

(S4, E11) The Barbenheimer Episode

And we're back! Hey, hi, how are you? Long time, no see. Wesley and I coincidentally booked holidays at approximately the same time, so we decided to take a little break. But we're back now! I was in Thailand for two weeks, which was lovely, but also I happened to be there when the movie event of the of the year was happening – Barbie and Oppenheimer were released on the same day, spawning a thousand 'Barbenheimer' memes and the marketing campaign of the century from the Barbie team.

Obviously, I flew back in, slept for 14 hours, woke up and went and saw both of them back-to-back. You know... like a normal person. That's where this episode is heading, in case you couldn't tell. You're welcome?

I'm Alex – this is Pop Culture Boner, the podcast edition, and today I'm thinking about the Barbenheimer phenomenon.

So, it occurs to me that 'Barbenheimer' is perhaps a reasonably niche thing if you're not completely brain poisoned by the internet as I am. When I told people who spend the majority of their time in the real world that I had watched the two films back-to-back the most common response was 'Why?', followed immediately by a horrified 'So you spent like 6 hours in the cinema?' I was then

forced to explain both what a meme was and why spending 6 hours in the cinema is actually the type of perfect day I'd write a Lou-Reed-esque song about if I had any musical talent. All round, fairly humiliating as an experience.

But, for those of you insist on being offline, in short, Greta Gerwig's Barbie and Christopher Nolan's Oppenheimer were both scheduled for release on 21st July 2023. Movies get released on the same day all the time, but the tonal contrast between the frothy pink girlhood of Barbie and the serious historical drama of Oppenheimer really caught people's eye in the leadup. Fan art combining the movie posters began popping up online, along with things like "I am become death, destroyer of worlds" in the Barbie font. The whole thing was probably also helped along by some shrewd PR moves from the cast's agents and the fact that they're both creations from household-name directors.

As it turned out, it wasn't for nothing. Barbie pulled in a staggering \$162million opening weekend – which was higher than predicted, but not wholly unexpected for a fun big budget film. The real dark horse was Oppenheimer – which to reiterate, is a three-hour historical drama about the building and detonation of the first atomic bomb during World War II. It pulled

\$82.4million opening weekend. To put that in perspective, Nolan's last historical drama about World War II, Dunkirk, hit \$50million opening weekend. As an aside, I was trying to understand the size of the Dunkirk opening weekend, I stumbled across this sentence on Wikipedia: Dunkirk's opening marked "the third-largest opening for a World War II film (behind Captain America: The First Avengers... and Pearl Harbor...)." And look... the Captain America thing is not TECHNICALLY wrong but it does FEEL wrong.

But I digress – my point is, the Barbie weekend was big but not unexpected, and the 'Barbenheimer' meme pumped Oppenheimer's numbers too. Anthony D'Alessandro made an interesting observation for Deadline saying that "audiences are approaching this Nolan movie like a comic-book movie, not the adult drama that it is." Which I don't know if I completely agree with as a sentiment – it feels a little dismissive of audience sensibilities – but I do think that the campy hype around the opening is attracting people who might not have otherwise seen it opening weekend, and reminding others who might've spaced their viewings out or waited for one or other to release on streaming that they do actually like going to the cinema. Movies are back, baby!

So that's the meme and its immediate aftermath. But what of the films themselves? Are they any good? Great question. Before I get into my serious chat, my personal response was that I went in expecting to love Barbie and be kind of meh on Oppenheimer. I quite like Greta Gerwig, but I don't really like most

Christopher Nolan films. They always look incredible, but he keeps making sci-fi films that are simply not as smart as they think they are – Interstellar is so interested in the science of black holes that it forgets to make the movie interesting. Inception asks the question 'What if... dream?' and then launches into a third act that is almost completely visually incomprehensible because everyone is wearing white on a white snowy mountain. Tenet is... a movie that was made.

But my expectations were subverted. Despite having all the elements of something that should be an instant classic for me, while I had a great time there were parts of Barbie that fell a little flat in terms of pacing and message. Meanwhile, Oppenheimer surprised me by being the most coherent thing that Nolan's done in years and strangely emotionally engaging despite the three-hour run time. All in all, 10/10 day for me. I enjoyed both movies. I love the cinema!

