



[Vimeo link for ALL of Bruce Jackson's and Diane Christian's film introductions and post-film discussions in the virtual BFS](#)

[Vimeo link for our introduction to *La Grande Illusion*](#)

[Zoom link for all FALL 2021 BFS Tuesday 7:00 PM post-screening discussions](#)

Directed by Jean Renoir

Cinematography by Christian Matras

Film Editing by Marthe Huguet and Marguerite Renoir

The film was nominated for Best Picture at the 1939 Academy Awards.

Jean Gabin...Le lieutenant Maréchal

Dita Parlo...Elsa - Farm Woman

Pierre Fresnay...Le capitaine de Boeldieu

Erich von Stroheim...Le capitaine von Rauffenstein

Julien Carette...Cartier - l'acteur

Marcel Dalio...Le lieutenant Rosenthal

Jean Renoir (b. September 15, 1894, Paris, France—d. February 12, 1979, Beverly Hills, Los Angeles, California). Academy Awards—1975—Honorary Award. Jean Renoir directed 41 films, including 1970 "The Little Theatre of Jean Renoir", 1959 *Picnic on the Grass*, 1956 *Elena and Her Men*, 1954 *French Cancan*, 1952 *The Golden Coach*, 1951 *The River*, 1947 *The Woman on the Beach*, 1946 *The Diary of a Chambermaid*, 1945 *The Southerner*, 1943 *This Land Is Mine*, 1941 *Swamp Water*, 1939 *The Rules of the Game*, 1938 *La Bête Humaine*, 1938 *La Marseillaise*, 1937 *La Grande Illusion*, 1936 *The Lower Depths*, 1936 *The Crime of Monsieur Lange*, 1936 *A Day in the Country*, 1934 *Madame Bovary*,



1932 *Boudu Saved from Drowning*, 1931 *La Chienne*, 1931 *Baby's Laxative*, 1929 *Le bled*, 1927 *Marquitta*, 1926 *Nana*, and 1925 *Whirlpool of Fate*. He also wrote the screenplay and/or dialog for 37 of his films. He acted in 11 of them, most famously as Octave in *The Rules of the Game*.

Christian Matras (b. December 29, 1903, Valence, Drôme, Rhône-Alpes, France—b. May 4, 1977, Paris, France) was the cinematographer for 115 titles, among them 1972 *Not Dumb, the Bird*, 1971 *Variétés*, 1969 *The Milky Way*, 1968 *Birds in Peru*, 1967 *Risky Business*, 1967 *Woman Times Seven*, 1966 *La mujer perdida*, 1965 *The Lace Wars*, 1965 *Beatrice*, 1964 *This Special Friendship*, 1963 *Le journal d'un fou*, 1963 *Scheherazade*, 1962 *Cartouche*, 1958 *Le miroir à deux faces*, 1958 *Modigliani of Montparnasse*, 1955 *Lola Montès*, 1955 *The French, They Are a Funny Race*, 1955 *Nana*, 1954 *Madame du Barry*, 1953 *The Earrings of Madame de...*, 1951 *Bluebeard*, 1950 *La Ronde*, 1948 *L'aigle à deux têtes*, 1946 *L'idiot*, 1945 *Mademoiselle X*, 1942 *La loi du printemps*, 1942 *Wicked Duchess*, 1940 *Four Flights to Love*, 1939 *Le dernier tournant*, 1938 *Café de Paris*, 1938 *Legions*

of Honor, 1937 *La Grande Illusion*, 1937 *Les réprouvés*, 1936 *Maternité*, 1934 *The House on the Dune*, 1934 *S.S. Tenacity*, 1932 *Billeting Order*, and 1928 *Misdeal*.

Marthe Huguet edited 3 films: 1939 *The Rules of the Game*, 1937 *La Grande Illusion*, and 1936 *The Crime of Monsieur Lange*.

Marguerite Renoir (b. 1906 in France—d. July 1987, Paris, France) was the editor of 64 titles, including 1972 *Chut!*, 1970 *The Stud*, 1968 *The Big Wash*, 1967 *Les compagnons de la marguerite*, 1967 “Le crime de la rue de Chantilly,” 1966 *Masculin Féminin*, 1963 *The Virgins*, 1958 *Modigliani of Montparnasse*, 1957 *The Crucible*, 1954 *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves*, 1954 *Touchez Pas au Grisbi*, 1952 *Casque d'Or*, 1951 *L'enfant des neiges*, 1947 *Antoine et Antoinette*, 1947 *Last Refuge*, 1939 *The Rules of the Game*, 1938 *La Bête Humaine*, 1938 *La Marseillaise*, 1937 *La Grande Illusion*, 1936 *The Lower Depths*, 1936 *La vie est à nous*, 1936 *Under Western Eyes*, 1936 *The Crime of Monsieur Lange*, 1936 *A Day in the Country*, 1935 *Mysteries of Paris*, 1934 *Madame Bovary*, 1932 *Boudu Saved from Drowning*, 1932 *Night at the Crossroads*, and 1931 *La Chienne*.



Jean Gabin (b. Jean-Alexis Moncorgé, May 17, 1904 in Paris, France—d. November 15, 1976, Neuilly-sur-Seine, Hauts-de-Seine, France) acted in 98 titles, including 1976 *Holy Year*, 1974 *Verdict*, 1970 *The Horse*, 1969 *The Sicilian Clan*, 1966 *The Gardener of Argenteuil*, 1964 *Monsieur*, 1962 *A Monkey in Winter*, 1961 *The President*, 1959 *Archimède, le clochard*, 1958 *The Night Affair*, 1958 *Les Misérables*, 1958 *Inspector Maigret*, 1957 *The Case of Dr. Laurent*, 1956 *Crime and Punishment*, 1956 *Deadlier Than the Male*, 1955 *House on the*

Waterfront, 1955 *Napoléon*, 1954 *French Cancan*, 1954 *Touchez Pas au Grisbi*, 1952 *The Moment of Truth*, 1951 *Victor*, 1939 *Daybreak*, 1938 *La Bête Humaine*, 1938 *Port of Shadows*, 1937 *The Messenger*, 1937 *La Grande Illusion*, 1937 *Pépé le Moko*, 1936 *The Lower Depths*, 1936 *They Were Five*, 1935 *Behold the Man*, 1934 *Zouzou*, 1933 *High and Low*, 1932 *La belle marinière*, 1931 *The Darling of Paris*, 1931 *Méphisto*, 1931 *Pour un soir..!*, 1930 *Chacun sa chance*, 1928 *Les lions*, and 1928 *Ohé! Les valises*.

