FROM IRON AGE MYTH TO IDEALIZED NATIONAL LANDSCAPE: HUMAN-NATURE RELATIONSHIPS AND ENVIRONMENTAL RACISM IN FRITZ LANG'S *DIE NIBELUNGEN*

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Abstract
From the Iron Age to the modern period, authors have repeatedly restructured the ecomythology of the Siegfried saga. Fritz Lang's Weimar film production (released in 1924-1925) of *Die Nibelungen* presents an ascendant humanist Siegfried, who dominates over nature in his dragon slaying. Lang removes the strong family relationships typical of earlier versions, and portrays Siegfried as a son of the German landscape rather than of an aristocratic, human lineage. Unlike *The Saga of the Volsungs*, which casts the dwarf Andvari as a shape-shifting fish, and thereby indistinguishable from productive, living nature, both Richard Wagner and Lang create dwarves who live in subterranean or inorganic habitats, and use environmental ideals to convey anti-Semitic images, including negative contrasts between Jewish stereotypes and healthy or organic nature. Lang's Siegfried is a technocrat, who, rather than receiving a magic sword from mystic sources, begins the film by fashioning his own. Admired by Adolf Hitler, *Die Nibelungen* idealizes the material and the organic in a way that allows the modern "hero" to romanticize himself and, without the aid of deities, to become superhuman.

Introduction

As one of the great figures of Weimar German cinema, Fritz Lang directed an astonishing variety of films, ranging from the thriller, *M*, to the urban critique, *Metropolis*.[1] Of all Lang's silent films, his two part interpretation of *Das Nibelungenlied: Siegfried's Tod*, filmed in 1922, and *Kriemhilds Rache*, filmed in 1923,[2] had the greatest impression on National Socialist leaders, including Adolf Hitler. Both Lang, a decorated war veteran[3] (whose mother was Jewish), and his wife and script writer, Thea von Harbou, had strong nationalist leanings.[4] Lang confessed, that in the aftermath of World War I, his primary goal in adapting *Die Nibelungen* to cinema was to produce specifically German art, to give Germany back a national consciousness (*Nationalbewußtsein*),[5] and to encourage a pessimistic nation to "draw

inspiration from her epic past."[6] Von Harbou asserted that the two *Nibelungen* films were the first in which "something truly German (*Wirklich-Deutsches*) was represented."[7]

The purpose of this study is to compare Lang's Weimar "ecomythology" or mythic presentation of human-nature relationships, with older versions of the Siegfried myth, including the Norse *Saga of the Volsungs*,[8] the middle high German *Nibelungenlied*,[9] (Lang's supposed source), and Richard Wagner's opera *Siegfried*.[10] In 1924, Frank Aschau complained in the weekly periodical *Die Weltbühne* that in Lang's *Siegfrieds Tod*, "the evil dwarf Alberich, who represents obscure powers, is, and it can't be mistaken, depicted as a Jew. Not as a handsome Jew, naturally, but as a vile Jew."[11] Lang's *Die Nibelungen* thus also provides an opportunity to investigate the potential links between rewriting national myths, twentieth-century environmental racism, and the philosophical subtext of European nature romanticism prior to World War II. From the Norse versions to Weimar Germany, the relationship of family, the supernatural, and Siegfried as the archetypal hero change relative to the natural world. Despite emphasis on natural imagery and a replay of an Iron Age plot, Lang's mythic cosmos is dualistic rather than holistic, and emphasizes human ascendancy over nature.

The plot of the film

The plot of *Das Nibelungenlied* and of *Siegfrieds Tod* is that young Siegfried journeys to Burgundy to ask King Gunther for the hand of his sister Kriemhild in marriage. Siegfried must first help unmarried Gunther win the affections of Brunhilde, Queen of Iceland (*Isenstein*), who challenges all her suitors to best her in contests of arms. Gunther is not strong enough to defeat this Nordic "Amazon" himself, so Siegfried secretly assists him. Ultimately, Kriemhild and Brunhilde have an argument over status, and Kriemhild betrays the fact that Siegfried assisted Gunther in bedding Brunhilde. Furious, Brunhilde encourages Gunther to destroy Siegfried. Hagen von Tronje accomplishes the murder by spearing Siegfried in the back.

Ancient relationships—old Norse and Christian cosmologies

The earliest known versions of the Siegfried saga describe intense and emotional human family relationships, while both Wagner and Lang portray Siegfried as an orphan or isolated child of the forest. In *The Saga of the Volsungs*, humans, dragons, and otters are siblings and engage in family quarrels. Siegfried as dragon-slayer is central to the plot, and the dragon is the evil brother of Siegfried's foster father, Regin, so Siegfried can converse with the serpent. This dragon, named Fafnir, has committed patricide in order to abscond with gold provided by three gods, the Aesir (Odin, Loki, and Hoenir), as blood money for the death of his other brother, Otr or Otter. Otr had captured a salmon with his teeth and was eating it, when the gods brained him with a rock and skinned him (the dangers of shape shifting). The Aesnir do not use their own wealth, but pay Otr's family with gold taken from the sometimes pike (a predatory fish), sometimes dwarf, Andvari, who lives beneath a waterfall.[12] Here, natural forces are personified or deified, and the boundaries between the humans, the natural and the supernatural are vague.

