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## Human Barriers in Renoir and Coppola

Artists, especially storytellers, often explore the nature of humanity and the ways that we attempt to elevate ourselves from the level of animals. Humans attempt to differentiate themselves from each other by establishing barriers and distinctions amongst themselves. This topic has been consistently returned to by artists for two main reasons. First, our world is so full of human barriers that all art wishing to capture some aspect of life must invariably include some of these barriers. Secondly, and more importantly to this paper, there is enormous potential for the artist to provide judgment on these barriers and use them to create interesting and relevant stories.

Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* is a classic example of a story driven by human imposed barriers. This story has as its fundamental conflict feuding between the Montagues and the Capulets. This barrier between the families is entirely fictional, though, so the audience easily sees this barrier as unnecessary. Instead, the audience sympathizes with the two lovers, whose predicament they can more easily understand.

However, barriers which are more applicable to an audience's life can be much more personal and less straightforwardly unnecessary than a fictional barrier like the one in *Romeo and Juliet*. For example, the social differences portrayed in Jean Renoir's *The Rules of the Game* were very applicable to those in the lives of the audience. This could have been one of the reasons why the movie was so poorly received at its opening.

One theme that Shakespeare repeatedly returns to is the idea of death as the ultimate unifier. No matter what a person accomplishes in his lifetime, in due course he becomes as dead as any other dead animal on the planet. Thus, it can be argued that any distinctions and barriers among people are utterly meaningless since death does not care about any of these differences. This is a theme that occurs not only in Shakespeare, but throughout art, including the films of Jean Renoir and Francis Ford Coppola.

Jean Renoir is considered a master at portraying the human spirit in film and I would like to begin my analysis by looking at his 1938 film *Grand Illusion*. In an interview with members of the American Film Institute, Jean Renoir states:

I discovered that *Grand Illusion* had another meaning. I discovered that *Grand Illusion* was perhaps a little approach to a big problem. Which is the problem of surrounding, and the problem of nations; which is the racist problem, the problem of how people from different

religions meet, how they can understand each other, how they cannot understand each other for some reasons. (Interview 60-61)

Renoir is summarizing the basic theme of the movie, which is much more complex than the simple escape story. The movie is really about the interactions between all these characters of different classes, nationalities, races, religions, and ideologies. As Renoir mentions later in the interview, the escape story is merely a “shell” that he can stuff all the important humanistic content into; this is the true content that he is interested in communicating in his art form (Interview 63).

*Grand Illusion* derives much of its humanistic power from the sheer ideological diversity of its characters. Von Rauffenstein is firmly entrenched in the classical ideals of aristocracy and class separation while Rosenthal believes in sharing all of his wealth with his comrades. These ideas are heavily clouded, though, by seemingly conflicting views of separation. To further my example, although von Rauffenstein and Rosenthal have opposite views on class distinctions, they both feel surprisingly little animosity for the opposing side in the prison system, perhaps stemming from their mutual respect for each other as fellow officers. So, there are interesting contradictions in the way we expect these characters to behave and the way they actually behave. Such

contradictions are useful in pointing out the follies of the human imposed barriers.

*Grand Illusion* is filled with such contradictions and many extreme character opinions on humanity and human barriers. The scene immediately following the downing of De Boeldieu and Maréchal is a sumptuous feast in which prisoners and guards alike take pleasure in the meal. This scene is quite amazing, considering these men were in mortal combat with each other mere hours earlier. A German officer even offers to help cut Maréchal's meat, since Maréchal has wounded his arm in battle. While this scene may be typical of the historical interaction between opposing officers in WWI, Renoir's emphasis on the civility between the two sides does not go unnoticed. Instead, the respect with which the officers treat each other makes the audience wonder why they would ever fight each other in the first place. In a television interview with André Labarthe, Renoir says "All these people are sentimental, as are all these types of societies, as are all the people who give in to their instincts and close their eyes to the world," (Renoir 202). Although he is talking about *The Rules of the Game* in this quote, his idea is applicable to all of his films. One of the great unifying aspects of humanity, according to Renoir, is the inherent sympathy and sentiment that all people share with each other. This

becomes more evident, according to Renoir, when you close your eyes to all the barriers and boundaries that have been established by society and civilization.

