

The Rules of the Game

Jean Renoir's 1939 film is a powerfully directed movie and functions historically with just as much flare and enthusiasm as it functions aesthetically. Even though it begins with a disclaimer regarding the unintentionality of any possible social commentary that could be derived from it, the disclaimer is more lip service than anything else. The film is as highly focused on the social facet as any that has ever been made, which is evident even on the first viewing. The particular mention of the historical setting as being on the eve of World War II is consciously guiding and is a foreshadowing of the general malaise of the characters in the film and the real-life social groups which they represent.

It is clear that the title of the film, in a general way, is referring to the upper-middle class characters of the diegetic world and the personal statutes that they follow in civilized life. It becomes apparent through the entirety of the film that the predisposition to follow these codified societal regulations is a sort of formality that is not always associated with the maintenance of rightness or the preservation of humanity. Renoir's message seems to be one of sacrifice. The bourgeois tendency to play by the rules is what ultimately brings about a forfeiture of humanity. The more the characters attempt to conduct themselves in a civilized and composed manner, the more they seem to be emotionally detached and basically uncivilized. If the characters are just playing out their

social roles according to the rules of the game, then they simply become literal pawns with no real direction or volition.

On another level of analysis, the game that takes place between the upper class people and the servants incorporates another analysis of class interaction. The plot device used in The Rules of the Game that mirrors the same occurrences amongst the two planes of social class is another creative conquest of Renoir. The opposition created by the different areas of the house (i.e. the upstairs/downstairs eating arrangement) is an example of the plurality of social differences that exist. They are separated in the story by social status and wealth, but the real differences elude the narrative. They all wear suits of course, they all become involved in complicated and circuitous love relationships, they all end poorly and unfulfilled, they stick to their rules in the end.

In the realm of the filmic, one of the most creative scenes is the hunting contest. Parallels can be drawn to many of the other themes of the film from this series of events. Primarily, the equation of the animals to people is the most glaring message that can be derived. The characters' instincts to follow certain rules, the very social creations that remove their emotion and humanity, are what delineate their likeness with the animals. In retrospect, the fast-paced slaughter of the 'game' animals could be a preemptive visualization of the horrors of World War II itself. This is particularly interesting taking into account the message at the beginning of the film. The competition itself is just another game; the "pieces" in the grand-scheme game of societal interaction become the players for a while.

The final piece that seals the message of the film is the poem at the start. It is substantially more enigmatic than the narrative, but it can be linked to the aforementioned analysis of the bourgeois mentality. The essential idea of the poem is the absurdity of the denial of love and emotion in favor of playing the silly roles of society. It is possibly going too far to say that Renoir is blaming this ideological function for the war, but it is to blame for something particularly conspicuous about French society of that period. The beauty of the film is that it can present this poem to accompany the narrative, it can present a forum for examining these great themes, and it can leave things at that [intended as entertainment].

The overarching message of The Rules of the Game is the need for a focus on the ideological misappropriations of the middle and upper classes. The viewer is brought to face certain questions upon a first viewing. Does someone need to die for the importance of humanism and emotion to be recognized? The obvious answer that Renoir gives is no. The murder at the end, aside from being unjustified, is no solution and no great awakening. Business continues as usual at the house, breakfast convenes at the normal time.