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Author(s)	C.P.R.
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LUDWIG

One of the strangest stories in European history is that of Ludwig II of Bavaria, the handsome Swan-King who financed and loved Richard Wagner, who was a favorite of the Empress Elizabeth of Austria, who offered in 1871 the empire of the Germanies to the Hohenzollerns, and who became so dissolute in his homosexuality and paranoia that his councillors finally locked him up. At the end he and the doctor assigned to care for him were drowned. To this day it's not known if it was suicide, accident, or murder.

Director Luchino Visconti has not conquered the difficulties inherent in the Ludwig story. Helmut Berger's portrayal of the title role is so effeminate that the tragic element of the sexual collapse of the man becomes meaningless. At best Berger is pitiful; in later scenes where he has lost all

control, lacking majesty and nobility, he becomes more convincing. There is a problem with the dialog. William Weaver, who is responsible for the translation, has betrayed Visconti if he did not tell him that in English the dialog is often laughable. Finally, Visconti needs a film editor badly. The film which runs for 173 minutes, representing a drastic cut from its first version, is still too long. Like so many of Visconti's films, it has a magnificent beginning. After a short scene with his confessor (Gert Frobe), the young Ludwig is prepared for his coronation and we are treated to a marvellously operatic pageant of court and church. The film ends dramatically as the lackeys, with flaming torches, seek the body of the drowned Ludwig. But there are so many in-between superfluties, such as the King playing blindman's buff with his "friends," which add nothing to our understanding or to the movement of the film. Too often Visconti overplays his hand, as he did in Dirk Bogarde's pursuit of the young boy in *Death in Venice*. Visconti has so little faith in his audience he evidently must beat an idea into its head.

The picture does have the Visconti style — opulence, exquisite sets, beautiful and interesting costumes, and authenticity of ambiance. Romy Schneider looks ravishing as Elizabeth, with enough cruelty in her face to make pertinent the oddities of that enigmatic empress. Trevor Howard is well made up as Wagner (if a bit too old), but the part is so weakly written that nothing comes of it.

(There is seemingly a fault in the editing of the Wagner sequences; the Wagners drop out of the picture after an absurd scene in which Cosima received her Christmas birthday gift — the "Siegfried Idyll.") Silvana Mangano is fair as the wily and somewhat homely wife of Von Bulow as well as mistress of Wagner. Most of the secondary roles are adequately handled: Gert Frobe as Father Hoffman, Helmut Griem as Durchein, Umberto Orsini as Von Holstein.

I'm glad Visconti will not direct the filmization of Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*.

For *Ludwig* there will be strongly divided opinions about its worth, but 30 years from now there is almost certain to be a coterie who will say that if you haven't seen it, you really can't understand the films of the '70s.

C.P.R.