

PASOLINI 101: An In-Depth Survey of the Filmmaker's Controversial Career

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Oppenheimer



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Oppenheimer

Produced by Emma Thomas, Charles Roven, and Christopher Nolan; directed by Christopher Nolan; screenplay by Christopher Nolan; cinematography by Hoyte van Hoytema; costume design by Ellen Mirojnick; edited by Jennifer Lame; music by Ludwig Göransson; starring Cillian Murphy, Emily Blunt, Matt Damon, Robert Downey Jr., Florence Pugh, Josh Hartnett, Casey Affleck, Rami Malek, and Kenneth Branagh. Color and B&W, 180 min., 2023. A Universal Pictures release, www.universalpictures.com.

A few generations ago, J. Robert Oppenheimer was a household name. As scientific director of the Manhattan Project, the theoretical physicist was celebrated on the cover of *Time* magazine as the “father of the atomic bomb,” and consulted in the halls of Congress and secret government committees. Less than nine years after the end of World War II, Oppenheimer’s reputation was in tatters. Brought before a special panel of the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC), he was grilled on his past associations with communists and his objections to the development of the hydrogen bomb—a weapon of potentially limitless explosive power, decried by many scientists as genocidal. In 1954, the AEC endorsed the panel’s decision not to renew Oppenheimer’s top-secret security clearance, a crushing blow to his ambitions to influence postwar U.S. nuclear policy. The AEC did not find him disloyal to the United States, let alone a Soviet agent—as the most extreme charges had maintained. Yet the AEC conveyed the impression that it had judged Oppenheimer mainly for his moral failings and unpopular policy prescriptions. In a polarized political atmosphere, not unlike the present, Oppenheimer’s defenders viewed him as a liberal martyr and victim of a McCarthyite witch-hunt; his opponents saw an overconfident egghead, soft on communism and dangerous to national security.

This is the version of the story well told in *Oppenheimer*. Written and directed by Christopher Nolan, and brilliantly filmed by longtime Nolan collaborator Hoyte van Hoytema, it works on two levels: as a psychological drama and character study of a conflicted individual and his complicated relationships, and as an historically informed morality tale. The movie features a galaxy of stars. Cillian Murphy plays Oppenheimer with eerie verisimilitude, capturing the steely blue-eyed, chain-smoking scientist’s mix of arrogance and insecurity; Emily Blunt, as his wife Kitty, is at turns coldly stolid and

excitable, ambitious for her husband, but confronted by her own demons. Matt Damon, as General Leslie Groves, military director of the Manhattan Project, strikes the right balance of grudging respect and bullying that characterizes his relationship with Oppenheimer. Other standouts include Florence Pugh as the psychiatrist Jean Tatlock, a kindred troubled soul, a known communist, and Oppenheimer’s sometime lover; and Casey Affleck as Boris Pash, the army counterintelligence officer and fierce anti-Bolshevik of Russian heritage. “This is a man who’s killed communists with his own hands,” an astonished Oppenheimer learns from Groves, in one of Nolan’s many clever bits of invented dialogue.

If *Oppenheimer* is the film’s tortured genius-hero, Lewis Strauss—in a bravura performance by Robert Downey Jr.—is the evil-genius villain. The self-made millionaire, Washington power broker, and AEC director engineers Oppenheimer’s downfall behind the scenes. The story is revealed in a fractured time sequence, with minor, but crucial roles played by Alden Ehrenreich as a Senate aide, Rami Malek as the little-known scientist who testifies against Strauss, and Olivia Thirlby, the Harvard-trained chemist and Jewish refugee from Czechoslovakia whom Oppenheimer rescues from the Manhattan Project typing pool to work on the explosives unit.