But if I want to do a serious review that isn't just about how much I love sitting in the dark and watching a large, beautiful face, there are two things that I've been mulling over. The first is that, as I was talking about Barbie with my friend, who is Kamilaroi, he mentioned that he was considering seeing the movie but had seen that Indigenous audiences on Twitter had been pretty upset by a line referencing the way smallpox had infected Indigenous communities and asked what I thought about the line. I genuinely couldn't remember what it was or where it fit in the film. Which made me think about how I'd consumed the film,

the pieces that had stuck with me, and what I'd discarded.

The second is that I was out with some friends a couple of weeks ago and one of them, in attempt to curate drunk conversation into something more coherent, asked us to summarise in 5 minutes or less what had been making our blood boil. It was timed but from the depths of my soul emerged a rant about *Oppenheimer*, endless online discourse about the exclusion of stories from the film and the seemingly impossible goal of mass media literacy that was simultaneously completely in character for me, and completely out of place in the smoking area of a gay bar at 3am.

And the core of those two conversations is the same – I swear... stick with me. They're both about the nature of perspective and the impossibility of total representation in a story. *Barbie* promised fun and maybe even a little feminism. *Oppenheimer* promised serious treatment of historical subject matter. The internet made the films two sides of the same coin. So, let's treat them like it, eh? I want to look at the discourse surrounding both films following the frivolity of the 'Barbenheimer' moment – what makes the cut in each film? What's excluded? What should be there? Also, up top: this probably won't be totally spoiler free... which is probably more relevant for *Barbie* than *Oppenheimer* but let's get into it.

Barbie features Margot Robbie as Stereotypical Barbie, whose perfect Barbie Land life is derailed when she is suddenly overwhelmed by existential dread (relatable). In an attempt to solve

this all-too-human impulse, she sets out from Barbie Land to the Real World, with a stowaway Ken played by Ryan Gosling. She discovers that the perfection of Barbie Land hasn't been replicated in the real world and instead, things like the patriarchy exist. It's fun, it looks incredible, and clearly audiences loved it, but there has been a steadily building pool of questions and criticism about the movie's version of feminism.

Now, to be clear, I'm not talking about culture wars bullshit, here. Yes, Ben Shapiro might have lit some Barbies on fire to try and make a point about... the feminist agenda... or something? But I'm not even going to bother engaging with this because the most generous reading of that silly little meat puppet is that he's a failed screenwriter who is wilfully misinterpreting the content so he can live out his fantasy of being culturally relevant and keep the conservative clicks that pay his bills rolling in. No right-wing talking head was ever going to genuinely engage with the film. So, not to be "sexist" and dismiss Ben's concerns outright, but what I'm thinking about is women wrestling with the more vastly complicated question of what the film is saying about feminism and representation.

Not every Barbie in Barbie Land looks like Margot Robbie – Barbies come in every shape and size. They're fat, thin, tall, short. They're lawyers, journalists, judges, scientists, and pilots. Issa Rae is a black Presidential Barbie; trans actress Hari Nef is a Doctor Barbie; plus-sized actress Sharon Rooney is Lawyer Barbie. Barbie is everything. Given that Barbie is taking an existing, highly recognisable

IP, the choice to take the look of Barbie beyond thin and white is an interesting one.

So much mainstream discussion of entertainment centres on "representation" as a key concept and moral marker of whether a film qualifies as 'good'. According to a 2021 survey conducted by Paramount, 78% of people indicated that TV and movies should offer diverse characters. This sentiment was stronger among people with marginalised identities, and the more intersecting marginalised identities a person occupied, the more likely they were to feel poorly represented. So having Barbie, whose physical doll form has long been discussed for its negative impacts on the psyche of young girls, occupy diverse bodies could be read as embodying both the ubiquity of the doll in households, regardless of a child's background, and as a kind of feminist push back on Barbie's perfect form. When American Ferrera, who plays Gloria, gives her big third act monologue about the paradoxical, unattainable demands placed on the modern woman it's supposed to be all the more resonant because we can visually identify all the walls those Barbie Land Barbies would come up against if they entered the real world.

