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FILMS IN FOCUS

The Legend of Louise Brooks

By Andrew Sarris

PANDORA'S BOX (1929). Directed by G.W. Pabst. Screenplay by Ladislaus Vajda, based on the plays *Erdegeist* and *Die Buchse der Pandora* by Frank Wedekind. Produced by George C. Horsetzky for Nero Film A.G. A Kino International release in association with Janus Films.

DIARY OF A LOST GIRL (1929). Directed by G.W. Pabst. Screenplay by Rudolf Leonhardt, based on the story by Margarethe Boehme. A Kino International release in association with Jerry Winters Inc.

HEAT AND DUST. Directed by James Ivory. Produced by Ismail Merchant. Novel and Screenplay by Ruth Prawer Jhabvala. A Universal Classic Release.

Louise Brooks is appearing, for two weeks only at the Regency Theater (Broadway and 67th Street, 724-3700) from September 18 through October 1 in what are billed as her two greatest films—and in a sense I suppose they are—G.W. Pabst's *Pandora's Box* and *Diary of a Lost Girl*, both released originally in 1929, and both silent films with musical accompaniment. Many writers on film have rhapsodized on the beauty and sensuality of Miss Brooks. She and the late Kenneth Tynan published evidence of an incisive intelligence as well. Anyone who has ever met her, and I had that great privilege some years ago, has marveled at both the generosity and insightfulness of her comments on the wild and often brutal milieu of movie people in the '20s and '30s. Miss Brooks herself was never exactly treated with kid gloves by the moguls, particularly after she made it crystal clear that she intended to live by her own unique

vamp in what is essentially a buddy-buddy romance between Victor McLaglen and Robert Armstrong. The mischievousness of the Brooks character is not without its amusing touches, but Brooks under Hawks is a long way from the spunky Hawksian woman later to be incarnated by Jean Arthur in *Only Angels Have Wings*, Rosalind Russell in *His Girl Friday*, Lauren Bacall in *To Have and Have Not* and *The Big Sleep*, Joanne Dru in *Red River*, and Angie Dickinson in *Rio Bravo*. The treacherous Eve of Brooks in *Port* is, if anything, closer to the schemingly enticing Joan Collins in *The Land of the Pharaohs*.

Though Brooks is considerably more sympathetic in *Beggars of Life*, here too she becomes somewhat submerged in the ultramacho rivalry between a nice-tough-guy protector played by Richard Arlen, and a swaggering king of the hobos played by burpy, growly Wallace Beery. Brooks is strikingly androgynous in drag, but the startling implications of the images are stifled by the puritanical development of a self-consciously Whitmanesque plot. By suggesting everything and delivering nothing, Hollywood movies have traditionally tantalized intellectuals with the fantasy of filling in the libidinally blank spaces with outrages no censor would ever



and embarrassment in her eyes, as if to reassure her loving audience that she wasn't really that cruel. Don't get me wrong, Hayes had her moments on the screen, though the camera never really loved her.

This is not to say, however, that Brooks was simply the beneficiary of a mindless cinegeneity. She was no mere creature of the camera, but a vibrant woman whose being was galvanized into aesthetic lightning by a master of the medium. He gave her a context in which she could wreak havoc with her good looks and yet emerge unsullied and spiritually redeemed. Her last moments with Jack the Ripper in *Pandora's Box* invoke a spiritual consecration on the altar of womanhood that is to find its subsequent expression in the sublime works of Sternberg, Ophüls, Mizoguchi, and, somewhat ironically, Fassbinder.

