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ADAPTATION OF THE EPIC LEGEND OF SIEGFRIED: FROM ARCHETYPAL HERO MYTH TO FILM

According to the psychic concept of adaptation, the original manifests itself as an archetype in culture. The film producer who employs archetypal hero myth creates yet another version of myth. A medieval narrative – a secularised sacred narrative – is translated into a cinematic narrative by a gallery of images. This kind of translation reveals similar semiotic complexity to that of the original. The film producer imitates the art of the medieval epic singer and remains faithful to the spirit of myth. This paper aims at deciphering the symbolic world of “The Nibelungen: Siegfried” (“Die Nibelungen: Siegfried”), a silent film created by Fritz Lang (1924). The novelty of the research lies in comparing the artistic expression of the film producer with the poetic expression of the medieval epic minstrel. The authors’ argument proceeds as follows: (1) consider the archetypal hero myth – its plot, theme, and motifs – as narratologically embedded in the adaptation of the epic legend of Siegfried; (2) reveal the interaction between the formulaic structure of the intertitles and oral epic poetry; (3) highlight mimesis as the imitative representation of the sacred world from the perspective of the symbolic world created in the film.

KEY WORDS: adaptation, intersemiotic translation, intertextuality, archetype, oral epic poetry.

1. The psychic concept of adaptation

According to Julie Sanders, adaptations “prove complicit in activating and reactivating the canonical status of certain texts and writers” (2006: 22); hence the intertextual dialogue denies the superiority of the literary text over film adaptation.

The term *intertextuality* was first introduced by Julia Kristeva. For Kristeva, the ‘text’ is “a permutation of texts, an intertextuality: in the space of a given text, several

utterances, taken from other texts, intersect and neutralize one another” (1980: 36). Hence, intertextuality encompasses the process of intersemiotic translation.

In the process of adaptation from the literary text to the film it is the form that undergoes changes. Film critic André Bazin defines form as “a sign, a visible manifestation, of style, which is absolutely inseparable from the narrative content” (2012: 58). Hence, Bazin claims that to remain faithful to the form is illusory; what really matters is the equivalence of meaning between different forms (*ibid.*).

According to Bazin, “it is not impossible for the artistic soul to manifest itself through another incarnation” (*ibid.*: 60). With reference to Kamilla Elliott, the transformation of myth into film can be presented as follows:

THE SPIRIT OF MYTH → THE SPIRIT OF THE MEDIEVAL EPIC
POEM → (THE FORM OF THE MEDIEVAL EPIC POEM) → (READER-
FILMMAKER RESPONSE) → (FILM) → VIEWER RESPONSE

Figure 1. **The metamorphosis of myth into film**
Source: Elliott (2009: 138). Created by the authors.

Dudley Andrew states that the main concern in this mode of adaptation is the existence of the original as a continuing form or archetype in culture (1984: 138), viz. the archetypal hero myth. The film producer who employs mythic narrative contributes to its existence in culture. Therefore, the relationship between the film and the myth presupposes a certain degree of faithfulness to the implied source; this kind of faithfulness is referred to as the psychic concept of film adaptation in the sense of borrowing.

A myth consists of all its versions, e.g. in the interpretation of the Oedipus myth the version of Sigmund Freud should also be taken into account (Lévi-Strauss 1963: 217); in Robert Stam’s view, a particular myth can be understood only in connection with a system of other myths, social practices and cultural codes (Stam *et al.* 2011: 204). According to Michail Bakhtin, it is not enough to study a literary phenomenon exclusively in the epoch of its creation. The roots of any artwork extend into the remote past; therefore, in order to penetrate into the semantic depths of work of art, it is important to understand that the moment of its creation is a matter of picking a ripe fruit after a long and intricate process of maturation (1981: 4). Moreover, “[myths] are valuable nonmaterial fossils of mankind’s recorded history, especially if still embedded in the layers of embalmed religion, as part of a stratum of tradition complete with cult, liturgy, and ritual. Yet equally important is the next level of transmission, in which the sacred narrative has already been secularised, myth has been turned into saga, sacred time into heroic past, gods into heroes, and mythical action into “historical” plots. Many genuine “national epics” constitute repositories of tradition where the mythical underpinnings have been submerged via such literary transposition.” (Puhvel 1989: 2)

