Homer and Nolan as Storytellers

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Homer REVIEW CONTEST AWARD

Nolan's *Odyssey* is distinctively his own. While preserving its basic plot, the film differs from Homer's epic at many points, often reaching beyond its source material to redevelop characters and explore new issues. It is not simply Homer's *Odyssey* transferred into another medium, but an artistic creation in its own right by one of modern cinema's most celebrated filmmakers. Throughout the film Nolan is in dialogue with Homer and his various interpreters from Vergil to Tennyson, though continuously guided by the necessities of the modern medium in which he works and his own artistic priorities.

With a running time of two hours and fifty-two minutes, Nolan's *The Odyssey* is particularly long for a major Hollywood movie. But compared to the time it would have taken for a performance of the *Odyssey* in antiquity—over twenty hours by a modern estimate[1]—the film's running time turns out to be remarkably short. Nolan, therefore, had to be selective. His decisions about what material to include and what to exclude, however, were not based primarily on time constraints but on his own priorities as a storyteller which differ from those of Homer.

A substantial portion of the dialogue and episodes in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, whatever their brilliance as literature, have little usefulness in advancing the plot. Homer frequently departs from the narrative entirely, through simile for example, and dwells on the stories associated with people, places, and even material objects mentioned in the narrative. A great deal of his brilliance lies in his ability to briefly slow the pace of his epics and narrate small moments of extraordinary pathos. The final farewell of Hector and Andromache in the *Iliad* is a particularly moving example, in which Hector's son Astyanax famously retreats into the arms of his nurse, frightened by the armour and helmet of his father. Episodes such as these are not particularly integral to the plot but are poignantly moving and deservedly placed among the great moments of world literature.

Nolan, by contrast, is primarily focused on plot, to the exclusion of every episode and dialogue that doesn't push it forward. He includes, for example, the famous encounter between Odysseus and Argos, his long-neglected hunting dog. Argos recognizes his master twenty years after seeing him last and begins to wag his tail, but is too weak to stand and greet him. Odysseus wipes away a tear. Just as Odysseus enters the palace on Ithaca, Argos dies, having been reunited with his master at last. This episode was expanded in significance by Nolan, who includes several flashbacks of Argos' life before Odysseus set sail to Troy and several scenes in which he is mistreated by the suitors. However, even this episode was felt to require a practical purpose in advancing the plot, in this case by allowing Telemachus to discover Odysseus' identity. Many of the other most memorable and moving episodes in the *Odyssey* were passed over, such as Odysseus' encounter with the shade of his dead mother in Hades, who Odysseus didn't even realize had died, and his three attempts to embrace her, each time failing as his arms pass through her incorporeal form. Nolan's films can be likened to elaborate jigsaw puzzles, with each piece perfectly fitted together to create a perfect whole. Though this approach often made the film seem artificial or mechanistic, and limited Nolan's ability to present genuinely moving episodes, his objective was achieved: the film has considerable dramatic momentum and a plot which pushes forward in an exciting way.

[1]Tom Nelson, "Homeric Narrative Technique in Nolan's the Odyssey." *St Hilda's College Oxford*, 2026. https://www.st-hildas.ox.ac.uk/news/homeric-narrative-technique-in-nolans-the-odyssey.

In sharp contrast to the Homeric poems but very much in the style of Nolan, the moral message of *The Odyssey* is made explicit and driven home at every possible opportunity. The moral system of the film is essentially as follows: the deception of the Trojan Horse, which the Trojans accept into their city like a host welcomes a stranger, violates "Zeus' law", a symbol of civilization throughout the film. By this deception the Greeks enter Troy in their thousands and sack the city, taking the fatal step across the thin line that separates civilization from barbarism. Through their lie the Greeks ultimately destroy their own civilization. The existential threat was really from within. This moral framework in the narrative provides the material for a complete reworking of Odysseus' character. Homer's Odysseus is one of the most ambiguous and difficult to interpret characters in all of literature. On Calypso's island he appears at once desperate to return home and strangely reluctant at the same time. Why he spends a full seven years on the island is not clear. Is he in some way compelled to remain? Has his will simply failed him? This ambiguity was not satisfactory for Nolan who prefers certainty in his narrative. Nolan suggests that Odysseus—racked by guilt over the Trojan Horse he had invented and the sack of Troy—never really wanted to go home. As Odysseus says to Penelope while still disguised as a beggar, he didn't want to return because "he couldn't bear to see the ruins of what he'd done, anywhere, least of all his home". Odysseus had created a world where divine unwritten rules are rejected, where craft and wiles replace fair dealing, where lies replace truth. "To burn the walls of Troy was to burn the world entire, including his [Odysseus's] home."

