

Lang contra Wagner

Die Nibelungen as Anti-Adaptation

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Since he was married throughout his most productive decade to his principal screenwriter, it is no surprise that Fritz Lang has never received his due as an adapter. Even apart from the films he directed from screenplays by Thea von Harbou and those based on her novels – *Spies* (1928), *Woman in the Moon* (1929), and *The Tiger of Eschnapur* and *The Indian Tomb* (both 1959), this last pair filmed many years after the couple’s separation and three years after von Harbou’s death in 1956 – many of his most characteristic films before and after his marriage to von Harbou are adaptations: *Harakiri* (1919), *Four Around a Woman* (1921), *Dr. Mabuse, der Spieler* (1922), *Liliom* (1934), *Man Hunt* (1941), *Western Union* (1941), *Ministry of Fear* (1944), *The Woman in the Window* (1944), *Scarlet Street* (1945), *Secret Beyond the Door* (1947), *House by the River* (1950), *American Guerrilla in the Philippines* (1950), *Rancho Notorious* (1952), *Clash by Night* (1952), *The Big Heat* (1953), *Human Desire* (1954), *Moonfleet* (1955), and *While the City Sleeps* (1956). It seems odd that Lang, legendary for his dictatorial attitude toward filmmaking, should have dedicated so much of his career to telling other people’s stories.

This paradox is nowhere sharper than in the most celebrated of all Lang’s adaptations, *Die Nibelungen* (1924). Neither of the two parts of Lang’s medieval epic, *Siegfried* and *Kriemhild’s Revenge*, lists any sources for its screenplay in its credits. Instead, both screenplays are simply credited to von Harbou. But if the ancestry of the gigantic two-part epic is obscure, its general outlines are clear. The story of Lang and von Harbou’s ultimate source, the anonymous late-twelfth-century Germanic epic *Das Nibelungenlied* and the mid-thirteenth-century Icelandic *Volsunga Saga*, had already been retold any number of times by such nineteenth-century poets as Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué, Ernst Raupach, Anastasius Grün, Emanuel Geibel, Friedrich Hebbel, Wilhelm Jordan, and William Morris. As Victoria M. Stiles has concluded, Lang, “besides following the basic plot of the Siegfried legend

(virtually known to every German) . . . simply utilized effective points from the various works listed above” (“The Siegfried Legend” 232).

One source, however, remained particularly problematic: Richard Wagner’s operatic cycle *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (1853–1874), by far the best known of all adaptations of the epic. Lang shared with his audience a sense of Wagner’s four operas – *Das Rheingold*, *Die Walküre*, *Siegfried*, and *Die Götterdämmerung* – as the most powerful and popular of all previous adaptations, the unmarked version of the story that would have been foremost in the mind of any German audience who heard about Lang’s forthcoming film. By the 1920s, in fact, Wagner had assumed the status of both a quasi-Scriptural source for the story of Siegfried and an unofficial touchstone of German high culture. For all Lang’s awareness of Wagner’s influence, however, he “detested Wagner with even more passion than his usual dislike of classical music” (McGilligan 103).

Despite Wagner’s long shadow, there were perfectly sound reasons why Lang would have proposed the project to Erich Pommer at Decla-Bioscop, which had recently merged with Ufa. A film version of Germany’s greatest epic offered the possibility of dispelling the defeated nation’s postwar gloom even as it celebrated the director’s German citizenship, which the Austrian-born Lang had taken in 1922. It would “outwit (or, better . . . out-culture) Hollywood by exploiting the Germans’ purportedly superior cultural tradition and, through it, their superior access to the universal” (Levin 97). By recalling the medieval glory of Germany, such a film could make a case for the nation’s long-standing place in history and spur its citizens to greater national pride. In addition, it could serve as the second panel of an epic triptych of Germany present, past, and future that Lang had begun with *Dr. Mabuse, der Spieler*, whose two parts had been subtitled “Ein Bild der Zeit” (A Picture of the Times) and “Ein Spiel von Menschen unserer Zeit” (A Play about People of Our Time), and would continue with *Metropolis* (1927) to form a portrait of Germany past, present, and future that could eclipse Wagner’s. Finally and most importantly, it might well provide Ufa with the lucrative international export that had so far eluded the German national studio. The monetary hyperinflation Lang had adverted to in the opening movement of *Dr. Mabuse* made it plausible for filmmakers and executives alike to dream of a big-budget film that could be financed with wildly inflated Reichsmarks and serve as an export commodity to countries whose effectively higher production costs would have made such an epic prohibitively expensive. Hence “the film seeks to win an audience not for itself alone, but for the cause of German film as well” (Levin 116).

The association with Wagner could help the studio sell the film abroad to audiences who would otherwise have disdained the decidedly lower-class cachet of the cinema. But it could not depend uncritically on the association, for the composer’s own international brand was in sore need of rehabilitation, or at least of updating, after World War I. Ever since the composer’s death in 1883, productions of the *Ring* operas had been dominated by the “Bayreuth Style” rigidly enforced by his widow Cosima and her son Siegfried. As Erick Neher notes, “Cosima taught by

imitation rather than by bringing the actors to a deep understanding of their roles so that movement would be spontaneous and organic" (176). The result was a highly unified performance style that emphasized the integration of words, music, gesture, and production design, but in a mechanical way increasingly challenged by the rise of psychological realism in the theater of Ibsen, Strindberg, and Chekhov. Not until Adolphe Appia's 1924 production of the four operas at the Municipal Theater of Basel, in which the performers sang directly to the audience, and the 1925 Frankfurt staging of the tetralogy, in which Ludwig Sievert supplemented Appia's stylized geometric sets with modern costumes, did the *Ring* begin to be delivered from an iron discipline that had originated in a quest for period realism and ended in its own hyperstylization.

At the same time, there was no denying the power of Wagner's reworking of his own sources as at once "a political parable on the use and misuse of power, a dialectic on the inevitable corruption of capital, an environmental warning against the rape of nature, and a philosophical manifesto on the need to remove oneself spiritually from worldly entanglements" (Neher 185) – all themes dear to Lang himself. Nor could the director ignore Wagner's success in having colonized *Das Nibelungenlied* so thoroughly that even today, "there are educated people who think that Wagner's cycle is somehow called *Das Nibelungenlied*. Whenever the epic is mentioned outside of specialist circles, the conversation usually turns to Wagner," because "it is Wagner who has kept the name Nibelung before the public, even for those who loathe him and his music" (Haymes xviii). Whatever Lang's own attitude toward Wagner, the *Ring* operas had assumed quasi-Scriptural status by the time he submitted his proposal for a gigantic two-part film on the subject.

