sophisticated genre which blended high-concept story-telling with visually stunning, technically advanced cinematography, often anchored by powerful performances from leading actors. This era witnessed the release of live-action movies which not only entertained, but also engaged audiences with deeper philosophical and existential questions, particularly regarding the future of humanity in the face of rapidly advancing technology. The current paper focuses on two recent live-action blockbusters belonging to the science fiction genre and starring in the lead role Tom Cruise – *Oblivion* (2013) and *Edge of Tomorrow* (2014) –, and the ways in which they re-define action cinema by taking over a philosophy of pragmatic exploration and practical experimentation by means of visual-auditive constructions, targeted at portraying the convoluted human condition and re-formulating the basic elements which had been regarded as crucial within the global business model of producing and releasing movies (Csicsery-Ronay, 2008). Although sensibly different in aesthetic approach, thematic conglomerate, and the ideology they represent, both movies address issues of individual engagement with self and history and one's position as a father and as a citizen, through the lens of the (male) main characters and their multi-layered growth on the background of troubled social structures and an increasingly diluted sense of identity, of purpose, and of orientation within the milieu which created them, in the first place. The intrinsic technical details of *Oblivion* and *Edge of Tomorrow* and the far-reaching reverberations they carry throughout the development towards the denouement are at the core of this analysis, seeking to unveil the concrete mechanisms encompassed in works of arts – in this case, live-action movies – potentially leading to role-models of liberated, resilient individuals, capable of courage, commitment, and compassion in their pursuit of meaningful lives.

Previous research on Hollywood blockbusters has focused mainly on theoretical explanations of box-office success and positive critical appraisal (see Brake, 2018; Brower, 2024; Csicsery-Ronay, 2008; Freedman, 2000; Stanley, 2002). The hands-on analysis of live-action movies is mostly avoided: the reasons range from practical – sitting with products of mass-media, regardless of the genre, and doing one's best to observe them in critical light somewhat defeats the purpose of the very existence of such products – to tactical – theories and methods need to be re-written or even (re-)invented for releases which more often than not reflect the Zeitgeist of the era and hardly offer any durable standpoints which could, in turn, serve as reference systems. Therefore, the current investigation aims at bringing into the spotlight on the intertwining between narrative lines and their processing in visual and musical architectures resulting into quasi-revolutionary cinema products: both *Oblivion* and *Edge of Tomorrow* shattered the principles of what had been considered up to their releases as mainstream cinematic works both by questioning the juxtaposition of the two major dimensions of expression – visual and aural – and by opening up fresh avenues for that very juxtaposition. The goal of this study, thus, is to highlight the inner mechanisms of two of the most iconic live-action movies in recent years, outlining basic strategies for producers, consumers, and critics.

Methodologically, I draw on more than 20 years of empiric-phenomenological fieldwork on mass media such as cinema and animation: the phenomenological experience is socio-culturally contextualized, emulated in cinematic artifacts as a discursive concatenations and performative displays of authentic selves in their resistance against conformity, uniformity, and the alleged superiority which comes from their association, hence striving to attain the highest level of existential transcendence. This addresses the fact that consumerist scenarios visible in the global late modernity manifest, eventually, as plain symptoms of a forever postponed confrontation with the individual reality, and not a reliable solution in terms of personal fulfillment and/or social cohesion. I observe the multiple layers of

cinema as representative of comprehensive mass-media, caught in the stress-ratio between arts and mainstream media, embedded in bureaucratic structures of administration and self-organization such as release politics, the economic supervision of brand-related consumption, the socio-cultural management of producers and consumers, as well as the products themselves and their meta-narrative implications. The sources consist of extensive fieldwork with long-term participatory observation and empirical data-collection resulting from archive research of press-releases and informal discussions with producers, viewers, critics as well as additional consumers of products of popular culture, both locally and internationally anchored. This complex endeavor allowed unexpected insights into the mechanisms of production, consumption, perception, processing, and dissemination of media phenomena in Europe, USA and Japan. Taking into account the extreme volatility of the global media industry, almost painful in its vivacious superficiality with a calculated momentary impact on audiences, the longevity of specific cinema works, live-action or animated, throughout decades is a powerful reminder that determination, hard-work, and persistence in pursuing an ideal one firmly believes in are worthy assets in the hierarchy of human values, although not always forthrightly advertised as such.

In a first step, this paper details the narrative structures of *Oblivion* and the complex ways in which ideas and characters are brought to life while critically observing the superficiality of the live-action science fiction genre. Subsequently, *Edge of Tomorrow* undergoes a similar procedure, whereas the science fiction genre serves as the dramaturgic pretext for the sensitive interrogation of interhuman relationships, their tensions as well as their rewards. The conclusion sums up the major ideas and reflects on potential future research to deepen the current findings. Inherent limitations notwithstanding, this study aims at elucidating a potential recipe for cinema blockbusters which transcend financial preoccupations and instead focus on educational experiences, permeating media releases of the global entertainment industry, which serve as familiar, memorable, relatable vehicles to convey hard yet necessary truths. As to be shown in the lines below, the answer to a potent, long-term solution to current developments is not an escalation of violence and destruction as means of numbing ourselves out of the perception of human suffering and the slow, but inevitable alienation both from our own selves and from others, but a re-consideration of what makes humans, human: a deep-dive into the extraordinary quest for human excellence.

