FRENCH FILM DIRECTORS

Jean Renoir

MARTIN O'SHAUGHNESSY

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Series editors' foreword

To an anglophone audience, the combination of the words 'French' and 'cinema' evokes a particular kind of film: elegant and wordy, sexy but serious – an image as dependent on national stereotypes as is that of the crudely commercial Hollywood blockbuster, which is not to say that either image is without foundation. Over the past two decades, this generalised sense of a significant relationship between French identity and film has been explored in scholarly books and articles, and has entered the curriculum at university level and, in Britain, at A-level. The study of film as an art-form and (to a lesser extent) as industry, has become a popular and widespread element of French Studies, and French cinema has acquired an important place within Film Studies. Meanwhile, the growth in multi-screen and 'art-house' cinemas, together with the development of the video industry, has led to the greater availability of foreign-language films to an English-speaking audience. Responding to these developments, this series is designed for students and teachers seeking information and accessible but rigorous critical study of French cinema, and for the enthusiastic filmgoer who wants to know more.

The adoption of a director-based approach raises questions about *auteurism*. A series that categorises films not according to period or to genre (for example), but to the person who directed them, runs the risk of espousing a romantic view of film as the product of solitary inspiration. On this model, the critic's role might seem to be that of discovering continuities, revealing a necessary coherent set of themes and motifs which correspond to the particular genius of the individual. This is not our aim: the *auteur* perspective on film, itself most clearly articulated in France in the early 1950s, will be interrogated in certain volumes of the series, and,

throughout, the director will be treated as one highly significant element in a complex process of film production and reception which includes socio-economic and political determinants, the work of a large and highly skilled team of artists and technicians, the mechanisms of production and distribution, and the complex and multiply determined responses of spectators.

The work of some of the directors in the series is already known outside France, that of others is less so – the aim is both to provide informative and original English-language studies of established figures, and to extend the range of French directors known to anglophone students of cinema. We intend the series to contribute to the promotion of the informal and formal study of French films, and to the pleasure of those who watch them.

DIANA HOLMES
ROBERT INGRAM

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To Gloria, Ana, John and Kay

1

An uneven career

This first chapter introduces Renoir's life and highly uneven career. It demarcates his vision of his films, craft and ideological evolution, indicating, in the process, the shape of this book and some of its main lines of inquiry. It draws substantially on his writings and interviews he gave at various times but it does so with a degree of scepticism. Much of what we know of him derives from his own accounts. It would be naïve not to expect him to have shaped his version of his life and career to fit the particular directorial persona he wished to present at a given time. Rather than taking biographical details as a somehow full and objective account, it is better to view them in terms of the retrospective importance Renoir grants them, an importance that can provide insights into his outlook at the time of writing. Of this, more later.

His life and films

Born in 1894 in Paris, Jean Renoir was the son of the Impressionist painter Auguste Renoir and Aline Charigot, a woman with peasant origins. His childhood was divided between three locations: Paris, or more specifically, Montmartre, which at the time was a semi-rural suburb of Paris; Essoyes, in Burgundy, where his mother's wine-growing family lived; Provence, and more specifically *Les Colettes*, the property where the old Renoir painted in his last years surrounded by olive trees.

There is some suggestion in Renoir's accounts that his home environment was overprotective. One key bone of contention was Auguste's insistence that his son should keep his long blond locks. The only adult male in a house otherwise full of women seemed intent on preventing him from asserting his masculinity. Jean was repeatedly mistaken for a girl and saw anything overtly masculine, especially anything military, as an escape into a more male world. Thus his passion for Dumas's stories of the musketeers and for Napoleonic toy soldiers, his interest in one of the servant's soldier boyfriend, and his hatred for ribbons and satin. Jean calls himself a *froussard,* a coward, telling how he was frightened by the noisy play of the boys in the street. This story of a young man having enormous difficulty negotiating his way between a 'feminine' domestic space and the world of adult masculinity is banal. What is of interest however is to what degree it seems to have haunted him, to the extent that it is a running theme of his book about his father (Renoir 1981b). It is also striking that when the young Renoir sought for role models in the broader culture, what was most immediately at hand were real or fictional military images. This was a highly gender-demarcated world.