Dita Parlo (b. Grethe Gerda Kornstädt September 4, 1908 in Stettin, Pomerania, Germany [now Szczecin, Zachodniopomorskie, Poland]—d. December 12, 1971, Paris, France) acted in 29 films, among them 1965 *The Queen of Spades*, 1940 *Cristobal's Gold*, 1938 *Ultimatum*, 1938 *Street Without Joy*, 1937 *L'affaire du courrier de Lyon*, 1937 *La Grande Illusion*, 1937 *Mademoiselle Docteur*, 1934 *The Kidnapping*, 1934 *L'Atalante*, 1931 *Die heilige Flamme*, 1931 *Girls for Sale*, 1931 *Kismet*, 1929 *Melody of the Heart*, 1928 *Secrets of the Orient*, and 1928 *Homecoming*.

Pierre Fresnay (b. Pierre Jules Louis Laudénbach April 4, 1897, Paris, France—d. January 9, 1975, Neuilly-sur-Seine, Hauts-de-Seine, Île-de-France, France) acted in 83 titles, including 1973 “Le jardinier,” 1973 “Les écrivains,” 1971 “Père,” 1960 *The Thousandth Window*, 1959 *Les affreux*, 1957 *A Bomb for a Dictator*, 1955 *The Aristocrats*, 1955 *The Fugitives*, 1952 *Dr. Schweitzer*, 1949 *Just Out*, 1949 *Barry*, 1947 *Monsieur Vincent*, 1943 *Le Corbeau: The Raven*, 1942 *The Murderer Lives at Number 21*, 1938 *Three Waltzes*, 1937 *La bataille silencieuse*, 1937 *La Grande Illusion*, 1937 *Mademoiselle Docteur*, 1936 *César*, 1936 *Under Western Eyes*, 1934 *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, 1934 *La dame aux camélias*, 1932 *Fanny*, 1931 *Marius*, 1923 *Le petit Jacques*, 1922 *Mysteries of Paris*, 1921 *L'essor*, and 1916 *Quand meme*.

Erich von Stroheim (b. Erich Oswald Stroheim September 22, 1885, Vienna, Austria-Hungary [now Austria]—d. May 12, 1957, Maurepas, Yvelines, France) has acted in 74 titles, among them 1955 *La madone des sleepings*, 1955 *Napoléon*, 1953 *The Other Side of Paradise*, 1950 *Sunset Blvd.*, 1949 *Portrait d'un assassin*, 1949 *Le signal rouge*, 1946 *Devil and the Angel*, 1946 *One Does Not Die That Way*, 1944 *Storm Over Lisbon*, 1943 *The North Star*,

1941 *So Ends Our Night*, 1940 *Thunder Over Paris*, 1938 *It Happened in Gibraltar*, 1938 *Ultimatum*, 1937 *Under Secret Orders*, 1937 *The Alibi*, 1937 *La Grande Illusion*, 1937 *Marthe Richard*, 1935 *The Crime of Doctor Crespi*, 1932 *The Lost Squadron*, 1930 *Three Faces East*, 1924 *Greed*, 1918 *The Hun Within*, 1918 *Hearts of the World*, 1917 *Panthea*, 1916 *The Social Secretary*, 1916 *Intolerance: Love's Struggle Throughout the Ages*, 1916 *Macbeth*, and 1915 *The Birth of a Nation*. In addition, he directed 12 films: 1934 *Fugitive Road*, 1933 *Hello, Sister!*, 1929 *The Great Gabbo*, 1929 *Queen Kelly*, 1928 *The Wedding March*, 1928 *The Honeymoon*, 1925 *The Merry Widow*, 1924 *Greed*, 1923 *Merry-Go-Round*, 1922 *Foolish Wives*, 1920 *The Devil's Passkey*, and 1919 *Blind Husbands*. He also wrote scripts (19), designed costumes (4 films), edited (3, including the 42-reel version of *Greed*), and was art director (5). And he performed the "Toccatà and Fugue in D-Minor, BWV 565" in *Sunset Boulevard*. It's not clear when he picked up the "von"; he didn't have it when he left his father's hat factory in Vienna.

Julien Carette (b. Julien Victor December 23, 1897, Paris, France—d. July 20, 1966, Saint-Germain-en-Laye, Yvelines, France) acted in 131 films, among them 1964 *The Adventures of Salavin*, 1963 *The Blockhead Fair*, 1959 *The Green Mare*, 1958 *Le miroir à deux faces*, 1956 *Crime and Punishment*, 1953 *What Rascals Men Are*, 1952 *Holiday for Henrietta*, 1950 *His Last Twelve Hours*, 1943 *La bonne étoile*, 1943 *A Star to the Sun*, 1942 *Lettres d'amour*, 1940 *Thunder Over Paris*, 1939 *The Rules of the Game*, 1939 *Le paradis des voleurs*, 1939 *The World Will Shake*, 1939 *Derrière la façade*, 1939 *Coral Reefs*, 1938 *La Bête Humaine*, 1938 *Café de Paris*, 1938 *La Marseillaise*, 1937 *The Buttock*, 1937 *La Grande Illusion*, 1937 *La reine des resquilleuses*, 1936 *Marinella*, 1935 *Speak to Me of Love*, 1935 *Gangster malgré lui*, 1934 *Un petit trou pas cher*, 1933 *La pouponnière*, 1933 *Baby*, 1931 *American Love*, and 1931 *Attaque nocturne*.

