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Telling tales about Beowulf

The poem and the films

UTZ

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English and Beyond

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Acknowledgements

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1. Introduction

It seems that people like the Middle Ages. (Eco 1986: 61)

The Middle Ages easily presented all the elements of a good film story: love, friendship, intrigue, passion and war. (Harty 1999a: 8)

Medieval stories have been reinterpreted many times fascinating people throughout the ages. *Beowulf* is one of them. It contains all the components required for a good film story[1] – except for love (at least with regard to the hero). The missing element presents a problem for film, however, since love stories are essential to a successful film's plot (Vogler 2007: 257). On the other hand, a film is a completely different medium than a book, and thus screenwriters need to think about the elements they omit or add when transposing a literary work onto the screen (cf. also Monaco 2009: 53). Every screen adaptation of a literary work is a new interpretation, and its purpose is not to retell exactly the original story.

Public interest in the Old English poem[2] *Beowulf* arose relatively late compared to its assumed composition.[3] The first edition was published in 1815 by the Icelandic-Danish scholar Grímur Jónsson Thorkelin. The next significant edition was Friedrich Klaeber's from 1922, which is still the most important source for scholars and students studying the poem, and which has been reissued several times since (the current edition is the 4th, from 2008). Not only editions and translations of the poem appeared in the 20th century,[4] it was also published in other forms. One of them is film,[5] and again the majority of screen adaptations were issued relatively late, around the turning point from the 20th to the 21st century. From 1999 onwards many of them were produced. Risden suggests that this might be due to Heaney's translation, which was published in that year (2013b: 66).[6] Through 2014, eighteen film adaptations of *Beowulf* have been released.[7] Only eleven appeared from 1999 onwards, however, and the two films from 1999 could not have been influenced by Heaney's translation since the year a film is released is not the same year the shooting starts.

One might say that these seem to be a lot of adaptations and pose the question of why *Beowulf* appears to be such a popular subject for film versions. In fact, eighteen adaptations are not so many, compared with Robin

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[1] See the quotation from Harty above.
[2] Usually the term Anglo-Saxon is used to describe the historical period, and the term Old English is used for the language.
[3] It is generally supposed that the poem was composed between the 8th and the end of the 10th century; see also chapter 4.3.
[4] For more information on editions and translations of the poem, see Sauer et al. 2011.
[5] For a list of modern adaptations of *Beowulf*, see Sutton's *Beowulfiana*.
[6] He writes that Heaney's translation was published in 2001, which is not correct; 1999 is the correct year.
[7] For their categorisation, see chapter 2.

Hood or the Arthurian legend, for instance. Harty's (1999a) list of films dealing with the Middle Ages includes many screen versions of Robin Hood and the Arthurian legend (around forty for each topic);[8] however it is no longer up-to-date, and there are many more films today. The same applies for Harty's (1999b) Arthurian filmography, which lists 106 films.[9] Wikipedia gives a list of both Robin Hood films and films about the Arthurian legend: the former entry lists sixty-seven films and television series (the first one was released in 1908) and thirty-six Robin Hood-themed episodes of other series;[10] the latter includes thirty-six films (the first of the Arthurian films even earlier than Robin Hood, in 1904), sixteen films which "modernised" the topic, twelve television series and thirteen animations.[11] Thus, compared to these two medieval topics, *Beowulf* did not produce a large number of adaptations. Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, on the other hand, were adapted for the screen even fewer times: besides Pasolini's *The Canterbury Tales* (1972) and *A Canterbury Tale* (1944), which is only loosely based on the original work,[12] there is also a BBC TV series from 2003 that features six tales in a 21st century setting (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/drama/canterburytales/>).[13] The reasons why *The Canterbury Tales* are not a popular subject for screen adaptations is obvious: firstly, there are too many single stories, and the frame story is not suitable for a successful film;[14] secondly, adapting the whole corpus would be too much for an average feature film of ninety minutes.

