



# Analyzing the double helix of story-telling in **Interstellar**: circularity and linearity

Un film de Christopher Nolan, 2018

Type d'activité : Questionnaire de visionnage

Durée : 2 h

## Introduction

Directed by Chris Nolan, known for his acclaimed works like *Inception* or *The Dark Knight Trilogy*, *Interstellar* tackles the genre of science-fiction and explores the idea of journey through space and time. The director uses intertwined story lines, creating a narrative DNA, to connect the fate of humanity to the intimacy of introspection.

How is *Interstellar* shaped as a narrative double helix, connecting images of linearity and circularity?

*Interstellar* not only is a film about space exploration, it becomes a visual and emotional progress.

The viewers are plunged into an imaginary, yet scientifically reliable, story in which the characters learn about their own human condition and emotions. Therefore, this film can be studied along the two notions of the LLCE program: «Imaginary» and «Meetings».

## Dans les programmes

Discipline	Niveau	Objets d'étude	Compétences
Anglais	Première LLCE	- Rencontre - Imaginaire	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Compréhension orale</li> <li>▶ Expression orale</li> <li>▶ Expression écrite</li> </ul>

## I/ IGNITION: BEFORE WATCHING *INTERSTELLAR*

**1 /** In pairs, give your own definition of the term «interstellar». Then exchange with the rest of the class to build a mind map.

**2 /** Watch the poster of the movie *Interstellar*: make hypothesis about the genre, the subject, the story of the film.



Film genre
Subject
Story

**3 /** Say what impressions are conveyed to the viewer by the colors used in the poster.

**4 / a /** Give your own interpretation of the lines formed by the man and the horizon.

**b /** Analyze the contrasting shapes of the circular cloud and the vertical light beam.

**5 /** In pairs, look for the possible meanings of the names used in the film.

**MURPHY**

**LAZARUS**

**WOLF EDMUNDS**

**COOPER**

**MANN**

**6/** Watch the trailer of the movie :



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2LqzF5WauAw>

**a/** Complete the following quotes:

1- "We didn't run out of \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_, we ran out of \_\_\_\_\_."

2- "Murphy's law doesn't mean that something \_\_\_\_\_ will  
happen, it means that whatever \_\_\_\_\_ happen will happen."

3- "We must think not as \_\_\_\_\_ but as a \_\_\_\_\_."

**b/** Comment on Cooper's line to his daughter: «I love you forever.»

**c/** Say what impressions are conveyed by the music and the rhythm of the trailer.

## **II/ LIFT OFF: WATCHING INTERSTELLAR**

For the following activities, the class can be separated into two groups; each group will focus on one story line of the movie (II-A and II-B).

Then the two groups can both work on the common elements (II-C).

### **A/ Backbone 1: Cooper's storyline**

**1/** Pick out the adjectives that best qualify the state of the Earth in the film:

**WELCOMING** **BARREN** **PLENTIFUL** **HOSTILE** **HEALTHY** **DANGEROUS** **VIALE**

**2/** Explain the visual impression and the symbolical meaning conveyed by dust.



**3/** Professor Brand explains: «We are not meant to save the world, we are meant to leave it». Sum up the purpose of Cooper's mission in space.

**4/** Here are three quotes from Cooper's departure speech to his daughter. Pick out the most meaningful one and justify your choice.

- a- «I can't be your ghost right now. I need to exist.»
- b- «[Parents] We're just here to be memories for our children.»
- c- «Once you're a parent, you're the ghost of your children's future.»

**5/** Explain the effect of the camera movements and the sound effects on the viewer when Cooper leaves Earth and reaches space (00:43:23).



**6/** Analyze the shape of Cooper's spaceship Endurance: what does it remind you of? What could it symbolize?



**7/** Describe the sound effect on Miller's planet and its implication for Cooper (from 1:08:16 to 1:11:00).

**8/** Watch the scene between Cooper, Brand and Romilly (from 1:25:33 to 1:29:08).



**a/** Say what the succession of close-ups between Cooper and Brand suggests about their opinions.



**b/** Dr Brand says «Love is the one thing we're capable of perceiving that transcends the dimensions of space and time». Explain why this quote is a twist in the narrative line of the film.