Nolan’s script hews close to the original source material—*American Prometheus*, the Pulitzer-prize winning 2005 biography by Kai Bird and Martin Sherwin. He employs a visual device to help the viewer navigate the flashbacks and flashforwards, and his editor Jennifer Lame makes it work. The film proceeds with shifts from one standpoint and time period to another, alternating color and black and white to contrast the perspectives of Oppenheimer and Strauss, and to help orient the uninitiated viewer. Piece by piece, Nolan assembles Oppenheimer’s story: from the scientist’s early days studying the new quantum physics with the greatest authorities in Europe; to his founding of the first U.S. center devoted to the new approaches at the University of California, Berkeley; through his service as leader of the super-secret project to build the bomb, with its nail-biting technical decisions and ethical quandaries; to the successful test of the Trinity prototype, and the (deliberately left unshown) dropping of the actual bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Meanwhile, questions arise about his communist friends and relatives, his own political activity in union organizing, and his support for the loyalist cause in the Spanish Civil War. As the FBI taps his telephone and agents trail his every move, suspicions linger about Oppenheimer’s own membership in a secret communist cell.

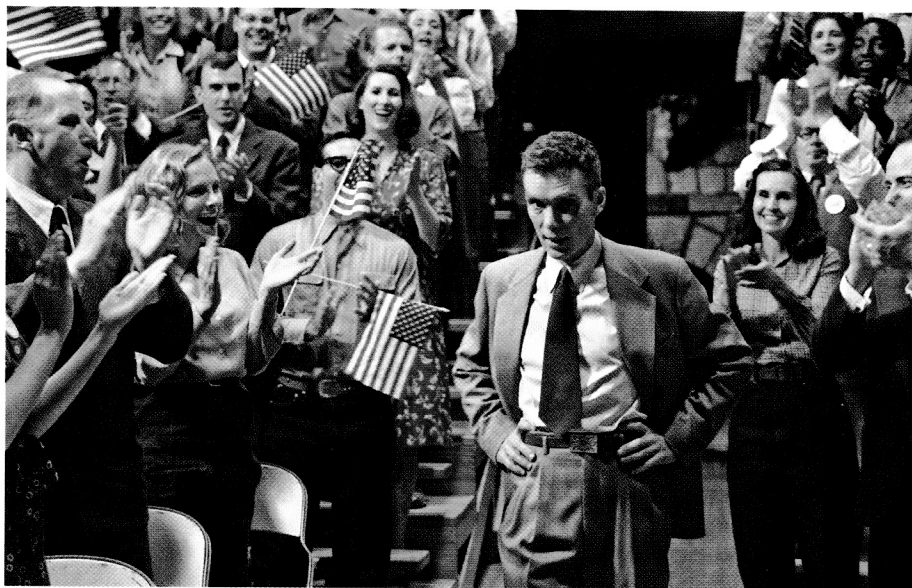


In *Oppenheimer*, the scientists’s relationship with Gen. Groves (Matt Damon) was fraught, but respectful, whereas the suspicious Col. Nichols (Dane DeHaan) helped engineer his downfall in 1954.

Despite the occasional dismissal of Nolan's film as a mere History Channel documentary, the aesthetic achievements of *Oppenheimer* should not be gainsaid. Consider cinematography. Van Hoytema, who served as director of photography for other Nolan films—*Interstellar* (2014), *Dunkirk* (2017), and *Tenet* (2020)—relied this time on large-format cameras, Panavision® 65mm and IMAX® 65mm. With so much of the film shot on location in the mountains and deserts of New Mexico, the large format was especially suitable. It is “used to present vistas and convey grandeur,” van Hoytema explained. “But from the very beginning, I have always been curious to discover if it can be just as powerful when used for close-ups. Can we shoot psychology? Can we make this an intimate medium?” Indeed, the format works well for interiors and close-ups, to highlight the subtle changes of facial expression in Murphy and Downey and the other cast members at the top of their game. With acting of such quality, the close-ups really matter. As van Hoytema suggests, *Oppenheimer* is part “psychological thriller; it’s reliant on the faces of its characters.” And although the cinematographer intimated in an interview with National Public Radio that he really wants us all to find the nearest IMAX cinema to see the movie in all its glory, *Oppenheimer* acquits itself well on any big screen.

One of the climactic moments of the film is the successful test of the first atomic bomb at Alamogordo, New Mexico. Nolan creates a lot of suspense for the Trinity test. Some thirty seconds of the countdown are in real time—and, even more affecting, the time between the blindingly bright flash of the bomb and the explosive thunder that followed is close to what it really was: more than a minute and a half. In between, just silence.

