

Reflections on Spiritual Dilemmas and Progressive Mania: Intermediality in *The Waste Land* and *Oppenheimer*

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Abstract

The *Waste Land*, as a long modernist poem, profoundly depicts the spiritual desolation, lack of faith and collapse of civilization in modern Western society. The study of transmediality from the literary classic *The Waste Land* (1922) to the contemporary film *Oppenheimer* (2023) provides insights into the mythological elements, audio-visual montage techniques and the theme of human redemption in *The Waste Land*. The transmediality of both works is demonstrated by the common element of myth, which reveals the possibility of both physical and spiritual destruction of mankind by instrumental progress. *Oppenheimer*'s implicit and explicit cross-media references to *The Waste Land* continue the poem's portrayal of the spiritual barrenness of modern Western society while reflecting on the progressivist ideology that pervades modern society and advocating restraint in human desires, thus fully highlighting *The Waste Land*'s modern value and influence.

Keywords

The Waste Land, *Oppenheimer*, transmediality, intermedial reference.

1. Introduction

The Waste Land, the Nobel Prize work, profoundly depicts the phenomenon of spiritual desolation, lack of faith and collapse of civilization in modern Western society. Scholars have explored it from various dimensions, including mythological archetypes, ecology, imagery elements, creative techniques, religious influences, etc. Scott Freer points out that "T.S. Eliot's epic poem, *The Waste Land*, is famous for using the mythical method as a poetic method to create a complex web of oblique allusions and cross-cultural correspondences".^[1] This work, in Dong Hongchuan's opinion, "breaks the concept of poetry in the traditional sense by using montage to 'collage' myths, legends, historical events, famous works, and religious teachings".^[2] "The poet establishes a substantial mythological system in the poem".^[3] *The Waste Land* has been regarded as "a master document of the modernist movement in literature, a work that both culminates the movement and performs an act of criticism upon it".^[4] Its influence continues into the contemporary era, leaving traces in several works. In the biographical film *Oppenheimer*, *The Waste Land* appears directly, suggesting the intermedial influence of this work on that film. The film's inheritance of the artistic approach and content of *The Waste Land* may take from reality. "Scientist Oppenheimer claimed that Eliot's *The Waste Land* had influenced him".^[5] After Oppenheimer's invention of the atomic bomb, "T.S. Eliot, a poet Oppenheimer admired and hosted later as the director of the Institute for Advanced Study, famously wrote: 'Do I dare Disturb the universe?' Oppenheimer surely did.". ^[6] In 1963, Oppenheimer was asked by *The Christian Century* magazine, "What books shaped his 'vocational attitude' and his 'philosophy on life' and Eliot's *The Waste Land* ranked among them".^[6]

From *The Waste Land* to *Oppenheimer*, from literary media to cinematic media, the process of how their influence is generated, inherited, and developed is worthy of in-depth exploration. The intermedia studies that emerged in the past two or three decades may provide effective support for this. “Intermediality” was first proposed by German scholar Aage Hansen-Löve in 1983, and since then, numerous definitions have been put forward. German cross-media theorist Rajewski notes that “intermediality may serve foremost as a generic term for all those phenomena that (as indicated by the prefix inter) in some way take place between media”.^[7] “In literary studies as well as in such fields as art history, music, theater, and film studies, there is a repeated focus on an entire range of phenomena qualifying as intermedial”, such as “musicalization of literature, *transposition d’art*”.^[7] Academic research on *The Waste Land* has primarily focused on the text itself, with some exploration of intertextuality with other works, but studies from a cross-media perspective remain relatively rare. Analyzing *The Waste Land* and *Oppenheimer* through a cross-media lens can reveal the influence of classic literature on contemporary popular culture and uncover the contemporary relevance of its themes. On the 60th anniversary of T.S. Eliot’s death, this article revisits *The Waste Land* and analyses its cross-media connections with *Oppenheimer*, revealing its reflections on technological progress and warnings about spiritual desolation through three directions: mythical elements, montage techniques, and the path of human redemption. Using contemporary film media to reflect the ideas of *The Waste Land* can highlight this work’s foresight and contemporary relevance, thereby showcasing Eliot’s visionary perspective and sense of responsibility as a poet of his time.

