HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Burak Sevingen, MA

Die Nibelungen 1924

Fritz Lang (1890-1976)

OVERVIEW

Die Nibelungen premiered in the February and April of 1924 as two separate films—*Siegfried* and *Kriemhild's Revenge*—which are nearly five hours long in total. The more popular first part (Sterritt) is a rite of passage (Bratton) story that follows the hero Siegfried, who becomes an invincible warrior and weds the Princess of Burgundy. This part ends with him falling victim to court intrigues and conspiracies. The second film spotlights his widow's quest for vengeance and culminates in a spectacularly violent denouement.

The Source. *Die Nibelungen* is based on the 12th Century epic poem **Nibelungenlied** and Norse mythology. The legend was also the basis of a theater play written by Friedrich Hebbel in 1862 (*Die Nibelungen*'s co-writer [with Fritz Lang] Thea von Harbou had performed in an earlier stage production as Kriemhild [McGilligan, 93]) and Richard Wagner's 1876 opera *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (*The Ring of the Nibelung*), whose four parts constituted the *Ring* cycle.

Artistic Influences. The figures, their costumes and mises en scène of *Die Nibelungen* are inspired by the art of Gustav Klimmt and Egon Schiele—whose works Lang collected (90). An even more direct influence would be Carl Otto Czeschka who had illustrated Franz Keim's abridged book for children, published in 1909 and **reprinted** in 1920. The film's nature scenes evoke Caspar David Friedrich's landscapes (Bratton) as well as Arnold Böcklin's art (Kracauer, 93)—his depictions of the God Pan for Siegfried's journey in the forest and **The Isle of Death** for Amazon Queen Brunhild's kingdom.

Design. Minimalism and geometric forms give the backgrounds and costumes their distinctive character. Exterior scenes in *Die Nibelungen* (e.g. the woods and Iceland) are not intended to offer a realistic depiction of nature and the "evident artifice highlights the legendary nature of the story" (Winkler). Similarly, interiors and costumes—especially in the Burgundy Kingdom scenes—are marked by the use of clean geometric patterns (e.g. arrows, zigzags and triangles) and minimalism. Production designers Hunte, Kettelhut and Vollbrecht would also contribute to *Metropolis***.** *Die Nibelungen* includes a short animation created by Walter Ruttman—a dream sequence that shows a white bird preyed upon by two black eagles. A special effects feat is the dragon that can move dynamically thanks to the ten operators inside and several others in a pit under it (McGilligan, 98). The fire-breathing monster anticipates *The Lost World* (1925) and *King Kong* (1933)—and countless science fiction films all the way to *Jurassic Park* (1993).

Themes. Lang's previous films *Destiny* and *Dr. Mabuse the Gambler* reflected the issues of the post-war period such as hyperinflation, political instability and trauma of war. Major themes in Die Nibelungen are loyalty (and betrayal), fate, and revenge. The two women—Kriemhild as the avenger and Brunhild as the powerful Amazon—offer refreshing representations of gender.

Legacy. Four decades later, a remake, *Die Nibelungen* came out in two parts (1966-1967) starring the former Olympic hammer thrower Uwe Beyer. It had the same producer (Artur Brauner) as Lang's last three films. Another remake, *Dark Kingdom: The Dragon Prince* was released in 2004. Lang's take on the epic was an inspiration for an episode of Belgian Comics series *Spike and Suzy* (van Straten). The ceremony with Siegfried appearing at the Court of Worms has prefigured the Nurnberg Rally scene of Leni Riefenstahl's Nazi propaganda film *Triumph of the Will* (1935)—and later, *Star Wars* (1977) has borrowed from both. Sergei Eisenstein's *Alexander Nevsky* (1938) and its Teutonic knights recall *Die Nibelungen*'s battle scenes with the Huns. Works associated with the swords and sorcery genre refer to it

one way or the other—contemporary examples are *Conan the Barbarian* (1982), *Lord of the Rings* (2001), and the television series *Game of Thrones* (2011).

