

“Destroyer of Worlds”: Individual Narratives, Mass Atrocity, and (Moral) Ambivalence

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This article addresses the confluence of two events in the summer of 2023: the release of Christopher Nolan’s Oscar-winning film *Oppenheimer* and the Biden administration’s decision to sanction the use of cluster munitions in the Ukraine War, via the lens of (moral) ambivalence. This analysis takes seriously the uncanny timing of these developments—one depicting the start of Cold War conflict in Hollywood style, the other marking the real-life continuation of that same conflict—to understand them as a single discursive event that offers a window into the storytelling modes that guide Western political life. I argue that Western narrative modes that privilege the individual as the central node through which we understand mass atrocity allow a vacuous moral ambivalence to emerge as the primary affect toward catastrophe wrought at the hands of U.S.-deployed and -sanctioned weapons. I suggest that a more rigorous, productive, and justice-oriented ambivalence is possible when we take a relational, historically oriented approach to discourses around mass violence.

Keywords: ambivalence, atrocity, Cold War, Ukraine, Oppenheimer, atomic bomb, discourse, narrative, conjuncture

We knew the world would not be the same . . . A few people laughed; a few people cried. Most people were silent. I remembered the line from the Hindu scripture, the *Bhagavad Gita*; Vishnu is trying to persuade the prince that he should do his duty, and to impress him, takes on his multiarmed form and says, “Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds.” I suppose we all thought that, one way or another.

—J. Robert Oppenheimer, *NBC News* documentary *The Decision to Drop the Bomb* (Freed & Giovannitti, 1965, 1:04:18–1:05:10)

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The detonation of the atomic bombs at Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the end of World War II marks the single most lethal act of modern warfare. Conservative estimates place the number of people killed in the bombings between 150,000 and 246,000. The full scope of the bombings' destruction is still unfolding as the health impacts of the thermonuclear radiation released on August 6 and 9, 1945, in the two Japanese cities persist with each generation (Listwa, 2012). What is clear, however, is the bombings' legacy in modern warfare, condemned by some and celebrated by others, but never repeated in the decades since.

The violence of the atomic bombings has been explained away in the West with a "lesser of two evils" narrative that prompts moral ambivalence in the face of utter atrocity. By "moral ambivalence," I mean the absence of a clear ethical position, where "ambivalence" suggests a resistance to binary oppositions of right and wrong. Seventy-eight years after the bombings—almost to the day—the release of Christopher Nolan's (2023) Oscar-winning film *Oppenheimer* has renewed conversation about the ethics of nuclear weaponry at a time when the possibility of nuclear war looks more real, some would argue, than it has since 1945 (Chappell, 2023). Providing a sympathetic and close look at the man behind the bomb, J. Robert Oppenheimer, a character Nolan refers to as "one of the more clearly ambiguous figures in history" (Overbye, 2023, para. 16), the film asks audiences to think rationally about the fundamentally irrational pursuit of manipulating the chemical structure of atoms to produce totalizing, potentially world-ending, force.

In July 2023, the same month *Oppenheimer* was released, the Biden administration in the United States made the controversial decision to send cluster munitions—weapons banned under the Geneva Convention and the Convention on Cluster Munitions—to Ukraine to support the country's fight against Russia. Criticized for their outsized impact on children, cluster munitions have killed between 56,500 and 86,500 civilians since World War II (Kim, Gupta, & Ismay, 2023). Reporting in mainstream Western journalism has emphasized former president Biden's decision-making process, noting the contested nature of cluster munitions while highlighting the potential for such weapons to turn around Ukraine's war effort and stressing that Russia, one of the West's most notorious adversaries, has them too.

Although the devastating impact of such weapons could not be clearer, Western discourses continually, if unknowingly, legitimize their use. Thus, in what follows, I ask: What kind of positionality toward atrocity might a distinctly Western commitment to the primacy of the individual and their presumed rationality enable? How might modes of narration that privilege rational debate obscure lived experiences of violence that should, but do not, preclude the further use of the very weapons that led to them? Placing these two events—*Oppenheimer's* release and Biden's cluster munitions decision—in conversation with one another, I argue that popular Western discourses, both cultural (as in *Oppenheimer*) and political (as in Biden's policy decision), engender a moral ambivalence that obscures ethical clarity. This moral ambivalence works in opposition to what some would consider the core function of ambivalence as a critical sensibility—to resist binaries and embrace complexity. In the Derridean sense, ambivalence refers to an "undecidability" that may allow for justice precisely because it requires rigorous engagement with more than one stakeholder (e.g., Derrida, 1993). Below, I discuss how the primary modes of discourse driving this "Bidenheimer"²

² The term "Bidenheimer" is a reference to the viral term "Barbenheimer" that emerged in the summer of 2023 to describe the joint release of the *Oppenheimer* (Nolan, 2023) and *Barbie* (Gerwig, 2023) films.

moment enable moral ambivalence, and I conclude by suggesting that a more rigorous, productive, and justice-oriented ambivalence is possible when we take a relational, historically oriented approach to discourses around mass violence via "compositional thinking" (Da Silva, 2016).

