
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Oppenheimer's Dilemma: A Marxian Examination of Power Dynamics and Ethical Justifications in Nolan's *Oppenheimer*

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| ABSTRACT

This paper scrutinizes Christopher Nolan's *Oppenheimer* through the lens of Marxian literary theory, revealing a rich tapestry of power dynamics, class conflicts, and the moral quandaries that arise from the pursuit of destructive technological progress. While Oppenheimer is lionized as an emblematic figure of the atomic age, the narrative concurrently casts him as a tragic figure ensnared in a web of political, economic, and military machinery. The film unravels the inherent contradictions of capitalism and its commodification of scientific prowess for warfare. Ultimately, the Marxian reading of *Oppenheimer* sheds light on the commodification of knowledge and the ethical grey zones of war, illuminating the human propensity to humanize and justify the architects of devastation. The paper also argues the control of the resources of entertainment by the capitalist forces making art and cinema a medium of propaganda to further the elitist agenda of the exploitation of the masses.

| KEYWORDS

Christopher Nolan's *Oppenheimer*, Dilemma, Ethical Justifications, Marxian literary theory

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1. Introduction

Christopher Nolan's *Oppenheimer* (2023), based on the biography *American Prometheus* by Kai Bird and Martin J. Sherwin, offers an incisive portrayal of the atomic age that warrants profound scrutiny through a Marxian lens (Bird and Sherwin 2005). This era, symbolized by the amalgamation of scientific purity and geopolitical urgency, exemplifies the commodification of knowledge and the subsequent alienation of its producers, echoing Marx's critiques on capitalism's influence on knowledge creation. The film presents the life of J. Robert Oppenheimer, the physicist behind the atomic bomb. From a Marxian perspective, it becomes crucial to understand how Nolan, a product of capitalist cinematic machinery, unravels the complex nexus of political power, economics, and the ethical compromises inherent in the production of the atomic bomb. The film unveils multifaceted power dynamics, entrenched class conflicts, and the inexorable moral quandaries sprouting from humanity's relentless march towards potentially self-destructive innovation.

Central to this narrative is the character of J. Robert Oppenheimer, who, despite being celebrated as the linchpin of atomic research, simultaneously embodies the tragic essence of an intellectual luminary caught in the treacherous crosshairs of political machinations, economic interests, and a militaristic zeitgeist. With Nolan's directorial prowess stemming from a global cinematic industry deeply entrenched in capitalist underpinnings, *Oppenheimer* not only underscores the commodification of scientific endeavors for wartime expedience but also amplifies the inherent contradictions of a capitalist society that, while venerating its innovators, often ensnares them in ethical ambiguities. This Marxian deconstruction of *Oppenheimer* not only accentuates the nuances of how knowledge, particularly of the groundbreaking kind, becomes a pawn in the grander game of warfare and political dominance but also delves into the mechanisms by which capitalist structures, especially in the realms of art and cinema, subtly

perpetuate narratives that, while appearing neutral, might inadvertently champion an elitist agenda, thereby facilitating the continued subjugation of the masses.

As we embark on this analytical journey, it becomes imperative to critically engage with how *Oppenheimer*, a cinematic marvel in its own right, grapples with the multi-layered challenges posed by its protagonist's scientific ambitions, contextualized within a world fraught with political upheavals and the looming specter of global annihilation. Through the Marxian lens, we aim to decipher not only the intricacies of the film's portrayal of its titular character but also the larger systemic frameworks within which such narratives are crafted and consumed. Nolan's *Oppenheimer* poses pertinent questions about the intersection of scientific enterprise, personal ambition, and socio-political motivations. Grounded in the rich historical tapestry of the mid-20th century, the narrative unfolds amidst an era of unparalleled global tension — a time when nations raced to harness atomic power, not merely for the advancement of human understanding, but more pressingly, for military supremacy.

J. Robert Oppenheimer, portrayed with profound depth by Cillian Murphy, emerges not merely as a physicist but as a complex emblem of this era. His journey from the hallowed halls of Cambridge, under the mentorship of Patrick Blackett, to the dust-ridden landscapes of Los Alamos, New Mexico, encapsulates the relentless pursuit of knowledge, often at the cost of personal and ethical compromises. However, it is not just Oppenheimer's personal journey that demands examination. The very environment in which he operated — a society on the precipice of atomic breakthroughs and, consequently, atomic warfare — offers a microcosm of the larger ideological battles waged during the 20th century.

Nolan's meticulous attention to historical detail, combined with a masterful blend of IMAX 65 mm and 65 mm large-format film, creates a cinematic universe that is as immersive as it is authentic. The choice of IMAX black-and-white filmography for certain sequences is not merely an aesthetic decision; it serves to accentuate the stark contrasts and the gray moral territories that defined the atomic age. Such artistic choices underscore the director's commitment to transporting the audience to an era marked by both scintillating scientific progress and haunting ethical dilemmas.

