

Review: Movie *Oppenheimer*

The Light of Science, the Myth of the State, and the Hypnosis of Entertainment

(Reviewed by Gaku Tsutaya)

Christopher Nolan's latest film, "Oppenheimer. Gaku Tsutaya, a New York-based artist who has dealt with the history and stories surrounding nuclear weapons, discusses the controversial movie, which was not released in Japan.

Oppenheimer, a biographical film featuring Robert Oppenheimer (1904-67), a theoretical physicist known as the "father of the atomic bomb" who developed the world's first atomic bomb, has become a worldwide hit. The movie director is Christopher Nolan, who has pioneered innovative visual depiction in films such as *The Dark Knight*, *Inception*, *Interstellar*, *Dunkirk*, and *Tenet*. Although there have been calls for *Oppenheimer* to be released in Japan, it is still not determined if it will be released. New York-based artist Gaku Tsutaya reviews this film. The artist, who creates works that reinterprets and reconstructs facts and memories suppressed in the war and nuclear eras until the present day using allegorical elements, discusses this film's issues. —*Tokyo Art Beat*

A Nation's Distorted Story of War and Nuclear Weapons

Even today, many in the U.S. are in favor of the choice of dropping the atomic bomb on Japan because the bombing ended the war. In Christopher Nolan's film *Oppenheimer*, released in the summer of 2023, the storyline can be read as one in which the atomic bomb ended World War II. Coming from a nuclear-armed country 78 years after the bombing, the highly skewed perspective of *Oppenheimer* broke blockbuster records with its hit, and I couldn't help but feel uneasy. The film depicts Robert Oppenheimer's life and, at first glance, appears to be a film that raises questions about the atomic bombing through his regrets and struggles, but it does not deal with issues that would update our perception of nuclear weapons. This film is not inconvenient for those who approve of the choice of dropping the atomic bombs, nor for those who argue for nuclear deterrence.

The way people discuss war and nuclear weapons in the U.S. is different from the ones in Japan. History is a national narrative, and each nation has education through history, which is a kind of fiction; how the historical events are described differently between countries is apparent. However, because of the political partnership between Japan and the U.S., they put a joint effort to manipulate history in terms of hiding the *Hibakusha* and those exposed to radiation. This inhumane weapon of mass destruction is still unprohibited to this day.

Even in the very country that experienced the atomic bombings, the suffering and inner emotions of the *Hibakusha*, who are supposed to be the true protagonists in the story of the horror of nuclear weapons and the atomic bombings, have not been adequately conveyed. It is difficult for the postwar generation to face the A-bomb survivors in-depth unless they grew up in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, or even if they were born in the A-bombed cities unless they have relatives who were the victims of the A-bomb. In addition, in some cases, the *Hibakusha* themselves do not want to be reminded of their suffering or remain silent to avoid discrimination; then, even their relatives will not actively talk about the damage caused by nuclear.

Behind this was a major postwar trend in which the Japanese government, seeking political balance with the U.S. even after regaining sovereignty as a nation, used mass media, including educational programs and entertainment, to control public opinion, creating an atmosphere in which *Hibakusha* could not speak publicly about their suffering. After the defeat of the war, Japan's rapid reorientation to build the future was established in such an atmosphere. History is the story of the victors, and the narrative shared in Japan, reconstructed under the GHQ occupation after the defeat of the

Japanese Empire, is distorted. The story shared in the U.S., the country that created and dropped the atomic bombs and continues to create nuclear weapons, is also distorted.

Invisibility of Hibakusha and the A-bombed City

Oppenheimer offers a masterful story of the birth of nuclear weapons and the politics surrounding them, developed with compelling visuals and a complex narrative structure. Although it is a biography, this film is the creation of Nolan the Artist; as Nolan himself said, it is not a documentary but his interpretation. Nolan has skillfully constructed a three-hour narrative that never bores the audience by guiding their focus on the human drama of winners and losers within the scientists and A-bomb developers who are the nuclear perpetrators and on the power of a nuclear explosion. It is the very story of the U.S. government, which has not changed since the time of the atomic bombings. It is fiction that the U.S. has continued to insist on keeping nuclear weapons from being banned internationally: "Nuclear weapons are innovative weapons of mass destruction, but they have no long-term effects on the human body and are not inhumane."

