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RIVERSIDE

Benjamin's Bards: Myth, Memory, and *Zeitgeist* in the  
Making of the Modern Storyteller

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Comparative Literature

by

Sue Louise Hertzog

March 2013

Dissertation Committee:

Dr. Sabine Doran, Chairperson

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Dr. Sabine Thuerwaechter

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The Dissertation of Sue Louise Hertzog is approved:

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Committee Chairperson

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It seems only appropriate at this time to hereby acknowledge the substantial contributions of time, support and advice that a number of colleagues, family and friends offered during this process.

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To Chelsea -  
Who Serves as a Constant Inspiration

## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Benjamin's Bards: Myth, Memory and *Zeitgeist* in the  
Making of the Modern Storyteller

by

Sue Louise Hertzog

Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program in Comparative Literature  
University of California, Riverside, March 2013  
Dr. Sabine Doran, Chairperson

In 1936, Walter Benjamin, fearful and frustrated with the traumatic residuals of the First World War and perhaps foreseeing a second one approaching, wrote an essay mourning what he perceived to be the loss of relevancy to storytelling in modern civilization. In this text entitled, "The Storyteller," Benjamin argued that the advent of modernization has alienated humanity from the histories and mythologies of their communities and has rendered the narrative and ultimately the storyteller, irrelevant to modern civilization. The storyteller, whose job was to pass on experience that allowed the community to deal with threatening "forces of nature" became irrelevant, because mankind was facing dangers it had never previous known and no amount of previous experience existed that properly equipped humanity to deal with the perils of modern warfare (102). Our stories no longer served their purpose of preparing us for any impending threat. Consequently, stories, which serve to define and interconnect

communities, became ineffective because our modern technologies have distanced us from our traditions and, ultimately, from each other.

Through an examination into the art of mediating a story by considering not only Benjamin's definition of the storyteller, but equally his understanding of the story and its role in the community, it is this discussion's intent to illustrate that the role of the storyteller is still pertinent to modern culture. As Benjamin argued stories must evolve to meet the needs of the community, so must the manner in which the narrative is mediated. It will be illustrated that a certain cinematic tradition invested in myth and mythology can revive the figure of the bard by maintaining the ritual of keeping history alive through storytelling, counseling, advising and helping modern cultures to define themselves. This discussion will concentrate on the work of Carl Theodor Dreyer, Luc Besson, Terry Gilliam, Helma Sanders-Brahms, Christian Duguay, and Tim Burton. Each filmmaker addressed will respond to Benjamin's contention by illustrating the modern method of mediation by which history and mythology is accessed and kept a relevant force within our modern cultures.

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## Introduction

In 1936, Walter Benjamin, wrote his essay entitled, “The Storyteller.” In this text, written after the conclusion of the First World War and on the brink of the Second World War, Benjamin laments what he feels is the lessening impact of the storyteller to modern times. Like many of his contemporary literati, such as Virginia Woolf and T.S. Elliot, who had personally witnessed the devastating effects of a new technologically – advanced warfare during World War I, Benjamin was concerned with the course of modernization’s interference with man’s traditions. The novel, an exercise in solitude, was replacing the communal nature of the bardic tradition and newspapers were merely mediating information. The storyteller, whose job it was to not only advise communities, but to also pass on their histories and their mythologies, was becoming less pertinent to modern civilization. The communal sharing of experience was at a premium. The bard’s were no longer prepared to counsel their communities, because the speedy pace of modernization cause encounters with dangers that people had never previously known and were ill-prepared to battle. Benjamin states:

*Eine Generation, die noch mit der Pferdebahn zur Schule gefahren war, stand unter freiem Himmel in einer Landschaft, in der nichts unverändert geblieben war als die Wolken und unter ihnen, in einem Kraftfeld zerstörender Ströme und Explosionen, der winzige, gebrechliche Menschenkörper* (A generation that had gone to school on a horse-drawn streetcar stood under the open sky in a landscape in which nothing but the

clouds remained unchanged, under them [the clouds], in a force field of destructive currents and explosions, was the tiny, fragile human body) .

(386)

No amount of experience existed to prepare communities for the impending devastation of modern warfare, and as a result, the storytellers were unable to counsel. The rapid modernization of the world was leaving bardic tradition irrelevant. In its adverse effects on the position of the community's bard, modernization was not only destroying the communities from without by leaving them ill-prepared for a swiftly changing world, but likewise from within by destroying the glue that held them together. The lack of communal sharing of histories and mythologies lessened the community's ability to define itself, which ultimately lessened the ability of its residents to bond as a common culture. Furthermore, the bard's place was taken by novels, newspapers, radios and other means of technology, which not only diminished the communal involvement in the process, but it also increased man's dependency on technology. Benjamin feared, as did many of his contemporaries, that the residual effects of this course would be devastating.

Several generations have passed since Benjamin wrote his essay, and despite Benjamin's pessimism and the ongoing conversation regarding the beneficial verses the adverse effects of modernization, much of humanity has adapted to technology and it has become part of their collective experience. As such, the manner in which they relay their experience has adapted as well. A modern method of mediating the story, the cinema, illustrates a manner in which the art of storytelling has changed through modernization. Benjamin argued stories must evolve to meet the needs of the community with each

storyteller adding his own “layer” to the narrative; likewise, equal consideration should be given to the method in which these stories are mediated and kept relevant (394). The medium of modern cinema reconfigures this role of the bard in current culture. Through a communal dissemination of experience, through a sharing of a community’s histories and mythologies, and through their counsel, modern filmmakers show that they can fulfill this role of the storyteller. As such, it is the task of this study to look at the manner in which contemporary film fills this role in our communities. To do so, requires not only looking at the manner in which Benjamin delineates the storyteller’s duties within the community, but additionally examining Benjamin’s concept of what a story entails. Through an examination of modern filmmakers engaged in the process of retelling stories through the projection of history, mythologies and fairytales, it is this study’s intent to explicate the bardic spirit that continues to thrive today as heartily as it did in ancient cultures.

This study commences with Benjamin’s basis of the narrative, historical event, by examining the manner in which the life of Joan of Arc is portrayed in film. Benjamin argues that the art of storytelling lies in the repeating of the stories (393). Looking at historical figures such as Joan of Arc, illustrate how the constant repeating of histories change histories into stories and how these stories evolve when they are mediated through cinema. Through the process of the application of various mythologies to the same historical event, it will be demonstrated how “culture works on history to recreate its protagonist in familiar forms” (Marina Warner *Joan of Arc: the Image of Female Heroism* 198-190). The discussion will revolve around three different films made on the

life of Joan of Arc from three different filmmakers: *La Passion de Jean D'Arc* by Carl Theodor Dreyer, *Joan of Arc* by Christian Duguay, and *The Messenger: the Story of Joan of Arc* by Luc Besson. Despite each filmmaker's "common ground" for their tales, it will be shown that the same historical event can evolve into a different story depending on the various mythology applied to it. In this vein, the filmmaker serves in the time-honored tradition of the storyteller by keeping our history alive and relevant to contemporary culture. The filmmakers to be discussed in this chapter, Carl Dreyer, Luc Besson and Christian Duguay, have innately understood and have consequently encapsulated in their craft the Benjaminian sense of the story that establishes a reconsideration of the figure of the bard.

The discussion then proceeds into the notion of community as it is promoted through the process of storytelling. Through consideration of that literary form that Benjamin found to be closest to the nature of telling the story, the fairytale, this section will address the tragic consequences that can result through the storyteller's misapplication or manipulation of this process. At the core of this discussion lies the Brothers Grimm, whose research and literary compilations have become so internationally well-known that they have served to index an entire culture. As such, they are often referenced in discussions that attempt to define the German national identity (whatever that may be), despite many weaknesses in the research and arguments of the two brothers. The films to be examined in this section, *Deutschland bleiche Mutter* (*Germany Pale Mother*) by Helma Sanders-Brahms and Terry Gilliam's *The Brothers Grimm*, interface Grimmian referent with notions of national identity. Both films annex

from the basic Grimmian question regarding the illusive nature of national culture and heritage: how does one define what it means to be German? Because both films additionally reflect on the complicated consequence of placing faith in the unreliable imagination of national identity as expressed in the narrative, they are reflective of the interconnection of storytelling and community.

Finally, this study ends with an investigation of Tim Burton's contribution to the role of the modern storyteller, by examining a selection of his films with the emphasis on his 2004 film, *Big Fish*. The subscript of Benjamin's essay, "Der Erzähler" (The Storyteller), is "*Betrachtungen zum Werk Nikolai Lesskows*" (Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov). The Russian author, Leskov, was the gauge by which Benjamin measured the modern storyteller. He opens his essay with the following comment on Leskov:

*Einen Lesskow als Erzähler darstellen heißt nicht, ihn uns näher bringen, heißt vielmehr den Abstand zu ihm vergrößern. (Depicting someone like Leskov as a storyteller does not mean bringing him closer to us, but much more means amplifying the distance to him. (385)*

Benjamin felt that storytellers such as Leskov were becoming increasingly more elusive as society progressed; Burton's work, however, shows that filmmakers can continue to carry this bardic spirit into modern culture. An examination into Burton's narrative art reflects many of the same attributes that Benjamin felt were so prevalent in the work of Leskov: a connection to the community, a teller of fairy tales, a counselor and a sense of humor. Burton's work responds to Benjamin's lament by illustrating that not only does

the storyteller continue to play a pivotal role in modern culture, but also that both a reconsideration of the notion of the storyteller and of the method in which the craft of storytelling is mediated is necessary.

Ultimately, the intention of this work is not only to validate the relevancy of Benjamin's storyteller in modern culture through a reconsideration of his notion of the bard, but to also give due consideration to the role of mediation in this process. Just as Benjamin argues that stories evolve with the needs of the community, so must the concept of the figure of the storyteller and the manner of the story's mediation evolve. With the latest advances in 3D animation, sound technology, video gaming and accessibility, it becomes apparent that this process is still evolving. Contrary to Benjamin's hopeless lament, the storyteller is to us in "his living immediacy [...] a present force," and will continue to be so as long as we allow the bard the ability to continue evolving with us ("Der Erzähler" *Illuminationen* 385).

## **Chapter 1: Benjamin's Bards – Telling the Story Cinematically**

The bard, highly revered in ancient times, known by a plethora of nomenclature – songster, minister, troubadour, balladeer, minstrel, jester, harper, poet or simply the storyteller - has historically maintained a privileged position in society. Often present in court and highly accessible to the regent, the bard held a powerful position within the societal hierarchy; he not only influenced the community, but often persuaded community leaders, such as the tribal chief or regent, with his stories as well. Thomas Percy credits the reverence with which societies held their minstrels to the ancient Nordic belief system that acknowledged “the father of the gods” (Odin or Wotan) as the source of their art (“Essay on the Ancient Minstrels,” *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* xxii). In a pre-literate age, the bard, through oral tradition, held the responsibility of relaying information, events, mythology, and experience from one generation to the next; in short, he was the gatekeeper to that most important of elixirs, knowledge. Through the dissemination of this knowledge, communities learned to define themselves; who they were and what they stood for was carefully relayed to them by word of mouth. As literacy increased, however, the reverence in which this ancient position was held began to diminish. According to Katie Trumpener, one could find the seeds of a bardic decline even as early as the sixth century when the bards fell out of favor with King Aedus, who began exiling them from Ireland (*Bardic Nationalism: the Romantic Novel and the British Empire* 4). Trumpener’s book argues that it was not until the post-literary eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries that there was resurgence in the interest in

bardic tradition that initially served as an Irish and consequentially Scottish literary reaction to English empiricism. Overpowered by English dominance, the Scots and the Irish eagerly clung to the remaining remnants of their respective cultures, which they searched for in their oral traditions.

This revived interest in bardic tradition imminently inspired a European literary revolution that eventually led to the development of the historical novel. Inspired by James MacPherson's collection of the ancient Ossian poetry, Gottfried von Herder began writing about the oral tradition as a representation of a culture and a nation. Herder felt that strains of the natural (or primordial) language of the people (the *Ursprache*) could still be found in tales passed down orally. The intellectual milieu of the era began navigating towards the notion of a national identity that could be found in oral tradition. The idea that a national heritage could be found in a seemingly uncorrupted and unbroken oral tradition was the basis of a philosophy that would soon influence the various collectors of the oral traditions. Following the examples of such European ballad collectors as Thomas Percy, Achim von Arnim and Clemens Brentano (brothers-in-law) began to collect German ballads and folksongs, which they put together in *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*. These ballads were supposed to be authentic representations of a minstrel tradition. Likewise, it was this same concept of collecting and preserving national oral tradition that influenced the world-renowned philologists, Wilhelm and Jakob Grimm, and inspired their collections of folktales assembled in *Kinder-und Hausmärchen*.

European political unrest during this post-French Revolutionary period continued to influence the documentation of oral tradition, while communities struggled to define

and redefine themselves. Rather than relying on the traditional mode of conveying a communal storytelling, the commonwealth began to look towards literature as a means of defining themselves. Several literary traditions developed from this historical trend. Katie Trumpener cites the emergence of the national tale from the novels of the 1790s as the impetus for the developing genre of the historical novel. Even prior to Walter Scott's historical novel (often regarded as the first of the genre), great European intellectuals such as Madame de Staël began to write about national literatures ("On Germany," *On Politics, Literature and National Character*). De Staël theorized that literature is shaped by a nation's character and is reflective of both the best and the ordinary minds and that literature helps shape a nation's government and political institutions. Ultimately, this ever-amalgamating form of narrating a community's mythologies and histories was changing the face of the storyteller; the written word was quickly replacing the spoken means of communication.

While the nineteenth century intellectual milieu may have seen the written word as a method of preserving this highly revered verbal custom (and respectively, cultural heritage as well), a certain contingent of twentieth century literati remained skeptical. German literary critic and philosopher, Walter Benjamin, was at the forefront of this sentiment by maintaining in his pivotal essay on the storyteller that the novel killed the storyteller by rendering the oral tradition obsolete (*Illuminationen* 385-410). His essay insinuates the inevitable dysfunction of modern cultures through their over-utilization of modern technology. It is a practice which generates a self-perpetuated alienation from the mythologies and histories that counsel and offer aid in directly meeting the inevitable

“forces of nature” (403). Additionally, Benjamin argues that the novel not only rendered the storyteller irrelevant, but rendered the story as equally irrelevant to modern culture. Once the story is written down, it is permanently defined, contextualized, left unchangeable and inevitably ceases to evolve thereby rendering it useless and irrelevant to its community. It is, in effect, dead. By collecting, documenting and defining ancient ballads, histories, folktales and mythologies, they cease to be an evolving force within a culture, and as such become a questionable representation thereof. Once documented, the ancient traditions became confined to the time and space of the person documenting them.

This discussion, however, responds to Benjamin’s literary lament by suggesting that the Bard is not deceased but rather continues to be a living, ever-changing force in modern culture. Just as Benjamin’s stories must evolve to be relevant, so must the method in which they are being told. The novel, the printed word, did not kill the stories within modern culture, but merely changed the voice with which they were told. This new means of mediating story, in turn, served to become an influential force within our communities, inspiring new stories, re-visitations of old stories and even serving as a potential impetus subsequent transmission and discussion. Benjamin argues that every story “*führt, offen oder versteckt, ihren Nutzen mit sich*” (carries with it, whether openly or hidden, something beneficial), whether it is a moral, practical advice or mere counsel; the novel can arguably maintain a persuasive ability of speaking to a community, inadvertently informing and counseling them (388). Certainly, novels such as Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and Alex Haley’s *Roots* arguably served to uplift

the plight of the African American community within the United States, while Sir Walter Scott's *Waverly* brought a sense of cohesion and pride of heritage to the clans of Scotland.

Just as Katie Trumpener argues for the evolution of our stories by suggesting that the historical novel emerged from the national tale, so must the method by which our stories are mediated continue to evolve (*Bardic Nationalism: the Romantic Novel and the British Empire* 131). The novel, in turn, influenced an even newer mediation of the story, film. As the ancient storytellers did, modern cinema blends histories with mythology to create meaningful, relevant stories. One may also argue that like its literary and oral counterparts, cinema has the potential to influence how modern communities define who they are, what they value, and what defines them as individual communities. This discussion intends to illustrate that each of the filmmakers towards whom this discussion shall be addressed; Carl Theodor Dreyer, Luc Besson, Terry Gilliam, Helma Sanders-Brahms, Christian Duguay, and Tim Burton are modern reflections of the figure of the bard. A study of their work will illustrate that they have maintained the honored ritual of keeping history alive through storytelling, counseling, and advising.. Each film addressed in later chapters will respond to Benjamin's contention by illustrating the modern method of mediation by which history and mythology are accessed and kept a relevant force within our modern cultures. Through an examination into the art of mediating a story by considering not only Benjamin's definition of the storyteller, but equally his understanding of the story and its role in the notions of community, it is this discussion's contention that certain modern cinematic reflections on mythology and history can

reinstate the the role of the bard in modern society despite Benjamin's claim to the diminished relevancy of such a role in contemporary culture.

### **Defining the Storyteller-Finding the Bard**

A connection to a specific representation of community, the ability to counsel, a credibility borrowed from natural history, equally at home in distant places and times, and an orientation toward practical interest and experience are the pertinent qualities Benjamin attributes to the bard. Of these qualities, however, Benjamin clearly considers the most essential point to be experience. Stories (according to Benjamin) are the result of a collective – infused with communal experience and passed down from generation to generation. Additionally, they are the tale of one who has experienced and thus has wisdom to impart. The storyteller should, as such, be able to take his or her experience and make it the experience of the listener. Benjamin's concept of experience is very specific, however.

In order to better understand why Benjamin places so much emphasis on the storyteller's experience, it is important to understand his concept of experience. A clarification of Benjamin's idea of experience will not only help explain his despair over the loss of mythology and story in modern culture, but will also aid in defining those qualities that validate the filmmaker as *auteur*. Establishing the filmmaker as *auteur* will ultimately be the focal point to establishing him (or her) as the contemporary storyteller.

Without question, Benjamin is very specific about his definition of experience. Because Benjamin sees history (the source of every story) as being irretrievably lost and one's only hope for accessing it is the storyteller, he emphasizes the need for the

storyteller who has experience. As the old adage goes for the novelist, “write what you know,” so should the storyteller tell what he knows. The bard, as delineated by Benjamin, can only effectively tell a tale if he has had a personal connection with it; otherwise, the tale becomes a mere meaningless transfer of information that no longer serves to counsel the community.

The German language, in which Benjamin wrote his essay, “*Der Erzähler*” (“The Storyteller”), has two distinctly different words for the English term “to experience,” “*erleben*” and “*erfahren*.” The first term, “*erleben*,” is used in the context of experience as having lived through something or done something; while “*erfahren*” carries the additional connotation of having acquired knowledge (or of having learned) from having lived through or done something. Benjamin primarily employs the term “*Erfahrung*” when discussing the storyteller. While the theorist notoriously reflected on language (Beatrice Hanssen refers to language as the “‘alpha’ and ‘omega’ of Benjaminian thought), Benjamin’s choice to utilize “*die Erfahrung*” rather than “*das Erlebnis*” when discussing the storyteller is critical (“Language and Mimesis in Walter Benjamin’s Work” 54). Hanssen refers to Benjamin’s nomenclature for this particular concept as “poetic experience,” but perhaps the term “spiritual” might more aptly define it. At the crux of Benjamin’s struggles with language, history and art lies (as with most philosophical discussions) a quest for truth, which is a wisdom one can only acquire through experience (Hanssen 54).

For Benjamin, experiencing a work of art, a film, a story, is to find some form of spiritual connection that, in turn, serves to teach or to counsel or that “contains something

beneficial” (388). To hear a story or to view a film in which the storyteller has no vested experience is to lose a personal connection within the story. At the beginning of his essay, Benjamin juxtaposes the example of the shell-shocked soldier, who has experienced an event but is unable to speak about it, against the writer, who writes about the event that he has not personally lived through (386). The storyteller, according to Benjamin, should not only be able to tell the story, but should also be personally connected to the story as well; otherwise, the tale becomes meaningless and loses its pedagogical strength.

In his essay on the storyteller, Benjamin states:

*Erfahrung, die von Mund zu Mund geht, ist die Quelle, aus der alle Erzähler geschöpft haben. Und unter denen, die Geschichten niedergeschrieben haben, sind es die Großen, deren Niederschrift sich am wenigstens von der Rede der vielen namenlosen Erzähler abhebt.*

(Experience, which passed on orally, is the source from which all storytellers have drawn. And among those who have recorded the stories, it is the great ones whose transcriptions depart the least from the speech of the many nameless storytellers). (386)

There is a mythology to this “speech of the many nameless storytellers,” an understood language that speaks the unspoken when mediating a story; it is the universal connection that allows the audience to connect to and understand the story (386). It is the storyteller who mediates this mythology between the community and its history. According to

Benjamin, one who has no experience cannot know the mythology behind the story and thus cannot properly relay that to his audience.

In their introduction to their text on Benjamin's philosophy, Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne argue, "Benjamin aimed, notoriously, to make philosophy embrace the totality of experience. He sought, thereby to render experience philosophical: the experience of truth" (*Walter Benjamin's Philosophy: Destruction and Experience* x). Therefore, according to Benjamin's philosophy as per Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne, it is not what one experiences in a historical sense (*das Erlebnis*), but rather what one has learned from one's encounters (*die Erfahrung*) that becomes essential to the process of relating a story. This wisdom acquired through experience, which Benjamin refers to as "*die epische Seite der Wahrheit*" (the epic side of truth) should be present in storytelling, but is losing its relevancy to the community because the novel has served to further separate or alienate communities from the source of the knowledge – the original event ("*Der Erzähler*" 388). The point of origin always serves as this German philosopher's North Star, navigating his theories towards the point of derivation, and ultimately, the bard who has personally experienced this point of origin is the one closest to it and thus most able to tell about it. No personal connection only serves to alienate his audience. It is this life experience that allowed Benjamin to not only legitimize such writers as Nicolai Leskov and Franz Kafka as storytellers, but that also nurtured his high regard of the filmmaker Charlie Chaplin.

While experience remains paramount to Benjamin's storyteller, there are additional points for consideration in his characterization of the bard. According to the

parameters outlined in Benjamin's essay, a storyteller should be equally at home in distant places and times, but he should also be likewise grounded in the community. Understanding his audience keeps his stories relevant, which allows him to impart his knowledge to the community. In order to counsel his audience, however, the storyteller should be able to go beyond that which is just readily apparent. The bard must be able to convey not just the event itself, but also the pedagogical value in it.

This is the primary attribute Benjamin found in the Russian author Nicolai Leskov, who Benjamin considered the quintessential storyteller. Before deciding to quit his employment as a clerk in order to dedicate his time to writing, Leskov's job required him to travel throughout Russia. As a result, this Russian storyteller had the opportunity to experience (in the Benjaminian sense) his culture. Benjamin claims that these trips advanced Leskov's "*Weltklugheit wie seine Kenntnis der russischen Zustände*" (worldly wisdom as well as his knowledge of conditions in Russia) (387). In the Russian writer's short stories, such as *The Steel Flea*, one sees a firm understanding of the Russian psyche; Leskov clearly conveys the importance of homeland and the pride in workmanship to the culture, yet the story allows for its audience to travel beyond the Russian workmen and their Russian home of Toola in order to learn "something useful" (Benjamin 388). The ability to see the extraordinary where there does not seem to be anything but the ordinary and to convey that to his audience so they too experience it is, unequivocally, the true gift of a story teller. Indeed, Leskov's tale of the mechanical insect even illustrates this need to look beyond that which is readily apparent to the naked eye; the Russian workmen's improvement to the English-produced mechanism (shoes on

the feet of the miniscule insect) was only apparent when examined under a microscope. So too must the bard be able to examine beyond what is visually apparent in order to see the story and its relevancy to the community.

In relation to the affirmation of cinematic storytelling techniques, this point will become even more evident while surveying the films and their makers in the subsequent chapters. Carl Theodor Dreyer's close-up shots, for instance, penetrate the presentation of an external reality by illustrating the inner emotional turmoil of a young martyred maid in *La Passion de Jean D'Arc*. In such films as *Big Fish* and *Edward Scissorhands*, Tim Burton takes his own mundane everyday experiences of modern suburbia and complex familial relationships, blends them with mythological imagery of cinematic expressionism, and creates a modern mythological history (fairytale). As Benjamin's storyteller uses the fairytale to impart his wisdom, so do Burton's figures of storytellers; in Burton's films, communities learn to accept outsiders (*Edward Scissorhands*), sons learn to understand fathers (*Big Fish*), and young children learn to dream big and believe in those dreams (*Alice in Wonderland*). Additionally, Helma-Sander Brahm's intertwines the history of her own troubled past (the survival of her and her mother in a war-torn Germany) and blends it with the familiar mythology of a Grimmian fairytale to narrate a story that becomes the story not just of the storyteller, but also of her community (Germany). In each case, the specific filmmaker takes the familiar (the place where he is at home) and allows his audience to travel with him to a distant place, whether it is another age, an alternative reality, or simply another perspective of a familiar story.

## Establishing the Cinematic Notion of the Bard

At the beginning of his essay, Benjamin writes:

*“Aus einer gewissen Entfernung betrachtet gewinnen die großen einfachen Züge, die den Erzähler ausmachen, in ihm die Oberhand. Besser gesagt, sie treten an ihm in Erscheinung, wie in einem Felsen für den Beschauer, der den rechten Abstand hat und den richtigen Blickwinkel, ein Menschenhaupt oder ein Tierleib erscheinen mag”* (“Viewed from a certain distance, the great simple outlines which define the storyteller stand out in him, or rather they become visible in him, just as in a rock a human head for an animal’s body may appear to an observer at the proper distance or angle) (*“Der Erzähler”* 385, trans Harry Zohn *“The Storyteller”* 83)

The distance in which Benjamin was referring denotes a reference to time. Those stories that resonate with the listener long after they have been told and give him (or her) the leeway to “to freely interpret things the way he understands them” are the tales that mark the prowess of the person telling them (391). This is something that can only be recognized when given ample temporal distance. When considering the filmmaker as storyteller, however, the temporal distance is additionally magnified by physicality making those “simple outlines” of the storyteller even more essential. The films where the signature of the filmmaker is readily apparent are the films that leave “the great simple outlines” of those telling the tale (385). These are also the films that bridge that

distance between the storyteller and the audience, allowing anyone viewing the film to feel they are “in the company (*Gesellschaft*) of the storyteller” (401).

Since Benjamin weighs the knowledge gained from experience (wisdom) as being paramount to storytelling, it is this wisdom that enables the receiver of the story to view the bard more clearly from a certain distance, because the life experience of each bard is decidedly unique and serves to fingerprint his work. The same story told by two different storytellers will always vary and it is the individual signature that the filmmaker stamps on his film that allows his audience to “be in the company of the storyteller” (Benjamin 401). As will be examined in a subsequent chapter, Joan of Arc, for instance, is hardly recognizable as being the same person in three different portrayals by three different directors. She is a messianic figure, a prophet, or a maiden warrior depending on whether one is introduced to her through Carl Theodor Dreyer, Christian Duguay or Luc Besson. The presence of a specific cinematic style is perceived when viewing the film through the manner in which the subjects are portrayed. That the corporeal manifestation of the storyteller is not required at the time of the storytelling does not change this; the filmmaker’s presence is felt within the art of the storytelling. Additionally, one does not need to see the credits at the end of a film to know that one is viewing a film from Tim Burton while watching *Big Fish*, for example: the aesthetics, the characterization, the props, the actors, the dialogue carry his overt signature. In the same vein, the audience clearly understands Helma Sanders-Brahms’ politics when viewing her film of her experiences as a child in Nazi Germany. Likewise, the audience experiences Joan of Arc not just as a medieval messianic figure, but also as a complex human being with the same

emotional and internal struggles as any other person in Carl Theodor Dreyer's narration of the young maid's life. In every instance, the audience is sitting in the company of the filmmaker, because the filmmaker's personal way of mediating experience has been imprinted on his art.

The filmmaker creates the figure of the storyteller when telling the tale that is relevant for his audience. It is a personal and singular vision despite the argumentation that filmmaking is a collaborative rather than solitary process. Without question, there is the contention that film is not the production of an individual but rather requires a plethora of technicians, actors, playwrights, producers and various other staff to support its production; therefore, crediting a sole individual with the cinematic creation is somewhat presumptuous. Benjamin, additionally, would argue that this interface between the story and the storyteller serves to buffer and ultimately alienate the receiver from the tale that is being narrated. This discussion recognizes the filmmakers being discussed as *auteurs* in their own right, however, despite the collective nature of the process because, in agreement with Benjamin, it recognizes this process as an art and art requires an artist. Film, in this case, merely serves as the clay with which the art is produced. The screenwriter, the actors, the camera and plethora of other paraphernalia and personages required to produce this art are equated to the brushes, the paint, the canvas and the model required for any oil painting.

