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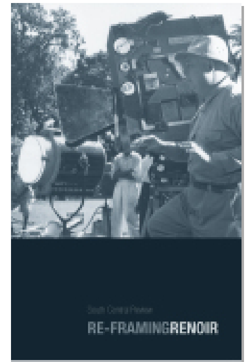

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Jean Renoir, American Artist

Leland Poague, Iowa State University

Few moving-camera sequences in the history of cinema have proven more fascinating to critics than the one in Jean Renoir's *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange* (1935) that follows Amédée Lange (René Lefèvre) as he descends from a second floor office/apartment to the courtyard below. After a graphic-match cut, the camera pans inexplicably left as Lange exits screen right, but in such a way as to arrive in the corner of the yard—where Valentine (Florelle) and Batala (Jules Berry) are conversing, the latter supposedly dead but on the verge of reclaiming his role as a philandering fly-by-night publisher—just as Lange arrives and guns down his sexual rival and class adversary in a fit of Popular Front idealism. I have elsewhere questioned the figural logic whereby the communal spirit of the *Arizona Jim* publishing cooperative is purportedly extended to include the viewer by reference to a "circularity" motif, of which the counterclockwise pan of the courtyard is the culmination and confirmation.[1] I urged that the consensus "historical" reading of *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange*, which sees the film's semantic fields as deriving from (resonating most deeply to) the politics of the Popular Front movement, pays short shrift to the film's (and Renoir's) narrational self-consciousness and is therefore largely silent on the film's "colonialist" or racialist intertext, a significant part of which is elaborated via Lange's *Arizona Jim* stories. Something I want to consider in the present essay is the extent to which this reference to Arizona—hence to America—is typical of Renoir generally, especially in view of the fact that Renoir relocated to Hollywood after the fall of France. Put otherwise, though it is hardly the case that Renoir's American films of the period 1941–47 are uninterested in America or uninflected by American production circumstances, it is strikingly true that "Americanness" is crucial to his inter-war French and Popular Front-era films, sometimes in ways that are surprisingly salient, as *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange* makes clear.

As my title avows, I am inspired in this regard by a remark in Peter Wollen's introduction to *Howard Hawks, American Artist*, where he claims—in the context of discussing "The Modernity of Howard Hawks"—that "the film-maker most like Hawks is Renoir," an assertion he elaborates by comparing *La Règle du jeu* (1939) to *Only Angels*

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Have Wings (1939).[2] Given that Renoir lived much of his life in Southern California and acquired dual French/American citizenship—a French edition of his 1940s correspondence is entitled *Lettres d'Amérique*—I wondered if Renoir's "Americanness" was not due for renewed attention, especially in view of Martin O'Shaughnessy's important work on Renoir's American films.[3] Readers should not be surprised if the artist I describe below is variously a modernist but strikingly and concertedly "American," his "Americanism" mediated largely though not exclusively through the category of race.

In his 1963 essay "The Modernity of Howard Hawks," Henri Langlois praises *A Girl in Every Port* (1928) as premonitory of "the future which leads through *Scarface* [1932] to the cinema of our time," further specified as the art of "an America which has now been exposed and which did exist, but whose evolution was then still in progress." Though Hawks, accordingly, "is the most American of film-makers," Langlois likens him to Walter Gropius (Hawks "conceived his films as one might conceive a typewriter, a motor, or a bridge") and Le Corbusier (in the almost architectural "way he handles lines and volume").[4] Hence it is not surprising that Wollen would link Hawks and Renoir under the sign of a transatlantic modernity, though a modernity whose common denominators are aviation, male heroism, and the "new woman," the former two seen at least in part as responses to the person and prospect of the latter.[5] How far this Hawksian "modernity" equates with something "American" in Renoir's French films is a good question.

Wollen's implicit answer is focused chiefly on *La Règle du jeu*, especially in his 1999 article "*La Règle du jeu* and Modernity," though here he brings Orson Welles and the radio aesthetic of *Citizen Kane* (1941)—not to mention Saint-Exupéry, Sartre, and Virginia Woolf—into the picture as well. Rather strikingly, then, the only reference Wollen makes to Charles Lindbergh is at second hand, in adducing Brecht's *Der Lindberghflug* (1929) when claiming that, at least circa 1939, "the aviator is the crucial representative of modernity."[6] The film is more explicit than Wollen about the link between André Jurieux (Roland Toutain) and his world-historical American predecessor. Both land at Le Bourget (Jurieux's landing is reported via live radio, though we also see a newsreel camera at the scene); it seems likely, given the reporter's comparison of his flight time to Lindbergh's, that Jurieux also took off from America, a likelihood confirmed in the wake of their motorcar mishap when Octave (Jean Renoir) critiques André's inability, once "back from America," to play his role as "national hero" by giving listeners "the twaddle they expect" rather than publicly complain about Christine's absence. Wollen's observation

that Renoir is more than slightly ambivalent about modernity is variously confirmed in the film, but the prospect that Jurieux, as a national hero, is a French Lindbergh has obviously troubling implications. His suicidally ego-centric presence among the *ancien régime* social set gathered at La Colinière confirms its affinity for nationalist, even proto-Nazi myopia (Lindbergh was a reserve military officer at the time of his flight, openly admired the Luftwaffe in the mid 1930s, and was a vocal advocate of "America First" isolationism prior to Pearl Harbor). André's death, moreover, would have been occasion for national mourning, which renders all the more breathtaking the proposition that La Chesnaye (Marcel Dalio) can dispose of the matter by expediently calling it a "deplorable accident." (One wonders what Schumacher might have said to the Marquis at the murder scene while Renoir's camera lingers on Octave's farewell to Lisette on the chateau balcony.)

A similarly apocalyptic and back-handedly "American" equation of modernity and flight is on view in Renoir's *Sur un Air de Charleston* (1927), whose title alone points toward a European fascination with American culture, specifically jazz. Upon landing his "spherical flying machine" in a war-ravaged European city (obviously Paris), the Central African explorer protagonist is met by a single human being, a woman (Catherine Hessling), who attempts to communicate by dancing.[7] The flying machine's black pilot somehow recognizes her choreography as "—Charleston!," before declaring "I have finally discovered my ancestors' traditional dance," though in his subsequent phone call to his base—relayed via singing "angels" depicted as heads (Renoir's among them) with wings—he reports "I've discovered the Charleston, that traditional White dance." (A closing title card announces "That is how White aborigin[al] culture became fashionable in Africa," as if the relations of the traditional and the fashionable, of black and white, were an historical/conceptual muddle from the outset.)