The *status quo* of the myth is enacted in rituals (Meletinsky 2000: 156). Mircea Eliade explains that for the archaic man every act has been previously posited and lived by some other being other than man, hence his life becomes unending repetition of gestures that were initiated by others. It was perceived that every ritual was performed for the first time by a god or mythical ancestor. Therefore, the scholar maintains that “the gesture acquires meaning, reality, solely to the extent to which it represents a primordial act” (1959: 5). Moreover, with reference to imitation of the sacred by the profane, “in *mimetic reference*, an interpretation is made from the perspective of a symbolically produced world of a prior (but not necessary existing) world, which itself has already been subjected to interpretation. Mimesis construes anew already construed worlds.” (Gebauer, Wulf 1995: 317)

In creating his own version of myth, the film producer penetrates the mind of a traditional epic singer of various epochs – “from the least to the greatest” – and imitates his formulaic style of verse composition. According to Eleazar M. Meletinsky, artistic expression in general (and the verbal arts in particular) carries within itself a considerable mythological inheritance (2000: *xix*). The verbal art – the traditional diction of oral composition – is recognisable, perceived and appreciated on first hearing, inasmuch as this kind of poetic speech had been previously heard (Lord 1991: 18).

Cinema, like any artistic language, is coded; codes, as autonomous levels of signification, exist within a film as parts of an overall system. For Umberto Eco, in cinema images of objects that occupy the frame are “effects of conventionalization by which an iconically codified signifier triggers our attribution of a signified” (Eco cited in Stam *et al.* 2011: 33). Cinematic language is the totality of interwoven specific cinematic codes and non-specific codes; inasmuch as a plurality of codes is manifested in the cinematic language, film is a *pluricodic medium* (Stam *et al.* 2011: 48).

The narrative enables translation from one medium into another, for it operates across different genres and in various media. “It is the autonomy of the narrative structure from media-specific manifestations that permits narrative forms to be translated into any medium. A novel may be transported into a film, for example, or into a ballet, and while wholly changing its surface texture, its narrative form retains a recognisable outline, an identifiable shape.” (Stam 2012: 75)

Christian Metz employs the term ‘diegesis’ to refer to “the posited events and characters of a narrative, i.e. the signified of narrative content, the characters and actions taken as it were “in themselves”, without reference to their discursive mediation”; thus, the same diegesis is carried by a variety of signifiers or narrative media (Metz cited in Stam *et al.* 2011: 39).

The non-diegetic mode in films can reflect the historical standard of technology (Schmidt 2009: 215); in the silent film era films had no spoken dialogue (or any other synchronised recorded sound), hence in the production of meaning actors’ body language

(gestures, facial expressions), intertitles¹, and extradiegetic² music were used as important devices substituting verbal speech.

Moreover, “*figuration* is a vital feature of human cognition manifest in film and literature. Verbal figures highlight special cognitive operations, e.g. metaphors and similes call for the creation of mental pictorial images in order to process them. In film, figurative visual symbols are dependent on mental verbalisation in order to be understood.” (Elliot 2009: 215–216)

Mimesis as an imitation of what can be perceived by the senses refers to metaphor and simile. In epic poetry, metaphor and simile carry comparison toward imitation of the spiritual and transcend the pure imitation; this is how low mimesis is defeated (Swanson 2008: 96).

According to Elliot “between the concept evoked by the picture and the percept evoked by the word lies a root connection between novels and films and, more generally, between visual and verbal expression” (2009: 221). This view is supported by the looking glass analogy. Yet, this analogy does not presuppose identical resemblance, since even though a looking glass seems to present an exact reflection, it actually reverses the left and the right fields of vision (ibid.: 210). Therefore, “depending on the particular editing strategy adopted, a filmmaker can privilege the horizontal, narratological, succession of shots to create specific space-time structures of action, or can privilege the vertical relationships created by the interaction of image and sound, or by the intertextual connections between the film’s pictorial composition and cultural codes deriving from painting and photography. Therefore, reading films allegorically is always a multi-focal cultural gesture, requiring the capacity to explore what is suggested both by the horizontal succession of shots and by the vertical effects of visual compositions or cultural codes imbedded on its soundtrack” (Xavier 2004: 337).