Even at the level of the bard, one may argue for the necessity of communal involvement in the process of telling a story. His tale must be based on some form of the familiar, a village or a historical figure, upon which to expand his tale in order for his

audience to relate to it. Arguably, it is this communal nature of the cinematic process which more closely aligns it with the bardic tradition than it does with the literary. Benjamin recognized the solitary nature of the literary tradition: the writer extols his craft in isolation, while the reader receives it in equal solitude (100). The film, however, aside from requiring a community to produce it, can also be shared as a communal event. Benjamin equally recognized the communal nature of cinema when he established the healing qualities that communal laughter generated by watching films such as Mickey Mouse (*The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media* 38).

This discussion aligns with other literary and film critics that argue for certain filmmakers as *auteurs*. In his defense of the filmmaker Fritz Lang as *auteur*, Tom Gunning responds to the argument for filmmaking as a result of a collective rather than a singular enterprise:

The critique of authorship which was launched in the 60s and 70s in literature and film studies, signaled by key texts from Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault and Peter Wollen, undermined the *auteur* theory, which treated film directors as authors, pronouncing it both methodologically naïve and ideologically suspect. [...he continues...] If we approach authorship in terms of the director maintaining control over the production of the film, Lang stands out in film history. Lang's assertion of control over his European film is legendary. (*The Films of Fritz Lang: Allegories of Vision and Modernity* 3)

As such, Gunning gauges “*auteur*-ship” by the amount of control the filmmaker exudes over his project. While arguing against the commercialization of art, Bertolt Brecht’s sentiments echo Gunning’s stance for the director as *auteur*. In Brecht’s response to the lawsuit regarding the G. W. Pabst cinematic production of his *Drei Groschen Oper* (Three Penny Opera) he defends the director as artist:

7. “A film must be a work of a collective.”

The idea is progressive. Indeed, film should do nothing that a collective cannot do. This limitation alone would already be quite a fruitful law and ‘art’ would thereby be out of the question. In contrast to the individual, a collective cannot work without a fixed direction point and an evening’s entertainment is no such fixed point [a director is necessary because the financier wants nothing to do with art [...]]. (*German Essays on Film* “Three-Penny Trial: a Sociological Experiment” 125)

Gunning ultimately justifies his argument for Lang as *auteur* by employing directorial “control” over the project as his determinable measure for crediting Lang with authorship of his films, while Brecht, on the other hand, envisions the *auteur* as the navigator, who merely steers the ship rather than controls the crew running it.

While both Brecht and Gunning approach film theory from entirely different eras and perspectives, their conclusions to the question of *auteur*-ship vary only slightly. This discussion defends the filmmakers to be discussed as *auteurs* (and ultimately, as bards) not through Gunning’s “control over production” argument, which insinuates that those working with the individual filmmaker were not given reign to exhibit their own personal

artistry, but rather more closely to Brecht's concept of the filmmaker who gathers the collective and uses it as the fuel for driving that engine to the "fixed point" (Brecht). One of the filmmakers to be discussed, Tim Burton, is notorious for his loyalties to other artists such as Danny Elfman, Johnny Depp and his own real-life partner, Helena Bonham-Carter, but rather than maintain control over these artists while producing a motion picture, Burton cultivates their art, harvests it and produces his own "uncompromised aesthetic" from it (Jenny He *Tim Burton* 22). In an effort to achieve his specific vision of the French maiden, Carl Theodor Dryer employed the accomplished actress Maria Falconneti, in *La Passion de Jean D'Arc*. The filmmaker manipulated camera shots, lighting and stage setting to minimize the external and maximize the internal realities not readily apparent in other films about Joan of Arc. These filmmakers that are addressed in this discussion have the vision; without the vision to encourage the medium (the cinematic mechanics) into art, the art itself would remain non-existent. In regards to Tim Burton, it would be challenging to make the argument for authorless-ness in one of his films; one might even argue that Tim Burtons' audience could easily recognize a film as one of his without ever seeing the credits. With his unique blend of fairytale narrative and expressionistic visuals, Burton's work most certainly carries his overt signature.

While Benjamin recognizes communal involvement in the process of telling a story or of making a film, he likewise establishes the filmmaker as singular as is reinforced in his essays on media. Benjamin was a great admirer of Charlie Chaplin and wrote extensively in reference to Chaplin's films; for understanding their great potential,

he both admired and feared them (keeping in mind that Benjamin was not only highly influenced by Marxism, but also saw the encroaching influence of an intensive propaganda campaign by the Third Reich where film was used to manipulate and exploit). The literary critic nevertheless saw great artistry in Chaplin's work, referring to him as the "poet of his films, as director," which indicates not only a clear acceptance of the singular in Chaplin's work but likewise establishes the artistic potential of cinema per Benjamin's thought (Walter Benjamin "A Look at Chaplin" *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 9 1996, 310). One may even conceivably establish the argument that Benjamin considered Chaplin a storyteller (additionally filmmaker) in his own right, for he comments on Chaplin's experience gained through his prominent capabilities of observation:

On his endless walks through the streets of London with their black and red houses, Chaplin learned to observe. He has himself told how the idea of bringing his character with the jerky gait, the small cropped moustache and the bamboo cane into the world first came to him when he saw office workers coming from the Strand. To him the specific demeanor and this clothing expressed the ethos of a man lingering over something. (311)

Certainly Chaplin, through film, was able to mediate the story of London's heartbeat; it is a story that he had personally experienced as a child and one that he had learned to know through intensive observation. This emphasis on Chaplin's personal experiences further illuminates Benjamin's concern with experience of the storyteller while equally promoting the concept of the filmmaker as modern bard.

Benjamin's respect for Chaplin's prowess as a storyteller is primarily derived from his recognition of the filmmaker's personal experience with the subject matter; the streets of London and its inhabitants. It is because Chaplin, himself, has observed and experienced these streets that he is able to tell stories that are relevant and meaningful to the community. In his narration thereof, Chaplin has, in essence, become London. The filmmaker has enabled his experience to be the experience of his audience; he has become the storyteller.

### **Film as Story**

The process of storytelling is threefold; it requires a bard (in this case, a cinematic representation of a storyteller), a story (film) and, finally, a listener (the audience). While the audience may be the final step of the process, it is by no means a trivial component in authenticating the process. Just as the old euphemism, "the proof is in the pudding," gauges the success of a process by its final product, so can the relevancy of a film be gauged by its effect on its listeners (audience). Audience reception to a story (film) is ultimately the epitomic evaluation of the film not only as a story, but of the cinematic filmmaker as well.

Benjamin argues that modern civilization is inundated with information, yet amidst this superfluity of news, facts and data, barely a smidgeon of that communication "benefits storytelling" (389). That one can pick up a camera, point it at something and create a likeness, may mediate information, but it does not necessarily serve to define a filmmaker, nor does the act of making a film define one as an *auteur* (and ultimately as bard). Indeed, the movie houses have many films that do little more than mitigate

information; yet, the question remains as to whether these movie-going audiences exit their movie houses with “something useful” (389). Furthermore, according to Benjamin’s essay, one must question whether an “over-explanation” of information within the story (film) has “forced a psychological connection of the events on the reader [audience]” (391)? This is, to Benjamin, a certain prescription for failure in the conveyance of a story (391). In other words, that which is left out of the story is as essential to it as that which is included. According to the essay, “The Storyteller,” a narrative has achieved its greatest amplitude when the reader (listener/audience) is left to “interpret things the way he understands them,” rather than being restricted to or told how he must feel about the data that he is internalizing. (391). Certainly, this is the art of storytelling, the filmmaker whose work haunts the thoughts of his audience, leaving them to contemplate and interpret on their own, long after the closing credits, is certainly a filmmaker worthy of the status of *auteur-ship*. Film must be an art before its maker can achieve the status of *auteur-ship* and, finally, before it can achieve the Benjaminian sense of the “story.”

Yet, what is it in great film that creates great art? Why has this discussion chosen to revolve around iconic filmmakers such as Carl Theodor Dreyer, Tim Burton and Helma Sanders-Brahms? These filmmakers have innately understood and have consequently encapsulated in their work the Benjaminian sense of the story. Not only are their stories relevant and “useful,” but they are “rooted in the people” (402). Dreyer’s tale of a national heroine speaks to a country eager to define themselves through their history. Burton’s tales, rooted in the domestic, address a sense of alienation derived from an over-

homogenization of modern suburbia, while Helma Sanders-Brahms confronts a community still attempting to reconcile itself with a troubled past. In each instance, the filmmaker draws from the history and the mythology of the community to whom he or she is speaking. A tale's relevancy to a community should never be underestimated: a community is the heartbeat of a story. Indeed, stories will always exist due to their symbiotic relationship to their communities; communities create stories by serving as their source and stories create communities by helping them to define themselves. This they do through the communal sharing of their histories and mythologies.

### **History and Mythology in Storytelling**

While Benjamin's concept of the constitution of a storyteller has been established, consideration should also be made to the question of what constitutes a story as well. History and mythology are the key ingredients to any Benjaminian tale. History provides the source of the tale, the memory of the tale, and its communal heritage. Mythology provides the template with which the community can understand the tale and learn from it. Mythology is the tale's relevancy to community: it is the language of the storyteller. Northrop Frye refers to "myth" as the narrative in the story (*Myth and Metaphor: Selected Essays 1974-1988* 3). The filmmakers to be addressed in this discussion comprehend and readily exploit the symbiosis between these two concepts and innately employ it in their art; they use mythology to elaborate on history. Carl Theodor Dreyer's film, *La Passion de Jean D'Arc*, for instance, employs biblical mythology in the construct of a national heroine, re-enforcing a certain definition of culture within a nation through the iconic status of Joan of Arc. Helma Sanders-Brahms, on the other hand,

utilizes fairytale referent that conversely illustrates the power of this symbiotic relationship when it is misanthropically employed in *Deutschland Bleiche Mutter*. Rather than addressing the community on a national level, Tim Burton's films address the symbiosis between history and mythology on a more domestic, familial level. In each instance, however, the filmmakers employ historical referent, whether that of a nation, a community or a family, blend it with mythology and leave their audience with something thought-provoking that allows the viewers to interpret the story as they see fit.

Benjamin understood the need for mythology in storytelling; his essay claims that the "*Der erste wahre Erzähler ist und bleibt der von Märchen*" (first true storyteller is and remains, the teller of the fairytale) (403). Fairytales were to Benjamin the epitomic narrative because they were "the first tutor of mankind." This literary genre contains the tools that allowed mankind to meet the forces of nature, the ultimate "sanction" of which is death, head-on (403). Mankind would succumb and cease to exist without the most essential knowledge passed on to it through their stories. Fairytales, in other words, contain "something useful" (388). They counsel and guide their listeners. It is their prowess in the skills of mediating mythology and fairytale that has excelled the status of Dryer, Sanders-Brahms and Burton to that of *auteur* or bard; their films counsel and guide while containing information that is meaningful to the audience.

Benjamin states that a story is a multi-faceted phenomenon painstakingly developed through what he refers to as a

*“jenes langsame Einander-Überdecken dünner und transparenter  
Schichten nicht mehr erlaubt, das das treffendste Bild von der Art und*

*Weise abgibt, in der die vollkommene Erzählung aus der Schichtung vielfacher nacherzählung an den Tag tritt*“(slow piling on top of each other of thin, transparent layers that emit the most accurate picture of the nature and manner in which a tale is developed from the layers of many retellings) (Benjamin 394).

These layers that systematically construct the work of the storyteller consist of eons of accumulated communal stratum of history and mythologies registered to battle the inevitable forces of nature (life and death). Through the course of these “layers of retellings,” a community’s histories (stories) become their mythologies and their mythologies, in turn, serve to counsel the community.

There is often a blurred line between story and history that is often a point of contention when viewing historical films (as are the films to be addressed in this discussion). When one considers that the two terms, both “history” (reality) and “story” (mythology), have the same etymological and linguistic roots, it is apparent this is an age-old discussion. It is no happenstance that several European languages, such as German and Italian, use the same term for both concepts of “history” and “story” (*Geschichte* in German and *storia* in Italian). This shared nomenclature emphasizes a close historical relationship between the two notions, and this is a connection that is not lost in the discussion within the literary academic circles and it is not lost on Benjamin.

To be fair to Benjamin’s tirade against the novel’s superimposition of the storyteller’s function in modern society, it is not particularly that the theorist had an inherent dislike of books. He valued them. Were he alive today, he would likely value

modern cinematic contribution to culture as well. Benjamin's issues with storytelling run much deeper than just the mode of mediating the story; ultimately, it is the theorist's complex relationship with history (the story) itself that complicates Benjamin's views on the manner in which we, as a community, try to access and relate to our history.

Modern historical theorist Hayden White revisits many of the same dilemmas as Benjamin concerning reconstruction of the past in his essay on "The Historical Text as Literary Artifact." Through his recognition of the literary construct of history, White argues that history is, as such, subject to the same verbal constraints as any other literary text. It is White's contention that historical documentation can never be objective but is always subjected to the perspective of the person documenting; accordingly it follows that historical event is corrupted not only by the personal perspective of the documenter, but also through the documenter's unconscious usage of emplotment (making stories of mere chronicles) and encodement (familiarizing the unfamiliar through usage of culturally based metaphysical concepts, religious beliefs, story forms and, most importantly, culturally based myths); thus exposing a quasi-fictional element to the relaying of historical events. Furthermore, the narration of history is always subject to the time and space of the person doing the narrating. Benjamin also addressed this concern of time and space when considering historical artifact. In reference to the passing of time's effect on evaluation of artifact, Benjamin considers an ancient statue of Venus, which would be held in a different esteem depending in which era and in which culture it was viewed. The theorist argues that a work of art that is held as an "object of veneration" for the ancient Greeks would likely be considered "an ominous idol" by the

clerics of the Middle Ages; ultimately, the statue's original intent is lost with history (*The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* 223). In essence, according to both theorists, history does not exist in a pure untarnished state, but is always a construct tainted by current perspectives; this is an avid consideration that fuels much of the criticism aimed against historical film.

Invariably, without mythology, the storyteller lacks the tools to narrate his event. Northrop Frye refers to the mythology as the “universally intelligible language” or “the Koine of myth” (*Myth and Metaphor: Selected Essays 1974-1988*). Without this language, the storyteller cannot narrate the history. The reference to the Greek historian Herodotus' tale of the Egyptian King in Benjamin's essay, “The Storyteller,” perfectly articulates this point (392). Benjamin cites the story of the captured Egyptian King Psammenitus who while in captivity was positioned alongside the road where he was forced to observe many atrocities. First, the King saw his daughter pass before him being treated like a servant carrying water from the well for her captors. Then he watched as his captive son was being marched to his execution. Finally, he viewed his old impoverished servant in the ranks of the prisoners. At each instance, the King remained silent and stoic, until he recognized his servant, at which point, he began to “hit his head with his fists and [give] all the signs of the deepest sadness” (392). Benjamin offers several explanations for the King's behavior:

1. The King was already so overcome with grief by the horrendous fates of his son and daughter that the slight additional shock of seeing his servant imprisoned was the final blow to his restraint

2. The King was not moved by the fate of the royal blood, for it was also his own fate
  3. The King was only able to expel his grief when he relaxed and seeing the servant forced him to relax, allowing him to expel his pent up grief
  4. The King saw the servant as an actor on a stage; thus he was moved by something that would not have otherwise moved him
- (392)

Herodutus offers no solid answer. This infinite ability to adapt and conform to whichever mythology the listener wishes to apply is, to Benjamin, the beauty of the story. No explanation is needed because it is provided by the myth code applied to it. Every person walks away from this text with something about which to think, to discuss and to share. The story does not die with the telling.

A story develops according to the myth applied to it. The tree, for instance, is a common motif in history, myth and fairytale alike; its character can conform to the story based on the myth applied in to each case. Whether presented in the singular as a tree or in multiples as a forest, trees can serve as a stairway to the Gods (Nordic Mythology), a Garden of Eden (Biblical Mythology), a Land of Enchantment (Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream*) or as a dark dismal abyss of no return (*Hänsel und Gretel* and *Rotkäpchen* in the Grimm Brother's *Kinder - und Hausmärchen*) that can serve to either uplift mankind or destroy him depending on the context in which it is used (Northrop

Frye *The Anatomy of Criticism: Third Essay* 32). In other words, if the myth changes, the story changes as well.

### **The Nature of Film**

The nature of film innately presents its own mythology through “the height of artifice” [presenting] “a vision of immediate reality” (Benjamin “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility” Second version 35). It is film’s ability to hyperbolize, reconstruct time, and ultimately restructure history that is part of Benjamin’s concern with the presentation of images in film (and perhaps his concern with the novel’s ability to do this as well). When the great Russian filmmaker and film critic Sergei Eisenstein wrote about Walt Disney’s work, to which he referred as “the greatest contribution of the American people to art,” he remarked on the incredible capabilities of cinema (in particular Disney’s animation) to “break form” (*Eisenstein on Disney* 1). Eisenstein was referring to film’s ability to present visual images and constructs in a manner in which they would never occur in the natural world. Alice shrinks and grows big again, pink octopi contort to the shape of an elephant, a fish becomes a tiger, and a mouse hunts for a ghost; they are all indicative of film’s ability to strike “the liberation of the forms from the laws of logic and forever established stability” (Eisenstein 22).

While Eisenstein celebrates film’s ability to “smash the machine of self-discipline and self-control,” Benjamin laments film’s ability to distort and ultimately alienate its audience from reality. Nevertheless, he did recognize some of the merit of film. When writing about the Disney Company’s mascot, Mickey Mouse, Benjamin marveled at the presentation of images: “here we see for the first time that it is possible to

have one's own arm, even one's own body, stolen" ("Mickey Mouse" 338). Despite Benjamin's hesitation over film's capacity to potentially manipulate and mislead its audience, he does find some therapeutic value in the collective nature of the laughter in "American slapstick comedies and Disney films [that] trigger a therapeutic release of unconscious energies" ("The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" 38). Indeed, in his essay on the Disney character, he likens Mickey Mouse to fairytales; likewise, his storyteller essay credits the fairytale with an inherent ability to "liberate" man from the forces of nature (402).

In the end, stories exist because they counsel us, they guide us, they help us define who we are, and they allow us to battle those "forces of nature" that we could not address without the knowledge encoded in them (Benjamin 402). German Literary Theorist Dietrich Schwanitz reasons that we need stories to solve those problems that do not solve themselves (*Literaturwissenschaft für Anglisten* 106). Because we need the counsel of our stories, we will always need our storytellers to pass them on to us. As such, it is the storyteller's task to not only pass on the experience that enables his listeners to meet these "forces of nature" (or things which are beyond our control), but also to do so without saturating the process with information that dictates his listener's course of action. The challenge of the bard is to enable his listeners to take an introspective look at themselves, which, in turn, enables his audience to become masters of their own individual stories and to determine which role it is they wish to play in their own tale.

The filmmakers to be discussed in subsequent chapters illustrate that the bardic spirit continues to be a relevant force in modern times, because they all encourage us to

take a look at ourselves and reconsider how we define what we are. In Carl Theodor Dreyer's *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc*, for example, Dreyer utilizes Christian mythology as the anecdote for tyranny. Tim Burton, on the other hand, deconstructs familial relationships and modern suburbia by offering hyperbolized versions of the confines these constructs impose on our lives. Contrariwise, Helma Sanders Brahm takes the opposing argument; through her consideration of folktales, she forces us to re-evaluate how we define ourselves by these bardic influences that are ubiquitous in our cultures. In each case, however, whether it is in the form of counseling or of presenting history and mythology, the notion of the bard is present and remains an undeniable force within modern culture.

## **Chapter 2: Valkyrie Joan: Manipulating Myth in the Making of the Maid**

### **from Domremy**

The maid is calm, reserved, serene, and unabashedly confident; she exudes a powerful inner strength that can only be defined as otherworldly. Her hair is dark and short; her clothing is decidedly masculine. Her visage is classically beautiful. The inquisitors attack with their accusations, but she remains nonplussed. The only evidence of her inner turmoil is a single tear that trails down her left cheek. They attack again. She remains heroically steadfast, looking defiantly at her accusers, an ethereal glow emanates from her tear-soaked eyes.

“Does God hate the English?” the father asks.

“I don’t know if God loves or hates the English,” she replies. “But I know they will all be driven from France ...except those that die here!”

The camera reverberates in and then out from the shocked expression on the face of the priest who is tormenting the young maid, illustrating the ease with which such a simple, seemingly unimposing woman is able to unsettle this powerful holy man. Clearly, it is the prisoner who is in control, not the judge. Young, humble and unassuming, yet of the most superior caliber and far outranking the divine station of the holy imposter before her; she remains the heroine, defeating evil at every instance.

The camera draws the viewers’ attention from the face of the unsettled priest down to the shadow of the courtroom window’s iron grating that reverently casts its crucifix-like image across the chamber’s floor. The Christian image is slowly obliterated

by the overpowering shadow of the priest as he paces before the detainee, displaying imagery that clearly questions the participation of a Christian God in these proceedings. Yet, the maiden's spirit is unbroken; she remains steadfast, clearly and concisely answering each question as it is presented to her. She is beautiful, intelligent and strong, but above all, she is brave.

Such is the courtroom image of the young warrior maiden, Jean d'Arc, as the Danish film director, Carl Theodor Dreyer, depicts her in his 1928 film, *La Passion de Jean D'Arc*. Although the subject is an actual historic figure, her life reads like a melodrama: answering to the call of un-embodied voices to rid France of her English enemies and to restore her beloved king to the throne, only to ultimately perish at the stake. Courage, fortitude, and – finally - self-sacrifice are the mantras by which she perseveres.

Dreyer's interpretation of the late-medieval French heroine offers a projection of a young woman with an almost superhuman constitution. Despite the plethora of historical artifact available that clearly attests to the actual existence of Joan and her many astonishing exploits, when told in narration, the magnitude of her life experiences enters into the realm of the magical, mystical, and mythological. This is the realm where modern film and Joan cohabit. Dreyer's modern retelling of the life of the young French maiden offers an exemplary illustration not only of the symbiosis between myth and the narration of history, but of the import of this literary marriage to the modern bard's (the cinema) telling of this story. Walter Benjamin argues that the craft of storytelling is developed from "a slow piling one on top of the other of thin, transparent

layers,” and that the “perfect narrative is revealed through the layers of retellings” (“The Storyteller” 93). While history serves as the source for each narrative, the individual bard’s use of mythology adds the layer; the story changes according to the myth applied to it. The allegorical value that myth provides additionally ensures the establishment of the event into the canon of history. Without the interjection of the superimposed archetypal imagery onto the historical figure of Joan of Arc, the warrior maiden would have likely remained an anonym, another one of the nameless, faceless casualties of the fifteenth century Anglo-French conflict relegated to certain obscurity in the metaphorical halls of history. Through a blended regurgitation of mythological imagery and film codes, modern cinema reincarnates Joan of Arc. Whether presented as a messianic figure, a female warrior, a prophetess or as a myriad of other characterizations, modern cinema is continuously recycling, redefining and rendering immortal the mythic life of the Medieval Maid from Domremy.<sup>1</sup>

### **Myth and Benjamin’s Bard**

The discussion in the preceding chapter argued for the cinematic representation of the bard despite Walter Benjamin’s claim in his essay, “*Der Erzähler*” (“The Storyteller”), to the diminished relevancy of such a role in contemporary culture. This discussion, however, will address the actual craft of telling the story. This chapter intends to illustrate not just the evolving process of the art of storytelling, but to further dissect this process by addressing the evolution of the tale as well. In order to validate the

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<sup>1</sup> Film theorist Lawrence Guntner defines the term “film codes” as “cinematic conventions-camera angles, movement, and focus, take length, lighting, symbols, montage techniques, *mise-en-scène* – we associate with particular film genres, e.g., the western, the musical, the thriller, the gangster film, or the war movie.” (52 “Recycled Film Codes and ‘The Great Tradition of Shakespeare on Film’”).

filmmaker as storyteller, his (or her) tale should be recognized as valid in the Benjaminian sense of the story as well. Benjamin recognized history as having a “common relationship with all forms of the epic” (395). As such, this chapter intends to illustrate the evolution of the tale by starting from the “common ground” of an historical figure, Joan of Arc. Through the process of the application of various mythologies to the same historical event, it will be demonstrated how “culture works on history to recreate its protagonist in familiar forms” (Marina Warner *Joan of Arc: the Image of Female Heroism* 198-190). The discussion will revolve around three different films made on the life of Joan of Arc from three different filmmakers: *La Passion de Jean D’Arc* by Carl Theodor Dreyer (1928), *Joan of Arc* by Christian Duguay (1999), and *The Messenger: the Story of Joan of Arc* by Luc Besson (1999). Despite each filmmaker’s “common ground” for their tales, it will be shown that the same historical event can evolve depending on the various mythology applied to it. In this vein, the filmmaker serves in the time-honored tradition of the storyteller by keeping our history alive and relevant to contemporary culture.

The filmmakers to be discussed in this chapter, Carl Dreyer, Luc Besson and Christian Duguay, have innately understood and have consequently encapsulated in their craft the Benjaminian sense of the story that firmly establishes them as modern bards. Not only are their stories relevant and “useful,” but they are “rooted in the people” (403). The filmmaker’s individualized tales of Joan of Arc speak to various communities - a nation, a gender, and a religion. In each instance, the filmmaker draws from the history and the mythology of the community to whom he or she is speaking. Carl Theodor

Dreyer's film, *La Passion de Jean D'Arc*, for instance, employs biblical mythology in the construct of a national heroine, re-enforcing a certain definition of a Christian culture within a nation through the iconic status of Joan of Arc. Another rendition by Christian Duguay of the same historical event speaks to a feminine community through a portrayal of Joan as an Amazonian pillar of inner strength. Indeed, stories will always exist due to their symbiotic relationship to their communities; communities create stories by serving as their source of inspiration and stories create communities by helping them to define themselves. In each instance, the filmmakers addressed in this discussion employ historical referent, blend it with mythology, and leave their audience with something thought-provoking.

### **Joan as History and Joan as Myth**

In her text, *Joan of Arc: the Image of Female Heroism*, historical scholar Marina Warner states that, after Joan of Arc was burned at the stake and her ashes were strewn into the River Seine on May 30, 1431, she “passed from the condition of the knowable to the condition of the all-imaginable” (13). It is in this realm of the “all-imaginable” that myth becomes so essential to telling the story of Joan's life. Indeed, the magnificent is such an essential element to the narration of Joan's history that it is often difficult to delineate the actual from the fictional history. In fact, the concept of “myth” and Joan are so interconnected that, as will be discussed later, an element of myth even paid a pivotal role in the development of the young maiden's iconic status during her lifetime.

In his discussion on literary archetypes, Northrope Frye describes the archetypal romantic hero borrowed from mythology as a human being who is superior to other men

and his environment and whose “actions are marvelous”: “the hero of romance moves in a world in which the ordinary laws of nature are slightly suspended” (‘First Essay’ *Anatomy of Criticism* 33). This combination of the human element (for example, a young French peasant-girl) conjoined with the element of the extra-ordinary (superhuman endurance and feats, “enchanted weapons,” associations with nature or animals) provides the necessary ingredients that promote Joan from her status as a simple French peasant with a determinant hatred of the English to the iconic status of a female warrior, savior of France (Frye 33). Would a Joan sans the trusty steed, knightly armor and aptly-found sword be as effectively legendary as would the unassuming young daughter of a French peasant who heard voices while standing out in a field?<sup>2</sup> Myth creates that larger-than-life aspect within the Joan of Arc legend that not only affords legitimacy to the d’Arcian legend, but also renders it complete. The various historical representations of Joan of Arc that constantly reincarnate the maiden into a figure of Prophet, of Warrior Maiden, of Virgin, Heretic, of National hero, of Feminist, of Saint or of Religious Martyr are dependent upon the congruous applications of culturally relevant mythologies applied to the accounts of the young French peasant. Ultimately, it follows that, not only are the literary artifacts regarding Joan’s life subject to the perspective of those doing the documenting, but the interpretation of them is also subject to the perspective of the person receiving them, this renders the Maid from Domremy a metamorphic character of history subject to the cultural age in which she is being embraced.

