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Antonia Lant, *Blackout: Reinventing Women for Wartime British Cinema*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1991.
Andy Medhurst, 'That Special Thrill: *Brief Encounter*, Homosexuality and Authorship', *Screen*, Vol. 32, No. 2, Summer 1991.

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Melanie Williams

Die Büchse der Pandora/Pandora's Box (1929)

[Country: Germany. Production Company: Nero Film. Director: Georg Wilhelm Pabst. Screenwriter: Ladislaus Vajda. Cinematographer: Günther Kampf. Art Directors: Andrei Andreiev and Gottlieb Hesch. Cast: Louise Brooks (Lulu), Fritz Kortner (Dr Ludwig Schön), Carl Goetz (Schigolch), Francis Lederer (Alwa Schön), Krafft-Raschig (Rodrigo Quast), Michael V. Newlinsky (Marquis Casti-Piani), Gustav Diesel (Jack the Ripper), Siegfried Arno (Stage Manager), Alice Roberts (Countess Geschwitz) and Daisy D'ora (Charlotte Marie Adelaide).]

Synopsis: Lulu is a beautiful woman with a mysterious past. Raised by the drunkard Schigolch, a pimp and possibly her father, she becomes the mistress of a wealthy and respectable newspaper editor, Dr Ludwig Schön (Fritz Kortner). Schigolch introduces Lulu to Rodrigo Quast, who offers her a role in his variety show. Dr Schön gets engaged to his secretary, Charlotte. Hoping to keep Lulu despite his engagement, Dr Schön persuades his son Alwa to cast Lulu in his revue instead. Refusing to perform in front of Dr Schön's fiancée, Lulu takes him backstage and seduces him at a rehearsal. Caught in the act, Dr Schön is socially disgraced and forced to marry Lulu. The Countess Geschwitz (Alice Roberts) is also attracted to Lulu. Things get out of hand when Dr Schön 'catches' Lulu with Schigolch at their wedding reception. Mistaking them for lovers, Dr Schön asks Lulu to shoot herself but it is

he who gets killed. On trial for murder, Lulu escapes with Schigolch's help, with Rodrigo Quast, Countess Geschwitz and Alwa as accomplices. The Marquis Casti-Piani recognises Lulu, on the run on a train. He blackmails and lures her into his ship, a gambling den. Alwa squanders his wealth. The Marquis shows Lulu's pictures to an Egyptian brothel-owner. Sensing a deal, Lulu tricks Geschwitz and Quast into helping her as she escapes with Schigolch and Alwa on a boat. The starving trio drift to London on Christmas Eve. Hunger drives Lulu to prostitution, leading her to Jack the Ripper, who proves to be her final undoing.

Pandora's Box gets its title from the Greek myth in which Pandora unknowingly opens a box full of evils. Frank Wedekind's two plays *Erdgeist* (The Spirit of the Earth, 1895) and *Die Büchse der Pandora* (1904) recast the mythical Pandora as Lulu, a woman who destroys men without intending to. The plays acquired enormous cultural significance as Germany struggled with rapid political, economic and social transformations during the Weimar Era (1919–33). Several theatrical and filmic adaptations of Wedekind's plays emerged soon after they were published.¹ Asta Nielsen starred in a 1923 silent version directed by Leopold Jessner, which was based on his own stage production of 1911. Such adaptations display a characteristic concern with modernity as a traumatic experience marked by a dangerous encounter with female

sexuality, a key trope of Weimar cinema. Together with *Joyless Street* (1925), *Diary of Lost Girl* (1929) and *The Blue Angel* (1930), *Pandora's Box* is often cited as one of the most representative melodramas of the Weimar Era. Louise Brooks' dark bobbed hair became a superlative icon of the New Woman, earning her the sobriquet of 'the girl with the black helmet'.² Brooks published her recollections in several articles and interviews that revived her as a silent film star who acquired a cult following: 'There was no Dietrich, there was no Garbo, there is only Louise Brooks', remarked Henri Langlois in a comment that encapsulates her unrivalled appeal as an androgynous, sexually liberated flapper girl.³

