

Section 1

Reassessing Renoir's Aesthetics

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Shooting in Deep Time

The *Mise en Scène* of History in Renoir's Films of the 1930s

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Opening Shots: Approaching Renoir's Style

At the start of *Boudu sauvé des eaux* (1932), immediately after the short, deliberately theatrical preface, there is a typical Renoir opening shot. It begins by fading into a close-up of a bust of Voltaire, the famous Enlightenment freethinker. It then tracks backwards and tilts down to reveal part of the bookshop within which the bust is located before tracking laterally and panning to open up the rest of the space and to reveal Monsieur Lestingois (Charles Granval), the bookshop owner, and his maid, Anne-Marie (Séverine Lerczinska), in each other's arms on the other side of the shop. Renoir's *La Grande Illusion* (1937) also begins with a shot that moves out from a close-up to introduce characters in their socio-spatial context. This time the opening close-up is of a gramophone turntable flanked by two hands. The camera tilts up and pauses on the face of the hero, World War I pilot, Maréchal (Jean Gabin) as he sings along with the record, and then pans right and tracks a short distance laterally to open up the space of the flyers' hut with its casually arranged tables, relaxing, card-playing airmen, and its bar. As the hero returns left, he is allowed to exit the shot as the camera pauses to pick up his squadron leader entering the room from the other side. It then reverses its initial track and pan to follow the squadron leader back to Maréchal behind the gramophone before tracking the other way and panning again to watch the pair as they head out of the hut. The two shots share their camera mobility (the combination of track, tilt, and pan), although, with its toing and froing, that of *La Grande Illusion* is more complex and, at nearly a minute, considerably longer than the *Boudu sauvé des eaux* shot, still

quite long at about 17 seconds. The shots are also joined by the way they open a scene with a close-up of an object that colors our appreciation of what follows: the bust of Voltaire in *Boudu sauvé des eaux* points to the freethinking character and enlightened bourgeois status of Lestingois, while the gramophone in *La Grande Illusion* underscores the essentially peaceful nature of the French flyers' hut. The shots remind us of the director's refusal to separate characters from their social and spatial contexts, one tying Lestingois to his bookshop and the other Maréchal to a context of popular leisure and culture.

We can clearly approach the shots in different ways. We can compare them to classical norms as a way of bringing out the specificity of Renoir's style but at the risk of fetishizing his auteur signature by seeking his difference from others and not his similarities to them. Or, we can compare the shots to each other in an attempt to demonstrate continuities and changes in Renoir's style. We will begin with the former approach. In some ways, the two shots seem to do some of the same work as more conventional and more static establishing shots by presenting the space of the action and locating characters within a broader context. Yet they are also different in important ways for they suggest a different relationship between the camera and the space. While the traditional establishing shot already knows the space it shows and offers a position of totalizing mastery, the Renoir shots only progressively discover the space, suggesting a reality that is not simply there for the camera, but which it must explore. Conventionally, establishing shots are followed by a move to analytical editing. There are moments in the shot from *La Grande Illusion* where such a transition is knowingly avoided. When Maréchal looks right and speaks to someone off screen, for example, there is no cut on a look. When he talks with his superior, there is no transition to shot–reverse shot. Conventional analytical editing combines apparently objective shots with shots that draw us into the film by aligning us with characters' points of view. Renoir's mobile establishing shots are never as distant and never as involved: they achieve what one might call a proximate distance or what Gilberto Perez calls “a sympathy combined with detachment” (1998: 220).

This kind of comparative analysis is undoubtedly very fruitful as long as we remember that Renoir's avoidance of classical norms is not absolute. As Kristin Thompson reminds us, there are sequences in Renoir films like *La Règle du jeu* (1939) where shot–reverse shot or point of view shots can be found. It is not that Renoir's films simply eschew dominant patterns: it is rather than they use them selectively and in a context where they are not the norm. Rather than being a neutral baseline, practices like shot–reverse shot become accented and expressive stylistic choices (Thompson 1988: 218–244; see also O'Shaughnessy 2009: 59–71). If, as Thompson suggests, the specificity of Renoir's style lies in the complex interrelationship between shots rather than in any particular type of shot taken separately, his films may prove recalcitrant to the kind of statistical analysis, deployed by scholars such as Barry Salt, that compares shot lengths, camera distance, and camera mobility between films and between directors (Salt 1983: 243–255). However, even if one remains at the level of the individual shot as unit of analysis, the opening shots from

Boudu sauvé des eaux and *La Grande Illusion* discussed above clearly need to be appreciated in terms of the *relationship* between shot length, camera use, and staging if one is to begin to understand their stylistic choices with some precision.

If we now move to comparing the two shots, we might note that, besides its greater length and more complex camera and figure movement, the *La Grande Illusion* shot is also different in another significant but more elusive way that is connected to the historicity that makes itself felt within it. The shot hovers, one might say, between the war and the prewar period. Through its evocation of peacetime sociability (the gramophone, the card playing, the popular relaxation) and its implicit nostalgia, it seems to look back to a period before the conflict. Through the presence of uniformed airmen, it reminds us of the war. As Maréchal is tracked back and forth in his movements across the room, as he shifts between heading away from the conflict to see Joséphine, the woman he hopes to visit, and back into it to fly a mission, he is literally poised between two different times. His final exit from the shot toward the mission that will see him shot down and captured is an irrevocable passage into history. There is a temporality that we do not find in the shot from *Boudu sauvé des eaux* which is of a stable bourgeois environment that will be severely disrupted in the course of the film but to which the characters can always ultimately return. It is this entry of history into Renoir's style that will form the main focus of this chapter.

