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## 1 Making Unmaking Remaking

CAHIERS To get back to *The Rules of the Game*: Weren't you surprised by the poor reception it got?

RENOIR Well, I wasn't expecting it. I never expect it, and for a very simple reason: I always imagine that the film I'm going to make will be an extremely marketable film, which will delight all the distributors and will be considered rather ordinary.<sup>1</sup>

Nowadays *La Règle du jeu* starts with an announcement. Before we get to the film itself we are told that we are to see a reconstruction. 'Jean Gaborit and Jacques Durand have reassembled the original version of this film with the approval and guidance of Jean Renoir, who dedicates this resurrection to the memory of André Bazin.' Implied here is a deal of significant context, much of it to do with the startling history of the film's production.

The Gaborit/Durand version is the one presented in triumph at the 1959 Venice Film Festival, twenty years after the calamitous Paris premiere of July 1939. In his memoirs, Renoir looked back from the 1970s on a failure that had so depressed him that he made up his mind either to turn his back on cinema or to leave France. He had been stunned to discover that the film rubbed most of the audience up the wrong way. 'It was a tremendous blow. The film was received with something like hatred ... and the public regarded it as a personal insult.'<sup>2</sup>

It was the public, more than the journalistic, response that floored Renoir. He acknowledged that a number of reviewers wrote in praise of the picture. The historian Claude Gauteur assembled a dossier of forty-one contemporary responses and was able to weigh seven completely favourable reviews against twice as many that were unqualified in their hostility.<sup>3</sup> Some revisionist historians wish us to

believe that the film's misfortunes were exaggerated, by Renoir among others, to support the legend of the martyred masterpiece. Gauteur, for instance, warns against supposing that the censors made it a special target before and after the outbreak of war. '*La Règle du jeu* was banned from September 1939 to February 1940 on account of the conditions of the time, as were a number of other French films. No more, no less.'<sup>4</sup> Renoir recorded its withdrawal as demoralising.<sup>5</sup> No memorable comfort came from knowing, if he did, that others suffered the same misfortune.

A notion of mastery is proclaimed in much writing about film. It pictures the author of a great work as from the outset certain of the intention, steadfast and confident in its execution. In this respect, forgetfulness worked to foster the image of pure victimhood for Renoir and *La Règle du jeu*. Accounts of the film's reception have tended to overlook the director's own misgivings as it was prepared for release, and to ignore his part in its undoing. It was because of the misgivings, perhaps, that he gave in to the demands of the film's backers. 'Commerce has spoken,' he told his colleagues. 'We are going to make cuts.'<sup>6</sup> As a result, the premiere version of the film had lost 13 minutes from Renoir's first cut; the losses affected a number of scenes and moments that would now be thought indispensable, and they may well have brought additional confusion to what was always an unorthodox storyline.

Panic cutting foresaw, tried to forestall, difficulties at the box office. Anxiety was inevitable when a major triumph was required for the film to realise the hopes, and return the money, invested in it. Since a mere moderate success would be accounted a failure, how terrible it must have been when it was received with worse than indifference. There is little room for doubt that *La Règle du jeu* was widely scorned and hated. Too many people who were there at the time – among others, the actors Marcel Dalio<sup>7</sup> and Paulette Goddard<sup>8</sup>, the set designer Eugène Lourie<sup>9</sup> and Henri Cartier-Bresson<sup>10</sup>, an assistant director on the film – left testimony that supports Renoir's memory of a painful rejection. In its wake, further cuts were made as the director attempted

to get rid of incidents that seemed particularly to rile the spectators, only to find that hostility erupted elsewhere in what remained. The picture shrank from the 113 minutes of its preview version to end up as a range of truncated prints of less than 90. The work of suppression was extended and apparently completed in 1942 by an Allied air raid that demolished the laboratories housing the negative. *La Règle du jeu* had become something beyond a film *maudit*.

If it was France that doomed the film, it was France too that rescued it. After the war, its reputation gathered. More voices joined those that had been raised in 1939 to defend or acclaim it. There came to light an 80-minute version in good condition. At that length, gaps in the continuity must have been evident and tantalising. But the version established itself in the ciné-clubs and specialised houses.

