

PODCAST INTERVIEW

Bob Hudson on Jean Renoir's *Grand Illusion*

Chad Turner

Clearly Underrated Podcast

SUMMARY

Podcast interview, originally published on 11 November 2020, the 102nd anniversary of the Armistice. Bob Hudson, editor-in-chief of *Lingua Romana*, has taught *Grand Illusion* annually to two decades worth of undergraduates between UCLA and BYU. The transcript that follows is that of the full interview and is published with permission from Chad Turner and the Clearly Underrated podcast.

Chad Turner (*Clearly Underrated*): As we dive in, Bob, can you briefly explain the historical significance of French film [...] from the onset of moving pictures and film up to WWII?

Bob Hudson (*Lingua Romana*): When you mention the onset of film up to WWII, it's important to recognize that "onset" actually happens in France. Of course, Thomas Edison had created his kinetoscope in the United States. However, the Lumière Brothers, based out of Lyon, were inspired by their father, who was a commercial photographer and something of an artist himself and who had gone to the United States to the World's Fair and seen the kinetoscope – and he was really concerned with them getting that image "out of the box." He saw this as one of the limitations with Edison's machine, that it can only be viewed by one person at a time; and, if you want a cinematic experience as a sort of a communal experience, they had to project that image so that audiences could enjoy it at the same time. So, film starts then in France in 1895 [...].

So, the Lumière Brothers begin making their 50-second vignettes, using 17-meter reels of film stock that they also manufactured. At this point, while they're publicly showing these shorts – as a novelty – they still don't have the idea of making narrative pictures. That was taken up by Georges Méliès, an illusionist turned filmmaker. If you've seen the Scorsese film *Hugo* (2011), he does a really good job of telling this early history of film (with Lumière and Méliès), and then showing how at the outbreak of WWI, which is the subject of *Grand Illusion*, that people didn't have a lot of time for film. It was, to quote Gertrude Stein, a "Lost Generation." There was a lot of turmoil happening in Europe, especially in France, which was the "home court" for a lot of the warfare of WWI. Serial films start around then (Max Linder, *Fantômas* with Feuillade and Irma Vep).

Renoir had cut his teeth on silent film, but he's also one of the first to adopt sound in France. After WWI, France enters back in the scene in the late 20s by adopting sound, and especially at the beginning of the 30s, with figures such as Pagnol, Carné and René Clair – these major figures who are the French pioneers in sound. And they lead us into the period when WWII was imminent, when Hitler had already begun his onslaught in Europe with the Third Reich; we knew we were going headlong into another war and film was forced to respond to that.

So, to summarize and return to your question, what France was doing (in film pre-WWII): You have invention. You have this WWI moment where things shift to Italy and to Germany, or things shift to the United States, then it eventually returns to France in the early 30s with sound. And the 30s really are, for myself and a lot of people, the golden age of a French film – if you want to talk about a decade that is “clearly underrated,” that would be the 1930s in France.

CT: And the film that we’re talking about today, *Grand Illusion*, stands out even amongst the films in that decade, I think. Jean Renoir, the director of the film, you mention, had done some silent films as well. This is a very interesting topic. He had been a soldier in WWI. Is there any additional light you can shed on why you think Renoir decided to make a film about WWI [...] right at the dawn of the Second World War?

BH: There are a lot of places we could go with this one. But Renoir himself, as you mention, was a veteran of WWI. In fact, he was a pilot, and he’d been shot down, and he would have an injury in his hip, where he was shot, that would gangrene [...] and he watched a lot of film while he was convalescing. Pierre-Auguste Renoir, his father, was a very famous impressionist painter, and Jean Renoir grew up between Montmartre and Cagnes and all the different places that his father was painting. So, he was surrounded by this intellectual world of the *belle époque*, as well as this literary world. And he was an artist himself. He painted pottery. His big thing was to paint and fire porcelain and pottery. But, while he was convalescing from this hip wound, one of the ways he spent his time, being bedridden, was watching movies. He would have people bring in reels a film. He would have people go out and purchase movies for him. He fell in love with moving pictures, and decided that’s what he wanted to do.

