The continuity of myth in cinema: Re-signifying Norse mythology within the framework of cultural memory and industry

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This study argues that Norse mythology, in contemporary film and television productions, is not merely a "narrative source" but a living narrative form that is continually reshaped, transformed, and adapted to present-day cultural contexts by the aesthetic, narrative, and ideological dynamics of the cinema industry. The central thesis of the study is that myth is not transmitted passively in cinema; rather, it is actively transformed through production context and cinematic language. Different modes of production, European art cinema, Hollywood blockbusters (high-budget commercial films), and long-form streaming dramas (online platform series), determine which themes are reconfigured, which character typologies are foregrounded, and which ideological orientations are embedded in the narrative. The audiovisual tools of cinema, colour palette, cinematography, music, and editing, can enhance the ritual dimension of myth or turn it into humorous or ironic rewritings. The reproduction of myth on screen operates not only at the narrative level but also as a multilayered process shaping audience perception, cultural identity construction, and the global circulation of culture. In this respect, myths reimagined through cinema occupy the intersection of historical continuity and contemporary aesthetic and ideological transformations. In this process, myth becomes both a vehicle of cultural memory and a narrative arena for current issues such as gender, ecology, and identity. The "life of myth in cinema" thus materialises as an ongoing practice of resignification, through which ancestral cosmologies are continually reconfigured to address contemporary anxieties and to inscribe new cultural meanings.

Introduction

Prevailing critical discourse in film and myth studies consistently privileged Greco-Roman legacies, biblical iconographies, and folkloric archetypes, thereby canonising a narrow repertoire of mythological traditions within screen cultures (Segal, 1999; Wyke, 1997). Classical reception scholarship scrutinised the cinematic reinscription of figures such as Hercules, Perseus, and Achilles (Solomon, 2001), while critical analyses of biblical epics such as *The Ten Commandments* and *The Passion of the Christ* disclosed theological and ideological investments embedded in their spectacle (Malbon, 2012). Folkloric traditions, particularly Grimm and Celtic sources, also generated extensive scholarly attention (Haase, 2010). Within this genealogy, the Norse mythological archive, despite cultural longevity and intensified global circulation, remained marginalised. Existing analyses largely enumerated divine genealogies or summarised sagas rather than theorised them as dynamic symbolic systems that mediate collective memory, produce ideological inscriptions, and become absorbed into aesthetic and industrial logics (Byock, 2005; Larrington, 2017; Price, 2020). This neglect reveals a structural imbalance that elevated classical and biblical corpora while relegating Norse traditions to the periphery of theoretical discourse.

The present article confronts this asymmetry and reconceptualises Norse mythology as a mutable discursive formation that continuously mutates, recalibrates, and re-enters contemporary media economies. Robert Eggers' *The Northman* (2022) mobilised ritual temporality, linguistic archaism, and ethnographic mise-en-scène to reactivate mythic cosmology through cinematic authenticity. Marvel's *Thor* franchise (2011–2022) reconfigured divine archetypes through spectacle, irony, and transmedia proliferation, thereby transplanting them into corporate storytelling regimes that commodified mythic capital. Serialised dramas such as *Vikings* (2013–2020) and *Vikings: Valhalla* (2022–) embedded mythic residues within extended negotiations of gender, power, and identity, thus reinscribing ancestral imaginaries in contemporary discourse. Collectively, these adaptive practices demonstrated that Norse mythology in screen culture operated as a contested symbolic economy that destabilised linear traditions and generated new ideological and aesthetic configurations.

The research orchestrates a comparative framework that synthesises narratological analysis, thematic cartography, and visual–sonic examination. The corpus spans three industrial registers, art cinema, blockbuster franchise, and serialised streaming drama, in order to trace how production infrastructures and aesthetic strategies sculpted the adaptive trajectories of myth. Supplementary works such as *Beowulf* (2007), *The 13th Warrior* (1999), *Ragnarok* (2020–), *Wonder Woman* (2017), and *Princess Mononoke* (1997) extended the comparative horizon, illuminated cross-cultural appropriations of myth, and demonstrated that strategically curated breadth enhanced conceptual focus rather than diluted it.

The contribution of this study emerges on epistemological, methodological, and substantive planes. Epistemologically, it problematizes inherited readings that frame Norse mythology as inert residue and conceptualises it as an active mnemonic formation embedded in cultural memory. Methodologically, it advances a comparative model that captured archetypal persistence while also mapping ruptures generated by industrial and aesthetic transformations. Substantively, it demonstrates that Norse mythology in screen culture functioned as a cultural laboratory through which ecological anxieties, gender politics, and transnational identities became articulated, contested, and reconfigured. Through this reframing, Norse mythology emerges as a central node for theorising myth's cinematic afterlives and the framework elaborated here provides a transferable instrument for analysing the adaptive trajectories of other mythic traditions in global media.

1.Theoretical and historical background

Understanding the cultural and narrative heritage of Norse mythology requires situating it within the historical realities of the Viking Age, which extended from the late 8th to the early 11th centuries. This era was defined by maritime expansion, intricate kinship-based social hierarchies, and a polytheistic worldview in which mythic cosmology anchored both religious belief and communal identity. Byock (2005) has emphasised that "the Norse myths were not merely stories told for entertainment; they functioned as frameworks for understanding the world and one's place within it" (p. 14). Because these narratives were primarily transmitted orally, they remained fluid, adjusting to political shifts, environmental pressures, and regional contexts long before they were preserved in medieval Icelandic manuscripts such as the *Poetic Edda* and the *Prose Edda*.