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<sup>2</sup> Northrop Frye suggests that the iconic imagery of romantic chivalry such as the trusty steed and gallant knight are a revisitation of the ideals projected through ancient mythologies (‘First Essay’ *Anatomy of Criticism* 33)

When attempting to comprehend a historical event, it is often necessary to fill in missing parts of the narrative. It is through the usage of mythological elements that history becomes comprehensive to modern culture. Mythological stories and archetypes serve as important tools in the relaying of historical event, because they allow the person telling the history to not only construct a conclusive narrative regarding a historical figure or event that might otherwise be left unfinished, but they also familiarize the unfamiliar and allow interest in an event that might otherwise go unnoticed. These archetypes afford the historical scholar the ability to fill in the blanks with narration that might not be readily available: for instance, documented evidence might narrate a historical figure's arrival at a certain time and location, but neglect to name with whom and describe in what manner he (or she) arrived. If the particular missing information proves essential in determining other factors regarding the person's life, myth can often serve as a rubric to help complete the narration. The narration of Joan of Arc's life is a prime example of this. Myth, as will be illustrated, played a pivotal role in creating the iconic figure of the maid from Domremy, not only in the afterlife of her story, but also in the creating of the iconic figure that the maid became within her own lifetime.

While this discussion addresses the mythical aspect of Joan's life that the bard exploits in retrospect, it is important to understand that seeds of the supernatural aura surrounding Joan were already well-sown during her existence. Interestingly, this played an essential role in the abundance of literary artifact available regarding Joan. Because Joan was viewed as a larger-than-life figure even during her own lifetime, she was considered a noteworthy subject for documentation. Modern culture feeds upon (and

additionally expands upon) the literary artifacts of letters, notations, and documents inscribed by those fifteenth century co-habitants who had crossed paths with Joan. From these documents, one can often infer that Joan was already considered extraordinary even in her own era. Incidentally, her rise to celebrity many have even played a fatal role in her relationship with the Dauphine Charles, who likely felt threatened by the power Joan's status evoked. He ultimately betrayed her and refused to ransom her from the Burgundians. In any case, it is clear that Joan carried an aura of the mythological hero with her even as she was alive.

The bards were busy relaying their interpretations of Joan even when she was still alive. There are many extraordinary tales of Joan that perpetuated during the young maid's lifetime, many of them fueled by her remarkable success on the battlefield. Her victory at Orleans established her as a military superstar. As news of her exploits reached beyond the battlefield, Joan's image among the French countryside became iconic. Sensational stories of her exploits spread rapidly and Joan could thereafter rarely enter a town without being thronged by mobs. The myth-fueled accounts of Joan began to breed. One such professed account occurred in Chinon, where a drawbridge guard purportedly fell into the moat and drowned after yelling rude remarks to the maid (Polly Schoyer Brooks *Beyond the Myth: the Story of Joan of Arc* 40). Another account occurred in Lagny, where Joan was asked to raise a recently deceased baby from the dead; the story follows that Joan resuscitated the baby long enough to be baptized before passing again (Brooks 100). The public, military, and regent endorsement of the young maid increased proportionately to the rampant distribution of these exaggerated accounts of her feats.

Without this support, one wonders if Joan would have been very effectual as any type of a figurehead: few battles would have been won without the faithful following of a military infatuated by her deeds.

Of the extraordinary tales of Joan's supernatural abilities, however, the most exceptional is arguably the tale regarding the acquisition of her sword, for "the chosen hero must have a magic weapon;" for it was in the acquisition of her sword where Joan's legend becomes inseparably associated with ancient mythologies (Warner 164).

The integral relationship between man and his weapon has a long history. The weapon was certainly an instrument of much import to the ancients; possessing one provided assurance of safety and sustenance to its owner. Thus weapons such as a sword, a knife, or an arrow became symbols of prosperity and strength. In the Nordic tradition of the Germanic sagas, for example, weaponry is seen as an entity unto itself rather than as just an extension of its bearer. With the nomenclature of Dainseuf, Naglhring, Balmung, Gram, and Sword of Freyr, one can hardly doubt the reverence with which weaponry was held in the ancient northern European belief system (Kevin Crossley-Holland *The Norse Myths*). While never going so far as to name her sword, Joan's story nevertheless shares a similar tradition. While en route to Chinon, Joan sent for a sword that had been buried near the altar at St. Catherine's Chapel in Fierbois. Unembodied voices that Joan claimed to have heard gave her instructions as to the location of the sword. Polly Schoyer Brooks relays the event:

Then there is Joan's sword, whose mysterious discovery has never been explained and is considered to be one of her miracles. Apparently, Joan

sent for a certain sword she thought was buried near the altar in St. Catherine's Chapel at Fierbois, where she had stayed en route to Chinon. "It was not very deep in the earth," she said. "It was, as I think, behind the altar, but I am not certain whether it was in front or behind it." [...] Many people thought of it as a magic sword. Its rust fell away easily upon rubbing, revealing five crosses on the blade. (48-49)

Brooks equates this legend to that of the King Arthur chivalric tradition, which leads one to further argue for the influence, in turn, of the much older Nordic tradition on the Arthurian legend. Even before Arthur, swords were an essential element to the *Volsung* and *Nibelung* sagas (*Nibelungenlied* Trans. A. T. Hatto and *The Poetic Edda* Trans. Lee M. Hollander). In the *Volsung* saga, Odin plunges the sword into the tree, Barnstokk, and only Sigmund is able to pull the magical weapon free (just as Joan was the only one to set the hidden sword free from its earthen burial at the altar of St. Catherine). Siegfried uses his magical sword to kill the evil dragon, Fafnir, in the *Nibelung* saga (Joan uses her sword to defeat her "evil dragon," namely, the English). In each tradition, the sword signifies might, power and victory to its bearer. Certainly, a similar insinuation is afforded to the myth of the Warrior Maiden. The maid's weapon, acquired under mysterious conditions, must allot its owner mysterious powers; in Joan's case, it was victory in the battlefield.

During her vindication trial, witnesses close to Joan quoted her as saying that "she did not wish to use her sword and did not wish to kill anyone" (Regine Pernoud *The Retrial of Joan of Arc: the Evidence for her Vindication* 114). She is also quoted as

saying that she much preferred her banner to her sword (Polly Schoyer Brooks, *Beyond the Myth: the Story of Joan of Arc* 48). Despite the French maid's apparent aversion to its utilization, it is her sword to which she remains indelibly linked. Joan's sword has ultimately become a contemporary symbol that defines the righteous warfare of the maid and is consequently often utilized by modern filmmakers (such as Christian Duguay's *Joan of Arc* and Luc Besson's *The Messenger*) to project their image of Joan as the authoritative heroine of the battlefield. Contrary-wise, the apparent lack of the presence of Joan's sword in Dreyer's film projects perhaps a truer reflection of the peace-loving Joan who abhorred violence and injury to her fellow man.

It is through her association with a somehow magical sword that other supernatural powers are credited to the maiden, such as an uncanny ability to prophecy or see things that were not readily available to the lay person. Just how Joan knew about the hidden location of the sword may never be divulged. To this day, her mysterious knowledge of the sword's whereabouts provokes much speculation among scholars. Polly Schoyer Brooks, for instance, weighs Joan's "clairvoyance" regarding the knowledge of the weapon's location against the more pragmatic likelihood that Joan had "glimpsed the sword among the other old and rusty ones when she was praying in the chapel [St. Catherine's]" (49). While this is, of course, one of those inexplicable mysteries of history that will likely never be solved, the intrigue generated (myth) by the inability to penetrate this mystery remains one of the defining factors in the legend of Joan and one often speculated about by filmmakers such as Luc Besson, who clearly sees Joan as a divine mystic (*The Messenger: The Story of Joan of Arc*). Regardless of whether or not

Joan was a seeress, her image as one only served to further establish her as veritable figure of authority.

That her sanity was never disputed and her sanctity always assumed aligns the maiden warrior with some of the great seeresses of antiquity. Female soothsayers were not only highly revered in the Germanic social structure, but were also a pivotal force in the Nordic mythologies. Such is the case with Odin, “first and foremost of the Aesir” Gods who consulted the *völva*, Groa, for advice (Crossley-Holland 248). That the head God who was noted for his wisdom defers to the counsel of the female seeress, Groa, is even more exceptional from the perspective of a modern patriarchal society and is a clear illustration of the esteem with which prophecy was held within this culture. Likewise, that Joan’s ability to prophesy was never questioned either during or beyond her lifetime undoubtedly deifies her status. In reference to a post-Freudian modern society, the sanity of a nineteen-year-old that claims to hear voices instructing her to eradicate a national enemy would doubtlessly be called into question.

According to Deborah Fraioli (who approaches the D’Arcian legend from a biblical perspective), there was resurgence in the interest of prophecy in the later part of the fourteenth century (*The Literary Image of Joan of Arc: Prior Influences* 3). Fraioli even cites biblical imagery of the prophetess and the foreshadowing by the Merlin prophecies as the impetus for Joan’s status as a seeress during her lifetime.<sup>2</sup> Accordingly,

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<sup>2</sup> The Merlin prophecies refer to a widespread belief in France during Joan’s time that a prophecy stated that France would be ruined by a woman and restored by a virgin. The prophecies were attributed to Merlin of the Arthurian legends and the maid was purportedly supposed to come from the borders of Lorraine. There is much evidence presented at Joan’s rehabilitation trial that Joan considered herself a fulfillment of this prophecy. (Régine Pernoud *The Retrial of Joan of Arc: the Evidence for her Vindication*)

Joan's association with prognostication established her not only as a prophetess, but as a "fulfillment of prophecy" as well and added to her legitimacy during her lifetime (Fraïoli 3). Joan, herself, was noted to have fed upon this prophecy and considered herself the fulfillment of it (Règine Pernoud *The Retrial of Joan of Arc: the Evidence for her Vindication*). The perpetuation almost seven centuries later of her legend as a prophetess, however, is more akin to a mythology, particularly in both the Germanic tradition of the female soothsayer and the Biblical tradition of the female prophetess such as Deborah, Anna, Ruth and Miriam.

While a recognizable visual, such as Joan's sword, or a recognizable action, such as Joan's prognostication, are unquestionably pertinent assets to the filmmaker in telling a story, perspectives, attitudes and motivations are equally as essential in building a narration. This is where Hayden White's elements of emplotment and encodement illuminate the narrative process and, likewise, this is consequently where mythological referent becomes closely intertwined with the narrative ("The Historical Text as Literary Artifact" 81–100). Emplotment and encodement become necessary tools in rendering Joan's history as a comprehensible construct, because they often allow one to fill in the gaps in historical narration.<sup>3</sup> Historical artifact is rarely complete. Even when provided with highly detailed literary artifact such as the transcript of Joan's trial, the motivations and agendas behind actions are often unclear. Why did Joan revert to wearing her page costume? Why did the King never post bail for Joan? These are unanswerable questions

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<sup>3</sup> As previously explained, emplotment refers to the process of superimposing a commonly recognized plot, such the rise and fall of an empire over the narration of history in order to make it more relevant to the person receiving the historical information (the process of creating a narrative from chronicles). Encodement refers to the superimposition of archetypes, perspectives and agendas to the historical person or event (familiarizing the unfamiliar through easily recognizable narrative constructs).

with the limited information provided. This leaves the reader to superimpose archetypal-based agendas or perspectives to aid in the completion of a narration. Joan's life is a clear reflection of a highly documented life that still leaves many unanswered questions.

A study of the record of Joan's trial (that reigns as the unequivocal source of information regarding the maiden soldier's life) presents almost as many questions regarding the young French peasant as it provides answers:

Though we don't know what she looked like, we know more about Joan's character than about any other woman who lived before the modern age. And what we know comes largely from her own words in the trial that condemned her and from the people who knew and testified about her in the retrial that cleared her. (Brooks 159)

Despite this thorough recording of her life and her mission, there remain many gaps in the available artifact of a young French Maiden's life. Marina Warner asks pertinent unanswerable questions regarding the heroine's life:

Why was Joan accepted by Charles and the Valois party? What was her contribution to the military campaign? Why, after achievements so signal, was she allowed to be sold and executed when ransoms were the custom? (5)

The storyteller, historian, or in this case, filmmaker, often reverts to mythology to explain these unanswerable questions. Duguay's film, *Joan of Arc*, answers the quandary regarding Joan's contributions to the battlefield by portraying her as an Amazonian warrior figure with exceptional prowess on the battlefield. Besson, on the other hand,

sees Joan's supernatural capabilities as prophetess that allow her to readily identify Charles, the Dauphin, upon their first meeting (despite her never having met him), consequently endorsing Charles' and the Valois party's unusual readiness to accept Joan as a potential deliverer of France (*The Messenger: the Story of Joan of Arc*). With the help of established mythological referent, culture works on these informational gaps in history to render a narrative more comprehensible and thereby more meaningful for the culture itself.

The question of Joan's name is another excellent illustration of culture working on history to create an icon that corresponds to the needs of contemporary society. Warner explains that even the D'Arcian surname was manipulated in creating the myth of Joan. Pointing out that the transcripts of Joan's trial indicate a Joan who could not even initially respond to an inquisition into her surname, Warner formulates that the trial documents maintain that while Joan named her father as Jacques Dars and her mother as Isabelle Romée (explaining that it was the custom in her part of France for girls to take their mothers' names), Joan only ever referred to herself as *Jehanne la Pucelle* (meaning Joan the Virgin) (Warner 22).

Such a minor problem as an alteration of nomenclature may seem insignificant to the casual observer, but Warner's argument is that this particular construct of D'Arc as a surname is significant due to its married associations of noble birth and archery imagery (an arched bow is an association of the Greek Goddess of the hunt, Diana). An aptly chosen appellation issues a license to hypothesize many of the remaining questions regarding the young soldier. A soldier with the surname of Dars or Romée would

insinuate nothing more than the unremarkable image of a French peasant turned soldier; however, carrying a name that connects one to the Greek Goddess of hunting, virginity and childbirth (essential elements of human survival, purity and procreation) superimposes an image of strength and leadership upon the subject. The relating of historical individuals, such as Joan, to mythological archetypes justifies counter-imposing the heroine with certain agendas and perspectives to which the viewer might not otherwise have access. Modern filmmakers embrace these aspects of historical narration – conclusively utilizing mythology to recreate a new myth based on a historical figure that consequentially promotes the personal beliefs, agendas and perspectives of those creating the film.

### **The Many Faces of Joan**

In the introduction to her book Warner opens with, “a story lives in relation to its tellers and its receivers; it continues because people want to hear it again, and it changes according to their tastes and needs” (*Joan of Arc: the Image of Female Heroism* 3). Certainly the image of whom and what Joan is has evolved over the half millennium since her death. Running the gamut of the various representations of Joan throughout the centuries, Warner’s work clearly exemplifies the heroic images of Joan that alter over the centuries according to the socio-economic climate of the age. During the French Revolution, for example, when a rising sense of anti-aristocratic sentiment became the corner stone for unity, Joan became an image of peasant heroism, while the post-revolutionary period of Romanticism embraced the pastoral image of the virtue rather than of the heroism of the French peasant. She became an Amazonian image of women’s

capability during the era of Women's Rights, while the English, understandably, painted the French peasant as a villainous witch (William Shakespeare *Henry VI*). As this ever-evolving picture of Joan clearly shows, the knowable story of our heroine can never be attained, because the environment in which it is perceived always taints Joan's story. Thus, the fine lines between myth, legend and history are drawn; concisely deducing that each has an element of the other. That Joan was a European, however, tends to dictate the influence of the mythologies that work upon her story. Western culture primarily thrives on the Classical Greek and Roman, the Ancient Nordic and the Judeo-Christian mythologies, which tend to mold Joan into like figures of the various cultures working upon her story: Messianic, Prophetess, or Female Warrior are common western representations of Joan.

Biblical imagery, for instance, is a popular mythological referent from which to build a narrative on the life of Joan, particularly in film. Even so-called documentaries often resort to associations of the French peasant with Biblical prophetesses when explaining the life of Joan of Arc. A recent documentary of the maiden warrior's life, *Joan of Arc: Child of War, Soldier of God*, adheres to the premise that Joan was divinely inspired. By arguing against the Post-Freudian temptation to label Joan's "voices" as a symptom of Schizophrenia, this docudrama claims that the clarity of mind revealed in Joan's testimony during her trial is a clear sign that there was no mental illness involved in her decision-making process. The conclusion, according to this documentary, is that Joan's voices must have had a divine origin rather than a physiological one.

Joan of Arc scholar Deborah Fraioli juxtaposes the maiden warrior's legend to that of legendary biblical female warriors: such as the Israelite woman Deborah, who led her people in their battle against Canaanite King Jabin. (*The Literary Image of Joan of Arc: Prior Influences*). According to Fraioli, biblical mythology even served to promote the myth of the iconic Joan during her lifetime:

The association of Joan of Arc with biblical figures and with prophecy lent authority and legitimacy to her mission. The tendency to provide her with an eschatological role may have begun as little more than the customary workings of a medieval exegetical practice. In the long run, however, the fact that Joan was explicitly linked with both the past (the biblical heroines) and the future (her implied connection with the Last Days) may have spelled the difference between her becoming 'just another visionary' and her being accepted as the restorer of France. (1)

Accordingly, in several treatises resulting from church investigations into Joan's legitimacy (commissioned by Charles VII), biblical heroines Deborah, Esther and Judith were cited as confirmation that "God is able to bring about victory even through the intervention of a woman," thus validating Joan's mission and, even more importantly, her sanity as well (Fraioli 2). There is little doubt that biblical associations play a significant role in promoting the various social attitudes towards the young maid; it is not, however, the only mythology employed in the promotion of the d'Arcian legend. Maiden Warriors, swords pulled from stone, dwarves, giants, and seeresses are common mythological archetypes that are often associated with Joan.

## Joan in Cinema

Just as the literary and cultural significations of Joan's stature have transmuted over the centuries, so has the cinematic portrayal of her. The aforementioned film of Dreyer's portrays Joan as the tragic hero, who rises in the face of adversity, more recent filmic images of Joan portray the legendary soldier as a divine messenger (Luc Besson's *The Messenger: the Story of Joan of Arc*) or as a simple peasant destined for patriotic victory (Christian Duguay's *Joan of Arc*). In each instance, however, Joan is seen as a young maid of later teen years, with shortly cropped hair (often blond), dressed in either battlefield armor or a page's costume, and usually carrying a sword, a shield, and a banner. Unquestionably, these have become the Barthesian signifiers that pop culture has learned to associate with the young French maiden; it readily follows that she has become an easily recognizable image in modern culture (Barthes *Mythologies* 127- 143). Dreyer's, Besson's, and Duguay's films propagate this mythical image of Joan.

The fact remains, however, that though the appearance of an illusory Joan is readily identifiable, no modern person really knows what she looks like. While there is a plethora of historical documentation regarding the heroic deeds of the maid (to which the aforementioned films attempt to be faithful), the only true attestation to her appearance is a simple sketch, hastily done by a clerk of the Parliament of Paris, who, incidentally probably had never even laid eyes on Joan (Brooks, *Beyond the Myth: the Story of Joan of Arc*). Other than this rudimentary image quickly drawn in the margins of the clerk's report from the May 10, 1429 Orleans battlefield, there remain no other likenesses of Joan that were made within her lifetime (Warner 14). Any other existing imagery of

Joan is entirely dependent on the unreliable source of eyewitness accounts, a composite of which exhibits a fairly unremarkable maid in appearance: “[she was] a healthy strong peasant of square build [...] her hair was black [unlike the Hollywood image of the young blond], her eyes dark brown and her complexion swarthy” (Brooks 18). This information is hardly detailed enough for a Hollywood casting call, yet how does the image of a person about whose appearance one has so little information become so easily recognizable? Theorists such as Roland Barthes and Hayden White attribute this type of recognition to the power of myth.

Venturing from the more common associations of myth (as either a traditional story based on religious practice or as a false notion), Barthes describes myth as a meta-language. According to Barthes, myth is a system of communication that is composed of a signifier and a signified (*Mythologies*). This system of communication not only conveys a message, but conveys an inference as well. As such, the viewer recognizes not only the image of a girl, but also the image of Joan of Arc, not because the image is necessarily her, but because those things associated with her (such as the sword, the short haircut and the armor) direct the viewer to infer her. Furthermore, cinema propagates this imagery by not only allowing the viewer to easily recognize the image of Joan, but also by affecting the effect of the image on the viewer. The shield, the sword and the banner, for instance, exude a sense of military might and strength, more so than perhaps a girl in peasant costume might. While in reality, both examples may have clearly been elements of the actual maid’s life. These cognitive tools allow the viewers to not only recognize the image, but direct him/her as to how they should feel about it as well, which becomes

a powerful tool for the filmmaker. Through the manipulation of what could be considered Barthesian signifiers, the image of Joan is subjected to the agenda of the storyteller (in this case, the filmmaker).

The marketing for Luc Besson's cinematic adaptation of the life of Joan of Arc, for instance, indexes the warrior maidens from Nordic mythology, the Valkyrie. A poster for his film, *The Messenger: the Story of Joan of Arc*, illustrates an image of Joan in battle. She is sitting high upon her horse, but the deep focus lens shows her towering above the un-horsed soldiers combating the enemy below. Her sword is prominently displayed in the clip's foreground, clearly emphasizing her super-human strength in battle; she is wearing armor. This particular shot only shows the rear of the shield maiden's shortly cropped head; nevertheless, the viewer knows she is beautiful. The viewer knows she is beautiful without ever seeing her face, because of the archetypal imagery being employed in this shot. This imagery resonates of the Valkyrian warrior maidens from Nordic Mythology. Kevin Crossley-Holland describes the Valkyries as the "(Choosers of the Slain) Beautiful young women who chose men doomed to die in battle and brought them back to Valhalla" (252 *The Norse Myths*). The armor, the sword and the apparent gender of the soldier, along with her distinct position above the battlefield directs the viewer to winged maiden soldiers from Nordic mythology. One relies on this archetype of the warrior maiden to know that this particular female soldier is not only super-human, but is beautiful without ever viewing her visage or her deeds. Through this association of Joan's image with a Nordic figure of divinity, Besson is depicting Joan not

only as the Mistress of the Battlefield, but also as a “Chooser of the Slain,” creating a character with the supra-human ability of control over life and death (Crossley-Holland).



*Illus. 1. Joan presented as a Valkyrie in a poster for Luc Besson’s  
The Messenger: the Story of Joan of Arc.*

Film, employing mythology such as archetypal imagery, capitalizes on this marriage of myth and historical narration while, ultimately, establishing a new mythological representation of history. Ironically, the circular natures of these narrative structures (film, history and myth) even mimic the revolving natures of history and myth themselves. Myth feeds history while both myth and history nourish film allowing film, in turn, to give birth to its own representation of myth and of history. A more introspective look at the interactions between the narrations of Joan's life and the imagery employed in the cinematic representations thereof more clearly illustrate this statement.

### **Joan as Christ (Carl Theodor Dreyer, 1928)**

In contrast to Duguay's poster, Dreyer's film, *La Passion de Jean D'Arc*, borrows from biblical mythology by transforming Joan into a Christly figure of religious martyrdom. The title of the film alone references Christ's suffering in the days before he was executed by crucifixion; the innards of the film reinforce the Messianic reference through the blatant Christian imagery of crosses, crowns, and the persecution of a martyr. Because Dreyer wishes to emphasize the Christly aspect of Joan, however, there is no presence of her sword in this film. Preferring to project the French maid as a catalyst for peace rather than a master of war, Dreyer exchanges Joan's sword for a crown of martyrdom.

The presence of Joan's crown serves as a significant mythological metaphor in Dreyer's film, because Dreyer's choice of regal headgear for Joan promotes his development of her as a Messianic figure (Jesus had a crown of thorns). The crown not

only references the Christ figure but also serves to signify the torment each martyr had to endure while securing a kingdom (Christ fought for the kingdom of God while Joan felt the heavy weight of the French crown upon her). Both martyrs wore crowns that tormented them. Christ was forced to wear a crown of thorns, which presumably caused him great physical pain; Dreyer's Joan makes herself a crown of twine that proves to serve as an instrument of mockery for her persecutors. Despite the historical records that indicate Joan was forced to wear a long pointed cap as she was being led to her execution, Dreyer persists with a crown as the only source of chapeau-driven ridicule for the young French woman (Brooks 146). By permitting the film's heroine to proceed to her funeral pyre sans a demoralizing dunce's cap, Dreyer accesses the inner dignity of the film's heroine in her last moments rather than exposing a ridiculous outer appearance, reinforcing the internal realm of the heroine with which Dreyer is most concerned and it is his detailed focus on the inner realm of his subjects that is ultimately one of the defining characteristics of Dreyer's film.

While never veering from a determinant vision of presenting Joan as an image of martyrdom, Dreyer's film achieves a rather singular representation of the young maiden because, unlike Besson's and Duguay's films, Dreyer readily enters into the alternative dimension of human emotion with his subject. That Joan is characterized as a woman far superior to her fellow man is evident in each of the film's being discussed, but that Dreyer dares to humanize this character by allowing her human frailties clearly displays Dreyer's artistic prowess as a filmmaker. Rather than seeing emotion as a point of weakness, Dreyer finds it a great defining factor of Joan's strength as a human being.

Compassion, sorrow, elation and love, are the ever-defining emotions that characterize not only Joan's strength, but also her purity. It is only through a masterful engagement with the close-up that Dreyer is able to access this interior realm of emotion within Joan.

The close-up becomes the painter's brush through which Dreyer conceptualizes Joan. These long, drawn out and emotionally expressive facial camera studies are shot in real time (as opposed to cinematic edited version of time) and prove to reinforce the mythological codes utilized in Dreyer's film. The utilization of mythological referent (such as archetypes, heroic journeys, and super-human deeds) in film serves as an effective method of condensing a lifespan of multiple decades into the typically two-hour duration of a film, because the filmmaker is not only able to clearly delineate who his hero is, but is also able to index an entire history with little explanation. The ability to condense the real time life of an individual into the reel time life of the subject of a film is the core of cinematic narration of historical event. The employment of mythological referent not only permits historians (in this case, the filmmaker) to infer much of their subject's history through the unconscious extrapolation of it, but it also allows the filmmaker to index an entire history with little explanation. By allowing much of the historical information to be inferred rather than explained, this ultimately indicates that that which is not said in the picture becomes just as important as that which is said. The close-up of Joan's facial expressions does this as well by inferring much more than is visually apparent within the limited scope of a centralized camera focus. Although they may seem initially entirely unrelated, the ability to communicate much with little explanation is a characteristic that the close-up shares with mythological referent.

Dreyer recognizes that Joan's humanity is just as critical to the import of her existence as are her deeds and the expression of this humanity lies not within the external realm of dialogue and action, but within the raw interior realm of Joan's emotions. In his study of the close-up, Béla Balázs states that "close-ups are the often dramatic revelations of what is really happening under the surface of appearances," thus, Dreyer's uses this method of shooting in order to portray the interior realm of Joan's existence where the real merit of Joan, namely, her soul lies ("The Close-Up and the Face of Man," 118). The simple courtroom image of a single tear trickling down Joan's cheek displays a sincere, unmasked emotion that cannot otherwise be represented through dialogue or action. Props, costumes and scenery are of little import in this film. Backdrops are often nothing more than a white canvas permitting minimal distraction from the face of the actor. Even the face of the actress, Renée Jeanne Falconetti, is bereft of make-up. The external narrative is incidental, the inference to that which is not seen becomes essential. In this stripped-down rawness of Dreyer's film, the viewer relies heavily on mythological referent to index the narrative behind that which is seen. The ethereal glow in her eyes, the heavenward glances, and the internal struggle of forgiving those persecuting her - the "inner storm" on the face of the martyred Joan as she perishes at the stake becomes the all-encompassing story line (Balázs 118). These facial expressions infer devotion more sincere than any action or spoken word. Through his actress' expression of deep emotional pain, Dreyer is able to re-enforce the extraordinary, mythical heroism in Joan; only a super-human could maintain her convictions while subjected to the extra-ordinary

levels of mental anguish and physical pain with which the maiden warrior was forced to endure. This surely shoots her into the realm of the exceptional.

Joan's inner storm rages until her death, at which point Dreyer permits exposure to the external storm of the crowds rioting over the loss of their saint. The filmmaker's change in focus from the internal to the external is a quasi-reiteration of a comment on narrative made by Northrop Frye in *Myth and Metaphor*:

Aristotle suggests that in the process the narrative moves from representing the particular to representing the universal. When we go from the early history of Scotland to *Macbeth*, we go from what happened to what happens, to a vision of something recurrent and never finished within human life (126).

Myth creates a narrative structure by creating a universal from the particular event or person. By changing his focus from the personal interior emotional realm of Joan's emotions to the exterior emotions of the rioting crowds, Dreyer is creating a universal from a particular event. Joan, as the particular is the archetypal Christian soldier; as the universal, she becomes a metaphor not only of martyrdom, but also of the certain deterioration of humankind when we allow the demise of the virtuous and the good.

Inevitably, Dreyer's Christly image of Joan's persecution not only relies on mythology to index her as a martyr, but also creates its own mythology of martyrdom as well by creating a particular image of how it should appear. We see many of these same images reverberating in more recent film. In his 2004 film, *The Passion of the Christ*, Mel Gibson, for instance, revisits many of these same techniques that Dreyer had

established over half a century earlier. Without question, there exist many comparable events in the narrative structures regarding the lives of Christ and Joan: both are considered religious martyrs with a rise to power through the execution of miraculous events, both suffer from a betrayal (Judas betrays Jesus while Charles deserts Joan) that leads to trials, executions and eternal life achieved through the propagation of various cultural revisitations of their stories.