To answer your question more directly about why he would make a film about WWI on the brink of WWII, he kind of knew, as everyone did, that war was imminent. He knew that Hitler was coming, and he took an optimistic view of what the war could be. He saw the positives that could come out of war. And one of the things he wanted to show with this film was, if we will forget nationalism, if we will forget the class structure system, if we will forget linguistic barriers and religious barriers, and all of these man-made barriers, all these man-made borders that separate human beings, then we might have a chance for humanity coming out of war. So he made this film, almost as a prescriptive film, to show us a model that had been successful in WWI, which he calls “almost a war of gentlemen,” where you have German and Belgian and French and Russian and English soldiers getting along pretty well in prisoner of war camps. Hitler is coming to ruin the world, but if he doesn’t succeed and we come out of this on the other side, maybe we’ll learn the lessons we didn’t learn the first time and realize that nationalism – at least this intensely jingoistic nationalism – isn’t something that helps us, it’s something that hinders us as humanity and that separates us from other people, rather than drawing us together. So, I think it was a film that showed his optimism that we could come out of war having learned the lessons of war.

CT: I love the word humanity. This is a film that is very, very human, and it’s an interesting film. It has dialog in French, in German, English, as you mentioned. It portrays soldiers from all walks of life, from whether it’s linguistically, geographically, religion, class, race, and that’s really a central theme throughout, is sort of showing or illustrating those differences and also explaining why we need to break down the barriers there that are man-made or fake barriers. And that’s a point that’s repeated over and over in the film. Along with that, what are some of the other key themes that you think emerge from *Grand Illusion*?

BH: Just sticking with the title, even the idea of what is illusory. The title comes from a 1909 book by Norman Angell called *The Great Illusion*, which is basically a pacifist treaty that says that the ends never justify the means in warfare – that whatever we gain from war, cannot compensate for the loss of life and the damage that we do to humanity. So, one of the “big illusions,” one of the big themes is that war is ever worth it, that duty is duty. When Von Rauffenstein shoots down Boëldieu, he tells him, “Le devoir est le devoir,” duty is duty. And that that would be an illusion for Jean Renoir. The term “illusion” shows up in the screenplay twice, the first time when they suggest that the war will be over soon; so, it’s another illusion that we’ll have “a short war.” Another time, later, that this will be the end of all wars, that we’re fighting “the war to end wars.” You know, that’s a big quote, since that’s the way they recruited a lot of people for WWI. Once again, “Tu te fais des illusions,” you’re deluding yourself. So, what is illusory? This is the big theme. In fact, even the border at the end and that beautiful scene when the German soldiers decide not to shoot at Maréchal and Rosenthal as they have crossed over into Switzerland. They say, “There’s the Swiss border, don’t shoot.” But’s covered with snow. You can’t see where the Swiss border is. So, even the idea of a border is illusory.

CT: It’s such an important theme in this film and that last scene, for whatever reason, just is so poignant for me. It’s repeated all throughout the film, but for whatever reason, when you get to the very end and they say that, they say, “Oh, we can’t shoot them down, they’ve crossed into Switzerland.” They’re across the border, and it’s a snow-covered landscape. There’s no way to really understand or know where the border is. And it just hits home that a man-made construct like the border reinforces all of the other man-made constructs that Renoir illustrates throughout the film. Are there any other scenes, now that we’re starting to dive deep into the film, that really strike you as you watch *Grand Illusion*?

BH: Yeah, there definitely are. But I want to say another word about borders first. If you just do a little bit of research, what’s pretty interesting about the film is that the fortress, the Wintersborn prisoner of war camp, the officers’ camp, the citadel is actually the Haut-Koenigsbourg château, which is now a cultural site you can visit today – and, it’s in France! Likewise, when the German soldier comes up to Elsa’s window and asks the distance to Wolfisheim, she responds in German 12 kilometers, and if you look at a map today, it’s actually in France, too. Both the camp they’re escaping and Elsa’s village where they escape are both in modern-day France. So, I think it’s really interesting that you even have this idea of the fluidity of borders, even since the film was made, and since WWI and WWII both ended. It’s pretty striking.