War itself is usually a manifestation of the national and religious differences between people. Throughout *Grand Illusion*, Renoir seems to emphasize that these boundaries are unnecessary. As I mentioned earlier, the banquet scene shows the pointlessness of drawing national distinctions, since men of different nationalities can get along so well together. At the end of the film, as Rosenthal and Maréchal escape into Switzerland, the German soldiers stop firing because they assume that the French soldiers have passed through the invisible country border. This scene evokes amazement in the audience that such a meaningless line on a map could have such important implications to life and death. Furthermore, Maréchal's romance with Elsa shows the unimportance of language or national differences. Similar to Shakespeare's theme in *Romeo and Juliet*, the scenes with Maréchal and Elsa show that love is an inherently human trait, unlike the artificial barriers erected by society.

By emphasizing the universality of human nature, Renoir seems to mourn the existence of human barriers. The barriers in *Grand Illusion* are so glaring and unnecessary that the audience realizes the folly in creating

such barriers. Von Rauffenstein is the prime example of a character that believes in the aristocracy and social class separations. He treats de Boeldieu as an equal and a favored prisoner, when it is apparent to the audience that de Boeldieu does not deserve this treatment. Or, rather, that the other French prisoners deserve the favored treatment as much as de Boeldieu does. Von Rauffenstein is willing to spare de Boeldieu a search of his belongings, but von Rauffenstein's trust is misplaced, since de Boeldieu lies to him and tells him there is nothing hidden. From this exchange, it is clear that although de Boeldieu is of a higher class, he is no more honorable than any of the other French prisoners. Instead, he is bound to them by their collective desire to escape their German guards. Von Rauffenstein wishes he could give de Boeldieu his own private room, but again, de Boeldieu is no more deserving of a private room than any of the other French prisoners. In fact, Rosenthal seems like he should be the most deserving, since he always shares his food and drink with the other prisoners. De Boeldieu, on the other hand, generally seems somewhat aloof and detached from the other French soldiers.

One interesting point that Leo Braudy makes in his book *Jean Renoir: The World of His Films*, is that the characters speak 4 different languages throughout the movie: French, German, English, and Russian. In many

instances, they transition seamlessly between languages, illustrating the universality of human thought, no matter what the method of communication. This idea must have been very familiar to Jean Renoir, who was born into the world of art. By diminishing the importance of any particular language, Renoir emphasizes that language is merely a contrived method of communication. The language barrier is an interesting issue and comes fully into play when Maréchal is unable to communicate to the English prisoners about the tunnel they are digging. Ironically, the existence of different languages in the world prevents the prisoners from communicating to each other.

In his book *Three Philosophical Filmmakers*, Irving Singer describes the “return to nature” process that pervades Renoir’s work, especially *Grand Illusion* (Singer 185). This idea is very closely tied into the idea of dissolving barriers and emphasizing the uselessness of such barriers. The natural world is much less densely populated the barriers our society has imposed upon itself. For example, animals rarely deal with problems such as unreasonable borders, social class, wealth, religion, and political barriers. *Grand Illusion* can be interpreted as a return to nature, especially for Maréchal and Rosenthal, as is explored thoroughly in Singer’s book. Most specifically, Maréchal and Rosenthal are thrust into the wilderness

and forced to survive, abandoning most ties to society and civilization. Here, there survival becomes the most important aspect, uniting them in the basic drive of humanity. However, even with most of the human barriers broken down, there are still remaining barrier problems with the men, most notably the issue of religion and nationality. Maréchal makes an anti-Semitic comment, angering Rosenthal as they journey away from their prison. There is also tension when the two men arrive at the house of the German woman since they are unsure how they will be treated by a German.

Although Renoir often claims in interviews to simply be a storyteller, he is really more accurately described as a teller of humanity. His films often point out the follies of the rules and barriers we establish on ourselves and use as a foundation the fact that we are simply animals with basic wants and desires. I would like now to shift the topic of this paper to Francis Ford Coppola, who seems at first to have little in common with Renoir. Instead of telling ordinary stories of ordinary lives, Coppola has followed the Hollywood tradition of telling grand and sweeping stories full of action and glamour. However, upon closer inspection, it should be noted that Coppola has quite a bit in common with Jean Renoir, especially with



his portrayal of human barriers. My analysis of Coppola will draw from his films *The Godfather*, *The Godfather Part II*, and *The Conversation*.

