

« *Bête de somme* »* : Reconfiguring Interwar
Masculinity in Jean Renoir's *Toni* (1935)



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* Bête de somme is a term coined by Jules Verne that translates to “beast of burden” in English.

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Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION	
<i>L'ENTRE-DEUX-GUERRES</i> : FRANCE BETWEEN THE WARS	1
CHAPTER ONE	
« <i>CITOYEN RENOIR</i> » : POLITICIZING AN “APOLITICAL” FILM	10
CHAPTER TWO	
<i>L'HOMME NOUVEAU</i> : POLITICIZING MASCULINITY IN <i>TONI</i>	23
CHAPTER THREE	
<i>LE « BON SAUVAGE »</i> : RURAL MASCULINITY IN <i>TONI</i>	38
CONCLUSION	
TECHNOLOGICAL AND CRITICAL RATIONALITY: RENOIR AS MARCUSE	51
BIBLIOGRAPHY	58

INTRODUCTION.

L'entre-deux-guerres : France Between the Wars

“At this terrible hour, great and magnificent, my duty is done ... In the name of the French people, in the name of the Republic of France, I send the salute of France, one and indivisible, to reclaimed Alsace and Lorraine!”

– Georges Clemenceau, November 11, 1918¹

The announcement French Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau (1841-1929) made to the *Assemblée Nationale* brought an end to 1,600 days of relentless warfare on European soil.² That morning, at 11 AM, November 11, 1918, Allied powers had met with the German delegates in a railway car in the Compiègne forest in Picardy to sign an armistice, ending what is now known in France as the Great War. Fifty thousand people gathered at the Place de l'Opéra in Paris, kissing and hugging each other to joyful chants of *La Marseillaise*.³ Yet, with 1.3 million Frenchmen killed in combat and an estimated 4.7 million wounded, France had witnessed a staggering ten percent loss of its active male population. Birthrates had suffered drastically, declining from 709,800 in 1914 to 366,000 in 1916. Around 11,000 square miles of French territory had been decimated, including infrastructure, farmland, and almost a million buildings.⁴ Furthermore, with both industrial and agricultural production operating at an approximate 50 percent loss, the franc lost its status as a stable currency as the country had accrued enormous debt to the United States for the war effort.⁵ France, having achieved victory and an end to the almost interminable four years of bloodshed, now found itself in the ashes of its formerly powerful empire, facing the daunting task of rebirth and regrowth.

And thus began the Interwar period.

¹ Leonard V. Smith, Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, and Annette Becker, *France and the Great War, 1914-1918*, New Approaches to European History 26 (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 158.

² Georges Clemenceau was the Prime Minister of France during the Great War and the leader of the *Parti radical*.

³ Tyler Edward Stovall, *Transnational France: The Modern History of a Universal Nation* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 2015), 275.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 143.

⁵ W. Scott Haine and Frank W. Thackery, *The History of France* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2000), 140.

POST-WAR FRANCE: POLITICS AND ECONOMY IN THE 1920S

As France entered a period of instability and inflation, anxiously awaiting financial reparations from Germany, workers and peasants felt the crushing post-war economic pressure. Heartened by the success of the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia in 1917, many went on strikes in an attempt to get the bourgeoisie to fund the reconstruction of industry and infrastructure.⁶ Alongside the strikes of 1917-1918, which started in the spring of 1917 in the clothing sector and spread to the metalworking factories, the socialist *Section française de l'internationale ouvrière* (SFIO) also saw a dramatic increase in membership between 1918 and 1919 from 36,000 to 133,000.⁷ As a reaction, the *Chambre des députés* passed a piece of legislation regarding collective bargaining (March 25, 1919) and instated an eight-hour workday, leading to the violence of the May Day riots in 1919, where 50,000 people clashed in the streets of Paris.⁸ With the SFIO unable to claim enough seats in the legislature, much less instigate a revolution, the parties of the political right won the November 1919 elections.⁹ In response to the political setbacks and the working-class discontent, a section of the SFIO broke off from the party to follow the Bolsheviks and create the *Parti communiste français* (PCF) in 1920.¹⁰ However, conflicts arose between the socialists and the Communists, and the lack of unification guaranteed that the political right would remain in power throughout the 1920s and the early 1930s.¹¹ The right-wing parties, as part of the coalition of *Le Bloc national*, would comprise of over two-thirds of the new *Assemblée Nationale*, making it the most conservative legislature since 1871.¹²

⁶ *Ibid.*, 144.

⁷ The *Section française de l'internationale ouvrière* (SFIO) was a socialist political party founded in 1905 by Jean Jaurès and Jules Guesdes.

⁸ W. Scott Haine and Frank W. Thackery, 144.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 145.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 146.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 147.

¹² Tyler Stovall, 290.

Despite the political unrest, by 1923 economic production had been restored to its prewar figures, and surpassed them by 1929. France owed much of its growth to a new sector of modern industries such as the manufacturing of automobiles from Citroën and Renault, thanks to influences from the United States.¹³ Mass industrialization transformed the French economy, increasing the demand for unskilled labor. The labor shortage drew in massive numbers of immigrant workers from parts of Europe, such as Italy, Poland, and Spain. Due to the United States' draconian Immigration Act of 1924, which constrained immigration rates to 2% of the already existing populations residing in the United States as per the 1890 census, by 1930 France had become home to the world's largest immigrant population.¹⁴ Paris' status as a cosmopolitan city of culture in the 1920s also inspired an influx of artistic and intellectual figures, including African American writers and musicians (the most famous being Josephine Baker). High culture thrived in Paris during *les années folles*, with the arrival of jazz, Surrealist art and literature, and avant-garde cinema. In rural areas, military damage notwithstanding, farmers had experienced some prosperity during the war due to food scarcity, but instead of industrializing old farming techniques, many of the farms continued to be run by peasant families in the 1920s.¹⁵ Consequently, as the rates of agricultural production were unable to match the increasingly urban population, one-fourth of the food had to be imported. In comparison to other industrialized countries, France's rural population fell much more slowly even though it dropped below 50 percent for the first time.¹⁶

FRANCE IN THE 1930S: THE GREAT DEPRESSION AND THE RISE OF FASCISM

The economic repercussions of the Great Depression, precipitated by the Wall Street crisis in 1929 and compounded by global debts incurred by the Great War, were not felt in

¹³ *Ibid.*, 285.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 287.

¹⁶ W. Scott Haine and Frank W. Thackery, 150.

France until 1931 as the French economy remained mostly insular.¹⁷ In the 1932 legislative elections, the *Parti radical*, a left-to-center political party led by Edouard Herriot (1872-1957), assumed power and attempted to counteract the effects of the global economic spiral.¹⁸ However, the policies enacted worsened conditions overall, leading to a period of instability as several different parties successively took and lost positions of political power.¹⁹

Elsewhere in Europe, the Great Depression challenged the growth of fledgling democracies as a wave of dictatorship swept across the continent, engulfing countries such as Italy, Poland, and Hungary.²⁰ Italy had already assumed a fascist regime under Benito Mussolini (1883-1945) in 1922, and was facing an economic crisis of its own in the 1920s. Germany, on the other hand, experienced the Great Depression just after its own hyperinflation disaster of 1923. As a nation under economic duress, still smarting from the humiliation of the Treaty of Versailles, Germany turned to Adolf Hitler (1889-1945). After being appointed chancellor in January of 1933, within six months Hitler and the Nazis had crushed all of their political opponents, leading to the rise of another powerful authoritarian regime.²¹ Fascistic parties and leagues emerged in France as a result of such international influences and a national discontent with the political system. For example, the *Croix de feu*, or Cross of Fire, was a French fascistic and nationalist league founded by a group of World War I veterans in 1927, most of whom had been awarded the *Croix de guerre 1914-1918*. The *Action française*, a far-right political movement, was founded in conjunction with its eponymous newspaper by Maurice Pujo (1872-1955) and Henri Vaugeois (1864-1916) in 1899 and continued to receive wide support in the 1910s. Both espoused anti-Marxist values and were authoritarian and anti-

¹⁷ Tyler Stovall, 302-303.

¹⁸ Edouard Herriot was the Prime Minister of France in the 1920s and 1930s, serving three times as a member and leader of the *Parti radical*, the same party led by Georges Clemenceau years prior.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 304.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 305.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 306.

Semitic in nature.²² Paramilitary fascist groups led violent demonstrations in the streets, countered by leftist rallies by the Socialists and Communists.²³ By January 1936, the Socialists, Communists, and the Radicals banded together to form a leftist coalition called the *Front Populaire*, commanded by former SFIO leader Léon Blum (1872-1950).²⁴ With the formation of the *Front Populaire*, the working class began to see a glimmer of hope in the country's political and economic situation.

ITALIAN IMMIGRATION INTO RURAL FRANCE

By 1936, France was still a predominantly rural nation, with 47.6 percent of its population in rural areas.²⁵ However, the rural population was steadily decreasing as agriculture declined in the 1930s due to the Great Depression. In the southwest region, Italian immigrants benefited from taking over abandoned farms left by those who migrated to urban spaces.²⁶ In 1926, out of the 760,000 Italians registered in France, 400,000 (53 percent) resided in the Mediterranean area commonly referred to as the Midi.²⁷ Many of those who left their home country did so not necessarily as political refugees against fascism, but rather as workers seeking employment opportunities elsewhere due to Italy's dire economic situation. Italy owed some 2.96 billion dollars to the United States, Great Britain, and France for the war effort, after having already spent 37.3 billion lire on the war itself. Like many other countries, Italy experienced a crisis of hyperinflation where wages suffered as prices increased, and unemployment grew to the point where Italian emigration dramatically swelled from 253,200

²² *Ibid.*

²³ The following chapter will examine the riots and repercussions thereof in detail.

²⁴ Léon Blum was a French politician who would later serve as President of the Provisional Government of France as well as the 76th and 83rd Prime Minister of France.

²⁵ John Bulaitis, "Communism in Rural France: French Agricultural Workers and the Popular Front", *International Library of Historical Studies* 55 (London ; New York : New York: I.B. Tauris ; In the United States of America and Canada distributed by Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 9.

²⁶ Edouard Lynch, "Interwar France and the Rural Exodus: The National Myth in Peril," *Rural History* 21, no. 2 (October 2010): 171.

²⁷ Pierre George, "L'immigration italienne en France de 1920 à 1939: aspects démographiques et sociaux," *Publications de l'École française de Rome* 94, no. 1 (1986): 48.

in 1919 to 641,600 in 1920.²⁸ Seasonal workers, familiar with agricultural labor, would arrive in organized groups, leaving members along the way at certain destinations to try their luck at family farms or join a family member who had successfully installed themselves within a small agricultural enterprise.²⁹

By 1932, the number of foreigners in Marseille alone was 206,647, and Italian community stood at 128,495, accounting for over 62 percent of the population.³⁰ The Marseillaise region attracted Italian migrants due to the shared border of southeastern France and northwestern Italy, among other factors. For example, given the existing Italian community in the area, largely established by seasonal workers who would come and go in response to the demand of labor at the turn of the century, migrants could rely on a population that spoke the same language. Thus, village and family networks allowed for expansion on an already existing framework, easing immigrants into a new way of life with systems of support.³¹ However, during this period of political turmoil in France, immigrants were not immune to expressions of xenophobia. Even before the turn of the twentieth century, Italians faced racial violence at the hands of the French, as famously exemplified by the massacre at Aigues-Mortes in 1893. The bloodshed occurred on the 16th and 17th of August in 1893 when a thousand Frenchmen, armed with rifles and revolvers, attacked 150 Italian immigrant workers, lynching and beating them to death.³² Although the French considered Italians similar in “race”, and therefore easier to assimilate within French society compared to their Slavic or German counterparts, they were still criticized for their perceived “primitivism”.³³ Italians were typified as morally loose,

²⁸ Zara S Steiner, *The Lights That Failed: European International History, 1919-1933* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 318.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 56.