We have two key witnesses to the impact even of the mutilated versions. Alain Resnais, speaking to *Sight & Sound* as the director of *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959) and *La Guerre est finie* (1966), recalled a 1944 screening as the single most overwhelming experience he had ever had in the cinema:

When I came out of the theatre, I remember, I just had to sit down on the edge of the pavement; I sat there for a good five minutes, and then I walked the streets of Paris for a couple of hours. For me, everything had been turned upside down. All my ideas about the cinema had been challenged ... Since then, of course, I've seen it at least fifteen times – like most film-makers of my generation.<sup>11</sup>

François Truffaut echoes this theme in a letter to Renoir:

I saw *La Règle du jeu* over and over again between the ages of thirteen and fourteen, when everything in my life was going so badly. [It] helped me to keep going, to understand the motives of the people around me, and to get through those awful years of my adolescence ... I will always feel that my life is connected to the film you made.<sup>12</sup>

If we can rely on Truffaut's memory, his immersion in *La Règle du jeu* must have occurred in the immediate aftermath of World War II.

Then and later, Renoir's cause was championed by major figures in French film culture who nurtured and disciplined the growth of young *cinéphilie*. At the Paris Cinémathèque, Henri Langlois lost no opportunity to screen Renoir's films and to set them among cinema's greatest and most educative achievements. The critic André Bazin, through his zeal and intellectual passion, spread the conviction that Renoir was the most vital figure in the French contribution to world cinema. His impact was all the greater because he was at the same time fostering the development of the new generation of critics – among them Truffaut – who were to gather round the monthly *Cahiers du cinéma* and quite soon to form the core of the New Wave of film-makers.

To acclaim Renoir's achievement was also necessarily to defend it against attack, since he had enemies on the left as well as on the right. His standing in many French eyes was compromised by his failure to return from America – from Hollywood! – after the German surrender. It was ten years before he made another film in the French studios, and in fact California remained his home until his death in 1979. His choice worried even his friends; it was open to a range of interpretations, many of them offensive to French sensibilities. The heat of cultural warfare did its bit to inflame the fervour of Renoir's admirers.

In that context, the absence of an authentic version of *La Règle du jeu* must have become, by 1956, worse than teasing. The directors of a Paris ciné-club set out to establish a more complete edition. They formed La Société des Grands Films Classiques, acquired the rights and assembled every scrap of film or negative they could lay hands on. Buoyed by their discovery of salvaged material in another laboratory – more than two hundred cans of it – Jean Gaborit and Jacques Maréchal worked with the editor Jacques Durand to reconstitute Renoir's movie. They went beyond restoration of the first premiere version to achieve something close to the 113 minutes that



Renoir had initially sanctioned. Although the term did not exist in 1959, their edition of *La Règle du jeu* was surely the first and still the most glorious instance in cinema history of a Director's Cut.

By eloquent coincidence the restored film had its festival screening in the season that found the French New Wave in glory at Cannes. As he was at Venice in 1959 to present his new film, *Le Testament du Docteur Cordelier*, Renoir was able to savour the rediscovery. 'Quite a triumph,' he wrote to his son Alain.<sup>13</sup> In *Sight & Sound*, Penelope Houston reported that 'on the day these two productions ... were shown, the festival was unmistakably Renoir's'.<sup>14</sup>

André Bazin did not live to see this vindication. He died at forty in November 1958 before he could complete his book on Renoir. (In homage, Truffaut undertook to organise the manuscript and fill it out for publication.) One of the last acts of his life as a critic must have been to cast his votes, alongside those of Chabrol, Godard, Rivette, Rohmer and Truffaut among others, in the selection of

*Cahiers du cinéma*'s Twelve Best Films of All Time. *La Règle du jeu* was placed at the head, second only to Murnau's *Sunrise* (1927). The list was published in the issue for December 1958, which carried the announcement of Bazin's death.

Like the *Cahiers* vote, all Bazin's writing on *La Règle du jeu* must have been based on truncated prints. Yet he acclaimed the picture's brilliant construction and provided understandings of its achievement that have proved doubly seminal. Bazin illuminated *La Règle du jeu* in ways to which all subsequent criticism is indebted; he was also the first to insist on its centrality for our assessment of the cinema as a whole. Since then, everyone who presents a significant argument on the aesthetics of film has been obliged to take account of Renoir's work and to engage with Bazin's view of it.

The dedication to Bazin's memory was indeed a fitting tribute. But the opening announcement was not the only addition that Gaborit and Durand made to the resurrected movie. *La Règle du jeu* had always carried in its titles a disclaimer offering the picture as a *divertissement* and denying any ambitions as social criticism. In 1959, assuredly with Renoir's approval and most likely at his suggestion, the disclaimer was modified and subtly transformed by an addition that gave the film the character of a prophetic period piece. It now reads – italics mark the insert – as follows: 'This entertainment, *whose action occurs on the eve of the 1939 war*, makes no claim to be a study of manners. Its characters are pure make-believe.'