Characters and Cast. Unlike most of comparable contemporary adventure films, *Die Nibelungen* is very character-driven. This is even more remarkable when one considers that it is a silent film. Regulars of 1920s Lang films make up the backbone of the cast—e.g. Paul Richter as the youthful Siegfried (*Dr. Mabuse the Gambler*) and Theodor Loos as the weak King of Burgundy (*Metropolis, The Testament of Dr. Mabuse*). Acting is elevated by supporting actors such as Bernard Goetzke (*Destiny*'s Weary Death) playing the noble minstrel. A riveting procession of characters struggle with intense emotions—they display devotion and solidarity, as well as frustration and rage. Such scenes are marked by operatic exuberance—one can think of gestures of Lord Rudiger (Margrave/Governor of Austria) as he strives to remain loyal to the Hun King Attila while desperately trying not to betray his fellow Germans.

Reception. Nine years after *Die Nibelungen*'s premiere, Fritz Lang was received by Joseph Goebbels in the newly established Reich Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda. Lang wanted to have the ban on the screening of his *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse* lifted. According to his **account**, when Goebbels talked about his plans for German cinema, he singled out *Die Nibelungen* and *Metropolis* as the films Hitler particularly admired. The accuracy of the facts in Lang's account of the meeting has been challenged (Werner) but the endorsement of Nazis has continued to plague the reception of *Die Nibelungen*.

Past and Future. Siegfried Kracauer—who held that 1920s German cinema was a premonition for Nazism—argued that *Die Nibelungen* pointed to the society struggling between the prospects of anarchy and tyranny (Kracauer, 88, 112). Lang on the other hand, said he wanted a "pessimistic nation to draw inspiration from its past" and hence the film wasn't about Germany's future. In any case, towards the end of the 1924, he was on his way to USA to promote his work. The sight of New York harbor would inspire his vision of future (ibid, 149)—which would form the basis for *Metropolis* (1927).

CHARACTERS

Siegfried. The prince of Xanten kills a dragon and becomes invincible by bathing in its blood. He marries the Burgundian princess Kriemhild and helps her brother King Gunther marry Brunhild. Siegfried is murdered by the Burgundian knight Hagen at the behest of Gunther and his intriguing wife.
Kriemhild. After his death, Siegfried's wife turns vindictive and marries the king of Huns to be able to settle scores with Hagen of Trojen. King Gunther and her other brothers do not support her revenge mission.
Gunther. The king of the Burgundians is a weak ruler manipulated by Hagen of Trojen.
Brunhild. The Queen of Iceland is a Valkrie who has set high athletic standards for her suitor. She is tricked by Siegfried into marrying Gunther—once she uncovers the trick, she plots to kill him. Brunhild commits suicide following Siegfried's death.
Hagen of Tronje. As a vassal and advisor of Gunther, Hagen is a powerful and menacing figure in the court of Worms. He murders Siegfried—who is avenged by his widow Kriemhild at the end of the second film.
Volker of Alzey. The noble minstrel at the court of Burgundy is present in both films. Played by Bernhard Goetzke (*Destiny, Dr. Mabuse the Gambler*) the fiddler is an important figure in the palace. During the last stand of the Nibelungs, he kills Rudiger in order to protect Hagen.

<u>Other Characters</u>

Part One: Siegfried's Death

Mime the Blacksmith. Thanks to his apprenticeship with Mime, Siegfried excels in blacksmithing and forges a perfect sword with which he would slay the dragon.
Alberich the Nibelung. In the forest, Siegfried encounters King Alberich, who attacks him twice and gets killed in the process. Siegfried acquires the possession of the treasure of the Nibelungs as well

as the magical cloak (which enables the wearer to become invisible and to change disguise). Mime and Alberich are played by the same actor—Georg John, a regular in Fritz Lang's 1920s films.

Part Two: Kriemhild's Revenge

Etzel. King of the Huns (Attila) marries Kriemhild in the second film. His military might becomes instrumental in her crusade for revenge. Etzel is played by Rudolf Klein-Rogge (*Metropolis*' Rotwang, *Spies*' Haghi and Dr. Mabuse).
Rudiger. Margrave (Governor) of Bechlarn (Austria) appears in the second film as a loyal and high-ranking Germanic vassal of Etzel. Rudiger brokers the marriage of Kriemhild with the king of the Huns. His daughter gets married to Kriemhild's brother Giselher, which is expected to bring the two dynasties closer. When Etzel commands Rudiger to personally kill Hagen, he reluctantly goes to the hall and accidentally slashes his own son-in-law (and Kriemhild's brother) Giselher. Rudiger is subsequently killed by Volker.
Grenot and Giselher. Kriemhild's brothers try to dissuade her from seeking revenge and stand by Hagen Tronje. Giselher marries Rudiger's daughter. He is accidentally killed by his father-in-law during the stand-off and Grenot is shot by Hun archers shortly after.
Dietrich of Bern. Like Rudiger, Dietrich is a senior Germanic vassal of the king of the Huns. Dietrich protects Etzel when the hall is taken over by the Nibelung knights and he sees to it that the Hun King safely exits the palace. He remains neutral during the clashes until he is ordered to capture Hagen and Gunther at the very end.
Hildebrand. Dietrich's comrade kills Kriemhild.

