

INTERVIEW

## Does Renoir Still Matter Today?: Interview with Elizabeth Vitanza

*Elizabeth Vitanza*  
Independent Scholar

Author of the 2007 doctoral dissertation at UCLA *Rewriting the Rules of the Game: Jean Renoir in America, 1941–1947*, which was praised in Richard Brody’s treatment of Renoir in *The New Yorker* (“Both Sides of the Screen,” 16 Nov. 2009), Elizabeth Vitanza has also contributed to the Wiley-Blackwell volume *A Companion to Jean Renoir* (ed. Alastair Phillips and Ginette Vincendeau) from 2013 and published a review of the 2005 “Renoir/Renoir” exhibit at the Cinémathèque française. After a decade of teaching Renoir and other major French filmmakers at the Marlborough School in Los Angeles, Vitanza now acquiesces to the title of Independent Scholar because “Local Antifa Mom School Board Community Organizer and Small Business Owner” might be a little too long for the byline.

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**Bob Hudson** (*Lingua Romana*): Your doctoral dissertation at UCLA dealt with Jean Renoir’s time and filmmaking in America in the 1940s. Could you give us a quick “elevator pitch” or Schwab’s Pharmacy treatment of what you researched there? Also, 15 years later, what still stands out to you as the strongest point of your argument?

**Elizabeth Vitanza**: I was interested in understanding why people seemed to have paid so little attention to the second half of Renoir’s life and career, even though he essentially started over at age 45 in a new country and community. His archives are housed at UCLA, and Los Angeles is where he spent the rest of his life, so it was the ideal way to look into his Hollywood years. What I wanted to show was that Renoir had carried forward a lot of his themes from his pre-war films, and that rather than some sort of huge rupture or failure, the time in Hollywood was worth analyzing and appreciating. I think the strongest point lay in the close readings of the films he wanted to make and could not, something that was possible to look at because the film treatments were in the archives.

**BH**: Sounds like such an amazing resource! Between talking to you and Frédéric [Levéziel], I have a long list of things to check out if I ever make it back to UCLA. While you and I were both there and you were researching for your dissertation, I recall you making a trip up to Berkeley to visit with Jean Renoir’s son, Alain Renoir, who had served in WWII (much as his father had in WWI). Of course, you can learn a lot about an individual by meeting people who knew them intimately, behind the public persona. What are your recollections of that visit and did you learn anything important about Jean Renoir the man?

**EV**: I probably could have written an entire second dissertation on Alain Renoir. It was such a gift to have this person and his partner invite us into their home in rural Northern California outside of Sacramento. Think of your favorite professor and favorite uncle and then multiply that by a factor

of ten. We had a great meal, great wine, and he shared stories about his father and mother, and about serving in the war. What stuck out to me was that he did not see himself as a hero (despite earning medals for bravery) or as exceptional. As far as his father, I think Alain wanted to stress that his father was also swept along by forces that were beyond his control. What Jean and Alain both shared was a commitment to doing right by people within the context of their time. For Alain – after discussing it with Jean – that was joining the U.S. Army and going to fight in the Pacific for the country that took him in as a refugee. For Jean, that was continuing to make the sort of films that presented the grace and dignity of people who are often ignored or at the mercy of larger forces.

**BH:** In 1958, Jean Renoir oversaw the re-release of *The Grand Illusion* and insisted that his decision to do so, in light of what was happening in French Indochina and Algeria, was because the film was “timely” and that the question the film poses “is so important today that if we don’t solve it, we will just have to say goodbye to our beautiful world.” Do you think that Renoir remains timely and important today? How can his portrayal of human relationships help us navigate our contemporary society?

**EV:** When I was still teaching, I would show several Renoir films each year. I was always struck by their relevance, because every year there seemed to be an event or news that directly connected to this “old” movie. I find *La Règle du jeu* as most illustrative perhaps – all sorts of people from different social classes and backgrounds all making decisions that are understandable in one context, and yet have disastrous and horrific consequences in another. I think about that film a lot today.

**BH:** What do you personally think is Renoir’s most important film and why?

**EV:** I think I’m always going to go with *La Règle du jeu*, probably followed by *Crime de M. Lange*. To me they represent two visions: one of a society without solidarity, and one with solidarity.

