An adaptation of the ‘Epic of Gilgamesh’
for the screen

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The Game of Uruk

Issues in adapting the Epic of Gilgamesh for the screen
An adaptation of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* for the screen

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This thesis is presented in two volumes. The first contains Issues in adapting the Epic of Gilgamesh for the screen and Annotations to the screenplay. The second contains a screenplay The Game of Uruk, a long-held ambition to write an adaptation of the Epic of Gilgamesh. I thank the Department of Communication and Cultural Studies at the University of Wollongong for giving me the opportunity to realise a long-held ambition to write an adaptation of the Epic of Gilgamesh.

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The Game of Uruk

Issues in adapting the Epic of Gilgamesh for the screen
ISSUES IN ADAPTING *THE EPIC OF GILGAMESH* FOR THE SCREEN.

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Bibliography 1
Introduction

In discussing my adaptation of the Ancient Sumerian *Epic of Gilgamesh* I am referring to a text which does not exist, a film that has not been made. What does exist is a screenplay with the working title *The Game of Uruk* where the visual style and features of an envisaged film are suggested through the medium of words and accompanying visual material. Art Historian Erwin Panofsky writing on film has said that ‘the screenplay has no aesthetic existence independent of its performance and ... its characters have no aesthetic existence outside the actors’ (1934). While this may be debatable, discussion of an adaptation for screen is certainly more difficult without an extant screen text. My adaptation, essentially, exists in the imagination dependent on the unreliability of words to suggest a visual world for the cinema.

Writing an adaptation of an ancient text is more problematic than adapting a contemporary play or novel since the source is rarely available as a definitive published text. In the case the *Epic of Gilgamesh* the source is truncated, and culturally overlaid by the contributions of different languages and peoples over more than two thousand years. In this discussion I will deal briefly with what have been some of the most significant issues in the development of this adaptation for the screen. Forming a relationship with *The Epic of Gilgamesh* is a large undertaking and as film maker Gillian Armstrong points out, there is no point in entering into the process of adaptation unless you love the text (*Good Weekend* Jan 3-4 1998). In my view the *Epic of Gilgamesh* is the most significant literary work of the ancient world with great potential for adaptation to the cinema.

Recorded on cuneiform tablets some time before 3,500 BC. the *Epic of Gilgamesh* concerns Gilgamesh of Uruk, ‘two-thirds god, one-third man’ and his friendship with Enkidu, wild man of the plains. The death of Enkidu leaves Gilgamesh
Recorded on cuneiform tablets some time before 3,500 BC, the *Epic of Gilgamesh* concerns Gilgamesh of Uruk, ‘two-thirds god, one-third man’ and his friendship with Enkidu, wild man of the plains. The death of Enkidu leaves Gilgamesh heart-broken and sends him on a quest for immortality. Even in outline the *Gilgamesh* epic is powerful and dramatic. It is a text which explores themes of grief and mourning, taking the epic into psychological territory with issues of identity and subjectivity which still speak to a reader today.

The transformation of any literary text to the different sign system of the screen presents many challenges since as Peter Wollen (1998) has said in *The Semiology of the Cinema*:

> Unlike verbal language, primarily symbolic, the cinema is ... primarily indexical and iconic. It is the symbolic which is the submerged dimension. We should therefore expect that in the ‘poetry’ of the cinema, this aspect will be manifested more palpably. (p100)

Transference of a poetic literary text to ‘poetry’ of the screen requires decisions about creating dramatic shape and developing characterisation. Further, the cinema is often seen as communicating differently with the spectator from the way a written text communicates, and in the process of transformation from one sign system to another, a new text will emerge where meanings may be changed, even distorted. Such new readings may enhance the scope of the source as I would argue of Sally Potter’s adaptation of Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando* or Anthony Minghella’s version of Michael Ondaatje’s *The English Patient*. Equally an adaptation may disappoint some audiences.

In the interview already mentioned Armstrong comments that the better the original, the more difficult the task of adaptation. Audience expectations will be
higher and greater complexity of meanings must be conveyed. The adaptation process which has occupied a significant place in cinema since the beginning, always faces the challenge that audiences familiar with an original text have been notoriously difficult to please. Those who know the Gilgamesh material might approach the Epic looking for different things. Some would have developed an interest through a study of ancient literatures or cultures. Others would have encountered the Epic of Gilgamesh from a study of mythology, psychology, or religion. Whatever the context, the epic does seem to produce in its readers a strong sense of personal ownership of the text.

Film adaptations are often judged on how ‘faithful’ they are. I have been interested in attempting the kind of adaptation which would not disappoint those who know Gilgamesh and the ancient cultures, but the problem is that

Fidelity criticism depends on a notion of the text as having and rendering up to the (intelligent) reader a single, correct ‘meaning’ which the film-maker has either adhered to or in some sense violated or tampered with. (McFarlane 1996, p8)

In addition, for many the Epic has iconic status, as even a brief persual of the quantity and variety of Gilgamesh sites on the Net illustrates. Even so, the Epic no longer has the status of a living cultural or religious text. The Epic remained unknown for almost two thousand years before its reemergence in the late nineteenth century. In my view adaptation of the Epic of Gilgamesh does not invite the kind of charges of cultural appropriation that have, for example, been levelled at adaptations of The Mahabharata of Peter Brook and Jean-Claude Carriere.

In writing The Game of Uruk I have approached the challenges of adaptation from two points of view. Firstly, in attempting to come to an understanding of the source and forming my own reading. Secondly, in dealing with the practical problems of writing in order to create a valid adaptation of this significant text. It is the
dramatic qualities of the Epic that have inspired this adaption, particularly the epic's characters and themes. I have set out to find my own understanding of The Epic of Gilgamesh as a writer in order to write a screenplay suitable for a mainstream audience. I envisage this adaptation as more suited to the British cinema because of its style and the inclusion of English characters and settings.

My screenplay The Game of Uruk is not intended as 'historical' drama, however, a sympathetic adaptation of this complex work requires consideration of some of the cultural meanings that are found within it. The difficulties of developing this kind of understanding might be sidestepped by a looser kind of adaptation employing only some key elements (setting/plot/character) from the source. With this type of transformation the screenwriter would not need to develop this kind of relationship or even read the original text. Many successful screen adaptations have of course been done in this way as Hollywood screenwriter Ben Hecht reveals in discussing his work on Gone with the Wind (1954). Some 'How-to' manuals for screenwriters advocate the option of changing the context or updating the source: Jane Austen’s Emma to Clueless, or Shakespeare’s Taming of the Shrew to Ten Things I hate about You.

In this screenplay on the other hand I set out to adapt the whole story as it is generally known today. I have also included as subplot the story of the discovery and decipherment of the Epic by George Smith and Sir Henry Rawlinson of the British Museum. The Epic of Gilgamesh provides a mythical core to the screenplay while the Victorian discourse of scholarship provides the context for a parallel narrative. A spectator would be aware of experiencing the epic through a European perspective of 1872-6 which serves as a metaphor for the present while providing a story in its own right.
Finding the 'essence'

In order to arrive at a valid reading as Dudley Andrew (1984) says 'the analyst needs to probe the source of power of the original' (p 98). In writing an adaptation, the writer needs to decide where to begin. In my reading, this 'source of power' in the Epic of Gilgamesh is the way that the epic deals with the experience of death and grieving. Despite the passage of time, the depiction of the pain of death and mortality is so vivid that the Gilgamesh epic continues to capture the vulnerability of human existence. If a notion of 'universality' is possible, it will be found here.

Research connected with writing a creative piece differs from other kinds of academic research in that it often seems less systematic and is necessarily broader in its area(s) of interest. Achieving a balance between respect for the source(s) and developing the independence needed to create something new is critical in the kind of adaptation that I have attempted. A systematic academic exploration of a particular area is not necessarily useful and may in fact deaden the material. While I have not set out to become a 'Gilgamesh' or Mesopotamian scholar, for example, I have approached the text and other ancient cultural material looking for ways to bring it to life and make it connect with a spectator.

I have taken a similar approach to research for the parallel plot. A search for a quality as elusive and problematic as 'essence' is not on the face of it an academic exercise. The challenge is in coming to terms with the ancient cultures and treating the sources(s) with respect, while at the same time the major task is in transforming the material for a cinema audience. Making oneself open at a personal level to what the work may be saying is part of developing a reading, though no modern reading can claim to correspond with ancient readings. My own relationship with the Epic of Gilgamesh began over twenty years ago when I came across an outline of the
Gilgamesh story. Even before finding the translation by N.K. Sandars I could feel the dramatic power of the source, which has held me ever since.

The heart of the Epic is Gilgamesh’s grief at the death of his friend. Gilgamesh, god-king of Uruk sits beside Enkidu’s corpse unable to give up the body for burial. The friendship that united human, animal and divine and brought harmony to Uruk has ended. This moment is the turning point. The ancient story captures the kind of pain caused by some deaths, the kind that divide a life into before and after. Sandars gives the section in this way:

He touched his heart but it did not beat, nor did he lift his eyes again. When Gilgamesh touched his heart it did not beat. So Gilgamesh laid a veil over his friend. He began to rage like a lion, like a lioness robbed of her whelps. This way and that he paced around the bed, he tore out his hair and strewed it around. He dragged off his splendid robes and flung them down as though they were abominations.

In the first light of dawn Gilgamesh cried out, ‘I made you rest on a royal bed, you reclined on a couch at my left hand, the princes of the earth kissed your feet. I will cause all the people of Uruk to weep over you and raise the dirge of the dead. The joyful people will stoop with sorrow; and when you have gone to the earth I will let my hair grow long for your sake, I will wander through the wilderness in the skin of a lion.” The next day also in the first light, Gilgamesh lamented; seven days and seven nights he wept for Enkidu, until the worm fastened on him. Only then he gave him up to the earth. for the Annunnaki, the judges, had seized him. (p95 ff) (My italics)

My screenplay has been built around the italicised lines. The horror and sadness of this scene is the ‘essence’ of this adaptation of the Epic of Gilgamesh and for me the power of these lines has travelled across five thousand years. It is the centre of the adaptation; the pivotal moment, the centre of the plot contruction. In The Game of Uruk Gilgamesh and Enkidu first appear in this scene. Scenes derived from Tablets I - VII are constructed as the past and shown in flashback and those based on Tablets VIII - XII follow this moment.
**Forming a relationship with the source**

The task of transforming the *Epic of Gilgamesh* from the medium of epic poetry to drama for the screen involves the challenge of coming to terms with cultural discourses of the past. An understanding of what kind of text the *Epic* is would be helpful before attempting this task. If an adaptation of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* is to meet the expectations of a spectator who knows the source it must attempt to come to terms with the source's more intangible elements. Elements which film analyst Dudley Andrew (1984) describes as the 'original's tone, values, imagery, and rhythm'. Appropriate 'stylistic equivalents in film' need to be found for these.

The difficulty here is of course that the Sumerians, the mysterious 'black headed people' who created the *Epic of Gilgamesh* vanished long ago and with them answers to many questions about the epic. Little is known about the origins of the Sumerians except that they were culturally different from the Semitic peoples who worked on the epic, subsequently offering their own overlaying of the material. The *Epic of Gilgamesh* has become a polyphonic work and no single modern adaptation could encompass the range of possible responses to the Gilgamesh texts.

In *The Masks of God Vol III* Joseph Campbell speaks of the Gilgamesh story as 'the first great epic of the destiny of man' (p87, 1964) but the concept of the literary epic was probably unknown in Mesopotamia. In calling the story of Gilgamesh an 'epic' certain assumptions have already been made, the *Epic of Gilgamesh* as it is called, is being seen as sharing features of a cultural narrative which employs gods and heroes, myth and history.

Yet calling the Gilgamesh poems an 'epic' is an imposition of a literary concept of a later period. When Aristotle, for example, discusses epic poetry in *Poetics* (c 335 BC) some three thousand years have passed since the first Gilgamesh stories.
appeared. While the title *Epic of Gilgamesh* has come to be used following its decipherment by modern scholars the term ‘epic’ assumes that the Gilgamesh poems form a unified text, which shares meanings with a variety of versions from widely divergent cultures and times. It tends to ignore the fact that the Gilgamesh story began as separate poems which were collected and given unity later.

Mesopotamian archivists on the other hand, called the Gilgamesh poems *iskaru*, which as Gilgamesh translator, John Maier explains is

usually translated as “series”, [with] the semantic range of “work assigned to be performed,” “materials or supplies for workmen,” and “finished products,” in addition to “literary work” or “collection of songs”.

However, the term *iskaru* does not reveal anything further about the nature or purpose of the poems.

As “literary work,” *iskaru* does not seem to indicate anything of the content, and is a designation often used for ritual texts. As it may also designate a collection of songs, however, the term does not shed much light on the genre of the work. (Gardner/Maier 1985, p 37)

In the Assyrian Ashurbanipal’s library where key fragments were found, poems were catalogued by first lines suggesting that they may have been so designated in the ancient world. The poems were unified in early Babylonian times when priest-scribes began treating the series as a single text.

Despite difficulties inherent in treating the poems as a unified composition they do seem to be about the same historical figure, named on the Sumerian ‘king lists’ as fifth ruler of Uruk who lived before 2,600 BC and is attributed with a reign of some 126 years. As Campbell states
Gilgamesh was, in fact, the last of those kings the lengths of whose reigns exceeded normal human years. (p87)

His predecessor and father Lugalbanda, the hero of other Sumerian poems, is attributed with a reign of 1200 years. In comparison with Lugalbanda Gilgamesh is a different kind of hero and I will discuss this issue in more detail later. For convenience throughout this discussion the poems will be referred to as The Epic of Gilgamesh, and with reservations, the term ‘epic’ will be used to designate the poetic series.

