LULU IN ROCHESTER: LOUISE BROOKS AND THE CINEMA SCREEN AS A *TABULA RASA*

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I.

During the course of an interview with the film director George Cukor, the interviewer mentioned Louise Brooks. Cukor responded: "Louise Brooks? What's all this talk about Louise Brooks? She was *nobody*. She was a *nothing* in films. What's all this fuss about her?"[1] A harsh verdict, but Cukor was right; for as far as America, Hollywood and the big studios were concerned, Louise Brooks *was* a nobody. However, she is certainly somebody today; she has become something in films. Brooks' friend, the film historian Kevin Brownlow, puts things more kindly: "Louise Brooks was not one of the important stars of the silent era … [b]ut of all the personalities of that era, Louise Brooks has emerged most triumphantly."[2] What Cukor could not understand is how she got to be somebody, how her personality managed to emerge triumphant, and that is the subject of this article, the *post factum* creation of the film star Louise Brooks.

On August the 8th of this year it will be the twenty-fifth anniversary of the death of Louise Brooks. Brooks was and still remains not only one of the most interesting stars of the silent screen, but one of the most interesting stars of all time. In many ways this is because she is one of the most complex, contradictory, subversive and seemingly reluctant film stars who, by her own admission, hated Hollywood, was bored by film-making, did not know how to act, never bothered reading scripts, and never watched her own films. Ultimately there are three things that make Brooks particularly interesting: firstly, that her most important films (two directed by G.W. Pabst, *Die Busche der Pandora/Pandora's Box, 1929,* and *Das Tagebuch einer Verlorenen/Diary of a Lost Girl, 1929,* and one directed by Augusto Genina, *Prix de beauté/Beauty Prize, 1930*) were largely ignored or disliked on release, and her performances in them were poorly reviewed at the time; yet these films, most notably *Pandora's Box,* were to be championed years later by some of the world's most influential film critics and theorists. Secondly, she is one of the very few American actors who is successful for her work in Europe[3]. As Kenneth Tynan points out, "[t]he traffic in movie actors traditionally

[1] Cuckor, quoted in: Paris, 2000, p.540

[2] Brownlow, 1968, p.356

[3] It is, of course, Jean Seberg who is perhaps the most famous actor to have made the eastbound

moved westward from Europe to Hollywood, where their national characteristics were sedulously exploited. Brooks, who was among the few to make the eastbound trip, became in her films with Pabst completely Europeanized."[4] Finally, she is particularly interesting for the way in which the star image we have of her today has been filtered, modulated and re-envisioned over the years by a number of people, with Brooks' own writings at the centre. This means that any viewing of her films will be substantially coloured by a major retrospective appreciation of the work of Brooks, an actor who owes more than most to posterity.

Although she is now the subject of much critical attention, it is easy to forget that Louise Brooks might have been forgotten forever had it not been for the efforts of a film curator at Eastman House, James Card. It was Card who remembered Brooks, having seen her in Howard Hawks' *A Girl in Every Port, 1928,* and it is through his efforts from 1953 onwards (and, very shortly thereafter, combined with those of Henri Langlois) that we view Brooks in the way we do today. It is of course unlikely that the films of G.W. Pabst would have been completely forgotten, but, unfairly or not, two of his greatest films are now remembered more for the star in front of the camera than for the director behind it.[5] One must not forget Lotte Eisner though, for although the popular narrative brings to the fore Card's important role in the revival of Louise Brooks, the real beginning of the Brooks revival began a year earlier when Lotte Eisner published *L'Ecran démonaique* (first published in English in 1969 as *The Haunted Screen*).

This brings us to the central question regarding Brooks, the one that will allow us to unravel the contradictions surrounding her image and properly analyse her star persona. The 'Question of Louise Brooks' is; how is it that Louise Brooks, an American actor who could have become a Hollywood film star, has been all but forgotten for the work she did in her native America, but has become to audiences today an iconic image and star of the silent screen for her performance in three European films that at the time were either ignored or disliked?

There are two strands that need to be pursued if we are to come to an answer to this question: the first is mainly biographical and historical and concerns Brooks' changing off-screen persona; the second requires an analysis of her on-screen persona and of the changing social conditions, aesthetic trends and audience types that made the Brooks revival successful from the mid-1950s onwards. Both these strands are essential, as it is my contention that Brooks' star image today is created largely by the constructed contiguity between her on-screen and off-screen personas, and that much of the pleasure generated in watching her films comes from an appreciation and understanding of this contiguity. This also

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trip from America to Europe. See, Handyside, 2002, pp.165-176.

[4] Tynan, in: Brooks, 2000, p.xxvi

[5] As Lotte Eisner (1973, p.296) points out, Louise Brooks, "succeeded in stimulating an otherwise unequal director's talent to the extreme." Mary Ann Doane (1990, p.70) also remarks that *Pandora's Box,* "often seems to be more accurately described as a star vehicle rather than the work of an auteur."

2. Lulu in Rochester: Louise Brooks and the cinema screen as a *tabula rasa*

suggests one reason why audiences at the time might not have enjoyed the films as we do today, because her off-screen persona has been reshaped over subsequent years to mirror more closely her most famous on-screen character, that of Lulu in *Pandora's Box,* creating the popular myth of Louise Brooks *as* Lulu.

II.

It is not my intention here to provide extensive biographical information about Brooks, but in order to understand her contemporary off-screen persona some biographical information about her is necessary. What this will hopefully begin to reveal is how different Brooks' current off-screen persona is from the off-screen persona that existed in the late 1920s. It is often said that a star is an actor plus a biography: if this is true then Louise Brooks is certainly a good candidate for film stardom. Although she acted in twenty-four films, she had leading roles in only a small number of them[6], but nevertheless is the subject of a six-hundred page biography with a narrative more improbable and unlikely than any film plot. So interesting was her life that Mike Nichols, director of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf, 1966*, and *The Graduate, 1967,* wanted to make her biopic, but, despite the best efforts of the critic Kenneth Tynan, author of the influential *New Yorker* article about Brooks, *The Girl in the Black Helmet,* she would not allow the movie to be made. Some of the motivation for her refusal came from her mistrust of Tynan's motives[7], but certainly a great deal of her motivation came from the fact that at the time she was enjoying a lot of control over the image of her past, control that would have undoubtedly been lost had she allowed the biopic to be made.

