

42ND Telluride

FILM FESTIVAL

RESTORING NAPOLEON

A conversation between Paolo Cherchi Usai, Resident Curator, and Georges Mourier, restoration expert

PAOLO CHERCHI USAI: How long ago did you start on the NAPOLEON restoration? How did you come to be involved?

GEORGES MOURIER: When I arrived in Paris in 1982, I was “adopted” by two schools of thought: one in the theater (the renowned director Charles Dullin), the other in the cinema, those close to Abel Gance, among them his daughter Clarisse; his friend Claude Lafaye, a devoted patron for the last 20 years; and Dagmar Bolin, who was his assistant on 11 films from 1934 to 1967. Naturally, I wrote my university thesis at the Sorbonne Nouvelle on the subject of Gance, benefiting from their support and the access they granted me to their personal archives. From 1986 on, I also worked with Bambi Ballard, who restored NAPOLEON for the Cinémathèque Française in 1992. Then, in 2004, after becoming a filmmaker myself and making several documentaries and narrative features, I decided to pay tribute to Abel Gance and his collaborators by making the documentary *IN THE SHADOW OF THE GREAT OAKS*, which will be presented at Telluride. I believe that it was thanks to all these friendships and efforts, that the Cinémathèque Française asked me to undertake this enormous project at the end of 2007.

NAPOLEON was presented in 1927 in two versions. Why? What are the differences in terms of duration and content?

One must not forget that Gance was not an isolated genius immersed in his dreams, as he is often represented. He was also a producer and knew well how to adapt to different markets. He had thus, from very early on, conceived of a short version and a long version, which he wanted to market in episodes. For the short version referred to as *Opera* (approximately four hours, and presented at the Paris Opera), he saved the “climactic” scenes, where the lyrical drive is strongest, where he “puts the pedal to the metal.” The emotional drift of history reigns supreme. In the long version, referred to as *Apollo* (approximately nine hours), he develops other characters in relation to the legend of Bonaparte: humble, anonymous characters inspired in ordinary people who experience history in the process of its becoming. This provides a much more human and balanced dimension. The intimate stands parallel to the grandiose. These characters were eliminated from the *Opera* version. As an anecdote, the actress Annabella, who got her first acting role in cinema in *NAPOLEON*, eagerly attended the premiere of the *Opera* version—only to be very disappointed to see her role practically reduced to a silhouette.

Why was the famous final sequence of the “triptych” absent in the so-called Apollo version?

Unlike the version presented at the Opera, the two screenings in the Apollo cinema were not destined to make a profit. There were 10 screenings at the Opera, and it set a box office record. The Apollo screenings were reserved for distributors and journalists, and the theater had therefore not been equipped with a special booth containing three projectors as it had been the case at the Opera. Gance thus projected an alternate single-screen version of the end. But when the film was distributed, this Apollo version was screened with the triptych in the theaters that were appropriately equipped. That was Gance’s desire.

Abel Gance produced other versions of his film. Can you explain the differences between these versions and those of 1927?

There is the 1927 film in two versions *Opera* and *Apollo*. Then in 1935, Gance adapted his silent film to a sound version, *NAPOLEON BONAPARTE*. It’s important to note that this was not simply a sound version of the 1927 film. In reality, Gance shot a new film, in which the characters meet again during one evening at an inn in Grenoble and reminisce about their adventures with Napoleon. Their flashbacks are extracts from the 1927 film. So Gance applied sound to the flashbacks of 1927, shot new scenes, and re-edited the film to a 140-minute version. In 1971, he returned to do a second sound version. This was called *BONAPARTE AND THE REVOLUTION*, produced by Claude Lelouch. For this version, he used what was left of the 1927 version, what was left of the 1935 version, and once again, shot new scenes and re-edited to create a new 275-minute version. The result is quite confounding. The role of King Louis XVI is played by three different actors! In the end, all these three versions, 1927, 1935, and 1971, are very interesting because, as Claude Lelouch noted, one can feel how Abel Gance perceived the character of Napoleon in three different stages of his long life.

Numerous archivists and scholars have presented their versions of the film in the course of many years. What is your opinion about the work of your predecessors?

Excellent. Each restoration has been a feat. Henri Langlois and Marie Epstein were the first to attempt a restoration of the film and succeeded in presenting it at the Venice Film Festival in 1953 with the triptychs. But their merit lies, above all, in managing to make reproductions of all the elements they managed to save. This tedious, painstaking, enormous and costly work decisively laid the ground for all future restoration work. Then came the great work of Kevin Brownlow, for which I have profound respect. Without his near lifelong efforts, I would have never discovered his version of Napoleon restored in 1983 with the BFI and the Cinémathèque Française presented at the Palais des Congrès in Paris with a live orchestra. Three thousand people cheered with enthusiasm: it was one of the greatest cinematic shocks of my life. I witnessed with my own eyes how Bambi Ballard, for her restoration of the 1992 version, had worked with thorough devotion. Since our work with my editor Laure Marchaut, we were

able to further appreciate the rigor of her method: she was the one who got me into the habit of writing “for those to come,” noting everything she did in her work, her research, her insights, even the justification for her editing choices. This is what she called her “per memoriam.” It’s what is known in Fine Arts, as an art dossier: the log of all the interventions done onto a piece. Before, no one used to do that for a film. She was thus well ahead of her time.

