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Places, History, and Cultural Heritage: Place Names and Setting of 21st Century Filmic Adaptations of the Nibelung Myth

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Introduction: Places, Cultural Heritage, and the Nibelung Myth

In Quentin Tarantino's film *Django Unchained* (2012), Dr. King Schultz calls the Nibelung myth "the most popular of all the German legends," a story which "every German knows,"[1] and thereby Tarantino refers to a rather problematic chapter in the myth's reception history. From the nineteenth century onwards, many Germans regarded one version of the myth, the Middle High German *Nibelungenlied* (*Song of the Nibelungs*),[2] as the Germanic national epic, conveying fundamental Germanic virtues and identity traits.[3] Nationalists and Nazis then (mis)used the Nibelung myth for propaganda, for example to illustrate the German defeat in both World Wars. In World War I, the German soldiers supposedly remained undefeated in battle but were betrayed like the *Nibelungenlied's* hero Siegfried; Hitler developed this metaphor by relating the treason to the democratic and socialist forces in the trenches and at the home front.[4] In an infamous radio speech during World War II, Reichsmarschall Hermann Göring compared the 1943 lost battle at Stalingrad to the one at the end of the *Nibelungenlied*, framing the German soldiers' deaths as a heroic and glorious sacrifice.[5] In the decades following World War II, German

[1] *Django Unchained*, directed by Quentin Tarantino (Sony Pictures, 2012), 46:25–47:07.

[2] The *Nibelungenlied* was first written down circa 1200 in the German south, maybe in Passau. It tells the story of a famous hero, Siegfried of Xanten, who marries Kriemhild, princess of Burgundy. To win her hand, he must help her brother Gunther win Brünhild, the queen of Iceland, as his bride. During a courtly feast, Kriemhild and Brünhild begin a fight about their status, which ultimately results in the murder of Siegfried by Hagen of Tronje, vassal to Brünhild and Gunther. Later, Kriemhild marries Etzel, king of the Huns, and the vengeful widow invites her family to Etzel's kingdom and starts a fight with Hagen which, in the end, leads to the death of almost everybody, including Kriemhild, Gunther, and Hagen. See: Burton Raffel, *Das Nibelungenlied: Song of the Nibelungs* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).

[3] See Jan-Dirk Müller, *Das Nibelungenlied* (Berlin: Erich Schmidt, 2009), 180. For more details and a critical perspective, see Klaus von See, "Das Nibelungenlied – ein Nationalepos?" in *Die Nibelungen: Ein deutscher Wahn, ein deutscher Alptraum*, ed. Joachim Heinzle and Anneliese Waldschmidt (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1991), 43–110. For scholarship in English, see Bettina Bildhauer, *Filming the Middle Ages* (London: Reaktion Books, 2011), 175.

[4] Paul von Hindenburg, *Aus meinem Leben*, 12th ed. (Leipzig: Hirzel, 1920), 403; Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf* (Munich & Berlin: A Critical Edition by the Institute of Contemporary History, 2016), 1589. For further reading see, for example, Herfried Münkler and Wolfgang Storch, *Siegfrieden: Politik mit einem deutschen Mythos* (Berlin: Rotbuch, 1988) or Cyril Edwards, "Censoring Siegfried's Love-Life: The "Nibelungenlied" in the Third Reich," in *Mythos – Sage – Erzählung*, eds. Johannes Keller and Florian Kragl (Wien: V&R Unipress, 2009), 87–103.

[5] Peter Krüger, "Etzels Halle und Stalingrad: Die Rede Görings vom 30.1.1943," in *Die Nibelungen* (cf footnote 3), 151–90.

adaptations of the Nibelung myth often parodied or commented on Göring's ideological appropriation. The early cinematic adaptation of the Nibelung myth by Fritz Lang (1924) and its "remake" by Harald Reinl (1966/7) mirror this transition from adaption as nationalistic appropriation to adaption as reflection on this nationalistic approach.[6] Historian Jörg Oberste describes the history of the Nibelung myth's reception as an example of the disruption of the German cultural memory: Germany remembering itself as a nation of poets on the one hand and wardens of concentration camps on the other.[7]

