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Oh Muse, Tell Me About a Complicated Man: The Odyssey by Christopher Nolan, Followed by the Ulysses of James Joyce and Teolinda Gersão

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Abstract: ***This paper examines the film Odyssey (2026) by British filmmaker Christopher Nolan, analyzing the role of adapting a classic literary work for high-resolution, technically complex cinema. It discusses the filmmaker's creative freedom to interpret the original work, adapting it to the social context of his time and his own unique vision of the classic text. The study also addresses the nature of the hero and his qualities, the much-debated Christianization of the Odyssey in Nolan's film, and the inclusion of themes characteristic of his cinema, such as remorse and guilt. Finally, it questions the relevance of this classic's reimagining in the novel Ulysses by Irish writer James Joyce and in A cidade do Ulisses (The City of Ulisses), by contemporary Portuguese writer Teolinda Gersão.***

Keywords: Classics, Odissey, Nolan, Hero

1. Introduction

We analyze the film *Odyssey* by British filmmaker Christopher Nolan, alongside two European "Ulysses" figures: first, Leopold Bloom- the Ulysses of the eponymous novel by Irish author James Joyce- who traverses Dublin following the structure of the poem's cantos; and second, the Ulysses-Paulo character created by Portuguese writer Teolinda Gersão. She positions this painter as the central protagonist of the novel A Cidade de Ulisses (The City of Ulysses)- a city that, according to ancient classical tradition, was founded by the Greek hero himself. Wilson asserts that in heroic and legendary narratives, many characters return to prosperous homes—such as "Jason, claiming the Golden Fleece, Launcelot glimpsing the Holy Grail, or Aeneas beginning the foundation of Rome. In The *Odyssey*, we find instead the story of a man whose grand adventure is simply to go back to his own home" (Wilson, 2026). Ulysses arrives in Ithaca destitute and incognito; the only spoil he brings back from a long war and an arduous odyssey are his own life. Finally, we briefly analyze the strategies employed in Christopher Nolan's film Odysse*, which presents his version of the Homeric myth. In this discussion, we maintain the thesis that every reader rewrites the work they read, creating their own unique version, while the original remains inimitable and primordial. The appropriation of ancient myths by film directors recalls the bewilderment that once swept through cinephile circles regarding the Spaghetti Westerns of Sergio Leone; these films took a staple theme of American cinema and reconfigured it in a highly original way.

2. Methodology

This preliminary study is an essay analyzing Christopher Nolan's film Odyssey by employing Michel de Certeau's concept of "poaching." When applied to the reading of a literary work, this concept allows us to detect how Nolan appropriated Homer's work, adapting it from the printed medium to cinema. This operation- a process of textual adaptation- resembles the one carried out by the British poet Tennyson in the 19th century. Tennyson altered the Catholic and sexually liberal elements of a 16th-century text to suit the Protestant, Puritan audience of the Victorian era.

Our source materials are Nolan's film and two novels inspired by the Odyssey. The first is James Joyce's Ulysse*, featuring a protagonist who is an apolitical, wandering Jew moving through a British-occupied Dublin where the smell of fires from the Easter Rising still hung in the air. The second is a work by Portuguese writer Teolinda Gersão titled A cidade de Ulisses (The City of Ulysses). This narrative is set in Lisbon- Portugal's bustling, cosmopolitan capital- a metropolis long reputed to have been founded by that industrious wanderer. In the Portuguese work, the hero is an artist seeking- much like in classical political texts- his right to happiness in life and love.

Therefore, our essay, investigates- on a limited scale- the twists and turns and the metamorphic nature of adapting the Homeric classic in the works of Nolan, Joyce, and Gersão. In doing so, it paves the way for a broader, more robust inquiry that would incorporate other reinterpretations of the Odyssey, such as those by Nikos Kazantzakis and the Soviet writer Vasily Grossman.

This exploratory study has yielded several findings, ranging from strategies of reading and appropriation to the shaping of the heroes; regarding Nolan's work specifically, it highlights the apparent adaptation of the ancient poem- with its classical, pagan religious and ethical premises- into a supposedly "Christianized" version of Homer.

2.1 Methods: Cinema and Literature

Literary heroes- especially Homeric ones- occupy a plane above ordinary humans, even though both overcome fantastic and everyday obstacles during their mortal existences (Frisk, 2019). In their discussion of heroes, Costa and Marino cite Freud, noting that "it becomes easy for us to recognize ourselves in the hero; we are susceptible to the same conflict he faces," as such conflict is part of the human condition. They further invoke Lacan, observing that "within each of us

lies a path traced for a hero, and it is precisely as an ordinary man that one realizes it" (Costa & Marino, 2018).

