

H-France Review Vol. 11 (March 2011), No. 81

Martin O'Shaughnessy. *La Grande Illusion*. London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2009. 126 pp. Notes, 4 appendices. \$24.50 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-1-84885-057-6.

Review by Marja Warehime, The University of South Carolina.

In his 1974 autobiography, *My Life and My Films*, Jean Renoir lamented wryly that for all its success *La Grande Illusion* had failed to prevent the Second World War. [1] Despite this signal failure, *La Grande Illusion*, Renoir's 1937 war film, set primarily in the POW camps of World War I, remains one of his most successful and well-known films. A "war" film that showed neither the horrors of trench warfare nor the drama of aerial combat, it was nonetheless the number one box office hit for the year in France on its release and, as Martin O'Shaughnessy reminds us, it was a major international hit—given a special jury prize in Venice (to avoid the awkwardness of awarding it the most prestigious award, the Mussolini Cup), praised by Franklin Roosevelt, voted best foreign film by the New York Critics Circle Awards, then nominated for an Oscar in 1939, and ultimately banned by Hitler (p.1). Inevitably, it disappeared from Europe's screens during the war and the Occupation. Yet, despite the difficulties presented by the disappearance of the original negative during the war and opposition from censors who felt certain aspects of the film would be problematic for a public whose memories of concentration camps were still vivid, it was re-released in truncated form in Paris in 1946. It again enjoyed enormous popular success, despite critical controversy. A carefully restored copy was released in 1958, again to great success—and, at the time, an international panel of film critics voted *La Grande Illusion* one of the twelve best films ever made. Since the discovery of the original negative, the complete film has been again reissued and is available on DVD.

Well-conceived and clearly argued, O'Shaughnessy's excellent guide to *La Grande Illusion* proposes "to provide a rounded exploration" of the film, "covering its complex sources, different creative inputs into it and its complex production and reception histories" (p. 2). Here, as in his earlier book on Renoir [2], O'Shaughnessy keeps a critical distance from a reductionist *auteurism* that would mythologize the director as the creative source of the film, as well as from an anti-*auteurism* that would focus exclusively on "broad socio-historical and narrower film-industrial contexts" as the key determinants of a film (p.5). O'Shaughnessy calls instead for a "multi-level contextualization" that recognizes the complex interactions of social and historical factors and industry practices as they impact the director, the actors and the creative specialists involved in the film's production. If, as he points out, these contextual layers cannot be collapsed into each other, neither can they be kept entirely separate (p.5), and the variety of perspectives he successfully keeps in play is suggested by the three compelling reasons he adduces for making *La Grande Illusion* compulsory viewing: "it is a great film made by a supreme filmmaker at the very height of his powers, seconded by a wonderful cast and creative team"; "its intervention in the war film genre," and thirdly, a central issue in O'Shaughnessy's reading of the film, the fact that "it is an essential example of political cinema" (p. 111).

The guide breaks into four parts. The first, "Contexts," provides a brief biography of Renoir along with a summary of his career, then discusses the careers of the actors who assumed major roles in *La Grande Illusion* (among them Jean Gabin, Pierre Fresnay, Eric Von Stroheim, and

Dita Parlo) and the screen personas they brought to the film, noting pertinently that despite Renoir's reputation for casting against type there is no effort to do so in this film. The last section of this part summarizes the film's complex historical positioning. Set in World War I, *La Grande Illusion* looks back to an earlier period, but also reflects the political situation at the time the film was made, responding to the growing threat of Fascism as the leftist coalition known as the Popular Front that came to power in 1936 began to unravel in the face of the Spanish Civil War. As O'Shaughnessy indicates, the important role that *La Grande Illusion* gives its Jewish character is clearly a reaction to growing anti-Semitism in the thirties, yet the film could not overtly address the current political situation without anachronism. The present then makes itself felt, O'Shaughnessy argues, "in the film's visual and auditory fabric, in its décor and mise-en-scène" (p.72). He notes in particular the use of popular songs, and the fact that the austere and repressive regime of the final prison, the medieval fortress of Wintersborn, presided over by an aristocratic German officer "looks forward to twentieth century totalitarianisms and notably to what was emerging in Germany in the 1930s" (p. 74).