STORY

Part One: Siegfried

The Hero's Quest in the Ancient Forest. Deep in the forest, Prince of Xanten Siegfried has been mastering sword making. The blacksmith Mime tells his apprentice that he has forged the perfect sword and is ready to depart. The prince hears the cavemen chat about the Princess of Burgundy and sets out to woo her. On his way to the Kingdom of Worms, he encounters a dragon and slays it. He becomes able to understand the language of birds and one of them conveys to him that bathing in the dragon's blood would make him invincible. As he proceeds to do so, the dying dragon's tail snaps a nearby tree and a falling leaf gets stuck on Siegfried's bare back—this covered spot remains untouched by the magical blood.

The Nibelung Treasure. Siegfried continues his journey and is faced with a sneak attack by the dwarf-king Alberich of Nibelungs. Siegfried easily overpowers the attacker and takes his special cloak of invisibility (which also enables the wearer to assume the appearance of others). Alberich gets killed after he makes another attempt to tackle Siegfried—who is now left in the possession of the vast treasure of the Nibelungs.

The Kingdom of Burgundy. At the Burgundian palace in Worms, the minstrel Volker recounts the story of Siegfried (now the King of Nibelungs) to King Gunther—whose sister Kriemhild sees a dream in which a white bird becomes prey to two black eagles.

Siegfried in Worms. Siegfried arrives to the city as the king of the Nibelungs. He is coldly received at the palace and tension arises between him and Gunther's right-hand man and bodyguard Hagen of Trojen. Thankfully, Kriemhild's appearance deescalates the tension. Gunther agrees to wed his sister to Siegfried on the condition that he helps him marry the Icelandic queen Brunhild. The two men agree and a royal party sets sail.

The Queen of Iceland. Brunhild has set high athletic standards for her suitor—who is expected to beat her in rock hurling, long distance jumping and javelin throwing. Since it is impossible for the meek and frail Gunther to meet her challenge, Siegfried uses the cloak of invisibility to assume the Burgundian

king's appearance. He is able to better Brunhild's performance and the contest concludes with Gunther winning the hand of Brunhild—who is left bitterly suspicious but cannot prove foul play.

Double Wedding. Together with Brunhild, the Burgundians and Siegfried sail back to Worms where a double wedding ceremony takes place. Brunhild continues to maltreat her husband, who once again requests Siegfried's intervention. Siegfried appears in the royal bedroom as Gunther and subdues the queen. During the struggle he grabs her armlet and holds on to it. His wife Kriemhild soon finds the armlet and Siegfried truthfully discloses to her his secret deal with Gunther.

Tension. Siegfried has his treasure horde brought to Worms. The spectacle of chests brimming with gold and jewelry increases Brunhild's suspicion that Siegfried cannot be a simple vassal of Gunther. In the meantime, the two most powerful women in the palace, Brunhild and Kriemhild become jealous of each other. During a public ceremony, an altercation breaks out between the two and Kriemhild excruciates her rival by revealing to her the secret about Gunther.

Conspiracy. Brunhild is inflamed and pressures the king and Hagen to get rid of Siegfried. The conspirators decide that the upcoming hunt would be a good opportunity to carry out their scheme. Before the hunt, Hagen approaches Kriemhild, pretending to be protective and concerned for the safety of her husband. Kriemhild trustfully discloses the location of Siegfried's vulnerable spot and promises to mark it by sewing a cross on his garment.

The Hunt. During the hunt, Hagen sneaks up on Siegfried and throws a spear which hits the marked spot to fatally wound the hero. Gunther, who has instigated and witnessed the murder, keeps quiet about it and so do Kriemhild's two other brothers. Brunhild on the other hand, commits suicide during the funeral. Hagen remains protected by the Burgundian oath of loyalty—and Kriemhild wows revenge.

