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# Renoir's *La Grande Illusion* and the "Jewish Question"<sup>1</sup>

Maurice Samuels

As an *engagé* director in the 1930s, Jean Renoir put his art in service of his politics. In his autobiography he describes how his cinematic masterpiece *La Grande Illusion* (1937) was inspired by the antifascist struggle of the period: "Il me semblait que tout honnête homme se devait de combattre le nazisme. Je suis un faiseur de films, ma seule possibilité de prendre part à ce combat était un film. Je me leurrerais sur la puissance du cinéma. *La Grande Illusion*, malgré son succès, n'a pas arrêté la Deuxième Guerre mondiale."<sup>2</sup> Renoir's exalted hopes for *La Grande Illusion* derive from the film's espousal of a doctrine of universal brotherhood. Set in a series of German prison camps for army officers during the First World War, the film demonstrates the common bond linking humans across the artificial boundaries of nations. In its depiction of the friendship that develops between two French officers, one of whom is Jewish, the film also seems to point to race as another artificial barrier separating men, and hence to make an antifascist statement.

1. I would like to thank Margaret Flinn, Gerald Prince, Ronald Schechter and Susan Weiner for reading drafts of this essay and for their helpful comments. I am grateful for invitations to present this material at Harvard University, Loyola College and the Musée du Judaïsme in Paris. I am also grateful to the students in my "Jewish Identity and French Culture" seminar for their inspiring suggestions.

2. Jean Renoir, *Ma vie et mes films* (Paris, 1974), p. 113.

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Yet, just as the film's pacifist and antinationalist message may not strike all viewers as self-evident today, so too does *La Grande Illusion*'s representation of the Jew prove highly ambiguous. While the film seems to transcend the antisemitic ideology that was widespread in France during the 1930s by including the Jewish character within the symbolic national community formed by the French prisoners, it also endows the Jew with a range of negative characteristics reminiscent of antisemitic stereotypes. Although André Bazin and other critics have attempted to occult the "Jewish question" in their promotion of *La Grande Illusion* to canonical status, dismissing the antisemitic stereotyping as irrelevant to the film's larger message of unity and brotherhood, I suggest in what follows that the "Jewish question" provides a key to evaluating and interpreting the film. At stake here is not only the political reputation of this most canonical of French films and filmmakers, but also a fuller understanding of the film's artistic strategies—how it constructs meaning through the invocation and interrogation of received ideas about culture and ethnicity.

An analysis of the representation of the Jew in *La Grande Illusion* also raises larger questions about the reading of race in cinematic culture. By what standard should we evaluate the nature of a racial representation? Should works be judged against the norms of the period in which they were produced? Or are critics justified in viewing films through the lens of subsequent historical events and according to more recently evolved standards? How, moreover, does film as a medium create special conditions both for the representation of race and for its reception? *La Grande Illusion* provides a particularly telling case for exploring these vexed questions both because it has given rise to such vehement polemics over the years and because its images of the Jew are so complex.

### The Critical Controversy

Critics of *La Grande Illusion* have diverged on the "Jewish question." One of the few Renoir films that critics greeted favorably upon its initial release, *La Grande Illusion* garnered glowing reviews in 1937. Certain critics on the Right, wary of Renoir's leftist leanings, do fault the film for "quelques petites phrases assez naïves" and for a "sociologie un peu primaire," but they by and large overlook issues pertaining to Jewishness.<sup>3</sup> Critics for *Le Candide* and *Ce Soir* mention the presence of a Jewish

3. See Jean Barreyre's review in *Le Jour*, 10 June 1937.

character, but they do not describe the film as either pro or antisemitic.<sup>4</sup> Of course, critics may have overlooked the issue because the film's depiction of the Jewish character so confirmed their prejudices: we are, by definition, blind to our own ideology. To the critic for *Les Nouvelles Littéraires*, for example, all the characterizations in the film, including that of "le juif riche Rosenthal" seem "fort exactement typés."<sup>5</sup>

A controversy over the "Jewish question" erupted, however, when the film was rereleased shortly after the Second World War, in 1946. Writing first in the left-leaning *Le Franc tireur* and then in *L'Ecran français*, critic Georges Altman describes his sense of "malaise" watching the film a second time, a malaise that "malgré Renoir, malgré la beauté des images ou à cause d'elle se changeait en stupeur, en méfiance." Altman's discomfiture stems in part from the sympathetic treatment of the Germans in the film, a representation that the ovens of Auschwitz and Dachau have caused him to see in a new light. "Rien à faire," Altman writes; "Notre optique a été bouleversée, comme bien d'autres choses dans le monde." This postgenocide optic also causes the critic to reconsider the film's representation of the Jew: "Quand dans la *Grande Illusion* on nous présente sympathiquement certes, le soldat français Rosenthal, israélite, mais qu'on éprouve le besoin de spécifier, de souligner qu'il est juif, on pose tout doucement la question raciste dont l'apothéose est Auschwitz."<sup>6</sup> In rather hyperbolic rhetoric, Altman accuses Renoir's film of participating in a racist logic, of beginning down the road that leads to genocide, even while representing the Jew sympathetically.

Altman's reaction to the film's alleged antisemitism is all the more striking in that many of the references to Rosenthal's Jewishness had been edited out of the 1946 version of the film in an effort to avoid offending postwar sensibilities.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps because of these cuts, other critics at the time did not share Altman's perception. Amid a general critical and popular appreciation of the film, the critic for the left-leaning *Libération* takes special pains to defend *La Grande Illusion* against Altman's attacks, finding the charge of antisemitism to be "peu fondé" and pointing out that the

4. See Jean Fayard's review in *Le Candide*, 17 June 1937, and Pierre Bonnel's review in *Ce Soir*, 12 June 1937.

5. *Les Nouvelles Littéraires*, 1 June 1937.

6. *L'Ecran français*, 4 September 1946.

7. According to Bazin, the love scenes between Maréchal and the German woman, Elsa, were cut along with the references to Rosenthal's "race" for the 1946 version. André Bazin, *Jean Renoir*, ed. François Truffaut, trans. W. W. Halsey II and William H. Simon (New York, 1971), p. 60.

film's producer was "israélite," as was the censor who approved the edited version of the film for release.<sup>8</sup>

More striking, perhaps, is the opinion of those arch antisemites and collaborators, Maurice Bardèche and Robert Brasillach, which runs directly counter to Altman's. In their disturbing but often insightful *Histoire du cinéma* of 1948, Renoir occupies an ambiguous place as both a despised mouthpiece for the Popular Front and an accomplished cinematic artist.<sup>9</sup> When they come to *La Grande Illusion*, which they call the best French film of recent years, their enthusiasm for an acknowledged masterpiece is tempered by what they perceive as the director's *philo-semitism*:

On discuterait, ici et là, quelques points. Les personnages sont magnifiquement caractérisés, et le plus original est sûrement le Juif Rosenthal, courageux, serviable, intelligent, ironique, qui se bat, dit-il, pour consacrer les biens que sa famille a acquis par son ingéniosité. Céline y voit avec raison 'le bout de l'oreille', et le premier Juif que le Front Populaire ait osé nous montrer comme sympathique *en tant que Juif*. Ce qui est fort inquiétant.<sup>10</sup>

The collaborating critics praise certain aspects of Renoir's depiction of "le juif Rosenthal," approving especially of his admission of greed and acquisitiveness. They are disturbed, however, by the character's sympathetic qualities. Like their fellow antisemite Céline, whose murderous fantasies about Jewish conspiracy earned him a death sentence *in absentia* after the War, Bardèche and Brasillach see in Renoir an agent of the Popular Front, which is to say, of *le Juif Blum*.

Despite this criticism from the extreme Right, Renoir's film could not completely escape the charge of antisemitism when it was next released in 1958, once again to great acclaim. Writing in *Le Canard enchaîné*, Henry Magnan, while admiring the film overall, faults it for being "un rien patriotard, un rien ingénu et une brisouille antisémite."<sup>11</sup> In a later article for *Combat*, Magnan criticizes the stylization of the characters, referring to

8. *Libération*, 7 September 1946. The producers of *La Grande Illusion* were Frank Rollmer and Albert Pinkevitch.

9. The antisemitism of Bardèche and Brasillach gets the better of their critical faculties when, for example, they praise Veit Harlan's *Le Juif Süß* (1940) for the "frénésie vengeresse" of the crowd scene where the Jew is executed, which animates "la fin de l'oeuvre dans un crescendo presque joyeux auquel on ne saurait comparer que le crescendo des meilleurs films américains." *Histoire du cinéma* (Paris, 1948), p. 508.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 403.