Nevertheless, German scholars as well as artists still engage with the Nibelung myth to this day. The myth inspires German filmmakers as well. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, at least three very different films by German directors borrow plot elements, names, or motives from the Nibelung myth: Uli Edel's two-part fantasy epic *Die Nibelungen* (2004); Sven Unterwaldt's comedy *Siegfried* (2005); and Ralf Huettner's adventure film *Die Jagd nach dem Schatz der Nibelungen* (2008).[8] None of these films follows the plot of the *Nibelungenlied*; instead, they develop their own version of the Nibelung myth.[9] At the same time they assimilate the medieval myth into genres which have strongly been influenced by American cinema trying to appeal to both international and German audiences.

Conspicuously, none of these films has been filmed in any of the many places which are either mentioned in the *Nibelungenlied* itself or which have been associated with the myth, and most of these films do not set the story they are telling in any such place. The absence of "authentic" scenery and setting thwarts the considerable effort to identify the very sites where the story of the *Nibelungenlied* supposedly has taken place—not least for tourism marketing. Moreover, it foils the importance of space for cultural identity. Jan Assman, for

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[6] Lang created two films, *Die Nibelungen: Siegfried* and *Die Nibelungen: Kriemhilds Rache;* Reinl also released his films in two parts, *Siegfried von Xanten* and *Kriemhilds Rache*. For more information about these early Nibelung films, see Bettina Bildhauer, *Filming the Middle Ages*, and Andrea Sieber, "Die schlechtesten Nibelungen-Filme aller Zeiten? Möglichkeiten und Grenzen einer mediävistischen Didaktisierung," in *Blockbuster Mittelalter: Akten der Nachwuchstagung Bamberg, 11.–13.06.2015*, ed. Martin Fischer and Michaela Pölzl (Bamberg: University Press, 2018), 417–53.

[7] Jörg Oberste, *Der Schatz der Nibelungen: Mythos und Geschichte* (Bergisch-Gladbach: Gustav Lübbe, 2008), 286.

[8] *Die Nibelungen*, directed by Uli Edel (Tandem Productions, 2004) (English titles: *The Ring of the Nibelungs*, *Curse of the Ring*, *Sword of Xanten*, *Dark Kingdom: The Dragon King*); *Siegfried*, Sven Unterwaldt (Constantin Film AG, 2005); *Die Jagd nach dem Schatz der Nibelungen*, directed by Ralf Huettner (Dreamtool Entertainment, 2008) (English title: *The Charlemagne Code*).

[9] Evelyn Meyer shows how Edel's film draws widely from different medieval sources (as well as modern adaptations like Richard Wagner's operas) weaving different versions of the myth together into a new form; see "Visual and Narrative Distortion of Nordic and German Source Materials in Edel's Adaptation of the *Nibelungenlied* 'Die Nibelungen – Der Fluch des Drachens' / 'Dark Kingdom – The Dragon King'" *(2004)*, *Studia Neophilogica* 85, no. 1 (2013): 37–56.

example, points out that cultural memory tends to create signs in the natural space,[10] so it is not surprising the streets of modern Worms feature little dragons, sculptures, fountains, and names relating to the *Nibelungenlied*.[11] Worms also hosts the annual Nibelung Theatre Festival, and has built a Nibelung Museum; Xanten[12] also has a Nibelung Museum.[13] Like Worms, Pöchlarn has not only named several streets and hiking/biking-routes after elements of the Middle High German epic, but has also built a memorial featuring all those towns calling themselves "Nibelungenstädte," i.e. "towns of the Nibelungs," because they are mentioned in the *Nibelungenlied*.[14]

Nibelung monuments inhabit the convergence of an imaginative space "that offers a threshold between literary past and real present; a creative space that mediates artistic forms, translating medieval verse into modern sculpture;" places like Worms, Tulln, or Pöchlarn anchor "a fictional creation shared in a collective imagination rather than in an experience of history."[15] Although a film does not offer its audience a physical experience of space, cinema has the potential to connect the imagined space (of the past) to the real world (and to the present) by showing or mentioning existing places. By setting the story in a still-existing place mentioned in the *Nibelungenlied*, the aforementioned filmic adaptations of the Nibelung myth could call upon the audience to navigate between what is fictional and what is imagined as real; they could use place names as a reference to the real world; they could invite the viewers to consider the story as history of their own world, country, region, or city. Just as retelling the Nibelung myth provides potential of reviving and revising the myth and its earlier reception,[16] so could the films thereby inspire a critical (self-)reflection by a German audience—especially given the nationalist reception of the *Nibelungenlied*.