The partnership between literature and its heroes- and cinema is long-standing, as evidenced by notes written by Abel Gance in the 1920s. He then stated that heroes were knocking at the door of the cinema, as king to be let in. The transposition of literature to the "seventh art" begins with the reading and reception of a printed work; adapted through a new rendering, it is tailored to the times and the audience's perception.

As noted in the methodology section, a novel adapted for the screen differs from the original and is not strictly bound to the book that inspired it. A work as experienced by the reader becomes a new book (Vanoye, 1993). As Emily Wilson stated in an interview with the London Review of Books: "Adaptations needn't and shouldn't follow the original with anything like the exactitude of a translation." "Some of the best radically transform or resist the source material, providing what Harold Bloom called 'strong misreadings' of their ancestors." (Wilson, 2026)

Over the long course of time, many writers have engaged with the Odyssey to produce their own works, such as Helen, by the Greek playwright Euripides; Virgil's Aeneid (read by Nolan); Paradise Lost by the British poet Milton; Joyce's Ulysses; Gersão's A Cidade de Ulisses; Atwood's The Penelopiad; Madeline Miller's Circe; and Nikos Kazantzakis's The Odyssey.

3. Findings

Renowned Homer translator Emily Wilson, despite criticizing Nolan's film, praised him for rendering the complex poem, the Odyssey, into colloquial English. According to her—echoing the words of de Certeau—the Homeric poem was an adaptation from fifth-century Athens. The shift from orality to the written alphabet enabled the reworking of mythical traditions and the reshaping of the veteran's homecoming story to resonate with the complex concerns of Greek speakers during the Archaic period- an era of migration, colonization, and urbanization (Wilson, 2026).

3.1 Reinterpretation and Christianization of the Odyssey

In the Homeric text, Odysseus is a human favored by gods such as Zeus and Athena- a point noted by Johannes Achill Niederhauser, who accuses Nolan of creating a film that appeals to conservative evangelicals in the USA (Niederhauser, 2026). A creative and formidable filmmaker, Nolan rewrote his own *Odyssey*, stripping away the original paganism and rendering the deities as harmless, asexual background figures. The existential human tragedies that punctuate the Homeric text are reduced to contemporary issues such as guilt and amnesia.

Following the overarching lines of our methodology, we turn our attention to the celebrated Arthurian poem published in 1833 by the British poet Lord Tennyson (1809–1892). According to Rebecca Umland, the author concealed his personal deist convictions, reaffirming the Anglican Christian order and the social standards of the Victorian era in his work. Aiming his work at a Protestant audience, he suppressed the traces of Roman Catholicism and sexuality found in Thomas Malory's 1485 work, Le Morte d'Arthur. Tennyson upheld middle-class ideology by suppressing the sexuality inherent in the origins of the character Arthur and in the chivalric romances, endowing him instead with moral standards he- like his contemporaries- deemed superior (Umland, 2016).

Cantor has analyzed the processes of sanitization and the cultural and political reconfigurations produced by US cinema, particularly in Westerns. In this context, it is filmmakers and screenwriters who are reinterpreting films. Cantor suggests that the cinematic conventions shaping blockbusters are controlled by astute and imaginative intellectuals. Despite claiming to be defenders of democracy and "freedom," these people criticize the vote and popular opinion, suppressing from their productions anything that poses a danger or threat to the establishment. (Cantor, 2012)

Nolan's choices, as a cultural operator and auteur, lead him to reconfigure Ulysses—a dangerous, subversive, and vengeful hero endowed with pagan moral values. In the film, the Olympian deities lose their capacity to bind humanity together; they appear to be stripped of their powers. Athena is portrayed as fragile and vulnerable, lacking her attributes of martial prowess and creative intelligence. To paraphrase Shakespeare: as the actor Matt Damon speaks, the deity is a passing shadow- uttering words no one understands before vanishing.

Odysseus moves through the sacrilege committed during the sack of Troy- the profanation of temples, icons, priests, and altars- bewildered by the uncontrollable explosion of violence he has unleashed. This sacrilege and the shedding of innocent blood constitute a primal crime that will haunt everyone involved in the enterprise.