If in some ways Jean had a particularly bourgeois lifestyle, in others his childhood was very unconventional. He was certainly relatively privileged, being part of a family with servants and more than one home. But on the other hand, his artist father was very unlike the other parents at his bourgeois school. Auguste's friends, people such as Zola, Cézanne or Toulouse-Lautrec, were predominantly drawn from a world of art and literature which tended to define itself by rejection of the very bourgeoisie with whom its education and lifestyle might otherwise seem to align it. His Montmartre home is also indicative of a degree of marginality, for the area was classically associated with prostitution, crime, artists and the entertainment industry, all a far cry from bourgeois respectability.

Formative cultural experiences that Jean retrospectively cites are Guignol (the French equivalent of Punch and Judy), the adventure stories of Dumas *père,* the music hall and the popular

melodramatic plays shown on the *boulevard du crime* in Paris. It was Gabrielle, his main carer, nurse and playmate who took him to see his first film at a Paris department store, an experience which apparently overwhelmed the young boy. His second exposure to film was at school where he laughed at the antics of *Automaboul,* a comically uncooperative car. Despite his exposure to an eclectic range of cultural forms, the dominant influence was surely high cultural. Jean grew up in a household which revolved around the needs of a great painter and was a centre for discussion between prominent artists and writers (Renoir 1974b: 31–2). His account of a young man growing up between élite and popular culture is particularly apt for a director whose work had to find a space for itself between 'high' and low' cultural forms.

To escape the shadow of his artist father, Renoir initially sought a career diametrically opposed to creative art, becoming an officer in the French cavalry, one of the most traditional and aristocratic branches of the military, only to find himself thrust into the trenches in 1914. Wounded and rescued from no-man's land, he was saved from gangrene and the amputation of his leg by innovative treatment. His sick mother, who had rushed to his bedside, died soon after in 1915. Jean re-enlisted, this time in the airforce. Aerial reconnaissance gave him his first experience of using a camera, but a bad landing put him out of action, this time permanently. This was not the last time war would turn his life upside down.

His recuperation afforded him a period of enforced idleness in Paris, during which he became steeped in the American cinema which was then assuming the unchallenged domination of world cinema screens that it has never relinquished. He had a particular passion for Chaplin. Later, he was given a desk job that enabled him to be beside his father, with whom he was now able to have long discussions. Auguste died in 1919 and soon after Jean married Andrée Heuschling, the artist's last model and an aspiring actress. She adopted the professional name of Catherine Hessling.

It was, he tells us, to help launch 'Catherine' that he decided to become involved in film-making (Renoir 1974b: 47–53). For his first project, *Catherine ou une vie sans joie* (1924), he hired Albert

Dieudonné (famous for his role as Napoleon in Abel Gance's film) to direct his wife. Having agreed to restrict himself to providing the story, he apparently made Dieudonné's life unbearable by interfering in the filming. He then donned the mantle of director himself to make the low-budget *La Fille de l'eau* (1924), which again centred on his wife. It seemed destined to be a complete flop but its dream sequence was projected at an avant-garde venue and achieved a success that convinced Renoir to continue in film-making. His next venture was a costly adaptation of Zola's celebrated novel, *Nana* (1926). Despite co-financing from a German production company, the film ate deep into Renoir's fortune, forcing him to sell some of his father's paintings. Almost at the same time, he shot *Sur un air de Charleston* (1926), a short avant-gardist science fantasy film designed to show off Catherine's dancing ability. Most of his subsequent silent works were paid for by others ranging from wealthy lovers of aspiring actresses to the *Société des Films Historiques*. In among these commercial ventures, Renoir made *La Petite Marchande d'allumettes* (1928), an adaptation of the Hans Christian Andersen story, in a small studio in the Vieux Colombier theatre. For this do-it-yourself production, Renoir and Jean Tedesco turned their hand to everything from lighting and special effects to developing.

It is astonishing to consider the diversity of this early work. Ranging from prestige literary adaptation to popular melodrama, from vaudeville to avant-garde experiment, and from costume drama to colonial propaganda, it certainly did not suggest someone who knew which way he wished to develop, or if he did, someone who was able to choose which films he would make. Looking back on it, Renoir picked out certain films which he felt to be important for different reasons, but the period seems to have been dominated by an interest in visual invention and technical innovation. Here was a director ready to experiment with film stocks, lighting, camera movements and scale models, someone who was ready, if need arose, to draw on his own cavalry skills and take the camera on horseback to film a desert chase.

