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CINEMATIC SELF-CRITICISM AS A METHOD OF JUSTIFICATION OF CONTEMPORARY POLITICS: THE CASE OF *BARBIE* AND *OPPENHEIMER*

Abstract

*The role of mass media in the dissemination of political propaganda has been widely explored; however, this research focuses on more sublime political messages that are conveyed through films, particularly blockbusters that target relatively broad audiences. Since the beginning, Hollywood movies have served as a reflection of viewpoints that have been socially acceptable at a given moment. Nowadays, filmmakers and movie studios often use the method of mild self-deprecation as a way of legitimizing broader political messages. In other words, they criticize themselves to avoid much harsher criticism from the audience. We use the recent examples of *Barbie* and *Oppenheimer* to explore the current trend in strategies – such as limited self-awareness and pseudo-self-criticism – that are used to justify far more glaring issues with capitalism and (American) imperialism.*

Keywords: *philosophy, self-criticism, legitimacy, films, politics, ideology, Barbie, Oppenheimer.*

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INTRODUCTION

This research examines the political strategies behind the film-making process, specifically those that aim to persuade the audience into acceptance and justification of a particular system of beliefs. The process that is sometimes informally described as the ‘whitewashing’ of questionable politics is, in reality, a web of complementing methods aimed to ensure the legitimacy of a specific political stance. One of the methods of gaining legitimacy relies on securing wide approval of a given political message, and pseudo-self-awareness may be particularly helpful in convincing the general public that the statement in question is morally and politically acceptable.

Before turning to specific examples from film dialogue, we will establish a framework on how cinematic experience serves in the deliverance of political messages. In the following section, we introduce the notion of political legitimacy and analyze the theoretical and practical obstacles that prevent films from becoming a more traditional medium of political authority. In Section 3, we turn to the alternative way of reaching legitimacy through persuasion and introduce many variations of the concept of self-criticism to establish a specific type that is suitable for subtle propaganda of various political sentiments. In Sections 4 and 5, we analyze the examples of self-criticism in *Barbie* and *Oppenheimer*, respectively, as we explore more general ideas encoded in the two films.

FILMS AS CONVEYORS OF POLITICAL IDEAS: A LONG ROAD TO LEGITIMACY

Throughout history, many mediums have been used to reflect current systems of beliefs or even promote different ideologies, and films are not an exception. From Wells’ musings in *Citizen Kane* on how greed stands in the way of (the American conception of) democracy¹ to strong anti-Soviet sentiment in films produced in the US during the Cold War,² and even feminist cinema as a more subversive illustration of a counter-culture to traditional Hollywood values and representations,³ examples of politically indifferent movies, if such even exist, are rare.

¹ J. Naremore (ed.) (2004), *Orson Welles’s Citizen Kane: A Casebook*, Oxford University Press, USA.

² T. Shaw and S. Kudryashov (2016), “The Cold War on film: Then and now”, *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 36 (1), 1-4.

³ C. Johnston (1973), “Women’s cinema as counter cinema”, *Film theory: Critical concepts in media and cultural studies* 3, 183-192.

Part of the reason is, naturally, the fact that filmmaking is a narrating process no less than traditional story-telling and, as such, is inseparable from everyday politics that shape the characters' and creators' lives and worldviews. Another reason is that films, similarly to journalism, appeal to a broad audience but, unlike the former, are not bound by impartiality. This position makes them a productive playground for creative individuals *and* various parties of interest willing to finance such ventures.

Given the context of financing, it comes as no surprise that producers often judge movie projects based on their *marketability* and *playability*. In the era of blockbusters, the former – the ability to attract the audience – is starting to take a lead over playability – the ability to *keep* the audience or, more precisely, elicit a positive response.⁴ If the film is marketable enough, it will be watched enough to make a profit for everyone involved, and whether the audience will enjoy or even approve of it is of lesser importance.

