Renoir's *La Règle du jeu* between automata and the phantasmagoria, or how to show the collapse of the European Enlightenment project when rational truth telling becomes impossible

One of the challenges when writing about a film as intertextually resonant and complex as Renoir's 1939 masterwork, *La Règle du jeu*, is to do so justice to its richness without getting lost in it. In what follows, I want to bring together three essential dimensions of the film: its generic instability and capacity to destabilise contemporary spectators; its use of automata, alongside other machinic elements, to activate an Enlightenment imaginary and position itself in a longer history; its recourse to something akin to a Benjaminian phantasmagoria to make sense of the chaos of its moment at a time when appeal to an enlightened subject no longer seemed operative. If, in the film itself, these three dimensions are co-emergent and their progressively building interaction is organically present, my argument will of necessity be more linear and its connections slower to emerge but hopefully no less persuasive because of that. I will draw throughout on Keith Reader's *La Règle du jeu* (2010), his lovely study of a film he loved but will also lean on other scholars whose arguments have helped shape my own.

Reader suggests that today's students are likely to respond to the film with a mixture of amusement at its farcical elements and verbal comedy and bewilderment 'at its evocation of a world whose effete opulence and supposedly rigorous codes of behaviour seem almost impossibly archaic.'[1] Elsewhere, casting further light on the film's capacity to bewilder, he notes that its rich intertextual web is almost unparalleled in French cinema. Although its cinematic posterity, the way in which it is picked up or echoed in later films, is richer than its stock of precursors, the latter is also undeniably rich, and includes, among others, Chaplin (the farcical elements), Lubitsch (the bouts of repartee) and Guitry (the overlapping upstairs-downstairs intrigues).[2] Yet, as Reader also observes, the film's influences are more literary and theatrical than cinematic, and notably include works by Beaumarchais, Marivaux and Musset. The latter's tragi-comic *Les Caprices de Marianne* (1833), with its tale of a jealous husband, mistaken identity and murder clearly helps to provide the film's dramatic core.[3] Beyond this immediate influence, however, it could be argued that the disturbing generic uneasiness of the Musset, its blending of comic and tragic tropes, also informs the film's tone more indirectly. Although critical responses to it were undeniably shaped by reviewers' political affiliations, those on the left being far more supportive of it, it was its uneasy generic location that, Reader and others have shown, particularly puzzled or alienated its contemporary critics.[4] Writing in *Le Peuple*, Marcel Lapierre, for example, said the film was remarkable for its 'combination of genres that hitherto have remained separate', while an exasperated Emile Vuillermoz in *Le Temps* asked, 'Are we in Shakespeare's world or at the circus?' and concluded, 'Everything in the film defies common sense'.[5] When the film was rereleased after the Second World War, critics still reported 'distress at the film's generic instability and tonal shifts'.[6] Writing in the *New York Times* (10/4/1950), for example, Howard Thompson, homed in on the film's slapstick elements, suggesting it had a finale that 'would shame the Keystone Cops'.[7]

This same unease is picked up by Colin Crisp when he locates the film in relation to generic and other patterns in classic French cinema. He finds familiar features from the time in it: recurrent narrative tropes such as the opening sequence's contrast between public triumph and private despair; familiar character types and their relation to a broader popular mythology as seen most notably in the film's disruptive hero figure, André Jurieu (Roland Toutain), who feeds off the period's imagination of the aviator as the archetypal representative of modern heroism; the use of recognisable generic patterns (the film's mobilisation of familiar features of the Boulevard comedy).[8] If these and the other parallels

which Crisp identifies with a broader cinematic and cultural context might seem to suggest that *La Règle du jeu* is a more banal product of its time than is generally thought, he also develops a grounded sense of what makes it different. He notes that it does not simply use conventions of Boulevard Comedy but does so in a way that is sufficiently 'reflexive and self-aware as to constitute a commentary upon them'. He adds: 'if there is one thing, which an audience acquainted with these conventions might not have expected, it is the abrupt death of the aviator at the end.'[9] It is this death which, he later concludes, means the film is best seen not as a pure Boulevard comedy but a *comédie dramatique*, a type of film which was less successful and popular in the 1930s than subsequently. Pulling together Crisp's analysis with Reader's overview of critical responses, we might suggest that the film pushes at the conventions of the Boulevard comedy at both ends, bringing in a murder it cannot accommodate at one extremity, pushing its comedy to the manic intensity of slapstick at the other. Where these two forms of generic excess meet thematically, even as they pull apart tonally, is in violence. That mixture of convergence and divergence is indeed disorientating for spectators.

