INTRODUCTION

Siegfried Kracauer, Lotte Eisner, and Heide Schlüpmann have noted the unusually heterogeneous form of G.W. Pabst’s *Diary of a Lost Girl* (*Das Tagebuch Einer Verlorenen*, 1929) — and indeed, the film might be viewed as several short films shoddily patched together. Such an observation seems the traditional starting point for an examination of the possible radical implications of this discontinuous form; nevertheless, Kracauer, Eisner, and Schlüpmann each wrestle with the disparate pieces and eventually argue for a coherent reading of the film. I, however, take my cue from Roland Barthes and Kristin Thompson. Thompson’s essay “The Concept of Cinematic Excess” prompts a reading based on attention to scenes whose richness of mise-en-scene exceeds any apparent narrative demands. Thompson draws from Roland Barthes’ “The Third Meaning” and discourages a conventional cause/effect analysis of a film’s narrative:

Once the narrative is recognized as arbitrary rather than logical, the viewer is free to ask why individual events within its structures are as they are. The viewer is no longer constrained by conventions of reading to find a meaning or theme within the work as the solution to a sort of puzzle which has a right answer. Instead, the work becomes a perceptual field of structures which the viewer is free to study at length, going beyond the strictly functional aspects.

This possibility of an arbitrary narrative goes against the grain of traditional criticism which views the films of the Weimar Republic as cohesive narratives which explain yet another narrative: the rise of National Socialism in Germany. Kracauer is, of course, the quintessential example of such a critic who looks for the puzzle’s solution — and if the pieces do not always fit, he hammers away at them until they acquiesce. Given the unique historical circumstances of Weimar cinema, one may be tempted to excuse Kracauer’s undeniably teleological reading of Pabst’s film. But what might be the implications of a reading which “goes beyond the strictly functional aspects” and allows the work to become “a perceptual field of structures which the viewer is free to study at length?” Perhaps such a reading, in its celebration of ambiguities and exploration of the narrative seams manifests a place for individual dissent and transgressive readings.

This essay proposes to test such a hypothesis as I uncover the transgressive potential submerged beneath *Diary*’s narrative and begin to speculate about a lost spectator — the dissenting female spectator of 1929 who might have mistrusted the narrative’s tidy closure and forged her own indemnifying interpretation. The possibility that such a spectator existed is elided by much feminist criticism which condemns traditional narrative cinema’s visual pleasure, declaring it inherently patriarchal. The resisting spectator is likewise elided by history; her story remains untold. Perhaps through Thompson’s and Barthes’ descriptions of a viewer no longer constrained to seek satisfaction in the narrative’s simplistic dissolution, we can move towards a reconstitution of this lost spectator. Although this historical reconstitution remains partial and provisional, it nonetheless illustrates how dominant narrative cinema can contain the seeds of its own undoing. The mere positing of this hypothetical lost spectator and elucidation of her resistant reading strategies constitutes an effective political tool as we enter the larger debate of visual pleasure and the gendered spectator.
Feminism and Visual Pleasure

Laura Mulvey’s landmark essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” has provided the paradigm to which any debate of pleasure and feminism must position itself. Mulvey employs psychoanalysis to explain how film’s “formal preoccupations reflect the psychical obsessions of the society which produced it.” Dominant cinema perpetuates the desires and fantasies of a patriarchal society by positioning the female image as a fetishized figure, with that fetish designed to gloss over the castration threat for the male spectator who finds scopophilic pleasure through Hollywood cinema’s privileging of the male gaze. In this way, the Hollywood style and the cinema which fell within Hollywood’s influence has capitalized on the filmic possibilities of patriarchally-defined scopophilic pleasure. Schlüpmann lumps Diary of a Lost Girl within such a sphere: “Long camera pans serve to prolong the male gaze, thus becoming an ever intensified and generalized manifestation of the patriarchal control inherent in the look.” Once Schlüpmann accepts that “patriarchal control [is] inherent in the look,” she reaches the conclusion:

The film does not address the female spectator and her repressed sexuality, posing Thymian [Louise Brooks] as a possible figure of identification. Rather, it speaks to the male viewer, the traditional representative and beneficiary of bourgeois dictates.

