Becoming the Sea People

Nolan's Odyssey and Europe's Responsibility for the International Legal Order

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Spoiler alert: If you have not yet watched the Odyssey, you may want to do so before reading on.

Christopher Nolan's long-awaited *The Odyssey*, released in mid-July, is already one of the most successful – and most controversial – films of 2026. The film retells the homecoming of Odysseus, king of Ithaca, after ten years of war at Troy. Odysseus was pivotal to that war, as he devised the famous Trojan horse that allowed the Greeks to enter and destroy the city. Despite his victory at Troy, Odysseus's return results in a disastrous cascade of ever more perilous events and mythical encounters – the proverbial Odyssey.

Even before its release, the film stirred considerable debate, concerning its unusual 70mm IMAX format, the casting, the choice of Western Sahara as a filming location, the use of modern language, and its historical inaccuracies and departures from the Homeric original.

I suggest that these choices can be read as a reflection on the current state of international law. I am aware that I am not the first to draw this parallel. In contrast to other contributions, however, I read the film from a European perspective as a parable about Europe's place in a fraying international order and its responsibility to uphold the rules of public international law.

Two Worlds

First, it is worth taking a closer look at the world, which forms the background of the Odyssey. This world is split into two spheres. The first is the Aegean, home to the Greeks and Trojans. For all their differences, the two peoples share the same values and abide by common rules. They belong to the same order and stand for the civilized world.

Beyond it lies another, dangerous world populated by mythical creatures and foreign peoples. A world completely opposite to that of the Aegean, located outside of any established order. The Odyssey is, at bottom, the story of Odysseus trying to escape that world and return to the safe and civilized shores of Ithaca.

I return to that opposition below. For now, it is enough to note that even in Homer's epic the contrast between a rule-based order and a world of anarchy lies at the very heart of the Odyssey.

Agamemnon, or the Reckless Hegemon

Begin with Agamemnon, king of Mycenae and military leader of the Greek alliance. His portrayal has drawn much of the film's criticism. Some complain that Nolan's Agamemnon resembles Batman from the Dark Knight trilogy more than a Bronze Age king. And indeed, among the scruffy, exhausted Greek warriors, including Odysseus, he stands apart: taller, clad in dark, almost flawless armour, his mask-like helmet hiding his face in shadow, its plume ending in a human spine. His deep voice and clipped diction complete the effect. He feels less like a fully developed character than a personification of power – a reckless hegemon, a *primus inter pares*, who sets the objective and expects his allies to fall in line.

Who does this Agamemnon resemble? Which contemporary leader stands at the centre of a powerful military alliance while cultivating an image of strength and dominance?

The parallels with Donald Trump are difficult to overlook. I do not claim, however, that Nolan's Agamemnon is a direct portrayal of the U.S. President. What matters more is the structural similarity: both occupy a position of exceptional power within a coali-

tion of formally equal partners and seek to extend their sphere of influence. Yet the real significance of Agamemnon, I think, lies in the way Nolan constructs him as Odysseus's counterpart. It is in the relationship between the two that the film's underlying theme begins to emerge.

Odysseus's Dilemma

In contrast to Agamemnon, Odysseus is a mere ally – weaker, but not without agency. In the Homeric tradition, the Trojan War is fought over the abduction of Helen by the Trojan prince Paris. Nolan deliberately alters this. In the film, Odysseus explains that Helen was merely a pretext and that Agamemnon's real motive was Troy's control of trade routes. Odysseus hesitates at first to follow Agamemnon's call for war, sceptical of its justification. Yet, fearing Agamemnon's vengeance, he ultimately yields and goes on to help destroy Troy. By the end, he regrets his choices and is tormented by their consequences for his world.

At first glance, Odysseus's dilemma recalls that of European NATO members pressed by the United States to join it in war. In 2003, the United Kingdom followed Washington into Iraq, while France and Germany opposed an invasion whose legal basis was contested. The question returned in 2026, when Trump asked European partners to help reopen the Strait of Hormuz amid another conflict of disputed legality – this time Europe did not follow.

At the same time, this analogy is not meant to assign fixed moral roles. Nolan does not cast Odysseus as Agamemnon's innocent counterpart. Shortly after leaving Troy, he and his men themselves take part in the plunder of villages. Nor should Europe be understood as inherently more faithful to international law than the United States. The relevant distinction here is one of power rather than virtue.

Thus, one could read the rewriting of the cause of the Trojan War as a mirror of a recurring problem of NATO: how far should loyalty to a much stronger ally extend when that ally places its own interests above international law? The film's moral focus is telling. It rests less on Agamemnon's ruthless pursuit of power than on Odysseus's response to it. Rather than idealising his role in the Trojan War, Nolan foregrounds his hesitation and, later, his remorse. The Odyssey is therefore not only about the abuse of power by a hegemon, but also about what responsibility remains with those who choose to follow him. Loyalty and pressure may help explain their decisions, but they cannot justify them. Odysseus's fate reads, in this sense, as a warning to Europe not to mistake dependence for obedience.

