

“Oppenheimer” and the ABC’s of the Atomic Apocalypse

by Scott Ritter,* USA



Scott Ritter. (Photo David Shankbone, wikipedia)

Assessing the birth of atomic America, put on display as only Hollywood can, I watched Christopher Nolan’s *Oppenheimer*. I walked away from the theater acknowledging the success of the film in portraying the protagonist, J. Robert Oppenheimer, as a fellow human

traveler in this adventure known as life. As portrayed by Irish actor Cillian Murphy, Oppenheimer was approachable by all who have toiled with the challenges of life, and our imperfect efforts to manage them. That Oppenheimer’s challenges were of a scope and scale unimaginable by most is irrelevant—the audience felt for the man, not the myth, and for this reason the movie is a great success.

The bomb was all flash and no substance

In its almost bored depiction of the banality of the bomb that serves as the centerpiece of Oppenheimer’s creativity, however, the movie fails. As much as I appreciate learning to like Oppenheimer the man, I very much wanted to leave the theater in mortal fear of the weapon he helped create.

Here the movie struggles—the bomb was all flash and no substance. The opening scene of “Saving Private Ryan” still resonates with me to this day; nothing about Oppenheimer’s creation stayed with me once the credits rolled on the film. It was Edward Teller’s “Super”—the Hydrogen Bomb—that struck fear into the hearts of moviegoers, a bomb whose destructive power

was symbolized on a map, using a drawing compass which placed circles around the major cities of the world showing the circumference of the “Super’s” lethal reach.

I felt no such fear when contemplating Oppenheimer’s creation.

That Oppenheimer’s “gadget” is the causation of calamitous chaos never resonates. Oppenheimer struggled, both in life and on screen, to compel those with whom the secret of nuclear death was shared to comprehend the absolute necessity of putting the atomic genie back in its bottle.

Oppenheimer, having helped unleash this awful power, understood the mortal sin he and his fellow scientists had committed. Conceived to defeat the forces of Nazi Germany, Oppenheimer’s “gadget” was instead given birth to intimidate the Soviet Union—ostensibly our wartime ally—at the expense of the Japanese, who were ready to surrender but first had to be made an example of.

There was a time when mankind feared the atomic bomb

This dearth of destruction directly linked to Oppenheimer’s weapon diminishes the impact of his later remorse over having breathed life into it. Moreover, it makes it difficult to use Nolan’s film as the foundation upon which Oppenheimer’s dream of banishing the destructive power of nuclear fission and fusion from the arsenal of mankind, limiting its utility to the production of energy, simply that – a dream.

There was a time when mankind feared the immediacy of its nuclear annihilation. Children grew up learning to “duck and cover,” while adults learned to promote détente over confrontation, abiding decades of Cold War because they feared the consequences of the nuclear fire that would transpire if the conflict between competing superpowers ever went hot.

Today’s generations have forgotten the evil echoes of everlasting doom that thundered across the Alamogordo desert on a July morning back in 1945; they did not steal furtive glances in the evening sky during the Cuban Missile Crisis,

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wondering if the setting sun might be the last they experienced, or if its dying light would be replaced by a bright light as if “hundreds of thousands of suns rose up at once into the sky,” like *Krishna* in the “Baghava Gita”. “Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds,” Oppenheimer claims to have thought to himself at the moment his theoretical gadget turned into the reality of man’s collective demise.

Has humanity become immune to mass death?

Foregoing the finality of the fate they have inherited, humanity has become immune to mass death. People die every day, this much is true. But the world no longer fears the imminence of nuclear mass death – the termination of all life as we know it.

Such a reality is beyond imagination, because we simply no longer imagine it, even though its cause resides amongst us, unseen because we opt to be blind. *Oppenheimer* could have been the movie that helped rip the blinders off the present occupants of planet earth, awakening them to the reality of the precipitous path we all are walking along, the edge of a nuclear abyss from which there can be no salvation.

God’s good graces cannot save those who refuse to save themselves. The hubris of men whose intellectual capacity was limited to finding out the flaws of men so that they might be destroyed is well-captured in “*Oppenheimer*”, the movie. The consequences of their actions are not.

