RACE AND RELIGION IN NIBELUNGEN FILMS: FRITZ LANG, HARALD REINL, AND QUENTIN TARANTINO

by

TARA PENTON

(Under the Direction of Alexander Sager)

ABSTRACT

While the themes of race and religion play a role in the *Nibelungenlied*, they do not drive the plot of the narrative in any significant way – a surprising fact when one considers the modern adaptations of the Siegfried myth, which appear to be largely centered around racial and religious differences. This thesis will analyze Fritz Lang's *Die Nibelungen*, Harald Reinl's *Die Nibelungen*, and Quentin Tarantino's *Django Unchained*, all of which highlight significant shifts in the reception of Nibelungen films.

# RACE AND RELIGION IN NIBELUNGEN FILMS: FRITZ LANG, HARALD REINL, QUENTIN TARANTINO

by

TARA PENTON

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF ARTS

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2018

# RACE AND RELIGION IN NIBELUNGEN FILMS: FRITZ LANG, HARALD REINL, AND QUENTIN TARANTINO

by

TARA PENTON

| | |
|---|---|
| Major Professor: | Alexander Sager |
| Committee: | Heide Crawford |
| | Berna Gueneli |

Electronic Version Approved:

Suzanne Barbour
Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
May 2018

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my committee members, Dr. Alexander Sager, Dr. Heide Crawford, and Dr. Berna Gueneli for their guidance, patience, and encouragement, without which this thesis would not have been completed. I would also like to thank Dr. Joshua Bousquette for standing in as a proxy for Dr. Gueneli.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

LIST OF IMAGES

Page

# INTRODUCTION

From its multitude of medieval influences and sources, to its disappearance and subsequent rediscovery, to its reception in the age of Nationalism[1], to its appropriation by the Nazis and its modern popularity in film, the history of the Siegfried myth is as convoluted as it is complex. Since the 18th century rediscovery of the 13th century *Nibelungenlied*, after a period of roughly two centuries during which it was all but forgotten, the legend of Siegfried has been retold in various media by many authors and directors, all of whom use the legend of the Germanic hero for their own, unique purposes. Furthermore, each modern retelling of the Siegfried myth appears to center itself, in some form or fashion, around two main themes: race and religion.

Curiously, these two themes play a relatively minor role in the medieval story and do not influence the outcome of the events detailed in the text in any significant way. Despite the religious and ethnic differences to be found between the Burgundians and the Huns, these two groups are described as interacting with one another peacefully. For example, although the Hunnish king Etzel is referred to as a heathen, this does not affect the way he is viewed by others. On the contrary, he is continuously referred to as a "mächtige" and "edle König," despite the religious and cultural differences that separate him from the Germanic Burgundians (*Das Nibelungenlied*, st. 1145, 1147). Kriemhild, on the other hand, is referred to as a Christian – yet her supposed Christian values and religious leanings are not reflected in her character either. In fact, it is only after the murder of Siegfried that Kriemhild's religious inclinations are even

[1] For more on the reception of the *Nibelungenlied* in the age of Nationalism, see Klaus von See's *Die Nibelungen: Sage – Epos – Mythos*.

mentioned and serve only as a superficial reason as to why she should not marry Etzel, who belongs to a different faith. To be sure, Kriemhild is initially repulsed by the thought of remarrying after her husband's murder. She asks, "Wie könnte mich jemals danach verlangen, die Frau eines Helden zu werden?" (*Das Nibelungenlied,* 1238). Yet after it is made clear that she could profit from a marriage with Etzel, her religious reservations disappear. With the knowledge that she will have an army of men sworn to serve and protect her – an army with whom she can take revenge on her brothers and Hagen for the murder of Siegfried – Kriemhild's excuse for not marrying Etzel vanishes and is thus revealed as a pretext.

Another example of religious and cultural co-existence is seen once the Burgundians have travelled to Hunnenland at the treacherous request of Kriemhild. There is a scene in which the narrator describes soldiers belonging to the Burgundians along with warriors belonging to the Huns worshipping together in the same space: "Sie sangen die Messe auf unterschiedliche Weise: Das wurde da offenbar" (st. 1851). Although they belong to different faiths and cultures, and worship in different manners, the Christians and the Heathens nonetheless worship in the same space, side by side. Thus religious differences do not, in the end, keep these groups from interacting and coexisting.

While the themes of race and religion are certainly present in the *Nibelungenlied,* they do not seem to drive the plot of the myth in any significant direction – a surprising fact when one considers the modern adaptations of the Siegfried myth, which appear to be largely centered around racial and religious differences. In the following chapters, I will address the extent to which these themes are utilized in the following films: Fritz Lang's 1924 *Die Nibelungen,* Harald Reinl's 1966/1967 *Die Nibelungen,* and Quentin Tarantino's 2012 *Django Unchained,* each of which highlights a significant shift in the history of *Nibelungenlied* reception. While Lang's film

portrays the medieval text as a nationalist epic, Reinl's film has traditionally been seen as a deliberate effort to distance the text from its connections to German Nationalism. Tarantino's film, a reimagination of the Siegfried myth set in the context of the American Pre-Civil War South, marks the beginning of a new era of *Nibelungenlied* reception, in which the original narrative may now be altered. Furthermore, each film acts as a social commentary on the time period in which they were filmed (or set); Lang's film responds to the rise of Nationalism in 1920s Germany, Reinl's film, to the emergence of the "68er" generation and the emergence of the concept of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, and Tarantino's film, set shortly before the Civil War, to the upheaval of the American system of slavery.

In the chapters to come, I will begin by detailing the presence of race and religion in Lang's and Reinl's films, and then analyze the social contexts in which each film was produced, as well as the directors' intentions. I will then move on to an analysis of Tarantino's *Django Unchained*, beginning with the film's sources and why it should be regarded as a modern reimagination of the Siegfried myth, after which I will examine the presence and reversal of racial tropes within the film.

# CHAPTER 1

# FRITZ LANG'S *DIE NIBELUNGEN*

## Introduction

In 1924, fifty years after Richard Wagner finished writing *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, Fritz Lang directed a two-part film based on the *Nibelungenlied*, titled *Siegfried* and *Kriemhilds Rache*. The film was an almost instant hit after its premiere, and garnered acclaim for Lang on an international level. The director, who has been called "eclectic in (his) use of literary, mythological, philosophical, and contemporary references," received high praise for the film series and its impressive set design – a project which took him eighteen months and eight million Reichsmark to complete (Hake, 34; Kiening, 190).

The film's 1924 premiere marked roughly six years since Germany's defeat in the first World War – a defeat that brought with it disorder, poverty, and humiliation to the German people. It has been argued that *Die Nibelungen*, which bears in its opening credits a dedication to the German people – "Dem deutschen Volke zu eigen" – was meant to return a sense of pride to the German public through the glorification of the national, German epic (00:01:25-00:01:31). In *Mittelalter im Film*, Christian Kiening describes the intention behind Lang's film series: "Es ging um ein Stück deutscher Identität. Es ging um nationale Selbstvergewisserung ... Das noch junge Medium soll helfen, die Traumata der jüngsten Vergangenheit zu überwinden und ein neues Selbstwertgefühl zu befördern" (192). The presence of nationalistic themes in *Die Nibelungen* will be returned to in the coming pages.

The significance of Lang's film in relation to the history of the *Nibelungenlied* and its reception cannot be understated. As the first film version of the *Nibelungenlied* to achieve international success, *Die Nibelungen* has unavoidably influenced the numerous subsequent film adaptations of the German epic. There are, for example, numerous artistic choices to be found in Lang's film that are not found in either the *Nibelungenlied* or in Wagner's *Ring* cycle – techniques that can be found in later Nibelungen films as well. Among these is the decision to have the confrontation between Brunhild and Kriemhild take place on the steps of the church as Kriemhild enters Mass. Harald Reinl would adopt this motif in his 1967 *Die Nibelungen*. Lang's representation of the Germanic myth is also unique in its depiction of the Huns. In the *Nibelungenlied*, though the Huns are represented as culturally different, they are largely respected by the Burgundians and seen as equal to the latter. In Lang's film, in contrast, the Huns are depicted as barbarous, savage foreigners. Like Wagner's *Ring* cycle, the influence of which casts a shadow over the future reception of the *Nibelungenlied*, Lang's film has in turn influenced subsequent representations of the *Nibelungenlied*.

