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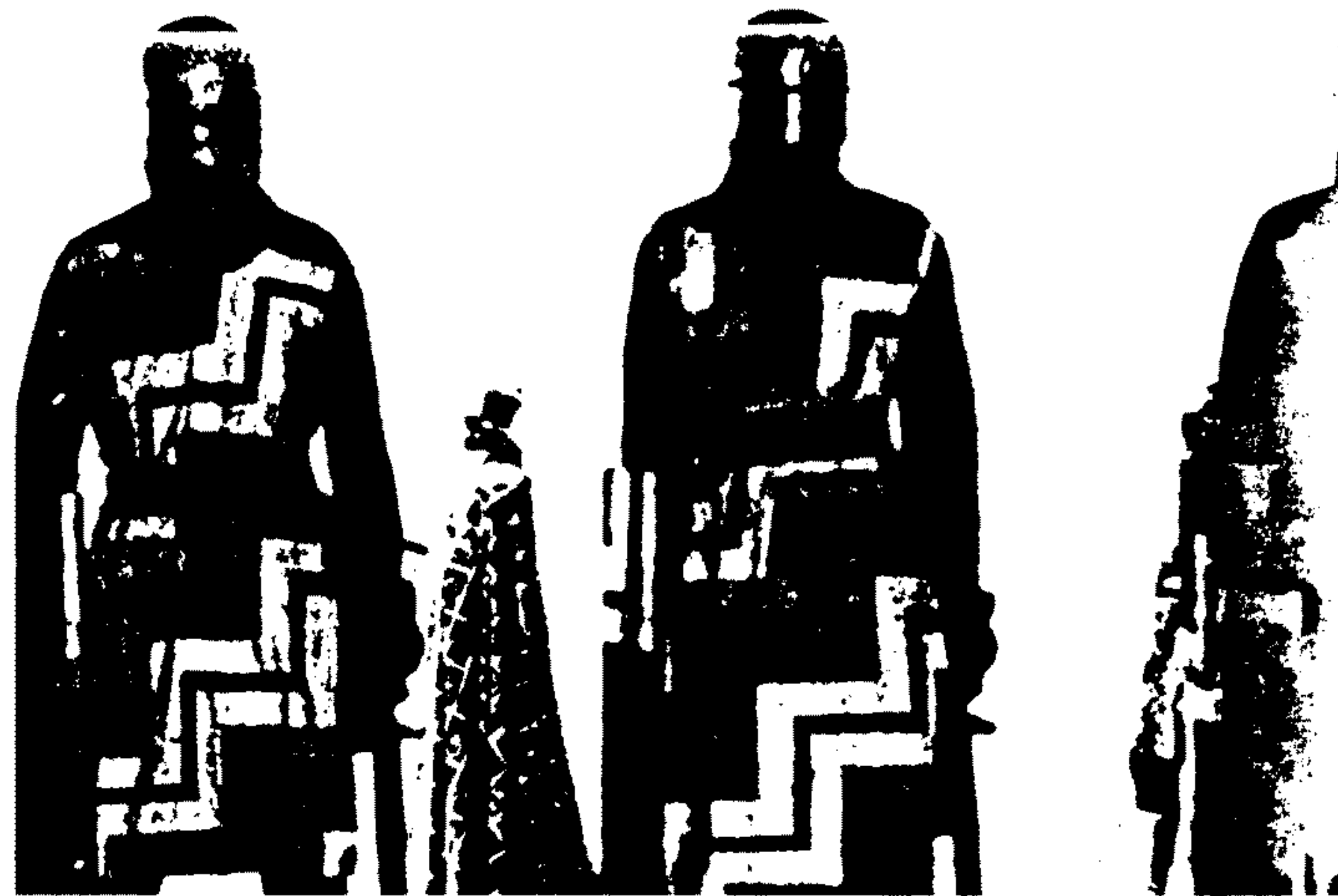
From the beginning to the end the films (Siegfried's Tod and Kriemhild's Rache) possess Greek tragedy, a quality of inevitability, but their emotional impact accrues not so much through specific identification with these abstract characters, but rather from their becoming the embodiment of a stirring saga of profoundly mythical appeal. In this the films resemble the multi-part Japanese period spectacles with their awesome samurai heroes.

