

## Screening Modernity: Cinema and Sexuality in Ann-Marie MacDonald's *Fall On Your Knees*

Candida Rifkind

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Article abstract

In *Fall on Your Knees*, Ann-Marie MacDonald writes early twentieth-century Cape Breton and New York through attention to the popular culture of the era, particularly in aspects of the visual, including paintings, photographs, and films. Just as the female characters transgress boundaries between normative and queer sexuality, so too the text offers an aesthetic queering of the boundaries between representational media. The representations of 1920s film star Louise Brooks, particularly, guide readers to a supplemental set of cultural meanings carried by her image and to a recognition that representation, like history, is always partial.

# Screening Modernity: Cinema and Sexuality in Ann-Marie MacDonald's *Fall On Your Knees*

CANDIDA RIFKIND

ANN-MARIE MACDONALD'S *Fall On Your Knees* folds documented twentieth-century events into a fiction about the uncertainties of the past. MacDonald's array of historical references is matched by the breadth of her literary allusions which, as Jennifer Andrews points out, "cultivates a consciously metafictional approach to the writing of fiction" (9). While MacDonald appeals to other literary texts and to the historical record, she also disrupts the dominance of the written word by incorporating songs and visual images into the story. MacDonald writes early twentieth-century Cape Breton and New York through attention to the popular culture of the era, thereby creating an effect of the historically real and opening up the female characters' possibilities for self-fashioning. *Fall On Your Knees* is obsessed with all aspects of the visual, from dreams and visions to paintings, photographs, and films. This fascination appears in descriptions of visual artifacts throughout the novel but also in the absorption of visual culture, particularly the semiotics of silent films, into the narrative itself. The circulation of early twentieth-century cinematic images and thematics within the narrative economy is most active around the character of Frances Piper, whose sexual transgressions are represented in descriptions that cross the boundary between word and image.

The very beginning of *Fall On Your Knees* mobilizes such interplays between the written and the visual; the prologue title, "Silent Pictures," signals that the novel will absorb photographic and cinematic images into its very form. These "Silent Pictures" are descriptive snapshots of the Piper daughters and their parents who, as the first line of the novel declares, are "all dead now" (1). From a temporal position at the end of the story the narrator describes these pictures of the past, anticipating their importance but offering only the barest of narrative detail. The first of these family

snapshots is of Materia and it is followed by those of James, Ambrose, Other Lily, Mercedes, Frances, and Kathleen. The penultimate image, that of Frances attempting to baptize Lily and Ambrose in the creek, is significantly unlike the others in that “this one is a moving picture” (3). Instead of being a photograph frozen in time, the image of Frances is alive: “And certainly it’s odd but not at all supernatural to see the surface [of the creek] break, and a real live soaked and shivering girl rise up from the water and stare straight at us. Or at someone just behind us. Frances” (3). The narrator’s use of the plural first person writes readers into the image as either the object of Frances’s gaze, or an obstacle between Frances and who or what she looks at.

In a 1998 television interview MacDonald explains the genesis of her work: “I was vouchsafed a vision of this young girl in the creek with a baby in her arms and it gave me such chills that I wrote about it. I described the picture as I saw it and ... I wanted to know more about that picture, so I went into that picture and then I thought that might be a good way for the reader to go into the story.” Just as MacDonald “went into” her vision of a young girl in the creek to write the novel, so too are readers lured into that fictional world spun out from this initial image. The “picture” of Frances in the creek holding an unnamed baby is one of many scenes in the overall story, yet it is distinctly important in its dual representation of narrative cause and effect. As Frances tries to baptize the twin babies born to her sister Kathleen, one of them dies, setting off a chain of traumatic events, but Frances’s very urge to “make sure their souls are safe” (147) is an attempt to counteract the traumatic events prior to the babies’ birth. The narrator asks Frances in this prologue what she is doing with a “a dark wet bundle” hugged to her as she stands in the creek, but then explains that “even if she were to answer, we wouldn’t know what she was saying, because, although this is a moving picture, it is also a silent one” (3). At this point in the novel, Frances is denied the ability to supplement her physical gestures and her line of sight with verbal explanation. She is an actor in a silent film. When Frances later becomes the novel’s focus, MacDonald draws extensively on allusions to 1920s cinematic culture, most notably to silent film star Louise Brooks.

I want to take MacDonald’s initial movement through visual images to verbal description as a guide to reading the novel as a whole, and her specific use of silent cinema as a key to understanding Frances’s seemingly monstrous sexual behaviour. If, as Katarzyna Rukszto contends, all of Frances’s actions “connect with the need to reconcile the many hidden aspects of the family’s history” (31), how is this need related to

the larger cultural history that is integral to her characterization? The introduction of Frances as a silent moving picture presents a complex series of relationships between visual and verbal records, physical performance and narrative description, and filmic object and spectatorial subject. At the centre of each of these relationships lie questions about the representation of female sexuality in modern mass culture and historical fiction.

