

Louis brooks: lulu and modernism



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Actress Louise Brooks and her best-known creation, Lulu, are together one of the most memorable expressions of modern cinema's "bad girl," an unabashed symbol of sexuality. Born November 14, 1906, Brooks was known for her idiosyncratic bob-and bangs black helmet, naturalistic style of acting, astonishing personality, and creation of a character whose avant-garde style was rivaled only by Brooks' own personal life. Both Brooks and Lulu formed an embodiment of the 1920s decadent Jazz Age, and later, carried a mythical and nostalgic quality upon Brooks' resurrection from Hollywood oblivion as a writer and cult star. Intriguingly, Brooks' Lulu is not a quintessential articulation of modernism's whore by any means. Her creation is iconic precisely because of its paradoxical quality—a portrayal of the innocent hedonist. It is an innocence that always seems to hover on the verge of compromise. Brooks combines the trope of a saintly good girl with the glamorous allure of a sinner to achieve a symbol of sexuality that will, and has, lived on for years.

New Yorker editor William Shaun once wrote, "It is difficult to believe that Louise Brooks exists apart from her creation...even Louise Brooks has had her moments of confusion." In many ways, Lulu was a character whose personality was not far from Brooks' own. Lulu's natural state of being seems to be one of constant, casual flirtation. She was of a big temperament and animal intelligence, a creature of the moment lacking conscience or reflection on her actions, a female celebration of the pleasure principle. Lulu was moral yet completely selfless, all of impulse and no pretensions.

Unlike Lulu, however, Louise Brooks thinks, reflects, reads, and writes.

Brooks writes in her autobiography of considering herself slapped with the

stereotype of “ beautiful but dumb.” However, this autobiography, *Lulu in Hollywood*, reveals her intense self-awareness and powers of observation. Brooks presents herself as well-read and cultured, having developed her love of words, music, and theatre at an early age through her mother’s exposure. Her mother, Myra Rude, told Leonard Brooks upon marriage that she had grown up fending for five squalling siblings, and had no intention of repeating the experience with children of her own. Leonard Brooks was her “ escape to freedom and the arts,” and Louise Brooks often wrote that whatever her mothers’ shortcomings in love were mattered little, for she had exposed her children to piano, to theatre, to a love of liberty (5).

Brooks was considered one of the first naturalistic actors of her time. She attributes her avoidance of artifice to both a lack of formal training and a result of her honest approach to life itself. She writes of Anastasia Reilly in the *Ziegfeld Follies* as being the only true personality in the act, sporting “ that faithfulness to nature which I sought, and still seek, in all human beings” (Brooks 9). Brooks was always critical of high society and its herd mentality. She writes of her social shortcomings—her refusal to charm, to lie, to please others, to be “ less openly critical of people’s false faces” (6). Her upbringing established a habit of truthfulness, having never experienced a need to lie in her home. There, she writes, “ truth was never punished,” and links this to her later inability to compromise in the Hollywood film factories.

Henri Langlois, director of the Cinematheque Francaise, has said of her style, “ 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 her 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 become invisible.” What Brooks projected onscreen was a curious mixture of both passivity and presence. Of this duality, critic Lotte H. Eisner wrote, “ Is she a great artist or only a dazzling creature whose beauty traps the viewer into attributing complexities to her of which she is unaware?” (Brooks 107).

Brooks’ trademark fusion of amorality and innocence in her characters is best seen in her naturalistic portrayal of Lulu in Pandora’s Box. The 1929 film marked her signature role under the respected German Expressionist director Georg Wilhelm Pabst. Pabst, specifically in his New Objectivity period (a movement that was both an outgrowth and reaction to Expressionism), captured her wonderfully expressive face in a style that simultaneously emphasized her naturalism. Pandora’s Box was itself shot with a moral coolness that distinguished it from the conscientiously dramatized sinfulness of other works based on Frank Wedekind’s two plays, *Erdgeist* and *Die Büchse der Pandora*. Brooks described Asta Nielsen’s preceding performance of Lulu as being “...played in the eye-rolling style of European silent acting. Lulu the man-eater devoured her sex victims...and then dropped dead in an acute attack of indigestion.” Alban Berg’s twelve-tone opera *Lulu*, was similarly permeated with blatant theatricality, “ throbbing with romantic agony” (Tynan 9).