**Race in Lang's *Die Nibelungen***

In his book *Toward the Final Solution: A History of European Racism*, George Mosse describes the shift in the perception of race from the Middle Ages, when the notion of race was virtually nonexistent, to the Holocaust and modern-day Europe. Mosse begins by describing 18th century Europe as "the cradle of modern racism," citing the conflicting influences of the Enlightenment and Christianity, both of which "would impress their stamp equally on racist thought" (1, 2). He then moves on to address the now-abandoned idea of the "noble savage," a notion which peaked

in the 17th century with the popular publications of Hakluyt, Purchas, Hulsius, and de Bry (8, 9). Mosse argues:

> Most information about primitive peoples derived from travel literature and from the numerous voyages into strange lands ... The natives were living symbols of the account of creation in Genesis or identified with the famous lost tribes of Israel. However, as this literature continued into the eighteenth century, the sacred analogies played less of a role, and the encounter with pagans became more immediate and shocking ... Soon the notion of European superiority and intellectual dominance asserted itself and charming naïveté was regarded as atavism, a reversion from modern to uncivilized man (9)

The 18th century shift in the way "savages" were perceived can be observed most clearly in the changing character of Etzel. If the Etzel of the *Nibelungenlied* and the Etzel of Lang's 1924 film were to meet, they would surely not recognize one another. Whereas Etzel is frequently referred to in the *Nibelungenlied* as a "mächtige" and "edle König," whose kingdom and people, although foreign, are regarded highly (st. 1154, 1194), Lang's Etzel is depicted in a manner which many have called barbaric – and few, even effeminate. According to Kiening, "das Auftreten eines effeminierten Hunnen lässt die heroischen Normen erkennen," here referring to the heroic norms of the Burgundians (Kiening, 204). With his headdress and attire that reveal both Oriental and Native American influences, Lang's Etzel is meant to be regarded as the opposite of his strong, masculine, Germanic counterparts. Elke Brüggen and Franz-Josef Holznagel argue that in the *Nibelungenlied*, "(the Huns) have the same values, norms, and forms

of self-presentation and interaction as courtly culture," whereas Lang's Huns are "marked by signs of disorder, squalor, and shortcomings" (224). Brüggen and Holznagel attribute this radically changed view of the Huns to the 19th century shift in the idea of who a "Hun" was considered to represent:

> from the nineteenth century at the latest, the term was associated with a particular concept. It combined geographical origins in the East, a foreign, Asian/Mongolian appearance (in some instances considered repulsive), an incomprehensible language, a style of combat that was associated with ruthlessness, brutality, and deception, then a greed for booty and a desire to destroy. (222)

Whereas the Huns are described in the *Nibelungenlied* as foreign, yet courtly, the Huns in Lang's film are portrayed as foreign, uncivilized, and uncultured. As Mosse would argue, this can be attributed to the 18th century development of the notion of European racial superiority, a development which the Etzel of the *Nibelungenlied* predates, and therefore escapes. Lang's Etzel, however, displays the altered perception of "primitive natives," who were now regarded "not so much as noble savages but as children who had to be educated and ruled" (10).

In her screenplay to the film, Thea von Harbou (Lang's wife at the time) included the following description of the Huns and their living quarters:

> Die Kinder sind fast nackt, die Erwachsenen in Fetzen und Leder gekleidet ... Schweine, mager und schmutzig, struppige Ziegen, alles wirr durcheinander ... Hunnenweiber mit ihren verlausten, brüllenden Kindern auf dem Rücken und den

> Hüften, mit offenen Mäulern zu Kriemhilds Antlitz aufglotzend. (quoted from Kiening, 214)

This description, which sets the scene of the first encounter between Kriemhild and Etzel upon her arrival in Hunnenland, delivers a clear message: not only can the Huns and the Burgundians not be viewed as cultural equals, but the Germanic Burgundians are, in comparison to the savage, animalistic Huns, meant to be viewed as an ideal – noble, courtly, and civilized.

In the *Nibelungenlied*, Etzel is regarded as a worthy match for Kriemhild – a union which is encouraged by her brothers. When Rüdiger, on behalf of Etzel, travels to Hunnenland to ask for Kriemhild's hand in marriage, the Burgundians are virtually unanimous in their approval (st. 1203-1204). In Lang's film, the Burgundians do not take a specific stance for or against the marriage proposal. When Rüdiger informs Gunther of Etzel's intentions, Gunther's only reply is "Ich fürchte, König Etzel weiß nicht, um wen er wirbt" (00:02:39-00:04:21). Unlike the *Nibelungenlied*, no mention is made of Etzel's virtuous character, yet the dramatic shift in music – perhaps the musical equivalent of foreshadowing – following Rüdiger's announcement does not give one the sense that this is a union to be celebrated.

The Etzel of Lang's film is marked by his dress, manner, body language, and environment as someone who could not possibly be a suitable match for the beautiful – one is tempted to say "Aryan" – Kriemhild. The Burgundians are shown riding gallantly into the barbarous Hunnenland wearing shining, knightly armor, and upon arrival they appear to be both surprised and unsettled by the Huns' way of life. Hunnenland is marked by dark shadows, strange, unnatural looking flora (Figure 1), and inhabitants who live in tents and filthy caves (00:28:40-00:38:33). As Kiening argues, "Der Film konstruiert Antagonismen in Form von Oppositionen zwischen hell und dunkel, hoch und niedrig, gerade und krumm... hier der

*Image 1: The unnatural, primitive flora of Hunnenland.*

*Image 2: Kriemhild's arrival in Hunnenland.*

lichtvolle, saubere, germanische Siegfried, dort der düstere, unheimliche mongolische Etzel" (Kiening, 208, 215). When placed in contrast to the Burgundian protagonists, the Huns are not simply meant to represent the foreign, uncivilized other, but to be seen as an example of a way of life that is unimaginably and disturbingly barbaric.

The contrast between the Burgundians and the Huns can be seen most clearly in the aforementioned first meeting between Etzel and Kriemhild. Kriemhild, in her royal attire, stands rigid and statuesque among the chaotic, uncivilized Huns, who run around her like wild animals fighting with one another (Figure 2) (00:33:00-00:34:20). Kriemhild is also depicted as standing at the top of a staircase leading to the dark den of Etzel's court, a position which places her both physically and metaphorically above Etzel and his people, who gaze up at Kriemhild in a manner that conveys awe as well as their own inferiority (00:33:00-00:38:30). Through the use of racist and xenophobic stereotypes, the Huns are effectively established as a group of people who are beneath their Germanic counterparts. Moreover, the Burgundians are elevated not only by means of contrast to the barbarous Huns; in several scenes their German/Germanic identity is valorized, for example, when Rüdiger and Etzel, towards the end of the battle in Hunnenland, meet to negotiate a possible surrender of the Burgundians. In a blind fury, Etzel grabs Rüdiger and screams, "Sie sollen mir den Mörder meines Kindes ausliefern – und sie sind frei!" Rüdiger, accompanied by a dramatic and spirited shift in music, condescendingly shakes his head at Etzel and replies, "Ihr kennt die deutsche Seele nicht, Herr Etzel," using language of ethnic or national identity which one does not find in the *Nibelungenlied* (01:43:58-01:44:18). It is implied here that loyalty and brotherhood are German values that Etzel, as a Hun, is incapable of comprehending, and moreover, that these values can only truly be understood if one possesses a "deutsche Seele" (01:44:18).

A similar moment can be witnessed when Volker, upon the Burgundians' realization that they will lose the battle, picks up his violin and begins to play one final song for his dying comrades. Volker's song moves not only the Burgundians, but the Huns as well; even Etzel can be seen gazing sympathetically towards the burning hall, in which his Germanic enemies are trapped (01:57:13-01:57:50). As Volker plays, the others join together in brotherly unity to lament their misfortune: "Ach, wären wir am kühlen, grünen Rhein!" (01:58:55-01:58:28). This dying wish is meant to evoke sympathy from the audience for the hopeless Burgundians, and simultaneously reinforces the idea of Germanic superiority; the Burgundians' cry for the paradisiacal, cool, green Rhine paints the Germanic homeland as an almost Garden-of-Eden-like setting that the Burgundians praise with their dying words and is meant to instill an idyllic sense of nationalistic pride in Germany.

The diction used here also calls to mind the poem *Am Rhein* published in 1814 by Max Schenkendorf. With the emergence of Romanticism in Germany, a movement which would contribute to the rise of German Nationalism, the German cultural establishment began to regard the *Nibelungenlied* as a Germanic national epic. In *Der Schatz des Drachentödters*, which documents two centuries of the epic's reception history, Werner Wunderlich writes:

> Nach dem Ende des Heiligen Römischen Reiches Deutscher Nation, nach dem Zusammenbruch Preußens und unter dem Eindruck der französischen Besetzung erwachte in Deutschland ein starkes Nationalgefühl. Auf der Such nach einer nationalen und vaterländischen Identität und Legitimation wandte man sich verstärkt dem Nibelungenlied zu. (11)

*Am Rhein* is one among many works of *Nibelungenlied* reception published in the early 19th century in which the medieval text's ties to the Rhine are romanticized. Schenkendorf writes: "Und hier am grünen Flusse / Die Stadt so wonnesam, / Zu der mit wildem Gruße / Der wilde Siegfried kam ... Tief unten in dem Grunde / Am feuchten, kühlen Ort, / Da ruht noch diese Stunde / Der Nibelungenhort" (Grimm, *Nibelungenrezeption*). In Schenkendorf's poem, the Rhine becomes a historic and romantic river through its ties to the Germanic *Nibelungenlied*, and therefore a subject of national pride. The narrator states: "Du hast es ja gehört / Das Lied nach weiser Kunst / Wie Siegfried ward betörtet / Von süßer Frauengunst" (Grimm, *Nibelungenrezeption*). In the Burgundians' last moments, Lang evokes Nationalist Romanticism to insert nationalistic pride into his film.

