Martin O'Shaughnessy's _Jean Renoir_ (2000) is part of a collection on French and British film directors. Previous issues in the series include work on Méliès, Godard, Besson, and Beineix. O'Shaughnessy's purpose in this detailed book, enriched with synopses of Renoir's films and a complete filmography to guide the reader, is to give a general overview of the complete works of Renoir, as well as trying to find coherence, underlying themes, and correspondences which unite all his films. Renoir's films have undoubtedly been influenced by the historical and ideological context in which they were produced, as well as the itinerary of the director himself from the pre-war years until his exile in Hollywood, but the question of whether he has given prominence to these factors in his films is debatable.

After exploring Renoir's reflections about his own work, and the way he was perceived by his critics as well as the influence of his father, the well-known Impressionist painter Pierre Auguste, O'Shaughnessy follows the career of the writer, director, and actor from the silent era and the early 1930s (the Popular Front era when Marxists and Socialists allied) to the films he created during his Hollywood exile, and later in the early 1950s when he returned to France. Renoir published three major books later in his life. His popular memoir _My Life and My Films_ appeared in 1975 and followed a book about his father, _Renoir_ (1962), and a novel _Les
Cahiers du capitaine Georges_ (1966). These are personal documents about the man, the actor, and the director, and as such warrant focus. O'Shaughnessy's analysis is chronological and falls into six main parts: 1. 'An Uneven Career', 2. 'Renoir and the Critics', 3. 'The Early Films', 4. 'The Popular Front Years', 5. 'Renoir Americain', and 6. 'Late Renoir'. The first two chapters broach the issues of Renoir's political commitment or non-commitment in his writings, and oppose the Renoir of the Left with the Renoir of the auteurists. The auteurist critic hopes to identify the unique personality of the filmmaker through his entire work, and indeed there are recurring stylistic features throughout. However, having an auteurist approach alone would be too restrictive, as his films are far more complex and multi-dimensional. Unlike auteurist critics, who simply perceive his work as the expression of his personal style, or Left-side critics, who describe his films essentially in the light of political and ideological background, O'Shaughnessy feels that the complete works of Renoir is more a combination of various influences, among which lie aesthetics, sociology, national identity, politics, and ideology, without speaking of literature. Renoir's films have been adaptations of authors such as Flaubert, Maupassant, Zola, and Simenon, and this adds a symbolic and philosophical dimension.

In the following chapters O'Shaughnessy concentrates on the films produced by Renoir. He first of all intends to analyse the 1920s films from two perspectives: 'first, for their engagement with the tensions and anxieties that marked the France of the 1920's . . . second, for a consistent social vision' (62). Renoir's early films, such as _La Fille de l'eau_ (1924), a mixture of neo-realism, farce, and surrealism, and _La Petite marchande d'allumettes_ (1928), regarded as the best Renoir film of the silent era, with charming special effects, were modest films and not as successful as his later films. They can be considered early experiments. Although they show Renoir's lack of maturity as a filmmaker, they are cinematic achievements.

Looking at Renoir's contribution to the golden age of French cinema, O'Shaughnessy pairs up _La Chienne_ with _Madame Bovary_, which show obvious similarities such as their 'focus on the power of money and class' and the way they both 'ground their realism' (83). Renoir's early sound classic _La Chienne_ (1931) is a tragi-comedy which will prefigure the focus of 1930s French cinema on the lives of fringe society and the working class, not only in Renoir's films but also in those of, for example, Carne or Duvivier. There are indeed strong links between these three directors. _La Chienne_ presents us with an incisive analysis of class structure and human conduct and cruelty. _Boudu sauve des eaux_ (1932), which encompasses the farcical and the tragic possesses a near-documentary approach. With their depictions of the French capital -- its parks, cafes, music, quayside -- the films manage to capture the spirit of pre-war Paris. _Madame Bovary_ (1933), drawn from the novel by Gustave Flaubert, is poignant, absorbing, and tragic, primarily on account of the acting of Valentine Tessier in the lead role. Renoir's technique of filming from a distance gives the impression that the viewer is a voyeur peeping through each scene and a participant in the pathos of the unfolding dramas. 