2. Prometheus and Sibyllam: The Transmediality of *Oppenheimer* and *The Waste Land*

Mythology, as a potential shared element across media, powerfully highlights the transmediality inherent in both film and literature. By juxtaposing the mythological elements in the film *Oppenheimer* and the poem *The Waste Land*, one can discern the dialogue and exchange between these two media, as well as the profound ideas they collectively convey: in the pursuit of knowledge and power, humanity has driven significant technological progress, yet may also subject itself to physical suffering and spiritual desolation. Transmediality “concerns phenomena that are non-specific to individual media and/or are under scrutiny in a media-comparative analysis” and transmediality “can occur, for instance, on the level of content in myths that have become cultural scripts and have lost their relationship to an original text or medium”.^[8] In short, transmediality emphasizes shared (fixed) phenomena that appear across two or more media, and myths are one of the typical examples of transmedial phenomena.

If Prometheus is the explicit myth in *Oppenheimer*, his image symbolizes a martyr who relentlessly fights for human faith; Sibyllam in *The Waste Land* serves as an implicit myth, reflected in the narrative framework of *Oppenheimer*, representing the image of the “wasteland dweller” who yearns for great power yet ultimately suffers brutal mental torment. The film *Oppenheimer* opens with the quote: “Prometheus stole fire from the Gods and gave it to man for this he was chained to a rock and tortured for eternity”.^[9] This classic myth outlines the noble image of Prometheus, the mythical figure who sacrificed himself for the sake of humanity’s better life. He fought for humanity’s ideals but ultimately endured physical suffering. Similarly, Oppenheimer dedicated himself to the development of the atomic bomb, initially driven by his passionate pursuit of physics and the hope that this achievement could bring peace amid the US-Japan standoff. However, things did not go as planned. He not only witnessed the devastating aftermath of the atomic bomb explosion but also endured over a year of security hearings, which imposed numerous restrictions and hardships on him. The preface to *The*

Waste Land is written in Latin, meaning that “For once I saw Sibyllam in a cage hanging in the city of Cumae, and when the children asked her, ‘Sibyllam, what do you want?’ she answered, ‘I want to die.’”.^[10] Sibyllam, this mythical figure, originates from *Satyricon* of Petronius Arbiter, a noted libertine of the first century C.E. “The Sibyl, one of a number of prophetic figures so named in ancient times, is confined to a jar because her body threatens to deliquesce. Granted a wish by Apollo, she had asked for as many years of life as there are grains in a handful of sand, but she forgot to ask for eternal youth as well.”.^[10] Her intense desire for the power of eternal life instead pushed her into a state of withering yet undead, despairing helplessness, plunging her into an endless spiritual wasteland. In the film *Oppenheimer*, Oppenheimer resembles the Sibyllam in *The Waste Land*. He successfully invented the atomic bomb, earning the cheers and praise of the masses, yet amidst this acclaim, he became mentally disoriented, trapped in a spiritual dilemma between scientific ideals and human morality. This plot mirrors Sibyllam’s fate, deeply revealing the shared creative intent of *The Waste Land* and *Oppenheimer*: humanity’s fervent exploration of its ability to control the world may lead to the collapse of scientific ideals, the disintegration of personal beliefs, and ultimately, a devastating blow to one’s spiritual world.

According to Werner Wolf’s perspective, transmediality is “under scrutiny in a media-comparative analysis”.^[8] A comparative analysis of the literary classic *The Waste Land* and the biographical film *Oppenheimer* reveals a shared thematic thread conveyed through their mythical elements: humanity’s fervent pursuit of technological progress, while enhancing our capabilities, may also precipitate the dual destruction of both our physical and spiritual selves. Thus, placing the 20th-century literary classic *The Waste Land* alongside the contemporary work *Oppenheimer* highlights the former’s foresight and its cautionary significance for contemporary society, offering a unique reference point for understanding the dilemmas of human development.

