

La Grande Illusion Movie Review (Final Draft)

This viewer found La Grande Illusion, a 1937 film directed by Jean Renoir, to be a treat on many levels. It was entertaining, had universal themes and perhaps most importantly it is a story that remains relevant today.

Though the movie takes place in Europe during World War I, it is far from the typical war movie. It heavily incorporates universal elements like love and humor, perhaps a reason it is so enticing, and all the while it subtly interweaves both political and social commentary. This unique approach to one of the greatest conflicts in history is what makes it so powerful and perhaps the reason it has stood up to be a classic, relevant for study some 70 years after its release.

Though the movie is entertaining, touching on a wide range of topics from male bonding and jokes to drinking, women and endless plotting to escape prison camps, one must realize that it takes place in a dark period of European history, and specifically French history. In A History of Modern France, Jeremy Popkin describes the First World War as “a turning point in the country’s history as decisive as 1789” (page 203), a reference to the pivotal French Revolution of that year. Popkin also cites that 1.3 million Frenchmen died in the war, nearly one out of every 10 adult men in the French population (page 220). For such a gruesome and devastating conflict, which had extreme psychological effects for the French that endured between the world wars, as described by Popkin and the documentary “The World at War,” Renoir’s movie told quite a different story than the “norm.”

One of the movie’s greatest attributes is that it can be approached from many different angles. The storyline is so dense and so rich that it is not lacking in any way of substance that

can be studied. The political commentary about war is one theme, the social commentary regarding class divisions is another, and the greater idea of the power of human relationships is yet another after that. Of course, now in 2007, the story can also be looked at from a historical point-of-view.

The intended audience of the film appears to be quite large. Renoir seems most to target his own French people, everyday Frenchman at that, focusing on the tale of the French prisoners, their plots to escape camps and their movement from place to place as they seek freedom. Yet, he also has a clear message for the Germans, and for that matter, the English, the Russians, other Europeans, and in one sense all citizens of the world. Renoir states in the special director's introduction to the film that if mankind does not do something about its failures and corruptions, its beautiful world will disappear. He says that the world is being destroyed, and it is the job of all people to preserve it. This universal message is another reason the film remains relevant today, particularly in wake of nuclear threats and many unstable parts of the world.

One must also look at the time the movie was released, the year 1937. World War II has not yet come, but Renoir seems to oddly foreshadow it. Renoir has an important character in the film, Rosenthal, who is Jewish – the group discriminated heavily against by Hitler's Germany – and some of his prison camps mirror those that sprouted up in Germany in the 1940s. Renoir seems to be warning the world, Europeans in particular, that war may be looming again, and all action must be taken to prevent it. He argued that the divisions across the world served no good purpose and they created artificial boundaries that should not exist between mankind.

The movie has a linear and chronological format to it, beginning when the French send a plane out for surveillance, the plane goes down and the men inside are taken prisoners. The story continues in chronicling the lives of those prisoners and the others they meet along the way

in the various camps, and eventually when Marechal and Rosenthal escape, it continues in the German countryside at a peasant woman's home. The story has a clear start to finish lineage, and has different high points and low points, as rumors of battles won and lost seep in at the camps and moods both rise and fall in different circumstances.

A weakness of the film for this viewer, who is seeing the movie 70 years later on a DVD and does not know French, is that the subtitles can prove distracting. The languages used in the movie are those of the original version, and other than words at the bottom of the screen, one can not decipher what is being said. Oftentimes, eyeballing both the text at the bottom and the visual of what is happening in the scenes is difficult, and it becomes specifically difficult to pick up on details. General concepts can be understood, and the universal elements of the film do help the viewer maintain interest and at least some idea of what is happening, but the subtitles still can take away from the film for one not familiar with the languages being spoken.

The movie's greatest strength is the fact it uses universal elements. Humor, love and bonding between friends can be understood by viewers of any native language, and all of these concepts are interlaced throughout the film. The humor in particular is overwhelmingly present, and it keeps the viewer interested and following the storyline at all times. There is a particular emphasis on drinking, and humor is tied in quite well with that, which perhaps should not be a surprise. Renoir also uses the universal element of music throughout the film, and that keeps the person watching fully immersed in the viewing experience.

Another strength of the movie was that there were some outstanding lines. Any good movie has good lines, memorable things that are said that can hold more weight than others and that are often recited later. One of this viewer's favorite lines was actually the film's last, "Don't shoot. They're in Switzerland." Those five words alone are just so telling of so much, about

how humans define borders, and they are especially powerful in the way the camera depicts the scene, an aerial shot with the beautiful snow-covered mountains and white that stretched on and on (no visible borders of any kind). This viewer also liked the line, “Golf courses are for golf, tennis courts are for tennis, and prison camps are for escaping.” That line incorporates some humor with the fact the French are prisoners trying to escape, and it also shows the playfulness of the act, at least the way they approached it, how it was almost like a game to them. Finally, this viewer liked the part when Marechal is reunited with his companions after a substantial time in isolation, and his first words in this dramatic reunion are, “Got any food? I’m hungry.” Not only are these lines fun, witty and memorable, they also have greater meaning behind them. They also help the viewer maintain interest.

The movie’s central theme of people of different nations being similar is resounding and most noticeable. Just watching the film, people may find themselves asking: Why do we fight? Why is there war? Why can’t we all get along? The points are striking, and they are touched on time and time again. Renoir effectively engages the viewer in this way and gets him or her asking questions, as he or she finds himself or herself wondering about things that only become common sense.

This viewer was surprised how much Renoir was able to avoid the war itself, even though the film was set in the middle of the war and involved people who were part of the conflict. Not one battle scene is depicted. Though sometimes the camps became riled up, they were predominately calm. The simplicity of the camps, and their isolation from the greater conflict at hand, was likely emphasized by the director to reiterate how people can work together and how silly war can be. There were certain scenes, like when a German guard gave Marechal a

harmonica, that showed how people of diverse groups can foster positive human relationships, even while at odds with each other.

Renoir's French nationality certainly had to play some role in his creation of the film. In his director's introduction, Renoir revealed that he was a veteran of the war himself and that much of the content from the film was based on actual events from when he was in service. In this regard, he personalized the war, while in other parts promoting the idea of lessons learned. Finally, the fact that the French people suffered so many losses made it ironic that a Frenchman would create a movie like this that positively paints the French.

Overall, La Grande Illusion tells the sad story of war, how it pulls people apart, and how needless and foolish that may be. Renoir emphasizes the unification of people of all groups and nationalities in several scenes, perhaps nothing more dynamic than those between Marechal and the German peasant woman Elsa, as they fall in love. Two very different people, with two very different pasts, who do not even know each other's language, learn and grow together to become closer. It is just a glimpse of what could happen if everyone just got along – if nationalities, borders, governments and social classes did not exist to divide people. It is a snippet of the director Renoir's view of how the world can be a better place, and it is one that all people, French or not French, can relate to. There should no wonder why it is a classic, and this viewer would recommend it wholeheartedly to anyone.