Marcel Dalio (b. Israel Moshe Blauschild July 17, 1900, Paris, France—d. November 20, 1983, Paris, France) acted in 178 films, including 1982 "Les longuelune," 1982 "Ultimatum," 1978 *The Paradise of Riches*, 1978 *The Honorable Society*, 1975 *Village Girls*, 1975 *The Beast*, 1973 *The Mad Adventures of 'Rabbi' Jacob*, 1970 *The Great White Hope*, 1970 *Catch-22*, 1969 *Justine*, 1967 *The Oldest Profession*, 1964 *Wild and Wonderful*, 1963 *Donovan's Reef*,

1963 *The List of Adrian Messenger*, 1962 *Cartouche*, 1961 *The Devil at 4 O'Clock*, 1960 *Can-Can*, 1959 *Pillow Talk*, 1959 *The Man Who Understood Women*, 1959 "Maverick," 1958 *Lafayette Escadrille*, 1957 *The Sun Also Rises*, 1956 *Miracle in the Rain*, 1954 *Sabrina*, 1953 *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, 1952 *The Snows of Kilimanjaro*, 1952 *The Merry Widow*, 1952 *Lovely to Look at*, 1945 *A Bell for Adano*, 1944 *To Have and Have Not*, 1944 *Pin Up Girl*, 1943 *The Song of Bernadette*, 1943 *The Desert Song*, 1943 *Tonight We Raid Calais*, 1942 *Casablanca*, 1941 *The Shanghai Gesture*, 1940 *Thunder Over Paris*, 1939 *The Rules of the Game*, 1938 *Sirocco*, 1938 *Les pirates du rail*, 1937 *Miarka*, 1937 *The Kiss of Fire*, 1937 *Sarati the Terrible*, 1937 *La Grande Illusion*, 1937 *The Pearls of the Crown*, 1937 *Marthe Richard*, 1937 *A Man to Kill*, 1937 *Woman Racket*, 1937 *Pépé le Moko*, 1936 *The Life and Loves of Beethoven*, 1936 *The Golem*, 1935 *Turandot, princesse de Chine*, and 1931 *Olive passager clandestin*.



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French director and scenarist, was born in Montmartre, second of the three sons of Pierre-Auguste Renoir, the impressionist painter, and his wife Aline, née Charigot....Renoir grew up in three environments: in Paris, in his mother's Burgundian village of Essoyes, and in Provence, where the family often spent winters. Much of his upbringing was entrusted to his adored Gabrielle, Aline Renoir's young cousin, who lived with the family.

“I was a spoiled child. Family life surrounded me with a protective wall, softly padded on the inside. Outside, impressive personages bustled about. I would have like to join them and be impressive myself. Unfortunately nature had made me a coward. As soon as I detected a crack in the protective wall, I yelled with terror.”

By the time his second son was born, Auguste Renoir was fifty-three, and his paintings, scornfully rejected twenty years earlier, were becoming accepted and salable. Jean Renoir (who often served as his father’s model) was brought up in comfortable, though never luxurious, surroundings, which he recalled as full of laughter, light, friendship and vivid physical sensation, “a simple environment in which nothing trashy was tolerated.” His first experience of the cinema, which took place in 1898, was inauspicious (“I howled as usual and had to be taken out”), but his introduction to the Guignol theatre at the Tuileries, two years later, sparked off a lifelong enthusiasm for the stage, as well as “a taste for naïve stories and a deep mistrust of what is generally called psychology.” Since his father considered all attempts to train children a waste of time, it was not until Renoir was seven that he was sent to school—to the Collège Saint-Croix at Neuilly, where he had been preceded by his elder brother Pierre.

Unlike his brother, Renoir was unhappy at Saint-Croix. He ran away several times before his parents moved him to the less strict Sainte-Marie de Monceau, where he greatly enjoyed the weekly movie show featuring a car-mad comedian named Automaboul. From there he moved to the École Massena in Nice, and in 1913 earned his Baccalauréat in mathematics and philosophy from the University of Aix-en-Provence. He had taken to writing poetry, and there was talk of his becoming a writer. However, “I began to realize that my father was an important artist, and it rather frightened me, and I tried to set my mind to everything that was contrary to art...I was very fond of horses, and so I wanted to be a cavalry officer.” He therefore enlisted as a sergeant in the Chasseurs Alpains. At the outbreak of World War I

he was commissioned second lieutenant and sent to the Vosges front, where “a Bavarian sniper did me the service of putting a bullet in my thigh.” Hospitalized with a fractured femur, he was only saved from having his leg amputated by the intervention of his mother, by then gravely ill with diabetes. She died two months later.

Renoir’s wound healed, but he was left with a permanent limp. While convalescing, he developed a passion for the cinema, often seeing twenty or more pictures a week, almost always American pictures. On a friend’s recommendation, he sought out Chaplin’s films. “To say that I was enthusiastic would be inadequate. I was carried away. The genius of Charlot had been revealed to me.” He even persuaded his father, now confined to a wheelchair, to buy a projector so that they could watch Chaplin movies together in the studio.

In 1916, returning to active duty, Renoir transferred to the Flying Corps and became a pilot. After several successful missions, he crashed, thereby aggravating his leg injury, and decided that he had seen enough combat. “French aviation lost little by this. I was not a very good pilot.” Securing the undemanding post of chief military

censor at Nice (“There was never anything to censor”), he spent most of his time at his father’s studio, a few miles away in Cagnes. Though immobilized, August Renoir was still actively painting; his most frequent model was a young Alsatian woman, Andrée Heuschling, with whom Jean fell in love. They were married in January 1920, a few weeks after Auguste Renoir’s death. Their son Alain, Renoir’s only child, was born in 1921.

