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“Oppenheimer” Review: The man who stole fire from the gods and gave it to humanity

On July 21st, 2023, *Oppenheimer* soared in theatres worldwide. The film’s masterful directing by Christopher Nolan, special effects and editing, acting by Cillian Murphy, cinematography by Hoyte van Hoytema, and composing by Ludwig Göransson make the film a recipient of seven Oscar awards out of its thirteen nominations. The directing of Christopher Nolan set a new standard for the genre of biopics, as not only did *Oppenheimer* surpass *Bohemian Rhapsody* as the highest-ever grossing biopic (over 912 million worldwide), but it proved to the world that if the quality is there, a three-hour runtime is still feasible for viewers to sit down through. Although much of the public first heard about *Oppenheimer* because of the same-day release of Greta Gerwig’s *Barbie*, Nolan’s movie proved to withstand its ingenuity and impact beyond the “Barbenheimer” Tiktok trend. Not only did Nolan find innovative ways to avoid the usage of computer-generated imaging (CGI), but he also managed to find the preciseness and suspense to voice the story of who he deems to be the most important man ever to live, J. Robert Oppenheimer.

The primary source for the film is *American Prometheus: The Triumph and Tragedy of J. Robert Oppenheimer*, published by Kai Bird and Martin J. Sherwin in 2005, a book introduced to Nolan during the shoot of his previous film “*Tenet*.” After reading the story of J. Robert Oppenheimer and how he assembled the team of scientists responsible for developing the world’s first nuclear weapon, he adapted it into a screenplay with Cillian Murphy as J. Robert Oppenheimer, Robert Downey Jr. as Lewis Strauss, Emily Blunt as Kitty Oppenheimer, Matt Damon as General Leslie Groves, Florence Pugh as Jean Tatlock, among other A-list actors. The narrative of the movie follows a very “Nolanesque” zig-zagged timeline where he jumps back and forth between the “fission” and “fusion” timelines. The fission timeline is all filmed in color and follows most of Oppenheimer’s life from first-person discourse. The fusion timeline is filmed in black and white and follows Lewis Strauss’ cabinet confirmation. What’s fascinating about Nolan’s non-linear narrative is that he finds a way for both timelines to engage in discourse, leading to perhaps the movie's most crucial scene: Oppenheimer’s conversation with

Albert Einstein in 1933. It's in this scene where Oppenheimer's guilt for contributing to the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings climaxes, but also where Lewis Strauss witnesses the Oppenheimer and Einstein conversation from a distance and speculates that they are bad-mouthing him. Although this scene is the beginning of the fusion timeline, Nolan maintains the film's coherence by building tension so that this scene links the timelines and ends the movie.

Although one might think that the movie is a simple retelling of how the U.S. assembled the Manhattan Project and how the scientists working on the project developed the first atomic bombs to exist, Nolan doesn't stop there. He dedicates the entire third act of the movie to conveying the psychological effect the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings had on the people involved in developing it. Following Oppenheimer's victory speech, we see the polarizing effect winning WWII had on different people. From a couple passionately making out, symbolizing the forthcoming of the baby boomers (what many people consider to be America's most prosperous time), to then seeing one of Oppenheimer's scientists throwing up out of anxiety and remorse for what they've done, Nolan gives us a unique insight on the psyche of the Los Alamos scientists. Above the acting of all stands Cillian Murphy's wide-eyed signature facial expression. One can almost feel his guilt by just looking at his crystal blue eyes, for which Christopher Nolan uses close-up shots to maximize the effect of remorse by combining his masterful directing with Murphy's acting.

A factor worth dedicating an entire paragraph to in this review is the practical effects Nolan uses to avoid using CGI. Just ten minutes into the movie, we can already see the ingenuity of his special effects team. To represent the space monster Oppenheimer encounters in his nightmares as a student in Cambridge, they used metallic balloons and marbles rolling on a reflective tarp to imitate space-like features and depth. Although avoiding CGI is another trademark of Nolan's films, such as when he blew up a 747 aircraft for Tenet and burned 500 acres of corn for Interstellar, the practical effects used in Oppenheimer go beyond real physical objects on the screen. Nolan gives us an insight into the abstract thoughts and visions that wandered Oppenheimer's mind; we see the representation of quantum equations, his fears, and his ideas, all to give a non-abstract representation of events a viewer would otherwise never experience.