**9/** Focus on the tesseract scene (from 2:20:10 to 2:34:15).



**a/** Say where Cooper has arrived after his journey through the black hole and what it indicates about the plot.

**b/** Explain Cooper's quote about Murphy's watch: "because I gave it to her" (2:31:31).

**10/** Analyze the shapes of Cooper's new environment at the end of the film.



**11/** Give your own explanation of Cooper's decision to continue his journey in space towards Dr Brand.

## B/ Backbone 2: Murphy's storyline

1/ Make hypothesis about the identity of the woman opening the movie. Explain her narrative goal.



2/ Pick out the three adjectives that best illustrate the personality of Murphy. Justify your choices.

**DETERMINED**

**SHY**

**CURIOUS**

**MEAN**

**OBEDIENT**

**RECKLESS**

3/ a/ Murphy says to her dad: «You said science is about admitting what we don't know»: say why it is / it is not a good definition of science, in your opinion.

b/ «In case the ghost is trying to communicate»: explain what the ghost represents and why Murphy wants to communicate with it.

4/ a/ Explain why Murphy mentions the ghost's message «Stay».

b/ Analyze the impression created by the countdown when Cooper leaves Murphy and his home (00:41:50).

5/ a/ Account for the goal of the ellipsis in Murphy's storyline (from 00:54:20 to 1:21:39).

b/ Study the purpose of the transition between Murphy's message to her father and her situation on Earth (1:22:47).



6/ Give an explanation of Professor Brand's quote: «As a physicist, I'm not afraid of death. I'm afraid of time.»

**7/** During the tesseract sequence, account for the alternation of shots between Murphy as a little girl and as an adult.

**8/** Say who the character giving her testimony actually is, and what it implies about the narrative structure of the film (2:37:45).



**9/** Comment on the shape formed by Murphy and her family at the end of the film: how does it conclude Murphy's story line?





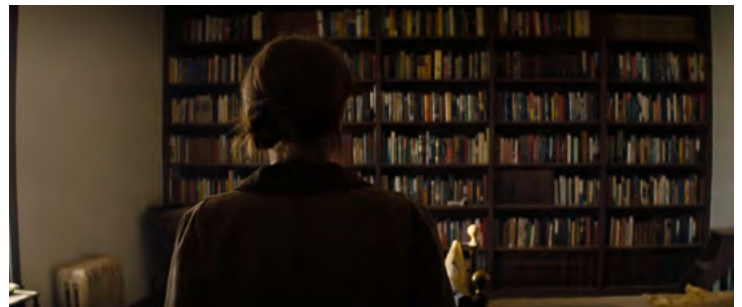
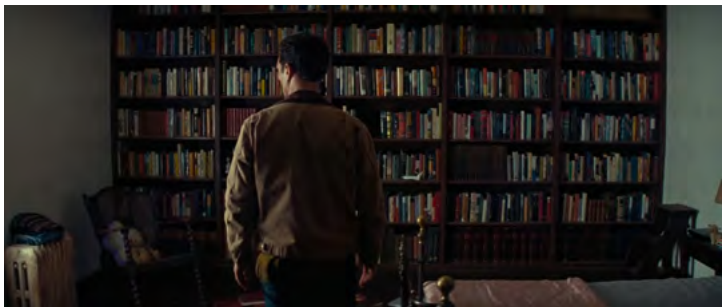
### C/ Base pairing elements

1/ Describe the visual structure of the following shots representing Murphy's room.



2/ Explain why the tesseract is made of an endless repetition of Murphy's room.

3/ Compare the following images of Cooper and Murphy; point out the common points and the differences.



4/ Observe Cooper and Murphy's outfits; say what you notice and what it reveals about the two characters.

5/ Focus on the shot representing Cooper and Murphy; say what element stands out from this image and what it symbolizes.



**6/** Describe the shot representing the characters' watches and relate it to Murphy's sentence: «Time will run differently for us?» (00:39:51).