In a film industry mainly motivated by profit, the question of what we can say about the political agenda of such films arises. Studies have shown that blockbusters are not only able to tackle more serious issues, such as capitalism, privatization, and racism but can also criticize the culture they are the product of, as long as such criticism does not stand in the way of profit.⁵ Furthermore, they can influence and change public opinion, especially when the public in question is unaware of the intention to have their opinion changed.⁶ But what is the nature of that influence?

The fact that media driven by profit can alter public opinion and to do so by criticizing at least some parts of the consumerist culture it originated from does not, in itself, certify that such an influence is justified or even beneficial. Furthermore, there are no guarantees that the blockbusters and movie studios that produce them have the authority necessary to drastically change the landscape of public opinion. Perhaps we should ask the following question: do political messages introduced in blockbusters have legitimacy, or should we consider their political

⁴ C. H. Davis et al. (2016), "Making global audiences for a Hollywood 'blockbuster' feature film: Marketability, playability, and *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey* (2012)", *Journal of Fandom Studies* 4 (1), 105-125.

⁵ M. Allen (2016), *Political Messages in Hollywood Blockbusters: An Analysis of Political Themes in Science Fiction from the Last Four Decades*.

⁶ T. Adkins and J. J. Castle (2014), "Moving pictures? Experimental evidence of cinematic influence on political attitudes", *Social Science Quarterly* 95 (5), 1230-1244.

content as gibberish that quickly loses its potency, just like the film's playability is becoming less and less important?

From a philosophical point of view, the concept of legitimacy originates from the concept of political authority, that is, an individual or a group whose moral virtues qualify them as the arbiters of law.⁷ Therefore, a policy or a message, in its broadest sense, is legitimate only if it is introduced by a morally respectable agent. Alternatively, we can take a minimalist route and describe legitimacy as a normative property of an individual political decision⁸ independent of the policymakers' moral propriety. Thus, a purely philosophical perspective does not seem to amount to the project of ascribing legitimacy to cinematic political messages, as it – even in its most reduced form – cannot be separated from normative moral theories, and it is tough to think of films as typical political decisions that can hold a normative property. It is, perhaps, even more challenging to describe filmmakers and producers as particularly virtuous individuals whose moral supremacy prompts us to accept them as indisputable lawmakers.

However, a more sociologically oriented approach could provide insight into why we *feel* that political messages encoded in films have such strength or even straightforward legitimacy. According to this perspective, legitimacy has less to do with morals and justice and everything to do with obedience and compliance.⁹ A political message is, thus, as legitimate as it is accepted. Therefore, if the audience is willing to act on the ideas portrayed in blockbusters, we could argue that blockbusters *are* a legitimate source of political information.

Nevertheless, this morally bereft outlook does not seem to settle the question of the political legitimacy of the movies for long, due to several reasons. The first reason is that the creators of modern blockbusters, as we shall see in Sections 4 and 5, do not shy away from positioning themselves as the ultimate *moral* arbiters. It means that they act as moral referees despite the lack of formal or even conventional recognition of them as such. People predominantly appreciate blockbusters for their entertainment value and rarely consider them ethical guidelines. However, if we are to argue that there *are* sublime messages in blockbusters, then those messages are typically nothing short of moralistic propaganda.

⁷ A. Buchanan (2002), "Political legitimacy and democracy", *Ethics* 112 (4), 689-719.

⁸ F. Peter (2020), "The grounds of political legitimacy", *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* 6 (3), 372-390.

⁹ U. Abulof (2016), "Public political thought: Bridging the sociological–philosophical divide in the study of legitimacy", *The British Journal of Sociology*, 67(2), 371-391.

The second obstacle in the way of political legitimacy concerns the technical limitations of film as a medium. While it is, as we have seen, more approachable to a broad audience than, for instance, professional literature, or, in our modern time, any other *written* source, the trouble with the film is that it is often implicit in its message encoding. While written sources can spell out the messages, films cannot do so, as they rely on visual content that is necessarily imprecise.¹⁰ Thus the question is: if a medium is vague in conveying its political content, how can we assess its legitimacy?

