

February 13, 2007: XIV:5

RULES OF THE GAME/LA RÉGLE DU JEU  
(110 minutes) 1939



Nora Grégor....Christine de la Cheyniest  
Paulette Dubost....Lisette, sa Camériste  
Mila Parély....Geneviève de Marras  
Odette Talazac....Mme de la Plante  
Claire Gérard....Mme de la Bruyère  
Anne Mayen....Jackie, nièce de Christine  
Lise Elina....Radio-Reporter  
Marcel Dalio....Robert de la Cheyniest  
Julien Carette....Marceau, le braconnier  
Roland Toutain....André Jurieux  
Gaston Modot....Schumacher, le garde-chasse  
Jean Renoir....Octave  
Pierre Magnier....Le Général  
Eddy Debray....Corneille, le majordome  
Pierre Nay....St. Aubin  
Henri Cartier-Bresson....Le Cuisinier

Directed by Jean Renoir  
Written by Carl Koch and Jean Renoir  
Produced by Claude Renoir  
Original music by Roger Désormières  
Non-original music by Frédéric Chopin, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart,  
Camille Saint-Saëns, Johann Strauß  
Cinematography by Jean-Paul Alphen, Jean Bachelet, Jacques Lemare, Alain Renoir  
Film Editing by Marthe Huguet and Marguerite Renoir  
Production Design by Max Douy and Eugène Lourié  
Costume Design by Coco Chanel  
Assistant Director Henri Cartier-Bresson

JEAN RENOIR (15 September 1894, Paris–12 February 1979, Beverly Hills) directed about 40 films and wrote or co-wrote the scripts for the best of them. He funded his earliest films—undertaken as a showcase for his actress wife—by selling some of his father's paintings. He moved to the United States when the Nazis occupied France. Some of his films are *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* 1959, *Éléna et les hommes* 1956 (*Paris Does Strange Things*), *French Cancan* 1955, *Le Carrosse d'or* 1952, *The River* 1951, *The Woman on the Beach* 1947, *The Diary of a Chambermaid* 1946, *The Southerner* 1945, *This Land Is Mine* 1943, *Swamp Water* 1941, *La Règle du jeu* 1939 (*The Rules of the Game*), *La Bête Humaine* 1938 (*The Human Beast*, *Judas Was a Woman*), *La Marseillaise* 1938, *La Grande Illusion* (1937), *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange* 1936, *Une partie de campagne* 1936, *Madame Bovary* 1933, *La Chienne* 1931 (*The Bitch*, *Isn't Life a Bitch?*), *Le Bled* 1929, *Nana*



1926, and *Une vie sans joie* 1924 (*Backbiters*, Catherine). He occasionally stepped in front of the camera. Some of his roles were: Octave in *La Règle du jeu*, Cabuche in *La Bête humaine*, and Père Poulain in *Une partie de campagne*. In 1975, Renoir received an honorary Academy Award as “A genius who, with grace, responsibility and enviable devotion through silent film, sound film, feature, documentary and television has won the world's admiration.” *La Grande Illusion* won a special award as Best Overall Artistic Contribution from the Venice Film Festival in 1937; the following year, the film was banned in Italy, and remained so until 1945. There's a great web site on Renoir, in French, “Je m'appelle Jean Renoir,” at [www.univ-nancy2.fr/re noir/](http://www.univ-nancy2.fr/re noir/).

**MARCEL DALIO** (Israel Blauschild, 17 July 1900, Paris—20 November 1983, Paris) got out of Paris just before the German occupation in 1940. He appeared in 120 films, beginning with *Turandot* and ending with *Brigade mondaine* in 1980. Along the way he appeared in *Le Golem* 1936, *Pépé le Moko* 1937, *La Grande Illusion* 1937, *Casablanca* 1942 (an uncredited role as Emil, the Croupier), *To Have and Have Not* 1944, *The Snows of Kilimanjaro* 1952, *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* 1953, *Sabrina* 1954, *The Sun Also Rises* 1957, *Catch-22* 1970 (a great performance as the philosophical old man in the whorehouse), and *The Great White Hope* 1970.

