



Christopher Nolan’s *Oppenheimer*: An Atomic Gaze

Elizabeth Haas, Ph.D.
College of Science and Society
Department of English
University of Bridgeport, Bridgeport, CT

Background

The concept of the “gaze” enjoys a long philosophical history to define intersubjective relationships as power dynamics. In Greek antiquity, the gaze of the Medusa was deadly. Plato relates seeing to knowledge, contrasting the vision of the philosopher with the cave-dwellers who perceive only shadows. For Jean Paul Sartre, “gaze” and “look” are used interchangeably to suggest the vulnerability and loss of freedom a subject experiences in apprehension of the Other. For Jacques Lacan, the gaze of the Other threatens subjectivity, implying an unstable boundary between subject and object obliterated by the perception of the object’s look as a force. “[The gaze] is an x, the object when faced with which the subject becomes object (Brown).” The subject is irrevocably separated from the observed. For Foucault, looking relations characterize the surveillance state and provide the mechanism for controlling subjects (Marinković).



Linking the concept to gender, John Berger studied the nude in European painting to define the role of “looking” as male and being “looked at” as female. Laura Mulvey extended this division in gendered positions to film, ascribing the role of looking as male and active and the role of to-be-looked-at as female and passive. While modern philosophers determined threat in perception of the object looking, later theorists assigned power to the subjectivity of the one looking.

Summary

The 2023 film *Oppenheimer* dramatizes the life story of J. Robert Oppenheimer, the physicist who headed the American effort to develop the atomic bombs that brought an end to World War II and decimated Japanese civilians in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, ushering in the nuclear age. The film cuts back and forth between his life story as a gifted, budding scientist to the Red Scare 1950s when his government security clearance is revoked over concern for his former associations with Communists and his opposition to the hydrogen bomb.

Looking at the Bomb



Oppenheimer’s narrative structure places equal weight on the outcome of the Senate hearings on whether to confirm Oppenheimer’s chief antagonist, Lewis Strauss, once his champion, and the scientific work to build the bomb and test it. Despite the dramatic tension of Strauss’s confirmation fate, the bomb-making’s visual spectacle overtakes it, establishing a way of looking that rewards viewers and characters alike with the mushroom cloud pay-off. The film suggests that to apprehend what the scientists created they cannot look directly at it but must shield their eyes. The object of their gaze must be held at a figurative distance, lest they be forced to own what they would cede to the



government: choosing the bomb’s target and its results. The film structures the sight of looking around disavowal, the ability of the characters to look as a choice and to prepare themselves for what the effect of comprehending this obliterating other could do to their ability to know at all. The “atomic gaze” is a shield from and mischaracterization of the object. While on the one hand Oppenheimer’s careful construction of looking at the bomb suggests reverence, it also underscores the human inability to bring the atomic planet-changing process into a ken of reference, to put its process in scale. When the pay-off comes and the test bomb explodes in clouds of fire and ruin, the visual force takes on the metaphor’s entire weight by occurring entirely in silence. Later at a documentary screening about the aftermath of the bomb on Nagasaki, Oppenheimer looks away, and the film does not show us what his turn away is a refusal to see. We are complicit in an atomic gaze that will not recognize the Other of the bomb’s destruction. That the target turned out to be Japan and not Europe was prepared for with years of propaganda depicting the dehumanization of Japanese people, a trope continued in post-War sci-fi horror films:



References

Emmanouil Kalkanis. (2017). *An Analysis of John Berger’s Ways of Seeing*. Macat Library.
Llewellyn Brown. (2019). *Beckett, Lacan and the Gaze*. ibidem.
Marinković, D., & Ristić, D. (2024). Gaze and Norm: Foucault’s Legacy in Sociology. *Foucault Studies*, 36, 268-292-292.
Nolan, Christopher. 2023. *Oppenheimer*. Universal Pictures.