Christopher Nolan's *The Odyssey*: A social and cultural phenomenon

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> "The poems of Homer and his contemporaries were the delight of infant Greece; they were the elements of that social system which is the column upon which all succeeding civilization has reposed."—Shelley

If Christopher Nolan's *The Odyssey* is not a great film, it is at the very least a sincere, serious one. Parts of it are successful, other portions are not at all. In any event, it has become without question an important social and cultural *phenomenon*, perhaps a barometer.

More than 60 million people worldwide have already seen the new film, and sales of Homer's epic in book form are soaring. Scholarly critics and defenders have weighed in extensively, generating an animated public debate. At the low end of things, ignoramus-oligarch Elon Musk has attacked Nolan's effort on the grounds of its casting "diversity" and promises that an "all-white" version would be a great improvement. What the world needs most of all—trillionaire adaptations of the classics!

This version of *The Odyssey* raises a host of questions, more than can be properly addressed in a single article.

How accurate or substantive is the movie as a version or re-envisioning of Homer's epic poem? Is Nolan's attitude toward war, heroism and society, which obviously differs from the ancient Greek poet's, a contribution or an unwanted intrusion?

Is he offering a critique of contemporary political life, in emphasizing the horrors of war, the "proud man's" arrogance and the *disastrous* consequences of breaking "Zeus's law," the sacred code of kindness to strangers?

Is the filmmaker's decision to return to a classic an implicit criticism of contemporary culture? Is the surge in popular interest in *The Odyssey* an indication of social or cultural discontent—or at the very least of a desire for something far richer and more creative?

Homer's *Odyssey* treats the aftermath of the Trojan War, a legendary 10-year conflict set off by the abduction or seduction of Helen of Sparta, wife of King Menelaus, by Paris, a prince of Troy. To retrieve Helen, the combined Greek forces besiege Troy without success, until Odysseus (played by Matt Damon), king of the sovereign island-state Ithaca, comes up with the idea of building a giant wooden horse in which soldiers might hide. The horse is brought into Troy by its residents as an offering to Athena. The band of concealed invaders, including Odysseus, climb out of the horse's belly, open the gates for the rest of the Greeks, leading to the sack of the city, mass devastation and the wholesale massacre of men and boys and the enslavement of the surviving women.

After the Greek victory, Odysseus with his men set sail for home, but they encounter tremendous difficulties, in part because they anger the gods, and it takes *another decade* for the ruler of Ithaca to reach his native island, alone. His wife, Penelope, has waited loyally for him, despite the strenuous entreaties of many suitors, along with his son, Telemachus, now grown up.

The work has three central strands: the "fairy-tale wanderings" of Odysseus, the power struggle in Ithaca going on in his absence and the fate of Menelaus, Agamemnon and the other Greek leaders upon their return home. Nolan retains this basic framework.

It is estimated that *The Odyssey* was composed in the 8th or 7th century B.C. about events and a society several centuries older. The epic, along with *The Iliad* (set during the Trojan War's final weeks), became central to Greek and later Roman culture and society, and it has immeasurably influenced world literature. The two works were composed independently, as part of extended oral traditions.

The Odyssey is a sensual, moving and lyrical work, profoundly engaging and thrilling. "Delight in physical existence is everything to [the Homeric poems], and their highest aim is to make that delight perceptible to us," argues Erich Auerbach in *Mimesis.*

Classical scholar M. I. Finley observes that *The Odyssey* "in particular encompasses a wide field of human activities and relationships: social structure and family life, royalty, aristocrats and commoners, banqueting and ploughing and swineherding."

Nolan opens his film version of the epic with a disturbing sequence, of Trojan soldiers discovering a great horse half-buried in the sand on a beach near their apparently impregnable walls and cruelly wounding (and later killing) the sole Greek soldier, the youthful Sinon (Elliot Page), standing near the huge wooden beast. The Trojans, fatefully, believe it is an offering from the retreating Greeks. "Take it to Athena's temple. The war's over."

From here, the film shifts its attention to the present, a decade later, in the great palace of Ithaca, where Penelope (Anne Hathaway) and Telemachus (Tom Holland) are plagued by dozens of noisy, well-to-do suitors, "greedy unwanted guests," led by Antinous (Robert Pattinson). The latter consume their hosts' food and drink, and generally take advantage of Odysseus's wife and son. "Zeus's law tells us to treat strangers as we'd be treated because they might be Gods in disguise," says Telemachus, but he and his mother burn with anger.

