

A CRITICAL FILMOGRAPHY OF FRENCH CINEMA 1929–1939

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*Prix de beauté*

Miss Europe

France–Germany–Italy, 1930, 92', b+w

*Dir* Augusto Genina (1892–1957) *Asst dir* Edmond Gréville, André d'Ollivier and Fernand Lefebvre *Prod* SOFAR (Société des Films Artistiques) *Scr* Augusto Genina, René Clair, Bernard Zimmer and Alessandro de Stefani, from an idea of Georg-Wilhelm Pabst *Cinematog* Rudolph Maté *Mus* Wolfgang Zeller, René Sylviano and H. Shephard *Lyrics* Jean Botey *Art dir* Robert Gys *Edit* Edmond Gréville *Act* Louise Brooks (Lucienne Garnier), Jean Bradin (Prince Grabovsky), Georges Charlia (André), H. Bandini (Antonin), André Nicolle (secretary), Yves Glad (Maharaja), Gaston Jacquet (Duc de la Tour Chalgrin), Alex Bernard (photographer), Marc Ziboulsky (manager)

The bewildering list of credits for direction and script above give some idea of the complicated origins of this film, but the reality is even more astonishing. The film was begun in 1929 as a silent film. Most sources say the scenario was primarily René Clair's, from an idea by Pabst, and that Clair intended to direct it himself, but the final scenario departed significantly from the original proposal and was rejected by the producer. Meanwhile Clair had seen the first talkies and had revised the script to include sound. It was still rejected, however, perhaps for financial reasons, and was finally allocated to the experienced Italian director Augusto Genina. SOFAR was an Italian–German–French production company, so it decided for tactical reasons to shoot the film in four languages, with those actors who didn't speak all of them being dubbed. Louise Brooks's voice, for example, was dubbed in the French version by Hélène Regelly. It is astounding that such a multiple-sourced film should be so coherent and so powerful, and no less astounding in that sound seems integral to the design of the film as it now stands. The climactic final scene, which had been central to Clair's scenario, must nevertheless have been conceived in its present form after the decision to sonorise.

The story is simple: Lucienne becomes a star, and it proves fatal to her. At first she and André are a humble working class couple; she works as a typist in a press-room, but dreams of a more glamorous life. Thanks to a beauty contest she

is able to achieve it; we follow her from office-girl to Miss France and finally to Spain, where she is crowned Miss Europe. She is courted by a prince, a duke and a maharajah, and is to do a screen test. The high life turns her head, and André issues an ultimatum: return to Paris and marry him, or it's all over. She is torn but accepts, and we see her trying to reconcile herself to a meagre living in a sordid apartment with André. Finally, unable to endure it, she slips away to do the screen test. While she is watching the rushes with the producer, André sneaks into the projection room and shoots her dead.

The film is, then, clearly reflexive: its focus is on the making of a film, and more generally on the corrupting effect of the media. It constitutes a critique of the myth of the star, which was clearly, along with the beauty contest, the 'idea' suggested to René Clair by Pabst. This makes the presence of Louise Brooks in the central role particularly appropriate, since her abrupt rise to fame in the preceding three years had made of her just such a star, notably in two Pabst films (*Pandora's Box* and *The Diary of a Lost Girl*). *Prix de beauté* picks up on several of her previous roles as a basically good-hearted girl whose intense sexuality almost accidentally entrains fatal consequences. From our first meeting with the couple André is intensely jealous of the admiring glances she attracts, and she attempts to defuse the situation by putting on a record of the song 'Ne sois pas jaloux' ('Don't be jealous this evening, I only have one love, and it's you. . . You must forgive me', etc). It becomes their theme song, and what outrages André particularly in the final scene is that, in the rushes of the film, she is singing 'their' song. As she collapses dead, her giant recorded image continues above the scene of the murder, singing gaily on. Here already in the form 'reality versus representation' we find the contrast of public gaiety and private grief which was to become a motif of 1930s films. The final images are of the flickering light of the screen illuminating fitfully their two faces—André sombre, she dead.

Although this critique of the star is central to the film, what is no less fascinating is the exploration of sonorisation techniques used in what had begun as a silent film. The sound-track is omnipresent, but only rarely are there moments of diegetic conversation, or diegetically-sourced sound and music. The early beach and street scenes are accompanied by a babble of bathers and traffic, out of which occasional identifiable voices arise. The following press-room scene celebrates the dynamism of the machines with bustling music, a player piano, the typewriters joining in a quasi-symphonic sound-mix and a loud-speaker announcing the beauty competition. All this is accompanied by a montage of images, including documentary-style 'hidden camera' images of the street scene. Lucienne's fashion magazines inspire her with apparently unrealisable yearnings, and these dreams are forcefully contrasted with her actual existence, both when we see André returning from work with grubby hands and broken

fingernails and when she and friends visit a fairground. There, the grotesque masses aggress her until she wonders what she is doing amidst this crush of unlovely individuals.

Throughout her ascent to Miss Europe this montage of sounds and images accompanies and comments on her aspirations and fears, but also (once she has decided to marry André) on his jealousy and frustrations. In the bleaker central section in their unhappy flat her moment of fame cannot be forgotten: her image intrudes in newspaper used as wrapping and fans inundate her with mail and photos to sign. André rips them all up and wanders disconsolate through the streets, finally spying on her encounter with the prince/producer of her film. Technically, then, this is an enormously ambitious film, including location shooting, a series of rapid camera movements and several long tracking shots, all of which are shot with a silent camera and which were to become well-nigh impossible for the next few years as the heavily-blimped camera lumbered round the confined spaces of the studio.

Genina was to direct another five films in France in the next few years, one of which, interestingly, was called *Ne sois pas jalouse*, while another, *Paris béguin* ('Paris Infatuation'), with Jean Gabin, likewise dealt with the preparation of a performance, and ended with his murder beneath a giant poster of the star who loves him, and who has to perform smiling through her tears. Pabst was also to make five more films in French versions, including *L'Opéra de quat'sous* (*The Threepenny Opera*, q.v.) based on Bertolt Brecht's version of *The Beggar's Opera*, and *L'Atlantide* (q.v.), while René Clair was even as this film came out putting the finishing touches to his first sound film *Sous les toits de Paris*.

Colin Crisp