University of Gothenburg

Faculty of Humanities

Die Nibelungen: Siegfried, and the Myth of 'Myth'

Abstract

This paper sets out to critically discuss and analyse both the scholarly and general implementation of the word 'myth' as designator of style, narrative, and cultural significance, within film studies and adjacent academic fields. This is done through an examination of scholarly discourse surrounding the topics of mythology, folk tale, and fairy tale, specifically in regard to Fritz Lang's film *Die Nibelungen: Siegfried* (1924), and, albeit to a lesser extent, its sequel *Die Nibelungen: Kriemhild's Rache* (1924). Studies of folkloric narratives within other disciplines are also considered, particularly those that have exercised direct influence on the development of film criticism, such as psychoanalysis. Finally, drawing on film studies, folkloristics, and literature studies, the most prominent parts of this text provide analysis of *Die Nibelungen* in the light of this discourse.

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1. Introduction

Between smiling and tears, laughter and yelling, destinies unfold that have always been the stuff of human tragedy. And I have not tried anything other than to rebestow one of these tragedies, as beautiful and as contemporary as I myself found it, upon the people of today through film, the liveliest art form of our time.[1]

Fritz Lang, *Will to Style in Film*

In the second chapter of *The Films of Fritz Lang*, titled *The Decay of Myth: Siegfried's Death, Kriemhild's Revenge*, Tom Gunning briefly discusses the two part film series *Die Nibelungen* loosely in terms of symbolic forms, comparing it to Lang's other films *Der müde Tod* (1921) and *Metropolis* (1927), labelling them as 'mythological epic', 'Marchen' (meaning 'fairy tale'), and 'futuristic science fiction', respectively.[2] In detailing the difference between the former two, he particularly notes their invoking of separate, albeit still traditional, genres of storytelling, specifically 'myth' and 'epic' in the case of *Die Nibelungen*. It is a distinguishment that will most likely seem entirely natural even to one not well versed in the reading or studying of myth, but therein lays a certain problem not addressed in Gunning's analysis. Specifically, it is that he does not provide a specific definition of *myth* or *fairy tale* as such or what differentiates them, presumably due to an expectation on his part that the reader will already be sufficiently aware of the distinction such that an explication would be superfluous. Reasonable enough to assume, perhaps, but is this really the case? While stories belonging to both categories unquestionably form a considerable part of any cultural consciousness, and are consistently discussed off-handedly within academia, the actual distinction between myth, fairy tale, as well as folk tale, as a topic of scholarly debate, has rarely been acknowledged outside the field of folkloristics.

'Myth', according to folklorist Alan Dundes, is 'but one form or genre of folklore, a form which consists of a sacred narrative explaining how the world and man came to be in their

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[1] Lang, Fritz. 'Will to Style in Film', in Kaes, Anton; Baer, Nicholas; Cowan, Michael eds., *The Promise of Cinema: German Film Theory 1907 – 1933*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2016, p. 96.
[2] Gunning, Tom. *The Films of Fritz Lang: Allegories of Vision and Modernity*. London: The British Film Institute, 2000, p. 34.

present form'.[3] Thus, while Gunning's separation of myth from fairy tale is in and of itself not wrong from a folkloristic point of view, the attributing of *Die Nibelungen* to myth as something that distinguishes the work in question certainly is, not least in its firm detachment from the fairy tale genre. Further, rather than basing his implementation of the term 'myth' on a definition separate from that one argued by Dundes, Gunning instead neglects to provide a definition altogether, and appears to be structuring his analysis of the film's 'mythic' aspects around a somewhat unclear and preconceived notion of myth, as opposed to one that is carefully considered or thought out. The result is not only detrimental to the analysis of *Die Nibelungen*, but also to the comprehension of mythology itself and the complexities of its relationship to other forms of narrative.

Unfortunately, this lack of insight displayed by Gunning's text is by no means a unique occurrence within film studies, as it is just as common to find in other fields as well. Both Joseph Campbell and Claude Lévi-Strauss, to name a few, have been criticised for consistently conflating myth with other folkloristic categories, something that is also detectable in the writings of Sigmund Freud.[45] Further, the anthology text *A Companion to Fritz Lang*, to give an illustrative example from film criticism, offers several instances where *Die Nibelungen* is carelessly characterised as myth (not least as 'national myth', a rather controversial designation that is employed perhaps too carelessly than is prudent).

The intended purpose behind this paper then is to attempt to rectify the misusing of the term 'myth' within film studies as designative of certain sorts of narratives and aesthetics through implementation and integration of terms and theory borrowed from folklore studies to the area of film studies. Simply replacing a generic usage of the categories 'myth', 'folktale', 'fairy tale', and 'legend', where they become, if not synonymous, then at the very least not clearly delineable from another, with a specific one that considers them as separate entities and understands what separates them, could possibly enrichen the studying of them as they appear or are adapted in film, as well as their intrinsic connection to the medium of film as a whole. Additionally, due to them being words charged with specific ideological connotations, not least due to their extensive politicisation throughout history in the forming of nationalist histories

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[3] Dundes, Alan. 'Folklore as a Mirror of Culture', in Bronner, Simon J., ed. *The Meaning of Folklore: The Analytical Essays of Alan Dundes*. Utah: Utah State University Press, 2007, p. 56.

[4] Dundes, Alan. 'Folkloristics in the Twenty-First Century (AFS Invited Presidential Plenary Address 2004*)'*, *The Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 118, No. 470, 2005, p. 391 – 392.

[5] Dundes, Alan. 'Binary Opposition in Myth: The Propp/Lévi-Strauss Debate in Retrospect', in Bronner, Simon J., ed. *The Meaning of Folklore: The Analytical Essays of Alan Dundes*. Utah: Utah State University Press, 2007, p. 149.

and identities, it could allow for a more nuanced and complex understanding of them within film discourse, not least regarding a film so artistically rich yet potentially problematic as *Die Nibelungen*.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Folkloristics and Mediaeval Studies

Because the specific study of myth, legend, and fairy tale, as folkloric genres delineable from one another is relatively unexplored within film studies, this paper will employ an eclectic theoretical approach in analysing and appraising *Die Nibelungen*, as well as the film theoretical discourse on myth of which the studying of the film in question has been part of. First, we shall have to draw up a distinction between 'myth' as a folkloric genre, the 'mythic' as a quality attributable to certain aspects of a text (motifs of content as well as structure), and 'mythology' as a larger framework within which connected stories operate of which some may indeed by myths, while others are closer to folk tales. The reason for this is to address the inherently somewhat confusing way in which these words exist in relation to one another.

Within folklore studies, the two texts most commonly referred to as a means of identification are the *Aarne-Thompson Tale Type Index*, and the *Motif Index of Folk Literature*, the first of which identifies tales by type according to motifs, while the second text catalogues the motifs that may be found in a specific tale ('motif' in this context being defined by Stith Thompson as 'the smallest element in a tale having a power to persist in tradition').[6] While both of these have seen extensive usage within the field of folkloristics since their inception, a few points of criticism levelled at them from within said field regarding the limitations inherently present in relying on them for categorisation should be noted.

Originally, the indexes were drawn up and developed so to offer an effective means of conducting comparative research on folkloric materials, which were drawn from a large amount of cultures. Dundes writes:

> This was why it became apparent to folklorists […] that for comparative studies there had to be some convenient means of referring to individual parts or pieces of folkloristic items as well as to these items as wholes. In the second place, in order to have trustworthy comparison, one needed to operate with comparable units. This was particularly important to the members of the Finnish school inasmuch as it was

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[6] Thompson, Stith, as quoted by Dundes, p. 92.

precisely the differences of some of the smaller units of a given folktale upon which the conclusions of a historical-geographical study were often based.[7]

However, as Dundes also notes, while the distinctions found in both texts were formulated so to provide a system of individual constituent units, the 'criterion of having genuine comparable units did not enter into the construction of either the motif-index or the Aarne-Thompson tale-type index.'[8] Additionally, Dundes argues, the types are by necessity defined according to the 'subjective evaluation of the classifier', as they are not based in terms of their structural qualities but in terms of their contents, meaning that it becomes a matter of personal opinion which category a tale that contains more than one defining motif should belong to.[9] Certain distinctions, therefore, have resulted in a degree of scholarly debate, and ought therefore to be discussed and implemented carefully.

In order to provide a richer and more flexible model, Dundes has therefore suggested that the type- and motif indexes (which he still claims to be of integral importance in spite of their flaws) be used in tandem with the morphological approach of Russian folklorist Vladimir Propp, and the linguistic approach of Kenneth Pike. To provide a brief summary, Propp's own *Morphology of the Folktale*, being of the Russian formalist school, suggests and delineates a classification of the fairy tale based on its structural components as opposed to its contents. These structural components are termed *functions*, and are defined as 'an act of a character, defined from the point of view of its significance for the course of the action'.[10] In contrast then to the motifs of a tale, such as specific characters or beasts, which are deemed as replaceable, the functions are labelled *constants* with the former being labelled *variants*. To exemplify further, Propp writes: 'The actual means of the realization of functions can vary, and as such, it is a variable. Morozko behaves differently than Baba Jaga. **But the function, as such, is a constant. The question of what a tale's dramatis personae do is an important one for the study of the tale, but the questions of who does it and how it is done already fall within the province of accessory study** [emphasis added].'[11]

As a means of complementing and tying together Propp's morphological approach and the historical-geographical one, Dundes forwards the use of two separate kinds of linguistic units devised by Pike: *etic* units and *emic* units. In essence, etic units are those that can be subtracted

[7] Dundes, Alan. 'From Etic to Emic Units in the Structural Study of Folktales', in Bronner, Simon J., ed. *The Meaning of Folklore: The Analytical Essays of Alan Dundes*. Utah: Utah State University Press, 2007, p. 90.
[8] Ibid, p. 91.
[9] Ibid, p. 93.
[10] Propp, Vladimir. *Morphology of the Folktale*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968, p. 21.
[11] Ibid, p. 20.

(in this case, from a selected text) and categorised without the need to consider their original context; emic units as part of an emic approach are, by comparison, defined by Pike as 'not absolutes in a vacuum, but rather […] points in a system, and these points are defined RELATIVE to the system. A unit must be studied, not in isolation, but as a part of a total functioning componential system within a total culture.'[12] In the case of folkloristic studies, then, Dundes has proposed that the etic unit be used to refer to the motif (or variant), and the emic unit be used to refer to the function, in this context renamed *motifeme*.

Dundes' proposed fusion has potential for the further understanding of both how fairy tales continue to be adapted into motion pictures in terms of motifs and motifemes alike, and how fairy tales and films from a given time period and culture may reflect one another as cultural objects. For the purposes of this text, however, it will be implemented solely as a means to identify and analyse what are specifically folk or fairy tale (or myth, such as they do appear) components within *Die Nibelungen*. But of course, film remains its own narrative medium with its own unique conventions and practical limitations, and as such cannot be expected to be fully disclosed by a theoretical approach that takes no consideration for those unique aspects, and was indeed developed with something entirely different in mind (perhaps Propp's theory, or Dundes' fusion thereof, can be remodelled for film scholarship – but such a concern is outside the scope of this work).

Further, it bears mentioning that in spite of being included in the Tale-Type Index, *Nibelungenlied*, the primary source of inspiration for *Die Nibelungen*, is in fact a literary work. While clearly steeped in oral folk tradition, it is also a text reflective of the literary conventions of its time period, not least in its entirely anachronistic elements of chivalric romance. The extent then to which the poem can defined as folk tale (even less 'myth') is debatable, as indeed, it has been argued that not even the fairy tales collected by the Grimms could accurately be defined as folklore, being, as they are, altered according to contemporary literary predilections. Nonetheless, the fact that *Die Nibelungen* draws mainly from a literary sources does not exclude that it, if albeit mainly indirectly, contains folkloric motifs and motifemes; however, considerations of its source material as literature are still necessary here in creating a more fully-rounded analysis. Specifically, while no theoretical model is here employed, academic work from within that of Mediaeval studies will be referred to in so far as it is found relevant to the literary treatment of the folkloric elements in the *Nibelungenlied* and the *Völsunga saga*.

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[12] Pike, Kenneth, as quoted by Dundes, p. 96.

2.2. Film Genre and Myth

Returning entirely to the matter of film, I will here be turning to the theoretical work done by Steve Neale in regard to the concept of film genre, as well as the Russian formalist school, so to tie the folkloristic and literary considerations of this text specifically to that of film categorisation and discourse. While folkloric genres such as myth, legend, and fairy tale, possess no direct equivalences within film genre nomenclature, and ultimately operate by a different set of rules as they have been designated almost entirely from within academia, as opposed to film sciences, the approach to film genre as espoused by Neale in *Questions of Genre* offers numerous helpful conceptions in discussing films in terms of their critical and general perception, the shaping of expectation through discourse and its inevitable impact upon each individual viewing, and their intermedial and intertextual relationships. Thus, while this text will not concern itself primarily with *Die Nibelungen* in terms of film genre as such, it will deal with it in terms of some of the processes pivotal to the formation of genres.

In his essay *Questions of Genre*, Neale writes the following:

> not simply bodies of work or groups of films, however classified, labeled, and defined. Genres do not consist only of films: they consist also, and equally, of specific systems of expectation and hypothesis that spectators bring with them to the cinema and that interact with films themselves during the course of the viewing process. These systems provide spectators with means of recognition and understanding. They help render films, and the elements within them, intelligible and therefore explicable. They offer a way of working out the significance of what is happening on the screen: why particular events and actions are taking place, why the characters are dressed the way they are, why they look, speak, and behave the way they do, and so on.[13]

A film genre then is here conceived not as an existing corpus of works tied together by norms or conventions, but something more akin to a conception that exists on a widespread level, which goes on to form 'generic regimes' that individual genres operate within. This conception, I would argue, and will attempt to demonstrate, possess potential not only in being applied within investigations of individual films, and the economic and cultural operations within which they work, but also in how these tie to other art forms and narrative traditions, aspects of film history and development which are also given precedence in formalist theory. To summarise, a film studies-based formalist approach

> takes account of the historicity not only of genres but of specific generic regimes; it takes account of their process-like nature; and, in its insistence on the importance of an interplay between canonized and non-

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[13] Neale, Steve. 'Questions of Genre', *Screen*, Vol. 31, Iss. 1, 1990 p. 46.

canonized forms of representation and between canonized and non-canonized genres, it takes account both

of the transience of generic hierarchies, and of the role of hybridization in the formation and dissolution of

individual genres.[14]

Continuing, it 'neither prescribes the conditions for generic outmodedness nor specifies any single mechanism by which non-canonized forms, devices, or genres might find a place within generic regimes or assume a position of dominance within them. It allows for a variety of factors and reasons.'[15] The advantages then of formalist theory, not least for its flexibility, in approaching something so contextually and cross-textually intricate as *Die Nibelungen* should be self-evident. Moreover, its suitability for discussing art forms outside of film (art forms with which it is nonetheless intertwined) should hopefully make it a workable fit with Dundes' proposed model of structural folktale study.