Finally, the third reason is that, according to the aforementioned sociological framework, the mere existence of a political message in a film does not warrant its legitimacy. For a message to be legitimate, it also needs to be accepted, which is not always an easy task. The audience typically has preexisting political attitudes that may or may not align with the message a film is trying to convey. Such background attitudes tend to be persistent to the point that each new piece of information is judged in the light of them. If a new message strongly contradicts the viewer's presuppositions, the viewer will be more inclined to reject it,¹¹ which means that the movies need to be/seem relatable to the vast majority of the audience. Just because the audience is presented with the political idea does not mean they are willing to follow it, and the lack of following indicates the lack of legitimacy. Therefore, filmmakers – if they aspire to legitimacy and the broader recognition that comes with it – typically need to use many different persuasion techniques to ensure that the message gets to the target audience and that the audience accepts it.

PERSUASION STRATEGIES, IDEOLOGY, AND THE ROLE OF SELF-CRITICISM

When an agent is not officially recognized as a political authority and still strives to make an impact on policies or influence public opinion in general, they may turn to a strategy described as *self-legitimization*. It is a process of justification of one's actions and values that even acknowledged political organizations sometimes turn to, particularly in the face of public criticism.¹² For the self-legitimization of Hollywood

¹⁰ T. McClelland (2011), "The Philosophy of Film and Film as Philosophy", *Cinema* 2, 11-35.

¹¹ D. O. Sears and R. Kosterman (1994), "Mass media and political persuasion", *Persuasion: Psychological insights and perspectives*, 251-278.

¹² H. Schmidtke and T. Lenz (2023), "Expanding or defending legitimacy? Why international organizations intensify self-legitimation", *The Review of International Organizations*, 1-32.

studios and producers, the people in charge must be aware of general sentiments in society to properly assess the risk of potential criticism. Ideally, the social criticism will be addressed even before it appears, or at least before it gets the cultural momentum that can negatively impact the overall profit.

While self-legitimization can, in fact, contribute to the overall transparency of the various businesses, it is, nevertheless, a fruitful ground for persuasion. Since there are no official guidelines on *how* one can fairly self-legitimize, companies are free to justify themselves in any way they find appropriate. And sometimes, the whole process is a farce that merely serves to calm the general public while the main issues remain intact. Some of the examples include practices such as *white-washing*, that is, the denial of systemic oppression of people of color,¹³ or *greenwashing*, which occurs when companies that significantly contribute to pollution present as eco-friendly.¹⁴

If we return to contemporary filmmaking, we can see that many modern blockbusters seemingly go out of their way to include diverse actors and messages about, for instance, women's empowerment, LG-BT rights, or any other socially relevant issue. And even these endeavors often fall short when it comes to proper diversity and representation among people behind the screen and, as it turns out, are rather symbolic compared to real-life numbers and statistics. A study conducted and published by the *USC Annenberg Inclusion Initiative* at the beginning of 2024, which covered popular US-produced films between 2007 and 2023, has shown that the number of women and people of color among film directors was disproportionately lower than expected compared to the percentage they make of the general population. Furthermore, available data points to the lack of probability that the underrepresentation issue is going to be resolved any time soon, due to the producers and distributors still being reluctant regarding investments in films made by non-white and non-male directors.¹⁵ The seemingly growing representation of minorities on the screen, thus, often covers the real power imbalance behind the scenes.

¹³ M. Reitman (2006), "Uncovering the white place: Whitewashing at work", *Social & Cultural Geography* 7 (2), 267-282.

¹⁴ Netto De Freitas et al. (2020) "Concepts and forms of greenwashing: A systematic review", *Environmental Sciences Europe* 32 (1), 1-12.

¹⁵ S. L. Smith and K. Pieper (2024), *Inclusion in the Director's Chair: Analysis of Director Gender and Race/Ethnicity Across the 1,700 Top Films from 2007 to 2023*, USC Annenberg inclusion initiative.