Brooks was a famous New York resident well before appearing in her first film in 1925. She had gone to New York in 1922, aged only fifteen, to study dance with the pioneer modern American dance company, Denishawn, and due to her remarkable ability as a dancer she joined Denishawn as a company dancer that same year. After touring with Denishawn between 1922 and 1924 she was dismissed by Ruth St. Denis primarily for the reason that her attitude did not chime with the rather more puritan values of Denishawn. Brooks then joined George White's *Scandals* early in 1924, and, after a brief spell in London and Paris in late 1924, came back in 1925 to dance for Florentz Ziegfeld in *Louie the 14th*, and shortly thereafter in the world famous *Ziegfeld Follies*. Brooks' success was remarkable, for "[i]n all of Broadway, if not all of American entertainment, there was no greater height than the *Ziegfeld Follies.* It was simply the top show in the business and its performers were considered to have reached the pinnacle

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[6] Aside from her starring roles in *Pandora's Box, Diary of a Lost Girl* and *Prix de beauté,* Brooks also played major roles in *Beggars of Life* and *The Canary Murder Case*.

[7] In a letter to Kevin Brownlow, reprinted in part in Paris (2000, p.506-7) she expresses her feelings that she had been doublecrossed by Tynan, and that since his New Yorker article she had become 'Tynan's drunken whore'. She also refers to the debts he had incurred trying to live like a Hollywood star and that he had been promised $20,000 by the film production company if he secured her agreement.

of theatrical success."[8]

Louise Brooks claims not to have been interested in the movies or in being a movie star, and given her success on Broadway there is every reason to believe her, but the *Follies* were where talent scouts came to find new film actors, and in 1925, aged eighteen, Brooks signed a five year contract with Paramount and became one of their junior stars. Between 1925 and 1928 she made fourteen American films[9] (seven of which are now considered lost), spent the summer of 1925 at the Ambassador Hotel with Charlie Chaplin, had an injunction placed upon a photographer in order to stop the distribution of a series of nude studio portraits of her[10], gave interviews for and appeared on the cover of various movie magazines, including *Photoplay* and *Motion Picture Classic*, married and divorced film director Eddie Sutherland, spent time at W.R. Hearst's 'Ranch' with Hearst, Marion Davies and, more importantly, Davies' niece Pepi Lederer (about whom she would later write an article) and, late in 1928, left Paramount and America to make a film in Germany, with a director who she had never heard of.

When Brooks left Paramount she, "was on the verge of becoming one of Paramount's major stars."[11] She was receiving a substantial amount of publicity and fan mail[12], and *Beggars of Life, 1928,* the film that Brooks would cite as her favourite of her American career, was getting good reviews. A 1929 review in *Vanity Fair* states that, "after a beginning heralded by the usual publicity fanfare of 'from chorus girl to star' stories, Miss Brooks seemed doomed to routine parts in program pictures. It is only with her recent, glamorous performance as the inadvertent murderess in … *Beggars of Life* that she has come into her own … She is now the favored star of the Süd Film Company of Berlin, for whom she will make a film or so abroad before venturing into the 'talkies'."[13]

But Brooks did not venture far into the 'talkies,' and rather ominously the first two talking pictures in which she appears contain her image, but not her voice[14].

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[8] Paris, 2000, p.82

[9] The Canary Murder Case was released in 1929, but principal photography finished in October 1928.

[10] Brooks said that she made the photographs in order to advance her career and to get herself on the first rung of the ladder to success. (See: Paris, 2000, pp.114-9) She later claimed that in the 1920s it was the norm in Europe for female actors to send nude portraits of themselves to film directors. She noted that G.W. Pabst had a substantial collection of these photographs. (See: Paris, 2000, p.318, and Tynan, in: Brooks, 2000, p.xliv)

[11] Paris, 2000, p.249

[12] Paris (2000, p.136*n*) records that in 1927 Brooks had ten major magazine pieces, the fourth highest of any female American actor of that year. In the same year Clara Bow had nineteen major magazine pieces, Joan Crawford fourteen, and Colleen Moore eleven. Also, by her own admission, she was receiving some two-thousand fan letters a week. (see: Paris, 2000, p.249-50)

[13] Vanity Fair, quoted in: Paris, 2000, p.272

[14] Brooks refused to dub *The Canary Murder Case* which was shot as silent, so her voice on the film is actually that of Margaret Livingston. *Prix de beauté* was also shot as silent but later dubbed

In a somewhat ironic twist, her voice, absent though it was from her first two ‘talkies’, would come to dominate her image and the discourses about her later in her life. Brooks ended her Hollywood career in spectacular fashion. In a short space of time she had angered Paramount by refusing to dub *The Canary Murder Case,* had turned down a contract from RKO, had turned down an offer by Columbia to work on a Buck Jones Western, and had turned down an offer from William Wellman to play the lead role opposite James Cagney in *The Public Enemy*, a role that later went to Jean Harlow. Added to this was the fact that *Pandora’s Box* did not do well in America, it “was in the bomb league – even worse, it was a *silent* bomb … The star, like the captain, would go down with the ship. Europe was thus a double flop: Louise not only failed to gain any sound-film experience there, but she appeared to be faltering even in the obsolete silent medium.”[15] Various reviews from the time indicate that Brooks’ performance was clearly not appreciated: “‘Pandora’s Box,’ a rambling thing that does not help her, nevertheless proves that Miss Brooks is not a dramatic lead”; “Louise Brooks [is] a beautiful girl … [but] her passive decorativeness made us scarcely conscious of any magnetic impulse”; “Miss Brooks is attractive and she moves her head and eyes at the proper moment, but whether she is endeavouring to express joy, woe, anger, or satisfaction is often difficult to decide”; “Louise Brooks cannot act … She does not suffer. She does nothing.”[16]