**Religion in Lang's *Die Nibelungen***

As Lang himself was a devout Catholic, it would seem to be no accident that there is a great deal of Christian symbolism to be found within his work. He has claimed, for example, that his Siegfried was raised in the "Dom des Waldes," and that *Die Nibelungen* as a whole concerns the "geistige Heiligtum" of the German nation (Bratton, 207). Furthermore, in an essay titled *Stilwille im Film*, published shortly before the premiere of *Siegfried*, Lang detailed his motivation to retell the story of the *Nibelungenlied* through the still-new medium of film: "This is where I see the ethical duty of film, and especially of German film: go out into the world and teach all peoples! This is the pivotal element of my desire to make *Die Nibelungen*" (Kaes, 96). Here, Lang's use of Christian missionary diction emphasizes his wish to include Christianity in what he considered his quasi-revival of the *Nibelungenlied*. Christianity, however, is only one among several religions represented in the film. Several critics have claimed that the dwarf

Alberich, who acts as a mentor to Siegfried, embodies antisemitic stereotypes. Shortly after the premiere of the film in 1924, for example, Frank Aschau was quoted in *Die Weltbühne* as saying: "The evil dwarf Alberich, who represents obscure powers, is, and it can't be mistaken, depicted as a Jew. Not as a handsome Jew, naturally, but as a vile Jew (McGilligan, 103).

Though Lang's mother was born to Jewish parents, she converted to Catholicism before marrying, and raised her children to be highly religious. Almost ten years after fleeing Nazi Germany in 1934, Lang, in his personal entry in *Current Biography*, published in 1943, wrote concerning himself: "While many famous Jewish directors had to flee Germany because of the 'Aryan' work decrees, Lang, a Christian, fled only because he is a believer in democratic government" (Kaes, 288). Whether Lang's personal account regarding his motivation to flee the Nazi dictatorship is true or not remains, of course, speculative; it has been said that in his later years, he "went out of his way to describe himself as an 'Austrian director' who was in fact the opposite of Jewish," and that even after fleeing Germany, he never personally acknowledged his ties to Judaism (288).

While the question regarding the extent to which Alberich can be viewed as an antisemitic figure remains unresolved, one must acknowledge that the manner in which he is portrayed is certainly unflattering in comparison to Siegfried, who, unlike the hero of the *Nibelungenlied*, is given no background or family, and appears to have been, as suggested by Bratton, immaculately conceived by the forest (207). Siegfried's lack of parents is perhaps meant to evoke the biblical virgin birth, a thought that appears less radical when one considers the different ways in which he represents the Christian figure of Christ – including his inexplicable powers and strength, as well as the betrayal that leads to his death.

If the character of Siegfried is indeed meant to represent Christ, then his death, at the end of the first film, symbolizes a shift in the way religion is portrayed in *Die Nibelungen*, and acts as a divider between the two films. This shift can most clearly be observed through Kriemhild, who transforms from a doe-eyed, innocent virgin in *Siegfried*, dressed in clean, white clothing, to a deceiving, hate-filled woman driven mad by her quest to avenge her husband's murder, "die am Ende des Epos als Teufelin bezeichnet wird" (Kiening, 217). Initially portrayed in *Siegfried* as an almost angelic figure, Kriemhild could be described as an almost witch-like figure in the aptly titled *Kriemhilds Rache*.

As previously mentioned, the main conflict between Kriemhild and Brunhild takes place on the steps of the cathedral as Kriemhild attempts to go to Mass (01:37:35-01:42:00). Kriemhild and her ladies in waiting, all of whom are dressed in white, are stopped rudely by Brunhild, who, along with her ladies, are clothed in black. Lang juxtaposes black and white to provide a commentary on his characters. Brunhild, with an outstretched, authoritative hand, stops Kriemhild in her tracks and proclaims "Nicht geziemt es dem Weibe eines Vasallen, vor der Königen Burgunds den Dom zu betreten!" (01:38:17-01:38:41). While a similar encounter occurs in the *Nibelungenlied*, the particulars are different. In the *Nibelungenlied*, it is Kriemhild who first offends Brünhild when she boasts about the superiority of her husband: "Mein Mann ist so überragend, daß alle diese Reiche eigentlich in seiner Hand sein müßten," a statement which the reader can assume is meant to offend Brünhild, whose husband is king (st. 815). More importantly, this initial confrontation takes place "auf dem Kampfplatz" during a tournament, and not in front of the cathedral (814). It is during the tournament that the two decide to walk separately to mass; Brünhild states: "Willst Du Dich mir nicht unterstellen, dann mußt Du Dich auf dem Weg zum Münster mit Deinen Frauen von meinem Gefolge trennen" (830). In contrast,

Lang decides to place the fight solely on the steps of the cathedral as a means of emphasizing Christian symbolism. It is important to note that neither Kriemhild nor Brunhild actually enter the cathedral after the fight, unlike in the *Nibelungenlied* (st. 844). Lang's Brunhild, insulted by Kriemhild's insinuation that it was Siegfried who stole her virginity rather than Gunther, flees to interrogate her husband to uncover the truth, while Kriemhild can be seen being escorted from the cathedral steps by a woman dressed in black (01:41:30-01:42:44). The woman in black escorting Kriemhild away from the cathedral is meant to foreshadow her eventual abandonment of the church and her faith.

After the death of her husband, Kriemhild is only shown in black, and expresses what appears now to be a new aversion to Christianity and Christian symbols. Such an aversion can be witnessed when she orders Rüdiger to swear his allegiance to her; she appears distraught when he attempts to swear on the hilt of his sword, which naturally bears the shape of a cross. Instead, she insists that he swear "auf die Schärfe (seines) Schwertes," thus subverting the cross as a symbol of passive suffering and transforming it into a symbol of violence (00:16:00-00:16:27). Shortly thereafter, upon her departure for Hunnenland, Kriemhild is confronted by the family's priest, who unsuccessfully attempts to persuade her into making amends with her brothers before leaving: "Wollt Ihr Euch zuvor nicht versöhnen mit den Euren?" (00:25:33-00:26:03). Kriemhild not only rejects the advice of the priest but seems to express an aversion towards him and what he represents. Here Lang once again juxtaposes black and white; the contrast between the priest, whose white, religious garments are adorned with symbols of Christianity, and Kriemhild, who stands solemnly and expressionless next to him in black robes, makes it clear to viewers that an irrevocable divide has been drawn between Kriemhild and the religion to which she was once faithful. The character of Kriemhild, whose first appearance in *Siegfried* shows her performing

the sign of the cross while in Mass, is transformed after the death of her husband into an anti-Christian hellbent on revenge (00:11:02-00:11:25).

Although Christianity is certainly the religion to which the most screen time is given in Lang's film, the heathen religion of the Huns also plays a significant role. Despite this, the words *Heide* and *Heidentum* are not mentioned within the film; this differs from the *Nibleungenlied*, in which Etzel himself uses the term "heathen." At the prospect of marrying Kriemhild, Etzel questions: "Wie könnte das geschehen, da ich doch ein Heide bin und die Weihe der Taufe nicht habe" (st. 1145). Though Etzel is not called a "Heide" in *Die Nibelungen*, his heathenism can be inferred from his foreign and uncultured manner, as well as through the lack of Christian symbolism (priests, cathedrals, crucifixes) in Hunnenland.

In comparison to *Siegfried*, in which relics of Christianity are represented in abundance, *Kriemhilds Rache* includes minimal references to religion; only before Kriemhild departs for Hunnenland, while still in Worms, are Christian symbols in evidence – for example, the cross hanging on the wall above as Kriemhild hands out treasure from the Nibelungen hoard after Siegfried's murder, or the above-mentioned tense encounter with the family priest upon her departure (00:04:30-00:05:24, 00:25:33-00:26:03). In Hunnenland, Christianity has no place – and its absence can most clearly be observed through the chaos and disorder that rules the savage, barbarous land. Rather than mentioning the heathen religion by name, as it is in the *Nibelungenlied*, Lang simply removes the presence of religion from his film, implying that the squalor in which the Huns live is a natural result of living under a lack of Christianity or Christian influences.

**Lang's Interpretation**

With its emphasis on the superiority of the Germanic Burgundians, it is difficult to miss the nationalistic undertones in *Die Nibelungen*. One is reminded of Siegfried Kracauer's *Von Caligari zu Hitler*, in which he argues that the emergence of the Nazi dictatorship was foreshadowed in several Weimar-Era films, including Lang's *Die Nibelungen*. In his book, Kracauer cites a connection between Leni Riefenstahl's work and Lang's: "Am *Triumph des Willens*, dem offiziellen Nazifilm des Nürnberger Parteitags von 1934, läßt sich nachweisen, dass die Architekten der Veranstaltung zur Anordnung ihrer Massenornamente Anregung schöpften aus den *Nibelungen*" (Kracauer, 103). Though still controversial, Kracauer's famous argument reminds one that Lang's film resonated with the National Socialists, perhaps due to his purposeful effort to paint the Siegfried myth as a nationalist epic. In an interview with Dieter Dürrenmatt about the making of *Die Nibelungen* in 1971, Lang described his motivation: "Nach der Niederlage des Ersten Weltkrieges wollte ich den Deutschen dadurch, dass ich ihre berühmte Sage verfilmte, wieder ein gewisses Nationalbewusstsein zurückgegeben" (Kiening, 192). In light of the foregoing discussion, this statement is all but surprising. In the *Nibelungenlied*, there are few differences to be observed between the Burgundians and the Huns. Though these two groups of people are separated by different homelands, religions, and customs, the culture of the Huns is not denigrated by the narrator. In Lang's film, the Huns and their barbaric ways implicitly elevate the Germanic Burgundians, who stand tall and statuesque next to the hunchbacked heathens of Hunnenland, to a racially and culturally superior position. As Kiening argues:

> Wo das *Nibelungenlied* eher den aufwendigen Weg ins ferne Land als dessen kulturelle Fremdheit betonte, setzt der Film – vor dem Hintergrund zeitgenössischer Völkerpsychologie – auf abstrakte Oppositionen, die nicht zuletzt den Unterschied der beiden gleichermaßen vitalen heroischen Herrscherfiguren herausstellen. (215)

By painting the Huns as savage, almost non-humans, Lang is able to place more focus on the Germanic Burgundians and their prideworthy qualities – thereby providing a German public, still reeling from the defeat of the first World War, with a group of Germanic heroes to idealize and perhaps see themselves in.

