HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Burak Sevingen, MA

Human Desire 1954

Fritz Lang (1890-1976)

OVERVIEW

> Ah! It's a fine invention; there is no doubt about it. People go along quick, and become more learned. But wild beasts remain wild beasts, and people may invent even finer machines still; but nevertheless, there will be wild beasts in spite of all.
>
> —Emile Zola*, La Bête humaine*

The train—that powerful symbol of modernity—had been prominently featured in previous Fritz Lang films: 1919's *Spiders* showed passengers enjoying the scenery in an observation car; *Dr. Mabuse the Gambler* (1922) opened with a well-orchestrated larceny staged aboard a train; the massive railroad sabotage in *Spies* (1928) was intended to murder a secret agent; the Western *The Return of Frank James* (1939) had a vicious railroad baron; in 1943's *Ministry of Fear*, a train got hit by German bombers during the blitz in wartime England. *Human Desire* (1954) takes place in a railway town and a locomotive driver gets to have the spotlight. He bears witness to the aftermath of murder and soon becomes entangled with the manipulative wife of the killer who is a fellow railman.

The Source Novel. *Human Desire* is based on Emile Zola's naturalist novel *La Bête humaine (The Beast Within).* Zola's novel was previously adapted into film by Jean Renoir in 1938 as *La Bête Humaine.* This would be the second instance of Lang sharing the same source material with the French director. His 1945 film noir *Scarlet Street* and Renoir's 1931 *La Chienne* were also based on the same novel.

Screenplay. Alfred Hayes wrote the screenplay for *Human Desire* as well as Lang's 1952 film *Clash by Night*. The latter film takes place in a fishing town that is depicted with realism akin to *Human Desire*'s railway community.

Italian Neorealism. *Human Desire*'s working class characters and on location scenes point out to the influence of Italian neorealism. The trailblazers for neorealism in cinema were Luchino Visconti's *Ossessione* (1943) and 1945's *Rome, Open City* directed by Roberto Rossellini. Scriptwriter Hayes had previously collaborated with Italian neorealist directors. He was one of the writers of Roberto Rossellini's *Paisan* (1946) and had contributed to the screenplay of Vittoria De Sica's *Bicycle Thives* (1948) (Bailey).

War. Hayes had met the Italian directors while he was serving in the US Army during WW2. The protagonist of *Human Desire* is also a veteran who has just returned from the Korean War.

The Cast and Soundtrack. *Human Desire*'s lovers Glenn Ford and Gloria Grahame had starred in Fritz Lang's crime melodrama *The Big Heat* a year ago. The two films also share the same composer, Daniele Amfitheatrof. In *The Big Heat,* the music alternated between a serene tune when the scene was the police sergeant's suburban home and got lively in the dangerous urban settings. Similarly, jazz music accompanies *Human Desire's* toxic husband and wife played by Broderick Crawford and Grahame. Glenn Ford's character boards with the Simmons—the happily married couple's daughter is portrayed as a wholesome young woman who is in love with him. The scenes at Simmons' house are marked by a soft and playful melody that would not be out of place in a TV drama—or some of the prolific composer's previous works such as his *Lassie Come Home*.

The Human Beast. *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* was published in 1886, four years before Zola's novel. *La Bête humaine* explores a similar theme, the co-existence of progress and cruelty. The translator of an early English edition of Zola's novel chose *The Monomaniac* as the title (Zola, 10). This refers not to the murderous husband but the character of Jacques Lantier—the engineer and counterpart of Glenn Ford's

Jeff Warren. Monomaniac would be an odd label for Ford's character. Fritz Lang mentions that (against his own preferences—the leading man was constructed to resemble the hero of American comic strip Li'l Abner (Bogdanovich, 92). Despite the taming of the protagonist, *Human Desire* raises thoughtful and at times provocative questions about war, class and gender. Who then, is Fritz Lang's human beast?

CHARACTERS

Jeff Warren. Engine driver has an affair with Vicki Buckley soon after becoming an indirect witness of her husband murdering a man aboard a train.

Vicki Buckley. Vicki is a housewife and married to Carl Buckley, a co-worker of Jeff.

