

# Frames per second: Exploding heads in the time of Oppenheimer

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**Western and Japanese artists found inspiration for post-humanist visions in the years following Hiroshima and Nagasaki**



Oppenheimer

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Reviewing Christopher Nolan-directed *Oppenheimer*, the three-hour-long biopic of theoretical physicist Julius Robert Oppenheimer, also known as the “Father of the Atomic Bomb”, award-winning film reviewer Uday Bhatia writes: “Scenes don’t transition so much as collide into each other... Nolan doesn’t just want us to see nuclear fission. He wants us to feel like we’re inside a nuclear reaction.” While watching it at an IMAX theatre in Noida on 21 July, the day it was released in India, I was reminded constantly of Spanish surrealist painter Salvador Dali’s painting *Exploding Raphaelesque Head*.

The painting, housed in the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art in Edinburgh, where I saw it in 2019, is one of the several fragmented heads and figures Dali painted after the first atom bomb was dropped in Hiroshima on 6 August 1945. The female face in the painting is easily recognisable as the face of Raphael's Madonna, but it is in a sort of a swirl, with innumerable fragments, possibly as a result of nuclear fission. Some of these fragments are rhinoceros horns, which Dali once described as "the only ones in the animal kingdom constructed in accordance with a perfect logarithmic spiral". In some ways, *Exploding Raphaelesque Head* and the other paintings of Dali's atomic period, which lasted from 1945 to about 1960, were a rejection of his style till then.

In December 1951 — the same year that he painted *Exploding Raphaelesque Head* — Dali declared at a press conference in London that he was no more a Surrealist but was the "First Painter of the Atomic Age", interested in the artistic possibilities of nuclear physics. In the same year, he published his *Mystical Manifesto*, where he described himself as an ex-Surrealist, trying to reinvigorate modern art by utilising techniques of the Italian Renaissance, while also being conscious of recent scientific discoveries like atomic energy and quantum physics.

He was, however, not the only artist or writer who had been deeply affected by the atomic explosion in Japan. Existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre in his essay "War and Fear" (1946) wrote: "In other times one risked one's life against the lives of others; one saw one's dead enemies in close proximity, one could touch their wounds. But today, atomic warfare means unleashing catastrophic destruction from afar." Similar pessimism can be observed in the works of Italian artist Enrico Baj, who started the Nuclear Art movement in Milan in the early 1950s, with Joe C. Colombo and Sergio Dangelo.

But filled as these works are with the premonition of a nuclear apocalypse, they are somewhat ignorant of the real effects of the atomic bomb. As a result, works of Dali's atomic period or Baj and his contemporaries are intellectual exercises that bemoan the possible destruction of European high culture, with little emotional investment in the horrors visited upon the citizens of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Japanese artist Shikoko Gorō, who was a part of anti-nuclear activism in his country, captured the devastation caused by the US bombs in Hiroshima through his watercolour illustrations for the children's book *Okori jizo (Angry Jizo)* written by Yamaguchi Yūko. In 2010, Ann Sherif, an Eastern Asian Studies professor at Oberlin College in Ohio, USA, visited Hiroshima in search of literature and art on the atomic bomb by Japanese artists and writers. One of the artists Sherif learned about was Gorō.

She created a website to ensure a wider proliferation of his work. Besides his artwork, the website also has a description of the *Angry Jizo* book (1979): "In wartime Hiroshima, a young girl finds comfort as she visits the neighbourhood Jizo stone statue. Jizō (Bodhisattva) icons can be found along the roadside as guardians of children and

travellers. This Jizo always has a smile on his face. On August 6, the bomb explodes over Hiroshima. Amidst the dead and dying, the badly injured girl finds her way to the Jizō. She calls for her mother, and for water. The Jizō's face shows his anger at human folly when his expression changes into that of a fierce guardian Niō statue. The Jizo sheds tears into the girl's mouth in her last moments. In the end, the Jizō's head crumbles into a million pieces."

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Nolan has been criticised for not depicting the true extent of the devastation caused by the atomic explosions in Japan and there has been a backlash in the country against the film, especially its marketing campaign that connects it to the other blockbuster of the season *Barbie*. Nolan has spoken about how his film relates to Artificial Intelligence,

which is having its “Oppenheimer moment”, and could lead to the destruction of the world as we know it. Others have reflected on how the film reminded them of the destruction of the planet because of human inaction to prevent climate change.

From the exploding head of the Madonna to the crumbling head of the Jizo, the atomic explosion inspired post-humanist visions in artists — terrifying possibilities that seem increasingly real in our world.

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