However, a Marxian analysis demands that we look beyond the narrative's surface. Oppenheimer, in his fervor to advance atomic research, inadvertently becomes a cog in the vast machinery of capitalist ambition. His science, while pure in its essence, becomes commodified — a tool wielded by the U.S. government to establish dominance in the post-war world order. The film's portrayal of Leslie Groves, played by Matt Damon, exemplifies the military-industrial complex's growing influence, encapsulating the very capitalist forces that Marx critically examined. The commodification of atomic knowledge, where groundbreaking scientific understanding becomes a marketable asset for geopolitical dominance, mirrors Marx's critiques of capitalist systems commodifying labor and intellectual resources.

Moreover, Nolan's depiction of Oppenheimer's interactions with key historical figures like Albert Einstein and Werner Heisenberg offers a rich canvas to explore the ethical quagmires faced by intellectuals of the time. Their dialogues, rich in philosophical and moral undertones, resonate with the dilemmas that scientific pioneers grapple with even today — where does one draw the line between pursuit of knowledge and its potential misuse? And to what extent are scientists responsible for the political appropriation of their discoveries?

Yet, the examination would be incomplete without acknowledging the paradox inherent in Nolan's own position. As a product of the modern entertainment industry — a billion-dollar behemoth deeply rooted in capitalist structures — Nolan's critique of the atomic age's capitalist undertones becomes doubly intriguing. It prompts us to question the extent to which art, even while critiquing the system, remains entangled within its webs, subtly perpetuating its ideologies.

In the analysis of *Oppenheimer* through a Marxian lens, we aim to shed light on the myriad dimensions of the atomic age, tracing the intricate interplay of personal ambition, scientific discovery, and the inexorable march of capitalist forces. We endeavor to understand how, in a world obsessed with progress and power, the very pioneers of innovation often find themselves ensnared in a web of their own making.

2. Capitalist Superstructure and its Agents:

Nolan's film, while chronicling Oppenheimer's journey, subtly critiques the capitalist superstructure where scientists like Oppenheimer are ensnared. The film highlights the tension between Edward Teller and Oppenheimer, emblematic of the larger conflict between pure scientific exploration and the political machinations that commodify it. However, it becomes ironic since the genre of film and the industry itself is a capitalistic venture, which we will explore in this section. The evolution of cinema, from its early days of silent film to the extravagant blockbusters of today, is often heralded as a triumph of technology and creativity. Yet, beneath its glitzy façade, cinema embodies the capitalist structures and class dynamics intrinsic to the bourgeois society. By critically examining cinema through a Marxian lens, one can unearth the intricate ways in which it serves and perpetuates bourgeois ideals.

2.1 Historical Context: Birth of Cinema in a Capitalist Society:

The Lumière brothers, often credited with the birth of cinema, unveiled their cinematograph in the late 19th century—a period marked by rapid industrialization and capitalist expansion. The cinema's inception during this era was no mere coincidence. As Marx might argue, the economic base influences the superstructure, including cultural forms like cinema (Marx, 1990). The earliest films were not universally accessible. They were screened in urban centers, targeting an audience that could afford this novel entertainment. This initial alignment with the bourgeoisie set the tone for cinema's continued relationship with capitalist structures which led to the commercialization of cinema. The emergence of the studio system in the early 20th century epitomized capitalist production models. Studios like MGM, Warner Bros., and Paramount operated much like factories, with a clear hierarchy and division of labor. This commodification of film production aligns with Marx's assertion of the bourgeoisie's exploitation of the proletariat's labor (Marx and Engels, 2019). The overriding determinant of a film's success became its box office collection. This profit-driven approach underscored the bourgeois prioritization of capital accumulation over artistic integrity. Understanding the factors behind box office profit has become more and more complex because people watch a movie for experiential motives, which suggests that pleasure and thrill are basic driving forces for their consumption. Yet despite a moviegoer's reliance on "quasi-search qualities" (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2001) there is a need to look at it through the Marxian perspective especially in the light of workers in the film industry (Negri, 1992; Holloway, 1992, 2005)

A recurring theme in Hollywood has been the 'American Dream'—the idea that anyone, irrespective of their background, can achieve success through hard work. Such narratives subtly reinforce the capitalist ethos of individualism and competition while sidelining systemic issues. According to Althusser, such ideological state apparatuses function to perpetuate the status quo of a capitalist society (Althusser, 2006).

Often, cinema portrays characters from the working class as either villains or requiring salvation by a bourgeois hero. Such narrative choices not only stigmatize the proletariat but also sanctify the bourgeois savior, consolidating class hierarchies. Contemporary blockbusters, with their extravagant budgets and relentless marketing campaigns, embody the bourgeois principle of consumption. Films are packaged and sold as products, with audiences being the consumers in a vast marketplace. Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* (2016) elaborates on how society transforms into a series of spectacles designed for consumption, with cinema being a prime example.