The trouble is that the studios that are, on the surface, vocal about social injustice, more often than not, benefit from the very same power imbalance they pretend to criticize. Such ‘criticism’ is, due to where it is coming from, very meek and hypocritical, even when the message incorporated in the script is unproblematic and seemingly empowering. But the more consequential issue is that it may not even be criticism *at all*, but rather the subtle way of justifying the *status quo*. Given all the benefits the entertainment industry has been reaping off social inequality¹⁶, it is evident that Hollywood was never about revolution; it was about entertaining and *preventing* people from thinking of revolution.

It should be noted that techniques such as whitewashing, greenwashing, and many other kinds of audience manipulation are not monolithic. They come in various shapes and forms and help different corrupt causes. Moreover, they are umbrella terms that serve to describe many small-scale coordinated tactics that filmmakers and producers use to persuade the audience into compliance and, thus, provide justification and legitimacy for the current state of things.¹⁷ Typically and, perhaps, unfortunately for moral philosophers, it can be challenging to draw a clear line between *persuasion* and *manipulation*, as both approaches have the same goal of changing one’s opinion. Furthermore, manipulation needs not to be done for nefarious reasons, as one can be tricked into doing something good for themselves or others.¹⁸ The same goes for the more specified strategy of *propaganda*, which may promote true or false beliefs and do so for better or worse for society.¹⁹ The most notable difference between propaganda and other types of persuasion lies in the former’s organized attempt to promote *ideology*,²⁰ although the ideological aspects of the content may not be apparent to those on the receiving end.

¹⁶ Studies have shown that women in the entertainment industry, on average, earn less than men of the same qualifications, while people of color not only earn less than their white peers but also have fewer work opportunities (Weinstein 2019, Yuen 2019). These examples show the intertwined relationship between systemic oppression and profit and illustrate how movie studios financially benefit from social inequality.

¹⁷ The strategies we discuss here are mainly borrowed and adapted from research concerned with mass media in general, as somewhat surprisingly, there are not many studies that focus solely on manipulation tactics in filmmaking.

¹⁸ S. Sorlin (2017) “The pragmatics of manipulation: Exploiting im/politeness theories”, *Journal of Pragmatics* 121, 132-146.

¹⁹ C. Wardle (2018), “Information disorder: The essential glossary”, *Harvard, MA: Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics, and Public Policy*, Harvard Kennedy School.

²⁰ A. Hyzen (2021), “Revisiting the theoretical foundations of propaganda”, *International journal of communication* 15, 3479-3496.

All the fuzziness around the notions of persuasion, manipulation, and propaganda prompts a challenge even for social scientists to recognize and differentiate them at times, let alone pass a moral judgment on when and to what degree these strategies are acceptable. This lack of recognition is what makes laymen susceptible to propaganda and is a reason why the ideologies persist even among those educated in ethics. Furthermore, mass media, including blockbusters, play a paramount role in ideology dissemination, as the same political content can reach many people at once. Despite mass media not being recognized as a political authority, it can serve the interests of the political and business elite while maintaining the illusion of a society that autonomously creates its public sphere.²¹ In summary, the strength of mass media is not in giving power to the people but in persuading us that we *already have* all the power we need so that we do not require more of it.

Although we have seen that blockbusters can have political legitimacy *only* in the sociological sense of the notion, it does not prevent filmmakers from including philosophical and ethical points in their work nor from using them to gain the audience's approval. Even though, in normal circumstances, most people would renounce movie studios as ethical authorities, it does not mean that their moral judgment cannot be clouded by the subtle propaganda introduced in the movies, particularly if it is done properly.

The best course of persuasion would entail that it runs smoothly so that, ideally, the target audience remains unaware of someone trying to alter their opinions. Thus, one of the simplest and most used persuasion tactics relies on a *mere repetition* of the political or ethical message. Although messages relayed in this way are bound to lose some of their content along the many repetitions, they are likely to stick in one's mind.²² If a message is simple, sounds intuitive enough, and is repeated a sufficient number of times, the chances are that at least some of its recipients will be reluctant to question it. The idea is to ensure a natural reception so the audience does not sense that the film is trying to influence them but instead feels that it is speaking *for* them.

