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Elena et Les Hommes or *Paris Does Strange Things – Eros* and *Eris* in Jean Renoir Reception of Helen of Troy

Elena e os homens *ou* As estranhas coisas de Paris – eros *e* eris *na recepção de Helena de Troia por Jean Renoir*[1]

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Abstract: This article is part of a broader research project on the reception of Helen of Troy in cinema. Here, I present an analysis *Elena et les hommes*, also known by the English title *Paris Does Strange Things*, directed by Jean Renoir. Released in 1956, during the Algerian War of Independence (1954-1962), the film fictionalizes an episode in the life of French General Georges Boulanger (1837-1891), making him one of the suitors of a beautiful Polish princess named Elena Sorokovska. I argue that the French director constructed his protagonist by transplanting to the screen literary material related to the version of Helen of Troy found in Euripides' *Helen*, a work that is also often interpreted as presenting a pacifist perspective.

[1] I presented the first English-language version of this text, titled *Jean Renoir's Representation of Men in Combat for Helen*, at the 2007 APA Conference as part of the Three-Year Colloquium on KINHMA (https://classicalstudies.org/sites/default/files/documents/2007program.pdf) : Classical Antiquity and Cinema, organized by Hanna M. Roisman and Martin M. Winkler. This presentation was, in turn, a translation of part of an article that I published in that same year in Portuguese: Coelho (2007). After 14 years, I have returned to it, adding substantial new material, and, as no English-language publication, as far as I know, has yet analysed this film in the context of classical reception, I believe that it is worthy of print. I wish to express my heartfelt thanks to Jim Marks for editing this text and polishing my English, to Martin M. Winkler for urging me to not let it sit in a drawer so long and Maria de Fátima Silva for reading the first version and inviting me to submit a new one to this volume on Reception.

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Keywords: Helen of Troy; Euripides; *Helen*, Jean Renoir; *Elena et les hommes.*

Resumo: Este artigo está inserido em uma pesquisa mais ampla sobre a recepção do mito de Helena de Troia no cinema. Meu objetivo é analisar o filme *Elena et les hommes*, também conhecido como *Paris does Strange Things,* dirigido por Jean Renoir. Realizado em 1956, época da guerra de independência a Argélia (1954-1962), ele ficcionaliza um episódio da vida do General Georges Boulanger (1837-1891), fazendo-o um dos pretendentes da bela princesa polonesa Elena Sorokovska. Busco mostrar como o diretor francês constrói sua protagonista transplantando para as telas material literário relativo à mítica Helena de Troia, conforme a encontramos na *Helena* de Eurípides, uma obra que é também um libelo pacifista.

Palavras-chave: Helena de Troia*;* Eurípides; *Helena*, Jean Renoir; *Elena et les hommes.*

On a voulu classer *Elena* dans une catégorie,
et qui parle de catégorie parle déjà de mécanisation.
Jean Renoir[2]

In this paper, I discuss the reception of Euripides' *Helen* in a 1956 film by Jean Renoir titled *Elena et les hommes in French and in English Paris Does Strange Things* (released in 1957) – it was shot in both French and English – with the Swedish actress Ingrid Bergman playing the leading role. In the same year, Robert Wise's *Helen of Troy* also put the Greek myth about the power of a beautiful woman on screen with the Italian actress Rossana Podestà in the title role, a production much better known in mainstream cinema and more widely discussed in the scholarship on the reception of the myth of Helen in film.[3] Wise's Helen was inspired mainly by Homer, and, applying the well-known typology that MacKinnon used for Greek tragedy,[4] can be described as

[2] In an interview to *Cahiers du Cinéma*, see Narboni (1979, p. 52).

[3] On Wise's *Helen*, see Vivante (2013) and Winkler (2016). Renoir's film is mentioned by neither Maguire (2009), Nikoloutsous (2013), nor Winkler (2016), while Rodrigues (2012) made only a brief mention of the film.

[4] MacKinnon (1986, p. 19) used an existing categorization scheme proposed by Jack J. Jorgens, distinguishing theatrical, realistic, and filmic adaptations of Greek tragedy for the screen; however, to cover Pier Pasolini's films and Jules Dassin's *A Dream of Passion*, he added a fourth category, meta-tragedy.

a realistic adaptation.[5] Renoir's film certainly isn't a realistic adaptation of Euripides' tragedy, but the two works have many elements in common, consideration of which provides fresh perspectives not only on the relationship between ancient Greek drama and cinema but also on representations of Helen as *causa belli* and a critique of heroic military values, both of which are inherited from Ancient Greek literature. In a sense, what Renoir did in his Helen film – taking the subject matter of epic and dramatic narrative and adapting it to a comic register (the film was referred to by Renoir as a comedy) and to another place and time – can be described as transplanting.

A first step in connecting *Elena et les hommes* with Euripides' version of the Helen myth is the familiarity with Greek themes that the French director revealed. In particular, he advised filmmakers to look to the tragedians as a model in one of his books:[6]

> [...] I know the best way to save cinema without Cinemascope and Cinerama. All directors should work from the same subject, a western or a crime film, and dedicate themselves to this subject exclusively for ten years. We would find ourselves in the same position as the Greeks, who had the custom of rewriting the same stories for an audience that already knew them by heart. As a greater guarantee, the play began with a recounting of the action, in case somebody had forgotten. It was the chorus that was responsible for this fundamental task, liberating the author from the ease of suspense. (RENOIR, 1991, p. 97-98)

Having thus connected the director with the *modus operandi* of Greek tragedians, I now revisit Euripides' *Helen* to prepare for a comparison of it to Renoir's *Elena et les hommes*.

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[5] *Helen of Troy* was a Warner Brothers epic featuring also a young Brigitte Bardot as Helen's slave Andraste. In that same prolific year for cinema, Robert Rossen's *Alexander the Great* was released as well as *Anastasia*, a historical drama by Anatole Litvak based on Arthur Laurents's play, in which Ingrid Bergman played an impostor of the Russian princess who is helped by General Bounine (Yul Brynner) who trains her to pass as Anastasia Romanov.

[6] Renoir (1991, p. 97-98), answering the question, "Do you put yourself between Shakespeare and Marivaux?" He starts by saying that "after some glasses of whisky, for sure" and then continues.

