

Opinion

Christopher Nolan's The Odyssey A Bastardized Parable for Our Times YET: Riveting and Entertaining A Short Opinion

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Abstract

Christopher Nolan's The Odyssey is one of the most discussed film adaptations of a classical work in recent years. This paper argues why this is so. It requires a two-part analysis: a discussion of the movie itself, using appropriate criteria, and a dissection of the movie based on political and cultural circumstances and objections. Thus stated, it is a riveting, entertaining, well-crafted enterprise in the former and less satisfying in the latter, but far from terrible. My argument is that this movie is a bastardized parable, which allows Nolan considerable control over his created virtual reality. Thus, he is able to communicate the trauma that Odysseus suffered, which can be interpreted as resembling post-traumatic stress disorder, doing so in a first-person manner, i.e. through his perception and not necessarily through what others see. This presentation is further updated by changes in the language and music used. The emphasis is changed to reflect more feminine concerns and may also provide a voice for political and social views. A parable's goal is to convey universal truths, which are achieved by combining them with a compelling story. Nolan appears to be using this device while not following all of the traditional characteristics of parables, despite invoking Zeus's Law. By combining aspects of Homer's works with Virgil's, he is also moving toward the construction of an allegorical narrative. Dante did this combination in his Inferno, while Nolan's construction is, in my view, bastardized. This is not necessarily a criticism of the craftsmanship of the movie, but rather a description of the way in which an ancient story has been substantially altered to communicate contemporary concerns.

Introduction

Christopher Nolan is arguably one of the most accomplished directors of the twenty-first century. His creations have several characteristics. One is that, despite spanning different times in his movies, he uniquely bends time: telling stories in reverse (*Memento*), having his actors operate at different times (*Dunkirk*), and even having time proceed in both directions (*Tenet*). He shows time as relative to the observer (*Interstellar*). He develops a story where a dream within a dream within a dream has a unique velocity of time passage (*Inception*).

Two, he is grounded in the concept that many phenomena which appear supernatural are not (*The Prestige*). He reimagines even a well-known and previously depicted comic book character, Batman, in a trilogy, in a fresh way, introducing epic themes of order versus disorder and how best to proceed.

Three, he sees a world where science can solve many of its problems. Thus, spiritual and supernatural explanations are often absent or minimized in his creations. *Oppenheimer* depicts the dawn of the nuclear age, which adds moral complexities of our time, while *The Odyssey* allows him to introduce a Trojan horse to the social and political discourse [1].

Four, he prefers using actors who have previously worked with him and likes to feature different ones in major roles. Five, he is a craftsman, along with his brother, in many aspects of the craft of movie making. Six, they are quite facile in the use of language, along with other aspects of production, to persuade, and this leads to the relevance of Marshall McLuhan [2]. The question therefore becomes how Nolan uses an ancient story to communicate ideas to a modern audience. This is where the concept of a parable becomes useful.

Virtual Reality

Knowledge, prior to writing, was communicated by oral poems. Homer was the presumed author of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. The historical record is very limited at this time because of the lack of surviving written records from the period [3]. It is known that these long poems were transmitted orally, and that singing and other mnemonic techniques aided memorization. It is highly likely that these tales evolved over the long period between their original formation and their eventual written transmission. They are stories relating to a war between rival civilizations during the Bronze Age, which have influenced subsequent generations of thinkers in the West. Reading text is a major advancement, which forever changed the world and the human condition. The act of reading changes how people use their eyes, how they move, and at what distance. It allowed people the ability to virtually visit anywhere in the world and have access to the world's accumulated knowledge. It literally changed humanity.

This virtual reality is analog, and in this sense we can be understood as cyborgs for millennia [4]. It is also a strong factor in spreading information of all kinds, including propaganda, which is a means of persuading, both in antiquity [5] and today [6]. Its ability to persuade is further enhanced by theories associated with Sigmund

Freud [7] and his nephew Edward Bernays [8]. Freud also devised, in his discussion of the mind, a tripartite model consisting of the ego, id, and superego [9]. Although later psychological theories have substantially revised these ideas, they remain historically important in understanding how earlier thinkers attempted to explain human behavior and persuasion. In this sense, the movement from oral poetry to written literature and finally to cinema represents another development of virtual experience. A movie allows an audience to enter a constructed world and experience events through images, sounds, language, music, and editing. Nolan's *Odyssey* can therefore be viewed as another form of virtual reality, in which the audience is encouraged to experience the story from a particular perspective.

Traditions of Theater

The ancient world had a multiplicity of performance traditions, from religious ceremonies and stories of supernatural beings to formal dramatic traditions. Ancient Greece saw the rise of dramas, tragedies, and comedies, demonstrating many aspects of human experience [10]. Characters could relate their first-person perceptions, while the chorus could provide commentary and a broader perspective on what was occurring [11]. This distinction between first-person perception and third-person observation is important to the present discussion. A filmmaker has the ability to determine what the audience sees and what it does not see. Music, editing, dialogue, camera placement, and performance can all influence the audience's perception. Nolan's craftsmanship allows him to use these techniques to create a particular experience of Odysseus. The audience is not simply being told what happened to him. It is being encouraged to experience his journey through a carefully constructed cinematic reality.