Crisp's suggestion that *La Règle du jeu* internalised and reflected upon the cultural context of its period underscores its capacity to feed off and into its historical period in ways which were disturbing for a contemporary audience. As Reader concludes towards the end of his study, 'the film … 'knows' a great deal about the France, indeed the Europe, of its time and its reception would surely not have been so tempestuous had that 'knowledge' not been manifest to the 1939 audience too.'[10] This sense of the film's capacity to be contemporary of its moment needs to be held in tension with what one might call, in tribute to Renoir's renowned visual style of the time, its historical depth of field. Picking up this aspect of the film, Pierre Samson suggests that, 'en filigrane de cette oeuvre totale, on devine une sorte de grand récit, comme si on dépliait les siècles les uns après les autres.'[11] In the poacher, Marceau (Julien Carette), who dreams of becoming a servant, he finds a figure from the Middle Ages. Then, in Robert de La Chesnaye (Marcel Dalio), the collector of mechanical birds, he finds echoes of Louis XVI and, in his Austrian wife, Christine (Nora Gregor), Marie-Antoinette. In the La Bruyère, he finds the nineteenth-century industrial bourgeoisie, and, in Jurieu, the aviator, the twentieth century.[12] In my own work on the film, I have suggested that the film's historical depth of field is inscribed not only in its use of the pre-revolutionary château location, its décor more broadly, and its foregrounded use of the automata so associated with the eighteenth century, but also in the referentiality of its dialogue which ranges from pre-Columbian art to Lindbergh and those, like Jurieu, who followed in his footsteps. In other words, the film places a contemporary French and European moment in the context of a much longer period of European rise and relative decline.[13] I have also suggested, not least because of important resonances between the two works, that the film represents a deliberate undoing of Renoir's Popular Front inspired tribute to the French Revolution, *La Marseillaise* (1939), an important intertext whose relation to the later film I will come to later.[14]

Automata and other machineries

Reader gives due prominence to the automata in *La Régle du jeu*. He notes the importance of both antique mechanisms and modern ones (the plane, car and radio) in the film. He connects La Chesnaye's collecting of automata such as the *négresse romantique* to a desire to exercise control, especially over women.[15] But he also notes that the same objects embody metonymically 'the smoothly functioning mechanisms of society [which] are to malfunction ever more catastrophically as the film nears its end' (Reader 2010; 61). Complicating the automata's significance, he observes how, as the film moves towards its chaotic climax, and the characters lose control, they become 'exemplars of what Deleuze and Guattari in the *Anti-*

Oedipus call "desiring machines," cyborgs of passion the rules of whose games bring them ever more into tragic as well as comic conflict with the rules of their society.'[16] Polysemic objects then, the automata express the powerful individual's desire for control, the automatic nature of mechanically followed social rules, and the automaticity of desires or the drives, both separately and in their chaotic interaction. Chris Faulkner and Patrick Ffrench complement Reader's insights by bringing historical depth of field to analysis of the automata's complex significance. I now turn to them but also broaden out from their work to locate the automata among the film's other machineries, in the context of which they ultimately resonate.

Faulkner begins by noting that *La Règle du jeu*'s automata are seen by a range of critics 'as indicative of Robert's – and by extension the haute bourgeoisie's – dislocation from the twentieth century into the eighteenth'. He immediately reminds us, however, that 'the instruments we actually see date from a number of different periods' and that 'the film demonstrates the commitment of most of the upper class characters to the technologies of modernity circa 1939 […] as well as their preoccupation with their consequences – records by land or air, the culture of celebrity, and the benefits of material progress.'[17] He agrees nonetheless that Robert is an informed, liberal, compassionate and reasonable 'man of the Enlightenment.'[18] Resolving the apparent tension between these positions, he observes: 'I take it that the presence in the film of the musical automata is in effect a citation of their history – and of a history they invoke – without some knowledge of which we cannot hope to understand their role in the film.'[19] Put differently, we might say that the automata are key elements of the film's composition in 'deep time' and provide clear clues about how we should read its diagnosis of late 1930s civilisational disorder. The dominant Enlightenment view, Faulkner notes, saw automata as embodiments of a rational and predictable order, one susceptible to understanding and potential control by the exercise of human reason.[20] The same overarching vision meant that automata were a privileged model for the exercise of rational mastery in 'disciplines as different as military training, medical analysis, natural history, and the architecture of factories and prisons.'[21] To which one might add the complicating factor that for many later Enlightenment thinkers, including political radicals, automata became associated with a lack of freedom, self-will and originality.[22] Gathering up these different associations, Renoir's film is able to use its automata as indexes of both control and its loss, of what a mechanistic worldview needed to repress to establish its apparently stable order, and the return of the repressed when the machinery malfunctioned, and of how an apparently reasonable order might become rigid and sclerotic.

Two early scenes which Faulkner discusses illustrate some of the dynamics in play. In the first, Robert loses the key to a mechanical warbler he had been working on, just as his failed musician friend Octave (Jean Renoir) persuades him to invite André Jurieu, his wife's self-declared suitor, to la Colinière, their château in Sologne, for a hunting party. Robert seems confident that he can control the increasingly complex situation as one would a clockwork automaton, but his excessive reaction to the loss of the warbler's key reveals his repressed difficulty controlling his emotions.[23] Faulkner identifies a similar dynamic when, again early in the film, helping to establish its thematic palette, Robert proudly holds his *négresse romantique*. As Faulkner notes, Robert acquires the *négresse*, an affectively charged but controllable mechanical object, just when he learns that his wife's romantic leanings might be out of his control. As he also notes, the automaton's racialisation situates it within a colonial imaginary that treated black women as sexualised objects and used them to assuage white men's anxieties about their sexual allure.[24] As Reader observes, however, Christine herself is also drawn to the little mechanical figure and expresses her preference for its predictability over the disruptive power of the radio which the unruly André uses to broadcast

to the world his frustration that she has not come to greet him at the end of his heroic transatlantic flight.[25]