Three years earlier, a review of *A Social Celebrity, 1926,* remarked that, “Miss Brooks looks more than ever like stellar material.”[17] This was typical of the pre-Pandora publicity that Brooks was used to getting, and she was understandably devastated by the poor reviews of *Pandora’s Box.* From 1931 until the end of her career she worked on only one short and six features, all of which are unremarkable, and her final film, *Overland Stage Raiders, 1938,* ended a career in which she had worked with directors and actors who would go on to have great success, including William Wellman, Howard Hawks, Michael Curtiz, Cary Grant and John Wayne. The question regarding the end of Brooks’ acting career is thus not ‘why was Brooks not more successful after her return from Europe?’ Given her self professed hatred of Hollywood and the above mentioned offers of work that she turned down it should be clear that she did not become a film star because she didn’t have any interest in becoming one. The real question to ask of the years 1931 - 1938 is, ‘why did Brooks make *any* films at all after *Prix de beauté?’*

The revival of the Brooks image began with Eisner in 1952. The revival of the films themselves began in 1953 when James Card persuaded Henri Langlois to screen *Pandora’s Box* and *Diary of a Lost Girl.*

> Card’s infatuation with Brooks began long before 1955 – and long lay dormant …

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in French.

[15] Paris, 2000, p.349

[16] Vanity Fair, New York Times, Close Up & unknown review, quoted in: Paris, 2000, pp.305-6

[17] Photoplay, quoted in: Paris, 2000, p.133

> [Langlois] grudgingly consented to project and watch [the films] with Card, if only to take a look at Brooks. Langlois was thunderstruck. Suddenly he wanted to know everything about her. So did Card, and he left the screening room fired anew with the desire to locate her.[18]

At the same time in New York, having considered and rejected both prostitution and suicide, Brooks had converted to Catholicism and was slowly drinking herself out of existence: but a series of important events then occurred. In the summer of 1955 Langlois mounted the *60 Ans de Cinéma* exhibition at the *Musée National d'Art Moderne*. As well as praising Brooks for her naturalness before the camera in the exhibition catalogue, he also erected two huge portraits over the entrance to the exhibtion: one of Renée Falconetti in *La passion de Jeanne d'Arc/The Passion of Joan of Arc, 1928,* and one of Louise Brooks in *Pandora's Box.* Given the relative obscurity of these portraits, especially Brooks', Langlois was asked why he had not put up portraits of Garbo or Dietrich: his response was, "There is no Garbo! There is no Dietrich! There is only Louise Brooks!"[19] Also in 1955 Card wrote to Brooks, visited her, and in 1956 Brooks moved close to Eastman House, Rochester, where Card persuaded her to write about her experience in film, her first article, *Mr Pabst,* appearing in 1956. In 1958 Langlois organised an *Hommage à Louise Brooks* in Paris, in which a number of her films were screened and a reception was held in her honour.

The successful Brooks revival was sustained between 1956 and 1978 by Brooks herself, through a series of articles written for serious film journals such as *Objectif, Sight and Sound,* and *Positif,* and it is through these articles we begin to see the development of the Louise Brooks as we see her today. Following Brooks' own articles, there was the 1977 publication in France of the first book about her, *Louise Brooks: Portrait d'une Anti-Star.* This book was produced with Brooks' help and co-operation, and was translated and published in English in 1986. Kenneth Tynan brought a great deal of attention to Brooks in the popular press with *The Girl in the Black Helmet* in 1979, and in 1989 Barry Paris published a comprehensive biography of Brooks. In late 1994 the Louise Brooks Society was formed and in 1998 the documentary *Louise Brooks: Looking for Lulu,* was directed by Hugh Munro Neeley. The most recent addition to the list of publications about Brooks is Peter Cowie's 2006 pictorial tribute to Brooks, *Louise Brooks: Lulu Forever*.

Since the Eisner/Card/Langlois revival of Brooks in the mid-1950s, and especially since Tynan's *The Girl in the Black Helmet* article appeared in 1979*,* we see Louise Brooks very differently. Rather than the 1920s flapper who played second fiddle to Clara Bow and Colleen Moore and who was praised largely for her beauty, the vision we have today is not quite of Louise Brooks as, "Tynan's drunken whore"[20] but of Louise Brooks as Lulu. Regarding the changing attitudes towards Brooks, Kevin Brownlow points out an interesting alteration between

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[18] Paris, 2000, p.440

[19] Langlois, quoted in Paris, 2000, p.440

[20] Brooks, in a letter to Kevin Brownlow: quoted in: Paris, 2000, p.506

the original and the later editions of Lotte Eisner's *L'Ecran Démonaique*

> Lotte Eisner, in a first edition of *L'Ecran Démonaique,* asked: 'Was Louise Brooks a great artist or only a dazzling creature whose beauty leads the spectator to endow her with complexities of which she herself was unaware?'
> After Miss Brooks had visited Paris, the paragraph was altered. Now it reads: 'Today we know that Louise Brooks is an astonishing actress endowed with an intelligence beyond compare and not only a dazzling creature.'[21]

Eisner had first met Brooks on the set of *Pandora's Box,* and again later in 1958 during Langlois' *Hommage à Louise Brooks,* where they had spent a great deal of time together. In a 1967 memoir entitled *Meetings with Pabst,* Eisner again shows her change of attitude towards Brooks