While mere repetition may be sufficient when it comes to simple messages, more complex aspects of the ideology require a more nuanced manner of communication. As we have seen, sometimes, a political

²¹ Arambala, G. (2023), "Mass media and propaganda: habermas and the decay of public opinion in contemporary society", *Prajñā Vihāra: Journal of Philosophy and Religion* 24 (2), 14-28.

²² H. Schmidtke and T. Lenz (2023), "Expanding or defending legitimacy? Why international organizations intensify self-legitimation", *The Review of International Organizations*, 1-32.

message cannot be spelled out, particularly not through mass media that people turn to for entertainment, not for a lesson in morality. The audience is, in general, unwilling to have their political opinion changed by something so mundane as a blockbuster. However, what blockbusters *can* do is to subvert the expectations through the imitation of *self-awareness* or even *pseudo-self-criticism*.

The notion of self-criticism is not unambiguous due to its various interpretations throughout the history of philosophy and social science. In Ancient Greece, it was understood as a vital part of self-care,²³ while in communist China, it was used to describe a part of the process of strengthening the solidarity among the party members.²⁴ Contemporary psychology, however, interprets it as an unhealthy form of self-judgment,²⁵ while some modern philosophers see it more benevolently – as a way of overcoming difficulties through reflection and humor.²⁶ Self-criticism, thus, appears as one of those conceptions with as many definitions as there are contexts in which it is used, and none of them seem to align with one another.

We argue, however, that there is yet another context, and our context concerns propaganda of the complex ideological messages in blockbusters. This new definition of self-criticism has two main characteristics. The first characteristic is that it is either *limited* in its scope or even entirely *manufactured* and only looks like self-criticism/awareness. The second characteristic is that filmmakers turn to it as a method of manipulating the audience, in the sense that they point out the *minor* flaws in the dominant ideology so that the audience loses the focus of the *major* flaws. To gain a better grasp on how such an approach can not only appease the harsh critics but even elicit praise from otherwise anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist audiences, we now turn to the examples of the two films that marked the year 2023 – *Barbie* and *Oppenheimer*.

²³ M. Nowicka-Franczak (2015), "Self-criticism in public discourse: A device of modernization? The case of Eastern Europe", in: *Dimensions of modernity: The enlightenment and its contested legacies. Junior Visiting Fellows' Conferences* (Vol. 34).

²⁴ L. Dittmer (1973), "The structural evolution of 'criticism and self-criticism'", *The China Quarterly* 56, 708-729.

²⁵ J. Costa et al. (2016), "Shame, self-criticism, perfectionistic self-presentation, and depression in eating disorders", *International Journal of Psychology and Psychological Therapy* 16, 317-328.

²⁶ C. Atkinson (2015), "Self-deprecation and the habit of laughter", *Florida Philosophical Review*, XV(1), 19-36.

THE *BARBIE* CASE: FEMINISM AND PSEUDO-SELF-CRITICISM AS JUSTIFICATION OF CAPITALISM

While most film critics judged *Barbie* based on its impressive technical aspects or the overall feminist message, little to no attention was given to the implied messages concerning capitalism and its side-product of consumerism. This comes as no surprise, though, as the film is arguably aesthetically pleasing, and its criticism of patriarchy is both well thought-out and age-appropriate. We have seen that mainstream movies sometimes criticize the culture they originate from and do so as long as this criticism does not interfere with profit. By the end of October 2023, *Barbie* made revenue of 1.44 billion US dollars worldwide, thus making its director Greta Gerwig a female director with the biggest debut at the box office.²⁷ It also made the top of the highest-grossing movies of 2023 list,²⁸ which shows that its feminist undertones not only did not harm the profit but may very well contributed to the film's box office success.

