

But It Ain't 3-D

No reason to hold back my feelings about Christopher Nolan's and Matt Damon's *Odyssey*. It is magnificent, an amazing experience.

I say Nolan's and Damon's *Odyssey* because it is Nolan's vision for his version of the *Odyssey* and Damon's entirely convincing portrayal of Odysseus that make this a great film.

Nolan makes Odysseus a complex guilt-ridden hero, a great fighter and crafty strategist who tries to understand the consequences of his pivotal and climatic role in the siege of Troy (the Trojan Horse), nothing less than the destruction and collapse of an entire civilization (which Damon's Odysseus calls the "End of the Bronze Age"). His sin is his violation of "Zeus's Law of Xenia," the obligation to respect and protect strangers and outsiders, an intercommunal golden rule that made Greek civilization possible.

The original sin could actually have been traced back earlier to Paris's violation of Menelaus's hospitality by absconding with Helen, but Nolan brushes that aside and makes the Trojan Horse, a war machine disguised as a peace offering, the mortal sin against Zeus's Law, and THAT was Odysseus's idea, making HIM responsible for the destruction of the era of heroes or, as he will have it, the Bronze Age, a term not coined until 1836, although the poet Hesiod who lived in the late 700s to early 600s B.C. had posited a golden age, descending into a silver age, and then, actually, a more degraded bronze age where the ancient codes were broken, with a late revival of an heroic age that encompassed the Trojan war, and then the final descent into the iron age where everyone had to work for a living like a slave. Since the Trojan war was around 1184 B.C. it is unlikely that Odysseus/Damon would have heard of Hesiod who lived 400 years later, or of Christian Thomsen, the Danish archeologist and HIS Bronze Age terminology, who lived some 3000 years later, but who knows? Maybe Odysseus met some men from the future besides Achilles, Sidon and Agamemnon (a giant in the poem and the movie) during his side trip to Hades.

Nolan sees his *Odyssey* as Odysseus's struggle to forget his guilt, then recall his guilt, and finally expiate his guilt. All this is explained in a needless plot summary delivered by Odysseus at the movie's end, unneeded because Damon's terrific acting through words and body language makes the course of his moral struggles completely clear to the audience.

Nolan's adaptation hits all the key marks of Homer's poem although everyone will probably lament some favorite missing elements, for me how Odysseus tricks Polyphemus by telling him his (Odysseus's) name in "Nobody," so that when Polyphemus's brothers call to the blinded Cyclops to tell who is hurting him, he says, "Nobody," and they go on their way. Plot hole: Damon's Odysseus somehow knows that the Cyclops are Poseidon's sons, and blinding Polyphemus has made Poseidon turn the seas against them, but how and when did Odysseus learn this? We dunno.

But Nolan wanted his Odysseus to be a man of sorrows as well as a man of guile and fury.) Nolan's vision for Odysseus and the *Odyssey* I suspect came from two external sources that helped him fine tune the arc of Odysseus's character development.

The first is Wagner's Ring Cycle. The second is Tennyson's poem "Ulysses."

In the *Ring*, Wotan carries a spear that he cut from the world ash tree, Yggdrasil, a symbol of prelapsarian harmony. On the spear are etched the laws Wotan is pledged to enforce and himself obey. But he violates them all, first offering the giants the goddess of eternal youth, Freia, if they will build a fortress for the Gods, Valhalla. He reneges on his promise, steals the gold and the all-powerful ring from the Nibelungs, trades that to the giants for Freia, ushering in a cascade of catastrophes culminating in Siegfried's shattering Wotan's spear and the rule of the gods, and finally the collapse of Valhall and the death of the gods and the end of their dominion.

One of Wotan's many personas, the deeply hooded Wanderer, may also have been the inspiration for Damon's Odysseus's beggar's costume that totally hides his face during his secretive return to Ithaca.

Wagner's guilt-ridden Wotan's gradually realization that *his* crimes were the cause of the *Gotterdammerung*, the twilight of the gods, may have given Nolan the idea of a guilt-ridden Odysseus, something lacking in Homer's poem, which is essentially a picaresque adventure with no unifying character development for the hero. In Homer's *Odyssey* Odysseus changes only in that he learns from his mistakes, becomes a more responsible leader, even more deadly, able to harness his rage until just the right moment. Homer's Odysseus has come to know many things as he fights and schemes his way home, but does he ever come to know himself? Has he obeyed the maxim inscribed on the Temple of Apollo at Delphi, "*Gnothi Seauton*," know thyself? Not really.

But Nolan's and Damon's Odysseus HAS by the end come to know himself, that he is guilty of a great sin, is a criminal, THE criminal, in fact, which is also Oedipus's final discovery in Sophocles' play.

Nolan added a great deal by giving Odysseus that growth in character, perhaps by recourse to Wagner. Of course, when something is gained, something is lost, and so there will be complaints.

It was Tennyson who supplied Nolan with the idea for Odysseus's last voyage to the Happy Isles in the West to offer penance for the deaths of his men and his crimes against Xenia. But Nolan domesticated Tennyson's vision of an idle king bored with an aged wife setting off on one last adventure which, based on Odysseus's Homeric M.O., would probably have involved a fair amount of chicanery and force and maybe the consolations of beautiful nymphs and goddesses.