Accompanying most of the movie is the Oscar-winning score of the Swedish composer Ludwig Göransson. Perfection falls short of the impeccable work he did for this film, such as his violin use to build tension and suspense. In multiple scenes, the music score elevates the quality of the narrative, such as when Colonel Pash interrogates Oppenheimer and the creepy-invasive violin lingers, or when Kitty shows up to testify in favor of her husband, Robert Oppenheimer, and the slow piano evokes the sentimentality of their relationship; nonetheless, the montage of young Oppenheimer at the University of Göttingen while “Can You Hear the Music” plays is without a doubt the most iconic use of the score in the film. The composition utilizes the violin in a fast-paced manner to resemble what Oppenheimer was going through at the time. Here, he is learning quantum theory, one of the cannon events that led him to gain the theoretical knowledge to direct the "laboratory of clandestine weapons" at Los Alamos, reading T.S Eliot's *Wasteland*, looking at Picasso paintings, and shattering glasses in his room as means of finding a physical representation of the abstract ideas he was learning at this doctoral program. Until Dunkirk in 2017, Hans Zimmer was Nolan's go-to composer for all his movies. However, since making Tenet, and now Oppenheimer, it is no surprise that Christopher Nolan has started a creative relationship with the two-time Oscar winner Ludwig Göransson, the Swedish guitarist whose beginnings are rooted in YouTube tutorials back in 2014.

The best way to watch the film is at an IMAX theatre with a 70mm projector. The 70mm IMAX at the Universal City AMC is the best place to watch this masterpiece. Although the TCL Chinese Theatre also has a 70mm IMAX, the seating arrangement falls short of the immersive effect Universal City's AMC has. Here, the seating wraps itself around the screen in a manner that traps the sound and screen inside a tight space filled by viewers. Unfortunately, the TCL Chinese Theatre's outdated layout doesn't keep up with the impact IMAX technology intends to have on the viewer. Between the release of the movie (July 21st, 2023) and October of the same year, I had the privilege of witnessing Nolan's film eight times in theatres. Six of those times were at Universal City's 70mm IMAX. Beyond the ingenuity and realness of the special effects, I couldn't help but rewatch this film repeatedly because of its cinematography, which unsurprisingly won an Academy Award. Hoyte van Hoytema, another long-time ally of Nolan (Nolan and Hoytema have been working together since the making of Interstellar in 2014), is the master behind making Oppenheimer look the way it does. To film their black and white scenes, Nolan and Hoytema had to make a special request to Kodak so that they could produce 70mm

black and white tape, a format never before seen. If any of you reading didn't watch this film on 70mm IMAX, you shall not worry. AMC will most likely re-release the film for its fifth anniversary. Only three and a half years to go!

Although I'm a fan of rewatching films again and again, and the puzzle-like resemblance of a film might not bother me one bit, I do understand if a lot of viewers might not enjoy Nolan's non-linear way of telling this story. It requires multiple viewings to see all the details he incorporates into his film, and for a viewer with no prior knowledge of the Manhattan Project, it might be hard to follow the plot. With a science fiction movie like Tenet or Interstellar, such a way of telling a story might work and even aid the genre's complexity; however, it's a valid expectation to want a straightforward re-telling of a non-fictional story.

It's no surprise that Oppenheimer "swept" the 2024 Oscars. The film assembled Hollywood's best cinematographer, composer, director, and actors. Although this doesn't always mean guaranteed success, the team delivered a masterpiece. The story of Prometheus has transcended into a film adaptation of J. Robert Oppenheimer, the man who stole fire from the gods and gave it to humanity.