

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Frederic Will, Ph. D.

La grande illusion. 1937

Jean Renoir. (1894-1979)

STORY

La grande illusion, released at an internationally hot moment in western Europe, when the Nazi party was fixating its grasp on Germany, and diplomatic tensions were tearing apart the major national powers of France, Germany, and Britain, still stands out as one of the deepest analyses of the nature of war. In this film war is observed up close through the personal interrelations of a variety of officers and soldiers thrown into confrontation during the hottest period of fighting in World War I.

Bonding. The film opens with shots of two French and German barracks, in 1916; then brings them together through coincidence; a French plane, from the French barracks, is shot down by a German pilot, and the two airmen are taken prisoner, by the Germans. The Frenchmen, as it happens, are of the same military rank but different classes—Maréchal is a ‘commoner’ while Boeldieu is an aristocrat, a difference which might in today’s world seem trivial, but which was not so in the military cultural world a century ago. The commandant of the German camp, to which the airmen are brought as prisoners, is an aristocrat, Commandant von Rauffenstein, who is inclined by birth to share the values of Boeldieu, and who bonds with this fellow French aristocrat over a congenial lunch. In the course of it they begin to unearth a network of shared acquaintances and experiences, which will they will continue to share despite the vicious fighting which is at just that time continuing to divide their two nations.

Imprisonment. As the film develops—amply unfolding the human relations among the various types of French prisoners, highlighting the presence of the wealthy Jewish nouveau riche, Rosenthal, who generously shares his food packages with fellow prisoners and even captors—we see the French prisoners occupied on two fronts, joking around, and digging an escape tunnel, a project which will be subverted at the last minute when the French prisoners are transferred to a new camp, in which they once more meet Rauffenstein, their commandant; the urbane relationship, between the commandant and Boeldieu is resumed.

Escape. While the new camp imprisonment continues, in a thirteenth century castle high in the mountains, a momentous escape brings the two aristocrats closer together, drives us to experience the monstrosity of war, and closes an imprisonment chapter for Rosenthal and Maréchal. In a word, it transpires this way: Boeldieu aids Rosenthal and Maréchal to escape from the prison, by diverting the camp’s attention, so that the two can descend on a rope ladder; Rauffenstein shoots Boeldieu in the stomach, aiming at the legs but failing his target and in effect killing his fellow aristocrat, who forgives him under-standingly, for doing what he must, in a final gesture of noblesse oblige.

Fallout. In this bolus of consequential actions, we continue to scrutinize war as human relations pressed to their extremities. (Whether war is ever anything except people in action, Aristotle’s definition for a tragedy, is to be doubted, even in our age of push button pulverization.) Ahead of us, at this point, lie arguably the most significant eventualities of the tale, the points at which the fatuity of hostility most sharply declare themselves. In the first place there is the love that develops between Maréchal and Elsa, a widowed German farm woman; in the second place the bonding of Maréchal and Rosenthal.

Elsa. Elsa is the salvation of the escaping Maréchal and Rosenthal, the latter of whom has injured his leg, and is in danger of having to give up. Just as the end seems near, for these two exhausted escapees high in the snow of the Alps, they come upon the small house of a German farm woman widow, who shelters them, helps hide their presence from a passing German military patrol, and in one gesture of acceptance makes a survival place for two ‘enemies.’ In the course of their stay with her—until they felt

the call of military duty—Elsa does the necessary to deconstruct the term ‘enemy.’ As it turns out, her husband and three brothers were killed in ‘three victorious German battles’; the scar of war’s bitterness has broken her life, and she has no toleration left for the international war scene—an Intolerance she makes evident by falling in love with Maréchal, from whom she parts with great pain. Maréchal has, by this time, sworn to her that, at war’s end, he will return to her and her young daughter.

