

Social Roles / Political Responsibilities: Jean Renoir's Search for Artistic Integrity, 1928-1939

CHARLES MUSSER

Throughout his life, Jean Renoir—the son of a renowned painter, a onetime potter, and filmmaker—was preoccupied with the role of the artist in society. What was the artist's place in, and his/her responsibilities to, the world (but particularly to France)? Under what conditions could an artist function and do meaningful work—not only meaningful for society but for him/herself? These were ethical, moral, and political questions with which Renoir wrestled, finding no easy answers, no simple verities. Rather he was often troubled by the relationship between artist and society which he understood as a dynamic one in need of constant reconsideration. The filmmaker's exceptional struggle with this problem found multiple arenas for expression. First, Renoir made numerous pictures in which a variety of artists figure more or less prominently. This trend, evident by *Tire au Flanc* (1928), only concluded with *Le Petite Théâtre de Jean Renoir* (1970). Second, he wrote extensively about his films and the cinema; these efforts ranged from various articles first appearing in the 1920s through a column in *Ce Soir* in 1937-38 to his autobiography. Renoir also made a substantial number of films that adapted great works of French literature, notably *Nana* (1926), *Madame Bovary* (1934) and *La Bête Humaine* (1938). Here the filmmaker's respect for, and engagement with, some of nineteenth-century France's foremost artists and their works is obvious. Closely related to these adaptations, he wrote a biography about his father Pierre Auguste Renoir, which was much concerned with this question of the artist's social role. To consider the ways that Pierre Auguste Renoir handled his responsibilities as an artist provided Jean Renoir with a way to reflect on his own efforts. Since the painter profoundly shaped "the tiny details" of his daily life as well as his filmmaking¹, Jean Renoir's biography of his father thus served as a necessary step toward the writing of his own autobiography, *My Life and My Films*, in which these issues recurred, albeit in somewhat muted form.

This article focuses on one specific strand of Renoir's preoccupation, the representations of artists in his films, beginning with the silent farce *Tire au Flanc* and culminating with the black comedy *La Règle du jeu* (*Rules of the Game*, 1939).² These films form an arc both in his career and in his approach to this subject. During this period France experienced extreme change politically, economically, and socially. The leftist government formed in June 1924 with the electoral success of the *Cartel des Gauches* was undermined and then replaced in July 1926 by the return of Raymond Poincaré as premier of a *Union Nationale* government. The prosperity and monetary stability of the late 1920s gradually gave way to a deepening depression, the rise of Hitler, the replacement of a conservative government with the *front populaire*, the left government's failure to intervene in Spain, the dissolution of the Popular Front, and finally the drift toward a Second World War. As Christopher Faulkner has pointed out, Renoir engaged these rapidly altering conditions in his work—a partial explanation for the fluctuating subject matter and themes of his films.³ Renoir uses the artists who figure constantly in these films not only to raise questions of ethical responsibilities, but to express these questions in the most immediate and personal terms, by repeatedly connecting them to himself and his own situation.

Before going further, it is necessary to reflect on Renoir's understanding of the artist's ontological status. Like his father, who banished the term "artist" from his vocabulary and preferred to be called a "workman-painter,"⁴ the filmmaker distrusted the term "art" due to its elitist connotations. Certainly he opposed its use either to create cultural hierarchies of forms (for example, he did not view his move from ceramics to film as a step upward from the world of craft to that of art) or as an evaluative mechanism to differentiate works within forms by genre. His autobiography opens with an assertion: "Everything that moves on the screen is cinema." and a denunciation:

I often hear people say: 'A very interesting film, no doubt, but not cinema.' I don't know why the use of pictures that move should be restricted to traditional melodrama or farcical comedy. A geographical film is cinema just as much as *Ben Hur*.⁵

Likewise his 1930s films reveal a radical egalitarianism in their portrayal of painters (including a hobbyist), street musicians, singers, actors, a symphony conductor and a writer of pulp literature. Renoir had deep affection for popular culture and quotidian creativity whether the untutored chanteuse singing to her lover or the person who never consciously conceived of his/her creativity as artistic. For Renoir, artistic activities pervade life even though political and social structures frequently relegate them to marginal positions.

THE ARTIST IS “GOOD FOR NOTHING”: *TIRE AU FLANC*

Renoir made *Tire au Flanc* (the title is military slang for "The Good for Nothing") in 1928, after the bourgeoisie had reasserted their firm control over the nation's political and economic future. As Alexander Werth observed the “Two Hundred Families” (also known as the mur d'argent or wall of money), which controlled France's economy, had sabotaged the leftist governments of 1924 and 1926 and then come to power through the political leadership of Poincaré.⁶ Renoir adapted a turn-of - the-century theatrical farce, *Tire au Flanc* (1904), that lampooned the army. Although the undertaking began as an assignment, Renoir quickly made the story his own and came to take pleasure in it⁷. About a poet inducted into the army to which he is ill-suited, the film is, as Alexander Sesonske has remarked, integral to Renoir's 1930s oeuvre⁸. The poet is named Jean d'Ombelles. His family name refers to the arrangement or order of budding flowers. His first name ties the artist figure to Renoir himself, a method of association that the filmmaker came to employ frequently over the next ten years. In *Tire au Flanc*, this coincidence of the two Jeans-one maker of the film and one artist in the film-was fortuitous. However, having grasped the name linkages implicit in his adaptation of the playscript, Renoir reshaped the personality of the poet figure to make the parallels fit more comfortably; at the outset, Jean d'Ombelles is less arrogant and elitist in the film than in the play⁹.

Jean d'Ombelles is engaged to his cousin, Solange Blandin, from a well-off bourgeois family of women whose income comes from rents and other forms of unearned income. The Blandin women eagerly pamper and protect their beloved male relative from the outside world. Jean is an awkward, inept daydreamer of questionable talents: even his fiancé does not particularly care for his verse and ultimately leaves him for an army officer. His adult life has barely begun and already he is a failure. Unable to make a living, he is hopelessly dependent on his future in-laws. Laurence Wylie has argued convincingly that Jean Renoir had a strong sense of personal failure, conceiving of himself as a *rate*, a social parasite living in the shadow of his father, with little aptitude or direction in life.¹⁰ Although Wylie sees this lack of self-worth as shaping most of Renoir's 1930s films, culminating with *La Règle du jeu*, his analysis seems most applicable to the 1920s and the Jean d'Ombelles character of *Tire au Flanc*. *Nana*, produced by Films Jean Renoir, was a failure that forced the filmmaker to sell off his father's paintings to pay for its debts. The release of *Nana* in June 1926, moreover, roughly coincided with the defeat of the leftist government. Both Jeans seemed to lack any meaningful place in the outside world as artists. The filmmaker playfully but despairingly associated himself with the poet whose work lacks both social and commercial value. D'Ombelles is appreciated most by a small family circle-and even here there are limits.

Tire au Flanc demonstrates a visceral incompatibility between the creative artist and regimented military life (an opposition that resonated with Renoir's own experiences in the army and one he went on to explore with greater subtlety in the 1930s). And yet Jean is too incompetent, too helpless to be classified as a romantic renegade. Inept at the most basic military exercises and tormented by Mufлот, a bully who rules the barracks, Jean hits bottom when he is thrown into a barren stockade. Sleeping on a cold floor, he is attacked by rats and finally witnesses his fiancé romantically embrace Lieutenant Daumel through his small prison window. Ready to kill himself, Jean is rescued by Joseph, the former servant whose last name (Turlot) suggests his clown-like proclivities. Joseph, who quickly learned how to get along in the army, imparts this knowledge to Jean.¹¹ Furthermore, Solange's sister happily steps forward to assume the role of fiancé.

The army barracks become increasingly infiltrated and domesticated by the Blandins, even while the military turns Jean into a “man”. The final breakthrough, the reversal of the unsuccessful dinner, occurs during an evening of amateur theatricals put on by the recruits for the regiment. Jean and Joseph take starring roles: Jean plays Pan, carrying both his customary pipe and a rifle, while Joseph dresses in

drag as an angel. The macho Muflet overplays his hand and in the ensuing chaos, Jean defeats the bully and earns the respect of his superiors. The film concludes with several simultaneous marriages both upstairs and downstairs, between the soldiers (now including Jean and Joseph) and the Blandin household. Here we truly encounter a Union Nationale, an alliance of preening wealth and incompetent power that echoed the political alliance of the government. Although the reconciliation of groups, symbolized by the many marriages, is a conventional happy ending, it is mocked by the film's narrational stance.

