

Victim or Vixen? Ambiguity and The Portrayal of Prostitution and The “New Woman” in The Films of G.W. Pabst

Marley Sternner

*This paper examines the ambiguous portrayal of prostitution in Weimar Germany through the films of German film director G.W. Pabst. The women prostitute characters in *Joyless Streets* (1925), *Diary of a Lost Girl* (1929), and *Pandora’s Box* (1929) reveal the extent to which class lines began to blur for prostitutes during the economic crisis in the Weimar Republic. Pabst’s films explore the different circumstances that steered women into prostitution, and how the prostitutes’ behaviours affects whether they are intended to be perceived by the audience as “victims” of financial desperation or sexually manipulative “vixens.” The paper further investigates the existence of an unofficial criteria in Pabst’s films that decides whether a prostitute character will have a fortunate or tragic end, and whether this criterion exists to appease the concern of censor boards that the existence of prostitutes as protagonists in film made the profession appear desirable.*

In the newly-formed Weimar Republic, endless economic struggles, the conception of the emancipated “New Woman,” and the embrace of human sexuality turned the spotlight onto a classically demonized profession that now seemed to fit within the shades of grey of this new society—the prostitute. Were prostitutes in the Weimar Republic seen as victims of the same challenges faced by a whole nation, or, were they viewed as manipulators driven by sexual desire and wealth, and therefore deserving of punishment for their sins? While many films of the era explore the prostitute character, no director examines the ambiguous nature of her existence in society quite like G.W. Pabst in *Joyless Street* (1925), *Pandora’s Box* (1929), and *Diary of a Lost Girl* (1929). Through an examination of the women in these films, this paper will discuss the facets of ambiguity in the portrayal of prostitution in Weimar cinema, and how these layers create a character that is never purely a victim nor a sinner.

Crucial to the establishment of the prostitute character in Weimar film were the circumstances that brought her into the profession—was she a prostitute for work or for pleasure? Pabst’s films portray prostitutes in both of these capacities. Due to increased financial desperation, especially for those of the working and white-collar classes, in the 1920s prostitution became a last resort for many women in order to provide for themselves or their families. Traditionally, prostitution was associated with lower classes, but as bourgeois morality trickled down through

the working class in the 20th century, the lower classes began to distance themselves from a direct connection to prostitution.¹ As a result, the profession of prostitution was no longer attached to a specific social class, but rather came to exist in-between the working class and the bourgeois “new woman.” The prostitutes of Pabst’s films belong to a range of classes, demonstrating the “in-between status” of prostitution that blurred class lines for women involved in the profession.²

Of the three films, *Joyless Street* most directly addresses the personalized socioeconomic circumstances that caused women of various classes to resort to prostitution in order to survive.³ Else—a new mother with an unemployed husband—sells her body to the butcher in order to acquire meat to feed her baby. Greta—the daughter of a civil servant that loses his pension on a risky investment—joins the cabaret after using all of her money to pay her father’s debts. Marie—the daughter of a working-class family—pimps herself in order to help pay the debts of the man she desires. It is important to note, however, that the sexual objectification of these women begins well before they enter the sex trade. Thomas J. Saunders suggests that “the nexus of sex and cash permeates or threatens to permeate all social and economic transactions,” and this is especially apparent in Greta’s story.⁴ She is fired from her secretarial job, a traditional white-collar profession for women, because she refuses her boss’ sexual advances after he wrongly assumes from the quality of her new coat that she has prostituted herself. It is therefore ironic that Greta is ultimately forced to join Madam Gill’s cabaret as a result of losing her job.

In her discussion on the relationship between white-collar women and prostitution in the Weimar Republic, Jill Suzanne Smith draws attention to the novel *Menschen im Hotel* and the way in which the character of Flämmchen—a white-collar woman driven by financial desperation into the sex trade—“is neither victim nor whore but a savvy, determined young woman who is very aware of the tradeoffs involved in the work she takes.”⁵ Some prostitutes, such as Greta, are clearly portrayed as “victims” of their financial circumstances; however, some of Pabst’s other prostitute characters are more similar to Flämmchen. These characters enter prostitution under similarly desperate conditions, but once in the profession their actions are layered with an element of playfulness and manipulation. A subtle, yet important, scene in *Diary of a Lost Girl*

1 Roberta Perkins, “Wicked Women or Working Girls: The Prostitute on the Silver Screen,” *Media Information Australia* 51, no. 1 (1989): 28.