**PAULETTE DUBOST** (8 October 1911, Paris) appeared in almost 150 films, the most recent of them a made-for-tv film in 2001, *Duval: Un mort de trop*. She has done a good deal of tv work in recent years. Some of her other films are *The Last* (1980), *Viva María!* (1965), *Germinal* (1963), *Mädchen in Uniform* (1958), *Lola Montès* (1955), and *Un coup de téléphone* (1931). **MILA PARÉLY** (7 October 1917, Paris) appeared in *Les Cent et une nuits* (1995) and *La Belle et la bête* (Beauty and the Beast 1946).

**CLAUDE RENOIR** (4 December 1914, Paris—5 September 1993, Troyes, Aube, Champagne, France) nephew of Jean and grandson of the painter, was cinematographer on nearly 80 films, among them *Le Toubib* (1979), *The Spy Who Loved Me* (1977), *French Connection II* (1975), *The Madwoman of Chaillot* (1969), *Barbarella* (1968), *Madama Butterfly* (1955), *Une partie de campagne* (1936) and *Toni* (1934).

**JEAN-PAUL ALPHEN** (20 April 1911, Paris—28 April 1993) was cinematographer for only five films. The other four are *Al Tafhidumu* (1947), *La Marseillaise* (1938), *La Vie est à nous* (1936) and the classic *L'Atalante* (1934). **JEAN BACHELET** (8 October 1894, Azans, Jura, Franche-Comté, France—1977, Cannes, Alpes-Maritimes, Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur, France) was a good deal busier. He is credited with 67 films, the last of them *Les Rates* (1958). Some of the others are *Les Mains sales* (1951), *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange* (1936), *Madame Bovary* (1933), and *Nana* (1926). **JACQUES LEMARE** (d. 2 June 1988) was cinematographer for *Les Mains d'Orlac* (1961) and about 30 other films. **ALAIN RENOIR**, writes Jean, “who was a cameraman before the war, tried to join the union in this capacity after the liberation of the American army, and they told him he would have to wait seven years before there was a place.” He eventually became a professor of comparative literature at Berkeley.



**Henri Cartier-Bresson, who worked as assistant to Renoir on several films, including *La Règle du Jeu*:**

“He was a very warm man, very cultured, but he loathed pretentious intellectuals. You simply had to be cultured to work with him, by which I mean a fundamental culture, like his father, of whom he spoke a lot. Jean had an intelligence about everything, in the way that an animal is intelligent, and not cerebral. He was not a specialist of anything except generosity, and life for him always came first. I owe him a great deal.”

**from *Jean Renoir Letters* Edited by David Thompson and Lorraine LoBianco. Faber & Faber. London 1994**

**from the Foreword by Bernardo Bertolucci January 1904**

When I am asked to list my ten best films of all time, in general I try to avoid the torture of making such a choice. But I know the number one used to be and always will be *La Règle du Jeu*. It was made in 1939 and I think that Renoir was very conscious of the fact that Europe was on the verge of war. This film, which is about a weekend in a country château where people we would today call Eurotrash gather, was in fact a supreme prophecy of the reality of that time. This film that I consider to be the ultimate achievement in cinema was a complete flop, it didn't work at all with audiences when it was first released. I remember that Renoir told me he was surprised at this reception, as he thought he had made such a light film, a social comedy in the style of Marivaux or Beaumarchais. He was still amazed by that rejection, wounded even, and it reminded me of the misery we often have to cope with as filmmakers.

### From the Introduction by Thompson & Lo Bianco

François Truffaut, Orson Welles and Charles Chaplin all said, at one time or another, that the greatest film director who ever lived was Jean Renoir.