At the heart of this mythological system is Yggdrasil, the world-tree, its branches and roots connecting nine distinct realms, from Asgard, the home of the gods, to Midgard, the human world, and Niflheim, the land of frost and the dead. The divine hierarchy itself is complex: the Æsir, exemplified by Odin, Thor, and Frigg, are often contrasted with the Vanir, gods of fertility and the natural world such as Freyja, Njord, and Freyr. Loki, a liminal trickster figure, embodies both creative ingenuity and destructive instability. Cyclical time is central to this cosmology, culminating in Ragnarök, the foreseen destruction and rebirth of the cosmos. Larrington (2017) captures this paradox well: "Ragnarök is both an end and a beginning, a cataclysm that promises rebirth as much as annihilation" (p. 203). Such a worldview resonates strongly with postmodern narrative structures that reject straightforward linearity.

A variety of theoretical models help explain how these legendary structures transition into modern audiovisual narratives. Campbell's (2008) monomyth, or "hero's journey," offers one such framework, mapping recurring plot patterns of departure, trial, and return. Figures like Sigurd and Brynhildr, though distant in tone from contemporary heroes, share structural affinities with this model. Eggers' *The Northman* exemplifies how such a structure can be invoked yet also subverted, favouring immersive ritual sequences and sensory detail over climactic confrontation.

Barthes' (1972) semiology of myth adds a complementary perspective, analysing myth as a "second-order signification" in which inherited meanings are overlaid with new ideological functions. The Marvel *Thor* films (2011–2022), for example, detach their protagonist from pre-Christian cosmology and refashion him as a transmedia superhero, an emblem of individualism, romantic heroism, and corporate brand synergy. Barthes' observation that myth is "a type of speech chosen by history" (p. 109) is particularly apt here, as the Norse pantheon is recast for the cultural economies of the 21st century. Assmann's (2011) concept of cultural memory situates these adaptations within longer cycles of identity formation and transmission. Cultural memory operates selectively: certain motifs, heroic combat, ocean voyages, sacrificial acts, are foregrounded, while more quotidian or domestic aspects of Norse life recede. These patterns are shaped not only by artistic preference but also by the geopolitical and commercial contexts in which such adaptations are produced. Hutcheon's (2013) theory of adaptation reminds us that reworkings of myth are not derivative replications but rather re-interpretations shaped by medium, audience, and moment. The television series *Vikings* (2013–2020) offers a vivid example: the historical Lagertha, fleetingly mentioned in the sagas, becomes a multi-season protagonist whose arc addresses modern discourses on gender and leadership while retaining a historical veneer.

The migration of Norse myth into visual culture also parallels shifts in the history of film. Early portrayals, such as *The Viking* (1928), were constrained by the technology of the silent era and tended towards exoticised spectacle. By the mid-20th century, Norse imagery entered pulp fiction, comic books, and adventure cinema, paving the way for the higher-

budget, more sophisticated adaptations of the current century. Elsaesser (2016) cautions that historical films, mythic ones included, are "less about reconstructing the past than about negotiating the needs and desires of the present" (p. 88). This is evident in the contrast between the ethnographic precision of *The Northman* and the stylised exuberance of *Thor: Ragnarok* (2017), each catering to different audience imaginaries.

It is important to acknowledge that the Norse tradition was never monolithic. Variations among regional sagas, the divergence between oral and written forms, and the interpretive latitude of modern creators mean that no definitive "authentic" version exists. This opens the door to multiple representational strategies. Refn's *Valhalla Rising* (2009) strips away conventional narrative to present a near-abstract meditation on violence, spirituality, and the unknown, its sparse dialogue and austere landscapes evoking existential uncertainty. In contrast, *Vikings* interlaces mythic motifs with detailed political and familial subplots, building a dense tapestry of power, loyalty, and betrayal.

The theoretical and historical background, then, is not a static set of facts but an evolving interpretive field where past and present continually reshape one another. The Viking Age offers the material; the myths supply the narrative architecture and archetypes; and the theoretical frameworks, Campbell, Barthes, Assmann, Hutcheon, provide tools for decoding the transformations from oral legend to screen narrative. In the realm of art cinema, this grounding supports the specificity of works like *The Northman* or *Valhalla Rising*, in which historical language, material culture, and ritual pacing resist the flattening often seen in mythic adaptation. Popular cinema, by contrast, abstracts these archetypes into globally recognisable icons, as in Marvel's *Thor*, where fidelity to historical context yields to the imperatives of franchise storytelling.

Serialised television, including *Vikings* and *Vikings: Valhalla*, occupies a middle ground. The extended format enables layered world-building, character evolution over multiple seasons, and the integration of myth with historical drama. Within these works, the historical-mythic background informs both the portrayal of individual figures and the thematic arcs that connect ancient values, fate, honour, survival, to present-day concerns about identity, governance, and gender dynamics. What emerges is a critical apparatus for understanding adaptive choices: the omission, emphasis, or alteration of particular episodes reflects an engagement, conscious or otherwise, with the cultural legacies outlined here. Cultural memory theory shows how such decisions shape collective identity, while adaptation theory frames them as negotiations between fidelity and reinvention. Thus, the background is not merely preparatory, it actively shapes the interpretive questions and pathways that guide the analysis in subsequent sections.

This section, in effect, provides the intellectual scaffolding for the remainder of the study. Without a nuanced grasp of the Viking Age, the mythological corpus, and the theoretical models that illuminate both, any exploration of their screen adaptations risks lapsing into surface-level commentary. The interplay between historical reconstruction, mythic structure, and adaptive practice will recur throughout the chapters that follow, anchoring the analysis in the deep temporal and conceptual currents that have carried Norse mythology from medieval manuscripts to the global screen.