3. Analysis

3.1. Myth, Mythology, and the Mythic

Earlier on in this text, I stated the need to delineate and separate the respective definitions of the words 'myth', 'mythic', and 'mythology', so to address the confusion they inevitably cause when used without consideration of their folkloric properties. More specifically, they warrant clearer definitions, I would argue, not only because they are rarely considered in the ways that they are separate from one another (in as much as they do connect), but because that very lack of consideration, I suspect, is part of why both the general and academic use of them tends to become rather ambiguous and vague.

For instance, when we describe a certain thing within a story – e.g. a dragon – as something 'mythic', what exactly do we mean by this? That it is something which has its inception in superstitions assumedly held by prehistoric humans? That it is something found in literary texts drawn from ancient oral sources in which such things are commonplace? That they were tied to certain pagan beliefs? That they once acted as explanations or metaphors for specific natural phenomena? Depending on the person describing, it can be one of these, several, all of them, or none whatsoever. What is usually consistent with such descriptions, however, is that the specific designator chosen is not given justification, and that its meaning is taken for granted.

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[14] Ibid, p. 60.
[15] Ibid, p. 61.

This creates problems because a designator like that will inevitably accumulate different meanings and connections over time as it continues to be applied to different things.

To exemplify, two of the most influential philosophers to grapple with myth and its relation to human thought processes, C.G. Jung and Claude Lévi-Strauss, offer significantly different views of these things in their writings. Jung, famously, discusses myth in terms of *archetypes*, universal images which originate from a collective unconscious of which cultural variants constitute only superficial differences; Lévi-Strauss, on the other hand, discusses myth in terms of *binary oppositions*, something he judges to be of central importance in interpreting them. That they conflate myths with other folkloric genres does in no way, of course, discredit their theories. Archetypes and/or binary oppositions may very well be found in the stories they analyse, as well as do not analyse, regardless of how we chose to label them. It becomes an entirely different matter, however, if we take these things to be characteristic of myth. To cite Dundes on this matter:

> *If binary opposition is a universal—or even if it were confined to folklore genres as diverse as myth, folktale, proverb, riddle, and curse—the question is: how can binary opposition be used to define the nature of myth? This is not to deny that binary oppositions can be found in myth. The critical point is that binary opposition is in no way peculiar to myth. If this is so, then what Lévi-Strauss has isolated in his analysis of "myth" tells us precious little about the nature of myth in particular. To be fair, since Lévi-Strauss is actually interested in the nature of human thought (rather than myth per se), perhaps it doesn't matter that binary opposition as a distinctive feature is not confined to myth. Quite the contrary. If binary oppositional thought is a pan-human mental characteristic, that is well worth noting. But then we must not pretend that the presence of binary oppositions in a narrative necessarily identifies that narrative as a myth.[16]*

To return then to the matter of the word 'mythic' being used in a descriptive sense, how do we implement it so not to arouse further confusion? Of this, I have found no clear attempt at detailing, but I will venture a rationally based guess, namely that if myths are 'sacred narrative[s] explaining how the world and man came to be in their present form', then for an element to be accurately defined as 'mythic' it must be directly derived from one such narrative. A dragon, then, is not something mythic in so far as it is found in ancient tales, nor is it something mythic in the sense that it might have originated as an unconscious representation of some primal aspect of human nature. It might very well, however, be rightfully regarded as mythic if it fulfils a role within a particular mythology, examples of which could include the Biblical Leviathan or the Norse Nidhogg (both of which are involved in the creation of the

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[16] Dundes, p. 151.

world, and its destruction). Finally, it is worth noting that characters or monsters found in other folkloric stories may have mythological origins, even if they no longer appear as such. So we might speak of Sigurd/Siegfried, Fafner and Brunhild as mythical (in origin, if nothing else) in relation to Max Müller's theory of the solar myth, where they are held to originally have been metaphors for natural phenomena:

> The young day slays the mist-dragon and awakens the sun-maiden that sleeps on the mountain; at evening he falls a prey to the powers of gloom that draw the sun down again beneath the earth. With this day-myth was probably combined the parallel myth of the changing seasons: the light returns in spring, slays the cloud-dragon, and frees the budding earth from the bonds of winter.[17]

Thus, while the categorising of a such a story as 'sacred' may be found dubious, it does nonetheless offer explanations for certain aspects of the natural order of the world itself, something that is present in, and necessary, for any story to be correctly labelled as myths.

Finally, this brings us to the matter of connected myths forming separately identifiable mythologies. This appears to me a particularly confounding aspect of distinguishing certain folktales from myth, not least due to tales involving or being somehow connected to mythological figures and events, e.g. the tale of king Minos of Crete, being often found grouped together under the designation of mythology together with genuinely mythic stories. I have as of yet found nothing written relating directly to this particular development, (though it may have been synchronous with the conflation of myth and folktale as a whole). Regardless, in terms of folkloric genres, there is nothing to support an assessment of certain tales as mythic or mythological that is merely based on the inclusion of deities and/or demigods, as the inclusion of motifs involving such beings do not by themselves constitute the criteria for any tale to be deemed as such.

3.2. Analysis - Motifs and Structure of Myth, and Fairy Tale, in *Die Nibelungen: Siegfried*

We may now then discuss *Die Nibelungen: Siegfried* in terms of myth, folktale, and fairy tale, proper. For the sake of streamlining the discursive elements of this text, we will here also turn yet again to the chapter 'The Decay of Myth' from Gunning's *The Films of Fritz Lang*, specifically so to single out the elements defined by Gunning in terms of myth, and observe how these contrast to identifications made in the light of Dundes' structural folkloristic model.

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[17] Henry Needler, George. *The Nibelungenlied: Translated into Rhymed English Verse in the Metre of the Original*, New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1904, p. xiv.

It should here be firmly stated that this is done with no intention of discrediting Gunning's analysis of the film, which is well-founded, and offers one of the richest discussions to be found on it. Rather, the point here is to examine the discussion on myth in a qualitative film scholarly work by an influential writer, and to observe how a more detailed and carefully considered approach as to what myth is can prove beneficial in the further studying of how film continues to engage with and adapt folkloric material. Likewise, it will also provide opportunity to discuss how the lack of such an approach can prove detrimental to certain cases of film analysis, and result in readings that, if not inevitably, than with great probability, confuse folkloric elements and their significance (or lack thereof) in a given film.

First of all, we must ask what is the connection between *Die Nibelungen* and myth? According to Gunning, as might be guessed from the title of the chapter, Lang's and Harbou's film 'traces a descent from the realm of gods into the human, out of the realm of legend into history. The fatality that rules this film is less the decree of the gods (who are absent) than the downfall of the world of myth.'[18] Gunning, then, ties the film not only to that of the supernatural and mediaeval superstitions ('a realm of more than human heroes, Valkyries, dragons and dwarves – an ambiguous legacy of magic'), but to the mythological – to that of the divine, the cosmological, indeed, to ancient, pagan beliefs, the decline of which the film chronicles, and where its core ultimately resides.[19] The clearest indicator of this connection to a world of deities is suggested by Gunning in his discussing of the film's opening shot:

> *The opening image of a rainbow descending from a high mountain recalls not only the landscape painting of Caspar David Friedrich, but Norse cosmology in which the rainbow bridge Bifrost unites the Middle Earth, where man dwells, with Asgard, the home of the gods. Lang and Harbou's film traces a descent from the realm of gods into the human, out of the realm of legend into history. The fatality that rules this film is less the decree of the gods (who are absent) than the downfall of the world of myth.[20]*

Earlier on in this text it was stated that from a folkloristic point of view, the story of *Die Nibelungen* bears little in way of similarities to actual myth, with part of the *Nibelungenlied*, the heroic German poem which offers the main source of inspiration for Lang's and Harbou's film, being included in the Aarne-Thompson-Uther Index, which solely collects folk tales, as tale type 650C.[21] However, the discussion of the film as myth is nonetheless complicated by the fact that it does not draw solely from *Nibelungenlied*, but also from Norse renditions of the

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[18] Gunning, p. 38.
[19] Gunning, p. 35.
[20] Ibid, p. 38.
[21] Aarne, Antti Amatus; Thompson, Stith, *The Types of the Folktale: A Classification and Bibliography*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, p. 227.

tale, as well as from Richard Wagner's opera *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. Here, a degree of contextualisation is required in order to delineate the film's borrowings from literature and folklore, and explicate how they tie into the film's relationship to mythology.

In an essay published in 1924, Fritz Lang rather explicitly discusses *Nibelungenlied* as the primary inspiration for *Die Nibelungen*, writing that:

> *For us and for the world in general, except a handful of people, the sublime glory of the Nibelungen is an untapped treasure. Who, in the chaos of our time, has the leisure and calmness to read the Nibelungenlied? Who has the opportunity to let the drama affect them, the heavy words, the static frames of the stage, from which they can only be told about the crucial element: mystical magic? The dragon that Siegfried slew, the lake of fire that surrounded Brunhild's castle, the battle that Siegfried fights for Gunther, the deception of the magic hood, even the Nibelungs' distress in Etzel's burning palace – these are all things that we basically have to take on good faith.[22]*

In the context of *Nibelungenlied* though, this line of reasoning reads a bit odd. For one, the 'lake of fire that surrounded Brunhild's castle' is not an element actually contained in the German poem – it is, however, found in the most famous of the Scandinavian versions, the *Völsunga saga*. But much more notably there is also rather little of 'mystical magic' to be found in *Nibelungenlied*, something that is made particularly noticeable when compared with other variants of the same tale, including Wagner's. Only when these things are of direct relevance to the narrative's chain of events, such as when Siegfried uses his magic hood to trick Brunhild, are they pushed to the forefront (a particularly notable example of this is Siegfried's slaying of the dragon, which is treated in great detail in the *Völsunga saga* and *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, but is here relegated to a single line of backstory). More importantly, in this particular instance, at the least, the pagan gods directly involving themselves in the events of the latter versions are nowhere to be found. The only explicit trace of any kind of pagan Germanic worldview is glimpsed in the prophecy uttered by the water sprites in the poem's twenty fifth section, read by Cyril Edwards as 'integral to the sense of *wyrd*, of inexorable fate, familiar to the reader of *Beowulf*, of the *Hildebrandslied*, and of Icelandic sagas such as the great tale of revenge, the *Saga of Burnt Njal*.'[23]

Why is this important? Because while *Nibelungenlied* is an originally pagan tale hollowed out of its underpinning mythology, the Norse variants preserve it to a great extent (if not entirely). By comparison, Wagner not only includes it, but emphasises it, turning the rather

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[22] Lang, p. 96.
[23] Edwards, Cyril. *The Nibelungenlied: The Lay of the Nibelungs*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010, p. xvi.

personal tale of Sigurd/Siegfried and Brunhild into a work of genuinely mythological proportions, where the actions its central characters result in the apocalyptic Twilight of the Gods, and the fall of the divine order of the world. We have thus three primary sources that *Die Nibelungen* evincingly draws from (as will be explicated further on): an (almost) entirely Christianised retelling, Christian retellings that preserve pagan mythic elements, and an operatic work that blends, and adds to, separate versions into a tale of full-blown myth.

To state, therefore, that *Die Nibelungen* lacks any kind of mythical motifs on the basis that it is an adaptation of *Nibelungenlied*, would be empirically insufficient – that it adapts *Nibelungenlied* is correct on a general level, of course, particularly in regard to its second part *Kriemhilds Rache*, but it neglects to consider the film's borrowings from other works. Additionally, it would be to cut the film off from its historical context, including the immense influence weighed by Wagner's opera over the public perception of Siegfried's tale, which is in fact closer to the Norse texts, and the scholarly perception at the time of the Norse variants as being closer to an older, more truly 'German' point of origin than the courtly *Nibelungenlied* (a perception that *Die Nibelungen* is very clearly illustrative of, as will be detailed later on here).[24]

How then do we determine if any motifs or motifemes in *Die Nibelungen* (such as we can identify any in a film by viewing it through a structural folkloristic lens) are in any way mythic? And what implications does their lack or presence have for the film itself? Since we cannot determine this simply by taking authorial regard at face value, we must direct our sole attention to the film as text itself, and base our assessments on what the film does and does not in fact include.

For simplicity's sake, we will start here by observing the non-structural etic units of the film as they pertain to folkloristic motifs delineated in Thompson's Motif-Index of Folk-Literature. Here, motifs are divided into seven main categories: Mythological Motifs, Animal Motifs, Motifs of Tabu, Magic, the Dead, Marvels, and Ogres, while the motifs themselves usually consist of either types of agents (deities, heroes, animals, etc.) or actions performed by certain agents (e.g. 'Magic object received from dwarf').[25]

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[24] Ibid, p. xxiv; xxvi.

[25] Thompson, Stith. *Motif-index of folk-literature : a classification of narrative elements in folktales, ballads, myths, fables, mediaeval romances, exempla, fabliaux, jest-books, and local legends*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1955 – 1958, p. 587.

Regarding *Die Nibelungen*, there are a number of folkloric elements that I would argue can be rather unproblematically identified with the help of Thompson's index, most of which fall under either Magic or Marvels (most notably regarding dwarfs and enchanted items, both of which appear with significant importance in *Die Nibelungen*). The most immediate exception to this is regarding the dragon which Siegfried defeats in one of the film's earlier parts. Dragons are brought up at numerous times under Mythological Motifs within contexts pertaining directly to things of a mythological nature, e.g. 'creator with dragon's head', 'combat between god of light and dragon of ocean', and 'thunder from flying dragon'.[26] Thus far, everything appears to line up according to Dundes' definition of myth as a narrative involved with the creation or the ordering of the world itself – that the dragon from the *Nibelungenlied*, or a similar counterpart such as the Heraclean hydra, is not included is to be expected, as the tales in which they appear are by definition not mythological (unless, of course, we choose to perceive them as metaphors for natural phenomena). And yet, directly underneath the category Animal Motifs we find dragons listed as 'Mythical beasts and hybrids', with the dragon Fáfnir (the Norse equivalent of the one in *Nibelungenlied*) even listed as motif B11.1.3., in spite of appearing in what is clearly not a myth.

This is an apparent contradiction that by necessity requires a degree of attention before we can proceed. If Fáfnir is indeed a mythical beast, then why is this motif not included under Mythological Motifs? By what criteria are dragons designated as mythical, while dwarfs and giants are not? Certainly we do find creatures listed here that are found within mythology, such as the Biblical Behemoth and the Norse Audhumla, but are we then to view these as belonging to the same category as supernatural animals found in fairy- and/or folktales?