Strongly opposed to adapting Wagner and unable to ignore his example, Lang developed a third strategy. David J. Levin contends that both Wagner's and Lang's versions of the story "figure their own aesthetic shortcomings, but fob them off onto a character within the work [Mime in Wagner, Alberich in Lang] who is eventually unmasked and killed off as an aesthetic bad object" (11). In Levin's reading, Wagner's reservations about storytelling and Lang's about visual representation are both figured in the different settings they design for Siegfried's death. Without either endorsing or disputing Levin's reading, this essay will argue that Wagner's *Ring* becomes Lang's bad object – in Levin's terms, "an agent within the work who is nonetheless foreign to it" (11).

Wagner, of course, cannot serve as an agent in the same way that Mime or Alberich does. He is not part of the diegesis, and his actions have no power over the world within the film. Yet both the production and the reception of *Die Nibelungen* are so inescapably entwined with Wagner's telling of the story that the composer/librettist does function as an agent, even though he is unaware of the role he is serving. Moreover, von Harbou clearly saw the film itself as a quasi-human agent. As Adeline Mueller points out, her "curious anthropomorphizing" of the film as "a singer, a bard-poet" to the "weary and overworked" German

people “suggests that for von Harbou, the film was no artifact but rather a living herald for all of Germany’s postwar aspirations” (93).

The most reasonable way to order the various agencies at play in the film – those of Wagner, von Harbou, Lang, the film itself – is implicit in Edward R. Haymes’s observation that Lang’s is “to some extent an anti-Wagnerian conception of the material even though many scenes are based on Wagner either in imitation or in reaction” (xviii–xix). The filmmakers acknowledge and trump Wagner’s agency by making their film a living argument with the dead composer, making *Die Nibelungen* an anti-adaptation, an adaptation fashioned specifically to take account of Wagner by contravening and correcting what Lang takes to be an errant earlier adaptation of the material on which he wishes to focus. The film’s famous dedication, “Dem deutschen Volke zu Eigen” (To the German People), marks Lang’s wish, as he maintained at the end of his life, “to draw inspiration from [Germany’s] past” in order “to counteract [the] pessimistic spirit” of the postwar era (Phillips 179), and not so incidentally to counteract the pre-eminence of Wagner.

Even casual viewers of Lang’s film can see that it follows the plot of *Das Nibelungenlied* much more closely than that of Wagner’s operas. It excises all the events of *Das Rheingold*, *Die Walküre*, and *Die Götterdämmerung*, along with the whole apparatus of Wotan, Valhalla, the fated Rheingold, and the apocalyptic cosmology to which Wagner had joined the story of Siegfried. Lang’s hero (Paul Richter) is a man of superhuman powers who comes by them not through his ancestral connections to the gods but by winning a magical cloak of invisibility and bathing in the blood of the dragon he has slain. Instead, the structure of the film, as Paul M. Jensen was the first to point out, follows Hebbel’s 1862 play, from which it borrows its title, its division into two parts titled *Siegfried* and *Kriemhild’s Revenge*, and several other alterations to the epic: “The dramatist made Gunther alone king of the Burgundians by reducing the importance of his brothers Gernot and Giselher, used Volker to narrate Siegfried’s past adventures instead of Hagen, and made the sword Balmung an accidental acquisition. He also built up the character of King Etzel (Attila)” (47). Von Harbou follows Hebbel, not Wagner, in including the cast members she does and adopts Hebbel’s spelling of “Ute,” “Brunhild,” “Gerenot,” “Hagen Tronje,” and “Dankwart.” And Lang follows Hebbel in rooting *Siegfried* in the austere chivalric court of Worms and *Kriemhild’s Revenge* in the considerably more demotic court of King Etzel. His most significant departure from Hebbel, his cutting of religious elements that emphasize the clash between a dying pagan culture and the rise of Christianity, is presumably motivated by the same impulse that makes him eliminate Wagner’s cosmological framing of the story.

Only the opening section of Lang’s first film draws its primary inspiration from Wagner. In beginning the story of Siegfried with the re-forging of the sword Notung – a rare Wagnerian scene drawn from the opening of *Siegfried* that has no cognate in *Das Nibelungenlied* – von Harbou and Lang follow Wagner in making Mime (Georg John) the guardian of Siegfried rather than keeping his birth parents Siegmund and Sieglind alive to celebrate his victories, as *Das Nibelungenlied* does.

Once Siegfried has succeeded in recasting the sword, the very next scene shows him encountering and slaying the dragon and bathing in the blood that will make his body impervious to wounds except in one spot on which a fallen linden leaf has prevented the dragon's blood from covering his skin – an incident *Das Nibelungenlied* presents only as part of Siegfried's backstory (28). Lang's film therefore compacts the events of the first two acts, or two and a half hours, of Wagner's opera into some twenty minutes before breaking decisively with Wagner and returning to Hebbel and, behind Hebbel, *Das Nibelungenlied*.

Even more important than Lang's decision to follow Hebbel and his epic source rather than Wagner in the selection and emphasis of incident is his adoption of anti-Wagnerian strategies of presentation. Some of these strategies are obvious. In Lang's film, the only leading characters who wear the winged helmets long associated with Wagnerian productions are Brunhild (Hanna Ralph), whose hostility toward marriage in general and Gunther (Theodor Loos) in particular propels the fatal intrigue of *Siegfried*, and Hagen (Hans Adalbert Schlettow), the dark knight whose murder of Siegfried betrays both his avowed friendship with the hero and the confidence Kriemhild (Marguerite Schön) has reposed in him in showing him the one place where her husband can be mortally wounded.

