



BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

La Grande Illusion

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away some of the plot.

Chronicling the fortunes of a group of French prisoners of war incarcerated in Germany during the First World War, Renoir's film is less anti-war diatribe than incisive study of how social standing may appear to become irrelevant during international conflict but is actually simply suspended or half-hidden: wealth and class still influence relationships, transcending patriotic ideals. An ageless gem, beautifully acted by a superb cast.

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Like all enduring classics, Jean Renoir's *La Grande Illusion* 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. The release of a digital print is a good opportunity to look at the reception of this mythic work both in its 1930s context and via its fluctuating reputation since, as a test not just of how a great work can mean so many different things to different people at different times, but also of the variability of critical agendas.

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 (in real life the Haut-Koenigsbourg chateau in Alsace) where they meet again the German officer glimpsed in the film's prologue, Captain von Rauffenstein (Erich von Stroheim).

An explicitly anti-war film, *La Grande Illusion* advocates human solidarity across national and class barriers: the French and German aristocrat 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 autobiographical, 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).

As Martin O'Shaughnessy details in his excellent 2009 book on the film, while there was a consensus about the brilliance of *La Grande Illusion* from the point of view of style and performances, critics tended to address its subject-matter: 'Its success was never narrowly cinematic because of its direct and obvious connection with the pressing issues of its day.' With the exception of a few right-wing writers – including fascist novelist Louis-Ferdinand Céline, who in his book *Bagatelles pour un massacre* odiously berated the sympathetic portrayal of the Jewish Rosenthal – most critics liked the film. This 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.

It's clear that the critical debates that have shaped the reception of *La Grande Illusion* are, as ever, historically grounded. The film has ridden waves of critical

approval and disapproval, yet through them continued to meet popular success. As a viewer's comment on IMDb put it when *La Grande Illusion* dropped out of the website's top 250 films in 2010 (typically, comparing it to *La Règle du jeu*), 'This is a film that you can both appreciate AND enjoy!' While the immediate topic of the film is a specific war, the virulent debates in 1946 show its significance to a later war – and, consequently, its ability to speak to us today; issues of war, class and national conflicts have, sadly, not lost their relevance. 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.'

Ginette Vincendeau, *Sight and Sound*, May 2012

LA GRANDE ILLUSION

Director: Jean Renoir
Production Company: Réalisations d'art cinématographique
Producers: Albert Pinkevitch, Frank Rollmer *
Production Manager: Raymond Blondy
Unit Manager: Pierre Blondy
Floor Manager: Robert Rips
Location Manager: Barnathan
Assistant Director: Jacques Becker
Script Supervisor: Gourджи
Screenplay: Charles Spaak, Jean Renoir
Director of Photography: Christian Matras
Assistant Photographer: Claude Renoir
Assistant Operators: Jean Bourgoïn, Bourreaud
Stills: Sam Levin
Editors: Marguerite, Marthe Huguet
Art Director: Eugène Lourié
Properties: Alexandre Laurié, Pillon
Costumer: Decrés
Wardrobe: Suzy Berton *
Make-up: Raphels
Music: Joseph Kosma
Orchestra: Vuillermon
Music Publishers: Smyth Music
Sound: Joseph de Bretagne
Technical Consultant: Carl Koch
Laboratory: Franay LTC
Filmed at: Tobis Klangfilm, Epinay, Studios d'Epinay

Cast

Jean Gabin (*Lieutenant Maréchal*)
Dita Parlo (*Elsa*)
Pierre Fresnay (*Captain de Boeldieu*)
Eric [i.e. Erich] von Stroheim (*Captain von Rauffenstein*)
Julien Carette (*the actor*)
Georges Péclet (*Cartier, French soldier*)
Werner Florian (*Arthur Krantz*)
Jean Dasté (*teacher*)
Sylvain Itkine (*Demolder, Greek teacher*)
Gaston Modot (*the engineer*)
Marcel Dalio (*Rosenthal*)
Jacques Becker (*English officer*) *
Claude Sainval (*Captain Ringis*) *
Little Peters (*Lotte, Elsa's daughter*) *
Karl Heil (*fortress officer*) *
Carl Koch (*Von Rauffenstein's batman*) *
Geo Forster (*Maison-Neuve*) *
Habib Benglia (*Senegalese prisoner*) *
Claude Vernier (*Prussian officer*) *
Michel Salina *

France 1937
113 mins

* Uncredited

BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

Touch of Evil

Mon 27 Mar 20:45; Tue 4 Apr 14:30; Sun 9 Apr 18:30; Fri 28 Apr 20:45

Wild Strawberries (Smultronstället)

Tue 28 Mar 20:50; Wed 12 Apr 18:10 (+ intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-Large); Fri 14 Apr 20:50; Mon 24 Apr 14:30

To Sleep with Anger + Borom Sarret (The Wagoner)

Wed 29 Mar 18:10 (+ intro); Mon 10 Apr 12:45; Wed 12 Apr 18:00

Rio Bravo

Thu 30 Mar 20:20; Sun 9 Apr 12:50; Fri 21 Apr 20:20

Aguirre, Wrath of God (Aguirre, der Zorn Gottes)

Fri 31 Mar 21:00; Thu 13 Apr 21:00; Thu 20 Apr 18:15

Last year in Marienbad (L'Année dernière à Marienbad)

Sat 1 Apr 12:50; Mon 3 Apr 20:30; Sat 8 Apr 18:20; Tue 18 Apr 20:45

La Grande Illusion

Sat 1 Apr 13:00; Wed 12 Apr 20:40; Sat 15 Apr 18:00; Fri 21 Apr 18:15

The Godfather Part II

Sat 1 Apr 16:00; Sat 22 Apr 18:40; Sun 30 Apr 16:30

Nashville

Sun 2 Apr 17:50; Sat 8 Apr 20:00; Sat 29 Apr 16:30

The Passenger (Professione: reporter)

Wed 5 Apr 18:00 (+ intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-Large); Fri 7 Apr 20:20; Sun 16 Apr 18:15; Thu 27 Apr 18:10

Pickpocket

Thu 6 Apr 20:45; Tue 11 Apr 14:30; Mon 17 Apr 20:50; Mon 24 Apr 20:50

The Portrait of a Lady

Fri 7 Apr 14:30; Wed 19 Apr 17:50 (+ intro); Sat 29 Apr 20:15

Code Unknown (Code inconnu)

Sun 9 Apr 15:45; Wed 26 Apr 18:15

The Lady Eve

Mon 10 Apr 18:15; Sat 15 Apr 12:40; Sun 30 Apr 14:15

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