

Why has *Oppenheimer* reached such a large global audience?

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Oppenheimer, the film biography of J. Robert Oppenheimer, physicist and “father of the atomic bomb,” written, directed and co-produced by Christopher Nolan, has struck an obvious chord with audiences around the world.

The film has met with widespread critical honors, having received some 377 nominations for prizes worldwide. Most recently, at the Screen Actors Guild awards ceremony in Los Angeles on February 24, *Oppenheimer* earned four major awards (the event only considers acting performances). Nolan’s film is nominated for 13 Academy Awards, and is expected to win in a number of categories at the upcoming event March 10.

The notice the film has received is genuinely deserved. *Oppenheimer* is a work that bears re-viewing, and the second or third viewing brings out elements that one has previously missed. It has a powerful, multi-layered performance by Cillian Murphy as Oppenheimer, an extremely complicated personality, and important performances by Robert Downey, Jr., Florence Pugh, David Krumholtz, Tom Conti, Benny Safdie, Gary Oldman, Kenneth Branagh and others, several of them in small roles.

The drama has various fascinating and pertinent elements. *Oppenheimer* manages to examine a wide range of issues—the development of the nuclear bomb, various debates in theoretical physics, the Cold War and McCarthyism, and more. It presents Albert Einstein (Conti) not merely as a brilliant scientist but as a profound social thinker, Edward Teller (Safdie) as an unpleasant, ambitious opportunist, and Harry Truman (Oldman) as the wretched, criminal figure he was.

Oppenheimer depicts the manner in which the American establishment persuaded or cajoled leading scientists, many of them Jewish and left-wing and often politically naïve, to work on the atomic bomb on the basis of their deep hatred of Hitler and fear that the Nazis would develop the terrible weapon first. Here the Stalinized Communist Party, falsifying the nature of the second imperialist world war and the Roosevelt-Truman administration, played such a devastating role, disorienting the physicists along with many others, leaving them utterly unprepared for the witch-hunts and repression to come.

Even then, numerous figures refused to join the Manhattan Project or criticized it. Nolan’s film offers a relatively nuanced picture of the numerous conflicts and contradictions. In his efforts to convince one scientist to participate, Oppenheimer asserts, “So you’re a fellow traveler [of the Communist Party], so what? This is a national emergency. I’ve got some skeletons, and they’ve put me in charge. They need us.” And the other replies prophetically, “Until they don’t.” Confronted with Oppenheimer in full military regalia, fellow physicist Isidor Rabi (a Nobel Prize winner in 1944, played by Krumholtz) tells him, “Take off that ridiculous uniform—you’re a scientist.”

Oppenheimer deals meaningfully with these remarkable people, many of them torn by conflicting impulses, its lead character in particular. Following the August 6, 1945 bombing of Hiroshima, Oppenheimer addresses a cheering crowd of scientists in these words: “The world will

remember this day. It’s too early to determine what the results of the bombing are ... But I’m sure the Japanese didn’t like it.” Murphy is able to communicate Oppenheimer’s own awareness of the horrifying callousness of his comment, as the screenplay continues (written in the first person), “I see FLESH RIPPED FROM THE SMILING YOUNG FACES... I see PLASMA ROILING and the DEVIL’S CLAW reach into the night sky... I see piles of ASHES where the young crowd was cheering.”

The story should be an object lesson today for those choosing to believe the lies about America’s “democratic” intentions in regard to Ukraine or Gaza. Oppenheimer and the others fell obediently into line, convincing themselves of the official story. American imperialism manipulated them and subsequently, in many cases, disposed of them, often harshly. As the military packs up the bomb for use in Hiroshima and Oppenheimer offers practical advice, an Air Force officer, speaking, in effect, for the entire ruling elite, informs him, “With respect, Dr. Oppenheimer. We’ll take it from here.” Indeed...

