PANDORA’S BOX:
A Movie is Being Watched

Jon Wagner
Those who have seen her can never forget her. She is the modern actress par excellence... She is the intelligence of the cinematographic 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.

Henri Langlois

Incarnation bouleversante de la “beauté fatale” selon l’esthétique de l’expressionnisme allemand, Louise Brooks est aussi, est surtout la seule actrice de l’histoire de cinéma qui se soit toujours insurgée contre cette novelle forme d’idolatrie qui tend à réduire l’idéal humain—et singulièrement l’idéal féminine—a la copie conforme d’une image a laquelle chacun pourrait s’identifier sans risque.

Roland Jaccard

Pabst’s remarkal evolution must thus be seen as an encounter with an actress who needed no directing, but could move across the screen causing the work of art to be born by her mere presence. Louise Brooks, always enigmatically impassive, overwhelmingly exists...

Lotte Eisner

The phenomenon of Louise Brooks, American star of G.W. Pabst’s silent film *Pandora’s Box* (1929), elegantly strolls an edge of modern critical appreciation which defines a place of quintessential movie stardom, an actress presented and signed by cinema itself, and which prefigures a void of difference, which makes of Louise Brooks’ Lulu the *sine qua non* of spectatorial irrelevance, she upon whom the gaze returns undone. This duality of regard toward the “miracle” of Brooks’ performance, a performance seemingly performed by the screen itself in defiance of secondary identification, totals a certain cancellation, or to use Freud’s phrase “a certain tendency towards zero,” a tendency I would like to argue is precise not only in summation of the narrative teleology of *Pandora’s Box*, but especially for the curious sophisticiation of the position the film grants, or denies, the spectator—a spectorial position equivalent to the film’s diegesis and the historic refusal of idolatry by its star.

In “Sickness Unto Death: Terminal Film,” I defined the imbrication of self in subjective spectacle as the signifying practice of cinema, cinema’s apparent subjectivity a re-presentation of the imaginary drive of the subject/spectator to subjective/symbolic processes. The endless demand of a subject’s desire for recognition, for satisfactory response, sets up a matrix of secondary identification with narrative representation that presents as its other term a potential and, in the last instance, an opportunity for spectatorial despair—a perspective on spectatorial intent that presents itself as formally hopeless, i.e. gratuitous. Desire exhibited in spectatorial despair, alienated in obsessive otherness as the difference between itself—its representation—and itself—its exhibition—can define a properly cinematic object—an alienated unity. If an alienated unity—a Lulu for instance, suffused with the Brooks persona and legend—can define a character of characteristic of cinema, then a unity of alienation can define spectatorship in its imaginary drive for secondary identification with the screen. But when the cinema begins to signify itself, its apparent subjectivity exhibited to itself in a display of the imaginary as secondary, of the voyeuristic gaze as object of the exhibited gaze, then cinema is in “despair,” witness to a self-consciousness that is, then, lethal, terminally ill. Spectatorial identification is no longer a suturing code, but the diegesis of the film itself. Terminal film is about spectatorship, and in this metalogical sense, about the death drive, the ends of desire as the end of desire.

In her essay “Pabst and Lulu,” Louise Brooks writes of the final sequence of *Pandora’s Box*:

It is in the worn and filthy garments of the streetwalker that [Lulu] feels passion for the first time—comes to life so that she may die. When she picks up Jack the Ripper on the foggy London
street and he tells her he has no money to pay her, she says, “Never mind. I like you.” It is Christmas Eve, and she is about to receive the gift that has been her dream since childhood. Death by a sexual maniac.5

Regardless of its relevance as a description of Lulu’s motivation, Brooks’ linkage of sexuality and death describes quite precisely the dialectical terms of the death drive and pinpoints its motivation.

The death drive is introduced by Freud in his 1919 essay “A Child is Being Beaten,” a meditation on neurotic fantasies of spectatorial positioning primarily in women. Freud offers an hysterical syllogism according to the neurotic logic of his patients:

1. My father is beating the child whom I hate;
2. I am being beaten by my father;
3. A child is being beaten.6

In its articulation of spectatorship as a theater of reflexive masochism, this formulation indicates the traumatic nature of a “propping” which not only implies the metaphoric drive of the erotic, but displaces it in a metonymy of obsessive confrontation with the unbearable, a positioning of Thanatos, the death drive. Freud details a traumatic maneuver to preserve anonymity which on the level of the voyeuristic serves as an analogy for spectatorship at a terminal point where the erotics of the gaze displays its own desperation.

To reformulate, if the screen is exhibiting a gaze I can’t bear to meet, and if the screen is exhibiting my gaze, then a movie is being watched: my voyeuristic intent depends on a poetics of “hidden” exhibition, an exchange of looking represented in a narrative that looks like me, but not at me. I preserve my spectatorship only by displacing the diegesis of my gaze beyond identification toward a pure metonymic spectacle which denies my metaphoric trauma and exhibits itself as gratuitous, deadly on its own scopophilic terms.