3. Visual and Auditory Montage: Oppenheimer’s Implicit Intermedial References to The Waste Land

Artistic techniques can be used as a means of intermedial reference to reveal the deeper meaning conveyed by the film’s reference to the literary work. Intermedial references are “meaning-constitutional strategies that contribute to the media product’s overall signification.”^[7] Intermedial reference, in Wolf’s definition, can be divided into explicit reference and implicit reference. Implicit reference, also known as cross-media mimesis, “is achieved by triggering an imaginative ‘as if presence’ of the heterogeneous media phenomenon being mimicked, and is achieved in a variety of ways...Formal mimesis is a particularly interesting phenomenon, which produces intermedia meaning through a particular likeness of the source medium’s symbols”.^[11] Simply put, intermedial reference emphasizes how a single medium, through its creative means, evokes associations with or imitates the work of another medium to refine its meaning. *Oppenheimer* implicitly refers to the audio-visual juxtaposition in *The Waste Land* through visual and auditory montage, continuing the significance of *The Waste Land* and refining its value construction. On the visual level, *Oppenheimer* presents many scenes: the audience in the auditorium cheers to celebrate scientific success, while the girl’s skin peeled away with the white light of the explosion, Oppenheimer “steps on something, look down to see my foot inside a charred corpse.”^[9] As the nuclear fallout falls, the tragedy of Hiroshima is recreated in the auditorium and the crowd disappears in an instant. Through this visual juxtaposition, the film shows the audience Oppenheimer’s spiritual conflict between scientific ideals and human morality. This visual montage is an intermedial reference to the visual montage in Chapter 5 of *The Waste Land*: “After the torchlight red on sweaty faces/ After the frosty silence in the gardens/ After the agony in stony places/ The shouting and the crying/ Prison and palace and

reverberation/ Of thunder of spring over distant mountains". ^[10] Eliot uses fast switching scenes and images throughout the poem, such as "sweat-slick faces red with torches" versus "frosty gardens", "prisons" versus "the palace and the spring thunder and the mountains", creating a picture of the desolation of the human spirit and depicting "the episode of arrested Jesus while praying in the Garden of Gethsemane". ^[2] Through visual montage, *The Waste Land* depicts the arrest of Jesus, a symbol of Western faith, and profoundly shows the disillusionment of faith in modern society. The film clip is the same as *The Waste Land*, visualizing the collapse of scientific ideals in modern society through juxtaposed images, extending the significance of *The Waste Land's* creation to contemporary times.

If the film's visual montage is of unique value to the continuation of the meaning of *The Waste Land*, then the auditory montage, through the combination of sound elements, is even more powerful in highlighting *The Waste Land's* portrayal of the human spiritual struggle in modern society. Oppenheimer heard, in the same time, both "the thunder of a thousand storms rolls over" and "young crowd was cheering" on piles of ashes. ^[9] Witnesses to nuclear explosions portrayed the sound of nuclear explosions as "howitzers", "trains whistling", and "thunder". ^[12] Richard King, the film's sound designer, juxtaposes these sounds in the film. As the sounds intensify, Oppenheimer falls into a trance, unable to distinguish between the cheers of the victors and the cries of the victims, revealing his moral dilemmas and spiritual struggles beneath the appearance of technological progress. This aural montage refers to the aural juxtaposition of *The Waste Land*. The juxtaposition of "The shouting and the crying" and "Of thunder of spring over distant mountains" highlights the spiritual despair of mankind after losing faith. "Dead mountain mouth of carious teeth that cannot spit/ Here one can neither stand nor lie nor sit/ There is not even silence in the mountains/ But dry sterile thunder without rain/ There is not even solitude in the mountains/ But red sullen faces sneer and snarl/ From doors of mudcracked houses". ^[10] Here, the "dry sterile thunder without rain" and the "sneer and snarl" portray the "dryness of the earth, the absence of water, and the death of everything after Jesus' death", ^[2] showing that human beings have been in a situation where the earth is dry and cracked, showing the collapse and despair of the human spiritual world after the loss of faith. Through auditory montage, *The Waste Land* juxtaposes human shouts with natural thunder, revealing the collapse and despair of the human spiritual world after the loss of faith. By referring to *The Waste Land* through auditory montage, Oppenheimer not only continues the core theme of human spiritual despair in modern society in *The Waste Land*, profoundly presents the dilemma of human beings who are at a loss when facing the rapid development of science and technology in the modern society, but also deepens the intrinsic connection between the two works in the spiritual dimension.

