The last major director we have is Christopher Nolan. As you watch his movies, you think about what it means for there to be masters of the art: people who seem to know the tools of the art so well that they are in complete control of what they're doing, yet when you see their work, you can hardly tell how they did it. Nolan is unique in bringing together high critical praise and very large audiences, and this time he has decided to do so by bringing attention to a subject of great importance—the making of the atomic bomb.

Oppenheimer is therefore a movie strongly in opposition to the tendency of our decadence, which is to despise human beings. We have many humanitarian concerns, especially with victims and discrimination, but these are essentially condescending. All a victim can hope to be is what we already are. We ourselves are hopeless—we cannot go beyond applauding. Nolan, however, shows us a movie about a great and terrible achievement, a scientific and political achievement, and the man who led that effort. He implies there is no one of J. Robert Oppenheimer's stature in our times. We are diminished, and he wants us to restore greater ambitions, higher horizons, and perhaps be wiser for the fear we have experienced contemplating the power we unleashed in WWII.

The structure of the film attempts to bring together in our field of vision, in Nolan's by now signature parallel editing style, the various personal and political concerns of scientific and other public figures from the 1930s to the '50s. We see Oppenheimer himself (Cillian Murphy, in the role of his career) primarily in color, a giant figure in the IMAX 70mm format, often in close-up. We follow him from his graduate school days in physics throughout his career, through Europe, California, and of course Los Alamos.

This is framed by his testimony, also in color, to a commission that will eventually remove his security clearance, in 1954, marking the end of his public career. This testimony is twinned by the 1958 secretary of commerce nomination hearings of Admiral Strauss

(played very well by Robert Downey Jr.), whom the movie blames for the humiliation of removing Oppenheimer's clearance. This part is in black and white. In a bit of poetic justice, the movie shows Strauss losing his nomination vote after he is humiliated by scientists who feel Oppenheimer was treated with great indignity by the politicians. This approaches the preposterous, with a young Senator John F. Kennedy noted as among those who sank Strauss. In reality, the admiral was a remarkable and worthy public servant, but a Republican facing a Democratic Senate.

The framework for Oppenheimer's biography is supposed to achieve something more serious than rescuing his reputation with a bit of poetic justice. It show us the political context of the decisions made during WWII and at the beginning of the Cold War, the great dangers the country faced, and the fact that scientists can be very unwise people, much more so than the ordinary American who does not presume to impose his will on the basis of impressive academic or technical knowledge.

The most shocking aspect of that difference between the politicians who did represent the American people and the scientists who wanted to rule the American people is that more of the scientists were Communists and some were traitors (obviously, some politicians were also Communist spies and traitors). Unfortunately Oppenheimer himself was as stupid as any other intellectual of his era, but more cautious and perhaps a little more serious. His brother, whom he brought to work at Los Alamos, did join the Communist Party against Oppenheimer's advice. His wife had been a Communist, as had his mistress. The list goes on. *Oppenheimer* does a great job of showing how blind and ridiculous all these very educated, upper-class people were. Part-time revolutionaries at one time or another, but also indignant Americans claiming their rights when their loyalty was questioned.

But there are more serious things than even treason that the movie brings to our attention in a way no other movie has before. The making of the atomic bomb was considered a necessity of war. The fear was that the Nazis would get there first. Science is not by nature pro-American, indeed, it has no loyalty. Nazis commanded the allegiance or obedience of scientists perhaps even better than the Americans'. Yet the American scientists believed that they were acting for a just cause, that they were patriotic, and therefore must have believed that knowledge is good, perhaps especially in the form of modern natural science. Yet that science that can split the atom and possibly incinerate our world does not include a branch that examines the motives of men or their politics. There is a remarkable sacrifice and perhaps a form of piety in the Progressive confidence of those men.

The radical distinction between technical knowledge and moral concerns is the core of the story and drives everything—from the often-jarring sound design and inspiriting score to the editing, which is relentless, pushing us not to the inevitable, the history we know, but to the inner necessities of the modern world, and all the way to the cinematography, which insists on privileging the personal suffering of Oppenheimer. The man who starts with an ambition to know the newest things man can know, then grows up to take responsibility for the Manhattan Project, and ends by believing he was somehow responsible for atomic energy in the postwar world. This is a sentimental delusion, since neither science nor politics cares much for Oppenheimer, but in a way it is testimony to what was noble in his character, acting to limit war reasonably. But when you see the amazing reconstruction of atomic fire, you can at least begin to understand how he could become so afraid of The Bomb. It is almost an object of awe.

Oppenheimer has a large cast of characters, played with a combination of intensity and modesty. Stars like Matt Damon and Casey Affleck, Emily Blunt and Florence Pugh, Josh Hartnett

and Kenneth Branagh know they are there to make Oppenheimer look impressive, even though Cillian Murphy has never starred in a big movie. The result is remarkable: they bring out the academic and social milieu in which this all takes place, and we see the upper classes of the period with a clarity almost no movie can achieve these days.

Needless to say, I heartily recommend *Oppenheimer*. I think many people are likely to want to see it more than once because it is overwhelming the first time. The sound is much better than I had anticipated, noises and voices are mixed together very well—much of the movie is men in rooms talking—but the editing sweeps you with few lulls to recollect yourself. It is too impressive to appreciate properly on a first viewing, partly because it also makes every effort to acquaint audiences with everyone involved, from Einstein to Truman, to conjure some familiarity. It gives a view of an America that was serious, competent, dignified, and full of purpose. Yet we so lack that now that it might take reflection or more viewings to fully appreciate what you're seeing. I felt grateful for such a vision of America.

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