

## BIMBOS AND BOMBS: THE BARBENHEIMER PHENOMENON

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**O**n July 21<sup>st</sup>, 2023, a tidal wave of pink and existentialism crashed into movie theaters. The simultaneous theatrical release of two highly anticipated blockbusters—Greta Gerwig’s *Barbie* and Christopher Nolan’s *Oppenheimer*—generated unprecedented post-pandemic box office sales, cultural commentary across the political spectrum, and, of course, memes.<sup>1</sup>

Both *Barbie* and *Oppenheimer*, spawning the portmanteau “Barbenheimer,” exist as strong markers of Western culture and cultural history; whereas the former is a postmodern feminist comedy about an iconic children’s fashion doll, the latter is a brooding biopic of the nuclear physicist behind the Manhattan Project. Through fan-made memes, social media campaigns, and merchandise, the “rivalry” between the two films was commodified by moviegoers, making “Barbenheimer” a global phenomenon. Juxtaposed affectively and aesthetically, Barbie’s hyper-feminine, positively pink aesthetics were jarringly contrasted against the grays and blacks of Nolan’s wartime biographical thriller. But instead of “picking a side,” many moviegoers saw both films back-to-back. They argued about the best order to see them in, dressed up in pink, searched out theatres with 70 mm film screening capability, and, in short, committed to the full “Barbenheimer” experience.

As two Oscar-nominated auteurs, Gerwig and Nolan have both achieved a cult-like status among their respective (and often differently gendered) audiences. Audiences are similarly protective of their esteemed directors, causing social media outrage at any per-

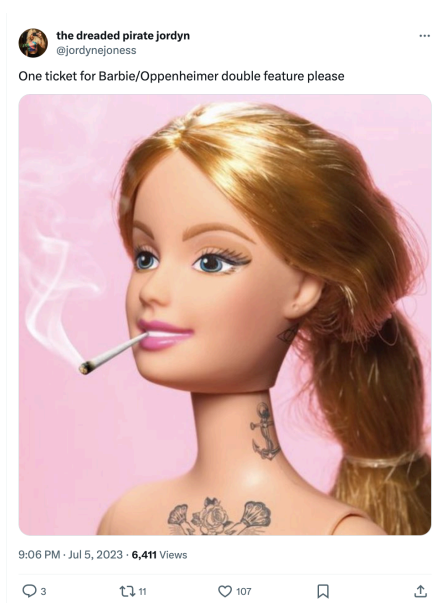


Figure 1: Screenshot of a tweet posted by Jordyn Jones (@jordynejones).

ceived awards season “snub.”<sup>2</sup> Whereas Gerwig’s feminist-forward cinema often features transgressive female characters rebelling against their restrictive environments, Nolan’s movies focus on introspective male personae framed by unconventional narrative structures, elaborate special effects work, and explorations of time as an artificial construct. Gerwig began her career as an actor in numerous independent films, gaining acclaim through her Golden Globe-nominated performance in *Frances Ha* (2012); she has since gained widespread notoriety as a solo filmmaker, notably with her coming-of-age drama *Lady Bird* (2017) and her adaptation of Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women* (2020). Nolan, on the other hand, dubbed a “Philosopher of Screen” by Michael Caine in *Time100*, is widely acclaimed as a Hollywood blockbuster-maker and pioneer of 21<sup>st</sup>-century cinema. His films, including *Inception* (2010), *Interstellar* (2014), and most



Figure 2: Screenshot of a tweet posted by Sean (@\_sn\_n).

recently *Tenet* (2020), are largely metaphysical and existential in nature.<sup>3</sup>

The “Barbenheimer” phenomenon is driven by the perceived duality of these directors and their differently gendered films. Gerwig’s film is suffused with costumes, dance numbers, omnipresent pinkness, critiques of patriarchy, and relationships between women: a decidedly feminine film. *Oppenheimer* is a jarring contrast with its serious tone, complex political and temporal terrain, and virtual ocean of white male actors. At first glance, the contrast between *Barbie*’s fun and feminine appeal and *Oppenheimer*’s serious and menacing marketing aesthetics seems to reinforce a gendered binary wherein the former is perceived as the light, unserious film and the latter as existential and important. One senior media analyst described *Barbie* as a “pink-tacular romp” and *Oppenheimer* as a “weighty atomic bomb drama,” stating that “*Oppenheimer* is going to appeal to a more



Figure 3: Screenshot of a tweet posted by Discussing Film (@DiscussingFilm). Poster art by Steve Reeves (formerly @SteveReevesArt).



Figure 4: Screenshot of a tweet posted by Becca (@littlebeckyb).

mature demographic.”<sup>4</sup> An otherwise complimentary review stated, “I was excited, in spite of higher ideas about myself, to see Gerwig’s film.”<sup>5</sup> Many “Barbenheimer” enthusiasts recommended seeing *Oppenheimer* before *Barbie*, comparing it to having dessert after your meal.

But, ironically enough, despite this playful marketing ploy, *Barbie* and *Oppenheimer* converge in their explorations of existential anxiety. In Gerwig’s film, a “perfect day” in Barbieland is disturbed by Stereotypical Barbie’s utterance of the now-iconic phrase “Do you ever think about dying?”<sup>6</sup> These thoughts of death incite a journey of self-discovery from Barbieland to the real world—yes, that means flat feet and (gasp!) cellulite—as Barbie ultimately surrenders her toyhood for mortality. Existential concerns also drive the plot of *Op-*



Figure 5: Screenshot of a tweet posted by Iana Murray (@ianamurray).

*penheimer*, as the titular character (characterized as a 20<sup>th</sup>-century Prometheus) grapples with the politics, implications, and effects of creating the atomic bomb. The spectacular sound design of the movie engrosses the audience with a looming sense of dread and death.