Throughout the film, Renoir uses a mobile, nervous and finally ironic camera. At the opening dinner, swish pans suggest the inability of the Blandins to make their world conform to their highly regulated bourgeois ideals. Camera positions violate conventional placement and actively ridicule both the pretentious Colonel and the inept poet. Ajiggly camera likewise struggles to record ineptly performed military exercises, which once again betray efforts to keep up appearances. The feminine Blandin household and the masculine military barracks are two complementary, virtually self-contained worlds that are joined in a successful defense against outside threats-social, cultural or economic. Although audiences at the time apparently enjoyed the seemingly anti-war wit that was then fashionable, the comedy is, on a deeper level, corrosive and unsatisfying. At the conclusion, Jean still lacks any purpose as an artist. Of all the characters, he stays closest to the bosom of the family, unable to connect with the social universe. The mood of claustrophobia and depression fails to lift. In many respects, *Tire au Flanc* is a bleak film that works against itself-a possible explanation for the critical neglect it has suffered.

In happily returning to his familiar self-enclosed bourgeois world, the poet soldier has “grown up”, but nothing has really changed. As a poet, if no longer as a soldier, Jean d'Ombelles is still a “good for nothing”. His identity as an artist remains only an eccentric career choice, never really taken seriously by anyone except the younger, still romantic sister Lili. Such might be said of Renoir at this time. Like some other Renoir films from this period, *Tire au Flanc* was partially financed by the wealthy lover(s) of an aspiring actress. This assured her of a role, suggesting that the film was funded for neither strictly artistic nor commercial reasons. Nor was the picture's place in the politics of culture very clear. Are viewer for *Cinémagazine* found *Tire au Flanc* charming but would have preferred it if the recruits had worn period costume (the play dates from 1904).¹² Although this comment suggests that the film's acerbic pertinence was difficult to ignore completely, the reviewer refused to take the picture too seriously and characterized it as a light-hearted romp.

It is, in fact, Renoir's authorial voice, the cinematic mediation between story and its filmic realization, that distinguishes Jean Renoir from Jean d'Ombelles. Moreover the satiric commentary which is expressed in filmic terms through framing, camera movement, and editing creates this distance both in terms of aesthetic achievement and socio-political function. Renoir thus associates himself with d'Ombelles through verbal name play but then qualifies and problematizes, that relationship. Yet this distinction -perhaps we might say this potential opposition between Jean Renoir and Jean d'Ombelles-must be recognized by critics and audiences if it is to be real. If the film is interpreted sympathetically as a serious reworking of the play, we might associate Renoir with a different kind of artist, say his father. But if it is seen merely as a light-hearted rendering of the stage farce, the distance between the two Jeans collapses. In the 1920s, this tension went largely unrecognized.

On the very day that *Tire au Flanc* opened, leftist critic Léon Moussinac published a column that denounced a whole series of American and French war films, including *The Big Parade* (1925) and *Wings* (1927), as propaganda promoting heroism under the guise of being anti-war. Although the military is decidedly unheroic in *Tire au Flanc*, the film hardly proposes the kinds of solution to permanent peace that Moussinac saw as the achievement of Soviet filmmaking. In this polemic, Renoir's comedy goes unmentioned¹³. During the film's relatively brief run, the communist daily *L'Humanité* applauded army recruits that denounced the hazing to which they were subjected and encouraged *les bleus* to organize into groups and take collective action¹⁴. Without accounting for Renoir's sardonic stance, *Tire au Flanc* apparently does just the reverse. Perhaps because the picture operated against the grain of current political discourse, leftist critics generally avoided mentioning it. This silence suggests the extent to which Renoir was then isolated from those left-wing organizations and critics with whom he was subsequently allied.

Renoir's political outlook of the 1930s should not and cannot be projected back onto an earlier decade, for leftist political activities were in depressing disarray at the time of *Tire au Flanc*. The French

Communist Party (P. C. F.) was then pursuing, as Karl G. Harr has observed, “an electoral policy cutting the Communists off completely from the Socialists, or even the Radicals, [that] was merely playing into the hands of an increasingly united Right for no political purpose”. This approach was completely divorced from the realities of the French scene and was “a folly which many of the French workers and militants would not sanction”¹⁵. Both, personal and political depression, were not only expressed in *Tire au Flanc*, they were intertwined. Although one suspects that the former predominated, further research into Renoir's own political sentiments at this time is needed to sort this out more thoroughly¹⁶. In any case, *Tire au Flanc* suggests that Renoir did not simply become politicized in the 1930s with the rise of *the front populaire*, but rather that he struggled with these concerns in his silent and early sound films as well.

ARTIST, MARGINALIZED AND SILENCED: LA CHIENNE AND BOUDU SAUVÉ DES EAUX

As the comfortable bourgeois world of 1920s France slowly collapsed with the delayed onset of the depression, Renoir made *La Chienne* (*The Bitch*, 1931) and *Boudu Sauvé des Eaux* (*Boudu Saved from Drowning*, 1932)¹⁷. The French situation was unique in the West; industrial production did not decline until May 1930, and the economic distress was initially much less severe than in other countries. In contrast to the 1925-26 period, France became a haven for currency fleeing insecurity in other countries with gold reserves jumping from 37 billion francs in mid 1929 to 56 in mid 1931¹⁸. This reinforced existing government policy, which served the class interests of; rentiers and the very rich, and further solidified the self-affirming values of the *haute bourgeoisie*. Their smugness was justified because life was worse elsewhere. It is no coincidence then that Maurice Legrand (Michel Simon), the protagonist in *La Chienne*, makes his living as a cashier-counting and handling other people's money.

Legrand is a decent, somewhat ugly, private man for whom every avenue of pleasure is cut off except one: his painting done in an impressionist or post-impressionist style. Renoir thus shifted his focus from a poet emblematic of his own predicament to one more consciously associated with his father. At the same time, he cast Michel Simon, who had played the servant Joseph in *Tire au Flanc*, in the role. Simon, who felt this film was one of the few times he could collaborate fully with a director, gives a remarkable, eccentric performance. Legrand moves awkwardly, his posture ruined from bending over books, his eyes and mouth in a permanent squint from examining columns in bad light. Yet inside this tight, rocked body of a cashier is a personality capable of decisive action, humor, strong feeling and love. In fact, this contorted body resembles that of Renoir père in the last years of his life when Jean knew him best, when painting was likewise his only real pleasure¹⁹. The different causes of these deformities are significant Pierre Auguste Renoir's were due to an accident and illness (not unrelated to old age), while Legrand's are attributable to an economic and social system that made him prematurely old.

Legrand is not only being sucked dry by the financial firm that employs him, his wife Adele is only interested in him for his paycheck. For Adele, his paintings are junk and her husband's hobby a wasteful, unjustifiable pastime. To intimidate Legrand, she evokes the memory of her first husband Alexis Godard, who apparently died gallantly in the World War. He supposedly possessed everything Legrand lacks-bourgeois respectability. Legrand quietly undercuts Adele's comments with a few ironic remarks as he turns to his painting, unrolling a large sketch. The camera moves in to reveal a Christ figure surrounded by unfriendly people in modern dress-the cashier's perception of his own situation. This is the type of allegorical painting that appears again in later Renoir's films-in *La Marseillaise*, *La Grande Illusion* and even *Boudu Sauvé des Eaux*.

In the conservative bourgeois realms of work and home, money is valued while art, lacking commercial worth, is scorned. For Legrand, in contrast, painting offers escape and psychic compensation. Only through it can he give expression to his innermost feelings. This state of affairs changes, however, when he falls in love with Lulu Pelletier (Janie Marèze) and she becomes his mistress.²⁰ He provides her with a modest apartment and hangs his paintings on its walls. Legrand creates a refuge where his paintings are given light and not treated as clutter. Impressed by the luxury, Lulu's friend Yvonne assumes she must be grateful and love her benefactor. But, as Lulu explains, Maurice does not interest her romantically but financially: her pimp/lover, Dédé (Georges Flamant), is broke. She sees the painter during the day and her true love at night.

The triangle of Legrand, Lulu, and Dédé succeeds initially, eased by convenient illusions and unstated “rules” on all sides. One of many lies- Legrand’s claim that his profession is that of an artist-comes true as Dédé, always desperate for money, takes Legrand’s paintings to galleries and eventually finds a dealer and a critic who champion them. The paintings are unsigned so Dédé creates the *nom de plume* Clara Wood, which is actually the name of a successful race horse. Perhaps because Dédé is a petty criminal, he functions successfully in the business world of art. The pimp proves a shrewd promoter and a natural capitalist. At a party for artists, he instinctively dresses like Legrand’s office colleagues at a somewhat similar celebration²¹.

Clara Wood is a creation of the trio-Legrand’s paintings, Dédé’s salesmanship, and Lulu’s performances as Clara at parties. They live happily together for a time in their *menage a trois*. Legrand loves Lulu, Lulu loves Dédé and Dédé loves Legrand’s money- generating ability. When Legrand stumbles across his paintings in a gallery, he discovers that one is being sold for 25,000 francs but does not protest. For Lulu, he will forego fame and money. Of course. Lulu and Dédé neither care for him nor appreciate his art. They are interested in him for only monetary purposes-like Adèle.