Another shot from *Boudu sauvé des eaux*, from just under 37 minutes into the film might also be seen as a signature Renoir shot. It begins by showing the Lestingois



Figure 1.1 The Lestingois couple (Charles Granval and Marcelle Hainia) and Boudu (Michel Simon) seated round the table in *Boudu sauvé des eaux* (Production: Société Sirius (Michel Simon)).

couple and Boudu (Michel Simon) seated round the table as Anne-Marie waits upon them. Rather than occupying the same space as the characters, the camera shows them in long shot, two rooms away, through two door frames, the intervening empty space being lined by books, a piano, and upholstered furniture. When Anne-Marie leaves the shot on the left, the camera tracks laterally to follow her movement, catching her as she traverses the far end of a long corridor and picking her up again as she enters the kitchen, a space this time framed by two windows. Finally, as she comes forward toward the kitchen window, the camera similarly tracks forward to the opposite window, looking at her across the empty space of the courtyard. In some ways, this shot underlines what we have already seen, the location of characters within a broader spatial and social context. It also reminds us of the importance of one of the most famous features of Renoir's *mise en scène* in the 1930s, his staging of action in depth, a formal choice often combined with camera mobility.¹ The use of frames within the frame is a recurrent feature of this kind of staging within his films. Sesonske, one of the foremost analysts of Renoir's style, notes, for example, that of the about 200 shots in *Madame Bovary* (1934) that are not rural exteriors, 40 or so are filmed through some kind of aperture (Sesonske 1980: 156). In *Madame Bovary* these kinds of shots tend to underscore both the heroine's entrapment in her rural, bourgeois lifestyle and her theatrical *mise en scène* of herself. Less implicitly claustrophobic, the shot we have looked at in *Boudu sauvé des eaux* nevertheless underscores the rigidities of bourgeois life as well as that class's self-conscious self-presentation.

There are so many shots in *La Règle du jeu* that deploy similar compositional strategies that it hardly seems to make sense to isolate one. There is nonetheless one I will examine because of its relevance to the main thrust of my argument. It comes during the famed concert party sequence as the chaos builds and the bourgeois collective brought together for the concert dissolves into chaos and individuals and couples pursue their own aims. It begins just under one hour and four minutes into the film when Octave, played by Renoir himself, enters the chateau gun room in the bear costume he has put on for the entertainment. As he walks forward toward the camera, moving from long to medium shot in the process, we see, past his body and through two door frames, both the receding backs of the jealous gamekeeper Schumacher (Gaston Modot) and his flighty wife, Lisette (Paulette Goddard), and figures dressed as ghosts that have descended from the concert stage to move among the audience. At the same time, Monsieur de Saint-Aubin (Pierre Nay), who is attempting to seduce Christine (Nora Grégor), the wife of the host, moves past him to close the door, briefly creating a third plane of action between him and the ghostly figures. Briefly, because, tracking back a little, the camera pans sharply left through about 90 degrees, past a range of hunting trophies, to open up another line of vision and to reveal Christine, hiding behind a cabinet. Octave spins around too late to see Christine and is followed by the tracking, panning camera as he opens the door at the back of the room and begins to exit into a corridor, as another space opens before us. The shot is like and unlike the shot from *Boudu sauvé des eaux*.

It resembles it in its depth staging, its use of intervening frames, and its determination to locate individual actions in social contexts. It differs in at least two important ways. First, it has much greater social density. This shows itself in its staging across different planes, its criss-crossing character movements, its multiple, interconnected actions, its shifting centers of attention and the presence in its background of a social collective, albeit a disintegrating one. With its connecting corridors, its large shared spaces, its multiple entry and exit points, the set of *La Règle du jeu* allows for the repeated *mise en scène* of assembly and disintegration. Second, there is a historicity to the shot in *La Règle du jeu* that is not present in *Boudu sauvé des eaux* but which echoes that found in *La Grande Illusion*. It is signaled most obviously by the presence of the ghostly figures moving among the background crowd: death, the coming war, stalks a society unable or unwilling to see or to face the threat. But death is also present in the shape of all the hunting trophies around the walls. Part of the film's internal memory and foresight, the trophies and soon to be scattered stuffed birds look back to the celebrated hunting sequence, with its implicit reference to the slaughter that has been (World War I) and the one to come.

