

Journal of African films and Diaspora Studies (JAFDIS)
(Research on African Films, Diaspora Studies,
Performance Arts and Communication Studies)
Published consistently since, 2018

ISSN: 2516-2705 (Print) ISSN: 2516-2713 (Online)

Indexed by SCOPUS, IBSS, EBSCO, ProQuest, COPERNICUS,
ERIH PLUS and Sabinet

Volume 8, Number 5, March 2025
pp 27-41

**Oppenheimer and the Introduction of First-Person
Narratives in Screenwriting**

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31920/2516-2713/2025/8n5a2>

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Abstract

This paper explores the innovative narrative techniques employed by Christopher Nolan in his film "Oppenheimer," an adaptation of the book "American Prometheus: The Triumph and Tragedy of J. Robert Oppenheimer." The paper characterises the film as a new kind of a "mind game film," using complex narrative structures to delve into the intricacies of the human condition and the role of memory in shaping historical narratives. Nolan's approach incorporates a fractured narrative that reflects the duality of Oppenheimer's life through multiple, often contradictory perspectives. He uses his narrative structure to stress the importance of diverse viewpoints to completely appreciate complicated historical events. Building on the allegories related to the nature of cinema, as seen in some of his previous films, Nolan creates a narrative that mimics the complexity of Oppenheimer's genius and the historical context of his achievements. The paper further examines how Nolan's narrative choices contribute to a deeper understanding of 'collective trauma' and the psychological impact of technological progress on society.

Keywords: *Mind Game Film, Fractured Narratives, Nolan, Elsasser, Genette, Focalisation*

1. Introduction

July 21, 2023, saw the release of the much-anticipated Christopher Nolan magnum opus, *Oppenheimer*, sold as the biopic of the creator of the atomic bomb, J. Robert Oppenheimer. The film was the official adaptation of the book *American Prometheus: The Triumph and Tragedy of J. Robert Oppenheimer* (Bird and Sherwin, 2023). Without using the title, the film uses the marvels of visual storytelling and montage editing to create what Thomas Elsasser has come to call the 'Mind Game Film,' perhaps not in the traditional sense, where the fracturing of the narrative is not communicating an 'altered mind-state' for the most part but captures the complexity of the human condition, the nuances of genius, and the role of individual memory in shaping human history at the macro level (Elsasser, 2009). In screenwriting parlance, Nolan's fractured narrative helps him encompass, in the same narrative, the rise and the fall, the 'triumph and the tragedy' of the man who, by Nolan's own account, was 'the most important person who ever lived', from two sides, creating for the audience a complicated portrait of a man, making sure to convey the message that the construction of a complicated, conflicting narrative in history often requires multiple, often conflicting points of view (Erlich,

2023; Olson, 2015; Overbye, 2023). There is merit to Nolan's proclamation, as the world as we know it today, or the modern, industrial world, where the sheer acceleration of advancements can be traced back to mankind harnessing nuclear power, and much of the film has Oppenheimer ponder over these big questions, with the film ending with the biggest question of all: did that moment start a 'chain reaction' that could perhaps change the world enough for us to destroy it.

Nolan has attempted to avoid any overt or obvious parallels to cinema, and his allusions to cinema have always been metaphorical, like in Inception and The Prestige (Erlich, 2023; Olson, 2015). Much of Inception and Prestige metaphorically pondered over suspension of disbelief that a director, the creator of illusions, can achieve by arranging visuals that connect through cause and effect or through theme, investing in the visual illusion, and looking over the apparent break in linear causality (Olson, 2015). Nolan's cinema pushes the boundaries of conventional continuity editing, often opting for montage-style editing to immerse the audience in the workings of, quite often, an individual human mind and how it processes trauma through memory and even attempts to decode the cinematic language to convey troubled or, in some cases, 'abberant mental states' to create a hypnotic audience experience, making him one of the key proponents of the mind-game film (Elsasser, 2009).