A key feature of Euripides' play is that the protagonist did not, in fact, travel to Troy. Rather, an image of her (an *eidolon,* 34) forged in heaven (*ouranos* 34) takes her place, deceiving Alexander/Paris on the orders of Hera. The word "name," *onoma* (43; 249) is also used in the play to describe the deceptive image. The real Helen was brought by Hermes to Egypt and there has remained, protected by Proteus and, after the latter's death, by his son Theoklymenos. Returning from Troy with the *eidolon*/*onoma*, Menelaus suffers shipwreck off the coast of Egypt, where he comes ashore and reunites with the real Helen, having left the false Helen with his men in a cave. Later, he learns from a messenger that the *eidolon*/*onoma* has vanished, returning to heaven (*ouranos*, 613). The reunion of Helen and Menelaus is opposed by Theoklymenos, who wants her to be his wife, but she and Menelaus manage to escape from Egypt with the assistance of Theoklymenos's sister, the virgin prophetess Theonoe. The successful plan involves Menelaus passing as a shipwrecked Greek bringing news of the death of "Menelaus." Helen, claiming now to be widowed, with the aid of the disguised Menelaus, obtains Theoklymenos's permission to perform a burial ritual at sea; once away from shore, they overpower the Egyptian king's men on board and return home to Sparta. [7]

The version of the story in which an *eidolon* replaces Helen had already appeared in Stesichorus' *Palinode*, and the idea that Helen had been in Egypt appears in Homer (*Odyssey*, IV, 220-33; 351-586) and Herodotus (*History*, II, 112-120).[8] One hypothesis about this innocent Helen is that Stesichorus's poem had a political message.[9] Even assuming that his *Palinode* was well-known and influenced Euripides, the Homeric

[7] See Euripide (1950), Euripides (1967) and Euripides (2006).

[8] For a detailed analysis, see Austin (1994).

[9] See Bowra (1961) and Bassi (1993). For a more recent approach to Stesichorus, corroborating Bowra's in many aspects, including regarding the story's Panhellenic appeal, see Finglass and Kelly (2018, p. 51-52).

version of the story of Helen was undoubtedly more influential,[10] as Eisner (1980), Kakridis (1972), and Foley (1992) have shown.[11]

Euripides' tragedy also contains seemingly comic scenes, for instance, when the old doorkeeper barks at Menelaus as the disguised hero approaches Theoklymenos's palace in rags (408-56).[12] For its inclusion of this and similar scenes and its happy ending, the play has been categorized as a "tragicomedy," "romantic tragedy," "domestic tragedy," and even an anticipation of the Greek novel.[13] Regarding these classifications of *Helen*, Donald Mastronarde (1999) suggested that the value of the terminology is mainly heuristic, urging caution in its use, and, in the case of "romantic tragedy," arguing that

> it is easy to observe retrospectively how features of the later genre of Greek romance are anticipated in plays like *Iphigenia in Tauris* and *Helen:* prolonged wandering from home to exotic locales, shipwreck, separation from and reunion with loved ones, close escapes from imminent death or unwanted marriage, ambiguous oracles and dreams, doubles and disguises [...] From the contemporary perspective of Euripides' time, however, these motifs look back to *Odyssey* and other epics tales of quests [...]. (MASTRONARDE, 1999, p. 36)

His argument here-which reinforces the connection to Homer mentioned earlier-is that terms such as "tragicomic," "romantic tragedy," and "melodrama," when applied to Euripides, "are too crude a tool, encouraging a view of genre that is too prescriptive and that oversimplifies

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[10] Concerning Euripides' *Helen*, Ghalil-Gahil (1955, p. 31) noted that the theme of the "impopulaire parce que trop audacieuse" play did not find any successors, particularly in iconography, for there are no known scenes relating to this version of the story.

[11] According to Foley (1992, p. 150-151), Euripides, while intentionally alluding to the *Odyssey*, had to create his characters in such a way that their behavior would conform to the standards of Athenian democracy at the end of the fifth century BC.

[12] Eisner (1980) analyzed the themes of Menelaus as a beggar after a shipwreck, the chaste wife resisting the suitor, and her fear that her husband has died. See also Silva (2004) and Morenilla (2007, p. 188-189).

[13] See Allan (2006, p. 62-76) in his Introduction to Euripides´ *Helen*.

the stemmatics of intergeneric affinities." (MASTRONARDE, 1999, p. 38)[14]

Besides looking back to the *Odyssey* to understand *Helen* better, a look forward, and much more distantly in time, can also provide illuminating comparanda. Thus, Helen Foley pointed out similarities between Euripides' play and Hollywood "comedies of remarriage",[15] a film genre especially popular in the 1930s and 1940s that presented serious discussions of values and social institutions. Her approach is suggestive, though the scope of my argument here is somewhat different. As a defense against the charge of anachronistic thinking, I assert that my aim here is to establish, not a direct line of influence from the Greek past to the present, but a kind of two-way street, at one end of which contemporary productions provide insight into the blurring of the ostensibly sharp demarcation between tragedy and comedy. From this perspective, the presence of comic elements in a play does not mean that it has to be understood as a comedy. These issues of classification and demarcation in relation to Greek tragedy in the fifth century provide a first indication that the figure of Helen and the heroic men who fight over her served to transfer notions of Euripidean tragedy to the comedy of Renoir. Moreover, this transmission occurred without any diminution of the seriousness of the themes of *eros* (desire) and *eris* (strife) that, in a manner of speaking, draw public and private issues together.

Having touched on the aspects of Euripides' *Helen* relevant to the present argument, I move ahead to the twentieth century for my analysis of Jean Renoir's *Elena et les hommes*. I begin by quoting André Bazin's description of this work as "a film whose extraordinary audacity is to venture so far at the same time into the tragic burlesque and the comic burlesque."[16] Jean Renoir (1894, Paris - 1979, Beverly Hills), director, actor, producer, screenwriter, and author, had a prolific career in France and the US lasting from 1925 to 1969.[17] He is best known for two works

[14] Likewise, Dale (1967, p. ix), in her edition of *Helen*, criticized such procrustean classifications, affirming that "*Helen*, then, though not tragic in our sense, is a Greek tragedy". See also Segal (1971, p. 553-556).

[15] The well-known term was coined by Cavell (1981).

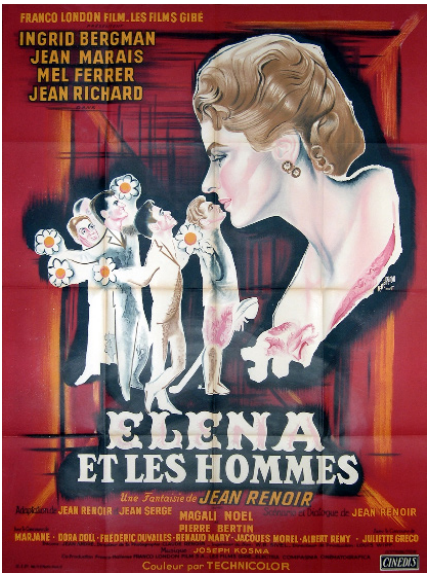
[16] See the edition organized by Truffaut (1992, p. 141), with introduction by Renoir.

