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"NANA" (Renoir Films, France, 1926) Produced and directed by Jean Renoir
Scenario by Pierre Lestringuez from the novel by Emile Zola
Art Direction by Claude Autant-Lara, camerawork by C.E. Corwin,
Asselin, Raleigh, Perle. 10 reels
With Catherine Hessling, Werner Krauss, Jean Angelo, Valeska Gert, Pierre
Philippe, Claude Moore, Jacqueline Forzani.

We assume that most of you who are here tonight were also at last week's program, and thus are aware of the drawbacks in this print of "Nana" which - due to its being such a rare and interesting film - we snapped up greedily without the usual precaution of screening the print first. Actually, the pictorial quality of the film isn't bad at all, and it certainly seems to be substantially complete, but the lab work is unforgivable since there is a pronounced jiggle - sometimes minor, occasionally frenetic, always irritating - through about 50% of the picture. Presumably the negative is badly shrunken, or the print from which the negative was made is shrunken - but either way, there are methods to overcome such hopping, and for a lab to release such a print is unethical to say the least. Basically, the condition of the print lessens its value to the purely academic level, which is a pity for it is a very good film. Students and those who feel they have to see this important early Renoir will doubtless find it rewarding; but it is not a print that one can relax with, and we hope that our forewarnings last week managed to divert those of our members who are only casually interested in the history of the silent film and seek entertainment first, and academics second. Because, presumably we will now attract a smaller and more specialized audience, the French titles become less of a drawback however. The story is of course fairly well known, and the film is surprisingly visual anyway; minor motivations are sometimes a little complex, and one doesn't always know who is who right away, but on the whole a familiarity with French isn't essential to a following of the story.

Renoir is somewhat of an acquired taste, and too many of his films fall short of the subtlety, beauty and humanity of his one genuine masterpiece - "La Grande Illusion" - a film that seems more rewarding with each viewing. Nevertheless, despite some tedium in many of his earlier films, he is always interesting, and "Nana" is an extremely sophisticated film. It catches the period effortlessly and convincingly, in a few deft strokes, and the photographic treatment is rather reminiscent of Stroheim. It is meticulously planned, unadventurous perhaps, certainly non-acrobatic in a camera sense, but it is always aware of what the camera can do, and when the camera pans or dollies it is always to a purpose. The sets, largely one assumes, the work of Autant-Lara, are extraordinarily handsome, and the film is certainly good enough to make one wish for the inclusion of the superb, non-hopping Eastman House print in the current Museum of Modern Art cycle.

The one big drawback for me (and I may well be wrong, for Herman Weinberg disagrees strenuously) is the rather important one of Catherine Hessling. Even admitting that she is playing in parody, and that Renoir must have been in agreement with or responsible for her performance, she is so grotesque, transparent and unappealing - even in an animalistic sexual sense - that one just can't believe in her dominance over the French male. Even the rather bizarre French maid, who looks for all the world like Stan Laurel in one of his dame masquerades (her spectacular exposed bottom notwithstanding), seems to offer rather more excitement. When one can't believe in "Nana", one finds her victims stupid rather than pitiable, and thus the whole neatly stacked house of cards tends to collapse. One yearns to see the whole production turned over to Pabst and Louise Brooks, or to Sternberg and Dietrich --

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Nevertheless, this "Nana" is probably still the best movie version of Zola's novel. The 1934 Hollywood version with Anna Sten was handsome but inept -- perhaps one should never expect an honest and objective portrait of a woman from another woman (Dorothy Arzner directed). The more recent French color remake with Martine Carol and Charles Boyer was surprisingly good, although Nana was far too sympathetic, and too much of the audience's interest in the dramatic proceedings was diverted to the more immediate concern of how Martine Carol could possibly get through another reel without disaster overtaking her incredible cleavage.

- - - - - William K. ...