The medieval *Nibelungenlied* emphasizes the importance of *human* family ties and inheritance when it specifically describes Siegfried's mother's care for him, his training in court, his return with his wife to his father's patrimony, and the vigorous keening at his death. The Christian medieval poem lacks the magical landscape, while discussing human fates and the will of an all powerful god. *Das Nibelungenlied* mentions the dragon only in passing, and he is hardly a relative of any of the knights. Hagen von Tronje, in a brief third party report, informs Gunther's court that Siegfried slew "*einen lintrachten*," and bathed himself in the blood so that his skin has become too thick or "horny" for a sword to cut, except where a linden leaf has fallen on his back. In *Das Nibelugenlied*, with the exception of the passages describing the betrayal and death of Siegfried, detailed natural imagery is uncommon.

The prelude to the medieval Siegfried's death incorporates a hunt during which Gunther's court effects unrelenting carnage among the big game. Siegfried not only slays wild boar, he kills a "lion," then dispatches wisent (European bison), elk, auroch (an extinct form of wild ox), and several harts and hinds (verse 937). His huntsmen actually protest that he should desist and leave a few animals living,

otherwise this chivalrous threat to endangered species will leave the mountain and the forest completely empty of game. The poet notes that Siegfried, the brave (*küene*) hero smiled at the request (940). As the hunters bring great stacks of meat and hides back to the camp, Siegfried captures a bear, lashes him to his saddle, and then releases the "great and strong" bear in the kitchen, resulting in much food spilled into the ashes. The terrified bear attempts to flee into the forest, and although many of the knights run after the beast, only Siegfried is able to catch up with the very excited animal and slay him with his sword (961). Siegfried's status as a hero is enhanced by his dominance over nature. The poem, however, develops subtle parallels between Siegfried and the bear, both of whom are powerful fighters, brought into the hunt camp only with the intent of slaying them. If nature is vulnerable to Siegfried, he in return has been weakened by the inconspicuous and innocuous linden leaf—a natural entity as frail and unthreatening as the bear is dangerous.

Das Nibelungenlied describes the site of the dragon-slayer's demise as a fountain, under the lindens, at the foot of the mountains. After Hagen pierces him with a spear, Siegfried wets a mat of forest-floor wildflowers with his blood (998). The poet first mentions the red flowers as Kriemhild asks Siegfried not to attend the hunt, because she has had a dream of Siegfried hunting two wild boars and at the end the flowers were red (921). Nature is neither an antagonist to the hero, nor does it darken at his passing. He falls in the midst of the fountain and the flowers—natural icons symbolic of eternal life and of the continual renewal within nature. The wild boar has a long association in Indo-European myth with death or with cosmic apocalypse.[13] The two boars in the dream could be Hagen and Gunther, but they also are the agents of wild chaos. In *Das Nibelungenlied*, humans are separate from nature, but join with other creatures in their mortality. God is a source of fate, while transcending streams and forests.

Wagner's Siegfried

Fritz Lang claimed he used the medieval poem and denied any affection for Richard Wagner's works, but the composer's influence is clear in Lang's construction of characters. Wagner created a foundling Siegfried, raised by a wicked dwarf. Wagner's Siegfried is

related to Wotan and hosts of galloping deities, who are not forces of physical nature, but icons of European culture, and place the Teutonic hero in deep mythical time. Wagner introduces a dichotomous portrayal of nature absent in *The Volsungs Saga*, and utilizes this dualism to accentuate racial themes. Marc Weiner, in *Richard Wagner and the Anti-Semitic Imagination*,[14] demonstrates that Wagner's operas repeatedly denigrate characters who are Jewish stereotypes. "In [Wagner's] tetralogy, heroes are associated with beautiful, lithe, and powerful animals, while those figures evincing traits associated with Jews, such as avarice, egotism and lovelessness, are likened to lowly, disgusting, and clumsy creatures. As the superhuman, superior being, Siegfried is close to nature, to the creatures of the forest (birds, foxes, wolves, bears, and deer), and even to the fish of the streams with which he compares himself.[15] It is the entrance of the slimy, toadlike dwarf Alberich ("der Kröter") into the clear, sunny waters of the Rhine "that brings about the demise of the natural state."[16] Siegfried describes the Nibelungen as "ugly, disgusting and gray, small and crooked, hunchbacked and limping, with hanging ears, dripping eyes."[17] Weiner concludes that Wagner utilizes "animal motifs representing the antithetical natures of the German and the Jew," and to "to convey the fundamental incompatibility between races."[18] The repeated use of animal metaphors makes a subtle, but powerful, argument against the assimilation of the supposedly "unnatural" Jews into German culture.