Ultimately, Schlüpmann leaves two sex-determined options for spectators of Diary of a Lost Girl: the male spectator identifies with the voyeuristic male gaze dictated by the camera / director and finds sadistic pleasure while the female spectator “denies her person and her sex” as she too finds pleasure in the film, which for her is ultimately narcissistic and masochistic. Thus Schlüpmann constructs an argument which affirms Mulvey’s constractive definition of filmic pleasure.

Since voyeuristic pleasure is aligned with narrative cinema’s seamless, transparent “flow,” Mulvey argues that perhaps a cinema which highlights the seams within a narrative and intentionally breaks the diegetic flow provides a solution. Additionally, Mulvey suggests that mainstream film’s “spell of illusion” can be broken by reversing the common hierarchy among the “three different looks associated with the cinema.” Dominant cinema subordinates the first two looks (“that of the camera as it records the pro-filmic event, [and] that of the audience as it watches the final product”) to the third (“that of the characters at each other within the screen illusion”). Mulvey proposes that foregrounding these first two “looks” will dispell mainstream cinema’s illusionistic regime and force the spectator to actively engage the film, lending a more critical eye and acknowledging the mechanics of spectatorship.

But what about the film that contains the deconstructive impulse characteristic of much independent counter-cinema, even as it adheres to conventions of dominant cinema? Many feminist film scholars maintain that alternative reading positions are possible within mainstream film. Dominant cinema can contain unintentional moments of discontinuity as it accidentally exposes the film’s material construction and invites counter-readings. Thus feminists need not abandon mainstream cinema altogether and retreat entirely to an independent, avant-garde cinema.

Possibilities of “Alternative” Pleasure

If Mulvey’s argument is correct, how might we account for the female spectator who enjoys dominant cinema? Must our only option be that such a spectator is denying her sex and adopting the very cultural poses which oppress her? Jane Gaines examines these issues in her article “Women and Representation: Can We Enjoy Alternative Pleasure?” Gaines rejects
Mulvey's call for a "counter-cinema" on the grounds that such a cinema is elitist, alienating viewers who were not afforded the "educational and cultural privilege" to understand a high-theory film. Instead, she suggests that pleasure may itself be an adequate political tool: "For feminists, investigating women's pleasure as counter-pleasure has become politically imperative." Thus, the call for "counter-cinema" is replaced with a demand for "counter-reading strategies."

Gaines believes that "the questions Mulvey did not address" are the ones we must now confront. In her article, she examines transgressive strategies developed within lesbian studies which emphasize the active role of the spectator rather than lament the dominant patriarchal forms. "These [lesbian] analyses show that the female 'look' cancels the male point of view and that active reading resists the flow of classical narrative."

Roland Barthes also argues for reading "against the grain" in his essay "The Third Meaning" and in The Pleasure of the Text. The latter, somewhat enigmatic and (self-consciously) contradictory text is unambiguous, if nowhere else, in its recuperation of pleasure as a revolutionary potential. Barthes writes,

An entire minor mythology would have us believe that pleasure (and singularly the pleasure of the text) is a rightist notion... Pleasure, however, is not an element of the text, it is not a naive residue; it does not depend on a logic of understanding and on sensation; it is a drift, something both revolutionary and asocial, and it cannot be taken over by any collectivity, any mentality, any ideoloc.

Clearly, Barthes (himself often accused of "hedonism") wants both pleasure and revolution. He champions a text of jouissance — "blissful" readings which explore the "drifts" within a text and, like the lesbian readings noted by Gaines, allot the spectator an active role in the creation of meaning.

Though the lesbian strategies Gaines discusses may not correspond exactly to the method Barthes espouses in The Pleasure of the Text, we can use Gaines to illuminate Barthes' ambiguous assertions. Unlike Barthes, Gaines affirms a method based on individual eccentricities while maintaining an emphasis on the individual's social context: "[Lesbian readings] are significant, however, because they remind us that meaning is always social and that hothouse
studies of film language alone cannot construct a semiotics of the cinema.”