Part Two: Kriemhild's Revenge

The Grieving Widow. Kriemhild continues to mourn Siegfried and her passion for vengeance is as strong as ever. She has been isolated in the Burgundian (now called the Nibelung) court and her brothers (King Gunther, Gernot and Giselher) firmly reject her calls to ignite a feud. Then, Hagen delivers her another blow and dumps the vast Nibelung treasure horde she inherited from Siegfried into the River Rhine.

The King of the Huns. Meanwhile, the Hun King Etzel (Attila) sends word that he wants to marry Kriemhild. Initially, the princess isn't interested—but thinking that it could help her get her revenge, she lets herself be persuaded by Etzel's vassal and emissary Rudiger—who swears allegiance to her. Kriemhild leaves Worms to travel to the land of the Huns. The knot between the Huns and Burgundians is further tightened as Rudiger's daughter gets married to Kriemhild's brother Giselher.

The Summer Solstice. When Kriemhild gives birth to Etzel's son, the king gets ecstatic—so much so that he abandons the siege of Rome to return to his wife. Kriemhild takes advantage of his joyful gratitude and asks him to invite her family to celebrate the summer solstice together. King Gunther accepts the invitation and the Nibelung royals head out to the land of the Huns. They are received warmly by Etzel and festivities begin. When Kriemhild demands that her husband have Hagen killed, he declines, saying that the Nibelungs are his guests.

Entrapped. Kriemhild personally pays Hun warriors to kill her arch-enemy. They sneak attack Gunther's soldiers as they dine and a full-scale melee ensues. An officer manages to escape the massacre and alert the knights who are with their king in Etzel's palace. As soon as Hagen learns of the attack, he snatches away Etzel's baby boy and instantly murders him. This is followed by Gunther's knights securing the doors and taking control of the hall. With the intervention of Rudiger and Dietrich of Bern, a safe passage is granted for Etzel and Kriemhild. Once they exit, the Nibelungs are left sealed-off in the hall.

Stand-off. Wave after wave of Hun attacks to the hall are repelled by the Nibelungs. Kriemhild appeals to her brothers but they refuse to hand over Hagen. When the horde's attack fails, Etzel orders Rudiger to personally kill Hagen. The knight reluctantly goes to the hall but accidentally slashes his own son-in-law

(and Kriemhild's brother) Giselher. He is killed by the noble minstrel Volker before he can get close to Hagen.

The Fire. Kriemhild orders Hun archers to hurl fire arrows at the palace. As the hall gets engulfed in flames, the remaining Nibelung knights perish. The sole survivors, Hagen and Gunther are dragged outside where they are confronted by Kriemhild. Hagen refuses to disclose where he dumped the Nibelung treasure, even after Kriemhild has her brother King Gunther executed on the spot. She grabs Siegfried's sword and stabs Hagen—and is in turn killed by Hildebrand, a Germanic vassal of the Huns. The palace collapses and none of the Nibelungs survive.

SCENES

Part One: Siegfried

The Hero's Quest in the Ancient Forest. Deep in the forest, Prince of Xanten Siegfried has been mastering sword making. The blacksmith Mime tells his apprentice that he has forged the perfect sword and is ready to depart.



Siegfried forges the perfect sword; his master, the blacksmith Mime is more than impressed. The dwarf-king and blacksmith Mime and the dwarf-king, the sneaky Alberich of the Nibelungs are both played by the actor Georg John. It has been pointed out that racist Jewish stereotypes defined them (196);



The prince hears the cavemen chat about the Princess of Burgundy and sets out to woo her. On his way to the Kingdom of Worms, he encounters a dragon and slays it. The dragon was a special effects feat of the time.



He becomes able to understand the language of birds and one of them conveys to him that bathing in the dragon's blood would make him invincible. As he proceeds to do so, the dying dragon's tail snaps a nearby tree and a falling leaf gets stuck on Siegfried's bare back—this covered spot remains untouched by the magical blood. The forest is the first of the four realms in Die Nibelungen—the others are Worms—the citadel of Burgundy, Brunhild's Icelandic kingdom, Huns' encampment in Hungary.



The Nibelung Treasure. Siegfried continues his journey and is faced with a sneak attack by the dwarf-king Alberich of Nibelungs—the sneaky dwarf-king and blacksmith Mime are both played by the actor Georg John. As has been pointed out above, it has been noted that racist Jewish stereotypes defined them (196).