The female deities of the Homeric text—highly sexualized figures like Calypso- are stripped of erotic appeal. Consider Circe, with whom Ulysses fathers the son who will eventually kill him. Robust deities like Poseidon or Zeus are merely hinted at. As Wilson notes, Nolan's vision of the world is not quite big enough to include either real gods or real people who might be different from us. (Wilson, 2026)

In an interview given by the filmmaker to Zhong Shu- a doctoral student in political philosophy at Boston College and a podcaster- it is suggested that Nolan transformed his version of the *Odyssey* into a Christian narrative. (YouTube, Interview, Shu, Zhong, 2026)

The constant use of the phrase "the law of Zeus"- Xenia- recalls the tactic of salespeople who draw our attention to an outlier detail. In the Homeric narrative, the gods assist, reward, and punish their heroes- both Greek and Trojan- shifting their allegiances along the way. Odysseus was a favorite of the gods, perhaps due to his unique creative capacity. Men can be predictable; Achilles, for instance, is prone to rage. Agamemnon and Menelaus are both cuckolds, while Ulysses is cunning.

Gods, however, are unpredictable and act when codes of conduct are violated. Cantor suggests that “Just as in the Oresteia, in Book XXIV Athena must intervene to put an end to a cycle of revenge that is beginning to emerge between Odysseus’ clan and the families of the suitors he has violently slain upon his return to Ithaka.” (Cantor, 2012)

4. Christopher Nolan as a Reader

Nolan studied literature at the university. However, hHis way of reading, recalls Michel de Certeau’s concept, as Nolan transforms his reading into an act of "poaching" (Certeau). In an interview,he stated he was most interested in authors who took an unusual approach to reading the classics.Nolan moved away from conventional perspectives, focusing instead on the complex interplay between narrative and characterization (Joy, 2015).

In his take on the Odyssey, Nolan employed robust visual technologies and a restrained color palette to illustrate his reinterpretation of the Homeric drama. To better connect with an audience familiar with recent series and films that celebratinge Viking culture, Nolan utilizes the recognizable nautical imagery of Nordic rowing vessels. Another visual element is the black armor- such as Agamemnon’s- featuring a mask with cubic protrusions that bears a striking resemblance to Batman’s.

In the Homeric text, Odysseus is a favorite of the gods, including Zeus and Athena; however, Johannes Achill Niederhauser argues that Nolan created a film tailored to the tastes of American evangelical conservatives (Niederhauser, 2026). A creative and formidable filmmaker, Nolan re-wrote his own version of the Odyssey, stripping away the original paganism and rendering the deities as harmless, asexual background figures. The existential human tragedies that punctuate the Homeric text are reduced to contemporary issues such as guilt and amnesia.

The British poet Lord Tennyson (1809–1892) published his celebrated Arthurian poem in 1833, concealing- according to Rebecca Umland- his staunch deism. In the work, he reaffirmed the Anglican Christian order and Victorian social norms, imposing a strict code of sexual conduct upon his characters. Aiming at a Protestant audience, the work suppressed the traces of Roman Catholicism found in Thomas Malory’s 1485 Le Morte d’Arthur. It reinforced middle-class ideology by suppressing the inherent sexuality in the character of Arthur’s origins and endowing him with high moral standards. (Umland, 2016)

4.1 Findings: Reconstructing the Hero, his gods and feelings.

Cantor analyzed the sanitizing processes and the cultural and political reconfigurations produced by US cinema, particularly in Westerns. The cinematic patterns that shape blockbusters are controlled by astute and imaginative intellectuals. Despite claiming to champion democracy and "freedom," they criticize the popular vote and public opinion, filtering out any dangers or threats to the establishment from their productions. (Singer, 2012)

Nolan’s choices, as a cultural operator and auteur, lead him to reconfigure Ulysses- a dangerous, subversive, and vengeful hero driven by pagan moral values. In the film, the Olympian deities lose their ability to bind humanity together; they appear stripped of their powers. Athena is portrayed as fragile and vulnerable, lacking her attributes of martial prowess and creative intelligence.

Amidst the sacrilege of the Sack of Troy- involving the desecration of temples, icons, priests, and altars- Odysseus moves, bewildered by the uncontrollable explosion of violence he has unleashed. This sacrilege and the shedding of innocent blood constitute a primal crime that will haunt all those who took part in the enterprise.

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4.2 Hero

Cantor observes that “Homer’s heroes are glorious in their willful independence and self-reliance, but they are consequently too quick to resolve their differences by resorting to force of arms; in an argument, their first impulse is to reach for their swords.” The state of permanent war in the Iliad and the Odyssey drags both the heroes and their world toward destruction, as if the conflict at Troy- as we have noted- shattered a primordial cosmic balance.

The blind rage of Achilles, bordering on madness, differs from the human heroism of Odysseus- perhaps the poorest of the Achaean monarchs, yet one whose tactics are unrivaled. Cunning, or the shrewd tactic, is- according to Michel de Certeau- the weapon of the weak (like Ulysses); it is employed in plain sight of both antagonists and allies (Certeau, 1990). A classic example of this usage is found in

the scene involving the Cyclops Polyphemus- reduced to a monster devouring Greeks before bed- who loses his only eye to the hero's sublime human stratagem, an element notably absent from Nolan's version.

