REALMS OF GOLD

I can think of no film thatrepays repeated viewings more generously than Jean Renoir’s The Rules of the Game. Its Mozartian complexities have been remarked repeatedly, but never resolved. Nor indeed does Keith Reader’s altogether admirable monograph attempt to resolve them. What Reader’s study does instead by covering the film’s reception as well as its content is to indicate the extent to which even misapprehensions or misjudgments of Renoir’s masterpiece (which flopped when it opened) turn out to be revealing despite themselves. Reader calls attention to “the viciousness of the responses” the film “was capable, almost by way of a tribute a contrario, of unleashing” (23). People have been trying to get the measure of The Rules of the Game ever since it was first shown two months before the outbreak of World War II. The misjudgments sometimes proffered as a result may be wrong or overdrawn (at least in the present reviewer’s eyes), but they are never ridiculous or preposterous; looked at from the right vantage point, they will tell us something.

The ironies here run deep. Julian Jackson’s no less valuable monograph on The Grand Illusion points out that “despite the vagaries of the film’s reception”—The Grand Illusion was at no point a favorite of the Cahiers du cinéma crowd, who treated it disdainfully—“the film enjoyed general popular success. It became the emblematic Renoir film, screened on French TV during an homage to Renoir on his 80th birthday and again on his death in 1979. It may never have been Renoir’s favorite [among his own films], but it was the film people remembered him by” (101). I think Jackson is on the money here, and he has raised an intriguing point into the bargain. This is that the two films, whatever their provenance, are very different, in temper, character, and ambit.

It was in 1956 that the Canadian film scholar Christopher Faulkner in his Princeton University Press book The Social Cinema of Jean Renoir (which I reviewed in this journal in spring 1988) attempted to demolish the rather fawning adulation of Renoir as auteur he thought André Bazin and François Truffaut had perpetrated. I thought at the time and still think today that this task was well worth doing (see my “The Sorcerer’s Apprentice: Bazin and Truffaut on Renoir,” Sight and Sound, winter 1974–75). The trouble is that Faulkner for his part carried it out by using what I take to have been a blunt instrument, the then-fashionable Althusserian notion of the “epistemological break,” which in Faulkner’s words entails “a radical change for the social function of art and the role of the artist-intellectual.” To juxtapose The Rules of the Game to The Grand Illusion is in a way to clinch Faulkner’s point as he proceeded to cast doubt on the auteurism of quite a long list of critical precursors—Alexander Sesonske, Leo Braudy, and Raymond Durgnat as well as Bazin and Truffaut. But there is a problem buried not very far beneath the surface of Faulkner’s argument. Like most people who invoked the notion of an epistemological break (including, as it happens, Maître Althusser himself), Faulkner fails to indicate why it only occurs once in anyone’s career. In Renoir’s instance I would argue that it or something like it happened over and over again. This is easy to see if we take the long view, and indicate that Renoir’s retour aux sources late in life was a reversion to the belle époque world of his childhood, which may be encountered in the biography of his father, his novel Les Cahiers du capitaine Georges, as well as in French Can-Can, Le Détective sur l’herbe, and other films. This shift back to France—where the past became not so much a repository as a dimension—may have been as abrupt a break from his U.S. experiences and films as was Renoir américain from his golden period, the French 1930s.

But the French 1930s themselves were not a seamless unity. Renoir’s output during this period was enormous. He made fifteen films from On purger bébé in 1931 to The Rules of the Game in 1939—the others were La Chienne (1931), Night at the Crossroads (1932), Boudu Saved from Drowning (1932), Chotard and Company (1933), Madame Bovary (1934), Toni (1935), The Crime of Monsieur Lange (1936), La Vie est à nous (1936), Une partie de campagne (1936), The Lower Depths (1936), The Grand Illusion (1937), The Marseillaise (1938), and La Bête humaine (1938). Renoir was prodigiously creative. There were eight films between 1936 and 1939 alone. But look how varied as well as prodigious this output was, and think back again to how very different The Rules of the Game is from The Grand Illusion. If we restrict our attention to just these two films, as we must, it does nothing to derogate Renoir’s status to indicate that, on the one hand, neither film could have been made by anyone else,
and that, on the other hand, they are very different, very distinct films. Each, that is to say, has to it a singularity that is all its own; and it is these singularities these two fine monographs bring to the fore. Keith Reader and Julian Jackson have put all of us who love Renoir in their debt.