We have several incarnations of NAPOLEON. Why create another one? What is it’s specific objective?

True, we have more than 22 versions of the film! Originally, my mission for NAPOLEON was meant to be a simple, three-month-long consultation ... But gradually, and as newly discovered elements came to light, a new restoration became inevitable. First, Claude Lafaye had kept all of Gance’s personal archives after his death, and had donated them in 1995 to the Bibliothèque Nationale de France. This very important and complex archive was only rendered accessible at the end of 2000. Similarly, and in tandem with my consultation, another immense Gance paper archive was restored and made accessible by the Cinémathèque Française. It took Delphine Warin, head of the archives, eight years, from 2002 to 2010, to compile and catalogue all the documents for the researchers. Whereas someone would write a simple three-line telegram, Gance would write three pages! Not a single archivist before had access to such a treasure trove of paper documentation. In addition, more than 400 cans of film that laid unopened since 1971 were discovered. A careful examination led us to discover that the Opera and Apollo versions each had their own negative, but these two negatives featured different artistic choices: framing, rhythm, camera movement, superimpositions, etc. All the previous archivists who had worked on the restoration, with the available means and knowledge at the time, had mixed the two negatives—with good intention. Two different “musics of light” as Gance said of his cinema, were mixed together.

Your restoration project benefited from an enormous quantity of original paper documents. Was there one in particular that aided you in your endeavor?

Yes, the one we called “the Epstein sequencer.” In 1969, when Gance launched BONAPARTE AND THE REVOLUTION, he appealed to Henri Langlois and Marie Epstein to gather everything that had been preserved from his preceding versions of 1927 and 1935. It was then that Gance and Marie Epstein each reproduced an original document: the list of all the scenes with their duration and order corresponding to the Apollo version. This unlikely document became our “Rosetta Stone.” It allowed us to have, at last, a coherent basis of the order of the film, and to understand a lot of things. Until that time, the only documents one could consult were, for instance, the “literary” version of the screenplay edited by the Plon Library in 1927, and which contained scenes that were never shot, and others that were eliminated in the final edit. After two years of work, all the puzzle pieces began to make sense. It was a revelation.

There wasn’t a triptych in the Apollo version. However, you are counting on including it in your version. Why did you make this choice, despite your enormous efforts to adhere to historical authenticity?

In fact, Gance was very clear on this matter, because as a producer, he closely followed and partially supervised the distribution of the film. The Apollo version was also screened with the triptychs. So it was the same fragment of film used in the two versions: Opera and Apollo. Unlike the rest of the film, which corresponds to two different negatives (one for the Opera, one for the Apollo), there was only one sequence of triptychs. You can already imagine the incredible complexities of shooting and mounting the sequence for three screens at the time! Doing a second sequence would have triggered a nervous breakdown for the technicians! Wherever he was able to project the long version of Apollo (or the version derived from this negative) with the triptychs, he did it.

When do you think you will present the new edition of NAPOLEON? Which musical score will you use?

The restoration in 4K has begun, but this endeavor will take nearly two years, since it entails numerous unprecedented technical feats. So it is too early to announce a place and a date. I think it will be for 2017. Worldwide, primarily with the music score of Carmine Coppola. Francis Ford Coppola wants to honor and perpetuate the memory of his father Carmine, who had composed a score for the memorable screenings at Radio City Music Hall in 1981. However, a great work of adaptation will be necessary, as well as respecting certain tunes that Gance had literally noted when he composed his original montage, and that we think we have finally found.

Your project will be judged in posterity. What are you most proud of? What is your biggest regret? Can you imagine another future version of NAPOLEON?

I wouldn’t speak only of pride, but also of honor. I never imagined that the young film student I was, when I discovered the NAPOLEON in the Palais de Congrès in 1983, would be called by the Cinémathèque Française to contribute to its history. Because this film, as Abel Gance would say, is more than a film, it’s a “cathedral of light.” And like all cathedral builders, I’m just a humble artisan, a stone carver, or glassmaker, who has had many illustrious predecessors. A cathedral is never finished. There will be successors. My greatest regret was having to abandon my personal projects as a filmmaker. But please know, I’m not comparing myself to these masters! When I was asked in 2007 to devote myself to this enormous feat, it was a little bit like asking an amateur Sunday painter to arrange Michaelangelo’s workshop. ... I have thus done my work with respect and willingness to learn, as a simple apprentice, and I thus had the great privilege of observing how a first-rate artist works to create emotion. I will never forget these moments of rapture.