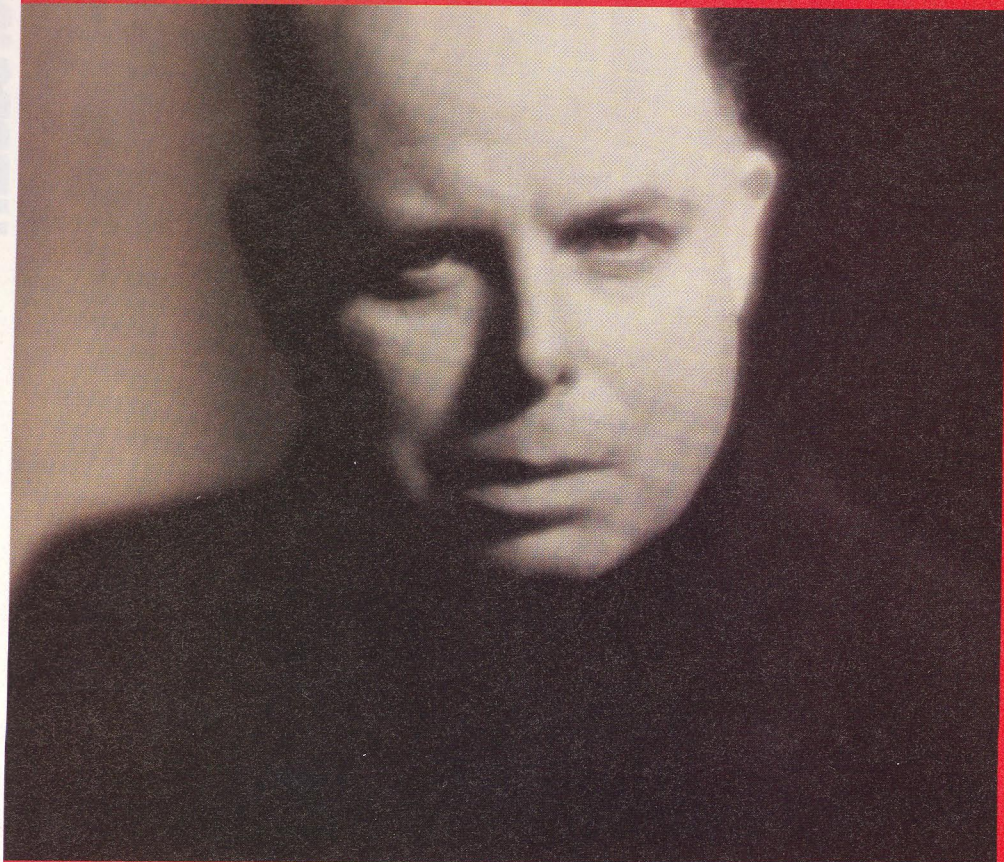


INTERVIEW BY GAVIN SMITH



Between two worlds: Jean Renoir, left, whose centenary is celebrated in 1995; Julien Carette as the poacher-turned-servant Marceau in the director's masterpiece 'La Règle du jeu', opposite

# A MAN OF EXCESS

PAUL  
SCHRADER  
ON JEAN  
RENOIR







● In the middle of editing his HBO film *Witch Hunt*, a private-eye mystery set in 50s Hollywood that combines supernatural, noir and comic elements, director, screenwriter and former critic Paul Schrader took time out to talk to me about Jean Renoir and *La Règle du jeu* (*The Rules of the Game*, 1939), on the occasion of Renoir's centenary. Our conversation ranged from reflections on the historical significance of the director to an analysis of the techniques of the film, which we watched together on tape.