Like Faulkner, Ffrench reads *La Règle du jeu* in terms of its temporal dislocation or what he calls its 'hetero-chronology'.[26] He picks up on Walter Benjamin's citation of Jules Michelet's celebrated phrase, 'Each epoch dreams the one to follow' and the great Jewish-German thinker's suggestion that 'these dreams leave residues, in which one can trace the conditions from which the present has emerged.'[27] He comments, 'the inventions of the eighteenth century offer a spectral fore-image of what will become a mode of production in the nineteenth; Vaucanson's dreams become the economic reality of the future.'[28] Vaucanson, a key historical figure here, was the inventor-constructor of three famous automata which were put in display in Paris in the late 1730s: a defecating duck (!), a drummer and a flute-player which effectively breathed to play its instrument. His resultant fame saw him appointed inspector of royal silk manufacture in which post he designed an automated silk loom.[29] It might therefore be said that, rather than simply dreaming the machine-driven factory production of a subsequent era, Vaucanson actively helped to prepare it, although France's industrialisation was to lag well behind Britain's. However, if a present of industrialised production is present in *La Règle du jeu*, it is only as a structuring absence. The only real reference to factories we find in the film is when Mme La Bruyère (Claire Gérard) boasts paternalistically of the successful use of the diphtheria vaccine in their factory dispensary. Ffrench's point that the automata in *La Règle du jeu* bridge between eighteenth and twentieth centuries still stands. He uses it to argue that, within the film, 'the machine functions as an index of a historical consciousness of the anachronistic survival of a decadent class in contrast with a modernity with which it is "out of joint"'.[30]

The pride and joy of Robert's collection is the orchestrion or *limonaire*, much the largest of his automata, which he proudly shows off to his assembled guests during the climactic *fête* sequence, even as his wife is hesitating between different suitors. As Faulkner notes, the orchestrion derives from late eighteenth-century mechanical instruments designed to imitate an orchestra, but the specific example we see in the film is a Gavioli which dates from sometime after 1870. A kitsch object, it is of a type used in fairs by showmen, in contrast to some of Robert's more refined automata. It figures a painted nude female figure below which are positioned three active figures, which are either ringing bells or marking time with a baton. Although one of the three figures is androgynous rather than clearly male, we could be tempted to see them, along with the female nude, as a condensation of the film's upstairs and downstairs love intrigues, with the various men pursuing Christine and Lisette (Paulette Dubost), her maid.[31] Drawing on Lacan, Reader reads the orchestrion in terms of castration anxiety, its large size not being incidental here, suggesting that it serves as a fetish which appears just when Robert's inability to control his emotional world and the associated libidinal economy is at its most acute.[32] Ffrench underlines the potential interpretative richness of the sequence when the orchestrion first appears, suggesting that its mechanical figures could be seen as 'obscene embodiments of the human automatism of both the aristocracy and their servants, but […] also resonate with the automatism peculiar to Fascism and in particular the Fascist parade.'[33]

The orchestrion provides unintended musical accompaniment when André fights with Robert after a previous fight with another of Christine's suitors, Saint-Aubin (Pierre Nay). Taking the chaos to a murderous peak, Schumacher (Gaston Modot), Lisette's jealous husband, bursts out of the door to the servant's floor to pursue Marceau, her suitor, through the guests, first waving and then firing his pistol. This time, the instrument plays, not the earlier 'A Barbizon,' a popular love song, but the jaunty overture from Johan Strauss' light operetta *Die Fledermaus*, a distinctly incongruous soundtrack to an attempted homicide. Berthelin (Tony Corteggiani), a relatively minor character, tries to shut down the orchestrion

but only succeeds in jamming it, so that, rather than falling silent, it emits a horrible clanking noise. Ffrench comments: 'it is the sound of bare mechanical repetition … the 'amusing' *divertissement* of the apparatus falls away to reveal the fundamental nature of the machine, its repetitive pulse.' He adds: 'its violence is due to the sensation of an annulment of time as continuity, the thrusting forward of the recurrent and static instant.'[34] This temporal paralysis could be seen as an implicit comment on both the dumb and unchanging repetition of the drives and the stalled chaos of a broader French society unable to go back to a more orderly period but also incapable of moving on. We will come back to this central aspect of the film. But, before we do, we need to flesh out and complicate some resonances of its use of the automata.

We should perhaps look first at the link between animals and automata, both figuring prominently in the film and linked in Enlightenment thought. As Faulkner reminds us, René Descartes famously accorded the monopoly on reason, consciousness and free will to humans in his *Discours de la Méthode* (1637), asserting that animals 'were really just machines without purpose, will, or feeling.'[35] This judgement provided implicit endorsement for the creation of automata, such as those of Vaucanson, able to simulate animal behaviours. But, in its underlying dualism, it also consigned the human body to the same mechanistic understanding, reserving higher human functions to an immaterial soul. Later, in *Les Passions de l'âme* (1649), Descartes complicated his dualism by suggesting that the human soul was subject to its own automatisms and that its 'passions,' as opposed to its higher capacities of thought and free will, were effectively like reflexes, humans thereby being closer to animals than his earlier work might have suggested.[36] This mechanistic account of animals was never uncontested. The traditional Scholastic position was that animals had sensitive souls even if they were incapable of reason, while the later Enlightenment shift to understanding the body holistically and in terms of vital forces meant that a conception of human or animal bodies in terms of separate, cog-like parts fell increasingly out of fashion.[37] In its mise-en-scène of animals, humans and automata, and parallels between them, *La Règle du jeu* knowingly but implicitly echoes these debates and probes the same border lines, in the process questioning assumptions of human superiority, rationality or control.

