

The questions left hanging by Christopher Nolan's *The Odyssey*

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Over 100 million people have watched Christopher Nolan's *The Odyssey* in cinemas around the world. The film has generated an enormous amount of discussion. So too has the highly critical commentary of Emily Wilson, whose translation of Homer's text was cited by Nolan as an inspiration.

Such debate is all to the good, and a sign of a growing and healthy concern in society for the challenging ideas addressed in the original epic, the reams of scholarship since, and the many artistic works it has inspired. This article explores the attractions and limitations of Nolan's film in part through a dialogue with Wilson's critique.

There is a one-sidedness to these criticisms that leaves it hard to understand why *The Odyssey* has produced such an enormous popular response: not only ticket sales, but purchases and loans of the book itself, in different formats. The more Wilson moves from relationships within the text to its overall relation to today, the less convincing her article becomes.

However, she is right that "the film's vision is too confused, its characters too underdeveloped, to deliver what it half-promises in terms of big ideas". This is the heart of the phenomenon around *The Odyssey*: its viewership and the many, varied responses. The film is a flawed but important attempt to address questions which are decisive today, and increasingly recognised as such.

As David Walsh's review of *The Odyssey* for the *World Socialist Web Site* has already observed, "The effort to recreate the intimate relations and attitudes among the characters" in the film is indeed "problematic". And Nolan creates problems for himself with his "excessively guilt-ridden Odysseus", which emerge "sharply in the final scenes set in Ithaca, where the film is at its least convincing and most contorted."

Before coming to these problems, the question of the film's characters looms large. It is hard to point to a particularly memorable scene, and even harder to a memorable exchange of dialogue. Talented actors in key roles (Matt Damon as Odysseus and Anne Hathaway as his wife Penelope in particular) are given very little to say.

Nor are they given much opportunity to develop. Odysseus is simultaneously war-weary and capable of great violence throughout. Telemachus does not noticeably mature. Penelope is kept passive, within a fairly narrow field of frustration. Relationships between them all feel glancing. Nolan has not captured in film the richness and complexity of human personality that make the *Odyssey* such a great work of literature.

There are of course enormous pressures bound up with a \$250 million production.

Perhaps more important, though, is a conservative outlook in which Nolan has to some extent inevitably been schooled, which prevents important intuitions being pursued. He has attempted to bring to the *Odyssey* a contemporary concern for the costs of war. However, he lacks the critical standpoint on the present—a real understanding of the origins and impacts of modern-day conflict—necessary to master this theme and bring it to life in the very different world of Homer's text.

That would be a difficult task in the best of circumstances and one feels Nolan was overwhelmed by it. Rather than give voice to these enormous questions, the characters of his *Odyssey* are almost dumbstruck by them. This need not have been the case. As Nolan seems to have recognised, there are few stories which better suit such a "for our times" reading.

Wilson's praised translation describes Odysseus as "complicated". In the original Greek, the word is ????????? (polytropos), or "many-wayed". Indeed, he is repeatedly described by words carrying the prefix "poly-" (many). He is many-faced, or multifaceted, meaning the shadow he casts depends on the direction of the light shone on him by different societies.

It is significant, therefore, that Nolan's last film was *Oppenheimer*. To a great extent, the two shadows cast by his Odysseus are produced by the glare of thermonuclear explosions: of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and of the new wars threatened today. Homer's *Odyssey* is an entirely valid vehicle for such concerns, forming the second part of the story begun by the *Iliad*: the apocalyptic Trojan War.

The film version of Odysseus that results is, as Wilson observes, relatively stunted. He is more haunted, more chastened. Our own history, of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, weighs on him as much as his own. He is not the variously silver-tongued, libidinous, curious, sparkingly intelligent, nor even quite so ruthless character of the Homeric text.

In itself this is legitimate; it has a purpose in the version of the story Nolan wants to tell. But that version should bring its own depths. Nolan stops at what war takes away from Odysseus, without asking what it simultaneously brings: anger, questioning, a radical reappraisal of life. As Wilson writes, "The film doesn't address the moral dilemmas raised by its own narrative invention".

Ultimately, the stalled characters are a reflection of *The Odyssey*'s well-chosen but underexplored themes. Audiences have recognised and been drawn to them, but given little chance to take much from their treatment.