2. *Oblivion* (2013): Memory, Identity, and Civilizational Collapse

One of the key movies which epitomized the evolution of the science fiction genre in the necessity and ability to explore complex ideas about humanity's future, technological advancement, and existential dilemmas is *Oblivion* (2013), directed by Joseph Kosinski and starring Tom Cruise in the lead-role. On the surface, *Oblivion* appears as a standard science fiction action movie, adhering to its overwhelming conventions, but beneath its sleek exterior lies a rich conglomerate of themes, character development, and genre-defining elements, revealed within its cinematic exploration of complex tropes such as identity, memory, and human resilience. Indeed, at closer scrutiny, *Oblivion* reveals itself as a pivotal moment in science fiction action cinema, due to its plot, character dynamics, visual and auditory design, thematic depth, challenging the broader context of the genre and of mass media, altogether.

Oblivion is set in a dystopian future in which Earth has been devastated by an alien invasion, leaving the planet nearly uninhabitable. The movie follows Jack Harper (Tom Cruise), a

technician stationed on Earth, tasked with maintaining drones which protect the planet's remaining resources, who, along with his communications officer and partner Victoria (Andrea Riseborough), lives in a high-tech tower above the clouds, isolated from the remnants of humanity who are supposedly en route to a colony on Titan, before they both are supposed to join the rest of humanity. Jack's seemingly routine existence is disrupted by vivid dreams of a past life he cannot remember and the appearance of a mysterious woman, Julia (Olga Kurylenko), who crashes on Earth, leading him to question the nature of his mission and his own identity. As the story unfolds, Jack uncovers the truth about his existence, the reality of the alien threat, and the fate of humanity – leading him to face a crisis which forces him to question everything he knows about himself and the world. *Oblivion*'s narrative weaves together elements of mystery, action, and philosophical inquiry, embedded with classical science fiction themes – identity, memory, and the struggle for freedom –, culminating in a story simultaneously thought-provoking and visually captivating, keeping the audiences engaged with its twists and revelations.

At the heart of *Oblivion* is Jack Harper, portrayed by Tom Cruise with a blend of stoicism, vulnerability, and restrained intensity, capturing the character's internal conflicts and gradual awakening to the truth. The quintessential archetype of the reluctant hero – a man who starts as a cog in a vast machine, but gradually awakens to his own agency and individuality –, Jack is a man caught between duty and doubt, a soldier who begins to question the very foundation of his reality: throughout the movie, Jack's journey is marked by his growing realization that his memories, which he once thought defined him, are fabrications imposed by an external power. This internal struggle drives *Oblivion*'s exploration of identity and self-determination, themes central to the science fiction genre, pushing the plot forward as Jack unravels the mystery of his existence.

Victoria, played by Andrea Riseborough, serves as both Jack's partner and a foil to his developing doubts, to which her loyalty to the mission sharply contrasts, as she represents the comfort of conformity and the dangers of blind obedience, preferring the assurances provided by their superiors rather than the confrontation with the reality gradually unveiled by her trusted partner. Her relationship with Jack is complex, blending professional partnership with romantic undertones, but it is ultimately defined by her adherence to the *status quo*, as Victoria's unwavering commitment to their assigned roles creates tension between her and Jack, hence emphasizing *Oblivion*'s representation of resistance versus compliance. This dynamic illustrates, ultimately, the seductive nature of security and the fear of the unknown, despite clear evidence backed by real-life experiences.

Julia, portrayed by Olga Kurylenko, is the key to unlocking Jack's true identity and the catalyst to his transformation: a mysterious woman from Jack's dreams, her character is imbued with a sense of mystery and emotional depth, denoting both Jack's past and his potential future as well as his lost memories which keep on haunting him. Julia's character is integral to the plot, serving as both a symbol of Jack's past life and the embodiment of his future choices, and her arrival challenges the stability of Jack's world, prompting him to confront the lies he has been enacting. Her presence pushes Jack to confront the reality of his existence and finally leads him to take a stand against the forces controlling his life: through Julia, *Oblivion* explores the power of memory and the importance of human connection in defining who we truly are.