For four years Renoir worked at pottery and ceramics, in company with his wife, his younger brother Claude, and various friends, but his interests were turning towards filmmaking. Two pictures in particular decided him: Voilkov’s *Le Brasier ardent* with Mosjoukine; and Stroheim’s *Foolish Wives*, which he saw ten times, stirred by the cinematic possibilities it revealed. “I started out in the cinema because I was interested in trick shots...purely in technique and trick shots,” he later recalled, although elsewhere he stated that “I



Jean Renoir par son père

only ventured into cinema in the hope of making my wife a star....I did not foresee that, once caught up in the machinery, I would never be able to escape.” Whatever the reason, in March 1924 he began work on *Catherine*, otherwise known as *Une Vie sans joie*, with Andrée starring under the name of Catherine Hessling. The director was the actor Albert Dieudonné (who played Napoleon in Gance’s grandiose epic), though some surviving prints credit Renoir with codirection. He certainly produced and scripted, besides taking a small role as a lecherous *sous-préfet*.

...In his autobiography Renoir expressed the hope “that no trace exists of this masterpiece of banality.” After its brief release in 1924, Dieudonné withdrew the film for re-editing, and re-released it three years later; in neither version did it achieve much success. But Renoir, eager to direct on his own account, proceeded with much of the same team to make *La Fille de l’eau* (1924).

Once again Hessling played a victimized heroine, daughter of a canal boatman who drowns, leaving her at the mercy of her brutal and lecherous uncle—a villain sneeringly portrayed by Renoir’s friend Pierre Lestringuez, who also provided the scenario. Pierre Renoir, by now a leading stage actor, made a brief appearance as a pitchfork-wielding peasant. Most of the film was shot on location in the forest of Fontainebleau and on the banks of the Loing, showing Renoir, in Richard Roud’s view, “already capable of capturing on the screen the atmosphere and beauty of landscape, and of suggesting that almost pagan reverence for nature which was to run through much of his work.” Together with this pictorial realism came a strong element of fantasy, in particular some hallucinatory dream sequences....Jacques Brunius, who later often worked with Renoir, wrote that *La Fille de l’eau* was the first film to show “a really dream-like dream.”

The general public, though, was not much taken with the picture, and Renoir, temporarily despairing of the cinema, opened an art gallery in Paris. Since he never had much head for business,

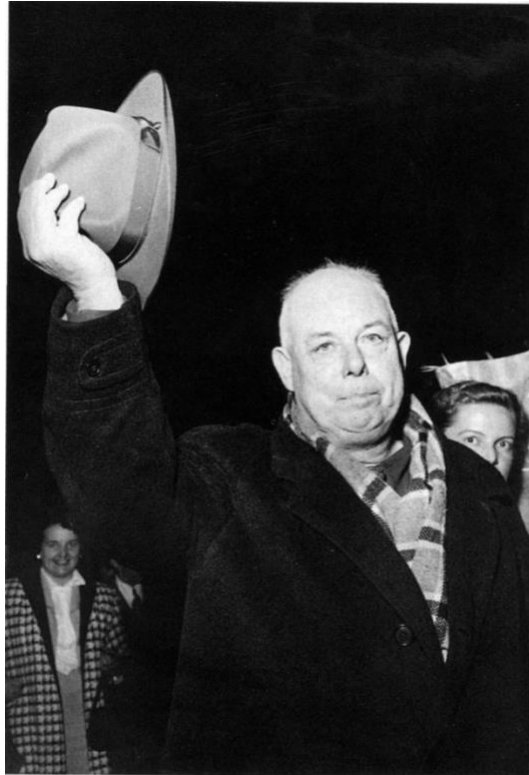
this foundered after a few months. In any case, the pull of movie-making proved too strong, and towards the end of 1925 he began to work on an ambitious new project: an adaptation of Zola’s novel *Nana*, planned as the first Franco-German coproduction and lavishly budgeted at over a million francs. The script was again by Lestringuez, in collaboration with Renoir himself and Zola’s daughter Denise Leblond-Zola, and the sets and costumes were designed by Claude Autant-Lara, the first of several future directors Renoir helped to launch.

Renoir’s first two films introduce two of the primary themes of his work: nature and the theatre. Generally reckoned as the best of his silent movies and visibly influenced by Stroheim, *Nana* (1926) traces the rise to fame, via the stage and the bedroom, of a slum-born girl in Second Empire Paris.... *Nana* was premiered in Paris to a very mixed reception. In some quarters the film was

attacked for being part-German, and Renoir himself encountered a good deal of professional hostility, being seen as a rich amateur trying to buy his way into the industry. He had, it was true, invested a million francs of his own money, raised by selling pictures left him by his father; and when *Nana*, despite some very favorable reviews, proved a financial disaster, he had to sell a lot more to meet the bills.

Realizing that, for a while at least, he would have to make commercial potboilers if he wanted to work in cinema at all, Renoir “deserted the ranks of the avant-garde for those of industry.”

...The best of Renoir’s commercial chores of the period was his contribution to the popular genre of *comique troupier* (military farce), *Tire au flanc* (1928). A boisterously episodic account of a young man’s induction into the army, “it does for barracks life,” wrote Bernard Mylonas, “what Vigo’s *Zéro de Conduite* was to do for life in a boarding school,” and it gave Michel Simon, playing the recruit’s valet, his first substantial screen role. Richard Abel considered it “Renoir’s



most underrated silent film” and “a first-rate social satire.”

...Renoir welcomed the coming of sound with delight, hailing it as “a magical transformation, as if someone had opened a secret door of communication between the filmmaker and his audience.” For a time, though, it seriously hampered his career...[as] he was seen as a director of cumbersome and costly period pieces, incapable of working with the speed and efficiency demanded by the new technology. For two years he was unable to find backing, until in 1931 his friend Pierre Braunberger set up a production company with Roger Richebé and took over the old Billancourt studios. Even then Renoir had to prove himself, and to do so shot his first sound film in six days for 200,000 francs.

This was a scatological Feydeau farce, *On purge Bébé* (1931), concerning the constipated son of a manufacturer of unbreakable chamber pots, with a cast that included Michel Simon and (in his screen debut) Fernandel. It found instant success, recouping its cost within a week of opening; the fidelity with which the soundtrack captured the flush of a lavatory was widely appreciated.