³⁰ Mary Dewhurst Lewis, “The Strangeness of Foreigners: Policing Migration and Nation in Interwar Marseille,” *French Politics, Culture & Society* 20, no. 3 (2002): 88.

³¹ Emile Temime, “Les Italiens dans la région marseillaise pendant l’entre-deux-guerres,” in *Les Italiens en France de 1914 à 1940*. Sous la direction de Pierre Milza (Rome: École française de Rome, 1986), 553.

³² “France Will Have to Answer; Massacre of Italians Interests the Peace Triangle,” *The New York Times*, August 21, 1893.

³³ Ralph Schor, “L’image de l’Italien dans la France de l’entre-deux-guerres,” *Publications de l’École française de Rome* 94, no. 1 (1986): 98.

leading private lives unguided by religion. According to the French, Latin culture promulgated habits of heavy drinking and consorting with “easy women”.³⁴ Stereotypes of delinquency, illiteracy, and lack of proper hygiene were also attributed to Italians, further fueling the French disdain of their “primitive manners”.³⁵ In an attempt to control the Italian population, authorities were three to four times likelier to arrest an Italian than a French citizen for a crime, as Italians were also perceived to be dishonest.³⁶

TONI (1935): AN IMMIGRANT STORY

Based on a true crime event from the Italian immigrant community of Martigues, French *cinéaste* Jean Renoir’s film *Toni* (1935) is a narrative about the rural migrant life in the south of France. Written and produced in 1934, *Toni* features as an important French cultural product of the Interwar period. While less overtly political in nature than some of Renoir’s more widely celebrated films, such as *La Grande illusion* (1937), *La Bête humaine* (1939), or *La Règle du jeu* (1939), *Toni* depicts the everyday life of an Italian immigrant as he fails to make a fulfilling life for himself in France, and dies in the redemption of unrequited love. Jean Renoir, as the political Left’s foremost filmmaker, was himself engaged in French politics, writing and directing films with socially conscious commentary particularly in the mid- to late 1930s. During this era of reconstruction, political parties on the far-right and the far-left extremes of the spectrum emerged with new ideas of how to revitalize masculinity after the Great War’s toll on the active male population in France. Communists and fascists alike promoted the ideal of *L’homme nouveau*, or the new man. This essay will examine the political engagement of Jean Renoir, the idea of *L’homme nouveau* with regards to political ideologies, and the relationship of *Toni*’s male characters with women, modernity, and nature in the film.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 99.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 98.

The first chapter of this study explores the politicization of Jean Renoir's career in the 1930s in relation to *Toni*'s naturalistic dramatization of the quotidian of rural life. The narrative situates the main character, Toni Canova, within the multinational melting pot of Martigues in the Midi, and focuses on him as a character immersed in the milieu of Italian working class immigrants seeking a better life in France. Renoir calls forth instances of racism and xenophobia, making the film one of the first to not only depict immigration, but to do so without demonizing the characters. The documentary-style aesthetic captures the troubles of immigrant life "as-is", and in doing so renders what would otherwise be an apolitical film political.

The second chapter delves into the political ideologies with regard to Communist and fascist ideals of *L'homme nouveau*, and analyzes the opposing instances of masculinity presented by male protagonists in the film. Without overtly labeling one character fascist or the other Communist, the film associates the men with values propagated by the two political extremes. By examining the relationships the male characters have with each other and with women, instances of politically coded virility emerge through careful consideration of the gender dynamics in the film.

The third chapter incorporates gender studies of landscape and nature relative to rural masculinity in *Toni*. Toni figures as a contemporary "bon sauvage", or noble savage, in his affiliation with his natural surroundings. In contrast to fascist virility and its close association with modernity, predicated on mastery of technology and nature, Toni represents the true working-class peasant. As a creature of the forest, he feminizes himself with his harmonious connection to nature, creating a third type of masculinity outside of the urban realm of the proletariat, achieving neither fascist nor Communist virility.

While even a cursory glance at the reconfiguration of gender roles during the Interwar period in France can reveal the general instability of the 1930s, *Toni*'s treatment of various historical, political, and social elements at play weaves together a rich narrative of troubled

masculinities at a time when France, reeling from the massacre of the Great War, was seeking to rebuild its nation and its people. As an instrument of culture, cinema provides a conduit through which people can make sense of their reality. Even in the face of lukewarm reception and lackluster box office receipts, for example, film, as art and as literature, remains a product that withstands the ravages of time. Sitting in a dusty DVD jacket at the *Cinémathèque française*, *Toni* endures to this day as a representation of French culture at a time when political anxieties were running high, faith in institutions in steep decline, and hope in short supply.

CHAPTER ONE.

« *Citoyen Renoir* » : Politicizing an “Apolitical” Film

“[M]an is shaped by the soil that nourishes him, by the living conditions that fashion his body and his mind, and by the countryside that parades before his eyes day in and day out.”

— Jean Renoir³⁷

Situated against the politically charged years of the Interwar period, poetic realism defined French cinema in the 1930s through socially conscious, realist depictions of working-class milieus with often fatalistic storylines. The term itself was coined in 1933, when Jean Paulhan, editor of *La Nouvelle Revue Française*, reviewed Pierre Chenal’s film *La Rue sans nom* (1933), stating, “This film, in my view, inaugurates an entirely new genre in French cinema: poetic realism”.³⁸ Chenal’s film, which relied on location shooting, told the story of a group of forgotten people who live in the streets of suburban Paris. One of many poetic realist films, it figured as part of a movement that came into phase just as France was confronting the sociopolitical and cultural moment of *le Front Populaire* (1936-1938). This cinematic movement, revisited in the 1940s for its “cult” value, featured the works of some of the most recognizable names of classic French cinema — Julien Duvivier (1896-1967), Jean Vigo (1905-1934), Marcel Carné (1906-1996), and Jean Renoir (1894-1979).

JEAN RENOIR’S EARLY CAREER

Born on September 15, 1894, to celebrated Impressionist painter Pierre-Auguste Renoir (1841-1919) and his wife Aline Charigot (1859-1915), Jean Renoir was brought up in a wealthy bourgeois household, spending much of his free time in the south of France countryside in Essoyes and Cagnes-sur-Mer.³⁹ Facing no real financial pressure, Jean and his younger brother

³⁷ Jean Renoir, “Souvenirs”, *Jean Renoir* by André Bazin (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973), 151.

³⁸ Dudley Andrew, *Mists of Regret: Culture and Sensibility in Classic French Film* (Princeton University Press, 1995), 11.

³⁹ Pascal Mérigeau, *Jean Renoir: A Biography*, trans. Bruce Benderson, 2016 (Paris: Flammarion), Loc. 523.

Coco (christened Claude) toyed with the idea of becoming ceramists.⁴⁰ However, living under the artistic shadow of his father proved too daunting, and Jean abandoned the idea in his mid-twenties.⁴¹ After enlisting in the French cavalry corps during World War I, seeking a military career, he sustained a leg injury that required an extended leave from service.⁴² He returned, after the recovery of his gangrenous leg, this time to become a pilot in the air force, where he learned to take photographs of enemy positions.⁴³ After the war, his wife at the time, Andrée - nicknamed Dédée, later known as Catherine Hessling (1900-1979) - was attempting to pursue her dream to become a film star, and Jean, who considered himself more of an entrepreneur than an artist, was seeking a means for her to make films.⁴⁴ In fact, in the words of Jean Renoir himself, “I insist[ed] on the fact that I gave film a try only in the hope of making my wife a star.”⁴⁵ According to one of his biographers Pascal Mérigeau, Renoir found himself in a situation that promoted filmmaking as a potential career, which at the time was the only art form that required a formal investment and arrangement of funds. Yet, just as his father who rejected the term “artist” and preferred “workman-painter”, Renoir detested the word “art” due to its elitism.⁴⁶

During the war, Jean Renoir met a friend who recommended films by a performer named Charlot, or Charlie Chaplin (1889-1977).⁴⁷ Renoir credited Chaplin with the birth of his love of cinema, and watching films like D.W. Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation* (1915) cemented his passion for American cinema in particular. He considered French film to be too “intellectual”,

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, Loc. 1069.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, Loc. 1149.

⁴² Edward Ousselin, “Europe Onscreen: Jean Renoir,” in *The Invention of Europe in French Literature and Film* (New York: Palgrave/Macmillan, 2009), 109.

⁴³ Ronald Bergan, *Jean Renoir: Projections of Paradise* (Overlook Press, 1994), 49-50.

⁴⁴ Pascal Mérigeau, Loc. 1149.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, Loc. 1178.

⁴⁶ Charles Musser, “Social Roles/Political Responsibilities: The Evolving Figure of the Artist in Renoir’s Films, 1928-1939,” in *A Companion to Jean Renoir*, ed. Ginette Vincendeau and Alastair Phillips (Somerset: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2013), 271.

⁴⁷ Ronald Bergan, 53.

and his views were further compounded by what his older brother, Pierre, at the time a relatively well known stage actor, expressed to him:

The cinema doesn't suit us. Our burden of literature and drama is too heavy for us to follow that particular line. We must leave cinema to the Americans. French dramatic art is bourgeois, whereas the American cinema is essentially working class. Between ourselves, I envy my colleagues over there who have that kind of public to work for – Irish or Italian immigrants who scarcely know how to read.⁴⁸

Renoir's gravitation towards a more naturalistic aesthetic combined with a certain level of class consciousness can be seen even in his first forays into cinema. In his first silent film, *Catherine* (1924), starring his wife Dédée (credited as Catherine Hessling), Jean Renoir attempted to guide his muse into a more realistic performance. His direction of *Catherine* resulted in a more "American acting style, more inspired by the observation of nature" as compared to the "far from natural" performances typical of French actors of the time.⁴⁹ His second feature-length film, *Nana* (1926), was adapted from the novel of the same name, published in 1880 by naturalist writer and friend of the family Émile Zola (1840-1902). The novel and subsequent film attacked the upper class haute bourgeoisie society of the Second Empire, and features as an early example of Renoir's social awareness in his work.

Between filming *Boudu sauvé des eaux* (1932) and *Madame Bovary* (1934), Jean Renoir made a trip to Germany to meet with some old friends in the film industry, who relayed to him stories of Nazi brutality. He himself saw members of the Nazi SA (*Sturmabteilung*) forcing an elderly Jewish woman down onto her knees to lick the ground.⁵⁰ According to his biographer Ronald Bergan, after Renoir spied Adolf Hitler (1889-1945) by chance from the back of a Berlin taxi, the event became the impetus for Renoir's greater political awareness.⁵¹ As Renoir himself says in his memoir:

I believed that every honest man owed it to himself to resist Nazism. ... I am a filmmaker, and this was the only way in which I could play a part in the battle. ... I felt at

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 56-57.

⁴⁹ Pascal Mérigeau, Loc. 1237.

⁵⁰ Ronald Bergan, 129.