Visually, *Oblivion* is a masterpiece of modern science fiction cinema, making use of established aesthetics to reinforce its themes and the corresponding mood: the movie's visual design is characterized by stark, minimalist design, juxtaposing the high-tech environment of Jack and Victoria's living quarters with the desolate, post-apocalyptic

landscapes of Earth (see Hayward, 2012). The derelict beauty of the ruined Earth itself, captured through sweeping landscapes and meticulous production design, creates a haunting backdrop for the story, reflecting *Oblivion*'s themes of isolation, artificiality, and the loneliness of the remnants of a lost world, with the stark visual contrast between the exquisitely technological facilities in which Jack and Victoria live and the barren wastelands of Earth emphasizing the disconnect between the characters' perceived reality and the truth: the design of the drones themselves, the Tet (the space station overseeing the mission), and the technology used by the characters contribute in combination to *Oblivion*'s futuristic yet sterile atmosphere, underscoring the sense of control and surveillance disguised as safety and control which dominate such a dystopian world. Its employment of color is particularly noteworthy, with the cold whites and grays of the high-tech accessories juxtaposed against the warmer earthy tones of the natural world, effectively symbolizing the tension between the artificial and the organic, the controlled and the free – even more compellingly complemented by the movie's cinematography, which captures the vastness of the barren Earth and the gradual alienation in Jack's existence. This visual dichotomy mirrors Jack's internal conflict between his programmed duty and his emerging sense of humanity, with the sleek, minimalist design of the drones and other technology additionally reinforcing *Oblivion*'s exploration of oversight and surveillance, central themes to its narrative.

The musical score, composed by M83 in collaboration with Joseph Trapanese, plays a crucial role in enhancing the movie's atmosphere, its emotional depth, and story-telling structure, as it blends electronic and orchestral elements, creating a soundscape both futuristic and profoundly human (see Buhler, 2019; Cooke, 2010). Moreover, the music complements the visual design, with the soaring melodies and pulsing rhythms bringing into the foreground *Oblivion*'s key moments, its tension and emotional beats, from the sweeping shots of Earth's ruined landscapes to the intimate, emotionally charged exchanges between characters: thus, the score's use of recurring motifs reflects the movie's themes of memory and identity, with certain musical cues associated with Jack's flashbacks and personal revelations – overall, the interplay between visuals and music in *Oblivion* enables an immersive experience which draws the audience into its world and reinforces its thematic concerns.

Entertaining yet thought-provoking, *Oblivion* addresses several major tropes which resonate with contemporary audiences: indeed, at its core, *Oblivion* focuses on memory, identity, and the search for meaning in a world which has lost its way, explored through the lens of science fiction and its futuristic setting, as questions about the nature of reality and the role of technology in shaping our lives which bring eventually the theme of memory into the central spotlight, and with Jack's journey gradually unfolding as one of (re-)discovering his past and reclaiming his identity from the forces seeking to control him. Haraway's (1991) essay is helpful in understanding the human-machine hybrids present in *Oblivion*, particularly in the context of Jack Harper as a clone and his relationship with the technological systems governing his world. The cyborg metaphor is a useful tool for analyzing *Oblivion*'s exploration of posthuman identity, located within the architecture of its depiction of control and resistance, with the Tet serving as a metonymic presence for oppressive systems bent on subjugation and dehumanization. Jack's rebellion against the Tet represents a broader struggle for autonomy and self-determination – themes deeply resonating with contemporary concerns about surveillance, corporate power, and the erosion of individual freedoms: Jack's trajectory is driven by his quest to uncover the truth about himself and his past, triggered by the suggestion that our memories are integral to our sense of self, and that the loss or manipulation of memory can have – and does in fact

have – profound implications for our identity. Such an approach is particularly relevant in an age in which technology increasingly influences the ways in which we remember and interpret our experiences.

In this train of thought, the tension between freedom and control is another fundamental issue, appearing as a continuation of Wood's (2003) critique of Hollywood cinema's ideological underpinnings through the analysis of post-Vietnam Hollywood, leading to *Oblivion*'s contextualization within the broader landscape of American action cinema and providing a framework for understanding its themes of disillusionment, trauma, and the questioning of authority: *Oblivion* displays a world in which advanced technology is employed to degrade and to dominate, with Jack's rebellion against the Tet representing a broader struggle for autonomy and self-determination – which reverberates through contemporary concerns about surveillance, corporate power, and the erosion of individual freedoms in the face of technological advancements. Supported by Žižek's (2012) examination of ideology in popular culture, *Oblivion*'s cinematic description of control, resistance, and the construction of reality corresponds to the critically essential ways in which movies propagate or challenge dominant ideologies, therefore highlighting the importance of *Oblivion*'s critique of tight hierarchical inspection and authoritarianism – despite the science fiction setting.

Environmental degradation is the third key theme in *Oblivion*, with its illustration of a ruined Earth serving as a cautionary tale about the consequences of humanity's exploitation of the planet: the barren, lifeless world brings forth anxieties about climate change and environmental destruction, making it a relevant and timely commentary on the state of the world and the importance of sustainable practices. Lastly, *Oblivion*'s exploration of love and connection, with Jack's relationship with Julia serving as a reminder of the power of human bonds in the face of adversity, suggests that affection and memory are intertwined, with our interhuman relationships forming the foundation of our own identities, and adding emotional depth while grounding the movie's hypothetical elements in a relatable human experience.

Firmly rooted in the science fiction genre, drawing on a rich tradition of speculative story-telling which explores the possibilities of future technology and its impact on humanity, *Oblivion*'s narrative is built around classic science fiction concerns such as the nature of identity and reality, the consequences of technological advancement, as well as the question of what it means to be free and human in an increasingly controlled society – these themes are embedded within a plot combining elements of dystopian fiction, post-apocalyptic setting, and existential drama.