Carl Buckley. Carl is assistant yard manager at the railroad company. He is extremely jealous of Vicki and has a tendency to get very violent. Carl murders John Owens whom he suspects of having an affair with his wife.

John Owens. Owens is a wealthy and influential businessman. Vicki had lived in his house in her teenage years when her mother used to work as Owens's housekeeper. There are alternate accounts of the nature of his relationship with Vicki.

Alec Simmons. Alec works as the secondman in Jeff's cab unit. They are good friends and Jeff boards at Alec's house.

Vera Simmons. Alec's wife Vera is portrayed as a perfect housewife.

Ellen Simmons. Simmons' daughter is a charming young woman who has a crush on Jeff.

Jean. Jean is a friend of Vicki's. She lives downtown and her apartment is used on two different occasions by Vicki: Carl waits there as she visits Owens and later she and Jeff secretly meet in Jean's place. Jean is single and is portrayed as a worldly modern woman—recalling the working women of *The Blue Gardenia* and Millie Ray in *Scarlet Street*.

SYNOPSIS

Korean War veteran Jeff Warren returns home to his small town and resumes his job at the railroad as an engine driver. Warren also gets back to lodging with his co-worker Alec Simmons, whose daughter is in love with him.

Jeff's co-worker Carl Buckley gets fired; he asks his wife Vicki to ask for a favor from an old acquaintance of hers, a wealthy man named Owens. Vicki obliges and requests his intervention from Owens. However, Carl is jealous and beats her up. He also forces Vicki to coax Owens into believing that she is seeking a rendezvous. The Buckleys board Owens' train and Carl murders him in his compartment. Jeff happens to be there and interacts with Vicki.

An inquest is held about the homicide and Jeff is called on to the stand as a potential witness. He chooses not to disclose having seen Vicki leaving Owens' car. She has her own reasons to keep quiet. Vicki and Jeff begin an affair; she remains untruthful to him about her involvement in the crime. Jeff's friend and landlord Alec tries to persuade Jeff to quit seeing Vicki and his daughter Ellen continues to vie for his attention.

Carl is once again fired from his job and Vicki pressures Jeff to murder her husband. He decides not to go along with her scheme and dumps her. Vicki attempts to leave the town for good, but gets murdered by Carl. Unaware of the killing, Jeff looks content; apparently he is likely to finally reciprocate Ellen's affection.

SCENES

Jeff Warren. Korean War veteran Jeff Warren returns home after three years of service. He resumes his job at the railroad as an engine driver. Warren also gets back to lodging with his co-worker Alec Simmons and his family. Simmons' daughter Ellen has a crush on Warren.



Simmons' daughter Ellen is in love with Jeff. The gift he brings for her from Japan is a kimono. The scene recalls one of Fritz Lang's early films, the Japanese-themed *Harakiri* from 1919—which starred German actress Lil Dagover in a Madame Butterfly story



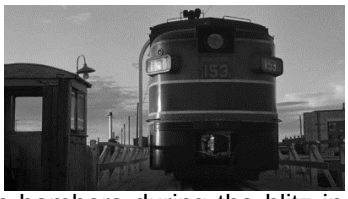
The scenes with Alec Simmons (Edgar Buchanan) and his family have a cozy feeling, almost like a TV sitcom. Mike Grost draws an interesting parallel between Fritz Lang and Jean Renoir: "The folksy Edgar Buchanan and the small town setting remind one of the TV comedy to come of *Petticoat Junction*, just as Irene Ryan's presence in Jean Renoir's *The Woman on the Beach* (1947) anticipates *The Beverly Hillbillies*. Both of these European directors clearly have a fondness for small town America, and folksy performers who can evoke it" (Grost).



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Human Desire (1954) takes place in a railway town and a locomotive driver gets to have the spotlight. The scene that introduces Glenn Ford's Jeff Buckley features a modern diesel engine. Jeff takes the engine to the depot, assisted by a brakeman.



A Comparison.

Human Desire is based on Emile Zola's naturalist novel *La Bête humaine (The Beast Within).* Zola's novel was previously adapted into film by Jean Renoir in 1938 as *La Bête Humaine.* This would be the second instance of Lang sharing the same source material with the French director. His 1945 film noir *Scarlet Street* and Renoir's 1931 *La Chienne* were also based on the same novel.

