

The Main Feature

Season 33 - Issue 5 (screening 8.11.12)

La Grande Illusion

France 1937 100 minutes

Director	Jean Renoir
Screenplay	Charles Spaak and Jean Renoir
Cinematography	Christian Matras
Sound	Joseph de Bretagne
Music	Joseph Kosma
Editor	Marguerite Renoir

Cast:

Jean Gabin	Lt. Maréchal
Pierre Fresnay	Captain de Boeldieu
Erich von Stroheim	Captain von Rauffenstein
Marcel Dalio	Rosenthal
Julien Carette	Traquet
Dita Parlo	Elsa
Gaston Modot	Engineer
Jean Dasté	Teacher
Sylvain Itkine	Demolder
Jacques Becker	English Officer



“Nowadays, this masterful film should be required viewing worldwide, especially on Remembrance Day.”

This quote was the final sentence of a Guardian film blog by Ronald Bergan, author of “Jean Renoir: Projections of Paradise”. He asserted that “Jean Renoir's *La Grande Illusion* is that rare thing: a masterpiece inspired by the Great War”.



At the end of an interview on an American television chat-show, the host suddenly asked Orson Welles which films he would take with him ‘on the ark’. Welles was surprised by the question, but answered immediately ‘*La Grande Illusion*’. It isn’t only Welles that thinks it a very fine film: in 2010 it was 35th in Empire magazine’s 100 best films of world cinema.

The film was banned in Italy by Mussolini, and in Germany by Goebbels, who labelled Renoir as "Cinematic Enemy Number One", and declared that "Stroheim's impersonation of a German officer is a caricature. No German officer is like that."

The film was promptly banned in Germany and the negative seized. It vanished during the War, emerging in truncated form in 1946 and only fully restored by Jean Renoir in the late 1950s. Why does it remain such a well-regarded film 75 years after it was made?

First, the director. Renoir was in the middle of a period of great creativity. Over the previous five years he had directed *Boudu Saved From Drowning* (1932), *A Day in the Country* (1936), *The Crime of Monsieur Lange* (1936) and he was about to direct *La bête humaine* (1938) and *La règle du jeu* (1939) which we saw at the club in 2006. His interest in film began when recuperating from a wound sustained in the First World War, and he found it helpful to rest with his leg propped up, normally over the seat in front of him in the cinema. He started to make films with his own money (subsidised by the sale of some of his father's paintings). It was only at the start of the '30s that he found the success which enabled him to form his own company to produce films.



Second, the cast. Jean Gabin had started as a singer in the music halls, but in 1937 was already an experienced film actor (he had just made *Pépé-le-moko* and was to go on to star in Renoir's *La bête humaine*). Pierre Fresnay was equally experienced both on the stage and in cinema (he had played Marius in the Marcel Pagnol trilogy *Marius*, *Fanny* and *Cesar* earlier in the 1930s). Eric von Stroheim began as an actor in silent films but became better known as a director. Marcel Dalio had also appeared

in *Pépé-le-moko* and was to appear in *La règle du jeu* (together with Gaston Modot and Julien Carette who play smaller parts in *La grande illusion*), and later in *Casablanca*. And the German actress Dita Parlo, who had already starred in *L'Atalante*, brings a subdued radiance to the screen. But it is not just a cast full of stars of European cinema. Much more important is the ensemble playing in a film which has no real heroes.

Third, the story. *La Grande Illusion* is a war film with no battles and hardly a shot fired. It is set in the First World War and the principal characters are drawn from the embryonic air forces of France and Germany. Renoir was in the cavalry at the outbreak of the First World War, but after his injury he returned as an aerial photographer. It is said that Gabin wears Renoir's old uniform as a costume in the film. Renoir later described the First World War as 'a war based on fair play, a war without atom bombs or torture'.



Almost all of the action is set in German prisoner of war camps, and the underlying theme concerns the duty to try to escape. This is heavily overlaid by considerations of class: Capitaine de Boeldieu (Pierre Fresnay) is a French aristocrat with his white gloves and monocle; Captain von Rauffenstein (Eric van Stoheim) is his German equivalent.

They share the same outlook on war, they have been to the same restaurants, and they even have mutual acquaintances. When they want to talk to each other without the others understanding, they use English. In contrast, Lieutenant Maréchal (Jean Gabin) is a solid Breton and the other officers are equally down to earth. Lieutenant Rosenthal (Marcel Dalio) is a

Jew, though his wealthy banking family keeps him and his fellow prisoners well fed by sending regular parcels. The plot revolves around the different attitudes to war between patricians and plebeians; and about which soldiers owe their loyalty to class and which to country. It's not a story about war, or even about prison camps. Rather, it's a story about people and the way they interact, and that make it timeless.

Fourth, innovation. From our perspective, where we take so much for granted in the cinema, it is hard to put *La grande illusion* into its technical context. It is in black and white (not a complaint from my point of view) and was made long before Cinemascope was widely used. Because Renoir was the second son of the French impressionist painter Auguste Renoir, he inevitably grew up in an artistic household. It is perhaps to be expected he had something of a painter's eye, and he began to incorporate depth into the scenes he filmed. Rather than having the characters spread across the scene, they are also spread from

the front to rear within the scene. For example, there are a couple of shots in *La grande illusion* where the camera begins inside a room and ends up outside (or vice versa), a commonplace now but it would have surprised audiences at the time.

Put all this together and you have a film which wears well, and compares very favourably with modern cinema. The French critic André Bazin wrote of Renoir that "he has inherited from the literary and pictorial sensibility of his father's era a profound, sensual and moving sense of reality." *La grande illusion* may be in its seventy-fifth year, but human nature – which is what the film is about – has not changed that much in the interval.

