Leaves of Homeric Storytelling: Wolfgang Petersen's Troy and Franco Rossi's Odissea* by Martin M. Winkler (George Mason University, U.S.A.)

In the introduction to his anthology *Homer in English*, George Steiner observes: "I believe our *Iliad* to be the product of an editorial recension of genius, of a wonderfully formative act of combination, selection and editing of the voluminous oral material" (1). What director Wolfgang Petersen recently said about his film *Troy (2004)* is a close echo of Steiner's perspective: "If there is something like a tree of storytelling, on which each book, each film, is a tiny leaf, then Homer is its trunk"(2) . Petersen's image of a tree and its leaves even reminds us of a famous simile in the *Iliad* (3) .

Troy is the latest film adaptation of Homer or of Homeric themes to date. Its worldwide success not only indicates that epic cinema can still find large audiences but also suggests that a comprehensive assessment of Homer's importance for today's most influential mass medium is appropriate. Such an assessment cannot be provided here, but the following pages will point to some of the important aspects of visual translations of Homer's texts, illustrated by Troy as an adaptation of the *Iliad* and by the Italian television film *Odissea* (1968) as the most accomplished version of the *Odyssey*. For reasons of space I limit myself to examining only a few representative aspects of both films.

1. Petersen's *Troy*

While Petersen and his screenwriter David Benioff were emphatic about stating that their film is not a direct translation of Homer to the screen, Troy is still a work very much in the spirit of Homer (4). Petersen had studied Greek and Latin and had read and translated parts of the *Iliad* as a student at a traditional *Gymnasium* in Germany. One moment of Troy in particular reveals Petersen's affinity for his source text. It is a direct translation of a passage from Book 4 of the *Iliad* into moving images. This passage contains two similes as frames; their purpose is to make the action narrative which they enclose immediate and easy to envision. The Greek army is advancing on the Trojans, who are holding their ground; then both sides clash in furious battle. The first simile is of waves breaking on the shore. The description implies an observer stationed on an elevation, such as a mountain top, and looking down along the beach. In the second simile two rushing rivers commingle. The poet also provides the "soundtrack" that accompanies the action: the Greek's menacing silence and, in yet another simile, the Trojans' cries. These lines I omit. Here is the decisive part of the passage:

As when along the thundering beach the surf of the sea strikes
beat upon beat as the west wind drives it onward; far out
cresting first on the open water, it drives thereafter
to smash roaring along the dry land, and against the rock jut bending breaks itself into crests spewing back the salt wash;
so thronged beat upon beat the Danaans' close battalions
steadily into battle, with each of the lords commanding
his own men..

Now as these advancing came to one place and encountered,
they dashed their shields together and their spears, and the strength
of armoured men in bronze, and the shields massive in the middle
clashed against each other, and the sound grew huge of the fighting.
There the screaming and the shouts of triumph rose up together
of men killing and men killed, and the ground ran blood.
As when rivers in winter spate running down from the mountains
throw together at the meeting of streams the weight of their water
out of the great springs behind in the hollow stream-bed,
and far away in the mountains the shepherd hears their thunder;
such, from the coming together of men, was the shock and the shouting.(5)

Description of the repeated waves of the Greek attack on a stationary Trojan line yields to that of close combat between the two armies by means of the second simile involving water; it is prompted by the observation within the action narrative that the ground already "ran blood." A filmic retelling of these lines has to be realistic. No actual waves could appear on screen. They would only divert viewers' attention from the battle instead of involving them in it more closely, as the similes do. An effectively staged on-screen battle needs no extraneous enhancement. Still, Petersen shows us how a real-looking attack can express Homer's imagery. Modern computer technology makes it possible.

