

## Ludwig Revisited

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A personal reflection on Visconti's film *Ludwig*, reissued in a 4½-hour version, and on the king's relationship with Wagner



The Venus grotto at Linderhof, the ‘visual peak’ of Visconti’s film

I remember seeing Luchino Visconti’s *Ludwig* when it was first released in the US in 1973. Helmut Berger’s Ludwig seemed over the top. Trevor Howard, in a brief cameo, at least looked like Wagner. As with any Visconti film, the scenery was luxurious – it was the dominant attribute.

In 1980 – four years after Visconti’s death – the original negative of *Ludwig* was purchased at an auction, then restored under the supervision of the original script supervisor. This is how it became generally known that Visconti had shot a film more than four hours long. The American version I saw was 137 minutes: barely half the movie.

Last June, I encountered the 'original' 264-minute version in a proper theatre with an excellent sound system when it was screened for a full week by New York City's Film Society of Lincoln Center. The same cut is now available from Arrow Academy on DVD and Blu-ray on four discs. Whether this mega-film (which does not permit an intermission) is precisely what Visconti had in mind I cannot say. But I am certain that it is a memorable achievement, a 'Wagnerian' film of the first rank – and not merely because it narrates a famous chapter from Wagner's life.

The Ludwig/Wagner story is familiar as a cartoon. King Ludwig II of Bavaria built expensive fairy-tale castles no one wanted. And he squandered a fortune supporting Richard Wagner, who opportunistically played him for the fool he was. He grew fat and ugly, crazier and crazier, and finally drowned himself in a lake.

Visconti's Ludwig is no cartoon. He is an idealist, an aesthete, unsuited to reign. He is made to suppress his homosexuality. His appreciation of Wagner's greatness is ridiculed and misunderstood. He detests the pomp of the court and resists military en-



The 20-year-old Ludwig II in Bavarian general's uniform and coronation robe. Ferdinand von Piloty, 1865

tanglements others regard as noble and patriotic. In this compassionate Visconti portrait, miraculously actualised by Berger, the question of whether Ludwig is 'mad' becomes moot. Chapter by relentless chapter, Ludwig descends into a condition of dissolute nihilism as a necessary consequence of passions and convictions he will not and cannot subdue. The triumph of this reading is that it's not conditioned by unwanted royal duties; Visconti is reflecting on contradictions inherent in the human condition: an incessant Wagner theme. He has discovered in Ludwig a true embodiment of the Wagnerian pariah; he has transformed Ludwig's story into a veritable homage to Wagner. The charged psychological/existential topic, the glacial pacing (the opening coronation sequence lasts fully 15 minutes), the luxuriance and amplitude – all this makes *Ludwig* a Wagnerian achievement of consequence.

The nub of Visconti's argument comes in a scene with Ludwig's most loyal retainer: Durkheim (Helmut Griem), who – dusty and bedraggled in his soldier's uniform



Helmut Berger as Ludwig II in Visconti's 1972 film

– announces that Austria (allied with Bavaria) has lost the Austro-Prussian War. 'I hate lies!' Ludwig exclaims. 'I want to live in truth.' This (in part) is Durkheim's response:

You are mistaken if you think you can find happiness outside the rules and duties of man. Those who love life cannot afford to search for the unreachable [...]. This is true even for a monarch, because the great power that a monarch has is limited by the boundaries of the society of which he is part. Who could ever be able to follow him outside those boundaries? [...] The only ones following [you] will be those who see freedom as a search for pleasure beyond any moral boundary. It takes a lot of courage to accept mediocrity for somebody who is pursuing sublime ideals beyond this world. But it is the only way to be saved from a terrible loneliness.

In the wake of this exchange, Ludwig resolves to marry his cousin Duchess Sophie. But he discovers he cannot go through with it. In an instant, the die is cast: his life spirals toward the 'terrible loneliness' he cannot evade. If all this starts you thinking about Tristan – his 'sublime ideals beyond this world'; his solipsistic solitude – it turns out that's also what Visconti is thinking.

