

Liberty, equality, fraternity: sharing food and drink as thematic motif in Jean Renoir's *La Grande Illusion*.

The destiny of nations depends on the manner in which they nourish themselves.
- Brillat-Savarin 2009, p. 15

In 1914, man's spirit had not yet been falsified by totalitarian religions and racism. In some respects the world war was still a war of respectable people, of well-bred people. I almost dare say, of gentlemen. That does not excuse it. Good manners, even chivalry, do not excuse a massacre.

- Jean Renoir quoted in Sesonske 1980, p. 282

Newly restored for its 75th anniversary and recently re-released for one week at Dublin's Irish Film Institute, film critic, Trevor Johnston, describes *La Grande Illusion* as the grand-daddy of all prison escape movies and a profoundly affecting portrait of just how decent people can be to each other (2012, p. 14). When their plane is shot down during a French reconnaissance mission, de Boieldieu, a monocled aristocrat and Maréchal, a working class Breton, are united with Rosenthal, a wealthy Jewish entrepreneur and held captive in a German prisoner-of-war camp during world war one. In their confinement, the film examines a spectrum of social classes and human relationships. After an abortive escape attempt, both Maréchal and Rosenthal finally succeed thanks to the self-sacrifice of de Boieldieu. They are taken in and sheltered by Elsa, a German woman, before making it across the border into Switzerland.

In his introduction to *La Grande Illusion*, Martin O'Shaughnessy tells us that it is widely considered one of the very finest French films, the world's greatest pacifist film and one of the most important war films made by France's greatest director at the very height of his powers (2009). But for all its success, in his autobiography, Jean Renoir lamented that it had failed to prevent the second world war (1974, p. 1247). None the less, on seeing the film, President Roosevelt is said to have declared that it was a film to be seen in all the democracies of the world (Faulkner 1986, p. 105). Clearly, *La Grande Illusion* is a film with no modest thematic agenda. This paper seeks to explore O'Shaughnessy's treatment of sharing food and drink as a thematic motif and to further consider this as an example of realism, according to the renowned French film critic, André Bazin, in order to consider it as more than just a motif but rather as the epitome of Renoir's social and cinematic vision.

For O'Shaughnessy, *La Grande Illusion* places great emphasis on the individual as part of a collective group (2000, p. 124). He notes that the characters collectively embody a range of class positions and nationalities so that their interplay constitutes a meditation on what divides or unites men. And while there are other motifs in the film, such as theatre and Christianity, it is the motif of food specifically, he claims, that serves to put

“flesh” on the “bones” of the potentially abstract concepts of class and nation – two of the film’s core themes. He further describes the group meal as the film’s preferred way to show its attachment to warm, fraternal community and egalitarian sharing thus highlighting two key values of the French Revolution - equality and fraternity. Indeed, it is food, he insists, that helps ensure that these values are not just dry, intellectual ideas but rather constitute a “warm, embodied sharing” between people (2009, p. 55).

It is precisely while sharing food and drink that we learn how both the German and French officers and the wealthy French Jew have much in common because they have all frequented Maxim's and Le Fouquet's - two luxurious Parisian restaurants. However, another French prisoner, a former school teacher, can only afford to eat at his brother-in-law's when he's in Paris, not unlike Maréchal, who tells us that he prefers a modest bistro and an ordinary table wine. It is again in the context of eating and drinking that we learn that what divides men socially across class can also unite them in terms of nationality (O'Shaughnessy 2009, p. 55). Thanks to the generous sharing of his lavish food parcels, Rosenthal, the wealthy French Jew, provides the French prisoners with an aperitif of fine cognac followed by a veritable feast of foie gras with truffles from Perigord, cold chicken and marinated mackerel. Meanwhile, and continuing to suggest national stereotypes in the narrative of the film, the German guards eat cabbage and something they claim smells like old socks. Indeed, even von Rauffenstein, the German officer, refers to his coffee as something akin to "slop".