Wagner develops ancient forests and individual venerable trees as the nurturing environment for Siegfried and his magic sword. According to Weiner, "Siegfried voices his natural antipathy [to the Nibelungen] under the linden tree, the home of his natural soulmate, the Forest Bird, and therefore it is fitting that, after having murdered Mime [Alberich's brother], he speaks to the bird of its brothers and sisters, whom he sees in the branches above him, and longs for a similar family."[19] In *Das Rheingold*, Wagner situates his ancient Germanic gods on "glittering pinnacles" or lounging in a "flowery meadow," while the earth-associated Nibelungen are at home in a subterranean cavern which appears to lead to "ever narrower passages" on all sides.[20] Just as Wagner's fauna is dichotomous, so are his stage settings of natural environments.

Richard Wagner moves the incident with the bear to the *beginning* of the opera *Siegfried*, where youthful Siegfried romps into Mime's cave with the bruin, tethered like a great, hairy dog on a rope. The

bear enhances the contrast between Siegfried and Mime of free/confined, natural/unnatural, courageous/weak, and organic/earthbound. Siegfried releases the animal unharmed, thus avoiding the theme of mortality inextricably embedded in physical existence. Siegfried, however, turns wild nature on the little smith by encouraging the bear to bite his foster parent, who cowers behind the forge. Typical of Wagner, the bear turns out to be an insult to the inadequate little Nibelung, who cannot control its natural strength. Siegfried declares that he caught the bear because he wanted a better comrade than the one he had at home (Mime) and that the bruin "appeals to me more than you do" (or "I like him better than I like you").[21]

Wagner's Nibelungen are very different from the dwarf, Andvari, of the *Volsungs Saga* who lived at a waterfall in the form of a noble fish, the pike and "caught food there for himself, for there were many fish in the falls."[22] Andvari exists in a fully organic boundary realm, between humanity and the rest of the living cosmos. Wagner also completely ignores the characterizations of *Das Nibelungenlied*, which describes the Nibelungen Shilbung and Nibelung as "die küenen Nibelunge," (verse 87) and the entire Nibelungen host as "vil manegen küenen man" (88). The adjective "küenen" could be translated "*tapfer*" or "stout" or "brave."[23] The text of the poem utilizes the same adjective for Siegfried a few lines later (92). The poem describes the battle with Alberich in heroic terms, by picturing the two combatants as wild lions ("*alsam die lewen wilde si liefen an den berc*") (97), and by identifying Alberich as very strong ("*Albrîch der vil starke*"). The medieval Nibelungen still have a mythic quality, but no longer merge with organic nature. They are not Siegfried's opposites, in terms of character, but serve as worthy opponents in battle.

The Weimar Nibelungen

Although the first title frame of Lang's *Siegfried* declares Siegfried to be the son of King Siegmund, his human parents never appear. After an opening shot of a mountain encircled by a rainbow, the camera moves from a distant view of a major landscape feature to Siegfried, in the low light of a cave. Engrossed in the manufacture of a sword, he heats, hammers, and then tempers the blade in water. When Lang's Siegfried carries his newly forged sword from the cave,

it is as if he is springing forth from the womb of the earth through a natural orifice. The two giant trees above the crevice become his parents. Ironically, Lang filmed the scenes using concrete tree trunks and boulders in indoor studios.[24] Siegfried emerges, not as a young feudal lord, but as a product of a highly dramatized German landscape. Later, National Socialism would similarly ignore family ties, and treated children as products of the German "Fatherland" and of the "healthy" German soil.

Lang's Siegfried is clearly human and does not have gods or goddesses (or dragons) for relatives or lovers. The supernatural beings in the film are all either enemies or nuisances. Lang's ancient forest or *Urwald* is stylized and has mystical power, but is no longer under the control of the supernatural. Lang's Siegfried is the child, not of the spirit imbedded Norse landscape or the culture of deep time, but of the natural world of deep time and, therefore, of Darwinian evolution. Lang adapts Wagner's Siegfried as ascendant over the Nibelungen. The camera accentuates the hero's stature, with frames that parallel Siegfried's upright and lithe body with other vertical and linear features, including trees, the sword, and even the edge of the screen. Lang's dwarfs, in contrast, are loutish creatures. Hairy, bent, plump and unshaven, they lounge about the forest floor, like peasants waiting for a tavern to open. When Mime and Siegfried part company, the little smith's shaggy attire merges with the leafy forest floor as he creeps back to his cave among the boulders. In contrast, Siegfried sitting upright astride his white horse, visually emerges from the forest, rather than sinking back into the ground. The hero strides across the sets like Cro-Magnon evolutionary advance pulling itself away from the vestigial Neanderthal lineage.