In order to achieve this, Lang seeks to emphasize the status of the *Nibelungenlied* as an ancient, revered narrative. Rather than referring to his filmic chapters as "Aventiuren," as in the medieval text, Lang uses the term "Gesang," a term that calls "eine Vorstellung älterer Epik auf, die sich mit Werken wie der *Ilias* oder der *Odyssee,* Dantes *Divina comedia* oder Tassos *Orlando furioso* verbindet" (Kiening, 201). This reminds one of the aforementioned literary shift of the 19th century, during which the *Nibelungenlied* became widely regarded in German-speaking countries as a national epic comparable with other ancient epics from the Greco-Roman world (Wunderlich, 11). Like these scholars, Lang, in order to return a sense of pride and national identity to the German people, attempts to emphasize the importance of the *Nibelungenlied* by using terms one might find in the literature of antiquity.

# CHAPTER 2

# HARALD REINL'S *DIE NIBELUNGEN*

## Introduction

The Siegfried' legend became Nazi propaganda during the Third Reich – encouraged in part by the nationalistic themes in Lang's 1924 film. "Because of its nationalist appropriation," states Bildhauer, "the Nibelungen story briefly fell from grace in 1945" (180). It was not until 1966/7 that the legend would reach the big screen again, when director Harald Reinl, like Lang, released a two-part film also titled *Die Nibelungen*. The time period in which Reinl's film premiered aligns with the emergence of the "68er" generation and its confrontation of the problematic national past (the beginnings of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*) in post-war West Germany. The film's release also falls in the middle of the Civil Rights Movement in America, just one year before President Johnson would sign the Civil Rights Act of 1968. As we shall see, the film bears traces of these new cultural climates.

Reinl's film draws heavily from Lang's *Die Nibelungen* and seems to serve as a response to the earlier film. The plots and subsequent endings of each film resemble one another fairly closely, yet the themes of race and religion are dealt with differently. It seems that Reinl wishes to reclaim the Siegfried legend that has become tainted by the mark of National Socialism, as well as strip the Huns of the racist stereotypes projected on them by Lang in light of the transnational reimagining of the notion of race brought on by the American Civil Rights Movement.

**Race in Reinl's *Die Nibelungen***

As discussed in the previous chapter, Lang depicts the Huns as a brutish, uncivilized race that differs greatly from their Germanic counterparts. They are, in all aspects, beneath the Burgundians, a distinction highlighted by the clashes between the two cultures. Reinl's Huns in contrast, while certainly meant to be regarded as foreign, a fact emphasized by the shift to oriental-sounding music whenever the Huns appear, are not meant to be regarded as inferior to the Burgundians. On the contrary, when Rüdiger invites the initially hesitant Burgundians to Hunnenland to witness the baptism of Kriemhild's son, he reminds them "Vergesst nicht, was es bedeutet, den mächtigsten aller Könige zum Freunde zu haben" (00:30:47-00:30:54). According to Rüdiger, Etzel is not just equal to the Germanic Burgundians, he is their superior – an argument none of the Burgundians, including Gunther, make any attempt to disagree with.

Upon the first encounter between Etzel and Kriemhild, the Huns are depicted as intriguing, mysterious, and arguably charming. As they approach one another, both Etzel and Kriemhild dismount their horses and stand facing one another on level ground (00:27:11-00:28:10). This calls to mind Lang's depiction of the same encounter, in which Kriemhild towers over Etzel from an elevated position. In Reinl's film, the two characters are presented as equals. When Etzel, while surveying Kriemhild, reaches out to touch her blonde hair, she smiles at him, and shortly thereafter kisses him on the cheeks (00:27:44-00:28:06). Unlike Lang's Kriemhild, whose repulsion for her new husband is evident in her expression of disdain, Reinl's Kriemhild is charmed by the gestures of her husband to be and responds positively. Furthermore, it is Kriemhild, rather than Etzel, who is depicted in this scene as foreign. Etzel seems to be intrigued by his new wife's blonde hair, a physical feature which distinguishes her from the other women

in Hunnenland. By drawing attention to her blonde hair, Reinl's Etzel reminds viewers that it is Kriemhild who will be a foreign outsider in Hunnenland.

While Reinl's Etzel and Lang's Etzel differ from one another on a number of levels, the most important distinction to be noted is that Reinl's Etzel is given more humanity. When Lang's Etzel first meets his son, he rocks the baby violently back and forth, puts its fist in his mouth, and holds the child with one hand by the cloth swaddling him (00:50:04-00:51:28). The comical manner in which he handles his infant son could be described as more animalistic than human. In contrast, Reinl's Etzel is depicted as a loving and gentle father. He can be seen holding the toddler, proudly displaying him to his people (00:31:24-00:31:46). At the dinner welcoming the Burgundians, he declares his son to be the "Mittler ... zwischen den Welten in Ost und West," words which seem to extend beyond the screen to the German audience of 1967, who would have been all too familiar with the ideological and physical division between East and West Germany (01:01:46-01:02:15). After his son's death, Etzel is depicted as severely weakened; he is barely able to speak, uttering the same phrase – "Räche meinen Sohn" – and must be supported by two men, as he can no longer stand on his own (01:14:27-01:15:28). Whereas Lang's Etzel is rendered less human by the way he handles his son, Reinl's Etzel is shown to be an emotional, loving, and compassionate father through his interactions with his child.

Although foreign, the Huns are nonetheless depicted as respectable, courtly, intriguing, and desirable; it is the Burgundians who, in comparison, are not given much extra praise or attention. In Lang's film, the status of the Burgundians is elevated above that of the Huns even as they are burned alive; Volker's aforementioned final, dramatic song causes his fellow warriors to evoke the cool, green Rhein of their Germanic homeland before they perish, a final reminder of Hunnenland's inferiority (01:58:55-01:58:28). In Reinl's film, however, the Burgundians are not

given a nostalgic ending. Shortly before the film's end, only Gunther and Hagen are left standing in a hall filled with dead warriors. As Kriemhild's men approach to take them as prisoners, the camera slowly pans to show Volker, who is lying half dead with his broken violin beside him; the frame closes in on his hand as he tries without success to strum the broken strings of the instrument one last time (01:22:16-01:22:33). Unlike in Lang's film, the Burgundians are not given a final moment of glory; there is no celebration of their Germanic heritage.

**Religion in Reinl's *Die Nibelungen***

As previously mentioned in the chapter on Lang, the presence of Christianity vanishes with Kriemhild's departure for Hunnenland. As a result, *Kriemhilds Rache,* in comparison to the religion-heavy *Siegfried*, is a film largely devoid of Christian symbols. In Reinl's film, however, religion plays a significant role throughout the entire narrative. Christianity is not left in Burgundy; on the contrary, it accompanies the characters all the way to Hunnenland.

Religion also plays a central role in the confrontation between Kriemhild and Brunhild, which occurs on the steps of the cathedral in a scene that directly evokes Lang (01:11:00-01:12:44). After being humiliated by Kriemhild, Brunhild lets a cross fall out of her hands and onto the steps, where she abandons it (01:12:26-01:12:44). While this seems to symbolize a rift drawn between Brunhild and the Christian church, it is important to note that Brunhild is given an explicitly pagan Norse background in Reinl's film, and this symbolic rejection of the church is likely meant to represent a rejection of her treacherous husband and his cultural values. As in Lang's film, Brunhild, searching for consolation, leaves the cathedral without attending Mass. However, in Reinl's film, this episode takes on an anti-Christian thrust: she encounters Hagen, whom she asks: "Willst du mein Ritter sein, Hagen von Tronje," to which he replies: "Ich war

das immer, Königin. Weihwasser und christliche Demut verdampfen auf unserem Schild" (01:13:00-01:13:08). The significance of Hagen's anti-Christian sentiments will be addressed at a later point, but for now it will suffice to say that both his and Brunhild's rejections of religion are meant to paint them in a negative light.

As previously mentioned, Christian symbolism travels with the Burgundians on the way to Hunnenland. Until forcibly separated from the group by Hagen, a monk escorts the travelling warriors. Reinl's monk contrasts with the spiritual figure present in Lang's film, the priest, who remains in Burgundy. Despite his status as a member of the clergy, the monk is shown a lack of respect by the soldiers, which Gunther claims is a result of fear brought on by uncertainty. He commands the monk: "Bete für uns," to which the latter replies: "Ihr sollt selber beten. Herr, vergib uns unsere Schuld" (00:39:23-00:39:32). It is significant that the monk uses the pronouns "ihr" and "uns," including Gunther among the guilty. The idea of collective guilt will be returned to at a later point. By rejecting the king's command, it seems as if the monk possesses a higher level of authority than Gunther, an authority perhaps bestowed upon him by his god.