A more subtle but far-reaching strategy is Lang's handling of deixis. Deictic references, whose meaning depends on their contexts, typically require an understanding of contexts that are not explicitly specified. Whenever a story refers by name to a character, or whenever a film presents a shot of a character, who has not yet been identified, readers and viewers are meant to assume either that the character is insignificant, as in the many heroes who are named and slain in a single breath in Book V of the *Iliad*, or that they are being invited to use their knowledge of familiar stories and representational conventions to gather clues and hazard guesses as to the character's identity, as in the films of Sergio Leone and Pasolini's *The Gospel According to Matthew* (1964).

Das Nibelungenlied begins, "We have been told in ancient tales" (Hatto 17) – a formula that promises an old story and presumes an audience familiar with it. But the epic makes little use of deictic markers for names or places, preferring instead to give what might well be unnecessary exposition of background information about characters and places. It begins by clearly identifying the heroine of the poem ("In the land of the Burgundians there grew up a maiden of high lineage. . . . Her name was Kriemhild"), her brothers ("She was in the care of three great and noble kings, the renowned warriors Gunther and Gernot, and young Giselher, a splendid knight, and she was sister to these princes who had charge of her"), and her parents ("The great queen their mother was named Uote, and their father, who had bequeathed them their heritage, was called Dancrat") (17). The hero is even more conscientiously identified by name, lineage, and place: "Down the Rhine, in the splendid, far-famed city of Xanten in the Netherlands, there grew up a royal prince, a gallant knight named Siegfried, son of Siegmund and Sieglind" (20). When foreign warlords threaten Gunther and his court, the poet obligingly gives their credentials: "Strange tidings were on their way to Gunther's country,

borne by envoys that had been sent to the Burgundians from afar by unknown warriors who were nevertheless their enemies. . . . I shall name these warriors for you. They were Liudeger, the proud and mighty monarch of Saxony, and Liudegast, King of Denmark” (33).

Even after the poem’s leading characters have been introduced, they are often reintroduced. The second half of the poem, corresponding to *Kriemhild’s Revenge*, is especially emphatic in this regard, perhaps, as A. T. Hatto notes, because “the poet’s full-scale epic source for the second half of the poem (the older ‘Nôt’) began at this point” (150). King Etzel, who announces that “I am a heathen and have never been baptized,” is urged to seek the hand of “a proud widow of Burgundy whose name was lady Kriemhild” (150). Volker, who had already been introduced at the very outset of the poem as “Volker of Alzei, a man of flawless courage” (18), is reintroduced as “bold Volker, a gentleman-musician” (186) and “a redoubtable warrior called Volker” (198). Even Gunther’s kinsman and vassal Hagen, whose murder of Siegfried had made him one of the leading characters of the epic, is reintroduced from a new point of view: “Many a brave man among the Huns was most curious to know what Hagen of Troneck looked like. . . . To tell the truth, the hero was well-grown, being broad-chested and long-legged. His hair was flecked with grey, and his gaze was terrible. His carriage was majestic” (215–216).

This epic convention inspires one of Wagner’s most distinctive tics: his characters’ constant use of highly repetitive narratives that review their backgrounds and their credentials one more time with everyone they meet. Of many accounts of this habit, the most amusing is that of George Bernard Shaw:

Siegfried inherits from Wotan a mania for autobiography, which leads him to inflict on everyone he meets the story of Mime and the dragon, although the audience have spent a whole evening witnessing the events he is narrating. Hagen tells the story to Gunther; and that same night Alberich’s ghost tells it to Hagen, who knows it already as well as the audience. Siegfried tells the Rhine maidens as much of it as they will listen to, and then keeps telling it to his hunting companions until they kill him. (109)

It is not surprising to find such repetitious backstories in opera, a narrative form that is not notable for economical exposition or self-effacing heroes. Even in the grand operas whose inert, detachable arias and ensembles Wagner attacked, obligatory speeches, borrowing on dramatic traditions rooted in Greek tragedy, often substituted for the staging of the events they described. Wagner’s dramatic innovation was not to discard these speeches but to integrate them more closely with the action and use them to complicate and deepen the meaning of his fables.

The silent cinema offered no possibility of duplicating the accounts of his triumphs Wagner had put into Siegfried’s mouth, and their omission does not make Lang’s film anti-Wagnerian. What is more striking is its much greater dependence on deixis than either the poem or the operas, particularly in its sparing and strategically deferred use of intertitles. After following the opening credits with

two further title cards – “Canto 1” and “How Siegfried slayed the dragon” – Lang proceeds directly to a sequence showing his blond, fur-clad hero forging a sword in a dark smithy as a disgruntled old man watches warily. Not until five minutes have passed and the sword has split a feather the old man has blown atop its blade does the film explicitly identify the two characters through its first expository intertitle: “This spoke Mime, the artful blacksmith: Siegfried, son of King Siegmund, ride home to Xanten. Even I cannot teach you any more!” Despite its use of epic epithets, this intertitle has the effect of confirming rather than establishing the characters’ identities. When Siegfried ventures outside the smithy, he overhears a burly, mustachioed man who is never named proclaiming the glories of Worms, whose castle is shown in the first of many visual representations of characters’ speech. Asked to elaborate, the man replies in an intertitle, “Have you never before heard of the king’s castle at Worms on the Rhine and the kings of Burgundy who reign there?” – a speech that is followed by a more extended montage of the court at Worms, ending with a church service in which a demure blond woman crosses herself. “I shall go there to win Kriemhild!” Siegfried cries exultantly, confirming the identity of this woman after the fact.

As Siegfried sets out on his journey, he tells Mime, “Show me the way to Worms or you will lose your life!” The old man responds by leading the hero’s horse to a clearing and pointing toward the camera. Once Siegfried has ridden offscreen, Mime mutters, “Farewell, Siegfried, son of King Siegmund. You will never get to Worms!” Although the tone of the dialogue and the postures and gestures of the performers make clear the hostility between Siegfried and Mime, they do nothing to explain its background or its causes. Mime’s confidence in his prediction is explained by the immediately following sequence, which links an iris-out on a dragon’s head to a full shot of the beast as it slowly lumbers forward to an iris-out on Mime as he turns and retreats to his forge, evidently satisfied in his reverie of the dragon. But it is never clear whether or not Siegfried anticipates meeting the dragon, whose growls he hears as he is riding through the forest, or why he chooses to rush forth and attack a fearsome beast that is presumably unaware of his own existence and certainly incapable of moving swiftly enough to follow him. After Siegfried handily slays the creature, he accidentally skims his hand in the blood that is gushing forth from its corpse. As a result he is able to decode the speech of a bird shown in close-up. An intertitle explains:

Young Siegfried understood the bird’s song:
If the dragon slayer would bathe in the dragon’s blood,
his body would become invincible,
forever safe against sword and spear.