The apartment becomes a sanctuary where Legrand paints newly-hopeful work. Wood's success generated the extra cash which might have kept the triangle going indefinitely, but everyone becomes increasingly greedy. Individual illusions make each unaware of their interconnectedness. Dédé only wants money. He keeps all the profits from Legrand's art works, buys a car and assumes that Legrand will support Lulu and paint, too. Legrand is more interested in Lulu than painting; when the opportunity arises he leaves his wife to be with her all the time. (Adèle's first husband returns and cynically offers to let Legrand keep Adèle in exchange for some cash. Instead Legrand arranges for the blackmailer to be discovered and escapes his marriage.) Lulu wants Dédé; when the painter runs to her after gaining his unexpected freedom, he finds her in bed with his rival. Legrand leaves in despair but returns the next morning ready to forgive her and take her away.

Lulu finds herself in an impossible double bind. She wants Dédé but can only have him if she also has Legrand. Legrand wants her all to himself and now realizes that Dédé has been using him-and using Lulu, too. Lulu blindly insists on her love for Dédé. When Legrand calls her “une chienne” (a bitch), she tells him he is ugly and laughs at him hysterically. He kills her in a moment of jealous passion. Renoir does not show the killing, and so allows audiences to retain greater sympathy for the character. While it occurs, he focuses on an itinerant chanteur singing a ballad underneath Lulu's window. The song comment son the action and the desperation of love-both Legrand's for Lulu's and Lulu's for Dédé. Here exists an implicit conspiracy among artist- painter, singer, and filmmaker .When the painter creeps out of the building, people do not see him because they are watching the singer. Dédé, however, pulls up in his new car, forcing the singer's audience to step aside (and demonstrating his disregard for the street performers, thus echoing his treatment of Legrand). Everyone sees him enter the building and exit a few minutes later badly shaken. When the murder is discovered he is the obvious suspect. Dédé is soon convicted and sentenced to death while Legrand is considered harmless. There are no reprieves, no confessions, no literal satisfaction of justice. Renoir refused a conventional ending with the moralizing declaration that crime does not pay .Dédé's execution is poetic justice rather than justice to the letter of the law.

Legrand apparently accepts the terms of the amoral world in which he lives, but then readily breaks its rules to protect his asylum (conforming more to its underlying principles rather than its official code). When his money runs short, the painter steals from his wife's savings hidden in a linen closet; ultimately he embezzles from his employers²². With the betrayal and death of Lulu, Legrand's desire to paint is destroyed. The loss is too great for painting again to play a compensatory role. He simply drops out. Renoir adds a postscript. Years later, two tramps meet on the street: one is Legrand and the other is Adèle's first husband. Legrand laughs heartily as he recites his life of petty crime. The two tramps open a car door for a man carrying a painting- Legrand's self-portrait (which recalls the self portrait of Pierre Auguste Renoir, the only one reprinted in color in Jean Renoir's book on his father). This commodity of the rich does not catch their attention, for the two men are overjoyed by a 20-franc tip which will enable them to eat and enjoy themselves. Legrand now lives only for the present, indulging in anti-social behavior and forsaking both the bourgeois world and the art which was his only solace. In this renunciation he finds a retreat that brings peace.

From *Tire au Flanc* to *La Chienne*, Renoir shifted his focus from a poet associated with his own predicament to a painter evoking his father. This was perhaps psychologically necessary, for silencing the filmmaker's alter ego could carry little condemnation when he had so much self-doubt as to his own abilities and worth. In contrast, for society to crush a figure associated with his father evoked strong feelings of outrage. This shift also meant a shift in subject matter and theme. Most of all, *Tire au Flanc* rebukes the artist in 1920s France. Jean d'Ombelles has nothing to say and nothing worth hearing. His sole recitation is for his fiancée, and a few mediocre love poems hardly constitute a meaningful identity for a writer. *La Chienne*, in contrast, is an indictment of society and its treatment of the artistic personality. Society embraces and incorporates those artists without talent, and destroys those who have it. Legrand's reclusiveness, his inability to assume a larger social role, is linked to the world in which he lived; his psychic survival, before Lulu arrived as well as after, required a certain lack of moral scruples. This lack helps to explain why Legrand stopped painting while Renoir pere did not. And why Jean Renoir continued to work as well.

Boudu Sauvé des Eaux should properly be seen as a continuation of—and an informal sequel to—*La Chienne*²³. Both films, for example, begin in quite similar ways, with theatrical, mock openings. Legrand is resurrected as the tramp Boudu who is likewise played by Michel Simon. Boudu is not the vagabond's Christian name but derived from *bouder*—to sulk. Might not the sorrows of *La Chienne* describe the basis for his sulking (although *bouder à la besogne* means to avoid work, surely appropriate for a tramp)? While this character continuity is ultimately an informal one, two pieces of evidence enforce such a claim. Early in the film Boudu opens the door to collect a tip just as the Simon character did at the end of *La Chienne*. The other clue seems more crucial. At the end of *Boudu Sauvé des Eaux*, he bobs down the river looking ever so much like a cork. This recalls Pierre Auguste Renoir's central theory of life—at least as reported by his son: "One is merely a 'cork'... You must let yourself go along in life like a cork in the current of a stream"²⁴. Boudu is cork-like at the outset, too. Unable to swim, he jumps off a bridge but does not drown. He bobs back to the surface and by 'chance' is rescued by Edouard Lestingois (Charles Granval), the bookseller who jumps into the Seine river to rescue him. While this visualizes and articulates, as William Simon has pointed out, the father's philosophy of life, it also suggests that we can think, of Boudu as an artist.²⁵

The key artist in *Boudu Sauvé des Eaux* is Boudu who has been silenced the way Legrand was finally silenced in *La Chienne* and in ways that look toward Octave in *La Règle de jeu*. Boudu has what might be called an artistic personality. His stay in the Lestingois household turns the place upside down, even though his abrupt departure is eventually mourned by those he once tormented, notably Edouard and Emma Lestingois (Marcelle Hainia) and Anne-Marie Chloë (Séverine Lerczinska). He provided Edouard with a new friend, Emma with a new sense of her sexuality, and Anne-Marie with enough money so she won't have to be a servant. This man, unfettered by societal conventions and rules (the rules of the game), enables them to see their relationships in a new light.

Americans in particular have tended to misread this film, seeing Lestingois as a bourgeois whose hypocritical world is exposed by the tramp. Such a misreading might account for Hollywood's travesty of a remake *Down and Out in Beverly Hills* (1985), but it misses the point. Lestingois is a remnant of the hearty eighteenth-century bourgeoisie for whom Renoir has uncommon affection. This petit-bourgeois type is altogether different from the bankers and industrialists represented by Legrand's employers. He is outside the labor-capital dialectic, not one who exploits it through speculation. He lives and works in the same building. His library is not merely a business: he reads constantly, loves books and gives them away to poor students. He practices a blatant paternalism but one that is both anarchistic and generous. As Alexander Sesonske points out, Boudu serves Lestingois as a second self. The world Lestingois has constructed is a haven from the rapacious outside world, a successful version of the apartment which Legrand filled with his paintings and Lulu. (Note that Lestingois rarely leaves his building, even avoiding his best friend's funeral.) There is, not surprisingly, trouble in this paradise. Lestingois's affair with the maid, Ann-Marie, is being hidden from his wife whose insistence on bourgeois respectability cuts her off from many pleasures.

There are many moments or works of artistic expression represented within this film. Lestingois sells great works of literature, often in rare editions, but with a philosophy that differs completely from Dédé's. Most other artistic expression is marginal or of an amateur nature. Edouard's friend Vigour (Jean Gehret) plays the flute, enriching daily life in the neighborhood, notably providing audio accompaniment

to the liaison between the bookseller and Anne- Marie. Just as musicians unknowingly protect Legrand as he murdered Lulu in *La Chienne*, here they cover Boudu's seduction of Mme. Lestingois²⁶.

Popular music permeates this small world. A song initially sung by Anne- Marie provides one of the organizing tropes of the film. It is repeated at various times by Lestingois and Boudu who hum, sing, or pick it out on the piano. Only Emma does not sing it. Taking appearances and rules seriously, she possesses a piano for their good bourgeois home. Rather than play the keys, she uses her fingers to check the piano for dust. It is she who must put aside her sense of propriety to find pleasure and joy in life. Just before she is seduced by Boudu, the music of an organ grinder unleashes a wave of sexual longing within her.