However, since the film aims at young women as its primary audience, its decision to criticize patriarchy is less of a bold take on social injustice and more of a good marketing strategy. Likewise, *Barbie*'s up-to-date take on women's empowerment, combined with its lack of proper criticism of capitalism in general, only goes to show the limitations of social criticism we can see in mainstream productions. It is not only *feasible* for blockbusters to succeed at one criticism while completely failing at assessing the other equally important social issue, but it is, as we argue, *essential* for them to avoid too strong a criticism of capitalism.

Furthermore, *Barbie*'s neat take on feminist topics not only does little for the women of the working class but may even contribute to Hollywood's more general goal of steering away the public's attention from other social issues at hand. It creates an illusion that *if* the criticism of oppression against women finally made its way into the mainstream, then it may also happen to other social problems. To solidify this idea, *Barbie* does *not* avoid the class discussion entirely but instead approaches it from the more favorable angle of pseudo-self-criticism and limited self-awareness.

The pseudo-self-criticism finds its way to the audience through characters' passing yet accurate remarks on feminism, capitalism, and

²⁷ The data was taken from the following statistics: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1401601/global-box-office-revenue-barbie-by-region-worldwide/>

²⁸ More information is available at: <https://collider.com/highest-grossing-movies-2023-ranked/#39-barbie-39>

consumerism, as well as comical depiction of *Mattel's* executive board, where the capitalists are presented as quirky, but overall not-ill-meaning-by-intention figures.²⁹ The trouble is that neither this self-awareness nor the criticism that characters seem to offer affects the story-telling in a relevant way. Therefore, it can be argued that these elements were introduced merely to *prevent* potential criticism regarding the film's overall blindness to the class issue. If we take a more distrustful approach, we could even argue that those messages serve to justify and normalize class inequality under capitalism. To avoid this discussion becoming purely speculative, we will now turn to the actual lines in *Barbie* that, arguably, provide a proper illustration of what pseudo-self-criticism looks like in practice.

The first hint at the intertwined connection between *Barbie's* liberal feminism and its pro-capitalist undertones appears in the opening narration that explains how the introduction of Barbie dolls has transformed little girls' play routine. It states that girls no longer had to play with dolls representing babies, nor to prepare for the role of motherhood but could instead own "money, house, car, career". To be a successful woman is, thus, apart from being a mother, represented in terms of monetary gain: a recurring idea that will be present in the rest of the film, most notably in one of the later scenes where the character of Mattel CEO eagerly explains:

"Women are at the foundation of this company! There was a female CEO in the 90s and then another one. At some point. So that's two right there!"

This exclamation occurs moments after we learn that Mattel's imaginary executive board is made exclusively of men and mostly plays out as a seemingly self-aware joke on how men run most companies. In one of the previous scenes, we get another similar and relatively accurate remark on how men run society when a random character explains to Ken that they still do patriarchy well and that they are "just better at hiding it".

These jokes work well within the context of the film insofar as they are correct and self-reflective to a point.³⁰ However, this criticism

²⁹ Such a representation, again, comes as no surprise given that *Mattel* is among the producers of the film.

³⁰ According to the available data, just under thirty percent of companies worldwide employ women as senior managers, and this modest number is even an improvement compared to the previous decades. More information is available at: <https://lefronic.com/blog/ceo-statistics/>

is of little importance even within the film's universe, let alone does it affect the real world. The character of Gloria, who started as a secretary, remains a secretary, and the ignorant male-exclusive executive board remains ignorant and male-exclusive. So, what was the point of including such complaints, if not merely to indulge the audience by looking self-critical while ultimately letting everything remain as it was?

This false sense of self-awareness, nevertheless, suffices in preventing the audience from becoming *too* curious and creative. We are invited to ponder on the lack of women CEOs just so we do not question the existence of CEOs as such, be they men or women. We are told to rethink women's position in society so that we do not challenge the capitalist society as a whole.