The *Mise en Scène* of History and the Need to See in Depth

There is a temptation, when examining a film's handling of time, to simply look at how narrative organization handles story time. In the case of *La Règle du jeu*, this might involve an analysis of how a few weeks are condensed into a little under two hours. But such an approach, no matter how valuable, would neglect the way in which *mise en scène* and other elements of the film, including of course dialogue, are used to inscribe the film's events into a much longer-term unfolding. Although the film foregrounds the modern technologies of the radio and the airplane in its nocturnal opening sequence, it quickly introduces a much older technology in the shape of the clockwork automata collected by Robert de La Chesnaye (Marcel Dalio), Christine's husband. Not only are these latter objects strongly associated with the eighteenth century, and thus a time period before the French Revolution, but they would seem to promise the mechanical reproduction of the familiar. *Mise en scène* is thus used to express the tension between change and repetition and between modernity and tradition. The sense that Renoir is inviting us to locate unfolding events within a broader historical unfolding is underscored when all the protagonists adjourn to Robert's seventeenth-century hunting chateau. The chateau is, of course, the icon par excellence of the old aristocratic order. With its hierarchical upstairs-downstairs organization and its Watteau murals (Lourié 1985: 61–66), it would seem to promise the possibility of a flight into an older, more stable social order. The chronological depth built into the props and decor of the film thus invites us to read its *mise en scène* historically and not simply socially. The shot we have been looking at is more complex than anything in *Boudu sauvé des eaux*, not

simply because of its more complicated staging but also because of its composition in deep time. When its camera mobility, figure movement, and depth staging are used to show and track chaos and disintegration, it is implicitly underscoring the impossibility of any restoration of an orderly, hierarchical society.

Because it is composed in deep time and deals with collective dangers, the film calls for a type of spectatorial awareness that its frivolous, self-centered characters cannot deploy. If they perceive threats at all, they perceive them belatedly. In the shot we have been discussing, Octave not only turns *too late* to see Christine, but he also seems blind to the presence, at the back of the shot, of the fascistic Schumacher and the dancing phantoms, and the danger they figure. While the shot demands a reading in terms of a historically threatened collective, the character is only attentive to the personal and to the immediate. If *La Règle du jeu* is a film composed in deep time, it is also one about shallow, inadequate seeing. There is a celebrated shot earlier in the film when, borrowing a hunter's spyglass, Christine inadvertently catches her husband in the arms of his lover, Geneviève (Mila Parély) and assumes that the couple are having an affair, whereas the affair is over and this is a farewell kiss. Jefferson Kline suggests that this shot can be seen as providing an implicit defense of Renoir's *mise en scène*: had Christine had access to the kind of contextualization provided by depth of field, she would not have made the mistake (2010: 42–44). Is not the crucial point that the problem with Christine's perception is its belatedness, that she realizes too late that her husband has betrayed her? The same faulty and tardy perception characterizes the crowd at the concert party. When Schumacher moves among the assembled guests with a loaded weapon, they either fail to see the danger or see it belatedly. The film asks for a breadth and chronological depth of vision that its characters do not possess. For André Bazin, one of the key advantages of depth staging was its capacity to restore the kind of ambiguity to the image that editing and shallow focus cinematography denied by corraling the spectator's attention (1990: 163–165). What is perhaps more interesting in the case of *La Règle du jeu* is the way in which depth staging and camera mobility repeatedly invite the spectator to see more than the characters, thus stressing the fatal spatiotemporal limitations of their vision.

From Bazin to Deleuze

Some of the classic statements on Renoir's 1930s style are those that come from Bazin, either in his posthumously published *Jean Renoir* or in the classic texts gathered in *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma?* In "L'évolution du langage cinématographique," an essay from the latter, he accords Renoir a special place as the prewar precursor of the key post-1940 developments in film style represented by Welles's and Wyler's deep focus, long-take cinematography and by Italian neorealism's rejection of the effects of editing and search for an unpremeditated real (Bazin 1990: 73–78). In the former he

underscores Renoir's visionary status by suggesting that he understood better than anyone else that the screen is best understood neither as a painterly frame nor a theatrical proscenium arch but as a cache, not something that reveals reality, but which hides it, so that what is unseen is as important as what is visible. A natural complement to Renoir's depth staging and its capacity to locate actions in their context, the lateral mobility that is so characteristic of his camera constantly reminds us that the world continues to exist on either side of the frame, that what we are seeing is part of something larger that is hidden from us. In contrast, in an editing-driven style, where each shot is conceived as a separate, independently lit and staged unit, there is no sense of the essential continuity of the world and there is literally nothing to hide. When a character enters the frame, because there is no sense of a reality beyond it, it is as if they are coming from the wings (Bazin 1989: 80–84).

If Bazin's writings are driven by an ontological understanding of realism, a sense that the virtue of Renoir's cinema is to respect the underlying interdependence of the real, Christopher Faulkner's classic analysis locates the director's films within a critical social realism. Looking at *Toni* (1935), Faulkner suggests that most critics have privileged the film's temporal narrative and passionate individual trajectories at the expense of its social density. He locates the latter principally in the spatiality of the film's shots and notably in the capacity of composition in depth, lateral camera mobility, and complex staging to locate individual actions in the contexts that explain them. He takes as an example a shot where Toni (Charles Blavette), the film's eponymous hero, explains to a workmate his desire to marry Josefa (Celia Montalvan), a peasant farmer's daughter, and to start to grow his own wine. As Toni speaks, depth staging allows us to see his fellow workers laboring in the quarry behind and below him. The meaning of the shot is generated neither from Toni's words nor from the image separately, but from the confluence of the two: his desire to become an autonomous wine producer makes sense in the context of his proletarian condition. The shot does not simply passively record the real, it actively analyzes it to reveal its class dimension (Faulkner 1986: 48–51). In a similar way, the systematic depth staging and mobile camera of *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange* (1936) socialize the space of the film's unfolding, linking individuals and their trajectories to a context of class relations (Faulkner 1986: 60–65).