This intertitle explains the hero’s decision to immerse himself enthusiastically in the lake of blood. But although the film shows the dragon’s tail, twitching in its death throes against a tree and a leaf falling from the tree to land on Siegfried’s

upper back in a close-up that ends Canto 1, it does not explain the significance of this leaf for over an hour, assuming that the audience already knows that it compromises the hero's invulnerability.

Because it defers a good deal of expository information, leaves some characters and motives unidentified, and keeps explanatory or dialogue intertitles to an absolute minimum (only six title cards in its first twenty minutes, including only the last one noted above for Siegfried's encounter with the dragon), this opening Canto assumes an audience that already knows enough about the story to gloss over particular details as either familiar or inconsequential. The effect, like that of the Nazarene sections of D. W. Griffith's *Intolerance* (1916), is to chart a path between telling a story and alluding to it, secure in the knowledge that the audience will supply the missing details, identifications, and connections.

In Canto 2, "How Volker, the bard, sang of Siegfried in front of Kriemhild, and how Siegfried came to Worms," the challenges to the audience become sharper. This canto begins with an establishing shot of a man with his back to the camera playing a stringed instrument in a large, sparsely peopled room. Lang holds the shot long enough for the audience to make out several much smaller figures in the background. Scanning the shot from left to right reveals a woman in dark attire, another woman in white robes, a man seated in an alcove at the center of the shot, and two dark figures seated against the right-hand wall. The sequence this shot introduces, which lasts for about two minutes, cuts from a full shot of the instrumentalist, now shown singing as well, to a full shot of the woman in white, now identifiable as Kriemhild at her needlework, to a full shot of the man in the alcove, now identifiable as wearing a crown and sitting on a throne, to a full shot that presumably shows the two more nondescript men originally on screen right of the establishing shot. A second round shows even closer shots of the singer, the dark-robed woman, her crown now clearly visible, and Kriemhild, before a third round returns to the singer, then Kriemhild raising her head from her needlework, and finally a full shot of a scowling mailed warrior who has appeared in no earlier shot in the scene. An intertitle follows:

The violin sounded and Volker sang:
The dragon slayer, the son of Siegmund
entered the realm of the Nibelungen.
He won the fight against the dragon.
There is no one on earth like him.

This intertitle is striking not so much for what it says as for what it omits. Although it confirms the aptness of Canto 2's title by conclusively identifying the singer as Volker (Bernhard Goetzke), the rest of what it tells the audience, in one of the film's rare Wagnerian expository duplications, is precisely what they have just seen and do not need to hear again. What it does not tell them is who has been listening to Volker's song. Most viewers will remember Kriemhild from the brief presentation

of her in the description of Worms in Canto 1. But only viewers very familiar with the story will have identified the man with the crown and throne as King Gunther and the crowned woman in dark robes as Queen Ute (Gertrud Arnold). And although these same viewers might well identify the scowling warrior who seems to come out of nowhere (his location in the throne room is never made clear) as Hagen, it would take a canny viewer indeed to pick out the two men originally on screen right as the Burgundian lords Gerenot (Hans Carl Mueller) and Giselher (Erwin Biswanger).

This same intertitle is obscure in still another way. The sequence that follows begins with a midshot of a bearded dwarf starting suspiciously at the approach of Siegfried. As the hero comes to a clearing, he suddenly clutches his neck and head, and a fade-in on a superimposition reveals that he is being choked by the invisible dwarf, now visible again. After Siegfried vanquishes his assailant, an intertitle retrospectively clarifies their encounter – “Thus spoke Alberich, the Nibelung: Spare my life and I will give you the wonder cap. Whoever wears it becomes unseen or takes whatever form he chooses!” – and introduces a sequence in which the defeated Alberich (Georg John) takes the hero to a subterranean dome and shows him the Nibelungen treasure, whose most notable items are the crown of the King of the Northland and the magic sword Balmung. When Siegfried, attacked once more by the dwarf, takes up the sword and kills him, Alberich, with his dying breath, calls on his slaves to follow him in returning to the stone from which they were wrought and curses his hero who has defeated him and won the treasure. After the film shows Alberich and his slaves turning to stone, another intertitle follows:

The violin sounded and Volker sang:
Siegfried became the dragon slayer
The lord of the Nibelungen Treasure.
Twelve kingdoms subdued the powerful,
Twelve kings became his vassals.

This intertitle, followed by a return to the court at Worms that shows Kriemhild now casting aside her needlework to sit in rapt attention, is the film’s first indication that the preceding ten minutes showing Siegfried’s encounter with Alberich have been a flashback, not a present-tense incident as the hero approached Worms, and indeed suggesting that this whole incident took place before “Siegfried became the dragon slayer.” It does nothing, nor does anything else in the film, to reconcile Siegfried’s acquisition of Balmung with his determination in the opening scene to forge his own, equally magical sword.

These opening sequences show how thoroughly Lang transforms establishing shots, proper names, and intertitles from their traditional function as expository devices that help to tell the story, in the manner of the epic he is adapting, or to develop or deepen its significance by lingering over information, in the manner of Wagner’s operas, into often deceptive or obscure hints that reward audiences who

are already familiar with his story and mystify those who are not. Since the tale has been told in so many versions before Lang, in fact, episodes like Siegfried's defeat of Alberich and his winning of the Nibelungen treasure and the cap of invisibility can assume an obscure position in the story's sequence of events even to filmgoers who know the story well. The film assumes an audience thoroughly familiar with the principal topoi of Siegfried's adventures – the forging of Notung, the pledge to win Kriemhild even before he meets her, the slaying of the dragon, the winning of the cap of invisibility – but relatively unconcerned about their sequence or causality. Its principles of structure and representation amount to an unbridled challenge to Wagner's determination to present the definitive version of the tale, one that requires no earlier acquaintance with the story to be intelligible.