Overall, the movie could have benefited from more such silences. The acting is so good in this movie, the dialogue so terse and restrained (and sometimes quiet), and the historical allusions so fleeting, that it is a shame to have them overwhelmed by sound. Ludwig Göransson's original score begins with a single violin and then gradually adds more instruments, from a quartet to an octet to a full orchestra of strings, brass, percussion, and even a synthesizer. But he frequently employs the same technique—a steadily building crescendo—for a range of scenes, from the banal to the profound, no matter how they are shot. The music swells when Oppenheimer first kisses Kitty; and when he offers an insight in a Berkeley seminar room; it swells when he imagines flying in an airplane with a supersonic rocket blasting past him. When his friend I. I. Rabi—played with avuncular authenticity by David Krumholtz—persuades Oppenheimer to reject Groves's demand that the scientists enlist in the army, we see “Oppie” abandon his bespoke officer's jacket and return to his usual attire. The camera lingers on his porkpie hat and



In *Oppenheimer*, after the bombs have dropped, they're ready for a victory party at Los Alamos, but the director of the top-secret Manhattan Project has begun to show signs of remorse.

pipe...and the music swells into a crescendo. The ultimate effect feels manipulative, and it sometimes undercuts Nolan's cinematography. To represent the young Robert's arrival in Europe for his troubled sojourn as a physics graduate student, for example, Nolan eschews convention. Rather than a standard establishing shot, he offers a quick montage of images—the Alps, a Picasso painting, a copy of T. S. Elliot's *The Waste Land*. Yet, the soundtrack gives us the usual swelling crescendo, distracting from the innovative visual effect.

What of the history? This is not just a “psychological thriller,” after all. Nolan's compelling screenplay distills the best lines from *American Prometheus*, and adds some gems of his own. When Ernest Lawrence (Josh Hartnett), Berkeley's top experimental physicist, tries to explain that Oppenheimer needs to limit his political activism if he wants to be included in the secret bomb project, he tells him, “you're not just self-important, you're *actually* important.” Nolan does introduce a few anachronistic expressions: “I can relate to that,” says Oppenheimer. “Have a great day!” Werner Heisenberg (Matthias Schweighöfer) calls out as he ends a physics lecture. And two separate characters reply, in comic-book fashion, “Ouch!” when they are criticized or contradicted. Still, the script conveys a complicated, multidimensional story through succinct and pithy dialogue.

Understandably, Nolan's story sometimes diverges from the actual history. The writer-director invents a postwar scene between Oppenheimer and Albert Einstein, as they talk together by the edge of a pond at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton. Nolan gives us several long shots of the same scene, viewed through Strauss's eyes, and without letting us or him hear their conversation. As a member of the board of trustees who had offered Oppenheimer the

job as Institute director, Strauss always felt that the physicist showed insufficient gratitude and was perhaps trying to turn Einstein against him. The effect of the scene contrived by Nolan is to heighten the suspicions of the overly sensitive Strauss. Sticklers for historical accuracy should forgive such inventions, as they often contribute to the film's artistry.

One device is particularly effective. The key limitation on the ability to build the atomic bomb before Germany could do it was production of fissionable material. In explaining this constraint to the scientists, Oppenheimer's assistant Robert Serber (Michael Angarano) displays two glass vessels—a fishbowl and a wine goblet—and he drops a few marbles at a time into each one to convey the slow production of Uranium-235 and Plutonium, respectively. The Germans—who did not give priority to developing atomic weapons during the war—faced the same constraint. They surrendered in May 1945 before Oppenheimer and his crew had produced a bomb.