Bazin's analysis of Renoir's style is, as one would expect, full of brilliant insights. Faulkner's helps correct its neglect of the politics of style. But both tend to bypass the way in which the films of the later 1930s are inhabited by history. In his *Jean Renoir*, Bazin gathers together the director's prewar films under the heading "Renoir français," a grouping that smooths out differences between the films that preceded and those that came after 1935, the year when Renoir aligned himself with the Popular Front. In *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma?* his focus is on film history in a narrow sense and not on any broader encounter between it and wider histories. Faulkner rightly reasserts the social dimension of Renoir's work but ties Renoir's socialization of screen space to the spatial dimension of the shot, effectively relegating historicity to the narrative and neglecting what one might call the *mise en scène* of history.

Deleuze's great work on cinema provides a partial corrective to this neglect (see Deleuze 1985). It gives time a central place in its architecture and thus can generate important general insights into how temporality is inscribed in Renoir's *mise en scène*, but it is insufficiently attentive to concrete historical contexts to allow for more detailed analysis of the historicity of the director's image. Deleuze devotes important pages to Renoir's work in his discussion of what he calls the "crystal image." He starts from the observation that cinema has always sought to place a world around its images by tying images of the present to memory images, dream images, and what he calls "world" images. He then suggests that, rather than building outward from the image in this way, cinema can move in the opposite direction, so that the real and the virtual, the past and the present are brought together within a single image, the crystal image. The crystal is essentially constituted, as Deleuze sees it, by the most fundamental operation of time. Time involves a constant splitting of the present, a fissuring of it into two opposing streams, one that launches itself into the future, the other which falls into the past. The crystal image is one that figures this fissuring, holding the actual and the virtual in tension. What above all constitutes the crystal in Renoir's work is the use of depth of field which, in *La Règle du jeu*, for example, allows for a concatenation of frames within the frame and a system of rhymes between masters and servants, living people and clockwork figures, reality and theater that brings the actual and the virtual together within the shot. The image thus captures the fissuring of time. All that is fixed or frozen, the ensemble of ready-made, conformist roles is trapped in the crystal, from which new presents may emerge, bringing the future into being. The theatricality associated with so many of Renoir's films is essential to the crystal's functioning for it allows characters to try on new roles until the right one is found to enter into a new real. Thus, in films as diverse as *Boudu sauvé des eaux*, *The River* (1951), or *Le Carrosse d'or* (1953), characters are able to cast off ready-made, worn-out roles and liberate themselves from dead forms. The same theatricality is present in *La Règle du jeu*, but the film is atypical because of its pessimism and the failure of renewal it figures whereby even agents of apparent transformation like airman André Jurieux (Roland Toutain) remain trapped in the crystal, caught by inert conventions (Deleuze 1985: 92–117).

Deleuze's insights into Renoir's work are brilliant and frustrating in fairly equal measure. Not only do they point to how temporality may be inscribed in the shot, but they also imply that it may emerge, not from any one element in isolation, but from a combination of elements. We have noted how the crystal's capacity to hold different possibilities in tension can most obviously be connected to depth staging and the way it lends itself to complex compositions. Yet, the capacity of characters to enter and leave the crystal, to try on new roles and cast off old ones also points to how figure movement, costume, and decor (elements which we will draw upon later) may give temporal depth to the image. It is, of course, dangerous to read Deleuze too literally. His insights into the functioning of Renoir's films tend to conflate the specific and the general, the concrete and the metaphoric. He makes

depth staging stand in for Renoir's compositional style as a whole, without discussion of other important elements such as lateral camera mobility. Moreover, his analysis seems to refer both to real shots and to a broader, more diffuse sense of how the films frame temporality. Yet, despite these difficulties, his work does show how we might approach the temporal dimension of Renoir's *mise en scène*. Ultimately, the more crucial problem with Deleuze's analysis is his failure to pay real attention to the relationship between the director's films and history despite the central role he allocates to time. It is this inattention to history and the concrete struggles that characterize it that allows him to reduce the shifting politics of Renoir's films to a general awareness within the director's work of the identity between liberty and the collective or individual opening onto the future that comes with an escape from the crystal. In the process, any sense of the specific historicity of his later 1930s film is blurred. Both the pre-Popular Front *Boudu sauvé des eaux* and the Frontist *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange* end with characters breaking out of a situation or social frame, or escaping from the crystal as Deleuze would put it, but Boudu's escape from bourgeois respectability is hardly equivalent to Lange's flight from justice after he has murdered his boss to defend a workers' cooperative. The contrast between the two films' *mise en scène* of history needs to be taken further.