The former of these queries can likely be explained by simply recalling the criticism levelled by both Dundes and Propp towards categorisation of tale types according to motifs as at times unavoidably arbitrary. For the latter two there is no such immediate answer (not to my knowledge, at least). It might be a matter of distinguishing the 'mythological' from the 'mythical', although I have found no definition within folkloristics of either terms to support such a distinguishment. That dragons do in fact appear in myth as well as other genres of folklore is also insufficient as far as explanations are concerned, as basilisks and chimeras are also listed underneath the same category without actually being included underneath Mythological Motifs as well. Regardless, the fact of the matter remains that the word 'mythical'

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[26] Ibid, p. 3; 28; 133.

when used in the context of folkloristic studies is most regularly only employed when discussing or designating things relating directly to myth, and as such, that is how we will continue to employ it here, in spite of the present incongruity.

This brings us then to motifs in *Die Nibelungen* that we might define as belonging to Mythological Motifs. Depending on how one chooses to interpret certain elements in the film, one may indeed find certain mythic motifs, but it is vital to note here that there is nothing in the film as text to verify that this is what they are intended to be understood as. In this instance, I am referring to two particular things: the rainbow in the centre of the introductory establishing shot in *Die Nibelungen*, which, if interpreted as the rainbow bridge Bifrost of Norse mythology would fall under motif A791.3, '*Rainbow made as bridge by the gods*', and the character of Brunhild, who, if interpreted as being a valkyrie, would fall under motif A485.2, '*Valkyries (shield-maidens). Demigodesses who attend battle.*'

The question of whether or not Brunhild as portrayed in the *Die Nibelungen* is in fact a valkyrie might at first seem like a tricky question to untangle due to the many conflicting versions of the figure. The most famous depictions of her are perhaps those found in the *Völsunga saga* and *Der Ring des Nibelungen* – in the former she is a human, albeit still a shield maiden, suggesting that perhaps the word 'valkyrie' has not always been used primarily to designate a mythical being, while in the latter she is a valkyrie in the truly mythical sense, as well as the daughter of Wotan, the opera's equivalent to the Norse god Odin. In the *Nibelungenlied* she is yet again depicted as a human warrior, though she is never referred to as a shield maiden, as well as the queen of Iceland.

To reach a verdict here, then, we must turn once again to the film as the primary text being studied. In line with the German poem, Brunhild is shown to be the queen of Isenland, and much like Siegfried, a warrior of superhuman prowess, capable of such feats of strength as throwing great boulders with ease, and jumping tremendous distances. No direct explanation is provided as to how Brunhild came to acquire these powers, which may be regarded as a hint towards a supernatural origin for the character. However, this remains mere speculation nonetheless, and is made even more unlikely by the fact that no explanation is given for Siegfried's even greater physical prowess either. In the end, then, there is no textual support for interpretating Brunhild as reflective of a mythological motif.

What then of the rainbow as Bifrost? Before proceeding to discuss this, however, it is important to bear in mind, that Gunning does not actually explicitly state that the rainbow *is*

Bifrost, but merely that it recalls it. That being said, the question as to whether or not the rainbow is meant to be literally taken as Bifrost is still worth posing, because, if this is indeed the case, then that is a clear indicator that the film not only possess a direct connection to the world of Norse mythology, but also that the gods of Northern Germanic paganism form a real presence in the film, in spite of their apparent lack of agency. This has implications not only for the film's connecting of Germany's cultural heritage with the Norse sagas, but also for the *Destiny Machine* discussed by Gunning regarding Fritz Lang's filmography as the structure within which the causal actions of agents are determined, and how we might consider it in regard to the element of *wyrd* discussed by Edwards.

However, with the exception of the central positioning of the rainbow, and that it does in fact appear in the film's first shot, which would seem to imply that it is of some significance, there is nothing explicit in the film that would suggest that the rainbow is in fact divine in origin. This is further compounded by the film's vague and at times confusing relationship with paganism, of which there are only hints, and at times contradictory ones at that. In fact, acknowledgment of beliefs or practices centred around organised religion are a rarity in the film in general, with only Christianity shown to have any real prominence, while traces of pagan worship can at best be surmised from a few instances of set design, as well as two scenes in which particularly non-Christian conduct is carried out (those being the use of runes as a means of prediction when Brunhild first hears of Siegfried's coming, and Brunhild's suicide). Any speculation then that the Norse gods might play some part, if only by their absence, remains unfounded in regard to the primary text itself – which is not to say that we cannot interpret the rainbow as metaphorically meant to represent a higher existence, or an older, more mystical world order, but such things are outside the scope of this section, which is focused on the film's explicit tie to myth. The implications of all this in regard to Gunning's analysis of the film will be discussed here later on.

This brings us then to the emic units, these in this instance being the motifemes, or, as Propp discusses them, 'functions'. It requires mentioning here that as of yet there has been no widely accepted scholarly work detailing the overall structure and structural units of myths in the way Propp managed to accomplish with the Russian fairy tale in his *Morphology of the Folktale* (although he does discuss how the structure of the fairy tale as outlined in that work does bear remarkable similarities to certain 'archaic myths', implying a direct connection between the

two).[27] While we cannot then perform a structural analysis of *Die Nibelungen* in regard to myth, we might implement Propp's own morphological approach toward the fairy tale to the film, and observe to what extent it lines up with the fairy tale structurally.

A crucial point made by Propp in regard to the functions constituting the structure of each individual tale, is that tales belonging to the same structural type need not contain all thirty-one functions; the ordering of the functions, however, always remain identical, regardless of the amount.[28] Thus, individual examples of the fairy tale, as outlined by Propp, remain structurally consistent in spite of their, at times, overt, differences. Equally important to note here is that, as self-professedly stated by Propp, the morphology proposed cannot be said to be applicable to all forms of the fairy tale, nor to fairy tales only; specifically, he writes the following:

> *The stability of construction of fairy tales permits a hypothetical definition of them which may be stated in the following way: a fairy tale is a story built upon the proper alternation of the above-cited functions in various forms, with some of them absent from each story and with others repeated. By such a definition the term "fairy" [...] loses its sense, since it is a simple matter for one to imagine a wonderful, fantastic fairy tale constructed in a totally different way. (Compare certain of Andersen's and Brentano's tales, or Goethe's tale of the dragon and the lily, etc.) On the other hand, non-fairy tales may also be constructed according to the scheme cited.[29]*

While some scepticism has been directed towards Propp's morphology and its potential for wider applicability on account of the specific focus on Russian fairy tales within *Morphology of the Folktale*, it has been suggested by Dundes that it should likely be found applicable to the entirety of Indo-European culture, writing that 'Many, if not all, of the tales [analysed by Propp] are Aarne-Thompson tale types and thus Propp's analysis is clearly not limited to Russian materials.'[30][31] Moreover, the fairy tales selected by Propp for his study also directly correspond to the Aarne-Thompson tale types 300 – 749, 'Tales of Magic', which notably includes, as stated previously, the story of Siegfried's vanquishing of the dragon in the *Nibelungelied*. While the entirety of the poem itself cannot be said to be a fairy tale, as it is an epic, and thus marked by different conventions, its partial inclusion into the Uther Index paints a clear connection to the fairy tale genre, nonetheless, as is also hinted by its multitude of motifs belonging to the categories 'Magic' and 'Marvels'. It is not unreasonable to assume, then, that *Die Nibelungen*

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[27] Propp, p. 100.
[28] Ibid, p. 22.
[29] Ibid, p. 99.
[30] Dundes, p. 159.
[31] Dundes, Alan. 'Introduction to the Second Edition', *Morphology of the Folktale*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968, p. xiii.

may possess notable similarities to the fairy tale, or the Märchen, not only in terms of motifs, but functions as well.

First, let us begin with a brief outline of the plot of *Die Nibelungen: Siegfried*, after which we will attempt to implement Propp's morphology to see in what ways it may be found applicable. The film begins with Siegfried residing as a young adult in the wilderness with the dwarf Mime, where he serves as an apprentice to Mime in smith work. After completing his final test by forging a sword whose qualities not even Mime can surpass, Siegfried overhears a conversation about the splendour of the kingdom of Burgundy, and of the beauty of the princess Kriemhild, whom he decides to seek out and marry. Mime, jealous of Siegfried's skill as a craftsman, intentionally points him in the wrong direction, believing that Siegfried will be killed on his way.

While travelling through a forest, Siegfried encounters a dragon, which he promptly slays, followed by him accidentally getting some of the dragon's blood in his mouth, after which he learns the language of birds. A nearby bird then tells him that if he should bath in the dragon's blood, he would become invincible; Siegfried does this, unaware however that a linden-leaf has fallen on his shoulder, making it the one spot where he is untouched by the dragon-blood.

Later during his journey, Siegfried is attacked by the dwarf Alberich, who ambushes him with the help of a magic object that turns its wearer invisible. Siegfried nonetheless overpowers Alberich, who then bargains for his life by offering him the magic object (titled the 'Tarnhelm'), along with great riches. Siegfried agrees, whereupon he is lead to Alberich's underground dwelling where the Nibelung treasure is kept. There, Alberich attempts once again to kill Siegfried, only to fail and be killed himself, after which Siegfried claims the treasure, along with 'Balmung', an ancient, peerless sword.

Finally, Siegfried, along with twelve of his vassals, reaches the city Worms, where the Burgundians live. Siegfried asks for Kriemhild's hand from her brother, king Gunther, whereupon Siegfried is asked to assist Gunther in obtaining the hand of the queen of 'Icenland', Brunhild, for him in return. After initially refusing, Siegfried agrees after meeting Kriemhild, and travels with Gunther to Icenland. There, he crosses the wall of fire surrounding Brunhild's castle, and, with the help of the Tarnhelm, secretly assists Gunther in completing the three challenges posed by Brunhild to any potential suitor. The three then go to Worms together, with Gunther marrying Brunhild, and Siegfried marrying Kriemhild, as promised. However, Brunhild, as it turns out, displays unwillingness to submit to Gunther as his wife; Siegfried is

then asked to take on Gunther's shape (once again, with the help of the Tarnhelm) and subjugate her for him, to which he reluctantly agrees (having also recently sworn a blood oath with Gunther). After overpowering Brunhild, Siegfried takes her armlet, and leaves.

Months later, Siegfried and Kriemhild are still remaining in Worms; Brunhild asks Gunther to tell them to leave, which he refuses to do. Later, Brunhild and Kriemhild have an argument outside of the cathedral as to who is above the other in rank, and thus who should enter first. Kriemhild, having found Brunhild's armlet by accident, and been told by Siegfried of how he acquired it, tells Brunhild the truth of how it was Siegfried, and not Gunther, who completed her challenges. Devastated, Brunhild demands of Gunther that he has Siegfried killed; while initially unwilling, he relents after her telling him that Siegfried had secretly taken her maidenhood. Gunther's chief advisor, Hagen Tronje, is tasked with organising a hunt where Siegfried is to be slain, and also tricks Kriemhild in giving away where Siegfried's weak spot is located. She then sews a mark on Siegfried's clothing right over where his weak point would be located, having been asked by Hagen to do so, and believing that it is Hagen's intention to protect Siegfried from harm.

Lastly, Siegfried is challenged by Hagen during the hunt to a game of running to see who can reach a nearby spring first. Siegfried enthusiastically agrees and dashes off, reaching the spring well before Hagen, and crouches down to drink from the spring's water, whereupon, with his back turned, Hagen throws a spear through Siegfried's weak spot. Siegfried dies shortly thereafter, and his corpse is taken to Worms, where Kriemhild, upon learning the truth, vows to have Hagen killed. Siegfried is then laid to rest inside the cathedral, where Kriemhild also spots Brunhild, who has killed herself next to Siegfried's bier.

To what extent then does this synopsis line up with the thirty one steps delineated in Propp's morphology? Interestingly enough, while the morphology does not provide a perfect match, there are striking similarities, particularly within the first third of the film, something that is made even more notable by the fact that it finds more applicability here than it does in the *Völsunga saga*, and a great deal more than in the *Nibelungenlied*. Whether or not this is primarily a result of the film borrowing elements from the more 'fairy tale'-like Norse version, or a result of the structural requirements of narrative film, will be discussed in a later section, but for now we will examine how exactly Propp's functions apply to *Die Nibelungen: Siegfried*.

The first six functions Propp outlines should be familiar to anyone acquainted with Western fairy tales, and they are, broadly, as follows:

I. 'One member [or members] of a family absents himself from home' (e.g. parents).

II. 'An interdiction is addressed to the hero' (e.g. 'do not enter the forest').

III. 'The interdiction is violated'.

IV. 'The villain makes an attempt at reconnaissance'.

V. 'The villain receives information about his victim'.

VI. 'The villain attempts to deceive his victim in order to take possession of him or his belongings'.

VII. 'The victim submits to deception and thereby unwittingly helps his enemy'.

   None of these can be said to apply to *Die Nibelungen*, but, as stated by Propp, 'for from all tales begin with the affliction of misfortune', with a common starting point being instead a variation of the eight function, 'One member of a family either lacks something or desires to have something.'[32] The first seven functions are then omitted entirely, with the thing that triggers the hero's journey, as opposed to an act of villainy, is an insufficiency that can have either an external or an internal cause. In this case, then, Siegfried overhears a conversation about Kriemhild, comes to desire her, and then sets out to win her hand in marriage.

   As stated previously, not all intermediary functions need to be included for the model to be found applicable; what is required, however, is that they all follow an identical order. Thus, function VII cannot be preceded by function III, function XIX always occurs after function XIV, and so forth. Thus, the fact that the two functions IX and X ('He is allowed to go or he is dispatched', and 'The seeker agrees to or decides upon counteraction') are not included does not derail the morphology, as these functions are made superfluous because of the specifics of the plot. What follows then is XI, 'The hero leaves home', although we are afterwards immediately faced with the first structural incongruence between the film and the morphology. While the functions XII, XIII, and XIV can be said to directly correspond to Siegfried's battle with the dragon, his slaying of the dragon, and his attaining of invulnerability, respectively, they also correspond equally to his being ambushed by Alberich, his defeating of Alberich, and his being given the Tarnhelm in return for sparing Alberich's life, as well as their second scuffle underground, Siegfried's slaying of Alberich, and his claiming of the ancient sword Balmung. We have then not only an immediate repetition of a certain set of functions, but two, the

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[32] Propp, p. 35.

possibility for which Propp never discusses or even suggests. Most likely this is a result of the film's adapting of epic poetry, the structural conventions of which are naturally different to those of the fairy tale, but the fact that the structure is nonetheless ultimately identical (only repeated twice) is worth noting.

Moving forward, it is here that the morphology finds its greatest amount of equivalency. Function XV, 'The hero is transferred, delivered, or led to the whereabouts of an object of search', fits nicely with Siegfried's reaching of Worms, as does XVI, 'The hero and the villain join in direct combat', and XVIII, 'The villain is defeated', with Siegfried's completing of Brunhild's challenges. The extent to which Brunhild can really be discussed in terms of being a 'villain' is, of course, debatable, particularly in this stage of the film, but there is no doubt that she fits the part in a functional sense as the last great obstacle for Siegfried to overcome in obtaining his desire. This assessment is further strengthened by the requirement framed by Propp for a battle or competition of this sort to always result in the hero's completing of his quest in order for it to be recognised as function XVI.[33] The function that naturally follows, then, is XIX, 'The initial lack or misfortune is liquidated', meaning in this context, marriage with Kriemhild.