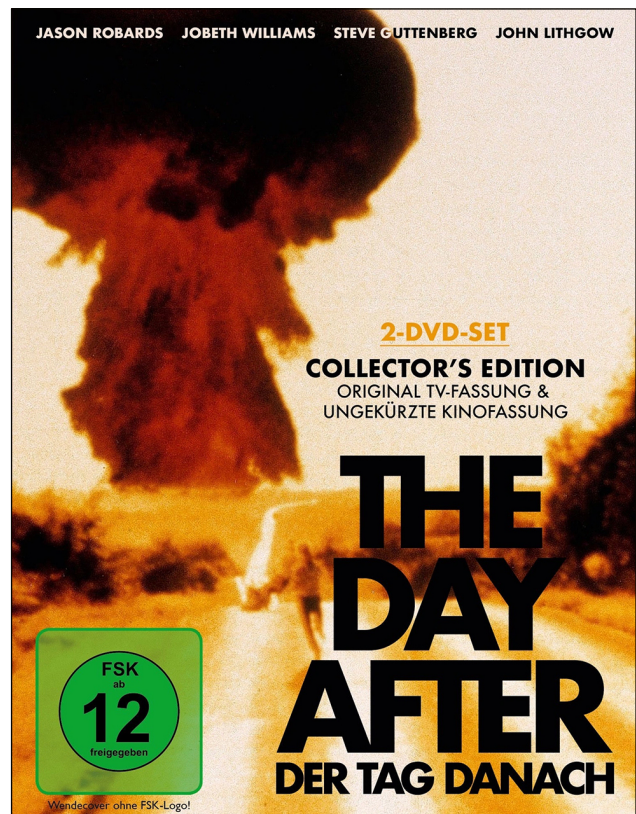
From their petty cataloging of human frailty came the growth of a nuclear weapons establishment the scope and scale of which is beyond the capacity of most Americans to comprehend, as is its purpose.

The notion of facilitating the mechanism of our inevitable demise – because if the nuclear genie is not returned to its bottle, it will be unleashed again – in the name of our collective security is a cruel trick played by the American government on its citizens.

We exist, it seems, to promulgate the very means of our destruction, perverting the purpose for which we were brought into this world, which was the perpetuation of the existence of our species.

I left the movie disappointed

Helplessly hoping humanity will have a collective awakening is a fool’s errand. I watched *Op-*



The purpose of the 1983 ABC television production "The Day After" was to scare the American people into an awakening where nuclear disarmament was not only desired but demanded and also initiated by President Ronald Reagan. (Picture ma)

penheimer in the vain hope that this film would be the vector for the transmission of the kind of insight that occurs when one is brought back from the edge of disaster. I left disappointed because the movie did not deliver in this regard.

That I expected such a revelation from theatrical art was not far-fetched – after all, it was ABC’s “*The Day After*” which helped alter the thinking of President Ronald Reagan in 1983, propelling him down a path that led to the initiation of nuclear disarmament between the United States and the Soviet Union.

But then again, that was the purpose of “*The Day After*” – to scare the American people into an awakening where nuclear disarmament was not only desired but demanded. “*Oppenheimer*”, unfortunately, was created to entertain. In this it succeeded. But as a vehicle for the salvation of mankind it fell far short of the mark.

“The Day After” achieved more impact

As I imagine the inevitability of the end of everything I have fought to preserve and protect, I am overcome by anger at what I had become – a defeated warrior for peace waiting

for some unseen (and unbeckoned) cavalry to ride to his rescue. "The Day After" did not occur in a vacuum — it aired nearly a year and a half after a massive gathering of one million Americans in New York City's Central Park to demonstrate in favor of nuclear disarmament and arms control. The actions and voices of this multitude of Americans empowered ABC to make "The Day After," and liberated Ronald Reagan politically so he could steer America down the path of nuclear disarmament. *Oppenheimer* cannot, on its own volition, change the world we live in. Only we, the people, can do that.

6 August –

Dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima

I therefore implore anyone reading this article to *join me in New York City* on August 6 in the joyful

juxtaposition of knowledge over fear, or life over death—of self-determination over fatalism.

Let us take charge of our future by demanding today what J. Robert Oppenheimer sought so many years ago—the return of the nuclear Genie into its bottle. August 6 marks the 78th anniversary of the destruction of the Japanese city of Hiroshima at the hands of one of Oppenheimer's "gadgets."

Help me and my fellow speakers and participants bring relevance to the moment, to awaken the fear that should exist in the bowels of everyone who has a brain about the dangers presented by nuclear weapons and rekindle hope in the hearts of humanity about the absolute need to rid itself of these awful devices before it is too late.

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