Embedded Framings, Shifting Frames

One way to approach the way that Renoir's films open themselves up (or not) to history is to focus on the frames within the frame that depth composition so frequently produces. There is a beautiful long take in *Boudu sauvé des eaux* where, making full use of depth staging and the connectivity of the film's set, the camera captures an interaction between Boudu and Anne-Marie. As the shot begins, and with the kind of dynamic staging and figure movement that so marks Renoir's films of the period, Boudu enters the foreground of the image from off screen left while Anne-Marie advances from the kitchen area in the back of the shot, crosses the intervening corridor and enters the dining room where Boudu is to be found, even as the ever mobile tramp moves into the middle ground of the image before stopping in the kitchen doorway. Anne-Marie retraces her steps toward the kitchen, only to find herself pinned by Boudu as he swings from the door frame. She breaks free and enters the kitchen. Boudu then presses his back against one side of the door frame and his legs against the other, blocking the door and suspending himself above the ground. Although he asserts his nonconformism (and masculine physicality) by defying the normal rules of domestic space, he is doubly held, not simply by the kitchen door frame, but also by the wider frame of the double doors of the dining room. The shot can be seen as condensing much of the dynamics of a film whose core lies in a collision between social convention and asocial "nature" as played out over Boudu's disorderly body and the bourgeois interior of the Lestingois house. Boudu can challenge the frame by scattering objects and dirtying

the clean even as the frame seeks to capture him, but the collision is essentially a static one. When he upends the boat carrying his marriage party, floats away, and re-dons a tramp costume stolen from a scarecrow, he is returning to an earlier asocial state, not changing society or moving history on.

There is also a moment where a physical and metaphorical frame is directly challenged in *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange*. It comes after the corrupt boss, Batala (Jules Berry), has fled the scene and the workers have decided to form a cooperative with the consent of young Monsieur Meunier (Henri Guisol) the son of the company's principal creditor. One of the film's mobile, virtuoso long shots sets things in motion. This celebrated shot begins by framing the advertising panel that Batala has placed over the window of young Charles (Maurice Baquet), the printworks' delivery "boy" as first Lange (René Lefèvre) and then the concierge (Marcel Levesque) enter the shot. Leaving the pair, it cranes diagonally up and pans right to show two groups of workers leaning out of the printworks' first-floor windows, watching events below, before tracking back left to show another set of workers at another window. It then cranes down and tracks back as first young Monsieur Meunier and then workers and other people enter an increasingly crowded shot. Finally, there is a cut to a camera position inside Charles's room, looking toward the window as the advertising panel is removed, revealing the watching group, some of the courtyard, and the doorway of the laundry business where Charles's girlfriend, Estelle (Nadia Sibirskaja), works. Several sets of hands come together to lift Estelle through the laundry door and propel her toward Charles.



Figure 1.2 Inside Charles's (Maurice Baquet) room in *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange* (Production: Obéron (André Halley des Fontaines)).

Clearly, some of what we see in *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange* echoes what we have seen in *Boudu sauvé des eaux*, notably in the way the second shot shows the same fondness for composition in depth and for frames within frames (the laundry door caught through Charles's window) in the shot. But there is also something radically different going on. The frame itself is no longer immutable in either its physical or its symbolic dimensions but, becoming an object of dispute between the workers and their boss, it is opened up to collective intervention. History enters the frame, one might say, as the frame enters history. At the same time, the workers enter Renoir's cinema, not as an explanatory part of the social context, as in the shot from *Toni* so perceptively analyzed by Faulkner (see above), but as a collective, transformative actor. The first of the two shots from *Lange* shows this well. As the camera cranes and pans to join *Lange* to the workers at the windows, and each cluster of workers to the next, it effects a bringing together that testifies to an emergent solidarity. A Bazinian understanding of the shot might emphasize how it underscored the ontological unity of the real by refusing the fragmentation implied by editing. A more political reading would note how, rather than simply exploring something that already existed, it was registering the movement of history, an emergence of the new in the midst of the old that demanded contextualization in the sociopolitical struggles of the Popular Front era. If one looked at the shot from a purely formal perspective, one might emphasize the elegance of the arabesque performed by the mobile camera. Yet, its complexity, the way it moves laterally and vertically to connect worker to intellectual and group to group, has its roots in the entry of the collective into the space of the action.

This capacity of the mobile camera to register the collective nature of action and to participate in the emergence of a group protagonist makes itself repeatedly felt in *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange*, *La Grande Illusion*, and *La Marseillaise* (1938). In the latter film, there is a nearly two-minute long, virtuoso crane shot which shows the collective singing of the *Marseillaise* which provides a perfect example. It begins by tracking forward to foreground a group of children high in the branches of a tree where a banner hangs honoring the Marseilles volunteers leaving for Paris. It leaves the children, cranes down and left to pick out a woman in the crowd giving a drink to soldiers around her. It continues leftward, bringing the woman into close-up even as it moves past her, showing other faces in the crowd, pausing to show a volunteer as he kisses several women, then moving on to find the soloist who is leading the singing of the anthem. Tracking past him, it moves on to pick out Bomier (Edmond Ardisson), one of the film's heroes, as his mother helps him with his pack, then sinks to her knees in prayer. Moving still further left, it shows other leading characters as they stand to attention and sing, even as more women fall to their knees. Then it reverses direction and tracks back right as the crowd join in a final enthusiastic chorus. Again it finds Bomier, previously skeptical about the song, now singing at the top of his lungs beside his mother. Finally, it remains still as the people themselves begin to move, the volunteers and some women exiting the shot to the right, other women turning their backs to camera to watch them go, Bomier's mother remaining stationary, supported by her housemaid. As the



