



Semiotic Significance in the Film *Oppenheimer*

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Abstract: Christopher Nolan's film *Oppenheimer* has astoundingly garnered seven awards at the 96th Academy Awards, including Best Picture, Best Director, Best Actor, Best Supporting Actor, and Best Original Score. In this film, the symbolic expressions within the film are crucial for understanding the characteristics of artistic language expression in the film and even the overall thematic expression. Through the establishment of symbols centered on *Oppenheimer* within the film, it achieves an echo to the expressions of tragedy and fatalism. Moreover, by negating symbols and symbolization within the film, it rebels against the nihilism underlying tragedy and fatalism.

Keywords: "Oppenheimer"; Christopher Nolan; film symbolism

1. Introduction

The first impression that *Oppenheimer* leaves on its audience is one of a disrupted narrative timeline, rich cross-cutting, and high-density dialogue. The film's style continues from Nolan's *Tenet*, challenging the audience's ability to comprehend the narrative, as if setting a puzzle. Traditional linear narrative films are easy to understand, but Nolan's films disrupt the chronological order, requiring the audience to reconstruct the information in their minds to grasp the artistic expression, thereby offering a puzzle-solving viewing experience.[1] In *Oppenheimer*, the key to understanding its artistic expression lies in grasping the interplay between different art forms, the intertextual relationship between modern art and modern physics, and the unique symbolic language of the film. Through its distinctive audiovisual language, the film weaves a "Promethean" tragic intertext, while also showcasing the fatalistic imagery embedded in various art forms. These elements collectively revolve around the symbolic system centered on *Oppenheimer*, creating a profound resonance with the themes of tragedy and fatalism in the film. Furthermore, by questioning and negating symbols and their symbolic actions, the film challenges and rebels against the nihilism implicit in tragedy and fatalism.

2. Symbolic Expression and the Negation of Symbols in the Film

In Nolan's films, he frequently employs one or several objects as symbols that correspond to the film's themes and characters to convey symbolic meanings. For example, in *Memento* (2000), the Polaroid photo occupies a prominent position, from the poster design to the visual language within the film. The protagonist, Leonard Shelby, who suffers from "short-term memory loss," uses Polaroid photos as clues to reconstruct his short-term memory. The Polaroid photo becomes the "embodiment" of the film's title, *Memento*, serving as a crucial visual symbol that drives the narrative. Similarly, in *Inception* (2010), Nolan introduces the concept of the "totem" as a symbol of dreams, particularly focusing on the protagonist's totem: a spinning top. The repeated appearance of the spinning top, synchronized with the protagonist's journey through different dream layers, creates a clear symbolic meaning. The film even ends with a shot of the spinning top, prompting the audience to question whether their own reality might still be part of a dream. [2] In *Oppenheimer*, Nolan once again employs numerous symbolic elements to enhance the film's expressive power. These symbols, forming their own system, contribute to an additional layer of narrative and thematic expression within the film's context, ultimately achieving a self-reflexive negation of the symbols themselves.

2.1 The Establishment of Symbols

At the beginning of the film, *Oppenheimer*, a student of experimental physics at Cambridge University, despises his field of study and suffers from depression due to homesickness and social difficulties. After a laboratory mistake causes him to miss a lecture by Niels Bohr, he injects poison into his mentor's green apple as an act of frustration. While reminiscing about his fond memories of New Mexico in his dormitory, he suddenly remembers the poisoned apple and rushes back to the classroom. It is here that Bohr engages *Oppenheimer* in a conversation and poses the question, "Can you hear the music?" In this scene, the apple in *Oppenheimer*'s memory, which he used to feed horses, is red. However, the apple he poisoned and which Bohr holds in his hands is green. In Western cultural and scientific history, whether in the biblical story of Adam and Eve eating the forbidden fruit or the legend of Newton being inspired by an apple falling on his head to discover gravity,

apples are rarely depicted with a specific color, and when they are, they are mostly red. In Nolan's screenplay, however, he deliberately emphasizes that the apple in the classroom must be green and even adds the detail of it having a stem and leaves. [3]It is clear that Nolan intentionally chose to include a green apple in this scene, likely to convey symbolic meaning.

In modern Western art history, there is a painter who used the green apple as a significant symbol in his works: the Belgian surrealist René Magritte. One of his famous paintings, *The Listening Room*, depicts a room filled with a giant green apple. The title and content of this painting resonate thematically with the scene in the film where Bohr holds a green apple and asks Oppenheimer, "Can you hear the music?" It is highly probable that Nolan is paying homage to Magritte by incorporating this symbol into his film while also establishing his own symbolic language.

