



La bête humaine (*The Human Beast*) is a summer 2026 LVCA dvd donation to the Ligonier Valley Library for its Classic Cinema Collection. Below is Kino Ken's review of that dvd release.

14 of a possible 20 points = ***1/2 = very good film

Key: *indicates outstanding technical achievement or performance

(j) designates a juvenile performer

France 1938 black-and-white 100 minutes subtitled live action feature crime drama Paris Film Producers: Raymond and Robert Hakim

Points:

- 2 Direction: Jean Renoir
- 2 Editing: Suzanne de Troeye* and Marguerite Renoir*
- 2 Cinematography: Curt Courant*
Still Photography: Sam Levin*
- 1 Lighting
- 0 Screenplay: Jean Renoir and Denise Leblond from the novel by Émile Zola
Script Supervision: Suzanne de Troeye
- 0 Music: Joseph Kosma
- 2 Production Design: Eugène Lourié*
Costume Design: Laure Lourié
Makeup: Paule Déan*

2 Sound: Robert Teisseire*

1 Acting

2 Creativity

14 total points

Cast: Jean Gabin (Jacques Lantier), Simone Simon* (Séverine Roubaud), Fernand Ledoux* (Roubaud), Blanchette Brunoy (Flore), Gérard Landry (Dauvergne), Jenny Hédia (Philomène Sauvagnat), Colette Regis (Victoire Pecqueux), Claire Gérard (a traveler), Charlotte Clasis* (Madame Misard, godmother of Jacques; a.k.a. Aunt Phasie), Jacques Berlioz (Grandmorin), Tony Corteggiani (Dabadie), André Tavernier (Judge), Marcel Pérès (lamplighter), Jean Renoir (Cabuche, a poacher), Julien Carette (Pecqueux), Jacques Roussel (Commissioner Cauche), Jacques Becker (lamplighter), Jacques Brunius (j) (farm boy), Guy Decomble (barrier guard), Émile Genevois (j) (farm boy), Léon Larive (valet), Maurice Marceau (mechanic), Georges Péclet (railwayman), Georges Spanelly (Camy-Lamotte), Marcel Véran (singer), two others

Adapted quite loosely from the novel by Émile Zola, *La bête humaine* is distinguished both positively and negatively.

On the positive side, realistic detail has been preserved to the tiniest minutiae. Except for resetting the time period from La Belle Époque to that of the Popular Front in contemporary France. It wasn't possible to find enough adequately preserved locations and costumes to reproduce the earlier era precisely.

Director Jean Renoir's gutting of sociopolitical themes from the original novel in favor of a bleak doomed love triangle is the film's cheapening deadweight, making it a charter member of France's poetic realism productions of the late 1930s. But denying it entry into the elite company of world cinema classics.

Apparently lead actor Jean Gabin wanted the privilege of driving a locomotive himself. Zola's story provided him with an opportunity to do so. Renoir was likewise enamored of a railroad engine's speed and power. Both performer and stager delighted in tinkering with machinery and outdoor lighting, the latter daring to shoot key scenes at night despite daunting foggy conditions.

What remains of plot is quite straightforward. Stationmaster Roubaud becomes jealous when he learns his wife has been a mistress of wealthy landowner Grandmorin. Upset by this spousal confession, he resolves to off a man he considers an amorous rival. Dragging along Séverine to witness the crime. As the Paris-Le Havre express passes through a tunnel with consequent clamor, Roubaud murders his victim. He then steals cash from the man's wallet and a watch, intending to mislead investigators into identifying the situation as a for-profit homicide.

Leaving the dead man's compartment, Mr. and Mrs. Roubaud encounter engineer Jacques Lantier in the aisle leading to their own accommodation. He's attempting to remove a cinder from his eye, taking more than a little time to accomplish that simple task.

Séverine attempts to determine whether this unexpected third party is aware of Grandmorin's fate and its perpetrator. Lantier sidesteps her inquiry, though clearly implying willingness to cover for the Roubauds. The stationmaster could make his job status shaky should he choose to do so.

