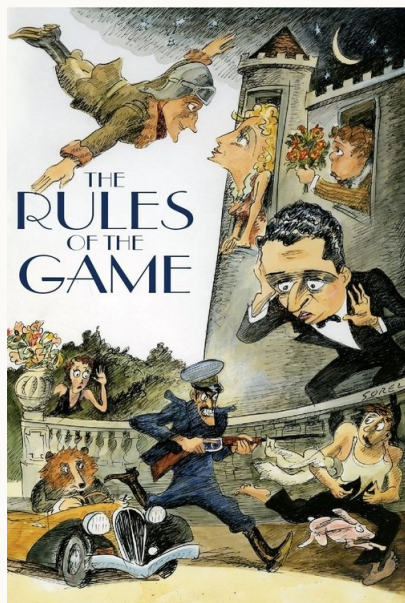




DRAMA · COMEDY · ROMANCE

# The Rules of the Game

1939 · Directed by Jean Renoir

Poetic Realism

Art Cinema

Comedy

*An aviator's public declaration of love for a married woman sends ripples through Parisian high society. A marquis invites his friends to a country estate for a weekend of hunting and a masked entertainment, while his servants carry on their own affairs below stairs. A comedy of manners with a sharp eye.*

|          |             |
|----------|-------------|
| DIRECTOR | Jean Renoir |
|----------|-------------|

|      |      |
|------|------|
| YEAR | 1939 |
|------|------|

|         |                  |
|---------|------------------|
| RUNTIME | 1h 50m (110 min) |
|---------|------------------|

|         |        |
|---------|--------|
| COUNTRY | France |
|---------|--------|

|        |                        |
|--------|------------------------|
| GENRES | Drama, Comedy, Romance |
|--------|------------------------|

|      |                                                                        |
|------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| CAST | Jean Renoir, Marcel Dalio, Nora Gregor, Julien Carette, Roland Toutain |
|------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|

|       |              |
|-------|--------------|
| MUSIC | Joseph Kosma |
|-------|--------------|

|      |                         |
|------|-------------------------|
| IMDB | 7.9 / 10 (31,917 votes) |
|------|-------------------------|

|                    |               |
|--------------------|---------------|
| ROTTEN<br>TOMATOES | 97% (critics) |
|--------------------|---------------|

|            |          |
|------------|----------|
| METACRITIC | 99 / 100 |
|------------|----------|

|            |                      |
|------------|----------------------|
| TMDB SCORE | 7.5 / 10 (684 votes) |
|------------|----------------------|

|                   |                                                                                                                                                                       |
|-------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| WHERE TO<br>WATCH | Rent: Amazon Video, Apple TV Store, Google Play Movies, YouTube, Fandango At Home<br>Buy: Amazon Video, Apple TV Store, Google Play Movies, YouTube, Fandango At Home |
|-------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

Part one is spoiler-free. Part two, "After watching", reveals the story, scenes and ending.

# Before watching

Spoiler-free

## WHY WATCH THIS?

### 1 Renoir's most celebrated film and a pillar of French cinema

Alongside *La Grande Illusion*, this is Jean Renoir's best-known work, and the most admired French film of the 1930s. Later filmmakers, including the New Wave directors, treated it as a founding text.

### 2 A comedy where every character is taken seriously

Farce, romance and social observation run side by side, and masters and servants are given equal sympathy and equal scrutiny. Almost no one in the film is simply a hero or a villain.

### 3 A masterclass in staging many people at once

Renoir keeps the camera moving through crowded rooms, using depth and long takes so that several storylines unfold in a single shot. It is a model for the ensemble film.

## WHY IT MATTERS IN CINEMA HISTORY

A defining film of late-1930s French cinema and the template for the ensemble social comedy, it moved film language toward depth, long takes and a more fluid, observational style.

## WATCH WITH INTENTION

### YOUR LENS

Watch it as a comedy of manners in which the camera, not just the dialogue, shows who belongs where.

### THREE THINGS TO NOTICE

- How often the camera holds a long shot with action at several depths, so that servants and guests are visible in the same frame.
- How the servants' world mirrors the guests' world, in their flirtations, jealousies and etiquette.
- How tone shifts within single scenes, with comic business and sincere feeling sitting side by side.