Moving slightly beyond the narrow confines of thematic motif in terms of equality and fraternity, O'Shaughnessy tells us that food also serves more broadly in the film to bring the characters down to earth and ground them in the material world. While this is initially more in evidence in terms of what the Germans are forced to eat as a blockaded Germany could barely feed its population during the first world war, it also eventually comes to bear on the French. When Maréchal, singled out from the group of French prisoners for an act of flagrant patriotism, is placed in solitary confinement, he is confronted with hunger. O'Shaughnessy reminds us that Maréchal will again face this same sensation, and this time with Rosenthal, as both endure the trek across the snow towards the Swiss border and their final escape with nothing more to eat than a daily ration of sugar which they have managed to steal from the prisoner-of-war camp for the journey (2009, p. 55).

However, something else happens during these scenes of human deprivation which stand in stark contrast to the “warm and embodied” scenes of sharing food and drink elsewhere in the film – and that is human kindness. While Maréchal is indeed hungry, it is not because he has nothing to eat but rather it is because he refuses to eat what he has been given. When the elderly German guard notices that he hasn't eaten, he is genuinely concerned. And while Maréchal complains, it is not of hunger, although his sudden rage and pathetic attempted escape may well be associated with hunger, it is of loneliness that he complains, and bitterly. Rather than punishing him further, the elderly German guard offers him a mouth organ which Maréchal accepts and begins to play instead of eating. His genuine concern is evident in the smile of satisfaction that fills his

face and it is further re-enforced when we consider that a certain risk is involved. He makes no mention of the incident at all, when asked by a fellow guard, save to remark that this war is going on for too long. In so doing, his simple act of generosity is transformed into an act of basic humanity which makes it all the more moving.

While it is true that both von Rauffenstein and Rosenthal extend generosity across national and ethnic divides, in terms of them sharing food and drink, it is also true that neither incurs any risk in doing so. In fact, when von Rauffenstein extends his officer's invitation to lunch to both Maréchal and de Boieldieu, before both are escorted to their prison quarters, we have a clear example of the kind of respectable, even gentlemanly behaviour in the midst of war which was highlighted by Renoir in his autobiography as typical of this pre-WW2 period (quoted in Sesonke 1980, p. 282). And when Rosenthal is complimented for his generosity in sharing his food parcels with the other prisoners, he wonders if it isn't his own vanity that lies behind it all and his desire to be liked. And liked he is, thanked and even toasted by the group.

However, on their trek across the snow to the Swiss border, when hunger, fatigue and despair have set in, particularly because Rosenthal has injured his foot and is limping, ever more slowly behind Maréchal, Rosenthal too expresses his bitter hatred of his companion albeit in response to Marechal's initial outburst of sudden and savage anti-semiticism. All the more re-enforced therefore, and moving, is the subsequent act of humanity when Maréchal returns to retrieve the Jew, who according to O'Shaughnessy, has effectively nourished the entire group (2000, p. 125). Finding him weeping helplessly and exactly where he had left him, Maréchal helps Rosenthal to his feet and both set off again together, nourished, not by food this time but rather, by ordinary, decent humanity and precisely in the absence of food.

The thematic motif of sharing food and drink is again addressed when Rosenthal and Maréchal arrive at Elsa's farmhouse in the German countryside. O'Shaughnessy highlights her hospitality and simple generosity, at the "material level", towards the escaped prisoners-of-war, as she feeds the hungry Maréchal with bread and a glass of milk before tending to Rosenthal's wounded foot (2009, p. 55). Just moments earlier, when they had been hiding in one of the outhouses, they were reluctant to trust her. It is, however, neither her hospitality nor her generosity that causes them to trust her, rather it is the risk that she incurs in harbouring them. Within earshot, Elsa makes no mention of them to the German soldier who knocks at her window asking for directions. It is the small detail of her complicity that transforms her acts of simple generosity into acts of basic humanity which in turns makes them all the more moving.

This paper argues that food takes us into the very heart of the characters' humanity even more than serving to bring them down to earth in the material world, as O'Shaughnessy suggests. It is food, and by association hunger, that presents the characters with clear-cut moral dilemmas – to choose, or not to choose, to do right by their fellow man, to help, to feed, and therefore, to extend humanity, regardless of class, nationality, ethnic origin, indeed, regardless of war. As such, food is part of a wider,

deeper and more general meaning in the film beyond its core themes of class, nation and war.