⁵¹ Ronald Bergan, 130.

ease in their company [leftist militants], enjoying the same popular songs and the same red wine. ... For a short time the French really believed that they could love each other.⁵²

On January 22 1934, the French fascist league *Action Française* and the French Communist Party (*Parti communiste français*, or PCF)⁵³ rioted against police in Paris as a reaction to the suicide of corrupt financier Alexandre Stavisky (1888-1934)⁵⁴. The Stavisky affair had caused quite a stir politically, as *Action Française* targeted Stavisky for being Jewish and the PCF held him up as an example of a corrupt system.⁵⁵ Stavisky had been on trial for fraud after selling many worthless bonds, and had ties to the Prime Minister as well as many other government officials. The Prime Minister, Camille Chautemps (1885-1963), resigned a week after the suicide, leading to the rise of Edouard Daladier (1884-1970), a member of the Radical Party (*Parti radical*). Daladier fired Chiappe, the Paris chief of police, who was linked to the extreme right, setting off a series of riots by fascist paramilitary groups which were then countered by strikes instigated by leftist organizations, resulting in a riot at the Place de la Concorde, later dubbed the 6 February 1934 crisis.⁵⁶ Over the course of a year, leftist parties and trade unions galvanized their efforts to fight against fascist leagues, their efforts culminating in the formation of *le Front Populaire*, formally inaugurated in 1936 under the direction of Léon Blum.⁵⁷ When 250,000 people marched against fascism in the Bois de

⁵² Jean Renoir, *My Life and My Films*, trans. Norman Denny (New York: Atheneum) (English translation of *Ma vie et mes films*. Paris: Flammarion, 1974), 125-127.

⁵³ *Le Parti Communiste Français* was created in December 1920 during the Congress of Tours after it split from the *Section Française de l'Internationale Ouvrière* (SFIO), which was a socialist party that resulted in the merger of *le Parti Socialiste Français* and *le Parti Socialiste de France*.

⁵⁴ Alexandre Stavisky was a Jewish Ukrainian-born French financier who ran pawnshops financed from the sale and surety of bogus artifacts. He was influential enough that whenever newspapers would attempt to expose his business dealings, he would oftentimes bribe them or even buy the newspaper outright. He died of suicide in 1934 in Chamonix after he was put on trial for fraud.

⁵⁵ Ronald Bergan, 146.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Le Front Populaire* was a political movement led by Léon Blum comprising of several leftist parties: *le Parti Communiste Français* (PCF), the *Section Française de l'Internationale Ouvrière* (SFIO), and *le Parti Radical*. The main objective of this alliance was to fight fascism, but the movement dissolved in 1938 due to extremism that emerged amongst certain of its members.

Vincennes on Bastille Day, 1935, Jean Renoir and his friends and colleagues joined in on the demonstration.⁵⁸

While Renoir never formally joined the PCF, he wrote many articles for various communist publications between 1936-1938 as “*compagnon du parti*”. Renoir’s status as a left-wing artist solidified during this time, but according to many scholars, it is imperative to consider *Toni*, filmed in 1934 and released in 1935, as a starting point in seeing his political engagement manifest in his films. Starting in 1936 and ending in 1939-1940, Renoir’s works tend to reveal a stronger sense of his politicization and affiliation with the left. The most overtly political film would be his episodic film *La vie est à nous* (1936), which he created as propaganda for the Communist Party under the suggestion of novelist Louis Aragon (1897-1982), one of the former leaders of the Dadaist and Surrealist movement and member of the PCF since 1927. At this point, Renoir had met and consorted with many members of the *Groupe Octobre*, a theater company led by Jean-Paul Le Chanois (1909-1985) and named after the month when the Bolshevik Revolution overturned the tsarist regime in Russia. Many members of the *Groupe Octobre* would end up collaborating with Jean Renoir on *La vie est à nous*. As Renoir himself stated, “The making of *La vie est à nous* put me in touch with people having a genuine love of the working class.”⁵⁹ The film was finished weeks before the May election of 1936 and projected at political meetings, the price of admission being a subscription to a new journal entitled *Ciné-Liberté* operated by *le Front Populaire*.

“CITIZEN RENOIR” AND *TONI*

Between 1931-1935, the French film industry was undergoing a financial crisis as ticket sales decreased from 938 million francs to 750 million, and fewer films were being produced

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ Jean Renoir, *My Life and My Films*, 125.

after 1933.⁶⁰ Foreign film technicians, working for lower wages, were favored over their French counterparts. In fact, in the position of head camera, twenty-six foreign workers were employed regularly while forty-six French continued to be unemployed.⁶¹ Jean Renoir resigned from the union in protest against the union's decree of restricting the number of foreigners working in each position. In a letter to union members on May 23, 1934, he wrote:

If I'm leaving the union, it is because the struggle against foreigners in our profession doesn't seem to me to be the right way to improve the situation. I believe that in France an artistic industry can only function if it acquires a certain international influence. Paris isn't a provincial city. It's one of the world capitals, and its influence has always been owing to and the result of the absorption of numerous foreign elements.⁶²

This statement in particular reveals Renoir's leftist leanings and prefigures his era of political filmmaking. In the section "Citizen Renoir (1934-1940)" in his biography *Jean Renoir: Projections of Paradise*, Ronald Bergan traces through Renoir's films during that time a consistent sociopolitical engagement. Breaking from his bourgeois period (1931-1934), where many of his films took place within French bourgeois societies, his filmography starting from 1934 with *Madame Bovary* and ending in 1940 with *La Règle du jeu* incorporated themes about class and society, particularly in *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange* (1936).⁶³ In *M. Lange*, the "dark undertones, the inherent social consciousness, the impassioned plea for collectivism and working-class solidarity against the evils of capitalism, [...] made it an uncomfortable form of entertainment for contemporary middle-class French audiences".⁶⁴ Similarly, *Toni*, with its social commentary, did not perform well at the box office. Shown in Parisian theaters in February 1935, *Toni* almost immediately followed the release of Marcel Pagnol's *Angèle* (1935), a Provençal film with a more sentimental and melodramatic tone.⁶⁵ According to

⁶⁰ Pascal Mérigeau, Loc. 3773.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ Alexander Sesonske, "Toni," in *Jean Renoir, the French Films, 1924-1939* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1980), 175-176.

⁶⁴ Ronald Bergan, 150.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 142.

François Truffaut (1932-1984), celebrated French Wave *cinéaste* and film theorist, audiences just were not ready for a grittier, realist approach.⁶⁶ Renoir himself stated that “[p]eople hate to have their expectations upset, and at that time the film was strange, unexpected. And it seemed brutal to people...It was as welcome as a hair in a bowl of soup.”⁶⁷ Yet, by depicting working-class laborers, their everyday lives and their troubles, Jean Renoir cemented himself as one of the foremost directors of the political Left.

As one of the first French sound films to have been shot on location, *Toni* is often referred to as one of the first neo-realist films, eight years before Italian film writer-director and critic Antonio Pietrangeli (1919-1968)⁶⁸ created the term in reference to Luchino Visconti’s first feature film, *Ossessione* (1943)⁶⁹. Visconti (1906-1976) was in fact the first assistant director on *Toni*, and had acquired the idea of basing a film off of James M. Cain’s novel *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1934) from Renoir.⁷⁰ Renoir, having the support of friend and Provençal *cinéaste* Marcel Pagnol (1895-1974)⁷¹, which included the use of Pagnol’s studio in Marseille and fifty percent of the film’s budget, shot *Toni* on location with direct sound in Martigues in the south of France.⁷² In order to further the authenticity, he also selected actors from the region, many of whom were non-professionals. Christopher Faulkner, a renowned Renoir scholar, states that most of the actors were cast corresponding to their social

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ Antonio Pietrangeli was an Italian film screenwriter and director combining Italian neorealism and the satirical Commedia all’italiana genre, as well as a film reviewer who regularly wrote for *Bianco e Nero* and *Cinema*. He also served as an assistant under Luchino Visconti on *Ossessione* (1943).

⁶⁹ Luchino Visconti was an Italian film, theater, and opera director who inaugurated Italian Neorealism with *Ossessione* and subsequently followed with such celebrated films such as *Rocco and His Brothers* (1960) and *The Leopard* (1963). He obtained the position of assistant director under Renoir on *Toni* due to an introduction by mutual friend Coco Chanel.

⁷⁰ James M. Cain (1892-1977) was an American novelist and journalist whose books were often adapted into films noirs in the 1940s, such as *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1934), *Ossessione* (1943), and *Double Indemnity* (1944).

⁷¹ Born near Marseille, Marcel Pagnol was a French novelist and filmmaker, widely considered to be one of the first French auteurs, who brought to the screen many stories about the Provence region.

⁷² Brett Bowles, “Renoir under the Popular Front: Aesthetics, Politics, and the Paradoxes of Engagement,” in *A Companion to Jean Renoir*, ed. Alastair Phillips and Ginette Vincendeau (Somerset: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2013), 405.

class and regional accents, and the professional ones, hired from within the Midi, were encouraged to incorporate their dialect and slang.⁷³ Charles Blavette (1902-1967), starring as eponymous character Toni, originated from Provence, and spoke with an accent befitting his role. The only character who speaks northern French in the film would be Albert, played by Parisian Max Dalban (1908-1958).⁷⁴ Renoir, recalling his direction of Catherine Hessling's naturalistic performance, wanted to avoid the French style of acting—"the exaggerated gestures, the facial contortions, the overelaborate decors, the sentimentalities"—that was so heavily influenced by the theater.⁷⁵ He sought instead, to "make a documentary about [actors] as he would make one about an animal in nature".⁷⁶

POLITICIZING AN "APOLITICAL" FILM

As if to further compound the film's documentary realism, *Toni* came to Renoir first as *fait divers*, a story of a murder case told to him by his childhood friend and police commissioner Jacques Mortier. The case examined a tragic murder that had happened in Martigues between Italian immigrants ten years before the release of *Toni* (see Fig. 1 below).

⁷³ Christopher Faulkner, *The Social Cinema of Jean Renoir* (Princeton University Press, 2014), 44.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ Jean Renoir, "Comment j'anime mes personnages", from *Pour Vous* 242 (6 July 1933), trans. in *French Film Theory and Criticism*, ed. Abel, 2:125-126.



Figure 1a. Newspaper article from Le Populaire on the case on which Toni is based.¹



Figure 1b. & 1c. Photo portraits of the parties involved in the crime, courtesy of le Petit Provençal

The case involved a man named Enrico Marchesi, who had allegedly killed the husband of Anna Giuliani in a crime of passion.⁷⁷ Giuliani was sentenced to death while Marchesi was banned from the region for ten years and sentenced to forced labor for twelve.⁷⁸ Jacques Mortier, who wrote crime thrillers under the pseudonym Jacques Levert, compiled the facts for Renoir, who would write the screenplay alongside Carl Einstein, changing the events and characters to the following narrative.⁷⁹

In the beginning of the film, Toni Canova (Charles Blavette) arrives in Martigues to find work. He meets a French woman named Marie (Jenny Hélia) and settles in with her in an unmarried arrangement. Some time passes, and he meets a young Spanish woman named Josepha (Célia Montalvan), whom he develops an attraction to. Even though he expresses an interest in her, Toni's boss Albert (Max Dalban) "takes" Josepha for himself and rapes her. He

⁷⁷ "La Fin du mystère de Martigues," *L'Ouest-Éclair*, January 29, 1930, Gallica.fr.

⁷⁸ "La femme Giuliani est condamnée à mort," *Le Petit journal*, February 1, 1931, Gallica.fr.

⁷⁹ Ronald Bergan, 141.

wants to marry her, and Marie suggests a double wedding for her and Toni, and Josepha and Albert. By the middle of the film, Toni has become part of this double wedding, marrying a woman he does not love anymore and witnessing his villainous boss marry the woman he fancies. After the wedding, it becomes apparent that Albert has been having numerous affairs with other women, all while Josepha is taking care of their child. Meanwhile, the rift between Marie and Toni increases, and after catching Toni kissing Josepha, Marie attempts to commit suicide. She fails, falls ill, and evicts Toni. Toni, now homeless, does not show up for work, and continues to nurse an obsession with Josepha. He ultimately ends up dead by sacrificing himself for Josepha, who kills Albert in self-defense just before the end of the film.