In contrast, Brooks surprised Berlin critics by not playing Lulu as the expected monster of active depravity. This lack of clear moral message was

met with mixed feelings. One reviewer wrote, " Louise Brooks cannot act. She does not suffer. She does nothing" (Tynan 11). Wedekind however, has himself said of his protagonist, " Lulu is not a real character but the personification of primitive sexuality, who inspires evil unawares. She plays a purely passive role." Indeed, when Schon forces a gun into Lulu's hands on her wedding day, begging her to commit suicide, she seems almost hypnotized by the desperation of his grief. In the resultant, fatal struggle, Lulu is shown to have apparently killed him—in a state of shocked innocence. Brooks does not act; she reacts. She explains Pabst's use of concrete phrases to get the desired emotional response—" Not the murder of my husband, but the sight of blood determined the expression on my face." This technical, dehumanized approach makes her reaction more impersonal, one of shock from spectacle rather than personally affected emotional loss or remorse. This sort of response is perfectly in line with her typically indifferent, child-like nature—she does not seem to grasp all the implications of the situation, and can more quickly and plausibly rebound from simple shock as opposed to complex emotional or psychologically affecting damage. Says film critic Kenneth Tynan, " What we see is not *Vénus toute entière à sa proie attachée* but a petrified child" (11).

Another demonstrative scene is earlier in the film; Schon arrives to break off his affair with Lulu, explaining his intentions to make a socially advantageous match with a Cabinet minister's daughter. Lulu's reaction epitomizes her character—completely unperturbed, almost brushing off his statement, she extends her arms outward to him angelically, as if to offer solace. Her allure derives partly from this untouchable spirit—though later on this blithe cool

becomes infuriating to those around her (and everyone around her is infatuated with her to some extent) and results in continual tragedy. Despite her effect on men (or because of it), Lulu is essentially an exploited, overly trusting character. Tynan writes that in addition to her birdlike movements and animal nature, “...in the context of the plot as a whole she resembles a glittering tropical fish in a tank full of predators” (10).

Tynan’s famous 1979 profile of Brooks in *The New Yorker* grounds her role in modernism, describing her acting style (or lack thereof) as “reinventing the art of screen acting.” He hails her lack of formal acting lessons as more beneficial than detrimental in that they contributed to her art of playing herself—“unrehearsed reality.” His essay is useful in understanding Brooks’ more passive style of acting, of ignoring the audience as if she were not consciously putting on a show for them. Brooks does not seem to pass moral judgment on the characters she plays; her performances did not issue tacit commands to the audience on how to emotionally respond (e. g. “love me,” “hate me,” “laugh at me,” “weep with me,”), instead declaring, “Here I am. Make what you will of me.”

One of Brooks’ more revealing lines shows what she has learned about acting in cinema—quite the opposite of Method doctrine, it turns out. She says of Osgood Perkins, “You know what makes an actor great to work with? Timing. You don’t have to feel anything. It’s like dancing with a perfect dancing partner. Osgood Perkins would give you a line so that you would react perfectly. It was timing—because emotion means nothing (emphasis added).” To Brooks, emotion and empathy with one’s character, no matter how deeply felt, mattered little in comparison to what the actor showed. It is <https://assignbuster.com/louis-brooks-lulu-and-modernism/>

what Tynan calls “ the contraband that he or she can smuggle past the camera” that matters to the audience (7).

