

Confronting Robert Zemeckis' *Beowulf* in the Digital Age

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Abstract

It is a fundamental fact that an epic documents the exploits of certain characters on a scale that sometimes crosses the limits of both space and time; in fact, these features account for the “grand style” of any epic composed. Coupled with its bravura sweep, any epic is also a faithful documentation of the age in which it is written, something that Prof. E.M.W. Tillyard calls its “choric” quality. However, in the digital age, with the advent of animation and other such modes of representation, much of the erstwhile grandeur of the traditional epics seems to have been lost, and this brings us closer to Walter Benjamin’s remark that in the mechanical age, a work of art loses its pseudo-divine aura as we tend to have “copies” of the work that is readily

consumed. Taking clues from such theorists, this proposed paper is an attempt to locate *Beowulf* in the digital age and within the 'mechanics' of representation called "animation pictures" and alternative narratological strategies that tend to compromise not only with its original tone, but also with the story line.

Keywords

Animation, Grand style, Digital, Walter Benjamin, Narratological.

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The epic, both as a 'standard' mode of narrative and commentary had its heyday in the classical times, especially during the Greco-Roman period, when epics were often a deliberate process to celebrate the exploits of certain characters who had a somewhat semi-divine aura about them. While Virgil aims to sing about the glorious exploits of humankind in his *Aeneid*, and in *The Odyssey*, the Muse is being invoked to sing about the exploits of a hero, Milton, as late as in the seventeenth century in his epic *Paradise Lost*, aims to sing something "unattempted yet in prose or rhyme" (Prince 29) and thereby fulfill his own hallowed task of a Christian poet. It is clear that Milton was, in a sense, trying to capture the classical poise and purity of which he had remained a life-long votary. Epics have been written with a definite aim in

view and they have often adhered to a specific world-view as well—however, there has been a steady change in this ‘world-view’ due to modern technological innovations and alternative modes of expressions. However, writing epics that may be considered to be an expression of “high-brow” art has become a thing of the past—when the Swiss poet Carl Spitteler (1845-1924) wrote his allegorical epic *The Olympian Spring* that was composed between 1900 to 1905, he was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1919 but still, as Gilbert Highet remarks, nobody was quite interested to know about his work except in his own country. This epic documents the re-establishment of the reign of the Olympic gods on earth.¹ Derek Walcott’s *Omeros* (1990) may be a re-telling of the epic *The Odyssey* (in fact, the very word “omeros” has phonological associations with the poet’s name, Omeros=Homer), in the Caribbean setting, but the characters in the epic of our poet have been reduced to a petty status of cab-drivers and fishermen, perhaps to re-inforce the notion of a unique Caribbean identity vis-à-vis the center/margin concept and the forces of erstwhile colonization.

Thus, what a critic, or even a reader has confronted in the digital era is a rapid proliferation of writing /representation of epics that strive to re-tell the old story in a new setting: a trend that has been steadily on the rise with the advent of motion pictures, computer animation, and the 3D. The older world view has given in for a newer

one, the human brain is becoming inured to processing information as pictures and in “bits and bytes” and there has been a tendency to view the older narratives in a new light. We are thus, reminded of Walter Benjamin’s remark in his essay “The Work of Art in the age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1936) that:

... as works tend to be produced for rapid consumption, they lose quasi-divine aura that was originally associated with work. In principle a work of art has always been reproducible. Man-made artifacts could always be imitated by men. [...] Mechanical reproduction of a work of art, however, represents something new. [...] One might subsume the eliminated element in the term “aura” and go on to say that what withers in the age mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art. (in Leith et al. 1167-69).

It seems evident that Walter Benjamin deplors the presence such works that that are not only re-producible, but those that get altered due to the changed situations and modes of re-presentation.

It would then be quite pertinent to situate an epic like *Beowulf* (c. 1000 A.D.) within such digital modes of representation and see what are the different forms that this epic takes in the digital age and in an age of animation and consumer culture. The story-line is well known—King Hrothgar of Denmark has been plagued for years by Grendel, a man-eating ogre, in all probability, a descendant of Cain and at the behest of his uncle King

Hygelac, Beowulf, the Geat, crosses the sea and comes to Hrothgar's mead-hall "Heorot" to kill the creature. After having killed it in a mortal combat, he is again confronted by Grendel's mother, the last in her race, whom he again kills with a magic sword. He is sent home laden with gifts by the grateful King. The next part of the story takes place fifty years later: Beowulf is now an old king and he has to defend his kingdom from a fiery dragon who has been reducing it to ashes. Although he is successful in killing the dragon, he is mortally wounded in the fight. The poem ends with a description of his funerary rites. R.K. Gordon in his *Anglo-Saxon Poetry* observes that "A summary of the plot of *Beowulf* sounds like a nursery tale of marvels. The fight with Grendel in the hall [...] and the encounter with the fire-breathing dragon belong to the same family as the adventures of Jack, the Giant Killer" (1).