Odysseus, meanwhile, is living in a state of semi-amnesia on an island with the beautiful nymph Calypso (Charlize Theron), who would like him to remain with her and encourages his forgetfulness about his past and family. "You want to remember. But what if remembering destroys your happiness?"

Interspersed are sequences drawn from the tortuous efforts of Odysseus and his men to sail back to Ithaca, what Finley refers to as "the adventures of a Greek Sinbad the Sailor." Many of these episodes are of course iconic: Odysseus and crew encounter a Cyclops (performed by Bill Irwin), a man-eating, one-eyed giant; they survive a visit to the sorceress Circe (Samantha Morton), who (temporarily) turns the Ithacan crew into pigs; Odysseus has himself tied to a mast to resist the alluring song of the Sirens; he steers the ship closer to the sea monster Scylla, losing six of his men, to avoid the fatal whirlpool created by Charybdis. … Most frightening of all, Odysseus is obliged to journey to Hades, the underworld, to find

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out his fate from the blind prophet Tiresias (James Remar). There he meets up with some of the resentful men whom he has previously led to death.

Telemachus makes his way to Sparta, to glean from Menelaus (Jon Bernthal) any news of his father. Instead, he learns of the tragic destiny of Greek commander Agamemnon (Benny Safdie), murdered by his wife Clytemnestra (Lupita Nyong'o, who also plays Helen). Penelope's suitors ambush and attempt to murder Telemachus, but Odysseus, now freed from Calypso's emotional sway, saves his son's life.

Eventually, the grizzled, long-bearded, battered and "broken" Odysseus, back in Ithaca at last, makes his presence known to Telemachus and others he considers loyal, including the blind swineherd Eumaeus (John Leguizamo). After undergoing a test set by Penelope, involving the use of his own treasured bow, Odysseus wreaks havoc on the hated suitors, dispatching all of them.

Nolan has taken considerable pains. *The Odyssey* was shot entirely on IMAX's 70mm film cameras over the course of six months in numerous countries at an estimated cost of $250 million. It has already returned this investment several times over in the first few weeks of its release.

Nolan has definite abilities when it comes to large-scale projects. There are many striking images and sequences here. Audiences have obviously been intrigued and entertained by the monsters, ghosts and assorted mythical creatures and the ability of Odysseus to undergo numerous, almost supernaturally demanding trials and tests. It is testimony to human endurance and determination to the highest degree.

The struggle to "return home" (*nostos* for the ancient Greeks) from war, adventure, trauma and other life-altering events, is one of the great themes in literature—and an objective reality for many in periods when participation in armies and conflicts *could* consume years or even decades. The fictional wanderer tests himself and his surroundings and loved ones, finds change or familiarity, and eventually attempts to restore stability or order in an unsettled, turbulent world. The harsh experience is also or can be a means of growing up (or old) and self-enlightenment.

Moreover, in Odysseus's case, the "'journey' is a ceaseless struggle with a stronger power [so] that every step along this path acquires an exciting significance: not a single circumstance depicted is mere circumstance, but a real event, the result of an action, the driving cause of a further encounter between the contending forces." (Georg Lukacs) The "stronger power," in the end, is nature and all that limits people ("the voice of blood, of sickness, of death"—Trotsky), which hangs over humanity like a fate. Trotsky added, "The myth did not create tragedy, it only expressed it in the language of man's childhood."

The intelligent and convincing scenes in Nolan's *Odyssey* include a conversation between Odysseus and Penelope, on the eve of the Trojan War, in which the former suggests the real reason for the conflict: "This is Agamemnon's excuse to break Troy's control of the trading routes. He won't let it pass. Ever." Later, Helen, with a badly scarred face ("The face that launched a thousand ships. … Now maybe just five hundred," her husband cynically notes), pours scorn on Menelaus's description of the Greek triumph in Troy as "a righteous victory," referring instead to "your brother's ambition."

Why should we dismiss these and other perceptive observations as unacceptable "modernizations"? And there is no reason to belittle Penelope's complaint to Telemachus about her inability as a woman to mount Ithaca's throne ("My knowledge, my years of experience—that's all nothing compared with the bristles on your chin"), although it feels somewhat awkward, and Circe's fear of rape by marauding soldiers as mere feminist diversions. These were real historical issues**.**

Tellingly, however, Nolan has *not* gone out of his way to refer to slavery and the conditions of slaves, who made up a considerable portion of the ancient Greek population, except for one passing, oblique comment by Antinous. Telemachus merely speaks of Eumaeus, a household slave, as "My dad's most loyal worker." Nor is it to Nolan's credit that he chose to film in Western Sahara, the victim of "Morocco's little-reported, decades-long and illegal occupation of Spain's resource-rich but impoverished former North African colony," as the WSWS has described it.

