

A Trojan Horse Is Supposed to Have Humans Inside It

Christopher Nolan's *Odyssey* is full of contradictions about deceit and violence.

By Emily Wilson



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IF YOU GO TO Christopher Nolan's *Odyssey*, you may be able to purchase, for a mere \$69.99, a plastic receptacle shaped as a Trojan

horse. The horse is used in the film as an image of moral decline. But the repurposing of a sinister instrument of war into a popcorn container hints at the malleability of the conceit: A Trojan horse contains unexpected multitudes.

This mythical item has always been a tricky symbol, used by generations of storytellers and artists to map shifting perceptions of deception in war. The physical design of Nolan's version is striking and wildly out of keeping with earlier representations, including ancient depictions and the pull-toy design of the giant equine in Wolf Petersen's fun 2004 blockbuster, *Troy*. Nolan's horse rears upright rather than standing on four hooves. The unwieldy creature is discovered half-buried in the sand, and proves almost impossible for the Trojans to lug into the city. This cinematic prop is an extraordinary feat of engineering: It stands nearly 40 feet tall and took hundreds of people to drag up the beach. The physical horror of people being trapped inside as the seawater rises is brilliantly and terrifyingly evoked.

But on a narrative level, Nolan's horse is light as air. In comparison with other blockbusters—such as, say, the *Die Hard* films, also action-packed tales of one man's dangerous journey back to his wife—*The Odyssey* contains far more pontificating about values and civilizational decline, but much less coherence and less heart. It gestures at a critique of xenophobia and violence, but it focuses primarily on the perspective of the guilty, traumatized warrior rather than that of his victims. Moreover, the movie's devoted attention to mechanics, and its heedless willingness to give us massacres as spectacle, undermines its moralizing claims of caring about man's inhumanity to man. Verbally, we are told that people matter; visually, we are shown that they do not.

[Gal Beckerman: The Odyssey was never about the Gods](#)

In ancient myth, Troy was a wealthy, powerful city whose walls were built by two gods, Apollo and Poseidon. Such walls could never be breached by mere mortals. So when Greek warriors gathered to besiege the city and retrieve the wife and wealth stolen from the Spartan king Menelaus by the Trojan prince Paris, they found themselves at an

impasse: The great army, unable to break through Troy's divinely constructed defenses, remained immobilized on the beach for 10 years.

Things changed only when Athena, the daughter of Zeus and goddess of military strategy, put an idea into the mind of her favorite mortal, Odysseus: to instruct the master craftsman Epeius to build a massive, hollow horse, inside which Odysseus and the other Greeks could hide. Odysseus was, as Nolan obviously recognizes, a mythical Robert Oppenheimer: a hero able to devise the ultimate weapon that could end a seemingly unwinnable war.

We do not know who first told the story of the Trojan horse, but it was in circulation by at least the early seventh century B.C.E. The earliest extant artistic depiction is on a large storage jar (in Greek called a *pithos*) from the island of Mykonos. It features a long-legged horse that has square cutout windows for the warriors to be seen through; outside the horse, more fighters are enslaving terrified women and children. The image is, like the popcorn-bucket horse, a joke: It would ruin the trick if the horse had windows.

The Homeric *Odyssey*, along with *The Iliad* and the poems of Hesiod, were likely composed around roughly the same time as the making of the Trojan-horse *pithos*, using the new technology that had become available in the Greek-speaking world in the mid-eighth century B.C.E.: the alphabet. This development enabled one or more composers—"Homer"—to create and preserve monumental written poems based on the oral tales about the great, lost days of heroes—characters who did extraordinary things and were closer to the gods than any normal mortal. The myths included partial, fictionalized folk memories of the earlier period of Greek prosperity, when the Mycenaeans built palatial structures and formed extensive trade routes across the eastern Mediterranean and beyond. Homer's *Odyssey* draws on many generations of preexisting myth but reshapes the old stories for its own era—a time of migration, colonization, urbanization, political and social diversity, and technological change.