The film is particularly focussed on what war does to the society of the aggressor. It draws heavily on the very literal "war comes home" arc of the *Odyssey*, in which the carnage of the battlefield is brought to the palace of Ithaca. Nolan expands on the idea with his "people from the sea" subplot.

Generations who have seen their rights savaged in the name of wars promising freedom and democracy, and increasingly delivering global disasters, understand this intimately. Terms such as "blowback" have become common currency. One could even say that never has a society been more suited to respond to that theme; in a sense, this aspect of the *Odyssey* has only now come fully of age.

Different beats in the story strike their own resonant notes on this score: the encounter, laced with ignorance and cruelty, with Polyphemus the cyclops; or the repeated moments of hubris when the Greek conquerors find themselves terribly outmatched by foes they do not understand, as on the island of the Laestrygonian giants; even the duping of the conscripted

soldier Sinon, or the mutiny half-threatened by Eurylochus.

All rich seams, but hardly mined, despite the ready contemporary material for allegory. At this moment, for example, thousands of sailors aboard the USS Abraham Lincoln are chafing against an overlong deployment in an interminable, criminal and unpopular war waged by a despotic president for geo-economic advantage.

The film's limitations are brought into sharper relief by the flashes of potential in the most effective scenes.

Circe is cleverly given the dual role in the film of vengeful sorceress and repeated, lone female victim of marauding soldiers, but the opportunity to fully scrutinise the role of the Greek conquerors through the eyes of the conquered feels missed. Odysseus's explanation to Penelope that perhaps he took so long to come home because he realised his actions had changed that home forever is moving, but rapidly undermined by what follows.

As for Odysseus's observation that Agamemnon sees in the war an opportunity to "break Troy's control of the trading routes", that this scene could have been significantly more forceful was proved by the *Economist's* review of the film:

The casus belli of the Trojan war is given as a desire to improve trade routes, as if Agamemnon were merely a blameless advocate for free trade rather than one of antiquity's greatest thugs.

This has actually been committed to print. If Agamemnon had massacred a city in the name of "free trade", he would be "blameless": the moral sensibilities of one of the premier journals of world capitalism in a nutshell!

Nolan identifies but does not effectively pursue these avenues, despite giving himself the space to do so.

For example, Wilson takes issue with the way the Greek gods are treated in the film, which "wants to have it both ways. There are no gods, and yet shipwrecks and death are presented as the inevitable consequence of blinding the son of Poseidon and devouring the Cattle of the Sun."

Telling the tale "both ways" is, however, an effective stylistic choice, helping the film probe questions of agency and social transformation. Placing the gods very much in the background leaves space for alternative, human explanations to enter the viewer's mind, without pretending that the story itself is in any way secular.

Take Wilson's example of the Cattle of the Sun and subsequent shipwreck caused by a storm. Keeping Zeus off-screen throughout helps frame this event as an example of humanity suffering under terrible powers which are beyond us yet somehow still of our own world and even making.

Parallels with the climate crisis are not hard to draw, especially in a story driven in large part by the weather's refusal to cooperate, and in which Athena points to natural events like fire, the tides and the flocking of birds as demonstrations of the gods' power. The same comparison can be drawn with economic crises and especially with war: more than anything else, the shipwreck scene recalls the terror of military bombardment.

The Odyssey maintains, through references to the gods, a sense of humanity as the victims of powerful forces in the world, which is important because the repeated disasters of the story then tell of something rotten at the heart of the powers that be. By distancing itself from the gods proper, bringing the story more into the human sphere, it implicates society in that corruption—but also, perhaps, empowers its members to change it.

This ambivalence is there to be found in Homer's text, which has Zeus say early on, framing the whole story:

Look you now, how ready mortals are to blame the gods. It is from us, they say, that evils come, but they even of themselves, through their own blind folly, have sorrows beyond that which is ordained.

Wilson also writes of how Nolan's "underwritten Athena turns out to be a vulnerable victim of war".

Certainly no such scene appears in Homer's epic, and one can hardly imagine it doing so, but the image was a powerful and subversive one in *The Odyssey*: a culmination of its probing of responsibility, and of the status quo. The two ideas that flash by are: isn't there something self-destructive in this old order, and how far is this in humanity's power to resolve?

