Enduring Worlds, New Horizons:
The Nature of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* in Three Re-Imaginings of the Nibelung Legend

by

Leslie Erin Reed Senter

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Prof. James McFarland (chair)

Prof. Jennifer Fay

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for M. B. and M. A. B.
in loving memory
There are many kinds of courage.

and for V. R. B.
There is beauty in the mundane and love in the practical.

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Introduction

‘Don't the great tales never end?’ ‘No, they never end as tales,’ said Frodo. ‘But the people in them come, and go when their part's ended. Our part will end later – or sooner.’[1]
--J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Two Towers*

The *Gesamtkunstwerk* and the Nibelungen: Three Artists and their Art

Stories can shape perceptions and can provide connection and perspective. This power can be an affirming or a destructive one, but either way, it is often compelling. Consider for instance Christopher MacLachlan's recent news article in *The Spectator,* explaining why, in the midst of the current Russian-Ukrainian conflict, the Ukrainian soldiers have been referring to marauding Russian soldiers as "orcs."[2] Given the situation and the nature of the conflict, that these soldiers should come up with names to denote the 'other' is hardly surprising, but their choice of epithet is unusual, and carries with it the weight of at least three stories.

MacLachlan notes that the term entered common usage through J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, in which they figured largely as faceless villains. But Tolkien himself did not invent the term. It is first recorded in the Old English epic poem, *Beowulf,* believed to have been written sometime between 700-1000 CE. The poet describes that Cain (of Biblical fame – so perhaps we may count four stories here), having killed his brother Abel, unleashed the curse of God upon the land, which released "Eotenas ond ylfe ond **orcnēas**."[3] MacLachlan translates this as "ogres and elves and monsters," while other translations have it as "ogres and

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[1] Tolkien, J.R.R.. *The Lord Of The Rings*. Harper Collins, 1993. pg. 697.
[2] MacLachlan, Christopher. "Why are Ukrainians Calling Russian Invaders 'orcs'?" *The Spectator,* 10 April 2022, https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/why-are-ukrainians-calling-russian-invaders-orcs/. Accessed 5 January 2023.
[3] Heaney, Seamus, trans. *Beowulf.* WW Norton, 2000. pg. 8

elves and evil phantoms."[4] MacLachlan suggests that these monstrous phantoms may perhaps even be animated corpses or the undead. However that may be, the Ukrainian soldiers choice of words (for good or ill) carries with it all of these implications as well as, MacLachlan notes, a possible reference to Russian Kirill Eskov's 1999 *The Last Ringbearer,* an unauthorized retelling of Tolkien's tale. According to MacLachlan:

> Eskov's novel is a mirror-image of Tolkien's. It follows a group of elves, led by Gandalf, who wage unremitting war on the peaceful realm of Sauron; eventually Sauron succeeds in defeating them and destroys their treacherous magic, ushering in a new age of progress and prosperity. 'The Last Ringbearer' is not the first or the only inversion of the morality of 'The Lord of the Rings', but it is striking in its readiness to identify with Sauron and his orcs against elves, dwarves and humans. It is hard in 2022 to resist seeing a parallel with Vladimir Putin's vision of Russia assailed by the West and driven to a self-righteous war of survival against a hostile world. On the other side, the people of Ukraine, not deluded by Eskov, label Putin and his troops the orcs they are.[5]

While current events are not the focus of this dissertation, this anecdote provides a reminder of the power of storytelling, and of the enduring nature of some artworks that seem to stay with those who have experienced them – for better or for worse. Tolkien's *Rings* is one example. Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen* is another. This dissertation seeks to trace the trajectory – the largely German trajectory – that links Wagner and Tolkien, and which may shed some insight on the phenomenon of a powerful story or artwork that proves to be unforgettable.

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[4] Heaney, Seamus, trans. *Beowulf.* WW Norton, 2000. pg. 9
[5] MacLachlan, Christopher. "Why are Ukrainians Calling Russian Invaders 'orcs'?" *The Spectator,* 10 April 2022, https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/why-are-ukrainians-calling-russian-invaders-orcs/. Accessed 5 January 2023.

This dissertation examines three artists – Richard Wagner, Fritz Lang, and J. R. R. Tolkien – each of whom made lastingly-famous artworks in their own respective fields (opera, film, and the novel). Specifically, this dissertation will consider Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen,* Lang's *Die Nibelungen,* and Tolkien's Middle-earth writings, including *The Hobbit, The Lord of the Rings,* and *The Silmarillion* (the last of which corresponds most closely with the Nibelung legend). Although these three artists are not usually brought into conversation with one another (particularly Tolkien), they have quite a lot in common. In addition to creating important and memorable work, all three included or worked with multiple kinds of media in crafting their art. Each of these artists attempted to create something that had not yet been done before, and in doing so provided an immersive (and communal) experience that pushed their artform or medium to new limits. Moreover, each was reacting to his socio-political context in some specific way, often with a specific goal in mind for their work. Finally, and perhaps most importantly (and strangely), they all three draw on the Nibelungen legend of Siegfried and the dragon in some degree as basis or inspiration (as the case may be), to create their art. This dissertation, moreover, seeks to come to an understanding of the term *Gesamtkunstwerk* (which is strongly associated with Wagner) to show that each of these artworks can be considered a *Gesamtkunstwerk* in their own right, following on the work of Imhoof, Menninger and Steinhoff, who argue for a broader interpretation of the term, and a release from a strictly Wagnerian definition.[6]

One commonality between these three disparate artists is they each faced a challenging socio-political situation, and each reacted to it through his art – as mentioned above, often with a specific goal in mind. For instance, Wagner began working on the *Ring* cycle in 1851, just two

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[6] Imhoof, David, Margaret Eleanor Menninger, and Anthony J. Steinhoff, eds. *The Total Work of Art: Foundations, Articulations, Inspirations.* Berghahn, 2016.

years after he had evaded arrest for his involvement in the anti-elitist, pro-enlightenment revolution of 1848. Wagner's attempt at a *Gesamtkunstwerk* is a response to his disappointment and dissatisfaction (particularly with politics, but also with the state of the arts as he understood them) and has an explicit reformist trend. Lang is also writing in response to the disappointment of the end of World War I, seeking to instill hope in his (newly adopted) fellow citizens, but also filled with hope regarding the new universal language of (silent) film which uses visuals to tell a story with little reliance on language. Tolkien's work, as will be shown, originated as a children's story, and slowly transformed into something larger. He was writing at first not so much as a result of disappointment with political issues, but his work is deeply informed by his trauma with war (he served in World War I, and lost close friends to its violence), and by his desire for something better, an escape, an alternative world, particularly after the onset of World War II, which disappointed him deeply. Unlike the other two, he does not try to solve any real-world issues, but withdraws into a world of his own making. It is possible that we shall find that *Gesamtkunstwerke* are bound up with troubled times.

Celia Applegate, in her forward to *Total Artwork*, points out both the validity and the futility of trying to define the term *Gesamtkunstwerk*, for, despite an immense number of attempts, no definition has stood the test of time to become quite definitive. "The usefulness of such efforts," she notes, is still worthwhile, "even if, by their nature, they are doomed to an academic version of the incompleteness that haunts – and taunts – the would-be producers of Gesamtkunstwerk[e]" (xi). Applegate argues that the *Total Artwork* is valuable for its inquiry and "celebrat[ing] the process of testing and discovery" (xi). And such is the hope for this dissertation as well.

Chapter One: Richard Wagner

The first chapter centers on Richard Wagner, whose famous (and as we shall see, pivotal) retelling of Germanic myths has perhaps had a longer reach than that of any other storyteller using the same material. His creation and use of German legends as a political tool is well-known, and his works have undoubtedly had myriad impacts in the 20th century in particular. However, this is not a dissertation on Wagner, nor is it intended to focus on music in any way. The necessity for the inclusion of this chapter lies in the fact that Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen* remains the most famous adaptation of the *Nibelungenlied* (and Nibelung material) to date, and in the fact that the term *Gesamtkunstwerk* is invariably associated with Wagner. However, as Lang and Tolkien remain the chief focus of this dissertation, this first chapter is rather shorter in length, and limits itself to looking at the four essays Wagner penned in 1849-1851, during the immediate period after his involvement with the 1848 Revolution (which was actually 1849 in Dresden). This chapter considers something of Wagner's historical context as well, but omits any detailed discussion of the *Ring* cycle as an opera or as a work of music, nor does it seek to analyze the plot or sources of the work in depth. As far as the enormous topic of the Nibelung legend is concerned, both this chapter and the majority of the following work will be narrowed to the tracing the use of the Nibelungenlied story as inspiration for an immense and involved artwork and these three of its retellings (or appropriations), beginning with Wagner's *Ring* cycle.

This chapter comprises five parts. The first, a brief introduction, sets the stage. The second gives a straightforward account of Wagner's early life up until his writing of the four essays in question. The third offers an appreciation of the essays, and explains the inclusion of the fourth essay, which is less well-known than the other three.

The fourth section is the most crucial of the chapter, focusing on the *Gesamtkunstwerk* in Wagner's writing, and is also itself broken into five parts. The first part of this section examines the use of the term *Gesamtkunstwerk* as it is generally understood, its links to Wagner's material, and some of the reasons behind its controversial nature. It also indicates that there is no universally accepted definition for this term – far from it. The second part looks at Theodor Adorno's understanding of Wagner's use of the term, as explored in *Versuch über Wagner*. Adorno has been an influential, even essential, part of the scholarly discourse on Wagner for the last 70 years. Although the conclusions of this chapter do not necessarily follow his line of thinking, his voice has been too important to ignore. The third part of section four is an interchapter or interlude that considers Wagner's anti-Semitism. Adorno claims that Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk* is linked to his totalitarian and anti-Semitic ideals, a position that must be taken seriously, at least in so far as it impacts the inquiry of this project. The fourth part of section four considers Wagner's goals as he had them in mind at the time of writing the essays and beginning work on his *Ring* cycle (which he began immediately following the third essay, *Oper und Drama* early in 1851). The fifth and final part of section four considers a working definition of *Gesamtkunstwerk* as it will apply in this dissertation. The chapter concludes with section five, a short conclusion building on and expanding the definition of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

Chapter Two: Fritz Lang

The second chapter of the dissertation considers the filmmaker Fritz Lang, of *Metropolis* fame. Three years before he made what has a credible claim to be the most remarkable film of its decade, *Metropolis,* he made what might have been thought the most remarkable film of its decade up to that time: *Die Nibelungen,* in 1924. *Die Nibelungen* is really two films, *Siegfrieds*

Tod and *Kriemhilds Rache,* both about two hours in length. As might be expected, the films are based on the Middle High German poem, *Das Nibelungenlied.* Of the three artists considered here, Lang's version most closely corresponds to the story in the poem. Given Lang's status as a preeminent film director of the Weimar period, and his direct use of the Nibelung material, his work is of central interest to this dissertation. Moreover, the multi-media nature of film as an art form lends itself well to the idea of a *Gesamtkunstwerk.* This chapter examines Fritz Lang's life and work up until the filming of *Die Nibelungen,* his hopes and goals for the film, the reception of the film, and considers the film itself and whether it might not be viewed as a form of *Gesamtkunstwerk.* This chapter does not cover Lang's life or work after 1924, nor is it intended as a comprehensive study of his filmography as a whole. It is rather a reading of the one film and its surrounding context, with *Gesamtkunstwerk* as the guiding principle.

This chapter is broken into six sections. First, there is an introduction, which is then followed by an account of Fritz Lang's life. This second part provides not only biographical information, but also concerns itself with Lang's context as a director of note in Weimar cinema, and with Lang's context as a newly-minted citizen (he was born in Vienna) of a Germany which had just lost a war, and lost it badly. The third section of the chapter is a close reading of several aspects of the *Nibelungen* film. This section is intended to give a detailed appreciation of the film itself, of the art and care that went into its making, and to show the grand scale of Lang's vision and attention to detail through the work. Appended to this section are select film stills included to demonstrate the conclusions of the close reading.

The fourth section of this chapter – and here I must beg the reader's indulgence for a convoluted structure which I trust will be worth the pains – is intended to lay out three things: Lang's goals in making the film, the success and/or failure of these aims, and lastly the

somewhat difficult legacy that the film has left behind, a legacy colored by both Siegfried

Kracauer's views (Lang's own Adorno, in a manner of speaking) and by Wagner himself. This

fourth section accordingly sets forth two primary goals Lang was pursuing in the making of the

film. The section then considers the success, failure, and legacy of the first goal, before returning

to consider the success, failure, and legacy of the second.

The fifth section of the chapter on Fritz Lang hones in on three specific ways in which

Fritz Lang pushes the boundaries of what was done (or even possible) in the filmmaking of his

day – a crucial piece of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* milieu. It considers Lang's mise-en-scène, special

effects, and world-building (though other aspects could also have been considered), and

endeavors to show that Lang was indeed making a film by integrating different practices,

artforms, and media to make a film the likes of which had never before been attempted. It is, of

course, evident from the nature of cinema history and the progression of technology that a

cutting-edge artwork of this kind would be (and was) quickly superseded by other films

(including his own *Metropolis*), but for that moment in 1924, this chapter argues, Fritz Lang

made something new that had never been done before. The fifth section also includes film stills.

The sixth section of the chapter closes it with the conclusion (or suggestion) that *Die Nibelungen*

by Fritz Lang may be considered a *Gesamtkunstwerk* in its own right.

Chapter Three: J.R.R. Tolkien

The third and final chapter of this dissertation attempts something new as well, though not on

any grand scale. That is, the inclusion, in a German Studies dissertation, of an English-language,

British author. The basis for this inclusion is that Tolkien, like Wagner and Lang, attempts to

create something new by integrating multiple art forms (in his case, the novel and linguistics)

and, strangely enough, bases his magnum opus on some of the same Nibelung material as the

others. Like Wagner, he does not follow the Middle High German *Nibelungenlied* at all closely, but rather (also like Wagner) incorporates material from other sources, like the *Prose Edda* and the Finnish *Kalevala.* Considering Tolkien's Middle-earth writings (primarily *The Hobbit, The Lord of the Rings,* and *The Silmarillion*) as a possible *Gesamtkunstwerk* may seem somewhat counterintuitive at first, for indeed they are a series of novels, not a multi-media art form.

The chief basis for this inclusion is the surprisingly little-known fact that Tolkien did not set out to write them as novels. Rather, Tolkien (who was after all a professional philologist) created two languages – fully fledged languages with grammar systems, vocabularies and their own writing system – as a hobby. He even made one of these languages (*Quenyan*) the predecessor of the second (*Sindarin*), in the way that Old English is the predecessor of Middle English (or even modern English), so that one may hear echoes or distorted cognates of *Quenyan* in *Sindarin*. Having done this, he felt that a language must have its own world and its own mythology to house it – he felt strongly that a language could not exist apart from a historical and cultural context, hence the failure of Esperanto – and set about creating a world in which his languages could exist.

These writings became *The Silmarillion,* which, to his lasting grief, he was unable to have published during his lifetime (the reasons for this are explored in the chapter). However, having written a very successful children's book (*The Hobbit*), Tolkien was struggling, under pressure from the publisher, to write a sequel to *The Hobbit.* Although he set out to write another children's book, the text morphed under his hands, and became a three-volume grand trilogy of gigantic proportions, which ultimately became the link between the world of the *Hobbit,* and that of the *Silmarillion,* though the two were not originally connected. This trilogy, *The Lord of the Rings,* became his best-known work, and, its popularity created a such a demand for more of his

Middle-earth that his son, Christopher Tolkien, spent much of his life editing and publishing his father's copious notes and unfinished texts (beginning with the *Silmarillion* shortly after Tolkien's death). To date, there are over 20 volumes of Middle-earth stories by Tolkien, published since his death, based solely on his notes and writings left behind. Additionally, *The Lord of the Rings,* together with the *Hobbit,* has been adapted into six full-length feature films, two animated films, and a television series.

In addition to these considerations, Tolkien's works contain a great deal of poetry and song, as well as timelines, hand-drawn maps and illustrations, appendices, genealogical trees, grammatical notations, and 'historical' documents of Middle-earth. This fact, together with the fact that they were originally linguistic in origin and considering the grand scale of Tolkien's writings, seems sufficient to consider them (as a whole) as a form of possible *Gesamtkunstwerk.*

This third and final chapter is divided into five sections. The first gives an introduction to the material. The second presents information on Tolkien's life and historical context, as well as a more detailed account of his Middle-earth texts. The third section explores Tolkien's unwitting journey from children's book author to fantasy writer through the lens of his correspondence with his publisher. Here the chapter explores his attempts to publish the *Silmarillion,* and traces his efforts at writing what he thought would be a sequel of similar kind to *The Hobbit.*

The fourth section of this chapter makes the case for viewing Tolkien's works as unique among fantasy writers of his day (or any day, really), both because of their linguistic origins, but also due to the nature of Middle-earth as it was crafted. Superficially, Middle-earth looks like Tolkien's escapist response to the tumult of his socio-political context, but it ultimately becomes a lens through which Tolkien was able view and re-engage with the world outside. Like Wagner and Lang, Tolkien writes with specific goals in mind, and he also must come to terms with his

socio-political context, and the struggles of war and disappointed hopes. The fifth and final section of this chapter includes a conclusion arguing for the viewing of Tolkien's Middle-earth as a *Gesamtkunstwerk,* and brings Tolkien into conversation with Lang and Wagner. This dissertation closes with a brief conclusion considering the *Gesamtkunstwerk* and suggesting that Tolkien's works offer a valuable lens through which Lang and Wagner can be profitably explored.

Chapter One: Something New under the Sun:
The *Gesamtkunstwerk* and Richard Wagner

I. Introduction

Few artists loom as large across history, across artistic disciplines, dividing opinion and interpretations, as does Richard Wagner. The composer and author from Leipzig is doubtless the most strongly connected and most famous name associated with the Nibelungen material. Basing his famous, four-part, sixteen-hour opera cycle on the story of Siegfried, *Der Ring des Nibelung* (also called the *Ring* cycle) is among the most famous of its kind – for good or ill. Soraya Peront gives an appreciation of the musical import of the work: "By continuously reinterpreting similar musical material, Wagner makes the plot more fluid and continuous. He specifically incorporates musical motifs to echo the dramatic events," keeping both the dramatic and musical aspects balanced as part of the overall effect.[7] The opera (or "Music Drama," as Wagner preferred it called) is also famous for its use of leitmotifs:

> Wagner sought to depict a particular overall message through the incorporation of *Leitmotifs* in the *Ring*. . . . It is clear throughout the four operas that there is a constant conflict between authority and man's natural desire for power, as well as his willpower to achieve what he desires. The ring itself symbolizes power, and multiple characters demonstrate what they are truly capable of in order to gain that power. The use of *Leitmotifs* helps to continually emphasize themes like power, curse, and destruction throughout the four operas. With the audience being continually reminded of these themes through the use of the musical motifs, Wagner's prevailing messages are ultimately more evident. (Peront, 18)

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[7] Peront, Soraya A. "Total Artwork: Wagner's Philosophies on Art and Music in the Ring Cycle." *Musical Offerings,* 13, no. 1, 2022, pg. 15. Hereafter cited in the texts with author's name and page number.

But what are these messages? The debate has raged for decades.

Wagner chose to base his operas on the Nibelung material, demonstrating his admiration, or better, fixation on the stories. Though neither these legends nor the opera itself are the focus in this chapter, Richard Wagner's (1813-1883) interest in the Germanic and Norse legends and stories is itself legendary. In the creation of his *Ring* cycle, Wagner drew heavily on the Middle High German *Das Nibelungenlied*, with its medieval courtly style, as well as on other legends, such as the *Prose Edda* and authors. Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué's work, for instance, was highly influential for Wagner. In creating his version of the Nibelung story, Wagner participates in the practice of many storytellers, drawing on the tales that had come before and embellishing and altering to make it his own. Wagner's *Ring* cycle contains, of course, many more elements than that of a story, being musical drama at its most elaborate. In August of 1876 the *Ring* cycle premiered in its entirety,[8] at the newly christened Bayreuther Festspielhaus, a theater Wagner designed with the *Ring* cycle in mind, and built with the help of his patron, King Ludwig II.

In the *Ring*, Wagner avails himself heartily of the general Germanic tale of the Nibelungs (dating from the 5th or 6th century), and more specifically from the medieval manuscripts of the *Nibelungenlied* as we have it from ca. 13th century, which was rediscovered in the 18th century. Unlike many other synthetic and pseudo-myths of the Middle High German period, the *Nibelungenlied* is not in Latin but in German, and does not have any explicit religious texture or Christian metaphor (the cathedral only serves as a backdrop), being rooted in oral tradition and ancient pre-Christian beliefs. This also appealed to Wagner.

In this chapter, however, the focus is not on Wagner the composer, nor on his *Ring* cycle, but rather, on one small aspect of his works: his use of the term *Gesamtkunstwerk* in his four

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[8] Wagner had previously been compelled by Ludwig II to show segments from the first two parts of the Ring Cycle as previews.

pivotal essays from 1849-1851. Like many of his predecessors and contemporaries coming out of the tradition of German Romanticism, Wagner pulled from other bodies of storytelling traditions (not just what might be called 'Germanic legends' broadly speaking), most notably (in the case of the *Ring* cycle) Greek tragedy. Between 1849 and 1851 he wrote four theoretical essays detailing his idealization of Greek tragic drama, his development of ideas for opera and artistic reform, and his plans to create a great artwork which would become the *Ring* cycle. In the longest of these essays, the treatise *Oper und Drama*, he claims that the ideal drama is one combined with myth (as opposed to history) and holds up the Greek tragedy as the template. In combining elements of Greek tragedy[9] with the Nordic/Germanic source material, and his own theory of composition and style, Wagner produces his own form of a *Gesamtkunstwerk,* as shall be shown. In addition to the famous essays, this chapter considers also Wagner's involvement in the 1848 Revolution and the impressions he formed during that time, and some of the goals or political intentions Wagner had for his Ring cycle, for these two elements also shape his notion of the *Gesamtkunstwerk.*

One of the challenges in writing on Wagner (besides his status as an extremely controversial figure) is that he was exceedingly prolific as a writer, both as a writer for publication and as a letter writer. Not only does he develop his ideas, opinions and ideologies at immense length over a 50-year period (during which time his views ranged from anarchistic to conservatively nationalistic), but he also had no scruples against constantly adjusting the truth to suit the situation while casting himself in the best light. Stewart Spencer and Barry Millington, both accomplished Wagner scholars, advise always taking Wagner with a grain of salt:

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[9] This is notable especially in his use of gods as (often flawed) characters with complex personalities and faults, with no real connection to any sort of actual religious observance, as well as his use of the idea of tragic fate – a predictable yet inevitable end fated to be – especially in the cases of Wotan and Brunhild. They (unlike Siegfried) see the big picture and the trend of events but are powerless to stop or change them.

The artist's own testimony is rarely a reliable source of biographical information. In the case of Wagner it is necessary to regard a good deal of it with some skepticism. Scholarly research into the source material relating to his compositions is continuing to contradict the image projected by Wagner himself and enthusiastically promulgated by his followers. His tendency to reconstruct a personal history in accordance with an idealized view of himself provided those intent on posthumous sanctification with precisely the raw material they required; even now, more than a century after his death, the icon is still being dismantled.[10]

This is not necessarily an uncommon problem, as we shall see in the Fritz Lang chapter as well.

Be that as it may, this chapter seeks to navigate the veritable mine field of Wagner scholarship, his own writings, and polemical viewpoints on the man himself to attempt to discover what Wagner originally meant by the term *Gesamtkunstwerk* in order to determine whether Fritz Lang and J.R.R. Tolkien might have more in common than just their source material.

This chapter, like many of Wagner's essays (or Tolkien's trilogy), is broken into three chief sections.

The first section, which is both the briefest and most straightforward, gives an overview of Wagner's early life and involvement with the revolution up until the 1849-51 period when he penned the four essays in question. This section does not attempt to give more than the briefest of dates for the *Ring* cycle, nor is it intended to give any kind of musical background. The inquiry here concerns only his life-events (such as a possible revolutionary agenda) that might play a role in his definition and use of *Gesamtkunstwerk.*

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[10] Spencer, Stewart and Barry Millington, ed. *Selected Letters of Richard Wagner.* Norton, 1988. pg. 3. Hereafter cited as "Letters."

The second section briefly examines the four essays of 1849-1851. The most famous are the first three: *Die Kunst und die Revolution, Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft,* and *Oper und Drama.* Following the work of Hilda Meldrum Brown on *Gesamtkunstwerk*, I include an interesting fourth text from 1851, *Eine Mittheilung an meine Freunde*, as it may be of interest.

The third and final section of this chapter is the longest, and it concerns the *Gesamtkunstwerk.* Any work on this term is necessarily incomplete, in part due to the vast literature on the subject, but more so due to the immensely weighty (and controversial) yet exceedingly diverse definitions with which it has been saddled. In order to make an examination in this brief space, this section restricts itself primarily to Wagner's own use of the term in the essays, and to Theodor Adorno's work on Wagner. Adorno's voice is perhaps the single most influential of all the Wagner critics, and so his ideas are duly considered here. This third section of the chapter is broken into four chief parts. The first gives a general sense of what is meant by *Gesamtkunstwerk,* broadly speaking, in the Wagner reception at large. The second is dedicated to Adorno's work on the term (also pertaining to Wagner). After a brief interlude on Wagner's anti-Semitism, the third part of the third section looks at Wagner's goals in making his purported *Gesamtkunstwerk,* the *Ring* cycle. This section is the least conclusive, simply because determining another human's motivations posthumously is a dubious proposal to begin with, but more so here due to the shifting sands of Wagner's own changing opinions and hopes, and the vast amount of scholarship on his work, well over a century later. Nevertheless, this section does what it can, to make some sense from his essays to determine his perspective on the term *Gesamtkunstwerk.* It should be noted here that this chapter takes as a given that the *Ring* cycle is Wagner's best example of a *Gesamtkunstwerk,* but others have put forward *Lohengrin*, *Parsifal*, and *Tristan und Isolde*, as the case may be. However, as this is not a dissertation on Wagner, this

chapter sticks with the broader consensus that the *Ring* cycle is the most "*gesamtkunstwerklich.*"

The final part of the third section attempts to set forth a working definition, or rather, criteria, for

the term *Gesamtkunstwerk,* which can then be used to aid in the exploration of Lang and

Tolkien's work in the following chapters.

II. Richard Wagner: Life, Context, Revolution

Richard Wagner was born in May of 1813 in the Jewish quarter of Leipzig, Germany. His father,

police actuary Carl Friedrich Wagner, died before Wagner's first birthday, and his mother,

Johanna (Paetz) Wagner, remarried (or perhaps simply co-habited with) an actor, Ludwig Geyer.

Geyer, who (presumably) married Wagner's mother Johanna 9 months after the death of Carl

Friedrich Wagner, was kind to young Richard Wagner (who went by the name of Wilhelm

Richard Geyer at the time), and the two appear to have had a good relationship.

Largely thanks to Geyer, Wagner was raised around theater and musical performances of

various kinds, and took a variety of music lessons. Geyer, however, died in 1821 when Wagner

was about 9 years old. Wagner seems to have suffered from considerable doubts about his own

paternity, and fixated on the question, apparently without ever discovering the truth, though it is

now believed that he was Wagner's son. Richard Wagner himself was haunted by this

uncertainty, and even more by the suspicion that Geyer might have been Jewish (he was not). His

suspicions were, according to Spencer and Millington, exacerbated by his having been born in

the Jewish quarter of Leipzig, and by his own (racist) opinions about Jewish physiognomy and

his own appearance (Letters, 3). However, this uncertainty and suspicion is notable because it

may perhaps illuminate (without excusing) his vehemence against Jews in later life. He was

frequently ill as a child, and took music lessons early, despite his family's lack of enthusiasm for music as a profession.

He fell in love at least twice as a young man, once—surprisingly enough—with the daughter of a Jewish banker, but neither time ended well for him. His first marriage to Christine Wilhelmine "Minna" Planer in November 1836 was a tumultuous one, and the couple moved frequently, living in various places in Germany, as well as in Riga and Paris. In the midst of financial and professional difficulties, Wagner began to take an interest in revolutionary rhetoric.

Spencer and Millington tell us that Wagner "began to turn a sympathetic ear" and that he "was a natural ally of the bourgeois liberals responsible for the uprisings of 1848/9" (Letters, 58). Of the revolutionaries themselves, they were neither "anarchists or national revolutionaries, but, spurred into action by the failure of the autocratic princes to relieve their people's poverty and by the threat to their own social position, these liberals began to press for freedom from feudal oppression and for the basic demands of constitutional and representative government" (Letters, 58). Juliet Koss notes in her book *Modernism after Wagner*, that some scholars have cast doubt on Wagner's political leanings from all sides: "The extent of his commitment to revolutionary events and of his political radicalism more generally in the ensuing years, has long been debated, with the composer himself often appearing to share the political inclinations of his critics and biographers."[11] In looking at his letters and actions from the time, however, it seems clear that Wagner was a revolutionary, committed enough to put his head into the proverbial noose, however much his political views may have shifted in his later years.

As early as 1848, while he was living in the Saxon capital of Dresden, Wagner's letters show a clear awareness of the German political situation and offer (characteristically) strong

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[11] Koss, Juliet. Modernism after Wagner. Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2010. pg. 1-2.

opinions as to what should or could be done in various eventualities. By June 1848 Wagner had "aligned himself conspicuously with the revolutionary republican Vaterlandsverein by delivering an address at one of their public meetings" (Letters, 58). Hilda Meldrum Brown notes that his involvement with the "Revolution of 1848 ('49 in Dresden)" was, for Wagner, a "life-changing experience." [12] Revealingly, it was also in the fall of 1848 that he began his work on the Nibelungen material. Spencer and Millington note:

> *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (WWV 86) began to take shape with a prose résumé entitled
>
> *Der Nibelungen-Mythus*. Als Entwurf zu einem Drama . . . the 1848 manuscript is in fact
>
> headed *Die Nibelungensage (Mythus)*. The same autumn, Wagner made a libretto for that
>
> part of the myth he intended to treat, calling it *Siegfrieds Tod.* (Letters, 59)

The earliest pieces of his ideas were emerging.

Around this time, probably early in 1849, Wagner also contributed anonymously several heated articles to a republican journal, *Volksblätter*, in which he railed against "privilege and inequality" (Letters, 59). Hilda Meldrum Brown notes that this perspective, and these kinds of revolutions were not limited to Wagner or Dresden at the time:

> Revolutionary manifestations were, of course, a pan-European phenomenon in 1848-9
>
> and sprang from a number of social and political causes, in particular the growth of
>
> industrialization … and the influence of a number of philosophers who were addressing
>
> the problems arising from the new capitalism, the autocratic society on which it rested
>
> and the awareness of the human cost and exploitation which it implied. These
>
> 'intellectuals' took it upon themselves to champion and articulate the cause of the victims

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[12] Brown, Hilda Meldrum. "Richard Wagner and the 'Zurich writings' 1849-51: From Revolution to Ring." *The Wagner Journal*, 8, 2, 2014, pg. 30. Hereafter cited as with author's last name and page number.

of such iniquities, the Volk (Wagner uses this term in preference to the highly charted

'proletariat', adopted by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels). (Brown, 30)

Wagner, it seems, was caught up in the revolutionary fervor of the day and by the borderline

anarchistic rhetoric. He was still a relatively young man, as Koss notes: "Wagner was almost

thirty-six when the revolution erupted in Dresden in early May 1849" (Koss, 1-2). But he was

perhaps not as circumspect as he should have been, and did not necessarily take the implications

of his actions as seriously as his friends could have wished. In addition to hosting meetings of

revolutionaries, he actually participated by keeping watch on the battlefield. Brown notes that

"the role Wagner was allocated by the 'revolutionary committee' [was] to monitor army

movements from the highest tower in Dresden, that of the Kreuzkirche" (Brown, 32). This was

not the deed that sealed his fate, however. Rather, it was, as might be expected, rather his pen

that landed him in legal and political trouble. When the editor of *Volksblätter*, August Röckel,

was forced to flee the country in April of 1849, Wagner took over management of the journal. As

Prussia prepared to invade Saxony, Wagner wrote to Röckel to encourage his return to Dresden.

When Röckel was arrested, this letter from Wagner was found on his person; incriminating

evidence against the composer. Spencer and Millington provide further particulars on Wagner's

revolutionary engagement:

> His [Wagner's] part in the uprising had been a reasonably active one. At least two
>
> political gatherings took place in his garden, and the arming of the populace was
>
> discussed. It seems also that Wagner was involved in the giving of instructions for the
>
> manufacture of hand-grenades. He attempted, further, to turn the King's troops away
>
> from the Saxon people and against the invading Prussian army. And he reported on the
>
> movement of soldiers from the vantage-point of the tower of the Kreuzkirche. By 9 May

(only a week after the letter to Röckel) the fighting in Dresden had ceased; the Prussian troops had succeeded in quashing the insurrection. Wagner narrowly escaped arrest, but Röckel was among those who were apprehended; he received a death sentence which was commuted to life imprisonment. . .Wagner naïvely thought at first that he might be able to return to his Court post. His letters. . .immediately after the uprising minimize the extent of his revolutionary involvement. [One of the letters] was intended to facilitate his return to Dresden; he falsely claims to have been no more than a spectator and attempts to justify his sympathy by representing it as merely the expression of dissatisfaction with artistic standards – an interpretation that, for obvious reasons, was to be sustained throughout his exile and in his autobiography, written at the request of his new royal patron, Ludwig II. (Letters, 59-60)

Wagner's letters and their contents were not sufficient, however, to persuade the Dresden police of his innocence, and he fled to Zurich, Switzerland (after a short stay in Paris), remaining in exile for the next 11 years. Brown reports:

On the collapse of the Revolution, and in the face of Prussian military reinforcements being brought in by the government, Wagner's flight was a matter of dire necessity; within days, after a house-to-house search, a warrant for his arrest had been issued, and several of his friends had been rounded up and imprisoned. Having arrived – after various meanderings on a false passport – in Zurich in July 1849, Wagner would remain in Switzerland until 1860, when he was granted an amnesty to travel once more to all parts of Germany with the exception of his native Saxony, which would relent only in 1862. (Brown, 32)

Towards the end of May 1849 Wagner wrote: "in my own country I had, without quite realizing it, come to be considered a criminal owing to the peculiar connection between my disgust at the public attitude towards art and the general political disturbances." (Koss, 9n32). However hot his revolutionary fervor may have initially burned, Wagner spent the rest of his life recasting his involvement to make it appear in what he considered the best political (and artistic) light. He seems to have taken almost a pleasure in making it look like an accident that he was considered an outlaw, and in emphasizing that whatever he did, it was all for the sake of art. His self-perceptions and self-projections were nothing if not flexible. However that may be, it was during this time that he penned his three most famous essays, *Die Kunst und die Revolution* (July 1849), *Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft* (November 1849), and *Oper und Drama* (January 1851), as well as a less prominent but no less interesting fourth, *A Communication to my Friends* (1851), and began work on his most famous work of all, *Der Ring des Nibelungen*.

The approximately 25-year period in which Wagner wrote and composed the *Ring* cycle was a tumultuous one for him personally. In the early stages, he frequently wrote to his friend, the composer Franz Liszt, of his grandiose plans, his giddy high moments, and his depressive low ones. Of the project itself, he admonishes Liszt in his 11 February 1853 letter to "Mark well my new poem – it contains the world's beginning and its end!" (Letters, 281). By November of the same year he wrote again to Liszt saying:

> My friend! I am in a state of wonderment! A new world stands revealed before me. The great scene in the Rhinegold is finished: I see before me riches such as I never dared suspect. I now consider my powers to be immeasurable: everything seethes within me and makes music. It is – oh, I am *in love*! – and so divine a faith inspires me that I have no need any longer – even of *hope*! (Letters, 295, emphasis original).

But by January of 1854, he seems much less sanguine about his project, describing to Liszt his disillusionment:

> Well, the Rhinegold is finished – more finished than I thought. With what faith, with what joy did I set to work on the music! But I was in a real rage of despair that I continued the work and finally completed it: I, too, alas, learned what distress is caused by gold! Believe me, no work has ever been composed like this before: I imagine my music must be terrible; it is a morass of horrors and sublimities! (Letters, 299)

Such excerpts give a sense of Wagner's mental state as he wrote, and of his hopes and fears for the project overall. Hilda Meldrum Brown describes Wagner's writing of the *Ring*, and its connection with his new ideals of Music Drama and *Gesamtkunstwerk* as laid out in his four essays of 1849-51:

> Not only was Wagner's celebrated method of moving from sketch to pose and from prose to verse already in force, but even as the essays were being written there was still much uncertainty in his mind about his plans for the Siegfried material, which, while, in a sense, basically 'complete', was still focused on a single work, Siegfrieds Tod, covering much of the ground of what would become Götterdämmerung. Since Wagner's decision to extend the material backwards – partly to unload some of the enormous amount of back-narrative which it demanded – was put into effect virtually as soon as the ink was dry on 'Opera and Drama', it is tempting to consider the possibility of connections between the ongoing plans for the *Ring* and the essays; the latter could possibly be regarded as attempts on Wagner's part to clarify and experiment with an operatic project which was still very much in its infant state. (Brown, 29)

The *Ring* project, and later the building of the Bayreuth Festspielhaus, dominated the second half of Wagner's life. His later life moreover was supported by the patronage of King Ludwig II of Bavaria, and characterized by various torrid love affairs. In 1870, following his split from Minna in the early 1860s, Wagner married Cosima von Bülow, the illegitimate daughter of Franz Liszt. who had still been married to the conductor Hans von Bülow when she gave birth to the first of her three children with Wagner. Bayreuth opened, after much delay and expense, in 1876, but failed to be a tremendous financial success. With advancing age, Wagner's writings became (if possible) even more anti-Semitic, reactionary, and Christian-nationalistic than before. He died while on vacation in Venice, Italy, in 1883, at the age of 69.

This is the Richard Wagner who wrote the *Ring* cycle. Vehement anti-Semite and racist, anarchistic revolutionary and a nationalist, who made a tremendous impact on opera as we know it, and whose terms Music Drama and *Gesamtkunstwerk* we will examine in the next section. Soraya Peront summarizes the difficulties in examining such a polarizing and problematic figure as Richard Wagner:

> Throughout music history, few composers have attracted as much controversy as Richard Wagner. From his outright rejection of Jewish composers due to their beliefs to his scandalous love affairs throughout his marriage, scholars have raised concerns about his works and whether they deserve a place in music education. However wayward Wagner's moral convictions may have been, his music is also acclaimed for its progressive nature and its unprecedented philosophical foundation. Wagner's pioneering ideas about art and music led to the composition of many operas that secured a place in the permanent repertoire. *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, or the *Ring* cycle, is the pinnacle of Wagner's compositional career. (Peront, 9)

Others have been less complimentary. But however controversial the man, that he made a lasting impact in the realm of music and opera cannot be contested.

III. Wagner's Essays: Revolution, Art and the *Gesamtkunstwerk*

The two years between his failed revolutionary attempts and the beginning of his serious work on the Nibelung material were pivotal ones for Wagner. He wrote three very famous essays during this time, two in 1849 alone: *Die Kunst und die Revolution* (July 1849), and *Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft* (November 1849). The third, *Oper und Drama*, was published in January 1851, and is by far the longest. A fourth essay arguably belongs in this group, *A Communication to my Friends* (1851), which originally appeared as a sort of prolog to the *Textbücher* (a.k.a. libretti; Wagner preferred the former term) (Brown 28). These four essays together total over 1,000 pages, which is somewhat surprising, since Wagner reportedly did not enjoy academic (essay) writing (Brown 29). However, they represent a time of pivotal intellectual development for Wagner and are essential for any discussion of the *Ring* cycle, and, more importantly for this dissertation, the term *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

<p style="text-align:center">Wagner's Essays: Die Kunst und die Revolution</p>

Having fled Dresden, first for Paris and the Zurich, in late May 1949, Wagner's pen was busy writing *Die Kunst und die Revolution*, which he finished in July 1949. Like much of his philosophical writings, this essay has what Brown calls "tripartite form," being laid out in three parts. Brown notes that there is an

> 'historical' section, looking back to the 'Golden Age' of Greek tragic drama . . . a section
> on the decline of art and culture since that pinnacle . . . finally a utopian vision of a new
> era when society will once more accord the significance to art which is its due – not by

imitating or replicating the Greeks, but by building on their outstanding features. (Brown, 33)

Wagner plays rather fast and loose with historical fact, however. In all four essays he continually holds up the ancient Greeks as the pinnacle of the arts, and as a model in particular for drama to which he and all writer-artists should aspire—not an uncommon view among classically educated Europeans of his day. The central point of the essay is that Wagner sees the negative decline of art (since the Greeks) as resulting from fragmentation—what Brown describes as "a falling away from the Greek idea of integration of music, poetry, and dance." It was the integration of these separate arts that Wagner sees in Greek art and which he holds up as the ideal, "an integrated total work of art, in which the Volk participated, and which Wagner here terms Gesamtkunstwerk" (Brown, 34).

In addition to illuminating Wagner's preoccupation with the integration of arts and the Greek tradition, *Art and Revolution* also displays a marked concern with the connection between art and profit. In this line of thinking, Wagner is arguing for "revolution" in the art world—freeing art from reliance on profit. Dan Venning notes:

In "Art and Revolution" (1849), an essay that is simultaneously leftist and elitist, Wagner explains that modern, mid-19th-century "art," whether theatre, literature, or music, is debased and not really art at all because it is tied to the commercial viability of the work through ticket sales and must thus cater to the unrefined tastes of the general public.[13]

Wagner wants to create art for art's sake and calls for art's economic freedom. Venning wryly suggests that Wagner may not have felt so strongly on this point had it not been for the relatively

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[13] Venning, Dan. "Game of Thrones as Gesamtkunstwerk: Adapting Shakespeare and Wagner." *Vying for the Iron Throne: Essays on Power, Gender, Death and Performance in HBO's* Game of Thrones. Edited by Lindsey Mantoan and Sara Brady, McFarland & Co, 2018, pg. 150.

poor early receptions of his *The Flying Dutchman* (1843) and *Tannhäuser* (1845). But Wagner makes his point by arguing that it is precisely this reliance on profit that tethers art to conventional attitudes and keeps it from reaching its full, integrated, potential, as exemplified by the Greeks. Venning notes that this is the crucial point for Wagner's aims: "In 'Art and Revolution,' Wagner argues that by separating art from business, whether through patronage or state subsidy, a more authentic art; along the lines of that experience by the ancient Greeks, could be achieved" (Venning, 150-1).

It is clear that Wagner's experience with an actual revolution two months prior informed his thinking at this stage, although he now positions himself as arguing for artistic rather than political revolution. All the same, he argues at some length for the emancipation of humanity that would result from freeing art from the confines of concern with financial gain. Spencer and Millington emphasize that, in Wagner's view, it is humanity that will benefit from this new artistic freedom. In *Die Kunst und die Revolution* Wagner

> addressed himself to the fundamental questions of the social role of art, which most composers, whether successful or unsuccessful with their publics, had been content to ignore. *Art and Revolution* was outspoken and polemical, advocating an "art-work of the future" in which emancipated humanity would express itself through artistic structures that had at last been divorced from capitalist speculation and profit-making. (Letters 157)

Koss notes that this essay, as well as his next, *The Art-Work of the Future*, show aspects of his disappointment following the political failure of the revolution and the political and social hopes he held for its promise (14n50).

Wagner's Essays: *Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft*

This failure of Wagner's early revolutionary hopes seems to have precipitated a surge of energy by which Wagner directed his fervor towards the art-world rather than the social or political spheres. Despite this, he still seemed at this point to hope for social change through art. Brown notes this second essay, *Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft* (1849), together with *Die Kunst und die Revolution*, still holds a large measure of his revolution-minded political and social hopes:

> In both these earlier essays, written barely a month or two after Wagner's own involvement at the barricades, the 'utopian' part of the triadic progression is still clearly linked to a call for a general Revolution, with overtones of political and social liberation at its heart. As a prelude to the re-creation of the Gesamtkunstwerk, a kind of moral rearmament is suggested. (Brown, 34)

Brown also notes that this essay specifically connects the strictures put on art through the necessity of financial gain with capitalism and that Wagner calls for reform in the form of art – collective art:

> 'The Artwork of the Future' attacks with zest capitalist greed and love of luxury, and points to the remedy once more in terms of the production of an artwork along the lines of the Greek model: this time it is termed 'the communal artwork of the future' ('das gemeinsame Kunstwerk der Zukunft') in which, as a collective enterprise, the Volk are once more to be involved as key players. (Brown, 34)

By connecting his art ideals with something that will benefit humanity (or at least further his revolutionary ideals), Wagner hoped to bring about social change through art.

This is the context in which Wagner famously coins the word *Gesamtkunstwerk*[14] as shall be discussed in the next section. The word appears in both these essays. Dan Venning describes Wagner's hopes in "The Art-Work of the Future" as follows:

> Wagner . . . sees art as an "immediate vital act" that provides spiritual fulfillment to both individuals and a populace as a whole, though poetry, which inspires love, tone, which connects to a natural wellspring of spiritual energy, and dance and acting, which make these abstract elements corporeal. He describes the orchestral music that accompanied his operas as providing a "loam of endless, universal Feeling". Wagner spent his career working towards creating such a work with his *Ring* cycle. (Venning, 150)

The *Ring* cycle is, of course, his attempt at a *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Overall, as Juliet Koss notes, these two 1849 Wagner essays, *Art and Revolution* and *The Art-Work of the Future*, depict his disappointment following the political failure of the revolution and the failure of his political and social hopes. His hopes for art eventually turn him to the conservative side, while also paradoxically possessing a somewhat utopian revolutionary nature, though not so utopian as the ideals of Christianity, notes Wagner (Koss, 14n50). The utopian-revolutionary nature of Wagner's proposed artwork is, moreover, decidedly intended as a collective or communal experience, which also plays a role in the nature of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

<div align="center">Wagner's Essays: Oper und Drama</div>

The third of Wagner's four core theoretical essays is also the longest: *Oper und Drama*. This is perhaps his most famous philosophical-theoretical text, although, interestingly, he makes no mention of the term *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Dan Venning notes that "In *Oper und Drama* (1851) [Wagner] builds on 'The Art-Work of the Future,' articulating how music and verse can

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[14] Let any future aspiring scholars learn from my woes and note that, for the purposes of searching an electronic copy of his writings, Wagner spells this word here and elsewhere: *Gesammtkunstwerk*.

organically intertwine and support one another. He describes these as "melodic moments" that could recur and highlight various elements" (151). Much of the essay (or, rather, book) is dedicated to such musical theoretical explanations.

William Ashton Ellis, the English translator of Wagner's *Gesammelte Schriften* in the 1890s and 1900s, clarifies in the preface to his own translation the structure of Wagner's text. According to Ellis, in Part I of *Oper und Drama* Wagner is concerned with the essence of opera, which he considers the female parent to the true poetic aim, that is tone-speech, clarified in Part III. The male parent is drama, which is the subject of Part II.[15] Wagner clearly intended Part I to be a criticism of opera as an art genre, while Part II deals with theater, and Part III lays out his own ideas (OD, 3). Ellis also notes that Wagner did not proofread or refine Part III very closely due to timing and various pressures in the publishing process, as well as health concerns, and it is true that the third part does contain the occasional difficult passage where clumsy wording somewhat obscures the meaning (OD, viii). However, according to Wagner's own introduction, Parts I and III were originally most popular, but later Part II was more widely read and discussed, which led to the release of a second edition (OD, 4).

The revolutionary undertones noted in the first two essays are still present in certain elements of *Oper und Drama*, but the style has become more measured and less polemical. Ellis does however note in his preface that in researching the history of the manuscript, he uncovered a private dedication to Theodor Uhlig (who corresponded with and supported Wagner in his writing) in which Wagner hints at the revolutionary undertones in his ideas about art expounded in the text (OD, xi).

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[15] Wagner, Richard. *Opera and Drama*. Trans. W. Ashton Ellis. Lincoln and London: U of Nebraska Press, 1995. pg. vii. Further references to are marked in the text with OD and page number.

In the text itself, Wagner takes great pains in endeavoring to elevate the art of poetry to the same level of significance as that he attributes to music. Even in his own introduction to *Oper und Drama*, Wagner begins with a discussion of art critics, specifically critics of operas. He first points out, reasonably enough, that art (in this case, opera) is charged with producing something, whereas critics merely make criticisms in reaction to art, and can therefore not exist without art. Art is necessary to the existence of art criticism; but the opposite is not true. He continues to disparage critiques of opera calling for better drama (his definition of which is somewhat unclear; he seems to mean both storylines/plot, and acting) in opera by pointing out that such critiques are aimed at musicians, who produce music, not drama. Opera critics believe that the better opera would result simply by adding in more drama. But this, Wagner says, is an error, an error which moreover offers no practical improvement for opera.

Their error, is, however, more fundamental than it seems. Prevalent throughout the conception, creation, production, performance, and critiquing of opera, the fundamental misconception is "that a means of expression (music) has been made the end [of opera], while the end of expression (the drama) has been made the means" (OD, 17). This readily understandable error is evident everywhere, but must in fact be expressed in so many words in order to effect change in opera. By way of supporting this claim, Wagner points (rather inexactly) to the history of opera, to show that poetry (encompassing drama, libretto, and librettist) has long been subservient to music. The drama is merely a scaffold to support and provide occasion and context for musical feats. This is what Wagner wishes his readers first to recognize, and eventually to change. In this way he introduces the first part of *Opera and Drama*: "Opera and the Nature of Music," in which he proposes to explore opera thoroughly in order that we may see the depth of this error (prioritizing music so far above drama in the opera).

His ultimate goal for the book is to lift poetry (drama) to equal footing and significance vis a vis music within opera, and thereby to imagine an opera which is the result of a precise and perfect collaboration between music and poetry (OD, 12-20).

This perfect collaboration between music and poetry, is, of course, what Wagner himself attempts in composing the *Ring* cycle, having first written his own libretti – a practice unheard of at the time, and hardly more common even today. Early in the text, Wagner expounds his ideas of opera, both modern (from Wagner's perspective) and historical. The main focus here is the great error of those creating opera: that music is prioritized far above drama. Wagner desires that poetry (drama) should be on equal footing with music in opera.

In prioritizing music, Wagner feels that opera composers are simply using music for profit, or else using music to convey much more that music ought to convey, that is, inserting music in the place of words. Moreover, he sees that makers of opera are trying to merge multiple art forms (music, drama, and dance; represented by aria, recitative, and dance tunes) together, but while making all other forms subordinate to music. Wagner then reviews the operas of Christoph Gluck, and later those of Gaspare Spontini, which he praises saying that they help to elevate the composer over the singer, but criticizes that they do not go far enough in also elevating the poet. His discussion continues with analyses of French and Italian opera, and of Mozart, whom he praises (though Mozart did not elevate the poet either, because the right poet was not at hand), and of Gioachino Rossini (OD, 38). He then covers the history of opera as he sees it, with many opinions but few facts. He likes the nationalistic tendency he sees in Carl Maria von Weber, and mocks the French attempts at national opera, explaining why, in his opinion that they fail. The next section considers the relationship of the masses (distinct from the Volk) and of religion to opera. The next considers Ludwig van Beethoven and Hector Berlioz,

indicating that he finds a song without poetry pointless (OD, 70). The next considers what, for Wagner, were modern characteristics in opera, looking at Gluck, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, and Giacomo Meyerbeer.[16] He notes that "we have seen [that] the frivolous Opera-melody—i.e. that robbed of any real connexion with the poem's text—grow big with taking up the tune of National-song, and seen it swell into the pretence of Historic Characteristique [sic]" (OD, 91).

Hilda Brown clarifies Wagner's overall goals in writing *Oper und Drama,* finding that it still contains "pet themes such as the exemplary quality of Greek tragedy," but is otherwise made up of primarily new material (Brown, 36). She also notes that is also by far the longest of the four essays. Parts I and II look at the histories of opera and drama, respectively. Wagner reviews German drama from the 1700s onward, but for him stage plays (what he calls word-drama) are a crucial part of his vision. Brown explains: "word-drama is a key building block in his own plans for reform, and his review of what he sees as a major crisis in this genre in his own time and his own country serves as justification for his plans for a complete restructuring of the opera" (Brown, 36-7). Wagner's goal, is, of course, to combine the arts of music/opera and drama to make a new and better art-form. Brown clarifies:

> According to the imagery used here by Wagner, the process of unification of these two
> expressive modes of communication, or 'languages' – words and music – resembles that
> of a force of nature: 'Wortsprache', as it were, pouring forth in a. torrent ('Erguß') to
> merge with 'Musik'- or 'Ton-sprache.' (Brown, 37)

The third section of the text, in keeping with Wagner's three-part structure in each of these essays, is the climax of the text. Here, he explains his ideal goal to combine music and drama, though notably without actually using the term *Gesamtkunstwerk* at any point. Brown shows "the

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[16] It is in this section that Wagner differentiates between *Effekt* (something without a cause) and a *Wirkung* (which has a cause). (See pg. 95.)

progression he had been following through in Part II from myth and music ('Tonsprache') and thence to 'vollendetes Drama (i.e. Gesamtkunstwerk, and 'Worttonsprache')" (Brown, 37). Part III, says Brown, "concerns the technical means whereby the new, completely restructured form of opera is to be achieved in musico-dramatic terms. The multifaceted analysis in this crucial section is both challenging and technically exhaustive" (Brown, 38). Brown continues by explaining Wagner's goals in writing *Opera and Drama*: "First and foremost is Wagner's original, proposed solution to the task of creating fusion and binding together musical, verbal and dramatic ideas and themes: the development of the motivic web, a device which in his hands achieves a level of complexity unparalleled in the history of opera" (Brown, 39). Stewart Spencer and Barry Millington also note "It is the third and final part of this vast essay . . . that is of most interest, for Wagner develops there the principles underlying his concept of the music drama. Essentially the argument centers on the relationship of poetry to music" (Letters, 158).

Ultimately, *Oper und Drama* lays out Wagner's plan for a the integration of music, drama, and other art forms into one great art form, which would be both unified and unifying – a quasi-religious experience for the spectator – uniting Wagner's own twin roles as both poet and composer.

<div align="center">Wagner's Essays: Eine Mittheilung an meine Freunde</div>

The fourth essay in this series, *Eine Mittheilung an meine Freunde* (generally rendered in English as "A Communication to my Friends"), deserves some slight explanation here as well, being rather less widely known and read than the others. Completed in 1851, the same year as *Oper und Drama*, the *Mittheilung* in many ways serves as a summary and as a reflection on the former three, and for this reason, deserves a mention with the rest.

The argument for the inclusion of this essay as Wagner's fourth, often overlooked, theoretical essay is made very ably by Brown, as well as others such as Venning. Brown, while acknowledging that the first three essays have customarily been described as a trilogy, argues for all four to be seen as a tetralogy, making a case for the inclusion of "A Communication to my Friends":

> the first two (both written in 1849), reflected something of the rhetorical flavour of Wagner's pamphleteering style, a style suitable on the barricades. . . . 'Opera and Drama' presents a more analytical approach and a clearer, though complex, thesis, as well as a great deal of insight into the nuts and bolts of Wagner's fast-developing grand plans for the regeneration of the opera. When the more firmly focused tone and constructive self-analysis of 'A Communication' is added to the trio, we have a tetralogy of essays which usefully chronicles and configures the evolution of Wagner's thinking at this crucial turning-point in his career. (Brown, 32-3)

Thus it is included here as well.

Mittheilung was originally meant as a sort of preface to the *Textbücher* (*libretti*) of his (at the time) three most recent operas: *Der fliegende Holländer, Tannhäuser,* and *Lohengrin*. It represents an attempt to synthesize some of his own perspectives from the earlier essays, as well as to defend himself and explain the discrepancy between his grand artistic vision of an integrated multi-media artwork in *Oper und Drama*, and the somewhat "lesser" reality of his actual operas thus far. Like the former essays, it is written in three parts, the first, a critique of opera and its conventions (similar to that in *Oper* and the earlier essays), the second, a detailed account of his own artistic development, and third, his detailed plans for the future, including a

three part opera with a prelude based on a myth (which he earlier indicates would be based on the Siegfried material). Wagner elaborates:

> Ich beabsichtige meinen Mythos in drei vollständigen Dramen* vorzuführen, denen ein großes Vorspiel vorausgesehen hat. Mit diesem Dramen, obgleich jedes von ihnen allerdings ein in sich abgeschlossenes Ganzes bilden soll, habe ich dennoch seine „Repertoirstücke" nach den modernen Theaterbegriffen im Sinne, sondern für ihre Darstellung halte ich folgenden Plan fest: — An einem eigens dazu bestimmten Feste gedenke ich dereinst im Laufe dreier Tage mit einem Vorabende jene drei Dramen nebst dem Vorspiele aufzuführen: den Zweck dieser Ausführung erachte ich für vollkommen erreicht, wenn es mir und meinen künstlerischen Genossen, den wirklichen Darstellern, gelang, an diesen vier Abenden den Zuschauern, die um meine Absicht kennen zu lernen, sich versammelten, diese Absicht zu wirklichem Gefühls- (nicht kritischem) Verständnisse künstlerisch mitzutheilen.[17]

Wagner footnotes the word Dramen, clarifying his preferences and choice of term: "Ich schreibe keine Opern mehr: da ich keinen willkürlichen Namen für meine Arbeiten erfinden will, so nenne ich sie Dramen, weil hiermit wenigstens am deutlichsten der Standpunkt bezeichnet wird, von dem aus Das, was ich biete, empfangen werden muß" (WGS, IV 417).

Wagner is here declaring his intentions to write the *Ring* cycle, as well as clearly using the term Drama instead of Opera to describe his work. Brown surmises: "The topics of the essays, with their missionary message and demands for a musical revolution, must surely have triggered thoughts about the future planning of the Siegfried material" (30). Indeed, Wagner apparently had already begun writing *Siegfried* immediately after finishing *Opera and Drama* in

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[17] Wagner, Richard. *Gesammelte Schriften und Dichtungen*. Leipzig: E. W. Fritzsch Verlag, 1872, IV, 417. Cited hereafter as WGS with volume and page number.

January of 1851 (Brown, 29). Wagner then published the full texts (*libretti*) in 1853 for all four, and then set to work on the musical scores. He finished these in 1854 (*Das Rheingold*), 1856 (*Die Walküre*), and the first half of *Siegfried* 1857, but it took him until 1874 to finish *Siegfried* and then *Götterdämmerung* (Brown, 41). Thus, it is clear that Venning is correct in his assertion that "Finally, in his 1851 essay 'A Communication to My Friends,' Wagner describes his intention to produce his own Gesamtkunstwerk: a prelude and trilogy of mythological works" (Venning, 151). Likewise, this text supports Brown's position that *Mittheilung* "serves as a recapitulatory, part-biographical gathering-up of the threads in order to advance the project for change, and in the process sheds further light on the material presented in its three essay predecessors" (Brown, 32). Wagner's "firmly focused tone and constructive self-analysis" in this essay make it a fitting piece of his mid-century theoretical works that set up his *Ring* cycle (Brown, 33). As Brown indicates, the turning point in his work are these four essays.

Wagner's Essays: Final Notes

In closing this brief appreciation of Wagner's theoretical essays, there are a few things that should be noted. First, there has been a great deal of research dedicated to parsing out exactly which philosophical and theoretical thinkers influenced Wagner in writing these essays. The reality is complex. He certainly developed utopian ideals at some point, likely, as Juliet Koss notes, based on his readings of Bakunin, Feuerbach, and Proudhon, among others. Much has been said on Schopenhauer as well. Clearly, Wagner himself did have strong feelings about the arts, and connected art strongly to politics. Koss also notes the influence of various German thinkers on Wagner (especially those German thinkers interested in the integration of the arts) such as: "Franz Brentano, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Friedrich Hölderlin, Novalis, Friedrich Schiller, Friedrich von Schlegel, and Ludwig Tieck and Wilhelm Heinrich

Wackenroder," and Koss and others also cite E. T. A. Hoffmann (Koss 10). Several thinkers, including Koss, have noted the possible influence of Hegel's writings, especially considering Hegel's and Wagner's esteem for Greek tragic drama. Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling prefigures the idea of *Gesamtkunstwerk* in certain ways (Koss, 11). There have also been many notable composers cited as influences, particularly Weber and Beethoven. Weber in particular found ordinary operas were not German enough and felt that Germans needed something deeper than other nations, something more reflective and philosophically stimulating (Koss 12). Be that as it may, tracing all of these sorts of influences on Wagner's perspective lies outside the scope of this dissertation, yet it is worth remembering that Wagner was not writing in a void, but was actively reading and responding to other thinkers of his day, some with the same prejudices and Eurocentric beliefs as himself.

