
A REBEL.REBEL LETTER

What Great Adaptations Actually Do

*Christopher Nolan's The Odyssey and the only fidelity
that matters.*

BY AUSTIN RIPMASTER

FUNCTION AND FURNITURE

Every civilization eventually confronts the same paradox: its greatest stories become too important to touch.

Homer. Shakespeare. The Bible. The stories that once taught a people how to understand courage, betrayal, sacrifice, and home gradually harden into monuments. They become classics, school assignments, sacred texts, their greatness so universally acknowledged that a peculiar fear settles over them, the fear of changing them.

At first, this caution feels like reverence. Eventually, it becomes embalming.

Christopher Nolan's *The Odyssey* reminded me that there are only two ways to inherit anything of value. You can preserve it, or you can continue it.

Those are not the same act.

Since the film opened, the internet has been arguing about casting. Every adaptation now passes through the same gauntlet, accusations of pandering on one side and nostalgia on the other, until every costume, accent, and face becomes a referendum on contemporary politics. I am almost entirely uninterested in that debate. Not because casting doesn't matter; it matters enormously. Because it obscures the better question.

What is an adaptation actually for?

An adaptation is not a photocopy, and it is not an illustrated edition of a story we already possess. It is an interpretation, an argument about what the original truly meant and what deserves to survive into another age. Every director, playwright, and translator answers the same question whether they know it or not: what is essential, and what is merely historical?

Here is the distinction I keep returning to.

Function and furniture.

Furniture is everything a story happens to be wearing: the costumes, the architecture, the weapons, the accents, the period. Function is the work the story does, the fear it names, the appetite it warns against, the love it defends.

Furniture belongs to history. Function belongs to humanity.

Great adaptations preserve function and change furniture without apology. Weak ones do the reverse.

That distinction matters more now than it did in Homer's time. When the first audiences heard *The Odyssey*, they did not know what waited beyond the next island. The Cyclops was a surprise. Circe was a surprise. Every decision

carried genuine suspense because neither the audience nor the hero knew how the journey would end.

We no longer possess that innocence. Three thousand years have made Homer common property, and even people who have never read the poem know the outline: the Horse, the Cyclops, Penelope, the bow. The plot is no longer the discovery. The interpretation is. If the audience already knows where the story goes, surprise cannot live in the sequence of events.

It must live in perspective.

Consider Shakespeare. No serious person leaves *West Side Story* believing it betrayed Romeo and Juliet because the Montagues became the Jets. Bernstein, Sondheim, Laurents, and Robbins understood that Verona was never the point. Love was. Family, honor, and the terrifying speed with which tribal loyalty turns ordinary teenagers into participants in tragedy. Those things survived the move from Renaissance Italy to twentieth-century New York because they were always the real story.

Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet* was my first encounter with this law, before I had words for it. Luhrmann surrounds Shakespeare's language with neon, beachfront mansions, helicopters, and handguns engraved with the word *Sword*. By every superficial measure it abandons accuracy, and almost no one accuses it of misunderstanding Shakespeare.

Why?

The furniture changed. The function did not.

Romeo remains Romeo because Shakespeare was never writing about sixteenth-century Verona. He was writing about what it feels like to be young enough to mistake intensity for

permanence, and no one watching Claire Danes appear through the aquarium glass has ever needed a footnote to understand that.

The Coen Brothers' *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* remains one of the finest adaptations of *The Odyssey* ever produced, and it barely resembles Homer on the surface. Odysseus becomes Ulysses Everett McGill, the Aegean becomes Depression-era Mississippi, the Cyclops becomes a one-eyed Bible salesman, and the Sirens wash clothes in a river. Everything changes. Nothing essential is lost.

Kurosawa reached the same conclusion from the other side of the world. *Throne of Blood* discovers Macbeth inside feudal Japan; *Ran* discovers Lear there too. Neither imitates Shakespeare. Both illuminate him.

The mistake modern criticism makes is assuming fidelity is visual. Did the costumes look right, did the buildings resemble archaeology, did the actors possess the proper ancestry? Understandable questions, and secondary ones.

The Cyclops is not memorable because he has one eye. He is memorable because he is appetite without civilization: he consumes rather than welcomes, mistakes possession for hospitality, and believes strength alone establishes moral authority. None of that requires a giant. A Cyclops can become a dictator, a corporation, a one-eyed Bible salesman.

The function survives. The furniture changes.

That is the only fidelity worth defending.

Casting, then. The internet treats casting as a problem of resemblance. It is better understood as a problem of jurisdiction.

Jurisdiction is the authority a performance earns to redefine reality. It cannot be announced or demanded; it can only be granted by the audience. Robin Williams becomes Mrs. Doubtfire. Morgan Freeman becomes Red. Cate

Blanchett becomes one version of Bob Dylan. In each case the audience accepts a new vessel because the function stays true. When jurisdiction fails, the audience keeps seeing the actor, and the vessel never disappears.

Which brings me to the most interesting choice in Nolan's film: one actress carrying both Helen and Clytemnestra.

Homer already made them sisters. Nolan makes them the same face.

The symmetry is genuinely beautiful. Helen destroys a civilization through desire; Clytemnestra destroys a household through vengeance. One launches a war, the other concludes one. Mirrors, not twins.

But symbolism has its own grammar, and once an artist introduces it, the audience must be taught to read it inside the work. Nolan has offered his grammar. He gave it in interviews: the casting as a nod to oral poetry, a story re-voiced by every generation that carries it. That is a real answer. It is also in the wrong place.

A symbol whose instructions live in the press tour is not a symbol. It is a caption.

The film needed to teach us to read the choice, and it never did. The idea is function. The execution left it furniture. That is the verdict, and it is a small one, because the larger project of the film is the right project: continuation, not preservation.

This is not merely a problem for filmmakers. Every generation inherits institutions it did not build. Courts, universities, churches, families, companies, each designed for another age, each surviving only if someone can tell its function from its furniture. History is filled with organizations that lovingly protected yesterday's forms while yesterday's purpose quietly disappeared. The form was maintained. The function was lost. Preservation became paralysis.

A cathedral survives because each generation repairs the roof without believing itself wiser than the architect. A language survives because children speak it differently than their grandparents while somehow preserving its grammar. A family survives because every generation resembles the last just enough to remain recognizable and differs just enough to remain alive. Stories obey the same law.

So do companies. Brands may be the purest case, because a brand is nothing but inherited meaning. A company inherits a founder's insight the way a culture inherits Homer, and most companies make the embalmer's mistake. They preserve the furniture: the logo, the tagline, the campaign structure that worked in 1998. They defend the archive and lose the argument. The brands that last do what the Coens did. They ask what the founder was actually saying, and they say it again in the language of the new age. They change everything except the one thing.

No one demands Shakespeare be performed exactly as audiences saw him in 1604. Electric light, women on stage, indoor theatres, modern pronunciation: all of it would have looked foreign to Shakespeare himself. Yet Shakespeare survives, not despite the changes but because of them.

Weak ideas require protection. Strong ideas invite reinterpretation.

Stewardship is not the refusal to change; it is the wisdom to know what must never change.

Nolan's *Odyssey* reminded me of something Homer already knew. Stories do not survive because they remain untouched. They survive because each generation discovers, with equal measures of humility and audacity, how to make them speak again.

Interpretation is how the past acquires descendants.

Austin Ripmaster is the founder of Rebel.Rebel, an independent research and editorial practice for the retrieval age.

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