

The popularity of Christopher Nolan's *The Odyssey*

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Christopher Nolan's *The Odyssey*, based on Homer's ancient Greek epic poem, has proven an enormous popular success. Estimates vary, but it appears well over 100 million people worldwide have already seen it in movie theaters.

The film's appeal is intense. At Milwaukee's Oriental Theatre, where *The Odyssey* is screening exclusively in 70mm in a 1,000-seat auditorium, the managing director reported that "more than 3,600 people saw the film in its opening days, and the demand heading into Week 2 is so large that the balcony section of the auditorium that is usually reserved for high-demand showtimes will be open all weekend."

The British Film Institute IMAX Southbank in London "has sold out 173 IMAX 70mm showings of *The Odyssey*, which is being shown around the clock even at 4 a.m. At the time of writing, the earliest screening you can buy a ticket for is on September 10." (*The Wrap*)

Nolan's film will open in China August 14, and sizeable audiences are anticipated.

The Odyssey has sparked widespread interest in the original poem. One commentator observed that "the ancient Greek epic is once again captivating readers around the world. What began as anticipation for [the] film adaptation has evolved into a remarkable literary phenomenon, with book sales soaring, library demand surging, and renewed interest in Greek language and culture."

"Print sales of *The Odyssey* in the United States have risen by 76 percent compared with the same period last year, while the New York Public Library has seen borrowing requests jump by more than 300 percent. Bookseller Barnes & Noble also reported that Homer's epic has become its bestselling title." (Greekreporter.com)

Global listens of *The Odyssey* audiobook on Spotify have increased more than 300 percent this year, with a large proportion being young people. Domestic sales of Emily Wilson's 2017 translation surpassed a million this year. Libraries across the country have soaring waitlists for the book.

The Odyssey moviegoers in the US are a mixed demographic, drawing people of all ages. However, it has notably attracted a younger baseline than typical "blockbusters," with roughly 55 percent of the audience falling under the age of 35.

What accounts for the wave of interest?

In the broadest sense, life-and-death themes embodied in a classic, treated seriously and generously, have encountered a sizeable global viewing public clearly starved for challenging material.

There is a double significance to this. In the first place, *The Odyssey*, with its strengths and weaknesses, focuses on the horrors of war, the foul role of a usurping and cruel aristocracy, and the need to treat strangers, guests—immigrants—with hospitality and kindness. And, not

a secondary matter, Nolan's effort depicts the immense difficulties and struggles facing those who oppose all that. The resonance should be clear. People are going to the film in part because it corresponds to how they increasingly feel about the world and about America in particular—and the need to make immense sacrifices in a big cause.

An "odyssey" has come to be defined as a long wandering or voyage usually marked by numerous changes of fortune—or an intellectual or spiritual wandering or quest. Isn't the depth and danger of the present situation *beginning* to convince many in America and elsewhere that there are no quick fixes, no easy solutions, that a protracted, complex struggle lies ahead? There is some moral, intellectual connection here to the life-conditions and challenges facing masses of people.

There are other "odysseys" that come to mind, including Nolan's own. Frankly, we were not impressed with the first more than 20 years of his filmmaking. As recently as 2021, we noted that "five different reviewers have commented on his efforts for the WSWs—and all negatively."

In response to *The Dark Knight* (2008), for example, we wrote that the "filmmakers apparently aspire to say something, but the comic-book adaptation is a limited form and, more to the point, one has to have important experiences and thoughts to say something interesting or enlightening about life."

Perhaps all that will be seen now as a mere tuning up, an apprenticeship. With *Oppenheimer* and now *The Odyssey*, Nolan has taken a considerable jump, contributing two substantial and complex films about issues that matter, and doing so in an accessible and visually imposing fashion. Equally important, their success must inspire others to break out of the twin ruts of infinitely tedious middle-class self-appraisal, which goes and arrives nowhere, on the one hand, and mindless "action" films, intended to deaden all remotely human thought and feeling, on the other.

And, connected to Nolan's individual trajectory, there is the more general matter of the film world's evolution. In 1998, the year of his first film *Following*, the WSWs, in its initial days, was asking "Why are the critics lauding *Titanic*?" and considering that empty "blockbuster" as a "as a social phenomenon."