*On 7 July, La Règle du Jeu opens in Paris to as disastrous reception. Audiences are confused and offended, necessitating various cuts in the film to make it more palatable to the public, but without success. It is eventually banned by the French government for being 'demoralizing.'*

### Letter from Truffaut to Renoir 23 October 1962

"After all , as Octave [character played by Renoir] says in *La Règle du Jeu*: 'The terrible thing about this world is that everybody has his reasons.'"

### Letter to Truffaut, 26 May 1978

For a long time I believed that subjects did not matter. Well, I was wrong. The best-told tales may run into difficulties if they are not supported by a larger theme.

### Letter from Truffaut to Renoir 13 November 1969

"I have never been able—or have never known how---to tell you how much *La Règle du Jeu* (which I saw over and over again between the ages of thirteen and fourteen, when everything in my life was going so badly) helped me to keep going, to understand the motives of people around me, and to get through those awful years of my adolescence. . .I will always feel that my life is connected to the film you made."

### Letter to Truffaut, 19 May 1974

—Long live the senses.  
—Down with the intellect.



JR with Gabrielle Renard by Pierre-Auguste Renoir

### From "A Memoir by Henri Cartier-Bresson"

After leaving Mexico in 1934, I thought I would never take photographs again—I wanted to make movies. I asked both Pabst and Lois Buñuel, but neither needed anybody to work with them. Then I met Jean Renoir, and he agreed to take me as a second assistant on his next film, which was *La Vie est à Nous*.

The third film I worked on with Jean was *La Règle du Jeu*, which for me is one of the summits of his art and a premonition of everything that was to happen in the world. . . .

I think *La Règle du Jeu* was badly received because the upper class felt attacked, and people could not decide whether the film was a comedy or a tragedy.

### from My Life and My films Jean Renoir Atheneum NY 1974

You spend an evening listening to records and the result is a film. I cannot say that it was French baroque music that inspired me to make *La Règle du Jeu*, but it certainly played a part in making me wish to film the sort of people who danced to that music. I based my thought on it only at the beginning. It does not accompany the film except generically. . . .

I thought of certain of my friends whose amorous intrigues seemed to be their only object in life. As Lestringuez said: 'If you want to write the truth you must get it well into your head that the world is one large knocking-shop. Men only think of one thing, and that is laying women; and the ones who think of anything else are played out—drowned in the muddy waters of sentimentality.' Lestringuez was, of course, speaking for himself, but his words impressed me and I decided to transpose the characters, enacting that hitherto non-existent theme into our own period. Then I began to see the outline of the story, but not to the point where I had decided on any definite style.

I needed a background: it was the Sologne which provided me with the setting in which the actors were to discover the truth about the characters they were playing.

. . .An important element is the emotional honesty of Christine, the heroine. Since the authors of films and books are generally men, they tell stories about men. I like to describe women. Another important element is the purity of