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[10] Jan Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis: Schrift, Erinnerung und Politische Identität in Frühen Hochkulturen* (München: Beck, 2007), 59–60.

[11] What is today a medium-sized town in the German south-west is the Burgundian kings' seat of power in the *Nibelungenlied*. For the (now closed) museum, see https://www.nibelungenmuseum.de/nibelungenmuseum/, accessed August 15, 2025; and see Alexandra Sterling-Hellenbrand, "The *Nibelungenlied* and Its Interfigures: Old Texts on the Museal Stage. The Machinery of Myth at the Nibelungen Museum in Worms," in *Studies and New Texts of the Nibelungenlied, Walther, Neidhart, Oswald, and Other Works in Medieval German Literature: In Memory of Ulrich Müller II (Kalamazoo papers 2014)*, ed. Sibylle Jefferis (Göppingen: Kümmerle, 2015), 249–68.

[12] In the *Nibelungenlied*, the medium-sized German town Xanten is the name of Siegfried's kingdom. For the museum, see https://www.siegfriedmuseum-xanten.de/, accessed August 15, 2025.

[13] Lately, there has been talk of establishing a Nibelung Museum in Passau, too. In the *Nibelungenlied* Passau is the episcopal seat of the Burgundians' uncle Bishop Pilgrim. Kriemhild and her brothers pass through the south-eastern German town on their way to King Etzel's court.

[14] One of the *Nibelungenlied's* characters, Rüdiger von Bechelaren, is supposed to have come from this Austrian town, through which Kriemhild and her brothers pass on their way to the Huns.

[15] Alexandra Sterling-Hellenbrand, "East Meets West? Heritage, Medievalism, and the Nibelungenlied on the Danube," *Year's Work in Medievalism* 33 (2018): 1-10, 3.

[16] Sterling-Hellenbrand, "East Meets West," 6–8.

Considering this, I will first investigate which places and place names are relevant for the three films, as well as the function of these settings. Second, I will examine what the featured locations and place names reveal about the films' treatments of German cultural heritage. Thus, this article is about the twenty-first century film adaptations of the Nibelung myth only.[17] Third, I will argue that these three films more or less fail to exploit "the temporal elasticity of medievalism to see—and even create—more meaningful dialogue with the past."[18]

Place Names and Setting in Uli Edel's *Die Nibelungen* (2004)

Among the three objects of inquiry, only Edel's *Die Nibelungen* follows the *Nibelungenlied* as far as setting the events in Xanten, Burgundy, and Iceland. However, there is nothing significant about the film's scenery that would definitively identify the landscapes, castles, or towns we see as any of these places. The film does not concern itself with Xanten, Burgundy, or Iceland as historic town, region, or country. The place names rather serve two simple functions: firstly, just like the protagonists' names, they link the famous *Nibelungenlied* to the fantasy film, whose connection to the myth would be barely recognizable otherwise. Secondly, as titles, the place names mark the characters' status as queen or king of a certain place, like Siegfried of Xanten or Gunther of Burgundy.

