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## Grand Illusion

Capsule by Jonathan Rosenbaum  
*From the Chicago Reader*

A film about war without a single scene of combat, Jean Renoir's 1937 masterpiece about French and German officers during World War I suggests with a great deal of irony and plausibility that the true divisions of that conflict were of class rather than nationality—a point embodied in the friendship between aristocratic captains played by Erich von Stroheim (in his greatest performance in a sound film) and Pierre Fresnay, both of whom ultimately become sacrificial victims to the nouveau riche Jewish officer (Marcel Dalio) and the French mechanic (Jean Gabin) who manage to escape from a German fortress to freedom. (It's fascinating today to relate the faint traces of anti-Semitism in Stroheim's character to the posthumous knowledge that he was himself a Jew in hiding.) And the relationship between the mechanic and a German widow (*L'Atalante's* Dita Parlo), who barely speak each other's language, is no less moving. (Unfortunately the subtitles, unlike the French dialogue, don't explain the film's title; a better translation might be "The Great Illusion," referring to the deluded belief that this war would soon end and be the last one.) The film doesn't have quite the demonic, polyphonic, and emotionally contradictory brilliance of Renoir's *The Rules of the Game*, made two years later, but it's still one of the key humanist expressions to be found in movies: sad, funny, exalting, and glorious. As Dave Kehr put it in his original *Reader* capsule, "Francois Truffaut described it as 'the least eccentric of all of Renoir's French movies,' and for that reason it has long been the most popular. But to imagine this same material in the hands of any of the cinema's more naive, more didactic humanists—a Capra or a Stevens, say—is to appreciate the measure of Renoir's genius and honesty." 117 min.