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Jean Renoir's *Grand Illusion*: The Beginning of Cinematic Realism

Steve Vineberg

THE GOLDEN age of French film began late in the silent era and ended when the Nazis marched into Paris in 1940. It included the exquisite farces and pioneering musicals of René Clair, the towering achievements of the modernist experimenter Abel Gance, the poetic-fatalistic melodramas of Marcel Carné, and the highly varied, now mostly forgotten work of Julien Duvivier. But the master of masters to emerge during this period was Jean Renoir, son of the painter Auguste Renoir, who translated into movies the spirited, uncorseted humanism of his father's approach to the canvas. The Impressionists, following the lead of Corot and Courbet, took painting out of the studio and into the streets and the countryside; in *Boudu Saved from Drowning* (1932) and *A Day in the Country* (1936), Jean Renoir took his actors and his crew *en plein air*. Renoir's remarkable body of work stretched over four and a half decades, but it's his output from the Thirties that we look at now with amazement: one treasure after another—*Toni*, *Madame Bovary*, *The Crime of Monsieur Lange*, *La Bête Humaine*, culminating in *Grand Illusion* in 1937 and *The Rules of the Game* in 1939.

D. W. Griffith was the first great movie storyteller, adapting the pastoral tropes of the nineteenth-century novelists to the screen and using the close-up to invent cinematic psychology. But he was a romantic by nature—the Charles Dickens of the movies. Renoir links up with naturalist authors like Stendhal and Tolstoy, who, in Erich Auerbach's words, portrayed human beings as “embedded in a total reality, political, social, and economic, which is concrete and constantly evolving.” True movie realism begins with Renoir; a neo-realist masterpiece by the Italian Vittorio De Sica (like *Shoeshine* or *Bicycle Thieves*), or the Indian Satyajit Ray's *Apu Trilogy*, or, in Hollywood, William Wyler's *The Best Years of Our Lives* and Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather* and *The Godfather, Part 2*, all demand that we read what's on the screen as Renoir taught audiences to do. These men inherited Renoir's lyricism, too. His technique is so subtle that he hardly seems like a revolutionary, but indeed he was.

The opening few minutes of *Grand Illusion* (*La Grande Illusion*) are a lesson in how to create realism. We begin in a French officers' club in 1916, where Lieutenant Maréchal (Jean Gabin), whose origins are in the working class (he was an auto mechanic before the war), listens to a popular music-hall ballad on a Victrola. A sign on the bar alludes in a joshing tone to the prevalence of alcohol, and both the décor and Maréchal's conversation with a buddy underscore the men's preoccupation with women. Maréchal is planning to visit his girlfriend,

Joséphine, that evening, a diversion he has to give up when Captain de Boeldieu (Pierre Fresnay) arrives with an aerial photograph that suggests the presence of a German squadron; Boeldieu feels obliged to investigate. Boeldieu, as the “de” before his name indicates, is an aristocrat. He takes the roughness of army life stoically but the jokes he makes about the flight gear he's forced to don, which either smells or sheds, tell us that he's used to a more comfortable existence. And though he's unfailingly polite to Maréchal, he is carefully distant; he doesn't court his camaraderie. Now Renoir cuts to a German officers' club, presided over by von Rauffenstein (Erich von Stroheim). Again we see girlie photos on the walls and hear references to booze: having just shot down his twelfth plane, Rauffenstein urges one of his men to prepare one of his famous fruit punches so they can all get drunk. But he's a European gentleman (“von” Rauffenstein), and, operating on the code of honor his class has been observing since medieval times, when he learns that the survivors of the crash are officers he invites them to lunch. They are Maréchal and Boeldieu. Over the meal Rauffenstein sits with the French aristocrat, whose cousin he knows, an equestrian like himself; later we learn that Boeldieu has seen Rauffenstein ride “in the good old times.” Of course these men would know one another, or at least each oth-

er's relations; they inhabit the same world. And of course Rauffenstein speaks perfect French, and Boeldieu feels free to interpolate an English phrase, confident that his German host will be able to follow him. Maréchal sits next to a friendly German officer whose French is good because he worked in an auto factory in Lyon before the war, and who kindly offers to cut the Frenchman's meat for him because an injury to his right arm renders him temporarily useless with a knife. No one alludes to the fact that the Germans and French are officially enemies or even to how Maréchal got his wound (during the downing of the plane). But by chance, some other German soldiers come through with a wreath for the grave of the dead French pilot. Everyone rises to his feet; Rauffenstein whispers to Boeldieu that he's deeply embarrassed by this coincidence, then he raises a glass and declaims in German a gracious benediction, “May the earth lie lightly on our brave enemy.”