Despite its relatively melodramatic plot, Renoir depicts this tragic tale without romanticizing or sentimentalizing the characters or the events that ensue from their actions. By refusing to overly dramatize the narrative, Renoir turns Toni's story into that of the life of an ordinary immigrant. *Toni*, in fact, as one of the relatively rare films of the 1930s to not only address the wave of immigrants in France but also portray them in non-demonizing way, presents its story of socioeconomic integration in a rather naturalistic yet somewhat moralizing fashion. During this post-Great War era, France saw the arrival of one million immigrants, between 1919-1924, mostly due to the devastation wrought by the war on able-bodied working men. As a result of this labor shortage, the demand for workers increased; by 1931, the number of immigrants tripled to three million.⁸⁰ When the effects of the Great Depression started to be felt, at the beginning of the 1930s, xenophobia began to run rampant. In 1932, the government of France decided to limit non-citizens in public-sector jobs to just five percent.⁸¹ Fascist organizations such as *Croix de feu* maintained that xenophobia was just a part of patriotism.⁸² In the scene entitled "Prologue", Jean Renoir situates Toni against a backdrop of immigrants

⁸⁰ Geoff Read, "The Savagery of the Barbarians: The Politics of Race," in *The Republic of Men: Gender and the Political Parties in Interwar France* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2014), 97.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 98.

⁸² *Ibid.*

arriving in Martigues. Guards check for papers of eligibility and identity, ushering through worker after worker carrying suitcases and singing folk songs of their homeland. According to Renoir scholar Alexander Sesonske, the dialogue of *Toni* propels the development of the narrative while the images convey the essence of the quotidian in the life of an immigrant in Martigues.⁸³ Out of this tapestry of audio and visual cues signifying Martigues' melting pot that appears almost accidentally captured by Renoir's documentary-style lens, the focus shifts to one individual: Toni Canova – who does not stand out from the setting, but remains firmly immersed in it throughout the film. By depicting Toni's story in a naturalistic fashion, Renoir's social commentary becomes political by demonstrating to his audience the travails of an immigrant in France.

Just before the start of the prologue, the film starts out with an epigram on “race” in the beginning of the film: “*L'action se passe dans le midi de la France, en pays latin, là où la nature, détruisant l'esprit de Babel, sait si bien opérer la fusion des races.*”⁸⁴ At the start it already sets a political tone and evokes a sense of a genuinely international milieu. In the beginning of *Toni*, with the influx of immigrants arriving in Martigues, one character who appears as an Italian from Turin complains about Spaniards taking “bread from our mouths”, and the other, from Barcelona, responds by saying “My country is where I can get enough to eat,” an anti-nationalist sentiment. Despite attributing these characters to their home countries through their accents and dialogue, nationalism soon becomes irrelevant in this particular setting. In the same opening sequence, Renoir intercuts the heavily accented dialogue of the Italian, Spanish, and Provençal migrant workers with popular Piedmontese and Corsican folk songs⁸⁵, sung by Paul Bozzi.⁸⁶ The use of the almost amateur performance of the folk songs in

⁸³ Alexander Sesonske, 169.

⁸⁴ “The events occur in the south of France, in Latin country, where nature, by destroying the spirit of Babel, can so well merge races.” (Trans. Edward Osselin, 115.)

⁸⁵ Charles Musser, 279.

⁸⁶ Ronald Bergan, 142.

both diegetic and non-diegetic contexts situates the viewer within the culture of the migrants, not just that of Toni. Bozzi, who plays Jacques, the guitarist, expresses in his songs the hardships of being an immigrant that undergird the narrative of the film. As another means to achieve the aesthetic reminiscent of documentary film, Jean Renoir uses this diegetic music in lieu of the artificiality of a composed film score to highlight the setting's multi-nationalism.

Toni reflects contemporary French xenophobia in its matter-of-fact portrayal of racist sentiments. In a scene where Marie is talking to Toni about Josepha, complaining about how she “hardly speaks a word of French, and everyone falls over her”, Marie labels Josepha in a xenophobic fashion as a “femme fatale” out to steal not just “bread from our mouths” but also the men. Josepha’s uncle, Sébastien, cautions her against the influx of the foreigners, in particular *les Sidis*, meaning Arabs — to which she answers, in Spanish, “I’ll be careful.” Her response is loaded in irony due to the fact that, by replying in Spanish, she underlines her status as an immigrant. The xenophobia and racism are thus doubly expressed on another level: not just amongst Europeans but from Europeans against other ethnic groups. Arabs, in particular, form a vast population still under French colonial rule in the 1930s, and were subjected to racial oppression not only in metropolitan France, but also in the colonies themselves.

By portraying issues of racism and xenophobia in a multi-nationalist milieu with quasi-documentary-style filmmaking, Renoir’s lens seems to capture the life of an immigrant as it unfolds in its setting. In terms of form, the camera’s naturalism gives credence and contemporary relevance to the struggles faced by immigrants as they attempt to make a life of their own in France, turning it into a social commentary of the time. The dialogue between characters varies between openly xenophobic to anti-nationalist, depicting a range of responses within and towards the melting pot population of Martigues. In incorporating sociopolitical

issues unique to France during the Interwar period, given his political engagement at the time, Renoir turns what would otherwise be a politically ambiguous film political.

CHAPTER TWO.

L'homme nouveau : Politicizing Masculinity in *Toni*

“One is not born male, one becomes male.”

— Simone de Beauvoir⁸⁷

At the end of the Great War, French masculinity was undergoing a rather destabilizing reconfiguration based on the shattering effects of the war itself and the confluence of far-right and far-left political ideologies the role of men in society. The idea of *L'homme nouveau*, or the new man, came about as a reaction to the fear of physical degeneration engendered by eugenicists in the Great War during an age where people, and especially some scientists, were obsessed with physiological purity in order to repair physical and mental flaws and elevate the status of man.⁸⁸ Communism, established with the creation of the Soviet Union after the Bolshevik Revolution in 1916-1917, was spreading to parts of Europe, such as Germany and the Netherlands. Fascism grew, starting with the Fascist Manifesto of 1919 in Italy, in part to counter the progression of far-left ideologies. Given the vast devastation of the war, each side sought to revive the status of man by promoting distinct values. To see this effect take its toll on men can reveal how the paradoxical impact of the desire to achieve *L'homme nouveau* can attempt to uphold the hyper-masculine ideal while the anxieties instigated by political instability resulted in a failed masculinity of the eponymous character in *Toni*.

“DISMEMBERED MEN”⁸⁹: POST-GREAT WAR REPERCUSSIONS ON MASCULINITY

France's Pyrrhic victory in 1918 over Germany witnessed casualty upon casualty with regards to the country's own troops. Due to the fact that the war was mostly fought on French

⁸⁷ Simone de Beauvoir, *Tout compte fait* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), 497.

⁸⁸ Joan Tumblety, “Introduction,” in *Remaking the Male Body: Masculinity and the Uses of Physical Culture in Interwar and Vichy France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 3.

⁸⁹ Joanna Bourke, *Dismembering the Male: Men's Bodies, Britain and the Great War* (London: Reaktion, 1996).

land, much of the French landscape was decimated by artillery, tanks, and mines.⁹⁰ While Germany suffered less damage in terms of percentage dead relative to overall population, a generation of young Frenchmen had lost their lives or their limbs.⁹¹ The percentage of deaths relative to population in France was 4.29%, meaning 1 in 10 men had died on the battlefield.⁹² Those who came home did so in varying states of dismemberment, their virility crushed by the dictates of a nation they served. Soldiers were rendered mute, deaf, or blind, while others lost their ability to stand up or walk — and many were left paralyzed.⁹³ At the end of the war, French President Georges Clemenceau (1841-1929) invited some of those who were heavily disfigured, dubbed “*gueules cassées*”, to the table during the signing of the Treaty of Versailles. In further recognition of their service, the government of France also presented some two thousand disabled veterans in a procession down the Champs-Élysées on Bastille Day, 1919.⁹⁴ With trench warfare, the “upright body stance [was] succeeded by the *prone body* [italics in the original] position” because soldiers, faced with modern weaponry, were left with the only solution of self-preservation, which was to curl up on the ground. In this state, they had to confront their own helplessness and fear, sometimes for hours on end.⁹⁵ Therefore, not only was the damage wrought on the men physical, it also had destructive emotional and psychic implications.⁹⁶

⁹⁰ Alexander Sesonske, “Toni,” in *Jean Renoir, the French Films, 1924-1939* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1980), 165.

⁹¹ John Ellis and Michael Cox, *The World War I Databook: The Essential Facts and Figures for All the Combatants* (London: Aurum, 2001), 269.

⁹² Great Britain War Office, *Statistics of the Military Effort of the British Empire during the Great War, 1914-1920* (London: London H.M. Stationery Off, 1922), 358.

⁹³ Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, “The Great War and the History of Virility,” in *A History of Virility*, ed. Alain Corbin, Jean-Jacques Courtine, and Georges Vigarello, trans. Keith Cohen (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 395.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 396.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 392.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 395.

As if to symbolically convey the effect the war had on virility, French author and doctor Georges Duhamel (1884-1966)⁹⁷ described an experience he had with a patient: “He was weeping into his hands with a despair that resembled shame. I asked him if he was in pain. He hardly responded to me. Then, gently lifting his blanket, I saw that the shrapnel had cruelly struck him in his virility. And I felt a deep compassion for his youth and for his tears.”⁹⁸ By the end of the 19th century, France was undergoing a crisis of population, where the birthrate had slowed considerably in comparison to other European countries. Middle-aged adults during the Great War could still remember the toll the Franco-Prussian War (1870-1871) had taken on their nation’s population.⁹⁹ As a reaction to the 1.5 million French lives lost during the Great War, the first post-war *Assemblée Nationale* passed a law in 1920 banning propaganda for birth control. In 1923, the same government passed another piece of legislation that gave abortion cases to magistrates instead of juries, hoping for higher rates of conviction. Pronatalists, anxious about the low birthrate, were found on both sides of the political spectrum, with each extreme aiming to regenerate French virility and to restore to France its former status as a world power.¹⁰⁰

The ubiquitous militarization of the Great War produced the ideal of *L’homme nouveau*, or the new man, in both Communist and fascist camps during the 1920s and 1930s. The fascist new man, derived from and inspired by the Communist new man, sought to repair the damage wrought by heretofore unprecedented modern warfare by revitalizing or “hardening” the male body. While Communist ideology emphasized fraternalism and solidarity amongst the working class, fascists distorted the new man into a version that was nationalist, racist and paternalist.

⁹⁷ Georges Duhamel was a French author, member of the Académie française, and twenty-seven time Nobel Prize for Literature nominee who had trained as a doctor during the Great War. Duhamel recounts the horrors of the war in his book *Civilisations*, which won the Prix Goncourt in 1918.

⁹⁸ Georges Duhamel, *Civilisation, 1914-1918* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1918), 38. (Trans. Keith Cohen, *A History of Virility*, 395.)

⁹⁹ Sian Reynolds, *France between the Wars: Gender and Politics* (London; New York: Routledge, 1996), 21.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 18.

FRATERNALISM: THE COMMUNIST NEW MAN

During the years of the Third Republic (1870-1940), the ideal male citizen was deemed to be selfless, hardworking, and a good father.¹⁰¹ The advent of Communism transformed the ideal of the respectable, republican father into the new man: a young proletarian who, without a family to support, was more likely to participate in revolution, and consequently more concerned with the welfare of his fellow citizens. In fact, during the Great War, many instances of mutiny within the French army occurred during 1917 as soldiers, encouraged by the Bolshevik Revolution, were reading about strikes in Paris in the newspaper and consuming pacific propaganda.¹⁰² This fraternalism, a virtue known to and traditionally celebrated by those on the left-of-center political spectrum, took center stage in the French Communist Party, which went so far as to tell French soldiers to blatantly disregard the chain of command. In doing so, in particular during the French occupation of the Ruhr Valley (1923-1924), French troops would peacefully lay down their weapons instead of attacking their German or colonial counterparts.¹⁰³ As an important extension of said fraternalism, the Communist Party, for the most part, opposed racism and encouraged working class solidarity over differences in ethnicity.¹⁰⁴

Among other Communist values of the new man were hard work, physical strength, and rebellion against capitalist authorities, shown in much of the propaganda disseminated at the time (see Fig. 2 below).¹⁰⁵

¹⁰¹ Geoff Read, "Gender and the Totalitarian Drift," in *The Republic of Men: Gender and the Political Parties in Interwar France* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2014), 63.