In addition to forming a view of the literary genre of the ‘source’, an adaptor of ancient literatures needs to consider the position of the text(s) within the culture(s) that produced it. Locating an ancient work is naturally more problematic than making decisions about a modern text, even one which is known today in more than one form. Cultural distance and the necessity of relying on fragments requires that the adaptor use creative judgement in developing a reading that is sympathetic to the nature of the text, and its position in the culture(s) which produced it.

Translations

Unless one is a cuneiform scholar, the would-be adaptor must approach the Epic of Gilgamesh through translation. Translations will, of course, be coloured by the positionality of translator(s) and reader(s) of later times. The Epic also works within a framework of other Sumerian mythic material presenting a complex intertextuality that further complicates (enriches) interpretation. Writing an adaptation then that is true ‘to the letter’ of the original is not possible even in theory with the Gilgamesh material. Five Gilgamesh poems were unified by Akkadian scribes to produce a single work now regarded as the ‘Epic’. These poems are: Gilgamesh and the Land of the

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Living, Gilgamesh and the Bull of Heaven, Enkidu and the Netherworld, Gilgamesh and Agga of Kish and The Death of Gilgamesh. Other Gilgamesh stories also exist.

Yet one could argue that despite changes somehow the Epic of Gilgamesh seems to have resisted localisation, retaining an identity over more than two thousand years. The process whereby a mythical hero’s name was changed and his deeds altered through appropriation by another culture, as the Romans did with the Greek, does not seem to have occurred with The Epic of Gilgamesh. The names Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and even Uruk their city seem to have been retained across the various cultures of the ancient world who were familiar with the text(s), outlasting Uruk itself. In a sense the Akkadian and the Babylonian versions leave their mark on the epic but perhaps without destroying what might be seen as the ‘essence’ of the original.

Modern adaptation of the Epic could be said to have its origin in 1872 when the first fragment was deciphered and translated into English by George Smith, Assistant Curator of Antiquities at the British Museum. Found at the site of ancient Nineveh by Sir Henry Rawlinson and his colleague Hormuzd Rassam, the tablet was part of a collection in the library of Assyrian king, Assurbanipal. The Gilgamesh epic began to reach modern audiences through this translation into English and subsequently into other European languages. Smith first deciphered Tablet XI which tells the story of a Great Deluge and shows similarities to the Biblical story but predates Biblical texts by some fifteen hundred years. Smith’s translation was followed in English by that of R. Campbell Thomson (1928) which became the basis of much subsequent work.

This adaptation draws mainly upon two later translations, one by NK Sandars (1972). Oxford scholar and archaeologist in the field, and one by co-translators John Gardner, novelist and John Maier, cuneiform scholar (1984). Later drafts have
included detail from the more recent translation by Maureen Gallery Kovacs (1989) of Stanford University including recently discovered Hittite fragments. For the screenplay however, I have relied substantially on the Sandars and Gardner/Maier versions. Sandars builds on the work of Campbell Thompson (1928), Alexander Heidel (1949), E.A. Speiser and A.K. Grayson (1955) and a fragment from O.R. Gurney (1964). Gardner and Maier draw on E.A. Speiser and A.K.Grayson. Both translations also incorporate material from general works on Sumerian culture by S.N. Kramer (1956) and others.

Translations of such ancient and incomplete texts can only offer a guide to the sources and their notes of explanation are as important as the lines themselves. This screenplay is not an adaptation of either translation as such but instead draws upon each and their notes, along with a variety of other sources from Sumer and other ancient cultures. Once again, my guide to selecting material has been dramatic. Had my purpose been to examine the Epic from literary or historical perspectives earlier translations may have been included. For this adaptation these two have worked well together with their differences and similarities reinforcing and complementing each other.

N.K. Sandars has written a prose version and describes her approach as follows:

It has seemed ... worth attempting a version which, while adding nothing that is not vouched for by scholarship, nor omitting anything of which the meaning is beyond doubt, yet will avoid the somewhat uncouth appearance of the line by line translation and will give the reader a straightforward narrative (Sandars 1972, p50)

As Sandars says this is a work intended for the ‘ordinary reader who is not also an Assyriologist or student of Ancient literatures and history’: the sort of ‘ordinary reader’ who might become a member of a cinema audience.
John Gardner and John Maier wrote their version in verse form and published it in 1984. It was completed just days before the death of John Gardner and was intended as a text for Gardner’s students at the State University of New York. This translation is described by John Maier as:

... a “top down” translation that emphasized large sections of literary discourse (schemata, speeches, verse paragraphs, columns, tablets, large narrative movements) rather than a “bottom up” translation that begins with cuneiform signs (and fragments of signs) and gradually builds up words and lines... one that, in particular, preserves the integrity of the poetic line (1984, p4 ff)

With its emphasis on dialogue, narrative rhythm and structure, this approach was very useful in the task of transforming the ancient poetry to drama for the screen. It is a creative writer’s translation. John Gardner had worked with the Gilgamesh material in his novel *The Sunlight Dialogues* (1972) but had developed his interpretation in the ten years this work took to complete.

I found that the Sandars version seemed to offer a sense of the Epic as a whole and an overall dramatic structure. It is the version which I read first and it informed my conception of the scope of the epic. However, the Gardner/Maier version gave fresh detail and a clearer sense of the style of the source. The Gardner/Maier version seemed to have a more filmic style but that of Sandars often supplied crucial interpretation of a moment that would become a scene.

Like others who have worked with this material my adaptation has taken many years to complete and the Gardner/Maier translation brought new energy to the project. Using both translations enabled me to develop what I hope is a coherent narrative. The Kovacs translation was particularly helpful in dealing with Tablets IV and V but I was unfamiliar with it when I began writing.
Oral tradition

The poems are generally believed by Assyriologists to have developed initially through an oral tradition and this would have shaped its relationship with an audience. Dealing with oral text offers particular challenges for adaptation but an oral text can offer the adaptor a starting point in the way that the reader is drawn into the story.

The Epic of Gilgamesh begins by speaking directly to the reader, posing questions and entering into a dialogue in some degree like an actor’s interaction with a spectator. The reader is placed on the spot:

Find the copper tablet-box
Slip loose the ring-bolt made of bronze,
Open the mouth to its secrets,
Draw out the tablet of lapis lazuli and read it aloud:
How Gilgamesh endured everything harsh, .... (Gardner/Maier p57)

The epic’s style is focussed on acts which suggests a series of shots and establishes an intimacy not unlike that achieved in the cinema through visual image.

It is not possible to know much about the audiences that would have read/heard these stories initially. J.G. Frazer author of The Golden Bough (1922) believes that all myth originated in ritual. S.H Hooke (1963) also discusses different kinds of myth which may have begun as cult rituals. The existence of a priest class of both men and women, suggests that priests may have been a significant part of this audience. The earliest versions of the epic may have been used as ritual texts but there is no direct evidence to suggest that they were integrated into ceremonies, for example in the way that Enmaa elish, the myth of Creation features in the Babylonian New Year festival.
Literacy seems to have been the preserve of a scribal class which overlapped with the priestly and does not seem to have been widespread enough to have resulted in a definitive version of the epic in Sumerian times. The source of power of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* lies in its relationship with oral tradition which has not only contributed to its wide appeal, but has also developed its richness through the contributions of diverse ancient peoples.

Difficulties of dealing with oral text are discussed by Craig Tapping in his article ‘Oral Cultures and the Empire of Literature’ (1989) which examines European responses to indigenous oral traditions such as those of Australia and Canada. Tapping’s argument that European literary perceptions restrict and distort cultural meaning(s) by failing to take into account performance discourses which give meanings through ‘speakerly difference and variation’ (p86), points to the problems of treating oral text as if it had always been literary. Such difficulties are bound to occur in dealing with ancient sources and are of course compounded when the text itself is a major source of information about the vanished culture.

The *Epic of Gilgamesh* as I have experienced it has been mediated by European scholarship. However, after working with the Gilgamesh material I now believe that the *Epic of Gilgamesh* at some stages has been a performance text enacted for a general audience by a storyteller, and not some kind of ritual or religious text. The epic’s use of dialogue, its characterisation and reliance on action, the dramatic structure of the episodes and above all what might be termed its ‘entertainment value’, suggest this connection with the participant. As an adaptor I have always felt that the rhetoric of the Sumerian poems is dramatic rather than poetic. The *Epic’s* emphasis is on the active and external, rather than the contemplative and introspective connection that poetry (especially ‘ritual’ poetry), tends to have with
the reader. I have approached the *Epic* primarily as a dramatic text rather than as a literary, historical or religious one.

That the Sumerians did have an oral performance tradition separate from that of religious ritual is evidenced by the survival of the *Dialogue Texts*. Henrietta McCall (1990) describes these as

... a form of popular entertainment, which may even have been enacted or recited at court, whereby two opposing points of view were put forward by two personified contestants who argued their respective merits, e.g. The Tamarisk and the Palm, The Grain and the Wheat, The Ox and the Horse, Summer and Winter. (p22)

Performance followed a set pattern and a winner was chosen. A culture which enjoyed one genre of general oral performance would be likely to enjoy others.

If, as I believe, the *Gilgamesh* epic was at some stage a kind of performance text it would still come within a definition of 'iskaru'. If this is the case, the *Epic of Gilgamesh* may be one of the world’s oldest general performance texts, from the simplest performance tradition of storyteller and audience. This performance tradition still exists in regions where fragments of the epic have been found. The 1997 BBC documentary *In the Footsteps of Alexander the Great* for example, includes footage of a travelling performer in an Iranian market place at Quse village enacting the murder of Darius III. Using a knife as the only prop, before a backdrop depicting a murder which occurred in 330 BC, his story still seems to hold relevance for its audiences.

What I find particularly significant here is the time-frame: that this enactment belies the passing of over two thousand years. Not only is Darius’ flight following Alexander’s victory a story still known in the region but even such local details as where Darius had stopped to water his camels have been remembered. The dramatic
style of the *Gilgamesh* story suggests that it too may have been performed in much the same way. If travelling performers had presented the *Gilgamesh* stories this might partly explain why Gilgamesh texts have been found over such a wide geographical area and why they continued to be produced over such a long period of time. The obvious affection that ancient cultures had for the series, motivating scribes to copy and circulate the material, may have been a response to similar qualities which speak to adaptors today.

**The written epic**

However much the *Epic of Gilgamesh* has been shaped by oral tradition, the survival of the epic owes more to traditions of writing and to the durability of the clay tablets on which it was written. The Gilgamesh series has become a polyphonic work from many languages, yet it is also a literal accumulation of traces and erasures as a result of the Mesopotamian practice of teaching writing through copying of important texts from a model.

Modern scholars have pieced the epic together from versions in several languages and several different cultural and historical periods. The various written versions of the epic known today show signs of having been reworked many times, a process that began very early with some existing tablets retaining the errors of student copyists. All have influenced the epic in different ways and it is probably impossible to discover very much about 'who speaks' through the texts. However, despite the difficulties of dealing with the oldest material, wherever possible I have based my screenplay on Sumerian rather than later Akkadian and Babylonian versions.
In this adaptation I have been attracted to the older Sumerian material for what I see as its pared down, tougher, more direct tone: its unsentimental view of life and death. I have attempted to capture this tone in *The Game of Uruk* as part of what I see as being the ‘essence’ of the text. The Sumerian worldview seems to be that primordial chaos is always close and that it is necessary to make the right choices. In addition to the *Epic of Gilgamesh* itself I have included other Sumerian myths and referred to Sumerian letters and spells for the screenplay.

This adaptation uses as its framework Sumerian myths about the cosmos. Specific myths that have been included are *The Descent of Inanna into the Nether World*, *The Myth of Adapa* and the myth of Inanna and Lilith in which Gilgamesh also features. Like the title ‘*Epic of Gilgamesh*’ these are merely a convenient way to designate the poems rather than the way they were known in Mesopotamia. A theme which recurs in these texts is the coming to terms with death and the afterlife.

*The Descent of Inanna* foreshadows the Greek myths of Persephone and Orpheus in describing the inevitable journey of the individual into darkness. It is one of several myths which depict a grim afterlife and is known in several incomplete versions. Inanna, guardian of the earth, makes her way through the seven gates to the Underworld kingdom of her sister Ereshkigal, giving up of part of her clothing and jewels at each gate. The 410 line fragment does not explain Inanna’s purpose but the view that she came to conquer given her nakedness and vulnerability seems unlikely. The exchange of Inanna for her husband Dumuzi (the priest-king preceeding Lugalbanda) allows Inanna to return to the heavens and is told in several incomplete versions.

My screenplay also refers to the story of Inanna’s tree which was taken over by Lilith and the snake. This story may have been a source for the Biblical story of
Adam and Eve. Kramer describes how Gilgamesh kills the snake and drives out Lilith and the bird deity Imdugud. Imdugud makes another appearance in the story of Adapa, an earlier part-divine king who was tricked by his father Ea into bringing mortality to humanity. I have added and blended these stories into the *Gilgamesh* material.

Sumerian texts like everyday personal letters seem to share a similar focus on the harsher aspects of existence. *Letters from Mesopotamia* selected and translated by A.Leo Oppenheim (1967) presents a collection of letters dictated to scribes and sent by courier. Their subject matter consists mainly of requests for gifts and sustenance or pleas for help. Despite the surprising speed of the Sumerian 'postal system' (overnight) the letter seems to have been used mainly in formal or desperate situations:

> Immediately after you left for the trip, Imgur-Sin arrived here and claimed: “He owes me one-third of a mina of silver.” He took your wife and your daughter as pledges. Come back before your wife and your daughter die from the work of constantly grinding barley while in detention. Please, get your wife and your daughter out of this. *Ur Excavations, Texts* (p91)

Oppenheim’s collection provided some of the detail of the ancient culture as well as some of the names for characters in the screenplay.