Lang's dragon is a large reptile who is hanging about his home pool, guarding nothing more valuable than a waterfall. Lang's Siegfried (unlike Wagner's) is not looking for a dragon, and encounters the beast as he is traversing Wotan Wood. However, rather than riding around the monster, who does not move to attack at a distance, the hero dismounts and strides right over to the dragon's pool. The dragon becomes upset, but it is Siegfried who bounds forward and aggressively initiates the battle, and stabs him in the eye. In the wake of his victory, the half-clothed warrior stoops to taste the dragon's blood, as if it is the obvious thing to do. After he ingested the warm fluid, a small bird, whom the hero can now understand, tells Lang's Siegfried to bathe in it. The dragon is not a metamorphosed humanoid

but is entirely a creature of the forest and the spring. When Siegfried kills him, he is drawing power from nature and not from human or divine sources.

In Lang's film, Siegfried's entry into Wotan Wood is charged with sexual imagery. He mounts a white stallion and rides saddleless through groves of huge, straight-trunked trees. Siegfried is human sexuality both arising from and penetrating nature. One could give a Freudian interpretation to the dragon, since once Siegfried has killed the suitably phallic beast, he jumps right into the herpetile's dearly protected pool. A discharge of blood is associated both with the feminine and with the life force or the source of all being, thus the act of bathing in blood has sexual and religious significance. The film's close-up of Siegfried bracing himself against the bank below the bleeding dragon has overtones of the intimacy of the sexual act, perhaps with the earth as mother. The sequence of shots, which fill the frame with Siegfried's head, muscular shoulders, and upper torso, emphasizes the human body—and the power of the Germanic male.

In the film, Siegfried's venture into Wotan Wood becomes a rite of passage. Siegfried overcomes the fearful and powerful forces of nature and, as a result, acquires wisdom and a special understanding of the natural world. This wisdom is clearly the booty of conquest and not the fruit of peaceful coexistence with nature. When he tastes or bathes in the dragon's blood, he absorbs the dragon's power without becoming the ugly dragon. Lang's film contrasts Siegfried's handsome presence and his speed and agility with the ugly, clumsy reptile. The juxtaposition enhances the already established theme of Siegfried's ascendancy over the dwarfs and other lower creatures. The prize that Siegfried has won is not material: it is an enhancement of the essence of his own being.

We should note that the origin and use of Siegfried's sword provides an important parallel to his relationship with nature. In *Das Nibelungenlied*, the young warrior is not a craftsman or technician. He wins his sword, Balmung, (Balmunc [95]) as a prize in battle. In Wagner's Ring, the sword comes from Wotan, who embeds it in a mighty tree. It is not Siegfried, but his warrior father, who removes the blade. Siegfried has the strength to repair or reassemble the broken pieces, which is his contribution to its power. The broken sword of Odin (Wotan) also figures in *The Saga of the Volsungs*, but it is Regin, the dragon's brother, who welds the two pieces of the sword Gram together.[25] Lang's Siegfried, as technocrat, has made the mighty

sword himself. The power of the sword over the dragon, and therefore in conquest of nature, does not lie in a transfer of magic, or in the will of a god, but in the skill of its human maker.

Organic/inorganic dualism

Penetrating ever more deeply into the mythic landscape of Wotan Wood, Lang's pale Siegfried and his white stallion wander purposefully through the mist. The Nibelungen king sees Siegfried approach and slips on a cape that allows him to disappear or to assume another shape. Unprovoked and invisible, he drops from a tree and attacks the hero from the back. Siegfried defeats him, and the king is forced to take the warrior to his treasure. When a fine blade in the horde distracts the hero, the treacherous dwarf jumps Siegfried from behind again. Siegfried easily tosses the king to the ground and kills him with a broad sword from his own treasure trove. Lang's depictions of the dwarf slaves in chains, supporting Alberich's treasure, (also in *Das Rheingold*), and the deceitful king are very different from the honorable martial Nibelungen of the poem.

Film critic Lotte Eisner rejects Siegfried Kracauer's criticism that the stereotypical Jewish appearance of Alberich in *Siegfried's Tod* is purposeful anti-Semitism on the part of Lang. She reports, however, that Lang and Otto Genath, his make-up specialist, had been influenced by "the grotesque character make-up used by the Russo-Jewish Habimah ensemble that was currently visiting Berlin."[26] Whether or not Lang, Genath or von Harbou intended to be anti-Semitic, their characterization of Alberich certainly could have elicited anti-Jewish feeling from a Weimar German audience. After using verticals repeatedly to enhance Siegfried's superhuman status, Lang presents a dwarf king who is not just short, but has a hooked nose, crooked fingers, a hunched back, and a chimpanzee-like walk. He guides Siegfried to his cave, much like a merchant guiding a customer into his shop. In the years just after World War I, his sneak attacks from behind would have been reminiscent of accusations that Jewish financial interests had been disloyal to Germany during the war and had stabbed *Das Volk* in the back.[27] Unlike the militant dwarf nobility in *Das Nibelungenlied*, Lang's Alberich appears in the forest without men at arms. His status is not maintained by weapons but is the result of his ability to accumulate wealth.