...Having passed his test, Renoir was allowed to start work on the first of his major films, *La Chienne* (1931)...”During the making of *La Chienne*, I was ruthless and, I must admit, intolerable. I made the film the way I wanted it, with no reference to the producer’s wishes. I never showed an inch of film or a scrap of dialogue, and I arranged for the rushes to remain invisible until the film was complete.” The producer, Roger Richebé, who had expected a farce, “found himself watching a somber, hopeless drama with a murder for light relief” and banished Renoir from the studio, calling in Paul Fejös to re-edit the material. When Fejös refused, Renoir was allowed back, and the film opened to a mixed but lively reception. The dispute with Richebé, though, earned Renoir a reputation for being difficult, and various projects including a filmed *Hamlet* with Michel Simon in the title role—fell through for want of backing....

“My work as a director,” Renoir once



observed, “starts with the actor....I don’t want the movements of the actors to be determined by the camera, but the movements of the camera to be determined by the actors.” Rather than mold his players into a predetermined scheme, he would readily modify scenes, dialogue, even the whole drift of a film in the light of insights that emerged from a developing performance. One inspired result of such creative collaboration was *Boudu sauvé des eaux* (*Boudu Saved from Drowning*, 1932), a long-neglected film now widely considered the first of Renoir’s masterpieces; in *Sight and Sound* (Summer, 1960) Peter John Dyer described it as “a film of such fresh, simple joy and total harmony between actor, director and setting that one can only regard it as a perfect example of collective evolution.”

housemaid. To regularize the situation, Boudu is married off to the maid. As the wedding party floats merrily along the river, Boudu topples overboard; while the rest mourn his death, he surfaces downstream, wades ashore, swaps clothes with a scarecrow and strolls off across the summer meadows.

Boudu has

sometimes been represented as a pointed and virulent attack on the bourgeoisie (Gerald Mast referred to “the venomous energy of Renoir’s spitting...on the whole of Western civilization”), but such a reading seems difficult to sustain in the face of the film’s genial exuberance— even if no opportunity is missed of satirizing the pretensions of the Lestingois household....

The anarchistic irreverence of *Boudu* owes a good deal to the political climate of the time; a similar spirit suffuses the Prévert brothers’ *L’Affaire est dans le sac* and (in a cooler mode) Clair’s *À nous la liberté*. Renoir, though never formally a member, had close contacts with several people in the left-wing agit-prop Groupe Octobre, including the Préverts (Pierre Prévert had lent a hand with *On purge Bébé* and *La Chienne* and Jacques Brunius. Brunius, in turn, was among those who during the thirties formed part of Renoir’s informal stock company, acting or otherwise assisting as occasion demanded.

Pierre Leprohon went so far as to say that “any ‘commitment’ is an abandonment of freedom, of that freedom without which there can be no art.” By this logic, either Renoir was not, at this time, a politically committed filmmaker, or the films that he made from *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange* to *La Règle du jeu*—on most counts, the finest work of his career—are not art. Either position seems hard to sustain.

Though nearly all films are works of collaboration, and Renoir’s more than most (“When I make a film, I am asking others to influence me”), *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange* (1936) is especially so; it bears Renoir’s signature as director but should perhaps be credited to the Groupe Octobre, whose first film it was. Aptly enough, the plot celebrates collectivity....

Predictably enough, *Lange* was vituperated by the right-wing press, but otherwise warmly received. Renoir, now considered the leading cinematic spokesman for the Left, was invited by the Communist Party to make a propaganda film in preparation for the forthcoming national elections.

His exact role in the making of *La Vie est à nous* (*People of France*, 1936) has been variously defined: “supervising director” probably comes closest. Even more than *Lange*, *La Vie* was a collaborative project, made (according to the



credit titles) “by a team of technicians, artists and workers.” Scenes were shot by half-a-dozen other directors beside Renoir, including Jacques Becker, Jacques Brunius and Henri Cartier-Bresson....

In its brief, seemingly artless simplicity, *Partie de campagne* must be the most perfect unfinished film ever made. The action, based on Maupassant’s short story, takes place in the 1860s.... One of Renoir’s most personal works, filmed at Marlotte on the Loire where Auguste Renoir used to paint, *Partie de campagne* was shot almost *en famille*. Alain, Renoir’s son, took a small role, as did Marguerite Renoir and the director himself, hamming throatily as the *patron* of the inn. Claude Renoir was cinematographer, and most of

the stock company lent a hand with the filming. For all this, the atmosphere on the shoot seems to have been poisonous. Sylvia Bataille, whose hauntingly vulnerable performance as Henriette holds the film’s emotional center, recalled days of miserable waiting, bitter quarrels, drunkenness, and recrimination—none of which shows in the film’s mood of elegiac nostalgia and bittersweet regret....

Les Bas-Fonds became one of Renoir’s biggest box-office successes. It also earned him the Prix Louis Delluc, and he was made a Chevalier of the Légion d’Honneur by the socialist government of Leon Blum. With this prestige, and the support of Jean Gabin, Renoir finally managed to secure backing for a project he had been working on for three years. *La Grande Illusion*, Renoir explained, is a war film without heroes or villains, in which “the villain is the war.” But not simply the war as such; all the divisive barriers—of nation, class, race, or religion which preclude fraternity, and which lead to wars, are equally indicted....” “I made *La Grande Illusion* because I am a pacifist,” Renoir affirmed, although he also suggested that

the film owed its initial success to being a prison-break movie.... The film was widely acclaimed, both in France and abroad, as a masterpiece. In New York it ran for twenty-six weeks; it was nominated for an

Oscar, and President Roosevelt declared that “all the democracies of the world should see this film.”... At the Venice Biennale, pressure was put on the jury not to award it the top honor, the Mussolini Cup; a special award, the International Jury Cup, had to be created instead, after which the film was banned in Italy. It was also banned in Germany, and in Belgium.... During and immediately after the war the film suffered various cuts (although it had been suppressed by the Nazis, it was attacked after the liberation for being pro-German), but the complete version was restored in 1958, in time to be voted fifth greatest film of all time at the Brussels World Fair.