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In *The Odyssey*, Odysseus repeatedly finds new ways to reenact his most famous trick of hiding inside the horse (an assumed backstory not described in the main narrative). He hides in the care of Calypso (whose name suggests “hiding”), beneath the name of No Man, under the sheep of Polyphemus, and in the guise of an old beggar. Eventually, he replicates his triumph at Troy in his own house by technological mastery of another trick involving a wooden weapon (this time, his bow). Odysseus’s mastery of technology enables him to invade a heavily defended home in disguise, achieve an impossible victory, and break an impasse, answering the long-deferred question of which man will claim the household and Penelope as his bride.

In one of only two extensive passages in Homer that evoke the horse explicitly (a long episode that Nolan excises), Odysseus, while enjoying the lavish hospitality of the Phaeacians on Scheria, asks a blind poet to sing the story of the Trojan horse. The poet complies, and Odysseus weeps at the story of his greatest triumph. The narrator offers a surprising simile: Odysseus sobs “as pitifully as a woman weeps” while watching her warrior husband die in a failed attempt to defend his city and his children. The woman falls desperately on her dying husband, but his killers are behind her, hitting her with spears as they force her into a life of enslavement. The simile suggests a connection between the victorious Odysseus and the victims of his greatest success. We are not told whether Odysseus is crying because he feels guilt and pity at the thought of those he has killed, tricked, and enslaved, or because he is tormented to be trapped so far away from either the battlefield or Ithaca—the spheres where he can be honored and known. The scene is a memorable reminder that warfare has victims as well as victors, and that it may sometimes be difficult to tell which is which.

After many misadventures, and eight years in the beds of two different goddesses, Odysseus makes it home from eastern Troy to western Ithaca. He is able to move from what Homer’s contemporary Hesiod calls the brutal “age of bronze” and the glorious “age of heroes” into the conflict-ridden “age of iron,” because he has mastered not only warfare with bronze weapons but also the more social skills of rhetoric, cunning, and technology—skills that enable him to survive and win eternal glory, even when he is far from the battlefield. Homer’s Odysseus specializes in clever scheming—in Greek, *mētis*—and the

narrator does not invite us to moralize against a flexible relationship with the truth.

Many centuries later, Virgil set his Roman epic, *The Aeneid*, in the aftermath of the Trojan War, and modeled its narrative on both *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad*. The protagonist, Aeneas, is like Odysseus in that he is a warrior on a journey from Troy to his western homeland. But whereas Odysseus returns to his original home, Aeneas is a migrant Trojan, fleeing his fallen city for a new homeland to which he has never been: Italy, where he will begin the historical process that is fated, one day, to lead to the foundation of the glorious city of Rome. Virgil reinvents the story of Odysseus in a double way. Homer's hero becomes both the pious refugee, Aeneas, and the cruel liar, Ulysses (the Roman name for Odysseus), who destroys a city through his unscrupulous wiles.

[David Sims: An Odyssey deserving of the biggest screen possible](#)

Homer leaves the Trojans to decide for themselves whether to take the horse into the city. But Virgil adds a character who persuades them to do so: Sinon, a cousin of “cruel Ulysses,” who shares his penchant for lies. Sinon, whose name means “harmer,” is found bound and alone after the Greeks pretend to sail away. He tells the Trojans a pitiful story about how he barely escaped being sacrificed by Ulysses, claiming that the horse is an offering specifically for Athena (Minerva in Latin), who will ensure the city's salvation if they take the horse inside. Yielding to their pious respect for the gods, and their eagerness to show mercy toward vulnerable suppliants, the Trojans free Sinon from his bonds and take the deadly horse inside their city. Aeneas, who narrates the story to the Carthaginian queen Dido, comments (in the translation by Scott McGill and Susannah Wright):

His tactics and the tears he falsely shed
now captured us—we who had not been beaten
by Tydides, Thessalian Achilles,
ten years of warfare, or a thousand ships.