From this point on melodramatics take charge. One hard-to-swallow incident follows rapidly after another all the way to a predictable climax.

Lantier becomes fascinated by Madame Roubaud and vice versa. He shies away from murdering a plainly guilt-ridden, downward plunging Monsieur Roubaud. Even though that insures ending his adultery with Séverine.

For some risibly incredible reason supposedly related to alcoholic genes, the engine driver can't finish off another male. Instead, he repeatedly launches into lethal attack mode against female lovers. Of course, crime mustn't pay. So there's an unhappy destiny awaiting Jacques Lantier. No happy Hollywood ending appears here.

While Jean Gabin is quite satisfactory as melancholic Jacques, a plaything of the gods as envisioned by both screenwriter and novelist, the most memorable performance is turned in by Simone Simon as coquettish strumpet Séverine, truly incapable of generating any lasting love for anyone, a possible result of being hopelessly corrupted by sexual abuse as an adolescent. Her charming exterior masks an interior demon, one more than willing to incite seduced males to violence on her behalf.

Quite engaging is Fernand Ledoux as pessimistic cuckold Roubaud, far more possessive of wife than of cash. A hopeless loser at gambling table and matrimonial sweepstakes.

Charlotte Clasis is endearingly patient, sympathetic, and permissively tolerant as elderly godmother of Jacques Lantier.

Curt Courant's cinematography generates a brooding, autumnal atmosphere which suffocates protagonist and viewers alike, wrapping them in a dismal, mostly sunless world where cool calculation is tossed aside for temporary outbursts of overheated passion. Train sequences are among the finest ever shot, on a par with those in the classic short *Pacific 231*.

Costuming, makeup, and production design recreate railway life with complete fidelity to place and dress.

Footfalls, train whistles, clattering train car wheels, and creaking barrier gates are recorded with sonic precision by the estimable Robert Teisseire.

Joseph Kosma's score, though, is a disappointment, lacking melodic lyricism and inclined to musical cliché. It mechanically doubles accents, reinforcing actions after they occur, threatening to delay strong forward rhythmic drive of visuals. No "Autumn Leaves" surfaces here. Though it would have been an ideal fit.

Lighting is rather too grainy in exterior scenes of the locomotive's passage from Paris to Le Havre.

Editing by Suzanne de Troeye and Marguerite Renoir is brisk and judiciously timed. A decidedly strong asset.

What's the chief flaw of *La bête humaine*? Its shallow screenplay. No character emerges as anything other than a piece of mechanical puppetry, incapable of reflection, logic, or foresight. Who should be charged with this inadequacy? Denise Leblond? Jean Renoir? Maybe both? Woefully on constant display is verbal dullness, a total absence of intelligent dialogue.

This Criterion dvd offers as bonuses a three-minute theatrical trailer for the film, a gallery with on-set photographs and theatrical posters (several of which imply a demonic spirit actively present in the drama), a perceptive eleven-minute interview with Peter Bogdanovich setting the drama in historical context and salted with anecdotes about Gabin and Renoir, a seven-minute television excerpt of Renoir re-enacting his direction of Simone Simon for the homicide intimation scene of the film, a twenty-four minute television program titled

Adapter Zola, where participants discuss the complexities of trying to distill Zola's five-hundred page *La bête humaine* novel into a two-hour screen runtime, Geoffrey O'Brien's essay "Renoir On and Off the Rails," Ginette Vincendeau's essay "The Beauty of the Beast," Jean Renoir's own six-minute introduction to his film, and translated excerpts from Chapter 3 of Eugène Lourié's autobiography *My Work in Films*, highlighting production details of this film.

Due to its sordid plot involving murder, adultery, and suicide, *La bête humaine* can only be recommended for adult viewers. Nearly a film classic, it's ultimately rewarding to watch for notable perfection of visual composition, exemplary production design, and inspired location shooting.