Here's his subplot: Romy Schneider, in a powerful star turn, plays Ludwig's cousin Elisabeth of Austria. I have no idea if their historic acquaintance was amorously shaded (Elisabeth was famously beautiful), but in Visconti's telling her rejection of Ludwig's early affections furnishes one key to his travails. Near the end, she attempts to visit him and is rebuffed. This non-encounter, played to strains of *Tristan und Isolde*, is a virtual gloss on the opera's ending, but with a different outcome. In Wagner, Isolde approaches after a long absence. Tristan maniacally rips open his wound and expires in her arms. Isolde's *Liebestod* ensues – freed of earthly shackles (Durkheim's 'boundaries of society'), the lovers unite in death. In *Ludwig*, the king discovers Elisabeth at the castle gate. Since their last meeting, he has squandered his personal beauty. Hysterically fraught, he instructs that he cannot see her. We identify with his shame and sorrow. Consummately played, musically amplified, this coda registers with shattering operatic finality.



Helmut Berger as Ludwig with Romy Schneider as Elisabeth of Austria and (left) Helmut Griem as Durkheim in Visconti's film



Helmut Berger and Romy Schneider as Ludwig and Elisabeth of Austria

Helmut Berger may be best known for his Marlene Dietrich impersonation in Visconti's *The Damned* (1969); this extraordinary film debut, playing a depraved aristocrat who falls into the hands of the Nazis, earned Berger a Golden Globe nomination. For *Ludwig*, he received a David di Donatello Award (the Italian equivalent of an Oscar). I read in *Wikipedia* that he was born in 1944, that he was Visconti's partner and protégé, that he attempted suicide after Visconti died. Also that he is 'openly bisexual' (his allure is plainly androgynous) and that his list of lovers included Ursula Andress, Marisa Berenson, Tab Hunter, Mick and Bianca Jagger, Rudolf Nureyev and Elizabeth Taylor. I also read that his personal favourite, among his films, is Visconti's *Conversation Piece* (1974), in which he plays opposite Burt Lancaster: a relationship (between an introverted intellectual and a wild hedonist) said to mirror Visconti/Berger. In tandem with *Ludwig*, Berger's performance here discloses an actor of remarkable range and capacity within a milieu of profound eccentricity.

The Berger/Visconti Ludwig is a painstaking study. Incarnated by the 29-year-old Berger, the 19-year-old king truly emanates a bewitching physical allure. Ludwig was 40 when he drowned under mysterious circumstances. Berger as the older Ludwig acquires bloated features and wretched teeth, but the shadow of beauty remains. His descent into the irrational does not preclude a core of self-knowledge he rarely shares. The cumulative outcome is an enigma of numbing pathos.

Had Visconti managed to populate his film with comparable studies of Wagner, Cosima and Hans von Bülow, the Wagner analogy would be more truly clinched. But he does not. The weakest link is Mark Burns's Bülow – inexplicably, the formidable neurotic mess underlying Bülow's achievements as a conductor and failures as a spouse is not even sketched. Silvana Mangano, as Cosima, is on the right track: a powerful presence about half as daunting as Liszt's actual daughter, who always got her way. One reads that Visconti wanted Laurence Olivier for Wagner. Howard is better than that – less stagey. Visconti rejects the cartoon cad some made Wagner out to be (and





**left** Berger as the older Ludwig with rotting teeth

**below** Helmut Berger with Trevor Howard as Wagner



still do – see Simon Callow’s recent hatchet job, *Being Wagner*). Like the real Wagner, he cavorts on the floor with his big dog. He honestly adores and admires the king – and also shrewdly critiques him behind his back. He paternally grasps the young man’s predicament. And he knows when he must dissimulate. But this portrait utterly lacks the necessary extremes of personality and behaviour that Berger brings to the title role.

Even Ludwig’s enemies – the courtiers for whom Wagner’s genius was a pernicious myth, the doctors and diplomats who conspired to declare Ludwig mad – are quite believably depicted. They are mere mortals, confronting factors they cannot glean.

I have so far said nothing about the aspect of *Ludwig* that has seemingly dominated critical attention: the *mise-en-scène*. Admittedly it is magnificent. Visconti so poetically renders one of Ludwig’s iconic night-time sleigh rides – the white horses, the pristine snow, the lanterns and footmen in livery – that it nearly stops the show. The film’s visual peak is (of course) the Venus grotto at Schloss Linderhof. It is a measure of Visconti’s empathy that Ludwig’s entrance in his swan boat, and his feeding of the royal swans, heartbreakingly transcend any hint of camp.

