

## ***Rules of the Game – Film – Analysis***

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*The Rules of the Game*, a brilliant 1939 French film by director Jean Renoir, is often regarded as one of the top one hundred films ever made. It is worth viewing several times to unravel its intricate complexity. Social interactions are overlaid with rich social commentary that is carefully and subtly communicated to the astute viewer, even after 80 years.

Set against the backdrop of the onset of World War II, *Rules of the Game* features a group of upper class French socialites bent on pursuing their own hedonistic pleasures while avoiding the reality of an imminent German invasion. Marriages are respected, but, then, too, so are affairs – so long as they are not talked about, one of the rules of the game. That way sexual playmates are not threatening to the stability of family ties. The rules of the game must be respected.

Are there “rules of the game”? And what game is being played?

### ***World of Mechanized Devices***

Renoir contrasts three scenarios. There is, first of all, the mechanized world. Robert, the marquis in whose house the action takes place, collects mechanical figures which he proudly displays to his assembled guests. The moving parts operate according to their built-in instructions, much like the player piano which plays without human intervention. This world obeys the rules of its game. In modern terminology, these devices are programmed to operate as their designer wishes.

### ***World of Nature***

Secondly, there is the world of nature. Robert instructs the gamekeeper, Schumacher, to reduce the number of rabbits on the estate, without building fences. Along with Marceau, a poacher who is hired by Robert to help complete the task, the rabbits are hunted down. They do not know the rules of the game – there are no fences – and they are killed.

The world of no fences is reminiscent of the Maginot Line, the thin border saddled with the task of protecting France from the Germans. Sadly the Line does not hold and the French are slaughtered, just like the rabbits.

Renoir is right: there is no fence.

### ***World of Human Social Interactions***

Finally there is the world of human social interactions. While there are rules – unlike the realm of nature – they are not as clear-cut as the domain of manufactured devices that work like clockwork. These rules are not articulated: they are just known...and observed. Affairs are to be carried out without passion; they are a form of sport, just like hunting rabbits or game fowl. Misunderstandings can occur: Christine spies her husband's (Robert's) embrace with his mistress Genevieve, construing it as indicative that the affair is still on-going (whereas we the viewer know, it is being terminated).

The world of human social interactions, then, is a flawed realm, messy and open to dark emotions and jealousy. These personality vectors complicate the social order, but, in this case, the complication -- the killing of the aviator, Andre – is quickly dismissed as a mere “accident.”

Lying is intrinsic to complex human affairs. Octave (played by Jean Renoir himself) muses that everyone lies – government officials, people in business and in the media. His point seems to be that it should be no different for ordinary people. So lying is part of the rules of the game.

Self-deception is also part of the social milieu as people carry on, seemingly uncaring about the carnage in interpersonal relationships ... and oblivious to the “elephant in the room,” the looming German invasion.

Will they obey the rules of that game, the terrible game of warfare?

Are they prepared for this imminent reality? Or are they just oblivious?

### **For Discussion**

So, what game? Are there rules?

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