2 Clémentine Tholas-Disset, “Early Representations of Female Prostitution in *Pandora’s Box*,” in *Selling Sex on Screen*, eds. Karen A. Ritzenhoff and Catriona McAvoy (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 31., Thomas Saunders, “The Sexual Economy and the New Woman: Images of Prostitution in Weimar Cinema,” in *Selling Sex on Screen*, eds. Karen A. Ritzenhoff and Catriona McAvoy (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 3-4.

3 Saunders, “The Sexual Economy and the New Woman,” 3.

4 Ibid.

5 Jill Suzanne Smith, “Working Girls: White-Collar Workers and Prostitutes in Late Weimar Fiction.” *The German Quarterly* 81, no. 4 (2008): 451.

alludes to this principle. Once the film's homeless and desperate protagonist, Thymian, is introduced to the life of prostitution, she has the opportunity to taste champagne for the first time. Her facial expressions illustrate the allure of prostitution and its transformative potential on young women—uncertainty, curiosity, intrigue, and excitement.⁶

In the first half of *Pandora's Box*, Lulu is the embodiment of the playful and, perhaps unintentionally, manipulative prostitute. The men in her world are her playground, she enjoys the attention and the comfort of the bourgeois lifestyle, but also will not hesitate to use her sexuality in a child-like way to ensure those affections never disappear. This is particularly evident when she ruins Schon's engagement to a government official's daughter by throwing a tantrum and seducing him in a closet, and when she is described in court as the mythical figure Pandora because of the way she manipulates men.⁷ While in the first half of the film Lulu's character does not appear to hold the same financial desperation as the women of *Joyless Street*, her refusal to leave Schon could be interpreted as her attempt to cling to a life of financial security. Saunders suggests prostitution was both a form of employment and personal identity, therefore at stake for Lulu, both when Schon attempts to leave her and when she is almost "sold" as a commodity in the casino, is her ability to control her own freedom and sexual payment.⁸ Pabst presents a set of female characters driven into an "in-between status" because of their socioeconomic struggles, but at the same time he prevents these women from being seen as pure victims by drawing attention to the playful and manipulative aspects of prostitution.

Much of the ambiguity present in the portrayal of prostitution in the films of Weimar Germany arises from the fact that a woman's motivations for becoming a prostitute do not necessarily decide whether she, as a character, is to be perceived as a 'victim' or 'vixen.' This becomes clear when the characters of Lulu and Thymian—both played by actress Louise Brooks—are contrasted in their respective films. In the original stage play of *Pandora's Box*, creator Wedekind saw Lulu as a "sweet creature" that "inspires evil unaware" because of her sexuality.⁹ At first glance, Lulu seems to live up to her description as the temptress that unleashes the evils of Pandora's Box onto the world—and yet, Louise Brooks viewed Lulu as a simple girl who was a victim of the sexualization of the "new woman."¹⁰ While it is evident that Lulu causes

6 Sabine Hake, "The Continuous Provocation of Louise Brooks." *German Politics & Society*, no. 32 (1994): 71.

7 *Pandora's Box*, end of Act 5. Lulu is tried for the murder of Schon, with the defending lawyer arguing she is a victim that acted out of self-defence. The prosecutor describes Lulu as 'Pandora,' a figure in mythology whose curiosity caused her to open a box that released several plagues on the world.

8 Saunders, "The Sexual Economy and the New Woman," 6, 8.

9 Hake, "The Continuous Provocation of Louise Brooks," 64., Thomas Elsaesser, "Lulu and the Meter Man: Louise Brooks, G. W. Pabst and Pandora's Box," in *Weimar Cinema and After: Germany's Historical Imaginary*, (London: Routledge, 2000), 267.