Schrader and Renoir may seem an unlikely match, but in fact it's the old story of an attraction of opposites. Schrader's cerebral – even academic – sensibility, with its emphasis on formal control, originates in a Calvinist upbringing that emphasised predestination, guilt and the denial of free will, and which considered art and imagery suspect. Renoir, by contrast, grew up in a liberal artistic environment, which privileged the visual and celebrated the vitality and richness of everyday life and the human appetite for experience. Schrader was not permitted to watch movies until he was at college, and his initial investment in cinema was via the metaphysical poetics and ascetic minimalism of avant-garde European film-makers such as Bresson, Antonioni and Dreyer. These led him to more liberal influences such as Godard and Bertolucci, who combined philosophical inquiry with more permissive cinematic form. Indeed, Schrader names Bertolucci's *The Conformist* as the film that made film-making seem a possibility to him, citing in particular its synthesis of intense pictorialism (think of late Renoir, father and son alike) and Godardian third-person camera style; perhaps for Schrader this was an aesthetic realisation of his own effort to unite cinema's sensory appeal and the spiritual discipline of Calvinism.

On the road to Bertolucci, Schrader was impressed by Renoir's artistic and secular-humanist values, perhaps recognising him as the godfather to post-war European art cinema. Schrader's eventual application of European art-film aesthetics to sensational Hollywood genre material would ultimately be informed by his own theoretical concerns: the life of the mind, the play of guilt and redemption. Yet Renoir represented the tantalising possibilities of a sympathetic, moral cinema of joyful extravagance, carnal humanity and material presence which would come to haunt Schrader's work. As he wrote of *Boudu sauvé des eaux* (1932): "A great artist like Renoir takes abnormal behaviour (that is, uncivilised, unpolluted and, in effect, very natural behaviour) and makes it so central to life itself, so enjoyable, and so contagious that even the most hard core establishment sycophants can identify with it."

Gavin Smith: When did you first meet Renoir?

Paul Schrader: In 1969. I was writing for the *L.A. Free Press* and I had a friend or mentor, Joel Reiser. He made a sort of career out of being a friend to the famous. He knew Lang and Huxley and Isherwood and Renoir and that whole émigré community. After I wrote an article on *Boudu sauvé des eaux*, Joel took me up to Renoir's house on Leona Drive where I met Jean and Dido. Renoir was in a pre-retirement period. He was making *Little Theatre* and was trying to get



**Taking fright:** Paulette Goddard as Lisette the maid, top; Julien Carette as Marceau, supporting the frightened house guest Charlotte (Odette Talazac), above

some films on, but he was also starting to work on the books. He liked to have people come up to the house, and for some reason he took a shine to me. I think it was almost out of perversity, because I was writing a book on Bresson at the time, *Transcendental Style*. Renoir was baffled by what I saw in Bresson because it was so against his sensibility. Renoir is a man of excess – the body language of giving and generosity – and Bresson's films are about the opposite: they're about taking away until he has taken away so much that the viewer has to start putting it in. Whenever I was up there, Renoir would wave me over and say to whoever was there, "You've got to meet this kid, he's the one who's doing the book on Bresson. Tell them about your book on Bresson." I realised after a couple of Saturdays that I was a running gag. *Did you and he throw your ideas about Bresson at each other?*

I threw my ideas at him, but they just bounced off. It was like trying to explain communism to Jesse Helms – you can talk and talk but it isn't going to get through. As much as I like Bresson's work, I do think *La Règle du jeu* is the consummate film. If you had to take one film to represent all of film history and put it on the spaceship, it would be this, because it has a mixture of humanism, comedy and technical innovation, all with a solid, socially meaningful basis. Relevant then, relevant now. But the thing you carry away from it is the human story. Renoir was everything a film-maker can be. I've met a number of artists who make your life bigger. When you're with them you feel as though you're in a darkened room, and as the conversation proceeds, they walk around and open the windows and more and more light comes in.

*Who else has made this kind of impression on you?*

Rossellini was like that. When you left the room after he'd been talking you really felt the world was bigger and that more things could be done, you were invigorated. The architect Charles Eames had a similar impact. As a young critic I met other artists I respect enormously – such as Peckinpah – but Sam wasn't that kind of man. Renoir made you feel your world was bigger because he had entered it.

I remember something Renoir said about his father and how much he disliked motion pictures and that there was nothing for him to do as a kid to get his father's approval. He said, "Lucky for me that film came along and I could do something creative that my father had nothing to do with. I could make my own creative life and get out from underneath that." The next thing he said was, "My son, on the other hand...!"