With the defeat of Nazi Germany, the original rationale for the Manhattan Project—the threat of a German atomic bomb—became irrelevant. Yet only a single scientist left the program. For his principled decision, Joseph Rotblat, a Jewish refugee from Poland, faced accusations of espionage. He went on to found the Pugwash movement of scientists, launched with a manifesto drafted by Bertrand Russell and signed by Albert Einstein as his last public act before he died. Pugwash later won the Nobel Peace Prize for its efforts to end the nuclear arms race and the Cold War. Given the many side themes pursued by Nolan, it's a shame that he missed Rotblat. The film does show other project scientists promoting a petition to avoid dropping the bombs on Japan, without an ultimatum or demonstration shot. Oppenheimer reacts with ambivalence at best, and the viewers are drawn to his

side. We see Leo Szilard (Máté Haumann), for example, only through Oppenheimer's lens—as some kind of crank, rather than as a moral compass for the atomic scientists.

Was it necessary to drop atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki to induce Japanese surrender? *Oppenheimer's* Oppenheimer tells his colleagues yes. History's Oppenheimer soon found out otherwise. The claim that the atomic bombs saved a million American soldiers' lives by ending the war quickly was a postwar invention to justify their use. Most historians agree that the Soviet entry into the war in August played more of a role in shocking the Japanese into giving up than the atomic bombings did. Only after the war, in Nolan's rendering, did Oppenheimer admit to Edward Teller (Benny Safdie) that "we bombed an enemy that was essentially defeated."

One drawback to focusing so much on Strauss as the wrecker of Oppenheimer's reputation is that it takes some of the responsibility off of Teller. His treacherous behavior enraged Kitty, as Blunt effectively shows. But Teller also alienated much of the Los Alamos cohort of scientists, including his former friend Hans Bethe (Gustaf Skarsgård), who went on to oppose decades of Teller's hawkish policies on a range of issues from the "neutron bomb" to the "Star Wars" ballistic-missile defense system. Nolan does offer a hint at Teller's mentality in the pivotal scene of the successful Trinity blast. Most of the other scientists, in dark glasses or behind protective screens, look aghast or awe-struck. Teller, instead, curls his lips into the slightest smile—an unmistakably Strange-lovian one.

President Harry Truman (Gary Oldman) backed the proposals of Teller, Lawrence, and Strauss to build the genocidal H-bomb. Oppenheimer was skeptical on moral and technical grounds, but eager to maintain his privileged position as a government adviser. He offered alternative uses for atomic weapons—for "tactical" deployment on the battlefield in Korea, where war was raging since June 1950, and in Europe, where many expected "another Korea," with a Soviet invasion across the inter-German border. Oppenheimer advised the AEC through three major expansions of fissile-material production until there was enough for thousands of H-bombs and tactical nuclear weapons as well. The scientist promoted so many new nuclear weapons that, as a scene from the movie shows, an exasperated Rabi exclaimed to the security-clearance board, "What more do you want? Mermaids?"

Before "blockbuster" came to characterize Hollywood movies, the term referred to the bombs of World War II that could literally destroy a city block. The blockbuster *Oppenheimer* offers new generations of moviegoers a compelling introduction to the tragic figure who made such weapons pale by comparison to the planet-destroying arsenals that are his legacy.—**Matthew Evangelista**

Barbie

Produced by Tom Ackerly, Robbie Brenner, David Heyman, and Margot Robbie; directed by Greta Gerwig; screenplay by Greta Gerwig and Noah Baumbach; cinematography by Rodrigo Prieto; edited by Nick Houy; music by Mark Ronson and Andrew Wyatt; production design by Sarah Greenwood; set decoration by Katie Spencer; costumes by Jacqueline Durran; starring Margot Robbie, Ryan Gosling, Kate McKinnon, Michael Cera, America Ferrara, Arianna Greenblatt, Issa Rae, Will Ferrell, Helen Mirren, and Rhea Perlman. Color, 114 min. 2023. A Warner Bros. production, www.warnerbros.com.

I'm too old to have played with Barbie. I had a rubbery Betsy Wetsy doll who, if fed a tiny bottle of water, would pee out of a hole in her bum, at which point you got to "diaper" her—an activity that quickly lost its luster as I returned my attention to *Space Patrol* and *Hopalong Cassidy*.