10 Elsaesser, "Lulu and the Meter Man," 267-268.

the lives of those around her to unravel—she sabotages Schon's engagement, kills him when she herself is threatened, and ultimately drags Alwa, Schigolch, and Roberto down with her—it is worth noting that all of her actions resemble childlike tantrums. Is Lulu the manipulative, femme fatale of popular myth, or an embodiment of the sexually free "new woman" turned victim?¹¹ Most authors that examine her character agree that she fits neither box, but is rather an "indefinable creature" created through the techniques used in Pabst's directing and Brooks' acting.¹²

The ambiguity around Lulu's character is rooted in Pabst's directorial choices. He never places the camera too close to Lulu, she is rarely alone in a scene, and she consistently displays either a playful smile or pouting frown in reaction to the characters around her. Thomas Elsaesser notes that in most scenes, Lulu is shown between two characters, never allowing the audience to experience an intimate moment with her.¹³ A prominent example of Pabst's ambiguous point of view occurs when Lulu kills Schon. In Schon's final moments, Pabst keeps the gun out of the camera frame so the audience cannot know for certain who pulled the trigger, sustaining Lulu's childlike appeal while also showing the capacity to which she can embody the monster "Pandora." Brooks complements Pabst's use of indirect camera angles by providing the audience with a Lulu that has no gaze.¹⁴ By rarely directing her attention to the camera or the character opposite of her in the scene, Brooks defies the common expectation of German cinema that character development should be linear and inspire empathy from the audience.¹⁵

Whereas Lulu is a victim rendered with a lack of intimacy, Thymian, in *Diary of a Lost Girl*, is also a victim of the same circumstances but is presented in a very different light. Pabst and Brooks collaborate again to create a distinct point of view that portrays its own type of ambiguity. In contrast to Lulu's limited spectrum of expression, Pabst places Thymian close to the camera in order to expose all of her reactions and emotions. One such example occurs when the camera closes in on Thymian's shocked expression as she learns of the death of her child. Russell Campbell notes that the "pathos generated by the story of a woman of good character reduced to selling her body had an obvious appeal" to viewers, and it establishes Thymian as a much more empathetic character—especially when she "falls" into prostitution.¹⁶

Pabst once again uses the concept of the female gaze in order to establish character and contrast in the life of prostitution. Throughout most of the film, Thymian, unlike Lulu, addresses characters directly, and Pabst's camera angles support her in this regard. However, once Thymian has established herself at the brothel, she takes

11 The term femme fatale refers to an attractive woman fated to bring chaos and catastrophe to the life of any man she seduces.

12 Tholas-Disset, "Early Representations of Female Prostitution," 23.

13 Elsaesser, "Lulu and the Meter Man," 275.

14 Ibid., 279.

15 Hake, "The Continuous Provocation of Louise Brooks," 65.

16 Russell Campbell, "Fallen Woman: Prostitute Narratives in the Cinema." *Screening the Past*, no. 8 (1999): 6.

on a ‘Lulu-esque’ gaze and smile as she surveys the crowd. Sabine Hake describes this effect on both Lulu and Thymian as the “mask of femininity” that makes it difficult to differentiate between “appearance and truth” in the portrayal of the female characters in Pabst’s films.¹⁷ In this particular scene with Thymian, her mask is only broken when she sees her father sitting in the crowd, and once again the directness of her gaze returns. The concept of a “mask of femininity” is also apparent when Thymian faints before every on-screen sexual encounter. Since the audience never sees her consent to sex—both when the pharmacist rapes her and when the madam at the brothel sends her off with a client—Thymian becomes “neither an example of female oppression nor of erotic liberation.”¹⁸ Ultimately, Lulu and Thymian represent two female stereotypes—the “femme fatale” and the “modern girl”—but Pabst’s portrayal of the ambiguous prostitute is strengthened when Lulu and Thymian are considered in tandem, for together they demonstrate Brooks’ ability to present two contrasting sides of femininity.¹⁹