In his essay “Why the Death Drive,” Jean Laplanche writes

Every living being aspires to death by virtue of its most fundamental internal tendency, and the diversity of life, as observed in its multifarious forms, never does anything but reproduce a series of transformations determined in the course of evolution, a series of adventitious detours provoked by any one of a number of traumas or supplementary obstacles: the organism wants not simply to die, but “to die in its own way.”7

On a profoundly superficial level, this description of the life drive, or Eros—that gatherer, as Laplanche says, of “richer and more complex unities”—in masochistic tandem with the death drive, or Thanatos, serves spectacularly well as a description of Pabst’s editing style of fluid fragmentation, stylized chiaroscuro lighting, and of the narrative characterization of Lulu herself. Lulu gets what she wants, and far from the theatrical portrayal of man-eating fatality she embodies in the Wedekind plays from which Pandora’s Box is derived, this Lulu dies cinematically, as an object of the film’s extraordinary style of nefarious multifariousness, at the limit, the zero point, of alienated unification, where death is achieved as “a triumph of the vital and the homostatic,” out of a multiplicity whose formulaic drive is the masochistic pleasure of unpleasure. “For the death drive does not possess its own energy. Its energy is libido. Or better put, the death drive is the very soul, the constitutive principle, of libidinal circulation.”8

The erotic representation or narration of traumatic encounter is, in many ways, the erotic itself, “the essentially traumatic nature of human sexuality” as a prop against overwhelming loss, a confrontation, as desire, with lack. Freud’s Beyond the Pleasure Principle (1920), a meditation on the dialectic of the erotic and the deadly, informs Laplanche’s reconsideration of the death drive and, more specific to cinema, informs Walter Benjamin’s ontology of the cinema in
"The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." Citing Freud’s observation that the rejection of stimuli is perhaps a more important function of the organism than the reception of stimuli, Benjamin concludes that cinema is a spectacular training device for a population whose historical context demands a dispossession, a distanciation, a fall from authentic contemplation into spectatorship, into a unity of alienated observation which will allow this population to represent its historical experience under the sign of the endurable. Already, Benjamin suggests, cinema emerges terminally, out of the necessity to strip representation of its humanism, of its aura, its divine right to authenticity. Man becomes an object of himself, trained to survive the destructive fury of his own explosively multiple means of presenting the ec-centric. Cinema, then, is already a formal ec-stasy, ecstatic in the same way that spectatorial positioning is a triumphantly distant perspective on the erotic, the pleasure, the grief, of historical unpleasure.

Spectatorship as a unity of alienated intentionality toward a screen of masochistic representation, of alienated unification, presents cinema as cinema, not yet that termination of historical spectatorship which presents spectatorship as cinema. Classical cinema is, as Dudley Andrews calls Griffith’s Broken Blossoms, a "vulnerable text," open to intense spectatorial assault, scopophilic identification with the exchange of glances which structures cinematic narrative. In "Broken Blossoms: The Vulnerable Text and the Marketing of Masochism," Andrew says,

If, in the conventions of cinema, glances are a prelude to the violence of narrative movement and action, if they invest characters and objects with differential value and vectorize the photographic space, then we must say of Lucy that she has internalized her desire by gazing only at herself, through the complexity of self-referring objects which ultimately condense into the hand mirror.
that absorbs her desire. The essential passivity of this response to the world cuts her off from positive action and makes her vulnerable to those at whose glare she casts down her eyes. It makes her, we must admit, vulnerable to our own intense view which seems as intimate and as close-up as we like.9

The “vulnerable text” of classical cinema is a regime that is watched, a structure of mimetic subjectivity that places the spectator as an object of secondary identification in suturing representation of imaginary drives, just as Münsterberg presumed. Classical cinema is a regime that allows a certain suspension of desire in sublimation, a text for “whom” we rival with tremendous success our own existential panic in voyeurizing that lost-object-quest up there. As Andrew’s rhetoric suggests, the classical masochistic text positions a sadistic, a meta-masochistic, spectator for whom the structure of film “prompts us to revere” in the close-ups of Lillian Gish a representation which “has displaced our drives in a delirious onanistic act of self-consuming sublimation.”10

The reflexive masochism of the classical text is a spectatorial one, a position of fatal sublimation that, as Benjamin predicts, makes of self-contemplation self-immolation. Benjamin explores this tendency into the fascist aesthetics of cultural holocaust and misjudges, I think, just as Andrews elides it, the astonishingly rapid sophistication of film beyond substitute fatality toward the terminal projection of death as the object, “the soul,” of the erotic gaze. At this stage, a filmic Götterdämmerung assumes spectatorship into its own text, exhibits desire at last out, up there in a sadistic relationship with its industrial/cultural project to desire us out here. The vulnerable text of terminal film is the spectator, its regime one of being watched. Terminal structuration does not so much represent the imaginary construct of subjectivity for secondary consumption but presents this traumatic memesis entire to itself beyond tragic recuperation. Indicating its own subjective ruse, terminal film presents gratuitously the spectator
unity of alienation as an alienated unity, as a cinematic object. Terminal films dies “in its own way.”