Illusion. The film will end on a note of subtle triumph. Maréchal and Rosenthal head for the Swiss border, neutral territory on which they will be safe. By luck, and a few hundred meters, they manage to cross over before they are overtaken by a contingent of German soldiers, mucking along through the heavy snow. The tale fades out into a peace where we can ask ourselves, for the first time, what the ‘illusion’ is in *La grande illusion*? From the outset, when the French plane is shot down carrying Maréchal and Boeldieu, we see that war is a convention. (In 1909 Norman Angell had published his pamphlet, ‘Europe’s Optical Illusion,’ which gave a title to the perspective of the present film; Angell argues that the economies of the European nations are so intertwined that for them to fight one another is self-destructive; war is an inherited behavior which has long outlived its function.) Boeldieu and von Rauffenstein bond, across class lines, as though their nations’ hostilities were irrelevant to their lives. The French prisoners of war, digging their tunnel, playing their games together, are a community apart, neither the generators nor the ideologists of the war. Maréchal falls for Elsa, and only deeply trained habit can extract him from his peace in the mountains. His only problem with Germany is the German language. And what is the ‘grande illusion’? It is war, which in the end, as we all know, is no longer founded even on self-interest.

THEMES

Illusion. The overriding illusion of the film is that war can solve problems. What we observe, of the French-German World War 1, shows us nothing but low level confusion, the odd killing—as of Boeldieu by Rauffenstein—and meaningless displacement of persons, such as the prisoners of war.

Aristocracy. Boeldieu and Rauffenstein are able to sit down to lunch together, after the former’s plane has been shot down—although Maréchal, a commoner, is not free to accept this perk of aristocracy. It must be said, though, that Boeldieu pitches in with his men, in the effort to construct an escape tunnel.

Commonality. Among themselves, the French prisoners of war become a mass of ‘guys off the street,’ plotters for freedom—they keep working at their tunnel---but basically little more than a national glom. The glitz of the war spirit is hard to maintain, these guys have no such aspiration.

Love. The true instance of love, in this film devoted to issues like camaraderie, is that which forms between Elsa and Maréchal. The fascinating driver here is Elsa; she is far from moved by the German propaganda, concerning their great victories, and is driven almost perversely to offer shelter, then love, to ‘the enemy.’

CHARACTERS

Von Rauffenstein is the classic representative of the old Germanic aristocracy. He feels at ease with his French counterpart, Boeldieu, with whom he shares values, social connections, and even an old girlfriend.

Boeldieu is the French aristocrat counterpart to von Rauffenstein. The two understand each other.

Maréchal is a French officer, who represents middle class France. It is he who falls in love with Elsa, and plans to join her after the war.

Elsa is the German farm woman who shelters Maréchal and Rosenthal, and who falls heavily in love with Maréchal.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

VON RAUFFENSTEIN

Character Von Rauffenstein is the perfect embodiment of the older European aristocracy. When Boeldieu and Maréchal are shot down, at the film's opening, von Rauffenstein is glad to sit down to a lunch with Boeldieu, a fellow aristocrat, but hardly with Maréchal, a commoner, though an officer. After Rauffenstein has shot Boeldieu—in the stomach instead of the legs, by accident—Rauffenstein turns out to be the one pitied, because he is destined to go on living in a world without respect for class.

Parallels. The perspective of von Rauffenstein is reminiscent of the value world of three masterful poets of the twentieth century. William Butler Yeats (d.1939) was an Irish aristocrat, convinced that the world of his time was growing hopelessly plebeian. Ezra Pound (d. 1972) saw all western culture as a vertiginous decline into intellectual and barbaric (Jewish) vulgarity. Wallace Stevens, the most powerful and fastidious poet of the century, d 1956, made clear in his language use that for him only the most curried and perspicuous language use befitted a cultured perceiver.

Illustrative moments

Ebullient. Von Rauffenstein is at the top of his game, at the film's outset, when he returns to camp to announce the shooting down of the French plane.

Welcoming. Von Rauffenstein is gracious and charming as he sits to lunch with the captured French pilot/aristocrat, Boeldieu.

Shamed. Von Rauffenstein is ashamed to have shot Boeldieu in the stomach, instead of the legs—as he fires to prevent the escape of his aristocrat counterpart.

Dandified. We blush at the aristocratic style awareness, as we see von Rauffenstein's valet de chambre aid him in slipping on the tight gloves which are required wear for evening dinner wear.

Discussion questions

Is Renoir sympathetic toward von Rauffenstein, when the latter refuses to dine with an officer (Maréchal) who is a commoner? It was the view of the conservative English poet, T.S. Eliot, that a society functions best whenever its members know their social class roles, and stay within their boundaries. What would Renoir say? What would you say?