The coming of sound at the end of the 1920s changed the context for Renoir and others. Films became much more expensive

to make so that commercial considerations discouraged innovative productions. The heroically mobile camera of the silent era was now tied down by microphone placements and bulky soundproofing. Stagebound, dialogue-dominated and highly derivative filmed theatre became the dominant form in the French industry, although adaptations of novels offered an alternative and increasingly important direction of development. Sound was not the only novelty in the period. With the collapse of the French majors in the mid-1930s, productions were increasingly *ad hoc* for single films. While some people suggest that this fragmentation held back the development of French cinema, others maintain that it made possible a diversity of film-making that a more structured system would not have allowed. Certainly, Renoir lived from hand to mouth with each project representing a new departure. On the other hand, he was able to work repeatedly with people he was close to, thus creating the tight-knit crews that he preferred. Jacques Becker, later a considerable director himself, became his assistant in 1932. Claude Renoir, his nephew, became his cameraman in the same year, while Marguerite Renoir, his companion in the 1930s (and who adopted his name), was his editor from 1931 onwards. His brother, the actor Pierre Renoir, played star roles in two films while other actors repeatedly appeared.

Renoir's initial forays into sound followed a conventional pattern, with three adaptations of successful theatrical comedies and three of novels to his credit between 1931 and 1934. While the theatrical adaptations were predominantly studio shot, the films taken from novels encouraged location shooting which permitted the close companionship, communal meals and single-minded concentration the director preferred. Perhaps because of the more uniform literary sources for all these films, it is much easier to discern shared characteristics than it is for the more diverse silent cinema. All the films can be seen as portraits of sectors of French society, usually the bourgeoisie, and most if not all share a satirical tone that ranges from the gentle to the acerbic. Moreover, in the tension between theatre and novel, and between studio and location shooting, one can suggest a Renoir struggling to escape from the predominant theatricality of early sound cinema and develop a

realist mode of filming. Renoir's final film of the early 1930s, *Toni* (1934), shot on location in the south of France, can be seen as a pursuit of such a quest. Breaking free from his literary moorings, Renoir made a film more closely rooted in contemporary issues and, for the first time, put ordinary workers and peasants on the screen. The key question that hangs over this period of Renoir's film-making is whether the early sound films' greater thematic consistency and new-found critical edge derives from directorial intent or from shared tendencies of their literary sources.

The year 1933 saw the coming to power of Hitler. Having visited Germany with his producer friend Braunberger, himself a Jew, Renoir witnessed an old Jewish lady being forced to lick the footpath by some of Hitler's brown-shirts. Closer to home, he stood out against a petition asking for foreigners to be excluded from the French film industry (Renoir 1994: 25–6). His hostility to racism was the first sign of overt politicisation of his outlook. Another potential factor is the largely unexplored influence of Marguerite, his companion and editor. Coming from a committed family as she did, she helped to expose Renoir to left-wing ideas and activists. Although the precise motives and circumstances are unknown, the fact that he became politically involved is neither surprising nor exceptional. Like many other French intellectuals of the 1930s, he was faced with an increasingly polarised and dangerous political context that encouraged involvement. Clearly too, after *Toni*, he must have been an obvious candidate for recruitment by the left, and especially by the Communist Party (PCF), which traditionally sought to associate artists and intellectuals with its cause.

Whatever the roots of his engagement, Renoir's next two films located him very firmly on the left of the political spectrum. *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange* (1935) brought him into close collaboration with the Groupe Octobre, the most celebrated left-wing theatre troupe of the period, while for his next venture he supervised a team of younger film-makers to produce a propaganda film for the French Communist Party in the run-up to the 1936 elections that would bring the Popular Front to power. Willy-nilly,

he was now a figurehead, the major left-wing film-maker of his day. He was a leading voice in Ciné-liberté, an ambitious attempt to bring together film workers and cinema viewers to create a radical alternative to commercial cinema and to ensure an audience for left-wing films outside of normal distribution circuits. The showpiece of Ciné-liberté was to be his *La Marseillaise* (1937).