Reminiscent of Dreyer, Gibson is more concerned with the internal anguish that his subject experiences in the days before his subsequent persecution than with the narration of the external chaos surrounding his subject. Gibson rarely uses long or distance shots when shooting his scenes, preferring to stay focused on the close, intent facial images of his actors (particularly when scenes portraying deep emotional stress are being shot). As such, the background images in these particular scenes become rudimentary and language becomes incidental. In certain shots, even color becomes meaningless; in Gibson's opening scene in the Garden of Gethsemane, for instance, Gibson fades the color in order to diminish any distraction from the study of Jesus' face as he struggles with the emotional torment of betrayal and impending doom. The reverberating images continue. Dreyer shot many of his images in real time, allowing for extended periods of facial study; Gibson even further exaggerates his expressions of emotional struggle by slowing the camera's speed. This usage of slow motion draws the emphasis away from the action and places it on the motivations behind the actions, because it allows for a clearer perception of the facial expressions on the actors as they are moving. Dreyer's film was a silent film – reducing spoken expression to occasional

verbal ejaculations printed across the screen; comparably, in Gibson's film, the dialogue was entirely spoken in Aramaic and Latin, leaving the English speaking audience to rely on gesture and facial inflections and written subtitles for communication. Both films cumulate in the imposing chaos exuded after the death of the chosen martyr. Storms, earthquakes and the suicide of Jesus' betrayer mark the death of Gibson's martyr, while rioting masses fill the screen in Dreyer's film. Final deaths of both martyrs are marked by a silhouetted shot of the drooped, lifeless head of the executed victim.



*Illus. 2 and 3.* The reverberating images of an internal anguish of martyrdom as portrayed by Renée Jeanne Falconetti's Joan of Arc and James Caviezel's Christ.

One could unequivocally contest Dreyer serving as the sole inspiration for Gibson. To insinuate this is, of course, not the intent of this discussion, but rather to suggest that Gibson adds another “layer” to the Benjaminian process of telling the story by taking those images that preceded his film and building upon them to create his own personalized version of the narrative (Walter Benjamin “*Der Erzähler*” 394). That this type of imagery is consistently revisited is also indicative of the cyclical nature of myth. Part of the power of myth is that it provides timeless allegories and archetypes that can be inter-generationally revisited, redefined, and re-manipulated into something that can be perceived as being just as pertinent and meaningful for the new generation as it was for the last. As such, myth becomes an important and powerful tool for the storyteller.

Because mythological references, such as the biblical reference of the cross, are so eagerly employed in Dreyer’s work, the result is a comprehensively represented narration of a pivotal point in history, according to Dreyer. That liberties are taken in the actual history of Joan, is incidental (one may, in turn, argue that the “actual history” of Joan is an unknowable concept). Dreyer, for instance, has Joan carrying an arrow rather than a sword as she is being mocked by her jailers. First and foremost, it is unlikely that Joan would have even been permitted to possess such a weapon while being under guard. Secondly, Joan was known to have possessed a sword, but other than in nomenclature and in having been pierced by one in battle, Joan was rarely associated with an arrow as weaponry. Nevertheless, Dreyer’s choice of Joan holding an arrow rather than a sword is an important one in portraying a vision of that which he considered the essence of whom and what Joan represented. The presence of the arrow not only indexes the maid’s

D'arc-ian surname, but it diminishes the image of a warrior maiden that the alternative presence of a sword might otherwise promote.<sup>4</sup> The fact that Dreyer has Joan gently cradling the arrow rather than utilizing it to attack is not only crucial to Dreyer's image of Joan, but it also exhibits a rather accurate account of a maid who abhorred violence. The literary artifact regarding Joan never really delineates, what, if anything, she might have had in her hand. Portraying her as holding an arrow does not necessarily misrepresent absolute historical fact, because it permits the viewer access to those qualities that the Dreyer felt reflected the truer essence of who Joan was. Dreyer was clearly intending to project a more peace-loving image of Joan, for he felt this was closer to the nature of the actual historical figure – or at least, as he wanted to project her.



*Illus. 4.* Carl Theodor Dreyer's Joan embracing her arrow as sceptre.

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<sup>4</sup> As was previously discussed regarding Joan's nomenclature, Marina Warner claims that it is a refeto Diana, the Goddess of the Hunt (*Joan of Arc: the Image of Female Heroism* 22).

### **Joan as Prophet (Luc Besson's Image of Joan, 1999)**

The scene opens as the pious young maid is trekking through the resplendent French countryside on her way home after her dutiful daily visit to confession. The girl is lovely, blond with a generous crop of golden ringlets and dressed in simple peasant costume; she exudes certain piousness, sweetness and sincerity that is determinably rare in such a young child. Full of God's post-confessional grace, she must maneuver a path through field and forest to find her way home. As the girl commences her merry path onward, the camera retreats from her lovely face to expose a resplendent field of vibrant red poppies that readily mirror the child's blissful revelry. She gaily prances through the field of flowers, which leads to a small stream over which she must cross. Unhindered, the girl skips down the streambed, playfully splashing through the water. She is delighted to reach the wheat field on the other side of the stream, rolling about in its long splendorous green blades. Here is where the child has her first vision. As the camera directs the viewer's gaze heavenward, the clouds in the sky begin to part, allowing heaven a direct path to the young girl. She hears a voice telling her to be good and a sword magically appears in the tall grass beside her. Complete with sword in hand, the young peasant girl rouses from her post-visionary stupor and continues her journey homeward.

The light exuberant mood of the scene is suddenly coaxed into darkness as the path leads the pious young maid into the forest. She is instantly dwarfed by the imposing stature of the trees. Towering and stretching their expansive limbs to defensively block any showering of the sun's radiance into its caliginous depths, the forest is dark and the

trees bear an ominous sense of foreboding. A lone, black wolf appears. The girl runs with it, directly leading her and the rest of the pack into battle. Archers, fire, chaos and destruction are abundant. The wolves gnaw and devour the human carcasses littering the blood-soaked terrain. The village, her home, is decimated; its inhabitants slaughtered and its shelter either ransacked or burned. The scene is one of utter despair and it presents a pivotal point in the young maid's life; she is now a maid with a mission.

The opening scene of Luc Besson's filmic depiction of Joan of Arc, *The Messenger: the Story of Joan of Arc*, presents an astonishing cinematic tribute to Romanticism. Vibrant and colorful visuals that display not only pantheistic worldly bliss and the magnificent but also the innermost dark abysses of human nature, Besson's retreat into Romanticism here is a clear depiction of the symbiotic relationship between mythology and historical narration. The figure of the young Joan merrily skipping through fields of flowers only to end up in a dark forest where she encounters an ominous wolf is akin to the Red Riding Hood fairytale ("*Rotkäppchen*" Grimms *Märchen* 133). Since folklore and fairytale are often considered a point of literary annexation for many of the Romantics (particularly in the German and French traditions), the mythological association here is clear. Joseph Campbell claims that fairy tale is the domestication of myth (*The Hero with a Thousand Faces* 30). Surely, Joan of Arc as savior of France (or in this case, as Red Riding Hood) serves as a domesticated version of the greater Amazonian figure who directly engages with the enemy (painted by Besson as the menacing wolf that, in turn, serves as a metaphorical representation of the invading English).

While Besson's film commences with the Romantic imagery of fairy tales, it is not the only mythological referent upon which he draws in order to depict Joan's history. Besson may chose a fairytale introduction and, as previously discussed, presents Joan as more the Valkyrian figure through advertising with his poster, but the film itself reflects a stronger image of a Biblical prophet than that of either a female warrior or a fairytale heroine.

In Besson's film, Joan is portrayed as a tool of the Christian God whose purpose is to carry out his will by ridding France of her enemies. A Biblical referent can be a powerful tool in explaining the essence and motivations of the devout young maid. There is much documented evidence to indicate that Joan was a pious, devout Catholic, who claimed to hear the voices of St. Catherine, St. Margaret and St. Michael directing her. According to Polly Schoyer Brooks' account, records indicate that Joan often requested to attend mass at seemingly inopportune moments: as a young maiden leaving her work in the field to pray in the middle of the day and as a young warrior requesting to stop and hear mass while marching her soldiers to the battlefield (*Beyond the Myth: the Story of Joan of Arc*). This certainly exhibits an element of the pious within the peasant soldier, which is readily explained through the employment of biblical archetypes. Through mythological association, Joan is transformed from the peasant girl who is seemingly obsessed with prayer to a young Christian soldier on a divine mission.

Because Besson emphasizes the import of Joan's voices by embodying them, he is directly engaging the film with the Joan as prophet discussion. The filmmaker, however, chooses to embody Joan's voices as masculine representations of her

conscience in various stages of life (a boy, a young man, and an old man) rather than crediting St. Michael, St. Catherine and St. Margaret as her divine directives (as Joan clearly asserted in her trial documents). An embodiment of conscience here, however, is hardly an attempt to argue for a post-Freudian claim of schizophrenia on the part of the filmmaker; rather, it serves as a vehicle for the Job-ian battle of God and the Devil arguing for the chosen soul. Unlike Dreyer, who sees the essence of Joan (or what is inside her) as the primal factor in relaying her story, Besson sees Joan's purpose (or what she does) as the driving force in her story. That Joan has a conscience that at one turn pushes her to save her country and at the next tempts her to disavow God is Besson's portrayal of Joan's humanity, which makes her unexceptional and likens her to other men. That she is able to persevere through these internal conflicts is, according to the filmmaker, what makes Joan exceptional. As such, by permitting the viewer access to the otherwise unknowable conscience of Joan, Besson gifts his audience with access to an explanation of her purpose (namely to carry out God's will). Consequently, since it is the "message" rather than the "messenger" that drives Besson's film; the actual character of Joan becomes almost incidental.

There are certainly historians such as Pernoud and Warner who might argue against some of the historical accuracies of Besson's film. Besson, for instance, creates a scene where Joan's sister, Catherine, is brutally raped and murdered by the invading English while Joan remains helplessly hidden in a closet, yet traumatically aware of her sister's horrendous fate. Aside from perhaps using this film to referent some of the atrocities during the Kosovo conflict in Yugoslavia (the filmmaker spent part of his

childhood in Yugoslavia and filmed in the Czech Republic), Besson uses this scene to develop the ulterior side of Joan's mission in the Job-ian battle for the maid's soul. Joan wrestles with her conscience over the validity of her voices: Were they from God or did she just want to believe that they were from God? Was she really using God as an excuse for the revenge of her sister's death?

Although emphasizing that it is with her own conscience that Joan is arguing and not particularly with God, Besson's work does ultimately recognize divine inspiration as the source of Joan's deeds. The legend follows that upon first meeting, Joan was able to mysteriously recognize the Dauphin in a crowded hall although she had never met or seen him before. The filmmaker remains loyal to this account. Doubtful of her intentions, the scene shows John Malkovich as Charles VII deliberately trying to trick Joan into thinking another member of his council was the Dauphin by setting his cohort upon the royal throne; Milla Jovovich as Joan is not deterred by the rouse upon entering the hall and is mysteriously able to pick the Dauphin from the crowd. Charles' explanation was that only a messenger sent from God could have done so. Additionally, by ignoring the discussion amongst historians over Joan's contributions to war maneuvers, Besson's Joan is likewise able to give clear and successful battle directives despite her complete lack of experience in the field. As previously mentioned, Joan of Arc scholar, Marina Warner, lists the question of Joan's involvement in the campaigns as one of the primary unanswerable questions regarding the young French maiden (*Joan of Arc: the Image of Female Heroism* 5). The literary artifact contains no proof of Joan's involvement in battle strategies; there is much speculation that she merely served as an inspirational

figurehead for the troops. Whether a manifestation of reality or not, these representations of an omniscient Joan, whose course of action is entirely beyond the scope of natural human behavior, are a necessary ingredient to the filmmaker's vision of Joan. Besson's interjection of these supernatural feats only serves to reinforce the mythology of the divinely inspired prophet that is being employed by the filmmaker.

In the end, Besson clearly considers that it is only through the maiden's ultimate death that her divine mission is served; the chosen hero must die. Since she is portrayed as possessing the same frailties as other men and she ultimately succumbs to her environment (through her execution at the stake), Northrop Frye would likely render Besson's rendition of the peasant warrior as the tragic low mimetic heroine rather than as the romantic hero as was previously discussed ('First Essay' *Anatomy of Criticism* 34). Frye claims that it is only through the mimetic hero's death that he is able to be isolated from other humans; surely this is the particular archetype that Besson projects with his Joan of Arc. Certainly, consideration of Joan's death is a critical point to this discussion. Benjamin places much emphasis on the import to the manner in which death visits the narrative. He states that "death is the sanction of everything that the storyteller can report [...] he has borrowed his authority from death" (396). It is the point at which each story must end and the manner of death becomes just as important as the life the protagonist. Since Joan died in such a dramatic manner, the storyteller often builds upon this narrative to emphasize the deeds of her life (as will be demonstrated in the next section, Duguay even commences his narrative with Joan's death). How much more important is a person's deed, when the risk of performing it is death?

This point is re-enforced through one of the most powerful scenes in Besson's film when Joan had her final argument with her conscience. The mysterious bearded man in a black robe, who appears as instantaneously as he vanishes, once again visits Joan (Dustin Hoffman projects a masterfully imposing older conscience arguing for Joan's soul in this scene). In an effort for self-preservation, Joan has signed a written statement recanting her visions and divine directives to her jailors. The conscience argues with Joan, "[...] and this is what you choose?" He accuses her of abandoning God. In the end, fully aware that it will mean her death (by being burned for heresy), Joan denounces her recantations and is resigned to her fate. Choosing God and eventual death over the church that is persecuting her with a potential promise of life becomes the only viable choice for the maid; it is only through her death that the heroine can remain true to her divine mission. Because Besson places such import on her death, he consistently re-emphasizes the nature of circularity that is so common to the narrations of both mythology and history: life culminating in death and eternal life achieved only through death. Ironically, it is also only through her death that the maid is able to remain alive through the countless cultural revisitations of the Joan of Arc legend.

Besson's use of a prophetic archetype is a clear illustration of the need for mythology in explaining historical event by allowing the figure of the bard to fill in the passages left ambiguous within historical artifact. By painting Joan as a prophet, Besson is able to explain those unanswerable questions from a previous era: such as, the reasons for the successful battle campaigns against the English, the motivations behind Charles' ready acceptance of Joan, the purpose behind Joan's change of heart in her recantation of

her visions. Incontrovertibly, there could have been a plethora of other explanation for these occurrences; Besson employs the image of a prophet as his response to these questions. Explaining history without this tool would render the event completely incomprehensible to the modern observer of Joan's history.

### **Joan as Valkyrie (Christian Duguay's *Joan of Arc*, 1999)**

The film's first shot is a close up of the dying maiden, gazing heavenward and gently whispering a heartfelt thanks to God. The camera lens quickly expands to expose the flames surrounding the young woman. The flames, not the face, become the story; it is the story of the death of an innocent victim. The face would never betray the warrior as she perishes at the stake. It is the dying maid who is in control, not her executioners and not the throngs that come to gawk at the sight. The viewer quickly assesses that it was even her conscious decision rather than that of her persecutors for her to perish. The construct of Christian Duguay's film, *Joan of Arc*, eventually reveals that the young maid's mission for a France unified under Charles VII and free from the English must eventually culminate in either the preservation of her faith and her own death or her eternal imprisonment in conjunction with an abdication of her faith. In the end, she is a demi-god, a superhuman, a heroic warrior, bravely marching to her death in the fight against tyranny and persecution.

Rather than defining his Joan through the qualities that show her human-ness, Duguay's vision of Joan transcends her humanity. It is her non-human or god-like qualities that define this Joan. Stoic, virtuous, righteous, wholesome, and strong while gallantly adorned in her beloved fleur-de-lys embossed suit of armor, Leelee Sobieski's

portrayal of Joan defines the very essence of the maiden warrior. While never completely denouncing the biblical influence in the making of the maid, it is primarily to this mythology of the female warrior that Christian Duguay appeals in his 1999 film. Sobieski as Joan remains serious, rarely laughing, crying, or displaying any other symptoms of human emotion. When severely injured in battle by an arrow that is shot through her shoulder, the female warrior demands to have the tip of the arrow broken off. She pulls the weapon out herself and commands her officers to lift her back onto her horse so she can return to battle. Like a Valkyrie from the Nordic mythologies, she rises from the debris of the battlefield to save the souls of the righteous soldiers. This Joan chooses to be the author of her destiny rather than its victim, which is incontrovertibly demonstrated in the opening scene of *Joan of Arc*, but further reinforced in this battle scene. The maid remains ever in control - even her death is her decision.

A Valkyrian association with Joan is a logical one. Much like a Valkyrie, Joan was a female soldier who wore armor, carried a sword and who was, in essence, the “Chooser of the Slain” (Kevin Crossley Holland *The Norse Myths* 252). According to Polly Schoyer Brooks, Joan led and directed the French armies against the English and Burgundian forces; she chose when, where and whom to attack (*Beyond the Myth: the Story of Joan of Arc*). On the battlefield, many lives were at her mercy. Brooks claims that there is no evidence, however, that she ever fought or killed anyone, but merely served as a figurehead to lead and inspire the troops during battle (much like a Valkyrie who may not necessarily have always fought, but merely flew over the battlefield collecting the souls of the dead warriors). Furthermore, Valkyries were immortal; at

times, the real Joan often exhibited a Valkyrie-esque aura of immortality about her. Joan's chaplain, Pasquerel, testified at the Nullification Trial of Joan of Arc, that she had indeed prognosticated an injury during battle the following day, "[...] tomorrow blood will leave my body above my breast" (Régine Pernoud *Joan of Arc: Her Story* 46). In event, she was indeed injured the following day by an arrow above her breast. The injury did not deter her, however, she withdrew long enough to have the shaft removed and returned immediately to battle.

The historic Joan was aware of this sense of the extraordinary about her and fed from it to further her cause. She continuously confirmed that she had been sent from God to free France from the English and place Charles, the Dauphin, on the throne; as to whether or not she ever considered her the prophesized savior of France is an unknowable factor. Marina Warner claims that the evidence from her first trial indicates that Joan initially argued against her status as "the maid who would come out of such a wood [the forest near her home] and work miracles." Warner further argues that Joan's trial would likely have had an entirely different outcome had she presented herself as a fulfillment of the internationally accepted Merlin-ian prophesies (26). Her Nullification Trial, however, is full of witnesses that claim Joan's reference to herself as the fulfillment of the Merlin prophesies (Régine Pernoud *The Retrial of Joan of Arc: the Evidence of her Vindication*). Warner, however, argues against this claim by confirming that the eye-witness accounts were speaking from the unreliable source of memory and "probably pooled their memories" in establishing Joan's mission as pre-ordained (26). In Duguay's film, however, what Joan thinks about herself is only secondary; the filmmaker's primary

concern is the external realm of how she is perceived by others. That others saw her as a fulfillment of a prophecy is the important factor to Duguay. As such, the filmmaker reinforces this mythology by promoting Joan's status as "the Maid of Lorraine," who would free France from the English not only by having Joan continuously refer to herself as such within the film's dialogue but even more effectually by introducing his film with the Merlin Prophecies carefully scripted across the screen:

Once in a time known as the Dark Ages

There lived a Legend whose coming had been foretold by the Great  
prophet Merlin.

It was said that after nearly a century of war this young maiden would  
unite her divided people

And lead them to freedom.

It did not say how...

The opening of this film with the Merlin prophecies presents a twofold effect. One being to legitimize Joan as a prophet, but the other, more subtle effect is that it introduces the storyteller to the story. Benjamin claims that many storytellers start with telling their audience how they first heard this story; in doing so, this leaves traces of the storyteller on the story "the way handprints of the potter cling to the clay vessel" (393). Duguay has personalized his version of Joan's story through this narrative construct.

According to Marina Warner, Joan arrived at a time ripe for receiving a woman in the guise of the expectant savior of France stating that there were "numerous and confused prophecies circulating in France [that] promised the rise of a virgin saviour"

(24). Warner primarily refers to the Merlin prophecies that promised France's salvation through a virgin, but illuminates the discussion by addressing other such vivacious prophetic notions such as the Sibyl and the Venerable Bede that were active during Joan's lifetime (25). Whether these prophetic notions were authentic revelations or not is, in essence, irrelevant, Duguay's treatment of them as valid serves to further present his historical drama as an authenticated one as well.

Duguay continues to develop the extraordinary rather than the ordinary within his character. Unlike the Joans of the two previous films who were permitted human flaws (Dreyer's Joan who is defined by the internal combustibility of her emotions and Besson's Joan who is defined through her struggle over internal conflict), Duguay does not permit his Joan such human frailties. Dreyer and Besson found strength in Joan's human-ness; Duguay finds her story in her God-likeness. Because Joan's human-ness is rendered irrelevant to the filmmaker, Duguay's primary focus within the film is not that which is happening within Joan, but that which is happening around her and the effect that Joan's presence has on that event. As such, the filmmaker chooses the exterior realm of gestures, costume, and background as his means of defining this image of the French maiden. Few facial studies are done in this film; the close-up is rather exchanged for distance and wide-angled shots that develop a greater sense of what is happening around Joan and how her presence has influenced the activities thereof. The film's opening shot is a good illustration of Duguay's pre-occupation with the exterior. Although the film initially opens with a close up shot from overhead of Sobieski's face gazing heavenward while her character communes with her maker, the camera lens is quickly retracted to

expand the audience's access to the activity surrounding the character. The flames surrounding the upward-gazed face quickly play as an essential part in the narrative as the face of the martyred Joan does. How Joan feels at this point is not as important to the filmmaker as is the fact that she is being martyred and that, perhaps, she has even fearlessly chosen to be so; this is, to Duguay, what defines the extraordinary within Joan.

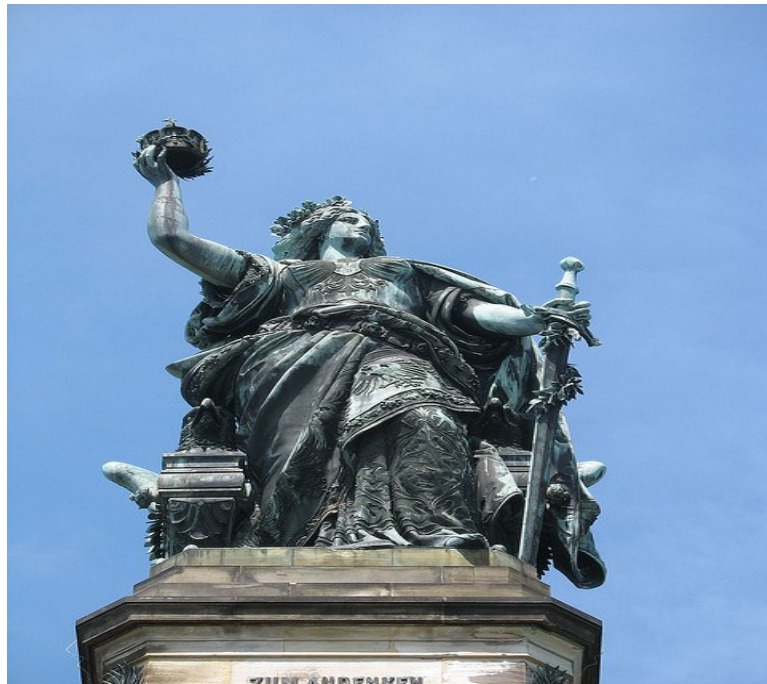
Sobieski's costume, likewise, is an eager participant in the film's interest with the exterior. Joan strikes an impressive figure of the female warrior in her suit of armor that is prominently displayed with the royal insignia of the French monarchy, the fleur-de-lys. Of the filmmakers previously mentioned, Duguay is the one who most utilizes the metaphorical referent of this symbol that is often considered synonymous to the Virgin French patriot. Marina Warner claims that the fleur-de-lys maintains an ancient tradition "with the legends of the earliest days of the Christian kingdom of France" (167). Accordingly, the insignia was considered not only a symbol of France's conversion to Christianity and as such a symbol of the God-granted domain of the French nobility, but it also became a token of great esteem; only those granted permission by the king were permitted to wear it. Joan's status was considerably elevated after she was granted permission to wear such a prestigious endorsement from the king; thus the symbol played an important part in the making of the Maid from Domremy. The fleur-de-lys indexes something far more visceral and ancient than just the French monarchy, however. The association of the fleur-de-lys with Joan establishes an even further mythological referent for the female soldier and those qualities that are established in connection to the ancient Amazonian myths. Warner argues that the arrow-like appearance of the tri-petaled image

produces a further connection of Joan not only with the cult of Diana (Goddess of the Hunt) but also of the Amazonian figure of the female warrior (165). According to Warner, this metaphorical imagery of bows and arrows perpetuated themselves not only in the emblems on the French maid's suit of armor and banner, but also effected the eventual development of her name as "d'Arc."



*Illus. 5.* Leelee Sobieski as the Saviour of France

Certainly, Duguay was able to communicate much with the mythological implications of this simple emblem, but even more so, by exuding all those qualities for which the emblem stands (the power of the hunt, the might of the nobility, the piety of the French people, the strength of the Amazon), through her embossed coat of armor Joan is projected not only as a female warrior, but also as the very embodiment of France itself. Duguay is essentially portraying Joan in the great patriotic tradition of feminine figures whose statuesque physiques project a mythological image of a specified geographical region: Lady Liberty, Germania, Bavaria and Athena. Duguay's illustration of Joan as the embodiment of France not only legitimizes her battle but also enhances her iconic status by promoting her struggle from the personal level of a French peasant to the national level of a French people.



*Illus. 6. Germania am Rhein*

## **Benjamin and Myth**

Memory and mythology remain the keys to any Benjaminian tale, because Benjamin saw myth as an explanation of the way the world works (402). This explanation was based on history and, as Benjamin was well aware, is arguable a myth in itself. Nevertheless, according to this strain of thought, the manner in which the world worked in the past is the same way it works in the present and will continue to function in the future. Storytelling, the epitome of which is the fairytale, empowers mankind to overcome the myth. The way things always were is not the way they will always be. This is the reason that Joan of Arc remains so exceptional; she showed that battles did not need to be fought the way they had always been. A woman could fight as well as a man, piety ruled over aggression, and a woman could be a leader. Benjamin likened the great storytellers to the Scheherazade, who always has a fresh tale when one tale comes to an end (400). The tale of Joan of Arc follows accordingly; each filmmaker adds his own conversation to the D'Arcian legend, keeping Joan of Arc alive within our modern culture. This is one of the notable aspects of the bardic spirit, in that it is able to keep the past relevant to the present.

A further consideration is, however, not necessarily just the commentary each film attempts to make on the past, but more importantly the reciprocity between the culture in which the film was made and the manner in which the historical figure was portrayed. With the cultural influences of actors, Mila Jovovich, and the European location of his film, Luc Besson, who spent part of his childhood in Yugoslavia, addresses the political unrest in Kosovo at the time the film was being made. By

contrasting a modern political unrest between two different cultures to the same political environment that Joan was experiencing in the fifteen century, Besson, encourages the viewer to reconsider how he or she views the world. Likewise, Joan of Arc was revisited as a cultural icon when she was sanctified in 1920. A few short years afterwards, Dreyer commenced work on his film. The environment in which the film is being constructed influences the cinematic representation of the bard, by allowing the contemporary cultural influence to add another Benjaminian layer to the narrative.

Ultimately, the suggested implications that the viewer draws from a confrontation with the literary elements of archetypes, heroic journeys and super-human deeds while still recognizing Joan as a figure of history is what drives the ever-revolving, ever-regenerating narrative of Joan upon which our figure of the bard draws his or her inspiration. In her foreword to Régine Pernoud's *The Retrial of Joan of Arc: the Evidence for her Vindication*, Katherine Anne Porter writes: "All attempts to account rationally for Joan of Arc's life end no better than those that try to shape it to fit some fantastic theory. She is unique, and a mystery... "(x). Despite the fact that few lives from the medieval era are as well documented as hers is, Joan's history remains an amorphous construct. Although Joan is destined to remain an enigma of history, this is what keeps her story alive. To confine Joan to the constraints of history would be to kill her, and through their revisitations of her story, the previously discussed filmmakers have managed to keep Joan an active force in culture. Myth, legend, history and pop culture blend together to create that political allegory that rose from the ashes of a war torn France to become the iconic hero we know today as Joan of Arc. Just as it does in

modern literature and film, mythology pro-generated by the storyteller, likewise, played as an essential role in the promoting of the D'Arcian legend during Joan's own lifetime, and perhaps, in doing so, promoted not only the iconic status she experienced during her lifetime, but also the perpetuation of her as a legend. That she still lives in our stories is a testament to the relevancy of the figure of the bard in contemporary culture.

