Tuesday next Jan 7th: Alfred Hitchcock's "NUMBER 13" (1932) with John Stuart & Donald Calhoun; and Tod Slaughter in "THE FACE AT THE WINDOW" (1927).

Dec. 28th 1926
The Theodore Harf Memorial Film Society

"LA BÊTE HUMAINE" (France, 1938) Directed by Jean Renoir, adapted from the novel by Emile Zola; Photographed by Curt Courant, assisted by Claude Renoir Jr., Alain Renoir, Pasquoy, Guy Ferrier, Matteau; Music by Josef C. Kosma; Sets: Louri; 8 reels (French dialogue; English titles). With Jean Gabin, Simone Simon, Fernand Ledoux, Carette, Jean Renoir, Gerard Landry, Jenny Hella, Colette Regis, Claire Gerard, Germaine Clausis, Berlioz, Andre Tavernier, Cortegiani, Rousseau, Perez.

Unseen in New York since the 5th Avenue Cinema's last showing in 1950, "La Bête Humaíne" is from Renoir's best period - surrounded by "La Grande Illusion", "La Regle du Jeu" and "Partie de Campagne". It could also be hardly more typical of the grim, moody, defeatist sex dramas that so proliferated in France in the mid and late 30's, and which seemed so raw and honest at the time largely due to the particularly superficial level and Production-Code harassed inanities of so much Hollywood product of the period. Many of the French "classics" of this period, and especially "Quai des Brumes", today seem quite as contrived and false as their giosisier Hollywood counterparts, but the best of Durville, Carne and Renoir survives rather well. Despite seeming very restrained about a subject that would today be handled with no delicacy at all, and even with its then subtle and "poetic" but today cliched stormy sex symbolism, "La Bête Humaíne" still has a certain raw power. It takes surprisingly long to get under way, and not all of the implications of the source novel are made explicit (it's the third of the Zola trilogy that also included "Nana" and "Germinale"; quite certainly it represents for Renoir a better directorial credit than a writing one!

Extremely well received over here, with especially glowing reviews from the NY Times, Cue, and the NY Herald Tribune, it was soon of course being sold via the standard sex-exploitation route. The basic catchline used was "VIVID DRAMA OF CONSUMING PASSION ... HUMAN FERVENTIONS ... A MAN'S DUST ... A WOMAN'S LOVE ... SEX MANIA INTELLIGENTLY UNFOLDED FOR ADULTS".

Our print is from England (where it was simultaneously released in a dubbed version titled "Judges Was a Woman") and it contains the standard censor out which always puzzled me -- Gabin's first "trainstorm" and his turning on his girl-friend. It's a key scene in that it sets the mood and plot up, explaining details that are otherwise not referred to again until much later. Judging from stills of the scene, it is not a particularly savage episode, and one suspects that some kind of deal must have been made, the censors letting the later steamy love scenes remain in return for the removal of this physically violent scene. It is quite evident where the cut takes place, and it's still a disconcerting moment. Otherwise however, the film seems intact and does have the original and far more powerful French ending -- the driverless train racing down the tracks to a presumed destruction, its passengers all unaware of their fate. (In the US version, additional footage was shot of the train being stopped, the body of the driver recovered, and the train then proceeding in an orderly fashion.) Quite incidentally, between this film and "La Hone", one doesn't have too much faith in the safety regulations of French railways, or the mental stability of their drivers. If Gance and Renoir were to be believed, madness, approaching blindness, sex mania and suicide fixations are quite acceptable traits among engine drivers as long as they remain sentimentally attached to their trains!

Fritz Lang, who made rather a good Hollywood remake of Renoir's "La Chienne" in "Scarlet Street", later remade this one -- as "Human Desire" -- with Glen Ford, Gloria Grahame and Broderick Crawford rather too literally type-cast. Comparisons here would be particularly unfortunate, though Lang -- like Renoir -- did work in some excellent documentary footage of trains. Otherwise, with Glen Ford as a somewhat fickle (and, of course, a normal) Korean war veteran, it was enough to make Gabin, Nana and Germaine spin in their graves.

Following "Le Bête Humaíne" (and to cheer us all up) we'll be running an extremely rare silent comedy feature tonight. We doubt if many of you will have seen it, and I'm sorry that we have to run it silent. Charlie Chaplin is often cited as my predecessor, and it would be too much to lend a film scoring chore on to his shoulders too. However, the film should provoke a constant enough stream of chuckles to prevent any prolonged periods of dead silence. Incidentally, due to sloppy lab work, two hairs are printed in the print. The worst disappears after about six minutes; the second follows it a few minutes later. So please be patient and don't blame the projectionist!

We. K. Everson