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THE MILIEU OF THE PRISONER-OF-WAR CAMP IN *LA GRANDE ILLUSION*

MELANIE CONROY

JEAN Renoir set his great film, *La Grande Illusion* (1937), in the relatively comfortable milieu of the German prisoner-of-war camp for officers of the First World War (*Offizierlager*). Renoir's decision to set the film in the camps for officers – rather than the camps for enlisted men (*Mannschaftslager*) – is responsible for many of the film's themes. Unlike the contemporary prisoner-of-war camps for enlisted men, these officers' camps were fairly well regulated and respectful of the rights of captured soldiers. The *Offizierlager* housed only officers, a population that was disproportionately well educated and even aristocratic. As in the film, these camps were often established in fortresses, walled areas, and even walled cities, anywhere that large numbers of men could be comfortably housed while being denied freedom of movement. Many of the themes of the film derive directly from aspects of these camps: the elitism, cosmopolitanism, military honor, and personal pride of many of the officers, especially the German Junker von Rauffenstein and the noble captain de Boëldieu, whose relationship stands at the center of the film.

La Grande Illusion has often been read as an allegory of European decline. According to this reading, the German von Rauffenstein and the captain de Boëldieu represent different aspects of the traditional nobility, or of European tradition. The film stages a confrontation between two types of aristocracy: the Germanic "blood and soil" aristocracy and the more inclusive French model. While this allegorical reading is valid, it fails to uncover much of what Renoir seeks to occlude in the film – that is, the shared socio-economic privilege of the officer class. Through deft use of editing and montage, Renoir creates a sense of continuity between the various camps, particularly in the long series of dissolve shots that appear to be taken from the perspective of the prisoners on the train that takes them from one camp to

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another. Whereas the *Offizierlager* was a very specialized milieu, divided off from the rest of the war and even other prisoner-of-war camps, it appears in *La Grande Illusion* as the whole of the space of war. The *Offizierlager* stands in metonymically for a new possible Europe, but this is an imaginary version of Europe built on the socio-economic and legal privileges accorded to the officer class. Paying attention to the spaces that the film occupies – rather than simply the characters – reveals the ways in which filmic milieu and the illusions of realism can create a false sense of continuity between discontinuous experiences.

La Grande Illusion is not a film about the mechanics of escaping from a prison camp; it is a film about the social experience within the camp. The milieu of the prisoner-of-war camp is highly developed through diverse character studies in *La Grande Illusion*. There are characters representing the lower classes, the upper classes, and the bourgeoisie, with enough individual variation to produce the illusion of a real society. Yet the characters are not atomized individuals; they change and articulate their perspectives in relation to one another. The status of characters in the film is marked by their speech, dress, and manners. The aristocratic de Boëldieu wears a fur coat and a monocle that contrasts comically with Maréchal's sailor-like peacoat. They do not, however, have spaces that they are able to personalize.

Von Rauffenstein is the physical and spiritual manifestation of the German *Kulturkrieg*: imperious, honorable, and magnanimous. "The First World War was a *Kulturkrieg*," writes Wolfgang Iser, "not only in the rhetoric of cultural superiority professed by German chauvinists, but also in the sense that the cultural sphere was an essential component that was instrumentalized for the war effort" (205). Only von Rauffenstein, the highest-status character in the film, has an elaborately decorated room that gestures at his personality and cultural background. His room in Wintersborn, adorned with images of the Kaiser and medieval artifacts, reflects his immersion in a martial aristocratic culture. He is not culturally French or even Francophile, despite his many attempts to appear so in the company of de Boëldieu and the other French officers. He is a German Junker to the core, but with the ability to masquerade as a Francophile in a French cultural context, such as the famed Parisian restaurant Maxime's where he has passed elegant soirées. Erick von Stronheim's portrayal of the character reveals how pre-possessed and self-certain von Rauffenstein is in his cultural mimicry (despite the actor's having forgot his native German while working in Hollywood).