After the non-Homeric death of Menelaus at Hector's hands, Agamemnon orders an attack on the Trojans by the entire Greek army, Achilles and his men excepted. (Achilles is watching the attack from an elevated position.) The Trojans are arrayed in battle line, with the walls of Troy at their back. The camera shows us the attack of the Greeks first from an eye-level position on the side of their battle line, as if from a combatant's point of view. Then, in a fluid motion and without a cut, the camera soars up and above the men. An extreme long shot is also from a high angle, but this time the camera watches from behind the advancing Greeks. Then Petersen gives us a corresponding shot from the opposite position: above and behind the Trojans we see, as they do, the Greeks storming near. Shortly after this comes the shot that is closest to Homer's simile of the crashing waves. The camera is now positioned high above the battlefield, looking down over both armies from the side so that the Trojans appear screen left, still standing firm, while the Greeks are attacking them from screen right. The camera begins to move along and above the entire battle line, in the process swooping down closer but still remaining above all the soldiers. The shot continues while the Greeks break into the Trojan line. The Homeric nature of the moment in which both armies make contact is made evident when the shields of the Greek warriors rise wavelike above the Trojans and tumble down over their heads. Only then does Petersen cut to close-up images of hand-to-hand combat. The wave-like nature of this fight continues in three very brief shots in which we see a few Greek soldiers who have jumped up into the air descending on the Trojans. In this battle sequence the attack of the Greeks is indeed cresting, smashing, driving, and breaking on the Trojans while shields massive in the middle clash against each other. Still images can capture neither the fluidity of these shots, graceful even in the context of the carnage that is about to ensue, nor the movements contained within them. As viewers realize soon after, the ground runs blood, too, because numerous Greeks die under the arrows of the Trojan archers, whom Homer does not mention here. The individual fights and deaths which Homer describes after the passage quoted find their equivalent in Troy in several brief duels; they culminate in the ferocious combat between Hector and Ajax, which is followed by another wave-like Greek attack filmed from different angles but not as long or visually expressive as the preceding one. Even the Trojans' counterattack has a wave-like quality, although it is seen only momentarily.

Like Homer's shepherd who overhears the roar of the rushing streams, we watch and hear the shock and the shouting of Greek and Trojan warriors in the film's battle sequence. Homer closes Book 4 with the comment: "on that day many men of the Achaians and Trojans / lay sprawled in the dust face downward beside one another." (6) Petersen includes shots that exactly correspond to these lines. When they see a chariot being driven over dead bodies lying on the ground, viewers familiar with the *Iliad* may even think of a specific moment later in the epic. Achilles, too, drives his chariot over dead bodies. His horses "trampled alike dead men and shields, and the axle under / the chariot was all splashed with blood."(7)

The Homeric similes of storms, fires, streams rushing down mountains, or waves breaking bring home to us the irresistible power of the elements, with which man must deal in his daily life. But they also express the devastating force of man-made conflicts like war and battle. So it is very much to the point that Petersen gives us a visual equivalent of the simile of the waves to intensify our sense of the Greek army's furious onslaught on the Trojans. (We still use the phrase "wave of attack.") The equivalent of Homer's simile in *Troy* has a precursor in *The Perfect Storm* (2000), the film Petersen directed immediately before. This drama deals with the impossible odds faced by the intrepid crew of a small fishing boat against a gigantic gale on the Atlantic Ocean. Images of their boat dwarfed by waves of overwhelming proportion express the insignificance of man before nature's implacability. The most monstrous wave imaginable eventually destroys the boat and kills its crew. The immediacy of this unusual storm derives from Petersen's use of state-of-the-art computer technology, for filming in an actual storm would have been impossible. *The Perfect Storm* was perhaps Petersen's perfect preparation for the epic battle scenes in *Troy*. *Das Boot* (1981), Petersen's submarine epic about heroism and death in a World-War II setting, a film that made him

internationally famous and paved his way to a successful career in Hollywood, is also likely to have influenced his approach to the material of Troy.

2. Rossi's *Odissea*

Like Troy and other American and European films about the Trojan War, films based on the Odyssey are usually rather loose retellings of their Homeric models. Well-known examples are Mario Camerini's *Ulisse* (*Ulysses*, 1954) and Andrey Konchalovsky's television film *The Odyssey* (1997). But one adaptation of the *Odyssey* stands out for both its unusual faithfulness to Homer-despite certain unavoidable liberties-and its accomplished style. A six-hour television film chiefly directed by Franco Rossi, this *Odissea* is the most accomplished adaptation of the Odyssey ever put on the screen.(8) Unfortunately it is not as well known as it deserves, so I devote some more space to it here than I did to Troy. Both works, taken together, illustrate the wide range of approaches that is possible in the process of adapting Homeric epic to the screen. I hope to demonstrate, if only briefly, the high quality of Rossi's version by discussing a few important aspects; readers familiar with this film will, I hope, think of others on their own. I also hope that my observations will serve to resuscitate interest in this unduly neglected film, clearly a labor of love on the part of its makers.