There are several *Beowulf* films, but there is no full analysis of them. Whereas a large body of literature on *Beowulf* exists, few scholars seem to have deemed the films worthy of close scrutiny. Most of the literature on them only deals with a few differences between the poem and films and the portrayal of single characters in the films. My aim is to give an overview and a

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[8] Only one of the films included in the present study is included in Harty's filmography: *Grendel, Grendel, Grendel* (1981). Harty only gives the most important data for this film, a brief synopsis and some reviews (1999a: 117).

[9] The following also include Robin Hood's history on screen: Behlmer 1999: 91-102, Knight 1994: 218-261, Richards 1977: 187-216, Turner 1989: passim and Johnston 2013. Except for Johnston, they are not up-to-date, however.

[10] <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_films_and_television_series_featuring_Robin_Hood>; Interestingly, Robin Hood, like Beowulf, appeared in one episode of *Star Trek*.

[11] < http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_films_based_on_Arthurian_legend>; Here the categorisation of the adaptations is interesting: 1) Adaptations, 2) Modernization, 3) Television series, 4) Films based on the Tristan legend, 5) Connecticut Yankee, 6) Animation, 7) Humour. I think this is a reasonable and well-conceived categorisation, but only makes sense for this amount of adaptations. Since I have only 18 adaptations, 7 categories would be too many.

[12] <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Canterbury_Tales#Adaptations_and_homages>.

[13] There are also two erotic films called *Gli altri racconti di Canterbury* (1972) and *The lusty wives of Canterbury* (1972), and *A Knight's Tale* (2001), which does not however have a lot in common with Chaucer's "Knight's Tale".

[14] On successful screenplays, see Vogler 2007.

comprehensive analysis of *Beowulf* films and examine how the Old English poem was translated into the screen medium. Some questions that arise in this context are: what are the differences and similarities to the Old English poem? How are the characters represented and why are they represented in this way? What role do women play in the films? These are only three of several questions that arise when considering *Beowulf* films. It is important to bear in mind that I will not conduct an analysis of the technical aspects of film, like perspective, montage, sound and music or film language, etc.[15] There are many approaches to analysing films, e.g., that of film scholars, media scholars, semioticians, etc., but my focus is philological, and my aim is to survey the differences between the original *Beowulf* and its film adaptations. For the present purpose, the content is important, and the formal aspects will therefore not be treated in any detail.

My list of films is based on the list in Sauer et al. (2011: 86ff.), but it has been supplemented with some more film versions. I shall analyse the following films (in chronological order):

Beowulf (1972)
Clash of the Titans (1981)
Grendel, Grendel, Grendel (1981)
Predator (1987)
Beware: Children at Play (1989)
Heroes and Demons (Star Trek: Voyager) (1995)
Animated Epics: Beowulf (1998)
Beowulf (1999)
The 13th Warrior (1999)
The Rheingold (Xena: The Warrior Princess) (2000)
The Ring (Xena: The Warrior Princess) (2000)
Return of the Valkyrie (Xena: The Warrior Princess) (2000)
No Such Thing (2001)
Beowulf & Grendel (2005)
Beowulf (2007)
Grendel (2007)
Beowulf: Prince of the Geats (2008)
Outlander (2008)

The year of the respective films will always be given in brackets throughout the study in order to identify the films. If the title *Beowulf* is given without any year in brackets, the Old English poem is referred to.