Methodological Approach

I closely read a constellation of materials related to *Oppenheimer's* release and Biden's cluster munitions rollout, including the film and its marketing materials, Nolan's and Biden's press interviews from July and August 2023, and the surrounding popular press coverage of the two events. I ground my close reading of these materials in both critical discourse and conjunctural analysis. Critical discourse analysis "implies a dialectical relationship between a particular discursive event and the situation(s), institution(s), and social structure(s) which frame it," where "the discursive event is shaped by them, but it also shapes them" (Wodak, 2014, p. 303). This approach allows me to conceptualize the release of *Oppenheimer* alongside Biden's cluster munitions decision as a discursive event, occurring at the same time in the same geographic locus (the United States), rooted in the same postwar / Cold War ethos and deploying similar narratives. Per the explicit interdisciplinarity required of both critical discourse and conjunctural analysis (Grossberg, 2019; Wodak, 2014), I draw from literary studies, cultural studies, human rights, and international affairs to parse this discursive event's meaning. For example, I look to Cold War-era thought from figures like Herman Kahn (1960) and Jonathan Schell (1982/2000) as well as anti-imperial reflections from thinkers like Ariella Azoulay (2019, 2023).

Critical discourse analysis entails an explicit attention to relations of power (e.g., van Dijk, 1993; Wodak, 2014) pairing naturally with conjunctural analysis, which "involves a strategic political choice—to work at a particular 'level of abstraction,'" where "intellectual and political analysis converge" (Grossberg, 2019, p. 42). The concept of the conjuncture requires a radical contextualism that refuses to take any societal developments for granted, seeing these as products of the power dynamics of a particular moment in time (e.g., Grossberg, 2019; Littler, 2016). Thus, my analysis takes seriously the uncanny timing of *Oppenheimer's* release and Biden's decision—the former depicting the end of World War II and the start of the Cold War conflict in Hollywood style, the latter marking the real-life continuation of that same conflict—by understanding them together not as a coincidence, but as a symptom of the conjuncture: the cultural, political, economic, social, and technological character of a moment in time (Littler, 2016). It is their timing, their joint rootedness in postwar / Cold War history, their subject matter—put simply, U.S.-made weapons—and the way they unselfconsciously reify the upper-class white³ male subject as the arbiter of morality on issues of mass violence that make these developments worth thinking together as a discursive event, symptomatic of a conjunctural moment.

Below, I begin my analysis with a close reading of a selection of *Oppenheimer's* crucial scenes to set the stage for the kind of narrative work I see unfolding from this discursive moment. Next, I turn my attention to a close reading of Biden's cluster munitions rollout, identifying a fixation on the role of individual male figures in allowing mass violence to become a rational occurrence. I end this same section by drawing

³ I break from APA style by not capitalizing "white." I do so to resist notions of white racial and ethnic superiority that have long led to violence and erasure (Laws, 2020).

connections between the news media's portrayal of Biden's decision-making process and Nolan's conceptualization of Oppenheimer's character. Then I discuss the ways in which the narratives at play in both cases figure the men at the center of the discursive event as "containers" of risk. Here, I draw from Cold War logics of containment to explain how individual men (and the violence they sanction) are portrayed as not only rational but also as the subjects with the most at stake in these decisions. Finally, I conclude with the concept of the historical referent, explaining how narratives centering white Western male figures remain dominant over time due to the logics of scientific and technical progress they employ. Throughout, I emphasize that Western narrative modes that privilege the individual as the central node through which we understand mass atrocity allow a vacuous moral ambivalence that emphasizes logic and individually oriented stakes to legitimize catastrophe wrought at the hands of U.S.-deployed and -sanctioned weapons.

"Now I Am Become Death"

Oppenheimer's much-anticipated release ran like a current through Nolan's and Biden's simultaneous press tours in July 2023, the inescapable pop culture backdrop—made only more visible by its bright-pink counterpart in *Barbie*—to the summer. Despite the excited buzz around this moment, a stern pragmatism marked Nolan's and Biden's interviews and the overall tone of the movie, which treats the detonation of the atomic bombs at Hiroshima and Nagasaki as a thought experiment more than a moral catastrophe. However, in one of its final scenes, the film makes an unexpectedly charged shift; Cillian Murphy as J. Robert Oppenheimer begins to come to grips with the gruesome reality of his creation when delivering news of the bomb's detonation to an audience of his colleagues and friends at Los Alamos, afflicted with involuntary visions of his audience as his victims, their skin melting off in ghostly, grotesque sheets. The moment is made more jarring by the audience's near-hysterical response to the news of the bomb's "success," the cheering and joyous crying of the Los Alamos crowd standing in sharp contrast to the visceral violence Oppenheimer imagines to their bodies. The camera flashes back and forth between the melting, frantic crowd and Oppenheimer's terrified, absent-looking face, highlighting a moment of potential reckoning with the violence his creation wrought. The moment is the most emotive in the otherwise stoic, processual film, which often feels more like a courtroom drama than the story of the most egregious weapon ever made.

This scene has been credited in popular reviews of the film as the clearest acknowledgment of the bomb's victims, who otherwise remain absent, a choice that has been criticized as an act of erasure that recenters whiteness amid an already whitewashed history of World War II (e.g., Mayeda, 2023; Wang, 2023; Zemler, 2023). A minority of critics see Nolan's choice to avoid showing the consequences of the bomb on the Japanese populations it decimated as a testament to the film's "formal and structural rigor" (Chang, 2023, para. 7), refusing "to exploit or trivialize Japanese suffering by re-enacting it for the camera" (para. 9). Nolan's aesthetic choice to nod to the violence of the bomb by imagining its effects on white skin, in the Los Alamos crowd montage, could even be read as somewhat radical, forcing the viewer to imagine nuclear disaster if it occurred at "home."