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Siegfried in Worms. Siegfried arrives to the city as the king of the Nibelungs. The reception of Siegfried at the Court of Worms. The scene has been imitated by Leni Riefenstahl's Nazi propaganda film *Triumph of the Will* (1935) which in turn inspired *Star Wars* (1977).



He is coldly received at the palace and tension arises between him and Gunther's right-hand man and bodyguard Hagen of Trojen.



Thankfully, Kriemhild's appearance deescalates the tension. Hagen brokers a pact between Gunther and Siegfried which makes them blood brothers;



Gunther agrees to wed his sister to Siegfried on the condition that he helps him marry the Icelandic queen Brunhild. The two men agree and a royal party sets sail to Brunhild's İcelandic kingdom.



The Queen of Iceland. Brunhild has set high athletic standards for her suitor—who is expected to beat her in rock hurling, long distance jumping and javelin throwing. Since it is impossible for the meek and frail Gunther to meet her challenge, Siegfried uses the cloak of invisibility to assume the Burgundian king's appearance. He is able to better Brunhild's performance and the contest concludes with Gunther winning the hand of Brunhild—who is left bitterly suspicious but cannot prove foul play.



Double Wedding. Together with Brunhild, the Burgundians and Siegfried sail back to Worms where a double wedding ceremony takes place. Brunhild continues to maltreat her husband, who once again requests Siegfried's intervention. Siegfried appears in the royal bedroom as Gunther and subdues the queen. During the struggle he grabs her armlet and holds on to it.



His wife Kriemhild soon finds the armlet and Siegfried truthfully discloses to her his secret deal with Gunther.



Kriemhild's private room reflects her modest and peaceful nature. This will change—note the characteristics of the room and compare it with her bedroom as the Queen of the Huns in the second part of the saga.



Tension. Siegfried has his treasure horde brought to Worms. The spectacle of chests brimming with gold and jewelry increases Brunhild's suspicion that Siegfried cannot be a simple vassal of Gunther. In the meantime, the two most powerful women in the palace, Brunhild and Kriemhild become jealous of each other. During a public ceremony, an altercation breaks out between the two and Kriemhild excruciates her rival by revealing to her the secret about Gunther.

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Then, Hagen delivers her another blow and dumps the vast Nibelung treasure horde she inherited from Siegfried into the River Rhine. Kriemhild is bitter and vindictive.



The King of the Huns. Meanwhile, the Hun King Etzel (Attila) sends word that he wants to marry Kriemhild. King Etzel is a tyrant—the Hun is played by Rudolf Klein-Rogge (*Metropolis*' Rotwang, *Spies*' Haghi and Dr. Mabuse.



The encampment of the massive army of the Huns is in Hungary and it is the fourth and final major realm in Die Nibelungen.



Initially, the princess isn't interested—but thinking that it could help her get her revenge, she lets herself be persuaded by Etzel's vassal and emissary Rudiger—who swears allegiance to her. Kriemhild leaves Worms to travel to the land of the Huns. The knot between the Huns and Burgundians is further tightened as Rudiger's daughter gets married to Kriemhild's brother Giselher.

The Summer Solstice. When Kriemhild gives birth to Etzel's son, the king gets ecstatic—so much so that he abandons the siege of Rome to return to his wife. Kriemhild takes advantage of his joyful gratitude and asks him to invite her family to celebrate the summer solstice together. King Gunther accepts the invitation and the Nibelung royals head out to the land of the Huns. They are received warmly by Etzel and festivities begin. When Kriemhild demands that her husband have Hagen killed, he declines, saying that the Nibelungs are his guests.

King Etzel is a tyrant—the Hun is played by Rudolf Klein-Rogge (*Metropolis*' Rotwang, *Spies*' Haghi and Dr. Mabuse. he is a proud and loving father, perhaps the only character in the film who shows genuine affection.



Entrapped. Kriemhild personally pays Hun warriors to kill her arch-enemy. They sneak attack Gunther's soldiers as they dine and a full-scale melee ensues. An officer manages to escape the massacre and alert the knights who are with their king in Etzel's palace. As soon as Hagen learns of the attack, he snatches away Etzel's baby boy and instantly murders him. This is followed by Gunther's knights securing the doors and taking control of the hall.

With the intervention of Rudiger and Dietrich of Bern, a safe passage is granted for Etzel and Kriemhild. Once they exit, the Nibelungs are left sealed-off in the hall. As the Germanic vassals of the Huns, Margrave Rudiger of Bechlarn and Dietrich of Bern face a difficult predicament. They never betray the Hun King—but confront their Nibelung friends only when they are left with no other choice.