One of *Oblivion*'s most significant contributions to the genre is its exploration of memory and identity. Bukatman (1993) discusses in the analysis of the "virtual subject", the intersection between identity and technology in science fiction, thus providing a theoretical framework for understanding Jack Harper's character arc as he navigates a constructed identity within a technologically mediated environment: *Oblivion* presents a world in which technology has the power to manipulate and erase memories, raising disturbing questions about the nature of self and the extent to which our identities are shaped by our past experiences. Furthermore, one might incur Baudrillard's (1994) work and its relevance to *Oblivion*'s profound investigation of identity, reality, and the manipulation of memory through or as simulation: a distant reinforcement of Baudrillard's concept of simulacra and the blurring of the boundaries between reality and simulation, particularly in the ways in which Jack Harper's reality is shaped by the fabricated memories imposed upon him by the Tet. This theme is central to the movie's narrative, as Jack's journey is ultimately one

of self-discovery and the reclamation of his true identity, while aligning with the science fiction genre's tradition of examining hypothetical scenarios to probe the human condition. Furthermore, *Oblivion*'s engagement with the questioning the role of technology in society as well as the relationship between humanity and technology reminisces of Csicsery-Ronay's (2008) comprehensive analysis identifying science fiction's key aesthetic, ideological, and thematic elements such as "future shock" and "novum", particularly applicable to the movie's portrayal of a dystopian future and its technological innovations. The drones and other advanced technologies in *Oblivion* are depicted as both tools of control and symbols of a lost civilization, as *Oblivion* delves into the idea that technology, while capable of great feats, can also be a means of oppression and dehumanization, a theme even more keenly reflected in the depiction of the Tet, the artificial intelligence which oversees the operation on Earth and which represents the dangers of placing too much power in the hands of technology: the movie's critique of technological control and its impact on human freedom is a common thread in science fiction, echoing concerns about the increasing role of technology in our lives.

Oblivion's major challenge is the representation of gender roles within a complex picture, particularly within the context of a genre often dominated by male-centric narratives. Butler's (1990; 2024) theories on gender performativity might offer carefully crafted insights into the gender dynamics in *Oblivion*, with the roles of Victoria and Julia being analyzed through Butler's lens, specifically in the strategies through which their identities and actions are shaped by societal expectations and their relationships with the male protagonist: clearly, the movie's both female characters occupy distinct yet complementary roles in relation to Jack. Victoria embodies the archetype of the dutiful, strong, competent, and disciplined partner, whose identity is closely tied to her role within the mission and her relationship with Jack, as a presence whose strength lies in her adherence to the rules imposed by external authorities. Her role, nonetheless, is ultimately constrained by her loyalty to the system and her inability to question that very system, mirroring a traditional portrayal of female characters as supportive, but secondary to the male protagonist's journey. Victoria's adherence to the rules and her fear of stepping outside the boundaries set by their superiors highlights the tension between security and freedom, a theme consistently resonating throughout the movie. Julia, on the other hand, is depicted as a figure of mysterious resonance and emotional depth, whose influence is pivotal in Jack's evolution, bringing forth the classical trope of the muse or the woman who inspires the male hero to transcend his limitations and to discover his true self. While this characterization may seem reductive, Julia's role is essential in the narrative progression, and her strength lies in her emotional resilience and connection to Jack's past, as she represents the human connection which Jack has lost and the memories which define his true identity: through Julia, *Oblivion* touches on themes of love, memory, and the enduring power of human relationships, even in the face of overwhelming technological control.

Thus, while *Oblivion* made strides in giving its female characters agency and importance, it still falls into some of the traditional patterns of gender representation in action cinema: while Victoria and Julia are strong, capable characters who embody crucial parameters in the story, their narratives are primarily and largely defined by their relationships to Jack, the male protagonist, being intertwined with his development rather than existing independently, reiterating a common trope in action cinema which often positions female characters in relation to the male hero's journey – nevertheless, both characters are integral to the narrative, and their interactions with Jack help to drive the *Oblivion*'s exploration of

memory, identity, and self-discovery as foundation to the human experience, adding layers of complexity to the overall conglomerate.

Oblivion was released at a time when science fiction action cinema was experiencing a resurgence while undergoing a significant transformation, driven by advancements in visual effects technology and a growing appetite for high-concept story-telling: the movie's ability to tap into the cultural Zeitgeist of the early 2010s, a period marked by increasing concerns about technology, environmental degradation, and the future of humanity, as revealed in Sobchack's (1997) analysis of the evolution of science fiction cinema as a historical phenomenon at the intersection of special effects, the depiction of dystopian futures, and deep-going philosophical questions, appears as one dimension of its success at the box-office ad with critics. At the same time, Truffaut's book (1985, a compilation of interviews between François Truffaut and Alfred Hitchcock) provides insights into the craft of suspense and visual story-telling as evident in *Oblivion*'s narrative structure and direction, with the influence of Hitchcockian suspense subliminally conveyed in its pacing and its gradual revelation of the central mystery, adding to its overall impact. Noteworthy, *Oblivion*'s marketing campaign played a crucial role in its lasting impact, leveraging Tom Cruise's star power and the movie's stunning visuals to attract a broad audience, with the promotional materials emphasizing its epic scope and high production values, therefore positioning it as a must-see event in the landscape of blockbuster cinema – a dissemination strategy reinforcing the power of mass media in shaping audience expectations and driving the success of major cinema releases, as the use of trailers, posters, and other promotional content creates a sense of anticipation and excitement while highlighting the product's visual and thematic strengths.