While I will return to this issue in more detail later it seems that the way that a culture chooses to express ideas has played a part in what meanings are explored. The letters, spells, fragments from the Sumerian world express struggle, doubt, and hardship - a tone to which audiences living in the grip of economic ‘rationalism’ might well relate. This is not say that there is not also delight and lyricism to be found.
in many works from Sumeria, but the winged beasts which I have used in the screenplay seem rarely cheerful and the depictions of everyday life are sombre.

Nor were the Sumerians in any hurry to make the journey across the sea of death. They believed that a bleak and dark afterlife awaited them and that it was no abstraction. To the Sumerians the Underworld even seemed close physically: reached literally through openings in the earth. I have used these ‘openings’ in the The Game of Uruk to suggest symbolically the precariousness of existence. The openings to the dark Underworld are physical in the Gilgamesh strand of the screenplay, while in the Victorian they are metaphorical - the social and political gulfs between people.

Ancient adaptation

Adaptations such as the one I have attempted would probably not be possible at all without the version written in the thirteenth century BC in Babylon, some fifteen hundred years after Sumer itself had ceased to exist. Collected by the exorcist priest Sin-Lequi-Uninni as twelve tablets, it is based on Akkadian versions which unified the epic in the Early Babylonian period. Sin-Lequi-Uninni gives the most complete edition of the epic. However, Sin-Lequi-Uninni’s text shows some significant differences from earlier material, particularly in the treatment of key characters Enkidu and the goddess Inanna.

Differences between Sumerian and Babylonian versions of the myth are discussed in Jeffrey H Tigay’s work The Evolution of the Gilgamesh Epic (1984). In addition, Tigay building on the work of Mesopotamian scholars like S.N Kramer, discusses the view of Morris Jastrow published in American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures (15:198) that
... Gilgamesh was "a favourite personage, to whom floating traditions were attached, in part by popular fancy and in part by deliberate efforts of literary compilers (1982 p 17)

The Akkadian versions on which Sin-Lequi-Uninni drew included material that did not originate in the Gilgamesh texts at all. Tigay compares Akkadian and Babylonian versions where it is difficult to distinguish which is source and which adaptation. Some adaptations made 'errors' of translation in taking the text from the Sumerian language to the Semitic. There is also evidence to support the view that some poets were still working from oral versions in the early Babylonian period. Tigay concludes 'We cannot really "explain" why these writers presented the epic as they did' (p22).

The relationship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu which I see as the dramatic centre of the epic seems to have been underdeveloped in the original Sumerian poems. The importance of Enkidu's death in relation to Gilgamesh's decision to search for immortality for example, grew as the iskarnu was unified by the Akkadian poets. Tigay shows that the Sumerian Enkidu was originally a beloved servant but in the Akkadian texts his role had grown to equal and beloved friend. Tigay sees development of the significance of the role of Enkidu as the major device which allowed the linking of the separate poems. If so this is a major 'plot point' in the story of the construction of the Gilgamesh material:

... it seems that converting Enkidu into Gilgamesh's friend was the seminal change by which the Akkadian author lent unity to the materials which he used in the epic. The epic is not a study of friendship per se. The motif of friendship serves as a device whereby Enkidu's death can be made to shock Gilgamesh into an obsessive quest for immortality, an effect which would probably have been less plausible had Enkidu been only a servant ... To enable Enkidu's death to turn Gilgamesh from the pursuit of lasting fame to a literal quest for immortality, the Akkadian author seized on the sporadic hints of
friendship in the Sumerian tales and applied them across the board consistently
termining Enkidu Gilgamesh’s friend (Akk. ibru. tappu), brother (ahu). and
equal (masil. kima) whom he loves and is to caress. (Tigay p29-30)

This inspired step is probably responsible for much of the appeal of the epic today.
The character of Enkidu caught the imagination and demanded a greater place in the
epic, a crowd pleaser for five millenniums. Without the dual heroes and the theme of
friendship and loss, the qualities that have inspired such great affection for the
Gilgamesh epic would have remained undeveloped.

While the role of Enkidu was being increased in the epic material, the character of
Inanna could be argued as faring less well from the adaptive process. Some feminist
historians have viewed Sumer as a kind of ‘matriarchy’ at the time when the epic first
the way the goddess Inanna/Ishtar was being depicted, as indicative of the status of
women in the two cultures.

The Sumerian scholar Dr Samuel Noah Kramer writes that about 2400BC
‘there is evidence to demonstrate the Sumerian woman was man’s equal,
socially and economically, at least among the upper classes’. But after this,
at the time when the Akkadian Semitic influence of the north becomes
paramount, the position of goddesses in relation to gods and of women
in relation to men is down-graded. (p182)

Inanna, the gentle fertility goddess of the Sumerian poems had become ferocious
Ishtar in the Babylonian texts. Differences between Inanna of the Sumerian texts and
the Ishtar whom Gilgamesh (understandably perhaps) rejects in the Late Babylonian
version are two different characters, leaving the adaptor with the challenge of
creating a consistent characterisation.
As an adaptor with a feminist perspective I have found the problem of depiction of Inanna/Ishtar indicative of the difficulties of depicting the feminine throughout the adaptation. I hope to have solved this problem through the adoption of a female narrational position for the story, an issue which I discuss later. The depiction of the feminine seems to be one of the areas where cultural adaptation from the Sumerian to the later Semitic cultures of Babylon and Assyria has had a great influence. In the days when Inanna was the nurturing Sumerian goddess of nature, that is when the Gilgamesh material first began to appear, the position of En or ruler, in Sumer could be occupied by either a male or female. Evidence suggests that counsellors of the city were both men and women. Early versions of the epic seem to resist male/female binarism especially in the Sumerian or Old Babylonian versions.

As a feminist I am interested in resisting this binarism but as a dramatist I am also interested in developing the female roles. The role of Ishtar is much larger in the Late Babylonian text but thus depicted is not the nurturing Inanna as she appears in the early sections of my screenplay. As ‘villains’ tend to do, the ferocious Ishtar of Sin-Lequi-Uninni offers more dramatic power. At this stage of writing I have not fully resolved these discrepancies but hope to do so by enlarging Inanna’s role through the story of Lilith and the snake. This gives a prior relationship between Gilgamesh and Inanna, a more developed ‘back story’.

A down-grading of the goddess in the Babylonian period seems to have occurred along with increases in the power of the temple priests. As the En became a male position only and was taken over by the priest class the cult of the male god Marduk assumed primacy. In the text of Sin-Lequi-Uninni Gilgamesh refuses marriage to the goddess Ishtar and condemns her for her savage treatment of previous husbands.
Tigay suggests that this section did not appear at all in the Sumerian version (Tigay 24, 175).

In Sin-Lequi-Uninni’s Tablet VI, Gilgamesh rejects Ishtar because she is more powerful than he is and he has no gifts that might impress her. He states that the gap between them will mean that his position will always be inferior. Gilgamesh is rejecting not only Inanna but the traditional role of En. He denounces Ishtar in a series of metaphors that deny her status as a fertility goddess. Ishtar is ‘the cooking fire that goes out in the cold’ ‘a back door that keeps out neither wind nor storm’ ‘a palace that crushes the brave ones defending it’. (Gardner/Maier p 149)

This denunciation of Ishtar continues in Column II, where Gilgamesh begins a litany of the fates of her former lovers: the shepherd bird, the lion, the stallion and the shepherd. These she has maimed, trapped, enslaved or transformed and destroyed in other ways. The list further brings out Ishtar’s betrayal of nature which was emphasised by her choices of lovers. Hence instead of caring for nature the text condemns her as capriciously destroying life. It is not just her power that seems to be at issue here but rather that ‘she is not what she seems’. (Gardner and Maier).

The reaction of Ishtar to Gilgamesh’s rejection could also be read as emphasising her inferiority to other gods. Enraged, she does not choose to wreak vengeance on Gilgamesh herself (for example by visiting one of the fates of the former lovers on Gilgamesh). Instead she relies on her parents Anu and Antum to assist her. At this time it seems that worship of Ishtar had taken over the Eanna temple in Uruk. This temple had once been devoted to Anu and Antum and it seems possible that the text here is intended to weaken the cult of Ishtar, perhaps to restore the older cult.

While understanding of cultural significances contained in the *Epic* is ultimately an impossible task, I have wanted to avoid writing the kind of adaptation that
assumes that cultural detail is fundamentally uninteresting and irrelevant to the spectator.

Adapting myth

The notion of what myth is and how it operates in a culture has been seen from widely differing perspectives for example as discussed by Karl Jung, Robert Graves, Joseph Campbell, Claude Levi-Strauss and Roland Barthes, to name just a few. Dudley Andrew (1984) speaks of the way that adaptation 'borrows' features of a pre-existing text, especially in response to...

... the generality of the original, its potential for wide and varied appeal, in short, its existence as a continuing form or archetype in culture. (p 98)

Adaptation of mythic material means finding ways to bring the power of myth to new audiences.

With regard to literary composition as Andrew observes 'connotation has thus taught us the primacy of the whole text over the mechanism of its parts'. (1984, p73) 'Whole text' implies narrative and myth is seen as its source and it is in this area that opposing voices have been raised when analysing the ways that myth functions.

Robert Graves (1955) draws a distinction between true myth and other kinds of mythical material:

True myth may be defined as the reduction to narrative shorthand of ritual mime performed on public festivals, and in many cases recorded pictorially on temple walls, vases, seals, bowls, mirrors, chests, tapestries, and the like (p 12)
Graves’ approach to myth is primarily historical and anthropological. It is a structuralist view of myth and culture that shares the approach of Claude Levi-Strauss’s studies of the stories of tribal cultures. Karl Jung on the other hand sees myth as an expression of the ‘collective unconscious’ a psychological ordering of experience from which cultures and individual subjectivities emerge.

Both views seem to take an essentialist position, the notion that there is something ‘universal’ about myth. In my view both Graves and Jung might see the *Epic of Gilgamesh* as myth for different though not mutually exclusive reasons. Graves might look for broad cultural themes such as the aspects of ritual marriage with the goddess and Enkidu’s journey to the Underworld. Jung on the other hand, might focus on the psychological journey of Gilgamesh and his encounters with characters who might qualify as ‘archetypes’.

In adapting the *Epic of Gilgamesh* I have taken the view that the themes of friendship and loss may be regarded as universal, from either an historical or a psychological perspective, but only in the sense that each culture will respond to them differently. I have attempted to explore the particularities of Sumerian subjectivity, to find in the slippages of meaning gaps that make the epic break with its context; that can be used to form correspondences with the present in order to construct a narrative. However Jungian principles about the psychological journey of life and some Jungian symbolism underpins the writing in *The Game of Uruk*.

Experiments in the cinema to reduce the dominance of narrative, films such as Luis Bunuel’s *Un Chien Andalou*, or Alain Resnais’ *Last Year at Marienbad*, have not changed the popularity of story with mainstream audiences, despite what appears to be an increasing sophistication in the spectator’s ability to read film narrative. In
his introduction to *Myth and Literature* (1973) John B. Vickery speaks of the vital links between myth and literary composition in any medium:

"myth forms the matrix out of which literature emerges both historically and psychologically. As a result, literary plots, characters, themes, and images are basically complications and displacements of similar elements in myths and folktales. (p ix)"

The view that there are mythic elements common to all story making is also explored by Clarissa Pinkola Estes, a storyteller and psychologist who argues that there are universal narrative patternings constantly being adapted but always leaving clues to the path that narrative has taken.

"... I compare the forms, reconstructing from ancient archetypal patternings learned through my years of training in archetypal psychology, which preserves and studies all the motifs and plots in fairy tales, legends and mythos in order to apprehend the instinctual lives of humans. (1992 p.16)"

Estes goes on to say that even where stories are incomplete or even get some of the elements wrong, a knowledge of the ‘archetypal patternings’ which reappear in all cultures will reveal how the tale can be completed correctly. This view implies that the way to adapt incomplete material such as the *Epic of Gilgamesh* is by using Jung’s archetypical patterning. Particularly in epic form, myth seems ideally suited to being transformed to cinema.

In *The Writer’s Journey: Mythic Structure for Storytellers and Screenwriters*, Hollywood story analyst Christopher Vogler emphasises an important connection between myth and the screen narrative. Taking a Jungian approach he suggests that the inclusion of mythic elements deepens resonance and gives significance by
satisfying the audience on a deeper psychological level. He views myth as providing
the centre of screenwriting. Vogler asks:

Then what is story? A story is also a metaphor, a model of some aspect
of human behaviour. It is a thought machine, by which we test out our
ideas and feelings about some human quality and try to learn more about it. (1992 pvii)

Christopher Vogler's influential work began as a pamphlet called 'A Practical Guide'
at the Disney studios. This work is based on Joseph Campbell's *The Hero has a
Thousand Faces*.

Campbell describes such patternings from ancient Egyptian or Mesopotamian
religions, which he claims reemerge in later cultures. Campbell discusses the
*Gilgamesh* material using Jung's theories in his powerful four volume work *The
Masks of God*. Campbell regarded myth as worthy of detailed study, seeing in myth
the basis of 'human cultural manifestation' and even the basis of thought:

It would not be too much to say that myth is the secret opening through
which the inexhaustible energies of the cosmos pour into human cultural
manifestation (1973 p3).

Vogler demonstrates how valuable such a 'secret opening' can be for screenwriters.
As novice screenwriters are often advised, the feature film is essentially the 'journey'
of a character who faces a challenge, deals with it and is changed as a result and the
*Epic of Gilgamesh* follows this path.