Modern cinema isn't just about the film itself. Merchandise, toys, games, and apparel further commodify the cinematic experience. This expansion into various markets underlines the bourgeoisie's drive to maximize profit avenues.

The emergence of independent cinema, often seen as a counter to mainstream films, raises an intriguing question. While they challenge narrative and production norms, do they genuinely break away from bourgeois influences? Adorno and Horkheimer, in their seminal work, caution against the "culture industry," where even supposedly counter-cultural movements are co-opted by capitalist structures (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2017). Events like Cannes and Sundance celebrate cinematic art. However, they also inadvertently create an elite space, often inaccessible to the general populace, thus echoing bourgeois exclusivity.

2.2 Hollywood and Its Benefactors: Unmasking the Power Dynamics:

Hollywood has long been recognized as a beacon of global entertainment, influencing culture and shaping perspectives on a global scale. However, beneath the glamour and glitz lies an intricate web of financial and ideological relationships. By exploring the major lobbies and powerhouses—like the gun lobby, pharmaceutical sector, military-industrial complex, religious institutions, and foreign influence (particularly China)—one can discern how Hollywood's content often mirrors the interests of its financiers.

2.2.1. The Gun Lobby and Hollywood:

The gun-toting hero has become an archetypal character in Hollywood movies. Films often showcase guns as symbols of power, justice, and freedom. This portrayal is not isolated from the financial influence of the gun lobby, which sees cinema as a medium to normalize firearm ownership and usage. There exists a symbiotic relationship. Movies drive gun sales, as showcased firearms become "must-haves" for enthusiasts, while the gun industry ensures continued favorable representation in films (Romer, Jamieson & Jamieson, 2017).

Hollywood has long been a mirror reflecting America's cultural and political landscape. Delving deeper into its ties with the gun lobby reveals not just a promotion of firearm culture but also an insidious link to the military-industrial complex and America's international interventions. Glorification of firearms in mainstream cinema is an issue that is attributed to the gun lobby. Archetypal heroes that wield guns are glorified. The rugged, gun-wielding protagonists in films from Westerns to modern action-thrillers signify power, justice, and liberty. This repeated representation ingrains the idea that guns are not just tools, but extensions of righteous American individualism. It isn't coincidental. The financial muscle of the gun lobby ensures that firearms are frequently depicted as instruments of empowerment. This narrative furthers their agenda, emphasizing the necessity of firearm ownership in everyday life.

Box office success and gun sales have a symbiotic relationship. Following the release of certain blockbusters, spikes in sales of particular firearm models have been observed, attesting to the films' advertising power for the gun industry. In return for this inadvertent marketing, the gun industry ensures favorable gun representation, perpetuating a cycle that benefits both Hollywood and firearm manufacturers (Beck, 2005).

2.2.2 War Films and the Military-Industrial Complex:

Justifying International Interventions: Periodic war movies serve as post-facto justifications for controversial American military actions. By focusing on the heroism of American soldiers and often sidelining political intricacies, these films rally public support and mute criticism. Since the inception of the Hollywood film industry, its connection with the broader machinations of American power structures, particularly the military-industrial complex, has been a topic of fascination and concern. It's no secret that the American government and its expansive military, often in tandem with the influential arms lobby, have found in cinema a potent tool for the molding of public opinion. By covertly funding and influencing the production of numerous films, these entities ensure that narratives favorable to their interests reach global audiences. Such practices are hardly confined to the realm of conjecture. Jeanine Basinger, in her seminal work *The World War II Combat Film: Anatomy of a Genre*, details how World War II films were meticulously crafted with the aid and input of the U.S. military, ensuring a portrayal in sync with state-sanctioned narratives (Basinger, 2003). Derek Charles Catsam, in his exploration of Hollywood's depiction of apartheid-era South Africa, underscores how cinema serves not just as a reflection of prevailing political ideologies, but often as a propagator (Catsam, 2009). Such state-cinema partnerships are not merely about promoting a particular view on a specific issue but are deeply embedded in the propagation of the broader notion of American exceptionalism. This narrative posits America as a unique force for good in the world, inherently superior and tasked with guiding global affairs.

Hollywood often perpetuates the myth of the white American savior, thereby reinforcing notions of American and Western superiority (Sirota, 2013). Given this backdrop, our analysis of war-themed movies from Hollywood aims to understand not just the stories they tell, but the broader socio-political and economic imperatives driving these narratives. The intertwining of cinema with military and political objectives provides a rich tapestry that reveals as much about American global ambitions as it does about the art of filmmaking. It's crucial to note the nexus between Hollywood and the arms industry. By financing war films, the arms industry indirectly propagates the indispensability of a well-funded, aggressive American military, rationalizing the nation's vast defense expenditure.