11. *Le Canard enchaîné*, 10 August 1958.

"l'ennui des distinctions trop tranchées," and once again singles out the representation of Rosenthal, played by Marcel Dalio: "là où le bat me blesse davantage, c'est dans la peinture du Juif Rosenthal."<sup>12</sup> While regretting the depiction of Rosenthal as supremely rich, ostentatious and given to complaining (especially during the escape sequence, when the proletarian Frenchman played by Jean Gabin remains stoic), Magnan sees the danger not so much in the specificity of these stereotypes, but in the way the film substitutes cliché for characterization: "Pour moi, rien que le fait de lui donner quelques défauts bien définis équivaut à nous porter à généraliser et à les imputer à tous ses coreligionnaires."<sup>13</sup>

The "Jewish question" was foremost on André Bazin's mind when he wrote an important analysis of *La Grande Illusion* in *Radio cinéma télévision* in 1958. The legendary film critic begins his review by describing how the new version restored the scenes relating to Rosenthal's Jewishness that had been cut in 1946.<sup>14</sup> Bazin invokes Altman's charge of antisemitism right from the start of his article only to dismiss it as a misguided aftereffect of the War: "La sensibilité des lendemains de la Libération peut seule expliquer des jugements contraires à l'esprit du film [...] en 1946 le message de *La Grande Illusion* ne pouvait pas encore être bien entendu."<sup>15</sup> This message, according to Bazin, is a theme dear to Renoir, one that he frequently described in interviews, namely that "les hommes sont moins séparés par les barrières verticales du nationalisme que par le clivage horizontal des cultures, des races, des classes, des professions, etc." As described by Bazin, Renoir's theory that vertical divisions (of nationalism) matter less than horizontal ones (of race, class, culture), often referred to by later critics, implies that race does remain a fundamental division between men and thus might seem to contradict the *anti*-antisemitic "spirit" that Bazin attributes to the film. Nevertheless, Bazin sees any critical focus on race as a distraction from the film's message of universal brotherhood.

12. *Combat*, 18 October 1958

13. Magnan argues that because the film presents certain characters as "prototypes de la classe sociale (voire de la race) qu'ils sont censés représenter," it too blatantly asks its viewers to see Rosenthal, along with his defects, as emblematic of all Jews. "Enfin le physique huileux de Dalio n'arrange rien," he adds.

14. Renoir and his coscriptwriter Charles Spaak were able to reconstruct the film for its rerelease in 1958 based on a negative that had been seized by the Germans during the Occupation and recovered in Munich by the Americans after the War.

15. *Radio cinéma télévision*, 2 November 1958, pp. 53-60, 54. This article was collected, along with many of Bazin's other writings on Renoir, for the volume edited by Truffaut cited above.

Before moving on to an examination of the film itself, I want to touch briefly on another feature of Bazin's analysis, one that has become a staple of Renoir criticism. I am referring to Bazin's praise for Renoir's realism. Bazin locates this realism first in the plurality of languages spoken in the film (as opposed to the Hollywood custom of having different nationalities all speak the same language), in the "véracité" of the interactions among the characters, as well as in such technical features as the film's use of real exteriors and of depth-of-field photography. "C'est la multitude de ces inventions réalistes qui fait la solidité de l'étoffe de *La Grande Illusion* et qui, aujourd'hui lui conserve intact son brillant."<sup>16</sup> For Bazin, Renoir's realism not only guarantees the film's enduring importance—indeed, in 1958 the film had just been named by a Belgian film commission as one of the six greatest films of all time—but it also might be seen implicitly to guard against the criticism of Altman and Magnan. If the film is indeed a monument of realism, then charges of antisemitism are unfounded, for such realistic images as the film provides cannot possibly be accused of presenting the world through a biased "optic" or of being "regrettably stylized" as Magnan had put it. According to Bazin's logic, the film presents reality which, by its very nature, cannot be prejudiced.

In general, Bazin's view of the film has triumphed. Subsequent cinema scholars have discussed its treatment of the Jewish character in passing, but to my knowledge there has been no sustained analysis of the question of antisemitism in Renoir's *oeuvre*. And the question of antisemitism is indeed that—a question, one that we have seen depends, to some extent, on the perspective of individual viewers. In the following sections, I will present both sides of this question through a close and contextualized analysis of the film's depiction of the Jew. Although I will analyze the film through the lens of more recent theories of realism and race, I want to argue for a historical answer to the "Jewish question," one that would judge the film against other representations from its time and according to the *doxa* of the moment.<sup>17</sup> I will show how *La Grande Illusion* raises and tries to answer a series of questions about Jewishness and the nation, questions that circulated in various ways and through various discourses in France in the late 1930s. While the mere asking of these questions (Does the Jew belong in France? If so, on what terms?), regardless of the answers the film provides, may seem to our present-day eyes to implicate the film in an antisemitic logic, I will ultimately suggest that the film escapes from

16. Ibid., p. 58.

17. On the notion of the antisemitic *doxa* and of a "champ du dicible" in relation to Jews see Marc Angenot, *Ce que l'on dit des Juifs en 1889. Antisémisme et discours social* (Saint-Denis, 1989).



this logic by subtly undermining the exclusionary categories on which such a logic depends.

### Jews on Film

A first step in evaluating from a historical perspective the film's representation of the Jew would involve comparing it to other cinematic depictions of Jews from the time. Rémy Pithon's work on the image of the Jew in French cinema of the 1930s allows us to perceive the truly exceptional nature of Renoir's representation. Pithon describes how the first half of the 30s saw numerous depictions of Jews on the screen, mainly in a comic register.<sup>18</sup> Explicit references to Jews in French cinema nearly disappeared, however, during the second half of the decade. This disappearance is all the more striking in that the same period saw a vast increase in the vehemence of antisemitic rhetoric in the popular press.

The Stavisky Scandal of 1934, in which a Jewish businessman committed suicide after the revelation of his links with corrupt politicians, as well as the rise to power of the Popular Front government of Léon Blum, who became France's first Jewish prime minister in 1936, both provoked a torrent of antisemitic writing as well as actual physical violence. The Stavisky Scandal caused a right-wing riot outside the Chamber of Deputies in which 14 people were killed. Blum was attacked by a mob incited by the right-wing Action Française, just five months before becoming prime minister. To explain the sudden disappearance of the Jew from the French screen in the late 1930s, Pithon suggests that filmmakers may have feared fanning the flames of this violent antisemitism. He further hypothesizes that the heavy concentration of Jews in the Parisian cinema world—a concentration that increased in the late 30s as Jewish refugee producers and directors, such as Fritz Lang and Max Ophuls, flocked to France—led to greater reticence and caution.<sup>19</sup>

18. The best known examples include the four films by director André Hugon, about a family of Jewish merchants named Lévy, made between 1930 and 1936: *Lévy et Cie*, *Les Galeries Lévy et Cie*, *Moïse et Salomon parfumeurs*, and *Les Mariages de mademoiselle Lévy*. In these films, which showcase a range of antisemitic clichés, Charles Lamy and Léon Bélières play Jews with heavy Germanic accents. See Rémy Pithon, "Le Juif à l'écran en France vers la fin des années trente," *Vingtième siècle* 18 (1988): 89-99.

19. Pithon quotes the report of a French parliamentary commission on the cinema in 1936-37 by the deputy Georges Scapini, which denounced "Ceux qui encombrant le marché . . . toute une série de métèques invraisemblables, dont on ne sait pas d'où ils viennent." Renoir himself, in his response to a questionnaire in *Pour vous* (1 November 1939), would call attention to all the "producteurs en -ich ou en -zy" who dominated the Parisian milieu. A similar language would be echoed by the arch antisemite Lucien Rebatet in his



Pithon goes on to show, however, that despite the *explicit* disappearance of the Jew, several films of the period included characters marked by what he calls a “judéité vague.” In these films, characters had Jewish connotations even if they were not explicitly named as Jews, especially if the actors playing them had played Jews in the past.<sup>20</sup> Pithon’s prime example of a connotated actor is Marcel Dalio, who was known for playing shady “métèque” characters in such films as Julien Duvivier’s *Pépé le Moko* (1936) and Robert Siodmak’s *Cargaison blanche* (1937) as well as on stage.<sup>21</sup> Even if these characters were vaguely foreign rather than explicitly Jewish, Pithon argues that they had Jewish associations for the average viewer of the time.