From the beginning, *Fall On Your Knees* suggests a textual desire to represent that which exceeds the text. W.J.T. Mitchell provides a useful explanation of this kind of desire when he argues that a “verbal representation cannot represent — that is, make present — its object in the same way a visual representation can. It may refer to an object, describe it, invoke it, but it can never bring its visual presence before us in the way pictures do. Words can ‘cite,’ but never ‘sight’ their objects” (152). Written descriptions of images differ from the visual borders that frame some of the pages in the novel, such as the description of Kathleen and her lover (176-77) and an excerpt from Kathleen’s diary (279). On these pages the reader can see actual images, credited to Gina Wilkinson, but I am interested in MacDonald’s use of written descriptions that refer to absent visual images. MacDonald’s “Silent Pictures” cite rather than sight their referents, and this verbal representation of visual objects recurs throughout the novel in descriptions of photographs and films. As the plot unfolds, the text’s desire to render the world of images in language can also be traced through the characters’ movements towards understanding their family’s sexual transgressions. The interplay between memory, images, and words aligns the visual with the underworlds of the everyday lives of the Piper family, in the same register as visions and dreams, the past and its repression. As the characters struggle to represent to themselves mental pictures of traumatic experiences, the visual comes to mediate between the subject’s history and its representation in the present.

The visual’s function as a relay between these spheres has much in common with Freud’s understanding of trauma. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud draws on his observations of World War One shell shock victims to discuss what he terms “traumatic neurosis” (6). Although war neuroses are more severe than those acquired in peacetime, they lead Freud to theorize that traumatized subjects experienced psychological wounds in the past for which they were unprepared, and to which they can only return mentally through such unconscious processes as dreams (6-7). The difference between traumatics and hysterics, who are also fixated on past experiences, is that the initial trauma cannot be recalled in the subject’s

waking life (7). The struggle for the traumatized subject is then to verbalize the repressed past in the present, to transform his or her memory into language to achieve a cathartic expulsion of the trauma. For Freud, the objects and events described need not have a referent in the real but rather in individual perceptions of the real, which are called up during analysis as visual images in need of verbal description (23-27). This connection between an individual's lived experience, her memory of it, and her unconscious compulsion to repeat it, appears in the novel as the female characters visualize the violence and incest perpetrated by their father, James. When Mercedes begins to recall a "painting from the junk pile ... called *Daddy and Frances in the Rocking-Chair*," she also realizes that "there never was a rocking-chair, in this room or any other. Just the pale green wingback" (374). The truth of the image is in the expression of its meaning and not necessarily in the details it contains. Just as the memory-images of past scenes of abuse represent an experience without necessarily being mimetic of it, so do the cinematic intertexts in the novel draw attention to the workings of representation itself.

The screen idols of the silent films whom Frances sees and emulates as she moves into adolescence carry the rise of modernity in Europe and the United States to the shores of Cape Breton. The terms "modern" and "modernity" can be vague and are often contested, yet they have a particular explanatory function in this context. Marshall Berman's often cited definition, cribbed from Marx, is that modernity "pours us all into a maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal, of struggle and contradiction, of ambiguity and anguish" (15). Berman takes pains to argue that although the modern era is not a total break with the past (it is the culmination of at least two hundred years of modern Western thought), only in the era following World War One is upheaval itself exalted in the aesthetics of modernism. This self-conscious fragmentation of tradition idealizes innovation yet usually does not break with traditional notions of gender. Indeed, as Rita Felski asserts, "the gender of modernity is unambiguously male" (145). Feminist rereadings of Berman's definition, and of many canonical works of modernist culture, yield the important recognition that "to write about modernity is always to be implicated — whether unwittingly or self-consciously — in discourses of sexual hierarchy" (Felski 153).

Two films directed by G.W. Pabst and featuring Louise Brooks exemplify the short-lived modernism of a late 1920s German cinema seeking to overturn the stale romanticism and repressed sexuality of the previous decade's films, and to expose the hypocrisies of an "insecure middle class foundering on the verge of economic ruin" (Orr 7). Just as in literary mod-

ernism, however, the European films of the interwar period often define themselves against an earlier period of aesthetics and mores constructed as Victorian. David Davidson's observation that European silent films install the female dynamo as a figure of modernity who represents larger cultural and economic ruptures also suggests the paradox that both the new age and the old are gendered as female. The modern woman of this cinema may be urban and urbane, dynamic and erotic, yet the female becomes as emblematic of the crises of the modern age as she is of the stagnation and religiosity of the Victorian past. In both cases, she threatens masculine self-possession and must herself be contained. Modernity and the modern, then, refer in this discussion to a shift in the signifiers of a gendered cultural logic but not to a transformation of that dominant ideology itself.

Like Frances, her two elder sisters Kathleen and Mercedes encounter modernity as represented in these films, but neither of their responses seeks to bring the new era home, literally or figuratively. While Mercedes stays at home and refuses to enter into modernity, Kathleen enters modernity by leaving home. It is only when she has fled Cape Breton for New York, and specifically for that city's internal site of difference, Harlem, that Kathleen seems to enter into the modern era and, consequently, into her full self: "Kathleen is truly and utterly and completely Kathleen in New York" (122). As she breathes in the artificial air of the city's buildings instead of the sea air of her "Atlantic island," Kathleen feels that

This air is what the gods live upon. The gods who get things done. Not the gods who mope on ancient promontories and exhale fossil vapours, waiting for someone to fill in the fragments of forgotten sagas that have come unraveled with age. Those gods have sagged so long on their rocks, they are well on the way to turning to stone themselves.