It is after this that we find the greatest discrepancy between the morphology and the film's plot. Functions XX, 'The hero returns', XXI, 'The hero is pursued', and XXII, 'Rescue of the hero from pursuit', cannot be said to correspond to any events in *Die Nibelungen* (function XX referring specifically to the hero returning home, which does not occur as Siegfried and Kriemhild never leave Worms after their marriage). However, some similarity is preserved in the sense that following XXII, certain tales end with the hero being killed and being relinquished of his prize, which would seem to fall in line with Siegfried's death at the hands of Hagen and the Burgundians, who, while they do not claim Kriemhild, do lay claim to the Nibelungen treasure and the sword Balmung.

Propp's morphology of the fairy tale, then, while not a perfect match, exhibits striking equivalences with Lang's and Harbou's film, nonetheless. An objection might then be raised here, and it has been voiced in the past, that Propp's morphology offers too lose and general of a structure to offer much insight into fairy tales specifically, as it can also be found to be applicable to certain literature, (Dundes notes the plot of *Beowulf*, and the final part of the

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[33] Propp, p. 51 – 52.

Odyssey as examples of this) as well as other forms of folklore.[34] That it can be largely observed in certain motion pictures as well should come as no surprise, with George Lucas' *Star Wars* (1977) being a notable example. If this is the case then, can we rightfully state that *Die Nibelungen: Siegfried* employs a fairy tale-structure, and is not simply representative of the diachronic requirements of cinema? I believe so – if the morphology can truly be found to be applicable to other, if not in some sense all, aspects of Indo-European culture, then that should be regarded as speaking in favour of it, rather than in opposition to it. That it is imperfect, and, inevitably, to some extent arbitrary, is an aspect of all structural theories, which can, by themselves, arrive only at estimates. Thus, there being overlaps with other areas in the employment of a certain structural model is to be expected, and, if anything, demonstrative of there being more to it than simply forced categorisation. In conclusion, that Propp's morphology of the fairy tale is detectable in other media and practices does not by itself devalue its worth as a tool in determining fairy tale motifs and motifemes.

3.3. The Workings and Significance of Fate in *Die Nibelungen*

My destiny was fashioned down to the last half-day, and all my life was determined.[35]

Anonymous, *The Lay of Skírnir*

The final aspect of the film which we now have to explore in order to reach a fully satisfying answer as to the way in which *Die Nibelungen* connects with myth and other folkloric genres is in its depiction of paganism and those particular pagan worldviews steeped in Northern Germanic mythology. Specifically, I am referring to the manner in which the tension between Christian faith and heathendom inherent to many (if not all) of the Germanic heroic epics preserved in Christian Europe, as well as the tension between Christian and pagan Germanic cosmology, particularly with regard to how divine providence and *wyrd* (or 'fate'), factor into the film.

Gunning, in his reading of the film, opts for an interpretation in which the events of the film are depicted as the results of the aforementioned 'Destiny-machine'. In *The Films of Fritz Lang*,

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[34] Dundes, p. 159 – 160.
[35] Turville-Petre, Edward Oswald Gabriel. *Nine Norse Studies*. London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1972, p. 32.

Gunning defines the Destiny-machine as that which 'determines the environment in which Lang's characters struggle, serving in most cases as an obstacle.'[36] Additionally, he writes that it 'corresponds in many ways to the theme of fate or destiny', and that, in the context of Lang's films

> destiny is not a metaphysical concept [...] but a material one, less a meaning than a structure. Destiny appears in Lang's films, not as a philosophy, but as a machine, whose mechanical nature in most of the films remains very literal. This is not to say that Lang's films are about a Luddite struggle against machines (although Metropolis does dramatise such a revolt). The machine in Lang does stand for something beyond itself. But, rather than a metaphor for a view of human nature or metaphysics, the machine is a metonymy, a fragment which stands in for the whole systematic nature of the modern world which Lang sees as a complex determining destiny.[37]

In discussing how this system factors into *Die Nibelungen* in particular, Gunning poses the question if it is 'anachronistic to speak of a Destiny-machine in this film which portrays a pre-mechanical era?' In answering this question, he turns to the scene in which the linden-leaf falls on Siegfried's shoulder, and states the following: 'If I intend by this term the way that Lang portrays individual destiny as the product of a complex system of interlocking elements with fatal consequences, the falling of this leaf stands as a perfect example in spite of its apparently natural process. The way Lang portrays this stroke of fate visually, makes this clear.'[38] Here, Gunning emphasises the causal aspect of how the event is framed, specifically regarding how the leaf itself does not fall by chance, but because of the deceased dragon's tail hitting a nearby tree, causing a single leaf to detach, and land on Siegfried's shoulder (as an additional point, though Gunning does not discuss it, the fact that the dragon appears to be dead when this happens also seems to emphasise the mechanical aspect of its physical body).[39]

Gunning elaborates further on this idea by analysing the film in terms of its aesthetics and narrative structure, judging both to be working in tandem toward *abstraction* and *the decay of myth*. 'Die Nibelungen takes place in a world of total design', Gunning writes, as 'the massive cement tree trunks of the Odenwald through which Siegfried rides are as carefully fashioned as the square turrets of the court city of Worms. Nothing in this film is natural (as evidenced by the intricate mechanism of Fafner, [...] or the bird that speaks to Siegfried).'[40] The consistent use of constructed sets in place of natural ones, then, along with the use of animatronics, are

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[36] Gunning, p. 10.
[37] Ibid, p. 10.
[38] Ibid, p. 35.
[39] Ibid, p. 36.
[40] Ibid, p. 36.

read in their 'lack of natural spontaneity' as revealing the '"heavy hand" of allegory'; conclusively, Gunning writes the following:

> There is nothing natural here: nature and myth blend into a second constructed nature through which a rich vein of artificiality runs. Beneath the film's invocation of a primordial, mythical world rumbles an appetite for the systematic, schematic and the abstract, the steady rhythm of the Destiny-machine. The film's main emblem of destiny, Siegfried's vulnerable spot – seemingly 'naturally' produced – goes through a radical process of abstraction, appearing finally as a diagrammatic mark on his cloak.[41]

Continuing on, Gunning draws a connection between the film's visual design and art historian William Worringer's ideas surrounding 'Gothic design', described as a 'hybrid of the two opposed forces of empathy and abstraction', where empathy is drawn towards the abstract, here placed in opposition to the organic.[42] Thus:

> In this film the uncanny quality comes from an absolute elimination of the contingent, natural or accidental, in favour of the heavily designed, calculated and predetermined, so that even the fall of a leaf can set in motion the Destiny-machine. Yet this world seems less soulless than, as Sabine Hake has put it, petrified - the rhythms of life frozen in the mode of abstraction. It is a world in which the violence of allegory becomes visible, as significance wrestles with organic form, converting it into anguished yet ossified images, like Alberich himself frozen into a gothic stone carving after his defeat by Siegfried.[43]

Finally, this is also supported by Gunning's reading of George Lúkacs's *The Theory of the Novel*, in particular the notion of 'spontaneous totality of being' as being characteristic of the kind of cultures that have historically produced epic narratives.[44] In line with this view, the divided world presented in *Die Nibelungen* illustrates how 'the pure products of myth are destroyed as they enter into the realm of history and civilisation', most evident in Siegfried's murder at the hands of the Burgundians, who exist in an almost abstract and constructed realm decorated with the imagery of the natural and fantastical, but in actuality almost entirely bereft of it.[45]

As for the film's narrative, Gunning discusses it in terms of a chain of events not dictated by the motivations of individual characters (at least, not solely), writing that 'Individual passions, rather than providing the source or explanation or motivation for the unfolding of the plot, are employed by a grand design in order to achieve its nearly diagrammatic symmetry.'[46] This is

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[41] Ibid, p. 36.
[42] Ibid, p. 40.
[43] Ibid, p. 40.
[44] Ibid, p. 39.
[45] Ibid, p. 39.
[46] Ibid., p. 44.

tied into the structural dividing of *Die Nibelungen: Siegfried* into seven 'Gesange', or 'songs', all of which end at a crucial point for the plot while also carrying the seed of each event's negation, such as Siegfried's attaining of invulnerability being partly nullified by the leaf, or Siegfried's and Gunther's initial agreement being viewed disapprovingly by Hagen.[47] Here, Gunning writes that

> Each of these images anticipates a future which will undo the apparent moments of control, harmony or invulnerability. These potential reversals are not witnessed by the characters, who remain ignorant of the plots into which they are pulled. It is the structure of the film which renders them visible to the viewer, the enunciating force of the film which asks us to read them as the fate of the characters and the workings of the Destiny-machine.[48]

It is here then that the plot structure and the visual design align, with the 'fate' or 'destiny' which controls the narrative not being drawn from a supernatural source, but from the Destiny-machine, most closely represented by the 'power of the world of Worms, the deceitful handshakes, the sham marriages, the staged hunt with a human victim', which finally results in 'the death of myth', symbolised in the last shot of the film where Siegfried's corpse 'lies within the highly ordered and symmetrical space of the cathedral', along with 'Brunhild at his feet, dead from her own dagger, and Kriemhild mourning at his head.'[49]

While Gunning does not in any way discuss the conception of fate as it is portrayed in the Northern Germanic heroic epics, either as a pure literary theme or in terms of pagan worldviews, his analysis of the workings of fate within Lang's and Harbou's film bears striking similarities nonetheless to the idea of *wyrd*. In discussing the elements of fate and heroism in the *Nibelungenlied*, Asia A. Sarakaeva and Elina A. Sarakaeva state that 'Fate, luck, destiny are the most important concepts of medieval Germanic legends and literature', noting the sense of the inevitable that pervades the Icelandic sagas as well as the Middle High German poem, and exploring how this presents itself both in terms of narrative and character portrayal.[50] 'From the very first lines,' they write, 'introducing his main characters into the narrative the author of the poem already announces their death and the cause of this death. The same predictions of future – especially misfortunes – are scattered throughout the text of the poem'; the poem's recurring reminders of the character's ultimate fates, they argue, serves to expound the

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[47] Ibid., p. 43.
[48] Ibid., p. 43.
[49] Ibid, p. 43.
[50] Sarakaeva, Asia, A.; Sarakaeva, Elina, A. 'Hero and Fate in the Nibelungenlied', *Galactica Journal for Media Studies*, No. 3, 2020, p. 163.

indeterminate nature of fate.[51] Perhaps needless to say, the parallel between this structural element of the *Nibelungenlied* and the Gesange structure of *Die Nibelungen*, which similarly, as demonstrated by Gunning, heightens that work's impression of impending doom, is striking. Additionally, fate as a working force within *Die Nibelungen* is made evident by more than just structure, most notably through Kriemhild's dream-premonition of Siegfried's death, an element that is present in both the *Nibelungenlied* and the Norse treatments of the tale.

What then are the implications of this regarding how we can read the significance of destiny within *Die Nibelungen*? Is it merely a structural component lifted from its much older source material, understood differently in line with a contemporary modern mind-set? Or is it exemplary of a lingering aspect of pagan cosmology, either consciously employed and emphasised, or something that has been reduced to a mere storytelling device through the tale's constant retellings? Certainly, the film in some ways seems more concerned with the older, possibly more pagan remnants of the German poem and its Norse counterparts, than the grafted-on chivalric elements in the case of the former, with its re-emphasis of Siegfried's killing of the dragon, the addition of Brunhild's burning castle, and its doing away with some of the *Nibelungenlied*'s anachronistic aspects, such as its depictions of knightly jousting and contemporary means of warfare. Additionally, the film contains numerous scenes where the workings of fate, or, at the very least, a belief in it expressed by the film's characters, is emphasised. How then do we determine the extent to which these parts can be said to correspond to aspects of a mythologically based worldview? The answer, I believe, lies in examining the film comparatively alongside its source material, as well as drawing on previous research made regarding how both mythology and cosmology find expression within said source material.

Here, we will examine individual instances within the film where fate can be observed directly as an element of the narrative (or, at the very least, possibly so, depending on the level of ambiguity involved with each specific part), and how these instances may be understood in the film in terms of structure. Finally, the implications of both the film's consistencies and its digressions in regard to the depiction and significance of fate in the *Nibelungenlied* (along with its other primary influences) will be considered, and conclusions drawn therefrom.

Which, then, are the scenes where the film appears to draw direct attention to fate (or something similar thereto) as an active force in regard to the film's chain of events? Of these, I would say, we can count four, here presented in chronological order:

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[51] Ibid, p. 163.

a) The scene where the linden leaf falls on Siegfried's shoulder.

b) The scene where Alberich places a curse on the Nibelungen treasure, and, by extension, anyone possessing it.

c) Kriemhild's dream.

d) The scene where Siegfried and Gunther swear their oath of mutual fealty, during which Hagen states the following: 'Red blood mingles with red blood. Inseparably fuse the drops. He shall perish at the wayside, dishonourably, who forsakes his loyalty to his blood brother!'

To start with, the curse of Alberich as a plot point is not present in the *Nibelungenlied*, but rather derived from the *Völsunga saga* and/or *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, although its significance in both works is greater, and, moreover, the effects of its workings are clearly stated and demonstrated: all who possess the ring Andvaranaut/the Ring of the Nibelung die. Because the ring, both as a central thematic device and a cursed object driving much of the plot, is not in *Die Nibelungen*, the curse is instead shifted towards the Nibelungen treasure, or the 'heir's inheritance' as Alberich here designates it. Its importance, however, is greatly downplayed, and, also considering the placement of its uttering in the narrative, appears to have little to no bearing on the film's chain of events at all. This stands in contrast to Gunther's broken oath, as Hagen's words do seem to forebode his death by decapitation at the end of *Kriemhild's Rache*, after having been made captive by his enemies on the steppes of the Huns. The extent, however, to which this is meant to reflect the workings of a predeterminate fate, or simply dramatic tragedy, is unclear. Both the curse and the oath will be discussed in greater detail later on.

Moving on, the falling of the linden leaf and particularly Kriemhild's premonition offer the greatest indicators of inexorable fate as an aspect of the film's narrative. With the linden leaf, it is most heavily suggested by the great deal of emphasis placed on its falling in terms of editing and cinematography (outlined in detail by Gunning), and, in hindsight, by its connection to the premonition.[52] It has been discussed by Gunning that the white falcon pecked at by two black eagles in Kriemhild's dream are meant to represent Siegfried, Hagen, and Brunhild, respectively, most evincingly displayed by the contrasts in colour (Siegfried always wearing white; Hagen and Brunhild always wearing black) and the wing motifs decorating Hagen and Brunhild's helmets.[53] If Siegfried is then already doomed to die at the hands of both Gunther's

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[52] Gunning, p.
[53] Ibid, p. 47.

advisor and his queen, as does seem to be the case here, then the unlikelihood of the leaf landing precisely where it does is most reasonably explained by it being a result of that doom. It is also because of this that Alberich's curse ultimately appears to have no effect; while the premonition does arrive afterwards, the curse is nonetheless preceded by the leaf, meaning that if Siegfried's death is the result of the curse, the falling of the leaf can only be explained by chance. This, as Gunning shows, would seem to be incompatible with the film's structure as reflective of a predeterminate end. However, Alberich's curse may still be important in some other, less direct fashion, but in order to discuss what that may be, we must continue to analyse the film comparatively alongside its source material.

