



Tracing Oppenheimer's Subjective Morality: John Fiske's Semiotic Study of Perspective and Symbol

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Abstract. This study analyzes the representation of subjective morality in Christopher Nolan's film *Oppenheimer*, using John Fiske's semiotic approach. The film not only presents a biographical narrative of J. Robert Oppenheimer as a central figure in the atomic bomb project, but also represents inner conflict and complex moral dilemmas within the context of power, science, and humanitarian responsibility. Through Fiske's three levels of television code—reality, representation, and ideology—this study examines how visual, symbolic, and narrative elements are used to shape audiences' perceptions of Oppenheimer's morality. Symbols such as the nuclear explosion, the interrogation room, monochromatic lighting, and sound construction play a significant role in conveying subtle yet powerful ideological meanings. The research findings indicate that the film *Oppenheimer* serves as a cultural text that is not neutral, but rather imbued with ideological positions that depict the tension between individual morality and the system of state power. By positioning the film as a popular cultural artifact, this study highlights how media shapes public understanding of history, scientific ethics, and personal responsibility within an increasingly complex global ethical landscape.

Keywords: Ideology, Oppenheimer, Subjective morality, Semiotics, Symbols.

1 Introduction

Film, as an audiovisual medium, plays a strategic role in shaping and disseminating social, cultural, and political discourse in modern society. Film is not merely a means of entertainment; it is also a cultural text that represents reality through symbolic constructions imbued with meaning and ideology. Representation in film is never neutral; the filmmaker's perspective always influences it, as does the production context and the power dynamics at work within it (Stam, 2017). In this context, film can become a platform for articulating moral and ethical values, particularly when addressing issues such as power, science, identity, and individual responsibility.

The development of biographical and historical films in contemporary cinema increasingly demonstrates a tendency to portray characters with moral complexity, where inner conflict becomes a central narrative element. One prominent example is Christopher Nolan's film *Oppenheimer* (2023), which tells the story of J. Robert Oppenheimer, the genius scientist behind the United States' atomic bomb project. The film not only

presents historical facts but also portrays Oppenheimer's moral dilemma as he grapples with the consequences of his achievements. The tension between scientific achievement and humanitarian responsibility makes this film's narrative rich in symbols, moral interpretations, and ideological messages relevant to modern ethical discussions.

Furthermore, the film "Oppenheimer" itself utilizes various symbolic elements such as nuclear explosions, monochromatic colors, interrogation rooms, and the use of distinctive narrative sounds and rhythms to convey profound moral and psychological meanings. These symbols not only enhance the film's aesthetics but also function as signs that convey ideological meaning.

Using Fiske's semiotic approach, this study seeks to interpret how these symbols shape perceptions of Oppenheimer's subjective morality and how that meaning is negotiated by the audience within a broader cultural context (Fiske, 1987). Within the framework of media and cultural studies, a semiotic approach is an important method for analyzing how these meanings are formed and communicated through the film's sign systems. John Fiske (1987) offers a three-level semiotic approach—reality, representation, and ideology—that allows for a critical reading of media texts as cultural products embodying specific ideological positions.

The urgency of this research lies in the film's position as a popular cultural artifact that has a significant influence on public perceptions of history and morality. In a world increasingly influenced by technological advancements and the complexities of global ethics, the representation of Oppenheimer as a figure with ambiguous morality opens up a critical discussion about how individual responsibility in the realms of science and power is constructed cinematically. As Storey (2015) emphasizes, popular media is not only a reflection of social reality but also an active actor in shaping social and ideological discourse.

This research is expected to make an important contribution to film studies and semiotics, particularly in uncovering how morality is produced and represented in popular media. Through a semiotic analysis of the perspectives and symbols in the film *Oppenheimer*, this article aims to trace the construction of the protagonist's subjective morality as a product of representational practices and ideology. This study also opens up a discussion about how media shapes our understanding of historical figures, scientific responsibility, and the moral dilemmas inherent in the development of destructive technologies.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Subjective Morality

Morality is a fundamental aspect of human life that has been debated by philosophers since ancient times. Morality is not merely an abstract concept but also serves as a practical guideline that influences decisions and social interactions. Singer (2024) emphasizes that morality is formed in both individual and social contexts, and Nichols (2004) views it as a standard of behavior that continuously evolves according to societal

dynamics. Changes in culture, values, and technology have reshaped moral standards in contemporary society (Plaisance, 2021), emphasizing that morality is not fixed.