We asserted then:

It might be best perhaps to describe *Titanic* as a sort of lowest common denominator. The film contains certain minimums necessary to draw an audience—attractive leading actors, a 'tragic love story,' expensive special effects, a mild dose of social criticism, a fascinating historical event, media

support—but its very blandness, in combination with these elements, accounts for its great success. *Titanic* is, in effect, a blank screen onto which a great many people are projecting vague, *but very powerful*, longings—about life, love, society—which they cannot yet formulate in more concrete and focused terms.

A good deal of water has flowed under the bridge since then, decades of war, social inequality, the re-emergence of openly fascist and authoritarian tendencies, a devastating pandemic, genocide in the Middle East and a resulting movement to the left within a broad layer of the population. The explosive, tumultuous conditions have now made a different type of *popular* filmmaking possible. There are both writers and directors willing and able to take on large, demanding questions as well as audiences hungry for them.

Second, it is a fact pregnant with fascinating historical implication that this social and cultural upsurge should take place centered on Homer, *The Odyssey* and the character of Odysseus.

In his extremely interesting book, *The Ulysses Theme* (1954), Irish classics scholar W. B. Stanford suggested that

From the first Greek poets, the first comedies and tragedies, to the last philosophers, and then from Virgil and Ovid, down to Dante and Shakespeare, Goethe, Tennyson, and Kazantzakis, to perhaps the most inventive of them all, James Joyce, no literary figure has been so endlessly adapted as Homer's Ulysses. ... Why?

It is outside the scope of this piece to follow Stanford's arguments thoroughly, but a few of his points can be noted. He contends that of all the heroes of Greek and Roman mythology, Odysseus (or Ulysses) "was by far the most complex in character and exploits." His chief qualities include adaptability, wiliness and, above all, intelligence. Wonderfully, once Odysseus has finally more or less washed up on Ithaca's shores, the goddess Athena tells him she can't desert him in his troubles, "You are so winning, so worldly-wise, so self-possessed!" He is the only kind of man, she implies, to be relied upon to bring a complex crisis to a safe conclusion.

Odysseus, "'the man of many turns,' is the main theme," Stanford writes, "and his personal qualities become specially luminous against the sordidness of his environment, as he makes his way among foolish shipmates, ruthless monsters, and greedy usurpers." Resourcefulness, Homer implies, is necessary "to overcome the trials of human life in general."

Stanford stresses Odysseus' intellectual curiosity (he is "alone among Homer's heroes in displaying this ... strongly"), his "desire for fresh knowledge." This quality "points away from the older Heroic Age with its code of static conventions and prerogatives, and on to a coming era, the era of Ionian exploration and speculation." He cites historian Ernest Barker, "To be a Greek was to seek to know; to know the primordial substance of matter, to know the meaning of number, to know the world as a rational whole." Irresistibly guiding Homer's hero is this thirst to know, to see and to be active.

In Odysseus' personality and mentality, far from flawless, occasionally deeply misguided or self-deluded, nonetheless,

psychological tensions never reach a breaking point. They serve rather to give him his dynamic force. As a result his purposefulness is like an arrow shot from a well-strung bow, and his energy has the tirelessness of coiled springs. Resilience, elasticity, concentration, these are the qualities that maintain his temperamental balance.

The overall picture, above all, is of someone terribly and recognizably human, yet with all the characteristics that involves very sharply heightened and intensified.

Stanford makes the valuable point that following a clever, resourceful person in action "is one of the most entertaining and instructive spectacles in life and art." He goes on,

As life and literature evolve from folk-society to higher forms of civilization, men's reactions to cleverness, intelligence, prudence, wisdom—whatever it may come to be called—will change. But the fascination of watching "brains," *nous* [mind, intellect or understanding], at work for good or evil will remain.

Can Nolan's film sustain this sort of cultural and historical weight? Or are audiences being tricked, believing they are watching a classical epic when, in fact, something cheaper and far more shallow has been substituted, like a comic-book version of Homer's *Odyssey*?

Whatever its shortcomings, this *Odyssey* is a genuine and heartfelt attempt to come to terms with Homer's work and its many complexities and even ambiguities. Audiences are not being cheated. And the logic of what has begun here, we suspect, is only likely to pick up steam. Many things can become contagious, including "the classical," the principled and a feeling for what is enduring and authentic in life.



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