An Archive of the (Political) Unconscious

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Abstract: This paper proffers two parallel and related lines of inquiry: (1) it considers the Federal Bureau of Investigation as a paradigm of all archives and, in that light, (2) it examines the meaning of the citations to Jean Renoir in numerous FBI files released under the U.S. Freedom of Information Act. These files provide the evidence of a heretofore ignored political activism on Renoir’s part in the United States during the 1940s that must lead us to rethink critical and historical assumptions about his film work during his American period and immediately thereafter.

Résumé: Cet article propose deux pistes de recherche parallèles et apparentées : (1) il présente le Federal Bureau of Investigation en tant qu’exemple paradigmatic du fonds d’archives et en ce sens, (2) il examine le sens des références à Jean Renoir dans de nombreux dossiers du FBI rendus publics en vertu de la loi américaine sur l’accès à l’information. Ces dossiers indiquent que contrairement à la croyance jusqu’ici admise, le cinéaste était politiquement engagé aux États-Unis durant les années 1940. Cette nouvelle information impose une réévaluation des présupposés critiques et historiques guidant l’interprétation de son œuvre durant son séjour aux États-Unis et par la suite.

“The theory of psychoanalysis, then, becomes a theory of the archive and not only a theory of memory” (Derrida, 1996, p. 19).

This paper has two objectives. It is first of all about a certain kind of unintended archive or, let us say, a certain institution which I shall choose to think of as an archive, an institution which seems to me paradigmatic of all archives. It is paradigmatic because an analysis of its practices must rely upon the insights included by psychoanalysis, which, as Derrida insists, “aspires to be a general science of the archive, of everything that can happen to the economy of memory and to its substrates, traces, documents, in their supposedly psychical or technoprothetic forms …” (Derrida, 1996, p. 34). Not only is the unconscious (obviously) an archive, in other words, archives can (obviously) be said to function like the unconscious. I hope this relationship between the one and the other will prove to be something more than a conceit.

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In the simplest terms, the purpose of the archive, any archive, like the unconscious itself, is to serve as an operating system for both remembering and forgetting. Forgetting, as we are often reminded, is the verso of remembering, of archiving. Forgetting is that equal and relational activity to which memory is bound—as the leaves of manuscripts, incunabula, books are tightly bound; but also bound in the sense of a direction or destination which tends—and which thus enables it. What I am trying to get at is that the deposits of an archive should not be thought of as merely existing, in a passive state; they are always already meaningful by virtue of their dynamic relation with that which has had to be forgotten. Remembering or saving, and forgetting or discarding, are active movements, mental or physical, that belong to the economy of the archive, in either its “psychical or technoprosthetic” forms.

In that economy of hoarding and expenditure lies the ethical-political function of the archive. Of course, it can only serve that function when we act to excavate it, when we activate its meanings. The archaeological work we do will force us to consider the uses of the past and the necessities we might want it to serve. In this paper, I want to activate some of the meanings of my unintended archive as a formal system, and thereby speak to its ethical and political function, as well as analyze the specific content of what it remembers. Not surprisingly, it will prove to be difficult to do justice to the analysis if one does not reflect on the workings of the system.

My interests are in what I would broadly call the social function of cinema. To that end, a lot of my work—books, articles—has been devoted to French cinema of the 1930s and more particularly to the career of Jean Renoir (1894-1979), who directed some 40 films over 45 years in France, the United States, Italy, and India. My research has been largely historical and critical and has depended significantly on archival resources in Paris, Los Angeles, New York, London, and Montreal. This research continues, albeit somewhat obsessively (as years have passed, I find that I have actually written twice about two of Renoir’s films). What I want to address here is a new research undertaking, research that is still in progress, around Renoir’s American career and the wartime and postwar French émigré community in the United States. My second objective in this paper, therefore, will be to claim that the unexpected rewards of an unintended archive must completely rearrange our thinking of what Renoir was up to personally and professionally in the United States.

About ten years ago I had the inspired idea of writing to the Federal Bureau of Investigation to inquire whether their multitudinous files included a dossier on Jean Renoir. This was an idea that ran contrary to all expectations because I am not an American citizen and I did not know whether I had the right to request the release of documents under the U.S. Freedom of Information Act. Two years passed—and I had long forgotten my initial inquiry—before I received a response from the FBI. The response came in the form of a large, brown envelope with a discreetly marked return address. (This felt a little like being invited to partake of a guilty pleasure.) An accompanying letter advised me that the FBI did
not have a main file on Jean Renoir, but did have 95 cross-references to Renoir in files on other subjects. Twenty cross-references, amounting to some 83 pages, were in the present envelope. I was advised that 75 cross-references were currently unavailable for review and were to be placed on something called “special locate” before being released. In brief, I could expect more material. The 80 pages of documentation I had in hand were already tantalizing. As I suggested above, part of what I want to do is to explain how this (FBI) archive works—or better, because more active in design—explain how it can be made to work, how it can be made to do work, and in relation to my subject, Jean Renoir.