Film historian Peter Cowie states that Louise’s darker, haunting performance in Pabst’s *Diary of a Lost Girl* was closer to her true personality than that of the immortal Lulu. Her looks of “ gloomy dejection” in the film were, by Brooks’ own admission, an unconscious manifestation of her jealousy toward Pabst’s flirtation with Leni Riefenstahl—another actress and filmmaker on set. When Pabst showed Louise the rushes with delight at her performance, she reportedly reacted with complete shock at her own acting on-screen. Pabst later said to his assistant, Falkenberg, “ Great mistake. Great mistake. Never do that again” (Cowie 86). In the scenes with Andrews Engelmann and Valeska Gert in the Nazi-esque reform school, Pabst further heightens Brooks’ naturalistic performance by encouraging Engelmann and Gert to portray almost caricature-like exaggerations of evil. In such contrast to their theatrical performances of gloating depravity, Brooks’ uncontrived portrayal of Thymian styles her as all the more pious, unadulterated, and wholesome in the film.

Brooks’ training as a professional dancer had a huge impact on the natural fluidity of her movement, giving her an instinctive grace and seduction. Her movements have the qualities of a choreographed dance. One sequence in *Diary* follows her burst of panic upon seeing her governess’ corpse; her ensuing dash up the stairs is filmed with such kinetic energy it looks as though she takes flight. She writes of her ten years of professional dancing as the best possible preparation for “ moving” pictures. “ I learned to act while watching Martha Graham dance,” she said later in an interview with <https://assignbuster.com/louis-brooks-lulu-and-modernism/>

Kevin Brownlow, “and I learned to move in film from watching Chaplin” (Tynan 4). Brooks’ dream of becoming a great dancer and her theatre-born contempt of Hollywood were also the underpinnings of her overall blasé view toward her sudden rise to success. She never took film seriously, and in 1982 told John Kobal that she had never seen it—though Peter Cowie writes this is probably because she recalled the production only through a haze of alcohol. Augusto Genina, who directed her in *Prix de Beauté*, maintained that, “Her drunkenness began at four in the morning and finished toward evening.” Louise was “borne to the set by assistants, because she was invariably asleep...” (Cowie 98).

In his introduction to *Lulu in Hollywood*, William Shaun links Brooks’ sexual exploits off-screen to her similarities with her character Lulu, “a hedonist without a sense of sin who lives for the moment and destroys men as she goes.” She is less Pandora than the box itself—unleashing all the world’s evil once opened. Kenneth Tynan says of Brooks’ acting (or perhaps Brooks herself), “There is no melodrama in her exercise of sexual power. No effort, either: she is simply following her nature.” Not surprisingly, Brooks became a symbol of raw sexuality.

Her choice in movies, particularly with Pabst, often placed her in sexual situations and portrayals that were ahead of their time (and heavily censored as a result). Her innocent allure as Thymiane in *Diary* is of a fallen virgin who finds herself in sexual-actualization through prostitution. A scene in the reform school depicts the matron beating her gong in a frenzied rhythm for the fallen girls to exercise to, as she reaches a state of orgasmic ecstasy, which Pabst shows in close-up. Another scene in the bordello alludes back to <https://assignbuster.com/louis-brooks-lulu-and-modernism/>

this when a client achieves orgasm simply by watching Thymiane beat a drum.

Pandora's Box is notable also for possibly one of the first explicit lesbians in movie history, adding the tight-lipped Countess Anna Geschwitz to Lulu's list of admirers. The rabid looks of adoration from actress Alice Roberts were shot in close-ups, then intercut with shots of Brooks—Roberts refused point-blank to direct her desire explicitly toward Brooks. Pabst appeased the actress finally by standing in her line of vision himself and convincing Roberts to direct the lustful gazes toward him instead, to which she acquiesced. Brooks, on the other hand, had no qualms about such scenes. In many instances to come, her sexually liberated persona would prove avant-garde in itself, adding to her savagely nonconformist manner and hilariously indiscreet personality, and cumulating in a huge impact on future films.

Directors knew to capture Brooks' sensual features best, focusing on the tremulous lips with which she was so expressive, her sultry Cleopatra bangs, her impeccable profile, the soft oval beauty of her milk-white face, and the swanlike grace of her neck. Brooks' sensuality was particularly suited to her specific medium. The two colors available to the great 1920s German filmmakers—black and white—were the colors of Expressionism that suited Brooks beyond any other. Writes Cowie, " First Pabst, then Augusto Genina, instinctively emphasized the raven black of her hair and the creamy whiteness of her face and neck and arms. Bright lights give a phosphorescent luster to her eyes, teeth, and lipstick. She is at home in a world dominated by the primeval conflict between darkness and light, corruption and innocence, vice and virtue... Louise/Lulu stands apart, like a <https://assignbuster.com/louis-brooks-lulu-and-modernism/>

burnished ideal, from the embittered men and women around her, with their materialist obsessions and their dread of the truth" (96).