In exploring the relationship between *La Chienne* and *Boudu Sauvé des Eaux*, the social formations that Renoir presents can be misconstrued²⁷. Boudu's encounter with the indifference of the police and the wealthy car-driving capitalists in the park are different from the intimacy and caring of the "real" France which borders the Seine.²⁸ In this contained world still imbued with the ideals of eighteenth-century revolutionary France, art is not professionalized and not ridiculed. It is an integral part of life. The world of industrial capital silences the artist in *La Chienne* and ultimately moves him to suicide at the beginning of *Boudu*. Boudu may change the world of the menage à trois, but the menage à trois also restores Boudu's faith in life. He is again ready to live and bob down stream like Pierre Auguste Renoir's cork. Thus an exchange takes place between Lestingois and Boudu which is not unlike the exchange between art lover and artist.

AN ARTIST IN THE RESERVE ARMY OF LABOR: *TONI*

In both *Boudu Sauvé des Eaux* and *Toni* (1934), Jean Renoir asserts his authorial position and affirms his alliance with figures in these films. The song which Boudu sings after he has floated away is reworked nondiagetically by Renoir as musical narration, first as a simple melody over the opening titles and then again at the close with lyrics. Through this music Renoir specifies his alignment with the silenced artist, the man who embodies his father's philosophy of life. In *Toni*, the situation is different. The sole "artist" in this film is Jacques the guitarist and balladeer whose songs express the travails of being an immigrant laborer in a way that parallels and comments on the film narrative. Some of this music is also used nondiagetically and so is an articulation of the filmic narrator, notably in the opening titles. In this way, Renoir associates his authorial stance with a person who is in the film but not actively a part of the drama-not with the protagonist Toni. In the process he affiliates his film with the popular, casual (need one add amateur) folk music of a marginal figure. Jacques's position in *Toni* is not unlike the role of the flutist Vigour in *Boudu Sauvé des Eaux*: he accompanies the narrative musically from within the diagesis. But with *Toni*, Renoir takes a perspective that parallels the balladeer's. The absence of point-of-view shots and scarcity of close-ups likewise suggests that the filmmaker refuses to ally himself with Toni as he did to some extent with Boudu.

In making *Toni* Renoir shifted his focus yet again, from the artist and his relationship to society (to the elite bourgeois world on which this artist must depend financially) to the hardest hit members of French society-its immigrant laborers. During the 1930s unemployment was never the problem in France it was in other countries since foreign laborers were merely returned to their home countries.²⁹ Renoir later explained that he intended to make *Toni* a film of uncompromising realism only to realize eventually that "I was recounting, almost despite myself, a heart rending and poetic love-story."³⁰ In fact this contradiction was resolved in terms comparable to the balladeer's songs, being about the melodrama of everyday life, of people half-hidden and undervalued like the songs played to console those dislocated in time and place. It is hope, sorrow, and love expressed in a colloquial idiom.



Jean Renoir (1939)

Jacques differs from Legrand in important respects. Legrand's artistry expresses his inner torment and isolation. His painting sexist because he is cut off from a world. They are self-portraits (as Christ, or in everyday clothing) or subjective images of his loves (the portrait of Lulu). The balladeer expresses the feelings of the group. The sentiments in his song about leaving are similar to those felt by all migrants, including Toni. The artist thus performs a positive function and has an affirming relationship to those in the group. He articulates and so clarifies their experience. Through him they can find solace and understanding. He thus recalls the street musicians in *Boudu* and *La Chienne*. In contrast, *Boudu Sauv  des Eaux* and *La Chienne* locate hope in small sanctuaries, in residual pockets of resistance, from

the otherwise cold, bleak world. And yet these pockets are places where artists are either soon silenced or dead.

With the film *Toni*, the artist is no longer completely silenced. The emphasis on group, which Renoir saw as the film's breakthrough, is particularly apparent in the guitarist's relationship to others. He is like them except for this small creative gift. In the reserve army of labor, he is a foot soldier like any other. In this respect he anticipates Javel, the artist in *La Marseillaise* although Jacques lacks a self-conscious sense of his role and the possibility for social change. (Again one should note that both share the first same first initial with Jean Renoir, emphasizing their affinity to the filmmaker and each other.) Nonetheless, the new configuration of artist and society reflects dramatically altered political circumstances. The Paris riots of February 1934 polarized the country politically. By focusing on working-class migrants, the conditions of their everyday living and their melodramas, Renoir clearly allied himself with one side- the left.³¹ Yet *Toni* does not overtly suggest political action. Characters are motivated by greed, passion, and love; but economic conditions only account for the presence of these migrants, not for social change.

THE ARTIST AS SAVIOR: *LE CRIME DE M. LANGE*

From *Toni* to his next film *Le Crime de M. Lange* (The Crime of M. Lange, 1935), Renoir makes a leap that reflects the new political conditions of France. On Bastille Day 1935, hundreds of thousands of Parisians had participated in a mass demonstration and declared their allegiance to the French Popular Front which included Communists, Socialists and soon the Radical Party as well. By the filming of *Le Crime de M. Lange* in October and November, this political alliance was moving toward victory in the electoral contests of April-May 1936.

Le Crime de M. Lange both reflected and encouraged the heady euphoria of the French working class which led to the rapid expansion of the C.G. T (Confederation Generale du Travail) from a membership of 1 million in January 1936, when the film was first released, to 5 million in 1936-37 during the Popular Front government of Leon Blum. The unrealistic ease with which the workers take over Bata's bankrupt publishing empire and turned it into a profitable co-op corresponds to the romantic, naive expectations of the workers. Renoir and his Groupe Octobre collaborators. One cannot say, as does Leo Braudy and Sesonske, that Lange's killing and subsequent departure for Belgium is the impingement of the real world on a utopia, of pessimism on optimism.³² Rather it suggests the need for the Popular Front to come to power so that men such as Bata could not threaten people such as Lange, the typesetters, and laundresses. If the cooperative had succeeded without this disaster, electoral victory would have presumably been unnecessary for the emergence of a new society. In this respect the film was ideal propaganda for the upcoming election which put the popular Front in power. To the extent that this electoral success seemed likely, the film is highly optimistic. Contra Sesonske, one notes a strong progression from the pessimism of *La Chienne* to the optimism of *Le Crime de M. Lange* and this has to do in substantial part with the artist's fundamentally different role in society.³³

Given its obvious political message, it is perhaps surprising that *Le Crime de M. Lange* received almost universally positive reviews, even from such bourgeois news-papers as *Figaro* and *Le Temps*. In the latter Emile Vuillermoz focused on the film's artistic achievements calling it, "in terms of pure cinematographic art, a great Step forward":

There are in *La Chienne* or in *Madame Bovary* literary elements that were not fully resolved in the images. Today by contrast, with a subject much less ambitious, the realization of the film is entirely satisfactory. Renoir is finally at his ease in the decoupage and editing of the film. It has rhythm and elasticity. This ease and suppleness which dominate the film from one end to the other indicate a master technician of his craft.³⁴

Both establishment newspapers passed over the political and class-conflict issues, seeing the film instead in terms of good versus evil. Perhaps this film so reflected the national mood on the eve of the Popular Front's victory that it was impossible to resist. Instead the left's opponents strategically offered a more benign interpretation of the film. It also suggests the way the film's political allegory could play as a modern fairy tale.

Le Crime de M. Lange presents the artist as hero. The writer saves the group and makes it possible for the workers to escape the clutches of rapacious capitalism as symbolized by Batala. Implicitly recalling Pierre Auguste Renoir's efforts to start a cooperative at the ceramic studio in which he worked during the late 1850s,³⁵ the film is about an artist's coming to consciousness and his willingness to make a supreme sacrifice. He gives up everything—at least his life in the courtyard—so others can presumably continue theirs. The creative artist now plays a crucial role, particularly when compared to those marginal or silenced ones of earlier Renoir films. At a time when the French Communist Party attributed great importance to cultural activity and championed Renoir as the leading left filmmaker, the picture contains traces of self-congratulatory arrogance that are part of the period's headiness.