Renoir's involvement did not stop there. He contributed a regular column to *Ce soir,* the Communist-affiliated daily, from the spring of 1937 till the autumn of 1938. He visited the Soviet Union in 1936 and wrote glowingly of his experiences in the Communist newspaper, *L'Humanité*. He also found time to make three other less obviously partisan films (*Une Partie de campagne* (1936), *Les Bas-Fonds* (1936), and *La Grande Illusion* (1937)). As the Front unravelled, Renoir made two dramatically different films, the dark, doom-laden naturalistic *La Bête humaine* (1938), and his final film of the 1930s, *La Règle du jeu* (1939), which shifted decisively away from naturalism by drawing on classical French theatre for inspiration. The latter's run was cut short by the approach of war, but not before it had provoked some violently hostile reactions. The challenge with these Frontist and immediately post-Frontist films is to trace the contours and evolution of their political commitment, considering them as interventions in a broader struggle but simultaneously investigating their specific need to invent modes of film-making that matched the demands of the time.

La Règle du jeu was followed by a curious and highly ambiguous episode. By this time working for the army film service, Renoir was invited to go to Italy by none other than Mussolini himself, to work on a film inspired by Puccini's *Tosca*. His acceptance, under apparent pressure from a French government determined to keep Italy friendly, dismayed his erstwhile allies on the left. While he only managed to shoot a small part of the film before the outbreak of hostilities forced him to leave Italy, the adaptation by a renowned French director of a prestigious Italian opera may be seen as a propaganda *coup* for the Fascist regime. However, the film's story of heroic self-sacrifice in the cause of

liberty and in the face of a tyrannical police chief is a strange one for the Fascists to have commissioned.

The rout of France in 1940 turned Renoir's life upside down. Accompanied by Dido Freire, who would become his second wife, he took to the roads along with millions of his compatriots. His flight came to a temporary halt at *Les Colettes,* his father's old house in Provence, only to restart again when he took up the invitation of the great documentary maker, Robert Flaherty, to go to the United States. His journey took him on a roundabout route through North Africa and Portugal. While in the latter location, he proposed the development of a 'Latin cinema' (Renoir 1994: 85–6) As the countries presumably to be involved were extreme right- wing or Fascist regimes, this was again an astonishing move, whatever his underlying intentions may have been. It was at this time that he developed the outline of *Magnificat* that was to have been the story of a group of French missionaries in Latin America and their self-sacrifice in the cause of the faith (Renoir 1981a: 79–83). The story is not overtly political but comes close to some key themes of the undemocratic Pétainist régime. The only existing article that Renoir wrote after the fall of France is similarly ambiguous. He castigates the French cinema of 1939 as selfish and frivolous, calling for a renewed industry that would demonstrate more fraternal attitudes (Renoir 1989a: 41–4). Although the sentiments expressed would not seem out of place in a Pétainist article, there is again no overt political stance.

How Renoir might have developed had he stayed in occupied France is sheer speculation and the existing evidence is so thin that no defensible hypothesis could be built on it. What we do know is that he arrived in the USA where he had to rebuild a career from scratch. Not only did he not speak the language, but Hollywood production practices and modes of filming and editing were radically different and unaccommodating to the artisanal practices and very personal style that he had developed in the 1930s in the relatively unstructured French industry. He expected to have a degree of control over almost all stages of the film- making process, from writing the screenplay, through casting and and rehearsal, to the *mise-en-scène* and editing. His practice was to work with a tightly

knit team but within a loose framework that allowed for constant revision when faced with the concrete realities of filming. The Hollywood studios had evolved a system that depended on division of labour and a high level of specialisation so that the director's control tended to be concentrated on the *mise-en-scène,* and even then limited by highly routinised practices and tight planning. Whether Renoir was engulfed by Hollywood, merely accommodated to it, or indeed transcended the limitations it imposed upon him is clearly a key question.

Renoir made six films in the United States with very varying degrees of directorial control. His first American production, *Swamp Water* (1941) brought him face to face with the Hollywood studio system and the dictatorial power wielded by Zanuck, the studio boss at Twentieth Century-Fox. Renoir wanted to do as much of the film as possible on location. Fox only let him do a few exteriors, preferring the security of studio shooting to the vagaries of location work. Renoir's taste for long takes and a mobile camera that allowed the actors' performances to develop and to be followed through the set came up against the much more fragmented Hollywood style of analytical editing. The multiple shots from different angles that analytical editing produced allowed the same sequence to be put together in very different ways and made editing a vital area of control. Renoir found to his chagrin that Fox had no intention of letting him edit the film as he saw fit. He and they parted company by mutual accord.

