

The Legacy of Babel: Language in Jean Renoir's *Grand Illusion*

Jeffery Alan Triggs

1988

It has become fairly commonplace to assert that film, like music, transcends the nationality of its audience.¹ Stanley Kauffmann has argued that film “is the only art involving language that can be enjoyed in a language of which one is ignorant.”² This depends, of course, on the role language plays in a particular film, the extent to which it functions as an integral part of a film’s meaning, and the way it functions with the film’s other constituents. In some films a foreign language provides a real barrier to full appreciation, while in other films the language may play a relatively insignificant role (as in opera) and do little to hinder the viewer’s appreciation beyond focusing his attention on other, perhaps more important, elements. In polyglot films the issue of language is seemingly most transparent. We are exposed to languages as we encounter them in life. Awash in such a Babel, we are frustrated not by an artistic barrier but by the conditions of life itself.

In fact, the polyglot text is a conscious artistic strategy feigning linguistic naturalism, and we should attend carefully to its motive and function. The polyglot text of Jean Renoir’s *Grand Illusion*, for instance, is the central constituent of the film’s meaning. While critics like James Kerans and Alexander Sesonske have noted the prominence of the film’s various languages, the detailed functioning of language as the film’s central metaphor is largely ignored. The issue of language constitutes the film’s most important and tragic theme: the separation of nations and even the social classes within nations.

The setting of *Grand Illusion*, a series of prisoner of war camps, provides Renoir with the perfect opportunity to mix together all the major races and lan-

¹Copyright ©1988 by Jeffery Triggs. All rights reserved. This essay first appeared in *The New Orleans Review* 15.2 (Summer 1988): 70-74.

²Kauffmann 418



Figure 1: Bruegel's *Tower of Babel*

guages of Europe. The camps become a microcosm of Europe itself, which has exploded into war through mutual misunderstanding and suspicion. Treating incidents in the middle of the war, Renoir avoids dealing in detail with its notoriously ambiguous origins. Blame need not be assigned; everyone in the film is bound up in the same unhappy circumstance. Renoir's use of different languages impresses us forcefully with the frustrating breakdown of human understanding that the war has brought about. Besides French, the major tongue of the film, we hear snatches of German, English, Russian, and various patriotic, folk, or popular songs in these languages (e.g. "Tipperary," "Die Heimat," "The Marseillaise," French music hall songs). Aside from the polyglot aristocrats, there is little communication between the ordinary men of different nations. An early scene shows a Russian soldier trying to teach a foreign soldier how to conjugate the verb "to be," but we are meant

to see that this communication is still at a very tentative and rudimentary stage. More typical is the sarcastic mimicing of other languages. The Parisian actor pronounces “*auf Wiedersehen*” with a mocking French accent. The French soldiers parody the stolid guard who always repeats “*streng verboten*.” Interestingly, it is especially forbidden (“*streng streng verboten*”) to talk with the guards—that is, to attempt to communicate with foreigners.

Even attempts at friendliness are frustrated at the level of language. When Marechal is in solitary confinement and on the point of going “stir crazy,” a kindly German guard tries to talk with him, but Marechal refuses any conversation not in the French language, the only one he knows. Finally, the German gives him a mouth organ on which he plays the popular song, “Frou-Frou,” with which the film began. Outside the door and significantly unknown to Marechal, the guard begins to hum the same tune. Music, the so-called “universal language,” offers some promise of communion here, perhaps even a premonition of the vision of harmony with which the film will end, but the comfort is small and the scene remains pathetic. One should note that only “pure” music without the taint of language can have even this effect. Once music is allied to language, as in “The Marseillaise” or “Die Heimat,” its effect is quite the opposite. The singing of “The Marseillaise,” with which the allied soldiers interrupt their revue (one of the few positive events embraced by both the Germans and the prisoners), has the effect of stirring up nationalist hatred.