Stand-off. Wave after wave of Hun attacks to the hall are repelled by the Nibelungs. Kriemhild appeals to her brothers but they refuse to hand over Hagen. The idea of giving away Hagen of Tronje to save themselves is unacceptable for the loyal Nibelungs. When Kriemhild demands that they do so, they respond with gestures: King Gunther extends his arm in front of Hagen and Volker the minstrel stands in front of both. Kriemhild's other brothers also step back and look away.



When the horde's attack fails, Etzel orders Rudiger to personally kill Hagen. The knight reluctantly goes to the hall but accidentally slashes his own son-in-law (and Kriemhild's brother) Giselher. He is killed by the noble minstrel Volker before he can get close to Hagen. Then, Kriemhild orders Hun archers to hurl fire arrows at the palace.



Kriemhild personally directs the Hun warriors to scale the walls of the palace and when that fails, to burn it down; the fire recalls Richard Wagner's fourth opera in the *Ring* cycle, the **Twilight of the Gods** and was depicted as a painting by Max Brückner. Other Lang films, such as *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse* and *Secret Beyond the Door* will also end with fires.

As the hall gets engulfed in flames, the remaining Nibelung knights perish. The sole survivors, Hagen and Gunther are dragged outside where they are confronted by Kriemhild. Hagen refuses to disclose where he dumped the Nibelung treasure, even after Kriemhild has her brother King Gunther executed on the spot. She grabs Siegfried's sword and stabs Hagen—and is in turn killed by Hildebrand, a Germanic vassal of the Huns. The palace collapses and none of the Nibelungs survive.



CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Kriemhild – Conscientious (Trustful, Strong-willed, Worldly, Leader)
Siegfried – Emotional (Self-made, Naïve)
Brunhild – Disagreeable (Powerful and Independent, Devastated)

KRIEMHILD (Conscientious) Kriemhild links the two parts of the films in which the princess becomes an avenger.

Illustrative moments

Trustful. Kriemhild unknowingly facilitates the assassination of her husband by telling Hagen about his vulnerability.

Strong-willed. When Siegfried is first received by Gunther, a clash seems imminent. Kriemhild's appearance prevents it and she makes it clear that it is her decision to marry Siegfried.

Worldly. Kriemhild is initially quite docile, but even then she is not aloof about mundane matters. When Brunhild becomes the 'First Lady' by marrying Gunther, Kriemhild struggles to maintain her previous position as the top woman in the Burgundian protocol. This turns out to be a key moment—Kriemhild nastily reveals to Brunhild the secret about her marriage, igniting her rival's fury for Siegfried.

Leader. Kriemhild marries Etzel in order to manipulate him to kill her arch-enemy. When the Hun King does not wholeheartedly embrace her thirst for revenge, she becomes the driving force of the attacks against the Nibelungs: she organizes the warriors, gives commands and changes tactics (e.g. scaling the walls, burning the palace down).

SIEGFRIED (Emotional) The valiant prince acquires magical powers in his journey through the forest.

Illustrative moments

Self-made. Siegfried is the Prince of Xanten but we don't get to see his family. He is introduced as an individual independent of his aristocratic connections. The hero's quest begins with him forging steel and making his own weapon—he is a master blacksmith, the "maker of the sword" (Bratton, 203) before becoming an invincible warrior.

Naïve. Siegfried is brave but he is also quite naïve. He remains unaware of Hagen and Brunhild's conspiracy against him. Just before assassinating him, Hagen challenges Siegfried to a running race in order to make him leave his weapons behind and he trustfully accepts it.

BRUNHILD (Disagreeable) The Queen of Iceland is the proud ruler of a kingdom of Amazons.

Illustrative moments

Powerful and Independent. Brunhild is the progenitor of action heroines of cinema—Imperator Furiosa in *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015), comic book superhero Wonder Woman (princess of the island nation Themyscira), *Xena: Warrior Princess* (1995). Her athletic prowess is undisputable and only through the use of magic is she eventually beaten by men.

Devastated. The basis of the alliance and blood brotherhood between Siegfried and Gunther is to control her physically and politically. Wedding Gunther makes her the Queen of Burgundy but costs her her independence. When she loses the athletic challenge, Brunhild is clearly devastated.