*You didn't start watching films until you went to college. When did you first see 'La Règle du jeu'?*  
At UCLA.

*Did it have an immediate impact?*

It was immediate, but because I was trying to reconcile my theological upbringing with my love of movies, certain artists came right out at me – Bresson, Dreyer, Ozu, Antonioni, artists who were into the spiritual predicament. Those were the first ones who made me say, "Aha, here's the connection between the way I was raised and what I am now. Here are people who



are trying to bridge that gap, trying to make sense of both worlds." It wasn't until *Boudu* that I began to fall in love with the humanist side of cinema. I had come in through the coldest, most austere door – I came in through the meat freezer. Because I was Pauline Kael's protégé, I used to send her the articles every week, and the *Boudu* article was the only one where I remember she wrote back to say, "Bravo, you did good."

*There's a point in Renoir, especially in 'The River', where his humanism is so absolute and lyrical it assumes an almost spiritual texture. How did you become familiar with the rest of his work?*

The LA County Museum did a complete retrospective and I must have seen 80 per cent of the films at that time. I particularly liked the early ones, *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange* and the Jean Gabin films. I didn't care for *La Grande Illusion*, I found that schematic. I find all the so-called touches forced, contrived, as opposed to the spontaneity of the other films, where he really put life in a bottle. I think one of the reasons *La Grande Illusion* is so revered is that it is a simplistic film. I don't think it holds up. I was teaching at Columbia University a couple of years ago and I asked the students to bring in something they thought was well made. A student brought in *La Grande Illusion*, and as we watched it, I said, "Look at it, it's not really well made. It's obvious, you can see the buttons it's going to hit before it hits them" – as opposed to *La Règle du jeu*, where buttons are being pressed all over the place and sometimes you're not even aware they've been pressed until after you've had the emotion. It's like those doors flying open in the château – you never know what's going to come at you and what characters you'll grow to like or dislike. Probably Renoir's most unique gift is his ability to take a character and show his reputable and disreputable sides with equal honesty and not condemn him.

*I think that comes from the fact that he worked very intimately with his cast. As with Cassavetes, if a director is of a generous disposition, his emotional commitment and admiration for his actors is transferred to the characters they play.*

One of the great marks of Renoir's genius is that he approached film as an actor. He was an actor himself and he could get out there and do the roles. On top of that was his ability to have an intellectual depth of field – and then to see what images can do as opposed to what performances can do, how a camera move is also a performance. Directors who are part of the cast in their mentality are often not part of the camera crew.

*As early as 'Boudu', Renoir mastered a very modern way for the camera to move through and reveal space – for instance, those lateral tracking shots linking adjacent but distinct spaces.*

Godard took that to its limit. I think it's in *Deux ou trois choses que je sais d'elle*, in a restaurant, where he's on his actors, then he pans out of the window and watches for a while, then pans back. Renoir was very good at that too.

It also has a lot to do with technology, a subject that is often skipped over in film theory. The moment you got rid of parallax you had a huge jump in the director's control, because then he or she could see when something was

out of focus. The same when sound became portable, and then when the advent of the KEM flatbed enabled the director to be the editor; the advent of video-assist has now made the director the camera operator. The director sees the shot, the move, as it comes down; the director sits there in front of a monitor. If the monitor has playback, the director can go back, look at it again and choose the match. Back then it was much more risky to go out and do things that may not cut together. You didn't know what they would look like because the operator was looking at it at an angle, not looking through the lens, and you had to take the operator's word for what he was seeing. And you had to take the assistant's word for whether it was going out of focus or not and the assistant wouldn't really know because he would be doing it on a calibrator. The famous shot in *Stagecoach* where the camera dollies up to John Wayne and goes soft in the middle of the shot – there was no way they could know that when they were shooting that shot. People who moved the camera in the early days had to have a much stronger vision of what the camera was doing. Directors are able to do a lot more with the camera these days with a lot less experience. Directors such as Renoir and Welles were out there imagining things they had no proof would work other than in their mind's eye.

