

## *Wordless Odysseus: Franco Piavoli's Cinematic Adaptation of the Odyssey\**

### 1. Introduction

Imagine an *Odyssey* without monsters, magical encounters, and gruesome killings, an *Odyssey* deprived of Mt. Olympus and its gods, an *Odyssey* in which its protagonist has lost, or perhaps has never mastered, the ability to speak<sup>1</sup>. This is the challenge that Italian director Franco Piavoli poses to his viewers with his 1989 film *Nostos: il ritorno*. Piavoli's little-known movie (at least among classicists) occupies a unique position in the broad landscape of the *Odyssey's* adaptations for the silver screen<sup>2</sup>. It is set in conscious

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<sup>1</sup> The translation of the *Odyssey* I quote is that of Emily Wilson (Wilson 2018). All other translations are my own.

<sup>2</sup> Since 1905, when director (and magician) Georges Méliès shot his four-minute-long film *L'île de Calypso: Ulysse et le géant Polyphème*, the *Odyssey* has been adapted numerous times, 54 by 2008, according to Edith Hall (Hall 2008, pp. 283-284), on the silver and small screens. Verreth 2014, pp. 43-68 provides a useful list of films' adaptations of ancient Greek works (including the *Odyssey*). On cinematic adaptations of Homer see also Ventura 2015, pp. 48-50.

opposition to the “peplum” genre<sup>3</sup>, and does not rest on literal faithfulness to the source material<sup>4</sup> nor on modernizations of an ancient story<sup>5</sup>. While *Nostos* dispenses with the most recognizable elements of the *Odyssey*, it evokes the feeling of the ancient text far more compellingly than other screen adaptations. In this article, I will attempt to explain how Piavoli achieves this seemingly impossible task. I analyze how Piavoli pointedly reworks three of the pillars that hold up the entire edifice of Homer’s *Odyssey*: i) a well-defined narrative structure; ii) an emphasis on rhetoric and storytelling; iii) a pervasive divine apparatus. My main purpose is to bring critical attention to a film that, despite being arguably one of the most thought-provoking adaptations of the *Odyssey* ever realized, has been too-often ignored by scholars of classical reception<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> One of the most known (and refreshingly tasteful) examples of this strain of films is the 1954 movie *Ulysses* by Camerini. It stars Kirk Douglas in the main role and compresses the plot of the *Odyssey* into an enjoyable 117-minute film.

<sup>4</sup> Arguably the most literal rendition of the *Odyssey* is Franco Rossi’s *Odissea*, a successful miniseries produced for the Italian public television station RAI in 1968. Also worth mentioning is *Contempt*, Godard’s 1963 meta-film about the making of a cinematic adaptation of the *Odyssey*.

<sup>5</sup> Among the films that set the *Odyssey* in modern contexts are Angelopoulos’ 1995 *Ulysses’ Gaze*, which recounts the journey of a Greek filmmaker, A (Harvey Keitel), in the Balkans, and the Coen brothers’ 2000 *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*. In the Coens’ version, the *Odyssey* takes place in 1937 rural Mississippi and the protagonist, Ulysses Everett McGill (George Clooney), is a con man who escapes a chain-gang to prevent his wife Penny (Holly Hunter) from remarrying. In this brilliant retelling of the ancient tale, Homer becomes a blind radio producer, the cyclops a one-eyed bible salesman who belongs to the KKK, Tiresias a black cart rider with a penchant for giving prophecies.

<sup>6</sup> The cinema of Piavoli has hardly been studied outside of Italy. There exists only one article in English devoted to *Nostos*: Lapeña Marchena 2018. Carlorosi analyzes *Nostos* and *Pianeta Azzurro* (the first feature-length film by Piavoli) in a chapter of her English monograph on Italian ‘cinema of poetry’. See Carlorosi 2015: 89-115. The majority of the scholarly publications on *Nostos* are in Italian and are often printed in volumes and journals of limited circulation. I found especially valuable the collections of studies edited by Faccioli and Brunetta (Faccioli-Brunetta 2003) and Morsiani and Augusto (Morsiani-Agusto 2011). A

## 2. A Plotless Odyssey?

One of the most recognizable features of the *Odyssey* is its strong and original narrative structure<sup>7</sup>. At the end of the proem, the poet tells the Muse to start the story of Odysseus from wherever she wishes (*Od.* 1.10)<sup>8</sup>. The Muse takes him at his word and starts where we would least expect it, that is, toward the end. We are at the end of the 20 years that Odysseus has been away from home. The poet first recounts the situation in Ithaca. Odysseus' son, Telemachus, is now an adult and embarks on a journey to find news of his father. Penelope, Odysseus' wife, is having a hard time rebuffing the advances of her suitors. With Book 5, the narrative finally moves to Odysseus, who is trapped on Calypsus' island. The gods have decided to let him go, so he fashions a raft and leaves, bound for Ithaca. But Poseidon is still angry at him and stirs up a storm that shipwrecks him on Scheria, where the Phaeacians live. During his stay among the Phaeacians, Odysseus recounts his adventures from the moment he left Troy to his arrival on Calypsus' island. This is the extended flashback at the heart of the poem that has inspired so many retellings. It spans four books, from 9 to 12. In Book 13 Odysseus finally gets back to Ithaca. There he is reunited with Telemachus, who has conveniently come back at almost the same time as his father. The reunion with Penelope needs to wait and will be postponed until almost the end, in Book 23. First, Odysseus and Telemachus have to kill the suitors, the consequences of which are dealt with in the last book, 24.