Part Georges Méliès (in its sci-fi premise) and part Eadweard Muybridge (in its slow-motion studies of bodies in action), *Sur un Air de Charleston* was produced as a *jeu d'esprit* in the wake of Renoir's disappointment with the reception and commercial fortunes of *Nana* (1926) and never completed. But the impromptu production circumstances only underscore its intriguingly uncensored combination of the aviator-as-technological-pioneer motif with a carnivalesque inversion or dispersion of American (and European) racial tropes. Here black Africa is the technologically advanced culture; "white" culture is defined as aboriginal, as jungle-like (the white female's only companion is an ape), as having little else but rhythm (and sex) to offer an alien visitor. All

of this is rendered doubly ironic by the fact that the aviator in question, whom the lone human female apparently accompanies back to Africa, there to teach the Charleston to the metropolitan locals, is played in minstrel-show regalia and black-face makeup by an African-American performer (Johnny Huggins, who was appearing with Josephine Baker in *La Revue nègre* at the Théâtre des Champs-Elysées).[8]

The connection between "America" and "modernity" in these two examples is obviously contingent, however overdetermined. Lindbergh was not the first pilot to be inspired by the $25K Raymond Orteig Prize to make the transatlantic attempt; two French pilots (Charles Nungesser and François Coli) took off from Paris in early May 1927 and were apparently lost at sea less than two weeks before Lindbergh landed in Paris. Moreover, as Wollen also suggests, aviation is not the only modernist technology on view in *La Règle du jeu*; radio is a crucial trope for the commercial and political technology of lies and hypocrisy that Octave describes to Christine after the fête scene at La Colinière. Indeed, among those cultural technologies put in question in *La Règle du jeu* Octave/Renoir pointedly includes cinema, which in 1930s Europe would have included American films as the dominant presence against which various national cinemas struggled to compete, especially after the coming of sound.

If we ponder modernity without reference to America for a moment, Renoir's ambivalence about technology is clear; his depiction of the heroism of the railway workers in *La Bête humaine* (1938) is a case in point, though by the time Jacques Lantier (Jean Gabin) has killed Séverine Roubaud (Simone Simon) in a fit of lust and hereditary madness the emphasis shifts from the heroic to the demonic, as Lantier subsequently strides down the tracks as if he himself were a death machine, running forever along the rails of his Zola-esque *fêlure*. Several of these technological and aesthetic motifs come together in *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange*. Batala apparently dies in a railway "accident," which Valentine and Lange hear about over the radio. An almost immediate consequence is the flourishing of the newly-formed publishing cooperative via Lange's *Arizona Jim* stories. Indeed, their magazine almost literally takes flight in the montage sequence depicting its rise in circulation. After the camera tilts down from the sky over the Champs-Elysées, we see a bicycle-riding Charles delivering magazines to a retail kiosk, but Renoir quickly cuts back (via graphic match from a closeup of the latest *Arizona Jim* number) to a cloudscape across which dance a succession of *Arizona Jim* covers, eventually dealt like cards across the screen. Though depictions of modernity in Renoir do not logically *require* some link with things

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"American," that link is often present and in ways that seem increasingly significant.

Evidence in support of this latter claim can be seen in *La Chienne* (1931), though it ties in with another theme familiar to Renoir scholars under the rubric of the "theatrical," as instancing a quality of artistic self-consciousness of the sort adduced above in reference to *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange* where the photo-roman parade of magazine covers is prologue to the entrance of Meunier *fils*, who announces his love-inspired intention to produce an *Arizona Jim* movie. *La Chienne*, of course, is famous for its puppet-theater frame device—anticipating similar devices in *Boudu sauvé des eaux* (1932), *The Golden Coach* (1953), and *Le Petit Théâtre de Jean Renoir* (1969)—but another strand of its reflexivity involves the status of Maurice Legrand (Michel Simon). Though he is married to a war widow and toils as a cashier for a long-established Paris firm, he is also an amateur painter and is enamored of Lulu (Janie Marèze), though her true love is her pimp, Dédé (Georges Flammant). The Legrand paintings we see vary in style and theme. The first we get a good look at is allegorical, Christ preaching to a group of café patrons, but there is also the self-portrait we see Legrand painting, a Matisse-like picture of a woman on a balcony with a birdcage, and several pastoral or suburban scenes—but what they share, with help from Dédé and his horse-playing demimonde confederate, is a capacity to be read as "American."

Prone to exaggeration if not to fabulation, Dédé boasts that Legrand sells his paintings in America in order to explain Dédé's sudden access to otherwise inexplicable wealth, as if convinced that Legrand really is a successful artist whom Lulu and he are exploiting. (Legrand is actually stealing from his employer and his wife in order to bankroll Lulu's well-appointed walk-up flat and her largesse to Dédé.) But when Dédé and his accomplice arrive at Wallstein's Art Gallery with two unsigned canvases in hand it's on the understanding that they will attribute them to "Madame Clara Wood," the name borrowed from "a filly that ran in the fifth," and Dédé's friend almost casually replies to an art critic's skeptical inquiry upon hearing the name by describing Mrs. Wood as "une artiste américaine." Whether the ruse succeeds is a good question. Dédé takes Lulu to an art-world party at Wallstein's flat, where she acquires a portrait commission more on the basis of sexual than artistic talent, but nothing is made of her accent (or lack thereof) or her supposed background as an expatriate American. Then again, an expatriate (African-)American artist *is* mentioned in the film—Josephine Baker, whose name comes up in the background conversation at the firm where Legrand works—and

it turns out that Dédé did his military service in an African unit of the French Army. So it makes some metonymic sense that Dédé had been accused of involvement in "white slavery," and that Madame Legrand is seen reading a book on that topic midway through the film.[9] The legacy of the transatlantic slave trade—an earlier instance of global commerce, communication, and exploitation—never seems far from Renoir's mind or lens in the 1930s.