In his book titled *Coppola*, Peter Cowie writes:

Coppola regards Michael [Corleone] as akin to Georgie Minafer in *The Magnificent Ambersons*; alone at the last, rid of his enemies but with nothing to live for. That is his 'come-uppance'. The accumulated wisdom of Michael's career is contained in a remark he drops when discussing the assassination of Hyman Roth: 'If anything in this life is certain, if history has taught us anything, it's that everyone can be killed.' (Cowie 101)

This quote goes back to Shakespeare's theme of death as the great uniting force. Natural and unnatural deaths pervade *The Godfather* and *The Godfather Part II* and in all cases, the victim winds up dead, no matter his or her initial wealth or power level. Vito Corleone, for all his power and intelligence, is still a human and has a completely normal death in a tomato patch, while his grandson plays with him. This scene is one of the most touching scenes in the entire trilogy because it emphasizes Vito's humanity. At this point in the movie, we have seen Vito as a ruthless criminal and even as a badly wounded human being. But when Vito talks to Michael about his grandson and then goes on to play with the young boy, we see that Vito is just as human as any other person. Only when he loses all the powers and responsibilities of being Don Corleone is he able

to come down to the level of a regular human being and laugh and chase his grandson around the tomato patch.

Other characters' deaths are equally plain and uniform despite the original social class and wealth of the original person. Everyone's death is messy and gruesome, from Carlo's kicking legs through the windshield, to Moe Green's blood spurting out of his eye socket. As in Shakespeare, all the characters are united in death and the elaborate social structures and hierarchies that they have spent their lives developing are instantly destroyed.

The audience develops a great amount of sympathy and caring for Vito Corleone because of his fearless devotion to basic humanistic principles, namely a clear sense of right and wrong as well as strong love and devotion to his family. Although he is a ruthless criminal at the head of a crime syndicate, his actions seem justifiable because at his core he is only protecting his family, much like the alpha male in a herd of apes would protect the herd. His love for his family is overwhelming and is made especially clear when he strives to entertain his grandson Anthony in the tomato patch. He has a clear sense of justice and right and wrong; for example, he refuses to enter the drug business with Solozzo because he believes it is an immoral business.

At first glance, the Corleone family seems like it is full of highly established barriers and hierarchies. For example, at the opening wedding sequence the sheer amount of ritual and organization involved in meeting the Don shows the amount of unnecessary human control imposed on the family structure. However, Coppola's point in making the family structure so elaborate is not to criticize the development of the strict organizational structure; rather, it is to celebrate the persistence of the core human values propagated from the top by Vito Corleone. Throughout most of *The Godfather*, the sense and joy of the family structure is well present. In the scene where Clemenza is cooking Italian food on the stove, Michael enters the room and is just "one of the guys", even though none of the other characters present is a member of the immediate Corleone family. They all treat him as an equal and even go so far to tease him about his relationship with Kay. Throughout *The Godfather*, Coppola makes a point of showing the closeness of the family instead of emphasizing the rigidity of their organizational structure. Similar to many parts in *Grand Illusion*, the characters realize that there are separations between them, but still understand that they are all at the core humans on the same level. In fact, the organizational structure of the family hardly functions as a barrier. Luca Brasi, who has hardly anything useful to say, obtains a meeting with Don

Corleone during Connie's wedding. Don Corleone treats him fairly with respect and friendship, as he does with every other member of his extended family. Vito is treating Luca as a close friend, rather than just a relatively low level thug.

The biggest tragedy of *The Godfather Part II* is Michael's loss of all the family values that make Vito Corleone so likable. With the death of both parents and his crumbling relationships with Kay and Connie, Michael's immediate family is truly falling apart. This is painfully settled with the execution of Fredo. At this point, Michael has a lot in common with von Rauffenstein; they are both going through the motions of the formerly established structure without any of the humanistic values that should accompany that structure. By this, I mean that Michael is still performing the actions of being the head of the family, but has lost the family love as well as the sense of right and wrong. Thus, he has lost what makes him human and subsequently loses the audience's sympathy.

