

Past versus Present: Selective Reception in Christopher Nolan's *The Odyssey*

Jerome De Smet

University of Waterloo

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IN a time when the cinema has become less of a cultural staple, and its role as a third place has waned, Christopher Nolan's *The Odyssey* has proven its exceptional cultural relevance upon release, something which was immediately obvious because I struggled to find available seating across all screening dates, and since my theatre was entirely packed when I could view it. Thus, I could immediately tell that Nolan's film would be a marvel of modern cinema and began taking notes on the film and its relationship with its source material (i.e., Homer's *Odyssey*). I will focus primarily on the connection between mythology and its framing in the film and discuss the contrast between scholarly and public perception to explore the film and its engagement with the 'past' and 'present'. As such, I argue that Nolan's film has a highly selective fidelity to its source material which the film aims to overshadow through cinematography and modern design choices for broad audience appeal.

To start, the costuming occasionally seems strange from a historical perspective: Agamemnon, for instance, wears black armour resembling 3D-printed plastic rather than worked bronze. Similarly, there are some fashion choices sure to leave one scratching their head, such as when Calypso (played by Charlize Theron) wears a rather gaudy fishnet dress, or when, if I recall correctly, Calypso is wrapped in a cloth with tortilla-like patterning. Such costuming decisions felt less like a fantastical representation of Bronze Age Greek adornment and more like bold pieces put together for Paris Fashion Week, thereby engaging with Bronze Age Greece rather superficially, although such costuming choices might be interesting to the average moviegoer. Still, that there is very much a gap between specialists and hobbyists of Classical Studies, on one hand, and the public, on the other, was made readily apparent to me when considering the remarks made by the other moviegoers. A group of men situated to my left declared with enthusiasm that Agamemnon was "just aura farming", apparently meant seriously rather than ironically. Likewise, I noted that many of the couples and families seated in front of me were delighted by the spectacle on the screen, unbothered that the film strays from Bronze Age Greek material culture and from era-appropriate costuming.

Total fidelity to the source material is not strictly necessary, especially as this is an adaptation, and certainly there were many aspects of the film I appreciated, such as the consistent use of practical effects; notable examples include the depiction of Circe's transformation of Odysseus' crew into pigs and Polyphemus' costuming. However, there was a highly selective and inconsistent application of such fidelity to confusing results. For example, composer Ludwig Göransson used "35 bronze gongs of varying sizes" in conjunction with synth instrumentation to produce a unique score (which was admittedly fantastic) because "It's not like the orchestra existed back then", and elsewhere in this interview published by *TIME*, the attention to "veracity" by Nolan is lauded, and Nolan justifies the decision to depict black armour with reference to Mycenaean daggers made with blackened bronze.¹

¹Eliana Dockterman, "Christopher Nolan Has Been Dreaming of *The Odyssey* for More Than 20 Years," *TIME*, May 12, 2026, <https://time.com/article/2026/05/12/christopher-nolan-odyssey-interview/>.

Such apparent attention to detail, however, is all the more confusing when considering the fact that the film used a replica Viking longship to represent Bronze Age watercraft,² an incongruity which leaves one to wonder whether there was much point to Nolan's alleged research on Bronze Age Greece.

The gods of Greek myth do not figure nearly as prominently in Nolan's film as they do in the Homeric original, where the gods and their actions are so vital to the story that one could scarcely imagine divorcing them from the narrative. For example, Odysseus' killing of Polyphemus, the giant man-eating Cyclopean son of Poseidon and Thoosa, and one of many Cyclopean residents of his island, involves a couple of key factors: 1) Odysseus and Polyphemus speak with one another, and Odysseus says his name is Οὐτις 'no one' (translated by Shaw as "Noman") and blinds Polyphemus (*Odyssey* 1, 9); 2) Polyphemus declares that Οὐτις has harmed him to his fellow Cyclops, who promptly ignore him, but Odysseus reveals his real name afterwards, causing Polyphemus to ask his father for revenge (*Odyssey* 9, 11). In the film, Polyphemus never speaks directly to anyone (save for indecipherable muttering at one point), and thus the pun which is so crucial to Odysseus and Polyphemus' interaction in the original never happens. Odysseus and his crew are then harried by sea storms, which the men suspect is the work of Poseidon, but this is never made explicitly clear in the film. In the poem, Odysseus and his crew encounter the wind-god Aeolus, who gives them a bag of winds to aid them on their journey home, only for Odysseus' crew to foolishly open the bag on the outskirts of Ithaca, prolonging their journey and causing them to land on the island of the giant, cannibalistic Laestrygonians. Meanwhile, the film never identifies the Laestrygonians (who appear as an armour-wielding troop of giants) as such, nor does Aeolus appear whatsoever. The motivation for Odysseus' apparent punishment was less clear in this adaptation than in Homer's poem, especially as Odysseus is hardly conniving or trickster-like in Nolan's film, where he appears as a morose and regretful (albeit clever) warrior. Consequently, the Nolan film feels rather disjointed at points, owing to the significant omission of mythical episodes and their interrelation in Odysseus' journey home to Ithaca, thus stripping the narrative of much of its context.

One peculiar occurrence is the refusal to acknowledge the god Helios by name; in the original story, Odysseus and the last of his crew land on Θρινακία 'Thrinakia', where they are warned by Tiresias and Circe that Helios (who is also identified as Hyperion) keeps his sacred cattle on the island. After the cattle are slaughtered and eaten by Odysseus' crew, Helios asks Zeus to punish the last of them for the offense, and thus a thunderstorm ensues, killing all but Odysseus (*Odyssey* 8, 12, 19). While this punishment of the crew remains in the film, Helios never appears directly, and, rather strangely, is only ever acknowledged as "the sun-god". I was also left wondering why Nolan felt comfortable including fantastical creatures and a visit to Hades while also shying away from explicit inclusion of the Olympian gods, whose involvement in the film essentially amounts to (a) natural phenomena (with superstitious overtones) and (b) a possible hallucination of Athena by Odysseus.

In any case, Nolan's film expects the audience to suspend its disbelief when it comes to beasts and magical powers, while simultaneously rejecting the unambiguous inclusion of gods as part of a highly selective and arbitrary 'realism'. Its strengths are found in its cinematography, visual storytelling, and Ludwig Göransson's score, rather than the film's fidelity to either the source material, especially as it concerns the relationship between humanity and the gods who played an ever-present role in ancient Greek myth, or to Bronze Age (i.e., Mycenaean) Greek material culture.

²Miranda Bryant, "Owner of Viking Ships Used in *The Odyssey* Says Studio Has Not Paid Bill for Damage," *The Guardian*, July 23, 2026, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2026/jul/23/owners-of-viking-ship-used-to-film-the-odyssey-say-studio-has-not-paid-bill-for-damage>.

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