Of course, not every black character in Renoir is explicitly African American, especially in his French films. Perhaps the best known instance is the Senegalese officer held prisoner at Wintersborn in *La Grande Illusion* (1937). Like Legrand, he is an amateur painter, who proudly shows his depiction of "Justice Pursuing Crime" to Rosenthal (Marcel Dalio) and Maréchal (Jean Gabin), though they are too preoccupied with Rosenthal's map and their escape plans to pay him real attention. (Is Renoir here marking the limit of *égalité* and *fraternité*, the place where the film's play with boundaries finally ceases?) Perhaps the least remarked-upon instance of blackness in Renoir occurs in *Boudu sauvé des eaux* at the crucial moment when Left Bank bookseller and aspiring pastoral swain M. Lestingois first espies the "magnificent tramp" Boudu (Michel Simon) as he telescopically checks out the (mostly female) passersby near the Pont des Arts from the window of his apartment above the bookstore. But he actually sees two people in this shot: Boudu is screen right, but a fashionably dressed woman of African descent is screen left. Perhaps this is pure contingency. But what then do we make of the fact that Boudu's dog—whose initial proximity and similarity to his master has prompted at least one critic to describe them as "like chimps grooming one another," hence as members of the same species—is named "Black"?[10] Should we see Boudu as, somehow, an honorary Negro? (Whether the black quarry worker in *Toni* [1934] is to be understood as African or African-American is uncertain, though Alexander Sesonske avows the role was played by an African-American actor.)[11]

Another category of "Americanness" that bears on racial matters in Renoir involves statues or figures, though sometimes they are linked to "American civilization" via dialogue or circumstance. The first of Robert de la Chesnaye's musical toys that we see in *La Règle du jeu,* as he describes it to his wife, is "a romantic Negress." To what extent that description is racially neutral is hard to gauge, at least until the subsequent conversation between Christine's niece, Jackie, and Madame La Bruyère, when the latter asks Jackie about her academic interest in pre-Columbian art. Jackie avows that it pertains to civilization in the Americas before Columbus, and Madame La Bruyère replies, "Oh, Negroes!"

When Jackie observes that there weren't any Negroes in the Western hemisphere before Columbus, only Indians, Madame La Bruyère replies, "What a goose I am! Buffalo Bill!" Madame La Bruyère's muddling of history—giving Buffalo Bill Cody priority over Columbus—certainly allows the possibility, in a world where Josephine Baker is the toast of the Paris music-hall scene, that at least some of the other guests at La Colinière would also link "Negro" and "America." (Part of the sadness attending the shooting death of Jurieux follows, I take it, not only from Jackie's unrequited and now impossible love for Jurieux but also from the reduction of the hopeful idealism expressed in her enthusiasm for things "American," André implicitly among them.)

That Renoir may have imagined a link between American blacks and America *per se* is definitively proven, at least to my mind, by a prop he included in *Les Bas-fonds* (1936). It is a painted terra-cotta bust of a black banjo player in minstrel regalia, the left hand on the fret board, the right in strum position over the sound box. It sits chest-high upon a four-legged stand (in the space below is the bust of a woman) right beside the front door of the upstairs flat shared by doss-house landlord Kostylyov, his wife, Vassilissa, and his oft-abused sister-in-law, Natasha. We first see it when Vassilissa leaves her marital bed to find her reluctant paramour, the thief Pépel (Jean Gabin); we last see it when Pépel—enraged at the beating Vassilissa and Kostylyov inflict upon Natasha for rejecting the attentions of a corrupt police inspector whose favor they seek—barges through the door and rescues her, which leads to the brawl in the doss-house courtyard and to Kostylyov's death.

Given the film's odd mixture of Russian and French cultural references (rubles and guillotines), and the genteel clutter of (probably stolen) bric-a-brac and *objets d'art* that decorates the Kostylyov quarters, the banjo player may not draw attention. But it is nearly life-sized, and features in nearly every sequence taking place in that space, even appearing at the edge of the frame in shot/reverse-shot passages, as if the banjo player were another member of the cast. Given the obvious implication that Natasha is being sold into marriage as if into slavery (the statue is right behind her, hovers over her, during the scene wherein Natasha is first propositioned), the implicit minstrel-show soundtrack is more than apt, as "playing" on the theme of involuntary servitude.

Perhaps this reference to slavery via an example of "Black Americana" does not evoke as strongly as "Clara Wood" or "Buffalo Bill" a picture of American exceptionalism, however tainted by colonialism. But a link between escape and renewal—a constant topic of conversation among Pépel and Vassilissa, Pépel and the Baron, and Pépel and Natasha in *Les*

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Bas-fonds—and something hopefully American is clearly asserted in the oft-remarked upon match between the film's closing shot and the closing image of Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936). To be sure, what Charlie and the gamin (Paulette Goddard) are escaping *from* in *Modern Times* is something American—a technology of production and social control more than slightly akin to the modernity about which Renoir was obviously anxious—but their horizon of hope, toward which they bravely march, is *also* an "American" prospect; we might even call it Hollywood. Pépel and Natasha seem headed in the same direction.[12]

In view of my earlier claim that *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange* employs numerous motifs from among those deployed in Wollen's picture of Renoir's modernity, perhaps here is the place to return to the question of race in that film and to ponder further the theme of "escape." *Monsieur Lange*, of course, *begins* with an escape, which is then delayed (why not cross the border and *then* bed down?) for the sake of Valentine's exculpatory narrative before the impromptu Café-Hotel de la Frontière jury; and the narrative she tells *itself* begins with an escape narrative as M. Lange writes his *Arizona Jim* story about a crack-shot western hero who stops a lynching and rides away with a rescued Negro in a cloud of righteous dust after killing one or two good gentlemen in the melée. (The first *Arizona Jim* cover we see is a graphic representation of this scene.) When prompted by the arrival of Valentine with his laundry, Lange interprets his story in class terms, as a conflict between bandits and poor people, and she gives his storytelling a proto-feminist spin by remarking on the absence of female characters and expressing a preference for love stories. To the extent that Lange's killing of Batala reflects the ideological commitment implicit in Lange's imaginary Wild West, it makes sense that Valentine's narrative would start just here.