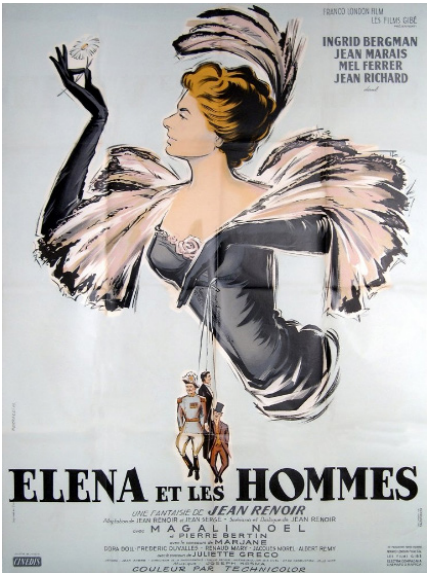
[17] A detailed filmography can be found in Truffaut (1992, p. 201-309).

recognized as masterpieces of the seventh art, *La Grande Illusion* (1937)[18] and *La Règle du Jeu* (1939).

Elena et les hommes is, by contrast, one of Renoir's least-known films. As noted, it was shot in both English and French (adding considerably to the effort involved in the production), and it received two titles in English: *Elena and her Men* – note the change from the article (les) to the possessive pronoun ("her") – and *Paris Does Strange Things.*

Figures 1 and 2 – Posters from the film depicting the title character as attractive and manipulative.[19]

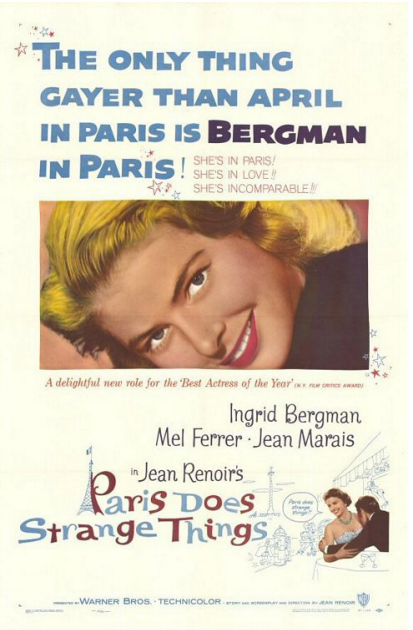


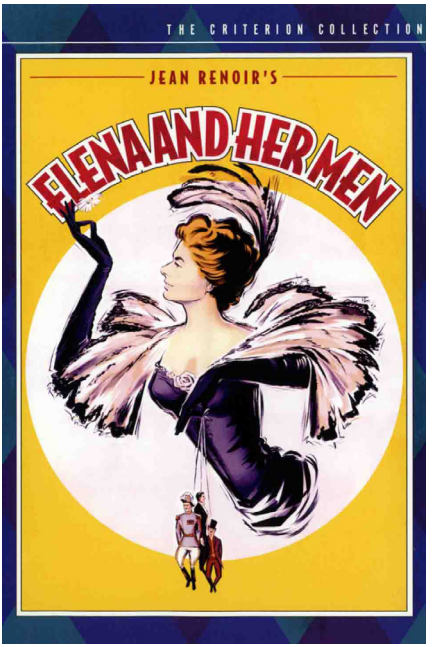


[18] It is worth providing some additional information in relation to this famous expression: in 1909 Norman Angell (an English writer and Nobel Prize-winner) wrote *Europe's Optical Illusion*, republished, from 1910 on, as *The Great Illusion*, in which he questioned the efficacy of war for bringing economic development to a nation by means of its subjugation of another. The book was re-edited in 1933, directly influencing Renoir's film of 1937. In 1950, Henri Grégoire (1950, p. 23) wrote in the preface to the French edition of *Helen*, that "C'est toute la pièce qui pourrait s'intituler, come le livre jadis fameux d'un idéaliste moderne, *La grande illusion*...". Barbara Cassin (1990, p. 37) reworked the title of Angel-Lane's expression in her essay *The Great Illusion, or a staging for Helen*.

[19] All of the images used in this paper are screenshots from films or have been obtained through open access, and their use is in compliance with all copyright and fair-use regulations.

Figures 3 and 4 – The American posters; the one on the left is for a re-release by Criterion but includes the original image.[20]





When questioned about his reasons for making this film, Renoir stated:

> I was dreaming of Venus and Olympus. But maybe of a Venus revised by Offenbach. [...] I played with political stories, with stories of generals. I tried to show the futility of human undertakings, including the undertaking we call patriotism, and to have fun juggling ideas that have become the serious ideas of our day. (BERGAN, 1992, p. 304).[21]

[20] In the first, the public from the fifties could identify a reference (and competition) to the 1952 David Butler´s musical comedy with Doris Day, *April in Paris.*

[21] The original can be read in "Conversations intimes avec Vénus" in *Cahiers du cinéma* XIII (1957), p. 48, reprinted in Narboni (1979), p. 67: "Je songeais énormément à Vénus et à l'Olympe. Mais peut-être à une Vénus un peau revue par Offenbach. [...] j'ai construit une satire, je me suis amusé avec des histoires politiques, des histoires de généraux. J'ai essayé de montrer la fluidité des entreprises humaines, y compris l'entreprise qu'on appelle le patriotisme, puis de m'amuser avec des idées sérieuses

This criticism of patriotism and defence of pacifism – similar to that attributed to Euripides in plays like *Helen*[22] – is accompanied by Renoir's enchantment with the figure of Elena, which in turn is transferred to all of the characters of the film and especially Paris, which, in his story, as a city, is one of Elena's main lovers. Renoir (1991, p. 326) stated that "this lover is multiple. It is the people of Paris. Elena has a lot of charm. Venus only needs to walk for everyone to look at her. And they want to follow her, to touch her."[23]

This statement brings to mind Helen's enchantment of the Greeks as well as the Trojans – even the elders, as seen in the *Teichoscopia* sequence in the *Iliad* (III,156-160).[24] Gorgias in his meditation on her insists that

> [...] by her one body she brought together many bodies of men greatly minded of great deeds. Some had greatness of wealth, some the glory of ancient noblesse, some the vigor of personal prowess, some the power of acquired knowledge.[25] (*Encomium of Helen*, 4)

Notable here is not only the importance of this text regarding the image of Helen but also the frequency with which it is analysed in a

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de nos jours." Offenbach was the author of the operetta *La Belle Hélène* with a libretto by Meilhac and Halévy first staged in Paris in 1864. On Helen in Offenbach and two other cases of the reception of her image in French and Russian culture, namely Zola and Tolstoy (*Nana* and *Anna Karenina*, respectively), see Munteanu (2016). On others metamorphoses of Helen, see Allan (2006, p. 72-82) and Suzuki (1989). On another disturbing Helen in the French cinema, the protagonist of *Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne* (1945), see Coelho (2008).

[22] Grégorie (1950, p. 23), for instance, in the preface of his edition of Euripides.

[23] For Bazin, "in this light the film can be seen as an illustration of both, the sovereignty and fallibility of the goddess" (see Truffaut, 1992, p. 139). In this sense, she is comparable to the *logos* in Gorgias' *Encomium*, simultaneously strong and weak.

[24] An echo of the tradition blaming Helen is also evident in the cinematic reception of her character, as I have discussed in an earlier study (COELHO, 2016).

