ABEL GANCE (25 October 1889, Paris—10 November 1981, Paris) directed 52 films and wrote 70 screenplays. Some of the films he directed are Bonaparte et la révolution (1971), Valmy (1967 TV), Marie Tudor (1966 TV), Cyranos d'Artagnan (1963), Austerlitz (1960), Quatorze juillet (1953), Paradis perdu/Paradise Lost (1940), J'accuse! (1938), Lucrèce Borgia (1935), Napoléon Bonaparte (1934), Mater dolorosa (1932), La Fin du monde (1931), Au secours!/Help! (1924), La Roue/The Wheel (1923), J'accuse! (1919), Barberousse (1917), Mater dolorosa (1917) and La Digue (1911).

LÉONCE-HENRI BUREL (23 November 1892, Indret, Loire-Atlantique, Pays-de-la-Loire, France—21 March 1977, Mougins, Alpes-Maritimes, Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur, France) shot 133 films, among them Bonaparte et la révolution (1971), Chair de poule/Highway Pickup (1963), Procès de Jeanne d'Arc/Trial of Joan of Arc (1962), Pickpocket (1959), Un condamné à mort s'est échappé ou Le vent souffle où il veut/A Man Escaped (1956), Le Journal d'un curé de campagne/Diary of a Country Priest (1951), Vénus aveugle/Blind Venus (1941), Napoléon Bonaparte (1934), Boudu sauvé des eaux/Boudu Saved from Drowning (1932), La Roue (1923), J'accuse! (1919), Barberousse (1917), Mater dolorosa (1917), and Strass et Compagnie (1915).


ANTONIN ARTAUD (4 September 1896, Marseille, Bouches-du-Rhône, France—4 March 1948 Ivry-sur-Seine, Val-de-Marne, France)—was an important member of the Surrealist movement, best known for his writing about theater, particularly Le Théâtre et son double/The Theater and Its Double (1938) and for his phrase "theater of cruelty"—was a film and theater director, and a sometime actor. Some of his 24 films are Bonaparte et la révolution (1971), Lucrèce Borgia (1935), Napoléon Bonaparte (1934), Mater dolorosa (1932), La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc (1928), Le Juif errant (1926), and Mater dolorosa (1917).


Directed and written by Abel Gance
Produced by Robert A. Harris (1981 re-release)
Original Music by Carmine Coppola (new score 1981 re-release), Carl Davis (new score 1980 restoration, expanded for 2000 restoration), Arthur Honegger (original score)
Cinematography by Léonce-Henri Burel, Jules Kruger, Joseph-Louis Mundwiller, Nikolai Toporkoff
Film Editing by Abel Gance
Production Design by Simon Feldman
Costume Design by Mme. Augris, Jeanne Lanvin (Josephine's costumes), Mme. Neminsky, Charmy Sauvageau
Special Effects by Minime, Edward Scholl, Eugen Schüfftan, Nicolas Wilcké, Segundo de Chomón
Visual Effects by W. Percy Day (matte painter), Eugen Schüfftan (visual effects supervisor), Nicolas Wilcké (miniature maker)
Kevin Brownlow...restoration (1981 re-release)
Carmine Coppola...conductor and music arranger (1981 re-release)
Francis Ford Coppola...presenter (1981 re-release)
Dennis James...musician: organ (1981 re-release)
George Lucas...additional photographer

Albert Dieudonné...Napoléon Bonaparte
Vladimir Roudenko...Napoléon Bonaparte enfant
Edmond Van Daële...Maximilien Robespierre
Alexandre Koubitzky...Danton
Antonin Artaud...Marat
Abel Gance...Louis Saint-Just
Gina Manès...Joséphine de Beauharnais
Suzanne Bianchetti...Marie-Antoinette
Marguerite Gance...Charlotte Corday
Yvette Dieudonné...Elisa Bonaparte
Philippe Hériat...Antonio Salicetti
Pierre Batcheff...Le général Lazare Hoche
Éugénie Buffet...Laetitia Bonaparte
Achô Chakatouny...Pozzo di Borgo
Nicolas Koline...Tristan Fleuri
Max Maxudian...Barras
Annabella...Violine Fleuri et Désirée Clary
Henri Baudin...Santo-Ricci, le berger
Alexandre Bernard...Dugommier
Roger Blum...Palma
Daniel Buiret...Augustin Robespierre
Georges Cahuzac...Le vicomte de Beauharnais