La Règle du jeu is famous for the way in which its characters reflect and double each other. This doubling, I would argue, extends to animals. Deleuze, as Reader notes, suggested that Schumacher, the murderous gamekeeper, is the only character not to have a double. But this observation, as Reader also notes, is misleading because it appears to suggest that other characters form *stable* pairings. Marceau, the poacher, has an affinity with Robert for much of the film, yet in the end aligns himself with Schumacher's decision to execute the person they take to be Lisette's lover, effectively mirroring the man who had tried to kill him.[38] But Marceau has another, non-human double early in the film, the cat from the neighbouring estate, another poacher which, anticipating his later actions, Schumacher takes pleasure in shooting. Similarly, Jurieu, the lover shot in error at the film's end, is compared by Marceau to an animal killed in the hunt while his dying fall visually echoes the tumbling of rabbits cut down in the same slaughter.[39] In an earlier sequence, hearing continuous gunshot, La Chesnaye asks Schumacher where it is coming from. From the neighbouring estate, where they are carrying out 'de la destruction de lapins,' the latter replies. In a film from 1939, when France's neighbour's murderous intentions were already all too clear, the firing is ominous. As Reader aptly comments, 'the spectre of the coming global conflict haunts *La Règle du jeu* as [if] it were just off-screen.'[40] Similarly, with its coordinated mass slaughter, the hunt itself both echoes the industrialised killing of the First World War and anticipates the slaughter to come. If the film's automata encapsulate both a human desire for control and its loss, the animals embody above all the capacity to be killed.

The violence done by and to humans in the film can be either rationally organised or uncontrolled, the former type exemplified by the neighbouring estate's off-screen cull and the on-screen hunt, the latter veering from the comic chases and fights (the film's slapstick elements) to the shooting of Jurieu. But, crucially, whether controlled or uncontrolled, the violences have a mechanical dimension whereby individual or collective human machineries are set in motion. This dimension is at its most evident in the case of the hunt which is organised with military precision and reduces all its participants, including the animals, its victims, to their roles in the machinery of death. The fascistic Schumacher, in his dark uniform, commands the beaters, keeping them in a line as they advance through the woods, beating the vegetation in unison, and driving the rabbits and birds towards Robert's guests, themselves distributed neatly along a line of shooting placements, also organised by Schumacher. Its violence is created as much through its rapid montage as through the sounds of beating and shooting and the shots of the animals' panicked flight and violent deaths. As Reader notes, the sequence occupies about 1/25th of the film's running time but takes up a quarter of its shots.[41] In a film otherwise celebrated for its virtuoso long takes, the exceptional fast editing of the hunt constitutes it as a semi-autonomous filmic object with its own machinery. While some of its shots (the lines of hunters and beaters) are visibly social due to their multiple human figures, the way that the editing moves swiftly from shots of individual humans or animal to another shot ensures that their cog-like insertion into the killing machine is prioritised over any individualisation at the level of the mise-en-scène. If the humans in the hunt appear to be privileged agents and the animals, in the automaticity of their flight, more passive, the parallels that the film draws elsewhere between the two are ample reminder that humans are also potential victims of rationally organised slaughter.

Because of the inherent chaos of the slapstick, its machinic dimension is less immediately apparent but clearly present. We see it in the scene within which Marceau begins his pursuit of Lisette. Initially slapped down by the maid, the grinning Marceau starts a musical doll, itself holding another toy doll figure, as he seeks to direct Lisette's response to him, in a way which mirrors Robert's own use of such figures to feel in control.[42] When he again attempts to grab Lisette, she evades him, but, having stood on his hand, is soon happy to hold onto him, that is, until Schumacher enters, surprises the pair, and starts to throttle Marceau. There is a clear automaticity to both the erotic drive that draws Marceau and Lisette towards each other and the violent response from Schumacher. With the musical automata underscoring the impression, three characters are clearly tied together as if mechanically, something which the familiar machinery of slapstick, with its routine comic business, underscores. Similar dynamics play out during the *fête* but on a much larger scale as the upstairs and downstairs forces of attraction and jealousy play out and combine: Marceau pursued by Schumacher pursued in turn by Lisette trying to hold back his violence; Christine dallying with different suitors who fight each other or her husband; the chaos caused when these two machineries (the fighting servants and masters) collide and interfere. As the confusion reaches its height and Schumacher starts to fire his pistol, the orchestrion is once again set in motion, its up-tempo music seeming to drive the social madness, as if the human figures were all connected extensions of its machinery. This is where the film is closest to slapstick.