In the study of ethics, Rachels and Rachels (2012) propose various approaches, one of which is subjective morality, which emphasizes that moral values stem from personal beliefs, not universal truths. This approach is relevant in the modern, pluralistic era, where different values can coexist. Lukes (2008) reinforces this view by stating that morality is strongly influenced by an individual's cultural and social background, and that no objective standard can claim superiority over other moral systems. In this context, understanding subjective morality is important for building a space for tolerance, critical reflection, and appreciation of the social diversity.

2.2 Film: A Medium Full of Perspective and Symbolism

Film is not simply a storytelling medium, but a tool that actively shapes the audience's perspective on social, cultural, and political realities (Hall, 1980). Representations in film are subjective constructs of the filmmaker, filtered through various technical and narrative aspects—such as camera angles, *mise-en-scène*, and plot structure—that frame characters or events within a particular ideological perspective (Stam, 2017). In this process, viewers are not merely passive consumers, but participate in constructing meaning through decoding influenced by their own social and cultural backgrounds (Hall, 1980). Visual symbols in film also play a significant role; as Barthes (1977) put it, symbols are "modern myths" that appear natural but are loaded with ideological meaning—for example, lighting, color, or gestures that suggest morality, power, or identity.

In the context of historical and biographical films, symbols and perspective are key to building emotional and interpretive bridges between present-day audiences and past events. Historical films are not objective documentation, but creative interpretations that convey meaning through symbolic visual elements such as courtroom scenes, characters' gazes, or bomb explosions (Rosenstone, 2017). Biopics, as a form of historical narrative, take artistic liberties to emphasize moments and characters that reflect the protagonist's morality or dilemmas, rather than simply the facts.

2.3 John Fiske's Semiotics

Semiotics is a crucial approach in media studies that allows us to understand how meaning is constructed and conveyed through systems of signs and symbols. According to Fiske (2010), semiotics is a crucial tool for unraveling the complexity of messages packaged by visual media such as television and film. He emphasizes that media do not simply present information directly, but rather package messages in the form of symbols and codes that require active interpretation by the audience. This aligns with Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding theory, which suggests that meaning in media is not fixed but dynamically processed by message creators and receivers. In this context, viewers act as active readers who not only receive but also interpret and even redefine the messages they receive.

Three main levels in understanding the production of meaning in media texts. The first level, reality, focuses on signs directly visible in the media, such as facial expressions, gestures, locations, and objects. The second level is representation, which examines how these elements of reality are encoded through production techniques such as camera angle, lighting, editing, and narrative. The third level, ideology, analyzes how media texts reflect, maintain, or challenge prevailing social and political value systems (Fiske, 2010; Hall, 1985; Stam, 2017).

John Fiske's semiotic framework provides a systematic analytical tool for exploring the layers of meaning in visual media, including film. With this framework, researchers can identify how character representation, visual symbols, narrative techniques, and sound work together to form specific ideological messages (Fiske, 2010; Barthes, 1977). This approach emphasizes that film is not only a mirror of reality, but also a medium that produces and reconstructs perceptions of identity, power, morality, and social norms (Mulvey, 1975; Hall, 1980).

3 Methodology

This research employs a qualitative method with John Fiske's semiotic approach as the primary analytical framework. Qualitative methods were chosen because the focus of the research is an in-depth understanding of meaning and symbols in media, rather than numerical measurements (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Haryono, 2020). John Fiske's semiotic approach allows for a comprehensive analysis of visual, audio, and narrative signs, utilizing three levels of analysis: reality, representation, and ideology (Fiske, 2010). Through this approach, the research seeks to uncover how the subjective morality of the main character in the film "Oppenheimer" is represented and interpreted by the audience (Hall, 1980).