> In a corner [of the set of *Pandora's Box*] sat a very beautiful girl reading the *Aphorisms* of Schopenhauer in an English translation. It seemed absurd that such a beautiful girl should be reading Schopenhauer, and I thought quite angrily that this was some sly publicity stunt of Pabst's. Some 25 years later, I found out that Louise Brooks really *did* read Schopenhauer.[22]

In the late 1920s Louise Brooks' off-screen persona was constructed by current interviews, photographs, newsreports and reviews in the press. But eighty years later, Brooks' off-screen persona has been recreated in a different light. However, before moving further it is important here to introduce a caveat. Amelie Hastie, in her 1997 article *Louise Brooks, Star Witness,* has correctly observed that, "much of what is said about Brooks can be traced back to single, economical source: Louise Brooks herself."[23] What this means for us is that the three principal sources of information on Brooks, Tynan's *The Girl in the Black Helmet,* Brooks' own writings, collected in *Lulu in Hollywood,* and Paris' *Louise Brooks: A Biography,* should not be treated uncritically as works of dispassionate historical fact, but as works of image construction and reinforcement[24].

There are two themes that today come across most strongly in Brooks' off-screen life: on the one hand is her honesty, truthfulness, candour and intelligence; "[r]elentless in her search for truth … [s]he is completely honest – about herself and with her herself"[25]; on the other hand is her hedonism, ambiguous responses to questions about her alleged bisexuality, and her sexual life; to illustrate, in the index of Paris' biography of her, under the heading of 'Brooks, Louise, sexual life of', there are nearly seventy entries under twenty-one separate sub-headings. This, as we shall see later, allowed her to fuse her identity with that of Lulu.

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[21] Brownlow, 1968, p.356

[22] Eisner, quoted in: Paris, 2000, p.302

[23] Hastie, 1997, p.8

[24] See, Amelie, 1997, p.7-8 for a discussion of the interplay between Brooks, Tynan and Paris. On this subject it is also important to note that Brooks' *Lulu in Hollywood* contains major and minor factual errors, as listed in Paris, 2000, p.553: Appendix: Errata in *Lulu in Hollywood.*

[25] Brownlow, 1968, p.356

Tynan remarks, "[a] shocked Catholic priest once asked Brooks how she felt about playing a sinner like Lulu. 'Feel!' she said gaily. 'I felt fine! It all seemed perfectly normal to me."[26] Later in the same article this fusing of identities is repeated

> On the last day of shooting [Diary of a Lost Girl] 'he [Pabst] let decided to let me have it.' Her friends, he said, were preventing her from becoming a serious actress, and sooner or later they would discard her like and old toy. 'Your life is exactly like Lulu's, and you will end in the same way,' her warned her. The passage of time convinced her that Pabst had a valid point. 'Lulu's story,' she told a journalist, 'is as near as you'll get to mine.'[27]

Both of these quotes that appeared in Tynan's article originally appeared in Brooks' own 1965 article *Pabst and Lulu*[28] and are repeated with only minor changes by Tynan. The following statement by Brooks also links her character with that of Lulu

> I played Pabst's Lulu … and she isn't a destroyer of men, like Wedekind's. She's just the same kind of nitwit that I am. Like me, she'd have been an impossible wife, sitting in bed all day reading and drinking gin.[29]

So important is Pabst's claim to Brooks about her life being exactly like Lulu's that in many ways it is the founding myth upon which the modern image of Louise Brooks is based. Margaret McCarthy reminds us that Brooks, "literally wrote herself out of Lulu's demise with highly intelligent celebrated autobiographical essays, and an afterlife sustained by the support of ardent admirers."[30] What we will see below when discussing Brooks on-screen is the way that in discussions of *Pandora's Box,* critics have been keen to stress the naturalness of Brooks' performance and transparency of her art; thus reinforcing the notion that she did not play the part of Lulu, she simply was Lulu. However, given that the myth of Louise Brooks as Lulu which sustains her star image today was not present in 1955, why was the Brooks revival of the mid-1950s successful? The reasons for its success are, I believe, to do with a change in aesthetic and social attitudes which meant that Brooks would now embody on-screen certain ideas that were considered important, and this I will argue below.

III.

Looking back at Louise Brooks' on-screen performance in *Pandora's Box* we see

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[26] Tynan, in: Brooks 2000, p.xxii

[27] ibid.

[28] in Brooks, 2000, pps.96 & 105

[29] Brooks, quoted in: Tynan, in: Brooks, 2000, p.xxv

[30] McCarthy, 2009, p.222

things very differently[31]: the question is why? There are of course two questions bound up here, namely: why was her performance derided in 1929/30? And; why, since the mid-1950s, has her performance gained increasing appreciation?

There are a number of reasons for the poor reception of Louise Brooks in *Pandora's Box*, the first one simply being that the film was made right at the end of the silent era. In order to recoup the enormous investment that was made in the transition to sound, studios did everything they could to ridicule silent films and promote the new sound films. "From the moment sound arrived, it was commercially useful to dispel the magic of the silent film; they were derided in print and on the screen as ludicrous, technically inept and badly acted. Something merely to be laughed at."[32] Thanks to historians and curators like Kevin Brownlow, Paolo Cherchi Usai and Henri Langlois, cinephiles today have a much greater appreciation and understanding of silent films, but the neophile public of 1929/30, encouraged by the studios, were much more interested in new sound films.

A second reason is contained in Mordaunt Hall's previously quoted *New York Times* review[33] of her performance in *Pandora's Box*: "Miss Brooks is attractive and she moves her head and eyes at the proper moment, but whether she is endeavouring to express joy, woe, anger, or satisfaction is often difficult to decide."[34] This review both explains the reasons for Brooks' lack of appeal in 1929/30 and gives an idea of why her appeal grew from the mid-1950s onwards. It is commonplace to remark on how modern Brooks appears in her films: she looks as much ahead of her time in her films as Bob Dylan does in D.A. Pennebaker's, *Dont Look Back* [sic]*, 1965.* Part of Brooks' modern look is due to her visual appearance, the kind that could be captured in a still photograph. However, the greatest part of the modernity of Brooks' on screen performance is to do with the way she moves and, more importantly, the way she acts (or, perhaps, does not act).