2.2.2.1 Justifying and Glorifying Wars with Cinema:

The Vietnam War, with its controversial political backdrop and brutal field realities, has been a fertile ground for Hollywood. *Apocalypse Now* (1979) delves into the psychological tumult experienced by soldiers, while subtly questioning the very moral foundation of the conflict. *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), in its stark portrayal of military training and subsequent combat, illustrates the dehumanization intrinsic to war. The film demonstrates how individuals are molded into killing machines, underscoring the systemic violence of military institutions. *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (1985) offers a different lens, portraying a hero's mission to rescue POWs, possibly attempting to salvage American pride post a traumatic war. Similarly, *Platoon* (1986) and *The Deer Hunter* (1978) explore the deep scars—both physical and psychological—left by the Vietnam War, offering a critical reflection on the human cost of geopolitical strife.

Top Gun (1986), set against the backdrop of the Cold War, glorifies American naval air prowess. Beyond the spectacular aerial sequences, the movie can be seen as an ode to American military superiority during a time of heightened tensions with the Soviet Union. *Black Hawk Down* (2001) and *American Sniper* (2014), while highlighting individual stories of valor, subtly reinforce the necessity of American military interventions, whether in Somalia or Iraq. *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012), documenting the hunt for Osama bin Laden, presents a justification for covert operations in the name of national security. Meanwhile, *The Hurt Locker* (2008) focuses on the intense pressure bomb disposal squads face, humanizing soldiers while also emphasizing the perilous nature of the Iraq War. This narrative is furthered by *Green Zone* (2010), which, in its quest for WMDs in post-invasion Iraq, indirectly reinforces the reasons for American intervention.

Behind Enemy Lines (2001) and *We Were Soldiers* (2002) both emphasize American resilience against formidable odds, be it in Bosnia or Vietnam. While they showcase individual heroism, they also subtly underscore the necessity of American involvement in global hotspots. *Jarhead* (2005) provides an introspective look at the Gulf War, shedding light on the soldier's psyche while avoiding overt political commentary. Still, its portrayal of soldiers' lives essentially supports the military structure and the necessity of their presence in the region. Films like *Red Dawn* (1984 & 2012) imaginatively explore foreign invasions on American soil, a premise that underscores the need for robust national defense. *Lone Survivor* (2013) recounts a failed Navy SEALs operation in Afghanistan, emphasizing both the valor and vulnerability of American forces. Similarly, *Courage Under Fire* (1996) and *Act of Valor* (2012) underscore the bravery inherent in military operations, indirectly justifying the reasons behind such interventions.

Clear and Present Danger (1994) deals with American intervention in South America's drug wars, reinforcing the idea of the U.S. as a global police force. *Rules of Engagement* (2000), through the lens of an embassy evacuation in Yemen, again touches upon the theme of American military involvement in global crises. Finally, *Syriana* (2005), while a critical exploration of the oil industry's geopolitics in the Middle East, also touches upon the complexities of American involvement in the region. Movies like *Saving Private Ryan* deserve special mention. While depicting the harrowing experiences of soldiers during D-Day, the film also cements the idea of World War II as the "Good War", with clear moral imperatives for American involvement.

Hollywood's portrayal of wars and conflicts, while often highlighting individual heroism, also serves to justify or at least contextualize American military interventions on the global stage. The intricate dance between cinema and political narratives is evident, with films often reflecting or subtly molding public opinion. Hollywood's war films often portray the military in heroic lights, reinforcing nationalistic sentiments. Such representations, while boosting recruitment, also subtly advocate for continued defense expenditure and armament production. Films portraying the military favorably often get unprecedented access to military resources, locations, and expertise, underscoring a quid pro quo relationship (Robb, 2011).

2.3 The Big Pharma and Hollywood:

In this section we will try to extend the argument of Big industrialist lobbies dictating the films in Hollywood like the Gun Industry and the Arms Industry. The interplay between Hollywood and the pharmaceutical industry can be likened to the subtle workings of propaganda machinery, a parallel drawn from the often overt relationship between films and military campaigns. Interestingly, in the case of pharmaceuticals, there isn't as much of a blatant promotional push, but rather a subtle normalization of drug use. The reason for this subtle approach might be rooted in the existing public sentiment. In the United States, where prescription drug advertisements are allowed on television, it becomes less essential for films to overtly advertise the merits of pharmaceuticals. Instead, the movies have often served to stigmatize mental illnesses and subtly emphasize the necessity of medication for stability. A considerable portion of the American public is already habituated, if not addicted, to various forms of medication—painkillers being a prominent example. This dependency on drugs doesn't arise in a vacuum; it's arguably a byproduct of a capitalistic machinery that consistently lobbies senators and influences healthcare professionals to promote the pharmaceutical industry's interests. While overt pharmaceutical funding for films is not widely reported, the cinematic depiction of medications and their effects, both positive and negative, is a recurring theme in Hollywood. It's worth noting that subtle inclusions of drug-positive messages in films can be as effective as blatant propaganda in shifting public sentiment, and this becomes all the more potent against the backdrop of an American society deeply enmeshed in prescription drug culture.