However, to the extent that this scene, and the film broadly, could trigger reflexivity on the part of American and Western audiences, it ultimately reinforces the "fallacy" that nuclear threat is "universal," when the violence of the nuclear has always disproportionately affected marginalized populations (Hurley,

2020, p. 16). Thus, in hallucinating the impacts of thermonuclear radiation on white Los Alamos scientists and their families, *Oppenheimer* prompts audiences to think about (exceedingly unlikely) harm to themselves, rather than come to terms with the devastation and lasting effects of the bomb on Japanese (and New Mexican) communities.⁴ It is ultimately a concern for the dire impacts of nuclear armament on populations like white, middle-class Americans that seems to drive Oppenheimer to his anti-armament advocacy in the final portion of the film, a trajectory that suggests any uncertainty he once felt about nuclear weaponry had vanished into moral clarity around its dangers. However, in failing to address the complex multisidedness of nuclear violence—or in other words, its sheer totality—the film bypasses a productive ambivalence of "undecidability," in which all elements are considered equally in service of a just conclusion (Derrida, 1993). Instead, the film enables a morally vacuous ambivalence that creates, rather than resists, binaries of "us versus them." Below, I turn to the popular discourses around the film and the modern-day instantiation of the story it tells—Biden and the Ukraine War—to dissect how this brand of ambivalence is baked into broader Western discursive modes.

Rationalizing Violence: Inside the Minds of Powerful Men

Both cases—Nolan's dramatized portrayal of Oppenheimer's making of the atomic bomb and Biden's decision to sanction cluster munitions—reveal a careful, detailed presentation of a seemingly torturous decision on the part of a singular individual that instills a kind of exhausted "damned if I do, damned if I don't" moral ambivalence toward the violence in question. When the Biden administration decided in July 2023 that it would send cluster munitions to Ukraine, debate about the extent of the United States' continued involvement in the Ukrainian war effort had been circulating for weeks. With consistent calls from Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky for more—and more powerful—weapons, the idea that the United States would break international law to send cluster munitions to Ukraine became increasingly realistic (Bertrand, 2023).

This dramatic lead-up helps to explain why the administration chose to release its decision on the topic in a highly controlled "exclusive" interview with CNN's Fareed Zakaria (2023), the topic receiving only about two minutes of airtime in the final cut released on July 9, 2023, during the program's primetime 10 p.m. slot (Herb, 2023). The interview took place in the Roosevelt Room at the White House, in the traditionally stoic, staged manner of official press proceedings, with Zakaria and Biden sitting directly across from one another *60 Minutes*-style (Figure 1).

⁴ The New Mexican communities impacted by the deleterious health and environmental effects of the Trinity Test at Los Alamos have yet to be compensated by the U.S. government for their suffering (Hegy, 2023). The movie leaves out the mostly Indigenous and Hispanic community members forced to work at Los Alamos, and live in its vicinity, during the Manhattan Project and omits the nuclear structure that still dominates the state's economy (Goffe, 2023).



Figure 1. Screenshot of Fareed Zakaria interviewing U.S. president Joe Biden on cluster bombs decision (CNN, 2023, 0:00–0:03).

As Biden shares his administration’s decision on cluster munitions, the camera closely zooms in on his face, highlighting the gravity of the announcement. It is worth quoting from this section of the interview at length:

ZAKARIA: You have news—the news is that the administration is going to provide cluster munitions to the Ukrainians. These are weapons that 100 nations banned, including some of our closest NATO allies. When there was news that the Russians might be using it admittedly against civilians your then press secretary said this might be constitute [sic] war crimes. What made you change your mind and decide to give them these weapons?

BIDEN: Two things, Fareed. I know it’s a very difficult decision in my part [sic]. And by the way, I discussed this with our allies, discussed this with our friends up on the Hill, and we’re in a situation where Ukraine continues to be brutally attacked across the board by munitions, by these cluster munitions that are—have dud rates that are very, very low, I mean, very high that are a danger to civilians, number one.

Number two, the Ukrainians are running out of ammunition. The ammunition that they used to call them 155-millimeter weapons. This is a war relating to munitions, and they are running out of that ammunition and we’re low on it. And so what I finally did, I took the recommendation of the Defense Department to, not permanently, but to allow for in this transition period where we have more 155 weapons [sic], these shells for the Ukrainians, to provide them with something that has a very low dud rate. It’s about—I think it’s 1.50, which is the least likely to be blown.

And it’s not used in civilian areas. They’re trying to get through those trenches and stop those tanks from rolling. And so—but it was not an easy decision. And it’s not—we’re not signatories of that agreement. But I—it took me a while to be convinced to do it. But the

main thing is they either have the weapons to stop the Russians now from their—keeping them from stopping the Ukrainian offensive through these areas, or they don't. And I think they needed them. (Zakaria, 2023, 10:05:08–10:13:38)

Here, Biden foregrounds the defense of his decision with a discussion of how challenging it was for him to make it. Zakaria (2023) nicely sets up Biden for this moment by directly acknowledging the controversy around the weapons, stating, "These are weapons that 100 nations banned, including some of our closest NATO allies" (10:05:08–10:13:38). Emphasizing how challenging the decision was to make allows Biden to present viewers with a choice—a lesser-of-two-evils narrative that presents violence as a risk/reward scenario—rather than a breach of international law. Biden emphasizes the lengths to which he went to conduct due diligence before making his decision, driving home the rational thinking process he undertook to arrive at his final call.