In Nolan's version of the Westward voyage to the Happy Isles, Odysseus and Penelope share a palatial love boat something along the lines of Cleopatra's barge, where their adventures along the way will presumably be G-rated. In other words, happy ending, nice and tidy. But Odysseus has certainly earned his cruise into his sunset years.

But that's not Tennyson's Ulysses, who says:

Tho' much is taken, much abides;
We are not now that strength which in old days
Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are,—
One equal temper of heroic hearts,
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

As for Damon, the first shot of his bulging biceps, triceps and six-pack abs absolutely sells that he is THE MAN. In the action parts of the movie, roughly half of the footage, his supreme bravery and lethality are never in doubt. In the sentimental and tearjerking scenes, the other half, Damon's acting abilities come across as never before.

The two famous recognition scenes are beautifully handled and the cutaway from Odysseus' dog Argos's face, after he has recognized his master, to his feebly wagging tail, is especially well done.

The climactic brawl with the suitors is amazingly suspenseful, and even though the audience has no doubt of the outcome of the bloody mayhem, emotionally, blow by blow, you can't tell who's winning.

If any actor lets us down it is Tom Holland's wishy-washy Telemachus. Holland was much better as Spider-Man. I can imagine a parody where he shows up in tights to help dad wipe out the suitors. Could be fun.

As for the achievement, if it is one, of Nolan's being the first to shoot a film completely in 70mm IMAX, hard to judge. The *Odyssey* is great to look at in an "ordinary" IMAX theater (there are only 41 70mm IMAX theaters in the WHOLE WORLD!). Maybe it's even greater to look at the *Odyssey* in one of those 41, but who knows? I don't.

But it ain't 3-D, and has nothing on Vincent Price poking sharp things out from the screen at you in *House of Wax*. Bring back those red and blue cardboard glasses. And while you're at it, 3-D comic books.

Nolan made such a huge selling pitch for *The Odyssey* by bragging it was the first to be 100%filmed in IMAX, 70 mm IMAX at that, that he all but challenges the moviegoer to measure the disadvantages of the medium against its obvious immersive advantages.

IMAX cameras are bulky, noisy and MOST importantly have a very narrow (or shallow) depth of focus. The first two problems Nolan claimed he overcame by commissioning smaller IMAX cameras and enclosing them in soundproof enclosures called "blimps." More about how successful that was later.

But the narrow depth of field of IMAX cameras dictates what can and cannot be done with them. Throughout *The Odyssey* there are moments that call out for those great David Lean panoramic shots that contrasted the lonely figure of Peter O'Toole with the immensity of the Arabian desert.

With an IMAX camera's narrow depth of field, no can do.

The narrow depth of field means that the background and foreground of a deep scene will be out of focus, so the sets will have to be REALLY tight and claustrophobic to get everything in focus. Hence Nolan's penchant for penning up his actors inside claustrophobic spaces, the holds

of ships, the belly of the Trojan Horse, or the battle scene with the suitors in the locked banquet hall. And if the battle scene is in an outdoor location, or moving from room to room as in the sack of Troy, it will have to be pieced together from jump cut closeups, and not tracking shots.

In Nolan's tepid, timid, and finally disappointing *Dunkirk* he provided panoramic location shots of the soldiers on the beach by filming those scenes with 35 mm cameras, hence the film was billed as only 75% IMAX. And the claustrophobic scenes of the Dunkirk soldiers trapped in the hold of a sinking ship required SOMETHING to tell the viewer that there was a world OUTSIDE the hold, hence the German boots clunking overhead.

Similarly in *The Odyssey* you need to have Trojans thrusting their swords through the skin of the Horse into the tightly packed (but in focus) Greeks to open up the scene. And in the banquet hall battle you need the suitors' allies banging on the doors and breaking through the ceiling to drop down weapons to let you know there's something going on outside the set. Those tight quarters scenes are expertly done by Nolan but it should be realized that they were forced on him by the limitations of the IMAX camera.

A shallow depth of field becomes even more shallow in dimly lit conditions where the lens aperture has to be opened wide. That means night scenes like Odysseus' meeting with his dead comrades in Hades had to be filmed in broad daylight and then converted to night using standard day for night post production lab techniques that have been around since the first movies. I suspect that other scenes were also day for night-ed. With IMAX he had no other option.

How successful was Nolan in quieting down the IMAX camera? Mechanical noise on the set interfering with dialog is generally overcome by ADR, Automated Dialog Replacement, having the actors watch themselves on a monitor while they re-record their lines matching their lip movements. Naturally Nolan does not want to let it out that the sound, even muted, of his cameras made ADR necessary, but in the balcony scene between Penelope and Telemachus the lip syncing was obvious to some viewers, though not to me. That raises the possibility that more dialog than that was ADR-ed. Probably.

The point is that Nolan's determination to produce an IMAX tour de force deprived him of some of the usual weapons in the directorial arsenal, rendering some of his most noted stylistic traits essentially work-arounds made necessary by the limitations of IMAX technology.

In movie making as in life, everything is a trade-off and what you gain here you lose there.

The Nazarene had something to say about that (Matthew 6:3).