Affinities through categories of class, nation and personality: Jean Renoir’s *La Grande Illusion*

In this essay I will analyze the movie *La Grande Illusion* (France 1937) by Jean Renoir concentrating on its representation of changing social paradigms after World War I in Europe. In particular I will focus on the affinities delineated by ideas of class, nation, game and war. I argue that in the movie the WWI is shown as a key factor in fostering the change of the models of social relations in postwar Europe resulting in the elimination of old, class-based social models in favour of social relations defined purely by economic and ideological demands of the industrial society. I will also explore the director’s privileging of humanist and anti-militarist values in the wake of World War II.

The historic interwar period in Europe is characterized by multiple processes and changes in the realm of social and political relations between people. The previously known models and paradigms, as well as the social structure, were no more relevant after the ending of World War I, which was declared to be a war to end all wars. Twenty peaceful years in Europe follow; in a cultural sense, these years were strongly influenced by the vanguard movements and by a shift in the perception of the world by average Europeans who survived the war. *La Grande Illusion* (*The Great Illusion*) is a complex and multifaceted attempt to trace the changes within the human relationships affected and modified by the First World War. An approach to filmic message, its
intentions and its impact requires consideration of the filmic text from various perspectives. From the first perspective, on the surface of the movie and inscribed into the plot and story is the problem of relationships between social categories of class and nation and changes in these relations during the course of the war. Renoir places this problem at the centre of his visual story for several reasons. First reason would be the feeling of social transformation in Europe involving the category of class happening after the War. The class of the aristocracy vanished from realm of the public and from decision-making processes; it ceased to be one of the ruling classes transforming itself into an obsolete element of the epoch. This transformation is revealed in multiple texts from the period, such as Virginia Woolf’s novels Orlando and Mrs Dalloway. But the twenty-year interwar period was about to end at the time Renoir shot his film, and the times were marked by radically growing social tensions inspired by the consequences of war (in particular the desire for revanche in Germany). The fight between left-wing and right-wing parties determined European politics and their confrontation was seen both in the political struggle between the Popular Front movement and Italian and German Fascisms and in an open fight on the fields of the ongoing Civil War in Spain. This dynamic of confrontation conjured a sense of impending and total conflict, more modern and more disastrous than ever. Renoir himself was active supporter of the Popular Front and his political positions are present alongside his aesthetic views in the movie and so his presentation of the ideological tensions is understandable. The film is marked by a nostalgic attitude for the lost values of the past, lost models of friendship and fraternity, and the lost possibility of love in times of war. La Grande Illusion is more a war film, but the viewer does not see any fight scenes. From the very beginning the viewer’s expectations are formed when both French and German pilots are given the military mission to accomplish. But the director consciously omits the scene of aerial fight,
and instead takes the spectator to the time right after the battle and into the same space of the mess halls. From the very beginning then, Renoir defines his characters according to models of determined social classes who express themselves through the identification with the particular class they belong to rather than through the idea of nation, or an army in which they fight (either French or German).

As a result of the unseen fight, the viewer learns that the German pilot-aristocrat von Rauffenstein managed to shoot down a military plane with two French officers – Maréchal and de Boeldieu. Before that they were clearly introduced respectively as representatives of working class and aristocracy. Renoir applies multiple visual codes aimed at class identification. In the case of aristocrat de Boeldieu Renoir uses are his way of standing, his talk and the style of his speech, his insistence on wearing a monocle, and his facial expression. He is the one who tries to “detach” himself being in common space near the table from the representative of working class – mechanic and pilot Maréchal. They both have close military ranks and both are enclosed in hermetic spaces, first of the plane and then within the prison cells in POW camps. Finally they both fight for France and demonstrate their patriotic feelings. But they are divided by the invisible barrier of their class origin, upbringing, education, etc. Applying literary analogies we could assume that de Boeldieu could be a perfect character emblematic of the society shown by Marcel Proust whereas Maréchal comes off the pages of the naturalistic novels by Émile Zola (Renoir who shot his adaptation of Nana in 1926). Another time when the expectations of the contemporary spectator are frustrated or unexpectedly challenged is the scene in which German pilot-aristocrat von Rauffenstein invites to lunch the crew of the plane he just shot down in the battle, during which Maréchal is wounded in his hand. This gesture is another trait of the sensibility in which the war is perceived not as a brutal, massive extermination mechanism, but
rather as a certain sport or exercise with its own rules, ethics and principles of fair play (or, code of behaviour). No more perception of the war as a sport/duty occurring after the First World War form an integral part of the changes in cultural sensibility and patterns of relations between people, or their affinities.