Jean Renoir's version: In contrast to the cab unit seen in *Human Desire*, in Renoir's *La Bête Humaine*, the engineer and his assistant work in an uncomfortable, messy and greasy one. Also, their tasks appear to be much more physical.

Carl Buckley. On his first day at work, Jeff comes across a fellow trainman named Carl Buckley who is on his way to the main office. Carl



is an assistant yardmaster and was summoned to account for an incident. A line of box cars had been left unattended on the 'repair in place' track and the perishables they contained were wasted.

Neorealism inspired scenes that are shot on-location; an example is the scene with Carl coming home after work. Alfred Hayes wrote the screenplay for *Human Desire* as well as Lang's 1952 film *Clash by Night*. Hayes had met the Italian directors while he was serving in the US Army during WW2. The protagonist of *Human Desire* is also a veteran who has just returned from the Korean War.

The Buckleys' marriage is in stark contrast with that of the Simmons'. Patrick McGilligan observes that the Buckleys' home represents "the bonafide American interiorscape" (McGilligan, 409).



Vicki thinks that "most women are unhappy, they just pretend they aren't". Jeff tells her that "the army was full of guys who were real glad to get away from home."



Trouble at the Buckley Home. Carl is known for his temper and the meeting with the yardmaster doesn't end well for him. "Carl Buckley, report to the yard master'. Loudspeaker keeps repeating the announcement. The voice of authority becomes more belligerent—"Carl Buckley, report immediately to the yard master's office"—the camera zooms in on the loudspeaker. Carl is summoned to the main office and he will soon get fired.



Carl goes home to his wife Vicki and explains that he has just been fired for insubordination. Carl has one idea that he thinks could get him his job back. He brings up the name of an acquaintance of Vicki—a man named John Owens. Her mother had been Owens' housekeeper and she had stayed in his home during her teenage years. Carl believes that Owens's intervention could save him as he is an influential businessman who does business with the railroad.



"You said once that he (John Owens) liked you". Vicki merely raises an eyebrow as Carl tries to persuade her to get in touch with Owens—who has most likely sexually abused her as a teen.

Vicki calls John Owens. Vicki is hesitant but eventually obliges to help her husband. She calls Owens' office to request an appointment and Buckleys prepare to take the train to meet him at his corporate office.

During Buckleys' initial trip for Vicki's appointment with John Owens, Carl nervously whittles matchsticks with his pocket knife. She ignores the ominous sign of what is to come; in their next train ride, he is preparing to kill Owens and keeps himself occupied in their compartment by whittling. He will soon drag Vicki to Owens' drawing room and use the knife as the murder weapon. This time, she watches him apprehensively.







Carl's Jealous Frenzy. Carl waits for Vicki at the apartment of a friend of hers while she goes to visit Owens. He gets restless as she doesn't show up after a few hours. Vicki finally arrives, and delivers the good news—with Owens' intervention Carl was reinstated to his position. Instead of cheering up, Carl is annoyed that her meeting has taken so long. He is suspicious that Vicki has been having an affair with Owens for a long time. His anger quickly grows and he starts battering her—this is clearly not the first time.



Murder Aboard the Train. Carl plans to settle things with Owens during the businessman's train ride to Chicago that night. He forces Vicki to write a message, telling him that she would be visiting him in his drawing room. A few hours later they board the train and Carl makes sure that Owens gets the note. After waiting for a while, he heads out for Owens' room, dragging Vicki with him. As soon as the door opens he attacks Owens and kills him by stabbing. He also steals some cash and takes the slip of paper with Vicki's handwritten message.

An Unexpected Witness. Jeff is also on the Chicago train as he is deadheading home and is idling in the car next to Owens'. As Buckleys leave the drawing room to return to their compartment, Carl spots Jeff standing in the vestibule smoking. He tells Vicki to go in advance and distract Jeff so that he can proceed to their room unnoticed. Carl and Vicki end up in an unoccupied compartment which happens to be a higher grade unit compared to that of the Buckleys'. It is more spacious and comfortable; there is no ladder for an upper berth and it has a private bathroom. Spaces of the train signify class distinctions. The murder victim John Owens was occupying a drawing room which would be in the top tier of compartments.