Pabst’s portrayal of prostitution and masculinity in his films unnerved censor boards as well as the patriarchy itself. In order to uphold moral norms, the prostitute character traditionally faced death or isolation for her crimes, but given shifting sexual attitudes in the 1920s, filmmakers began to experiment with different prostitute narratives—much to the chagrin of censors.²⁰ A significant amount of *Diary of a Lost Girl* was banned by the Prussian Board of Censors out of concern that the film made prostitution appear desirable and easily escaped from, and that it might entice younger audiences to explore the profession.²¹ *Joyless Street* drew a large amount of public attention because of its frank depiction of the economic struggles of post-war Austria and the extent women had to go to survive. However, it was heavily censored in parts of Germany and America, to the point that Pabst was forced to cut parts of the film moments before its first screening in Germany.²² In order to pass the censor gatekeepers, all three films examined here contain criteria that determine whether their heroines will be saved or punished for their sexual sins. This next section will examine what conditions allowed Greta and Thymian to live, and caused Else, Marie, and Lulu to face legal or fatal repercussions for their behaviour in their respective stories.

One of the fundamental conditions to be “saved” in these films is for the prostitutes to ultimately take actions that condemn prostitution, and thus reaffirm the moral status quo. Throughout *Joyless Street*, Greta never resorts to sexual favours to maintain financial stability. She loses her job for refusing her employer’s advances, and avoids working for Madame Gill until she can no longer afford to because of her father’s financial missteps. Unlike Thymian, Greta does not have a ‘champagne’ moment

17 Hake, “The Continuous Provocation of Louise Brooks,” 72.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid., 68-69

20 Perkins, “Wicked Women,” 29.

21 Campbell, “Fallen Woman,” 13.

22 Landazuri, Margarita. “The Joyless Street.” *The Joyless Street: Silent Film Festival*. <http://silentfilm.org/archive/the-joyless-street> (accessed November 20, 2019).

in which she sees the liberating aspect of prostitution, rather she remains ashamed and unwilling to step on-stage until her American lover and father rescue her. Of the three women focused on in *Joyless Street*, Greta is the only one allowed a happy ending. In *Diary of a Lost Girl*, Thymian is also permitted to be ‘saved’ despite showing indulgence because ultimately, she too takes action that condemns prostitution and upholds basic moral values. Her decision to give her inheritance money to Meta—the woman that once forced Thymian from her own home—reaffirms Thymian as a moralistic character and victim of circumstances that were out of her control. By dismissing the advances of the pharmacist that once raped her, and stepping in to save her prostitute friend at the reformatory, Thymian proves that prostitutes are capable of becoming ‘proper’ women. With her declaration of “your ignorance will not help her,” Thymian calls for empathy and an understanding of the conditions that force good women into prostitution.²³

A much different fate awaits those women that do not dismiss prostitution by the end of their respective films. In *Joyless Street*, both Marie and Else willingly—although under different circumstances—sell their bodies in order to survive. Else prostitutes herself for meat and Marie prostitutes herself to Alfonso in order to settle Egon’s financial debts. However, desperation is not enough to save them from the fate of the “fallen woman” narrative.²⁴ As a result of these decisions, the women follow parallel stories. Marie murders one of Egon’s other lovers and Else murders the butcher when he refuses to give her any more meat. In contrast to Thymian, both Marie and Else condemn themselves to be morally irredeemable because of these actions, and therefore must face punishment. Else burns to death in the brothel fire and Marie admits to the murder of Egon’s lover and is arrested.

Another crucial aspect to determining the fate of women in these films is the extent of which they reaffirm or challenge the concept of the patriarchy. Campbell suggests that what “these women may really be guilty of, in the patriarchal mind, is enjoying their sexuality” and that only the “reformed prostitute” will be saved by the love and charity of men.²⁵ This holds true in *Joyless Street* and *Diary of a Lost Girl*. Greta is first scorned by her American love interest for joining the cabaret, but when her circumstances are revealed, he rescues her from the brothel. Thymian is first saved from the reformatory by Count Osdorff, and her marriage to him allows her to start a new life. After Osdorff’s suicide, his uncle steps in to ensure Thymian is able to live in financial and social security. While Thymian still makes her own decisions, she loses her independence and her status becomes tied to the tolerance of the patriarchy.