II

On December 31, 1940, when Renoir landed at New York in full flight from Vichy and Occupied France, he was one among a stream of refugees, German mostly, but French too, and Austrian, Hungarian, Czech, and so on, refugees with very considerable artistic and/or intellectual attainments, who sought sanctuary from European fascism in the United States. Because of their politics (radical, Communist; liberal, socialist) or their heritage (often Jewish), or both, many of these refugees were distressed exiles from their homelands, not just relieved immigrants to a new found land. Their cultural or professional identities and their political identities were not things apart, whether these men and women were novelists, playwrights, film directors, academics, poets, painters, musicians, research scientists, or what have you. If they brought their talents with them to America and continued to practice their professions, they necessarily brought their various (mostly left-wing) politics and continued the old arguments on new shores. Two things followed from this European tradition of the inseparability of professional from political or social life. The first was that many of these émigrés (predictably) became involved in social or political causes in America. Occasionally these were American causes (Scottsboro and anti-lynching, the Sleepy Lagoon case and minority rights), more often they were European causes (relief for Republican Spain or Mother Russia, various anti-Nazi organizations). The inevitable corollary to these sorts of commitment was the pall of suspicion cast over many of them by certain investigative bodies during the first years of the Cold War as to their involvement in so-called “subversive” activities. To have had a political past in Europe (“premature anti-fascism” [Ceplair & Englund, 1980, p. 55]) or to have been active in liberal, social causes in the United States (with alleged communist front organizations) did not help one’s chances of eluding investigation.

In a frustrated effort at making his way in the Hollywood film industry, Renoir made five commercial features in the United States between 1941 and 1947. Only one of these films alludes specifically to political events. This Land Is Mine (1943) is a melodramatic tale of Occupation and Resistance in which a location “Somewhere in Europe” is a thin screen for collaborationist France. The film does inveigh against a number of policies and practices synonymous with Vichy, such as anti-Semitism, the break-up of unions, and the suppression of women’s rights. Apart from this film, Renoir struggled rather unsuccessfully with and against the conventions of the American genre system until he went off to India in
1949-50 to make *The River*, thereby opening up his return to Europe in the 1950s and a new career as a postnational filmmaker.

In the 1930s, however, in France, Renoir’s name was synonymous with the popular causes of the decade, with workers’ rights and anti-fascism. At the time of the Popular Front he was French cinema’s most celebrated man of the left. He directed the anarcho-syndicalist political comedy, *Le Crime de M. Lange* in 1935, made a film for the French Communist Party in 1936, *La Vie est à nous*, and wrote regularly and widely for Party papers and journals in the latter half of the decade. (He even stood as godfather to the son of Maurice Thorez, the Party’s Secretary-General). At the end of the decade, at the time of the release of *La Grande illusion* (1937), *La Bête humaine* (1938), and *La Règle du jeu* (1939), Renoir was consistently excoriated by his enemies on the right as “politically of the same persuasion as the Judeo-democratic lineage of Zola” (Vinneuil, 1988, p. 256). In short, when Jean Renoir disembarked at New York on December 31, 1940, he came ashore carrying a great deal of political baggage not easily disposed of. In other words, there was every reason to think he might have been put on file by the FBI and that he might have had to deal with the consequences.

Congressional interest in American Communists in the arts, their fellow travellers, and foreign associates dates from the formation of the first House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) in 1938. The Dies Committee, as it was then known, actually cited Renoir because of two articles that he had written in France for the Communist youth magazine, *Les Cahiers de la jeunesse*, in February and July 1938 (“Hearings Before a Special Committee …,” 1938). But it was the prospect of the Cold War that brought about that period of political-juridical and extra-juridical notoriety with which we are most generally familiar, and whose repercussions continue to make the news these fifty-odd years later. The death of Roosevelt in April 1945 spelled the end of progressivist legislation and a progressivist climate in the public realm. (Renoir: “I love Mr. Roosevelt …” [in Thompson & LoBianco, 1994, p. 128]). With the Truman Doctrine of 1946 and the desire to limit the sphere of Soviet influence, the Cold War began in earnest. This was the period of the renewed application of the *Smith Alien Registration Act*, the introduction of the Taft-Hartley Bill in 1947 and various other loyalty oaths, the investigation of the Hollywood Ten of 1947, the McCarran *Internal Security Act* of 1950, Joseph McCarthy’s red-baiting tactics and the ensuing witch-hunts, and the second round of House Committee hearings on Hollywood between 1951 and 1953. All of these public institutions of inquiry and regulation relied, of course, on the secret investigations of the FBI for their (mis)information.