In his book about Renoir, André Bazin, the renowned French film critic, reminds us that Renoir is essentially a moralist (1974, p. 39). He explains that "social realism" was for Renoir only a means of demonstrating the permanence of man and his questions. He reminds us that *La Grande Illusion* is a true story based on Renoir's own personal experiences of World War One and those of others, notably a friend of Renoir's called Pinsard who had been shot down and imprisoned several times - his escapes are the basis of the film (p. 60-1). Bazin also draws our attention to "human relationships" as typical of realism in Renoir and explains the importance of small, yet "telling" details in a given characterisation or situation (p. 62 - 63). Bazin also suggests that there is no point in rendering something realistically on film in the first place unless it is precisely to make it more meaningful in an abstract sense. And even though that's something of a paradox in terms of film, he considers it central to Renoir's cinematic genius (p. 84-5).

However, Bazin does not refer to eating and drinking in *La Grande Illusion*. Nonetheless, Anne Bower reminds us in her introduction to a series of essays about Food and Film, that it is precisely the "commonness" of food in everyday life that causes it to work so effectively in film and in turn, causes it to often be omitted from the discussion about food in film (2004, p. 3). Yet, Bazin's more general comments on realism in Renoir can clearly accommodate eating and drinking quite comfortably. More important, it seems, to explore how much meaning we can attach to food if we consider it part of Renoir's realism and if we accept that meaningfulness, as Bazin tells us, is indeed the whole point of being realistic on film in the first place.

This paper argues that meaning in the film is best understood in terms of Bazin's more general description of Renoir as a moralist. While it is true, as O'Shaughnessy notes, that there is thematic importance to eating and drinking in terms of class, nation and war, it is the moral general concept of Renoir as a moralist that allows us to consider and differentiate what may be *right* from what may be *wrong* in these key areas. This is especially true in the "telling" details that reveal a character's moral stance in relation to other characters and particularly in terms of sharing food and drink. After all, for a film about war, *La Grande Illusion* has many more scenes of eating than it has of fighting (O'Shaughnessy 2009, p. 55). It is nonetheless one of the most important war films and the world's greatest pacifist film (O'Shaughnessy 2009). In truth, there are no scenes of fighting in the film and Renoir himself hoped it might even prevent a second world war thus changing the very course of history. Whether or not that was naive, let us consider in moral terms what greater meaning might be attached to eating and drinking.

Firstly, it is the rather "telling" details in a character's response in tight moral dilemmas concerning food which allow us to read deeper meaning. For example, we understand that the elderly German guard is *right* to choose to give the mouth organ, even to a French man, who has not only attempted to escape but who is also refusing to eat because it sustains him, at least emotionally, in his wretched state of solitary

confinement as a result of the war. We understand that Maréchal is *right* to choose to retrieve his comrade on the hillside where he is injured and unable to walk any further, even if Rosenthal is a Jew and especially because both of them are starving. And Elsa too, we understand, is *right* to choose to give food and shelter to Maréchal and Rosenthal in their attempted escape even if it is from her own people. It is precisely the choices involved which allow us to share, to empathise and even to celebrate with the characters thus engaging us in deeper meaning.

On the other hand, de Boieldieu's self-sacrifice, for example, which enables Maréchal and Rosenthal to escape and which results in his own death, while certainly noble, essential and even successful, cannot be understood in the same way. This is because he does not incur the same risk because he does not face the same moral dilemma. He tells us himself that to die in a war would be an awful thing for a poor man, for a working class man like Maréchal, for example, but for somebody of his class, for an aristocrat, it is a badge of honour. And so while we may understand that he does the *right* thing in facilitating the escape of his comrades, it is perhaps for the *wrong* reasons. In any case, the wider and deeper moral meaning of the film, in which food functions as an important vehicle of characterisation, allows us to consider a character's "telling" reasons for choosing to do what they choose to do and consider, therefore, what it may mean to be *right* and what it may mean to be *wrong*.