The unit of analysis in this study is the film "Oppenheimer" (2023), a 180-minute film that tells the life story of Robert Oppenheimer, a key figure in the history of the development of the atomic bomb. This film was chosen because it contains various symbols and narratives that illustrate the moral dilemmas and subjective values of the main character (Stam, 2017; Rosenstone, 2017). The importance of this film analysis lies in its role as a medium that not only conveys stories but also shapes and influences the audience's social and ideological perspectives (Natalie & Haryono, 2021), particularly in understanding complex and contextual morality (Hall, 1980; Fiske, 2010).

The research data consists of two types: primary and secondary. The primary data consists of seven excerpts from the film "Oppenheimer," featuring images, dialogue, and other visual elements that represent the moral values of the main characters (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). These excerpts were selected based on their relevance to the theme of subjective morality being studied. Secondary data, meanwhile, includes literature related to semiotics, film studies, morality theory, and media analysis, which are used to strengthen the interpretation and validate the results of the primary data analysis (Fiske, 2010; Creswell & Poth, 2018). A total of seven scenes were selected from the entire film based on thematic salience.

4 Findings and Discussions

4.1 Scene 1: Oppenheimer puts cyanide poison in Patrick Blackett's apple

In the film *Oppenheimer* (03:57–07:22), it is told of a young Oppenheimer who has difficulty adjusting to the rigid educational system at the University of Cambridge, especially in the class of Patrick Blackett, a lecturer who belittles him. Frustrated by failing to fulfill his assignments and not being allowed to move to his favorite class, Oppenheimer desperately injects cyanide into Blackett's apple as the lecturer leaves the room. However, guilt immediately attacks him, so he runs back and retrieves the apple before Blackett can eat it.

This scene shows Oppenheimer in his Cambridge laboratory, disheveled and distressed, reflecting his discomfort with the academic environment. He injects cyanide into an apple—a symbol of sin and temptation—with a nervous gesture, then panics as he tries to retrieve it. On an ideological level, this act represents a rebellion against traditional scientific authority (symbolized by Patrick Blackett), while his decision to retrieve the apple demonstrates that morality still guides him. This scene visually depicts the struggle between ambition and conscience, without relying on dialogue.

4.2 Scene 2: Oppenheimer Talks with Dr. Chevalier On Social Issues and War

In scenes 20:45–23:10, Oppenheimer meets and engages in a friendly conversation with Dr. Haakon Chevalier at a social event attended by members of the Communist Party. They have a lively discussion about social issues and the war, but this meeting becomes the starting point for major problems. Oppenheimer's closeness to Chevalier and his involvement in the event will later be questioned, raising suspicions about his loyalty to the United States.

In the scene above, Oppenheimer attends a communist gathering in formal attire, accompanied by his sister and girlfriend. He appears enthusiastic yet tense, while the camera uses eye-level and close-ups to highlight his inner conflict. Although his presence is considered politically risky, Oppenheimer insists he is not a member of the communist party. His conversation reflects more humanistic and intellectual values, including his desire to help war victims and discuss science, suggesting his intentions are empathetic and non-political.

4.3 Scene 3: Oppenheimer speaks in an auditorium after the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

In the scene 2:04:40–2:08:35, Oppenheimer delivers a speech at the Los Alamos Auditorium the day after the bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Although he appears dignified and smiles before his colleagues, his heart is filled with guilt and trauma as he imagines the destruction and suffering of the Japanese people caused by the bombs.

In the speech scene in the Los Alamos auditorium, Oppenheimer appears pale with teary eyes and an unfocused gaze, delivering his speech in a halting tone that conveys tension and mixed emotions. The editing displays perceptual distortions that depict Oppenheimer's imagination of the atomic bomb's effects, while the dark lighting in some angles symbolizes his moral ambiguity. The cheers turn to cries, emphasizing his inner distress. His sentences are slurred and halting. This scene represents the conflict between the ideology of nationalism—the success of creating a weapon that ended World War II and defeated the Nazis—and humanism, in which Oppenheimer feels sadness and regret for the destruction and mass death caused by his creation.

4.4 Scene 4: Oppenheimer meets President Truman

In this scene (2:09:02–2:12:45), Oppenheimer is invited by President Truman to the White House after the dropping of the atomic bomb. He expresses his opposition to the development of the hydrogen bomb and expresses his guilt. However, Truman's initially friendly demeanor changes to cold and angry after hearing Oppenheimer's statement.