The archetypal appeal of the story, particularly the content of Odysseus' flashback, is what has made the *Odyssey* such a prolific

more recent and insightful article on *Nostos* is Danese 2015. Especially useful are the interviews with the director, such as the ones contained in Faccioli-Brunetta: 2003 and Morsiani-Agusto: 2011, and the essay on *Nostos* by Piavoli himself (Piavoli 2011) edited by Gian Piero Brunetta. Other Italian scholarly works on *Nostos* and Piavoli's cinema are: Maisetti 2006; Fusillo 2015; Schillaci 2020; Padrini 2022.

<sup>7</sup> De Jong 2001 is the place to start when it comes to the narrative structure of the poem.

<sup>8</sup> Literally, "from some place or another", ἀπόθεν.

hypotext for cinematic experimentation. Martin Winkler puts it best:

The birth of cinema reincarnates Homeric epic. Or, to look at it from the opposite perspective: Homeric epic, chiefly the *Odyssey*, is the precursor of a new technological medium of storytelling in images, just as it had provided the impulse for a new art form in the seventeenth century. Claudio Monteverdi's and Giacomo Badoaro's *Il ritorno di Ulisse in patria* came near the birth of opera in 1640 (Winkler 2009, p. 12).

Winkler's argument rests upon the assumption that the essence of cinema is the ability to tell stories through images. While the achievement of narrative integration was a momentous accomplishment in the history of film, cinema was alive and well before movies became a medium for storytelling, and a significant portion of the history of cinema consists of works that were created outside the narrative mold<sup>9</sup>.

The cinema of Franco Piavoli lives outside the narrative paradigm. For the Italian director, images and sound, not plot, come first. His way of doing cinema is consciously set in opposition to dominant modes of film production<sup>10</sup>. A now-retired professor of business and law and painter, directing movies for Piavoli started almost as a hobby. His first feature-length movie, *Il pianeta azzurro*, was produced in total autonomy with very limited resources. After its critical success, Piavoli decided to fund his own production company, Zefiro Film. The choice allowed him to keep operating in freedom while being able to raise the money necessary for more ambitious projects, such as *Nostos*<sup>11</sup>.

At first glance, *Nostos* is a disorienting film. There are very few temporal and spatial points of reference and the boundaries between reality, memories, and dreams are intentionally blurred. It

<sup>9</sup> On the cinema pre narrative integration Gunning 1986 is a classic piece.

<sup>10</sup> After seeing *Il pianeta azzurro*, the Russian director Andrej Tarkovskij wrote this note to Piavoli: «*Pianeta Azzurro* / poem, journey, concert on nature, universe, and life. / A different image from the one we are accustomed to see. / A true anti-Disney [my emphasis] / Andrej Tarkovskij / 29.VI.1983 / Roma».

<sup>11</sup> On Piavoli's biography see Maisetti 2006, pp. 100-102, n. 2.

is never said explicitly why the protagonist, Nostos<sup>12</sup>, is in the condition he is in, where he is going, and what motivates him. The lack of dialogue also heightens this sense of confusion. Much like the protagonist, the audience is lost.

I mentioned that Piavoli operates outside the narrative paradigm, but it is worth noting that *Nostos* is the most narrative of Piavoli's films. *Nostos*, according to the director himself, starts from «a more elaborate script», (Faccioli 2003a, p. 31). This is an atypical way of working for Piavoli, who shot his previous films, including the feature-length *Il pianeta azzurro*, without preliminary written materials. Visually as well, Piavoli makes an effort to be more descriptive. He uses a significant number of medium shots, instead of his usual juxtaposition of close-ups and extreme close-ups with wide and extreme wide shots. «To provide a small hook to the viewer I often had to use medium shots», explains the director (Faccioli 2003a, pp. 40-41). But the real narrative hook comes from the viewer's knowledge of the *Odyssey*, specifically Books 9 to 12. Once one analyzes this film with the *Odyssey* in mind, the different scenes start to acquire greater coherence<sup>13</sup>. As I will try to demonstrate, the main sequences of the movie can be linked, in a precise way, to episodes of the *Odyssey*<sup>14</sup>.

As the opening credits roll, the sound of seagulls anticipates the first shot of the movie: a wide shot of the sea right before dawn, a ship lulling over it, the blue of the water blurring into the blue sky. A man, Nostos/Odysseus (Luigi Mezzanotte), is having a dream. A series of helmets aligned in a row characterize him and his crew as soldiers and set up the subsequent flashback (Piavoli 1989, 00:05:38-00:08:58). A city is in flames, and Nostos in his armor arouses

<sup>12</sup> The identification of the protagonist as Nostos, which means 'return-home' in Greek, is made by the director in various interviews (see, e.g., Faccioli 2003a, p. 31). The protagonist remains nameless in the film.

<sup>13</sup> Piavoli seems to expect great familiarity with the *Odyssey* from his audience. As Faccioli puts it: «the spectator that hasn't read the Homeric poems needs to work hard to retrace the steps of the rhapsodic path that the protagonist undertakes» (Faccioli 2003b, p. 87).