Second, it is worth noting that Wagner was very concerned, as mentioned above, with the unification of various art forms. As a corollary to this, in all four essays he finds that the separation of arts or art-forms is an aesthetic evil in and of itself. Brown clarifies: "The separation of art-forms, which [Wagner] believes to be at the root of all present-day cultural malaises, is presented here, … as a kind of aesthetic selfishness on the part of these recalcitrant genres" (Brown, 35). Wagner's vehemence against this may be worth keeping in mind through the next section of this chapter.

Third and finally, although music theory also lies outside the scope of this dissertation, it should still be noted that the term "leitmotif" has long been associated with Wagner. This term, however, was not coined or used by Wagner in any of these essays, and it is believed that the term was invented after the fact to describe a particular (and very marked) element in Wagner's music. Venning notes:

In his 1876 work *Thematic Guide through the Music to Richard Wagner's Festival Drama The Ring of the Nibelung*, the critic and composer Hans von Wolzogen coined the term Leitmotiv to describe such repeated melodic moments. The anglicized term "leitmotif" has of course become a central term in musicology, but is often especially associated with Wagner. (Venning, 151)

IV. *Das Gesamtkunstwerk*

The term *Gesamtkunstwerk* has long been considered central to both Wagner's own understanding of his vision, and to understanding Wagner's works. However, few terms have been so widely discussed with so much vehemence, yet so little consensus or literary basis. This section first seeks to provide a general appreciation of the meaning of the term and the controversy surrounding it, second, to show specifically how Theodor Adorno (perhaps the most influential critic of the term) understood its meaning, third to show how Wagner himself used the term.

Gesamtkunstwerk Part 1: Legacy

The interpretations of the term *Gesamtkunstwerk* are nearly as varied as the scholars who have written about it. Nor is there any single accepted English translation of the term. *Gesamtkunstwerk* has variously been translated as "combined art work," "comprehensive art form," "complete artwork," and most famously, as "total art-work." It has also been called "universal," "ideal," "unified," and "synthesizing." The word is often left untranslated in modern academic texts, joining various German loanwords which have found a home in English, such as *Zeitgeist*, *Weltanschauung*, *Schadenfreude*, and *Doppelgänger*. The one central idea of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* is that it consists of a combination of either art-forms or media (depending on one's perspective) to form a new, encompassing work of art.

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Juliet Koss, in her book *Modernism after Wagner*, gives us, as a starting point, a casual definition of *Gesamtkunstwerk* as it is often thought of in the mid 20th century: "a seamless melding of a variety of art forms that overwhelms spectators' emotions, impedes the possibility of critical thought, and molds a group of individuals into a powerless mass" (Koss, xi). This idea has become so much a part of the Wagner-aura and perceptions of the *Ring* cycle that it is difficult to conceive of either Wagner or his *Ring* without some element of overwhelming, forceful display of sights and sounds. Perhaps even more dire, Wagner and his term *Gesamtkunstwerk* have become indelibly mixed up with National Socialism. The term is often pitted against or used as a contrast with the Avant Garde and internationalism. But this is, as Koss demonstrates in her book, a false dichotomy. She notes that others have defined the *Gesamtkunstwerk* in relation to the work's effect on its audience: "'Gesamtkunstwerk' often stands for an artistic environment or performance in which spectators are expertly maneuvered into dumbfounded passivity by a sinister and powerful creative force" (Koss, xii). This "intoxicating" quality of a *Gesamtkunstwerk* is often seen as its most sinister aspect; the idea that an artwork that can somehow actively manipulate an unsuspecting and passive audience helps support the link between *Gesamtkunstwerk* and some form of fascism. Another common criticism of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* is, as Koss notes, that it "would simultaneously sustain and destroy the autonomy of the individual arts" (Koss, xii-xiii).

However, other scholars have chosen to focus less on the sinister elements of control or dark political views that have been associated with the term *Gesamtkunstwerk* and focused instead on the combination of art works or media inherent in the idea of a "combined" artwork. Noting Wagner's interest in the idea of art forms combining, Soraya Peront explains: "The idea of combined art forms led to Wagner's fascination with Gesamtkunstwerk, or 'total artwork,'

where drama and music could work harmoniously; in this relationship, each provides the other with expressive abilities that they do not possess individually." Peront holds moreover that "Wagner created Gesamtkunstwerk not only for his own satisfaction, but he believed that collective art satisfied the intrinsic desires of his audience" (Peront, 11).

There is perhaps some link between the unification of art forms and the unification of an audience into a collective body. Many, like Peront, connect this aspect of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* to Wagner's political hopes and revolutionary experiences: "His music was also a call for political revolution. In incorporating music with drama, he initiated a radical change in the musical sphere that simultaneously expressed his desire for change in the social order" (Peront, 11). Peront goes on to detail some of Wagner's chief aims and requirements for his *Gesamtkunstwerk*:

> it is clear that [Wagner] also sought to create a new type of music that had not yet been explored. He believed "an artwork is a great artwork only if it 'works,' only if it has a powerful effect, only if it is received and digested by an attentive audience….Wagner believed that in order for an opera to be a complete work, the lyrics and music had to be intimately fused from the beginning; they must each be written with the other in mind, and they must be written simultaneously….Wagner referred to his operatic works as "music-dramas," attempting to make a clear distinction between his works and those from the classical operatic tradition….Wagner did not separate his musical material into categories of recitative, aria, or arioso; instead, the melody continued throughout the work, not promoting virtuosic opportunities but focusing on storytelling. Compared to other operas, this was a radical approach. Language, music, and drama had not been

previously fused so intimately; this allowed for emotional depth and artistic continuity

that flawlessly formed to the dramatic demands of the production. (Peront, 12-13)

These various voices help to give some sense of what is generally meant by *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

Following Koss, Peront, and others, it is clear that the use of the term *Gesamtkunstwerk* implies

that a work is a combination art work, utilizing a variety of forms or media that have been fused

or joined in such a way as to become a part of each other, and not merely co-existing.

However, many authors use the term to mean or imply a great deal more than that. Many

have used the term to indicate that a work possesses some (though by no means all) of the

following attributes: it may be overwhelming or intoxicating in some way, it may provide

satisfaction for either the artist or audience, it may point towards a revolution of arts or politics,

it may herald the advent of film and other multimedia forms, it may anticipate National

Socialism, totalitarianism or fascism, it may provide a collective experience for its spectators or

participants, it may create a new art work or art form that did not exist before, and, last but not

least, it may recall Wagner or his general style.

All of these aspects, attributes and definitions are to be found throughout the secondary

literature on Wagner, and some writers hold very strongly to their own definitions of the

Gesamtkunstwerk. Wolf-Daniel Hartwich, for instance, stresses the quasi-religious elements

connected with the term: "Obgleich Wagner den Begriff ‚Gesamtkunstwerk' eher selten

verwendet, wurde er doch zur Parole für sein ästhetisches Projekt, das nicht nur die Kunstformen

vereinen, sondern auch die Menschheit sozial reformieren und ethisch regenerieren wollte."[18]

This quasi-religious aspect of the term comes up in a good portion of the modern discussion.

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[18] Hartwich, Wolf-Daniel. "Religion als Oper: Richard Wagner und Lew Tolstoi über das 'Gesamtkunstwerk.'" *Ästhetische und religiöse Erfahrungen der Jahrhundertwenden Band II: Um 1900*. Edited by Wolfgang Braungart, Gotthard Fuchs, and Manfred Koch, Schöningh, 1998, pg. 93.

Hartwich's article indeed posits Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk* as standing in direct competition with cultural Christianity, especially taking into account Wagner's enthusiastic (in the negative sense) philosophical writings. Hartwich, following Walter Benjamin, writes:

> Dabei wird die Religion entweder als Funktion des Ästhetischen oder des Politischen gesehen. Auf der einen Seite läßt sich die Gesamtkunstwerksidee Wagners in den Kontext der romantischen Kunstreligion stellen, die auf die Kritik der kirchlichen Glaubensformen antwortete und den Künstler zum Priester erhob. (94)

Hartwich goes on to show that the *Ring* could be considered as religious work, or more exactly, that experiencing it is like having a religious experience. This, too, could form a part of a potential definition of a *Gesamtkunstwerk*. The kind of intensity and fervor, the very fact that the idea of a religious experience rivaling a world religion is being discussed in conjunction with an artwork, gives a sense of the debate around the term and the composer himself.

Erik Vogt, in his article "Music Drama and Politics: Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Alain Badiou on Richard Wagner's Idea of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*" acknowledges that there is a great deal of controversy surrounding the notion of a *Gesamtkunstwerk*. While the idea is certainly controversial itself, there is, as has been shown, astonishingly little consensus about the meaning or nature of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Vogt notes that Wagner's practice, both as an author and composer of what Wagner termed music dramas, differs somewhat from his long-winded ideals in discussing the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Vogt explains one solution:

> The nature of the relationship between Richard Wagner's conception (and praxis) of music drama and his idea of the Gesamtkunstwerk has remained a controversial issue in the literature on Wagner. Referring to the fact that Wagner's writings employ the idea of the Gesamtkunstwerk rather sparingly, several commentators have argued that a strict

conceptual distinction between music drama and Gesamtkunstwerk has to be maintained.[19]

Vogt summarizes these commentators arguing for a distinction between *Gesamtkunstwerk* and Wagner's music dramas, holding that a music drama, in Wagner's eyes "defines and enacts innovative relations between language, music, and theatre" while they find that the *Gesamtkunstwerk* "ultimately signifies a cultural vision, a visionary ideal" (63). Vogt notes here that these commentators see the *Gesamtkunstwerk* as having a public dimension in the form of a festival/Bayreuth that is not inherent to music dramas. However, Vogt mentions that other commentators do not see a separation between music drama and *Gesamtkunstwerk*, holding that "the idea of the Gesamtkunstwerk provides precisely the interpretive key for an adequate understanding of Wagnerian music drama" (63). As Vogt notes, this is Theodor Adorno's position as well in his musicological treatise *In Search of Wagner.*

Gesamtkunstwerk Part 2: Richard Wagner and Theodor Adorno

Theodor Adorno's 1952 text, *Versuch über Wagner,* has had a lasting impact on Wagner criticism, and has helped to shape Wagner's legacy. In the text, Adorno links Wagner, and particularly his ideal of the *Gesamtkunstwerk,* intimately with National Socialism and totalitarian ideals. Thus, any discussion of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* must at least include some exploration of what Adorno contributes to this discourse.

Adorno's perspective on Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk,* which is detailed particularly in chapters 7 and 8 of *Versuch über Wagner (In Search of Wagner),* connects and contrasts the Romantic ideals of universality in the arts (and synaesthesia) with Wagner's aesthetic program

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[19] Vogt, Erik. "Music Drama and Politics: Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Alain Badiou on Richard Wagner's Idea of the Gesamtkunstwerk." *New Sound*, 42, II, 2013, 62-70. pg. 63.

for the *Gesamtkunstwerk.*[20] If the Romantics found that each art discipline was an art form in and of itself, Wagner shifts and looks at the arts not as arts in themselves, but as separate *media*, which can be unified. Although the universal art form was something of a Romantic ideal, there was little attempt in practical terms to unify art forms because, on the whole, the Romantics did not consider the separate arts as being combinable in any meaningful way, and certainly not by a single artist. There was perhaps some hope that the novel might be a unifying art form, accomplishing the mystical union of the arts, but it did not pan out, at least not to the extent that Wagner envisioned.

Suggesting in his text that a disappointed Wagner turned from revolutionary politics to musical revolution, Adorno sees a parallel in Germany's disappointment in 1918 which he determines ultimately led to Nazism. Adorno considers Wagner (and his concept of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*) as totalitarian because it requires the artist to impose his will on the art work and on the audience (including attempts to control the reception of his works). Adorno's perspective seems at first glance to be somewhat contradictory. Erik Vogt clarifies:

> Adorno distinguishes between different models of the Gesamtkunstwerk to be found in Wagner's writings. On the one hand, the Gesamtkunstwerk as protest against the bourgeoisification of art (in opera) clearly presupposes the prior revolutionizing of societal relations, thereby affirming the thesis that only a truly free society provides the proper conditions for the existence of the Gesamtkunstwerk…. On the other hand, by simultaneously conceiving of the Gesamtkunstwerk as aesthetically representative of societal emancipation, Wagner renders the Gesamtkunstwerk ambiguous in that it

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[20] As an example of this kind of Romantic thought, see the Trahndorff citation in the third *Gesamtkunstwerk* section.

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becomes impossible to decide as to whether it contributes to societal emancipation in a

real manner. . .represents it merely. . .or replaces the latter ideologically. (Vogt, 63-4)

Adorno ultimately concludes that there is an inherent link between the Gesamtkunstwerk and

totalitarianism/fascism. Vogt explains:

Adorno insinuates an indissoluble link between the synthesizing and totalising

programme of the Gesamtkunstwerk and political totalitarianism in that the

Gesamtkunstwerk, by producing intoxicating global sound effects, by employing

overpowering beat and authoritarian-regressive theatrical elements, and by enforcing in a

repetitive manner the same motives as the main construction principle, violently

incorporates the human collective through calculated effects, thereby fusing the latter

with the mythical construction of the German Volk. (65)

Vogt's able summary of Adorno's position vis-à-vis the *Gesamtkunstwerk* shows both the scale

of Wagner's vision and Adorno's perception of the permeating tinge of totalitarianism that

pervades the whole project.

Adorno himself acknowledges that there is a certain protest-like quality to Wagner's

project: "Wagner's impatience towards everything isolated, everything limited and existing

simply for itself, . . .is a protest against the bourgeoisification of art that rests content with

metaphors of dour self-preservation." But for Adorno, this is no kind of a barrier to the

totalitarian nature of the *Gesamtkunstwerk.* In his own words, Adorno declares that Wagner

"would like single-handed[ly] to will an aesthetic totality into being, casting a magic spell and

with defiant unconcern about the absence of the social conditions necessary for its survival." [21]

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[21] Adorno, Theodor. *In Search of Wagner.* Trans. Rodney Livingstone. NLB, 1981. pg. 101. Further references are cited as Adorno with page number.

It is this unilateral imposition of the will that, for Adorno, condemns the whole project. And more than that, Wagner's limitless ambitions for the effects of his project on his audience not only underscores the totalitarian nature of his ideal, but also seals the doom of his *Gesamtkunstwerk*:

> This basic idea is that of totality: the *Ring* attempts, without much ado, nothing less than the encapsulation of the world process as a whole…[Wagner] protests at the narrowness of an objective spirit whose social and aesthetic subject has shrunk to the dimensions of the private individual. His own starting-point, however, which is itself merely aesthetic, remains dependent on the listening habits of that individual, on what he is able to create on his own and on the transcendence he would like to be able to achieve in the name of society as a whole. For this reason the Wagnerian totality, the Gesamtkunstwerk, is doomed to failure. (Adorno, 101-2)

Adorno even goes so far as to cite Wagner's own words to show that he (Wagner) knew his ideal of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* could never truly be realized:

> No one can be better aware than myself, that the realization of this drama depends on conditions which do not lie within the will, nay not even within the capability of the single individual—were this capability infinitely greater than my own—but only in community, and in a mutual co-operation made possible thereby: whereas, at the present time, what prevails is the direct antithesis of both these factors. (Adorno, 113) [22]

Wagner's perseverance in the face of this knowledge is neither useful nor commendable, from Adorno's perspective. Andreas Huyssen explains Adorno's perspective:

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[22](Originally from Richard Wagner's Prose Works, Vol. 2, p 356n.)

Thus the drama of the future, as Wagner called his Gesamtkunstwerk, prefigures that

nightmarish regression into an archaic past which completes its trajectory in fascism. The

Gesamtkunstwerk is intended as a powerful protest against the fragmentation and

atomization of art and life in capitalist society. But since it chooses the wrong means it

can only end in failure.[23]

For Adorno, at least, little good can come of Wagner's notions of *Gesamtkunstwerk.*

It is worth remembering, in considering Adorno's perspective, that he was writing during

his own period of exile, having fled Nazi Germany and its totalitarian regime. Moreover, Adorno

was, along with the Institute of Social Research, attempting to

resist National Socialism by converting indignation and shock toward the rise of Nazism

into an understanding of its origins…. His aim was to shake off the notion that fascist

totalitarianism was a mere historical accident and to uncover its origin within the social

processes that supported it.[24]

Karin Bauer, in her article on Adorno and Wagner notes that, for Adorno at this time, Wagner's

taste and aesthetic bent is not only born out of the same context as that of fascism, but may carry

within itself the seeds of fascism. It is here that Adorno writes some of his most vehement text

against the concept of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, looking not so much at Wagner's use of the term,

but rather at the way in which the *Gesamtkunstwerk* joins seamlessly into the authoritarian

structure of fascist totalitarianism. Bauer notes that Adorno does not spend any time looking at

the way in which Hitler utilized Wagner's oeuvre but is much more concerned with "with the

dialectical relationship between art and society and between Wagner's music and its affirmation

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[23] Huyssen, Andreas. *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986. pg. 40-1.
[24] Bauer, Karin. "Adorno's Wagner: History and the Potential of the Artwork" *Cultural Critique,* 60, 2005, pg. 71.

and negation of the larger social order within which it functions" (Bauer, 72). Bauer finds that *In Search of Wagner* starts with a study of Wagner's social and public persona, which Adorno reads as symptomatic of Wagner's tyrannical personality which in turn finds expression in all aspects of his work and music, especially and most pointedly in that pinnacle of totalitarianism, the *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

Adorno is certainly less than complimentary about Wagner, finding him both deceptive, lacking in character, sadistic, insulting, and dreadfully anti-Semitic (Bauer, 73-4). Bauer notes that this perspective carries over into Adorno's perceptions about Wagner's music: "Adorno sees Wagner's musical gestures as manifestations of the unlimited symbolic power Wagner held over his audience" (Bauer, 74). For Adorno, the *Gesamtkunstwerk* represents nothing more or less than an attempt to impose his will to create unity where there was none, and ultimately fails not only in this aim but also in its own art – it fails as a project. Bauer demonstrates:

> In the central chapter on 'phantasmagoria,' Adorno delivers a sharp critique of the medium of phantasmagoria, the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. For Adorno, it is a representation of power demanding obedience, a rationally constructed artificial wholeness repudiating free will. […] Without realizing that the social conditions necessary for the survival of unity are absent, Wagner wants to will an aesthetic unity into being. The stylistic failure of the music drama results from an arbitrary combination of different elements and genres that ignores the internal requirements of the artistic material. Instead of creating style, Wagner strives for stylization […] Adorno contends that Wagner's seemingly unified totality, which turns out in the end to be a mere illusion, owes its existence to the extirpation of the individual. (Bauer, 77)

Thus does Adorno pass judgement on Wagner. However, as Bauer notes, although Adorno's rejection of Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk* is very thorough, Adorno does see a place for Wagner as a herald of technology and arts to come. Wagner represents a pivotal moment in history at the last moments of Romanticism and presages the culture industry (including film). In Bauer's words:

> Through their phantasmagoria, Wagner's total works of art are the early miracles of modern technology, which immortalize the moment in history between the death of Romanticism and the birth of realism. They anticipate the products of the culture industry, because the miracles and wonders of technology render the works as impenetrable as the daily reality of reified society. The works, through their magic, function like commodities that satisfy the needs of the culture market. (Bauer, 78)

Ultimately, Bauer concludes, Adorno needed Wagner, and found him significant, though deeply flawed: "Wagner represents a significant marker in the development of modern art in a myriad of ways, and throughout his work, Adorno turned again and again to Wagner in order to work out issues that are preoccupying him" (Bauer, 68).

In conclusion, we have seen that, for Adorno, Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk* project was born out of the Romantics' quest for a mystical unified artform. Adorno sees Wagner as a deeply flawed individual as well as a disappointed, failed revolutionary who wants his project to be emancipatory, but falls short of his hopes and ends up doing nearly the opposite. Adorno finds the unilateral imposition of will to be the undoing of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* project, for Wagner tries to control everything (and ultimately fails); in this control, too, Adorno sees the *Gesamtkunstwerk* as an irredeemable extension of totalitarianism and fascist ideology. Despite

this, Adorno finds that Wagner has had an extensive impact on art and culture, and stands, with his *Gesamtkunstwerk* at a pivotal moment in history.

Before moving on from Adorno entirely, it would be well to note that, although Adorno has shaped Wagner criticism and the notion of *Gesamtkunstwerk* in many ways (and rightfully so), his is by no means the only critical perspective. As a modern example and counterpoint, Juliet Koss' book, *Modernism after Wagner,* provides valuable perspectives. Koss examines "medium specificity as part of modernism…but [finds that] that is really a myth, a myth that led to the misunderstanding and marginalization of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* in the discipline of art history" (Koss, xxiii). Koss posits that if medium specificity as a cornerstone of modernism is untrue, this means that the idea that the *Gesamtkunstwerk* is thereby anti-modern is also untrue. In her book she "presents Wagner's concept of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* as he described it in 1849 as the theoretical framework for understanding a range of subsequent modernist developments, concentrating on art and architecture with occasional forays into such other disciplines as theater, music, and film" (Koss, xxvi). Moreover, Koss finds that Adorno is largely responsible for the tarnishing of Wagner's reputation, and she argues that Adorno's criticism is unfair. Adorno's perspective, according to Koss, led to a casual definition of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* as it is often thought of in the mid 20th century: as "a seamless melding of a variety of art forms that overwhelms spectators' emotions, impedes the possibility of critical thought, and molds a group of individuals into a powerless mass" (Koss, xi). This is certainly consistent with Adorno's emphasis on the unilateral imposition of the artist's will, as exemplified by Wagner. One further piece of Koss' argument is relevant to this discussion: Koss (and others) note that Wagner's notions of *Gesamtkunstwerk* were not at all consistent throughout his life and work, as shall be explored in the next section. Also, Koss notes, and rightly so, that Wagner originated the idea in

connection with revolution, and that this has been largely forgotten. She argues that although the *Gesamtkunstwerk* is commonly thought of as an *advanced* art form, it was actually intended to be a *revolutionary* art form, which is quite another thing! (Koss, xi).

Excursus: Wagner and Anti-Semitism

In connecting Wagner's work with the idea of *Gesamtkunstwerk* (despite Wagner's limited use of the term), and by then connecting the *Gesamtkunstwerk* with totalitarianism, Adorno forged a clear link in the chain connecting Wagner to fascism. (Another link is Hitler's own famously fanatical preference for Wagner's work.) In closing this discussion of Adorno, and in preparing to redefine and rediscover new aspects of the concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk,* it must be acknowledged that although this dissertation does not follow a strictly Adornian interpretation of *Gesamtkunstwerk,* and refuses to see the concept itself as inherently totalitarian, it does nonetheless unequivocally confirms that Wagner indeed held abhorrently anti-Semitic and racist views, which it disavows vehemently.

Despite Wagner's early writings, particularly the 1849 essays, showing a rebellion against – even a call for revolution against – the commercialization and commodification of art, his later life was spent desperately trying to fund his vision. Adorno notes that Wagner, despite his claims and ideals, was sucked into the culture industry in trying to make a profit, or, as Bauer notes, "driven by the prospect of success" (Bauer, 75). Interestingly, this is, for Adorno, the very point on which Wagner's bitterness towards what he perceived as "Jewish" (aka greed and capitalism) hinges. Andreas Huyssen notes that this is what he sees as Adorno's best point: the idea that "mass culture and commodification were already inherent in Wagner, there can be no 'purity' of art wherein the art is somehow perfectly detached from the society and culture that produced it" (Huyssen, 42-3). For Adorno, art can never be truly independent of the social

(Huyssen 35). Adorno himself noted in a review of Ernest Newman's book *Wagner, Nietzsche, and Hitler*, that he found a connection between Wagner's anti-Semitism and the commodification or commercialization of art and culture:

> Conversely, many of Wagner's specifically Fascist traits, particularly his anti-Semitism, are due to his opposition to the commercialization of culture, the socio-economic roots of which he was as incapable of realizing as was Nietzsche. But Wagner himself was not protected against the cultural industry to come.[25]

Wagner's financial troubles and anarchist-revolutionary experiences had given him a distaste for capitalism, particularly as he blamed the system for his difficulties in financing Bayreuth later in life. His insistence on blaming Jews for his frustrations – and for capitalism itself – is damning, particularly since this connection in his mind was based solely on harmful stereotypes of Jews that were then prevalent.

Dan Venning points out that this anti-Semitism and Eurocentrism also plays out in Wagner's choice of myth:

> Furthermore, his choice of the Nibelungenlied as the archetypal myth to adapt indicates his extreme Eurocentrism: he did not just want to create a new art for the German Volk, but saw German and Nordic culture as the ultimate and universal expression of high culture. It is no accident that his works were celebrated by the Nazis and remain unofficially banned in Israel. (Venning, 153)

Although Wagner cannot really be held responsible for what others did with his works after his death (though some argue otherwise) it is true that he was entirely Eurocentric in his philosophy and beliefs. This was admittedly quite a widespread and pervasive perspective in his day.

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[25] Adorno, Theodor. "Review: Wagner, Nietzsche, and Hitler" *The Kenyon Review*, 9.1, 1947, pg. 162.

However that may be, he can and should be blamed for his deeply held and pervasive anti-Semitism.

Aaron Klaus tells us that while writing under a different name, "Wagner articulated his antisemitic views most clearly in the infamous 1850 essay, *Das Judentum in der Musik* (Judaism in Music)."[26] Klaus goes on to cite an article by James Loeffler, saying that Wagner's ideas were part of the larger and fairly general anti-Semitic discourse in Germany (and Western Europe) throughout much of the 1800s, which can be traced back to Martin Luther, if not further. Klaus notes that *Das Judentum* was initially largely ignored, but when it was "re-published in 1869 at the height of Wagner's popularity as a composer (under his real name), *Das Judentum* quickly became a public favorite. In fact, this essay would strongly influence Nazi ideology several decades later" (Klaus 1). However, Klaus also notes that "Prior to *Das Judentum*, Wagner did not exhibit anti-Jewish sentiment in any of his statements, writings, or public behavior; furthermore, the period between initial publication and republication was, in fact, marked by a relative lack of anti-Jewish sentiment in Germany" (Klaus, 2). Though this may seem to be a mitigating factor, Venning notes, as have others, that *Das Judentum in der Musik*, despite often being rendered in English as "Jewishness in Music," should really be "Jewry in Music," as the term "Judentum" is of itself a derogatory term (Venning 153). Venning (working from David Conway's 2012 *Jewry in Music*) notes that in *Das Judentum*, Wagner:

> argues that Jewish culture, with, as he characterizes it, a greedy capitalistic focus on
> usury and business, can never create true art. The false art of the mid-19th century,
> Wagner says, was "Jewish" in spirit. In an essay written less than a decade after the
> Jewish composer Felix Mendelssohn created his "Wedding March" (1842), and only a

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[26] Klaus, Aaron. "Ernest Bloch, Richard Wagner, and the Myth of Racial Essentialism." *SCJR*, 13, no. 1, 2018, 1-14. pg. 1.

century after celebrated German authors Gotthold Ephraim Lessing and Friedrich Schiller

pleaded for religious tolerance and an end to anti-Semitism, Wagner wrote an essay that

paved the way for Hitler and the Nazis in the 20th century. (Venning 153)

This is the dark side of Wagner's legacy.

Over the years, some have tried to excuse Wagner from these views, putting forward

various defenses (including his friendship with Hermann Levi, a Jewish orchestra conductor).

Yet there can be no doubt that both he and Cosima were horribly anti-Semitic. His treatment of

Levi, with whom he supposedly had a good relationship, hardly shows him in a better light than

his twice-published racist treatise *Judentum.* However, an argument has been made, for example

by Juliet Koss, among others, that, though disgusting, Wagner's anti-Semitism should not be

held against him in any greater measure than it is held against many other Eurocentric, anti-

Semitic, or racist thinkers of his day. It was hardly a singular failing in his day and age. Nor can

Wagner reasonably be blamed for the actions of Hitler and the Nazis, as he was long dead at the

time, and they are responsible for their own actions. Koss notes that, although Wagner was

certainly (and abhorrently) anti-Semitic:

> neither this aspect of his thinking nor his later designation as Hitler's favorite composer
>
> should distract attention from Wagner's own historical context, or obscure the fact that
>
> both anti-Jewish feeling and nationalism were common features of radical leftist thought
>
> in mid-nineteenth century Germany. (Koss, 3n7)

Be that as it may, this dissertation seeks neither to excuse nor defend Wagner's decidedly anti-

Semitic actions or beliefs in any way, other than to note that his anti-Semitism and racism were

both real and pervasive. The only position this chapter seeks to take is to decline to follow

Adorno in connecting the *Gesamtkunstwerk* concept to totalitarianism, and to craft a different

picture of the concept from Wagner's theoretical texts. The man himself may be left to the judgment of the ages.

<p align="center">*Gesamtkunstwerk* Part 3: Wagner and his Aspirations</p>

Having looked at the general nineteenth-century idea of Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk,* and more specifically at the concept as Adorno and other twentieth-century theorists understood it, we may now pivot and examine exactly what it was that Wagner said that has led to so much ink and paper being dedicated to deciphering it. As noted above, Wagner uses the term four times in his four theoretical essays. The first two instances occur in *Die Kunst und Revolution,* and the second two in *Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft*, the earliest two of the four essays. The term is, however, conspicuously absent from *Oper und Drama,* and from *Eine Mittheilung an meine Freunde.* The first two, then, supply the examples of Wagner's early usage of the term. Stewart Spencer and Barry Millington provide a reminder of what these essays contain:

> [Wagner] …addressed himself to the fundamental questions of the social role of art, which most composers, whether successful or unsuccessful with their publics, had been content to ignore. *Art and Revolution* was outspoken and polemical, advocating an "art-work of the future" in which emancipated humanity would express itself through artistic structures that had at last been divorced from capitalist speculation and profit-making. These ideas, and in particular the concept of the reunification of the arts into a comprehensive *Gesamtkunstwerk* ("total work of art") on the ancient Greek model, were developed in two longer essays, *Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft* (The Art-work of the Future) and *Oper und Drama* (Opera and Drama). (Letters, 157)

Despite the chief impetus for Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk* project being delineated most fully in *Zukunft* and *Oper* (and, in very specific terms concerning the Nibelung material, in *Mittheilung*,

as has been shown above), the first two occurrences of the term *Gesamtkunstwerk* are in his first

essay, *Die Kunst und die Revolution.*

<center>Gesamtkunstwerk<i>: First Instance</i></center>

Early in *Revolution,* Wagner is discussing the ancient Greeks, and the flowering of the arts.

Waxing enthusiastic on the topic of the Greek tragedy, Wagner says, "Diese Blume war das

Kunstwerk, ihr Duft der Griechische Geist, der uns noch heute berauscht und zu dem

Bekenntnisse entzückt, lieber einen halben Tag Grieche vor dem tragischen Kunstwerke sein zu

mögen, als in Ewigkeit – ungriechischer Gott!" He continues immediately:

> Genau mit der Auflösung des athenischen Staates hängt der Verfall der Tragödie
>
> zusammen. Wie sich der Gemeingeist in tausend egoistische Richtungen zersplitterte,
>
> löste sich auch das große **Gesammtkunstwerk** der Tragödie in die einzelnen, ihm
>
> inbegriffenen Kunstbestandtheile auf: auf den Trümmern der Tragödie weinte in tollem
>
> Lachen der Komödiendichter Aristophanes, und aller Kunsttriebe stockte endlich vor
>
> dem ernsten Sinnen der Philosophie, welche über die Ursache der Vergänglichkeit des
>
> menschlichen Schönen und Starken nachdachte. (WGS III, 16-17. Emphasis added.)

It is into this highly enthusiastic account of the Greek drama that Wagner first deploys the term.

Wagner, in each of the four essays, consistently elevates classic Greek tragedy as the highest and

most revered artform. As an aside, it is an often-overlooked fact (particularly in the first half of

the 20th century) that Wagner himself did not in fact coin the term *Gesamtkunstwerk.* The word

itself has been traced back to 1827, when it was first used by Karl Friedrich Eusebius Trahndorff

(Koss, 13). Trahndorff was a theologian (and philosopher), and used the term in his 1827

Ästhetik oder Lehre von der Weltanschauung und Kunst. Trahndorff appears to be following

<center>57</center>

strongly in the Romantic tradition as he details the hope of finding a unified artwork that will bring together the other four:

> Wir sprachen schon oben in dem Abschnitt von der Kunst des Wortklanges davon, daß die vier Künste, die ebengenannte Kunst des Wortklanges, die Musik, Mimik und Tanzkunst die Möglichkeit in sich trügen zu einer Darstellung zusammen zu fließen. Diese Möglichkeit gründet sich aber auf ein in dem gesamten Kunstgebiete liegendes Streben zu einem **Gesamt-Kunstwerke** von Seiten aller Künste, ein Streben das in dem ganzen Kunstgebiete ursprünglich ist, sobald wir die Einheit seines innern Lebens erkennen; diese Möglichkeit wird von eben deshalb aber auch nicht bloß die genannte Künste, sondern alle umfassen.[27] (emphasis added)

This is the first known use of the term. A few pages later, in a discussion about movement and its connection to the public performance nature of *Tanzkunst* and *Mimik*, he says "Dies wird begründet sein darin, daß die Gestalten, an denen es gebunden wird, nicht für sich als Kunstwerke gelten sollen, sondern nur als integrierende Theile des **Gesamtkunstwerkes** von dem die Rede ist…" (Trahndorff, 318). (Emphasis added.) By using this term in reference to Greek tragedy, Wagner is pursuing a line of thought that the Romantics had long been engaged in tracing.

Gesamtkunstwerk*: Second Instance*

Wagner's second use of the term also occurs in *Die Kunst und Revolution.* Here he begins by describing the disintegration of tragedy after the classical Greek period, which he attributes to self-centered lack of focus on community:

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[27] Trahndorff, Karl Friedrich Eusebius. *Ästhetik oder Lehre von der Weltanschauung und Kunst.* Berlin: Maurerschen Buchhandlung, 1827. pg. 312.

Mit dem späteren Verfall der Tragödie hörte die Kunst immer mehr auf, der Ausdruck des öffentlichen Bewußtseins zu sein: das Drama löste sich in seine Bestandtheile auf Rhetorik, Bildhauerei, Malerei, Musik u. s. w. fließen den Reigen, in dem sie vereint sich bewegt hatten, um nun jeder ihren Weg für sich zu gehen, sich selbstständig, aber einsam egoistisch fortzubilden. (WGS, III 35-6)

Wagner continues, again using the term in reference to the Greek tradition – the great Greek *Gesamtkunstwerk* – which is to say, the Greek tragic drama:

Und so war es bei der Wiedergeburt der Künste, daß wir zunächst auf diese vereinzelten griechischen Künste trafen, wie sie aus der Auflösung der Tragödie sich entwickelt hatten: das große griechische **Gesammtkunstwerk** durfte unserem verwilderten, an sich irren und zersplitterten Geiste nicht in seiner Fülle zuerst aufstoßen; denn wie hätten wir es verstehen sollen? Wohl aber wußten wir uns jene vereinzelten Kunsthandwerke zu eigen zu machen; denn als edle Handwerke, zu denen sie schon in der römisch-griechischen Welt herabgesunken waren, lagen sie unserem Geiste und Wesen nicht so ferne: der Zunft- und Handwerksgeist des neuen Bürgerthums regte sich lebendig in den Städten; Fürsten und Vornehme gewannen es lieb, ihre Schlösser anmuthiger bauen und verzieren, ihre Säle mit reizenderen Gemälden ausschmücken zu lassen, als es die rohe Kunst des Mittelalters vermocht hatte. Die Pfaffen bemächtigten sich der Rhetorik für die Kanzeln, der Musik für den Kirchentor; und es arbeitete sich die neue Handwerkswelt tüchtig in die einzelnen Künste der Griechen hinein, soweit sie ihr verständlich und zweckmäßig erschienen. …Nur die große Menschheitsrevolution, deren Beginn die griechische Tragödie einst zertrümmerte, kann auch dieses Kunstwerk uns gewinnen; denn nur die Revolution kann aus ihrem tiefsten Grunde, Das von Neuem, und schöner,

edler, allgemeiner gebären, was sie dem konservativen Geiste einer früheren Periode,

schöner, aber beschränkte Bildung, entriß und verschlang. (WGS III, 36-7)

Wagner bemoans the forces, societal, cultural, and religious, which seemed to him to encourage

the breakdown of the original unified artwork (the Greek drama), into separate artforms (such as

poetry, or theater, or even painting) which are lessened by the separation, and which can never

achieve their full potential in their several forms.

<p align="center">Gesamtkunstwerk: Third Instance</p>

Wagner's third use of the term occurs in his second essay, *Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft.* He

begins again with the Romantic idea of the human spirit striving to be reunited with nature

through art: "Hier sieht denn der Geist, in seinem künstlerischen Streben nach

Wiedervereinigung mit der Natur im Kunstwerke, sich zu der einzigen Hoffnung auf die Zukunft

hingewiesen, oder zur traurigen Kraftübung der Resignation gedrängt" (WGS III, 73-4).

Wagner's passage continues:

> Er begreift, dass er seine Erlösung nur im sinnlich gegenwärtigen Kunstwerke, daher also
>
> nur in einer wahrhaft kunstbedürftigen, d.h. kunstbedingenden, aus eigener
>
> Naturwahrheit und Schönheit kunstzeugenden, Gegenwart zu gewinnen hat, und hofft
>
> daher auf die Zukunft, d.h. er glaubt an die Macht der Nothwendigkeit, der das Werk der
>
> Zukunft vorbehalten ist. Der Gegenwart gegenüber aber verzichtet er auf das Erscheinen
>
> des Kunstwerkes an der Oberfläche der Gegenwart, der Öffentlichkeit, folglich auf die
>
> Öffentlichkeit selbst, so weit sie der Mode gehört. Das große **Gesammtkunstwerk**, das
>
> alle Gattungen der Kunst zu umfassen hat, um jede einzelne dieser Gattungen als Mittel
>
> gewissermaßen zu verbrauchen, zu vernichten zu Gunsten der Erreichung des
>
> Gesamtzweckes aller, nämlich der unbedingten, unmittelbaren Darstellung der

vollendeten menschlichen Natur, — dieses große **Gesammtkunstwerk** erkennt er nicht

als die willkürlich mögliche That des Einzelnen, sondern als das notwendig

denkbare gemeinsame Werk der Menschen der Zukunft. Der Trieb, der sich als einen nur

in der Gemeinsamkeit zu befriedigenden erkennt, entsagt der modernen Gemeinsamkeit,

diesem Zusammenhange willkürlicher Eigensucht, um in einsamer Gemeinsamkeit mit

sich und der Menschheit der Zukunft sich Befriedigung zu gewähren, so gut der Einsame

es kann. (WGS III, 74)

In this instance, Wagner is not referencing the Greek tradition so much as he is that of

Romanticism. The Romantic ideal of the mystical universal artform, similar to what Trahndorff

describes, echoes here. As Adorno emphasized, Wagner can certainly be considered as a late

Romantic, and that is very evident in this instance of the term *Gesamtkunstwerk.*

<center>Gesamtkunstwerk: Fourth Instance</center>

The fourth mention of the term *Gesamtkunstwerk* in Wagner's essays is also in *Das Kunstwerk*

der Zukunft. Late in the essay, following a discussion of the relationship between the *Dichter* and

Darsteller, Wagner writes:

Nicht eine reich entwickelte Fähigkeit der einzelnen Künste wird in dem

Gesammtkunstwerke der Zukunft unbenützt verbleiben, gerade in ihm erst wird sie zur

vollen Geltung gelangen. So wird namentlich auch die in der Instrumentalmusik so

eigenthümlich mannigfaltig entwickelte Tonkunst nach ihrem reichsten Vermögen in

diesem Kunstwerke sich entfalten können, ja sie wird die mimische Tanzkunst wiederum

zu ganz neuen Erfindungen anregen, wie nicht minder den Athem der Dichtkunst zu

ungeahnter Fülle ausdehnen. In ihrer Einsamkeit hat die Musik sich aber ein Organ

gebildet, welches des unermeßlichsten Ausdruckes fähig ist, und dies ist das Orchester.

> Die Tonsprache Beethovens, durch das Orchester in das Drama eingeführt, ist ein ganz
>
> neues Moment für das dramatische Kunstwerk. (WGS III, 185-6)

Again, we see Romanticism's project playing out—Wagner believes, as did Trahndorff and other Romantics, that each artform can only reach its highest potential in a mystical union with the others. However, Wagner took matters into his own hands, and set about creating such an artwork.

<div align="center">Wagner's Gesamtkunstwerk</div>

In each instance that Wagner deploys the term *Gesamtkunstwerk,* we see he was either mourning the loss of the supposedly perfect classical Greek tragic drama, or else was aspiring to the Romantic mystical and, (until he altered the artistic landscape) imaginary universal artform that would join the long-lost disparate arts into one transcendent unity. Here, Wagner's vision is not about control, politics, or the imposition of the will, but rather about the mystical unity and transcendent beauty of a long-held Romantic ideal, one which seemed impossible to realize. Moreover, the term *Gesamtkunstwerk* comes from the Romantic tradition, and is here used only for the Romantic project or for the supposed Greek ideal (which Romanticism also venerates).

In recent years, scholarship has become increasingly aware of the relative *rarity* of the term *Gesamtkunstwerk* in Wagner's texts. Although, as has been shown, the term has become something of a shorthand to describe Wagner's *Ring* cycle, there is very little consensus about what the term implies. Hilda Meldrum Brown notes its absence in *Oper und Drama*, which contains many of the ideas that Wagner ended up pouring (or attempting to pour) into his *Ring* cycle:

> To express the operatic end-goal various terms are used. Latter-day critics of the term
>
> Gesamtkunstwerk (which, as was observed above, Wagner had originally applied

specifically to Ancient Greek culture) have pointed to the absence in this, his most

substantial and significant critical work, of what was later to become the 'flagship'

critical term to describe Wagner's late dramas, and which is still in common currency

today, albeit vaguely defined. (Brown, 39)

Brown also notes, as have others, that although Wagner never specifically applies the term

Gesamtkunstwerk to his own project in *Oper und Drama* (or in *Mittheilung,* for that matter), he

does use various other terms which could, possibly, have been synonyms in his own mind, but

which do not loom as large for the modern reader. Brown has noted several:

> However, the ghost, or possibly the *Doppelgänger* of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, still lurks in
>
> 'Opera and Drama' in the form of its many synonymic equivalents: 'das vereinigt
>
> Kunstwerk', 'das vollendete Drama/Kunstwerk', 'das vollkommene Drama', 'das höchst
>
> menschliche Kunstwerk'; and of course 'das Drama der Zunkunft'. The term 'das
>
> gemeinsame Drama' as used in 'The Artwork of the Future' is, however, lacking. A
>
> possible explanation might be a slight shift on Wagner's part away from the
>
> foregrounding of the social implications of the new form of opera, which still loomed
>
> large in that work, to more strictly art-based criteria. (Brown, 39)

These other terms, it could be argued, are what Wagner uses to mean *Gesamtkunstwerk. And it*

may be so. But what is most interesting here is that Wagner does not use the term to label his

own work. This is especially notable given the importance that later criticism, Adorno included,

have attached to the term and for the particular and apparently controlling nature of Wagner's

art. What is clear from the essays, is Wagner's desire to bring together different art forms to

create something new and astonishing—the holy grail of the Romantics, if you will. Brown

continues (speaking of *Oper*): "First and foremost is Wagner's original, proposed solution to the

task of creating fusion and binding together musical, verbal and dramatic ideas and themes: the development of the motivic web, a device which in his hands achieves a level of complexity unparalleled in the history of opera" (Brown, 39).

This level of complexity and intensity which exists in Wagner's works, and which Wagner brings to the theoretical table is no doubt a large part of the reason why his work has received such a strong and inalienable association with the term *Gesamtkunstwerk.* It is clear that he was trying to create something new and altogether innovative, and to describe such a project, a word that is seldom used for others' work make sense. Moreover, since Wagner applies the term to the Greek tradition of which he thought so highly, it is perhaps a compliment to him that the word was taken up and applied to his music-dramas. However, it is not the purpose of this dissertation to trace every instance of the word from 1827 onwards; the object here is simply to examine its uses in the four essays and in conjunction with Wagner's work. It must be noted, too, as Juliet Koss notes, that Wagner's notions of a *Gesamtkunstwerk* were not at all consistent throughout his life and work. The two essays from 1849 are generally cited, but his writings later in life show changing perspectives. Also, Wagner originated the idea in connection with revolution, and this has been largely overlooked. The *Gesamtkunstwerk* as he originally conceived of it, despite being commonly thought of as an advanced art form, was meant to be a *revolutionary* art form (Koss, xi)! Koss further notes that Wagner wanted his works to connect in some meaningful way to ancient Greece, which he revered, but the Greek 'democratic' tendencies contrasted with the strong utopian currents in his own work. Koss reports:

> [T]he *Gesamtkunstwerk* he [Wagner] imagined in the mid-nineteenth century was, fundamentally, a proposal for the democratic German nation he imagined for the future, decades before the founding of this nation in 1871. Simultaneously artistic and political,

Wagner's proposal must also be understood within the context of his own experiences in

the revolution of 1848-49—and of his disappointment following its failure. (Koss, xiii)

Some say Wagner abandoned politics and radical ideals after the failure of the revolution, but

according to Koss that is not in fact the case. She notes that in this respect, Wagner is rather a

walking contradiction. In his (later) relationship to King Ludwig "The ideals were republican;

the mind-set conservative. The mixture of respect for authority and desire for radical change

would prove symptomatic of his thinking" (Koss, 5). The *Gesamtkunstwerk* in Wagner's earlier

conceptions is Wagner's effort to inspire action and engagement, he himself being inspired by

the failure of the revolution.

Coming out of the revolutionary context that he did, Wagner clearly had political as well

as social aims for his work. Politically speaking, he hoped for the unification of the disparate

German kingdom-states. George Mosse in *The Nationalization of the Masses* is very concerned

with fitting Wagner into that historio-political context, and he points out that Wagner was neither

unique in his political aims nor in his use of myths out of the past.

In achieving his political goals through his artwork, Wagner's approach, however,

differed from his contemporaries. According to Mosse, Wagner, in seeking to contribute to the

sense of national unity that was already pervading the nation as early at the start of the 19th

century, did not look to bourgeois art of his day to create a sense of unity and Germanness, as did

his contemporary Friedrich Theodor von Vischer. Wagner followed the romantic tradition and

turned to the past, which was somewhat less fashionable by the 1850s than it had been half a

century earlier. But Wagner, unlike the Romantics, did not want Egyptian or Greek legends.

Instead he sought out the primeval "*Mythos,* or eternal Germanic truth, which provided

inexhaustible material for the German artist."[28] In shaping what he thought of as a unifying

national feeling and sense of what it means to be German, Wagner relied on the mythos of the

eternal German *Volk,* and on an insistence on intuition, which Mosse describes:

> This intuition is defined as an effort of the soul to rise beyond the present world to a
>
> higher unity through ancestral memories. The *Mythos* is, therefore, expressed through
>
> symbolism and art. The Romantic movement had sought to rediscover the memories of
>
> fore-fathers through ballads, fairy tales, and legends. Ideals of beauty were an essential
>
> part of the *Mythos*, whether linked with Greek or Germanic antiquity, or with a
>
> combination both. [Art and aesthetics…] became crucial for the new political style
>
> because they functioned as a unifying element of the national cult. Wagner agreed with
>
> the functional purposes of art but turned his *Mythos* into that of the Germanic Volk. […]
>
> The Germans, Wagner believed, were characterized by an inner substance which had
>
> never changed; therefore the ancient sagas were also an expression of the present. (102)

This belief guided much of his work, and his prejudices.

The seeking out of this so-called German *Mythos*, George Mosse argues once again, was

not unique to Wagner. Nationalism and nation-worship were trends that Mosse traces back to the

turn of the 19th century. As the middle class grew larger in around the turn of the century, its

values, ideals, and stability became increasingly linked with the growing national feeling. Mosse

notes that around this time "Richard Wagner became the central figure in the revival of an

emotional and religious nationalism which found its expression in myth, symbol and festivals"

(Mosse, 100). In the *Ring Cycle* in particular, coming shortly after the culmination of Bismarck's

efforts in the 1871 unification under German Emperor Wilhelm I of Prussia, Wagner is both

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[28] Mosse, George L. *The Nationalization of the Masses: Political Symbolism and Mass Movements in Germany from the Napoleonic wars through the Third Reich.* Howard Fertig, 2001, pg. 101.

looking for and showing forth something uniquely German that is yet common to Bavarians, Prussians and Saxons.

Whatever may be said about the use of Wagner in the later Nazi era, Wagner in the 1840s and 1850s was more a symptom of the growing national feeling than its instigator, but over time began to take a more considered and active role. He was deeply "concerned with the maintenance of the national spirit which had […] inspired th[e] revolution" in which he participated in 1848. Moreover, Mosse points out that the notion of the eternal German Volk was also not original to Wagner, but had always been an integral part in the idea of German nationalism. Indeed, Mosse argues similarly for many of Wagner's tropes and sources, holding that much of what Wagner did to contribute to nationalism (and later, to the Nazis) was not original to him. He simply drew on various currents, trends, and ideas of his time, and incorporated with the originality and power of his music. His operas became the musical and theatrical reification of these ideas, feelings, and trends, and they thereby became tangible symbols giving Wagner a bigger political role than perhaps his originality warranted.

The second part of Mosse's point, that Wagner in his historical context was not alone in seeking out myth, is quite expected given Wagner's association with the later German Romantics. Wagner was in good company in reimagining ancient stories, and to some extent in becoming deeply concerned with German-ness and the German nation as such. Classicism and Romanticism both led many authors and artists to look to a more or less ancient past that was more or less fictional (often more than less). Romantics, who like the classicists, drew on Greek and Roman tales, moved beyond classical antiquity and made themselves at home with ancient Egyptian and Indian legends, and of course borrowing heavily from medieval European traditions as well. In adapting, copying, appropriating, combining, and (re)inventing such

narratives, the Romantics lived out their search for universal truths and unity with nature. In seeking to aid in the unification of the German kingdoms, Wagner follows the path of the romantics in love with the French revolution, but makes his work more clearly political than most.

Wagner's desire for reform (both political and artistic), and his efforts to that end by attempting to create a *Gesamtkunstwerk* ultimately led, of course, to his convention defying work in the *Ring* cycle, which brings together multiple art forms (or media) and allows him to simultaneously belong to the late Romantics while also being, from a certain perspective, an early modernist. Wagner writes into and out of the time of the Industrial Revolution. Although the term *Gesamtkunstwerk* did not originate with Wagner, the concept of a complete and fully realized art form played a key role in his thought and work and has since become indelibly associated with him.[29] For Wagner, the combination of music (opera) and theater (drama = poetry + physical element/dance) was the ideal art form and had not been fully realized since the ancient Greek tragedies (particularly those of Aeschylus) (Borchmeyer 34). Borchmeyer clarifies the term:

> Any discussion of Wagner must distinguish between two different concepts of the 'total work of art'. Where the term is expressly employed, it serves to define a cultural vision (the synthesis of all the arts) that goes far beyond its concrete artistic feasibility. But where a union of the arts is held out as a structurally constitutive principle of what he termed 'musical drama', […] what he meant here is simply the restoration of the 'original unity' of the 'three purely human art-forms', […] dance, music, and poetry. […] It is only with regard to this sense of integration […] that the concept of the total work of art can be

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[29] Borchmeyer, Dieter. *Richard Wagner: Theory and Theater.* Trans. Stewart Spencer. Oxford: Clarendon P., 1991. Print. Pgs. 65-6.

invested with any concrete musico-dramatic meaning – assuming that we wish to use it at all, given that Wagner, significantly, refrained from quoting it in this context. (66)

Juliet Koss outlines Wagner's early goals for the *Gesamtkunstwerk*:

The *Gesamtkunstwerk* would foster a more direct artistic communication between the creative artist, the work of art, and the audience: three elements that would combine during the process of aesthetic engagement to achieve the grand unifying experience at which Wagner believed all artistic creation was ultimately aimed. Interweaving aesthetic, national, and political aspirations, conflating production and reception, and utopian in orientation, Wagner's discussion of the communal activity of artistic production and spectatorship that helped create both the total work of art and its audience would prove central to modernism for well over a century. (Koss, 12-3)

For Koss, the reason the *Gesamtkunstwerk* is so important to Wagner is the idea of unity – the unity of art forms, of spectators, and ultimately, of Germany. Wagner in *Die Kunst und die Revolution* reminds us that: "Bei uns ist die echte Kunst Revolutionär, weil sie nur im Gegensatz zur gültigen Allgemeinheit existirt [sic]" (WGS III, 35).

Because of all this, or perhaps in spite of it, Wagner set about creating the *Ring* cycle just after finishing *Oper und Drama,* around the same time that he was writing *Mittheilung.* Spencer and Millington note that the idea of making an opera out of the Nibelung material was not original to Wagner. They cite three contemporaries of Wagner (Franz Brendel, Friedrich Theodor von Vischer, and Louise Otto) who had proposed the idea in the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* in the mid-forties (Letters, 158-9). Indeed Otto had gone so far as to publish a partial libretto. But it cannot be proven with any certainty whether Wagner had read or considered their ideas. Spencer and Millington quote Brendel's 1845 call for such an opera: "In my view a setting

of the Nibelung opera would indeed be a step forward, and I believe that the composer who could accomplish this task in an adequate manner would become the man of his era" (Letters, 159). Much has been written on his inspiration and influences, though some of this must be deemed no more than speculation. Be that as it may, some two decades later, Wagner's attempt at an artwork combining multiple artforms was complete, and he needed somewhere to stage his unwieldy creation.

In building Bayreuth specifically to house his operas, Wagner certainly went where no composer had gone before, and gave himself financial headaches quite beyond the common run as well. Dan Venning notes that:

> Wagner's concept of the Gesamtkunstwerk thus extends beyond the artistic melding he describes in "The Art-Work of the Future." His design for the Bayreuth Festspielhaus and the reception of his Ring cycle as an era-defining cultural touchstone at its 1876 premiere are part of what make the cycle a Gesamtkunstwerk, encompassing literary sagas, music, dance, theatrical performance, architecture, and national mythology. (Venning, 155)

However much inappropriate mystical emphasis was placed on the Bayreuth building project in the early 1900s, Wagner did in fact manage to make some positive innovations. Venning, following Simon Williams, clarifies:

> Wagner's Ring was not just a landmark composition: the very theatre that he had built for it, the Bayreuth Festspielhaus, marked a total transformation of theatrical aesthetics. Wagner pioneered the practice of dimming the lights over the audience, so that the performance, as opposed to fellow theatre-goers, would be the primary focus. Bayreuth's fan-shaped auditorium allowed for "democratic seating," where all seats had an equally good view and ticket prices were the same throughout the house. And Wagner was also

the first to hide the orchestra in a pit so that the music would arise as if from the ether.

(Venning, 154)

These valuable innovations aside, the mystical fanaticism of Bayreuth fans can be off-putting. However, Koss notes that although Bayreuth was certainly unique and unusual, not to say bizarre, for its time the concept was not so out of the blue as it may seem to the modern opera-goer. She cites various examples of buildings constructed for specific art purposes such as an Artists' Colony, Darmstadt, 1901 and the Artists' Theater, Munich, 1908 (Koss, xxi).

Some of Bayreuth's extreme reputation, too, comes from the strict control that Wagner exercised over performances in his lifetime, and that his widow and estate exercised after his death. Thomas Leitch gives a striking impression of the situation:

Ever since the composer's death in 1883, productions of the Ring operas had been dominated by the "Bayreuth Style" rigidly enforced by his widow Cosima and her son Siegfried. As Erick Neher notes, "Cosima taught by imitation rather than by bringing the actors to a deep understanding of their roles so that the movement would be spontaneous and organic" (176). The result was a highly unified performance style that emphasized the integration of words, music, gesture, and production design, but in a mechanical way increasingly challenged by the rights of psychological realism in the theater of Ibsen, Strindberg, and Chekhov. Not until Adolphe Appia's 1924 production of the four operas at the Municipal Theater of Basel, in which the performers sang directly to the audience, and the 1925 Frankfurt staging of the tetralogy, in which Ludwig Sievert supplemented Appia's stylized geometric sets with modern costumes, did the Ring begin to be delivered

from an iron discipline that had originated in a quest of period realism and ended in its own hyperstylization.[30]

In a strange twist of irony, Wagner's strikingly original innovations that broke with numerous conventions combined with his own authoritarian ways (and the fact that Wagner continually kept changing and innovating and trying to perfect it all during his life) meant that later, his convention-defying innovation became the rigid authority that inspires the innovative rebellion. Wolf-Daniel Hartwich, too, notes this:

> Cosima Wagner verpflichtete die Inszenierungen bei den Festspielen auf die überlieferten Angaben des Komponisten, obwohl dieser seine Vorstellungen zu Lebzeiten immer wieder revidiert hatte. Die Kanonisierung und Sakralisierung des Komponisten ließ kritische Wagneranhänger wie Thomas Mann gegen den ‚Bayreuther Stil' protestieren, wobei sie sich auf Nietzsches Kritik der Wagnerianischen Ideologie stützen konnten.
> (Hartwich, 94)

Wagner's rebellion had become the establishment.

In concluding this section, we see that Wagner's idea of *Gesamtkunstwerk* can be traced back to *Die Kunst und der Revolution* and *Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft.* His original use of the word, rooted in his revolutionary experiences, held up classic Greek tragedy as an ideal model, and he follows in the tradition of Romanticism in hoping, through a mystical *Gesamtkunstwerk*, to unite the arts. Where he diverges from the Romantics, then, is in his latter two essays, *Oper und Drama,* and *Eine Mittheilung an meine Freunde.* There, he details his specific theoretical framework (without using the term *Gesamtkunstwerk)*, and his plans to create a multi-part operatic work in his own style and in keeping with his own principles of writing and composing,

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[30] Leitch, Thomas. "Lang contra Wagner: *Die Nibelungen* as Anti-Adaptation." *A Companion to Fritz Lang,* edited by Joe McElhaney, Wiley Blackwell, 2015, pp. 177-8.

in which he would serve as both composer and librettist – an unheard of combination of roles. His concept of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* was very much focused on unity, both of the arts and of people – he wanted his works to be a unifying spectacle that would bring Germans together, that would reform the arts, and that would provide an experience of transcendent beauty as well as a sense of national pride. Regardless of his later changes in perspective, and his reception in later years, it is clear that he did achieve something new, something that had not been done before, something which made a significant impact on the world.

Although a musical analysis of the *Ring* lies outside the scope of this dissertation, it is worth noting that the central core of the *Gesamtkunstwerk,* that is, the combination of artforms, is notable in the *Ring.* Although later iterations of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* encompassed any number of art forms, Wagner's definition in 1849 contained only 3: poetry, music, and dance. He also preferred the term "music drama" over "opera," as a way of showing that what he was trying to do was different from other operas. Soraya Peront in her musical analysis of Wagner confirms that in the *Ring*, "neither the words nor the music are of lesser importance than the other." Additionally, "Wagner's music was directly fused to the drama. In a similar way, the music was not merely an accompaniment, but furthered the plot by partnering with the poetry" (Peront, 13-14). This was accomplished by his unending melody style, preferring "operas to feature continuous melodic material, or "endless melody," where the musical material was birthed from a few simple motifs" (Peront 13). Lastly, in closing this section, one final aspect of Wagner's notion of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* is worth reiterating—the communal nature of the experience. Koss notes this in her discussion of *Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft*, which focuses on the utopian aspects of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, as well as on the centrality of spectatorship. The audience is a key factor, for the *Gesamtkunstwerk* is a communal experience—individuals having a collective

experience is a part of the concept (Koss, 19). The idea being, of course, that the individuals would be altered through their shared experience in the music drama and would then become transformed into a community. This is evident in his essays, in which the collective term "communism" is a positive element, set against its negative antithesis "egoism" (Koss, 20). It was in this way that Wagner hoped to transform his community.

