

Oppenheimer's victory at the Academy Awards

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The comprehensive success of Christopher Nolan's *Oppenheimer* at the Academy Awards has genuine and far-reaching significance.

The biographical drama about the life and career of theoretical physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer (1904-1967), known as the "father of the atomic bomb," deservedly won seven important honors on Sunday, for best picture, director, lead and supporting actor, cinematography, editing and achievement in music.

The dimensions of the film's reach is socially meaningful. Nolan's work has now been seen by well over 100 million people in dozens of countries, resulting in some \$1 billion in box office revenue, and has collected 333 film awards internationally.

This level of accomplishment is almost unheard of for a lengthy, intellectually demanding and artistically dense work. The great success of *Oppenheimer* with the public, "astonishing" and "unexpected" to the philistine commentators, reflects molecular changes in thinking and feeling in response to decades of war, social decay and the undermining of democracy, as well as the danger of far wider and more catastrophic conflicts, including nuclear conflagration. This is not a politically articulate sentiment, either among the artists or within the general populace, but it unquestionably speaks to widespread anxiety and powerful anti-establishment discontent.

Ironically, at the precise moment that Nolan's film was receiving various honors, the public became aware of how recklessly the Biden administration and its NATO allies were barreling into a confrontation with Russia that involves planning and preparations for catastrophic nuclear war. The interest in *Oppenheimer* is one of the indicators there is no popular support for such a monstrous, bloody development.

The audience for the three-hour biographical drama only continues to expand. Nielsen Media Research reports that the film recorded 821 million minutes of viewing during its first week of streaming in mid-February on Peacock. The streaming platform announced that during that seven-day period, *Oppenheimer* became the most-watched film in its

history.

Nolan's film has a genuinely broad-based following. A YouGov survey conducted in late February estimated that 22 percent of the American population (which would translate into more than 50 million adults) had seen the film, and 90 percent had "loved" or "liked" it, and, according to the pollsters, more Americans "say it should win [a Best Picture award] than any other nominee," and the same holds true for "who will win." There is not widespread knowledge about Oppenheimer or the historical events depicted in the film, but there is evidently a profound sense that grappling with this material is essential and urgent.

The Academy Awards are a notoriously unreliable barometer of either artistic excellence or consistently progressive social views. The voting expresses the opinions of a certain petty-bourgeois social layer, which can be swayed by a host of factors, including racial and gender politics. That only makes the outcome of the voting by the 10,000 or so Academy members this time all the more telling. More than anything else, the awards confirm and consolidate an eight-month process during which *Oppenheimer* became a global cultural and social phenomenon.

The affair Sunday was relatively subdued. In the first place, attendees were faced with an angry crowd protesting the ongoing Israeli mass murder in Gaza, chanting, "No Oscars during genocide!" and "Ceasefire! Now!" Signs read "Eyes on Rafah," "While you're watching, bombs are dropping," "Let Gaza live" and "What good is art that ignores genocide?" The protesters blocked traffic temporarily, before being pushed away by Los Angeles police, and delayed the start of the awards ceremony. As he entered the venue, actor Mark Ruffalo shouted "Palestinian protest shut down the Oscars tonight. Humanity wins!"

Attendees supporting the Artists4Ceasefire, a group of actors and others who issued an open letter in October, wore red pins at the Academy Awards appealing for an immediate halt to the mass slaughter. Singer Billie Eilish, who won an award for best original song, wore the pin, along with her

brother Finneas, Ruffalo, Mahershala Ali, Ramy Youssef, Ava DuVernay, Riz Ahmed, Swann Arlaud and others.

Onstage, actor Cillian Murphy, accepting the best actor award for *Oppenheimer*, noted that “We’re all living in Oppenheimer’s world—I would really like to dedicate this to the peacemakers everywhere.”

Director Jonathan Glazer received the award for his film *The Zone of Interest*, about the commandant at Auschwitz, and read a written statement on behalf of himself and his colleagues on stage:

All our choices we made to reflect and confront us in the present. Not to say “look what they did then”—rather, ‘look what we do now.’ Our film shows where dehumanization leads at its worst. It shaped all of our past and present.

Right now, we stand here as men who refute their Jewishness and the Holocaust being hijacked by an occupation which has led to conflict for so many innocent people. Whether the victims of October 7 in Israel or the ongoing attack on Gaza—all the victims of this dehumanization, how do we resist?

Glazer’s comments, often misquoted or taken out of context, have come under furious attack from pro-Zionist elements.

As a whole, the awards ceremony left the viewer with the impression of great social and psychological tension bottled up. Attendees, by and large, still played things close to the vest. Widespread opposition exists, not only to Trump and the Republican fascists (ridiculed by host Jimmy Kimmel), but also to the warmonger Biden. But that hostility has yet to find a clear political expression.

There was less garishness and self-involvement on display than usual. Ongoing events and the presence and centrality of *Oppenheimer* and to a certain extent, *Poor Things* (the two films between them took 11 of the 17 awards for which they were potentially eligible), generally acted to elevate the ceremony, although there were sophomoric features. After all the chatter, *Barbie* won nothing (except for Eilish’s song), also deservedly.

The issues in *Oppenheimer* are so pressing and have obviously provoked such a strong response from audiences that the identity politics fanatics were relatively quiet after Sunday’s event, or felt that the atmosphere was not conducive to their reactionary clamoring. Hollywood’s new, foul “diversity” rules and quotas are now in effect, but at this point film productions find ways to sidestep them, which may not always be the case.

The example of Nolan’s movie points again to the fact that filmmaking is a vast, complex, collective art form, entailing the efforts and skills in a major production of hundreds and even thousands. To produce a work that makes compelling and coherent sense, artistically worked through, is an immense undertaking.

Important work is already being done. The best artists have a sharp, *intuitive* grasp of some of the great social issues. The brief sequence involving Harry Truman (Gary Oldman) in *Oppenheimer*, for example, reveals the American president to be a brutal war criminal in a manner that goes beyond Nolan’s own considered viewpoint. Their artistry surpasses the artists’ own understanding at this point, although the latter is unquestionably gaining ground.

One might say that many artists have a growing sense that capitalism is the problem, but the exact character of its insoluble contradictions and, above all, the nature of the *remedy* remain outside their consciousness.

Art, Leon Trotsky pointed out, finds the necessary forms “for dark and vague moods, it brings thought and feeling closer or contrasts them with one another, it enriches the spiritual experience of the individual and of the community, it refines feeling, makes it more flexible, more responsive, it enlarges the volume of thought in advance and not through the personal method of accumulated experience, it educates the individual, the social group, the class and the nation.”

Events, creating new impulses, are breaking through the “shell of the subconscious.” The horrors in Gaza are unquestionably opening many eyes, even if the filmmakers and other artists do not yet formulate their understanding of the world in definite political terms. That is a more complicated, protracted process. Above all, it depends on the political development of masses of people and the emergence of a movement in the working class that directly and knowingly strikes at the foundations of capitalism. That will come. Sunday’s event was a notable landmark.



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