Figuration, being inherent in human cognition, presupposes the reciprocal relationship between literature and film.

2. Unveiling the symbolic world of *the Nibelungen: Siegfried*

The intertextual relationship is particularly manifest in film adaptations of literary texts. *The Nibelungen: Siegfried* (*Die Nibelungen: Siegfried*)³, a silent film directed by Fritz Lang (1924), indicates the epic legend of Sigurd/Siegfried⁴ as its source. The symbolic world

¹ The term ‘intertitle’ refers to “words, phrases, or sentences within and between film sequences to describe the setting, mood, or action or to represent dialogue or thought” (Bernard, Rist 1996: 384).

² The term ‘extradiegetic’ was introduced by Gerard Genette in his analysis of the three levels of narration in literature: the ‘diegetic’ (arising from the primary narration), the ‘extradiegetic’ (narrative intrusion upon the diegesis), and the ‘metadiegetic’ (pertaining to narration by a secondary narrator) (Stam *et al.* 2011: 38). In relation to sound, the term ‘extradiegetic’ is interchangeable with the term ‘non-diegetic’ and refers to mood music or the voice of a narrator represented as being outside the space of the narrative (ibid.: 61). According to Johann N. Schmidt, even though the music is not a proper part of the story, it “may reflect the inner state of a character or establish a certain mood” (2009: 221).

³ Also known as *The Nibelungen: Siegfried’s Death* (*Die Nibelungen: Siegfrieds Tod*) re-released in 1933.

⁴ The legend itself is rooted in the greatest Middle High German heroic poem *The Nibelungenlied* (*The Song of the Nibelungs*), the Old Norse *Völsunga saga*, *The Prose Edda*, and *The Poetic Edda*. The film director Fritz Lang

of *The Nibelungen: Siegfried* discloses the universal motifs embedded in the archetypal hero myth – the sacred narrative – and the epic legend of Siegfried, its secularised version.

In *The Nibelungen: Siegfried*, Lang highlights the narratological succession of shots to constitute certain mythic space-time modes of action. Yet, his symbolic world appears to be an imitative representation of the mythic time and space connected with rituals. The mythic hero slays the dragon – a symbol of chaotic elements of Nature – and restores the cosmic order. The mythic hero is imitating the actions of the God of Thunder, who smote the dragon, the obstructor of waters, and restored fertility and boon of the community.

Siegfried exhibits the features of the *archetypal hero* – exceptional parentage, extraordinary strength, and near-invulnerability. Siegfried's archetypal journey delineates all the essential stages/*motifs* – the preparatory period, the call to adventure, the adventure in the unknown world, the heroic quest, the return with a boon for the community, and heroic death. Siegfried undergoes a series of archetypal transformations by forging an exceptional sword and proving his exceptionality, by slaying the dragon and establishing himself as a hero, by bathing in the dragon's blood and winning strength and near-invulnerability.

The plot of *The Nibelungen: Siegfried* is divided into the seven *Canto* – the Songs, which specify the *motifs*/stages in the heroic monomyth: *How Siegfried Slayed the Dragon*, *How Gunther Betrayed Siegfried*, etc. Each *Canto* is supplemented with the intertitles; both the *Canto* and the intertitles are written in the finest Gothic calligraphy and adhere to the medieval setting of the film, so that the intertextual/mimetic (non-diegetic) connection between the film's pictorial representation and medieval painting is manifest. Regarded as the typical medieval script, the Gothic script immediately evokes certain associations with medieval graphic art, inasmuch as the initials of the intertitles are elaborately decorated with the small figures of animals or birds, which are paired with special characters (e.g. the initial with an image of an owl is used to represent the speech of the dwarves). The associations of images with certain characters unveil Lang's interpretation of these characters in accordance with the literary sources. Exaggerated acting style as an expression of the inner emotions of the characters reveals German Expressionist⁵ camerawork.