The addition of Sinon makes it clear that deception happens not primarily through inanimate mechanical objects but through people deliberately using rhetoric to manipulate audiences, and through the choices of those audiences about what and whom to believe. With the Sinon episode, Virgil asks his readers to consider whether cities and civilizations may fall for noble motives rather than because of moral failures.

Virgil's version of the Trojan-horse episode was written in the time of the first Roman emperor, Augustus. The new leader was a canny manipulator of words and imagery who presented his revolutionary autocratic regime as if it were in line with Roman tradition. Virgil showcases the dangers of deception and offers an account of how easily good people can be deceived. The scene offers an ambivalent reflection on the culture and politics of its time. We might read Sinon's deceptions in light of his Greekness: Perhaps the future Roman people need fear no such schemes, as long as they hold fast to their own identity and maintain suspicion of all foreigners, especially Greeks. But we can also see a dark shadow in Augustus's manipulation of the Roman people through clever storytelling that disguised and enabled the destruction of the old Republic and the slide into one-man rule.

Where Virgil's Ulysses is cruel and predatory, and his mendacious instrument, Sinon, is unambiguously a bad guy, Nolan re-creates Sinon as his film's sinless moral center. The focus on "sin" is presumably the reason for the odd but consistent pronunciation of the name: More normally pronounced by English-speakers as *Sigh*-non or *See*-non—echoing the long *i* of the Latin—in Nolan's film, it's always *Sin*-none as if to reinforce the Christlike innocence of Elliot Page's version of the classical "harmer." Nolan's Sinon is not a trickster but a poor innocent to whom Odysseus has lied by omission, in failing to tell him about the trick with the horse. The episode is a cautionary fable about a director who fails to trust an actor to play his part: Odysseus lies so that Sinon will give the most convincing possible performance when he falsely tells the Trojans, with his dying breath, that the horse is a gift.

The film's oft-invoked "Zeus's law" is explained as a version of the Golden Rule: We must host beggars and strangers kindly, to "do as we would be done by," and because they could be gods in disguise (a quite different point). The unkindness of Penelope's suitors to Odysseus's

poor dog Argos and to the blind Eumaeus is a clear violation of this principle. Yet the film also suggests that the law of Zeus is concerned with a quite different moral problem: deception. The horse is presented as the ultimate violation of the law of Zeus, because it entails wielding a weapon of mass destruction disguised as a gift. The Homeric Zeus is a cunning schemer, whereas Nolan's Zeus takes a particularly hard line on deceit, especially in relationships between hosts and guests. The film's arch-villain, the lead suitor, Antinous, proves his villainy by being a bad guest, and a bad host, and an entertainingly weaselly liar. The horse is presented as breaking "civilization" because it represents the moment when the good guy, Odysseus, echoes the behavior of the bad guy by being a deceitful, ungrateful guest. But the film does not explain what "hospitality" has to do with a narrative situation in which the Greeks have been besieging Troy for 10 years already; the Trojans are not their hosts but their enemies in war. If the war is bad, it is nonsensical to suggest that the most important turning point is the use of the horse rather than Agamemnon's choice to invade Troy in the first place and Odysseus's choice to yield to the empire's demands. The visually impressive spectacle of the horse on a stunning stretch of pristine beach (shot in Essaouira, Morocco) contributes to the narrative muddle: The Greeks have supposedly been encamped there for the past decade, yet it shows no sign of human habitation.

Nolan shot the Calypso episodes in the disputed Moroccan-occupied territory of Western Sahara without the consent of the Indigenous Sahrawi people. The choice underlines the lack of seriousness in Nolan's thinking about his themes: the ethical and cultural costs of entering other people's homes uninvited, for the purpose of extracting resources without respect for an unwilling host.