In *Le Crime de M. Lange* Renoir puts an artist on trial. Amédée Lange (René Lefèvre) is judged by an informal group of his peers who fill a café near the border with Belgium. If they find him guilty, Lange will be turned over to the police. If innocent, he will be allowed to cross the border to safety. His actual responsibility for a murder is not in dispute. Rather it is the contention of Valentine Cardès (Florelle) that this artist's action was justified because it fulfilled a higher obligation to society. As Valentine begins her story, Lange works at a publishing firm, setting type during the day and writing fanciful stories at night. For Lange, scribbling fantastic westerns of Arizona Jim serves a compensatory function: it is like sleep and not unlike Legrand's painting at the outset of *La Chienne*. (In fact, Lange's name is contained within Legrand's and can be extracted by dropping the r and d and rearranging the letters slightly.)³⁶

Lange's employer, Batala, is a scheming, manipulative and dishonest capitalist who is rapidly running his business into the ground (just as the economy of France was being run into the ground). Batala knows of Lange's stories but dismisses them as valueless because he sees no way to make money from them. When a client accuses him of failing to live up to a business agreement, Batala proposes to publish *Arizona Jim* while altering selected passages so the hero can take Ranimax pills, the client's product. The client accepts the deal, and Batala convinces Lange that he will publish the writer's stories as a kind of favor (never even mentioning the insertions of the Ranimax commercials). As had happened with Legrand's paintings, Lange's work finds a commercial outlet and helps sustain the group, but he does not receive direct benefits or proper recognition. Batala, like Lulu's pimp Dédé (and Batala at one point pimps his secretary to a creditor), finds it easy to manipulate this naive artist. Only at this point do the stories significantly diverge. Lange fails to give Batala an urgent message and when the publisher discovers the oversight he must flee and abandon his firm. Rather than liquidate the company, the genial creditors let the workers form a cooperative. Lange becomes the first among equals and the whole prospers. Those living in the courtyard soon participate in the production of *Arizona Jim* with its photo format. Creation is no longer a solitary activity performed at night but a collective endeavor done during the day. The night can now be devoted to romance, large dinners, and other quotidian pleasures.

Instead of fantastic escapist melodramas, the stories of the courtyard now are realized allegorically in the photo-roman. They have a relationship to real experience similar to Legrand's paintings or Jacques songs. They are a way for members of the courtyard to work through their own traumas. Charles and Estelle, whose love suffers many difficulties, play a couple who have a romance. The concierge, who always evokes his heroic military past, plays a Mexican general. Lange who fantasized himself as Arizona Jim in his opening scene, plays Arizona Jim. As Sesonske has pointed out, the stories of good versus evil, of Arizona Jim (Lange) pursuing the masked bandit (Batala) are actually realized when Lange catches Batala, learns of his plans to return, and kills him.³⁷ Art and life shape each other in turn.

Just as Lange & Company make *Arizona Jim* into an allegory of the cooperative, so Renoir & Company relate the cooperative to the Renoir-October group making the film. The wealthy Meunier proposes that they make a film: he will invest provided the picture stars a woman he is wooing. This was, according to Renoir, the kind of situation that he routinely confronted when financing his films. Are we going too far if we look again more closely at a name? The first letters pronounced in Arizona Jim's name are R J, the inverted initials of Jean Renoir.

The name Lange means angel, and we can see this film in some respects as a fairy tale, daydream, or fantasy for adults—like *Arizona Jim* was for Lange and the children who run to the kiosks to

buy the latest editions. While this suggests that we look at *Le Crime de M. Lange* as a fantasy or children's tale for adults, the film also offers a serious political program. It calls for the removal of speculators and schemers such as Batala among the large capitalists, while embracing the cooperation of more genial types like Meunier fils. Job actions by employees and radical reorganizations of the workplace should be instituted. Workers such as Lange must also be ready to defend their gains when the political Right tries to reassert its lost authority. Political action and fantasy are intertwined. This utopianism was both inspiring and deceiving. It articulated a leftwing vision that helped the Popular Front come to power even as it encouraged a naive euphoria that produced the spontaneous and disruptive strikes of May-June 1936, before the Front began to govern. As Renoir would later explain:

I found myself engagé without having meant to be. I was willy-nilly the witness of events, which are always stronger than my will. Exterior events influence my beliefs. ..What I see around me determines my reactions. I am the victim-the happy victim-of my environment.³⁸

The film lacked a realistic assessment of the forces facing the Popular Front and the kind of discipline and commitment it would need to succeed. Both politically and in its conception of the artist, the film cut both ways. On one hand *Le Crime de M. Lange* articulates the intense pleasure that the filmmaker found in finally having a meaningful voice and valued place in society. On the other it assigns the artist an all-powerful role of protector which is out of all proportion to reality. Lange not only provides the product which keeps the cooperative financially prosperous but takes the necessary steps to protect the cooperative by killing Batala. This despite the fact that he, of all the people in the film, seems least capable of action.

The collective sharing of work celebrated in *Le Crime de M. Lange* was applied to *La Vie est à Nous* (*The People of France*), which Renoir helped make early in 1936. In the euphoria of political victory Renoir went off to make *Une Partie de Campagne*, which remained unfinished until after the World War II. Set in 1860, based on a story by Maupassant, it evoked the France his father painted in his youth. *Les Bas Fonds* (*The Lower Depths*, 1936), based on Gorki's famous play, followed. It was in the tradition of *Madame Bovary* but now Renoir adapted a work of international leftist importance.

ARTISTS IN WARTIME: LA GRANDE ILLUSION

La Grande Illusion (*Grand Illusion*), shot in the first months of 1937, responded to the growing reality of war in Europe-Germany's occupation of Rhineland in March 1936 and the Spanish Civil War starting in July 1936 onward. Looking back to World War I, it was already a historical film. Among its many achievements, this anti-war picture situates the artist in the military world where Renoir himself had spent hostilities. In the first prisoner-of-war camp, a comic actor (Julien Carette) digs a tunnel. Instead of performing under the spot light, he works by the light of a single candle that burns out for lack of oxygen. He almost suffocates. Later he serves as master of ceremonies at their amateur theatricals, entertaining prisoners and guards alike. This more familiar role is interrupted, however, and the evening of comradeship is destroyed by patriotic demonstrations around the German capture and French liberation of a town, culminating with the singing of *La Marseillaise*. Although the moment is extremely moving, Renoir also explicates the post-WW I, anti-war reaction against the song. The same town would be retaken the next day, by which time-as one prisoner remarks-there is not much of a town to fight over anymore. (The historical roots and meaning of this song would be reaffirmed in Renoir's next film.) Song unites one moment and divides the next. A guard gives Maréchal, locked in solitary confinement and going stir crazy, a harmonica. This gesture of human solidarity perhaps rescues him from mental collapse.

Theater is again shown to be a powerful group experience that can either forge new relationships by bring together diverse, even antagonist members or inflame emotions and emphasize divisions. Its impact can not always be foreseen. As at an all-boys college, men dress up as women. The effect is not the comic one intended but rather, unleashes a disconcerting wave of sexual longing in the prisoners. The division between life and theater, symbolized by the proscenium, breaks down easily and unpredictably, a fact emphasized by Renoir's introduction of amateur productions here, in *Tire au Flanc* and later in *La Règle du Jeu*.

Life becomes increasingly grim and art more marginal as the war proceeds in *La Grande Illusion*. A painter appears briefly in the last prison camp, the only black in the film. He completes a

painting entitled *Justice Pursuing Crime* and shows its proudly to his fellow prisoners. They could care less, dismissing it and him out of hand. Art grappling with serious peace-time issues has no place during the war. Another prisoner is ridiculed for his wish to translate Ovid during his incarceration. Creativity finds no social resonance. Russian prisoners get a crate of books from their Czar. Having hoped that the shipment contains food, they angrily burn it. In a twining of the earlier harmonica scene, Boeldieu uses a penny flute to play noise not music, to cover the escape of Maréchal and Rosenthal. The destruction, subjugation (to war-time ends), or marginalization of the artists' possibilities are part of war's costs. Only in little pockets or moments of humanity does it manage to survive. In this respect the world of war shares much with the world of finance that entrapped Legrand in *La Chienne*. The sculpting of a nativity scene by Rosenthal, Maréchal and Elsa -which becomes for Lotte a kind of theater with lighting effects and phonograph music- is an affirmation of hope not unlike the making of *La Grande Illusion* itself.

ARTISTS IN THE ARMY OF REVOLUTION: *LA MARSEILLAISE*

Renoir followed his powerful anti-war film with *La Marseillaise*, which acknowledged the need for revolutionary action to achieve political goals and ultimately protect the nation. In this context, the artist role is not marginalized as in *La Grande Illusion*, despite the emphasis on military action. The song *La Marseillaise*, which was depicted problematically in *La Grande Illusion* is affirmed and moved to center stage. This innovative historical treatment and affirmation of the French Revolution was the last film that Renoir made during the Popular Front period. Shot in the summer and fall of 1937, during the Second and third popular front governments under the leadership of Camille Chautemps of the Radical Party, *La Marseillaise* was intended to confront mounting working-class disillusionment and play a rallying function.³⁹ As Louis Cheronnet noted in the communist daily *L'Humanité*, "Renoir had wanted, with the aid of 1789 and 1792, to throw the light of day on the months that have passed since the events of February 1934."⁴⁰ Or as Marcel Lapierre of the CGT's *Le Peuple* wrote, "The parallels that the spectator is able to make between the people of Coblenz and our pro- Hitlarians come naturally to the spirit of anyone who reviews his history of France."⁴¹ Viewers with leftist sympathies could enjoy and hopefully be inspired by the interplay between 1792 and 1937, which is necessary for a full appreciation of the film. This would include the aristocrats as a rough equivalent to France's 200 families. Not least of these parallels is the implicit one between the painter Javel and the filmmaker Jean Renoir.