The movie by Renoir has a linear structure divided into four parts that could be called chapters (O’Shaughnessy, *La Grande Illusion* 49). The first part is the lunch shared by the German military and their fellow French pilots and prisoners. The second part deals with everyday life of French prisoners and their attempts to escape from the military camp of Hallbach. They live in the abandoned stables and try to prepare an escape plot digging a tunnel. The third part takes place within the space of another military concentration camp located in the ancient castle. And the final part shows Maréchal and Rosenthal’s escape from the castle and their temporary stay in a house of Elsa, a German widow who lost all the males from her family because of the war. Within the spatial and temporal displacements of the characters in the movie Renoir never abandons his main project to explore class, national, social and intimate relationships. For this purpose he depicts his characters around the stereotypes of the class they belong to and creates double structures of their relations. Every character has his counterpart or class-and-social antagonist. Maréchal is clearly opposed to de Boeldieu, de Boildieu is opposed to von Rauffenstein by nationality although de Boildieu shares a class origin with von Rauffenstein. Apart from that, Rosenthal is French but has Jewish roots. His Jewish origin is connected to the story of his ancestors who became richest French bankers in a short period of time (Cardullo 138). The figure of the French Jew is not contingent taking into consideration the very ambiguous attitude to French Jews in France especially in the beginning of the XX-th century. It is worth mentioning here the well-known Dreyfus Affair widely discussed in France
during the time right before WWI and dividing French society into those who protected the ideas of justice and those who supported antisemitism. That case was widely reflected by French thought of the time. There are even suggestions that it resulted in death of Èmile Zola who was active supporter of the Jewish side in the Dreyfus Affair. It even became one of the main topics in Anatole France’s famous novel *Penguin Island*. Renoir consciously questions limits of national identity and the idea of “frenchness”. Rosenthal is a clear representative of the bourgeoisie, and the figure of the bourgeois is the most important social agent within the industrial societies of that time, replacing the vanishing aristocrats. Rosenthal becomes a friend of everyone in part because he always gets large packages of food that he generously shares with his comrades in the cell. But later on he declares openly to Maréchal that such a gesture is pure vanity in an attempt to prove that he is worth the respect of others. Therefore, Rosenthal cannot escape his self-identification with his Jewish ethnos and his marginal “incomplete” frenchness”. He fights in such a manner (by sharing food) this ethno-social inferiority complex.

Rosenthal becomes a subject of dialectic relations later in the movie as well, when he escapes from the castle together with Maréchal. In that scene Renoir shows to the viewer the “sin” of French antisemitism. Tired and exhausted, Maréchal has to carry the wounded Rosenthal and at some point he has a nervous breakdown and refuses to save his friend, shouting at him traditional racist insults. National stereotyping here enters into the conflict with the acquired social fraternity that is cemented by the sacrifice of de Boeldieu, who accepted death in order to distract Germans from the escape of two Frenchmen. In general these paired structures allow Renoir to exploit the mechanism of a dialectic in approaching to the problems he wants to consider (O’Shaughnessy, *Jean Renoir 128*). Also he gives his characters traits proper to the social type. A character considered as a personification of the social type is a tradition in French
literature and later in film that is rooted deeply back in the XIX century. An approach to the dialectics of social-individual was firstly offered by Balzac when he created the theoretical foundations for his *Human Comedy*. The social type was for him the foundational principle permitting existence and development of the society. Approach to the type of the character as to the generalizing was one of the foundations for the artistic method of French realism, culminating in the powerful text by Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*. Tradition of the realistic methods explored by the authors mentioned is definitely addressed by Renoir too. And the filmmaker made his adaptation of *Madame Bovary* in 1934, only 3 years before making *La Grande Illusion*.

The affinities of class shown in communication between von Rauffenstein and de Boeldieu deserve special consideration. Von Rauffenstein is the pilot who shoots down de Boeldieu’s plane. But after a severe injury he becomes the commander of the remote military camp in the castle where three French end up. His image is stiff and personifies the Prussian war model, based upon strict discipline. To underline his stiffness Renoir decorates von Stroheim’s character with a shining metal plate supporting his neck and ambiguously look like either the element of the medieval knight’s armour or like the halo of the Christian saint. For the same purpose there is the element of white gloves worn by the German officer all the time, not only to cover his injuries but to affirm his difference and special position in front of the others. His stiffness is contrasted to his sentimentality: while he grows geranium in his office, “the only plant in the castle” as he says. They can speak freely with de Boeldieu only about common friends and about their passion for horses. They communicate freely in multiple languages changing them in the course of conversation and perform codeshifting in such a way (Smith 45). Von Rauffenstein is conscious of their class decay and waning power. He tries to hold for his French counterpart in search of lost values that his nation cannot provide him anymore. At this
point it is also relevant to mention that Renoir had a historic prototype for his von Rauffenstein character. One of the best World War I pilots was Manfred von Richthofen, called “The Red Baron.” He was an aristocrat, and his nickname derived from the fact that he was not only a baron but used a plane painted in red color to show his disdain for death. The red plane made him more visible (absurd from the military point of view) but it had its own good sense from the point of view of his pride and ambition. This pilot fought in the battles of Douamont and Verdun, mentioned in Renoir’s movie as a historic and military context, and perished on the battlefield.