What is in some respects the point of supreme frustration occurs when the French officers are being moved out after having just completed their tunnel, a work entailing much labor and considerable peril. While they are waiting to leave, a group of new prisoners is arriving. One of the new prisoners, an English officer, drops his suitcase, and under the pretext of helping, Marechal breaks ranks and tries desperately to explain to him about the existence of the tunnel. The Englishman cannot understand Marechal, however, and only answers him with “It’s really too kind of you.... I’m sorry, I don’t understand French.” Thus, the new English prisoners lose the opportunity to use the tunnel. As in the story of the Tower of Babel, human endeavor is frustrated at the point of completion by the confusion of tongues. But the problem is more dangerous than mere frustration—lack of understanding leads to suspicion, hatred, and war. The Frenchmen cannot understand the human tragedy of the two old German women at the gate who watch the youthful soldiers and murmur: “*Die armen Jungen*.” Paul Fussell has suggested interestingly that

What we can call gross dichotomizing is a persisting imaginative

habit of modern times, traceable, it would seem, to the actualities of the Great War. "We" are all here on this side; "the enemy" is over there. "We" are individuals with names and personal identities; "he" is a mere collective entity. We are visible; he is invisible.³

What Renoir implies is that by not understanding the "enemy's" language, we deny him a name and make him invisible and therefore infinitely frightening.

As much as language underlies the separation of nations, it also underlies the separation of classes, which is the second major concern of the film. Indeed, the characters provide a microcosm of the European class system in the early twentieth century. It is interesting to note that not everyone in the film is limited by the barriers of his mother tongue. The two aristocratic officers, von Rauffenstein and de Boeldieu, as well as the scholar, Demolder, can speak or understand several languages other than their own. The Jewish officer, Rosenthal, who has relatives on both sides of the front, can speak German. With the possible exception of Rosenthal, however, the linguistic skills of these characters are ineffectual instruments of human understanding. The reasons are various and have mostly to do with class.

Demolder, the Greek professor, is the object of much ridicule. To the aristocrats he is never more than a subject of minor amusement. They ignore him, for instance, when he gawks like an undergraduate art history student at the Medieval fortress of Wintersborn, where they are being held prisoner. Even the middle class Marechal parodies him at one point, exclaiming that the castle is "Fourteenth century," to which Boeldieu replies wittily, "Pure Gothic." Ironically, the scene was actually shot in a chateau built by Wilhelm II.⁴ Demolder's books, in which no one else is the least bit interested, disturb Boeldieu's cards. Boeldieu remarks "coldly" that Demolder's dictionaries are going to be in his way. Demolder is in the process of translating Pindar, whom he considers "the greatest of the Greek poets." We are left in no doubt, however, that the undertaking will not be as momentous as Demolder would like to think. Rauffenstein's contemptuous comment upon learning of Demolder's activity is: "Poor old Pindar!" Boeldieu says that Demolder has "the soul of a bird." Although Demolder has a sentimental worship of books (he is incensed when the Russians set their books on fire) and studies a foreign language, his interests are ineffectual. The student of a "dead language," he offers no help in bridging the language barrier between the French and Germans.