[25] English translation by Kennedy (1991, p. 285). In the modern era, Helen has even served as a metaphor for the condition of being Greek; thus Nietzsche (2017) wrote, "the onlooker may well stand in real consternation in front of this fantastic excess of life, to ask himself with what magical drink in their bodies these high-spirited men could have enjoyed life so that wherever they look, Helen laughs back at them, that ideal image of their own existence, 'hovering in sweet sensuousness'."

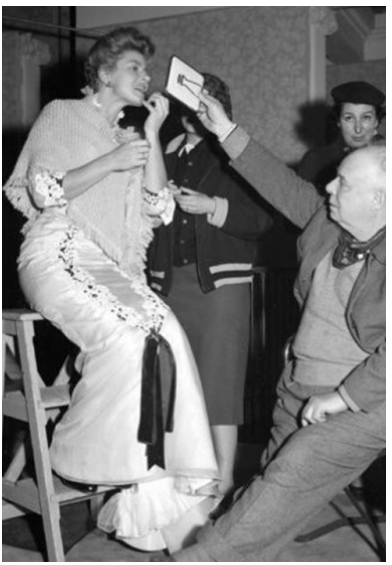
dialogue with Euripides' *Helen*[26] (and with Helen's scene in the *Trojan Woman*, too[27]). Though very different works, the parallels are thought-provoking. Gorgias's Helen departure to Troy is not put into question. His defence of her (and, in fact, of anyone and of the *logos*) involves trying to prove (*deixas kai epideixas,* 2), with a well-structured and -supported argument (*logismon*, 4), that she cannot be responsible for her departure. *Logos* is a powerful master that moves throughout a small body (*soma*, 8) in the same way that Helen's body (*soma,* 4) moves everyone around her. He concludes that *logos* (in its physicality) has the same power as violence (*bia*) and, thus, that she, "forced by speech, is unreasonably blamed" (*anagkastheisa*, 12). Euripides also focuses on Helen's body (*soma*), separating it from her name – which, as I pointed earlier, refers in some verses to her *eidolon*[28] – in a plot in which Hera plays a more important part than Aphrodite, the goddess normally associated with Helen.

Returning to Renoir's version of Venus (Aphrodite) in her *flânerie* in Paris, in a medium in which physicality is prominent, embodied in a symbol of beauty played by a singularly beautiful actress, I now trace the origin of the film and the main aspects of the plot. Renoir's first intention was to put on screen episodes from the life of General George Boulanger, a very popular military leader and politician during the Third Republic.[29] The general became involved in a feeble attempt at a *coup d'état*, but, by some accounts, his love for his mistress proved greater than his desire for power, and he fled France, ending up in Belgium, where he killed himself at her tomb a few months after she had died in his arms of tuberculosis. A journalist of the time summed up his career pithily: "He began like Caesar, continued like Catiline, and ended like Romeo."[30] Renoir's plan was to portray Boulanger´s character with a sense of humour despite his sad

[26] I have already pointed out some important connections. See Coelho (2010b).
[27] See the accurate analysis and comment on the subject in Constantinidou (2008), especially the chapter titled "Euripides' *Troades*: The *Logos* of Helen.", and Gumpert (2001) in the chapter titled "Epideixis".
[28] On the use of the word *soma* in Gorgias, see Coelho (2009). The philosophical discussion of *logos* as an *eidolon* is found in Plato too (*eidola legomena*, *Sophist* 234c), as Solmsen (1934) was among the first to point out.
[29] For a penetrating analysis of the general's persona and Boulangism, see Foulton (1991).
[30] See Durgnat (1974), p. 321-2.

end.[31] He said that even minor reasons influenced him to write a script for Boulanger, like the story of an old friend, who, during a military revue, was able to hold the reins of Boulanger´s horse and remained a partisan of the general fifty years after his suicide. However, to avoid any conflict with Boulanger's descendants, Renoir decided to shoot a film on the same subject (a plot and a *coup d´état*) but to change the name of the General to François Rollan and make a fictional Elena the protagonist, in part to satisfy his desire to put Ingrid Bergman's smile on screen.[32]

Figures 5 and 6 – Ingrid Bergman and Jean Renoir and the toilette of the Princess on the set of *Elena et les hommes*.[33]



[31] Narboni (1979, p. 152) "[...] il y avait des parents, des héritiers du géneral Boulanger qui étaient des gens extrêmement sympathiques et que peut-être, d'évoquer la mémoire de leur aïeul pourrarit les gêner [...]".

[32] See Bergan (1992) p. 304 and Narboni (1979, p. 57). It is impossible not to recall Nietzsche's (2017) reference to Helen's smile. See my note 25.

[33] The image of Renoir holding the mirror (Fig. 5), even if is not part of the film, brings in mind the significance of mirrors in the iconography of Aphrodite and Helen; see, e.g., Cerqueira (2018).

The story takes place in 1900. Ingrid Bergman's Elena Sokorowska, an impoverished Polish princess (sometimes called a countess) and widow, is living in Paris with her aunt. She meets the handsome and idle Count Henri de Chevincourt (Mel Ferrer) at a Bastille Day party after having lost track of her companion and prospective husband Martin-Michaud (Pierre Bertin) during the festivities, who, in turn, introduces her to General François Rollan (Jean Marais), a popular official and war hero. Unsurprisingly, the count and the general become interested in Elena, as, indeed, do all of the other men who meet her. Elena, for her part, considers it her mission to help every man who needs her assistance, but she then distances herself from them when these men reach their objectives. The first scene in the film makes clear how she views this calling: when Lionel (Jean Claudio), a musician hoping to marry her, is informed that his *Héloise et Abelard* has been accepted for performance at La Scala in Milan, Elena is unsurprised, affirming, while eating an apple, "I knew it, as I had given you the *marguerite*." Then, after explaining that her mission is finished, she bids him farewell and proceeds to the parade and Rollan. From the beginning, the daisy (*marguerite*) symbolizes her presence. Renoir explained that it was important that his Venus be Polish because of her "extravagant ideas" and that she had fled Russia for political reasons – her anarchist husband, Prince Volodia, had died while preparing explosives to be used in an attempt to assassinate the czar. On the day of his death, she is in the fields with other ladies picking daisies, making the flower a powerful symbol for her. In Renoir's (1990, p. 324) words, "the daisy is a kind of magic flower...it is not only an amulet but also a symbol of the power that Elena thinks that she has over the destinies of the men to whom she is driven".[34]

The film is also driven by two parallel subplots. In one, various politicians and businessmen appeal to Elena to assist in their efforts to manipulate General Rollan, among them Martin-Michaud, boot-supplier to the French army, whom she promises to marry to please her aunt. These characters see Elena as more a commodity than a person. In the other subplot, Elena's maid Lolotte (Magali Noël) is in love with Rollan's

[34] As I was unable to access a French or English edition of this book, I translated the passage from Portuguese to English.

servant Hector (Jean Richard) and is pursued by Eugène Godin (Jacques Jouanneau), who, in turn, despite being Martin-Michaud's son, becomes attracted to Elena at one point in the story.