Moreover, the diction in the intertitles imitates a traditional epic choice of words and poetic combinations, viz. formulae. The genuine artist Lang exhibits a laudable consensus with his predecessors – the medieval epic minstrels – in “restricting himself to formulae already created and in perpetual use by all his competitors” (Norman cited in Lord 1991: 72). A striking similarity between the singer of the *Nibelungenlied* and Lang manifests itself in the pursuit of traditional values in the distant past, viz. in myth. Thus, the singer of the *Nibelungenlied* deliberately chose to imitate the oral epic formulaic style and, by identifying himself with the traditional world, “distance himself from the courtly value system implied in the romances and, perhaps, more importantly, from the political and social system that was sweeping across the empire under the banner of chivalry” (Haymes

designates *The Nibelungenlied* as his primary source, yet the film exhibits an intertextual relationship to more than one source as only in their totality the legend unfolds in all its richness.

⁵ German Expressionist Films are characterised by distorted, graphic style of *mise-en-scène*, extreme stylisation, exaggerated acting, etc. (Thompson, Bordwell 2003: 101).

1986: 43–44). Apparently enough, Lang chose to imitate not only the oral epic style, but also the poet's mode of behaviour and distance himself (and Germany?) from the Nazi regime. An opening intertitle announces that the film is "Dedicated to the German People", to German resistance to Nazism, in particular.

In the film, the intertitles reveal an abundance of patronymic formulae: "*Siegfried, King Siegmund's son*", "*Kriemhild, Ute's daughter*", and speech formulae, viz. "*Thus spake Mime, the artful blacksmith*", "*Thus spake Alberich, the Nibelung*", "*Thus spake Kriemhild, Ute's daughter*", "*Thus spake Hagen Tronje*", etc.; other modes of elevated style exhibit themselves in a form of appeal to Siegfried, and emphasise his elevated position, viz. "*O, King*", "*O, Hero*", "*O, my dear Lord*", etc.

The speech formulae – the so-called *mabelode* formulae (Reichl 1989: 43) – are likewise characteristic of Old English poetry, viz. "*Beowulf mabelode, bearn Ecgþeowes*" "*Beowulf spoke, the son of Ecgtheow*". The speech formulae are paralleled with patronymic formulae and kennings, which disclose the essential features of a particular character, viz. "*the dragon-slayer*", "*He who donned the Tarnhelm*", "*the mistress of the Nibelungen treasure*", etc. Moreover, Siegfried is an exceptional hero – "*no hero is he like*"; he is "*the mightiest*", "*the wisest*", "*the invincible*", "*the invulnerable*", "*the most powerful suitor*", "*the richest King on earth*", and "*the most agile of heroes*". Formulae are often expressed by epithets; thus the latter epithet attributed to Siegfried calls to mind a traditional Greek hero – "*the god-like Achilles*" or "*the swift-footed Achilles*".

2.1. "Winning a Bride"

Siegfried heard of the castle of Worms ruled by the kings of Burgundy and a beautiful Princess Kriemhild who dwells there. In the intertitles, Kriemhild's speech is indicated by the image of a unicorn, a symbol of purity and chastity. Kriemhild is a fair-haired maiden – another symbol of feminine purity. The formula of the exceptional bride – "*no bride is she like*" – is characteristic of Princess Kriemhild. With reference to the intertitle: "*I shall set out for that place, so that I may win Kriemhild!*"; the formula "*winning a bride*" is echoed by a similar poetic word combination in the *Nibelungenlied*, namely "*to take the princess for his bride*":

*The noble royal maiden / in Burgundy that dwells,
For sake of all her beauty. / Of her the story tells,
Ne'er monarch was so mighty / that, if for spouse he sighed,*

'Twere not for him befitting / to take the princess for his bride (Third Adventure. How Siegfried came to Worms).

The stanza above bears all three stylistic characteristics of oral style, viz. the presence of a number of formulae – the opening formula "*there dwells*", the formula of "*winning an exceptionally beautiful bride/princess*" – a theme of bridal quest, and the presence of unperiodic enjambement⁶.

⁶ *Enjambement* is described as follows: "The verse can end with a word group in such a way that the sentence, at the verse end, already gives a complete thought, although it goes on in the next verse, adding free ideas by new word groups" (Parry cited in Lord 1991: 26).

Siegfried's bridal quest begins with his combat with the dragon, the subsequent dragon slaying and ritual bathing in the dragon's blood (which alludes to the ritual of initiation), winning near-invulnerability, the Nibelungen hoard, and imperishable fame.