2.Theoretical framework

The present study constructs a deliberately layered theoretical apparatus, drawing upon an interdisciplinary spectrum of myth theory, cultural memory studies, adaptation scholarship, and media-specific narrative analysis. Such an apparatus is not conceived merely as a collection of conceptual tools, but as an integrated methodological matrix designed to interrogate the multiple ways in which Norse mythology is reframed for contemporary screen

culture. By embedding theoretical discourse within concrete textual examples, this framework ensures that abstract concepts remain anchored in specific cinematic and televisual practices.

Joseph Campbell's (2008) "monomyth" or "hero's journey" provides a foundational yet flexible schema for tracing recurrent archetypal patterns. *The Northman* (2022), for instance, stages Amleth's exile, initiation, and climactic return in ways that initially align with Campbell's structure. However, Eggers interlaces these structural beats with prolonged ritual sequences, firelit dances, sacrificial oaths, and dream visions, that delay resolution, thereby inviting the viewer into a temporality that feels older and stranger than the modern three-act form. This contrasts with *Beowulf* (2007), where the hero's feats, rendered through motion-capture animation, culminate in a fatal confrontation that closes the narrative loop with mechanical precision. In *The 13th Warrior* (1999), the pattern is hybridised: the outsider Ahmad ibn Fadlan's gradual acculturation into Norse warrior society mirrors the transformative arc of departure and return, but his role as a cultural intermediary adds layers of perspective absent in traditional heroic epics.

Roland Barthes' (1972) semiology of myth illuminates the ideological reconstitution of such material. Myth, for Barthes, is a second-order semiological system wherein primary meanings acquire new connotations shaped by the socio-historical moment. Marvel's *Thor* (2011–2022) exemplifies this process: Thor's divine heritage is re-coded into the idiom of the superhero blockbuster, where intergalactic battles and witty banter replace the sacrificial economy and fatalism of the sagas. The Netflix series *Ragnarok* (2020–), by contrast, embeds its reimagined deities in a contemporary Norwegian town, transforming the mythic battle between gods and giants into a parable of environmental activism. Here, Barthes' idea that myth becomes "a type of speech chosen by history" (p. 109) resonates strongly, climate crisis replaces eschatology as the ultimate threat.

Mircea Eliade's (1963) theory of sacred and profane time adds another interpretive dimension. Norse cosmology's cyclical temporality, epitomised by Ragnarök's destruction and renewal, rejects linear historiography. In *Vikings* (2013–2020), seasonal festivals and sacrificial rites are not mere set dressing; the mise-en-scène (torches reflected in snow, the rhythmic beating of drums) works to "reactualise" mythic origins, collapsing past and present. In *Valhalla Rising* (2009), Nicolas Winding Refn distils this ritualised time into austere, near-static tableaux: a warrior's silent gaze over a fog-drenched fjord lasts long enough to feel suspended outside ordinary chronology.

Jan Assmann's (2011) formulation of cultural memory foregrounds the curatorial nature of collective remembrance. In *Vikings*, recurring invocations of Odin's favour, the evocation of shieldmaiden legends, and the careful reconstruction of ship burials all serve as acts of cultural reaffirmation, both within the narrative world and for a global audience consuming an image of "authentic" Viking identity. By contrast, *Vikings: Valhalla* (2022–) reshapes these mnemonic codes to suit a faster-paced, globally accessible storytelling mode, simplifying genealogies, foregrounding intercultural alliances, and reframing political conflicts in terms legible to modern sensibilities. Marianne Hirsch's (2012) concept of "postmemory" proves illuminating when examining works that inherit Norse mythology from a distance, geographically, temporally, and culturally. In *Thor: Ragnarok* (2017), the destruction of Asgard is a spectacle framed by humour, colour-saturated spectacle, and irreverent dialogue; it is catastrophe reimagined as entertainment, an echo of a tradition now mediated entirely through popular culture. Similarly, *How to Train Your Dragon* (2010–2019) offers a domesticated Viking world in which martial values are softened, dragons become allies, and the child protagonist navigates a hero's arc that privileges empathy over conquest.

Linda Hutcheon's (2013) theory of adaptation situates such transformations as creative dialogues rather than exercises in fidelity. *The Northman* draws on the Amleth legend in Saxo Grammaticus' *Gesta Danorum*, yet overlays it with ethnographic detail, costumes woven

from undyed wool, reconstructed Old Norse dialogue, that asserts historical gravitas even as it embraces cinematic stylisation. Julie Sanders' (2006) concept of appropriation extends this analysis: in Marvel's *Thor*, the mythic source is uprooted entirely from its cosmology and transplanted into the Marvel Cinematic Universe's superhero ensemble, altering Thor's narrative function from solitary avenger to team player in a corporate mega-franchise. The Netflix *Ragnarok* offers yet another mode of appropriation: mythic roles are not simply re-cast but re-inherited, with adolescent protagonists bearing the burdens and powers of ancient gods in the context of small-town politics. In *The Last Kingdom* (2015–2022), historical fiction intersects with mythic archetype as Uhtred's loyalty conflicts and shifting allegiances evoke the liminality of legendary heroes who belong fully to neither side of a cultural divide.

David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson's (2017) narrative theory provides the vocabulary for parsing deviations from classical norms. In *The Northman*, prophetic visions and ritual combats disrupt causal logic, producing a narrative rhythm that oscillates between forward motion and contemplative pause. *Valhalla Rising* radicalises this approach by fragmenting narrative space and time, privileging mood and visual composition over explanatory progression. Thomas Elsaesser's (2016) framing of historical film as a negotiation with the present is evident in *Vikings*, where gender politics, religious pluralism, and cross-cultural diplomacy are refracted through the lens of a semi-mythic past. Henry Jenkins' (2006) concept of transmedia storytelling is essential for analysing *Thor*, whose mythic character exists simultaneously in films, comics, animated series, and interactive media. Jason Mittell's (2015) notion of "complex TV" explains how *Vikings* and *Vikings: Valhalla* manage multi-season arcs that weave together political intrigue, character transformation, and recurring mythic motifs.