However, it is important to note that such celebration did not become the norm until the late fifties. A contemporary German review wrote Brooks off rather quickly: 'Louise Brooks cannot act. She does not suffer. She does nothing'.⁴ Though unflattering, this is a telling remark in that G. W. Pabst's Lulu does not apologise for her actions – she is unafraid to seek what she desires, whether it is food, sex or money. For Wedekind, Lulu represents an uninhibited, animalistic sensuousness while for G. W. Pabst, she represents evil's universal appeal. Both were drawn to Lulu precisely because she defied conventional definitions of evil: it is the reason why she is so alluring. Pabst's film was significantly different from the earlier silent version: in Brooks' words, 'Only five years earlier the famous Danish actress Asta Nielsen had condensed Wedekind's play into the moral prostitute film *Loulou*. There was no lesbianism in it, no incest. Loulou the man-eater devoured her sex victims – and then dropped dead in an acute attack of [moral] indigestion'.⁵

Pabst wastes little time to begin the film with a tableau that immediately establishes Lulu's extraordinary desirability. Lulu is the mistress of a middle-aged newspaper baron, Dr Schön. We first see her as a provocatively dressed woman who cavorts with a drunk, ageing Schigolch in a loose peignoir as he eyes her lecherously. It is clear that she has known Schigolch all her life. She sits in his lap with an easy familiarity and dances seductively in front of him as they reminisce about their past. She introduces Schigolch to the meter man outside her apartment as her 'first patron' in a turn of phrase

that suggests that Schigolch is a pimp. As Dr Schön lets himself into their apartment, Lulu hides Schigolch as if he were a former lover.

The entire exchange sets Lulu up as an object accessible to a range of men, irrespective of age, class or kinship. Schigolch is her symbolic father but he tries to claim her like an incestuous lover. Dr Schön is old enough to be her father but makes love to Lulu by the end of the first sequence. Incest is again apparent in a scene at their wedding reception, where, enraged at finding Schigolch on their nuptial bed, Dr Schön ironically hands her a pistol and orders her to kill herself. In a visible loss of power, the pistol – clearly a phallic symbol – goes off in Lulu's hands, knocking Dr Schön dead. The resulting image defines Lulu as a *femme fatale* even as it positions Alwa as an infantile Oedipal son who usurps his father's place.

But Pabst does not leave it there. In a sequence that precedes the wedding, he is unabashed in his introduction of Countess Geschwitz as the woman who falls for Lulu. Geschwitz is the antithesis of Dr Schön's fiancée, Charlotte, whose wispy blond hair and faraway look mark her as a sentimental icon of femininity. Geschwitz, on the other hand, is introduced as Alwa's 'buddy'; she is unafraid of male company. Her cropped hair mimics Lulu's but the resemblance ends there. Unlike Lulu's ebony, gleaming crown of hair, hers is blond and tightly curled, while her breeches and tight jacket highlight a tightly reined in masculine personality. Transfixed by Lulu as she sets eyes on her, there is no confusion about Geschwitz's sexual desire; rather, the problem stems from her inability to express it clearly. To make matters worse, Lulu does not return her love. In Pabst's hands, this encounter is never reduced to a self-congratulatory scene of lesbianism. Instead, it reveals the complex but ambiguous nature of Lulu's sexual appeal, ironically noting Geschwitz's powerlessness. Pabst layers these sequences with shots that capture Lulu's innocence through her carefree movements and gestures; none of them openly solicit her lovers' desire. They fall for her because of her sexual magnetism.

Indeed, Pabst cast the very American Brooks in the by-then very German character of Lulu because of her candid and unaffected portrayal of sexuality. He believed that the overexposed

Marlene Dietrich would reduce Lulu's part 'to a burlesque'.⁶ While he was very well respected in Germany, Pabst was not as well-known in Hollywood. Paramount immediately turned down his request to loan Brooks for *Pandora's Box* as she was still under contract. It was only when Brooks quit the studio over a salary dispute that Pabst was finally able to cast her. Disgust at the American studio system led Brooks to foreign waters – like Garbo, Brooks' gay personal life (in both senses of the word) and iconoclasm fuelled intense gossip about her bisexuality.