¹⁰² Leonard V. Smith, "War and 'Politics': The French Army Mutinies of 1917," *War in History* 2, no. 2 (1995): 192.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 66.

¹⁰⁴ Geoff Read, "The Savagery of the Barbarians: The Politics of Race," in *The Republic of Men: Gender and the Political Parties in Interwar France* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2014), 112.

¹⁰⁵ Geoff Read, "Gender and the Totalitarian Drift", 70.

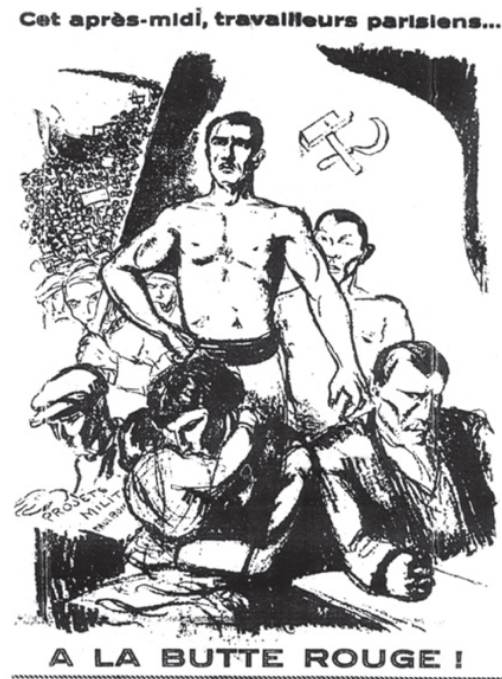


Figure 2. A strong, industrious, Communist *L'homme nouveau* in *Le Premier Mai*, May 1, 1927, 1.

The emphasis on an authoritative stance and a “hard”, physically sound body ready to serve the working class is evident in the above image. The bare-chested figure armed with only his muscles, suggesting that strength and hard work are the only resources of the proletarian, appears ready to take on capitalist authorities. Communist ideology endowed the new man with such hypermasculine iconography, and the images would soon become familiar in popular culture. In the 1930s, poetic realism introduced to film audiences the iconic movie star Jean Gabin (1904-1976), who embodied working class virility in many French films such as Julien Duvivier’s *La Bandera* (1935) and *Pépé le Moko* (1937), as well as Marcel Carné’s *Le Quai des brumes* (1938), and Jean Renoir’s *La Bête humaine* (1938). Renoir, who had enlisted in the French military during the Great War and suffered grave wounds – one leaving him with a permanent limp – depicted Gabin at the height of working class virility in *La Bête humaine*, one of the films released during his highly politicized era of filmmaking of the late 1930s. In the film, Gabin leans out of a train carriage, sporting bare forearms and a strong jaw (see Fig. 3 below).



Figure 3. Jean Gabin as the symbol of working class virility in *La Bête humaine*.

In this image, Gabin appears authoritative and self-assured, and his angular features and forearms suggest a hardened physique – virile attributes of the worker exalted by the Communists.

PATERNALISM: THE FASCIST NEW MAN

Fascism in France, in particular the fascistic parties *Croix de feu* (1927-1936)¹⁰⁶ and *Parti populaire français* (1936-1945)¹⁰⁷, sought to undermine communism as one of its key objectives. In turn, these parties re-appropriated Communist values of the new man in hopes to recruit from the Communist Party militants to join their cause.¹⁰⁸ While both fascism and communism shared similar values – strength, hard work, and other traits traditionally defined as masculine – fascists distorted the fraternalist new man by replacing class solidarity with ideas regarding the duty of man in guarding his nation, his “race”, and his patriarchal superiority.

¹⁰⁶ Between the years of 1930 and 1936, the *Croix de feu* was led by Lieutenant Colonel François de La Rocque, and played a large role in the demonstrations following the Stavisky Affair.

¹⁰⁷ *Le Parti populaire français*, or French Popular Party, was a fascist political party that operated on anti-Semitism and opposition to *le Front Populaire*. Interestingly, its formation came about after several members of *le Parti communiste français* (PCF) split from the party due to their opposition to Marxism and to the inclusion of Jews.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 72.

Additionally, fascist ideology championed action and anti-intellectualism in order to combat the “muddleheaded, talkative, intellectualizing liberals and socialists—the exhausted, tired old men of the old order,” writes author George Mosse (1918-1999).¹⁰⁹ The association with youthfulness is similar to that of the Communist new man as young men were seen to be instruments of change for the future. Alongside youthfulness were the values of beauty and purity, exalted by fascists who sought recourse in the glory of Antiquity.¹¹⁰ While the Communists espoused a level of pacifism (to the extent of which the militant nature of Revolution would allow), fascists prioritized a highly militarized masculinity. Many in high positions of power were veterans of the Great War, and their ideologies regarding virility were evidently informed by their wartime experiences. Seeing the devastation wrought by the war on young men’s physiques, they sought to repair the extensive damage. Violence, as a method of reviving a fractured virility and of endowing man with newfound power, became an avenue by which fascist militants would act according to their parties’ directives. Additionally, the modern armaments and technologically advanced warfare faced by soldiers during the Great War became an impetus for fascists to confront the quickly encroaching threat of modernity. In the face of the death machine, the fascist new man must be able to “harden” his body and become stronger than that machine.¹¹¹ As a result, fascism became associated with modernity and technology, militarizing the parties’ youth.

In line with traditional masculine characteristics, fascist ideology emphasized the importance of reproductive creation. The fascist man had to be pronatalist, and needed to

¹⁰⁹ George L. Mosse, *Masses and Man: Nationalist and Fascist Perceptions of Reality* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1987), 185.

¹¹⁰ Italian fascists, for example, recalled the past glory of the Roman Empire. In aiming to restore this status to the Italian people and to symbolically continue the lineage of Roman emperors, Mussolini marched alongside a life-sized statue of Trajan after the conquest of Ethiopia in 1935 by Italian troops. Johann Chaputot, “Fascist Virility,” in *A History of Virility*, ed. Alain Corbin, Jean-Jacques Courtine, and Georges Vigarello, trans. Keith Cohen (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 501.

¹¹¹ Johann Chaputot, “Fascist Virility,” in *A History of Virility*, ed. Alain Corbin, Jean-Jacques Courtine, and Georges Vigarello, trans. Keith Cohen (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 501.

procreate in order to produce more children for the cause, for the nation and for the “race”.¹¹²

Women were excluded from the male domain and were relegated to narrowly delineated roles instead, such as child-bearing and child-rearing. As Max Horkheimer (1895-1971)¹¹³ posits in the words of Claudine Haroche:

[I]t is the family that keeps watch over the formation of the authoritarian personality and character; it is within the family that submission to authority and ‘dependence’ have been learned; it is the family, finally, that takes part in the production of mentalities required by the traditions of bourgeois society.¹¹⁴

A woman has no place in public society, and femininity – in stark opposition to values coded as masculine such as strength and violence – has no place in the realm of men. According to Johann Chaputot’s analysis of fascist masculinity, “[t]o define virility is therefore first to exclude the supposed and actual antitheses of the male being”.¹¹⁵ The fascist man upholds the patriarchal hierarchy and wields his power over his female subordinates, using them as a means to an end: to perpetuate nationalism in a paternalist manner.

POLITICALLY CODED MASCULINITIES IN *TONI*

Through careful consideration of certain characteristics respective of Communist and fascist ideologies, the various depicted masculinities in *Toni* can be analyzed through a politically tinted lens. This is not to say that one character personifies exactly Communist or fascist virility – rather, specific aspects of these extreme political ideologies can be teased out of certain characters. As mentioned in the previous chapter, given the nature of Jean Renoir’s political engagement and the pervasive multiculturalism evoked within the first five minutes of *Toni*, it would be difficult to not ascribe some of the attributes of politically charged virility

¹¹² *Ibid*, 496.

¹¹³ Max Horkheimer was a German philosopher and member of the Frankfurt School of critical theory. Many of his works feature theories on authoritarianism, Marxism, and mass culture.

¹¹⁴ Claudine Haroche, “Origins and Transformations of Male Domination,” in *A History of Virility*, ed. Alain Corbin, Jean-Jacques Courtine, and Georges Vigarello, trans. Keith Cohen (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 412.

¹¹⁵ Johann Chaputot, 492.

to the male protagonists. At first glance, none of the male characters seem to embody the physical features of the new man. Set aside physical appearance, and the hints of fascism and communism manifest themselves in the actions, the language, and the relationships between characters.

Albert, the foreman of the quarry in which Toni works, has been dubbed by Keith Reader and Geneviève Guillaume-Grimaud – both scholars of classic French cinema – as a “violent little fascist.”¹¹⁶ In the first half of the film, he meets Josepha and takes a liking to her. After she repeatedly repudiates him and rejects his advances, he forces himself upon her, and eventually takes her for his wife. Some time after the wedding, it is revealed that he and Josepha have had a baby together, and that Josepha, who has to endure his odiousness, is further tasked with raising the child and cooking for the family. Used as a stepping stone for Albert to realize his traditional masculinity and patriarchal role, Josepha is there for him to exclude from everything except household needs. In fascist ideology, woman exists as a relative being to man and her role is simply to serve him and raise children, perpetuating patriarchal norms and ensuring male power over the feminine.¹¹⁷ For instance, he complains vehemently when she makes ratatouille for dinner:

ALBERT: Christ almighty! Ratatouille again! Tomatoes and peppers. You know I hate it!

JOSEPHA: The garden’s full of them.

ALBERT: I don’t care! Now that *I’m the master here* [emphasis added] you might put some variety into the menu. Open a tin of sardines.

JOSEPHA: As you wish!

The confinement of the woman to the domestic sphere, upon which fascist virility is predicated, speaks to Albert’s exclusionary and authoritarian relationship with his own wife. His violence, another attribute embraced by fascists, escalates in the same scene where he screams at his

¹¹⁶ Keith Reader, “Toni: A Regional Melodrama of Failed Masculinity,” in *A Companion to Jean Renoir*, ed. Alastair Phillips and Ginette Vincendeau (Somerset: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2013), 450.

¹¹⁷ Johann Chaputot, 492.

crying infant (“That’s enough!”), before snatching a cat from a shelf and making a show of roughly dropping it onto the floor. He grabs a pistol from a cabinet, threatening its potential use, and reiterates to the child, “That’s enough!” and to Josepha, “Take that thing away,” referring to their infant girl. Ultimately, his violence reaches its most extreme when, after catching Josepha attempting to lift his purse from him during his sleep, he grabs his pistol menacingly, and beats Josepha mercilessly with his belt. In this sequence, Albert towers over Josepha and dominates the frame, while she seeks refuge under a table (see Fig. 4 below).



Figure 4. Albert's violence towards Josepha.

He asserts with all his patriarchal power that Josepha just needs “*une bonne correction*.” Translated into English from the dated French, the word *correction* means punishment rather than rectification. His use of authoritarian language, his violence, and his treatment of women (or rather, the only woman he interacts with in the film) all point towards fascist values of masculinity.

Furthermore, certain traits of Albert’s character recall fascism’s identification with modernity and technology. While in the French countryside, those who were armed with a gun would usually own a hunting rifle for sustenance and protection, whereas Albert’s possession of a pistol not only codifies him as urban (i.e. not of this milieu) but, also, as threatening and malicious. No other character in the film carries a pistol, much less uses it to intimidate.