In contrast to the reception of *Le Crime de M. Lange* and even *La Grande Illusion*, moderates and conservatives could no longer approve of Renoir's efforts. Like Pierre Leprohon who had little use for the film, Jean Laury of *Figaro* contended that "Others will discuss the political tendencies of Renoir and condemn them. We will simply content ourselves with insisting on its cinematic weaknesses: its slow beginning, the liberties he took with history."⁴² Midway through the film, the king's advisor refers to his stockbroker who was "ready to see the franc go to zero rather than let the Revolution go unchecked." Here Renoir used a proleptic strategy in a way that delighted his political sympathizers but outraged others intent on "authenticity." In 1938 it was not possible to consider this film from the viewpoint of "pure cinematographic art."

The difference between the principal creative figures in *Le Crime de M. Lange* and *La Marseillaise* say much about the differences between these two films and Renoir's changing assessments of the artist's position and role in society. Javel's role in *La Marseillaise* is more modest and more realistic, if not emotionally always more appealing. Like J. Renoir, Javel is portly, a gourmand; like Renoir's father he's a painter-fusing father and son in a way that Renoir had not found possible before (its own form of psychic unity). These correspondences of outward appearance, of figure, occupation and style, treated with an edge of deprecating humor that makes them palatable, are mirrored by an inward attitude toward 'art' and cultural production. As Javel tells the dockworker, he has stopped painting shepherds and shepherdesses for the aristocracy (at the start of his career Pierre Auguste Renoir had painted portraits of Marie Antoinette in the dress of a shepherdess). Correspondingly, Jean Renoir had stopped making films for the industry that defined commercial as satisfying the tastes of the producer. Later Javel returns from Avignon where he was commissioned to paint a historic panorama of Brutus killing Caesar with 1,550 local citizens appearing in Roman costumes "with their faces all clearly discernible." Likewise Renoir was commissioned to do the group portrait of contemporary French patriots in historical dress by the CGT. As reviewers recognized, the French people of 1937-1938 were also meant to see themselves and their world in the characters who populate the world of *La Marseillaise*.

Both artists were seeking to give their audience a historical perspective on their situation and to rally them.⁴³

La Marseillaise is also a film about a song and how it came to be the anthem of France and its revolution, helping to reclaim it-as Jonathan Buchsbaum has pointed out-for the left.⁴⁴ The song is used as a unifying force within the narrative and helps to define the revolution for its participants. In the Club des Amis of Marseille, after those present have agreed to send a battalion to Paris, the gallery chants "Come on! Come on! String up the aristocrats!" Later we hear the aristocrats with a similar cheer-"Come on! Come on! Down with the democrats!" These chants may define the groups negatively, in terms of their opposition to one another, but it is *La Marseillaise* which offers the diverse revolutionaries a song around which to rally, one that is "the echo of my own thoughts" and "will unite all Frenchmen". Bomier, who complains that the song does not follow the rules of harmony and is only a craze, ends up singing it "because everyone else is." The song is also shown to have multinational and class roots. Arnaud gives its genealogy: a Rhenish Army song sung by a Jewish pedlar from Strausbourg and picked up as a worker's chorus in Montpellier. The soldiers make up their own verses or alter those already being sung. *The Marseillaise* is a fully realized example of collective creativity. The conscription of the battalion which opens with the chant "Down with the aristocrats!" ends with the uplifting and unifying spirit of *La Marseillaise*.

The ways in which songs unify and divide groups is reformulated in Renoir's use of a panning camera and editing strategies. The politics of the Popular Front were based on the unity of different groups: workers, students, farmers, petit bourgeois, shopkeepers and middle-class professionals. The basis for this unity is explicated in the opening scenes of *La Marseillaise*, set in Provence during June 1790 and October of the following year, both through narrative and cinematic form. The bourgeois mayor of a small town defends Roux, an impoverished peasant who killed a pigeon that was eating his plant seed. The scene begins with a rapid pan of the courtroom but shifts to a series of alternating shots that juxtapose the mayor, a former warrant officer and the local lord as they argue. The mayor says the lord is mistaken to think that their self-interests are intertwined: he does not have to defend the substantial prerogatives of the aristocracy to protect his own, more minor advantages. Editing emphasizes their differences (creating the framework for the later opposition "Down with the Democrats" and "Down with the Aristocrats.") Soon after, future members of the Revolution meet on a mountain top where they have retreated to avoid the law: Roux; Honoré Arnaud, the bourgeois; Jean-Joseph Bomier, the mason; and even Paget, the priest. Toward the end of this sequence, after these men of disparate backgrounds have shared their skills and their dreams, the camera pans back and forth across their faces as they look off into the distance and converse. In his autobiography, Renoir discusses how he used a panning camera "which linked characters with one another and their environment."⁴⁵ The pan of four lonely patriots early in the film is repeated on an ever grander scale during its course. The clearest echo of this comes as the people of Marseille sing *La Marseillaise* before the battalion's departure. Here the film of 1937 seeks to play a function similar to that of the song of 1792.

Renoir's narrative and camera present the aristocracy as a group or political force comparable but opposed to the revolutionaries. Madame Saint-Laurent's song, an evocation of her home in Provence, plays a function for the aristocrats that is similar to *La Marseillaise* for the revolutionaries. This sad, nostalgic tune unifies the ex-patriots. Only when it stops do they squabble about politics-until the resumption of music and the dancing of the minuet restore order. Likewise in scenes involving the aristocracy and king, Renoir's camera often moves in a style consistent with Saint-Laurent's song. An exploration of the parallels -and differences- between her song and *La Marseillaise* suggest the ways that Renoir retains a dialectic tension between unity and inclusion versus opposition and conflict. This portrayal of the balance of forces represents a major step forward from *Le Crime de M. Lange* where those opposing the Popular Front are represented by isolated individuals such as the conniving entrepreneur Batale and the reactionary concierge whose drunken, dazed tour around the courtyard late in the film suggests his bewilderment at the incomprehensible course of events.⁴⁶ Renoir's representation of both artist and political struggle have matured in an interrelated fashion.

The rallying cry of *La Marseillaise* went unheeded: the fourth and last Popular Front government collapsed on April 8 1938, two months after the film opened. Alexander Werth described the changing mood of the public: "the Radicals, and, in fact, the man in the street, who had been profoundly disturbed by the strikes under the (second) Blum government, felt at heart that the Front Populaire experiment had come to an end. They were inclined to say that it was 'nice to be back to normal at last.'"⁴⁷ *La Règle du*

jeu (*The Rules of the Game*.1939) was filmed in February and March 1939, almost a year after the left coalition had disintegrated. In the intervening months, the new Finance Minister had announced a series of economic decrees that eliminated the 40-hour week and many other gains of the June '36 strike. In November the CGT, which had financed *La Marseillaise*, held a general strike to protest the decrees and failed badly. Many of the most active unionists lost their jobs. The central union lost a million members, reducing its membership to 2 1/2 million and soon down to its original size of 1 million. The grand bourgeoisie showed renewed confidence and felt they could once again run the country. Hitler held Austria and had occupied much of Czechoslovakia. Édouard Daladier had recognized the Franco government in February while the film was being shot.

As with *Le Crime de M. Lange*, *La Règle du jeu* focused on a social group that was on the rise and asserting its power. The sympathetic treatment of the courtyard collective is replaced by a satiric view of the grand bourgeoisie. If the working class had lost its five-day week, "a week with two Sundays," the owners of the same factories are shown going off to the country for a fall holiday of almost two weeks. At a moment when the future of France would seem to be the overriding question, these representatives of the "200 families" never appear the least concerned with the country's fate but spend their time indulging in amateur theatricals. These are organized by the owner of the estate, Robert de la Chesnaye, who wants to entertain guests, local friends and servants who will serve as the audience. In many respects it recalls the amateur theatricals of *Tire au Flanc*, but the outcome is much more bleak. In *Tire au Flanc* the show brings about a national union, the wedding of the military and the haute bourgeoisie. In *La Règle du jeu*, as evidenced by the guest list, that union has been achieved from the outset. Rather the evening's show, which involves a dance macabre, spins out of control and culminates with the killing of an aviator-hero, the shattering of illusions, and La Chesnaye's reassertion of la règle du jeu. This head of one of the 200 Families actively assumes the role of an artist while the Octave character, a conductor by profession, is reduced to silence. Renoir thus depicts a process alluded to by Walter Benjamin—the aestheticizing of politics rather than the politicizing of art.⁴⁸