Though this essay has so far focused on the profound differences between the priorities and interests of Homer and Nolan as storytellers, Nolan also took considerable inspiration from Homer's narrative technique. In his epic, after Odysseus' time on Calypso's island, he makes it to the island of Scheria and is eventually offered hospitality at the house of the local king Alcinous. It is at this point that Odysseus narrates the events of the intervening period between the sack of Troy and his shipwreck on the island of Calypso. Poet and protagonist temporarily merge. Most coming to the *Odyssey* for the first time are surprised to learn that what Odysseus is most associated with in the popular imagination—the Cyclops, Circe turning Odysseus' men into pigs, the Sirens, and Scylla and Charybdis—is narrated to us by Odysseus. A great deal of Homer's brilliance in the *Odyssey* was his adoption of this non-linear structure which almost anticipates modern cinema's interest in such narrative structures. In order to avoid excessive complexity, the easy option for a film adaptation would be to adapt the poem to a linear narrative structure, narrating the events of Odysseus' journey in roughly chronological order. Nolan instead took inspiration from what he himself called the radical narrative structure of the original[2] and brilliantly adapted it to film. In Nolan's film, Odysseus' journey is presented to the audience as a series of flashbacks he experiences on the island of Calypso, a structure which only extends the dramatic power of the original and preserves the possibility, often mentioned in reference to Homer's poem, that Odysseus is an unreliable narrator. Certainly mental flashbacks interspersed throughout the narrative were not precisely what Homer had in mind, but the general idea is his. Above all, Nolan's *The Odyssey* reminds us that Homer was a remarkably "cinematographic" poet, and the originality of his "radical" narrative structure should not be overestimated.

Nolan's *The Odyssey* takes the non-linear structure of the original still further, reflecting the interest in such structures he displays in previous films and effectively capturing Odysseus' fixation on the past. Besides Odysseus' journey, at least four other flashback scenes reappear within the narrative: the Trojan horse on the beach, the Greek soldiers inside the horse, the sack of Troy, and Sinon and Antinous drawing lots. Each of these recurs more than once during the film in slightly different forms. Repetition, then, is a characteristic Nolan shares with Homer. Nolan complicates his narrative still further, however, by making different parts of the film echo each other. For example, very much in the Homeric spirit, Nolan includes two instances of ring composition. The opening scene of *The Odyssey*, in which a bard (played by rapper Travis Scott) rhythmically beats his staff, distinctly echoes the surviving suitors' acclamation of Odysseus in the last minutes of the film. The image of a sunset also draws the narrative full circle. It first appears in a flashback scene where Penelope suggests to Odysseus that they sail west into the setting sun to prevent him from having to fight for Agamemnon and a cause in which he does not believe. The

[2]Christopher Nolan, "The Odyssey : The Only Christopher Nolan Interview You Need to Watch." Interview by Hugo Travers, June 13, 2026. https://youtu.be/3jHpisxcmkc?si=eAHVj1hSYmk6ViPL.

image of the sunset appears again in the closing sequence, as they make their dream from twenty years before a reality. This closing, a reference to Tennyson's great poem *Ulysses*, reminds us that Nolan is not the first to remake Homer's epic, but his powerful interpretation will be one with which generations of future artists and readers will have to reckon.

The lights begin to twinkle from the rocks:
The long day wanes: the slow moon climbs: the deep
Moans round with many voices. Come, my friends,
'T is not too late to seek a newer world.
Push off, and sitting well in order smite
The sounding furrows; for my purpose holds
To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths
Of all the western stars, until I die.

— Alfred Tennyson, *Ulysses*

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