In this scene, Oppenheimer sits on a sofa facing President Truman, dressed immaculately, but his face is stiff and tense with anxiety. He has been invited to the White House by Truman. The scene opens with a *TIMES* magazine photo of Oppenheimer titled “Father of the Atomic Bomb,” signifying his success. In dialogue, Oppenheimer expresses guilt, but Truman responds with a handkerchief in mockery. This scene depicts an ideology in which the political system sacrifices morality for power, with Truman representing the power of government and Oppenheimer representing the individual with subjective morality.

4.5 Scene 5: Oppenheimer Faces Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) Hearing

In scenes 2:44:00 – 2:47:05, Oppenheimer faces a closed-door hearing of the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) to determine his eligibility to hold a top-secret security clearance due to his alleged communist ties and his refusal to develop a hydrogen bomb. He is pressed about his decision to create the atomic bomb and his contribution to the dropping of the bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but rejects the hydrogen bomb.

In the closed-door trial scene at the New Post Office, Oppenheimer appears in formal attire, but his nervous gestures, averted eyes, and trembling voice indicate deep psychological distress and inner conflict. Roger Robb poses a provocative, morally provocative question, illustrating how the state, through the AEC Commission, treats scientists as tools of power, rather than as moral individuals. This scene reflects the dominant ideology that personal moral principles are considered an obstacle to national security. Ultimately, Oppenheimer's defeat at trial reflects the defeat of subjective morality and humanistic values by the state's political power.

4.6 Scene 6: Oppenheimer Conversing by the Lake with Albert Einstein

In scenes 2:51:18 – 2:2:54:07, Oppenheimer meets Albert Einstein on the lakeshore at the AEC center. Here Oppenheimer and Albert Einstein discuss the impact of their discoveries.

In the scene where Oppenheimer and Albert Einstein meet on the lakeside of the AEC office, Oppenheimer appears modest and enthusiastic, but his expression turns serious as the conversation touches on his inner conflict. This scene highlights how great discoveries can backfire, and emphasizes the strength of Oppenheimer's subjective moral impulses and humanism.

4.7 Scene 7: Oppenheimer shakes hands with Edward Teller at the White House

In scene 2:52:09 – 2:52:58, Oppenheimer is invited back to the White House and receives an award after being previously dismissed by the government. At that moment, he shakes hands with Edward Teller, his former colleague on the Manhattan Project who testified against Oppenheimer in the AEC hearings, and is the originator of the first hydrogen bomb.

This scene shows Oppenheimer years later, as he is invited to the White House to receive an award and reunite with Edward Teller, a former colleague who betrayed him. Oppenheimer appears tense but maintains authority, with awkward gestures that reflect discomfort. As they shake hands, Oppenheimer is framed with a high angle and tight composition, suggesting his inner turmoil, while Teller's low angle and wide shot emphasize his dominance.

Table 1. Summary of reliability and validity pls-sem

No	Scene	Reality	Representation	Ideology
1	Poisoned Apple	Oppenheimer tries to poison Blackett but regrets it and takes the apple back.	Dark tone, nervous gestures, the apple as a symbol of "sin."	Ambition vs morality; rebellion against scientific authority.
2	Conversation with Chevalier	Oppenheimer attends a communist gathering and discusses war and social issues.	Close-ups showing inner conflict; warm yet tense atmosphere.	Humanism vs political suspicion; scientists viewed as ideological risks.
3	Post-Bomb Speech	Oppenheimer gives a speech while internally haunted by guilt over Hiroshima and Nagasaki.	Visual distortions, cheers turning to screams, dim lighting.	Nationalism vs humanism; ethical conflict after mass destruction.
4	Meeting with Truman	Oppenheimer expresses guilt; Truman mocks and dismisses him.	Truman framed as dominant; Oppenheimer appears small and anxious.	State power > individual morality; political interest overrides ethics.
5	AEC Hearing	Oppenheimer is interrogated for communist ties and anti-H-bomb stance; he loses clearance.	Closed room, intense questioning, signs of psychological distress.	The state sacrifices personal morality for national security.