### **Chapter 3: Fashioning Fairytale in the Mis-appropriation of Benjamin's**

#### **Storytelling**

In his essay on the storyteller, Walter Benjamin affirms that “the storyteller is the figure in which the righteous man encounters himself” (410). Often, however, in the Benjaminian process of storytelling, the storyteller does not encounter the righteous man, but rather finds something much more sinister. In other situations, the storyteller assures himself that it is the righteous man he is seeing in his story, while the audience is abundantly certain of no redeeming qualities to be found. Writing in an era when a National Socialist propaganda mechanism was rapidly gaining strength, no one was more aware of the dangers of a misapplication of the tradition of storytelling than Walter Benjamin. Surely, it promoted his loss of faith in mankind’s connection to this tradition when audiences were told how to think rather than “[being] left to interpret things the way they saw them” (391). The introduction to this discussion argued for the filmmaker as storyteller per a construct constituted by Benjamin. The chapter on Joan of Arc argues for the necessity for the blending of myth and history in the creation of a story as constituted by Benjamin. Through consideration of that literary form that Benjamin found to be closest to the nature of telling the story - the fairytale, this section will address the tragic consequences that can result when the figure of the bard misapplies or manipulates this process.

At the core of this discussion lie the Brothers Grimm, whose research and literary compilations have become so internationally well-known that they have served to index

an entire culture. As such, they are often referenced in discussions that attempt to define the German culture (whatever that may be), despite many weaknesses in the research and arguments of the two brothers.

### **The Myth of the Mythmakers: the Case of the Brothers Grimm**

These two legendary brothers whose adept abilities in language, culture and research forced the academic, social and political communities around them to re-evaluate the manner in which they viewed themselves, their history and consequently others. It was the Brothers' philological love of language that produced a keen interest in the oral tradition that surrounded their culture and eventually led to their published editions of documented folktales, legends and myths. The Siblings' publications were so successful and eventually became so well recognized and admired internationally that they inevitably served to index not only their work but also an entire culture and its history. Rarely has a country produced two scholars so nationally (and internationally) influential and so consistently beloved that they still continue to impact world culture nearly a century and a half after their demise.

Without question, the Brothers Grimm were exceptional. These two mid-nineteenth century siblings were the first to systematically collect, document and publish a comprehensive collection of German folklore. Their contrived notions of nation, language and history served to sway not only the academic arena of their era (and as well as long after), but held certain clout in the political arena as well. The Grimms and their theories did not exist without a generous amount of controversy, however. Since the inception of their first publication of *Kinder- and Hausmärchen* in 1812, there has been a

plethora of literary discussion fueled with argument either supporting or berating the Grimms and their theories. This continuous literary hullabaloo surrounding the Grimms has, in turn, only fed into their iconic status as a viable representation of those values against which or for which one may argue: namely, that language and oral tradition serve as a viable reflection of the German culture and its history. The controversy surrounding the Grimms has only become incidental to those indexing the Brothers and their work as a suitable depiction of the German culture. The fact remains that the Grimms, the German culture and the German history have become so undeniably interlinked abroad that modern culture has difficulty differentiating them; indeed, they are often conceived as being synonymous.

Because the Grimms, their stories, and the German culture are so interconnected, our modern storyteller (the cinema) generously exploits them as a type of myth to reinforce a German, a Grimm or a fairytale referent. Mark Twain, for instance, infuses chapters in *A Tramp Abroad* with the fairy tale imagery of an enchanted forest to reinforce the other-worldliness of his visit to the German *Schwarzwald* in the later part of the nineteenth century. Likewise, Catherine Harwicke's recent film, *Red Riding Hood* (based on the Grimms' *Rotkäpchen* fairytale), is set in a medieval village with the Germanic name of Daggerhorn and the principal villain (a werewolf) that is named Cesaire (no doubt in reference to the somnambulist in Robert Wiene's 1920 German Expressionist film, *Das Cabinet des Doktor Caligari*).

This interchangeability of the Grimms, their fairytales and the German culture becomes extremely valuable as a referencing index when narrating a history in film. The

two films that will be primarily addressed in this discussion employ the Grimms and their work to explain historical event. The first film, Terry Gilliam's, *The Brothers Grimm*, rewrites history by interfacing the Brothers' lives with that of their *Hausmärchen* characters'. This version of the Brothers' history, (developed from a 2001 screenplay by Ehren Kruger) although intentionally highly fictionalized, presents one of the interesting phenomena in narrating a history through the use of mythological referent, in that a history can still be true to the spirit of the event despite gross liberties (mythologies) taken in its narration.

The second film to be addressed in this discussion; it is a German film by Helma Sanders-Brahms, *Deutschland Bleiche Mutter*. In this film Sanders-Brahms parallels a rendition of a Grimm *Märchen*, *Räuberbräutigam*, with the narration of a national history. This filmmaker's choice to parallel a national history with a tale that represents a national heritage, displays not only the reflective nature of mythology to man, but also the illusory and potentially destructive nature of national mythologies when they are mis-employed. Both films, although of entirely different genres (Gilliam's is pop culture fantasy while Sanders-Brahms' is high art semi-autobiographical drama), annex from the basic Grimmian question regarding the illusive nature of national culture and heritage: how does one define what it means to be German? Both films additionally reflect on the complicated consequence of placing faith in the unreliable imagination of national identity.

### ***Der einzige Samen für die Zukunft (The Single Seed for the Future)***

To better comprehend the historical context within which many of the filmmakers referencing the Grimms' work are operating, it is helpful to be familiar with the context of the historical, cultural, political and literary environment in which the Grimms were doing their research. The mid-nineteenth century, when the Grimms were researching and documenting, was a pivotal point in German history. The French Revolution had led to the onset of a Napoleonic era, which affected Germany greatly. Before the Napoleonic wars, Germany was merely a collection of principalities with no common government. Foreign invasion, however, sparked a need for coherency and unity. The intellectual milieu of the era began pointing towards the notion of a national identity that can be found in literature. Great European intellectuals such as Madame de Staël began to write about national literatures ("On Germany." *On Politics, Literature and National Character*). De Staël theorized that literature is shaped by a nation's character and is reflective of both the best and the ordinary minds and that literature, in turn, helps shape a nation's government and political institutions. Other literati quickly joined in the academic discussion. Inspired by James MacPherson's Ossian poetry, Gottfried von Herder began writing about literature's representation of culture and a nation ("Philosophy of Language: Fragments of Recent German Literature." *Philosophical Writings*).<sup>5</sup> Herder felt that strains of the natural (or primordial) language of the people (the *Ursprache*) could still be found in tales passed down orally. The notion that a

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<sup>5</sup> There remains much conjecture that MacPherson's Ossian poetry was manufactured and not authentically written. That Herder's theory was based on one of Great Britain's greatest literary farces is, of course, the great irony of his literary and lingual philosophies (James MacPherson *The Fingal of Ossian: an Ancient Epic Poem in Six Books*).

national heritage could be found in a seemingly uncorrupted and unbroken oral tradition was the basis of a philosophy that would soon influence the collectors of the oral traditions.

Following the examples of such European ballad collectors as Thomas Percy, Achim von Arnim and Clemens Brentano (brothers-in-law) began to collect German ballads and folksongs, which they put together in *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*. It was this notion of collecting and preserving national oral tradition that influenced the Grimm Brothers and inspired their collections. In their introduction to their *Kinder- and Hausmärchen*, the Brothers provide their readers with imagery that references the harvest, suggesting that one must actively protect that which nourishes a community, not only by protecting the crop from harmful elements of nature and premature harvesting at the hands of greedy opportunists, but also by saving some of the seeds for future sowing (*Vorrede* 12). The Grimms theorized that through the documentation of their cultural oral tradition, they were in effect, preserving the tradition by organically sowing it for the future generations.

While there are many individuals responsible for the long journey of the transcription of European folktales from oral tradition to modern popular culture, no two people have been so influential to this process as the aforementioned brothers, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm. The elements in the Grimms collections that primarily differentiated them from other collections were twofold. The first being that the Brothers Grimm were the first workers in this genre to present their stories as so-called “faithful renditions” of the kind of direct folkloric traditions that underlay the stylized adaptations of collectors

like Charles Perrault; thus the brothers were militant advocates of natural language (*Naturpoesie*) rather than of a cultivated one (*Kunstpoesie*).<sup>6</sup> This point being very clear in a letter Jacob wrote to Achim von Arnim defending the Brothers' usage of natural language in documenting their tales (Arnim and Brentano had freely edited their collections of folksongs in *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*):

Poesie is that which emanates from the soul and turns into words. Thus it springs continually from a natural and innate ability to capture this drive – folk poesie [*Naturpoesie*] stems from the soul of the entire community (*das Ganze*). What I call cultivated poesie (*Kunstpoesie*) stems from the individual. That is why the new poetry names its poets; the old knows none to name. It was not made by one or two or three, but it is the sum of the entire community. (Jack Zipes *The Brothers Grimm: from Enchanted Forests to the Modern World* 11).<sup>7</sup>

The second element that differentiated the Grimm's work from other collections of oral tales was that the Brothers wrote and re-wrote their collections to present them as suitable for children. According to Jack Zipes, many references that were either overtly sexual in nature, overly gruesome or anti-Christian were either removed or re-worded (46).

Ironically, it is the counter-productivity of these two elements that lie at the root of much of the controversy regarding the Grimms and their theories.

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<sup>6</sup> Charles Perrault was a French collector of children's tales whose, *Tales of Mother Goose (Les Contes de ma Mère l'Oie)* laid the groundwork for much of the Grimmian collections that were to follow.

<sup>7</sup> Arnim and Brentano were in disagreement with the Grimms on several counts. They not only argued against the Brothers usage of simple language, but also questioned their claims that these were stories passed down orally - arguing that there was no way to know what stories nursemaids told to their charges at bedtime (Paradiž).

The work that these two eldest sons from a family of nine children produced proved to be a monumental literary and cultural milestone that not only promoted the study of Folklore as an academic discipline, but also proved for generations to come to be an internationally recognizable symbol of the German culture. The modern representation of the Brothers Grimm is often slightly skewed, however.

In his foreword to the 1979 American edition of a collection of fairytales from the Brothers Grimm, Bryan Holme depicts the Grimm brothers as they are often historically represented: two dedicated German brothers scouring the remote German countryside while communing with the simple folk in an obsessive quest for local lore, legends and fables (*Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm: illustrated by Kay Nielsen 6-9*). This is an image that the Brothers themselves promoted. In the preface to their 1837 edition to *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*, Wilhelm leads his readers to believe that these tales are a result of intensive research with “the folk” and that all their tales have been collected by the simple people and were directly documented, verbatim, from an unbroken oral tradition. There is a reference to the kindly elderly peasant woman, Frau Viehmann, who the Brothers claim told them many of the old regional sagas, leading their readers to infer that the simple folk were the source of their tales (16). The source of the folktale proves to be an issue regarding the Grimms; that all their tales have been collected by the simple people (not necessarily an honest account) and were directly documented, verbatim, from an unbroken oral tradition remains also one of the great myths of these mythmakers. In actuality, the Grimms primary method of collecting tales was “to invite storytellers to their home and have them tell the tales aloud, which the Grimms either noted down on

the first hearing or after a couple of hearings” (Zipes 28). Many of these storytellers were highly educated young women. Interestingly, the Hassenpflug family was included in the list of contributors to the Grimms research; scholarly research generally agrees that the Hassenpflugs were “of French Huguenot ancestry and spoke French at home,” leading one to argue for the French rather than the German influence on the Grimms work (Zipes 29). Such scholars as Simon J Bronner even argue that Frau Viehmann was from an educated middle class rather than of the uneducated peasant classes (“The Americanization of the Brothers Grimm” *Following Tradition: Folklore in the Discourse of American Culture* 184 – 236).

The reality was that many of the Brothers’ tales were not only not sourced from uneducated folk, but were also not necessarily culturally specific either. One of the questions regarding the development of a national literature is of course the question of defining origins and authenticity, particularly in a case like this where the undocumented oral tradition is involved. Certainly, there are well-documented international trade routes leading throughout Europe as far back as a pre-ancient era. It is ludicrous to suggest that there could be no outside influences on local mythologies as a result of this. The exact criteria that the Grimms used on claiming German Volk origins of particular tales are not exactly clear to this particular scholar (I am not really sure that they had any); it is unquestionable, however, that many of the tales that the Grimms documented as being “German” were in fact not necessarily “German”. *Aschenputtel* is one example of this. There are Cinderella stories in almost every existing culture. In Europe alone, Giambattista Basile was documenting a Cinderella tale as early as the seventeenth

century (Basile *The Tale of Tales or Entertainment for Little Ones*). Nearly a century before the Grimm brothers were even born, Charles Perrault was documenting stories not only of *Cendrillon ou la petite pantoufle de verre (Aschenpudel)*, but also of *Le Petit Chaperon rouge (Rotkäpchen – Little Red Riding Hood)*, and *La Belle au bois dormant (Dornröschen – Sleeping Beauty) (Les Contes de ma Mère l'Oie)*. Additionally, Germany of the nineteenth century (and even of today) had a language that consisted of hundreds of dialects. The Grimms were inconsistent in including different dialectal oral traditions in their collections; including one Bavarian story while excluding another does not represent an accurate illustration of a national literature. There was never any clear criterion as to what exactly was considered “German.” Many of the stories were divided by region (such as the Main, Westphalia or Hessa). While some regions were included, many were omitted.

To be fair to the Grimms’ academic standards however, Simon Bronner adversely credits the Grimms with recognizing “that the stories had counterparts in other countries,” but further qualifies this by referencing the Grimms’ detailed marginal notes that “underscored the special German quality of the tales in their collections”:

The notes provided the [parameters] they used to show the German quality of folktales and their spread through Europe. Later they would use old comparison of motifs and language to argue that the tales stemmed from the Indo-European common authenticity of the tales by giving locations and tellers of the collected tales. Not only did they find references to comparable tales outside of German-speaking regions, but they also

insightfully recognized parallel themes and motifs in proverbs, beliefs, games, legends and myths. (*Following Traditions: Folklore in the Discourse of American Culture* 194)

Bronner gives greater credit to translations such as Edgar Taylor's English edition of *German Fairy Tales and Popular Stories* in 1846 with promoting the "romanticized" notions of the German peasantry as the source of the folktales (195). Regardless, the point that seems more essential here is that there seemed to be a rash of collection within the nineteenth century European literary culture that promoted the notion (whether it be the Grimms' notion or Edgar Taylor's notion) that the lower uneducated classes held the key to a more primordial linguistic system and that, somehow, the Grimms' collections reflected this.

There are other points that argue against the accuracy of the Grimms work as a representation of the German culture; the fundamental one being the question of the documentability of what is considered an oral tradition. In the Introduction to his text, *The Longing for Myth in Germany*, George Williamson reinforces this point by echoing Micheal Foucault's sentiments that one of the fundamental ambiguities in the German discourse on myth is the relative importance of the individual artist as opposed to the community or nation in creating myth (13). The determination of the collection of the Brothers and the final editions presented to the public were highly personalized, subjected to their agendas, pedagogies and personal discretions (indeed, the brothers had edited seven versions in all of their *Kinder- and Hausmärchen* each with stylistic changes – the term "editing" insinuates "changing"). That the Brothers promoted their work as

accurate representations of oral culture and yet published versions that were highly edited leaves one to question how well the final texts reflect the actual originals that belonged to the oral tradition. Bronner reinforces this dilemma by addressing the criticism of a Grimm contemporary and supporter, Achim von Armin, who hesitates at the Grimms' censoring of "erotically tinged" and intentional misrepresentation of "the collective nature of folk composition" as "impersonal, generic units rather than the varying expressions of individual tale-teller" (193).

That national collections, such as those documented by the Brothers, carry personal and political agendas is unquestionable as well. In her book, *National Dreams: The Remaking of Fairy Tales in Nineteenth-Century England*, Jennifer Schacker illustrates how despite Edgar Taylor's convictions to remain "invisible" in the process of translating and publishing the Grimms' tales, the tales in Taylor's *German Popular Stories* were highly edited and Anglo-sized (14). When Taylor's version of the Grimms' tales was first introduced to the British reading public, much of the violence and cruelty in them were removed to better suit the English sensibilities (these are closer to the editions that eventually reached the American public – primarily via Walt Disney – who further altered them). Certainly authorship becomes a question when original texts are altered. As Hayden White argues in his text, "The Historical Text as Literary Artifact," that entirely objective documentation in literary artifact is "never neutral," because documentation of history (in this case, oral history) is a linguistic structure and thus subject to the same tools, constraints and limitations as language; additionally, history is bastardized, because it is subject to the perspectives, cultural mores, mythologies,

agendas and privileges of those doing the documenting. This was apparent in the highly edited final versions of many of these tales that were eventually published. The Grimms' religious and pedagogical agendas, for instance, are evident in many of the tales such as *Der treue Johannes* and *Das Marienkind*. An additional comparison of the various editions of the *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* indicates that there was considerable re-writing done between editions:

[...] the Grimms made major changes while editing the tales. They eliminated erotic and sexual elements that might be offensive to middle-class morality, added numerous Christian expressions and references, emphasized specific role models for male and female protagonists according to the dominant patriarchal code of that time and endowed many of the tales with a 'homey' or *biedermeier* flavor by the use of diminutives, quaint expressions, and cute descriptions (Zipes 46).

Additionally, the collection was so named *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*, because it specifically addressed the domestic; thus expelling an agenda directing a moral education towards the domestic realm. They were stories that were meant to be read to the family (and servants) around the evening fire. Their pedagogical value was determined by the moral lessons illustrated in the stories – always aimed at manipulating familial relations. *Der treue Johannes*, for example, tells the tale of a servant who was so faithful he gave his life to saving his masters' daughter. *Das Mädchen ohne Hände* illustrates the virtues of the daughter who allows her father to chop off her hands so that he might save himself from the devil. These stories were entirely patriarchal in nature – teaching familial values

of patriarchal hierarchy, masked in Christian undertones. The personal, pedagogical, philosophical, religious and political agendas of the brothers became more apparent with each edition: “Through many editions over the years the preface to the brothers’ collection of fairy tales always ends with a religious thought parallel to that at the beginning: the tales enable blessing”. (Zipes 13)

There remain other issues regarding the documentability of an oral tradition. In his essay on “The Storyteller,” Walter Benjamin argues that printing killed the oral tradition (87). He explains that storytelling was an active evolving entity and subjecting it to the printed word permanently defines and contextualizes it while rendering it unchangeable; it inevitably ceases to evolve. It is, in effect, dead. By collecting, documenting and defining folktales, they cease to be an evolving force within a culture, and as such become a questionable representation thereof. Once documented, the ancient tales became confined to the time and space of the person documenting them. Ultimately, it was the revisiting of these tales that actually created the myth of them. Many of them did not even exist in their current form until the brothers documented and edited them. In her article entitled “Upward and Outward: Fairy tales and Popular, Print, and Proletarian Culture, 1550-1850,” Ruth B. Bottigheimer discusses this phenomenon in relation to the documentation of folklore and fairy tales. The author suggests that perhaps it is “the written work [that is] the point of origin for the spoken word of the folk as tales are and were told” (104). Is it not also conceivable that it was the documentation of folktales that, in effect, created them? Bottigheimer argues that we can never know an oral transmission of a story, but merely the written transmission of it; as such, it is the

written transmission of the tale that becomes the actual history and may not necessarily be an accurate representation of the true history.

Thus it becomes ever clearer that uncorrupted authorship is definitely one of the primary myths regarding these mythmakers and that the idea of a national myth is in and of itself an illusion and one that is created on one part by those documenting it and on another part by those who are reading it. The question remains, however, as to whether the culture created the myth or the brothers created the myth, in either case, the one fact remains that the Grimms remain irretrievably inter-connected to German culture and history and that despite certain uncertainty regarding the Grimms' research, it is nevertheless perceived as veritable. The siblings and their work remain modern representations of German culture..

**Through the Forest and into the Mirror: Finding the Brothers' Grimm in Terry Gilliam's Film, *The Brothers Grimm***

The point that is ultimately more pertinent to this discussion, however, is not the controversy regarding the Brothers and their work, but rather the manner in which modern filmmakers play with the Grimm's iconic status as a representation of German culture. Ironically, the filmmaker Terry Gilliam not only clearly recognizes much of this controversy regarding the Brothers, but also uses it as a cornerstone in the development of a fundamentally viable transmission of an historical event.

At first introduction, Gilliam's film may appear to have little resemblance to the actual lives of the Brothers, but a metaphorical reading of the film clearly displays a functional narration of the Grimms' history. Gilliam's film directly addresses the

indistinct delineation between the Brothers and their work by infusing the film's narrative with *Märchen* related imagery; the imagination of the Brothers' lives have essentially become a tale in and of themselves (the siblings encounter enchanted forests, vengeful witches, big bad wolves and anthropomorphic ravens on their journeys - all clearly in reference to Grimmian tales). To further illustrate this certain uncertainty regarding the Grimms, Gilliam portrays them as con men, two scheming Brothers who make their living traveling the German countryside and profiting from local legend and lore by ensuring the simple folk that they can rid their villages of any evil forces that reside there.

The portrayals of the Brothers' characters even further project this opposing dichotomy in the narrative of their lives. Will, the older Brother, is portrayed as a pragmatic and realistic soul who maintains little faith in the primitive beliefs of the simple folk. The villagers are "ignorant peasants who cling to their folklore," according to Will. While Jake, on the other hand, is the dreamer who remains faithful to the lore of the folk. He has a pen ever-present in hand and is constantly documenting the tales he hears along their journeys, but even more so, he believes in these tales. Gilliam is clearly parodying the Brothers' manifestations from their *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* preface that declares these tales to be a result of intensive research with "the folk" and that they (the Grimms) have directly collected these tales from the folk and, thus, documented them, verbatim, from an unbroken oral tradition.

The apparent reference to the controversial nature of the Grimms' research is a point that is especially driven home when one examines the mirror scene in the witch's tower chambers. The Brothers are sent into the forest to neutralize the local witch who

has been tormenting the village of Marbaden. The particular witch in question lives deep in the forest within a tower that stretches high above the treetops. Here is where she sleeps in the tower's uppermost quarters. In this scene, Jake has scaled the tower walls seeking to save the young maidens who have been mysteriously disappearing from the village, but inadvertently disturbs the slumbering witch in the process. The tower chamber, though ancient and covered in cobwebs, appears as though it has at one time been resplendent. The queen (also known as the town witch) sleeps nearby in a canopied bed. Her long graying tresses, bearing no resemblance to the luster of their prior beauty, cascade in long wiry curls over the mattress frame and abruptly end in a piled heap upon the chamber floor. Her face is withered and her gnarled hands are tipped with long curling fingernails. Across the room, an enchanted mirror covers the chamber wall, which reflects the witch-queen, not as she truly is, but as the beauty she had been in ages past. Disturbed by Jake's unwelcome intrusion, the witch-queen rises from her bed and looks into the magic mirror. On the left side of the screen, one sees the ugly, the old and the decrepit, while on the right side of the screen is the mirror side where the beautiful, the wondrous and the magnificent appear. The witch-queen grabs Jake and forces him to look into the mirror with her; there he is seduced by her beauty, completely enraptured by the marvelous world he sees before him. This Janis-effect of two realities is, in effect, Gilliam's understanding of the Grimm's as an iconic reflection of German culture. On the one side of the mirror, the Brother's work exists as a creative imagination; on the other side, it has become a self-created reality. Indeed, that the character Jake looks into this mirror while standing next to the queen and is seduced by the wondrous, the beautiful and

the magnificent, believing that, in fact, they are reality displays the Brothers' own sense of belief in their work, however extraordinary it may seem.

That this scene takes place in a tower room, deep in the forest is also an especially significant referent that must be taken into consideration. The forest serves to not only index the Grimm's *Märchen* and the German peculiarity thereof, but more importantly, it serves as an important descriptive device in narrating the particular social and political environment of a nineteenth century Germany. Reading the aforementioned rendition of Gilliam's film metaphorically does indeed represent a rather palpable translation of a nineteenth century Germany that was severely struggling from a lack of societal and political cohesiveness, and additionally, culturally crippled by a Napoleonic invasion. Foreign interference, represented in Gilliam's film by the inept French General Delatombe and the Italian torturer Cavaldi, sparked a desperate need for coherency and unity in the German communities, a void which the Grimm brothers (both historically and, when revisited in this film, cinematically) attempted to fill. Gilliam's work readily depicts two valiant brothers whose deft actions not only preserve the simple folk and their ways by saving the village not necessarily from their own folklore (belief in the evil witch), but by saving the villagers from the French interference with the manner in which the folk interact with their folklore and their traditions. In the film, Will and Jake kill the Napoleonic General Delatombe (subduing the French influence in the area) and eventually realign the Italian Cavaldi's thinking to the German way of doing things (the Italian even opts to remain in the village as one of the folk after the evil spirits are abolished). Even more essential to the film, however, is the notion that through this

protection of their folklore, the pair also proved to preserve Germany itself as is illustrated in the film by their preventing the French from burning down their forests.

Gilliam's emphasis on the forest and its threat at the hands of the French should not be underestimated here. When one considers the prominence of such dense, thick forests as the *Schwarzwald*, *Bayrischer Wald* and *Thüringer Wald* to the German ecological, demographic and economic systems, its value as an essential ingredient to German culture cannot be underscored. In effect, any threat to a forest in Germany is a threat to Germany itself, and Gilliam's portrayal of the French torching of the German forest is directly indexing the threat that Napoleon's invasion imposed on the German culture. Even more essentially, though, is that through his mythological usage of the forest, Gilliam is also directly referencing the Grimm *Märchen* (consequentially, due to its importance in the Germanic culture, the forest necessarily became an integral part of the Grimm *Märchen*). Indeed, the forest plays such a pivotal role in the Brothers' tales that Jack Zipes not only affords the forest nomenclature in his title, *The Brothers Grimm: from Enchanted Forests to the Modern World*, but he also addresses it as the place of origin for the Brothers. The author allots considerable effort to his discussion of it within the text. Zipes claims that in the Grimms' work the forest "[...] possess the power to change lives and alter destinies" and is "in many ways [...] the supreme authority on earth and often the great provider" (65). Surely with combined natures of omniscience and omnipotence in reference to the forest, one could not employ a symbolism more powerful, particularly when speaking in reference to one's culture.

Inadvertently, Gilliam has presented a functional representation of the historical view of the Grimms. Historically, the Grimm brothers are often credited with preserving and promoting a part of German culture through their collections of fairytales:

Highly acclaimed as the founders of the popular fairy-tale tradition in the West, if not in the entire world, the Grimms aspired as brilliant philological scholars to glorify the greatness of the German popular tradition and believed deeply that their voluminous works on the German language and customs would have a moral impact on the German people. (Jack Zipes *The Brothers Grimm: from Enchanted Forests to the Modern World* xi).

Accordingly, Grimm scholar Jack Zipes saw the Grimms' purpose as giving the people of Germany not only a sense of German-ness, but ultimately a unified sense of morality as well.

Rather than skirt the issue of controversy within the Grimms' and their research, Gilliam embraces it and even to some degree justifies it. As previously discussed, the lack of intercultural influence on these tales is indeed one of the great myths regarding these mythmakers (and one that Terry Gilliam readily recognizes). In Gilliam's film, the Italian Cavaldi blurts out during one intense moment, "I know this story...I know this story from my childhood!" Here is where the film questions the German-ness of many of the Grimms' stories, when they are clearly recognized internationally. At the conclusion of *The Brothers Grimm*, however, all foreign interference has been squelched. The invading French forces leave after the Hessian Brothers kill their Napoleonic General and

the Italian Cavaldi has decided to remain in the village of Marbaden rather than return to Italy. The village embraces Cavaldi's decision to become one of them; he has acclimated, become one of them. The Italian even dances and celebrates with the villagers after the Brothers' victory, displaying a clear acceptance of the foreigner as one of their own. In other words, despite certain foreign influence on the German culture, in Gilliam's view of the Grimms' theories, the fact that the German folk take and embrace these influences, in effect, Germanizes them. Such international influence ceases to be foreign and commences what is considered to be a domestic relationship with the community.

That Gilliam's film does not directly address factual conversation and documentation from the Grimms and their contemporaries that references the Brothers' political, moral and academic sensibilities does not necessarily discredit Gilliam's film as a work of historical narration. Certainly with the element of the extraordinary within the film, it is not the filmmaker's intent to project "reality," but rather to project the essence of the political and social climate of a mid-nineteenth century Germany and the brothers' role within that climate. This the filmmaker does quite adeptly.