There were those among Renoir’s close friends and co-workers in the United States, both American citizens and foreign nationals, whose personal liberties and professional careers were directly affected by this postwar regime of discipline and punishment represented by bodies like the House Committee on Un-American Activities. Bertolt Brecht, whom Renoir had known since the early 1930s and with whom he socialized in Hollywood, was the “eleventh” of the Hollywood Ten, and fled the day after his HUAC hearing on October 30, 1947. The composer,
Hanns Eisler, who wrote the music for Renoir’s *The Woman on the Beach* (1947), was denounced by his sister, Ruth Fischer, and after a year-long investigation “voluntarily” deported to East Germany in February 1948. Irving Pichel, one of the original “nineteen” subpoenaed in 1947, a member of the Hollywood Democratic Committee and a signatory of the famous “Open Letter” in the *Hollywood Reporter* in October 1947, was the dialogue director on *Swamp Water* (1941), Renoir’s first American film. Renoir had an enduring friendship and planned numerous projects with Clifford Odets, who confessed his Communist Party membership and named names to the House Committee on Un-American Activities in May 1952. The blacklisted Hugo Butler, a Communist and twice Vice-President of the Screen Writer’s Guild, who went underground to avoid a hearing, was the writer on Renoir’s belated New Deal-influenced *The Southerner* in 1945, as well as for two films by the blacklisted director John Berry. (His partner, Jean Rouverol, has just published an account of their 12-year exile in Mexico.) Additional research will bring to light more friends and co-workers who suffered similar fates.2

In the 1940s, Renoir was a frequent visitor to the homes of members of the German émigré community in Santa Monica and to Sunday afternoons at Salka Viertel’s where everyone talked “film and politics.” Here one could find her husband Berthold, along with Lion Feuchtwanger, Hanns Eisler, the brothers Thomas and Heinrich Mann, Arnold Schoenberg, Emil Ludwig, Bruno Frank, Franz Werfel, and Alma Mahler, among others. A handful of British émigrés and sympathetic American friends also attended (Viertel, 1969, p. 259). At this time, Renoir spoke German almost as fluently as he spoke French, and certainly a great deal better than he spoke English. Many among this crowd had honourable left-wing credentials, and many among this crowd—little did they know it at the time (or do they know it to this day?)—were under more or less constant surveillance by the FBI.3

In other words, there is no question that Renoir had a close and ongoing personal and professional relationship with the kinds of people, both foreigners and U.S. nationals, who were actively trying to change the course of European and American political and social history. But it is important to remember one crucial fact: film criticism and film history have always reliably reported that in the United States Renoir was not involved in politics. Renoir seems to have made this disavowal of political life clear himself by his complete silence on the matter in his autobiography, *My Life and My Films*, published in 1974, many years after the period in question. Was Renoir’s disavowal of his involvement in politics in the United States a matter of forgetfulness? Or, to open a different meaning, did he choose to reject from *My Life and My Films* the inclusion of any memory that he was involved?

Célia Bertin, Renoir’s biographer, has insisted that “In California, Jean Renoir was careful to stay away from political activity of any kind. He wasn’t even tempted to indulge during the war …. Accordingly, no one even dreamed of adding Jean’s name to those of suspected Communists” (Bertin, 1991, p. 273).
Certainly, Renoir was never denounced to HUAC, and he had not done anything especially reprehensible in the United States. However, if HUAC was primarily interested in certifiable Communist Party members during the two stages of the hearings into Hollywood, in 1947 and again from 1951 to 1953, there were other agencies interested in fellow travellers, progressives, and liberals who belonged to alleged CPUSA cultural front organizations or organizations with international connections. And it appears that on this score, Renoir was more than a little worried about something in 1947-48. When his son Alain was a student at the University of California, Santa Barbara—“his hair and his political opinions—the one as red as the other,” as Renoir said to Robert Flaherty at the end of 1946 (in Thompson & LoBianco, 1994, p. 201)—Renoir wrote with concern to his son:

Don’t go and get yourself kicked out. That would really be a shame, after all the trouble you’ve taken to learn. On another front, a little scandal in my family wouldn’t help my own business. Hollywood movie people are even more conservative than the suburban middle class in Paris. The latest thing is that Hanns Eisler is being insulted in the papers because he’s a foreigner and, it seems, a Communist. The same thing could happen to me, even though I stay away from politics, not out of fear, but from boredom. There’s nothing more boring than an American Communist. (in Bertin, 1991, pp. 234-235)

That Renoir wished to distance himself from “boring” American Communists is not altogether surprising. Many liberals who espoused reformist causes, people like Philip Dunne and Melvyn Douglas, for example, were determinedly anti-Communist, especially after the end of the war, when the CPUSA returned to a Stalinist hard-line. Guilt by association, however, was a very real force. And certainly Renoir had reason to worry. The American papers were preoccupied with the Eisler affair for an entire year, beginning in February 1947, through Eisler’s HUAC testimony in May, right up to the moment of his “voluntary” deportation from the United States on February 16, 1948. The Eisler affair actually extended before and after the furor that broke out around the Hollywood Ten between September and December 1947, which suggests that the course and outcome of the two investigations (one into domestic communism, the other into a foreign communist presence) were deliberately interrelated (at the very least with a thought to the publicity value that each would accrue for the other). Following his work for Losey, Lang, Odets, and Chaplin, Eisler finished the music for Renoir’s The Woman on the Beach, his last American film, just months before he was subpoenaed.