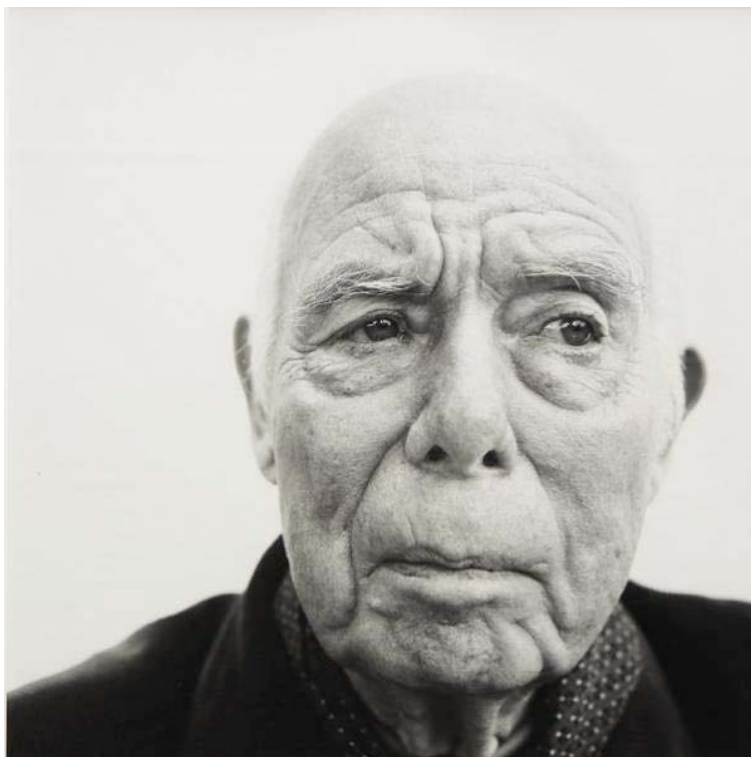
Jurieu, the victim, who, trying to fit into a world to which he does not belong, fails to respect the rules of the game. During the shooting of the film I was torn between my desire to make a comedy of it and the wish to tell a tragic story. The result of this ambivalence was the film as it is. I had moments of profound discouragement; but then, when I saw the way the actors were interpreting my ideas, I became wildly enthusiastic. My uncertainties are apparent in the development of the story and the acting of its protagonists. I recall the hesitations of Christine. The part was played by Nora Grégor, who was none other than Princess Stahremberg. Her husband, Prince Stahremberg, was an Austrian landowner who had founded an anti-Hitler peasant party. In his own domain the peasants voted for him, but the wave of Hitlerism was to sweep them aside.

I had got to know him shortly before *La Règle du Jeu*. He and his wife were in a state of great disarray. Everything they believed in was collapsing. One could write a novel about the state of mind of those exiles. But I was content to use the appearance of Nora Grégor, her look of 'bird-like' sincerity, to shape the character of Christine. Once again I started from externals to arrive at the creation of a character or plot. I must ask forgiveness for dwelling upon this point, but, having reached the time of life when I must face the fact that I shall make no more films, I am more than ever attached to that principle. One starts from the environment to arrive at the self. I respect and admire artists who proceed in the opposite direction. Abstract art corresponds to the necessities of our time. But personally I remain a man of the nineteenth-century and I need observation as a point of departure. My father, who mistrusted imagination, said: 'If you paint the leaf on a tree without using a model you risk becoming stereotyped. Because your imagination will only supply you with a few leaves whereas Nature offers you millions, all on the same tree. No two leaves are exactly the same. The artist who paints only what is in his mind must very soon repeat himself.'

One does not really know what a film is until it has been edited. The first showings of *La Règle du Jeu* filled me with misgiving. It is a war film, and yet there is no reference to the war. Beneath its seemingly innocuous appearance the story attacks the very structure of our society. Yet all I thought about at the beginning was nothing avant-garde but a good little orthodox film. People go to the cinema in the hope of forgetting their everyday problems, and it was precisely their own worries that I plunged them into. The imminence of war made them even more thin-skinned. I depicted pleasant, sympathetic characters, but showed them in a society in process of disintegration, so that they were defeated at the outset, like Stahremberg and his peasants. The audience recognized this. The truth is they recognized themselves. People who commit suicide do not care to do it in front of witnesses.

I was utterly dumbfounded when it became apparent that the film, which I wanted to be a pleasant one, rubbed most people up the wrong way. It was a resounding flop, to which the reaction was a kind of loathing. Despite a few favorable notices, the public as a whole regarded it as a personal insult. There was no question of contrivance; my enemies had nothing to do with its failure. At every session I attended I could feel the unanimous disapproval of the audience. I tried to save the film by shortening it, and to start with I cut the scenes in which I myself played too large a part, as though I were ashamed, after this rebuff. Of showing myself on the screen. But it was useless. The film was dropped, having been judged 'too demoralizing.'