The aristocrats, Boeldieu and Rauffenstein, might effect such a bridge between

³Fussell 75

⁴Sesonske 286

the nationalities, but they are prevented from doing so by the duties and isolation of their class. They are separated from their fellow officers as much as anything by language. Boeldieu, for instance, is isolated by a certain class dialect as well as what one might call his idelect. Throughout the film, he speaks in a witty, formal, epigrammatic style typical of the aristocracy. At Hallbach, noticing the young German soldiers drilling while the prisoners of war prepare their play, he comments: "On one side, children playing at soldiers. On the other, soldiers playing at children." The conversation at Wintersborn is distinguished by his witty banter with Rauffenstein. When the latter has finished showing his new prisoners around the fortress, Boeldieu remarks: "It was very pleasant of you, sir, to have shown us around your estate." The other French officers cannot or are not allowed thus to "pull off" their attempts at wit. Marechal's amusing joke about Maxim's does not go over with Rauffenstein. Boeldieu's formal style leaves his fellows cool to him and indeed suspicious of his motives. Marechal himself, who must "explain" Boeldieu to the others, notes at one point that "he's a good bloke, but you can't let yourself go with him, you can't feel free.... A different sort of education.... If ever you [Rosenthal] and I found ourselves in a bad spot, we'd just be a couple of poor down-and-outs, but him, he'd always be Monsieur de Boeldieu." Later in the film, when the bourgeois Marechal, aware of Boeldieu's impending sacrifice, attempts a deeper level of friendliness, Boeldieu puts him off: "I'm not doing anything for you personally. That excuses us from the danger of getting emotional." When Marechal questions Boeldieu's continued use of the formal "vous" after eighteen months together, Boeldieu responds: "I say vous to my mother and my wife."

Rauffenstein is similarly isolated from his fellow officers by class and language. His preferred languages seem to be French and English, and when he does speak German his voice takes on an unaccustomed and alien rasp. His junior officers are also of the middle class, and they consider him something of a lunatic for what is to them eccentric behavior. Rauffenstein's careful cultivation of the geranium, "the only flower in the castle," is ridiculed by his martinet of a junior officer, a former headmaster who claims to "know how to keep that gang of devils [the prisoners] in their place." Interestingly, in the moving scene of Boeldieu's death, Rauffenstein sacrifices this last "flower of the aristocracy."

Boeldieu and Rauffenstein, isolated from their fellow officers, have the most in common with each other, but ultimately they are separated by something else they have in common: their patriotic duties as aristocratic career officers. Rauffenstein seems to regret this more than Boeldieu and is keener to maintain their privileged intimacy. To effect this intimacy he makes continual use of the En-

glish language. A language common to the aristocracy of Europe, English allows Rauffenstein to distinguish himself and Boeldieu from the others, in effect to talk over their heads. It becomes their special language. In the early banquet scene, Rauffenstein, recognizing Boeldieu's name, presumes his knowledge of English. Sesonke has pointed out that "Rauffenstein switches from French to English without question or explanation, knowing that a 'de Boeldieu' will of course understand," whereas "Marechal is surprised to find his German neighbor speaking French and seeks an explanation."⁵ In a later scene at Wintersborn, Rauffenstein shows off his twenty-five Maxim machine-guns to Boeldieu and the others. Marechal attempts to imitate Boeldieu's witty style: "Why, of course, sir. Personally, I prefer the restaurant..." The response of the two aristocrats to this infringement on their stylistic territory is interesting. Boeldieu, at whose expense the joke is made, accepts it with a benign resignation, as a master does a pupil's imitations: "Touché." Rauffenstein, on the other hand, will not condescend to the humor of an inferior. He shifts immediately to English, talking as he knows over the heads of the others: "I used to know a pretty girl at Maxim's... back in 1913. Her name was Fifi." Boeldieu responds also in English: "So did I." Rauffenstein's aristocratic snub recalls, as he likes to do, a nostalgic time before the war when aristocratic career officers did not have to accept middle class "officers" such as Marechal and Rosenthal as in any sense their equals.

Both Rauffenstein and Boeldieu know, however, that the old European aristocrats, along with the peculiar form of international understanding they possessed, are a dying breed, cut off from their own lower classes and no longer in control of events. In a private conversation in Rauffenstein's quarters, again punctuated with English phrases, they discuss this situation candidly. Rauffenstein admits his distaste for his present position as commandant. "I was a fighting man and, now, I am a bureaucrat, a policeman. It is the only way left for me to try and serve my country." When Boeldieu asks him why he made an exception in inviting him to his quarters, Rauffenstein responds disdainfully: "You call Marechal and Rosenthal... officers?" Whatever else the war brings, "it will be the end of the Rauffensteins and the Boeldieus." To Rauffenstein, such middle class soldiers are "the charming legacy of the French Revolution." Boeldieu comments that "perhaps there is no more need for us." Rauffenstein immediately asks: "And don't you find that is a pity?" Boeldieu responds, less certainly: "Perhaps." Boeldieu's scepticism suggests that if there is to be a solution to the problem of lack of international understanding, it will not come from an international aristocracy with an

⁵Sesonke 320

exclusive language.