Such a reading which both recuperates individual pleasure and acknowledges the social construction of such pleasures may provide our answer.

**A Weimar Pleasure?**

Before interrogating the social context for the film’s reception and the film’s specific ruptures, an examination of Elsaesser’s comparison of Weimar cinema and American “primitive cinema” seems pertinent. Thomas Elsaesser probes this pleasure/spectator debate within the specific context of Weimar cinema in his article “Film History and Visual Pleasure: Weimar Cinema.”

Perhaps his most illuminating insight occurs as he invokes Noël Burch’s work on “primitive” cinema. Burch contrasts Edwin S. Porter’s work (characterized by a narrative “ambivalence” which encourages proletariat-friendly readings) with D.W. Griffith’s work (characterized by a calculated narrative continuity which steers the viewer toward the narrative’s predetermined conclusion). Elsaesser asks if Weimar cinema might exist somewhere in between these extremes: “German silent cinema is different from Porter’s kind of [proletariat-friendly] ambivalence and Griffith’s or ‘post-Griffithian’ [bourgeois] classical narrative, and yet it is decidedly and significantly a ‘bourgeois’ cinema.” We are left, then, to question the effect of this co-existence (of the progressive, proletariat impulse *and* the classical bourgeois narrative) on the 1929 spectator.

This co-existence of contradictory narrative strategies illuminates another contradiction of Weimar cinema—the problematic relationship between pleasure and the female spectator. Exploring Weimar cinema’s “openness” in more detail, Elsaesser observes:

> In German silent films, the authority, origin and control of the act of narration was constantly foregrounded. The profusion of nested narratives, framed tales, flashbacks, *en-abime* constructions and interlacing of narrative voices emerges as the index of the very difference that singled out German silent cinema as historically specific.

He suggests that this foregrounding of the “origin and control of the act of narration” (and as I would argue, the simultaneous foregrounding of the materiality of cinema) “allow(s) the female spectator to assume a pleasurable subject-position.” Since Elsaesser stops short of a complete elaboration of such a position, I pick up where he left off, explaining, in the context of a single film, how Weimar cinema’s “profusion” of these cinematic foregroundings created an ideal text for the female spectator to interrogate its seams, open up the narrative, and construct her counter-response.

The existence of multiple spectator identifications in *Diary’s* melodramatic structure reinforces the possibility of a reading against the grain. In her illuminating study of Weimar spectatorship, Joyless Streets: Women and Melodramatic Representation in Weimar Germany, Patrice Petro examines several Weimar films which, she argues, specifically address the working-class female and her desire for emancipation. Petro finds within the narratives of these films a constant thematization of the contradictory position of the “New Woman” of 1920s Germany—the vast industrial expansion offered her new opportunities *and* old subjugations. Petro argues that the female spectator identifies simultaneously with the oppressor and the oppressed within these films. The often androgynous female protagonist further encourages multiple identifications. Petro maintains that *Diary of a Lost Girl* promotes such a “sexual mobility” as the androgynous “Thymian (Louise Brooks) moves through three distinct social and institutional spaces: an oppressive bourgeois home, a regimented girls’ correctional facility, and a carnivalesque
brothel.”23 I will show how the faults and seams exposed throughout this progression can undermine the narrative, thereby arguing against Petro’s ultimately censorious conclusion: that these scenes are in the final analysis dominated by a “controlling, calculating gaze,” whether of the male authority or the gaze of the brothel’s madam.24

On one level, Diary of a Lost Girl traces the regretful (and certainly predictable) plight of a naive and trusting young woman who encounters a cruel world of rapists, opportunists, and other exploiters of innocence. The symbols of the young woman’s tragic “coming of age” are clear enough: her first appearance shows her ready for her confirmation, clad in virginal white; the rape scene with Meinert involves the spilling of a glass of red wine to indicate the virgin’s blood; and the very name Thymian evokes associations with hymen. It seems we have all the makings of a male fantasy, as the film unfolds a voyeuristic vision of tainted female innocence.