While Elena ends up, in a very theatrical scene,[35] in the arms of the count, it is important to point out the central role of Rollan as – if I may – an *eidolon* of Boulanger[36] as well as the context of the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, in which France was defeated and forced to cede Alsace-Lorraine to Germany. Boulanger became the Minister of War in 1886, but, as discussed, his passion for his mistress compromised his political career and led to his suicide five years later. At the general's request, "A bientôt" ("See you soon") was engraved on Marguerite Brouzet's tomb when she was interred, and, two months later, "Ai-je bien pu vivre deux mois et demi sans toi?" ("Did I really live two-and-a-half months without you?") was added to the epitaph. Such actions were judged unworthy of a military man by the standards of the time.[37]

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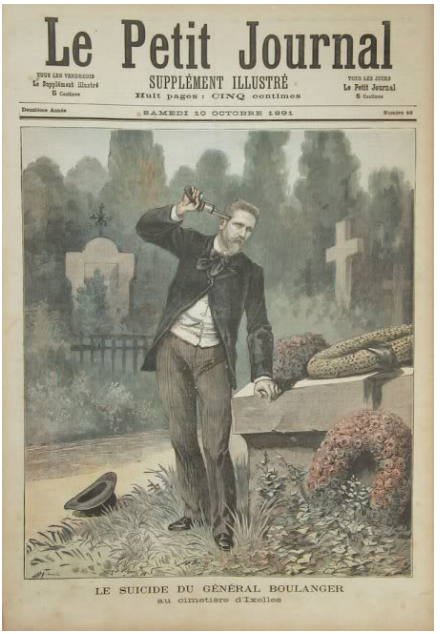
[35] The connections between Renoir's films, in particular *Elena et les hommes*, with theatre have been well analysed by, e.g., Durgnat (1974), Renoir (1974, mainly Chapter 47), Faulkner (2004), and Elsaesser (2013).

[36] In literature, Boulanger is also referred to in Maurice LeBlanc's novel *The Countess of Cagliostro* (1924) and Guy de Maupassant's (2006) *The Magic Couch*, where his creation of a "Suicide Bureau" is described as "the only good thing he did."

[37] Interestingly, the name Marguerite is significant also in Renoir's *The Grand Illusion* (1937), in which the character Cartier (Julien Carette) sings (in a vaudeville show in which male prisoners impersonate women), "Have you met Marguerite? She is neither tall nor petite. With eyes that glow, Skin like snow, and lips in a Cupid's bow, well when this divine creation." Keller and Rector (2008) made the connection, noting that "The '*marguerites*' – i.e., daisies – of *Eléna* find a precedent in the belting-out of '*Marguerite*' during the prisoners' show in *The Grand Illusion*." Durgnat (1974, p. 320) also pointed to the similarity between the two films. More speculative is a connection, I dare to propose here – of the flower to Margaretha (again meaning "Daisy") in Goethe's *Faust* and thus to Helen, perhaps as a sort of epiphany; for Helen in *Faust*, see Cassin and Mathieu (2000) and Coelho (2010c).

Figure 7 – Contemporary depiction of General Boulanger.



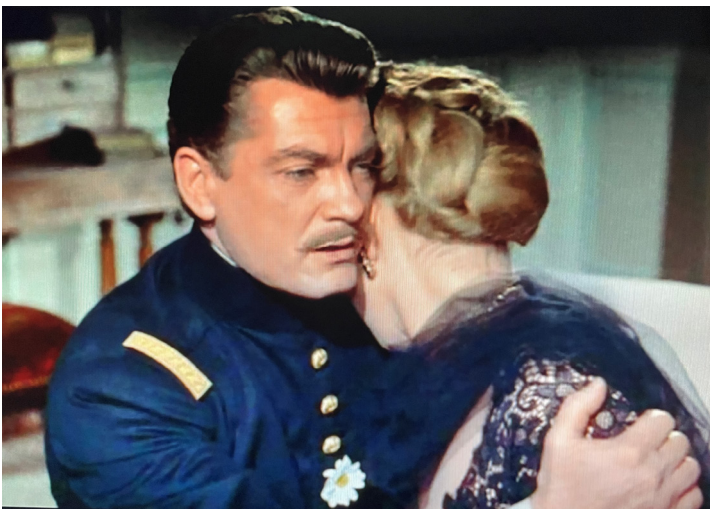
Returning to the Greek myth, Renoir's Rollan and the historical Boulanger resemble Euripides' Menelaus, who declares his intention to kill Helen and himself at Proteus's tomb (*Helen* 842, 982-5). The character (and the historical general) also brings to mind two scenes from Greek myth. The first, of Menelaus dropping his sword when he encounters Helen during the capture of Troy, is found in literature (Euripides *Andromache*, 621; Aristophanes *Lysistrata*, 155-6) as well as iconography.[38] The second scene is of Menelaus questioning Hekabe's concern about taking Helen in the same ship (1049) after he has explained he would not have killed her in Troy and that his main reason for instigating the war was not to reclaim Helen, as many think, but rather to punish the man who betrayed his hospitality. Hekabe protests that "there is no lover who does not desire always" (*ouk est´erastes hostis*

[38] See, for instance, the famous image, with Eros and Aphrodite surrounding the couple, that appears on an Attic red-figure krater in Louvre Museum (Accession No. 424; Beazley, ARV2 1077,5; Add2 326), c. 450-440 BC. For an authoritative comment on this famous episode, see Edmunds (2015, 148-150).

ouk aei philei, 1051). Though Menelaus, in response, promises to travel in different ships and to kill Helen upon arriving at Sparta in order to provide an example of women who fail to be chaste, the audience knows that this will not happen and that his actual behavior is inconsistent with his alleged intentions.[39] In the film, while Elena is conscious that the politicians around her are using her to influence Rollan, the general's conduct is guided, not by heroic military values, but by personal erotic interest, as is apparent in this exchange between the couple[40]:

> *Rollan*: For love of you, I sent that ultimatum. Luckily, it was a successful gesture, and I became a national hero. But only for love of you, not because I love success. It's you I want, Elena, not power.
> *Elena*: Not me, power...I do not matter; it's your cause.
> *Rollan*: I am sick of my cause.

Figure 8 – General Rollan and Elena share a passionate moment.



[39] In Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, the strength of Menelaus' *pothos* for Helen is evident in his solitude, which is expressed in the empty gazes of the sculptures in his palace (414-419). Though Hekabe twice uses the verb *haireo* (892), thereby reinforcing the Aeschylean etymology of the woman who destroys ships, men, and cities (689-90), Menelaus will nevertheless yield to this *pothos*. On the ominous but never punished Helen in Aeschylus, see Coelho (2000).

[40] 78:18-78:55 in the 2000 DVD copy of the VHS edition by Kinovideo.

Figure 9 – Elen a with General Rollan in disguise as he prepares to flee.