**7/** Explain the effect of the alternating scenes on Mann's planet and on Earth (from 1:44:24 to 2:07:50)

**8/** Read the extract from the poem by Dylan Thomas used several times in the film:

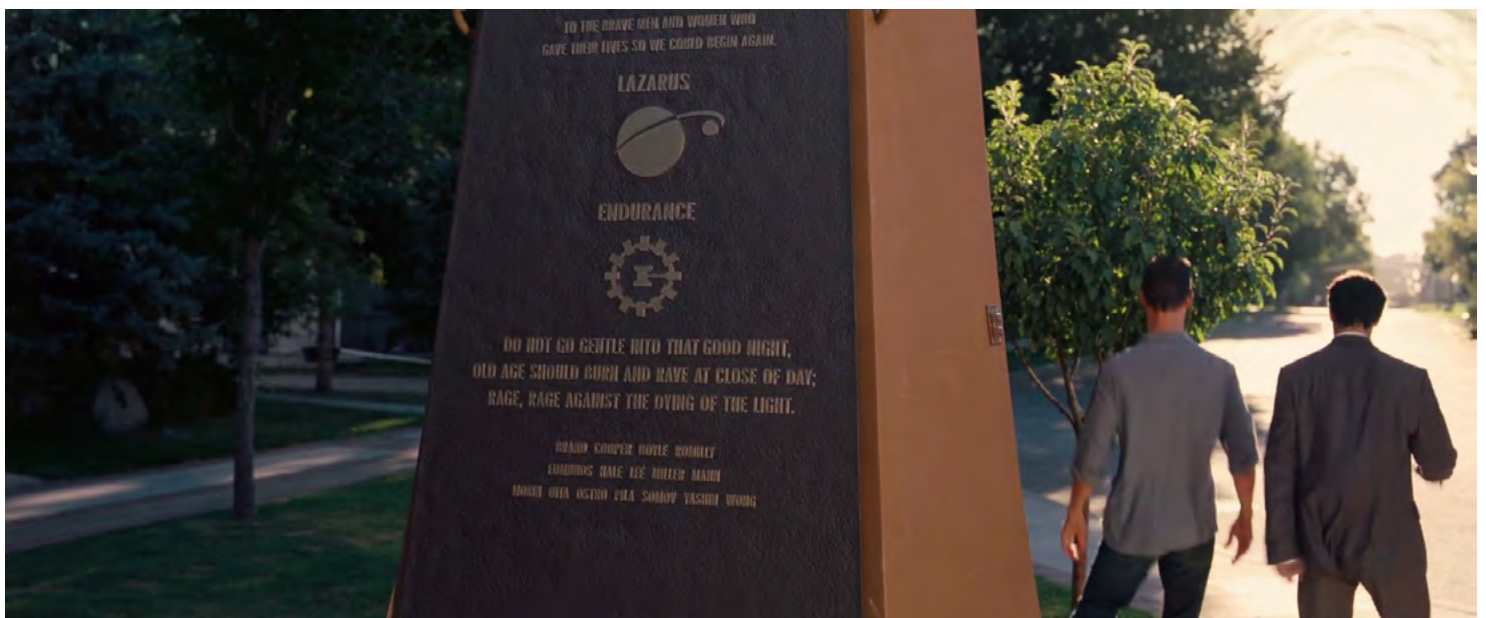
Do not go gentle into that good night,  
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;  
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

**a/** Say what the «night» and «the dying of the light» can symbolize in the film.

**b/** Say what the verbal structure «Do not go» and «rage» suggest.

**c/** Explain the goal of the repetition of this poem throughout the film.

**9/** Observe the following shot and analyze its structure, its shapes and lines. Explain why this image symbolizes the end of the narration in the movie.



### III/ ORBITING INTERSTELLAR

1/ Watch the poster of the film again, and say if your impressions about the colors, the shapes and lines have changed. Why? Why not?



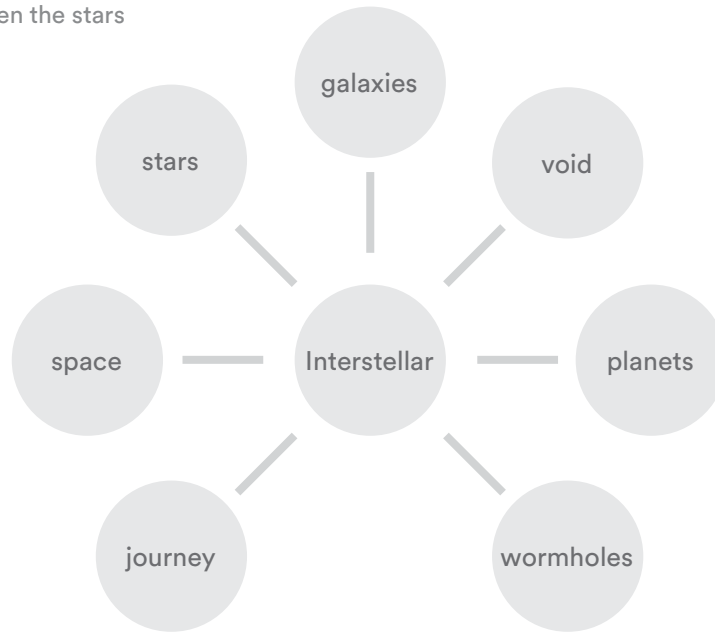
2/ Analyze Cooper's line to his daughter, «I love you forever», in the light of the whole film.