Vogler shows how unravelling myth can lead to greater sophistication in filmic
writing, not only adding significance to the narrative but also offering solutions to
technical problems in plotting and characterisation. Psychological theory that places
emphasis on 'universality' is bound to interest the film industry. Untroubled by
charges of essentialism, the cinema, especially as practiced by Hollywood finds practical application for mythic and archetypical construction: myth as a tool subsumed in the interests of the box office.

However, I would argue that the incorporating of mythic elements in film also allows the cinema to reinvent ancient links between drama and ritual enactment. Audiences keep coming back not only for entertainment and escape, but for answers to questions that were once the preserve of religion(s). This search involves the spectator in participation in a two way transaction that in turn gives film its social and cultural importance. Jostein Gripsrud (1998) comments:

The production of a film provides a raw material which regulates the potential range of experiences and meanings to be associated with it, but it is through audiences that films become ‘inputs’ into larger socio-cultural processes. (p203)

However, the nature of connection between myth and audience in the cinema is seen by some theorists as a function of language, another aspect of the process of communication.

Building on the anthropological work by Claude Levi Strauss, Roland Barthes takes a ‘scientific’ structuralist approach in order to show that for the cinema mythologies operate both in an internal and an external framework. Based on the work of linguistian Ferdinand de Saussure, Barthes treats cinema as functioning within a system of language and shows how a diversity of texts are read mythically by the subject/spectator, who recognises intrinsic mythic patterns in areas as different as the 'world of wrestling' or 'the iconography of the Abbe Pierre'. (1957)

Interesting though Barthes’ work is in terms of the spectator’s connection to the material, the reductive mode of structural analysis is less useful for creative
adaptation. As Dudley Andrew observes the success of adaptations ‘rests on their fertility’ (1984, p99). The task of the adaptor of myth for the screen must be more than using myth as a tool, a language or ‘grammar’, or for its cultural and psychological possibilities. The best use of myth for a creative adaptation is to develop scope and richness of meaning in order to open possibilities. An artificial layering in of mythic concepts advocated by some guides to screenwriting, can only result in predictability that can best be avoided by allowing the story to unfold in its own more haphazard way, letting the gaps, erasures and slippages to speak for themselves.

Since any film text will result from the input of many the range and scope offered by the screenplay is important, though the adaptor must also be aware as George Bluestone (1957) observes:

> If the history of aesthetics proves anything, it is that a given set of myths, symbols, conventions is unable to satisfy all spectators at all times in all places.’ (p31)

In writing this screenplay I have been interested in extending and opening up the possibilities of using the epic form so that the Epic of Gilgamesh might reach new audiences.

*From epic poetry to drama*

The most important decisions in transforming the Epic of Gilgamesh from the literary sign system of epic poetry to drama for the screen concern dramatic form. For many the Gilgamesh Epic is seen as tragedy and initially I would have agreed. Epic and tragedy as Gorg Lukacs (1962) says ‘both lay claim to portraying the
totality of the life-process. ‘*Gilgamesh* translator John Maier sees the epic in this way, and comments: ‘It is not necessary that the hero die in a tragic work; the key is the suffering for which the protagonist is partly responsible.’ (p 39). The *Epic of Gilgamesh* has already been adapted into a range of mediums and those adaptations which I have considered whether or not presented as drama, seem to share a tragic vision.

Polish composer Bohuslav Martinu has written an operatic adaptation, *The Epic of Gilgamesh* which was first performed in 1954-5. Martinu said in 1954 ‘The poem is truly dramatic. I’m even afraid it’s too tragic’. Based on Campbell Thompson’s translation, this work has been performed in English, German and Czech. Martinu described its form as ‘neither a cantata nor an oratorio, simply an Epic’. He sees the *Epic* as dealing with:

... questions of friendship, love and death. In *Gilgamesh* the wish to find answers to these questions is expressed with great intensity and almost painful anxiety ...

The work is in three parts: Part I *Gilgamesh* Part II *The Death of Enkidu* and Part III *The Invocation*. Martinu’s *The Epic of Gilgamesh* captures this intensity.

Herbert Mason, scholar in Near Eastern Languages and Literatures also sees the epic as tragic. Mason first encountered Gilgamesh at Harvard in the mid fifties in a course in Oral Epic Tradition. Mason read E.A. Speiser’s translation and says:

I lost interest in the other epics, stopped going to Dr Lord’s fine lectures ... because I was audaciously secluding myself in an empty room in Emerson Hall writing an “Epic of Gilgamesh” in longhand and in *my* style, saying what I had (and needed) to say. (1970 p108)
He speaks of the way that the *Epic* connected with his feelings about his father's death which occurred when he was seven. 'When I first read the epic I felt I had received a wound, or rather, I felt that a wound in me had been exposed' (p. 109).

Mason calls his work a ‘verse narrative’ and uses modern poetic language:

> I have tried to retell an old story simply and to infuse it with as much passion, immediacy, and specific wisdom as I have known. At times my line of narration is very prosy indeed, at times I hope I achieve poetry in the evocation. (p. 114)

Mason sets out to capture the subjective connection that the epic still makes with the reader and to give a personal reading. Initially I would have agreed with this approach and in looking for ways to write the adaptation as tragedy for the screen I considered film adaptations of Shakespearean tragedy.

There is not space here to discuss this issue in any detail, however, I felt that those Shakespearean adaptations which have enjoyed the greatest popular success, and those which I personally prefer, have heightened intimacy between spectator and protagonist in a way that tends to alter the significance of the tragic protagonist. The screen's ability to isolate the face gives a special kind of connection between spectator and protagonist, as Barthes explores in *Mythologies* (1973) in his essay 'The Face of Garbo'. This connection is arguably different from that with the hero on stage. In the theatre especially, the protagonist of a Shakespearean tragedy is seen in a *context* signified by the visual/aural patterning of the production and it tends to be the *stature* of the protagonist which comes across the footlights.

The cinema, on the other hand, offers more opportunity to present the protagonist as an individual. I feel that this quality is particularly valuable in depicting Gilgamesh, as a character to whom a mainstream audience might be able to relate. I see choice of
form as fundamental in shaping the way that the spectator interacts with the hero. Since form dictates not just the way that the characters are interpreted and the meanings but also the way that the film text is structured. The use of tragic form in my view results in major structural problems in adapting the *Epic*.

The adaptor of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* must decide whether s/he is dealing with one protagonist, or two. If the tragic form is chosen, Enkidu who functions as Gilgamesh’s ‘other’ has almost an equal claim to sharing significance as tragic protagonist. As I see it, if *The Epic of Gilgamesh* were to be adapted as tragedy, it should be a variety of love tragedy and Enkidu’s death would become the major climax. This seems to be the approach chosen by many, including Martinu.

However, my purpose has been to adapt the whole of the epic as it is generally known and tragic form as I see it would make this impossible. Tablet VII column vi dealing with Enkidu’s death is too close to the middle of the epic and even harder to justify than Antony’s somewhat early departure in Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra*. All of the section about Gilgamesh’s search for immortality - that is Tablets VIII through to XII - would need to be cut creating a briefer, intense focus on the first half of the epic. This leaves out the epic’s theme of the gaining of wisdom and skews the focus on to destructive transgression. It ignores the fact that Gilgamesh dies an old man beloved by his people. In my view the use of tragic form is the imposition of a structure alien to the epic and one that does not facilitate its transformation to the screen.

The *Epic of Gilgamesh* was being produced long before Greek tragedy began its participation in moral and religious discourse in Athenian culture with its lasting influences on shaping the aesthetic through which ‘Western’ drama views itself. The
world view it expresses I would argue is not that of Greek theatre. As Elaine Aston and George Savona (1991) point out:

... the tragic discourse is based on philosophical dialogues of right and wrong. In terms of thematic or ideological continuity, it aims to provide universal 'truths' in order to give meaning to life ... (p56)

The tragic ending implies that whenever certain cultural values cease to guide a society destruction will result. The tragic form is then ultimately coercive. In my reading the Gilgamesh Epic explores concepts of identity and communication, what it means to be human, themes that have been reinterpreted by different cultures associated with the source. The epic celebrates human potential and the intention of The Game of Uruk is to assert and explore these notions of possibility.

Epic to screen romance

In working from a source which was initially an oral text adaptation for the screen entails transformation of the text to a form which is extrinsic to it. As Craig Tapping (1989) says in "Oral Cultures and the Empire of Literature", 'Form is always a message .... frequently the most significant message' in working with oral text:

Our quest, returning to the repressed of oral culture, is to un-block, to learn to hear and see the cultures which exist not - as is currently fashionable - in or on the margins of, but actually outside our documents and archives. And here, the very old begins to look like the very new. (p91)
Adaptation of ancient myth requires an emphasis on beginnings and continuation and for this reason, the form which I prefer to tragedy is the romance. Writing the epic as a romance not only avoids the closure of the tragic ending but also offers a dramatic shape that I believe is more effective in making the epic ‘new’. In J.A Cuddon’s definition, romance is ‘principally a form of entertainment’ where

... characters ... live in a courtly world somewhat remote from the everyday. This suggests elements of fantasy, improbability, extravagance and naivete. It also suggests elements of love, adventure, the marvellous and the ‘mythic’... a narrative of heroic or spectacular achievements...(1979, p578)

In *The Game of Uruk* the romance offers a way of integrating aspects, of capturing the ancient world as well as the framing world of nineteenth century Europe.

Choice of the romance with its discourse of the quest, and its primacy of story, allows the adaptation to attempt a wider reading of meanings. In my reading, the *Epic of Gilgamesh* celebrates life and says that loss is part of ‘the totality of the life process’ but that transformation of the self does not end with the death of the beloved. The journey of Gilgamesh is towards maturity, a continuing process and part of this is coming to terms with the loss of Enkidu. Any adaptation of the whole epic as I see it depends on Gilgamesh being the sole protagonist. The character of Enkidu is a ‘supporting role’.

I have also adopted the romance form for what I see as its closer resemblance to the *iskaru*, the series, offering stylistic flexibility, wider thematic possibilities and a less confronting connection with the spectator than the moral *exemplar* of the tragedy. Romance also offers potential for a filmic rhythm, which like the *Gilgamesh iskaru* connects the episodes and extends narrational possibilities. I have set out to explore the *Epic*’s social and psychological rather than moral construction of identity.
the view that human relationships function within various discourses of power, so that in this way at least, the ‘very old begins to look like the very new’.

In *The Game of Uruk* I have been interested in exploring power and its effects on subjectivities both individual and cultural, rather than the notion that a protagonist breaches *the* (essentialized) moral code at his peril. The hero proceeds through a maze of social and political discourses of power, some of which he has internalised, and some of which he may be in a position to change.

**Dealing with hero discourse(s)**

Since epic poetry shares with cinema the centrality of the hero, writing an adaptation of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* for the screen means deciding to what extent filmic hero discourse impinges on characterisation. I would argue that the hero of myth and the hero of popular cinema while sharing similarities, show some essential differences. I have attempted to develop a characterisation for Gilgamesh that partly contests aspects of the hero as represented in mainstream cinema.

As Joseph Campbell has said of the hero in myth:

.... the hero figure points a way through life’s most baffling and fearful obstacle - death. No mortal quite understands it .... But mythology offers another, metaphorical truth, reassuring and humane.  

The hero endures. He has confronted death, as well as the agonies leading to it. He has crossed alone into unknown territory, suffered, and returned. So will we, his experience tells us.... The hero myth is universally a powerful shaper of beliefs, rituals and arts. Yet despite its countless variations, there is only one hero story... even if you haven’t heard this story before you will recognize it. (pp 32-33)

In patriarchal cinema on the other hand, the talents of actor combined with cinema technologies, often use the hero to reinforce a phallocentric stereotype of invincibility.
and sexual dynamism that simultaneously attracts and alienates the spectator. Where the hero of myth offers a discourse that is ‘reassuring and humane’, this cinematic hero is rarely either.

In other Sumerian epic poetry the heroic generally intersects with a patriarchal discourse of the warrior. Since Gilgamesh is son of Lugalbanda this element might be expected in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. Lugalbanda’s great deeds, including victory over the winged deity Zu and a return alive from the Underworld, would have been familiar material. Yet despite this intertextuality Lugalbanda’s triumphs are not mentioned at all in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. Lugalbanda is mentioned only briefly when Gilgamesh is assured that Lugalbanda his ‘personal god’ will help him defeat Humbaba. However, when Gilgamesh actually needs Lugalbanda’s help this ‘personal god’ is strangely absent. Gilgamesh’s mother, the goddess Ninsun, on the other hand, plays a significant role in the *Epic* and her involvement makes Lugalbanda’s absence more obvious.

In the *Epic of Gilgamesh* I see the feminine constructed partly to contest the patriarchal implications of hero discourses. At most key stages in the story female characters take the role of advisor to Gilgamesh. Ninsun interprets Gilgamesh’s dreams in the beginning and produces guidance after the death of Enkidu. At key points significant female characters move the story along. Inanna’s Priestess is responsible for bringing Enkidu out of the wilderness and debates with him the value of being human. In the later phases, Siduri, the gods’ winemaker tries to make Gilgamesh accept the impermanence of life.