Ultimately, *Oblivion* fits within the continuing trend in science fiction cinema towards blending action-oriented story-telling with deeper philosophical and existential themes, a trend be observed in movies from the same period, such as *Inception* (2010) and *Interstellar* (2014), which similarly combine thrilling action sequences with complex narratives, challenging the audiences to think critically about the implications of the stories, the nature of reality, and the human condition (see Kurzweil, 2005). In this larger context, *Oblivion*'s success demonstrates the power of mainstream cinema to engage with sophisticated ideas about the human experience while still appealing to wide audiences, as it exemplifies the evolution of science fiction action cinema by the mid-2010s combining high-concept story-telling with stunning visuals and a powerful performance from its lead-actor, in this case Tom Cruise, compounded by the credible exploration of themes such as memory, identity, control, and environmental degradation, which places it distinctly within the science fiction tradition, with action and spectacle ensuring its appeal to broad audiences. *Oblivion* is a testament to the power of science fiction to engage with complex ideas while providing thrilling entertainment, as its relevance extends beyond its speculative genre's canon and narratives, embedding vast cultural concerns about technology, the environment, and the future of humanity, within a mass-media framework which continues to resonate with global audiences throughout the years.

3. *Edge of Tomorrow* (2014): Invasive Aliens, War, and Limitless Chances

As mentioned previously, by mid-2010s, the landscape of science fiction action cinema was undergoing a significant transformation. Among the movie which contributed to this shift, *Edge of Tomorrow* (2014), starring Tom Cruise and Emily Blunt, stands out as a compelling example of the ways in which the genre could evolve by blending high-concept

science fiction with relentless action and cerebral story-telling within gradual complex – and innovative – narrative structures, complex character dynamics, and cutting-edge visual effects. Directed by Doug Liman with a story-line based on the Japanese science fiction light-novel *All You Need Is Kill* by Sakurazaka Hiroshi with illustrations by Abe Yoshitoshi published Japanese by Shūeisha under their Super Dash Bunko imprint in December 2004 and released in English by Viz Media in 2009, *Edge of Tomorrow* interrogates themes of repetition, transformation, and survival in a futuristic war against an alien species. The movie's influence extends beyond its immediate success, marking a pivotal moment in the genre's development and reflecting broader trends in mainstream media: by examining *Edge of Tomorrow*'s constitutive elements in detail, one can better understand its place within the history of the genre and its impact on contemporary cinema.

Edge of Tomorrow presents a narrative both ingenious and engaging by employing time loops in the context of war: on a near-future Earth, an alien race known as the Mimics has invaded, pushing humanity to the brink of extinction. The story follows Major William Cage (Tom Cruise), a public relations officer with no combat experience who is unwillingly thrust into battle. After promptly being killed in the first moments of combat, Cage quickly discovers that he is caught in a time loop, re-living the same day over and over every time he dies, as each death on the battle-field resets the day, giving Cage the opportunity to learn, adapt, and improve his combat skills: such a narrative structure, reminiscent of the 1993 comedy *Groundhog Day*, is adapted with a fresh twist, as the stakes are higher, the consequences more severe, and the repetition more grueling. While the narrative device of the time loop serves as the movie's most compelling element, blending science fiction with the tension and intensity of an action thriller, the story is not plainly a plot device but a metaphor for personal growth and resilience as well as for the cyclical nature of war, as the narrative structure forces audiences to engage with the concept of repetition, which allows Cage to develop from a cowardly, self-serving individual and inexperienced officer into a battle-hardened soldier, thus bringing into the spotlight themes of personal development, anti-fragility, and the futility of armed conflict (see Barber, 1996; Bauman, 2003; Krugman, 1994; Mestrovic, 1997). Through each loop, Cage becomes more skilled, courageous, and selfless, with the repetitive nature of the narrative mirroring the learning process, in which failure is not the end, but a step towards mastery: such a narrative construction serves, in addition, to heightening the tension, as audiences are increasingly aware of the consequences of failure, even if the protagonist is temporarily immune to it (see Greene, 2013; Taleb, 2012). Time turns, therefore, into the focal point of the movie, as viewers are confronted with the existential implications of repetition and the possibility of altering one's fate, while the time loop convention allows, ultimately, for a unique pacing, in which the narrative can skip over redundant sequences while focusing on incremental changes leading to the protagonist's eventual success.