# Éléments de correction

## I- IGNITION: BEFORE WATCHING INTERSTELLAR

1/ Interstellar = a journey between the stars



2/ This film can be: a science fiction movie / a thriller/ a horror film about a travel in space, an adventure. The story can be about a man travelling to another planet.

3/- Dominating color = black representing the unknown, something unexplored, the idea of absence. It can represent space, but also the man himself, who seems lost.

- White = the circular cloud, some kind of vortex, and a light beam. White stands for the stars, hope, life. The white light seems to be coming from the man = he will bring hope.

4/a/ The line of the horizon and the line of the man are in two different directions. The man is to go beyond the surface of the Earth, in a vertical, ascending movement. The two lines cut each other, indicating division and separation between man and Earth. Yet, the crossing point of these two lines is the focal point of the poster, symbolizing that man is at the chore of the universe.

b/ The two different shapes suggest two opposite movements; the circle stands for comfort, whereas the light beam elevates straight into space, to explore the unknown.

5/ Murphy = Murphy's Law, an American aerospace engineer expressing that what can happen will happen.

Cooper = Leon Neil Cooper and his theory on the absence of magnetic field; also the Cooper Pairs: electrons which are bond together.

Amelia Brand = Amelia Earheart, an aviator who flew across the Atlantic Ocean. Brand = a word meaning a symbol marked in fire. Also Saint Amelia, the mother of five saints.

Lazarus = a man brought back to life by Jesus Christ.

Wolf Edmunds = Saint Edmund and the wolf: King Edmund of England, captured by Vikings, was asked to renounce his faith, but as he refused, he was beheaded. His head was reunited to his body by a wolf, who kept repeating "Here" to warn Edmund's followers.

Mann = human being, mankind.

6/a/ 1- "We didn't run out of planes and TV sets, we ran out of food."

2- "Murphy's Law doesn't mean that something bad will happen, it means that whatever can happen will happen."

3- "We must think not as individuals but as a species."

b/ This line proves the strength of the link uniting father and daughter, a bond which is stronger than anything.

c/ The score used in the trailer rises, building up tension. It gives an atmosphere of adventure, the sense of an impending danger. The rhythm is fast, with a quick succession of scenes and images, emphasizing the sense of emergency.

## II- LIFT OFF: WATCHING INTERSTELLAR

### A- Backbone 1: Cooper's storyline:

1/ The Earth is barren – hostile – dangerous.

2/ Dust is covering everything on the planet, visually hiding all elements and objects. It seems to annihilate all forms of life, giving an impression of suffocation. Dust symbolizes death, decay, absence, the disappearance of mankind. It can echoes the sentence used during funerals: "ashes to ashes, dust to dust". It can also be a historical and cultural reference to the Dust Bowl: a region of the USA struck by drought and dust storms in the 1930s.

3/ Cooper and his team need to travel to space, in order to contact one of the three surviving members of the Lazarus mission, who may have found a planet where humans could settle. The idea is to relocate mankind, not to find a solution to the disaster striking Earth.