<sup>14</sup> The director himself encourages the precise identification between episodes of the *Odyssey* and scenes of his film. See esp. Piavoli 2011, p. 135.

the invaders with a war cry. The inhabitants flee in a panic, a young woman embraces her young brother, and Nostos grapples with the idea of being responsible for other human beings' death and suffering. The cry of a baby (perhaps a reference to Astyanax, Hector's baby and heir to the throne, that Odysseus killed by throwing him from the wall of the city?) calls him back to action. The last shot shows the soldiers leaving on their ship loaded with the booty. This scene references the pillaging of Troy, in which Odysseus, according to mythical tradition, played a major role. He came up with the idea of the Trojan horse, which allowed the Greeks to break into Troy after a 10-year siege. There is no wooden horse in this movie, but the neighing of horses that we hear in the background might allude to it.

The events surrounding the sacking of Troy are intrinsic to the Trojan cycle, but they are only briefly referenced in the *Odyssey*. When Odysseus is among the Phaeacians still in incognito, he invites the bard Demodocus to «sing the story / about the wooden Horse, which Epeius / built with Athena's help. Odysseus / dragged it inside and to the citadel, / filled up with men to sack the town» (*Od.* 8.492-495). Upon hearing Demodocus' song, Odysseus weeps:

as a woman / weeps, as she falls to wrap her arms around / her husband, fallen fighting for his home / and children. She is watching as he gasps / and dies. She shrieks, a clear high wail, collapsing / upon his corpse. The men are right behind. / They hit her shoulders with their spear and lead her / to slavery, hard labor, and a life / of pain. Her face is marked with her despair. / In that same desperate way, Odysseus / was crying (*Od.* 8.521-531).

In this extended simile that captures so vividly the horrors of war, Odysseus, the aggressor, is compared to his victim, a mother who loses everything. This subversive equivalence between aggressor and victim is emphasized by Piavoli as well, particularly in the match cut in which the war cry of Nostos connects to the silent and desperate cry of a woman who is witnessing the carnage (Piavoli 1989, 00:06:38). As Piavoli explains, «I wanted to represent one of the themes that haunts me the most, that of man's intraspecific [*intraspecifica*] aggressivity, that is of men that attack and

kill other men» (Faccioli 2003a, p. 37). Nostos is a man in crisis: condemned to be away from home and his loved ones, he becomes more empathetic toward his victims and grapples with a haunting sense of remorse. While the *Odyssey* does not elaborate on the horrors of war<sup>15</sup> and Odysseus' responsibility, the idea of shared suffering that unites aggressors and victims is a theme that is well represented in Homer, as the simile I quote above demonstrates<sup>16</sup>.

The next sequence (Piavoli 1989, 00:09:57-00:25:15) combines two episodes of the *Odyssey*: the encounter with Circe and the visit to the souls of the underworld<sup>17</sup> (Books 10 and 11). The crew touches land but Nostos and his companion get separated, much like in the *Odyssey* where half the group gets turned into pigs by Circe and the other half remains near the ship. Nostos' entrance into the cave functions as a symbolic return to the womb of Mother Earth<sup>18</sup>, positioning the space as both origin and threshold between life and death. The reverberating sounds he hears – suggestive of a female, maternal voice – trigger recognition, and the protagonist utters the word “mater” three times. Three is not an accidental number, since it is also the number of times in the *Odyssey* that the protagonist attempts to embrace the soul of his dead mother, Anticlea (*Od.* 11.204-226). As Anticlea reminds her son, however, it is impossible to embrace the dead: «The spirit flies away and soon is gone, / just like a dream» (ll. 222-223). In Piavoli's re-interpretation, Anticlea is even more elusive than in Homer: she is a mere echo, a sound that might not even be human. The maternal figure dissolves into landscape and element – Anticlea becomes Earth itself – transforming Odysseus' attempt to embrace his mother into Nostos' yearning to return to his primordial source.

<sup>15</sup> The horrors of the sacking of Troy are recounted elsewhere. Particularly famous is the narrative offered by Aeneas in Book 2 of the *Aeneid*.

<sup>16</sup> Perhaps the best Homeric illustration of this theme is found in the encounter between Achilles and Priam at the end of the *Iliad*.

<sup>17</sup> I am resistant to call it a *katabasis*, since, strictly speaking, in the *Odyssey* Odysseus does not descend into the underworld; instead, the souls come up to him. However, Piavoli is clearly thinking in katabatic terms when he has the protagonists walk down stairs carved into the mountain.

<sup>18</sup> Morsiani 2011, p. 45.

When he gets out of the cave, Nostos starts to call out for his men. In his search he reaches a mountainous area surrounded by fog, Piavoli's adaptation of the land of the Cimmerians, which according to Homer was «covered up in mist and cloud» (*Od.* 11.14). He starts descending stairs carved into the rocks. Naked men and women lie or sit all around. In his descent, the protagonist enters a dark space and is approached by a dressed woman (Ginevra Alighieri) who offers him a conch shell, an unmistakable symbol of female sexuality. The woman is Circe, with whom Odysseus spends a year in the *Odyssey*. In *Nostos* their union lasts only one night, and when the protagonist wakes up he miraculously finds his companions sleeping next to him. He hurries them up and the group continues their journey over the sea.

Through the episodes of Circe, the sirens, and Calypso (on which see below), Piavoli elaborates upon a theme – Odysseus' adultery – that is mentioned in the *Odyssey* but never problematized. For Piavoli, these sexual encounters represent man's temptation to indulge in polygamous experiences, (Faccioli 2003a, p. 40) a temptation that, however, cannot eclipse Odysseus' essential devotion to Penelope and vice versa<sup>19</sup>.