In my *Monsieur Lange* essay, however, I examine how narrational complexity qualifies any simple endorsement of Lange's murder of Batala, not least because Lange's homicidal impulse derives as much from an identification with Batala ("You should kill me," Batala tells Lange, little thinking he will do so) as from Lange's more naive (more naively American) *Arizona Jim* fantasy. But I also ponder the implications of Lange's decision to set his fables of race and class exploitation on the Arizona/Mexico border. Crucial here is the concierge, M. Besnard, whose desire to control his risk-prone and lovesick son, Charles, takes the form of colonialist nostalgia linked to his time as a soldier in French Indo-China. He responds to Lange's defense of Charles's adventurousness, for example, by implying that his first-hand knowledge of the Tonkinese—who are like Indians and blacks in their stupidity and

laziness—makes his opinion of his son's inclinations far more credible than whatever Lange might say.

It struck me then that the laughter occasioned by the death of Estelle's Batala-fathered baby was uncomfortably akin to that of the laughing lynch-mob gentlemen in the first *Arizona Jim* story, especially because Lange had already compared Estelle to a Mexican girl ("Has nobody ever told you you are the Mexican type?") during their abbreviated rendezvous in a Paris park. And I associated that discomfort with a more general failure—of the film, of its critical tradition—to link French colonialism to its Anglo-American counterpart, without which Arizona, hence *Arizona Jim*, is geographically and historically unthinkable. Put another way, "Mexico" in *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange* seems, at least for a time, even more abstract than Arizona, as we see during the parade of *Arizona Jim* covers when the ostensibly "Mexican" Estelle is costumed in "Indian" regalia.

I still think these issues are important. But several features of the *Arizona Jim* "montage" have led me to a more inclusive, one might even say more "modernist," view of the matter. First of all, the *Arizona Jim* covers taken together tell yet another rescue story, this one implicitly set in Mexico, not Arizona, unless we imagine that the Mexican general played by M. Besnard has invaded Arizona Territory with his uniformed aide-de-camp. And this story, unlike the first *Arizona Jim* story, centers on the rescue of a woman by Arizona Jim and his compatriots, the Mexican/Indian played by Estelle, whose courage in distress is rewarded by her reunion with the cowboy played by Charles (so Lange has apparently taken Valentine's advice to heart, if also Besnard's equation of women, Indians, and blacks).

More to the point, two of the covers bear banner-style headlines: "New Version" and "Next Issue: Arizona Jim against the Hooded Fascists." The former signifies a shift from a graphic to a photographic style of cover art, evoking the ongoing refinement of the technology of mass communications, and it comes at the outset of the montage, with the depiction in two successive covers of Besnard's Mexican General confronted by Lange's Arizona Jim. The latter banner evokes the specter of allegory, and of a pointedly topical sort, one that links Besnard's Mexican General with the inter-war fascist La Cagoule ("The Cowl") movement of which the obvious middle term is Besnard's history as a colonialist soldier in French Indo-China. Moreover, once the photo shoot for the next cover is completed, Lange dictates a new headline: "Estelle, led astray by the sordid hooded fascist, had a certain amount of luck: the baby died." Given the continuity of actors and costumes between the latest cover

photo and the earlier ones, we can say that Besnard's General stands in for Batala (who is last seen in a cowl-like get up and claiming "authority" over the entire cooperative) and that *Arizona Jim* can and should be seen as an instance of French political culture, even if Lange's main reason for distress at the prospect of an *Arizona Jim* movie is the fear that painted sets would not be sufficiently "American." To what extent my earlier critique of narrowly "historicist" reading practices is confirmed or complicated by Lange's Valentine-inspired willingness to inscribe his *Arizona Jim* ethos within the ambit of his own historical moment is another good question. So is the question of whether *Arizona Jim* and *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange* should be seen as exact cognates in their world-historical significance.

An equally pressing question is how Renoir's evocation of things "American" in his inter-war French films casts new light on the films he made in America, especially in view of the claim that Renoir's American films effected a severe break in his ideological and aesthetic allegiances.[13] Arguably the most "modern" of Renoir's American films, if also the most deeply (if implicitly) autobiographical, is *The Woman on the Beach* (1947), to which I will now turn by way of addressing the complexity of Renoir's relationships to "America."

I start with *The Woman on the Beach* because it is the only one of Renoir's five American-period films to actually employ the word "American," said in reference to the Tod Butler character (Charles Bickford), a renowned painter gone blind as a result of his tumultuous marriage to Peggy, his sometime model and fulltime playmate; a boozy night gone bad, broken glass, a severed optic nerve, and the New York highlife that Peggy Butler (Joan Bennett) recalls so fondly is replaced by removal to a seaside town near a Coast Guard station so far removed from the (still ongoing) war that it doesn't even have boats and is commanded by an officer, Lt. Scott Burnett (Robert Ryan), still traumatized by the sinking of a ship he served on earlier in the conflict. Late in the film—just before Burnett arrives and asks Butler to go fishing with the intention of winning Peggy's freedom (accusing Butler of making "a slave out of her"), by sinking the boat and taking Butler down with him if necessary—Peggy and Tod reminisce about "those champagne parties" the two used to have, and Peggy recalls how Tod would greet her in the morning with a breakfast tray, and she would feel so proud of "the great Tod Butler, fiery American painter who approached his canvases like a prize fighter."