Moreover, the presentation of these places seems to mirror their kings' and queens' current condition as well as their attitude towards the male protagonist, Siegfried. For example, in the beginning of the first part of the film, the king and princess of Burgundy are happy and healthy. Therefore, the first shot of the Burgundian castle shows a sunny, vibrant place surrounded by beautiful, rolling landscapes. In the beginning of the second part of the film, the selfish king and princess betray the hero. Thus, their castle changes into a dark place surrounded by storm clouds. While the names of places and characters superficially link the story to the medieval myth, the film's aesthetics have far more in common with other cinematic fantasy genre specimens, using computer-generated visual impressions of castles and landscapes in the tradition of Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* series. The marketing materials reinforce this genre connection, and in fact one of the film's English titles is the "Curse of the Ring."[19] The posters establish clear visual parallels: the DVD of Edel's *Die Nibelungen* features chest-up shots of the protagonists'

[17] I will not center my discussion on comparisons to earlier cinematic reception. Though it is likely that earlier films are an influence for more recent adaptations, it is evident that they are not a dominant one concerning the choice of setting in Edel's *Die Nibelungen*, Unterwaldt's *Siegfried*, or *Die Jagd nach dem Schatz der Nibelungen*. This article was written before the premier of *Hagen – Im Tal der Nibelungen*, directed by Cyrill Boss and Philipp Stennert (Constantin Film AG, 2024).

[18] See Sterling-Hellenbrand, "East Meets West," 10.

[19] Bildhauer, *Filming the Middle Ages*, 183.

bodies, one of the heroes holding a drawn sword, centered above the golden-letter title, just as on the DVD cover of *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001); at the bottom of the image, a fire-breathing dragon and misty woodlands produce a display analogous to one of enemies emerging from the fog on *Lord of the Rings* theatre posters. These references to a popular franchise might partly explain why the film has attained a comparable level of commercial success, despite the harsh judgement of most critics.[20] The *Spiegel*, for example, called it a "Lord-of-the-Rings-spectacle with social welfare-budget," a "globalized fantasy-fairy tale" in which "the story drags on in an unspecific fantasy landscape."[21] Relatedly, the map displayed in the introduction of the film rather more resembles maps of Middle Earth than maps of medieval Europe. Nevertheless, the film clearly locates its events in Europe. The voiceover also mentions Europe—not Germany—as the place where the story originated.

Edel's work is an example of the assimilation by the European motion picture industry of the Nibelung myth into the Hollywood-shaped fantasy film.[22] The production adjusts the Nibelung myth for a globalized market while at the same time "de-Germanizing" it, that is, getting rid of most national or nationalistic connotations acquired during its history as the German national epic. Heike Hupertz criticizes this "de-Germanization," wondering whether a film "which claims to be the TV-event of the year" should deal with the reception of the Nibelung myth as a "German trauma." Her sarcastic conclusion is that the answer was, "Uhm, nope," given that the film is dominated by action and simplification, with every possible controversial moment cut out of the picture.[23] In its efforts to avoid all possible problems caused by past ideological misuse of the Nibelung myth, Edel's bland fantasy adventure denies German viewers the possibility of engaging with the myth as part of their cultural heritage.

Place Names and Setting in Sven Unterwaldt's *Siegfried* (2005)

Sven Unterwaldt's comedy, like Edel's fantasy film, shows a certain naïveté towards the history of reception of the Nibelung myth. Mention of the river Rhine at the film's beginning, as well as the characters' strong Rhenish dialects, locates the story in the

[20] Meyer provides an interesting analysis demonstrating the very different responses to the film on English-speaking and on German speaking websites; see "Visual and Narrative Distortion," 38–40.
[21] Lutz Kinkel, "Brunhild auf der Plastikscholle," *Spiegel*, October 15, 2004, accessed August 15, 2025, http://www.spiegel.de/kultur/gesellschaft/sat-1-spektakel-die-nibelungen-brunhild-auf-der-plastikscholle-a-323223.html. Translations from German are my own.
[22] The international cast reflects this adaptation to American cinema, too: in addition to the German actor Benno Fühmann, Julian Sands, Kristanna Løken, and Robert Pattison feature in the film.
[23] Heike Huppertz, "Weine nich', wenn der Siegfried kommt," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, November 29, 2004, accessed August 15, 2025, https://web.archive.org/web/20150530033528/http://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/kino/fernsehen-weine-nich-wenn-der-siegfried-kommt-1192796.html.