Indeed, this point is dramatized in the final exchange of English between the two men. When Boeldieu devises a plan of escape for Marechal and Rosenthal, he reserves for himself the role of creating a diversion. While all the prisoners except Marechal and Rosenthal assemble for a general roll call, Boeldieu climbs the watch-tower and plays the tune, "Petit Navire," on a flute (an instrument he claimed earlier to have hated). He distracts the Germans long enough for his middle class comrades to effect their escape. When Rauffenstein learns of Boeldieu's dangerous escapade, he makes a final personal appeal to Boeldieu to surrender. Interestingly, the appeal is in English, unintelligible to his own men and the various prisoners.

Rauffenstein in English: Boeldieu, have you really gone insane?

Boeldieu in English: I'm perfectly sane.

Rauffenstein in English: Boeldieu, you understand that if you do not obey at once and come down, I shall have to shoot.... I dread to do that. I beg you... man to man, come back.

Boeldieu in English: It's damn nice of you, Rauffenstein, but it's impossible.

At this point, Rauffenstein is forced to shoot Boeldieu, and only afterward learns that Marechal and Rosenthal have escaped. To himself in English (in a language he can now use only with himself) he mutters, "so that is why," and suddenly shifting to a harsh German, orders the dogs called out to search for the escapees. In the end, the mutual intelligibility of the aristocrats is overcome by their intense sense of divergent duties. As Boeldieu comments on his deathbed when Rauffenstein begs his forgiveness, "I would have done the same thing. French or German... duty is duty." However moving the scenes with the two aristocrats may be, they cannot offer a solution to the problem of human understanding that the film poses. They represent rather a dead end.

If there is to be such a solution, Renoir seems to tell us, it must come from the middle class, from the Marechals and Rosenthals and Elsas of Europe. Accordingly, these characters dominate the film's final scenes. As Marechal and Rosenthal, who has injured his foot attempt to make good their escape, they are forced to seek shelter at a German farm house. It is here that they meet Elsa, a German widow with a five year old daughter. Her husband has been killed at Verdun, ironically the battle that wavered back and forth as background to the early

scenes at Hallbach. When she first discovers them, the two French soldiers, particularly Marechal, are suspicious of her. Marechal, threatening her with a log, is frustrated in his attempt to explain to her that they are not bandits but French soldiers (a fact she already guesses and questions in German). Rosenthal, though in considerable pain, is able to speak to Elsa in German and explain their situation. Interestingly, this is the first we learn of Rosenthal's knowledge of German. As a Jew with relatives in Austria, his problem has been how to allay the suspicions of his fellows and to fit in with the ordinary French officers. Perhaps for reasons such as these, he has kept quiet about his German until an emergency requires him to use it. Now he becomes literally and symbolically the translator and mediator between the French Marechal and the German Elsa. His linguistic mediation allows the relationship between these two, with its hope for eventual international understanding, to deepen.

