COMPARING FILMS: AN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS PERSPECTIVE

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Prof. Alan Whitehorn, Kingston ON, 11 January 2024

There has been a great deal written about and comparing the two recent blockbuster movies *Oppenheimer* and *Barbie*. Both films were made by prominent directors, included casts of outstanding actors, received exceptionally-praising reviews, have already won a number of awards and raised thought-provoking themes. Christopher Nolan's film *Oppenheimer* included actors Cillian Murphy, Florence Pugh, Robert Downey Jr and Emily Blunt. Greta Gerwig's *Barbie* cast Margot Robbie, Ryan Gosling, America Ferrara and Kate McKinnon. The film *Oppenheimer* is focused primarily on the biographical life of the US physicist Robert Oppenheimer and the issues of world war, the development of destructive weaponry, and the scientific and ethical roles of an academic amidst global conflict and international tensions. *Barbie* is a fantasy film based on the fictional Barbie doll created in the 1950s, but nevertheless explores women's identity, gender relations, and the nature and dynamics of 21st century contemporary society.

As interesting as it is to compare these two highly successful films of 2023, both of which are now on streaming networks; it might be useful and germane to explore a slightly different pairing of films in these tense times of rival military alliance systems and international conflict. This is particularly so for Armenian decision-makers who have lost two recent wars and need to engage in a major strategic and defence policy rethink and explore related structural reorganization.

We can explore and learn key analytical themes from pairing two films about World War Two. It involves comparing the currently released *Oppenheimer* about the creation of the atomic bomb and the earlier 2014 movie *The Imitation Game* which starred Benedict Cumberbatch, Keira Knightley, Mathew Goode and Charles Dance. Both films explore critical concepts of modern war. *The Imitation Game* examines the life of Alan Turing and the wartime pioneering work in intelligence code breaking. Turing and his team harnessed revolutionary computing capacity (i.e. vast data processing) to crack the German Enigma code.

Part of the importance of these two war films is the timeliness for current international relations. Of course, other factors are also involved, but contemporary war relies heavily on two pivotal scientific and industrial aspects: the development of ever more destructive and deadly weaponry, but also the gathering and processing more efficiently and swiftly military information and overall intelligence through a variety of means. The Oppenheimer movie dealt with the creation of weapons of mass destruction, while the Turing film analyzed the challenges of swiftly gathering vast amounts of secret military intelligence, particularly germane for wartime targeting.

The Allied final victory in World War Two was greatly facilitated first by the British breaking of the German Enigma code by the Colossus calculating machine and then, by the American development of the atomic weapon for two history-making bombing raids against Japan.

Today scientists race to develop more extensive and swifter use of thousands of satellites gathering vast and continuous amounts of information on the war zones of Ukraine, Russia, the South Caucasus, the Middle East and elsewhere. They also design and mass manufacture more deadly swarms of advanced killer drones. This was particularly revealing in the technologically innovative Azerbaijani victory over Armenia in the 2020 Karabakh War. It is in even more evident in the current Russia-Ukraine war. If the South Caucasus was drone war 1.0, the Ukrainian battle space is drone war 2.0, with vastly more and increasingly sophisticated drones filling the skies. The revolutionary drone war era is upon us.

In this 21st century world, more deadly weapons and vastly swifter processing of masses of

information continue to be twin key factors in modern war. The pioneering lives of the physicist Oppenheimer and the mathematician Turing in confronting these issues remain timely. Interestingly, both biographical films explored major ethical concerns amidst scientific breakthroughs and their deadly applications to warfare. Oppenheimer agonized about the A-bomb's enormous destructive capacity, while Turing dealt with what secret information should be shared by the code-breakers and the profound implications for who lived and who died.

The films *Oppenheimer* and *The Imitation Game* give us insight not only into these two remarkable intellectuals, but also the mixed blessings of the Promethean fate of our contemporary world. We continue to wrestle with the complex issues of war and peace and the role of applied science upon our lives. Our collective fate continues to be defined by such calculations.

Alan Whitehorn is a professor emeritus at the Royal Military College of Canada and a former JS Woodsworth Chair of Humanities at Simon Fraser University. He is the author of several books on political conflict, including most recently *Karabakh Diary: Poems from the Diaspora/Gharabaghyan Oragir: banasteghcutyunner Spyurqic* (2022) and *Reflections on Vladimir Putin & Russia's Foreign & Military Policy: Exploring Motivations, Factors & Explanations* (2022).

Comments

ANTOINE STÉPANE TERJANIAN – 2024-01-19 13:17:02
Thank you Professor Whitehorn. These are inspiring and à propos comparisons. Perhaps Armenia's mathematicians can engender an Armenian Turing. A genius mathematician who would break the code of the guiding and controlling system for attacking drones. Perhaps their guidance system can be jammed. Perhaps ARPA (https://www.arpainstitute.org/) can be involved in helping develop the technology.