4.3 Heroic feats and labors.

Heroic feats inhabit the human imagination from afar- a condition Zimbardo defines as arising in "particular situations at particular times, when situational forces play a compelling role in moving individuals across the line from inaction to action" (Zimbardo, 2007).

To expand their symbolic resonance within the collective imagination and strike fear into their antagonists, heroes identify with totemic animals- figures described as a "messenger of invisible forces, mask and mask-bearer, concrete and mysterious, a reflection of the self and an image of the other, at once so wild and so divine that none can escape its haunting presence." (Schnapp-Gourbellion, 1981)

Ulysses-Odysseus is a cunning hero and a man whose hands- complementary instruments of a wily mind- kill enemies, blind Cyclopes, row, hunt, make wine, and craft a marriage bed around an olive tree.

5. Discussions: Cinema, Sensory Experience

US cinema has a long and fruitful tradition of adapting classics- especially Homer's works- into the most quintessentially American genre: the Western. For Cantor, John Ford was a "storyteller, like Homer," while experts acknowledge the close connection between Ford's Westerns and the classical antiquity literature. "They suggest that Ford is working on a Homeric scale, and captures the spirit of Greek tragedy in the way he shapes his characters' encounters with elemental forces and a cruel destiny." (Cantor, 2012)

Nolan's body of work establishes him as a storyteller whose screenwriting successfully bridges media gaps by translating narrative from print to film. While written narrative appeals to memory and imagination, film are projected onto a screen where the viewer's senses receive the cinematic image.

Nolan's films challenge paradigms; they are complex, bold narratives- akin to puzzles and structured stories- in which Pheasant-Kelly observes psychologically afflicted characters uses flashback techniques. Beyond the amnesia that plagues Ulysses, Nolan suggests emotional situations and traumas linked to grief and guilt- themes common in films of the new millennium. (Pheasant-Kelly, 2015)

5.1 Ancient Greek vs. Modern Perception

Unlike contemporary audiences- saturated by a multitude of stimuli and media- Hellenic spectators relied primarily on sight and imagination. However, in writing his version of the classic, Nolan- following de Certeau- executes a "scriptural project" that, much like modern American evangelicalism, discards the past to rewrite it as something new, refashioning history as a driver of progress and modernity.

Furthermore, today's reading public is characterized by its movement across mass media channels and the highways of television and information. Within these spaces, we detect cultural patterns capable of shaping the multitude of viewers. (Certeau, 1990)

In the Classical era, the sense of hearing created a realm of meaning that required a concrete physical presence to anchor the voices. According to Sala, this practice identified protagonists through attributes characteristic of oral storytelling. Thus, there was an abundance of repeated expressions- such as "resourceful Ulysses"- as well as interpolations and repetitions. In contrast, the Judeo-Christian perceptual sense relied fundamentally on the ear, without... ...embodiment. Sala, on the other hand, considers it possible to hear and "see" a sound that is filtered and placed "before one's eyes" (Sala, 2011).

The Hellenic sensibility viewed "the world in an objective, bounded, and mathematically intelligible way; sight is the highest sense, whereas for the Old Testament, it is hearing." Curiously, the synesthesia found in Hellenic literature is present in cinema- as Sala suggests- by making visible on screen that which is distant and absent (Sala, 2006).

Hellenic culture- despite the irreducibility of the Achaeans' claimed superiority over the "Eastern" Trojans- recognizes the human character of otherness in the "other."

There are no irreconcilable oppositions- such as "you are either with me or against me," or "you shall have no other before me." We do not know if the family of Goliath the Philistine asked the Israelites to bury their loved ones' bodyes. In Homer, the wrathful Achilles is appeased- something even the gods failed to achieve- by the human and anguished lamentations of the Trojan King Priam. The hero, shaken by the personal grief of his beloved Patroclus's death, sees his own pain reflected in the other; he returns Hector's corpse to the unfortunate monarch.

6. From Nolan to the two European Ulysseses

Writers appropriate the Homeric myth and reconfigure it in new works. According to Bernardes, writer-readers such as "Dante, Shakespeare, Giovanni Pascoli, Gabriele d'Annunzio, Alfred Tennyson, James Joyce, Haroldo de Campos, and Nikos Kazantzakis, among others," were enriched by Homer's work (Bernardes, 2009).

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James Joyce created his Ulysses as a resident of Dublin. In his Odyssey, he traverses the city of Dublin over the course of a single day. This hero is Leopold Bloom, a Jew who echoes another Wandering Jew- a character named Hunter who appears in a short story from Dubliners (Elliman).