This narrative harkens to the kind of well-worn mental gymnastics that have characterized U.S. imperial violence since the end of World War II, in which atrocity is rationalized through extensive deliberation, scenario brainstorming, and gaming out of risks. There is perhaps no better example of this logic than Kahn's (1960) *On Thermonuclear War*, which paints elaborate pictures of life under threat of, in, and beyond nuclear war. Even the book's back-cover blurb goes so far as to say Kahn's analysis was the first to "make sense of nuclear weapons," noting the book's tone is "calm and compellingly reasonable" in its treatment of such a thoroughly charged topic. Setting out elaborate thermonuclear scenarios, Kahn brings unthinkable violence to life in concrete ways, allowing the apocalypse to become palatable (at least for some readers). While what Biden addresses in his decision on cluster munitions is violence on a smaller scale than the kind Kahn entertains in his series of lectures, both use similar rationales, emphasizing extensive deliberation to justify their ultimate understanding of violence as "reasonable."

How does understanding violence as a choice—a complex calculus to be decided on rational deliberation—make it palatable? A close look at high-profile arguments against nuclear armament reveals just how deeply the logic of choice is embedded in Western policy discourse. Schell's (1982/2000) *The Fate of the Earth* rails against the deterrence argument laid out in Kahn's (1960) *On Thermonuclear War*, but does so by appealing to the same logics of human intelligence and progress that Kahn uses to imagine a human future after thermonuclear war. Schell (1982/2000) titles Part Three of *The Fate of the Earth*, where he lays out his argument against deterrence, "The Choice," echoing Kahn's (1960) preface, which reads, "Men and governments have long been faced with the painful problem of choice" (p. vii). While clearly taking a different stance than his counterpart—Kahn (1960) sees nuclear war as *part* of humanity's Enlightenment trajectory, whereas Schell (1982/2000) argues that the nuclear is incompatible with humanity's fundamentally rational nature; Schell's framing of the nuclear in terms of "choice" still places the "nuclear option" within the realm of reason.

Schell's (1982/2000) lofty argument against nuclear weapons relies on a sweeping view of humanity that assumes a teleology—his argument beginning with the formation of the Earth "four and a half billion years ago" (p. 182)—that makes the nuclear moment appear as just a blip on the otherwise progressive, liberal trajectory of humankind. Schell sees unchecked technological advancements, not human

nature, as the sinister force behind nuclear weaponry, emphasizing this determinism as a stain on humanity's otherwise great "achievements" to highlight the evil of nuclear war. He writes:

But, as we built higher and higher, the evolutionary foundation beneath our feet became more and more shaky, and now, in spite of all we have learned and achieved—or, rather, because of it—we hold this entire terrestrial creation hostage to nuclear destruction, threatening to hurl it back into the inanimate darkness from which it came. (Schell, 1982/2000, p. 181)

Schell (1982/2000) nods to the clichéd ideal of a quintessential "light" humanity threatened by "dark" forces of technology and war, appealing to "mankind's" inherent creativity, rationality, and capacity for progress to suggest that nuclear weaponry's threat of destruction is irreconcilable with human nature's enlightened trajectory. While he paints nuclear weapons as *irrational*, his argument that humans are fundamentally *rational* and progressive furthers a view of human intelligence that echoes Kahn's (1960)—that we should evolve *with* the nuclear—inadvertently opening the door for justifying even the most destructive of actions.

The fact that Kahn (1960) and Schell (1982/2000), who stand on diametrically opposed sides of the nuclear debate, draw from the same rational narrative mode to make their case puts the emphasis on choice in the Biden and Nolan modern-day examples into context and suggests this kind of equivocation is a trope, not a one-off. Mirroring the same "challenge" Biden describes in his justification of cluster bombs, Nolan imagines how difficult Oppenheimer's calculus around the atomic bomb would have been, making it his mission to show viewers Oppenheimer's fraught thought processes. In an interview with *PBS* (Brown, 2023), Nolan reveals he wrote the *Oppenheimer* script in the first person, as if he were Oppenheimer, so that he could "jump into his head" (0:54–0:57), portraying the character with "understanding" rather than "judgment" (1:08–1:15). The film reflects this intense individualism, using now-iconic close-ups of Cillian Murphy as Oppenheimer, his face gaunt, serious, and brooding, to highlight the hyperactivity of Oppenheimer's mind.

While the bulk of Oppenheimer's moral questioning in the film comes after the bomb is already made, the interiority with which Nolan fixates on Oppenheimer's mind highlights scientific complexity in a way that masks the simple fact of nuclear consequences. Nolan's obsession with Oppenheimer's scientific mind mirrors the diplomatic complexity with which Biden's munitions decision is painted, overall suggesting that the matters are far too difficult for the layperson to understand. Speaking to *National Geographic*, Nolan describes the direct relationship between Oppenheimer's thought processes and work, emphasizing:

There had to be a strong connection between Oppenheimer's interior state and the ultimate manifestation of his work on the grandest level possible. . . . There is a vibration to energy that relates to Oppenheimer's own neurotic state as a young man. (McDowell, 2023, para. 24)

The piece later notes that the movie's special effects were meant not only to illustrate the bomb and its mechanisms but also "Oppenheimer's inner world and thought processes—explosions, waves, and particles, and the classic vision of electrons spinning around" (McDowell, 2023, para. 25). The cerebral nature of

these discussions allows violence to become something that is thought versus felt, the rational, logical, and teleological narratives with which it is presented turning undoubtedly extreme physical violence into something that can be understood as tediously complex, boring, or otherwise political. What is foregrounded in these interviews is the diplomatic, military, and scientific complexity of the problem at hand, not the reality of the violence set to occur.