Nolan and his colleagues treat their audience sincerely, arranging issues and arguments in an accessible manner, without pandering or vulgarizing, and people have responded with interest and support.

Oppenheimer has taken in some \$960,000,000 at the international box office. It is possible, with an opening in Japan scheduled for March—a controversial event—the film may surpass the one-billion-dollar mark.

How many people have seen *Oppenheimer*? It is difficult to arrive at a precise figure. The American film industry in particular is only interested in “gross revenue.” With \$330,000,000 taken in US ticket sales, and an average movie ticket price of \$10, one comes up with the very rough estimate of 30–40 million audience members.

Globally, ticket prices average \$5 or so, but they vary so widely that the figure is not very helpful (with a much higher cost in Western Europe and Japan). About certain countries one can be more precise. In France, for example, figures released by the National Cinema Center at the beginning of the new year showed that *Oppenheimer* was the fifth-most successful film in the country, with 4.39 million individual admissions. The Federal Film Board (FFA) reports that the film was the fourth most popular in Germany last year, with 4.1 million tickets sold.

In the UK, the film’s gross revenue was \$74,872,624 and ticket prices averaged US\$10.04 last year, for an attendance of approximately 7.45 million people. In Italy, *Oppenheimer* “secured over 70 percent of market share” during its first five days in cinemas, “and recorded the highest-ever opening weekend in the territory for IMAX screenings.” (*Collider*) More than two million Australians have watched the film, a figure apparently matched in South Korea. According to the *Korea Times* in August, “*Oppenheimer* topped the local box office for five consecutive days, selling over 1.5 million tickets.” If this writer’s calculations are accurate, some five million spectators have attended showings of *Oppenheimer* in Mexico.

The number of Chinese viewers has probably surpassed 10 million, and

perhaps far surpassed that figure. The *Hollywood Reporter* noted in September that “Despite its long runtime and weighty historical subject matter—which many analysts expected would be a drag in China—*Oppenheimer* has been boosted by a rave local reception. On the influential fan platform Douban, it has received nearly half a million reviews averaging 8.8, one of the highest scores of any Hollywood film of recent memory. On Maoyan and Alibaba’s Tao Piao Piao ticket services, it averages 9.4 and 9.6, respectively.” Large numbers have also watched *Oppenheimer* in India, Brazil, Spain, the Netherlands, Saudi Arabia, Poland and Sweden.

In addition, given present-day realities, millions of people internationally have likely seen the film in “pirated” versions, and millions more now through streaming platforms.

Making use of the most conservative estimates, well over 100 million people have seen Nolan’s film, an intense and compressed work dealing with world-historical events, in half a year.

The reference above, about the response to the film in China having confounded the “expectations” of analysts, holds good everywhere. In the US, above all, empty-headed commentators continue to express astonishment. The Associated Press reported, no doubt accurately if crudely, that “no one in the industry expected that a long, talky, R-rated drama released at the height of the summer movie season would earn over \$900 million at the box office.” *Variety*, for its part, observed that the film’s “numbers” were “more or less unheard of for an incredibly dense, three-hour, R-rated historical drama.”

The Motion Picture Association in the US, revealing all we need to know about its outlook, described *Oppenheimer*’s box office “haul” as “staggering” for a film “about such a complicated figure that includes no superheroes.” Unable to suppress its surprise, the Association went on to remark that a “long, oft-technical, complicated movie about a historic figure many people knew little about is *not* supposed to be the type of movie that enchants audiences all over the globe.”

Oppenheimer is now, according to Box Office Mojo, at number 62 on the list of “top lifetime grosses” worldwide. To be blunt, it is the only substantial film for adults among the first 100 films ranked, the others *all* being either comic book adaptations, children’s movies, James Cameron’s miserable efforts (*Titanic*, *Avatar*, etc.) and the like. Indeed, one has to dive deep into the list to find, for example, *Rain Man* at 428, *Schindler’s List* at 494, *Green Book* at 496, *Lincoln* at 599, *The Truman Show* at 631. Rising ticket prices over time cloud the picture somewhat, but *Oppenheimer*’s accomplishment remains significant.

