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Germinal. Claude Berri, director.

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I recently got a chance to see Claude Berri's production of *Germinal*, Emile Zola's classic of French workers lives. The movie is incredibly powerful and left me moved and saddened. The lead performances, especially of Etienne Lantier and La Maheude, are brilliant, almost overwhelming. Class conflict and class oppression are at the center of the film, as are the effects of endless grinding poverty and a life that leaves you coughing coal dust five years after you leave the mines. Berri had the problem of bringing to the screen a book which most French would know about, and yet most Americans have never heard of. Undoubtedly U.S. audiences will not pick up on most of the Socialist vs. Anarchist vs. Syndicalist discussions, which are the most wooden part of the film. But Berri almost delights in contrasting the luxuriousness of the provincial petit-bourgeois mine managers with the constant worry about food which permeates the miners' lives. Women

play a central role in the book and in the movie. They are like pack animals in the mines, pushing the heavy carts in the heat. They also manage the home and family, beg for food and credit, endure the worst insults, and take the sharpest revenge in the film—against the greedy and grasping storekeeper. I have heard that *Germinal* is a box office dud, and would not be surprised. Like *Matewan*, this is the story of a great defeat. Zola may end with the hope that a successful workers revolt is germinating, but there is little reason given to hope for anything better. I managed to see the film during its three-day engagement at our only decent mid-Maine movie theater. If you get a chance, you should not miss it. This is also a visually stunning film, with powerful scenes inside the mines and in the family homes, which are ever-dark. No VCR will do it justice. And this is a film about justice.

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