The research question considers Christopher Nolan's peculiar narrative techniques within the film Oppenheimer as the means with which to establish the internal and external predicaments of the protagonist through fragmented storytelling. The study's objective is to demonstrate how Nolan's use of nonlinear narrative structures, subjective focalisation, and innovations within the screenplay create newer avenues of filmic expression and modify the canon of historical biopics. Thus, the knowledge gap that this study intends to fill occurs at the intersection of mind-game films and historical narratives: much of the scholarship has examined Nolan's use of fragmented storytelling within films such as Inception and Memento; not much has been said about his application of these techniques in telling the story of historical figures and real individuals, especially an enigma like J. Robert Oppenheimer. This builds on Thomas Elsaesser's theory that the mind-game films, in their narrative structures, clash with common sense cause-and-effect storytelling, complicating the audience's perception of the narrative itself. While previous discussion in the realm of Mind-Game Films has concentrated on studies of altered states of consciousness or unreliable narrators, this study demonstrates that Nolan's treatment extends that to historical biopics by way of multiple conflicting perspectives, disavowed subjectivity, and

thematic dissonance. Moreover, this research examines Nolan's choice to write parts of Oppenheimer in the first person on a rare instance in screenwriting that propels audience immersion with contributions to the scholarly debate on the evolution of screenplay writing. This structural choice holds weighty significance in further blurring the lines between perception and reality, with the thematic essence of the film embedding the concerns of memory, trauma, and the onus of scientific advancement. Through the prism of narrative theory, screenplay analysis, and film philosophy, the investigation indicates how Nolan's shattered storytelling is not so much a stylistic choice as it is intended to encapsulate the paradoxes of Oppenheimer's existence: both triumphs and tragedies. Thus, it is significant for both the academic discourse of Nolan's work in film theory and the light it sheds on how filmmakers today reconstruct historical memory through non-traditional means of storytelling. Engaging with the theories of trauma, collective memory, and cinematic immersion, this study creates an avenue of knowledge for how films impact collective understandings of history, morality, and the mind.

2. Theoretical framework

This study lies at the intersection of different theoretical perspectives on narrative theory, film studies, memory studies, and trauma theory. At the core, the research is based on Thomas Elsaesser's (2021) theory of mind-game films, which is concerned with contemporary cinema's disruptions to cause-and-effect storytelling to engage audience members in fragmented, nonlinear tales that are reflections of the protagonist's psyche. Oftentimes, Mind-Game Films become juxtaposed with the reliability of perception and memory, placing the viewer in a situation akin to a puzzle where meaning unfolds gradually (Kiss, 2017). Whereas Elsaesser has traditionally confined the application of his theory to films employing unreliable narrators, non-realistic mental illnesses, or science fiction, the present study shows that the insights he provides can be fruitfully applied to Oppenheimer. Simply put, Nolan uses 'mind-game' techniques to explore historical reality and the protagonist's inner contradictions. Instead of a conventional representation of an altered or fractured mind, Oppenheimer's fragmented narrative embodies the complexities of historical remembrance and the existential quandaries that arise when scientific advancement meets ethical responsibility. The other major framework informing this study is narrative theory with particular regard to

subjective focalisation, as elucidated by David Bordwell (2013). About film narration, Bordwell distinguishes between objective externalisation and character-driven internalisation (Marks, 2015). By employing an unusual and innovative method in the writing of the screenplay for *Oppenheimer*—namely, writing sections of it in the first person—Nolan supports Bordwell in arguing that filmmakers can manipulate narrative perspectives for purposes of audience identification and immersion. This first-person scriptwriting mode, the study argues, engenders greater audience alignment with *Oppenheimer*'s consciousness, thereby deepening their involvement in an internalised conflict. By sequencing between first-person subjective sequences in the "Fission" part of the film and an observably more distant perspective in the "Fusion" one (Tonkin, 1995), Nolan develops a two-pronged storytelling strategy that resembles personal and collective histories.

This study also attempts to build on collective memory theory, using the work of Maurice Halbwachs (Sutton, 2024), who asserts that memory is constructed, shaped and 'stabilised' through the intersection of cultural, political, and historical contexts (Sutton, 2024, p.314). *Oppenheimer* engages in this collective memory by contrasting the perspectives of differing subjectivities: his own experiences, those perceptions embodied by his peers, and the political machinations that sought to either erase or vilify his contributions. The film's structure, broken into portions, represents the very instability of memory, that history can come into being and 'evolve' via changing social and, as a result, personal narratives (Sutton, 2024). In this respect, it ties neatly with the two-colour scheme, black and white being for the outside perspective and colour for *Oppenheimer*'s internal subjective experience, thereby emphasising the fact that historical truth is in itself contested.