Viewed in this context, *La Grande Illusion* stands out all the more strongly as one of the only films from the late 1930s to depict Jews explicitly and to confront head-on the question of their place within French society. According to Pithon, Renoir’s clear intention was to combat antisemitism with the representation of Rosenthal as a sympathetic Jew.<sup>22</sup> Whether or not he succeeded, however, Pithon leaves in doubt. By casting Dalio as Rosenthal, for example, Renoir may have compromised his intentions since audiences at the time would have perceived the actor as sinister because of his prior roles. And by depicting Rosenthal as supremely rich, Renoir played into popular prejudices against Jews. For Pithon, the lesson of *La Grande Illusion* is that “même si on cherche, dans les années

pamphlet of 1941, *Les Tribus du cinéma et du théâtre*, in which he railed against the presence in the film industry of “tous ces youtres en ‘sky,’ en ‘off,’ ou en ‘eff’ . . . des nomades vomis par les ghettos d’Orient.” Pithon, “Le Juif à l’écran,” pp. 92-93.

20. These connotations could include an affiliation with banking, as in Pierre Billon’s screen adaptation of Zola’s novel *L’Argent* (1936), where the banker Gundermann is named as Jewish in the book but not in the film. Or the Jewish connotation might derive from the presence in the film of an actor who had played Jewish characters in other films. In Jean-Paul Paulin’s *Trois de Saint-Cyr* (1939), for example, Léon Bélières’ portrayal of the banker Le Moyne might have read as Jewish, not only because of his profession but also because the average spectator would have recognized the actor from the Lévy films. Pithon, “Le Juif à l’écran,” p. 94.

21. Dalio would go on to play several more similar “foreigner” roles in French films before fleeing to Hollywood where, ironically, he would be typecast as a typical Frenchman during the War in such films as *Shanghai Gesture*, *Unholy Partner*, *Casablanca*, Darryl Zanuck’s *Wilson*, where he played Clemenceau (!), and in several films about the French Resistance. After the War, he continued to play stereotypical Frenchmen in many more films, including *On the Riviera* and *Sabrina*, before ending his career playing the rabbi in Gérard Oury’s madcap *Les Aventures du Rabbi Jacob*.

22. Rémy Pithon, “L’image du Juif dans le cinéma français des années trente” in *Cinéma et judéité*, ed. Annie Goldmann and Guy Hennebelle (Paris, 1986), p. 140.

30, avec les meilleures intentions du monde, à donner du Juif une image sympathique, on ne peut s'empêcher de retomber dans les stéréotypes."<sup>23</sup>

But is antisemitism really so inescapable an ideology? And is the film really so blind to its effects? To absolve the film of antisemitism in this manner is to view it, in a sense, as a failure. In my analysis which follows, I point to the highly elaborate and even self-conscious nature of the film's portrayal of Jewishness. Rather than view the depiction of the Jew as the film's blindspot, I show it to be, in spite of Bazin's analysis, one of the "optics" through which its meaning can be seen most clearly.

### Profiling the Jew

The debate over the film's antisemitism turns on the issue of stereotypes, the most obvious of which is Rosenthal's extreme wealth. The recipient of packages from home loaded with expensive foodstuffs while a prisoner of war, Rosenthal is introduced as a figure of ostentatious privilege. Presiding over a table set up in the prison dormitory, he doles out delicacies from fancy Parisian restaurants to his fellow officers, including the new arrivals, the aristocratic de Boieldieu (Pierre Fresney) and the proletarian Maréchal (Jean Gabin). The men accept "les gentilleses de Rosenthal" with an appreciation not untinged by resentment. "Je n'ai jamais si bien mangé de ma vie," states one officer, but Maréchal declares that he prefers bistrot fare to the gastronomic luxuries of Maxim's and Fouquet's. As numerous critics have pointed out, Rosenthal's display of alimentary largesse quickly becomes a pretext for the portrayal of class difference among the French officers, another of the film's themes that has aroused much critical debate.<sup>24</sup> Maréchal, a mechanic who has risen through the ranks, emerges as spokesman for traditional French values of simplicity and thrift, values clearly opposed to Rosenthal's expensive tastes.

In the scene following the lunch sequence at which Rosenthal shares his packages ("colis") from home, Maréchal and the engineer (Gaston Modot) discuss their fellow prisoners. While the engineer wonders about de Boieldieu's trustworthiness (they refer to him as "le monocle," mocking his affected eyepiece), Maréchal inquires about Rosenthal's wealth. "Il doit

23. Ibid., p. 141.

24. Scenes of eating often serve an important function in Renoir's films. See, for example, Raphaëlle Moine, "Nourritures de Jean Renoir" in *Nouvelles Approches de l'oeuvre de Jean Renoir*, ed. Frank Curot (Montpellier, 1996), p. 134. I would note that it is during the servant's dinner scene in *La Règle du jeu* that the Marquis's Jewish origins are revealed.

être à son aise,” Maréchal states, inviting elaboration.<sup>25</sup> The engineer proceeds to explain that Rosenthal’s family are “les grands banquiers Rosenthal,” while Rosenthal himself runs a “grande maison de couture.” He is thus linked to not one but two professions stereotyped as Jewish in 1930s France.

As the son of a “grand banquier” he would seem to belong to that financial aristocracy that had been associated with Jews in France since the early nineteenth century, when such families as the Rothschilds, Foulds and Péreires presided over France’s incipient industrialization.<sup>26</sup> “Les grands banquiers” formed the pinnacle of French Jewish society and consisted mostly of Jews whose presence in France already stretched back several generations by the First World War. Yet, as we discover later, Rosenthal’s father is an immigrant from Poland, and thus not the type of Jew who would have been likely to possess the capital or connections to penetrate this select coterie. Something is not quite “realistic” in this characterization.

As the son of a Polish immigrant, himself born in Vienna, Rosenthal would have been far more likely to engage in the clothing business, which carried different class associations. According to Paula Hyman, while some assimilated native-born French Jews were engaged in the garment industry on the eve of the First World War, this business was dominated by the poor, Yiddish speaking, unacculturated immigrants from Eastern Europe.<sup>27</sup> As the son of a “grand banquier,” Rosenthal’s chosen profession in the garment industry would thus represent a surprising *déclassement*, one that is more easily explained, I would suggest, by the film’s desire for ethnic stereotyping than by a concern for sociological accuracy. Even admitting that as the owner of a “grande maison de couture” Rosenthal might have artistic or creative ambitions that would elevate him above the level of mere commerce (although no such ambitions are mentioned in the film), there is something not quite realistic in the mix of Rosenthal’s family origins and *métier*. Indeed, the film seems to associate him with two stereotyped and relatively incongruous professions as a means of

25. The humor of this comment derives from the fact that Maréchal, who is having his feet washed by the engineer because of his wounded arm, is in no position to comment on the pampering enjoyed by another, but this irony escapes his interlocutor.

26. Paula Hyman cites statistics indicating that as many as one-third of Paris bankers were Jews on the eve of World War I. See Paula Hyman, *From Dreyfus to Vichy: The Remaking of French Jewry, 1906-1939* (New York, 1979), p. 47.

27. Hyman estimates that one-third to more than one-half of the Jewish immigrants who arrived in France in the two decades before World War I worked in clothing manufacturing and trade. *The Jews of Modern France* (Berkeley, 1998), p. 120.

reinforcing the Jewishness of the character. Rosenthal's role as garmenter, it should be noted, serves a specific function as the plot unfolds, for it is his Parisian *maison de couture* that provides the officers with the case of women's dresses they will wear in their theatrical performance later in the film. (The association with female fashion might also serve to feminize his character, which I will comment on below.) But if Rosenthal's profession as *couturier* is narratively necessary, his banking background is stereotypically necessary, since the association of Jews and finance had such deep roots in French culture.<sup>28</sup>

I should note that Rosenthal is not explicitly named as a Jew in the early scenes of the film. The words "Juif" and "Israélite" are not mentioned even as Rosenthal's character comes to embody an increasing number of antisemitic clichés. Instead, his heavily coded name serves as substitute for any overt reference to his ethnic identity. The film lays particular stress on the name "Rosenthal" right from the start, in the first scene set in the POW camp when the Germans distribute packages to the French officers. The accentuating of the Jewish name, with its Germanic tonalities, implicitly links the Jew with the enemy and stands in contrast to the film's treatment of the names of the other French officers. With the exception of Maréchal and de Boieldieu, these "French" names are passed over quickly or not mentioned at all.