A Gilgamesh character might be constructed to fit a contemporary ‘Western’ cinema hero stereotype. Gilgamesh is strong, invincible and has all the gifts of both parents. Any cinema adaptation would need an attractive actor for the role but I
would argue that the *Epic of Gilgamesh* contests the view of masculinity implied by many cinematic heroes. Something different is apparent from the beginning. The Sandars’ translation gives the opening line of the poem in the voice of the storyteller: ‘I will proclaim to the world the deeds of Gilgamesh’ and begins by discussing Gilgamesh’s *wisdom*. Gilgamesh is being treated as a kind of sage, rather than as another warrior hero. Kovacs calls this section The Legacy:

*He who has seen everything, I will make known (?) to the lands.*
*I will teach (?) about him who experienced all things (p 3)*

However, the poem is dealing here with Gilgamesh’s career in retrospect. The summary of Gilgamesh’s life is disrupted by a change in perspective as the poem begins to deal with the start of Gilgamesh’s story. The focus changes with a depiction of Gilgamesh’s tyrannical nature and behaviour.

It is clear that despite Gilgamesh’s ‘heroic’ qualities - his physical gifts, invincibility in protecting Uruk from her enemies (qualities a cinematic hero might envy) at the *beginning* of his story Gilgamesh is condemned as an arrogant oppressor. Gilgamesh ‘leaves no son with his father’, no ‘bride to the young groom’. Gilgamesh the invincible warrior, preys on his own city:

*But the men of Uruk muttered in their houses,*
*“Gilgamesh sounds the tocsin for his amusement, his arrogance has no bounds by day or night ....”* (Sandars p 62)

Gardner/Maier stress that while ‘the raising of his weapon’ has no equal, he ‘runs wild with the young lords of Uruk through the holy places. ’ (117-11)
It is clear that the *Epic* is saying that power and physical superiority is not enough to make a hero. Gilgamesh's shortcomings are emphasised by repetition as the people petition the gods. There follows a series of brief sequences: the gods' conversation about making a rival and glimpses of Enkidu's life in the wilderness. The contrast between Gilgamesh and Enkidu (in a way that is almost filmic) reinforces the extent of Gilgamesh's betrayal of the city. With the introduction of the character of Enkidu the *Epic of Gilgamesh* is setting up a different discourse of hero and offering a more complex depiction of masculinity. Enkidu is Gilgamesh's physical equal but Enkidu is a hero who is also champion of the people.

The warrior discourse continues to face symbolic disruption in sequences concerning Gilgamesh's dreams. Sumerians placed great significance on dreams and texts discussing the meanings of dreams have survived. In the *Epic* dreams are always truthful, whether their truth is accepted or not. In the first dream sequences in the *Epic* Gilgamesh the invincible is suddenly disturbed by two dreams of vulnerability. The following lines from the Gardner/Maier version describe how Gilgamesh dreams of a star falling at his feet:

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Uruk, the land, towered over it:
the people swarmed around it.
the people pressed themselves over it:
the men of the city massed above it;
companions kissed its feet. (p 82)
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Not only is Gilgamesh unable to lift the star but he is also troubled by the love that overwhelms him. In a second similar dream Gilgamesh finds an axe:

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Over the assembly of Uruk of the Sheepfold an axe fell.
Uruk, the land, towered before it
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Similar feelings result. It is Ninsun who 'unties' the dreams:

Go, [find him], I say; this is a strong companion able to save a friend, strong in the land; power belongs to him. Like a shooting star of Anu he has awesome strength. (Gardner/Maier p 86).

With this answer the epic begins to offer the alternative discourse of brotherhood, significantly I would argue as interpreted and guided by the female characters.

Symbolised by star and battleaxe, Enkidu is connected with the people from the beginning. Enkidu arrives in the city to interrupt Gilgamesh's customary depredations on the bridehouse and a wrestling match follows. The Epic stresses that the combatants are equally matched. When Gilgamesh ultimately gains the advantage in combat he abruptly chooses not to kill Enkidu. Gardner/Maier give an Old Babylonian version which heightens the ambiguity of whether Gilgamesh wins, or simply tires of fighting:

Gilgamesh and Enkidu
wrestled one another.
locked like bulls.
they shattered the doorpost

and the wall shook.
As Gilgamesh bent his knee.
his foot on the ground.
his anger abated
and he turned away. (p100)

Instead of serving the gods' purpose ('so that Uruk may find peace') Enkidu becomes for Gilgamesh a companion and friend:
They seized one another, embracing, took one another's hands like [brothers] (p 102)

and for the reader/spectator, a point of reference for constructing the heroic.

In the Humbaba section of the epic which follows, dream sequences continue to comment on the ambiguity and contradictions inherent in hero discourses. Though Gilgamesh has lost his alienation from life he remains trapped within the 'great deeds' discourse. He remains determined to perform deeds worthy of being carved on stone so that his name will not be forgotten. He decides to challenge Humbaba, the dragon/ogre of the forest. Humbaba appears to be an 'evil' being, meaning perhaps that he is against nature since 'no birds sing' in his forest, but Gilgamesh's main reason for challenging him seems that no one else has ever defeated him. A series of dreams of ill-omen warn of the futility of this enterprise. Gilgamesh's first dream is that a mountain falls on him and that he and Enkidu are as 'flies' before it. A second dream concerns a savage battle with a 'wild bull of the wilderness' and a third that he is struck at by lightning and lost among flame and falling ash.

As Samuel Noah Kramer (1969) says of Mesopotamian deities the 'divine hierachy ... was male-dominated' following Anu's defeat of Nammu, goddess of the primeval sea, "who gave birth to heaven and earth". The dreams represent in symbolic terms the futility of Gilgamesh's arrogance in setting himself against the patriarchal gods Enlil and Anu who have given the forest to Humbaba. After killing Humbaba, Gilgamesh is abandoned not only by his father Lugalbanda, but also by Shamash, the sungod, in whose name he set forth. Gilgamesh is punished by Enlil despite his request that Humbaba's powers be given to the people not to himself.

The betrayal of Gilgamesh by the gods whom he had expected to help him contests further the value of performing great deeds to enhance reputation.
Gilgamesh had propitiated the gods with the appropriate ceremony before setting off, and Ninsun had placed her son in the care of Shamash. Yet none of the gods intervene on his behalf when Gilgamesh suddenly finds himself in opposition to Anu and Enlil. He is abandoned as Adapa had been.

Ambiguities in the depiction of the heroic are, of course, compounded by the fragmentation and incompleteness of Tablet V. In *The Game of Uruk* I have interpreted this section as meaning that Gilgamesh pursues Humbaba believing that with Enkidu’s strength and loyalty he can now achieve the impossible. Gilgamesh over-rides Enkidu’s warnings and misgivings and achieves his victory only because of Enkidu’s help. The hollowness of such heroics is emphasised by the capriciousness and unreliability of Shamash and Lugalbanda.

One way that the *Epic* continues to speak is in this exploration of power dynamics in love relationships. Enkidu is sent by the gods to teach Gilgamesh a lesson, though the lesson turns out to be different from that intended by the gods. Gilgamesh and Enkidu are virtually ‘equals’ in a physical sense but power belongs to Gilgamesh. Gilgamesh is mistaken in believing that he can share it with Enkidu. Even after Enkidu’s death Gilgamesh is unable to understand that his power is not his to share.

... I made you rest on a royal bed, you reclined on a couch at my left hand, the princes of the earth kissed your feet. (Sandars p95)

Gilgamesh’s learns that in pursuing his notion of the ‘heroic’ he has lost Enkidu who was his link with the world. The *Epic* is contesting a notion of masculinity and the heroic based on use of force and dominated by the ego, the same qualities usually seen as essential and attractive in the cinematic hero.
Inanna’s temple which dominates Uruk visually, also contests patriarchal notions of ‘heroic’ deeds, offering instead the possibility of harmony in the differing aspects of Gilgamesh’s nature. Inanna’s priestess is the most significant female character in the Epic of Gilgamesh. Her seduction of Enkidu begins his initiation into the ways of humanity and anticipates his friendship with Gilgamesh. The Priestess shows Enkidu how to be human, giving him bread and wine ‘of the gods’ and cutting his long hair.

In the screenplay I have attempted to avoid a characterization that reduces her role to sexual cliche or represents her as a Delilah figure. In the Sin-Lequi-Uninni version Inanna’s priestess is called ‘Shamhat’ meaning simply ‘woman’ and she does not reappear after Enkidu’s death. I have changed her name to Enheduanna, from the name of a priestess and poet who was a daughter of Sargon of Akkad and one of the few female poets from ancient civilizations whose name has been remembered.

The temple is connected to ritual marriage and symbolises life and sexuality. In The Game of Uruk I have resisted some of the meanings of the Late Babyonian period particularly in the construction of the feminine, for example as previously discussed in the transition of Inanna to Ishtar. Both of the translations which I have used based refer to the priestess as a ‘harlot’. However, modern connotations of prostitution have little in common with the priestess’s role. The epic speaks of both the young women and young men of the temple and it seems as Baring and Cashford point out that the ritual marriage to the goddess/god of the city was symbolically re-enacted at certain times with the citizens. This ritual marriage which Graves might see as central in myth, is rejected by Gilgamesh when he refuses Inanna. In rejecting marriage with the goddess Gilgamesh is also rejecting the role of divine-ruler, integral in the stories of his own father Lugalbanda, and Lugalbanda’s predecessor, Dumuzi.
(Tammuz). As previously discussed this is one of the ambiguities of the late Babylonian version.

However, the trope of the son who attempts to find an identity independent from the father is a familiar one in much mainstream cinema and this would be an important aspect of character construction of Gilgamesh. Many mainstream films imply that the son’s growth to maturity is eventually recognized and blessed by the father. In the *Game of Uruk* I have set out to explore the notion that the patriarchy inevitably betrays its sons, that the son’s progress towards individuation is in opposition to patriarchal values which are inherent in hero discourses.

Gilgamesh is a hero who fails. His great achievements occur *before* the action of the poem begins. His quest for Humbaba’s ‘splendours’ and later for the secret of immortality leave him aging and empty-handed. This pattern of failure might have been even more sharply delineated when the episodes were told as separate poems, especially to audiences familiar with poems about Lugalbanda’s victories. Gilgamesh, for all his powers, is not the kind of hero whose exploits could serve to demonstrate/justify the superiority of Sumerian culture over others. The *Epic of Gilgamesh* could not have been what S.H. Hooke calls a ‘prestige myth’ which ‘tend to gather round the names of famous cities’.

The Epic presents a view of hero not as one who performs great deeds, but instead as one who journeys towards maturity. Tablet 1 Column i emphasises Gilgamesh’s vulnerability:

...who saw things secret, opened the place hidden, and carried back word of the time before the Flood - he travelled the road, exhausted, in pain. (Gardner/Maier p57)
The scope of the epic deals with the stages of a whole life. The first stage of Gilgamesh's journey is presented as a progress towards individuation, the second, integration of self and community. Based on Friedrich Nietzsche's 'The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music' (1871), Maier divides Gilgamesh's journey into two phases: the Apollonian (Tablets I - VII) and the Dionysian (Tablets VII - XII). 'Where Apollo dominates a world of cause and effect, Dionysus reveals a cosmic unity.' (p26)

The phase symbolising growth to adulthood seems a familiar element in many cinema genres whether comic or dramatic. Fewer mainstream films seem to deal with the later stages of the hero's journey. Yet it is Gilgamesh's quest for immortality which is the major focus of the Epic. Perhaps it is this quest which best symbolises human vulnerability and continues to win the affection of Gilgamesh audiences. That he almost succeeds in his second quest is particularly significant. Gilgamesh is a hero whose failures achieve more than any other mortal's successes. Gilgamesh holds the plant of immortality in his hands, losing it only because he waits to bring it back to the people:

Gilgamesh said to Urshanabi the ferryman, (of the dead), "Come here, and see this marvellous plant. By its virtue a man may win back all his former strength. I will take it to Uruk of the strong walls: there I will give it to the old men to eat. Its name shall be "The Old Men Are Young Again" and at last I shall eat it myself and have back all my lost youth. (Sandars, p 116)

Gardner/Maier give the lines as:

Gilgamesh said to Urshanabi the Boatman: 'Urshanabi, this is the plant of Openings, by which a man can get life within
I will carry it to Uruk of the Sheepfold. I will give it to the elders to eat, they will divide the plant among them.
Its name is The-Old-Man-Will-Be-Made-Young
I too will eat it, and I will return to what I was in my youth. (p240)
Just as when Adapa allows immortality to slip through his hands, there is a sense here implied in the narrative that it was 'meant to be', which links the *Epic of Gilgamesh* with aetiological myths. Gilgamesh's quest teaches him that he cannot conquer death or pit himself against the gods and win, but in his struggle he achieves greater success than might have been predicted and he makes it back to tell his people:

The one who saw the abyss I will make the land know;
of him who knew all, let me tell the whole story
... in the same way ...
[as] the lord of wisdom, who knew everything. (Gamer/Maier p 57)

In *The Game of Uruk* I have attempted to construct Gilgamesh as the hero whose journey reverses phallocentric achievement. Gilgamesh's strength comes from challenging the gods, that is, in struggling against part of his own nature and Enkidu too, like Gilgamesh Enkidu learns to come to terms with his humanity. In my reading this coming to terms with identity is the central theme of the epic. The epic offers two heroes whose greatest challenge is achieved through their friendship.

The character of Gilgamesh inspires affection based on contradiction. He is loved for what he tries to do, despite the impossibility of his ambitions. *The Epic of Gilgamesh* offers a hero who simultaneously asserts and contests the heroic. When Gilgamesh returns from the abyss with wisdom, he is able to '... cut his works into a stone tablet'; not a stone monument glorifying his power, but the tablets of the epic itself.
Positioning the spectator

If scope is the keynote of the written epic, then epic form offers the adaptor a range of potential positionalities to explore in the film text. The ‘epic’ film might choose to use the camera in a kind of limited third-person narration, placing the character in a broad context of his life and times. Films which style themselves as ‘epics’ seemingly assert ‘universality’: they are films ‘for all time’ with big budgets and spectacle. In comparison the written epic might be seen as something much simpler: a tale filtered through an omniscient storyteller spanning one lifetime or longer.