Upon his arrival in Burgundy Siegfried is wearing ornate clothes and is accompanied by twelve vassals, inasmuch as he has arrived as a King to ask King Gunther for his sister's hand in marriage. The scene depicts King Gunther's hall in a distinctive Expressionist *mise-en-scène*. The visual composition of the scene is created by the geometric shapes of the setting and symmetrical positions of the actors that merge into an overall stylised composition, which resembles the lavishly decorated medieval manuscripts. The members of the Burgundian court are listening to the bard who sings of Siegfried, celebrating his heroic deeds.

The greeting ceremony between Siegfried and King Gunther indicates their equal status. However, when Siegfried asks King Gunther for his sister's hand in marriage, Hagen Tronje, the King's kinsman, asks Siegfried to help King Gunther in his bridal quest – to win Brunhild, Queen of Iceland. Siegfried firmly refuses to become the King's vassal, since this is incompatible with his status of a King and a Hero. The proceeding scene portrays Kriemhild as a peace-weaver. She slowly descends the stairs and approaches Siegfried with a cup. Giving the mead-cup to her lord is an act of special ritual significance and symbolises betrothal. Kriemhild as a peace-weaver restores peace between King Gunther and Siegfried, cf.: “*Prepare for your bridal quest [...] King Gunther – / for it is Siegfried, the mighty hero, / who shall win you Brunhild!*”.

2.2. Wooing Brunhild

In the *Völsunga Saga*, Brunhild the valkyrie is portrayed as the Sleeping Beauty surrounded by the ring of fire. When Sigurd awakened Brunhild, they plighted troth, and Sigurd gave Brunhild a gold ring. It is Kriemhild's mother, Queen Grimhild, who provided Sigurd with a magic drink, so that he forgot the pledge to his fiancée.

The motif of an enchanted drink is made distinct in the Old Norse literary sources of the epic legend of Siegfried, wherein Siegfried appears as Sigurd. This motif is absent in both the *Nibelungenlied* and *the Nibelungen: Siegfried*, yet is elaborate in Uli Edel's adaptation of the epic legend, *Ring of the Nibelungs*⁷. In the film, it is dwarf Alberich who prepares a love potion, which makes Siegfried forget Brunhild and fall in love with Kriemhild. The drink is made at night; its preparation is accompanied by the ritual of black magic, off-screen sounds of howling wolves, and Alberich's incantation, which is being repeated twice. With reference to the magician's semiotic fallacy, the manipulation of a magical signifier (the sign) affects the signified (the thing) (Nöth 1995: 190–191). Consider Alberich's incantation, cf.:

*As the moon wanes, the heart wanders,
Sweet memories dwindle, the heart grows cold.*

⁷ *Ring of the Nibelungs* by Uli Edel (2004) is likewise known as *Dark Kingdom: The Dragon King* (in the United Kingdom and in the United States), *Die Nibelungen* (the German language version), *Curse of the Ring* (in Australia), and *Sword of Xanten* (in the United Kingdom). U. Edel's film reveals the Old Norse sources of the legend.

*Drinking the draught, make new love sweeter;
Past love a memory, withered and old.
Power, nothing prevaieth, grey iron nor silver, jewel nor gold.*

The imagery of the moon, an important element in witchcraft⁸, is significant in Alberich's incantation, for the waning moon is a symbol of decrease; hence, the wane of memory and the oncoming death⁹. The dwarf draws the magic circle with the four elements – earth, air, fire, and water – being substantiated by the four candles. By consecrating the circle with the four elements Alberich invokes the spirits who watch over the four quarters of the sky and the four elements (Guiley 2006: 185). Hence, the circle represents a magic space – the dwelling place of the spirits and demons. The centre of the circle is marked with the magic cauldron of herbs, viz. the container of the forces of transmutation (Cirlot 2008: 39). In Edel's film, Siegfried is presented with the magic potion by Princess Kriemhild herself.