The name "Rosenthal," constantly repeated by the various characters who discuss his wealth, ostentation and banking connections, comes to serve as a substitute for the word "Jew," which the film withholds. The word "Jew," then, remains an absent but over-determined signifier in the first half of the film, standing for an accumulation of attributes, while the name "Rosenthal" functions as what psychoanalysis would call a fetish, a site where knowledge about these attributes is at once displayed and repressed. Like all over-determined figures, the word "Jew" becomes so laden with meaning that its eventual manifestation late in the film, when hurled as an insult by Maréchal, contains all the impact of the return of the repressed. By continually circling around the "Jewish question" without naming it specifically, moreover, the film seeks to create a kind of complicity with the viewer over the tacit recognition of Rosenthal's difference. This complicity implicates the viewer in an antisemitic logic, a logic of exclusion, that the film will later seek to overcome both by explicitly thematizing the inclusion of the Jew within the symbolic nation formed by Maréchal and by undermining the category of race itself.

28. Hyman describes how the role of Jewish bankers, and especially that of the Rothschilds, was "greatly inflated by antisemitic opinion, which saw the development of finance and industrial capitalism as a Jewish plot." *Ibid.*, p. 93.

Throughout the first half of the film, however, both the other officers and Rosenthal himself engage in a game of circumlocution that insists on pointing to an identity that nevertheless remains unspecified. The absence of the word “Jew” is felt in the oddness of the dialogue, characterized by apparent non sequiturs. An example of this pattern occurs in the scene in which the officers take a break from digging a tunnel to discuss their reasons for wanting to escape the German camp. Maréchal states in characteristically unselfish terms that he wants to rejoin the war effort and prevent others from dying. For de Boieldieu, a camp is to be escaped from just as a tennis court is to be played on. The aristocrat then asks: “Et vous, Rosenthal? Vous qui êtes un sportif?”<sup>29</sup> This unmotivated reference to Rosenthal’s athletic prowess (nothing thus far indicates that Rosenthal is athletic, although we later learn that he hunts) gives way to an antisemitic slur, when the actor (Julien Carette) chimes in: “Il est né à Jérusalem.” Through the metonymical association of Jews with Jerusalem, the actor moves a step closer to literalization, to naming Rosenthal’s Jewishness as such. He also thereby calls into doubt Rosenthal’s patriotism and courage by implying that since he was “born in Jerusalem,” Rosenthal is not really French and thus cannot really want to return to a country that is not his own.

Rosenthal’s deadpan answer to both the actor and the aristocrat about where he was born at once acknowledges the hidden subtext of the dialogue and perpetuates the game of circumlocution. “Non, à Vienne,” he responds, “d’une mère danoise et d’un père polonais naturalisé français.” The humor of Rosenthal’s response derives from the fact that even while denying that he is from Jerusalem, he all the more emphasizes that he is Jewish by referring to his cosmopolitan, partly Eastern European, and hence highly coded, parentage.<sup>30</sup> “Vieille noblesse bretonne,” adds Maréchal, showing that he too can joke about Rosenthal’s Jewishness, this time by naming a seeming opposite. But Rosenthal has the last laugh: “C’est possible,” he declares, and then abruptly shifts registers, putting an

29. Certain (paranoid?) ears might hear in the seemingly nonsensical “sportif” a rhymed displacement for the repressed word “Juif.”

30. If the Polish origins of the father seem calculated to identify Rosenthal even more strongly with (a particular brand of immigrant) Jewish stereotype, the reference to the Danish mother is more difficult to parse. While there were about 8,000 Jews in Denmark on the eve of the Second World War, this was one of the smallest Jewish communities in Europe and Jews made up less than 0.2 percent of the Danish population. It seems possible that through the Danish reference the film means to imply that Rosenthal is only half Jewish. At no other point in the film, however, is Rosenthal’s Jewishness seen as less than total. I would also point out, though, that in Renoir’s later film, *La Règle du jeu* (1939), the eccentric Marquis played by Dalio is half Jewish.

end to the series of displacements. Speaking as the *parvenu* immigrant he is, although still stopping short of owning his Jewishness specifically, he accuses the other officers, "français de vieille souche," of not possessing a hundred square meters of their country while the Rosenthals in thirty-five years of residence in France have acquired three castles along with their hunting grounds and picture galleries of "authentic" ancestors. All of that, he concludes, is certainly worth fighting for. De Boieldieu comments, bemused, that the question of patriotism viewed in that manner is certainly very unique.

Rosenthal's speech provides the cornerstone of the case that would impute antisemitism to the film. Not only is he ostentatiously wealthy and involved in the stereotypically Jewish professions of banking and fashion, but, freshly arrived in France, his family has used its wealth to lay hold of the French *patrimoine*. This reference to the Rosenthals' rapaciousness calls to mind the viciously antisemitic diatribes of Édouard Drumont, who in his bestselling *La France juive* (1886) had denounced what he saw as a Jewish takeover of the nation.<sup>31</sup> Not content with the three castles and their hunting grounds, Rosenthal hints at an even more threatening possession, the future assimilation of his family into the very aristocracy they have displaced through the appropriation of their portraits. Although the word "Jew" has still not been spoken, the character of Rosenthal has come to embody a series of threatening antisemitic stereotypes. His very brazenness and unapologetic boast, in spite of his *bonhomie*, seem calculated to arouse the worst fears of French audiences in the late 1930s, who were all the more alert to the threat of Jews taking over France following the rise to power of Léon Blum.

Renoir buffs will recognize in the reference to Rosenthal's *châteaux* and aristocratic ancestors an intertextual anticipation of Renoir's later film *La Règle du jeu* (1939), in which the same actor who plays Rosenthal, Marcel Dalio, plays an eccentric marquis, Robert de La Chesnaye, who invites guests for a hunting party on his estate. In *La Règle du jeu* we discover, through some servant gossip, that the marquis's family tree contains a Rosenthal, as if to signal that the threat of aristocratic assimilation alluded to in *La Grande Illusion* has come to pass. In his autobiography, the Jewish Dalio describes the daring of Renoir's casting him against type in *La Règle du jeu*, as well as his own nervousness at the challenge of playing an aristocrat, in terms that recall Rosenthal's speech in *La Grande Illusion*:

31. The fear of Jews "taking over" France stretches farther back into the nineteenth century, at least to the Fourierist Alphonse Toussenel, who in *Les Juifs, rois de l'époque* (1845) made similar pronouncements, although his definition of "the Jew" seems to include anyone who engaged in financial manipulations, including and especially Protestants.



"Me voici donc, moi, Marcel Blauschild, dit Dalio, en instance de départ pour la Sologne où je vais devenir le marquis Robert de La Chesnaye et prendre possession de 'La Colinière', château de mes ancêtres."<sup>32</sup> While in retrospect Dalio's performance as La Chesnaye seems of the utmost brilliance, the actor's outsider status lending the character a remarkable poignancy, Renoir's doubts at the time led to the reference to the marquis's Jewish ancestry, which, we learn from Dalio, was a late addition to the script: "Avec moi, il [Renoir] avait besoin d'être rassuré, d'être sûr qu'il ne se trompait pas, de pouvoir justifier le marquis de La Chesnaye sous mes traits de Levantin. Dans le doute, il ajouta une scène au cours de laquelle on apprend par la bouche du personnel que je suis à moitié juif."<sup>33</sup>

Unlike *La Grande Illusion*, *La Règle du jeu* was not well received by audiences or critics at the time of its release. And the peculiarly Jewish marquis posed a particular problem. According to a critic in *Les Annales*: "Le choix des acteurs aggrave encore l'étrangeté de l'entreprise. M. Dalio interprète le rôle du marquis; pour camper un nobliau de terroir, on est allé prendre le petit officier israélite de la *Grande illusion*!"<sup>34</sup> Even if the reference to an ancestor named Rosenthal did not immediately call to mind the Jewish character in *La Grande Illusion* for viewers of the later film, Dalio's presence in both films makes the Jewish connection between them inescapable. Indeed, the presence of this highly connotated actor did not go unremarked by Bardèche and Brasillach who, writing in *L'Action française*, see in the later film, "Un Dalio étonnant, plus juif que jamais, à la fois attirant et sordide."<sup>35</sup> The antisemitic critics carry a mimetic or realist reading of cinema to an extreme, refusing to see the actor as playing a character or the film as a fiction. For Bardèche and Brasillach, the presence of Dalio makes *La Règle du jeu* a film not about the aristocracy at all, but the Jew's inescapable foreignness: "Une autre odeur monte en lui du fond des âges, une autre race qui ne chasse pas, qui n'a pas de château, pour qui la Sologne n'est rien et qui regarde. Jamais peut-être l'étrangeté du juif n'avait été aussi fortement, aussi brutalement montrée."<sup>36</sup> For these critics, it is the threat of the Jew taking over the patrimony of France, a threat alluded to in *La Grande Illusion* and carried out in *La Règle du Jeu*, that provokes hostility. Even if Renoir raised this

32. Marcel Dalio, *Mes Années folles*, récit recueilli par Jean-Pierre Lucovich (Paris, 1976), p. 127.

33. Ibid., pp. 128-29.

34. Cited in ibid., pp. 131-32.

35. Cited in ibid., p. 132.

36. Ibid.



threat in order to defuse it, as I will suggest below, he nevertheless played into existing passions and prejudices.