It is evident from the reviews of *Pandora's Box* at the time, and especially evident in Mordaunt Hall's review, that Brooks' acting style was highly problematic and confusing to audiences. It would be legitimate to ask at this point, given the good reviews that she had achieved for her previous films, why this hadn't been a problem beforehand. Some of the reasons for the change in attitude to Brooks' performance could be explained by the recent trend away from silent films, but it could also be explained by the fact that prior to *Pandora's Box,* Brooks was a rising star working for Paramount, and the studio handled much of her publicity

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[31] Brooks was quite aware of the difference that time has on a film. In a letter to Kevin Brownlow, dated March 27th 1966, she wrote, "[w]hen I made *A Social Celebrity* and when I saw it in 1957, it seemed utterly dull and pointless, yet Lotte [Eisner], seeing it in Paris in 1958, found it delightful. Now I see why. She had the historical view of our naïve world that I lacked." (Brooks, quoted in: Paris, 2000, p.134*n*)

[32] Brownlow, in: Usai, 1994, p.1

[33] From *The New York Times*, 2nd December 1929. Reproduced in part in Paris, 2000, p.306

[34] New York Times, quoted in: Paris, 2000, p.306

via press books[35]. It could also be argued that prior to *Pandora's Box,* Brooks was not the sole star of the films; in all of her previous films, including *Beggars of Life, 1928* and *The Canary Murder Case, 1929,* she played alongside established actors, and reviewers were keen to carry on praising her beauty, rather than finely critique her acting skills.

What happened in *Pandora's Box* is that Brooks dominated the screen in a way that she had not done before, and she acted in a manner that would not start to become appreciated for another twenty-five years. It is important to note that Brooks' acting style was not the result of accident; she had clear ideas about the acting styles of the day that she wished to avoid, as she made clear to John Kobal when discussing *A Social Celebrity, 1926,* directed by Malcolm St. Clair and starring Adolphe Menjou

> Mal came from the mugging school of Sennett[36] and he did everything by making faces, and would mug out a scene for me and then send me into the scene, and I would be so embarrassed. I tried my best to please him and yet not to make all these mugging faces that date so terribly, like Adolphe Menjou. You know, the old type of film acting in those days was because of the titles, to establish the emotions, let's say, a flirting leer at the girl. So Menjou would begin the scene by making this hideous, grim expression #7 of a grinning leer, and then he knew they were going to cut to some title and then his face would drop to nothing at all and he would do into his next emotion, and that was the kind of acting that Mal tried to direct. And I felt Mal was a really terrible director, although I thought he was a charming man, a lovely man. In those days anyone could become a director.[37]

André Bazin's *The Evolution of the Language of Cinema* (a composite of three articles written between 1950 and 1955) provides some clues as to the success of the Brooks revival in the mid-1950s. In explaining the superiority of deep focus over montage, Bazin tells us that, "montage by its very nature rules out ambiguity of expression … depth of focus reintroduced ambiguity into the structure of the image, if not of necessity … at least of a possibility."[38] Bazin further notes that

> Depth of focus brings the spectator into a relation with the image closer to that which he enjoys with reality … it implies, consequently, both a more active mental attitude on the part of the spectator and a more positive contribution on his part to the action in progress … here he is called upon to exercise at least a minimum of personal choice. It is from his attention and his will that the meaning of the image in part derives.[39]

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[35] A number of these press books are still extant and can be viewed via the online archive at the Louise Brooks Society. See: http://www.pandorasbox.com/archive.html

[36] Mack Sennett (1880 – 1960), the 'King of Comedy': actor, director, producer and founder of Keystone Studios, most strongly associated with slapstick and the Keystone Cops.

[37] Brooks, quoted in: Paris, 2000, p.134

[38] Bazin, 2004, p.50

[39] ibid.

Here we can clearly see that the ambiguous and ambivalent qualities of Brooks' performance that required interpretation by spectators and were criticised in America in 1929/30 were exactly the kinds of qualities that would begin to be praised in post-WW2 modernist European cinema. Modernism began with Italian neorealism, a movement that heralded a new type of cinema, the time when, for Deleuze, "a cinema of seeing replaces [a cinema of] action."[40] As Thompson and Bordwell point out, "ambiguity is a central effect … in the postwar modernist European film. The film will typically encourage the spectator to speculate on what might otherwise have happened, to fill in the gaps, to try out different interpretations."[41] Thus it seems fair to conclude that Brooks' performances were simply too ambiguous and too ambivalent for popular audiences at the time, and it would have to wait until the rise of the cinephile and the post-war modernist cinema for her performance to be appreciated. As Paris makes clear, "[r]evisionists would later revere Pabst for exploring, 'the uncharted depths of Louise Brooks, who appears serious yet innocent, sensual yet honest, with an ambivalence the screen had never before reflected.' But it was this very ambivalence, for which Pabst had striven, that most annoyed critics at the time."[42]

The positive attitudes towards Brooks' acting are evident from the quotes below

> in Pandora's Box and Diary of a Lost Girl we have the miracle of Louise Brooks. Her gifts of profound intuition may seem purely passive to an inexperienced audience, yet she succeeded in stimulating an otherwise unequal director's talent to the extreme. Pabst's remarkable encounter must thus be seen as an encounter with an actress that needed no directing, but could move across the screen causing a work of art to be born by her mere presence.[43]
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> she was one of the first performers to penetrate the heart of screen acting.[44]
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> Her youthful admirers see in her an actress of brilliance, a luminescent personality.[45]
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> Louise Brooks is the only woman who had the ability to transfigure no matter what film into a masterpiece.[46]
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> she does not care what we think of her. Indeed, she ignores us. We seem to be spying on unrehearsed reality, glimpsing what the great photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson later called "le moment qui se sauve." In the best of her silent films, Brooks - with no conscious intention of doing so - is reinventing the art of screen