The French director and screenwriter was born in the eighteenth arrondissement of Paris, on the edge of Montmartre, He was the illegitimate son of a prosperous doctor, Abel Flament, and Françoise Péron (or Perthon), a working-class woman from the Bourbons then living with a mechanic Adolphe Gance. The child was baptized under the name of Péron and only given the surname Gance three years later....

In later life, Gance suppressed this working-class background entirely, substituting a comfortable bourgeois upbringing as the son of a respectable doctor and his wife. This account was universally accepted, and only after his death did the facts emerge, as a result of research by Roger Icart....

Gance’s natural father provided funds to send him to the Collège de Chantilly, a privately run boarding school some miles north of the city. Gance was unhappy there and relieved when, at twelve, he was transferred to the Collège Chapital in Paris, which he could attend as a day pupil. In September 1904 he left school, apparently without graduating, and was articled to a solicitor specializing in divorce cases. (This apprenticeship too was probably paid for by Dr. Flament.) Lacking all aptitude for the law, Gance was bored and miserable. Whenever possible he escaped to the Bibliothèque Nationale, where he lost himself in the works of Shakespeare, Hugo, Rostand, and other romantic playwrights for whom he had acquired a taste at school. Dreaming of a career in the theatre... he eventually made his stage debut in a tiny role....

Though his taste in theatre was traditional, he frequented avant-garde artistic circles, where his friends included Apollinaire, Léger, Chagall, Blaise Cendrars, and Honegger.

Gance’s health had never been robust, and in 1910 tuberculosis was diagnosed. Luckily he secured an acting engagement at the Casino de Vittel, and after a few months at the spa he was pronounced cured. On his return to Paris he sold several more scripts. Deciding to take the cinema rather more seriously, he and some friends scraped together 1,000 francs to set up a production company, grandly named Le Film Français. It made four films, all directed and scripted by Gance; none of them has survived. ...In November 1912 he married Mathilde Thizeau, a journalist who shared many of his interests. In 1914 he completed La Victoire and sent it, with a recommendation from de Max, to Sarah Bernhardt. She liked it and promised to have it staged. Three weeks later war was declared, and theatrical activity was curtailed until further notice.

Gance was called up but then rejected on account of his poor health. [He began writing for film and directing.] Instead of another routine melodrama, Gance came up with La Folie du Docteur Tube (The Madness of Dr. Tube, 1915), a surreal black comedy about a mad scientist (Albert Dieudonné) who discovers how to change the appearance of people and things—an excuse for Gance and his cameraman Léonc–Henry Burel, to make resourceful use of distorting lenses. The earliest Gance film to survive, it provides a diverting and intriguing link between the theatrical effects of Méliès and the 1920s experimental avant-garde of Jean Epstein, Duchamp, and Man Ray. “For the first time,” observed Roger Icart, “the cinema was aiming. Not to reproduce an external reality (however much rearranged), but...to create an abstract universe of its own.”...

Gance’s view of cinema was changing rapidly. Initially he had seen himself as a playwright dabbling in this limited, and fairly ludicrous, medium until the live theatre should return to peacetime normality. But now he was coming to realize the vast undeveloped potential that cinema offered, and to consider that here, rather than on the stage, might lie his true métier. Contemporary Hollywood output, especially that of Ince, Griffith, and DeMille, had come as a revelation of what might be achieved, given sufficient imagination and resources.

