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Erich von Stroheim, as von Rauffenstein in Jean Renoir's LA GRANDE ILLUSION.

An older, but still monocled, von Stroheim flew from Paris to Hollywood, scene of his splendors and defeats as a director, to appear in SUNSET BOULEVARD, and was greeted by Billy Wilder: "We are honored to have you with us . . . I have always admired your great films. You were ten years ahead of your time." "You are wrong—twenty years."

Another recent revival with an impressive place in film history is Jean Renoir's *Grand Illusion* (1937). This is a straightforward but finely realized World War I piece set off by the acting talents of Erich von Stroheim and Jean Gabin. Shot down on a reconnaissance mission, two French airmen, de Boeldieu (Pierre Fresnay) and Maréchal (Gabin), are entertained under the old code of honor-among-enemies by the German squadron leader, von Rauffenstein (Stroheim). The point is early made that between de Boeldieu and von Rauffenstein, both of them aristocrats and professional soldiers of the traditional kind, there exists an understanding, even a rapport, that does not exist for people like Maréchal, who is a mere conscript from middle-class Paris. The longest section of the film shows us prison-camp life, with an exciting escape-tunnel theme that nevertheless suffers from the multiplicity of such themes in films about World War II; however, there is an unreproduceable irony whereby the prisoners are transferred to another camp on the very eve of the tunnel's completion—it is rubbed in by a moment at which Maréchal vainly tries to convey the tunnel's existence to a non-French-speaking British captive.

So we move to the central episode, in which Rauffenstein reappears as the commandant of a camp located in a castle deep inside Germany. He is physically in poor shape after a crash, unusable any more as an active soldier, but he continues to treat Boeldieu with inflexible courtesy, breaking with him into English as they discuss happier days in London, continuing to maintain that Maréchal and his buddy Rosenthal, a Jewish Frenchman, are in no position to understand the reality of war or of what is happening to Europe. Boeldieu says he can't really agree with any of that, and proceeds to lay a plot for the escape of Maréchal and Rosenthal. This comes off all right, but in the course of it Boeldieu is shot—by Rauffenstein, naturally—and soon dies without fuss, forgiving the remorseful German.

Although everything is beautifully done, it is not easy to say unhesitatingly just what is the grand illusion that we are being told about. It is not war as such, for its horror and futility are no more than implied: they are not the main subject. Nor is it the notion that escape is possible; Maréchal and Rosenthal actually do escape, clear over the frontier to neutral Switzerland, with no hint of rigors ahead or an eventual return to the front line. The most substantial moral one can find is that it is an illusion to suppose that the enemy is not also a human being, and certainly both Boeldieu and Rauffenstein are human under their impressive but readily penetrable disguises. Yet here the concept of military aristocracy intrudes, interesting in itself and as played, but seeming an interlude from the stern business of imprisonment and escape. Further, the film ends with a long interlude recounting the adventures of the fugitive pair; more intrinsic interest, but little application to the main threads.

Does this lack of unity matter? Not much if the thing has energy in its constituent parts, as here. The novel can stand such diversity too, and it is the novel—not ballet or poetry or still photography in motion or animated painting—which is the film's closest relative. How about a little brooding on that? ##