<center>*Gesamtkunstwerk* Part 4: Beyond Wagner</center>

Having examined multiple iterations or interpretations of Wagner's use of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* concept, we can see that there are a few things in common: both Wagner's version and Adorno's version ascribe specific goals to Wagner's project (though they vary as to what exactly these are), they both use the term to mean a combination of multiple arts (or media), and they both acknowledge that the *Gesamtkunstwerk* creates something new, something that had not been done before and something that makes an impact on the world in some way. These three elements can form some sort of basis for the concept of the *Gesamtkunstwerk.*

First, it was clear both from Adorno's and from Wagner's own perspective, that both the concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk,* and more notably, Wagner's iteration of such a work, the *Ring* cycle, includes some aspiration towards some goal or aim, which the artist hopes to accomplish through their combined artwork. For the Romantics, this was some kind of transcendence through the Universal Poetic. Wagner, as we have seen, had more political goals in mind, as Koss notes. Wagner being "inspired by the revolution of 1848-49 (or, more accurately, by its failure)" (Koss, xix), equated unification among the art forms with political unification in Germany (Koss, 16n58). Others, such as Dan Venning, have ascribed Wagner's goals as being, if anything, more ambitious. Together with Alex Ross, Dan Venning sees Wagner as writing "from leftist impulses" (Venning, 152) and that "Wagner intended an allegorical assault on modern

<center>74</center>

capitalist society [...and] bourgeois restrictions on sexuality."[31] From Adorno's perspective, however, Wagner's goals were considerably more sinister, using art as the tool to impose his will on the masses. (These goals are not mutually exclusive.) Indeed, the control of the audience seems to be one of the *Ring* cycle's strongest potential links to fascism, according to Adorno and thinkers who have followed his lead. But however the reality turned out, the concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk* was ultimately revolutionary and emancipatory in origin. Koss argues as much in her book:

> [F]or all its affiliations with right-wing spectacle culture in 1930s Germany and beyond, this book [*Modernism after Wagner*] argues, the concept of the Gesamtkunstwerk maintains the radical, emancipatory potential of its revolutionary origins: the aspiration to merge art and life, spectator and audience, the aesthetic and the political, in order to create a utopian total work of art of the future. (Koss, xxix)

To aspire to such ends is surely a worthy goal for any artwork.

Second, to achieve such ends, Wagner famously combines the separate artforms of drama, music and poetry to create a single artwork. This is perhaps the central component, the very core that lies at the heart of the concept of the *Gesamtkunstwerk.* It is also one of the less disputed elements, though some have argued that the *Gesamtkunstwerk* must be limited to Wagner's original three arts, while others, like this dissertation and many recent scholars, argue that there could be any number or kind of arts incorporated into a *Gesamtkunstwerk.*[32] Interestingly, Koss notes that this central idea of a combination of artforms is one of the things

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[31] Ross, Alex. "Wagner, Incest, and 'Game of Thrones.'" *The New Yorker*, 29 August 2017, https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/wagner-incest-and-game-of-thrones. Accessed 20 December 2022.
[32] Recent scholars such as Joy Calico, Cecila Applegate, David Imhoof, Margaret Eleanor Menninger, and Anthony J. Steinhoff, in *The Total Work of Art: Foundations, Articulations, Inspirations,* for instance.

that lends the *Gesamtkunstwerk* so much power, both as a concept and as an artwork: "Where individual art forms, encountered without the presence of their sister arts, might impress an individual spectator, only a unified set of art forms—each one struggling to delimit its own formal boundaries—could achieve a truly powerful effect on a larger audience" (Koss, 21). A large audience whose members have, ultimately, a collective experience is an integral part of the concept, and one common to not only Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk,* but also those of Fritz Lang, and Tolkien as well, as shall be shown. Indeed, by opening up the *Gesamtkunstwerk* to a myriad of artforms, one begins to see that there have, in fact, been many kinds of *Gesamtkunstwerke* in the modern milieu. Dan Venning's article posits the HBO television series *Game of Thrones* as a *Gesamtkunstwerk,* precisely because it combines various art forms (perhaps it could be said that film is inherently a *Gesamtkunstwerk*) and because it relies on cultural icons such as Wagner's *Ring*. Venning summarizes his article, using Wagner's terms: "Furthermore, by relying on works that have attained a mythic status in Western culture such as Wagner's *Ring* cycle, the creators of *Game of Thrones* have created something similar to what Wagner himself called a Gesamtkunstwerk, or 'total work of art,' combining poetry, music, dance, painting, and all of the arts, designed to fill the 'common and collective want' of the 'Volk'" (Venning, 150).

Third, by combining artforms with specific goals in mind, the *Gesamtkunstwerk* is finally achieved through the final core component: the creation of something new. This may seem an overly trite requirement, but it is essential to the *Gesamtkunstwerk* as a concept. Even the sharpest critics of the *Ring* must acknowledge that, for all its faults, Wagner does innovate with it, particularly musically. And for those more accustomed to the romantic opera of the period, Wagner's does stand out sharply. Koss notes that: "Wagner wished his music dramas to emphasize psychological nuance, dialogue between individual characters, and his signature

'unending melody;'" these were traits that are not or had not been so much a part of the opera of his day (Koss, 19). Innovation, the creation of something new—this joins the combination of art forms and specific goals as an essential ingredient in the *Gesamtkunstwerk.*

V. Conclusion

The second and third parts of this dissertation will show that, like Wagner, Fritz Lang and J.R.R. Tolkien in their recrafting of the Nibelung material combine a variety of techniques and art types with specific goals in mind and ultimately something new that, as Wagner did, has made a lasting impact in their respective spheres. These three fundamental principles of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* concept hold true, for all three artists, as does the communal nature of the experience that their audiences inhabit. For Wagner and Lang, this is the straightforward communal nature of the theater, the collective experience of watching and experiencing in a group. For Tolkien, this played out in a wholly unexpected way – solitary readers became members of a collective of fans at a very early period. All three artists made deep and lasting impacts on their respective fields, and all three, starting with Wagner, pushed the boundaries of their chosen art forms to new and unexpected heights.

In redefining *Gesamtkunstwerk* in this way, there is no necessary subordination to Wagner, other than to say that he did it first, and perhaps most famously. It is certainly true that the term, or rather concept, of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* has had a long and often messy history, both as Wagner conceived it and in its multiplicity of forms that later came to be, and particularly so in its connections with National Socialism, so widely promulgated by prominent scholars such as Adorno. However, this dissertation argues that these dark connections, though possibly intrinsic to Wagner and his nationalistic views, are neither essential nor innate in the concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk* as a concept. Koss reiterates that "aesthetic theories themselves have a history;

the meanings of concepts develop over time," which is certainly the case here with the *Gesamtkunstwerk* (Koss, xviii). Like Koss, Imhoof, Menninger, Steinhoff, and even Brown or Venning, this dissertation redefines *Gesamtkunstwerk,* based on its beginnings in Wagner's work and yet divorcing its meaning from his persona and ideologies. Koss' own book does something similar: "This book [*Modernism after Wagner*] by contrast, in attending to the history and theory of the Gesamtkunstwerk following the conceptual model provided by Wagner, argues that interdisciplinarity itself derives its strength from the achievements made within particular disciplines—and, in turn, it strengthens these disciplines" (Koss, xxii).

For the purposes of this dissertation, then, a *Gesamtkunstwerk* is an artwork created by combining either separate art forms or separate media,[33] with some specific goal or aim that will be achieved through that artwork, and that, in being created, becomes something new, innovative, and original. The innovative originality of a *Gesamtkunstwerk* ultimately pushes its field or medium to new limits, and provides some sort of a collective experience for those who experience it. Margaret Eleanor Menninger in the introduction to *The Total Work of Art* indicates that "the ideal of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* has always revolved more around a central idea of promise rather than of delivery."[34] And this is its promise: to push art further than it has been before—a dangerous notion to be sure. Menninger's book (together with Imhoof and Steinhoff) argues for a more diverse and open-ended interpretation of the *Gesamtkunstwerk,* noting that the *Gesamtkunstwerk* is of an "aspirational nature" (Menninger, 6). Their book, whose trailblazing path (together with Koss) this dissertation follows, look at various more recent (post Wagner) works as *Gesamtkunstwerke,* (such as Brecht, for instance), as the term is constantly shifting and

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[33] Depending on one's perception of the definition of media. This dissertation is not prepared to argue either for or against medium specificity in the space allotted.

[34] Imhoof, David, Margaret Eleanor Menninger, and Anthony J. Steinhoff, eds. *The Total Work of Art: Foundations, Articulations, Inspirations.* Berghahn, 2016. pg. 1.

being redefined. This is what the next two chapters will do for Lang and for Tolkien. In closing, Menninger's words provide a fitting conclusion to a chapter on Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk:*

> The idea of Gesamtkunstwerk continues to inspire and vex us. Humans still thrill to the promise of experiencing a moment of transcendent unity through art, despite all the evidence for the potential for misuse and the passionate arguments against the dangers of totality. (Menninger, 12-3)

Chapter Two: In the Face of the Inexorable:
Die Nibelungen and Fritz Lang

I. Introduction

Friedrich Christian Anton Lang, familiarly known as Fritz, was born December 5th in 1890 in Vienna, Austria. Indisputably one of the greatest German-speaking filmmakers of all time, Lang's storied life lead him from Vienna, to Germany, to France, and finally, to the United States, where he had a profound impact on Hollywood film. Similar to Wagner's operatic *Ring Cycle*, Lang was inspired by the medieval legend of Siegfried and the Dragon to create a four-hour long film, in two installments, known collectively as *Die Nibelungen.* Lang's version, however, follows the Middle High German poem much more closely than does Wagner's. The first part, *Die Nibelungen 1. Teil: Siegfrieds Tod*, picks up Siegfried's story rather later than does Wagner, introducing Siegfried as a young man, and follows him through his adventures, marriage, and eventual death at the hands of Hagen. The film ends with Brunhild's suicide, and Kriemhild's oath of vengeance. *Die Nieblungen 2. Teil: Kriemhilds Rache* continues with Kriemhild's quest for revenge on Hagen and his family, her marriage to Etzel, king of the Huns, and the last hour of film is a series of battles as the Burgundians and the Huns kill each other off, with Kriemhild killing Gunter and Hagen before being killed herself.

As has been shown, Richard Wagner's threads of inspiration from the Nibelungen tale, the specific social goals he had in mind for his *Ring Cycle,* the way he pushed his medium to its limits, and the manner in which he gave birth to a new form or era in his medium set his work on this tale apart. This chapter explores the same ideas or themes in Lang's *Die Nibelungen* work. Where Wagner was loosely inspired by the medieval poem, varying in both in broad terms and in details, Lang follows the medieval text fairly closely. For instance, in Lang, as in the medieval

text (and other versions, such as Hebbel's) Siegfried is given a vulnerable place on his back, notably absent in Wagner's *Ring Cycle.*[35]

This chapter seeks first to situate Lang's engagement with the *Nibelungenlied* in his context of Weimar Cinema. In looking at his work on his two-part *Die Nibelungen* series, it is important to note that these films are firmly seated in the context of Lang's other Weimar films, during which time German-made silent films were among the leaders in the world film industry in terms of their artistic value. His most famous film of this period is doubtless *Metropolis*, which can be seen as a different sort of engagement with myth. Moreover, unlike opera in the late 1800s, film in 1924 was more accessible to all classes of people, and indeed, it was through the taking on of highly cultured topics such as the story of Siegfried, that helped film become an entertainment acceptable to the bourgeoisie and the well-to-do. To this end, this chapter will review Lang's life and work in the context of Weimar Cinema (section II), and engage in a close reading of some selected aspects of the *Nibelungen* film (section III).

Second, this chapter will explore Lang's aims in creating a Nibelungen story for his time and socio-political context. Where Wagner was motivated by the unification of Germany and his nationalistic goals, Lang is working in the post-Great War Germany of the early 20s. *Die Nibelungen,* in many respects, represents Lang's attempt to lay out or discover a new version of the foundational truths of his community. In the wake of World War I, this sense of community, German-ness, and even the German past lay under threat, and Lang places the fate and future of Germany firmly in the hands of the German people, making it their story, and distancing viewers from the fallen empire, and the Hohenzollerns. This chapter looks specifically at Lang's aims in

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[35] This is noted by David J. Levin in *Richard Wagner, Fritz Lang and the Nibelungen: The Dramaturgy of Disavowal.*

making the film, and successes and failures he met with in his attempt, including his reception and legacy (section IV).

Third, this chapter will examine *Die Nibelungen* itself as a sort of *Gesamtkunstwerk* in its own right. Wagner's attempt to create a new art form, a total artwork, a new kind of dramatic work, although not successful in spawning a new medium of art, nevertheless remains a monument to the huge scope and blending of types of art unique in opera. The practice of pulling together multiple media can be seen as a red thread connecting later adaptations of the same Nibelung myth. Fritz Lang does something similar in 1924, likewise drawing heavily on the Middle-High-German tale and pushing his medium to its limits in an attempt to create something new. Like Wagner, Lang pulled together old myth and new innovation to craft a masterpiece on an epic scale, utilizing all of the cutting-edge technology at his disposal, and creating the richest visual world for his mythic heroes that he could. Lang brought intense creativity to his medium, pushing it to new heights. Where Wagner intentionally sought to create a new art form, Lang embraces the human innovation and experimentation inherent in the new medium of film, bursting with hitherto unimaginable technological potential, and uses it to tell his own story for his own time, thereby furthering the scope of what was possible in film. This chapter looks specifically at Lang's use of mise-en-scène, special effects, and world building to these ends (section V).

II. Fritz Lang and his Times: Weimar Cinema, Aftermath of the War, and the

Nibelungenlied

Wagner, Lang, and Tolkien were each inspired by (and subsequently made use of) the

Nibelungenlied legend. In their own individual and vastly different ways, they took the elements

of the story that most interested them and interwove them into their separate media in an effort to

make something beautiful. Each sought to make something that fulfilled his ideal of what a story

told through opera, film, or writing should be. Each sought to make something that he found to

be important or necessary to his own time, context, and experience. We have seen how Wagner

used the elements of the *Nibelungenlied* to craft a tale that at once fulfilled his highest notions of

what a *Gesamtkunstwerk* should be while at the same time represented his attempt to provide a

unifying concept of German shared history meant to bring the inhabitants of the separate German

kingdoms into a sense of shared culture and meaning. In doing so, he pushed the medium of

opera to new achievements and set new bounds for what the medium is capable of exploring.

In an analogous way, Lang took the story of the *Nibelungenlied* as the starting point for his epic

film.[36] He, too, pushes his medium to the fullest, using every effects trick and lavish set design

he could in order to demonstrate the scope and technical achievement of Weimar film on the

international market and provide a popular national fairytale for an increasingly broad social

spectrum of German audiences.

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[36] My use of the term "epic" in this chapter is intended in the common or colloquial sense; merely as a reference to the length of the film(s), and their ambitious, even grandiose, scope. I do not intend any scholarly assertion here, such as a bold situating of my filmmaker vis-à-vis Homer, nor any scholar (such as György Lukács in *The Historical Novel*) concerned with defining the exact boundaries of epics versus novels, etc.

Fritz Lang

Before looking at the films themselves, it is vital to situate Lang's work in his context of first his

life and second the German film industry and the larger trends of Weimar Cinema. Lotte Eisner,

the noted film critic, gives insight into his early life. She was a personal friend of Lang's, and in

1976, shortly after his death, published a biography of him. Although it is more of an analysis of

his films than one of his life, it does provide deep insight into his perspectives and thoughts

about his films, among other things. Lang himself was able to review much of this book before

his death, and, according to Eisner, corrected dates and facts throughout.

Friedrich "Fritz" Christian Anton Lang was born December 5th in 1890 in Vienna,

Austria. According to Lang himself, he was a very visual person even from a young age, and

thought he might like to be a painter.[37] As a young man, he ran away from home, because his

father was insisting that he be something besides a painter. After traveling the world for a while,

he ended up in Paris living off his painting. He even studied painting at a school in Paris when he

could afford it, and still went to the movies as frequently as he was able (Eisner, 12).[38] When the

war broke out, he was compelled to return to Vienna in August of 1914. He rented a studio, but

was soon drafted and sent to war. He was wounded multiple times (spending time in military

hospitals), promoted, and was discharged in 1918.[39]

It was during this period in Vienna that filmmaking, or at least screenwriting, began to

become his creative focus, rather than painting. He first wrote a film script called *Wedding in the*

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[37] Eisner, Lotte. *Fritz Lang.* Da Capo, 1986. Pg. 9. He also declared that he loves (and has magical memories of) Christmas markets, surely a good quality in a story-maker. (Further references marked in the text with author's name and page number.)

[38] He states categorically here that he was very interested in women from a young age "to the present day," a rather specific and odd assertion from a modern perspective, though his inappropriately flirtatious style in interviews with women (for instance, with Gretchen Berg) bears out his assertion.

[39] Anton Kaes, in his 2009 book *Shellshock Cinema*, links the World War I military hospitals and the traumatic experiences on the front with German expressionist filmmaking.

Eccentric Club and was pleased to sell it to film director Joe May, but was shocked to find that

May did not credit him in the film at all. Lang cites this as the turning point when he

subconsciously made the decision to pursue directing himself (Eisner, 13).

Eventually, after Lang's discharge and a stint in a military hospital, in August 1918,

Erich Pommer saw him performing in a play, and offered him a job at Decla. He worked first as

a script reader, and wrote scenarios and acted a little on the side to earn extra. Two years later he

married Thea von Harbou and declared in no uncertain terms that "from then on, all my German

scripts were written in collaboration with her" (Eisner, 14). It was during this time he gained

German citizenship, of which he was later stripped in 1933 when the Nazis rose to power.[40]

This is Eisner's (and through her, Lang's own) picture of his life, but it was not the whole

story. Later scholars have given a fuller picture. For instance, Frederick Ott tells us that Lang's

father, Anton Lang, was:

> born in the Roman Catholic parish of Alservorstdt in 1860. His mother Paula
>
> [Schlesinger] was Jewish, a Catholic convert, born in 1864 in the city of Brünn (Brno),
>
> the capital of Moravia. After their marriage in a civil ceremony in May 1883, the Langs
>
> established their home in Vienna where Anton practiced architecture and became a
>
> *Statbaumeister* (municipal architect).[41]

Patrick McGilligan, in his notable 1997 biography of Fritz Lang clarifies that while Lang's

mother Paula was Jewish, it was not permitted for Jews and Catholics to marry in Vienna at the

time (1883). So Anton Lang, Fritz' father, never a particularly religious person, declared himself

to be non-religious (the usual custom for circumventing the laws against inter-religious

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[40] Lang was of Jewish descent through his mother, though as she was raised Catholic, she likewise raised him Catholic.

[41] Ott, Frederick W. *The Films of Fritz Lang.* Citadel, 1979. p. 10. Further references are marked in the text with author's name and page number.

marriages), so that their civil ceremony could go ahead. Paula, however, perhaps hoping to ease

her children's assimilation into Austrian society, raised her children as strict Catholics.

Seventeen years later, when Lang was 10 years old, Anton and Paula arranged what McGilligan

calls a "double conversion," with both parties formally converting to Catholicism, and then, with

a special license, marrying again under the purview of the Catholic Church in August 1900,

perhaps, in part, to aid her children's path in society and distance them from the pain of the then

prevalent anti-Semitism.[42] Fritz Lang would have been nine years old at the time.

Another missing piece of Eisner's story of Lang is the little-known fact that Lang had an

older brother, Adolf Lang (McGilligan, 13). It appears that Eisner, despite her friendship with

Lang, may not have even know of his existence, and Lang certainly ignored him as much as

possible, communicating with him only when necessary, and failing to mention him in any

interviews (not that he spoke much of his personal life in interviews at any time). McGilligan,

corroborating evidence from military and hospital records, found that Adolf (or Dolf, as he was

familiarly known) suffered from an unsightly skin condition, probably a form of psoriasis, and

was often hidden away from guests and the public eye. Lang, was therefore his parents' favorite,

and enmity between the two brothers seems to have been lifelong. McGilligan also tells of a

protracted legal battle between Fritz and Anton on the one hand, and Dolf on the other, over

Paula's possessions and property upon her death in the early 1920s.

Perhaps the most tantalizing piece of Lang's story, which is almost entirely glossed over

in Eisner, is the existence of his first wife. Lang almost never mentioned her, even among

friends, though apparently Eisner did know that he had been married before. It was fairly

common knowledge in the film world that she had died, but not much else seems to have been

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[42] McGilligan, Patrick. *Fritz Lang: The Nature of the Beast.* St. Martins Press, 1997. p. 11-12. Subsequent references in the text with author's name and page number.

widely known. Frederick Ott speculated in the 1970s that she had been a Russian Jew from Vilna, and that she had died by suicide in 1919 or 1920. Ott gives the impression that there was some whisper that he was having an affair with Thea von Harbou at the time, and that fact of the affair, or Lang himself, may have had something to do with the death of his first wife. McGilligan, after a thorough review of public records, concludes that Lang must have married his first wife some time in 1919, most likely. McGilligan was unable to find any marriage certificate or other record of her name, but document from a family member McGilligan believes her name was Lisa Rosenthal, and he guesses that she was likely either Jewish, a cabaret dancing girl, or possibly both (McGilligan, 56-6). Other scholars have posited other theories, particularly Frederick Ott, and Georges Sturm. Lotte Eisner and Cornelius Schnauber both apparently heard of her existence from Lang himself, but neither ever revealed the details. The only real public record proving her existence was from an August 1920 protocol form (at the death of Lang's mother) that he was married and living in Berlin at Tharandterstrasse 1 (McGilligan, 57).

However that may be, Frau Lang died suddenly, probably in late 1920, under mysterious circumstances. She was found with a bullet wound in her chest, with a bullet from Lang's gun, almost certainly shortly after finding Lang and von Harbou together in a compromising position. But Lang and von Harbou both testified that it was a suicide, and in the absence of any other evidence or witnesses, the investigation was summarily closed. Lang married Thea von Harbou in August of 1922. McGilligan notes Lang listed himself as non-religious on the official papers, and she listed herself as Protestant, and it was around this time that he also became a German citizen (McGilligan, 88).

Frederick Ott illuminates the portentous first meeting between two Weimar cinema greats: Erich Pommer, the legendary German film producer, and Fritz Lang. At the time he met

Pommer, Lang was acting (rather indifferently, apparently) in a play called *Der Hias*. Pommer

said, "I was very agreeably surprised to discover that behind the arrogant mask hid a sensitive

man, very knowledgeable and with honest ambitions."[43] Ott goes on to say that:

> Pommer was impressed by Lang's belief that the motion picture should follow a path
>
> independent of the theatre; it was not the function of film to imitate the conventions of
>
> the stage. Lang felt that the film must do more than simply reproduce, photographically,
>
> action and objects. As a painter, he believed that the story and its background must be
>
> combined with light and shadow to create a "filmic totality." Perhaps Lang had been too
>
> adamant in advocating a visual point of view, but Pommer was convinced that the man
>
> who sat before him was "a true artist who was concerned with a new form of
>
> cinematographic dramaturgy. (Ott, 18)

This encounter led, as Eisner noted, to Pommer's offering Lang the post of Dramaturg at

Pommer's celebrated Decla studio. As Lang moved into directing, Ott finds that von Harbou had

a profound impact on Lang's art and career from 1920 to 1932, which has been unfairly

downplayed by other authors. He points out that Lang regarded her as a very talented writer

throughout his lifetime (Ott, 22). In any case, one of their early projects together, *Der müde Tod*

(1921), though not well received at first, was later lauded in Paris. German critics reevaluated it

and were more complimentary. This helped to cement Lang and von Harbou's professional

partnership, and was their biggest and best-received film up to that point. It was released on the

eve of Decla's merger with UFA (Ott, 24-5). After two two-part films, *Das Indische Grabmal*

(1921), which marked the end of Lang's professional work with director Karl May, and the very

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[43] Erich Pommer, qtd. in Ott, Frederick W. *The Films of Fritz Lang.* Citadel, 1979. p. 18. Further references in the text with author's name and page number.

successful *Dr. Mabuse, der Spieler* (1922), Erich Pommer green-lighted Lang and von Harbou ambitious new project: a two-part *Nibelungen.*

Lang and von Harbou finished the script for *Die Nibelungen* in the fall of 1922, soon after their marriage (McGilligan, 94). Ott finds that "Von Harbou based her screenplay on Norse sagas, the *Nibelungenlied,* and perhaps Friedrich Hebbel's trilogy of *The Nibelungen (Horned Siegfried*; *Siegfried's Death; Kriemhild's Revenge*), a work which she had studied as an actress" (Ott, 26). Though other scholars such as Jensen and McGilligan suggest other sources for von Harbou's screenplay, these two seem the most likely and convincing sources. Thea von Harbou intentionally tried to synthesize different versions of the Nibelungen material:

> I made it my object to take the most beautiful from all the Siegfried versions, and there are more than most people think. The most beautiful themes have been welded into one wonderful story. It was necessary to bring down all these essential events to a short and limited space of time to fit with our modern feeling, which in no way would impair the beauty of the entire production. In the old heroic song I found one beauty after the other and there was no limit to the film's possibilities. (Ott, 107)

Die Nibelungen was released in Germany in the first half of 1924 (Part I in February, and Part II in April). Lang visited the United States (particularly Los Angeles and New York City, whose towering skyline inspired *Metropolis*) in the fall of 1924. *Siegfried*s *Tod* (Part I alone) was released in the States the following Spring.

Although Lang's relationship with von Harbou had begun passionately enough, his proclivity for young women soon led him to take a variety of mistresses. Von Harbou seems to have accepted this surprisingly calmly, and it does not seem to have damaged their working relationship. However, by the early 1930s, they were living apart, and she, too, had taken at least

one lover. In his divorce suit, Lang cited her unwillingness to fulfill her marital duties, and she

did not contest this. Their divorce was finalized in April of 1933. Despite this, in later life, Lang

loved to stress their mutual fondness, solid working relationship, and their lack of an antagonistic

or acrimonious split: "Our separation was amicable, the only thing that divided us was National

Socialism" (McGilligan, 181).

In later years, Lang was very vocal about his being anti-Nazi, and very clear about von

Harbou's support for the movement. Her legacy in this regard is murky at best; although she

never published any clear statements, nor was she particularly politically active, it is also true

that she did not appear to oppose National Socialism in any way, and it is true that her career

continued successfully throughout the Nazi regime. Lang did indeed make various films that

could be taken as critical of National Socialism, such as *The Last Will of Dr. Mabuse,* and *M,* and

once in the United States more explicitly anti-Nazi films such *Hangmen Also Die, Cloak and*

Dagger, Man Hunt, and *Ministry of Fear,* among others.[44] Lang especially considered *The Last*

Will of Dr. Mabuse to be an anti-Nazi film, and was clearly quite proud that it had been banned

upon its release in 1933. According to Lang, he was soon thereafter called in to meet with

Propaganda Minister Goebbels, but instead of the expected threats or reprimand, received a job

offer, as Hitler had allegedly seen and approved of the earlier film *Metropolis*. Lang then states

that he fled to Paris that very night, without a penny to his name. This has been disputed

elsewhere, however. Interestingly, Lang told the story many times over in later years,

highlighting and varying his account as desired. One such account, his flight in Lang's own

words, as told to Mark Shivas, later published in *Movie.* The interview was later printed in

Sarris' book, *Interviews with Film Directors,* which appeared in 1967. In the interview, Lang

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[44] Eisner notes *Cloak and Dagger, Man Hunt* and *Hangmen also Die!* specifically, Eisner, Lotte. *Fritz Lang.* Da
Capo, 1986. p. 267.

tells of his escape from Nazi Germany in the context of making his first *Mabuse* film, and shortly after completing his second, *Das Testament des Dr. Mabuse*:

> So I invented, with the help of Mrs. von Harbou, the next Mabuse—*The Testament of Dr. Mabuse*—and then said, "Now I am finished. Now I am killing him." I had been able to put into the mouth of an insane criminal all the Nazi slogans. When the picture was finished, some henchmen of Dr. Goebbels came to the office and threatened to forbid it. I was very short with them and said, "If you think you can forbid a picture of Fritz Lang in Germany, go ahead." They did so.
>
> Then I was ordered to go see Dr. Goebbels. I put on striped trousers and my cutaway jacket, stiff collar. I didn't feel very agreeable. It was in the long wide corridors, with stone flags and so on, and your steps echo, and as you come round the corridor, there are two guys there carrying guns. It was not very agreeable. You come to another desk, a third desk, and finally to a little room and they say, "You wait here." So now you are perspiring a little. The door opens on a long, long office, and at the end of the office, there is Dr. Goebbels. He says, "Come in, Mr. Lang," and he is the most charming man that you can imagine. I was sitting opposite Dr. Goebbels and he said to me, "Look, I am terribly sorry, but we had to confiscate this picture. It was just the ending we didn't like." He didn't say anything about the real reason—the Nazi slogans in the mouth of an insane criminal. And he said, "With this picture as it is, it must have another ending. That such a criminal is insane, that's not punishment. He must be destroyed by the people." I could only think, "How do you get out of here?" I wanted to get some money out of the bank. Outside the window there was a big clock, and the hands went slowly round.

So finally he said to me, "The Fuehrer has seen your pictures, and he has said, 'This is the man who will give us the big Nazi pictures.'" I said, "I am tickled pink, Herr Minister." What else could I say? And this was the moment where I said to myself, "This evening is the last moment you can be sure of getting out of Germany." I looked at the clock again. At two-thirty the banks close and how can I get out of here? I didn't get out. He was very nice. I said "Yes" to everything.

When I got out, it was too late. I couldn't get my money out. I went home and said to my butler, "Look, I have to go to Paris. Put out the things necessary for a few days," because by now I didn't dare tell anybody the truth. And when he wasn't looking, I put in all the things which a man has—a golden cigarette case, a gold chain, buttons for your shirt, a little money which you have in your house, and said, "You will take this to the bahnhof, you take the ticket and I will be there."

Because I was afraid that I was now tailed by someone, I came just one minute before the train left. I looked around over my shoulder. It was like a very bad moving picture. Next morning I was in Paris, and things were quiet for a bit. Then came a letter from the income tax people, saying, "There is a slight difference in income tax of the year 1927. I think you should come back as fast as possible." I was intelligent enough by now to know what that was about, so I wrote a very polite letter saying, "It cannot be very important, but I will come back, but not at the time you want me. I am just here trying to get a job which cannot be got in Germany; I will be back in eight or ten days." Eight days later I got a letter saying that they had confiscated all my money. Then they confiscated *M* and took everything.[45]

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[45] Sarris, Andrew, ed. *Interviews with Film Directors.* Avon Book, 1967. p. 312-314. (Interview with Mark Shivas and Fritz Lang originally published in *Movie*, No. 2, September 1962.)

Lang was always careful in curating his own image, as the Eisner biography reveals. Lang scholar Keith Grant notes in his introduction to his edited volume, *Fritz Lang Interviews*, that Fritz Lang was always an "ardent self-promoter who carefully constructed myths about himself and his life."[46] This is evident in many of the interviews Lang gave, particularly later in his life. The truth of his dramatic flight from Goebbels office has largely been debunked. McGilligan in particular notes the various records that contradict Lang's account (McGilligan, 174-85). According to Lang, he fled in late March or early April (depending on which account), but his signature on his divorce papers shows he was in Berlin in late April. Others have noted that there are no stamps in his passport from this time, and he may have been in Berlin as late as November, since he appears to have signed a document relating to the division of his property from von Harbou's. Indeed, the dramatic, even cinematic, account of his flight tells us more about how he wished to be perceived than actual fact. Be that as it may, Lang did indeed make his way to Paris some time in 1933-4.

Once in Paris, Lang made another film with Erich Pommer, before receiving and accepting a job offer from Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer and moving to Hollywood, where he had a successful career, despite the immense changes both to filmmaking and the world that separate 1920s Germany from 1940s Hollywood. Eisner notes that this change was hard in some ways, would be hard for anyone, as the role of a film director in Germany was more like "a twentieth century prince … commanding unlimited money and manpower," whereas in Hollywood the director was "just another employee of the big film companies" (Eisner, 367). Nevertheless, Lang did well in Hollywood. He was instrumental in the development of American Film Noir as a genre, which fit in nicely with his clear interest in telling stories of guilt and transgression, and

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[46] Grant, Keith, ed. *Fritz Lang Interviews.* UP of Mississippi, 2003. p. XIV. Further references are marked in the text with authors name and page number.

of the internal human conflict between good and evil. Despite some earlier criticism that his American films represent a decline, more recent scholarship has been kinder, upholding Lang's continual depictions of the human struggle in the face of doom that runs through nearly all his works. Regardless of one's position on his entire *oeuvre*, it is fully evident that Lang had indeed found his medium in the moving pictures. Keith notes that "Just as raw emotion and violence sometimes burst forth in Lang's characters, so periodically here [in interviews with Lang] does Lang's love for his chosen medium" (Grant, xv). Fritz Lang passed away in August of 1976, following a stroke, in Beverly Hills, California.

Lang the Filmmaker and Weimar Cinema

With filmmaking, much of Lang's skill seems to be more or less innate, or perhaps intuitive. This is not surprising, as we have seen similar vision with Wagner, and will see it again in J.R.R. Tolkien. While intuitive artistic prowess was not unusual for many of the more well-known film-makers of the Weimar period, the sense of falling under the creative spell of the cinema (and thereby shaping the art form through many, many films) is nevertheless a part of the story for Fritz Lang.

> This curious instinct that made me feel that I was right in choosing the cinema has never left me. I was completely immune to any criticism of my films, whether good or bad. This is not arrogance or megalomania on my part, and requires explanation: Films are, or rather were, until the end of the Second World War, made by a group of people to whom cinema was not only the art of our century, but also the sole purpose of their lives. Among these film-obsessed mortals I count both myself and the members of my crew.... [W]hoever worked on my films always considered them *their* films. (Eisner, 13)

He seems to have been rather proud of ignoring any and all film reviews. He argues that a critic who saw a film once and who was probably whipping up the review in a hurry to meet a deadline could not possibly understand or plumb the depths of a project that took dozens of others so many months to create. He makes a point of saying, however, that he felt it was only fair, if he refused to heed negative reviews on these grounds, that it was only just to refuse positive reviews as well.

One of the most interesting aspects of the Eisner's book is that it includes a short (six pages) autobiography by Lang himself, seemingly suggesting that he had thought of writing an autobiography but ultimately decided against it. He explains that:

> A chapter [about one's parentage] would delve deep down into one's private life. And I have always insisted that my private life has nothing to do with me or with my films. If my films do not add up to an image of myself, then I do not deserve the book you are writing about me. (Eisner, 15)

And what image of Lang do we find in his *Nibelungen*?

To explore this, the greater context of Weimar Cinema is essential. Throughout much of the 1900s and 1910s, German cinema, though films were being made, lagged somewhat behind in the international market. World War One, however, changed this rather dramatically. Anton Kaes sets the scene:

> Erich Ludendorff, major general and chief manager of the German war effort, had been one of the first to realize that the enemy was fought not only on the battlefield. An avid proponent of propaganda, he had suggested from the beginning of the war that film be utilized to manipulate public opinion. However, it was not until July 4, 1917, after the debacles of Verdun and Somme, that he wrote his famous letter to the Ministry of War, a

letter that is today considered the founding document of the Universum-Film-

Aktiengesellschaft (Ufa): "The war," he wrote, "has demonstrated the supremacy of

image and film as instruments of education and influence. . . .Unfortunately our, our

enemies have so thoroughly exploited their advantage in this area that we have suffered

serious harm as a result." Ludendorff was referring to the propaganda shorts made by the

British and French.[47]

Although the realization of the power of film as a medium had dawned rather late in Germany, it

dawned in force. Ludendorff's response to the powerful cinemas of Britain, France, and the

United States, was to quickly form a state-sponsored studio in Germany:

> To make up for past errors in underestimating the power of mass media, [Ludendorff]
>
> strongly suggested embracing the very medium that the right had maligned as a
>
> contemptible symptom of Western modernity. He proposed no less than a radical reversal
>
> in policy: consolidating the movie industry with Deutsche Bank funds, placing it secretly
>
> under state control, and concealing the deal as a business venture. At Ludendorff's
>
> urging, on December 18, 1917, less than a year before the war's end, Ufa was founded as
>
> a new umbrella organization financed jointly by the state and private industry. It was
>
> designed to oversee both domestic and foreign film propaganda, and to coordinate the
>
> activities of the commercial film industry in relation to the war effort. (Kaes, 35)

This solution, the creation of UFA, changed the face of the German film industry. UFA began

buying up, consolidating, and/or incorporating many of the smaller existing film studios. As a

result, not only did UFA have approach a monopoly in the German film industry, it also

controlled an inordinate amount of Germany's film talent. Kaes continues:

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[47] Kaes, Anton. *Shell Shock Cinema: Weimar Culture and the Wounds of War.* Princeton UP, 2009. p. 34-35.

After the war, the German government's secret involvement in Ufa was exposed and publicly condemned in the National Assembly. Even though the state had to sell its holdings in the company, the consolidation of the German film industry had produced an unprecedented pool of artistic talent tin every department, spanning screenwriting, acting, set and costume design, as well as directing. Fully privatized in 1921 and incorporating Decla-Bioscop, Ufa soon became the largest film enterprise in Europe, and Germany's film production in the 1920s was second only to that of the United States. (Kaes, 35)

Germany's meteoric rise in the international film market, achieved in just a few years, was instrumental in providing the conditions necessary for the blossoming of Weimar Cinema and German Expressionism. UFA's deep funding resources for series, high-quality films, etc. soon led to it attracting the best filmmaking talent in Europe after the war, and much of German Expressionism came out of UFA. It was a director's cinema. Such was the world that Lang stepped into – with top-of-the-line tools at his disposal and enough resources to create something like Siegfried's dragon, for instance.[48] Unfortunately, however rosy things were looking in the film industry by 1921, Germany in general struggled mightily in the aftermath of the first World War.

After the close of World War One, things were bleak in Germany, economically speaking. Filmmaking, however, was a beacon of artistic creativity and prowess, and out of the emotional and psychological turmoil of the times German Expressionism bloomed. And by the mid-1920s, German films, both Expressionist and otherwise, had made significant inroads into

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[48] It is a strange irony that in some ways Lang's *Metropolis* put an end to these golden years of well-funded director's cinema, with its unthinkably large budget and subsequent failure to produce revenue. But many say the impact of *Metropolis'* losses have been overstated. However that may be, by 1926-7 banks and political conservatives took over, rising inflation made it harder to get funding for projects, exporting film became more difficult, American and other imported films flooded the market, and the beginnings of what became Nazi film is detectable.

the international film market. Although he had already been screenwriting for a few years, Lang entered the directorial arena as early as 1919 with *Halbblut* and *Der Herr der Liebe*, both of which have been lost, alas, and *Die Spinnen*, and *Harakiri*. Although not all of his early films can be considered Expressionist, many were, and he is widely, if not solely, credited with bringing Expressionism to Hollywood in the 1930s, and contributing directly in no uncertain terms to the rise of American Film Noir as a genre in the 40s.

As well as being reasonably prolific in general, Lang made an early name for himself. Lang's *Dr. Mabuse, der Spieler* (1922) was quite successful in Germany (though initial reviews were more mixed in the States), and so by 1923, when Lang and Thea von Harbou were writing *Die Nibelungen,* he was already quite a well-known, prominent director. Frederick Ott in his *Films of Fritz Lang* highlights that, "Lang's rise to prominence from an obscure artist and Dramaturg to a director of world renown coincided with the growth of the German film industry in the postwar era. During the war, Germany had been deprived of film imports from the major producing centers—America, France, and Britain" (Ott, 18).

Thus, at the time of Lang's Berlin film career, Germany's film industry was turning its attention with serious intent towards the international film market. Ott continues:

> By the early 1920s, moving pictures had become Germany's second major industry, with 1,600 film companies doing business. Half of these companies were located in Berlin, which became the nation's cinema capital, with at least a hundred film businesses on the Friedrichstrasse alone. The UFA was by far the most important, followed by Pommer's Decla and Joe May's May-Film, which had transferred to Berlin. These companies, large and small, supplied the domestic product as well as foreign imports to 3,700 theaters throughout the Reich. (Ott, 18-19)

This emphasis on the international film market coincided, not coincidentally, with German Expressionism.[49] It was a strangely happy accident that this should happened in the years just after film was finding its elevation as a medium. Although film was not initially taken seriously as an art form, relegated to the fairground as a trick or spectacle attraction, this was certainly beginning to change by the 1910s, thanks to filmmakers like D. W. Griffith or stars like Charlie Chaplin. Cinema was becoming a serious art form, not just in Hollywood, but on the international markets as well, particularly with Soviet, British and French cinemas. By the time war broke out in Europe in 1914, the transformation of film into an accepted art form – if not quite on par with opera or theater, then certainly approaching it – was complete. By the early 20s, middle or even upper-class ladies need not have blushed to be seen attending a cinema. The rise of German Expressionism in the early 20s, born as it was out of the theater, contributed directly to the growing importance of film as a medium. Many Expressionist (and Expressionist-era) films were designed to raise the standing of the German film industry as a whole – to raise Germany's international profile.

Despite the exciting happenings in the film world, as McGilligan shares in his Fritz Lang biography, it was:

> During this tranquil domestic period, [that] instability and unrest wracked Germany.
> Even the motion picture industry was affected. Liquidations, bankruptcies, and a flurry of
> mergers took place among producers attempting to consolidate their resources. The

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[49] In considering Lang's impact on Expressionism, it is interesting to note that Lang was considered as a potential director for *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari.* Frederick Ott thinks Lang convinced Pommer to make Mayer and Janowitz add the frame narrative into Caligari. (Ott, 20.) Patrick McGilligan also asserts that Lang, later backed by Pommer, was the instigator of the addition of the Rahmenerzählung for *Dr. Caligari* which famously ran counter to the wishes of writers Janowitz and Mayer. (McGilligan, 61.)

number of film releases dropped off. Hollywood companies made further inroads into the

German-language market. (McGilligan, 93)

Anton Kaes explains how it was into this atmosphere of German unrest and international film

market competition that:

Lang and Thea von Harbou, who co-wrote the screenplay, used the undisputed cultural

capital of the *Nibelungenlied* to raise the artistic stakes of the new medium by a few

notches. […] While [the] popular cinema soon developed an international set of narrative

strategies and visual tropes, high art tended to draw on national folk-tales and historical

legends.[50]

Kaes also cites Griffith's 1915 *The Birth of a Nation* and Abel Gance's 1928 *Napoleon* as

evidence that "the nexus of artistic aspiration and national discourse was not confined to

Germany."[51] For Lang, in choosing the Nibelungen legend as his inspiration, his aims were two-

fold: to encourage his German audiences' national feeling (which was incredibly dispirited in

light of the immense war reparations mandated by the Treaty of Versailles) and to somehow

capture and package (though the medium of film) an impressive and unique aspect of German

culture that would astound the international film market. The chapter explores his hopes in these

regards in more detail later. McGilligan describes Lang's hopes at this juncture: "To celebrate

his citizenship and to bolster Germany's sagging pride, the newly naturalized director proposed

to make a film of *Das Nibelungenlied*, [. . .] whose many stage and literary interpretations had

proved its enduring appeal to national patriotism" (McGilligan, 93). Or, in the words of David J.

Levin:

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[50] Kaes, Anton. "Siegfried – A German Film Star Performing the Nation in Lang's *Nibelungen* Film." *The German Cinema Book,* edited by Tim Bergfelder, Erica Carter, and Deniz Göktürk, British Film Institute, 2002, p. 65.
[51] Kaes, Anton. "Siegfried – A German Film Star Performing the Nation in Lang's *Nibelungen* Film." *The German Cinema Book,* edited by Tim Bergfelder, Erica Carter, and Deniz Göktürk, British Film Institute, 2002, p. 65.

The avowed purpose of the *Nibelungen* film was twofold: first, to outwit (or better, out-

culture) Hollywood by exploiting the Germans' purportedly superior cultural tradition

and, through it, their superior access to the universal; then to make the results available to

the German public at large.[52]

With these goals in mind, Fritz Lang preceded to make his four-hour tour de force *Die*

Nibelungen, which was released in Germany in 1924. In concluding this examination of the

Weimar Cinema at the time of Fritz Lang, it is clear that Fritz Lang's rise as a filmmaker had

coincided with the rise of cinema as a medium of the arts. By leaning on both theater and

literature, cinema began to make a name for itself, and Fritz Lang made full use of this in his

films (including the *Nibelungen*), particularly incorporating visual aspects of theater, as famously

detailed by Lotte Eisner. One strange side effect of cinema's rise was the wide appeal and

accessibility of film, which permitted a far wider audience than would be possible for theater or

opera, or even literature. *Die Nibelungen* is one of Lang's few works that is based on a well-

known work of literature, which in turn made that literature accessible to a wider variety of

viewers, both in Germany and internationally.

As mentioned above, a great many, if not all of Lang's films engage in some way with

the human struggle against destiny or fate. Lang himself mentions *Die Nibelungen* in particular

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[52] Levin, David, J. *Richard Wagner, Fritz Lang, and the Nibelungen: The Dramaturgy of Disavowal*. Princeton UP, 1998. p. 97. Thomas Elsaesser summarizes Levin's argument from *Dramaturgy of Disavowal* (which he suggests may have been based on his own idea in *Weimarer Kino: Aufgeklärt und Doppelbödig):* "Levin argues that, like Lang's *Metropolis* from 1927, the *Nibelungen* film can also be read as part of the competitive struggle between the German film industry and Hollywood. He amplifies this point by arguing that it should be read as an allegory of the international film industry, insinuating that it is in the hands of 'Jewish' world capital, from which Germanic 'epic' blockbusters like *Die Nibelungen* have to rescue it. Levin, in other words, sees in the film a significant anti-Semitic subtext." Elsaesser, Thomas. "Haptic Vision and Consumerism: A Moment from Fritz Lang's *Siegfried* (1924)." *Film Moments: Criticism, History, Theory,* edited by Tom Brown and James Walters, Palgrave MacMillan, 2010, p. 70.

in a 1959 interview with Jean Domarchi and Jacques Rivette, describing that what he tries to

examine in all his films is "the fight of the individual against circumstances."[53] This topic is no

doubt one that is close to Lang's heart, considering both his catholic upbringing and the dramatic

world events that he lived through as a young adult. This image of Fritz Lang as a lover of myth,

of the epic struggle between the human spirit and the inevitability of death comes through clearly

in much of his *oeuvre*, and especially in *Die Nibelungen.* Film, of course, has proved many times

over to be an ideal medium for mythic or epic struggles. And film likewise proved ideal for what

Fritz Lang had in mind for *Siegfried* and *Kriemhilds Rache,* as well as for *Metropolis,* another

kind of engagement with myth, which followed shortly on the heels of *Die Nibelungen.*

<div align="center">Lang and the Nibelungenlied</div>

It is clear that Lang's use of the *Nibelungenlied* legend as the inspiration for his four-hour

double-feature is no accident. In a 1975 interview with Gene D. Phillips, just a year before his

death, Lang reflected on his motivations for filming *Die Nibelungen.* It is clear from the rest of

the interview that Lang is hoping to distance himself from Kracauer's *From Caligari to Hitler*

(which he detested, both as a piece of scholarship and as a perceived tarnish on his good name)*,*

and from the filmic pageantry of Riefenstahl's *Triumph des Willens* and all that that entailed.

Nevertheless, Lang provides certain insight into his choice of source material in the early 1920s:

> When I made my films I always followed my imagination. By making *Die Nibelungen* I
>
> wanted to show that Germany was searching for an ideal in her past, even during the
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> horrible time after World War I in which the film was made…. To counteract this
>
> pessimistic spirit I wanted to film the epic legend of Siegfried so that Germany could

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[53] Grant, Keith, ed. *Fritz Lang Interviews.* UP of Mississippi, 2003. Pg. 17. Interview originally published in: Domarchi, Jean and Jacques Rivette, "Interview with Fritz Lang." trans. Glenwood Irons. *Cahiers du cinéma*, 99, (Sept. 1959) p. 1-9.

draw inspiration from her past, and not, as Mr. Kracauer suggests, as a looking forward to

the rise of a political figure like Hitler or some such stupid thing as that. I was dealing

with Germany's legendary heritage, just as in *Metropolis* I was looking at Germany in the

future and in *Frau im Mond* (*Woman in the Moon*) I was also showing Germany in the

age of the rocket-ships. (Grant, 179).

Although Lang was not working with the same political intentions as Richard Wagner, who

sought to unify his disparate Germany, Lang nevertheless was thinking of Germany when he

made these films. With them, he hoped to present an "ideal" so that Germany could draw

"inspiration." Given the historical events that followed, Lang clearly felt that it was both too easy

and deeply unfair for later authors such as Kracauer to associate him in any way with the Third

Reich. Perhaps this association was impossible to avoid, given that Lang was using the same

source legend as Wagner, and given the Nazi fascination, both with Wagner and, at least

superficially, with the legends themselves. Nevertheless, Lang is very clear in his conversation

with Phillips in expressing his views on myth, comparing the imaginary American West of

Hollywood to the general Germania of *Siegfried:* "I never believed for a moment that the Old

West as pictured in the Western movies which I saw ever existed. The legend of the Old West is

the American counterpart of the Germanic myths like that which I embodied in *Die Nibelungen*"

(Grant, 184-85). Lang, like Tolkien in the next decade, did not appreciate the comparisons with

Wagner which their subject matter invites. Henry Hart, in a 1956 interview, discussing his

interview titled "Fritz Lang Today" explains that "Lang is disinclined to talk about *Siegfried*, and

shrugged disinterestedly when I said it contains things which are still effective. I had the feeling

the subject matter of *Siegfried* had become distasteful to him" (Grant, 14). Small wonder, given

his own Jewish heritage and flight into exile, and not least of all, the media scrutiny of his life in later years.

Be that as it may, in his younger days, Lang fully embraced the opportunity to exploit the myriad of possibilities that the newly expanding medium of film had to offer. And what better opportunity for pushing film to its limits than an over-the-top, grandiose legend brought to life in a moving picture? Working with UFA and Erich Pommer yet again, Lang focused heavily on world-building, ultimately opting to film exclusively in studios to guarantee the atmospheric elements and specific visual qualities he had in mind. It is important to note, too, that Pommer, UFA, and Lang also had the film export market in mind during the creation of the film. Film exports proved to be a lucrative market for post-World War I Germany, and *Die Nibelungen* gave UFA a chance to market a uniquely German story. Lang mentions these hopes in the interview with Gene D. Phillips, perhaps laughing a little at its lackluster American reception: "UFA had us take the picture to the United States for release there because it was a tremendous success all over Europe, but we did not meet with the same kind of success in America. After all, what do people in Pasadena know about Siegfried fighting with dragons?" (Grant, 180). The film was however, reasonably successful in Germany and Europe as a whole. Axel Madsen describes the situation and the film in the notes to his 1967 "Interview with Fritz Lang" as follows:

UFA absorbs Deutsche Éclair and gets Pommer and Lang in the bargain. *Die Nibelungen*, which makes Lang world-famous, is an UFA double-feature taking seven months to shoot during 1923-24. It is a national monument to Germania and expressionistic architecture in which an Aryan Siegfried, loved by a long-tressed Kriemhild, rides through colossal, half-medieval, half-cubist sets to express primitive guilt, wrath and vengeance and foretell Wagnerian doom. (Grant, 86-7)

Even in his own press, it seems, Lang cannot escape comparison with Wagner.

III. The *Nibelungen* Films: A Close Reading

Lang's *Die Nibelungen,* although not at all intended to be a *Gesamtkunstwerk* in Wagner's sense of the word, is nevertheless a monumental artwork in its own right. Like Wagner's *Ring Cycle*, draws on the medieval legend of the *Nibelungenlied* and at the same time challenges the limits of artist's medium: in the former case, opera, in the latter, film. Lang's delight in his medium is evident, as is his proclivity for pushing the limits of what cinematic technology was capable of in the 1920s. And if it is not a Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk,* his innovation blended with the epic material and the immense scope of his creative vision results in something not dissimilar.

<div align="center">Sets and Staging</div>

As has been noted elsewhere, the production design for Lang's films is often lavish, and *Die Nibelungen* films are no exception. In the opening sequence, set in Mime's smithy cave in the forest, the massive trees stand like mountainous pillars lending a grandeur to the otherwise rather squalid woodland inhabitants. When Siegfried leaves Mime, setting off on his adventures, any viewers expecting a typical 1920s painting backdrop will be pleasantly surprised as Mime and Siegfried ascend the hill behind Mime's cave, passing behind the trees and deeper into the three-dimensional background.

Lotte Eisner notes that much of Lang's intuitive creative abilities are showcased in *Die Nibelungen.* Although *Metropolis* and *M* are better known, the groundwork was laid earlier. Eisner draws a connection between *Metropolis* and *Die Nibelungen* in Lang's affinity for "underground chambers" citing first *The Spiders* (1919), then Alberich's treasure cave in *Die Nibelungen*, the moon grotto in *Die Frau im Mond* and of course the underground town in *Metropolis,* as well as the leper caves and the temple grotto in the Indian films late in his career.

She sees this as indicative of his "love of the mysterious, atmospheric and unusual, a curiosity about the mysteries that lurk beneath the surfaces of the earth" (Eisner, 37-8).

Eisner also discussed Lang's forest sets in particular detail, noting their quality and the importance of the depiction of the Germanic Urwald (see fig. 1.1) to Lang. This is especially remarkable in the sequence in which Siegfried approaches the dragon's lair. The massive trees evoke a forest so primeval that magic seems to hang in the air. It is this love of the atmospheric that permeates *Die Nibelungen* so thoroughly. The attention to the set, to detail, to the mise-en-scène is painstaking to say the least. Like Wagner, Lang had a particular vision to fulfill. This can be seen in Lang's description of creating Siegfried's magic forest, recalled by Eisner:

> Lang relates in a letter how the magic forest of Siegfried was built: 'I remember how Thea von Harbou and myself tried, at first near Dresden, then in the Harz mountains, to find a forest that seemed to fit the intended stylization of the *Nibelungen.* We could not find a 'heroic' forest. Somehow I was thinking of Boecklin's *Schweigen im Walde*, and after discussions with my working crew Vollbrecht, Hunte and Kettelhut, we decided to build the forest. And all the other external shots were built, apart from the sand dunes down which the Huns rush on horseback. (Somewhere around Berlin there was a suitable sand dune in those days, though it was eventually swallowed up by building sites.) … as far as I can remember I never filmed on location in Germany except in the grounds of Woltersdorf.' (Woltersdorf was used in *The Spiders* and perhaps *Harakiri*.) On another occasion Lang told me that if he had known the great American Redwoods he would probably have used them for Siegfried's forest. Yet ultimately he preferred building his sets in the studio or the studio grounds, because it gave him greater control of atmosphere and mood by means of lighting. (Eisner, 377-78)

By building sets for the most part, Lang could control the finished product down to the minutiae, not unlike Wagner's intentions in the construction of Bayreuth. Eisner notes that, in her view, Lang intentionally moved away from Wagnerian-styled characters – only Hagen has a beard, whereas nearly all the male characters are bearded in the *Ring Cycle*. She also is quick to point out that Lang's characters are slimmer than the traditionally stout Wagnerian characters, and wear more stylized and geometric costumes (Eisner, 73). Although Lang's approach (and intentions) were decidedly different than Wagner's, the two artists did share an extreme dedication to their craft and to invention.

The same sense of ancient and mystical terrain is found in the swamp where Siegfried meets Alberich. Indeed, the crooked tree (see fig. 1.2) and floating mists where Alberich hides has become synonymous with cinematic swamps! Lang also uses glowing light effects frequently here, whether it is the sliver of a moon shining down on Alberich as he leads Siegfried to the hoard, the halo of sunlight framing Brunhild's fortress (see fig. 1.3), or the arched rainbow in the opening shot of the film (see fig. 1.4).

Inside Alberich's kingdom, Siegfried and Alberich walk in procession along a ridge above the stone basin of treasure, with stone columns set between Siegfried and the viewer (see fig. 1.5). This set not only echoes the earlier shot of the Burgundians in Worms (where guards stood in rigid, symmetrical formation in the foreground, and the royal court paraded past in the middle ground) giving an unparalleled depth of field/action for 1924 (see fig. 1.6), but also gives the impression that, despite having defeated the dragon, Siegfried has once more fallen into monstrous jaws filled with stone teeth, which will soon close and pierce him – which does soon happen, in the form of Alberich's curse.

Worms itself features several large, distinct sets, including a full-sized drawbridge sturdy enough to hold multiple horses at one time (see fig. 1.7). Equally lavish is the full-sized ship set in which Gunther and Siegfried arrive in Iceland, and another (or perhaps the same one) in which they later return up a channel, actually floating (see fig. 2.18). Filling his sets with vast numbers of extras became something of a trademark for Fritz Lang later in the decade with *Metropolis*, but even here Lang allows Brunhild her army of maidens running every which way, and a human gangway bridge to the land for Gunther and Brunhild to disembark upon in Worms.

Ancient forests and elaborate tree sets also play a role near the end of the first film, as Hagen, Gunther, and Siegfried prepare to go on their fateful hunt. The unsurprising but no less impressive multitude of extras in the hunting camp scramble among the massive trees, producing smoke effects and giving a credible impression of bustling woodsmen's competence. The most visually notable scene here, however, is that played out between Gunther and Hagen. Feeling clearly conflicted and upset by his admittedly questionable decision to allow Siegfried's murder, Gunther mopes and winces at the edge of the camp. Hagen, on the other hand, a picture of determined resolution, hefts the spear that is to do the deed. Cutting from Hagen, displaying the deadly spear, the camera frames Gunther, and we see the shadow of the weapon move across his face and body, foreshadowing that this course of action will be the destruction of Gunther and all that he stands for. Another cut, and the camera is now behind Hagen and Gunther in a shocking (at least to modern eyes) rejection of the 180˚ rule. Hagen, still clutching the spear, approaches Gunther in the foreground, while Lang, once again displaying extraordinary depth of field and action for his day, stages the bustling hunter's camp in the middle ground against a far backdrop of ancient trees.[54] Another cut, and Hagen is standing near and slightly behind Gunther, the tip of

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[54] This is especially extraordinary, since it will be well over a decade before such films as *Rules of the Game* (dir. Renoir, 1939) and Citizen Kane (Orson Welles, 1941) become famous for having multiple planes of action.

his horizontal spear just out of sight behind Gunther's head (see fig. 1.8). Yet another cut, and Siegfried enters the camp in his boyish glory. The final cut in this sequence shows Gunther's head jerking upwards, in response to hearing Siegfried's entrance. As he does so, Gunther's head appears to move from being pricked with the tip of the spear to being transfixed by the full breadth of the deadly spearhead. Gunther will be pierced by the same fate as Siegfried, with events set in motion by his own hand.

The elaborate sets and minute attention to detail continue in the second film, *Kriemhild's Revenge.* As the film opens, Worms lies deep in winter. When Kriemhild visits the crypt where the Nibelungen treasure is held, she must wade through deep snow (see fig. 1.9), and when Hagen casts her treasure into the river, the set includes faux icebergs and real water (see fig. 1.10).[55] The sequence even features an "underwater" shot with the treasure sinking to the riverbed (see fig. 1.11). Later in the film, when Attila gallops back to see his newborn son, there are some very impressive outdoor scenes of many horsemen riding over the hills. This is yet another instance of Lang's famously lavish style involving multitudes of extras and long-distance outdoor shots.[56]

The final half of *Kriemhild's Revenge* is an extremely lengthy battle between the Burgundians (now called Nibelungs) who have barricaded themselves in Attila's palace, and the Huns, led by Kriemhild. This plot, of course, lends itself to all kinds of special shots and effects. There are, as may be expected by now, a tremendous number of extras, all fighting at various points. And just when it seems there is no end to the number of extras, Kriemhild calls for reinforcements, and more Hun extras swarm onto the set. There are also many battle shots which

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[55] This is particularly interesting when read as a sort of allegory for the Rhine river as a valuable trade route; the source of national treasure.
[56] Seriously, it is hardly better in *Game of Thrones*. These long-distance outdoor galloping horse and rider type shots are practically synonymous with fantasy film.

now may seem very classic, very standard in fantasy or historical battle films. For instance, Attila's brother shoots an escaping Burgundian loyalist, Dankwart, who then in turn throws an ax and kills Attila's brother, Bladdel (see fig. 1.12). Ranged weaponry shots continue to be a staple of fantasy films. The complex palace set allows many other elements of the battle to be shot in detail, including the Huns climbing (with ladders) up the side of the palace. This includes the (by now) siege trope shot of a defender cutting a siege ladder away and attackers falling to their death.[57] A third example would be a close up shot of Kriemhild's brother in which an arrow suddenly appears sprouting from his chest as he is apparently shot from a distance. Other now-classic shots include a silhouette battle shot with Kriemhild in the foreground before the burning palace, shots of burning arrows striking the palace, and of course various shots of the palace on fire (see fig. 2.12, 2.13).

No fantasy film, either in the twenties or now, would be complete without a few shots of heroic poses. Siegfried does plenty of that in the first film, and by the end of the second, we find Hagen leaning over a wounded Gunther, declaring his sacrificial loyalty while dramatic white smoke billows behind.[58] Later, Hagen stands over Gunther, protecting his fallen king – another now-classic trope.[59] The final shots of the film are of Kriemhild's own death from an unseen stab wound. She staggers, falls, and the film closes.