In terms of visual and auditory montage settings, *The Waste Land* as the literary classic, has a significant influence on the film *Oppenheimer*. Oppenheimer's implicit reference to *The Waste Land* successfully perpetuates *The Waste Land's* core meaning of warning against the spiritual desolation and despair of mankind, revealing the spiritual wasteland and moral dilemma that mankind faces in the pursuit of technology. On this basis, it is worthwhile to explore in depth whether Eliot gives a way of redemption for human spiritual dilemmas in *The Waste Land*, and how this way is continued in *Oppenheimer* in an intermedial form.

4. Progression Reflection and Desire Restraint: Oppenheimer's Explicit intermedial References to The Waste Land

The Waste Land's profound revelation of the spiritual dilemma of modern humans is implicitly referred to by *Oppenheimer* in the form of an audio-visual montage, and *Oppenheimer's* explicit intermedial references to *The Waste Land* further perpetuate the idea that the crisis of the modern human spirit is addressed in *The Waste Land*. Wolf notes that "explicit reference (or

intermedia thematization), which is most easily recognizable in the medium of speech, exists when a text refers to or discusses another medium (or a work produced in another medium), as in the discussion of art in an artist's novel", ^[12] meaning that explicit reference is achieved when one medium directly presents a work from another medium, which in turn triggers an associated reflection on the thematic content of that medium. In *Oppenheimer*, director Nolan sets the appearance of *The Waste Land* in the period of Oppenheimer's fervent exploration of quantum physics in Göttingen. This arrangement may be aimed at achieving an intermedial explicit reference to *The Waste Land*, thus establishing a connection with the theme of *The Waste Land*, which is to reflect on the idea of progressivism that is prevalent in modern society, while at the same time advocating for the restraining of human's desires.

After the Industrial Revolution, society was mechanized with the spread of progressivism. Mankind was reduced to the subordination of tools and became "waste-landers" who lacked independent thought. In *The Waste Land*, Eliot uses "the sound of horns and motors", ^[10] "human engines", ^[10] and "trams and dusty trees", ^[10] and presents that mechanical tools gradually became dominant in human life. With the rapid development of industry, automobiles became the first choice for traveling, trains carried goods, trams were used for daily commuting, and the dust was raised by the transportation between the speeding vehicles and the trees. This scene was just like the modern civilization described by Matthew Arnold: "The whole civilization is, to a much greater degree than the civilization of Greece and Rome, mechanical and external, and tends constantly to become more so". ^[13] People were caught up in a progress mania and quietly lost themselves in the constant development and advancement of machines. In this regard, Max Horkheimer (1895-1973) and Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno (1903-1969) pointed out that this phenomenon "weakens people" and described a society under the manipulation of alienated reason: "In the form of machines, however, alienated reason is moving toward a society which reconciles thought, in its solidification as an apparatus both material and intellectual, with a liberated living element, and relates it to society itself as its true subject.". ^[14] *Oppenheimer* similarly refers to this chaos of thought triggered by the mania of progress. The successful test of the atomic bomb is the turning point of the film. Before this point, Oppenheimer was convinced that the bomb would bring peace, When confronted with the question "How can we justify using this weapon on human beings? ", ^[9] he responds, "When the world learns the terrible secret of Los Alamos, our work will ensure a peace mankind has never seen. A peace based on the kind of international cooperation that Roosevelt always envisaged.". ^[9] But Oppenheimer began his reflection when he was shocked by the bomb. Witnessing the immense power of the bomb, Oppenheimer was awakened from his daydream: "Now I am become Death, destroyer of worlds...". ^[9] From then on, he begins to question the legitimacy of mankind's development of technology and weapons and the possibility of relying on the advancement of weapons in exchange for peace. *Oppenheimer's* explicit reference to the theme of "reflection on progress" in *The Waste Land* profoundly reveals the limitations of the human mind under the manipulation of instrumental rationality, and at the same time implies that mankind's over-pursuit and reliance on scientific and technological progress may ultimately lead to its demise. As the introduction in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* warns, "Yet the wholly enlightened earth is radiant with triumphant calamity.". ^[14]