Marechal's and Elsa's growing love for each other is expressed symbolically by their attempts to learn each other's language. Elsa invites this with frankness and simplicity. Unlike Boeldieu, who addresses even the intimate members of his family as "*vous*," Elsa immediately addresses the two French soldiers in the familiar. She invites them in with "*kommt herein*," the first friendly German words they have heard. Her only reproach is that they might wake her sleeping child. With perfect naturalness, she sets about tending Rosenthal's foot, which is, as he puts it, "*kaput*." And she earns their trust when a group of passing German soldiers knock at her window by not giving them away. (Ironically, the German soldier echoes in his own language Boeldieu's fatal "duty is duty." Like Boeldieu and Rauffenstein, the soldier is trapped by the ethos of duty in the insanity of the war.) At Elsa's farmhouse, however, the war now seems a distant mirage, an illusion of which we are reminded only by the empty chairs at Elsa's table and the mute photographs of her fallen family on the wall. Marechal begins speaking French to the "German cow" he finds in Elsa's barn, a preparation for his understanding of the German woman. While Rosenthal entertains the little girl, Lotte, with German nursery rhymes, Marechal helps Elsa with her chores and begins with Rosenthal's help to understand her German requests. At one point Marechal remarks that while he never understood a word of German spoken to him by his guards, he can understand Elsa's German. On Christmas Eve, Marechal and Rosenthal decorate a Christmas tree for Elsa and Lotte and construct a manger scene complete with Mary, Joseph, and baby Jesus, "my blood brother," as Rosenthal jokingly comments. They play a gramophone record (unadulterated music, the symbol of international understanding) and the delighted Lotte is treated to her Christmas celebration. This harmonious scene suggests the answer of the bourgeoisie to the

failure of Boeldieu's and Rauffenstein's aristocratic internationalism. Marechal is eager to understand the culture of his hosts. When Lotte wants to eat the baby Jesus and her mother tells her that he is not to be eaten, Marechal chimes in with a transfigured version of the only German he had known: "*Streng verboten.*" But unlike the sarcastic parodies of German at Hallbach, the irony here is gentle and reflexive. Before Lotte is put to bed, Marechal attempts tentatively his first friendly German sentence: "*Lotte hat bleu Augen,*" and is gently corrected by Elsa. At Hallbach, language learning did not go beyond the verb "to be," but at the farm, incipient love carries understanding forward. The climax of the scene is wonderfully suggestive. Marechal and Rosenthal retire for the night. Marechal picks up an apple and begins to eat it, indicating perhaps his renewed acceptance of life. He notices Elsa still standing by the tree, however, and putting the apple down, goes out to her and takes her in his arms.

The "peace" at Elsa's farm continues for some time and the love of Marechal and Elsa is suggested by their language learning. Marechal learns to say in German that Lotte's eyes are blue, while Elsa learns to say in French that the coffee is ready. But the war outside continues, and the day comes when Marechal and Rosenthal must leave. Interestingly, it is up to Rosenthal to explain the situation to Elsa. He arranges one last conversation between the two lovers. Moving as the conversation is, it is curious that Marechal speaks in French while Elsa speaks in German. We can hope at least that somehow they understand each other, but our hope is a matter of faith that the language barriers have been transcended by love. This delicate, trembling faith is the hope of the film. Marechal and Rosenthal will indeed go back to the real world of the war, and perhaps they will survive, and perhaps Marechal will return afterwards for Elsa—and perhaps Frenchmen and Germans will learn to live together—but the ambiguity of the war surrounds this hope. Elsa, not yet fluent in French, can listen to Marechal's promises only with her tears.

Renoir ends his film with such an ambiguity. As Marechal comments, "German snow and Swiss snow look pretty much the same!" In fact, the protagonists have traversed the western front from Holland to Switzerland, and do escape, but the fate of modern Europe is still uncertain: like the two dark stragglers in their valley of Swiss snow.

Works Cited

- Fussell, Paul. *The Great War and Modern Memory*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1975.
- Kauffmann, Stanley. *A World on Film: Criticism and Comment*. New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1966.
- Kerans, James. "Classics Revisited: 'La Grande Illusion.'" *Film Quarterly*. Vol. XIV, No. 2, Winter 1960: 10-17.
- Renoir, Jean. "Grand Illusion." *Masterworks of the French Cinema*. Ed. John Weightman. New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1974.
- Sesonske, Alexander. *Jean Renoir: The French Films, 1924-1939*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1980.