Rossi's *Odissea* exhibits surprisingly few weaknesses and surprisingly numerous strengths. The most noteworthy among the former are some of the costumes, especially the kind of "mini-dress" worn by Telemachus, apparently an inheritance from the miniskirts (or indeed "micro-minis") in which bodybuilders used to show off their virility in the Italian muscleman epics of the 1950s and 1960s. Rossi's Calypso is as much of a bland blonde as is Petersen's Helen. The weakest sequence in Rossi's *Odissea*, fortunately only a few minutes long, is the one involving Aeolus. He and his entourage appear as a weird group of pudgy hedonists, dressed in white and with big white hair standing straight up. Evidently they suffer from what Americans call "a bad hair day." But perhaps we should not be too critical. After all, his very nature condemns the god of the winds to a bad hair life-an eternal one at that. Nor is Rossi's Aeolus any worse than his counterpart in Konchalovsky's Odyssey, in which Michael J. Pollard's Aeolus is an infantile imp. On the whole, for a film as long as it is, Rossi's *Odissea* manages to eschew the ludicrous and the pathetic extremely well. It is therefore more appropriate for us to forgive the film's few infelicities and to appreciate its many virtues

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Not least among these is the preservation of a Homeric narrator-an off-screen *aoidos* who serves as the viewer's faithful guide and companion through the entire film. Uniquely in the history of films based on Homer, the narrator preserves the two key features of Homeric diction: formulaic epithets and similes. This alone ensures the film a closer adherence to its model than occurs in any other screen adaptation, although Rossi does take liberties with the structure and progression of his long narrative. Unavoidably, he and his screenwriters had to abbreviate, condense, and omit, but in some parts they also increased the complexity of the narrative, for instance by having Circe as a kind of prophetic sub-narrator (in voice-over) within parts of Odysseus' tale to the Phaeacians. The best proof of the overall quality of the film is in Rossi's visual sense, coupled with what we might call his "will to style." He makes good use of the magnificent outdoor scenery of the Mediterranean, chiefly filming along the coast of what then was Yugoslavia, and his re-imagining of certain scenes for the sake of non-specialist viewers can be remarkable. My favorite examples are the episodes involving the black cattle of Helios with their long curved horns, the Sirens, Telemachus' visit to Menelaus and Helen at Sparta, Odysseus' landing on Scheria and meeting with Nausicaa, and the flashback to the fall of Troy, in which we see the eeriest and most menacing wooden horse ever built for the screen. In addition, Rossi had a reliable cast, led by Bekim Fehmiu as Odysseus and Irene Papas as the screen's greatest Penelope. Others who stand out are Scilla Gabel as Helen, Marina Berti as Arete, and Barbara Gregorini as Nausicaa. The last-mentioned is most familiar to filmgoers as future Bond girl Barbara Bach, the later Mrs. Ringo Starr. Much of the architecture is appropriately Mycenaean, weapons are stylized (if not to the extent of those in Pasolini's Edipo re (Oedipus Rex) from the year before, and Odysseus' bow is the most magnificent ever wielded by a cinematic hero.

What I called Rossi's will to style appears most notably in some of the scenes set on Ithaca. For special emphasis, Rossi at certain moments has Penelope's servant women move as a group and speak in unison or by turns; at the same time they are facing the camera and so directly addressing the film's spectators. They comment on their situation and its possible ramifications in the way the chorus of classical Greek tragedy

does in fifth-century Athens. To anyone who recognizes the choral function--avant la tragédie, as it were-the effect is striking. It is also an indirect reminder that Homeric epic was a major source of material for Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, and the other tragic playwrights.