Containing Risk: Abstracting Violence Through Individual Decision-Makers

The rational decision-making processes at play here further foreground the role of the individual at the expense of the collective by framing the decision-makers as those with the most at stake in each situation. Contributing to a sense of moral ambivalence in the face of visceral violence, the narration of these decisions suggests it is the men at their center who stand to lose the most in the decisions they struggle to make. The opening lines of Kahn's (1960) tome lay out the stakes facing those embroiled in the kind of high-risk/high-reward scenario at the heart of questions about military strategy and mass atrocity:

Men and governments have long lived with the painful problem of choice. Even those with the courage to make hard choices and the willingness to choose resolutely between good and evil, redemption and damnation, joy and sorrow, have never been able to insure the final result. The final outcome of benevolent, informed, and intelligent decisions may turn out to be disastrous. But choices must be made, dies must be cast. (p. vii)

Kahn's accounting of the decision-making process as "painful" and an act of "courage" suggests it is those who take on the burden of choice who are most affected by potential consequences. The emotional highs and lows Kahn points to are for the decision-maker to face and for the (un)lucky recipients of the decision to simply accept.

One way to understand this misplacement of risk is via the U.S. Cold War policy of containment, which stated that with its might and moral compass, the U.S. would manage the nuclear threat it unleashed on the world. In his classic analysis, Alan Nadel (1995) identifies the rhetorical strategy at the heart of containment, in which the predominant national narrative of the Cold War period identified a "dual nature" of objects in the world, a binary "us vs. them" logic organizing American perspectives on global relationships and domestic threats. Using Eve Sedgwick's (1990) notion of the "gay closet," Nadel (1995) observes the ways in which the binary-laden "narrative of the American Cold War," which requires "clear, legible boundaries between Other and Same," "takes the same form as narratives that contain gender roles" (p. 29). For Nadel (1995), containment was as much a rhetorical strategy as it was a foreign and domestic policy, one that "functioned to foreclose dissent, preempt dialogue, and preclude contradiction" (p. 15). Thus, we can map the policy of containment onto the narrativizing around *Oppenheimer* (the film, its director, and the man it portrays) and Biden's policy decision, where the consequences of violence stop and end with the individuals who create and sanction it. In other words, by centering the individuals behind the decisions and the risks they take by making them, popular storytelling around this discursive event constructs powerful white Western men as containers who "hold" the binaries of good and evil, success and failure, of key diplomatic and military decisions.

In the cluster munitions case, Biden acknowledges the experts and allies he consulted to make the decision to sanction the weaponry; however, he makes clear that the decision is ultimately his, meaning the risks and consequences squarely rest with him. The use of the first person in his brief, but impactful, rollout interview emphasizes Biden's own subjecthood and, importantly, contrasts it with the broader collective entities of Ukraine and Russia. Biden repeats, "I discussed this with our allies, I discussed this with our friends up on the Hill," before concluding, "But the main thing is *they* either have the weapons to stop the Russians now—keep *them* from stopping the Ukrainian offensive through these areas—or *they* don't. And I think *they* needed them" (Zakaria, 2023, 10:03:08–10:13:38; emphasis added). Not only does Biden's response rest on the dual "us vs. them" logic of containment, invoking Russian aggression versus innocent (and threatened) Ukrainian democracy, but he does so while centering himself—his first-person subjecthood containing the risk of the misuse or malfunctioning of cluster munitions and also the broader risk of "communist" authoritarian impingement on a capitalist, sovereign democracy.

In his telling of Oppenheimer's story, Nolan also figures Oppenheimer as a container of existential risk by reinforcing the well-worn justification for the atomic bomb, that if "we" did not make it, Nazi Germany would have. Speaking with *PBS*, Nolan notes he wanted to recreate the experience of what it would have been like to have been asked by one's government to "help in a race against the Nazis to unleash the power of the atom" (Brown, 2023, 2:05–2:17). Nolan rehearses the ethical dilemma Oppenheimer would have found himself in, constructing his choice as "no choice" (Brown, 2023, 2:20–2:22). He continues, as if in Oppenheimer's shoes, "You can't allow the Nazis to have a nuclear bomb . . . what then are your responsibilities as a scientist . . . for something that was necessary and consequences that are . . . perhaps inevitable . . . in bringing this thing into the world" (Brown, 2023, 2:24–2:43). Although Oppenheimer's work on the bomb occurred before the official ushering in of the Cold War—and, by extension, containment as an official policy—containment logics characterize how Nolan sees Oppenheimer as a sole decider on matters of freedom versus fascism.