But Thompson’s notion of “excess” and Barthes’ notion of “the third meaning” suggest an alternative for the spectator, who may surpass this obvious reading and attend to problematic moments within the film during which the material exceeds the narrative demands. Thompson writes, “The minute a viewer begins to notice style for its own sake or watch works which do not provide such thorough motivation, excess comes forward and must affect narrative meaning.”25 I will explore three such scenes from Diary of a Lost Girl which exceed any obvious or symbolic readings and thereby contain their own undoing.

THE LOOK IS REVERSED

The three scenes of cinematic excess on which I will focus my eccentric reading of Diary of a Lost Girl involve the returning of the gaze from the character Thymian and/or the actress Louise Brooks. The first returned gaze occurs shortly after the film begins. Thymian learns that Elizabeth has been replaced by another governess, but she does not understand the reason. When Thymian looks down to find the corpse of Elizabeth (who has likely drowned herself), she raises her hands to her face, then quickly gazes into the camera before fleeing in horror. This return of the gaze breaks the invisible diegesis and calls attention to the audience’s position as film spectators. The characters in the narrative are not supposed to look back. This unusual return of the gaze corresponds to Mulvey’s “second look associated with the cinema: that of the audience as it watches the final product.”26 Such a technique was used intentionally by Godard to produce a Brechtian “alienation effect” which upsets the spectator’s passive identification with the characters and forces the spectator to stand apart from and actively question the text.

Spectator
Louise Brooks’ / Thymian’s return of the look may produce a similar “alienation effect” because the enigmatic look cannot logically and coherently be fixed as either an “informational” or a “symbolic” meaning within the film. Barthes’ “The Third Meaning” explores such captivating moments within a film which seem to exceed any “informational” or “symbolic” readings. A purely “informational” reading of the scene would tell me that Thymian is distraught at the death of Elizabeth. Her look of horror and raising of her hands to her face clearly indicate a stereotypically feminine pose of shock, which leads to a symbolic reading. Whereas the informational reading exists simply at the level of communication which tells me how the narrative advances, the symbolic reading evokes a “diegetic symbolism”: within the film’s narrative, Thymian is an innocent, stereotypically feminine creature. “Taken in its entirety, this second level is that of signification.” 27 Yet as Barthes writes,

Is that all? No, for I am still held by the image. I read, I receive (and probably even first and foremost) a third meaning—evident, erratic, obstinate. I do not know what its signified is, at least I am unable to give it a name, but I can see clearly the traits, the signifying accidents of which this—consequently incomplete—sign is composed . . . 28

Thus according to Barthes, this “left-over” or “excess” meaning is not necessarily intended by the film’s director. In fact, one cannot know whether Pabst intended for Brooks to gaze into the camera, or whether the look indicates a failure of the film editor to make an adequate cut. And certainly, if the spectator follows the patterns I have outlined for a reading against the grain, he/ she does not care what Pabst intended.

Brooks’ / Thymian’s second return of the gaze occurs during her indoctrination into the brothel. She and her friend have escaped from the reform school with the help of Count Osdorff, and they ultimately find themselves within the jovial surroundings of a brothel. The carefree style of this scene is decidedly different from the preceding ones ridden with weighty and ominous despair. It seems that both women and men are happy as they dance and enjoy sausages provided by a weiner-vendor. Thymian enters, distraught by her discovery that her daughter is dead; yet her expression soon changes as she is reunited with her schoolmate and puts on a glamorous dress provided by the Madame. They drink champagne and all seems idyllic until Thymian is paired off with a customer. As he takes her into his arms, she falls unconscious and he carries her away to bed. The man turns off a lamp and just as Thymian is ready to fall into bed, she looks up and gazes into the camera.