Rhineland, and thereby this adaptation gains a provincial, rather than German, framing. Overall, the setting remains unspecific, yet features typical elements of cinematic imaginations of the pre-modern: a (nameless) castle amid an idyllic, agricultural landscape and a (nameless) village surrounded by vast woods.[24] The forest is reminiscent of a fairy tale-world, not least because of its speaking animals. The making-of feature included in the DVD, where the director categorizes his film as a fairy tale as well as a comedy, confirms that impression was intentional.[25] For an audience familiar with the *Nibelungenlied*, the film contains at least one surprising story-twist: Siegfried is not murdered by Hagen. Or, to be precise: Siegfried is killed, but the film stops immediately after the murderous incident. An off-screen voice reveals that Siegfried's death, as it had always been told by the legend, was a lie. Then the film rewinds itself, giving Siegfried's companion, a speaking piglet, a chance to sacrifice himself by jumping between the man and the spear. For a time, Siegfried mourns his savior, until the piglet returns: he had only pretended to sacrifice himself, to hear the sorrowful Siegfried confess his friendly affection.[26] Thus, the film parodies the motives of the hero's death and heroic sacrifice, which are central to the German nationalistic reception of the Nibelung myth.

The film also demonstrates that there is always an alternative story and an alternative way of storytelling,[27] but does not directly confront how Siegfried's death was historically exploited by nationalist propaganda that used Siegfried as a cypher for German soldiers. Thus, an opportunity for education, or reflection on that misuse of medievalism, is missed and in fact actively prevented: Siegfried is depicted as strong, but very naïve and provincial—via language and setting—and thus less German than Rhenish. Siegfried is called "the greatest wonder boy of the Rhineland" by the director, and according to the actor Tom Gerhardt, he is also characterized by a "lovable" and "positive-thinking" disposition; Siegfried becomes the "positive hero" Germans need today, a character that inspires through his resilience and everlasting joy to cease the "constant whining."[28] I wonder, though, if continuing to propagate Siegfried as a German hero/model, while at the same time portraying him as naïve and provincial, is an attempt at German self-mockery—or a potentially harmful trivialization of nationalistic motifs.

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[24] See for example Andrew Higson, "'Medievalism,' the Period Film and the British Past in Contemporary Cinema," in *Medieval Film*, ed. Anke Bernau and Bettina Bildhauer (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), 203–24.

[25] Unterwaldt, *Making-of Siegfried*, 04:11–04:24.

[26] Unterwaldt, *Siegfried*, 1:03:37–1:06:37. For an interpretation of this scene see Bildhauer, *Filming the Middle Ages*, 72–3.

[27] Andrea Sieber discusses the educational potential of this scene and other 'bad' Nibelung-films: "Die schlechtesten Nibelungen-Filme aller Zeiten? Möglichkeiten und Grenzen einer mediävistischen Didaktisierung," in *Blockbuster Mittelalter: Akten der Nachwuchstagung Bamberg, 11.–13.06.2015*, ed. Martin Fischer and Michaela Pölzl (Bamberg: University Press, 2018), 417–53.

[28] Unterwaldt, *Making-of Siegfried*, 2:09–2:22; 0:59.

Place Names and Setting in Ralf Huettner's *Die Jagd nach dem Schatz der Nibelungen* (2008)

The third film reveals yet another function of the significance of space within cultural memory: cultural and economic capital, in tourism and film industries alike. In the case of the 2008 film, commercialization goes hand-in-hand with trivializing history. *Die Jagd nach dem Schatz der Nibelungen*, like Edel's fantasy adaptation of the Nibelung myth, also belongs to a genre significantly influenced by internationally-successful American cinema: the treasure hunt. Like the *Indiana Jones* or *National Treasure* franchises, Huettner's film features a white male protagonist hunting treasure alongside his love interest and a funny sidekick. They find clues, solve riddles, and survive dangerous situations often caused by a competing team of treasure hunters; all are seeking the Nibelungs' legendary treasure. According to the Middle High German *Nibelungenlied*, the hoard is more than a hundred wagons worth of jewels and even more red gold; a magic hood of invisibility, which lends its owner the strength of twelve men; and a golden rod, which grants those able to use it the power to rule the world.[29] In the medieval epic, Hagen steals the treasure from Siegfried's widow and sinks it in the Rhine river. In *Die Jagd nach dem Schatz der Nibelungen*, Charlemagne finds the treasure but hides it after it brings him nothing but trouble, "so that a wiser man in wiser times may find it again."[30] The adventurers follow Charlemagne's clues from the island of Rügen to Cologne's cathedral, from there to the Externsteine (prominent rock formations in North Rhine-Westphalia) and then the cathedral of Aachen, and finally to Neuschwanstein Castle. It is no surprise that the international trailer calls the film "a thrilling race to Germany's most ancient and celebrated landmarks,"[31] and indeed the focus is on landmarks central to the modern German tourism industry.