When the film addresses the problem of capitalism more directly, it does so in a similar manner. We get some characters mentioning the "rampant consumerism" or being excited about the idea that can raise the company's profit, but these one-liners lack the impact on the story's unfolding. Self-awareness that seemingly unmasks the dark side of capitalism, in reality, only serves to create an illusion that something is changing for the better.

As one character jokingly tells another: "I gave you a choice, so you could *feel* some sense of control", in a situation that is mostly out of their control, the same happens to the audience. The pseudo-self-criticism this film offers aims at our *feeling* of excitement when we see our opinions represented on the cinema screen. Nevertheless, it ultimately reveals the obligatory lack of imagination under capitalism. Capitalist productions can imagine many magical worlds except for the one where capitalism does not exist.

THE *OPPENHEIMER* CASE: PARTIAL CRITICISM OF AMERICAN IMPERIALISM

Unlike *Barbie*, *Oppenheimer* aims at a mature audience. From the lengthy runtime to the inclusion of prolonged nudity scenes and the constant scientific and political jargon, everything about the film firmly insists on the aforementioned maturity. Likewise, the political messages it has to offer are, expectedly, more complex and more elegantly handled. While historical films arguably require a sense of seriousness, this approach often serves the purpose of covering more subtle undertones, which – in itself and even in this case to a certain degree – does

not necessarily include unfair characterizations. *Oppenheimer* – unlike many of its predecessor Hollywood movies that uncritically praise the history of American warfare – offers a more nuanced approach to the highly sensitive episode in human history.

What makes *Oppenheimer* stand out from the majority of US-produced films is its atypically compassionate take on communism – a political stance whose strawman versions have been endlessly scrutinized in Hollywood since the beginning of the Cold War.³¹ In this case, communism is, somewhat originally, not exclusively associated with the Soviet Union but is also an ideal Oppenheimer, his friends, and even his wife strived for in their youth. Moreover, it is represented through the highly sympathetic depiction of the US Communist Party activist Jean Tatlock, and her complex and tender relationship with the main character. The “Red scare” from Hollywood’s past takes both human and *humanized* forms here, thus allowing *Oppenheimer* to establish itself as an apparent criticism of not only the history of the US war involvement but also the history of cinematic representation of various political ideas.

However, even in this case, capitalism triumphs over communism, and not only because it historically occurred that way. More importantly, the film itself resigns its seemingly strong anti-capitalist sentiment from the beginning by allowing Oppenheimer’s character to almost unprovoked conclude that such an idea is unattainable, which leaves any communist presumptions to die alongside Tatlock’s character. The overall message is that while communism may not be the ‘red devil’ after all, it simply cannot succeed for reasons that are never explained and can only be grasped in the broader context of the film being a Hollywood production. The most explanation we get within the film’s universe comes in the following words of the character of Oppenheimer’s wife, Kitty, who is also a former *Communist Party* member:

“I don’t like the phrase *having anything to do with the Communist Party* because Robert [Oppenheimer] never had *anything* to do with the *Communist Party* as such. I know he gave money for Spanish refugees. I know he took an *intellectual* interest in Communist ideas.”

Although the main characters relatively quickly move away from communist ideas, the ghost of communism persists within the narrative in a somewhat unusual manner. It becomes a deflection point once

³¹ D. J. Leab (1984), “How Red Was My Valley: Hollywood, the Cold War Film, and I Married a Communist”, *Journal of Contemporary History* 19 (1), 59-88.

World War 2 comes to an end, and the main villain of the story begins to use communist accusations to discredit Oppenheimer and anyone who stands in the way of his imperialist pretensions. This is where *Oppenheimer*'s previously unapologetic criticism of US imperialism takes an interesting turn. The character of Oppenheimer, who earlier – opportunistically and against the better judgment of his scientific peers – supported the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, suddenly gets the revelation, once plagued by horrifying visions of people burning. The morally gray protagonist becomes a traditional Hollywood hero and a vocal opponent of the further development of atomic and hydrogen bombs.