While Nolan makes Oppenheimer's position as a container legible, popular reception of the film also maps Nolan himself onto the containment logic, emphasizing that despite the risks of making the film, his genius made him the best person for the job. As trade outlet *MovieWeb* notes, "Mostly known for his science fiction (*Interstellar*), thrillers (*Inception*), and war films (*Dunkirk*), Nolan was well-experienced in dramatic character studies when he began writing the script for *Oppenheimer*" (Starks, 2023, para. 3). Nolan quite literally contains Oppenheimer's story by setting the terms of its interpretation, justifying his decision to exclude the Japanese victims of the atomic bomb(s) because "to depart from Oppenheimer's experience would betray the terms of the storytelling" (Yam, 2023, para. 8). Nolan emphasizes his commitment to Oppenheimer's story while simultaneously containing a broader understanding of history, a move Brandon Shimoda, a Japanese American writer and curator of the Hiroshima Library, says keeps Asian experiences of World War II from being completely "knowable" (Yam, 2023, para. 13). Nolan's decision can be read as one of "containing risk" (or foreclosing criticism), as he does not want to sacrifice the "integrity" of the story (or likely risk criticism as a white male director for telling a story that is not "his") in casting the net of

Oppenheimer's story to include his victims.⁵ The very making of *Oppenheimer* was a professional risk/reward scenario for Nolan—one that paid off.

Similarly emphasizing personal and reputational risk while containing the possibility of critique, reporting on Biden's munitions decision highlights that rules are worth breaking for the sake of Ukraine, a friend and ally. By framing the decision as a sacrifice made friend to friend, the possibilities for fully knowing or grappling with the potential for violence all but disappear. For example, reports note that Zelensky expressed immense gratitude to Biden for making such a "difficult" call on cluster munitions. According to Washington, DC, insider publication *The Hill*,

Zelensky acknowledged it was a "difficult political decision" for Biden to move forward on providing the weapons, which make an explosive more dangerous by indiscriminately dispersing hundreds of projectiles over a larger area. "It's very simple, you know, to criticize, for example, cluster munitions, and you made a difficult political decision," Zelensky told Biden as the pair appeared together in Vilnius, Lithuania, amid the NATO summit. (Kelly, 2023, paras. 2–3)

Zelensky's remarks acknowledge the potential for Biden to face "criticism" levied on a seemingly simpleminded or naive understanding of war. Zelensky alludes to a double standard between Biden and his Russian counterparts, adding:

But you have to know that Russia used such weapons from the first day [of its aggression against Ukraine] . . . I didn't hear from all parts of the world when Russia began to use it; I didn't hear the same kind of criticism. (Kelly, 2023, para. 4)

Calling attention to the "unfair" criticisms Biden received for his decision to send cluster bombs to Ukraine, Zelensky highlights the reputational risk Biden took in making this call. Zelensky's sympathy toward Biden mirrors Nolan's understanding of Oppenheimer's duty to country, the invocation of threats like the Russians or Nazis in the face of seemingly inarguable values like democracy and freedom foreclosing debate around the weapons used to fight them. The only consequence made legible is that of the "brave" leader for making a potentially unpopular decision, which is seen as "containing" the threat of fascism and dictatorship for the greater good.

Historical Meaning: The Individual as Referent

As the only legible subject of risk, the white male decision-maker emerges as the core historical referent of this discursive event—Nolan's interpretation of the making of the atomic bomb(s) coinciding with Biden's cluster munitions decision in Ukraine. The hyper-legibility of the individual decision-makers has

⁵ Some critics have suggested that *Oppenheimer* need not shed light on the human toll of the bombs in Japan, given that Japan has a "robust" film industry and can tell the story itself (Goffe, 2023); others have argued Nolan and Hollywood generally are not well-positioned to tell the story of Japanese victims because of their distance from their experiences (Yam, 2023).

consequences not only for a politics of representation in which collective groups of victims remain invisible but also for historical meaning-making, in which individuals set the terms for how an event is understood over time. Historian Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995/2015) reminds us of the stakes at play in the question of narrative referents, arguing that the referent is essential in the context of mediated histories as the hinge on which historical meaning is made. In the case of the cluster munitions decision and Nolan's *Oppenheimer*, the individual not only overshadows the collective but also dominates the historical meaning of the events in question. For example, that the victims are wholly left out in both cases is made only more visible by the adversaries who emerge in their place. The intense rationalization of Oppenheimer, Nolan, and Biden requires an urgent "other" to work—the logic behind the violence only making sense if there is an identifiable threat with which Western publics can relate. Just as Nolan imagined the Nazis as an important part of Oppenheimer's decision to move forward with the creation of the atomic bomb, the final straw for Biden in making the decision to sanction cluster munitions was the fact that they were "needed" to "stop the Russians" (Zakaria, 2023, 10:05:08–10:13:38). Recall Biden saying, "But the main thing is they either have the weapons to stop the Russians now—keep them from stopping the Ukrainian offensive through these areas—or they don't. And I think they needed them" (Zakaria, 2023, 10:05:08–10:13:38). Here, the imminent, existential threat of "the Russians" and "the Nazis" funnels meaning back to an "us vs. them" mentality that allows historical space for heroes and villains, but not victims.

It is worth paying attention to how easily and unself-consciously seemingly higher-order national and global interests driven by logics of progress merge to obscure material consequences. Drawing from these logics, even arguments against violence compound the obfuscation of human loss, often citing moral leadership as a core reason to avoid violence, invisibilizing victims and highlighting the status of the nation—and, by extension, its key representatives—instead. For example, speaking to *CNN* about Biden's munitions decision, California representative Barbara Lee argued that using cluster munitions was inappropriate not only because they are dangerous but also because without them "we would risk losing our moral leadership" (Gregorian, 2023). Thus, the nation, a nonsentient entity, is afforded subjecthood in the form of "interests" and "progress." Schell (1982/2000) makes a similar observation in his argument against nuclear weapons, pointing to the disturbing way in which nation-state interests trump human lives:

The dilemma of the nation that in order to protect its national sovereignty finds that it must put the survival of mankind at risk is a trap from which there is no escape as long as nations possess arsenals of nuclear weapons. The deterrence doctrine seeks to rationalize this state of affairs, but it fails, because at the crucial moment it requires nations to sacrifice mankind for their own interests—an absurdity as well as a crime beyond reckoning. (p. 216)

What is most at stake, Schell laments, and Lee spells out, is the United States' standing in the world—and thus the abstract figure of "the nation"—not the very real lives in the mix.