But the new gods. That bright baritone chorus. They inhabit every steel support, every suspension bridge, every gleaming silver train, all things vertical and horizontal, all glass, gravel and sand. They take big breaths and they make big sounds and with every breath and sound they open up more sky. (122)

Kathleen imagines in the physical site of urban New York a futuristic space whose vertiginous possibilities replace the oppressive stagnation of New Waterford. Although it is her father's plan that she move to New York to further her singing career, Kathleen makes herself at home in the city by venturing into a Harlem which seems so alive with new forms of music, dance, and behaviour that she writes in her diary, "this is an enchanted city where you hear with different ears and see with

different eyes" (473). Kathleen's flight out of the "graveyard" of her Cape Breton life is at once spatial and sexual. Her entry into New York and her exploration of Harlem precede her love affair with her Black accompanist, Rose (473). Kathleen becomes a modern woman through multiple embraces: she embraces a modern city and celebrates its new, multiracial forms of music and dance just as she embraces Rose, an act through which both women transgress boundaries of sexual, racial, and gendered norms.

Throughout the text, MacDonald prefigures Kathleen's transgressions so that they shadow other characters' stories. Kathleen is absent from Frances's daily life in Cape Breton yet she haunts Frances's narrative domain as a spectral figure of alternate female performances. Conversely, Frances's other elder sister Mercedes refuses to embrace modernity and instead retreats into the piety and domestic femininity that seem to belong to the Victorians. Mercedes's decision to become a religious devotee contrasts with the social and political ruptures of her time:

Although Mercedes was too young to respond mercifully to the first twenty-five years of disaster, she has been working hard to make up for it. And there's plenty of time; this is, after all, only 1929. In the grievously wounded but still young twentieth century, Mercedes finishes her prayer with a discreet sign of the cross etched with her index finger upon her thumb and turns into Luvovitz's Kosher Canadian to buy a roast for Sunday's supper. (254)

Mercedes's life course parallels the century in which she is born. However, she does not move forward with time, but retreats into the values coded as characteristic of the previous century. Mercedes strives to become an ideal maternal figure for the family and through her charity work within the community. Mercedes, who in childhood witnesses the transgressions of cultural, moral, and familial boundaries of desire that lead to Kathleen's, Materia's, and Ambrose's deaths as well as to James's molestation of Frances, refuses to become an agent of transgression herself. Rather than lament her rejection by the Luvovitz's son Ralph or the pain that surrounds her family, Mercedes takes the title of the pious poem "Don't Whine" as her motto (313). Mercedes neither complains nor rebels, but withdraws into the stereotypically feminine state of religious and filial duty that modernity attempts to disrupt.

Mercedes's retreat into domesticity is also an attempt to return to a premodern site of innocence particularly important to the novel's setting. In his study of popular and official Nova Scotia culture during the pe-

riod in which the novel is set, historian Ian McKay argues that such an idealization of innocence was necessary for the cultural regulation of Nova Scotian women at the beginning of the twentieth century. According to McKay, Nova Scotia has been popularly constructed through the mythologization of the region's population as a folk: a premodern, insular, and racially homogeneous people whose archetypal representation "came to emphasize muscle-bound masculinity and prowess" (McKay 32). While the dominant image of the Nova Scotian was that of its rugged Scottish-descendent sons, the masculinity of this image was supplemented by a mythology of the folk that includes the idealized feminine virtues of purity and innocence. Local cultural producers took up the mythology of the folk as "part of a broader antimodernist movement within the region and the province. This local variant of antimodernism can be called Innocence. Innocence emerged in the period from 1920 to 1950 as a kind of mythomoteur, a set of fused and elaborated myths that provided Nova Scotians with an overall framework of meaning" (30). Central to this paradigm of the folk was the claim that traditional family life endured in Nova Scotia in a way that was no longer possible in the wider world. Ironically, although the antimodernist thrust in Nova Scotia celebrated a culture in which women's roles seemed to be fixed in traditional patterns, during this period the inventors of Innocence "found themselves dealing with a modern world in which gender ideals and roles were confusingly blurred" (252). MacDonald's fictional Cape Breton chimes with McKay's historical thesis. More importantly, this novel shows what can happen when an antimodernist cultural ideology is either challenged, as it is by Kathleen, or internalized, as it is by Mercedes. Kathleen crosses cultural, racial, sexual, and geographical boundaries to enter the modern. This transgression is punished by the paternal violence that leads to her death. Conversely, Mercedes internalizes the antimodernist mythos of her social and geographical world and refuses to cross into any spaces of the modern. She responds to newly blurred gender roles, and to the blurring of sexual roles which occur in the Piper family's transgressions, by becoming what McKay terms the Innocent. Modernity, then, is kept at bay in MacDonald's Cape Breton through the disciplining and suppression of female desire.

Frances's two elder sisters respond to modernity — and especially to the pressure to become a subject within it rather than an object of it — in ways that are at once diametrically opposed and similar. Although Kathleen embraces modernity and Mercedes retreats from it, neither sister attempts to be a modern subject at home. Frances stays in New Waterford but her fascination with the cinema's representations of the modern age compels



her to construct a new form of female subjectivity within the cultural sphere of Cape Breton. Although as a teenager Frances collects the publicity stills of numerous celebrities, including Lillian Gish, Houdini, and Theda Bara, her adoration of these figures is quickly supplanted by her fascination with Louise Brooks. At the age of sixteen, Frances becomes “stir-crazy waiting for her life to begin” (246). Her attempts to transform her self-image into that of a fashionable and modern woman lead Frances to perform the role of the “bad apple she really is” (246). When the school principal, Sister Eustace, asks Frances what she wants to be in life and Frances responds, “a cabaret parasite,” the humour of this answer illustrates Frances’s fantasizing about the world of spectacle and performance (245). To this end, she refashions herself according to the images of 1920s performers and in particular the American actor Louise Brooks, star of two films by the German director G.W. Pabst that circulate within Frances’s narrative, *Pandora’s Box* (1928) and *Diary of a Lost Girl* (1929).