In What is Cinema Andre Bazin (1972) argued that identification ‘with the film’s hero [is] by a psychological process, which treats the audience as a “mass” and strives “to render emotion uniform.” In Bazin’s view the nature of the intimacy of the cinema spectator’s identification with the hero is closer to the intimacy of reader experience with fiction than with the spectator’s experience in the theatre. Bazin uses the heterosexual male spectator as his reference point:

Let us compare chorus girls on the stage and on the screen. On the screen they satisfy an unconscious sexual desire and when the hero joins them he satisfies the desire of the spectator in the proportion to which the latter has identified himself with the hero. On the stage the girls excite the onlooker as they would in real life. The result is that there is no identification with the hero. He becomes instead an object of jealousy and envy. (p.279)

This view suggests that the camera in determining point of view in cinema positions the spectator more precisely than is possible in the theatre and that spectators read the film text without independence.

Drawing on feminist criticism of such positioning of the spectator Alexander Doty gives a different perspective. In an article entitled ‘Queer Theory’ (1998) Doty suggests that the spectator may respond to the film text from more than one position.
simultaneously. Doty argues that ‘queer readings’ or ‘subcultural readings’ for example exist beside normatively straight ones:

... viewers, no matter what their stated gender and sexuality identities, often position themselves ‘queerly’ - that is, position themselves within gender and sexuality spaces other than those with which they publically identify. Most radically this ever-shifting gender and sexuality positioning in relation to film and popular culture would obliterate for the spectator the sense of functioning within any particular gender and sexuality categories. (p151)

Thus latent eroticism in the friendships of dual heroes in ‘buddy’ films for example, offers the spectator such a choice of readings.

Though the _Epic of Gilgamesh_ can be given a ‘queer reading’, for example by Aubrey Menen, (1991) in my view the epic lacks such a rigid sense of ‘particular sexual categories’ which has developed in the West in the twentieth century. Whether a sexual relationship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu is implied does not seem to be an issue in the source(s). On the one hand, in describing the relationship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu the language of the epic can suggest the sexual as in Gilgamesh’s dream of the star:

I loved it and embraced it as a wife. (Kovacs, p11)

on the other, the actual sexual relationships of both Gilgamesh and Enkidu described in the _Epic_ are with women. Part of the _Epic_’s scope is that it does offer a choice of readings of gender and sexuality as Doty suggests, just as cinema itself can.

A cinematic text that attempts to capture epic scope would need to offer the potential of entering not only a variety of gender and sexual spaces but other kinds of spaces as well. Through hero discourse the spectator can achieve identification with
many kinds of ‘otherness’, social, cultural, political, which may influence subjectivities. Bruce F Kawin (1978) quoting Christian Metz discusses the way this is engineered ‘by some narrating intelligence’:

The viewer “is leafing through an album of predetermined pictures, and it is not he who is turning the pages of some ‘master of ceremonies,’ some ‘grand image-maker.’... The image does not simply appear, but gives the impression of having been chosen. It is in this sense that the distinction I asserted earlier between speech and narration - that the narrator tells - becomes applicable to cinema (p13)

It is the screenplay’s task to begin this process of creating the ‘predetermined pictures’ located ‘somewhere behind the film’ before the addition of the contribution of direction, acting, cinematography and so on. The screenplay begins the positioning of the spectator.

Cultural theorists have a rich field of study in examining ways that cinema and film industries respond to the subjectivities of its audiences. Various studies have set out to map the extent of cinema’s role in relation to subjectivity. As Bruce F. Kawin puts it:

Film is a dream- but whose? One rests in the dark, and sees; one is silent, and hears. One submits to the dream-field, yet actively scans it - for play, for release, for community, solitude, truth. The viewer’s interplay between passivity and creation is analogous to the sleeper’s, since both forget, almost continuously that the dream-world is “made”... (1978 p3)

If film is a dream then the dreamer, at least initially, is probably the writer. When the dream-world of the cinema is ‘made’, the first step in the process where spectator becomes hero, is often the screenplay.
Narrating the epic

In *The Game of Uruk*. I wanted the source, the *Epic of Gilgamesh* itself to be present so that the spectator is aware of participating in adaptation. The key to the way that the hero is to be constructed is the overall narrative position of the film. Since as Aston and Savona (1982) suggest:

> The cinema spectator ... is habituated to a convention analogous to that of 'fourth wall' theatre ... (and) the implicit contract of cinematic spectatorship is breached by address to camera, a device which 'leaves a space for the spectator to enter and thereby complete the work' (Harvery 1982:49) (p 176)

My central concern is in exploring the nature of narrative, how voices from one era can speak to another. To capture a sense of the story-teller who as Bruce F. Kawin puts it not only speaks but *tells*, I have integrated the story-teller in voice-over speaking directly to the spectator. This device is intended to enhance the 'largeness' of the hero, to give stature to Gilgamesh as a central character who would need to succeed within hero discourses of the cinema.

The narrator's voice provides a bridge from the past and the narrator and in *The Game of Uruk* the name I have chosen for this character is Sin-Lequi-Uninni. The narrator is also *seen*, writing on the cuneiform tablets which are an important visual and symbolic motif in the screenplay. The Gilgamesh story is being told some fifteen hundred years after the Gilgamesh period in Assyrian times later than Sin-Lequi-Uninni actually wrote.

In *The Game of Uruk* Sin Lequi Uninni is depicted not as exorcist priest but as a semi-human winged lioness, inspired by Mesopotamian visual arts. As a mythical creature Sin Lequi's lifespan can cross two millenniums, linking heaven and earth.
past and present. That she is a fantasy character develops the mythical element in the screenplay and adds to the power inherent in the position of story-teller.

The one who saw the abyss I will make the land know:
Of him who knew all, let me tell the whole story. (Gardner/Maier p57 my italics)

The position of story-teller is the ‘one who knows’ whose version of events is to be taken as real and who guides the spectator.

The use of a female narrator is also the major way that I hope to construct the feminine in the screenplay, filling in the gaps of more predictable phallocentric discourses of hero and readings of myth. In choosing a female narrator and appropriating the male honorific ‘Sin’, I am interested in challenging narrative conventions which privilege phallocentric positioning. The device of the female voice-over seems more often associated with material that might be described as ‘personal’ and ‘emotional’ rather than that asserting the authority of ‘truth’. In my experience a female world view rarely assumes the power inherent in the position of omniscient story-teller. Sally Potter’s Orlando also shows the potential of the (female) voice-over as a device for linking widely divergent periods and providing a guide to the spectator.

As in Orlando the effect of a female narrator might be to disrupt the predictabilities of the phallocentric filmic hero discourse, necessitating new readings by the spectator not only in the Gilgamesh Epic but in the Victorian story as well. Further, the device of the mythical beast gives the additional power of ‘magic’ to disrupt positionality so that the spectator might see through eyes that were completely ‘other’. However, I have in mind a different kind of characterization from that of the mythical beast in what might be regarded as the genre of the ‘children’s film’. This creature having
been inspired by the ritual beasts of the ancient art works, is more austere than the
delightable pet dragons of such films as Dragonheart. Sin-Lequi-Uninni lioness narrator.
also assumes an active role in the strands of the story, challenging the spectator’s
experience of character, plot, issues and context.

Sin Lequi is the major device in blending the five historical periods that are used in
the screenplay to create the magic of the ancient text. She takes over the role of
Inanna’s vizier Papsukkal from The Descent of Inanna, facilitating the blending of
this story with the Myth of Adapa. Later she is depicted as Gilgamesh’s friend and
vizier in Uruk. She begins writing the tale of Gilgamesh as Uruk falls to the Assyrian
Sennacherib. (Long life spans of course feature in ancient texts.) It is her work which
is being deciphered by George Smith in the parallel plot. She is intended to remind
the spectator of the millennia that have been crossed to bring the Epic to the
present.

In the screenplay I have further split the narrative perspective by using two other
narrators to widen the scope and suggest epic sweep. Urshanabi the crocodile-man
and George Smith. Urshanabi, second narrator from ancient times is the boatman for
the dead who is inadvertently freed from his task when Gilgamesh breaks ‘the things
of stone’. Where Sin-Lequi-Uninni is guardian of humanity rather than judge,
Urshanabi on the other hand, sees mainly the destructiveness of humanity. Urshanabi
is not an ‘artist’, he is free of any discourse of the aesthetic and only reluctantly takes
over the task of writing when Sin-Lequi-Uninni dies.

It is Urshanabi who looks into the future and sees only recurring bloodshed. His
vision of future conflicts, the result of the political ‘games’ of the late nineteenth
century, from the First World War to the Kosovo horrors, provides the closing
moments of the film. He is given the final line, a Victorian rendering of an anonymous Sumerian: ‘Look thou about thee and see that all men are fools’.

The perspectives of these non-human narrators in turn are filtered through George Smith the voice of the ‘modern’ world as he deciphers the epic in the 1870s. Smith provides the spectator with a guide to the past. His limited ability to understand what he is deciphering, is suggested visually by the fact that Sin-Lequi-Uninni’s real nature is unknown to him but not to the audience and offers a dramatic irony to involve the spectator more fully. The use of voices rather than voice, and narrators rather than narrator, contest the single omniscient viewpoint. These voices - alternatively mythical, female or disimpowered - offer a ‘space’ for the spectator to enter the hero discourses of the double plot.

Adapting the past

A major challenge in writing a screenplay set in an ancient culture is that ultimately the world depicted on the screen must work dramatically rather than as a design spectacle. In The Game of Uruk my decision to include the period of the 1870s as well the Mesopotamian has made this issue a crucial one in writing this adaptation. There have been many different ways of constructing the past in film often influenced by whether the adaptation’s sources are literary or historical. If literary, the adaptation will use elements constructed by the writer(s) of the sources. If historical by the agendas and viewpoints of the historian(s). However these are then overlaid with the perspectives and preoccupations of the screenwriter’s own times. The final reading and representation of the period can only offer another reading or viewpoint on the past.
Four main historical periods both ancient and modern have been used in this adaptation. The narration of *The Game of Uruk* begins with a voice, like the ‘I’ who tells the story in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. Three historical periods are from the ancient world: the earliest times of human existence - before 4000 BC, Gilgamesh’s own era about 3,000 BC and the later Assyrian period of about 1500 BC. The 1870s of Victorian England represents the ‘modern’ world. Rivalry between European powers for spheres of influence in the Middle East was also referred to as ‘The Game’ in political circles in England and the game motif is developed to include political game-playing in England. In the screenplay George Smith is linked to the game.

Unlike the wellworn depictions of the culture of ancient Egypt (from versions of *Antony and Cleopatra* to the various ‘*Mummy*’ films) the Mesopotamian world has featured less often in cinema. In one way this gives greater freedom in depiction of its costume, buildings and references to Mesopotamian art, since these elements have not become cinema cliches. However, it also runs the risks of the design representing the context as ‘exotic’, or worse as ‘barbaric’. The visual depiction of the past would be central to this adaptation of the *Gilgamesh* myth but would not necessarily require a big-budget approach. The greater challenge would be to avoid fetishising of the historical period, as in some examples of the ‘heritage film’ where as Pamela Church Gibson (1998) comments:

> The particular interest of this genre is the emphasis it gives to costume and the way it is linked to traditional ‘feminine’ genres, such as the ‘women’s film’. (P38)

This is not to say that the design would not incorporate the visual richness of ancient Mesopotamia but that a camp aesthetic of, for example, the fifties Biblical spectacular would be avoided and in particular the design would be well integrated.
This screenplay aims at capturing the everyday, the 'domestic' world so that the focus is the psychological journeys of the characters not the 'exotic' qualities of the setting. Key areas for consideration here are overall design, dramatic motif and the use of an appropriate diction. In dealing with the ancient world I have taken the view that the writer must try to lose the feeling of its 'otherness' so that the period works primarily as a context for the characters, shaping and determining the individual subjectivities. One way that this might be achieved is in careful use of point of view shots through the characters. Hence Uruk might be seen less through 'impersonal' wide-angle panoramic views which heighten strangeness and more through Gilgamesh's view as he looks down on what is actually happening in parts of the city, or beyond.

In contrast to the Mesopotamian, the English nineteenth century world is more familiar to mainstream cinema goers, particularly in the many excellent film and television adaptations of nineteenth century English writers developed in recent years. Recent adaptations of Jane Austen such as *Emma, Sense and Sensibility, Persuasion* and *Mansfield Park* have been particularly successful in capturing an aesthetic of the past, temporarily perhaps, overtaking the frequency with which Charles Dickens' and the Brontes' works have been transformed for the screen. *Her Majesty Mrs Brown* set in the 1880s draws on historical material for its narrative. A variety of television adaptations have continued the trend. The 'period' film, although made less frequently than other genres still seems to be thriving.

This offers a different challenge of presenting what appears to be familiar to the cinema audience, in a new light. Brian McFarlane notes:

In 'period' films, one often senses exhaustive attempts to create an impression of fidelity to, say Dickens's London or to Jane Austen's village life, the result of
which, so far from ensuring fidelity to the text, is to produce a distracting quaintness. (1996, p9)

Rather than such ‘distracting quaintness’ in the depiction of Victorian England, I have envisaged creating a strong sense of unreality, an irony in design, an approach closer to the ostranenie or “making strange” of the Russian Formalists which set out to offer a ‘whole battery of shocks … to our routine vision of things’ (Jameson, 1974, p373ff). The context serves as a metaphor. My themes for the period have come from the Epic of Gilgamesh and I have used the Victorian as a site for examining social and political issues that link with my reading of the Epic.