Renoir's early neo-realist experiment with talkies consisted in taking his camera out on the streets and out into rural France, using untrained actors in principal roles, such as the native Southern speakers with regional accents in _Toni_ (1934). As Renoir phrased it: 'My aim was to give the impression that I was carrying a camera and microphone in my pocket and recording whatever came my way, regardless of its comparative importance.' [1] _Le Crime de Monsieur Lange_ (1936) conveys an anti-capitalist message and shows the political mood of the pre-war period in France. In this film, Amedee Lange (Renee Lefevre) symbolises the socialist hero struggling against the capitalist, obnoxious Monsieur Batala (Jules Berry). There is also quite clearly a social message in _Les Bas-fonds_ (1936), drawn from Gorki's play. The pairing of Gabin and Jouvet, the ruined aristocrat on the one hand and the young proletarian burglar on the other, makes the film entertaining as well as poignant. In his analysis O'Shaughnessy pairs up Popular Front films such as _Le Crime de Monsieur Lange_ with _La Vie est a nous_, as well as _La Grande illusion_ with _La Marseillaise_, to show the evolution of the backdrop message from radicalism to nationalism.
_La Grande illusion_ (1937) starring Eric Von Stroheim, Jean Gabin, and Pierre Fresnay, has reached the status of masterpiece. Banned by the Nazis during the Second World War, this constitutes a very powerful antiwar film, mostly on account of the outstanding performances of the actors, who seem perfectly moulded for their parts. Von Stroheim plays a soldier from aristocratic origins who appears to be the German counterpart of Fresnay, aka Capital de Boeldieu. Lieutenant Marechal (Gabin) is also part of the French army, but his origins are working class. Renoir would describe the film as 'a story about human relationships'. However, social divisions and prejudices are clearly obstacles in this film more than language, religion, or ethnic barriers. _La Marseillaise_ (1938), an historical epic which commemorates the French Revolution, is another representation of the director's 'engagement with a tormented period' (103). It is successful as an historical account, but it is more a string of episodes, and as such, on the whole, its lacks unity and dramatic thrust. Moreover, behind this depiction of the Revolution, there is an underlying political orientation and a Frontist message.

O'Shaughnessy focuses on aspects such as Renoir's political and ideological stances, anti-Semitism, and the philosophical dimension which surrounds the symbolic picture of the *femme fatale* and his exploration of the destructive and delusive representation of the social world. Whether it be called literary realism, naturalism, social or poetic realism, one enters the psychology of Renoir's characters, dragged by the same motives and unravelling inexorably to their fate and often to their death. As O'Shaughnessy makes clear, Renoir's films 'show the destruction of a self-deluding individual by a corrupt society' (69). In Renoir's adaptation of Zola's _La Bete humaine_ (1938), starring Jean Gabin and Simone Simon, the image of the railway and locomotive is central to symbolise both 'the transformatory power of technology and . . . the regressive, bestial nature of passion' (141). The proletarian hero is torn between these two worlds, one progressive and associated with modern industrial capitalism, the other atavistic and self-destructive. The move from platonic to sexual love has a foretaste of original sin, leading the characters into the fallen world, a post-edenic wandering, and eventually to death.

Renoir's human comedy is a microcosm and a stage 'shaped by social-class relationships' (107). For instance _La Regle du jeu_ (1939), which was overtly criticised when it was released and later censored, before reaching the status of one of the greatest films in the history of French cinema, is often regarded by critics as a blatant attack on the bourgeoisie. As O'Shaughnessy shows, the absence of cohesion between the proletarian and bourgeois characters is the source of disorder, and is finally fatal. One should read through the apparent chaos. Trying to escape the claustrophobic *peau de chagrin* of their social milieu, Renoir's characters are all in search of freedom and of their own self. _La Regle du jeu_ is a sophisticated piece which does not comply with any particular genre. On the contrary, it is a combination of different genres, interweaving at the same time slapstick farce, drama, music-hall, comedy, and tragedy, thus creating a complete sense of anarchy behind this caricature of mankind's nature and behaviour. The upper class, of which Robert de la Chesnaye is the embodiment, blindly complies with the "rules of the game", showing cruelty (the slaughtering of rabbits during the hunt game prepares us for a fatal ending) and hardly any emotion towards their servants, while the latter indulge in the more frivolous games of courtship and love. The constant game metaphor brings to mind the image of a chessboard where characters in this sterile world 'are like pawns in some absurd game' (148) and could be seen to represent 'a microcosm which stands for the nation itself' (149).