Films like *Love and Other Drugs* (2010) and *Limitless* (2011), while divergent in their narratives, both portray drugs as life-changing or enhancing elements. In *Love and Other Drugs*, Viagra, for instance, is shown as a groundbreaking solution for men, and in *Limitless*, the fictional NZT is a gateway to unparalleled intelligence and success. Movies such as *Lorenzo's Oil* (1992) and *Awakenings* (1990) further embed the idea of drugs as a miraculous solution to life's most pressing health challenges. Another disturbing portrayal is the idea that those who refuse or don't have access to certain medications end up with exacerbated mental health issues or are perceived as "crazy." A case in point is how individuals with schizophrenia are depicted in some films. If not shown as violent or unstable, they're often represented as individuals who've gone off their medication, perpetuating the idea that medication is the sole solution to mental health challenges. In movies like *A Beautiful Mind* (2001), the protagonist John Nash, based on a real-life character, struggles with schizophrenia. Though the film's portrayal of the illness has been criticized for inaccuracies, it does underscore the devastating impact of the disease and the pivotal role of medication in managing it (Butler & Hyler, 2005) showcase the struggle of a schizophrenic individual, and while the narrative does highlight non-pharmaceutical coping mechanisms, the importance of medication is underscored.

Similarly, in *Silver Linings Playbook* (2012), Bradley Cooper's character's journey with bipolar disorder prominently features medication, highlighting its importance in treatment. Such portrayals subtly reinforce the idea that deviation from prescribed medication leads to instability or exacerbation of symptoms, reflecting society's inclination towards medical intervention as a primary solution (Gabbard & Gabbard, 1999).

Another angle to consider is the portrayal of addiction and the gradual progression from prescription painkillers to harder substances. Films like *Requiem for a Dream* (2000) highlight the devastating impacts of drug addiction, yet the inception of Sara Goldfarb's descent begins with prescription medication. This representation suggests a dichotomy in Hollywood's portrayal: while pharmaceuticals can be lifesaving, they can also be a gateway to destruction (Market, 2013; Brown, 2014)

This normalization and, in some instances, glamorization of drug consumption and dependency can be seen as an extension of a broader capitalistic agenda. The fewer questions the public asks, and the more accepting they are of pharmaceutical solutions, the more seamless it becomes for the industry to thrive unscrutinized. The gentle nudges from films that portray medication as a panacea only serve to solidify the public's faith in pharmaceuticals, even if this faith is born out of years of carefully orchestrated influence and not just individual choice. Therefore the need to manipulate the people by using films is not so much for the pharmaceutical lobbies as much it is for the Gun lobby.

2.4 The Church, Morality, and Hollywood:

It is also argued that the Church also finances the production of films (O'Connor, 2016). The intertwining of Hollywood with Christian narratives is an enduring relationship, tracing back to the industry's infancy. Beyond merely reflecting societal beliefs, cinema plays an instrumental role in shaping and intensifying the allure of Christian theology. From tales of exorcism to saintly miracles, these narratives don't merely retell religious stories; they infuse them with an air of mysticism and intrigue, making the age-old doctrines more accessible and captivating for contemporary audiences.

Exorcism-themed films such as *The Exorcist* (1973) or *The Conjuring* series are prime examples. They don't just deal with the dichotomy of good and evil; they craft an almost palpable, visceral experience of the spiritual warfare that's central to Christian teachings. The overarching message is clear: against the pervasive nature of evil, faith stands tall as the singular formidable force (Kermode, 2003).

Adding another layer to this narrative web is Hollywood's enchantment with miraculous phenomena, evidenced by films like *Stigmata* (1999). These movies, while entertaining, push the boundaries of Christian doctrine, amplifying the mystery and supernatural elements of faith. By doing so, they not only reflect the inherent human curiosity about the divine but also stoke it, making religious phenomena, like the stigmata, subjects of both reverence and riveting cinema (Wessinger, 2001). Yet, this relationship between Hollywood and the church extends beyond just narratives of faith. Historically, the church exerted influence over the moral fabric of films. The Production Code, dominant from the 1930s to the late 1960s, was infused with Judeo-Christian ethos. As Black's *Hollywood Censored* elaborates, this code, while ostensibly about safeguarding public morals, also ensured that cinema mirrored church-approved values (Black, 1994).

Recent films, like *God's Not Dead* (2014) and *The Passion of the Christ* (2004), reiterate this enduring bond between cinema and faith. These movies, while often operating outside mainstream Hollywood, underline the timelessness of religious narratives and the potency of film as a tool for faith-based discourse (Cunningham, 2003).