IN HOMER, DECEPTION is relatively benign. In Virgil, it is evil. But in both poems, we learn directly about how the Greeks enacted their schemes, as well as the decision-making process of the pious, thoughtful Trojans. In Nolan, we never see Odysseus planning the construction of the horse or lying to the innocent Sinon, and his Trojans take mere seconds to make up their minds. The film is not interested in the social or psychological questions of how people deceive and are deceived. Deception is a fait accompli: The horse appears on the beach in the opening sequence as if deposited there by helicopter, and Sinon does not know that he is not telling the truth. What matters

cinematically are the logistics: the rolling of the horse uphill and the claustrophobic, waterlogged interior. Once the ambush of the Trojans begins, the camera lingers repeatedly not on the human actors but on the enflamed, toppling buildings and the great gates of the city, whose slow-moving mechanism is observed at great length. The script tells us loudly that people matter, but the camera shows us that what matters is the mechanical challenge of moving objects through space.

Nolan's *Odysseus* goes to war to protect his biological son, Telemachus, but in so doing betrays his quasi-son, Sinon—an irony whose emotional impact is dulled by the film's frenetic pacing. Page is a luminous, heartbreaking presence on-screen, whereas the Trojans are mostly masked nonentities. *Odysseus's* moral development is retold in miniature on the island of Circe, where he shoots what he thinks is an animal but then realizes was actually a human being. Yet neither *Odysseus* nor the film itself seems to move beyond the occasional moment or two of noticing the humanity of all humans. The face of the slaughtered deer-man is not shown, and the film's narrative rushes on. The final massacre of the cartoonishly bestial suitors inside *Odysseus's* house is presented with thrilling exuberance, and the camera does not linger on the pain and humanity of those who die or allow for the possibility that they, too, should be mourned. Instead, the long, repetitive final fight sequence fixates, again, on logistics: how the weapons are hidden, and how they descend from the storeroom through a hole in the ceiling. The film's primary fascination with maneuvering objects creates a mismatch between what we see and what we are being told to think and feel. We see inside the horse, but we do not see inside the characters or their world.

Peter Wehner: An *Odyssey* for our own time

In the final sequence of the movie, *Odysseus* leaves home for yet another journey. It draws heavily on Alfred Tennyson's poem *Ulysses*, whose narrator abandons his "aged wife" and leaves his son, Telemachus, on the throne of Ithaca, while he departs for the "untravell'd world" "to follow knowledge like a sinking star." Matt Damon as *Odysseus* likewise embarks in a boat toward the sunset, although he gets to take his wife (played by Anne Hathaway) along for the ride. The self-imposed exile of *Odysseus* enables his son (Tom Holland) to rule over the Ithacans who survive. The camera depicts the

newly be-crowned prince as a sunlit golden boy, who can receive the power and wealth won by his father's bloody hands without having to taint his own—although we have been given no reason to believe that Telemachus is ready for the role, or that the concentration of power and wealth in one man is beneficial for anyone.

The final goal of Nolan's *Odysseus* is not infinite knowledge but redemption: He is at last awake from his amnesia and intends to bury the comrades left uninterred on his journeys. Yet the waking vision of the protagonist, and hence also of the film, remains extraordinarily narrow. There is no suggestion that he will offer burial to the Trojans, or the suitors, or the various foreigners killed during his journey. Despite *Odysseus*'s spiritual awakening, the dead remain as dead as ever. But there is a spectacular sunset and yet another lavish display of a large vehicle grandly making its way through space, across churning waves.

Nolan's *Odyssey* is itself a kind of Trojan horse. The script grandly insists on the importance of human kindness, while the camera shows us an entirely different set of values. In these times of hatred and misinformation, we need more than the "apparent magic" of deceptive images. We need art that is truthful about the costs and the necessity of compassion, and that recognizes that a sense of spiritual superiority may not protect us from lies. These lessons are legible in Homer and Virgil, but are elided by Nolan's visually stunning, emotionally empty film.

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