The treasure hunt's first location, Rügen, is quite surprising to students of history, as the island never belonged to Charlemagne's realm. Today, however, it is part of Germany and thus part of the German tourism landscape. The cathedral of Cologne, begun in the thirteenth century and completed in 1880,[32] and thus considerably postdating Charlemagne's life, is a magnet for national and international tourists. The film acknowledges that Charlemagne could never have been inside the building—so instead they discover a secret older necropolis, where they find an arm bone of the emperor.

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[29] See Ursula Schulze, ed., *Nibelungenlied* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2010), 30–2, 365 (S. 90, 95, 1121).

[30] Huettner, *Die Jagd nach dem Schatz der Nibelungen*, 01:26.

[31] "'Charlemagne Code' Trailer HD," PROROM Channel, accessed March 10, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A_GeeD6i_w8,accessed.

[32] Cologne Cathedral, accessed September 10, 2024, https://www.koelner-dom.de/erleben/geschichte.

Indeed, amongst all locations of the treasure hunt, only the Externsteine has any connection to Charlemagne in German cultural memory: popular belief holds that the impressive rock formation is where the Christian Charlemagne destroyed the Irminsul, a pagan sanctuary, and thus the location has been of interest to neo-paganism from the second half of the nineteenth century and for "völkisch" (racial) Germanic research. The Irminsul was misused as a symbol by the "Forschungsgemeinschaft Deutsches Ahnenerbe," a Nazi organization performing archeological, anthropological, and historic research between 1935 and 1945; those efforts were used to legitimize racist ideology, as well as racial and cultural prosecution, and systematic art theft. A stone relief depicting Christ's deposition from the Cross that is carved into the Externsteine, which the amateur "völkisch" researcher Wilhelm Teudt took for evidence that the Externsteine have been the site of the Irminsul,[33] appears on-screen in *Die Jagd nach dem Schatz der Nibelungen*. The protagonist Katharina Berthold, an archaeologist, merely states that it is an ancient relief, neither mentioning its problematic role within Germany's cultural history nor contemporary academic understanding of the relief. [34]

The cathedral of Aachen is the only setting of the treasure hunt actually connected to the historic Charlemagne. From there, after the museum has denied them access, the adventurers steal the fourteenth-century reliquary containing a piece of Charlemagne's skull. Even Katharina Berthold reluctantly participates in the theft, despite calling the artefact a national treasure. The relic is valuable to the treasure hunters, since carvings on Charlemagne's skull fragment lead the hunters to a hidden chamber behind a waterfall near the nineteenth-century Neuschwanstein Castle. There, the adventurers learn that Charlemagne has buried the treasure in the Alps, where, for some reason, it has not been found for over a thousand years but can quickly be discovered now. Though they do find the treasure, they quickly lose it again; they console themselves by quoting Charlemagne, "May a wiser man in wiser times find it again," and this statement links the end of the film to its beginning. The hunters identify a new treasure to seek as the film ends.