At the same time, the film makes Siegfried considerably less endearingly naïve or open-hearted than he is in either the epic or Wagner's opera. In *Das Nibelungenlied*, Siegfried offers "to help [Gunther] avert all your troubles" (34–35) even before he knows what they are and then, when he hears that the king's Saxon enemies are preparing to attack, elaborates: "let me win honour and advantage for you" (35). In the poem, Gunther proposes that if Siegfried helps him win Brunhild, "I will stake my life and honour for you in return" (53). Siegfried's counter-offer – "I will do it, if you will give me your sister fair Kriemhild, the noble princess. . . . I wish no other reward for my trouble" (54) – comes across as modest and unassuming rather than calculating. Just before the invisible Siegfried assists Gunther in his three contests with Brunhild, the poet observes that "Gunther and Siegfried went in fear of her enmity" (66); when he battles Alberich, "Siegfried feared for his life" (71). Such descriptions make the hero seem more impetuous, mercurial, and human than he ever is in Lang.

In Wagner, Siegfried, responding to the bird's song evoking Brünnhilde at the end of Act Two of *Siegfried* as a bride who cannot be won by a coward, at once emphasizes his fearlessness and his boyishness when he describes himself as "der dumme Knab', der das Fürchten nicht kennt" (a stupid boy who knows not fear [my translation, like all those from Wagner]). He takes up the same theme when he tells the newly awakened Brünnhilde that "das Fürchten, ach! das ich nie gelernt, das Fürchten, das du mich kaum gelehrt: das Fürchten – mich dünkt, ich Dummer vergaß es nun ganz!" (the fear that – ah! – I never learned, the fear that you just now taught me, that fear, I think, I have forgotten like a simpleton already!). Her rapturous response again roots his heroism in his childlike innocence: "O kindischer Held! O herrlicher Knabe! Du hehrster Taten töriger Hort!" (O childlike hero! O splendid boy! You silly hoard of sublime deeds!). Minutes before he is slain in fulfillment of their prophecy in *Die Götterdämmerung*, the Rhinemaidens tease him in similar terms for his refusal to avert his death by returning the ring to them:

Flosshilde: So schön! (So handsome!)

Wellgunde: So stark! (So strong!)

Woglinde: So gehrenswert! (So desirable!)

All three: Wie schade, daß er geizig ist! (What a shame he's so stingy!)

Lang's Siegfried seems from the first less boyish and more calculating. When Hagen tells Gunther upon Siegfried's arrival that "Siegfried, the unique hero, has come to Worms at an opportune moment. He may help us win Brunhild for you!" Siegfried's instinctive response is not to support the man he hopes will be his brother-in-law but to bridle at Hagen's insult: "You are presumptuous, my lord Hagen. Twelve kings have I for vassals, but vassal am I to no man, now and ever!" Only the sudden entrance of Kriemhild prevents Siegfried and Hagen from breaking out their weapons. After first gazing at the bride he has never seen before and then accepting some wine from the bowl she carries, he announces, "Prepare for the quest to get your bride, King Gunther, it is Siegfried the mighty hero who will win Brunhild for you!" A fateful shot of Siegfried, then Gunther, and finally Hagen clasping hands in mutual friendship ends the film's second Canto. It is an image of complicity in which the hero's conceited self-regard carries no trace of boyish modesty.

All these devices pit Lang's *Siegfried* against its Wagnerian counterpart in ways that are impossible for *Kriemhild's Revenge*, which ventures into territory Wagner never touches. In its own way, however, the second half of Lang's film is equally anti-Wagnerian in its refusal of Wagner's rhetorical strategies. The single most anti-Wagnerian feature of Lang's film is of course the absence of Wagner's music. According to Patrick McGilligan, Lang "said he had resisted suggestions to use the archetypal (and notoriously anti-Semitic) Wagner as background for the film's original release in Germany" (103). There was no question of using any uncut Wagner score for *Kriemhild's Revenge*. There would have been no such possible score, since the film takes the story in a very different direction from *Die Götterdämmerung*; only Gunther appears as a character in both Wagner's opera and Lang's film. But Adeline Mueller, implicitly contesting Lang's account, reports that Ufa "had originally wanted to use Wagner's own music to score the film, but was prevented from doing so by the composer's heirs" (86). Instead, the studio chose Gottfried Huppertz to compose the film's music, even though he had never scored a film before. Mueller pointedly describes the "double bind" the newcomer faced: "Huppertz had to create original music for a subject that seemed almost inseparable from Wagner's *Ring*, and furthermore, he had to compose within a mainstream film-scoring practice that relied heavily on quasi-Wagnerian thematicism" (87). The composer resolved this dilemma largely by adapting a pastiche of Wagnerian-sounding melodies and sonorities to standard Hollywood practice, attaching easily recognizable themes to specific characters and places, rather than following Wagner's practice of evoking more abstract ideas (the Rheingold, Fate, servitude, and so on) by shorter musical motifs that could be variously transformed and intertwined. More generally, the film avoids diegetic musical cues. Even when Volker is singing one final lay as Attila's hall is engulfed in flames, leaving both Huns and Nibelungs rapt in attention, the audience in the theater cannot hear – or, courtesy of intertitles, see – a word.

An important result of this strategy is that the appearance of leading characters throughout the film is accompanied by music that emphasizes their identifiability