[40] Deleuze, 1989, p.9

[41] Thompson & Bordwell, 2003, p.358

[42] Paris, 2000, p.306

[43] Eisner, 1973, p.296

[44] Thompson, quoted in: Tynan, in: Brooks 2000, p.viii

[45] Brownlow, 1968, p.356

[46] Kyroit, quoted in: Tynan, in: Brooks 2000, p.viii

acting.[47]

But the most glowing praise came from Langlois, and whilst it was Brooks' own writings that have dominated the discourses surrounding her off-screen persona, it was Langlois' comments that would come to dominate the way that we would interpret her on-screen persona

> Those who have seen her can never forget her. She is the modern actress par excellence … As soon as she takes the screen, fiction disappears along with art, and one has the impression of being present at a documentary. The camera seems to have caught her by surprise, without knowledge. She is the intelligence of the cinematic process, the perfect incarnation of that which is photogenic; she embodies all that the cinema rediscovered in its last years of silence: complete naturalness and complete simplicity. Her art is so pure that it becomes invisible.[48]

The notion of Langlois' of 'being present at a documentary', of 'the disappearance of fiction', or of Tynan's 'unrehearsed reality' could only make sense if the on-screen Lulu were the same as the off-screen Brooks, and this is exactly the off-screen image that Brooks spent time constructing: thus these two images we have, become over the years interdependent and mutually reinforcing.

But it was not just Brooks' performance style that appealed to the aesthetic tastes of the mid-1950s that made the Brooks revival successful, it was also the social context. It is vital not to forget the importance of social context when considering films and film stars, for, as Richard Dyer makes clear, the appeal of a film star is intricately bound up with what those stars represent and the way in which those representations are felt to be important at the time

> Stars matter because they act out aspects of our life that matter to us; and performers get to be stars when what they act out matters to enough people. Though there is a sense in which stars must touch on things that are deep and constant features of human existence, such features never exist outside a culturally and historically specific context. So, for example, sexual intercourse takes place in all societies, but what sexual intercourse means and how much it matters alters from culture to culture, and within the history of any culture. … [I]n the fifties, there were very specific ideas of what sexuality meant and it was held to matter a great deal; and because Marilyn Monroe acted out those specific ideas, and because they were *felt* to matter so much, she was charismatic, a centre of attention who seemed to embody what was taken to be a central feature of human existence at that time.[49]

At the time of the Brooks revival in the mid-to-late 1950s Marilyn Monroe was at the height of her fame. The ideas of sexuality that were a central part of Monroe's success were also applied to Brooks, and she was presented as an erotic presence on screen, and even overtly linked to Monroe, for "[i]n Paris, the

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[47] Tynan, in: Brooks, 2000, p.xiv

[48] Langlois, quoted in: Tynan, in: Brooks 2000, p.viii

[49] Dyer, 1987, p.19

newspapers were billing her as 'the Marilyn Monroe of the silents.'"[50] Both Monroe and Brooks were praised for their naturalness, Dyer states that Monroe's, "perceived naturalness not only guaranteed the truth of her sexuality … it was also to define and justify that sexuality."[51] Monroe herself stated that, "I think that sexuality is only attractive when it is natural and spontaneous."[52] It was this same naturalness that Langlois praised Brooks for when he said that Brooks, "embodies all that the cinema rediscovered in its last years of silence: complete naturalness and complete simplicity."[53] Lack of naturalness was one of the reasons that Pabst did not want Marlene Dietrich for the part of Lulu, "What she crucially lacked, Pabst felt, was the innocence he wanted for his Lulu. In his own words, 'Dietrich was too old and too obvious - one sexy look and the picture would become a burlesque.'"[54] Regarding Dietrich's unsuitability for the part of Lulu, Margaret McCarthy notes that, "Dietrich's alluring, mature sexuality … was too self-conscious to pass for natural."[55]

Although both Brooks and Monroe derive their appeal from the perceived naturalness of their sexuality, we cannot avoid an awareness of the crucial differences in their personae. Monroe is an obvious and overtly heterosexual icon with a classically feminine figure; Brooks' on-screen and off-screen personas were both ambiguous regarding sexuality, most famously with Lulu and Countess Geschwitz on screen, and with Brooks and Peggy Fears, Fritzi LaVerne and Pepi Lederer off-screen. Paris refers to Brooks cultivating, "an ambivalent, almost coy attutide about lesbianism."[56] Brooks has also been repeatedly described as having an androgynous appearance, of being a "childlike androgyne"[57]; an appearance that is in stark contrast to Monroe's hourglass figure. Hair also becomes key in descriptions of both, for Monroe is typically described as the 'dumb blonde', whereas Brooks is the 'girl in the black helmet.' The 'dumb blonde' idea so often applied to Monroe reveals two further oppositions: if we take dumb to mean stupid (which, in contrast to her popular image, Monroe was not), then immediately the opposition with the intelligence always ascribed to Brooks' is evident; but if we take dumb to mean mute, then we can oppose this with Brooks' voice, which through the key texts that tell her story is always audible.