In light of Peggy's repeatedly urging her husband to sell his paintings—worth more than ever now that he can no longer paint—it is hard not to think of Renoir's selling some of his father's canvases to make

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good on his film-related losses and to finance his bohemian 1920s lifestyle with Catherine Hessling.[14] The explicit link of America and painting also recalls *La Chienne*, another film in which painting and marital/sexual slavery are ironically linked. (Legrand declares both "freedom" and Lulu equally wonderful as he leaves the building where he had lived with Adèle—upon the return of Adèle's first husband—only to find Lulu in the arms of Dédé upon arriving at Lulu's walk-up flat.) Curiously, both films see the painter in question forswear his art. Legrand does so to confirm his alibi in the matter of Lulu's death, for which Dédé suffers the penalty, and Tod Butler responds to Scott Burnett's attempt at murder-suicide (both having been rescued by a boat the Coast Guard borrowed from Burnett's ex-fiancée) by burning his paintings and the house he and Peggy had shared, thus to free himself of obsessive masculinity and to free Peggy from himself, though she chooses Tod over Scott in the film's closing moments.[15]

That "Americanness" should be linked to violence and oppression—if also to a therapeutic escape therefrom partly effected by someone who describes himself as a "beach cowboy"—is perhaps already a token of a post-Freud American modernity. Another form of modernity in play is technology, mostly connected to warfare, ships and anti-ship mines and military jeeps; a key comparison here is between Lt. Burnett's recurrent shipwreck nightmare—in which he and his ship go down and the submerged Burnett figure encounters a female specter, his fiancée in the dream's first manifestation, an explosively fiery Peggy in the abbreviated second, semi-conscious instance—and the beach-wrecked vessel where Scott first encounters Peggy Butler during one of his horse-patrol excursions along the shore. Scott and Peggy are both traumatized castaways, wrecked upon the same Freudian strand where the difference between nightmare and reality is eerily uncertain.

More decisive yet is the stylistic "modernity" of the dream's depiction. Though Burnett's nightmare can be read in film noir terms via the iconographic presence of Robert Ryan, there are similarities between the dream imagery in this film and that on view in *La Fille de l'eau* (1925) and *La Petite Marchande d'allumettes* (1928), as if Renoir were returning to the artisanal avant-gardism of his earliest experiments with film. Most strikingly, the diaphanous white gown worn by the Eve Geddes figure that greets Lt. Burnett on the ocean floor in the nightmare recalls the "dream" costume of the Catherine Hessling character in *La Fille de l'eau*. Moreover, his dropping/floating journey to the seabed recalls the way the Hessling character drops or floats to earth at the end of the rescue fantasy in *La Fille de l'eau* (in *La Petite Marchande d'allumettes*

as well). Of course, each of the 1920s dream sequences features a gallant horseman who comes to the rescue of the woman involved, and that figure is absent from Scott Burnett's dream. But then Lt. Burnett himself is a figure of military gallantry whose main occupation is riding his horse along beaches and seaside cliffs, often framed against the sky in ways that recall the "flying horse" motif in both *La Fille de l'eau* and *La Petite Marchande d'allumettes*. (That we first encounter Peggy Butler collecting firewood is another reason for linking *The Woman on the Beach* with *La Petite Marchande d'allumettes*.)

If *The Woman on the Beach* is explicitly "American," its America is "barely sketched in" given its isolated characters and community.[16] Hence the more normal approach to "Renoir américain" is to focus on those among his American films where an American society is most overtly depicted. That means *Swamp Water* (1941) and *The Southerner* (1945) by contrast with the faux France of *This Land is Mine* (1943) and *The Diary of a Chambermaid* (1946). Given the emphasis on American race relations in Renoir's inter-war French films, it is unsurprising that Renoir should have been drawn to the American South as the place where his encounter with America would be most productive, though it bears saying that *The Woman on the Beach*—in its "cowboy" motif, which is initiated by a Coast Guardsman in the first scene playing "Home on the Range" on a harmonica—recalls *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange* in evoking the American Southwest.

If the modernity of Renoir in the 1930s is associated (however ambivalently) with an heroic era of technological advances in transportation and communication, it is no surprise that critics of Renoir's 1940s films will see them as variously regressive or conservative, as retreating in time (the late nineteenth century in *Swamp Water* and *The Diary of a Chambermaid*) or space (the American South). The two most obviously contemporary of Renoir's Hollywood films—*This Land is Mine* and *The Woman on the Beach*—depict technology chiefly as destructive, as clanking tank treads, as never-seen strategic bombers whose raids over occupied France send variously anxious villagers to underground bomb shelters, as sunken warships. The most overt acts of heroism in any of Renoir's 1940s films are those of Paul Martin in *This Land is Mine*, the most effective of which involves railway sabotage, defending liberty by attacking technology. Hence perhaps the tendency to read *Swamp Water* and *The Southerner* either as instancing an outright break with the progressive and largely urban/industrial loyalties of Renoir's French films or as displaced "symptoms" of various crises in capitalism's most virulently successful form—American capitalism.

A critic whose view of this symptomatic or mythic tendency significantly anticipates my own is Martin O'Shaughnessy. Our paths cross in observing how Renoir invokes the plantation era of chattel slavery in setting the opening scene of *The Southerner* in a cotton field where the backbreaking work is depicted as literally fatal in the death of Uncle Pete. Inspired by Pete's dying advice to grow his own crop, even if that means sharecropping on the boss's land rather than work as a seasonal picker and live in a migrant camp, Sam Tucker (Zachary Scott) borrows a truck and moves his family to a run-down but soil-rich farmstead where he can be "free" to make his own decisions about plowing and planting, as he subsequently describes his circumstances to his good friend Tim, an urban factory worker who returns to his rural hometown near to the Tuckers' farmstead for "fairs and weddings and such." Though O'Shaughnessy sees a radical potential in this evocation of the legacy of slavery and the conflict of urban and rural labor under the aegis of capitalism, he expresses disappointment that the Renoir who "cast a black character in a supporting role in *La Grande Illusion* and alluded to the rescue of a Negro from a lynch mob in *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange*" not only "find[s] no significant place for oppressed minorities in a film set in the American south" but proceeds to reinvigorate "American myths in a conservative manner; the conquest of a wild land by the small farmers whose independence and strong-mindedness made them the backbone of American democracy; the centrality of the family as foundation of society; the goodness of small rural communities; the key role of religion."[17] Instead of attributing the hardships of the Tucker family to capitalism or the capitalist boss, Renoir displaces responsibility to a "malevolent neighbor" and to the destructive vagaries of Nature and offers, in ideological recompense, the family and the local community as modeling "internal harmony, self-abnegation, and mutual support."[18]

Though aspects of this picture of *The Southerner* are hard to disagree with, there are reasons for finding it partial. One of these involves an "ethnographic" quality to Renoir's work akin to that of Robert Flaherty, at least according to Wollen, who associates it with modernism. If Renoir can be both sympathetic toward and deeply critical of the society he depicts in *La Règle de jeu*, why must we imagine that his obviously sympathetic treatment of the Tuckers in *The Southerner* requires uncritical assent to every aspect of their world or to every aspect of their perceptions of it? Sam Tucker is expressly depicted as ignorant of the cause of spring sickness, for instance, attributing it to eating vegetables in the spring rather than to their absence from the family diet in the winter. And we are free to attribute this to a flawed educational or public health system.