THEMES

Justice – Revenge
Relationship – Loyalty
Flaw – Treason
Ethics – Heroism
Change – Fate
Quest – Animal Symbolism

JUSTICE

Revenge. Kriemhild's thirst for revenge is unparalleled, even compared to the most vindictive characters in Lang's other films—Vern in *Rancho Notorious*, Joe in *Fury*, and Bannion in *The Big Heat*. She marries the Hun King as a way to gain leverage for her revenge mission and to accomplish her objective, she readily sacrifices her entire family. When Etzel is reluctant to massacre his guests, she has their little son brought in to the dining hall—possibly anticipating Hagen's murderous violence and how it would ignite Etzel's fury. Subsequently, her two brothers Gernot and Giselher die trying to protect her arch-enemy. This seems to upset her but doesn't slow her down—she orders the execution of the remaining brother, King Gunther.

RELATIONSHIP

Loyalty. Oath of loyalty is held above everything in *Die Nibelungen*. The Burgundian King Gunther refuses to take action against Hagen who has been loyal to him. Kriemhild also appeals to her two other brothers, Grenot and Giselher, whose response is no different. Their stubbornness entails the annihilation at the end of the second part. Etzel's vassal Dietrich remarks to his king that this is a character trait of his fellow Germans—their "soul"—which he would not be able to comprehend. Then again, it appears loyalty is a complicated issue: Rudiger has sworn allegiance to Huns but he is also friendly with the Nibelungs who trust him. He tries to remain neutral as the two sides battle, but is ultimately forced by Etzel to join the fight on the side of the Huns.

FLAW

Treason. According to the **stab-in-the-back** myth circulated after WWI by the Nazis and conservatives, the war was lost due to the betrayal of politicians. *Die Nibelungen* evokes this myth with two of its key scenes: Alberich, the dwarf-king of Nibelungs, sneak attacks Siegfried twice; later, Hagen of Tronje waits for Siegfried to drink water from a stream and launches his spear when he is defenseless.

ETHICS

Heroism. What makes a hero? This seems to be one of the questions Lang poses. For example, Hagen of Tronje, the chief villain of *Die Nibelungen*, is a sneaky and manipulative killer (also a vicious child murderer). Yet he is portrayed as a courageous knight who is unflinching in his loyalty to Gunther. He fights to the end—ultimately offers to personally surrender to the Huns in order to save his king.

CHANGE

Fate. Three years before *Die Nibelungen*, Lang's *Destiny*'s heroine struggled with her fate and found that nothing she does would change the outcome of events. Similarly, Siegfried fulfills his destiny by slaying the dragon and becomes invincible by bathing in its blood. It is also part of his fate that he has a vulnerable spot—by coincidence, a leaf falls and gets stuck on his back. According to Kracauer, "in *Destiny* fate manifests itself through the actions of tyrants; in *Die Nibelungen*, through the anarchical outbursts of ungovernable instincts and passions" (Bratton, 93).

QUEST

Animal Symbolism. Animal symbolism—particularly birds—is used to underscore character traits (Rees). This is done by the use of costumes as well as ornamental intertitles—Kriemhild and Siegfried are respectively represented by a unicorn and a dove. More striking is the characterizations of the deadly and formidable Hagen and Brunhild. Hagen wears a majestic winged helm, which evokes the deadly black eagles in Kriemhild's dream. The Woodcut intertitle cards associated with him display a wolf. Brunhild's metal headgear features a swan and a snake adorns her intertitles.

Discussion questions

Goebbels and Hitler were reportedly fond of *Die Nibelungen*, particularly (perhaps only) of its first part. What are themes and scenes that could have appealed to the Nazis?

Most of the characters in the film are quite unlikable (including Siegfried) and some are downright despicable—yet they are all loyal-unto-death. What is Lang's approach to the theme of loyalty?

How has Leni Riefenstahl borrowed themes and/or visual motifs from *Die Nibelungen*? How have they been put to use in *Triumph of the Will (1935)*?

Critics have pointed out that one of the popular sword and sorcery films, *Conan the Barbarian* (1982) is permeated with racism and inspired by fascist aesthetics—in the spirit of *Triumph of the Will. Are there* parallels between *Conan* and its decade—1980s—and *Die Nibelungen* and 1920s*?*

The Queen of Iceland is an Amazon woman who may be considered to be a progenitor of Imperator Furiosa, Wonder Woman and *Xena: Warrior Princess*. In what ways is this figure similar and different compared to contemporary heroines?

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