and consistency rather than their openness to change. The apparent exception to this pattern, the film's use of Siegfried's own theme, proves the rule. For this music, which is heard after the hero's death in connection with the earth Kriemhild takes from his grave, the betrothal of Giselher to Dietlind (Annie Röttgen), the daughter of Ruediger von Bechlam (Rudolf Rittner), and, in a minor key, over the film's final intertitle, "Thus ends the tale of Kriemhild's Revenge," dramatizes Kriemhild's unwavering devotion to the husband from whom not even death can separate her. Such an adamant conception of character is at odds not only with Wagner – whose *Wanderer in Siegfried*, to take the most obvious example, is so much more chastened than the Wotan who appeared in *Das Rheingold* – but with *Das Nibelungenlied*, whose use of formulaic epithets presages Wagner's use of musical motifs. The convention of attaching descriptive epithets to even the most important characters in many an oral epic might be described as an aid to both the poet's and the audience's memory, which would otherwise have to depend on deictic markers to identify leading names and places. But *Das Nibelungenlied* uses epithets not only to identify characters but to indicate the poet's changing attitudes toward them. Once Hagen determines to kill Siegfried, the poet, noting his "monstrous treachery" (123) and "overweening pride" (133), shifts from calling him "mighty Hagen" (30) to "the traitor Hagen" (122) and "fierce Hagen" (137). After the killing of Siegfried, the poet shifts in the second half of the epic, the part that corresponds to *Kriemhild's Revenge*, to more neutral epithets that emphasize Hagen's fighting prowess without taking an ethical stand: "the bold lord of Tromeck" (197), "the splendid fighting-man" (245), and, as King Etzel eulogizes him after Kriemhild beheads him, "the best knight who ever bore shield to battle" (290–291). As "the noble king" (47) Gunther sends Siegfried off to fight in the nonexistent war Hagen has cooked up as cover for Siegfried's murder, the poet describes him as "the faithless man in his perfidy" (120). In the second half of the poem, however, he sets Gunther, who repents of his role in Siegfried's death, against Hagen, who is proudly unrepentant, by restoring to the king the epithet "noble Gunther" (184, 285) and referring to "his own high excellence" (187). In Lang, by contrast, Hagen remains unburdened by any new epithets. In his loyalty to his lord and his men and his refusal to abandon them throughout *Kriemhild's Revenge*, he remains heroic, tragic, and in some ways admirable to the end, assuming along the way much of the burden of the unbearable conflict of loyalties the poet had assigned to Etzel's vassal Rüdiger, whose unwilling attack on Gernot, who has been a guest in his home, ends in both their deaths.

Just as Huppertz's score trades Wagner's intricate calculus of musical motifs for a grammar of more readily recognizable themes associated with characters and places rather than relations or ideas, von Harbou's screenplay generally forgoes the epithets that play such a decisive role in encouraging the audience's shifting sympathies as the plot against Siegfried moves toward its calamitous consequences. It might be argued, of course, that epithets have no place in movies – it is hard to

imagine a synch-sound film pressing them into service – and that including them in silent intertitles would be unidiomatic and anachronistic. But the film, which sets its intertitles in an equally anachronistic Gothic script, could certainly have included descriptive epithets if it chose. Unlike *Siegfried*, which uses such epithets as “the artful blacksmith,” “son of King Siegmund,” “the Nibelung,” and “the daughter of Ute” to introduce characters on their first appearance, not to modulate or complicate the terms on which they are presented, *Kriemhild’s Revenge* virtually dispenses with them altogether.

The film’s rejection of epithets as a means of developing the characters is only one aspect of a larger decision to keep the leading characters from changing. Because he chooses to present a version of the Siegfried story that does not require Brunhild to fall in love, Lang does not need to show her softening or warming to Siegfried or Gunther; instead, she can remain baleful till the last. Once she is widowed, Lang’s frozen Kriemhild, who thereafter never smiles and rarely moves quickly or abruptly before she strikes Hagen dead, is far more consistent and cool-headed in plotting revenge than her counterpart in *Das Nibelungenlied*. The poem’s Kriemhild strongly resists Etzel’s proposal of marriage until Rüdiger adds his urging to that of Kriemhild’s brothers and mother. The film’s Kriemhild, bent on vengeance before she ever receives the proposal, agrees to marry King Attila (Rudolf Klein-Rogge) only when Ruediger, speaking on his behalf, swears to avenge any insults to her. At Kriemhild’s insistence, he takes this oath not on the cross but on his sword.

The most distinctive rhetorical feature of the second half of *Das Nibelungenlied* is its set speeches. Whenever Kriemhild and Hagen come face to face, they hurl invective at each other. The hospitality Kriemhild shows Hagen upon his arrival in Hungary is representative:

“Welcome to whomever you are welcome!” she said. “But *I* shall not greet you for any love between you and me. . . . What have you done with the treasure of the Nibelungs? – It was mine, as you well know.” . . .

“Truly, my lady Kriemhild, it is many a day since I had charge of the treasure of the Nibelungs. My lords commanded it to be sunk in the Rhine, and there it must stay till the end of time!”

“This is just as I thought: not one piece have you brought me, though it was my lawful property and I once had it in my power, so that now I shall spend my days in never-ending sorrow.”

“I have brought you nothing and be damned to you!” retorted Hagen. (216–217)

Given Wagner’s proclivity for dramatic speeches charged with hostility – there is scarcely a single scene throughout the *Ring* that is not structured by rising conflict – one can only imagine what he would have made of confrontations like this one had he ordered his version of the story to accommodate *Kriemhild’s Revenge*. Lang’s film, by contrast, is marked throughout by its avoidance of big speeches. Hagen,

who has little to say throughout the film, makes exactly one big speech after the tormented Ruediger, attacking Hagen, accidentally kills Giselher, his prospective son-in-law and Kriemhild's brother, instead:

Rejoice in your revenge Kriemhild!
 Dead are your young brothers.
 Ruediger is dead,
 Dead are all his men!

Hagen demonstrates his undying loyalty to his liege not by what he tells him but by what he does, tossing Ruediger's shield contemptuously at Kriemhild's feet and later holding his own shield over Gunther to protect him from the fire and smoke after Kriemhild succeeds in setting Attila's palace aflame. The queen's harsh triumph is conveyed through brief speeches ("Lord Hagen, here is the sword. Where is the treasure?") and unflinching poses. In showing the doom to which the characters' unwavering loyalties have led them, the film rejects nuance and development for purification and apotheosis, as if hatred, conflict, and holocaust make the antagonists ever more truly themselves.

It seems clear that instead of simply adapting *Das Nibelungenlied*, Lang and von Harbou were seeking to unadapt it from Wagner by treating the rhetorical and presentational strategies of the *Ring* operas as encrustations that had misdirected or corrupted an older, authentic story they wished their film to present directly to the German people. The film does not offer itself as an update or new version of the story but as the original version. This strategy recalls Wagner's own in drafting *Siegfrieds Tod* and then feeling obliged to write a prequel, then a prequel to the prequel, and finally a two-and-a-half-hour prologue to the three dramas, creating in the process "an artificial myth to explain and change history" (Cicora 71). Unlike Hebbel, whose play "is based tightly on the *Nibelungenlied*," Wagner "wrote a scenario based on his understanding of the entire Nibelungen 'myth,' which he felt was behind all the medieval versions. . . . When he got through with the myth it made a new kind of sense, but not one any medieval person would have recognized" (Haymes xvii).

