

Kultur ohne Grenzen: Walhalla and Cultural Identity in Nineteenth

Century Germany

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In cultural history, the use of case studies is useful, to be able to compare and put the case in a wider historical context. When a particular case is either forgotten or falls out of favour with the modern popular narrative, it becomes the role of the historian to revive analysis and critique in this area, in order to maintain an open and diverse debate. Constructed between 1806 and 1842 upon the banks of the Bavarian Donau, Walhalla is a large neoclassical monument built in homage to the Greek Pantheon that holds busts of the greatest individuals of the German tongue throughout history. The building was started during the Napoleonic War in 1806, and was inaugurated in 1842, six years before the 'Spring of Nations' (1848). Walhalla exemplifies the great cultural changes of nineteenth century German history. Though it remains absent from many major and prestigious volumes on German history, there is no documented reason why Walhalla has been forgotten in modern German historiography. It should remain an essential touchstone for historians, who aspire to decipher the foundations of modern German cultural identity. The case study of Walhalla shall be re-examined from a Barthesian perspective, using a balanced mixture of modern and contemporary sources, in order to achieve an understanding of the political and cultural discourse that defined nineteenth century/modern German cultural identity.

Why reconsider Walhalla's cultural influence through Barthes' mythological theory? Barthes recognised how language formed the foundation of cultural narratives, how nuanced the definition of language is in determining culture. In his article "*Myth Today*", Barthes defined language as consisting of multiple formats: "*A photograph will be a kind of speech...in the same way as a*

newspaper article."¹ Barthes saw Myth as being second to language, in that it followed where language's semiological chain (signifier-signified-sign) ends: "*That which is a sign [the associative total of a concept and an image] in the original [language] system, becomes a mere signifier in myth.*"² Myth hollows out the original linguistic signifier, leaving behind the Form, from which history is removed, leaving only the basic outline.³ From the Form comes the Concept, "*a tamed richness*" that becomes artificially flexible, allowing it to be used in any number of circumstances, which define its "*historical and intentional*" character.⁴ This leads to the final stage of Myth, the mythical signification, which is wholly defined by the motivation behind the narrative's construction. Myth immobilizes the speech, halting the linguistic development. Simultaneously, it alters its appearance in accordance with the motive behind the Myth.⁵ Particularly with drawings and sculpture, Barthes highlights how significations codify certain facts in favour of others, facilitating connotation and appeal to certain groups of the population.⁶ Barthes instructed historians and semiologists to focus upon the Mythical Signifier as "*an inextricable whole made of meaning and form.*"⁷ Through this form of analysis, one fully connects the mythical system to the general historical context, consuming the total myth "*to the very ends built into its structure.*"⁸

The proximity of Walhalla's residences gives credence to Barthes' statement that visual myth is uniquely multidimensional; "*the elements of the Form...are related...to place and proximity*" thus making the Form spatial.⁹ The entirety of Walhalla exists as Mythical Signification. Each individual bust is pulled from its own biography, hollowing out its original historical presence. Its creator immobilizes it within a symbolic network of his own design, within his own motivated context. It will

¹ Barthes, 'Myth Today', in *A Barthes Reader*, ed. by Susan Sonntag (New York: Hill and Wang, 9th edition, 1995), p.95.

² Barthes, 'Myth Today', in *A Barthes Reader*, p.99.

³ Barthes, 'Myth Today' in *A Barthes Reader*, p.103.

⁴ Barthes, 'Myth Today', in *A Barthes Reader*, p.104.

⁵ Jack Zipes, *The Brothers Grimm: From enchanted forests to the Modern world* (Palgrave Macmillan 2nd edition: New York, 2007), p.211.

⁶ Zipes "*The Brothers Grimm*", p.222. Barthes, 'Myth Today' in *A Barthes Reader*, p.111.

⁷ Barthes, 'Myth Today', in *A Barthes Reader*, p.115.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Barthes, 'Myth Today', p.108.

be this network of signs that this article will focus on, and by following the mythical system to its intended conclusion we shall understand the importance of Walhalla as a representative of modern German national identity.