There are some films which retell the story of *Beowulf* almost completely and are rather faithful to the original poem. Others only exhibit minor similarities to the poem. Some are films with a length of around ninety minutes; others are only episodes of a television series, which have a running time of around forty-five minutes. Most of them are very diverse, and categorising

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[15] On film analysis, see ,e.g., Faulstich 2008 or Monaco 2009.

them is a challenging task. There are several possible ways to divide them into groups, depending on the focus of the study. Here I divide them into major, minor and marginal *Beowulf* films. The category of major films comprises films (not episodes of series) that either have the plot of *Beowulf* as their basis or bear obvious similarities to the poem. The plot of the Old English epic that is decisive for the categorisation is the "main plot" of the poem: Beowulf's monster fights. The various digressions and episodes are not crucial for categorising a film as a *Beowulf* film.[16] Moreover, a major film needs to have the length of an average feature film which is at least forty minutes according to the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, the American Film Institute and the British Film Institute (Kuhn & Westwell 2012: 155). The minor films, on the other hand, only display similarities regarding plot structure or motifs or include certain characters which have the names of figures from *Beowulf*. Their running times vary from twenty-seven to 118 minutes, but are not alone decisive for the categorisation of a minor film. The marginal films show only slight allusions, e.g., motifs or names, to the Old English poem and are often not recognisable as having a connection to *Beowulf* at all. Moreover, some of these are films are listed as *Beowulf* films in literature, but I would not include them in *Beowulf* films; thus the designation marginal.

After the introduction in chapter 1, chapter 2 explains the categorisation in more detail and provides three tables with the major, minor and marginal films respectively; moreover, all the important data on the films are given. In chapter 3, the current critical literature on *Beowulf* films will be reviewed according to the individual films. There it will become clear that some aspects have been discussed at great length while others are missing completely in the literature.

Before starting with the detailed analysis of the films, however, the basis for my study will be analysed in chapter 4: the Old English *Beowulf*. Here, the contents and structure of the poem are especially important in order to compare the films with the poem. Moreover, the dating of *Beowulf* is still controversial today and therefore this topic will be outlined as well. Additionally, religion, women and the myth of the hero are interesting points in the Old English epic. Religion and women also play an important part in most of the films, and thus these items need the poem for comparison.

The major films are discussed in chapter 5, which is the longest chapter of the study. First, the contents and structure of the films are outlined in chapter 5.1. Then the differences to the Old English poem will be shown in chapter 5.2. Within the differences there will be further divisions. First the digressions and episodes in the seven major films will be examined in chapter 5.2.1: some films include various digressions and episodes, others leave them out completely. The other sub-items here are the dragon fight: there are four films that omit the dragon fight (chapter 5.2.2) and only three which include it (chapter 5.2.3). The representations of the dragon in the films are very interesting.

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[16] On the digressions and episodes in the films, see chapter 5.2.1.

Since there are only three films with the dragon, I did not include an extra chapter for this figure. The representations of the dragon (which in fact has appeared in only two films since *Beowulf* (1972) uses special ways to depict the monsters) is thus included in the last chapter 5.15 of the major films.

Next come the times and places of action in the films discussed in chapter 5.3. Some films have a different time and place of action from that of the original *Beowulf*. What are the reasons for the deviation and what did the filmmakers intend?

One of the most important aspects is certainly the representation of the characters in the films. I concentrate on the most important ones: Beowulf (chapter 5.4), Grendel (chapter 5.5), Grendel's mother (chapter 5.6), Hrothgar (chapter 5.7) and Unferth (chapter 5.8). Beowulf is the hero of the poem and Grendel and Grendel's mother are his antagonists in the first part. Hrothgar is the reason why Beowulf sails to Denmark: the hero's intent is to free Hrothgar's kingdom from Grendel since there has been a long-standing friendship between the Danish king and the hero's family. Unferth, finally, is Hrothgar's thane and the one who tries to cast Beowulf in a negative light, his rival in a way. These characters are represented in a different way in all the major films. Often the roles were reversed and Beowulf is shown as a monster, whereas Grendel is only his or other people's victim. Grendel's mother has completely different appearances in the various films as well: in some she is a monster, in others an attractive, but evil seductress. Hrothgar is mostly depicted as a negative character as well. Unferth's image, however, did not change in most cases since he is already a largely negative character in the original poem. There is a clear tendency to denigrate the unblemished, heroic characters from the epic. As Gruber writes:

> An audience does not expect a recitation of the epic accurate to the half-line; they want characters in a well-told tale they can identify with. (2008: 101)

This is probably the reason why the characters in the film are represented the way they are: in the poem Beowulf and Hrothgar, for instance, are mostly flawless and possess only few human traits; this needed to be changed in the films and thus, faults and malice were added, and consequently human characters were created. This makes it easier for the audience to identify with a character from the film, which is important for its success.

