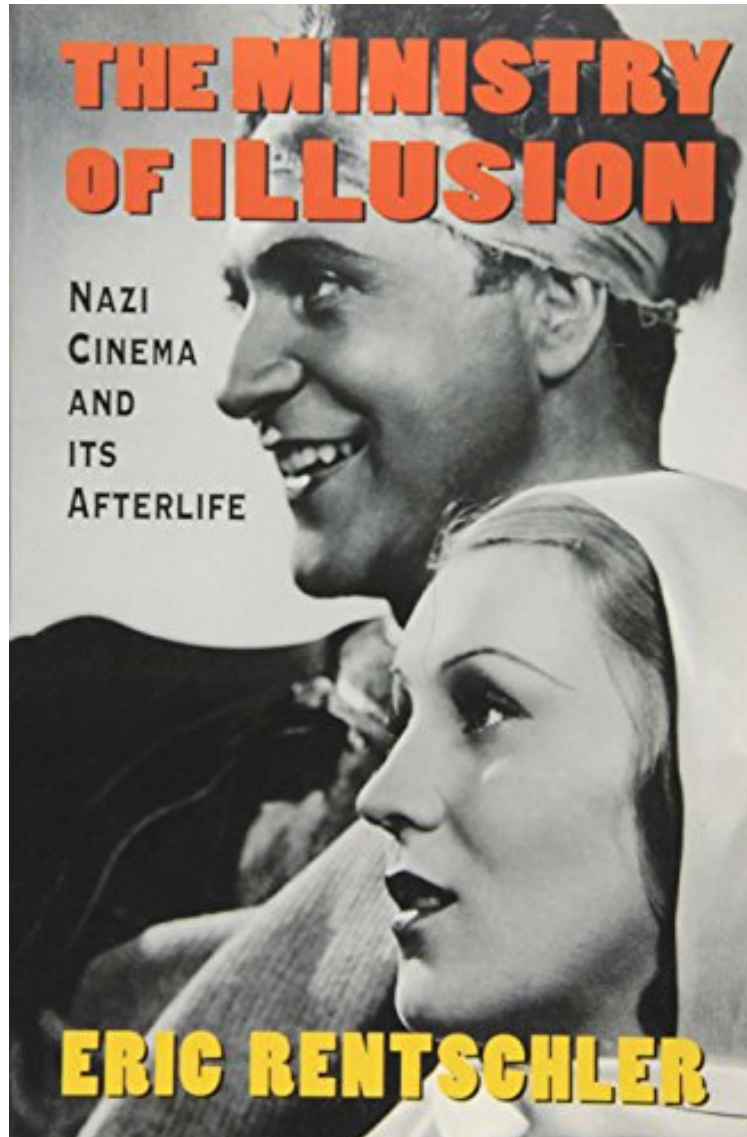


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## The Ministry of Illusion: Nazi Cinema and Its Afterlife

*Eric Rentschler*

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**Eric Rentschler : The Ministry of Illusion: Nazi Cinema and Its Afterlife** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Ministry of Illusion: Nazi Cinema and Its Afterlife:

4 of 4 people found the following review helpful. The book is goodBy MaynardFor starters, I took Professor Rentschler's class a while back, so I have some context in how it is used as a teaching aid. At first, I was somewhat annoyed that the professor had assigned his own work for it suggests a desire to pump sales by forcing students into the purchase. However, his syllabus included a range of other works from Sontag, Kracauer, and Ellul (among others)

that really provided a framework explaining his analytic process used herein. Further, this book is extremely well sourced. We saw many of the films he discusses and I can honestly say that between the filmographic source material, his text, and the secondary texts assigned, it's very clear how Rentschler's analytic process derives the conclusions he reaches. I know I'm supposed to be reviewing the book and not some class taught by the author. However, I have to admit that by the end of the class I kept the book (and every other book and text assigned). I also wound up buying additional books by Kracauer, which I am indebted to the professor for having introduced me to. This is an excellent overview of German Nazi cinema and the underlying value system that was promulgated by their propaganda machine. One gets a slice of the regime's steadfast adherence to not just implied propaganda values and implicit assumptions, but also their careful management of the aesthetics of the artistry of cinema in order to achieve that goal. It is one of many invaluable texts for understanding the confluence of artistic aesthetics and totalitarian ideology in authoritarian regimes. Highly recommended.