In five or six minutes of screen time, Renoir has told us an extraordinary amount without underlining any of it. We understand that we're in an era where a code of honor compels enemies to behave like gentlemen to each other—the very last one in history, because the aristocracy that invented this code is on its last legs; the war will finish it off. Already modernism has altered the way wars are fought, not only in terms of weaponry but in the social make-up of the officers. A de Boeldieu can serve side by side with a Maréchal and—as we see once the Frenchmen are sent off to a POW camp—a Rosenthal (played by Marcel Dalio), who's a Jewish bourgeois. Officers like Lieutenant Rosenthal and Maréchal are “happy gifts of the French Revolution,” as Rauffenstein observes ironically to Boeldieu when, in the second half of the movie, these

three Frenchmen are transplanted to Wintersborn, a camp that the German, forced off the battlefield by war injuries, commands.

We understand, too, from the similarity of the two officers' clubs and from the easy rapport of the two aristocrats and the two working-class men, that the war that divides them is a social insignificance, an idiocy—a grand illusion, even though that illusion, we know, is going to devastate the youth of Europe. The theme of Renoir's movie is boundaries, the kind we can cross and the kind we can't. *Grand Illusion* is so superlatively understated that it doesn't feel remotely like a thesis picture, but it is, and its pursuit of its thesis—that, in Renoir's words, the real divisions between human beings are horizontal (class) rather than vertical (national borders)—makes it one of the great anti-war pictures, even though it doesn't contain a single battle scene. (All the great war movies, from King Vidor's *The Big Parade* and Lewis Milestone's *All Quiet on the Western Front* through René Clément's *Forbidden Games*, Kon Ichikawa's *Fires on the Plain*, Paolo and Vittorio Taviani's *The Night of the Shooting Stars*, and Brian De Palma's *Casualties of War*, are anti-war.) The movie carries its structure as lightly as its thesis, but the brilliant screenplay by Renoir and Charles Spaak is divided carefully into a prologue and three acts, the first two set in the two German POW camps and the third in the German countryside, where Maréchal and Rosenthal, having escaped from Wintersborn, take refuge with Elsa, a widow with a little girl and a small farm. Renoir begins his movie with members of the French air force crossing the German border and being taken prisoner and ends it when Maréchal and Rosenthal make it across the Swiss border and back to freedom.



Only rarely does Renoir address the stupidity of war directly: in the announcements of the military skirmishes that result in Fort Douaumont's being passed back and forth between the French and the Germans; or in Maréchal's observation, as he and his comrades watch their German captors at the first camp during exercises, that what makes the music in the background so stirring is the sound of marching feet; or when, during preparations for a variety show (Rosenthal's wealthy family has sent costumes, just as they send the food packages that he shares with his fellow prisoners in both camps), one soldier emerges in a dress, stunning the other men, whose faces the camera pans across, into silence as they remember what they're missing. But mostly Renoir points up the ridiculousness of war simply by showing the irrelevance of national divisions and how easily they can be crossed. Arthur, the German guard at the first camp, is sympathetic to the French officers and they are fond of him; a German peasant woman who watches the French prisoners marching refers to them as "poor boys." Elsa has lost her husband and brothers to the war—ironically, they died on the sites of the greatest German victories—but she takes in Rosenthal and Maréchal without hesitation when she finds them hiding out in her barn, and she even forms a romantic attachment with Maréchal. A conventional director might have her despise him, but the vagaries of politics are outside her everyday existence. She recognizes only human needs: their hunger, Rosenthal's pain (he's hurt his foot badly), her loneliness and Maréchal's, her child's need for contact with male adults.