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But Sam is no less admirable for that. A related reason for demurring from this "mythical" analysis of *The Southerner* is the extent to which, far from naturalizing capitalism by treating it as neutral background, the film devotes much of its running time to explicit talk about ownership of the means of production and about the material conditions under which people make a living—much of this developed via the relationship of Sam Tucker and Devers, the malevolent ex-sharecropper who clearly stands as exemplary of what *could* happen to Sam. Simply put, *The Southerner* is significantly more explicit on these materialist accounts than *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange*. We know to the penny what the Tuckers are worth; the sharecropping conditions under which they farm (they can't draw from the company store until they clear the land); the cost of medical care, of pipe cleaners, that one possum pelt is worth two silk stockings; we even get a debate between Sam and Tim over different conceptions of freedom, tied explicitly to the question of farm work vs. wage labor, with the former seen as the more obviously capitalistic of the two for being more speculative, more subject to cycles of boom and bust.

But my main reason for objecting to the standard reading of *The Southerner* as a nostalgic apology for Jeffersonian capitalism is the extent to which Renoir explicitly does *not* ignore the legacy of slavery adduced in its opening scene. If we carefully attend to the film's first sequence, in the cotton field, we hear a chorus evoking the tradition of black spirituals and we see more than a few blacks among the pickers and workers. The most obviously black workers are the two men dumping picked cotton into a truck after it has been weighed. Identifying blacks among the pickers is complicated by camera angles and head gear, but it seems clear that at least one of the pickers we see is black, and likely many more to judge by all the dark hands we see skillfully picking cotton, though some may be Mexicans, one of whom talks with Sam about where he will go after the crop is harvested. I concede that the film could not have been made in 1945 if Renoir had told the story of one of the black or Mexican families working that field, but that does not prevent us from thinking that Sam Tucker and his family are more than slightly representative of the impoverished circumstances under which they all labor. This is certainly the class-oriented view Renoir pursues in *Toni* (1934), to which *The Southerner* is often compared.

Crucial here is Sam and Tim's visit to Seamen's bar while Nona and the spring-sick Jotty are at the doctor's office. It is in the back of the bar that they have their discussion of labor conditions, prompted by Tim's proposition that Sam join him in the city factory where he works. (There is a gender text to untangle here, not least because of the pres-

ence of a bar girl, though it also hinges on the question of skilled vs. unskilled male labor.) As they leave the bar, however, Tim notices that he has been shortchanged—a little Marxist parable about exchange value and reification!—and the beer bottles soon start flying. Eventually the ruckus moves out to the street, where a large cement-mixing machine is a prominent feature, at which point Tim picks up a metal drum and runs with it held head high toward the bar, as if to throw it through the front window, though he actually goes through the front door and tosses it down the bar. (I cannot help but think of Spike Lee and his garbage can in *Do the Right Thing* [1989].) While the bottle-damaged jukebox plays "Roll Out the Barrel," the barkeep comes down the adjacent alley with a six-gun, and Sam, mostly a bystander until now, knocks him cold with a well-thrown rock. At this point Sam and Tim duck down the alley and exit over a high fence, while a crowd of onlookers gathers around the fallen barkeep, prominent among them three well-dressed black men.

The scene is uncanny because nothing comes of it in the story, beyond one brief mention of the bar girl late in the movie. But I read the odd combination of economic philosophy, heavy construction equipment, and street violence—along with the sudden appearance, as if from nowhere, of black citizens among their white neighbors—as the Brechtian equivalent of an urban/industrial race riot in which Tim and Sam stand in for disadvantaged blacks who have been short changed by the white economic system. Though film posters on view as Tim and Sam walk down the street toward the bar mark the film as taking place in the late 1930s or pre-war 1940s (or else Sam and Tim might well have been in uniform), it is easy to imagine 1945 audiences recognizing in this scene events like the race riots that took place at the Alabama Dry Dock and Shipbuilding Company in Mobile in spring 1943, which involved issues of pay and promotion and white resistance to black advancement.[19] I can also imagine audiences from any era who would find this last claim, at least, tendentious. I now turn to Renoir's first American film, *Swamp Water*, in the hope of confirming a deep continuity between Renoir's inter-war French films and those he made in Hollywood.

My reasons for concluding these remarks on Renoir's Americanness by reference to *Swamp Water* are several. To begin with, its depiction of a rural past is more readily seen as a symptomatically reactionary response to modernism than the America on view in *The Southerner*, where the tools and products of industrial technology—bulldozers, tractors, trucks, factories—are either directly on view or are referred to in dialogue and advertisements. (The office of the Ruston Land & Water Co. features a calendar with a large bulldozer illustration advertising

International Harvester construction and agricultural equipment, for example). This is clearly the tack taken by O'Shaughnessy, who sees Renoir's American pastoralism as a compensatory acknowledgment of "large-scale capitalism" and the strong role played by "the central state": "A focus on the tight-knit social bonds of the rural helped Americans to reimagine a sense of community and interdependence in a modern world increasingly characterised by anonymous or impersonal interaction."[20] Yet O'Shaughnessy prefers *Swamp Water* to *The Southerner* because, though complicit like *The Southerner* in occluding "the dark sides of American history," it nonetheless stages in greater detail "the tension between rugged individualism and community" by depicting the Oedipal conflict of fathers and sons as a study in displacement and misperception, and by integrating the supposedly "self-made man" into the frontier community by letting him usurp the female role as well, thus defusing the threat represented by wild and sexually-forward women.[21] Thus Ben Ragan (Dana Andrews) refuses to obey his father's injunction that he stay out of the Okefenokee Swamp when searching for his lost hunting dog and the Oedipal guilt incurred is borne by Tom Keefer (Walter Brennan), a convicted murderer whom Ben encounters in the swamp, where he has taken refuge after his verge-of-execution escape from the custody of the local Sheriff. Thus Ben's father, Thursday Ragan (Walter Huston), despite the hard words between them after Ben returns from the swamp with a good supply of marketable hides, rescues his son from the mob who nearly drowns him once a jealous Mabel MacKenzie spitefully reveals that Ben knows where Tom Keefer is hiding, and Thursday subsequently nurses Ben back to health.