Slapstick, as Tom Gunning reminds us, 'originated in the *commedia dell'arte* in the form of the *battacio*, a club or wooden sword used in comic beatings.'[43] It gave its name, as Gunning also notes, 'to the dominant genre of silent comedy and the knockabout vaudeville and clown acts that preceded cinema, because of the high degree of physical violence … that many comedians cultivated.'[44] A tool of comic violence, the slapstick was 'a rather minimal form of crazy machine, a seemingly purposeful device, which in fact detours that purpose into a spectacular but destructive or purposeless end, triggering laughter.'[45] The machinic

dimension of historical slapstick found its prolongation in silent film comedies which were fascinated by machines such as cars and trains. In primitive cinema, the machines were involved in simple gags but, as we moved to the later silent period, a more complex pattern developed, in which gags were connected into longer sequences.[46] As Gunning explains, 'In these later films the machine becomes the center of a larger gag scenography, in which performance, other objects, and the unfolding of action all work together. A great comic gag sequence works, well, like clockwork, but a clock that could never tell you the right time and might blow up in your face.'[47] The analysis here maps remarkably well onto the slapstick elements of *La Règle du jeu* with its chaotic chases and fights and its incorporation of machines (the automata) into larger comic machineries of which humans are cog-like elements.

The murderous and amorous desires that power the slapstick and subvert rational control or order are not the only mechanisms that drive the characters. They are also inhabited by what Reader calls 'the codes of high society,' although one could equally well name them the rules of the game.[48] They make themselves felt, for example, when about finally to win Christine for himself, as he had so desperately desired, André feels obliged to inform his host, Robert, rather than leaving immediately as Christine wanted. The film's designated disruptor, the apparent hero of spontaneous desire, is as much a prisoner of conventions and its dead mechanisms as anyone else.[49] At the end of the film, in what Reader calls 'a bravura piece of collective hypocrisy,' the same dead mechanisms oblige everyone to perform polite belief in the fiction that Schumacher has shot André after mistaking him for a poacher.[50] If the characters effectively have their strings pulled, puppet-like, by their desires or drives, they are also insistently tugged by social norms, although the two pulls are in very different directions and comic tangles inevitably result.

If we accept that scenes with Robert and his automata evoke the high Enlightenment desire for rational human control over a mechanistically conceived world, then, in its mise-en-scène of social and other mechanisms and the place of humans within them, Renoir's film shows this desire to have failed. Rather than being in clear-sighted control, its characters are unaware puppets to their urges and in thrall to dead conventions. The animated but lifeless machines that they manipulate give back an image not of control but of its loss. If power over machines might once have seemed the foundation of progress, now, in its machine-like functioning, the film's society is unable to move on, trapped not in a stable or harmonious repetition but in a chaotic and decaying one, as figured by the hideously stalled clanking of the orchestrion. Where rational control functions all too well, Enlightenment's dark shadow, is in the deadly machinery of the film's hunt with its echoes of wars ended or to come. If the film's humans are reflected, unbeknownst to them, in its automata, they are also mirrored, in their vulnerability or murderousness, in its animals and hunters.

La Marseillaise and its enlightened citizens

I have suggested elsewhere that *La Règle du jeu* represents an undoing of the version of the French Revolution that Renoir developed for the 150th anniversary of the event in his Popular Front inspired *La Marseillaise* (1938).[51] The latter work premiered less than eighteen months before *La Règle du jeu* and focused on a group of *Marseillais* as they assembled in their city before marching on Paris, making the anthem of the film's title their own in the process. I summarised some of the parallels and contrasts between the two films as follows:

> The film [*La Règle du jeu*] both echoes and reverses the spatial economy and narrative of *La Marseillaise*. In the earlier film, an episode of poaching leads to arrest, escape to nature and the burning of châteaux. In the later one, the arrested poacher turns his back on nature to work inside the château. *La Marseillaise* shows a weak

> leader who has an Austrian wife and likes to hunt. A noble named La Chesnaye is prominent in the defence of his palace. In *La Règle du jeu* La Chesnaye, now the leader himself, has an Austrian wife and hunts but shows no capacity to defend his territory from intruders.[52]

It is within this broader context of revolutionary absence that *La Règle du jeu*'s automata, with their chaotically failed promise of control and stability resonate most fully, with the orchestrion's horrible clanking suggesting a stalled society that cannot move on. Automata were associated with the royal court and might have figured in *La Marseillaise* but don't. The famous Jacquet-Droz harpsichord player with its simulated breathing was shown to Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette.[53] David Roentgen gifted the royal couple, his patrons, an elegant mechanical dulcimer player, reportedly modelled on Marie-Antoinette, who gave it on to the Académie des Sciences.[54] But, given that for later Enlightenment thinkers, automata tended to be associated not with order and control but with a lack of freedom, representation of the monarchs as automata could flip from flattery to its opposite. Indeed, an anonymous letter sent to *Le Républicain* in 1791 and later published in the Marquis de Condorcet's complete works but attributed by some scholars to his wife, Sophie de Grouchy, mischievously suggests that France could save itself a significant sum and avoid unrest if the whole court were replaced by automata.[55] Despite the absence of automata as artefacts from *La Marseillaise*, the film implicitly echoes de Grouchy's letter in its opening sequence which shows the changing of the guard at Versailles. The first shot, a characteristically mobile long take, first shows a single moustachioed guard by a door as he is marched off only to be replaced by another almost identical moustachioed guard in precisely the same posture and position. At the next door, the same thing happens, but this time with two guards being replaced by another pair, all marching in step as they change places. Foucault, among others, noted how automata served as models for the mechanical disciplining of bodies in convents, armies, and workshops during the second half of the eighteenth century.[56] The mechanically disciplined palace guards in *La Marseillaise* are effectively life-sized automata. A sense of automaticity, this time a decaying one, recurs in a later scene involving a group of aristocratic exiles in Coblentz. Two men argue about the meaning of the nation defended by the revolutionaries. They are interrupted by a woman who summons them for a question she deems of the utmost urgency: at Versailles, when they danced the third movement of the gavotte, did they look left or right when turning right? They cannot remember. Like the orchestrion in *La Règle du jeu*, their movements are stalling. An older aristocrat sets them in motion again, and like mechanical figures, they once again take up the dance with its pre-established movements.