Kevin Thomas, *Los Angeles Times*, 10 October 1969

Thea von Harbou appears to have published the *Nibelungen* script retrospectively, just as she was subsequently to write the novel *Metropolis* after the completion of the film. This published script reveals how over-rich in detail Harbou's language is. For Lang this detail provided a welcome possibility of revealing character and motive, and of developing symbols – and the Lang of the silent German period took it for granted that he had to use symbolism. Without a means of verbal explanation, the symbol was a structural necessity, helping to convey to the spectator the things which could not be spoken. It might be argued that such visual symbolism is necessary to achieve the necessary stylisation in a Homeric and epic sense. Certainly Lang refused to attempt a remake of *Die Nibelungen* in the sixties because the sound dialogue would destroy such stylisation and make the characters appear bombastic and ridiculous.

So when Kriemhild reveals to grim Hagen, before the hunt, where Siegfried's vulnerable point lies, in order as she thinks to protect him, Lang uses a symbolic image to express the presentiment of coming disaster. Kriemhild stands beside a flowering tree, waving goodbye to her smiling hero. A moment later, she sinks desolate into the arms of her mother Ute, because before her eyes and ours there is a terrible apparition: the flowering tree turns into a mass of leafless branches, and finally into a death's head. Thus the spectator is prepared by a symbol for the coming event.

For some curious reason many people still regard the well-balanced, symmetrical, spacious sets as Expressionist. Yet there are none of the ecstatic distortions, the oblique angles of *Caligari* or *Raskolnikov*. Lang and his architects, Otto Hunte and Erich Kettelhut, inevitably had to pass



Die Nibelungen: geometrical design and architectural composition

through the Expressionist experience of their age; but the only trace of it surviving here is a tendency to abstraction, to anonymity and stylisation of form.

For the most part all is harmony, balance, structure. Arcades and niches predominate, with figures practically fitted into them and framed by them. This is particularly apparent in Hunte's sketches now preserved in the Cinémathèque Française (cf. illustration, page 71). Often the figures become part of the decor; for instance the row of soldiers like pillars in the foreground, their backs to the camera, all dressed identically with geometrical ornament, and parallel in posture, one hand on the hilt of their swords, the other holding their shields; and behind this palisade of bodies the procession of kings and heroes slowly approaches on its way to the cathedral. Lang uses the soldiers here to symbolise the sheer power of the Burgundians. In the use of extras, the anonymity of character may well be a hangover from Expressionism.

Similarly, when Brunhild leaves her ship, the soldiers line up on either side, visors down and shields held up to form a kind of pontoon bridge. Their helmets and shoulders seem to rise out of the water like decorative railings. On shore other extras, also motionless, silhouetted against the light (Lang explains they were positioned in front of a blue-painted wall) to form a lattice. Yet again, in *Kriemhild's Rache*, when Kriemhild says farewell to her husband's tomb before departing for the country of the Huns, she is surrounded by her women. Faces and figures disappear in the heavy folds of their coats and head-dresses. The bowed heads and shoulders seem part of the curved vaulting, depersonalised into decorative motifs, the mosaic ornaments of the apsis. The people, the extras, appear faceless in this stylised world of heroes because they constitute a kind of chorus, with no motive function in the development of the action.

The main characters too, however, are sometimes treated 'architecturally'. After the Nibelung's gold has been stolen and sunk in the Rhine, the two arch-enemies, Kriemhild and Hagen, are seen standing like pillars, flanking the heavy gate of the treasure-chamber.

Lang chose to divest the Nibelung saga of its Wagnerian pathos. No-one except Hagen wears a beard, or resembles the stout heroes and heroines of the operatic stage. The decadent world of the Burgundians is treated with appropriate stylisation, and the wonderful costumes designed by Guderian resemble early miniatures.*

To portray this world demanded a certain strictness of form. Structure is all. (Heine, talking about the *Nibelungenlied* and its expressiveness cannot find a tower as high, a stone as hard as the grim Hagen and vengeful Kriemhild). Nothing in Lang is façade; everything is three-dimensional and spatial. His *mise en scène* makes constant use of this space and he composes with it. The white-robed followers of White Kriemhild and the dark followers of Brunhild meet to form the shape of a wedge on the cathedral steps, in just the same way that the masses were employed in Reinhardt's Grosses Schauspielhaus productions of Greek tragedy.

The sets had likewise to be structured. Lang says that if he had had the use of the American Redwoods, he might have done the forest scenes in natural exteriors; but as it

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Die Nibelungen: atmosphere created by the lighting potential of the studio: Klein-Rogge as Attila

was, the atmosphere he sought was only possible with the lighting potential of the studio. Nothing is accidental: the spirit of the sets is conjured up by Lang's will alone, inspired by pictures he recalled. Though Böcklin may now appear kitsch to us, he was important for his own age, and Lang used his *Great Pan* (also called *Schweigen im Walde*) as inspiration for Siegfried's ride through the mysterious sun-streaked, misty forest. The flowering meadow with the spring where grim Hagen's spear strikes the blond hero is a combination of two other Böcklin pictures; the images of the naked children with wreaths about their hair, and Attila in black armour (*Kriemhilds Rache*) were inspired by an etching by Max Klinger.