In discussing the importance of *wyrd* as it appears in the Old English poem *Beowulf*, Jon C. Kasik writes that 'In the pre-Christian Anglo-Saxon mythology, the term denoted a force in the universe which controlled the destinies of all things', adding that

> It was something against which he [the pagan Anglo-Saxon] was helpless. It organized everything in the world from births and deaths to the outcome of battles, even those in which the gods intervened. Nobility lay in the action of the man who behaved as best he could, but yet knew that the outcome of his actions was predetermined. There was a choice for the individual in how an event was to be enacted, even if the end result was beyond his control. His reward was lasting fame.[54]

Drawing on the writings of noted mediaevalist scholar Aron Gurevich, the assessment that nobility would have been most chiefly considered in terms of how one acted in regard to fate is reinforced by Asia and Elina Sarakaeva, who, in extending their discussion to include Anglo-Saxon as well as mediaeval German and Scandinavian literature, write the following: 'By and large, a hero for German legends is not so much a person who has accomplished a feat as a person who was beautifully killed and beautifully avenged.'[55] Continuing, they write that what is most significant 'is not the fact of the violent death itself, but how the character was able to meet it, how many enemies they managed to take with them, and most importantly – whether they went to death without fear,' while also adding that heroic German characters in regard to fate 'do not obey it and do not oppose it – they accept it courageously and initiatively, go towards it and implement it through their own deeds.'[56]

This conception of heroism, however, clearly a lingering remnant of an older, pagan worldview, as has been here noted previously, does not exist unproblematically within the

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[54] Kasik, Jon C. 'The Use of the Term "Wyrd" in "Beowulf" and Conversion of the Anglo-Saxons',
Neophilologus, Vol. 63, Iss. 1, 1979, p. 128; 130.
[55] Sarakaeva; Sarakaeva, p. 166.
[56] Ibid, p. 166; 165.

works of Anglo-Saxon and German heroic poetry, as they were first written down during the High Middle Ages with Christian elements added, resulting in a problematic relationship between the heathen concept of fate and the Christian one of divine providence. Looking at *Die Nibelungen*, a similar sort of tension certainly seems to be present in a visual as well as a thematic sense, as highlighted by Gunning in his discussion on the four 'realms' in which the two-part *Die Nibelungen* takes place. These are the magical forest realm of Siegfried along with Brunhild's similarly enchanted kingdom, contrasted with the civilised court of Worms and the steppes of the Huns.[57] 'While Lang and Harbou differentiated these four separate realms through their differing meanings, characters and dominant visual designs, the film tells the story of their mutual contamination', Gunning writes, adding that the 'figures from the realms of myth, Brunhild and Siegfried, enter the human realm where their powers are exploited or scorned, where they become subjects of intrigue and betrayal. In the final shot in The Death of Siegfried their dead bodies rest together in the cathedral, the image of Worms' civilised order.'[58]

It can be argued that Gunning's distinguishing between the four realms is too rigid. After all, in spite of his introduction, Siegfried still carries himself as a man of princely upbringing and Gunther's equal in rank, while the civilised people of Worms still seem to have their fair share of relatively barbaric practices, as exemplified by the blood oath (carried out, notably enough, in a forest, as opposed to at court or in the cathedral). There is no arguing, however, that this distinction remains in some way central to the film, the clearest indicator of this being its final image. Additionally, the set designs found in Icenland also seem to supply a noticeably heathen contrast to Burgundy, being defined by striking animal imagery and primitive cave drawings, along with halls adorned with weapons and demonic masks – things implicational of a pre-Christian society, even if nothing suggestive of any kind of organised religion or belief system is provided.

It is tempting to read here both a thematic and a narrative undercurrent of an older, pagan world order inevitably giving way to a new, Christian one, not least for how often such things are blatantly pushed to the forefront in films dealing with similar, if not identical, material, German director Uli Edel's rather infamous adaption *Ring of the Nibelungs* (2004) making it even the core theme. There is in actuality however very little in Lang's and Harbou's film to support such an interpretation, as anything resembling paganism is almost entirely hollowed out of religious or cosmological content. However, what can be said then of the element of fate

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[57] Gunning, p. 39.
[58] Ibid, p. 39.

and heroism in both *Nibelungenlied* and the *Völsunga saga*, so distinctively grounded in this ancient, heathen understanding of the universe? In line with our assessments, the film's depiction of both fate and heroism, I think, seem to represent yet another step further from its source material's mythological roots, the details and implications of which we will now discuss.

Building on the understanding of the wilful embracing of fate and death as the cardinal criteria against which heroic figures are measured in the Germanic epics, Asia and Elina Sarakaeva propose the following theory regarding the significance of prophecy as a narrative device:

> The real goal is to emphasize the character's courage, their willingness to go towards death, not blindly, but with their eyes wide open. The fact is that the "heroic ethos" is a rather limited ethical system; in fact, it emphasizes only two moral qualities: courage and loyalty to one's blood or political clan. But these two qualities, especially courage, must be present in the actions of any hero in an extreme degree; in order to be worthy of being called a hero, a person must consciously seek death, even if he was warned in advance about it, and even if it is not necessary.[59]

Relating this view to the *Nibelungenlied*, they discuss Siegfried, Kriemhild and Hagen as heroic figures in terms of how they act in regard to their respective amounts of knowledge of predestined events. Siegfried, as opposed to his Norse counterpart Sigurd, is entirely unaware of his own fated end, something which he shares rather with the Siegfried of *Die Nibelungen*; instead, it is only Kriemhild and Hagen who are provided with insights regarding future events, and who are shown to act accordingly.[60] If we turn then again to *Die Nibelungen*, we will notice a crucial difference here with regard to the fact that Hagen's moment of prescience is entirely non-present, while Kriemhild's premonition ultimately tells her nothing of future events other than providing a sense of foreboding. 'Kriemhild's prophetic dream provides no apotropaic power; forewarned is not forearmed', as Gunning notes, meaning that a fundamental shift has occurred in terms of fate's function in the story, and, consequentially, the significance of these three characters' actions.[61]

To begin with, the shift in *Die Nibelungen: Siegfried* from Hagen and Kriemhild to Siegfried as the main protagonist is itself indicative of fate's change in role. The main role of Siegfried, in *Nibelungenlied*, 'is not proactive, but causal,' writes Asia and Elina Sarakaeva, 'he doesn't perform significant actions himself, but rather determines the significant actions of other characters. And, most importantly, he does not have time, before his death, to show any

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[59] Sarakaeva; Sarakaeva, p. 167.
[60] Ibid, p. 167.
[61] Gunning, p. 47.

resistance to his killer, not to mention taking more enemies with him to the next world. Because of this, he does not reach a true heroic level, and the future is not revealed to him.'[62] It is then Siegfried's ultimate failing at achieving this heroic status which provides the reason for his lack of prescience, instead bestowed upon Hagen and Kriemhild. 'Their actions are proactive, their will is directed to death, and they confidently impose it on the maximum number of other people', they write, adding the following:

> This longing for Valhalla has long remained hidden even from them. Throughout the first part of the poem, Krimhild wants only family happiness; Hagen, until his departure from Worms, dissuades Gunther and his brothers from suicidal decisions, trying to provide them and himself with maximum safety. However, when the previous desires of the characters turn out to be impracticable, when the world refuses them happiness and safety, the heroic vector of their will immanent to their spirit is actualized, the vector that is directed towards death. These two people have the right to a special relationship with fate, because they are ready to accept it and act as its co-authors, taking hordes of people with them to the grave so that the memory of their death will be preserved for centuries.[63]

If then a character's feats is not what predominantly determines his or her heroic status in the *Nibelungenlied*, it is certainly what determines Siegfried's heroic status in Lang's and Harbou's film. His death at the hands of Hagen, rather than being illustrative of his failing as a hero, is depicted tragically, while his slaying of the dragon and claiming of the Nibelung treasure, practically footnotes in the German poem, have been elevated to prominent positions within the film's narrative. Hagen, by comparison, is turned from a heroic operative of fate to the back-stabbing presence enacting that tragedy. The film also highlights the vicious and calculating aspects of his character while downplaying his heroic ones, the only remnant of which is his fierce loyalty to the Burgundians. Additionally, Siegfried is elevated further by his moral qualities, exemplified by his faithfulness to Gunther, his initial refusal to subdue Brunhild, and his protectiveness of Kriemhild, things which stand in contrast to the Siegfried of the poem, who instead breaks Gunther's trust in order to sleep with Brunhild, and beats Kriemhild when she reveals the truth of this to her. Here, it is this sense of virtue (indeed, to a fault, as it is his naïveté that ultimately allows for his downfall) in contrast to Hagen's deviousness that most clearly defines them in relation to each other, instead of their differing connections to fate as separate heroic figures.

The likelihood of this being the case is further strengthened by the fact that if one takes into consideration of this missing element of heroism in relation to fate allows for a number of

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[62] Sarakaeva; Sarakaeva, p. 169.
[63] Ibid, p. 169.

narrative oddities within the film to be elucidated. A notable example is the insignificance of Siegfried's sword Balmung, which, although at first seemingly important given the amount of emphasis it receives when Siegfried first obtains it, serves in actuality no plot-specific purpose, and is not even mentioned again until *Kriemhild' Rache*, when Kriemhild observes that Hagen has taken it for himself. But again, this seems to serve little-to-no purpose; Kriemhild is already aware of Hagen's role in killing Siegfried, and her hatred for him is already a matter of fact, meaning that neither she nor the viewer either learn or gain anything new, the only real effect being a superfluous reinforcement of Hagen's unscrupulousness. In the poem, however, Hagen carrying Balmung does serve a purpose in so far as it is tied with his acquiring of the shield that had previously belonged to the deceased nobleman Nuodung: 'The property of the dead, […] is intended for those who are doomed to die.'[64] This is an element that is not to be found in *Die Nibelungen*, and, as a result, the significance of Balmung's inclusion is inevitably diminished, lifted from the source text as it is without this additional context.

We may well ask ourselves then, if the primary characters' lack or possession of prescience, along with their willingness to co-operate with fate, is no longer a central part of the story itself (in fact, not a part of it at all), why has the element of fate not been written out altogether? Is it of lesser importance to the film than it is to the *Nibelungenlied*, or is it merely that its overall purpose has become something different? And, if so, what is that purpose? Is this the world determined by the Destiny-machine after all, as Gunning claims? Possibly, but it bears to mention here that Gunning's analysis, compelling though it may be, is not without flaws that impede upon the finality of its conclusions, these being the reading of the film's lack of natural spontaneity as working towards abstraction along with the emblematic decorations and 'obsessive geometry that determines composition of shots' in Worms, as well as the possible misinterpreting of Hagen's character as the film's 'pre-eminent agent of fate'.[65]

While it is correct that the forest which Siegfried travels through on his way to Worms is entirely constructed, along with the dragon and the bird which he encounters, the statement that nothing in the film is natural is somewhat exaggerative, as later scenes do include what are quite clearly living animals (the horses standing on ceremony in the film's fourth Gesange, as well as the bird which Siegfried speaks to in the fifth one). Moreover, it has been stated by Lang that the reason for using a constructed forest set in the film was due to his and Harbou's inability to

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[64] Sarakaeva; Sarakaeva, p. 164.
[65] Gunning, p. 36; 44.

find a natural one that fit stylistically.[66] The dragon and the bird then, we can suppose, were likely constructed because of similar limitations.

A similar objection can be raised towards the reading of Burgundy's aesthetic qualities as specifically reflective of history's progression towards abstraction, as the particular aspects which Gunning discusses, symmetrical shot composition and mise-en-scène, as well as the absorption of myth and animal motifs into the imagery displayed at Gunther's court, are not strictly unique to that one 'realm'.[67] In fact, Siegfried's arrival in Worms finds a striking parallel visually with his and Gunther's arrival in Brunhild's castle, which is likewise distinguished by symmetry and animal abstraction that remains consistent throughout the entire scene:

[66] Winkler, Martin M. 'Fritz Lang's mediaevalism [sic]: 'From Die Nibelungen to the American West', *Mosaic : a Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature*, Vol. 36, Iss. 1, 2003, p. 135 – 146.
[67] Gunning, p. 40.
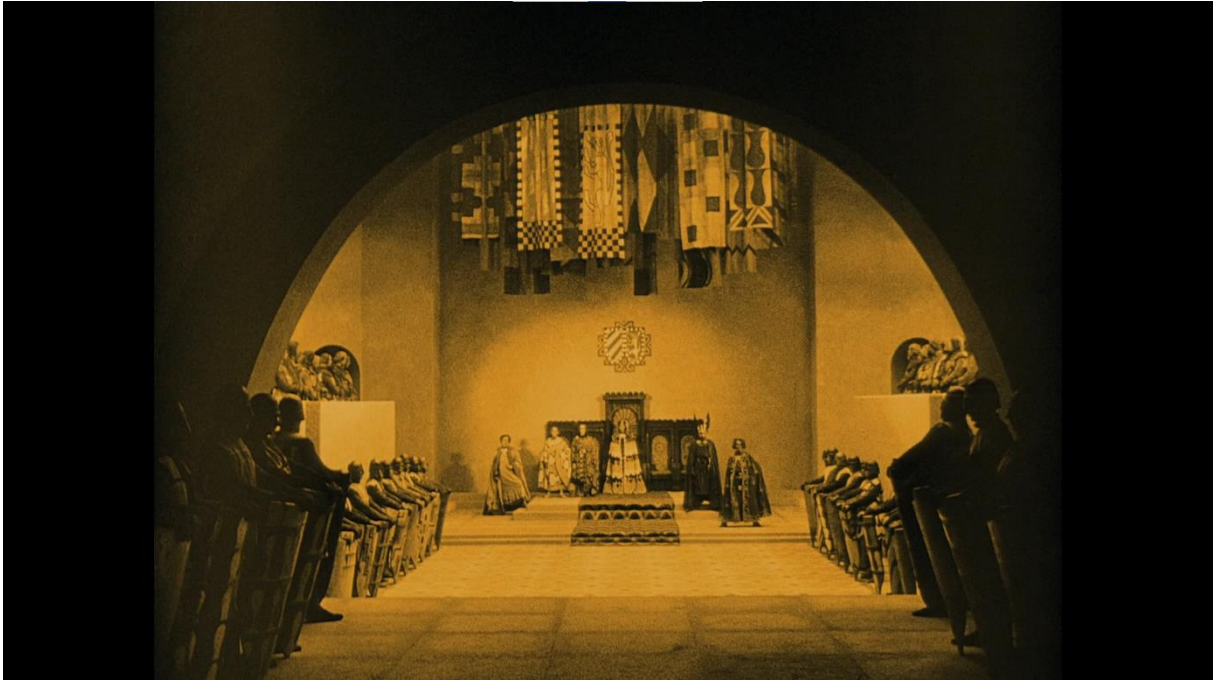
Additionally, the exterior introductory shot of Brunhild's castle conspicuously echoes the exterior introductory shot of Gunther's castle, again drawing a clear parallel between the two:

Finally, in discussing the character relations in how they all connect to Siegfried and result in his undoing, Gunning writes that 'Individual passions, rather than providing the source or explanation or motivation for the unfolding of the plot, are employed by a grand design in order to achieve its nearly diagrammatic symmetry', exemplified by the oppositions between Kriemhild and Brunhild, and Gunther and Hagen which Siegfried finds himself in the middle of, and the lack of plausibility regarding Hagen actions being motivated by personal incentive.[68]

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[68] Ibid, p. 43 – 44.