Renoir considers relations between people in society as a game that has its own rules to be followed. Living through one’s life following a model of the game may bring this person towards winning or losing. In a more detailed way, this perception of the society as a chess board is definitely explored in Renoir’s later movie, Rules of the game (1939). But already in La Grande Illusion we can observe an attitude of characters towards the reality of war as an attitude of players to a game. In this context the concept of the game is rather more about sports than about gambling one’s life. The idea of perceiving military exercise or war in a ludic way in a broader sense dates back to previous centuries. And, in particular, we can observe a clear consequence of this attitude towards war by the characters who inherit memories of the archaic and pre-modern French-Prussian war that took place in 1871 and ended with the Second Empire in France. That was the last war with the participation of the German and the French, “played out” traditionally in the framework of Napoleonic wars. More narrowly, it means conducting the war as a tactical exercise involving mostly the military and leaving aside the peaceful population. At the same time such traditional war is not impersonal; it does not apply weapons of mass destruction and it has its own ethics close to the British idea of fair play in sports. Renoir’s characters, especially aristocrats, try to apply their outdated ideas on “just” war in everyday life,
but they fail to perceive the new nature of war within the industrial epoch. This new war is massive, the casualties are huge, and the weapons are sophisticated. Nevertheless both de Boeldieu and von Rauffenstein treat their military pilot’s roles similarly to position of a traditional cavalry officer. The horses in that case are substituted by the machines – military planes. Throughout the movie, Renoir consciously reiterates the impossibility to follow this traditional “cavalry” war model. The Hallbach concentration camp where the French prisoners live is nothing else than the remodeled stables, but the horses are not there anymore. At the same time, the walls of the camp are still decorated with the pictures of the horses that have disappeared. Horses do not appear in the entire movie. Characters travel by train, by plane, on foot, but never on horse. Failure to perceive new model of “massive” war expulses traditionally minded characters farther and farther from one concentration camp to another. Renoir ingenuously shows this in rapidly changing frames with the tables showing the number of the camps from two to eighteen. The last camp (number eighteen) symbolically turns out to be the medieval castle in the mountains, the symbol of archaic past that absorbs both von Rauffenstein and de Boeldieu. That space is shown by Renoir as one deprived of life. The only living thing there except for prisoners is the geranium in von Rauffenstein’s office as he bitterly declares. De Boeldieu consciously provokes von Rauffenstein to shoot him and the latter cuts down the flower as the French officer dies.

At the same time, the game-style or playful and ironic atmosphere is present in multiple scenes from the movie. Despite the fact that Verdun was the most massive battle of the war where chemical weapons were applied almost for the first time in history, Renoir’s characters behave within different patterns of playing with each other and with the Germans. It can be verbal playing, communication using puns and jargon from different social groups, singing
popular songs etc. Any serious activity carried out by the prisoners is shown by Renoir as a forbidden game of the children in the kindergarten at a time when they are supposed to sleep. Such is the attempt to dig the tunnel out of camp while they hide ground in the bags. One of French almost dies of asphyxia. Another time they try to hide the rope intended for escape from the castle. The playing attitude is staged by Renoir as a model of the psychological condition of the prisoners who do not have any freedom of choice and, therefore, act as children. This pattern changes only once when they get to know about the seizure of Douamont in time of theatrical play where the French men wear female clothes and sing frivolous songs. At this time their attitude changes from playful to passionate and solemn at the same time – males take off the female wigs and sing “La Marseillaise”. This deviation results inevitably in punishment.