Most significantly we find that the word 'erotic' is frequently applied to Brooks, a word that does not seem to fit well when applied to Monroe, for Monroe's appeal

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[50] Paris, 2000, p.458

[51] Dyer, 1987, p.32

[52] Monroe, quoted in: Dyer, 1987, p.32

[53] Langlois, quoted in: Tynan, in: Brooks, 2000, p.viii

[54] Tynan, in: Brooks, 2000, p.xix

[55] McCarthy, 2009, p.221

[56] Paris, 2000, p.416

[57] McCarthy, 2009, p.221

is to a more straightforward and adolescent heterosexuality, whereas Brooks' is to a more mature and perhaps voyeuristic sexuality. In her article *The Erotic Barter,* Mary Ann Doane[58] collects together a number of excerpts responding to the erotic presence of Brooks on screen

> From that eroticism which reunites sensuality and love, tenderness and cruelty, Louise Brooks forms that first cinematographic experience (Charles Jameux)

> The success of Pabst lies first and foremost in the nuanced art with which he sumptuously deploys the ensemble of magical qualities of Louise Brooks: firm flesh and satin skin, the looks as smiles bewitching sweetness of a being consecrated to the exaltation of the instant, to the plenitude of pleasure (Raymond Borde & Francis Courtade)

> In this "realist" drama, the "metaphysical meaning" is only suggested through the simultaneously guileless and demonic character of a girl whose eroticism is in the image of the sinister seductions of the night (Jean Mitry)

As we can see, although tapping into our notions of sexuality, Brooks is not presented like Monroe as an unthreatening vision of sexuality suitable for consumption by an inexperienced or uninitiated audience, rather her status as the 'Monroe of the silents' is as a darker vision of sexuality. Just as Lulu is both the object of Dr Schön's desire and his killer, so Brooks offers us more pleasures than Monroe, but makes us aware that behind those pleasures lie dangers as well. Dyer suggests that Monroe is "[u]nthreatening, vulnerable, … available, on offer."[59] He also suggests that her vulnerability, "may call forth any number of responses, including empathy and protectiveness as well as sadism."[60] If Monroe attracts the sadist, perhaps Brooks appeal is to the masochist. The following passage from Géorge Bataille's *Eroticism* (published in France in 1957, the year in between Langlois' *60 Ans de Cinéma* and his *Hommage à Louise Brooks*) could have been written for Schön and Lulu, for at the moment that Schön enters the bedroom during his wedding reception and finds his bride, Lulu, with Alwa's head on her lap and Schigolch and Rodrigo drinking and making merry, he knows that Lulu is beyond possession, and as Bataille observes

> Possession of the beloved object does not imply death, but the idea of death is linked with the urge to possess. If the lover cannot possess the beloved he will sometimes think of killing her; often he would rather kill her than lose her. Or else he may wish to die himself.[61]

Later in the same scene, at the moment of Schön's death, the following line from de Sade that is stressed by Bataille seems particularly appropriate

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[58] 1990, p.70

[59] Dyer, 1987, p.49

[60] ibid.

[61] Bataille, 1987, p.20

"There is no better way to know death than to link it with some licentious image"[62]

As well as differences in aesthetic tastes and social conditions, there was another important change that helped the Brooks revival; a change in the audience. Eisner acknowledges this when she says that Brooks' "gifts of profound intuition may seem purely passive to an inexperienced audience."[63] To explain this let us return briefly to Brownlow's observation regarding the changes in Eisner's *L'Ecran Démonaique,* and to consider the change in the type of spectator that would typically view *Pandora's Box.* Eisner begins by asking a question: "Was Louise Brooks a great artist or only a dazzling creature whose beauty leads the spectator to endow her with complexities of which she herself was unaware?"[64] After spending time in Paris with Brooks, Eisner then removes the question and replaces it with a statement: 'Today we know that Louise Brooks is an astonishing actress endowed with an intelligence beyond compare and not only a dazzling creature."[65] We have not met the 'real' Louise Brooks that Eisner met, but we have come to know Louise Brooks through her writings and through their extended reach, and Eisner's question that might also have been our question is replaced by a belief in Louise Brooks for both Eisner and for us. This highlights an important shift in audience type that has helped sustain the star image of Brooks, as the typical viewer of a Brooks film is likely to be interested in and knowledgeable about film history, and may well be viewing the film because they know something about her, and are interested in finding out more. One might well object to the idea that the general viewer has a good knowledge of the off-screen Louise Brooks. Indeed this is a perfectly viable objection when considering the original audience: however, her audience today are a specialised cine-literate cinephile audience who, in virtue of the fact that they are still watching silent movies, have a keen interest in film history and are likely to pursue this interest in the films they watch well beyond the boundaries of the film text itself. To illustrate how the modern cinephile audience are connecting the off-screen and the on-screen Louise Brooks one need only consider the American DVD release of Pandora's Box: as well as the film itself, which is offered with the choice of four different musical scores and an audio commentary by film academics Mary Ann Doane and Thomas Elsaesser, it also contains, amongst other things, two documentaries, *Louise Brooks: Looking for Lulu*, and *Lulu in Berlin* and reprints of Tynan's *The Girl in the Black Helmet* and Brooks' *Pabst and Lulu*. Thus the modern viewer of *Pandora's Box* is invited to get to know Louise Brooks and to dispel any thoughts that she might have been, "only a dazzling creature whose beauty leads the spectator to endow her with complexities of which she herself was unaware?"[66]

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[62] de Sade, quoted in: Bataille, 1987, p.11

[63] Eisner, 1973, p.296

[64] Eisner, quoted in: Brownlow, 1968, p.356

[65] ibid.

[66] ibid.

IV.

As has been stated, in the mid-1950s James Card began the full scale resurrection of Louise Brooks. What was important about what Card did was that he did not limit himself to the restoration of Brooks' films, which is where we might expect the work of a film curator to end, but he also found and brought back into the public sphere the real Louise Brooks, and persuaded her to write about her experience in film, thus helping to bring into existence the popular idea of Louise Brooks through her autobiographical writings and interviews. Card understood the tripartite character of the film star, the fact that a film star is simultaneously a filmic presence on-screen, a collection of extra-textual off-screen material, and a real person who can give interviews, write memoirs, etc. It was the fact that Card paid attention to all three of these elements that brought into existence the film star Louise Brooks, to whom Brooks then fused her most famous character; Lulu. What this illustrates quite clearly is the importance of the extra-textual identity of a film star.