3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. An achievement! By Dr Ren Codoniby Eric Rentschler Eric Rentschler, Professor of Film Studies at the University of California, Irvine, (now Harvard) argues that the cinema in the Third Reich emanated from a Ministry of Illusion and not from a Ministry of Fear. Party vehicles such as Hitler Youth Quex and anti-Semitic hate films such as Jew Sss may warrant the epithet "Nazi propaganda," but they amount to a mere fraction of the productions from this era. The vast majority of the epoch's films seemed to be "unpolitical"--melodramas, biopix, and frothy entertainments set in cozy urbane surroundings, places where one rarely sees a swastika or hears a "Sieg Heil." Minister of propaganda Joseph Goebbels, Rentschler shows, endeavored to maximize film's seductive potential, to cloak party priorities in alluring cinematic shapes. Hitler and Goebbels were master showmen enamored of their media images, the Third Reich was a grand production, the Second World War a continuing movie of the week. The Nazis were movie mad, and the Third Reich was movie made. (Excerpt from Publisher's Note, 1996, third print 2002) Rentschler .. feels that to concentrate exclusively on themes, trends, and manifest content is to miss the significance of the films' semiotic complexity. He suggests, not entirely fairly, that little has been previously said about the aesthetics of the Nazi films, those features that he feels make them so resonant and well regarded. He sees, and here his point should receive emphasis, a reciprocal link, at least aesthetically, between Hollywood and Berlin, and realizes that not every film produced in this era was crude propaganda. He lays out his thesis based on five premises. He suggests that 1 "the cinema of the Third Reich is to be seen in the context of the totalitarian state's concerted attempt to create a culture industry in the service of mass deception." 2 "entertainment played a crucial role in Nazi culture. The era's many genre films maintained the appearance of escapist vehicles and innocent recreations while functioning within a larger programme." 3 "Nazi film culture--and Nazi propaganda in general--must be understood in terms of what Goebbels called an 'orchestra principle'" where not everyone was expected to play the same instrument. 4 "it is by now a truism that we cannot speak of National Socialism without speaking about aesthetics." Rentschler adds that we must also speak about mass culture. 5 "when critics decry Nazi cinema as an abomination, they protest too much.... It is common to reduce all Nazi films to hate pamphlets, party hagiography, or mindless escapism, films with too much substance or none at all, either execrable or frivolous." (Source: Mark Welch, The Grim Fascination of an Uncomfortable Legacy, Book review 1998 Mark Welch) I have just reviewed two books on related topics, viz Re-viewing Fascism: Italian Cinema, 1922-1943 (as fbuk 40, 30/6/2012), and Reclams Deutsches Filmlexikon (German Edition, 1984, 11/6/2012, as fbus27). The first, compared to Rentschler's book, is a relatively specialized study, so it is less burdened with 100%, ie all films; Rentschler needs to give all production and directorship data, so he has a potential volume problem. This, he handles with panache and finesse: He presents the analytical section in three parts, viz Fatal Attraction, Foreign Affairs, Spectres and Shadows, and has Films and Events, Directorial Filmographies, and American Film and Videotape Sources in three annexes. Similarly transparent to the clear thinking is the graphic layout of the book - you never get rushed or crushed; despite the volume of analysis and material, the book can do with 450 pages. Reclams Deutsches Filmlexikon, finally, with his 450 full entries, would be the ideal complement to Rentschler's book: First, it gives some more detailed material on who is who questions; second, it is a perfect illustration for the fact that only a handful of members of the film industry, at all levels, were eliminated from the rostrum. The rest went happily on, as no Italian Partisan style revenge on the top stars set a marker: In my youth, I still saw Kaethe Gold, the strikingly attractive female on the book's cover, in Vienna Burgtheater and Zurich Schauspielhaus productions, a beautiful and distinguished actress of classical German roles (Goethe, Schiller) to her old age. PS I do not hope that my readers think I advocate Italian Partisan style violence; but the ease of transition was still an argument in Berlin during the 1968 student revolt. Well, the Schiller Theater, ein Hort der Reaktion, was finally dissolved and closed - in 1993, "because of the financial difficulties of Berlin"... Honni soit qui mal y pense! fbus 41 - Ministry of Illusion: Nazi Cinema and Its Afterlife, by Eric Rentschler - 3/7/2012 2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. An Excellent Companion to Kracauer's Book!!! By Diane Byrnes I probably would have liked and was expecting a more conventional book - there was not much mention of Willy Fritsch, purportedly Hitler's favourite actor, only a footnote about Renate Muller whose movies were constantly the highest grossing movies of the year or why an actress like Paula Wessley whole heartedly embraced the Nazi ideology. But it was still excellently done with each chapter devoted to one movie that seemed to encapsulate its time. Chapter One - "The Blue Light" (1932), of course directed by Leni Riefenstahl and by the lastre-