In the end, it is the audience's reception of the film that becomes the essential gauge to Gilliam's work. According to Roland Barthes, in his text, *Mythologies*, the important issue is not what the spectator is actually seeing, but what the spectator thinks he is seeing that becomes the essential point in projecting an image. While discussing the spectral reception of a wrestling match, for example, Barthes claims that reception is basically based on two important factors:

- A. It is not the actual passion, that the audience wants, but the image of the passion.
- B. The imagery must give the proper representation to have the proper reception. (15-25)

Certainly this concept that what the audience thinks it is viewing rules over what the audience is actually viewing is also applicable to a cinematic representation of history, as in the case of Gilliam's film. Primarily due to the fact that in cinema one can never actually produce history, but merely re-produce an image thereof. Consequently, the audience can never actually experience the historical event, but the key is in the image that must be properly conveyed to allow the audience to feel as though it is actually experiencing an event or at minimal, understand it (Gilliam's usage of mythological referent allows him to visually project an otherwise non-projectable image – the brothers' perspectives and agendas). Surely, Gilliam's intent is not to produce a convincing portrait of the Grimm brothers actually physically battling the forest's witches, but merely to project a picture of two brothers who are irretrievably interlinked with both the culture and the history of their people. This is a view of the Grimms that is conceived as being historically accurate.

Indeed, the German brothers have arguably become one of the most internationally recognizable symbols of the mid-nineteenth (and thereafter) German culture; the two remain so indelibly linked that their work is often used as a type of myth code to explain the history and culture of Germany. Gilliam's final scene in this film expresses this sentiment quite well:

*Hopeless though this tale may appear, the story does, eventually, have a happy ending. The diligent brothers at last are able to find the witch's tower, scale its edifice, and destroy the witch, her tower, her magic mirror and her wolf. They save the local maids from her enchantment and return them to their grateful families. Most importantly, however, the brothers are able to save not just the village maids, but also the entire village, by preventing the forest from burning at the command of the French General. In the end, everyone is happy. Marbaden revels in the victory of the Brothers. The villagers danced and cheered for the return of their daughters, the safety of their village and the bravery of their newfound friends, the Brothers Grimm. (as summarized by the author)*

### **Deutschland Bleiche Mutter – Myth, Seduction and Destruction**

One of the great residual effects of the Grimms' work was its ability to establish a sense of shared cultural heritage and communality, which inevitably served to aid in the unification of a once divided realm. During the Napoleonic Wars, this newfound sense of a national identity served to strengthen Germany as a European entity. This same belief in a national identity when re-visited three-quarters of a century later, however, would ultimately prove to be the downfall of the same country it had previously served to establish. While Terry Gilliam sees the Grimms and their theories as a positive factor in building a nation, Helma Sanders-Brahms film, *Deutschland Bleiche Mutter*, on the other hand, sees the opposing destructive nature of this manufactured sense of identity.

In 1980, Helma Sanders-Brahms shook up the cinematic world with her semi-auto-biographical rendition of German suffering during World War II. Her *Deutschland Bleiche Mutter* was a seminal piece of work due to its unique perspective not only of German wartime suffering, but a rather audaciously qualified feminine suffering as well. However impolitic it may have appeared at the time, acknowledgement of German suffering was a cinematic rarity in 1980 on any account, yet alone from a feminine perspective; as the film clearly states, the women of Germany fought their own war as well.

Sanders-Brahms' film presents a ready portrait of an unconventional childhood during wartime Germany, the semi-autobiographical history that the filmmaker and her mother share during the war years. As an exceptionally effective narrative device, the filmmaker interweaves the Grimmian tale of *Der Räuberbräutigam* throughout her story paralleling it to that of the young Anna (Sanders-Brahms) and her mother, Lene. With her husband away at war and their house destroyed from an air-raid, Lene and her small daughter are forced to flee their town in search of relatives in Berlin. As they are trekking their way through the German countryside (much like the young bride does en route to her bridegroom's house in the Grimms' tale), Lene shares the folktale with her daughter. As Lene is narrating, the characters in the film encounter situations similar to the young bride in the tale. Upon an invitation from her bridegroom to whom she was unwillingly promised, the maid from the folktale treks through the forest to find his home. Lene and Anna, likewise, must trek through the forest to find the home of their relatives in Berlin. Once the maid arrives at the house, she is greeted by an old woman

who warns her away from the murderer's den in which she has entered; the old woman hides the young bride where she has the ill-fate to witness the rape, murder, dismemberment and subsequent devouring of another young woman. Lene and Anna, too, unwittingly enter the murderer's den (the remains of a concentration camp with powerful images of ovens and chimney towers) on their way to Berlin; they witness rape (the rape of Lene by American soldiers as Anna looks on) and the death and decay (dismemberment) of corpses found within the forest. In the end, the maid from Grimm's tale exposes her bridegroom and is able to save herself. Lene and Anna would have no salvation in this film; the post-war period would only find an ineffective Lene, suffering not only from a partial facial paralysis but from an emotional paralysis as well. It is not until the post-war "*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*" (dealing with the past) that the German people would be able to confront their aggressors (their own National Socialistic Government). This film, in some respects represents Sanders-Brahms' confrontation with the war, but just as the young bride in the Grimms' *Märchen* must veil her confrontation with the seductive Bridegroom as a dream, Sanders-Brahms' must also indirectly address the war atrocities through the guise of her work, cinema.

*Deutschland Bleiche Mutter* is often critically read in a feminist vein. In "Through my Daughter's Eyes: Helma Sanders-Brahms' Germany Pale Mother," for instance, Angelika Bammer emphasizes the silencing of Lene during the film as a sign of patriarchal oppression. She argues further that the war, at times, almost served to free the woman from her domestic bondage. Certainly while most of the male population was away at war, the feminine populace was afforded new opportunities and responsibilities

that were previously considered primarily masculine. With newfound employment and release from domestic duties, German women began to experience their own sense of emancipation. As such, this interpretation of Sanders-Brahms' work typically employs the feminist reading of the Grimms' *Räuberbräutigam*:

Sanders-Brahms sensed that what Lene encountered in her trek through Germany stirred up the same primeval psychic fear that "*Der Räuberbräutigam*" depicts allegorically—a fear of the male aggressor/warrior spirit that, when rekindled, inevitably unleashes its terror on women (R. F. Cook "Melodrama or Cinematic Folktale? Story and History in *Deutschland Bleiche Mutter*," *Germanic Review* 5)

With no intention of trying to underscore this viable reading of Sanders-Brahms' film (certainly part of the mid-1980's feminism), I would like to suggest another reading of the film by positing the narration against a more historical connection on the national level rather than on the personal or domestic footing, and that *Deutschland Bleiche Mutter*, as the title indicates, is not just depicting the wartime feminine condition, but rather a feminization of a nation and its people. Weakened by the controlling tyranny of their patriarchal National Socialistic government, the German people, in effect, became voiceless second-class citizens (they became females in a patriarchal society). The use of the mythological referent (Grimm fairytale) serves to reinforce the seduction and ultimate destruction of a people (the feminine) by an oppressive government (the masculine) that fed upon a belief in a national heritage and used its people's faith in its culture as a means to manipulate and control.

In his discussion of the Grimms and their work, Jack Zipes, references a letter that Jacob wrote as an appeal to the “*gesamten Freunde aldeutscher Poesie und Geschichte erlassen*” (collective friends of the old German poetry and history) (26). In his appeal, Jacob calls for the collection and preservations of the existing songs and tales that can be found among the *Volk* by claiming, “our fatherland is still filled with this wealth of material all over the country that our honest ancestors planted for us” (26). Zipes continues this discussion by manifesting that “the Grimms shared a sense of imaginative *nation-building* and the Germany they thought had existed and existed during their lifetime was a Germany that they sought to create in the name of the Fatherland” (28). The National Socialist movement, in turn, profusely exploited the Grimms patriotic sentiments of a pure national heritage that can be found by tracing the natural language and folklore of the people. “The Nazis made special use of folklore in schools and youth organizations to promote national unity and cultural superiority, and their propaganda especially touted the Grimms’ tales for showing morals [...]” (Simon Bronner *Following Tradition: Folklore in the Discourse of American Culture* 213). As such, there was a certain stigma attached to the Grimms after World War II. Indeed, the post-1945 associations of folklore and national mythology carried implications of tyranny that were completely irrelevant to the Grimms’ initial stance when researching. The seduction through a mythological belief in a national superiority and ultimate destruction at the hands of a tyrannical government were components of the National Socialists years that were not readily forgotten by a post-war German culture (indeed according to Zipes, the *Märchen* were even briefly banned in 1945) (231).

Part of the problem with reading *Deutschland Bleiche Mutter* from a strict feminist perspective is that it ignores the Brothers' work as a labor of research in cultural heritage. By expanding Lene's character to a metaphorical referent that encompasses the German people as a whole rather than just the feminine population, it more directly addresses the discussion of folklore as a representation of national heritage; this is a problem that, in turn, more directly addresses the historical aspect of the development of National Socialism and its rape of the very people it was formed to protect. This is not just a film about the wartime experiences of those left behind while their men are turned into soldiers and deployed to battle; *Deutschland Bleiche Mutter* is a very specific film, set in a very specific place and time. When one contrasts this film against other films such as *Cold Mountain* that depict female wartime suffering and empowerment, one sees the importance of nationality and heritage in Sanders-Brahms' work. In her film, the filmmaker frames her parent's history within her own personal narration of it. When introducing her parents she states:

*Das ist deine Liebesgeschichte, meine Mutter...*

*Deine Geschichte, mein Vater...*

*Ganz normal, nur, dass es in dieser Zeit geschiet und in diesem Land.*

(This is your love story, my mother. Your story, my father. Completely normal, but that it happened in this time and in this country)

This introduction emphasizes the importance of who and where her parents were in a point of time. This is not just a film about a woman who must fight her own battles while her husband is away at war; it is a film about a decidedly white (specifically, non-

Jewish), presumably protestant, German woman (the “ideal” German woman) who must fight her battle in the face of external aggression. *Deutschland Bleiche Mutter* is not just a story of “male aggression unleashing his power on women,” as R. F. Cook suggests, it is a story of political aggression. It tells the tale of a bridegroom (the National Socialist Party or even more specifically, Hitler) who woos and seduces his bride (the German people) with promises of riches, when his intent is merely to rape and devour them, just as he had the other young maid (the Jewish people), just as the bridegroom attempted to do in the German *Märchen, Räuberbräutigam*. This infuses not only an even more pertinent signification to the Grimm *Märchen* within the film, but also accounts for imposition of the powerful political imagery that Sanders-Brahms provides within her film.

Indeed, the opening scene is a blurred image of a swastika reflecting off the gently rolling waves of an otherwise serene lake. Anton Kaes reflects on the import of this image of time and place in Sanders-Brahms’ film:

The times of her parents appear in the film’s first shot: a gigantic swastika rippling on the waters of an idyllic lake. We do not see the flag itself but rather its reflection, which fills the screen. The black swastika against a red background, a symbol of Hitler’s regimen not only locates and dates the events: it also symbolizes the power of the Nazi state over its subjects, an all-encompassing but not tangible power, present only indirectly as a reflection. (“Our Childhood, Ourselves” *From Hitler to Heimat* 142)

Although much credit must be given to Kaes for his recognition of something other than a feminist reading in his analysis, a footnote must be made noting that his analysis still lacks emphasis on the contribution of the Grimm fairytale and its implications in this film. An even deeper analysis of this opening shot indexes the taint that the Nazi party had put on all things inherently German: whether it be the literature, the heritage, or the geography. What could be more incontestably indicative of a country than a portion of its geography (in this case, the lake)? To show this blurred vision of something so perversely marring something so inherently German in its serene beauty is surely an indicator of the overall far-reaching affect that the Nazi-party held on everything within its jurisdiction.

Sanders-Brahms argues that the presence of the Nazi party infiltrates everywhere, even the marriage; Lene claims her relief at not having a picture of the *Führer* hanging above their bed on her wedding night. Images of Nazi flags covered in bugs showing the desperate corruption of National Socialism and constant background noises of radios reporting war update show the ubiquitous nature of the National Socialism. None of these images are overt, they are always in the background, blurred, marred or muffled, yet they remain undeniably present. The presence of National Socialism is the elephant in the room; everyone wants to pretend he is not there, yet one cannot look anywhere without seeing him. The corrupt political party has stained everything that the German people have held dear - family, politics, nature, heritage and culture. Yet to be clear, despite these strong images of perverse government, Sanders-Brahms film is not about National Socialism per se; it is about the corroding effect that a corrupt government, that seduces

its people through the misapplication of their faith in who they are, has upon the very people it was formed to protect. Likewise, the usage of the German fairytale within the film serves multiple purposes. The narrative of the tale reinforces the filmmaker's images of seduction and destruction, while the specific employment of a Grimm *Märchen* (as opposed to another tale that might reflect the filmmaker's sentiments but may not be considered so innately German) represents another part of German culture that has been marred by the National Socialist's mis-use of it.

Likewise, the progressive silencing of Lene within the film that is explained by theorists such as the aforementioned Angelika Bammer as a reaction to patriarchal oppression, serves more essentially as a commentary by Sanders-Brahms of German complicity during the war. The figure of Lene, as a representation of the German people, removes herself from the realities of what is happening around her (just as the maiden from *Räuberbräutigam* remains hidden and does nothing to save the other young maiden as she is being murdered and devoured). Lene watches as her Jewish neighbor who she presumably knew well, is being molested through a bedroom window and does nothing to stop it, and likewise shows little distain at sifting through the rubble of a Jewish shop (whose owners are conspicuously absent) looking for thread to finish a blouse she is making. Lene is, in effect, living in her own fairytale. Her growing silence as her husband returns from war and her submergence inward after her facial paralysis incurs further indicates a post-war tendency to not want to talk about the war. Anton Kaes's convictions that Sanders-Brahms' generation were the children of the "war generation" and that "questioning them meant interrogating the German past" are important

considerations in respect to Lene's developing disfigurement (140). Lene's face has become divided. Half paralyzed, Lene covers the darker, uglier side of her face with a scarf where it remains hidden and unexposed. The German people have not only been divided as a nation between east and west, but they have been dissected emotionally as well.

This emotional distancing, to which the filmmaker is alluding, was an important part of the post-war fallout. It was one of the key elements with which the German *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (dealing with the past) era wrestled. Having lost faith in how it defined itself, the German psyche lost confidence as well, as a result it shut down; there was no longer any pride in being German. This is reflected in Lene's inability to function as a mother and a wife, preferring to retreat into alcoholism and her disease. The family unit ceased to function. The *Märchen*, as an allegorical representative of German heritage was dismissed (even temporarily outlawed after the war); defeated and downtrodden, the distance between the romanticized dream of being German and the reality of being one was ever-widening. In the process of telling this story semi-auto-biographically, Sanders-Brahms puts space between her and her history as well. Not only has her history been filtered through a filmic representation thereof, but through her personal voiced over narration, Sanders-Brahms has become a disembodied character in her own story. Additionally, the young Anna (who would have actually been Sanders-Brahms as a child) is played by the filmmaker's daughter Anna, in effect, removing the storyteller a generation from her own. The characters within the film are more allegorical than actual, representing a composite of individuals rather a specific, further removing them from the

real person. Lene as the pale mother, Germania, has survived the war but is left deformed, broken and depressed. Lene's husband Hans is the victim. Hardened by the war, the father/victim "returns from prison camp, defeated, embittered and alienated" (Kaes 144);

The fathers, made deeply insecure by their military defeat and the knowledge (not often admitted) of the grotesque futility of their personal sufferings and losses, were beaten as soldiers, held in contempt as Germans, humiliated by the 're-education' program. (Kaes 156)

The historical film footage that Sanders-Brahms weaves into the film, while serving to legitimize the historical value of her cinematic rendition, additionally serves to distance one from the reality of the history. The grainy quality of the old film footage projected against the newer film provides a telltale contrast; this is particularly clear in the scene of Lene encountering the orphaned child among the bombed out rubbles. The juxtaposed image of Lene talking with the young orphaned boy displays a sharp contrast between the imagined history and the actual; the image of Germany (Lene) looking at a mirrored image of itself in a prior time. The reality of looking into one's past, as Lene is doing in this shot, is not necessarily as romantic as the Grimms had imaged, in fact, it is quite devastating.

A tone of alienation is so important to her work that the filmmaker establishes a mode of detachment from the onset of her film. *Deutschland Bleiche Mutter*, borrows its title from a Bertolt Brecht poem by the same name that expounds shame and disgust directed at a government that exploits and inevitably betrays the very people it was

formed to protect. Because a sense of detachment is so essential to her film, Sanders-Brahms' choice to utilize a poem from Brecht adds an additional dimension to her narration. While certainly referring to the advent of National Socialism, Brecht's poem employs its own sense of mythology in regards to the mother/child relationship that the poet juxtaposes against the government/populace relationship, but delivers it through the decidedly Brechtian employment of *Verfremdungseffekt* (alienation effect). Brecht spent his career developing his "*Verfremdungseffekt*", which is his method by which he forces his audience to distance themselves from the characters on the stage, so the audience is able to think about the message of the text rather than to emote with it. As a result, the audience is estranged from the characters within the work; the narrative never becomes a reality for the audience, just a distorted sense thereof.

The echoing of the mode of detachment in Brecht's poem is multi-faceted within Sanders-Brahms' film. From the start, the poem is distanced from the poet, by having Brecht's daughter read it rather than the poet himself (this technique, of course, reverberates Sanders-Brahms' narrating her mother's history). The film, likewise, has become distanced from itself, by having the text appear in the rather unconventional cinematic form of voiced-over writing rather than in visual imagery. Ultimately, however, it is the language of the text that proves to so effectively associate itself with the film. Anton Kaes begins his discussion of the poem's language by stating that it "opens up a fictional space in which, according to a tradition that goes back to the late Romantic poet Heinrich Heine, Germany appears as the mother" (147):

*O Deutschland, bleiche Mutter!* (Oh Germany, Pale Mother)

*Wie sitzt du besudelt* (how befouled you sit there)

*Unter den Völkern.* (amongst the people.)

*Unter den Befleckten* (Amongst the tainted)

*Fällst du auf.* (you are conspicuous)

The Romantic (or even biblical as Kaes also suggests) language of the poem feeds to the *Märchen* imagery that is so prominently projected in this film (147). The association to the Grimm *Märchen*, *Räuberbräutigam*, is further exaggerated with references to pointing fingers (*Die Ausgebeuteten zeigen mit Fingern auf dich* –The exploited point fingers at you) and Robbers (*Wie beim Anblick einer Räuberin* – as at the sight of a woman robber). The disconnect between this poetic, fairytale-like language and the horrific subject matter that it is illustrating is a typical Brechtian technique – mesmerizing the observer with the language but then shocking him back into reality with the harsh subject matter.

Ultimately, the organic component of the *Märchen* in *Deutschland Bleiche Mutter* serves to supersede itself even as a narrative device; what it is reflecting as an indicator of a national heritage and history is more essential to Sanders-Brahms work than the actual narrative. The fact remains that despite the dialogue they opened concerning the medium that they were trying to preserve, the Grimms' and their tales remain an integral, undeniable part of the German culture. Jack Zipes writes:

Since the Grimms' fairy tales became established as the conventional model of the fairy tale in the nineteenth century, hardly a single German has escaped being influenced by a Grimm fairy tale (121).

Certainly a division of the Grimms and their culture is a modern day impossibility.

### **From Myth to *Märchen*; from *Märchen* to Myth**

In his text, *The Brothers Grimm: from Enchanted Forests to the Modern World*, Jack Zipes states, "Fairy tale is myth. [...]. Any fairy tale in our society, if it seeks to become natural and eternal, must become myth (209). Ultimately, the long-winded academic discussion that was so reverently addressed in Terry Gilliam's film, as to whether the culture created the *Märchen* or the Grimms created them is a rather endless exercise in futility. In the end, the Grimms' fairytales have become a "natural and eternal" element to the German culture; the controversy in regards to their theories has become incidental to those referencing them. As such, a type of myth has developed regarding the Grimms, their work, their history and their connection to the German culture: they have become so closely intertwined that indeed one has ultimately come to signify the other.

This point has become evident in the recent influx of American film projects that have been highly influenced by the Grimm's and their fairytales. Such films as *Red-Riding Hood* and *Snow White and the Huntsman* are modern re-visitations of the classical *Hausmärchen* (tales for the home), *Rotkäppchen* and *Sneewittchen*, collected by the Grimm brothers nearly a century and a half ago. The ever-Grimm-inspired Disney Company recently released, *Tangled*, its version of the brothers' tale of the young maid

*Rapunzel*, who was imprisoned as a child by a vengeful evil witch; the maid's only means of escape was by letting her long hair trail down from her prison tower window so her lover could climb up to rescue her (this, incidentally, is the tale referenced by Terry Gilliam's witch in the tower with the long cascading hair). The list continues. The sophisticated animated film, *Hoodwinked*, encompasses a list of *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*-esque characters that include a Little Red Riding Hood and a Big Bad Wolf.

American television has, likewise, in recent months seen its share of fairytale based projects. In the fall of 2010, two television networks debuted fairytale inspired series: American Broadcasting Corporation developed *Once Upon a Time* featuring an alternative world where fairy-tale characters co-exist with "real world" people and NBC opened a new cop-drama series aptly titled, *Grimm*, where Grimmian-themed plots come to life in the "real world" of Portland, Oregon and a descendent of the Grimms must solve the extraordinary crimes committed by super-terrestrial beings.

These projects encompass a wide variety of genres ranging from dark fantasy, detective fiction and melodrama to the more light-hearted, comedy, family drama and light romance. Initially, the only common denominator that these various productions seem to share is their relationship to a fairytale (and even the tales vary with each project). There remains, however, one even deeper, more visceral, running undercurrent of commonality that they share. Because each project, in some manner, supports a relationship to the fairytales collected by the Grimms, they are infused with cultural references to Germany that, in turn, serve to directly index the Brothers. Whether

reflected in the plot, the characters, the props, the scenery or the nomenclature, each film in some manner draws upon Germanic culture (primarily, the culture of nineteenth century Germany when the Grimms were initially documenting their collections of local folktale) in order to reinforce the present *Hausmärchen* motif.

Few of the aforementioned projects, however, so aggressively employ Germanic referent in an effort to validate their association to the Grimms as the television series functionally titled, *Grimm*. Although the episodes in this television series generally present a relatively distorted relationship to the original Grimms and their work, they do, nevertheless, cherish a relationship to their origins and through their modernization of the *Märchen*, serve as a modern-day response to Benjamin's death of the Storyteller.<sup>8</sup> The leading character in the television series, *Grimm*, is Nick Burkhardt, who inadvertently discovers from a dying aunt, that he is the last in the line of direct descendents of the Grimms and it is his destiny to fight the supernatural forces that threaten mankind. He is provided with a "storybook" full of sketchings of various creatures that Nick is sure to encounter; bear-like characters, elves, little pigs and big bad wolves are etched onto the pages of Nick's book. Nomenclature is also essential in the development of a Germanic essence within the show. Monroe Wieder Blutbad is a reformed "Big Bad Wolf" who aids Nick in solving many of his supernatural mysteries. As part of his reformed life, the Volkswagen-driving Wieder employs himself as a clockmaker; the walls of his home are adorned with cuckoo clocks. Other characters sport decidedly German nomenclature such

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<sup>8</sup> This statement is in reference to the aforementioned discussion of Walter Benjamin who argues that publishing killed the oral tradition by permanently encasing a story in the time and place in which it was published. ("The Storyteller" *Illuminations*)

as Gilda or Stark. None of the tales in the series directly copies the tales of the Brothers', but the association is painstakingly indicated. However subtle it may be, the connection between the Grimms and their culture is unmistakably there and, as such, can become a useful tool not only in the narration of a tale, but in the narration of a history as well.

Through its manipulation of the Grimmian folklore and by bringing the history of the Grimms and their culture to life in a modern setting, this television program inadvertently asks the same questions regarding the validity of the Brothers and their theories that Terry Gilliam did in his film. By viewing many of the tales in a modern context and infusing them with German referent, one can easily ponder the question, "how German are these tales?" Nevertheless, like Will in Gilliam's film looking into his magic mirror and believing in his tales, we, the television audience, also believe in these tales. A camera shot of a Cuckoo clock hanging on a wall serves no narrative purpose other than to remind the audience that these tales remain an integral part of the German culture.

There is much theoretical discussion regarding the manner in which the German is represented in modern American culture and media. In 1997, two political scientists from Northern California, Beverly Crawford and James Martel published an essay entitled "Representation of Germans and What Germans Represent: American Film Images and Public Perceptions in the Postwar Era." In their essay, Crawford and Martel, denounce the plethora of derogatory Germanic stereotypes that are so prevalent in modern American film. They even go so far as to categorize them: as bubbling Prussians, sadistic terroristic Nazis or mad scientists. Although their thesis was well-researched, taking a

plethora of Post-1945 Hollywood films into consideration, they, sadly, gave little consideration to the manner in which German culture was presented in the American Disney-ized versions. Simon Bonner, on the other hand, carefully notes the effect of American pop culture on the Grimms' tales:

The Grimms' tales have been translated into 140 languages and are indeed known worldwide, but they have a special American impact because of Hollywood's recontextualization of Grimm's tales into mass culture. As Walt Disney and countless children's authors re-created Grimms' fairy tale figures for popular consumption, the German quality of the original has given way to media fantasy. They have become stylized vehicles for popular entertainment of romance, music and comedy rendered gleefully through cinematic animation. Indeed, they have become Americanized, given a cheery message and romantic core, and thereby globalized. If there is a German connection within mass culture it is in the Grimm reference to the German peasantry as the quintessential folk. Assumed to be old and of earthy appearance, isolated and communally rural, poor yet socially content, peasants are depicted as unusually telling stories, often for children, and being fairy tales unto themselves. ("The Americanization of the Brothers Grimm" *Following Tradition: Folklore in the Discourse of American Culture* 187)

Bonner specifically targets some of the language within the film that "mimics American vernacular," with the inclusion of words like "purty" and exclamations of "Why bless my

soul!” in the Dwarves’ lexicon as they are conversing with Snow White (187). Likewise no Grimmian Dwarf ever maintained an appellation of Doc, Bashful, Happy, Sleepy, Sneezzy, Dopey or Grumpy.

Jack Zipes joins Simon Bonner in his critique of the Disney-fied (Americanized) Grimmian tales by addressing the structural changes within the tales: namely, the chauvinistic character within them (as though this were not an already potent presence in the original tales, as was clearly exhibited in the previous discussion of *Räuberbräutigam*). Nevertheless, Zipes credits Disney with “celebrating the virile innocence of male power; emphasizing the domestication of sweet, docile pubescent girls; and extolling the virtues of clean-cut, all-American figures and the prudent, if not prudish life” (60). Ironically, Zipes took little consideration into the fact that Disney was merely imitating much of the same characterizations that the Grimms likewise perpetuated.

Perhaps this lively discussion regarding the Americanization of the Grimms brings us back to Walter Benjamin. As previously discussed, Benjamin argued that documenting the oral tradition, in effect, killed it by permanently subjecting it to the printed word thus rendering it frozen in the space and time of the person doing the documenting (“*Der Erzähler.*” *Illuminationen* 388-389). Certainly, Benjamin died before he would have been able to see the advent of modern media in its full-bloom. This reconceptualization of Grimm tales into modern American pop culture is living proof that the figure of Storyteller is indeed alive and well. The cinema, (our modern storyteller) takes these tales, reshapes them, and then applies new mythologies to them that render

them accessible and relevant to the modern culture. Many of these tales are even once again re-incarnated after they are Americanized, re-translated into German and returned to Germany. It is this process that keeps our stories and our mythologies alive and proves to us not only that we need mythology in our cultures, but that we also need that thread that intertwines us all. It is the historical mirror that the Grimms looked into nearly two centuries ago that allowed us to define ourselves and to know not only where we have been, but also where we are going.

#### **Chapter 4 - Benjamin's Bard Rediscovered in Burton's *Big Fish***

The shot opens with a close-up of the nervous face of a man; the camera pulls back far enough to show that he is anxiously pacing back and forth in the waiting room of a maternity ward, leaving the observer to surmise that he is an expectant father, frantically awaiting the news of his offspring's arrival. A scream is heard! The camera jerks toward the direction of the sharp cry; the clean straight narrow lines of the hallway, the diminishing lines of the checkered patterned floor and the angled doorways all direct the viewer's gaze to the door in front of the noise. The camera passes through the door to show what lies behind it; a woman is in the final throes of giving birth. Another cry, one last push and the baby shoots like a cannon out of his mother. Missing the grasp of the attending physician, the newborn catapults through the open doorway and slides down the checkered patterned hallway, past the reaching hands of a hospital attendant and, finally, body-blocked by a head nurse who quickly scoops the infant into her down-stretched arms before he slides into the open elevator that patiently waits at the end of the hall.