The occasional references to "Dad" and "Mom," to "10 years on this fucking beach," seem out of place linguistically, but they don't present insurmountable problems, any more than the "diversified" casting. Musk is the last person to know what the ancient Greeks actually looked like!

The effort to recreate the intimate relations and attitudes among between the characters (Odysseus, Penelope and Telemachus, in particular) is more problematic.

Emily Wilson, on whose 2017 translation of *The Odyssey* Nolan based himself, provoked a controversy by sharply criticizing the film. Wilson asserted it "lacks psychological, emotional, political and ethical depth. Its narrative structure is gimmicky. The writing is abysmal. None of the characters has convincing motivation for their actions or words."

Her comments appear one-sided and even quasi-spiteful, but undoubtedly there are weaknesses in the drama. Although one must point out at the outset that conceiving of how people conducted themselves 2,700 years ago or more in their personal relations is no small matter. Nolan is ambitious, as his *Oppenheimer* admirably demonstrated, but he has been functioning in a broadly degraded cultural atmosphere, especially when it comes to the treatment of history and historical development. The tendency to impose a modern-day, middle class outlook on people in the past is pervasive.

To solve the problems would, first of all, require a more conscious grasp of the fact that people and social life have not always been the same, that social relations are alterable and that what exists presently has not always existed and will not always exist. Such an understanding is most available to those, including left-wing artists in the past, who gravitate toward Marxism.

As it is, Nolan grapples with the dramatic elements but tends at times toward earnest Hollywood cliché, toward relatively familiar language and gestures. Hathaway-Penelope's "door-slamming," Holland-Telemachus' suppressed frustrations and Damon-Odysseus's angst and long face all wear a little thin. It is difficult to say precisely how such a thing might have been carried off more convincingly, freshly, but a more "primitive," naïve and direct style comes to mind, the opposite, in any case, of the slick and smooth**.**

Hints might be extracted from Auerbach's comment that the Homeric style has a need "to leave nothing which it mentions half in darkness and unexternalized." He refers to

> uniformly illuminated phenomena, at a definite time and in a definite place, connected together without lacunae in a perpetual foreground; thoughts and feeling completely expressed; events taking place in leisurely fashion and with very little of suspense.

The new film paints a picture of a man tortured by his experiences of war and bloodshed. This Odysseus is anguished and guilt-ridden, over the war, over the corpses left behind, over the "abandonment" of his family, over the notorious horse deception, over violating Zeus's law …

> We left them [the Trojans] a gift. An offering of peace that they took into their home. … We violated all that's ever sacred between people. … One man's idea [i.e., his]. One man's trick to break Zeus's law forever. … We lived in a world of palaces and trade and language … blind to its beauty until we broke it. … The breaking of Zeus's law is spreading like cancer. Our age of bronze is

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> collapsing. And maybe he [speaking of himself in the third person] couldn't bear to see the ruins of what he'd done, anywhere. Least of all his home.

There are apocalyptic rumors throughout the film about an invasion by the mysterious "people from the sea," who will bring about "an age of darkness" by violating Zeus's law. On hearing Odysseus's tale of the devastating, brutal fall of Troy, it occurs to Penelope that "You are the people from the sea," that is to say, the Greek forces themselves have proven to be the barbarian threat.

One of the film's aspects that has stirred the fascists' particular ire is the depiction of Odysseus as deeply and openly ashamed about his role in war and the destruction of Troy. The requirements of contemporary imperialist militarism demand a different ethos—and personality, an unthinking, unfeeling warrior.

More generally, it is impossible to consider various elements of the film's picture of reality—the ghastliness of war, the catastrophic consequences of turning one's back on strangers or guests (immigrants?), the snarling cruelty of wealthy, selfish princelings who victimize beggars and the poor, the palpable moral and political vacuum in Ithaca, the threatened collapse of existing civilization—without being mentally directed toward contemporary life, whether this was fully Nolan's aim or not.

Every production or adaptation of an older work inevitably contains arguments about the "here and now," polemicizes about or interprets the present. Is the filmmaker here being faithful to the original work? Yes and no. *The Odyssey* is not an "anti-war" epic in the contemporary sense of the phrase, that would have had little meaning in the context of the society out of which it emerged. The poem contains references to the harshness of military conflict, but more often than not, it is the suffering of the aggressive *Greek forces* that is emphasized. The far greater ultimate punishment meted out to the Trojans is more or less taken as an inevitability, an unpleasant, unavoidable fact of life**,** like a destructive storm or wildfire.