**BH:** How about a deep cut? What Renoir film that most people might not have seen deserves more attention?

**EV:** I don’t know if *Boudu Saved from Drowning* is a “deep cut,” but I really enjoy the class satire. I would also recommend his shorter film *Une Partie de campagne* – which was pretty impossible to find back when I was studying but is now available on Criterion (last I checked).

**BH:** Yeah, they both are now! They are two I’ve taught in my film classes as well – the latter, the shorter film, is my all-time favorite Renoir and is in my all-time Top 10. I also really love Robert Webster’s analysis of it, “Film as the Art of Fishing” [*French Review*, 64.3 (Feb. 1991)]. Of the American films, I love *Swamp Water* but, as a son of Arkansas sharecroppers, I have always been partial to *The Southerner*. And, as a Southerner, I’m shocked how sensitive Renoir is to people from cultures so different from his own. Which of Renoir’s Hollywood films stands out to you? Why do you think his films exude such humanity?

**EV:** I think being a successful filmmaker means you have a keen eye for human behavior and human drama. Renoir’s whole theory of humanity was that people across class had more in common than people within nations. I think that’s why *The Southerner* and *Swamp Water* evoke a

lot of the same sensitivity and humanity that Renoir brought to his French films like *Toni*, *Monsieur Lange*, *Grande Illusion*, etc. Also, let's be real – rich people are not that interesting, generally.

**BH:** That's right! (*laughs*) Who is our current filmmaker who comes closest to being today's Jean Renoir? Are there any real *auteurs* out there anymore?

**EV:** I don't know that I've seen enough movies lately to make that call. Someone that stands out for their films about marginalized people but who highlights their humor and smarts might be Sean Baker (*Tangerine*, *Anora*). Maybe Greta Gerwig, just for the range of genres (*Frances Ha* to *Ladybird* to *Barbie!*), since Renoir also worked within various genres, especially later on.

**BH:** Yes, I love her work, as do my students!

**EV:** I don't know that our current state of filmmaking is even set up anymore to allow someone to work in a way that would lead to the depth/breadth Renoir did. Director Steve McQueen might be the closest to an *auteur* and the closest to the spirit of Renoir in his focus on history seen through the eyes of marginalized or working class people. I feel like *Blitz* was almost a darker version of a film that Renoir wanted to make when he initially arrived in Hollywood (but never did).

**BH:** Saoirse Ronan is great in that – and in *Ladybird*, too! What is the best film you've seen in the past ten years? Why does it stand out?

**EV:** *Close* (Lukas Dhont) was a beautiful, devastating film. I loved *Moonlight* (Barry Jenkins) too, visually stunning and a story that manages to be both specific but also universal. I appreciate films that deal honestly with childhood/adolescence and don't portray parents as one-dimensional clichés. It also is a film that is relatable to people everywhere. That one definitely stuck with me. I can't really think off the top of my head of a "best," but that is one that pops into my head immediately. *Deux jours, une nuit* (Dardenne Brothers) for the same reasons. The economic insecurity and the way it pits worker against worker portrayed in that film was so relatable and prescient. I really loved *Poor Things* (Yorgos Lanthimos), *Zone of Interest* (Jonathan Glazer) and *Anatomy of a Fall* (Justine Triet) last year. For the more mundane slices of life, *Eighth Grade* (Bo Burnham) and, again, *Ladybird* stood out. As a former teacher in a school for girls, those were fairly accurate portrayals of that phase of life. I recently watched *The Teachers' Lounge* (İlker Çatak) and loved it. For the first half hour I thought it was going to be a horror film, and in a way, it is – the film evoked the nightmarish feeling of being in public education today, trying to do the right thing by kids and still somehow not quite getting it right because of external forces and workplace dynamics. Even though it's set in Germany, it resonated deeply. The story has so much simmering in the background and avoided all the clichés you'd expect, and I think Leonie Benesch gives such an accurate, masterful performance of a teacher in that film.

**BH:** Sounds amazing – I'll have to add that one to my list! What can Jean Renoir still teach people today?

**EV:** Income inequality is the root of a lot of human conflict, suffering, and misunderstanding. Solidarity can save us, morally and politically.