In addition, trauma theory becomes integral to the study by incorporating Cathy Caruth's (1996) concept of traumatic temporality whereby trauma interrupts linear time so that, instead of considering the past as something entirely bygone, it becomes a permanent intrusiveness in the present (Ong XinWei, 2014; Pheasant-Kelly, 2015). Such an observation legitimises that the narrative structure in Nolan's film is not merely a stylistic choice but provides a cinematic representation of the cyclical nature of trauma.

Screenplay studies are another framework utilised in the study, addressing, among other phenomena, the evolution of screenwriting techniques and their effect on reception. Only somewhere in the middle of the artistic endeavour lies the traditional screenplay, written as a set of production instructions in the third person. Finally, the study examines

technological and ethical points of view, especially dealing with the existential crisis brought about by scientific discovery. One of the critiques that he levelled against technology is that all technological innovations inevitably change human existence in most cases without human control over the inevitable changes (Zimmerman, 1990). This study examines how Oppenheimer captures this paradox created by scientific progress. Oppenheimer, as represented in the film, is a contradiction in himself - his brilliance necessitates human advancement, while on the other hand, his creation gives birth to irreversible moral and existential crises. By structuring the film as a series of conflicting perspectives, Nolan visually and narratively enacts Heidegger's argument regarding technology; it compels humanity to permanently reckon with the consequences it refers to (Zimmerman, 1990).

3. Methodology

This study is a qualitative approach incorporating textual analysis, film theory, and screenplay studies to comprehend Christopher Nolan's *Oppenheimer* as a mind-game film, in the light of Thomas Elsaesser's theory. The basic method entails a close reading of the narrative structure, screenplay, and cinematic techniques of the film, studying how these induce audience immersion and thematic profundity. The research proceeds to analyse and critique using non-linear storytelling, montage editing of the film, and first-person screenplay of *Oppenheimer* to determine how these devices affect the psychological and emotional landscape of *Oppenheimer* as a character.

The comparative analysis against Nolan's previous works, especially *Memento*, *Inception*, and *The Prestige*, will ground Nolan's narrative innovations and thematic preoccupations. The secondary source material incorporates Mind-Game Films, representations of trauma in cinema, and studies on the psychological impact of fragmented storytelling. Screenwriting conventions are interrogated through a structural analysis of the *Oppenheimer* screenplay, suggesting perhaps that the first-person writing that constitutes a marked departure from classical third-person narration can assert most strongly Nolan's theoretical commitments.

In this regard, thematic analysis is used to explore some main themes, such as "chain reaction," "fission vs. fusion," and the duality of scientific progress and destruction. The film's use of colour contrast and black-and-white cinematography is viewed as distinguishing between subjective and

objective realities within the narrative. Combining film analysis with screenplay study and narrative theory, this research aims to illustrate how Nolan reconstructs historical memory in a fractured cinematic architecture. Ultimately, the results will contribute to the broader discourse on biographical storytelling, the development of screenplays as a literary form, and the function of Mind-Game Films in manipulating audiences' perception of history and trauma.

4. Analysis discussion

4.1 Fractured Narrative and the Mind-Game Film

As Joy (2015) explicates about Nolan's characters,

The plots and central characters of Nolan's films regularly display symptoms of neurosis, often stemming from guilt, trauma or some overarching sense of loss. From the amnesiac protagonist of *Memento* to the dissociative identity disorder of Bruce Wayne (Christian Bale) in the *Dark Knight* trilogy, each of Nolan's leading characters are frequently debilitated by inner conflict and the after effects of traumatic events. The character of Cooper (Matthew McConaughey) in *Interstellar* continues to underscore Nolan's preoccupation with the themes of memory and trauma as the character struggles to cope with the absence of his children. While the psychological states of the main characters in Nolan's films are such a dominant aspect of his work, there is a marked lack of writing on the various representations of trauma within existing scholarship (Joy, 2015, p.9).