Campbell suggests women that demonstrate an ability to survive on their own through prostitution must meet a tragic end because they offer “too much of

23 *Diary of a Lost Girl*, final scene. Thymian, now a respectable woman with the support of her late husband’s uncle, is asked to join the board of the reformatory that once imprisoned her.

Instead of taking the staunch attitude of the other board members, Thymian shows kindness and empathy for the struggles of the girls in the reformatory.

24 Campbell, “Fallen Woman,” 1.

25 Ibid., 8-9.

a threat to the patriarchal norm.”²⁶ Lulu is a prime example of this principle in Pandora’s Box. Throughout the film, Lulu’s very existence twists traditional patriarchal figures into her unintentional slaves—Schon commits social suicide to marry Lulu, Alwa loses everything to run off with his father’s murderer, and Schigolch and Rodrigo get roped into the scheme because of their connection to her. Perhaps the inclusion of the Countess as one of the figures infatuated with Lulu was orchestrated in order to lessen the attack on masculine audiences by suggesting that even women could fall victim to Lulu’s charms. Both Campbell and Roberta Perkins stress that in the analysis of prostitute narratives, it is important to consider the influence of the male perspectives that created such narratives, as well as the films’ intended audience.²⁷

Censor boards were careful to ensure these films did not paint prostitution in a positive light for the young women already influenced by the image of the free and independent “new woman.” Subsequently, there was also concern about wounding the already fragile egos of a financially struggling white-collar class of males.²⁸ As a result, films centred on prostitution had to strike a delicate balance between establishing the prostitute as an object of desire for male viewers, but also as “an object of hatred, symbolizing everything in the female other he wishes to deny or destroy.”²⁹ Based on these principles, Lulu—a character that drags the men around her down the social ladder—is not permitted to survive the film. Her death at the hands of Jack the Ripper, after offering him sex without payment, contains the perfect amount of irony to appease the uncertainties of male audiences. By ending the film on an image of ‘proper’ women volunteers for the Salvation Army, Lulu’s death is denied the attention befitting of a tragic heroine, and strips her of the victim status that unsettled critics of the film.³⁰

G.W. Pabst’s *Joyless Street*, *Pandora’s Box*, and *Diary of a Lost Girl* are films that confront the image of prostitution in a society of change. While all three films are based on novels or plays, the source materials for *Pandora’s Box* and *Diary of a Lost Girl* were published in 1904 and 1905 respectively. This suggests that Pabst intentionally reinterpreted the source material and shot the films to reflect the societal values and issues of Weimar Germany specifically. Bound to an extent by the expectations of censors and the public, Pabst creates an ambiguous image of the Weimar prostitute that indicates a dichotomy between motivations of financial desperation and pleasure, a blurred definition of victimization, and ultimately establishes a set of criteria that decide whether the prostitute will experience moral redemption or condemnation. The debate on the victimization of prostitutes in Weimar film can be summarized into a question posed by Russell Campbell: “Did she jump, or was she

pushed?”³¹ Pabst’s films suggest that women could enter prostitution under either circumstance. However, perhaps the greater problem lies in society’s tendency to turn a blind-eye to the circumstances of the woman poised on the precipice—only when she falls is she acknowledged, and then blamed for her plummet from propriety.

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²⁶ Campbell, “Fallen Woman,” 9.

²⁷ Perkins, “Wicked Women,” 29., Russell Campbell. *Marked Women: Prostitutes and Prostitution in the Cinema* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), 21.

²⁸ Elsaesser, “Lulu and the Meter Man,” 271.

²⁹ Campbell, *Marked Women*, 27.

³⁰ Elsaesser, “Lulu and the Meter Man,” 273.

³¹ Campbell, “Fallen Woman,” 6.

Filmography

Joyless Streets (1925) directed by G.W. Pabst
Pandora's Box (1929) directed by G.W. Pabst
Diary of a Lost Girl (1929) directed by G.W. Pabst

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