Ulysses was a Greek wanderer due to his *hubris* and divine punishment. The "Wandering Jew" is a figure from medieval

Christian beliefs and legends, condemned to wander for his sin against Jesus Christ. The myth of the Wandering Jew also appears in Hebrew literary tradition as a male character living in perpetual exile, "attempting to find his way back to the Jewish homeland," as Potok explains (Potok, 1995).

In her article, Jerusa Pires Ferreira suggests a possible connection between the narrative of the Wandering Jew and those of Faust, the Flying Dutchman, or even Prometheus. The author links them to notions of rebellion, defiance, the quest for knowledge, punishment, and even salvation (Ferreira, 2000).

It is certainly curious that a Jewish Odysseus living in Dublin would yearn for Eretz Yisrael without rebelling against the British occupiers during his odyssey, or joining the Easter Rising or the Catholic IRA. For Cantor, the Greek hero struggles to escape a cycle of destruction and triumphs largely because he is "a more political one, someone who is intelligent and self-controlled enough to make the compromises necessary to survive in a hostile and violent world of proud and spirited warriors. The political character of Odysseus is shown by the fact that, unlike Achilles, he knows how to lie"- and, like the talented Ripley, Odysseus lies very well (Cantor, 2012).

6.1 Teolinda's Ulysses

Teolinda Gersão, the renowned Portuguese author, wrote the novel A Cidade de Ulisses (The City of Ulysses), linking the city of Lisbon- capital of her native Portugal—to its mythical founding by the eponymous hero Ulysses. Up until the 16th and 17th centuries, this account of the city's founding was not considered absurd; rather, it was regarded as true, appearing in Monarquia Lusitana- a historical work by the Cistercian monk Frei Bernardo de Brito (1569–1617). In it, Bernardo describes the adventures of Ulysses and depicts him founding the city of Lisbon, providing it with a port and defensive walls (Vol. II).

This vibrant urbs, which is not Mediterranean, lies beyond the gates of another hero, Hercules, on the maritime route to the open ocean and the far north of Europe. Teolinda casts a Portuguese artist as her heroic Ulysses, naming him Paulo- the Romanized form of Shaul, a Jew from the Hellenistic city of Tarsus who used the Septuagint version in the letters he wrote in Greek (Potok, 1998).

Teolinda's Penelope is named Cecilia, a Latin-derived name associated with both innocence and blindness. Ulysses-Paulo—no longer a king but a painter—wanders through the ancient city (which is, coincidentally, his Ithaca) to capture it on canvas. (Gersão, 2017) The Homeric narrative is reinvented in Teolinda's work (as it is with other author-readers), for, in her words, both the reader and the work itself are transformed by the act of reading. Instead of epic cantos, sins, punishments, sacrilege, the deaths of innocents, burning Troys, and cuckolded kings, Teolinda describes her work as "a successful love story (that) ends with a return home." This reference recalls the ending of Nolan's film, in which the royal couple, having stepped down from the throne, embarks on a cruise that serves as a second honeymoon. According to the author, the city is linked to Ulysses, embodying a "millennia-old tradition connecting the city to Homer's character. In this regard, Paulo and Cecília need not invent anything; instead, they appropriate what has already been created and allow themselves to be guided by an ancient imaginary" (Gersão,2013). This imaginary, as the author points out, is amply supported by "classical sources disseminated by the Romans, who sought to lend the prestige of Hellenic culture to a key city within their empire."

7. Conclusion

In summary, this essay evaluates the reception of Christopher Nolan's film *The Odyssey*, arguing for its independence and originality in adapting a classic, canonical literary work for the screen. A student of literature and a reader of classical authors, Nolan crafted a personal *Odyssey*, suppressing fundamental elements of paganism and replacing them with Christian references. He also revisited themes from his earlier films, such as guilt, anguish, and amnesia. Finally, we contextualized Nolan's film alongside its reception and reimagining in works such as James Joyce's *Ulysses* and Teolinda Gersão's A cidade de Ulisses (The City of Ulysses)- both set in their respective national capitals, Dublin and Lisbon.

The former traces the journey of a wandering Jew through Dublin, following the Homeric cantos without antagonizing the British occupiers. The latter, grounded in memory and classical texts, celebrates Lisbon- a city founded by Ulysses- which the author's character traverses in a work that represents a joyful homecoming. Future research will delve deeper into Nolan's Odyssey, investigating Odysseus's bewilderment during the sack of Troy and the theme of Christianization- which challenges the concept of *xenia*- alongside Nolan's cinematic references.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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