CHRISTOPHER NOLAN’S ODYSSEY (1) – AN OLD STORY, BUT NOT THE ONE THAT’S BEING TALKED ABOUT



Replaying Homer – Theatre/Archaeology.

Notes on Christopher Nolan’s *Odyssey*.

The Odyssey, adapted from Homer and directed by Christopher Nolan. Even before its release on July 17, the movie generated much discussion and commentary. **Historical accuracy** – helmets from the wrong period, Viking ships in the Bronze Age, and an Agamemnon that looks like Batman. **Fidelity to Homer’s original** – is this movie more about Nolan’s by-now familiar focus on memory and identity, grim moral complexity in a war-weary, flawed and obsessive principal character? **Arguments over casting and diversity** – a Black Helen of Troy, when Homer described her as “white armed”? **Cinematography and production values** – the spectacle of action and immersive landscapes shot entirely in large format IMAX. **Storytelling and**

characterization – how nuanced are the women characters? What about the gods, who have disappeared from a story that centers on the psychological effects of a moral economy of violence?

Such responses and debates are not without interest. And Richard Martin is right that “every generation makes its own version of the poem”. Homer’s Odyssey was already historical fiction, myth and legend. And here we have another confabulation.

Instead of such questions I want to come at the film through concepts of retelling, re-enactment, replay. If archaeologists are those who work with remains, then these are archaeological concepts. Let’s look at Nolan’s Odyssey through an archaeological lens.

Nolan’s Odyssey is a reenactment of an old theme, but not one actually associated with the Odyssey. Nolan offers us a nineteenth-century myth of civility, barbarism, and savagery. Neither anachronistic nor woke, this is a key trope of colonial-imperialist ideology transcribed into Hollywood spectacle.

Retelling, re-enacting, replaying the past in Theatre/Archaeology

Archaeologists work with what remains, reconstructing, conserving, preserving, and mediating – writing reports, curating exhibitions, making documentaries, and, yes, making movies. In this regard, a particular manifestation of archaeology is Theatre/Archaeology which one may define as the re-articulation of remains (of the past) as real-time event. Let me treat Nolan’s Odyssey as a work of Theatre/Archaeology.

A significant motivation for retelling an old story is to refresh it – not to repeat, though repetition has its pleasures and its market, but to renew a story’s pertinence, to make it matter now. This is what one can call replay, as distinct from reenactment. Replay is to work with the remains of the past as re-source for a present that is still deciding what it will become – the re-articulation of remains as real-time event, rehearsing their pertinence to now and to futures still to come. In contrast, reenactment treats the past as a script to be restaged as faithfully as possible – stabilizing what-was, sealing it into heritage and spectacle.

The question to ask of any retelling of an old story is therefore not just whether it is faithful, but what it refreshes, replays – and what it merely restages, reenacts.

(A fuller treatment of replay and adaptation appears in my essay “Re-playing Remains: Theatre/Archaeology” (Performance Research 31.2, forthcoming 2026).)

So, the question, for me, is – What is this version of Homer’s Odyssey doing? What is it for? Who is it for? What, in the retelling, is refreshed, replayed – and what does the film merely rehearse, re-enact?

A fall from grace and civility – the old story

The film’s scaffolding is a grand narrative, a metanarrative, and an old one: the fall of civilization. Nolan’s Odysseus moves through a world in which Zeus’s law of hospitality – that strangers be offered welcome – is being abandoned. This *xenia* is the basic law of “civilization” in the film’s moral economy, the root of social and cultural stability. When one can no longer trust xenia to be universally respected, the way lies open to violence and chaos.

And we see a lot of violence and chaos. The episodes are serial manifestations of this fall from social grace: the sack of Troy itself; Polyphemos the monstrous host, and Odysseus the uninvited guest; the giant Laestrygonians massacring visitors from the sea; Calypso and Circe offering perilous hospitality; the suitors back at Ithaca as guests who devour their host’s stores. And the drama registers the fall in the character of Odysseus himself – the movie is a kind of reverse Bildungsroman in which the hero is educated downward, coming face to face with the collapse of an old way of life.

This is much more than a matter of honor, and it is to the movie’s credit that we are shown the ramifications through matters of civility and conviviality. It is not coincidental that best-selling author of the early nineteenth century, Walter Scott, placed such matters of what he called “manners” at the heart of his historical novels – the way character, disposition, memory, and what Bourdieu called “habitus”, shape history.

I am not alone in seeing this armature. David Crow at Den of Geek reads the film through precisely this breakdown of guest-host obligation, concluding that in

Nolan’s telling “the collapse of civilization comes from within, and from the corruption and erosion of literal civility.” Sean Woods in Rolling Stone names the frame outright: the movie is “an anti-war epic and a powerful warning about the dangers of civilizational collapse for our time.”