The next Odyssean sequence is that of the sirens (Piavoli 1989, 00:28:00-00:31:33). Set at sunset in an orange light that progressively gets darker as time goes on, the sirens are, very aptly, introduced through sound. We do catch a glimpse of a female figure (Simonetta Saglia) swimming under the water, but the sirens' presence is mainly auditory: female chants mixed with whispering voices. The crew is entranced by the music and awaits for the source to reveal itself. Ultimately, despite the build-up, nothing happens. The voices fade away and the film moves on to the next sequence, the storm (Piavoli 1989, 00:31.34-00:36:04).

Sky and sea grow dark and the crew realizes they are in danger. Through a metonymical process that is so typical of his cinema, Piavoli uses tight shots of faces and objects combined with specific sounds to evoke an experience. A hand trying to lower the sails, a

<sup>19</sup> Piavoli, much like Prokosch, the producer in Godard's *Contempt*, does not believe that Penelope was actually faithful to Odysseus. See Faccioli 2003a, p. 32.

face in distress, a helmet floating overboard, the sound of a thunderbolt are enough to portray the confusion created by the storm and the impending sense of death. The process is not so different from Homer's recounting of the scene (*Od.* 12.400-418). The poet is obviously more descriptive than the director, but he also anchors his narrative on a few key details: the sea growing darker, the gushing wind, the mast breaking down and killing the pilot, the men falling overboard.

After the storm we enter the longest and one of the most charged episodes of the movie, the Calypso sequence (Piavoli 1989, 00:36:05-00:58:50). Nostos emerges from the gray sand of a beach. He is naked, and his robe and the helmets that were on the boat are now lying on the shoreline. Nostos has been deprived of his identity as man (the clothes) and soldier (the helmet) and experiences the trauma of rebirth. He lies for a while – hours, perhaps days – on the sand in the fetal position. We transition to a clear sky and a brighter color palette that announce a new beginning: Nostos walks through the white sand, green ponds, and lush meadow reclaiming his place as part of creation. Part of the experience is a reinitiation to sexual life. Nostos encounters a woman (Branca De Camargo), with whom he spends days and nights in affectionate and unencumbered lovemaking, conversation, and play. But the idyll is only temporary, for home is calling. It does so in the form of a dream that resumes and expands the dream sequence at the beginning of the movie. Nostos sees himself as a child playing with a hoop and young women running around with a white sheet attached to sticks, a sort of rudimentary kite. Upon waking up Nostos fashions a raft and sails away, while his lover observes the scene from afar, on the top of a cliff.

The inspiration behind this sequence is the Calypso episode in Book 5 of the *Odyssey*. Calypso's promise of an eternal life becomes, in Piavoli's vision, the promise of a life in harmony with the rhythm of nature and its simplest pleasures. The Edenic setting that Piavoli creates mirrors the island of Ogygia, the archetypal *locus amoenus* (*Od.* 5.58-74), and entices Nostos to remain. But Nostos, like Odysseus, has not completely lost touch with his previous life and knows that he cannot forget who he is. For as long as he is

haunted by the thought of the people he has abandoned, he cannot enjoy the gifts that Calypso offers. So he goes back to the sea, this time alone.

The raft that Nostos fashions is not strong enough to provide safe transport and soon enough the protagonist, deprived of any floating device, has to swim for his life. At this moment, the director inserts an oneiric sequence, a sort of near-death experience, in which we witness the protagonist entering a catacomb (Piavoli 1989, 01:08:49-01:14:28)<sup>20</sup>.

The final sequence of the film is one of the most successful. The brighter colors provide a strong contrast to the previous sequence and anticipate the much-awaited happy ending. On a beach we meet the same young women playing with the white sheet that Nostos saw in his dream. Dream and reality now merge together<sup>21</sup>. The women playing on the beach are reminiscent of Nausicaa and her servants in *Odyssey* Book 6, but in the film the protagonist will not interact with them. Instead, he refamiliarizes himself with a landscape that he used to know so intimately and slowly walks toward home. A stone wall, a courtyard, the hoop that he saw in his dreams, a horse, children running around, two old people sitting, a dove. With a few still shots, Piavoli paints for us an entire domestic universe. And then, when Nostos finally sets foot inside his palace, the triumphal music of the *Magnificat* from Monteverdi's *Vespers for the Blessed Virgin* announces the culmination of the movie, the much-awaited reunion with Penelope. Penelope (Neria Poli, Piavoli's wife) appears as a shadow behind the curtains, intent on arranging flowers in a vase. We then see her from far away folding Nostos' robe and putting it away in a chest with great care, a gesture that she must have done many times in the

<sup>20</sup> The director makes it clear that this sequence happens in Nostos' head by superimposing the image of the protagonist floating in the sea over the image of him entering the catacomb (Piavoli 1989, 1:10:25). The end of the sequence with Nostos falling back (twice) into the sea signals the end of the dream (Piavoli 1989, 1:14:00).

<sup>21</sup> See Maisetti 2006, pp. 104-105.

20 years of her husband's absence. The last shot of the movie is reserved for Penelope, an image of resilience and wifely love.