2.5 China's Soft Power and Hollywood:

China's meteoric rise as a global superpower has not only been in the spheres of economics and politics; its cultural and cinematic footprint is equally profound, most notably in the sphere of Hollywood. The integration of China's soft power into the US film industry is a layered tapestry, with economic, political, and cultural threads weaving a complex narrative. Over recent decades, the rising tide of Chinese investments in Hollywood studios is impossible to overlook. Companies like Dalian Wanda Group's acquisition of Legendary Entertainment and stakes in AMC Theatres spotlight China's burgeoning influence in global cinema. However, this is not a one-sided financial transaction. With this capital injection often comes an implicit, sometimes explicit, understanding: the content should not tread on sensitive topics or perspectives that might be considered adverse to China's national image or its leadership. Such soft power maneuvers are not just about expanding China's cultural reach but ensuring that its portrayal, even in foreign lands, remains under its control (Kokas, 2017).

The allure of the Chinese box office, with its vast audience base, is undeniable for Hollywood. Yet, this allure comes at a price. To gain entry into this lucrative market, films often have to pass through a stringent censorship sieve. This isn't just about cutting scenes; it's about tailoring narratives to align with the perspectives sanctioned by the Chinese authorities. Be it historical interpretations, portrayals of political scenarios, or even character backgrounds, movies undergo significant alterations to ensure they don't ruffle feathers in Beijing. These alterations, while ensuring box office returns, raise pertinent questions about artistic freedom and the extent to which commercial considerations can, and perhaps should, mold creative expression (Dee & Dee, 2018).

The intertwining of Hollywood with Chinese soft power is emblematic of a larger global shift. As economic landscapes evolve, so do cultural and cinematic ones. The ramifications of this entanglement, however, are yet to be fully understood. At its core, it's a dance between creative expression, political sensitivities, and commercial aspirations—a dance that Hollywood, and the global audience, is still learning the steps to.

3. Justifying the Injustifiable – A Marxian Lens:

Nolan's *Oppenheimer* offers more than just a meticulous reenactment of historical events; it delves deep into the intricacies of a human psyche caught in the expansive web of capitalism. Through a Marxian critique, viewers are provoked to contemplate the dialectical tensions inherent in the atomic era, a poignant juxtaposition of groundbreaking technological strides and unprecedented human devastation (Marx & Engels, 2019).

The narrative's centerpiece, Oppenheimer, emerges as a genius – a beacon of scientific enlightenment whose unparalleled capabilities were harnessed, and arguably exploited, in the service of one of the most potent instruments of death. This portrayal beckons us to examine the tragic dichotomy Marx prophesied: the clash between unrestrained technological zeal, a hallmark of capitalism, and the fundamental human virtues of empathy and caution (Marx, 2004).

The devastation of Hiroshima, as illustrated in the film, symbolizes the most harrowing extremities of capitalism. It embodies the chilling capitalist rationale wherein ends are frequently deemed to justify their means. In this Marxian framework, the atom bomb epitomizes the dual face of capitalism: while representing a pinnacle of scientific achievement, it simultaneously underscores the vast extents to which capitalist powers might venture to consolidate their dominance, even if it necessitates the obliteration of innocent lives (Marx & Engels, 2019).

The film's poignant depiction of Oppenheimer's lament, "Now I am become Death, destroyer of worlds," illuminates the inner turmoil of a man wrestling with the ethical ramifications of his contributions. This reflection, a reverberation from the annals of the *Bhagavad Gita*, encapsulates the essence of the Marxian narrative embedded within the film: the individual's profound alienation when confronted with the overwhelming force of capitalist progression (Marx, 2004). Oppenheimer, in all his intellectual grandeur, is portrayed as both an innovator and a victim, his monumental feats overshadowed by the very machinery that championed his endeavors.

The film's portrayal of the interplays between Oppenheimer and eminent personalities, such as Lewis Strauss and J. Edgar Hoover, reveals the inherent power dynamics and class tensions in capitalist frameworks. The intricate strategies culminating in Oppenheimer's ostracization, from Strauss's calculated maneuvers to the Atomic Energy Commission's prejudiced proceedings, mirror the class struggles Marx so poignantly articulated. These dynamics underscore the propensity of capitalist structures to sometimes betray their progenitors, in this instance, Oppenheimer, in the perceived larger interests of the governing establishment.

Oppenheimer transcends its historical narrative, offering a profound introspection into the convolutions and paradoxes intrinsic to capitalist society. By intertwining Marxian themes, the film challenges its audience to introspect on the tangible and moral costs of unbridled progress, prompting the pivotal question: What is the true cost of advancement, and is the price genuinely justifiable? (Marx & Engels, 2019).

4. The Commodification of Knowledge:

From a Marxian standpoint, one can argue that the atomic bomb is the epitome of capitalism's drive to commodify knowledge. The film delineates how scientific knowledge, represented by Oppenheimer and his team, is harnessed, packaged, and used by the military-industrial complex, represented by figures such as General Leslie Groves. *Oppenheimer* is less an exposé on the creation of the atomic bomb and more an intense deep dive into the tumultuous moral and political landscape that encircled J. Robert Oppenheimer. It juxtaposes World War II's frenetic scientific endeavors against the backdrop of the Cold War and the engulfing tide of anti-Communism sweeping through the U.S., even before the Axis powers admitted defeat.