This return of the gaze seems undeniably unintentional. For the purposes of the plot (both informationally and symbolically), Thymian should be unconscious as she takes her first customer. The next scene shows Thymian in bed, confused, as the Madame shows her the money she earned. Clearly, Thymian is somewhat surprised and horrified that she prostituted herself, for the Madame coaxes, “Be reasonable, my dear one. You don’t even have a shirt on your back.” Within the diegesis, Thymian does not know exactly what happened with the client.

Brooks’ / Thymian’s third gaze into the camera also occurs in a moment of distress. Thymian receives a letter telling that her father has died. Distraught, she shows the letter to the Madame and laments, “If I only could change my life.” The practical, perhaps cold Madame replies, “You would have to become someone else.” And once again, the pained Thymian glances into the camera, and for a moment, becomes someone else: Louise Brooks, returning the gaze of her audience.

The question is, what effect(s) do these “signifying accidents” have on the female spectator? Foremost, these looks remind the spectator that what she is watching is not a coherent,
self-enclosed narrative, but a material, constructed product, subject to its own flaws and faults. Schlüpmann agrees that “the film manifests a systematic dismemberment. It does not really allow a dramatic plot to develop, much less to take on any psychological depth, for, in both cases, the photographic medium intervenes and provides distance.”29 Yet Schlüpmann ultimately decides that

_Diary of a Lost Girl_ lets the male spectator enjoy the filmmaker’s fantasies of omnipotence. We have here a monologic structure in which the place of the viewer is designed as a replication of the director’s perspective. Such an address no doubt leaves the female spectator with no room for autonomous response.30

On the contrary, I propose that the alienating, narratively problematic instances sparked by Brooks’ returned gaze into the camera carve out a space for the female spectator’s autonomous response—particularly, I will argue, when these looks come from such a notorious personality as Louise Brooks.

Barthes proposes that these “third meanings” demand an interrogative reading: “It [the third meaning] cannot be conflated with the simple existence of the scene,... it compels an interrogative reading (interrogation bears precisely on the signifier not on the signified, on reading not on intellection: it is a ‘poetical’ grasp).”31 Barthes calls the third meaning a “signifier without a signified”; any clear referent for the signifier is not present within the text/film. The spectator and/or critic need not ignore the “signifier without a signified” or dismiss it because it is unintentional. It is precisely these unintended excesses, I would argue, that affect the viewer much more intensely and perhaps even for a greater duration than do the narrative’s established themes and morals. And these excesses leave the viewer free to graft her own meanings onto the erratic signifiers.

Ample evidence suggests that the 1929 spectator of _Diary_ was well-aware of Louise Brooks’ irrepressible personality. Pabst’s search for the actress to play Lulu in the previous year’s _Pandora’s Box (Die Büchse Der Pandiram, 1928)_32 has been compared to the search for Scarlett O’Hara a decade later. And Brooks’ arrival in Berlin was no less hyped. Most evidence suggests that the Germans were thrilled to host the flamboyant American, while a few resented the fact that Wedekind’s Lulu would be played by an American. In any case, any spectator of 1929’s _Diary_ was certainly acquainted with Brooks—knowing both her role as the wanton Lulu from the previous year’s _Pandora’s Box_ and her reputation as the pleasure-seeking American actress.33 When the excessive signifier emanates from the gesture of
such a notorious actress, the cultural baggage surrounding that actress imbues the film’s narrative with a variety of nuances and complicates the female spectator’s identification with the narrative. Identification with Louise Brooks begins to threaten identification with Thymian. In her study of female spectators of Hollywood cinema in the 1940s and 1950s, Jackie Stacey argues that a multitude of identificatory patterns between female fans and film stars exist. Stacey’s studies show that female spectators compare themselves to famous actresses and find pleasure in contemplating both their similarities and differences. Some fans take pleasure in “reproducing similarity,” in which “the star’s identity is selectively reworked and incorporated into the spectator’s new identity.” The interrogative reading strategies I have outlined encourage this “active engagement and production of changing identities” by permitting the spectator’s cultural baggage, so full of contradictions, to complicate the film’s narrative, and occasionally subvert its patriarchal underpinnings.