Few critics would go so far as Kevin Brownlow in seeing La Dixième Symphonie as “a remarkably sophisticated marital drama” with which Gance proved himself “a sensitive, brilliantly imaginative director...the equal of any...in the world.” Nonetheless, the picture demonstrates his growing mastery of visual and structural composition, of rhythmic editing, and of narrative technique Roy Armes observed that “there is a constant interest to be found in Gance’s use of masking and the play of silhouettes and shadows to create mood and his evident awareness of the ability of faces, movement and lighting to convey emotion.”

For all the crudeness of its plot, La Dixième Symphonie can be seen as the first recognizably Gancian film, prefiguring certain recurrent elements in his later output. Damor stands as forerunner of a whole series of heroic figures—Kean Diaz,
Napoleon, Jean Novalic, Beethoven, Columbus—"to whom," as Marcel Martin put it (Revue du Cinéma, May 1983), “Destiny has assigned an exceptional task because their visionary insight penetrates beyond that of ordinary mortals.” The film also marks the first appearance of Gance’s notorious literary intertitles: florid quotes from favorite authors interrupting and clogging the action in a way that even his warmest admirers found hard to justify. In spite of them, the film was hugely successful; made at a cost of 63,000 francs, it grossed 343,000.

Before shooting La Dizzième Symphonie Gance had finally been drafted and assigned to the Cinematographic Corps. He was soon discharged, thanks to an appeal from Film d’Art, but his few weeks in the army had given him the idea for a great cinematic statement about the war. By now he had come within the orbit of the art historian Elie Faure, the first major theoretician of French cinema and center of a group that included Louis Delluc, Jean Epstein, Germaine Dulac, and Marcel l’Herbier. Influence by Faure’s theories and those of Rietti, Gance now aspired to create “cathedrals of light,” “visible symphonies” that would “create for the whole of humanity a unique memory, a kind of music of faith, of hope of recollections.” The cinema, he believed, could become a great force for peace and understanding, playing a mystical, near-sacramental role: “People should go to the movies as they go to Mass.”

The first step towards this ideal was to be J’accuse (I Accuse), Part One of a projected trilogy inspired by Woodrow Wilson’s plan for a League of Nations, of which the other parts would be Les Cicatrice (The Scars) and La Société des Nations. Almost at once, though, this was set aside for a more ambitious plan: an apocalyptic trilogy centered around the figure of a Christ-like philosopher named Jean Novalic. Gance had gained the support and financial backing of the doyen of French producers, Charles Pathé, through whose company Film d’Art released, and in April 1918 began shooting Ecce Homo, first of the Novalic trilogy. Dissatisfied with the results, he abandoned filming after a few days, and with Pathé’s agreement started work instead on J’accuse.

J’accuse (1919) is generally considered, in Kevin Brownlow’s words, as “the first major pacifist picture in the cinema’s history.” This may not have originally been quite the case. Surviving prints (themselves incomplete) derive from the re-edited version released in 1922 when the patriotic fervor of war had cooled. The much longer version released in March 1919 was described by Gance in his spoken prologue as “an ‘objective’ and triumphant cry against German militarism and its slaughter of civilised Europe,” and its script contained an episode (which may not have been filmed) in which a sneering monocled Prussian is confronted at a World Tribunal by the crippled victims of his Hunnish bloodlust....

On its release J’accuse had a staggering impact. It seemed to speak directly to the grief-stricken, war-weary population of Europe. Exhibitors reported whole audiences in floods of tears, women fainting and being carried from the auditorium. Whatever Gance’s original intentions, the film was hailed everywhere as a passionate outburst against the futility of war. “If this film,” a Prague reviewer wrote, “had been shown in every country and every town in the world in 1913, then perhaps there would have been no war.” Attention focused in particular on the Return of the Dead, a virtuoso sequence much argued over ever since. Where Brownlow saw “an allegorical scene of unique and bizarre power,” Jacques Brunius referred to “an intolerably bombastic war film distinguished chiefly for the cliché of making dead soldiers rise in superimposition from the battlefield and pull tragic faces at the camera.” David Thomson judged the sequence “an instance of emotional self-inducement on Gance’s part, as moving but as contradictory as the shots of crowds in Triumph of the Will....There is a naive passion in the conception that has more to do with melodramatic pageant than with true disenchantment.”