As Elsasser points out, the fractured construction of the narrative signifies a 'breakdown in the relationship between the film and its spectator' because there is a change in the narrative vocabulary of 'cause and effect' (Elsasser, 2009). He goes on to add that the protagonists in such films often suffer from 'conditions' like paranoia, schizophrenia, and amnesia, creating a new paradigm for the audience to 'identify, align and create allegiance' with the characters (Elsasser, 2009; Smith, 1994). Elsasser goes on to call these 'pathologies productive', as they create a new kind of 'privileged point of view', often leading to discoveries and epiphanies (Elsasser, 2009). In the case of *Oppenheimer*, while the character doesn't seem to be suffering from any kind of 'mental pathology', his genius does give him access to higher truths and hidden realities, as represented through the much-talked-about representations of the subatomic world from Oppenheimer's subjectivity, allowing him to be a key figure in the ushering in of a new world while allowing him to comprehend the chain reaction he has set into motion through his genius (Elsasser, 2009).

Nolan's structure and his specific writing choices allow him to capture the complex nature of Oppenheimer's genius, one that takes him to the pinnacle and the one that brings him down, while attempting to capture the sheer complexity of the events that follow, flowing not just from within Oppenheimer but from outside him, like two slow but destructive parts of a nuclear reaction.

4.2 Chain Reactions and Narrative Disruptions

While the audience is exposed to the final product, the visual construction of the image, the beginning of the groundwork of this construction, is created with the written word itself. The art of constructing the screenplay is the art of imagining and then writing the narrative edit before the actual edit is done. Here, with *Oppenheimer*, Nolan chooses to make the parallels between the subject matter of his films and the nature of narrative structuring even more apparent. The first idea is that of 'chain reactions', an idea that Oppenheimer becomes quite preoccupied with somewhere in the middle of the linear chronology, as he becomes aware that the act of conducting the Trinity test can lead to them destroying the world. This eventually gives way to the bigger preoccupation with the act of creation of the nuclear device itself that has caused a chain reaction, a never-ending arms race, that will lead to the eventual destruction of the world. The ultimate end Once again, in screenwriting parlance, the construction of the narrative rests on a moment of 'disruption' that sparks the narrative into existence and motion, carrying the 'idea' that it wants to communicate with it, building momentum until the 'end', and with it, catharsis is achieved. The scene between Oppenheimer and Einstein at Princeton is repeated from different perspectives, almost like an emotional pivot for the characters involved, including Strauss and Oppenheimer, for, as it is gradually revealed, two completely different reasons. While for Oppenheimer, it is fear and worry of sparking a chain reaction that could end with the destruction of the world; for Strauss, it is the moment that sparks a transition in their relationship, a doubt he harbours in his mind that sets in motion a chain of events that eventually destroys their relationship, as well as their legacy (Old, 2023). As it is noted several times in the film, this was also a period of transition from the old physics (Einstein is a stand-in for the 'old guard' or humanity, while Oppenheimer represents humanity as it transitions to a new world) to the new physics as well, a physics not ruled by causality anymore, the physics originating from

a hidden world that Oppenheimer was afraid of and striving to access (Old, 2023). The fractured narrative of the film attempts to capture this break in causality as well, with reality connected by something inexplicable, something waiting to be discovered by humanity as a whole, represented here by Oppenheimer and Strauss.

Hence, with Oppenheimer, Nolan attempts to create what could be called a ‘collective mind-game film’, continuing with the tradition of building upon the legacy of the Hero’s Journey and replacing it with his representation of a Collective Journey (Gomez, 2017). This film is not about individual trauma but about collective trauma, as a civilisation and how every moment, at once, exists in multiple states, multiple versions, all at once, creating what is often referred to as polarisation (Ong XinWei, 2014; Sutton, 2024). As mentioned above, it attempts to construct the complicated image of a man who at once was responsible for creating an instrument of progress and was involved in one of the most traumatic moments in history. As the fractured narrative of the film attempts to explore, much of what transpired was because of the complicated construction of collective memory, created by the combination of memories and the interpretation of events for all those who are involved (Old, 2023; Ong XinWei, 2014; Elsasser, 2009; Sutton, 2024).