It is somewhat ironic that Piavoli considered the reunion scene between Odysseus and Penelope in Book 23 of the *Odyssey* to be the inspiration for his movie (Piavoli 2011, p. 134). No reunion takes place on the screen and, as a matter of fact, the audience is made to question whether the entire last sequence actually took place. Is *Nostos* really home? In a film in which the boundaries between reality and dream, external and internal, are intentionally blurred there is no easy answer to this question<sup>22</sup>. Whether Piavoli was conscious of it or not, the ambiguous finale is in keeping with the *Odyssey*. Odysseus does return home to his wife and child in the poem but cannot remain. As Tiresias announced to him in the underworld (*Od.* 11.121-137), a new odyssey, this time inland, would be necessary to fully placate the wrath of Poseidon<sup>23</sup>.

I started this section by pointing out that Piavoli departs from the traditional narrative paradigm. This is certainly true of Piavoli's cinema in general, but when it comes to *Nostos*, the Homeric subtext gives the film a semblance of plot. Knowledge of the *Odyssey* helps the viewer bring a sense of progression into what could otherwise appear as series of disjointed, albeit hauntingly beautiful, shots of nature and landscapes. That said, whereas the *Odyssey* is packed with action, there is not much happening in *Nostos*. Piavoli has turned the literal journey home of Odysseus into a psychological and emotional journey, epic has become lyric.

<sup>22</sup> The ambiguity of the finale is confirmed by the director. See Faccioli(a) 2003: 33 and Schillaci 2020, p. 41.

<sup>23</sup> On the end of the *Odyssey*, see Bakker 2020. Interestingly, even the Fritz Lang of *Contempt* chooses to have an open ending for his adaptation of the *Odyssey*. In the last scene of the movie, when Paul takes his leave from the director he finds him shooting «Ulysses' first gaze when he sees his homeland again» (Godard 1963, 01:37:01). Yet the point-of-view shot that ends *Contempt* depicts no land, only the vastness of the sea. Despite critics taking Lang's words at face value (Ulysses is actually seeing Ithaca from afar), the film ending clearly suggests that the hero cannot find his way home: the sea has become his homeland.

### 3. A Wordless Odyssey?

Odysseus' main attribute is his *metis* (craftiness), the ability to bend circumstances to his advantage. The primary embodiment of this *metis* is his proverbial rhetorical ability. Odysseus' ability to manipulate *logos* (rational discourse) is celebrated many times throughout the poem. He tricks Polyphemus in believing his name is "no one" and convinces him to drink the wine that will lead to his blinding, he maintains his identity a secret once he is back in Ithaca by making up the most incredible stories, and he rivals with the bard Demodocus when he entertains the Phaeacians with the stories of his travels. The name Odysseus is, in Homer and subsequent tradition<sup>24</sup>, synonymous with persuasive speech<sup>25</sup>. It might appear as a shocking surprise, therefore, that Odysseus in Piavoli's movie barely talks and, when he does, his words are deprived of denotative meaning. In fact, for his movie Piavoli created an artificial language that is inspired by «the sounds of ancient languages of the Mediterranean»<sup>26</sup>. Before we focus on *Nostos*' language, it is worth describing, in general, *Nostos*' soundscape.

As noted by Silvia Carlorosi, who wrote important pages on the study of sound in Piavoli's movies, «Piavoli is distinguished by his treatment of sound and silence, a treatment so remarkable that it might be considered the distinctive trait of his *cinemopoiesis*» (Carlorosi 2015, p. 90)<sup>27</sup>. *Cinemopoiesis* is here a crucial word, because for Piavoli cinema does not merely capture reality but creates reality anew<sup>28</sup>. Piavoli recorded the sounds that he used in his movie

<sup>24</sup> Perhaps one of the most celebrated examples is the «orazion picciola» that Odysseus give his crew in Dante's *Inferno* (*Inf.* 26.112-120).

<sup>25</sup> In this respect, the Coen Brothers' idea to have Odysseus impersonate a lawyer, is particularly amusing.

<sup>26</sup> «The dialogue of the film is inspired by the sounds of ancient Mediterranean languages», says the director in the opening credits.

<sup>27</sup> On the sound in Piavoli's cinema see also Piva 2003 and Danese 2015, pp. 415-417.

<sup>28</sup> Piavoli's experimentation with sound is developed in dialogue with the research conducted by other influential directors and cinema theorists. Particularly

separately from the shooting of the images and when he recombined image and sound he did so in non-mimetic ways. For instance, as he himself noted in an interview, when in *Il pianeta azzurro* the spider attacks the dragonfly, the sound that the audience hears is the shriek of a peacock because that sound best expresses the pain of laceration (Faccioli 2003a, p. 37).

In *Nostos* the disjunction between sound and image<sup>29</sup> is used to interesting effects. Consider the scene in which Nostos is swimming in the sea, at night, after his raft has come undone. The screeching of birds flying over Nostos' head mingles with the sound of his body floating in the sea until the mimetic soundscape takes new shapes. The sound of the birds progressively intensifies and turns into the noise of a battle: we hear the clash of the swords, the cry of men, and the neighing of horses (a similar acoustic landscape to the one we heard in the sequence of the sacking of Troy). The soundscape here breaks the distinction between external and internal world and evokes what cannot be shown through images: Nostos' fear and remorse, a fragment of his subconscious indelibly marked by his experiences of war.