At the same time, it was a mistake to visit the grotto a second time. The question of when excess becomes excessive bedevils many a Visconti film. In *Ludwig*, excess is inherent to the subject matter – including excessive music. Be that as it may, the *Liebesnacht* and *Liebestod* are both over-used, even indiscriminately so. The soundtrack – arranged, orchestrated and conducted by Franco Mannino, who also plays the piano – additionally incorporates the Song to the Evening Star from *Tannhäuser* (sans baritone) and a snatch of



The Venus grotto with swans and Ludwig arriving in his boat

the *Lohengrin* Prelude. Early on, we for some reason hear Schumann's *Kinderszenen* and paraphrases thereof – to characterise Ludwig's immaturity? The *Siegfried Idyll* is shown performed on the steps to Cosima's bedroom – Wagner's famous birthday present. The vignette is beautifully turned, but why does Visconti opt for a body of strings rather than the original chamber scoring? He sacrifices a degree of intimacy.

Visconti's shrewdest musical strategy is to use Wagner's *Elegy* in A flat major for piano as theme-music throughout. It's a coup – these thirteen bars, marked 'Schmach-tend' (longingly), were little known in 1973. Notwithstanding the extreme brevity of this cameo, its chromatic density is Wagnerian – and Visconti discovers that slowed down, the *Elegy* acquires a languorous profundity. The same is true of the *Adagietto* from Mahler's Fifth – Visconti's theme music for *Death in Venice* (1971), where it melodramatically supports a mawkish, self-conscious and ill-conceived cinematic rendering of Thomas Mann's novella (turning Aschenbach into a tormented Mahlerian composer contradicts his detachment). *Ludwig* is in every way a higher achievement. (The third film in Visconti's 'German trilogy', *Götterdämmerung* or *The Damned*, 1969, bears a Wagnerian title but the soundtrack is freshly composed by Maurice Jarre, the only Wagner being the *Liebestod*, bawled by a drunken SA officer.)

Arrow Academy's DVD packaging of *Ludwig* includes two variants, both exceeding four hours: the 'uncut' theatrical release and a five-part TV version. The booklet is a joke. An ancillary filmed interview with Dieter Geissler, a co-producer, confuses rather than clarifies the tangled history of the film's various incarnations. But a loopy interview with Helmut Berger, filmed in 2016, memorably allows us to experience this singular actor at the age of 72. 'How much of the real Ludwig went inside of you?', he is asked. 'I was Ludwig', Berger answers. 'I loved it.' 'But there are things about Ludwig that are not lovable. And he gets more strange [...]'. Berger: 'Well, I am strange enough, you know.' The topic shifts to *The Damned*. 'How did you approach the role of Martin, with the decadence?' 'I am myself decadent [...]. Why not? I think decadence is nice – if you have the money.'

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Is Visconti's *Ludwig* a credible re-enactment of history? Doubtless it could be considered a whitewash job. But not by me. As Wagner remains an object of condemnation and mistrust, I feel the need to append to this film review my own version of events.

As his letters confirm, Ludwig was eccentric, but certainly no simpleton. His instantaneous agenda was to rescue Wagner materially, and to collaborate with Wagner in the project of redeeming German culture. These aspirations were no more deranged than was Ludwig himself.

Wagner and the teenage king kept company for hours at a time. Wagner's written salutations to Ludwig characteristically read 'my most beautiful, supreme and only consolation', 'most merciful font of grace', 'my adored and angelic friend'. The notoriously florid effusions of these letters were both sincere and consciously hyperbolic. Looking back, Wagner would say to Cosima: 'Oh, those don't sound very good, but it wasn't I who set the tone'.<sup>1</sup> (10 July 1878). For his part, Ludwig (whose own letters indeed 'set the tone') supported Wagner faithfully, but not without discrimination or reservation. Meanwhile Bülow was installed as conductor in Munich, and there led the premieres of *Tristan und Isolde* (1865) and *Die Meistersinger* (1868).

But Wagner's fate was never simple. Ludwig was both homophilic and prudish. Feasting on the cuckolding of Wagner's preferred conductor, the Munich press was viciously predatory. It brandished every fresh report and misreport of the composer inflicting his unwanted operas upon abused singers and instrumentalists, of his being rightly refused access to the royal Residenz, of his having 'completely forfeited the favour so richly bestowed on him by our monarch, and truly in such a way that nothing now remains but to hope that mistrust has not been sown all too soon in the good and noble heart of our young King'.<sup>2</sup> Contesting the most irrefutable instance of Wagner's generosity, the *Volksbote* in January 1866 identified a 'person of high position' who testified that the recently deceased Frau Wagner had lived 'in direst penury', reduced to accepting poor relief notwithstanding 'a momentary sustenance on the part of her husband'. Never mind that a letter signed by Minna herself stated that Wagner's allowance had permanently freed her from financial cares – it had been written for her, testified the *Volksbote*, in order to conceal the facts.

