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Prakash Younger, *Boats on the Marne: Jean Renoir's Critique of Modernity*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017. xxv + 326 pp. $90.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-253-02901-0; $38.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-253-02926-3.

Review by Colin Davis, Royal Holloway, University of London.

The back cover of *Boats on the Marne* describes the book as offering "an original interpretation of Jean Renoir's celebrated films of the 1930s." This is a bold promise given how intensely the films Renoir directed in the decade before the Second World War have been studied in both French- and English-language scholarship. The preface begins with a personal anecdote about the author's first experience of the enigmatic power of *La règle du jeu* and his subsequent attempts to understand it. "Most of the critical consensus was in place," he tells us, "[but] nobody seemed willing to take the final step and say…what the film was ultimately about" (p. xiv). Indeed, existing scholarship is accused of "unconscious evasiveness" (p. xvii). However, the introduction gives a more modest statement of the aims of the book: "This book does not purport to offer a better or more comprehensive account of Renoir's films, French culture or politics in the 1930s, the philosophical legacies of Plato or Rousseau, or any of the other subjects it examines along the way, though it should, I hope, offer a different and liberating way of looking at all of these things…." (p. 18). The book is sending out conflicting signals about its originality: it will be "different and liberating" whilst not claiming to be "better or more comprehensive"; yet at the same time it will finally explain the mystery of *La règle du jeu*, Renoir's final film of the 1930s which is often regarded as his definitive masterpiece.

The main body of the book consists of four chapters. These trace the genesis and style of Renoir's 1930s films (chapter one); the stylistic and thematic development of his work in the 1930s (chapter two); the philosophical engagement with history and politics through the period (chapter three); and finally, a detailed account of *La règle du jeu*, which constitutes the culmination of Renoir's work up until that point (chapter four). The conclusion explains to us, as its subtitle puts it, "Why *La règle du jeu* Matters." The problems of encounter and community are the guiding thread here, which Younger examines through what, following Bakhtin, he calls chronotopes, that is, distinctive configurations of time and space. There are initially four of these: the Flaubertian, in which individuals are isolated and incapable of genuine encounter; the Cytherean, which envisages a world of ineffable pleasures; the naturalist, which depicts a deterministic relation between protagonists and milieu; and the revolutionary, which aspires to show the prospect of a new social order. Through his developing, critical exploration of these chronotopes in his films, Renoir creates a fifth, celebrating an ever-present utopia of human civilization, in which encounter and community are possible on the basis of assumptions about identity, desire, reason, and time which are different from those which have dominated modern philosophy since Rousseau. This chronotope emerges in *Les bas-fonds* and *La grande illusion* and it returns in *La règle du jeu*, in which it is both articulated as a possibility and frustrated in the light of interpersonal conflict, hatred, and encroaching fascism. The 1930s would not end well for Renoir or for Europe.

The interest of this analysis depends on its ability to offer new understanding of Renoir's films or of the

decade in which they were made. The approach yields some valuable insights. Its accounts of historical, political, intellectual, and conceptual contexts are useful despite being sometimes over-long. The films themselves sometimes fall into the background. The book is at its best in its descriptions of scenes and sequences from some of Renoir's greatest works. However, the persuasiveness of the analysis is weakened by a consistent avoidance of engagement with the critical heritage. Take for example the account of the famous pan shot in *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange*, which leads up to the killing of the exploitative capitalist Batala by the protagonist Amédée Lange. This is how Younger describes the shot: "Having manifestly abandoned the established focus of dramatic interest (that is, Lange), the pan continues around the entire empty courtyard until it arrives at the fountain where it picks up Lange, who is about to kill Batala. Bazin notes that most of the critics writing at the time of the film's initial release reproached Renoir for such 'complicated and awkward camera work,' that is, gratuitous displays of technique dissociated from any narrative motivation. Though I do not wish to discuss all the aesthetic justifications for this particular shot here, I offer it as an unmistakable example of a camera movement that runs counter to conventional expectations that the film has itself established: what begins as a dramatically motivated following shot seems to lose itself temporarily in a meaningless formal digression" (p. 64).

This is one of the most famous and most analysed shots in French film history. The great film critic André Bazin, who is cited here, suggested that the shot was aesthetically motivated, calling it "l'expression spatiale pure de toute la mise en scène."[1] There is now something approaching a consensus according to which it has political significance as it implicates Lange's community and the spectator in the act he is about to commit. There are some dissenting voices from this reading (myself included), and by describing the shot as "a meaningless formal digression," Younger is actually taking a controversial and potentially interesting position. But he leaves it undeveloped, apparently unimpressed by the weight of critical readings which regard the shot as anything other than meaningless. And Younger avoids further analysis because he "[does] not wish to discuss all the aesthetic justifications for this particular shot here."