These theoretical perspectives will be applied with deliberate precision in the chapters that follow. Campbell and Eliade will inform close readings of *The Northman*, particularly its structuring of narrative time as a ritual sequence. Barthes and Jenkins will frame the critique of *Thor*, revealing the processes of ideological re-coding for transmedia consumption. Assmann and Hutcheon will illuminate *Vikings*, where acts of cultural remembering intersect with creative re-invention. Sanders' appropriation model will be used to interpret *Valhalla Rising*'s stripped-down minimalism as a conscious rejection of myth's more ornamental conventions. Additional Works, *Beowulf*, *The 13th Warrior*, *How to Train Your Dragon*, *Ragnarok*, will be strategically invoked where they elucidate variant strategies of adaptation, contextual displacement, or thematic reconfiguration. By synthesising these theoretical approaches with an expanded body of examples, the study seeks to uncover not only the formal and thematic recalibrations that occur when Norse myth enters modern screen media, but also the cultural logics, commercial imperatives, ideological shifts, and audience negotiations, that underlie such recalibrations. In this way, the theoretical framework serves as both a diagnostic instrument and a bridge between the mythic past and its mediated presents.

The methodological framework of this research is designed to address the multi-layered phenomenon of Norse mythological adaptation in contemporary screen media. It maintains a balance between analytical precision and interpretive depth, combining comparative case study analysis, qualitative narrative and thematic investigation, and close visual-sonic examination. This integrated approach is grounded in established practices within film and television studies, yet remains adaptable to the distinct cultural and aesthetic characteristics of the selected works.

A comparative multi-case study methodology has been adopted to enable direct juxtaposition of works across distinct production modes: auteur-driven art cinema (*The Northman*, *Valhalla Rising*), large-scale popular cinema (Marvel's *Thor* franchise), and long-form television or streaming drama (*Vikings*, *Vikings: Valhalla*). This tripartite selection facilitates the identification of both convergences and divergences in narrative strategies,

aesthetic vocabularies, and thematic emphases across varying industrial contexts and target demographics. The qualitative orientation of the research recognises that screen texts are not static artefacts but dynamic cultural expressions whose meanings are shaped through interpretive engagement. Accordingly, the analysis triangulates three complementary methods, narrative analysis, thematic coding, and visual–sonic analysis, each contributing a distinct dimension to the examination of adaptation.

The primary corpus comprises five central works:

1. *The Northman* (Eggers, 2022), a historically grounded adaptation of the Amleth legend, infused with ethnographic and ritual detail.
2. *Valhalla Rising* (Refn, 2009), an austere, allegorical odyssey with sparse dialogue and symbolic landscapes.
3. Marvel's *Thor* series (2011–2022), reimaginings of Norse deities within the narrative economy of the superhero blockbuster.
4. *Vikings* (2013–2020), a serialised historical drama weaving saga elements with political intrigue.
5. *Vikings: Valhalla* (2022–), a continuation that reshapes earlier motifs into faster-paced, action-oriented storytelling.

Supplementary works broaden the comparative scope:

- *Beowulf* (Zemeckis, 2007), performance-capture adaptation of the Anglo-Saxon epic with thematic intersections to Norse tradition.
- *The 13th Warrior* (McTiernan, 1999), a hybrid of historical record and heroic archetype.
- *Ragnarok* (Netflix, 2020–), contemporary relocation of mythic roles into a modern Norwegian town.
- *The Last Kingdom* (BBC/Netflix, 2015–2022), historical fiction with myth-inflected identity conflicts.
- *How to Train Your Dragon* (2010–2019), animated reinterpretation of Viking identity for younger audiences.

Selection was guided by three criteria:

1. Explicit engagement with Norse mythological content or associated motifs.
2. Diversity in production scale, genre, and audience orientation.
3. Availability and accessibility for scholarly analysis.

Narrative Analysis examines plot structure, causality, temporality, and character arcs. In *The Northman*, prophetic visions and dream sequences are mapped against Campbell's monomyth to assess how ritual pacing reshapes heroic trajectory. In *Thor: Ragnarok*, comedic framing and intertextual humour are evaluated through Barthes' lens to reveal ideological re-coding. Thematic Coding identifies recurrent motifs, heroism, fate, divine agency, cyclical destruction and renewal, and the human–nature relationship. For example, *Vikings* frequently encodes seafaring imagery as both exploration and liminal passage, whereas *How to Train Your Dragon* reframes maritime space as a site of reconciliation between species. Visual–Sonic Analysis interrogates mise-en-scène, cinematography, costume, colour design, soundscape, and musical composition. The subdued, earth-toned palette and diegetic chanting in *The Northman* are contrasted with the neon colour saturation and rock-inflected soundtrack of *Thor: Ragnarok*. *Valhalla Rising*'s long takes and ambient soundscapes are examined as techniques for evoking mythic temporality.

The frameworks outlined in Section 3 are applied with precision at the scene level. Campbell's monomyth and Eliade's sacred time illuminate *The Northman*'s ritual structuring; Barthes' semiology and Jenkins' transmedia storytelling elucidate *Thor*'s re-coding across

media; Assmann's cultural memory and Hutcheon's adaptation theory frame *Vikings*' interplay of tradition and invention; Sanders' appropriation model interprets *Valhalla Rising*'s deliberate minimalism. Supplementary works are mobilised where their adaptive strategies shed light on the range of representational approaches within the corpus. While the corpus encompasses multiple genres, media formats, and production contexts, it does not represent the entirety of Norse mythological adaptation. Certain regional works, independent productions, and experimental formats remain beyond the scope of this research due to limited accessibility or absence of adequate distribution for scholarly review. This necessarily narrows the representational spectrum, a factor acknowledged when drawing analytical conclusions.