'The contrasting motives of jealousy of Siegfried and loyalty to his sovereign seem inadequate as an explanation for Hagen's actions,' Gunning states, continuing on that

> As David Levin has shown, Hagen scurries about doing the narrative's bidding, making the fatal connections between characters, as visualised in the shot which closes the second Gesang of Hagen glowering behind Gunther and Siegfried's clasped hands. Hagen arranges Siegfried's deception of Brunhild for Gunther, tricks Kriemhild into marking Siegfried's tunic, arranges the final hunt. But Hagen doesn't direct and stage manage these scenes in order to advance his own aims. Instead, he seems to be working out a predetermined pattern, the course of the narrative as the course of destiny.[69]

We have discussed Hagen's significance in the *Nibelungenlied* as the character shown to be most in-tune with the workings of fate, as well as the one most clearly seen to be working towards its conclusion, and so, on a surface level, this interpretation appears as entirely fitting, not least due to, in reiterating Gunning's assessment, Hagen's active role in driving the plot forward. However, a closer examination of Hagen's dialogue and characteristics, particularly when placed in relation to his portrayal in the heroic poem, reveal him to be as equally driven by personal motivations as Brunhild, Gunther, and Kriemhild.

We find the first indication of this in Hagen's name, which has been theorised to connect in meaning to the words 'protect, guard, defense', as well as his most common epithet in the poem, 'Shield of the Nibelungs', reflecting his 'main activity […] to protect the royal house of Burgundy from foreigners, dishonoring rumours, dynastic crises and other possible dangers.'[70] This chief aspect of Hagen's role remains his primary driving force in Harbou's script, something that is most notably evinced by his immediate dislike of Siegfried, not out of jealousy but of the threat he poses, and his loyalty to not Gunther as such, but to the house of Burgundy.

The most outwardly visible sign of Hagen's dedication to the Nibelungs is his dialogue, wherein it is hinted at throughout the film, one exemplary line being found in the scene where the apparent imperviousness of Brunhild's spirit is discussed: 'Brunhild may be defeated, but she is not cowed! Shall the King of Burgundy be scorned by an obstinate woman?' What is notable here is that Hagen is not referring to Gunther on a personal level, who is by all accounts a frail and feeble ruler, but strictly in terms of his title and position. It is the insult to the sovereign head of the Burgundian royal house which Hagen cannot abide, not that to Gunther himself, a person he shows constant emotional detachment towards, while seemingly possessing no qualms about manipulating him, either to ensure Brunhild as queen or to

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[69] Ibid, p. 44.
[70] Sarakaeva; Sarakaeva, p. 171.

assassinate Siegfried. In fact, Hagen's detachment to the people around him, in contrast to his emotional involvement with matters pertaining directly to Burgundy's reputation and prestige, is entirely telling of where his real loyalties lie. Only twice is Hagen in *Die Nibelungen: Siegfried*, who is generally aloof, shown to be visibly agitated: when Brunhild refuses to acknowledge Gunther as her husband, and, earlier, when Siegfried refuses to assist Gunther in wooing Brunhild, claiming to be the king's equal and above vassalage; so quick to anger is Hagen in the latter scene that he almost immediately reaches for his sword at Siegfried's presumed arrogance. That he also freely engages in false displays of emotion in order to manipulate Kriemhild further exemplifies his lack of care for the actual people constituting Burgundy's royal family, as does his remark at the beginning of the fifth Gesange: 'Burgundy's glory is waning, O King!' While Gunther is visibly worn down by complacency and inner turmoil brought about by his own catastrophic marriage to Brunhild, encapsulated in the closing shot of the preceding Gesange, that is not Hagen's concern, but the state of the kingdom itself.

It is here we find the root of Hagen's disregard for Siegfried – not strictly because of Siegfried's pride, as Hagen desires him gone from Worms before meeting him – but the threat he poses as a potential rival. Upon introduction, the court of Worms is shown to be caught in a state of stagnation (not counting Siegfried's own envisioning of Worms), with each of its members depicted as stationary and inert, an impression that is reiterated in a similarly composed scene in the fifth Gesange. In this later scene, the impression is also heightened by the use of somewhat dim lighting, creating an effect of hazy darkness creeping in from the edges of the image. Siegfried, by contrast, is not only shown to be lively, active, and charismatic, but is often visually accompanied by much brighter lighting, a dynamic that becomes more apparent as the film progresses. The two most striking examples are placed adjacently to each other, these being the ending of the fourth Gesange and the opening of the fifth one; in the former, we have the visual duality between the union of Siegfried and Kriemhild to that of Gunther and Brunhild, and in the second, we have, again, the near-catatonic Burgundians contrasted with the joyous, youthful Siegfried (in addition, the choice of set design is telling here, as while the Burgundians are surrounded by bare stone walls, Siegfried sits in a blossoming garden, connecting him visually to life, and growth). If Siegfried then comes to represent the light of life, the shadow of death hanging over Gunther's court becomes all the more apparent in his presence:

It may then be argued that Gunning has overemphasised the mechanical and unnatural aspects of the film in regard to its narrative and the workings of fate; this, however, does not provide cause for objecting against his reading of the film as depicting the inevitable progress towards abstraction. If anything, it reinforces it, and it may be that it provides the most convincing explanation for the inclusion of fate within the film in spite of its lack of a heroic ethos. The scenes outlined by Gunning where Alberich and his dwarf servants turn to stone, as well as the one where Siegfried's corpse 'lies within the highly ordered and symmetrical space of the cathedral, Brunhild at his feet, dead from her own dagger, and Kriemhild mourning at his head'

are both exemplary of this development. The same can be said for the two-part film series' progression from a legendary past into a semi-historical one. The aforementioned parallels between Worms and Icenland might also be construed as reflective of this; if the enchanted forest found at the beginning of the film and the court of Burgundy exist in opposition to one another, then Brunhild's realm appears to occupy a sort of middle-ground between the two. The elements of symmetry and fantastical imagery are accounted for, but to a lesser extent, and appear in unison with truly magical forces, such as the castle's wall of fire. Additionally, Brunhild's castle, which is carved into a mountainside, presents a hybrid of man-made form (architecture) and nature, which serves to strengthen impression that it displays an intermediate stage within the historical development of which the entirely geometrical Worms represents its inevitable conclusion.

Viewed from this perspective, the film's relatively indeterminate 'pagan' elements can be understood as similarly reflective of this element; rather than depicting paganism and Christianity as contrasting sets of religious practices and cosmological views, they become different stages within the same gradual process. That Brunhild's Icenland offers the one instance where civilisation appears to exist harmoniously alongside the fantastical may be inferred from the fact that said fantastical elements, rather than appearing threatening as they do during Siegfried's journey, provide protection to Brunhild's kingdom. Similarly, the inertia and sense of stagnation found in Gunther's court, presumably, then, as a result of its complete subduing of the fantastical, is absent; only when Brunhild is forcibly made a resident of Worms is she shown to similarly deteriorate.

Gunning's interpretation then of Siegfried and Brunhild as figures representative of the magical forces of nature, characters 'whose origins lay in the elemental realms of dark forests and frigid mountains', regains its traction here.[71] We have discussed previously how the distinguishing of Siegfried in *Die Nibelungen* as a pure product of myth that is destroyed upon entering human society appears as ultimately reductive, as it seems to forego his own status as a prince of Xanten. While Brunhild quickly withers within Worm's stone walls, Siegfried, prior to his death, is shown to flourish, which is precisely the point; they represent, again, different stages in the same process, both closer to the fantastical than, say, Gunther, but by no means equally so.

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[71] Gunning, p. 39.

This would in addition provide further explanation for Siegfried's association with both life and light. If the deathlike state of Worms is, at least in part, due to its completed process of abstraction, then said connection for Siegfried, who is still connected to that of the elemental, is sensible, and in line with Gunning's own analysis, which arrives at the following conclusion:

> In *The Death of Siegfried* [alternative German title for *Die Nibelungen: Siegfried*] death's role does not end with the perishing of Siegfried, but with the dying out of the realm of myth he and Brunhild represent, the abstraction of its magic into the calculations and intrigues of the court of Worms. The movement out of the forest of symbols into the geometrical order of the Burgundians, from the timeless realm of myth into the realm of history and civilisation is a movement into the fallen world of death, a soulless duplicitous world which can only await its apocalypse. Thus what Kriemhild perceives in her visions signifies more than the death of her husband. In contrast to the maiden in *Der müde Tod*, Kriemhild does not simply experience death as the opponent to love, the figure of personal loss. The death head that Kriemhild perceives condemns the world she lives in.[72]

If the inevitable result, then, of humanity's progression into civilisation is the abstraction and subsequent lifelessness of the fantastical, and if Siegfried comes to represent this development metaphorically in his being killed at the hands of the Burgundians, what implication does this have for the element of fate in the film? If Siegfried's death is unavoidable in so far as it is fated, and the death of that which he here comes to represent is likewise impossible to prevent, then the tragedy of his passing naturally extends to the death of those aspects of wonder and fairy tale which allegory and abstraction inevitably cause. As the tale is no longer predominantly a heroic one, but rather tragic, fate has suitably shifted to a predominantly tragic role, expounded upon by the inevitability of doom and decay.

Does the work still then reflect the mythologically based worldview found in its source material? Arguably, but if so, it is entirely removed from any mythological underpinning. Is this also the world as determined by Gunning's Destiny-machine? Based on our preceding analysis it certainly does seems to be the case, though, not entirely, with Gunning's reading of the film's mechanical aspects appearing to ultimately fall short. What then of those other ambiguous elements of fate and foretelling suggested through the curse of Alberich and Gunther's broken blood oath?

Here, we will venture a guess, albeit one that does not seem entirely unlikely in relation to our present observations. If it is the decay of the fantastical that provides the thematic core for *Die Nibelungen: Siegfried*, and the fantastical is here represented by the mysterious and the

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[72] Ibid, p. 45.

unknowable, then the diffuse means by which fate also appears to operate, through destiny, curses, and blood oaths, may simply serve to enhance that ambiguity. Certainly, it only appears truly detectable in the much more fairy tale like first film, as it is nowhere to be found (in spite of it being located in its source material) within the more grounded, harsher, *Die Nibelungen: Kriemhild's Rache*.
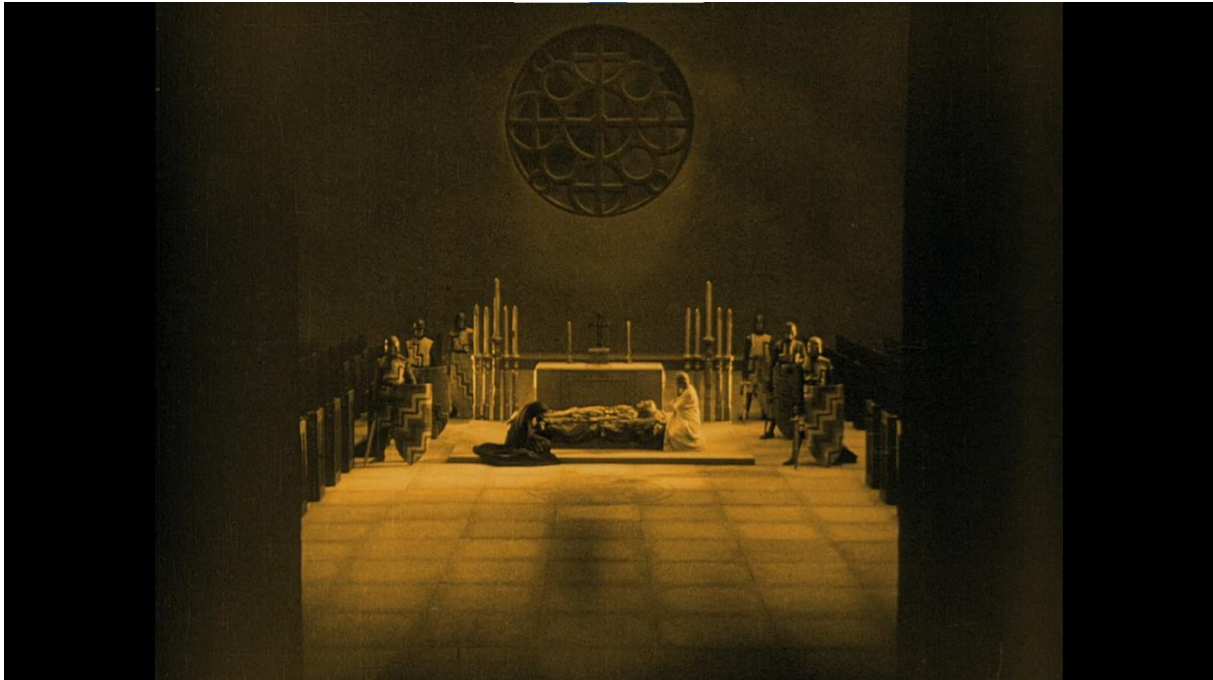
5.4. The Misuse of 'Myth' as Designator, Its Appeal, and Its Consequences

Based on the results of the previous analyses, we can infer that Gunning's initial, and, indeed, sensible, distinction between *Der müde Tod* and *Die Nibelungen* as 'Marchen' and 'mythological epic' respectively are not only unfounded in so far as *Die Nibelungen* does not portray, nor is directly connected to, myth, but also in the sense that *Die Nibelungen*, in terms of both motifs and motifemes, is by itself in fact very close to the Märchen. This is not to say, of course, that these two films offer the same sort of story, or that they are even that structurally similar (even though they both choose to divide their respective plotlines into easily identifiable sections). Certainly, the style and *feel* of both films are remarkably dissimilar, not least with one delving into a much closer anachronistic past historically speaking (or at least one that appears closer), and the other into something that seems noticeably more ancient. It is quite possible that it is this very factor which most heavily influences Gunning in drawing the conclusion that he does, and indeed, it has been written by Propp that, for from being the

structure, it is a tale's 'attributes', 'their age, sex, status, external appearance, peculiarities of this appearance, and so forth', which 'provide the tale with its brilliance, charm, and beauty', continuing to write that 'When one speaks of a tale, he first recalls, of course, Baba Jaga and her hut, many-headed dragons, Prince Ivan and the beautiful princess, magical flying horses, and many other things.'[73]

Propp is entirely correct in his assessment, I believe, though he does not consider it much in regard to how it may affect the continuing development of both public and scholarly perception of fairy tales and adjacent folkloric genres. Regardless, it is my belief that these attributes have exercised a greater influence on the general understanding of folkloric and (insofar as they tie into) literary genres than might have hereto been supposed by most, and that this has not only affected acts of categorising of stories drawing on folkloric traditions, but also what exactly is read into the works themselves. After all, though a number of folktales, such as the story of Oedipus, are consistently mislabelled as myths, there does also seem to exist some consistency in which sorts of stories end up being mislabelled. Why the story of Oedipus is commonly referred to as myth may be found to be self-explanatory, given its connection to Greek mythology, but what of something like *Die Nibelungen* where there is evidently no direct connection to mythology within the film itself? It is, possibly, at least partially, a matter of attributes, the 'brilliance, charm, and beauty' of the film which cause some of us to regard it as something different from a 'mere' fairy tale – a sense, perhaps, of something more ancient, of something we perceive as connected to fundamental human truths.