Louise Brooks, then, is a movie star, but apocalyptic as Lulu, a superstar gone nova. Her subsequent defection for the screen, from an idolatry with which identification is accomplished without risk, is a defection of the screen itself into the kind of proto-filmic gaze Andrews ascribes to Lillian Gish in Broken Blossoms. Pandora’s Box, in the supremely elegant historical context of its star’s biography, and especially on the eve of the general recuperation of the myth of total cinema by the medium itself in sound, accomplishes for the silent period a terminality that is only now reappearing in “replicant” cinema. Of Pabst’s classical parody of cutting for continuity on shattered movement, Kracauer accuses this “interest in reality as a steady flow” as “symptomatic of Pabst’s desire to withdraw from his advanced position”11 of realistic “waver between” and objectification of Weimar’s images of “tyranny and chaos.” It is as if Pabst propped classical stylization at its near-birth on itself and in so doing produced the auto-thanatopic miracle of Lulu.

Like Falconetti in Dryer’s The Passion of Joan of Arc, Lillian Gish in Broken Blossoms invites consumption by the gaze, and identification with that consumption. Louise Brooks as Lulu invites spectatorial aggression, or grasping, not as self-consuming gaze, but by refusing the gaze, literally displacing its intention and denying its identification. This refusal is her character, her image, and Brooks’ legend. Lulu gazes through herself in her introductory close-up with the mirror, in the “Gentlemen of the Jury, look at this woman!” close-ups at her trial, in the mirror at her apartment after her flight from the trial—shots which mirror the scopic reflexivity of the murder sequence and the backstage sequence. Lulu not only gazes past herself, but at herself for us, in a characteristic obliteration of narcissistic vulnerability which returns our gaze, our kind of gaze. Lulu defies consumption of her image and exiles her own close-ups in looking back, in looking at looking. She destroys the discourse of voyeurism in guiltless exhibitionism,

Spectator  28
an exhibitionism that makes of spectatorship itself the violence of narrative movement, of the film an invulnerably sadistic text. In forcing a scopic confrontation with a gaze already traumatically sexual, a kind of erotic mutilation is accomplished through the meta-masochistic, or sadistic, portrayal of those primary erotic properties of the gaze submitted to its own processes. The imaginary is made secondary on its own terms, the metaphoric erotic submitted to the metonymical or meta-metaphoric drive for death. This refusal of secondary identification or consumption elevates the masochism of the text to the status of the seen, an obscenity of primal scenery exhibited in the spectacle of a close-up as mise-en-scene. Brooks’ face impassively, overwhelmingly exists, but as cinema’s reason for being, effectively terminating the suspension of disbelief that allows the spectator to let cinema simply love him back.

In Thomas Elsaesser’s x-ray critique of Pandora’s Box, “Lulu and the Meter Man,” he writes

Against this world, obsessed with intentionality, goals and motives, Lulu appears exacerbating and provocative, i.e. seductively sexual—because she is a being of externality, animated but without inwardness; attentive, but without memory; persistent, but without will power or discipline; intelligent but without self-reflexiveness; intense but without pathos. Her superiority resides in the fact that these effects—without causes are experienced by the men as both fascinating and a threat.12

Her externality as opposed, say to Lucy’s interiority in Broken Blossoms, returns the self-reflexive in the face of the spectator, against the intentionality of viewing in a refusal of the tragic, pathetic, recuperation of desire on the screen. She is experienced diegetically as both fascinating and threatening, yet for a diegesis so thoroughly spectatorial, this erotic threat is both the fascination and the fixation of an essentially
comic effect without cause which is, to use Heidegger’s phraseology, the Nothingness, the gratuitous recall of Difference, which is “Being towards Death.” Vital zero.