In the same way, Lang does not adapt Wagner, Hebbel, or even *Das Nibelungenlied*. Instead, as he announces in his essay in the 1924 program book that accompanied the film's first release, he seeks to create "a film that would belong to the *Volk* and not, like the *Edda* or the medieval German epic, belong to a relatively small number of privileged and cultivated minds" (translated and quoted in Levin 97). In fulfillment of this quest, he might be said to adapt some proto-Wagner, proto-Hebbel, proto-epic source or sources. Because these sources are by their very nature conjectural, most commentators have followed Victoria M. Stiles in pronouncing the film something of a mishmash that "draw[s] on the original epic while borrowing and blending ideas from other sources" (McGilligan 93), just as Wagner does. Some critics emphasize Lang's debt to Hebbel (Jensen 47–48; Armour 66, 72), others his

visual echoes of German paintings (Eisner, *Fritz Lang* 73–74; McGilligan 95). But Levin, who agrees that Lang’s “aspiration is less explicitly totalizing than amalgamative,” acutely adds that “as in Wagner’s work . . . the revision occurs most distinctly in a new *form* of vision, one that will represent differently as it represents all” (13, 14). He argues that “the *Nibelungenlied* has repeatedly served as a privileged object – if not a fetish – in the fervent search for an origin in German cultural identity.” For Levin, here is no evidence that the anonymous epic “is the original telling; rather it has, over the past two centuries, repeatedly been assigned that function” (19). In effect, Lang’s film seeks to create and valorize its hypothetical sources by invoking them, purifying its idealistic, nationalistic inspiration by casting out the taint of Wagner, treating Wagner as a god as false as Hollywood. Not so much rooted in Hebbel or medieval epic as delivered from Wagner, from Hollywood, and from the elitist audience of the Middle Ages, Lang’s film can be the one version of *Das Nibelungen* that finally gets the story right.

Lang is hardly the only filmmaker to approach adaptation through anti-adaptation. Don Siegel insisted that the 1964 film he directed titled, over his strenuous objections, *Ernest Hemingway’s The Killers*, “has absolutely nothing to do with Hemingway . . . with the exception of the catalyst” (Siegel). Twenty years earlier, Howard Hawks had adapted what he considered Hemingway’s worst novel, *To Have and Have Not* (1937), into a successful film by the simple expedient of ignoring its story in favor of a backstory explaining how Hemingway’s leading characters had originally met. The classic case of anti-adaptation is *The Spy Who Loved Me* (1977), whose title Ian Fleming’s estate sold to Eon Productions, which had already produced nine earlier James Bond films, on the contractual condition that “only the title could be used, and not the story” (Chapman 151–152). Just as Hemingway adaptations like *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1943), *To Have and Have Not*, and *The Killers* (1946) established themselves by adapting the commercial, action-oriented Hemingway while disavowing the inconveniently radical political Hemingway, Hollywood remakes, as I have argued elsewhere, depend on a triangular model of intertextuality that allows each remake to claim that it is “liberat[ing] values that were present in the story all along but were obscured by the circumstances of its earlier incarnation” in order to present the remake not merely as “a new version of a familiar story” but as “the definitive version that renders its model obsolete” (53). In wishing for “his film to replace Wagner’s *Ring* as the popular representation of the Nibelung legend for the German public” (Haymes xix), Lang, like the creators of remakes who disavow their models in an attempt to supplant them, does not want to adapt Wagner; he wants to become Wagner.

This apparently megalomaniacal ambition is not as unusual as it might seem. Leo Braudy, contrasting the performances of Laurence Olivier and Orson Welles in their Shakespeare films, casts Welles in strikingly similar terms: “Olivier is putting on a great performance, but Welles feels superior enough to the Shakespearean text to cut, reorganize, and invent. Olivier is a great interpreter; Welles is an equal combatant. . . . We judge Olivier finally by Shakespeare, but we judge Welles by

other films” (199). Any number of auteur filmmakers – Ernst Lubitsch, Alfred Hitchcock, Stanley Kubrick, Oliver Stone – approach adaptation in the same imperialistic terms.

Although he failed to dislodge the composer’s operatic cycle from its pre-eminence, Lang succeeded all too well in his aim of becoming a twentieth-century Wagner. Ironically, he did not succeed in supplanting the model he regarded as an antitype; instead, despite his most strenuous efforts, he found his film repeatedly characterized by reviewers, statesmen, and audiences around the world as Wagner on cinema. After a February 1924 Berlin premiere McGilligan describes as “one of Germany’s all-time fiascos,” the film, as Lang had hoped, “became the first of the director’s works to receive any genuine attention in the United States” (101, 102). Robert A. Armour notes that when *Siegfried* opened in America the following year, however, “it was generally assumed . . . that the film was based on Wagner’s operas” (66). Mordaunt Hall, for example, reviewing “this German production with the Wagnerian score” for the *New York Times*, framed his discussion of the film in terms of cinema’s “invasion of the sacred realm of opera.” Hall seemed only too ready to follow the cue offered by the division of both *Siegfried* and *Kriemhild’s Revenge* into “Gesänge” (Cantos), intended to stake out Lang’s claim as Wagner’s superior counterpart, as an indication that he was following in the composer’s footsteps instead.

And indeed the film is Wagnerian in many ways. Von Harbou and Lang were faced with innumerable opportunities to choose between *Das Nibelungenlied*’s descriptions, often ironically down-to-earth (“Siegfried was born for our honour and good fortune, and moreover he is so terribly strong and so prodigiously brave that were he to get wind of [any plots against him], none could dare oppose him,” 117–118) or conversational (“If you ask me, it was the foul fiend who prompted Kriemhild to break with Gunther,” 177) – a homely poetic style often more redolent of saga than epic – and Wagner’s unrelenting sublimity. Over and over they choose the sublime over the everyday, the individual, and the personal. As early as 1930, Paul Rotha qualified his praise of Lang’s “bigness of outlook and his power of broad visualization” by lamenting “his entire lack of filmic detail, of the play of human emotions, of the intimacy which is so peculiar a property of the film” (272). The film, whose striking visuals were marked by its grandiose scale, geometric decoration, and ritualistically symmetrical blocking, took no interest in the chivalric grace the epic had revealed between Gunther and his captive Liudegast (44) or the delicacy that prevents Siegfried from taking sexual possession of Brunhild in the guise of Gunther (90). And the “sometimes arrogant and overly precise way in which Lang directed his actors” (McGilligan 98) recalled nothing so much as Cosima Wagner’s deployment of the Bayreuth Style.

