

Leaving the cinema after Christopher Nolan's *The Odyssey*

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I couldn't resist. Despite the complaints I'd been hearing from all sides about Christopher Nolan's film, I went to see "The Odyssey". And I came out delighted – yes, absolutely delighted. Let's be clear. Yes, I know, I know that in the Homeric epic they didn't row in battle armour, that you can't reach Sparta by sea, that there's nothing in the Homeric text to suggest that the beautiful Helen was Black, that Odysseus doesn't recount to Calypso on the island of Ogygia but at the court of King Alcinous, and that there is never any mention of the "Sea Peoples" in Homer, and so on. But anyone who expected this film to be a picture book illustrating Homer's "Odyssey" would have been mistaken. Not only because a contemporary filmmaker who adapts a heroic tale from antiquity has the right, if not the very duty, to make it relevant to the present day, just as the Athenian tragic poets did when they incorporated the great mythical figures into their plays, but also because the fluidity of the epic narrative would quite simply be betrayed if one were to freeze the text of the "Odyssey" in the form it has been handed down to us from a specific point in antiquity.

Indeed, the figure of Odysseus and his adventures were part of Mediterranean culture long before the arrival of the Greeks, which is thought to have taken place around 2000 BCE. The name Odysseus, and consequently the character himself, comes to us from a language that predated Greek. The Greeks subsequently incorporated this character into the narratives of their great epic of the Trojan War, along with another major epic subject, the war of Thebes, featuring the royal family of Oedipus, Antigone, and the others. For centuries, these tales were passed down orally, a common practice in antiquity. Julius Caesar found that the oral tradition was still being practised by our Gallic ancestors during his visit to our regions. The verse form served as a "preserving agent". From the 8th century BCE onwards, the Greeks began to use the alphabetic system they had created based on the Phoenician consonantal script. They initially used it for trade, but also to record epics, including those attributed to Homer. What we know as the "Odyssey" probably dates back to a version finalised in Athens in the 6th century BCE. This latter codification met the needs of public recitation during a religious festival: in other words, the text had to convey values specific to the society of the time (in the case of Athens, one thinks of the pre-eminent role of Athena, particularly in political terms towards the end of the Homeric "Odyssey"). We do not, of course, know what forms the tales of Odysseus's exploits might have taken before they were shaped by a poet often referred to as Homer into the brilliant poetic work that has been handed down to us ever since under the name "Odyssey".

By taking up this text, Christopher Nolan takes his place in the ancient lineage of the "aedes", "singers" of epic poems. The aedes performed with a melodic voice. Their role was to choose a subject and adapt it to a meaning relevant to their audience, which is precisely the role that Homer assigns to the aedes when he depicts one.

From its very first images, Nolan's film is built around a subtle device: a character – in this case, a Black man – standing before an audience seated at a banquet table, announces the topics of his narrative by tapping the floor with a stick. This is the very figure of the Homeric narrator, that "rhapsode" who announces the chosen subject: *"Rhapsodes were those who, in the theatres, announced the recitation of Homeric poems. They were so named because they did so whilst holding*

a stick in their hand”, states the Byzantine encyclopaedia known as the “Souda” (with a play on words here between “rhabdos” = “stick” and “rhapsodia” = “song of the stick”). Though this is not the only explanation for the word “rhapsody”—one of the terms used to refer to the Homeric poems—one gets the impression that the filmmaker’s choice was dictated by the intention to make his opening “striking” for the way it draws on an ancient tradition. The choice of a Black rhapsode serves to emphasise the fact that the reciter of epic poems was generally an itinerant artist “from elsewhere” as was the case with Odysseus himself when he recounted his adventures at the court of the Phaeacians in the ancient “Odyssey”. My daughter Samia made me notice that Nolan chose a famous Afro-American rapper, Travis Scott for this role, clearly not by chance.

The audience before whom, with the tapping of his staff, the rhapsode announces the subject that will form the basis of the film, irresistibly evokes the assembly of Penelope’s suitors, feasting at Odysseus’s palace in the absence of the master of the house. In his absence? Are we so sure? Who precisely is that figure wrapped in a hooded cloak? Might he be Odysseus disguised as a beggar? The audience has no time to focus on whether the story might, by chance, be beginning at the end: clearly we are in the presence of the assembly of suitors and Odysseus may already be there. The events of the story being announced by the rhapsode will befall these very same people, who form the work’s internal audience, and lead them to their brutal end. Yet we, the audience seated in the cinema, are the other audience for this story. We are the audience of the new “bard”, the filmmaker, and we may be being led to believe that this story, in turn, will befall us. In this way, the filmmaker appeals to the viewer’s freedom of interpretation. This freedom is brought into play throughout the film, both in the choice of episodes selected and in the way they are treated.

The ancient “Odyssey” comprises just over 12,000 lines. Reciting it takes just under twenty hours. (The public recitations held in Geneva since 1998 are spread over 24 hours, but there are breaks between each section.) Christopher Nolan’s film lasts 173 minutes, or just under three hours. Obviously, then, the filmmaker had to make choices, and the significance of these choices lies in the meaning one wishes to derive from the selected episodes.