Moreover, the monk appears to possess certain powers and abilities through his spiritual connections. After hearing the prophecy that only the monk will return alive to Burgundy, Hagen devises to murder him, so as to disprove the prophecy. As Hagen approaches with a devious expression, the monk seems to intuitively comprehend his murderous intentions, and slowly lifts a cross above his head in what appears to be a cry for help (00:40:35-00:40:51). After Hagen pushes him into the water, the monk, who cannot swim, prays to his god and is delivered safely to shore (00:41:15-00:42:05). As a Christian figure, the monk appears to be both above the law, i.e. outside of Gunther's jurisdiction, as well as above the laws of nature, since he is able to survive Hagen's attack despite not being able to swim. Furthermore, once he has made it alive to

the opposite shore, the monk lifts his face to the clouds and calls for a curse to be placed on the Burgundians (00:42:17-00:42:32). As he speaks, the clouds begin to darken and thunder can be heard, emphasizing the power possessed by the monk as a Christian figure and also of the Christian god as a metaphysical power within the narrative.

It is only after the disappearance of the monk and Christian symbolism that the characters are truly desolate – a fate first acknowledged by Hagen. After the monk survives his attack, Hagen allows the boat to drift away, stranding the Burgundians without a way to get home (00:42:07-00:42:17). Christianity, which acted as a voice of reason in Reinl's darkening world, is forcibly removed from the plot by violence, and the Burgundians are left without its shield of protection.

**Reinl's Interpretation**

In her 2012 book *Filming the Middle Ages*, Bettina Bildhauer notes the following concerning Reinl's *Die Nibelungen*: "It was marketed as a film about German heroes and widely reviewed at the time as an allegory of the contemporary nation's relationship to the Nazi past" (180). She refers to Hagen as "a Hitler-esque criminal with a black moustache, side-parting and obsession with loyalty" (180) (Image 3). There are several scenes in which Hagen, as Bildhauer shows, "begins to talk like Hitler did," displaying a "bloodlust" in the fervent speeches he delivers to Gunther and the Burgundian warriors (180). He also uses rhetoric similar to that used by Hitler to further anti-Jewish propaganda, such as the infamous "stab-in-the-back" myth which blamed Jews for Germany's failure in WWI. When attempting to persuade Kriemhild to divulge where Siegfried can be wounded, he states: "Ich weiß, Siegfried braucht kein Feind zu fürchten, aber ein Pfeil, oder ein Speer aus dem Hinterhalt geworfen, in den Rücken" (01:16:35-01:16:43).

*Image 3: Side-parting, Hitler-esque Hagen.*

*Image 4: "Ich habe es getan" – "Und ich habe es nicht verhindert."*

Although there are numerous scenes in which Hagen is depicted as an evil, bloodthirsty killer, including when the people throw stones at him and call him Siegfried's murderer, it is repeatedly asserted by Gunther and the Burgundian warriors that he is not the sole bearer of blame (00:15:27-00:16:08). As Bildhauer argues: "the guilt for Siegfried's murder oppresses the Burgundian people ... Hagen takes the blame upon himself ... but they rightly feel guilty for not having prevented it, like passive bystanders in Hitler's Germany" (180). Gunther, though not Siegfried's killer, nonetheless feels guilty for failing to intervene. Twice Hagen states: "Ich habe es getan," and twice Gunther replies: "Und ich habe es nicht verhindert," even claiming that he and Hagen share the same guilt (00:10:09-00:10:18, 01:08:17-01:08:24) (Image 4).

The same applies for the rest of the Burgundian warriors. When Gunter tells his men to go home, they refuse to leave (01:16:02-01:17:37). Bildhauer argues that the Burgundians' "loyalty to Hagen despite his crime is depicted as a sign of strength," but I would disagree (180). This scene, which contains no triumphant music and no moment of brotherly comradery – no glorious, verbal declaration of the soldiers' unwavering loyalty to Hagen and Gunther – does not make the viewer believe the Burgundians are being praised for their blind loyalty. On the contrary, it appears as if the warriors are being chastised, perhaps as German soldiers and bystanders were after the war. As his frustration grows, Gunther screams: "So geht doch! Warum rührt ihr euch denn nicht?" (01:17:12-01:17:17). Gunther's words, which seem to extend past the screen and address the German public, asks the audience – why didn't *you* leave, why didn't *you* fight back? Perhaps this is why Gunther's soldiers do not provide him with a verbal response; the German public is responsible for answering his questions.

As previously mentioned, the ending Reinl orchestrates is nowhere near as glorious as that of Lang's film. In the film's final moments, which are neither particularly heroic,

commendable, nor inspiring, Hagen and Gunther are delivered their just punishment. As a member of Kriemhild's court states: "Das ist das Ende der Burgunder," to which one of Etzel's warriors replies: "So ergeht es mit Männern, die einem Mörder die Treue halten." (01:15:55-01:16:03). Here, the Burgundians, like the German public, are chastised for their blind loyalty to a murderer and are therefore not given a nostalgic ending. Instead, the film's conclusion leaves the viewer questioning what could have been done to avoid such a humiliating and brutal tragedy, much like the "68er" generation was in the middle of attempting to do retrospectively after WWII and the Holocaust.

To deliver this message, Reinl utilizes Christian imagery to create a juxtaposition between good and evil, between Christianity and Hagen – or more specifically, the Hitler-esque figure he represents. As previously mentioned, in an effort to prove his loyalty to Brunhild, Hagen states: "Weihwasser und christliche Demut verdampfen auf unserem Schild" (01:13:04-01:13:08). Several other references are made to his shield, for example, when he reassures Brunhild that he will avenge her embarrassment: "Es gibt keinen Fleck auf dem Schild der Ehre, der sich nicht abwaschen ließe ... mit Blut" (01:15:58-01:16:04). Another reference is made to his shield when he attempts to divulge information on Siegfried's weak spot from Kriemhild: "Ich möchte gern an Siegfrieds Nähe bleiben und diese Stelle mit meinem Schild decken" (01:16:51-01:16:56). In the context of Christianity, such language brings to mind the numerous Bible verses in which the protection of god is likened to a shield – Psalm 28:7, "The Lord is my strength and my shield," Proverbs 30:5, "He is a shield to those who take refuge in him," and 2 Samuel 22:26, "You have also given me the shield of Your salvation," to name a few (*New King James Bible*). Hagen too offers to wield a shield of protection, yet his shield repels Christian values rather than defending them. It appears as if Hagen is meant to be an anti-Christian figure,

and therefore doomed in Reinl's world, where valuing Christianity secures one's forgiveness, and therefore survival. After all, the monk, who seems to be the only character outside of the narrative of collective guilt, is the only figure permitted to return home safely to Burgundy. While Reinl's film centers around the, for lack of a better term, the damnation of collective guilt, the presence of Christianity as a redeeming force offers the guilty characters, and the guilty German public, a path by which the past might be overcome. *Die Nibelungen* is not just concerned with addressing public guilt – it seeks to provide a way through which public guilt might be absolved.

# CHAPTER 3

# QUENTIN TARANTINO'S *DJANGO UNCHAINED*

## Introduction

In 2010, the director Quentin Tarantino was taken by his friend and occasional co-worker Christoph Waltz to see *Siegfried,* the third drama of Richard Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, at the Los Angeles Ring Festival. The extent to which this experience would affect Tarantino, whose "hyper-modern and manic sensibilities would seem at odds with slow-moving 19th century German opera," as David Ng puts it, would not be realized until several years later, after the release of his Academy Award winning film *Django Unchained* (Ng, 1). In an interview following the movie's release, Waltz, who himself played the character of Dr. Schultz in *Django Unchained,* admitted that he took Tarantino to see Wagner's *Ring* cycle because he sensed a connection between the two artists and their work; when asked about Tarantino, Waltz stated, "His movies are like operas...it's a *Gesamtkunstwerk.* Richard Wagner kind of coined that term – he wrote the script, he wrote the music, he directed, he conducted, he produced it at his own festival house in Bayreuth. Quentin is exactly like that. Wagner chose big mythological themes for his art – so does Quentin" (*Christoph Waltz on Quentin Tarantino,* 00:00:13-00:01:05). The evidence connecting Wagner's *Ring* cycle and Tarantino's *Django Unchained* is substantial; the parallelism to be found between the characters and events of Wagner's and Tarantino's work is striking and will be discussed at length in the pages following.

There is little mention of Tarantino's influcences outside of Wagner in the (sparse amount) of scholarly literature on *Django Unchained*. This is particularly surprising when one

considers that Wagner himself built his opera by combining themes from multiple influences and versions of the Siegfried myth; Tarantino, it appears, has done the same. Contrary to my sources, in which Wagner is the only connection mentioned linking the film to the Siegfried myth, I believe Tarantino's film contains numerous evocations of scenes from Fritz Lang's 1924 *Die Nibelungen*, as well as references to events found in the *Nibelungenlied* itself.

Tarantino's film is by no means a simple retelling of the Siegfried myth; on the contrary, *Django Unchained*, like Wagner's *Ring* cycle, draws from, as Waltz puts it, various "mythological themes" to reimagine the Siegfried myth in a new and surprising context. In this chapter, I explore the various influences on *Django Unchained*, as well as the effect these influences have when placed into the unexpected framework of Pre-Civil War American slavery. While religion plays virtually no role in Tarantino's film, the theme of race is much more important than in the previous two films.