III

Sixteen months went by after the receipt of my first package before I received my next (similarly plain) brown paper envelope from the FBI, this time with another 40 cross-referenced files amounting to 105 pages. Fifteen months after that, 7 more pages came from the Department of State, followed by 3 pages from the Department of the Navy six months later, and finally 32 cross-references or 63 pages again from the FBI more than three years further on. That was in 1998. I have been promised three outstanding cross-referenced files. I am still waiting.
After 10 years and a total of 261 pages of material, this is an archive whose intermittent rewards require that one exhibit a monastic patience.

What are the rewards? What does the material look like? See Figure 1. There are numerous pages (no less helpful!) just like Figure 1. On the one hand, with the FBI one has reached the limit-case of archival scrupulousness. Documentation received under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) comes with a reader’s guide that explains (justifies) the erasures. With FBI material, ongoing concerns about national security still remain paramount.
This ongoing production of secrecy can be seen as a continuation of the Cold War by other means. For the past 50 years that war has been a war waged by agencies of the state against its own citizens as much as it has been a war against foreign powers. Although it may be illegible (not the same thing as unintelligible), the unconscious of an earlier period makes its presence felt in the blacked-out pages of these documents. What has been repressed still awaits its return.

The erasures on the pages of the files signify the very raison d’être of the FBI as an archive. These blackings out testify to its power and authority, to its “hermeneutic right and competence” (Derrida, 1996, p. 2), a right and competence that applies definitionally to all archives. Part of the FBI’s interpretive competence here involves designating certain utterances as unsayable, as to be repressed, and in this very prohibition creating the (political) unconscious of the archive, or rather signifying in this bold way that this archive (like all archives) has an unconscious. At the same time, however—literally, at the same moment—that it blacks out, it unwittingly calls its authority and its hermeneutic competence into question. It undermines itself. The admission that there is the unsayable, the repressed, that there is an unconscious of the archive, makes room for the heterogeneous, the unassimilable, the incommensurable, for the possibility of meanings which are beyond control, which are left over and open. I need hardly underline the political and ethical importance of such a possibility with regard to an institution like the FBI, which is charged with nothing less than the responsibility of securing the meaning of (and for) the nation-state.

There is not space to present a detailed account of the extent to which Renoir was evidently caught up in ongoing FBI surveillance, involving the interception of mail, pursuits by car or on foot, stakeouts on street corners, or conversations in person or on the telephone as recorded by informants, all of which appear in reports filed to the office of J. Edgar Hoover (see Figure 2). One has the impression of a thick cloak and dagger world, populated by secret agents, spies, and informers; in short, all the ingredients of espionage fiction are here. Make no mistake, the world of the documents is constructed, interpretive, and meditative, which is why it invites the language of metafictional analysis (which is also always the discourse of psychoanalysis). The omniscient narrator, one might say, of this constructed world is none other than J. Edgar Hoover himself, Hoover, that hand-washing, germ-obsessed, anti-Semite and homophobe—every “subversive” a pollutant, all of them disease-carrying vermin—of Don DeLillo’s brilliant Underworld, itself a novel about the Niederschriften of the 50 years of the Cold Postwar.

Once so many whispers have been overheard, conversations recorded, meetings, affairs, encounters noted in so many rooms, and the reports submitted that accumulate in the FBI archives—reports that become the archive as they accumulate—what has been confirmed is the evidence of the passage of so many lives from the private to the public sphere, of the now forever inescapable interrelation between the two. Institutional memory has become personalized; private
memory has become publicized. This is a convergence of some importance that needs to be pursued.

However, a first reaction of the disinterested researcher (what disinterested researcher?) might be frustration or disappointment at the incompleteness of the material because of its erasures (both pages blacked out and pages withheld). These FBI documents (familiar enough in their appearance to anyone who has worked with restricted material) immediately raise questions about the limits of
knowledge and the problem of evidence. After all, recognition of the evidence provided by this body of material depends upon the acknowledgement of a lack. What can I hope to know, the inquisitive researcher asks, given what I have to acknowledge is lacking? The documents are incomplete, partial, unsatisfying. What can they tell me? In the files, the blacked out passages (apparently) situate the object of desire, full knowledge, as founded on an absence. “Is not … mass communications defined by its limits, the energy with which it excludes, its censorship?” Barthes once famously said (1977, p. 158). But Barthes’ remark represents a prohibitionist view of the problem of limits.