Tom Cruise's portrayal of William Cage is a study in transformation and agency in crafting one's own identity – and a resolute departure from his typical action hero roles, as Cage starts off as an anti-hero: self-serving, cowardly, and entirely unprepared for combat. Indeed, at the beginning of the movie, Cage is a far cry from the typical action hero as he is manipulative, selfish, incompetent, and (mis-)using his position to avoid the front-lines, but the time loop forces him to face his limitations, fears, and failures repeatedly, until he develops into the hero he never wanted to be, and thus to evolve into a leader capable of saving humanity (see Campbell, 1949; Connell, 2005; DiAngelo, 2018; Katz, 2006). Cage's character arc is defined by his transformation into a seasoned warrior, capable of leading humanity's final stand against the Mimics and towards the final victory: his metamorphose is gradual and hard-earned, making it more impactful than the instantaneous changes often

seen in regular action movies, as Cage's character development is not just a personal journey, but also a commentary on the nature of heroism in science fiction cinema. Unlike conventional protagonists, often depicted as inherently brave and morally upright, Cage's heroism is forged through suffering, repetition, and the gradual accumulation of knowledge and experience, with the time loop serving as a crucible which burns away his flaws, leaving behind a more refined, albeit scarred, individual.

Cage's journey is paralleled by that of Sergeant Rita Vrataski (Emily Blunt), known as the "Angel of Verdun": a fearsome warrior who has killed hundreds of Mimics, Vrataski is the embodiment of the experienced soldier, already having experienced a time loop similar to Cage's, which has turned her into a symbol of hope for humanity, but in contrast to Cage, who begins his journey in ignorance, Vrataski's character is marked by her knowledge of the time loop and the burden it carries. Her relationship with Cage evolves from one of mentor and student to equals in the fight against the Mimics, as Vrataski's character challenges traditional gender roles in action cinema – not a damsel in distress or a mere sidekick, but a powerful, independent figure who drives much of the plot, with her physical prowess and strategic mind emerging as crucial to the mission's success (and the narrative's credibility), and her emotional resilience providing a counterpoint to Cage's initially fragile psyche (see Kristeva, 1974; Hooks, 2000; Lavigne, 2012). Thus, the dynamic between Cage and Vrataski subverts the typical male-dominated narrative, offering a more balanced depiction of gender in the context of war and survival. In this train of thought, *Edge of Tomorrow* challenges traditional gender roles in science fiction action cinema through Vrataski's character, delivering an unexpectedly progressive vision, particularly for a genre which has historically been dominated by male heroes. While her character is instrumental in Cage's transformation, portraying both a mentor and a partner in the fight against the aliens, she is presented not just as Cage's equal, but in many ways, his superior, the battle-hardened warrior who trains Cage, guiding him through his journey. This role reversal is significant in a genre in which female characters are often relegated to secondary roles, as "accessories" to the male character's development, transformation, and cathartic climax.

Nonetheless, Vrataski's construction is complex. She is not defined by her relationship to the male protagonist, but by her own experiences and agency, and her depiction rejects the conformist illustration of women in action films, in which physical strength is often coupled with a loss of femininity, therefore revealing a female character who is both strong and emotionally nuanced, capable of showing vulnerability without compromising her authority. In doing so, *Edge of Tomorrow*'s treatment of gender dynamics reflects broader societal shifts towards equality rather than artificial equity: by orchestrating a female presence who is both a mentor and a warrior, *Edge of Tomorrow* contributes to the ongoing conversation about the representation of women in media and offers a model of gender vitality in which power is not defined by gender itself, but by competence and character. Vrataski's role in *Edge of Tomorrow* subverts the typical description of female instances in action cinema releases, with her strength, intelligence, and determination turning her into a central figure in the narrative, as the movie script avoids, gracefully, moving her and Cage's relationship towards a conventional romance, focusing instead on their mutual respect and shared goal of defeating the Mimics: such a re-calibration mirrors a rather inconspicuous shift in gender ideology within the science fiction genre, gradually allowing for more nuanced and empowered representations of female characters.

The major themes of *Edge of Tomorrow* – war, time, and (personal) transformation – resonate deeply with contemporary audiences, each contributing to the movie's depth, relevance and impact. To start with war, the movie's depiction of war as a repetitive, seemingly

endless cycle reflects real-world conflicts which often appear intractable and unresolvable, and with the time loop emerging as a metaphor for the ways in which individuals and societies can become trapped in destructive patterns, unable to break free without significant effort and sacrifice – and often the ending of a cycle of violence only constitutes the beginning of new tensions to result in a further armed conflict down the road (see Arendt, 1970; Barber, 1996; Mestrovic, 1997). Without being explicitly anti-war, *Edge of Tomorrow* questions the validity of wars without coherent solutions in the background, able to provide sustainable resolutions in the aftermath.

The concept of time as a malleable force is another key theme, resulting in a time loop which allows the characters to manipulate temporalities, thus enabling them to change the outcome of events. Coupled with these temporal loops, the representation of war in *Edge of Tomorrow* raises questions about fate, destiny, and the extent to which individuals can control their own lives, exposing the underlying idea that, while time may be indeed cyclical, it is not immutable, and through determination and courage, it is possible to alter the course of history.

