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Classics Revisited: "La Grande Illusion"

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grow. The costume that looked inappropriate on the hanger was first tried on the stage before any change was attempted. Such a method gives rein to inspiration and instinct, rather than relying on logic: its compound of openness to change and professional experience characterizes Renoir's directorial method.

And this is the method that resulted in *La Grande Illusion* and *La Règle du Jeu*. *Carola* is a strange play, which many have found not really satisfactory. And there are some of us who do not like *Elena and the Men*, or *French Can-Can*; some, indeed, do not find the loveliness of *The Golden Coach* to their taste, or wish *The River* were more genuinely profound. We must, obviously, speak our minds on these recent works. Yet we are grateful to Renoir for continuing to make films at a time when he could with good grace simply retire from the follies of the film world to his olive trees and grandchildren. In all his films, Renoir himself *does* come through, as he wishes. In the crowded forest of film production his particular trees have a personal verve and grace and humanity of which we have far too little.

For them, and for his uncontested masterpieces, we are in his debt, as those who love the film will always be.

Renoir's views on film-making have in recent years been set forth fairly often in the press and through interviews, most recently and accessibly in an interview with Gideon Bachmann published in *Contact* magazine (Sausalito, Calif., \$1.45), No. 4. *Cahiers du Cinéma* (146, Champs-Élysées, Paris 8e, 3.5 NF) devoted its entire issue of Christmas 1957 (No. 78) to Renoir; it includes a talk by Renoir, "Ce Bougre de Monde Nouveau," an interview by J. Rivette and François Truffaut, excerpts from *Carola*, and a biofilmography by André Bazin. Instead of duplicating such admirable materials, therefore, we present, as our homage to Jean Renoir, an analysis of *La Grande Illusion*. This film was voted fifth among the great films of all time at the Brussels Exposition. Its reputation is immense and genuinely world-wide. (Moreover, it was a great popular success, unlike *La Règle du Jeu*, and a revival of it in a definitive version specially prepared by Renoir was a smash hit in Paris several years back.) Yet, like many great films, it has received too little serious analysis and too much superficial praise. The following reappraisal, then, aims to show some of the reasons why *La Grande Illusion* is a lasting work of art.

JAMES KERANS

Classics Revisited: "La Grande Illusion"

Above all, in *La Grande Illusion*, we find lucidity and innocence. We find these qualities everywhere in Renoir, but never under such stress, for here they are not only signs of a style, but maneuvers in a gathering war. Are they the right maneuvers? We are bound to ask the question, regardless of our aesthetics, because we are being asked to agree and to act, as well as to admire: "Because I am a pacifist," Renoir wrote in a postscript to the film in 1938, "I made

La Grande Illusion." I see no reason to disarm the film of this central motive, or to turn its dramatic energies out to graze in the pastures of "film art." It is a persuasion: it tries to turn us away from Z and toward A, and from this turning proceed the real excitement, tact, and beauty it offers.

Certain difficulties always latent in pacifist persuasion appear in acute form in *La Grande Illusion*. There can be none of the familiar

coercions based upon organized honor or dogma—these are irrecoverably the property of the militant man. Appeals to the impulse toward “betterment” in any form, economic or moral, eventually work around to systems of striving, of competition, of sacrifice, which betray the disguised logic of disregard for personal peace. Worst of all (and most common) are films in the “but-can’t-you-see-how-horrible-it-all-is?” tradition—sexual fantasies masquerading as anti-war films, which combine panoramic violence with twitching close-ups, shuddering landscapes with blasted meat, all done in an atmosphere of “grimly exposing the empty heroics of war.” (It would be comforting to suppose that half a century of education to the psychological facts of life would have rid our more thoughtful film audiences of the rudimentary gullibility involved here. But consider *Paths of Glory*. This tidy bit of rough-toughery might sound “realistic” in a high-school valedictorian, but who would have mistaken it for a protest against war if he had not heard it approved as such by “enlightened” audiences?) I suppose one of the reasons *La Grande Illusion* is not always consciously and immediately recognizable as a pacifist film is that it avoids all this noise and as a result actually *works* as one. It does not “fight the war for peace” with any of the overt strategies that provoke opposition, or even excited agreement: the customary response to the film is a kind of inarticulate acceptance, a profound, disarmed approval. I feel this, too, and think it exactly the right response.

