Reckoning with self-destruction

# We all live in Oppenheimer’s world now, and it is one that constantly invents the Ethan Hunts and Indiana Joneses of our fantasies.

by Kathryn Reklis in the December 2023 issue


Cillian Murphy as J. Robert Oppenheimer (Universal Pictures)

This has been quite the movie season to meditate on the ways our intellectual and technological hubris might destroy us. In the seventh and penultimate installment of the *Mission: Impossible* franchise—*Mission: Impossible - Dead Reckoning Part One* (directed by Christopher McQuarrie)—Ethan Hunt (Tom Cruise) is on a rogue mission

to stop sentient artificial intelligence from destroying the world. In *Indiana Jones and the Dial of Destiny* (directed by James Mangold) Nazis are seeking a nearly 3,000-year-old dial, created by Archimedes, that may allow time travel. With it, the outcome of history as we know it could be reversed, along with the progress of democracy (though I am not sure we need time travel for that, unfortunately).

Despite the high-tech gadgets and high-octane physical stunts on display in both movies, they each offer an old-fashioned fantasy about the power of the human body and will to overcome disembodied technology. Even as the superintelligence eludes every world government and manipulates some of the world's most deadly superspies to work on its behalf, it is Tom Cruise's leaping, running, climbing body that will stop it. Indiana Jones (Harrison Ford) must lace up his boots, grab his whip, and hurtle his own aging body through both space and time.

In each case human ingenuity has pushed the frontiers of thought to their absolute limits, and in each case our very species, our planet, and our deepest ideals might be destroyed as a result. Which might be why I couldn't stop thinking about Ethan Hunt and Indiana Jones when I finally settled down to watch *Oppenheimer*, Christopher Nolan's three-hour epic biopic of J. Robert Oppenheimer, the man who ushered the world into the atomic age.

*Oppenheimer* is a serious movie in a way the other two can never quite be, burdened as they are with the bells and whistles and car chase quotas their franchises demand. Whereas *Mission: Impossible* and *Indiana Jones* are both about the fantasy of the men who will save us from the apocalypse of our own making, *Oppenheimer* is about the man who pushed the frontiers of human thought to their breaking point in the first place. Indeed, the story *Oppenheimer* is telling is the origin story of modernity's deep-seated fear: that our own intelligence will ultimately destroy us.

As the title suggests, the film isn't a bird's-eye view of the atomic age but rather one man's life story. We follow Oppenheimer from his time as a student in Europe (and his early struggles with depression and anxiety), the founding of the first theoretical physics department in the US, his recruitment to run the Manhattan Project, the successful building and deployment of the first nuclear bombs, and his eventual fall from grace with accusations of un-American activity. These bare facts are layered with moral complexities. His commitment to deterring Hitler by building a nuclear bomb before the Nazis do is counterposed to the subtle and persistent antisemitism

that defined his precarious position in postwar America. The sheer exhilaration of chasing down an intellectual problem to the end is tempered with the regret and bitterness of realizing that the problem he solved unleashed species-destroying power in the hands of people he could not control.

Although Nolan uses plenty of special effects and makes movies on a blockbuster scale, to most of his fans his films are anti-blockbusters: intellectually dense, artful puzzles of nonlinear timelines and cerebral meditations. *Oppenheimer* is more restrained in this regard than many of his earlier films, but it still bears the marks of his signature style. The movie announces its seriousness in a somber palate of gray, brown, and atom-rending red, an unrelenting and at times almost stiflingly ominous musical score, and disjointed visual effects that signal Oppenheimer's occasionally fractured inner life. The story is told in two competing timelines that jump forward and backward in time without explanation. One, shot in color, is the story told from Oppenheimer's perspective. The other, in black-and-white, is a different version of events told from the perspective of Lewis Strauss (Robert Downey Jr.), eventual atomic energy adviser to Eisenhower, outspoken advocate of developing the hydrogen bomb, and Oppenheimer's nemesis in the later part of his life.

These competing narrative arcs reframe Oppenheimer's life as a tragedy destroyed by rivalry and jealousy he neither chose nor wished to engage. By giving us Strauss as a petty villain, Oppenheimer can emerge more fully as a tragic hero who was used by his society in a moment of great need—and then scapegoated for his Jewishness, his genius, and his own moral qualms. But even though Oppenheimer comes to question the nuclear power he helped build, the film cannot genuinely imagine a moral universe in which humans would willingly stop technological or intellectual pursuit in the name of greater goods. This is a deeper tragedy the film is not able to fully face, enamored as it is with Oppenheimer's lonely genius and the sheer magnitude of what he achieved.

We all live in Oppenheimer's world now, and it is one that constantly invents the Ethan Hunts and Indiana Joneses of our fantasy stories to save us from the threat of extinction that we have ourselves created. Taken as a trifecta of movie meditations, it seems we are trapped in a loop of destruction and salvation, foisted onto the weary shoulders of lone heroes. This is good for blockbuster ticket sales, but maybe not so great for our collective imaginations. Still, maybe we can learn something from Indiana Jones. In 1969 everyone around him is fixated on the space race, eyes turned to the great technological future. True to his first calling as a professor of

antiquity, his most important act of heroism is convincing anyone to pay attention to the past. If we heed his call, we might be able to look even farther past Oppenheimer’s story to resources that would help us imagine a world where we didn’t need to be saved from our own inventions.