Whereas men are mostly depicted as feeble beings, women took on more powerful roles in the films. Above all Wealhtheow, Hrothgar's queen, but also other women play important roles in the films. In some, women are also degraded to mere sex objects. They take on different roles and functions in each of the films, although they do not seem to have an important role in the original *Beowulf* (chapter 5.9).

The language in the films is also of interest (chapter 5.10). Obviously the films are not rendered in the same language as the poem, even though *Beowulf* (2007) uses some Old English terms and phrases. *The 13th Warrior* (1999) re-

fers to the different languages people from different countries speak and discusses how they can communicate. *Beowulf & Grendel* (2005) tries to convey the image of rough Vikings, using strong language. *Grendel* (2007) tries to reflect the language of the time by using purportedly archaic language. The language is very dissimilar in each film and fulfils different functions as well.

If one looks at the names of certain characters in the major films, it is obvious that they were not chosen at random. Onomastics is another feature worth considering in connection with *Beowulf* films (chapter 5.11). As is the case with all chapters concerning the major films, in some films there is more to examine, in others there are only individual names that are salient. This applies to *Beowulf* (1999), for instance, while *The 13ᵗʰ Warrior* (1999) offers a great deal of material on onomastics. In *Beowulf* (2007) names are also used to allude to episodes from the poem which are not directly part of the film.

Religion is a regular feature in *Beowulf*; both Christian and pagan elements permeate the poem. This is also the case in most of the films. The conflict between Christianity and Germanic paganism is one of the major topics in the films. In several cases there is also a third religion which plays an important role, and in others there are hardly any religious aspects. The people who are religious in the films live mostly according to their faith and orientate their lives accordingly. It is conspicuous that Christianity is usually shown in a negative light and not taken seriously by many characters (chapter 5.12).

The subsequent subchapters of this study deviate slightly from the idea of the previous ones: they do not analyse the translation of certain aspects from the poem onto the screen, but deal with different topics. One of them is anachronisms and modern concerns (chapter 5.13). In almost all of the films the influence of modern times is perceivable. The question is whether this is an unconscious anachronism or whether it was produced on purpose, and if so, why. Moreover, the transposition, doubling and blending of motifs appear in the films (chapter 5.14). What is the purpose of these functions? Finally, there are other aspects that do not fit in any of the above-mentioned categories. As I have already mentioned, I did not write an extra chapter for the dragon. Still, it is an important character in *Beowulf*, but only appears in a few films. The dragon, for instance, is something that does not fit in any other chapter, but it is still important and deserves to be examined in the films in which it appears (chapter 5.15).

The second, shorter part of this study deals in chapter 6 with the minor films. The first subchapter discusses the contents and structure of the films (chapter 6.1), like the first subchapter of the major films (chapter 5.1). The second subchapter will show the parallels and differences to the Old English *Beowulf* and outline what has been adopted from the epic (chapter 6.2).

Finally, chapter 7, which is the smallest part, deals with the marginal films. In 7.1 the contents and structure of the films will be analysed (as chapters 5.1 and 6.1 do in reference to the major and minor films). The second

subchapter (chapter 7.2) will point out the parallels with the Old English poem.[17]

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[17] See also Sauer & Traidl 2013. In this essay we used a binary division, but here I added a third categorisation, i.e. marginal films, and also added one more film, i.e. *No Such Thing* (2001).

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herausgegeben von Hans Sauer, Gaby Waxenberger und Monika Kirner-Ludwig