Let me revise what I just wrote about the incompleteness of these documents. “Incompleteness” supposes the (im-)possibility of completeness. When did a researcher ever think an archive or a set of documents was complete? What does that mean? That can only be a necessary illusion (of coherence) that we may have to tell ourselves, in order to get the job done. If I do not begin to write something, if I wait, always in the expectation of more files, I shall never write anything. The supply of files is, after all, potentially inexhaustible. But it is a necessary illusion for another reason, too, because without a fiction of completeness the security and authority of one’s own subject position is endangered. As Joan Copjec (1999) cleverly argues (in quite a different context), all totalities are, in truth, incomplete, either because they lack something (something is excluded, the prohibitionist view) or because they lack nothing (everything is included). In other words, a surplus makes the formation of a totality as impossible as a deficit. A totality—one can only imagine such a thing—would be a body, any body, which is ordered, coherent, delimited. That is to say, confronted with our archival material, we are always reminded of that which is inaccessible, on the one hand, and of that which exceeds, on the other. Not all meaning(s) can be recovered; there is no secure (in the sense of inviolable, transcendent, omniscient) reading position. Archival research is about compensating for the incommensurable; that is a first condition of the research.

But what of those under investigation? All those secrets that the FBI documents create (yes, create: does the unconscious not create secrets?), all those plots, real and imagined, that they reveal, do they not operate, as has been suggested, at the unstable borders between the public and private, between the individual and the state, and even “between oneself and oneself” (Derrida, 1996, p. 90)? In blurring those borders more than is usual, how could one’s sense of identity not be troubled, how could one not wonder where one’s subjectivity intersects with the authority of the public interest? The other that the suspect under investigation is to the state becomes the other of one’s unconscious to oneself (Kristeva, 1993). Given the “technoprosthetic” and psychic circumstances, one might understandably have a sense of one’s relation as unheimlich, as not at home, so to speak, both with respect to the state and to one’s self. One can therefore understand the difficulty of writing about all of this, about the need to defer writing about all of this, for Renoir, as for so many others.

The question to be begged is not that Renoir should find himself a character in this world of the FBI files. Guilt by association with all those others, who are in
turn guilty by virtue of their associations, has ensured that. It is not within his, or their, power to declare oneself not guilty. The point is that Renoir is indeed a character in this world, but he is not the agent of its narrative. To be under surveillance, to be the object of someone else’s look, attention, knowledge, is to be deprived of agency. The power to drive this narrative history of incrimination and guilt lies somewhere else. To suffer the fate of the guilty object, or to play the part of the bad object (thereby doubling the burden of guilt), as Renoir did by disavowing his political involvement in the United States, is to invite the punishment of having to relinquish one’s agency. This is the punishment that is appropriate to the refusal of recollection, to talking it out, to taking the cure. To have gone to jail for contempt (the fate of the Hollywood Ten), to have been blacklisted (perhaps 300-400 people), or graylisted (how many more hundreds?), were (unmistakably) serious material consequences for having been found guilty. But in themselves they are no substitute for (re-)visiting and making public the archive of the private unconscious.

However, the paradox faced by all these people, including Renoir, is that since power cannot lie with the (not-)guilty, each must assume the position of a guilt-laden, scape-goated figure in order to (re)claim his or her agency. Hence, all those memoirs written by all those who were surveyed and punished (most of the Hollywood Ten, for example), memoirs that continue to appear to the present moment (Gordon, 1999, for example, and Rouvelol, 2000, and even the children of the punished in McGilligan, 1997), the personal archive that has to be searched, recorded, talked out, to (dis)burden oneself with guilt even as one talks. Only in this way can private memory contest the authority of the public record; in this way institutional memory can be altered by personal recollection.

I could say that with this project I am taking on the task of restoring Renoir’s forgotten memory to public history. I have already established that such a project is not just a matter of restoring the facts. No archival work is ever simply that. Perhaps a better explanation of what I am doing would be to say that I am returning (political) agency to Renoir. The repressed that awaits its return in the material of the FBI documents is not just some hidden knowledge; it is also the agency of the actors involved. In being granted agency, Renoir is being permitted to take up a subject position with respect to his political self in America; this period of his life can be entered into the record of the symbolic order. The fact that everyone who is implicated has to write about this period emphasizes first of all the singularity of every experience of that period, but also the specific singularity of every being, of every particular existence altogether. We would have to think of the former as a political move, just as the latter is an ethical move. In so many ways, John Howard Lawson, Dalton Trumbo, Samuel Ornitz, Adrian Scott, and so many others were right to draw a (psychical) analogy between these events, their repercussions, and the excoriation of Jews in Germany after 1933 or the long history of systematic racism in the United States (Kahn, 1948). In fact, that (analogy) was the very condition of any continuing engagement between the FBI, HUAC, the American (too often Republican) right—and its suspects: their heter-
ogeneity, their unassimilability, their otherness. Politically, ethically, the meaning of the files is that they sustain the evidence of the other and of the continuing war with otherness; they therefore keep the potential for political disturbance open. Reading the archive becomes an experience of the uncanny. It will always be an *unheimlich* world, within and without.