Albert's use of technology for less than peaceful means further emphasizes his "violent little fascist" personality. Additionally, his street clothing and business dealings feature as two aspects of his character that place him within modernity. His clothing appears more fitted and therefore more urban than the shapeless suits of his rural, working-class counterparts. In particular, his hat labels him as a member of the *petit bourgeoisie*, in contrast to his employee's cap, traditionally a symbol of the proletariat (see Fig. 5 below).



Figure 5. Albert's crisp hat and suit in comparison to Gabi's lumpy outfit.

The fact that Renoir seems to mostly place Albert in an interior setting also speaks to his association with modernity. The modern world connotes industrialization, urbanization, capitalism, and political revolution. Once Albert is inside, he is in his element: abusing Josepha and discussing business matters as a member of the capitalist *petit bourgeoisie*.

On the other hand, the character of Fernand figures as a foil to that of Albert. He is distinctly working class, kind, and always willing to extend a helping hand. His fraternalism echoes that of the Communists. In his quasi-sidekick role, he supports Toni and Marie through their marital disputes, tempering Toni's dissatisfaction and frustration. When Marie attempts to drown herself after catching Toni kissing Josepha, Fernand rushes Toni back to towards the lake, both of them arriving just in time to help her off the rescue boat. When Marie wakes up and confronts Toni, it is Fernand who carries her back home and nurses her back to health.

Even while taking care of Marie, Fernand continues to bring bread and wine to Toni, who at this point is living in the forest after his eviction by his own wife. Solidarity in Fernand remains unwavering as he continues to provide for his friends. To literally “*partager le pain*”, or break bread, evokes communist values of fraternalism. Additionally, given the abject poverty of the Great Depression and the economic repercussions thereof in the 1930s, Fernand’s gesture comes across as incredibly selfless. Ultimately, his kindheartedness manifests itself in the final scene of the film, where, upon finding Toni slumped on the ground from a fatal gunshot wound, he cradles Toni’s dying body in his arms. In constantly comforting Toni that he is in the company of a friend, Fernand attempts to soothe him: “I hurt you if I move, I’m sorry. Put your head on my arm, breathe slowly.” In the face of violence, Fernand’s brotherly love represents a hope in the good of humanity – a hope that Communism may one day result in a utopic world where its citizens look after one another.

TONI: AN AMBIVALENT MASCULINITY

If hypermasculine traits were indicative of embodying the *L’homme nouveau* ideal, Toni fails to achieve either Communist or fascist virility. His unmarried arrangement with Marie stagnates their relationship as it becomes more and more toxic. His relationships with women are both failures: Marie constantly berates him, and he can never have Josepha. In many of the two-shots featuring Marie and Toni, Jean Renoir often positions her above Toni in the frame, in a commandeering and almost oppressive manner (see Fig. 6 below).



Figure 6. Marie dominates the frame when she is with Toni.

Toni's lack of agency lies in the fact that instead of proposing marriage to Marie, he finds himself roped into a double wedding with Albert and Josepha. Marie further erodes his virility by remaining childless – whether Toni can father children is not known. Yet, this absence of paternalist instinct emasculates him as it translates to impotence. Additionally, his lack of violence towards women constitutes an unwillingness to subjugate and exclude femininity. Not only does Toni not exemplify Communist or fascist virility, he is not even virile in a traditional sense.

Toni's emasculation continues in his relationship (or lack thereof) with Josepha. When he discovers that Josepha has killed Albert in self-defense after Albert had beaten her with his belt, he decides to turn himself into the police in her place. However, he gets shot by a villager and dies. Because he can never have Josepha, the only way he can redeem his love for her is in death. In contrast to Albert, Toni's relationships with women are predicated not on domination, but on romance. Romance, relying on the reciprocity of affection between partners, implies an equal relationship rather than a patriarchal one. For example, when Albert mocks Toni for being a peasant who does not know how to flirt with women, Toni rushes over to strangle him, only to be gently deterred by Josepha (see Figure 7 below).



Figure 7a & 7b. Josepha urges Toni to stop strangling Albert.

Renoir cuts directly from the shot pictured in Figure 7a to the shot in Figure 7b to privilege Toni's interaction with Josepha rather than Toni's attempt at strangling, highlighting his softness rather than his violence. In placing Toni at the same level as Josepha but just slightly below, Renoir further illustrates Toni's submission to Josepha while maintaining a visual structure of quasi-equality. By associating his desire for romance, and therefore a theoretically egalitarian paradigm, Toni not only eschews fascist ideals of gender hierarchy, but also becomes less virile by bringing himself down to what fascism would deem a lower order – femininity.

France during the Interwar period witnessed an era of troubled masculinity introduced by the overwhelming damage of the Great War on the male population. As a form of restitution, political parties on either extreme of the spectrum emerged with similar ideas of how to revive virility to serve their causes. Communists created the new man, looking for a strong, industrious proletarian ready to devote his life to the concept of fraternity and revolution, which fascists later took and rendered paternalist and racist. Furthermore, fascism prioritized violence and the use of which to subjugate and exclude women.

Toni reveals instances of politically charged masculinities not through similarities in physical appearance to the new man, but rather in the qualities, or lack thereof, embodied in

the characters. Albert personifies fascist ideals of virility by brutally dominating women and keeping them relegated to the domestic sphere, whereas Fernand incarnates a kindhearted comrade motivated by brotherly love. In contrast to either character, Toni fails to fulfill not just communist and fascist virility, but traditional masculinity as well. As a result of this inability, he is thus feminized, creating a third type of masculinity. The following chapter will analyze this new masculinity in relation to Toni's setting: nature and the rural landscape.

CHAPTER THREE.

Le « bon sauvage » : Rural Masculinity in Toni

The bourgeois way of life has made the worker himself into a bourgeois. A genuine proletariat is now only to be found in the under-developed countries. The Brazilian peon is a proletarian, but the worker for General Motors is not.

— Jean Renoir¹¹⁸

Before the 20th century, Italian immigration to southeastern France was strongly correlated with labor in the agricultural industry¹¹⁹, with most of the migrating population hailing from the Piedmontese region in northwest Italy.¹²⁰ After the Great War, the rate of immigration accelerated, and by 1931, almost one out of four people in the Marseillaise region were of Italian origin.¹²¹ Many of the migrants sought refuge from the dire economic situation in their home country after the war as unemployment skyrocketed in the early 1920s under Benito Mussolini's (1883-1945) fascist regime.¹²² As the Italian Empire (1861-1946) operated on a primarily agrarian economy during the Interwar period, many of the émigrés were searching for manual labor within rural communities.

Between 1923 and 1924, the Italian male population in the Marseillaise region had augmented by 4,000, in stark contrast to the mere increase of 1,050 Italian women.¹²³ Given the nature of the labor, rates of male immigration overwhelmed those of women. In order to interrogate rural, working-class masculinity, it is imperative to examine the relationship man has with nature. Nature, defined in this context as the “natural world” existing outside of towns and cities, is closely linked to but not synonymous with the countryside. However, rural areas,

¹¹⁸ Jean Renoir, *My Life and My Films*, trans. Norman Denny, 1st American ed (New York: Atheneum, 1974), 125.

¹¹⁹ Pierre Milza, *Français et italiens à la fin du XIX^{ème} siècle : aux origines du rapprochement franco-italien de 1900-1902*, Édition complète, 2 vols. (Rome: École française de Rome, 1981), 195.

¹²⁰ Stéphane Kronenberger, “Passer la frontière en temps de guerre : le cas des agriculteurs italiens du Sud-Est de la France lors du premier Conflit mondial,” *Migrations Société* 2012/2, no. 140 (n.d.): 191.

¹²¹ Emile Temime, “Les Italiens dans la région marseillaise pendant l’entre-deux-guerres,” in *Les Italiens en France de 1914 à 1940*. Sous la direction de Pierre Milza (Rome: École française de Rome, 1986), 547.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 552.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 554.

commonly associated with the agricultural industry, can oftentimes involve harnessing natural processes for cultivation and sustenance. Denis Cosgrove, the first scholar to define landscape as the ideology that consists of interaction between nature and human activity, describes the concept as “represent[ing] a way in which certain classes of people have signified themselves and their world through their imagined relationship with nature, and through which they have underlined and communicated their own social role and that of others with respect to external nature.”¹²⁴ Landscape therefore cannot be separated from the social aspect, as it is a product of nature under human transformation. Furthermore, landscape also represents a “system of power relations which are vital to the production of gendered identities.”¹²⁵ Rural masculinity, as a result, becomes a model subject to the way social hierarchies are influenced by human interaction with nature.

NATURE VERSUS MODERNITY: FROM LE « BON SAUVAGE » TO FASCISM

The “noble savage” has been a term in history and literature used to describe a man who represents either a member of an indigenous population, or simply “otherized” as an outsider living within wilderness, and as such has not been corrupted by civilization. While the French term *le « bon sauvage »* is often falsely attributed to philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), the idea was first brought up by Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592) in his essay “Of Cannibals” in 1580. Montaigne describes the culture of the Tupinambá people in Brazil and their cannibalism, comparing it to the barbaric and figurative cannibalism of the St. Bartholomew’s Day massacre of 1572 in which violent mobs of Catholics targeted the

¹²⁴ Denis E. Cosgrove, *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984), 15.

¹²⁵ Lorraine Dowler, Josephine Carubia, and Bonj Szczygiel, eds., “Introduction,” in *Gender & Landscape: Renegotiating Morality and Space*, Routledge International Studies of Women and Place 6 (London, New York: Routledge, 2005), 1.

Protestant Huguenots.¹²⁶ The myth of the “noble savage” thus privileges the status of the man not yet ruined by modernity but who, in his association with nature presents himself as pure and innocent.

The dialectical opposition of nature and modernity defines modernity as the socio-cultural properties of a modern civilization. The modern world, following the gradual discontinuation of feudal agrarianism, arrived with industrialization, urbanization, and the rise of capitalism and the market economy. With modernity also comes the advent of technology, a means of domination over nature. According to philosopher and Frankfurt School political theorist Herbert Marcuse (1898-1979):

Technology, as a mode of production, as the totality of instruments, devices and contrivances which characterize the machine age is thus at the same time a mode of organizing and perpetuating (or changing) social relationships, a manifestation of prevalent thought and behavior patterns, an instrument for control and domination.¹²⁷

Aside from changing the relationships between humans and objects (specifically, tools), and humans and nature, technology also changes the relationships humans have with each other. Vast industrialization towards the end of the 19th century ushered in the machine age, which manifested itself in utmost brutality in the violence and destruction of the Great War. The invention of the airplane, for example, led to large-scale military use of aircraft in warfare that had heretofore been unparalleled. As mentioned in previous chapters, the modern armaments of the early 20th century wrought irreparable damage to the European continent and its citizens. Fascists, seeking to revitalize and regenerate national populations after such devastation, embraced technological advances, and in doing so, also employed technology as a means of control. The nature of technology and subsequently of machines, posits Marcuse, entails that man, “[i]n manipulating the machine ... learns that obedience to the directions is the only way

¹²⁶ Michel de Montaigne, “Of Cannibals,” in *Quotidiana*, trans. Charles Cotton, Patrick Madden, 2006, <http://essays.quotidiana.org/montaigne/cannibals/>.

¹²⁷ Herbert Marcuse and Douglas Kellner, “Some Social Implications of Modern Technology,” in *Technology, War and Fascism: Collected Papers of Herbert Marcuse* (London: Routledge, 1998), 41.

to obtain desired results,” and that “[g]etting along is identical with adjustment to the apparatus. There is no room for autonomy.”¹²⁸ Technology organizes human activity by rendering it hierarchical and procedural, and eliminates human individuality by mechanizing and commoditizing labor. The economic freedom of the individual is thus subsumed under the vast enterprise of the machine industry. The “noble savage”, with his intimate relationship with nature and freedom from economic mechanization, therefore has no place in modernity, and stands in opposition to fascist ideology.