<center>Symmetry</center>

Symmetry is another important element of the cinematography and staging in *Siegfried*. As noted earlier, the sets of Worms in particular are extremely symmetrical. This seems to provide a sharply intentional contrast between the society of the Burgundians and that of the dwarves, as

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[57] The same thing occurs in the Battle of Helm's Deep in Peter Jackson's Two Towers (2002), for instance.
[58] Comparable to Aragorn holding Boromir as he dies in *Fellowship of the Ring* (Peter Jackson, 2001).
[59] Not unlike Éowyn standing over Théoden in *Return of the King* (Peter Jackson, 2003).

Alberich's kingdom is much more naturalistic and asymmetrical, and for that matter, so is Mime's home. This is particularly apparent in the first glimpse of Worms, which we see as a sort of dream sequence, as one of Mime's fellows tells Siegfried of the Burgundians. The Worms guards are shown standing to attention in the foreground, almost as though they were the upright supports of a window, through which we see the court of Worms' processional passing.

This designation of Worms as intensely symmetrical is furthered at the wedding of Siegfried with Kriemhild and Gunther with Brunhild (see fig. 1.13). Notably, this staging stands in opposition to the primarily asymmetrical sets of the Huns, and Kriemhild's second wedding, as if the Hun's uncouth savagery could be determined by a ladder to one side, or an oddly shaped window. The long shot of the wedding ceremony is perfectly symmetrical, with the strange window full of circles and crosses being lined up exactly above the evenly spaced candle array behind the altar, the two couples on either side of the altar, and the children with the incense burners mirror each other across the aisle (see fig. 1.13). The symmetry is somewhat marred in the next moment, however, when the film cuts to a medium shot of the altar, the couples, and the priest. The tallest candle is now out of alignment with the central cross of the window! This could be a minor oversight, but with a director such as Fritz Lang, that seems unlikely (see fig. 1.14). Could it be that these marriages are doomed from the start? The misalignment of the candle seems to signify the misalliance between the four characters. With this in mind, a careful eye may return to the first, symmetrical long shot of the wedding. There, the couples, their attendants, the guests, and the children are standing in a perfectly symmetrical pattern. The priest is centrally located, standing exactly below the cross in the window and aligned with the tallest candle just in front of him. The only element in the still, in fact, that is not symmetrical, is the silhouette of a figure in the foreground, standing to the left of center, not far enough to the side to

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blend in with the other silhouettes of guest, nor close enough to the center to be in line with the priest. The silhouette of this symmetry-breaking guest includes the silhouette of his winged helmet. Hagen disrupting presence lies like a shadow over these marriages from their very inception.

The wedding scene is echoed in the final scene of the film, as Kriemhild enters the cathedral once again and approaches Siegfried's bier (see fig. 1.15). The arrangement of candles is different, and instead of many guests there are a few guards, but they, too, stand in rigid perfect formation. The cross on the altar is perfectly centered under the cross on the window, and Siegfried lies in the center of the room beneath the altar. Kriemhild follows the central line as she approaches Siegfried's body, staying aligned to the central window cross, and walking only on the central row of floor tiles. However, as before, the otherwise perfect evenness is marred by a dark shadow figure. This time it is not Hagen but Brunhild, the instigator of the events leading to Siegfried's demise, shrouded in a black veil, crouching dead at Siegfried's feet.

The intensity of the symmetry and the exact blocking calls attention sharply to these instances where the symmetry is instead broken. By drawing attention to Hagen and Brunhild, Lang underscores their roles in the tragedy, or perhaps more accurately, their roles as the instruments of the fateful curse of Alberich and the treasure of the Nibelungen.

Careful framing and extreme symmetry are part of the balanced, deliberate style of Lang's *Die Nibelungen.* There is an argument for viewing *Die Nibelungen* as a German expressionist film, in part due to this extreme symmetry, which is to say, lack of realism. Eisner however is critical of the perception of *Die Nibelungen* as an expressionist film. In her view, "there are none of the ecstatic distortions, the oblique angles of *Caligari* or *Raskolnikoff,*" and

that "the only trace of [expressionism] surviving here is a tendency to abstraction, to anonymity and stylization of form" (Eisner, 69-70).

<p style="text-align:center">Symbolism: Death</p>

Lang's use of effects throughout the films is quite extensive, and while some are used to call to life aspects of the fantasy world that would otherwise be unfilmable, such as the dragon, and others, such as the human bridge gangway disembarking from the ship, may simply be Lang's idea of playing with the medium and employing his famously large crowd of extras, still others are used to create a strong sense of symbolic meaning throughout the films. One of the most memorable instances of this is Kriemhild's flashback/vision of the Death's Head tree, which is prompted by the touch of Siegfried's blood, once his body is brought back to her (see fig. 1.16-18).

Death is ever-present symbolically throughout the film. Hagen's winged helm features black wings, perhaps crows' wings, which are heralds of death. Brunhild's helm also has wings, and the two helmets call to mind Kriemhild's dream of the birds, another extremely memorable and symbolic effect. In the medieval *Nibelungenlied,* Kriemhild's dream is of a falcon killed by two eagles, which is interpreted to mean that her husband would be die by violence. In Lang's version, a white bird is attacked by two dark birds. Siegfried, being dressed in white and riding a white horse, is clearly represented as the white bird. As Brunhild tells the lie that turns Gunther against Siegfried, and as Hagen is the one who carries out the deed, it seems likely that their helms are meant to call to mind the echoes of Kriemhild's dream and to foreshadow their roles in Siegfried's downfall. Though the act of using animation (combined with shadowplay) to

visualize a dream sequence was not unique to Lang in the 1920s,[60] it does further demonstrate his willingness to fully exploit every aspect of film technology available to him (see fig. 1.19).

The treasure itself (which in this version is taken with violence from Alberich after his treachery) also represents death, or rather, the curse on Siegfried and his fate. Dying, Alberich curses Siegfried (apparently making a vulgar gesture at the same time), saying "Cursed be the heritage of the heir!" and seals his curse by calling his fellow dwarves to death and turning them all to stone. Thus is Siegfried's (and Kriemhild's) doom decided, and his curse pursues them and all who become entangled with the treasure's fate until their deaths.

<div align="center">Symbolism: The Dragon Motif in Kriemhild's Revenge</div>

Although this chapter is primarily focused on *Siegfried,* one important element of symobolism in *Kriemhild's Revenge* should not be ignored. Throughout Kriemhild's time with the Huns, dragon motifs seem to surround her. After having given birth to her child, Kriemhild is seen lying in a bed with a footboard carved in the likeness of two dragon heads. Later, when Attila arrives to see his child, he enters a outer side door which appears also to have the likeness of two dragons devouring each other. The carved inner doorway, too, has a dragon across the lintel, as though it would devour anyone who lingers beneath it. There is even a dragon motif on the tapestry above the guest beds where Gunther and the other Burgundians/Nibelungs are to sleep once they arrive at Attila's Court. The message here seems clear. If Siegfried is represented by the dragon he slew, then his lady, the lady dragon, now lies in wait for her prey at the court of the Huns.

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[60] See "du musst Caligari werden" scene from *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920, dir. Wiene) for a similar animation use, in this case, text overlaid on the filmed image rather than animated images.

Symbolism: Arches

The large set of Worms, unlike most of the other sets in the films, features many archways. This are primarily used for framing the main characters, as nearly all are frequently shot either in front of or entering through various arches. Hagen, Gunther, and Brunhild typically in or in front of rounded archways, while Siegfried and Kriemhild are often put in front of square archways and doorways. Although not the couple are not exclusively placed in square openings, the distinction is very marked. It seems a little odd that only Kriemhild's (later also Siegfried's) chambers have square doorways when apparently every other room in the palace has rounded archways.

Framing Siegfried and Kriemhild in these square (or rectangular) entryways sets them apart visually, and emphasizes their roles as the main focus of the two-part story. Although there are several scenes like this, one example would be when Siegfried is preparing for his fateful hunt. Kriemhild and Siegfried stand together in front of a squared doorway, and when he says farewell for the last time, they kiss in front of a rectangular curtain or tapestry covering an arch or doorway. Besides setting them apart visually, Lang appears to use the square looming shape as a symbol of their doom. When Siegfried's corpse is returned to Kriemhild she kneels, mourning, by his head in a long shot before a large rectangular archway that is clearly part of their chambers. The elaborately decorated beams in the ceiling are now visible. For this first time here, Gunther, his entourage, and other members of the household are shown standing in the room with the square backdrop, perhaps signifying that Kriemhild's time together with Siegfried is at an end, and that they, as a married couple, are no more. And like the shadow of their fate, Hagen himself at last enters the room, casting a long and ominous shadow of himself within the square frame before appearing in it himself. The meaning is clear. If the square archways signify Siegfried and Kriemhild's happiness and union, it has now fallen under the shadow of Hagen –

and is no more. This is foreshadowed earlier in the film when Hagen convinces Kriemhild to mark Siegfried's vulnerable spot. At the end of that scene, Kriemhild is shown exiting through a (round) archway – the only time she does this, and one of the few exits shown on screen. Hagen will bring about the exit of Siegfried, and of her happiness. She has unwittingly betrayed her husband, and is now furthering the designs of the others – those who have not shared in her happiness with Siegfried in places set apart. Indeed, these types of archway framing shots and the emphasis on the difference between Siegfried/Kriemhild and the others are frequent enough (and the square ones are distinct enough) that it almost seems as if Lang were trying to create visual motif for Siegfried and Kriemhild, not unlike Wagner does in music.

However, Siegfried and Kriemhild are not exclusively shot in front of squared backdrops. One of the most notable scenes with Siegfried framed in a rounded arch is upon his first arrival in Worms. He enters through the wide doors into Gunther's throne room, and stands in his white garments, framed, along with his entourage of vassals, in wide, curving archway. This brilliant shot echoes the very first opening shot of the film, a wide, curving rainbow, thereby underscoring the legendary nature of Siegfried, and visually cementing his status as legendary hero of the first half of the story (see fig. 1.20). This striking shot is echoed later, just after Kriemhild takes her oath of vengeance at the end of the film, in the next shot she is framed in a massive round archway as well (apparently entering the cathedral). Mirroring Siegfried's first entrance in the throne room at Worms, when he met Kriemhild, Kriemhild now appears dwarfed by the huge archway, a forlorn figure wrapped in white. But she has now sworn her oath of revenge, and is now, like Siegfried, become a legendary figure, beyond ordinary human considerations. Her only purpose is now revenge, at any cost.

Robes and Costumes

Although one of the most striking costume choices, Hagen's winged helmet, has already been

discussed above as a death symbol, there are a few other costuming choices that deserve

consideration here. For instance, Siegfried and Kriemhild are typically shown (in *Siegfried*)

wearing white, while the other characters display darker tones. This not only sets them apart

visually as the main characters (as does their squared archways), but also connects them as a

couple, visually and aesthetically. The spectator is meant to understand viscerally that they

belong together. Moreover, Siegfried in particular arrives at Worms wearing a pattern made

entirely of circles, while the inhabitants of Worms (including Kriemhild) are all styled in

different geometric patterns, featuring sharp angles, zigzags, and straight lines (see fig. 1.21).

The unity between the allies (however short-lived) is signified by a change in pattern; by the time

they arrive at Brunhild's castle, Siegfried is wearing zigzags (though still clad in white, of

course), and Gunther's geometric figures are (later in the film) a little less sharp.

Another notable costuming moment is the crucial scene in which the two queens quarrel

over precedence at the entrance to the cathedral. Their confrontation is dramatically staged with

Brunhild and her women in long flowing black gowns, and Kriemhild and her attendants in

white. The difference between the two sides could hardly be starker. This contrast is highlighted

throughout the film, with Siegfried's white clothes and white horse, and Gunther's black raiment

and horse.

III.a Film Stills[61]

Figure 1.1 Siegfried in the massive forest

Figure 1.2 Alberich's swamp

Figure 1.3 Sun halo around Brunhild's castle

Figure 1.4 Opening Rainbow

Figure 1.5 Columns like dragon teeth in Alberich's cave
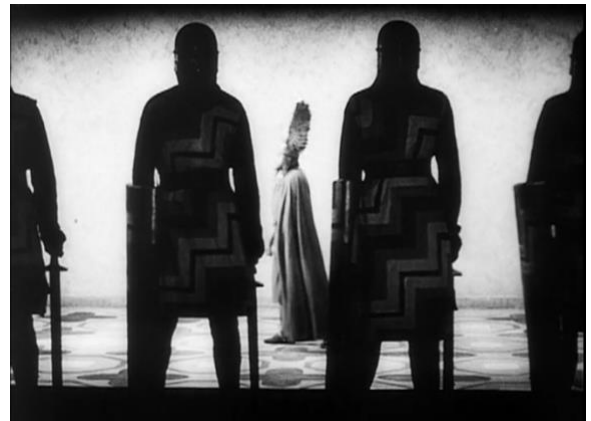
Figure 1.6 Burgundian soldiers as columns

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[61] All film stills in this chapter are taken from: Lang, Fritz, director. *Die Nibelungen*. Decla-Bioscop, 1924.

Figure 1.7 Drawbridge on set with horses

Figure 1.8 Hagen foreshadows with spear

*Figure 1.9 Elaborate snow-covered set in Worms–the crypt
where the treasure lies*

*Figure 1.10 Elaborate set–icebergs in the Rhein, where
Hagen dumps the treasure*
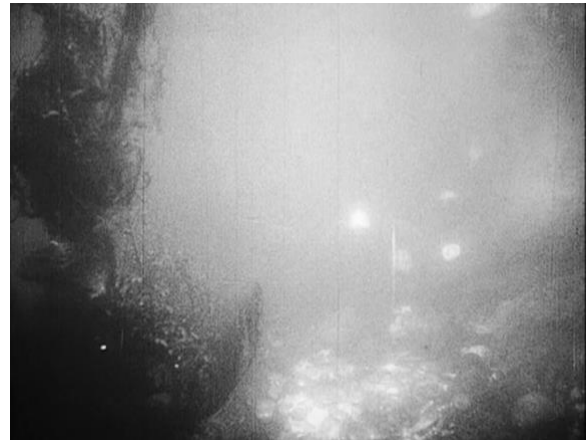
Figure 1.11 Nibelung treasure in the Rhein

Figure 1.12 Bladdel's death by thrown axe

Figure 1.13 Symmetry at the double wedding

Figure 1.16 Kriemhild remembers Siegfried in life

Figure 1.14 Something is not quite right

Figure 1.17 The wilting tree as symbol of disaster

Figure 1.15 Siegfried's bier echoes his wedding

Figure 1.18 The tree transforms into a skull

Figure 1.19 Kriemhild's dream sequence

Figure 1.21 Siegfried arrives at Worms – the last time he is seen wearing a circle pattern before adopting the Burgundian zigzags

Figure 1.20 Siegfried arrives at Worms – the only time he is framed in curved archways – echoes of the rainbow from the opening sequence

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IV. Lang's *Die Nibelungen:* Hopes, Reception, Legacy

Lang's Goals for the *Nibelungen*

As remarked above, Lang's stated hopes for the *Die Nibelungen* were to lift the incredibly

dispirited national feelings of his German audiences in the wake of World War I, and to capture

and package for export though the medium of film an impressive and unique aspect of German

culture that would astound the international film market.

Lang's Aim Part I: Encouraging the German People

In the introduction to his edited volume of essays on Lang, Joe McElhaney refers to the

Nibelungen as "a film that was the most sustained effort on the part of Lang and his screenwriter

wife, Thea von Harbou, to create a work that would serve as a national epic for an economically

and morally devastated Germany after World War I and whose dedication, 'to the German

People' (via an intertitle) could not be more explicit in this regard."[62] McElhaney is certainly

right to regard the explicit dedication as proof of Lang's hopes, but there is surely more to

Lang's perspective. Anton Kaes ably reminds us of the intense trauma experienced in the

aftermath of World War I that must serve as a backdrop to all Lang's hopes, motives, or

responses:

> In early 1924, when *Siegfried* opened, German society was deeply split and traumatised
>
> by its military defeat in the First World War and the failed revolution, by the harsh and
>
> seemingly unjust terms of the Versailles Treaty, and by a string of political assassinations
>
> and hyperinflation, which had destabilized the middle class. The *Nibelungen* responded
>
> to these multiple traumas by offering a radical shift in perspective – from history to myth:
>
> by rejecting the present, eternal values would emerge, values that would not only

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[62] McElhaney, Joe, ed. *A Companion to Fritz Lang.* Wiley Blackwell, 2015. p. 9.

relativise the misery of the post-war period but indeed would transcend them in myth.

The film took up the challenge of re-inscribing images of a founding myth for Germany

(however problematic this myth was in light of the fact that it ends in total destruction).

The political and cultural stakes seemed higher than in any previous German film.[63]

Lang and the Germans of the 1920s are not the first people to be comforted by myth in times of

national distress, though the events of the 1930s have colored this tendency with a much more

sinister tinge than it might otherwise have had. Lang, in his own mind, was trying through his

choice of the legend, to gift Germany with visual moving images of the *Märchenhafte.* As a part

of the program for the 1924 film premiere of *Siegfrieds Tod,* he published a few remarks entitled

"Worauf es beim Nibelungen-Film ankam." He detailed his hopes quite explicitly: "Vor allem

aber hoffte ich, im Nibelungen-Film die Welt des Mythos für das 20. Jahrhundert wieder

lebendig werden zu lassen, – lebendig und glaubhaft zugleich." He also expresses his hopes here

that his viewers will "sehend miterleben." He goes on to say that: "Kurzum, es schien mir, daß

gerade die besonderen Vorzüge des Films dem Märchenhaften im Nibelungen-Film zugute

kommen mußten, wenn es glückte, der technischen Schwierigkeiten – und ihrer waren Legion –

Herr zu werden."[64] In these remarks we see the well-intentioned, if naïve, hopes of a young man

(he was only 33 years old at the time of the premiere) who, deeply in love with the visual

medium of film, wants to master its possibilities and bend them to his fairytale vision of what he

sees as a great German legend.

Lang indeed sees film and legend as being natural allies, united in a common purpose. In

the mid 1920s, Ott tells us, Lang wrote an article called "Kitsch-Sensation-Culture and Film" in

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[63] Kaes, Anton. "Siegfried – A German Film Star Performing the Nation in Lang's *Nibelungen* Film." *The German Cinema Book,* edited by Tim Bergfelder, Erica Carter, and Deniz Göktürk, British Film Institute, 2002, p. 65-6.
[64] Gehler, Fred and Ullrich Kasten. *Fritz Lang: Die Stimme von Metropolis.* Henschel Verlag, 1990. p. 171. Further references to are marked in the text as "Gehler" with page number.

which he "tried to put the sensational film in perspective and defended it as a legitimate genre of cinematic art." In this article, Lang address to those who "reproach the film for catering to the desires of the masses who seek sensations." He admonishes them: "What does the film do differently than the so highly praised folktales, the glorified hero-sagas common to all nations?" (Ott, 25). The article goes on to point out that although people object to seeing violence and gore on film, there is actually much worse in literature and particularly in fairy tales, which are held up as a valuable genre of story. Lang seems to have been primarily motivated to write the article in defense of his *Dr. Mabuse* film, but his point is well-taken. Film is, in itself, a vehicle of myth and legend – regardless of the subject matter of any given film.

Lang not only views film and myth as allies, but he even sees film as a tool by which myth can be consumed or enjoyed by all – cinema as the great equalizer – unlike esoteric poems in Middle High German. In his program notes („Worauf es beim Nibelungen-Film ankam.") he explicitly wants to exploit cinema as a mass medium to bring his chosen myth to life, and *rescue* it, so to speak from elitism:

> From the first moment, I believe, I keenly felt the responsibility which I had taken upon myself by my decision to direct the "Siegfried" film. My task was not merely to adapt for the screen a pieced of literature. I had to see to it that the spiritual element would not be desecrated through trivialities and that the production should become the property of the broad masses and not, like Edda or the medieval epos, that of a limited number of highly cultivated brains. In order to gain this end, the Nibelungen production had to absolutely do away with each and every conventionality of the costume film. The production was to be put on a basis which, while having nothing whatever to do with the costume play and

the sensational drama, would still possess something of the splendor of the former and

the tension of the latter. (Ott, 107)

Steve Choe summarizes Lang's hopes for the film, citing a separate article, also from 1924:

In an article published in 1924 called "Determination of Style in Film," Lang elucidates

the "ethical task" of his *Nibelungen* films. Appealing to Germany's national specificity,

they are to teach people of the world the depth of Germany myth and fairy tale. Lang sees

this as an opportunity to bring German legend to the masses, who have been acclimated

to the sensationalism of the American melodrama. Above all, the cinematic adaptation of

the *Nibelungenlied* is an opportunity to showcase aesthetic possibilities specific to the

film medium.[65]

Choe here offers a clear statement of Lang's views about the unique ability of film to showcase

myth, as well as a deliberate alternative to Hollywood's artistic style and aesthetic.

In Lang's original German version of this second 1924 article, entitled "Stilwille," he

reiterates his desire to make a film that would make the medieval tale accessible to the masses, in

all its wondrous fantastic glory – not its enthusiastic, nationalistic 'glory' – but its aesthetic

splendor. There is a clear emphasis on the quasi-haptic nature of film and moving image that

creates a magical quality impossible in any other medium:

Hier liegt für mein Gefühl die ethische Aufgabe des Films und speziell des deutschen

Films: Gehe hin in alle Welt und lehre alle Völker! Hier liegt der Angelpunkt des

Wunsches, den Nibelungenfilm zu schaffen. Die grandiose Herrlichkeit der Nibelungen

ist, mit Ausnahme einer Handvoll Menschen, *für uns wie für die allgemeine Welt ein*

ungehobener Schatz. Wer hat im Chaos unserer Zeit die Muße und die Nervenruhe, das

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[65] Choe, Steve. "Redemption of Revenge: *Die Nibelungen*." *A Companion to Fritz Lang,* edited by Joe McElhaney, Wiley Blackwell, 2015, p. 210.

Nibelungenlied zu lesen? Wer hat die Möglichkeit, das Drama auf sich wirken zu lassen,

das schwere Wort, den starren Rahmen der Bühne, von der herab er sich das Wesentliche:

das Mystisch-Zauberhafte doch nur erzählen lassen kann? Den Drachen, den Siegfried

erschlug, den Flammensee, der die Burg Brunhilds umgab, den Kampf, den Siegfried für

Gunther kämpft, den Trug der Tarnkappe, – selbst der Nibelungen Not in Etzels

brennendem Palast, das alles sind Dinge, die er gleichsam auf Treue und Glauben

hinnehmen muß. *Aber der Film gibt ihm das lebendige Bild.* Er schaut das Geschehen, er

hört nicht nur von ihm. Und vom breiten Grund des Anfangs baut sich die unerhörte

Unerbittlichkeit von der ersten Schuld bis zur letzten Sühne bildhaft vor ihm auf. (Gehler,

162-63 emphasis added)

Lang here, in 1924, is convinced that this legend, like all myths, is a treasure for the whole

world. His emphasis on the link mystical-magical nature of myth and the "living image" of film

underscores his view of cinema as uniquely qualified to be a medium of myth. Lang continues

his „Stilwille" article: „Sollte der Nibelungenfilm aber *zu einer neuen Form des alten Epos*

werden, so war es notwendig, einen Stil für ihn zu finden, der die Idee des Werkes kristallen ins

Licht hob" (Gehler, 163). Here, again, his goal is clear: to make a new form of the myth that can

only exist in the unique medium of film, with its own style – different from literature, and

different from other films. Lang hoped to convey the full range of wonder and fantastic elements

visually: „die Majestät und fabelhafte Buntheit deutscher Dome" and „die unsäglich schöne

Schlichtheit des Volksliedes" as well as „die gespenstische Dämmerung von Nebelwiesen, wo

unholde hausen und Drachen sich träge zum Wasser wälzen – das letzte Gemunkel eines Natur-

Märchen-Glaubens – mit der tiefen Inbrunst ernster Gebete im Dom zu vereinen, das Geheimnis

der Urelemente mit dem Geheimnis des Weihrauchs" (Gehler, 163).

As far as the transposition of the antique legend into a modern medium, Lang felt that, if he were successful in his filmic translation, his audience would feel the impact of the story all the same:

> Es [gibt] keine Menschen von heute oder von damals […] Es gibt nur Menschen. Die Unterschiede, die aus den Jahrhunderten entstanden sind, verschwinden zu nichts, wenn Wesen aus Fleisch und Blut – und diese Elemente sind sich doch gleichgeblieben – vor die Urbegriffe alles Gefühls gestellt werden: Liebe und Haß, Treue und Verräterei, Freundschaft und Rache sind dieselben heute wie zu allen Zeiten, und der Mensch reagiert auf sie genau so wie er damals und heute auf Hunger reagiert.

He seems to suggest here, that the enjoyment of story is at once a basic and integral part of the human experience, undiminished by time, even if the vehicle of the story is dynamic and changeable. His essay closes with a word about fate – Schicksal – an ever-present theme in all his works:

> Zwischen Lächeln und Weinen, zwischen Gelächter und Schrei spinnen sich die Schicksale ab, aus denen zu allen Zeiten die Tragödien der Menschheit bestanden haben. Und ich habe nichts anderes versucht, als eine dieser Tragödien, so schön und so *gegenwartsstark*, als ich selbst sie nur empfand, *durch die lebendigste Kunstart unserer Zeit – durch den Film – den Menschen von heute neu zu schenken*. (Gehler, 163-64 emphasis added)

He closes with a reiteration of his hope to provide accessibility to the legend to the modern cinema-goer, and with a reminder of the power of old story to shape the present. How truly he spoke.

Lang's Aim Part II: Keeping up with Hollywood and the Exporting of German Film

If the first part of Lang's aims in making his *Nibelungen* film was to remind the somewhat depressed and economically suffering Germans that there was more to their history than recent defeats, the second part of his clearly stated goal was to provide yet another German cinema gem for export on the international market. Such a film could go far to restoring some of the international respect and pride that German had lately lost so spectacularly. Frederick Ott describes a banquet in Lang's honor following the release of Part II, *Kriemhilds Rache*, in April 1924:

> At the conclusion of part II, Lang was honored at a banquet presided over by Foreign Minister Gustav Stresemann. In his address, Dr. Stresemann described "the motion pictures as a link between nations and a *bridge from culture to culture*." Stresemann was speaking of film in general, but he no doubt hoped, as did many Germans, that *Die Nibelungen* would be a *positive advertisement for Germany and German culture*, especially in the entente nations which still looked upon Germany, the late enemy, with suspicion and hostility. Lang, who denied that it was his intention "to compete with the great super-productions of American origin," expressed similar sentiments. (Ott, 26-7 emphasis added)

Ott goes on to quote Lang, who, despite his earlier sentiments, also said he had:

> endeavored to give them [the Americans] what they do not possess, *that which they cannot imitate because it is unique and individual*. With "Siegfried" I have dared the experiment, and I hope it will meet with success, not only for the benefit of the production, not only for the sake of all of us who have joined hands in the production and have learned to love it with all our hearts, but above all, *for the sake of recognition*

abroad of the great art of which the song of the Nibelungen is one of the most noble

roots. (Ott, 27 emphasis added)[66]

After the German *Nibelungen* film releases (in February and April of 1924, respectively) Lang

made his first trip to the US in October of 1924, which culminated in a tour of several prominent

Hollywood studios including Warner Brothers, United, and Universal. Ott reports that towards

the end of the tour, at a luncheon with Samuel Goldwyn, "Pommer, reaffirming the sentiments of

Dr. Stresemann [the German Foreign minister], stated that the film [*Die Nibelungen*] might

contribute to *breaking down the barriers of distrust between nations*" (Ott, 28 emphasis added).

A part of representing one's own nation is, after all, representing it to other nations. Daniel

Morgan notes that "*Die Nibelungen*, after all, seems to mark Lang's final attempt to create an

'authentically German' style of his own."[67] Although Lang's level of success in international

diplomacy can be debated, it is clear that he filmed *Die Nibelungen* with an eye for the

international film market.

    Success and Failure Part I: The Dark Side of Lang's Portrayal and the *Dolchstosslegende*

As we have seen, Lang's stated hopes for the *Die Nibelungen* were to encourage his German

audiences' national feeling and to export an impressive cultural artifact for the international film

market. How did he fare? This section examines the fallout from his hopes of making the so-

called national legend accessible to the masses.

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[66] Paul Jensen cites this same speech of Lang's, drawing comparisons between Hebbel's and Lang's versions of the Nibelungen material, and asserting that both men were motivated to bring the story to the public. He quotes Lang as follows: "Lang too hoped his version would be successful "for the sake of recognition abroad of the great art of which the song of the Nibelungen is one of the most noble roots."" [Lang quote source provided by Jensen: "Letters and Art: Wagner Thirty Miles Away," *Literary Digest* (September 26, 1925).] Jensen, Paul M. *The Cinema of Fritz Lang.* A. S. Barnes, 1969. p. 48.
[67] Morgan, Daniel. "Beyond Destiny and Design: Camera Movement in Fritz Lang's German Films" *A Companion to Fritz Lang,* edited by Joe McElhaney, Wiley Blackwell, 2015, p. 260.

Anton Kaes has earlier reminded us of the backdrop of trauma that permeates nearly every aspect of German culture and society in the immediate aftermath of the first World War. Here, he recounts the peculiar associations between the medieval legend of the Nibelungen and the end of World War I:

> Both von Hindenburg and Ludendorff had invoked the Nibelungen myth in early 1917 when they established the so-called Siegfried Line on the battlefield between Arras and Reims. After being defeated by the French, the German army successfully retreated to this line because it was heavily fortified and, like Siegfried, supposedly invulnerable. Naming it after the hero of the German epic was also meant to inspire confidence and keep alive the idea of what was widely propagated as a *Sieg-Frieden,* a pun on the name Siegfried, meaning peace (Friede) through victory (Sieg).
>
> When in summer 1918 Ludendorff again retreated to the Siegfried Line, the defense did not hold, and few weeks later the German army was in total disarray. But defeat did not keep Ludendorff from once again exploiting the Nibelungen saga, now by linking the murder of Siegfried to the military defeat. He blamed the outcome of the war on a betrayal. Just like Siegfried, Germany had been betrayed and "stabbed in the back" by a home front that did not sufficiently support the fighting army. (The fact that Siegfried was killed by a spear, not stabbed with a knife, was overlooked.) The so-called stab-in-the-back legend was heavily promoted toward the end of the war by both the government and the Supreme High Command, which had in fact misled the public about the true state of military progress for years. Even in 1924, these mythically tinged lies lived on.[68]

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[68] Kaes, Anton. *Shell Shock Cinema: Weimar Culture and the Wounds of War.* Princeton UP, 2009. p. 145.

Proponents of the *Dolchstosslegende* variously blamed Communists, Marxists, Bolsheviks, and all the women who had likely been unfaithful to the soldiers at the front. But mostly and above all, they blamed the Jews. Kaes concurs: "Predictably, the trauma of defeat was displaced onto an already stigmatized group. A prevailing fiction, the so-called *Dolchstoßlegende,* the 'stab-in-the-back myth,' blamed Germany's military defeat on the Jews."[69] This pervasive falsehood infected German society to such a great extent, that by 1924 its associations with any and all versions of the Nibelungen story were indelible. Thomas Elsaesser summarizes the situation:

> Fritz Lang's two-part *Die Nibelungen* is, everyone agrees, a masterpiece of Weimar cinema: a landmark in the development of cinematographic art and special effects, an extraordinary display of the use of light and shadow in the staging of mass scenes, an exquisite example of Ufa set design, which – made between 1922 and 1924 – shows Erich Pommer's famous Decla studio at one of the peaks of its creative power.… Equally well known is the fact that, with a script based on the ancient twelfth-century German and Norse epic poem, Das Nibelungenlied, this monumental film of 288 minutes (in its most complete, restored version) has never been anything but steeped in controversy: for its slow-moving, bombastic *mise en scene,* for its pastiche iconography, borrowed mainly from Carl Otto Czeschka's Jugendstil designs, and above all for its nationalist, 'revanchist' ideology.

Elsaesser goes on to say that the films, and particularly the image of Siegfried, murdered by the betrayals of Kriemhild and Hagen, "seemed to give credence to the so-called *Dolchstoss-Legende*, the myth that the Germany army had been defeated in the war of 1914-18 not on the battlefield but because it was 'stabbed in the back' by 'socialist' politicians and communists on

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[69] Kaes, Anton. *Shell Shock Cinema: Weimar Culture and the Wounds of War.* Princeton UP, 2009. p. 111.

the home front, undermining the morale of the civilian population."[70] Moreover, much of the imagery, especially Siegfried's poses, found in Lang's film were familiar and current in common artistic discourse surrounding the Nibelungen story. Kaes notes that:

> Since its rediscovery in the middle of the eighteenth century and its glorification at the height of German romanticism, the epic had become mandatory reading in school. It was a favourite among illustrated children's books, and it comes as no surprise that Lang took his major design ideas from Carl Otto Czeschka's illustrated *Nibelungen* edition for children, published in 1909…. It was also widely known that Hindenburg and Hitler, after the defeat of the German army in 1918, had likened Germany to the figure of Siegfried, claiming that Germany was betrayed by the home front and stabbed in the back just like Siegfried was. In popular memory from the romantic period to the First World War, Germany was identified with Siegfried. Siegfried was Germany. Germany was Siegfried.[71]

Thus, even before it was filmed, Lang's choice of an uplifting legend was already tainted with anti-Semitism, lies, and propaganda.

Even if we excuse Lang from associations with the *Dolchstosslegende* on the grounds that he was an artist with perhaps less notion than he should have had about the political rumours of his day, it cannot be denied that, separate and apart from any connotations about his subject matter in general, there are arguably a certain anti-Semitic, or at least nationalistic and potentially racist elements in *Die Nibelungen.* Patrick McGilligan acknowledges, for instance, the "racial implications" of some parts of the film – particularly the anti-Semitic portrayal of

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[70] Elsaesser, Thomas. "Haptic Vision and Consumerism: A Moment from Fritz Lang's *Siegfried* (1924)." *Film Moments: Criticism, History, Theory,* edited by Tom Brown and James Walters, Palgrave MacMillan, 2010, p. 70.
[71] Kaes, Anton. "Siegfried – A German Film Star Performing the Nation in Lang's *Nibelungen* Film." *The German Cinema Book,* edited by Tim Bergfelder, Erica Carter, and Deniz Göktürk, British Film Institute, 2002, p. 65.

Alberich (McGilligan, 103). Thomas Elsaesser summarizes David J. Levin's argument from *Dramaturgy of Disavowal* (which he suggests may have been based on his own idea in *Weimarer Kino: Aufgeklärt und Doppelbödig*)*:*

> Levin argues that, like Lang's *Metropolis* from 1927, the *Nibelungen* film can also be read as part of the competitive struggle between the German film industry and Hollywood. He amplifies this point by arguing that it should be read as an allegory of the international film industry, insinuating that it is in the hands of 'Jewish' world capital, from which Germanic 'epic' blockbusters like *Die Nibelungen* have to rescue it. Levin, in other words, sees in the film a significant anti-Semitic subtext.

From this perspective, the entire existence of the film could be read as an "Aryan" action against the Jewish-American run Hollywood. To cite a more ambiguous example, Elsaesser connects the scene in *Siegfried* in which Alberich shows Siegfried a sort of film-within-a-film with the tradition of "Rube Films" in which a thoroughly derided bumpkin believes in the reality of the moving pictures as well as with a meta-level reading of the (primarily Jewish-run) Hollywood studios (represented by Alberich and his wealth) being lorded over and conquered by a 'Germanic' film (Siegfried). He says of this moment: "Its ironic-playful self-referentiality removes the film, for a few instances, from the associations of suspected nationalism, revanchism and anti-Semitism that *Die Nibelungen* carries for the modern viewer without thereby freeing it from this heavy burden."[72]

It is also true, of course, that Lang's *Nibelungen* films were re-evaluated in the early 1930s as the Nazis came into power, with *Siegfrieds Tod* being especially praised – and even re-

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[72] Elsaesser, Thomas. "Haptic Vision and Consumerism: A Moment from Fritz Lang's *Siegfried* (1924)." *Film Moments: Criticism, History, Theory,* edited by Tom Brown and James Walters, Palgrave MacMillan, 2010, p. 70, 72.

released, under the title *Siegfried,* complete with an introduction by Theodor Loos and a score comprised of Wagner music. *Kriemhilds Rache,* meanwhile, was quietly forgotten. McGilligan notes that "during the Nazi era the second part was not made available to the public, because its all-out nihilism conformed even less to Nazi ideology—though the first half, without the pay-off, was essentially meaningless" (McGilligan, 103). Be that as it may, however, Lang is at least not responsible for the Nazi party commandeering his work, as it did so many others.

There are, naturally enough, as many ways of viewing Lang's work as there are spectators who have seen it. As Paul Jensen reminds us:

> In these films Lang transferred part of a national heritage into permanent visual form, and he did so with great skill and imagination. In the process he was also able to examine the thematic concerns of duality, revenge, and guilt,… An innocent individual is threatened by his social environment…. [The supernatural] can be controlled or defeated in some way, while the normal world of chance, emotions, and human nature becomes the menace (Jensen, 57).

And this "national heritage" like Germany itself has a complex and (at times, darkly) storied history. I would agree with Tim Bergfelder, Erica Carter, and Deniz Göktürk that there is something to be said for separating German Cinema from German political history, at least to a limited extent, for it has often overshadowed cinema and led to flawed retrospective interpretations.[73] They particularly speak to the extreme influence of Siegfried Kracauer's *From Caligari to Hitler* on later 20th century understandings of Weimar Cinema, which had a direct influence on Lang himself, as we shall see. Bergfelder, Carter and Göktürk argue in the introduction to their book:

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[73] Bergfelder, Tim, Erica Carter, and Deniz Göktürk. *The German Cinema Book.* British Film Institute, 2002. For the specifics of this argument, see the first Introduction.

One reason why the conception of German cinema around notions of the national and art has proved so persistent and persuasive is that is complements commonly held ideas and stereotypes of German identity and culture which remain in circulation both abroad and in Germany itself. Because German Cinema (and culture more generally) has often been exclusively defined as 'high culture', the notion of a popular German cinema is, particularly outside Germany, difficult to imagine, possibly even eliciting ridicule and disbelief.[74]

While it may be true in general, that German film has been unfairly politicized because of the extreme nature of German political history, it is arguable that Lang's choice of the Nibelung material in such a socio-political climax cannot be viewed as neutral. However, in this instance, it is worth noting, as does Steve Choe, that contrary to the numerous explicit links between the character of Siegfried and the so-called *Dolchstoßlegende,* Lang's film portrays Hagen's betrayal "as necessary and justified."[75] Indeed, most readings of Lang's film actually uphold Hagen as the possessor of the true Germanic ideals of *Treue* and *Ehre.* Such a reading makes Lang's film subversive of the prevailing *Dolchstosslegende*.

It seems clear, then, that Lang did not partake in, or intend his film to partake in, any sort of explicit anti-Semitism or *Dolchstoss* perspective. But what of his portrayal of Alberich the dwarf, the most evidently anti-Semitic portrayal in the film? Patrick McGilligan appears to agree with Eisner in concluding that this portrayal was more a product of the society of the time, and

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[74] Bergfelder, Tim, Erica Carter, and Deniz Göktürk. *The German Cinema Book.* British Film Institute, 2002. p. 2. This introduction suggests that many readings of Weimar cinema are strung between Kracauer and Adorno. "Critical approaches to German Cinema have, in sum, often been constricted by the double ideological bind of, on the one hand, a Marxism that situates film within the culture industry as an ineluctable matrix of capitalist mass manipulation [Adorno], and on the other, a theory of nation in which film becomes the morally compromised product of a national culture tainted with fascism's historical stain [Kracauer]" (4). They then go on to highlight current work on film being done in Germany and argue for new theories and new methods.
[75] Choe, Steve. "Redemption of Revenge: *Die Nibelungen.*" *A Companion to Fritz Lang,* edited by Joe McElhaney, Wiley Blackwell, 2015, p. 199.

the (admittedly anti-Semitic) way in which dwarves had long been portrayed in Western Europe, rather than any idiosyncratic attitude of Lang's. McGilligan concludes: "The inklings [of political awareness] may have been there, but Lang the patriot was more an artist than a practical man, largely unaware of the nascent Nazi movement in 1923-24. He was still sleepwalking through history" (McGilligan, 103).

<div align="center">Lang's Legacy Part I: Siegfried Kracauer</div>

No discussion of the associations between Lang's *Die Nibelungen* and National Socialist ideology could be complete without considering a film theory text that has overshadowed and been entwined with Lang's film for the greater part of the 20th century. I refer to Siegfried Kracauer's watershed book, *From Caligari to Hitler,* which appeared in 1947. Although it is surely responsible for bringing Weimar Cinema deservedly further into the public eye, particularly the scholarly-film theorist public eye, its rather problematic thesis has become indelibly associated with many of the films it discusses, *Die Nibelungen* included.

Kracauer's idea is that the seeds of National Socialism were already present in 1920s German cinema, and that by using these films as a sort of cultural gauge, one could trace the growth of these seeds to their fruition in 1933 and the rise of Nazism. Although many have taken issue with this thesis, most notably Thomas Elsaesser working on what he called the "historical imaginary" in *Weimar Cinema and After,* Kracauer's influence on the critical theory reception of Weimar cinema can hardly be overstated.[76]

For Lang's *Nibelungen* work, Kracauer has influenced even modern reception quite broadly. For instance, Steve Choe finds extreme rigidity in the mise-en-scène of Lang's film,

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[76] Elsaesser points out that Kracauer did not analyze a large enough sample of films to make this claim satisfactorily, and he and others have questioned the efficacy of using films to pyschoanalyze an entire country. Elsaesser, Thomas. *Weimar Cinema and After.* Routledge, 2000.

which he sees (retrospectively, of course) as being a key ingredient in National Socialist ideology:

> Kracauer sees this causal rigidity echoed in the mise-en-scène of the film. The austere, highly ritualized acting, the larger-than-life, monumental architecture, and the rigor of the perspectival framework organizing each shot: all this aesthetically mirrors Fate's uncompromising compulsion.

For Choe, Kracauer's view that Hagen is the instrument of fate in the *Nibelungen* posits him as an unfavorable character and connects fate and revenge to foreshadow the Nazi party's views:

> If the pursuit of revenge may be said to provide an overarching structure to Lang's film, then according to this strict logic, an eye *must* be necessarily compensated with an eye, a tooth *must* be given up for a tooth, and betrayal *must* be followed by revenge. For Kracauer, this linkage of means to ends is overseen by the power-hungry Hagen, whose adherence to the principle of necessity foreshadows [the Nazi leaders].[77]

In Kracauer's view, fate, Hagen, and the rise of Nazism are all inevitable: "Fate's pace-maker is Hagen, whose sinister presence suffices to prevent any good luck from slipping in and altering the inevitable."[78] Another example of Kracauer's influence on modern theory might be what Tom Gunning calls the "Destiny-machine," whereby fate is logic and structure.[79] Choe says that for Gunning (and Kracauer): "'Fate' is not a metaphysical concept, but a 'material' one for Gunning, functioning as a kind of structuring logic for the modern world in general." But for all his (very helpful) influence, Kracauer's theory is generally seen as inadequate for a fair

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[77] Choe, Steve. "Redemption of Revenge: *Die Nibelungen.*" *A Companion to Fritz Lang,* edited by Joe McElhaney, Wiley Blackwell, 2015, p. 199-200.

[78] Kracauer, Siegfried. *From Caligari to Hitler.* Princeton UP, 2019. p. 93. Further references are marked in the text with author's name and page number.

[79] Gunning, Tom. *The Films of Fritz Lang: Allegories of Vision and Modernity.* British Film Institute, 2006.

evaluation of Weimar Cinema. Steve Choe summarizes: "Lang intended *Die Nibelungen* to be understood as a resurrection of the *Nibelungenlied*, a reanimation of the past, and not as a forecasting of the future, as Kracauer's *From Caligari to Hitler* argues."[80] Choe is speaking specifically about the *Nibelungen* film, of course, but the point would be true for most of the works Kracauer discusses.

An interesting side effect of Kracauer's publishing when and where he did is that Lang had to deal with the public and recurrent discussion and speculation about his and his works' relationship to National Socialism. What makes this even stranger is that Lang had actually known and befriended Kracauer when they were living in Berlin during the interwar period. It must have been hard to hear himself so firmly associated with National Socialism (if only in a premonitory sense), particularly considering his Jewish heritage and his own exile. Lang seems to have felt this as something of a betrayal. It is worth recalling Lang's words quoted earlier:

> By making *Die Nibelungen* I wanted to show that Germany was searching for an ideal in her past, even during the horrible time after World War I in which the film was made.… To counteract this pessimistic spirit I wanted to film the epic legend of Siegfried so that Germany could draw inspiration from her past, and not, as Mr. Kracauer suggests, as a looking forward to the rise of a political figure like Hitler or some such stupid thing as that. (Grant, 179)

Before completely dismissing Kracauer, however, it must be remembered, as Bergfelder, Carter, and Göktürk note in their introduction, that a "critical rediscovery of Weimar film theory" in the 1960s was due in part to Kracauer's *Theory of Film* (1964) and later *Mass Ornament* (1977)*,* as

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[80] Choe, Steve. "Redemption of Revenge: *Die Nibelungen*." *A Companion to Fritz Lang,* edited by Joe McElhaney, Wiley Blackwell, 2015, p. 211, 214.

well as works by Benjamin and Balázs. They also summarize the general modern perspective on Kracauer and Weimar Cinema quite succinctly:

> The rediscovery of the Weimar Kracauer, and the concomitant displacement of his 1947 *From Caligari to Hitler,* are, however, only part of a larger process that has begun to unhook German film historiography from its anchorage in a political master narrative of nation. Weimar film theory emerged in response to a modern cinema whose production modes, film styles and popular appeal derived as much from German film's relation to international as to national film-cultural, political and economic developments.[81]

Despite these positive aspects, Lang was not only hurt by Kracauer's thesis, but he felt the need to defend his *Nibelungen* from the aspersions thereby cast on it for the rest of his life. Patrick McGilliagan explains that, from Lang's perspective, Siegfried Kracauer had "branded Lang's film an incipient Nazi document.... Worse, according to Kracauer, Nazi propaganda pieces like *Triumph of the Will* drew their inspiration from *Die Nibelungen.*" He continues: "The accusations of Kracauer, whom he had befriended, haunted the director to the end of his days." (McGilligan, 103)

<center>Success and Failure Part II: Release and Reception</center>

As stated above, the first part of Lang's aim in making his *Nibelungen* film was to remind the economically depressed Germans that there was more to being German than defeat and reparation payments, and the second part of his clearly stated goal was to provide a cultural artifact in the form of German cinema that could be exported with pride on the international market. How did his film fare? This section examines the releases of *Die Nibelungen* in Berlin, London and New York, and the reception it received.

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[81] Bergfelder, Tim, Erica Carter, and Deniz Göktürk. *The German Cinema Book.* British Film Institute, 2002. pp. 6-8.

In looking at the reception for a film by a film director as famous as Fritz Lang, it is easy to assume it was well received in Germany, particularly in light of the fact that Lang had a successful career in both Berlin and Hollywood. However, in the introduction to his edited volume of essays on Lang, Joe McElhaney gently reminds readers that despite the retrospective glorification of Lang as a director during his German career (especially considering many critics' opinion that his US films never quite lived up to his Weimar triumphs) is neither accurate nor fair. He says: "In spite of the widely held belief that Lang's German period represented a critical and aesthetic height to which his Hollywood career was never able to aspire, Lang's German films, in fact, often drew sharply divided critical responses upon their initial release."[82] As McElhaney suggests, reviews and accounts of Lang's *Nibelungen* were, even in Berlin, quite mixed.

A. The Berlin Premiere

The German premiere of *Siegfried* took place on 14 February, 1924 at the UFA-Palast am Zoo, Berlin's most prestigious film theater. *Kriemhilds Rache* came out in the same location on 26 April, 1924. Willy Ley (who had collaborated with Lang on *Frau im Mond)* recalled the experience of a Fritz Lang premiere in the 1920s:

> The audience—it was an unwritten but rigid rule that one had to wear full evening dress, not just a dinner jacket—comprised literally everybody of importance in the realm of arts and letters with a heavy sprinkling of high government officials. It is not an exaggeration to say that sudden collapse of the theater building during a Fritz Lang premiere would have deprived Germany of much of its intellectual leadership at one blow, leaving mostly those who for one reason or another had been unable to attend. (Ott, 8)

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[82] McElhaney, Joe, ed. *A Companion to Fritz Lang.* Wiley Blackwell, 2015. p. 6.

This account seems a little exaggerated, but clearly shows the esteem in which Lang was held. Anton Kaes reports that the Berlin premiere was a tremendous success:

> Billed as a *Monumentalfilm,* the *Nibelungen's* premiere resembled that of an opera with orchestra, curtain and long applause at the end of the film. The director as well as the actors appeared on stage to take bows and receive flowers. At a banquet afterwards, Stresemann expressed the hope that the Nibelungen film would unite the German people and build a bridge to other nations. Stresemann's speech (published in the next day's papers) confirmed the film's serious political and ethical mission. His words echoed a chorus of voices that had preceded the film's premiere and pre-structured its reception.[83]

This account sounds very positive, though it also hints a certain attempt to control the reception. This turns out to be the case. The release of *Die Nibelungen* certainly had a nationalistic flavor, or at least a strongly political one, according to Kaes:

> When *Siegfried*, the long-anticipated new film by Fritz Lang finally opened on 14 February 1924, it was more than a cultural event. It was brazenly political. Gustav Stresemann, Germany's Foreign Minister, and numerous other politicians as well as delegates from German industry and commerce were in attendance. The widely covered spectacle turned these officials themselves into actors who performed their roles as representatives of the nation; they provided the national framework within which a cultural product like the *Nibelungen* – Germany's quintessential national epic – could resonate.

Though it may be true enough, Kaes does not seem to take into account that a nation seeking to export film and cultural artifacts for financial gain must perform "as representatives of that

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[83] Kaes, Anton. "Siegfried – A German Film Star Performing the Nation in Lang's *Nibelungen* Film." *The German Cinema Book,* edited by Tim Bergfelder, Erica Carter, and Deniz Göktürk, British Film Institute, 2002, p. 65.

nation," to export their goods. This does not necessarily indicate some kind of proto-Nazisim, though there is not denying a nationalistic spirit was widely prevalent at the time – and not only in Germany.

Kaes also tells us, intriguingly, that the *Nibelung* film was, at the time, the most expensive European-made film to date! It is small wonder that Dr. Stresemann would hope for successful exports of the film! Kaes details the events of the premiere:

> Costing 8 million marks, it was the most expensive European film ever made before *Metropolis* topped this record three years later. A sixty-member symphony orchestra played an original score by Gottfried Huppertz, emulating the *leitmotif* structure of Richard Wagner's *Ring des Nibelungen* (1876). Cinema itself seemed to have arrived at the pinnacle of high culture after having [been] denigrated (especially in Germany) as a disreputable and frivolous form of commercial mass culture for more than two decades.[84]

This information is moreover notable in that Kaes is drawing a connection between Lang's *Nibelungen* and Richard Wagner, yet, as shall be shown, Huppertz score was meant more as a deliberate stepping away from Wagner than any kind of tribute to him.

In case this information is not enough to dispel the common belief, according to McElhaney, of Lang's immediate and total popularity where German audiences are concerned, let it also be mentioned that T. R. Ybarra of *The New York Times,* reporting on the German film premiere, reports of protests against UFA-created advertisements. The protesters were apparently upset that Lang's that portrayal of the Burgundians came across as less-than-noble, or so McGilligan tells us. McGilligan also notes that Lang's "uncompromising attitude toward Siegfried, Kriemhild and the Burgundians disturbed certain German critics" who wanted the

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[84] Kaes, Anton. "Siegfried – A German Film Star Performing the Nation in Lang's *Nibelungen* Film." *The German Cinema Book,* edited by Tim Bergfelder, Erica Carter, and Deniz Göktürk, British Film Institute, 2002, pp. 64-65.

heroes to be less morally gray, and felt that Lang's film did not offer sufficient "opportunity for nationalistic demonstrations" (McGilligan, 102). Lang, it seems, is brought up all standing by Kaes on the one hand, taken to task for holding too nationalistic a film premiere, while on the other hand, there are protesters in the street saying that his film is not nationalistic enough. Such was the quandary and fine line that Lang's film tried to walk.

T. R. Ybarra, who had initially reported on the protests on behalf of *The New York Times*, is cited again in Paul Jensen's book with a contemporary review in April 1924, just after the German release of *Kriemhilds Rache*, telling of further protests. Jensen cites Ybarra's article entitled "*Die Nibelungen* Meets Disaster in Berlin," *The New York Times* (published 29 April, 1924), three days after the German release of *Kriemhild*:

> *Siegfrieds Tod* was the greater success of the two films, no doubt because this
> nationalistic saga of a Nordic hero returned to the German people some of the self-
> confidence lost after the First World War, and needed during the current inflationary
> period. But the irony added by *Kriemhilds Rache,* with its more serious concern with the
> nature of revenge, probably proved too disturbing; significantly, its first showing in
> Germany was halted by protests from the audience against the final sequence of
> Kriemhild's murders. The viewers were offended at seeing a nationalistic heroine so
> besmirched.[85]

Despite Ley and Kaes reporting that the film was well-received, Ybarra's account and McGilligan's certainly call this into question.

Sadly for Lang, protests and too much/too little nationalism were not his only troubles. Frederick Ott reports that Lang decided to re-edit the film just a few days before the premiere,

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[85] See Ybarra's article re. the protests. Jensen, Paul M. *The Cinema of Fritz Lang.* A. S. Barnes, 1969. p. 54.

and, as he could not quite get it finished in time, carried the film reel by reel to his own premiere.

Ott says "*Die Nibelungen* premiered at the UFA-Palast am Zoo on February 14, 1924. Edgar G.

Ulmer recalled that on the night of the premiere, "Lang carried it reel by reel to the theater

because he was still cutting. When the second reel was running, he was cutting the third" (Ott,

26). McGilligan corroborates this account.[86] He paints a colorful picture of Lang deciding to re-

edit the entire *Siegfried* film a few days before the show, to the point of finishing the later reels

while the first were playing. Because of this, McGilligan details that the premiere was something

of a disaster, with long pauses between the reels, and the audience becoming inattentive and

restless: "The premiere, held hostage to the director's perfectionism, was one of Germany's all-

time fiascos" (McGilligan, 101). Strong language from McGilligan! In all, it seems, McElhaney

was right to remind us that his German period was not necessarily smooth sailing for Lang where

reception is concerned. But what of *Die Nibelungen's* international releases?

B. The London Release

The London releases of Lang's *Die Nibelungen* took place just after the German releases, in

February and April of 1924. A contemporary review from the London *Times*, dated 16 February,

1924 makes much of the "artistic" nature of the film, and especially of its beautiful and

"fairyland" scenery. Despite its length, it makes for an interesting read:

> The *Nibelungen* film, which was shown for the first time last night by the Decla-UFA
>
> Company, is a very beautiful production. It shows what marvelous things the
>
> cinematograph can achieve in the hands of an artist. We have had successful films of all
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> periods of history, but to create the scenery and figures of fairyland and ballad poetry and

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[86] Although, strangely, McGilligan dates the premiere of *Die Nibelungen* on February 24, 1924, ten days later than all other accounts. He gives no explanation of this. I believe this may be a typo, a very small blemish on what is otherwise an excellent book.

make them live before the imagination without the assistance of language is a far harder task. Herr Fritz Lang, the producer of Nibelungen, has managed it very effectively. . . . The value of Herr Lang's film lies in the wonderfully beautiful scenes in which he presents the story. The Giant Forest in which Siegfried finds and slays the Dragon has the true background of Fairyland. It is not taken from nature; it could not be. The trees, with their towering trunks, immense roots, and impenetrable shadows, have been wrought by an artist's hand out of lath and plaster and are transferred to the screen with supreme photographic skill and with an artist's sense of composition and effect. So, too, with the ghostly country of Nifelheim, where Siegfried finds the treasure and fame; this is all "faery" and wonderful, and one falls under its spell. One forgets that one has been told how many litres of petrol it took to make the fiery sea and that the fantastic rocks and tree-shapes are only canvas and paint. It may be questioned whether Herr Lang was right in bringing in the Dragon. No stage Dragon could really challenge fantasy, but merely as a technical achievement the Dragon is a marvel and will certainly remain the *clou* of the film to the popular taste. He really lives. Some of the scenes in the castle at Worms are full of poetic, beautiful, and true romantic feeling, and here, too, the author's rare sense of decorative effect and harmonious groupings is evident. (Ott, 110-12)

Here the focus is on the film's visually stunning qualities of the set and shots. Note, too, the emphasis on fairy-land and fantasy – there is no question of nationalistic ravings here, but rather on the magical qualities that can only be achieved through a visual medium like film. Lang would no doubt have been pleased.

Another contemporary London review for *The Spectator* (London), is dated 14 June, 1924 and written by Iris Barry:

The producer, Fritz Lang, already famous in this country as the begetter of *Destiny* ... was once a painter, which probably explains why, in utilizing, not the opera-glass but the field-glass method, he has seemed to insist, quite rightly, that the visual beauty of a film is just as important as its dramatic economy and effectiveness. Actually he has completely subdued the dramatic element to the visual one. The human beings in this epic of Siegfried remain legendary characters: these kings and queens in their bleak inaccessible castles on mountain-tops behave with the passionlessness and dignity of actors in a pageant. Architecture and trees, dragons, dwarfs and the elementals in the heavy mist-shrouded forests are the real protagonists, and the emotional situations in the tangled and sinister love-affairs ... are keyed down to give them their proper value in the producer's conception. It is very nearly incredible, but true, that all of the picture was taken at Ufa-Decla studios in Berlin with built scenery: it is more astonishing still that the audiences in the Albert Hall should be moved every evening to applaud, not emotional acting, but pictures – the misty woods, the dwarfs and Alberich turned to stone (very fine sculpture they make, by the way), the flaming lands round Brunhilde's Iceland stronghold, and, most of all, the simple and terrifying symbolism of Kriemhild's premonitory dream. The camera's divorce from reality here is one of the most effective achievements of moving photography: no real white dove, no real ravens even photographed with the subtlest lighting and distortion could equal the intensity and meaning of those formal bird-shapes in the Dream. The use of tone, of sharp black and clear white and clean silver, here and throughout, is very accomplished and lovely. (Ott, 112-15)

Barry's praise for Lang "subdue[ing] the dramatic…to the visual," is an apt observation, her difficulty believing the film was shot in a studio, and her surprise that the audience should applaud beautiful pictures instead of moving acting all give a good sense of the generally positive response to the film in London.

Interestingly, Paul Jensen also cites this same publication, but he notes a piece later in this review. The *weakest* point of the film, according to Barry, were the English titles, which had been butchered. Jensen quotes Barry as saying it was a "horrible medley of mock-Saxon, inverted phrase and sheer nonsense" and as citing one title card: "Siegfried . . . . hath made him scatheless by the bloody laving."[87] Peculiar translation indeed!

Paul Jensen also notes that *Kriemhilds Rache*, under the name *The She-Devil* did not do well in Great Britain, but was more positively received in the States (Jensen, 47). Jensen also suggests that audiences outside of Germany did not realize that the two parts were meant to be viewed together and in contrast with one another, as they had generally opened with an interval of a year or more between.

<div align="center">

C. The New York Release

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In New York, *Siegfried* opened on 13 April, 1925 not in New York City but in Rochester, over a year later than the Berlin release.[88] Strangely, *Kriemhilds Rache* (under the title *Kriemhild's Revenge*) would not open until 13 October, 1928, four years after its Berlin release, and three years after its counterpart – a rather suprising delay.[89] George C. Pratt, in his book *Spellbound in Darkness: A History of the Silent Film*, notes the delay but does not give a reason for it.

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[87] Iris Barry, qtd. in Jensen, Paul M. *The Cinema of Fritz Lang.* A. S. Barnes, 1969. p. 46.

[88] Pratt, George C. *Spellbound in Darkness: A History of the Silent Film.* New York Graphic Society Ltd. 1973. p. 534.

[89] Pratt, George C. *Spellbound in Darkness: A History of the Silent Film.* New York Graphic Society Ltd. 1973. p. 535.