Now, I am not immune to being unexpectedly moved by seeing "myself" onscreen. In fact, it happened in Barbie – seeing Sharon Rooney in a bunch of great outfits, at the centre of a choreographed dance number snuck up on me and I was suddenly delighted. But 'representation' is a pretty spindly leg to stand on – much like saying you have a black friend doesn't make you any less

racist, a simple insertion of a 'diverse' character doesn't necessarily change the perspective of a film, and trying to shoehorn in a perspective for the sake of checking a box immediately reads as disingenuous to the audience. It's also impossible to capture the full spectrum of humanity in singular movie or TV show. At which point, if you're just box checking, you're going to be arbitrarily drawing a line where you think the cut off point for inclusion should be.

Which brings me back to the chat I had with my friend, and the smallpox joke. The line in question happens just before America Ferrera's big speech, when she realises that the Barbies are essentially encountering patriarchy for the first time and it's overwhelming them. "Oh my god!" she says, clutching a Barbie. "This is like in the 1500s with the Indigenous people and smallpox! They had no defences against it!" Indigenous critics were quick to respond, pointing out that the flippancy of referring to the smallpox-related deaths of Indigenous people as something that spontaneously happened in the 1500s was lazy writing and that the film had failed to include any Indigenous characters despite its attempts at building out a diverse cast.

It might surprise you to learn that Mattel has a long history of attempting to include Indigenous peoples in their Barbie line dating back to the early 80s – and I want it noted that I'm saying that with a tone that implies that it's a pretty fucked up version of capitalism operating here. The First Edition Native American Barbie was released in 1993, and the description on the packaging reads "Native American Barbie doll is part of a proud Indian

heritage, rich in culture and tradition. Her tribe-inspired costume is a white dress decorated with Indian artwork, fringe and complemented by the soft faux leather moccasins on her feet." She looks kind of like Cher in the 1970s? This doll is released in the same 'Dolls of the World' line that brought you Princess of the Portuguese Empire Barbie... because nothing says girlish fun like the history of slavery and genocide perpetuated by the Portuguese Empire.

Writing for Native News Online, Neely Bardwell points out that Indigenous women have a unique relationship to both the patriarchy and to colonisation, and that while Barbie is successful in portraying the general experience of women under the patriarchy, it ultimately continues the tradition of the now-discontinued Native American Barbie doll by flattening the experiences of Indigenous women into a single, historically inaccurate throwaway line before erasing them entirely. Barbie was never going to successfully capture everything about feminism and modern womanhood in a single film, and it would be foolish to expect it to, but it's also interesting to see where it felt comfortable drawing the line on inclusivity.

Alright, so that's Barbie. Coin flip time: Oppenheimer is a biopic of 'father of the atomic bomb', theoretical physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer, adapted from the Pulitzer Prize-winning biography American Prometheus by Kai Bird and Martin J. Sherwin. You might be familiar with the broad strokes of the story here – in 1941, Oppenheimer was brought into what would eventually become the Manhattan Project, and the decision was made to set up a secret lab in Los Alamos,

New Mexico. By July 16, 1945, the work culminated in the first ever detonation of a nuclear weapon, known as the Trinity test. On the August 6 and August 9, 1945, the US dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Following the war, Oppenheimer advocated for transnational co-operation to stifle the nuclear arms race but was ultimately stripped of his security clearance during the McCarthy era for his associations with the Communist Party. Structurally film bustles between the making of the bomb, the hearing in which Oppenheimer's security clearance was stripped and the Senate hearing into Lewis Strauss' appointment as the Secretary of Commerce, which was ultimately derailed in part by the scientific community's opposition to the role he played Oppenheimer's public demise. Like I said, I think it's the most coherent thing Nolan's done in years. Cillian Murphy's performance really holds the film together, but it's packed with some phenomenal performances and holds a solid emotional centre even despite its 3 hour run time.

Much of the online discourse that sprung up around the film in the leadup to its release was focused on concerns that it might read as another piece of propaganda about US military might. A lot of the push back on Oppenheimer boiled down to "why make this at all?", which I think was at least partially driven by the silliness of the 'Barbenheimer' memes. When all the discussion of a horrific real-world event that has continued to have devastating consequences for generations of people to come is focussed on some camp silliness about the crossover between Barbie dolls and atomic bombs, it feels like a big disconnect. Coupled with the decision to

tell that event through the eyes of one of its military-backed architects rather than those most profoundly impacted, it would feel dismissive.