The trouble with Oppenheimer's epiphany, which otherwise might have worked as a good character arc, is that it comes across as sudden and unprovoked as his previous denunciation of socialist ideas. Scary visions of nuclear demise hardly provide an explanation for his sudden change, given that Oppenheimer knew what the effects of the bombing would be. In one of the previous scenes, as Oppenheimer argues for the bombing of Japan, he states:

“We [the scientists] imagine a future, and our imaginings horrify us. But they [the ordinary people] won't fear it until they understand it and they won't understand it until they've used it.”

What is more intriguing than Oppenheimer's sudden change of heart is that the film decides to dedicate its final third to a conflict between his new-found empathy and the ambitions of power-hungry Lewis Strauss, a former chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission, who gets nominated for the role of Secretary of Commerce. During his Senate hearings, Strauss reveals all the ugly features of imperialist politics but is fortunately rejected by the decent senators of the US, who are off-screen encouraged by young Kennedy. The lead cause of Strauss's downfall is, according to the film, his unfair treatment of Oppenheimer, whom he wrongfully accused of the communist agenda due to some petty disagreement.

In reality, it is more likely than not that the root of his rejection had more to do with the Democrats not agreeing with his Republican policies, but it is something easily overlooked in the context the film provides. This is especially true for the non-American part of the audience that is not used to viewing politics as a binary relation in a two-party system. It may even work for some native viewers, especially the younger generations who are not familiar with political figures from the past. The truth is, however, that the disagreement ran deeper than Strauss simply

being a bad man – which, without a doubt, he was – and Oppenheimer being a voice of reason – which he may or may not have been.

Nevertheless, the film uses their conflict in a way that minimizes the *collective* responsibility for the war terrors inflicted on Japanese civilians. While this change in approach does not necessarily take away from the overall message in a purely ethical sense – since the use of the atomic bomb is rightfully declared unfortunate – it narrows the scope of criticism, as the blame for the historical misbehavior is overly simplified. What started as a nuanced and general criticism of imperialism quickly deteriorated into a clichéd conflict between two *individuals*.

By the time the film ends, the audience is expected to embrace Oppenheimer as a reformed hero and American politics as overall fair, except for some individuals. Although the self-reflection we find in *Oppenheimer* is not lacking in content, it is very narrow in scope and suffers from too much optimism that a morally upright majority will prevent corrupt individuals from carrying out their evil intentions. However, it significantly weakens the criticism of imperialism that the film could and almost did offer. Instead, we are once again reminded that wicked intentions are merely an exception and that decency will prevail, no matter the broader political context or interests at play.

CONCLUSION

Creators of modern blockbusters are in a compelling position in which they both serve the needs of the *current* market and promote the ideas that will shape the *future* market. For their films to succeed, they need to find a proper balance between the ways of maximizing profit, the background political opinions of the audience, and the political ideology they wish to promote in their projects. Profit is, naturally, the ultimate goal, but to maximize it, they cannot be entirely oblivious to the current political climate in society since the movies are as marketable as the audience feels they reflect their opinions and concerns. However, they cannot get carried away in appeasing the harshest critics, as they need to stay loyal to the current capitalist ideology insofar as it enables future profitable projects.

It does not mean that blockbusters do not reflect the current societal and political trends. Moreover, they *need* to be reflective to ensure a sufficient level of legitimacy that leads to wide acceptance and interest of the audience. But only to a certain degree. This limited self-criticism

serves the purpose of making films *look* relatable while, between the lines, they continue to justify and perpetuate the same old power imbalance in society. Ultimately, they are here to remind us that capitalism has *no* alternative and that other ideologies are either irreparably flawed or simply unattainable in comparison. Blockbusters will, ideally, come across as ‘woke’ enough to recognize the social issues but simultaneously remain unthreatening so that they discourage revolutionary thinking among the general public. As long as profit dictates artistic endeavors, art cannot be a source of authentic social insurgence. Moreover, mainstream art needs to persuade the audience to accept the current state of things, as the future of profit depends on the audience’s obedience to the global capitalist ideology.

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