# Éléments de correction

- 4/a/** Cooper needs to accomplish himself as a man, with his own identity and dreams; he cannot exist in the shadow of his children.
- b/** Parents are supposed to launch their children in life, to put them on the right trajectory, they are a source of inspiration for their children.
- c/** Parents, once they have raised their children, remain in the past, as if stuck in time and space.
- 5/** Once Cooper reaches space, the camera starts moving slowly in different directions, even upside down, not along straight lines as was the case during the scenes on Earth. These camera movements create an idea of confusion, a loss of landmarks for the characters and for the viewers. The camera takes us beyond our usual perception, it challenges our visual codes and habits. Moreover, we go from music and sound effects to silence, enhancing the idea of isolation in space.
- 6/** The spaceship Endurance is circular and rotating, and has twelve sorts of pods, which make it look like a clock. This shape suggests that space and time are deeply connected. The spaceship represents both movement and time passing.
- 7/** We hear a ticking sound effect, similar to a clock. It implies that each second counts, it underlines the irrevocable consequences of each of the character's actions and choices on this planet. It also reminds of the viewer of the importance of time passing.
- 8/a/** This succession of close-ups emphasizes the opposition between the two characters, visually showing their disagreement, their different points of view. It gives a visual representation of the choice, the dilemma Cooper and Brand are facing.
- b/** This quote indicates the real concern of the plot is not just science. We understand the survival of humanity does not only rely on science and facts, but also on emotion and love. This quote introduces a new data in the equation: love.
- 9/a/** Cooper gets into a gridiron pattern called a tesseract (= the four-dimensional analogue to the cube, a four-dimensional hypercube), which is in fact made of several occurrences of Murphy's room in different space and time. Cooper is in fact returning to his starting point and gets stuck in it. It may indicate that Cooper's journey is a quest for love. His journey into space and time brings him to his daughter.
- b/** The watch given to Murphy by Cooper stands for the feelings, the bond between father and daughter, which cannot be broken by anything. Murphy cannot leave behind something reminding her of her father. The watch connects Murphy to Cooper, as if he had left something of himself in it.
- 10/** The house is identical to Cooper's house on Earth, its shape is very straight, made of lines. However, it is integrated in a circular landscape, the one of Cooper Space Station. Cooper's journey led him to a compromise, a safe haven between space and Earth.
- 11/** Cooper has reunited with Murphy, he has fulfilled his promise to her. Murphy does not need him anymore, as she has her own family. His task is accomplished, he is no longer useful in her life. So he needs to continue his quest for love toward Dr Brand. Murphy has closed the family circle, so Cooper can continue the line of human evolution.

## B- Backbone 2: Murphy's storyline

- 1/** This old woman can be a witness, a survivor of Earth. She can even be Murphy. She is telling her memories about life on Earth to give a sense of accuracy, precision, just like in a documentary. This testimony also enables the viewers to create suspension of disbelief: the viewers accept the possibility of what they are going to see.
- 2/** determined = she is focused on her goal, she never gives up / curious = she is not afraid of the unknown, she is open-minded to new things / reckless = she is not afraid to challenge the rules and push the limits.
- 3/a/** This definition of science can be considered as ambivalent, as science is supposed to be relying on facts and tends to give rational explanations. Here, Murphy suggests science can have a part of random which must be accepted.
- b/** Murphy's ghost is the symbol of the unknown, the unexplored, things which cannot be explained by science. She wants to discover, to lift the veil over the unknown to find answers.
- 4/a/** Murphy seems to be trying to find any way to keep her father close to her. The viewer wonders about the nature of the ghost and the message, we are led to have a moment of doubt, as this message seems to be coming from emotion, not reason.
- b/** The countdown we hear when Cooper leaves his home and especially Murphy behind emphasize the pain of separation, the feeling of abandonment which cannot be avoided.
- 5/a/** The ellipsis in Murphy's storyline conveys the idea that a long time has passed. It underlines the notions of absence: Murphy has grown up without her dad, and Cooper, like the viewer, has not seen her change from childhood to adulthood.
- b/** This transition reminds the viewer of the two storylines which are followed. It indicates that life on Earth continues but at a different pace. The message bridges the time and space distance.
- 6/** Death is unavoidable, it is part of the cycle of life, it is a known fact, whereas time is relative, not predetermined. We have no way of knowing how long we will live. Time, unlike life and death, is the only unknown in the equation.
- 7/** The alternation between images of Murphy as a girl and as an adult proves to the viewer, as well as to Murphy, that all the elements are connected, forming a sort of loop, which is symbolized by the tesseract itself. Murphy comes to the realization that the answer was here from the very beginning. Time helped her reveal the answer.
- 8/** The old woman giving her testimony is in fact Murphy; we understand she is the one we saw at the very beginning of the film. It means that the narrative structure of the film is circular: we are back to the starting point of the story. We were told from the start that Murphy would be surviving and that humanity would be saved. The answer was in front of us the whole time.
- 9/** Murphy and her family, her descendants, form a circle. The character is surrounded by her loved ones, illustrating the cycle of life, However Cooper does not belong to this circle anymore.