His next American film, *This Land is Mine* (1943), was financed by the RKO studio and shot using the American style of analytical editing with shots and counter-shots, master shots and medium shots rather than in Renoir's flowing French style of the late 1930s. In an interview in 1954, Renoir said that he filmed this way in order to be able to remake at the editing stage what was a propaganda piece with a very sensitive message (Renoir 1989b: 17). One might alternatively suggest that he had altered his style to suit Hollywood. He none the less reports enjoying complete freedom while shooting his next three films. The first, *The Southerner* (1945), his own favourite among his American output is set, like *Swamp Water,* in a rural community. Renoir reworked an original

screenplay with the help of the great American novelist, William Faulkner, hiring his old set-designer Eugène Lourié and a French cameraman, and shooting on location in his favoured communal atmosphere. *The Diary of a Chambermaid* (1946) was shot in a small, independent studio with considerable room for improvisation (Renoir 1989b: 25). *The Woman on the Beach* (1946), was shot for the RKO studio which apparently let Renoir work as he wished. The film was not a success. RKO bought Renoir out of his contract, bringing his Hollywood period to a close.

His American output is decidedly varied with no clear evolution or thematic consistency. Two films look back to France but only one of them can be definitely attached to the present. Two films are rural dramas which clearly feed off American myths of small towns, settlers and wilderness. One *(The Woman on the Beach)* is a *film noir* that deals with the scarring effects of the war. Should we bracket off Renoir's American production from the rest of his work, seeing it simply as the floundering about of an exile? Is it a mere interlude, or can we link it to what came before or after? One of his films is an overtly propagandistic piece, but to what degree were the other films also tailored for a wartime context? Was Renoir seeking to express some personal vision or making conventional products in a bid for acceptance (in which case his degree of freedom during shooting becomes somewhat irrelevant)? To what degree were myths of America or American genres simply voicing themselves through his films?

It is not really clear why Renoir turned his back on Hollywood. The decision seems to have been an initially tentative separation that hardened into a divorce. In an article which Gauteur dates as 1946 but which simple mathematics locate as 1948, Renoir speaks of enormous difficulty adapting to working in America but adds that he now feels enthusiastic about working there and will be able to express himself as well as in France. He even adds that America is the only place where he can easily finance the projects that he has in mind (Renoir 1974a: 54–9). However, in an interview from 1954, he recounts how American banks refused to finance the innovative low-budget independent productions he then wanted

to embark on (Renoir 1989b: 31). Unable to function within the studios or finance ventures outside of them, there were few avenues left to him.

The inevitable question is why France's most famous filmmaker did not return sooner to the country where he had made his most celebrated films. Again, no clear answer arises. One problem was that Renoir's divorce from Catherine was not valid in France, so that he might be liable to charges of bigamy if he arrived with his second wife. In addition, his American output was generally very badly received in France, especially *This Land is Mine* which came in for savage attack for what some felt to be an offensively false image of occupied France. At a deeper level, there was clearly a risk that the director who had felt he had his finger on a nation's pulse in 1939 would simply be out of touch with a country that had gone through so much in his absence.

Renoir's next film and his first in colour, *The River* (1950), was shot in India. Because of its concentration on an English family and the twilight of colonialism, it helped bring him closer to Europe again. *Le Carosse d'or* (1952) completed the journey. This Franco-Italian co-production continues *The River's* critique of European civilisation and opens a tryptych of historical costume dramas that are deliberately anti-realist in their theatricality. *French Cancan* (1954) saw Renoir return at last to film-making in his native country.[1] Set in the *belle époque,* it can be seen as a celebration of French popular culture designed to help the director to re-establish himself in his homeland. *Eléna et les hommes* (1956), an uneasy mix of light comedy and dark satire, is set in the same period.