IV

What kind of character does Renoir make in this *unheimlich* world of espionage and double-dealing?

The FBI files offer evidence that Renoir was an active participant in the affairs of at least three organizations that were named as “subversive” by the Department of Justice, pursuant to Executive Order No. 9835, issued by Truman in March 1947, because they were alleged to be cultural front organizations for the Communist Party. Witnesses who appeared before HUAC were routinely asked if they had ever been associated with or were ever members of one or more of these three organizations.

Renoir was first of all a supporter of the People’s Educational Association (to which he gave money) from 1943 to 1945. The PEC was an experiment in education for working people that grew out of a 1943 writers’ congress held at UCLA on the theme of “unconscious fascism.” Although it survived until 1948, this organization was condemned in the 1945 Tenney Report (the state of California equivalent of HUAC) because it had been directed by some members of the Hollywood Writers Mobilization, who were also members of the Screen Writers Guild, and of the defunct League of American Writers. (The blacklisted writer Ben Barzman was told that he lost his U.S. passport because he had worked for PEC [Schwartz, 1982]). The People’s Educational Centre in Los Angeles offered courses “in history, in culture, and in the problems of various ethnic groupings within the community, such as blacks, Chicanos, and Jews, in addition to courses in the arts, which included writing workshops …” (Schwartz, 1982, p. 203). Prior affiliation with the League of American Writers (LAW) was in itself condemnable. On April 23, 1943, Renoir delivered an address to the LAW, just a month before the release of *This Land Is Mine*, and many of his remarks about workers’ rights and anti-fascism in that talk are to be found in the dialogue of the film (Faulkner, 1996). According to Larry Ceplair & Steven Englund (1980), among those few groups who really played “crucial” parts in the struggle against fascism, two were the LAW and the Joint Anti-Fascist Refugee Committee (p. 100). To the American right, their anti-fascism was synonymous with pro-communism.

The Joint Anti-Fascist Refugee Committee was frequently cited in the HUAC hearings as an anti-Catholic communist front, “master-minded by Jews” (Schwartz, 1982, p. 239). Along with people like John Garfield, Dorothy Parker, Irving Pichel, Frank Tuttle, and others no less well known or well connected on the left, Renoir was an active member from 1941 through until at least 1948. In fact, he was, for a time, co-director with Dorothy Parker of the motion picture committee, and then Honorary Chairman of the Los Angeles branch in 1946 and 1947. (Before Renoir’s turn as Honorary Chairman of the JAFR, Philip Merivale
had preceded him in the position. In a fortuitous bit of casting, Merivale was the actor who had played the role of Professor Sorel in *This Land Is Mine*, the editor of the pro-worker, anti-fascist underground resistance newspaper who is executed by the Nazis after having been denounced.) The JAFRC was a coalition of groups like the American Committee to Save Refugees, the League of American Writers, and the United Spanish Aid Committee, all of which had previously been cited as subversive by the Dies Committee. To raise money for medical supplies, ambulances, hospitals, orphanages, and the like on behalf of refugees from European fascism, the JAFRC sponsored a number of events in the 1940s with which Renoir’s name (and many another name) is repeatedly linked in the FBI files. One such event infiltrated by FBI informants was a gathering called the “Free People’s Benefit Dinner” at the Beverly Hills Hotel on July 2, 1942. The entire guest list is in the FBI files. A letter written to Burgess Meredith on October 27, 1945, gives every indication that Renoir was actively collecting funds in support of JAFR programs: “The Varsovie Hospital people are hanging on the phone to proclaim their enthusiasm about your name and Paulette’s name printed on the mail paper. I feel the same and hope that we will very soon get the necessary money to help these Spanish Partisans who, in the real beginning of the war, were the first defenders of our liberties” (in Thompson & LoBianco, 1994, pp. 167-168). With this last sentence, Renoir seems to be recalling the defeated anti-fascist Popular Front governments of the 1930s in both France and Spain, causes to which he had willingly devoted his energies in film and print. Later, in March 1948, Renoir was the committee head for a fund-raiser chaired by Edward Dmytryk and attended by Edward Barsky, the national chairman of the JAFRC, who had earlier been cited for contempt of Congress along with 16 other executive members (Schwartz, 1982). The main speeches at this gathering were about the fate of refugees loyal to the Spanish Republic and the subject of “Atomic Energy for Peace.”