Although MacDonald borrows the film title *Diary of a Lost Girl* for one of the novel’s sections, the film *Pandora’s Box*, based on Frank Wedekind’s 1904 play *Die Büchse der Pandora*, is more thematically important in the cinematic economy of the novel. Frances tears her dresses to make them more fashionable, experiments with new hairstyles and lipstick, and attempts to straighten her curly hair because “always before her mind’s eye is Louise Brooks, with her jet-black shingle and fringe” (246). Brooks’s iconic status rests primarily on her hair. The Brooks Bob is at once a marker of Brooks as a female dynamo and a symbol of modernity. The haircut also signifies an aesthetics of androgyny (Fig. 1). The geometric shape and simple lines of the haircut are, as Peter Wollen points out, “‘girlish’ for a boy, but (on Louise) it [is] ‘boyish’ for a girl” (24). This haircut, a signifier of both pristine youth and alluring androgyny, disturbs the traditional gendered polarization of innocence and experience, passivity and aggression.

The Brooks Bob and its attendant meanings may be at the forefront of Frances’s imagination, but Brooks is also literally before Frances’s eyes, for her photographic image

has usurped Lillian Gish in Frances’s heart and on her wall. Lillian survives now only in an honorary capacity, alone on her virginal ice-floe. Louise smolders from beneath a black widow’s veil, smirks in a tuxedo, flirts over the rim of a champagne glass, simpers on Jack the Ripper’s knee, and sprawls in a wicked heap, naked but for a handful of feathers. She is the best and the worst girl in the world. She is also the most modern. (246)



Fig.1. Louise Brooks in *Pandora's Box*.

The images of sexual experience, aggression, and transgression that Brooks projects in her films are in direct opposition to the antimodernism MacDonald describes in her fictional Nova Scotia of the early twentieth century.

The modern world encroaches into Nova Scotia in part through the advent of new forms of mass media and popular culture. Film critic Christian Metz provides a useful metaphor to understand the impact of film in this novel when he suggests that the cinema provides "a 'hole' in the social cloth, a loophole opening on to something slightly more crazy, slightly less approved than what one does the rest of the time" (266). Frances sees Brooks's films at the Empire cinema in New Waterford, and they become for her just this sort of loophole out of the everyday and the local. She takes Lily to the matinee of *Diary of a Lost Girl* that ends with a title card whose text is reproduced in the novel. It extrapolates the film's moral for the viewer, and in turn for MacDonald's readers: "IF THERE WERE MORE LOVE IN THIS WORLD, NO ONE WOULD EVER HAVE TO BE LOST" (349). Although the film is set in Weimar Germany,

Frances responds to the film by folding herself as much as possible into the kind of world it represents. The specular exchange between Frances and the films of Louise Brooks is consequently as much about being in the local space of her home as it is about knowing the cosmopolitan spaces of Europe, for Frances not only wants to look like Louise Brooks but to become like her. When she takes a picture of Brooks to the local barber shop, her unusual request for a new kind of haircut demonstrates the cultural meanings attached to the Brooks Bob. Frances asks Satchel-Ass Chism, the barber, to transform her appearance, but he hesitates over having to cut a woman's hair because her request positions him in a new role within the community. The barber wonders why Frances does not go to the nearby city of Sydney to a "proper beauty parlour," but he performs the task nonetheless (289). In so doing, however, he becomes feminized in the eyes of the men who loiter in the barber shop: "The checker players chuckle and lisp and call him 'Pierre'" (289). Frances's desire for an androgynous haircut reveals the incursion of modern mass culture into the local site of the folk; the barber who helps Frances become a boyish girl is characterized by his peers as effeminate in the enactment of a stereotype of the European sissy whose image circulates in the same mass media as Brooks. The androgynous Brooks Bob thus has an unsettling effect on both women and men as it disturbs the border between girlish and boyish, normal and queer.

Frances's relationship to the image of Louise Brooks exceeds both identification and fetishization; it is a complex specular economy through which she at once sees and refashions herself (Mulvey 201). Frances knows that she perceives something imaginary, yet she identifies with a new kind of self through this act of perception. Frances becomes a new image of herself through the image of Louise Brooks and, because this is also the image of a different social order, Frances's acts of cinematic perception are paradigmatic of her efforts to carve out a new subjective space. The androgyny and sexual transgression Brooks represents operate in concert with a feminism and sexual cynicism played out in her films set in the Weimar Republic. Frances is particularly attached to the story of the fallen woman central to the tragedy of Lulu in *Pandora's Box*: "Frances longs to be sold into a 'life of sin', forced onto the stage and into 'houses of ill fame' where life is tragic but so much fun" (246). These allusions to the plot of *Pandora's Box* illustrate Frances's attraction to that film's representation of the amoral woman relegated to the spectacular spaces of the stage and brothel. The film thematizes sexual transgressions (incest, androgyny, narcissism, les-

bianism, prostitution) that occur within Frances's family but are suppressed by its members at the level of representation.