**The influence of Richard Wagner in *Django Unchained***

The character who plays the role of Django's wife, Broomhilde, is both an obvious as well as necessary starting point. Broomhilde, who has been described as "possibly the only character in movie history inspired by both German opera and blaxploitation cinema," is the namesake of Wagner's Brünhilde, barring the slight alteration in her name – the change to *broom* likely referencing her status as an enslaved woman (Ng, 2). In Wagner's *Ring*, Brünhilde is a Valkyrie who disobeys an order from her father, Wotan, when she decides to spare the life of a fallen warrior, Siegmund. Adrian Daub and Elisabeth Bronfen argue that as semi-divine beings, the Valkyries are expected to heed the commands of Wotan "for no reason beyond the fact that this is their purpose in existing" (Daub, 64). By making "a decision that breaks with that purpose,

one that disrupts mythic repetition" and causes the natural order of things to become "an impossibility," Wagner's Brünhilde frees herself from the role she was enslaved to; so too does Tarantino's Broomhilde, "by virtue of her repeated attempts at escape," show what it means "to break free from the role of a slave assigned to her" (Daub, 64). Broomhilde's role as a slave in *Django Unchained* is one that fits with the order of the Pre-Civil War antebellum South; through her repeated attempts to shed this role, Broomhilde, like her Valkyrian namesake, causes an upheaval of order that signifies an impending change in her world.

Because of their attempts to disrupt the traditional social order of their respective worlds, both Brünhilde and Broomhilde are punished. In *Django Unchained*, it is Dr. Schultz who brings Wagner directly into the script of Tarantino's film as he recalls the legend of Brünhilde – the details of which align with Brünhilde's role in Wagner's *Ring* cycle, rather than the Brünhild of the *Nibelungenlied*. While he and Django sit around a campfire, Dr. Schultz explains that Wotan, according to legend, "puts her on top of the mountain...and he puts a fire-breathing dragon there to guard the mountain, and he surrounds her in a circle of hell fire" (Tarantino, 00:46:14-00:48:32). It is there that Brünhilde waits until awakened "from a fire-ringed deep sleep" by Siegfried, who rescues her (Ng, 2). Similarly, when Django finds Broomhilde, whom he searches for at length, he finds her "sleeping in a 'hot box'" in which she has been placed as punishment for another escape attempt, "a direct correlation to Siegfried finding Brünhilde on the mountain surrounded by fire" (Salazar, 3). Indeed, Tarantino repeatedly portrays Broomhilde "rising from a drowsy or sleep-like state," including her retrieval from the hot box, as well as a scene towards the film's end when Django, in his second, successful attempt to rescue her, finds her sleeping in the servant's quarters (2) (02:34:13-02:35:07). This directly aligns with "the sleep motif of Brünhilde" in *Die Walküre* (*Das Rheingold*, 16).

Broomhilde, whose masters, Django explains, "were German," is also able to speak fluent German, as we first learn in a scene in which she and Dr. Schultz speak German with one another, so as not to arouse suspicion of their plans to escape (01:37:08-01:40:30). Broomhilde and her Valkyrian counterpart appear to be in sync with one another not only through their rebellious acts and resulting punishments, but through the fact that they use the same language to communicate.

Similarly, the conclusion to *Django Unchained* involves "a Brünhilde on a horse and a colossal fiery hecatomb," mirroring the ending of Wagner's *Ring* cycle, where Brünhilde and her horse ride into the fire so that she may join Siegfried in death (66-67). At the end of *Götterdämmerung*, she cries out, "Grane, mein Ross / sei mir gegrüsst / Weisst du auch, mein Freund / wohin ich dich führe? / Im Feuer leuchtend / liegt dort dein Herr / Siegfried, mein seliger Held" (124). In Tarantino's adaptation of the Siegfried myth, in contrast, both Broomhilde and her horse, as well as Django, are spared from the fire and allowed to live.

If Broomhilde is meant to evoke Brünhilde, then Django must naturally be Siegfried; indeed, "Siegfried" is the title given to Django by Dr. Schultz upon uncovering Django's intentions to rescue Broomhilde: "When a German meets a real-life Siegfried, that's kind of a big deal. As a German, I'm obliged to help you on your quest to rescue your beloved Brünhilde" (00:50:16-00:50:29). But the parallel between Django and Siegfried does not end with his quest to rescue Broomhilde. After Django's freedom has been purchased by Dr. Schultz, he throws the tattered blanket he had wrapped around his shoulders to the ground, as if shedding his former

*Image 5: Django bares his scarred back.*

*Image 6: A leaf falls from the Linden tree as Siegfried bathes in the dragon's blood.*

status as a slave. For a moment, the viewers, as well as Dr. Schultz, are given a glimpse of the scars on Django's back (Image 5, 00:09:39-00:09:44), a shot which bears close resemblance to the moment in which Siegfried's back is covered by a fallen leaf from the Linden tree in Lang's film (Image 6, 00:22:08-00:22:36). In my view, Django's markings are meant to be an evocation of the mark Siegfried bears on his back in the *Nibelungenlied*, which shows the spot where he can be wounded. In the *Nibelungenlied*, Kriemhild is persuaded by Hagen to reveal where Siegfried might be mortally wounded. She confesses that while her husband, after slaying the dragon, bathed in its blood, "da fiel ihm ein ziemlich groβes Lindenblatt zwichen den Schulterblättern, und an dieser Stelle kann man ihn verwunden" (*Das Nibelungenlied*, 902). Kriemhild is thereafter persuaded by Hagen to sew "ein kleines Zeichen auf sein Gewand" to mark the exact spot of his vulnerability (903).

Like Siegfried, Django bears markings on his back that indicate a vulnerability. However, while Siegfried's mark shows where he will be fatally wounded, the markings Django bears show where he has already been wounded and survived. In fact, the first time we are given a glimpse of Django's back, his freedom has already been purchased by Dr. Schultz. In Tarantino's reimagination of the legend, "Siegfried" survives his attack and remains part of the narrative, proudly baring the scars that show his triumph.

In the *Nibelungenlied,* Siegfried must also wear a disguise – a cloak of invisibility – in order to aid in the act of winning over Brünhilde, so that he may not be recognized (453-470). Similarly, Django, in order to hide his status as a former slave and the husband of Broomhilde, must wear a disguise (Image 7). As he and Dr. Schultz approach Candieland, where Broomhilde has been taken captive, Django is shown wearing sunglasses, a cowboy hat, and clothing made of fine material (01:27:23-01:27:40).

*Image 7: Django arrives at Candieland in disguise.*

The character of Django also undergoes a transformation like that of Wagner's Siegfried. "Much like the inexperienced and brutish Siegfried of (Wagner's) opera," Django grows "from a speechless slave ... into a polished hero that slays his own dragon ... and saves the love of his life" (Salazar, 2-3). Rather than passing through a ring of fire, as Siegfried does, Django must free Broomhilde by passing through "a barrage of gunfire" (Daub, 65).

By the film's end, Django has broken free of his physical and metaphorical chains and become a warrior whose wrath none can escape. He has become the "German" hero Dr. Schultz recognized him to be. The completion of this transformation is signaled when Django, after the death of his mentor, speaks German, saying "Auf Wiedersehen," as he bids Dr. Schultz farewell (02:33:49-02:33:53). The guidance of Dr. Schultz is no longer needed to bring the legend of Siegfried to life – Django has become the legend himself.

As mentioned, the character of Dr. Schultz acts as a mentor to Django, one who is "morally ambiguous, much like Mime is to Siegfried" (Ng, 3). Although the roles they play as guides are structurally important to their respective narratives, both Wagner's Mime and Tarantino's Dr. Schultz "use the protagonist to further their own agendas" while behaving in manners that are morally questionable. Mime, for example, wishes to enlist Siegfried's help in the reforging of the sword that will help him attain the Ring, while Dr. Schultz, a hitman, recruits Django to help him identify and kill men with large bounties on their heads" (Ng, 3). Furthermore, once these figures are no longer needed in their roles as mentors, they are killed off; for both characters, this occurs "about two-thirds of the way through their corresponding works" (Ng, 3). It is also Dr. Schultz who – like Mime does for Siegfried – relays to Django the way in which the "monster" guarding Broomhilde might be slain.

The monster that Django must overcome to rescue Broomhilde is Calvin Candie, the owner of Candieland – Tarantino's version of Wagner's fiery mountain. Monsieur Candie, as he prefers to be called, a staunch Francophile who does not speak French, is portrayed as a brutal, unhinged maniac who participates in Mandingo, a fictitious sport taken from Kyle Onstott's 1957 novel *Mandingo*, in which slaves are forced to fight to the death. In a dramatic display of his monstrous anger, Candie, after being informed by one of his slaves, Steven, of Django's plan to rescue Broomhilde, smashes a glass with his hand and wipes his blood on Broomhilde's face, claiming her as his property (01:59:55-02:02:32). It is Candie's death that marks the beginning of the long, drawn-out bloodbath necessary to set Broomhilde free, and it is Steven's death that concludes it.

Steven, a slave who ardently tries to ensure the security and longevity of the institution of slavery, stumbles through Candieland from room to room with a cane and an awkward shuffle,

grumbling and complaining. Above all other figures at Candieland, including Candie himself, he is the most vocal about his disapproval of Django's status as a free man, and cannot accept the idea of a black man being offered a room in Candieland rather than a bed in the slave's quarters (01:28:14-01:30:25) (Image 8).

Through his shuffle, generally unhappy and disapproving demeanor, and inability to accept the change which his world is undergoing, Steven is recognizable as a caricature of Wagner's Wotan, the "keeper of treaties and guardian of an order he upholds without really remembering why" (Daub, 65). Steven, like Wotan, is a figure "who upholds the status quo because it is the status quo," and his insistence on maintaining a dying system of order ultimately leads to the downfall of his world – to the destruction of Candieland and the institution of slavery it represents (65).