As is well known, *La Règle du jeu* suffered a chilling reception. Paul Reboux, a leading critic of the day, considered the film "very interesting for it points out all one must not do in cinema."⁴⁹ *Figaro* typified the generally devastating reaction, insisting "*La Règle du jeu* is only a long series of errors." Its critic, James de Coquet, then asked rhetorically:

What did M. Jean Renoir want to accomplish? This is a question that I have asked myself at length in dismissing this strange spectacle. A satiric comedy of the kind that made Frank Capra's fortune? But this laborious fantasy, aided by flat dialogue is exactly the opposite to the spirit of irony. A comedy of morals? The morals of whom, since these people do not belong to any recognizable social group.⁵⁰

Marcel Lapierre at *Le Peuple* found Coquet's review comic and responded incredulously: "Doesn't the writer of *Figaro* know any eccentric or slightly cracked marquis, nor slightly frivolous charlatans, nor men of the world who are imbeciles? Has M. James de Coquet lost all contact with the readers of his paper?"⁵¹ It is hardly surprising that Renoir failed to appear at a screening of Joris Ivens' *The 400 Million* on the night that his film opened because he was ill. *L'Humanité* called the film "particularly strong and truly original," suggesting that it or *La Bête Humaine* were worthy of a major prize that would be impossible to give because of Renoir's politics. As Georges Sadoul remarked, the film was a "portrayal of a refined, oblivious and decadent civilization."⁵²

Renoir's bitter disappointment and despair are distilled in the character the filmmaker assigned himself, the role of Octave. Octave worships his mentor, a great but dead conductor, and describes himself as a "failed musician." About *La Grande illusion*, the French director wrote in his autobiography that "I over-estimated the power of the cinema. *La Grande Illusion*, for all its success, did not prevent the Second World War."⁵³ Likewise, *La Marseillaise* had failed to rally the Popular Front forces. It was as if no one had listened or the films had never been made. In effect, the criticism that Jonathan Buchsbaum levels at *La Marseillaise*, as to its ineffectual nature, had been made by Renoir in *La Règle du jeu*.⁵⁴ In one of the film's many extraordinary moments, Octave acts out the role of Christine's father by walking out onto a porch, photographed to emphasize its stage-like qualities, and pretends to conduct. The fantasy of power (embraced so enthusiastically in *Le Crime de Lange*) becomes too painful to bear and he sits down on the steps in despair. His attempt to play with a nonexistent orchestra to a nonexistent audience is overwhelming, duplicating Renoir's own sense of hopelessness.

The representations of artists on screen- whether Octave, Jean, Lange, Jacques, or Javal -are obviously not simple stand-ins or substitutes for Renoir himself, even though the fact of a relationship is more or less explicit. Renoir's artists are often silenced but Renoir himself was amazingly vocal and productive. Many were naive or isolated but Renoir was remarkably savvy and depended on a group of loyal associates. Octave may have been a genial if depressed social parasite who cultivated the wealthy, but Renoir made bold films that increasingly alienated them- of which *La Règle du jeu* was only the final and most daring example.³⁵

Given the remarkable pace of Renoir's output, it is appropriate to see Octave in relation to Javel and his other predecessors, just as the social milieu of *La Règle du jeu* reverberates with corresponding depictions in *La Marseillaise* and the filmmaker's earlier work. This apparent "auteurism" was constructed historically, not only by Renoir but in the framework of the films' reception, in the critical discourse of reviewers and newspapers. In Renoir's Popular Front films, the aristocracy or 200 Families are decadent, defeated, and dying out: the baron in *Les Bas Fonds*, Boeldieu and von Rauffenstein in *La Grande Illusion*, the king and his followers in *La Marseillaise*. With the post-Popular Front *La Règle du jeu*, the 200 Families resume a central and triumphant position. They no longer have to talk politics or worry about the left. Their supreme confidence can be seen in the easy grace of La Chesnaye.

Correspondences between *La Marseillaise* and *La Règle du jeu* abound but involve devastating displacements. Following a historical progression, one was set in eighteenth-century France, the other informed by an eighteenth-century, pre-revolutionary play (Beaumarchais' *The Marriage or Figaro*).³⁶ Marie Antoinette describes the unfolding of events as a tragedy; La Chesnaye as a farce (perhaps an allusion to Marx's famous quote that historical moments appear twice, first as tragedy, then as farce). The La Chesnaye name is recycled from *La Marseillaise* but again he is not descended from that "real" aristocracy since he is Jewish. La Chesnaye's love of eighteenth-century mechanical toys is a fetishism that seeks to deny the traumas of previous revolutionary moments. He is determined to banish the events depicted in *La Marseillaise* from his memory.

The links between Renoir and Octave only emphasizes that, not unlike *La Marseillaise*, the film world stood in close relationship to the momentous events that surrounded its making. In this film such events go unmentioned because any awareness of the outside world is precluded by the aristocracy's absorption in their own complicated lives and love affairs. But they were there for the viewer to recognize: the rapidly changing alliances between persons in the film are suggestive of the rapidly changing political alliances occurring on an international level. The seemingly impossible happens constantly: Marceau and Schumacher, who are bitter enemies throughout the first five-sixths of the film, suddenly become allies just as Hitler and Daladier could sign a peace pact in December 1938. Certainly Schumacher's murder of Jurieux calls to mind German aggression of the late 1930s (Austria, Czechoslovakia): It is La Chesnaye who redefines the murder as an accident just as France redefined German expansionism as "effective victories for peace" and "organizing the right of option for individuals."³⁷ In *La Règle du jeu* Renoir no longer uses the camera to suggest the unity of groups. It must scramble to catch the warring factions and rapidly shifting alliances as the guests and servants move about the chateau. The swish pan, found in *Tire au Flanc* but absent from Renoir's repertoire in the intervening years, sudden reappears.

Commencing with the inarticulate, artistically insignificant poet of *Tire au Flanc* and concluding with the silenced conductor in *La Règle du jeu*, Renoir has come full circle. Both are, to use Laurence Wylie's term, ratés. Both hangers-on depend on informal familial ties and their charm over women (Christine in *La Règle du jeu*, Solange and her sister in *Tire au Flanc*) to retain access to the privileged world of wealth and comfort. Being an artist counts almost for nothing and they produce almost nothing. The somewhat younger Jean d'Ombelles learns how to get along during the course of the film, the older Octave finally has enough, finally wants too much and leaves. In between, and at the other extreme, we have Amédée Lange-the unassuming and yet remarkable artist who saves his small world of ordinary Parisians-through his stories and through his killing of Batala. Perhaps then, this allows us to begin to appreciate the place and significance of *La Marseillaise*. Between the euphoria of opportunity and the despair that comes from both failure and clairvoyance there is Javal. Neither all powerful nor impotent, Javal helps others see themselves and their place in the Revolution (surrounding Brutus, killing tyranny) by giving them a historical frame of reference to events. His is able to make a modest but vital

contribution to society, one that is credible and, given the two other extremes, balanced. His place within the group likewise involves fraternité and égalité. He is a foot-soldier of the revolution, a man among equals, all of whom have potentially a vital contribution to make.

At the same time, we should not simply privilege some particular moment in which Renoir achieved a balance of emotions and intellectual insight with cultural and political opportunity. Examining Renoir's films of this twelve year period as a group, one finds this constant search- his readiness to rethink, reexplore, and finally revise the problems of the artist's role -both enlightening and moving. Out of this search emerges an author striving to find his own sense of artistic integrity- an always elusive but momentarily realized unity of expressive form with story, and the combining of political responsibilities with a realistically assessed social role.

NOTES AND REFERENCES:

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(1) RENOIR, J. *Ma vie et mes films*. Paris: Flammarion, 1974, p. 91, cited and translated by Laurence WYLIE in "La Vérité Derrière Les Masques," *Quarterly Review of Film Studies*, Vol. 7, No.3 (1982): 249. Wylie's translation is more acute than the one appearing in Jean RENOIR, *My Life and My Films*. New York: Atheneum. 1974, pp. 99-100.

(2) Production information for this article is drawn from Christopher FAULKNER, *Jean Renoir: A Guide to References and Resources*. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1979.

(3) FAULKNER, Ch. *The Social Cinema of Jean Renoir*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986.

(4) RENOIR, J. *Renoir, My Father*. London: William Collins Sons & Co, Ltd., 1962. pp. 34-35.

(5) RENOIR, J. *My Life and My Films*. p. 11.

(6) WERTH, A. *The Twilight of France, 1933-1940*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1942. p.3. Other studies of France in the 1920s and 1930s include: Julian JACKSON, *The Politics of Depression in France 1932-1936*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985; Karl G. HARR, Jr, *The Genesis and Effect of the Popular Front in France*. Lanham. Md: University Press of America, 1987; Julian JACKSON, *The Popular Front In France Defending Democracy, 1934-38*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988, p. 17.