Brooks and her characters tend to be surrounded by portraits of wealthy, frustrated males. The parallels to her own career and life are prominent in her portrayal of Lucienne (Lulu again) in the silent-sound hybrid film, *Prix de Beauté*. As a young ingénue, Lulu is brought into the spotlight and surrounded by "fawning, lecherous men of influence and property." The indolent celebrity also finds herself stifled by her marriage to a jealous husband, who ultimately murders her in an expressionist nightmare that mirrors Brooks' own chill fate in the late 1930s and 40s. As she dies in the Prince's arms, the screen test above her flickers with her image, laughing eternally and singing of her fidelity (which succumbed to the allure of stardom), ironically juxtaposed with her violent death below. Like Genina's Lulu and Pabst's Lulu, however, Brooks herself has managed to find some strange fulfillment in oblivion. Of this parallel in stifled initiative, Cowie comments, "Louise both craved the limelight and endured the consequences of her fame" (111).

There is a signature duality of both the whore and the Madonna in Brooks' lusty characters. In the introductory scenes of *Diary*, the virginal Thymian is introduced to the audience in all her confirmation finery, with fresh flowers adorning the crown of her head in innocent beauty, and a childish plumpness to her body. Guests press lavish gifts onto her that further emphasize her purity and virtue, such as the pendant from Count Osdorff—a nine-pointed coronet denoting nobility. When Schon's son, Alwa, lays his head down in Lulu's lap in *Pandora's Box*, there is an element of pure adoration and

infatuation, mixed with Brooks' maternal, symbolic pose as the Virgin Mary. Additionally, the wedding scene in Pandora's Box shows Lulu donned more like a child attending her first communion than the victorious coquette she is, given her recent triumph in ending Schon's engagement backstage at the revue. In that opening night of Alwa's revue, Schon manages to push Lulu's buttons despite her typically unruffled disposition. Brooks infuses Lulu's tantrums and refusal to go on with a certain childlike nature that offsets the conscious manipulation of which she is capable. This ingenuous quality protects Brooks' character from being grouped into the classic bad girl stereotype—that of the savvy femme fatale—even when she looks up in obvious triumph when Marie, Schon's betrothed, walks in on their intimate reconciliation in the property room. This magnificent look of satisfaction on Brooks' face clearly indicates that Lulu has been calculating the entirety of her tantrum and watching Schon's every move. However, Lulu's subsequent, almost immediate resilience, her sincere and unperturbed pleasure upon getting what she wants, is a performance of no clear moral judgment.

This lack of ethical message distinguishes Brooks' Lulu from a Lulu as Marlene Dietrich may have played her. Like a child, Brooks' Lulu seems to have completely forgotten any heartache she experienced only moments prior to her reward. Her destructive actions seem guided more so by the natural selfish impulses we are borne into—an airy disregard for authority and an unawareness of socially dictated morality—rather than premeditated strategies guided by a cynical, conniving mind. As Lulu breezily sweeps past her casualties onto her real performance, it becomes intriguingly clear: she is blithely amoral, rather than gleefully immoral. Lulu is effectually the

artless hedonist because she wears the bliss of one unaware of the full extent of her sin and its dire consequences. She lives purely in the present and when confronted with her own destruction, fails (or does not care) to connect the causality to her own misdeeds. Lulu's lack or failure of conscience is the source of both her radiating irresistibility and reckless devastation to the unfortunate around her. Her fundamental immaturity and irresponsibility parade as a liberating lack of inhibitions, empowering her with a mix of willfulness, dynamism, and insatiable joie de vivre. Her vibrant personality and fearless nature is infectious, marking her a natural center of social action, the fun-loving optimist everyone wants to be around. She seems to radiate life and energy. Her vitality and vivacity enlivens, her carefree beauty enchants, her effortless sensuality emboldens. This overpowering cocktail of seduction easily masks the less admirable traits from which they emanate. Lulu is at once a death wish and a celebration of life—in its most extreme pursuit of pleasure.