A VERY COMFORTABLE WAR FILM

The relative comfort of the milieu of *La Grande Illusion* is apparent in comparison to the historical record. “The atmosphere of upper-class decorum and respect,” writes Graham Cairns, “belies the horrors and madness of World War I that had long been captured on film” (22). The battlefield, especially the trenches, was arguably the most de-humanizing space of war: artillery warfare, poison gas attacks, and the first use of the machine gun marked the First World War as barbaric and inhuman, producing maladies like shell shock and blistered lungs. “The effects of hunger, homesickness, exhaustion and continual danger were exacerbated by the apparent purposelessness of combat,” writes Alexander Watson; “[t]he difficulty of keeping men motivated in such conditions was a primary concern of all armies fighting on the Western Front” (22).

La Grande Illusion also contrasts with earlier films about the First World War, which centered on the battlefield and the relentless bloodshed of a worldwide war of attrition. Abel Gance’s 1918 classic *J’accuse*, like other films focused on combat, is an odd mixture of patriotic and anti-war currents that is more explicit than later films like *La Grande Illusion*. Gance’s expressionist anti-war masterpiece staged the resurrection of dead troops from the battlefield in a scene that has been read as a condemnation of war through religious discourse. As Jay Winter writes, “At the very end of the 1914-18 conflict, Gance’s film brought to the cinema a vision of war in which the dead were central figures” (17). Gance’s film was controversial – with its harsh, expressionistic depictions of death on the battlefield and jarring incorporation of newsreel footage – yet it spoke to the general perception of the battlefield as a space of barbaric mayhem. For Laurent Véray, *J’accuse* reflects “toutes les contradictions de la société française victorieuse, mêlant patriotisme et volonté pacifique, sur fond d’extrême culpabilité des vivants au regard des pertes énormes” (175).

The power of Gance’s polemical film sheds light on Renoir’s choice to avoid the dark, nihilistic space of the battlefield – a space where the threat of violence is ever present and the subtleties of human relationships are illegible. For Alexander Sesonske, this distance from the battlefield frees the film from the clichés of the war film: “war films make their plea by providing a surfeit of the horrors of war; Renoir’s does not. Nor does he win our allegiance to peace by grasping our attention with thrilling combat scenes” (213). By comparison with the battlefield, the prisoner-of-war camps are safe and welcoming. It is notable that *La Grande Illusion* takes place in nearly



Figure 1. *J'accuse* (1919), Abel Gance.

every space associated with the First World War except the battlefield: camps, train cars, fields, small towns, train stations, and borderlands. The only mentions of violence in the film are a few descriptions of battles reported through the news bulletins and discussion of escapees who were shot after breaching the perimeter. In Renoir's version of the First World War, the battlefield only exists as a place to which men talk about returning.

THE MILIEU OF THE PRISONER-OF-WAR CAMP

The prisoner-of-war camps, especially the camps for officers, were relatively humanizing sites in which real human relationships could form, even between captive and captor – as they do between the French officers and their jailors, particularly the French-speaking Arthur and von Rauffenstein. There are legal reasons for the camps to be so humane. The Hague Convention IV, signed on October 18, 1907 and entered into force on January 26,

1910, guaranteed the humane treatment of prisoners of war. The “Convention Respecting the Laws and Customs of War on Land” affirmed that that “Prisoners of war [. . .] must be humanely treated.” The spaces in which prisoners were interned, “whether town, fortress, camp, or other place,” could be enclosed, but prisoners of war could not be held continuously, for example, in solitary confinement (II, Art. 5). Past escapees could not be punished if they were successful (II, Art. 8), a law of which the prisoners in *La Grande Illusion* are well aware. All prisoners were to be treated decently – that is, as the German army treated its own men: “In the absence of a special agreement between the belligerents, prisoners of war shall be treated as regards board, lodging, and clothing on the same footing as the troops of the Government who captured them” (II, Art. 7). Prisoners, including past escapees, were protected by international law.