### ONE QUESTION TO CARRY WITH YOU

*The characters keep invoking an unwritten code of behaviour. Who actually benefits from it, and who is simply trapped by it?*

## CINEMA AT THE TIME

- **Technology:** Sound was by now fully mastered. Renoir used it to layer overlapping conversations and let the camera roam, instead of cutting between speakers as most studio films did.
- **Dominant styles:** French Poetic Realism favoured studio-built working-class settings and doomed lone heroes. Renoir moved the action to an aristocratic country house and spread attention across a whole ensemble.
- **Industry:** Renoir had just made *La Grande Illusion* (1937), a major international success, and *La Bête humaine* (1938). He made this film with his own production company and a freedom few directors had.
- **Audience:** The film opened in Paris in July 1939, weeks before war began. Audiences were anxious and in no mood to see their own society reflected back at them.

## WHERE IT CAME FROM

### FILM

#### *La Grande Illusion* (1937)

Renoir's earlier study of class and loyalty across social lines, which established his humane, observational approach.



### TRADITION

#### Comedy of manners and Musset's theatre

The tradition of romantic comedy with real emotion underneath, in which Renoir found the model for his tangled house party.



### MOVEMENT

#### Poetic Realism

The French mood of the decade, with its atmospheric realism and social observation, which Renoir both belonged to and widened.



### THIS FILM

#### *The Rules of the Game* (1939)

**NEW AT THE TIME** *It treated a whole social class, upstairs and downstairs, as one ensemble, and mixed farce, social satire and gentle observation in a single, fluid style.*

## SOCIAL CONTEXT

*Made in the last year of peace in France, after the Munich crisis, when a divided country sensed war coming and sought distraction.*

- **Country and moment:** France in 1938–39 was politically polarised after the Popular Front's collapse and shaken by the Munich Agreement. Many feared another war with Germany, and anxiety and cynicism ran through public life.

- **Society and audience:** The film portrays an aristocratic and servant-class world that Renoir saw as complacent and out of touch. It premiered in July 1939, and many viewers took it as an insult to French society and to themselves.
- **Politics and censorship:** After the outbreak of war in September 1939, the government banned the film as demoralising. Under the Occupation it stayed banned, and the original negative was damaged in Allied bombing.
- **The filmmaker's situation:** Renoir was then one of France's most prominent directors, with a left-leaning record from *La Grande Illusion*. He set up his own production company to make this personal film. Its failure, and heavy cuts to the original, marked a low point before he left for the US.

## WHAT TO EXPECT

- **Pace:** Unhurried at first, then increasingly busy. The long middle section at the country house is dense with overlapping characters and incidents.
- **Style:** Fluid camerawork, deep staging and long takes. Dialogue often overlaps, and comedy and feeling share the same scenes.
- **Format:** Black and white, roughly 1.37:1, sound.
- **Language:** French with subtitles. Wit and class distinctions live in the dialogue, so it is worth reading closely.
- **Versions:** The 1939 release was cut heavily after a poor reception. The version now shown is a restoration assembled in the late 1950s, running about 110 minutes.

## WATCH WITH KIDS?

**12+** SUGGESTED AGE

Official ratings are lenient (France U, Britain PG, US unrated; lowest implies 8), but adult infidelity themes, subtitles and a talky black-and-white style suit ages 12 and up.

Official ratings: US NR · UK PG · France U

- **Good for:** Teens curious about classic cinema may enjoy the sharp social comedy, the lavish country-house setting, a lively hunting-party sequence and playful farce, plus its famously fluid camerawork.
- **May unsettle, mature themes:** Adultery, flirtation and romantic deceit run through the story, treated as comedy and as heartbreak, with no explicit content.
- **May unsettle, violence:** Some chases and gunplay, including a hunt, and a darker turn late in the film. Not graphic, but the mood shifts.
- **May unsettle, pace:** Black-and-white, subtitled, dialogue-heavy with a large cast. Younger children may struggle to follow who is who.
- **May unsettle, dated attitudes:** Class snobbery and some period attitudes to gender and to outsiders are part of the satire and may need comment.
- **Explain first:** It is a French satire from 1939 poking fun at the rich and their servants, made just before the Second World War.

- **Explain first:** It is in French with subtitles, so reading speed matters. A quick guide to the main characters helps.

**Talk about it after:** *The film suggests the rich and their servants follow different 'rules'. Where did you see those rules at work, and who did they protect?*

Cinespective's own guidance, a draft. Check it against the official ratings and your own judgement.

# After watching

CONTAINS SPOILERS

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## THE FILM, UNPACKED

### CENTRAL IDEA

The film can be read as a study of a society that survives by agreeing on appearances. Its unwritten rules govern love, class and honesty, and anyone who ignores them, whether from sincerity or from impulse, upsets the whole arrangement.