The inserted words were not put in to explain anything about the film's plot for an audience that would now be offered it under the rubric of Les Grands Films Classiques. They were there to alert the spectator to the purpose of *La Règle du jeu*, and to insist on the relevance of the eve-of-war context even though – or especially because – the process of national and international events would not intrude upon the action and would be absent from the concerns of the characters. Evoking the brink of war gave the author's approval to interpretations that emphasised social criticism. These new words

asked that the film be seen in the light of the events that followed 1939. Thereby they prepared it for understanding as a portrait of the ruling class in its decadence, and as an analysis whose insights had been validated by the French collapse before Nazism.

There is an oddity, on the face of it, in making so much of the 1939 setting while retaining the surrounding words that seem to boast of insignificance. The stress on make-believe in the main text echoed the subtitle that, right at the start, identified *La Règle du jeu* as a ‘dramatic fantasia’ – with the French word *fantaisie* carrying the sense of the whimsical, of a caprice. The apparent contradiction here continues the dividedness that had marked Renoir’s project since its inception. While still at the planning stage, he had told a journalist on *Pour Vous* that the film would offer ‘a precise description of the bourgeoisie of our time’.<sup>15</sup> From a director who was also celebrated as an internationalist, anti-fascist and polemicist for the left, such an undertaking could only imply a denunciation; the description would predictably be merciless. On the other hand, he was setting out to make a comedy, of a sort, in a baroque spirit, drawing on French theatrical tradition, and offering himself and his audience a break from the warfare of *La Grande Illusion* (1937) and *La Marseillaise* (1937), and the murderous convulsions of *La Bête humaine* (1938).

The first and last of those films had been hugely successful, paving the way for Renoir to set up his own production company so as to work with greater freedom. It was hoped that La Nouvelle Édition Française would develop into a French counterpart to United Artists in the USA, offering independence to major French filmmakers and allowing them to participate more fully in the rewards of success. But first it needed to prove itself at the box office. Renoir had established the NEF with a group of friends and associates. Did any of them remark that *La Grande Illusion* and *La Bête humaine* had both profited from the charismatic brilliance of Jean Gabin in the starring role, and that *La Règle du jeu* was going ahead – once Simone Simon had priced herself out of the female lead – without that kind of support?

We know that objections were raised when Renoir ended the search for a principal actress with an invitation to the all-but-unknown Nora Gregor, a refugee from Hitler's Austria. He was able to override the objections and to redirect his development of the scenario with this actress in mind. Gregor was to play Christine, wife of a French aristocrat and the centre of a tangle of amorous intrigue. Since Renoir's design was evolving towards an ensemble piece with a growing array of developed characters, he may well have felt that beyond his personal attraction to Gregor there was also an objective justification for non-star casting.

It was the strength of Renoir's position as the creative force in the NEF that he could insist on an artistic decision, or possibly a whim, in face of his associates' worries. But the strength contained some familiar weaknesses. The independent film author has no immediate source of financial discipline (such as a producer or a studio ordinarily imposes) to restrain the perfectionism that is necessary to the director's function. That would be a pure advantage, creatively, if the material resources were limitless. Since they never can be, the pursuit of the ideal may soon – as the costs pile up – put the artist back in thrall to the bankers.

Renoir was never a profligate film-maker, and he was conscious that his own money, as well as that of his friends, was riding on the success of the NEF. Still, there were corners that could not be cut. His story was of the idle rich in French society. It moved from Paris to the chateau of La Colinière for a shooting party, where a wealthy host spent freely for the entertainment of his many guests. On location, the weather was hostile and a two-week schedule stretched to five, leaving the sound stages at the Joinville studio expensively idle. There Eugène Lourié had constructed sets for the scenes inside the chateau based on a plan which would allow Renoir's camera to travel freely between spaces. This would enable the director to stage the action in ways that would stress not only luxury but also the continuity between conflicting interests, as well as the criss-crossing between the affairs of the masters and those of the servants.