J’accuse was astonishingly profitable, eventually grossing over 3.5 million francs. With Pathé’s help, Gance now set up his own production company, Films Abel Gance. Recognized as the foremost French director, he was acknowledged (in Norman King’s words) “not just as an innovator but as a filmmaker who blurred the distinction between the ‘artistic’ and the ‘popular,’ supplying films that were both prestigious and profitable,” and thus a person ideally equipped to lead French cinema out of its financial and cultural depression. Conscious of these expectations, Gance spent some time searching for a suitable next subject. ...Finally he settled on a novel Le Rail, by the proletarian writer Pierre Hamp, which—with the help of Blaise Cendrars—he adopted as La Roue (The Wheel).

During the war Gance had fallen in love with Ida Danis, a secretary at Film d’Art, and in June 1918 left Mathilde for her. The great flu epidemic of the winter after the war had left Ida with an infection which, just as work started on La Roue, was diagnosed as terminal tuberculosis. According to Gance’s own romantic account, he tailored the scenario to Ida’s medical requirements, setting the first half in Nice because she needed sunshine, then adding the second half on Mont Blanc when Alpine air was prescribed. On the other hand, the Pathé studios were at Nice; and in a diary entry predating the diagnosis of Ida’s illness, Gance discussed his concept of a “symphony in black” (the railyard) followed by a “symphony in white” (the mountains)....

La Roue took over a year to shoot, almost entirely on location. Sisif’s house was constructed in the very middle of the railyards outside Nice, giant locomotives thundering past a few feet from the camera. The mountain scenes were shot on Mont Blanc itself. The budget, some two-and-half million francs, was the highest of any French film to date. In its original version the picture ran something over ten hours.

On the day that the initial cutting was completed, Ida Danis died. Soon afterwards Gance made an extended visit to the United States, While there, he learned of the death of Séverin-Mars. Gance stayed five months in New York where he presented J’accuse to an audience that included D.W. Griffith and the Gish sisters. (Griffith, deeply moved by the film, arranged to have it distributed by United Artists.) Watching the latest Hollywood films, Gance was greatly impressed by the fluency and precision of their editing. On his return to Paris he completely recut La Roue, which was premiered (in three parts) in December 1922. The previous month he had married Marguerite Danis, Ida’s sister.

[Critical reaction ranged from ‘an extraordinarily important monstrousity’ to René Clair’s “if only he would renounce literature and have confidence in cinema!” and Jean Cocteau’s “There is cinema before and after La Roue just as there is painting before and after Picasso.”]

The most revolutionary aspect of La Roue lay in its unprecedented use of rapid, rhythmic cutting, which was to prove widely influential. Two sequences attracted particular notice: the death of Elie, and Sisif’s first attempt to crash his train. Gance achieved a crescendo of narrative hysteria by steadily decreasing the length of his shots to near subliminal level: close-ups of hands, faces, levers, wheels, hurtling railway tracks are intricately intercut; some shots are no more than a single frame in
...These sequences were internationally admired; Eisenstein, Pudovkin, and Dovzhenko all studied them in detail, and Kurosawa named La Roue as the film which first aroused his enthusiasm for the cinema....

Initially, it seems, Gance embarked on the idea of a biopic of Napoleon with some detachment, regarding it merely as "a commercial trampoline which will let me achieve the freedom to work as I want." But as so often happened, he got caught up in the project developed in a surge of self-generated enthusiasm, and was soon talking in terms of six, or even eight, vast films to cover Napoleon’s life, “the greatest drama of all time.” The problems of raising funds for such a project, daunting in any case, were often exacerbated by Gance himself....