Brooks is known for her brief but brilliant career, her equally quick rise and fall from fame. As a teenager, her first experience with blacklisting was by “Miss Campbell,” the dancing teacher whose complaints of her poor temper and insulting nature would later be echoed by her boycott from Hollywood. Brooks' great downfall was her pride, this captivating devil-may-care attitude, an unapologetic disregard for social etiquette and maturity. Her negligent, emotionally irresponsible actions were the very qualities that were once disarming and attractive. Years later, Brooks would refuse to return at Paramount's request to reproduce “The Canary Murder Case” with sound, marking the beginning of the downward spiral of her career. Paramount,

infuriated, retaliated by putting out word that Brooks was difficult to work with and unrecordable, placing her on an unofficial blacklist.

Parallels abound in Brooks' portrayal of Lulu and her own real life persona. The simultaneous allure and downfall of the childish nonchalance was a particularly notable force at play in both lives. Regarding a Photoplay reporter whom she uncouthly received in bed, Brooks writes, " Possessing that precious quality of youth—indifference to the censure of those whom one did not admire—I found my composure equal to an hour of Miss Waterbury's hostility" (18). Nonetheless, Brooks' iridescent charm was enough to win the following publicity from the hostile Miss Waterbury: " She is so very Manhattan. Very young. Exquisitely hard-boiled. Her black eyes and sleek black hair are as brilliant as Chinese lacquer. Her skin as white as a camellia. Her legs are lyric." This bewitching insouciance so characteristic of Lulu, however, was likely the same flippancy that allowed Brooks to so freely throw away her Hollywood career. " Your life is exactly like Lulu's," Pabst once warned her, " and you will end the same way."

By the end of the second world war, Brooks had found herself truly forgotten by " a generation that had celebrated the Jazz Age, and then endured the Depression and the call to arms that followed Pearl Harbor in December of 1941" (Cowie 148). She evoked a leisurely, libertine society at odds with the newfound austerity of the post-war years. It was only through the organized efforts of James Card and Henri Langlois that Brooks reemerged from obscurity to begin the second phase of her life.

Brooks eventually became a virtual recluse in a small Rochester apartment in New York, a location chosen at the suggestion of Langlois, who played a huge role in sparking the Brooks cult following. Langlois organized a huge exhibition entitled *Sixty Years of Cinema in Paris*, after which Brooks embarked on a series of homage screenings and tributes, before resigning herself to isolation, with the occasional interviewers and fans who would call on her. She began writing over a period of years for *Sight and Sound*, *Film Culture*, and other film publications, receiving small allowances from various sources (including lovers from her past). In these later years of her rediscovery, Brooks' correspondents marveled in her singular strength of mind, extolling her " lucidity in observation and frankness in expression" (Brooks 108). It is during this less glamorous phase of her life that she developed her second identity, and it is through her activities in this period that her fame truly solidified.

As a modernist icon, Louise Brooks must be recognized as a writer as well an actress, capable of sustained literary effort. Shaun states, " Her apparently innate ability to offer herself to the screen with nothing held back carries over to her writing" (Brooks 5). Brooks wrote with a natural born writer's affinity for memorable epithets, and her personal memoirs often demonstrated her skill in constructing profiles of her contemporaries; she was a gossip-monger of the first water who " could pin down a personality with the dexterity of a lepidopterist" (Cowie 207). Louise Brooks was at once an extraordinarily observable woman and a brilliant observer of others. Later fans marvelled at her " insight into human character, her extraordinary powers of observation, her wit, and her literary style." Louise Brooks died on

August 8, 1985, alone and beloved in Rochester. Accomplished as both a silent film star and a brilliant, idiosyncratic writer, she passed away a “ born center of attention, who might have been doomed to passivity, [but] was all the while paying astute attention to those around her” (Brooks 5).

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