It's a thorny subject, but is it that we don't have Renoirs today because we just don't have Renoirs, or is it because the whole nature of society has changed? And if we had a Renoir, what would he or she be like? I agree with George Lucas that in 20 years we will look back at the way we make films now with a sort of nostalgia – for the days when there was transportation and electricity and wardrobe. I'm of the opinion that film is 100 years old, it's the art form of the century and it's running its course. *One reason why Renoir may not be as influential on contemporary film-makers is that he isn't sexy or immediate in the way of Welles, Hitchcock, Godard or Peckinpah. Godard points out in the second two instalments of 'Histoire(s) du cinéma' that there's too much film history for today's generation to come to terms with and define themselves within, whereas the nouvelle vague were perfectly positioned historically, 50 years after cinema began.*

In many ways Renoir's was a nineteenth-century sensibility in a twentieth-century art form.

**One of the great marks of Renoir's genius is that he approached film as an actor**

While he was making these humanist films, his more avant-garde contemporaries in France were forging the existentialist hero, and I don't think he had much sympathy with that. Now I think we're at the point where just as Renoir's hero ran its course years ago, the twentieth-century existentialist hero that came after it has run its course too. The existentialist hero was born of cynicism and died of irony. Now we're in an almost post-cynical era where everything is ironic, recycled and non-contextual. It's a very difficult time to be an artist.

*If you read the film criticism of the 50s and 60s, the term 'anti-hero' was widespread. Now it's a given and therefore obsolete – name a genre hero who isn't either an anti-hero or an ironised hero construct like Indiana Jones.*

The anti-hero was someone who didn't have heroic qualities but had a heroic soul, so here was Bresson's *Pickpocket*. Now even he is seen as a sentimental creation, and we're into the Quentin Tarantino hero, who is just another ingredient in our Cuisinart culture, where you throw everything in the blender and turn it on. *Yet what Renoir, for all his warmth, shares with Tarantino is that he maintains a certain detachment, he doesn't implicate the viewer through identification with any one character's point of view.*

I think that's just the humanist point of view – a moment-to-moment non-judgmental quality, though in the end the judgment is made on society, not on the individuals. That's also a very nineteenth-century thing – Stendahl, Flaubert. There's an argument to be made that in the first half-century of cinema, all they did was translate nineteenth-century stories into a twentieth-century medium and that the dramaturgy of motion pictures didn't change until the *nouvelle vague*, when the idea of the well-made play and the arc and fall of a character seemed too contrived. Renoir was using the objectivity of this twentieth-century medium to breathe new life into Victorian drama. And maybe that's why *La Règle du jeu* is such a masterpiece – it's right there on the cusp, an old story with a brand new way of storytelling.

*If you look at the first and last shots of the film, that sense is right there. The first image is of a live radio transmitter and the opening scene concerns a transatlantic flight. Then the film ends with the shadows of the upper classes moving across an outside wall as they go back inside the château. It begins with the ultra-contemporary and ends in the eighteenth or nineteenth century.*

There's the sense that the old order has come to a close, mixed with the moral relativism of the characters' individual passions, the bedroom-comedy aspect of it. The image is really quite devastating because it's a big canvas. Usually when you have stories that seem hopeless, they're relatively small-canvas stories – a character tries to do good in this world and nothing comes of it; *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang*, what do I do? I steal. To do that on a big canvas is quite devastating.

One of the things that distinguishes contemporary film-making from classical film-making is that audiences today want an incessant flow of new visual information. That old technique of the master shot and coverage back and forth, back and forth is basically a stage idea that ►



◀ film got away from for a while until the influence of television brought it back again. What separates film-makers of my generation from those before is that one of the things we try to do is to make every cut a new cut so you're constantly moving forward. Unless you have a scene where it's important that you go back and forth, you want to get away from the talking heads thing. So every shot is a new set-up. The whole notion of matching or continuity is contingent on a master shot. You establish your scene in the master and then everything has to match it. But in the opening shot of *La Règle du jeu*, you start with a close-up, it comes over to a single, then we're working our way through the crowd in a simulation of hand-held camera newsreel footage.