Early on in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell writes the following:

It has always been the prime function of mythology and rite to supply the symbols that carry the human spirit forward, in counteraction to those constant human fantasies that tend to tie it back. In fact, it may well be that the very high incidence of neuroticism among ourselves follows from the decline among us of such effective spiritual aid. We remain fixated to the unexorcised images of our infancy, and hence disinclined to the necessary passages of our adulthood.[74]

Campbell, as stated earlier, is not discussing mythology in line with a strict folkloristic definition of the term, designating stories and literary texts as disparate as the tale of Theseus and the Minotaur, *Hansel and Gretel*, and even *The Divine Comedy*, all under the common denominator of 'myth', in spite of the fact that none of them truly qualify to be distinguished

[73] Propp, p. 87.
[74] Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1949, 1968, 2003, p. 5.

as such. His statement here, however, along with *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* as a whole, is exemplary of a wide spread notion within certain influential works that aim to analyse myth in regard to how it relates to human experience, even if the definitions of myth themselves (and thus, what constitutes a mythic narrative) greatly differ. Specifically, it is the notion that myths, being construed as somehow primordial, reflect universal aspects of human existence, and of our connection to the world itself. In the 2004 introduction to *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Clarissa Pinkola Estes states the following:

> Throughout the inhabited world, in all times and under every circumstance, the myths of man have flourished; and they have been the living inspiration of whatever else may have appeared out of the activities of the human body and mind. 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. Religions, philosophies, arts, the social forms of primitive and historic man, prime discoveries in science and technology, the very dreams that blister sleep, boil up from the basic, magic ring of myth.[75]

Notably, a strikingly similar line of thought is detectable within the writings of C.G. Jung – whose work constitutes a significant presence within Campbell's own – one particular example being found in his renowned analysis of a patient's dream wherein 'he was bitten in the heel by a snake and instantly paralyzed.'[76] On this, he writes 'We are evidently dealing here with that same old serpent who had been the special friend of Eve', adding that

> The patient's conscious knowledge of the Bible was at a lamentable minimum. Probably he had once heard of the serpent biting the heel and then quickly forgotten it. But something deep in his unconscious heard it and did not forget; it remembered this story at a suitable opportunity. This part of the unconscious evidently likes to express itself mythologically, because this way of expression is in keeping with its nature.[77]

Leaving aside the question of the extent to which either Campbell or Jung discuss myth, both have faced contention within the scholarly field in regard to their conclusions and methods, with Dundes criticising Jung's conception of mythical archetypes in particular as being exemplary of eurocentrism and mysticism.[78] However, even among academics seemingly rejecting the Jungian approach there seems to exist traces of a similar sort of universalism, a hint of which may be found in a statement by Claude Lévi-Strauss that 'Tales [in this instance, fairy/wondertales] are constructed on weaker oppositions than those found in myths'.[79]

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[75] Estes, Clarissa Pinkola. 'Introduction to the 2004 Commemorative Edition', in Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1949, 1968, 2003, p. xl.
[76] Jung, C.G. 'The Structure of the Psyche', in Campbell, Joseph, ed. *The Portable Jung*. New York: Penguin Books, 1971, p. 31.
[77] Ibid, p. 32 – 33.
[78] Dundes, p. 345.
[79] Lévi-Strass, Claude, as quoted by Dundes, Alan, p. 147.

Lévi-Strauss's theory of binary oppositions has been touched upon (very) briefly in this text in so far as it ties into the studying and understanding of myth. Similar to that instance, we will here not dwell on the theory itself, but merely note some of the comments made by Lévi-Strauss regarding the discourse on myth in relation to other folkloric genres, which seem to imply an implicit understanding of, at least, myth and fairy tale, as bound up in a sort of hierarchy of complexity.

To contextualise, the comment by Lévi-Strauss quoted here was provided as a point of criticism within a review published in 1960 of Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale* (at the time just recently translated into English), which, though largely positive, faulted the text for its choice of tales as its object of study as opposed to myths, arguing that 'the tale lends itself imperfectly to structural analysis'.[80][81] The resulting debate and disagreement between the two has been summarised by Dundes, who described it as an instance of 'the two scholars talking past one another: Propp […] [being] concerned with empirically observable sequential structure whereas Lévi-Strauss is interested in underlying paradigms, typically binary in nature.'[82] An example of this 'talking past one another' may be observed in Propp's assessment, in contrast to Lévi-Strauss, that certain myths are in fact constructed in a way very similar to the tale, claiming that some 'present this structure in an amazingly pure form', referring here, of course, to a structure of an entirely different sort.[83]

However, another, in this case more relevant, point of disparity between the two appears to be their respective conceptions of what myth is, tying back into the aforementioned criticism of Lévi-Strauss's work conflating separate folkloric categories. On this, Dundes discusses Lévi-Strauss's settling on the tale of Oedipus so to demonstrate his proposed structural approach to the studying of myth, noting that the chosen object of study is in fact, by strict folkloristic standards, a folktale, rather than a myth.[84] Moving forward, Dundes notes numerous instances where folk tales are analysed by Lévi-Strauss under the inaccurate moniker of 'myth', claiming thusly that the inference that myths evince oppositions to a greater degree than tales is ultimately incorrect.[85]

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[80] Dundes, p. 147.
[81] Lévi-Strauss, as quoted by Dundes, p. 147.
[82] Ibid, p. 148.
[83] Propp, p. 100.
[84] Dundes, p. 149.
[85] Ibid, p. 149 – 150.

Returning then to Gunning's contrasting of Lang's *Der müde Tod* and *Die Nibelungen*, we can detect a similar line of reasoning in his discussing of the one as 'invoking the simple form of the *Marchen*' in contrast to the other as 'mythological epic', in spite of the fact that, as we have demonstrated, *Die Nibelungen* is by all accounts itself a cinematic fairy tale (though certainly an epic in the cinematic sense, if not in the literary one).[86] This assessment, which does not, as stated previously, refer back to any clear-cut definitions of mythology and fairy tale, also appears to correspond well with a statement made by Lévi-Strauss in his essay *The Structural Study of Myth*:

> Myth is the part of language where the formula *traduttore, traditore* reaches its lowest truth value. From that point of view it should be placed in the gamut of linguistic expressions at the end opposite to that of poetry, in spite of all the claims which have been made to prove the contrary. Poetry is a kind of speech which cannot be translated except at the cost of serious distortions; whereas the mythical value of the myth is preserved even through the worst translation. **Whatever our ignorance of the language and the culture of the people where it originated, a myth is still felt as a myth by any reader anywhere in the world. Its substance does not lie in its style, its original music, or its syntax, but in the *story* which it tells.** [emphasis added]. [87]

And yet, as we have observed, stories which do in fact possess very little (if not none whatsoever) in terms of 'mythical value' are consistently mistaken for being myths. It bears mentioning, of course, that Lévi-Strauss is not working here with a vague, undefined notion of what myth is, but rather from the comprehensive view that 'mythical thought always progresses from the awareness of oppositions toward their resolution.'[88] Though that may be true, it is in that case, as we have previously noted, not something uniquely characteristic of myth; however, if a great deal of people (indeed, if not most) tend to determine whether or not they consider something to be a myth depending on how it is 'felt' by them, is it due to them innately perceiving (if unknowingly) the interplay between binary oppositions within it? This seems unlikely, as Dundes has stated that binary oppositions exist not only in equal measure within myths and folktales but are also commonly found in other genres of folklore, such as proverbs, riddles, and curses.[89] Further, it does not appear to be what Gunning fixates on in his distinguishing between *Der müde Tod* and *Die Nibelungen*, who seems to attribute the latter's supposed mythic qualities more to the implementation of specific motifs along with its setting and aesthetic, with binary oppositions being of central significance in both works.

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[86] Gunning, p. 34.
[87] Lévi-Strauss, Claude. *Structural Anthropology*. New York: Basic Books, 1963, p. 211.
[88] Ibid, p. 224.
[89] Dundes, p. 150 – 151.

The overall question as to why we appear so adamant in attributing 'myth' to narratives that do not meet the semantic criteria is outside the scope of this text, but is still relevant in so far as it ties into how it inclines us to read and interpret certain texts. In that regard, I believe there is some common ground shared between Campbell, Jung, Lévi-Strauss, and Gunning, in that, for Campbell and Jung, a required characteristic of mythology appears to be *depth*, while for Lévi-Strauss it appears to be *structural complexity*; in the case of Gunning, it appears to be both.

To elaborate, both Campbell and Jung call attention to depth at numerous instances in their respective discussions on myths in relation to the stories themselves as well as in so far as they relate to human psychology. Campbell, in referring to mythology as 'psychology misread as biography; history, and cosmology' describes it as a 'rich and eloquent document of the profoundest depths of human character', while Jung, in discussing the healing capabilities of the archetypal images of myth, writes the following:

> The rationalist may laugh at this. But something deep in us is stirred, and not in us alone but in millions of Christian men and women, though we may call it only a feeling for beauty. What is stirred in us is that faraway background, those immemorial patterns of the human mind, which we have not acquired but have inherited from the dim ages of the past.[90][91]

A unifying characteristic then of both writer's understanding of what constitutes the mythic appears to be its relation to primordial, fundamental elements of human consciousness.

Lévi-Strauss, by contrast, refrains from the study of myth in regard to the primordial or psychological depth, but we may yet observe a degree of similarity if we consider the distinction drawn between myth and fairy tale as one exhibiting stronger oppositions than the other. If this were to be so, and if the inclination towards binary oppositions is construed as a universal element of human perception, then by deduction, mythological narratives would be reflective to a greater extent of the inherent workings of the human mind than fairy tales. This, of course, would not by necessity determine myths as more complicated per se, but it does seem to imply that the study of them in that case offer greater promise of insight into human consciousness.

There are no associations made in Gunning's analysis tying mythology to either depth or complexity in regard to human consciousness, though there are certainly parts that appear to echo these notions. Notably, the elements of the film construed as 'mythic' are repeatedly

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[90] Campbell, p. 238.
[91] Jung, p. 35.

described in the terms of the primordial and the unknowable, 'an ambiguous legacy of magic', while the apparent intricacies of *Die Nibelungen*'s alleged mythical borrowings are judged to be what disavows its status as fairy tale, which comes to be regarded as a simpler form of storytelling overall.

We may then pose ourselves the question whether or not Lang and Harbou consciously set out to create an aesthetic in the film evocative of primordiality so to instil in it what may have been intended as a sort of mythic resonance. As has here been previously laid out, the film does eschew many of the relatively modern additions found in the *Nibelungenlied*, though that may simply be the result of adhering to the most common perception of the work's origin at the time (to which the Norse variants where viewed to be more adjacent). Certainly, as evinced by one of Gunning's quotations, Lang did refer to the story of the film as 'myth', but then, he also referred to it in the terms of Märchen, implying that the director drew no particular distinction between the two.[92] Most film scholars, however, appear adamant in discussing the film as exemplary of myth; aside from Gunning's own writings, the film is consistently designated as myth in the anthology text *A Companion to Fritz Lang*. The only exception to this is found in an essay on the film by Steve Choe, who, in reference to an article by Fritz Lang, writes of it in regard to both myth and fairy tale; it should be noted, however, that Lang himself in said article only discusses it as fairy tale.[93]

The disparity displayed here between artist and analyst warrants acknowledgment. If Lang himself did not particularly care for, nor consider, distinctions between myth and fairy tale when directing *Die Nibelungen*, and used the terms interchangeably, then it is intriguing that so many of his commentators insist on one term in favour of the other in regard to the work in question. We cannot in this present instance ponder in-depth the reasons as to why scholarly rhetoric on myth appears to have developed along a certain line (though parallels between fields certainly do seem to exist, if sometimes subtly so). We can, however, consider the ways in which the film medium, particularly *Die Nibelungen*, along with film scholarly writing, may have contributed to the perpetuation of certain understandings of myth. Is it, as Lévi-Strauss claims, the story of something in particular that inclines us to read it as myth? Or is it, as Gunning's analysis seems to suggest, also a matter of setting, aesthetic, and possibly even mood?

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[92] Lang, as quoted by Gunning, p. 37 – 38; 38.
[93] Choe, Steve. 'Redemption of Revenge', in McElhaney, Joe, ed. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015, p. 211.

To attempt to grapple with these questions, we will turn here to Steve Neale's theory of the systematisation of genre, for reasons outlined in the theory section of this paper. Of course, it would be a misuse of terminology to label *Die Nibelungen* 'mythological' in regard to film genres, as there is neither basis for it within scholarly labelling through genres (as means of analysis and categorisation) nor widespread public usage. However, Neale's theoretical basis of film genres within a capitalist framework as consisting of both 'institutionalized classes of texts and systems of expectation', and 'critically or theoretically constructed terms [used] as the basis for discussing classes of films' nonetheless offers an apt starting point for considering the ways in which categories perpetuate specific readings.[94]

Firstly, if we begin with the supposition that genres 'provide spectators with means of recognition and understanding' as well as 'offer a way of working out the significance of what is happening on the screen', then it is also necessary to address what Neale describes as 'their inherent mutability on the one hand and their inherent historicity on the other.'[95] Genres, then, being understood as processes as opposed to finalised entities, are treated as subject to constant change, along with, by extension, our perception of them. The flexibility of this conception, I believe, allows for it to be integrated in studying the idea of the 'mythical' as a quality that has been held to be attributable to certain types of cinema, e.g. the epic, or fantasy. An in-depth examination of the historical implementation of 'myth' as designation within film discourse, both in public and strictly academic forums, is an undertaking outside the scope of the present text; nonetheless, we will here explore a few of the ways in which this may prove fruitful.