In recent years the reputation of *La Grande*

Illusion has slipped a little, supplanted as Renoir's supreme achievement—at least in most critics' estimation—by *La Règle du jeu*. . . . Renoir was now generally recognized, even by those who disliked his political stance, as one of the foremost directors in France.

Despite this, he could rarely find anyone willing to back the films he wanted to make. "Even after *La Grande Illusion* had made a fortune for its producer I had difficulty in raising money for my own projects. I was not, and still am not, 'commercial.'" The failure of *La Marseillaise* having done little to further his box-office standing, he accepted an assignment from the Hakim brothers' company, Paris Film, to direct Jean Gabin in a 1938 version of Zola's *La Bête Humaine* (*The Human Beast*)—mainly he later insisted, "because Gabin and I wanted to play with trains." . . .

Of all Renoir's films, *La Règle du jeu* (*The Rules of the Game*, 1939) is the richest and most complex, the most subtly composed both in the interweavings of its narrative intrigue and in its wider implications. . . . It is, Penelope Gilliatt wrote, "not only a masterpiece of filmmaking, not only a great work of humanism in a perfect rococo frame, but also an act of historical testimony." Renoir himself, describing the film as "a sort of reconstructed documentary . . . on the condition of a society at a given moment," added: "It is a war film, and yet there is no reference to the war. Beneath its seemingly innocuous appearance the story attacked the very structure of our society." . . .

"The failure of *La Règle du jeu* so depressed me that I resolved either to give up the cinema or to leave France." As things worked out, Renoir chose the latter option. It would be fifteen years before he made another film in France. In July 1939, shortly after the disastrous premiere of *La Règle*, he left for Rome, where he had been invited by the Scalera company to direct a film of Puccini's *Tosca*. His relationship with Marguerite Renoir having ended, his companion on the Italian trip (and henceforward) was Dido Freire, Cavalcanti's niece, who had worked with him as



his secretary and continuity assistant.

When war broke out in September 1939 Renoir returned home. For the time being, Mussolini remained neutral, and a few months later Renoir was persuaded by the French Ministry of Information, anxious to maintain good relations with Italy, to go back and resume filming in Rome. He did so, but had directed only a few shots when in June 1940 Italy declared war on France and Renoir departed hastily, leaving the film to his assistants Carl Koch and Luchino Visconti. *La Tosca* (1941) finally appeared with Koch credited as sole director.

As the Germans advanced on Paris, Renoir and Dido Freire joined the trek southward, finally reaching Auguste Renoir's old house at Cagnes, where Renoir's brother Claude now lived. While there, he received an invitation, couched in seductive terms, to make films for the German government. "So attractive and dazzling did their offers become . . . that I felt it might be better for me to leave." Through the influence of Robert Flaherty and Albert Lewin, who had met him in Paris before the war, Renoir was granted an entry visa to the United States. In December 1940, having travelled via Algiers, Casablanca, and Lisbon, he and Dido took ship for New York; Renoir found himself

sharing a cabin with Antoine de Saint-Exupéry.

Renoir arrived in Hollywood in January 1941 and signed a one-year contract with Darryl F. Zanuck at Fox—a relationship characterized, on both sides, by well-meaning incomprehension. Renoir suggested various subjects, including Saint-Exupéry's *Terre des hommes*, which the studio

turned down as "too European." Fox, for their part, came up with a range of action-packed melodramas which Renoir politely declined. Eventually agreement was reached on *Swamp Water*, a script by Dudley Nichols based on a recent novel by Vereen Bell, set in the Okefenokee Swamp in Georgia. In its subject—a man falsely accused of murder and driven to take refuge in the swamp—Renoir may have seen the opportunity for an exploration of the relations between man,

society, and nature. As things turned out, he felt that he had “passed by a great subject without penetrating it...but it is still something to be able to direct a film with a story that is not completely idiotic.”

“What bothered me in Hollywood wasn’t interference,” Renoir later explained. “I love interference; it produces discussion, and discussion frequently helps you improve your work....People believe that Hollywood producers are very greedy and think only of earning lots of money, but that’s not true. The defect is much more dangerous: they want their films to be technically perfect.” The shooting of *Swamp Water* (1941), he had assumed, would allow him to escape from the studio and film on location in the Okefenokee itself. Zanuck maintained that Fox could build a swamp as good or even better than Nature’s in the controllable environment of the studio. In the end, Renoir was allowed to film a few exteriors in Georgia with his lead actor, Dana Andrews, but with none of the other players, not any sound equipment. Swamp sound effects would be created back in the studio, along with the rest of the film.

Renoir completed *Swamp Water* in a state of misery. Though he got on well with his cast and crew, the Fox approach to filmmaking baffled and depressed him. “I ask you not to judge my work in America by this film, which will be Mr. Zanuck’s and not mine,” he told Dudley Nichols. “I would rather sell peanuts in Mexico than make films at Fox.” He was further hampered by his limited English, and by worries about his son Alain, who was still in Vichy territory....Despite Renoir’s unhappiness, *Swamp Water* got good notices and received the New York Critics Award.

Having severed his Fox contract, to the relief of both parties, Renoir found himself out of work but under no urgent financial pressure. Towards the end of the year he managed to secure his son’s passage to America; Alain Renoir arrived in December and soon afterwards enlisted in the US Army. In February 1942 Renoir signed a long-term deal with Universal, but after a few day’s work on a Deanna Durbin vehicle, *Forever Yours*, he asked

to be released from his contract....

When, after the war Renoir’s American films were eventually released in France, none of them aroused much enthusiasm. The most hostile reception greeted *This Land is Mine* (1943)....With its pasteboard studio sets, well-nourished Hollywood faces (Maureen O’Hara, Kent Smith), and ringingly sententious dialogue, *This Land is Mine* seems now absurdly remote from any kind of reality. All that saves it from inanity is the passionate sincerity of Renoir’s intentions, detectable even through Laughton’s barnstorming peroration. The same emotional commitment can be felt in *Salute to France* (1944), a half-hour propaganda film codirected by Renoir and Garson Kanin for the Office of War Information. Alternating staged sequences with documentary footage, it was intended to offer GIs some understanding of the country they were about to liberate. (Renoir also recalled having worked, uncredited, on other propaganda films around this time, but never identified them.) In February 1944, while *Salute to France* was in preparation, Renoir and Dido Freire were married.