*Image 8: Steven disapproves of Django's treatment.*

Before moving on from Wagner's Wotan, his second Doppelgänger must be addressed – the mysterious German, Dr. Schultz. At the beginning of *Siegfried*, Wotan is found dejectedly wandering through the forest wearing a "low-brimmed hat," in search of a hero who might redeem the gods (*Die Walküre*, 20). In the opening scene of *Django Unchained*, Dr. Schultz is likewise introduced as a mysterious, "unmoored wanderer," who, "with a broad-rimmed hat and a cane," encounters Django while travelling through the forest in search of someone who might help him catch his next bounty (Daub, 58). According to Daub and Bronfen, Tarantino has decided to split the mysterious, mentoring side of Wotan from his more destructive and stubborn side – assigning these conflicting personality traits to two characters rather than one.

**The influence of the *Nibelungenlied* in *Django Unchained***

Several connections to the *Nibelungenlied* have been mentioned so far, including Django's marked back and the disguise he uses to aid in the retrieval of Broomhilde. However, the most important link between the two works is the final dinner scene, at which an extremely bloody and very lengthy battle ensues. In both *Django Unchained* and the *Nibelungenlied*, the protagonists are invited into a treacherous, foreign realm, where they are initially treated as guests. When Django and Dr. Schultz arrive at Candieland, a cotton plantation driven by slave labor, they receive a warm welcome (by all characters excluding Steven), and are offered luxurious rooms in the large, foreboding mansion (01:29:00-01:30:11). They are invited to dine with the household, and all parties are treated in a rather courtly manner – up until the moment where the true intentions of Django and Dr. Schultz are revealed. Upon learning that his guests have entered his house under false pretenses, Candie becomes enraged; he breaks his belongings and pounds on the table in a display of power that foreshadows the quickly approaching

bloodbath (01:59:55-02:02:32). During the ensuing battle, in which, some have suggested, Tarantino "uses more cinema blood" than he has previously used "in his entire film career," blood and bodies litter the dining room as the pleasant evening unfolds into chaos (*Django Unchained: Two Very Different Wagnerian Interpretations*, 2).

In the *Nibelungenlied*, the Burgundians are initially welcomed in Hunnenland as guests as well. Like in *Django Unchained*, they are offered luxurious sleeping quarters:

> Da führte man die Gäste in einen riesigen Saal. Dort waren den Recken überall lange, breite und prächtige Betten bereitet ... da sah man viele kunstvolle Decken aus Arras, gefertigt aus hellem Wollstoff, und viele Bettdecken aus arabischer Seide, und zwar die besten, die man nur finden konnte ... Niemals hat ein König mit seinem Gefolge so prächtig geruht. (1824 – 1826)

However, the meeting between the Burgundians and the Huns – which, as in *Django Unchained*, has also been arranged under false pretenses – quickly turns sour. Like the bloodbath in Tarantino's film, which unfolds in the dining room, the battle in the *Nibelungenlied* begins violence derails a courtly meal. As the fighting begins to escalate, the bodies quickly begin to pile up – so quickly, in fact, that the warriors must take a brief recess so that the dead may be carried away and the battle can proceed (st. 2013-2014). Tarantino seems to have taken this particular aspect of the *Nibelungenlied* to heart as well, with one author counting a total of "sixty-four" deaths in *Django Unchained* (Maiti, 3).

In the *Nibelungenlied*, the struggle between the Huns and the Burgundians lasts from Aventiuren thirty-two to thirty-nine – a span of over four hundred and fifty stanzas. The battle

itself appears to have a spirit of its own, ebbing and flowing from periods of greater activity to brief moments of rest. The momentary ceasefire takes place in Aventiure thirty-four so that the Burgundians may remove their dead from the hall, followed by a brief period of mourning:

> Da befolgten sie den Rat und trugen siebentausend Tote vor die Tür und warfen sie aus dem Haus. Vor der Treppe des Saales fielen sie zu Boden. Da stimmten deren Verwandte ein klägliches Geheul an ... darüber jammerten die Verwandten. Sie hatten auch wirklich Grund dazu. (st. 2013-2014)

Similarly, the final battle in *Django Unchained* is disrupted by a short intermission, during which the dead, specifically Candie, are buried and mourned by those who have not yet died. Afterwards, the mourners return to Candieland, where the battle continues. In the mansion still splattered with blood and bullet shells, they find Django, who has recently escaped the very brief enslavement to which he was sentenced as a punishment for Candie's death (02:25:36-02:36:43).

After killing Candie's remaining relatives, Django shoots Steven and leaves him to die in a fire he starts with the use of dynamite (02:36:45-02:40:33). This particular scene evokes both the *Nibelungenlied* and Wagner's *Ring* cycle in a way that fuses these two versions of the myth together. In the *Nibelungenlied*, Kriemhild sets the great hall on fire as the warriors are battling inside: "Die Gemahlin Etzels lieβ nun den Saal anzünden. Da quälte man die Recken mit Feuer. Das Haus wurde vom Wind schnell in Flammen gesetzt" (st. 2110). In *Götterdämmerung*, the audience also witnesses Wotan's fiery fate to "burn in Valhalla" as flames infiltrate the final scene (Salazar, 4). As noted above, Steven, who shuffles around Candieland disapproving of the

change he sees taking place in his world, is a character who is strongly reminiscent of Wotan. In the final scene of *Django Unchained*, fire is set to the hall of the battle – as in the *Nibelungenlied* – and the figure representing Wotan also experiences a fiery death – as in Wagner's *Ring* cycle. In this scene, Tarantino draws from multiple sources of the Siegfried myth to create a version of the legend that is unique to his film.

**The influence of Fritz Lang in *Django Unchained***

In *Die Nibelungen*, Fritz Lang uses intertitles to include dialogue for his characters, as well as to provide narrative information difficult to convey through dramatic expressions and orchestra music alone. For example, the opening scene of *Kriemhild's Rache* includes an intertitle which summarizes the film's plot: "Wie Kriemhild um Siegfried trauerte, und wie König Etzel durch Rüdiger Bechelaren um sie warb" (00:03:00-00:03:08). In *Django Unchained*, there are several instances in which scrolling titles are used to convey narrative information; for example, after a montage showing the exploits of Django and Dr. Schultz as bounty hunters, the following words scroll from bottom to top across the screen: "And after a very cold and very profitable winter, Django and Dr. Schultz came down from the mountains and headed for..." after which the word "Mississippi," written in capital letters, scrolls across the screen from right to left (00:58:02-00:58:27). The use of scrolling titles in *Django Unchained* reminds one of the intertitles used to convey information in Lang's film series. This could, of course, simply be a topos borrowed from the genre of silent film in general, and not a specific reference to Lang. However, since there are several other striking parallels to Lang, it may be a reference to this particular film.

The second connection between Tarantino's and Lang's films is the way in which the dangerous, foreign realms to which the protagonists travel are represented. In *Die Nibelungen*, as

previously mentioned in Chapter 1, the Burgundians, upon their arrival in Hunnenland, appear to be unsettled by the Huns' way of life. The Huns sit leisurely in trees, walk in a hunched over, ape-like manner, and scuffle with one another for sport in a dark, disorderly cave 00:30:54-00:31:42). In contrast to the Burgundians, the Huns are not simply meant to represent the "other," but are meant to be seen as an example of a way of life that is unimaginably and disturbingly barbaric.

When Django and Dr. Schultz – who, like the Burgundians, have clothed themselves in expensive looking garments to give the impression of wealth – first meet Candie, they find him red-faced holding a glass of scotch and a cigar, standing over two slaves who are in the process of beating one another to death (01:03:37-01:07:15). The slaves, who have been forced to engage in Mandingo, can be seen bludgeoning one another in the middle of a finely furnished sitting room while surrounded by their meticulously dressed masters. The scene is extremely difficult to watch; unlike other deaths to be found in *Django Unchained* both before and after this point, this death does not feature an excessive amount of cinema blood, and in contrast to the final shootout, in which Tupac Shakur can be heard in the background, it is not accompanied by any music to lighten the mood (02:13:20-02:14:15). This scene is not one that invites laughter, but rather horror and disgust. The viewer is meant to be appalled by the barbarism on screen, and to question how such a world is imaginable, let alone plausible. The protagonists have entered Candie's world, a world which, like Candieland itself, is replete with violence, brutality, and chaos. Both Hunnenland and Candieland, whose names bear a certain similarity to one another, emphasize the shocking barbarism of the antagonists.

While both the Mandingo fighting and the use of scrolling titles in *Django Unchained* call to mind aspects of Lang's *Die Nibelungen*, these similarities alone are not enough to suggest

that Tarantino borrowed from the 1924 film. However, when one considers the strongest connection between *Django Unchained* and *Die Nibelungen*, these similarities begin to look less random and more purposeful. There is a moment in the final shootout scene of *Django Unchained* that makes Lang's influence on Tarantino hard to deny. In the *Nibelungenlied,* during the final battle in Hunnenland, the doors to the great hall are locked; this is to prevent warriors from escaping, and so that outside help may not be permitted:

> Der tapfere Dankwart stellte sich auβen vor die Tür. Er sperrte denen den Zugang zur Saaltreppe, die heraufkamen...Volker aus dem Burgundenland machte es innerhalb des Saales genauso. Der tapfere Fiedler rief über die Menge hin: "Der Saal ist völlig abgeriegelt, Freund Hagen. Die Tür Etzels ist gut verschlossen. (1978-1979)

In *die Nibelungen,* Lang overcomes this barrier by depicting men using ladders to enter the locked hall from the roof (01:35:06-01:35:27) (Image 9). This scene is unique to Lang and cannot be found in any other versions – except in Tarantino's film.