A significant part of the production design would be the incorporation of the Victorian love of the ‘Orient’ which would also provide a way of linking the two narrative strands. The presence of oriental detail through costume, architecture, paintings and furniture might underscore Orientalist discourses of the era. The appropriation of ‘Oriental’ design in the domestic sphere, from furniture with Egyptian shapes, Mesopotamian bookends, wine coolers and so on, to English gentlemen ‘slipping into’ something Eastern, might offer a visual reminder of the importance of Orientalist values in Victorian England. In the screenplay I argue that England played many games and that its social rigidity created an insatiable appetite for fantasy, eccentricity and the exotic in everyday life.

The ‘oriental’ in cinema design seems to have been overlooked in depictions of Victorian England in favour of asserting the ‘Englishness’ of the culture, yet this emphasis on the Orient offers a revealing insight into the times. Such visual appropriation, for example seen in paintings of the Pre-Raphaelites, serves not only to romanticise the past but is combined with the ‘mystic East’ to express the erotic. 1
have incorporated some of the works of the Pre-Raphaelites which disrupt Sumerian
sequences as ironic reference to Victorian perceptions of the world. I have wanted to
create a distancing perspective on the Victorian world to ‘make it (more) strange’ in
order to reevaluate the motives behind this fascination for the ‘East’. Rather than
depicting the Sumerian as ‘other’, I have tried to express ‘otherness’ in the Victorian.
My approach to context has more in common with use of the grotesque in the BBC’s
Vanity Fair or the heightened sense of darkness of Dr Bell and Mr Doyle. As in
both of these productions design would be used to deepen and underscore theme, not
to foreground ‘authenticity’ in period detail.

The characterizations of Rawlinson, Smith and others in the screenplay, while
based on historical records have been shaped to parallel plot and character from the
story of the Epic. In general I have resisted the temptation to ‘make things up’ but
the view of the period primarily serves the purpose of adaptation. The characters of
Louisa Rawlinson and Anne Smith on the other hand, have been fabricated, since
there is naturally less information available about them than their famous husbands.
Rawlinson’s life in particular offers more material to the screenwriter than I have
been able to include. This is also true of Arthur Munby whose fascinating
contradictions might provide enough material for his own film.

This adaptation includes self-reflexiveness through symbolic references to the
cinema. The cinema itself can be seen as a game: attempting to impose patterns on
reality through dramatic form and aesthetic construction. This screenplay
incorporates several references to the medium of the cinema. To give just a few
examples: in Uruk, where a bas-relief of captives of war comes to life and in the
Victorian love of experimentation with visual images. In the Uruk sequence reference
is being made to bringing characters to life on the screen. Mesopotamian art here
anticipates the storyboard by depicting a visual sequence to be read as a progression which asserts its own viewpoint. The Standard of Ur depicts captives of war as lacking individuality and as being just-the-right-size, that is smaller than their conquerers, just as supporting characters on the screen are depicted in ways that privilege the hero.

Scenes from the Victorian era feature several references to photography and technologies which not only led to development of cinema but also indicated a desire for its invention. George Smith gives a magic lantern display which shows the increasing popularity of the visual as entertainment. The drama performance of smoke and images called ‘Robbing of the Tomb’ attended by Smith and Rawlinson, is based on French illusions being performed as early as the 1830s. (This particular performance even prefigures the cinema’s fondness for combining things Egyptian with the horror genre.) Albert Hopkins’ *Magic. Stage Illusions and Scientific Diversions* of 1897 describes examples of stage performance of magic that are dependent of a variety of visual tricks which seem to anticipate the cinema’s love of ‘special effects’. Technology was moving toward the expertise needed to provide an alternative reality, one much easier to control and understand than the chaos of the everyday.

*Devising dialogue*

One of the most difficult problems in writing an adaptation set in the past is that of capturing speech patterns and writing appropriate dialogue. In *The Game of Uruk* I found the Mesopotamian sections more difficult in this regard than writing the Victorian, where so much more material is available. In working with translations one
tends to hear the diction of the translator rather than that of the source. This issue presents the adaptor difficulties that are basically unsolvable. Ultimately the writer has to make arbitrary choices and get on with it but in this adaptation I wanted to avoid dialogue that uses colloquial language of the present, that inserts anachronisms or creates subjectivities that seemed clearly of the present. Equally I hoped to avoid language that seemed remote, ornate and self-indulgent. Dialogue for characters in the ancient world presented the greatest challenge, complicated by the distraction that the Epic uses a lot of dialogue with diction that is poetic rather than dramatic.

In attempting to discover ancient 'voices' I looked to Sumerian literatures. These did not yield a great deal. The style of the words behind the translations was masked further through the literary discourses of the texts. The dramatic elements of the Sumerian myths were transmitted through the declamatory style of the ancient poetry using an elevated register. In turning to Oppenheim's *Letters from Mesopotamia* for example, I hoped to hear a voice from the past but found the formality of the genre accentuated by the uniformity of style used by the scribes, and the informal rendering by Oppenheim. The letters yielded only the occasional glimpse of the subjectivity of those who were sending the letters.

My next approach was to examine translations of Greek drama, to see how different translators had dealt with this difficulty when approaching Euripides, Sophocles and Aristophanes. Some seemed to elect a serious ‘poetic’ diction that I felt to have a distinctly Victorian tone, others to ‘update’ and localise. Two versions of *Lysistrata* for example, chose to use dialect for the Spartan women but significantly not for the Athenian. The British translation featured Scottish accents, the American accents from the Deep South. The best advice seemed to come from
Ezra Pound who says in the introduction to his translation of Sophocles’ *Women of Trachis*:

...that the thought and the speech of another age should be rendered in English in such words as are spoken by this generation. (p 9)

and even more interestingly quoting from *Poetry Review* 1912:

... the poetry which I expect to see written during the next decade or so.... will ... move against the poppycock, it will be harder and saner, it will be ... nearer the bone.

Pound goes on to mention that such language will avoid ‘rhetorical din and luxurious riot’, with fewer ‘painted’ adjectives ... austere, direct, free from emotional slither’.

However, when I turned to the play itself for useful examples of such absence. it seemed that Pound’s translation was extremely colourful and individual. Ultimately I have approached this difficulty by keeping dialogue as functional as possible, avoiding ornamentation and attempting to rely on the visual. While this screenplay does use more dialogue than is currently fashionable in many feature films, as in any screenplay the words are simply a starting point for actors and director.

Dialogue for characters in the Victorian era seemed easier to construct, particularly as many of their real-life counterparts have left written records. Where possible words from the actual historical characters have been used in the script. Otherwise lines have been written to approximate the richly individual verbal styles of many of the characters. Other contemporary material too provided a Victorian diction. This diction has however, been simplified in syntax and made more direct to suit a modern audience. Ultimately the result is closer to the ‘new’ than to the
historically accurate but I have tried to avoid the intrusion of obvious contemporary expressions.

*Plotting and its correspondences*

In the transfer from the medium of poetry to the medium of the screen the unity of the source even in the later Babylonian texts is far from the dramatic unity needed to transform the *Epic* for the screen. In creating a plot for the *Epic* decisions must be made with regard to the presentation order of the stories, their relative importance to the whole, ways of completing those that are incomplete and of linking those that are unrelated to each other.

This screenplay begins in 1872 when George Smith of the British Museum began examining the Gilgamesh tablets at the height of British imperialism. *The Game of Uruk* has four phases. The first is a Prologue imitating the Prologue of the *Epic* and deals with the rediscovery of the *Epic*. This is intended to bring the epic closer to our own times. Three phases follow: The Choice, Civilization and The Journey, based on movements in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. The Victorian plot is constructed with a parallel structure.

*The Choice* concerns Gilgamesh's alienation from humanity and the beginning of his friendship with Enkidu. In the Victorian strand it relates to the choices that have made Rawlinson's subjectivity and Smith's decision to devote himself to scholarship. *Civilization* deals with Enkidu's initiation into the world of humanity and ends with his death. Notions of what constituted 'civilization' to the Victorians are also explored from an ironic perspective. *The Journey* deals with Gilgamesh's search for immortality, his encounter with Ziusudra, the Sumerian Noah, and his return home.
This phase is paralleled by Smith’s journey to his death in Syria while searching for the Gilgamesh tablets.

The story of the discovery of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and its translation by the British Museum, is the main framing device of the screenplay. This positions the audience to connect with the civilization of Ancient Sumer through the eyes of ‘modern’ scholarship. Connections between discourses of scholarship and imperialism provide the context for the parallel plot. The spectator is made aware of how the Gilgamesh narrative is mediated by Victorian Assyriologists; the narrative of both eras in turn being mediated through the perspectives of the screenplay.

The action slips in and out of the ancient world as the Victorians discover Mesopotamia, and come to terms with their discoveries. The two writers, Sin-Lequi-Uninni and George Smith, represent the search for ‘knowledge’ and the need to pass it on. They also represent the difficulties of understanding such communication from the past. The introduction of the parallel plot of the friendship of George Smith and his mentor Sir Henry Creswicke Rawlinson parallels the relationship of Gilgamesh and Enkidu and is a device intended to suggest the continuing significance of the *Epic*’s themes of power and identity.

The Victorian context offers an additional site through which the discourses of the hero are refracted. Rawlinson is the ‘Gilgamesh character’, wealthy, privileged, dealing with ‘royalty’ at home and abroad. In his roles of British Resident at Baghdad, or Minister Plenipotentiary to Persia, Rawlinson often lived in the style of an Eastern prince with huge households and Persian servants. Smith is his Enkidu, an outsider from a different class whom he tries to welcome into his world. Like Enkidu, Smith dies young being destroyed by his quest for international scholarly recognition. Like Gilgamesh, Rawlinson experiences public success and honours early but goes on
to old age alone. The Victorian context, often blamed for legacy of social rigidities offers a metaphor for the present in its determination of social subjectivities. In the screenplay, the Victorian context is depicted as a patriarchal world which supresses the female and the feminine, only to produce a resulting confusion in modes of masculinity.

The emergence of the English dandy as one of the modes of contestation of dominant masculine discourses is commented on by James Eli Adams in *Dandies and Desert Saints*. The significance of interaction with the spectator’s gaze is important in the characterization of Disraeli in the screenplay and is in contrast to modes adopted by the austere Gladstone and the military mode of Rawlinson. Adams describes the type of Victorian dandy in this way:

*The dandy haunts the Carlyean hero less as an emblem of moral indolence or economic parasitism than an image of the hero as spectacle, which arrestingkly embodies a problematic of audience and authority - and hence of masculinity.*

Adams’ description echoes the star system of western cinema. He goes on to say

*Far from presenting an assured ‘nonchalance’ (Buckley 37) the dandy Carlyle describes in “The Dandical Body” is an anxious, almost plaintive character, wholly lacking a secure sense of self. His sole desire, Teufelsdroch mocks, is “that you would recognise his existence: would admit him to be a living object; or even failing this, a visual object ...Your silver or your gold ... he solicits not: simply the glance of your eyes ... do but look at him, and he is contented” (205) (p22)*

In the screenplay I hope to suggest that such a rigid patriarchal society resulted in the emergence of types of masculinities that contested dominant patterns, particularly for men excluded from dominant social modes who then sought power by other means.

In *The Game of Uruk* on the other hand I want to suggest that to privileged men, who were secure in the patriarchal structures, the range of available sites was very
wide. Economic prosperity, combined with the class system in offering men like Henry Rawlinson a choice of social, artistic, military, political and scholarly avenues to dominate. Hence the close interconnectedness of those who made their name in this period. George Rawlinson in his biography of his brother mentions London as having ‘the advantage that it draws within its vortex the most gifted minds of all classes’ (1898) but opportunities to excel continued to be linked to wealth and privilege. George Rawlinson includes a partial list of Rawlinson’s friends and acquaintances:

... statesmen, such as Mr Gladstone, Mr D’Israeli, Lord Palmerson, the Duke of Devonshire, Lord Salisbury, and the Duke of Argyll, ... authors and artists such as Dean Milman, Dean Stanley, Lord Houghton, Bishop Wilberforce, Millais, Leighton, Watts, Herkomer, Froude, Yule, Reve, &c, ... judges, such as Sir R Collier and Lord Wensleydale, ... diplomats, such as Lord Dufferin, Lord Stratford de Redcliffe, M de Stael, and Count Schouvaloff, and last, not least, with practical men of the world, such as Mr John Walter, Mr Delane, Baron Rothschild, Lord Cork, and Lord Sherbrooke. (p244)

This list hardly seems representative of all classes. In selecting which of these might become characters in the screenplay, I have of course needed to be selective. I have opted to include the rival Prime Ministers, Benjamin Disraeli and Gladstone, and in order to find a visual aesthetic to evoke the age, the painters.

In exploring the contradictions of the era, Disraeli and Gladstone offer great potential as comic opposites. Benjamin Disraeli is the ‘dandy’, a skilled manipulator and an outsider on religious grounds who must look to foreign policy to gain power. Gladstone on the other hand, with his taste for black and white, relies on his entrenched social position, making domestic policy his base. Victoria offers an interesting counterpoint: in her plain, grim clothing she resembles Gladstone physically, suggesting a need to identify with male power structures, but it is
Disraeli's charm to which she succumbs, Disraeli adopts display in order to obtain power, relying on avenues usually chosen by women, the largest group of outsiders in this society.