The idea to fabricate a new language for this film must be understood as part of the director's attempt to evoke interior landscapes and to provide nature – the true protagonist of Piavoli's movie – with its own language. To use Carlorosi's paraphrase of Brenta's words, the language that Piavoli constructs in *Nostos* is “the uncodified language of the world itself rather than the abstract language of concepts” (Carlorosi 2015, p. 95). The inspiration for the invented language that Nostos speaks comes from ancient Greek as well as Sanskrit and Latin<sup>30</sup>. The words that we hear throughout the movie have *almost* completely lost their denotative function (they do not ‘signify’ anything), and are employed in *almost*

important to him were the 1928 *Statement on Sound* by S.M. Eisenstein, V.I. Pudovkin, and G.V. Alexandrov, and Bresson's 1975 *Notes sur le cinématographe*. On the influence of Eisenstein and Bresson on Piavoli's cinema see Piva 2003, p. 121; Carlorosi 2015, p. 90; Danese 2015, p. 427 n. 1; Schillaci 2020, p. 12.

<sup>29</sup> Piavoli often uses asynchronous sound, that is, sound that is not immediately connected to what is shown in the frame.

<sup>30</sup> See Piavoli 2011, p. 132.

a purely connotative way (sounds become vehicles of impressions).

I stress the word ‘almost’, because there are few specific moments in which the words acquire a clear denotative function. In the underworld sequence, Nostos enters a cave and hears a familiar sound. He calls for his mother three times with the easily recognizable Latin word ‘mater’. The presence of this word allows us to fully grasp the meaning of a scene that would be too cryptic otherwise (Nostos is communicating with a maternal figure). The same is true for the next scene in which Nostos speaks with a tree and utters the word *pater*, Greek for father (on this scene see below). Another word that has both denotative and connotative value is *oikos*, Greek for home and family. The word, which is uttered for the first time after the war flashback, sets a clear trajectory for the movie: what motivates the protagonist is his search for home. When Nostos, at the end of the film, finally enters his house, he utters the word *om*, a sanscrit root meaning ‘home’ and a homophone of the English word ‘home’<sup>31</sup>. By collapsing the distinction between ancient Mediterranean languages and modern ones, the word *om/home* links past and present and underscores Nostos’ journey as an archetypal return to his roots and origins.

Through the creation of this artificial language, molded around the languages of ancient and bygone civilizations, Piavoli subtracts Odysseus from his specifically Greek cultural context and universalizes his struggles. He successfully projects the events depicted in the movie into an ancestral dimension, a “pre-Homeric world”, to use Lapeña Marchena’s expression. At the same time, with his invented language, Piavoli emphasizes the distance and substantial incommunicability between his source, the *Odyssey*, and the world of this viewership. Even for the most seasoned Homerist, the true feeling of the *Odyssey* is indeed impossible to fully grasp.

Piavoli’s invented language is rooted in modern theories and experimentations, and yet, it is a surprisingly apt substitute for the

<sup>31</sup> We hear the word *om* / ‘home’ and *oikos* in a previous sequence as well (Piavoli 1989, 1:06:20). On this term see Schillaci 2020, p. 194 n. 140.

Homeric language. In fact, the language of Homer, much like Piavoli's language, is an artificial one. Homeric Greek is a *Kunstsprache*, a highly stylized language, with a unique morphology and syntax, that combines different Greek dialects (Ionian, Aeolic and, to a smaller extent, Arcado-cypriot and Attic). It was never spoken by a specific group of people besides the bards who used it in their recitations and compositions. Much like Piavoli's language it has a universalizing and archaizing feeling. It is difficult to say to what extent Piavoli's invented language is meant to capture the linguistic condition of the Homeric poems<sup>32</sup>, but it is certainly very Homeric of Piavoli to have Nostos speak the kind of language he speaks in the movie.

#### 4. A Godless Odyssey?

Another major characteristic of the *Odyssey* that Piavoli dispenses with is the representation of divine machinery. Gods in Homer constantly and capriciously intervene in human vicissitudes and ultimately decide their outcomes<sup>33</sup>. In the *Odyssey* Poseidon's anger prevents Odysseus from coming home. Divine councils kick off the main narratives (both in Books 1 and 5), and the intervention of Athena and Zeus in the last book brings the story to completion.

Piavoli's decision to not include the Olympians in his film is in continuity with the majority of screen adaptations of Greek and Roman myths<sup>34</sup>. As Joanna Paul has shown<sup>35</sup>, the representation of gods has always created major complications for film directors and screenwriters. There are two orders of problems when it comes

<sup>32</sup> Piavoli, who attended the Italian Liceo Classico, had certainly studied Homeric Greek. As he says in a recent interview: «The passion for epic and the etymology of words is a daily game that I never stopped practicing» (Piavoli 2023).

<sup>33</sup> For an overview of the divine apparatus in the *Odyssey* see Saïd 2011, pp. 315-354.

<sup>34</sup> A notable exception studied by Paul is the 1963 movie *Jason and the Argonauts* (Paul 2013, pp. 94-131). There exist other attempts at depicting the gods on screen. One of the latest is the 2018 TV show *Troy: Fall of a City*.

<sup>35</sup> Paul 2013, pp. 107-122.

to the representation of the Olympians on screen: i) the vast distance between the Homeric conception and our conception of the divine; ii) the difficulties of visually representing «anthropomorphic beings who nevertheless occupy a different plane of reality» (Paul 2013, p. 48).