Maréchal makes fun of the authoritarian sound of the German he hears barked at him at the first camp, but when he and Rosenthal live with Elsa, he tries to learn her language, out of love, and she corrects him patiently. In this movie, people who speak different languages can nonetheless make themselves understood to each other. The French in Wintersborn understand the Russian prisoners' fury at receiving a box of books from the Czarina instead of the food they've been anticipating—though they're amused, as we are, by the *style* of their response, which is distinctly Russian. The German guards at the first camp can't make out what Maréchal is saying when, after being caught in an escape attempt and sent to solitary, he cries out in frustration, but they get the essence: one explains to the other, as if translating for Maréchal, "The war has gone on too long." Only in one instance does the difference in language impose a boundary that can't be crossed. When the Frenchmen are transferred out of the first camp, Maréchal tries to communicate to an incoming English officer who will be moving into their old digs that they've been digging a tunnel under their cell, but the Englishman hasn't a clue what he's saying and the information is lost.

Rosenthal constantly jokes about the religious difference between him and the others, but this isn't a real obstacle for the characters, either. He and Maréchal become close companions; it's only when the rigors of their life on the lam after they escape from

Wintersborn make them irritable with one another that Maréchal reverts to an anti-Semitic comment. This episode shows the two men at their worst, but it ends with their humanity restored—Maréchal, having gone off alone in a huff, returns to his injured friend and quietly extends his arm to help him walk. After Rosenthal and Maréchal have been living happily with Elsa and her daughter Lotte, they all celebrate Christmas together, and Renoir provides a lovely comic-ironic culmination for the religious-boundary theme when it's Rosenthal who constructs a crèche for the little girl. By now Maréchal and Elsa, having learned a little of each other's languages, are ready to become lovers; the scene ends with their embrace. This interlude is an example of the muted way Renoir works, so that his markers are almost subliminal: the scene is full of boundaries—thresholds, doorways—which the characters cross easily to get at each other.

The tough divisions here are the ones created by class. The one between the middle and working classes is more elastic, so Maréchal and Rosenthal can become friends, even though Rosenthal is wealthy and educated. But the only friend Rauffenstein can have in the movie is Boeldieu, and when the French aristocrat winds up in Wintersborn, a fortress converted into a camp, the German seizes the chance to share his thoughts with a member of his class, the only person here he can communicate with. Rauffenstein himself is a fortress; the huge, cavernous medieval building is a realist symbol for him, and for his and Boeldieu's class, which is also conspicuously, grandly out of date in the modern world. Rauffenstein holds out against the extinction of his class but without hope, for as he confides in Boeldieu, he knows it is inevitable when the war is over.

We see the distance between Boeldieu and the other French officers early on. Boeldieu wears a monocle (the only other character who does, of course, is Rauffenstein). He's slightly repelled when, the new arrivals at the first camp having gathered to hear the rules, Maréchal yawns in public, and he's embarrassed by the dumb jokes of one of their cellmates, a music-hall actor. When the men's cell is searched routinely at Wintersborn, Rauffenstein intervenes and demands that his men leave Boeldieu alone, asking instead for his word of honor as a gentleman that he has no contraband on the premises. Boeldieu treats war as a sport—he takes it seriously but he approaches it with good humor. His contribution to Maréchal and Rosenthal's escape is to stage a diversion for them, playing the flute as he pretends to escape, and he does it with panache, as if he were presenting a little entertainment for Rauffenstein's pleasure. He tells the other two Frenchmen that he's not going to join them in their actual escape because he sees that their plan will only work for two and he recognizes that they would rather be in each other's company than in his. It's true: Maréchal respects Boeldieu (it's mutual), his natural congeniality makes him reach out to his cellmate, but he's put off by his chilly formality, by his monocle and his fondness for English tobacco and his ritual of washing his

gloves in hot water in a POW cell. When he complains that Boeldieu doesn't use the personal pronoun ("tu") with him, even after eighteen months of occupying the same space, Boeldieu explains, "I use 'vous' to my mother and my wife." Maréchal can fall in love with a German farmer's widow, and he can get to Switzerland, but this is one boundary he can never cross.