The real problem is that the film leaves the matter at the level of relatively shallow flashes and images, when the *Odyssey* has far greater depths to plumb. At heart, the story is a question posed: in both an immediate and more encompassing sense. Where is Odysseus, and is he safe? But also, where is society, and are we?

It is, relatedly, a work of transition, again in a literal and symbolic sense. Of course there is Odysseus's journey itself, his attempt to return home. However, there is also the role played by the narrative as a whole: the siege of Troy, narrated in the *Iliad*, is a turning point for the Greek world, the consequences of which the *Odyssey* begins to unfurl.

This is too bluntly and anachronistically stated in the film ("Our Age of Bronze is collapsing"), but is undoubtedly a large part of the reason it has received such an enthusiastic response. Old political assumptions are collapsing all around the world, rocked by wars, economic and environmental shocks and popular unrest; the question of what comes next is on everyone's minds.

As Walsh asked in his second article on the film: "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?"

Whatever its artistic success, it is to Nolan's credit that he has attempted to respond to this moment in history with a popular recreation of a well-suited classical masterpiece. The scale of the response is fuelled by years and decades in which audiences have been largely deprived of serious political and artistic *questions about* contemporary society, let alone answers.

In this regard, there is something poignant about the story of the Lotus Eaters today. Again, this is not used as well as it could have been: almost purely as a narrative framing device and not, as might have been the case, an investigation through his memories of Odysseus's psychology, his moral questioning. But the artistic impulse is a good one.

Rather than follow the text—in which Odysseus's sailors who eat the lotus flower are trapped in a life of blissfully unaware luxury (hardly appropriate today)—Nolan has Odysseus eating the lotus. Resting on Calypso's island, he is prevented from facing the fate of his crew and the world after Troy.

Reality intrudes, however, and he wakes to the disaster, whose resolution can no longer be postponed. Many would see something of their own situation in this.

That these questions were pregnant in Homer's text was recognised by his more immediate successors. Aeschylus, who lived some 200-300 years later, took up the aftermath of the *Odyssey* in his *Oresteia*. The trilogy's central theme is the collapse under its own contradictions of a world of personal revenge and blood prices—overseen by the gods' agents, the Furies—and its transition into one governed by human legal systems.

Karl Marx, who counted Aeschylus among his favourite authors, grasped the enduring significance of this. His praise for the author's *Prometheus* trilogy and its "aphorism against all heavenly and earthly

gods who do not acknowledge human self-consciousness as the highest divinity” applies also to the *Oresteia*. The theme of social crisis, a crisis of authority, compelling the conscious creation of new ways of living speaks across the centuries, even millennia.

Aeschylus was responding to problems posed particularly sharply by the *Odyssey*’s conclusion. His work represents a significant artistic advance over it, bound up with the development of tragedy as a dramatic form and the changes which had taken place in Ancient Greek society. It chimes with what Nolan sets himself up to do with a version of the *Odyssey* focused on the social impact of a terrible war.

Yet when Nolan reaches his conclusion, by far the most problematic part of the film, the door is decisively slammed on this open-ended potential of the *Odyssey*. We are shown a lengthy and violently uncomplicated restoration of Odysseus to power, followed by the succession of his strangely exculpated son Telemachus. Odysseus and Penelope sail off into the sunset.

It is hard not to see this as a deeply, if not entirely consciously, conservative move. Given that Nolan’s own stylistic choices deny him Homer’s mechanism for bringing order—Athena demands peace from the awestruck Ithacans—it is striking how readily the filmmaker reaches for another. Any lingering questions are pushed over the distant horizon.

Many of the film’s earlier weaknesses have their roots here. Could the violence of war or the hierarchy which organised it have been better interrogated if this is where we were heading? Rather than use Odysseus’s homecoming as an eruption of all that was unsettling or unresolved in the film, as the climax of how the character has changed, it brings a sort of easy certainty.

Wilson is right to conclude that any of the film’s “contradictions could make for an interesting and generative theme in a movie” but Nolan leaves them “fragments of an incomplete set of big ideas”. It might be added that he is still too much a part of the real establishment to press the upsetting of its fictional equivalent further.

If the ending fails to resonate with social life today, however, elements of the story of human struggle that brought us to it plainly have. Contemporary struggles—against war at home and abroad, the climate crisis and much besides—will bring the subjects only hinted at in Nolan’s film fully into view in the work of a new generation of artists.



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