Why has Nolan’s film resonated so strongly with so many people regardless of geography?

A second viewing confirms that *Oppenheimer* stands out, first of all, for its complexity and challenging character, and its appeal to the viewer’s mental powers, under conditions where film production has become increasingly dominated by noisy, empty blockbusters that insult or numb the intelligence. Its success demonstrates once again there is a genuine, abiding, *growing* hunger for more substantial film work.

Nolan’s film treats political life in a convincing and objective manner, both through its scathing portrait of figures such as Truman, Lewis Strauss (Downey) and a collection of military and governmental McCarthyite thugs worthy of an authoritarian dictatorship, and its sympathetic gaze at left-wing intellectual life in the US in the 1930s. Some of the most compelling, intimate scenes take place there. Alex Wellerstein, a science historian specializing in the history of nuclear weapons at the Stevens Institute of Technology in Hoboken, New Jersey, pointed out to *Time* magazine that every person in *Oppenheimer*’s “close circle is or was at one point either a member of the Communist Party or very close, and he was probably very close himself.” Or, as one character in the film observes, *Oppenheimer*’s security file revealed the existence of “his Communist brother, sister-in-law, fiancée, best friend, wife.”

It never occurs to any of the pundits that the arguments offered for *Oppenheimer*’s anticipated *lack* of broad success—for example, according to one startled critic, “it’s a biopic about a scientist, a morality tale about the creation of the atom bomb, and a red scare courtroom drama” (AV Club)—are *precisely* what has attracted a wide audience: above all, in other words, the seriousness of the film’s themes and historical setting, and the seriousness of its presentation.

As the WSWS argued in an initial review last July, *Oppenheimer* is an “appropriately disturbing film about nuclear weapons and nuclear war. It is intended to leave viewers shaken, and it succeeds in that.” At a time when—with criminal recklessness—the “Biden administration and its NATO allies continue to blithely insist they will not be ‘deterred’ by the threat of nuclear conflict” with Russia in particular, that Nolan’s film “has gained a wide audience speaks to a different sentiment in the general population, one deeply appalled by the possibility of the use of atomic bombs.”

In interviews, Nolan (born 1970) has disclosed that such concerns have been with him for decades. He grew up in Britain in the 1980s, “a time of great fear of nuclear weapons,” he told *Deadline* in an interview. “It was like growing up in the ’60s, with the Cuban missile crisis.” Nolan went on. “The ’80s were a very similar thing. There were protests, and there was a lot in the pop culture about nuclear weapons. But it was Sting’s song ‘Russians’ [1985] where I first heard *Oppenheimer*’s name, and there was this very palpable fear of nuclear Armageddon.”

In an intriguing conversation with John Mecklin, editor-in-chief of the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, prior to the film’s release, Nolan was quite specific, insisting that “our intention with the film—whatever world it was coming out into—absolutely part of the intention of the film is to reiterate the unique and extraordinary danger of nuclear weapons. That’s something we should all be thinking about all the time and care about very, very deeply. But obviously, it’s extraordinarily troubling that the geopolitical situation would have deteriorated once again to the extent that it’s being talked about in the news.”

The writer-director decried a situation in which government and military officials “start to see them [nuclear weapons] as more ordinary armaments ... You’re normalizing killing tens of thousands of people. You’re creating moral equivalences, false equivalences with other types of conflict, et cetera, et cetera.” He referred to army spokesmen who “start talking about tactical nukes—that’s the conversation that I now am most afraid of, because I hear that from both sides of the political spectrum, not just from [Russian president Vladimir] Putin. I feel we’re in a world now where people are starting to once again talk about those things as some kind of acceptable possibility for our world.”