In Lang's film, Queen Brunhild is wearing chain-mail and a helmet, which is shaped like a swan; in the Old Norse tradition swans are associated with the valkyries, the warrior-maidens of Odin. It is Siegfried, and not King Gunther, who receives Brunhild's welcome. Thrice is King Gunther humiliated by Brunhild: when she does not give him welcome, when she threatens him with death: *"Before evening falls, King Gunther, [...] your shattered weapons shall adorn my hall!"*. The formula *"before evening falls"* is significant in the cinematic narrative not only because it sets a particular time for the completion of a certain task(s), but also because it appears twice in parallel constructions and manifests an antithesis between the mighty Siegfried and the irresolute Gunther, cf.: *"Before evening falls you shall board / prepared to head homeward / with Brunhild, your royal bride!"* And, finally, when Brunhild refuses to consummate her marriage with King Gunther: *"I am your captive! But I shall never be your wife!"*

The perjury of Brunhild became the cause of the hero's death: *"He who took the armlet from me, [...] made me his wife! He took my maidenhood from me!"* (Intertitle from *The Nibelungen: Siegfried*). However, in the context of the *Poetic Edda*, cf.: *"Sigurd [...] laid a naked sword, a glittering falchion, between them; nor the damsel did he kiss [...]. He the blooming maid to Giuki's son delivered"*. The formulaic expression appertains to the formula *"sword in the bed"*. Siegfried was not only the most loyal friend, but also King Gunther's blood brother.

2.3. *The allegorical dream vision*

In the film, the first dream of Kriemhild is presented in an allegorical manner, wherein the birds indicate certain individuals and reveal future events. The white bird alludes to Siegfried, while the black birds represent Hagen and Brunhild. In general, colour symbolism in Lang's cinematic narrative creates the antithesis between Brunhild and

⁸ Rosemary Ellen Guiley enumerates the following reasons for the association of the Moon with witchcraft: "[the Moon] rules the night, the time when witches are said to be about; it rules the underworld and the dark powers, which are associated with witchcraft; and it regulates the rhythms of life, which witches disturb" (2006: 205).

⁹ According to Juan Eduardo Cirlot (2008: 215), the four phases of the moon, i.e. waxing, fullness, waning and disappearance, are analogous to the seasons of the year and the ages in the span of human life.

Kriemhild, Hagen and Siegfried, light and darkness, the struggle of opposite forces. Such characteristics are reinforced by the tone of music – major/minor – leitmotifs associated with the characters (Tarasti 1979: 81). The initials of the intertitles, which indicate Hagen's speech, are decorated with an image of a wolf, an allusion to the formula "beasts of battle", viz. the raven and the wolf, and as an omen of the forthcoming death of Siegfried.

Hagen deceitfully obtains the knowledge of Siegfried's vulnerable spot – another poetic formula of a mighty hero with a vulnerable spot, Achilles, – and treacherously kills him. The cross sewn by Kriemhild on Siegfried's cloak becomes a material sign of the hero's death. During the hunt, Hagen hurls his spear into Siegfried from behind his back. Thus, Hagen of Tronje is an anti-hero who kills the hero. It is blooming Nature that is chosen as a setting for the scene of the hero's death. Intertextually, Nature, with its ever-lasting cycle of re-birth, is superior to the mortal hero. In the scene of Kriemhild's lament, she remembers Siegfried waving her goodbye by the blooming tree. With reference to the non-diegetic mode, Siegfried's pose resembles the blooming tree on the back plane; the presence of death in the bloom of life is evoked by the darkness of tones, for tree is gradually transformed into the shape of a skull, an emblem of the mortality of men.

3. Conclusions

The symbolic world of *The Nibelungen: Siegfried* (*Die Nibelungen: Siegfried*) reveals itself as a sophisticated interpretation of the sacred narrative, wherein different levels of diegesis – the narrative structure *per se* – are specified by the seven *Canto* and adhere to the motifs in the archetypal hero myth. It is the formulae in the intertitles that manifest themselves as authentic borrowings from the classical and medieval epic, for the repetition and sequence of motifs and certain formulae – the patronymic and speech formulae in particular – imitate the pattern of ring composition in epic poetry. In terms of visual analogy, the elaborately decorated intertitles bear resemblance with medieval graphic art, whereas the symbolic images in the intertitles are paired with certain characters and disclose essential characteristics of these characters.

Meanwhile, the *mimetic* reference exhibits itself in connection to ritual performance. Siegfried is imitating the actions of the God of Thunder, who smote the dragon, the obstructor of waters, and restored world order. The allegory of the sacred narrative is uncovered through the juxtaposition of Nature and the mythic hero, *cyclical* time and *linear* time with the emblematic representation of death.

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