*The images are chaotic and unstructured, in contrast to the more formal, ordered style of the rest of the film, another way of offsetting the contemporary world and the anachronistic, backward-looking world of the characters.*

Then the shot introducing André [Roland Toutain] in the cockpit is just like the first one, a close-up that becomes two or three different shots. Welles was doing this at the same time, taking one set-up and making it a single, an insert, an over-the-shoulder, a crowd scene, doing it through the choreography rather than through the editing.

Look at the second scene in Christine's boudoir – there's no master. It's shot cut-to-cut. Conventionally, it would have been a master and coverage. But at some point in the editing they decided to intercut to keep the first scene alive. Probably in the script it was the airport scene and then the boudoir scene. So they pan up from the radio; Christine [Nora Grégor] comes forward, switches it off and goes back and sits down; we cut back to the airport; next, the wide shot of Christine sitting at her dressing table, which would theoretically be the master, but it isn't because you don't see the face of the protagonist. And he hasn't used the same angle twice in the film up to this point. We cut to the maid Lisette [Paulette Dubost] walking into the foreground and then back; and then Renoir reveals Christine in a two-shot, and then she gets up. There are no repeat cuts. It has an enormous validity because you don't know what's coming next, you're just going from one thing to the next to the next.

What this tells me is that this is all rehearsed, and at some point he said, "Here are the cuts." Eventually he's going to end up in conventional back-and-forth coverage, but he starts the film with this kind of fluidity. One of the ways you do this is to keep the characters on their feet, you keep them moving and then you just shoot the cuts. That's what makes this film look so modern. If you shot this sequence this way today, it would be considered stylistically *au courant*, which is saying something for a movie that's more than 50 years old. And it's a very time-consuming way to shoot, particularly in those days. Every time you do a new set-up it requires a new lighting break. You can't just pop lights around.

*Do you think he was aware of what he was doing?*

He was absolutely aware of it. When you shoot this way, your goal is to cut this way, although

often in editing you realise that it's better storytelling to punch in. The first repeat cut in the film is in the scene where Octave [Renoir] and André argue after the car crash, 16 minutes in. The characters don't move, he's stuck and he has to go back. [In fact on a later viewing we find there doesn't appear to be a repeat cut even here. Certain shots from the same basic angle are repeated but at different ranges from the subjects.] The only reason for it is that he has two characters who have their feet planted for two or three pages. That's why nobody gets to sit down in one spot for long in most of the film.

In *Witch Hunt* there's a scene where Dennis Hopper and several others look around a house for evidence. I shot it cut-to-cut. We rehearsed it, I called out the cuts and I cut it on the set, and that's the way it cuts in the film. The nice thing is that it's fluid. But what you don't get is the ability to shorten it; you're time-locked and you don't get back-and-forth close-ups. That's the trade-off. When you have four characters exploring a space it's ideal, but it's risky because you limit your options. In *La Règle du jeu*, once you get into it, that's how you do everything and you live with it.

Another example of something you'd do today that they didn't do then is in the scene at Geneviève's [Mila Parély's] house, where they're playing cards: move the camera ahead of the character and then let the character catch you up. Renoir uses Geneviève's move to carry you into the next room. The move is motivated by the character but is not driven by her. If it was, he'd stay with her, but instead he's jumping ahead and letting her come back in.

Then in the next scene when Robert [Marcel Dalio] visits Geneviève, Renoir starts out on a two-shot and dollies back to a wide shot rather than starting out on an establishing shot and cutting in, which is the way a more conventional film-maker would do it. That keeps him from having to do an establishing shot. The dolly back establishes the room. And again there are no repeat shots – in the dialogue between Geneviève and Robert, when he cuts back and forth the shots get tighter. There's all this theatre staging, but usually when they shoot theatre they try to lock it down rather than moving it around. He may have done an establishing master on all that, but I don't see it. That one shot where he pulled back, he prob-

**Fluid editing is about getting the actors' movements to force the cuts, so they don't seem arbitrary**

ably stayed there and shot a master, if only because once you do that, it's hard to say "cut". But in his head he knew he'd never be back there again.

