

Nick LOWE
Writing Troy

"I sold *Troy* as a pitch, and the first thing I said in that pitch was, 'I am proposing a ruthlessly stripped-down version of the Trojan War, concentrating on the two dominant heroes of either side - Hector and Achilles.' I don't remember the second thing I said in the pitch, because it was my first pitch and I was sweating through my jacket."

Troy is that Hollywood rarity, a writer's film, and a novice writer's at that: greenlit from that original pitch to Warner Brothers by teacher-turned-novelist David Benioff, who went on to write thirty-two drafts with no other writer involved at any stage. Yet at the time of his *Troy* commission, Benioff's only writing for the screen had been the adaptation of his own debut (and to date only published) novel *The 25th Hour* - whose final form owed a heavy and acknowledged debt to the mentoring of director Spike Lee. Off the back of *Troy*, Benioff has since become a hot screenwriter, with his third script *Stay* (his first non-adapted work) selling for over a million dollars. But *Troy* itself, whose first draft was written in October to December 2001, is still a calling-card script, the first solo flight of an ambitious emergent writer with some experience of the development process, but everything still to prove and a career hanging on the result.

This paper pieces together the story of the development of Benioff's *Troy* screenplay, and analyses Benioff's own subsequent accounts of the rationale governing his key adaptive choices: the fates of nine major characters, the radically collapsed timeline, the recasting of motivation, and the euhemerising of divine machinery. A key corroborative document is the extant shooting script draft dated 21 February 2003, which presents a snapshot of the screenplay in late development - including significant Homeric material subsequently dropped from later drafts or edited out of the cinema cut, but also a startling final scene confirming the very unHomeric fate of five major characters. As a Homeric adaptation, Benioff's *Troy* is not incoherently conceived, but is rather a systematic attempt by an intelligent if underexperienced writer to reconcile his deeply engaged reading of the *Iliad* with the dictates of contemporary Hollywood screenwriting doctrine. Where conflicts arise, Benioff has been readier to capitulate than a more senior player would in the same position; an instructive comparison here is with the veteran writer-director Nicholas Meyer's rejected screenplay for the *Odyssey*, which remains the benchmark achievement in accommodating Homeric material to mainstream Hollywood narrative values, but at the cost of never actually making it to the screen. Benioff's own uneasy but interesting choices encapsulate the dilemma of the Hollywood writer who finds himself, in the notorious absence of any academic consultant to the production, simultaneously the principal warden of authenticity to source and a commercial artist under intense pressure to prove himself professionally. The curious end product is as much a reading of current Hollywood narrative ideology through the lens of the *Iliad* as vice-versa.