With this scene from *Big Fish*, the audience is birthed into the odd, humorous, alienated, and often fragmented cinematic world of Tim Burton. Burton's is a world where scissors can serve for hands (*Edward Scissorhands*), a man can marry a decomposing corpse (*Corpse Bride*) and the Pumpkin King becomes a skeletal Santa Claus (*Nightmare before Christmas*). This filmmaker's quirky style, an amalgamation of stylized aesthetics and lively narration, not only guarantees instant recognition, but also

serves to qualify him as one of the foremost storytellers of this era. In a modern world of 3-D animation, laptops, i-Pads, cell phone texting and self-narrating children's books, one could almost readily acquiesce to the sentiments of the modernist thinker, Walter Benjamin, who feared that modern technology would render the position of the storyteller obsolete. Technology, according to Benjamin, not only threatened to divide and separate our communities, but also to leave us without the communal sharing of experience and thus ill-prepared to battle any potential threats to our well-being (Benjamin felt that the process of communal sharing of experience was a role that was readily executed by the bard). Benjamin, of course, was a product of his era; nevertheless, from Andy Warhol to Al Gore and Roland Emmerich, some of his sentiments still resonate in the more current arena of technology, academia, politics and culture.

A more introspective study into the work of Tim Burton will illustrate, however, that despite (or perhaps, due to) the intervention of modern technology, the storyteller continues to thrive in current culture. Through a communal sharing of his unique blend of suburban experience, fairy tale imagery, and stylized aesthetics, this film *auteur* readily fulfills the job description of Benjamin's storyteller. As the aforementioned maternity ward scene from *Big Fish* demonstrates, it is the art of telling the story that inspires the work of this filmmaker and serves to provide irrefutable evidence that although the face of the ancient bard may have changed, storytelling remains a relevant force in our modern communities.

## **Burton in the Evolution of Benjamin's Bards**

In 1936, Benjamin, fearful and frustrated with the traumatic residuals of the First World War and leery of the mounting evidence of a second one rapidly approaching, wrote an essay mourning what he perceived to be the loss of relevancy to storytelling in modern civilization. In this text, aptly entitled, "The Storyteller," Benjamin argues that the advent of modernization has alienated humanity from the histories and mythologies of their communities and, as such, has rendered the narrative and ultimately, the storyteller, irrelevant to modern civilization. He writes:

*Eine Generation, die noch mit der Pferdebahn zur Schule gefahren war, stand unter freiem Himmel in einer Landschaft, in der nichts unverändert geblieben war als die Wolken und unter ihnen, in einem Kraftfeld zerstörender Ströme und Explosionen, der winzige, gebrechliche Menschenkörper* (A generation that had gone to school on a horse-drawn streetcar stood under the open sky in a landscape in which nothing but the clouds remained unchanged, under them [the clouds], in a force field of destructive currents and explosions, was the tiny, fragile human body) .  
(385)

The storyteller, whose job (according to the essay's author) was to pass on experience that allowed the community to deal with threatening "forces of nature," suddenly became irrelevant, because mankind was facing dangers it had never known and no amount of previous experience existed that could properly equip humanity to deal with the perils of modern warfare (385). Our communal sharing of experience (storytelling) that served to

define and interconnect our communities also served a purpose of preparing us for any impending threat. This tradition was rendered ineffective because our modern technology has distanced us from this ritual and its purpose.

Ironically, the work of Tim Burton illustrates that technology (specifically cinematic), rather than eradicating the relevancy of the storyteller in current culture, can serve as another “layer” in the evolving process of storytelling. A noteworthy statement from Benjamin’s essay describes the art of storytelling as being developed through “a slow piling up of thin and transparent layers” (394). Benjamin sees each layer as a telling or retelling of the story, each with the bard’s personal interpretation added. Burton adds his own layer in the retelling of his tales through film, art and mythology. Cinematic technology remains an essential component to Burton’s brand of narration as well; camera shots, lighting, angles, special effects, time-lapses all become essentials to this filmmaker’s art. In retrospect, one might even say that filmic technology creates its own character in a Burton film and adds its own contribution to the Benjaminian narrative by introducing a new layer to the method in which the narrative is being relayed. Burton’s use of lighting, for example, not only to distance or distort the *mise-en-scene* from the audience, but to also display a character’s isolation from the world within the narrative is a perfect illustration of Burton’s reflection on technology.

The use of this technique is particularly effective in one of Burton’s most self-reflective films, *Edward Scissorhands*. The audience’s first introduction to the protagonist shows Edward standing alienated and alone in an attic, encircled by a ray of light that is filtering through a massive hole in the roof. Incidentally, this scene, which is

reminiscent of Cesare on the rooftop with the crowd calling after him in Wiene's *Caligari*, is also one that closely reflects the influence of German Expressionism in Burton's work. The rays of light produce a cage-like image that serves to imprison Edward within his own little world where no one may enter. Edward is inaccessible to the neighborhood Avon Lady, Peg Boggs, who is standing on the other side of the room outside of Edwards's prison of light. Yet, Peg does not dare to approach or enter his enclosure of moonlight. The man with the scissors for hands remains singular, alone, and isolated. The technology of light manipulation has added another dimension to a narrative that otherwise might not have been as accessible to the audience.

In the discussion of technology, however, it is even more essential to note that Benjamin and Burton are from two different eras, with entirely different responses to the events occurring during the two World Wars. While Benjamin's generation was the first to witness the tragic consequences of modern warfare and, as such, was ill-prepared for the unfathomable events that the technology warfare perpetuated, Burton's generation is several removed. Mankind has recuperated from the trauma of modernization and technology (particularly in the mediation of information) has become a ubiquitous, if not a welcome, resident in a culture that cannot remember the advent of colored television. Technology has become part of the collective experience and, in order for story-telling to serve its role of counseling its communities, the experience of modernization is an experience that not only invites itself into, but must as pertinently become an element in the ever-evolving process of storytelling.

This is not to say that Burton's personal views of certain forms of modernization do not necessarily align themselves with Benjamin's; on the contrary, many of Burton's films actually capitalize on the alienation and fragmentation created through modernization. Modern technology in varying forms such as medicine or electricity often serves as the catalytic divide between the human and the non-human in Burton's distorted characters. He creates a plethora of distinctive individuals that are either psychologically or physically broken or in some other obscure manner left un-whole through the interventions of modern science. Edward Scissorhands, for example, was left in a quasi-human state by the mad scientist who died before Edward was completed, leaving his Pinocchio-esque son with scissors for hands. Likewise, in *Frankenweenie*, a small boy genius is able to bring his dead dog back to life, and Ichabod Crane tries in vain to use science for explaining the mysterious deaths in *Sleepy Hollow*. Sally in *The Nightmare Before Christmas* is a rag doll held together by stitching. In each instance, the intervention of science and technology fragments the world where it is employed, leaving its residents dysfunctional. The actor Johnny Depp, who has collaborated with the filmmaker on numerous projects, explains some of the characters in Burton's films:

The characters that I've played in Tim's films are all ... kind of deeply damaged. Which I think of as a good thing. The damaged individual dealing with the world. That is probably, at its very root, why Tim does what he does, and why I do what I do (Jim Smith *Tim Burton* 241).

The distorted character is the trademark of Burton cinema (which, as will later be discussed, is the heart of the symbiotic relationship Burton maintains with German

Expressionism) and is often self-reflexive. In *Frankenweenie*, for instance, Burton engineers a virtual version of his young self while spoofing Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* novel and revisiting the mad-scientist motif from Fritz Lang's expressionist film, *Metropolis*. Burton invokes a lonely young boy, Victor Frankenstein, who passes many hours in the isolation of the family's attic and whose only viable relationship is that with his dog. Worried about his son's inability to maintain meaningful friendships, Victor's Dad encourages him to pursue activities outside of the boy's attic laboratory. At Victor's first baseball game (Burton's father was a professional baseball player), Sparky is killed by a vehicle while chasing down Victor's ball. When Sparky dies, Victor stitches him together and enlists the aid of a lightning bolt to "spark" the canine back to life. The pain at the loss of his beloved canine companion and the isolation that Victor experiences is akin to the filmmaker's own experiences from his childhood. That Burton's character distortion is very personal is very introspective of the auteur's self-reflexivity and serves as another testament to the company of this storyteller being present while he tells his tales.

While perhaps both being extremely leery of the varying forms of modernization, Burton and Benjamin respond to it in very different manners. By responding to this Benjaminian wariness of technology with humor rather than despair, Burton serves to alienate his audience from the very fear he is addressing. While Benjamin viewed the approaching dependence on varying forms of technology as replete with unmanageable dire consequences, Burton reduces the fear, encapsulates it, and conquers it. The alienated Edward is removed from society and contained in his hilltop. Ichabod Crane

finds that there are occurrences in life that must be explained outside of science, and Sparky, the ill-fortuned mutt from *Frankenweenie*, falls in love with a regenerated female version of himself. In Burton's work, technology has become a place outside of human civilization rather than something that defines it as Benjamin feared it would; in essence, the filmmaker is adding another layer to Benjamin's story.

Burton does not restrict himself to adding merely one layer to the Benjaminian narrative, however. Burton's aesthetic choices and creative narratives add yet another to the process. The filmmaker's re-visitation of German Expressionism, for example, creates the film's atmosphere and further develops the characters. One of Burton's quasi-auto-biographical characters, Edward Scissorhands, for example, is an amalgamation of the organic and the inorganic, and the union of these two types of matter creates a dysfunctional entity akin to Cesare in Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*. Edward's body parts are pieced together by an inventor (incidentally, played by Burton's childhood icon, Vincent Price) who dies before he is able to complete Edward. This deems Edward unfinished, with only a massive construct of several pairs of scissors to serve as temporary hands. While the scissors prove to be a source of inspiration and creativity for Edward (much like the extension of the artist's pencil to Burton's own hands), they also serve to differentiate him from society. Inevitably, like the somnambular character in Wiene's masterpiece, Edward is an incomplete human being and therefore socially dysfunctional. Cesare is reliant on Caligari for direction, while Edward bends to the guidance of Peg and her daughter, Kim. Much like the quiet, reclusive Burton, the distortion of self is apparent in Edward's speech patterns as well. Edward's mono-

syllabic language and pantomimed body and facial expressions suggest language reductionism to the point of abstraction; this is at its core an abstraction of Burton's own self-reflexivity, who admits to the recurring tendency to withdraw (*Burton on Burton* 168). Ultimately, Edward (like Burton) is different and therefore, not meant to exist in a scissor-less society; he returns to his castle on the hill where he remains isolated. With characters such as Cesare in Wiene's film and Count Orlok in F. W. Murnau's *Nosferatu: eine Symphonie des Grauens*, German Expressionism thrives on alienated characters. Burton's reference to these characters reinforces the sense of alienation within his own characters.

While the re-visitation of German Expressionism aids Burton in his development of characters in his work, the *auteur's* borrowing of established narratives such as *Frankenweenie*, *Planet of the Apes* and *Dark Shadows*, provide a structure from which the story is told. By borrowing techniques from prior representations of the storyteller (which includes filmmakers), Burton is borrowing from the experience of the past to develop and continue his narrative. In this manner, the filmmaker is keeping the story as well as the storyteller an active evolving force in the community.

Benjamin mourned what he felt was a great lack of individuals who were qualified to be storytellers. *Der Erzähler* clearly defines what its author considers to be the essential qualities of a bard; the first being experience. Stories (according to Benjamin) are the result of a collective – infused with communal experience and passed down from generation to generation; additionally, they are the tale of him who has experienced and thus has wisdom to impart. Because Benjamin sees the purpose of this

process as a transfer of acquired knowledge that allows the audience “to meet the forces of nature with cunning and high spirits,” the storyteller should, as such, be able to take his experience and make it the experience of the listener, or, in other words, pass on his acquired knowledge (403).

Likewise, according to Benjamin, a great storyteller should be grounded in the community, understanding his audience keeps his narration relevant; the community’s vested interest in what the bard is relaying allows him to more readily impart his knowledge to the community; Burton’s renditions of commonplace communities allow him to do this. Most importantly, however, “the first true storyteller is, and will continue to be, the teller of the fairytales,” because “the fairytale, which to this day is the first tutor of children because it was once the first tutor of mankind, secretly lives on in the story.” (Benjamin 102) As Benjamin’s bard uses the fairytale to impart his wisdom, so does Burton; in his films, communities learn to accept outsiders (*Edward Scissorhands*), sons learn to understand fathers (*Big Fish*) and young children learn to dream big and believe in those dreams (*Alice in Wonderland*) through the filmmaker’s stylized modernizations of the fairy tale.

### **Burton, the Teller of the Fairytale**

The import of the fairy tale should never be underestimated in either the work of the filmmaker, Burton, or in the work of the critic, Benjamin. Benjamin saw in the fairytale a type of Herderian *Ursprache*, a voice from the pre-historic tribes that was passed down from generation to generation bringing with it the acquired wisdom of the community’s predecessors (Johann Gottfried von Herder. “Philosophy of Language:

Fragments of Recent German Literature.” *Philosophical Writings*). The fairytale, in effect encompassed a manual for life; its inherent life instructions gave humanity the courage (*Mut*) and cunning (*List*) to survive (102).

Burton, on the other hand, adds his own twist to the fairytale. The historical fairytale is prone to take the exceptional and infuse it with the commonplace: for example, the Prince (the exceptional) marries the peasant girl (the commonplace) in *Cinderella* and the Mermaid (the miraculous) falls in love with the human (the ordinary) in *The Little Mermaid*. Rather than taking the extra-ordinary and introducing it to the ordinary (as fairy tales have historically been known to do), Burton takes the mundane and commonplace and makes it extra-ordinary. In Burton’s *Big Fish*, for instance, Edward Bloom, the non-exceptional traveling salesman, the father and husband, becomes the superhero of his tales; he saves the town of Spector, rescues the conjoined twins from a war torn country and befriends the town Hag who frightens everyone else. In this vein, Burton follows in the footsteps of the German author Adalbert Stifter who was well known for his concentration on the minutiae and the mundane in his fairy tales; despite the availability of everyday occurrences, Stifter was able to see the miraculous in them. To Stifter, the grandiose and large were merely a conglomeration of small wonders:

*Die Kraft, welche die Milch im Töpfchen der armen Frau empor schwellen und übergehen macht, ist es auch, die die Lava in dem feuerspeienden Berge empor treibt, und auf den Flächen der Berge hinab gleiten läßt.*  
 (“Vorrede,” *Bunte Steine* pp 5 - 11).

Stifter argues that it is the same force that causes the milk in the pot at the end of the Housewife's arm to boil that causes the volcano to erupt, so how much more important it is to appreciate the small and see the wondrous therein – the larger, grander occurrences in life are, after all, only a hyperbole of the smaller. Burton, likewise, sees the hero in the ordinary man (Edward Bloom) and the miraculous in the commonplace (a child being born) and this is reinforced through his ordinary characters who manage extraordinary feats. Edward Bloom, for instance, won the heart of his sweetheart by losing a fight rather than by winning it. Burton always imagines the underdog as the hero.

Benjamin subscribed to a similar philosophy. To begin with, starting the narrative with the commonplace or the ordinary made the story more accessible to the storyteller's audience, because the protagonist is generally a common man. More essentially according to Benjamin though, lies the mark of a great storyteller (his art) in his ability to see the extraordinary in the ordinary: Edward Bloom is not just the average traveling salesman, he is the traveling merchant who encounters a plethora of adventures on his journeys that includes (but is certainly not limited to) encounters with giants, treks through mystical forests and friendships with anthro-morphic animals. This is a talent that Benjamin found in the Russian author Nicolai Leskov. In his ability to see the grandiose in the ordinary Benjamin found Leskov to be a premier teller of fairy tales. Referring to the Russian writer's skill as a bard, Benjamin writes:

*Je tiefer Lesskow auf der kreatürlichen Stufenreihe herniedersteigt, desto offenkundiger nähert sich seine Anschauungsweise der mystischen.* (The

deeper Leskov descends on the scale of created things the more apparently his point of view approaches the mystical 408)

In Burton, one finds much of this same bardic quality. Burton consistently draws upon his unexceptional, middle class, suburban childhood in order to convey a story that is not only relevant to its audience, but attractive and informative as well. In *Edward Scissorhands*, for example, the *auteur* creates an inflated view of modern suburbia. While set in a regular middle class neighborhood, there are shocking reminders of reality interrupted everywhere. Sets and costumes are intentionally off-kilter and only reminiscent of the Florida neighborhood it emulates. The cookie-cutter houses are painted in uninteresting shades of pastels (another commentary from Burton on the over-homogenization of modernization). The neighbors' eccentricities are hyperbolized (ballooned hair styles, over-enthusiastic homemakers and painfully perfect landscaped yards) creating characterized versions of the community; an effect which inevitably creates a humorous commentary on modern suburbia. In each case, Burton is able to take the ordinary and make it extraordinary.

More than just being able to see the wondrous in their stories, however, both master storytellers excel in the art of humor when purveying their tales as well. In Leskov's *The Steel Flea*, for instance, the author creates an international competition (between Russia and England) over something as seemingly insignificant as a mechanically produced miniscule metal insect; the winning point in the competition is something that resides on an even "lower scale of created things;" the placement of shoes on the mechanical insect (408). Leskov emphasizes the insignificance of the winning

factor by requiring his characters to use a microscope to even see what it is. Burton mirrors this aspect of storytelling through the humorous undertones infused in his work; towns are created where none of the inhabitants wears shoes (*Big Fish*), iconic figures of one holiday intervene with the iconic figures of another (*Nightmare Before Christmas*) and scruffy family pets become gothic creatures (*Frankenweenie*). Benjamin recognized the attractive and the instructive potential of humor in storytelling; for in its ability to command the attention of the audience, humor also has the ability to alienate the audience from the reality of the instructive process in which they are partaking; “the profoundness of [the] story is hidden behind its silliness” (Benjamin 406). In the case of each storyteller, however, “something beneficial’ and profound is presented; acquired knowledge passed on to audience, whether it be the tools needed to navigate modern suburbia, complex relationships or international relationships, the audience or the reader is duly counseled (388).

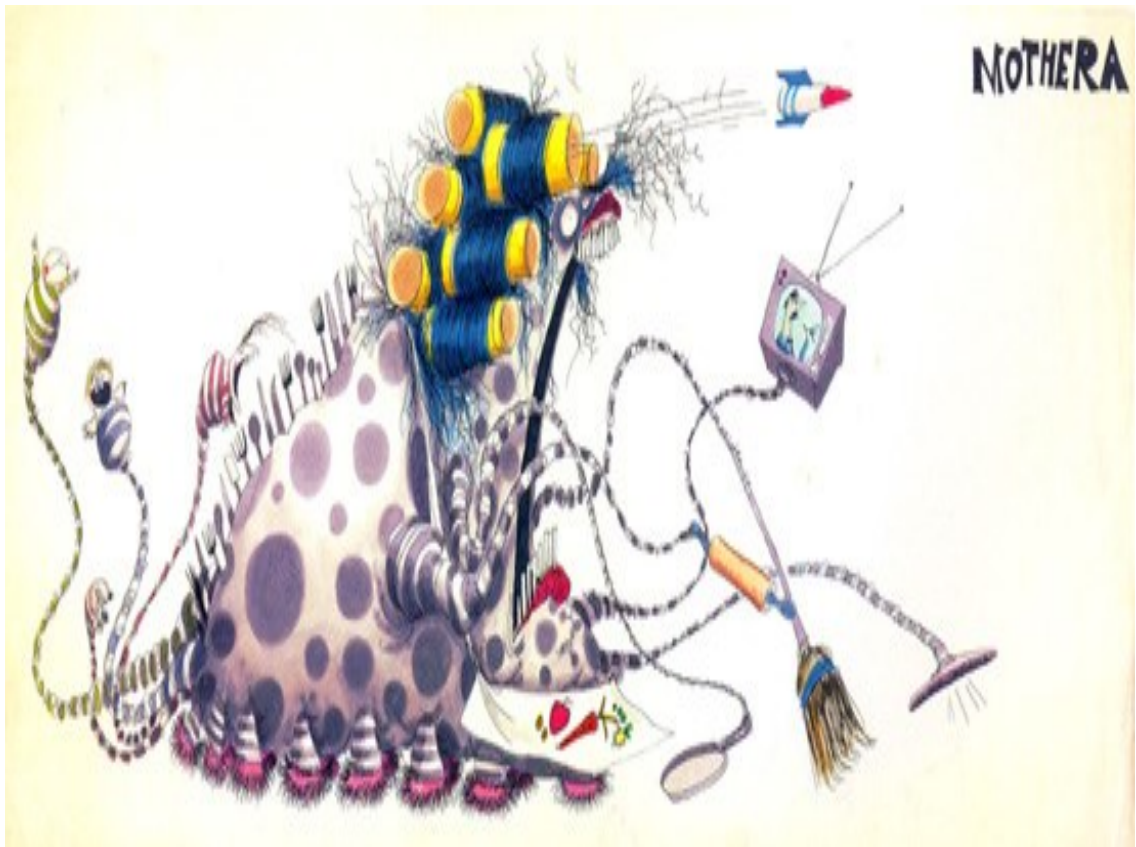
In essence, Tim Burton serves as a cinematic representation of the bard, because Burton’s ability to create the miraculous from the mundane establishes him as a master at creating and relaying what Benjamin considers to be the epitomic structure of the narrative - the fairytale. In *Big Fish*, this *auteur* retreats into his personal childhood to illustrate the complexities of a strained father-son relationship. Just as Benjamin praised the Russian storyteller Nikolai Leskov for his ability to see the extraordinary in the ordinary, Burton, likewise, sees the story, the fairytale, the magical, the magnificent and the mythological in the banality of commonplace experience: traveling salesmen can be adventurers, ringmasters can be werewolves and lake fish can be bribed with wedding

rings. Through his rich employment of mythology, history, and storytelling, Burton offers a personal tribute to the bard, which is consistently reverberated in the structure of the film. *Big Fish* represents a type of triptych of storytelling. On the first fold, one has the filmmaker, Burton, as the storyteller, while the next level presents the actual film telling the narrative. Thirdly the film becomes self-reflexive through the development of the main character, Edward Bloom's son, Will, telling the story of his father, the storyteller (who, in turn, tells the story of his own fantastical history). In each level, the audience is drawn into this distinctive world of the bard, sharing the tale along with the storyteller, whether it is Burton the filmmaker, *Big Fish* the film, or Edward Bloom the character. Likewise, the film's cinematic representation reflects upon the gift of storytelling through its stylized version of the fairytale. The cinematic artistry within this film (as with most Burton films, borrows heavily from the filmic genre of German Expressionism) readily lends itself to the obscure, mystical nature of fairy tales.

### **Burton's Experience**

In order for the story to be relevant to its audience (according to Benjamin's essay), the bard must not only convey a narrative about which he has certain knowledge, but the knowledge must contain "something useful" for the audience as well; as such, according to Benjamin, "a great storyteller will always be rooted in the people" (403). Burton seems to innately understand this part of the process, because his art consistently references his own experiences of a youth spent in the outskirts of Los Angeles. Despite the filmmaker's unique aesthetic that carries with it a sense of fragmentation and alienation, Burton has always drawn upon the commonplace in his own unremarkable

Southern California childhood as a source for his inspiration that, in turn, produces images with which his audience can easily empathize. Images of harassed suburban housewives, frantically multi-tasking, and of young couples experiencing the pain and torment of cupid's arrow rather than its frequently romanticized bliss are concepts to which most viewers can readily relate. While Burton eagerly argues



*Illus. 7. Mothera – Tim Burton's concept of a multi-tasking suburban housewife*



*Illus. 8.* Burton's Untitled (Cartoon Series) Lover's hit by Cupid's Arrow

against the monotony of his own relatively unexceptional history, it has, nevertheless, permitted him access to his audience. Likewise, Burton permits his audience access to himself. The Benjaminian mantra of “a man listening to a story is in the company (*Gesellschaft*) of the storyteller” is certainly applicable when referring to Burton's work (401). Because so much of Burton's personal experience is reflected in his work, the audience shares a part of this experience with the cinematic storyteller as it views his film.

There was little to indicate a fledgling Hollywood powerhouse in the making in Burton's unremarkable childhood. He was born in Burbank, California, to a father who worked for the City Parks and Recreation Department and a mother who owned a gift shop with merchandise strictly for and about cats. The filmmaker claims that the most memorable aspect of his childhood were the B-rated monster films such as, *Son of Godzilla*, he spent hours watching; notably, his usual tendency was to empathize more with the monster rather than the pedestrians shooting at them (Tim Burton *Burton on Burton* 2). It is this childhood attachment to monster films, however, that inevitably defines Burton as a filmmaker. In describing his childhood, the author claims:

Every kid responds to some image, some fairy-tale image, and I felt most monsters were basically misperceived, they usually had much more heartfelt souls than the human characters around them. [...]  
Because I never read, my fairytales were probably those monster movies.  
(Burton 5)

These sentiments would remain Burton's throughout his cinematic career and are one of the dominant characteristics of what this scholar refers to as Burton Expressionism. When asked in an interview whether the father/son relationship in *Big Fish* mirrored his own relationship with his father, Burton responded that it "actually had more to do with the *Son of Godzilla* movie," a film that Burton considers the quintessential father/son relationship (David Schwartz *The Burton Interviews* 177). Monsters or not, however, this filmmaker does maintain a deep personal connection with the characters in his films, like Edward Scissorhands and Edward Bloom, effectively offering a virtual representation of

self, allowing his life experience, in turn, to become part of the experience of his audience. When viewing a Burton film, one is indeed, “sitting in the company of the storyteller” (Benjamin 400).

### ***Big Fish* as Bard: Telling a History of Mythological Proportions**

A street lined with identical houses that can only be differentiated by the slight variance in the shade of pastel used to color their exteriors (*Edward Scissorhands*), a town where none of its perennially-barefooted residents may leave (*Big Fish*), a home where a boy genius sequesters himself in an attic laboratory to avoid ridicule from his peers (*Frankenweenie*) and a community whose leader is easily duped by painfully obvious space aliens (*Mars Attacks*) – these are just a few of the cinematic indicators of Burton’s wacky view on modern civilization. These representations are rife with the exaggeration, fragmentation, and alienation inherited from their mythological referent; yet they offer a very honest representation of the filmmaker’s perspective on modern community. They are also clear indicators of the need for the employment of mythology in storytelling, regardless of whether the story being told is of an actual event (history) or one of generated event (fiction).

As has already been established in previous chapters, history and mythology are irretrievably linked; they are also integral elements to storytelling. In the previous discussion on Joan of Arc, for instance, mythology was used to define a history; albeit a history that changed with the various mythologies applied to it. In the discussion on the Grimms, it was illustrated that the various manipulations of mythology can change the manner in which a community defines itself. In Burton, however, one finds the

employment of mythology not just in the utilization of various archetypes and narratives to explain a history, but also the additional employment of mythology to create a figure of a community. This point is better illustrated in the discussion of the filmmaker's tribute to the storyteller, *Big Fish*.

In the opening scene of *Big Fish*, the audience can hear the voiceover of the film's primary storyteller, Edward Bloom appropriately narrating a story about beginnings, "the day his son was born." Referencing the old fisherman's tale about "the fish that got away," Bloom explains why the day that his son was born was such a memorable one, because it was the day he caught the legendary uncatchable gargantuan river fish using nothing but his wedding ring as bait. Several years in the life of Edward Bloom and his son are cinematically strung together by a single telling of this story, indicating a story that has been told repeatedly throughout the life of the young Will. Edward's tales initially serve as a source of contention between father and son. Tired of his father's stories and sure that he will never be able to ascertain the "true" story of the man's life, Will rejects Edward's tales, which creates a rift between the two men. Will moves to Paris and the two men do not speak for three years. Ultimately, however, storytelling proves to be the string that conjoins father and son in the end. "We are storytellers, both of us" Edward explains to Will, "I speak mine out, you write yours down" [Will's character is a journalist]. Edward's simple statement to Will inadvertently responds to Benjamin lament: there are multiple ways in which to mediate a story.

In his discussion on the storyteller, Benjamin writes:

*Jeder Morgen unterrichtet uns über Neuigkeiten des Erdkreises. Und doch sind wir an merkwürdigen Geschichten arm. Das kommt, weil uns keine Begebenheit mehr erreicht, die nicht mit Erklärungen schon durchsetzt wäre. Mit andern Worten; beinah nichts mehr, was geschieht, kommt der Erzählung, beinah alles der Information zugute.* (Every

morning reports to us about the news of world crisis, and yet we are notably poor in stories. This is because occurrences no longer come to us that are not gone through with explanation. In other words, by now almost nothing that happens that benefits storytelling; almost everything benefits information. (391)

Perhaps these were the same sentiments that the character from *Big Fish*, Edward Bloom, shares with Benjamin and thus feels a need to infuse the tales of his past with fantastical imagery. This makes his tales worthy of the story while not saturating them with “over-explanation” as Benjamin argued against (89). The fantastical imagery, borrowed from such mythological referent as enchanted forests, anthro-morphic animals and exotic prophetesses that Burton (or Edward Bloom) uses not only adds vibrancy to the story being told, but also makes it more comprehensible to the listener by following the grid of the familiar, time-honored and well-worn narratives that myth provides; ultimately, “mythology provides the narrative in literature” (Northrop Frye *Myth and Metaphor* 4).

