

Christopher Nolan, director, screenwriter, producer. *Oppenheimer*. Syncopy, Inc. 2023.

*Oppenheimer*, based on the book *American Prometheus: The Triumph and Tragedy of J. Robert Oppenheimer* (2005) by Kai Bird and Martin J. Sherwin, recounts the life of the theoretical physicist and “Father of the Atomic Bomb.” Beginning with his education, following academic appointments at the University of California and Caltech, director Christopher Nolan presents the story with Cillian Murphy in the lead role. After creating his own theoretical physics department in Berkeley, “Oppie” is recruited by the US government to direct the Manhattan Project at Los Alamos during WWII to develop the atomic bomb. The epic culminates in his loss of U.S. security clearance during the 1950s McCarthy era due to communist ties and allegations of espionage.

*Oppenheimer* begins with an ominous quote, an homage to the original work, referring to the Greek god Prometheus, who stole fire and gave it to man, and thus enduring punishment for all eternity. Presented with a fiery explosion, this quote refers to the power the atomic bomb unleashed on humanity, forever changing the world, setting the grim tone for the film. The scene transitions with Oppenheimer seated in a small room, with his supportive wife Kitty (Emily Blunt) behind him as he begins reading his unfiltered prepared statement for the security clearance board. Throughout the testimony, Oppenheimer is frank regarding his previous communist associations, denying any nefarious activity, and defends the decisions he made as director at Los Alamos as they assembled “the gadget.” The story follows two non-sequential perspectives: the first Oppenheimer’s and the second of former Chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) Lewis Strauss (Robert Downey Jr.).

The first perspective, titled “Fission”, focuses on Oppenheimer’s testimony to the security clearance board where he presents his life events from his early physics education in Cambridge, to his communist associations in Berkeley, to his appointment to the Institute for Advanced Study (IAS) in Princeton, New Jersey following the war. Throughout the testimony, Oppenheimer endures exhaustive questioning for his past decisions and defends his loyalty to the U.S. government and denies Soviet collusion.

In parallel, the second perspective titled *Fusion*, Strauss is preparing for his Senate confirmation hearing for his appointment to President Eisenhower's cabinet as Commerce Secretary, five years after the Oppenheimer security hearing. Strauss is disclosing details of his ambivalent working relationship with the physicist, which began at IAS and later at AEC, to an unnamed senate aide. Strauss unassumingly believes Oppenheimer's security clearance hearing will not affect his cabinet confirmation hearing.

The audience can grasp whose perspective each flashback scene is depicting as the film transitions between "*Fission*" in color and "*Fusion*" in black and white throughout. This is helpful as the story is complex due to the many notable names, events, locations, and acronyms to follow. Nolan disappointingly takes artistic license when depicting Oppenheimer reciting the Bhagavad Gita quote, "I am become death, the destroyer of worlds." Instead of recreating the widely known 1965 NBC interview where an older Oppenheimer solemnly states this on television, the quote is proclaimed in an intimate scene with love interest Jean Tatlock (Florence Pugh), one of his early communist associates.

*Oppenheimer* depicts a balance of advancing science for a cause and the subsequent fallout of weaponizing that science. With a three-hour running time, the film includes many depictions of famous scientists and government officials, including Niels Bohr (Kenneth Branagh), General Leslie Groves (Matt Damon), Isidor Rabi (David Krumholtz), Richard Feynman (Jack Quaid) and Albert Einstein (Tom Conti), contributing to the historical reenactment. Visually, the realistic recreation of the Trinity test is both terrifying and captivating. With exciting sound editing and a compelling narrative, Nolan successfully makes science and history intriguing to a general audience. The story moves quickly, and yet there are many details omitted from the original 721-page Bird and Sherwin work. While the film is tragic, the audience is left without knowing the full tragedy of Oppenheimer's final years. Nonetheless, viewers should experience this film twice: once on the IMAX format for the immersive experience as intended by Nolan and a second time to learn everyone's name.

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