

## Document Citation

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*La Nuit du carrefour* [literally, *The Night at the Crossroads*] was the first screen treatment of a Georges Simenon novel, and perhaps the only one to capture the novelist's true tone. According to contemporary accounts, Simenon himself had intended to make it into a movie and worked on the project for a long time before finally handing it over to Renoir, "for friendship's sake." † Renoir is credited with the adaptation of the novel, but Simenon closely followed the shooting of the film.

Nothing could be more antithetic to the mechanical precision of a detective novel than Renoir's unmethodical approach and his taste for improvisation; and he did not modify his style in order to work in this new genre. When André-G. Brunelin, a journalist and critic, asked him if the film had been cut in editing, Renoir replied: "Possibly, but you see, even at the time it wasn't very clear. I don't think anyone understood it, especially me . . ." It is even said that Jean Mitry, who later became a distinguished critic and a close friend of Eisenstein's, "mis-laid three reels after the shooting was all over," which would go far to explain certain obscurities.‡/§

\* *Pour Vous*, No. 157, November 19, 1931.

† Article by Suzanne Chantal, *Cinéma*, May 1932.

‡ *Télé-Ciné*, Special Numbers 36/37, March-April 1953.

§ *Cahiers du Cinéma*, No. 78; *Premier Plan*, Special Number.

However, a crime is supposed to be mysterious, at least in the beginning—otherwise it wouldn't need to be investigated. But Renoir was not so much concerned with this sort of clarification as with giving life to his characters, and in this way the film has ties with *La Chienne*.

*La Nuit du carrefour* is one of Renoir's most misunderstood movies, perhaps simply because it is not well known. It is misunderstood because it has been judged in terms of its genre, though Renoir never troubled himself to observe the rules of any genre. *La Nuit du carrefour* is a sort of fairy tale in the sense that, according to Renoir, "reality is a kind of fairy tale." Today it seems one of his most appealing and fascinating works, and this is so precisely because of what used to be considered its faults. In the first place, the film has the same diffuse quality *La Chienne* had—a quality that a critic of Jean-Georges Auriol's stature found fault with in *La Chienne* \* and which would come to full flowering in *Boudu*.

We should emphasize here Renoir's complete refusal to subscribe to the practices of the talkies of that era: developing plots through dialogue, binding actors to theatrical styles emphasizing overblown rhetoric, and adhering strictly to the scenarist's words. When Renoir was making silent films, people accused him of ignoring "true" cinema; when he turned to talkies, it was without changing his style very much at all. We can see today that his work was—with its freedom and astonishing boldness—thirty years ahead of its time. The actors he chose were often great ones, but they were not highly acclaimed at the time. Long before *Toni*, Renoir rejected supporting actors who might have seemed made for their roles in favor of amateurs (the painter Dignimont, the journalist Michel Duran), charging them with the creation, not of episodic sketches, but of real characters who took part in the action along with the principals. His concern not to isolate the protagonists led Renoir to other

\* *Revue du Cinéma*, November 1931.

techniques that were unique for the time: very few close-ups; an almost total absence of crosscutting; sounds and images often out of phase. He employed depth of field regularly at a time when it was almost never used; he disdained, apparently quite consciously, clearly heard dialogue when true sound was not important for illumination of the situation. And finally, there was his predilection for "natural sets." The freedom he exercised in every category of filmmaking, including selection of subject matter, for example, the amorality of *La Chienne*, the obscurities of *La Nuit du carrefour*, the anarchic fantasy of *Boudu*, invests each of these three films with an exceptional originality. They constitute a sort of satiric trilogy of the French petty bourgeoisie, an ironic condemnation of its conventions and shabbiness. But the films have no bitterness in them; they are suffused with a kind of tender indulgence toward people, weak though they are. The seeds of the "New Wave" lie in these three films; it is through them that Renoir exercised his strongest influence on the movement of the early sixties.

Exteriors for *La Nuit du carrefour* were shot at the highway intersection at Bouffémont, north of Paris. The location corresponded, not geographically but in spirit, to Simenon's description: a roadside tavern, two or three houses with a nearby garage, roads edged with poplars and fields covered in mist. The crew lived there for three weeks, working round the clock in that atmosphere of comradeship without which Renoir could not function. Some new faces appeared among the old familiar ones: Jacques Becker, whose real value to the Renoir "making do" system would not become clear until later, and Jean's brother, Claude, who made his film debut as jack-of-all-trades assistant. André-G. Brunelin, recalling Becker's work on the Renoir set, drew an accurate picture of the atmosphere during shooting:

As always with Renoir, there was a lot of odd-job work. We made sets out of anything around, painting and mending when



necessary. There was never enough money. We had the basics—camera and film—and for the rest, we had to make do. Three-quarters of the company were either badly paid or not paid at all. But the important thing was the involvement, making something we believed in. And there was a wonderful community of friendship and youth.\*