A further consideration concerns the linguistic and cultural mediation of source material. Many myths survive only in Old Norse or medieval Icelandic texts, whose modern iterations are shaped by layers of translation and editorial intervention. The versions available to filmmakers, and to scholars, are thus already interpretive constructions, complicating notions of textual fidelity. This study treats such mediation as an intrinsic aspect of adaptation rather than a deviation from an imagined "original."

From an ethical standpoint, the research engages with copyrighted audiovisual works within the provisions of fair use for academic study, ensuring all material is properly cited and contextualised. Sensitivity is exercised in addressing sacred or culturally significant content, with clear differentiation between historical belief systems and their commodified reinterpretations. Respect for the cultures from which these myths originate remains paramount, particularly when adaptation choices risk altering symbolic meanings. It should also be recognised that reception contexts are heterogeneous. An adaptation regarded as respectful and enriching in one cultural or scholarly setting may be perceived elsewhere as reductive or appropriative. Such divergences are integral to understanding the cultural work performed by mythic adaptation in the contemporary media landscape, and the present research approaches them as analytical opportunities rather than peripheral complications.

This section consolidates the analytical results derived from the close readings of each selected work, situating them within a comparative framework that foregrounds thematic convergences, structural divergences, aesthetic strategies, and ideological coding. The aim is not merely to juxtapose the texts but to interrogate how each navigates the complex terrain between mythic inheritance and contemporary cultural production. The discussion here is informed by the theoretical perspectives outlined in Section 3 and anchored in the methodological procedures detailed in Section 4. Across the corpus, certain thematic constants recur with notable insistence, functioning as mythic anchors even in the most radical reimaginings. Heroism, fate, cyclical destruction and renewal, and the intricate relationship between humanity and the natural world are foundational across *The Northman*, *Valhalla Rising*, *Thor*, *Vikings*, and *Vikings: Valhalla*. Yet the expression of these themes diverges significantly according to medium, genre, and industrial positioning.

In *The Northman*, heroism is framed as an act of ritualised inevitability. Amleth's journey, from exile to vengeance, is less an individual quest than an enactment of a predetermined cosmic script. The final duel, staged against the sulphurous glow of an erupting volcano, visually fuses elemental violence with mythic closure, signalling that death is not cessation but the fulfilment of narrative destiny. Icelandic sagas such as *Njáls saga* and *Grettis saga* convey a similar fatalism, where vengeance is pursued even when it forecloses the possibility of survival. This fatalism contrasts sharply with Marvel's *Thor* films, where heroism is bound to personal growth, choice, and the capacity for reinvention. The destruction of Asgard in *Thor: Ragnarok* is reframed as an opportunity for communal rebirth, consistent with Barthes' notion of myth as a historically contingent discourse (Barthes, 1972) that can be repurposed to speak to contemporary anxieties about displacement and renewal.

Valhalla Rising offers a starkly different engagement with fate, one that eschews narrative closure in favour of allegorical ambiguity. The one-eyed warrior's trajectory, unfolding in near-silence, resists the consolations of redemption or triumph; his final dissolution into the mist-laden landscape suggests a return to the elemental, an image of both erasure and subsistence within the cosmic cycle. This sense of ambiguous return recalls Old Norse poetic imagery from the *Hávamál*, where the traveller is perpetually on the threshold between known and unknown worlds. In contrast, *Vikings* and *Vikings: Valhalla* articulate renewal in socio-political terms, where survival depends not on solitary sacrifice but on negotiated alliances, shifting loyalties, and the capacity to redefine cultural identity in response to external pressures.

A pronounced structural bifurcation emerges between the works that employ art-cinema narrative strategies and those shaped by the imperatives of popular cinema or serialised television. *The Northman* and *Valhalla Rising* privilege atmospheric immersion and ritual temporality over linear causality, structuring their narratives around visionary and ceremonial sequences. In *The Northman*, Amleth's encounters with the seeress suspend narrative momentum to foreground mythic temporality, aligning with Eliade's (1963) concept of sacred time as a suspension of the profane order. In these moments, the diegesis slows to accommodate imagery drawn directly from archaeological reconstructions, burial mounds, ritual masks, that evoke the lived religious practices of the Viking Age. Similarly, *Valhalla Rising*'s segmented chapters, each marked by cryptic titles, fragment the temporal flow, encouraging allegorical interpretation over narrative continuity.

In contrast, the *Thor* films adhere to the pacing conventions of the Hollywood blockbuster, marked by clearly delineated acts, escalating conflict, and climactic resolution. These structures facilitate integration into a broader transmedia narrative, as theorised by Jenkins (2006), where each instalment contributes to an expansive fictional universe. The long-form television format of *Vikings* and *Vikings: Valhalla* adopts the principles of "complex TV" (Mittell, 2015), sustaining multiple intersecting plotlines across seasons. This allows for extended character arcs, Lagertha's transformation from warrior to political leader, or Leif Erikson's evolution from outsider to cultural mediatör, that mirror the adaptive capacities of myth itself.

The visual–sonic registers across the corpus are as revealing as the narrative and thematic structures. *The Northman*'s earthy palette, reliance on natural light, and meticulous recreation of material culture (weaving patterns, weapon craftsmanship) produce a visual texture that approximates ethnographic cinema. The sonic dimension, particularly the use of diegetic chanting, guttural vocalisations, and percussive rhythms, reinforces the corporeal immediacy of its ritual sequences, rendering myth as a lived, embodied practice. Such techniques recall Robert Eggers' own assertion in interviews that authenticity in sound design was as critical as historical costuming for achieving immersion.