Looking back on his Hollywood films, Renoir reflected that “while not regretting them, I’m all too well aware that they come nowhere near my ideal.” The least unsatisfactory, he felt, was *The Southerner* (1945); many critics have agreed....The film was based on a novel by George Sessions

Perry, *Hold Autumn in Your Hand*, about the struggles of a poor farming family in Texas. Renoir wrote his own script (with some uncredited help from William Faulkner), and was given complete freedom to film as he wanted, largely on location with a small crew and relatively unknown actors. His set designer was Eugène Lourié, who



had worked on *La Grande Illusion* and *La Règle du jeu*....”Physically,” James Agee wrote in *The Nation*, it is one of the most sensitive and beautifully American-made pictures I have seen....It gets perfectly the mournful, hungry mysteriousness of a Southern country winter.” He was less happy with the actors, most of whom he

found “screechingly, unbearably wrong. They didn’t walk right, stand right, eat right, sound right or look right, and...it was clear that the basic understanding and the basic emotional and mental...attitudes were wrong, to the point of unintentional insult.”... *The Southerner* was picketed and boycotted throughout the South and banned in Agee’s native Tennessee. Elsewhere, though, it was warmly received. Winning an Oscar nomination (for best director) and several other awards, and becoming the only commercial hit of Renoir’s American period. ...

For the last film of his American period, Renoir returned to RKO, for whom he had made *This Land is Mine*. As with *Madame Bovary*, it is difficult to assess *The Woman on the Beach* (1947), since the original (which no longer survives) was heavily cut and reshot. This time, though, no heavy-handed executive can be blamed; the butcher was Renoir himself....

For Renoir, as for other European exiles with a history of prewar leftist sympathies, the political climate in the USA was starting to turn cold; for this and other reasons, he was coming to feel himself alienated from Hollywood. “Since the death of Lubitsch,” he observed sadly, “the idea of a filmmaker, as such, has vanished from Hollywood. It happens all too often that the post of director consists of little more than a folding chair with his name on it.” California remained his

second home; his son Alain was studying at Santa Barbara, with a view to an academic career, and just after the war Renoir had become a naturalized American, retaining dual French-US citizenship. But America no longer seemed a good place to make films in, although some unspecified reluctance prevented Renoir returning

directly to France. Instead he embarked on a long detour, by way of India and Italy.

While still struggling to salvage *Woman on the Beach*, Renoir had come across Rumer Godden’s *The River*, a semi-autobiographical novel based on her own Anglo-Indian childhood, and had secured an option on it. Backing proved hard to come



by.... Working closely together, Renoir and Godden devised a script which, with each successive draft, diverged further from conventional narrative structure to incorporate documentary and lyrical episodes, ending up as (in Renoir’s words) “an Occidental meditation on the Orient.... I wanted to bear witness to a civilization which wasn’t based on profit.” The picture was to be shot entirely on location in India, and in color—the first color film that either Renoir or his nephew Claude, the cinematographer, had ever worked on....

In July 1951 Renoir arrived in Italy, a few days before *The River* won the International Critics Prize at the Venice Biennale. This was fortuitous; he had come to direct an Italian-French-British coproduction, *The Golden Coach* (1953), originally planned for Visconti. (It was released in three languages, but Renoir always considered the English version to be the original, since the other two were post-synched.)...

With *French Cancan* (1955), Renoir made his long-awaited return to the French film industry, and also to the Montmartre of his boyhood.

Conceived as a riposte to the Hollywood view of Bel Époque shown in Huston’s *Moulin Rouge*, the film offers a romanticized account of the founding of the Moulin by Ziegler (called Danglard in the film, and played, in his fourth and last role for Renoir, by Jean Gabin).... Like *The Golden Coach*, *French Cancan* is frankly and unashamedly

theatrical, its Montmartre an idealized studio construction complete with crescent moon.... Renoir’s preoccupation with theatre at this period was not limited to the subjects of his films; he was also branching out as a playwright and stage director. On 10th July 1954 he directed single open-air production of Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* in the Roman arena at Arles to commemorate the 2,000th anniversary of Caesar’s

founding of the city....

In making *Elena*, Renoir was fulfilling a long-standing ambition to shoot a film with Ingrid Bergman, and especially one in which she could be seen “laughing and smiling.” Filming, as it turned out was less happy experience due to linguistic problems; neither Bergman nor Ferrer spoke

French, and the rest of the cast knew little English. Despite this, the warmth and gaiety of Bergman's performance glow from the screen, and almost contrive—with the help of Claude Renoir's vibrant color photography—to carry the film over its dramatic and political inadequacies. At least, they do so in the French version; the American version, which Warners truncated, partially reshot, and released under the title *Paris Does Strange Things*, is probably beyond redemption. Renoir, furious, disowned it.

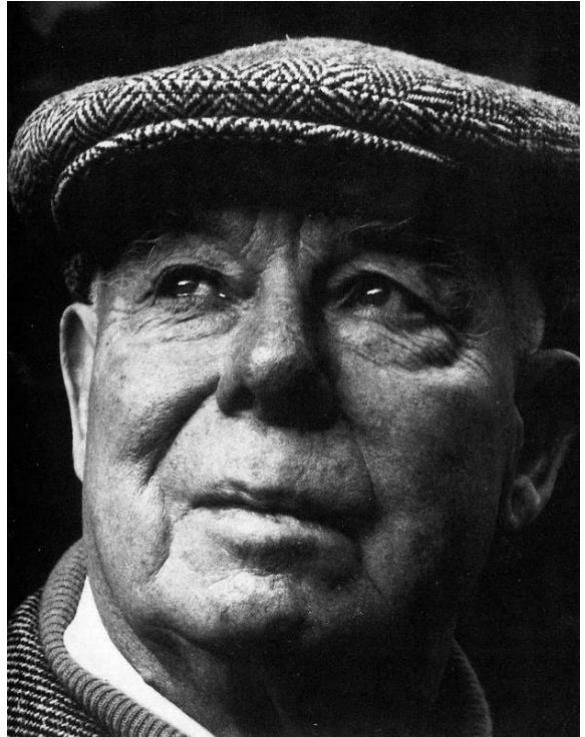
"I've spent my life trying to raise money for my productions," Renoir once ruefully remarked. "With a few exceptions, I've never succeeded—and then only thanks to the intercession of Providence." The commercial and critical failure of *Elena*, which had been far from cheap to make, exacerbated his difficulties; during the remaining twenty-three years of his life, he was able to direct only four more films....