### THEMES

- **Class and its parallels:** The servants' intrigues echo the guests' ones almost exactly, suggesting the two worlds differ in manners and consequences rather than in human nature.
- **Sincerity versus social performance:** André's honesty is treated as a breach of etiquette. The film asks whether polite deception is a kindness or a form of cowardice.
- **Everyone has their reasons:** Renoir's refusal to assign blame gives each character a plausible motive. This is the film's moral stance, summed up in one of Octave's lines.
- **A society nearing its end:** Made on the eve of war, the film can be read as a portrait of a complacent Europe amusing itself while history approaches.
- **Play and artifice:** Mechanical toys, hunts, costumes and theatricals keep surfacing, tying social ritual to performance and game.

### Key scenes

#### The aviator's radio interview

André's frank complaint on air breaks the code that private feelings stay private. It starts the plot and sets sincerity and etiquette against each other.

#### The hunt

Rabbits and pheasants fall in orderly, ritualised slaughter while the guests chat. The sequence is both comic and quietly chilling, and shows how a polite class treats killing as sport.

#### The house entertainment and the chase

Costumes, a staged show and a pursuit through the rooms bring every storyline together. Farce and danger become hard to tell apart, and Renoir's choreography of many people is at its peak.

#### The final speech on the steps

A guest and the host describe the night's outcome in terms that protect the social order. The scene shows the rules at work, as the group closes ranks over what has happened.

### Filmmaking

- **Camera and staging:** Renoir often places action in the foreground, middle ground and background of one shot, and moves the camera through doorways and corridors, so scenes feel like observed life rather than assembled cuts.
- **Ensemble performance:** Dalio, Gregor, Carette and Dubost play sharply individual types without caricature. Renoir himself plays Octave, a rumpled, sympathetic go-between who connects both worlds.
- **Sound and music:** Overlapping dialogue and ambient noise give the house a lived-in feel. Joseph Kosma's score and borrowed classical pieces underline the theatrical mood.
- **Writing and structure:** Renoir co-wrote with Carl Koch, drawing loosely on Musset's romantic comedies. Parallel plots and a repeating pattern of pursuit give the structure of a classical comedy that later breaks its own frame.
- **Design:** The estate, with its corridors, mechanical toys and glass spaces, works as a stage on which characters can be observed from many angles.

## THE FULL STORY

*The full plot, including the ending.*

The aviator André Jurieux lands in Paris after crossing the Atlantic and, on live radio, complains that the woman he loves, Christine, did not come to meet him. Christine is the Austrian-born wife of the Marquis de la Chesnaye, who is conducting an affair of his own with a woman named Geneviève. André's friend Octave tries to smooth matters over.

The Marquis invites a party, including André, to his country estate for a weekend of hunting. Downstairs, the servants have their own entanglements. Lisette, Christine's maid, is married to the gamekeeper Schumacher, but she is drawn to Marceau, a poacher the Marquis has hired as a servant. Schumacher is jealous and quick to violence.

After the hunt, a costumed entertainment turns into chaos. Christine, Robert, Geneviève and André all find their feelings exposed, and Schumacher pursues Marceau through the house with a gun. Octave, who adores Christine, urges André toward her and lends him his coat.

In the dark, Schumacher mistakes André for Marceau and shoots him. The Marquis addresses the guests, calling the death an unfortunate accident. A general comments admiringly on his restraint, and the guests file indoors. The social order is restored and the truth stays hidden.

## BEHIND THE FILM

- **A failure on release:** The film opened in Paris in July 1939 to a hostile reaction. Renoir cut it substantially in the following weeks, but audiences still stayed away. He later said he had misjudged the public's mood on the eve of war.
- **Banned and lost:** The French authorities banned the film as demoralising once war began, and the occupying Germans kept the ban in place. Much of the original negative was later destroyed in a wartime bombing raid.

- **Rebuilt in 1959:** Two enthusiasts, Jean Gaborit and Jacques Durand, recovered surviving material and reconstructed the film with Renoir's approval. The restoration was shown at the Venice Film Festival in 1959, and the film's reputation rose from there.
- **Renoir as Octave:** Renoir cast himself as Octave, the shaggy friend of the household who moves freely between rich and poor. Playing the part let him shape the film's tone from inside the ensemble rather than only behind the camera.
- **Musset's influence:** Renoir said he was inspired by Alfred de Musset's romantic comedies, with their mix of banter and real feeling. The idea of lovers caught in a dangerous game of manners comes from that tradition, transposed to 1939 France.
- **Myth:** The film was recognised as a masterpiece as soon as it appeared. **Reality:** It was a commercial and critical failure in 1939, was cut, then banned. Its standing grew only after the 1959 restoration and the admiration of younger directors.
- **Myth:** It is simply an attack on the aristocracy. **Reality:** The servants mirror the masters in their jealousies and deceptions. Renoir insisted that everyone has their reasons, so the film is as much a portrait of shared human weakness as a class satire.