Many explanations of this attitude have been propounded. For my own part, I think the audience's reaction was due to my candour. The film had been shaped in response to influences in my personal life, the most powerful being those of my childhood. But that part of my life had been lived with my parents and Gabrielle, people incapable of not perceiving the truth behind the mask. To use a word that crops up frequently in the modern vocabulary, life with my family had been a 'demystification'. We are all 'mystified'—that is to say, fooled, duped. Treated as of no account. I had the good fortune to have been taught to see through the trickery in my youth. In *La Règle du Jeu*, I passed on what I knew to the



J.R. by Richard Avedon

public. But this is something that people do not like; the truth makes them feel uncomfortable. A quarter of century later I gave a lecture at Harvard University. *La Règle du Jeu* was showing at a nearby cinema. There was a burst of cheering when I appeared on the platform. The students were applauding the film. Since then its reputation has steadily grown. What seemed an insult to society in 1939 has become clear-sightedness.

But the fact remains that the failure of *La Règle du Jeu* so depressed me that I resolved either to give up cinema or to leave France.

**from Jean Renoir. André Bazin. Da Capo NY 1992**

Renoir said, "When I made *The Rules of the Game* I knew where I was going. I knew the evil that gnawed at my contemporaries. My instinct guided me, my awareness of the imminent danger led me to the situations and the dialogue. And my friends were like me. How worried we were! I think the film is a good one. But it is not so difficult to work well when the compass of anxiety points in the true direction."

Alas, we know which direction this was. The Munich Pact had just been signed. Georges Sadoul has said quite rightly that *The Rules of the Game* is for the prewar era what *The Marriage of Figaro* was for the Revolution of 1789: the portrayal of a refined, oblivious, and decadent civilization. Renoir was in fact inspired by Beaumarchais, taking as the epigraph of the film a couplet from Cherubin, as well as by de Musset's *Les Caprices de Marianne*, from which he took the basic situation of *The Rules of the Game*.

Neither the public nor the majority of the critics in 1939 could recognize in *The Rules of the Game* the fullest, most lucid expression of a moribund age. But this was certainly not the principal cause for the commercial failure of the film. As a conventional love story, the film could have been a success if the scenario had respected the rules of the movie game. But Renoir wanted to make his own style of *drame gai*, and the mixture of genres proved disconcerting to the public. Perhaps audiences were also put off by the stunningly mobile *mise en scène* and the subtle irony of the compositions and the camera movements. The photographic style which prefigured the famous depth of field, now returned from America via *Citizen Kane* and *The Best Years of Our Lives*, appeared at the time a droll but dubious curiosity.

Today *The Rules of the Game* is a classic of the film societies. It is admired not only as the most advanced expression of prewar French realism but also for its prefiguration of the most original elements of the cinematographic evolution of the next fifteen years. This legacy has yet to be exhausted.

**COMING UP IN THE SPRING 2007 BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS (REDUX) XIV:**

- Feb 20 Vittorio De Sica, *Bicycle Thieves/Ladri di biciclette* 1947
- Feb 27 Yasujiro Ozu, *Tokyo Story/Tokyo monogatari* 1953
- March 6 Orson Welles, *Touch of Evil* 1958
- March 20 David Lean, *Lawrence of Arabia* 1962
- March 27 Jean-Luc Godard, *Contempt/Le Mépris* 1963
- April 3 Stanley Kubrick, *Dr. Strangelove* 1964
- April 10 Sergio Leone, *The Good the Bad and the Ugly/Il Buono, il brutto, il cattivo* 1966
- April 17 Robert Altman, *Nashville* 1975
- April 24 Stanley Donen and Gene Kelly, *Singin' in the Rain* 1952



J.R. by Pierre-Auguste Renoir

**Contacts:**

- ...email Diane Christian: [engdc@buffalo.edu](mailto:engdc@buffalo.edu)
- ...email Bruce Jackson [bjackson@buffalo.edu](mailto:bjackson@buffalo.edu)
- ...for the series schedule, annotations, links and updates: <http://buffalofilmseminars.com>
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- ....for cast and crew info on any film: <http://imdb.com/search.html>

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