Michael Hipkins

At a time when Germany was threatening the world, Renoir said he made the film because he was a pacifist, as well as wanting to show French officers as he remembered them when he was in the army. Another reason Renoir had for making the film was that, with the exception of *All Quiet On The Western Front*, he felt no film he had seen had given a true picture of the men who did the fighting. "Either the drama never got out of the mud, which was an exaggeration, or else the war was made into a kind of operetta." Renoir had no time for noble patriotic sentiments, nor did his fellows-in-arms during the Great War. *La Grande Illusion* was first shown in Paris in June 1937, the month that Léon Blum's government fell. Despite its ambiguities, the film was welcomed by the left.

Why I Love... Renoir's 'La Grande Illusion'

British film director Mike Newell (*Four Weddings and a Funeral*) explains his passion for Jean Renoir's 1937 masterpiece *La Grande Illusion*, being re-released to coincide with its 75th anniversary.

I vividly remember seeing it for the first time. It was in 1958, and I was 16. I went with my father to the Academy cinema in Oxford Street. It was a perfect film for me. I was full of Lefty humanism at the time, which is pretty much where I've stayed. The French aristocrat and the German commandant come from the same privileged background, and have an instinctive empathy that surpasses nationalist hatreds. I remember being electrified by the notion of wartime enemies reaching across divisions.

The film's themes are obvious. It's the end of class, the aristocrats are gone. The working man and the outcast – they're the ones who are now going to be in the ascendant. If Renoir has had any influence on me, it's been indirect. Like most ordinary directors I've been all over the map, in a way that Renoir was not. But I did see in him that there was a standard to which you could aspire – a truth about what you put on screen and the way you saw characters.

The wonderful thing about *La Grande Illusion* is that all its characters feel true and complete. No character is denied a rounded portrayal. It truly is a classic.

Source: Daily Telegraph website Interview by David Gritten

Renoir said in a film trailer dating from the re-release of the film in 1958:
"[*La Grande Illusion* is] a story about human relationships. I am confident that such a question is so important today that if we don't solve it, we will just have to say 'goodbye' to our beautiful world."

The printing of the notes for each film is undertaken by Repropoint free of charge



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Reactions to **Peepi Live**

25 October 2012

Score	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Votes	~	~	2	2	5	12	8	5	1	~

Total received – 35 Average Score – 6.17

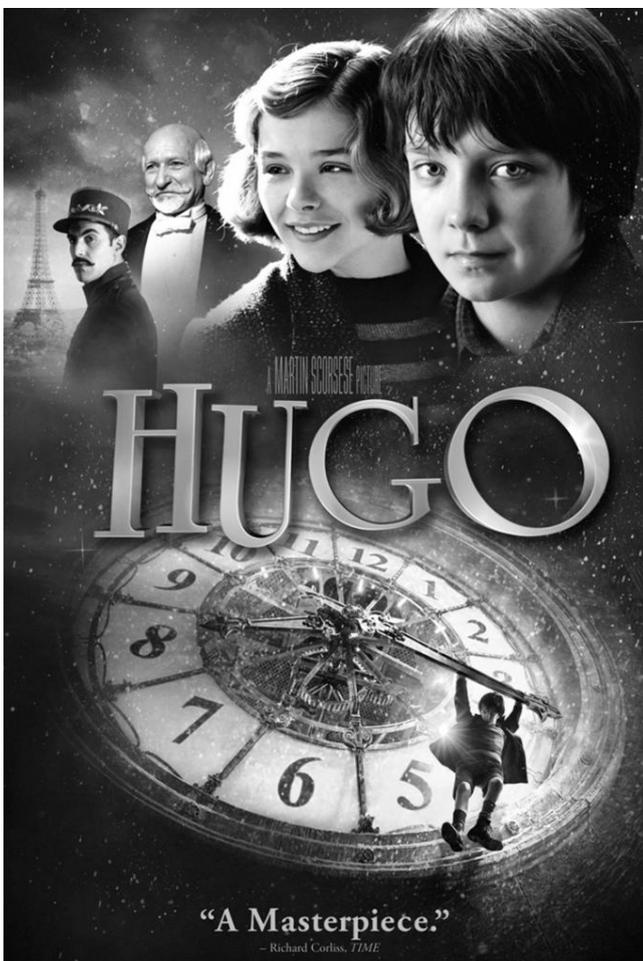
Your Comments

- Difficult to watch as lots to look at as well as reading subtitles
- A really creative take on a very sad situation
- A very clever critique of Indian society
- Rather drawn out but worth watching
- “Ace in the hole” Indian style but not as gruelling
- Wonderful light-hearted portrayal of media circus and political intrigue
- Maybe that’s what you call “black comedy” – reminded me of a Monty Python film
- Well observed Indian life – amusing at times but underlining the difference between the lives of the rich and poor and the skulduggery of politics!
- Another excellent choice for One World Week – an amusing as well as moving film

Position	Film	Average Score
1 st	The Artist	8.28
2 nd	My Week With Marilyn	7.56
3 rd	A Separation	6.97
4 th	Peepi Live!	6.17

Our next film

8pm on Thursday 22 November 2012



“Martin Scorsese’s sweeping family adventure, a love letter to the cinema, this year earned a record number of Oscar nominations (11), including Best Picture and Best Director nods.”

“A moving, funny and exhilarating film.”

“Scorsese has created an exquisite jewel box of a movie, polished and honed to glittering, diamond-hard brilliance.”

“Hugo is pitched as much to cinephile adults as children.”

“This is a great director's greatest love story.”