The last four films were relatively low-key ventures. *Le Testament du Docteur Cordelier* (1959) and *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (1959), shot using the same multi-camera technique, form a deliberate if contrasting pair. *Le Caporal épinglé* (1962) is, on the

1 Renoir began to talk of returning to France to direct from 1949 (see Renoir, J. 1994: 220). The emergence of a European art cinema, the adulation heaped on him in the influential French journal *Cahiers du cinéma,* and the difficulties he was experiencing making films in Hollywood are all factors which may have pushed him back towards France.

surface, the story of French prisoners of war in the Second World War, while *Le Petit Théâtre de Jean Renoir* (1969), a consciously valedictory work, is a collection of four short pieces shot in a range of styles that evoke different aspects and periods of the director's output. All these late films pursue a critique of the false priorities and repressive attitudes of modern technological and consumerist society. Renoir's post-war cinema, even when in apparently realist mode as in *Le Caporal épinglé,* is predominantly a didactic cinema of ideas in which characters encapsulate values or attitudes to life rather than being rounded, socially embedded individuals.

The United States remained Renoir's permanent home in the post-war period although he no longer made films there. Some of his later output, because of its transnational production or themes, positioned him on the international art-house circuit. His specifically French films seemed to avoid engaging with contemporary issues. He seemed strangely semi-detached. It is easy to understand why some critics felt he was simply out of touch. This study will need to justify its identification of a sustained critique of the West in the later films while at the same time explaining why other critics read them so differently.

The shape of a career

When one attempts to give a shape to Renoir's career, one is struck by the difficulty of the endeavour. He made films addressing different audiences with varying degrees of freedom in shifting production and socio-historical contexts. Rather than seeking any overall coherence or consistency, it makes more sense, initially at least, to identify periods when one or more contextual factors remained relatively stable. Such an approach leads me to identify the following stages as the basis of my analysis. First, the silent period which is marked predominantly by Renoir's fascination with technique and shows no consistent sense of artistic development and no clear ideological stance. Second, the early sound period which is dominated by adaptations of plays and novels. Third, The Popular Front period when Renoir's cinema was engaged fully with

contemporary struggles and his realist aesthetic was put at the service of a clear ideological commitment. Fourth, the American period when, against a background of war, the exiled Renoir struggled to establish a sense of direction. Finally, the post-war period when his films turn away from realism and engage in a critique of dominant values and traditions of western societies in general and France in particular.

Renoir's writings

The place of the director in our interpretation of films has been one of the central sites of conflict in film criticism. Those who wish to establish film's credentials as an art form need a central originating genius, an *auteur*, to set it on a par with novel, poetry, music or painting. The director is perforce their central candidate for this role, being the obvious potential link in the various stages of the creative process from scriptwriting, through *mise-en-scène* to editing. Such *auteurism,* undoubtedly the dominant public form of reception of 'art' or 'serious' cinema, is embedded in the way film is presented, viewed and reviewed. *Auteurism* has dominated Renoir criticism, constantly seeking to privilege links between the thoughts expressed by the director outside the films and themes and patterns identified in the films themselves. One cannot engage with the existing body of criticism without considering Renoir's writings and interviews.

Any adequate consideration of Renoir's utterances would consider when they were produced and in what specific institutional and ideological contexts. More specifically, it would consider whether they were produced by the politically committed director of the later 1930s or the politically disengaged figure of the postwar era. It would also consider whether the texts were contemporary to the period they described or whether they were retrospective accounts that imposed a particular slant on previous films in order to bring them into line with the attitudes of a later Renoir. All too often, however, they have been used uncritically and selectively to support a particular interpretation of the films.

Pierre-Auguste Renoir, mon père (Renoir 1981b) is the text most frequently drawn upon to fill in Renoir's early years and to suggest what influence his artist father may have had upon him. The problem with it is that it was published in 1962 when Renoir himself was an old man. Rather than giving a simple account of his father, it repeatedly contrasts his era with the time when the book was written, broadly suggesting how the world has changed for the worst and what role an artist can play in modern society. Some critics (notably Gauteur) have suggested that this text plays a key role in Renoir's denial of his previous political commitment (Gauteur 1980). By creating a father in his own image, Renoir is able to suggest a smooth transition of values that neatly hides his own ideological about-turn. While one may use this text as a source of basic biographical information, it is unwise to take its ideological or aesthetic positions at face value and important to remember that Renoir needed to produce a childhood to account for his adult directorial persona.