(Although, to be thorough, *The Odyssey* was commonly read in tandem with *The Iliad*, some of whose most moving scenes describe the suffering or the threat of suffering of the Trojans.)

In Homer (in Robert Fagles' translation), Menelaus describes "our champions armed with bloody death for Troy." A bard sings of "the tidal waves of ruin tumbling down on Troy's and Achaea's [Greece's] forces, both at once, thanks to the will of Zeus who rules the world." Another explains that the famous wooden horse was "filled with fighting men who laid the city [Troy] waste." We read about "death and slaughter bearing down on Troy" and "heaps of lovely plunder" hauled home from the unfortunate city. Homer's unrepentant Odysseus calls on Athena to "fire me with daring, fierce as the day we ripped Troy's glittering crown of towers down."

Along the same lines, Odysseus, the "crafty," "strategic," "wily," "cunning," the man of "twists and turns" and no pacifist!, recalls quite bluntly and matter of factly that following the end of the war, the wind drove him and his men from Troy

> to Ismarus, the Cicones' stronghold. There I sacked the city, killed the men, but as for the wives and plunder, that rich haul we dragged away from the place—we shared it round so no one, not on my account, would go deprived of his fair share of spoils.

The problem Nolan creates for himself with his excessively guilt-ridden Odysseus emerges sharply in the final scenes set in Ithaca, where the film is at its least convincing and most contorted. How is it possible to reconcile the "broken," saddened voyager with the warrior who single-handedly wipes out 50 or more able-bodied young grandees? When Telemachus asks his father in the film, "How will we take on the suitors?" he is told, "Not *we*. Their blood has to be on *my* hands. Or you'd face exile." This makes no particular sense and is simply a device for Nolan to preserve his "new," reformed-humble Odysseus and the moral innocence of his son. In Homer, Telemachus and several servants enthusiastically take part in the "Slaughter in the Hall."

The film ends with Odysseus and Penelope heading "into the unknown west to honour my men" and musing vaguely about "a new dawn" breaking "over the darkened world." This is weak and not effectual.

What is lost in Nolan's *The Odyssey*, aside from the scenes inevitably excised for reasons of time or budget?

To a certain extent, the intense "delight in physical existence" that Auerbach refers to. Again, it is virtually impossible to recreate the relationship to nature and other human beings that the Greek bards experienced and illustrated so eloquently**.** But Nolan's film has a dryness and even glumness at times that grates. The "wholeness," fullness and vitality of human existence in *The Odyssey* and the poem's effortlessness, its exuberant sensuousness, even at the most dire moments, its utter lack of moralizing … these would probably be challenges for any contemporary artist.

Writing about Homer, Hegel suggested that the poet spoke as someone

> at home in his world, and where others are at home, we are too, for there we contemplate truth, the spirit living and possessing *itself* in its world, and we are well and cheerfully disposed because the poet is there too with his whole mind and spirit.

The German philosopher went on to insist that the world of *The Odyssey*

> remains at the stage of poetry and immediate beauty, so that we recognize and understand the substance of everything that our higher needs and real humanity demand—the honour, disposition, feeling, wisdom, and deeds of each and every hero; and we can enjoy these figures, throughout their detailed description, as being lofty and full of life.

Nolan has told the media he filmed *The Odyssey* because it filled a major gap, as no one had ever made an epic action movie out of Homer's work before. This may be immediately true, but it hardly tells the whole story. He perhaps comes a little closer when he says *The Odyssey* is "foundational … it truly contains all stories."

A turn to the classics has meant different things at different points in history, and there is no need to overload Nolan's decision. No doubt, arbitrary or accidental factors come into play. However, *objectively*, a large-scale filming of (and mass reception to!) *The Odyssey*, with everything that entails, signifies a sharp repudiation of the current cinema and its overall mass of stupidities. The success of a complex film about earthshaking matters, about humanity's struggles with immense obstacles, puts the lie to the claims of apologists for the prevailing banal "product." Many people, it turns out, are evidently hungering for something more elevated and demanding.

Moreover, the representation of Homer's realm argues against the degradations and cruelties of present-day society, its damaging division of labor, its diminution of the human personality, and in favor of Hegel's

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contention that the Greek gods are merely “what is immanent in man himself,” that those gods appear only as the “universal element” human beings themselves accomplish when they are able to act with “the whole energy” of their essentially heroic character.

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