Elsaesser writes, “Lulu is desirable whenever her appearance is caught in the crossfire of someone else desiring her as well, and her sexual attractiveness constructs itself always in relation to someone experiencing a crisis in their own sexual identity.” Schoen’s desire for Lulu is rekindled after he realizes his son’s, Alwa’s, attraction to Lulu; Alwa’s attraction is provoked by the Countess Geschwitz’s erotic gaze at Lulu; Casti-Piani’s exploitation of Lulu is in response to her trial photo, and the Egyptian pander is convinced by Casti-Piani to buy Lulu after viewing a catalogue of photographs of Lulu. Lulu herself exists within this negotiation, a literally pornographic economy of the gaze sold out to itself in a sexuality always perceived primarily as a secondary result, provoked by an image already observed. The erotic response within the narrative is already spectatorial, is displaced in precisely the same way that classical cinema addresses the classical spectator. This syntagmatic logic classically insures the temporary fatality of desire staked by the apparently satisfactory response to, the recognition of, erotic demand. These narratives traditionally present women—create stars—who are vulnerable to this self-consuming identification, who are icons of annihilated desire, the very fulfillment of which marks the woman as femme fatale. Film fatal, however, begins to narrate this syntagmatic logic of desire, takes the annihilation of desire as that cinematic object it classically exhibits as an occasion for closure. This lost object recaptured performs on screen the drama, the trauma, of being found, making the third term of spectatorship either irrelevant to the text, or subjected by cinema to a spectacle of its own erotic credulity, a sadistic address that is in fact the theatricalization of spectatorship disciplining itself, finding the exclusively human pleasure of its own unpleasure. In this terminal sense, terminal film locates an endurable perspective, a specifically elegant site of viewing the unseeable. A movie being watched watches the “absurd” diegesis of having to watch, achieves a fatality on its own terms by self-evidently fictionalizing the fantasy of its own trauma. The ends of desire become the end of desire, a peculiarly vital, erotic, means of lethal mastery. The willing suspension of disbelief ultimately occasions a transference of faith to willing suspension, a vital homeostasis.

Lulu is not a femme fatale. Even the sequence that narrates Schoen’s “murder” by Lulu stylizes, as Elsaesser observes, “the logic of glance-glance, facial expression, space and gesture” into a “virtually unreadable” exhibition. Staged as it is in medium shot before a bedroom mirror where Schoen discovers his bride cradling her now step-son Alwa’s head, the sequence erupts in response to Schoen’s demand that Lulu shoot herself, certainly the most articulate plea for the recuperation of spectatorship in silent, particularly expressionistic, cinema. Schoen’s forcible entreaty with the gun is reflected in a constant chiaroscuro of light and image, of outright cinematic power, which makes it “impossible for the spectator to decide whether he sees Schoen or his mirror-image, whether Schoen looks at Lulu, the camera, or himself.” When a spiral of smoke appears between Schoen and Lulu, except for its indexical value, it signals a frantic attempt by the spectator to “read” its significature. Schoen appears post-coital, Lulu mirrors spectatorial curiosity, and, until the blood from Schoen’s mouth resolves the viewing crisis, spectatorship is witness only to its own intentionality.

This sequence is unreadable in order that it be read unreadable, readability itself the logic of the mise-en-scene. Lulu resists fatal femininity in the classical noir, or American expressionistic, sense by exchanging the self-consuming gaze of the spectator—that voyeurism—for an exhibition of that gaze in search of identification. By refusing to occupy the classical site of abysmal desire, she reflects—deflects—the narrative logic of murder in this sequence as a diegesis of aimless spectatorship: Schoen is undone by our inability to follow his look and by Lulu’s refusal to receive it, to locate that otherness that the gaze can accuse. Murder in this sense is not the in-
evitable result of the erotic fatality, but a consequence of erotic confusion, the spectatorial search for response and responsibility returned for terminal re-consideration: A movie is being watched. Lulu is watching it.

Elsaesser writes that in Pandora's Box sexuality is "the infinitely deferred moment of, the constantly renewed movement away from, identity..." This refraction is specifically expressionistic in style, but expressive of an erotics allied to the continual, continuous, flow of discontinuous presence, the glittering appearance and disappearance of Lulu herself, of the cinematic image, of the occasion for a mise-en-scene the dynamics of which inhabit its obliteration in the next cut. This constant shift of image, scene, and star finally organizes an exposure of the cinematic process in defiance of its imaginary function, a cinematic exhibitionism that dismisses the "morality" of its characters or characteristics and projects an iconography of spectacle independent of intentional, voyeuristic origin. By vacating the site of traumatic sexuality, this "sexuality in the cinema as the sexuality of the cinema" terminates the endless aggression against and toward the presentation of absence, and makes of this desperate forlorn game with the cinematic image a representation itself, exchanges the endless desire for spectacle with an infinitely playful, gratuitous, spectacle of desire. When the guilty criminality of spectatorship at last rips its spectator, like Lulu we get what we always had to want: an Eros and a Thanatos unified in the ecstatic alienation of being loved to death.

8LaPlanche 108.
10Andrew 24.
13Elsaesser 19.
14Elsaesser 31.
15Elsaesser 31.
16Elsaesser 33.
17Elsaesser 33.