In the scene where Octave visits Christine and asks her to invite André to the château, there's a cut that they always tell you you can't do when you're shooting. Lisette goes to the window and turns to look back to Octave and Christine, and it cuts on Lisette's eyeline to the other side of the door.

*Her look motivates the cut?*

Renoir is cutting on her eyeline back into a new axis.

*So he finesses an axis break?*

He wants to get on the other side of Octave and Christine. The easiest way to do that is to cut inside and then cut out, but it's not the most innovative. What Renoir does here is to dash over to Lisette and use her look to bring us back on the other side of them. And then later in the scene he uses her to change axis again.

*He's using a third character to reconfigure the spatial relationship between the other two.*

In the kitchen scene where the servants are having dinner, he uses someone outside the table – the Chef, then Marceau the poacher-turned-servant [Julien Carette] – to bring us back to the table rather than getting saddled inside the coverage. He's constantly using people who are coming to the table. The only time he really comes in purely on a cut is when Lisette and Corneille [Eddy Debray] talk about their former employer and then one of the servants points out that the Count's real name is Rosenthal, clearly an important story point. He comes in and makes sure you get that.

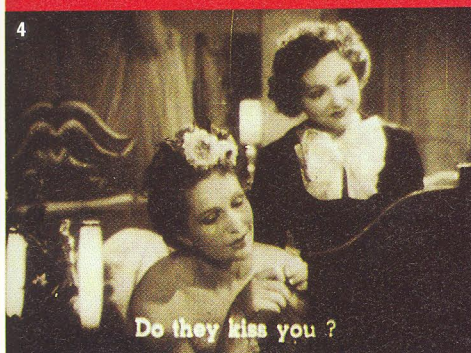
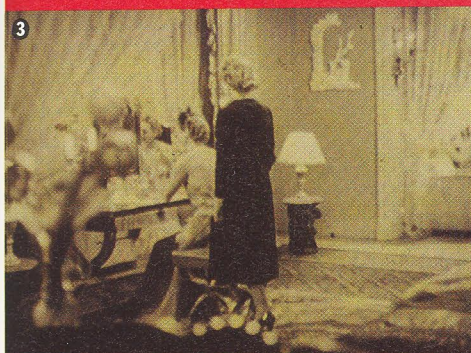
*He also uses incidental stuff to motivate cuts – twice people are asked to pass the mustard and that action prompts a cut, getting him out of a shot in an unobtrusive way.*

The long hallway scene is even more liberated than I remembered – the courage to move away from a character, back pans, things like that. With so many people, how do you shoot that kind of situation? You have your actors blocked like crazy and you keep leading them off and going with them and coming back with someone else. You *can't* cover this stuff. But the very fact that he can't cover it means he doesn't feel obliged to. He has a group shot and instead of cutting in for a close-up, he moves people out, moves in to a two-shot, pans with one of the characters to bring you to something else. Very similar to the stuff Welles was doing. Then when he does settle down for a conversation between Lisette and Christine, it's such a relief you pay attention to it. That's part of what makes the pacing work – you have to stop every now and then and lock down for a moment.

*There's a real interplay between busy and static action. A lot of the film happens in long sections of real time, without time compression or deletion.*

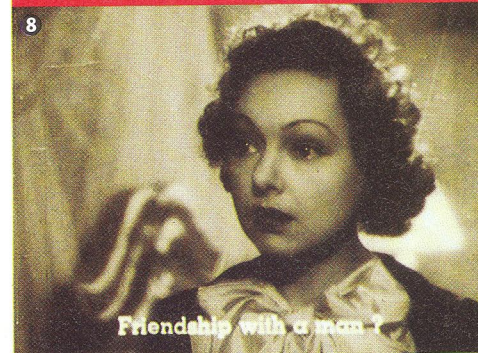
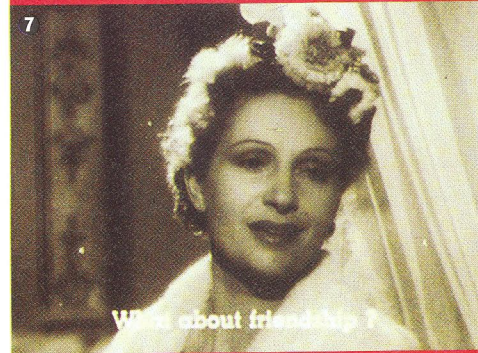
It places you as a viewer completely at the director's mercy because you have no idea where a character is going to take you. He doesn't have his characters walk up into close-ups the way we would today, and which Welles was able to do. The equipment wasn't good enough to pull focus that critically. But if you take any of the \$50 million films that are out right now – *The*