But note what happens in both these observations: the grand metanarrative of collapse of civilization is identified and then endorsed. The warning is taken as salutary, its terms as given. Yes — civilization falls when civility is abandoned, we are reassured.

Civilization, xenia and civility, equals stability, threatened by moral failure: nowhere in the reception of the movie, nor in the movie itself is this trope questioned. I suggest we examine this equation and narrative trope. And let’s begin with the currency of the concept of civilization — its decisive formation belongs to roughly 1750–1830 when it was called civility, civil society opposed to barbarism and savagery. The second half of the nineteenth century was its period of institutionalization, global diffusion, and increasingly imperial application in the service of colonial governance.

Gibbon at the end of the Bronze Age

This grand narrative, this historiography, this retelling of history, has a pedigree. The narrative arc — a stable civilization undone by the ethical failure of men who should have known better — is the trope Gibbon made canonical for Rome. In the film it is mapped onto an archaeological narrative: the “collapse” of the eastern Mediterranean world at the end of the Bronze Age. This narrative is popularly associated with Eric Cline’s book 1177 BC which propagates the myth that the end of the Bronze age, end of the second millennium BCE in the eastern Mediterranean, is about the collapse of well-established and prosperous civilizations, and involves the “Sea Peoples” — marauding sea-borne agents of destruction. Nolan has Odysseus declare, after Troy, that the age of bronze is ending. There is resonance with Hesiod’s scheme of ages (Gold, Bronze, Iron), though the film’s usage is the plainer archaeological periodization. And the sea peoples, mentioned throughout the movie, arrive as its harbingers. Commentator Woods would “bet money Nolan read Cline’s book.” A journalist’s speculation, but a telling one, because it shows how completely the collapse story now circulates as received truth: an archive to be performed and reenacted rather than a question to

be asked.

The actual archaeological evidence is nothing like so clear or conclusive. Many of the destruction and burning events claimed as evidence for the collapse of civilization are episodes in long sequences of destruction and rebuilding. Beneath the horizon of c 1200 BCE run deep continuities of settlement, practice, and lifeway that point to transformation in elite lifestyles and power networks rather than “systems collapse.” More fundamentally: social stability is not the norm in prehistory and antiquity, to be assumed until it fails. Mobility and volatility, diversity and change are ever-present. What requires explanation is metastability — how elite networks held together for as long as they did in the face of tension and contradiction. The question is not why civilizations fall but how they ever manage to stand. And why they get called “civilized” in the first place by archaeologists, anthropologists, and historians in the nineteenth century and after. It is worth recording that in the film’s opening week no archaeologist — not Cline, not the critics of the collapse narrative — has published a word on its use of this material. The archive performs itself unopposed — reenacted.