The Brooks films Frances incorporates into her own image position the actor's body as a paradoxical site of illusion and materiality. According to Mary Ann Doane, Weimar Republic films display a sexual cynicism that rejects the romantic innocence and repression of the previous era: "Such a cynicism does not attempt to unmask or unveil the true sexuality but rather to demonstrate that sexuality resides in the mask, the game, the deceptiveness of vision associated with the crossing of boundaries of sexual identity" (63). In this sexual exhibitionism, however, the performance rarely has a referent in the real. This visual deception emerges in *Pandora's Box* through Lulu's participation in the spectacular worlds of the circus, theatre, and brothel. Much has been written on Brooks's performance of a captivating yet ultimately doomed sexuality in her portrayal of Lulu, but the debate over whether she performs the role of victim or agent, subject or object points to the film's unsettling representation of sexuality itself as a system of unstable representations. If the Brooks films are at all mimetic of Weimar Republic sexuality, then, they are filmic representations of a sexuality which is itself a performance. Doane's analogy between sexuality and signification helps to explain Brooks's status as icon and in turn elucidates her role within the novel.

Frances's performances of a de-realized sexuality in her burlesque acts at the speakeasy mimic Brooks's model of a deceptive sexuality. Similarly, Frances's story operates through the shadows and spectres of a de-realized referential image of the Brooks dynamo. Frances becomes like Brooks, who is herself a performance, in the section of the novel in which the story also tries to realize the film icon for readers. These textual strategies mirror Frances's strategies of sexual representation. When Frances performs a Brooks-inspired striptease for the men and women in the speakeasy, she parodies the genre as well as the sexual expectations of her audience:

She invests her early profits in face paint and costumery. She'll start out as Valentino in a striped robe and turban. While one hand teases the piano keys, she removes the robe to reveal Mata Hari in a haze of purple and red. The seven veils come off one by one to 'Scotland the Brave' and, just in case any one's in danger of getting more horny than amused, there's always a surprise to wilt the wicked and stimulate the unsuspecting. For example, she may strip down to a diaper, then stick her thumb in her mouth. 'Yes my heart belongs to Daddy, so I simply couldn't be ba-ad'. (293)

Frances's burlesque act transgresses multiple borders: she crosses genders in her dress and travels across nationalities in her choices of dance and music; she blurs distinctions between adult and childhood sexuality to both titillate and deflate her admirers; and, her choice of song lyrics introduces an oblique and grotesque commentary on her suppressed family life into her public exhibition. Frances's wickedness — her deviance and her humour — complicates her burlesque act so that she inflects the performance with her own subjectivity. The body she exposes to the audience is a series of masks that transgress social categories and moral boundaries separating genders, nations, adult sexuality and childhood innocence, domesticity and public performance.

Frances plays with and undermines the idea of the burlesque as a striptease that will eventually reveal the real of the naked female body. Although she abandons this spectacular self when she performs sex acts "out back" of the speakeasy, Frances continues to play with dominant notions of gender and sexual identity (293). The playfulness of her stage dancing may be lost once she begins her sex work, but Frances continues to assert herself as a subject within a context overdetermined by women's sexual availability to men. Just as in her striptease act, her body remains untouched during her sex work and Frances makes her money by simultaneously upholding and dislodging traditional moral codes: "Frances is a sealed letter. It doesn't matter where she's been or who's pawed her, no one gets to handle the contents no matter how grimy the envelope. And it's for sure no one's going to be able to steam her open" (293). Although Frances cannot articulate why she "remains a technical virgin throughout," she has "a feeling" that it is "For Lily" (293). Frances does not save her virginity for a man or for a greater moral ideal but for her younger sister, for whom she is also saving all of her earnings. Frances has no idea at this point that the money she makes from her striptease and prostitution will be the catalyst for Lily's reconciliation with Kathleen's lover and ultimately with the family's past. Yet, she seems to have a portent that Lily will need the funds, not for any miraculous polio cure at Lourdes but for a larger project and flight. The seeming immorality of Frances's behaviour consequently serves her individual moral quest to help Lily get out of the family's repression of the sexual transgressions of its past. The community's regulation of sexuality, which is itself always partial, becomes the boundary beyond which Frances must move to uphold her own sexual moral code.

Frances's burlesque dancing and prostitution reveal her apprehension of the body as a site of a reality that is always an illusion. Frances shifts from being a spectator of modern icons of femininity to becoming a performance

of sexual transgression, but her apprehension of desire is nonetheless informed by her film idol: "Frances's reflections on the subject of romance are summed up by the last scene of *Pandora's Box*: when Louise Brooks finally gives it away to a fella for free, he ups and kills her" (294). The final scene of *Pandora's Box* depicts Lulu, now a destitute sex worker in London, being murdered by Jack the Ripper. Lulu's death at the hands of an historical figure notorious for his sexual perversion signifies her inability to move outside systems of female sexual commodification. Pabst indulges in the anachronism of Jack the Ripper's appearance in 1920s London to indicate the psychosexual appropriateness of Jack the Ripper as a modern male figure. Lulu escapes the official justice of the legal court earlier in the film only to be finally punished by an arch-misogynist who represents an extreme version of modern male anxieties about female sexuality. In this film, Lulu tries to play with her sexuality by becoming its de-realized image. However, she is also subject to a chance return to the absent referent of this image, a moral code defined by modernity's anxieties about the destructive potential of the female dynamo — the femme fatale who embodies the pleasures and sins of the city. Lulu's death is as much the judgement of a misogynistic society's inability to accommodate female sexuality as it is a judgement of the character herself; as Martin Esslin says of her, "Lulu is a character of pristine *innocence*; it is society which is sick" (qtd. in Davidson 47). This scene that informs Frances's attitude towards romance signifies more than the murder of a prostitute who finally offers her body freely; it also represents the punishment of perceived female hedonism by a figure of sexual perversion whose misogyny is an extreme form of the dominant social law.