However, the 2007 film *Beowulf* directed by Robert Zemeckis and written by Neil Gaiman and Roger Avery not only uses a considerable amount of "motion picture technology" and animation, but it also goes to the extent of altering the story-line as well, and this brings us again closer to Walter Benjamin's analysis that a work of art is always re-producible. Motion capture technology produces a 3D image of the real-life movements of the characters depicted in a film, and the faces of these characters bear a striking resemblance to their faces in real world. Antony Hopkins (Hrothgar) has been depicted

an alcoholic womanizer in the film, with whom, his wife Wealtheow refuses to sleep, and for good reasons. Queen Wealtheow, in the movie, is being persistently forced by Hrothgar to give a heir to the Danish Kingdom, but she resists, as Hrothgar has already enjoyed a sexual relationship with Grendel's mother (Angelina Jolie). Beowulf, in contrast with the original plot, falls irresistibly in love with Hrothgar's queen and in the end, ends up marrying her at the arbitrary orders of Hrothgar, who commits suicide after crowning the hero the king of the Danes. Unferth has been depicted a pious Christian in the second part of the movie, who questions whether our hero is the same Beowulf who had been defeated by Brecca in a swimming match: to this Beowulf, unlike in the original epic, lies that his course was diverted by a giant wave when he was very near to his goal. Beowulf travels down the memory lane to re-collect the whole incident: he admits that he was driven ashore by a giant wave and water demons, but knows inwardly that there was nothing of that sort. Grendel, in the original version of the epic, is depicted as a terrifying beast and a scourge on humankind, but in the 2007 movie, he is a fragile-infant like being, whom Beowulf kills without much effort. Similarly, in the movie, Beowulf along with Wiglaf travels to the cave of Grendel's mother, but when Wiglaf asks his peer if he wants him to accompany him to the cave or not, Beowulf replies in the negative. Beowulf meets Grendel's mother, who much in contrast with the story-line of the

original Germanic epic, strikes a deal with the hero: he now should sleep with her to give her a son, after having taken Grendel away from her, and if he does so, his name would remain imprinted in the sands of time "when everything is reduced to dust" (*Beowulf*, film). Beowulf gives in to the irresistible temptations of the monster's mother, much like Dr. Faustus selling his soul to the Devil, in return for twenty four years of supreme power. Fifty years later, Beowulf is being depicted a Christian ruler (in the original epic, he dies a Geat) whose kingdom has been attacked, firstly by Finn of Frisia, who challenges the aged hero to a fight, that he eventually accepts, having declared that he cannot be killed, as he 'died' when he was young, and that the age of the heroes is dead, and secondly by a fiery dragon who happens to be Beowulf's own son, begotten from the union between the hero and Grendel's mother. Cain, the servant of Unferth has got hold of a golden horn that Grendel's mother had given to Beowulf as a token towards their agreement. The deal has finally been revoked and Beowulf must confront the fiery dragon alone. He kills the dragon after having lost his arm in a bid to pierce its heart in the way Hrothgar had done years ago in order to slay the famous dragon Fafnir.² Beowulf dies without a heir, as Wealtheow, who had married Beowulf after Hrothgar (Antony Hopkins) committed suicide, knowing well enough that Beowulf is the best person to rule his kingdom, too refuses to sleep with him for the same reason for which she had refused to sleep with

Hrothgar.³ Beowulf tries his best to tell his 'truth' to Wiglaf, but his trusted ally would have none of it: he is determined to preserve Beowulf's legacy, as "they sing of it" (*Beowulf*, film). The film ends with Grendel's mother rising from the sea waves and looking seductively at the newly proclaimed king Wiglaf, who too reciprocates her gaze, as he has got hold of the drinking horn that stipulates that he be the next participant in this game of evil re-asserting itself again-and-again. In this context, the comments of Arthur Edwin Krows seem pertinent:

*If there is one outstanding fact about attendance at motion picture theatres, it is that nobody goes there to read a book. Every patron, consciously or unconsciously, presents himself to see pictures. This fact naturally influences every interpretation of business. In one direction, it impels producers to make thoroughly objective films like *The Last Laugh* and *The Old Swimmin' Hole*, in which there is little or no need for titles or cut-in captions to make their stories intelligible; and in another way, the comparative independence of words leads professors to declare that the motion picture in its best form is apart forever from what is generally called literature. (70)*