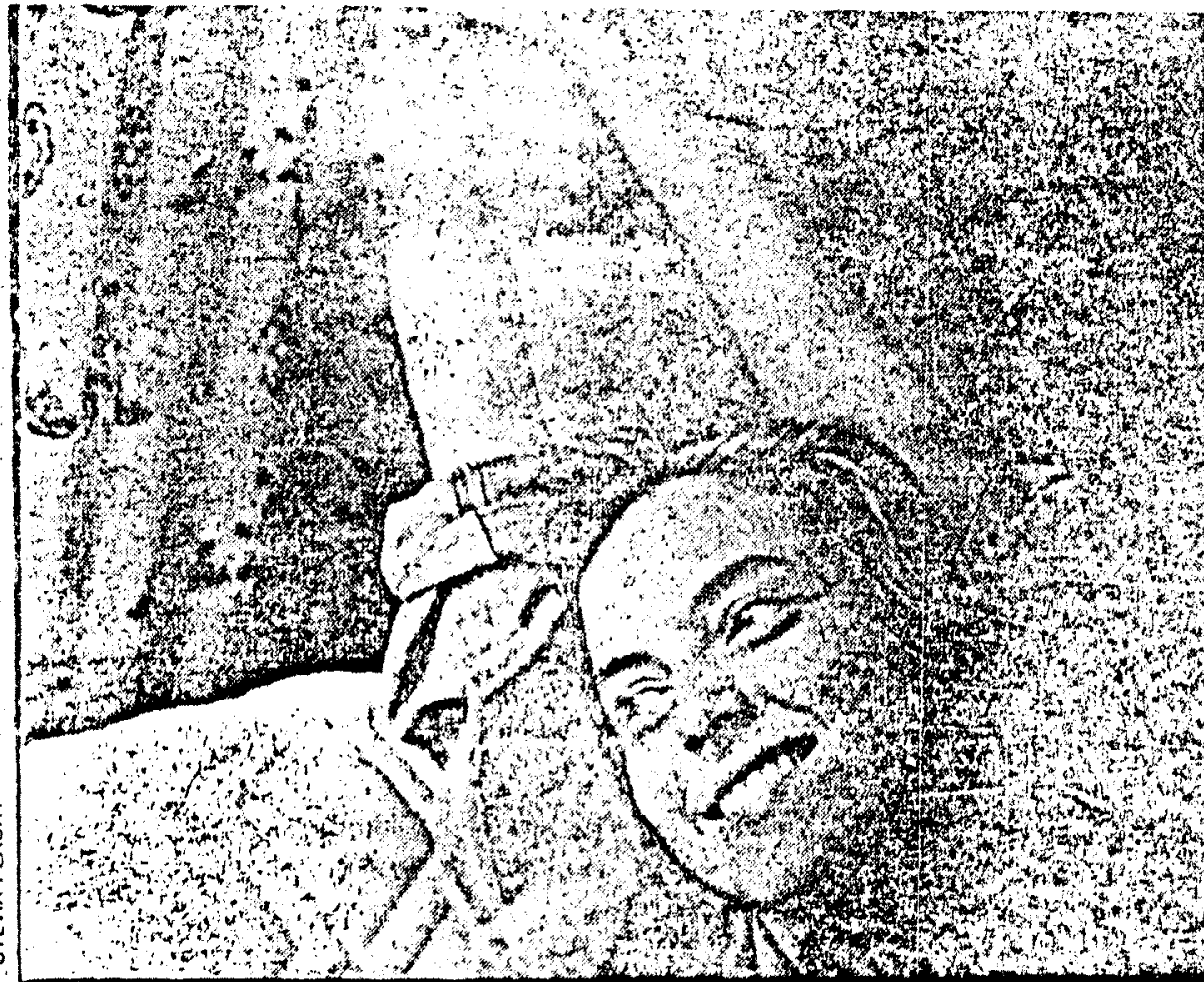
Pandora's Box and *Diary of a Lost Girl* are not great films in and of themselves, and they are certainly not feminist tracts on the order of Room's amazingly un-Soviet *Bed and Sofa* from Russia, about the same time as *Pandora*. Pabst and Brooks are still ahead of their time commercially by not playing for cheap sympathy from the galleries. Despite all the talk of a sexual revolution, most people are still not comfortable with an authentic female sex goddess who insists on ruling or ruining the lives of her adoring male subjects. It is amazing how close the right and the left come on this issue as the ideologues on both sides gang up to defend their respective patriarchies. That is why Pabst himself had to run for cover to regain some of his lost critical standing by subsequently celebrating male camaraderie in such "humanist" works as *Westfront 1918* and *Kamaradschaft*.

More than half of a century after *Pandora's Box* and *Diary of a Lost Girl*, the team of Ismail Merchant and James

Brooks, "but strictly her own, and, as she has confessed herself, she tended to burn the candle at both ends at every opportunity, but, oh what a lovely flame she still makes on the screen!"

It is hard to say what would have happened to her in the talkies of the '30s if she had played her career cards more shrewdly. Her voice was probably far from the disaster that her professional detractors of the period claimed it to be. The period itself may have been a bigger problem. Between the Great Depression that replaced Good Times with Hard Times, and the toughening of the Production Code, the exuberant flapper embodied by Brooks became a vanishing social type.