The first of these difficulties is perceptively identified by Molteni, the screenwriter of Moravia's *Disprezzo*, the novel upon which Godard based his 1963 film *Contempt* – a movie that centers around the challenges of adapting the *Odyssey* for the screen:

The council [the council of the gods that opens the *Odyssey*] was important, it seemed to me, because it introduced into the poem the notion of Fate, and of the vanity and, at the same time, the nobility and heroism of human effort. Cutting out the council meant cutting out the whole supramundane aspect of the poem, eliminating all divine intervention, suppressing the figures of the various divinities, so charming and poetical in themselves. But there was no doubt that Battista [the producer] would not want to have anything to do with the gods, who would seem to him nothing more than incompetent chatterboxes who made a great fuss deciding about things that could perfectly well be decided by the protagonists. As for Rheingold [the director], the ambiguous hint he had given of a 'psychological' film presaged no good towards the divinities: psychology obviously excludes Fate and divine intervention; at most, it discovers Fate in the depths of the human spirit, in the dark intricacies of the so-called subconscious. The gods, therefore, would be superfluous, because neither spectacular nor psychological (98-9).

In this passage Moravia identifies the presence of the divine as “important” to a proper adaptation of the *Odyssey* but also acknowledges its limits. The gods of Homer are redundant: the decisions they take could easily be made by the characters themselves, especially when the movie focuses on their inner lives. In other words, the Homeric conception of the divine is at odds with modern ideas about human psychology and self-determinism.

The second difficulty provides perhaps an even greater obstacle for film directors. As Joanna Paul notes, «because poets never had to arrive at a total, coherent visual representation of divinity, they had more latitude in representing the gods than did sculptors or

painters» (Paul 2013, p. 111). Homer is especially ambiguous in his representation of the divine. While it is often said that gods in Homer are anthropomorphic tout court, a closer look to the text suggests that the question of divine representation is much more complex. Gods in Homer exist on a spectrum: at times they can be pure stand-ins for natural elements – such as in the passage of the *Iliad* in which the Greeks are said to be barbecuing over Hephaestus, i.e., fire (*Il.* 2.426) – while at other times they have a full bodily presence and become visible to one or more selected human characters<sup>36</sup>. The anthropomorphic gods can physically intervene in battles by throwing punches or moving objects and heroes around, and are even susceptible to being wounded by humans<sup>37</sup>.

Writers can afford to be more vague and inconsistent than visual artists in their conception of the divine because they can capitalize on the participation of the reader, who contributes with their imagination to the divine representation. A visual artist, on the other hand, typically needs to make a coherent visual choice and cannot hide behind the ambiguity of words<sup>38</sup>. Many directors and screenwriters have hence decided to sacrifice the divine apparatus for fear of ridiculous and cheesy effects. For instance, David Benioff, screenwriter of the 2004 film *Troy*, reports that he «had this terror of some actor in a toga hurling CGI thunderbolts from the top of Mount Olympus»<sup>39</sup>.

Piavoli's decision to not represent the Olympians in his film is, however, perfectly coherent with his vision and does justice to the original material, as we shall see. First, it should be emphasized that the gods, while not represented on screen, are not completely absent from the film. In the middle of the flashback of the sacking

<sup>36</sup> Usually gods manifest themselves by taking the form of other human beings, but in exceptional cases they become visible to humans in all of their divine power. In *Iliad* Book 5, for instance, Athena endows Diomedes with the power to see the gods.

<sup>37</sup> Like in the case of Book 5 of the *Iliad* where Diomedes wounds the goddess Aphrodite.

<sup>38</sup> Aristotle makes a similar point when he notes that scenes narrated by Homer would become ridiculous if visualized on stage. *Ar. Poet.* 1460a14-17.

<sup>39</sup> See in Paul 2013, p. 109. See also Winkler 2015, pp. 115-142.

of Troy, the camera lingers on the head of the statue of a male god while fire is burning in the background and a baby's scream pierces the air. With one simple shot the director raises the old theodicean doubt: how could a god allow a catastrophe such as war?

The presence of the gods becomes manifest also in the scene in which Nostos converses with an olive tree (00:14:35-00:17:04). When he is under the tree, Nostos utters the Homeric clausula *Zeū pater*, 'O Zeus father', which clearly configures his words as a prayer. In the next sentence we can recognize the work '*oikos*,' home, and we can deduce that Nostos is asking Zeus for help in reaching home. The tree provides an answer to Nostos' prayer through the sound of the wind moving through its leaves<sup>40</sup>.

As Lapeña Marchena correctly notes<sup>41</sup>, in Piavoli's film the gods are present in all the manifestations of nature. The clearest example is the prayer I just mentioned, but the identification can be expanded to all of Nature, a character in its own right. To seek the divine behind the forces of nature is an impulse common to many different cultures, Greek included. As we have seen, Homer sometimes associates specific gods with specific elements: Hephaestus is fire, Poseidon controls the sea, Zeus the sky, etc. On this basis, many ancient interpreters of Homer felt it legitimate to allegorically interpret all gods as manifestations of nature<sup>42</sup>. This urge to find the laws of nature behind the actions of the Homeric gods has a long afterlife of which Piavoli, in a sense, can be considered one of the last heirs<sup>43</sup>.