There is, however, an important difference. Odysseus faces Agamemnon alone, as the ruler of a comparatively small kingdom. Individual European states face a comparable asymmetry vis-à-vis the United States, but gain considerably greater leverage when acting collectively. The dispute over Greenland offers a recent illustration. Confronted with Trump's threats, Denmark and Greenland stood their ground with broad European backing, before Trump eventually stepped back from his most far-reaching demands.

Against this backdrop, Europe's current pursuit of greater strategic autonomy can be understood as an attempt to create precisely the room for manoeuvre Odysseus lacks in the film – the capacity to remain an ally while retaining the ability to say no.

Zeus's Law and the Prohibition on the Use of Force

One element runs through the film like a red thread: Zeus's law. Nolan's characters are unusually preoccupied with this rule and invoke it time and again. Without much exaggeration, I think one can say that Zeus's law is the central normative aspect of the film – and the key to its interpretation.

Zeus's law, or *xenia* in ancient Greek, also plays an important role in Homer's epic. More custom than written rule, *xenia* governed hospitality. Hosts owed food and shelter to strangers and strangers in turn owed respect to the host and his household. In Homer's world, this rule is what makes peaceful interaction beyond one's own community possible. It is the foundational building block of the social order and separates the civilized world from the uncivilized.

The Odyssey can be read as a sequence of violations of that law: Paris, as Menelaus's guest, takes Helen; Polyphemus and the Laestrygonians attack

Odysseus and his men; Circe feeds her guests only to turn them into animals; Odysseus's crew slaughter the sacred cattle of Helios, god of the sun; and the suitors devour Odysseus's household in Ithaca.

The worst breach of *xenia*, however – and here Nolan's reading becomes particularly interesting – is committed by the Greeks themselves. Sinon, a figure absent from Homer but drawn from Virgil's Aeneid, pretends to be an abandoned soldier and persuades the Trojans to take in the wooden horse as an offering to the gods.

The Greeks thus win the war by weaponising trust, breaking the very rule that sets them apart from the uncivilised world. The Trojan horse becomes a perverted form of *xenia*. Fittingly, near the end of the film, we see Greek soldiers at Troy decapitating a statue of Athena, goddess of wisdom and Odysseus's closest divine ally – an allegory of how the Greeks, in violating *xenia*, destroyed what mattered most to them.

Here, I see a clear parallel to the prohibition on the use of force in Article 2(4) UN Charter. I admit that this is not a one-to-one legal analogy. The Trojan horse is used during an ongoing war and the atrocities of the sack of Troy would thus, in modern terms, be governed by the *ius in bello* rather than by Art. 2(4) UN Charter. The parallel I have identified is functional: *xenia* and Article 2(4) UN Charter may govern different relationships, but they perform a comparable function as central ordering principles. In addition, both rules derive much of their normative force from the fact that they apply to all actors alike. While *xenia* ensures that an encounter with strangers need not end in violence, Article 2(4) UN Charter bars states from resorting to war to resolve political conflict. Together with the principle of sovereign equality, the prohibition on the use of force is a central building block of the modern international legal order, much as xenia was for the social fabric of ancient Greece.

Read this way, Nolan's message is simple, but timely. If the most powerful states repeatedly claim exceptions to the order's most fundamental norm and allies accept those exceptions because they are allies, the norm soon loses its authority. If the strongest actors do not obey the law, in the end no one will, and the order slowly decays.

That is precisely what happens in the film: once Nolan's Greeks break Zeus's law, the line between the order they defend and the disorder they fear begins to dissolve. Read this way, the Odyssey is a warning to European leaders to uphold public international law for the sake of the stability of the international order.

Becoming the Sea People?

From the start, Penelope, Odysseus's wife, is troubled by stories of mysterious sea people, who plunder and destroy settlements along the coasts. At first, they appear as an alien threat from beyond the ordered world of the Greeks. Penelope fears for the survival of her civilization. In the end, however, it emerges that the sea people are Odysseus and his men. The threat to Greek civilization comes not from foreign forces, but from the Greeks' own violation of the rules meant to set their world apart from barbarism.

The sea people are among Nolan's boldest departures from Homer – and among his most effective. If Europeans do not resist their most powerful ally's attempts to undermine the international legal order, the disorder they fear is the disorder they will have helped create – and it may ultimately rebound on their own security.

Europe's Choice

Nolan's Odyssey may be just another – if visually impressive – historical drama. But I think the film can teach us a great deal about Europe and the present crisis of public international law.

This is, of course, only one of many possible readings, and I do not claim it is the correct – or intended – one. Other features of the film may support or contradict it. Take this piece then as an invitation to (re)watch the film and form your own view.

The Odyssey has survived precisely because every generation can recognise something of itself in Odysseus's journey. Our generation might ask how Europe can manoeuvre through these stormy times without becoming the sea people.

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