Despite Lang's impression, later in life (cited elsewhere), that *Die Nibelungen* was not a huge success in the States at the time, Pratt notes that it was positively reviewed, and cites a contemporary review, which though jocose and somewhat sarcastic, is nevertheless quite positive:

> The German picture, SIEGFRIED, supplies what to this correspondent has always been a long-felt want: it affords the opportunity to hear operatic music, pictorially interpreted, without having to go to the opera. For here is set forth the legend of "Siegfried" in all its barbaric splendor, and with all the impressive beauty of Wagner's score, but without the dead weight of fat tenors, fatter sopranos and collapsible scenery. Here the ear and eye may work together, and the one is not offended by the other. The absence of the human voice, to me, is a negligible loss. SIEGFRIED has been produced on a mammoth scale—as of course it should be—and is set forth in terms of utter unreality—again as it should be. Its director, Fritz Lang, and its designer, Otto Hunte, have displayed the flawless taste that, for some strange reason, is evident in all German pictures. These men are artists; because of this, they can avoid the obvious pitfalls of ignorance into which the average movie maker of Hollywood must inevitably stumble. SIEGFRIED, above everything else, is eminently *right*—in tempo, in manner and in design. There is some magnificent acting ... but the greatness of the picture is creditable primarily to the men behind the cameras. We could use more of them over here, just as we are using Lubitsch and Seastrom and von Stroheim.[90]

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[90] Pratt, George C. *Spellbound in Darkness: A History of the Silent Film.* New York Graphic Society Ltd. 1973. p. 374. Pratt's citation: "SIEGFRIED," excerpt from "The Silent Drama," R. E. Sherwood, *Life*, Vol. 86, No. 2239, October 1, 1925, p. 24.

It should be noted that, though the reviewer's references to Wagner are natural enough, given the association of topics and the rather limited cultural awareness of the Nibelungen material in New York City in the 1920s, they were not the throw-away comments that they may seem. Paul Jensen tells us that: "A year later [*Siegfried*] opened in New York City on a two-performances-daily, reserved-seat policy and with 'A Symphonic Orchestra of Sixty Musicians from the Metropolitan Opera Company' playing a special score culled by Hugo Riesenfeld from Wagner's music" (Jensen, 47). This shows that Lang and Huppertz' non-Wagnerian score was not being circulated with the film internationally. Lang could not escape Wagner, though he had earnestly tried, as shall be shown below.

Some three years later, *Kriemhild's Revenge* was released in New York. Mordaunt Hall, writing for *The New York Times,* reviewed it on 16 October, 1928, immediately following the US release of the film:

Rarely does one discover knowledge, intelligence, imagination and expert direction in a picture. Yet these attributes are to be found in KRIEMHILD'S REVENGE, a sequel to the pictorial transcription of SIEGFRIED, which is now on view at the Fifty-fifth Street Playhouse. When one recalls the many fatuous film stories that have been privileged to occupy Broadway screens, it is hardly believable that this fine Ufa picture was passed over for nearly four years, and that despite the fact that hosts of exhibitors had an opportunity to view SIEGFRIED (when it was launched here there years ago at the Century Theatre), and gave a fair idea of the worth of this current offering. KRIEMHILD is a magnificent piece of work that is not staled by age, and, so far as one can determine, it is a picture that can grin at Father Time. A mint of money probably went into its production, but here it has not been wasted, for the spectacular episodes are worth every

mark that has been expended on them—that is, to those who enjoy such works of art. To the vast majority of other films it is like a Tintoretto painting being compared to a novice's effort. Here, Fritz Lang, the director, has happily seized upon the very things that a spectator expects in a scene.... Sometimes this production is just like a story being told in a fanciful fashion and during other passages it is like delving into the distant past. The action may not be any too speedy, but it is sufficiently interesting to hold one's eyes, if not by the action, then by its scenic values, its properties, or the sight of a man on horseback plunging up an imposing flight of stone steps. Nothing is done by halves in this picture and toward the end there is a glorious conception of a blazing household.... The subtitles of this production are of both German and English.[91]

This glowing review hardly seems the lukewarm reception Lang remembered. In all, the reception in London and New York seems to have been more universally positive than in Germany. With that in mind, it seems Pommer and Lang's goal of exporting was a success, at least morally speaking. Yet there was still one thing that nagged at Lang. Just as later he could not escape Kracauer's interpretation of his work, no matter how hard he tried, so he was equally unable to escape association with Richard Wagner and his *Der Ring des Nibelungen.*

<center>Lang's Legacy Part II: Richard Wagner</center>

Richard Wagner's *Ring Cycle* is still one of the most well-known adaptations of the Nibelungen material world-wide. Lang would certainly have been familiar with Wagner's version. And yet his own version is quite different. Thomas Leitch posits, in his 2015 article, "Lang contra Wagner," that Lang intentionally made his version as anti-Wagnerian as possible, and it was Lang's misfortune that the rest of the world could not see that. Unhappily for Lang, such was,

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[91] Pratt, George C. *Spellbound in Darkness: A History of the Silent Film.* New York Graphic Society Ltd. 1973. p. 389-90.

and to a certain extent, is, Wagner's pre-imminence, that he proved inescapable even for the great director.

David J. Levin's book, *Dramaturgy of Disavowal,* also brings these two famous personalities into conversation with one another. Leitch leans on Levin's account to ground his argument. Leitch finds that Lang did not wish to adapt Wagner for the screen and being "unable to ignore his example, Lang developed a third strategy."[92] Leitch cites Levin's argument that both Wagner's and Lang's versions "figure their own aesthetic shortcomings, but fob them off onto a character within the work [Mime in Wagner, Alberich in Lang] who is eventually unmasked and killed off as an aesthetic bad object. [. . . the two characters] are not just foreigners within the work, they embody aesthetic practices that the works would want to inflect [. . .] as foreign, threatening, bad."[93] Leitch continues: "In Levin's reading, Wagner's reservations about storytelling and Lang's about visual representation are both figured in the different settings they design for Siegfried's death." Leitch finds that:

> the filmmakers [of *Die Nibelungen*] acknowledge and trump Wagner's agency by making their film a living argument with the dead composer, making *Die Nibelungen* an anti-adaptation, an adaptation fashioned specifically to take account of Wagner by contravening and correcting what Lang takes to be an errant earlier adaptation of the material on which he wishes to focus. The film's famous dedication, "Dem deutschen Volke zu Eigen" (To the German People), marks Lang's wish, as he maintained at the end of his life, "to draw inspiration form [Germany's] past" in order "to counteract [the]

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[92] Leitch, Thomas. "Lang contra Wagner: *Die Nibelungen* as Anti-Adaptation." *A Companion to Fritz Lang,* edited by Joe McElhaney, Wiley Blackwell, 2015, p. 178.
[93] Levin, David, J. *Richard Wagner, Fritz Lang, and the Nibelungen: The Dramaturgy of Disavowal.* Princeton UP, 1998. p. 11.

pessimistic spirit" of the postwar era, and not so incidentally to counteract the pre-

eminence of Wagner.[94]

Leitch's position is that Lang is making his film in spite of Wagner's version, and is consciously

avoiding making the same choices as Wagner, whether aesthetically or for the characters or plot.

This is born out by Lang himself, who specifically said, in a 1966 talk at Yale: "I was interested

in bringing to life a German saga in a manner different from Wagnerian opera, without beards

and so on" (Eisner, 76).

This idea may seem rather startling, considering how the two artists are often lumped

together, both by their subject matter, and by the uneasy taint of indirect contact with National

Socialism. To make Leitch's position clearer, it would be well to review what we have already

found connecting Lang and Wagner. An obvious point of connection (or lack thereof) would be

the film score. But rather than using Wagner's music, Lang had Gottfried Huppertz compose an

original score for his *Nibelungen* film, which was played by a full symphony at the Berlin

premiere.[95] Although it has been noted that Huppertz has been said to have used a sort of

leitmotif system (like those made famous by Wagner) for his score, he specifically did not

emulate Wagner's music. Indeed, in his program notes from opening night, Lang in thanking his

colleagues whose work has made the film possible, he singles Huppertz out for special

appreciation: "Nicht zum letzten gilt mein Dank Gottfried Huppertz, der die schwere Aufgabe

auf sich nahm, die scheinbar unlöslich mit dem Begriff Richard Wagner verbundene

Nibelungen-Idee in ihre eigene, ganz abseits von Wagner gelegen Welt zu übertragen" (Gehler,

174). Lang spends no less than three lines of the program notes specifically thanking Huppertz

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[94] Leitch, Thomas. "Lang contra Wagner: *Die Nibelungen* as Anti-Adaptation." *A Companion to Fritz Lang,* edited by Joe McElhaney, Wiley Blackwell, 2015, pp. 179.
[95] Kaes, Anton. "Siegfried – A German Film Star Performing the Nation in Lang's *Nibelungen* Film." *The German Cinema Book,* edited by Tim Bergfelder, Erica Carter, and Deniz Göktürk, British Film Institute, 2002, pp. 65.

for avoiding any hint of scoring something Wagnerian, and instead, musically freeing Lang's film from the controversial composer.

If this were not convincing enough, Thomas Elsaesser also notes that Lang's version of the Nibelung story is thematically quite different in terms of plot from Wagner's version. Elsaesser finds that Lang's film is "like the original saga, but differing from Wagner's opera *The Ring of the Nibelungen,"* and finds that:

> Fritz Lang and Thea von Harbou here present the 'origins' of the German nation as a fratricide, a story of 'hate, murder and revenge' and as an act of ethnic cleansing that wipes out the leading elite of an entire people (the Burgundians). And like other 'myths of origin' […] this national epic of Germany insists that a nation is forged from catastrophe and disaster.[96]

Lang positions his story quite differently from Richard Wagner. Finally, Lang biographer Patrick McGilligan declares that Lang "detested Wagner with even more passion than his usual dislike of classical music, and said he had resisted suggestions to use the archetypal (and notoriously anti-Semitic) Wagner as background orchestral music for the film's original release in Germany" (McGilligan, 103). Lang, it seems, went to great lengths to ensure that the success of his project would remain his alone, untainted by any reliance or imitation of Wagner's *Ring Cycle.* Alas for Fritz Lang! He had reckoned without taking account of the strength of association between Wagner and the Nibelungen in the public mind. How frustrated Lang must have been when he heard that the New York release of *Siegfrieds Tod* was being accompanied by Wagner's music![97]

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[96] Elsaesser, Thomas. "Haptic Vision and Consumerism: A Moment from Fritz Lang's *Siegfried* (1924)." *Film Moments: Criticism, History, Theory,* edited by Tom Brown and James Walters, Palgrave MacMillan, 2010, p. 70.
[97] Pratt, George C. *Spellbound in Darkness: A History of the Silent Film.* New York Graphic Society Ltd. 1973. p. 374.

Paul Jensen verifies that at the New York release of *Siegfrieds Tod,* a symphony from the Metropolitan Opera Company were "playing a special score culled by Hugo Riesenfeld from Wagner's music" (Jensen, 47). This clearly shows that Lang and Huppertz' non-Wagnerian score was not being circulated with the film internationally. Lang, it seems, could not escape Wagner, despite his best efforts. Adding insult to injury, Steve Choe reminds us that in 1933 "*Siegfried* (and not *Kriemhild's Revenge*) was re-edited and re-released by Ufa, with a Wagnerian soundtrack and voiceover narration delivered by Theodor Loos."[98] A contemporary review from *Der Kinematograph* (in Berlin) was published on 30 May, 1933, pompously exclaiming that "It is truly amazing how the direction and the art of the camera in the *Nibelungen* film anticipated the achievements of later years" (Ott, 115). There was no mention of the second half of Lang's film (*Kriemhilds Rache*) which remained unavailable to the public for many years. His film was butchered, cut up, and set to music he detested. Small wonder that in later years, Lang was disinclined to give many interviews on the subject of *Die Nibelungen.*

In closing this section, it would be valuable to circle back to Thomas Leitch's article, "Lang contra Wagner: *Die Nibelungen* as Anti-Adaptation." Leitch having argued that Lang's directorial choices repeatedly distance his film from Wagner, concludes as follows:

> It seems clear that instead of simply adapting *Das Nibelungenlied*, Lang and von Harbou
> were seeking to unadapt it from Wagner by treating the rhetorical and presentational
> strategies of the *Ring* operas as encrustations that had misdirected or corrupted an older,
> authentic story they wished their film to present directly to the German people. The film
> does not offer itself as an update or new version of the story but as the original version.[99]

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[98] Choe, Steve. "Redemption of Revenge: *Die Nibelungen.*" *A Companion to Fritz Lang,* edited by Joe McElhaney, Wiley Blackwell, 2015, p. 201.
[99] Leitch, Thomas. "Lang contra Wagner: *Die Nibelungen* as Anti-Adaptation." *A Companion to Fritz Lang,* edited by Joe McElhaney, Wiley Blackwell, 2015, p. 189.

Instead, Leitch argues, Lang and von Harbou sought to create a story which Leitch, Levin and Lang all describe as "the property of the broad masses and not, like Edda or the medieval epos, that of a limited number of highly cultivated brains" (Ott, 107). Although the intent of the director may never be enough to totally separate the *Nibelungen* from its associations with Wagner, anti-Semitism, National Socialism, and white supremacy, Lang was very clear about distancing his work from such ideas. He never intended Siegfried to be some sort of Aryan hero. Indeed, in his reading of the story, Siegfried's pride is at fault for all that later befell. As he remarked in a talk at Yale:

> It is easy to be a hero when you make yourself invisible with the help of the *tarhelm* [sic]. And though it may perhaps be forgivable that Siegfried gets the Virgin Queen Brunhild into the connubial bed of his weak King Günther of Burgund [sic] by trickery, it is quite unforgivable that he cannot keep his mouth shut, and brags to his wife Kriemhild about his deeds. The final destruction of the Nibelungen has its origins in this bragging. (quoted in Eisner, 79).

In Lang's view, Wagner, and later, National Socialism, read the myth incorrectly, and his version stands in opposition to their reading of Siegfried. It is Lang's own misfortune that his work is inseparably linked to Wagner's. He was aware of this, and felt it keenly, as is evident by his frustration with Kracauer's work, which, in his view, contributed to the association.

V. Lang's Artistic Touch: Breaking New Ground with Mise-en-scène, Special Effects, and World-Building

This chapter has examined the life of Fritz Lang and put him into context as a Weimar film director in the immediate aftermath of World War I. This chapter then did a close reading of select aspects of Lang's *Nibelungen* film. The fourth section of this chapter examined Fritz Lang's goals for his film, and evaluated the mixed successes and failures in which those goals

ended, as well as looking at the inevitable associations between the *Nibelungen* film and National Socialism, Siegfried Kracauer, and Richard Wagner. This final portion of the chapter will examine a close reading of Lang's use of mise-en-scène, special effects, and world building in the film in order to show how, together with his specific aim and goals for the project, Lang was successful in creating a Gesamtkunstwerk as described in the previous chapter.

<div align="center">Mise-en-Scène in Die Nibelungen</div>

Mise-en-scène may seem a rather external aspect of Lang's art to focus on, among all the myriad facets of Lang's films, but it is central to his vision, an aspect that Lang used in a markedly consistent and characteristic way. Lang is unusually careful in his mise-en-scène, and it is, along with his special effect and sense of world-building, what shapes *Die Nibelungen* into the *Gesamtkunstwerk* that it is.

Michael Mourlet, writing in 1959, gives an appreciation of Fritz Lang's trajectory, and its unusual parallels with the path of film itself:

> Not surprisingly, Fritz Lang's *oeuvre* has followed a path which is none other than the one taken by the cinema itself, seen as a whole. The means he has placed at the service of his ends reveal both their permanence and a sense of transformation…. Expressionism was cast into a Euclidean mould which transformed its meaning. Unable as yet to encompass beings and expose their very depths, Lang extrapolated their movements towards a decorative blueprint whose ordinances were symmetry and slowness. So a liturgy was created, based on a purely formal hieratism. Already the principal feature of Lang's later attitude to actors is prefigured in this liturgy, where they are its servants: in other words, turning them into a completely neutralized vehicle for *mise en scène* considered as pure movement, whereas the reverse is generally true of other film-makers,

for whom *mise en scène* is a means to glorify the actors rather as the flow of an

imponderable current lights up electric bulbs. Hence Lang's predilection for actors who

are more negative than positive, and whose reticence, diffidence or passivity more readily

suffers the annihilation imposed on them.[100]

Mourlet shows that Lang, even from his early days, subordinates the acting to the production

design, and places more emphasis on the physical movement and position of actors than to their

psychological expressiveness in the overall mise-en-scène. Raymond Bellour, too, notes that

"Lang alone … incarnates the notion of *mise en scène*" both "decisively" and "abstractly."[101]

Moreover, it is in this milieu that Lang's delicate hand gives the hint of German Expressionism:

"Lang's expressionism only appears through simplified designs and movement" (Jensen, 54).

Lang's singular use of mise-en-scène has in fact been remarked on by film critics throughout the

decades of its analysis. More recently, Paolo Bertetto asserts that "Throughout the 1920s, Lang's

mise-en-scène worked toward the construction of a dynamic form that integrated the concept into

itself."[102] Mise-en-scène, then, is an integral part of both form and concept in Lang's films.

Turning our attention to *Die Nibelungen,* Demonsablon gives a specific example from

that film, detailing that the effect serves to provide visual layers that heighten the sense of

illusion, pulling back from the narrative in favor of the visual:

Adopting this [visual] method of disrupting the standard development of a plot, Lang

impairs the narrative and, seemingly at least, distorts time in favour of pure scrutiny,

thereby conferring a sense of strangeness on the action that is thus stretched out, and on

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[100] Michael Mourlet, qtd. in Jenkins, Stephen, ed. *Fritz Lang: The Image and the Look.* British Film Institute, 1981. p. 12-13.
[101] Raymond Bellour, qtd. in Jenkins, Stephen, ed. *Fritz Lang: The Image and the Look.* British Film Institute, 1981, p. 27.
[102] Bertetto, Paolo. "Metropolis and the Figuration of Eidos." Trans. Maggie Fritz-Morkin. *A Companion to Fritz Lang,* edited by Joe McElhaney, Wiley Blackwell, 2015, p. 400.

the suddenly ominous, insistent vision; the result is more or less what Lang achieves for

vision alone, in a much briefer and more compact shot, when he assembles his elements

in such a way that the eye always seems to be in the wrong place, either too close or too

far away. In *Siegfried*, for instance: three warriors occupy almost the entire surface of the

screen; they are so close that they cannot be seen in their entirety; between them are

blank spaces, in the background a bare wall; the image is perfectly flat and the soldiers

look like cardboard cutouts; when Kriemhild's women pass behind them, following her,

perspective suddenly returns so vividly that one feels it as being too deep, and it seems

like another illusion.[103]

This dream-like quality, or even illusion-like quality, with its hint of trickery and mischief, that

permeates so much of Langian mise-en-scène (see fig. 1.6).

This unusually pictorial deployment actors in his frame is particularly marked in *Die*

Nibelungen. In many scenes, the actors, far from being the center of focus, are part of the décor

themselves. This tendency gives the film a distanced feeling, creating a sense of objectivity and

fated-ness (a visual representation of what Tolkien would no doubt call a "High Doom").

Puecker notes in her essay, "Fritz Lang: Object and Thing in the German Films," that the

Nibelungen films, among most of his earlier films, "feature aestheticized decors rife with

objects."[104] She specifically mentions the royal court from *Kriemhilds Rache:*

> In the court sequences in *Kriemhild's Revenge*, however, their patterned costumes
>
> overwhelm the actors, who seem merely to function as part of the overall décor – a point

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[103] Philippe Demonsablon, qtd. in Jenkins, Stephen, ed. *Fritz Lang: The Image and the Look.* British Film Institute, 1981, p. 35-36.

[104] Peucker, Brigitte. "Fritz Lang: Object and Thing in the German Films." *A Companion to Fritz Lang,* edited by Joe McElhaney, Wiley Blackwell, 2015, p. 279.

that Eisner made in 1952 – and the movement of the human body is slowed to a nearly inorganic motionlessness.[105]

This intensive lingering or insistence upon objects is characteristic of Lang's work. Particularly in the *Nibelungen,* it helps to create a sense of discord, of disjunction, even remoteness. Demonsablon, too, remarks on this:

> There remains the question of why Lang is so concerned with disjunction. To leave repeatedly in his work the signs of a pervasive defeat, revealed by the hopelessness of a dead-end, entirely self-enclosed system. Crevices seem to appear in the dense texture of Lang's films, as if he were always anxious to make the precariousness of the real world clearly visible, and to show how illusory is the notion of a harmony achieved through a total autonomy in its representation. Between one shot and the next, … a clearly defined *mise en scène* takes shape, always concerned in any of its constituent effects to maintain the impulse behind the whole, to impress the body of its material with the creative imagination's constant reflection on itself; and to do so with even greater stringency when the cinema gains new expressive possibilities along with technical mastery, and the camera becomes possessed of the magic which makes it so difficult for us to follow it: becoming, as it brushes against the life it espouses while attempting to pin it down 'an actor of great importance, mobile, *living'*. So with Lang, in a sense, the film always seems to be constructing itself as it goes along. […] Hence the fascination and the sense of remoteness always aroused by his superb films. And that feeling that, with him, *mise en scène,* and *mise en scène* alone, attains to myth.[106]

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[105] Peucker, Brigitte. "Fritz Lang: Object and Thing in the German Films." *A Companion to Fritz Lang,* edited by Joe McElhaney, Wiley Blackwell, 2015, p. 282.

[106] Philippe Demonsablon, qtd. in Jenkins, Stephen, ed. *Fritz Lang: The Image and the Look.* British Film Institute, 1981, p. 36-37.

Demonsablon thus links remoteness, conveyed through mise-en-scène, with myth in Lang's work.

In addition to these three qualities of mise-en-scène (its oneiric character, its subordination of actors to objects, its remoteness), Lang also adds two more qualities in his attempts to convey the mythic or heroic in visual terms: symbolism and symmetry. These two aspects, discussed above in more detail, play a significant role in shaping Lang's mise-en-scène as well. This first, symbolism, is connected to the subordinating of actors in favor of objects. For Lang, fate or destiny (visually speaking) is entwined with physical, inanimate objects, rather than people. The weight of this symbolism is conveyed visually though objects. One might almost call it a visual destiny of objects, rather than symbolism. As an example, Jenkins cites the fateful leaf that falls on Siegfried's back as the first in a series of objects representing the fate that will bring about his downfall.[107] Lang is always trying to capture the elusive visual representation of fate, what Bertetto calls the "fundamental structure of an idea." Bertetto says: "Lang's work aims to capture visually the fundamental structure of an idea, that is, to construct a symbolic figure. His cinema is one of eidetic figuration."[108] For Lang, objects imbued with destiny become symbols, something more than reality. And this figures largely in his construction of mise-en-scène.

Symmetry, too, is a key aspect of Lang's mise-en-scène, and one that has been much remarked on, for it is notable when it is present, but also notable in its absences. Paul Jensen reflects on the symmetry in *Siegfrieds Tod:*

Lang's direction of *Siegfrieds Tod* is as formal and ordered as its structure, with emphasis on the solidity and size of the settings, the stateliness and control of the acting, and the

[107] Jenkins, Stephen, ed. *Fritz Lang: The Image and the Look.* British Film Institute, 1981, p. 53.

[108] Bertetto, Paolo. "Metropolis and the Figuration of Eidos." Trans. Maggie Fritz-Morkin. *A Companion to Fritz Lang,* edited by Joe McElhaney, Wiley Blackwell, 2015, p. 398.

balance and symmetry of the compositions. The pace is slow and steady, with panorama and distance replacing close-ups, overt emotion, and psychology. This stylised approach is a conscious attempt to visualise Heroic myth. It creates an atmosphere of unreality wherein the story's elements of fantasy can appear at home, and the formal technique emphasizes the inevitable approach of the tragic end as though it were a ritual that could end no other way (Jensen, 51).

It is through symmetry, through rigid mise-en-scène, that Lang gives fate or destiny a formal vocabulary to speak into *Die Nibelungen.* Symmetry also provides a marked change between the two halves of his film, as Jensen notes:

The heroine's character changes in *Kriemhilds Rache*, and so does the director's approach to the film. The world in *Siegfrieds Tod* was orderly, cold, and objective, and the symmetry of the visuals echoes this; At Siegfried's death, the world (as found in *Kriemhilds Rache*) is turned over to the humans and becomes one of disorder, in which the passions rule. This switch to an unstable emotional situation is accompanied by a change in style to more natural visuals and gestures and to less schematic characters (Jensen, 53).

Symmetry and symbolism, then, join a dream-like quality, prioritization of objects, and a definite sense of remoteness to craft Lang's unique mise-en-scène filled with myth and fate.

Before leaving this section, something must be said of one other aspect of Lang's mise-en-scène, which is actually perhaps the most immediately striking visual aspect of *Die Nibelungen* – the giant scale. This absurd scale is linked to Lang's desire to visually capture the qualities of "mythic" or "heroic" in some way that can be easily seen and interpreted in image.

When UFA billed *Die Nibelungen* as a *Monumentalfilm*, they meant that quite literally. Bertetto explains that, unlike the deformed and strangely haunting, unreal lines in Caligari:

> Lang does not alter the natural order, but rather depicts it using sharpened practices of geometrization, which integrate seamlessly with the other major feature of his compositional style: the creation of gigantism, the monumentalization of objects.… However, for Lang it is not simply a question of constructing monumental proportions out of a mere taste for magniloquent decoration, although that would also be completely legitimate. Instead, in Lang's *Die Nibelungen* and even more so in *Metropolis*, the process of monumentalization reflects his desire to inscribe the contingent within the essential, to transform the legendary or futuristic into the epochal, the epochal into the meta-historical. That is, it reflects the project of systematically transcending concrete facts and elements, the specific individuality of a narrative action or situation, in order to reveal its universal aspect, its epochal relevance, as if it were the superhistorical form of myth. Monumentalization is a way of inscribing objects into the valuing or affirmation of an order of hypersignification of the filmic signs that are produced.[109]

This monumentalization then, as Bertetto calls it, joins symmetry and symbolism, dream-like quality, supremacy of object, and a certain remoteness to visually represent, on a mythic scale, the hand of destiny (see fig. 2.14). This is Lang's signature mise-en-scène, particularly for *Die Nibelungen,* though all of these elements appear variously in most of his other films. It must be remembered, too, that Lang was much concerned with embodying destiny, showing the movements of the hand of fate, not only in his films, but also in his self-curated public image. Destiny compels Lang. Raymond Bellour speaks of Lang and his preoccupation with destiny:

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[109] Bertetto, Paolo. "Metropolis and the Figuration of Eidos." Trans. Maggie Fritz-Morkin. *A Companion to Fritz Lang,* edited by Joe McElhaney, Wiley Blackwell, 2015, p. 398-399.

Not that his life is irrelevant to this image. His non-compliance with Goebbels, his flight from Germany and disenchanted return after twenty years of exile in America, the way in which he set himself up, from *Siegfried* onwards, as the film-maker of destiny, all this lends Lang an explosive density.[110]

<div align="center">

Special Effects in *Die Nibelungen*

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One of the ways in which Lang pushed the boundaries of what film could accomplish was through the use of special effects and trick shots. His creativity in exploiting film technology's capabilities to the fullest extent set him apart from many of his contemporaries and lend his films an enduring interest value. Arguably the most memorable of all the effects in *Die Nibelungen* is Siegfried's battle with the dragon – a central element of the Siegfried legend in itself – and the sequence a staple of fantasy films ever since.

The dragon itself, a human operated mechanical puppet, was extremely large and mechanically detailed. It featured articulated eyes and legs, a moving neck and tail, and even the head was capable of independent movement separate from the neck (see figs. 2.1, 2.2). In the film, Siegfried arrives at the dragon's territory, having been directed there by Mime, who, in showing him the road to Worms, chooses to omit the detail that a dragon lurks in the way. Perhaps this is Mime's idea of vengeance for Siegfried's threats on his life. However that may be, the opening shot of the dragon is a closeup of its face, focused with an iris effect, immediately after Mime calls out "Farewell, Siegfried, son of king Siegmund. You will never get to Worms!" This ominous beginning is heightened as the iris retracts and the dragon's body comes into view. Not one to miss any detail, Lang displays the dragon in all its glory: its armored back, its copiously slavering mouth, its rolling eyes, and then even a gaping jaw filled with teeth!

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[110] Raymond Bellour, qtd. in Jenkins, Stephen, ed. *Fritz Lang: The Image and the Look.* British Film Institute, 1981, p. 27.

(see fig. 2.2, 2.3)[111] After putting the puppet through its paces, Lang has it begin to "walk"

forwards, moving its massive legs, although they are not able actually to transport the body. The

effect is, however, still quite striking. The next cut takes the viewer back to Mime, who still

stands looking in the direction Siegfried left, clearly aware of the danger of the dragon that

Siegfried will soon be facing unawares. The iris closes on Mime's back as he walks away,

providing bookends to the sequence, and giving viewers an awareness of what Mime knows and

Siegfried does not know.

Siegfried, absent for the whole opening dragon sequence, finally makes his appearance

now that the threat is thoroughly established. The iris opens again on the sun-dappled, misty

Urwald, as discussed in Eisner, and Siegfried, on his horse, approaches through the trees.

Another cut to the dragon, and Lang intensifies the sense of foreboding. Now the dragon is able

to "walk" or move forward – at least its body progresses while its legs move up and down. But

what is much more striking is the way in which it looks around, turning its head and moving its

eyes slowly, as though scanning the forest for danger or prey, before lowering its head to take (a

very messy and convincing) drink of water (see fig. 2.4). Siegfried approaches, and at last is

aware of his danger. Dismounting, he moves forward with the stylized jerky movements

common to 1920s cinema, and pauses near the waterfall at the dragon's pool for an aesthetically

pleasing silhouette shot, first of himself, and then later of his sword drawn (see fig. 2.5).

The battle itself, after Siegfried's cautious approach, gradually reveals new effects.

Siegfried has to fight with and avoid the dragon's thrashing tail, the dragon is able to rear up a

little, lifting its front legs, and, of course, the crucial element – Lang's dragon breathes fire and

smoke (see fig. 2.6)! The amount of smoke is truly impressive, at times nearly shrouding

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[111] Small teeth, that is, and short fangs on the lower jaw. No upper fangs, despite their being a staple of dragon lore –
presumably because the mouth would not have been able to close around upper fangs!

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Siegfried. The beginning of the end, from the dragon's point of view, occurs when Siegfried manages to stab one of the dragon's eyes (see fig. 2.7). Although it is a very brief effects shot (the sword pierces the eye, and a thick goo spurts out, the entirety lasting approximately one second), it calls instantly to mind the comic scene in Georges Méliès' *Le Voyage dans la Lune* (1902), wherein a rocket strikes the Man in the Moon's eye, and goo splats down his face, as well as the rather more serious shot a few years after *Siegfried,* in Louis Buñuel and Salvador Dali's *Un Chien Andalou* (1929), showing an eyeball (in that case, an actual bovine eyeball) being sliced open.

The gruesome, though brief, effect almost seems like an homage or perhaps even a necessary effects element that must be included before the battle's true denouement, when Siegfried, taking advantage of the dragon's partial blindness, leaps under its guard and pierces its chest. If the shot of the eye goo is mercifully short, the camera makes up for it with the death wound (see fig. 2.8). Liquid pours out of the dragon, spurting and smoking in quite a long sequence, which leads to Siegfried's discovery of the magic of dragon's blood (informed by an extremely convincing special effects bird puppet) and ultimately to the dragon's revenge (see fig. 2.9). In another display of the tail's independent movement capabilities, it strikes a nearby tree in the dragon's final moments, thereby causing a leaf to fall onto Siegfried's back to create his fatal weak point.

The dragon's highly mobile tail wreaked vengeance on the actor, as well, when Paul Richter, who portrayed Siegfried, was struck in the knee by the heavy tail. Some reports said that Richter's kneecap was shattered, which held up production for 6 months.[112] This, however, seems to be exaggerated, for in Patrick McGilligan's account, which relies on a report from art

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[112] Anton Kaes mentions this his article in Bergfelder, Tim, Erica Carter, and Deniz Göktürk. *The German Cinema Book.* British Film Institute, 2002.

director Erich Kettelhut, it was only a contusion, and Siegfried/Richter was only "out of action for a while" (McGilligan, 98).

Whatever dangers the dragon may have presented, it is clear that it was a labor of love for Lang and his film crew. Frederick Ott details the behind-the-scenes particulars:

> Vollbrecht's dragon measured approximately seventy feet in length; its scaly "skin" was made of plaster and coated with vulcanized hard rubber. The seventeen technicians who operated controls inside the dragon were trained over a period of several months. Seven technicians worked in a pit, receiving their instructions by telephone. After weeks of rehearsals and trials, they mastered the instruments which would enable the dragon to writhe in the forest, drink water from a pool and exude smoke and fire at the appropriate moment. The smoke and fire were produced by bellows while a device pumped "blood" when the dragon's skin was pierced by Siegfried's sword. The crew watched for their directions from tiny windows inserted in the forward spines of the animal. To make the dragon realistic, its jaws and teeth were drenched with a fluid to suggest bestial drooling. (Ott, 108)

Other sources, like Patrick McGilligan, citing an account by F. Wynne-Jones', suggest there were only 10 men inside the dragon. But however that may be, it is clear that the undertaking was enormous, particularly in comparison to the limited amount of screen-time the dragon scene represents. The effort must have been enormous, particularly under such a perfectionistic director like Fritz Lang. McGilligan reports that "Under Lang's prodding, the dragon men practiced walking, crawling, and dying for weeks" (McGilligan, 98).

As for the ambitious mind behind the dragon, there is some uncertainty. Frederick Ott attributes the dragon sequence to "Lang's art director" Karl Vollbrecht (Ott, 107), while Steve

Choe says the dragon was brought to life by art director Erich Kettelhut (and sixteen operators inside), which differs from some other accounts.[113] Lang himself names both Erich Kettelhut and Karl Vollbrecht as the creators of the dragon (Gehler, 171), while McGilligan plumps for the safest option, naming all three art directors who worked on the film: Otto Hunte, Karl Vollbrecht, and Erich Kettelhut (McGilligan, 95). Whoever it may have been (though Kettelhut and Vollbrecht together are the most likely), their tremendous expenditure of time and effort resulting in what was, for original audiences, a stunning scene.

Paul Jensen notes, too, that although there is extremely limited camera movement (even by 1924's standards) in *Die Nibelungen*, rapid editing[114] is used to heighten the breathtaking effect in such scenes:

> This variation in style [between *Siegfrieds Tod* and *Kriemhilds Rache*] indicates that the film's stateliness and beauty is a calculated effect, yet it is even today viewed as a semi-attractive flaw and an example of "art-for-art's-sake" decadence. But the film is not nearly as static and lacking in cinematic form as its many critics contend.... When called for byplot and situation, rapid editing is used with skill and effect; there are, for instance, forty-seven cuts from the iris-in on the dragon to the shot of the linden leaf on Siegfried's shoulder. There is no use of the moving camera, and the dragon is attached to one spot (a necessity since it was run by ten men inside the body and twenty-two in pits below)....
> The dragon itself, about 70 feet long, was originally praised for its life-like appearance....

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[113] Choe, Steve. "Redemption of Revenge: *Die Nibelungen*." *A Companion to Fritz Lang,* edited by Joe McElhaney, Wiley Blackwell, 2015, p. 195.

[114] If anyone should find themselves rejecting the idea that this film contains rapid editing, it is recommended that they try to get a screen shot of the dragon breathing fire or being stabbed in the eye. This will allow them to reconsider their position.

[Despite being now outdated] the scene is well executed, as are all the film's technical

and atmospheric elements (Jensen, 54-5).

This account gives some idea of how the scene must have seemed to those who first saw it.

Daniel Morgan also comments on the complete absence of camera movement, with the only

moving shot being in the dragon scene:

Relative to his contemporaries, Lang uses very few camera movements; in some cases,

there are surprisingly few. Across the entirety of *Die Nibelungen* (1924), for example,

there is only one shot which moves: Early in *Siegfried's Tod*, the first view of the dragon

includes a tilt down as it takes a drink from the lake. No other shot in the next four and a

half hours will change its initial framing. This does not mean that there is no movement

in these films – far from it – but such movement is largely contained within the frame....

The static camera seems intrinsically tied to this account of Lang, creating the basic

template within which these larger dramas can play out. The rigidity of the frame, that is,

establishes the sense of control that is reflected in and emphasized by the images and

narratives Lang presents.[115]

Other notable effects occur in the Nibelungen's (or Alberich's) cave. Alberich possesses

a glowing ball and piles of treasure, but the two stand-out moments here are the crown of the ice

giants and Nibelungen turning to stone.[116] As Siegfried and Alberich enter the cave, Alberich

explains that they are making a crown for the ice giants, and gestures towards an empty stretch of

rocky wall. The wall then fades into an apparent window, through which Siegfried (and the

viewer) can see Nibelungen at work constructing a massive crown before the scene fades back

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[115] Morgan, Daniel. "Beyond Destiny and Design: Camera Movement in Fritz Lang's German Films" *A Companion to Fritz Lang,* edited by Joe McElhaney, Wiley Blackwell, 2015, p. 259-260.
[116] Patrick McGilligan tells us that "The resourceful [Günther] Rittau accomplished this by step-by-step superimposition." (McGilligan, 97).

into the rock wall (see fig. 2.10). Although not the first time a film-with-a-film technique had been used, this effect is the more impressive for the irregularity of the shape of the screen, and for the fact that Siegfried and Alberich are standing in front of the magical "window" partially blocking it without disturbing the image, almost like a work-around for a primitive green screen.

Magical displays account for the most striking effects in the film, such as the Nibelungen turning to stone following Alberich's death, as discussed in Eisner (see fig. 2.11). The first fight between Alberich and Siegfried is noteworthy too, not as much because of the special effects (Siegfried is "fighting" with an invisible Alberich, an effect easily achieved by miming rather than by technology), but because a strikingly similar fight between Frodo and Gollum occurs in Peter Jackson's *The Return of the King*, which did, in fact, make use of digital special effects.[117]

Lang's penchant for experimenting and inventing new special effect techniques is well documented. Lotte Eisner offers various charming examples, such as Lang's use of fire extinguishers as impromptu fog machines to during the scene in which Alberich tries to kill Siegfried while invisible (Eisner, 75). Patrick McGilligan also reports that "Many of the marvelous effects were obtained by deviously simple means. The dense mist in the sequence where Alberich, made invisible by the Tarnkappe ... tries to strangle the hero, was produced by the spray of fire extinguishers." Kriemhild's rainbow was drawn on black paper separately, then superimposed, and the aurora borealis scene was made using mirrors to reflect various lights and make them dance. McGilligan also notes that: "Much of the photography took place after midnight in the studio—to ensure an evenness of light in artificially illuminated scenes. (Even so, strips of film had to be retouched later by hand to accent the tones.)" (McGilligan, 97).

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[117] This is doubtless one of many elements that for years caused Tolkien's book to be deemed "unfilmable."

According to Frederick Ott, Alfred Hitchcock visited the UFA-Neubabelsberg studio shortly after the completion of the *Nibelungen* film. Hitchcock later reported:

> They had a big outdoor stage four hundred feet long, two hundred feet wide with an earth floor, and all the walls at the sides were of scaffolding going up to a hundred feet, twelve feet deep platforms all the way up. And on the back was a panoramic backing two hundred feet long, an enormous thing. And on that they built the forest of the Nibelungen . . . . It was beautifully done. (quoted in Ott, 107)

The forest, indeed, as Eisner noted, was of special importance to Lang. McGilligan tells of how the forest was made to look frozen:

> Siegfried's journey through the magical stone forest was filmed partly on a soundstage. Stagehands cast wagonloads of salt over the studio floor to create the impression of a vast frozen forest; the tree trunks were straight plaster coated with cement, real soil and moss piled about their roots. (McGilligan, 97)

For the grand finale in *Kriemhilds Rache,* McGilligan shares the intensive preparations for the final scene:

> The director planned, for the final scene, an apocalyptic inferno that would outdo the ending of *Der müde Tod*. This was the attack on the Burgundians, barricaded inside Etzel's great hall, which culminates in the Huns' setting fire to the place. An abandoned factory site in Spandau was renovated at considerable expense, just so it could be reduced to rubble in a scene that would be photographed simultaneously by some sixteen cameras. (McGilligan, 99)

McGilligan notes, too, that it was Lang himself who set off the explosion and subsequent inferno (see fig. 2.12, 2.13). Who else could it have been?

Lang credits the ingenuity of Carl Hoffman, cinematographer, for coming up with so many of these tricks, praising not only his inventiveness but his skill in filming: "He knew the secret of photographing a woman, so that while looking at her face a light in the corner of an eye, a shadow across her forehead, a luminous line across the temple revealed not only her externals but also the spiritual content of a scene" (quoted in Eisner, 75). Lang further recalls Günther Rittau's contributions:

> Together with Carl Hoffman he experimented for entire nights. He approaches the visual aspects of the cinema by way of mathematics. Every third sentence he uttered began: 'What will happen if…?' What happens when mathematics, technology and imagination combine may be seen in the northern lights in *Die Nibelungen* and the petrified dwarfs whose mouths are still moving in a scream while their bodies have already turned to stone. (quoted in Eisner, 76)

This effect, in which the dwarves are petrified and frozen, but continue to move their faces for a while, was created by superimposing slowly, frame by frame, from below to above (see fig. 2.11) (Eisner, 76). The same technique was used to create the effect of Siegfried's invisibility while wearing the Tarnhelm. The dragon Fafnir is, as we have seen, the most spectacular of all the effects in the two films, which took a lot of effort and reworking to bring it up to Lang's expectations.

Lang was a remarkably careful director in this regard. Frederick Ott cites one account as follows:

> F. Wynne-Jones, UFA's American representative, noted: 'The care with which *Siegfried* was made can be partly understood when I say that every effort was made to get the true rhythm of action. Countless rehearsals were required before the acting of the hero, the

movements of the dragon, the wind that blew the tree that stood entrenched on the ground

just over the spring, and even the leaf that flutters down on Siegfried's back as he takes

the bath of blood were all timed so that jarring notes would be avoided so far as possible.'

(Ott, 108)

Looking back on the film, later in life, Lang recalled many of these capers (in a 1966

interview with Gretchen Berg) with a certain glee:

Look at this photo: This is Paul Richter in *Die Nibelungen*, when he got the javelin in the

back. Those are real flowers on the border of the fountain; we planted the seeds in

autumn, and in the spring the "set" was ready.... Do you know how the rainbow was done

at the beginning of *Nibelungen*? With a superimposition of the mountain, done in the

studio, and an arch drawn in chalk on a black card. When the sword splits the feather, it

was in effect two feathers that fell, and filmed in reverse. (Grant, 71)

In the same interview, Lang also says he enjoyed the "large frescoes of *Nibelungen, Metropolis,*

and *Woman in the Moon"* but after that period enjoyed focusing more on individuals and their

motives than on such sweeping tales (Grant 72). He clearly enjoyed the challenge of creating

new and wonderous effects – the true magic of cinema. Reflecting on the special effects in the

making of *The Last Will of Dr. Mabuse* and the excitement of those times he says:

But that was the happiest time of my life and nothing in the world could have made me

want to miss it. . . . It was like a great college: we spent long hours, after work, in the

cafeteria, discussing the film, my collaborators and me. . . . It was like we revisited our

college days together. (Grant, 72)

"All the time there were new inventions and experiments," according to Eisner (75). Lang's

creativity and willingness to explore combined with his firm vision for the *Nibelungen* film gives

it a balance and a magical quality not found in many films. His desire to control the details of every shot (leading to the nearly exclusive use of studio sets rather than location filming) gives a theatrical quality to the scenes, but the magic is in the details, such as the real earth and real snow where Kriemhild finds the blood of Siegfried after his betrayal, real ice in the water, real flowers in the ground (Eisner, 75). Despite the use of sets, which could easily look one-dimensional, Eisner notes that "nothing in Lang is façade; everything is three-dimensional and spatial. His mise en scène makes constant use of this space and he composes with it" (Eisner, 73). Eisner cites Kriemhild's people (dressed in white) and Brunhild's people (dressed in black) on the steps of the cathedral.

The almost-magical ability of film to depict the fantastic is one of the wonders of cinema, and Lang makes full use of the possibilities. The flaming sea before Brunhild's castle, the shadow of Siegfried still being visible while he wears the Tarnhelm, Siegfried's head floating near to Gunther's as he whispers the plan for defeating Brunhild,[118] Siegfried's assistance during the contests against Brunhild, the two Gunthers meeting outside Brunhild's door (one being Siegfried in disguise) when Siegfried subdues Brunhild on Gunther's behalf, or Kriemhild's premonition in the form of the Death's Head tree sequence (see fig. 1.16-1.18), are all beautiful examples of the capabilities of film, and Lang's determination to exploit the possibilities to the fullest (see fig. 2.15-2.17).

Lang's uses of effects, both those mentioned here and others elsewhere, contribute to the same sense of magic that Eisner describes when discussing Lang's engagement with the concept

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[118] This magical scene is sure to remind modern viewers of Harry Potter's head floating above his invisibility cloak in *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone,* (dir. Chris Columbus, 2001). This is a point of interest, because although that particular scene (with the invisibility cloak) was made using green screen, the filming of the ghosts of Hogwarts castle in the early Harry Potter films was achieved with projector technology, which could be considered a direct descendant of the film cell overlay technique used in *Siegfried* to create the ghostly, transparent hero.

of Urwald. Although Lang was by no means the only director of his day to use such effects, the sheer quantity of them, combined with his attention to detail in the cinematography and his penchant for lavish numbers of extras (such as when the courtly group returns from Iceland and crosses on a human bridge to the shore) combine to make *Die Nibelungen* a fantastical journey notable for its intensity and epic proportions, as well as the use of the Nibelungen legend (see fig. 2.18). Ott finds that "The *Nibelungen* was produced on a scale unparalleled in the history of the German film" (Ott, 107). Or in the words of Patrick McGilligan: "Seen today, *Die Nibelungen* remains one of the breathtaking wonders of the silent screen" (McGilligan, 101)

Lang and World Building

As explored in the films themselves, as well as in the first-hand account by Eisner, we have seen the extreme artificiality of Lang's work, not in any negative sense, but in the sense of artifice - something *created*. As Eisner related above, Lang had intended to film Siegfried in a real forest but not being able to find a suitable one (having not yet seen the American redwoods), he constructed a forest – an Urwald – set. This is but one example, but taking the films as a whole, the set design is meticulous and elaborate, and there are comparatively few shot-on-location scenes, which is typical for Expressionist film. This artificiality and reliance on sets gives Lang a far-reaching, wide-ranging control over the minutest of details on set, a control which he utilizes to its fullest again and again. The same is true, as we have seen, of his bewildering array of cleverly arranged special effects. And we have seen that Lang was no less particular about the timing and portrayal of the effects, as the above anecdote of numerous dragon-scene rehearsals shows.

With all the fantastical set pieces and effects, it is clear that Lang is not particularly interested in displaying the everyday real world on screen. Neither in *Die Nibelungen*, nor in

Metropolis, nor even to a certain extent in his *M* or his *Mabuse* series, does he seek the realism of ordinary nature or daily life. His is an interest in world creation. By deliberately moving away from location shooting to the malleable domain of set design and special effects, Lang creates worlds exactly as he wishes his viewers to see them.

This desire for intense (if not "total") aesthetic control both of the production (and at least in the first two cases, the reception) of their work is a common thread running through the works of all three artists. We have seen Wagner's desire, not to say obsession, with aesthetic control in the way he alters the older myths to suit his tastes, his writing both the music and the libretti (unusual for an opera composer), and most particularly in his construction of Bayreuth. Bayreuth served at once to control the production and set design of his operas, and to control the reception of his work by crafting the space, manner, and timing of his audiences' experiences. For instance, by designing the orchestra pit in such a way as to render the musicians unseen by the audience, Wagner creates the illusion that the music simply occurs within the story rather than being performed alongside it. In Tolkien's work, we will see a similar tendency in his myth-creation, most especially in his invention of fictional languages. For Tolkien, the two, myth and langauge, were inseparable. Myths are born out of language, and a language is inextricably linked to its myths. To engage in world-building, for Tolkien, was first to create multiple functional languages. Where Tolkien differed from Lang and Wagner, as we shall see, was in his disinterest in affecting an actual audience. He often insisted that he was writing for himself and his own pleasure, and was not a little surprised that as many other people were interested in his creations as it turned out there were. As we shall see, while he produced immense amounts of

writing about Middle-earth, he originally had no plans to publish any of these texts beyond *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and *The Silmarillion*, the last of which he left unfinished.[119]

Lang, like Wagner, liked to keep the entirety of his aesthetic design as far as possible under his own control, and, with due credit to the incredibly talented artists who worked with him on set design and effects, he certainly did. Tom Gunning, in his timely book, *The Films of Fritz Lang,* calls for more work on both Lang criticism, and on Lang as an *auteur,* despite the drawbacks of *auteur* theory as a lens. Likening Lang to Hitchcock, Gunning sees a filmmaker of extraordinary depth who closely monitors his films, even appearing in them himself whether as a cameo (Hitchcock) or merely as a hand (Lang). Gunning's approach to Lang is that of allegory, which he sees as being a central element in Lang's works. For Gunning, *"Die Nibelungen* takes place in a world of total design."[120]

This is interesting considering that cinema has various strengths and weaknesses, but one of its most remarkable strengths is the offering of a collective experience, a strength it shares with opera, and other performance arts. The necessarily communal reception of these myths, stories already intended to lead towards a sense of unity in uncertain times, wraps another layer of collectivity around the myth itself, with Lang at the helm.

If myth is to give meaning to a collective, this collective reception is valuable, if not essential. This is not the case with many art forms, including the novel, which as Walter Benjamin points out, comes forth from "the solitary individual, who is no longer able to express himself by examples … is himself uncounseled, and cannot counsel others." For Benjamin, it is the lack of oral counsel and communal experience (whether first-hand or not) in novels that

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[119] For the published version of the *Silmarillion*, the 12 volume *History of Middle-earth, Beren and Lúthien, The Children of Húrin,* and *The Fall of Gondolin,* among other texts, the world is much indebted to the late Christopher Tolkien, J.R.R. Tolkien's third son and literary executor.

[120] Gunning, Tom. *The Films of Fritz Lang: Allegories of Vision and Modernity.* British Film Institute, 2006. p. 36.

makes them so isolated, unlike the collective experience of listening to a storyteller who "takes what he tells from experience.… And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale."[121] If this is true for storytellers, it may also be true for those who tell their stories through the medium of film, with whom the storyteller has much in common. Lang also, of course, like most of his contemporaries, created his films with an eye towards their eventual reception beyond the local cinema, which is to say, exportation to Europe and the US, if not beyond. Demonstrating the German film industry's prowess abroad was a key goal for many Weimar period directors, whether openly avowed or not.

Despite intending *Die Nibelungen* to represent the German film industry, Lang did not intend to create something intensely nationalistic (racist depictions of Alberich and even Attila/Etzel notwithstanding) in the same sense that Wagner did. Even without intending to reduce Wagner to his deeply flawed worldview, it is clear that he was speaking to a very different time and a very different world than was Lang. Lang intended his *Nibelungen* to be an export product – it is his way of demonstrating Germany's contribution to cinema, and also to world myth. Yes, the Siegfried legend had been (in Wagner's day) and was (for Lang) a touchstone, a common reference point for Germans, but one that Lang meant to be shared with the world as a contribution, not a private possession held over others by some "master race." It could also be viewed as a cheering, comfortable sort of reminder for Germans who, in the wake of World War I, were divided, dispirited and despondent. Wagner, by contrast, does clearly take a position of Germans and Germany above all others and at all costs, if only because the Germany he was addressing consisted of a patchwork of various kingdoms. Lang does not.

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[121] Benjamin, Walter. "The Storyteller," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, New York: Schocken Books, 1968, p. 87.

Endeavoring to create something grand, uniquely German and visually stunning enough to make a splash on the international market, Lang turned to myth for his source matter. It is not only in *Die Nibelungen* that we see Lang's tendency towards creating mythic alternate worlds. His most famous film, *Metropolis*, features not only mythic and science fiction elements, but above all, a strong aspect of intensive world building. World building is integral to fantasy and science fiction, both in film and in literature. This no small part of the draw of those genres. Creating a different world is necessary, as problems can be solved there that cannot be solved in this world, and issues confronted there that cannot (or only with great difficulty) be confronted in this one. This is as true in the present day as it was in Lang's, as we consider the modern popularity of the Marvel Cinematic Universe films, the *Star Wars* saga, the seven *Star Trek* series (not to mention two separate film franchises), *Game of Thrones* or even Stephen King's novels of horror and the supernatural, which have proven fertile ground for more than one movie, television show, or streaming series. The worlds created in these films, shows, and books have an internal coherence that is clear, but distinctly different to our own world in some way.

This artificiality that Eisner notes in Lang is therefore an expression of his desire for control over the world-building process, an integral aspect of fantasy/mythic stories, science fiction, and such tales of epic proportions. Lang creates in *Die Nibelungen* his own world, a world in which dragons live and breathe, in which dwarves have subterranean treasure hoards, and where ancient trees bear witness to heroic deeds. Using his magnificent sets, careful manipulation of mise-en-scène, cinematography, editing, and sound, Lang constructs a world into which his viewers can enter and lose themselves for a while, experiencing Siegfried and Kriemhild's adventures.[122]

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[122] Although common to the fantasy genre in both film and literature, world building is less clearly a part of the operatic tradition. Possibly Wagner's insistence on incest is a clear sign of his "own little world," as well as his

Like Wagner, if less like Tolkien, Lang starts by trying to tell his story inside our world, but discovers he needs to go farther, to jump the bounds of what is possible in our reality. And so (like many other myth-makers, fantasy authors, and science fiction creators) he makes the world of *Die Nibelungenlied* similar to ours–very close indeed in places–close enough to be accessible, immediately comprehensible. But there exist sharply visible key alterations in his myth-world; the existence of dragons for example, or magical maidens like Brunhild. This alteration of our world is a way to ask "What if?" What if dragons roamed the earth? What if dragon's blood could make a hero invincible? What if a mighty queen lived on a flame-filled island but set forth clear parameters to relinquish her hand in marriage? What if a wily dwarf lived deep beneath the earth in a kingdom filled with his slaves and amassed a stupendous treasure? What if a woman loved a man so much that losing him drove her to a vengeance so powerful it caused her to break the bonds of ultimate loyalty and overstep the bounds of civilization's mores? That Lang saw cinema this way is clear from his praise of his cinematographers on *Die Nibelungen*, as we have seen: "Every third sentence [Günther Rittau] uttered began: 'What will happen if…?'" (quoted in Eisner, 76).

Through his singular mise-en-scène, through his over-the-top special effects, through his strict control over the world building, Lang crafts a film that brings together all the elements at his disposal to explore the idea that haunts him: fate. Philippe Demonsablon, too, sees Lang's oeuvre as being concerned with the inevitability – almost the overdone inevitability, if such a thing is possible – of fate. In discussing Lang's *The Woman in the Window* (1944), though it could just as well apply to *Die Nibelungen*, Demonsablon remarks:

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alterations of the mythology. This dovetails with his desire for total reception control in the design of Bayreuth. J.R.R. Tolkien is obviously totally committed to creating mythic alternate worlds.

Here, spurning all verisimilitude, Lang undertook the description of a world which, as the dream stresses, is not so much imaginary as entirely possible. A world too facilely described as one of fatality: for where does destiny come in if the character expends the little liberty he has on his own downfall, and where the inexorable decree in this play of forces which he retains the privilege of setting in motion if not always of controlling? This kind of destiny cannot be fulfilled without the co-operation of the victim (even back in the days of *M*, the little girls at the beginning offered themselves to a potential murderer by singing about his exploits), and no matter how perfect the circle encompassing him, it cannot close in unless he consents. Everything here tends to present him as the only anomaly, the only obtrusive element in this world: were he not to intervene, cause and effect would maintain themselves in loose symmetry, and only his desire to act disturbs the balance. Lang often delights in endowing even the most *natural* gesture with repercussions so weighty that the mind, powerless to deny the patent fact, finds itself questioning the logical system behind it.

So, too, does Siegfried inevitably go on the fateful hunting trip. So, too, does Hagen attend gathering at Etzel's doomed palace. The hand of fate rests heavy on Lang's characters. Demonsablon further finds that Lang "delights in choosing the most extreme form of obstacle, so that the mind cannot entertain it except under a tension which obviates any placidity. It is in this way that Lang both alienates his viewers and yet draws them inexorably in. He concludes by pointing out:

This unblinking eye, this merciless gaze directed on the simulacra which occupy the screen . . . suddenly the spectator feels it turned on him, reflecting this scarcely flattering

portrait of himself. Why accept it, you may say. Because no one is exempt from

intelligence – and yet, in the light of intelligence alone, no one is spared.[123]

Lang, builder of fantastical worlds, built to explore the inexorable destiny that awaits us all, does

not spare his characters, his viewers, or himself.

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[123] Philippe Demonsablon, qtd. in Jenkins, Stephen, ed. *Fritz Lang: The Image and the Look.* British Film Institute, 1981. pp. 21-25.

V.a Film Stills II[124]

Figure 2.1 The dragon lies in wait

Figure 2.2 The dragon contained several people inside to work its levers

Figure 2.3 My what big teeth!

Figure 2.4 Dragon drinking and showing off his articulated neck and moving jaws

Figure 2.5 Siegfried in action

Figure 2.6 Dragon belching smoke

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[124] All film stills in this chapter are taken from: Lang, Fritz, director. *Die Nibelungen*. Decla-Bioscop, 1924.

Figure 2.7 Siegfried's sword about to pierce the dragon's eye

Figure 2.10 Siegfried and Alberich view the crown of the ice giants

Figure 2.8 Blood gushes from the dragon's death wound in its chest

Figure 2.11 The Nibelungen halfway turned to stone

Figure 2.9 The bird tells Siegfried to bathe in the dragon's blood

Figure 2.12 King Etzel's palace burns

Figure 2.13 Lang's fiery finale to Kriemhilds Rache
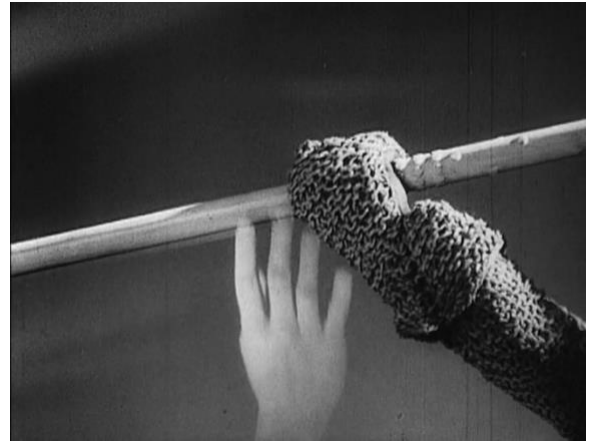
Figure 2.16 Siegfried's invisible hand aiding Gunther

Figure 2.14 The massive scale of the set at Worms

Figure 2.17 Siegfried may be invisible, but his shadow is not

Figure 2.15 Brunhild's lake of fire
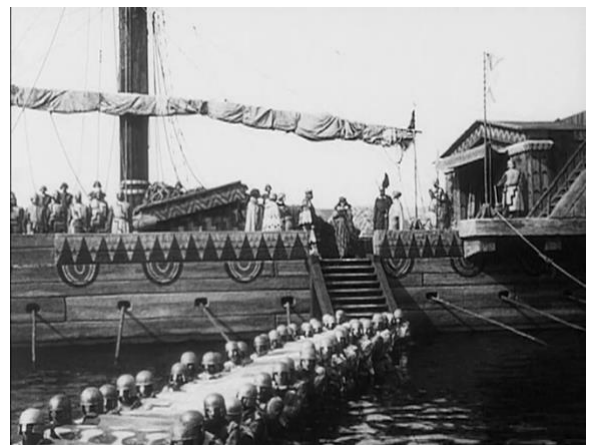
Figure 2.18 Brunhild arrives in Worms

VI. Conclusion

Paul Jensen, speaking about Lang's work on *Die Nibelungen*, concludes with the following words:

> By using separate styles in this two-part epic, he visually opposes the halves of his dual visions of justice and personality; form is integrated into content, and manner into matter, to a degree rarely achieved. This brilliantly structured, conceived, and executed work surely stands as one of the high points in the silent cinema (Jensen, 57).