The way in which Rossi handles the gods is also significant and revealing, in particular if we compare Petersen's extensive, although not complete, exclusion of them from Troy.(9) While gods and goddesses who have assumed human shape in order to interact with mortals on earth can be portrayed by actors without any problem, scenes in which gods remain among themselves, for instance on Olympus, usually are a kind of Scylla and Charybdis for modern directors, a danger spot that can drown their film in a sea of silliness. We may think back to the assemblies of Olympian gods in Don Chaffey's Jason and the Argonauts (1963) or Desmond Davis's Clash of the Titans (1981). Petersen was probably right in avoiding scenes in which actors in swirling robes move or stand around in bombastic palatial sets while sprouting dialogue in overwrought diction. By contrast, Rossi's adaptation of the assembly of the gods in Book 1 of the Odyssey, abbreviated as it necessarily is, is a revelation. The dialogue between Zeus and Athena concerning the return of Odysseus is heard in voice-over, while ancient statues or statuettes of the two deities appear on screen before a neutral background. Cutting back and forth between them and moving into close-ups of their faces while they speak and listen, Rossi treats dead marble like living flesh (i.e. of actors moving and talking) and so achieves an unexpected level of dramatic tension. This procedure is a masterstroke because it is as simple and elegant as it is effective (and cost-effective: no need to build yet another elaborate and expensive set). It solves any modern director's problem of how to present the ancient gods, in whom no one believes today, without making them too human or too superhuman and without running the risk of making them either unbelievable or ridiculous. The pay-off then comes at the very end of the film. Unlike its model, which ends with a second series of killings (after the deaths of the suitors) that would have turned into wholesale slaughter if Athena had not interfered, Rossi's ending turns to Athena again, with her statue very briefly on the screen. The Olympians, as whose representative she functions, are now revealed as providential and just guardians of the well-ordered and peaceful world, an ideal kosmos as described in Hesiod's *Theogony*. The narrator's final words accompany the last images we see in the film: medium close-ups of the ruins of a Greek temple that represents the abode of the immortal gods. In stately and measured tones and in simple poetic terms the narrator tells us about Olympus, if without any concern about meteorological accuracy. According to his summation, it is "the always serene seat of the Gods. It is not battered by winds, never drenched in rain; snow does not fall, but the air's expanse is always free of clouds. Bright shines the light." ("... la sede sempre serena dei Numi. Non da venti è squassato, mai dalla pioggia è bagnata, non cade la neve, ma l'etere sempre si stende privo di nubi. Candida scorre la luce.")

The narrator's final sentence gently guides us toward closure. Our last glimpse, from between two columns of the temple that frame the screen on left and right, is across the Aegean while the final fade-out darkens the screen. The quiet and peaceful atmosphere of the film's closing moments conveys to us a sense of serenity, of divine justice, and even of regret that we must now take our leave of the world of Odysseus, Homer, Greek epic and myth, and, indeed, of Rossi and his cinematic ancient world as well.

I now turn to a brief consideration of a specific moment in one sequence of Rossi's film. A hero's descent to the realm of the dead-*katabasis* or *nekyia* in Greek-is an archetypal theme in all mythology. The first instance in Greek literature occurs in Book 11 of the Odyssey. It is difficult to do justice to its moving and atmospheric quality on the screen, but Rossi rises to the occasion. He succeeds better than more famous filmmakers in his rendition of Book 11, abbreviated and free as it must be. Appropriately for its supernatural aspects, the whole sequence shows its own artifice. We are meant to realize that it was shot indoors in a studio, in contrast to the magnificent outdoor scenery filmed on Mediterranean locations. Rossi communicates to his viewers a sense of sorrow and loss in Odysseus' encounters with some of his closest friends and with his mother Anticleia. Rossi creates his supernatural atmosphere with a subdued visual style. The dominant colors are black, grey, and a washed-out blue. The actors who play the deceased deliver their lines without any emotion, a manner suitable to the dead. Nevertheless, Rossi does not neglect the horrifying side of Odysseus' katabasis. At its beginning we see the body of a black lamb, slaughtered to call up the spirits of the dead, and the pool of its blood. In a medium close-up we see Tiresias' mouth, smeared with this blood after he has drunk from it. The chief technical effect to which Rossi resorts is double exposure. The dead have no bodies but are only shades, and the rocky background of Hades is visible through their silhouettes. This technique leads to a moving climax when Odysseus encounters his mother. Differently from the Odyssey, she appears as an image of quiet domesticity. Sitting in a simple chair and engaged in wool-

working, she reminds us of Penelope. (Rossi is tasteful enough not to have Anticleia drink any blood.) During their conversation Odysseus kneels before her and begs to embrace her, but she explains that this is impossible for the dead. Homer's Odysseus remembers:

So she spoke, but I, pondering in my heart, yet wished
to take the soul of my dead mother in my arms. Three times
I started toward her, and my heart was urgent to hold her,
and three times she fluttered out of my hands like a shadow
or a dream, and the sorrow sharpened at the heart within me.. (10)

In his adaptation of these lines Rossi shows what Homer tells. Odysseus appears briefly to be stroking his mother's knees and then putting his head on her lap, but since she is insubstantial his head sinks lower and lower until it touches the ground. Over complete silence Rossi now gives us a close-up of Anticleia looking down on her son. We realize that she, too, longs to embrace him but cannot. Then the image of her shade fades from the screen, and Odysseus is left behind alone. The moment achieves a high level of emotion without being in the least sentimental.