Maréchal ends up in a punishment cell. Once again we see an example of the archaic model for the relations between war rivals, when the German guard tries to help Maréchal emotionally, offering him food, tobacco and finally a mouth harmonica. This attitude would be unimaginable in future wars because of wars de-personified nature. Precisely an ability to play a tune is a key to escape from the inevitable trap of grim reality, allowing Maréchal to enter once again into the protection of the symbolic space of the game. Playing a tune brings his emotional condition back to normal. All prisoners of war in the camp feel this emotional displacement caused by their loss of free will. In their case it equals to the loss of manhood or virility. The impossibility to assume responsibility for the actions is unsupportable and does not correspond to their social stereotypes of the time. The men try to overcome it in any possible way. They try to escape building the tunnel; they try to hide in the textual space, as the ex-school teacher who voraciously reads Pindar all the time. They try to escape to the atmosphere of the banquet, supported by food from Rosenthal. Finally they assume the change of gender roles by switching symbolically the sexual
identity to females in their play. The virility is returned by the good news from the frontline and lost once again almost immediately, obliging all of them to return into the protective realm of the game. The game rules the prisoners life up to the end. The final escape plot crafted by de Boeldieu is based upon collectively playing flutes. That scenario sounds pretty awkward and absurd, but its point is to distract the Germans. At the same time, the scene where the French aristocrat attracts the guards by playing the flute and running away on the roof is the exact repetition of the medieval legend about Pied-Piper of Hamelin, in which the character playing flute managed to save the town from the army of rats. Same thing happens here in the medieval castle, where de Boeldieu sacrifices his life in order to let Maréchal and Rosenthal save themselves. Here he commits the move considered unacceptable by von Rauffenstein. He betrays his class affinity to a German aristocrat in favour of human affinity and national fraternity with his fellow French friends and comrades. Before dying de Boeldieu declares this move to be a conscious one and von Rauffenstein supports him, lamenting that their time had gone and that they are as obsolete as the castle they are in.

So the idea of the game is present in the filmic text in several ways. Firstly, it is the perception of the war itself as a game resulting from historic tradition going back to codes of chivalry. Secondly, it is the attitude of the characters to their situation, applying codes of conduct proper to the game in order to avoid any serious interpretations. It is made in order to ease the impact of traumatic reality on them. In the end the game proves to be even stronger than death as it is proved by the example of de Boeldieu who continues to play even knowing of fatal consequences.

The game in a more narrow sense is a part of the general social codes of interpersonal relations proper to previous times to the XIX century, vanishing in the upcoming industrial
As it has been already mentioned, relations between people changed after the experience of massive destruction caused by the war resulting in depersonalization. That contributed to elimination of the category of the individual in favour of the category of the masses. At this point it is relevant to address the theory of the advent of masses proclaimed by J. Ortega y Gasset in his famous work *The Revolt of the Masses*. There he argues that in Europe after World War I takes place “the accession of the masses to complete social power” (Ortega y Gasset 8). According to Ortega it means simplification of the social life, bringing in the primitive models of mass cultural and ideological production. Total standardization and industrialization of social life centered on consumption result in disappearing ethic and aesthetic values. Cultural production is negatively influenced in order to correspond to the tastes and to the interests of the masses who are incapable of individual critical judgment. Technical progress accompanying this process may be considered as something positive at first sight. But after more detailed consideration Ortega comes to the conclusion that technical progress does not produce humanistic values per se, but rather contributes to the development of the new technological barbarism. Ortega reconsiders the traditional opposition of civilization and barbarism (offered by D. Sarmiento among others as far back as in XIX century) and comes to the conclusion that only technological development results in civilizational primitivism. This dialectics is partially present in Renoir’s movie, as well. Technological gains represented in the film are military aircrafts (never shown on the screen but spoken about) and massive machine guns in the medieval castle. They are obviously opposed to the book of Pindar, carefully read by one of the characters who exclaims that “Pindar is above the war, above that all,” while the Germans are trying to destroy the book. For Renoir civilization culminates in the perfection of weapons of mass destruction ending up with systematic elimination of people. He underlines this position with the visual parallel of the line
of portraits in house of Elsa, the German widow. The frame contains a line of portraits of men, all of different ages and all killed at war. At the same time the table in the house of Elsa is very long and big. It delivers the message through its emptiness, as far as all men who used to sit at that table were systematically eliminated by the machine of war. Resolving the dilemma of civilization versus barbarism, Renoir performs a pantheist move in traditions of French Enlightenment. Maréchal conducts a significant and ironic “dialogue” with the cow in the stable. He declares the affinities among all the living things in the universe and artificial nature of the borders between people and nations. The cow responds to him with a moo. Renoir constructs the frame in this scene to underline biological nature and the common “natural” origin of Maréchal (with his large expressive “rustic” features of Jean Gabin) and the cow put together on a single horizontal line, allowing the viewer to sense the common nature of both of them. This episode is a declaration in favor of pantheism and pacifism and seems to be a rather radical move, taking into consideration the socio-political context of the time when the movie was shot and distributed.