Yet her books, her articles, and her interviews suggest a talent that might have been profitably diverted to movie journalism early on in the '30s. If a fifth-rate actress like Hedda Hopper could make her fortune in such an occupational switch, why not Brooks? Here again, Brooks might have been handicapped by a deficiency in cattiness and power-worship. I propose these speculations against the background of her visual eruption not only in *Pandora's Box* and *Diary of a Lost Girl*, but, previously, in such Hollywood flicks as Howard Hawks's *A Girl in Every Port* and William Wellman's *The Beggars of Life*. We must remember that the Brooks look had already manifested itself before Louise was summoned to Germany by the prematurely Freudian Pabst. As one watches her glide gracefully and innocently past the overburdened expressionism of German acting and set design, one is reminded of an Iowa farm girl named Jean Seberg floating calmly through the hyper-intellectualized Paris of Jean-Luc Godard in *Breathless*. The Seberg boyish ingenue had already taken form in Otto Preminger's much reviled versions of Shaw's *Saint Joan* and Sagan's *Bonjour Tristesse*, two movies that look much more interesting today than they did at the time. If anything, Preminger's conception of Seberg was less conventional, than Hawks's, and even Wellman's of Brooks. *A Girl in Every Port*



SYLVIA PLACHY

Louise Brooks (above) in *Pandora's Box* and *Heat and Dust's* Greta Scacchi

tolerate.

Enter G.W. Pabst with an unusually developed flair for eros in the cinema even for a European. He is not such an overt iconoclast as Stroheim and Bunuel, nor as witty and as elegant a witness to sexual folly as Lubitsch, nor as strongly driven to grandiose designs of erotic domination as Lang. Pabst is more the urbane analyst, bemused by the desires depicted in his films, occasionally even enchanted by them, but never hypocritical about his own complicity in the spectacle. What did he see in Louise Brooks that led him to pick her over the then still widely unknown Marlene Dietrich for the lead in *Pandora's Box*? Not just another pretty face, to be sure, for there were a great many extraordinary beauties on the Hollywood screen at this time, and even a great many infinitely bigger stars. What

and enthusiasm, and, yes, innocence of a New World blissfully unaware of the tired old rules and attitudes of the Old.

F. Scott Fitzgerald was to write a few years later that he had been looking in vain for the New Woman of the '20s on the screen. Pabst and Louise Brooks provided just about the only cinematic evidence that such a creature ever existed. Pabst achieved this effect by having Brooks either underreact or react inappropriately to the most melodramatic situations. Watch Brooks's expression as she exposes her ex-lover to a humiliating backstage scandal that ends his chance of an advantageous marriage to a "nice" girl. Brooks's face, still flushed with the exertions of passion, opens up with the fierce joyousness of triumph. She glows with healthy high spirits. It is much too original an effect for general audiences. Helen Hayes would have done the scene with more pain

to explore the paradoxes of sexual desire with all the literary nuances presumably denied to the makers of silent films. The canvas is again India, the time between an Indian province in the '20s and that same province in the '80s. The two female protagonists—the colonial lover of Greta Scacchi in the '20s and the liberated Anna of Julie Christie in the '80s—are treated less as the sexual rulers of their realms than as the ultimate victims. In a sense, both women are seduced by India itself, its heat and dust, its passion and disorder, its insistently interminable music and its persistently pornographic art. The filmmakers themselves are still somewhat seduced by India as well, with the result that they often seem to be displaying it rather than dissecting it. Much of the acting is first-rate, notably Shashi Kapoor as a rascally Nawab or rajah, and Nickolas Grace as a wondrously articulate homosexual hanger-on. Indeed, I don't know what we would do without Grace's great talent at providing information from a suitably ironic perspective, a talent that was equally indispensable in the recent TV series, *Brideshead Revisited*.

Fortunately, *Heat and Dust* does not shun narration in the contemporary manner, and thus the film hangs together after a fashion. Christie is not without charisma, and Scacchi is not without a certain histrionic guile, but the characters both women play seem to drift depressingly to bleak destinies unworthy of either their beauty or their intelligence. Adding to the gloom of this otherwise creditable achievement is the inevitably downward spiral in dramatic interest from past to present. Hence, Julie Christie ends up pregnant on a monastic mountainside, as if she had wandered unbidden into some unwritten sequel to *The Razor's Edge*. If only *Heat and Dust* had lingered more on its glorious middle where nuance and subtlety and irony and humor seem to be bursting at the seams of two centuries in the throes of a fascinating death struggle. As it turns out, the endings of both stories are too much corpse-ridden.