

Oppenheimer Shelved In Japan

David McNeill

Editor's Note: Please see the companion piece, “Reflections on Oppenheimer, the War in Ukraine, and Democracy in America,” available [here](#).

Three months since its worldwide release, the movie *Oppenheimer*, about the creation of the atomic bomb, has yet to be seen in the only country where it was dropped: Japan.

Neither Universal Studios, which rolled out the movie in the US, nor Toho-Towa, its local distributor, will comment on its fate in the world’s third-largest cinema market.

Toho-Towa tersely refers all queries to Universal and says it has yet to even receive any promotional materials from the company. The movie was released in the United States on July 21.

The Japan Confederation of A-and H-bomb Sufferers Organizations, which represents Japan’s *hibakusha*—victims of the bombing, also declines to comment. “We haven’t seen the movie,” said a spokeswoman.

Christopher Nolan’s historical epic tells the story of J. Robert Oppenheimer (played by Cillian Murphy), the American scientist who directed the team that designed and built the bomb.

It has received mostly strong reviews—[Tara Brady in *The Irish Times*](#) called it “deeply flawed but brilliant”—but criticism for relegating the many victims of Oppenheimer’s work to a footnote.

The two bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, less than a month after Oppenheimer oversaw the Trinity test in New Mexico, killed over 200,000 people, mostly civilians. The destruction is alluded to but not shown in the movie.

Among its critics is director Spike Lee [who said this month](#) that at three hours long, *Oppenheimer* could have spared a few minutes” to show “what happened to the Japanese people.”

Nolan, who calls Oppenheimer “the most important person who ever lived,” says that he felt that departing from the scientist’s experience in the movie would have “betrayed the terms of the storytelling.”

“He learned about the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki on the radio—the same as the rest of the world,” Nolan [told NBC in July](#).

Japanese commentators speculate that Universal is worried about local reaction to the movie, including the prospect of protests. “A biography of the maker of the atomic bomb that excludes any scene of the dropping of the bomb is highly likely to be flooded with criticism in Japan,” said the [Weekly Gendai magazine](#).

Oppenheimer’s orchestrated box-office faceoff with the fantasy comedy *Barbie*—many Americans were encouraged to see both movies as a double feature—probably did not help its prospects in Japan, speculates M.G. Sheftall, author of the forthcoming book, *Hiroshima: The Last Witnesses*.

The “Barbieheimer” phenomenon was “frivolous silliness involving content directly related to the darkest chapter of Japanese suffering, which made the Americans come off as glib and insensitive,” he says.

“Had it gotten a Japan release, there would no doubt have been some criticism for the elision of Japanese suffering in the film, but nothing some corporate spin doctors could not have gotten around.” Sheftall predicts the movie would have been successful in Japan and is “mystified” why it has not been released.

The incineration of Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the end of the second world war, viewed by many as one of history’s great war crimes, has never been graphically depicted in a mainstream American film.

James Cameron, who came closest with his “judgment day” scene in *Terminator 2*, has [reportedly](#) spent years trying to develop a film based on the story of double *hibakusha* Tsutomu Yamaguchi, who survived both Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Oppenheimer opened in nearby South Korea in August and has been a [financial success in China](#) and other Asian markets.

Hollywood movies are typically released without incident in Japan, though there are exceptions. [Unbroken](#), a 2014 film depicting the story of Louis Zamperini, a prisoner of war who is tortured by a sadistic Japanese camp commander, was stopped in its tracks by a campaign in the right-wing media. It was eventually screened at art house cinemas.

Oppenheimer will have another chance in Japan if it picks up any Oscars at the Academy Awards early next year. But the longer the distributors wait, the more it loses in commercial terms, points out Roger Pulvers, a Japan-based filmmaker and author. The decision to shelve the movie is commercial, not political, he says, as the producers want to avoid eliciting controversy and protests. Yet he sees this as a mistake as the film can stand on its own artistic

merit, including in the Japanese market. “There are some awfully dense people in movie companies,” he concludes.

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