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Julian Jackson, *La Grande Illusion*. London: British Film Institute/Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. 116 pp. Still shots, film posters, notes, credits, and bibliography. \$14.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 1-84457-285-4.

Review by Thibaut Schilt, College of the Holy Cross

Most films that Jean Renoir (1894–1979) directed in the 1930s are still considered classics of French cinema today, from *La Chienne* (1930) and *Boudu sauvé des eaux* (1932) to *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange* (1936) and *La Bête humaine* (1938). Even *La Règle du jeu* (1939), which unlike the above-mentioned films failed to impress at the time of its release, was retrospectively hailed as masterpiece. *La Grande Illusion* (1937), however, stands out as a timeless classic, one that transcends political and national boundaries, one that continues to fascinate both cinephiles and scholars over seventy years after its original showing. Indeed, the year 2009 alone saw the release of two English-language books on Renoir's best-known film, one written by modern historian Julian Jackson, the other by film scholar Martin O'Shaughnessy.[1]

Jackson's volume is part of the celebrated "BFI Film Classics" series. In the words of its editors, the series "introduces, interprets and celebrates landmarks of world cinema. Each volume offers an argument for the film's 'classic' status, together with a discussion of its production and reception history, its place within a genre or national cinema, an account of its technical and aesthetic importance, and, in many cases, the author's personal response to the film" (p. 1).[2] The book begins with an introduction, which contextualizes the release of *La Grande Illusion* in the Paris of 1937, followed by eight short chapters. It ends with notes, the film's detailed credits (including production and release information), and a bibliography that conveniently separates sources according to their type and content (for example: writings by Renoir, published scenarios of the film, film-specific sources and memoirs of people who worked on the film).

A prize-winning, respected specialist of the history of France, including the Popular Front and Occupation periods, Julian Jackson convincingly situates *La Grande Illusion* within its socio-historical context. Jackson also contextualizes the film in relation to Renoir's overall filmography.[3] Chapter one ("Renoir before *La Grande Illusion*") provides a biography of the filmmaker, discussing his childhood as the son of painter Auguste Renoir, his days as a member of the cavalry during World War One, his fondness for Erich von Stroheim's filmmaking style (particularly, the Austrian director's use of the *plan séquence*), ending with his early film career, from the silent films of the 1920s starring Catherine Hessling to the increasingly politically charged talkies of the 1930s. After a two-and-a-half page synopsis of *La Grande Illusion*, chapter three ("Making of the Film: Auteur as 'Ringmaster'") briefly denounces the reductive auteurist vision of the *Cahiers du cinéma* critics (and later, of Renoir himself), before detailing the close partnership between the director and Belgian scenarist Charles Spaak, who crafted multiple versions of the film's screenplay. The chapter also contains insightful information about the film's shooting, the demanding personality of Erich von Stroheim, who plays the German officer Captain von Rauffenstein, and the many last-minute transformations that occurred, and are now part of the final cut (although, as Jackson mentions later in the book, there exist many "final cuts" of the film).

Jackson's close reading and interpretation of the film proper occur most notably in the ensuing two chapters. The fourth chapter ("Variations on Realism: 'Interior Truth' and 'Exterior Truth'") provides crucial information on the location shooting in Alsace, the studio-shot interior scenes, the tripartite structure of the narrative, and Renoir's unique vision of "realism" in cinema. Jackson mentions aesthetic and technical aspects of the film, such as the director's preference for the close-up shot over the conventional (long-distance) establishing shot, his predilection for shooting in deep focus, careful wardrobe choices, and the meticulous use of sound effects. The chapter concludes with a discussion of Renoir's well-known inclination for a theatrical *mise-en-scène*, not in an attempt to imitate theatre, but in Jackson's words "to theatricalise cinema" (p. 47).