The Engineer is Beguiled. Vicki grips Jeff and lures him away. Jeff apparently welcomes the chance encounter and the two seem to click. They start kissing but Vicki abruptly dashes out and returns to her room where Carl is waiting for her. After the train reaches the station, the Buckleys deboard and come across Jeff on the platform. Carl salutes his colleague and duly introduces his wife. Vicki acts like she is seeing him for the first time and the engineer is left baffled.



Film noir photography: Buckleys leave the train following Carl's murder of John Owens.

The Inquest and Vicki's Letter. An inquest is held about the homicide and Jeff is called on to the stand as a potential witness. He chooses not to disclose having seen Vicki leaving Owens' car. Meanwhile, Vicki keeps quiet because of Carl blackmailing her with the incriminating letter which casts her as an accomplice. She tries to find out where he hides it but fails and concludes that Carl must be carrying it with him at all times.

Vicki's Past and her Lies. Jeff runs into the Buckleys at Duggans' Bar. Carl has lately taken up drinking heavily and on this occasion he can barely stand on his feet. Jeff helps Vicki take him home. After the drunken man goes to sleep, the two talk about their eventful encounter at the train. She thanks him for not pointing a finger at her during the inquest. Vicki also lies about that evening—she tells him that Carl was not with her when she went to Owens' drawing room and stumbled upon the dead body.

A Secretive Dalliance. In the following days, Vicki frequently calls Jeff and they begin to see each other. She is particularly interested in Jeff's military background and asks him questions about combat killing. Soon, they continue their affair in out-of-town rendezvous at the apartment of Vicki's friend. Ultimately, she reveals that it was actually her husband who killed Owens in a fit of jealousy.





Costumes were designed by Jean Louis: Vicki on her way to meeting Jeff in the city.



Reactions to the Affair. Jeff's frequent meetings with Vicki become noticed by his friend and landlord Alec. He tries to persuade Jeff to drop it off but gets a cold shoulder. Alec's daughter Ellen who had been vying for Jeff's attention makes her interest more explicit. She brings Jeff two tickets to the Railroad Association's ball and tells him that they would be a reminder to make up his mind.

Simmons' daughter Ellen appears as a wholesome alternative to Vicki. In another chiaroscuro lighting shot, she stands at the entrance of Jeff's room, its shadows reflecting his troubled mind.

Vicki's Smooth Coaxing. Carl is once again fired from his job and the Buckleys are leaving the town. Vicki tells Jeff that she has no recourse but to follow her husband as long as he has her handwritten note. She finally articulates that she could be liberated only by Carl's death. Jeff gets the message and goes out to find and murder Carl.

Film noir photography: Buckleys leave the train following Carl's murder of John Owens; Jeff enjoys a smoke under a no smoking sign while Vicki brings up the topic of war in order to coax him to kill Carl.





End of the Affair. Jeff follows the heavily intoxicated man in the depot. Apparently he battles his conscience and chooses not to harm him. This is another Neorealism inspired scene that was shot on-location with the depot's train carriages in the background; showing Carl drunk and wandering around in the yard.

When Jeff returns to Vicki, she scolds him for failing to get rid of her husband. In return, he accuses her for lying about her past. This prompts Vicki to revise her account of her history with John Owens. This time, she says that she had been molested by her mother's employer in her teens. Jeff doesn't care and shows no sympathy. Before leaving her for good, he gives her the incriminating slip of paper he grabbed from the drunken Carl's pocket at the depot.

Nobody Leaves the Town. With the only piece of evidence tying her to the murder now in her possession, Vicki takes the next train to leave the town by herself. Suddenly Carl shows up at her compartment and tries to persuade her to come back. A heated exchange of words ends in a fierce fight and he murders her.

Happy Ending (for Jeff). Jeff happened to be the engine driver of Buckleys' train, but he is unaware of their fate—nonetheless, he looks relieved. Jeff also appears to have made up his mind about the upcoming town hall dance—and most likely shifting gears in his relationship with Ellen. Alec affirms his decision with a friendly gesture and the train hurtles on.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Jeff Warren – Open (Ordinary, Amiable, Traumatized, Cold)
Vicky Buckley – Closed (Manipulative, Equivocal, Victim, Scarred)

JEFF WARREN (Open)

The engineer is tempted by Vicki but soon backs away from her because of her past and her manipulative ways. The ending with his apparent decision to hook up with young Ellen implies that he has opted for the simplicity and happiness of small town life.

