



***La grande illusion (Grand Illusion)* is a summer, 2026 LVCA dvd donation to the Ligonier Valley Library in Ligonier, Pennsylvania. Below is Kino Ken's review of that Janus Films / Criterion Collection Essential Art House dvd release.**

15 of a possible 20 points = *1/2 = excellent film**

**France 1937 black-and-white 113 minutes subtitled live action feature drama Réalisation d'art cinématographique (RAC)
Producers: Albert Pinkovitch and Frank Rollmer**

**Key: *indicates outstanding technical achievement or performance
(j) designates a juvenile performer**

Points:

- 1 Direction: Jean Renoir**
- 2 Editing: Marguerite Houllé**
- 2 Cinematography: Christian Matras**
Still Photography: Sam Levin
- 2 Lighting**
- 2 Screenplay: Charles Spaak and Jean Renoir**
Script (Continuity): Françoise Giroud
- 1 Music: Joseph Kosma**
- 1 Production Design: Eugène Lourié**
Set Decoration: Eugène Lourié
Costumes: René Decrais

Makeup: J. Raffels

Props: Alexandre Laurié and Raymond Pillon

2 Sound

Sound Recording: Joseph de Bretagne

Technical Direction: Carl Koch

1 Acting

1 Creativity

15 total points

Cast: Jean Gabin (Lieutenant Maréchal), Dita Parlo (Elsa), Pierre Fresnay (Captain de Boeldieu), Erich Von Stroheim* (Captain von Rauffenstein), Julien Carette* (Cartier, the actor), Jean Dasté (the schoolmaster), Georges Péclet (locksmith), Werner Florian (Sergeant Arthur), Sylvain Itkine (Lieutenant Demolder), Gaston Modot (the engineer), Marcel Dalio (Lieutenant Rosenthal), Jacques Becker (English officer), Habib Benglia (Senegalese), Pierre Blondy (soldier), Albert Brouette (prisoner), George Forster (Newhouse), Georges Fronval (soldier), Karl Heil (officer in the fortress), Carl Koch (von Rauffenstein's orderly), Little Peters (j) (Lotte, Elsa's daughter), Claude Sainval (Captain Ringis), Claude Vernier (Prussian officer), Michel Salina

***La grande illusion (Grand Illusion)* was intended to be an antiwar film directed at the progressively aggressive Nazi regime in Deutschland. Its message of the futility of war and shared humanity of political foes was regarded by autocratic governments as incendiary and intolerable. Germany and Italy banned the film. The national socialist and fascist parties that controlled those nations have dropped into the dustbin of history but Renoir's plea for peace still hangs around.**

Featuring Jean Gabin as working-class officer Lieutenant Maréchal, Pierre Fresnay as aristocratic French Captain de Boeldieu, and Erich von Stroheim in the role of German Captain von Rauffenstein, much-wounded war veteran from a cosmopolitan upper-class family, Renoir's drama is largely set in prisoner-of-war camps inside Germany. There, captives such as Maréchal and de Boeldieu chafe, impatiently scheming improbable escapes, moving inexorably from minimum security confinement to isolation cells and, ultimately, into fortress

prisons. Their initial commandant is von Rauffenstein. He's back again at their last incarceration, considerably the worse for wear but still exhibiting the same bonhomie radiated at their first encounter.

Wintersborn, once a mountain stronghold of medieval warlords, is supposedly escape-proof, a sort of Alpine Alcatraz. Not at all overawed by its reputation, de Boeldieu assures two fellow inmates he can and will get them successfully out of its confines. He's noted the German obsession with order, obedience, and quietude. Violating those cardinal principles of their jailers, de Boeldieu guesses, will create such momentary disturbance and frenzy as will allow a couple Frenchmen to slip down to freedom unnoticed. Which Maréchal and Jewish chatterbox Rosenthal manage, following instructions he provides. De Boeldieu himself nobly spurns accompanying them, preferring instead to serve merely as useful decoy. That adventure costs him his life, for von Rauffenstein reluctantly shoots him when the French captain rejects his offer of immediate unconditional surrender.

Taking advantage of darkness and a short lead on pursuers, Rosenthal and Maréchal struggle across Germany to an isolated farm where a German war widow and her little daughter reside. Within sight of the Swiss border, the two fugitives temporarily take shelter with farmwife Elsa, played by Dita Parlo of *L'Atalante* fame, and serenely accepting Lotte, Elsa's only child. The trio spend Christmas together placidly, afterwards the French resuming their accustomed duties. For that duo, crossing the invisible snow-covered line into Switzerland is essential. They must evade patrols and reach real safety.

Maréchal first assures Elsa he will return to her after the war. She, however, knows the truth. Their idyll is merely a happenstance episode with no joyous sequel. The French lieutenant will soon find himself back on a combat mission, perhaps destined to die before it is completed. She will remain on native soil, mournfully tilling it and then harvesting whatever she can produce from the family acreage. Life can only be lived, not planned.

Renoir was uninterested in any heroic or patriotic aspects of war. The pointless absurdity of abandoning one's job, family, and peacetime obligations in order to murder strangers on somebody else's turf is what concerned him here. Shooting in stark black-and-white underscores that theme.

Notable for its caustic screenplay, deftly framed compositions, and skillfully recorded sound, *Grand Illusion* also highlights a magnificently nuanced

performance by Erich von Stroheim as world-weary von Rauffenstein, who, like his French counterpart, recognizes he's part of a dying breed no longer fulfilling a useful function in contemporary society. When his character cuts off the only beautiful flower in Wintersborn, that dreary action encapsulates the passing of Europe's Old Guard.

Informally energetic Marèchal and his companion-in-flight Rosenthal represent the new European. One that is restless, modest, self-centered, earthy, nationalistic and, most discouragingly, totally disconnected from the past. Not necessarily an improvement. Just an inescapable development.

Renoir would further probe the breakdown in society's established rules in his 1939 work, *La règle du jeu* (*The Rules of the Game*), where none of the players follow what might be termed house rules. Here, obedient participants are either killed or alienated while upstarts and outsiders appear to earn at least partial triumphs.

This melancholy drama is much too bleak for teens or children. Hailed at the Brussels World's Fair in 1958 as one of the ten greatest films ever made, *La grande illusion* is a sobering exploration of war's societal costs, blatantly directed at experienced adult audiences.

There are no bonus features on this Janus Films dvd release.