Again, I concede the cogency of O'Shaughnessy's perspective, especially his claim that "the swamp can be seen as a female space" in its combination of nurturing spirituality (as when Keefer describes swamp and stars alike as "other worlds" full of "living things," as "big shining rafts afloating in the ocean of God's night") and physical threat (as in the bog that sucks Bud Dorson under in the film's climax).[22] But I see a deeper connection than does O'Shaughnessy between the film's gender text and its onset-of-righteous-manhood main story, and there is a racial subtext as well that bears attention, especially in the present context.

The "community" in *Swamp Water* is gender-segregated in the extreme. The General Store run by Marty McCord and his wife is almost always full of men, playing checkers, getting shaves, buying shotgun shells, selling animal hides. Apart from the proprietor's wife, the only female who regularly enters that space is Julie Gordon (Anne Baxter), Tom Keefer's daughter, who lives there under her mother's maiden name

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and is treated with stern severity as a servant. The other two women of consequence in the film are Mabel MacKenzie and Hannah Ragan, both of whom complain of loneliness in a world where men prefer the company of each other and their hunting dogs to the company of women. Mabel is less obviously the victim of this system than Hannah Ragan, but Mabel's efforts to manipulate Ben—especially after he starts paying attention to Julie—betray a level of anxiety and anger that seems both earnest and excessive.

And Hannah Ragan is victimized twice over, first by her neglectful husband (though her concern for *his* feelings provides reason for pondering the effect on him of his first wife's death, perhaps as motivating his anxiety about Ben), but also by Jesse Wick (John Carradine), who uses Thursday's nighttime hunting trips as occasions to pay court to Hannah, to the point of assaulting her just as Thursday returns one evening. When Thursday asks Hannah who was chasing her through the house, she refuses to say, because she assumes Thursday will kill him. Ben eventually figures out that Jesse was the intruder, and confronts him, threatening to tell Thursday himself. Wick avows that he needn't fear Thursday because the Dorson brothers will protect him. Given that Thursday was a member of the Keefer jury, and that Jesse and the two Dorsons were the only prosecution witnesses, a picture emerges of an entire community that knows an injustice has been committed, though they are as reluctant as Hannah Thursday to tell who did it—perhaps because they don't exactly know, though they know something is deeply wrong. (The Dorsons, it turns out, shot the Deputy Sheriff and framed Keefer for the crime; Ben promptly marches Jesse to the Sheriff, where he confesses to his perjury and thus permits Keefer's deliverance from the swamp, once he gets past the still trigger-happy Dorsons.)

Something else deeply wrong in the world of *Swamp Water*, though this is elaborated allegorically and iconographically, is racial segregation and injustice. The allegory may already be clear, but it keys on the prospect of a lynching, the hanging that Tom Keefer barely escaped. That he escapes to the swamp evokes the legacy of antebellum slave patrols and escaped field hands; that he only went so far as the swamp so that he could stay close to his daughter also invokes the history of slave families and their struggles. Some confirmation of this is found in the scheme Tom and Ben effect to harvest animal pelts for profit. Though Tom hopes his share can be used to send Julie away for schooling, this can easily be read as buying her freedom from the McCords. Add to that the way she is treated by Marty McCord (especially in the scene where she tries to rescue a kitten from the Dorsons, who plan to drown a whole litter in

return for a bottle of whisky) and the way she is gawked at when Ben brings her to the dance, and the idea that Julie is effectively a “slave,” like Peggy Butler in *The Woman on the Beach*, is hard to avoid. (It ought to matter more than a little, in this regard, that Mrs. McCord is played by Mae Marsh, who played the “Little sister” driven to suicide by the threat of miscegenation in D.W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation* [1915].)

The delivery from bondage theme gets considerably harder to avoid, moreover, when you start noticing the black characters in *Swamp Water*. The second scene of the film—after the initial swamp scene where Ben’s favorite dog runs off—finds Ben looking for his dog with the Ragan house in the background. In the near foreground, however, three black boys walk left to right across the image, one of them whistling “Yankee Doodle Dandy.” How can we not take this hint as suggesting that a declaration of something like independence is in the offing or at issue, as if we are being cued to recall the famous Archibald MacNeal Willard *Yankee Doodle* (or *The Spirit of ’76*) painting featuring three Revolutionary soldiers bearing fife and drums, with the national banner waving above them? Moreover, on three occasions thereafter Ben Ragan is strategically framed with a black man, and in all three he is being shunned by a white character.

In the first, Ben quarrels with Mabel about the fact that, given his extended time in the swamp, she has decided to go to the dance with Miles Tonkin. Ben steps up to the porch of McCord’s General Store and comes toward the camera as Miles walks into the background to confer with Mabel; there to screen left is an old black man, sitting and smoking a pipe. After Thursday recues Ben from the Dorson brothers and the mob, Ben returns to the store with another load of furs, and the same man is visible through the window, again sitting on the porch; McCord refuses to do business with Ben because he can “smell Tom Keefer” on the hides. (McCord also backhandedly informs Ben he cannot go hunting with the boys by saying that they sure will miss his dog!) Ben then leaves the store, walks around back to see Julie, who also spurns him because he revealed her father’s whereabouts, and then walks back toward the front of the building, where all the whites leave from the porch and head off to look for Keefer. (Much of this is done in extended take à la Renoir.) Only two people are left behind, Ben and a young black man, the latter sitting on the porch to Ben’s right. Like the banjo-player bust in *Les Bas-fonds*, these details of mise-en-scène are potentially invisible. But once brought to attention, they make the ideological critique in *Swamp Water* far more pointed and progressive than its reputation as a war-time hymn to rural American values allows.