Illustrative moments

Ordinary. In an interview, Fritz Lang has mentioned that the character—against his own preference—was conceived as a simple and regular guy, sort of a "**Li'l Abner**".

Amiable. The actor Glenn Ford plays a likable and easygoing character. Good friend, boarder and co-worker—until he is temporarily sidetracked by the seductive Vicki.

Traumatized. Despite his good-natured charm, it is hinted that Jeff might have been traumatized by his war experience. He is not talkative about the subject but even his terse remarks suggest that the three years he spent in Korea were taxing.

Cold. When Vicki finally tells him about her past as a victim of sexual abuse, Jeff is unmoved and breaks up with her. This comes before Vicki's revelation that she was the one who had tried to seduce John Owens. Jeff has no way of knowing about this final account (which may well be not true). He simply assumes she is lying or he doesn't care.

VICKI BUCKLEY (Closed)

Before she met Carl, Vicki was working at the train station's magazine stand. She is the only character who doesn't like the small railroad town and would leave it at the first opportunity. The ending shows her getting murdered by her husband while attempting to do that.

Illustrative moments

Manipulative. Vicki brings up the topic of war and combat in order to steer Jeff to get rid of Carl.

Equivocal. As a teenager, Vicki had lived at John Owens' house where her mother worked. Carl has the idea that she has an ongoing affair with this man and her remarks about this episode of her life have an equivocal nature. She finally claims that there was no abuse, she had herself attempted to play a temptress.

Victim. Even at the end, we don't know which of Vicki's narratives about her past would be the accurate one and she may well have been abused by Owens. She tells Jeff that the reason she got married to Carl was because of her need for a father figure—"he looked big, solid and decent". Carl is in fact very violent and their marriage is marked by his physical abuse of Vicki.

Scarred. Gloria Grahame's previous film was Lang's *The Big Heat.* There, her character Debby's face had got disfigured by a brutal attack that scarred one side of her face. Her character was similarly divided between her essential goodness and her involvement with the immoral world of gangsters. Vicki is also scarred—she shows them to Jeff to prove her husband's abuse. She is like Debby, both a suffering victim and a scheming femme fatale.

THEMES

SOCIETY (War, Domestic Abuse, Sexual Abuse, Family, Class, Modern Transport, Modern Technology)

War. Jeff is a veteran of the Korean War and this is the second time this war gets to be the backdrop of the story in a Fritz Lang film. In *The Blue Gardenia*, it was the leading woman's boyfriend who was serving in Korea and had dumped her with a letter. The war is referred to a few times in *Human Desire.* Jeff is a veteran but he is not too fond of talking about the war. "How come they didn't make you a general" a fellow railway man asks in jest—"they'll make me a general next time" Jeff genially responds. The fact that Jeff is not a decorated veteran creates some interesting exchanges. When another co-worker wants to know if Jeff was awarded any medals, he replies "they ran out of them". Later, the topic returns when Vicki tries to get Jeff to talk about war. She asks him whether it is difficult to kill a man and he says that "that's what they give you medals for". They then have a revealing dialogue about Jeff's combat experience:

- It must be a strange feeling.

- What?
- To be surrounded by death, the way a soldier is during the war.
- Well, you don't think about it after a while. I mean, you're usually so cold or hungry or sleepy. Death, well, it just comes as sort of an accident.

Walter Metz observes that "the fact that *Human Desire* represents Korea at all is something of an anomaly in American culture" (Metz, 99) and "despite conservative gender constructions; *Human Desire* effectively gives voice to the trauma engaged by the Korean War" (101).

Domestic Abuse Vicki is a victim of spousal abuse as Carl savagely beats her. Jeff looks concerned when she first mentions this and shows him her scars. It turns out that he actually doesn't care. He even sympathizes with his co-worker—"Carl must have known something about you and Owens to feel the way he did" he says distantly.