As envisioned in the treaty, the essence of the milieu of the *Offizierlager* in *La Grande Illusion* is mutual respect between captor and captive. In the second scene of the film, von Rauffenstein tells his men to investigate a plane that he has shot down (his first) and, if the pilots are officers, to invite them to lunch. The French pilots – the aristocrat de Boëldieu and Maréchal, a mechanic – find much in common with the Germans, who have spent time in France and speak perfect French. Beyond this, the officers share so much simply because of their standing as officers. Many commonalities derive from their similar socioeconomic status before the war. In the first meal between the captured French prisoners and their German captors, de Boëldieu and Maréchal both encounter a German officer of a similar class, with comparable pre-war experiences. De Boëldieu finds that von Rauffenstein knows his cousin the comte de Boëldieu. Similarly, Maréchal meets a German mechanic who has been to his hometown of Lyon and declares “moi aussi, je suis dans la mécanique.” That meal, a convivial affair between French and Germans, is the first of many. From this one scene alone, we can see that the rarified milieu of the *Offizierlager* colors the interactions between the characters in subtle ways; it also structures the narrative itself by limiting the conflict between individuals. The scene ends with a moment of collective grief. The diners glimpse a wreath for the burial of the comte du Crussol, who has been shot down and killed. Von Rauffenstein declares “Je suis désolé de cette coïncidence” and all of the men observe a few seconds of silence, ritualistically honoring one of their fallen comrades. This meal sets the tone of aristocratic largesse that predominates in the *Offizierlager*, especially during their meals.



Figure 2. *La Grande Illusion* (1937), Jean Renoir.

This first dinner scene is also an excellent example of Renoir's use of long takes and deep field to create a single milieu occupied by multiple characters. At one point in the scene, de Boëldieu, von Rauffenstein, Maréchal, and the German mechanic are visible in one single shot (Figure 2). As Graham Cairns observes: "Using a series of long takes, the camera documents the room and the actions within it. Each man introduces himself and then, in preparation to sit for dinner, finds his seat in a subtle choreography that allows Renoir to dolly around the principal characters without ever cutting. In this way, the space remains strikingly – and ironically – continuous while completely unrelated sets of actions and conversations occur" (23). Despite social differences among the officers, this framing encourages the viewer to see them as members of a single class and a shared culture. It is through these cinematic techniques that Renoir creates a sense of solidarity within the prisoner-of-war camp.

The French officers hold more such meals, sharing the packages they receive from relatives in Paris. The first dinner of French officers alone is

held at Hallbach, the first prisoner-of-war camp shown in the film. Following the traditions of French sociability, the wealthy Rosenthal shares his bounty of high-end French products from “petits pois” to cognac with his fellow officers, echoing the behavior of the mythical *grand seigneur* who organized marvelous feasts under the Ancien Régime. It is fundamental that all of the officers participate in these meals and that the most “aristocratic” role is played by Rosenthal, a character who is not of aristocratic origin – all the officers are equal under the rules of the *Offizierlager*. The French officers amuse one another by playing exaggerated roles: for instance, de Boëldieu relishes his role as the aristocratic snob, or, as Cartier calls him, “le monocle,” pretending that he dislikes the other men. The vaudeville performer Cartier, played by Julien Carette, remarks, “Quel menu!” upon seeing the food on offer, exaggerating his role as the perpetually impressed *ingénu*. Although their roles are stereotypical and sharply delineated, the French characters share a tradition of conviviality that ties them together.

Despite their commonalities, much of the drama of the film comes from the minor socio-economic differences between characters. Cut off from regular contact with enlisted men, housed with their military equals, the occupants of the *Offizierlager* see their personal differences magnified. There is a constant tension between the Frenchmen’s sentiments of equality as officers and their natural sense of the hierarchy imposed by the larger French society. In a world where everyone is a military officer, the differences between a former mechanic like Maréchal and an aristocrat like de Boëldieu seem far greater, as do the differences between a German aristocrat like von Rauffenstein and a French one like de Boëldieu.

We can see the importance of subtle cultural differences most clearly in the comparison between von Rauffenstein and de Boëldieu. Von Rauffenstein sees himself as especially akin to de Boëldieu as a fellow aristocrat. Still, he offers special protection not only to de Boëldieu, but also to his French compatriots, subjecting them to French rather than German regulations. Both von Rauffenstein and de Boëldieu see that class-based special treatment, which has no official military or legal support, will not last beyond the First World War:

DE BOËLDIEU: Je crains que ni vous ni moi ne puissions arrêter la marche du temps.

VON RAUFFENSTEIN: Boëldieu, je ne sais pas qui va gagner cette guerre. La fin, quelle qu’elle soit, sera la fin des Boëldieu et des Rauffenstein.

DE BOËLDIEU: On n’a peut-être plus besoin de nous...

VON RAUFFENSTEIN: Et vous ne trouvez pas que c’est dommage?

DE BOËLDIEU: Peut-être...