Figure 1.3 Bomier (Edmond Ardisson) and his mother (Marthe Marty) in *La Marseillaise* (Production: CGT (Confédération générale du travail), Société de production et d'exploitation du film *La Marseillaise*).

shot fades out, another shot fades in, this one with a static camera showing the volunteers marching from back of shot, forward, and past the lens. For the few seconds of the fade, it is as if the marching men were walking through and past the stationary body of Bomier's mother.

When we examine this virtuoso shot, we might be struck by how its length (almost two minutes) and complex camera movement allow the whole sequence of the group farewell to be encapsulated in a single shot. Probing further, we might note how, by refusing the fragmentation associated with analytical editing, it ties individuals and small groups to a larger context, with the mobility of the camera allowing it to move close to individual emotions without ever allowing this proximity to detach the personal from the collective, as a more traditional close or medium shot might. Yet to do the shot full justice one would need to consider it dynamically and not statically. It is discovering the collective just as the collective discovers itself as a dynamic force. It is not simply noting that the personal is articulated within something larger; it is registering the transformation of the framework within which lives are led as they open onto history. The way the camera pauses on individual interactions before moving on makes tangible how these frames are expanding. The shot in *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange* where the advertising hoarding is removed and Charles reconnected with Estelle by the collective showed a similar reframing whereby the private and personal were opened onto the collective and the love story was reworked by a progressive politics. The difference, in the case of *La Marseillaise*, is that a whole people are taking note of their power. No mere stylistic flourish,

the length and mobility of the shot are directly linked to the need to track the dimensions of this emergent historical actor. The historicity of the shot is underscored by the closing fade that allows the newly formed volunteer army to literally march through the image, even as Bomier's mother, too old to participate in the reinvention of the nation, stays behind, trapped in the crystal as Deleuze might have put it.

From a formalist point of view, the bravura camera mobility of *La Marseillaise* or *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange* might seem exactly similar to that in *La Règle du jeu*. Yet if we pay attention to the relationship between camera and characters, the differences quickly appear. There is what one might call a solidarity between the camera and the human figures in the former two films: just as the camera is driven to connect, so the human figures are moved to come together. The camera takes stock of the power of the collective as the collective itself comes to self-awareness. In *La Règle du jeu* the dynamics are very different, notably during the concert party sequence. There, even as the camera struggles to keep track of things, the characters all pull in their own selfish directions. At the same time, and as we noted, the camera's ability to see in width and depth runs directly counter to the characters' short-sightedness. The solidarity between camera and character has gone.

Historicity as Uncertainty

If we are to understand Renoir's style of the later 1930s in terms of its *mise en scène* of historicity, then we must be attentive to moments when the world figured on screen literally begins to move or to change its contours. These are shots in some of Renoir's films of this period when the movement of history does indeed seem to become tangible. In *La Marseillaise* the shot which fades in over the stationary form of Bomier's mother is one of a cluster which come in close succession within which the volunteers move through and out of the image, either advancing diagonally past the camera or moving laterally across the screen. Shots of surging groups accompany the battle for the royal palace later in the film and shots where the volunteer army moves past the camera return at the end of the film when the soldiers march toward their counter-revolutionary foe at Valmy. If virtuoso camera mobility seems destined to trace the coming together of a historical actor, these slowly panning or stationary shots register the moment when that collective actor begins to act, so that the movement of the world makes the camera's own mobility redundant. Unremarkable from a formal point of view, they nonetheless form an essential element of the film's *mise en scène* of history. Something similar might be said about *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange*. Scholars of the film understandably tend to accentuate the staging in depth and lateral camera mobility that bring the courtyard set to life as the space of the collective, with particular attention being paid to the bravura circling pans that accompany Batala's murder. Little has been said, however, about the plunging tracking shot from the speeding car that

fades in over the final of these pans just as it reaches the fallen Batala, a superimposition that suggests that the way forward is over the capitalist's body (Golsan 2007–2008: 40). This forward movement, an acceleration of history, is extended by shots of and from the speeding car at the beginning and end of the film. However, far from developing any sense of a predictable, linear development, these shots are highly ambiguous. They simultaneously connote progress (the triumph over capitalism) and flight (the purely local nature of this triumph and the need to escape the law). When we observe the entry of history into Renoir's films this should not be taken to imply a teleological understanding of a predictable historical unfolding. What enters the films when they open themselves to history is an uncertainty driven by the co-presence of competing possibilities.