Nolan suggested nuclear Armageddon was unlikely to occur through “some Dr. Strangelove-type scenario with bombers getting the wrong signal.” It was far more probable, he said, “to be the normalizing of atomic weapons at the beginning, the use of tactical nukes leading to larger- and larger-scale conflict that will ultimately destroy the planet.” He came away from making *Oppenheimer*, the filmmaker asserted, “with a different understanding, a different set of fears that ultimately are founded on the same ultimate fear, which is that the world is going to be destroyed by these things.”

Time, in its piece on Nolan, remarked that “*Oppenheimer*’s little Hiroshima bomb had an explosive power of 15 kilotons—or 15 thousand tons of TNT. A single, modern-day U.S. Trident II missile can carry up to 12 nuclear warheads, packing 475 kilotons of punch each.” In other words, *each* such missile (of which there are hundreds in existence) contains more than 380 times the destructive power of the bomb that demolished a major city and killed some 100,000 people.

The filmmaker has taken his pressing concerns, ones that affect humanity as a whole, and acted on them conscientiously and rigorously. A major film is one of the most elaborate, involved artistic undertakings

imaginable, with a tremendous number of moving parts. The writer-director has concentrated his attention on this particular theme, and coordinated the efforts and skills of hundreds of collaborators in the same direction, bringing to bear a host of technologies, in such a fashion that the viewer relives or reworks this same problem, this complex of moods and ideas about historical events and about the present. Nolan's film effectively communicates a sense of urgency because the filmmakers have found a means of materializing their own urgency in the form of a patient, carefully constructed artistic work.

Oppenheimer sets about addressing historical questions for which vast numbers of people, whether they are fully aware of it or not, urgently need answers: How has humanity arrived at its present dangerous, threatening condition? What's to be done about it? Moreover, it does so not as a lecture or tract, but as an absorbingly human, many-sided drama. Even disagreement with Nolan's too apologetic, accepting view of Robert Oppenheimer's role and legacy ("he was definitely a hero" and the scientists on the Manhattan Project "had to do what they had to do") does nothing to take away from Murphy's subtle, extraordinarily sincere performance and, as noted, the performances of many of the others.

The repulsive nature of contemporary bourgeois politics, the vast moral and intellectual void it represents, also helps produce an atmosphere receptive to a work like *Oppenheimer*. The leading political figures in country after country are an assortment of corrupt corporate shills, fascist thugs and warmongers, the dominant parties are generally despised, the authorized sources of information become seen to be as little more than lying extensions of the state. It is unsurprising that millions will look in another direction, perhaps naively and even credulously, to artists for an honest appraisal of life. "Art," Trotsky wrote in *Culture and Socialism*, "is one of the forms through which man finds an orientation in the world." When so little rational orientation is forthcoming from official sources, the filmmaker may take on an outsized importance.

Beyond that, however, one might also argue that *Oppenheimer* has drawn forth a strong response not simply because of the immediate conjuncture. There is something here of an cumulative effect, which bursts forth "unexpectedly" and "astonishingly" only in the mind of the philistine. Masses of people have undergone traumatic experiences in recent decades, or witnessed them. War has been a constant. Upheaval, disruptions, instigated directly or indirectly by the great powers, have occurred in every corner of the globe. Rough estimates place the number of forcibly displaced and stateless persons at 130 million in 2024, in 133 countries and territories and more than 500 locations.

Nearly everyone on the planet becomes involved. Imperialism is agitating, politicizing and radicalizing great numbers of people, forcing them to think about very basic questions. These are not isolated episodes, small clouds in an otherwise sunny sky, but persistent, recurring, increasingly violent. Decades of conflict and disequilibrium, and now the emergence of a third world war, lead to shifts in popular thinking. People begin to connect up the experiences, to draw conclusions, to search for deeper causes, not the ones offered in the capitalist media. Parochialism, nationalism, "exceptionalism" tend to break down. These are more and more shared, collective global experiences. No wonder there is a hunger for more serious artistic material!