Piavoli's decision to remove the gods' intervention from Nostos' journey makes it paradoxically more Odyssean. Throughout Books 9 to 12, the section of the *Odyssey* in which Odysseus narrates

<sup>40</sup> The idea of a god that speaks through a tree is possibly inspired by the Greek oracle of Dodona, mentioned by Odysseus in one of the fictive accounts of his travels (*Od.* 14.327-328).

<sup>41</sup> Lapeña Marchena 2018, p. 103.

<sup>42</sup> On the ancient tradition of reading Homer allegorically see Réal 2023, pp. 190-256.

<sup>43</sup> «Everything is holy, everything is holy, everything is holy [...] wherever your eyes look, there a god is hidden» says the centaur Chiron to a 13-year-old Jason in Pasolini's 1969 *Medea*.

his own adventures and that inspired *Nostos*, the Olympians are almost never present<sup>44</sup>. As already noted by Jørgensen over a century ago<sup>45</sup>, the absence of the Olympians from these books of the *Odyssey* can be explained in narratological terms. With his omniscient knowledge that comes from the Muses, the poet is able to report exactly what happens on Mt. Olympus, which god was angry at Odysseus and why, and who intervened in his favor and how. When, however, Odysseus tells his story in the first person, he is not privy to the details of the gods' machinations; he can only infer, very generically, that some god must be behind his sufferings. Much as in *Nostos*, in Books 9-12 of the *Odyssey* the gods are removed from the action but the sense of divine informs the quest of the protagonist.

From a narratological point of view, nothing would have prevented Piavoli from representing the actions of the Olympians. In his film, in fact, the protagonist is not telling his story to an audience or remembering his past<sup>46</sup>; the focalization, strictly speaking, is external. At the same time, the lines between internal and external are intentionally blurred. Through the isolation of the protagonist on screen, the representation of his internal psyche, and the use of many point-of-view shots, we experience the world through *Nostos*' eyes and ears, much like in the *Odyssey* we hear of Odysseus' adventures through the hero's own words. The decision to remove the Olympians is, hence, in keeping with the internal focalization of Odysseus' flashback and emphasizes the individual experience of the movie's protagonist.

## 5. Conclusion

In the panorama of screen adaptations of the *Odyssey*, *Nostos* occupies a unique position. It underscores the temporal gap between

<sup>44</sup> There are two exceptions, Hermes' appearance to Odysseus on his way to Circe's (*Od.* 10.273-308) and the small Olympian scene that follows the killing of the cattle of the sun (*Od.* 12.373-388).

<sup>45</sup> Jørgensen 1904.

<sup>46</sup> This is the solutions adopted by Camerini in his 1954 *Ulysses*.

the source material and its viewership not through literal faithfulness to the original but by projecting the audience into the ancestral dimension of myth. As I have shown, the film departs from the poem in three major ways. *Nostos* turns the literal journey of Odysseus with its thrilling adventures and magical encounters into the inner journey of a protagonist scarred by the experience of war. Despite his more intimate approach, Piavoli still employs the broader narrative arch of the *Odyssey* as a canvass for his film. As I have shown, almost all the sequences of his film can be linked to episodes of the poem. Piavoli also decides to let the images and sounds of his movie do the talking. While in the *Odyssey* the focus is on words and their power, Piavoli uses words as vehicles of impressions more than meaning. Yet, his invented language aptly captures the artificial nature of Homeric Greek. Finally, Piavoli substitutes nature for the Olympians. In so doing he does justice to the spiritual core of his source without having to commit to the specific nature of Homeric religion. His *Nostos* is a spiritual man that feels all the weight of his human condition and, much like Odysseus in Books 9 to 12, grapples with the essentially inscrutable nature of the divine.

All in all, the most original aspect of this film is its contemplative nature. What the director emphasizes is the experience of a man who spends most of his time alone, at the mercy of the elements, thinking about the horrors of his past and dreaming of a new beginning. In contrast to Odysseus, *Nostos* does not act, he reflects. This emphasis on contemplation over action might seem like a modern bias, but Homer's narrative was itself biased. His poem – and the many screen adaptations it inspired – may give us the impression of a man who jumps from one adventure to another without respite. The truth is that the majority of Odysseus' journey back was spent alone at sea or secluded in remote islands. Of the 10 years of his return, Odysseus spent seven years on the island of Ogygia, alone with Calypso, one year on Circe's island, and many days at sea (he spent 19 days alone on a raft when he left Ogygia)<sup>47</sup>. His adventures, while memorable, are only a fraction

<sup>47</sup> See De Jong 2001, p. 588.

of his odyssey. Piavoli gives a voice to those silences and moments of inaction that Homer placed into the background. In so doing, he certainly veers away from his source, but captures, perhaps more genuinely than Homer, a core element of Odysseus's experience.

**Abstract.**

Franco Piavoli's 1989 film *Nostos* occupies a unique position in the panorama of screen adaptations of Homer's *Odyssey*. This little-known film captures the essence of Odysseus' journey while rejecting three core elements of the *Odyssey*: i) its well-defined narrative structure; ii) its emphasis on rhetoric and storytelling; iii) its pervasive divine apparatus. In this article, I examine the ways in which Piavoli intentionally departs from Homer in order to better convey the inner experience of a man lost at sea.

**Keywords.**

*Odyssey*; Homer's reception in films; Franco Piavoli; *Nostos*; representation of gods in films.

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