The issue of masculinity is explored from a different angle by Rawlinson's other friends, Leigh Hunt and Lord Leighton, members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood of painters. In discussing the discourse of masculinity explored by these painters, Herbert Sussman (1995) says:

.... the Brotherhood shared the project of Carlyle and Browning, forging within the gendered field of early Victorian aesthetics a specifically masculine aesthetic, creating or in their historicist terms, re-creating a manly visual art that differentiated manly practice from the feminine by associating art production with the work of the male sphere, that took as its subject and as its goal the regulation of male desire, and that was energized in its practice by male-male bonding (p111)

'Work of the male sphere' represented a monopolistic situation which was for the most part closed to female participation, 'male-male bonding' a way of coping with the dominant discourse. This versions of 'brotherhood' offers an ironic reflection of the brotherhood of Gilgamesh and Enkidu as do the discourses of masculinity in both periods. The Epic of Gilgamesh offers brotherhood as a model for inclusion, rather than the exclusion practiced by the Pre-Raphaelites.

In the Game of Uruk I have included some reference to social movements which struggled to change dominant structures in Victorian England and whose achievements in the areas of public education, health and working conditions have been undermined in the last years of the twentieth century. The beliefs in social progress that underpinned Modernism created discourses of social and political reform that seems in sharp contrast to economic rationalism's agenda of marginalisation and division. In the screenplay both the Sumerian and the Victorian
strands are intended to argue against such patriarchal values. The Epic's values of community are juxtaposed against European imperialism that absorbed and used international scholarship to further nationalistic agendas.

**Finding poetic equivalences**

Adaptation of any poetic work necessitates forming a relationship with the poetry. While it is arbitrary to separate meaning and technique in writing, I have been interested in using the poetry of the Epic to provide the aesthetic for the envisaged film. The adaptation of poetry, particularly of ancient poetry, is less frequently attempted than the adaptation of fiction or drama. Transformation to the screen means discovering visual ways to express imagery, tone and aural qualities. If film sequence is to evoke poetic sequence. At this distance from the sources I would argue that the main aspect of the ancient poetry that has not survived is the sound of the words; the music of the ancient languages is lost except to those who can read the texts in the original. Units of sound such as the phrase, individual words or sequence that work aurally, can only be guessed at.

Lacking the aural qualities of the poetry, I suggest that the sounds of the past might be represented in a different way, through a musical score using instruments like those depicted in ancient art works. Such instruments, like the silver Egyptian trumpet that shattered when played on BBC radio in 1939, can reproduce the sounds of the past and even suggest the kind of music that might have been played in the ancient world. For *The Game of Uruk* I envisage a musical score incorporating some use of ancient sounds, in expressing the world of Gilgamesh.
Many other aspects of the ancient poetry have survived and I have set out to find filmic ways to suggest the poetic. To attempt this is to assert the view that valid approximations of poetic aesthetics might be found, even though as Peter Wollen points out:

The whole drift of modern thought about the arts has been to submerge them in general theories of communication, whether psychological or sociological, to treat works of art like any other text or message and to deny them any specific aesthetic qualities by which they can be distinguished, except of the most banal kind, like primacy of the expressive over the instrumental or simply institutionalisation as art. (1998, p9)

While giving ‘general theories of communication’ their due I would argue that the poetic language of the Epic, its imagery, rhythm, and motif patterns, has contributed greatly to its survival and is integral in its meanings. The vitality and beauty of the epic still evident in translation suggests that more of the ancient poetry has survived than had been lost. Part of the task of the adaptor of this ancient text is to look for the source(s) behind the translation. A critic who believes that such a task is meaningless would never take on such an adaptation.

There are ways in which the semiotics of poetry might differ from film semiotics. George Bluestone holds that film and poetry are so different that:

With the abandonment of language as its sole and primary element, the film necessarily leaves behind those characteristic contents of thought which only language can approximate: tropes, dreams, memories, conceptual consciousness. In their stead, the film supplies endless spatial variations, photographic images of physical reality, and the principles of montage and editing. (1957 pVIII)

A theoretical discussion of this point is beyond the scope of this discussion, yet as an adaptor I would disagree, particularly in regard to the notion of conceptual
consciousness and would regard the unified focus of a film in its relationship with the spectator as being like the relationship between poet and reader.

The task then is to find appropriate ways of conveying the tropes, dreams, and memories that carry the Epic’s themes. Memories can be seen on screen as flashbacks which become part of the pattern of the whole. For this reason some parallel scenes are first viewed as fragments of a scene that will be repeated later. I have used this technique in the sequence of Gilgamesh beside the corpse of Enkidu, and also in introducing and developing the Adapa story. Miriam Lichtheim says ‘in order to come within hailing distance of the Egyptian’ and by extension the Mesopotamian.

it is necessary to pare the English sentences to the bone and to shun all paraphrasic additions ... The resulting rhythms will roughly approximate the rhythmic beat of the original texts, even though we cannot know what particular methods of accentuation, or cantilation, the Egyptians may have employed when they read, chanted, or sang the dancing words. (p 12)

Lichtheim’s reference to the concrete segmentation of the lines. seems not unlike the directness of the series of concrete images which form cinematic sequences. While the sound of the Epic’s words has been lost, a sense of the epic’s poetic rhythm remains. This aspect of the aural is suggested by the repetitions and inversions of lines, which like the Egyptian and biblical poetry discussed by Miriam Lichtheim (1975) shows:

....the (importance of ) the metrical line as a whole ....(that) The unit of a line was a unit of meaning, be it a whole sentence or a part of a sentence sufficiently self-contained to allow a pause before and after it. In Egyptian and biblical literature the metrical line is made apparent through parallelism of members and through more specialized devices such as the repetition of one line or part of a line.(p 12)
In *The Game of Uruk* I envisage the use of montage and repetition of scenes, echoing the constructed nature of 'units of meaning' of the ancient poetry. As Maier (1985) points out, the poetry of the ancient world:

> with its careful segmentation, echoing devices, repetition and counterpointing ... play(s) one scene against another, one speech against another. (Gardner and Maier p6)

I have attempted to write a screenplay in which the rhythm of the scenes suggests the rhythm of the sources. Counterpointing has been done by linking scenes, either physically through place, or symbolically through mood or situation. Sumerian and Victorian are also counterpointed resulting in dissonance to involve the spectator in making a judgement.

Parallelism and repetition in the epic is also intended in the intercutting of the two plots. Sergei Eisenstein points to the presence of ideology in such patterning:

> The final order is inevitably determined, consciously or unconsciously by the social premises of the maker of the film-composition. (1949 p 40)

Eisenstein saw the selection and prioritising of cuts being done on the basis of class-determined tendencies, and to this I would add other aspects of subjectivities such as gender and ethnicity. I am interested in the way that film establishes its own hierarchies of images, where the dramatic and filmic significance given to an image, its relevance in the areas of meaning of the film, can position the spectator to accept alternative views of reality. In *The Game of Uruk* I have used a number of objects to open the meanings, objects such as the instruments of writing, the gaming board, the various examples from the visual arts.
The use of montage is intended to distance the spectator from the characters, to take a broader view of the material. The kind of filmic rhythm created by montage allows the blending of additional Sumerian myths with the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. In the first two phases of the screenplay montage is used to introduce and integrate the periods and the various characters. Visual elements of Sumeria have survived largely through succinct and evocative choice of detail in the *Epic* and I have attempted to provide corresponding details from the Victorian.

The first two thirds of the screenplay develops these connections between the eras. Scenes become longer and the relationship with the spectator changes in the final third. At the beginning the emphasis is on narration, what is being told, rather than on submergence of subjectivity into the action. Using a Brechtian 'separation of the elements' which 'turns the spectator into an observer' this approach offers a space for the observer to 'take decisions' 'to face something'. It 'arouses' the spectator to see what is wrong with her/his world, though in *The Game of Uruk* I have tried to avoid a didactic closure, to attempt to open meanings by using both historical contexts as metaphors for the way that social relationships are constructed.

However, in addition to the structure of the ancient work I have wanted to give a sense of its tone. As Tigay points out:

> The thematic and structural integrity of the epic is supplemented by a number of motifs and phrases which echo through it. For example one passage from the 'frame' (formed by lines appearing both in the prologue and in Tablet XI), "Go up onto the wall of Uruk and walk about" (I.1 16 and Tablet XI, 303) is echoed in VI, 157: Ishtar went up onto the wall of Uruk (of?) the sheepfold. Early in the epic, Enkidu "roamed the steppe" (*xera rapadu*), as Gilgamesh did at the end (Tigay P7)
The two symbols of the walls of the city, and the plain outside it have been used throughout the screenplay. These symbolise aspects of the natures of Gilgamesh and Enkidu but also represent different ways of living.

In the *Epic of Gilgamesh* motifs of this kind are usually linked with action. ‘(You) go up onto the Wall of Ur’. The interrogative and the imperative aspects of the written text translate well to the cinema, making film an ideal medium for expressing the ‘conceptual consciousness’ of myth which I see as essentially dramatic. Dream sequences which also feature in the epic possibly work quite well in a piece that blends fantasy and realism. The rhythm of the screenplay should at times suggest the rhythm of the epic itself, even though the rhythm of the screenplay as a whole is dramatic and cinematic.

**Finding a visual language**

In a search for visual language for this adaptation I have turned to the visual arts of Mesopotamia and used many images for characterisation and details of setting. In addition to the Sumerian I have included Babylonian, Assyrian and Hittite - the artworks of the later peoples connected with the *Epic*. Attempting a reading of the visual works of a vanished culture of course, presents its own difficulties in responding to ancient conventions of style and meaning. As with other ancient material my purpose has been to respond in a dramatic sense, to find aspects for creating the visual world of the adaptation, not to develop an expertise in Mesopotamian visual arts.

Further, I have largely experienced the works through photography, a type of mediation not unlike that of translation of the written text. Discourses of photographer/printer overlay the images, for example in the size chosen for the
photograph or whether or not it has been reproduced in colour. I have also found that visual arts pieces through which Mesopotamian culture is known today, those which might have seemed characteristic, even iconic, vary according to the language in which the works are published. Readers in French will probably be more familiar with pieces now kept in the *Louvre*, in English with those from the British Museum and so on.

Despite these limitations the visual image offers a vital field for adaptation to the screen and gives the (useful) illusion of more direct contact with ancient peoples, of developing a sense of what this world might have looked like. Pieces of Mesopotamian art which have provided some of the visual aspects of this adaptation will be discussed in annotations to the screenplay. As George Bluestone (1957) observes ‘Like musical notes, each image must have the proper timbre before the entire sequence can be strong.’ (p 19)

Sumerian stylisation in visual arts often seems stern, even grim, which may be one of the reasons why Mesopotamia has not experienced the same extended partnership with cinema as its near contemporary Ancient Egypt. Though ‘western’ cinema has been fascinated with the ‘East’ since the days of the silent film, it has more often been the graceful, apparently pleasure-loving aesthetic of Egypt that has been raided so enthusiastically. While stylisation in visual arts may be impossible to read from such cultural distance, in my view Mesopotamian works which appear awkward, even ugly, in comparison with contemporary Egyptian express great energy and diversity and have had much to offer in searching for the ‘essence’.

Much visual symbol in the screenplay comes from everyday aspects of life: water, the sun, gazelle and animals. There is reference to Jung especially in the water imagery, which is used throughout but most scenes are based on the visual world of
Sumer, Babylon and Assyria as depicted though a subjective interpretation of examples of surviving visual arts.

The major visual motif in *The Game of Uruk* is the ancient Sumerian board game, the Game of Twenty Squares. This game also serves as a major way of linking the narrative strands of the screenplay. This game is sometimes called the Royal Game of Ur from the site where Sir Leonard Woolley's excavation team found one of the best known examples. The game was played throughout regions where fragments of the epic have been found, at much the same time. The contemporary Egyptian game of senet was also sometimes doublesided with the Mesopotamian game.

The game is used to represent the tablet of destiny which Sumerians believed was held by Enlil. In the screenplay the game symbolises the struggle of the individual to control the direction of her/his life. It is played by Anu and Enlil his son. The device of the game used to underscore theme is a familiar one in cinema and here is intended to assist the spectator in connecting strands of the plot. This screenplay uses rules discovered recently on tablets dating from 177-176 BC by Irving Finkel, current curator at the British Museum. However, early versions of the screenplay were written using my own interpretation of the rules.

The game links heavens and earth, past and future, and was regarded in ancient times as a symbolic game of life. Catherine Soubeyrand (1999 online) mentions that the back of the Ur tablet shows three squares with zodiac signs and messages of good and bad luck. In *The Game of Uruk* Gilgamesh is first seen while playing the game. Gilgamesh is beside the dead body of Enkidu, playing Enkidu's pieces in an attempt to defeat the gods and bring Enkidu back to life. Learning to play the game is part of Enkidu's initiation into the ways of civilisation. Finally, when Enkidu returns from the Underworld he reveals to Gilgamesh a vision of the game being played by the
The breaking of this game is Gilgamesh's demand to take control over his life ironically by giving up the need to win.

In *The Game of Uruk* I have included the relationship between archaeology and local cultures, how discourse of empire intersects with orientalism in international competition for discovery and publication, and the politics of ownership of 'knowledge'.

**Coda**

This adaptation of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* is the result of a relationship with the source over many years. I have found my own attachment to the *Epic* has only grown and deepened throughout the time that I have spent with it. The *Game of Uruk* offers my own set of 'solutions' to the challenges of developing a modern adaptation for the cinema. With *The Game of Uruk* I have set out to write a screenplay that might serve as a starting point, opening the *Epic* 's great richness for the screen. It is an attempt to bring the *Epic of Gilgamesh* a wider audience, to explore and celebrate the *Epic* 's visual and dramatic gifts and to allow new audiences to connect with Gilgamesh of Uruk and his friend Enkidu.
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