The speakeasy owned by Frances's Uncle Jameel is on the geographic, economic, and racial periphery of the New Waterford community. It is located outside the mining company town in the Black settlement of the Coke Ovens and is run by a branch of the Lebanese family of which the Pipers are an estranged part. Despite being a site of racial and economic difference, the clientele for whom Frances performs are part of the dominant community of New Waterford. Among them are "miners, merchant seamen and steelworkers" and, once Frances has refined her act and the establishment as a whole, their female dates (287). The speakeasy is represented as a space in which she can express a sexual freedom denied to her within the morally bound space of the town, but it is nonetheless circumscribed by a heterosexual economy in which women are subject to the gendered anxieties of the larger social sphere. MacDonald's representation of the speakeasy as a kind of brothel serves as yet another allusion to the content of a Brooks film. Pabst's *Diary of a Lost Girl*, like *Pandora's Box*,

focuses on a female protagonist cast out from middle-class society because of a sexual transgression (Thymian becomes pregnant and has an illegitimate child), who becomes a prostitute. Unlike Lulu, Thymian is rescued by a Count and is restored to a pleasant middle-class life. Based on Margarethe Böhme's 1905 novel of the same name, Pabst's *Diary of a Lost Girl* imagines prostitution as a release from the restrictive bourgeois institutions of family, school, and marriage. Heide Schlüpmann observes that the brothel in this film functions as a seemingly Arcadian space in which "the utopia of unfettered bodies stands as an enlightened alternative to a reality of bruised and battered prostitutes" (82). Beneath this spectacle of pastoral escapism, however, the brothel is a space very much defined by the morality of the larger society. According to Schlüpmann, "the seemingly Arcadian space in fact contains an abyss: when pleasure finally comes into its own, it brings with it the marks of a repressive society" (Schlüpmann 82). It is here that the father-daughter reunion at the centre of the film's psychosexual investigation occurs. The brothel to which Thymian escapes after being incarcerated in a sadistic reform school seems to be a site in which women can become sexual agents, but it is ultimately a site in which women are transformed into objects of incestuous male desire. In Pabst's earlier film, *Jack the Ripper* represents an extreme form of a more generalized sexual violence. In *Diary of a Lost Girl*, the brothel represents an extreme regulation of prelapsarian female sexuality in a society governed by the incest taboo (Schlüpmann 83). The brothel may seem to be one of decadent Berlin's sites of sexual liberation but it is still subject to violent male desire. In *Fall On Your Knees*, Frances's behaviour appears monstrous as she moves beyond the social limits that define female sexuality and begins to mine men's bodies for her own gain. Given the cinematic narratives embedded in her story, however, it is possible to read Frances's behaviour as a response to the monstrous regulation of women's sexuality that she observes in Brooks's films, which in turn inform her perceptions of her own experiences of paternal incest.

Frances asserts herself in sexual masquerades to emulate Brooks, but these may also be unconscious compulsions to repeat and thereby exorcise the trauma of James's abuse. She also seems to heed the lesson of Lulu's death and Thymian's prostitution that enacting female sexuality leads to a literal or figurative death at the hands of a perverse male sexuality. Frances's sexual cynicism, manifest first in the deception of her dancing and then in the economic pragmatism of her sex work, later shifts into another kind of deception which at once acknowledges and disrupts the community's moral standards. Frances lures Leo Taylor, known as



Ginger, to her retreat in the abandoned French mine in a premeditated attempt to impregnate herself with his child. Although her motivation is never explicitly described, the narrator indicates that Frances chooses Ginger for reasons other than desire or attraction: "It wouldn't matter to Frances if Ginger were a cruel man. She would do the same thing. Kindness or cruelty, it's all by chance and what's worse anyway? It's easier to endure cruelty so maybe kindness is worse. The only question is, how do you get a nice man to do a bad thing?" (342). Ginger serves a pragmatic sexual function for Frances and she plays with the complex array of sympathy, concern, and attraction he displays towards her to achieve her goal.

As in her burlesque act, Frances straddles performances of childhood innocence and adult sexuality when she begs Ginger not to leave her alone in the abandoned mine:

'Don't leave me, please, I'm so frightened of the dark,' closer.

'I won't leave you, but —' he's embarrassed to find he's hard, he didn't know till now he wanted her, still doesn't know, 'excuse me,' and he moves to release her. (372)

Frances does not let Ginger go and instead arouses in him a combination of "misery and desire" (372). While Ginger later fears that he has taken advantage of Frances, she quickly corrects this misapprehension (382). The economy of the sexual system Frances constructs around herself does not operate through an exchange of mutual desires or even physical gratification but through an exchange of men's sexual arousal for her own desires to enter an idealized modernity: her sex work supplies the money she needs to reconstruct her image and to subsequently send Lily into the modern as a way to recover the past, while her seduction of Ginger supplies the child she needs to ultimately experience desire.