In contrast to this decaying stasis, the film's *Marseillais* represent renewal. They constitute a self-aware collective actor made up of actively consenting individuals who gather in vibrant political assemblies, actively and humorously debate the meaning of the anthem of the film's title and are fully aware of the threats they face from defenders of the old order and invading Prussians and determined to confront them. The film's final shot captures them moving towards the future as, having stormed the Tuileries Palace, they march out with the revolutionary army to meet the invading Prussian forces at Valmy. Before these more epic moments, there is a quieter sequence where we see one of their number and his love interest watching a shadow play, accompanied by live harpsichord playing, in which the King tries and fails to court a personified Madame la Nation. An active and aware public, the spectators laugh and jeer at what is a representation of their current situation. Involving light, a screen, moving forms, dialogue and sound, the shadow play clearly evokes cinema and adds an element of reflexivity to a film which seeks to bring its own spectacle to an actively engaged public aware of internal and external threats to France.

La Rêgle du jeu has its own famous spectacle, the *fête de la Colinière*. It begins harmoniously enough with a woman guest playing 'En revenant de la revue,' a militaristic anthem in tribute to the late nineteenth century putschist manqué, General Boulanger, even as some of the film's leading players sing in a predominantly Tyrolean range of fancy dress in front of a mountain backdrop.[57] At this stage, despite the incongruity and anachronism of the performance, the audience of guests and servants and the performers on stage are united in their enjoyment. The unity on both sides of the curtain soon fragments as different pairs of lovers and their jealous pursuers spin off. The piano reveals itself to be another automata, a pianola, and plays Saint-Saëns' 'Danse Macabre,' with its evocation of death, as a skeleton and a ghostly group of sheet-clad figures begin to dance on stage, before descending into the audience area, even as spotlights follow them, projecting shadows onto the walls. As Reader writes, quoting Jean-Luc Nancy, 'the hitherto carefree stage is transformed into "the place from which death shows itself"'.[58] We return to the stage, just before Robert proudly displays his orchestrion on it, for another song, this time a comic one, performed by four men wearing long black beards, as if they might be Orthodox Jews, but standing in front of a décor showing the Champs Elysées, with an aeroplane in the sky, as if for a military parade. The backdrop might have fitted the jingoistic Boulangist song but seems out-of-place here. It is as if, reflexively mirroring the film's own deliberate generic and tonal confusion, the spectacle were using a mismatched collection of cultural forms to provide a commentary on France's situation in 1939 in an incoherent and jarringly jocular form, as if its audience were no longer trusted to respond in an adequate manner to a plainly delivered message as the audience for *La Marseillaise*'s spectacle was.

La Règle du jeu as Phantasmagoria

The dance of the skeleton and ghosts and their projected shadows are worth returning to in their capacity to evoke, like the automata, an earlier technology, the phantasmagoria and its cultural and historical resonances. The phantasmagoria, a cinematic precursor, which emerged at the time of the French Revolution, was a modification of the classical magic lantern. Using back projection of moving slides or objects and thereby hiding its apparatus, it was able to produce sudden variation in the size of figures, as if they were rushing threateningly towards spectators. Their most famous early exponent, the self-styled Robertson, used the device to make phantoms, including that of Robespierre appear, even as he had his assistants walk among the crowd wearing papier-mâché masks lit from the inside.[59] The phantasmagoria is not literally present in *La Règle du jeu* but the film's use of ghostly figures and projected shadows clearly evokes its spirit. If the earlier phantoms aroused people's memories of revolutionary violence or the possible return of the *ancien régime*, those in Renoir's film surely point to former or future wars haunting the film's internal and external audiences.