After the doors to Candieland have been locked, men are shown propping ladders up against the side of the house, so that they may enter from the roof (02:14:13-02:14:19) (Image 10). This scene serves as a direct reference to Lang's film, making it very likely that Tarantino took inspiration for his movie not only from Wagner's *Ring* cycle, as the current scholarly literature written on *Django Unchained* would suggest, but from Lang's *Die Nibelungen* as well.

*Image 9: The Huns use ladders to enter the locked great hall.*

*Image 10: Candie's men use ladders to enter the locked house.*

**Tarantino's Interpretation**

As previously mentioned, Wagner himself gathered inspiration for his *Ring Cycle* from various sources of the Siegfried myth. From these legends, he created a work that was uniquely his own, a novel variation of the Siegfried myth – one that ends with the fiery death of Wotan. Wotan's death signals the death of the old gods, and therein, a way of life that has become outdated and can no longer exist in the modern world. Rather than awakening a sense of nostalgia, the death of Wotan produces a feeling of rebirth – that the world to come will be better than the last. As Daub and Bronfen put it, as the old world goes up in flames, "there is a sense that the world pretty much deserved it" (67). So too does the destruction of Candieland in Tarantino's film, and the death of the Wotan-figures Dr. Schultz and Steven, signify the end of an old, outdated way of life. Like Wagner, Tarantino has drawn from various retellings of the Siegfried myth to tell the story of the death of a world that will not be missed, and to promise the coming of a new, better world.

In the film's opening scene, we learn that the year is 1858, shortly before the start of the Civil War (00:03:39-00:03:43). As the cotton plantation burns down in the final scene, we are reminded that this world, and the system of slavery which it represents, will soon come to an end as well – and that a new world will follow (Image 11). However, unlike other versions of the Siegfried myth, the protagonists of *Django Unchained* live to see the birth of the new world. While in Wagner's *Götterdämmerung*, the deaths of Siegfried and Brünhilde become necessary to complete the cleansing of the old world, for Django and Broomhilde, "there will be a tomorrow," as they have "successfully severed themselves from the mythic narrative in which they were enslaved" (Daub, 67).

*Django Unchained* is a film in which familiar racial tropes of Hollywood are reversed (65). Daub and Bronfen argue:

> It is a film in which only black people are left standing at the end, in which white people, no matter how well-meaning, are just cannon fodder. It is a film that replaces Hollywood's most enduring racist figure, the "magic negro" who selflessly guides white people to their goal only to conveniently expire at the end, with King Schultz, who performs exactly the same role, and whose death is acknowledged ... as pure narrative contrivance. Having learned all it takes to become a gunslinger from his German friend, Django literally steals the show. (65).

*Image 11: Django blows up Candieland.*

Django succeeds in escaping not only from (and thus changing) the narrative of the Siegfried legend to which he was enslaved, but from Hollywood's repetitive racial narrative in which white figures must outlive their black counterparts. Through the use of purposefully inverted racial tropes, Django: "turns this convention on its head. Tarantino's film tells the story of a black man's quest in which every white face serves a simple narrative function" (55).

In Wagner's *Ring Cycle,* Siegfried acts as a catalyst for an upheaval of power. In Tarantino's film, a rebellious "Siegfried" again overthrows an outdated system of order, only this time, the traditional plot has been turned on its head. As Daub and Bronfen argue: "Tarantino does more than just repeat: he wonders whether it could have been otherwise" (65). Siegfried, the once Germanic hero, has become Django – a black man, a former slave, who fights to overthrow an outdated regime as well; only in this version of events, he lives to see the other side of the revolution.

# CONCLUSION

Together, Lang's, Reinl's, and Tarantino's films highlight significant shifts in the reception of Nibelungen films. With *Die Nibelungen*, Lang created a filmic representation of the (by 1924) well-established tradition of viewing the *Nibelungenlied* as a Germanic nationalist epic. In contrast, Reinl's *Die Nibelungen*, though certainly filled with motifs typical of Hollywood-style films, has traditionally been seen as an attempt to distance the Siegfried myth from its controversial ties to National Socialism. Yet while the respective messages of these films differ greatly, their storylines remain fairly traditional. Neither director dares to deviate too far from the events found in the *Nibelungenlied*; Siegfried is still betrayed, Kriemhild still seeks her revenge, and in the end, there are hardly any heroes left standing. In fact, it seems as if no director could imagine a version of the myth in which Siegfried actually survives the ending – until Tarantino. As the first Nibelungen film to take massive liberties with the traditional plot, *Django Unchained* marks an important shift in the legend's reception. Through his bold reinterpretations, Tarantino opens up a world of possibilities for future Nibelungen films, giving the once fairly one-directional narrative a new life.

REFERENCES


Bildhauer, Bettina. *Filming the Middle Ages*. Reaktion Books, Limited, 2012.

Bratton, Susan Power. "From Iron Age Myth to Idealized National Landscape: Human-Nature Relationships and Environmental Racism in Fritz Lang's Die Nibelungen." *Worldviews: Global Religions, Culture & Ecology*, vol. 4, no. 3, 2000, pp. 206-210.

Brüggen, Elke and Franz-Josef Holznagel. "Des Künic Etzelen Man: The Huns and Their King in Fritz Lang's Classic Silent Film Die Nibelungen and in the Nibelungenlied." *Thamyris, Intersecting*, 2015, pp. 223-237.

*"Christoph Waltz on Quentin Tarantino."* YouTube, uploaded by Nadia Neophytou, 10 January 2013, www.youtube.com/watch?v=WEC8bS2igrI.

*Das Nibelungenlied: Mittelhochdeutscher Text und Übertragung*. Ed. and transl. Helmut Brackert, Fischer Klassik, 2014, (2 vols.).

Daub, Adrian and Elisabeth Bronfen. Broomhilde Unchained: Tarantino's Wagner. *The Wagner Journal*, 2015, vol. 9, no. 2, pp. 55-67.

"Django Unchained: Two Very Different Wagnerian Interpretations." *The Wagnerian*, 18 August 2015. Accessed 10 December 2017.

Grimm, Gunter and Uwe Werlein. *Nibelungenrezeption*. Universität Duisburg-Essen. http://www.nibelungenrezeption.de, Accessed 1 April, 2018.

Hake, Sabine. *German National Cinema*. London and New York. Routledge, 2008.

Kaes, Anton, et al. *The Promise of Cinema : German Film Theory, 1907-1933*. Oakland, California : University of California Press, 2016.

Kiening, Christian, Heinrich Adolf, and Cornelia Herberichs, ed. *Mittelalter im Film*. Berlin and New York. Walter de Gruyter, 2006.

Kracauer, Siegfried. *Von Caligari Zu Hitler: Eine Psychologische Geschichte des Deutschen Films*. Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1984.

Lang, Fritz, director. *Die Nibelungen: Kriemhilds Rache*. UFA, 1924. *This video was viewed on YouTube, and as such the time stamps included in this thesis may not correlate with the original film.

Lang, Fritz, director. *Die Nibelungen: Siegfried*. UFA, 1924. *This video was viewed on YouTube, and as such the time stamps included in this thesis may not correlate with the original film.

Maiti, Rashmila. "Power Politics in Django Unchained: Broomhilde as Victim." *Magazine Americana*, May 2015.

McGilligan, Patrick. *Fritz Lang: The Nature of the Beast*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013.

Mosse, George L. *Toward the Final Solution: A History of European Racism*. New York, H. Fertig, 1978.

Nd, David. "'Django Unchained' pays Homage to Wagner's 'Siegfried'." *LA Times*, 18 April 2013.

Reinl, Harald, director. *Die Nibelungen: I Teil – Siegfried*. Constantin Film, 1966. *This video was viewed on YouTube, and as such the time stamps included in this thesis may not correlate with the original film.

Reinl, Harald, director. *Die Nibelungen: II Teil – Kriemhilds Rache*. Constantin Film, 1967. *This video was viewed on YouTube, and as such the time stamps included in this thesis may not correlate with the original film.

Salazar, David. "Opera Meets Film: How Quentin Tarantino's 'Django Unchained' is Inspired by Wagner's 'Siegfried'." *Opera Wire*, 27 July 2017.

*The Bible*. New King James Version, Thomas Nelson, Inc., 1982.

Tarantino, Quentin, director. *Django Unchained*. The Weinstein Company, Columbia Pictures, 2012.

Wagner, Richard. *The Rhinegold / Das Rheingold*. London: J. Calder; New York: Riverrun Press, 1985.

Wagner, Richard. *Siegfried*. London: J. Calder; New York: Riverrun Press, 1984.

Wagner, Richard. *Twilight of the Gods = Götterdämmerung*. London: J. Calder; New York: Riverrun Press, 1982.

Wagner, Richard. *The Valkyrie = Die Walküre*. London: J. Calder; New York: Riverrun Press, 1983.

Wunderlich, Werner. *Der Schatz Des Drachentödters: Materialien Zur Wirkungsgeschichte D. Nibelungenliedes*. Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1977.