# Éléments de correction

## C- Base pairing elements:

**1/** Murphy's room is mainly occupied by a bookshelf, with a very linear structure forming geometrical rectangular shapes. It is a very straight and rational, balanced structure, conveying the idea that it is not random. It holds center stage in the scene, so the viewer understands it is a key element in the plot.

Murphy's room is also the place where the code first appears, with more vertical lines made by dust in suspension. This image mixes a very rational system (a binary code) to a very mysterious and paranormal atmosphere.

But Murphy's room is also the place connecting her to her father. This room triggers their collaboration to solve a riddle, it witnesses their love.

**2/** Murphy's room is at the chore of the plot, it connects Cooper and Murphy's storylines. The room sheltered Murphy's childhood: it was a safe place where her dad could comfort her. The tesseract symbolizes that love between father and daughter is the answer.

**3/** In those two pictures, the bookshelf seems identical, as if frozen in time. Both characters are seen from behind, intensifying the idea of puzzlement and wondering when facing the unknown. Cooper is in light, giving him a very active aspect. In the picture with Murphy the colors are quite dull, emphasizing the idea of time gone by.

**4/** We notice the characters actually wear the same jacket, proving once again the very strong bond uniting father and daughter. It also shows Murphy needs to continue Cooper's mission down on Earth. The jacket symbolizes Cooper's legacy which Murphy literally carries on her shoulders.

**5/** Cooper is hugging Murphy before his departure into the unknown. Cooper's watch is calling the attention of the viewer, as it is the central element of this picture. Time, represented by the watch, will separate the two characters, it is against them. But their love will also go beyond time.

**6/** The two watches are side by side, like the characters themselves. The position of the different handles is absolutely identical, proving the characters are two different persons with an intense connection. Murphy's reflection is visible in her watch, whereas Cooper's is not: they already are separated by time. Yet, Murphy's question underlines this idea of separation: the two characters will, from then on, evolve in different ways, following different timelines.

**7/** These alternating scenes illustrate the survival instinct shown between the two sets of characters, as well as their diverging viewpoints on the survival of mankind. It underlines the connection between the two storylines and how the decisions taken by Cooper in space can have consequences on the fate of Murphy.

**8/a/** "Night" and "the dying of the light" can represent the idea of death, the absence of light, of life. But it can also mean the unknown, a place left unexplored, like space. These nouns may symbolize the loss of loved ones, or even the very extinction of humanity.

**b/** The use of imperative forms indicates an order, something that needs to be done. The negative form "do not go" sounds like a warning, something which must be avoided. They suggest the refusal of death, the need to struggle against it, to call into question its unavoidable nature. "Rage" has a violent connotation, proving the rejection of what is meant to be.

**c/** The repetition creates narrative coherence, it helps connect the different storylines. It illustrates the importance of choices, the need to struggle for survival, either individually or collectively.

**9/** On this picture, the foreground represents a memorial stone with Dylan Thomas' poem on it. The memorial is made of straight lines, has a vertical shape implying exploration and loss. This memorial is a landmark, a reminder of the sacrifices made. In the background, we notice a bright circular shape symbolizing a bright and hopeful future. In the middle, a path is formed by straight lines on the ground. Cooper is seen from behind, he is going beyond the memorial. He symbolizes survival, the need to go forward, the idea of a new destiny. Cooper has left behind the two space missions, represented by circular symbols, and goes straight into the future.

## III- ORBITING INTERSTELLAR

**1/** The poster, once we are familiar with the whole film, does underline the loneliness of the character, his isolation and separation from his loved ones. The poster reveals the notion of introspection: the answer to his journey was in fact in himself. The use of lines and circles shows that the movie deals with the cycle of life and the linear evolution of humanity.

**2/** This quote confirms the idea that love goes beyond anything, even time and space, as was suggested by Dr Brand. Love forms endless circles which nothing can break or erase, love is the ultimate bond between two characters, as is shown by Cooper and Murphy, but also by Amelia Brand.

## Pour aller plus loin

▶ Christopher Nolan and Kip Thorne break down the physics of *Interstellar* : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z-9tUFJGOIWA>

▶ The Hollywood Reporter's full *Interstellar* discussion : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1b1ibbFGPSE>

▶ *2001: a Space Odyssey*, Stanley Kubrick (1968)

▶ *Arrival*, Denis Villeneuve (2016)