The political linguistics within Walhalla's mythical network must be seen within the historical context of nineteenth century Germany. When Crown Prince Ludwig of Bavaria first approached the theoretical idea of Walhalla in 1806, nearly all German lands existed under French control. Neil Macgregor, the former Director of the British Museum, highlights how Walhalla was built when all major German political institutions had been shackled to the French state, shown in the formation of the Confederation of the Rhine, or wholly dissolved.¹⁰ This context rightfully justifies Macgregor's definition of Walhalla as "*a National Portrait Gallery as a step to national liberation.*"¹¹

Within this context of nineteenth century national liberation and resistance, Walhalla represents the successful reduction of German history to a mythical narrative of resistance and unity. This is best found on the two pediments on the outward face of Walhalla. Here, two alternative historical scenarios are shown: Hermann defeating the Romans in the Teutoburger Wald (7AD); the other shows the various German states pledging allegiance to Germania, the feminized representation of the German nation. In both cases, the reality has been reduced to Forms, which have been immobilized so as to grant new meaning to them. The disunited, conflicting tribes of Tacitus' Germania are reimagined as the mythical united *Urvolk*, cultural ancestors to the German nation, whilst the legions of the Roman Empire are reduced to conceptual representations of Imperial France. The war of a coalition of independent states, with independent agendas and institutions, becomes the liberation of a unified cultural unit in the face of imperialist occupation and aggression. These two scenarios flank the whole of Walhalla, thus "*the whole...of what the German peoples*

¹⁰ Neil Macgregor "*Germany: Memories of a Nation*" (London: Allen Lane, 2014), p.152.

¹¹ Macgregor, "*Germany: Memories of a Nation*" p.153.

*achieved lie between these two defining moments.”*¹² The vast majority of residents are defined by their prestigious military careers. This shows how saturated in violence the political linguistics of Walhalla are.¹³

Walhalla's political linguistics can be felt further afield in German culture. In his extensive study of nineteenth century German literature John Lyon writes about how the popular German author Georg Büchner framed his protagonists in relation “*to violence and systems of powers*” where wounded bodies are a common motif.¹⁴ In *Danton's Death* (1835), Büchner uses the French Revolution to demonstrate how symbolic networks are created through the wounding of language and the body.¹⁵ The result is that symbolic networks can only be measured by their mutilated fragments.¹⁶ This connects strongly with Barthes' own views on Myth, in which he describes how the linguistic subject is left “*half amputated*” after the Mythical process, its history distorted by the Concept.¹⁷ This violent network of signs was also common throughout Prussia: Christopher Clark writes about how the narrative of the War of the Sixth Coalition (1813-1814) was re-signified into a “*War of Liberty...an insurrection of the people.*”¹⁸ Just as Ludwig rewrote the ancient histories of Germany, so did the Prussian bourgeois volunteers rewrite their own struggle, all with the same violent linguistics of mythical signification. Within this context, Walhalla can be considered a Freudian slip of German culture; in seeking to rebuild a new cultural system, it reminds historians of the linguistic violence, which defined the nineteenth century German cultural identity.

¹² Macgregor, Neil “*Germany: Memories of a Nation*” p.155

¹³ Macgregor, Neil “*Germany: Memories of a Nation*” p.163

¹⁴ Lyon, John. B “*Crafting Flesh, Crafting the Self: Violence and identity early nineteenth century German literature*” (Lewisburg: Bucknell university Press, 2006), p.155

¹⁵ Lyon, John. B “*Crafting Flesh, Crafting the Self*” p.159,161

¹⁶ Lyon, John. B “*Crafting Flesh, Crafting the Self*” p.161

¹⁷ Barthes, 'Myth Today', in *A Barthes Reader*, p.108

¹⁸ Clark, Christopher “*Iron Kingdom: The Rise and Downfall of Prussia 1600-1947*” (Penguin, 2007), p.379

The cultural linguistic network, which defines Walhalla's system offers historians one of the best case studies into how German cultural identity throughout the nineteenth century sought stability and strong national foundations. This could be felt during the late eighteenth century, when Wolfgang von Goethe described the Gothic cathedral in (then French controlled) Strasbourg, recalling a feeling of "oneness, wholeness and greatness."¹⁹ This same desire, to secure control over a united cultural narrative, permeates Walhalla's linguistic networks. In his guidelines to membership, Ludwig stressed the importance of the German language: "To become an inhabitant of Walhalla, it is necessary to be of German origin and to speak the German language."²⁰ Ludwig also stressed the international nature of 'Germanness': "The German remains a German, whether from the Baltic or Alsace, from Switzerland or the Netherlands...Flemish and Dutch remain dialects of Low German."²¹ Here, the re-signification of 'Germanness' within the European linguistic network into Myth, one that seeks German cultural importance over other linguistic systems. This is most noticeable in the re-appropriation of other nation's iconic individuals through the mythical German linguistic system. From Charles Martel and Charlemagne, Alfred the Great and Catherine II, to Copernicus and Hugo de Groot, Walhalla sought to reduce European history into Myth, with German culture at the centre.²² This re-appropriation process fits perfectly into Barthes' myth theory, as mythical systems contain little of the historical stories these individuals inhabited beyond the Myth.²³ This desire for a united central cultural network can be felt in other monuments beyond Walhalla. At the opening of the *Befreiungshalle* (Liberation Hall) in 1865, the choir sang: "See the symbol of Unity towering boldly to Heaven...Be united, German brothers!"²⁴ Though recorded to have