In its original form, as practiced by Robertson and his contemporaries, the phantasmagoria claimed to be a form of enlightened demystification to the extent that, while it summoned up spirits and demons, it did so by using the science of optics rather than any dark magic. But the phantasmagoria would soon become a metaphor for individual and collective illusion. Thomas Carlyle, for example, repeatedly used it to evoke the French Revolution and its power over the collective imagination.[60] Karl Marx turned to it to describe the working of commodity fetishism and its capacity to replace a relationship between 'men' with a phantasmagoric relation between things.[61] In a work initially drafted in 1937, Theodor Adorno would build on Marx to analyse how Wagner's operas functioned as phantasmagoria by creating a falsely whole and backward-looking world and hiding their own means of production.[62] However, it would be Walter Benjamin who would widen the term's application

the most, using it in his *Arcades Project*, and especially the 1935 and 1939 'Exposés' which preface it, to analyse the functioning of phenomena as apparently diverse as commodity display, world fairs, Haussman's rebuilding of Paris, the collections built by private individuals and the great socialist revolutionary, Louis-Auguste Blanqui's 1872 text, *L'Eternité par les astres*.[63] Faulkner and Ffrench both productively apply Benjamin's description of collections as a 'phantasmagoria of the interior,' to Robert's automata. Citing Benjamin, Faulkner writes,

> Benjamin saw the domestic drawing room that emerged with the nineteenth century as 'like a box in the world theatre' in which the private citizen could assemble those objects which represented 'the distant in space and time' that served 'to support him in his illusions' of knowledge and control over the world.[64]

Despite its phantasmagoric promise of a prolongation of the Enlightenment project of mastery through science and rationality, the collection represents its collapse inwards, as Faulkner notes and besides, as we have seen, Robert's automata come to embody not control but its loss.[65]

I would argue that it makes sense to extend the use of the phantasmagoria to the film as a whole and not just its collector and his automata. The dancing phantoms of the *fête*, as I have suggested, are another form of phantasmagoria, as indeed is the *fête* more broadly, with its disorientating gathering up of costumes, dances, classical music and human and mechanical performers to suggest obliquely something of France's position in 1939. The final shot of the film is also clearly phantasmagoric. By showing the shadows cast on the château wall by Robert's guests as they retreat inside after assembling to endorse the collective lie that André's death was an accident, the film underscores their double status as shades: shades of a society no longer able to face or renew itself, and shades of the dead of the war to come.[66] But the film itself, as we noted at the start, drawing on Reader and Crisp, is an astonishing phantasmagoric compendium of cultural references, culturally and historically charged objects and locations and, last but not least, genres. It is as if, no longer able to count on the enlightened audience of *La Marseillaise*, Renoir had to resort to a different, more allusive and disruptive form of communication, gathering together different cultural forms, objects and genres and making them resonate uneasily together, just as Benjamin felt the need to in *The Arcades Project* when he saw that, as Margaret Cohen put it, Enlightenment critical procedures of the sort to which Marxism was still attached could no longer work. As Cohen conveys it: 'in a world where all experience was saturated by the phantasmagorical power of the commodity, even the critic cannot achieve the distanced and multi-dimensional relation to his/her object necessary for rational thought.'[67] Although Renoir's film does not centre on the consequences of the generalised commodity form, a similar sense that he can no longer count on an enlightened public implicitly runs through it. The automata and the film's other machineries give the lie, as we have seen, to the illusion that its humans can exercise rational control over their world. Moreover, the film's characters reveal themselves to be frivolous and short-sighted even as the film shows death stalking them. When they do see the truth, it is belatedly: the guests at the *fête* initially take Schumacher's murderous firing of his pistol as just one more act. Similarly, when seeing her husband through a spyglass as he gives one final embrace to Geneviève (Mira Parély) at the hunt, Christine very belatedly realises that they have been having an affair but still fails to detect that they are putting on an act of ongoing affection. Even belated perception is not to be trusted! When she complains to Octave that she has been living a lie for three years, the latter, played by Renoir himself, we remember, comments: 'On est à une époque où tout le monde ment, les prospectus des pharmaciens, les gouvernements, la radio, le cinéma, les journaux. Alors pourquoi veux-tu

que nous autres, les simples particuliers, on ne mente pas aussi?' Faced with this context of lies, frivolity, faulty and belated perception, and lack of self-awareness, Renoir could not rely on the kind of realist filmmaking of his Popular Front work to communicate with his audience and needed to find other more unconventional means to do so. Turning his film into a form of phantasmagoria was his answer.

