

La Grande Illusion

Country: France - 1937

Director: Jean Renoir

Cast: Jean Gabin, Dito Parlo, Pierre Fresnay,
Erich von Stroheim.

Could Renoir's 1937 classic, reissued earlier this year in a brand new format by the BFI, be seen as the beginning of a new genre, the POW movie? "Not only hugely important in film history – it was the first foreign-language film ever to be Oscar-nominated for Best Picture – but a sorrowful, acutely thoughtful and wholly imperishable masterpiece, Renoir's drama about the 1st World War fortunes of Old Europe holds up sublimely: better, even, than 'La Regle du jeu' (1939), which is more often called his crowning glory" (Tim Robey in 'The Telegraph').

The friendship forged between Pierre Fresnay's French captain and Erich von Stroheim's refined German commandant lends a core of humanity as vulnerable as it is profound: and the feelings between Jean Gabin's escapee mechanic and the farm widow Elsa (wonderful Dita Parlo) have all the purity of a great, silent romance.

In 1952 both Orson Welles and David Lean cited 'La Grande Illusion' as one of their all-time favourite films. Joseph Goebbels was not a fan: "Cinematic Public Enemy No.1" he called it.

Film-maker Mike Newell ('Four Weddings and a Funeral') said this about the film:

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

The film's themes are obvious. It's the end of class, the aristocrats are gone. The working man and the outcast – they're the ones who are now going to be in the ascendant. If Renoir has had any influence on me, it's been indirect. Like most ordinary directors, I've been all over the map in a way that Renoir was not. But I did see in him that there was a standard to which you could aspire – a truth about what you put on screen and the way you saw characters. The wonderful thing about 'Las Grande Illusion' is that all its characters feel true and complete. No character is denied a rounded portrayal. It truly is a classic."

So what is the 'grand illusion'? Originally, Renoir was making reference to the British author Norman Angell's belief that the supposed financial advantage of war is a falsehood. For Renoir the idea that war can be fought according to gentlemanly rules is an illusion – like the belief that the 1914-1918 conflict was 'the war to end all wars'. The great illusion, which the film subverts, is that war is an evil which leads to a greater good.

Commandant von Ruffenstein wears white gloves, concealing his terrible burns from when he was shot down in combat. He maintains a ramrod-straight demeanour and pursues an elaborately civilised policy of martial respect for his distinguished prisoner, Captain de Boeldieu, while disdainful of Boeldieu's more plebeian (one trusts that word still has some legitimate meaning in a post-Mitchel world?) comrades Rosenthal (petty anti-Semitism is never far away) and the boisterous Marechal (Gabin). Von Ruffenstein's 'civility' is, thus, another illusion, also lampooned in the BBC 'Balckadder Goes Fourth' series when Flasheart confronts Baron von Richthoven in a castle prison: but there comparison's end!

Next Film Club screening on Tuesday 4 December: The Fairy