In each case, national interests, far from stymying, are seen as inherently progressive, promising peace as the ultimate reward. Azoulay (2019) points to the stranglehold that notions of progress have on U.S. hegemony, arguing:

Destruction is done in the name of progress, a concept that today still holds the status of a supreme authority, sparing people the responsibility for their destructive actions and making them believe that their actions were guided by an authority higher than human interests. (p. 18)

Violence, when committed in the pursuit of peace, is necessary, this logic suggests, appealing to the "higher authority" of national and global order. This order is perhaps nowhere more visible than in the deep attention to the scientific and technical processes at play in this discursive event. For example, Biden's and Nolan's press tours included an overwhelming amount of explanation of the mechanisms of weaponry, where quasi-scientific examinations of *how* violence happens come at the expense of its results. *Oppenheimer* is riddled with scenes of "science in progress" in laboratories at Stanford and Los Alamos, culminating in what is the most climactic moment of the movie: the Trinity Test determining whether the bomb worked and, most importantly, if it would catch the atmosphere on fire, as was feared. Even the movie poster (Figure 2) for *Oppenheimer*, which circulated endlessly in the months leading up to its premiere, features a close-up image of Cillian Murphy as J. Robert Oppenheimer in front of a zoomed-in bomb, its wires and nodes revealing the complexity behind the technology.



Figure 2. *Oppenheimer* official movie poster (Warner Bros., 2023).

An obsession with scientific rigor pervades the movie, but what is even more impactful is how media coverage of the film obsessed over Nolan's recreation of the bomb, praising his use of "science" and rejection of computer-generated effects (CGI) to portray such a realistic nuclear detonation. Headlines promising insight into Nolan's genius include "How 'Oppenheimer' Pulled Off an Atomic Bomb Explosion Without CGI: A Giant Aquarium, Balloons and More" (*Variety*; Tangcay, 2023), "Christopher Nolan Takes Us Inside Creating Oppenheimer's Atomic Bomb Explosion" (*Entertainment Weekly*; Collis, 2023), and

"Atomic Expert Explains 'Oppenheimer' Bomb Scenes" (*Wired*; Wallerstein, 2023). These extensive explanations center individual genius and scientific progress as the core takeaways for *Oppenheimer* viewers, again emphasizing Nolan and Oppenheimer—and their genius—as the key figures we should remember from this history.

Similarly, coverage of Biden's munitions decision illustrates how cluster bombs work, providing consumers of the story with in-depth detail of a mechanical process over its potentially fatal results. Alongside reprints of Biden's *CNN* interview, which provided rationale for his decision, an adjacent set of coverage emerged the same week digging into the details of the munitions themselves, asking, "What is a cluster bomb, the controversial weapon the U.S. is sending to Ukraine?" (*CBS*; Ott, 2023) and "What are cluster bombs and why is US sending them to Ukraine?" (*BBC*; Gardner, 2023). A diagram from the *BBC* (Gardner, 2023; Figure 3) details the steps of cluster bomb detonation: "1. Munition is fired from the ground or air; 2. Bomblets are released; 3. Bomblets fall to the ground—not all detonate immediately."

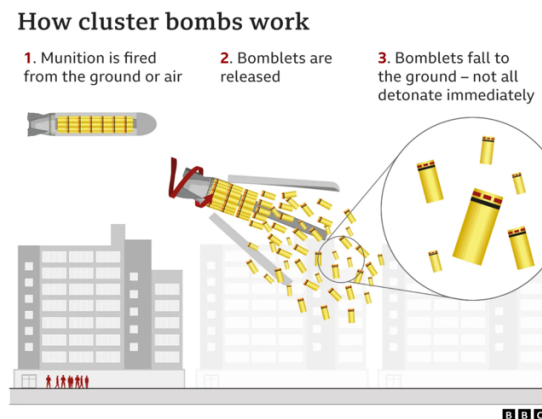


Figure 3. Screenshot of BBC diagram "How Cluster Bombs Work" from explainer piece "What Are Cluster Bombs and Why Is US Sending Them to Ukraine?" (Gardner, 2023).

What is the meaning of this kind of explanation for a lay reader? While each of the explainer pieces on cluster munitions includes mention of why they are "controversial," noting they have been banned in certain countries due to the outsized risk of harm to children, the pieces foreground the workings of the military technology in a move that seems to let readers come to their own decisions about whether Biden was right or wrong to sanction their use.