Brooks' collaboration with Pabst was riddled by a tense relationship that carries over into Brooks' alluring portrayal of Lulu's destructive impact on whosoever falls in love with her. In fact, Brooks claims that she never acted for the role, but just 'played herself'.⁷ Trained in the Denishawn dance academy, Brooks was graceful to a fault. Pabst let her movements and her costume do the acting, a device so effective that contemporary audiences rightfully felt that she 'did nothing'.⁸ Indeed, Brooks' performance of Lulu can be seen as an allegory of the film star's irresistible visual appeal. Brooks essentially plays herself when she acts as the impossibly attractive showgirl who revels in being seen. Pabst exemplifies this quality in a sequence where Lulu rehearses for Alwa's revue: everyone wants to look at her, a feature that is at the core of a cinematic image that is irrepressibly linked to feminine beauty.⁹

Above all, *Pandora's Box* documents a world thrown into sudden ideological crisis and moral flux with no secure ground to fall back on. Formally, it is dominated by indoor shots that evoke a sense of unremitting claustrophobia and entrapment, with few or almost no outdoor sequences. Interiors are bathed in high-contrast lighting that is striking in its avoidance of intimacy: close-ups conceal more than they reveal. Visually, it is pervaded by harsh, glamorous, brightly lit but cold surfaces. Exact details are generally excluded – the camera moves restlessly between disconnected objects whose meaning is not immediately apparent. Looks between Lulu and Schigolch, Lulu and Dr Schön, Lulu and Alwa, Lulu and Geschwitz rarely culminate in full eye contact, rendering cinematic meaning incomplete. The spectator is left searching for a point of contact or identification – a sequence

on an open boat is shrouded in mist and fog; a scene on the train is so tightly framed that actors have barely any room to move. The camera teases by refusing to deliver what it promises: should viewers sympathise with Lulu or should they chastise her? Is Lulu responsible for her ruin?

There is no final answer: instead, Lulu and Dr Schön are often framed against mirrors or paintings that distort, dwarf or overwhelm their presence. Pabst holds an unflattering mirror to his characters, singling out the worst for biting ridicule, yet his style refuses to conform to a traditional melodramatic style that polarises good and evil. His approach cannot be reduced to a sympathetic identification with any single moral exemplar. Lulu emerges as an enigma that is simultaneously attractive and repelling. Pabst refuses to sentimentalise her – this is apparent in the final segment where she meets the fearful Jack the Ripper. The lighting is soft but unrelentingly mysterious and threatening. For the first time, Lulu openly solicits a client, saying that she 'likes him'. Instead of portraying this episode as her comeuppance, Pabst treats it as the final expression of Lulu's love, conflating death with ecstasy, fulfilment, and rest. Lulu does not suffer.

Notes

1. Thomas Elsaesser, 'Lulu and The Meter Man: Louise Brooks, G. W. Pabst and *Pandora's Box*', in *Weimar Cinema and After: Germany's Historical Imaginary*, London, Routledge, 2000, pp. 259–92, p. 264 in particular.
2. Kenneth Tynan, 'The Girl with the Black Helmet', originally published in *the New Yorker* (11 June 1979). Reprinted in a booklet included with the DVD compilation of *Pandora's Box* (Criterion, 2006), pp. 20–73.
3. Louise Brooks, 'Pabst and Lulu', originally published in *Sight and Sound* (Summer 1965). Reprinted in *Pandora's Box* (Criterion, 2006), pp. 74–93. See *Looking for Lulu* (Directed by Hugh Munro Neeley, 1988) included in *Pandora's Box* (Criterion, 2006).
4. Quoted in Tynan, 'The Girl with the Black Helmet', p. 46.
5. Brooks, 'Pabst and Lulu', p. 76.

6. Brooks, 'Pabst and Lulu', p. 78.
7. Tynan, 'The Girl with the Black Helmet', p. 32.
8. Quoted in Tynan, 'The Girl with the Black Helmet', p. 46.
9. For a detailed discussion of this point, see Mary Ann Doane, 'The Erotic Barter: *Pandora's Box* (1929)', in Eric Rentschler (ed.), *The Films of G.W. Pabst: An Extraterritorial Cinema*, New Brunswick and London, Rutgers University Press, 1990, pp. 62–79.

Further reading

Lotte H. Eisner, 'Pabst and the Miracle of Louise Brooks: *Pandora's Box*, *Diary of a Lost Girl*, Censorship and Pabst's Realism', in *The Haunted Screen: Expressionism in the German Cinema and the Influence of Max Reinhardt*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1956, pp. 295–308.

Amelie Hastie, 'Louise Brooks, Star Witness', *Cinema Journal*, Vol. 36, No. 3, Spring 1997, pp. 3–24.

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Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, Revised edition, 2004.

Carrie J. Preston, 'Posing Modernism: Delsartism in Modern Dance and Silent Film', *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 61, No. 2, May 2009, pp. 213–33.

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