If Rosenthal's boasts about his acquisitiveness provide rather obvious fodder for critics intent on seeing *La Grande Illusion* as antisemitic, closer inspection reveals more subtle, and perhaps for that reason more troubling, ethnic stereotyping. In *The Jew's Body* Sander Gilman describes how a tradition of antisemitic discourse stretching back to the nineteenth century in France and Germany purported to read racial difference as a series of physical signs. "In the world of nineteenth-century medicine, this difference becomes labeled as the 'pathological' or 'pathogenic' qualities of the Jewish body."<sup>37</sup> In *La Grande Illusion* Rosenthal bears many of these Jewish stigmata. Gilman devotes a chapter to what he calls "The Jewish Disease," syphilis, a sickness that had begun to be perceived as a crisis in Germany by the 1920s and 30s, but had already been viewed as a national catastrophe by the French a half century before, where it originally had aristocratic and intellectual associations. According to Gilman, the deadly qualities of syphilis eventually became associated in the mindset of the period with the Jew,<sup>38</sup> a link underscored in *La Grande Illusion*. During a conversation among the prisoners about the nature of infectious disease, Rosenthal announces that he contracted "la vérole" from a society friend of his mother. ("Tout se démocratise," de Boieldieu comments snidely.)

Gilman devotes another chapter to the Jew's supposedly deformed feet, which represented another sign of inferiority for both German and French antisemites. The idea that the Jew's feet bear a resemblance to the cloven foot of the devil can be traced back to the Middle Ages,<sup>39</sup> but in France this association received renewed emphasis during the Dreyfus Affair in the 1890s, when antisemitic caricaturists capitalized on the alleged traitor's name, depicting him as a three-toed demon. According to Gilman, the pathognomonic foot of the Jew, now diagnosed as flat rather than cloven, took on a new significance in the nineteenth century when it seemed to exclude the Jew from military service, and hence from citizenship in the nation state. Moreover, the condition of intermittent claudication (a limping produced by insufficient blood flow to the outer extremities), identified first

37. Sander Gilman, *The Jew's Body* (New York, 1991), p. 39.

38. *Ibid.*, p. 219.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 39.

by Jean-Martin Charcot, the French founder of modern psychiatry, also came to be considered a Jewish nervous disorder.<sup>40</sup>

The limp that Rosenthal develops while fleeing with Maréchal through the German countryside taps into these stereotypes. The product of an injury rather than a congenital weakness or nervous symptom—the film shows the moment when Rosenthal hurts himself in closeup, as if to guard against these other explanations—the Jew’s lame foot nevertheless acts an impediment (so to speak) to his escape, and hence to the accomplishment of his military duties. It risks jeopardizing his life and that of his comrade, who must stop to help him. The Jew’s clumsiness—Maréchal will later call him “maladroit”—partakes in stereotypical notions about the Jewish body, highlighting to what extent de Boieldieu’s attribution of athleticism to Rosenthal was ironic. At home neither in his own body nor in nature, Rosenthal once again contrasts unfavorably with Maréchal, the physically and morally healthy Frenchman.

Here the contrast is instructive, for while Maréchal grew up in the inner city—he refers proudly to his origins in the proletarian 20<sup>th</sup> arrondissement of Paris—he is nevertheless able to establish an immediate bond with the cow of Elsa (Dita Parlo), the German woman who shelters the two escaping Frenchmen while they wait for Rosenthal’s foot to heal. “Tu sens comme les vaches de mon grand père,” Maréchal tells the cow, revealing a connection with the soil, a bond all the more “natural” because it is shown to be hereditary. While hiding out on the farm, Maréchal is continually shown stretching in the out-of-doors, looking out at the rolling hills, whereas Rosenthal remains confined by domestic space on account of his injury. Whereas Maréchal is filmed against deep-focus landscapes suggesting an affinity with nature, Rosenthal is continually framed or bounded by windows and doors, a sign of his association with culture. While Maréchal engages in rustic farm occupations, Rosenthal occupies himself by teaching the German woman’s daughter to count, in German. Stereotypical ethnic divisions of labor thus find their echo in these scenes as both men revert to their ancestral occupations: Maréchal returns to his peasant roots while Rosenthal exercises his innate talent for the calculation associated with banking.

Rosenthal displays other deficiencies as well. Reduced to the role of interpreter between Maréchal and Elsa, he watches passively as their

40. Ibid., pp. 54-57. Also see Jan Goldstein, “The Wandering Jew and the Problem of Psychiatric Anti-Semitism in Fin-de-Siècle France” *Journal of Contemporary History* 20 (1985): 541. Goldstein describes how one of Charcot’s disciples, Meige, would draw on case studies of a number of Jewish patients who had fled to France from Eastern Europe, often on foot, to diagnose what he referred to as a “Jewish Wandering Disease.”

mutual attraction turns into a love affair. The feminization of Rosenthal's character, already hinted at through his association with female fashion, is even more accentuated during the scenes on the German farm, when his virility suffers further compromise. As Gilman points out, antisemitic discourse represented male Jews as both overly libidinous and castrated (circumcision was often associated with castration in the popular mindset).<sup>41</sup> Rosenthal's injured foot might thus symbolize a kind of symbolic castration, an exclusion of the Jew from the erotic triangle, allowing the two blonde, blue-eyed Christians of different nationalities to consummate what the film presents as a natural bond between them.<sup>42</sup>

Of all the elements of the Jewish body marked by antisemitic discourse, however, the nose stands out as the most visible and identifiable. As Linda Nochlin has shown, "exaggeratedly hooked noses" became a common symbol for Jews in late nineteenth-century French visual culture. In Degas' painting of the Jewish financier Ernest May, entitled *At the Bourse* (ca. 1879), for instance, the banker's curved nose, on which a pair of eye-glasses perch, the better to read what is perhaps a secret stock tip, serves to focus the viewer's gaze on a possibly illegal transaction. Nochlin argues that the semitic nose became such a common symbol for designating Jews, and by extension a range of unsavory occupations associated with Jews, that even Jewish artists such as Camille Pissarro used it as a shorthand to designate capitalist exploitation.<sup>43</sup> *La Grande Illusion* makes much of Rosenthal's nose, or rather, of Marcel Dalio's. Renoir (and his director of photography Christian Matras) film Gabin and Dalio differently, the former often facing the camera and the latter in profile, his aquiline appendage given full prominence.<sup>44</sup> Dalio's silhouette becomes all the more marked in the scenes when Rosenthal's "race" is at issue, such as when he describes the Jewish tendency toward pride from behind and slightly to the right of Gabin, who faces the camera head-on. The

41. Gilman writes, "Central to the definition of the Jew—here to be understood always as the 'male' Jew—is the image of the male Jew's circumcised penis as impaired, damaged, or incomplete and therefore threatening," *The Jew's Body*, p. 96.

42. The emasculation of the Jew is all the more striking in that an early treatment for the film, in which Maréchal escapes with a fellow Christian, has them share the affections of the German woman. See "An Early Treatment of *Grand Illusion*" in the appendix to Bazin's *Jean Renoir*, p. 181.

43. Linda Nochlin, "Degas and the Dreyfus Affair: A Portrait of the Artist as Antisemite" in Norman L. Kleeblatt, ed. *The Dreyfus Affair: Art, Truth, Justice* (Berkeley, 1987), pp. 96-116. On the Jewish nose also see Gilman, *The Jew's Body*, chap. 7.

44. Pithon makes a similar point: "on le filme souvent autrement que les autres personnages," *Le Juif à l'écran*, p. 97. He also suggests that Dalio was typecast "du point de vue de la silhouette," p. 97.