Die Nibelungen is indeed a high point in silent cinema, and this chapter aims to contribute some small modicum of appreciation of that achievement. In the introduction to his edited volume of essays on Lang, Joe McElhaney refers to "Lang's reputation as the creator and perpetrator of mythologies (in particular, mythologies built around the concepts of nation and history), and as an artist with a deeply tragic vision of the world…," a description which certainly suits the Fritz Lang we have explored here. [125]

This is a Lang, who, deeply in love with the medium of film, sought to fulfill certain, specific goals with his craft, and more generally, to raise the medium to new heights. Anton Kaes clarifies:

> The film's goal, according to Thea von Harbou, was to instill in [Germans] a desire for a collective identity based on a mythical national narrative. Following Wagner's project of his *Ring* cycle which was designed to reconstitute a national community that had been lost, Lang's *Nibelungen* indeed promised a renewed sense of national identity and pride at a moment of crisis."[126]

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[125] McElhaney, Joe, ed. *A Companion to Fritz Lang.* Wiley Blackwell, 2015. p. 7.

[126] Kaes, Anton. "Siegfried – A German Film Star Performing the Nation in Lang's *Nibelungen* Film." *The German Cinema Book,* edited by Tim Bergfelder, Erica Carter, and Deniz Göktürk, British Film Institute, 2002, p. 65.

In this chapter, we have seen that Fritz Lang, working in the context of Weimar Cinema, approached the creation of *Die Nibelungen* with two specific goals in mind: to encourage a dispirited nation with a "renewed sense of national identity and pride at a moment of crisis," and to contribute to Germany's prestige on the international film market.[127] Although he worried that his efforts could be compromised by associations with Wagner, troubling stereotype portrayals, and Kracauer's thesis connecting his film to National Socialism, not to mention the Nazi hijacking of his film in 1933, Lang nevertheless succeeded in making a remarkable film. *Die Nibelungen* is a film in which he pushed the medium to its limits, giving new form and new life cinematic art – particularly through his use of an idiosyncratic mise-en-scène, deeply involved special effects, and a monumental vision for a mythical world.

Like Wagner, Lang pulled together old myth and new innovation to craft a masterpiece on an epic scale, utilizing all of the cutting-edge technology at his disposal, and creating a rich visual world for his mythic heroes. Lang brought intense creativity to his medium, pushing it to new heights. He embraced the human innovation and experimentation inherent in the new medium of film, bursting with hitherto unimaginable technological potential, and used it to tell his own story for his own time, thereby furthering the scope of what was possible in film. Therefore, I argue that this film is a *Gesamtkunstwerk* in its own right, being a work created with a specific vision or goals for Lang's society, created from a combination of means and skills, and uniting a combination of diverse media (such as music, film, light, acting, painting, design, writing). Lang, like Wagner and Tolkien, uses the Nibelungen material for his own ends, finding that it speaks into his own context. Lang chooses to use this material to create his own

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[127] Kaes, Anton. "Siegfried – A German Film Star Performing the Nation in Lang's *Nibelungen* Film." *The German Cinema Book,* edited by Tim Bergfelder, Erica Carter, and Deniz Göktürk, British Film Institute, 2002, p. 65.

masterpiece which will meet his own specific social goals and allow him to think in new ways about his medium, and, in so doing, pushes the medium to new heights.

Though problematic in certain respects, particularly viewed through our modern lens, *Die Nibelungen* is still a tour de force of the silent film era, and, as posited above, a film that meets the criteria of a *Gesamtkunstwerk*. And, beyond all this, it is a pleasure to watch. Patrick McGilligan waxes poetic on the subject:

> Seen today, *Die Nibelungen* remains one of the breathtaking wonders of the silent screen. The spectator is swept along on a journey to a mythic time of dwarfs, ogres, giants, and dragons; a place of spectacular landscapes and grandiose settings; a world of primal images and emotions. Lang was never more in command of his flair for drama and sensation on a panoramic scale. Scene after scene is richly imagined. The costumes and design are magnificent. The camerawork is beautifully composed. Every scene is inventively dappled with sparkle and haze, smoke and fire, gusts of wind, reflection in water and mirrors, and the constant interplay of shadow and light.... After all these years the film still conveys with tremendous power. (McGilligan, 101).

A great deal of that power comes from the film's universality, an intentional choice on Lang's part. Humanity must always struggle against fate or destiny. Lang explored this struggle in nearly all his films, and perhaps, in his own life too. Keith Grant, in the introduction to his volume of Lang interviews, summarizes Lang's oeuvre: "His films depict an entrapping claustrophobic, deterministic world in which people, controlled by larger forces […] struggle vainly against their fate." (Grant, viii-ix)

The epic, inexorable struggle against fate, though common to all, deserved, in Lang's view, a mythic backdrop of equally epic proportions. Humanity has often turned to myth, to

fairytale, to legend for this, for comfort in the midst of the struggle, and Lang is no exception.

The epic fight in which we are all engaged, the struggle against destiny, is truly the stuff of myth.

Hence its appeal. Lang certainly found it compelling, as a project. He remarks in his program

notes for the film's premiere, "Above all in the Nibelungen film, I hoped to make the world of

myth live again for the twentieth century, to live again and be believable."[128] Perhaps it held his

interest because a believable world of myth can hold up a mirror to humanity, challenging or

encouraging as the case might be. This was certainly a part of Lang's goal for his work, not just

with the Nibelungen, but with his life's work. As he told Gretchen Berg in his 1965 interview:

"…what I always wanted to show and define is the attitude of combat that must be adopted in the

face of destiny. Whether or not the individual wins this fight, what counts is the fight itself,

because it is vital (Grant, 61).

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[128] Lang, quoted in: Gunning, Tom. *The Films of Fritz Lang: Allegories of Vision and Modernity.* British Film Institute, 2006. p. 37-8.

Chapter Three: A Dwelling-place for a Language: Middle-earth and J. R. R. Tolkien

I. Introduction

Although John Ronald Reuel Tolkien, author of *The Lord of the Rings,* is British writer (an English-language rather than a German-language author), and an unorthodox inclusion in a German Studies dissertation, his work is not out of place here, for no consideration of the early modern usage of the Nibelung legend would be complete without him. His most famous trilogy, *The Lord of the Rings,* often overshadows his other Middle-earth writings,[129] whose homages to ancient legends are more explicit than the more familiar trilogy. *The Silmarillion* is perhaps the best known and most read of these, if only because it seems more accessible than the 12 volume *The History of Middle-earth.* Although both *Silmarillion* and *History* were published posthumously (with edits by his son, Christopher Tolkien[130]), they represent much of Tolkien's life work and thought, particularly in relationship to the *Nibelungenlied,*[131] its Norse counterpart, the *Völsunga Saga*, the *Poetic Edda*[132], the Finnish legend *Kalevala,*[133] and other similar myths.

Like Richard Wagner and Fritz Lang, Tolkien created his myth-based work for a specific purpose. While Wagner and Lang had sweeping socio-political motivations, Tolkien's motivation was more personal. His work begins with his fascination with languages. Since childhood he had been inventing fictional languages. He continued this as a hobby in his adult life, eventually creating the two Elvish languages, which he dubbed *Sindarin* and *Quenyan*.

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[129] It is fair to say that these less widely known Middle-earth writings, in their turn, have often overshadowed his not-inconsiderable academic work.

[130] To whom the reading world in general owes a tremendous debt of gratitude.

[131] Tolkien disliked openly acknowledging the influence of the *Nibelungenlied* on his work, in general wishing to distance himself from Wagner and Wagner's open anti-Semitism and the public's association of Wagner with Hitler. See Carpenter, *Letters* pgs. 306, 319.

[132] Carpenter, Humphrey, editor. *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*. Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000. pg. 31. Hereafter cited as *Letters*.

[133] *Letters* 345.

Being firmly convinced that languages and mythology were intimately interconnected, he simultaneously began to create a mythos to accompany the languages. His first real Middle-earth publication, *The Hobbit,* was released in 1937. This, however, was not originally meant to be part of the language-mythology he had invented for his own amusement; rather it was a bedtime story, written to please his children. It was only when his publisher begged for a sequel to *The Hobbit* and he began writing, that much of the other matter began to seep into the tale. Indeed, the first few chapters of the first book in the trilogy, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, are more light-hearted and whimsical (similar in style to *The Hobbit,* a children's tale) than the later, darker chapters. For as he wrote, *The Lord of the Rings* took on a life of its own, and, instead of a children's book sequel, he found himself writing about the latter days of his mythological-linguistic world.

Tolkien's work must be situated, of course, in his own socio-political context, just as Wagner's *Ring Cycle* and Lang's *Die Nibelungen* are products of their own times. Although Tolkien famously declared that he was writing neither allegory nor alluding to current events in the slightest[134], it would be impossible for him or any of his readers to completely separate the events of his life and times from his work. However, unlike Lang and Wagner, who both intended their Nibelung adaptations to have a specific effect in their modern contexts, with Wagner wanting to assist the unification of the German kingdom-states, and Lang to calm the divisive culture of Weimar Germany, Tolkien's adaptation represents an attempt to create a pre-history for Britain in the same way that the Iceland has the *Eddas*, and Finland has the *Kalevala*. While Tolkien loved *Beowulf*, and in fact wrote one of the most definitive academic essays on the poem, he regretted that Britain had no *Poetic Edda* of its own. In pursuit of this goal,

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[134] In the introduction to *The Lord of the Rings,* he says "I cordially dislike allegory in all its manifestations." Tolkien, J.R.R.. *The Lord Of The Rings*. Harper Collins, 1993. pg. xvii. Hereafter cited as *Rings*.

Tolkien, like Wagner and Lang, went on to create a *Gesamtkunstwerk* of his own, which pushed his own medium to new heights, and which, not unlike Wagner's *Musikdrama*, led to the birth of a new literary genre: High Fantasy.

I begin this chapter by situating Tolkien in the context of his time and providing details about his life, specifically leading up to the point when he began publishing his Middle-earth writings, and by providing an overview of the Middle-earth writings in question. The following section details the long journey of publication, which was, for Tolkien, a process of discovering what he truly wanted to write, which was not what he set out to write. The next section explores the nature and elements of Tolkien's Middle-earth, with an eye toward his goals for his work and the motivating factors in his writing. It also looks at the basis of his work: the invented languages. The final section considers the Middle-earth writings as a *Gesamtkunstwerk,* and brings them into conversation with Lang and Wagner.

II. J.R.R. Tolkien: Life and Context

John Ronald Reuel Tolkien was born in 1892 in Bloemfontein, Orange Free State (located in present-day South Africa and Lesotho), less than a year after his parents' marriage. Tolkien was the first of two boys. At the age of 4, while Mabel Tolkien and her two sons were visiting her family in Birmingham, England, they received word that Tolkien's father, Arthur, had contracted rheumatic fever and unexpectedly died. Choosing to remain in England, near her family, Mabel Tolkien worked hard to make a life for her two young sons on very little income. Humphrey Carpenter, in his biography of Tolkien, speculates that Mabel Tolkien's move to the countryside

near Birmingham (around Sarehole) had a lasting impact on young Tolkien's ideas of rural, idyllic landscapes.[135]

Even as a small boy, Tolkien enjoyed inventing made-up languages with his brother. He could read by the age four, and soon was soon learning Latin and French from his mother, proving to be an adept pupil (Carpenter, 21). He especially enjoyed reading Arthurian legends, and stories of fairies and goblins, in particular those of George Macdonald. At some point he also came across the Fairy Books by Andrew Lang. Carpenter notes:

> […] especially the *Red Fairy Book*, for tucked away in its closing pages was the best story he had ever read. This was the tale of Sigurd who slew the dragon Fafnir: a strange and powerful tale set in the nameless North. Whenever he read it, Ronald found it absorbing. 'I desired dragons with a profound desire,' he said long afterwards. 'Of course, I in my timid body did not wish to have them in the neighbourhood. But the world that contained even the imagination of Fafnir was richer and more beautiful, at whatever cost of peril.' (Carpenter, 22-23)

In June of 1900, Mabel Tolkien converted to Catholicism, and her sons were baptized not long after. This unfortunately led most of her extended family on both sides to cut off what little support they had been providing, leaving the Tolkiens nearly destitute. Because of this, the family was forced to move again, to the town of Moseley, a suburb of Birmingham. This abrupt change from idyllic countryside to a bustling urban environment clearly made an impression on Tolkien, who missed the countryside. Around this time, the young boy was exposed to the Welsh language for the first time, a language that he clearly found fascinating (Carpenter, 28). Mabel's health was beginning to deteriorate, however, and in 1904 she was diagnosed with diabetes. The

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[135] Carpenter, Humphrey. *Tolkien: A Biography*. Houghton Mifflin Company, 1977. Pg. 20. Hereafter cited in the text with author's name and page number.

three moved to a more rural residence again in June of 1904, with the help of a priest, Father

Francis Morgan, who had found a country postal worker's wife able to give them a room and

cook for them during Mabel's convalescence. The boys benefitted from the change of air and

scenery, but Mabel's condition worsened. In November of 1904, she fell into a diabetic coma

and died (Carpenter, 29-30). Tolkien was 12 years old.

The circumstances of his childhood, and particularly of his mother's death, made a

lasting impression on Tolkien, and almost certainly contributed to his deeply held Catholic faith,

which remained with him throughout his life. Carpenter quotes Tolkien on his mother:

> My own dear mother was a martyr indeed, and it is not to everybody that God grants so
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> easy a way to his great gifts as he did to [my younger brother] Hilary and myself, giving
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> us a mother who killed herself with labour and trouble to ensure us keeping the faith.
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> (Carpenter, 31)

Tolkien clearly associates the strength of his faith with what he saw as his mother's sacrifice, and

sacrificial mothers appear in small but important places throughout his Middle-earth writings.[136]

Carpenter felt that "his religion took the place in his affections that she had previously occupied.

The consolation that it provided was emotional as well as spiritual" (Carpenter, 31).

After his mother's death, Tolkien (who was sometimes called Ronald and sometimes

called John) and Hilary came into the care of Father Francis Morgan. Tolkien excelled in school,

despite his difficult personal and family situations, and by his teen years had studied Latin,

Greek, French, and German. He was deeply intrigued by the Welsh language, and also began

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[136] Gilraen, for instance, the mother of Aragorn (who was also named Hope – in Elvish, of course), who, in preserving his life and giving him into the care of Elrond, "I gave hope to [men], I have kept none for myself" (*Rings* 1036). Also notable would be Aredhel Ar-Feiniel (the wife of Eöl, mother of Maeglin), and the tragic allusions to Celebrian (*Silmarillion* 161; *Rings* 221). Melian is also an interesting mother figure – although not tragic, her Girdle of Protection around her land ensures the safety of her child and her people (*Silmarillion* 107).

studying Anglo-Saxon (Old English), and later Old Norse (Carpenter, 34-5). He started saving what money he could to buy German philological books, and became much interested in the discipline of philology.[137]

Thus Tolkien's interest in languages dates back almost to his earliest days. As a young child, he had enjoyed his cousins' Mary and Marjorie Incledon invented language, "Animalic," in which certain English words (mostly animals) stood in for others.[138] Later, he and Mary made another pretend language of their own, Nevbosh, which as Carpenter notes, was "new and more sophisticated […] and it was soon sufficiently developed for the two cousins to chant limericks in it.[139] Carpenter sees these early childhood language-games as being the inspiration for his first serious attempt at language invention in adolescence. He tried making "Naffarin," an invented language based loosely on Spanish, but with its "own system of phonology and grammar" (Carpenter, 37). He left off working on it, however, when he got hold of a Gothic language primer. Carpenter describes this event and Tolkien's language "process":

Tolkien opened [the primer] and immediately experienced "a sensation at least as full of delight as first looking into Chapman's *Homer.*" Gothic ceased to be spoken with the decline of the Gothic peoples, but written fragments survived for posterity, and Tolkien found them immensely attractive. He was not content simply to learn the language, but began to invent 'extra' Gothic words to fill gaps in the limited vocabulary that survived, and to move on from this to the construction of a supposedly unrecorded but historical

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[137] Carpenter, *Tolkien,* pg. 35. Carpenter does not list specifically what "German books on philology" Tolkien read during this time, but this could be a possible link to the Grimms' work on Indo-European languages and the sound shifts.

[138] Carpenter, *Tolkien,* pg. 35-36. Carpenter here gives an example: "Dog nightingale woodpecker forty" (You are an ass.)

[139] Carpenter, *Tolkien,* pg. 36. Carpenter here gives an example, demonstrating Nevbosh was far more developed than Animalic: "Dar fys ma vel gob co palt 'Hoc/Pys go iskili far maino woc?/Pro si go fys do roc de/Do cat ym maino bocte/De volt fact soc ma taimful gyroc! (There was an old man who said 'How/Can I possibly carry my cow?/For if I were to ask it/To get in my basket/It would make such a terrible row!)

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Germanic language.… Tolkien also began to develop his invented languages *backwards*;

that is, to posit the hypothetical 'earlier' words which he was finding necessary for

invention by means of an organized 'historical' system. He was also working on invented

alphabets; one of his notebooks from schooldays contains a system of code-symbols for

each letter of the English alphabet. (Carpenter, 37)

In 1908 Father Francis moved the Tolkien boys from an aunt's house to a lodging house owned

by a friend, and it was there that Tolkien met Edith Bratt. The orphaned only child of a single

mother, Edith was also living at the boarding house. Tolkien would have just turned 16, and

although Edith was three years older, the two soon became friends. Things turned romantic

between them in the summer of 1909, but that autumn Father Francis discovered their

attachment, and separated the pair, moving the Tolkien boys to other lodgings. His objections

were his desire for Tolkien to focus on schoolwork, and moreover he disapproved of their age

difference and Edith's non-Catholic upbringing (and perhaps also of her illegitimate birth). At

first he only demanded that they break off the romance, but finding that they continued to see

each other, he forbade them any contact or communication until Tolkien should be of age and

out of Father Francis' care at twenty-one, that is, for the following three years. Their feelings

remained steadfast, despite (or, more likely, as Tolkien recalls, because of) their separation

(Carpenter, 44). They were wed in March of 1916 after her conversion (at his instance) to

Catholicism, and remained together until her death in 1971.[140]

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[140] The rest of their love story, though quite romantic, is not of direct interest here. During their separation, she had become engaged to another man, but when Tolkien wrote to her on his twenty-first birthday (in January 1913), she hinted she would break it off for him. He pursued her, and she did. The two had to get to know each other again, however, have grown apart, and having lived in very different circumstances for the intervening years. Although they did not have much in common (he was at Oxford and she had minimal education, and no particular interest in languages, literature, or history), their mutual affection remained strong. She was reluctant to convert to Catholicism because of her friends and family's objections, but eventually did, as it was deeply important to Tolkien, particularly in light the connection between his religious feelings and his mother. The war broke out in 1914, Tolkien finished his degree at Oxford in 1915, and began military training (specializing in signaling) that summer. Early in 1916, it

In 1914, when Tolkien was twenty-two, the Great War broke out. Like nearly all the young men of his acquaintance, Tolkien sought a commission. He began training, but was nonetheless able to finish his degree at Oxford in 1915. In 1916 was deployed to the front in France, where he served as a signal Lieutenant. In Fall 1916 he was sent home with "trench fever," a recurring and persistent fever, now known to be caused by a Bartonella quintana infection. By early 1917 he had nearly recovered, but relapsed that summer and was not considered fit for duty. His first son John was born in November 1917. Tolkien spent the remainder of the war in England, serving at various postings, and in and out of the hospital. When the war finally ended, as he notes in his forward to *Lord of the Rings*, all but one of his close friends had perished. During this time, he began inventing language in earnest—a language that would later become one of his two elven tongues: *Sindarin*.

After a short stint working on the *Oxford English Dictionary*, Tolkien took a position as Reader in English Language at the University of Leeds in the north of England. Although it was a far cry from his dream of returning to Oxford, Tolkien accepted the job around the time his second son, Michael, was born, in the fall of 1920 (Carpenter, 100). In 1922 he was appointed a Professor of English Language at Leeds. In November 1924 the couple's third son, Christopher, was born, and by 1925 Tolkien applied for and eventually won the position he had always wanted: the Professorship of Anglo-Saxon at Oxford (Rawlinson and Bosworth) (Carpenter, 108). He remained in this position for the next twenty years, until he was elected to Merton College (also at Oxford) as a Professor of English Language and Literature. His daughter Priscilla was born in 1929.

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seemed evident that he would be deployed soon, and so the couple married before he left. For further information, see Carpenter's biography, chapters 6 and 7.

It was during this time that he met and became friends with the author Clive Staples Lewis, and the pair started the now-well-known writers club known as the Inklings. This friendship certainly had an impact on Tolkien's writing, although despite their shared love of history, fantasy, and narrative world-building the friends had vastly different approaches to their work. Moreover, the friends differed in their religious confessions—Lewis converted to Anglicanism later in life, and turned his not inconsiderable writing skills to Christian apologetics, with such notable titles as *The Screwtape Letters, Mere Christianity,* and *Surprised by Joy.* Even Lewis' fantasy and science fiction books were allegorical explorations of the Christian faith, such as *The Chronicles of Narnia* series and the *Perelandra* trilogy. Lewis, then, was protestant, and despite his persuasiveness, his dear friend Tolkien remained staunchly Catholic, and never seriously considered Lewis' entreaties to convert. Tolkien seems to have connected his faith to a certain extent with the memory of his mother, which was sacred to him. Later in life, he lamented his children's lack of faith, saying "when I think of my mother's death … worn out with persecution, poverty, and. largely consequent, disease, in the effort to hand on to us small boys the Faith … I find it very hard and bitter, when my children stray away [from Catholicism]" (*Letters,* 354).

Tolkien and his Middle-earth

J. R. R. Tolkien's fantasy writings, what I am here referring to as his Middle-earth texts, are primarily set in the fantasy realm of Middle-earth (sometimes called Arda). Middle-earth is his version of the Norse, Germanic and Scandinavian "Midgard," which is to say the middle realm, middle abode, or middle earth. Middle-earth is also a kind of proto-Europe, or proto-Britain, not in any specific geographic sense (for in his hand drawn maps of Middle-earth Tolkien by no means gives way to any sort of direct representation), but only in a linguistic sense. Tolkien

delights in little asides to let us know which Middle-earth words or expressions or phrases are now remembered in English as though to say "still to this day." For example, at the inn at Bree, Frodo sings a long song that Bilbo had earlier written, and Tolkien says "only a few words of it are now, as a rule, remembered" (*Rings* 154). It is a nonsensical ballad featuring a cow jumping over the moon, and a dish running away with a spoon—clearly emulating the Mother Goose rhyme of our world—and meant to prefigure it.

Tolkien's major fantasy writings are all set in Middle-earth, though he published several short stories, fables, and poems which are only loosely connected or not at all, such as *Leaf by Niggle*. He was also a rather prolific poet (both within Middle-earth and out of it) and published a great deal of poetry in addition to his numerous scholarly writings. During his lifetime, his Middle-earth publications included *The Hobbit* (1937), *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, comprised of *The Fellowship of the Ring* (1954), *The Two Towers* (1954), and *The Return of the King* (1955), and *The Adventures of Tom Bombadil* (1962), which is a slim volume of Middle-earth-related poetry, and which includes three poems that also appear in the trilogy.

The first foray into Middle-earth began long before *The Hobbit,* in the sense that Tolkien had begun work, as a hobby, on his invented languages, which later became two separate elvish languages, as a young man. However, by 1929, Tolkien had four children, and being professionally as well as personally interested in fairy tales, around 1930 he began to write the episodic adventures of a small-statured, large-footed human-like creature called a Hobbit. The hobbit's name was Bilbo Baggins, and he found himself on an unexpected magical adventure with a wizard and dwarves in which the dwarves go on a quest to defeat an evil dragon, in the course of which Bilbo finds a magic ring that can make its wearer invisible. This tale was, at first, completely unconnected with Tolkien's languages or whatever early thoughts he may have

had about a fantasy Midgard or its mythology. He showed his manuscript to some friends, including Lewis, and received positive responses. He also allowed a student, Elaine Griffiths, to read it, who passed it on to a friend who worked for publisher Stanley Unwin (Carpenter, 181, 294). Unwin's 10-year-old son Raynor having given it a favorable review, *The Hobbit* was first published by Allen & Unwin on 21 September, 1937, when Tolkien was 45 years old.

 The Hobbit enjoyed international success, to Tolkien's surprise and bemusement. Allen & Unwin soon approached Tolkien to see if he would be interested in writing a sequel. Tolkien agreed, and set about creating a new story, picking up the tale of Bilbo as an elderly hobbit, passing his magical ring to his heir, Frodo, who would also go on an adventure. However, by this point, Tolkien had spent many years crafting his elvish languages, and these in turn had given rise to a mythology to support them (see below). Tolkien was spending his free time working on his mythology and languages. The new story initially (as can be seen in the first chapters of *The Fellowship of the Ring)* took a whimsical, fairy-tale tone, much like *The Hobbit*, as Frodo sets out on his own adventure to the Old Forest. It was not very long, however, before Tolkien found himself "drawn irresistibly towards the older world [of the *Silmarillion*]" (*Rings* xv). The children's book sequel quickly became darker, deeper, and much more vast. Tolkien felt that the story had taken on a life of its own, and that the magic ring Bilbo had found in the first adventure would not only serve as the catalyst for Frodo's new adventure, but also as the crucial connection to the "past," the history of Middle-earth, which is to say, the link to Tolkien's extensive mythology. The sequel soon far surpassed its predecessor in length as well as in complexity. Unwin had to wait rather longer than he had hoped for the sequel, but in 1954, seventeen years after The Hobbit had appeared, he was able to publish both *The Fellowship of the Ring,* and *The Two Towers,* the first and second parts of the trilogy. There was some discussion as to whether to

publish the trilogy as six separate volumes, or a single whole, but eventually Tolkien and the publishers agreed to having two volumes combined into one, with separate headings for the six "books." For example, *The Fellowship of the Ring* contains a "Book One" and a "Book Two" and *The Two Towers* a "Book Three" and a "Book Four."

By 1955, *The Return of the King* was published, and the trilogy was complete. Like its predecessor, it was quite successful on both sides of the Atlantic, and Tolkien spent the rest of his life answering fan mail, much of which concerned fans' detailed questions concerning minute points about the language and history of Middle-earth and aspects of his larger mythology.[141] In private, Tolkien continued to work on the histories and mythologies of Middle-earth, and seems to have refined his vision quite a bit in this period. Sadly, he passed away in September of 1973, in Bournemouth (Hampshire), England, at the age of 81, without having published any further Middle-earth texts, other than *The Adventures of Tom Bombadil.* This is a collection of 16 poems, which are written as though they were a book of poetry written by hobbits for hobbits, and which contains a little supplemental information about Middle-earth and mentioned a few of the characters from *The Lord of the Rings,* such as Tom Bombadil and Samwise Gamgee.

After Tolkien's death, the first Middle-earth-related text to be published was a short poem entitled *Bilbo's Last Song.* This was, oddly enough, first published in a Dutch translation in 1973 and then in English in 1974 (as a poster). It was then later illustrated and set to music and republished in 1990. It is notable not so much for its content as for the touching fact that before his death, Tolkien had given it as a gift to a secretary, Margaret Joy Hill, employed by Allen & Unwin. Joy Hill had been tasked by her employers to assist Tolkien with his fan mail, particularly after an injury and a stint in a physical rehabilitation facility in the late 1960s. She

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[141] Some of Tolkien's responses can be read in Carpenter's *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien.*

became very close with Tolkien, and with his wife, Edith. In gratitude for her assistance, Tolkien gave her the poem, along with the rights to it in perpetuity.

The second posthumous publication was in 1975, a *Guide to the Names in the Lord of the Rings,* which Tolkien had originally written as an aid to translators of the trilogy. This was followed by a third posthumous work, the one that is of most interest to this dissertation: *The Silmarillion.* This work appeared in 1977, and, although made up of Tolkien's texts and manuscripts, it was not ready for publication as he left it, and so it was edited and published by his third child and youngest son, Christopher Tolkien, with assistance from Guy Gavriel Kay. Christopher, indeed, from this point forward, became the editor of his father's papers, and it was his life's work editing and publishing Tolkien's remaining manuscripts—no small feat, as we shall see. The Middle-earth related works Christopher Tolkien compiled, edited and published from his father's papers and manuscripts include: *The Unfinished Tales of Númenor and Middle-earth* (1980), the twelve volume *The History of Middle-earth* (published almost annually from 1983-1996; an index for this was also published in 2002), *The Children of Húrin* (2007), *Beren and Lúthien* (2017), and *The Fall of Gondolin* (2018). Others have shared in this work as well, notably Carl F. Hostetter, who, in 2021, edited and published Tolkien's *The Nature of Middle-earth* about the world itself, its seasons, and geography.

The Silmarillion is of greatest interest to this inquiry. It contains, in brief, much of the contents of the later works (particularly *The History of Middle-earth, Unfinished Tales, Beren and Lúthien,* and *The Children of Húrin*), albeit in condensed form. *The Silmarillion* is more or less a summing up of the vast mythos that Tolkien had created, first as a background or even as a support structure for his imaginary languages, then later used as a "historical" backdrop for his *Lord of the Rings* and, retroactively, for *The Hobbit.* It is broken into five sections, the

Ainulindalë, the *Valaquenta*, the *Quenta Silmarillion* (by far the longest section), the *Akallabêth*, and a final section entitled *Of the Rings of Power and the Third Age*.

The first, rather short, tale is the *Ainulindalë* ("the song of the Ainur"). This begins with the creation of Middle-earth by the god-figure, Eru (who is also called Ilúvatar; Tolkien delighted in giving both characters and places multiple names, and names in different languages). Eru (the god-figure) first creates the Ainur (angelic beings) through his music and shows them, in a sort of symphonic experience, a vision of Middle-earth. [142] Some of the Ainur choose to come and labor to make Eru's envisioning a reality, and they descend to the Deeps of Time, and there create the mortal realm, and, in accordance with the designs of Eru, Middle-earth itself (also called Arda).

The second part, the *Valaquenta*, is concerned with these specific Ainur (angelic beings), who became workers in Arda (earth), and which are known as the Valar. Being not dissimilar to the Greek or Norse pantheons, they each have specific attributes which are explained in detail. There is a Valar, a god, of the ocean, for instance, as well as gods of plants and growing things. The chief among them is Manwë, god of the winds, air, and birds. His partner, Varda (also called Elbereth Gilthoniel) is the goddess of the stars (which are sacred to elves) and of light. Varda is, incidentally, the only Vala mentioned multiple times in *The Lord of Rings*. [143] However, one of these angelic beings, or demigods, turns the music of Eru (the creator-god) to discord, and tries to create his own music. This is Melkor (also called Morgoth), [144] the first and most powerful

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[142] Attentive readers of Tolkien's friend, C.S. Lewis, will remember that his fantasy world of Narnia was also created through music in its own mythology, depicted in *The Magician's Nephew* (1955).

[143] She is mentioned numerous times throughout the text as Elbereth (only Galadriel's song as the fellowship leaves Lothlórien names her as Varda). In contrast, Manwë is mentioned only in the appendices (pertaining to the history of Númenor), and then he is only referred to as The Elder King, a tolerably obscure reference. Her frequent appearance may be connected with Tolkien's real-life veneration for the catholic ideal of the Virgin Mary.

[144] Morgoth, like Manwë, is discussed in the appendices to *The Lord of the Rings*. In the main text, however, he is mentioned only once, when Legolas describes the Balrog (a monster the fellowship must face) in the Mines of Moria as "a Balrog of Morgoth" (*Rings* 347).

Dark Lord, the predecessor of the evil Sauron from *The Lord of the Rings*. This is hinted at in the

first part, mentioned in the second part, and discussed at length in the third part, the *Quenta*

Silmarillion. Melkor tempts many lesser Ainur to the dark side, and they, the forces of evil, are at

war with Manwë and the good Valar.

The *Quenta Silmarillion*, the chief part of *The Silmarillion,* is an extended series of

stories recounting the first age of Middle-earth. The creation story is retold, in brief, and the evil

demigod Melkor is shown to have corrupted much of what was done by the Valar. There is also a

brief account of the origins of elves, humans, dwarfs, and ents (a tree people). The central focus

is on the elves, and on their relationship to three hallowed jewels (which preserve the last

remaining glimpse of a sacred light), the Silmarils. These are made by an elf called Fëanor. The

lust for the jewels (both the elves and Melkor desire them), and a rash oath by the seven sons of

Fëanor lead to the early wars of the elves and Valar, and set the tragic backdrop of war, unrest,

and upheaval for the other "lays" summarized here. These stories, such as that of Beren and

Lúthien, and of Túrin Turumbar (*The Children of Húrin*), are the nearest in style and content to

the *Eddas*, or the *Nibelungenlied*, or the *Kalevala*. On some, such as Beren and Lúthien, Tolkien

spent more time and effort, which enabled Christopher Tolkien later to publish separate books

concerning these stories.

III. Tolkien's Publishing History:
The Journey from *The Hobbit* to *The Lord of the Rings*

Publication Journey: *The Hobbit*

Although *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* are much more widely familiar than *The*

Silmarillion, the latter is much more closely tied to the beginnings of Tolkien's creative

impulses, and the stuff of the *Silmarillion* lurks in the corners of *The Hobbit* and looms large

over *The Lord of the Rings.* But how did Tolkien move from an amusing children's story to a three-volume high fantasy novel of epic proportions?

The manuscript for *The Hobbit* was written during Tolkien's first 7 years as a Professor of Anglo-Saxon at Oxford (probably mostly in 1930-1), and already existed as an actual manuscript by 1932 (*Letters*, 14). *The Hobbit* was originally read as a serial to his oldest child John, who was about 13 at the time. Tolkien later described himself as having "forced" the manuscript on his friends to read, including C.S. Lewis (*Letters*, 21). Once the typescript had come to the attention of publishers Allen & Unwin (with help from Elaine Griffiths and Susan Dagnall). The manuscript had to be reworked and fleshed out in places, but by 1936 it was nearly complete. He then spent the next year working with Allen & Unwin on illustrations for *Hobbit,* ultimately there were 8 drawings by the author included in the book, despite Tolkien's assertions that he was no artist.

Early reviews of *The Hobbit* were quite positive in general, but for Tolkien, there was some mild concern over his professional reputation in becoming, essentially, a children's author. In a 28 May 1937 letter to Allen & Unwin, Tolkien supposes that most of Oxford University will take no notice of such a story as *The Hobbit*, and that he is concerned that it has not been published early in 1937, as he has been under a research-contract since October of 1936 and is anxious that it will not be supposed that he had been using research funding to write such "frivolities" (*Letters*, 18-19). By May of 1937 Allen & Unwin were already in talks with Houghton Mifflin Company to publish *The Hobbit* in the US. In August 1937, Tolkien wonders whether Houghton Mifflin have it in contemplation to renumerate him for his efforts at providing some illustrations for this edition, admitting to financial difficulties due to medical expenses, and hopes that *The Hobbit* may "come to [his] rescue" (*Letters*, 20).

The Hobbit came out in September of 1937. C.S. Lewis, having read the manuscript in its early stages, published two positive reviews of *The Hobbit* by October 1937. Tolkien recalls the reviews in an October 15 letter to Stanley Unwin:

> [the two reviews] were both written by the same man, and one whose approval was assured: we started with common tastes and reading, and have been closely associated for years.… Also I must respect his opinion, as I believed him to be the best living critic until he turned his attention to me, and no degree of friendship would make him say what he does not mean: he is the most uncompromisingly honest man I have met! (*Letters*, 23)

Stanley Unwin was, however, already thinking of a sequel by October of 1937, as can be seen in the published letters of Tolkien (*Letters*, 23). Tolkien agrees to consider a sequel, but is concerned to say that he thinks he has already told all the story that could be told about hobbits. He also admits to having already written a good deal exploring the larger world (Middle-earth) beyond the hobbits, and wonders if those writings might be a "marketable commodity." At the same time he is concerned that he may be taking himself "too seriously" (*Letters*, 24). He continues, commenting on the hope that for once he might be able to be paid for writing about what he wishes to write rather than choosing his topics by what he feels he might be able to publish for a profit: "But I must confess that your letter has aroused in me a faint hope. I mean, I begin to wonder whether duty and desire may not (perhaps) in future go more closely together" (*Letters*, 24). Towards the end of the letter, he references this apparent gap between the idea of Tolkien as a fantasy author and Tolkien as an esteemed academic. He mentions the reception of the *Hobbit* by his academic colleagues in an amusing aside:

> I think 'Oxford' interest is mildly aroused. … The attitude (as I foresaw) not unmixed with surprise and a little pity. … Appearance [of a review of *The Hobbit*] in the The

Times convinced one or two of my more sedate colleagues that they could admit

knowledge of my 'fantasy' (i.e. indiscretion) without loss of academic dignity. (*Letters*,

24-5)

By December 1937, with the *Hobbit* already in a second edition due to increased sales around the

holidays, Tolkien submitted an early version of the Quenta Silmarillion (the third and main

section of the *Silmarillion*) as well as a part of a poem concerning Beren and Lúthien to Unwin

for perusal and for consideration as a possible sequel to *The Hobbit*. These manuscripts were sent

by Unwin to an outside reader for evaluation. Although neither text was suitable as a sequel, the

reader praised the Silmarillion story. Tolkien was not surprised by their lack of suitability, but

was deeply relieved that the matter of the Silmarils was not seen as either ridiculous or

repugnant. In his response to Unwin's report of the reader's evaluation, Tolkien acknowledges

his hopes and fears:

My chief joy comes from learning that the Silmarillion is not rejected with scorn. I have

suffered a sense of fear and bereavement, quite ridiculous, since I let this private and

beloved nonsense out; and I think if it had seemed to you to be nonsense I should have

felt really crushed.… I did not think any of the stuff I dropped on you filled the bill [for a

Hobbit sequel]. But I did want to know whether any of the stuff had any exterior non-

personal value. I think it is plain that quite apart from it, a sequel or successor to The

Hobbit is called for.… I am sure you will sympathize when I say that the construction of

elaborate and consistent mythology (and two languages) rather occupies the mind, and

the Silmarils are in my heart. (*Letters*, 26)

It is clear that the larger myth is not only near and dear to Tolkien as early as the late 1930s, but

also that he had already committed a substantial amount of Middle-earth history to paper. But, as

Unwin still called for a hobbit-related sequel, Tolkien again expresses his doubts: "Mr Baggins began as a comic tale among conventional and inconsistent Grimm's fairy-tale dwarves, and got drawn into the edge of it – so that even Sauron the terrible peeped over the edge. And what more can hobbits do?" (*Letters*, 26) However, in another letter later that same month, Tolkien nevertheless tries his hand at a sequel concerning hobbits and mentions that he has already written the first chapter of the new work, which later became *The Fellowship of the Ring*, calling it "A Long Expected Party" (*Letters*, 27), a playful inversion of the first chapter of *The Hobbit*, "An Unexpected Party." This chapter reintroduces hobbits, and picks up the story of Bilbo Baggins once again, as an elderly hobbit, about to pass the torch and his adventurous legacy to his heir and nephew, Frodo Baggins.

Publication Journey: Attempts at a Sequel and the Beginnings of War

In February 1938 Tolkien sent off a copy of this first chapter of the potential sequel for Unwin's son Rayner to read, the same son who had read *The Hobbit* in manuscript and given it the decisive favorable review. Rayner Unwin approved of the new project, but Tolkien was soon at a loss for how to continue the tale. Later that February Tolkien wrote to a Mr. C. A. Furth at Allen & Unwin, saying that "the Hobbit sequel is still where it was, and I have only the vaguest notions of how to proceed. Not ever intending any sequel, I fear I squandered all my favorite 'motifs' and characters on the original 'Hobbit.'" Around the same time he also wrote to Stanley Unwin with the same concern; "I squandered so much on the original 'Hobbit' (which was not meant to have a sequel) that it is difficult to find anything new in that world" (*Letters*, 29).

However, by March 1938 he writes again to Unwin: "The sequel to *The Hobbit* has now progressed as far as the end of the third chapter.[145] But stories tend to get out of hand, and this

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[145] The first chapter picks up with Bilbo, and introduces Frodo as the new main character. The second chapter establishes Bilbo's magic ring as the link between these two stories, and the third chapter sets up the main adventure

has taken an unpremeditated turn" (*Letters*, 34). He then offers to let Unwin's son Rayner read it

as a serial, along with C.S. Lewis, and his son Christopher (*Letters*, 34). By June of 1938 the

American edition of *The Hobbit* (published by Houghton Mifflin) had sold 3,000 copies and was

the recipient of the *New York Herald Tribune's* prize for juvenile literature, which bolstered

Tolkien's spirits. Yet by July he was once again stuck and hadn't written any more: "my mind on

the 'story' side is really preoccupied with the 'pure' fairy stories or mythologies of the

Silmarillion" (*Letters*, 38). At this point, Tolkien did not think he would be able to work more on

the sequel until he has finished writing, and possibly publishing, the *Silmarillion* (*Letters*, 38). It

is clear where Tolkien's heart lay.

Yet for all that, Tolkien seems to have made a great deal of progress that summer. By

August 1938, he reached Chapter 7 and wrote to Furth, mentioning the title for this first time:

> I have begun again on the sequel to the 'Hobbit' – The Lord of the Ring. It is now
>
> flowing along, and getting quite out of hand. It has reached about chapter VII and
>
> progresses towards quite unforeseen goals. I must say I think it is a good deal better in
>
> places and some ways than the predecessor… it is, like my children … rather 'older.'
>
> (*Letters*, 40-1)

He mentions too that "Mr. Lewis…professes himself more than pleased." But in the same letter

he warns of the changing tone, from children's literature to something darker: "But it is no

bedtime story" (*Letters*, 41). Things continued moving along well. By October he had reached

chapter eleven, [146] and writes "I have all the threads in hand," but that the sequel is "becoming

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to be the four hobbits (Frodo, Samwise, Merry and Pippin) setting out to get the dangerous ring out of the Shire and away from the agents of the dark lord Sauron.

[146] By chapter 11 Frodo and his friends had escaped the terrifying Black Riders and made it to Bree, where they found a mysterious ranger called Strider, who offers to lead them to the safe haven of Rivendell, in the absence of their friend and guide, Gandalf. In chapter 11 itself, the group is caught by the Black Riders, and Frodo is injured, stabbed with a cursed blade that will slowly turn him into a wraith. It is certainly not a chapter suitable for young children at bedtime.

more terrifying than the Hobbit. It may prove quite unsuitable. It is more 'adult' – but my own children who criticize it as it appears are now older." In reflecting on the changing tone of the story, he acknowledges that "The darkness of the present days [that it, the looming threat of the Second World War] has had some effect on it. Though it is not an 'allegory'" (*Letters*, 41). By February of 1939 Tolkien wrote to Furth at Allen & Unwin to say he had reached chapter 12, in which the group reaches Elrond at Rivendell, which brought his total up to about three hundred handwritten pages. He says (amusingly, in retrospect) that he expects to need at least two hundred more to finish the story. Although still plagued by doubts about the suitability of the story as a successor to *The Hobbit,* he wants to know the absolute latest that his publishers would require a manuscript, and offers an explanation of why he has not had much time for writing.

> I think *The Lord of the Rings* is in itself a good deal better than *The Hobbit,* but it may
>
> not prove a very fit sequel. It is more grown up…. The readers young and old who
>
> clamoured for 'more about the Necromancer' are to blame, for the N. is not child's play.
>
> [The Necromancer is Sauron, the chief antagonist of *The Lord of the Rings*.] (*Letters*, 42)

Furth replied that the middle of June was the latest they would like a manuscript. Tolkien said he would send it unfinished now, and if they liked it, then he would put forth the effort to finish by June (*Letters*, 43). However, this seems not to have taken place, and there are no further published letters to Allen & Unwin from the summer of 1939. And then, on September 3 of that year, Great Britain declared war on Nazi Germany.

In a long letter to Unwin in December 1939, Tolkien apologizes for having been out of touch and explains that between a severe gardening accident, his wife's prolonged illness including a cancer scare, the outbreak of war, and various other civil and professional duties he has had little time for correspondence and his writing. He has, however, made it to chapter

sixteen, and is concerned the text will end up being too long. He wonders if there would be a chance of getting it published if he could finish a draft by spring 1940. What Unwin responded is unclear, but Tolkien wrote again in March of 1940 about another matter, and does not mention the sequel, but makes reference to a threefold increase in his professional workload, as well as personal difficulties. His wife's health is poor, and their house has been damaged by water pipes bursting. Moreover, he was serving as an Air Warden during this period, with the Second World War raging on. His second son Michael was serving in the military at the time, and by 1943 Christopher, as well.

Tolkien seems not to have written to Unwin again until December of 1942. Unwin had written to him concerning a reprint of *The Hobbit*, and Tolkien took the opportunity to ask if a sequel was still desired. He says he has reached chapter thirty-one (which later became chapter nine of book three in the first half of *The Two Towers*) and believes he will need another six chapters to finish the tale. He describes it as follows: "I ought to warn you it is very long, in places more alarming than 'The Hobbit', and in fact not really a 'juvenile' at all.…[T]he chapters are as a rule longer than the chapters of *The Hobbit.* Is such an 'epic' possible to consider in the present circumstances?" His doubts and insecurities, however, seem to vanish, however, as his mind turns towards doing his story justice, for in the same letter he also warns that "It would require two maps" (*Letters*, 58).

Unwin's response has not been preserved, but there are no further letters between them for a great while. However, it is clear from Tolkien's letters to his son Christopher, training as a military pilot in South Africa, that he continued to work on it off and on, and seems to have been writing the second half of *The Two Towers* and the first part of *The Return of the King* in the spring of 1944. He comments on his new characters and events to Christopher with the intent to

keep up Christopher's spirits. He seems to have been missing Christopher very much, not only as a son, but as a reader and critic of his writing.

In June of 1944 he writes again to Unwin to thank him for sending another royalties check for the *Hobbit*, and says that he continues to work on the sequel, but that it has grown very long, and perhaps Unwin would not be able to consider publishing something so long, considering paper shortages due to the war. By August of 1944, having come to the end of the section which we now have as the end of *The Two Towers,* he wrote to Christopher that he was out of inspiration and did not know how to proceed. This dry spell, however, did not last long, as Tolkien found some inconsistencies in his timeline of Frodo and Sam that did not quite line up with the other characters, and in attempting to fix this, seems to have begun writing again by October of 1944. By November he was able to give Christopher a summary of his plans reaching all the way to the end of *The Return of the King,* though he hadn't yet written much of it.

<div align="center">Publication Journey: The End of the War Years and After</div>

Although Tolkien continued to work on the sequel, his heart was (and really had always been) with the Silmarillion, which Unwin's reader had deemed back in 1937 beautiful but too "Celtic." Clearly those words still haunted Tolkien. In March 1945 he writes to Unwin:

> Of course my only real desire is to publish 'The Silmarillion': which your reader, you may possibly remember, allowed to have a certain beauty, but of a 'Celtic' kind irritating to Anglo-Saxons. Still there is the great 'Hobbit' sequel – I use 'great', I fear, only in quantitative sense. It is much too 'great' for the present situation, in that sense. But it cannot be docked or abbreviated. I cannot do better than I have done in this, unless (as is possible enough) I am no judge. But it is not finished. […] I could send it to you, Part by Part, with all its present imperfections on it […] until you cry 'halt! This is enough! It

must go the way of "The Silmarillion" into the Limbo of the great unpublishables!'

(*Letters*, 113-14)

The following summer, July 1946, he writes again to Unwin, now *Sir* Stanley, to congratulate him on his elevation to the knighthood. He apologizes for more delays, and says he has had a lot to deal with, both professionally and in terms of health issues. He also adds that Christopher, "my chief critic and collaborator" was working on maps for the book. He hopes he may be able to finish by the end of the year and promises to prioritize it. In December he writes again, and refers to it for this first as his magnum opus, which it certainly appears to be in retrospect: "I still hope shortly to finish my 'magnum opus': the Lord of the Rings: and let you see it, before long, or before January. I am on the last chapters" (*Letters*, 118-19)

Tolkien at last allowed Unwin and his son Rayner see Book I, the first half of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, and on 28 July 1947 he received comments from Rayner, who found that the "tortuous and contending currents of events in this world within a world almost overpower one." This somewhat critical view seems to have nettled Tolkien, especially as Rayner continues: "sometimes one suspects leaving the story proper to become pure allegory." Thirdly, Rayner says: "quite honestly I don't know who is expected to read it . . . . If grown ups will not feel infra dig [beneath their dignity] to read it many will undoubtedly enjoy themselves" and that nevertheless he finds it "a brilliant and gripping story" (*Letters*, 119-20).

Three days later, on July 31st, Tolkien responds. He notes that he hopes to send on the next section at the end of August. By way of addressing Rayner's remarks, he mentions that he thought there was a fair amount of humor in the first book, and is disappointed that Rayner made no mention of that in his comments. He is, however, much more direct in providing a rebuttal to the "charge" of allegory: "do not let Rayner suspect 'Allegory,'" Tolkien writes, followed by a

discussion of his own views on the limitations of allegory, as we shall see later. Finally, Tolkien

gives Unwin some idea of his own perceptions about a potential audience, which, in retrospect

seems, rather surprisingly, an apt description of his own "fandom":

> As for who is to read it? The world seems to be becoming more and more divided into
>
> impenetrable factions, Morlocks and Eloi, and others. But those that like this kind of
>
> thing at all, like it very much, and cannot get anything like enough of it, or at sufficiently
>
> great length to appease hunger. The taste may be (alas!) numerically limited, even if, as I
>
> suspect, growing, and chiefly needing supply for further growth. But where it exists the
>
> taste is not limited by age or profession (unless one excludes those wholly devoted to
>
> machines). (*Letters*, 121-22)

This interesting letter closes with a final insight into Tolkien's state of mind in 1947, a decade on

from the publication of *The Hobbit,* and ten years into his attempt to write a sequel:

> Well, I have talked quite long enough about my own follies. The thing is to finish the
>
> thing as devised and then let it be judged. But forgive me! It is written in my life-blood,
>
> such as that is, thick or thin; and I can no other. I fear it must stand or fall as it
>
> substantially is. It would be idle to pretend that I do not greatly desire publication, since a
>
> solitary art is no art; nor that I have not a pleasure in praise, with as little vanity as fallen
>
> man can manage (he has not much more share in his writings than in his children of the
>
> body, but it is something to have a function); yet the chief thing is to complete one's
>
> work, as far as completion has any real sense. (*Letters*, 122)

The next important moment for *The Lord of the Rings* comes a year later, in October 1948, in a

letter to Hugh Brogan, a friend and a fan. Tolkien is "happy to announce that I succeeded at last

in bringing the 'Lord of the Rings' to a successful conclusion." He admits it is frightfully long,

but "[h]owever length is no obstacle to those who like that kind of thing." and that "[t]his university business of earning one's living by teaching, delivering philological lectures, and daily attendance at 'boards' and other talk-meetings, interferes sadly with serious work" (*Letters*, 131).

Although finishing so long a text was something of a triumph, it brought with it more trouble. In February of the following year (1949), Tolkien writes to Allen & Unwin: "I am finding the labour of typing a fair copy of the 'Lord of the Rings' v. great, and the alternative of having it professionally typed prohibitive in cost" (*Letters*,132). By December 1949 he seems to have put the finishing touches the manuscript (though he had not yet revised it) and was looking forward to having it published at last. He writes to Naomi Mitchison, who "had written in praise of *Farmer Giles of Ham,* which was published in the autumn of 1949," giving his impressions of *Rings* at the time:

> I hope to give you soon two books, about which at least one criticism will be possible: that they are excessively long! One is a sequel to 'The Hobbit' which I have just finished after 12 years (intermittent) labour. I fear it is 3 times as long, not *for* children (though that does not mean wholly unsuitable), and rather grim in places. I *think* it is very much better (in a different way). The other is pure myth and legend of times already remote in Bilbo's days. (*Letters*, 133-34)

It is significant that Tolkien is still intently focused on publishing the Silmarillion text (the "myth and legend") despite Allen & Unwin's lack of enthusiasm. It is this fervent desire that led to the strange final chapter of the publication history of *The Lord of the Rings*.

<div align="center">Publication Journey: Hopes for The Silmarillion at Last</div>

Humphrey Carpenter, Tolkien's first biographer and the editor of his published letters, explains the situation as follows:

As Allen & Unwin had not accepted *The Silmarillion* when Tolkien offered it to them in 1937, he now believed that he should try to change his publisher; accordingly he showed Waldman [to whom he was introduced around the time he finished the manuscript and who was an editor with Collins publishing house in London] those parts of *The Silmarillion* of which there were fair copies. Waldman said he would like to publish it if Tolkien would finish it. Tolkien then showed him *The Lord of the Rings.* Waldman was again enthusiastic, and offered to publish it providing Tolkien had 'no commitment either moral or legal to Allen & Unwin.' The reply that Tolkien sent cannot be traced, but what follows is part of a draft for it. (*Letters*, 134)

The drafted letter to Milton Waldman on 5 February 1950 reveals Tolkien's deep attachment to his Silmarillion text, and the corresponding lack of commitment to Allen & Unwin:

I was moved greatly by the desire to hear from a fresh mind whether my labour had any wider value, or was just a fruitless private hobby…. I believe myself to have no *legal* obligation to Allen and Unwin, since the clause in *The Hobbit* contract with regard to offering the next book seems to have been satisfied either (a) by their rejection of *The Silmarillion* or (b) by their eventual acceptance and publication of *Farmer Giles.* I should (as you note) be glad to leave them, as I have found them in various ways unsatisfactory. But I have friendly personal relations with Stanley (whom all the same I do not much like) and with his second son Rayner (whom I do like very much).

Still, Tolkien did not feel himself free to quit Allen & Unwin immediately:

Sir Stanley has long been aware that *The Lord of the Rings* has outgrown its function, and is not pleased since he sees no money in it for anyone (so he said); but he is anxious to

see the final result all the same. If this constitutes moral obligation then I have one: at

least to explain the situation.

For the sake of his beloved Silmarillion, Tolkien did intend, by 1950, to leave Allen & Unwin.

He continues: "I certainly shall try to extricate myself, or at least the Silmarillion and all its kin,

from the dilatory coils of A. and U. if I can – in a friendly fashion if possible" (*Letters*, 135).

As promised, Tolkien soon wrote to Unwin, on 24 Feb. 1950. Tolkien's ultimatum:

Publish *The Lord of the Rings* and the *Silmarillion* both, for they belong together. Tolkien

acknowledges that Unwin has been long waiting for a *Lord of the Rings* manuscript. He notes

that he was delayed further by the costs of having a fair copy typed professionally, not having a

spare £100 to spend on a typescript, and ended up typing they entire manuscript himself (*Letters*,

136). Re-reading his own work as he typed him seems to have convinced him more firmly than

ever of the indelible link between *Rings* and the Silmarillion legends. He explains this to Unwin:

And now I look at it, the magnitude of the disaster is apparent to me. My work has

escaped from my control, and I have produced a monster: an immensely long, complex,

rather bitter, and very terrifying romance, quite unfit for children (if fit for anybody); and

it is not really a sequel to *The Hobbit*, but to *The Silmarillion*. […] I can see only too

clearly how impracticable this is. But I am tired. It is off my chest […] Worse still: I feel

that it is tied to *The Silmarillion.*

Tolkien reminds Unwin, perhaps a little ungraciously, of Unwin's previous rejection of the

Silmarillion material, which clearly still rankled. Considering his earlier letter to Waldman, it

almost seems that Tolkien is trying to discourage Unwin from accepting Tolkien's ultimatum

and thus freeing him to go to Collins and work with Waldman. He brings their earlier discussions

to Unwin's recollection:

You may, perhaps, remember about that work, a long legendary of imaginary times in a 'high style', and full of Elves (of a sort). It was rejected on the advice of your reader many years ago.… And you commented that it was a work to be drawn upon rather than published.… [T]hough shelved,…the *Silmarillion* and all that has refused to be suppressed. It has bubbled up, infiltrated, and probably spoiled everything [of that nature] I have tried to write since.… Its shadow was deep on the later parts of *The Hobbit.* It has captured *The Lord of the Rings,* so that that has become simply its continuation and completion, requiring the *Silmarillion* to be fully intelligible – without a lot of references and explanations that clutter it in one or two places.

Having justified the connection between the two works, he lays down his ultimatum at last:

Ridiculous and tiresome as you may think me, I want to publish them both – *The Silmarillion* and *The Lord of the Rings* – in conjunction or in connexion.… All the same that is what I should like. *Or I will let it all be.* I cannot contemplate any drastic re-writing or compression. Of course being a writer I should like to see my words printed; but there they are. For me the chief thing is that I feel that the whole matter is now 'exorcized', and rides me no more. (*Letters*, 136-37 emphasis added)

Tolkien was clearly hoping that Unwin would release him and he would be free to publish both works elsewhere.[147]

As a strategy for escaping an unwanted publisher, however, this proved ineffective. In early March 1950, Unwin wrote to ask if the two books could be published together more

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[147] Indeed, he says as much to Unwin directly: "I am not really filled with any overweening conceit of my absurd private hobbies. But you have been very patient – expecting during the long years a sequel to *The Hobbit*, to fit a similar audience; though I know that you are aware that I have been going off the rails. I owe you some kind of explanation. You will let me know what you think. You can have all this mountain of stuff, if you wish. […] *But I shall not have any just grievance (nor shall I be dreadfully surprised) if you decline so obviously unprofitable a proposition; and ask me to hurry up and submit some more reasonable book as soon as I can*" (*Letters*, 137 emphasis added).

manageably by splitting them into 3-4 parts. Tolkien responds on March 10, still emphasizing the

unsuitability of his work for Unwin's ends: "Thank you for your letter…. I see in it your good

will; but also, I fear, your opinion that this mass of stuff is not really a publisher's affair at all,

but requires an endowment. I am not surprised" (*Letters*, 138). He says that of course any text

can be artificially split, "But the whole Saga of the Three Jewels and the Rings of Power has

only one natural division into two parts (each of about 600,000 words): *The Silmarillion* and

other legends; and *The Lord of the Rings.* The latter is as indivisible and unified as I could make

it." Still trying extricate his texts, Tolkien reasons:

> After all the understanding was that you would welcome a sequel to *The Hobbit*, and this
>
> work can not be regarded as such in any practical sense, or in the matter of atmosphere,
>
> tone, or audience addressed. I am sorry that I presented such a problem. Wilfully, it may
>
> seem, since I knew long ago that I was courting trouble and producing the unprintable
>
> and unsaleable, most likely.

Tolkien apparently seemed to think that would do the trick, and wrote confidently to Waldman

again on that same day:

> I have replied [to Unwin] to the effect that I see in his letter his good will, but also
>
> perceive his opinion that this mass of stuff is not suitable for ordinary publication and
>
> requires endowment. (I had in my letter made a strong point that the *Silmarillion* etc. and
>
> *The Lord of the Rings* went together, as one long Saga of the Jewels and the Rings, and
>
> that I was resolved to treat them as one thing, however they might formally be issued.) …
>
> I added that I shall not be surprised if he declines to become involved in this monstrous
>
> Saga.… There at the moment the matter waits. *I profoundly hope that he will let go*
>
> *without demanding the [manuscript].* (*Letters*, 138-39 emphasis added)

So the discussion continued. Several other letters were exchanged. Carpenter, in an editor's note, quotes Rayner Unwin making the case for publishing *The Lord of the Rings* without the *Silmarillion* in April 1950: "*The Lord of the Rings* is a very great book in its own curious way and deserves to be produced somehow. *I* never felt the lack of a *Silmarillion*" (*Letters*, 140) Rayner apparently recommended publishing *The Lord of the Rings* and *then* dropping the *Silmarillion.* Unwin let Tolkien read Rayner's remarks, though they were obviously not intended for Tolkien's eyes. In April 1950, Tolkien, perhaps a little offended, says "Weeks have become precious. I want a decision yes, or no: to the proposal I made [to publish both works], and not to any imagined possibilities" (*Letters*, 140). Unwin declined, though let it be known that if he had been allowed more time and access to the complete typescript to both, things might have gone otherwise. Tolkien seems to have been quite confident that Waldman would publish both works at Collins. Waldman had planned to start the process in the fall of 1950, but his ill-health and other issues delayed the process. Carpenter notes "By the latter part of 1951 no definite arrangements for publication had yet been made, and Collins were becoming anxious about the combined length of both books" (*Letters*, 143).