We are the barbarians

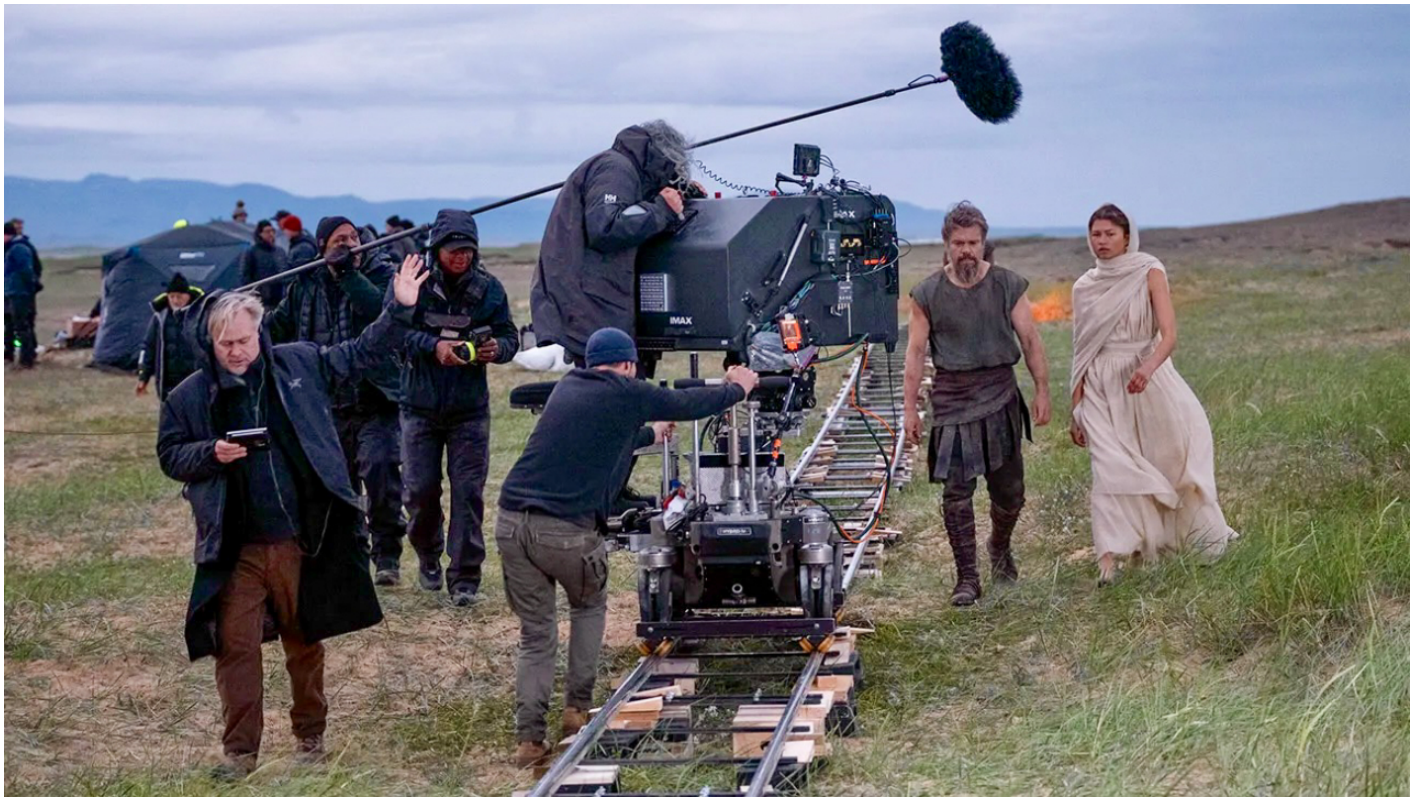
Why does this matter beyond professional and archaeological scruple. I am not talking about historical accuracy here. I am pointing to what the metanarrative does in the present. A story about violent seaborne strangers who do not respect a law of hospitality, about mobile others threatening the peace and order of civilization, about the demise of shared values — this echoes all too easily in a contemporary mediascape of migration panic, clash-of-civilizations punditry, and replacement conspiracy. Sea peoples: migrants. The allegory writes itself, whatever the intention.

Nolan, to his credit, complicates a simple reading. The film’s third act springs a revelation: we hear that the “people from the sea” are the Greeks themselves — the victorious coalition, brutalized by its own war, together with those displaced by Troy’s fall. We are the sea people, the movie all but states. Read one way, this inverts the xenophobic allegory: collapse comes not from the external other but from the internal corrosion of the männerbund, the band of warriors itself. I take the point, and it is a better film for it.

But two things follow. First, the twist confirms rather than escapes Gibbon’s

master narrative. Rather than barbarians arriving at the gates of civilization, the moral failure is now of the men who should have known better. Civilization is undone by the abandonment of its own values — the villain is swapped; the historiography, the arc of grand narrative stays.

Second, the late reveal that the Greeks are the barbarians does not un-show two hours of images. For most of its running time the film visualizes civilizational threat to involve armed arrival by sea, in media environments where that image of violence-plus-resistance has a settled political valence. (BTW The historical movements grouped as "sea peoples," as Toby Wilkinson and others remind us, included women, children, and ox-carts — migration, not armed armada.) Iconography does its work below the level of plot. We have seen this before and know it well, in the news, in action movies. Meanwhile, the only political controversy the film has actually generated is the mirror image — a manufactured outrage over "woke" casting — which suggests how little the deeper allegory has yet been noticed.



Athena, played by Zendaya, plays Jiminy Cricket — Odysseus's conscience.

Gods without divinity; women with problems

The metanarrative also determines what the film cannot accommodate: the gods. Nolan has been explicit that his creative "breakthrough" was a "realistic interpretation

of Greek mythology," depicting natural phenomena once considered supernatural. The reception has mostly applauded the result as good narrative craft. But something ancient and provocative is lost: divinity as capricious, independent, genuinely beyond the human – a lifeworld in which agency is distributed and efficacy must be negotiated with powers that owe us nothing. What remains is Athena as a kind of Jiminy Cricket conscience whispering at Odysseus's shoulder; Calypso and Circe stripped of divinity because divinity is irrelevant to the narrative – women who deal in drugs to work through their own problems, the witch working out her victimhood and the selfish beach-bum. One might extend the observation to all the film's women: they are working out their problems on the men, above all on Odysseus.

