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An adaptation of the 'Epic of Gilgamesh' for the screen

Loretta Judd
University of Wollongong

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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

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of

Honours Masters of Arts

from

University of Wollongong

by

Loretta Judd

Department of Communication and Cultural Studies,

2000.

Acknowledgements

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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ISSUES IN ADAPTING *THE EPIC OF GILGAMESH* FOR THE SCREEN.

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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 perusal 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.