But when you ask for a scene that’s especially poignant, I think of two juxtaposed scenes – so, a sequence of scenes. One that is just iconic – and I think is so beautiful and so well fulfilled by the end of the film – is when you have De Boëldieu (played by Pierre Fresnay) and Von Rauffenstein (played by Erich von Stroheim), sitting together near a window sill in Wintersborn, and there’s this geranium that Von Rauffenstein has carefully kept alive that’s separating them. It’s just framed so well. And that’s something that that Renoir is so well known for, his mobile framing, and also his ability to sort of use an object as his pivot to frame against. So, you have this geranium separating these two men who have great posture, whose mannerisms all show their nobility, who are switching effortlessly between English, German and French. You even find out in their conversation that they had even dated the same woman back in Paris at one time. But the tenor of their conversation is so different. Von Rauffenstein, who is the more traditional German character, sees that all traditional values are being corrupted, even diseases that used to belong to

the nobility are found now in the working class. And he calls it “un joli cadeau de la Révolution française,” a beautiful gift of the French Revolution. Whereas you have De Boëldieu – whose name testifies of his nobility, *De Boëldieu* – who says that this is a good thing, that no matter what comes out of this war, whether the Germans win or the French win, it will be the end of the *Von Rauffensteins* and the *De Boëldieus*. So, you have that sort of stilted, informal conversation between the two of them that cuts and transitions quickly to Maréchal and Rosenthal. Rosenthal, who’s probably richer than both of the aristocrats we’ve seen in the previous scene, is still huddled low and talking about his family’s pride, and if they offer gifts, and if he brags about his possessions in France that his family’s been able to buy, it’s because, as he says, “Jehovah has given us a fair dose of pride.” And you have Maréchal, who is like, “I could care less about the religion and the religious aspect of it all. I just know you’ve been a good friend!” And, the way they’re huddled together in this tightly framed shot, just sort of carrying on like two buddies, as opposed to the stilted conversation we seen before, shows some of these illusions, but also shows these people, these human beings, coming together at a time of war – people who normally probably wouldn’t talk to each other have become friends, have established a meaningful relationship as prisoners of war.

CT: What we’ll shift to talk about now is why this film, among certain people, has become iconic and has been listed as among their favorites. I know that you are on record as saying that this is one of your three favorite French films, the other two being *Hiroshima mon amour* and *Amélie*. Orson Welles, at one point declared that if he were to only take two films on the ark, this would be one of them. (Interestingly enough, he didn’t say what the other one would be.) But, this film rates really well with film connoisseurs, with people who study film; it’s ranked pretty highly on lists of world cinema. But outside of that, I don’t feel like it’s as widely viewed. Do you think that that the *Grand Illusion* is in some sense still underrated, despite all the wonderful things that have been said about it, particularly by film critics? Has it reached a wide enough audience? Is it really where it should be in terms of a historic film?

BH: No, I think it definitely fits in the category of “clearly underrated,” despite the critical praise and acclaim that it has received simply because I don’t think enough people are watching it. I know when I teach my cinema class every year at BYU, it’s almost always the first time anyone’s ever heard of the film, let alone seen it. So, yeah, I think it’s underrated, because not enough people are seeing it. You know, it was only in 1999 that Rialto bought the distribution rights for to the United States and Criterion didn’t produce enough copies in their original release that same year. So, not enough copies are floating around. [...] So, people know about it. People have read about it. [If you read] the BFI *Sight and Sound* greatest films list. Or if you look at what Leonard Maltin or Siskel and Ebert have said about this film, or reaching back like you said, Orson Welles or the *Cahiers du Cinéma* group, everybody has unanimous praise for this film, but not a lot of people have seen it. So, we need to find a way, hopefully, through the Criterion Channel or through different streaming services, for people to see this movie and for it to get enough critical mass of people talking about it that people come back and watch it because it has stayed, as you said, very, very fresh and very pertinent, even today.

