

Barbenheimer’ Isn’t a Contest. But if It Were, Which Film Would Win?

It’s been an epic matchup, but it’s time to declare a victor. We devised nine super-scientific tests to determine whether “Barbie” or “Oppenheimer” rules.



By **Kyle Buchanan**

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The simultaneous release of “Barbie” and “Oppenheimer” captured the pop-cultural imagination because before we had seen either film, it was hard to imagine two features that occupied such distinctly different lanes. But now that audiences have sampled Greta Gerwig’s colorful Mattel comedy and Christopher Nolan’s weighty drama about J. Robert Oppenheimer, the so-called father of the atomic bomb, it’s become clear that for all their tonal differences, each film is a one-of-a-kind auteurist blockbuster pondering some pretty meaty existential questions.

All this is a heady way of saying: Let’s pit ’em against each other!

Who would win if there were an actual battle of Barbenheimer? To arrive at an answer, I’ve put each film through its paces in nine categories, with tests devised to measure them that are every bit as scientifically rigorous as the experiments conducted during Oppenheimer’s Manhattan Project. (Note: This claim has not been fact-checked.)

Cite

Culpability of protagonist



Two experts in the laser death stare: Emily Blunt and Cillian Murphy as the Oppenheimers. Melinda Sue Gordon/Universal Pictures

Do Oppenheimer and Barbie both have blood on their hands? After racing to create an atomic bomb that will end World War II, Oppenheimer (Cillian Murphy) spends the final hour of his movie haunted by visions of the dead and wondering whether he has unleashed a nuclear arms race that will imperil the future of humanity. Barbie (Margot Robbie) is also forced to face her own complicated legacy: Upon entering the real world, where she expects to be greeted as a benevolent superstar, she is instead dressed down by teenage girls who deride her as a fascist has-been whose unrealistic beauty standards have harmed generations of women. At least Barbie can assuage her guilty conscience with a journey of self-discovery and you-go-girl support from America Ferrera; Oppenheimer has to endure a humiliating government hearing and a series of withering looks from Emily Blunt. Then again, it's a level of flagellation he feels he deserves, which packs even more of a punch. Advantage: "Oppenheimer"

Depiction of governance

Men rule the world in “Oppenheimer,” and their government is filled with vipers: After the war ends, battles are waged on the home front as ambitious apparatchiks scheme to discredit their rivals and formerly jovial colleagues are moved to stab one another in the back. The female-led government in “Barbie” rules over a comparative utopia that subs slumber parties for strife and posits that a dangerous coup perpetrated by angry, addled men can be undone simply by tricking them into a musical number. Who wouldn’t rather live in that world? *Advantage: “Barbie”*

Depth of ensemble

The seeds of Barbenheimer were sown early in production as both films raced to cast half of Hollywood in their ever-swelling ensembles, and each cast came with some notable similarities. Leads Murphy and Robbie have both played Batman villains. (He was Scarecrow in Nolan’s Bat-features, while she was Harley Quinn for DC.) Each film features a hot young auteur in the cast — the “Uncut Gems” co-director Benny Safdie pops up throughout “Oppenheimer,” while “Barbie” has a cameo from the writer-director of “Promising Young Woman,” Emerald Fennell — as well as a next-generation Marvel star (Florence Pugh in “Oppenheimer,” Simu Liu in “Barbie”). “Oppenheimer” flexes a bit harder by filling even its smallest roles with Oscar winners like Rami Malek, Kenneth Branagh and Casey Affleck, but “Barbie” had the good sense to wonder what Rhea Perlman has been up to lately, which ought to count for nearly as much. Ultimately, this category is just too close to call. *Tie*

Fashion



Ta-da! Margot Robbie's Barbie pulls off a western look with aplomb. Warner Bros. Pictures

