

LA GRANDE ILLUSION
(French, 1937, 113 Minutes, Subtitled)

Described as “the great escape” of the First World War, Jean Renoir’s antiwar masterpiece remains as vibrant and meaningful today as it was in 1938. It was the favorite film of Orson Welles. On the surface, the plot is fairly straightforward: two French aviation officers attempt to escape from increasingly more challenging German POW camps. One is working class, the other from a rich Jewish family; their commander is a French aristocrat. The German camp commander is a combat disabled Prussian aristocrat.

Renoir, son of painter Auguste Renoir, was a French aviator in World War before he became a renowned film director. **La Grande Illusion** contains a number of illusions. It reflects the conflict between class and national identity during World War I, and mirrors divisions in later interwar French society. Renoir intended the film to tell a story of war and humanity, of survival and attempts to live life in the best way possible within human limitations of class and social role. The French and German aristocrats from the doomed nobility share a deeper cultural bond with each other than they do with the men of their respective countries. There also is the illusion of civility between enemies. And the French aristocratic officer risks his life for the illusion of a nationalism he doesn’t believe in.

German actor and Hollywood director Erich von Stroheim played the camp commandant and fortuitously took the film with him to New York in 1938 where it won Best Foreign Film honors. Hitler and Goebbels hated the film, declaring it “Cinematographic Enemy Number One.” The Nazis sought out and burned all copies they could find after they occupied France in 1940.