The self that Frances becomes once she is pregnant with Anthony is apparently antimodern in its valorization of maternity and the domestic sphere, but there is an aspect of autoeroticism to Frances's maternal state that suggests yet another permutation of self-sufficient female sexuality. Frances only experiences desire once she is pregnant, and then it is a desire for her own body. Mercedes gazes at Frances's naked pregnant body and observes that it has become autoerotic:

She has been washing, stroking, feeding, drying a woman who is blooming like a hothouse rose. The nipples look ready to burst and scatter seed, the russet pubic hair hangs proud like a bunch of grapes. A fig leaf would not do in this case —ripe and uncooked, pink and grainy as that fruit, Frances's whole boatful of genital cargo, from lip-



wrapping-lips to clitoris in the prow, is in constant rockabye motion in response to the new deeper tides of her body. She is almost always somewhat aroused, can feel her soft-sided barque opening, closing, taking on water from within. Her body is making love to itself. Until now, Frances had no idea what all the fuss was about. (416)

Not only does her pregnancy allow Frances to finally experience the desire absent from her prior sexual encounters, but it also removes her from the performance of sexual masquerades. In her autoerotic state, “for once, Frances is stripped of irony. She is in the presence of something bigger — namely *Herself*” (416). Frances, whose sexual energy has been expended on countering oppressive images of femininity with performances of a de-realized sexuality, now enters into a position of desire through becoming at once the erotic object and subject. Frances becomes herself through the pregnancy that is the result of her aggressive and pragmatic approach to sex with men. Through this autoeroticism she becomes narcissistic: “Nothing is ironic in the moment of first love. And Frances is in love. With her body, and what it is bringing forth” (416). Once she has fulfilled her goal of having Ginger’s baby, Frances returns to the domestic sphere dominated by Mercedes and James. Although she may appear to have followed Mercedes’s model and banished modernity from her everyday life, it is in this domestic arrangement that Frances finally learns the story of Kathleen’s transgressions in New York. James gives Frances Kathleen’s diary and she reads it, while pregnant, sitting on the veranda next to her father (432). Just as the Brooks films are a loophole in the apparent seamless traditionalism of the folk, so is Kathleen’s diary a textual escape for Frances which represents alternate forms of sexual behaviour. The coincidence of Frances’s autoeroticism, her monstrous maternity, and her revelation of Kathleen’s lesbianism suggests that Frances’s shift into maternity and a typically feminine domesticity nonetheless disrupt normative heterosexuality.

The movement in Frances’s characterization once she is pregnant seems to be a turn away from the Brooks model of modern sexual cynicism, but I want to suggest that Frances’s autoeroticism is as informed by cinematic culture as is her earlier behaviour. In *Lulu*, Brooks portrays a femme fatale who is, by all critical accounts, a model of narcissism (Hart 52). *Lulu* adores herself and it is perhaps this narcissism as much as her sexual aggression that marks the illicit and transgressive sexuality of the film. In 1899, Havelock Ellis published the findings of his study of narcissism, which revealed to him the “continuing associations of auto-eroticism, narcissism, and homosexuality, as well as the preponderance of the phenomenon in women” (Hart 50). When Wedekind constructed his dramatic *Lulu*, Ellis’s

theories had been expanded by other sexologists and had entered popular cultural discourse to the extent that Wedekind's construction of Lulu as a narcissist is matched by his creation of a lesbian, Countess Geschwitz, as her constant companion and shadow (Hart 51). Andrea Weiss contends that these psychosexual theories are dramatized by the two female characters in Pabst's film of the Wedekind play:

The character of Lulu, played by Louise Brooks, is the embodiment of 'primitive,' polymorphous sexuality which brings about the ruin of herself and everyone she comes near, while Countess Geschwitz, played by Alice Roberts, is a lesbian artist who takes a passionate interest in her. Lulu's innocence about her own sexuality and those around her makes her susceptible to, yet ambivalent towards the Countess' overture (21).

The Countess, often cited as cinema's first explicit lesbian character, is a version of the predatory lesbian Ellis believed would try to recruit other women to homosexuality (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2. *Pandora's Box*:

"Dancing the tango with Alice Roberts the Lesbian, to Kortner's dismay, at the wedding reception" (Brooks n. pag.).

If the danger of the lesbian is that she will convert heterosexual women, the danger of the female narcissist is that she does not return male desire. Each of these illicit sexualities threatens to move women outside of the heterosexual economy and beyond the reach of male desire. Lulu's narcissism is shadowed by the Countess's lesbianism, and the two are connected versions of the same possibility that social and moral degeneration manifests itself in sexual degenerates. The Countess's shadowing of Lulu in *Pandora's Box* becomes itself a shadow to MacDonald's text in its thematization of the connections between the female narcissist and the lesbian. Before her pregnancy, Frances explicitly plays the Lulu role to a Countess Geschwitz in a description of the birthday party thrown for her at the speak-easy:

A woman whom Frances calls 'The Countess' because she looks like the lesbian in *Pandora's Box* gives her a one-way ticket to Boston. The Countess has got a big education and some kind of set-up down there — she's described it to Frances a thousand times but Frances, though she keeps her eyeballs pointing in the same direction no matter how much she's had to drink, still can't get it straight whether this woman runs a nightclub or a home for wayward girls. 'My intentions are entirely honourable, Fanny,' says the Countess, at which Frances yawns in her face and winks. (304)

Because she has seen the Brooks film, Frances understands fully the offer made by the Countess. This description of Frances's recognition of alternative sexual possibilities derived from her fascination with Brooks is supplemented by another textual linking of the narcissist and the lesbian. However, the connection between Frances's and Kathleen's desires is enacted at the narratological rather than the descriptive level of the text. Although the narrator describes Frances as finally not ironic once she is pregnant, one of the overarching ironies of her story is that she only becomes autoerotic once she has attained the feminine ideal of reproduction. While pregnant, Frances occupies her own version of transgressive sexuality, which is as monstrous as her prior sexual behaviour in its manifestation of the maternal body's absolute desire for itself. At the same time, Frances reads about her eldest sister's illicit desire. The autoerotic narcissism and the lesbian desire of the novel meet in Frances at the moment when she becomes sexually self-sufficient. Frances finds herself and learns of her sister's discovery of herself at the moment when her body is prodigal with a desire only available in the maternal.