The third important, targeted organization with which Renoir was connected in the 1940s was the National Council of American–Soviet Friendship. It was as a member of this group that Renoir made occasional visits to the Soviet Consulate and with Hanns Eisler attended a reception for the Soviet filmmaker, Mikhail Kalatozov (who later directed *I Am Cuba*, 1962), at the Mocambo Cafe in Hollywood on August 12, 1943. (Kalatozov became Soviet Consul in Los Angeles.) On behalf of this group Renoir broadcast an address—still unpublished—to the women of the Soviet Union on March 8, 1944, that begins: “Women of Russia, I send you my best wishes. Although these greetings are coming to you from the United States of America, they are those of a Frenchman, a Frenchman among so many others, who has not forgotten that in Red Square, beside Lenin’s Tomb, there rests a tri-coloured flag, the standard of the Paris Commune” (Renoir, 1944, p. 1).

Renoir’s most important role on behalf of the National Council of American–Soviet Friendship was his membership on the committee of administration for the cinema. His most interesting service on the committee’s behalf, and far and away his most interesting political engagement during this entire period, was his stage direction of a spectacle whose existence has until now been entirely for-
gotten. Renoir took responsibility for mounting an elaborate political rally held at
the Shrine Auditorium in Los Angeles on November 16, 1943, to commemorate
the 10th anniversary of diplomatic relations between the Soviet Union and the
United States. Thanks to the diligence of the FBI, I can report the discovery of a
"new" work by Renoir and reproduce the program of the event (see Figure 3 and
Figure 4).

Figure 3

Chairman

THE HONORABLE J. F. T. O'CONNOR

Narrator

ROBIN SHORT

Staged by JEAN RENOIR . . . . . . . . . . . . Art Direction—EUGENE

THE PROGRAM

Presentation of Flags, with Chief Warrant Officer Rudolph Klenik and the MacArthur Band

The Star Spangled Banner . . . . . . . . . . . . . Anne Fouquier

Walt Whitman's Letter to the Russian People . . . . . . . Walter Huston

The Internationale . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . Sergei Radinsky

Invocation . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . The Rt. Rev. W. Bertrand Stevens

Greetings from Community Leaders

The United Nations Song . . . . . . . . . . . . . Adia Kuznetzoff

The Vice Consul of the U.S.S.R. . . . . . . . . . V. V. Pastoev

Greetings from the Army . . . . . . . . . . . . . Lt. Col. Gerard N. Byrne

Greetings from the Navy . . . . . . . . . . . . . Comdr. Martin Dickinson, U.S.N. (ret.)
Many details about this rally are still wanting, but recognizable among the names on the program is that of Eugene Lourié as the art director, Renoir’s close collaborator since the mid-1930s and the art director on This Land Is Mine. Earl Robinson, the composer of the cantata “Song of a Free People,” was interrogated by HUAC on April 11, 1957, on the subject of this music and about his role on the musicians’ committee of the National Council of American–Soviet Friendship (a question, incidentally, he declined to answer) (Bently, 1971). Another highlight of the rally was the screening of extracts from American and Soviet films. An invitation to the event, found in the Renoir correspondence files at UCLA, reads as follows: “The climax will be a spectacular film presentation, arranged by Jean Renoir, showing the parallelisms between the American and Soviet people at war
and at peace” (Los Angeles Council of American–Soviet Friendship to Renoir, 1943a). There is also an unpublished letter of thanks to Renoir for his contribution to the rally from the Los Angeles office of the Council: “Your ideas, and Mr. Lourié’s, turned what might have been just another stuffy meeting into something which at moments was genuinely exciting—and we are really grateful. I still hope that we can work out your two-screen film idea for a meeting some day. It’s too good an idea to give up” (Los Angeles Council of American–Soviet Friendship to Renoir, 1943b).

There is no question that all of this activity on Renoir’s part in the People’s Educational Association, the League of American Writers, the Joint Anti-Fascist Refugee Committee, and the National Council of American Soviet Friendship qualifies as political. Renoir was a partisan of the Hollywood left during the American Popular Front of the 1940s for the same reasons that he got caught up in the French Popular Front of the 1930s. To many people, the taking of sides did not seem a particularly complicated matter in those days. Against the isolationist politics and cultural nationalism of the American right, against the forces of anti-labour, racism, and anti-Semitism, there was not much doubt about the stand someone of Renoir’s background and convictions would adopt. This is also a way of saying that there is not quite the hiatus or break or rupture between Renoir’s career in France in the 1930s and his career in America in the 1940s that is usually supposed.