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[1] Keith Reader, *La Règle du jeu* (London: I. B. Tauris 2010), p.1.
[2] Reader, *La Règle,* p.11.
[3] Reader, *La Règle,* p. 12-23.
[4] Reader, *La Règle,* p. 18-20.
[5] Reader, *La Règle,* p. 20.
[6] Faulkner cit Reader, *La Règle,* p. 21.
[7] Reader, *La Règle,* p. 21.
[8] Colin Crisp, *Genre, Myth and Convention in the French Cinema, 1929-1939* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), pp. xix-xxv, 105-6, 138-9.
[9] Crisp, *Classic French Cinema*, p. 139.
[10] Reader, *La Règle,* p. 82.
[11] Pierre Samson, '*La Règle du jeu* ou comment un film s'empare de l'histoire de France, *Positif* 665-666 (2016), pp. 152-5, (p. 155).
[12] Samson, '*La Règle',* p. 155.
[13] Martin O'Shaughnessy, (2013), 'Shooting in Deep Time: The *Mise en Scène* of History in Renoir's Films of the 1930s,' in *The Blackwell Companion to Jean Renoir* ed. by Alastair Phillips and Ginette Vincendeau (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), pp. 16-34, (pp. 20-24).
[14] Martin O'Shaughnessy, *Jean Renoir* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), pp. 150-1.
[15] Reader, *La Règle,* pp. 54-5.
[16] Reader, *La Règle,* p. 63
[17] Christopher Faulkner, 'Musical automata, *La Règle du jeu*, and the cinema,' *South Central Review*, 28:3 (2011), pp. 6-25, (p.6).
[18] Faulkner, 'Musical automata,' p. 6.
[19] Faulkner, 'Musical automata,' pp. 6-7.
[20] Faulkner, 'Musical automata,' pp. 6-7.
[21] Faulkner, 'Musical automata,' p. 7
[22] Minsoo Kang, *Sublime Dreams of Living Machines: The Automaton in the European Imagination* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011), p. 167.
[23] Faulkner, 'Musical automata,' pp. 10-11.
[24] Faulkner, 'Musical automata,' pp. 11-13.
[25] Reader, *La Règle,* p.35.
[26] Ffrench, Patrick, 'Renoir's automaton, Vigo's puppet: automatism and movement in *La Règle du jeu* and *L'Atalante*, *French Studies*, LXX:4 (2016), (pp. 535-49), p. 536.
[27] Ffrench, 'Renoir's automaton,' p. 535.
[28] Ffrench, 'Renoir's automaton,' p. 536
[29] Simon Schaffer, 'Enlightened automata,' in W. Clark, J. Golinski and S. Schaffer, *The Sciences in Enlightened Europe* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago, 1999), pp. 126-165, (p.136); Jessica Riskin, 'The Defecating duck, or, the ambiguous origins of artificial life,' *Critical Inquiry*, 29:4 (2003), pp. 599-633.
[30] Ffrench, 'Renoir's automaton,' pp. 538-9.
[31] Faulkner, 'Musical automata,' pp. 14-15.

[32] Reader, *La Règle,* pp. 68-9.
[33] Ffrench, 'Renoir's automaton,' p. 542.
[34] Ffrench, 'Renoir's automaton,' p. 543.
[35] Faulkner, 'Musical automata,' p. 9; see also Kang, *Sublime Dreams*, pp. 116-7.
[36] Alain Vizier, 'Descartes et les automates,' *MLN* 111:4 (1996), pp. 688-708, (pp. 702-6).
[37] Kang, *Sublime Dreams*, pp. 149-50.
[38] Reader, *La Règle*, pp. 81-2.
[39] O'Shaughnessy, *Jean Renoir*, p. 148.
[40] Reader, *La Règle,* pp. 44-5.
[41] Reader, *La Règle,* p. 51.
[42] Reader, *La Règle,* pp. 58-9.
[43] Tom Gunning, 'Mechanisms of laughter: the devices of slapstick,' Paulus, T. and King, R. eds, *Slapstick Comedy* (New York, Routledge, 2010), pp. 137-51, (p. 140).
[44] Gunning, 'Mechanisms,' p. 140.
[45] Gunning, 'Mechanisms,' p. 141.
[46] Gunning, 'Mechanisms,' pp. 141-5.
[47] Gunning, 'Mechanisms,' p. 142.
[48] Reader, *La Règle,* p. 79.
[49] Reader, *La Règle,* p. 66.
[50] Reader, *La Règle,* p. 79.
[51] O'Shaughnessy, *Jean Renoir*, p. 150.
[52] O'Shaughnessy, *Jean Renoir*, p. 150.
[53] Kang, *Sublime Dreams*, p. 106.
[54] Katherine B. Crawford, 'Designed women: gender and the problem of female automata,' *History and Technology*, 30:3 (2014), pp. 261-8, (p. 262).
[55] Sophie de Grouchy, 'Lettre d'un jeune mécanicien,' in ed. By A. Condorcet O'Connor, and M. F. Arago, *Oeuvres de Condorcet, XII*, (Paris: Firmin Didot Frères, 1847), pp. 239-41; Sandrine Berges, (2015), 'Sophie de Grouchy on the cost of domination in the "Letters on Sympathy" and two anonymous articles in *Le Républicain*,' in *The Monist*, 98:1 (2015), pp. 102-112, (p. 105).
[56] Michel Foucault, *Surveiller et punir: naissance de la prison* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), pp. 159-66.
[57] Reader, *La Règle*, pp. 61-2.
[58] Reader, *La Règle*, p. 62.
[59] Laurent Mannoni and Ben Brewster, 'The phantasmagoria,' *Film History*, 8:4 (1996), pp. 390-415, (pp. 405-6).
[60] Terry Castle, 'Spectral technology and the metaphysics of modern reverie,' *Critical Inquiry*, 15 (Autumn, 1988), pp. 26-61, (pp. 27-8).
[61] Margaret Cohen, 'Walter Benjamin's phantasmagoria,' *New German Critique*, 48 (1989), pp. 87-107, (p. 88).
[62] Theodor Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, transl. by Rodney Livingstone (London: Verso, 2009), pp. 74-85.
[63] Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, transl. by Howard Eiland and Kevin Mclaughlin (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), pp. 3-26.
[64] Faulkner, 'Musical automata,' p. 9.
[65] Faulkner, 'Musical automata,' p. 9.
[66] Reader, *La Règle*, pp. 80-1.
[67] Cohen, 'Benjamin's phantasmagoria,' pp. 102-3.