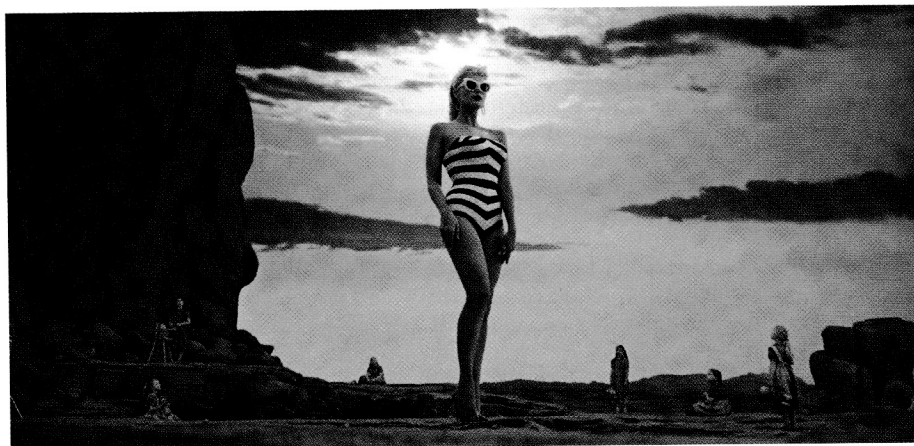
Consequently, I approached *Barbie* with neither nostalgia nor agenda. I was skeptical about Gerwig's decision to use her talents in the service of rebranding a retro toy—a venture whose \$150 million marketing budget was financed by that toy's manufacturer. But I admired *Ladybird* (2017) and had some hope that Gerwig would find a way to turn her subject on its head and create something fresh and dissident. She did not.

I tend to write about films I admire in some way. But when a film I think is a crock is overpraised or given outsized attention, I am ready to rumble. Think *Crash* (1996) or *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (2022)—a film I would have trashed except that the idea of watching it for a second time was unbearable. But *Barbie* isn't a true stink bomb. It is a mildly amusing "feel-good" movie that didn't make me feel good. I was troubled by its reception, and the interpretation by both audiences and some critics of its cultural resonance. Most disturbing to me were Gerwig's delusions about what she thought she had wrought.

In her *New York Times* review of *Barbie*, Manohla Dargis asks the salient question: "Can a doll with an ingratiating smile, impossible curves, and boobs ready for liftoff be a feminist icon? That's the question that swirls through Greta Gerwig's *Barbie*." The answer is no. Gerwig and her partner Noah Baumbach are smart people. But they apparently are not smart enough to turn shit into Shinola. (I know the adage is "Know shit from Shinola." But the misuse here is apt.) And why would they even want to do that? That is the question that nagged me as I watched this derivative, unsubversive, nonempowering, live-action fantasy about a bimboish doll. *The New Yorker's* Richard Brody has offered his own thumpingly hyperbolic answer to the question of *why* Barbie when he wrote, "*Barbie* is about the intellectual demand and emotional urgency of making preexisting subjects one's own, and it advocates for imaginative infidelity, the radical off-label manipulation of existing intellectual property." Huh? I'm all for "imaginative infidelity," but I don't think Gerwig's very on-label *Barbie* delivers anything remotely like that. For me "imaginative infidelity" is *Fur* (2006), *I'm Not There* (2006), or *Mr. Turner* (2014).

The actual answer to the question of why Gerwig chose to make this film is not that the idea of creating a "radical off-label imagination" offered a cool challenge. The answer, obviously, is money. And *Barbie's* original sin is Gerwig's collaboration with Mattel, which compromises the film from the get-go and ensures that nothing genuinely critical or insubordinate can take place during its bloated one-hour-and-fifty-four-minute duration.

Still, Gerwig has dispensed her filthy lucre wisely by gathering a brilliant creative team to make a visually arresting film. Cinematographer Rodrigo Prieto magically backlights Barbieland, suffusing the screen with radiant sunlight by day and a soft eggy moonlight by night. He also adeptly manages the shift to the Real World with its scattershot lighting and welcome absence of pinkness. Production designer Sarah Greenwood and set decorator Katie Spencer have



In a clever take-off on Kubrick's *2001* that opens *Barbie*, an Amazonian Barbie makes her first appearance on earth as a gaggle of little girls, clutching their baby dolls, look on in awe.