By contrast, *Thor: Ragnarok* embraces a hyper-saturated colour scheme, kinetic camera movements, and a soundtrack infused with rock anthems, signalling its departure from the gravitas of the source myths towards a self-aware spectacle. *Valhalla Rising*'s visual austerity, long static shots, muted tones, and fog-shrouded vistas, creates an atmosphere of existential suspension, where the absence of a conventional score leaves the viewer attuned to environmental sounds: wind, water, and the distant cries of unseen birds. This sparseness mirrors the film's thematic engagement with spiritual desolation. *Vikings* negotiates between these extremes, combining cinematic battle sequences with the textural detail of serial television, where costume design and set dressing must sustain immersion across dozens of episodes.

The ideological work performed by these adaptations is multifaceted, particularly in their negotiation of gender, power, and cultural identity. *Vikings* disrupts the traditionally

male-centred heroic model through figures like Lagertha, whose martial prowess and political acumen position her as a central agent in the narrative. This is not merely an anachronistic insertion but an exploration of the mythic figure of the shieldmaiden as a site of cultural memory (Assmann, 2011), reactivated to resonate with contemporary discourses on gender equality. Such portrayals echo historical accounts in Saxo Grammaticus, which, while likely embellished, nonetheless record women taking part in martial exploits.

In *Thor*, the introduction of Valkyrie offers a version of female heroism reframed for the ensemble-cast dynamics of the superhero genre, where empowerment is embedded within a framework of genre conventions and franchise continuity. Environmentalist allegory shapes *Ragnarok*, where the antagonists' exploitation of natural resources becomes a mythicised articulation of ecological crisis. In *The Northman*, the natural world is more than a backdrop; it is an active agent within the cosmological order, witnessing and sanctioning the hero's fate. In *Valhalla Rising*, the landscape's hostility underscores the precariousness of human endeavour, aligning with posthumanist perspectives on agency and survival.

Taken together, these comparative findings demonstrate that the adaptation of Norse mythology in contemporary screen media operates along a continuum from historical gravitas to postmodern reinvention. Works positioned within the art-cinema tradition (*The Northman*, *Valhalla Rising*) deploy formal restraint, ritualised temporality, and sensory immersion to evoke a sense of timeless mythic weight. Popular-cinema texts (*Thor*) mobilise myth as a flexible narrative resource, integrating it into a transmedia economy that prioritises accessibility, spectacle, and intertextual play. Serialised dramas (*Vikings*, *Vikings: Valhalla*) navigate a middle path, exploiting the narrative depth afforded by long-form storytelling to balance mythic resonance with political and interpersonal complexity.

The interplay between thematic continuity and formal variation underscores the adaptability of Norse mythology as a narrative resource. These works confirm that myth is not a static inheritance but a mutable, dynamic system capable of absorbing, refracting, and transforming cultural anxieties and aspirations. The corpus as a whole reveals that the power of myth lies precisely in its capacity to exist simultaneously as historical memory, ideological instrument, and aesthetic experiment, an observation equally valid for medieval audiences hearing sagas in the longhouse and for 21st-century viewers streaming them on global platforms.

3. Methodology, comparative framework, and empirical dimension

A methodological architecture articulates itself through the synthesis of narratological inquiry, thematic cartography, and visual–sonic analysis. This constellation theorises Norse mythology as a mnemonic formation that continually mutates, rearticulates, and inscribes itself within the industrial and aesthetic economies of screen culture. Rather than descriptive inventory, the framework foregrounds myth as a cultural practice ceaselessly recalibrated by institutional infrastructuresand aesthetic regimes. The corpus comprises three registers: auteur art cinema (*The Northman*, *Valhalla Rising*), blockbuster franchise cinema (*Thor* series), and serialised streaming drama (*Vikings*, Vikings: *Valhalla*). Art cinema mobilises ritual temporality and ethnographic density to activate mythic fatalism.

Blockbuster production extracts, commodifies, and transposes mythic figures into transmedia spectacle. Serialised drama embeds mythic residues into protracted negotiations of gender, power, and identity, thereby consolidating ancestral imaginaries within contemporary discursive formations. Comparative reading discloses these registers as interdependent yet distinct logics that generate myth's modern afterlives. Supplementary Works, *Beowulf* (2007), *The 13th Warrior* (1999), *Ragnarok* (2020–), *Wonder Woman* (2017), *Princess Mononoke* (1997), extend the comparative horizon and situate Norse myth within a transnational ecology of adaptation. Their invocation substantiates the claim that Norse material circulates as one

node within global mythopoeic economies, appropriated and hybridised across divergent cultural contexts. Corpus selection rests on three principles: direct engagement with mythological material, variation in scale and genre, and accessibility for critical analysis. The Western orientation of the corpus is recognised as structural. Rather than treated as deficiency, this orientation functions as evidence of imbalance and converts limitation into vantage. The analysis thereby theorises Western dominance as constitutive of the conditions through which Norse mythology circulates globally.