Sexual Abuse. Vicki's mother used to be a household employee of John Owens. Her husband Carl suspects that Vicki and Owens used to have a sexual relationship which has continued to the present day. Vicki is initially taciturn about her past and offers contradictory accounts about her relationship with John Owens: she confirms Carl's suspicions to stop his bashing; she later tells Jeff that her jealous husband was imagining things; then she revises her story and reveals that she was indeed sexually abused by Owens when she was a teenager. In yet another reversal, she lashes at Carl in the finale and says she was in fact the one who tried (unsuccessfully) to seduce Owens. This last bit sounds odd and makes the ending rather artificial—unless it was something she said to show her scorn. It feels like the ending of *Metropolis*—without this scene, things look very different.

Family. In contrast to Vicki who dislikes the small town, Jeff's friend Alec and his family appear content with their life there. Alec and Vera Simmons are presented as an old fashioned and happy couple: he jokingly calls himself her 'bread and butter', teases her about the loose buttons on his clothes and she gladly indulges him when asked to scratch his back. Their daughter Ellen is in love with Jeff and in the end, it is suggested that he would reciprocate her interest. Resisting the excitement offered by Vicki and opting instead for the wholesome Ellen also entails a choice to stay in the small town.

Class. In *Human Desire*, Carl Buckley gets reprimanded because of neglecting a task in his field of responsibility. He is subsequently fired because of his manners and talking back to his supervisor. In the Renoir version, this episode is considerably different. A woman complains to Roubaud (Buckley's counterpart) about another passenger with a dog. As the stationmaster, he approaches the man and explains to him that it is against regulations to keep pets in the compartments. The man gets annoyed and wows to deliver a backlash. Roubaud soon learns that this person is a very well-connected individual. Roubaud talks to his wife and brings up the idea of asking an aristocrat named Grandmorin (counterpart of *Human Desire*'s John Owens) for his backing—as a preemptive move. In Zola's novel, this episode is laid out in detail. When Roubaud addresses the man with the dog, he gets angry and blurts that "you others will not always be the masters" (Zola, 10). This single sentence jeopardizes his position and the narrator observes that "he was suspected of being a republican".

Modern Transport. Renoir's film was released 16 years before that of Lang's and it revolves around a steam locomotive. The driver is drenched in grease and performs arduous physical tasks. His assistant is a fireman who feeds the engine's firebox with coal. In *Human Desire*, A young woman mentions that she remembers steam trains from her childhood—they have been replaced by diesel. The protagonist drives one and the robust machine is shot majestically. The job requires tasks that are less physically demanding compared to the one in *La Bête Humaine*. The cab unit is tidy and clean; sightly train is efficient and comfortable. The competition from airlines is mentioned in passing—a railroad executive utters how he would have liked it only if the homicide had taken place aboard an airplane.

Modern Technology. Television "makes an inconspicuous debut" (Gunning, 445) in a Fritz Lang film with *Human Desire.* A TV set is the centerpiece of Buckleys' modestly decorated home. Simmons don't seem to own one (perhaps explainable by Carl's better position at the railroad). No scenes show the characters watching the TV—it is basically a part of the décor. On the other hand, sound technologies have important functions. Microphones are used at the inquest and loudspeakers are employed as

technologies of control. The manager controls railway operations via directives emanating from the loudspeakers that can be heard around the yard.

Discussion questions

The leading woman's past points to sexual abuse and her marriage is marked by domestic abuse. How does the film approach to these issues?

How would you compare Lang's *Human Desire* with Renoir *La Bête Humaine*? Lang's version is much less faithful to the source novel. Does it have its merits as an adaptation?

Fritz Lang and Peter Lorre had collaborated for *M* 23 years ago and the director originally wanted to cast this actor for the part of Jeff Warren that was ultimately played by Glenn Ford. Why might Lang have preferred Lorre for this role? Would his casting make a fundamental difference in the story?

In *Human Desire*, three domestic spaces are depicted in detail: Buckleys' and Simmons' houses and the downtown apartment of Vicki's friend Jean. In what ways are these three spaces different?

Who is the human beast? Is there one character that can be specifically identified as such in *Human Desire*? Which of the three main characters come closest to Zola's title for the novel—Jeff Warren, Carl Buckley or Vicki Buckley?

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