La Ferté Saint-Aubin becomes ... La Colinière



Rain on location ... and in the studio

Lourié's main set spread across both the largest sound stages. As the shooting extended beyond the initial eight-week schedule, the NEF came under pressure to release the space. Then some principal members of the cast, essential to scenes or shots that remained to be filmed, found themselves up against their commitments to other productions. Some of them had to go – Roland Toutain, for instance, to Morocco – and their uncertain availability became another hazard for the director. During a production hiatus when three scenes at the start of the movie remained to be shot, Renoir reflected on his experience in a letter to his NEF partner Camille François. He affirmed his belief in the film's quality but was not confident about its reception. Any problems, he wrote on the first day of June 1939, would be the result of circumstances that had

delayed the script of *La Règle du jeu* and made us start out with an incomplete draft. This draft wasn't good; I had to do several revisions during the shooting, and if *La Règle du jeu* is not well received by the public I think we must attribute it to that alone. It's a lesson for next time: we must never again start without being thoroughly prepared.<sup>16</sup>

Extensive overhauls to the screenplay after the start of production seem to have occurred only on those of Renoir's pictures where intractable problems drove him into panic. But it was part of his customary working method to embrace discoveries made in the course of rehearsal and shooting, and to adjust the film's development to the character of the settings and to the specific talents of the actors. Indeed it was the refusal to blueprint the detail of the movie's realisation that was to run him into conflict with governing concepts of efficiency during his career in the Hollywood studios. Part of the special richness of *La Règle du jeu* should perhaps be attributed to circumstances that pushed Renoir into a more extreme version of his normal practice.

It seems certain that the anxieties and tensions surrounding the production interacted with the wider context of life in 1939 to amplify



Preparing the shot with Nora Gregor and Jean Renoir

the movie's sense of the precarious, of barely containable hysteria. After the collapse of the Popular Front, the left in France was fractured in defeat. No one knew whether or how the arrest of fascism's triumph in Europe could be achieved. For most, a war was too dreadful to contemplate. Its horrors would multiply the carnage of 1914–18 by the new terrors of air attack that Hitler had demonstrated through his intervention in the Spanish Civil War. In the months of shooting on *La Règle du jeu*, between January and June 1939, it became ever more difficult to sustain the blind euphoria that had greeted the Munich Agreement. It required an ever more earnest investment of will to believe that the policy of appeasement would succeed in averting disaster – but many people in France and England were making that investment.

At various times, Renoir gave conflicting accounts of what he expected as the film was readied for its premiere. Speaking at the Academy Cinema in London in 1967, he recalled having been 'sure the public would like it – it was a light picture, parties are not big problems and the big problems were so well hidden that the audience wouldn't be hurt in their feelings. Well, I was very wrong.'<sup>17</sup> His autobiography repeats this theme. Yet his remarks in a radio broadcast on the day of the 1939 opening reflected the doubts expressed to Camille François: 'I'm anxious about the reception the public will accord to *La Règle du jeu*. But I believe it's an experience which is worth the trouble of attempting.'<sup>18</sup>

The contradictions became more pronounced when he discussed the film's content and intentions. In the Academy Cinema lecture, he denied a social purpose: 'People thought that ... I was criticising society, but not at all. I wish I could live in such a society – that would be wonderful.' Introducing the film for French television four years later, his claim was reversed:

I wanted to ... criticize a society that I considered to be rotten and that I continue to consider to be absolutely rotten, because this society is still the same. It's still rotten. It hasn't finished drawing us into some very pretty little catastrophes.<sup>19</sup>



No doubt it was not only the adjustment of memory to various occasions and purposes that left us these changing accounts but also the storyteller's drive to give his stories dash and colour, and the performer's judgment of what will keep the audience hanging on his words. Like many another great film-maker, Renoir was a beguiling conversationalist whose joy was to hold forth for the delight and instruction of his fellows. Whatever the qualifications advanced by the revisionists, Renoir's differing tales seem to me to be valuable as images even when they are less sure as history. They give convincing expression to ranges of feeling about the film and its production. A 1952 statement in *Cahiers du cinéma* suggests the difference between creative determination and intellectual uncertainty:

When I made *La Règle du jeu* I knew the way to go ... My instinct guided me. Awareness of danger provided me with situations and lines, and my comrades were in the same state as I. How troubled we were. I think the film is good.

Renoir introduces *La Règle du jeu* for French TV (1961)

But it's not so very hard to do good work with a compass of anxiety to guide your path.<sup>20</sup>

The contradictions in Renoir's accounts point up real tensions that are vital to the work's character. His autobiography tells us that during the shoot he was 'torn between the desire to make a comedy of it and the wish to tell a tragic story. The result of this ambivalence was the film as it is.'<sup>21</sup> We may take these words to represent the film-maker's understanding of his achievement, arrived at over a span of thirty years. 'Ambivalence' has to be a key term in any discussion of the film. I doubt too if any one phrase better evokes the instability of genre and the complexity of tone in *La Règle du jeu* than Renoir's remark in 1966 that he had based the film on the expression 'dancing on a volcano'.<sup>22</sup>