As Elsasser points out, Nolan puts the audience in a treacherous position, demanding that they work their way through the puzzle of events that may not be seemingly arranged chronologically to achieve two rewards: catharsis, which is indirectly achieved through their eventual construction of an understanding of J. Robert Oppenheimer, a combination of his ‘triumph and tragedy’ (Bird and Sherwin, 2023). Often, the film, visually told in a combination of black and white and colour, to create some semblance of differences in point of view, gives little breathing room to absorb subtle differences, if any, in the two versions of the same event, making it evident that the true nature of the impact of that particular event can be understood through a combination of the two (Sutton, 2024). As David Erlich points out, Nolan’s interest lies in exploring the fracturing of the human psyche by the advent of a new age, an age that promised a better life through better technology and better security and yet created an era of doubt and paranoia, and his structure, often non-linear, is his way of immersing the audience into that chaos and the trauma (Erlich, 2023; Joy, 2015; Sutton, 2024; Zimmerman, 1990).

4.3. Dual Perspectives: Fission and Fusion

In his review of Oppenheimer, Erlich (2023) noted,

Nolan has never come up with a cleaner way of framing the chemical reaction that galvanizes so many of his films. From “Inception” to “Dunkirk,” Nolan’s symphonic movies don’t hinge on linear cause-and-effect so much as they split themselves into a series of discrete atomic parts that eventually slam into each other with enough excitement to create a hyper-combustible chain reaction, and that’s exactly what happens in “Oppenheimer.” Here, Nolan’s non-chronological approach allows us to experience the bomb and its fallout all at once, thus making discovery inextricable from devastation, creation inextricable from destruction, and the innocent joy of theory inextricable from the unfathomable horror of practice (Erlich, 2023).

Examining the internal workings of Oppenheimer is essential to the same and how the various aspects of his personal life, his experiences, what he wanted to achieve because of the same, and how he went about doing it, all finally culminated in him becoming who we all know him to be, the creator of the atomic bomb. The narrative also attempts to make clear his struggle with his choices post the creation and especially the usage of the atomic bomb. Nolan uses various visual and cinematic techniques to create and establish the mindscape of the character, but then, he takes this a step further. He attempts to deepen the audience’s and the reader’s understanding of Oppenheimer by creating a new kind of screenplay text, writing in the first person, a technique previously used by French writer-director Gaper Noe in Enter the Void (2009). He chooses to write one part of the film, presented in colour within the film, in first person. As an example, instead of writing ‘Robert/Oppenheimer stands’, he writes, ‘I stand’ (Sharf, 2023).

4.4 Cinematic Techniques and Screenplay Innovation

Traditionally, scripts are seen as the blueprint that lays out the scene-by-scene construction of the plot or the screenplay through various elements of script design. They do so by the writer, laying out as an omniscient narrator how the events unfold in the third person and the present tense. The formatting of the script allows for those working in production to isolate the individual elements such as the scene location, whether it takes place inside or outside in a particular location, the characters involved, their blocking, the lines of dialogue they speak, and the props required. For the director and cinematographer, it would lay out the number and kind of

shots and a tentative idea of the lighting setups required. A script is generally not a document that is read beyond those directly involved with the production, but once again, Nolan identifies that we appear to be at a crossroads when it comes to experiencing the filmic text. His status as a modern auteur has led to unparalleled interest in his form, starting from his writing and his complex narrative constructions to convey complex ideas. He is aware that his work is broken down and discussed extensively; the scripts of his films are commodities in themselves, sold to connoisseurs as a book tie-in. He has identified that scripts are gradually moving out of the territory of blueprints into what could be called accompanying para or even intertexts (Stam and Raengo, 2004). Thus, he has identified this as the right opportunity to achieve further immersion into the world of his narrative beyond the long list of functionalities that he has created and promoted as the new industry standard, including, but not limited to, using IMAX film stock like never before and attempting to create most of his spectacular set pieces in camera, rather than using special effects (Whitney, 2015). This time, with his screenplay, he made a choice specifically unique to the subject matter, which, in conjunction with the cinematic product, creates a new kind of filmic grammar. According to Nolan, this was his attempt to capture the genius of Oppenheimer. He was working with the knowledge that his subject was distinct, unlike anyone else, and wanted it to be clear to the reader that this is his story, told by him, removing, in the best possible way, the barriers between the audience and his cinematic construct of Oppenheimer. The fact that all screenplays are written in the present tense helps give another level of authenticity to the action and urgency to his fears. For Nolan, it is of utmost importance that he achieves a level of 'internal focalisation' that has never been associated with scripts (Genette, 2013). The story information is not necessarily sieved perceptually through Oppenheimer at all stages but creates the feeling of experiencing every single moment as Oppenheimer is experiencing it, as it is happening, adding, from the outset, a certain burden of emotional subjectivity to the text. Nolan perhaps wants to create a sense of human, ideological, and even moral 'allegiance' that has never been achieved in the text of a screenplay. (smith, 1994).