Barbie is a famous clotheshorse, and Gerwig's movie more than delivers on the fashion front: Whether Robbie's doll is wearing gingham dresses or disco jumpsuits, she takes costumes that could read as cosplay and makes them chic. You might not expect the same attention to sartorial detail from "Oppenheimer," but 12 films into his career, one of Nolan's cinematic trademarks has become impeccable suiting: After Oppenheimer is advised by a colleague to level up his look, we watch him don a hat and select a pipe in a sequence that Nolan shoots as portentously as Batman putting on body armor. Still, even though Murphy is striking in period garments, there can be only one victor in this category. We have no doubt that Barbie would look fashionable even in Oppenheimer's tailored menswear, but could the theoretical physicist pull off her rollerblading look in eye-searing fluorescents? *Advantage: "Barbie"*

Catchphrases

Oppenheimer said that after the explosive test of the atomic bomb, a quote from Hindu scripture came to mind: “Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds.” In Nolan’s film, we hear those words said by Oppenheimer, but the first time he speaks them is in an unusual sex scene with his recurring flame, Jean Tatlock (Pugh), in which she pauses coitus to fetch a copy of the Bhagavad Gita, then asks Oppenheimer to translate the famous quote from Sanskrit, sans clothes. (Kinky, yes, but Tatlock clearly knows that the way to this man’s heart is to first admire his bookshelf.) “Barbie” has its fair share of quotable lines — two Ken catchphrases, “I’m just Ken” and “I am Kenough,” have already set social media ablaze — but were any of them translated from the original Mattel? *Advantage: “Oppenheimer”*

Usage of the color pink

If anything pink has ever appeared on the set of one of Nolan’s films, it was only because Harry Styles hadn’t changed out of his concert wear before shooting “Dunkirk.” Meanwhile, “Barbie” features more pink than a clone army of Jigglypuffs downing rosé on the set of “RuPaul’s Drag Race.” You knew who would win this category going in. *Advantage: “Barbie”*

Usage of the color blue



Think of the hat as a shield ... to protect the audience from those baby blues. Melinda Sue Gordon/Universal Pictures, via Associated Press

“Oppenheimer” is about the moral cost of unleashing upon mankind the most terrifying and powerful weapon it has ever known: Murphy’s gigantic blue eyes. (Can you get radiation poisoning from a pair of peepers? If you watch “Oppenheimer” in IMAX, you may want to take precautions by gazing upon the screen through a pane of dark glass.) The beautiful cerulean sky of Barbie Land simply can’t compare to what Murphy is serving up: Even in the black-and-white portions of “Oppenheimer,” the actor’s eyes still feel bright blue. *Advantage: “Oppenheimer”*

Sound design

In recent films, Nolan has employed a “wall of sound” approach that hits its apex in “Oppenheimer”: Every single minute is soundtracked by Ludwig Goransson’s propulsive score, while set pieces like the Trinity test and Oppenheimer’s foot-stomping gymnasium rally employ so much thunderous bass that they threaten to shake the entire multiplex. Though the film is a three-hour drama about men in lecture halls, classes and courtrooms, its soundscape blares with the blockbuster momentum of an action film, and for all its sonic sophistication, “Oppenheimer” is surely the front-runner for this year’s best-sound Oscar. Still, “Barbie” has a Dua Lipa song. *Advantage: “Barbie”*

Box office

The rising tide of Barbenheimer has lifted both films to smash-hit status. “Barbie” scored the biggest opening weekend of the year with \$162 million, barely faltered in its second week, and is now on track to pass more than \$1 billion worldwide and potentially dethrone “The Super Mario Bros. Movie” as the year’s top grosser. And though other prestige dramas have struggled to connect at the box office since the pandemic, “Oppenheimer” has been thriving: Its \$82 million opening weekend far surpassed any of Nolan’s non-superhero features, and the film’s final worldwide total could top \$800 million, a stunning finish for a super-long biopic. Though “Barbie” is the clear winner here, this is a race with no loser. *Advantage: “Barbie”*

Final result

Think pink! In the battle of Barbenheimer, Gerwig’s comedy ekes out a victory over “Oppenheimer,” proving that some fights can be finished with no nuclear escalation whatsoever. (But how would Gerwig’s “Little Women” fare against Nolan’s previous film, “Tenet”? Watch this space: If the strikes continue, I may have to write that.)

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