One view of the film finds it a demonstration of the essential sympathy which binds men and which is perverted by the unnatural conditions of war into complementary killing and sacrifice. The affection and respect between de Boeldieu and von Rauffenstein cannot prevent one’s killing the other, once they are factors in the war equation. Captor and captive are alike unwilling, war finds its metaphor in a crumbling fortress in which the elite of a culture die or kill by rules which misuse their capacities for loyalty and love. The solution is escape—literally from the fortress, metaphorically from the military

compulsion and constrictions (on German and French alike) for which the fortress stands. This view is capable of considerable refinement, and on its terms the film is a masterpiece.

I find this reading insufficient in that it does not follow the film carefully enough to distinguish one kind of fraternity from another, one kind of escape or eloquence from another. It is all too easy to enter upon the exquisite pain and traditional nobility which dictate our response to the Boeldieu–Rauffenstein drama. Few films, if any, can execute as beautifully as this one does the ready oratory of heroic resignation. The death scene—with its snow and ticking watches and cut flower (to say nothing of von Stroheim and Fresnay)—is moving, but the skills and apparatus it uses are the stock in trade of the apologist for heroes in their essential guise—dying the beautiful death. Renoir takes this scene in stride; but he goes on to prove he is even a greater master than he is usually thought by transcending this material and leading us to another value: a life almost without name, of bread, wife, child, work, and survival. How can such material compete with the exaltations of ritual sacrifice? Any praise falsifies it, any intensification or highlighting spoils it, even abbreviation misrepresents it. One thinks of the gorgeous, hectic celebrations of “natural life” in Dylan Thomas. This is all very well, but suppose you don’t want to celebrate, or appropriate the rhetoric of religious fire to speak for daily bread? Suppose you don’t want people to *thrill* to daily bread, but to eat it? Thrill leads only to thrill, and nothing better shows the seriousness and integrity of Renoir’s film than the risk it takes in refusing to “combat” the glorifications of heroic suicide with irrelevant seductions to pacifist survival. The farm, as we shall see later, is clearly the alternate to the fortress, and it is dangerously near to exaltation in the near-miraculous ease with which it offers plain food and love, but it is a metaphor, as is the fortress, and only the sentimental would feel that Renoir is promising it to Maréchal. We see it plainly and at its best—but so do we see Rauffenstein; and the lucidity and innocence of which I spoke earlier, once they have faced both “sides,” speak

irresistibly for their equivalent in life: the farm. This is a major triumph in the film—the political victory of a style which features candor, balance, antithrill. (Revisiting the film in the context of present-day Bergmanism, with its mystifications and general goosing of all possible effects, one is struck by the wonderful clarity and dignity of Renoir's masterpiece.)

The essential action of *La Grande Illusion*, that which organizes nearly all its material, is a dialectic, as we would expect in a persuasive strategy. The tendencies involved are hard to name, because they attach to a tremendous amount of detail, from rudimentary psychological gesture to the complexities of national honor. One tendency I call ceremony; the other, instinct. Under ceremony I range the impulse toward rules and order, reserve, sacrifice, honor, suicide, brotherhood by exclusion; under instinct: relaxation, conviviality, drift, disorganized emotion, survival, brotherhood by inclusion. Presumably, any person includes both tendencies, and a possible problem-play approach to the material would be to have a hero confronted with a series of choices which lead him one way or the other. The trouble with this approach is that it forces upon the deciding character a form of consciousness and clarity, of reflection, which both simplifies his character and eliminates alternatives to his choices. Renoir's solution is the "double"—a dialectical resource most familiar to us from the nineteenth-century novel (*La Grande Illusion* is very like *War and Peace* in many respects). From the moment they set out together on the aerial mission which opens the film, Maréchal and de Boeldieu are linked by common circumstances, and from this community proceeds the dialectic which says that they move toward opposite poles. They are further linked by the ironies involved in their "escapes," each of which is dependent upon the other. The irony of de Boeldieu's escape through honorable death is obvious; as for Maréchal—can one really escape at the expense of accepting (to say nothing of forgetting) another man's life? Escape to what?