Each of them has much to teach even to a repeat viewer who takes pride in his or her prior knowledge of and acquaintanceship with Renoir’s films. I did not know, for instance, that (as Reader recounts) Alain Resnais said that his first viewing of The Rules of the Game was “the most overwhelming experience I have had in the cinema in my whole life,” and that on emerging from the cinema he walked the streets of Paris for two hours, feeling that “everything had been turned upside down, all my ideas about the cinema had been challenged” (1). (Claude Chabrol and François Truffaut had similar reactions, as did countless other viewers too.) Nor did I know that Jacques Lacan, no less, had called attention to Robert de la Chesnaye’s “derisory and disturbing rictus of ecstasy” once his limonaire (or fairground organ) is unveiled at the Château for his guests (68). (These words, I suspect, could not have been better put.) Reader also quotes André Bazin (about whom he is in general scrupulously fair) to telling effect. Bazin compared Renoir’s camera in the postchasse part of the film to “an invisible guest, wandering about the salon and the corridors with a certain curiosity, but without any more advantage than its invisibility” (25). These words, too, are hard to beat—but Reader, memorably, caps them with words of his own, with the observation about this same camera’s “slightly edgy aplomb.”

Julian Jackson freely admits that The Grand Illusion is “an easier film to appreciate than La Règle du jeu,” partly, he thinks, because it “drew more than any of his previous films on [Renoir’s] personal experiences” (9–10). He observes also that “Renoir’s fascination with de Boëldieu and von Rauffenstein almost turns them into heroes” (79), as, indeed it does; he does not add, however, that Rauffenstein’s clipping of the geranium in his quarters is more mawkish than any other gesture, any other moment in the film. What, then, is the illusion of the title? Jackson propers several candidates; “the illusions of friendship, . . . of peace, . . . of love (will Maréchal really go back to Elsa?), the illusion that 1914–8 was the last war . . . the illusion of frontiers” (104). This last-named might have given him pause, for when Maréchal and Rosenthal cross into Switzerland (“so viel besser für Euch [so much the better for them],” says the German guard) it is noteworthy that there is no frontier, no border, to be seen, just two men in long shot on a snow-covered field.

But whatever the illusion of the title may have been, it is certain that Renoir by the time he made The Rules of the Game in 1939 was a very disillusioned man. In Reader’s words, “La Grande Illusion redeems its mourning for an era of spontaneity and fraternity . . . through its solidarity, however circumstantial and temporary, between Maréchal and Rosenthal at the end. The narrative of La Règle du jeu offers no such redemptive possibility . . . Its merriment is . . . that of those who do not know, or choose not to see, that they are ‘dancing on a volcano’” (14–15).

What links the two films is that neither of them is a star vehicle, but a collective product (the courtyard in The Crime of Monsieur Lange extended through time?). Each has the feel of an ensemble piece, but each is a distinctive kind of ensemble piece, which does not admit of being reduced to any other ensemble piece. (“When I make a film,” Renoir—that least disembodied of men—once famously said, “I am asking others to influence me.”) In The Rules of the Game, everyone except Schumacher and Lisette is, bizarrely, cast against type, but this doesn’t seem to matter at all. Best of all, we have Renoir himself as Octave. As Reader, again nicely, puts it, “Octave’s staging of his own failure is also Renoir’s staging of his own triumph” (71). Octave is the meneur de jeu who is set apart and fails to fit, the dangereux poète, the observerfrom-within, the “wild card” (as Reader calls him), the go-between, the manipulator manqué who cannot escape the disguise he has assumed without the help of the other participants in the comédie, help which no one wishes to provide. That tout le monde a ses raisons is precisely what’s terrible. “The decline of the old aristocracy had been a matter for regret in La Grande Illusion, set nearly a quarter of a century before,” in Reader’s words. “By the time of La Règle du jeu, that class’s manners and conventions have become a risible and etiolated shadow of their former selves” (66).

These two books, which would grace any Renoir lover’s bookshelf, are labors of love. And so they should be. Neither Julian Jackson nor Keith Reader, I should fondly imagine, would in any way dissent from the idea that Renoir, whose own best films are themselves labors of love, should at this point be allowed to carry us out: for he knew the strange forms that love can take. We need only think once again about Robert de la Chesnaye’s mechanical birds and (the pièce de résistance) his limonaire.

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