The most fascinating aspects of Jackson's analysis can be found in chapter five, "Boundaries and Crossing Boundaries." It is there that he points out that Renoir "believed the 'vertical' frontiers of nationality less important than the 'horizontal' ones of class and this is what many have taken as the central message of *La Grande Illusion*" (p. 51). Jackson proceeds to argue quite convincingly that in reality, Renoir's film is much more ambiguous. *La Grande Illusion*, upon closer look, insists upon the existence of various boundaries (whether vertical or horizontal) and takes pleasure in crossing them repeatedly. Jackson separates the chapter into three separate types of boundaries: nation and class, gender and sexuality (although the subsection is simply called "Gender") and race (particularly, Jewish identity). Highlights of this section include discussions of the war-created destabilization of gender identity, as well as the homoerotic undertones (of which Renoir was fully aware) between the two French and German officers. As for the portrayal of the lone Jewish character Rosenthal, it is a complex one which "does not conform to anti-Semitic stereotypes" but rather "draw[s] viewers into a dialogue with that stereotype" (p. 70). This complexity partially explains the fact that viewers across the whole spectrum of political opinion (Louis-Ferdinand Céline excluded) applauded the film and saw in Rosenthal simply what they wanted to see.

The next two chapters ("Politics: *La Grande Illusion* between the Popular Front and Vichy" and "Afterlives: Escapes and Survivals") further contextualize the film and recount its life, and that of its creator, from 1937 to the postwar era. As a director who was "as obsessed with avoiding the clichés of pacifism as the clichés of patriotism" (p. 81), *La Grande Illusion* is a film that serves no particular cause, a film suspended between two historical periods (the Popular Front and the Vichy Regime), "sharing elements of both" (p. 87). This ambivalence caused the film to be banned by Vichy in the free zone, banned by the Nazi regime in the occupied zone, and disliked at the Liberation (as well as further censored) for its all too familiar subject matter and "favourable portrayal of Germans" (p. 99). The film was rereleased in 1958, and enjoyed tremendous success. Its final resuscitation occurred, Jackson informs us, when its original nitrate negatives were found in Toulouse in the early 1980s. This version was shown to the public for the first time in 1997, and is the one we still enjoy today. The book concludes with Jackson's own interpretations of the film's mysterious title.

Illustrations are abundant throughout the book, mostly still shots from *La Grande Illusion*, but also two versions of the film's poster, a few shots from other films by Renoir, and one capture from Erich von Stroheim's 1922 *Foolish Wives*. While these contribute greatly to the reader's enjoyment of Jackson's analysis, a number of them come with no captions and are occasionally difficult to link back to the text they are meant to illustrate. Another minor but potentially distracting downside concerns errors (spelling mistakes, missing accent marks, inaccurate characters' name, errors and inconsistencies in French capitalization of titles, etc.) that were missed at the copyediting stage.<sup>[4]</sup> Finally, a filmography of Jean Renoir in an appendix would have been a welcome addition, especially because Jackson spends significant time discussing

Renoir's entire film career. In spite of those details, Jackson's commentary on the film is passionate and informed, and convinced this reader to incorporate Renoir's masterpiece (and Jackson's reading of it) in a future course on French cinema.

## NOTES

[1] Martin O'Shaughnessy, *La Grande Illusion* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2009). O'Shaughnessy's book is part of the "French Film Guides" series. I have not read it, and will not be able to compare it to Jackson's. Ten years ago, the same scholar wrote an overview of Renoir's career with Manchester University Press's "French Film Directors" series: Martin O'Shaughnessy, *Jean Renoir* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000).

[2] The only other book dedicated to a French-language film in the BFI Film Classics series, which released its first volume in 1992, is Steven Ungar's 2008 study of Agnès Varda's new wave classic *Cléo de 5 à 7*.

[3] See Professor Julian Jackson's professional page on the Queen Mary, University of London website for an extended bibliography of his writings: <http://www.history.qmul.ac.uk/staff/jacksonj.html>

[4] These errors can be found in the text proper, but also in the bibliography. Examples include: *Le Braisier ardent* instead of *Le Brasier ardent* (p. 13); "Maréchal and von Rauffenstein" instead of "de Boëldieu and von Rauffenstein" (p. 52); *tres* instead of *très* (p. 53); *Les Croix des Bois* instead of *Les Croix de bois* (p. 82); *Bagatelles pout* [instead of *pour*] *un massacre* (p. 115); *15 an* [instead of *ans*] *d'années trente* (p. 115); Verdun et a [instead of *la*] *Grande Guerre* (p. 115).

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