Moreover, in the wake of the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the enormous historical issues brought to the fore by that trauma, cheap, demagogic radicalism will appear inadequate to a growing number. In the aftermath of the restoration of capitalism in the former "socialist" countries, only the most penetrating arguments and analyses are called for. How was this "failure" possible? Denunciations and sloganeering will not do. Precise and sober examinations once more begin to "catch on." Even if many matters are not yet understood, there is a growing intuition that difficult, demanding problems have to be tackled, that much hard, taxing work needs to be done.

The potential once again emerges for human beings to consider their own lives as historically and socially shaped, for them to see the life-and-death importance of understanding and mastering crucial historical and social developments. It is not accidental that filmmaking, as a mass, large-scale, industrial-style activity, which tends to function at its best under conditions of popular mobility and seething unrest, begins to pick up on this process. And Nolan himself admits to being "drawn to working at a large scale" and feeling "the responsibility" to use those resources "in the most productive and interesting way."

Oppenheimer of course is not the only art work that reflects some of these developments, nor has this artistic process just begun. We have pointed to other works, films and television series that have conveyed unease, dissatisfaction, even disgust with the existing state of affairs. But *Oppenheimer's* enormous, international prominence represents something of a nodal point.

None of this is meant to suggest that the film is without weaknesses and blind spots. As we noted last July, the problems with *Oppenheimer* "are not so much the failings of the individual writer-director. They reveal more general problems bound up with understanding the Second World War and mid-20th century political realities." One might even say that "absolving" Oppenheimer, as it were, becomes obligatory when one works backward, as the filmmakers do, from a defense of World War II as the great battle for democracy and the Roosevelt administration as a social reformist utopia. The weakest portion of the film, when it temporarily turns into something of a formulaic "procedural," occurs during the organization of Los Alamos as a secret military facility and the preparations for the first atomic bomb test.

As we argued last year, "The working class cannot adopt Oppenheimer as one of its heroes. Although he held sincerely left-wing views in the late 1930s, Oppenheimer became a significant figure in the American military-intelligence apparatus. That the 'left' in America by and large, including prominently the Communist Party, cheered on the incineration of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and that Oppenheimer could more or less seamlessly pass from pro-Roosevelt Popular Frontism to direct participation in the war machine, none of that excuses his role."

The character of the 1917 October Revolution, which still held such a power for figures like Oppenheimer and his generation, the emergence of Stalinism in the USSR and the betrayal of the revolution, the filthy role of the Communist Party in the US, these are gigantic questions that hover unresolved over Nolan's *Oppenheimer*.

In his interview with the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* last year, Nolan made suggestive reference to some of the issues. Speaking of "the revolutionary nature of quantum physics in the 1920s," he added, "You're dealing with people who were engaged in a revolutionary reappraisal of the laws of the universe, just as Picasso and other artists were engaged in a revolutionary reappraisal of aesthetic art, of visual representation, just as Stravinsky, you know, was there writing all his music, and indeed, Marx, the communists—that is to say, moving on from Marx, the communist 1920s, the Russian Revolution."

He continued: "It's kind of an amazing time. And then, of course, as you start to research and look at the drama of his [Oppenheimer's] story and where it then went, where this revolutionary fervor actually wound up—that's when so many revolutions wound up in a pretty awful place."

This is a critical point, although Nolan does not proceed any farther in his comments or perhaps his thinking. There is indeed a profound connection between the "awful place" that the October Revolution "wound up," as a result of the perfidy and treachery of Stalinism, and the terrible historical dilemma in which vast portions of humanity, including scientists and intellectuals, found themselves in the late 1930s, and in the ensuing slaughterhouse of the world war and the Holocaust. This too is surely a matter to be investigated in a serious artistic film (or films), which would also, we are convinced, gain the interest of millions and

millions.



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