Words to Describe Literary Devices

Recently, I briefly discussed parables and compared them to other constructions [12]. They are a simple story involving humans doing activities, with a conclusion which presents an important truth. The story is essential for this to be successful, and parables have continued value because they allow audiences to learn from a particular story and apply its meaning more broadly. Therein, it is compared to other constructions, including fables and allegories. My assertion is that Nolan, in his movie, uses a parable as one tool to communicate his ideas. Yet, he modifies the writings of Homer by adding a character from Virgil's *Aeneid*, Sinon, and modifies this character's arc. By so doing, he moves away from a straightforward retelling

of Homer and toward a hybrid literary construction. The term “bastardized” is therefore used here to describe substantial transformation rather than artistic inferiority. The film remains recognizable as an adaptation of Homer while incorporating material, structures, and emphases from elsewhere. Allegory is another possible way to understand this process [13]. It has been used many times over the centuries, from *Beowulf* to Dante’s *Inferno*, and more recently by Ibsen in multiple plays [14]. An allegorical construction would have allowed Nolan considerable flexibility in literary construction.

For example, Odysseus could have said he was “nobody,” which would have allowed a small interlude of humor in his work. It is interesting that there is little humor in this tale, and I think this is intentional. Perhaps this is partly to flatten out the complexity of the work and to go along with the mission of making the movie more accessible for the audience. The absence of humor can also make the trauma and moral conflicts more serious and immediate. Cognitive dissonance is the mental condition of distress when one has thoughts or behaviors which conflict with one’s values [15]. Odysseus is presented as so traumatized that his experiences can be interpreted through the modern concept of post-traumatic stress disorder [16]. I am not attempting to clinically diagnose a fictional character. Rather, I am using PTSD as a modern framework for understanding the psychological consequences of what Odysseus has experienced. Dialectical thinking, in this context, involves recognizing and working through tensions between apparently contradictory ideas or experiences. It can be a useful mental habit, and Odysseus strives, with the help of Circe, to accomplish a return to greater psychological stability. The conflict between what Odysseus believes, what he has done, and what he must do provides another way to understand the transformation of the character.

Synthesis of All These Ideas

Greeks recognized that the human condition was typified by uncertainty. People had their place within a social and political culture and were deeply shaped by it, in a world influenced by human effort, the gods, and chance. They recognized that extraordinary characters could possess serious limitations or make consequential errors, ideas that can be considered in relation to *hamartia* [17]. These limitations have been represented in literature through jealousy (*Othello*), irresolution (*Hamlet*), and narcissism (*Narcissus*). Hubris, or excessive pride, has been involved in several Greek tragedies, most notably *Oedipus*. It is my impression, by weighing the evidence, i.e. having seen

the movie, researching this topic for months, and rationally thinking about these things, that hubris can explain part of why this movie is as it is. Nolan has considerable control of his virtual reality. He has been developing his craft, forming relationships with his actors, and frequently presenting explanations for observed phenomena that do not depend on supernatural intervention. *The Odyssey* presents a different challenge because supernatural forces are central to the original story. Nolan therefore has to determine how those elements will function in a modern cinematic environment. This is where “Zeus’s Law” becomes particularly important.

The film also appears, in my interpretation, to devote considerable attention to perspectives that may be described as more feminine in emphasis. This is not necessarily the same as arguing that Nolan personally holds a particular political position. Rather, the film provides greater opportunities to examine female experience, participation, agency, and the consequences of male decisions. In this sense, the film can be interpreted as giving greater prominence to perspectives that have traditionally received less attention in heroic narratives. I also see Odysseus as a “trickster” figure, and this may provide another way of understanding the film’s construction. I cannot know whether Nolan personally identifies with Odysseus in this way, but the similarity between the filmmaker’s manipulation of narrative and the character’s manipulation of circumstances is an interesting interpretive possibility. The movie may therefore be understood as a means of communicating political and social ideas. I cannot establish Nolan’s private intentions, but the political interpretation is difficult to avoid. He may cloak the central moral principle in the phrase “Zeus’s Law,” and thus suggest a Christian idea similar to the “Golden Rule,” but I am not convinced that this is the only interpretation. The ancient concept has its own history and meaning, and the modern interpretation may therefore be more complicated. Another bit of evidence is that, in this movie, words are often used to express someone else’s actions, as with Sinon. This contributes to the film’s concern with perception, responsibility, and the reliability of narrative. Finally, a satisfying conclusion occurs, which can produce a sense of catharsis. This does make it easier for an audience to accept the message of a story. Whether that message should be called propaganda depends upon how the term is defined. In my view, the movie possesses persuasive political and social elements, but the evidence is stronger for saying that it **can function persuasively** than for claiming that Nolan consciously created propaganda [18].

Conclusion

Judging the movie alone, using the criteria detailed above, my score is 8/10. Judging the movie concerning its propaganda elements, my score is 6/10. I suspect that those strongly opposed to the movie may not be persuaded by this interpretation. However, I do think that the issues of PTSD and female participation in society are important. The movie provides an opportunity to consider these issues through an ancient story that has been altered for a contemporary audience. It appears in our society today that the pendulum has swung back, correcting many views which were centered on narcissism and making one's personal identity everybody's problem. Civility and the law are returning, like Harvey Dent. *The Odyssey* therefore succeeds for me primarily as a riveting and entertaining cinematic construction. It is less satisfying when judged as a faithful representation of Homer or as a transparent political statement. Its greatest strength may be precisely its ability to take an ancient story, modify it substantially, and use that story to encourage contemporary audiences to think about trauma, morality, social participation, and the consequences of human choices. For these reasons, I continue to regard Nolan's *Odyssey* as a **bastardized parable for our times**: bastardized because it does not follow the original literary construction closely, but a parable because it uses a compelling story to communicate ideas that extend beyond the story itself.

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