In the film, there is a scene in which scientists at Los Alamos look at documentary photographs and video news reports of the A-bombed city. Here, Oppenheimer is wide-eyed and frightened and turns his face away. However, the film's audience cannot see the images Oppenheimer sees. Nolan does not insert shots of the *Hibakusha* or the bombed scene into the film, leaving this critical visual information to the audience's imagination, building a narrative solely on the stories of those on the perpetrators' side, and within that hierarchy, setting Oppenheimer as a victim of government pressure. Despite his failures, Oppenheimer is a human hero with a heart, and he captures the audience's hearts and minds. If the film had included images of the contaminated and bombed areas from the Trinity test, if it had told the truth about the *Hibakusha* and the long-term effects of radiation, the audience would have been able to more realistically and desperately accept Oppenheimer's anxiety and regret.

In museum exhibits, one can see the official view of America's nuclear history. Still, even those museums have, in recent years, displayed photographs of the atomic bomb-affected areas and revealed the health hazards of American uranium miners and downwinders (residents downwind), although they are only a glimpse. The interpretation of *Oppenheimer* is older than the museum in terms of historical narrative.

It would not be easy to notice that *Oppenheimer* is a film that could be propaganda after viewing it only once unless one is a *Hibakusha* or second-generation *Hibakusha* who knows firsthand the health hazards of nuclear weapons, a worker on nuclear weapons production lines around the world, a soldier, a downwinders or other global *Hibakusha*, or an anti-nuclear activist, a journalist or a researcher. The film gives the audience unconscious numbness and entertainment pleasure through high-quality visuals and a clever storyline about nuclear weapons. It satisfies the audience as a version of a true story about nuclear weapons without telling them the critical reality for the next generation: the damage and semi-permanent danger of radiation.

In the scene of Oppenheimer's congratulatory speech after the atomic bombing, an image that alludes to the bodies of nuclear bomb victims appears for a moment. The white skin of the faces of the audience members who are applauding and cheering peel off and flutter in the blast. Oppenheimer's foot crunches on a barely recognizable human body as he exits the hall, causing him to pause momentarily in shock. Throughout the film, Nolan extensively uses images of chain reactions to nuclear explosions, flashes, blasts, and shockwaves to portray Oppenheimer's psychology. Still, amidst such relentless repetition of light, sound, and shaking to show the power of the atomic bombs, these images of atomic bomb victims are just some additional segments in the film.

In reality, it was a world of black and red, with the ground covered with debris and bodies, the flames spreading, and the burnt and barely alive people running desperately for water and jumping into the river. Did Nolan not even feel the need to depict the already obvious hellscape beneath the mushroom cloud when creating a story about nuclear weapons, an

instrument of genocide that could be used in the current war? Nolan's idea was to visualize a story from the past century in the visual language of our time to reinterpret Oppenheimer's thoughts. The film is filled with explosions, shockwave tremors, and complex stimuli enhanced by editing. In scenes where there are supposed to be dead people or victims of the bombing, the images are replaced with white flashes. It is as if this new Hollywood movie is reenacting the magic of erasing tragedy with the light of science, the myth of the state, and the hypnosis of entertainment.

The Power of Entertainment and the Role of Culture

Since the end of the war, the world of nuclear has been depicted extensively in Japan through manga, TV programs, and movies. We, the postwar generation, also learned about the atomic bombing through *Barefoot Gen* and *Godzilla*. Some masterpieces were full of critical spirit and denounced invisible problems based on the A-bomb theme—Hideo Sekikawa's *Hiroshima*, Akira Kurosawa's *Record of a Living Being*, and Kei Kumai's *Apart from Life*. But *Hiroshima*, for example, was rejected by the distributors for its strong anti-American tone and was only screened independently.

Culture is our tool for conveying the truth in a way that escapes the political strife of reality. However, many commercial entertainment productions have twisted the story to favor box-office success. The tragedy of nuclear weapons and the havoc wreaked by science and technology has been portrayed as a fantasy, and the narrative pattern of a righteous cause solving even radiation has enthralled a generation that did not experience the war. We should not underestimate the power of entertainment. It fills our memories, stimulates our imagination, and nurtures our thinking. After watching Nolan's blockbuster film, which is still an outdated national narrative, I reconfirmed the importance of a cultural approach that reconciles the discrepancy in how tragedies are discussed and recorded in different countries, depending on the country and its social position. Culture's role is to cut through the political structures that mask the truth.

Since Robert Oppenheimer, we have lived in a world that went through over 2000 nuclear tests, with nuclear weapons and reactor production lines, and in an environment contaminated by the radiation spread by nuclear accidents. In this world where the destruction of the entire society by nuclear weapons can be real, we no longer have time to be hypnotized by fiction and ignore the actual situation of the damage.

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