Lang's little dwarf king is disassociated from living nature and has control over a realm of the nonliving or physical sphere. Alberich does not share a common heritage with humans, who come entirely from the organic portion of the cosmos. When Lang's dwarf king dies, in an amazing special effect for the silent film era, he and his slaves turn into stone. Siegfried stares down at the distorted, fossilized face of his defeated adversary, whom the viewer can be certain is eternally entombed in immobile rock. Siegfried's acquisition of the treasure is immediately justified, in the mind of the viewer, by the treachery of the dwarf king. When the king offers to pay Siegfried off, rather than have the hero kill him, he essentially transfers the legal rights to the horde. Apparently innocent of covetousness, Siegfried's capture of the wealth of the earth is linked to his superiority over the dwarves, and to his success on his heroic quest. Lang's film takes Wagner's natural dualism to the extreme—even the "bad animals" are gone, and the Nibelungen as *Untermenschen* have become soulless creatures of stone. Further, Siegfried does not face his own mortality in the contest with Alberich—the mismatched combat ignores the question of human frailty or failure.

Fritz Lang drops the bear entirely, despite his lengthy dragon sequence. Lang, however, had his scene with the hero lying dead in the forest wildflowers prepared months in advance, and a crew member "planted seeds in the fall, so that in the spring, when they were scheduled to photograph the meadow scene in which Siegfried is pierced by Hagen's spear, real flowers would blanket the ground."[28] The Lang/von Harbou approach reduces the association of Siegfried with the animal realm and avoids any identification between a bear, the hero, and shaggy Mime. In the film, Siegfried has long ago shed his animal skins and dies wearing pale, aristocratic "satin." Lang's version retains the linden leaf, but this "tiny, unnoticed incident . . . doesn't cause his death, but simply provides him with a vulnerable spot."[29] As Lotte Eisner has pointed out: "The decor of the flowery meadow in which Hagen kills Siegfried has the same mellowness as that in which the love-scenes between Siegfried and Kriemhild take place, beneath a tree in full bloom."[30] The flowers symbolize purity and eternal life. Siegfried dies, not as a bear would die, but as a cultural icon, rising above the mortal bonds of living flesh. Just before the thrust of Hagen's spear, he leans to drink from a free-running, natural, German fountain. Not just the glowing petals of the flowers, but the pale bark of the birches behind the trusting knight catch the

white lozenges of his doublet. The setting is both the implied source of his virtue and an affirmation of his superior character. His bed of flowers is also a living contrast to the dwarf king's return to inorganic stone—thus the dualism continues into the realms of eternity.

Environments in opposition

In Lang's second Nibelungen film, *Kriemhilds Rache* (*Kriemhild's Revenge*[31]), Siegfried's widow marries Etzel, the King of the Huns, who has sent his emissary Rüdiger to ask for her hand. After having a son by Etzel, Kriemhild plots her revenge against the Burgundian court by inviting them to a feast at the summer solstice. Hagen, on hearing the Huns have massacred Burgundian knights, kills Kriemhild's beloved son. A bloody combat ensues between guests and hosts, and, over stacks of bleeding bodies, Etzel's hall erupts in flames.[32]

The first major encounter between the German knights and nature in the film is a detailed sequence depicting Hagen throwing Siegfried's treasure, which gracious Kriemhild had been using to support the people of Burgundy, into the depths of the Rhine. The Weimar viewer watches as precious metal and jewels bubble down into the clear waters that run through Germany's heartland. At the time Lang filmed *Die Nibelungen*, the financial situation in Germany was already disastrous, food prices were soaring and even Lang's crew, who were working late, had trouble getting to the store to stand in line for scarce commodities. "Realizing that desperate conditions were mounting, von Harbou offered to prepare hearty meals for everybody," and established a canteen, while the studio managed to locate groceries.[33]

The film's attention to Hagen becomes a political commentary on members of the old regime, who have supposedly thrown away Germany's wealth. The detested Treaty of Versailles had not only produced a massive financial burden of war reparations, the Rhineland had become a "border realm" occupied by Allied troops.[34] It was exactly the economic problems Hagen creates for Kriemhild that the National Socialists promised to resolve through their policies of *Blut und Boden*.[35] Lang's sequencing emphasizes the scene where Hagen willfully discards the inheritance of Siegfried, the natural Aryan knight. Although the destructive ending of the film in Etzel's burning hall has been seen as a premonition of the ruins of World War II, for the Weimar audience it could have just as easily admonished a

financially strapped culture not to "marry" Bolsheviks out of desperation or out of anger with the ruling classes. The film is a strong statement against adopting the life styles of eastern, non-Aryan, "non-Christian" neighbors.