Because the film is an address to the people of Germany and France, we must finally exam-

ine its cultural attitude, but a more modest beginning would be to examine how the differentiations between Maréchal and de Boeldieu introduce the larger appeals. At their meeting, in the first episode, the lines are drawn. Everything about Maréchal is negligent, easy—his uniform, the nostalgia with which he listens to an old record, his anticipation of a night with one "Jenny," whom he dismisses from the film with an offhand "She'll wait for me." The mission comes to him as a slightly bothersome reminder of the present. De Boeldieu, on the other hand, is meticulous and intent. We first see him studying an aerial photograph through his monocle, very much the staff officer, stopping tactfully short of urgency or officiousness, tying up a loose end at the front. A marvelous little stroke in the dialogue gives away the connection between his own psychology and the system of military responsibilities he represents. He holds out the photograph and accounts for the mission: "It's this little gray smudge that disturbs me." No one can say just what the smudge is, so a plane is called out, and the consequences of Boeldieu's curiosity begin to tick.

This is military scrupulousness, of course, but the reader must pardon me if I refuse to ignore the overtones of neurosis in the fussiness. Throughout the film white-glove militarism is given plenty of literal play and symbolic weight. At one point Rauffenstein wonders ruefully whether the two pairs remaining to him will last out the war; in their last conversation Maréchal and Boeldieu are talking about the fundamental differences between them, and the background business to the scene is Boeldieu's washing a pair of white gloves so that his large gesture shall be in high parade style; and the hand with which Rauffenstein shoots Boeldieu and closes so tenderly his dead eyes also wears a white glove. In the film these details do not seem like trifles embarrassingly inflated into opportunistic symbols; rather they are, as in music, passages through the major key in the midst of a series of modulations. In themselves and in their variants they speak everywhere for the ritualized distrust of and withdrawal from whatever puts a smudge on the immaculate

LA GRANDE ILLUSION: *Arrival at
the first prison camp.*

glove, photograph, or honor of the career officer. They have the look of manliness and the reality of suicidal courage; nowhere does Renoir disgrace them, as Zola would have done, with blunt, impatient “disclosures” of their dark side; and the watcher with a taste for soap-opera (or Hemingway) sentiment will see only beautiful reserve in the last words of Boeldieu and Rauffenstein. But through these words we can also see the dead end of a way of life which gives men nothing more to say to each other than small talk about marksmanship and agreement that death is “a good solution.” To those who are outraged by my discounting of the eloquence of the deathbed scene I can only say that I, too, have tried to find in it an argument against war based on the sense of waste we feel when we see the flower of a nation’s honor inextricably trapped into killing each other. However, I prefer to agree with Boeldieu, rather than cry for him: the “good solution” he reaches he has prepared, like the mathematician of behavior he is, with all but conscious accuracy. To cancel his death is to cancel the other side of his equation—his life; and the impulse to do this comes from what he calls the “shop-girl soul.”

If we have come a long way from the smudged reconnaissance photo, it is by a logic which finds in honor a ritual suicide only slightly more disguised than Russian roulette, and in this “dignified” suicide a disguise for the perfectionist’s fastidious rejection of life along with other messes. The logic, retraced, brings us to the end of the first episode and de Boeldieu’s amusing, suavely sarcastic indifference to which sort of flying clothes he will wear: the goatskin suits smell bad, while the fur suits shed hairs on his uniform.

The polarity of Maréchal and Boeldieu might have become clumsy and loud if its extremes had not been assigned to characters more remote from each other. The next two episodes introduce these surrogate figures in a beautifully subdued and suggestive sequence. First,



Boeldieu’s surrogate, von Rauffenstein. Immediately after we leave Boeldieu about to dress for flight, we meet Rauffenstein just taking off his flying clothes in *his* canteen—practically a replica of the French canteen—after the flight during which he shot down Boeldieu and Maréchal. The ease of this transition from freedom to captivity is one of the brilliant strokes of the film. It lets us know directly that we are not to be bothered by a rehash of patriotic hostilities and heroics, that except for the one great circumstance which makes some men captors and others captives, life and motives are pretty much the same on either side of the line. The central event of the episode is the dinner—a model of Hohenzollern gallantry—to which Rauffenstein treats his enemy. It is a courtly, almost formal affair, despite the operation-shack surroundings, resolutely above any cheap triumph or rancor, and Maréchal, the “officer by accident,” as the script describes him, seems almost imperceptibly out of place. Decidedly *in* place, however, and perhaps definitively so, is the unfortunate entry of a black wreath of mourning about to be delivered as a memorial to a fallen French pilot. The grace of Rauffenstein’s apology for the incident, like the grace of his apology to Boeldieu later, cannot quite disguise the fact that the fraternity of honor includes among its other courtesies that of mutual extinction, and the party is spared the stress of proving its ability to respect this condition by the arrival of the civilian police, who lead the prisoners off.