Thirdly, transformation, both personal and collective, surfaces as *Edge of Tomorrow*'s overarching theme: Cage's journey from cowardice to heroism is a classic narrative arc of personal metamorphosis, but the time loop adds layers of complexity, making his development more profound, particularly relevant in the late-modern context, in which individuals are often faced with the imperative to adapt and grow in the face of adversity, with *Edge of Tomorrow* suggesting that change is possible, but it requires persistence, resilience, and the willingness to confront one's own weaknesses and failures, as change is not a singular event but a continuous process of sustained self-aware effort. Related to this, teamwork and collaboration appear as crucial to the movie's resolution: Cage and Vrataski's partnership is essential to their success, highlighting the importance of trust, communication, and mutual respect in overcoming challenges – even more striking in the context of the movie's depiction of war, in which victory is achieved not by individual heroism, but by collective effort (see Castells, 1997; Giddens, 2020). Survival, therefore, in the face of overwhelming odds, is more than just a physical battle – it is a psychological one, as the characters grapple with the fear of death and the toll of endless repetition until they find strategies to endure and ultimately triumph. From this perspective, *Edge of Tomorrow* explores the meaning of being human in the context of war, which often equates survival with sacrificing one's humanity in the name of saving those whom one loves – or choosing to preserve one's own humanity. Both Cage and Vrataski are willing to sacrifice their lives repeatedly to achieve their goal, a staple of the science fiction genre, uncovering uncomfortable questions about the value of individual lives in relation to the greater good. In *Edge of Tomorrow*'s particular context, sacrifice is portrayed not as a tragic loss but as a necessary and noble act in the pursuit of a better future for as many people as possible.

Edge of Tomorrow's visual and aural elements subtly enhance its storytelling through a discrete yet subliminally impactful interplay of visuals and musical score: its visual style, characterized by gritty realism and futuristic design, grounds the science fiction elements in a believable world and effectively conveys the bleakness of a macrocosm under siege with the emotionally charged contrast between alien technology and the devastation of a war-torn Earth. The battle scenes are chaotic and intense, realistically depicting the confusion and brutality of warfare, sensibly augmented by the design of the Mimics, with their fluid, almost organic movements and menacing appearance, adding to the movie's sense of otherworldly menace. The exoskeleton suits worn by the soldiers are a key visual element, symbolizing the merging of human and machine in the fight for survival: while

these suits harness the soldiers' abilities, turning them into superhuman warriors, they also serve as reminders of the dehumanizing effects of war, as they are heavy, cumbersome, and require the soldiers to surrender some of their humanity in exchange for power.

The movie's musical score, composed by Christophe Beck, complements the *Edge of Tomorrow*'s visuals by setting the tone, increasing the tension, and highlighting the emotional impact of key scenes. Both atmospheric and propulsive, mirroring the urgency of the plot, the music oscillates between somber, reflective tones during moments of introspection, and pulsating, insistent rhythms during battle sequences, employing a combination of orchestral and electronic elements conducive to the creation of a soundscape futuristic yet grounded in the visceral experience of war, conveying and almost immersive experience in the movie's ecosystem, re-formulating the time loop concept as more subliminal and thus more emotionally-mentally engaging (see Buhler, 2019; Cooke, 2010). The relationship between the visuals and the score is virtually symbiotic, as each enhances the other, delivering a cohesive aesthetic which supports the movie's themes, amplifying, on the one hand, the sense of repetition and of inevitability which comes with the time loop, and with the visuals bringing, on the other hand, the futuristic setting to life in a way which feels immediate and tangible.

A quintessential science fiction movie utilizing the genre's conventions to explore complex themes of time, identity, and survival, *Edge of Tomorrow* embodies the very lens through which contemporary issues can be examined by blending traditional elements with action-oriented story-telling, revealing the time loop not merely as a gimmick, but as a fundamental aspect of its narrative structure, and allowing for complex character development and thematic exploration, with specific focus on the human condition while raising questions about free will, the nature of heroism, and the possibility of redemption (see Fuller/Goffey, 2012; Žižek, 1998; Eagleton, 2003). In the broader context of science fiction cinema, *Edge of Tomorrow* can be seen as part of a trend towards more sophisticated and intellectually engaging productions, as it draws on classic themes such as the nature of time, the consequences of war, and the human capacity for change, while simultaneously delivering the thrills and spectacle expected of a big-budget action movie: this combination of cerebral and visceral elements is emblematic of the mid-2010s shift in science fiction cinema, as movie-makers began to push the boundaries of what the genre could achieve.

