

Myth or History? (Praise for Christopher Nolan's Rendition of The Odyssey)

(By Toshio U.-P.)

"History is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake"

~"Ulysses" by James Joyce

In Christopher Nolan's blockbuster rendition of the Odysseus' long and perilous journey back home to Ithaca, we meet the aging Trojan War hero stuck on a secluded island with the fair Calypso as he struggles with mild PTSD paired with frequent hallucinatory flashbacks from the flaming siege of Troy and random apparitions of Olympus deity Athena who acts as his closest spiritual guide and protector throughout the course of the film narrative. After Odysseus recounts some of his misadventures and the loss of his many loyal crew and soldiers at the hands of the Cyclops, the Laestrygonians, Scylla and Charybdis (among others), he eventually leaves the mesmerizing Calypso with his aging grey beard, miraculously drifting his way back to Ithaca on a raft as a tattered army of one. Back on the shores of Ithaca, a Macbethian massacre looms as Odysseus masks his return to the royal courts where his wife Penelope's many suitors vie to usurp the throne from his boyish son Telemachus, the rightful future heir. While Nolan's modern interpretation of Homer's poetic verses adds a stunning new visual and auditory dimension to the ancient tale of war-torn separation and reunion, I couldn't help but feel the renewed importance of the Joycean parallel in "Ulysses" where each chapter alludes to key episodes of Homer's epic poem with reinterpreted dynamics between estranged family members and rivals set against the backdrop of Dublin as a contemporary equivalent to the mythological isle of Ithaca. While Nolan's theatrical version references the tale of the Trojan Horse, inserting the character Sinon from Virgil's *The Aeneid* as a martyr who unwittingly plays a role in getting the Trojans to pull the hollowed sculpture within the fortifications of their city, we are left debating whether the great Greek warrior Odysseus—who took part in the clever war ruse with his army—is truly a war hero or a mere barbarian and pillager. While the vision of Troy in flames with the imposing spectre of King Agamemnon adorned with distinct shiny black armour—reminiscent of Sauron in *The Lord of the Rings* or even Darth Vader—makes one ponder whether to side with the Trojan or Grecian hordes in the film, Helen of Troy is equally cryptic as a key catalyst and precursor of the lengthy war conflict, with her fickle and slightly mercurial nature. In the end Nolan taps into a fascination of a post-Covid cinema market where wars are seemingly endless and mythology functions to create necessary abstraction from the harsh reality of incessant violent conflict and separation. At the film's conclusion, I found myself torn between interpreting the film either as a mythological fable with little historical bearings or as some sort of ancient war meme that is still grounded in true events and plausible historical characters.

Source:

The Odyssey (2026). Dir. Christopher Nolan. Universal Pictures. USA & United Kingdom. 173 min.