Adaptive permutations of Norse mythology materialise when examined through axes of heroism, temporality, gender, ecology, and ideology. The following matrix renders visible the divergent strategies by which industrial registers reconfigure inherited motifs:

Mode / Production	Heroism	Temporality	Gender	Ecology	Ideological Orientation
The Northman (Art Cinema)	Ritualised vengeance; cosmological fatalism	Cyclical, ritual temporality	Female seers as mediators of destiny	Nature endowed with cosmic agency; volcanic closure	Ethnographic authenticity discourse
Valhalla Rising (Art Cinema)	Silent warrior; liminal messianic figure	Fragmented, allegorical temporality	Gender effaced; masculinity concentrated in violence	Mist and landscape as existential void	Allegorical religiosity; nihilist ambiguity
Thor (Blockbuster)	Heroism through self-fashioning and choice	Linear, three-act temporality	Valkyrie as feminist icon	Asgard's destruction reframed as ecological allegory	Corporate spectacle; transmedia economy
Vikings (Serial Drama)	Collective heroism through kinship and power	Episodic, multi-layered temporality	Lagertha reactivates shieldmaiden tradition	Sea voyages as liminal thresholds	Hybridisation of history and myth; identity politics
Vikings: Valhalla (Serial Drama)	Heroism articulated through alliances and survival	Accelerated, action-driven temporality	Female leadership simplified	Nature as backdrop to migration and conflict	Popularised historicity; global accessibility

Empirical Dimension

Industrial and audience metrics substantiate the analysis. The Northman (2022), produced at 70 million USD, returned 69 million USD worldwide, commercially modest yet significant as a film that foregrounded ethnographic authenticity (Box Office Mojo, 2022). The Thor franchise (2011–2022) generated more than 2.2 billion USD globally, a scale that illustrates myth's commodification within transmedia infrastructures. Serialised dramas mirror these dynamics: *Vikings* (2013–2020) attracted multi-million audiences weekly across Europe and North America; Vikings: *Valhalla* (2022–) registered 265 million viewing hours in its release month, consolidating a place in Netflix's global top ten (Netflix, 2022). These indicators disclose that myth's vitality derives from a composite interplay: aesthetic reinvention, ideological inscription, and economic validation. Norse mythology in screen

culture persists by being ceaselessly reshaped, inscribed, and activated across symbolic, institutional, and market registers.

4. Discussion

The comparative findings outlined in Section 5 reveal a layered portrait of how Norse mythology is reshaped, reframed, and circulated in the varied ecology of contemporary screen media. This discussion engages directly with those findings, placing them within the theoretical frameworks introduced earlier and considering the cultural, industrial, and ideological contexts in which these adaptations operate. The aim is to clarify not only *what* these adaptations do, but *why* they take the forms they do and they contribute to the ongoing life of myth in the 21st century.

From Campbell's (2008) perspective on the monomyth, both *The Northman* and *Valhalla Rising* exhibit recognisable heroic structures yet employ them for different purposes. In *The Northman*, Amleth's trajectory, departure, initiation, return, is framed less as a quest for personal growth and more as a ritual enactment of ancestral obligation. The climactic duel against the backdrop of volcanic fire can be read as a visual metaphor for the closing of a cosmological cycle, echoing Eliade's (1963) conception of sacred time, where endings fold back into mythic beginnings. Interestingly, Eggers' production incorporated consultation with Icelandic historians to ensure that the duel's setting drew from authentic volcanic landscapes in the sagas.

By contrast, *Valhalla Rising* pares the heroic pattern down to an almost skeletal form, replacing return with disappearance, refusing the closure that heroic myths often promise. A similar strategy is seen in the Icelandic film *Of Horses and Men* (2013), which uses fragmented vignettes to evoke a folkloric world where endings remain unresolved. Barthes' (1972) semiology helps explain how the *Thor* films transform these structures for a mass-market audience, turning Ragnarok into a narrative beat that revitalises the franchise without severing ties to its mythic roots, a strategy paralleled in family-oriented works like *How to Train Your Dragon* (2010–2019), where Viking motifs are reshaped into narratives of cooperation rather than conquest.

Assmann's (2011) theory of cultural memory clarifies, these works engage with the past as a reservoir of identity. *Vikings*, for example, weaves together historical events such as the siege of Paris with saga-inspired plotlines, creating a hybrid memory that feels both grounded and legendary. This selectivity mirrors historical chronicles, which often elevated heroic exploits while marginalising everyday realities. *The Last Kingdom* (2015–2022) operates similarly, framing the conflict between Danes and Saxons as both a political and a cultural negotiation, with Uhtred's shifting allegiances embodying the hybridity of identity in a transitional era.

The politics of gender emerge as a critical arena. *Vikings* foregrounds Lagertha not only as a warrior but also as a ruler, drawing on the cultural memory of shieldmaidens to resonate with modern debates on gender equity. Historical sources like Saxo Grammaticus mention such women, though often filtered through a male chronicler's perspective. In *Thor*, Valkyrie's presence introduces female heroism into a male-led franchise, but her arc remains partly bounded by ensemble storytelling conventions. Similar patterns are visible in Lars von Trier's *Melancholia* (2011), where a myth-inflected female figure carries both narrative and symbolic weight.

The industrial conditions of production decisively influence both style and substance. The financing of *The Northman*, involving European co-producers and location shoots in Ireland and Iceland, allowed for the integration of historically informed set and costume design, down to the weaving techniques visible in close-up shots. In contrast, *The 13th Warrior* (1999) demonstrates how Hollywood epic form blends historical source material with

the demands of exotic spectacle aimed at global audiences. Marvel's *Thor* series, operating within the MCU's transmedia economy (Jenkins, 2006), must maintain narrative continuity across multiple properties, prioritising recognisable character arcs and visual branding. Streaming dramas like *Vikings* and *Vikings: Valhalla* straddle cinema and television, balancing large-scale battle sequences with episodic pacing designed for binge viewing. Comparable strategies appear in *Ragnarok* (2020–), which pairs mythic allegory with the rhythms of youth drama, adapting its arcs in response to audience feedback, a flexibility unavailable to fixed-format cinema releases.