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accentuation of this feature underscores the way the film indulges in Jewish stereotypes with explicitly negative connotations.<sup>45</sup>

### Defending the Film

Defending the film against charges of antisemitism would involve showing that the characterization of Rosenthal, while invoking a set of antisemitic stereotypes, is but one element in a much larger picture. First of all, one might point out that the film portrays all nationalities in clichéd terms: the English as plum-pudding eaters, the Russians as vodka drinkers, etc. . . . Each of the individual French officers, moreover, embodies a series of stereotypes characteristic of his class or profession. While most of these are less pejorative or threatening than the characteristics associated with the Jew, some might in fact be seen as worse. De Boieldieu's monocle, English cigarettes, and inability to say "tu" even to his wife and mother, for example, represent the typical trappings of the effete and painfully remote aristocrat.

Eventually de Boieldieu redeems himself by transcending his stereotype, confirming through his heroic gesture of self-sacrifice that the values associated with his class are doomed to extinction. Acting as a decoy and allowing himself to be shot so that Maréchal and Rosenthal can escape, de Boieldieu forges a link with his fellow officers that makes any criticism of his haughty manners seem trivial. So, too, does the film depict Rosenthal rising above the stereotype of Jewish acquisitiveness through generosity. Although he brags of his family's vast fortune, he shares his wealth by feeding his fellow officers. Indeed, the film endows Rosenthal with a series of positive qualities that earn him the esteem of his comrades as well as the sympathies of the viewer. When Maréchal returns from solitary confinement, the camera cuts to a close-up of Rosenthal's face, showing him wipe a tear away at the sight of his friend's haggard appearance.<sup>46</sup> As we have seen, moreover, Rosenthal is deeply patriotic and eagerly takes on the project of escape, displaying great personal

45. For François Garçon, this use of cliché is antisemitic and may betray a hidden or repressed antisemitism in Renoir himself. See Garçon, *De Blum à Pétain: cinéma et société française (1936-1944)* (Paris, 1984).

46. According to Daniel Serceau this moment counters the effect of the Jew's negative associations with wealth: "Dans *La Grande Illusion*, lorsque Marechal revient du cachot, Rosenthal ouvre tout de suite une boîte de conserves, tout en écrasant une larme. Ce plan, très court, sur un Marcel Dalio plus émouvant que jamais, en dit plus long et fait davantage pour la 'cause antiraciste' que de nombreux films proclamatoires." See Serceau, "A-t-on le droit de montrer un banquier juif au cinéma?" in *Cinéma et judéité*, ed. Annie Goldmann and Guy Hennebelle (Paris, 1986), p. 143.

courage. When von Rauffenstein (Erich von Stroheim), the aristocratic German commander of the second and supposedly escape-proof prisoner camp, makes a disparaging comment about Maréchal and Rosenthal, de Boieldieu defends his countrymen: "Ils sont de très bons soldats," he declares.

This affirmation of the Jew as soldier, in the mouth of an aristocratic career officer, had a particularly strong resonance in French culture in 1937. Since the time of the Napoleonic Wars, when a policy of mandatory Jewish conscription was instituted with the aim of "regenerating" a population seen as culturally unfit for soldiering, and by extension for citizenship in the new nation, French Jews had prided themselves on their military accomplishments.<sup>47</sup> By the mid-nineteenth century, Jews had become top ranking officers, but the Dreyfus Affair opened a rift between the Jews and the army that did not close easily.<sup>48</sup> Although the Jewish captain falsely accused of treason was eventually pardoned and rehabilitated into the army (Dreyfus served in the First World War and died in 1935, shortly before the filming of *La Grande Illusion*), many Jews felt that their military aptitude had been called into question. Perhaps as a result of a nagging insecurity, native-born Jews as well as immigrants supported the First World War enthusiastically, enlisting in large numbers. De Boieldieu's recognition of Rosenthal as a good soldier, and perhaps even more importantly, the lack of distinction made between him and Maréchal in regard to their soldiering skills, signals the film's acceptance of Jewish military virtue, its normalization of the Jewish soldier, a deeply felt issue for Jews at the time the film was set and when it was made.<sup>49</sup>

Returning to the comparison between Rosenthal and de Boieldieu, we recognize that although the Jewish character embodies a series of negatively connotated stereotypes, these deficiencies are perceived as less negative than those of the aristocrat. Whereas Rosenthal is genial and generous, de Boieldieu is distant, at times rude and snobbish, and earns the mistrust—even the dislike—of his fellow soldiers. Once again,

47. According to a Napoleonic decree, in effect from 1808 to 1818, Alsatian Jews were forbidden to purchase the services of a substitute to replace them in the army.

48. There were high-ranking Jewish officers in the army as early as the July Monarchy. During the Third Republic, there were twenty-five Jewish generals. This relatively open attitude of the French army toward Jews contrasts with other European countries. See Paula Hyman, *The Jews of Modern France*, p. 94.

49. In Charles Spaak's screenplay the first character to whom Maréchal speaks at the very start of the film is a soldier named Halphen. Although this character is not named in the actual film, it perhaps suggests that the filmmakers, at least originally, intended to normalize the image of the Jewish soldier by including another one, aside from Rosenthal, with an obviously Jewish name. The Jewishness of this minor character does not become an issue.

Maréchal, the embodiment of the average Frenchman, provides the terms for gauging the relative merits of the two men. In a crucial scene Maréchal tells Rosenthal that he would prefer escaping with him rather than de Boieldieu. With de Boieldieu, Maréchal says, “Je ne peux pas me laisser aller. Je ne suis pas libre.” Maréchal contends that their different “education” erects a barrier between them: “Il y a un mur entre nous.” Maréchal’s highly charged metaphorical language assimilates the French class structure to the German prison, suggesting that class differences, what Renoir and later Bazin would call horizontal divisions, count at least as much, if not more, than national (or vertical) frontiers.

Interestingly, Maréchal does not experience Rosenthal’s wealth as a similar wall. While we know little about Rosenthal’s education, I would point out that he and Maréchal speak in a similar manner. This similarity is displayed most clearly at the moment of greatest tension in their relationship: when Maréchal threatens to abandon Rosenthal because of his twisted ankle, he mimics the Jew’s exact words. As Rosenthal intones, “J’ai glissé . . . C’est pas ma faute,” Maréchal echoes, “T’as glissé . . . Je sais que t’as glissé.” The mirroring words underscore the fundamental bond between the two men in spite of the temporary rupture. Their familiar mode of address and colloquial constructions, moreover, contrast with the highly proper and formal French of de Boieldieu (who would never address his fellow officers with “tu” much less “t’”) as well as with the English that de Boieldieu speaks with fellow aristocrat von Rauffenstein. Although later he will reveal that he also speaks German, Rosenthal might thus in some way be seen as closer to an “authentic” kind of Frenchness than the scion of an ancient French bloodline, who reveals a greater linguistic affinity with the German nobleman and with a trans-national aristocracy of English-speaking, horse-racing privilege. The traditional antisemitic charge of cosmopolitanism, of not being sufficiently *enraciné*, as Maurice Barrès would have it, is thus ironically shifted in *La Grande Illusion* from the Vienna-born Jew to the representative of the *vieille noblesse française*.

Maréchal returns to the issue of Rosenthal’s generosity in his explanation of why he feels closer to him than de Boieldieu. Rosenthal, however, dismisses his generosity as a function of pride. “Je suis très fier de ma famille riche,” he explains modestly. Rosenthal then engages in a remarkable reflection on the nature of antisemitic stereotyping (although still without mentioning the word “Jew”): “La foule croit que notre grand défaut c’est l’avarice. Grave erreur. Nous sommes souvent généreux. Hélas, en face de cette qualité, Jéhova nous a largement doté du péché glorieux.” For the viewer attempting to decode the film’s stance on Jews, this scene is highly ambiguous. On one level, Rosenthal’s statement may



be understood as an internalization of the antisemitic gesture of viewing the Jews as a group tinged by collective defect. On the other, the Jew explicitly contradicts the stereotype of Jewish avarice, or rather replaces it with pride, an arguably less offensive sin. The possibility of Rosenthal's irony complicates the question, opening the potential for his subversion of the very act of speaking of Jews as a group at all. The ambiguity of the scene resolves itself, however, when Maréchal brushes aside Rosenthal's entire disquisition: "Tout ça, c'est des histoires. Je m'en fous de Jéhova." Maréchal thus dismisses Rosenthal's rhetoric about the Jews as precisely that, as mere rhetoric, "des histoires," substituting a clear expression of friendship for what perhaps might be seen as a (Jewish?) splitting of hairs.