(7) RENOIR, *My Life and My Films*. p. 102.

(8) SESONSKE, A. *Jean Renoir: The French Films, 1924-1939*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980. p.52.

(9) SYLVANE, A. (pseud. of Paul Gerard) and André MOUEZY-EON, *Tire-au-Flanc!* Paris: LibrairieThéâtrale.1905.

(10) WYUE, L. "La Vérité Derrière Les Masques," pp. 248-249.

(11) That Joseph's name begins with a J suggests that is Jean's doppelganger and also a character intimately connected with Renoir. Employed by a bourgeoisie family, he is as awkward as Jean but knows how to charm, to hang on. Jean and Joseph are synthesized in the character Renoir played in *La Règle du jeu*.

(12) *Cinémagazine* (27 July 1928), reprinted in *Jean Renoir*. Lyon: Premier Plan, 1962, pp. 89-91.

(13) "Cinéma-Radio," *L'Humanité* (7 december 1928), p. 4.

(14) "Bravo, les Bleus." *L'Humanité* (13 december 1928). p. 4.

(15) HARR, Jr., K. G. *The Genesis and Effect of the Popular Front in France*, p. 9.

(16) Sesonke offers a number of useful observations about the ways Renoir's films functioned within a bourgeois milieu, but his suggestion that the filmmaker "simply took the bourgeois background for granted" needs to be questioned (*Jean Renoir*, p. 176); Sesonke's view is shared by Célia BERTIN in *Jean Renoir* (Paris: Librairie Académique Perrin, 1986), published in English as *Jean Renoir: A Life In Pictures*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991.

(17) *La Chienne* was released in the United States in the 1950s and the film was unfortunately subtitled in English according to the censorship codes of that period. The title should really have been translated as "The Bitch," and there is the crucial moment when the protagonist, Maurice Legrand (Michel Simon), calls Lulu Pelletier "a bitch" (une chienne) which goes untranslated.

(18) Martin WOLFE. "French Interwar Stagnation," in WARNER, Ch. K. (ed.) *From the Ancien Regime to the Popular Front*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1969, p. 164.

(19) RENOIR, J. *Renoir, My Father*, pp. 358-359,397-398.

(20) Lulu's first name perhaps evokes the femme fatale of G. W. Pabst's *Pandora's Box* (1929) and the Wedekind plays.

(21) At the conclusion of this opening party scene, these business men were going off to a bordello. One colleague invites Legrand to join them, finding the idea ludicrously amusing. The pimp-businessman relationship thus functions both in dealing with women and art. For Jean Renoir's father, in contrast, women represented the materialization of his art (*Renoir, My Father*, p. 59). In both instances Legrand remains an outsider.

(22) Legrand's thievery suggests that the world on money has not only crippled him physically but morally.

(23) Christopher FAULKNER notes that Boudu is a continuation of the clochard character in *La Chienne* (*Social Cinema of Jean Renoir*. p. 31). This continuity has never been fully pursued, however, even though it is important to a full appreciation of the film.

(24)RENOIR, J. *Renoir, My Father*. p.38; see also pp. 52,72,73,93,101,122,124,198,222, 232, and 288.

(25) William SIMON lecture (September 1978).

(26) The band plays as they give Lestingois a medal, in effect, rewarding him for becoming a cuckold.

(27) FAULKNER. Ch. *Social Cinema of Jean Renoir*. pp. 33-41.

(28) Just as Boudu is a "real" tramp.

(29) WOLFE. M. "French Interwar Stagnation." pp. 171-172.

(30) RENOIR. *My Life and My Films*. p.155.

(31) In a very public fashion Renoir thus answered the question on everyone's mind in the wake of the February riot -which side are you on? (*The Popular Front in France*. p. 17).

(32)BRAUDY .L. *Jean Renoir: The World of His Films*. London: RobsonBooks.1977 .p.119; SESONSKE. A. *Jean Renoir*, pp. 196-197.

(33) SESONSKE. *Ibid.*. p.197. While The joy of Legrand is the joy of someone who has given up the struggle, for whom this cessation is an immense relief. For the spectator who has presumably not given up the struggle it is correspondingly depressing.

(34) "Le Crime de M. Lange- Le Coujat" *Le Temps* (25 January 1936). p. 6.

(35) RENOIR. J. *Renoir, My Father*. p. 71.

(36) Sesonske points out that Lange's estrangement differs from Legrand's. The painter held his colleagues in contempt while Lange does not. Clearly the temperaments of the two are quite different -as well as their conditions of work and home. Legrand expresses his inner most emotions in his paintings while Lange escapes into fantasy. The differences are also the differences in tone for the films. One lays bears the filmmaker's fears about exploitation and/or losing his voice -an easy enough fate for filmmakers who need so much money to create a work. These differences are clearly explained by the different political and cultural conditions under which Renoir worked as well as by the fact that Legrand is a stand in for Jean Renoir's father while Lange is a version of himself.

(37) SESONSKE, *Ibid.*, p. 202.

(38) LEPROHON, P. *Jean Renoir*. New York: Crown 1971, p. 90.

(39) By the summer of 1937, disenchantment had developed in three areas: the failure to intervene in Spain against Franco was felt to be a betrayal of the government's anti-fascist pledges; the refusal of employers to recognize their employers newly won privileges as a result of the strike; and the evaporation of negotiated wage increases as a result of devaluation, inflation and government financial policy.

(40) "Pour Le Film La Marseillaise Le Jour de Glorie est Arrivé," *L'Humanité* (11 February 1938), p. 1.

(41) "La Semaine au Cinéma," *Le Peuple* (1 February 1938),p. 5.

(42) "Les Films Nouveaux," *Figaro* (12 February 1938), p. 8.

(43) The film thus seeks to address the different areas of worker disenchantment. The mason Bomier, a representative of the working class, complains that the Revolution is extremely conservative.

His friend Arnaud counsels patience: the Revolution is only getting started. Here is a plea direct at the impatient workers who were too aware of the Popular Front's shortcoming and not willing to acknowledge its achievements. Bomier's desire to have his mother sit at the as an equal of men suggests the women's rights issues addressed by the Blum government. The need for a unified left capable of opposing the fascist threat from Germany was emphasized, particularly at the end as the French prepare to go into the battle against the Prussians.

(44) BUCHSBAUM, J. *Cinema Engagé*. Urbana, Ill: University of Illinois Press, 1988, pp. 264-265.

(45) RENOIR, *My Life and My Films*, p. 156.

(46) In *Le Crime de M. Lange*, as in *La Marseillaise*, the pan is used to emphasize the unity of groups, but only of working-class groups. The courtyard as a basis for community is often emphasized by the panning camera, particularly in the 'famous' scene where the camera follows Lange across and down the stairway and then, in the next shot, spins 180° in the opposite direction to rest on Lange killing Batale. The world of the collective is thus reiterated before Lange kills the man who threatens to destroy it. The camera pans across groups: the cafe's customers at the beginning of the film, the typesetters, the laundresses. In this film the pan simply amplifies, predicts or reiterates the unity of the cooperative. *La Marseillaise*, however, is the more ambitious because it tries to articulate the unity of a heterogeneous group, that is the principle of revolutionary unity, through the pan which becomes more formal, more extreme, as a result.

(47) WERTH, A. *The Twilight of France*, p.162.

(48) Walter BENJAMIN, "The work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations*. New York: Schocken, 1969, p. 242; edited and with an introduction by Hannah Arendt.

(49) Quoted in "La Semaine au Cinéma," *Le Peuple* (15 July 1939), p. 2.

(50) "Chronique de L'écran," *Figaro* (12 July 1939), p. 4.

(51) "La Semaine au Cinéma," *Le Peuple* (15 July 1939), p. 2.

(52) BAZIN, A. *Jean Renoir*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1973, p. 73; edited and with an introduction by François Truffaut, translated by W. W. Halsey II and William H. Simon.

(53) RENOIR, *My Life and My Films*, p.125.

(54) BUCHSBAUM, J. *Cinema Engagé*, pp. 250-270.

(55) Wylie's assertion that Octave expressed Renoir's own sense of his identity must be pursued cautiously with many caveats ("La Vérité Derrière Les Masques." p. 247).

(56) The film was also a loose adaptation of Alfred de Musset's *Les Caprices de Marianne* (1833) a literary source set in a post-revolutionary period of reaction -thus following a loose historical progression that resonated with the new post-Popular Front era.

(57) WERTH. *Twilight of France*. p. 267.

CHARLES MUSSER teaches American studies and film studies at Yale University. He made the documentary film *Before the Nickelodeon: The Early Cinema of Edwin S. Porter* (1982) and has authored several books on early cinema, including *The Emergence of Cinema: The American Screen to 1907* (1990).