Late in 1951 (the exact date is uncertain), at the suggestion of Waldman, Tolkien wrote a 10,000-word letter "with the intention of demonstrating that The Lord of the Rings and The Silmarillion were interdependent and indivisible" (*Letters*, 143). This letter Waldman preserved, and valued so much that he had it typed fair to keep. It is a powerfully written 22-page synopsis of the legends and histories of *The Silmarillion,* highlighting the connections between the older material and *The Lord of the Rings.* Unfortunately for Tolkien's hopes, however, whether or not it had convinced Waldman, Collins publishing house did not get things moving to his satisfaction. Carpenter notes:

In the spring of 1952, Tolkien lost patience with the delays at Collins over the publication

of his books, and told the firm that they must publish *The Lord of the Rings* immediately

or he would withdraw the manuscript. Collins, frightened by the length of the book,

decided that they must decline it, together with *The Silmarillion*, and they withdrew from

the negotiations.… In June, Rayner Unwin wrote to Tolkien to enquire about [other

matters]; he also asked about progress with the publication of [both works]. (*Letters*, 161)

Tolkien responded to Rayner in June 1952, at last defeated in his aims and with mounting

financial concerns, to see if Allen & Unwin would accept *The Lord of the Rings* again without

The Silmarillion:

As for *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion,* they are where they were. The one

finished (and the end revised), and the other still unfinished (or unrevised), and both

gathering dust. I have been both off and on too unwell, and too burdened to do much

about them, and too downhearted. Watching paper-shortages and costs mounting against

me. But I have rather modified my views. Better something than nothing! Although to me

all are one [complete work], and the 'L of the Rings' would be better far (and eased) as

part of the whole, I would gladly consider the publication of any part of this stuff. Years

are becoming precious. And retirement (not far off) will, as far as I can see, bring not

leisure but a poverty that will necessitate scraping a living by 'examining' and such like

tasks. When I have a moment to turn round I will collect the *Silmarillion* fragments in

process of completion – or rather the original outline which is more or less complete, and

you can read it.… But what about *The Lord of the Rings*? Can anything be done about

that, to unlock gates I slammed myself? (*Letters*, 163)

In July, Rayner (who was now working at Allen & Unwin) asked Tolkien to send a typescript of *Rings,* saying "We do *want* to publish for you – it's only ways and means that have held us up" (*Letters*, 163-64). Tolkien replied in August that he wanted to publish as soon as possible, whatever that might mean for his text. He goes on to say that although he is very willing to let Rayner have it, he was never able to afford a professional typist to copy the manuscript, so the only typescript in existence is the one Tolkien had himself made. He proposes meeting in person, and adds, hopefully enough, that he now has "a constant 'fan-mail' from all over the English-speaking world for 'more' – curiously enough often for 'more about the Necromancer', which the Lord [of the Rings] certainly fulfils" (*Letters*, 164). The two did meet in person in September, and Tolkien did in fact let Rayner have the typescript.

Publication Journey: The Trilogy

In October, Rayner reported that the book might have to be priced at £3. 10s in order to break even, and that that cost would increase if the work were divided into two volumes. Allen & Unwin eventually decided to publish in three volumes, each comprised of two of Tolkien's six 'books' or sections. The plan was to price them at 21 shillings each, and Tolkien was supposed to have the finished manuscript completely ready for the printer by 25 March 1953. On March 24th, Tolkien wrote to Rayner Unwin with apologies, citing his wife's illness, and asked if Rayner would be able to accept the first two volumes only, as he had not been able to finish revising the third in time for the deadline. Tolkien also suggests that the book titles he had been using for each of the six parts of the whole be used as the volume titles. Or, if Rayner felt these would not work, Tolkien suggests the following titles: "I *The Shadow Grows* II *The Ring in the Shadow* III *The War of the Ring* or *The Return of the King*" (*Letters*, 167). By August of 1953, Tolkien suggests *The Lord of the Rings* as a title for all three volumes with a subtitle for each. He

offers *The Return of the Shadow*, *The Shadow Lengthens,* and *The Return of the King.* Rayner Unwin apparently came to visit him in person, and shortly after this, Tolkien writes to agree that *The Fellowship of the Ring, The Two Towers,* and *The War of the Ring* would be good, though allows that *Return of the King* is permissible if Unwin prefers (*Letters*,170). It seems we have Rayner Unwin to thank for the finalized titles!

Tolkien then struggled to get the necessary maps finished in October of 1953, and was still not completely satisfied with the titles of the latter two volumes. By early 1954 Houghton Mifflin Co. was preparing the American edition of *The Lord of the Rings*. Although there was some back and forth about the dust jackets for both the British and American versions, Tolkien writes to Allen & Unwin on June 3, 1954 to hurry things along: "I would rather have the things as they are than cause any more delay" (*Letters*, 182). By June 14, he had received an advance copy of the first volume, *The Fellowship of the Ring,* which he describes as "a great moment" (*Letters*, 183). This volume was, at long last, published on 29 July, 1954. *The Two Towers* followed on 11 November, and *The Return of the King* the following year on 20 October, 1955. Unfortunately for Tolkien, however, the matter nearest and dearest to his heart, *The Silmarillion*, would not be published until 15 September 1977, five years after his death. It is worth noting that in the end, it was Allen & Unwin who did publish it, with assistance from Christopher Tolkien. It has remained in print ever since, and perhaps this end to his hopes would not have displeased Tolkien after all.

IV. Something Old, Something New: Tolkien, Lewis, Allegory, and Modernism.

Through the history of the writing of Tolkien's Middle-earth texts, we have seen that he created his own elvish languages, then wrote the *Silmarillion* as a backdrop for those languages. Then, at first not connecting the two, Tolkien wrote a children's book set in that world. Only when that

proved popular was he was asked to write a sequel. He tried for some years, but try as he might, the larger, darker elements of the *Silmarillion*, despite being rejected by the publisher, kept bleeding over into his children's book sequel. In time, instead of a children's sequel, Tolkien succeeded in writing a massive trilogy on an epic scale, ultimately bridging the "old world" of the *Silmarillion* and the "new" or child's world of *The Hobbit*, unifying both and creating through the process his own *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

In this section we will find that Tolkien created his own fantasy world based around his invented languages, which makes it vastly different than a "normal" fantasy world, such as C.S. Lewis's Narnia. Moreover, it sits between the poles of myth and fairy tale and synthesizes them into a new thing – his *Gesamtkunstwerk* – that was created to fit with his specific ideas of significance and verisimilitude. This act of creation situates Tolkien as a unique writer, with elements of modernism in his works. Additionally, his fantasy world was not meant as an allegory, which he disdains, and instead created a fantasy world based solely on his imaginary languages from the very beginning. Because of these things, in creating this fantasy world, he authors a *Gesamtkunstwerk* on par with those created by Wagner and Lang, and, whether Tolkien likes it or not, this is partly based on or inspired by the *Niblelungenlied* and similar legends.

<div align="center">Narnia and Middle-earth</div>

It is hardly possible to discuss Tolkien's writings without mentioning C.S. Lewis. Clive Staples "Jack" Lewis was not only a close personal friend of Tolkien, but also a fellow fantasy writer, and, until 1954 when he moved to Cambridge, a fellow professor and colleague at Magdalen College, Oxford. He and Tolkien are moreover the two most famous members of their informal writer's group, the Inklings.

Lewis is most well-known as a lay theologian and Christian apologist, particularly as the author of *Mere Christianity* (1952). He was, however, a prolific writer, and by no means confined himself to theology. His works of fiction and science fiction are widely read, but it is Lewis' fantasy series, *The Chronicles of Narnia,* which is his best-known work and which provides the most informative contrast with Tolkien's work. The *Narnia* series comprises seven volumes, published between 1956-1960. They tell the story of the land of Narnia, a fantasy realm inhabited by humans, dwarves, talking animals, and other creatures, from its creation to its end.

Tolkien's Middle-earth books are often spoken of in conjunction with the Narnia series, in part because of the close friendship between the two authors. However, a closer look at the two shows vast differences between the series, which is useful here as a means of illuminating the *mythic* rather than the *fairy-tale* style of Tolkien's work. While both myth and fairy-tales depart from a realistic picture of the world, myth as I am using it is foundational and totalizing, while fairy-tales are disruptive wish-fulfillments. The mythic character of Tolkien's work involves the position of Middle-earth in relationship to our real world – or rather its striking lack thereof, as we shall see. We will return to this distinction.

One of the most immediately evident differences between Middle-earth and Narnia is size. The sheer amount of writing about Middle-earth leaves Narnia far behind. This is not surprising, since we have seen that although the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy may have started out as children's literature, it and later writings were certainly not aimed at children in the same way that *Narnia* is. The protagonists of the Narnia books, for instance, are usually children, while in Middle-earth, while the hobbits are in some respects childlike, they are nonetheless adults. Moreover, the Middle-earth writings (especially *Rings* and *Silmarillion*) are in many respects Tolkien's life's work, whereas Lewis was not only prolifically publishing monographs in

Christian apologetics in addition to his professional writings, but he also created an adult science

fiction trilogy (the *Space Trilogy*, published 1938-1945) among other adult fantasy writings (for

example, *Til We Have Faces*, published 1956, a retelling of a Greek myth). To put it simply,

Lewis lived in many worlds, while Tolkien spent his life putting depth and detail into just one.

Another quite illuminating difference between Middle-earth and Narnia, or really,

between Middle-earth and nearly all other works of high fantasy, is the intent behind the work.

For Tolkien, Middle-earth was born out of his love of language, and as a myth or history to

"house" his created language (and later languages). Middle-earth became Tolkien's playground,

or a sort of private garden that he returned to again and again as he embroidered ever more richly

the histories and languages of his characters to create an immersive and fleshed out world. Early

in 1948, in a long (rather mysterious[148]) apologetic letter to C.S. Lewis after a quarrel, Tolkien

writes of his drive to write and create:

> My verses and my letter were due to a sudden very acute realization (I shall not quickly
>
> forget it) of the pain that may enter into authorship, both in the making and in the
>
> 'publication', which is an essential part of the full process […] For I have something that
>
> I deeply desire to *make*, and which it is the (largely frustrated) bent of my nature to make.
>
> (*Letters*, 126-27)

Lewis, on the other hand, famously intended the first book in the *Narnia* series, *The Lion, the*

Witch, and the Wardrobe (1950)*,* as an allegory for the story of Christ and humanity, while the

rest of the series is meant not only as a fantasy story but also as a Christian fable, illuminating

various aspects of his faith through the stories of the children who adventure in the land of

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[148] According to Humphrey Carpenter, biographer of Tolkien and editor (with the help of Christopher Tolkien) of Tolkien's published letters, says of this letter: "The exact circumstances behind this letter are not clear, but it seems that Tolkien and Lewis had been corresponding about criticisms that Tolkien had made of a piece of Lewis's work read aloud to the Inklings." (*Letters,* 125)

Narnia. Narnia was not meant as a personal refuge for Lewis (beyond the refuge that all fantasy is, by nature), but rather takes a more proselytizing perspective. The world of Narnia is based on preconceived real world religious beliefs, and is intended to explain that doctrine (the Christian belief system as Lewis understood it) in the real world. It is meant to heighten that which is good and appealing in that belief system; to make it more approachable. And it glosses over some of the less appealing or more criticized aspects of that system (appropriately enough, perhaps, as it is intended for children).

The religious aspects of Narnia, or rather, the allegorical intent in Lewis' writing of it, not only gives it its Christian flavor (as we shall see below), but also builds a concrete bridge between the world of Narnia and a faith or belief system in our (real) world. Tolkien had no such intent in his Middle-earth writings. He famously (and vehemently) rejected any attempt at allegorical interpretation of his work, and, despite his own deeply held Catholic faith, resisted any temptations he might have had to link Middle-earth to the real world through religion. In 1953, a friend of the family, Father Robert Murray, wrote to Tolkien (after reading part of *The Lord of the Rings* drafts) that "the book left him with a strong sense of 'a positive compatibility with the order of Grace', and compared the image of Galadriel to that of the Virgin Mary" (*Letters*, 171-72). Tolkien replied:

> I have been cheered specially by what you have said … because you … have even revealed to me more clearly some things about my work. I think I know exactly what you mean by the order of Grace; and of course by your references to Our Lady, upon which all my own small perception of beauty both in majesty and simplicity is founded. *The Lord of the Rings* is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work; unconsciously so at first, but consciously in the revision. *That is why I have not put in, or*

have cut out, practically all references to anything like 'religion', to cults or practices, in the imaginary world. For the religious element is absorbed into the story and the symbolism. (*Letters*, 172 emphasis added)

Thus, although his own religious ideals of holiness, self-sacrifice, redemption, and the like, may exist as plot elements in his work, he never intended any sort of link with the modern-day Catholic church, nor any sort of proselytizing allegory. The following year, referencing the lack of detail of Gandalf the Grey's transition to Gandalf the White:

I have purposely kept all allusions to the highest matters down to mere hints, perceptible only by the most attentive, or kept them under unexplained symbolic forms. So God and the 'angelic' gods, the Lords or Powers of the West, only peep through in such places as Gandalf's conversation with Frodo: 'behind that there was something else at work, beyond any design of the Ring-maker's'; or in Faramir's Númenórean grace at dinner. (Letters, 201)

So although Tolkien's Catholic faith did indeed influence his writing, there was never any clear motive to make a Catholic story, or a story with a moral that connects to a real-world religious belief system. Indeed, Middle-earth is not meant to connect in any concrete way to our world, except perhaps as a vague pre-history.[149]

The fantasy world of Narnia, therefore, has a relationship with the real world that Middle-earth does not.[150] Much of the magic in Narnia pertains to thresholds – the thresholds between worlds. Whether it is the magical painting of the Dawn Treader ship which serves as an entry to Narnia, or the Dawn Treader itself which sails the protagonists of *The Voyage of the Dawn*

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[149] See some slight comments on this in letters 211 (*Letters* 277) and 212 (*Letters* 284).
[150] By Narnia here I mean not only the kingdom of Narnia, but also the other realms in the world of Narnia, such as the Calormene Empire, Telemarines, and Archenland.

Treader (1952) to the various enchanted isles, or the magic rings and pools which lead to other worlds in the Wood-Between-the-Worlds in *The Magician's Nephew* (1955), or of course the eponymous Wardrobe itself, from *The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe* (1950), much of the magic in the tales centers around these kinds of links.

Of course, this is not surprising when one reflects that the Narnia series was written with an eye towards religious conversion. In Narnia, the threshold is about the experience of religious conversion with the protestant focus on the interiority of an individual's soul, and how an individual may overcome whatever stands between them and the experience of grace or conversion. Catholicism, as practiced by Tolkien, focuses less on the individual, and more on the powers of priest, institution, and Pope. Narnia is full of the religious vision of conversion, and is about changing (or introducing) a religious perspective, to ease readers into the comfort of the faith. Middle-earth is a much more Catholic approach, focusing on the world as a whole and occasionally on the individual, but with no emphasis on conversion. There is more concern with ideas about corruption, death, and the fading of things. None of the characters have what could really be called a conversion experience. Boromir nearly falls to evil but manages to keep his honor, and Gollum nearly repents, but ends up falling back to evil. The good and the evil that are in the world continue to be in the world, but what concerns Tolkien and his characters "is what to do with the time that is given us" and whatever circumstances may arise from this (*Rings* 50). Tolkien was pleased – and surprised – by the reception of his fantasy world; his readers instantly recognized Middle-earth; they shared his interest and his vision as soon as he had given it to them; there was no conversion necessary.

Narnia is, at is heart, Lewis' highly metaphorical, famously allegorical form of proselytizing – in Narnia there are many ways to be saved. The series shows the fallen world

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becoming a redeemed world.[151] Narnia is full of transition. In this way (except for the definite Christian message), Narnia is like so many other fantasy worlds – about passageways, growing, transition – not wholly unlike Oz, or Wonderland, or Neverland, or many other children's and young adult fantasy series, even the famously non-Christian *His Dark Materials* (published 1995-2000) trilogy by Philip Pullman.[152]

<div align="center">Religion and Tragedy: Significance</div>

The marked contrast in the way that religion informs Lewis' and Tolkien's work pervades the *Narnia* series in obvious ways, but also impacts Tolkien's writing. Lewis frequently goes a step further than Christian apologetics in *Narnia;* he is openly proselytizing. His writing is in service to what he sees as truth. This is notably different to Tolkien's work – although his religious beliefs inform his sense of holiness and beauty, he ultimately is trying to present narrative or mythic elements that he finds beautiful. His sense of what is beautiful is closely connected to the tragic.

Tragedy[153], on the face of it, indicates happenings that are always saddening, and nearly always superficially negative (i.e. loss, grief, death). But at a deeper level, a tragedy implies that whatever bad event has transpired is at least in some way *significant*. Tolkien is frightened by the idea that suffering could be meaningless. This is evident in his comments on how his mother: "a

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[151] Lewis himself had a very formative conversion experience in adulthood (around 1930-1931), recounted in *Surprised by Joy* (1955). It shaped much of his writing and thought from that period. Tolkien (as devout Catholic) was involved in his friend's conversion, though it grieved Tolkien that Lewis became an Anglican (protestant) Christian rather than Catholic.

[152] It is worth noting here that while Narnia (and so many other fairy tales) is indeed about passageways and transitions, it is also about rescues and escapes. In most of the story, Aslan the Lion (representing Christ or Christianity) rescues the children, though they grow from the experience. Indeed, religion serves as a sort of fairy godmother or Deus ex machina in Lewis' work.

[153] I here use the word in the Greek or mythological sense, as in a 'high and tragic fate'; it is not meant in the newsreel or political sense of 'yet another tragedy for stranded airline passengers' or even in the sense of 'another tragic shooting', for this kind of tragedy is not particularly significant in our society, which is, with darkest irony, incredibly tragic.

mother who killed herself with labour and trouble to ensure us keeping the faith" (Carpenter, 31) and again: "I witnessed (half-comprehending) the heroic sufferings and early death in extreme poverty of my mother who brought me into the Church" (Rings 340) and elsewhere: "my mother, who clung to her conversion and died young, largely through the hardships of poverty resulting from it" (Rings 172). Her sacrifice grieves him, and all the more so when it appears to have been made meaningless through his own children's desertion of the Catholic faith (Rings 354). To him, this appears to make her sacrifice, in his view, in some way less meaningful, and less impactful. Moreover, World War I certainly affected his ideas of meaningless suffering as well. In the introduction to *The Lord of the Rings,* he calls the war a "hideous" experience and writes that "by 1918 all but one of my close friends were dead" (Rings, xvii). These deaths doubtless felt pointless to Tolkien, as to many of the survivors of World War I, an absurd waste of life, perhaps even more so than those who experienced World War II as soldiers, the narrative around it being rather more concerned with ideological positions.

Middle-earth by contrast, is a world full of *significance*. History (our history, any history) is of course full of meaningful gestures, as things that are considered insignificant are usually forgotten with time. Middle-earth is *made* of history, in a sense – which gives it an historical feel. This fictional-historical feel is what Tolkien calls "verisimilitude" and which he seems to have strongly preferred to other styles of writing (*Letters*, 24). Everything in Middle-earth, at least everything that concerns the main characters, is given a certain weight or significance. This makes sense, if historical happenings are, by definition, significant, and if the conceit of the tale is that these texts are the supposed history-books of Middle-earth, records that have come down to us through the ages. But above and beyond this, Tolkien seems to be at pains to stress the importance of seemingly insignificant things, or even to assign significance at different times.

One example of this might be the *Silmarillion's* account of human death and afterlife. Humans are just one of the five free peoples of Middle-earth – a space they share with elves, dwarves, hobbits, and ents – and as such they are not inherently at the center of the story (in the *Silmarillion*, elves are at the center, and elsewhere, hobbits). Human die (which distinguishes them sharply from the immortal elves), but their mortality, which is called the "Gift of Ilúvatar [God]" can be a source of *significance* and can provide redemptive possibilities. Tolkien has the God-character describe mortality thus:

> 'But to the Atani [humans] I will give a new gift.' Therefore he [God] willed that the hearts of Men should seek beyond the world and should find no rest therein; but they should have a virtue to shape their life, amid the powers and chances of the world, beyond the Music of the Ainur, which is as fate to all things else; and of their operation everything should be, in form and deed, completed, and the world fulfilled unto the last and smallest. […] It is one with this gift of freedom that the children of Men dwell only a short space in the world alive, and are not bound to it, and depart soon whither the Elves know not. […] Death is their fate, the gift of Ilúvatar [God], which as Time wears even the Powers shall envy. But Melkor [the evil one] has cast his shadow upon it, and confounded it with darkness, and brought forth evil out of good, and fear out of hope.
>
> (*Silmarillion* 36)

Therefore, death is, for the humans, an opportunity to demonstrate true courage and sacrifice, at least more so than for the elves, who have the option, after death, to eventually return to their bodies (though many do not do so). Human actions can be greatly memorable, indeed, *significant*, because of their death.

Tolkien's Middle-earth writings helped him compensate for some of the difficulties he faced in life – especially for the collapse of historical significance or historical continuity that he may have felt in conjunction with his war experiences and the death of his mother – two early-life events that marked him deeply. A lack of historical continuity may have been particularly troubling to Tolkien as a Catholic – as the Catholic church is meant to provide a sense of continuity from the time of Jesus and the apostles to the second coming of Jesus and Judgment Day, and the Christian faith in general is meant to offer meaning and significance, particularly in times of suffering.

Links to the Real World

Middle-earth is quite different, not just from Narnia, but from much of fantasy literature. Or at least it is much closer to something like Brandon Sanderson's *Mistborn* series than it is to Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, for instance. Fantasy stories like *Narnia* or *Wonderland* feature characters from our world who go through some sort of passageway or gateway into another, fantastical, world. Tales such as those of Middle-earth or the *Mistborn* series (or even *Game of Thrones,* loathe though I am to mention that series in the same paragraph as Professor Tolkien's work), on the other hand, are set in their own worlds, with no reference whatever to our world or the real world.[154] The path to Narnia is (literally) the Wardrobe for the Pevensie children, but for us, the readers, the passageway to Narnia is the book itself. In Middle-earth, the characters need no passageway, and for the reader, the passageway is the text itself –personified or characterized inside Middle-earth as the Red Book of Westmarch – which allows the text to become our own real-world history. The conceit inside the story is that Red Book is a copy of a copy of the notes

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[154] Though in fairness to Sanderson, some conjecture that once he finishes the *Stormlight Archive* series, he may tie it together with his *Mistborn* series and thus connect all his works, setting them all in the same solar system or galaxy, though possibly on different planets. It is possible that this might take place in the distant future of the Earth as we know it.

and narratives of Bilbo and Frodo, set down on paper after their respective adventures, being more or less the texts of *Hobbit* and *Lord of the Rings* with their attendant notes and appendices purportedly added by later 'scholars'.

The *Silmarillion* is separate from this, being the supposed histories of Middle-earth as the elves would have known or remembered them, but still existing, like the other texts, as a sort of pseudo-history or invented history, (in Tolkien's words, "an imaginary history") of Middle-earth. In this way, the only link or connection to the real world is that it *could* have taken place in Europe in long-ago forgotten days. This is the mythic quality of the story – not that it is some kind of Homeric epic but that it sets itself up as the complete foundation of its world that could connect to our actual history only long, long ago, in an unremembered time.

While this conceit is not unique in the world of fantasy writing, it is unusual, and was much remarked upon even in Tolkien's life, as indicated in some of his published letters. In a 1958 letter to Rhona Beare, who wrote to Tolkien with specific questions on behalf of a group of "fellow-enthusiasts for *The Lord of the Rings*," Tolkien clarifies his views of religion in his texts and comments on the relationship between *Rings* and the real (geographical) world:[155]

> May I say that all this is 'mythical', and not any kind of new religion or vision. As far as I know it is merely an imaginative invention, to express, in the only way I can, some of my (dim) apprehensions of the world. All I can say is that, if it were 'history', it would be difficult to fit the lands and events (or 'cultures') into such evidence as we possess, archaeological or geological, concerning the nearer or remoter part of what is now called Europe; though the Shire, for instance, is expressly stated to have been in this region (I p. 12). I could have fitted things in with greater verisimilitude, if the story had not become

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[155] *Letters,* 277 (from the introduction to letter 211, Carpenter's words, not Tolkien's).

too far developed, before the question ever occurred to me. I doubt if there would have been much gain; and I hope the, evidently long but undefined, gap in time between the Fall of Barad-dûr and our Days is sufficient for 'literary credibility', even for readers acquainted with what is known or surmised of 'pre-history'. I have, I suppose, constructed an imaginary time, but kept my feet on my own mother-earth for place. I prefer that to the contemporary mode of seeking remote globes in 'space'. However curious, they are alien, and not lovable with the love of blood-kin.

Tolkien, then, at least at in the later part of his writings, did intend for *Rings* (and the other texts) to be a sort of 'pre-history' which he hopes will have 'literary credibility'. He continues on in the same letter to note that the name Middle-earth itself belongs to our real-life world and actual linguistic history:

Middle-earth is (by the way & if such a note is necessary) not my own invention. It is a modernization or alteration (N[ew] E[nglish] D[ictionary] 'a perversion') of an old word for the inhabited world of Men, the oikoumenē: middle because thought of vaguely as set amidst the encircling Seas and (in the northern-imagination) between ice of the North and the fire of the South. O.English middan-geard, mediæval E. midden-erd, middle-erd. Many reviewers seem to assume that Middle-earth is another planet! (*Letters*, 283)

He had also in an earlier letter (1954) made reference to his works in a general statement about "any legends put in the form of supposed ancient history of this actual world" including his own works (*Letters*, 203).

However, a decade later, when he was interviewed by Charlotte and Dennis Plimmer, for the *Daily Telegraph Magazine*, he elaborates more explicitly on the idea of Middle-earth as an ancient sort of pre-Europe. The text quoted here is part of the interview draft (the first line in

italics), which was sent to Tolkien, along with his comments (the main body of the quote). The interview itself was later published in the *Daily Telegraph* in March of 1968, and his comments are published in the collection of his published letters:

> *Middle-earth. . . . corresponds spiritually to Nordic Europe.*
>
> Not *Nordic*, please! A word I personally dislike; it is associated, though of French origin, with racialist theories. Geographically *Northern* is usually better. But examination will show that even this is inapplicable (geographically or spiritually) to 'Middle-earth'. This is an old word, not invented by me, as reference to a dictionary such as the Shorter Oxford will show. It meant the habitable lands of our world, set amid the surrounding Ocean. The action of the story takes place in the North-west of 'Middle-earth', equivalent in latitude to the coastlands of Europe and the north shores of the Mediterranean. But this is not a purely 'Nordic' area in any sense. If Hobbiton and Rivendell are taken (as intended) to be at about the latitude of Oxford, then Minas Tirith, 600 miles south, is at about the latitude of Florence. The Mouths of Anduin and the ancient city of Pelargir are at about the latitude of ancient Troy. Auden has asserted that for me 'the North is a sacred direction'. That is not true. The North-west of Europe, where I (and most of my ancestors) have lived, has my affection, as a man's home should. I love its atmosphere, and know more of its histories and languages than I do of other parts; but it is not 'sacred', nor does it exhaust my affections. I have, for instance, a particular love for the Latin language, and among its descendants for Spanish. That it is untrue for my story, a mere reading of the synopses should show. The North was the seat of the fortresses of the Devil. The progress of the tale ends in what is far more like the re-establishment of an

effective Holy Roman Empire with its seat in Rome than anything that would be devised

by a 'Nordic'. (*Letters*, 375-76)

This description shows not only Tolkien's connection between Middle-earth and a sort of

imaginary ancient pre-history Europe,[156] but also his distaste for and rejection of the racist (even

Nazi) enthusiasm for certain aspects (or at least certain misguided depictions) of Northern

European legends.[157] This is no doubt plays into Tolkien's dislike of Wagner, given his

associations with some of that ideology during Wagner's lifetime, and the even stronger

posthumous associations between Wagner and the Nazi Party.

Myth and Fairy Tale

We have seen, therefore, that the differences between Narnia (and Narnia in some respects as a

representative for fantasy tales in general) and Middle-earth include (but are not limited to) its

size, scope, and intended audience, its intent, whether as an outgrowth of a private hobby or as a

means of proselytization, its posture towards religion in the story, and its connection or

relationship to the real world. Another difference, which is perhaps less obvious or clear cut and

therefore more difficult to pin down, is that of style.

Though structuralist perspectives such as Vladimir Propp, for instance, or Claude Lévi-

Strauss do not differentiate between the myth and fairy-tale, since they are looking for deep

anthropological structures common to all narrative,[158] a helpful contrast between these notions

can be drawn. For the purposes of this discussion, I intend to use the terms as follows. I use fairy

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[156] In another letter from 1955, Tolkien jokingly refers to Venice as "Gondor", showing a definite connection between the 'Kingdom in the South' and real-life Italy. (*Letters*, 223.)

[157] An enthusiasm which, unfortunately, continues today, both in Europe and in some US white supremist groups, alas.

[158] Claude Levi-Strauss shows how structuralists actually deemphasize the differences between myth and fairy tale, because both genres have no specific authors – all popular forms of these stories are relatively anonymous forms – and both give insight into the anthropological constants of collective life.

tale to mean a jovial tale in which the protagonist, having overcome whatever obstacles stood in their way, receives help from an unlooked-for source and finds a happy end, typically learning something in the process. Fairy tales feature fluidity and mobility. Myth, on the other hand, points to tales on a much grander scale, often with great suffering, tales that explore existential questions of divinity, eternity, humanity and morality through adventures, and which may have an ambiguous or tragic end. Myth (and its shorter version, tragedy) is also connected to repetition, predetermined fate, and facing inescapable doom with dignity.

In Oedipus Rex, for instance, everything that happens in the end of the play is already known in the beginning – Oedipus has already killed his father and married his mother. The prophecy, patricide, incest, and consulting with the oracle have all taken place before the play starts. The tragedy is not concerned with these matters, but rather with how Oedipus will discover his own guilt, and how he will behave once he does. Will he rail against his fate and despair, or will he face his doom with dignity and courage – these are usually the only choices left to a tragic/mythic hero. This is not to be confused with religion, which in this context means in the most general sense, a faith practice based on a set of beliefs or myths that honor the tradition and the deity concerned. Finally, in regards to Tolkien, I note that although myth, religion and fairy tale all seem to contrast to realism, Tolkien was deeply invested in what he calls verisimilitude, by which he means that sort of faux-historical flavor of his writing. This verisimilitude – a narrative reflecting in some recognizable way our world around us – is a major part of Tolkien's style. Note that verisimilitude has nothing to do with whether a story is plausible or not – that is irrelevant. Often times real life is not particularly plausible. Yet we

recognize the verisimilitude in Tolkien's works in the detail, breadth and scope of the backstory he created for *The Hobbit* in *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion*.[159]

In exploring the differences between Narnia and Middle-earth, Tolkien's world fits this sense of myth, while Narnia is more of a fairy tale. Narnia itself has some bizarre contradictions in its internal totality, such as Christmas being celebrated in a world where Aslan is the divine figure, rather than Christ.[160] The jovial, child-like nature of Narnia (which we also see to some extent in *The Hobbit*) is more suited to the classic fairy tale despite the grandness of scope and darker, or at least deeper themes. The sense of wonder and adventure is present in all the *Narnia* tales and *The Hobbit`,* despite topics such as the incursion of evil into the land of Narnia, the shadow of Sauron the Necromancer, or even, in Lewis' *Last Battle,* the end of the Narnian world, death, and the afterlife.

Middle-earth, on the other hand, is full of darkness and decay. This can be seen especially clearly in the *Silmarillion.* Decay in Middle-earth eventually leads to the ultimate alteration of the world (including the actual landscape), the decline of natural beauty, the disappearance of the elven race, and humans taking over (which of course eventually leads to our real life world in the far distant future). Humans are depicted as fallible and broken (Boromir serves as an example of a human; see also the downfall of the human kingdom of Númenor). This is a kind of relativizing of the humans, which fits into Tolkien's notion of Middle-earth as a pre-Europe – very different from Narnia, where all races or species make up one people (Narnians), and the Pevensies (although there are other humans in Narnia) struggle with their

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[159] We shall later find that it is actually all a backstory or backdrop for his elven languages, but based on what we know about the publication of the three texts, this is also true.

[160] It would actually be fairer to Narnia, if this were really the chief topic under investigation, to compare it to *The Hobbit* only, as they were both written for children. In fairness to Lewis, his *Perelandra* (from *The Space Trilogy*) might make a better comparison to Middle-earth. But since the goal of this discussion is the illumination of the myth-like aspects of Middle-earth (as a non-fairy tale), Narnia serves as a reasonable example of a fairy tale in any case.

faith in Aslan. The Narnians, by and large, have less trouble believing in Aslan – he is of Narnia, as are they.[161]

In his short essay "The Fairy Tale Moves on Its Own Time,"[162] Ernst Bloch contrasts the fairy tale and myth, finding that myth is tied to geographical location and is primordial and authoritative. Fairy tales, on the other hand, differ in that they are not location-specific. Little Red Riding Hood could get lost in the deep dark forest of Sherwood just as easily as in the Black Forest of Baden-Württemberg. The Big Bad Wolf could peep from behind a boulder in Yellowstone as well as from any along the Rhein. Fairy tales are, in a word, more mobile. Whereas myth, for Bloch, needs a character or figure whose fate is determined by birth (think of the prince destined to take his father's place, or even the long-lost heir to the throne who has a conveniently crown-shaped birthmark – he was the infant king all along). Fairy tales have millers' daughters marrying princes, or the youngest son of a youngest son defeating a dragon and making his fortune; fairy tales feature social mobility as well as geographic mobility.

This mobility, in Bloch's view, means that fairy tales are tied to a notion of freedom whereas myth is about the un-alterability of existence. For Bloch, this accounts for mainstream America's fascination with fairytales, such as those presented by Disney, despite the fact that the United States has no feudal history and is a famously anti-monarchial society. Bloch sees fairy tales as freeing us from history. They possess an emancipatory quality, telling us of our escape from destiny, or at least of the possibility of such escape. In a fairy tale, the plucky hero faces an impossible task or obstacle and overcomes either by magical aid or often, their own pluck and

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[161] Remember that there are mythological aspects to Christianity. There is, for example, no record of a census being taken in the year of Jesus' birth, but we need to get Jesus of *Nazareth* to Bethlehem somehow, to invoke the prophecy about the son of David, the city of David. To fulfill the prophecy, the Messiah must be born there.
[162] Bloch, Ernst. "The Fairy Tale Moves on Its Own Time," in *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature: Selected Essays*, trans. Jack Zipes and Frank Mecklenburg, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988, 163-166.

cleverness. For Bloch, myth and tragedy are, on the other hand, more concerned with destiny, and the attempt to create significance in the face of death, loss, or destruction. Although one cannot escape one's fate, there is comfort to be had in the *significance* of the fate itself, and in the elevated dignity that comes with the acceptance of the inevitability of the end, when it comes.[163] Fairy tales are not concerned with destiny, and even eschew the subjection of their characters to the hands of fate. Fairy tales challenge the idea of fate. Fairy tales deny that nobles or aristocrats are inherently better or superior to others, and nearly always have those of low birth succeeding, often in unexpected ways. In a fairy tale, one's fate is not predetermined, but is rather dependent on one's own goodness, virtue, courage, cleverness, and not infrequently, persistence. This distinguishes them sharply from tragedy. But tragedy and myth go hand in hand.

The Niebelungenlied features the doomed (though unwitting) incestuous relationship of Siegmund and Sieglinde, similar to that of Oedipus and Jocasta. It has death, despair, darkness, and characters who face their inevitable and long-foreseen fate with quiet dignity. *The Silmarillion* certainly partakes of myth and tragedy. *The Lord of the Rings,* on the other hand, is not a true myth, for Frodo is neither the lost son of a king (with a convenient birthmark or heirloom) nor is he fated to do as he does, but nor is it a fairy tale, for it does not feature any particular social mobility, nor end happily with a clear moral, but deals with high and dark themes.

We see the distinction between specific geographical ties in Middle-earth on the one hand, as well as the geographical mobility (Narnia could be anywhere, and could be accessed from anywhere) and social mobility (middle-class children becoming monarchs) in Narnia on the

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[163] Consider Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus* and *Oedipus Rex*, often held up as held up as exemplary of classic tragedy, despite Hegel's preference of *Antigone*.

other hand. This plays out in the hints and assertion about religion in the two worlds as well. In Middle-earth, for instance, prophecy plays but a minor role; memory and history have removed the need for it.[164] The characters are shaped by their places in the world, and although they have free will and may accomplish surprising things, it is not the fulfilment of a prophetic vision. Tolkien does make references to "the gift of foresight," particularly with regards to his wiser characters such as Elrond, Galadriel, and Gandalf. This foresight, though never clearly explained, seems to be a sort of seeing of options, or possible futures, combined with a sense of intuition about others' future actions or bent of mind. It is a matter of seeing the present clearly and wisely, not seeing the future directly. In Narnia, on the other hand, prophesy is everywhere. "Wrong will be right, when Aslan comes in sight" or the prophesied coming of the two kings and two queens of Narnia.[165] The fulfilment of these prophecies is central to the plot, part of Lewis' vision of God's will playing out. This underscores the link between Narnia and Christianity, for of course Christianity is itself the fulfillment of prophecy. [166]

Middle-earth is quite different. It is not religious in any overt sense. In a way, the religion inside the story, that is, the belief system practiced by the characters, is history rather than

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[164] The only real prophesies that are mentioned in *Rings* are: Malbeth the Seer's prophecy concerning the heir of Isildur (Aragon) treading the paths of the dead "From the North he shall come, need shall drive him…" and Éowyn's "no living man am I!" moment, which seems to have to do with a prophecy that no living man can kill the Witch King of Angmar. (*Rings* 764, 823)

[165] Lewis, C. S. *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. Collier, 1978. pg.74.

[166] Frodo is an unlikely hero (not like Túrin, Boromir or Siegfried). Frodo is a stand-in for us, the readers, which is an affirmative message not found in the likes of the *Silmarillion*. There, the only hope is in the distant future; it is a much bleaker place altogether. There is little suspense in the *Silmarillion*, nor in the *Nibelungenlied* for that matter. There is little introspection either. The only exception might be the night before Kriemhild's marriage to Itzel the Hun, when she ponders through the night if she can really marry a heathen, and ultimately decides it is worth it – for the sake of vengeance. In the *Nibelungenlied*, people are almost never alone – everything that takes place is witnessed by others – witnesses can report what happens to the characters in nearly every case – they have no inner life. As an example of prophecy in the *Nibelungenlied*: On the way to Kriemhild's feast (at the palace of Etzel), Hagen gets a prophecy from a wood nymph, which says that none but a certain priest will return from the feast alive. Hagen then sets upon the priest unexpectedly. However, the priest escapes him, and from then on he knows they are doomed. He is unable to avert the prophecy by rendering it untrue via the death of the priest. Perhaps this is fatalism? Or a deterministic environment? Suspense is relatively new in literature, and Tolkien enjoys copying the old styles. There is not much in the way of suspense in Shakespeare, for instance. Probably not in Greek tragedy either.

religion. The inhabitants of Middle-earth have no specific liturgical or ritual practices[167] tying the present to the past (despite the extensive descriptions of the gods, or angelic powers in the *Silmarillion*), except for language itself, and song (and Faramir's table grace[168]). The past and its glories are almost irrevocably severed from the present and its conflicts. Aragorn revives the glorious past for a few more generations, but it seems destined to fade in the end. But the more mythological aspects of the elves' religion (that is to say, their history of the gods and their creation story – the first part of the *Silmarillion*) remain intact here.

By this measure, it seems Middle-earth is the more *mythic* by Bloch's definition, and Narnia more the *fairy tale.* However, upon closer examination, we see that Tolkien's work is actually a hybrid of the two, a synthesis of the poles of Bloch's dichotomy. The darkness and fictional historicity of the Middle-earth texts create the verisimilitude of an almost realist novel, about an unreal place. This paradox, or rather, the astounding scale of this paradox, is part of what makes Tolkien's work so unique. He creates a historical tradition that doesn't exist. This in turn creates a strange relationship between our world and Middle-earth. It is a complete fantasy, and yet so like a realist novel in many ways, with its verisimilitude, plausible characters, and internal reality. Tolkien doesn't want to lose that relationship to our world (i.e. the verisimilitude) entirely, and yet wants to write about a fantastical world.

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[167] The essence of ritual is something which has been done for a long time, connecting past and present. This very fact makes fictional rituals intriguing, but they often fail to ring true. The lack of real connection with the past makes them seem fictional. Consider for example the Vulcan Pon Farr ritual in *Star Trek*, or any of the solemnities practiced by various "alien" cultures in the *Marvel Cinematic Universe.*

[168] The character of Faramir, the younger brother of Boromir, while hosting Sam and Frodo in the secret Gondor outpost in Ithilien, has his company and his guests rise and face the West in a symbolic moment of remembrance before sitting down to a feast. "Before they ate, Faramir and all his men turned and faced west in a moment of silence. Faramir signed to Frodo and Sam that they should do likewise. 'So we always do,' he said, as they sat down: 'we look towards Númenor that was, and beyond to Elvenhome that is, and to that which is beyond Elvenhome and will ever be. Have you no such custom at meat?' 'No,' said Frodo, feeling strangely rustic and untutored. 'But if we are guests, we bow to our host, and after we have eaten we rise and thank him.' 'That we do also,' said Faramir." (*Rings* 661)

For Ernst Bloch, myth is primarily a neutral force, or even a negative one in contrast to the happiness and hope of fairy tale. Tolkien has a more positive view of myth (or legend), seeing it as anchoring historical significance to things worthy of being retold. For us, *Narnia* is a fairy tale, in a Blochian sense. For Bloch, fairy tale is anti-mythic, the antithesis of myth. In the world of myth there is no freedom. For him, myth means a pre-determined destiny, whereas fairy tales are magical – a space where anything can happen. But this is not how Tolkien sees the matter.

Fairy tales are, for Bloch as well others, about growth and learning. Bruno Bettelheim famously interpreted fairy tales in Freudian terms of infantile maturation to adult sexual maturity (He finds Hansel and Gretel, with its edible house and cannibalistic plot to be about oral fixations, Cinderella, with its focus on dirtiness and splendor, to address Freud's anal stage, and Little Red Riding Hood to be about sexual maturation). Even the Brothers Grimm themselves, although originally not intending their work for children (but rather to foster a galvanizing, unifying sense of the German spirit, not unlike Wagner's aims for the *Ring Cycle*), soon found their fairy tale volumes in demand due to parents reading the tales as cautionary or instructional entertainment for their children. The brothers published a children's version not long after their initial collection. Fairy tales are inherently connected to childhood, or at least to ideas of growth, maturation, coming of age.

The Hobbit's origins, too, are intimately connected to childhood. Not only was the story first created for the amusement of Tolkien's children, but it contains also many aspects inspired by other fairy tales and legends (particularly dragons) that Tolkien found particularly enchanting in his own childhood. Bilbo the Hobbit overcomes the dangers of his journey to achieve fame and fortune as Cinderella overcomes the malice of her stepmother to achieve love and marriage.

As in all fairy tales, the protagonist leads a charmed life – unexpected help from an unlikely source arrives in the nick of time to save the day – whether it is a magic ring or a fairy godmother, seven dwarves or a bearded wizard, the outcome is the same: happily ever after.

We see fairy tale elements in Middle-earth, primarily in *The Hobbit* and, to a lesser extent, *The Lord of the Rings*. Fate may await, doom may hover, but ultimately our heroes can escape with unlikely aid. This is not, however, the case for most characters in the *Silmarillion*. There, doom looms large, and, be it early or be it late, there is no escaping the hand of fate. Tolkien values myth for its gravity and significance, and fairy tale for the prospect of freedom and unexpected aid given to the unlikely hero. Both of these trends or elements figure strongly in *The Lord of the Rings.*

It is in this idea of significance that Tolkien bridges the gap between fairy tale and myth. Whatever it may have been that led him in the 1910s to begin to create the first words of the elven languages, it was the languages that started the whole process, as we shall see. Tolkien seems to have felt compelled to write of Middle-earth – particularly the Silmarillion – it was the "bent of [his] nature to make" such a thing (*Letters,* 126-27). He appears to have a sense of the importance of the past that connects to his view of language. Language is, clearly, a means of communication, but its also a vast archive – an archive with a temporal dimension – and it is the way the past communicates with the present. This temporal dimension is a key element in the Middle-earth texts, closely allied with Tolkien's emphasis on the past.

It is worth noting that this is very different from *Narnia*, where time is flexible and there is a definite lack of detailed history. *Game of Thrones* and some other fantasy worlds do thorough world building in multiple time periods but their characters are not in constant dialog with their own past through languages, ruins, poems and songs to anything like the same extent

as in Middle-earth. Moreover, in Middle-earth historical time cannot expand or compress, which is in sharp contrast to Narnia, where time flows erratically. In Middle-earth, each year, each age is all important or significant and worth remembering. And many characters do remember various portions of the past, and interact frequently with their own unambiguous histories. Even the sceneries and landscapes are full of ruins that are legible, so to speak, to the characters, and still significant even after many years. These markers of the past give significance to the characters, because they know they will be remembered. This same thought occurs to Samwise Gamgee in one of Tolkien's favorite passages. Sam is recalling the ancient history of the Silmaril jewels, one of which was later made into a star. Sam exclaims "Why, to think of it, we're in the same tale still! It's going on. Don't the great tales never end?", as he recollects that Frodo possess a glass filled with the starlight of that special star (Rings 697). Even if they should die or fail in their quest, they know they are part of something larger than themselves.

Things are different for us as denizens of these modernist times as compared to characters in Middle-earth. We moderns are disconnected from the past – its relevance has lost any self-evidence. For the inhabitants of Middle-earth on the other hand, there is no sense of historical dislocation – there is a connection to the past and to signifiers of their own past. There is no ambiguity – they know what battle filled the Dead Marshes with corpses, they know the old dwarvish name for the Silvertine, and the historical significance of the Mirrormere. No one in Middle-earth ever found a battle insignificant – that is the realm of modernism or modernity (or the US today) where there is no consensus, no connection to our history, no consciousness – and this seems to be part of what Tolkien was fighting against. In the US right now, we seem to be trying to recapture the moment of our origins, trying to figure out what those origins mean to us – for example with the emphases on the "founding fathers" and the Constitution. There is also a

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prevalent sense of concern that if the opposing side (whatever that may be) gains control of the present, it will separate us from our nearly-sacred, nearly-perfect origins, making ourselves unrecognizable to ourselves. Middle-earth is, perhaps, what our world could look like if history were recognizable. It is a world with an intact history, which is very attractive. Tolkien used this sense of intact history to comfort and reassure Christopher during his time in the war – at a time when his own present might have seemed unrecognizable.

The distinctions between fairy tale and legend, or tragedy and myth, for Tolkien, all come down to *significance*. What happened is memorable, in the sense that it is worth remembering, and it is therefore significant or important. Tragic actions, heroic actions, noble actions, and sometimes even mundane actions do not just disappear, they become myth. What I mean by the term *significance* here is: worth remembering, worth retelling, worth recalling, recounting. That seems to be what, for Tolkien, it means to be the stuff of myth or legend.

Another aspect of this question hinges on the social mobility of fairytale characters. By contrast, characters in a myth therefore have their fate predetermined by birth or destiny. In Tolkien's works, *The Silmarillion* features more characters who suffer under Fate or Doom or even pre-destination than do the characters in *The Lord of the Rings*. In the latter work, although there is some importance attached to dreams, foresight, intuition, and "aid unlooked for," which are more typical of fairy tales, the world is not determined by fate or destiny. This is less true for the *Silmarillion*, where Túrin Turambar is the "master of doom, by doom mastered," and suffers his long-foreseen fate in due course (*Silmarillion* 268).

This sort of doomed existence is by no means unique to Tolkien, nor indeed, even limited to the realm of myth. The mythic *Iliad*, for example, depicts Achilles faced with choice between leading a long, satisfying life but being ultimately forgotten in the passing of time, or being

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remembered forever, thereby achieving a kind of immortality, but dying violently in battle. He does have a choice, but he is destined to live out one or the other option. Greek myth is suffused with fate and destiny, but it does not have a monopoly on the market. Film noir, a much more recent genre, unfolds in a world in which the protagonist's doom is often sealed from the very beginning. The young reporter has accepted an invitation from the femme fatale, and no amount of planning or effort on his part will prevent his inevitable demise – there is an atmospheric premise that cannot be escaped. We see this strongly in the *Silmarillion*, as well as with other characters of legend such as Siegfried, Tristan and Isolde, etc.

One curious instance of doom in *The Lord of the Rings* might be the Éowyn prophecy. But it is not so dark a doom as those from the *Silmarillion.* The evil Witch King of Angmar, Lord of the Nazgûl believes no man may kill him due to a prophecy: "Far off yet is his doom, and not by the hand of man will he fall" (Rings 1-27). However, as was vividly depicted in Peter Jackson's 2003 film adaptation, Éowyn, a woman, does in fact slay the Witch King. Here Tolkien may perhaps have been inspired by Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, where it is prophesied that "none of woman born" can kill Macbeth (IV, 1, 96). Macbeth takes this to mean that no human being can kill him, but it turns out that man who ultimately kills him, Macduff, was not born vaginally but rather "from his mother's womb/Untimely ripp'd" (V,10, 15-16), which is to say, born by caesarean section. The prophecy sets Macbeth and the Witchking of Angmar both up for failure, by making them feel safe in their mistaken assumptions.

These, and a few other prophetic instances notwithstanding, *The Lord of the Rings* seems rather less concerned with doom and fate than *The Silmarillion*. If *The Silmarillion* were the only Middle-earth story, Bloch's view of myth would be much more fitting. *The Silmarillion*, in large part, depicts a world in which one's ultimate fate is largely pre-determined (if one is a person of

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sufficient birth and character to be significant, at least). And we must resist our inevitable (though significant) doom until the last, and then bow graciously to fate as we meet our demise with admirable courage. So end Túrin, and Beren, and Lúthien, and Maeglin, among others.

However, Tolkien, in writing *The Hobbit*, makes something much more like a fairytale. How fitting that he wrote it with his own children in mind! For Bloch, the unexpected nature of Bilbo's adventures, the arrival of aid unlooked for, and the lack of a determined fate for Bilbo (at least from Bilbo's perspective; of course any *reader* familiar with the narrative arc of a fairytale will expect a happy end of some kind) make *The Hobbit* a fairy tale. *The Lord of the Rings*, is, however, a special case by Bloch's definition. It resolves and synthesizes the two, originally disparate, Middle-earth texts, the fairy tale and the myth. In combining the two, *The Lord of the Rings* becomes a modernist novel that partakes of both the myth and of the fairy tale, and establishes in doing so, the genre of High Fantasy. *The Silmarillion* is magnificent and is not only, for Tolkien, at the very heart of his Middle-earth writing, but also part of the backdrop that was necessary for Middle-earth and *The Lord of the Rings* to be what they are. However, it is *The Lord of the Rings* that defines the new genre and is, most clearly, the crowning piece of Tolkien's *Gesamtkunstwerk*, which brings together and unites his other Middle-earth pieces.

Allegory

Therefore, we see that Narnia has a standing relationship to the real world that Tolkien and Middle-earth do not. This examination shows us that *The Lord of the Rings* combines mythic and fairy tale elements. Tolkien conceived it as a self-sufficient world; it did not lean allegorically on the religious or historical features of the real world. This question of allegorical intent is a special one for Tolkien. Tolkien often expressed a deep distaste for allegory, and his stalwart insistence upon the rejection of any allegorical reading of the Middle-earth texts is notable. His objections

have both to do with the kinds of allegories that can be drawn with such a tale, and also with his own relationship with his writing, which would be spoiled by allegory.

Tolkien's rejection of allegory began at a very young age, according to his own account in the introduction to *The Lord of the Rings*:

> But I cordially dislike allegory in all its manifestations, and always have done so since I grew old and wary enough to detect its presence. I much prefer history, true or feigned, with its varied applicability to the thought and experience of readers. I think that many confuse 'applicability' with 'allegory'; but the one resides in the freedom of the reader, and the other in the purposed domination of the author. (Rings, xvii)

He also details in the introduction how different the story would be if he had been trying to make it an allegory for World War II, mentioning that the allies would have tried to use the One Ring against Sauron-Hitler, and no matter which side won, the hobbits would have ended as an oppressed and occupied people, and would not have survived for very long. It seems to be this same disconnect or distancing himself from the real world that is so evident in comparison with or contrast to Lewis' works that was, for Tolkien, an essential ingredient in his story. In a 1947 letter to Unwin, Tolkien remarks on Unwin's son Rayner's comments that he (Rayner) saw in *Rings* an allegory connected to the ideas of grace and the triumph of good over evil.[169] Tolkien feels that making an allegory of his story would lead the story to a *deus ex machina* situation with the magic ring of power:

> [D]o not let Rayner suspect 'Allegory'.… Of course, Allegory and Story converge, meeting somewhere in Truth. So that the only perfectly consistent allegory is a real life; and the only fully intelligible story is an allegory. And one finds, even in imperfect

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[169] This is likely part of what Tolkien meant in his remark "For the religious element is absorbed into the story and the symbolism." (Carpenter, *Letters*, 172.)

human 'literature', that the better and more consistent an allegory is the more easily can it be read 'just as a story'; and the better and more closely woven a story is the more easily can those so minded find allegory in it. But the two start out from opposite ends. You can make the Ring into an allegory of our own time, if you like: an allegory of the inevitable fate that waits for all attempts to defeat evil power by power. But that is only because all power magical or mechanical does always so work. You cannot write a story about an apparently simple magic ring without that bursting in, if you really take the ring seriously, and make things happen that would happen, if such a thing existed. (*Letters*, 121)

For Tolkien, allegory is ultimately congruent with the real world. And such congruence imposes, to his mind, obligations to make the story true to our world. If the work has verisimilitude, it will not need explicit correspondences to elements of the real world but will capture the basic structure of reality. But he continued to eschew any link to our world, although he certainly wanted a story that would be true-seeming, and which would have a pseudo-historical flavor or style – what we have called a mythic-style. This style was evident even as early as *The Hobbit*, children's literature though it was. In a letter to Unwin regarding *The Hobbit* in October 1937, Tolkien states that it is "…actually the presence…of the terrible [that] is, I believe, what gives this imagined world its verisimilitude. A safe fairy-land is untrue to all worlds" (*Letters*, 24). Even in *The Hobbit,* little hints of a larger, darker world hover just out of sight. For Tolkien the "verisimilitude" or historio-mythic-style story must have a certain amount of darkness to be consistent with, if not directly representing, our reality.

Part of Tolkien's dislike for allegory can also be traced to the specific connection that many readers, past and present, have made between his work and either World War I or World

War II. Perhaps this is inevitable, given that he lived and worked and wrote during both wars, but he makes it clear that it was never his intent to write about the world wars, either directly or by allegory. He does admit, in the introduction to *The Lord of the Rings* that "[a]n author cannot of course remain wholly unaffected by his experience," but objects specifically to any intentional connection between the War of the Ring and World War II, or between Sauron and Hitler. He also, perhaps a little piqued at the insistence of the horrors of the second World War, reminds his readers that "as the years go by it seems now often forgotten that to be caught in youth by 1914 was no less hideous an experience than to be involved in 1939 and the following years. By 1918 all but one of my close friends were dead." He makes it clear that he intended no direct connection between his work and either of the wars, however much they may have impacted him personally. It is also clear from his introduction that Tolkien was following a sort of narrative impulse in his writings – the stories are leading him, not the other way round. He describes in the introduction the halting progress he made over the years it took him to complete *Rings*, "As the story grew it put down roots (into the past) and threw out unexpected branches," though he goes on to say that by selecting the Ring as the link between *Rings* and the *Hobbit,* the main story of the Ring at least was clear from the beginning (Rings, xvii). However, it would seem that a prerequisite for allegory would be a predetermination of the links or connections between the story and the real world, as well as the desired outcome or moral of the story. None of that seems to have informed Tolkien's writing at all.

The World Wars, on the other hand, did inform his work, though not as a plot device. The Middle-earth writings are not an *allegory* of war, or even a way of thinking about war so much as an *escape* for Tolkien, an alternate reality where he could capture his own sense of beauty, nobility, suffering, or tragedy, where he could give the terrible violence of war significance that

he feared it might not have in reality. But, of course, there is much war and darkness in the stories too – very much so – and no less in the *Silmarillion* than in *Rings*. But in Middle-earth even war is not as complicated as in our world. No doubt this need for escape contributed to his resistance to any attempt to return his meaningful world allegorically to the real one.

In 1943, while Tolkien was working on *The Lord of the Rings*, his son Christopher was drafted into the Royal Air Force. In 1944 Tolkien wrote to Christopher regarding the real war and discussions about it:

> I cannot understand the line taken by BBC…that the German troops are a motley collection of sutlers and broken men, while yet recording the bitterest defence against the finest and best equipped armies (as indeed they are) that have ever taken the field. The English pride themselves, or used to, on 'sportsmanship' (which included 'giving the devil his due'), not that attendance at a league football match was not enough to dispel the notion that 'sportsmanship' was possessed by any very large number of the inhabitants of this island. But it is distressing to see the press grovelling in the gutter as low as Goebbels in his prime, shrieking that any German commander who holds out in a desperate situation (when, too, the military needs of his side clearly benefit) is a drunkard, and a besotted fanatic. I can't see much distinction between our popular tone and the celebrated 'military idiots'. We knew Hitler was a vulgar and ignorant little cad, in addition to any other defects (or the source of them); but there seem to be many cads who don't speak German, and who given the same chance would show most of the other Hitlerian characteristics. There was a solemn article in the local paper seriously advocating systematic exterminating of the entire German nation as the only proper course after military victory: because, if you please, they are rattlesnakes, and don't know

the difference between good and evil! (What of the writer?) The Germans have just as much right to declare the Poles and Jews exterminable vermin, subhuman, as we have to select the Germans: in other words, no right, whatever they have done.… You can't fight the Enemy with his own Ring without turning into an Enemy; but unfortunately Gandalf's wisdom seems long ago to have passed with him into the True West. (*Letters*, 93-4)

Amidst the unpleasantness of war, and especially of his dear son being caught up in it, it is not surprising that he would reject any connection between it and his writings. But more than that, Tolkien's hostility to allegory is certainly connected to the fact that his stories, his writing (especially the *Silmarillion* related work) was his defense against these wars, against real world. It was his alternative, preferred world, his escape. In writing so many letters to Christopher during the war, he tries to cheer him repeatedly – using Middle-earth as an alternative to our world, a reverse allegory – reminding him that he must go through his own version of Mordor too. In one of the most touching letters, Tolkien appears to comfort Christopher (and to encourage him to write), when Christopher was apparently feeling overwhelmed by the cruelty of the world, and was unhappy in his posting with the RAF in South Africa:

Your service is, of course, as anybody with any intelligence and ears and eyes knows, a very bad one, living on the repute of a few gallant men, and you are probably in a particularly bad corner of it. But all Big Things planned in a big way feel like that to the toad under the harrow, though on a general view they do function and do their job. An ultimately evil job. For we are attempting to conquer Sauron with the Ring. And we shall (it seems) succeed. But the penalty is, as you will know, to breed new Saurons, and slowly turn Men and Elves into Orcs. Not that in real life things are as clear cut as in a

story, and we started out with a great many Orcs on our side. . . . . Well, there you are: a hobbit amongst the Urukhai. Keep up your hobbitry in heart, and think that all stories feel like that when you are in them. You are inside a very great story! I think also that you are suffering from suppressed 'writing'. That may be my fault. You have had rather too much of me and my peculiar mode of thought and reaction. And as we are so akin it has proved rather powerful. Possibly inhibited you. I think if you could begin to write, and find your own mode, or even (for a start) imitate mine, you would find it a great relief. (*Letters*, 78)

Tolkien goes on to say that some of his darkest times during the first world war led to the creation of Morgoth (the chief enemy in the *Silmarillion)* and of the two elven languages. And yet, of course, even this comforting use of allegory breaks down at some point, when the complexities and evils of the world are more than those of Middle-earth:

Urukhai is only a figure of speech. There are no genuine Uruks [orcs], that is folk made bad by the intention of their maker; and not many who are so corrupted as to be irredeemable (though I fear it must be admitted that there are human creatures that seem irredeemable short of a special miracle, and that there are probably abnormally many of such creatures in Deutschland and Nippon – but certainly these unhappy countries have no monopoly: I have met them, or thought so, in England's green and pleasant land).