I do not intend to go through the film’s 173 minutes to highlight the merits of its choices or to point out what some would no doubt call omissions or alterations. Here are simply a few examples that struck me as particularly successful.

Let’s start with the beautiful Helen, who has been the subject of so much discussion... Why choose a Black actress? Quite apart from the fact that the aim is not to illustrate the Homeric text, the choice of an “other” actress to portray Helen and her twin sister Clytemnestra (played, in this case, by the same actress) powerfully emphasises that these two female characters are, precisely, different from the humanity that surrounds them: born of the union between a god and a mortal (Zeus transformed into a swan and Leda), they emerged, according to one of our mythological sources, from the same swan’s egg. Thus, their birth is of semi-divine origin, fundamentally different from that of humanity. The visual contrast of colour emphasises this difference.

Let’s now turn to Calypso. In the ancient “Odyssey”, Odysseus recounts his adventures at the court of King Alcinous in the hope of winning his sympathy and so his help in returning to his island home of Ithaca. In the film, King Alcinous and his court, including the touching Princess Nausicaa and the

powerful Queen Arete, have disappeared. Odysseus recounts his adventures, instead, to the nymph Calypso. Through narrative condensation, Calypso's role is not limited to merely providing the hero with a listener. She steers his memories by making him consume the "lotus", a plant that can induce forgetfulness. However, in the ancient "Odyssey", this plant is at the centre of an episode in which its consumption risks causing Odysseus's companions to forget their desire to return home. This episode is absent from the film.; the consumption of "lotos" is here restored to its original function, but directed by the nymph Calypso: it is through this means that she manages to keep Odysseus by her side for seven long years. The bond between Odysseus and Penelope is, in a sense, strengthened by the use of this magical plant; Calypso's charms alone would not have been enough. And as for the audience comprising the court of the Phaeacians, one can safely assume that they are sitting with you in the theatre.

Considering the characters of Cassandra and Polyxena in the ancient text, we see a new fusion of two characters into one in the film. A harrowing moment in the account of the fall of Troy, depicted in the film in greater detail than in the ancient "Odyssey", is the sight of a teenage girl being brutalised and beheaded at the foot of a statue of a deity. A distillation of the horrors of war, this sequence combines the rape of Cassandra by Ajax of Locris at the foot of the statue of Athena and the sacrifice of Polyxena on Achilles' tomb (an episode preceding the fall of Troy). The impiety of these acts is fully evident in the film: it is the head of the deity that falls. Here we are on the path towards the anti-war confession that the filmmaker will attribute to Odysseus following his reunion with Penelope.

A few words will suffice to describe the brilliant portrayal of the sorceress Circe, who in the film has become a cook, a true "housewife", capable of using food to shape men and bring out their true nature – a predatory lion, a greedy pig, as if the potions and magic staff of the Homeric text had been imbued with the influence of Sigmund Freud.

The "Sea Peoples" are known for the attacks they launched against Egypt in the thirteenth century BCE. They are never mentioned in the ancient "Odyssey". However, the oldest tablets written in Greek ("Linear B") from the thirteenth century BCE (the period in which the Trojan War, and thus the events of the "Odyssey", were traditionally situated) contain references to the defence of the coastline of the kingdom of Pylos in the southern Peloponnese (the "Pylos *o-ka* series"). It cannot be proven that this defence was out of fear of the "Sea Peoples", but neither can the opposite be proven. The filmmaker is therefore free to introduce into his version of the "Odyssey" a vague, underlying fear evoked by the mention of a mysterious danger, referred to simply as the "Sea Peoples" in purely general terms.

These scenes are undoubtedly touching on fundamental themes: the evocation of a threatening invasion, the dangers of war for society as a whole and for the civilisation it has built – dangers recognised as such in Odysseus's confession to Penelope. And his realisation of these dangers amidst the burning of Troy calls to mind in the audience situations similar to their experience and appeals again to their freedom of interpretation.

A final word on the final journey. In Homer's "Odyssey", Odysseus's journey does not end with his return to Ithaca. During his encounter with the world of the dead, Tiresias foretells that Odysseus will embark on a new journey inland. This journey will involve offering a sacrifice to Poseidon, god of the

sea, amongst a people who are unaware of the very existence of the sea. This premise forms the basis of Nikos Kazantzakis's famous "Odyssey". Christopher Nolan draws on this supplement to Odysseus's journey in his own way. In the final scenes, we see the reunited couple, Penelope and Odysseus, boarding the same ship; whatever their destination, whatever tribulations this "new Odyssey" may hold in store for them, they have decided to face it together.

These few fleeting and sporadic thoughts that sprang to mind as I left the cinema are in no way intended to serve as a definitive judgement. All in all, to say that I find no fault with Christopher Nolan's film might be an exaggeration, but, as you have gathered, for me the film's strengths far outweigh its weaknesses. Christopher Nolan, with his "Odyssey", uses the means of today to fill the role of the bards of old, who, like Demodocus in Homer's "Odyssey", were called upon to choose a subject that would stir their audience. Has Christopher Nolan stirred us? The success of his latest work certainly seems to provide the answer.

AH/English translation with DeepL revised by Prof. Martha Montello.