4.5 Oppenheimer as a Collective Journey

Reading the script alongside the film, it becomes clearer that Nolan doesn't want to restrict the colour portions of the film to Oppenheimer's perceptual subjectivity but wants to mimic our perception of existing in time and space in the best possible way, creating within the text

(combining the screenplay and the film) the most human and authentic 'artificial' construct of the genius of Oppenheimer. All the wide shots, capturing the expanse of Los Alamos with Oppenheimer within them or him trapped within the boundaries of a seedy backroom where his 'trial' is later conducted, or him giving privileged access to the mind of his wife Kitty, that may originally seem to be arranged in the traditional 'zero or external focalisation' of filmic texts, are suddenly all 'internally focalised', perceptually or ideologically through him (Genette, 2013). His world or reality exists, just like us, because he is experiencing it. His life is unravelling because of his actions and choices, making it quite apt for Nolan to call these portions of the film 'Fission'. As mentioned above, the narrative, or rather the narration, of such a key moment in the story of humanity is not complete until it captures the view of someone looking in at Oppenheimer from the outside, and their actions, guided by their own opinions and misconceptions of Oppenheimer, combine with those of the latter to create a completely new kind of reaction, different but just as dangerous. These portions of the film, aptly titled 'Fusion', capture Lewis Strauss' ultimately unsuccessful Senate confirmation hearing, where his anger against Oppenheimer and misguided reasons behind the same is gradually revealed. The allegory is explored in the film when Edward Teller expresses his desire to create the 'Super', a hydrogen fusion bomb, where the fusion reaction would be triggered by a smaller fission reaction, a request that is initially turned down but one that becomes a key ingredient in the recipe for Oppenheimer's downfall.

It is by design that Nolan uses the cinematic form to its fullest during 'Fission', the marvels of cinematography and editing to repeatedly put us in Oppenheimer's mindscape, the visions of the subatomic universe, culminating in the post-Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombing sequence that makes the differentiation between his mind and public persona. Oppenheimer's worst fears are shown to come true, trapping him in his genius forever; mirroring the fate of the figure Niels Bohr compares him to, Prometheus.

5. Conclusion

Christopher Nolan has gone through the process of making Oppenheimer, and Mind-Game Film now has taken a twist through a fragmented narrative structure, immersive first-person screenplay and other means of visual construction that would deconstruct and construct historical

memory. In the construction of this film, non-linear narrativity captures all the paradoxes of the life of J. Robert Oppenheimer: a scientific pioneer and, at the same time, the tragedy of his burden from having made such a thing. By changing the screenplay conventions from ordinary traditional third-person narration to a first-person subjective perspective, Nolan induces greater audience immersion so that they may know what it is like to have Oppenheimer's mental agitation. This dual structure-fission (internal conflict of Oppenheimer) and fusion (external perception of him)-reinforces the thematic complexity of causation, mirroring the principles underlying its scientific mythos.

This study contends that Oppenheimer is as much a biopic: it is also a celluloid experience of collective memory and historical interpretation. Connecting the film's disjointed narrative to Elsaesser's idea of the mind-game film shows that it goes beyond depicting individual trauma to encompass rather the older existential fears that the era has inherited through nuclear power. Finally, the film altogether redefines the biography, placing Oppenheimer as one of the most relevant works in today's cinema, which manages to mesh history with psychology and progress within the craft.

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