A very modern fluidity: Christine sits at her dressing table and Lisette walks into a wide shot, which includes her reflected image (1). Lisette turns and leaves the frame. Cut to a long shot over Christine's left shoulder. Lisette walks towards the camera into medium shot (2). She collects a lipstick from a surface in the foreground, turns and walks back to hand it to Christine, then stands behind her (3). Cut to a two-shot from behind the

table (4). Cut to a medium shot as Christine rises from the table (5). The camera pans right as she moves to the centre of the room. Here Lisette drapes Christine's coat over her shoulders (6). The camera pans left as Christine walks away into middle distance towards the door. She stops. Cut to a close-up of Christine as she half-turns towards Lisette and delivers her final question (7). Cut to a close-up of Lisette as she replies.



*Client, Clear and Present Danger*, any of them – they're not a fraction as innovative in terms of keeping scenes alive and action and movement of characters.

Obviously Renoir took his inspiration from *The Marriage of Figaro*, where people are constantly moving and your eye is constantly moving. One of the secrets of fluid editing is to get the actors' movements to force the cuts, so they don't seem arbitrary. In the scene between Robert and Octave where Octave persuades Robert to invite André to the château, there's a proscenium wide-shot of the two of them. Renoir is now in a situation where visually he doesn't want to be here any more, the shot is dying. But he also has you interested in what's going on over here in the frame.

*Marcel Dalio's bit of business with the vitrola.*

Yes. So he's forcing the cut to what you want to see, a much smoother cut than just going in. It contributes to the film's dance-of-life feeling. At any moment someone is going to walk in or out of the room. Of course, life is nothing like this. People don't move around this much.

*Do you think Altman is in this tradition?*

I think Altman's reference point in shooting is multi-camera television, and then applying that to sound as well.

*Which is how Renoir shot 'Le Testament du Docteur Cordelier' – he used eight cameras in some set-ups.*

It suffers for it too. There's no room for a second camera in cut-to-cut. Multi-camera set-ups have hurt as many films as the zoom did. Altman is the only other director to have attempted this kind of roundelay, but he lacks the two most interesting things you find in Renoir. One is the humanism. Altman doesn't care much for his characters, he's superior to them. He's at his best when he has characters who are sleazy to begin with. When he deals with regular people, his condescension comes through. The second thing is that Altman doesn't have Renoir's dance-of-life fluidity, he doesn't have a feeling for that. You have a sense in *La Règle du jeu* that one person is leading you through this labyrinthine world and that you are getting a single consistent vision rather than a pastiche. Altman has that pastiche feeling. With Renoir, you feel that the director wants you to be here, now. That it only appears random, and in fact you are in the hands of a very stern moral tour guide with an overall plan that he is allowing you to find out about as it goes along. It's fair to say that this is somewhat atypical of Renoir – it's his masterpiece, but it's full of a kind of freedom you don't see in all his films.

Few film-makers today have the stylistic confidence to do something like this. You really have to be secure with the story you're telling and the relationships you're showing. You're taking irrevocable decisions and assuming that these relationships are going to work out without conventional coverage. If you were not a major film-maker and you put these kind of dailies into a studio, you would get a screaming phone call. "Where are the close-ups? Where's the coverage? How are people going to know what to feel?"

*A Renoir season, including a two-part 'Omnibus', will be screened by the BBC in early 1995. 'La Règle du Jeu' is available on Connoisseur Video*