There is some subtlety here, and the discussion about casting has largely missed it. Much has been made of Lupita Nyong'o as Helen – Homer gives Helen white arms, and so the casting becomes a matter of diversity for celebrants and outraged alike. But Helen in this tradition is the woman blamed for the whole catastrophe – the face that launched a thousand ships – while the cause lies beyond her agency and control. And Nolan casts Nyong'o in a dual role: Helen and her twin sister Clytemnestra, who murders Agamemnon, king of kings, on his homecoming – hardly hospitable, though he had sacrificed her daughter to get to Troy. The same Black actress embodies the blamed woman and the punishing wife. Black women in roles of blame and subordination: not so inappropriate, perhaps, and rather more worth discussing than the color of Helen's arms (the epithet "white-armed" was stock metonym for beauty and not a description of Helen). Joel Christensen, editor of the Oxford Critical Guide to the poem, has said what needed saying: "I actually think it's a very conservative film. The roles for women are constrained. The interracial casting is women of color who just get to be married to white men, which is not progressive." The scholarly critique and the online outrage point in opposite directions; the scholars are right.

And what of sexuality and the erotic? Like divinity, Nolan has removed these from his retelling. The tense erotic energies between Odysseus, the Sirens, Calypso, Circe, and Penelope are subordinated to the anguish of the hero in his betrayal of the solidarity of the männerbund (the blood of his comrades is on his hands, and he knows it), of the decency of civility (grounded in the mutual respect of gift exchange that he violates).

Batman at Mycenae

Then the spectacle. Nolan came to prominence with Batman, and it shows: a masked Agamemnon in armor that fans promptly called a Batsuit; male leads with the physiognomy of two decades of Hollywood action heroes; combat staged in the grammar of the franchise choreography of the fight/warrior/battle/martial arts scene.

The classicists have rightly dismissed the accuracy complaint — "The Odyssey is filled with anachronisms," as Christensen says; Homeric poetry is itself a layering of historical horizons. But accuracy is not my objection here. The objection is internal contradiction: a film that presents itself as a reflection on the costs of war and on the failure of hospitality, dialogue, conviviality — and that delivers this reflection through gratuitous, pleasurable, expertly choreographed violence. The medium fights the message. Richard Martin has come closest among the scholars, observing that Nolan waters down Homer's morality in favor of spectacle. I would push further: the spectacle grammar is not a dilution of the film's content; it is content itself — the männerbund "band-of-brothers" aesthetic reproduced in the very texture of the images that are supposed to mourn it.

Reenactment, not replay

Which returns me to adaptation. Myke Cole, writing in Slate as a military historian and veteran, reads the film as finally being about veteran trauma — "to go to war is to die, even if you survive" — and the reading is humane, textually grounded, and supported by the twist ("we are the barbarians"). But moral injury is our idiom, as moral declension was Gibbon's: each age processes the warrior's return, the nostos, through its own explanatory equipment. A psychologized Odysseus is a contemporary mediation, not an escape from mediation. Jason Baxter, in America, offers the more interesting complication: the film knows about the four centuries that separate the Mycenaean ruin from Homer's composition, and it ends, he suggests, on civilizations that rise, collapse, and rise again. There is something almost archaeological in that gesture — an acknowledgment that the Odyssey itself is a replay of remains, a poem built four hundred years later from the debris of the world it mourns. But the film loses the insight as a coda, just as it spends its best moment — "You are the people from the sea" — as a plot twist rather than a critical insight. The moral allegory of civility and collapse returns within minutes of screen time.

And so my conclusion. In the terms of Theatre/Archaeology I have developed elsewhere: this is reenactment, not replay. The film takes liberties with every incident and none with its worldview. What it faithfully restages is not Homer but an eighteenth- and nineteenth-century ideology of civilization: stability as norm and achievement, guaranteed by a universal ethics, held in trust by a fellowship of men, threatened by mobility and by others not like them, lost when they lose sight of the values that bind. Ruins monumentalized in IMAX; the past sealed into spectacle; identity restored. Nothing is rehearsed for future possibility.

The final irony is dramaturgical. Hospitality — the film's great theme — is also the ethic of media adaptation. When one adapts a novel for a movie one is faced with matters of reception and representation. Curiosity, respect, and care toward what remains — an archaeological ethics of hospitality and xenia. Nolan's film is an inhospitable guest in the Homeric milieu. It arrives, imposes its own law — the collapse trope, the action grammar, the disenchanted cosmos — and consumes its host's stores, resources. This is a film about the violation of xenia that violates xenia at the level of adaptive practice. A replay worthy of the poem would do otherwise: it would let the remains resist, keep the gods capricious, allow the women their own problems, and treat the so-called collapse not as a warning delivered from the past but as an open question about how any world holds together at all.

Reception cited: David Crow (Den of Geek, 18 July); Sean Woods (Rolling Stone, 17 July); Joel Christensen, Richard Martin, and Justin Arft (Variety, 18 July); Myke Cole (Slate, 16 July); Jason Baxter (America, 17 July); Guy Lodge (Variety review, 15 July); Nolan on demythologizing, Empire (January 2026). Plus a smattering of others.