The film that was wrought during this difficult but satisfying adventure is indisputably the best screen version of a Simenon novel extant. Moreover, no one has ever played Maigret as well as Pierre Renoir. The film holds, fascinates, from the moment the first images appear on the screen, not because of the plot but because Renoir has created an atmosphere of anguish, mystery, and a strange nostalgia. One is struck immediately by the extraordinary number of shots. Renoir—without fuss or fancy theories, and without trying, as did Clair and Pabst, for effects or for cleverness with sound—went back to (or rather, maintained) the technique of the silent film. Even more than in *La Chienne*, he drew back from any kind of theatricality. While his contemporaries were floundering around with well-made scenes and well-defined situations, Renoir directed a movie where nothing is said, where silence reigns—a film of the unknown where everything drowns and dissolves in images that don't always seem to make sense. In other words, we, the audience, are presented with the same enigma that Inspector Maigret must come to terms with. This is true despite the fact that we, as spectators, are omniscient. Movement is slow, and scenes are broken up. We are simultaneously observers of the action (which is devised with extreme skill to tell us just enough, but never too much) and participants in it. And we are never cheated the way we are in Grade B mysteries by being misled.

A popular tango has its role to play in setting the emotional

\* André-G. Brunelin, "Jacques Becker ou la trace de l'homme," *Cinéma 60*, No. 48, July 1960.



*La Nuit du carrefour*: Winna Winfried and Pierre Renoir



tone (like the violin's plaintive tune during the murder in *La Chienne*), and, in fact, the record of the tango provides Maigret with the clue he needs to tie together the relationships and complicities of the people at the crossroads. At the end, Maigret's explanations clear up the ambiguities of the plot, and justify the way the situation was developed. But actually, the facts of the story are much less important than the fact that we have been so cleverly—or better, so justly—enmeshed in it. It is possible that *La Nuit du carrefour* opened the door to the French school of "poetic realism" \* just as *La Chienne* may have led to the "film noir" † of the thirties.

But the kind of poetry that a Carné sought in artifice and in literature, Renoir found in realism. Everything in this "magical" film is truthful: the characters, the settings, the props, the words. To achieve realism, one has only to extract this poetry from reality, instead of fabricating it.

The images in that winter light, that atmosphere of night and fog and rain, are sometimes startlingly beautiful, especially the horses on the road, the furtive silhouettes in the shadows, and the "sublime tracking shot through the narrow streets of the village," as Godard put it. We can join our voices to Godard's in his statement that "every detail of every moment of every shot make *La Nuit du carrefour* the only great French detective film, and, indeed, the greatest French film of adventure." ‡

This is so, in the first place, because Renoir approached this genre from an oblique point of view, rejecting every sort of conven-

\* An aesthetic school based on the principle that daily reality can be transmuted into poetry. This theory is sometimes attributed to Jean Vigo; and some of Fellini's early work (*I Vitelloni*, *Il Bidone*) may also owe something to these ideas.

† A reference to the American "black" films of the period: gangsters (*Scarface*, etc.), films of social concern, etc.

‡ *Cahiers du Cinéma*, No. 78.

tion and artifice. Not only is there no violence, but the film is in fact permeated by a kind of melancholy, a bitter sadness, in the same way that the characters are bathed in a kind of misty atmosphere. This melancholy endows the film with an absolutely unique charm that gathers weight, despite the rapid cutting, through slow plot development, the exemplary sobriety of Pierre Renoir, and the erotic languor and intonation of Winna Winfried, who is perfectly directed. Georges Altman wrote in a contemporary review: "There is in this work a sense of mysteriously extended time that is quite rare in films." \* *La Nuit du carrefour* is a film that should be re-circulated today; it is the equal of *La Chienne* and *Boudu*.

*Boudu Sauvé des eaux* [*Boudu Saved from Drowning*], produced by Jean Gehret and Michel Simon and played perfectly by Simon, is well known, and will not be discussed at length here. Like *Nana* and *La Chienne* it prefigures later productions—both the poetry of *Partie de campagne* and the truculence of *Déjeuner sur l'herbe*. The epicurean philosophy—the enjoyment of worldly pleasures—shared by the Renoirs father and son is given expression in the person of the bookseller, M. Lestingois; Boudu the hobo carries this philosophy one step further, with his joyful anarchy. Their friendship is quite credible: they respond to and complement one another.

Renoir favors Boudu a little in his treatment of the story, but the vitality of the character and the actor who plays him make this imbalance understandable. Michel Simon never gave a freer, more flavorsome performance. Throughout this rather bitter fantasy, Renoir was delighted to give Simon his head in the structure and treatment of the story as well as in Simon's own interpretation of the role. Scenes seem to fall together more or less by accident, incidents flourish all over the place, and the characters do what they

\* Quoted in *Premier Plan*, Special Number, "Jean Renoir."