The conflict between Mario Puzo and Francis Ford Coppola is described at length by Jeffrey Chown in his book, *Hollywood Auteur*. Chown describes how Coppola took the basic storyline from Puzo's book and injected his own ideas into the story, allowing the movie to stand completely on its own (Chown 67). Puzo has complained that Coppola

took an essentially honorable and just society portrayed in his novels and turned it into a selfish world in the films (Chown 67). Perhaps this is an indictment of the portrayal of Michael Corleone in *The Godfather Part II*, but I think Coppola in general has done a good job in emphasizing the honor of the world, at least in *The Godfather*. All of the loyal members of the Corleone family are highly honorable and likable. Again, this goes back to the family values injected into the entire structure by Vito Corleone.

The introduction of Hyman Roth in *The Godfather Part II* introduces an interesting character in that he has a different religion and lifestyle than the other crime families. Even his house in Miami looks different, with white walls and a television instead of the oak paneling that is so common in the Corleone and other Sicilian families. The Sicilians in the movie treat Hyman Roth with great disdain, mainly because of his ethnic background. In the end, though, he acts just like many of the other Sicilian crime bosses though, attempting to arrange the murder of Michael Corleone. Hyman Roth is also murdered, and dies just like any other human being would. These events emphasize that the ethnic and religious background of Roth are insignificant in differentiating him from the other mobsters. Chown summarizes this idea succinctly by saying "...racism is more a tool than a real attitude," (Chown 82). In other words, the characters use racism to try

and provoke their enemies into acting irrationally; however, they realize (or should realize) that there really is no significance to the racial slurs they are committing. Chown uses this example in the scene where Jack Woltz is insulting Tom Hagen's German-Irish heritage, but it is equally applicable to the general disdain for Hyman Roth's Jewish heritage.

I would like to finish this paper with a brief look at Coppola's *The Conversation*, which is significantly different than any of the other films mentioned so far. In this film, Harry Caul imposes his own barriers in his life rather than being born into them. He is so paranoid of everyone and everything that he defensively retreats from any sort of human interaction. His plastic looking raincoat is a symbol of his separation from the world, and he almost never takes it off in the film, not even in his dream sequence or when he is fooling around with his mistress.

Although Harry attempts to wall himself off from any human interaction, he is still innately a human being with thoughts and feelings. This is evident when he opens up to Meredith and sleeps with her after the party in his office. Also, despite his attempts to distance himself from his work, his humanistic impulses take over and force him to love and care at a basic level what happens to the people in the tape. Finally, he is able to

express himself through his music, one of the fundamental forms of human expression.

In *The Conversation*, the main tragedy is that whenever Harry lowers his self created barriers, he gets hurt as a result. When he sleeps with Meredith, she ends up betraying him and stealing his tape. When he tries to save Mark and Ann (the couple being recorded), it turns out they were the criminals in the first place. Finally, as he is expressing himself through his music, he is recorded and violated in his most sacred sanctuary: his own apartment.

Harry's main problem is that he is so hypersensitive that he has created these barriers as protection and invariably gets hurt when he lowers them. Coppola is passing judgment on Harry, saying that humanity was not meant to live with such hypersensitivity. Rather, Harry would be much better off, as the audience would be able to relate to, just relaxing a little bit and enjoying life. Harry's humanistic elements are so deeply buried within himself that he has become incapable of enjoying life; rather, he is doomed to simply suffer whenever he tries to.

Jean Renoir and Francis Ford Coppola share many basic philosophical ideas in their films. Both are able to emphasize the prevailing power of humanity even in situations where social structure and other

human imposed barriers seem like they should dominate and snuff out the human spirit. Coppola goes further to show the fall of humanistic attributes and the tragedy that occurs when only barriers remain with no basic attributes of love and honor to anchor those barriers. Renoir, on the other hand, never sees a need for the existence human imposed barriers, showing that all humans are the same and that there is never a reason to differentiate between people.

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