The war as a phenomenon contributed vastly to the dehumanization of multiple spheres of life. In this context I use term of “dehumanization” in the sense expressed in the essay by J. Ortega y Gasset The Dehumanization of Art. In that text he argues that the human aspect was expelled from contemporary art. The idea of compassion, sharing emotion and obtaining Aristotelian catharsis was largely sacrificed to the form of the art object (Ortega y Gasset, Dehumanization of Art 9). Therefore, the art was losing its human component. La Grande Illusion in this particular respect seems to be an open declaration against dehumanization, an attempt to bring back the image and the message into the space of human emotion, founded partially on compassion. No wonder Christian values are so important in the film. We can
observe large crucifies several times in the rooms. The only female figure is the figure of the mother (Elsa has a daughter), and at the same time she has a cow – the biblical calf who helps Maréchal to formulate and declare his humanistic views. Loss of humanism is a loss of uniqueness for each human being, which makes it easier to justify mass destruction and mass murder. W. Benjamin in his text *Work of art in the mechanical age* declares that technical reproduction contributes to the loss of uniqueness personified by the work or art. He called this uniqueness “the aura” (Benjamin 302). The aura of the original traps the observer, the viewer. The original work of art builds a special relationship with the direct witness of the history and the art themselves. The copy simulates the original and delivers a false message according to Benjamin. The copy reproduced technically loses its aura, destroys the feeling of the immanence awaken by the original. At this point I would like to make a metaphorical connection of the Benjaminian “aura” to the idea of humanism in the period between wars. The work of art copied and dehumanized by the object of the depiction or by technical reproduction could be metaphorically connected to the loss of value of human life and uniqueness in the age of the advent of masses. In same way as a work of art, human life loses its uniqueness and value in favour of bigger social projects and illusions. The attitude reflected in a proverb attributed to Joseph Stalin: “when wood is cut splinters fly” (Thurston 152), meaning that in social processes victims are unavoidable. Renoir’s movie is a powerful manifesto against such a position, praising the value of individual human life yet acknowledging the vanity of this proposal. In one of the final scenes Maréchal and Rosenthal come to the conclusion that their war as the last one is a “great illusion” – the title and the message of the film.

Yet there is another metaphor used to describe the condition of the veterans of World War I worth mentioning here. It is the metaphor of “lost generation” attributed to Gertrude Stein
and used by E. Hemingway in the epigraph of his novel *The Sun Also Rises* (Hemingway 5). This metaphor characterizes a specific attitude to life proper to veterans of the war who failed to adapt to life in times of peace. It is a combination of post traumatic syndrome and an inability to adapt to peaceful life. The entire generation of veterans, including multiple intellectuals, were impacted by this syndrome. It also gave a title to entire literary current represented by some novels of Hemingway, R. Aldington, E.M.Remarque, and D.H. Lawrence among others. The veterans were incapable of adapting to the “world of the masses”. They felt profound disillusionment and rupture between the sense of humanistic relations created in times of war (like fraternity formed between Maréchal and Rosenthal) and dehumanized society of 1920s & 1930s. Renoir’s movie does not directly point at this phenomenon, but the atmosphere of loss and disillusionment conceived in the structure of the film creates parallels to the feelings personified by the characters of the lost generation. *La Grande Illusion* is a movie—a quest, or an odyssey, where the characters move within geographical and spiritual places on their way to create fraternity and friendship despite initial class and social differences. But there is no definite answer where these different people will arrive in the end. In the famous final scene the “united” Maréchal and Rosenthal (the worker and the bourgeois) walk on the surface of clear white snow, a tabula rasa. They go towards the neutral territory of Switzerland. So the director deliberately leaves the viewer with an open ending. In the same way the lost generation that formed powerful social impact in times of the movie creation mostly did not assume and existed on the margins of the new European order between two wars. Consequently the social model expressed by the movie shows origins of the disillusionment proper to the representatives of the lost generation that caused their passive social attitude.
Conclusions

As a result of approach to the Renoir’s movie it became possible to determine some traits of the decay of traditional social and communicative models based upon categories of class in times of World War I. The war as a gigantic challenge made a significant shift in social paradigms allowing formation of affinities between people based upon their personalities rather than class or nation. It could be clearly demonstrated by cases and models of Marèchal and Rosental, Marèchal and Elsa and failure of relations de Boeldieu – von Rauffenstein. Also it was possible to establish the game as one of the foundational metaphors of the movie, helping the characters to protect their identity and preserve themselves from the negative impact of the War.

The movie positions itself as an open text, and the testimony of the changes happening in human affinities between two world wars and powerfully attracts the spectator to participate in the challenging search for answers to the questions offered.
Works Cited