The second section of the book addresses the "Genesis, Evolution and Preparation" of the film, comparing the various drafts that show the reworking of Renoir's original idea of dramatizing the wartime experiences of a World War I flying ace who had actually saved his life while he was on a reconnaissance mission. O'Shaughnessy's discovery of an early typewritten draft of the film allows him to add to our knowledge of the evolution of the script, although he notes that class differences are already the central theme of the film as of the first draft. While screenwriter Charles Spaak worked with Renoir up through the completion of the shooting script, other changes were introduced by external factors—issues involving financing, changes in casting, and the evolving political situation itself. However, O'Shaughnessy concludes that "the broad pattern behind these changes is a progressive shift of emphasis from sequences to scenes, from action to interaction, and from spectacle to dialogue" (p. 36). O'Shaughnessy also devotes a section to the discussion of a lawsuit alleging "partial plagiarism" brought against Renoir and his screenwriter Charles Spaak after the film's release, for borrowings from Jean des Vallières' novel, *Kavalier Scharnhorst*. While the suit was ultimately dismissed and O'Shaughnessy demonstrates that the borrowings were negligible, the incident also allows him to establish that, at the time, Renoir feared the suit might provide the right-wing press with the chance to discredit him as a leftist intellectual and to insinuate that all "national" subjects belonged to fascists (p. 41). Still, as O'Shaughnessy himself remarks, the film project moves away from a narrow celebration of the national, building "an international *and* internationalist" dimension as it evolves (p.34). This section concludes with a valuable discussion of the importance of sets to the evolution of the film which, while not fully integrated with the other material of the chapter, sets up certain aspects of the "Analysis" that comprises section three. This third section presents the film as a structure in four acts (p. 49), then moves on to discuss five key "motifs," some primarily thematic, others with visual counterparts—couples and families, Christianity, food and drink, theatre and culture, language and translation—whose repetition creates parallels and mirrorings that enrich and unify the film (p. 52).

The final section deals with the complex reception of the film and it is here, and in the brief conclusion, that O'Shaughnessy's emphasis on *La Grande Illusion* as a political film takes on its full weight. While he notes that in 1937 the film was uniformly praised for its cinematic qualities, the ambiguities of a film that reflected two distinctly different political situations led to widely varying assessments of the film's politics. Critics praised it for its nationalism, its apolitical humanism and its leftist internationalism (p. 101). The film had a more difficult reception in 1946. It was a profoundly different post-war context, one in which the treatment of the Jewish character seemed anti-Semitic to some, images of "good Germans" hit a nerve for others, and "Franco-German understanding" was viewed in light of a collaborationist history. Yet the film's overwhelming success suggests that Renoir's film still touched a broad public.

The film's 1958 release put it in the realm of the great classics of all time, even though, as O'Shaughnessy argues, the rise of *auteurist* analysis in the 1960s, driven by the Young Turks of the New Wave, led to reading the film as part of Renoir's larger *oeuvre*, blunting the political edge of the films made during the Popular Front. This is a reading that Renoir seemed willing to endorse, given his exquisitely apolitical valedictory assertion in his 1974 autobiography that his chief aim in *La Grande Illusion* was "to express the common humanity of man."<sup>[4]</sup> By contrast, O'Shaughnessy's guide explicitly seeks to reassert the political dimension of the film and to reaffirm its place in a history of committed cinema.

His reading of *La Grande Illusion* is complemented and enriched by his research in *The New Face of Political Cinema: Commitment in French Film since 1995*, even though this study locates antecedents of current committed cinema in the more recent flowering of political cinema after May 68. *The New Face of Political Cinema* examines the loss of a political cinema that O'Shaughnessy defines, with reference to the work of Jacques Rancière, as "rooted in radical disagreement over social roles and places and the right to public speech," a cinema that brings "disagreement over the order of things to the surface," challenging the dominant order "while pushing its audience back towards a politics."<sup>[3]</sup> In 1937, Renoir could still draw on a leftist narrative of class opposition and his Popular Front films both extended and contributed to a broader ongoing political debate. For this reason, *La Grande Illusion* remains an essential example of political film. O'Shaughnessy's perspective on *La Grande Illusion* also has the considerable value of attempting to draw the film into a larger political conversation and providing us with past references against which to measure present experience. His conclusion emphasizes the film's radicalism. "*La Grande Illusion* is not simply about respect for others. It is about the mutability of the existing order, its capacity to change for better or for worse" (p. 112).

## NOTES

[1] Jean Renoir, *My Life and My Films* trans. Norman Denny (New York: Atheneum, 1974), p.125.

[2] Martin O'Shaughnessy, *Jean Renoir* (Manchester University Press, 2000).

[3] Martin O'Shaughnessy, *The New Face of Political Cinema: Commitment in French Film since 1995* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books), p.4.

[4] Renoir, *My Life and Films*, p.149.

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ISSN 1553-9172