Very different is the dinner to which Rosenthal—Maréchal's surrogate—treats them. Just as the expected hostility of the conqueror fails to materialize at the front, so at the prison camp the cliché brutalities and deprivations are replaced by conviviality and, thanks to Rosenthal, abundance. There is a slap-dash, gossipy familiarity immediately set up, from which de Boeldieu seems slightly distinct, as did Maréchal on the preceding occasion. The quiet, bracketed exchange at the front, in which Maréchal and Broller, one of the German officers, discover that they have a trade in common, here becomes the tone of the occasion, open, eager, relaxed. These men are a civilian army, apparently more concerned with comfort and rapport than with the practice of war. They do not brace themselves with any pretensions, their motives for escape are as vague as their motives for fighting, and as various, while those of the career officers are single and clear. Their war is not the daytime chivalry of the air, but surreptitious nightly burrowing in the earth; and their reward is not a funeral wreath, but, as the engineer among them puns, "*une salade de pissenlits*."^{*} They too have a "death's-head" at the banquet, but appropriately lacking in glamour—the dull, cuckolded, square teacher, the epitome of petit-bourgeois failure.

The polarity of Rauffenstein and Rosenthal is too obvious to call for much explication. Junker and Jew were as relevant in 1938 as they could ever be, and there is not time here to explore all the varieties which keep the polarity alive but not obtrusive. More interesting than their personal differences are the clusters of ideas which gather around them. Each is representative of a brotherhood, an international elite. Rauffenstein is the spokesman for the European corps of military aristocracy left over from the French Revolution, Rosenthal for the international fraternity (French jargon for Jewry) of the chosen people. The one is jealous, exclusive, moribund, and in the process of being dispossessed; the other aspires to belong

anywhere and everywhere (Rosenthal was born in Vienna of a Danish mother and a French-naturalized Pole), is ingratiating, flourishing, and assuming the places—in one sense, at least—of the first.

Renoir redeems this banal motif by the quality of the association between Rosenthal and Maréchal. In the postscript to the film, to which I referred earlier, Renoir speaks of a ground of understanding (*un terrain d'entente*) to be discovered by men of good will, the true pacifists, whom he identifies as "authentic" Frenchmen, Americans, Germans, etc. This *terrain* appears in the film as Switzerland, the land whose frontiers are man-made, unnatural, as Rosenthal tells us at the end of the film—the refuge from enmities, the symbol of international sanctuary. Maréchal is an "authentic" Frenchman, and he does cross over into the land of understanding in a gesture of hope—not unmixed with irony, as we have seen, but still hope, and even encouragement. But what of Rosenthal? We have been carefully told that his Frenchness, like the food which reaches him in prison, is by special favor, whatever may be his legal status. And yet it is Rosenthal who has the map of how to get to Switzerland, the map for which Maréchal once thought him as mad as the translator of Pindar or the Senegalese with his drawing of Justice prosecuting Crime. The point would seem to be that it is the mark of the authentic Frenchman (or German, etc.) that he will put humanity—not some "other" nation, but humanity as detached as possible from specific national loyalties—before Frenchness, and that when Maréchal identifies himself with Rosenthal he finds "Switzerland." (Boeldieu's part in the escape I shall take up later.)

The faint resonance of "salvation" here is supported by Rosenthal's joking reference to Jesus as "my racial brother" during the Christmas Eve party at the farm, and by the obvious value of some form of Christian reference in a pacifist appeal. Here, as always, Rosenthal and Rauffenstein are arranged as opposites. To

* A crucial pun. *Pissenlits* are a kind of poor man's radish; but also, "*manger des pissenlits*" (to eat pissabeds) is slang for "to die," about equivalent to our "pushing up daisies."