Die Jagd nach dem Schatz der Nibelungen exhibits a circular narrative structure that is typical for films of the treasure hunt genre, especially those within a franchise. The circularity of the narrative structure does not support a circular conception of history, however. The film is too eclectic, even arbitrary, in its choice of historical locations to construct the idea of historic cycles—though, again, the locations are top German tourism sites. This would explain the illogical focus on Neuschwanstein Castle (a medievalism itself). Another probable reason is that the film was sponsored by the FilmFernsehFonds Bayern, a Bavarian organization exclusively co-financing film projects which spend

[33] Wilhelm Teudt, *Germanische Heiligtümer. Beiträge zur Aufdeckung der Vorgeschichte, ausgehend von den Externsteinen, den Lippequellen und der Teutoburg* (Jena: Eugen Diederichs, 1929), 27-8.
[34] Huettner, *Die Jagd nach dem Schatz der Nibelungen*, 57:40–57:51.

money in Bavaria.[35] The movie locates the Nibelungs' treasure in the Alps, which extend into Bavaria. Another sponsor likely influenced the film's other locations: the Filmstiftung Nordrhein-Westfalen, a foundation giving money to movie projects filming in North Rhine-Westphalia.[36] According to the news magazine *Spiegel*, producer Stefan Raiser spoke about German locations he would like to exploit in the future—using the rather demeaning term "abfrühstücken" (literally "to gorge down for breakfast").[37] Some evidence exists that the film's setting drew tourism: in April 2010, "Delphina" writes in her five-star-Amazon review of the film series that she and her family have visited the Walhalla near Regensburg after its appearance in the second movie.[38]

The film's eclecticism appeals to audiences: Franziska Oeler's Amazon review of December 2011 recommends the film series for everyone who wants to experience history differently, with tension, humor, and secrets.[39] In this context, "differently" can only mean different from a more academic approach, since *Die Jagd nach dem Schatz der Nibelungen* presents academia and museums as exclusive and boring: the film even features an academic event where the audience, including the organizer, are nearly asleep. Yet the treasure hunters clearly see history as a blurred past which left behind riddles to solve and exciting places to discover. One character demonstrates clearly how the film plays off an academic approach to history against an adventurer's perspective: Katharina Berthold, the archeologist of the "good" team of treasure hunters. At one point, the antagonist unsuccessfully tries to lure Katharina into his team by offering her the opportunity to *make* history instead of merely writing about it. Over the course of the film she transforms from an academic into an adventurer, and the movie shows her becoming increasingly passionate, happy, and attractive.

The film presents history as something to be engaged with, to be touched and experienced, not stored away in museums and analyzed in boring academic presentations. This is a valid point, but the film belabors the question by presenting

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[35] The FilmFernsehFonds Bayern calls this the "Bayerneffekt" on its website.

[36] "Produktion," Film und Medien Stiftung NRW, accessed January 31, 2022, https://www.filmstiftung.de/foerderung/fernsehfilm_serien/foerderung-film-fernsehen-produktion/.

[37] Peter Luley, "'Schatz der Nibelungen' bei RTL: Drachenblut tut Quote gut," *Spiegel*, August 31, 2008, accessed August 15, 2025, https://www.spiegel.de/kultur/gesellschaft/schatz-der-nibelungen-bei-rtl-drachenblut-tut-quote-gut-a-575211.html.

[38] Delphina, April 3, 2010, "Eifach Klasse!!," Amazon review comment, accessed August 15, 2025 (sign-in required), https://www.amazon.de/Die-Jagd-nach-Schatz-Nibelungen/product-reviews/B001CSM2AU/ref=cm_cr_getr_d_paging_btm_next_4?ie=UTF8&reviewerType=all_reviews&sortBy=recent&pageNumber=4.

[39] Franziska Oeler, December 8, 2011, "Für alle Abenteurer!," Amazon review comment, accessed August 15, 2025 (sign-in required), https://www.amazon.de/Die-Jagd-nach-Schatz-Nibelungen/product-reviews/B001CSM2AU/ref=cm_cr_getr_d_paging_btm_next_3?ie=UTF8&reviewerType=all_reviews&sortBy=recent&pageNumber=3.

museums and academia as incredibly dull. Museums and academic research allow a deeper engagement with history, after all, since the adventurers' involvement with history is quite shallow: the treasure hunters stay with one historic topic and at one historic place just long enough to find the next clue, and then they immediately depart. And in the end of the story, when the treasure is lost, they easily forget the quest and instead turn to their next target. There is no place for long-term engagement, and, of course, there is no time for critical thinking, either, for example about the (mis)use of historical places like the Externsteine or the ideological abuse of the Nibelung myth.