The information revealed by the FBI files suggests the necessity for new research on Renoir’s activities in the United States that may encourage us to rethink the meanings of his American films. For example, one could look at This Land Is Mine as a film which is interested in the ethics of naming names before it becomes a fact of American life. Concerned with a right-wing assault against the working class, against women, and against Jews, the film was implicated as subversive in the files of the FBI along with other pro-labour, anti-fascist resistance films from 1943 such as Fritz Lang’s Hangmen Also Die, written by John Wexley from a script by Bertolt Brecht; Hostages, directed by Frank Tuttle from a script by Lester Cole; and Irving Pichel’s The Moon Is Down, from the John Steinbeck story. The point is that This Land Is Mine belongs to a minor genre of films from the early 1940s that engaged a number of left-wing film personnel on a body of related subject-matter and that this is the political and cinematic context within which it should be situated and understood. In the guise of a European story, then, This Land Is Mine is interested in a subject-matter and its dilemmas that may have been nearer to the American consciousness than the French.

Was Renoir “gray-listed” for his films, for his friendships, for his activism? The “graylist” was devised to dispose of liberals and fellow-travellers who were not subpoenaed by HUAC:

The graylists never enjoyed the publicity or effectiveness of the blacklists, but they touched many more people. [A number of reactionary organizations] culled HUAC and Tenney Committee reports, appendices, and hearing transcripts, back issues of the Daily Worker, letterheads of defunct Popular Front
organizations [like the JAFRC], etc., to compile a list of people who could not be accused of ‘communism’ but who had, at one time or another, dallied with liberal politics or causes… No studio was without a full set of these blacklists and graylists; no studio failed to ‘honor’ these judgements from without; no studio was without its ‘executive vice-president in charge of clearance.’ (Ceplair & Englund, 1980, pp. 387-388)

The reactionary organizations which compiled these lists included groups like American Business Consultants, the American Legion, the Wage Earners Committee, and Aware, Inc. Certainly, after Howard Hughes took over RKO in 1948, one cannot imagine Renoir working there again.

In view of the total collapse of his Hollywood career at the end of the 1940s, notwithstanding the commercial and critical failure of The Woman on the Beach, and in view of the prolonged period during which he was without work until the opportunity presented by The River, one might be forgiven for speculating about Renoir’s fate. But the evidence that Renoir was graylisted is not yet conclusive.

There is one more tantalizing detail, however, just to add fuel to the speculation. After the disaster of The Woman on the Beach, Renoir returned to his old dream of an independent production company. Now he wanted to create a company called The Film Group (obviously an homage to the left-wing Group Theater). In a letter to Clifford Odets, dated October 1, 1948, he wrote:

My independent production is a complete failure. After months (I should say years) of useless talks, after having found the private guarantees asked by the bank, the same bank decided to reject my bid for a loan. No money, no pictures. My partners and I are going to have a meeting very soon to decide whether we dissolve the corporation or not. … I don’t feel unhappy. The reason given by the bank is that they act according to the new policy recommended to the Federal Reserve by the Congress. But I believe that even without this contrary circumstance there was a worm in the nut, and that I will some day find a better way to put on the screen one of your works. (in Thompson & LoBianco, 1994, p. 213)

One day we may even find the worm in the nut.

If we are forced to re-map Renoir’s American career in the 1940s, and to re-think the meanings of his American films in light of the knowledge revealed by the FBI files, we will also have to look again at the transition from this decade to the international co-productions and humanist philosophy of the 1950s. The new worldview offered up in The River says a great deal about the psychology of forgetting on the part of many former social activists. Whereas his Popular Front films (both French and American) left room for the agency of individuals and groups in the face of injustice, Renoir’s new, conservative humanism after 1950 depicted worldly problems as cyclical, and personal struggle as pointless. In the face of social violence and personal tragedy, the message of The River is to “consent.” Renoir’s first post-American film (which happens to star Thomas Breen, son of the infamous Joseph Breen of the censorious Production Code Administration), is quite possibly a more profound mea culpa for his past convictions than any public denial or personal repression of his political life could ever be.
Acknowledgments
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Notes
1. A third article for *Les Cahiers de la jeunesse* appeared in December 1938.
2. One of the most coincidental of associations is with the black-listed writers Ben and Norma Barzman. In the 1950s, they uprooted to France where they had a son, Paul, who (by chance?) became Renoir's private secretary in the 1970s.
3. It has been reported that in the first nine years of its existence alone (from 1938 to 1947), HUAC had accumulated files on over one million people whom it claimed were subversive or Un-American (Kahn, 1948).
4. In a letter that he wrote to Dudley Nichols on January 12, 1954, Renoir advised his old friend and colleague that his name had appeared in a report of the Joint Fact-Finding Committee on Un-American Activities of the California Legislature, otherwise known as the Tenney Committee: "probably my 'activity,'" Renoir said, "is the article I wrote about Chaplin's *Monsieur Verdoux* in *The Screen Writers Magazine* [sic] in 1947" (in Thompson & LoBianco, 1994, p. 314). The article was "Chaplin Among the Immortals," which appeared in *Screen Writer* for July 1947, not a good month in a good year, or in a good venue on a good subject, for anyone who might want to keep a low political profile.
5. "There is no political power without control of the archive, if not of memory" (Derrida, 1996, p. 4, note 1).

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