Today, few film critics would deny the obvious racial stereotypes in Lang's version of *Kriemhilds Rache*. Lotte Eisner apologizes for Lang but, in the process, captures the glaring contrast between the Teutonic knights and their adversaries, the Huns, who "never walk upright; they never lift their faces towards the sky with the noble arrogance expected of the Germanic hero: they slither like slimy reptiles or else skip around, bent at the waist and knees, in a sort of strange squatting posture. It is enough for Hagen to deploy his height to send this wretched offspring 'of an inferior race' scuttling away like rats."[36] Lang set his negative or dangerous characters in barren or boundary landscapes. The Huns occupy a desert with only sparse vegetation and few trees. Siegfried, in contrast, is upright and mighty, like the immense trunks of his forest haunts. The character of the Huns is similarly rooted in their dry and earth-dominated homeland. Rolf Hempel, who believed the film was intended to encourage hatred of Jews and *Untermenschen*, points out King Etzel's place looks like a pigsty ("*Schweinstall*").[37] Lang himself is supposed to have described Attila as "the Oriental, who is master of the earth" ("*Erde*" not "*Welt*").[38] The connection between the worthy human and the organic and the unworthy "nonhuman" and the inorganic thus extends into the second film.

The Essence of Siegfried

One of the more disturbing aspects of *Siegfrieds Tod* is the sequencing of Siegfried's rise from the forest cave to the well-dressed knight who enters Burgundy. If one interprets the forging of the sword as the initiation of Siegfried's manhood, then the slaying of the dragon and the destruction of Alberich are the two critical steps in his pilgrimage to knightly status. The three phases of development of the Aryan hero are, therefore, making a mighty weapon, obtaining power over nature through conquest, and killing a Jew. In *Das Nibelungenlied*, Siegfried primarily establishes himself by battle with human or mythical adversaries of equal status and great prowess in arms, rather than by slaying unarmed beings a third his size. In *The Saga of the*

Volsungs, he similarly leads a large army into battle, prior to pursuing the dragon, and wins banners by heroic combat. Using a low angle shot, Lang's camera views Siegfried and his followers mounted on horses, standing tall over a rocky gorge and waiting for admission on the bridge into Gunther's fortress. At the end of his forest trek through Wotan Wood, Siegfried has risen out of the earth and stands over it. Siegfried, now fully dressed in eye-catching white with geometric black stripes, storms forward, marches *up* the steps, until his head and shoulders fill the screen. The scene presents a man of tremendous self-confidence and personal strength, who has no evident experience in pitched battle, to the defeated populace of post-World War I Germany. Director Leni Reifenstahl would later film Hitler much the same way, as over and above the German people and landscape.[39]

Wagner's Siegfried, who is caught in a complex tangle of relationships with his cultural heritage, differs from Lang's who is primarily a product of nature, and strides out of the woods into a pure expression of human existence.[40] The hero has no messy problems with old deities to whom he is related, nor is his human parentage an issue. Lang's natural realm is ancient and powerful but, less transcendent than Wagner's, and can "function quite well without any Gods of any sort involved."[41] When Lang's Siegfried completes his journey through Wotan Woods, he becomes the sole possible interpretation of Wotan. (The old high god is nowhere to be seen.) The only presence of the divine in *Siegfried's Tod* is found in human adventure. Lang has managed to idealize the material and the organic in a way that allows the modern human to romanticize himself and, *without the aid of the gods*, to become superhuman. Lang's Siegfried is a material and natural hero, whose power is inherent in the cosmos itself. Perhaps more than any other mythical Siegfried, he has a "natural" right to his riches and to his political and social ascendancy.

Lang's statements and writings in the Weimar press demonstrate an almost religious passion behind the national icons in *Die Nibelungen*. Lang claimed that it concerned the spiritual holiness ("*geistige Heiligtum*") of the nation.[42] This was ironic descriptive vocabulary to apply to a film that would not even give Wotan a job as an extra. Lang thanked the set designer for "a German forest" that was constructed "like a cathedral" and declared that Siegfried was raised in the cathedral of the forest ("*der Dom des Waldes*").[43] As if cataloging myth-centered German art, Lang purposefully imitated scenes from painters, such

as Caspar David Friedrich's misty landscapes, Arnold Böcklin's *Island of the Dead* and *The Silence of the Forest*,[44] and Romantic portrayals of Siegfried.[45] The forest as cathedral or the cathedral in the forest are, in fact, frequent themes of Friedrich. In a 1924 article on film as national epic, Lang, borrowing from the Biblical Gospel of Mark, declared that the ethical task of German film was to "go into all the world and teach all the peoples!"[46] For the patriotic director, the film unites the deep fervor of "earnest prayer in a cathedral" ("*ernster Gebete in Dom*") and the secret of the original elements ("*Urelemente*"), with consecrated incense smoke ("*Weihrauchs*").[47] A number of cultural or art historians, such as William Vaughan and Simon Schama, have commented on the importance of forest cathedral or as a spiritual landscape in 19th and 20th century German art, and its relationship to German nationalism.[48]