There is a rather tiresome schoolteacher character in *La Grande Illusion* who earns the mockery of Maréchal by repeatedly drawing attention to the age of the castle camp to which, in the latter part of the film, the repeat escapees are transferred. On the surface, this is one of those little details without importance that serve to flesh out a scene or differentiate characters. At a deeper level, however, it points to the capacity of dialogue and *mise en scène* to inscribe the film's action in a longer-term unfolding. In so far as the castle evokes the feudal era, it suggests that European history risks stalling or falling backwards. In so far as it embodies military discipline, surveillance, and a loss of freedom, it suggests a potentially authoritarian future. It thus represents the potential collapse of any progressive vision of French and European history. When de Boeldieu (Pierre Fresnay), the aristocratic French man, sacrifices himself so that Maréchal, the proletarian, and Rosenthal (Marcel Dalio), the bourgeois Jew, can escape, the film is suggesting that a progressive, egalitarian history may still be rescued, not as something inevitable, but as a possibility whose fragility is encapsulated in the shots of the two small figures climbing down from the massive battlements amidst the darkness. We get a similar sense of fragility when, at the end of the film, we see the same two figures, bearers of the film's implicit message of egalitarian internationalism, escaping in extreme long shot across a snow-covered field to Switzerland. The snow is a brilliantly simple way to suggest a border that is and is not there and a history whose ultimate shape is yet to be determined. Moving through time, the characters are simultaneously heading back into the war and into a possible future where borders no longer separate. The Deleuzian account invites us to read this last scene as an escape from the crystal in which, bearers of outdated values, de Boeldieu and von Rauffenstein (Erich von Stroheim), his German counterpart, remain trapped. But the point of the film in general, and the last sequence in particular, is surely the profound uncertainty of the future. As the characters struggle through the snow, they are literally walking in virgin territory. The same could be said of the final shots of *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange* when we see Lange and Valentine (Florelle) escape along the beach into Belgium. Theirs are the first footsteps on the sand, for the future is as yet unwritten.

Despite the *mise en scène* of indeterminacy in the films of the Popular Front era, there is still a sense that history is something that can be made by the human

figures. In this respect it is no accident that *La Marseillaise*, *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange*, *Les Bas-fonds* (1936), and *La Grande Illusion* all end with human groups walking into the future. By the time of *La Bête humaine* (1938), something fundamental has changed. The film famously begins with a sequence showing the locomotive driven by Lantier (Jean Gabin) and Pecqueux (Julien Carette) as it plunges down the line from Paris to Le Havre, with the most impressive shots being those taken looking straight ahead by a camera attached to the side of the locomotive. The sequence would seem to place the workers in control of their destiny. The rest of the *mise en scène* of the film shows that this is not so: the railway is a presence in almost every sequence, no longer as something that the workers control, but as a driving force external to them from which they cannot escape. This makes itself felt in the way in which interiors are made to connect to the outside world, in typical Renoir fashion, by shots through apertures or in which exterior locations are chosen within railway yards or where the railway is a visual presence. There is a telling shot immediately after the hero has murdered Séverine (Simone Simon), the woman whom he loves, where he is seen walking in a befuddled state between the rails of the railway line, as if his path was already mapped out for him. The closing shot of the film, after he has killed himself by jumping from his locomotive, is of Pecqueux, his fireman, walking along the tracks with others who have dismounted from the train. Whereas characters in the other films were seen advancing into uncertainty, here the future is already charted, a direction they must follow but have not shaped. The same closing down of possibilities is of course seen in the final frames of *La Règle du jeu*. As the assembled guests leave the chateau terrace after the marquis has told them of the unfortunate accident that has befallen Jurieux, the aviator, we see the shadows of the characters move along the chateau wall. Representatives of a society unable to renew itself or to face up to external threat, they become phantoms, visual manifestations of their own lack of a future.

There is an astute piece by Jean Douchet (1996) in which he discusses the importance of windows and doors in Renoir's films, suggesting, essentially, that by looking onto something different the window lends itself to a mental passing through, while the door, a space of physical movement, constantly lends itself to real transitions. What Douchet does not discuss, no doubt because they are so rare, are those moments when windows, or their equivalent, are turned into improvised passageways and imagined possibilities are turned into concrete realities. The sequence in *La Grande Illusion* when Maréchal and Rosenthal pass through the battlements, turning an observation post into an escape route and opening up a space of freedom where no such thing seemed possible is one such moment. Something similar happens twice in *La Marseillaise*: first, when we see Cabri (Edouard Delmont), the peasant on trial for killing a pigeon, clamber to freedom through the courthouse window, the frame of which then becomes a vantage point from which to see his escaping body, as he heads for the hills and his initial experience of revolutionary comradeship: second, when Bomier, who has been looking through his house window lamenting his



Figure 1.4 Lantier's (Jean Gabin) future already mapped out for him, in *La Bête humaine* (Production: Paris Film Production (Robert Hakim)).

inability to take part in the momentous events outside, is seen through the same window, a few seconds later, running to join his comrades, having moved into the space of his desire. These shots, although few in number, suggest something more general about the spatiotemporality of the Popular Front films. If the films are constantly connecting inside and outside, it is not because the world is a stable, unified whole that must be shown as such but because it is uneven and in flux and a movement through can mean a passage into something qualitatively different. Unevenness is implicit in the whole spatial organization of a film like *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange* where first Lange's bedroom, where he writes his Arizona Jim stories, and later the courtyard below are constituted as spaces whose utopian possibilities and their limits are directly related to their discontinuity with what lies beyond them. It is the loss of this unevenness that marks a shift in *La Bête humaine*: the omnipresence of the railway through windows or doors suggests a closing down of the space of the imagination and the loss of the possibility of a transformative passage through.