editing in 1951 she had erased all the Jewish names who had a prominent role (Henrich Sokal, Carl Mayer etc) in the initially released movie. Chapter Two - "Hitler Youth Quex" (1933) - perhaps the most controversial film ever made. In Hitler's newly formed government movies were initially seen as bringing the public around to the Nazi ideology and what better way than to make a movie glorifying a young boy who in 1930 had been killed while handing out pamphlets in the Communist part of the city. The film was blatant propaganda but one of the stars, Heinrich George, had been a Communist but was swayed around to the National Socialist way of thinking. Chapter 3 - dealt with Luis Trenker's "The Prodigal Son" (1934) and showed how Trenker, through charisma and vitality could have a foot in both camps. There was a lot of controversy, after the war, whether he was an opportunist or a genuine artist. According to the book, the question has yet to be answered. Chapter 4 - examined "Lucky Kids" (1936), one of the first films to embrace and try to copy the American style of cinema. Apparently Hitler loved "It Happened One Night" and was eager for Germany to have its own "screwball comedy" style. It showed me why all Europe was embracing American films. I'd often wondered why a couple of Jessie Matthews films at that time introduced gangsters, reporters, prize fights etc - reading the "Lucky Kids" chapter I found my answer. Chapter 5 - "La Habanera" (1937) - proved how a director (Douglas Sirk) who was very soon to leave for America and Germany's most popular star, Zarah Leander (who was disliked by Hitler) could come together and make one of the most critically acclaimed films of the year. Chapter 6 is about the most hated and reviled films of all time - "Jew Suss" (1940). Chapter 7 - "Paracelsus" (1943) was a resounding flop but the chapter is more about G.W. Pabst and why he returned to Germany when the politics of National Socialism were so hateful to him. The book ends with the film "Munchausen" (1943), a glorious color triumph and poses the question how a film made to celebrate UFA's 25th anniversary and made with an open chequebook could have been handed to a cast of workers who were definitely not party followers (Erich Kastner, the scenarist had been forbidden to publish in Germany for many years) and all made a film that was Germany's biggest hit at the box office. There is also 90 pages of notes which I read adjacent to the book and together they fill you in on just what was going on in German fan magazines etc (one article had a fan magazine taking the German public to task for writing to their favourite stars for autographs etc, when they knew the stars were kept busy writing to soldiers!!!) On top of that there is a year by year summary of all the films released and also which were banned plus a diary of important events.

German cinema of the Third Reich, even a half-century after Hitler's demise, still provokes extreme reactions. "Never before and in no other country," observes director Wim Wenders, "have images and language been abused so unscrupulously as here, never before and nowhere else have they been debased so deeply as vehicles to transmit lies." More than a thousand German feature films that premiered during the reign of National Socialism survive as mementoes of what many regard as film history's darkest hour. As Eric Rentschler argues, however, cinema in the Third Reich emanated from a Ministry of Illusion and not from a Ministry of Fear. Party vehicles such as Hitler Youth Quex and anti-Semitic hate films such as Jew Suss may warrant the epithet "Nazi propaganda," but they amount to a mere fraction of the productions from this era. The vast majority of the epoch's films seemed to be "unpolitical"--melodramas, biopix, and frothy entertainments set in cozy urbane surroundings, places where one rarely sees a swastika or hears a "Sieg Heil." Minister of propaganda Joseph Goebbels, Rentschler shows, endeavored to maximize film's seductive potential, to cloak party priorities in alluring cinematic shapes. Hitler and Goebbels were master showmen enamored of their media images, the Third Reich was a grand production, the Second World War a continuing movie of the week. The Nazis were movie mad, and the Third Reich was movie made. Rentschler's analysis of the sophisticated media culture of this period demonstrates in an unprecedented way the potent and destructive powers of fascination and fantasy. Nazi feature films--both as entities that unreeled in moviehouses during the regime and as productions that continue to enjoy wide attention today--show that entertainment is often much more than innocent pleasure.

From Library Journal Over 1000 films were produced during Germany's 12-year Third Reich. While some were blatant anti-Semitic propaganda, like the notorious epic Jud Suss, a variety of films were made in line with the "orchestra" principle of Goebbels, which stated, "We do not expect everyone to play the same instrument, we only expect that people play according to a plan." Rentschler (film, Univ. of California, Irvine) examines the Nazi media culture "plan," which created a world of illusion, alternating between "heavy hands and light touches" with the aim of negating "alternative experience and independent thought." His book covers much the same ground as Klaus Kreimeier's *The Ufa Story* (LJ 6/1/96), but this book is more readable, gives greater detail on important films, and contains extensive chronologies, filmographies, and source lists for obtaining these films. This scholarly book will be useful in large film collections. Stephen Rees, Levittown Regional Lib., Pa. Copyright 1996 Reed Business Information, Inc. This massively documented study of Nazi cinema...notably succeeds in analysing how Nazi films created a dreamworld that seemed neither realistic nor fantastic, but agreeable and persuasive--indeed closer to Hollywood than to Stalinist cinema. Above all, [Rentschler] stresses how films belong to a German cultural continuum, reaching into the present. Fifty years after Siegfried Kracauer's landmark book *From Caligari to Hitler*, this