Rauffenstein belong all the vestiges of Christian faith. His bedroom at the fortress is the ruined chapel, and we are introduced to it and to him in his new capacity as jailer by a pan which begins at a crucifix in stained glass. The death of Boeldieu, in that same chapel, is introduced by the priest closing the case over his missal, after administering extreme unction. To the despised Rosenthal, on the other hand, occurs the idea of celebrating—not a death, but the Nativity, and of carving the Holy Family out of food—potatoes!

A vague cultural corollary to the religious placement of the two men appears in the properties we find in their cinematic portraits. Rosenthal is typically filmed against a background of Botticelli reproductions and musical instruments, though he never *talks* about any interest in these arts. The typical background for Rauffenstein includes the photographic portrait of the Kaiser and Empress (these are generally relevant to the German side of the film, of course—one thinks of the huge photos at the German drinking hall in the first prison, and of Elsa's family portrait at the farm), and the mélange of weapons, toilet articles, and souvenirs of the chic bachelor.

As we move farther away from both the Maréchal–Boeldieu axis and its complement, we meet more abstract versions of the split. Language, for example, is a key tool for discriminating between “sides.” Again and again we find the language barrier is only superficially a barrier. We see a Russian trying in vain to teach Russian to a Frenchman; Maréchal tries unsuccessfully to tell an English officer just arriving about the nearly-completed escape tunnel at the prison camp he is leaving; he goes nearly frantic with frustration at not hearing French while he is in solitary confinement; he can hardly say a word to Elsa. But the “entente” in most such cases is there, even if the vocabulary is not—an entente depending finally on national authenticity rather than language. The facility in language of Rauffenstein and Boeldieu tends critically to emphasize their privacy—thus, the exchange leading up to the shooting of Boeldieu is in English, which puts it beyond the listening

soldiers, in a world of cosmopolitan isolation. And there is a touch of almost real regret in Rauffenstein's voice when he deplores the coming translation of “poor old Pindar.”

If we accept the polarity of ceremony and instinct as the scene, so to speak, of the action, we can see how much of the film is devoted to establishing the scene and the place of the various figures within it. But we have not said much about the action itself. In its simplest form, *La Grande Illusion* is the story of an escape from prison. With certain scenic and narrative embellishments the prison develops metaphorical qualities. The prisoners go farther and farther into a world of rock and snow and heights and age, where nothing can grow except one carefully tended flower. The sculpture, the commandant, the guards—everything is old, useless for anything except to constrict. In this sense the fortress—its name is Wintersborn—is really a state of mind as well as a prison. To escape from it, if you really have been in it, in the psychological sense, you must leave behind that part of you which is identified with it, and in doing so you sacrifice part of yourself. It is in this way, I think, that we are to understand the “sacrifice” of Boeldieu. To think of Boeldieu as a man who sacrifices himself “for” Maréchal and Rosenthal is to misunderstand and perhaps to belittle him. We must remember that when the time was approaching for the first escape, and Maréchal was in solitary confinement, Boeldieu showed no compunction at leaving Maréchal behind. Only Rosenthal felt that. And when Maréchal tried to express some thanks for what de Boeldieu was about to do at Wintersborn, de Boeldieu cut him off—partly, no doubt, because there is something distasteful in any such attempt, but partly, also, because Boeldieu was in fact not doing it for Maréchal and Rosenthal at all, but doing it in line with his attitude earlier: “What is a golf course for? To play golf. What is a tennis court for? To play tennis. What is a prison for? To escape from.” This is not precisely a man executing an assignment; rather, a man putting his life into practice. Fundamentally there is nothing accidental in his death, any more than there is any

real military exigency behind Rauffenstein's plea—"[Stop or] I'll have to shoot you." The death of one and dereliction of the other are built into their morale, and the fortress prison is the scenic metaphor of their destiny. Boeldieu is sacrificed, but not so much by himself as by the moral imagination that created him.