In turn, the fairytale, of which Benjamin held such high esteem, gives mankind the courage and the wisdom to challenge the accepted rituals that myth establishes. In

*Big Fish*, for example, the fairy tale confronts the established myth that the son overcomes and conquers the father (as Zeus does with Cronos and Oedipus does with King Laius). Burton's usage of mythology and fairy tale, however, adds the "extra layer" of presenting an alternate reality within the story; the filmmaker utilizes myth codes to present Bloom's reality not just as it appears externally, but rather to express the internal realm of how the protagonist feels about his experiences. Though seeming to reside on the outskirts of plausibility, it is the protagonist's very real internal reality that the filmmaker is expressing.

The metaphorical "Big Fish" proves to be not only what seems to be the uncatchable truth about the life of Edward Bloom, but additionally, the noteworthy "big" events in the character's life. The past, his history, is what Edward deems interesting; not that he lives in the past, but that only through his storytelling, is he able to bring it to life in the present. Burton, incidentally, manipulates the cinematography to chromatically emphasize the importance of Edward's past by shooting all of the scenes from Edward's stories in vibrant colors, daffodil yellows, azure blue skies, ruby reds and grasshopper greens pop out of the screen to grab the attention of the audience, while the colors of the present are subdued and quasi-monochromatic, presenting a sincere projection of banality. With vibrant colors, exaggerated plotlines and abstracted characters, Edward's past is more alive than his present and ironically, it is only in the present, that Edward's past really lives.

Sigmund Freud wrote that creative writing [storytelling] is a means of replacing child's play, which is rife with fantasies of super-heroes and extraordinary events

stemming from the desire to be bigger and better, grown-up (“The Creative Writer and Daydreaming” *The Uncanny* xxi). Certainly, Blooms’s stories are abundant with extraordinary events, characters and fantastical, fairytale imagery: witches, giants, golden rings, mermaids, water monsters, dwarves, and, of course, the self-declared demi-god, Edward Bloom himself (he is ultimately the hero of each of his stories).

Edward’s stories, however, do not exhibit an internal desire to be “bigger and better” (as Freud would claim) that this fantastical imagery might otherwise indicate; on the contrary, his anecdotes display an external expression of those things which Edward sees as being bigger and better. The important things, the monumental occasions in Edward’s life are the things he embellishes in his tales: meeting the love of his life, the day his son was born, being lost and given up for dead during the war, the stories about the people who were important to him in his life. In other words Edward tells stories about the “big fish” in his life. At the film’s end, Will is sitting by the dying Edward’s hospital bed. Downtrodden and hopeless, Will is certain that he will never truly know his father or his father’s history; he is convinced that the real Edward Bloom was always hiding behind some fabricated event. When Dr. Bennett, the family doctor and good friend, enters the room, he responds to Will’s lament. Dr. Bennett tells Will the “true” story of the day that Will was born, which proves to be very uneventful, very unexceptional and, honestly, rather boring. Edward’s tale of Will’s day of birth is quite antithetical, however. To Edward, the day was one of the most eventful in his life; rather than telling an un-newsworthy story such as Dr. Bennett’s rendition, Edward embellishes the story to express how truly exceptional that day was to him. The reality lies in the

perception. Edward's stories are not necessarily myth as Will designates them; on the contrary, they are merely infused with fantastical imagery that everyone can understand to bring them to life. In doing so, the storyteller has created a story as exceptional to the listener as it is to the one who actually experienced the story.

With the terms mythology and fairytale comes a certain amount of incredulity; it is a characteristic of the literary genre that Burton wholeheartedly embraces. That father and son reside on opposite ends of the spectrum where Edward's tales are concerned (Edward sees them as the perfect representation of his past while Will sees them as fabricated and polar opposite to reality) is indicative of what Max Lüthi refers to as "our own ambivalent feelings about fairy tales" (*Once Upon a Time: On the Nature of Fairy Tales* 21). Lüthi argues that something with the ability to consecutively attract and repel so ardently, must target something very raw and base ("the fundamental") to who we are and how we define ourselves – what could be rawer or more fundamental than a relationship to one's father (22)? Burton is meeting the Benjaminian forces of nature here; certainly, everyone has a father and the manner in which one defines one's relationship to one's father is often how one defines who or what he is; for Will, defining who he was, meant defining who his father was.

Benjamin claims that our fairytales are there to teach us, as liberated men, to cunningly deal with the forces of myth (402). In the end, as Benjamin's fairy tales suggest, Edward's tales teach Will to deal with the most fundamental elements that we all must encounter, the forces of nature (birth, life, death, humanity and, most importantly, family). Inevitably, the two men are able to reconcile; Will becomes the

storyteller, narrating his father's death to him and, in turn, telling stories to his own son. Page refers to Will's telling the final tale as "Edward's passing the mantle from one life to the next" (206). Just as Benjamin's storyteller makes his experience that of those in his company; Edward's (the father's) experience has become Will's (the son's) experience (84).

Burton's employment of mythical imagery to bring a history to life is further reinforced with this employment of the leitmotif of the passing generations that is so prevalent in the narration of both history and mythology. Both myth and history exhibit cyclical patterns; their heroes rise and fall and old regime's lead the path for new ones. Burton's narrative clearly mimics the revolving circularity of generation within the passing of time starting with the voiced over narration of the film: the film exhibits the filmmaker, telling the story of a son telling the story of his father telling the story of his father's past. Likewise, one can find this same return to point of departure within the narrative. The film begins with a father telling his son a story and ends with a son telling a father a story; this is the same son who becomes a father and, in turn, tells his own son a story. After years of separation from his father, Will must also return to his home; he leaves Paris with his pregnant French wife to return to his childhood home where he can be by his dying father's bedside. Just as Will's journey is cyclical, so is Edward's. While Edward's stories contain constant re-visitations of long lost friends, towns and loves, they also always reflect back to Edward; he becomes them and they become him. Upon reconciliation with his father, Will finally concludes, "a man tells his stories so many times that he becomes his stories and in that way, he becomes immortal."

It is this repetitive rhythm within the narrative that creates a more empathetic relationship between the audience and the characters and allows the storyteller (Burton) to connect with his community. It is this rhythm that is so essential to the camaraderie of myth (Edward's stories) and history (Edward's past). The patterns of circularity or continuity found in myth are the same patterns one finds in history: birth and death; father and son; old regime and new order; creation and destruction. They are generational; they are seasonal and they are constant, and this constant revolution of time is something that everyone has experienced in some manner. Thus, through this narrative structure in his film, Burton has created a metaphor to which his audience can relate. The filmmaker has made "his experience" that of his audience as well (Benjamin). In the end, *Big Fish* is a "good natured story about the stages of life that we all go through" (Page 197).

### **Monsters, Madness and Misfits: Revisiting German Expressionism**

Ultimately, it is the art of telling the story, however, that most defines Burton. Unlike, Leskov, Benjamin's premier storyteller who did not have access to filmic representation, Burton adds the extra aesthetic of visuals to relay his narrative; this is apparent with his cinematic expressionism. As striking black and white linear visuals in the previously discussed maternity ward scene from *Big Fish* indicate, Burton's flights into the world of the marvelous are not just limited to his narratives, but invade the audience's ocular sense as well. In fact, short of the scream and a few words of encouragement from the attending physician, this scene has no verbal cues employed as narrative devices at all. With generous employment of *chiaroscuro* (*Helldunkel*),

irrational fragmentation, distorted body and architectural proportions, and unconventional camera angles, one surmises that Burton's art, that primarily revisits German Expressionism, are as an essential element to the telling of the story as is the narrative. This is a filmmaker who clearly "prefers to use visual modes of expression to verbal communication" (Edwin Page 196).

Part of the appeal of *Big Fish* is its overwhelming duplicity; the line between reality and fantasy is often indecipherable; the obscure lines that exhibit an alternative reality found in German Expressionism readily lend themselves to this form of narrative, reinforcing the mythical and supernatural. While Edward's tales border on the fantastic, they are grounded in actual events that occurred during his life. Perusing the attendees at his father's funeral, Will is surprised to discover that many of the characters in his father's tales were actual people. Ping and Jing prove to be actual twin sisters, although not conjoined as Edward had told. Karl, while easily considered altitudinous, is not a giant and Norther Winslow is an actual poet. As previously mentioned, however, Edward's tales do not reflect necessarily what happened, but how he felt about what happened. Because Edward's world lies within the outer margins of an alternative reality (a fairytale), Burton's ability to create aesthetics with "settings that are not limited by the parameters, logic, and physics of reality" create an effective method of telling Edward's story in a world that simultaneously is and is not reality ("An Auteur for all Ages" Jenny He 18). As such, Burton's unique aesthetics, which create a distorted sense of reality through striking visuals, echo many of the characteristics of early German film, specifically, German Expressionism. This type of aesthetic not only lends itself well to

the other-worldliness of the magical, the mystical and the grotesque in Edward's stories, but it exteriorizes the internal world of Edward's emotions as well. Through his usage of *Abgrundlose Tiefen* (Bottomless Depths) created through unconventional camera angles, contrast, and exaggerated shadows and through usage of light as a *raumgestaltender Faktor* (space-forming factor), Burton creates a world that eagerly blurs the delineation between reality and fantasy, creating a mood that becomes as critical an element to the narrative as is the spoken word.

This point becomes exceedingly clearer through an introspective look of the most chromatically exciting scenes in this film; it is the field of Daffodils where Edward and Sandra initially fall in love. In this scene, Edward, still trying to win Sandra's heart, has called around to five states to collect every yellow daffodil he can find (Sandra's favorite flower) and has them put on the lawn outside her bedroom door. She is awakened by him calling to her. When Sandra comes down to meet Edward, whom she hardly knows at this point, Edward is brutally beaten by Sandra's current fiancé, who just happens to be Edward's old nemesis from Ashton. After she sees the brutality of which Don is capable, Sandra immediately breaks her engagement to Don and runs to kneel beside the beaten Edward. The two share a moment where they fall in love, surrounded by a field of brightly colored yellow daffodils. While the body languages of both characters exhibit a relaxed atmosphere at this point (Sandra kneeling and Edward reclining), the scene is anything but casual. Indeed, it is kinetically charged with an energy that only young love can produce - hopeful, vibrant, exciting and sexual. It is indeed a fairy tale. True to the

heart of the Expressionist aesthetic, it is the interior realm of emotion that is externally presenting itself here; dialogue, costume and action serve an entirely extraneous purpose.



*Illus. 9. Young Love - Edward Wooing Sandra in Burton's Big Fish.*

In fact, the minimalized dialogue in the scene reinforces the expressionistic ideals because sound technology was underdeveloped during the second decade of the twentieth century and silent films highly relied on visual means for telling their narratives. As a result, costume and scenery became indispensable contributors to the narrative, which, in turn, developed an artistic form of storytelling.

It is not just the minimalistic dialogue that characterizes German Expressionism, however. The art form was highly influenced by an *avant garde* movement in the

European cultural arts, expressionism is a hybrid of the rampant modernism that was characteristic of the 1920 European milieu and the nostalgic Romanticism of the nineteenth century. The genre is characterized by its dark, moody, surreal sets and Hoffmanesque plots that are often saturated with “morbid Freudian” themes (Lotte Eisner *The Haunted Screen* 17). In contrast to Bazinian stark realism, expressionism is self-aware and, as such, is often infused with blatant, shocking reminders that force the audience to confront an alternative concept of reality (Bazin, André. “The Evolution of the Language of Cinema.” *What is Cinema?* Vol. I). At its core, however, the basic ideology that dominates German Expressionism is the external representation of an interior (emotional) reality resulting in abstract aesthetics and distorted characterizations. This expressionist ideology is reflected in Edward’s narratives that describe a distorted sense of reality: towns where everyone is barefoot and no one can leave, descriptions of gargantuan fish, and tales of giants single-handedly lifting automobiles. These distorted images create a sense of alienation that distances the audience from the narratives; reinforcing the story telling within the film. Burton’s intent is not to project reality, but to project a story.



*Illus. 10. Distorted Proportions Employed as Narrative Devices in Burton's Big Fish.*

Because expressionism defies the confines of reality, it creates its own sense of mythology, which, in turn, produces an effective narrative device for the filmmaker by allowing visual access to archetypal characters and plots. As is apparent in German Expressionist films such as Robert Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* and F. W. and Murnau's *Nosferatu: a Symphony of Horror*, the translations of these gothic motifs onto film were not only aesthetically exceptional but they were also decidedly unique, and, as such, became very influential in the noir and horror film industries of the 1920's and 1930's. This highly stylized method of filmmaking did not, however, influence only iconic filmmakers like Orson Welles (*Citizen Kane*) and Alfred Hitchcock (*Psycho*); its influence is still seen in the artistry of many modern auteurs like Werner Herzog

(*Nosferatu: Phantom der Nacht*) and Steven Soderbergh (*The Good German*). Of the modern cinematic icons, however, few cinematic storytellers have embraced this tradition as entirely as Tim Burton. The abstract imagery of distorted bodily and architectural proportions created a world that reconfigures reality, which fits perfectly into the schema of this innovative filmmaker's world. Expressionistic aesthetic "interiorizes" by "reappropriating an alienated universe into a private, personal vision" (Marc Silberman *German Cinema* 20). As such, Tim Burton revisits this type of aesthetic as a vehicle for "reappropriating" the alienation and fragmentation within his own personal, often self-reflexive vision.

While the fairytale motif dominates *Big Fish*, there are some dark, somber moments. As Edwin Page argues, death dominates this film (199). In fact, it is the primary catalyst driving the narrative in this film; Will and Edward only have their final encounter, a storyline that frames the narrative, because Will is returning to be with his dying father. This is an essential element to Burton's art of storytelling, because Benjamin argues that "death is the sanction of everything that the storyteller can tell;" it is, after all, where every narrative must ultimately end (396). Death, or knowledge thereof, also drives Edward's tales. One of his initial stories tells of young Edward and his friends visiting the local witch, who had a glass eye. When one looked into the witch's glass eye, his death is revealed to him. This scene is in some regard the focal point to this film, not only for its narrative value, but also for its exceptional aesthetic value as well. It is also a pivotal point in the film because it is the point where Burton directly addresses the Benjaminian "forces of nature" (death) against which the story

should counsel. The young Edward far outshines his other young friends by fearlessly approaching the witch and asking to see his death in her eye. While Edward never shares with anyone what he saw, Edwin Page argues that it was Edward's knowledge of his death that allowed him the confidence and the freedom to really live:

The seeing of his death in the witch's eye is linked with the idea of destiny. Edward is sure his destiny lies beyond his home town, and soon he is sure his destiny lies in the arms of the woman with whom he has fallen in love. This belief in his destiny causes Edward to forge ahead despite various obstacles and trials, like some adventurer after a treasure or some hero of old. Because of this Edward makes the most of his life. (200)

In other words, the confidence of knowing when one's time will come, allows one the freedom to experience life's challenges. As Benjamin argues, the storyteller needs to have experiences in order to have stories to tell (386). If Edward had not wholeheartedly embraced life, he would have had any experiences from which to create his craft.

Burton re-emphasizes the narrative structure in this scene by cinematically instilling a dark somber theme to the aesthetics with generous employment of *chiaroscuro* and irregular architectural features, much akin to Robert Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*. By draining the scene of color and infusing it with shadow, Burton renders the mood as obscure as death itself, one of the great unknowns in life. The *mise en scene* of the southern bog, the old hag and the creepy old shack are rendered even eerier through Burton's gothic undertones. This scene is reminiscent of a horror film.

True to Burton's narrative style that remains ever empathic to the misperceived monster, however, the witch may be scary in appearance, but she remains a non-threatening force to her young visitors. In fact, she even aids young Edward, by informing of the manner in which he dies, she frees him to really live.



*Illus. 11. Helena Bonham-Carter as the Witch in Burton's Big Fish*

While Burton's subject matter is often frightening, his dissonant humor distances the audience and reminds them that it is not reality that they are viewing, just an imitation thereof. He abstracts the reality in his work through usage of montage (or collage) when creating distorted characters; giants, conjoined twins, and circus

ringmasters who become werewolves serve to distort the reality within Burton's narratives.

This ability to distance the viewer and constantly remind him (or her) that the film is merely a representation of reality is what distinguishes the expressionistic film and separates it from the realism of early cinema. In *Das Kabinett des Doktor Caligari*, Wiene's architecture, for instance, was not painted to be architecture, but rather just to be a symbolic representation of urbanity. This image of abstracted architecture was replicated in several scenes within *Big Fish*. The town of Spectre represents a charming heterotopic town, yet the perfection of the town's quaintness is contrasted to the oddly grass covered streets and shoeless inhabitants. Likewise, in a later scene, Jenny's home is decidedly askew; doorways are crooked and the front porch angles defy the askew angles of the external architecture; Edward has Karl the Giant single-handedly push the house aright. Nature maintains an abstracted form as well. With trees playing pivotal roles in *Alice in Wonderland*, *Sleep Hollow* and *Big Fish*, Burton seems to have a penchant for trees; in fact, he decided to do *Sleepy Hollow* because it did have a tree (*Burton on Burton* 163). Burton's trees, however, are odd, fragmented and misshapen, oddly resembling the angular tree so prominent in *Das Kabinett des Doktor Caligari*.



*Illus 12. Tree of Death from Sleepy Hollow.*



*Illus.13. Expressionist Tree in Big Fish*



*Illus. 14. Representations of Trees in Das Kabinett des Dr. Caligari*



*Illus. 15. Representation of a Tree in Das Kabinett des Dr. Caligari*

Whether through architecture, character, costume or clothing, Burton maintains this awareness of Expressionism in his films. It is reflected not only in his penchant for the contrary, but also in the high art that the filmmaker creates out of kitsch, and his unusual tendency to empathize with the marginal character. Karl's size becomes an asset when renovating Jenny's home and the old hag's deformity of a glass eye serves rather than harms Edward.

While Burton revisits this art form in his creation of imaginary worlds, and characters, he also remains true to its aesthetic ideologies of alienation through expressionism in his mastery of light manipulation. The fact that Lotte Eisner allots an entire chapter in her book, *The Haunted Screen*, to a discussion on shadows, illustrates the import of lighting and shadows to the German expressionist (92). Eisner claims that the German penchant for *Helldunkel* (light/dark contrast) can never be overestimated and is at the core of Romantic authors and artists, "represent[ing] a sort of twilight of the German soul, expressing itself in shadowy, enigmatic interiors, or in misty, insubstantial landscapes" (8). Burton embraces this nuance of German Expressionism. By creating *chiaroscuro* (*Helldunkel*), irrational fragmentation, *Abgrundlose Tiefen* (Bottomless Depths), contrast, and exaggerated shadows and through usage of light as a *raumgestaltender Faktor* (space-forming factor), Burton replicates much of the light manipulation techniques used by the German Expressionist.

In such films as *Corpse Bride* and *Sleepy Hollow*, Burton uses the light/dark contrast to create thematic and aesthetic effects, but it is more than the obvious equations of the good equals the light and the bad equals the dark that display Burton's aesthetic

proWess; the sources and the angles of lighting are just as essential. In the scene at the witch's house in *Big Fish*, for instance, indirect low level lighting, creates shadowing and vague imagery or as Eisner calls them, "misty landscapes" (*The Haunted Screen* 8). The lighting source emanates from behind the scene (the horizon). This serves a three-fold purpose: the characters are now in shadow, which creates an ominous and other-worldly (Gothic) effect, it serves to elongate and distance the set (this promotes a distancing and alienating effect not unlike Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt*) and it controls the eye of the audience.<sup>9</sup> These were techniques that were readily employed by the Expressionists. Murnau, for instance, consistently used bright, low level lighting to create ominous oversized shadows of Orlok in *Nosferatu: a Symphony of Horror*. Burton uses a similar effect when he has Edward manipulating shadows from his hands to tell Will a night time story. While Wiene painted his sets contrasting light and dark to accentuate the chaotic abstraction within his character's madness in *Das Kabinett des Doktorr Caligari*, Burton juxtaposes a vibrant chromatic effect to a somber mono-chromia to contrast the past and present in Edward's stories.

As previously mentioned, the representation of alienation is an important ingredient to Burton's expressionism and is evident within the narrative that illustrates an estranged father-son relationship. Burton does not just distance his characters; he distances his audience as well. While German expressionism alienated through horror, Burton conversely alienates through humor (just as Benjamin argues did Leskov). The

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<sup>9</sup> This references Bertolt Brecht's theatrical ideologies, specifically, his "*Verfremdungseffekt*" (alienation effect), which is Brecht's method by which he forces his audience to distance themselves from the characters and be actively intellectually engaged with the play rather than emoting with it and will be further and more fully referenced later in this discussion. (Brecht *Brecht on Theatre*) See later discussion.

audience does not feel a visceral sense of horror at the witch's cottage, because the intentionally matter-of-fact acting within the scene prevents the audience from fearing for young Edward.

Just as Benjamin feared progressiveness in his essay, so does Burton expressionism. In their commentaries on the conflicting ideologies of modernity and nostalgia, German Expressionist Film and Burtonesque cinematic expressionism ask the question, "How do we progress without losing those values that we consider essential to our humanity?" In this intersection between the regimented confines of modernism and the unrestricted possibilities of romanticism, there is the inevitable collision that leaves characters fragmented, distorted, and alienated. In Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*, the workers have become part of the machinery, moving in a uniform rhythm to the interior of the underground factory. The character of the automaton is formed (reminiscent of German Romanticist E.T.A. Hoffman's *The Sandman*), leaving the workers neither human nor machine. In *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, not only are the primary characters insane, but the entire story at its conclusion is reduced to a madman's hallucinations as well, creating a disjunction between the human element and the modern science of psychology. In Murnau's *Nosferatu: a Symphony of Horror*, Orlok is neither human nor monster; he is one of the undead, caught between two worlds.

### **Burton's Layer in the Bardic Process**

Benjamin appreciated the fairytale because its obscurity never saturated its audience with meaning. The listener was left "to interpret things the way he understands them, and thus the narrative achieves amplitude that information does not give to the

reader” (391). Unfortunately, Benjamin did not also recognize that the same dangers exist in over defining the method of story mediation that exist in over provision of information. Not permitting the method of mediation to evolve along with the evolution of the narrative, in effect, kills the tradition. With films such as *Big Fish* that embrace the art of mediating the story, it is clear that Burton’s work displays an intense awareness of the modern representation of the bard. While Benjamin’s definition of the storyteller focused on the oral tradition, Benjamin’s storyteller has evolved into the oral constructs of narration from voice-over and the choir. Hand gestures were the only visuals afforded to Benjamin’s bard, with an exaggerated awareness of the camera that manipulates visual images through the technology of cinema, Burton’s work displays that images can narrate a story. By framing such stories as *Big Fish* in a narrative about storytelling, Burton reinforces this cinematic representation of the storyteller; it is never him as the individual telling the story, but the film that tells the story. In the end, Burton’s work inadvertently responds to Benjamin’s lament by illustrating that not only does the storyteller continue to play a pivotal role in modern culture, but also that both a reconsideration of the notion of the storyteller and of the method in which the craft of storytelling is mediated is necessary.

## Conclusion

We see in Benjamin's essay on children's books, that children are natural storytellers. If you give them four or five words, according to Benjamin, "the most amazing prose comes to light"[...] they are like theatre directors who refuse to submit to censoring by 'sense'" ("A Glimpse into the World of Children's Books," *The Work of Art in The Age of Its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media*, 226). He argues that the creative imagination in the prepubescent years allow children to create stories from picture books and paper cutouts. When children are given an ABC-book with pictures of Apples, Airplanes, Ark and so forth, Benjamin suggests that they are able to create the mythology that narrates them:

Just as the child describes the pictures with words, so too, does he "inscribe" [*beschreibt*] them in a more literal sense. He scribbles on them. Unlike the colored pictures, the surface of the black-and-white illustration is arranged only suggestively and has a capacity for a certain condensation [*Verdichtung*]. So the child composes into the picture. At the same time as he learns language from them, he also learns writing [*Schrift*]: hieroglyphics. (227)

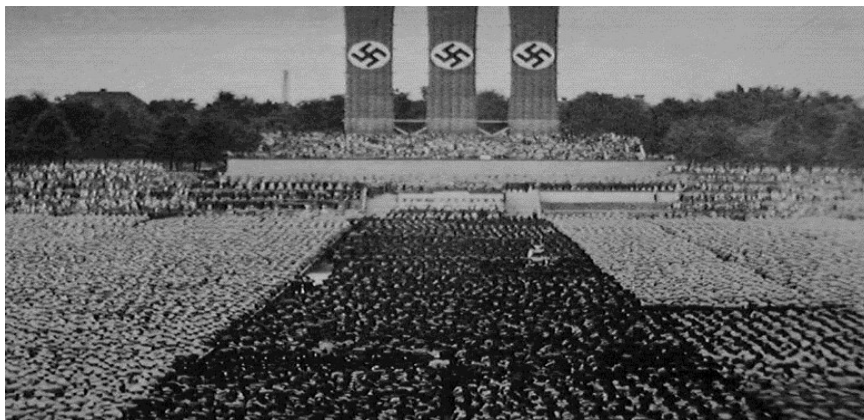
Uncorrupted by forced homogenous explanation of the world that is the result of over prolific publications, Benjamin regrets the inability of adults to maintain this sense of mythology so vital to understanding the world that children apply to their everyday activities. Clearly, Benjamin felt that even at the most elementary stages in life, people

have a natural inclination to share experience; we are all born natural storytellers. Thus, it is the storytellers challenge to encourage his audience to tell their own stories and to determine which role it is they wish to play in their own tale.

The work of the filmmakers discussed in the previous chapters illustrated that this bardic spirit continues, despite Benjamin's argument, to be a relevant force in modern times. The cinematic representation of the bard can encourage the listener to take a look at himself or herself and when offering tales that are not "saturated with over-explanation," can leave the listener to interpret the story on his own (391). By juxtaposing Christian mythology to tyranny, Carl Theodor Dreyer leaves his audience pondering not only the definition of piety, but also its price in *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc*. Tim Burton encourages his audience to re-consider the confines of familial relationships and modern suburbia through his deconstruction of them. Additionally, Helma Sanders Brahm cultivates an examination of these ubiquitous bardic influences and how we define ourselves through them. Modern cinema can show that the notion of the bard is present and remains an undeniable force within modern culture.

The oral tradition was the central focus of Benjamin's argument. Simon Bonner argues that part of the problem with following tradition is that the emphasis then switches from the initial event to the tradition ("The Problem of Tradition," *Following Tradition: Folklore in the Discourse of American Culture*, 9-12). The meaning of the process has become lost. By over-establishment of the method in which a story is narrated, Benjamin runs into this same danger here. Not permitting the method of mediation to evolve along with the evolution of the narrative can equally devalue the process.

When considering Benjamin's regret at what he felt was the loss of relevancy to the storyteller in modern culture, it is also important to acknowledge that Benjamin was writing at a time when histories and mythologies were being mis-appropriated by the Nazi propaganda machine in order to manipulate the nation. Leni Riefenstahl's 1934 film, *Triumph des Willens* (*Triumph of the Will*), is a good example of this mis-application of mythology in storytelling. In this film, blatant imagery of Christianity and Nordic mythology were aligned with National Socialism in order to enlist the sympathies of not only a Germanic, but also a primarily Christian nation still recovering from the trauma of the First World War. The manner in which the nation was defining itself was changing, and this form of storytelling was to Benjamin an over-saturation of information. The audiences were no longer permitted to "interpret things the way [they] understood them" (391). Storytelling was no longer a communal effort, but merely an effort to manipulate the community. This process was ultimately betraying the audience, instilling perhaps what Benjamin felt was an alienation from their histories and mythologies.



*Illus. 16* Leni Riefenstahl presents an image of the cross in order to persuade a Christian audience in *Triumph des Willens*.

Benjamin lamented the death of the storyteller because he felt that modernization separated man from his heritage, the cinematic representation of the bard proves that modern cinematic technology can re-unite man with his heritage in a manner that is relevant to the listeners of the tale. The filmmakers discussed in this study illustrated that not only does the perfect narrative evolve in the process of the many re-tellings, but likewise, the bardic spirit evolves as well. With the recent developments in 3-D animation, computer gaming, iPhones, iPads, and a plethora of other developments that have the potential to re-invent this process of storytelling, it becomes ever-clearer that this process is continuing to evolve.

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