Anne Bower reminds us that the consumption of food in a film can stand for consumption of any aspect of culture (2004, p. 7). Divisive ideas of class, nation and ethnic origin are "consumed" in *La Grande Illusion* along with the fruit punch, the cognac and the foie gras, and so too is a social vision of equality and fraternity. Bower particularly emphasises the remarkable ability that food has to produce meaning in a film and precisely because it can function as a powerful semiotic system which can communicate effectively ideas about culture and cultural identity (Poole in Bower 2004, p. 10). In terms of eating and drinking, *La Grande Illusion* makes a clear distinction between the culture of the individual as isolated and detached from the group to which he or she belongs and the culture of a cohesive group of integrated individuals.

Maréchal, isolated in his solitary confinement refuses to eat and refuses therefore to "consume" or to accept this idea of detachment. On his release and return to the group, he is immediately asked if he is hungry. He is duly fed and integrated thus within his group and by his group. O'Shaughnessy tells us that the loss of Elsa's husband and brothers in the war is "communicated" by the unoccupied chairs around a large dining table (2000, p. 53). This is all the more effective when we later observe a single occupied chair where her young daughter eats alone. In comparison to the earlier group scenes of celebration and feasting around the table, Renoir's social ideas clearly favour the individual as a member of community who is in turn nourished by that community.

But where is liberty - the first and arguably, the most important, of the social ideals of the French Revolution? It cannot be absent given the meaningfulness of the film as an

example of realism and yet, this is a film almost entirely shot in captivity. Even the final scene of "liberation" is a brief and uncertain moment albeit one surrounded by vast potential. Film historian and screenwriter, James Leahy, describes Renoir's work as a source of vital emotional and intellectual experience (2003). He notes, however, that too little is made of this because a kind of academic respectability tends to enshrine both Renoir and his work as "classics". This paper argues that liberty is to be found not in Maréchal and Rosenthal's final escape, but rather, it lies in the kind of vital and emotional experience which Leahy describes. Eating and drinking in *La Grande Illusion* provides us with many important examples of precisely this kind of vital and emotional experience - it is essentially the experience of being human. And what is distinctly liberating about it in the film is that, in terms of eating and drinking, people are free to choose to function outside of social and political conditioning, in terms of class and nation. It is a kind of personal and interior liberty expressed between people and shared in terms of a meal.

This seems most appropriate given that Renoir often compared the functions of a film director to those of a chef in a restaurant. Leahy cites Eugène Lourié, Renoir's longtime collaborator and his production designer on *La Grande Illusion*, and it seems that Renoir did not see himself as an individual "auteur" with sole responsibility for a film but rather, like a great chef, who makes a great meal with the help of the saucemaker, wine steward and meat chef, he too saw himself working in collaboration with a group (Lourié in Leahy, 2003). A case of Renoir's art imitating his life? Redoubtable chef or social film maker? Either way, in *La Grande Illusion*, Renoir serves up a slice of humanity which, in hunger and in pain, in rage and in compassion, suggests little or no difference in class or nation - certainly none that could possibly justify a war - and that is very liberating indeed.

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Filomgraphy

La Grande illusion (1937) France

Production Company: RAC (Frank Rollmer, Alexandre and Albert Pinkéwitch)

Distribution: Réalisation d'Art Cinématographique

Production Manager: Raymond Blondy

Assistant Director: Jacques Becker

Screenplay: Jean Renoir, Charles Spaak

Technical Consultant: Carl Koch

Photography: Christian Matras, assistants: Claude Renoir Jr., Jean Bourgoïn, Bourreaud

Stills: Sam Lévin

Production Design: Eugène Lourié

Sound: Joseph de Bretagne

Music: Joseph Kosma

Editor: Marguerite Renoir, assistant Marthe Huguet; 1958, restoration for re-release, Renée Lichtig

Cast: Jean Gabin (Lt. Maréchal), Pierre Fresnay (Captain de Boieldieu), Erich von Stroheim (Captain von Rauffenstein), Marcel Dalio (Rosenthal), Julien Carette (Traquet), Dita Parlo (Elsa), Gaston Modot (Engineer), Jean Dasté (Teacher), Sylvain Itkine (Demolder), Jacques Becker (English officer)