Following Oppenheimer's release, the discourse has shifted to what it lacks—specifically, at no point in the film are the bombings of Hiroshima or Nagasaki shown. Which I will say, was a choice that surprised me while I was watching it – I wasn't expecting a full-scale rendition of the horrors of the bombing, but I was sort of expecting there to be maybe a flash of light over skyline or something. Nevertheless, much of the online discourse has equated that absence to both a moral failing of the film, and an implicit endorsement of the American military industrial complex. Nolan has spoken about this choice with MSNBC's Chuck Todd, indicating that one of the things that struck him about Oppenheimer's story was that despite his leading of the Manhattan Project, he learned of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki on the radio at the same time as the rest of the world. He points out that the story is an interpretation through Oppenheimer's eyes rather than a blow-by-blow account of the war.

As I mentioned earlier, there is a certain impossibility in trying to encapsulate every lived experience and identity in one film. With Barbie, it's a trickier line in the sand to draw because it's aiming for a type of inclusivity. That's not the case with Oppenheimer – it's trying to show the very narrow perspective of a single man throughout the course of his life. More importantly, I think the absence here actually works to build up the abject horror of the situation – the

decision to kill 120,000 people, mostly civilians, was just made by men sitting around in a room. One of whom, then-Secretary of State Henry Stimson is shown asking that they not bomb Kyoto because he honeymooned there with his wife. Later, it's revealed that the haunting rushing sound that weaves through flashbacks and which you believe to be the detonation of the bomb, is actually the fascistic roaring of American cheers following the detonation. Bodies writhe in unbridled joy in a way that slowly transforms into something visceral and revolting. Regardless of any ambiguities in the narrative around Oppenheimer's character, it's impossible to read the actual decision-making process and outcome as anything other than horrific.

The counterpoint from Japanese American organisations, is that the selective storytelling of Hollywood films continues to shift the emphasis away from the ongoing experiences of hibakusha, the Japanese word for survivors of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings. Speaking with Kimmy Yam, for NBC News, Nina Wallace, a media manager for Densho, which is a nonprofit dedicated to preserving the stories of Japanese Americans incarcerated during World War II, pointed out that while we shouldn't depend on Hollywood to tell nuanced stories of marginalised people, institutions of power do put more value on stories of men like Oppenheimer, rather than the Asian and indigenous communities that were more immediately impacted by the bomb. In the same article, Stan Shikuma, co-president of the Seattle Chapter of the Japanese American Citizens League, points out that the onus for telling alternative stories often

falls on independent film makers which means the playing field isn't really equal in terms of the sheer scale of distribution and production. Japan has produced some fantastic and haunting films about the bombings, but there's never going to be the kind of cultural cut through that something like a Nolan film will have.

But that is a thoughtful take about the nature of cultural imperialism and the ubiquity of American product, that is ultimately separate from the bulk of angry digital discourse that seems hell-bent on seeing Christopher Nolan arbitrarily shoehorn in a Japanese perspective for the sake of making sure we all knew the bomb was bad. And there's the crux of what's so frustrating here – on the one hand, the hollow nature of box-checking representation in a movie means that you're inevitably going to fuck up somewhere, as they do in Barbie, but audiences have become so conditioned to associate that representation with moral righteousness that they immediately seek out the hollow box-checking when it's not there, as with Oppenheimer. Rather than considering that a stylistic choice from a director might be the most rational way to approach that specific narrative in the current Hollywood framework, people are demanding that the lines be drawn wider for the sake of proving visually that killing 120,000 thousand people in a war crime was a pretty terrible thing to do, actually.

Anyway... that's the Barbenheimer episode I can tell movies are back because I've written 3,000 words that essentially boils down to me complaining about media literacy and begging people to watch a movie produced outside the

US. We're so back! If you would also like to complain about the watching habits of your friends and family, talk to me about it next time you see me at the pub. Peace!

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Episode written and narrated by Alex Johnson and produced by Wes Fahey. Theme tune by Wes Fahey. (Soundcloud: [lee snipes](#))

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