Earlier, we noted some of the parallels between certain influential scholarly perceptions of what constitutes myth and its particular characteristics. Particularly, we observed a certain tendency to regard myths (regardless of whether or not the narratives denoted as such fulfilled the criteria according to folkloristic terminology) as especially tied to fundamental aspects of human existence, echoed, again, in Gunning's analysis by that text's association of myth with nature and the prehistoric. In an attempt to come to terms with how these tendencies may have developed, both within and outside of film studies, we can observe the means by which Neale implements formalist theory in order to provide a brief outline of certain genre progressions in American cinema:

> In sketching the application of this model to the American cinema, one could argue, for instance, that the
> cinema itself arose in, and as, the conjunction of a variety of art forms—canonized and otherwise—from

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[94] Neale, p. 52.
[95] Ibid, p. 46; 56.

photography, through pictorial entertainments and spectacles like the diorama, the zoëtrope, and the magic lantern show, to magic itself and to the vaudeville routine. Its earliest generic regime, in America as elsewhere, was dominated by the genres associated with these forms: the moving snapshot or 'view', re-enacted and reconstructed news, trick films, and slapstick and gag-based comedy.[96]

Continuing to observe the importance of influences outside of the film medium, he states that what is 'particularly striking about this historical sketch is the extent to which many genres either originated in forms and institutions of entertainment other than the cinema or were (and are) circulated additionally by them.'[97] This particular film historical approach can prove useful in so far as we are discussing myth and folklore within cinema, as they are derived from much older sources, and have been continually reshaped by, among other things, literature, drama, and art.

The greatest limitation, perhaps, is that two of the main concepts used by Neale, 'the dominant' and the 'canonization of the junior branch', in reference to the means by which genres and art forms respectively are established and subsequently displaced, might be found incompatible as categories of folklore define neither narrative genres nor forms of art. For instance, while Pablo Pasolini's *Edipo Re* (1967), Toshio Matsumoto's *Funeral Parade of Roses* (1969), and Park Chan-wook's *Oldboy* (2003), can all be construed as reimaginings of the tale of Oedipus, they remain nonetheless, in terms of genre, entirely distinct. For the purposes of this text, however, the overall approach of formalism should remain sufficient in spite of this lack.

In demonstrating its potential usefulness in discussing the idea of myth in film, while also furthering our analysis of both *Die Nibelungen* and myth as a concept in film scholarship, we will be implementing this approach through an examination of the historical context surrounding Lang's film in relation to an ideology commonly associated with myth: nationalism. To begin with, the appropriation of the story of the Nibelungs by the Nazi regime for propaganda purposes is well-documented, with Gunning referring to it briefly in a discussion on the re-issuing of *Die Nibelungen: Siegfried* in 1933.[98] Moreover, attempts to foster national identity through the use of folk tales and myths was a notably wide-spread practice in Europe during the 1800s, as shown by Verilyn Flieger:

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[96] Ibid, p. 60.
[97] Ibid, p. 61.
[98] Gunning, p. 38.

In Germany Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm were searching for the oldest remnants of the Germanic language in order to establish a German national identity (the best-known result being their huge collection of folk and fairy tales first published in 1812). Elias Lönnrot's 1835 *Kalevala*, expanded and republished in 1849, gave Finns their mythic identity, and John Francis Campbell's 1860 *Tales of the West Highlands* salvaged on the brink of disappearance the folktales and lore of Celtic Scotland. The Irish-American linguist and folklorist Jeremiah Curtin, who collected and studied the myths and folktales of Slavs and Native Americans, also published in 1890 *Myths and Folk-lore of Ireland* and in *1895 Tales of the Fairies and of the Ghost World* collected from Munster. In 1901 John Rhys's two-volume *Celtic Folklore* did the same for Wales. Many more examples could be cited from the great nineteenth-century surge of interest in myth and nationalism […] brought to an abrupt close by World War I and never afterward revived with the same force.[99]

How then does this development tie into *Die Nibelungen*? As noted by Gunning, Germany's preoccupation with folkloric narratives, in contrast to that of the United Kingdom, did not disappear during the time of the Weimar Republic, possibly attributable to the political upheaval (e.g. class divisions, the establishment of a new government, and the London Ultimatum) of the time.[100] Certainly, both parts of *Die Nibelungen* do appear to reflect a tendency to connect folklore with that of national identity, the clearest indicator of this being the two films' shared opening intertitle: 'Dedicated to the German People' ('Dem Deutschen Volke zu eigen').

Additionally, the theme of heroism displayed most prominently at the end of *Kriemhild's Rache*, where the massively outnumbered Burgundians unflinchingly deliver their last stand against the Huns at Attila's court, appears to strongly echo patriotic sentiments. Here, Rüdiger von Bechlarn's reproachful reply when Attila wishes to offer the terms for their surrender in exchange for Hagen's lives provides the pivotal moment: 'You know not the German soul, Lord Attila!' ('Ihr kennt die deutsche Seele nicht, Herr Etzel!') While the previously discussed element of fate in relation to heroism has effectively been removed, the unfaltering loyalty of the Burgundians till death remains. This is particularly notable in relation to the mass desertion that occurred within the German military at the end of World War I, described by Thomas Kühne as a refusal by its soldiers to 'trade their individual lives for the honor of a warrior nation.'[101]

[99] Flieger, Verilyn. 'Introduction', quoted from Tolkien, J.R.R. *On Fairy Stories.* London: Harper Collins Publisher, 1947, 1968, 2008, p. 20 – 21.

[100] Gunning, p. 38.

[101] Kühne, Thomas. 'Todesraum: War, Peace, and the Experience of Mass Death, 1914–1945' in Smith, Helmut Walser ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Modern German History*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011, p. 588 – 589; 589.

We can then observe *Die Nibelungen* as reflective of both past and contemporary folkloristic and socio-political developments – but what about developments within the field of film specifically? Certainly, in regard to genre, we can discuss Lang's and Harbou's work in relation to another category of films that, particularly during the 1910s, appeared particularly involved in nationalist agenda, that category being 'the epic'. Early examples, such as *Cabiria* (1914) and *Birth of a Nation* (1915), much like *Die Nibelungen*, are both depictive of the early histories of their respective countries of production: the consolidation of the Roman Empire for the one, and the American Civil War for the other. In continuing this tradition, while similarly depicting a legendary German past prior to that country's establishing (yet one where people belonging to separate 'German' kingdoms are still tied together by a sense of kinship), *Die Nibelungen* can be understood as historically reinforcing the perception of the early epic as explicitly tied to nationalism.

How does then does this notion of the epic in film relate to the understanding of myth? To Gunning, the epic values of *Die Nibelungen* certainly seems to be what, at least partially, elevates it to a level of 'myth'. Notably, Gunning's interpretation of *Die Nibelungen: Siegfried* as depicting 'the way the pure products of myth are destroyed as they enter into the realm of history and civilisation' is built on George Lukacs' theory of the *literary epic*, which only connects indirectly to myth. Which, again, appears as a vague criteria to base a definition of myth on, though perhaps not an uncommon one, attributing the qualities of the epic as characteristic of myth. Additionally, we have of course the *Illiad,* and the *Odyssey*, works which are not only considered defining examples of the literary epic, but, to many, Greek mythology. All of these things may have informed a wide-spread notion of connecting myth to the epic, but, of course, we cannot here say for certain – though it does seem to imply, again, that aside from a sense of scale, it is also a work's complexity that predisposes towards the reading of something as myth as opposed to fairy tale.

However, in order to delve into questions regarding the relationship between notions of myth and the epic satisfactorily, which would in and of itself require a study of the distinctions between the literary epic and the cinematic epic, the scope of this text would need to be expanded considerably. Particularly, a closer study of the history of the literary epic and folklore in regard to nationalist agendas from the 1800s and onward could perhaps prove an apt starting point for an analysis on discourse regarding the idea of 'nationalist myth'. For, as demonstrated by Flieger, myth, historically speaking, is by no means the only folkloric genre that has been adapted for nationalist purposes, and yet, it appears so much more unusual to refer to something

as 'nationalist folk tale/fairy tale'. Perhaps this has something to do with the alternative meaning of myth as 'lie' or 'untruth' – yet we can, at this stage, only speculate.

Regardless, if we ponder these things in regard to Neale's concept of *generic regimes*, then perhaps there is greater cause for concern here than that of terms being merely misapplied. If generic categories do indeed influence, if not direct, the means by which we provide significance to things within a work, then what does that entail for films we attribute to adapting mythical material? As we have here discussed, *myth*, whether or not it is a matter of the folkloristic category as such, is intricately tangled up in a number of ideas that are likely to shape our conception of it to varying degrees, not least if we understand it as inherently bound up in political ideologies. A reading of this sort may well be more predisposed to read *Die Nibelungen* as reflective of contemporary nationalist tendencies within Germany, while perhaps less so for *Der müde Tod* or F.W. Murnau's *Faust* (1926) – even though they are all in fact derived from German *fairy tale* (on a side note, *Faust* would in fact be closer to myth than either of the other two, being the only film of the three where an element of the *divine* is included).

Of course, because fairy tales have also been unfairly misconstrued as operating under a lesser degree of complexity than myths, another reading of *Die Nibelungen* could instead be inclined to discuss it as myth from a desire to elevate it. We can here turn to Neale's writings on 'realism' as a quality within critical discourse generally attributed to certain generic regimes (e.g. the war film) where the adherence to this quality is perceived as exemplary of 'serious' art due to it being conceived of as closer to reality, while disguising the nature of that conception as constructed according to cultural bias.[102] Thus, generic regimes can be seen as operating according to certain hierarchies, with both genres and general qualities existing in relation to each other. Working in relation to one, or several such hierarchies (for instance, the film critical sphere as well as academia), referring to *Die Nibelungen* as derived from ancient myth, as opposed to fairy tales, is an act of cultural legitimisation, regardless of intent. It, seemingly, ties the work to a tradition that includes both the epics and the tragedies of ancient Greece – Western works of indisputable canonicity. Moreover, it removes it further from generic regimes regarded as lesser in terms of intellectual appeal, such as the high fantasy/swords-and-sorcery films from the 1980s and onward with which *Die Nibelungen* share a number of obvious (if largely superficial) similarities.

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[102] Neale, p. 47 – 48.

4. Conclusion, and Suggestions Toward a Richer Understanding of Folklore in Film

To reiterate, the primary intended purpose behind the writing of this paper has been to address the consistent misapplication of the term 'myth' within film studies and adjacent academic areas through the implementation of theoretical frameworks and terminology from the field of folkloristics. Additionally, I have here attempted to apply scholarly models and research from said field, along with relevant findings from Medieval studies in performing a film theoretical analysis of Fritz Lang's and Thea von Harbou's *Die Nibelungen*, with especial emphasis on its first part *Die Nibelungen: Siegfried*. In doing so, it has effectively been proven that *Die Nibelungen*, far from being a film based on myth, has little to do with mythology at all, and is in fact much closer to the fairy tale in regard to both content and structure.

In disproving the existence of any explicit mythical elements within the film, we have then discussed the film in terms of *implicit* mythical elements, most notably that of fate in regard to the pagan Anglo-Saxon mythology from which the tale of Siegfried appears to have originated. Here, we have drawn upon Medieval scholarship focusing on fate, or *wyrd*, as it appears in Northern Germanic poetry, particularly heroic poetry, and found that, though the element of fate is preserved to an extent, it appears to be entirely hollowed out of any mythological significance.

Following this analysis, the misappropriating of 'myth' as designator has been examined as it appears in writing by three particular influential scholars: Joseph Campbell, C.G. Jung, and Claude Levi-Strauss. Here, using criticism expressed by Dundes as a starting point, we have observed certain commonalities between the three researchers in terms of their respective writings on the subject of 'myth', not least in regard to the implicit assumptions that appear to underlie these texts. Said commonalities have been considered in regard to Steve Neale's theory of *generic regimes*, as well as the historical intertwining of nationalism and folklore (myth *and* fairy tale) from the 1800s and onwards – conclusions, however, regarding the use of the term 'myth' as a cultural and critical designator, particularly in film discourse, remain limited, with the topic as of now requiring further study in order for more precise conclusions to be drawn.

In the beginning part of this text, a quote from Fritz Lang finds the acclaimed director ascribing to the story of the Nibelungs a quality of timelessness:

> Between smiling and tears, laughter and yelling, destinies unfold that have always been the stuff of human tragedy. And I have not tried anything other than to rebestow one of these tragedies, as beautiful and as contemporary as I myself found it, upon the people of today through film, the liveliest art form of our time.

Whether or not *Nibelungenlied* or *Die Nibelungen* are in any sense 'timeless' narratives is not a concern of this particular work, nor is the extent to which *Die Nibelungen* can be said to fit in with the nationalist appropriating of folkloric material within contemporary Germany. While these are both inquiries worth pursuing, any attempt to do so, scholarly or otherwise, may well find itself hindered in that writing on such topics tend to be inextricably tied to ideas of 'myth'; ideas that, when compared between texts, whether they are written by lesser known scholars or intellectual heavy-weights, tend to be contradictory on levels as basic as the mere defining of what myth is – assuming definitions are even provided at all. This, needless to say, creates tremendous difficulties in researching a topic such as myth in other media or forms of art as it inevitably results in an academic field that is rife with contradictions and inconsistencies. It is here, in that case, we most acutely find the need for clearer distinctions.

The question of why certain elements in a film (or any narrative) seem to suggest things that incline us to refer to something as mythical when we are unfamiliar with folkloristic distinctions is of central importance here, as a closer examination can prove elucidating not solely regarding academic discourse on myth, but also public discourse. Further, a more in-depth understanding of these things could be tremendously useful in examining the development of the film medium, as well as particular film genres, in how it relates to folkloristic categories; not least, it can provide a spring-board for posing questions regarding the reception history of films dealing with folkloric material, and how designators such as myth, legend, or fairy tale, have been used according to critical or political agendas.

Finally, it is here important to stress yet again, as we have observed in examining Tom Gunning's analysis of *Die Nibelungen*, that the misusing of the term 'myth', even in regard to works that purport to examine it, or elements attributable to it, in detail, are not by themselves negated by this shortcoming. While it may, as has here been demonstrated, result in certain readings that are incorrect, as well as cause difficulties for those wishing to conduct research themselves in this particular area, it does not by itself provide sufficient basis to dismiss theories or conclusions built on misconceptions of this sort. Gunning's assessment that *Die Nibelungen* employs the 'mythological epic' as a symbolic form is an inaccuracy; his core theory, however, still holds in spite of this, and has been shown to be compatible with, and even benefited by, a structural folkloristic approach. This alone demonstrates the potential of integrating the fields of film and folklore in the studying of cinema and the myths, legends, and fairy tales, which it continues to adapt, and from which its images and narratives draw their oldest heritage.

5. Reference list

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