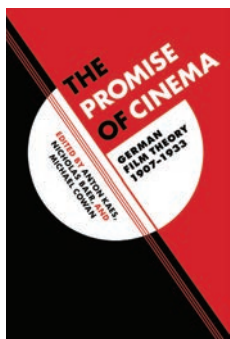


## The Promise of Cinema: German Film Theory, 1907-1933

Edited by Anton Kaes, Nicholas Baer, and Michael Cowan  
University of California Press, \$65



Beginning not with the birth of film but the birth of film writing, *The Promise of Cinema* offers an invaluable compendium of critical and theoretical texts—originally published in journals, newspapers, and magazines in Germany and Austria—that span the prewar period up to the rise of National Socialism. Some of the selections appeared in Anton Kaes’s pioneering 1978 anthology *Kino-Debatte*, but this bold, new American offshoot is considerably more ambitious in scope,

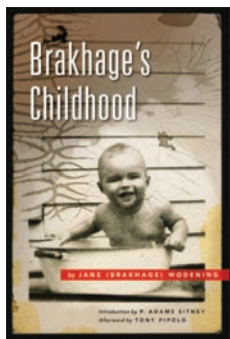
including a vast number of texts that have never been published before in English. Readers now have access to a dazzling array of insights into the world of cinema during its heady first decades.

The expertly chosen selections, nearly 300 in total, include pieces from among the era’s great filmmakers (Fritz Lang, Ernst Lubitsch, Paul Wegener), novelists (Vicki Baum, Alfred Döblin, Joseph Roth), playwrights (Bertolt Brecht, Erwin Piscator, Ernst Toller), composers (Giuseppe Becce, Edmund Meisel, Kurt Weill), artists (Lászlo Moholy-Nagy, Lotte Reiniger, Hans Richter), and critics (Béla Balázs, Lotte Eisner, Siegfried Kracauer). A young Billy Wilder, then a journalist, congratulates Conrad Veidt on his return from Hollywood in 1929. A twentysomething dancer Leni Riefenstahl recounts how she fell into film. Walter Ruttmann describes the shot setups for his acclaimed 1927 film *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City*. Marlene Dietrich writes a letter to an unknown fan after her 1930 sound-film debut in *The Blue Angel*.

“Father, send your kids to the Kientopp!” exhorts Hanns Heinz Ewers in 1907, using the colloquial German term for cinema. “It’s better than Sunday School! And you should go in yourself.” Many people, from Hamburg to Vienna and places in between, heeded these words. Over a century later, we can still appreciate their fascinating, poignant, and varied reactions to the medium in all its manifold guises.—*Noah Isenberg*

## Brakhage’s Childhood

By Jane (Brakhage) Wodening Granary Books, \$39.95



Avant-garde legend Stan Brakhage mythologized and poeticized childhood by invoking “the untutored eye” of the child that, as he put it in his 1963 book *Metaphors on Vision*, “must know each object encountered in life through an adventure of perception.” Yet, as this revelatory new work demonstrates, Brakhage’s own childhood was an adventure less of perception than will, the inchoate artist struggling to form an identity through an upbringing marked by abuse, neglect, loneliness, and fear.

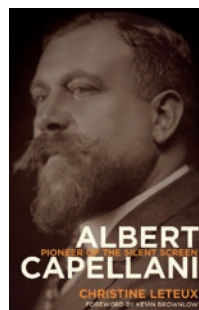
*Brakhage’s Childhood* is the result of a project started in the early Eighties by the filmmaker and his first wife, writer Jane Collom (now Wodening). Over the course of several months Brakhage told Wodening of his infancy, boyhood, and incipient adolescence, with his partner planning to

mold the material into a first-person “autobiography.” The Brakhages’ divorce in 1986 cut the project short and relegated the fruits of Wodening’s labor to the storage bin, until now.

Brakhage’s first 12 years—coinciding with the Depression and World War II—were almost Dickensian in their hardship and humiliation: adoption, separation of the adopting parents, a litany of health issues, a hysterical mother’s rotating cast of boyfriends, bullying, an itinerant lifestyle that truncated friendships, etc. Through it all Brakhage found solace in movies, self-expression in comics and church choir, and haughty power in commanding others, at one point heading a juvenile gang of drug store thieves. In the preface, Wodening explains that she initially intended to relate Brakhage’s tale in an impressionistic vein but, by putting aside the project, ultimately “left the stories intact as he told them to me.” The incomplete state of the manuscript is a blessing in disguise, however, displaying in raw, unfiltered fashion the wounds that fueled Brakhage’s creativity but also remained a source of unresolved pain. Indeed, more telling than the book are Wodening’s preface and an afterword by psychoanalyst and film scholar Tony Pipolo, which trace both Brakhage’s genius and volatile personality to the demons—and triumphs—of his youth.—*Michael Joshua Rowin*

## Albert Capellani: Pioneer of the Silent Screen

By Christine Leteux University Press of Kentucky, \$40



We didn’t know a lot about Albert Capellani. Despite the Italian name, he was French, began making films in 1905, came to America in 1915, and worked successfully in Fort Lee before an abortive relocation to Hollywood, where his independent production company went broke. He returned to France and died, probably of diabetes, in 1931. The world had moved on by then—talking pictures had landed with both feet, and Capellani hadn’t made a movie since 1922. His death occasioned almost no notice.

But even a cursory look at his movies starring radiant divas such as Alla Nazimova and Mistinguett—the music-hall soubrette whose boy-toy was the young Maurice Chevalier—shows a director with a very distinct sense of framing and a passion for strong but subtle acting. His 1908 film *L’Arlesienne*, shot on location in Arles, is a virtuoso compendium of camera-work and atmosphere, and his adaptations of classics like *Germinal* are similarly ahead of their time.

Christine Leteux’s monograph/biography adds a considerable amount to the body of knowledge, mostly via an assiduous trawl through public records and trade papers. It carefully positions Capellani as one of a group of gifted French filmmakers who came to America and flourished until the movie business relocated to the West Coast, with an accompanying centralization to which few of them could adapt.

Capellani, along with Maurice Tourneur, the art director Ben Carré, and the cinematographer Lucien Andriot were the advance party for the French filmmakers who came to Hollywood before and during World War II. Capellani films like the aforementioned *L’Arlesienne* and 1919’s *The Red Lantern* show that he was not just a predecessor of Renoir, Clair, and Duvivier, but a peer.—*Scott Eyman*