Heroes or men (politicians or military) who abandon their careers or public duties out of love (or other personal reasons) have generally been represented negatively from ancient Greece to the twentieth century, both in history and fiction. Hector sternly denounces Paris's ineptitude in war and his preoccupation with pleasure and beauty in the *Iliad* (III, 38-57), and Helen likewise criticizes him (III, 428-36). Though Helen praises Menelaus when comparing him to Paris, the standing of the former as a warrior in epic and tragedy is lesser than that of major heroes such as Achilles, Odysseus, and Agamemnon.[41] In a recent article, Barbara Castiglione (2020, p. 229) argued that Homer and the Greek tragedians "emphasize his [Menelaus'] hesitancy, his passivity, his inadequacy as a fighter, and, most of all, his sense of regret, his sensibility and his grief", noting in passing the survival of this anti-heroic character in Richard Strauss's *Die ägyptische Helena* (with libretto by Hugo von Hofmannsthal). With respect to my argument here about Helen, I note that Kevin Lee (1986), in a brief but insightful paper about line 1399, where Helen is addressing Theoklymenos after the latter learns of Menelaus' supposed death, argued for printing *kleinos* ("famous") instead

[41] See also Peleus' criticism in Euripides´ *Andromache* (630-1) calling Menelaus a coward under Aphrodite´s power.

of the traditional reading of *kainos* ("new"). The word can refer to both men: as Helen's clever deference to the king, who believes her to be his future bride, and also to Menelaus doffing his vagabond's disguise and reclaiming, through his resourceful wife, his fame. However, Helen's deceptive *logos* (1055) in effect further reinforces the passivity of her husband and the apparent power.[42]

Reflecting on Euripides' play, it is important to keep in mind that the Helen in Egypt (or, from some perspectives, the "real Helen"[43]), apart from not having bedded a barbarian (i.e., the Trojan Paris or the Egyptian Theoklymenos), shares all of the characteristics of the *eidolon* of herself in Troy. Thus, she is beautiful, able to attract men, and persuasive, combining active characteristics (it is she who creates the plan to escape from Egypt) and passivity (her body continues to be an object of exchange).[44] Interestingly, in her pleading to Theonoe, she is conscious not only of these characteristics but also of how to use them in order to save the life of Menelaus. In her exchanges with the sister and brother Theonoe and Theoklymenos, she deploys distinct forms of persuasion based on the polyvalent concept of *charis*, one sense of which can be translated as "beauty" or "charm."[45] With Theonoe, Helen speaks of *charis* in relation to the concepts of piety (*Helen*, 901-2), justice, and reputation (940-1). With Theoklymenos – to whom Helen promises herself in marriage after having performed a funeral for her missing husband – on the other hand, Helen uses *charis* principally in the sense of charm.

I observed at the beginning of this paper that Renoir's film is not an adaptation of Euripides' *Helen*, but comparison of the tragedy and the film, in relation to both the characters and the plot, seems to me not only justifiable but illuminating. Beyond the explicit references to

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[42] On the peculiarity of Menelaus, see also Olson (1989), Edmunds (2015) and Kyriakou (2016).

[43] For instance, Segal (1971).

[44] On *kallos* (noum) and *kalos* (adj.) for men, women and things, see Konstan (2014), chapter 2 and 3.

[45] Helen has already spoken of her gratitude to Persephone at the beginning of the play, in case the goddess should hear her *threnos*. However, beyond the use of this idea in relation to Theonoe (*Helen*, 902, 940), it is most apparent during the funeral scene (1234, 1254, 1281, 1374, 1378, 1397, 1402, 1411, 1420, 1449).

Venus and beauty in connection to Renoir's protagonist, the adaptation of another Helen (Wise's) to the screen – and, among directors and producers, emulation is to be expected – there is a question that, even if unanswerable, provides a basis for speculation about possible influence. Thus it is, perhaps, not a coincidence that, five years before shooting began on *Elena et les hommes* (on December 1, 1955, being completed on March 17, 1956), an authoritative French edition of *Helen* was published by Les Belles Lettres, in the preface to which Henri Grégoire (1950, p. 23; see note 18) makes reference to Norman Angell's novel *The Grand Illusion*, the source of Renoir's title for his renowned 1937 film. Renoir, himself a writer, was aware of this new French edition. This sequence of events, I suggest, supports my argument, though, again, I am not proposing that Euripides' Helen represents the primary source material *Elena*. Accordingly, in support of my comparative approach, I list here some further similarities that may catch attract the notice of attentive viewers and that justify describing the film as, if not an adaptation in the most common sense of the word, more than passingly similar to the story of the Trojan Paris. This perspective fosters a dialogue between past and present regarding the power of *eros* and *eris*.

To begin with, Elena is a foreigner, a Pole among French, in like manner as Helen is a Greek among Trojans. Also, her seductive power, symbolised by the daisy/charm, is equivalent to that of Euripides' Helen.[46] Further, though outwardly innocent and naive, both Renoir's and Euripides' Helens are perceptive strategists. Thus, Renoir's understands that she is being used as a means to the power that Rollan desires and that the other men are attempting to manipulate her; and it is she who convinces Rollan to issue an ultimatum to resolve a diplomatic incident between Germany and France. In addition, Helen's name is associated with war, power, and duels between powerful men. Particularly interesting in this regard is the scene in which the count duels with an aristocrat who opposes the general whom Elena praised. The aristocrat ultimately admits that it was not for Rollan (who is Henri's friend) that the count engaged in the duel but for Elena.

[46] This power is suggestive of the expertise that Helen demonstrates in the *Odyssey* (IV, 220-8) in the use of *pharmaka* that she acquired in Egypt and in Gorgias' (14) analogy between *logos* and *pharmakon*, on which see Coelho (2009).

A similarity that merits a little closer attention is the criticism of superstition and fortune-tellers in both the play and the film. In a revealing scene in the latter, the gypsy Miarka (Juliette Gréco) offers to read the palms of three of the principal characters involved in plotting the coup with Rollan, and each, despite being a serious politician, naively allows himself to believe in the irrational ritual. In the play, Theonoe is an example of the unreliability of oracles and fortune-tellers, for, though she is said to uphold justice and tell only the truth, she nevertheless lies to her brother in order to help Helen escape. Menelaus and Helen, for their part, fear Theonoe's supernatural powers. In the end, Miarka, despite singing of love, finds herself alone, as does the wealthy industrialist Michaud, their situations in this regard echoing those of Theonoe and Theoklymenos.[47]

Regarding structure, both works feature domestic scenes, disguise, mistaken identity, a happy ending, and a degree of self-reflexivity (the use of which in the film earned high praise from Godard[48]). Rollan and Henri both bear similarities to Menelaus and Paris. sometimes playing

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[47] On Miarka, it is worthy quoting Rohmer (1956, p. 38) : "Pourquoi notre blonde et claire Vénus a-t-elle besoin pour être adorée et révélée à elle-même d'une prêtresse noire précédée d'enfants tristes au visage barbouillé qui évoquent les rites de quelque franc-maçonnerie moins ouverte aux "lumières" que celle de la Flûte Enchantée?". On Helen represented as blonde in cinema and literature, see Maguire (2009, p. 214), Vivante (2013, p. 26) and Nikoloutsous (2016).