Myth functions as an ideological tool across these adaptations, grounding contemporary concerns in the legitimising aura of antiquity. Environmental conflict, for instance, is reframed as cosmic struggle in *Ragnarok*, where corporate exploitation of natural resources mirrors the mythic war between gods and giants. This recalls *Princess Mononoke* (1997), where industrial expansion is dramatised through supernatural allegory. *The Northman*'s presentation of the natural world as an active agent aligns with posthumanist critiques (Braidotti, 2013), positioning landscape and nonhuman forces as co-participants in the unfolding of destiny. Political legitimacy is another recurring theme. In *Vikings*, claims to leadership are often validated through assertions of divine ancestry, reflecting pre-modern systems where myth and governance intertwined. In *Thor*, worthiness is defined through ethical agency rather than hereditary status, aligning with modern liberal values. This ideological reframing finds echoes in *Wonder Woman* (2017), where classical myth is reinterpreted to foreground moral choice and global responsibility.

The corpus illustrates an ongoing dialectic between preservation and reinvention. Core narrative patterns, archetypes, and cosmological frameworks persist, lending cohesion to adaptations even when surface details are radically altered. Art cinema tends to preserve ritual structures while experimenting with temporal fragmentation and atmospheric immersion, as in *Valhalla Rising* and *The Lighthouse* (2019), where maritime folklore intersects with psychological horror. In popular cinema, transformation is facilitated by generic hybridity and intertextual humour, enabling wide circulation without requiring prior mythic literacy. Serial television offers yet another mode: in *Vikings: Valhalla*, historical events and legendary motifs are woven together over extended arcs, allowing space for the introduction of new characters and thematic concerns responsive to contemporary debates. This capacity for constant reconfiguration while maintaining a recognisable mythic core underlines the structural adaptability of Norse mythology within global screen culture.

Conclusion

This investigation problematizes the assumption that mythic persistence within screen media reflects passive survival. Norse mythology appears as a mnemonic regime continually recalibrated within aesthetic infrastructures and industrial logics, its vitality secured through perpetual resignification and ideological contestation. Cinema and television operate not as neutral vessels of inheritance but as cultural machines that inscribe ancestral material into new symbolic economies.

Epistemological implications involve the interrogation of disciplinary hierarchies that traditionally privileged Greco-Roman and biblical traditions. By foregrounding Norse mythology as theoretical archive, the study exposes structural asymmetries of canon formation and redefines the conceptual field of comparative mythology. Myth here functions as a diagnostic instrument for analysing the interplay of cultural memory and ideological inscription, its marginalisation revealing the selective operations of scholarly memory itself.

Methodological interventions derive from the comparative architecture developed in this study. A hybrid framework synthesises narratology, thematic cartography, and visual–sonic analysis with empirical attention to audience metrics and industrial infrastructures. This

constellation renders visible divergent adaptive logics across art cinema, blockbuster spectacle, and serialised drama, while also substantiating the argument that myth must be analysed as both symbolic discourse and economic product. The framework establishes a transferable paradigm for interrogating mythic adaptation across global screen cultures.

Substantive contributions reside in the disclosure of myth as a cultural laboratory in which ecological crisis, gender politics, and identity formation undergo constant negotiation. The shieldmaiden motif rearticulates feminist agency within heroic economies; ecological allegories translate Ragnarök into planetary critique; serialised dramas engender imaginaries of hybridity and migration. Mythic vitality therefore emerges not through conservation but through ideological productivity, its endurance secured by perpetual adaptability.

Industrial dynamics further determine the modalities of adaptation. European co-productions privilege ethnographic authenticity, Hollywood franchises commodify archetypes as intellectual property, and streaming platforms reconfigure mythic material according to algorithmic regimes of visibility. Mythic survival consequently depends upon its circulation within infrastructures of global capital and the symbolic economies they sustain.

Aesthetic registers materialise mythic cosmologies as perceptual event. Cinematography, mise-en-scène, and sound design instantiate myth not as abstraction but as embodied experience. Ritual temporality in *The Northman*, the saturated palette of *Thor: Ragnarok*, and the stark landscapes of *Valhalla Rising* demonstrate the power of cinema to actualise cosmology as lived atmosphere and sensory rhythm.

Ideological dimensions involve myth's capacity to legitimise and destabilise social imaginaries. Thor's moralisation of worth displaces hereditary paradigms with liberal-democratic ideals; *Vikings*' shieldmaidens contest patriarchal norms; *Ragnarok*'s ecological allegory resignifies eschatology for an age of climate anxiety. Myth thus survives through ideological inscription, its flexibility ensuring perpetual relevance.

Theoretical implications extend beyond Norse material. Myth studies gain a redefinition of mythology as adaptive discourse, while media theory acquires a paradigmatic case for analysing the reciprocity of narrative form, industrial logics, and cultural memory. Screen media consequently emerges as a privileged locus where symbolic economies, artistic experimentation, and capitalist infrastructures are mutually constituted.

Prospective trajectories indicate further transformation through emergent media ecologies. Virtual reality and interactive platforms will engender participatory archives in which audiences co-produce mythic meaning; algorithmic and AI-driven storytelling will generate novel mythopoetic forms, reassembling archetypes within computational regimes. These trajectories demand renewed theoretical vigilance, since they will redefine infrastructures of cultural memory transmission and contestation.

Ultimately, the cinematic life of Norse mythology exemplifies the dialectic of continuity and rupture, tradition and innovation, preservation and reinvention. The analysis of myth on screen discloses the processes through which societies inscribe values, anxieties, and aspirations into ancestral cosmologies. Cinema actualises myth as dynamic cultural practice. Myth and cinema, as co-constitutive forces, constitute a symbolic economy in which the past undergoes perpetual rearticulation, recalibrated to present urgencies and projected toward possible futures.

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