Edge of Tomorrow's success is a testament to the power of mainstream media in shaping popular perceptions of the future: science fiction has always been a genre which looks forward, imagining what the world could be like and what challenges humanity might face. By presenting a future in which humanity is on the brink of extinction, *Edge of Tomorrow* taps into contemporary anxieties about war, environmental destruction, and the fragility of human existence, while discretely reflecting the compulsive nature of modern media consumption. In the longer run, the time loop emerges as a sophisticated metaphor for the repetitive cycles of news, entertainment, and social media which dominate contemporary life: just as Cage is forced to re-live the same day over and over again, audiences are bombarded with the same stories, images, and narratives, creating a sense of inevitability and ultimate desensitization. *Edge of Tomorrow* challenges this potential – and actual – reality by offering a narrative of resistance and change, suggesting that even in a world of endless repetition, it is possible to break the cycle and forge new pathways.

Edge of Tomorrow represents a significant moment in the evolution of science fiction action cinema by mid-2010s as it combines a compelling narrative with complex characters and progressive gender dynamics, innovative visuals and subtle musical intertwining as well as a thought-provoking exploration of major themes such as time, identity, and survival.

Through its innovative use of the time loop, complex character development, subversion of gender roles, and the interplay of visuals and music, the movie offers a fresh take on familiar genre conventions, while highlighting the challenges and opportunities presented by the power of mass media in shaping a movie's reception and cultural impact.

Indeed, despite positive reviews from critics, the movie initially struggled at the box office, with the underperformance being partially attributed to marketing challenges, including the confusion surrounding the movie's title, which was later rebranded as *Live Die Repeat* for home video release. This situation brings into the spotlight the importance of effective marketing in the movie industry, particularly for high-concept science fiction releases which may not have immediate mainstream appeal, with *Edge of Tomorrow*'s case illustrating the ways in which the power of mainstream media can influence a movie's commercial success, regardless of its quality or critical acclaim. Nonetheless, the movie's eventual success on home video and streaming platforms demonstrates the potential for science fiction cinema to find audiences outside of traditional theatrical releases, particularly in an era in which digital media consumption is on the rise. Ultimately, the major themes of war, time, and personal transformation explored in *Edge of Tomorrow* remain relevant today, mirroring the ongoing struggles and hopes of contemporary societies: as such, the movie not only entertains but also invites deeper reflection on the nature of heroism, the costs of conflict, and the potential for change in a world which often seems caught in its own time loop.

4. Conclusion: Science Fiction Blockbusters and the Power of Individual Charisma

In a first attempt of its kind, the current study has critically analyzed two science fiction blockbusters released by mid-2010s – *Oblivion* (2013) and *Edge of Tomorrow* (2014) – which, in their very specific ways, shattered the traditional understanding of the role and ability of cinema works to bring into public foreground the anxieties and obsessions of producers and consumers alike. In both movies, the larger-than-life stature of Tom Cruise dominates the cinematic discourse while allowing, in the particularly subtle manner which had turned the actor into a global icon, for such a crucial concept like identity and its role in formulating our perception and processing of reality, to materialize as the core of both *Oblivion* and *Edge of Tomorrow*. Repetitiveness, be it in the infinite number of clones or in the apparently endless todays, emerges as one strategy through which we might try to grasp who we are, as individuals and as members of collectives, thus eventually, gradually understanding our position in the world. Lost memory, on the one hand, and exquisite enhancement of life experience due to limitlessly available "one very day", on the other hand, are intricately connected with war either as a past, completed event, or as an ongoing destruction with no victory in sight.

By intermingling identity, memory, and war, the two movies lay bare our vulnerability in the face of truly species-threatening incidents, and cautiously warn of the humanity's painful fragility. An important role in this construction of potential realities and alternative futures plays the musical score: stylistically diverse without protruding into the narrative logic of quest and redemption, in both movies the music reminds of the powerful healing power of unconscious drives and propensities, subtly yet progressively crafting parallel discourses of longing and paradoxically belonging. In classical non-diegetic tradition of musical scores, *Oblivion*'s and *Edge of Tomorrow*'s music faithfully intensifies and outlines

emotional paradigms and mental imageries, thus crucially contributing to the movies' overall subliminal credibility, memorability, and enduring relevance.

Last but not least, Tom Cruise's presence delivers pivotal impulses to the science fiction genre by mid-2010s: not only a tool for entertainment and to a certain degree mindless consumerism, but the deeply motivated opportunity to think about ourselves and about the future – and in doing so, to re-imagine ourselves as co-creators of that very future, not helpless victims of history's trajectory. There is hope and there is vision – empowerment results from self-awareness and from the willingness to deeply heal, so that tomorrow does not simply repeat today's suffering, but transcends it and turns it into valuable life lessons.

The major limitation of the current study is its almost exclusive focus on the narrative dimensions of the two movies and the ways the story-lines emerges from the visual architecture and its aural entanglements. Future research might observe the critical reception and audiences' reactions, in an attempt to expand the findings of this investigation so that the inner pathways of planning, projecting, pursuing, promoting and lastly releasing masterworks become more visible – and therefore more easily to be developed by aspiring creators. The juxtaposition of an all-encompassing human symbol such as Tom Cruise with pressing issues of late modernity such as identity, war, and memory as (individual as well as collective) history might result, after all, into the reconsideration of our hierarchies of values and, potentially, into a return to what makes us truly human.

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