It seems evident that the directors of this film have taken considerable liberty while presenting the matter as well as the manner of this earliest piece of epic poetry in the English language. When we 'situate' this film within the greater discourse of consumer culture, one thing becomes

very evident—the inclusion of popular commercial figures like Angelina Jolie as Grendel's mother obviously underscores the seductive charm that her character is expected to have on Beowulf in the film, someone whose character has to be seen as typically flawed, including characteristics of a braggart. This is in sharp contrast with the original epic, where the hero is set to function as a paragon of courage for the whole Teutonic world. Stories of Beowulf's exploits and the whole plethora of incidents connected with him find expression in the form of 'motion' pictures in two other movies as well—in the film *Grendel and Beowulf* released in the year 2006 wherein Grendel's mother has been associated with the Germanic goddess of fertility Nerthus, and in the film *Outlander* released in the year 2008, where science fiction joins hands with Norse culture and history. The setting is Viking Norway in the year 709 A.D., and Kainan, a space traveller, who has been gifted a new home in an alien planet is being hounded by a mysterious being, a 'moorwen', who seeks revenge from humans for having destroyed its community. Humans in a futuristic era recklessly try to colonize a near planet that is populated by intelligent beings : the "moorwens", flesh-eating, extremely agile and very adept in guarding their own territory. Humans like Kainan participate in a brute game of superiority: they nuke fire the entire planet and succeed in killing all the 'monsters' but some of them still remain alive to avenge on humans. Kainan presumably settles on the same planet

once populated by the moorwens, but then, as duty calls, he has to take leave of his son and wife to go for a similar expedition elsewhere. En route, Kainan's spaceship crashes on earth and he eventually finds himself in the Viking age, surrounded by well-known figures from the Teutonic legend like Hrothgar, Freya, King Gunnar and others. He eventually is successful in killing the fierce moorwen who has followed him, but decides not to return to his home planet as his wife and son are already dead by then, and ends up marrying Hrothgar's daughter Freya, who too loves him. Thus, the film somewhat has the exploits of the hero Beowulf in store for us in the action of the space traveller Kainan slaying the moorwen and losing his own men, just like the epic *Beowulf*.

Beowulf (2007) earned a whopping \$196,393,745 after its release and was distributed internationally by Warner Bros. It received mixed reactions from several quarters, but got noticed by its use of the "motion capture technology", that was also used in the film *Polar Express* (2004); in the latter, the same technique was used to capture the real-life motions of the characters and was projected in 3D.⁴ It seems what the producers of the film *Beowulf* really wanted to do was depict the character of the hero in its truly human dimensions, away from the pseudo-divine aura in which it had been hitherto seen in earlier literature and in popular imagination. Though this entails a considerable shift from the more 'accepted'

version of the narrative, it is up to the readers and critics of motion pictures to say to what extent the rendition of the same does 'justice' to what ought to be metamorphosed originally occurring within a text and what not, and with what degree or consequences. What is, in the end consumed or assimilated is a matter of considerable complexity, encompassing such diverse parameters like the mode of representation used, the technology at hand and its reception within a heterogeneous sample of population and the market forces at work.

End Notes

1. See Gilbert Highet's commentary entitled "A Neglected Masterpiece "Olympian Spring"" in *The Antioch Review*, Autumn 1952 issue on *JSTOR*. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4609578>.
2. As the Teutonic legends document, it was indeed very difficult to slay a dragon, and anyone having done so was considered a paragon of courage and good sense, displaying a supreme sense of tact and tenacity. See the film *Beowulf* (2007), especially the end of the movie where the dragon tries every possible trick known to it to topple Beowulf from its back. In the original epic, there is no mention of Hrothgar killing a dragon, yet the latter does not fail to give useful tips to the

Teutonic hero as far as killing such a beast. It seems that the ways to kill a dragon had become a 'discourse' in the art of killing ferocious non-human entities during the Pagan era, as the movie in particular seems to show.

3. The "Genealogies" in R.K. Gordon's *Anglo-Saxon Poetry* (p.2) shows the Danish Royal Family with Hrothgar as the "father" of Hrethric, Hrothmund and Freawaru, but "Beowulf II" or the hero Beowulf of the epic is being shown without a heir. Even the name of Beowulf's mother is not explicitly mentioned: the family tree reads "a daughter, m. Ecgtheow." In the motion picture, while going over the stormy ocean to aid Hrothgar, Beowulf proudly claims the sea to be his "mother".
4. Motion-capture technology captures the real life motions of different characters and tends to produce a 3D effect that seems part animation and part reality. When one sees the film *Beowulf*, it is not difficult to find resemblances between Hrothgar's face with that of actors like Antony Hopkins and Grendel's mother's with Angelina Jolie.

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