These atmospheric landscapes were built in the grounds of Neubabelsberg, since they were too big for the studio itself. The dense tree-trunks of Siegfried's magic forest were made of long wooden frames coated with cement to look like bark, and ending half-way up the trunk. Real soil

and moss were heaped about their roots. They were enclosed by a cyclorama which was open only at the point where the camera and lighting equipment were positioned. The top of this cyclorama was covered with laths and bits of sacking.

The shooting began in autumn, and the two parts of the film took about nine months to complete. Lang was therefore able to wait for real snow to cover the earth for the scene where Kriemhild kneels to pick up the soil stained with her husband's blood, to carry it to the country of the Huns, and for real flowers (sown by Vollbrecht) for the flowering meadow in *Siegfrieds Tod*. For the scene where Hagen drops the Nibelung's treasure into the frozen Rhine, the unit waited for a pool in the grounds to freeze over, adding some ice from the Wannsee.

Elsewhere atmospheres were created inside the studio proper. The misty sequence where Alberich, made invisible by the *tarnhelm*, tries to strangle the hero, was shot on a small stage at Neubabelsberg, and the dense mist in which a filigree of twigs can faintly be distinguished was produced by the use of fire extinguishers. Since it was a hot spring day, the wan sunbeams pouring through the glass walls and roof gave the suspended vapour and eerie atmospheric affect. Lang attempted to repeat the effect, but at the next try the fog simply dispersed about the studio.

All the time there were new inventions and experiments. Lang wanted a rainbow for the scene where Kriemhild's ship travels up the Rhine. Carl Hoffman objected that rainbows could not be filmed, but Rittau, the second cameraman, had the idea of drawing a rainbow on black paper and superimposing it. The weird flickering aurora borealis which appears in the sky when Brunhild first sees the heroes' arrival was produced by Rittau with the help of spotlights and a moving mirror. In his programme note to *Die Nibelungen* Lang praises the talents of his cameramen. Carl Hoffman, he said, was able to realise everything the director had imagined visually, by means of light and shadow:

He knew the secret of photographing a woman, so that while looking at her face a light in the corner of an eye, a shadow across her forehead, a luminous line across the temple revealed not only her externals but also the spiritual content of a scene.

Günther Rittau's talents were more experimental:

Together with Carl Hoffman he experimented for entire nights. He approaches the visual aspects of the cinema by way of mathematics. Every third sentence he uttered began: 'What will happen if...?' What happens when mathematics, technology and imagination combine may be seen in the northern lights in *Die Nibelungen* and the petrified dwarfs whose mouths are still moving in a scream while their bodies have already turned to stone.

This petrification of the dwarfs in Alberich's treasure cave is an astonishing feat. As they gradually turn to stone, their faces stay alive for a while before they, too, freeze. Günther Rittau achieved this not by ordinary superimposition, but by superimposing from below to above – all, it must be remembered, done directly inside the camera by a footage and frame count, since the German cinema did not yet have special effects departments like the Americans. Even the ghostly effects of the silhouette of Siegfried made invisible by the *tarnhelm*, while assisting Günther to defeat Brunhild in the contest, was achieved in this way by superimposition in the camera.

Another technical difficulty was presented by the dragon. At first, Lang recalls, it crawled along 'like a decrepit old man' and, according to Vollbrecht, collapsed the moment it was moved. Finally a mechanism was devised to give it suitably life-like movements.

The narrative flair Lang had displayed in *Destiny* comes into its own in the confrontation of the Burgundian world with three other worlds and three other styles. In 1966 he recalled, in a talk at Yale:

I was interested in bringing to life a German saga in a manner different from Wagnerian opera, without beards and so on. I tried to show in the *Nibelungen* four different worlds: the primeval forest, where lives the crippled Mime who teaches Siegfried to forge his sword, the dragon and the mystic subterranean realm of Alberich, the deformed, dwarfish keeper of the Nibelung treasure, which he curses when slain by Siegfried.

Secondly, the flame-enveloped caste of the Amazon Queen of Iceland, Brunhild.

Thirdly, the stylised, slightly degenerate, over-cultured world of the kings of Burgundy, already about to disintegrate. And finally the world of the wild Asiatic hordes of the Huns, and their clash with the world of the Burgundians (who changed their names to Nibelungen after taking over the treasure).