Die Jagd nach dem Schatz der Nibelungen at first creates the possibility of showing a shared history of Europe—or at least France and Germany—by joining the Nibelung myth with those of Charlemagne, calling Charlemagne the father of Europe.[40] This proves to be mere lip service, since the film does not include French locations in the treasure hunt and uses only German places. This tension between a German-focused national viewpoint and recognition of the appeal of international perspectives characterizes the marketing materials. The primary target group was the German TV audience: viewers who are used to the stories and aesthetics of Hollywood. In the making-of feature, RTL, the TV channel responsible for the film, explains that they planned to broadcast it on a Sunday evening, a time slot usually reserved for American movies. To appeal to the German audience that watches American films, RTL declared that they crossed all of Germany, from its northern seashore to its highest mountain in the south, "catching all the highlights."[41] But the film was also marketed to an international audience, and this entailed removing German words from the DVD covers when translating the title, including the word "Nibelung," showing that the Nibelung myth seems to still be considered typically German.[42]

Conclusion

All three films assimilate the Nibelung myth into genres which have strongly been influenced by American cinema, and they try to appeal to German and international audiences. Despite the cultural significance of the myth for the places mentioned in the Middle High German *Nibelungenlied*—and despite their national and international tourism marketing efforts—none of the films feature any of those "authentic" places. My discussion of the places and place names actually relevant for the twenty-first-century Nibelung-films instead has shown that the setting serves different purposes in each film. Yet, one common function of at least Edel's *Die Nibelungen* and Unterwaldt's *Siegfried* is the trend to "de-Germanize" the Nibelung myth. However, the films' choices concerning

[40] Huettner, *Die Jagd nach dem Schatz der Nibelungen*, 00:51.

[41] Johannes F. Sievert, *Making-of Die Jagd nach dem Schatz der Nibelungen*, 10:20–11:16.

[42] The French title is alternately *Le Trésor perdu de Charlemagne* or *The Code de Charlemagne*; the English is *The Charlemagne Code*.

setting and representation of places, seem to be determined primarily by commercial interest, as was most obvious in *Die Jagd nach dem Schatz der Nibelungen*. Historical places are either irrelevant or used as beautiful and interesting background, and all three films use cultural heritage for entertainment and to promote commerce and tourism. I conclude that these films are examples of how twenty-first-century commercial interests have replaced German nationalist ideology of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in ongoing exploitation and use of the Nibelung myth. There is nothing wrong with this, *per se*, but the films often do not encourage their audiences to engage further in history or to reflect critically upon German cultural heritage. This reflection is necessary, since right-wing nationalists are still referring to Germany's cultural heritage, including the Nibelung myth.[43] Directors are not morally obligated to dwell on past appropriations of a myth when they create new films, though the *Nibelungenlied* has long been received as a national German epic, one whose motifs were taken and abused horrifically by Nazis. Yet this lack of consideration creates a blank space in regarding popular representation of historic places and cultural heritage, and this void could, and likely will, be filled with new nationalistic narratives, particularly given the significance of places and place names in cultural identity. Thus, we might suppose that *Django Unchained* offers an underlying warning: the story which every German knows—or at least should know—is not the Nibelung myth, but the story of the harm right-wing nationalism can do.[44]

[43] One example of a nationalist reference to the Nibelung myth is the name of the biggest martial arts tournament of right-wing extremists in Germany: Kampf der Nibelungen. See: "Kampf der Nibelungen," Wikipedia, accessed February 1, 2022, https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kampf_der_Nibelungen).

[44] Bettina Bildhauer, conference panel discussion, July 20, 2016. Bildhauer offered this interpretation of the scene in discussion following Ingrid Bennewitz's conference presentation of "German Slave Owners, German Myths: The 'Nibelungen' in *Django Unchained*," as part of *Europäische Mythen neu erzählt / Tradition or Myth? The Reception of Medieval European Topics in the Anglo-American and European Spheres*, University of Bamberg, July 18-20, 2016. See also Ingrid Bennewitz, "Siegfried Unchained, oder: Die gefährliche Brautwerbung des Quentin Tarantino," in *Die Horen* (Göttingen, 2013), 140–44.