Although the two aristocrats are preoccupied with questions of honor and the survival of their class, in the end, de Boëldieu gives his life to free his compatriots, regardless of their socio-economic background. He is motivated primarily by his duty as an officer. Likewise, von Rauffenstein is only willing to make minor life-style concessions to de Boëldieu and never considers freeing him or in any way betraying the oath of an officer of the German state. Even von Rauffenstein is an officer first and an aristocrat second.

THE IDEA OF "MILIEU"

La Grande Illusion presents a strong image of the *Offizierslager* as a unified space in which there are rules and a shared culture. Renoir does not seek to represent the experience of other-rank captives (that is, non-officers). "The deterioration in other-rank prison camp life in Germany in 1917 and 1918 is not depicted, apart from a brief scene with angry, hungry Russians," writes Heather Jones; "[t]he darker side of life for other-rank prisoners – harsh working conditions in the labour companies in the occupied territories, the factory, the mine, reprisal camps – is absent" (318). Within the camps, "Renoir labors," Rosemarie Scullion argues, "to negotiate differences and to strengthen the prisoners' mutual trust and sense of group belonging, despite the linguistic, national, regional, class, and ethno-religious differences that are forever threatening to fracture this community" (65).

Renoir does much to avoid a class-conscious film. The humanist nature of the film is tied to Renoir's holistic concept of the filmic milieu, in which characters, space, and society are intertwined. Milieu – which André Bazin first applied to the films of Renoir – allows the filmmaker to smooth over differences between individuals within the prison camps without destroying the illusion of their individuality. Renoir's humanism is expressed through his cinematic technique as much as through his themes. The idea of milieu conflates several techniques that Renoir used in order to create connections between his characters and the spaces they inhabit. Long shots, depth of field, and spaces that are used by multiple characters within the same scene normalize the idea of connection between characters. Bazin famously argued that Renoir's decision to shoot in Alsace, as close as possible to the German border, added to the realism of the film through the use of plausible exteriors as well as interiors that reveal outdoor scenes (for example, through windows) with minimal use of cutting. For Bazin, this use of real locations makes the psychological realism of the film more complete. Renoir makes a similar point about the interaction between place and character in an interview:

Everything surrounding the actor should be subordinated to the aim of bringing the audience in touch with a human being. The setting can make a large contribution, not by the illusion that it conveys to the beholder but by the influence it can have on the actor. This is particularly true in the case of outdoor shots. The audience only sees the scene, but for the actor it is another matter. (*Renoir on Renoir* 137)

Renoir makes the most of these locations, as Bazin argues, by using long takes, depth of field, and other techniques that create continuity between the real spaces visible on film; and scrupulous attention to the details of spaces further augments the believability of the fictional world. Still, it is notable that the milieu of *La Grande Illusion* does not rest alone on the purely realist techniques favored by Bazin; Renoir also incorporates fictional settings and almost avant-garde editing in key sequences. Milieu is doubtless related to the physical spaces inhabited by characters, but it is inflected with the social and psychological states of those characters who inhabit the fictional world.



Figure 3. Hallbach, a German Prisoner-of-War Camp in *La Grande Illusion*.

The first thing to note about the milieu of *La Grande Illusion* is that there is nothing materially objectionable about the prisoner-of-war camps. Two prisoner-of-war camps are depicted in *La Grande Illusion* (Hallbach and Wintersborn); four are named. There is a sameness to the various prisoner-of-war camps that suggests that they are all representative of the larger world. In both camps that we see, the prisoners are treated decently, circulate freely, receive packages from outside, and are even allowed to stage a vaudeville performance. They line up for a roll call in French, spend much of the day conversing freely; indeed, they have the physical freedom that they need to dig tunnels and plot their escape. In Hallbach, the first camp, they live according to German military law; in Wintersborn, they live according to French military law. In both cases, they are unhappy and seek to escape despite their pleasant situation in wartime.



Figure 4. German Prisoner-of-War Camp in *La Grande Illusion*.