Audiences inclined to see the film’s Wagnerian echoes not as a trace of the director’s rising to a strong predecessor’s challenge but as a return of the repressed received further encouragement by two later versions of the film that circulated widely. Stiles has summarized the differences among the three versions succinctly: “In 1925 UFA released a shortened version of *Siegfried* for export. The

film was cut from the original 10,551 feet to 9,000 feet. Later in 1933, UFA reissued the original film as *Siegfrieds Tod* (*Siegfried's Death*), reducing the footage to 7,383 feet. Especially those scenes unflattering to the hero were cut, and some sequences were rearranged to enhance Siegfried's image. A prologue spoken by Theodor Loos and music by Gottfried Huppertz were added to this version. Neither edited UFA releases were authorized by Lang" ("Fritz Lang's" 258). One additional change in the 1933 version that Adeline Mueller emphasizes served as a final humiliation to Lang: After securing the permission from the Wagner estate that had been denied for the film's initial release, Ufa, now firmly under the thumb of the National Socialists, commissioned Huppertz to prepare a new score combining Huppertz's original music with selected excerpts from Wagner. Thanks largely to the new soundtrack and a foreshortened ending that left the audience demanding revenge for Siegfried's death, "*Die Nibelungen* no longer belonged to the German people but to the Nazi party" (Mueller 102). As Stiles points out, the long unavailability of the 1924 version of *Die Nibelungen* in the United States meant that abridged, recut, and rescored prints of *Siegfried* served for many years as the sole basis for American scholars' analysis of Lang's two-part film.

In the meantime, Siegfried Kracauer made an extremely influential case for the ways in which Lang's film, "a national document fit to publicize German culture all over the world," served to "anticipate[] the Goebbels propaganda" (92). Kracauer saw the film, which "is rich in events which no one can witness without being haunted by Wagnerian leitmotifs" (92), as "reduc[ing] human beings to accessories of primeval landscapes or vast buildings" (94). The "complete triumph of the ornamental over the human" (94) in Lang's film made it for Kracauer not only a prophecy but a blueprint of *Triumph of the Will*, Leni Riefenstahl's 1934 documentary of the Nuremberg Party Convention, whose "decorators drew inspiration from *Nibelungen*" (95). Lang and his admirers spent years defending him against the charge of having joined Wagner in providing background music and visuals for the Third Reich.

Lotte H. Eisner was the most devoted, resourceful, and persistent of these admirers. In *The Haunted Screen* she followed art historian Julius Langbehn in ascribing the impulse to "monumentalize" (160) to German artists generally instead of reserving it to Lang. The posthumous monograph on Lang she published twenty-five years later, acknowledging that "often the figures become part of the decor" throughout the film, quotes Lang's praise in the 1924 program booklet of cinematographer Carl Hoffmann's ability, in "photographing a woman," to reveal "not only her externals but the spiritual content of a scene" and observed that when "Siegfried leaps onto the piles [of the Nibelung treasure] to distribute jewelry to the people," they "no longer appear as anonymous faces, but as individuals" (*Fritz Lang* 70, 75, 77). Eisner is at pains to refute Kracauer's charge that the distorted features of the scheming Alberich reveal Lang's anti-Semitism, arguing instead that "Lang and his make-up artist Otto Genath were simply influenced by the grotesque character make-up used by the Russo-Jewish Habimah ensemble that was currently visiting Berlin" (79). Surveying the holocaust that ends

Kriemhild's Revenge, she concludes, "Fortunately, even here there is no trace of Wagner" (81), and links Lang's vision to Eisenstein's instead.

As both he and Eisner pointed out (Berg 54; Eisner, *Fritz Lang* 69), Lang refused German invitations to remake *Die Nibelungen* in color and synch-sound in the 1960s, though he did return to the stories of Eschnapur and Dr. Mabuse around the same time. To the end of his life, he insisted that he had hurriedly left Germany for Paris in the spring of 1933, leaving behind almost everything he owned, shortly after a private meeting in which Joseph Goebbels offered him a position as "the Nazi's Führer of film" (McGilligan 175), because he detested the Party and feared its power against a filmmaker whose mother had been born Jewish – a story whose veracity McGilligan has called into question (174–181). Of his divorce that same year from Thea von Harbou, a Nazi sympathizer who stayed in Germany to work on films under the Reich, he said, "Our separation was amicable. The only thing that divided us was National Socialism" (Ott 38). Supplementing his narrative of Lang contra Wagner with a narrative of Lang contra von Harbou allowed Lang to claim the most enduring achievements of *Die Nibelungen* as his own while ascribing any incipient Nazism to others. It seems more likely, however, that the film provides part of the case file in Lang contra Lang. The dissolution of individuals into mobs or architectural elements of the decor, the lack of interest in individual psychology, the impulse to represent the German national soul as both barbaric and heroic – but above all as knowable and representable as such – are as intrinsic to Lang's work as the monumentality and visual expressiveness for which he was eager to take credit. And his determination to battle his most well-known source for victory instead of adapting it is not an exception to his normal practice of adaptation but a stellar example of it.

The case of *Die Nibelungen* as an anti-adaptation of Wagner's *Ring* and its fate among critics and audiences who insisted on watching it as an adaptation illustrates in the end the remarkable difficulty of differentiating anti-adaptations from the adaptations from which they struggle to distinguish themselves. Levin acutely observes that the *Ring's* "status as fetish has in turn been fetishized, such that German nationalism's good object has become in turn a bad object for progressive cultural criticism since the 1970s" (19). So too anti-adaptations cannot help fetishizing the texts and authors by the very energy with which they disavow them. It could plausibly be concluded that every anti-adaptation is by definition an adaptation, whatever its creators aver. Indeed, the reverse may be true as well: that every adaptation, riven by the contradictory impulses to imitate a prized original while striking out on its own, is necessarily an anti-adaptation.

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