On the basis of archival research, Alexander Sesonske has made a strong case for seeing *Swamp Water* less as a Renoir film than as a Darryl F. Zanuck movie, or perhaps worse—as a "better than average example of the everyday product of the Hollywood dream factory."[23] I take the present remarks to complicate Sesonske's description of *Swamp Water*, by showing that in some respects *Swamp Water* is more typically Renoir than Sesonske allows for, and in ways that Zanuck might not have welcomed had he seen them. For present purposes, however, I want to note Renoir's agreement with Sesonske to the extent that both see Hollywood as an instance of industrial technology, as (in Renoir's words) "an immense machine, an admirable mechanism without a soul."[24] But it also bears saying that Renoir's earliest enthusiasm for this "admirable mechanism" was an enthusiasm largely for "the great age of the American film."[25] In 1938 he reported seeing American films in the immediate post-World War I period at the rate of "about two hundred" a month, much preferring them to those shown by "[t]he big theaters," where the daily fare amounted to "pretentious nonsense awkwardly acted by worn-out old actors or else the totally ridiculous Italian films"—if it is also true that he decided to become a filmmaker when he saw Mosjoukine's *Le Brasier ardent* (1923), which first indicated that something cinematically vital could actually be *made* in France.[26]

So the picture I conclude with is this. The "modern" technology that offered Renoir the opportunity to become the hero of his own life was the American cinema, though his sense of its possibilities was always qualified by his awareness of America's most obviously unfulfilled promise, to wit, that "all men are created equal." As a childhood devotee of Mark Twain, as a lover of jazz, as an amateur anthropologist in his trip to Waycross, Georgia in preparation for the filming of *Swamp Water*, Renoir was always keenly aware of America's ambivalence about itself, an ambivalence his American films, no less than his French ones, find themselves repeatedly addressing.[27] How modern is that? How American?

NOTES

For collegial assistance and advice I gratefully thank Geoffrey Sauer, Matthew Sivils, Susan Yager, and Susan Poague. I gladly acknowledge Katherine Golsan's helpful encouragement as well.

1. Leland Poague, "Figures of Narration in *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange*," *New Orleans Review* 17.2 (Summer 1990): 22–36. (The first fifteen lines of the first column on p. 34 should have appeared at the break between the first and second columns on p. 33.)

2. Peter Wollen, "Introduction," in *Howard Hawks, American Artist*, ed. Jim Hillier and Peter Wollen (London: BFI, 1996), 8.

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3. Jean Renoir, *Lettres d'Amérique*, ed. Dido Renoir and Alexander Sesonske (Paris: Presses de la Renaissance, 1984); Martin O'Shaughnessy, *Jean Renoir* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), especially his "'Renoir américain'" chapter.

4. Henri Langlois, "The Modernity of Howard Hawks," trans. Joseph McBride, in Hillier and Wollen, *Howard Hawks, American Artist*, 72–73.

5. Wollen, "Introduction," 8.

6. Wollen, "*La Règle du jeu* and Modernity," *Film Studies* 1 (Spring 1999): 10. The essay was reprinted as "*Rules of the Game*" in Wollen's *Paris Hollywood: Writings on Film* (London: Verso, 2002), 149–63.

7. Ronald Bergan, *Jean Renoir: Projections of Paradise; A Biography* (London: Bloomsbury, 1992), 87.

8. Ibid.

9. See Katherine Golsan, "Murder and Merrymaking: The 'Seen' of the Crime in Renoir's 1930s Cinema," *Film Criticism* 32. 2 (Winter 2007–08): 44.

10. Richard Boston, *Boudu Saved from Drowning* (London: BFI, 1994), 49.

11. Alexander Sesonske, *Jean Renoir: The French Films, 1924–1939* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), 167.

12. In *Jean Renoir: The World of His Films* (London: Robson, 1977), Leo Braudy finds the Chaplin allusion more ironic than I do (48). Where Braudy sees optimism in Chaplin and Goddard's walking away from the camera, and irony in the fact that Renoir's camera retreats from Pépel and Natasha, to the point where the illuminated image shrinks within an expanding black border, I notice that they are leaving police officers behind them (which requires the "reverse angle" by which we face Pépel and Natasha) and I take the allusion to the film frame and the dark of the theater as part of Renoir's general self-consciousness. An equally apt comparison here, especially in light of Paulette Goddard's appearance in both *Modern Times* and *The Diary of a Chambermaid*, is between the ending of the latter and that of *Les Bas-fonds*; the death of Joseph at the hands of a Bastille Day crowd recalls the death of Kostylyov, and the escape of Célestine and George Lanlaire to Paris clearly echoes in its idealism that of Pépel and Natasha.

13. See Christopher Faulkner, who argues in *The Social Cinema of Jean Renoir* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986) that Renoir's Hollywood films evidence "an epistemological and ideological rupture" (127) of his earlier filmmaking practices.

14. Bergan, *Jean Renoir*, 85.

15. Unlike Legrand's paintings in *La Chienne*, those by Tod Butler are never displayed so we can see them. They exist as "paintings" only in his (or Burnett's) verbal descriptions of them, so it makes backhanded sense that Butler intends to become a writer, as did Renoir.

16. O'Shaughnessy, *Jean Renoir*, 178. On the "abstraction" of *The Woman on the Beach*, see Janet Bergstrom, "Oneiric Cinema: *The Woman on the Beach*," *Film History* 11.1 (1999): 114–25.

17. O'Shaughnessy, *Jean Renoir*, 167.

18. Ibid., 166 and 169 respectively.

19. See Geoffrey C. Ward, *The War: An Intimate History, 1941–1945* (New York: Knopf, 2007), 88–97, 110–11.

20. O'Shaughnessy, *Jean Renoir*, 162.

21. Ibid., 162 and 164 respectively.

22. Ibid., 165.

23. Alexander Sesonske, “Jean Renoir in Georgia: *Swamp Water*,” *Georgia Review* 36.1 (Spring 1982): 60.

24. Ibid., 50

25. Jean Renoir, “Memories,” in André Bazin, *Jean Renoir*, ed. François Truffaut, trans. W.W. Halsey II and William H. Simon (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973), 150.

26. Ibid., 150–51.

27. On Renoir’s reading of Twain see his June 20, 1941 letter to Pierre Fighiera in *Lettres d’Amérique*, 62; on his love of jazz see Renoir’s *My Life and My Films*, trans. Norman Denny (New York: Atheneum, 1974), 92–93.