ARCHETYPES OF RURAL MASCULINITY

While the “noble savage” is a term usually associated with early modern and modern Western history, the concept has persisted into contemporary 20th century literature and art, as will be seen in the case of *Toni* in this section. In this context, the “noble savage” has evolved into one of its more contemporary counterparts: the rural male worker. Human activity or culture has traditionally been defined as masculine, whereas the concept of nature carries with it a feminine connotation. Woman and nature both embody ideas of sexuality, fertility, and reproduction.¹²⁹ Man’s domination over nature thus entails as a corollary the domination of women, while man’s association and identification with nature feminizes him. Nature is also associated with purity and innocence, as it recalls the Garden of Eden before the Fall of man. In Lise Saugeres’ paper in the *Journal of Rural Studies*, entitled “The Cultural Representation of the Farming Landscape: Masculinity, Power and Nature”, she brings forth two archetypes of the rural man: the peasant farmer and the business-like farmer.¹³⁰ The former values and identifies with nature, and is seen as “genuine and virtuous”, in contrast to the latter, who

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

¹²⁹ Lise Saugeres, “The Cultural Representation of the Farming Landscape: Masculinity, Power and Nature,” *Journal of Rural Studies* 18, no. 4 (2002): 375.

¹³⁰ Lise Saugeres is a scholar at the Swinburne University of Technology, Australia, who has authored many publications on gender and landscape.

exploits nature for capitalist gain.¹³¹ In Marxist terms, the peasant farmer maintains an intimate relationship with his labor by respecting the environment in which he operates, while the business-like farmer alienates himself from both his labor and the natural world by capitalist incentivization of his work. These two archetypes constitute the dichotomy of class in rural areas, with one representing the rural proletariat and the other the petit bourgeois capitalist. As such, the business-like farmer is already spoiled by modernity and urbanization, leaving the peasant farmer representing the true *paysan* as a modern day “*bon sauvage*”. While Saugeres specifies the agricultural aspect of rural life, such as cultivation of livestock and crops, her analyses can be extrapolated to include rural activities that involve working directly with the land to harvest natural resources, such as mining. In *Toni*, Toni and Albert represent, respectively, the true *paysan*-cum-“*bon sauvage*” and the exploitative industrialist.

TONI LE « BON SAUVAGE » AND HIS ANTITHESIS ALBERT

Toni’s relationship with nature is for the most part presented as harmonious. Nature is his milieu, situating him outside of civilization as yet uncorrupted by modernity. Oftentimes he is portrayed in an exterior setting, where he seems most at peace. Interior settings, such as his home with Marie, constitute spaces of conflict. When Toni first arrives in Martigues and meets Marie, he inquires for work opportunities and lodging. With Marie’s affirmative reply, he enters her house. A fade-out indicates that some time has passed, and the next scene depicts him still inside, arguing unhappily with Marie about their romantic relationship. In contrast, his interactions with Josepha take place outside in full view of natural surroundings. During his first encounter with her, they strike up a conversation and he helps her with the mule cart. This kind gesture leads to another, in which Toni sensually sucks the venom out of a wasp sting on Josepha’s neck (see Fig. 8 below).

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 377.



Figure 8. Toni is unhappy inside with Marie, but passionate with Josepha outdoors.

The framing in the medium shot of the interior scene with Marie suggests not only a distance between the characters, but a power dynamic where Toni is subjugated by his partner. The high-angle shot emphasizes the imbalance of power by rendering Toni smaller and insignificant in the frame, while Marie poses with authority over his lounging figure. In contrast, Toni's passion is visible in the scene with Josepha as the camera is positioned close enough to capture the intimacy of a two-shot close-up. Instead of languishing depressed with Marie, he is simultaneously engaging in an act of benevolent assistance as well as that of passion. Consequently, the film associates Marie with interior settings, providing a source of conflict, and identifies Josepha with nature, providing the impetus for passion.

Similarly, Marie's suggestion of a double wedding, effectively serving as the final nail in the coffin of Toni's romance, occurs in an interior scene where Toni is again lying down in bed (see Fig. 9 below).



Figure 9. Toni lies in bed listless as Marie proposes a double wedding with Josepha and Albert.

By lowering the camera angle to Toni's level, Renoir situates the viewer in his position of powerlessness. It seems as if every time Toni finds himself in an interior setting, he appears weak and ill. His lack of agency is thrown into high relief by the imposing figure of Marie looming over him, who, having just sealed his fate, appears almost as a warden guarding her prisoner within the cell-like bars of the bed.

Toni's relationship with Marie proves unsustainable throughout the course of the film as she constantly berates him, and after witnessing Toni kissing Josepha, she attempts to drown herself in a nearby lake. Her attempt to exit from an interior space to an exterior one does not succeed as her suicide attempt is thwarted by village rescuers, and she fails to achieve the result she sought. In traversing this boundary, she may have been searching for a way to symbolically enter Toni's world and to become closer to him, even in death. However, this failure constitutes her incapacity to live as Josepha and Toni do in nature, as nature does not seem to cooperate with her wishes. Furthermore, she remains firmly rooted in the interior realm as a direct consequence after she falls ill and becomes bedridden for a period of time.

After Marie's suicide attempt, Toni becomes a permanent creature of the outdoors after he is evicted as Marie no longer wishes to see him. He retreats to the forest, sleeping and eating by a campfire, listening to his friends play folk songs on the guitar. Not only does nature

camouflage and protect him, it provides a space in which he can exist among friends in fraternal companionship and comfort. In contrast to Albert, who like Marie is most comfortable in interior settings, Toni finds his sanctuary and his home in nature (see Fig. 10 below).



Figure 10. Albert is sitting upright indoors, and Toni is lying down in the earth.

In the first image above, Albert is seen sitting upright in his house as he deals with business matters. His source of light is a lamp, powered by electricity. The vertical position of his physique and of the lamp not only reinforce the modernity of his character, but also the verticality of everything he stands for: patriarchy, hierarchy, and male power. In contrast, Toni lies horizontally among friends on the ground next to a campfire. In the second shot above, he is relaxed, sleeping, on the same physical level as every other character and object placed in contact with the earth. The ideological distinction between verticality and horizontality appears in Renoir's 1974 autobiography *Ma vie et mes films*, where he describes his propensity towards "horizontal" divisions by similarities such as class as opposed to "vertical" differences of boundary and nation.¹³² Nature functions as an equalizer, conveying *liberté*, *égalité*, and *fraternité* by opening up a space in which people of a lower socio-economic status have the freedom to help one another and enjoy each other's company. Moreover, the natural darkness envelops Toni against the gentle diffusion of light from the campfire, connoting softness. In

¹³² Jean Renoir, *Ma vie et mes films* (Paris: Editions Flammarion, 1974), 146.

contrast, the harsh illumination of Albert's lamp only serves to highlight the artificiality of his modern style of living.

Not only does Renoir evoke Toni's innocence and purity, untainted by modern civilization, through visual associations with the land, he fills Toni's dialogue with wishful thinking about the potential that nature has to offer. In this same scene, Toni dreams about taking Josepha to Argentina, a place in the New World where "stars are visible", an unexpectedly revealing statement that recalls the utopic connotations of starting anew in nature. Without industrialization's polluting byproducts, best exemplified in the modern era by opaque plumes of dense smoke billowing from chimneys on factories and train engines alike, aspects of nature remain unthreatened by modernity in the New World. Fernand, upon hearing Toni's plan, attempts to dissuade him from leaving by phrasing his counter-argument in language to which they can both relate:

TONI: We'll have a new life under a new sky.

FERNAND: Impossible dreams, Toni. Your head is in the clouds. You'll end up breaking your neck. Come down to earth. Back to our old hillside.

It seems fitting that as friends having an intimate conversation in the forest, both characters would use figurative speech loaded with natural imagery in order to articulate personal thoughts. Nature not only offers a safe space, but a common language with which to communicate between men, further equalizing fraternal relationships.

Not only does Toni seek solace in nature, nature provides him with a source of agency. As seen in the above example with Josepha and the wasp sting, Toni comes into his own when encountered with situations in exterior settings. In a scene taking place outside what appears to be Josepha's uncle Sébastien's house, Toni laments Albert's violent courtship of his love interest. An off-screen voice belonging to Albert mocks Toni, saying, "He's a peasant, he doesn't know how to talk to women." Toni responds with "You stupid bastard!" and rushes over to strangle Albert. Only with Josepha's intervention does he let go, and the scene fades to

black. By virtue of being outdoors, Toni derives his virility and passion from nature to the extent that he would have inflicted grave damage onto Albert. Fueled by emotion, as opposed to reason, his behavior stands in opposition to traditional French Enlightenment values.¹³³ Moreover, his status as a rural, non-French immigrant, and therefore the nature of his alterity, elicits a kind of “primitive” virility that would have no place in French society. Yet it is only with Josepha (i.e. a woman of nature), whose advice Toni heeded, that the violence is stopped. Interestingly, nature renders Toni virile but also moderates his instances of virility, giving him a source of mediated power.

In stark opposition to Toni, Albert figures as the foil who, concerned with business dealings and capitalist gain, exploits nature (and subsequently, women) for his own means. Rather than having a harmonious and equal relationship with the land, he dominates it and by doing so, relegates it to a lower order. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Albert’s association with modernity and authoritarian power evokes certain values promoted by fascist virility. His capitalist tendencies also align closely with fascist ideology. He incarnates the archetype of the business-like rural petit bourgeoisie, or “bad farmer”, who “has forgotten his connection to the land in favor of greed and financial profit.”¹³⁴ Additionally, his attitude towards women, namely Josepha, correlates with his desire of mastery of nature. By raping Josepha, Albert destroys her sexuality and the sexual agency she had prior. The Josepha before the rape flirted openly with Toni, found herself lambasted by village women assuming she was a foreign “*femme fatale*”, and was even accused of coquetry by Fernand without her knowledge. The Josepha after, however, is a subdued domestic prisoner lacking any of her previously expressed vivacity, forced to serve Albert and their child. Albert, in brutally taking possession

¹³³ Christelle Teraud, “Virility in the Colonial Context,” in *A History of Virility*, ed. Alain Corbin, Jean-Jacques Courtine, and Georges Vigarello, trans. Keith Cohen (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 338.

¹³⁴ Lise Saugeres, 379.

of Josepha's fertility, exploits her and her capacity for reproduction (that nature endows woman with) to buttress his paternalist conquest of all that is feminine and natural.

In the final sequences of the film, Toni turns himself in for Josepha's crime after being caught attempting to bury Albert's body. Taking advantage of the escorting police officer's inattentiveness, he pushes the officer down a slope and absconds through the forest (see Fig. 11 below).



Figure 11. Toni amongst the trees.

Completely shrouded by trees in this wide shot, it almost seems that Toni has hope in his mission to escape. Unfortunately, his escape route steers him to the bridge's railroad tracks where he first crossed in the beginning of the film to arrive in Martigues. The close association between the proliferation of rail transport and the rise of capitalism in the 19th century should not appear as coincidental. Railways reduced the cost and duration of transport, thereby ushering in unprecedented technological efficiency in the modern era and allowing for the emergence of national markets. The dense forestry in Figure 11 is thus immediately superseded by the overwhelming industrial beams of steel, placing Toni on a bridge that, as an instrument of modernity and a product of industrialized technology antagonizes him and heralds his demise (see Fig. 12 below).



Figure 12. Toni running towards his death on the bridge.