If we delve further into Magritte's works, some of his most famous paintings include *The Son of Man*, *The Great War*, and *The Treachery of Images (This Is Not a Pipe)*. Among the recurring elements in his paintings are the bowler hat and the pipe. In the film, Oppenheimer is almost always accompanied by these two elements—the pipe and the bowler hat—during his time at Los Alamos. There is a scene where Oppenheimer, after confirming his identity as a scientist in a discussion with another physicist, Rabi, puts on his hat and pipe. This scene emphasizes these objects with close-up shots, underscoring their significance. Through the symbols of the pipe and the bowler hat, the character of Oppenheimer becomes symbolically linked to the imagery of René Magritte's paintings.

2.2 The Negation of Symbols

To interpret these symbols, it is necessary to conduct a comparative analysis of the context of Magritte's paintings and the context created by Nolan in *Oppenheimer*. First, in Magritte's painting *The Treachery of Images (This Is Not a Pipe)*, Magritte attempts to negate the concept behind the representation by depicting a pipe and writing "This is not a pipe" beneath it. This forces the viewer to refocus on the form of the painting itself. In other words, the shape of the pipe on the canvas is merely a superficial representation, a symbol, not reality or concreteness. This painting fully demonstrates the signifier and the signified in language, indicating that the best way to study language is to start from the language itself, without arbitrarily extending its meaning devoid of context. In this way, Magritte creates a symbol of a pipe in the painting but does not want the viewer to be obscured by the inner meaning of this symbol, thereby losing the ability to judge the essence of the painting. Thus, Magritte negates the symbol of the pipe, revealing the essence of the painting as, ultimately, a painting. In this work, Magritte uses the creation of symbols to negate symbols, which becomes a central theme in his artistic practice.[4]

In *The Great War*, a diptych, the second painting depicts a woman in a white dress with her face obscured by flowers. This explains why Jean Tatlock, Oppenheimer's lover in the film, always throws away the flowers given to her during her meetings with Oppenheimer. She does not want Oppenheimer to see her as someone who, like other women, would appreciate flowers—a gesture that would reduce her to a symbol. Here, Nolan echoes Magritte's approach by creating and then opposing symbols through the treatment of a supporting character.

From Oppenheimer's subjective perspective, represented by the color scenes, the elements of the pipe and bowler hat do not appear on his person before he enters Los Alamos or after he hears the news of the atomic bomb being dropped on Japan. This demonstrates Nolan's intention to use the dissolution of these symbols in Oppenheimer's attire to reflect and parallel Oppenheimer's efforts in the film to resist being reduced to a symbol by others. From the beginning of the film, Oppenheimer's identity is constantly in flux: he transitions from a student to a university professor, from a non-partisan individual to someone labeled as a communist and Soviet spy due to his donations to the Spanish Civil War and his frequent associations with the American Communist Party, and from the "father of the atomic bomb" to someone reflecting on his role as a destroyer of worlds. Throughout the film, Oppenheimer is in a state of identity movement and self-reflection. He is acutely aware of his multidimensional humanity, which is why, during the security clearance hearing, he firmly upholds his principles and expresses discomfort and pain at the black-and-white nature of the questioning.

In contrast, in the black-and-white scenes from Strauss's narrative perspective, Oppenheimer is consistently associated with the symbols of the pipe and bowler hat. Nolan uses these visual symbols to show that, from Strauss's perspective, Oppenheimer is always viewed symbolically. This ultimately leads to Strauss's profound misunderstanding and prejudice against Oppenheimer, culminating in the infamous Oppenheimer case. Through the tragedy of Oppenheimer being reduced to a symbol by Strauss, Nolan highlights the dangers of arbitrarily using symbols to reduce individuals to symbolic representations. Ultimately, by continuously creating and utilizing the symbols of the pipe and bowler hat throughout the film, Nolan negates the symbols themselves. More importantly, this act pays homage to Magritte's artistic philosophy in both form and content, grounded in the medium of film. It further elevates the expressive power of film as a modern art form within the context of contemporary art and fulfills the artistic responsibilities that cinema should bear in the post-modern era.

It seems that through the negation of symbols and symbolic actions, the film further shapes Oppenheimer's "Promethean" tragic heroism, who endures suffering, while also breaking and dissolving the cyclical fate of his tragedy. The decisive

moment of Nietzsche's concept of "the eternal recurrence of the same" [5] is left to the audience's reflection after the screen fades to black.

3. Conclusion

Christopher Nolan's film *Oppenheimer* achieves a multi-layered intertextual expression through masterful cinematic techniques and the ingenious combination of artistic languages, seamlessly integrating auditory and visual elements alongside various art forms. Behind this intertextuality lies a perfect correspondence to the mythological figure of "Prometheus," as well as a dual emphasis on fatalism, reinforced by the film's non-linear narrative. By creatively reinterpreting and reconstructing the symbolic elements found in the works of Belgian surrealist painter René Magritte, the film deconstructs the meaning of symbols within the framework of postmodern formalism. Ultimately, it achieves a self-reflexive negation of symbols and the symbolic actions they imply, attempting to carve out a decisive moment for the character of Oppenheimer to break free from the "eternal recurrence" of tragic fate.

References

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