

# 1930s European Film

## October 3, 2005

- Jean Renoir, *Grand Illusion* (1937)
- The Great Depression
- Polarization of Left and Right
- French film in the 1930s
- Career of Jean Renoir
- German film under Naziism
- Other nations in Europe

# Background: Europe in the 1930s

- After-effects of World War I (ended 1918)
- Great Depression begins in late 1929
- Italy: Mussolini & Fascism since 1922
- Germany: Hitler & Nazis take power in 1933
- Soviet Union: Stalin consolidates power in purges from 1934 onward
- France: polarization between Left and Right
- Outbreak of World War II with Hitler's invasion of Poland in 1939

# French Film in the 1930s

- Transition to sound
- Experimental lyricism (as in René Clair, *Under the Roofs of Paris*, 1930)
- Surrealism (as in Jean Cocteau, *The Blood of a Poet*, 1930)
- Poetic Realism (as in Jean Vigo, *L'Atalante*, 1934)
- Renoir combines lyricism and naturalism

# Jean Renoir (1894-1979)

- Son of Impressionist painter, Pierre Auguste Renoir
- Silent films in the 1920s
- Early experimentation with sound, & with shooting in real locations (*La Chienne*, 1931)
- Leftist politics in the 1930s
  - *Boudu Saved from Drowning* (1932)
  - *The Crime of Monsieur Lange* (1936)
  - *Grand Illusion* (1937)
  - *Rules of the Game* (1939)
- To Hollywood in the 1940s, escaping the War and the Nazis
- Back to France, films on a smaller scale in the 1950s and 1960s



# Renoir: Form and Meaning

- Realism vs. Theatricality
- Ensemble acting
- Exploration of space
- Sequence shots
  - Deep focus photography, great depth of field
  - Long shots (i.e. camera far from the action)
  - Close-ups only for special emphasis
  - Long takes (i.e. long shot lengths, less cutting)
  - Action on all planes, not just in foreground
  - Active, fluid camera movements

# *Grand Illusion* (1937)

- Set during World War I (1914-1918)
- Made just two years before the start of World War II (1939)
- Banned in Nazi Germany
- Jean Gabin (Marechal)
- Erich von Stroheim (von Rauffenstein)

# *Grand Illusion*: Basic Elements

- An expression of universal humanism, but set in the context of many impediments
- Nationalism (France vs. Germany)
- Social Class
  - The aristocrats (de Boieldieu & von Rauffenstein)
  - The bourgeoisie or *nouveau riche* (Rosenthal)
  - The working class or common people (Marechal)
- Antisemitism (again, Rosenthal)

# *Grand Illusion*: The show

- Theatricality: frontal view of the stage
- Burlesque & drag emphasize the prisoners' isolation, the life they are missing
- 360° Pan: camera moves from stage to audience, and around audience—effect of linking them all together
- News of a French victory: the French sing *La Marseillaise*, the Germans walk out
- Irony (in the next sequence, the Germans retake the town)

# *Grand Illusion:* Von Rauffenstein and the prison

- Tracking shot (with pans, tilts, and other movements) shows us objects in von Rauffenstein's office, and his servant, before it shows us von Rauffenstein himself
- Rigidity and precision
  - Literally, because of his accident
  - Metaphorically, because of his social class
- Movement and objects reveal character
- Paralleled/opposed by later tracking shot of Elsa's house

# *Grand Illusion*: Death of de Boieldieu

- Isolation; the geranium
- Theme: the passing of the old ruling class
- De Boieldieu and von Rauffenstein have much in common
  - The international aristocracy
  - Rigid codes of behavior
  - Expression in brief gestures
- De Boieldieu dies to allow his non-aristocratic colleagues to escape
- Social class vs. nation
- Patriotism vs. universal brotherhood

# *Grand Illusion*: Themes

- Passing of the old aristocratic order
- Irrelevance of national distinctions
- Commonalities: Boieldieu and von Rauffenstein vs. Marechal and Elsa
- Duty and freedom
- The dream of peace, and the reality of going back to war
- What is the “grand illusion”?

# Other European Cinemas in the 1930s

- Soviet Union: Stalin and “socialist realism”
- Great Britain: Hitchcock’s early films
- Germany under the Nazis
  - Departure of Fritz Lang and many others
  - Film in the service of the Nazi regime
  - Film as propaganda
- Leni Riefenstahl (1902-2003)
  - Early career as actress
  - Filmmaker for the Nazis
  - Postwar career
- *Triumph of the Will* (1935)