Christopher Nolan's *The Odyssey* (2026): A Modern Epic Worth the Wait, and a Grandiose Opportunity for Self-Reflection

Dr. Altay Coşkun
University of Waterloo

DOI: 10.15353/et.v2i1.7375

Few films have arrived with the level of anticipation as Christopher Nolan's *The Odyssey*. For months, audiences were treated to a steady stream of trailers, production reports, and behind-the-scenes documentaries, many of which also offered welcome introductions to Homer's ancient epic. By the time the film reached cinemas, expectations had grown almost impossibly high. I caught the first, glowing review on Germany's ARD anchor news *Tagesschau* the day before release, followed by another enthusiastic assessment on CTV News the following day (16/17 July 2026). While both gave credit to the nearly 3,000-year-old epic of Homer, their emphasis was on the bold director, stellar cast, and innovative use of IMAX technology. For the next few days, I had to make a stronger effort to resist my natural instinct to listen and respond to colleagues and students who were sharing their views publicly or addressing me personally. For sure, I was keen to engage with them about the movie—but not until I had a chance to watch and enjoy it with as little prejudice as possible.

Eventually, on July 21, *The Odyssey* held me captivated for over three hours. Nolan's remarkable command of pacing ensures that the film never feels ponderous despite its considerable length. The cast is uniformly excellent, the cinematography breathtaking, and the performances consistently compelling. Every sequence feels meticulously crafted, balancing spectacular action with quieter moments of reflection. What stood out to me repeatedly were *The Odyssey*'s naval scenes: they urged me to compare them with the grandiose sea storms and naval combats of *300: Rise of an Empire* (by Zack Snyder & Noam Murro, 2014), which had fascinated me as a lover of bold large-screen action but troubled me as a historian. In contrast, Nolan (and his team) soaked me into the salty seawater, struggling with the crew to survive the storm—and not caring much that the men of Ithaca were sailing on Viking ships.

However, those who had eagerly awaited to encounter the miraculous beasts and beings told about in *Odyssey* 9–12 may be disappointed. Aeolus, the god of the winds, was cut out and the Laestrygonians were exchanged by fast-running oversized Medieval knights. In the Cyclops scene, I sorely missed the iconic dialogue in which Odysseus tricked his 'host' into believing his name was 'Nobody'. The conversation fell victim to rationalization—why should anyone expect that two different species can communicate with each other? But I had just told my kids about the Nobody plot, and so we were all disappointed that it did not come up. At least, the grotto provided marvellous scenery, giant Polyphemus was awe-inspiring, and I did not miss the wine that Homer's hero used to make the Cyclops drowsy—I had always wondered why the Greeks should have been able to hold on to this supply.

The Sirens were my personal low point: while I had been expecting beautiful, lascivious mermaid-like creatures with mesmerizing voices, they were no delight for the eyes, covered by misty clouds, and produced unpretentious instead of hypnotizing tunes. The latter choice was in line with the overall attempt to desexualize the epic. Some moderate intimacy was admitted between Odysseus and his wife, whereas the bed scene with Clytaemnestra and Agamemnon was an orgy of blood spill. Circe, whom I must visualize as most attractive for the human eye (after reading Madeline Miller's *Circe*, 2018), was an ugly witch with no interest in Odysseus, although the stunning transformation of his companions into pigs compensated for the choice. Calypso, in turn, was beautiful, yet acted as his therapist, not rapist, treating him

with lotus to help him cope with his war trauma; a more intimate relationship was at best alluded to. It came to me much later that both divine women were in fact variations of Miller's Circe, the first acting out of fear of rape, the other a divine appearance despite her simple dressing, caring for Odysseus with affection and engaging in long conversations with him.

After watching Wolfgang Petersen's *Troy* (2004), I was not surprised about Nolan's decision to rationalize the gods out of his *Odyssey*. With what appeared to be Athena (acted by Zendaya), the goddess gradually emerged as Odysseus' conscience, and the trauma of the war criminal that she represented was revealed only late in the film when the same actress appeared as Athena's Trojan priestess, murdered beside a decapitated statue of the goddess. Hospitality was often invoked as the "Law of Zeus", but the god made no show, nor did he wield power to protect vulnerable strangers. However, Poseidon and Zeus were repeatedly invoked as punishing forces. As in *Troy*, the gods owe their existence to belief, prophecy, and defiance.

Nolan nevertheless has left Odysseus with a world of wonders: besides the aforementioned creatures, he has put a remarkable Scylla on screen; the hero's encounter with the dead in Hades evoked Michael Jackson's *Thriller* (1983) or *The Walking Dead* (2010–2022). The Darth-Vader-esque appearance of Agamemnon—a powerful but human king in the *Iliad*—made me understand eventually that Nolan has, to no small degree, exchanged the phantasy world of the archaic period with one of modern pop culture. Feedback will be divided on that.

For some viewers, the film's strongest suit will lie in its moral vision, one that dwells on Homer's epics but tries to develop them to appeal more to a modern audience. Homer's *Iliad* demonstrates the destructive consequences of excessive greed, pride, and anger, while the *Odyssey* repeatedly portrays divine punishment for human wrongdoing, yet not consistently, as cunning or cruelty sometimes appear to be praiseworthy. One may be troubled no less about the fact that Homer's gods are often more concerned with petty offences against themselves than with harsh justice among mortals. Their favouritism is a related flaw, as they readily shield their protégés from the consequences of misdeeds others would have to endure. Warfare itself remains morally ambiguous, granting immortal glory to some while condemning countless others to violent, anonymous deaths—not to mention those who live on crippled, enslaved, or held hostage by the demon of trauma.