But how is it that an actor can fuse their identity so strongly with a character they played in a film. The answer, I believe, lies in the fact that both Lulu and Louise Brooks are not simply a character in a film and an actor, rather they are both ideas; or, more accurately, personifications of ideas. Most people have never met Louise Brooks, but those who have read about her and seen her films have an idea about who she is and what she was like. Our idea of Louise Brooks is created not through our acquaintance with a person, but through our acquaintance with constructed media texts, her films, photographs, biographical material, etc. Thus our impression of Brooks is not generated from the 'real' Brooks, but is created from certain works whose purpose it is to present a certain idea of Brooks. This is not surprising, but what helps to fuse Brooks and Lulu is that Lulu is not really a character, but an idea also. As her creator, Frank Wedekind stated

> "Lulu is not a real character … but the personification of primitive sexuality who inspires evil unaware."[67]

This personification that applied to Lulu could also, through a series of autobiographical works, be made to apply to Brooks; and just as Lulu comes to represent certain idea about sexuality, so our idea of Louise Brooks comes to represent those same ideas: thus Louise Brooks and Lulu become one. It is perhaps stretching things too far to claim that Brooks inspires evil unaware, but Lulu and Brooks certainly share the personification of primitive sexuality (i.e., an uncomplicated sexuality, free from the distortion and repression by social norms and taboos). The difference is that Brooks is Pabst's Lulu, rather than Wedekind's, for as Tynan points out, "[w]here the Pabst-Brooks version of the Lulu story differs from the others is in its moral coolness. It assumes neither the existence of sin nor the necessity for retribution. It presents a series of events in which all the participants are seeking happiness, and it suggests that Lulu, whose

[67] Wedekind, quoted in: Paris, 2000, p.288

notion of happiness is momentary fulfillment through sex, is not less admirable than those whose quest is for wealth or social advancement."[68]

Brooks' *post factum* success as a film star has been remarkable. She has, as Brownlow suggested, "emerged most triumphantly … [from] the silent era."[69] Brooks has even had considerable inter-textual success: most notably she has been the inspiration for characters in comic strips, as Dixie Dugan in John Streibel's *Show Girl* and as Valentina Rosselli in Guido Crepax's *Valentina,* and as Faustine in Adolpho Bioy Casares' Book *The Invention of Morel.* Brooks is also said to have been the inspiration for female characters in many films; most famously for Anna Karina playing Nana in Godard's *Vivre sa vie*, *1962,* and for Liza Minnelli playing Sally Bowles in *Cabaret*, *1972.* Melanie Griffith's character in *Something Wild*, *1986,* whose real name is Audrey Hankel, also sports a Brooks bob and goes by the name of Lulu.

There are also the links with German philosophers: as well as Brooks' well known interest in Schopenhauer, Roland Jaccard makes some interesting connections between Lulu, Louise Brooks, Freidrich Nietzsche and Lou Andréas-Salomé

> We can say about Lou Andréas-Salomé exactly what Freddy Buache said about Louise Brooks, Lulu's unforgettable interpreter: 'Louise Brooks, a vine-like woman, assaults statues, dismantles the stones of temples, winds herself around columns and comes out on top of the wall, proclaiming by virtue of her own devouring purity, the victory of innocence and mad love over the debilitating wisdom imposed on society, by churches, nations and families.[70]
>
> Lulu, like Lou Andréas-Salomé, by her mere presence reduced this tense restraint, behind which the men and the women of her time hid, to a grotesque mockery.[71]
>
> She [Lulu] alone is capable of living out Nietzsche's words, 'Everything that is created by love is above good and evil'[72]

The connections with Salomé and Nietzsche are not quite as tenuous as might be first imagined. Salomé was Nietzsche's friend, and possibly his lover, and she had met Wedekind in Paris in 1894. Jaccard[73] notes that the choice of the name Lulu came from Lou Salomé, and although he feels that, "even though there is strange similarity between the figure of Lulu and the devastating charm of Lou Salomé, the analogy remains a superficial one,"[74] he still describes Brooks as the,

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[68] Tynan, in: Brooks, 2000, p.xix-xx

[69] Brownlow, 1968, p.356

[70] Jaccard, 1986, p.140

[71] ibid.

[72] ibid. p.30

[73] ibid. p.33

[74] ibid.

"spiritual daughter of Lou Andréas-Salomé."[75] Perhaps we might suggest that despite being inspired in part by Salomé, it was actually Brooks who had more in common with Salomé than Lulu.

Louise Brooks' greatest performance was not in playing the part of Lulu, but in persuading the world that she wasn't playing a part at all, that she simply was Lulu. But it was also in being something else, something more important. What I would ultimately like to conclude synthesizes the ideas of Henri Langlois, Lotte Eisner and Richard Dyer, and provides an answer to Eisner's question "Was Louise Brooks a great artist or only a dazzling creature whose beauty leads the spectator to endow her with complexities of which she herself was unaware?"[76] The answer is that Louise Brooks was a great artist, and a dazzling creature, whose art was so invisible that the cinema screen became a *tabula rasa* upon which the deepest and most constant elements of human society could be projected: ideas of love, sexual desire, erotic pleasure, possession, and death. And it is this that is the source of her enduring appeal.

Filmography (Chronological Listing)

Die Busche der Pandora/Pandora's Box, dir. G.W. Pabst, 1929.

Das Tagebuch einer Verlorenen/Diary of a Lost Girl, dir. G.W Pabst, 1929.

Prix de beauté/Beauty Prize (aka, Miss Europe), dir. Augusto Genina, 1930

Lulu in Berlin, dirs. Richard Leacock & Susan Woll, 1984.

Louise Brooks: Looking for Lulu, dir. Hugh Munro Neeley, 1998.

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[75] ibid. p.18

[76] Eisner, quoted in: Brownlow, 1968, p.356

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