

# The Many Faces of Weimar Cinema

Rediscovering Germany's Filmic Legacy

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 CAMDEN HOUSE  
Rochester, New York

2010

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## Preface

THESE ARE EXCITING TIMES for the study of Weimar Cinema: in the summer of 2008, the international press was abuzz with news that a nearly complete print of the original version of Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927) had been found in Argentina, one that includes footage long thought to have been irretrievably lost.<sup>1</sup> Now we can look forward to the opportunity of experiencing Lang's legendary science-fiction epic as he originally imagined it both visually and aurally. In February 2010, a reconstructed version was unveiled at a lavish gala presentation at Berlin's Friedrichstadtpalast, complete with a live symphony orchestra performing the original score, and beamed to crowds at the Brandenburg Gate. This reconstruction, with some thirty minutes of recovered footage, may resolve many of the questions raised by the inconsistencies and omissions in the truncated version created in the 1920s for circulation in the United States, upon which much of the film's fame rests. While this may indeed be the most spectacular and the most significant rediscovery of Weimar film footage, it is only one instance in many. Over the past two decades, prints of many films from the period have resurfaced, primarily in European archives, sometimes in surprisingly good quality. Archives and research institutions in Europe and the United States have begun to collaborate on restoring rare films from the Weimar period, making them available to researchers and, increasingly, to interested audiences at large.

Today we can enjoy meticulous and intriguingly beautiful reconstructions not only of canonical masterpieces but also of many lesser-known, but no less important, Weimar German films. In the United States, Kino International has teamed up with the German Murnau-Foundation to release significant films on DVD, including some discussed in this volume, such as Ernst Lubitsch's early silent *Sumurun*, Robert Wiene's *Orlacs Hände* (The Hands of Orlac), and German "experimental" films. In Germany, Filmmuseum Munich has started an equally excellent series of DVD releases, among them Robert Reinert's *Nerven* (Nerves) highlighted in this volume. The Austrian Filmarchive in Vienna has made available other films, accompanied by extensive volumes of essays. It is to be hoped that such official releases of Weimar-era films will soon replace the numerous DVDs and videotapes of questionable quality (and often dubious origins) circulating in this country.

Outside academia, general audiences are now able to encounter films from the Weimar period in a variety of settings: summer festivals such as the "Internationale Stummfilmtage" (International Silent-Film Days) in Bonn draw tens of thousands to outdoor screenings of silent films; every fall, CineGraph Hamburg organizes an "International Film Festival of the German Filmic Heritage"; throughout the year, the Zeughauskino in Berlin shows a regular series, "Wiederentdeckt" (Rediscovered), in cooperation with Cinegraph Babelsberg; the Babylon Cinema in Berlin features "Stummfilmkonzerte" (Silent-Film Concerts) with superb live piano accompaniment; the film museums of Düsseldorf, Frankfurt am Main, Potsdam, Vienna, and the Filmpodium Zurich periodically screen Weimar German films as part of their public programming; the Kinothek Asta Nielsen (Frankfurt am Main) seeks to maintain the legacy of Germany's first movie superstar, Danish diva Asta Nielsen, with public screenings and scholarly symposia; the "Giornate del Cinema Muto" (Silent-Film Festival) at Pordenone, Northern Italy, regularly features films made in the Weimar period. And TV channels such as the Franco-German *arte* or Turner Classic Movies in the United States regularly broadcast reconstructed Weimar films as well. Thanks to the efforts of these institutions and initiatives, we now have unprecedented access to ever larger portions of the incredibly rich filmic legacy of the Weimar period. With every new discovery the history of Weimar Cinema has, in a sense, to be rewritten.

The present volume seeks to contribute to a reassessment of Weimar Cinema and to pay homage to its exciting richness and variety. The increased availability of Weimar films reminds us that the field is much more complex than had traditionally been assumed — and, to be sure, much larger than can be adequately covered in a single volume. In the roughly fourteen years that comprise the Weimar period, the German film industry produced more than 3,500 full-length feature films, that is, an average of around 250 films a year — a staggering number by any measure. True, the vast majority of these films have not been preserved. Yet most Weimar feature films were genre films, and we have more than enough samples from the hundreds of genre films that have survived to provide us with a general picture of the filmic output of Weimar Germany. All the same, I am painfully aware of a number of lacunae even in this sizeable overview of lesser-known films from the Weimar period. The essays here assembled may remind the reader that there are still many, many aspects of Weimar Cinema left to discover.

The present volume owes its existence to a large extent to the pioneering efforts of Eric Rentschler and Anton Kaes. Since the mid-1980s, in summer seminars and workshops, Rick and Tony have introduced generations of German Studies scholars in the United States to the study of German film in general, and to Weimar Cinema in particular. Many of the

essays collected here owe their inspiration to the happy hours of screenings and discussions in German Film Institutes devoted to “Unknown Weimar Cinema” held at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor during the summers of 2004 and 2006, with Johannes von Moltke as the gracious local host. I wish to dedicate this volume to Rick and Tony, as a gesture of my appreciation and gratitude for their scholarly expertise, their pedagogic acumen, their seemingly boundless energy, and the remarkable generosity with which they share their knowledge and love of the subject. The present volume will have succeeded if it can convey some of the fascination of the rich legacy of Weimar German film and make the reader hungry for more. These are, now more than ever, exciting times for the study of Weimar Cinema.

C. R.  
Amherst, February 2010