[48] *Cahiers du Cinéma* (1957, p. 78), where we read Godard typical entusiatic commentary: "Et si *Elena et les hommes* est "le" film français par excellence, c'est parce qu'il est le film le plus intelligent du monde. L'art en même temps que la théorie de l'art. La beauté en même temps que le secret de la beauté. Le cinéma en même temps que l'explication du cinéma. Notre belle Elena n'est qu'une muse de dé partement. Sans doute. Mais à la recherche de l'absolu. Car en filmant Vénus parmi les hommes, Renoir, pendant une heure trente, superpose le point de vue de l'Olympe à celui des mortels. Devant nos yeüx, la métamorphose des Dieux cesse d'être un slogan de bazar pour devenir un spectacle d'un comique déchirant. [...] Voilà l'étrange et dure morale de ce fabliau moderne déguisé en opéra-bouffe.[...] Et jamais non plus un film n'a été plus logique" An English version can be read in Truffaut (1992, p. 287). In 1963, Godard brought a highly self-reflexive adaptation of the *Odyssey* based on the 1956 novel *Contempt* by Alberto Moravia to the screen featuring a Penelope with quite a bit of Helen in her characterization.

the role of a weak general sometimes that of a lover.[49] They are stripped of any public heroic value, however, and show that what is inside a military uniform is unimportant, as illusory as Helen's *eidolon*. With respect to the strategy of duplication as a kind of reinforcement, Hector and Eugene, the suitors of Lolotte, can be viewed as further emphasis on the themes of the male characters' duplicity and of their greater interest in private affairs than military matters (another example of duplication is the role of Teucer who, arriving in Egypt, demonstrates how difficult it will be for Menelaus to recognize Helen[50]).

Arguably, in Renoir's version, the tragic tone is inverted in that Elena helps rather than hurts the men with whom she is involved (as she alleges in the prologue to Euripides' play that, because of her beauty, she destroyed so many and so much; *Helen*, 51-60).[51] Nevertheless, considering that the film brings together historical and fictional characters in a criticism of military and political ambitions, operating with elements of fable and farce, with its humorous effect, the positive characterization of Helen is not inappropriate.[52] Moreover, regarding the theme of illusion and false appearances, the references in the film to performance and the production of false beliefs are quite clear, as the following discussion shows.

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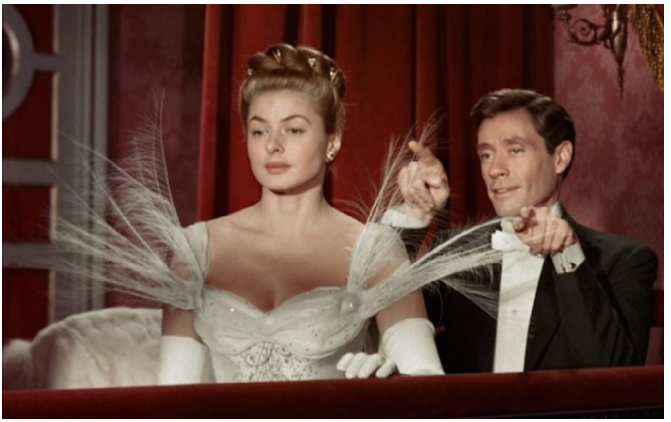
[49] In the last sequence of the film, Henry explains to Elena that in France, where love is so important, the danger of politics and power could never be serious – incidentally, a scene criticized by Bazin as "extremely weak" – see Truffaut (1978, p. 138) –, but which can be revalued in the light of new approaches, like my one, to the film.

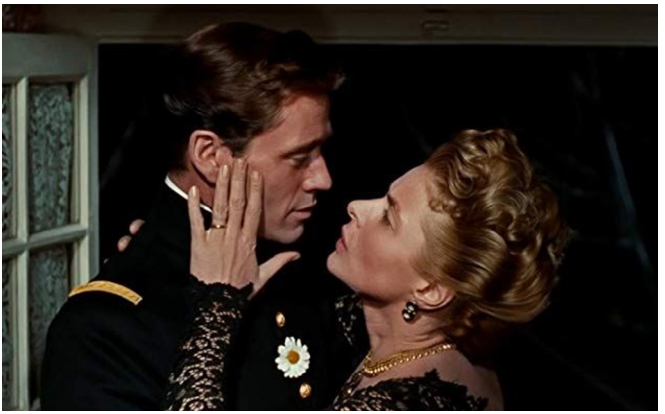
[50] See Segal (1971).

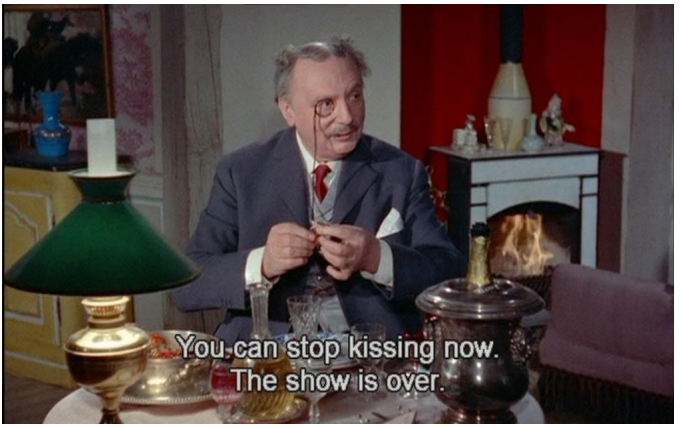
[51] It goes without saying that even in Greek literature we can attest that the war and strives are not seen by her fault, but produced by the gods, as Priam affirms (*Iliad* III, 164-5), and in the same book we testimony how Helen is under choleric Aphrodite pressure (414-421). And even authors who do not deal with divine interference argue that Helen, like anyone, can be moved by persuasion, making any categorical judgement difficult.

[52] Another comic version of the story is the (now fragmentary) 1927 film *The Private Life of Helen of Troy* by Alexander Korda, which was based on a novel of the same name by John Erskine that is not comic; see Coelho (2013). However, a comparison of Korda´s and Renoir´s films is a good example of how the general category of "comedy" can be misleading (because polysemous). On another important Helen in the same decade, Manfred Noa´s epic *Helena*, *Der Untergang Trojas* (1924), a German epic of 3h39, see Coelho (2011).

Figures 10, 11 and 12 – Illusion and reality in performance: Elena, the Count, and the former fiancée.