Maréchal feels awkward about what Boeldieu is doing for him and Rosenthal, but Boeldieu assures him that it isn't personal, thus preventing him from getting sentimental—which Boeldieu, the embodiment of perfect taste and emotional restraint, couldn't bear. His sacrifice (which turns out to be a mortal one) for men he doesn't feel any attachment to is an extension of his nobility, but it's also a suicide: knowing that the time of his class is over, he prefers not to live on to see a world ruled by Rosenthals. But it costs Rauffenstein, who is obliged to shoot him, the loss of his only friend. Maréchal can't read beneath the surface of these men's *politesse*, but Renoir, working with Fresnay and Stroheim (both are superb), makes sure that we can. "Enchanted to see you again" is Rauffenstein's greeting to Boeldieu when they meet in the fortress, and then he adds, "Very sad to see you here," and the tossed-off sentiment resonates like a thunderbolt. Rauffenstein invites Boeldieu to his quarters, as if he were a cherished guest rather than a prisoner. Renoir fills this scene with two-shots that echo the link between the two men; promenading across the floor, smoking silently, they're mirror images of each other. When Rauffenstein details with some embarrassment the war wounds that have retired him to the role of a functionary, a *policier*, his casual allusion to the metal accessories that bind him at his neck and knee touches Boeldieu, who realizes how much pain his host must be suffering, but he conveys his sympathy and admiration merely in a blink and a smile. Rauffenstein shows his friend his pride and joy, a geranium; aside from it, he says, "only ivy and nettles grow here." It is, of course, a symbol for Boeldieu himself, the sole flower Rauffenstein has found among the officers in his prison; when Boeldieu dies, he clips the geranium as an expression of his grief and loss.

Renoir, the great humanist, depicts all the characters as fully three-dimensional beings and has respect and affection, even admiration, for all of them—for Maréchal's good humor and warmth, for Rosenthal's generosity, for Boeldieu's honor and lack of sentimentality, for the depth of Rauffenstein's friendship for him and the graciousness with which he executes his command, for the bravery all three of the Frenchmen exhibit without making a show of it. All are gallant men who keep up a noble, cheerful front as much as possible in the face of pain and deprivation. They act in the time-honored manner of prisoners: they break all the rules they can get away with and they try repeatedly to escape. Even the most annoying character in the movie, the actor Cartier, is given some shining qualities. He illustrates courage and grace under pressure, especially when it's his turn to play the mole and enter

the tunnel under their cell, even though he nearly dies in the process when he runs out of air and his comrades don't notice the signal right away.

It's always Renoir's instinct to work against melodrama. The deaths of the French pilot and an escaped prisoner at the first camp occur off screen, and the scene in which Cartier nearly suffocates underground achieves its effect not by intercutting, but by letting our glimpse of him losing consciousness remain in our heads while we watch the other prisoners in the cell above and wait for them to become aware of the dire situation. The most conventional way to shoot the escape from Wintersborn would be to cross-cut between Boeldieu's escapade, Rauffenstein's reluctant shooting of him, and Maréchal and Rosenthal trekking across the German countryside. But for Renoir that would mean choosing rigged suspense over character. Instead he stays with Boeldieu and Rauffenstein and rejoins the two escaped Frenchmen only after framing Boeldieu's death scene—which he directs with tremendous feeling but (as the character himself would prefer it) completely without sentimental manipulation. There's no soft focus, there are no lingering close-ups of him in the agonies of death, no musical crescendos, just the restrained farewell conversation between him and Rauffenstein, the nurse's gently informing the commandant when his friend has died (off camera), and the heartbreaking poetic touch, Rauffenstein's cutting the geranium.

Grand Illusion was recognized as a masterpiece upon its release and its status has never wavered. But *The Rules of the Game*, Renoir's contemporary high comedy about the French moneyed classes, released on the verge of World War II, was roundly despised; its perceptions cut too deep. And then it almost disappeared after the Nazis occupied France: they believed they had destroyed all copies and the negative, but fortunately a copy resurfaced in the Sixties. Now it's considered an indispensable movie—and no discussion of *Grand Illusion* would be complete without a mention of it, since it's an unofficial sequel. Rauffenstein is right, of course, when he comments to Boeldieu that, no matter who wins, the war will finish off their class. By 1916, rich merchants like Rosenthal's family have effectively bought up the bankrupt European aristocracy, even to the point of moving into their one-time chateaux; by 1918 they've become the new aristocracy. In *The Rules of the Game* Dalió plays Robert de la Chesnaye, whose title ("de la") is merely an affectation—he has Jewish ancestors. The standard of the circle represented by Chesnaye and his friends is how well they can play the rules of the game of social intercourse and surface behavior; everyone has his or her follies, but anyone who acts authentically—that is, from the heart—looks like a fool, and that's unacceptable. In Boeldieu and Rauffenstein, surfaces have depth and impeccable conduct is inseparable from authenticity. Class is still an indomitable factor as Renoir leaps from the First World War to mere moments before the Second, but the make-up and meaning of the ruling class has shifted forever.□