Film adaptations of literature have always had to face tough criticisms. The most likely reason is the continuing influence of the age of Romanticism and its concept of artistic quality: only a completely original work of art can be valuable or significant. Anything that is likely to raise objections of some kind or other is suspected of being mediocre, a deviation from an earlier and higher level of creativity, ingenuity, imagination, and overall greatness. Rarely are critics willing to entertain, much less concede, an argument to the opposite: that works need not be contemptible because they are copies of originals believed to be vastly superior. Creators of works of the latter kind usually strive to preserve a measure of artistic and creative independence from their models. They may wish to avoid any slavish adherence to or simple imitation of the original works; they may further develop traits, ideas, or other concepts inherent in these models they may even succeed in improving on their models in certain regards. The artistic impulse for innovation or improvement, however, generally goes unrewarded. Artists of the kind here outlined are quickly charged with misunderstanding a beloved model or with falsifying it beyond recognition. Such is the case most frequently when the original work goes back such a long time that it has by now become part of our common cultural heritage. The closer a work of art is to the very roots of our civilization, the more we tend to treasure it. In some cases it may even acquire an aura of mystical or quasi-religious reverence. This process is especially noticeable with works of literature. Whoever tampers with them is quickly charged with profaning them. Change, any change, is tantamount to sacrilege. Texts dealing with religion are a case in point, for these carry their own baggage, as it were, being weighed down by taboos.

As foundational texts of Western culture, the Homeric epics have by now acquired a nimbus of such inviolability. Wolfgang Petersen's film *Troy*, inspired by the *Iliad*, was therefore a risky undertaking from the beginning. For this reason it is downright astonishing that the film could achieve an overall positive reception despite negative criticism from a number of reviewers and scholars. It is quite possible that Petersen profited from the newly awakened interest in epic films set in antiquity that came in the wake
of the unexpected success of Ridley Scott’s *Gladiator* (2000) and encouraged studios or producers to launch films on comparable topics. Moreover, the Trojan War had long been a subject attractive to filmmakers. Adherence to Homeric epic was rarely to be taken for granted, however, as even a brief glance at film history tells us.¹ Much the same can be said about the reception of Homer and the myths of Troy in traditional artistic media such as opera, novel, painting, and stage play.² The first two large-scale films about the war, made in the silent era, were *The Fall of Troy* (*La caduta di Troia*; Italy, 1910–1911), directed by Piero Fosco (pseudonym of Giovanni Pastrone) and Romano Luigi Borgnetto, and *Helena* (Germany, 1923–1924), directed by Manfred Noa. Both have only a few points of contact with the *Iliad*; rather, they are a kind of potpourri of the most important episodes and characters of the Trojan War. Equally John Kent Harrison’s *Helen of Troy*, an American television film broadcast in 2003, about a year before the release of Petersen’s *Troy*, has only vague connections with Homer’s epic. Marino Girolami’s Italian spectacle *Fury of Achilles* (*L’ira di Achille*, 1962) is the only exception, along with *Troy*. From the beginning, *Troy* was intended to show rather closer adherence to Homer, as its working title, “*The Iliad*” Project, indicates.³ Screenwriter David Benioff and director Petersen proceeded accordingly. Petersen in particular repeatedly emphasized his knowledge of Homer in interviews. As he states on the bonus material included on the DVD release of the director’s cut of *Troy*:

I grew up with Homer…. I was in Hamburg in Germany, where I grew up; I was at school [*Gymnasium*, i.e. high school], where we learnt actually ancient Greek and Latin, so I actually read Homer’s work in the original ancient Greek language. So I was very close to it, very familiar.⁴


³ So according to the Internet Movie Database at http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0332452/releaseinfo#akas.

⁴ Quoted from *Troy in Focus*, part 1: “Adapting Homer” on the director’s cut DVD edition of *Troy*. 