The escape is a confusion of trials, sufferings, anger, insults, and affection for Maréchal and Rosenthal, whose uninhibited releasings of emotion vividly contrast with the polite, unchanging (and fatal) relations of their opposites. The German farm to which they finally win is the metaphorical opposite to Wintersborn. It, also, is on a mountain-top, with the same horizon, but here Renoir writes freedom upon everything, with a stream of lovely frames in which open windows and doors spilling sunlight and the sense of distance combine with food and love unhesitatingly offered to make a kind of dream of gratification. It is only when the time has come to leave for the Swiss border that we realize with Maréchal the profundity and impossibility of the peace he has been offered, and, beyond him, its place in the dialectical action of the film. In this anonymous, irretrievable life we are given the terms of the pacifist's peace, not that we may have them, but that we may know them. The scene onto which the "authentic" man or pacifist steps is defined by conflict. There is no farm, nor its national

equivalent—"Switzerland"—to which he may here and now "cross over"; the war stretches before and after the action of the film. But to think of the action as an ironic dialectic is to settle for a futile tease under the name of tragedy, or at best a vague rousing of ourselves to prevent such a waste. The film is quieter, more explicit than that.

One of the many motifs we must leave unexamined is that of theatricality. Customary as the motif is in Renoir, it is especially suggestive here. The insistence war brings upon fixed functions or ranks or sides or roles prompts a counterplay of confusion or switch, and both vocabulary and device in the film deal constantly with these possibilities, in an attempt to sort out, after various stages of confusion and resettlement, at least *some* realities. As we might expect, the devices bear most upon Maréchal and de Boeldieu and upon the escape. We learn that in their various attempts to escape, Maréchal always disguises himself, whereas de Boeldieu, while he will bear the "smudges" of garbage cans, laundry baskets, and the like, and the more abstract humiliation of "making oneself small," as he says, will never disguise himself. (Nor does he take a part in the musicale.) But he refers to the coming escape at Wintersborn as a performance for which a rehearsal has been provided, and he himself is the central performer—playing in a grotesquely un-Boeldieu-like way upon a fife (for which instrument he has a horror, as we learn earlier). If I understand the film properly, these inversions (they are virtually innumerable) are a context for the realities (ironic, it is true) of death and freedom which the two heroes achieve, but any kind of adequate explication must be deferred.

So much praise has fallen to the artistry of this film that I hesitate to add more. Symbolic of its fidelity to observable life is the uniform Gabin wears as Maréchal—Renoir himself once wore it as a pilot in World War I. But everywhere the authentic background detail (to which Renoir paid very close attention) converts to meaningful participation. One thinks of the ubiquitous "no passage" signs; the con-

LA GRANDE ILLUSION: *Wintersborn—stone walls, white gloves, and the geranium, possibly the most famous flower in screen history.*



trast of the random, casual prisoner formations and the strict marching of German soldiers in the background; the poster of prison regulations which stands between Maréchal and de Boeldieu during their last good-bye. But more important than the profusion of this detail is its freedom from seeming "made" or set up: the film is a model of relaxed, harmonious style.

When a cast has fulfilled, as this one has, everything its director could ask, one can only praise or compare performances in terms not strictly just to the actors. Thus, the rightness of Gabin's performance does not quite overcome my sense that he is, by comparison with von Stroheim, a bit dull. Once, on the way from the cow shed to the farmhouse, he takes up a hatchet and sinks it cleanly farther into its stump. This little bonus of vitality is worth the rest of his "art" combined—it *is*, in fact, his art: an aura of good-natured, robust nonchalance, capable of real but limited sensitivity. And Fresnay, perfect as he may be, chooses or executes a perfection which cuts him off from too much. It is really von Stroheim, converting the Prussian mask into a register of extraordinary range, from crude disdain to the most delicate anguish, whose performance shows the greatest depth and control.

Renoir's gift for compositional beauty, usually absorbed in revealing the players at their best, adds real meaning to the film. The framing device of doors and windows so familiar in all his work has special significance in a context of escape and illusion. Trying, as he is, to state a truth about human possibility in terms which would be betrayed by dramatic intensity, he finds in the camera's steady revelations a wonderful resource. Perhaps the finest example is the series of compositions at the farm. After the claustrophobic density of the Wintersborn walls, and the perilous implications of its windows; after the bleak, shapeless exposures of the flight through the mountains, the shelter and freedom of the domestic life, multiplied with one invention after another of door and window composition, is transposed almost into that other dimension "where ask is have, where seek is find, where knock is open wide."



Erich von Stroheim

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