

An Age Collapsing: Christopher Nolan's *The Odyssey* and the Aftermath of War

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ONE of the most anticipated films of 2026 was Christopher Nolan's adaptation of the ancient Greek epic *The Odyssey*. Even for a director as acclaimed as Nolan, adapting one of the foundational texts of Western literature was a monumental feat, especially when captured entirely on IMAX film, which has never been done before. Putting the historical inaccuracies aside, the film leaves audiences and historians wondering whether Nolan's adaptation manages to do what the ancient invocation to the muses asks for: does it "tell the old story for our modern times"?¹

Nolan is not the first person to adapt and alter the story of *The Odyssey*; this is a practice as old as the epic itself. In fact, not only the identity of Homer is still debated to this day, but also the question of whether and how the two epics attributed to this poet might have been changed when they were first written down in the eighth century BCE. Given the countless adaptations and retellings, from Vergil's *Aeneid* to Madeline Miller's *Circe*, it is obvious that there is no one true version of *The Odyssey*.²

The modernisation of the ancient story is evident from the very beginning through the film's engagement with the oral tradition of Homeric epics. *The Odyssey* begins with rapper Travis Scott's character performing the song of the Greek victory at Troy, this is a nod to the epic's heritage of a story sung in verse and written down later.³ While the performance does not adhere to the dactylic hexameter and is told rather than sung, the casting of a contemporary musician links the oral tradition of the Homeric epics to a world familiar to audiences.⁴ The performance in the dining hall of Odysseus' palace is not only similar to the traditional performance of such stories,⁵ it is reminiscent of parties and gatherings today, during which fantastical stories might also be shared with friends and families (and suitors).

Nolan stated that he relied upon multiple translations of the epic poem, yet all of them use the same Greek text as a basis, in which Odysseus is described as a character of multitudes or, as translator Emily Wilson puts it, "a complicated man".⁶ In the epic Odysseus is often described with an adjective beginning with the prefix "poly-", which shows that this is a character with multiple facets and traits.⁷ And yet in the 2026 adaptation Odysseus is stripped of his polytropic nature and portrayed as little more than a traumatised soldier on his way home. He is a soldier who, unlike the Homeric hero, does not go to Troy for glory but because he fears the consequences, as he tells his wife Penelope.

¹Hom. *Od.* 1.10.

This quote is from the English translation by Emily Wilson; this translation was chosen for the review because Christopher Nolan himself based his adaptation of *The Odyssey* on it.

See Travis 2025.

²For more on the Homeric question, see West 2011, 383–93.

³This is something Odysseus also mentions towards the end of the film, when he says that their story will only be remembered in song before finally being written down centuries later, as was the case with Homer's *The Odyssey*.

⁴Though the epics might not have originally been in hexameter anyway. See Scodel 2009, 44.

⁵Scodel 2009, 12.

⁶Hom. *Od.* 1.1.

⁷Christensen 2026, 5.

As his companion Eurylochus points out, Nolan's Odysseus does not believe in the vengeance of the gods, despite this he talks to the goddess Athena throughout the film. Whether the young woman is really Athena in the body of her slain priestess or a manifestation of Odysseus' guilt is not made clear throughout *The Odyssey*. Maybe Odysseus, like in the epic, is a loyal disciple of Athena and one of the goddess' favourites, or maybe 'Athena' stands for all the innocent people killed by Odysseus and his men during the ten years of the Trojan War. This ambivalence of Athena's character leaves the role of the gods and the (mental) scars Odysseus has from the Trojan War open to the audience's interpretation, which is arguably more fitting to a modern retelling focusing on the aftermath of war rather than quarrels between gods and goddesses.

The flattening of Odysseus is not necessarily a failure of adaptation, but a deliberate thematic choice, since the Homeric text can be seen as a metaphor for veteran trauma and the psychological scars of war.⁸ Nolan leans heavily into this interpretation. The lack of chemistry between Odysseus and his family, and his arrogant belief that he can outsmart everyone without consequence,⁹ leaves audiences with a character who has lost his sense of self and the person he once was, something that is underlined by the fact that Odysseus himself realises that he does not really want to return to Ithaca. Nolan does not give us a mythological trickster; he gives us a man suffering from profound PTSD. Since we do not live in an age of legendary (war-)heroes, but in turbulent times fraught with conflict, Nolan's Odysseus reflects a modern understanding of what decades of war do to the human psyche.

Throughout the film, there are multiple references to the end of the Greek Bronze Age and the beginning of the Dark Ages that followed, going as far as Odysseus saying that their "age of bronze is collapsing".¹⁰ While the boundaries of historical periods are defined long after and the epic's characters would therefore not know that their epoch was coming to an end, Nolan uses this anachronism to serve as a mirror to threats of civilisational collapse and era-defining wars in the twenty-first century.¹¹

Ultimately, the strongest suits of Nolan's *The Odyssey* are not found in historical accuracy, but in practical special effects, sound effects, and cinematography, all of which make the film epic in the truest sense of the word. In a brilliant and highly enjoyable film, Nolan does not simply adapt *The Odyssey*, instead his film is a retelling of the ancient text for a time of uncertainties, looming larger-than-life threats, and an underlying hope that despite struggles, everything will turn out all right.

⁸For more on the psychological reading of *The Odyssey*, see Christensen 2020, 21–46.

⁹One example of this is Odysseus' tricking his crew in order to avoid Charybdis. Arguably the most famous example of Odysseus' arrogance is his interaction with Polyphemus and claiming that his name is Nobody and later revealing his real name (Hom. *Od.* 9.360–506), this did not make it into the film.

¹⁰The Greek Bronze Age started collapsing in the 13th century BCE due to a number of reasons, including, but certainly not limited to, the Sea Peoples often mentioned in Nolan's adaptation. The following Dark Ages got their name because of a lack of archaeological finds from this time period, but did not, as the name might suggest, eradicate the Greek way of life entirely.

For further reading:

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¹¹Lorenz 2017, 110–111.

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