CT: Yeah, if that’s not enough of a plug, one of the things that does it for me is the fact that this film was essentially declared Cinematic Public Enemy No. 1 by Joseph Goebbels of the Third Reich during the Nazi order. And it was banned in in Vichy France, and then the Germans actually tried to destroy every single print. This was a film that Goebbels, in particular, wanted to

erase from off the map. So, if nothing else, you have all the acclaim you mention, but also so much opposition. I think that is telling as well. As an interesting transition we alluded to earlier, you talked about some of the magnificent framing, the way that Renoir set up his shots. This was a film that was released in 1937, but you watch it today, and something about it feels incredibly crisp. It looks good. The dialog is great. Everything about this just feels like such a well-done film, and it does not feel like it's from 1937. How much of that do you think is the cinematography? How much of it is the script, the story and the themes? What is it about this film that makes it still feel so special, even now we're getting close to 80 years later.

BH: Renoir was someone who was always ahead of his time. When the French New Wave hits in 1959, you have Truffaut and Bazin looking back and saying, this was the first *auteur*, this is the first one who took control, wielding the camera like it was his pen and writing cinematographically. Cinematography is something the textbook that I teach from, *Film Art* by Bordwell and Thompson, highlights Renoir for, particularly his mobile framing. [...] Every time you watch this film, it feels fresh, because everybody does mobile framing now, but he was really the first one to experiment with it significantly, and he still stands as the model for mobile framing.

People watch it now, and it kind of has the feel and even the pacing of a modern film in that way. And then thematically, you also get a lot that feels remarkably modern. You mentioned that Nazi propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels wanted to eradicate this film from the earth, and he almost succeeded. One interesting thing is that Renoir, himself, kind of assumed this would be his great unknown masterpiece, because so many of the existing prints [...] were butchered and spliced together into edits that didn't resemble the film he made at all. But after the fall of the Third Reich, American troops were doing cleanup efforts in Munich, and there was an American soldier, a female American soldier, who found an original, in-the-can, unedited version of this film. When that happened, Jean Renoir went on a worldwide tour. He had already left France during WWII, and had established himself in Beverly Hills, in Hollywood, and was making English-language films. But when this happens, he goes on a world tour in 1958 showing this film to audiences, because people, again, had heard about it, but nobody had seen it. What was so interesting about 1958 in the United States? That's when Vietnam was really heating up, and he was aware of that, and that's when in France, the New Wave was starting up, and he knew he had something special. He knew he had something that was ahead of its time, but he also knew he had something pertinent. So, when audiences saw that in Hollywood, in New York, in Paris, they realized the mastery of the art form and also the thematic pertinency of the film that still works.

And I think it still works today, for the same reasons. You know, we have rarely been as polarized, not just in the United States but in the Western world, between left and right, between looking at differences rather than looking at similarities. So, I think it's a film that we can watch today and still learn from. It's 80 years old, but humanity hasn't grown enough that this film is outmoded or outdated. The film is still very, very pertinent. I think that's both the wonder of the film and a little bit the tragedy of our lack of progress all wrapped into one.

CT: On that note, I'm thinking of one moment where Maréchal has just been transferred to the château-prison. There's a black soldier there who is trying to show Maréchal a painting and Maréchal totally ignores him. There are so many moments like that – whether it's race, class, religion – Renoir didn't mince words, so to speak. He was very clear and spread things out on the table, showing both the current failings of humanity but also the hope that exists. I think you also

see a lot of that in the character of De Boëldieu, whose reactions show that hope that I think Renoir had for what could happen if people realized some of the things that he was talking about and corrected some of those issues.