The illusion of one unified milieu is created, above all, in a long sequence of dissolve shots that depicts the prisoners' transportation from one camp to the next. The shots begin with an exterior of Hallbach; they end with the sign for Wintersborn. In between, we see towns, train stations, signs for the camps of Alsheim and Sente, guards walking the trails, and fields, many of which are planted with crops. These images are almost all that we see of the external world in the first half of the film. The camera stands at eye-level and follows the movement of the train across the countryside from one camp to another, depicting the many sleepy stations and military outposts between the camps. The signs on the camps, visible from the train, read:

Kriegsgefangenen Lager N°17, Hallbach, offizierslager, C.K.VII.

Kriegsgefangenen Lager N°2, Alsheim, offizierslager, C.K.V.

Kriegsgefangenen Lager N°9, Sente, offizierslager, C.K.XI.

Kriegsgefangenen Lager N°14, Wintersborn, offizierslager, B.G.K.III.



Figure 5. The Sign for Hallbach.

The numbers and designation as *Offizierslager* add to the “effet de réel” of the voyage from one camp to the next. The series of dissolve shots adds to the effect of time passing, as one moment bleeds into the next, despite jumps in time that occur in the interstitial moments. The camera’s consistent position looking out at eye level from the train, the unchanging upbeat soundtrack, and the smooth dissolving of one shot into the next create the impression of a continuous and placid world. Through this long sequence, Renoir introduces the various camps as though they were real places; he also implies, through editing and camera placement, that they are interchangeable.

This inconspicuous scene – which links together two distinct parts of the film, and does not, therefore, particularly grab the spectator’s attention – is exemplary of Renoir’s filmmaking. By using the same techniques (e.g. tracking shot, dissolve, depth of field, etc.) throughout the sequence, he renders them almost invisible to the casual spectator. At the same time, he uses quick editing, which is not associated with Bazin’s milieu-forming techniques, to paper over the gaps in space between the camps, implying that the world of his film stands in for the rest of Europe at war. This is the contradiction at the heart of a representative art like Renoir’s cinema. As Karla Oeler argues, “realism in art can only be achieved in one way – through artifice. Every form of aesthetic must necessarily choose between what is worth preserving and what should be discarded, and what should not even be considered” (28). Through the creation of a milieu, realist cinema papers over the choices that were made in the depiction of that world. When cinema is highly effective in convincing the spectator of its representativeness, the techniques of creating the milieu are less apparent. The combination of expansive film techniques and details, such as the signs for individual camps, generates the illusion of an entire system of camps, of which we are seeing only two representative examples.

The illusion of this system of camps is so complete that many spectators would imagine that the camps were real sites, or at least the names of camps of the First World War. Nevertheless, all four of the camps mentioned by name in *La Grande Illusion* are fictional. Perhaps, the desire to create a realist geography pushes Renoir towards fictionalization and away from journalistic depiction because references to real camps might only serve to heighten inaccuracies in details. At any rate, three of the camps carry the names of real places in Germany, close to the German border with Lichtenstein: Hallbach, Alsheim and Winterborn, spelled Wintersborn in the film. A fourth, Sente, does not correspond to a named place in Germany.



Figure 6. Wintersborn, a German Prisoner-of-War Camp in *La Grande Illusion*.

Wintersborn is a fictional camp – probably intended to be located by the town of Winterborn near the Franco-German border. The exterior shots were in fact filmed at the Chateau du Haut-Koenigsbourg, a medieval German castle in Alsace, which was rebuilt thirty years before the filming by Wilhelm II (Le chateau du Haut-Koenigsbourg). The geography of the camps is convincing but illusory.

* * *

Through the metaphor of the castle transformed into a prison, Renoir suggests that the greatest destruction of the First World War was to the social glue of a shared European heritage. The old code of the cosmopolitan aristocracy, represented by von Rauffenstein, was dead; the end of the film suggests the possibility of forging a new working-class cosmopolitanism. The differences between these two codes are the explicit subject of the film. What are not thematized are the shared material circumstances of the cosmopolitan

aristocracy and the rest of the officer class. In *La Grande Illusion*, Renoir has made the crucial decision to set the action in the privileged space of the *Offizierslager* and used editing and dissolve shots to imply that the machinery of the prisoner-of-war camp was overall benign and even humane. This depiction of the prisoner-of-war camp was known to be false in the 1930s and it seems particularly false after the horrors of the camps of World War II. It was, however, a last effort on the part of a great humanist to present war as it could be, rather than as it was – that is, as a source of egalitarian energy and classless altruism.

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