The difference between the two shots above (Figures 11 and 12) is not only the scenery in the background, but also the camera movement used to capture Toni. While the forest shot is static, and pictures him disappearing into the thickets, the bridge sequence lasts roughly thirty seconds as the camera tracks him running across to the other side. The effect renders the viewer claustrophobic as steel beam after steel beam race across the screen, creating a prison-like tunnel from which he seems unable to escape for the duration of the shot. Unfortunately, this sudden encounter with modernity prefigures his death, and he is shot and killed by a bystander whose help had been enlisted by the police.

Given the sociological implications of Italian migration to France during the Interwar period and Toni's status as an Italian émigré, his background in rural labor should not come as surprising. Toni's identification and intimate involvement with nature as *le « bon sauvage »* situates him outside of modernity, and by consequence, outside of fascist ideologies of technological domination. Nature nourishes and protects him, giving him a sanctuary, a home, and a comforting framework of fraternalism when all else looks bleak. It simultaneously renders him virile *and* feminine, by giving him agency and in turn, mediating said agency. In

contrast to the vertically hierarchical structure of society imposed by the modern era, nature functions as an equalizer, acting in a horizontal fashion. As opposed to Albert, the fascist exploiter of nature, Toni represents the return to a simpler time before the oppressiveness of modernity.

CONCLUSION.

Technological and critical rationality: Renoir as Marcuse

Material prosperity has been accompanied by a diminished purity of spirit.

— Jean Renoir¹³⁵

By tackling issues of immigration, xenophobia, class struggle, and gender relationships, *Toni* (1935) marks a decisive shift from Jean Renoir's bourgeois chapter (1931-1934) to his *Front Populaire* era. That is not to say that prior to *Toni*, Renoir was intentionally focusing on stories from bourgeois milieus, but rather the bourgeois setting was one that continued to dominate French popular cinema at the time.¹³⁶ With *Toni*, Renoir opened up the cinematic playing field to characters of other classes and other locales, diversifying his oeuvre and creating more complex characters and narratives.

In rooting the film's underlying conflict in the clash of the rural proletariat against industrialized modernization, Renoir brings to the fore characterizations of masculinity with political undertones. Fascist virility and unforgiving modernity abound in the character of Albert, juxtaposed with fraternalist and Communist values personified by Fernand. Toni, constantly on the receiving end of a brotherly helping hand as well as romantic rejection and marital complaints, fails to achieve masculine ideals set by either camp. His ambivalent masculinity, which differs from the aforementioned archetypes, begins to make sense when taking into account his affiliation with nature. As a man who respects nature, who nurtures and finds himself nurtured by it, Toni incarnates the true peasant who lives in harmony with his natural and rural settings. Situated squarely in opposition to technology, he becomes the anti-fascist; placed alongside principles of fraternity, his masculinity diverges from Communist

¹³⁵ Jean Renoir, *My Life and My Films*, trans. Norman Denny (New York: Atheneum) (English translation of *Ma vie et mes films*. Paris: Flammarion, 1974), 124.

¹³⁶ Alexander Sesonske, "Toni," in *Jean Renoir, the French Films, 1924-1939* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1980), 176.

virility – ultimately to reveal a rural working-class figure who, in dying on the same railroad tracks he arrived on, warns the viewer about the imminent dangers of destructive modernity.

“NEW WOMEN” IN *TONI*

In order to explore archetypes of masculinity, the other side of the gender binary must also be examined. In the 1920s, many Communists in France, including the women participating in the newspaper *L'Ouvrière*, sought to create a “new woman” similar to the Communist new man. This new woman, inspired by actress and suffragette Marguerite Durand (1864-1936), predicated its terms on female independence and the transgression of traditional gender norms.¹³⁷ Many supporters of the new woman proposed that women should be active in the workplace, fight as activists for their unions and for their rights, and join the Communist Party.¹³⁸

Josepha and Marie represent a form of the New Woman by taking matters into their own hands. Josepha begins the film being told that she is “part of the livestock” of her Uncle Sébastien’s farm, traded into the hands of Albert as a result of her betrothal.¹³⁹ While her situation worsens as she continues to suffer verbal and physical abuse from him even long after the wedding, she eventually acts decisively to alter her oppressive circumstance by first attempting to steal Albert’s money, and then shooting and killing him in self-defense. Similarly, Marie eschews passivity by attempting to drown herself, and later on by evicting Toni. Both actions imply a sort of agency on her part where, instead of giving up and resigning to her fate, Marie tries to change her own life no matter how destructive the consequences. By giving the

¹³⁷ Geoff Read, “Gender and the Totalitarian Drift,” in *The Republic of Men: Gender and the Political Parties in Interwar France* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2014), 56.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 57.

¹³⁹ Kim Wells, “Commodification and Women in Three Early Jean Renoir Films: A Feminist View,” *Lingua Romana* 5, no. 1 (January 1, 2006), <http://linguaromana.byu.edu/2016/06/08/commodification-and-women-in-early-jean-renoir-films-a-feminist-view/>.

two female protagonists in the film a means of control, Renoir reveals his sympathy for women in a patriarchal society that regards them as nothing more than property.

RENOIR ON MODERNITY

“Fascism, like communism, believes in progress. The followers of both creeds look at a social order based on technology. Technology is the ruling god, whether in Moscow or New York.”¹⁴⁰ So writes Jean Renoir in his autobiography *Ma Vie et mes films* (1974), echoing Herbert Marcuse’s 1941 article “Some Social Implications of Modern Technology”.¹⁴¹ This statement reveals Renoir’s disenchantment with Communism, which began to take shape towards the end of the 1930s. By the time the PCF had reached the height of its influence, Renoir had moved on from communism.¹⁴² *Toni*’s disavowal of modernity and all that it stands for prefigures Renoir’s ideological disillusionment, perhaps indicating an undercurrent of doubt even as he entered into his period of political engagement. Speaking retrospectively, Renoir continues on the same page of *Ma Vie et mes films*:

If I were forced to do so, with my back to the wall, I would opt for communism because it seems to me that those who believe in it have a truer conception of human dignity. But for me, as I have said again and again and shall go on saying, the real enemy is progress, not because it doesn’t work but precisely because it does. Aircraft are not dangerous because they occasionally crash, but because they leave and land on time and carry their passengers in comfort. Progress is dangerous because it is based on perfect technology. It is its success which has distorted the normal values of life and compelled man to live in a world for which he was not intended.¹⁴³

In the context defined by Renoir, “progress” relies on technology, in turn an instrument of modernization. Having suffered severe mutilation in a war that, owing to modern technology, devastated an entire generation of men, Renoir’s denouncement of “progress” even this late in his years should not come as surprising. Mentally scarred by wartime trauma, Renoir began his

¹⁴⁰ Jean Renoir, 124.

¹⁴¹ Article previously cited in Chapter Three.

¹⁴² Laurent Marie, “Renoir and the French Communist Party: The Grand Disillusion,” in *A Companion to Jean Renoir* (Somerset: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2013), 343.

¹⁴³ Jean Renoir, 124.

career during a period where France was scrambling to rebuild its economy, culture, and citizenry. He later on attained recognition and prestige in a time and place where he witnessed constant fracturing and reconfiguration of political parties, all struggling in the name of “progress”. By choosing communism not out of pure choice, but rather from the lack thereof, Renoir defends his position in the above passage by aligning himself with ideological values, such as “human dignity”, instead of political movements. Because communism was born in the early 20th century with the founding of the Soviet Union, historically it remains a distinctly modern phenomenon, and cannot be separated from its roots. Additionally, communism grew in part from syndicalist unions in rapidly industrializing Moscow, where Bolsheviks had begun to realize the technological nature of their labor.¹⁴⁴

The success of “progress”, in consisting of technology’s increasing mechanization of human activity, is therefore predicated on human obedience to procedures.¹⁴⁵ Whereas critical rationality presupposes the ability to reason as part of being an individual, technological rationality operates by subjecting individual self-interest to heteronomous factors, confining its realization and determination to external directives.¹⁴⁶ As Marcuse ominously declares, “There is no personal escape from the apparatus that has mechanized and standardized the world.”¹⁴⁷ Toni, who represents the purity of man, fails to thrive in a society marked by increasing industrialization; surrounded by railroad tracks, he literally cannot escape as he sprints towards his death. By the end of the film, modernity has corrupted his innocence by “distort[ing] the normal values of life and compell[ing] man to live in a world for which he was not intended”.¹⁴⁸ Toni, as a “noble savage” and a true peasant, was never meant to survive

¹⁴⁴ Ralph Darlington, “Introduction,” in *Syndicalism and the Transition to Communism: An International Comparative Analysis* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 3.

¹⁴⁵ Herbert Marcuse and Douglas Kellner, “Some Social Implications of Modern Technology,” in *Technology, War and Fascism: Collected Papers of Herbert Marcuse* (London: Routledge, 1998), 46.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 50

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 46.

¹⁴⁸ Jean Renoir, 124.

in a modern world, and instead dies yearning for a utopic and natural New World in Argentina with the woman he can never have.

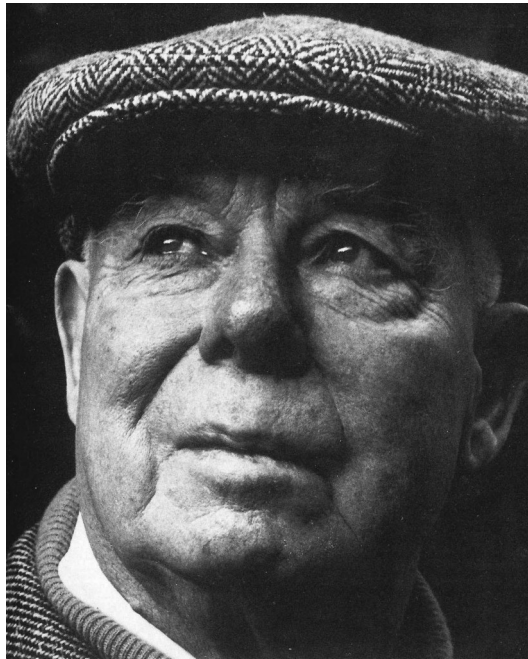
Since Renoir defines “progress” as a process of modernization, it would seem fitting that he would theoretically propose “regress” as its antidote. Yet, by moralizing Toni’s death as the inevitable demise of man *as he should be* in the face of such “progress”, Renoir does not prescribe “regress” as a solution. Any association with nature without intent to manipulate or control it will invariably be phased out as society marches on to the beat of technological rationality. Even though Albert faced retribution in death, his capitalist and exploitative legacy lives on in the gendarmerie seeking to capture Toni as part of an overarching societal structure aimed at stamping out critical rationality. Critical rationality, “whose values can be fulfilled only if it has itself shaped all personal and social relationships”, is partially manifested in Toni’s hopes of romantic success.¹⁴⁹ The concept figures throughout the film as a goal to which to aspire in the form of Josepha, again only to be crushed by the industrial machine that is Albert.

To the average French cinemagoer in 1935, barely recovering from the economic crises of the 1920s only to wrestle with the political instability of the 1930s, *Toni*’s fatalistic qualities certainly did not provide a source of escapism or solace. As mentioned in Chapter One, Renoir himself reflected on the reception of *Toni*, remarking that “it seemed brutal to people...It was as welcome as a hair in a bowl of soup.”¹⁵⁰ Nevertheless, with his subsequent films in the mid-to late 1930s, up until his escape to the United States following the onset of World War II, Renoir sought to illuminate the human condition by holding up his lens to issues of class conflict in celebrated films such as *La Grande illusion* (1937) and *La Règle du jeu* (1939). As

¹⁴⁹ Herbert Marcuse, 50.

¹⁵⁰ Ronald Bergan, *Jean Renoir: Projections of Paradise* (Overlook Press, 1994), 142.

the era of the *Front Populaire* approached the audiences of *Toni*, hope seemed possible once more for the people of France.



Jean Renoir
15 September 1894 – 12 February 1979

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