(*Letters*, 90)

By, in a manner of speaking, encoding Christopher's World War II experiences into the language or terminology of Middle-earth, Tolkien is using Middle-earth as a "real" myth. He could have had the same conversation with Christopher using Greek myths, or the *Iliad*, or even *Beowulf*. But this is not the negative usage that Tolkien gives the word allegory. For Tolkien, allegory is something (potentially) manipulative, that the author forces upon the reader, or, as an interpretive

device, something readers may impose on a writer who intended no allegory. What he does with Christopher, to use his own words from the Introduction to *The Lord of the Rings*, is "applicability" (Rings xvii). The Middle-earth lore has been firmly established between the two men for some years at this point, and the texts have become a reservoir of comparison through which to understand the real world – or in this case used to comfort Christopher – it has become a lens. It is at least in part this *applicability* that has won the books a such a large and dedicated following over the years, and which is doubtless one of the elements in Middle-earth that invites comparisons with such illustrious texts the *Iliad,* or even the *Nibelungenlied.*

An interesting insight into the limits of Tolkien's willingness to entertain connections between Middle-earth and our world – indeed, perhaps the closest he comes to allegory in the books themselves – can be seen in his thoroughly negative portrayal of technology in Middle-earth. There appear to be two different views of or perspectives on technology that come up in his Middle-earth writings. On the one hand, there are literal machines, and on the other, the eponymous ring can be seen as another sort of technology, clearly superior to, or at least more sophisticated than, machines. Inside the world of Middle-earth, what gives the ring its power is called magic, of course, but it is in its own way a powerful technology, invented and created by the elves and Sauron. It represents a certain control over nature or the natural world, rather than being the direct antithesis of nature, as are the machines. Its power is a constant temptation to the characters to try to use the ring, not always for selfish benefit, but often for the betterment of the world. But Tolkien makes it clear that no matter how good the intention, the ring, that is to say, the technology which gives power over nature, will always corrupt good intentions in the end.

Machines, too, in Tolkien's works, always stand in opposition to nature and the natural world. Machines are depicted primarily as engines of war, and are always aesthetically

unpleasant. They are dirty, and noisy, and only employed by evil characters. Indeed, Tolkien goes out of his way to mention that hobbits, in particular, eschew machinery: "They do not and did not understand or like machines more complicated than a forge-bellows, a water-mill, or a hand-loom, though they were skilful with tools" (Rings 1). It is not hard to draw a connection between this view of machines and turn-of-the-century industrialization such as the development of factories, mining, and oil drilling, as well as with pollution in general.

For Tolkien, the connection between the concepts of war and machine (of both literal and ring-kind) is inescapable. In addition to his feelings about the Second World War itself, Tolkien during the World War II period makes frequent references to the evils of the technologies of war, a theme that appears in his Middle-earth writings (particularly in *The Lord of the Rings* in connection to the wizard Saruman), and is particularly notable since he himself served in the military during the First World War, the first large-scale European war to be faught with industrial technology. In 1945 he refers to World War II as a "War of the Machines" (*Letters*, 111), and later that same year, he writes to Christopher of his disgust for airplanes as a technology of war:

> It would be at least some comfort to me if you escaped from the R.A.F. […] It would not be easy for me to express to you the measure of my loathing for the Third Service […] But it is the aeroplane of war that is the real villain. And nothing can really amend my grief that you, my best beloved, have any connexion with it. My sentiments are more or less those that Frodo would have had if he discovered some Hobbits learning to ride Nazgûl-birds, 'for the liberation of the Shire'. Though in this case, as I know nothing about British or American imperialism in the Far East that does not fill me with regret

and disgust, I am afraid I am not even supported by a glimmer of patriotism in this

remaining war. I would not subscribe a penny to it, let alone a son, were I a free man.

Not surprisingly, Tolkien's vehemence against war technologies finds even stronger outlet

against the atomic bomb: "The utter folly of these lunatic physicists to consent to do such work

for war-purposes: calmly plotting the destruction of the world! […] Well we're in God's hands.

But He does not look kindly on Babel-builders" (*Letters,* 115-16).[170] This attitude bleeds over

into *The Lord of the Rings*, when Tolkien has the character of Treebeard (an Ent who is a

caretaker of the forests) say (of the wizard Saruman) with deep disapprobation: "He has a mind

of metal and wheels; and he does not care for growing things, except as far as they serve him for

the moment" (Ring, 462). Whether it is Saruman (former ally of Gandalf) with his literal

machines or Boromir falling for the tempting lure of the Ring, Tolkien makes it clear that no

matter how good the intent, technology which gives power over nature will always corrupt good

intentions.

Even if it were not the corrupting forces of the Ring, and evil in general, it is not to be

supposed by any attentive reader of Middle-earth that it is a utopia, nor that it is free from

darkness or sorrow – quite the opposite. For if Tolkien wished to separate Middle-earth from the

world by removing both real-world religious references and also any hint of allegory, he also

wished to make Middle-earth (as we have seen) a pre-historic Europe, or at least to give his

writing the verisimilitude of history. And to do this, of course, darkness, sorrow, and evil must

be woven into Middle-earth as it is in our world. This is especially true in the *Silmarillion*. In the

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[170] In another, rather more amusing reference from a 1952 letter to Rayner Unwin, after complaining he has been very busy, Tolkien mentions his thoughts on the British atomic bomb test done in Australia: "And also (if I can) finding somewhere else to live and moving! This charming house has become uninhabitable – unsleepable-in, unworkable-in, rocked, racked with noise, and drenched with fumes. Such is modern life. Mordor in our midst. And I regret to note that the billowing cloud [referencing the British atomic bomb test in Australia] recently pictured did not mark the fall of Barad-dûr, but was produced by its allies – or at least by persons who have decided to use the Ring for their own (of course most excellent) purposes." (*Letters,* 165.)

creation-myth of Middle-earth, a goddess (Nienna), foreseeing the brokenness that evil will bring

to the as-yet uncreated world weaves sorrow into the fabric of Middle-earth:

> So great was her sorrow, as the Music unfolded, that her song turned to lamentation long
>
> before its end, and the sound of mourning was woven into the themes of the World before
>
> it began. But she does not weep for herself; and those who hearken to her learn pity, and
>
> endurance in hope. (Rings, 19)

And although there is some humor in *Rings*, there is virtually none in the *Silmarillion,* which

reads more like a poetic history book. But for Tolkien, both humor and darkness are necessary:

"I cannot bear funny books or plays myself, I mean those that set out to be all comic; but it

seems to me that in real life, as here, it is precisely against the darkness of the world that comedy

arises, and is best when it is not hidden." He finds that stories of this sort "must have a warp of

fear and horror, if […] it is to resemble reality, and not be the merest escapism" (*Letters*, 120).

This clearly stated desire to create what he calls "verisimilitude" – true-to-life, "feigned"

history – is connected of his rejection of allegory. He did not want anything to jar the reader

from the world (and histories) of Middle-earth and return them to our world. In Lewis' Narnia

books, Father Christmas appears, despite Narnia being a land in which the celebration of the

Christ-child could not take place (since the deity is Aslan). Such inconsistencies would be

antithetical to the internal consistency or totality that we find in Middle-earth – what Tolkien

calls verisimilitude – and what he very clearly prizes as an integral part of his work.

If allegory justifies a story externally, verisimilitude justifies it internally. Tolkien is

much more concerned with the latter. In allegory, one invents a fictional character or

circumstance B to represent real-life figure or circumstance A, as Aslan represents Christ, or as

the stone table in Narnia clearly represents Jesus' cross. But Sauron was not invented to

represent Hitler; indeed he was invented and referenced in the *Silmarillion,* likely in the mid

1910s, and certainly by the mid 20s. However, once invented, of course a fictional character can

remind one of a real-life figure, rather as one might find a bizarre fictional character who

reminds one strongly of one's peculiar Uncle Joe. And this is of course what Tolkien does in his

letters to Christopher during the war; drawing parallels between Christopher's real-life

experience, and their (Tolkien and Christopher's) shared mythology of Middle-earth.

This is not the making of an allegory, but rather a sort of simile. Tolkien tries to guide

Christopher using Middle-earth events as an analogy. Tolkien is applying Middle-earth as a lens

with which to view our world. In his letters to Christopher, he elaborates on the happenings of

Middle-earth as if it were already an established mythology (which of course it was, between the

two of them), but this is different than either allegory or even than a complete, escapist, alternate

world with no bearing or meaning in our own world. Moral lessons in Middle-earth are

applicable to our world – we can learn from their mistakes – and what works in their world may

work in ours. We all face the similar dangers (morally, if not physically), such as the corrupting

influence of power, or the tendency to judge others by their appearance rather than their merits,

and the remedies are much the same. This verisimilitude and internal reality, or what we might

almost call an internal totality, is, as we have seen, was a goal not only for Tolkien but for

Richard Wagner and Fritz Lang as well.

A World both Connected and Apart: The Real in Middle-earth

Although not an escapist fantasy, Tolkien's desire to separate Middle-earth from our world

underscores its nature as an escape for him – a place of refuge, a going back to the joys of his

childhood. In some direct sense, the Shire was based on recollections of the English countryside

beloved in his youth, but also in a less direct sense – Middle-earth is his attempt to capture the

wonder and delight of his childhood that he felt in reading great stories, hearing legends, and even in learning new languages. Tolkien desired to create a kind of a wholistic imaginary creation – he creates an alternate world in detail.[171] This is a rejection of the real world; it is another environment to inhabit, an escape from the modern world. Tolkien seems to have an impulse to protect or preserve, to build a better world, one that he likes more than this one, where his values and his interests can thrive, and which reflects his own attitudes toward history and society. This sense or tendency can be seen in his 1968 interview with Charlotte and Dennis Plimmer for the *Daily Telegraph Magazine*, five years before his death in 1973. The interview quoted him as having said "'I'm always looking for something I can't find. . . . Something like what I wrote myself." In reference to looking for books to read (*Letters,* 378). Tolkien, reading his own spoken words, responded to the interview draft in writing with an anecdote about his (and CS Lewis') desire to write:

> *'I'm always looking for something I can't find. . . .*Something like what I wrote myself.'
> There's nothing like being vain, is there? An apology for seeming to speak out of vanity.
> Actually this arose in humility, my own and Lewis's. The humility of amateurs in a world
> of great writers. L. said to me one day: 'Tollers, there is too little of what we really like in
> stories. I am afraid we shall have to try and write some ourselves.' We agreed that he
> should try 'space-travel', and I should try 'time-travel'. [172] His result is well known [as
> *The Space Trilogy*]. My effort, after a few promising chapters, ran dry: it was too long a
> way round to what I really wanted to make, a new version of the Atlantis legend. The
> final scene survives as *The Downfall of Númenor*.… We neither of us expected much
> success as amateurs, and actually Lewis had some difficulty in getting *Out of the Silent*

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[171] Which, as we shall see, has echoes of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or a certain internal totality.
[172] They apparently tossed a coin to see who should get each topic.

Planet published. And after all that has happened since, the most lasting pleasure and

reward for both of us has been that we provided one another with stories to hear or read

that we really liked – in *large* parts. Naturally neither of us liked all that we found in the

other's fiction. (*Letters*, 378)

Tolkien, then, was largely motivated by his own pleasure in writing, and by his desire to read the

sorts of things that he wrote. In the introduction to *Rings* he reflects on his own motivations:

The prime motive was the desire of a tale-teller to try his hand at a really long story that

would hold the attention of readers, amuse them, delight them, and at times maybe excite

them or deeply move them. As a guide I had only my own feelings for what is appealing

or moving, and for many the guide was inevitably often at fault. (Rings, xvi)

What Tolkien found most "appealing or moving," at least in part, is clearly the

mysterious and often tragic stories in both myth and history, often in which only a part of the tale

can be known. His Middle-earth books are very much imagined histories which reference an

even earlier history. These histories also have a geo-spatial dimension, a topography, populated

with ruins (and runes) of their own. In a letter to Christopher in 1945 he says:

There are two quit[e] diff[erent] emotions: one that moves me supremely and I find small

difficulty in evoking: the heart-racking sense of the vanished past (best expressed by

Gandalf's words about the Palantir); and the other the more 'ordinary' emotion, triumph,

pathos, tragedy of the characters. A story must be told or there's no story, yet it is the

untold stories that are most moving. (*Letters*, 110)

These untold stories are, in his writing, often the hinted at but rarely explained in detail histories

of Middle-earth, some of which are revealed in shortened form in the *Silmarillion.* Interestingly,

in 1945 Tolkien wrote that he found "Sam's disquisition on the seamless web of story, and by the

scene when Frodo goes to sleep on his breast, and the tragedy of Gollum who at that moment came within a hair of repentance – but for one rough word from Sam." the most moving (to him personally) in the entire trilogy (*Letters*, 11). But, near the end of his life in 1968, he wrote that "the passages that now move me most – written so long ago that I read them now as if they had been written by someone else – are the end of the chapter Lothlórien, […] and the horns of the Rohirrim at cockcrow" (*Letters*, 378).

In creating his own world, then, and writing it in the way and in the style he found most compelling (mythic-historical), Middle-earth ultimately became for Tolkien his own private garden, his memory vessel, connected intimately with his own life. The connections with his children, Christopher in particular, are evident in Tolkien's letters, but also in the care with which Christopher spent throughout much of his adult life in organizing and publishing what remained of his father's work, most importantly, Tolkien's dearest work, *The Silmarillion*. And at the heart of *The Sillmarillion* stands the Lay of Beren and Lúthien, the story of two lovers who faced nearly insurmountable odds (including actual death) to be together. It is also one of the most referenced of the "untold stories" in *Rings,* with characters such as Aragorn referring to it frequently. It is not hard to draw a parallel between the fraught love story of Beren and Lúthien and Tolkien's lengthy and difficult courtship with his wife, Edith. Tolkien made it no secret that Edith was the inspiration for Lúthien, said to be the fairest of all elven women and the ancestor and image of Arwen, who later marries Aragorn. He even included a moment from the early bloom of their love, when Edith danced for him in a meadow – this becomes a central scene in the first part of Beren and Lúthien's story. Indeed, Lúthien – and with her character, Tolkien's love for Edith – is woven throughout the Middle-earth writings, as was her love, and the memory of her love, in his life.

Edith passed away in 1971, two years before Tolkien. In the summer of 1972 Tolkien wrote at some length to Christopher, detailing that he wished her headstone to be inscribed with the name "Lúthien" (and later his own would read "Beren"):

EDITH MARY TOLKIEN 1889-1971 Lúthien : brief and jejune, except for *Lúthien*, which says more than a multitude of words: for she was (and knew she was) my Lúthien.*… I never called Edith *Lúthien* – but she was the source of the story that in time became the chief part of the *Silmarillion*. It was first conceived in a small woodland glade filled with hemlocks at Roos in Yorkshire (where I was for a brief time in command of an outpost of the Humber Garrison in 1917, and she was able to live with me for a while). In those days her hair was raven, her skin clear, her eyes brighter than you have seen them, and she could sing – and dance. But the story has gone crooked, & I am left, and *I* cannot plead before the inexorable Mandos. I will say no more now. But I should like ere long to have a long talk with *you*. For if as seems probable I shall never write any ordered biography – it is against my nature, which expresses itself about things deepest felt in tales and myths – someone close in heart to me should know something about things that records do not record: the dreadful sufferings of our childhoods, from which we rescued one another, but could not wholly heal the wounds that later often proved disabling; the sufferings that we endured after our love began – all of which (over and above our personal weaknesses) might help to make pardonable, or understandable, the lapses and darknesses which at times marred our lives – and to explain how these never touched our depths nor dimmed our memories of our youthful love. For ever (especially when alone) we still met in the woodland glade, and went hand in hand many times to escape the shadow of imminent death before our last parting.

        *She knew the earliest form of the legend (written in hospital), and also the poem

        eventually printed as Aragorn's song in LR. (*Letters*, 420-21)

Just as in our world, Middle-earth is subject to the darkness of death and loss, and Tolkien could

not or would not hide from that in his fantasy world. By making the story of Lúthien central to

Aragorn, but not telling the tale in full in *The Lord of the Rings,* he immortalizes Edith in veiled

form, and lets her remain as one of those supremely moving "untold stories." Although, of

course, the tale of Lúthien was eventually published in the *Silmarillion.* In 1958, Tolkien wrote a

letter to a Rhona Beare, who had written to Tolkien with specific questions on behalf of a group

of fellow fans of the trilogy. After answering her questions, he added his own views on what *The

Lord of the Rings* and Middle-earth itself is really about, which illumines for us his motives in

creating his own non-allegorical, story-filled world:

        But I might say that if the tale is 'about' anything (other than itself), it is not as seems

        widely supposed about 'power'. Power-seeking is only the motive-power that sets events

        going, and is relatively unimportant, I think. It is mainly concerned with Death, and

        Immortality; and the 'escapes': serial longevity, and hoarding memory. (*Letters*, 284)

These very life truths, wrapped in with Tolkien's own experiences, provide the realness that

gives the text the verisimilitude that Tolkien so prized. Middle-earth is a response to (rather than

an allegory of) World War I. In Middle-earth, everything is significant, not just memorable.

Everything has meaning.[173] For Tolkien, part of this giving meaning to things was his unusual

imagined-history style, his pseudo-historical environment for his characters, the landscape of

'historical' traces that his characters occupy. The characters in Middle-earth know about,

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[173] This is what is so exactly opposite in *Game of Thrones* and George R. R. Martin's writing. It is just WWI all over
again. This is one of the reasons the two bodies of work are so fundamentally at odds, despite sounding rather
similar on paper.

remember and even care about history.[174] Significance or meaning is closely entwined with history, for Tolkien. If deeds are remembered in history, they must have been significant. And small wonder that he was so concerned with this, when one considers how in the early days of World War I young men of his acquaintance may well have wanted to prove themselves; countless young men of his generation had previously had a comfortable life that had not been particularly challenging; they longed to do something of significance. And if one can't survive the war, the next best thing would be to do that something of significance – die saving their friends, or in an important battle – to do something and be remembered for it. But the realities of World War I were such that there was not much of significance to do. Soldiers died en masse, members of a faceless crowd of dead, for strategically negligible results. There is little meaning or significance in trench warfare when one can see neither the faces of the enemy, nor even of the friends who lie dead in the mud just out of reach. There was little sense of achievement or of defending. It was a catastrophe. There was no heroic sacrifice, no meaning, only rotting death with no change for courage. Only random meaningless death. The experience of all this clearly marked Tolkien deeply, although he does not write about it in so many words.

Another personal experience which is clearly connected with Tolkien's view of verisimilitude in his works is his own Catholicism, about which he did write frequently in his letters. For Tolkien, Catholicism is ancient and linked to the past. The sequence of Popes, after all, is said to have begun with Peter himself, creating an institution whose historical continuity preserves a divine revelation and the promise of universal redemption. The Middle-earth texts present an exemplary and traditional continuity of history, which is what allows the present (in which our chief heroes reside) to be filled with meaning and significance. It is an attractive thing,

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[174] Consider Aragorn's comment to Bilbo: "he said that if I had the cheek to make verses about Eärendil in the house of Elrond, it was my affair." *Rings* 231.

the continuity of history. As a collective, we as humans do long to have a connection to a meaningful past which can give our present a sense of significance or purpose. Such ideas were clearly in the minds of Wagner and Lang in their works as well. Middle-earth, is, at its core, an emotional testament to the power of historical continuity and the power of believing in the significance of one's life and actions.

<p style="text-align:center">Modernism and Middle-earth</p>

The deep yearning that Tolkien seems to have had for significance and meaning that led him to create Middle-earth gives him a strange connection to modernism. Although never claiming to be a modernist himself, Tolkien is inescapably situated in the milieu of his time. Moreover, the building of an imaginary pre-history is ultimately an act of escapist world building, a reaction to contemporary cultural and social fragmentation that he shares with other modernists. Finally, he is modernist in the sense of critiquing the modern, industrialized, secularized, capitalist world with its commodified sexuality. As we have seen, he was hostile to machinery and technology, preferred rural, agrarian life, and was even frustrated with the English-language liturgy in place of Latin.

Surely no artist can remain wholly unaffected by their time and place, the circumstances under which they grew up, or the happenings in the world around them, and Tolkien is no exception. Yet it is a strange coincidence that the world that shaped him also shaped modernist thinking, given that his works share certain surprising similarities with modernism. Perhaps the chief reason for this is the way in which World War I shaped Tolkien and so many writers of the period. Loss is a clear theme of modernist writing, and World War I was a chief agent of that loss. It would be too simplistic to think we could locate the break in tradition unambiguously, for if we could, whether in August 1914, or with the Holocaust, or anywhere else, then history

would be intact and the break would not have happened. Nevertheless, World War I was certainly a cataclysmic break in tradition that shaped both modernism and Tolkien in various ways.

For Tolkien, as we have seen, the break with the past and with tradition that he experienced through the move to England, the death of his parents (particularly his mother), the guardianship of Father Morgan, being forced to break off his early romance with Edith, and eventually the war itself, left a lasting impact. These events set in motion his creative wish to see a world where loss and sacrifice are never meaningless. This is, of course, the central difference between Middle-earth and twentieth-century Europe. In Middle-earth there is clear significance. It may be in decay and past its prime (by the time of Frodo and *Rings*), but it is full of meaning. Its history is intact. In place of religious practices, Middle-earth has an intact historical tradition. The inhabitants of Middle-earth can know (though of course some do not), unambiguously, where they stand in the march of history. They have meaningful connections to their history. For Europe at the time of World War I there was a deep fear that history has no meaning – that everything is pointless, which in turn helped to give rise to modernism.

The practice of Christianity, and specifically for Tolkien, Catholicism, is one way in which he was able to assign some meaning to the sufferings and losses he experienced. For him (and of course for many people of various faiths) Christianity gave a sense of continuity or significance to history. Early Christians may have expected Jesus would return quite quickly, but of course this did not take place. The early church then helped to reshape the absence of Jesus by declaring it was a merciful delay giving more time for more people to join the faith (delayed parousia). This lent meaning to much of the next 2000 years of European history, in one way or another. Whereas the Jewish belief that the messiah has yet to come gives a sense of meaning to

the centuries of waiting. Much of (particularly European) history, according to some religious groups, has therefore been, in a sense, the time needed to get one's house in order before the apocalypse. However, this sense of meaning collapsed dramatically with World War I, and this collapse contributes to the rise to modernism. History can no longer be seen as a meaningful progress towards some kind of redemption.

Middle-earth represents Tolkien's response to the meaninglessness of modernity and the World Wars, particularly those of World War I, with its senseless slaughter. Tolkien doubtless witnessed courageous soldiers as well as scrubs get mowed down in trench warfare. For many soldiers of this time, their sacrifices had no meaning, and their comrades were left wondering what they died for. In the midst of suffering, we all want our lives, our suffering, and our sacrifices to have meaning or purpose.

The second connection between Middle-earth and modernism comes from what might be called world-building. In a 21st century context, world-building has become the preserve of fantasy, science fiction, and gaming fields, yet developing an encompassing world, an internally cohesive world, is a characteristic of modernist art. Where would *Ulysses* or *Finnegan's Wake* be without their own imaginary version of Dublin? The characters from the one book would recognize it in another, but it is not the real Dublin, which Joyce had left and never returned to. The entirely fictional Yoknapatawpha County in William Faulkner's *Absolom, Absolom*! or *As I lay Dying* is a thoroughly imagined alternate reality of the American South.[175] Modernist novels often take place in their own little world, such as Proust's *À la Recherche du temps perdu* in his reimagined French countryside*,* or the Vienna of *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften,* which, like the Dublin of Joyce, though based on the real world, is not quite real, not quite factual. Tolkien, of

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[175] Present day examples of this could include Stephen King's version of Derry, Maine, or the entire alternate reality world-timeline of the Marvel Cinematic Universe.

course, breaks the link and eschews any notion of basing his world on the real one (which could lead to allegory, after all), and instead tries to create a world upon which the *real one could be based*. It is not that Middle-earth is not linked to the real world, for it certainly is, but rather that it is linked in a new way. The real world is not lost in the past as it is with some other modernist writers. Tolkien is far more radical. Our world is, for Middle-earth, the nearly as yet un-glimpsed future. This is a radical anticipation of our present-day culture's appetite for fantasy worlds, especially in the literary and entertainment industry.

This break with the referential relationship between the created world and the real world is modernist in itself.[176] James Joyce's *Ulysses* is full of things that have meaning – but not the same meaning as in the real world. It is the same with Faulkner. Tolkien goes even further and simply invents new names and new words – that is, his own lexicon – and the relationship between those words – which is to say, syntax. He starts with syntax and creates lexicon. This, as we shall see, has some bearing on the relationship of Tolkien's work to the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. This is, of course, another reason that his work is so fundamentally not allegorical – allegory is itself a form of reference, referring or connecting to things in the real world – and Tolkien is trying to do just the opposite. Tolkien, through his invented languages, is breaking down references or links to our world, and making Middle-earth a different one. Though, as we have seen, at the same time he is careful to link it in places to craft it into a pre-history for our world.

These intentional links are notable in that besides the geographic ones already mentioned, many of these are links are linguistic in nature, language being the most foundational part of his work, as we shall see in the next section. Examples of this are myriad. One instance would be Goldberry telling the hobbits to "make haste while the sun shines," with the idea that over the

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[176] The referential relationship being the relationship between a word and the object it represents, in this case, the relationship between our world and Middle-earth.

supposed centuries between then and now, the phrase has evolved into: "make hay while the sun shines" (Rings 133). Another such example would be Frodo's song at the inn at Bree (discussed earlier) in which the "cow jumped over the Moon" (Rings, 156). The lyrics have several phrases in common with our own nursery rhyme, but is otherwise quite different. Again, the conceit is that the song is meant to be the origin of our familiar rhyme. Further instances would include the naming of the Shire months and other similar etymological notes pertaining most especially to the Shire.

Tolkien's third modernist tendency is his heartfelt rejection of so many aspects of the modern world. His spirit seems to rebel against so much that he found in the world, from factories to warfare to the affrontery of having a woman clerk witnessing marriages at the county registry office.[177] The world is inhospitable to serious artists and the values art espouses and defends. This led modernist artists and authors make an alternative world – as does Tolkien.

Although not an avowed modernist, Tolkien nevertheless exhibits these modernist traits. He partakes of these three aspects of modernist writing: he is writing in response to his historically dislocated times, the First World War in particular; he creates a complete and internally cohesive world; and he rejects or pushes back against much of the fragmentary modern condition. By trying to capture the complexities of a world in a single work – a totality – he creates a microcosm of the macrocosm. This is if not an explicit goal of every modernist writer, then at least a consequence of their modernism, and, is, in its own way, a *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Modernists often want their art to imitate not a mere fragment of our world, but rather to reflect a whole world entire.

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[177] This is recounted in a rather unfortunately famous misogynistic letter, see *Letters* pg. 62: "The State's witness (a registrar, and in this case – adding in my view to the impropriety – a woman)."

Language as the Foundation of Middle-earth

J. R. R. Tolkien's Middle-earth texts, meant to be a fictional pre-history of Europe, blend myth-like styles, fairy tale elements, classical tragedy, obscure geo-spatial references, and modernist world creation tendencies to accomplish this form of pseudo history, and to fill it with his own ideals of poetic beauty, imaginary historical significance, and verisimilitude. The single most integral and essential element of this massively ambitious project, and the true heart of his work, is language. Or rather languages, most especially his two separate invented Elvish languages; the seeds of Middle-earth as we know it was first born in the 1910s in his hobby of inventing a language that sounded and looked in a way that he felt was most beautiful. Tolkien writes in the introduction to the second edition of *Lord of the Rings:*

> I wished first [before writing a sequel to *The Hobbit*] to complete and set in order the
> mythology and legends of the Elder Days, which had then been taking shape for some
> years. I desired to do this for my own satisfaction, and I had little hope that other people
> would be interested in this work, especially since it was *primarily linguistic in inspiration*
> *and was begun in order to provide the necessary background of 'history' for Elvish*
> *tongues* (*Rings* xv, emphasis added).

Tolkien's interest in language was clearly life-long. He played with invented languages as a child, and studied a variety of languages as he grew, an interest he attributes largely to his mother, as he recalls in a letter to Charlotte and Dennis Plimmer, who had recently interviewed him for the *Daily Telegraph Magazine*, which was later published in March of 1968:

> My interest in languages was derived solely from my mother, a Suffield (a family coming
> from Evesham in Worcestershire). She knew German, and gave me my first lessons in it.

She was also interested in etymology, and aroused my interest in this; and also in

alphabets and handwriting. (*Letters*, 377)

In time, of course, the hobby turned into a career, with Tolkien becoming a philologist and

serving as a professor of Anglo-Saxon at Oxford for much of his life, although he did later

switch to English literature.

We have already seen that much of what interested Tolkien about epics (such as the

Nibelungenlied), story, and history, as well as language, is the way that it changes with time. His

creative impulse to make an imaginary pre-history for Europe, shows his concern with history

and historical re-telling, and how one word or place-name passes into another over time. He is

clearly interested in how knowledge and particularly language pass from generation to

generation. Language is the key to all this, and is the point from which, for Tolkien, all else in

his work flows. The Middle-earth texts, and especially *The Lord of the Rings*, are premised on

the continuity of history and a sense of being tied to the past, and feature detailed sound and

linguistic links between the ancient past of Middle-earth and its present.

In inventing his languages, Tolkien began with the phonemes, selecting sound

combinations either from real languages (he particularly like Welsh and Finnish) or from his own

sense of what sounded well together, and putting them together to make new words. He gave his

two elvish languages their own alphabet (shared between them) and writing system, their own

separate grammar structures, and multiple vowel systems. The earliest language, Quenyan, was

meant to serve as a sort of proto-language, not in relation to English, with which it has no

detectable relationship whatsoever, but to the second, supposedly younger, language, Sindarin.

Quenyan would be to Sindarin what Latin is to modern Spanish. He then left traces of Quenyan

in Sindarin, so that the two would be connected, but ultimately separate, languages. Of the two,

Sindarin is the more complete, with distinct tenses. It is complete enough to be easily used in real life situations, and indeed it has been used for everything from the weddings of superfans to extensive dialog in Peter Jackon's *Lord of the Rings* film trilogy (2001-2003).

In piquing Tolkien's interest in the historical development of languages, the work of Jakob Grimm on the Germanic sound shift doubtless played a significant role. Grimm's law finds the sound shifts responsible for the transition of Proto-Indo-European languages to Proto-Germanic languages. Grimm determined that the sound shifts in ancient languages were systematic, and that a particular set of sound shifts distinguished the Germanic descendants of Greek and Latin from the Romance languages. Not unlike Wagner, Grimm hoped that the establishing the sound shift he would thereby elevate the German identity, and that it would prove unifying to the various German princedoms, with the fact of a common German language conferring a sense of shared identity on the separate German-speaking citizenry. Tolkien's shift from Quenyan to Sindarin (which happened presumably sometime between the First and Second Age of Middle-earth) was by no means a direct recreation of this, for the two languages are related more through shared words and sounds than through a systemic sound shift, but Tolkien was certainly aware of etymological development in our world. Moreover, Tolkien was at all times interested in the process by which languages turn into other languages.

This specific interest helps in large part to clarify the link between the *Nibelungenlied* and J. R. R. Tolkien. He was clearly interested in Norse myth in general, and specifically mentions being inspired by the *Poetic Edda*, and the *Kalevala* of Finland (*Letters*, 31, 214). Indeed, the earliest written portion of his Middle-earth texts, according to his own memory, was "The Fall of Gondolin" sequence from the *Silmarillion*, which, together with "Túrin Turambar," most nearly resembles the specific tales in the *Nibelungenlied*, and particularly Wagner's version

of the story of the unknowing incest between Siegmund and Sieglinde (*Letters*, 214-25).

Certainly Tolkien knew of Wagner, and rejected him, both for his anti-Semitism and probably more so for his associations with Hitler during the 1930s. He famously, vehemently, denied any connection between his works and Wagner's: "Both rings were round, and there the resemblance ceases,"[178] he wrote. He was also careful, when referring to the *Nibelungenlied,* to specify that the only connection with his work was with the "Norse Nibelung" story rather than anything more clearly German.[179] And even in these few instances, he clarifies that the only real inspiration he took from the Nibelung story were name forms (*Letters*, 306-7). Carpenter also recalls Tolkien's further distaste for Wagner in particular: "[Tolkien] delighted his friends with recitations […] and recounted horrific episodes from the Norse *Völsungasaga*, with a passing jibe at Wagner whose interpretation of the myths he held in contempt" (Carpenter, 46).

Of course, this distaste can be seen as a product of his time and circumstances. His deep reverence for history and a sense of being tied to the past through history and legend, was, for many people, destroyed by the World Wars of the 20th century. Mussolini, Hitler, and other fascists made crude attempts to link their regimes to the past, but often without much education, accuracy, or truth, and Wagner was a clear tool to this end. But however much Tolkien might protest against Wagner, against Wagner's interpretation of the Nibelung legend, or even against the *Nibelunglied* itself, if only by omission, the fact remains that Germanic and Norse myths are closely related, and feature many of the same characters and plots. And Tolkien loved these myths and legends. Moreover, as he was playing with ideas of proto-history, clearly Britain,

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[178] *Letters,* 306. This is the quote from the original letter. Although the letter refers only to "Nibelungenlied" and not Wagner, we can be confident it was a reference to the *Ring Cycle* based on Carpenter's explanation in the biography, when he cites the same letter: "The comparison of his Ring with the Nibelungenlied and Wagner always annoyed Tolkien: he once said: 'Both rings were round, and there the resemblance ceased'" (Carpenter, 202).
[179] *Letters,* 319. See also pages 312-4 and 305-7.

Scandinavia and Germany have similar and sometimes overlapping or intertwining histories from an historical-linguistic perspective, not to mention much common context. Tolkien himself notes frequently that he tried to give his stories a general "northern atmosphere," which could mean British, Scandinavian, Norse, or Germanic, according to one's own interpretation (here in reference to *The Hobbit*):

> The magic and mythology and assumed 'history' and most of the names (e.g. the epic of the Fall of Gondolin) are, alas!, drawn from unpublished inventions, known only to my family, Miss Griffiths, and Mr Lewis. I believe they give the narrative an air of 'reality' and have a northern atmosphere. (*Letters*, 21)

Tolkien's scholarly interest in pre-Norman Conquest English meant that he valued the Germanic heritage of English. Beowulf's Anglo-Saxon language he finds much more compelling than Chaucer's French-influenced Middle English, for example. His perspective does not put a great deal of distance between English and German, nor between England and Germany – historically speaking. From his historical-linguistic perspective, they have a common context. While the various non-human characters in his fantasy world serve to distance his tales from the modern political conflicts of his day, his fascination for the common linguistic antecedents of English and German, as well as his devotion to mythic foundations of historical continuity, brings his work into proximity with Wagner and Lang.

This imaginary-historical-linguistic perspective is underlined by his anachronistic prose style of writing. For example, he has characters say things like "the white page may be overwritten" or "which you have deemed the matter of legend" rather than something more colloquial. He also famously insisted with his publishers on changing the then-standard plural spellings "dwarfs" and "elfs, elfin" to "dwarves" and "elves, elven," which he found important

for historical-linguistic reasons, and which have now, thanks to him, become the standard English spellings.

By paying attention to and even insisting on these minute linguistic details, Tolkien is further illuminating his perspective of our relationship to the past, especially as we are connected to it by language. In Middle-earth, those who know the past (and can speak in the old elvish tongues) prosper, such as Elrond, Aragorn, even Sauron for a time. Those who forget or distort the past (Boromir, Saruman, eventually Sauron) fall. Interestingly, the Shire has little to no recorded history – it possesses a perfect organic connection to the past – the past and the present are one and the same, time has stopped there.

This is not entirely true, for Tolkien did include various tidbits of Shire history in the Appendices to *The Lord of the Rings*, but much of it is of a personal, small-scale, or familial nature. One has but to think of mathoms (heavily circulated hobbit gifts), of hobbit obsession with genealogies and familial histories, of famous event of the white wolves crossing the Brandywine river to see that the chief connections between the hobbits and their own history have little effect on their present. They carry on in the Shire now as they have always done. When Gandalf discovers a link between Gollum and the early hobbit folk, he relates the history of hobbits to Frodo (a hobbit himself), who did not know it. Tolkien knows that this timeless Shire existence cannot be sustained, no matter how much its inhabitants (or he) wish that it could. Hobbits, Tolkien, and we ourselves, must face and deal with historical transformation. The various peoples of Middle-earth have to deal with changing times, moving history in their own way. The Elves record, observe, withdraw, remember, and grieve. The humans are divided; those who remember try to live up to their history and are noble, those who forget, or distort history (such as Denethor), or have less history (the Rohirrim) are lesser beings. The Dwarves

entrench, become hostile to outsiders. The Ents are caught on the wrong foot by changing times,

almost to the point of extinction. Saruman is an interesting character in this regard, standing at

the crossroads or center of the changing times and the tension created by an awareness of the

disparity between the present and the past. He senses the probability of historical change (as

early as *The Hobbit*), senses that all cannot go on as it has done for centuries, that a crisis is

imminent. He knows that everyone must reconsider their own relationship to the historical past

(to Sauron, to the kingship of the Númenoreans, etc). He fails the test, however, distorting (as

Hitler and Mussolini distort) the past, and becomes evil and stands ultimately in the text as a

representation of the evils of modernity and industrialization. He claims to be both maintaining

and overthrowing the past.

This emphasis on one's relationship with history is experienced by his characters through

their connection to language, and particularly the elvish languages. As we have already shown,

Tolkien puts language at the very heart of Middle-earth. For Tolkien, language, history and myth

are inseparable from one another. If he had written the story, and then "built" a language to suit

the story, it would have been a very different project, with a different result. Tolkien started with

language, creating his two elven languages and basing the story thereupon. His tale is really the

setting for a linguistic idea rather than a narrative idea. In his own words, he describes it thusly in

third person (correcting a passage in an article about himself): "'The imaginary histories grew

out of Tolkien's predilection for inventing languages. He discovered, as others have who carry

out such inventions to any degree of completion, that *a language requires a suitable habitation,

and a history in which it can develop*'" (*Letters*, 375, emphasis added).

Indeed, the centrality of his language creation to the Middle-earth texts can hardly be

overstated. They, or at least the first elements of Quenyan, preceded nearly all his prose work,

with the possible exception of "The Fall of Gondolin" piece of the *Silmarillion,* which may date from around 1913. He had been working on both early pieces of the *Silmarillion* and on Quenyan since around that same time, certainly by 1914 (*Letters*, 130). By 1916 he clearly had a substantial amount of (most probably) Quenyan already laid down, and wrote to his then-future wife Edith Bratt in March of that year: "I have done some touches to my nonsense fairy language – to its improvement. I often long to work at it and don't let myself 'cause though I love it so it does seem such a mad hobby!" (*Letters*, 8)

Having created at least one of the elven languages, Tolkien went on to write what became the *Silmarillion* to house his invented languages, a project that seems to have been more or less complete by the end of the 1920s. After the publication of *The Hobbit* in 1937, when Allen and Unwin were inquiring about a sequel, he offered up the *Silmarillion.* Their rejection of it seems to have weighed on him heavily. He mentions it frequently in his published letters, often in response to fans who had written hoping for more information on Middle-earth histories. It must have been particularly gratifying to receive these kinds of letters, particularly those asking for linguistic clarifications, which he often provided. There are examples dating to as early as December of 1937 asking for information on his dwarven runes in *The Hobbit,* and he suggested to Unwin that the publishers include a key to reading the runes in the next edition (*Letters*, 26).

Although he did invent runes and languages for the other peoples of Middle-earth, much of that seems to have been done later. Some, like the language of the Rohirrim, is not much of a language at all, but just a few made up words mixed in here and there with a bit of Old Norse. It is the elven languages that preceded the *Rings* texts which are nearly fully fleshed out, and which were intertwined with the *Silmarillion.* As we saw earlier, his desire to get the *Silmarillion* published nearly led to him to a break with Allen and Unwin around 1950. But, however, it all

came to nothing, and to his lasting sorrow, *The Silmarillion*, the core containing the heart of his work, was not published during his lifetime. Despite this, much of what he loved about the *Silmarillion*, and especially the language and accompanying lore elements, he was able to pour into the famous trilogy.

Much of this language-lore is in the form of poetry and song, which he frequently has his characters sing. Music is often portrayed as a creative impulse in Middle-earth, from Bilbo's penchant for making up songs and rhymes to the angelic powers shaping the world through song (not unlike Narnia, which was also created through Aslan's song). For Tolkien, music and song and language are interlinked; and are carriers both of emotion, and history. In this way, language almost functions as a kind of currency, a medium of exchange. It is quite literally a store of value, like money. Language stores value, and is an archive of experience, reflecting changing cultural and social experiences for the characters (and for us). In consequence of this, Middle-earth has a much bigger backstory than almost any other work of fantasy even today, and certainly in the mid-1950s. As the popularity of series like *Harry Potter*, *Narnia*, *Doctor Who, Star Wars*, *Star Trek*, *Game of Thrones,* and *The Hunger Games,* among many others, will attest, fans of fantasy and science fiction do seek out immersive worlds and world-building in which language creation and fictional-historical backstory play a major part. And although other thoroughly constructed languages do exist, such as Esperanto, Klingon (from *Star Trek*) or Dorthraki (from *Game of Thrones*), no other fantasy language has provided the inspiration for multiple volumes, *and* preceded its chief text by nearly four decades.

The relationship between history and language, is, in Tolkien's mind, so utterly inseparable, that it would be useless to try. The elven languages give a totality to the Middle-earth world that successfully links the disparate *Silmarillion* and *Hobbit* texts with *Rings*, and

represent an absolutely unparalleled amount of work, thought and care. With this in mind, the Middle-earth texts truly belong in the company of such *Gesamtkunstwerke* as Wagner's *Ring Cycle,* and Lang's *Nibelungenlied.* And like those artists, Tolkien is writing with is a sense of historical crisis. He uses story, language and fictional archaic history to hold together a society that is disintegrating. We see this attempt in Wagner too, and also in Lang. They all use the Nibelung legend to try to repair their world, whether in public ways (Wagner and Lang) or more privately (Tolkien). The three of them, however, recreate the legend in some way, retelling it, translating it, using it to fit their own situations in time and their own creative visions.[180]

IV. Conclusion: *Gesamtkunstwerk* and Tolkien

The *Nibelungenlied* as the text we know today was likely written down as a complete story around 1200, but the tale itself may actually date back 500 years earlier. We can see here a parallel with the world of Middle-earth in *The Lord of the Rings*, when the events recounted in the *Silmarillion* are ancient history. The *Nibelungenlied* has a Christian backdrop for legitimacy but no actual Christian ethos – which in some ways actually makes it more intriguing for our three artists. Similarly, Wagner was intentionally appealing to the pagan past, Lang had no discernable overt religious intentions whatsoever, and, as we have seen, Tolkien specifically chose to omit any direct reference or connection between his work and his deeply held Catholic faith. This secularization is an aspect of modernization, and in the *Nibelungenlied* itself, Hagen can be seen as a sort of modernizer – he is the only one who understands what is going on – he knows Kriemhild invites the Burgundians only to kill them.

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[180] They *use* the legend itself, which is a distinction from others who would merely invoke the story for their own ends.

Despite this, the three artists whose works we have explored, Lang, Tolkien and Wagner, all create stories that are more morally acceptable to their audiences than the original myths that inspired them (including the *Nibelungenlied*). They all (even Wagner) include a touch more Christian ethos than the original, such as forgiveness and mercy. This presumably makes their work more palatable to their intended audiences. Though it must also be said that they all three, whether intentionally or unconsciously, also include certain measures of racism, anti-Semitism and/or misogyny. However, as we have seen, Tolkien is rather less Christian-esque than the average reader of *The Lord of the Rings* may assume. This is much more evident once one reads the *Silmarillion,* which reads much closer to the *Nibelungenlied*, the *Kalevala*, or even the biblical *Old Testament,* full of war, murder, betrayal, and even incest, with redemptive moments few and far between.

It is also true that the work of these three artists compare very well together. However much Tolkien may have resisted being compared with Wagner, like any good tragi-mythic hero, his fate is, in this respect, inescapable. Wagner's use of the *Nibelungenlied* (and other similar source material from the *Poetic Edda*, *Volsunga* or *Kalevala* – which both Wagner and Tolkien use freely, though Lang does not) influences all iterations that have come after his, whether with his force, presence or powerful aesthetic view. Indeed, even those artists who are decidedly trying to avoid any Wagnerian connection (such as Tolkien) find themselves having to go out of their way to either defend their work from such comparisons, or avoid using source material that they might otherwise wish to use because of its powerful association with Wagner's work. Tolkien does this by emphasizing his connection with the Norse source material rather than the *Nibelungenlied*, which is ironic, since Wagner's version is also heavily influenced by the same

Norse material, and does not at all faithfully follow the *Nibelungenlied* text. It is Lang, of course, who is much more faithful to the original.

As a philologist and historian, Tolkien would have recognized Wagner's numerous distortions of the original source material. Though there are no further recorded mentions of Tolkien's thoughts on that subject, it is not hard to imagine what he thought of them. But clearly Wagner had a specific goal in mind, and philologically accuracy was irrelevant to his vision and his ends. Wagner's use of the *Nibelung* material is quite different from Tolkien's in so many ways, both in his vision and in his execution. It is hardly surprising, then, that Tolkien would vehemently reject it. Wagner was trying to make the medieval epic relevant to his modern Germany – he understood himself, after all, an avant garde artist! Tolkien uses the medieval legends as a protection or refuge from the modern world, an escape from the present, from his world and its contemporary situations and struggles. Tolkien uses the past against the present – to shield himself from a present he dislikes, with no larger reformist campaign in mind, whereas Wagner hopes the past can change the present, and employs its legends to that end. Moreover, Tolkien, witnessing the 1920s and 1930s Germany, the rise of Hitler, and the brutality of both World Wars, is more concerned than we might find necessary today to distance himself clearly from Wagner, given the association of his work with Hitler, and the aims of the Nazi Party. Tolkien rejected anti-Semitism explicitly.[181] Wagner was, for Tolkien, indelibly associated with the evil, which perhaps explains not only why he sought to distance himself, but also the brusque nature of his references. Finally, Wagner is himself a late-romantic revolutionary, whereas Tolkien is a modernist (if perhaps inadvertently), and while those two perspectives are not the same, there are distinct connections between them, whether Tolkien appreciates that or not.

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[181] For an example, see letters no. 29 and 30, *Letters pg.* 37-7.

As a late-romantic, Wagner held a hope of crafting a new myth to re-establish the historical continuity and to respond to the collapse of monarchy and the industrial revolution was very prevalent; moreover, he was not alone in pursuing this. This goal informs Wagner in his creation (or reframing) of a legend of and for the German people. This was considered politically progressive in his own context – he would, for example, perhaps have rather sided with the French revolution rather than the monarchial establishment in seeing the people as the source of power rather than the divine right of kings. He specifically wanted to work from a uniquely German story. He (and others of his day) held up the independent Greek city-states of Ancient Greece (such as Athens or Sparta) as an ideal comparison for the German princedoms (such as Saxony or Bavaria). The Greek city-states were held together by their language and their mythology and this connection is not lost on Wagner nor on Tolkien. The Greek language and mythology with its common pantheon served as the unifying force needed to unite them against outsiders (such as the Persians or the Trojans). Wagner hoped to create something similar for Germans. He knew his new work must be a compelling and even overwhelming sensory experience – and so was born his *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the *Musikdrama*.

Richard Wagner, like C.S. Lewis, wanted his work to effect a clear and specific change in the real world. Lang and Tolkien lean more to the side of reveling in their arts and in their chosen media. Or certainly Tolkien does – he writes for himself and his own pleasure first, and only later does he discover the marketability of his work. Lang clearly revels in his medium, but surely also worked with an eye for exporting film; he was no stranger to the film *industry*. In thinking about the international accessibility of silent film, Lang knew his work would be exhibited internationally, to varied and international audience. Wagner wrote for an audience of Germans, and Tolkien wrote for himself (or at most, his friends and children, initially).

In thinking about the goals of these artists, varied though they are, it is intriguing that they all chose to work with legend or "myth" in the generic sense. Legends certainly provide a picture of who a society is and what cannot therein be changed, which helps explain its popularity in the 19ᵗʰ century German context of disunited city states and princedoms struggling towards unification. Story gives a sense of identity that transcends local citizenship and was meant to unite (in Wagner's case) German-speakers against outsiders.[182] It was a fairly prevalent idea that 19ᵗʰ century modernity could be improved by a common mythological foundation which would capture and uphold societal virtues and give meaning to loss, death, and the finitude of human life. A collective myth, it was thought, would help counteract the uncertainness of the modern, expanded world and the accompanying loss of a clearly shared common religious framework. In reaching for old legends, Wagner's goal is clear and defined: bringing together, uniting. Lang's goal is less clear cut, but it is certain that he was aware he was speaking into his own fractured, post-war society, and offering up a gem for export. Tolkien offers an alternative to a modern fallen or broken world, an alternative where meaning and tradition are still intact.[183] All three men think that story can solve real world problems.

In choosing to use the Nibelung material, Wagner defines, or attempts to define, both a art (opera or *Musikdrama*) and the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Lang practices his own form of *Gesamtkunstwerk* with the immediacy and totality of his own immense experience, thereby creating an immersive experience for his audience. Tolkien practices his form of *Gesamtkunstwerk* in his multi-layered art form. The integrity of the experience of reading is

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[182] This can be seen throughout much of Europe post-Enlightenment and during the Romantic (not German Romanticism) period, and it is likely Tolkien was aware of this in various ways.

[183] C.S. Lewis still thinks the world can be redeemed through allegorical tales – if enough people convert, hence his work in apologetics.

different to that of film, which is turn different to that of opera, but all three show forth the very best of their craft and push their medium to new heights as they work with this myth.

The term *Gesamtkunstwerk*, although indelibly associated with Wagner, did not originate with him.[184] As I have defined and used it in this dissertation, it means a comprehensive or expansive work that pushes a medium to its utmost, while defining a new horizon, standard or genre for itself. For Tolkien, the production of such a piece meant creating a language that became a book, that became multiple books, that bridged the gap between myth and fairy tale, between history and fantasy, between child and adult literature, and ultimately established a new genre: High Fantasy. It is worth noting that Tolkien's work has inspired not only a myriad of high fantasy books, but also three film projects which could arguably be considered as *Gesamtkunstwerke* themselves, on par with what Lang tried to do in his *Die Nibelungen.* The first is Ralph Bakshi's 1978 animated adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings,* which, though flawed and sadly incomplete, pioneered the use of live-action rotoscoping for animated film, an attempt that enriched its medium. The second film project is Peter Jackson's two Middle-earth trilogies, *The Lord of the Rings* (2001-2003)*,* and *The Hobbit* (2012-2014)*. The Lord of the Rings* trilogy in particular was broke new ground in Computer Generated Imagery and motion capture (Lang would have been proud). Moreover, his initial trilogy pioneered the concept of shooting a trilogy all at once, which was a massive gamble on the part of the studio, but which ended happily for all concerned, audiences not the least.

The first two examples are intriguing because of their multimedia aspects. *The Lord of the Rings* had for decades been considered unfilmable (Bakshi's attempt notwithstanding), and only became filmable once Computer Generated Imagery allowed photographic films to be

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[184] See Wagner chapter for details.

supplemented with invented components. The third film project would be Amazon Studio's *The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power* television show. Whether or not this show will live up to the other two projects has yet to be determined (Jackson's *The Hobbit* did not seem to). But it is notable for having the largest show budget of all time. This alone, of course, does not qualify it either as a *Gesamtkunstwerk* or as a good show. Time will tell.

If we can use the term *Gesamtkunstwerk* to mean an innovative, medium-defining work with multiple media elements, we see that Fritz Lang does his innovating with visual technology, Wagner with his reworking of opera and Tolkien with his invented languages. At the same time, each artist has a specific goal in mind: Lang wished to export a fine example of the potentialities of German cinema, and Wagner, to present a mythic (in the sense of unreal, but also in the stylistic sense) vision of the past to help hold his present Germany together. Tolkien is not seeking to hold his country together so much as his own heart and memories, especially a sense of his favorite childhood times (the countryside) and his childhood sense of wonder in both old myths (especially dragon stories, which were a particular favorite) and in languages – while fighting against the meaninglessness of the modern condition.

The true innovation, however, in Tolkien's work is that the bones of Middle-earth are linguistic in nature, rather than narrative, and that is unique. Indeed, it is the opposite of other invented languages, even though many of those claim to follow in his footsteps. They are instead created to fit worlds and cultures that were invented in advance of them, rather than the other way around. Examples of thoroughly constructed languages for fictional or fantasy worlds might include Na'vi (*Avatar*), Klingon and Vulcan (*Star Trek*), Lapine (*Watership Down*), and Dorthraki and High Valyrian (*Game of Thrones*). Aside from its uniqueness, the priority or even primacy of language in the creation of Middle-earth is intimately connected to Tolkien's view of

history and story-telling, which flavors the whole text. For Tolkien, history *is* language. Inside Middle-earth, the Shire, for instance, represents tradition (rather than history, which is connected with the elves). The hobbits leave the Shire and only then meet people with histories or even memories reaching back to beginnings – the inheritors of some kind of historical consciousness. They (those such as Aragorn, Elrond, Gandalf) can recognize landmarks, understand the changes that have happened in the world (including geographical changes, or, in Gandalf's case, the beginnings of the hobbits as a people), and are able to tell the hobbits about Middle-earth histories – which are always connected to language. Examples include: Amon Sul, Minas Ithil/Minas Morgul, the Song of Nimrodel, etc. It would actually be hard to find an example of a historical place or even that did not feature some sort of linguistic creation on Tolkien's part!

Middle-earth presents readers with an encounter with history, just as the hobbits are confronted with history when they leave the Shire. Indeed, it is an interesting side note that the chief celebration of the year for hobbits is their own birthday celebration, rather than a national or seasonal holiday. There is nothing particularly noteworthy or worthwhile to remember about the past, as far as hobbits are concerned, except for the eager keeping of family trees. But those few hobbits, such as Bilbo or Frodo, who study elvish languages discover the wide world, both in their present time and stretching back into the, for them, ancient past. And that ancient past is woven together with the present through song, poetry, story, through language. Language *is* history for Tolkien. So it was that he made Middle-earth as a setting for the elvish languages – which provided Middle-earth a history to go with it. And though his histories and stories do not try to hide from darkness, suffering, the failure of religion or moral integrity, they do protest, vehemently, against meaninglessness, pointless suffering, and lack of significance in a person's life.

One of these places in the story, and one of Tolkien's own favorite passages in *Rings*, occurs when Frodo and Sam are traveling towards Mordor in the company of Gollum, and are reflecting on the adventurous histories of the ancient heroes of Middle-earth:

The brave things in the old tales and songs, Mr. Frodo: adventures, as I used to call them. I used to think that they were things the wonderful folk of the stories went out and looked for, because they wanted them, because they were exciting and life was a bit dull, a kind of a sport, as you might say. But that's not the way of it with the tales that really mattered, or the ones that stay in the mind. Folk seem to have been just landed in them, usually – their paths were laid that way, as you put it. But I expect they had lots of chances, like us, of turning back, only they didn't. And if they had, we shouldn't know, because they'd have been forgotten. We hear about those as just went on – and not all to a good end, mind you; at least not to what folk inside a story and not outside it call a good end. You know, coming home, and finding things all right, though not quite the same – like old Mr. Bilbo. But those aren't always the best tales to hear, though they may be the best tales to get landed in! (Rings, 696)

Tolkien longs for there to be significance and meaning in life, and yet knows from harsh experience that this cannot always be, and sometimes life ends with a dream unfinished, or a book unpublished. But this too, is perhaps a part of what it means to be human. In the *Silmarillion,* the world he created to house his languages, he describes the goddess (*vala)* of sorrow, Nienna, and the sadness that exists in a world where sometimes significance and meaning are lost, and in which death is a part of living:

So great was her sorrow, as the Music unfolded, that her song turned to lamentation long before its end, and the sound of mourning was woven into the themes of the World before

it began. But she does not weep for herself; and those who hearken to her learn pity, and endurance in hope. (Silmarillion 19)

Such is Tolkien's legacy, and his magnum opus that has given hope to so many.

Conclusion: *Gesamtkunstwerk* Beyond Wagner

Theodor Adorno once said of Wagner's *Ring:* "This basic idea is that of totality: the Ring attempts, without much ado, nothing less than the encapsulation of the world process as a whole."[185] For Adorno, this was not a compliment, he was pointing to what he took to be a totalitarian aspect of Wagner's art. And yet, divorced from Wagner and all that he entails, this sounds not unlike Tolkien's project. Tolkien sought to present a whole world, in its entirety, with its own deities, history, customs, languages, and cultures, not to mention creation story, tragic events, and heroic deeds, and most importantly, the ravages of the passage of time. Lang, too, tries to show the rich fabric of the world of Siegfried and Kriemhild, as he imagines it, in such a thorough way that his audience might also be able to experience his vision. It is clear that Adorno meant this remark negatively, to bring awareness and critique to the way in which Wagner imposes his will on his audience (through his artwork), it also says something about the impetus or motivation of making a *Gesamtkunstwerk* in the first place.

This strange impulse, to recreate the world – or better, *a* world – in its own entirety is another piece of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* phenomenon. Lang, for instance, seemed to believe this recreation to be a part of the art of film – to allow spectators to experience a story immersively, viscerally. Though each of these three artworks engages with this immersivity in a different way, Lang commented (as quoted above, but it bears repeating) on the immersive nature of film in 1924:

> Hier liegt für mein Gefühl die ethische Aufgabe des Films und speziell des deutschen
>
> Films…. Wer hat im Chaos unserer Zeit die Muße und die Nervenruhe, das
>
> Nibelungenlied zu lesen?…. Den Drachen, den Siegfried erschlug, den Flammensee, der

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[185] Adorno, Theodor. *In Search of Wagner.* Trans. Rodney Livingstone. NLB, 1981. pg. 101.

die Burg Brunhilds umgab, den Kampf, den Siegfried für Gunther kämpft, den Trug der

Tarnkappe, – selbst der Nibelungen Not in Etzels brennendem Palast, das alles sind

Dinge, die er gleichsam auf Treue und Glauben hinnehmen muß. Aber der Film gibt ihm

das lebendige Bild. Er schaut das Geschehen, er hört nicht nur von ihm. Und vom breiten

Grund des Anfangs baut sich die unerhörte Unerbittlichkeit von der ersten Schuld bis zur

letzten Sühne bildhaft vor ihm auf.[186]

Film creates for the spectator, by its nature, an immersive totality, which, it is to be hoped, does

not intrinsically partake of the totalitarian imposition that Adorno sees in Wagner's work.[187] It

may be that the desire to show – and to make tangible the experiencing – of a whole world, even

another world, is part of the nature of the *Gesamtkunstwerk.* And this is where Tolkien proves to

be a valuable member of the trio of artists examined here. In his attempt (whether successful or

not is beside the point) to create an alternative world for his own enjoyment, there is less

suspicion on his work as being the forceful imposition of his own viewpoint upon his unwitting

viewers. Tolkien helps us retrospectively understand the two German works, and their impact on

society, but also helps us look ahead at the power of story in shaping and crafting future

iterations of or perspectives on what might be called *Gesamtkunstwerke.*

This leaves us with an impression of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* as explored by these three

artists and their work. Each work, Wagner's *Ring,* Lang's *Nibelungen,* and Tolkien's Middle-

earth writings, includes a combination of artforms or media, brought together into a single work

with specific socio-political goals in mind. Each piece strove to create art that was in some way

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[186] Gehler, Fred and Ullrich Kasten. *Fritz Lang: Die Stimme von Metropolis.* Henschel Verlag, 1990. p. 162-163.
[187] Although it is certainly possible to argue that all film must be tarred with the same brush – especially when one considers the propagandistic value of film and its ties to capitalism – but such an inquiry lies outside the scope of this dissertation. Suffice to say that Adorno's objections were focused on Wagner and his ideologies – in this instance, at least.

new – having never been attempted in that way before – that pushes its medium to new limits, ultimately providing a collective experience that allows those who experience it to sense the fullness of a complete world as envisioned by the artist. Finally, each of these artists, and thereby, their works, were strongly affected by troubled times – their art was born out of their dissatisfaction with the world in some way, leading them to try to create another as they wish it could be. Tolkien helps remind us that his creation can be an act of creative, even transformative, hope, rather than (necessarily) an act of totalitarian control and single-minded imposition of will. And while this in and of itself does not clear Wagner (or even Lang) of their various potential associations with totalitarianism, it does argue for a fresh look at what it means to craft a *Gesamtkunstwerk*. For it is truly in the *crafting*, rather than in the finished work, that the value lies – as has been shown for each of these three artists. Celia Applegate, in her forward to *Total Artwork: Foundations, Articulations, Inspirations* hints at his as well when she says there is "no definite achievement of a total work of art, just the far more interesting process of trying to arrive." And it is with the same hope as Applegate and her colleagues that this dissertation closes, having sought to help us "think about more than Wagner when we think about the *Gesamtkunstwerk.*"[188]

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[188] Imhoof, David, Margaret Eleanor Menninger, and Anthony J. Steinhoff, eds. *The Total Work of Art: Foundations, Articulations, Inspirations.* Berghahn, 2016. pg. x-xiii.

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