This glut of explanatory journalism around technologies of war contributes to what Azoulay (2023) identifies as a decades-long Western-led effort at teaching a "visual literacy" and "curriculum" of "legitimate" violence based on the global world order ushered in after World War II (p. 160). Azoulay (2023) contends, provocatively, that structures like the United Nations and accompanying documents like the "Universal Declaration of Human Rights," rely on a narrow view of "self-determination," where the rights of one body politic necessarily come at the expense of another. Without explicitly sanctioning violence, this explainer journalism places the reader in the position of liberal subject, encouraging them to think "rationally" about

whether the risk of civilian casualty is worth the reward of "peace" and "democracy." Azoulay (2023) argues this imperial form of visual literacy rests on temporal, spatial, and differential dynamics, where a linear version of time, sovereign authority, and the fact of inequality in society work to naturalize violence in the name of progress. In the case of the atomic and cluster bombs, coverage highlighting the workings of military technology presents viewers/readers with a scientific, rational logic that highlights the expertise and authority of those deploying them. An emphasis on progress allows the narrative's consumers, technologies of violence, and the main characters who decide on the weapons' use to emerge as history's referents, not those who suffer the consequences.

Conclusion: Thinking "Bidenheimer" Compositionally

Wishful thinking would follow that the release of *Oppenheimer* at the same moment the United States faced another critical decision related to high-risk weaponry could have provided the presidential administration with the historical perspective necessary to choose against sanctioning cluster munitions. Instead, Nolan's blockbuster hit and Biden's widely reported cluster munitions decision passed each other like ships in the night, existing in the seemingly separate spheres of pop culture and politics, the events doing little to inform one another. It is precisely in these moments, when the present offers no coherence, that conjuncture as a critical analytic allows us to find patterns that help explain such contradiction (Grossberg, 2019). A conjunctural lens allows us to see *Oppenheimer* and the cluster munitions decision as "overlapping sites" (Trouillot, 1995/2015, p. 19) where history is both played out and produced. The narrative driving this discursive event, where Cold War-tinged violence reemerged in the present day, relies on a version of moral ambivalence, avoiding moral clarity by gaming out hypothetical risk/reward scenarios. Ultimately, Western narrative modes that privilege the individual as the central node through which we understand mass atrocity allow a vacuous moral ambivalence to emerge as the primary affect toward catastrophe wrought at the hands of U.S.-deployed and -sanctioned weapons.

However, thinking of the pop culture moment of *Oppenheimer* together with the diplomatic moment of Biden's cluster munitions decision in Ukraine, as a single discursive event, also points to the productive potential of ambivalence as a critical sensibility.⁶ Taken as a framework that allows for rigorous attention to the specificity and complexity of given events, where agreed-on definitions and alliances are called into question, ambivalence is the disposition that allows us to see the Biden/Nolan discursive event not as a set of opposites (i.e., to send the bombs or not, to make the movie or not), but as a set of simultaneous elements that are meaningful in their co-occurrence. This understanding of ambivalence as it relates to the "Bidenheimer" moment allows us to undertake a "mapping of the present" that identifies the "elements" (Da Silva, 2016, para. 18) by which historic inequities are produced and reproduced in a seemingly endless feedback loop (Da Silva, 2016, para. 19). Denise Ferreira Da Silva (2016) argues that this kind of mapping amounts to "compositional thinking" through which we can begin to grasp "what has happened before and...what has yet to happen" (para. 17) in the world.

⁶ Thank you to Shani Orgad at the London School of Economics, an early reader of this article, for this very helpful and productive formulation of ambivalence.

Thus, following Da Silva (2016), my intention here is not to center linear time in a kind of “history repeating itself” critique, but rather to decenter the expectations of progress that come with linear time to call attention to how the past and present are co-constitutive. Just as the events in *Oppenheimer* technically precede the events in today’s Ukraine War, today’s events in Ukraine provide a framework through which we can understand Nolan’s blockbuster interpretation of the end of World War II. Paying attention to the compositional elements at play in both instances—including rationalization and complexity, containment of risk, and obscured referents—moral ambivalence emerges as a primary structural logic for mainstream Western storytelling modes, creating cognitive dissonance amid mass atrocity.

Others have asked what it might take to move subjects, particularly those in the West, to action when confronted with atrocity—how to understand life as inherently “grievable” no matter the body living it (Butler, 2016; see also Chouliaraki, 2006 and Sontag, 2004). With the ongoing suffering in Ukraine, mass death unfolding in Sudan and Congo, and the atrocities facing Gaza, as well as the decades of violence that preceded it in the region, this question remains valuable. However, the present analysis works somewhat in reverse of those questions, interested less in what it might take to bring the layperson to action and more in how narratives of violence render action unthinkable against the ultimate agency and rationality of elite, white, male decision-makers.

The present case study suggests that in mainstream Western discursive contexts, a hyperfocus on individual decision-makers in questions of mass death and atrocity allows moral ambivalence to emerge as a primary structuring logic of Western political life. However, while this reductive moral ambivalence takes on an unsavory tenor in the present discursive context, representing a level of stasis in the face of unimaginable violence, the work of ambivalence, as a broader sensibility, is far from inevitable or predetermined. Just as Trouillot (1995/2015) argues that history is actively “produced” in “overlapping sites” by competing actors, he asserts that “pastness” (pp. 15–19) is a position more than a temporality. What might an ambivalent positionality toward pastness look like for Western storytelling modes that did not sacrifice the moral for the sake of the individual? Where might ambivalence belong, if not in service of rationalizing past harms or sanctioning present-day violence? While the narrative elements dominating the present discursive context invoke an ambivalence that erases lived experiences of violence, perhaps future narrativizations will prompt ambivalence toward seemingly settled questions of world orders, moral leadership, and the necessity of war, making more human-centered decisions possible.

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