Viewers inclined to see Maréchal's gesture of friendship toward Rosenthal (and over de Boieldieu) as a sign of the film's positive attitude toward Jews receive confirmation during the climactic scenes following the escape. First, however, Maréchal and Rosenthal put their friendship (and Maréchal's dismissal of racial difference) to the test. De Boieldieu has just nobly sacrificed himself so that his compatriots can get away. Setting out through the German countryside in the middle of winter with only a few lumps of sugar, Maréchal and Rosenthal experience extreme privation. When Rosenthal hurts his foot and cannot keep up, Maréchal threatens to abandon him after first venting his rage. Calling Rosenthal a "colis," thus symbolically returning the packages the Jew has shared, Maréchal states baldly that he cannot stand Jews: "Les Juifs, j'ai jamais pu les blairer!" The first time the word "Jew" is mentioned in the film, it hits Rosenthal, and the viewer, like a slap in the face, redounding with all the pent up fury of a broken taboo. "Un peu tard pour t'en apercevoir," comments Rosenthal sardonically as Maréchal leaves him behind to die in the snow. The viewer is momentarily left with the impression that all the expressions of goodwill have been a pretense, and that the fundamental antipathy of the true Frenchman toward the Jew has finally been revealed. Then follows a justly celebrated scene in which Rosenthal sings loudly to cover his misery. We see him alone in closeup. The body of Maréchal then appears in the frame like a guardian angel. He gently helps his friend to walk slowly. "Tu n'en peux plus?" Maréchal asks tenderly. "Oh ça va," Rosenthal replies and the bond between the two men, temporarily broken, is reforged of much stronger stuff.

Maréchal's generosity, his unwillingness to abandon his injured friend even at the risk of his own life, stands as the film's moral centerpiece. The fact that it comes immediately after the one overt expression of antisemitism in the film would seem to signal Renoir's elevation of human sympathy over hate and prejudice. His antisemitism brought into the open and thereby dissipated, Maréchal illustrates the film's message of unity, a



message made all the stronger, like their bond of friendship, by the venting of repressed animosity. This typical Frenchman's gesture of inclusion also would seem to indicate a larger French openness to minority and marginality, a symbolic inclusion of racial difference within the nation.

Maréchal's gesture has all the more significance in that the original treatment for the film showed Maréchal escaping with a non-Jewish officer named Dolette (indeed, it did not include a Jewish character named Rosenthal at all). As Dalio recounts in his autobiography, the tensions between his character and Maréchal were a last minute addition to the script, made during the shooting.<sup>50</sup> The addition of the Jewish theme in the highly-charged political atmosphere of the late 1930s no doubt signals the filmmakers' courageous willingness to take a stand against antisemitism. The transformation of Dolette into Rosenthal and the inclusion of Maréchal's antisemitic diatribe endow his later affirmation of the human bond with not only a universal message of brotherhood but also a particular one of acceptance winning out over antisemitic prejudice.

One could certainly argue, however, that the Jew's inclusion in the nation is shown to depend on the precarious magnanimity of the non-Jew. Moreover, the act of asking whether the Jew belongs in the French nation might seem by its very nature antisemitic. After all, versions of this question had been asked by such turn-of-the-century antisemitic writers as Maurice Barrès who, in *Scènes et doctrines du nationalisme* (1902), offered a vision of Frenchness based on blood and ancestry, "la terre et les morts," a vision that would have excluded recent immigrants such as Rosenthal.<sup>51</sup> In his novel *Les Déracinés* (1897), Barrès showed the debilitating effects, both for individual subjectivities and the health of the nation, of cosmopolitanism. The Barrèsian doctrine would have an enormous influence on French fascist writers in the 1930s, and to recognize the singularity of *La Grande Illusion*, it is important to see the film in contrast to the virulent

50. Dalio reports telling Renoir: "Écoutez, Jean, il y a quelque chose qui cloche dans cette scène. Ces deux hommes s'évadent avec une trentaine de morceaux de sucre pour gagner la frontière. L'un des deux hommes est juif, il se casse la cheville et l'autre lui masse la cheville comme une infirmière. Je crois que leurs rapports devraient être différents. Presque le contraire de ce qu'ils sont actuellement." The director agrees: "Renoir m'écoute avec attention et tombe d'accord avec moi [. . .] Notre évasion prend une autre dimension, ainsi d'ailleurs que mon rôle," *Mes Années folles*, p. 91.

51. As Hyman points out, Barrès would modify his views somewhat as a result of Jewish patriotism in the First World War. In *Les Diverses Familles spirituelles de la France* (1917), he would declare that "many Israelites, settled among us for generations, and centuries, are natural members of the national body." Cited in Hyman, *From Dreyfus to Vichy*, p. 50. One can still wonder whether a recent immigrant such as Rosenthal, even in spite of his patriotism, would be included in Barrès' "national body."

antisemitism of other works from the time.<sup>52</sup> Indeed, in its focus on a group of young Frenchmen cut off from their homeland, analyzing the links that tie them to the nation while trying to return to it, *La Grande Illusion* might be seen as a kind of reworking of *Les Déracinés*, but one that subverts the novel's main thesis by offering a different model of Frenchness—one based not on a deterministic model of ancestry but on an affirmation of shared values and patriotic acts, one that explicitly includes the Jew. The film participates in a dialogue with such antisemitic works, but it does so in order to have the last word.

The case for defending *La Grande Illusion* against charges of antisemitism receives further confirmation from the recognition that Rosenthal, more than any other character in the film, serves as a stand-in for the filmmaker, for Renoir himself. I am referring here not only to the fact that Renoir, like Rosenthal during the escape, walked with a limp following an injury received during the First World War. The film itself points to the resemblance between character and director in the Christmas scene on the farm where Rosenthal and Maréchal are hiding out while waiting for the Jew's foot to heal. The scene begins with a close-up on a miniature manger with a male voice describing the various members of the Holy Family. The camera then pulls back to reveal the Jew arranging the *crèche* like a director setting props. He then insists on shutting off the lights while cranking up the Victrola and telling Maréchal and Elsa where to stand. With lights, sets, music and actors in place, the scene is ready for its audience, Elsa's daughter Lotte. Making Rosenthal into a director points to the extent to which his outsider status (both as Jew and as interpreter for the lovers) is viewed in the film as a source of creativity and productivity.

The playful nature of the Christmas scene also helps us see how the film views race itself as a kind of role-playing. While Rosenthal's pride in the *crèche* may seem either ironic or blasphemous, the genuine care and interest he takes in its creation is that of an artist able to see universal beauties beneath obvious differences. "Il n'est pas gentil mon petit ange?" Rosenthal asks Maréchal as he arranges the figures in the manger. "Et le petit Jésus? . . . Mon frère de race . . ." Like Rosenthal's previous forays into racial theorizing, this line has its ambiguities. On one level, the reference

52. On the preponderance of antisemitism in French intellectual culture of the 1930s see David Carroll, *French Literary Fascism: Nationalism, Antisemitism, and the Ideology of Culture* (Princeton, 1995), which explores the link between the *fin-de-siècle* antisemitism of Barrès, Charles Maurras, Edouard Drumont and their disciples in the 1930s, including Brasillach, Drieu La Rochelle and Lucien Rebatet. Also see Jeffrey Mehlman, *Legacies of Antisemitism in France* (Minneapolis, 1983).

to race smacks of pseudoscientific categorizing.<sup>53</sup> On another, it reminds audiences that Jesus himself was Jewish. But beyond either of these two literal readings, the line undercuts any antisemitism it may seem to espouse. Dalio's delivery, and its accompaniment by a smile (once again viewed in profile) directed at Maréchal, contains an unmistakably ironic tinge. In the intimacy of the domestic setting, where he controls not only the two languages spoken but also directs the others' actions, Rosenthal's invocation of his Jewish "race" reveals its playfulness, its theatricality. Just like during the earlier theatrical performance, in which men dressed as women succeed in arousing the silent respect (and titillation) of the assembled prisoners, certain forms of identity—gender or, in this case, race—are seen as a kind of illusion, inessential in the face of a deeper humanity. The film thus undermines the very categorization that underpins the exclusionary logic of Barrès and his avatars.