Lang himself divided *Die Nibelungen* into four worlds: Worms and its already overly-refined civilization, an almost barren, unspeakably serious realm in which humans fulfill their destinies; the haunts of young Siegfried, including the forest cathedral, the twilight-filled meadows, and caverns, rich in gold and phantoms; the strange world of Brunhilde, dominated by ice and fire, in which humans appear "like glass;" and the world of Etzel and the Huns, the Orientals and masters of the earth ("*Erde*"), whose destiny is tangled with the wife of a dead man and bitter revenge.[49] Each of these worlds is supposedly fully self-contained, closing out the others, and standing as a separate pole.[50] Lang states that the same people walk through these realms, not all completely on the same path, but on many intersecting routes.[51]

Much of the confrontation and destruction in the film, however, results when the heroes move between these worlds. Further, Siegfried's forest realm lacks internal integrity, and Alberich wanders at the boundary of Wotan Wood, in meadows with no clear footing. Brunhilde also occupies a boundary landscape filled with fire and obstacles, and she, like the dwarf, turns out to be a threat to Siegfried. Lang's Brunhilde, who rules an island, looks much like Brittania, the icon found on English coins, with her circular shield and spear. Nordic yet treacherous, she turns to deceit after Siegfried overcomes her mysterious physical strength. This theme further substantiates Dieter Dürrenmatt's conclusion that Lang's *Nibelungen* was intended as an answer to the Peace of Versailles, which was burdening Germany's recovery after World War I.[52]

Karin Bruns has argued that the works of von Harbou are a "virtual archive of racism," and that von Harbou was repeatedly depicting stereotypes of racial purity. Von Harbou defined the basic essence of members of the Nordic race in terms of both battle readiness and a distinctive physiognomy that included blue eyes with a gaze "like a falcon." The lack of this distinctive gaze distinguished the racially mixed peoples of the New World (USA, Canada) and the racially impure ("*verwandten*") peoples of Northern Europe.[53] Purifying German film and clarifying boundaries appears to have been one of the Lang/von Harbou team's primary goals. The environments within *Die Nibelungen* isolate and idealize the supposedly ancient Nordic landscape. Lang casts Alberich as an evil shadow of the supernatural, easily destroyed by Siegfried's "modern" technology. Langs' simultaneous idealization of a national landscape and of martial technology are typical of reactionary modernism, which was also a Nazi approach to the environment.[54] For Lang, the spirit is in the artistic product and its cultural content, not in some transcendent deity. In joining with von Harbou to produce a national epic, Lang may have been naively exempting himself from accusations of Jewish disloyalty and rationalizing his own mixed background by producing a work that was "truly German." Unfortunately he inspired the sadists and sociopaths of National Socialism, who seized temporary, but deadly, control of "holy" German culture.

In conclusion, we should recognize that many retellings of venerable myths, legends, and religious narratives restructure human-environmental relationships and may even divorce the cosmos from the gods. Modern works can modify ecomythology to forward socially radical views or political agendas. The Norse saga presents humans who merge with animals and dwarves and deities tied to positive natural forces or features. *Das Nibelungenlied* rarely describes natural features, and associates nature, not with divine wrath, but with human frailty. Wagner's Siegfried creates an idealized cultural landscape and history, and divides humanity into those who are ascendant, and thereby associated with "good" nature, and those who are degenerate, and associated with the subterranean and slimy. Fritz Lang, concerned about boundaries among humans, creates a Siegfried who arises from the natural landscape, and conquers the subhuman. Ethnic "others" are strongly associated with nonliving, inorganic environments. The divine is actualized in "pure" German culture, rather than in the supernatural, as warrior heroes take control of their own

fates. This nationalistic perspective on environmental meaning, tragically rationalized removal of the supposed "inorganic" ethnic others, from the supposedly "healthy" German landscape, and must be counted as a cultural root of the Holocaust.

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Acknowledgments

I thank Zsuzsanna Ozsvath, who experienced the terrors of the Third Reich first hand as a Jewish child in Hungary, and the Holocaust Studies program at the University of Texas at Dallas for their assistance and encouragement on this project, which was part of the studies for my second Ph.D. I also thank Paul Cornelius and Gerald Soliday for their advice concerning German cinema, culture and history, and Marilyn Waligore for her help with the history of art.

