

## Lecture 17 - Renoir and Poetic Realism

### I. French film

- A parallel history
- Film theory

### II. Jean Renoir (1894-1979)

- 1926 *Nana* (Zola novel)
- 1928 *The Little Match Girl*
- 1931 *La Chienne*
- 1932 *Boudu Saved from Drowning*
- 1934 *Madame Bovary* (Flaubert novel)
- 1935 *Toni*
- 1937 *Grand Illusion*
- 1939 *Rules of the Game*
- 1950 *The River*

### III. Poetic Realism

- Forerunner: Jean Vigo (1905-34)
- Key features
- Andre Bazin (1918-58) on Renoir

### IV. Two examples

- The ending of *Boudu*
- Dinner in prison: *Grand Illusion*

### V. Visual style as moral vision

**Disclaimer:** *The following notes were taken by a student during the Fall 2006 term; they are not Prof. Thorburn's own notes.*

- Final exam in three weeks
  - There will be one makeup exam available if you can't make it at the normal date.
- A word about the last three weeks in this course:
  - Normally the final three weeks are devoted to examples of three different filmmakers from three different nations/cultures
  - Often we look at Bergman or Kurosawa
  - However, this time we'll be looking at two different French directors: Jean Renoir and Truffaut
  - I'm looking to illustrate a certain continuity across European cinema
  - These films are central examples of dominant schools of filmmaking
    - Renoir is at the center of the movement of Poetic Realism
  - Neo-realism is also an important movement

- You should get a feel for both how different these films are from American cinema, and simultaneously you should understand the continuity of style
  - Look for the continuity in the moral vision of these movies
- For these reasons we won't be watching Kurosawa's *The Seven Samurai* this semester, but it's a wonderful movie, and you should watch it on your own time
- French Film – history
  - One could create a sort of map in which every phase of American movies is matched and overcome by French film
  - Even the invention of film is rivaled – as Edison worked on inventing film, there were French inventors working on it simultaneously
  - Fundamental features of film like the fadeout
  - French film underwent a consolidation similar to American film, as production companies developed
  - Zecca – chase films
  - Variety of French film – closer relation to cultural and artistic authority
  - Avant-garde movement – very experimental films were made that could not have been made in early Hollywood
  - A critical discourse about film emerged in France very early, in the silent era.
    - We might say that the French invented film criticism
    - It developed like the French literary salon
  - We could list a French counterpart to virtually every technical advance and every genre that developed in the U.S.
- Jean Renoir
  - Many people would say that Renoir is the most important director of all time
  - He's certainly still a director that contemporary viewers continue to look back on with respect
  - He's the second son of the great impressionist painter, Auguste Renoir
  - He wrote a book about his childhood with his father
    - He grew up relatively privileged, surrounded by artists
  - Little redheaded boy, shows up in a number of his father's paintings
  - He served in the first World War in the cavalry, in the infantry, and very briefly as a pilot
  - First film: *The Water Girl*
    - It was fantastical and fable-like
  - Another early film: based on Zola's famous novel, *Nana*
  - However, these films were silent, and it was in the sound era that he really made his reputation
  - *La Chienne* (1931)
    - The title means "The Bitch"
    - Established the actor Michel Gabin

- Noble but working-class character who is driven to extremes
    - The character murders his girlfriend – an act of despair
    - Gabin embodied this noble despairing character – he later had it written into his contract that there had to be a moment in all of his films when he sort of lost it
      - He was sort of like an early Jack Nicholson
    - Marxist undercurrent – noble working classes
    - Established Jean Renoir
  - *Boudu Saved from Drowning* (1932)
  - *Toni* (1935)
    - In a way this is the origin of the Italian Neorealist movement
    - It's about Italian immigrant workers
    - It doesn't use professional actors – he was trying to create an additional note of realism
      - This use of real people instead of professional actors was an essential part of Italian Neorealism
  - Renoir always worked with a certain anticipated discovery to complete his films
  - *Grand Illusion* (1937)
  - *Rules of the Game* (1939)
    - In some ways this is a better film than *Grand Illusion*, but it depends on a lot of elements of French culture and language that are hard to understand in translation
  - Renoir's career continued after this – don't think that it ended after this list
  - Renoir lived in the U.S. for a time during World War II
  - He made *The River* in English, about life in India
    - It's an astonishing film visually
  - Renoir was an acknowledged master, and he was actively sought out by others
- Poetic Realism
    - This is the movement that Renoir originated
    - The name comes from a quality of the camera:
      - Even the most ugly slum is photographed in a way that becomes lyrical
      - It's not that this denies the ugliness of the situation, but that it responds poetically to the complexity of the situation
    - Andre Bazin (1917-1958) – a great champion of Renoir
      - Wrote a book about him
      - Prof. Thorburn reads the class a passage by Bazin, explaining Renoir's magnificence and his essential contributions to film
      - Renoir is the one who frees movies from imprisoning rectangular framings – Renoir was famous for very long takes.
        - As Bazin puts it, "Montage disappears"
        - So much takes place in one take, so that you're left trying to figure out what to watch

- Almost everything takes place at eye level, without distortion, because Renoir wants his audience to experience the movie the way that people really view the world
  - Renoir reminds you that you are only seeing a chunk of a three-dimensional world
  - He calls your attention to the space that normally doesn't make it into the frame
- Clip: from *Boudu Saved from Drowning*: rowing on the river on the wedding day, and then what happens after Boudu pulls them over and swims away
  - Note the way the boat sort of comes into the frame, and the way Renoir gives you a physical sense of the environment
  - Note that the music is part of the action – it gets louder as they move toward the band, and softer as they move away
  - Boudu represents unmitigated nature. He stands for accident, contingency.
  - Note the wide, slowly swinging turn of the camera at the end
  - The true purpose of the scene ceases to address Boudu's intentions, and instead addresses his pleasure
  - At the end, everything becomes intrinsically beautiful
- Visual Style as Moral Vision
  - Embedded in what you've seen.

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