An interrogative reading of Thymian’s reversal of the gaze compels the spectator to recall Brooks’ outspoken interviews and her “difficult” reputation in Hollywood. Brooks’/Thymian’s look, while interrupting the imaginary diegesis, reminds me of my own look which “cancels the male point of view” and “resists the flow of classical narrative.” I recognize her look as an arbitrary, accidental addition to the narrative and I find pleasure in Brooks’ own dismantling of the narrative. I respond with a “gut reaction”—I feel that Thymian is, in fact, larger than the role written to accommodate her. These moments of excess, in which Brooks violates the continuity codes, enable Thymian to overflow from her role and demonstrate the absurd inadequacy of such a stereotypically passive “damsel in distress.” Brooks returns the gaze as if to say, “Was that scene sufficient? Did I appear unconscious as he whisked me away to bed?” And with that look, I confuse the dull Thymian with the rebellious Louise Brooks. And with that confusion, the narrative crumbles.

**Conclusions**

The “signifying accidents” of *Diary of a Lost Girl*, and perhaps of any narrative film, can radically alter the film’s narrative intentions. A reading based on these unintended moments of filmic excess which destroy the “spell of illusion” and elicit a subversive pleasure constitutes a political act. If, as Barthes suggests, a spectator interrogates those pleasurable, “obtuse” moments which indicate a space outside the diegesis, she recuperates her own typically denied pleasure and uses it as a revolutionary potential. Like Barthes, the transgressive female spectator can celebrate the narrative ambiguities and inconsistencies, as she uses them to subvert the controlling and oppressive diegesis.

Mulvey accurately isolates narrative cinema’s patriarchal framework. She boldly confronts the ways narrative cinema typically places the female actress at the service of the male spectator. Yet because Mulvey equates pleasure with identification with a patriarchal narrative, the female spectator who enjoys a film must either deny her sex or experience masochistic enjoyment at witnessing her own oppression. Such a conclusion is painfully inadequate.

My eccentric reading of *Diary of a Lost Girl* prompted me to consider the 1929 spectator. Thus, my speculations about a “lost spectator” remain rhetorical. What I hope to suggest is that eccentric readings and eccentric readers have been elided by much film history and criticism, and not without some cost. The eccentric spectator does not deny the patriarchal biases and injustices which punctuate dominant cinema; she refuses them. By interrogating and appropriating the “disturbing, rough parts” of dominant cinema, she applies the refractory images to her own advantage, unfastening the narrative’s constractive underpinnings.
I am indebted to the work of Robert B. Ray, whose graduate seminars I attended while writing this paper. His approach to the works of Roland Barthes (elucidated in his recent publication, The Avant Garde Finds Andy Hardy, Harvard, 1995) greatly influenced my application of third meaning reading strategies in this essay.

4. Thompson 141.
7. Schlüpmann 85.
8. Schlüpmann 86.
12. Gaines 82.
17. Gaines 85.
19. Elsaesser 58.
21. Although Elsaesser does not explicitly argue that the heterogeneous narratives result in pleasure for the female spectator, he does suggest a relation: "If it is true that castration anxiety is that which is pointed to as the pivotal structure of texts, and that the films of the Weimar cinema share with their severest critic, i.e., Kracauer, the same 'male hysteria,' then it is clear that the differences between Weimar cinema and 'classical Hollywood narrative' are indeed insignificant...The question, then, becomes rather one of deciding how it is possible that certain films nonetheless allow the female spectator to assume a pleasurable subject-position...[Patricia] Mellencamp is no more prepared than Kracauer to see in some films a degree of ambiguity and indecibility that would allow the female spectator to appropriate them for the construction of her visual pleasure" (64-65).
23 Petro 153-154.
24 Petro 154.
25 Thompson 132.
26 Mulvey 756.
29 Schlüpmann 84.
30 Schlüpmann 84.
32 *Die Büchse Der Pandora*, Dir. G.W. Pabst, released January 30, 1929 in Berlin; December 1, 1929 in New York.
35 Stacey 171.
36 Stacey 171.
37 Gaines 84-85.