is the study that's long been needed of the movies' most disturbing triumph. (Sight and Sound) Fifty years after Kracauer's monumental *From Caligari to Hitler* comes the next installment of the story. Rentschler shows how German films were central to an administered popular culture. Goebbels' chilling, still-seductive cinema exemplifies the complex social role played by the mass media at the end of our century. Rentschler—one of America's finest scholars of German cinema—has given us a lucid, passionate book. (David Bordwell, University of Wisconsin, author of *The Cinema of Eisenstein*) [A] quite exceptional new book... [Nazi cinema] is an issue which is, in fact, far more urgent, and more topical, than it may at first appear. The cinema of Hitler, far from perishing with the passing of the Third Reich, continues to thrive... One is grateful to Rentschler both for producing such a well-researched, thorough and thoughtful book, and for doing so with such constructive energy, fine style and subtle wit. Any serious student either of film or of the Third Reich will learn a great deal from this splendid new account. (Graham McCann *Times Higher Education Supplement*) [This is] an invaluable book of film history... Rentschler has actually watched the several hundred films made in Germany under the Third Reich, and he's the first to be able to talk authoritatively about their content and ideology. (Gerald Peary *Boston Phoenix*) The scope of Rentschler's argument and the thoroughness of his research—not to mention the elegance of his prose—will significantly change how we look at the cinema of the Third Reich... [This is] a passionate, nuanced, and highly readable book that contributes significantly to existing studies on Nazi cinema while remaining accessible to a general public interested in German history, cinema, and the study of mass media in general. (Gerd Gemünden *German Quarterly*) The regime of Adolf Hitler was the world's 'first full-blown media dictatorship,' writes Eric Rentschler... [An] accomplished and engaging writer... Mr. Rentschler pays great... attention to the historical context of each film 'text.' (J. Hoberman *Forward*) The book is well researched and documented. If one wants... to learn more about the sociopolitical realities in Nazi cinema... then this is the work with which to settle down. (*Washington Times*) Rentschler's readable, superbly researched, and meticulously documented study does not attempt to engage all of the nearly 1,100 films made during the Third Reich. Rather, the author provides measured, elegantly written assessments of several key films—such as the 'movement film' *Hitler Youth Quex*, the breezy, American-style *Lucky Kids*, Sirk's *La Habanera*, the notorious *Jew Sss*, and the fantastic, still much beloved *Munchhausen*—to explore recent claims of their alleged resistance to the Nazi regime and to examine reasons for their enduring popularity, at least in Germany. Rentschler avoids both pitfalls often associated with discussions of these films—reductive ideological critique and evasive 'aesthetic' appreciation. He enhances readers' awareness of the ways Nazi filmmakers used the 'Jewish' Hollywood conventions Goebbels simultaneously feared and admired and their complex relationship with Weimar film culture. An immensely useful chronology of key events, the most extensive general bibliography of the subject ever compiled in English, and helpful filmographies of and bibliographies about the leading Nazi cineastes make this an essential acquisition. (Choice) *The Ministry of Illusion* provides a long-awaited and meticulously researched examination of films in the Third Reich that will be of tremendous value to both scholars and educators. Eric Rentschler, whose encyclopedic knowledge of German film has earned him a reputation as one of the foremost film historians in the United States, provides both a historical account of Nazi ideology and a number of readings of exemplary Nazi propaganda films, such as *Hitler Youth Quex* and the notorious *Jew Sss*... [It is] essential reading for anyone interested in the popular appeal of the Third Reich or the ideological working of film in general. (Marcia Klotz *Historical Journal of Film, Radio, and Television*) Eric Rentschler, America's leading scholar of National Socialist cinema, has produced a compact compendium of everything you wanted to know about Nazi filmdom but were afraid to ask... well written and extensively researched; nearly half the manuscript is footnotes that yield fascinating anecdotal information... For those with an itchy curiosity about Third Reich culture, *The Ministry of Illusion* warrants reading. It provides delightful browsing in bits and pieces—the perfect gift for a cinephile-compulsive literate who has a magazine rack in the loo. (Stewart Brinton *Pacific Cinematheque*) Given the fact that even in Europe there still doesn't exist a comprehensive book on this sordid matter, *The Ministry of Illusion* will serve as a primary source for the historiographers of the Third Reich and its cultural institutions. (Gertrud Koch, coeditor, *Frauen und Film*, and Professor, Ruhr University, Bochum) Fifty years after Kracauer's monumental *From Caligari to Hitler* comes the next installment of the story. Rentschler shows how German films were central to an administered popular culture. Goebbels' chilling, still-seductive cinema exemplifies the complex social role played by the mass media at the end of our century. Rentschler—one of America's finest scholars of German cinema—has given us a lucid, passionate book. --David Bordwell, University of Wisconsin, author of *The Cinema of Eisenstein*