Taking their parallels further, Cillian Murphy’s *Oppenheimer* and Margot Robbie’s *Barbie* are similar figures in their own respective narratives. Both films highlight the internal and existential journeys of their two titular characters, who are represented as figure-heads—or even products—of their institutions. Things are perhaps not so different between Mattel’s *Barbieland* and the Manhattan Project’s Los Alamos Laboratory, representational diversity aside.<sup>7</sup> Both protagonists begin their narratives as valuable commodities to their institutes but end up as outcast figures of resistance at their end. *Barbie* rebels against Mattel wanting to keep her as an “idea,” which is to say a perfect and immortal emblem of stereotypical femininity: an object acted upon, not one that acts. The film ends with *Barbie* choosing humanity over dollhood, with all its joys and messiness, including an impromptu trip to the gynecologist—one final challenge to feelings of embarrassment and discomfort around feminized bodies.<sup>8</sup> In Nolan’s film, *Oppenheimer* fervently opposes the development of the hydrogen bomb, which, along with his past Communist Party associations, results in his losing his security clearance, his access to the technology he created, and his career as a nuclear physi-

cist. Oppenheimer and Barbie are mirror protagonists marked by institutional, corporate, and/or governmental transgression.

But what is the place of these narratives of transgression in popular culture, especially when commodified by institutions of power? The billion-dollar *Barbie* movie playfully appraises consumerism at every turn, critiquing Mattel's male-dominated enterprise; yet the success of the film has inspired a successful line of Mattel dolls and an entire "Mattel Cinematic Universe," the project itself a revival plan for a brand with decreasing revenue.<sup>9</sup> On the flipside, for all its protagonist's transgressions, *Oppenheimer* is a film painfully entrenched in the white male gaze. Depicting histories of the bomb has always been tricky in the United States, as demonstrated by the Enola Gay exhibit.<sup>10</sup> However, there are significant and troubling choices about how history is depicted in this film, including:

- Prioritizing Oppenheimer's trauma over the trauma of Japanese people (as Scottish comedian Frankie Boyle has said, "Not only will America go to your country and kill all your people ... they'll come back 20 years later and make a movie about how killing your people made their soldiers feel sad.")<sup>11</sup>
- A refusal to discuss or depict the racism and anti-semitism that would have been prominent at the time.<sup>12</sup>
- A strange hyperfixation on Kitty Oppenheimer's alcoholism, and not the massive alcohol and amphetamine use that would have been happening around her.<sup>13</sup>
- The historically unfounded and appropriative use of a Hindu holy text during a sex scene.<sup>14</sup>
- The choice to depict New Mexico as empty land, ignoring the forced displacement of New Mexicans, mostly Hispanic and Indigenous peoples, who built and worked in Los Alamos and who were the first victims of nuclear colonialism and nuclear weapons.<sup>15</sup>

These critical conversations are sacrificed for more scenes of Jean Tatlock (Florence Pugh) languishing naked or Kitty Oppenheimer (Emily Blunt) being a drunken shrew, reducing women’s representation in the film to either the seductress or the nagging wife. The capitalist appropriation and historical choices of these films cause one to pause, and they merit a longer discussion than we can provide in this review. Are we playing back into the hands of Mattel’s consumerism? Are we participating in the regurgitation of a specific brand of history, one which perpetuates and incentivizes the white male gaze?



Figure 6: Screenshot of a tweet posted by Culture Crave (@culturecrave).



At the end of the day, both films capitalize on nostalgia. Nostalgia enabled the hybrid creation of “Barbenheimer” as a symbol of contemporary American culture as much through their opposition as their commonalities. Gerwig adopts a revamped 60s aesthetic that features many iconic Mattel outfits and toys recognizable to any Barbie consumer, as well as a custom-built movie set reminiscent of Golden Age Hollywood musicals. *Oppenheimer*’s opening scenes lean heavily into the aesthetic of Dark Academia, which became particularly popular during the isolation and campus shut-downs of COVID.<sup>16</sup> (If *Oppenheimer* poisoning his professor’s apple before fleeing along dark-wood lined corridors to a lecture isn’t Dark Academia, we don’t know what is.) As Robbert-Jan Adriaansen argues in their article examining the relationship between aesthetics and affect, this “historical outlook is pastiche and affect-driven: rather than remembering specific pasts it creates a blended image of artifacts, literature, art, fashion, and architecture” (105). The aesthetics of these films, though diametrically opposed, create a similar affective feeling of recognition and nostalgia that fetishizes its subjects—yet incentivizes its audience to partake in their spectacle. And participate we did, in our bright pink ensembles and iconic wartime fedoras.

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7. *Oppenheimer* has been critiqued by many on the basis of its all-white cast, with some commentators joking that Nolan hired every white male actor in Hollywood. In contrast, Barbie tried to represent a range of different identities, notably infuriating conservative Christian groups with its casting of a trans woman. Surrey, Miles. “A Taxonomy of Actors Cast in Christopher Nolan’s ‘Oppenheimer.’” *The Ringer*, 10 May 2022, <https://www.theringer.com/movies/2022/5/10/23064414/oppenheimer-christopher-nolan-cast-actors-taxonomy>. Oosthuizen, Megan. “Christopher Nolan’s *Oppenheimer* Has An All White Cast.” *Fortress of Solitude*, 29 November 2022, <https://www.fortressofsolitude.co.za/christopher-nolans-oppenheimer-has-an-all-white-cast/>. Ring, Trudy. “Republicans Go Nuts Over Barbie Film’s Trans Inclusion and Alleged Communism.” *Advocate*, 20 July 2023, <https://www.advocate.com/film/right-wing-barbie-transgender>.↵
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