The book culminates in a close reading of *La règle du jeu* which attempts to understand its philosophical and political significance in the context of France in the late 1930s and for the present day. The truths the film shows are, Younger tells us, *incredible*, and the fundamental goal of his book is "to make those incredible truths credible" (p. xx). In practice, the reading of *La règle du jeu* is well conducted and interesting. In considering two pseudo-fascist characters, for example, Younger shows how the racist chauffeur, whose side-parted haircut "clearly alludes to Hitler," is a character who "functions to link the world of the servants to the fascist elements of French society" (p. 267). By contrast to this "low-grade embodiment of Hitler," the violent, bigoted gamekeeper Schumacher is a "low-grade prefiguration of the Pétain of the Occupation," representing the "misty-eyed, backward-looking, conservative tendency within fascism" (p. 269). These points are well made, but it is not clear that they are particularly original. Like a great deal of what is said in this book, the seventy-page chapter devoted to *La règle du jeu* is broadly in line with the interpretations of those critics whom Younger had earlier accused of "unconscious evasiveness" (p. xvii).

What, then, are the incredible truths which the book tries to make credible? The conclusion ends with what the author calls "a very simple point": "The one quality that I have always found convincing and beautiful in Renoir's films, the quality that is to my mind his unique signature as an artist, is his absolute fidelity to the contingent Created-ness of the worlds he wishes to express his response to. The audiovisual details of Renoir's films are striking in their singularity and at the same time seem thoroughly saturated by his responses to them. This miracle or paradox of being loyal to the accidental or chance aspects of the world, to life in all its messiness, and being able to make it all cohere as a whole was the source of the hyperbolic emotions I felt when I first discovered his films in college—infinite, teeming worlds, raging mountain torrents, the light and sounds from long-vanished stars, glistening eyeballs, and so on" (pp. 311-12).

This is a nicely-expressed summary of Renoir's charm, and it is refreshing to see a critic exhibit such

unabashed enthusiasm for his subject. I suspect, though, that many of Renoir's admirers would readily assent to this description. Much of what is to be found in this book is useful and interesting. The discussion of chronotopes offers a helpful lens for understanding the variety, continuity and development of Renoir's films in the 1930s, but this provides not so much a brand new reading of Renoir, as an approach which might augment existing interpretations.

The principal problem with this book is its failure to take account of and position itself accurately in relation to Renoir scholarship of the last two decades. I try to avoid being self-important or overvaluing the significance of my own work; however, I have to admit to a twinge of vanity in noting that the bibliography of *Boats on the Marne*, a philosophical re-reading of Jean Renoir's films of the 1930s, does not include my own philosophical re-reading of Jean Renoir's films of the 1930s, *Scenes of Love and Murder: Renoir, Film and Philosophy* (2009).[2] I am not the only author who might feel a little piqued. Given the philosophical theme, Irving Singer's *Three Philosophical Filmmakers: Hitchcock, Welles, Renoir* (2004) might have deserved a mention, or Martin O'Shaughnessy's *Jean Renoir* (2000), which is now the standard general study of Renoir's films in English, or Pascal Mérigeau's *Jean Renoir* (2012), the definitive biography which devotes over 300 pages to Renoir's life and work in the 1930s, or other relevant books by, for example, Christopher Faulkner, Keith Reader, Nicholas MacDonald, Julian Jackson, and Todd McGowan.[3] In fact, with the exception of Phillips and Vincendeau's co-edited *A Companion to Jean Renoir* (2013), the bibliography does not list any book or article principally devoted to Renoir published in the twenty-first century.[4]

It may be, of course, that Younger does not see any value in anything that has been written on Renoir in the last twenty years. However, a revisionist reading needs to know what it is revising, otherwise it risks replicating what it aimed to surpass. It is surprising that the near-total lack of reference to recent scholarship in English and the total lack of reference to any scholarship on Renoir in French were not picked up at the peer review stage. A much shorter version of this book might make a useful study of Renoir's films of the 1930s. At over 300 pages the current study is longer than it need be and less scholarly than it should be. As it stands, *Boats on the Marne* contains interesting material, but it is not quite right either for specialists or for those seeking a reliable guide to some of Renoir's greatest films.

NOTES

[1] André Bazin, *Jean Renoir* (Paris: Editions Ivrea, 2005), p. 42.

[2] Colin Davis, *Scenes of Love and Murder: Renoir, Film and Philosophy* (London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2009).

[3] Irving Singer, *Three Philosophical Filmmakers: Hitchcock, Welles, Renoir* (Cambridge, Mass., and London: MIT Press, 2004); Martin O'Shaughnessy, *Jean Renoir* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2000); Pascal Mérigeau, *Jean Renoir* (Paris: Flammarion, 2012); Christopher Faulkner, *Jean Renoir: A Conversation with his Films 1894-1979* (Cologne: Taschen, 2007); Keith Reader, *La règle du jeu (Jean Renoir 1939)* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2010); Nicholas Macdonald, *In Search of "La Grande Illusion"*: *A Critical Appreciation of Renoir's Elusive Masterpiece* (Jefferson, North Carolina, and London: McFarland and Company, 2014); Julian Jackson, *La Grande Illusion* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Todd McGowan, *Psychoanalytic Film Theory and "The Rules of the Game*" (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2015).

[4] Alastair Phillips and Ginette Vincendeau, eds., *A Companion to Jean Renoir* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013).

Colin Davis
Royal Holloway, University of London
colin.davis@rhul.ac.uk

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