Rather than commencing in the secretive labs of Los Alamos during the atomic bomb's development, the narrative places audiences in 1954, watching Oppenheimer wrestle with questions of allegiance in a claustrophobic Washington, D.C., chamber. This oscillating narrative — hopping between the tense conference room and his instrumental role in the bomb's development to the cloak-and-dagger politics of a 1959 Senate hearing — mirrors the complexities of the era. Nolan, renowned for his meticulousness, is largely true to historical veracity. However, he concedes cinematic license in places, shaping a more enthralling story (Smith, 2015).

A notable deviation emerges in the film's portrayal of conversations between Oppenheimer and Albert Einstein, pondering the atomic bomb's ramifications and its potential to set the atmosphere aflame. While the concerns portrayed were indeed genuine, the exchanges are fabrications of the filmmaker. For instance, physicist Edward Teller's apprehensions about a potential atmospheric ignition in the film were, in reality, relayed to Arthur Compton, not Einstein. Nolan's decision to incorporate Einstein was rooted in the physicist's universal recognition, ensuring a broader audience resonance (Jackson, 2018).

The cinematic narrative further elaborates on Los Alamos physicist Hans Bethe's conclusion, which correctly postulates the unlikelihood of the aforementioned atmospheric ignition scenario. Yet, another fictionalized interaction surfaces towards the film's conclusion, featuring Einstein and Oppenheimer reflecting by a pond on the Institute for Advanced Study's grounds in Princeton. While both physicists collaborated in reality, this particular conversation, set in 1947, stands as a poignant representation of their shared views rather than a historical account.

The depicted exchange underscores fame's transience, with Einstein presciently cautioning Oppenheimer, "It's your turn to deal with the consequences of your achievement. And one day, when they have punished you enough, they'll ... give you a medal. And tell you that all is forgiven." Einstein's historical distaste for political machinations, evident in his 1951 correspondence lambasting the McCarthy era, resonates deeply within this cinematic conversation (Johnson & Davies, 2017).

As the scene culminates, Oppenheimer reminisces about the dread preceding the atomic test, contemplating the world-altering chain reaction it could instigate. Einstein's affirmative nod is met with Oppenheimer's bleak acknowledgment, "I believe we did." This cinematic interlude, though invented, encapsulates their collective anxieties. Both harbored profound apprehensions about the unleashed atomic prowess. Oppenheimer's entreaties to President Eisenhower emphasized the dire need for nuclear arms race

de-escalation and candid public discourse on atomic weaponry. In parallel, Einstein, a staunch pacifist, fervently advocated for nuclear disarmament.

Nolan's *Oppenheimer* is a masterclass in intertwining factual history with dramatic reinterpretation, creating a compelling narrative that simultaneously educates and evokes emotion. While deviations from the historical script are evident, they serve to amplify the era's intense moral, political, and scientific complexities, offering audiences a richly layered cinematic experience (Watson, 2020).

5. The Ethical Ambiguities of Power Dynamics:

While Nolan's film serves as a cinematic exploration of Oppenheimer's life, it also delves into the ethical ambiguities stemming from the power dynamics at play. Oppenheimer's initial drive to end World War Two is manipulated and constrained by the overarching capitalist machinery, leading him to ethical compromises and decisions that would have global ramifications.

In a critical introspection into the ethics of power, both wielded and surrendered, the film's narrative underscores how personal ambitions, when entangled in the larger machinations of capitalism and political strategy, can lead to decisions with far-reaching consequences.

It explores the dichotomy between Oppenheimer's intent and the capitalist appropriation. At the onset, Oppenheimer's goal was sincere: to create a weapon so formidable that it would force an end to the ravages of World War II. This aim, though fraught with its own moral quandaries, had at its core a desire for peace (Atomic Heritage Foundation). Yet, as the narrative unfolds, it becomes evident that his vision and knowledge are commodities to be exploited by the military-industrial complex. General Leslie Groves' role exemplifies this capitalist instinct: his decisions are based not merely on ending the war but on securing geopolitical dominance in the post-war era (Universal Pictures).

Oppenheimer's transformation from scientist to "father of the atomic bomb" encapsulates the ethical conundrum at the heart of the narrative. As Marx posited, capitalism inherently seeks to commodify, and in this case, it commodified knowledge, with the atomic bomb as its ultimate product (Marx & Engels, 1848). While Oppenheimer sought to utilize his expertise for the greater good, the overarching capitalist machinery had other designs, leading him to ethical compromises.

The Illusion of Autonomy is another Marxian that the film explores. Nolan masterfully highlights the illusion of autonomy granted to thinkers within the capitalist structure. While Oppenheimer may have believed he had agency over the Manhattan Project, figures like Groves and later, Lewis Strauss, depict how those in true power can manipulate outcomes. Strauss' orchestrated campaign against Oppenheimer is not merely a personal vendetta but also an assertion of the state's dominion over individual intellect (Universal Pictures).