## LEGACY AND CONNECTIONS

### Its place in the lineage before → after

#### FILM

#### La Grande Illusion (1937)

Renoir's earlier study of class and loyalty across social lines, which established his humane, observational approach.



#### TRADITION

#### Comedy of manners and Musset's theatre

The tradition of romantic comedy with real emotion underneath, in which Renoir found the model for his tangled house party.



#### MOVEMENT

#### Poetic Realism

The French mood of the decade, with its atmospheric realism and social observation, which Renoir both belonged to and widened.



#### THIS FILM

#### The Rules of the Game (1939)



#### MOVEMENT

#### French New Wave

Truffaut and his contemporaries revered Renoir's fluid camera, humane attitude to characters and loose, observational style.



## FILM

**Gosford Park (2001)**

Robert Altman's country-house ensemble echoes the parallel upstairs and downstairs plots of Renoir's film.



## FILM

**Smiles of a Summer Night (1955)**

Bergman's comedy of tangled lovers at a country estate shares the interlocking romantic structure, though it was not a direct copy.

**Reception and reputation**

Critics and audiences in Paris reacted badly. Some viewers felt the film mocked French society at a moment of national anxiety. Renoir shortened it, but it still failed commercially. The government banned it after war was declared, and the occupying authorities maintained the ban.

After the 1959 restoration, the film went from a forgotten failure to one of the most admired films ever made. Critics now praise its staging, its balance of comedy and sorrow, and its prescient portrait of a society refusing to look ahead.

**Cultural impact** *beyond cinema*

- **Everyone has their reasons:** Octave's line that the terrible thing is that everyone has their reasons is among the film's most quoted. It is often used to sum up Renoir's refusal to cast clear villains and his humane, forgiving view of human folly.
- **Portrait of a vanishing world:** The chateau party and the rabbit hunt, where aristocrats and servants mirror each other's affairs while animals are casually slaughtered, are often cited as shorthand for a complacent elite on the eve of catastrophe. Historians and critics regularly use the film that way.
- **An idiom for social codes:** The title has become a common phrase for the unwritten etiquette of a class, a profession or an institution. Books, articles and other works borrow it, usually with little or no reference to the film itself.
- **Rediscovery and teaching:** After the original negatives were lost in wartime bombing, the film was reconstructed in the 1950s from surviving material and re-released. Its recovery became a famous story of a banned work coming back, and it is now a staple of film courses.

**Its lasting influence**

Directors of the French New Wave, especially Truffaut, took Renoir as a guiding spirit, and Robert Altman's *Gosford Park* (2001) openly reworks its upstairs-downstairs structure. Its fluid depth-staging also informed later ensemble filmmaking.

**WHAT NEXT?****CONTINUE THE DIRECTOR****La Grande Illusion (1937)** **COMING SOON**

Renoir's earlier masterpiece pursues similar ideas about class and loyalty, set among prisoners of war. It shows how his humane style developed.

## COMPARE ANOTHER APPROACH

**Citizen Kane** (1941)

Both films use depth of field and long takes to put several planes of action in one shot, though Welles builds a dramatic spectacle where Renoir stages social life.

## SEE ITS INFLUENCE

**The 400 Blows** (1959)

Truffaut was among Renoir's most devoted admirers, and his debut shows the same sympathy for flawed characters and loose, observational camerawork.

## FOLLOW THE IDEA

**Jules and Jim** (1962)

Another French film that treats love and betrayal without simple blame, with the camera moving freely among its characters.

## JUMP FORWARD

**Gosford Park** (2001) **COMING SOON**

Altman's country-house film borrows the upstairs-downstairs structure directly. Seeing it after Renoir shows how a model survives.

## FULL CAST AND CREW

**Jean Renoir**

DIRECTOR · ACTOR

as Octave

**Marcel Dalio**

ACTOR

as Robert de la  
Cheyniest**Nora Gregor**

ACTOR

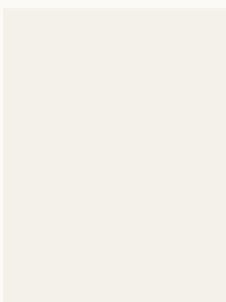
as Christine de la  
Cheyniest**Julien Carette**

ACTOR

as Marceau, le  
braconnier**Roland Toutain**

ACTOR

as André Jurieux

**Joseph Kosma**

COMPOSER