Under the appearance of progressivism, the human desire to control technology and tools is growing. "Restraining desire" becomes one of the paths to salvation for the "waste-landers". "According to Eliot, all the problems of modern society can be attributed to the desires generated by human beings because of their self-exaltation and arrogance, and therefore, the first step to save society is to save the mind trapped by desires". ^[2] The phrase "Now I am become Death, destroyer of worlds..." ^[9] in *Oppenheimer* is derived from the Hindu classic *Bhagavad Gita*. *The Decision to Drop the Atomic Bomb*, an American documentary, records that Oppenheimer recited this line when recalling the Trinity test on 16 July, ^[15] which may be an

allusion to the influence of *The Waste Land* on *Oppenheimer*. In *The Waste Land*, Eliot connects the waste-landers' way of salvation with religion and uses the Sanskrit phrase "Datta, dayadhvam, damyata" ^[10] which signifies "giving, compassion, and restraint". ^[16] Thunder was mentioned three times, each conveying a different meaning: the first time it refers to "Datta", namely "giving", calling on humans to reject greed and selfishness and to purify their hearts by giving; the second time it suggests "Dayadhvam", namely "compassion" emphasizing compassion as the key to escaping from loneliness and indifference; and the third utterance of "Damyata", namely, "restraint" pointing out that the only way to find inner peace is to restrain desire. "In Eliot's view, human life lacks meaning and is often plunged into emptiness, and man is spiritually trapped by his overflowing desires...Religion can provide not only the highest realm of meaning but also the precepts of restraint, which transforms individual desires into the divine". ^[2]

Although *Oppenheimer* does not explicitly refer to the "religious redemption" of *The Waste Land*, its deeper theme continues the point of "restrained desire". During the security hearings, Oppenheimer responds to the question "And the GAC report, which you co-authored, following the Russian atomic test said that a Super bomb should never be produced, did it not?" with "It would be a better world if there were no Hydrogen bombs in it", ^[9] which is a reflection on the phenomenon of technological mania. When asked, "When did your strong moral convictions develop with respect to the Hydrogen bomb?", his answer: "When it became clear to me that we would tend to use any weapon we had", ^[9] confirms the unlimited nature of human desire. Oppenheimer's attitude towards the hydrogen bomb is both a call for restraint of human desire and an expression of the aspiration for world peace. At the end of *The Waste Land*, Eliot quotes the Sanskrit word "Shantih", ^[10] meaning "peace", which, in Christopher Beach's view, refers to a "peace that transcends understanding", ^[17] which embodies a desire for tranquility and suggests the possibility of redemption. *Oppenheimer's* explicit reference to "restraint of desire" as the path to salvation for the "waste-landers" in *The Waste Land* highlights *The Waste Land's* forward-looking insight into the "spiritual depravity" of mankind, calling on mankind to restrain the inflated desires under progressivism and return to the peace of mind.

5. Conclusion

The Waste Land portrays the spiritual desolation and loss of faith in the Western modern society driven by an obsession with progress, accurately highlighting the issue of humanity's growing reliance on technological tools leading to a gradual decline in self-reflection. Through a cross-media analysis of *The Waste Land* and *Oppenheimer*, it becomes evident that the shared mythological elements in both works convey a consistent theme: humanity's fervent pursuit of technological progress while enhancing our capabilities, also harbors the latent danger of dual destruction—both physical and spiritual. *Oppenheimer's* cross-media references to *The Waste Land* depict humanity's despair and moral dilemmas as it plunges into a spiritual wasteland while pursuing technology with fanatical fervor. Simultaneously, the film also references *The Waste Land's* proposed solutions to real-world problems, namely, reflecting on the rampant ideology of progressivism and restraining human desires to achieve peace and spiritual tranquility. Eliot once proposed the duality of literary standards: "The 'greatness' of literature cannot be determined solely by literary standards". ^[18] Re-reading *The Waste Land* on the 60th anniversary of Eliot's death reveals that its influence has long transcended literary boundaries, extending to different media such as the contemporary film *Oppenheimer*. By establishing connections between the two works through cross-media elements, the greatness of *The Waste Land* is further illuminated. Conclusion

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