6	Lakeside with Einstein	Oppenheimer and Einstein discuss the consequences of scientific discovery.	Calm natural setting; shift in Oppenheimer's expression to seriousness.	Responsibility of scientists; strength of personal moral reflection.
7	Handshake with Teller	Years later, Oppenheimer receives an award and shakes Teller's hand awkwardly.	High-angle on Oppenheimer, low-angle on Teller; tense body language.	Political dominance and fractured scientific community; unresolved moral tension.

5 Discussion

The film "Oppenheimer" (2023) presents a complex representation of subjective morality within the context of history and power. This analysis identifies seven key scenes that unpack Oppenheimer's moral dilemma through three levels of code: reality, representation, and ideology (Fiske, 1987). From the beginning, the film depicts Oppenheimer as grappling with inner conflict, such as when he attempts to poison his professor but later regrets it. This scene implies that morality is not a fixed entity, but rather the result of personal reflection (Rachels & Rachels, 2012). Tensions escalate in Oppenheimer's relationships with members of the Communist Party, which aroused suspicion amidst the Cold War atmosphere. Through dim lighting and enclosed spaces, the film frames Oppenheimer's alienation from dominant values, while suggesting that these interactions are based more on humanism than political ideology (Lukes, 2008).

The moral conflict reaches its peak when Oppenheimer leads the Manhattan Project. The Los Alamos speech scene marks a psychological turning point: amidst the cheers, he appears isolated and devastated, accentuated by visual effects such as contrasting lighting and non-diegetic sounds of screams. This emphasizes that scientific success does not always bring moral satisfaction (Stam, 2017). The confrontation with President Truman then highlights the clash between individual morality and state interests. Oppenheimer voices guilt and rejects the development of the hydrogen bomb, but Truman's cynical response—shown through his handkerchief gesture—demonstrates that state power does not accommodate personal morality. In Foucault's (1977) view, this reflects how power disciplines subject and suppresses individual consciousness.

This tension continues in the AEC hearing, where Oppenheimer is positioned as an ideological threat. The courtroom is depicted with dramatic lighting and cramped framing, reinforcing the sense of systemic oppression. A montage combining the courtroom, the bomb explosion, and the victims' faces creates emotional and existential tension, making Oppenheimer not just a historical figure but a symbol of the moral crisis in modern society. In this context, morality is understood as the result of an individual's reflective construction within repressive social conditions (Singer, 2024).

One of the most philosophical moments occurs in Oppenheimer and Einstein's dialogue by the lake. The ripples of the water and the silence serve as metaphors for the cascading impact of scientific decisions. Einstein serves as a moral mirror, not a provider of answers, reinforcing the idea that moral questions often lack definitive resolution. The film's conclusion highlights the irony of Oppenheimer receiving a state award

while remaining haunted by inner turmoil. The image of his rigid body and blank expression suggests that institutional recognition does not resolve his internal moral struggle (Haynes, 1996).

The final handshake with Edward Teller demonstrates the contrast between technocratic success and human values. The film ends the narrative without absolute resolution, adhering to the existentialist principle that each individual is solely responsible for their moral choices (Sartre, 1946). With a powerful visual and narrative approach, Oppenheimer conveys a profound philosophical reflection on the relationship between science, power, and humanity. As Nichols (2004) emphasizes, film is not just a medium of entertainment, but a tool of moral representation that shapes the way we understand the world (Rosenstone, 2017).

6 Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Oppenheimer's inner conflict is central to the narrative, highlighting scientific responsibility, guilt, and humanitarian dilemmas, while simultaneously critiquing systems of power that disregard humanistic values. Through visual, audio, and gestural constructions, the film presents subjective morality as a personal experience that often conflicts with institutional values, and offers a framework for understanding the representation of the character's internal conflict within broader power relations. Future research could expand this discourse by comparing subjective morality in other biographical films that depict ethical and political dilemmas.

The film also demonstrates that the scientific process is inseparable from values, emotions, and personal dilemmas, so that the boundary between what is technically possible and what is ethically justifiable remains a constant moral struggle. In the context of AI technology, evolving ethical debates demonstrate a similar dynamic, where innovation raises questions about moral responsibility and boundaries that cannot be resolved solely through technical logic. This confirms that subjective morality, both in scientific narratives and contemporary AI discourse, remains a crucial mechanism for assessing the direction and consequences of technological progress.

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