BH: Yeah, I think that scene with the black soldier – actually played by the Franco-Algerian actor Habib Benglia (who also appears in another clearly underrated masterpiece *Les enfants du Paradis*) – who’s listed in the screenplay as “Le Sénégalais,” is remarkable as a socio-historical document, as proof of racially mixed battalions in WWI. It’s also pretty interesting to see that in France, a lot of 1930s films have black characters, when you wouldn’t really have that type of integration in Hollywood until much later. Still, I do want to defend Maréchal’s character (played by the great Jean Gabin, who’s just amazing here). They are planning an escape at that time after all; so, I want to give him the benefit of the doubt that his disinterestedness in the Senegalese soldier’s artwork might be chalked up to the simple fact that they wanted their escape plan to be as tight as possible before they escape that night. But I do agree that this an interesting scene that makes you ask a lot of questions about race. That’s another reason it’s so modern, the way it deals with this and so many other illusions that separate us.

Talking about poignant scenes, there’s another great scene that is somewhat comedic but also makes us think a lot. It’s the scene when the trunk full of women’s theater clothes is sent to Rosenthal. Of course, if you put this film up to the Bechdel Test – Do you have at least two women conversing with each other and not about men? No. – it fails miserably. It’s a prisoner of war film. It’s a film about men caught up in prison, caught up in war. But because of that, you do have this great scene where Maisonneuve, a soldier with something of a boyish, effeminate or ectomorphic physique, puts on a dress and a wig and everything, and, all of a sudden, he starts looking really good to all of the other guys. And it shows this fluidity that can happen, especially in situations of war, especially in barracks and the like, where the binaries of gender aren’t as hardline and firmly established as we would like to think. With this, Renoir was already onto something that would be relatively new in the 50s with Kinsey and has continued to be studied by those who study human sexuality, who see that, yeah, that’s the truth of it – there is some fluidity there.

Another thing that’s really poignant and modern in the film is the scene where Maréchal is talking to Elsa’s cow, and he just says, “You know, you’re just a poor old cow from Württemberg and I’m just a poor old mechanic from the 20th in Paris, but that doesn’t mean we can’t be pals.” And he pats the cow, leaves and the cow moos back at him, and you’re like “Wow!” I mean, Renoir got animal rights. He got the rights, not just of human beings, but for all life, to have the right to pursue happiness and to try to live in peace and in harmony with their world. He was so ahead of his time, cinematically, but also with his themes, that the film just holds up. And it is this unheralded masterpiece. (Maybe I shouldn’t say unheralded, because some people herald it pretty highly.) It hasn’t got the popular acclaim I think it so justly deserves. Hopefully, our conversation will help a few more people watch this film and see what we’re talking about. It is a beautiful film, and one that I think for the reasons we’ve said here everyone should watch. It’s wonderful.

CT: That brings me to one more question where I’d love to just get some additional thoughts. *Grand Illusion* is, in some ways, the classic escape movie. We’ve already talked about the premise that it’s a prisoner of war camp film, and it clearly influenced other movies that came along. *The Great Escape* is one that comes to mind. This was a movie that I saw a ton as a kid. I heard all about *The Great Escape* and never heard about the *Grand Illusion*. What I find so interesting is

The Great Escape has a very different theme to it and the *Grand Illusion* really is not in that same vein. We've talked a little bit about patriotism, and what patriotism is in this movie and what it is not. How do you think that this film, as a war film, accomplishes sending a pacifist or an anti-war message in a really clear and clean way?