In the 1940s Renoir retreated to the America, directing _Swamp Water_ (1941), _This Land is Mine_ (1943), _The Southerner_ (1945), _Diary of a Chambermaid_ (1947), and _Woman on the Beach_ (1947), films which are generally ranked among his least successful. Nonetheless, for Bazin and Scherer, the American years led to an inward search and a purification in Renoir's style which became more 'spiritual than aesthetic' (154).
Renoir’s post-war films draw on aesthetics and Impressionist motifs, with an emphasis on colour and music. _Le Carrosse d’or_ (1952), tinged with melancholic realism, marks Renoir’s return to European filmmaking after his Hollywood exile. O’Shaughnessy insists that some often neglected films of Renoir’s later career are worth analysing in spite of any explicit political dimension. As he pinpoints pertinently, films of that period “engage consistently with their socio-historical context and the director’s lack of commitment should not be taken for “detachment”” (225). _Le Carrosse d’or_ is, with _French Cancan_ (1955) and _Elena et les hommes_ (1956), the first film in the 50s trilogy of Renoir films related to the past, love, and artifice. The beauty of _Le Carrosse d’or_ lies in the performance of Anna Magnani as the leading lady of a touring Commedia Dell’Arte theatrical troupe. _Le Dejeuner sur l’herbe_ (1959), which is reminiscent of Manet’s famous painting, is also a classic of Renoir’s later period. Indeed, certain scenes of extreme beauty in the film conjure up an Impressionist painting. In _Le Testament du Docteur Cordelier_ (1959) one finds motifs dear to Renoir. In the wake of his late-1930s film _La Bete humaine_, Renoir’s representation is Manichean. Cordelier and Opale are two sides of the same character of the Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde type, driven between good and evil, between the spiritual and the libidinous. The often underestimated _Le Caporal Epingle_ (1962) is an entertaining comedy, echoing some of Renoir’s earlier work. And Renoir’s last film, _Le Petit theatre de Renoir_ (1969), is made up of four separate vignettes, along with a musical interlude, all theatrically combined, and encapsulates some familiar Renoir techniques and themes (popular music, opera, art, the theatrical and social imaginary).

One could regret that in this volume Renoir’s direction of actors, the technical aspects of his films, his camera work, as well as the cinematic sound and effect of his films, have been little emphasized. Since his early films (_On purge bebe_ 1931) and the dawn of sound films Renoir has made the most of sound technology. As he himself put it in his autobiography:

‘People imagine that in a talkie nothing matters except the actual dialogue. I, too, believe in dialogue, but to me it is only part of the sound track: a sigh, the creak of a door, the sound of footsteps on the pavement, things such as these can say as much as the spoken word.’ [2]

On the cinematic technique of Renoir, one could mention as an example the long shot, which in _La Regle du jeu_ gives a naturalistic impression to the film. Renoir is said to have been one of the forruners of the film noir in America, and his designed sets and particular lighting present the viewer with an artifice which is part of what critics have referred to as “psychological realism”. Baron Edward Turk, in his book _Child of Paradise_, gives us a very good insight into Marcel Carne’s work, illuminated by psychoanalysis and philosophy. He also offers a very comprehensive and thorough analysis of his films, with a greater emphasis on the director’s techniques and directorial innovations. O’Shaughnessy’s book could have drawn on Turk’s detailed analyses to emphasize Renoir’s techniques and symbolic underlying messages.

What O’Shaughnessy does show is that there is not one single axis of analysis of Renoir’s films, but that they indulge in a far more complex pattern, where the social, historical, aesthetic, as well as philosophical, intermingle. As a comprehensive document on Renoir’s career, this book is a major contribution to French film studies: its clarity and focus make it accessible for film specialists, scholars, students and cinema lovers alike. Through this work one comes to question Renoir’s political commitment, and rediscover films that often remain unmentioned among his more acclaimed masterpieces, films whose techniques have inspired generations of actors and directors ever since the New Wave era.
Notes


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