Less than a year after that – as could only happen to Wagner – Ludwig Schnorr von Carolsfeld's widow, Malvina, turned up with a daffy pupil who, instructed by Schnorr's spirit, resolved to marry Ludwig. Malvina, meanwhile, decided to enlighten Ludwig as to the nature of Wagner's 'friendship' with Cosima. Entrapped in a web of lies, Wagner – his lofty ideals of candour among friends notwithstanding – discovered there was no turning back. In a series of ever more egregious letters, he fended off the truth as deviously as possible. 'My most heartfelt need drives me to be totally open with you: I feel as though I would be deceiving myself if for any reason I were to leave you in the dark concerning me', he pledges Ludwig as of 17 May 1865.<sup>3</sup> Three years later, his dissimulations had become desperately aggressive.

<sup>1</sup> *Cosima Wagner's Diaries 1869–1883*, tr. and ed. Geoffrey Skelton, 2 vols. (London, 1978–80), 10 Jul. 1878.

<sup>2</sup> See Ernest Newman, *The Life of Richard Wagner*, 4 vols. (Cambridge, 1976), iii.335–6.

<sup>3</sup> *Selected Letters of Richard Wagner*, tr. and ed. Stewart Spencer and Barry Millington (London, 1987), 644.

In the midst of this never-ending subterfuge, we discover Wagner whispering to Bülow: 'Though we berate the "fool", he none the less belongs to us, and will never be able to break free of us. All we need now is a little patience. If we can obtain from him all that he has promised me – intelligible to my innermost self – , just think what an unprecedented and un hoped-for miracle that will be!' (8 April 1866).<sup>4</sup> But Wagner had earlier written to Bülow: 'There is something godlike about him [...]. He is my genius incarnate whom I see beside me and whom I can love' (1 June 1864).<sup>5</sup> And this was by no means Wagner's only such expression of a platonic love liaison with the king.

The relationship was further complicated by promises unkept or kept incompletely. Wagner underestimated his financial needs. He changed his mind about assigning his operas to a new Munich festival theatre. But it must be said that the 562,914 marks Wagner received from Ludwig over a period of nineteen years was substantially less than what Meyerbeer received for 100 performances of *Le Prophète* in Berlin. As for choosing Bayreuth over Ludwig's Munich – Wagner was surely correct to situate his Festspielhaus offsite. His controversial dealings with the Munich opera likewise deserve a sympathetic reading. The ordeal of mounting the *Ring* in 1876 doubtless shortened his life. And prior to that ordeal, he doubtless felt the need to conserve his strength for when it would be most needed. This is one reason he resisted Ludwig's insistence on premiering *Das Rheingold* in Munich. It is why he refused to attend rehearsals or the performances themselves. If he nonetheless dictated the cast, the conductor, the scenery and the stage machinery, this was not a symptom of 'neurosis' or 'paranoia'. The performance requirements of *Rheingold* were new. A failure would have risked ridicule or worse. In this instance, Wagner's ambivalence – so typically read as perversity – was merely human.

Ludwig got his way with *Das Rheingold* and *Die Walküre*, premiered in Munich in 1869 and 1870 respectively. In 1876 he travelled to Bayreuth, twice, on each occasion to attend the complete *Ring of the Nibelung*. In the aftermath of this first Bayreuth Festival, Wagner's efforts to cope with the deficit in concert with Ludwig are exhausting merely to read about. He was simultaneously composing *Parsifal*, premiered at Bayreuth in 1882 under Ludwig's court conductor Hermann Levi. Ludwig could not countenance attending a public performance of the sacred play; in 1884, a year after Wagner's death, the Bayreuth production was mounted for the king, and the king alone, in Munich.

These early incarnations of the Bayreuth Festival, so instantly historic, vindicating Wagner's genius to the world, were also a vindication of Ludwig, without whose patronage they could never have occurred. Ultimately, the king and his composer served one another royally. Every other factor bearing on their friendship of two decades shrinks to insignificance.

(A much shorter version of this article appeared in the 'Wall Street Journal' on 16 June 2018.)



<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 689.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 609.