BH: Yeah, I think it's clean because you don't see a lot of warfare. I mean, it's a war film where you see very, very little gunfire or actual combat. So, that helps keep it clean. It also helps that Renoir himself was a veteran. He had lived through war, and there's something to someone writing about what they know, and he was writing what he knew personally. It's interesting that you bring up *The Great Escape*. I can think of a few other escape films that do this cleanly and interestingly. Jacques Becker, who was one of Renoir's assistants for a number of his films, would make *Le Trou* (The Hole) in 1960 – and his characters are humanized as they make progress digging their way out of prison. There is another film about escape – and you might laugh at when I tell you – but it does it in a way that is so similar to what the *Grand Illusion* does. Its *Toy Story 3*. I tell my students all the time, I'm a late comer to the Pixar movies. I had my children in my 30s and, until then, had made the big mistake of thinking that the Pixar movies had nothing for me as a film fan and a film buff. I'd assumed it was all kid stuff. Then, I started watching these, and I was like, "Wait a minute, these animators, even though they're using digital and computer animation, they really know what they're doing!" You know, they have three-point lighting. Their mise-en-scène is impeccable. Anyway, what you get in *Toy Story 3* is two patriotic or jingoistic characters from two generations (the Wild West and Space Age) who think they couldn't be any further apart, in Buzz and Woody. However, the two are able to come together – in fact, all the toys are able to come together – to stage their escape. So, it is this idea of overcoming differences and finding escape, not just escape from the physical prisons, but escape from the mental prisons that we build for ourselves, of thinking that these binaries are something that exist primordially and they're something we can't overcome. Hope that answered that question well enough.

CT: Absolutely, that's awesome! Now I'm going to have to go back and rewatch *Toy Story 3*.

BH: You should, your kids will like it.

CT: Yeah, and when we watch it together, I can assure them this is a productive use of our time. There's, there's something to learn here. What have we not touched on in this film that you'd want to make sure that people know or aware of?

BH: It really is an early mastery of almost all elements of filmmaking. We've talked about the screenwriting. It won the prize at the Venice Film Festival for best cast ensemble, or best artistic ensemble, I think. It was also the first ever foreign film to be nominated for the Oscar for Best Picture. And there's the casting; we've talked about cinematography; we've talked about the screenplay. We really didn't talk about the music or the mise-en-scène. One scene where you can really see its beautiful mise-en-scène is in the juxtaposition at the very, very beginning of the film between the officers' bar on the French side, and then the officers' quarters on the German side. Here, their cultural differences are really shown and exaggerated, not only by the mise-en-scène, but by the way the camera angles and, again, the mobile framing introduce us to what is interesting with a camera wandering as our eye would. So, that mise-en-scène is pretty remarkable.

Also, when we meet Von Rauffenstein for the second time, he's living in that chapel in Wintersborn and, before we see him and realize it's him, there is this sweeping cinematography going over his desk, and you see his gloves, you see his pocket watch, you see his flask, you see his sword, his cologne, you see all these things that are marks of his distinction. So, the way that Renoir gives you information with *mise-en-scène* and mobile framing is also pretty remarkable.

And, to come back full circle to this idea of humanism, Jean Renoir loved people, and he loved actors. His casting job here was really picking the best of the French 1930s. Even some of the minor players in this film were major actors. Gaston Modot, who plays the land surveyor and who washes Jean Gabin's feet in that great scene, he's another great actor from the 30s. The fact that you have Julien Carette, who is the Vaudeville actor who does the "Marguerite" scene in the stage production that they do at the prisoner of war camp, you see that Renoir didn't necessarily want to stick to a tight script. The screenplay gives a basic vision and then let's the actors act. He wanted to let these people be who they were. So, he let them *ad lib* a lot. This is something we see with Andy Kaufman, or Jim Carrey today – *impromptu ad libbing* is something that you do with comedic geniuses. This is something that Renoir got way back then in the 30s and said, "Look, I'm gonna let you do your thing, and we'll take the best take, and that'll become our shot." So, that's something else to look out for, is that he's someone that loved people. He loved performers. He loved all aspects of the filmmaking process. Even Jean Gabin himself, this working class, Parisian type actor, your "acteur à la casquette," the cap wearing actor, who would have these violent fits of rage in his films. You get that in the in the solitary confinement scene with the harmonica and the cigarettes. If it's on my list of top-three French films, it's because it really is like *Amélie*, in my opinion, as well as *Hiroshima*, in its total mastery of the cinematic art form.