

Germinal

“Naturalism” was a late 19th century literary movement, especially in France, which aimed to rigorously depict the inevitable--the “natural”--forces to which man in society was subjected. It described a deterministic world which pitiable man could not escape, and its adherents aimed at the scrupulous documentation of detail, especially in the lives of the working and lower classes. The principal voice of naturalism was French novelist and activist Emile Zola, and his most famous opus, *Germinal*, published in 1885, has now been made into a most ambitious motion picture by director Claude Berri.

Berri's *Germinal*, ten years in the making and the most expensive French production ever made (at some \$30 million), was intended to be *the* film epic of France, an elaborate and vivid saga of 19th century life in an Alsatian mining town. This was filmmaking aiming at the sweep--if not the breadth--of the American *Gone With the Wind*, the Russian *War and Peace*, or the Italian *1900*. Director Berri (*Jean de Florette*, *Manon of the Springs*) qualified his effort, at its premiere, as both “a plea for a better world” and proof that “work was a jungle, corrupted by money.” If all this makes *Germinal* sound dutiful rather than thrilling, you've got the picture. While not without interest, this film is thoroughly relentless and grim, and you are likely to leave the theater with a sore back and the feel of coal dust under your nails.

The film opens with the vision of a burning Hades that is a northern coal town (subtlety is rarely the point in this picture). An unemployed newcomer Etienne (Renaud) lucks into a position on the squad of rugged mine foreman Maheu (Gerard Depardieu) and also comes to board with him, his wife Maheude (Miou-Miou), his father, and their crowd of seven children in a raw company-town house. Times are tough, and the proto-socialist Etienne, goaded by a resident anarchist Souvarine (Laurent Terzieff), starts to raise the workers' consciousness of poor conditions at worse pay.

The grubby, grasping life of the miners is contrasted periodically--and blatantly--with the offhand luxury of the mine owner's family, the Hennebeaus. The miners, asked to produce more for less, began to cut corners and--as inevitable as naturalism--cave-ins, protests, strikes, sabotage, and the crushing of rebellion ensue. Etienne leaves, having affected no change at all, but leaving Maheu and others dead and the nascent labor movement crushed.

The viewer is likely to feel crushed, too. There are no winners here to cheer for, there is no ennobling death or suffering. Fate, for Berri as much as for Zola, rules this nether world and he leaves no prisoners: “The worker,” in Zola's phrase, “is simply overwhelmed by the social situation as it exists.”

Other than as an introduction to Zola and his work, *Germinal* offers elements to appreciate, if not to love. The recreation of the mine and the mineworkers' lives seems feels authentic, from the mens' clanking off of coal chunks to the womens' poignant pleadings at the company store. You slog through their trials with them and hope for at least some of them to find redemption. Through Yves Angelo's cinematography, you see the entire range of bleak earth tones they live in. In the recreation of this swarming industrial town, you can see a lot of that \$30 million on the screen.

Gerard Depardieu is, as is to be expected, a formidable *presence* as the working stiff Maheu. This is the rough-hewn Depardieu familiar to U.S. filmgoers from Bertolucci's *1900* and *Jean de Florette*, the bovine French peasant, dull but decent, put upon by others and tricked by Fate. Director Berri, true to the spirit of Zola, allows Maheu no real breakthroughs or epiphanies; killed by an errant rifle shot, he is as uncomprehending of it as he was of almosy everything else in life. He is allowed one lovely, revealing moment, though. During the strike and away from the mine, he confides to Etienne how much he truly loves being underground, the world where his strength and experience count. It is a recognition, for an inarticulate man, of where his competence lies.

As the long-suffering Maheude, Miou-Miou is appropriately tenacious and tough. Her world, except for one brief dance fest, hardly allows her to become a well-rounded personality. Café *artiste* and pop protest singer Renaud makes his movie debut in the crucial role of Etienne, the catalyst for much of the plot. Unfortunately, he shows a meager screen personality and sports a uniformly pained expression which discloses little. One particularly striking performance is that of the force-of-nature Chaval (Jean-Roger Milo) who seduces the oldest Maheu daughter. Milo's way over-the-top acting and his fac--like a Venetian mask--seem like visitors from an early Jean Cocteau film, but he is somehow watchable.

Like the life it renders, *Germinal* is a motion picture which must, above all, be endured. Perhaps a larger question is whether this film, intended by its makers as a Gallic monument, will itself endure.

(*"Germinal"* is rated "R" for nudity, sexual situations and raw life. The nudity--as in the family's baths--is as matter-of-fact as it must have been in the world of 1880 lacking all privacy. Viewers should be forewarned of one ghastly unmaning scene that goes way beyond Lorena Bobbit !)

(May 1994)