

## Lecture 18 - *Grand Illusion*

### I. Camera

- Invisible witness: respectful, attentive, restless

### II. Actors

- Von Stroheim: The man you love to hate
- Gabin: Mad proletarian

### III. Themes

- Prison camp as microcosm
- Barriers, boundaries
- Historical transition

### IV. Renoir's maturity

- Character
- Plot
- The title: how many grand illusions?

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

Film viewing tonight:

Renoir, Jean. *The Grand Illusion*. 1937.

- As Bazin makes clear, Renoir liberated film from its unnecessary ties to older art forms
  - Renoir's films have a certain impulse to avoid the plot in favor of investigating the beauty of the world, even if it doesn't seem relevant to the story
  - It's as though the work of the camera is that of an anthropologist
  - The style of poetic realism is a purely cinematic style, one that acknowledges that what you see through the camera is only a tiny chunk of the world, and that life continues outside of the frame
  - Renoir makes you aware of three-dimensionality
  - Renoir explored the features of the camera in a totally new way
- Renoir's camera
  - Mise en scene style
    - Long takes
    - The camera's almost constantly, subtly moving, but it follows the content of the scene
    - Editing is much less prominent
  - In-camera editing
    - The camera does the editing work while it's watching

- You can almost feel the small, nervous decisions that the camera's making
    - There's a kind of tentative respect for the complexities of the world present in the movement of the camera
  - Location filming
    - Renoir hated the studio
    - He almost always filmed in real places or buildings, whether indoors or outdoors
  - Commitment to true light and true sound
    - It's very rare in his work to have music that's superimposed on the action
    - The music in the scene is generated by an actor within the scene, whether by singing, instrument, etc.
    - Diegetic sound
    - He insisted on natural light
      - This was very difficult to do in his day – film wasn't very light sensitive
      - However, this choice enhances plausibility
  - Fluid, moving camera
    - The camera is always moving in some way, shifting around, changing its focal length, etc.
    - The camera is an expression of the audience's gaze
    - In any image there is a foreground, a midground, and a background
- Visual style as moral style
  - There's a quality of openness in the way the camera behaves, which has value, moral implications
  - These implications have to do with the fact that an attentive viewer can understand the world, but we have to be very respectful of the world's complexity
- *Grand Illusion*
  - Oddly lighthearted, for a war film
  - Foot-washing scene – echoes a story of Jesus washing feet in the bible
  - Characters of very different social strata interact
  - The sense of life going on outside the scene is very strong
  - Profound similarities between Robert Altman and Renoir, or between Orson Wells and Renoir
  - Clip: from *Grand Illusion*
    - Note the motion of the camera
    - Note the people moving on the other side of the window
    - The French prisoners are eating much better food than their German captors
    - Note how unbelievably concretely each of the characters are defined – they're hugely different from each other

- The camera moves so that we follow all the characters and experience the space of the entire room
  - Even when it's not making large movements, the camera shakes and adjusts slightly – it never stays still
  - There are at least four different social classes or positions that are discussed
  - There are class tensions (though not class hostilities) dramatized here.
  - The dinner party becomes a microcosm of French society, with so many different class positions involved
  
- Actors in *Grand Illusion*
  - The French audience would have had certain expectations for Gabin's character – like John Wayne or Jack Nicholson, he had developed a type of character that he always played and that the audience expected
    - The way that Renoir uses this is very subtle
  - Similarly, there's another character that the audience expects to be evil and morally repugnant, but who turns out to be much more gentle, complicated, and interesting
    - Note the point where he starts speaking to the French aristocrat in English
    - In a way, they have more in common than either of them has with their lower class compatriots
    - The first World War marked the death knell of aristocratic Europe
  - Note the way that the French aristocrat is treated
    - He is less open than the other Frenchmen somehow – he has a certain reserve
    - There is sometimes a class separation and tension between him and the other characters, though he likes them and they like him
  - There is nobody in this film without imperfections, and there is also nobody without human, redeeming qualities
    - The Germans are sometimes kind to their French prisoners – this is not a film about bitter enmity
  
- Themes
  - What separates people from one another?
  - Social class
  - Language
    - Note the scene where Gabin takes a tremendous risk to try to inform an English prisoner of the tunnel they've made – but he can't communicate, due to the language barrier
  - Barriers and boundaries
    - The barriers and cultural traditions that separate one nation from another may have the same stupid arbitrariness that the physical geographical lines between countries have

- Note what the camera does in the scene where the French soldiers stand up to sing their national anthem
- Pay attention to the complexity in the balance of character, with French soldiers who sometimes seem greedy or petty, and German soldiers who are sometimes very kind
- Historical transition
  - The class balance of the world is shifting – the upper classes are becoming less important, less powerful
  - Comradeship, respect for one’s enemy, respect for people of other nationalities
  - Think about the title of the film – what are the grand illusions that it wants to remind us of?
    - Two of the characters spend the winter sheltered by a German widow
      - They become very close – unbelievably so
        - One of the soldiers has a love affair with the widow – he claims he will come back, but this is very difficult to believe
        - The two soldiers become like fathers to the widow’s daughter
      - If you think about it, this seems like a grand illusion
        - It seems like an illusion of comradeship and the crossing of barriers and boundaries
    - This film is made on the eve of the second World War
      - It exposes the fallacy of believing that the first World War was the “war to end wars”
    - Film itself is a grand illusion – it isn’t real