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The Human Beast (1938)

MANUSCRIPT NOTES

Zola's novel is not without faults.* For one thing, the writing is grossly uneven. Beside some marvelously crafted scenes—the opening, for example—one finds pages of sloppy or conventional writing. The construction of the plot seems arbitrary, since it is rarely determined by the psychology of the characters (or by anything else). The events seem to be ordered by some *a priori* postulates of the author, or merely by whimsy. We sense that he set out to describe a single situation in a particular milieu. Ironically, it is the novel rather than the film which seems to rely on “stock scenes” as in the American spectacles. Here the novelistic rhetoric serves the same function as cinematographic effects: for example, the derailling of the train, described hastily and without conviction and with tremendous improbabilities (the survival of Lantier and Pecqueux). The ending (the train speeding out of control) is also a piece of rhetoric.

* The reader may have noticed that several of the manuscript notes concern the adaptation of the film from the original literary sources. They were written after a systematic reading of all the novels on which Renoir drew for his films. F.T.



Simone Simon and Fernand Ledoux in *The Human Beast*

Jean Gabin and Blanchette Brunoy in *The Human Beast*



It is an example of Zola's "cinematic" vision which Renoir did not film.

As for the writing, the best examples of laxity occur in the metaphors and the images relating to the locomotive, *La Lison* and to Flore (the virgin warrior, the Amazon, etc.).

Another improbability of the story: it includes no less than six murderers, potential or actual, nearly everyone in the book. Lantier, Roubaud, Séverine (when she wants to do away with her husband), Misard, Flore, and even, at the end, Pecqueux. This accumulation of criminals would seem improbable even in a detective story.

Again note the weakness or the cursory nature of the psychology, with the possible exception of Séverine. The only consistent characters are social stereotypes (Philomène, the neighbors). Jacques Lantier is certainly not the strongest character. He is rather crudely discussed by the man from the caverns, but besides that, is given almost no psychology at all (notice his indifference after the murder of Séverine).

On the whole, we can say that Renoir has in almost every way improved on the book. The sense of milieu in the film is not inferior to that of the book, and the explanation of the characters is much better. Renoir founds this explanation not on psychology but on a metaphysics of actors. What we see on the screen is not the murderous anger of Lantier, but that of Jean Gabin. Even when the actor does not correspond physically or morally to the character in the book, the "error" of casting offers more advantages than disadvantages, because the presence of the actor, his powers of suggestion, are clearly superior to what is in the book (Roubaud, played by Fernand Ledoux; Pecqueux, played by Carette; and even Flore, played by Blanchette Brunoy).

Note the intelligence of the changes. The scene of the railroad workers' hall, which Renoir added, is a piece of social observation completely in the spirit of Zola and certainly not inferior to what the novelist would have done with it.

On the whole, Renoir judiciously simplified and dramatized the story to suit the demands of the cinema, and the result is better than the novel. You could almost say that the only lapses in the scenario are the remnants of the novel: the role of Flore, the role of Séverine's lover, that of Cabuche, which Renoir plays himself, as if he gave himself the part as a trial run for his role as Octave in *The Rules of the Game*.

Finally, note the use in several scenes of dialogue taken directly from the book. The effect is one of a slightly literary affectation, which is not at all un-enjoyable.