The Loss of Solidity

One of the consequences of the opening of the films to history is that the on-screen world loses its solidity and fixity. We see this, for example, when the characters in *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange* reopen Charles's window and change the spatial

relationships of the setting. We may also note how, in the same film, the iconography of the western (the map of Arizona, the cowboy apparel, etc.) that is initially restricted to Lange's room spreads into Batala's office, the courtyard, and, via the distribution of the Arizona Jim comic book, into the broader space of Paris. The decor of the film becomes fluid to permit a progressive expansion of the ideals behind the worker's cooperative. A similar flux is found in the *mise en scène* of *Les Bas-fonds*: when it begins, its hero, Pépel (Jean Gabin), a thief, is part of the misery of the lower depths while the man who will become his friend, the baron (Louis Jouvet) is associated with the spacious opulence of the ministry where he works, his house, and the casino where he likes to gamble. By the end of the film, the baron will have moved to the lower depths, Pépel will have chosen to walk away from them and the baron's luxurious furniture will have been carried away by the bailiffs. Looking back, the baron sums up his life as a series of costume changes over which he has had no control. *Les Bas-fonds* lacks the political clarity of *Lange* but is at its most interesting when, in contrast to an immobilizing social realism which would tie characters to social roles and locations, it loosens their bonds to open up the possibility of transformation. As we might expect, there is a different temporal logic inscribed in the decor and props of *La Bête humaine*. Apart from the ubiquitous railway with its predetermined routes, we may note that major props all seem to pin characters to a past that reaches out to shut off the future. Thus, in the middle of Séverine's mantelpiece we find a photograph of her as a child with Grandmorin (Jacques Berlioz), the obscene capitalist patriarch. The ring he has given her years before is the trigger that launches her husband Roubaud's (Fernand Ledoux) homicidal rage while the penknife she buys Roubaud becomes Grandmorin's murder weapon. After the murder, Roubaud hides Grandmorin's pocket watch and wallet under a floorboard, getting the wallet out to retrieve money when gambling debts start to build up, getting both out after Séverine's murder, using his penknife to lift up the floorboard, unaware that she lies dead on the bed, killed by another knife. Finally seeing her, he stands in the door frame with Grandmorin's watch dangling in his hand, a physical manifestation of the film's temporality. The way in which objects keep tying the characters to a corrupt and violent past serves to remind us how regression is embedded in the physical fabric of the film. As if to underscore this, the final, fateful rail journey replays the *mise en scène* of the heroic opening sequence with its forward-plunging tracking camera shots, but this time the journey from Le Havre to Paris is the reverse of the earlier one. History is going nowhere.

Conclusion

There is something deeply paradoxical about dominant understandings of Renoir's films of the 1930s. The more the films are located in the history of film style, the more history is excluded from them. At the same time, the history of style being

driven by the search for marks of difference, the films' own stylistic diversity becomes flattened as certain distinctive features (especially depth staging, long takes, and lateral camera mobility) become fetishized. My account here does not seek to be entirely revisionist, not least because the features classically associated with Renoir do indeed make up some of the core of his style. However, what I have sought to show is that, when we move away from the history of style to something much larger, we do note that something significant changes in the films' style as history enters their frame, opening them up to the *mise en scène* of competing historical possibilities and challenging them to trace the emergence of a collective actor. Although I have been partly drawn to bravura shots, I have also sought to highlight the role attention to the mundane and neglected (to staging, props and decor, static camera shots, etc.) can play in stylistic analysis, not least when we recognize that an approach to style needs to consider how different types of shot and different elements of *mise en scène* work in combination. Attention to the mundane rather than the bravura might seem to distract from the exhilaration that Renoir's filmmaking so often produces. However, I would suggest that our exhilaration can be even greater if we are attentive to the type of stylistic transformation that occurs when his films open up to history and the world loses its reassuring yet deadening solidity.

Note

- 1 The shot in *Boudu sauvé des eaux* is able to take place only because the floor of the Lestingois house was built by Jean Castanyer and Hugues Laurent as a single connected set and not as a series of separate rooms to be conjoined through editing. It thus looks forward to *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange*, a film whose celebrated staging around a courtyard, also built as a single set by Jean Castanyer, allows for the film's consistent recourse to composition in depth, shots connecting separate spaces, both interior and exterior, frequent framings through doors and windows and, with the aid of camera mobility, constant reframings that open up new axes of visibility. Scenes in the chateau of *La Règle du jeu* take the same pattern to its highest pitch of bravura brilliance. In the same way as the staging and camera mobility in *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange* are possible only due to the unified set, those in *La Règle du jeu* are tightly dependent on the connectedness of the ground floor of the chateau set that Eugene Lourié built as a single unit in the Pathé studios in Paris (Lourié 1985: 61–63).

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