All of the political and private confusion, in which love, strife, and power intermingle, is on view (with conventions of theatre represented in filmic terms) at the respectable Château de Maisonvilliers, where Elena is living with her fiancée, Martin-Michaud, and – in the denouement – at the *maison close* in the countryside, under the management of Madame Rosa (Dora Doll) and through the decisive interference of Elena.[53] General Rollan, seeking to trick his enemies and escape, disguises himself as a gypsy, while Elena falls into the arms of Count Henri, who is dressed in the clothes of the general.[54] These developments take place under the gaze of the man who was once Elena's prospective husband as well as the gypsy Miarka, who sings a moving love song (written by Renoir) but herself ends up alone. The significance of the participation of these two characters, from the perspective of the present study, is that their functions and characteristics are analogous to those of Theoklymenos and his sister Theonoe in Euripides' tragedy. Thus, Miarka also participates in General Rollan's escape plan with his former sweetheart, Paulette (Élina Labourdette), and everything plays out as a game of appearances and disguise in front of figures who, at a distance, think that they are seeing one character when in fact they are seeing another.

Lastly, I offer a note on Elena's power. She thinks she has power (the sign of which is the daisy); as Faulkner observed (2004), she

> tries to take control – of the narrative, of her life – to exercise power, even, but who is ultimately deceived by men. Like Christine in [Renoir's 1939 film] *Rules*, Elena attempts to become the subject of the narrative instead of

[53] As Faukner (2004) observed, "the private and public spheres as personal feelings collide with national interests. In *Elena*, this tension is first of all between Elena's private, domestic, and feminine interior, in which we see her seated at the piano; and the public, masculine world of Rollan, with its martial music and delirious crowds. However, we quickly learn that Elena aims at public influence, while the General is distracted by affairs of the heart."

[54] This stratagem appears in Homer, though it yields unwelcome results, as when Nestor suggests that Patroklos appeared in Achilles' armour, which he agrees to do (in *Iliad* XI and XVI), but in the film the connection to the scene in Euripides' *Helen* is conspicuous.

> its more conventional object. In *The Rules of the Game*, the deception of the heroine ends in tragedy; in *Elena and Her Men*, a moonlit farce ends in a brothel! *Elena and Her Men* is *The Rules of the Game* in a different key. [...] However, because the film concludes with its lovers, Henri and Elena, impersonating General Rollan and his mistress at the brothel window before the crowd below (returning at its close to the tension between the private and the public), the point is made that a woman can only find (provisional) power within representation, on a stage, playing a part. At the end of the film, as *coup d'état* dissolves into *coup de théâtre*, the suggestion is that all effective power is actually a function of performance.

In relation to the political ambitions of the men who fight for Helen and all of the private and political games that they play, the comments of other directors are revealing, indicating that, though Renoir called his film a comedy, the genre did not impose a straightjacket on it. François Truffaut highlighted the connection between the film and the war in Algeria, describing the film was realistic and, at the same time, a fairytale: "Elena tells the truth about the princes that rule us," but the general presented by Renoir has at least two advantages in that "he prefers women to war and also makes us laugh."[55] It should also be kept in mind that Renoir made the film at a time when General de Gaulle was being asked to return to politics and lead France. Another great filmmaker known for bringing philosophical discussions into the theatre, Eric Rohmer (1956), adduced Diogenes and Epicurus in his

[55] Truffaut (1978, p. 45), here I am quoting the English translation of the French edition released in 1975. "To answer those who argue that Renoir's last films are too far removed from the realities of the world we live in, I shall sum up *Elena et les hommes*: On the eve of the Great War, Bastille Day is being celebrated by a crowd wild with enthusiasm for a certain General Rollan. After a stupid diplomatic incident has created a war mentality, the general's entourage tries to take advantage of the occasion to overthrow the government. In the streets the people are singing, "And thus has destiny placed him on our path...." Two years after Elena was released, de Gaulle pronounced his famous "I have understood you," referring to the Algerian agitation being carried out by his partisans. So it is true, you see, there is always a general somewhere."

evaluation of the film, affirming, based on their apolitical "règle de vie" that appearances are deceptive in *Elena* because Renoir, condemning the marionette General Rollan and presenting the heroine in a positive light, unmasks the truths behind the great lies and the animal behind the cutaway coat morning suit and military uniform (ROHMER, 1956, p. 38-39). Rohmer, regarding the form, also observed that, in this comedy, small gestures serve to communicate grand themes, such as war, even when it comes to the film's cinematic language:

> watching the film one has the impression that long shots predominate, however, a careful analysis reveals that what predominates are the detailed shots, because Renoir moderated his compositions so well that we are under the illusion that we see these characters from a distance, when, in fact, they are very close to us (ROHMER, 1956, p. 40).

Observation of the themes of war, love, and courage as they are treated in the film prompts reflection on this transformation of the story of Helen/Elena and, specifically, how Renoir makes men revolve around her.[56] The presentation of the epic and tragic male hero in new clothes and in more fragile and humanized tones is not entirely derogatory, for, in this way, Euripides and Renoir, in their pacifist works, denounced illusions in various aspects of human life through tragedy with comic undertones and comedy with tragic undertones, respectively.[57] Further, each work, precisely because of its fictional nature, reflects on and criticizes the motives for sending men to war in the name of patriotism, thus contributing to the discussion of traditional models of manhood and heroism. Moreover, even if this film was far from being condemned "cinematographic enemy number one," as Joseph Goebbels condemned

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[56] Though the stories do not seem likely contexts for expressing the harsh reality of war or the happy union of a couple after so many stumbling blocks, Renoir (1974, p. 248), answering his critics in his book *Ma vie et mes films*, in a chapter entitled "The artificial triumph of the interior truth," declared that "what is not verisimilitude can be more truthful because, sometimes, the truth is not likely".

[57] As Faulkner (1986, p. 110) argued, *La Règle du Jeu* is, at the same time, a comedy, a slapstick farce, and a tragedy with a conscious "resistance to a ready-made structure".

The Grand Illusion,[58] a *paignion* can still offer serious commentary, as Gorgias showed in his *Encomium*. Thus the renowned Brazilian critic Paulo Emilio Salles Gomes[59] (2015) commented in 1958 that, in this "divertimento," the final sequence of love spreading through the gardens of Madame Rosa's house represents a "sincere lesson in life that Renoir gave to his contemporaries."[60]

I hope that my comparison of this film to Euripides' *Helen* has kindled in readers the desire to (re)read and (re)watch these works. Finally, regarding my interpretation, I appeal to the sagacious words of Octave (a character played by Renoir himself) in *The Rules of the Game*: "You see, in this world, there is one awful thing, and that is that everyone has his reasons."

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[58] The Fascists banned the film in Italy; see Truffaut (1992), p. 248-9.

[59] The Brazilian writer and critic lived in exile for many years in France, where he published what remains one of the most important studies of Jean Vigo. In Brazil, besides his work as critic, he wrote the short novel *Duas vezes com Helena*; see Coelho (2010a; 2017).

[60] Noteworthy here is André Bazin's (1929) comparison of the final scene in an earlier comedy about army life, *Tirer au flanc* with this film: "As for themes, note the 'Cytherian' ending, which foreshadows the triumph of love in *Paris does Strange Things"* (quoted in Truffaut, 1992, p. 218).

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