3. A Classical Defense of Adaptation

Anyone who might still be skeptical about the value of modern adaptations of classical texts even after my plea on behalf of the Homeric possibilities of the cinematic medium will, I hope, be persuaded by the authority whose shade, as it were, I am about to conjure up. Concerning those who disdain recent versions of works by revered and usually long-dead authors like Homer, a great poet once unequivocally stated that those who judge nothing to be comparable to the old masters are in serious error. Their judgment is wrong because it is no more than a prejudice against anything modern. "I find it offensive," says this poet, "when something is criticized...merely because it is new." The ultimate problem with blind adherence to everything ancient and with quick condemnation of everything modern is that this attitude denies the great authors of the past one of their most important achievements-their creation of a never-ending tradition of influence: "If the Greeks had hated anything new as much as we do now, what would now be old?" Our poet had previously observed about the ancient Greeks that their earliest works are the greatest of all, so the attitude with which he takes issue, if it had prevailed, would have stopped any literary creativity since the time of Homer.

But who is this poet who is so outspoken in his attack on the self-appointed keepers of the classical flame, the precursors of today's critics and of some scholars? It is none other than Horace. In an open letter addressed to Emperor Augustus, Horace anticipated much of the seventeenth-century Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes.(11) Horace firmly came down on the side of the Moderns, among whom he numbered himself, but without being in the least disdainful of the Ancients or denying them their high standing. Virtually all his works, most famously his Odes, illustrate to us how sensible Horace's position is in balancing the old and the new and finding praiseworthy qualities in both. A moment's thought will make it clear that Horace's point applies not only to poetry but also to all creative endeavors in literature and the visual arts. No wonder that modern poet, painter, and filmmaker Jean Cocteau called the cinema la dixième Muse:(12) "the tenth Muse". So I close with an intentional (and non-metrical) misquotation from Homer: Kinêma moi ennepe, Mousa, polytropon!

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Footnotes:

*First published in E. Cavallini (ed. by), Omero Mediatico. Aspetti della ricezione omerica nella civiltà contemporanea, Bologna: Dupress 2007.
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1) Steiner 1996, xxviii.
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2) Quoted from Kniebe 2004 (interview with Petersen); my translation.
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3) *Iliad* VI 146-149 on the generations of man as compared to the regeneration of the leaves on a tree.
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4) The essays collected in Winkler 2006 address various thematic connections, deviations, and their contexts. My observations here follow my longer examination "The *Iliad* and the Cinema," in Winkler 2006, 43-67.
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5) *Iliad* IV 422-429 and 446-456; quoted from Lattimore 1951, 124 and 125.
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6) *Iliad* IV 543-544; quoted from Lattimore 1951, 127.
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7) *Iliad* XX 499-500; quoted from Lattimore 1951, 417.>
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8) Rossi's co-director was cult favorite Mario Bava, who was hired for the film's Polyphemus episode. In Bava's hands it became not only the longest (ca. 40 minutes) but also the most accomplished and most atmospheric sequence of Odysseus' encounter with the monstrous Cyclops, vastly superior to that in Camerini's and Konchalovsky's versions. Alessandro Bozzato, "L'occhio del Ciclope: momenti di cinema nell'*Odissea* di Franco Rossi," in Cavallini 2005, 27-39, provides a recent assessment.
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9) On this Petersen himself observed in an interview: "I think that, if we could consult with him up there, Homer would be the first today to advise: 'Get rid of the gods.' He knew exactly how stories were to be told in his time. The gods are permanently present [in Troy], in the dialogue. But the audience today can no longer deal with gods jumping out of the clouds and interfering in the duel between Hector and Achilles." Quoted from Zander 2004; my translation.
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10) Odyssey XI 204-8; quoted from Lattimore 1967, 173.
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11) Horace, Epistles 2, 1, especially lines 45-49, 63-65, 76-77 (indignor quicquam reprendi...quia nuper; quoted above), and 90-91 (quod si tam Graecis novitas invisa fuisset / quam nobis, quid nunc esset vetus?; quoted above).
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12) Cocteau 1992, 23, 123, and 56; cf. 176-177 and 192-193.
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