¹⁹ Macgregor, Neil "Germany: Memories of a Nation" p.68

²⁰ Macgregor, Neil "Germany: Memories of a Nation" p.156

²¹ Ibid

²² Macgregor, Neil "Germany: Memories of a Nation" p.165

²³ Barthes, 'Myth Today', in *A Barthes Reader* p.103

²⁴ BayHStA, MK 19012, S.11495, 2.8.1.4 MK 4/1-2: Gesamter Geschäftsbereich "Verlassenschaft Seiner Majestät des Königs Ludwig I "Ruhmeshalle und Walhalla etc." (1868-1870) p.134

been opened to rapturous applause, Walhalla was not universally accepted at its inauguration; the poet Heinrich Heine likened the building to “*a field of skulls.*”²⁵ Walhalla mirrors the drive by the German cultural elite to reform and entrench their mythical national identity at the heart of German culture during the nineteenth century.

Walhalla was not alone in codifying German cultural identity during this period. Much of what Walhalla sought to achieve (reduction of German history to cultural Myth, appropriation of European culture around German history) can also be found in the works of the Brothers Grimm. Professor Steffen Martus wrote extensively about how the Grimms sought to rediscover German culture “*in an international context*”, particularly one that highlighted the autarkic nature of German linguistic identity.²⁶ Just as Walhalla positioned itself within the mythical narrative as a place of German resistance, so did the Grimms’ works seek to represent the German cultural character in an unchanged, historical Myth. Will Vaughn concludes that the Grimms re-edited German narrative into a mythical narrative that, unlike its other European linguistic counterparts, could express the whole character and psyche of the German people.²⁷ However, unlike Crown Prince Ludwig, the Grimms’ cultural narrative came from the middle class, whom Jacob Zipes identifies as the vanguard of nineteenth century German political and cultural influence, particularly in constructing new institutions.²⁸ Barthes’ myth theory applies to both parties, as both appropriate the historical past in order to construct new mythical narratives. The use of the *Urvolk* and *Ursprache* (primeval ancestors and language) is prevalent in both networks. This can be seen in the name of the monument, itself a reference to the fabled home of the Norse gods, Valhalla. Around the hall of Walhalla, runs the pictorial narrative of Germany’s mythical nomadic ancestors, immobilized into a mythical narrative that led straight through to the Sack of Rome (AD.409). The Grimms also followed this romanticised

²⁵ Macgregor, Neil “*Germany: Memories of a Nation*” p.170

²⁶ Macgregor, Neil “*Germany: Memories of a Nation*” p.117

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ Zipes “*The Brothers Grimm*” p.55-56

mythical narrative, with Gabrielle Seitz to conclude that the Grimm's collected works played a political role in "*reactivating interest in in the customs, laws and norms that bound German people together.*"²⁹ These parallel narratives represent the omnipresent existence of Myth throughout nineteenth century German cultural identity, but also demonstrates the importance of Walhalla as an entry into this diverse historical context.

Walhalla stands as the prominent example of how Myth has been employed in the creation of nineteenth century German cultural identity. With its appropriated symbols and fantastical reimagining of historical events, it must be further studied to comprehend the methods that facilitate the creation of mythical narratives throughout German culture.

The importance of studying memorials within this era remains essential to understanding the diverse and local nature of nineteenth century German cultural identity. Macgregor argues, that the locality of German history and monuments-such as the Bavarian *Siegestor*-produces "*a composite of different, sometimes conflicting, local narratives.*"³⁰ This makes each monument a useful case study in understanding modern German cultural identity. With Walhalla, this is doubly so, as it attempts to do away with the locality of its history, developing an artificial, cultural identity. In the process, it develops a narrative at odds with the realities of German cultural identity. One that dictates unity and pan-nationalism, at odds with the historical narrative. Only Barthes' myth system can decipher the tectonic shifts that sought to re-shape German cultural identity. Even if these monuments are, as Berthold Riehl bluntly suggested, "*a coat of paint [and] a structure of yellow and rose stone...against death*"³¹, they remain useful case studies into understanding modern German cultural identity.

²⁹ Zipes "*The Brothers Grimm*" p.68

³⁰ Macgregor "*Germany: Memories of a Nation*" p.xxviii

³¹ BayHStA, MK 19012, S.11495, 2.8.1.4 MK 4/1-2: Gesamter Geschäftsbereich "*Verlassenschaft Seiner Majestät des Königs Ludwig I "Ruhmeshalle und Walhalla etc"*", record (1868-1870) p.150

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