Renoir on Renoir (Renoir 1989b) contains a series of key interviews that Renoir gave to the *Cahiers du cinéma* critics for whom he was a totemic figure, the model French *auteur*. *Cahiers* played a key role in the propagation of *auteur* theory in the 1950s and first half of the 1960s. Its interviews with Renoir, which date precisely from this period, provided him with the sort of sustained platform to talk about his outlook and his films that he had never previously enjoyed. *Cahiers* looked positively upon all aspects of his career and invited him to review his previous films in terms of a developing personal style and philosophy, or, in other words, to view himself as an *auteur*. *Cahiers* was not alone in promoting Renoir as an *auteur* at this time. The re-release of key films, television showings, the appearance of the first book-length studies of the director's works and the emergence of a flourishing network of *ciné-clubs* where 'great' directors were adulated, all helped to ensure that Renoir's films were increasingly viewed in a context of personal development and detached from broader socio-historical contexts. However, *Cahiers* undoubtedly played a key role, and its own decided leaning towards formalism and ahistorical humanism tended to create a Renoir in its own image.

My life and my films (Renoir 1974b) builds upon the *auteurist* account of his work that Renoir and *Cahiers* had connived to generate. It gives an evolutionary account of the director's life and work tailored to account for the emergence of his mature outlook and style. The films are seen as the product of personal experiences and of the influence of other artists, usually consecrated cinematic *auteurs,* such as Chaplin (famous for his participation in all aspects of his own films), Griffiths (credited with the almost single-handed invention of the 'grammar' of narrative film and notoriously unable to fit his artistic creativity into the Hollywood mould) and Pagnol (who resolutely maintained his status as an independent film-maker in the 1930s). Although the broader historical and political context is not entirely absent, the text focuses resolutely on individuals and personal contexts. Famously, Renoir glosses over the Popular Front period, the time of his most fertile film-making, in just a few pages, almost completely erasing his own deep involvement in the politics of the period and its decisive influence on some of his most celebrated films.

Claude Gauteur wanted to restore some balance to our vision of Renoir and to show the complexity of his evolution. In *Jean Renoir: Ecrits, 1926–1971* (Renoir 1974a), he assembled a diverse collection of texts which had been unavailable to or neglected by those who had produced overviews of Renoir's work in the previous twenty years. Most notably, he brought together the journalistic writings from the Popular Front period, the majority of which appeared in Renoir's weekly column in *Ce soir,* the Communist daily. These reveal a partisan figure, engaged fully in the quarrels of the period, and happy to bend his language to fit the discourse of the Popular Front or the Communist Party. This political Renoir was, of course, responsible for many of what are conventionally seen as the greatest films. *Auteurists,* who by rights should use these texts to produce political readings of the films, rather unsurprisingly prefer the retrospective and apparently apolitical comments of the later Renoir.

Gauteur's second collection, *Le Passé vivant* (Renoir 1989a), contained neglected texts generated between 1933 and 1978. It was far less polemical than the first, seeming to be motivated more by a

desire for completeness than by the earlier wish to correct a distorted view of the director. With his previous volume, it does however demonstrate how little Renoir wrote about his films, his art or his outlook before 1936 and indeed during the 1940s. The two volumes of Renoir letters which are now available can, to a degree, fill the gap for the latter period, although their general focus on day-to-day issues of film production or on private and interpersonal issues prevents them from being an adequate substitute for more considered articles or interviews (Renoir 1984 and 1994). The Renoir of the earlier period is largely unavailable to us except through the films.

While we might seem to have a remarkably rounded picture of the director stretching from his father's youth to his last years, the available texts come largely from an intense burst of activity in the later 1930s and a more sustained period from the 1950s onwards. In both cases, as we have shown, these texts were produced to respond to specific expectations. A key question facing those who work on Renoir is how we should relate them to each other and beyond that to the films. One solution is to contrast the 1930s writings with the later output to show a man who turned his back on progressive politics. Another is to use the later writings to overwrite the earlier ones and to reorientate the films, thus producing an 'authentic' and self-consistent Renoir whose commitment was only on the surface. A more judicious approach is to use texts from a period to cast light on the films from that same period while remembering that, although they may provide important insights, they are also part of the production of a directorial persona.

We can now turn to Renoir's versions of his past, his craft and his philosophy of life. I hope it is now clear why we will always need to contextualise his comments and be tentative in any conclusions we draw from them. We will begin by considering the political and ideological stances that he adopts at different stages of his career, showing how these provide an essential context for his comments on his films and his craft.