The textual representation of Louise Brooks as an icon who signifies a new era and alternative sexual performances draws on images of her

physical appearance, Frances's specular exchanges with those images, and coincidences between Brooks's and Frances's performances of sexuality and desire. MacDonald also uses Brooks to govern Frances's narrative domain in an extradiegetic move when she titles the fifth book of the novel "Diary of a Lost Girl." There is already a diary within the text, as the book that immediately precedes "Diary of a Lost Girl" concludes with a visually framed excerpt from the diary Kathleen writes when she is in New York (279). This entry, as is only later evident, points to Kathleen's love affair with Rose and to her personification of her diary as a part of her, as an ideally modern listener who will accept her confession without being scandalized. She writes, "I have no shame in front of you, Diary, for you are me. You won't squirm, you can't be shocked, you know that nothing in love is nasty so I will try to be as free with you as I am in my own thoughts" (279). The book "Diary of a Lost Girl" is prefaced by this intratext and concludes with a narrative description of Kathleen caressing Rose, whose cross-dressing disguises the fact that she is a woman (308). The final line of this passage, "they are so young, they forget that the world is not as in love with them as they are," describes the romantic idealism of Kathleen and Rose, which is quite unlike Frances's approach to sex with others (308). Between these two passages of illicit and excessive desire is the story of Frances's work as a burlesque dancer and prostitute at the speakeasy, which concludes when she visualizes the traumatic memory of the night of Kathleen's death. If the story of Kathleen's lesbianism is a narrative shadow to Frances's autoeroticism, then these passages, which belong to Kathleen, are explicit frames for Frances's narrative. Together, they are further framed by the reference to Brooks's second film in the section's title.

Brooks ruptures the novel both in one character's consciousness and in the transposition of the semiotic structure of modern cinema into the novel. She appears at the surface level of the narrative action in descriptive passages, her image and filmic stories are thematized in the development of Frances's story, and she operates extradiegetically in the novel's composition. Frances cites, absorbs, incorporates, and sustains the image of Brooks within her narrative domain. This spectral presence of the filmic icon has the effect of making Frances's story intelligible in terms of cultural histories represented in the text. It also highlights the novel's overall concern with relationships between visual and verbal representations of female sexuality. The text as a whole operates through multiple narrative centres situated in different periods and places, but it always returns to the causes and effects of that key moment when Frances tries to baptize Ambrose and Lily. Just as the image of Frances in the creek is at

the centre of narrative action, so do her other performances point readers to the many layers of representation at work in the text. The surface articulations of her character, the apparent meanings of Frances's behaviour, rest on a subterranean system of representation implied in the density of cultural allusions to the modern visual world.

In this sense, the representations of Brooks function as directive interruptions guiding readers to a supplemental set of cultural meanings carried by her image and to a recognition that representation, like history, is always partial. MacDonald's literary images of filmic images interrupt the apparent seamlessness of the narrative to suggest an alterity at play in the very act of narration. The visual becomes the verbal's other as the text oscillates between the familiarization and defamiliarization of that difference. MacDonald's movement through pictures to words is repeated by the characters and within the novel's structure to manifest an ambivalence about the truth claims of representation. This ambivalence functions as an analogue to cultural ambivalences about modern female sexual subjectivity. Rukszto reads the female characters' transgressions of sexual and racial norms as MacDonald's attempt to fuse questions of belonging and longing (19), thereby rendering multiple kinds of difference "queer and disruptive" (25). This blurring of normative social, racial, and sexual boundaries in the fictional histories of the Piper family is also achieved at the textual level through the aesthetic gaps and desires in the novel's form. Just as the female characters transgress the boundaries between normative and queer sexuality, so too the text offers an aesthetic queering of the boundaries between representational media.

These operations at work in *Fall On Your Knees* position us as readers within the interplay between two more kinds of difference: they force our movement between, on the one hand, the novel's descriptions, which convert the visual into the verbal, and, on the other hand, our own reconversions of the verbal back into the visual as we receive the written images. This process is analogous to readers sounding aloud the popular song lyrics that permeate the novel and whose tunes may be variously familiar. The lyrical fragments in the novel invite readers' immediate implication of ourselves in the historical popular culture represented in the text, while the visual descriptions foreground our recognition that the words point to objects beyond the page. Because they are absent in the work itself, we must reconstruct these images in our own visual imaginations using partial textual descriptions and the circulation of iconic film images in popular culture as a guide. The text's desire for visual objects as well as Frances's desire to become like the icon she sees pushes us through a nar-

rative path of traces and shadows. In this way, readers enter into the dynamics of the image just as MacDonald hopes we will, but we can also reciprocate that sight with a view of our own, one which has the potential to implicate within the text an array of extratextual cultural meanings and histories.

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

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