

Pandora's Box (*Die Büchse der Pandora*, 1929)

Sophie Johanna Schweiger

dir. Georg Wilhelm Pabst; prod. Seymour Nebenzal;
screenplay Georg Wilhelm Pabst, Ladislaus Vajda;
photography Günther Krampf; music Timothy Brock.
silent, 35mm, black/white, 110 mins. Nero-Film A. G.,
distrib. Süd-Film.

Released just before the Weimar film scene's transition from silent to sound, *Die Büchse der Pandora* (1929) stands among the most iconic moving pictures of its time. The production is the first in a series of filmic collaborations between Austrian director G. W. Pabst and U.S.-American actress Louise Brooks—a rather unlikely constellation, considering the competitive relationship between Berlin's and Hollywood's production empires at the time. The two films that Pabst and Brooks worked on next, *Diary of a Lost Girl* (1929) and *Beauty Prize* (1930), are frequently read as serial continuations of the narrative around »Lulu,« the infamous heroine of *Die Büchse der Pandora*. However, neither of these unofficial sequels reached the fame and cult status that the debut has enjoyed. While initially *Die Büchse der Pandora* was neither critically nor commercially successful, it belatedly gained iconic status in the 1950s, due to the efforts of *Cinemathèque Française*'s founder, Henri Langlois (Krenn and Moser). Today, *Die Büchse der Pandora* is viewed as an emblem of its time. This is rooted in the film's exploration of seriality's relationship to the melodramatic mode as well as in the ambiguity of the heroine, Lulu, who continues to inspire new interpretations in film, text, comics, and countless other visual and new media.

Die Büchse der Pandora is divided into eight consecutive episodes or »acts.« Organized by »an optics of eroticism« (Doane 66), the intermittent narrative tells the story of Lulu, a *variété* dancer who engages in a series of flirts, affairs, and romantic liaisons, as well as one unhappy marriage, before she eventually falls prey to the notorious serial killer, Jack the Ripper. Throughout this series of melodramatic events, Lulu, far from passively



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enduring her fate, proves herself a willful agent of the plot. It is Lulu who approaches the men—and women—she is interested in, and who makes sure that her desires are met, usually with seemingly little awareness for the consequences of her behavior. It is Lulu who torpedoes the happy engagement of a wealthy man so that she can marry him herself, before she then also ensnares her new husband's adult son. It is Lulu who puts an end to the unhappy marriage and stabs the abusive husband—arguably in an act of self-defense. It is also Lulu who eventually seals her own fate with a last romantic conquest: In the final act, set in murky London and in a milieu of abject poverty, she heads out on Christmas Eve to find her murderer. Unaware of his identity, she picks up Jack the Ripper, coaxes him into coming with her, ignoring his reluctance and insistence on the inability to pay for her services. »Come on, I like you« are Lulu's final words.

The episodic structure of *Die Büchse der Pandora* highlights how the proliferation of melodrama is intricately linked to the heroine's—as well as the filmic medium's—dependence on seriality. Indeed, the melodramatic mode seems to emerge from the heroine herself. After Alexander von Antalfy's *Lulu* (1917), starring Erna Morena, and Leopold Jeßner's *Pandora's Box* (1921) and *Earth Spirit* (1923) starring Asta Nielsen, Pabst's 1929 adaptation both responds to and fully exposes the material's affinity to serial iteration. »Lu-Lu« is conceived as the very principle of dramatic repetition. She becomes legible as the protagonist in a violent soap opera, a format that, like Pabst's film, »defers its moment of narrative closure« (Allen and van den Berg 2). And it is in this regard that the melodramatic mode reveals itself most openly: in Lulu's fundamental inability to avoid repeating mistakes, in her insatiable hunger for more, her irrepressible movement from conquest to conquest, and from sexual encounter to sexual encounter. The schematic formula of »the stronger the serialization [...] the more overt the melodrama« (Williams 177) proves accurate and simultaneously sums up the hopelessness of a dilemma that cannot be resolved—or only could be in radical ways. Significantly, *Die Büchse der Pandora* enlists an actual »serial killer« to stop the proliferation of drama and to put a preliminary end to the series.

Despite the radicality with which the film eventually disposes of its heroine, she is not the villain, and she resists being identified as »the very principle of evil,« as Frank Wedekind, the author of the textual Lulu, did. Rather, the film »updated Wedekind's femme fatale« (McCarthy 217) and found ways to give more nuance to the character. In Pabst's version, and even more so in Brooks' unique interpretation of the character, Lulu remains an ambiguous figure. She is, as has been argued, »always in-between« (Elsaesser 19). She is also, one could argue, always *both*: perpetrator *and* victim, androgynous *and* classically feminine, resistant *and* fragile. In this, Lulu marks an eminently modern intervention into the history of a tearful genre. In contrast to the heroines of the classical domestic tragedy, who proved themselves worthy of the spectator's compassion by marrying all qualities seen as desirable in a female (virtuousness, modesty, sensibility, compassion, and innocence), Lulu, in her perfect ambiguity, rather poses a challenge to the tradition—and thereby to the affective response of the audience. While there is no question that Lulu is the victim of the patriarchal structures surrounding her, the mere fact that she refuses to suffer quietly—and, for instance, is capable of publicly throwing a tantrum to get her way instead of despairing in private, of pleading not guilty after stabbing her husband, of eventually trying to sell her body in order to earn money—distinguishes her character from that of the classical melodramatic heroines prevalent in the films of her time.

This is how *Die Büchse der Pandora* modernizes melodrama. The film employs an aesthetic of serialization to amplify the melodramatic mode. At the same time, it presents a heroine as vector throughout the series, who at times invites classically melodramatic modes of reception—pity and compassion for an illegitimately suffering female, for example—but who also systematically disappoints the viewer, should they, as the domestic tragedy has taught them to, attempt to identify with the heroine fully and at all times. *Die Büchse der Pandora* is a formal-aesthetic celebration of melodrama that refuses to be watched and enjoyed as such. That Lulu has been and still is subject to citation across media is also rooted in this very tension: The film presents itself as a melodrama, but Lulu, the melodramatic subject, discourages the viewer from identifying with her. It is the medium's intrinsic seriality itself, exemplified by Lulu's incessant need to repeat and reproduce drama that gives the melodrama its modern form and that lays the ground for Lulu's continued citation.

References

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