



La Grande Illusion

Director: Jean Renoir

Country: France

Date: 1937

Extracted from review by Ginette Vincendeau for *Sight and Sound* magazine:

Like all enduring classics, Jean Renoir's *La Grande Illusion* (1937) comes to us encumbered with a lot of baggage. A resounding success in its time, made by the most canonical French filmmaker of the interwar era, it has been laden with prizes, consistently screened and much written about. This is a film with a legend. Yet at the same time it has not been untouched by controversy, while its status in the film canon is less secure than it might seem.

La Grande Illusion follows French prisoners of war in two German camps during World War I. The core group of officers includes the working-class Maréchal (Jean Gabin), the aristocrat de Boeldieu (Pierre Fresnay), the wealthy Jewish bourgeois Rosenthal (Marcel Dalio) and the comic music-hall actor Cartier (Julien Carette). Their attempt to tunnel out of the first camp (Hallbach) is foiled at the last moment by a transfer to the forbidding fortress of Wintersborn where they meet again the German officer glimpsed in the film's prologue, Captain von Rauffenstein (Eric von Stroheim). From there, thanks to the sacrifice of de Boeldieu, Maréchal and Rosenthal finally escape. After being rescued by German widow Elsa (Dita Parlo), they eventually make it across the border to Switzerland.



An explicitly anti-war film, *La Grande Illusion* advocates human solidarity across national and class barriers: the French and German aristocrats bond over memories of Maxim's and horses while the lower ranks on both sides are unanimous in their opinion that the war has gone on too long. Meanwhile the well-supplied Rosenthal shares food parcels with his comrades while de Boeldieu, knowing that his class is doomed, sacrifices himself to further the escape of his commoner fellow officers ("a nice present from the French revolution", von Rauffenstein remarks).

Shot in the winter of 1936-37 and released on 8 June 1937, *La Grande Illusion* was a combination of autobiography, humanist statement and political tract. It bore the marks of the Popular Front's left-leaning politics, in which Renoir had been closely involved; but with the Popular Front on the wane, those politics were already less clear-cut than in the director's three 1936 films *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange*, *Les Bas-fonds* and the Communist-sponsored documentary *La vie est à nous!*

A transitional film in this respect, before the noir pessimism of Renoir's 1938 Zola adaptation *La Bête humaine*, *La Grande Illusion* is about class solidarity rather than class struggle. Its pacifism makes sense against a backdrop of international tension marked by the mounting threat of fascism and world war. Equally importantly, it was part of the strong current of anti-war feeling in France in the wake of World War I. In French that war was known as 'la der des ders' ('the last of the last') – and perhaps the most poignant of the multiple meanings of the title 'grand illusion' was the recognition that, sadly, it wouldn't be the last.

In the details of its narrative, *La Grande Illusion* was also auto-biographical, based on Renoir's own memories of the war, in which he served as a pilot until he was shot down in April 1915 (Gabin wears Renoir's old uniform in the film). To his own recollections he added those of his friend Pinsard, another pilot. Trouble flared when Renoir and scriptwriter Charles Spaak failed to acknowledge that their

screenplay also drew on Jean des Vallières's novel *Kavalier Scharnhorst*, leading to a plagiarism case. While there are similarities between the book and the film, they remain relatively minor. More significant were Spaak's input and changes in the cast, especially the inclusion of von Stroheim and the consequent expansion of von Rauffenstein's part (Renoir greatly admired the Austrian as a director).



The critical consensus reflects both the film's artistic success and its ability to express contradictory points of view – for instance, while national barriers are criticised as artificial, the film also indulges in national stereotypes. With the exception of Germany, where it was banned as Goebbels's “cinematic enemy number 1”, *La Grande Illusion* was a triumph on the international scene too. It managed to please both Fascist Italy and Franklin D. Roosevelt, winning a raft of prizes including the ‘International Jury Cup’ at Venice and the New York Film Critics’ Circle award.

Much more controversial was the film's French reception on its reissue in 1946. The audience still loved it, but this time round the critics were far less enthusiastic. Some cuts were made to the scenes concerning Rosenthal, as well as to the romantic episode between Maréchal and Elsa. Renoir's adoption of US nationality in the same year may have accounted for some of the flak; but that aside, in the aftermath of World War II and the revelations of the Holocaust, three areas in particular appeared problematic: the film's pacifism; its view of war as steeped in chivalry, with sympathetic portrayals of ‘good Germans’; and the representation of Rosenthal, which was now read as having anti-Semitic resonances.

The latter issue gave rise to a long series of debates that still continue today, centred on whether or not the film's recourse to anti-Semitic stereotypes (Rosenthal as rich banker) and directly anti-Semitic remarks (Maréchal to Rosenthal: “I could never abide Jews”) were meant as a critique of anti-Semitism. The other questions, however, quickly receded into the background. On the one hand, the heated political divisions that informed film criticism in France gave way to other agendas; on the other, the reconstruction of Europe soon made the film's pacifism and advocacy of rapprochement between nations seem relevant once again.

As it became detached from these polarised debates, *La Grande Illusion* was poised to start a different career as a classic. The 1950s saw the beginning of retrospective assessments of the history of cinema, marked by the appearance of a number of polls, in particular in Belgium in 1952 and 1958. Significantly, the 1952 list by the Brussels Cinémathèque and the 1958 list compiled on the occasion of the Brussels World Fair both included *La Grande Illusion* among the top ten (or 12) best films ever made. [...]

The ‘easy’ accessibility of *La Grande Illusion*, its balanced structure in three acts (Hallsbach, Wintersborn, Elsa), the complex yet apparently seamless cinematography and the presence of major stars all signal a harmonious, classic film, whose subject is cohesion between individuals and nations. By contrast, the more ‘de-centred’ aesthetics of *La Règle du jeu* echo its theme of social disintegration. Thus for Truffaut, the fact that *La Grande Illusion* “is perhaps the least eccentric of all of Renoir's French movies” is a reason to dampen his praise. When we add the presence of serious subject-matter – of a ‘great theme’, in Chabrol's terms – we can almost see traces of New Wave accusations against the ‘tradition of quality’. Hence Truffaut also downplays *La Grande Illusion* for “serving a patriotic theme”. [...]

It's clear that the critical debates that have shaped the reception of *La Grande Illusion* are historically grounded. The film has ridden waves of critical approval and disapproval, yet through them continued to meet popular success. In its ensemble perfection, *La Grande Illusion* is also a snapshot of French cinema of the late 1930s at its absolute best. It is a classic in the terms defined by Frank Kermode: that is, a film not frozen in time, but open to different readings across times and cultures. In all these senses, then, Bazin's verdict is as true today as it was when he wrote it in the late 1950s: “It is not enough to say that it has retained its power... the stature of the film remained undiminished by the passage of time.”

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