Disliking what he saw as a pursuit of bland technical perfection in the contemporary cinema...Renoir began to investigate the potential of a younger medium. Television, he believed, was "in a technically primitive state which may restore to artists that fighting spirit of the early cinema, when everything that was made was good." In the hope of revitalizing the cinema through the introduction of fast, cheap TV techniques, he planned a film to be shot live for television, which would then receive immediate cinematic release....

In *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (*Picnic on the Grass*, 1959), as its title suggests, Renoir paid his most direct homage to the world of the impressionist painters in which he grew up. Filmed in and around the Provencal estate of Les Collettes, where Auguste Renoir spent the last years of his life, it offers a long lyrical hymn to nature, luxuriating in the warm southern summer landscape....It was eight years [from *Cordelier*, 1959] before Renoir was able to make another film—eight years during which the man generally acknowledged as France's most distinguished filmmaker could find no one to back his projects....Meanwhile Renoir busied himself with writing....Renoir's last years were spent mainly in California. He was paid all the expected honors and tributes; in April 1975 he received a special Academy Award for his "grace, responsibility, and enviable competence" as a filmmaker. An autobiography of sorts, *Ma vie et mes films*, appeared in 1974, and he wrote three more

novels....

Today few would dispute Renoir's status as one of the greatest of all filmmakers, and most would accept that the films he made between 1932 and 1939 (from *Boudu*, that is, to *La Règle du jeu*) include half-a-dozen of the supreme masterpieces of the cinema.



From Jean Renoir. André Bazin. Edited with an introduction by François Truffaut. DaCapo Press, NY, 1992.

...The print of *The Grand Illusion* shown in 1958 is a complete version, reconstructed by Renoir and Charles Spaak (his co-scenarist) using a negative seized by the Germans and recovered in Munich by the Americans. In the course of commercial distribution nearly all of the prints originally in circulation had been mutilated.

The principal cuts were made in 1946 for a reissue, which caused some controversy. The film was criticized, notably by George Altman for being too kind to the Germans and for suggesting at least a trace of anti-Semitism. Only the mentality which prevailed in the days following the Liberation can explain those judgments, so contrary to the spirit of the film, especially considering that a few references to Rosenthal's race and part of the love scenes between Maréchal and Elsa had already been cut. In any case, in 1946 the message of *Grand Illusion* could not yet be thoroughly understood (or reunderstood). The triumph of the film when it was

next reissued, in 1958, was then all the more significant.

In 1937, on the other hand, the critics had been generally enthusiastic about *Grand Illusion*, making it almost unique among Renoir's films, which have often received bad press, or mixed notices at best.

The film was an immediate success not only in France but also abroad. It would certainly have won the grand prize at the Venice Film Festival of 1937 (instead of *Carnet de Bal*) if the award of the "Mussolini Cup" to a democratic and pacifist film had not seemed impossible. A prize for the "best artistic ensemble" was created especially for it, to ease the consciences of the jurors. Despite this official recognition, the film was banned in Italy and, naturally, in Germany. In America, on the other hand, it had a triumphant success (fifteen weeks at a major first-run house in New York and distribution throughout the country). President Roosevelt said, "Everyone who believes in democracy should see this film."

In the introductory sound track made for the



1958 reissue Renoir himself explained how the film was born:

"The story of *Grand Illusion* is strictly true, It was told to me by my friends in the war...notably by Pinsard. Pinsard flew fighter planes; I was in a reconnaissance squadron, One day I had to go to take photos of the German lines. He saved my life on several occasions when the German fighter planes became too persistent. He himself was shot down seven times. His escapes are the basis for *Grand Illusion*... But an escape story, however gripping, is not enough for a film. You must make a scenario of it. For that, Charles Spaak lent me his talents. Our collaboration was smooth and without incident. The ties of our friendship were reinforced by our common faith in the equality and fraternity of men. ..."

How has *Grand Illusion* held up over the years? It is not enough to say that it has retained its power.

Not only has the stature of the film remained undiminished by the passage of time (except in a few minor details), but the innovation, the audacity, and, for want of a better word, the modernity of the direction have acquired an even greater impact.

COMING UP IN THE FALL 2021 BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS 43:

- September 14 Carol Reed ODD MAN OUT (1947)
- September 21 Kon Ichikawa THE BURMESE HARP (1956)
- September 28 Satyajit Ray THE MUSIC ROOM (1958)
- October 5 Andrei Tarkovsky ANDREI RUBLEV (1966)
- October 12 Stanley Kubrick BARRY LYNDON (1975)
- October 19 Roman Polanski CHINATOWN (1974)
- October 26 Roland Joffé THE MISSION (1986)
- November 2 Mike Nichols CHARLIE WILSON'S WAR
- November 9 Asghar Farhadi A SEPARATION (2011)
- November 16 Hsiao-Hsien Hou THE ASSASSIN 2015)
- November 23 Chloé Zhan NOMADLAND (2020)
- November 30 Rob Reiner THE PRINCESS BRIDE (1987)

CONTACTS:

- ...email Diane Christian: engdc@buffalo.edu
- ...email Bruce Jackson bjackson@buffalo.edu
- ...for cast and crew info on any film: <http://imdb.com/>

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