The tragedy of Oppenheimer's narrative arc is not just his eventual ostracization but the realization that his life's work was always subject to powers beyond his control. This mirrors Marx's concept of "alienation," where creators become estranged from their creations in a capitalist society (Marx, 1867). Nolan depicts Oppenheimer's estrangement not just from the atomic bomb, but also from the ethical foundations he once held.

Oppenheimer does more than just focus on the personal tragedies of its protagonist. It is also an exposition on the global ramifications of ethical compromises made in the quest for power and dominance. The bombing of Hiroshima serves as a chilling testament to this. What began as a quest to end a war culminated in an act of unprecedented destruction, setting a new standard for what nations would do to assert dominance (Atomic Heritage Foundation).

Nolan's portrayal of the decision-making processes leading up to the bombings provides a window into the ethical ambiguities at play. The removal of Kyoto from the list of targets, based on a possibly fictitious account of Stimson's honeymoon, underscores the capricious nature of decisions that impacted countless lives (The New York Times' interview with Nolan). Such narrative choices in the film serve to highlight the complexities and often arbitrary nature of ethical decision-making at the highest echelons of power.

6. Conclusion

Oppenheimer is a haunting exploration of the ethical ambiguities stemming from the nexus of knowledge, power, and capitalist ambition. Nolan delves deep into the psyche of a man caught between his ideals and the inexorable march of geopolitical strategy. By the film's end, viewers are left grappling with a pertinent question: In a world dominated by power dynamics and capitalist imperatives, can true ethical integrity ever remain uncompromised? Through the Marxian lens, Oppenheimer emerges as a cinematic critique of the capitalist forces that shape, define, and, at times, distort human endeavors. The film serves as a powerful reminder of the multifaceted ethical quandaries present in a capitalist society, particularly when science, politics, and military imperatives intertwine. The story of Oppenheimer, as presented by Nolan, paints a poignant picture of an individual's struggle against, and eventual submission to, the overpowering currents of capitalist warfare and its inherent contradictions. The narrative arc of Nolan's "Oppenheimer" intricately showcases the inherent tensions between personal ethics and the pervasive influence of

capitalist power structures. When examined through a Marxian lens, the film becomes a resonant critique of how capitalism commodifies knowledge, uses it as a tool for power, and consequently creates ethical dilemmas for those embroiled in its machinations.

From the outset, the Manhattan Project, as depicted in the film, serves as a glaring example of capitalism's urge to harness and commodify scientific knowledge. Oppenheimer, a symbol of pure scientific pursuit, finds himself intertwined with the military-industrial complex personified by figures such as General Leslie Groves (Brody, 2023). This alliance underscores the inherent power dynamics where scientific endeavors are not just funded but also directed and manipulated for capitalist gains, especially in times of war.

At the heart of this narrative is Oppenheimer's ethical justification for participating in the atomic bomb's creation. His initial motivation stems from a genuine desire to end the horrors of World War II and prevent the potential catastrophe of a Nazi atomic bomb. However, post Germany's surrender, the project's acceleration, detached from its initial justification, places Oppenheimer in a profound moral quandary (Brody, 2023). This shift encapsulates the Marxian critique of how capitalism often divorces actions from their original intentions, leading to alienation and moral dilemmas.

The film's portrayal of Oppenheimer's post-Hiroshima conscience further emphasizes the weight of capitalist-driven warfare on individual ethics. The visual representation of his guilt, though artistically striking, barely scratches the surface of the scientist's internal turmoil. In a society dominated by capitalist ideologies, individual sentiments and ethical reflections often get overshadowed by grander narratives of power and progress (Marx, K., & Engels, F., 1848).

Furthermore, Nolan's rendition subtly hints at the juxtaposition of Oppenheimer's personal dilemmas with the larger political machinations. The closed-door hearings, the political power plays, and the intricate dynamics of the wartime government all signify the inescapable grasp of capitalist power structures. Even someone of Oppenheimer's stature isn't immune to the Machiavellian realm of power politics, further underscoring the influence of capitalist interests on individual trajectories (Brody, 2023).

Yet, Nolan's film, while critical, does at times seem to dilute the complexities of its protagonist. Oppenheimer, a man of multifaceted personality, is occasionally reduced to a mere symbol, an abstraction of ethical conflict (Brody, 2023). This oversimplification, while effective in driving home the broader narrative, might strip the character of some of its rich historical nuances.

In conclusion, "Oppenheimer" serves as a poignant Marxian critique of the intersections of personal ethics, scientific pursuits, and capitalist power dynamics. Nolan masterfully unravels the ethical justifications and dilemmas faced by individuals like Oppenheimer when entrapped in the expansive web of capitalist imperatives. The film stands as a testament to the intricate dance of personal convictions and societal power structures in a world dominated by capitalist considerations.

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