Such themes have already been familiar from Petersen's *Troy* and much more recently and emphatically from Uberto Passolino's *The Return* (2024)—a fascinating rendering of the old story that turned most of the epic's miraculous encounters into rumours and made Odysseus choose not to return home, incapable of facing his guilt. While touching and sensitive in many regards, Passolino's film was barely able to convince me that Odysseus' outrage about the suitors could give him enough strength to overcome his trauma and exhaustion, to once more become the heroic fighter. Nolan, I think, probably found both inspiration and ideas for improvement.

Odysseus repeatedly displays extraordinary courage and ingenuity, but most of his successes are based on wronging or harming others, which ultimately leads to disaster. Nolan has preserved much of this tragic tension of the Homeric epic while trying to give it a distinctly modern resonance. His choices are somewhat idiosyncratic but original and intriguing. The looming threat in his version of the Greek world is not simply divine wrath but civilizational collapse. References to the mysterious Sea Peoples and the chilling observation that "our Bronze Age is collapsing" transform the voyage into a meditation on the fragility of entire cultures rather than merely the fate of one hero. To me as an Ancient Historian, these—anachronistic—utterances felt somewhat naïve and inorganic throughout much of the movie, but I nevertheless appreciated the allusions to our own unhinged times, in which so many different wrongs on the world stage are concatenated. I eventually felt satisfied when Penelope spoke out that Odysseus and his men were part of those destructive Sea Peoples—as I regularly teach in my Greek History course. Nolan styles this moment as an—overdue—anagnorisis, Odysseus finally being able to connect the dots that have been showing up through his quest. As in a Classical tragedy, the recognition of guilt and understanding of causality lead him to catharsis.

Homer's *Iliad* resembles the later tragic genre, but not so much his *Odyssey*: only a few lines before the very end of this latter epic, Athena must intervene to halt Odysseus' rage and the slaughter of his opponents (then the relatives of the massacred suitors). Somewhat surprisingly, in Nolan's movie, Odysseus is still facing the final combat with the suitors after his catharsis, causing significant tension. The endgame battle is epic, with meaningful emphasis on Odysseus' bow. It ceases when about half of the leaders have been killed and the others submit; pardon is seen as a chance to also appease the suitors' relatives.

Nolan's happy ending is, however, tainted: yes, Odysseus is happily reunited with Penelope, but then does not claim kingship over Ithaca for himself but passes it on to Telemachus, while accepting exile and sailing west to remember the dead. But the theme had been developed organically from the beginning, first as an escape from war, then, in the Hades prophecy, intertwined with the duty to honour the dead, and eventually to atone for the offences against the divine and humanity. Let us remember, at any rate, that Homer's *Odyssey* ends somewhat abruptly, and there are various ancient traditions that felt the need to improve on it. Aristotle (*Constitution of the Ithacans*, fr. 507 Rose = Plutarch, *Quaestiones Graecae* 14, 294c–d) already mentions his exile, but the version in which Odysseus sought new adventures is first attested through Eugammon of Cyrene, *Telegony* (fr. 1 = Proclus, *Chrestomathy* 2) in the 6th century BC, albeit without mention of Penelope's company. Nolan, I assume, engaged more broadly with the Homeric tradition than some commentators want to concede, not, of course, to satisfy Classical Philologists, but to put together a coherent version of the story that he wanted to tell.

The harshest criticism of the film that I have heard from colleagues is the change of Odysseus from a trickster hero into either a brutish protagonist of dull action movies (someone who shoots Polyphemus once more into his eye after escaping) or an anti-hero (who is entangled in thinking about himself while the world around him is falling apart). But like Homer's character, Nolan's Odysseus is truly "one of many ways" (*polytropos*: Od. 1.1). He still is the clever hero, who is praised as Agamemnon's best advisor and (often) successfully manages the emotions of his impatient men. There is also some ingenuity in Nolan's conflation of Sinon with Odysseus, in multiple ways. Homer is actually ambiguous about the inventor of the trick; in his version, a certain Epeius built the horse, and Odysseus led the fighters in it (Od. 8.481–520). In an alternative tradition told by Vergil (*Aeneid* 2.57–194), the man who designed the plot and convinced the Trojans to take in the horse was called Sinon. In Nolan's film, Odysseus was the culprit but tried to deflect divine vengeance onto the innocent Ithacan Sinon; however, breaking the Law of Zeus by making a gift of hospitality into a lethal weapon ultimately resulted in the destruction of his entire fleet. In fact, Odysseus had tricked Sinon into truly believing that the horse was a divine gift for the Trojans, and left him to deliver the message and be killed.

Haunted by this complex guilt, Odysseus eventually tries to do better with the recovery of Ithaca: here, he deflects all blame from his son Telemachus onto himself—and this time he succeeds in tricking fate: after killing part of the suitors and reconciling the others, his son becomes king of Ithaca, while he gets his happy ending with Penelope, even if in exile, but at least the collapse of the world is halted.

One may like or dislike such twists but cannot deny their thoughtfulness or engagement with either Homer or the much larger ancient and modern traditions. Observing the astounding variety of responses to Nolan's movie, I was induced to also reflect on my own reactions, and to acknowledge their subjective nature. The enjoyment and appreciation of art cannot be otherwise. Nolan has given me grandiose pictures, chilling entertainment, and many opportunities to remember or reconsider what value I can find in Homer and in the creative tradition following the first poet of Western civilization.

Postscript: We Classicists are well advised to remember that we are privileged curators of the ancient Greek and Roman tradition, which enables—and obliges—us to help the wider public with its understanding, appreciation, and inspiration, whenever this help is welcomed. We are not the owners of ancient literature or history. But, funnily, not even Homer owns the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*, although he will always hold the most prominent position in their broad and colourful tradition. Everyone who so chooses is entitled to a share of it. Welcome to *Epic Threads*!