Notes

1. Töteberg, Fritz Lang; Maibohm, Fritz Lang: Seine Filme-Sein Leben; see also Bratton, The Natural Aryan and the Unnatural Jew: Environmental Racism in Nazi and Weimar Film.
2. Eisner, Fritz Lang, pp. 69-81. Eisner, The Haunted Screen Press, pp. 151-170; Eisner, Ich Hätte Einst ein Schönes Vaterland: Memoiren, p. 117.
3. McGilligan, Fritz Lang: The Nature of the Beast, pp. 27-48.
4. Eisner, Vaterland, p. 163, Maibohm, Fritz Lang, pp. 67-71.
5. Dürrenmatt, Fritz Lang: Leben und Werk, appen. 11 and 12.
6. "Fritz Lang Gives His Last Interview," *Village Voice*, Aug. 6 1976, cited in McGilligan, Nature of the Beast, p. 104.
7. Dürrenmatt, Fritz Lang, cited in Appendix 12 on Die Nibelungen, np.; Keiner, Thea von Harbou und der deutsche Film bis 1933, pp. 84-90.
8. Byock, The Saga of the Volsungs: The Norse Epic of the Dragonslayer.
9. Brackert, Das Nibelungenlied.
10. Wagner, The Ring of the Nibelungen, Wagner, Siegfried.
11. McGilligan, The Nature of the Beast, p. 103.
12. McGilligan, The Nature of the Beast, pp. 57-66.
13. Schouwink, Der wilde Eber in Gottes Weinberg: Zur Darstellung des Schweins in Literatur und Kunst des Mittelalters.
14. Weiner, Richard Wagner and the Anti-Semitic Imagination; see also Katz, The Darker Side of Genius: Richard Wagner's Anti-Semitism; and Rose, Wagner, Race and Revolution.
15. Weiner, Anti-Semitic Imagination, pp. 90-91.
16. Weiner, Anti-Semitic Imagination, p. 92.
17. Weiner, Anti-Semitic Imagination, p. 96.
18. Weiner, Anti-Semitic Imagination, p. 91.

19. Weiner, Anti-Semitic Imagination, p. 98.
20. Stage directions for Das Rheingold, Act I, sc. 2 and 3.
21. "gefiel mir besser als du," from Wagner, Siegfried, Act I, Sc. 1, p. 66.
22. Byock, Volsungs, p. 58.
23. Bracket, Nibelungenlied, p. 25.
24. Eisner, Haunted Screen, pp. 151-152.
25. Byock, Volsungs, pp. 59-60.
26. Eisner, Fritz Lang, p. 79.
27. Graml, Antisemitism in the Third Reich, pp. 42, 78.
28. McGilligan, Nature of the Beast, p. 96.
29. Jensen, The Cinema of Fritz Lang, p. 48.
30. Eisner, Haunted Screen, p. 155.
31. Eisner, Haunted Screen, p. 47.
32. Ott, The Films of Fritz Lang, p. 110.
33. McGilligan, Nature of the Beast, p. 97.
34. Heiber, Weimar Republic, p. 42.
35. Peukert, The Weimar Republic, pp. 107-146, and 247-273.
36. Eisner, Haunted Screen, p. 168.
37. Quoted in Keiner, Thea von Harbou und der deutsche Film bis 1933, p. 87.
38. Simsolo, Fritz Lang, p. 29.
39. Hoffmann, The Triumph of Propaganda: Film and National Socialism, 1933-1945; Riefenstahl, Leni Riefenstahl: A Memoir.
40. Wagner is more the Romantic, while Lang borrows from both Romanticism and Expressionism.
41. Cinema of Fritz Lang, p. 47.
42. Lang, "Worauf es beim Nibelungen-Film," p. 170.
43. Lang, "Worauf es beim Nibelungen-Film," p. 170.
44. McGilligan, Nature of the Beast, p. 95
45. Storch, Die Nibelungen: Bilder von Liebe, Verrat und Untergang.
46. ("Gehe hin in alle Welt und lehre alle Völker"), "Stilwille im Film," Jugend, München, Heft Nr. 3, Feb. 1, 1924. Reprinted in Gehler and Kasten, Fritz Lang, p. 162.
47. *Ibid.*, p. 163.
48. Vaughan, German Romantic Painting; Schama, Landscape and Memory, pp. 3-17, 75-134.
49. Lang, "Worauf es beim Nibelungen-Film ankam," in Gehler and Kasten, Fritz Lang, pp. 171-172.
50. "Vier Welten" in Gehler and Kasten, Fritz Lang, p. 99.
51. Gehler and Kasten, Fritz Lang, p. 172.
52. Dürrenmatt, Fritz Lang, p. 11.
53. Bruns, Kinomythen: 1920-1945: Die Filmentwürfe der Thea von Harbou, pp. 11-12.
54. See Herf, Reactionary Modernism: Technology, Culture and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich.

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