The final exchange between Maréchal and Rosenthal, once they have left the protected paradise of the German farm and as they prepare to cross the Swiss border into freedom, reinforces this dismissal of race as an essential category. As they say goodbye, perhaps for the last time should German guards shoot them while they make haste for the frontier, Maréchal calls Rosenthal a "sale Juif" and Rosenthal counters by hurling the less loaded epithet of "vieille noix." Given the significance that the word "Jew" has taken on over the course of the film, first as a site of repressed anxiety and later, during the escape scene, as the insult that marks their temporary rupture, its return at the film's close as an endearment shows how far the men, and the viewer, have come. Rendered innocuous through the film's thematization and exploration of antisemitic stereotype, the taboo word now has the power not to divide but unite. As the last word Maréchal speaks to Rosenthal in the film, "Jew" serves as a sign of their friendship, as a mark of the Jew's integration into French culture, not just in the universalizing manner that would deny Jewish particularity, but as Céline would lament, *en tant que juif*.

The argument that the film invokes racial categorization only to undermine it would seem to be upheld by the way the act of racial stereotyping is represented in the film. Or rather, by whom. For, as we have seen, it is frequently Rosenthal himself who gives voice to the discourse on

53. On the designation of the Jews as a "race" in France see Michael Marrus, *The Politics of Assimilation: A Study of the French Jewish Community at the Time of the Dreyfus Affair* (Oxford, 1971), chap. 2. Marrus describes how some Jews, especially assimilated Jews without overt links to the Jewish religion or community, used "race" as a term to designate their group affiliation. "Race, in fact, provided Jews with the means to express their sense of a distinct Jewish identity, a sense which was difficult to define in other terms, and which they themselves were not always prepared to admit," p. 10.

Jews. It is Rosenthal, for example, who describes his family's acquisitions and not without a tinge of irony. It is Rosenthal, moreover, who describes Jews as more prideful than avaricious, while Maréchal dismisses such a debate as "des histoires." And Dalio's heavily ironic delivery of the line referring to Jesus as his "frère de race" indicates that the audience should view such racial categorization with the same kind of distance.

A similar if more subtle distancing from the pseudoscientific discourse on race occurs earlier in the film, when the German commandant, von Rauffenstein, conducts a surprise inspection of the French officers' barracks. The comedy of this scene derives from the fact that de Boieldieu hides a rope ladder out the window and then gives von Rauffenstein his word of honor that nothing illegal has been hidden *in the room*. The irony derives from the fact that the German commandant will only believe a fellow aristocrat and views "la parole d'honneur d'un Rosenthal" or "celle d'un Maréchal" as worthless, thus proving himself the dupe to his own class (and race) prejudices. In the easily overlooked conclusion to the scene, von Rauffenstein, before exiting, turns to another of the French officers, a scholar who has obsessively been working on a translation of Pindar. The German measures the man's skull and then declares, "Pauvre vieux Pindare." Phrenology, of course, served as a tool of Nazi racial "science" and would provide the justification for the German conquest of certain "inferior" peoples, including the French, and extermination of others, including the Jews, during the Second World War. The film seems to mock this racial discourse by showing von Rauffenstein, the dupe, to be its exponent. A further level of irony might be perceived by those who notice a black officer among the prisoners, his race never commented upon, and by those who know that Erich von Stroheim, the celebrated film director who plays the racist Prussian aristocrat, was the son of a Jewish hat merchant from Vienna.

### Conclusions

Unlike Python, who suggests that Renoir resorts to antisemitic cliché unconsciously, I would argue that *La Grande Illusion* invokes the discourse of antisemitism strategically, the better to lay it to rest. I agree with Daniel Serceau who maintains that antisemitic stereotypes and clichés can only be neutralized or overcome if they are acknowledged, brought out into the open. "Comment ne pas voir," he asks, "que le cliché est ici le meilleur instrument d'une lutte antiraciste?"<sup>54</sup> By portraying the Jew as a wealthy

54. Serceau, "A-t-on le droit de montrer un banquier juif au cinéma?," p. 143.

banker, Serceau argues, Renoir makes his character realistic, *vraisemblable*, confirming the audience's expectations of what a Jew is like. And by then showing the character in a positive light, as rich with a curving nose but likable in spite of his wealth and profile, the film negates the negativity of the cliché. Had Renoir chosen to avoid all traces of stereotype in his depiction of Rosenthal, Serceau implies, audiences would not have believed the representation, would not have seen it as an accurate depiction of a Jew, and Renoir's attack on antisemitism would have failed to hit its mark. "On ne combat pas les préjugés en leur interdisant droit de cité,"<sup>55</sup> Serceau concludes.

The value of Renoir's representation of race, then, lies in the complex way it subverts the very racial categories it seems to espouse. But is this the only conclusion to be drawn from the film's representation of the Jew? To argue that *La Grande Illusion* attacks racial prejudice by invoking stereotypes and then dismantling them may absolve it of charges of either deliberate or inadvertent antisemitism, thus preserving its reputation as an anti-fascist film and Renoir's reputation as a leftist filmmaker; but it does not entirely resolve the "Jewish question." Up to this point, my argument has centered on how the film constructs its message rather than on how viewers understand this signification. Recent film theory, however, has insisted that it is viewers in historically and materially specific situations who ultimately determine a film's meaning.<sup>56</sup> And, as we have seen, certain viewers did see the film as antisemitic.

For Python, *La Grande Illusion* proves that filmmakers may end up resorting to antisemitic stereotypes despite their best intentions. I think the film teaches a different lesson—namely, that filmmakers cannot, despite their best intentions, ultimately control or fix the meaning of their representations. They lack the power to determine how their representations will be received or to what use their images will be put. Perhaps Renoir deserves to be blamed for creating a representation too subtle, too complex, too liable to be read in the wrong way. Perhaps also his famous realist style was the true culprit: the realist codes employed by Renoir, and celebrated by Bazin, naturalize a certain image of the Jew, encouraging viewers to accept rather than question the representation.

Cinematic depictions, particularly realist ones, have a way of escaping the limits prescribed to them, just as audiences have a way of retaining not the subtle message of a film but its more overt images, particularly if these

55. Ibid.

56. Among many examples of this critical position see the chapter entitled "Viewers Make Meaning" in Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright, *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture* (Oxford, 2001), pp. 45-71.

confirm rather than unsettle long-standing prejudices. The picture of Rosenthal as a large-nosed capitalist may have made a greater impression on viewers than the subtleties of his disquisitions on race. To illustrate this concluding point, I turn once more to an anecdote from the autobiography of Marcel Dalio, the actor who played Rosenthal (and La Chesnaye).

In the Spring of 1940 Dalio was waiting in Portugal, like so many French Jews, for a visa to the United States—or England, or Mexico or any other country that would take him. Like so many French Jews, he had abandoned a promising career after the Fall of France and was now desperate to leave Europe. One night, in a bar called the Avenida, frequented by French Jews (and thus not unlike Rick's Bar in *Casablanca*, a film in which he would later play a supporting role), Dalio ran into an old friend who told him that he had done well to flee Paris ahead of the Germans. For, according to this friend, Dalio's face was now plastered on posters all around the *place de l'Opéra* that purported to show the French how to identify Jewish physical characteristics. Overnight he had gone from being a typical French Jew to being a *prototypical* French Jew—public enemy number one.

The Nazis seem to have chosen Dalio as the image of the criminalized, deviant Jew not—or not merely—because of his profile, but because his cinematic roles, including and especially in Renoir's two films *La Grande Illusion* and *La Règle du jeu*, had helped fix an image of the Jew in the minds of the French public. Should Renoir therefore be considered an antisemitic filmmaker? A historically informed reading would answer no. But did his films lend themselves to antisemitic uses under particular circumstances? Unfortunately history seems to answer yes. Despite what may have been Renoir's wish to overturn stereotypes, to offer up a positive vision of the Jew, his image returned in grotesque form, appropriated by the fascist menace it was meant to counter. Perhaps, ultimately, it is not so much Renoir as film itself, the medium, which must be blamed for Dalio's plight, because of the ease with which its images can be isolated, divorced from the subtleties of narrative, captured as a still and splashed on a poster.<sup>57</sup> Dalio did, however, at least manage to find some humor in his

57. Tom Gunning has shown how the "realistic" technologies of photography and cinema, both processes of mechanical reproduction that in some ways disburse identity, functioned historically as a means of fixing or controlling identity by tying it to a particular body. Both types of images, moving and still, were used by the police and other agents of regulation as a means of identifying and tracking criminals in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. See Tom Gunning, "Tracing the Individual Body: Photography, Detectives, and Early Cinema" in *Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life*, ed. Leo Charney and Vanessa Schwartz (Berkeley, 1995), pp. 15-45.

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predicament: the actor notes feeling a certain pride that, for once, he was “seul à l’affiche.”<sup>58</sup>

58. Dalio, *Mes Années folles*, pp. 146-48.