Pathé was prepared to put up some of the money, but most of the financial support for the project came from Germany—giving rise to much hostile sniping from the French press. Vladimir Wengeroff, a White Russian businessman based in Berlin, and Hugo Stinnes, one of the leading German industrialists, formed the Westi Consortium to provide the bulk of the budget, which was set at seven million francs. Gance retained absolute artistic control.

The first film was due for completion by the end of 1924, but shooting only began in January 1925. The initial episode covered Bonaparte’s boyhood and experiences during the Revolution, ending as he led his army over the Alps to Italy, scene of his first great military triumph; originally it also included the Italian campaign itself, but Gance was obliged to cut this from his script, shortening it by almost a third. Even so, it would be the most expensive film that had ever been made in France, or anywhere outside America.

As the adult Bonaparte, Gance cast Albert Dieudonné, an old friend who had played the title role in La Folie du Docteur Tube. Antonin Artaud was Marat, and Gance himself played Saint-Just, theoretician of the Revolution. The sixteen-year-old Annabella made her screen debut as Violine, a young woman of the people who adores Napoleon from afar. Bonaparte as a boy was played by Vladimir Roudenko, one of the singularly large number of Russians involved, both as actors and crew. This was mainly because the Billancourt studios, where Gance shot his interiors, was owned by Cinéfrance, whose head, the Russian Nöe Bloch, had staffed his company largely with his fellow exiles. Two of Gance’s assistants on Napoléon were established Russian directors—Viacheslav Tourkansky and Alexander Volkoff.

All accounts of Gance as director—especially on Napoléon—stress the exceptional personal magnetism he exercised over those who worked with him, persuading them to tireless, uncomplaining effort. Before shooting the battle scenes for the siege of Toulon, he made an impassioned appeal to his extras—most of them not professional actors, but strikers from the nearby Renault works: “Thanks to you, we are going to relive the Revolution and the Empire—an unheard-of task. You must find in yourselves the fire, the frenzy, the power, and the mastery and the abnegation of those soldiers of the Year II....My friends, all the screens of the universe await you.” Emile Vuillermoz, film critic of Le Temps, who watched much of the shooting, felt that Gance established such influence over his extras “he could have made them storm the Palais-Bourbon or the Elysée and had himself proclaimed dictator.”

Five months into shooting, disaster struck. Hugo Stinnes died suddenly, and the Westi Consortium was dissolved. The budget now stood at nine million francs, of which five million had been spent. Gance had to halt the production for several months until fresh sources of finance could be found....

Shooting was finally completed in August 1926, after which Gance spent seven months editing the film, restless recutting and rearranging, and driving his collaborators—especially Honegger, who was providing the score—to distraction. A shortened version (some four hours long) prepared especially for the premiere was finished with only hours to spare.

Napoléon vu par Abel Gance (Napoleon as Seen by Abel Gance) was premiered at the Opéra on April 7, 1927, before a glittering audience that included most of the senior dignitaries of the Republic. Despite the occasional hitch—a few frames, spliced in at the last minute, appeared upside-down—the response was intensely enthusiastic. Several sequences, such as Bonaparte’s dashing horseback escape, in best Fairbanks style, from his Corsican enemies, were greeted with cheers and shouts of excitement, and when the film ended Gance received a fifteen-minute standing ovation.

If the startling originality of La Roue had resided in its editing, imposed on the material almost as an afterthought, that of Napoléon lay, more intrinsically, in the shooting approach. Gance had aimed for an -unheard-of degree of camera mobility. “I made [the camera] walk, run, turn its head, fall to its knees, raise its eyes to heaven; I made it into a living being with a brain and—even better a heart.” He also made it gallop on horseback, dive from a cliff, breast the waves, swing from a giant pendulum, and join in a snowball fight. (Despite persistent reports, though, he never hurled it through the air like a snowball.) His intention was not merely to astonish his viewers but to compel them to become totally involved as participants in the drama.

Throughout the film, Gance also experimented with the effects of blending and multiplying images. Sometimes by superimposition: “I had up to sixteen images on top of one another; I knew that from the fifth image on, nothing more could be made out—but they were there, and therefore their potential was there too, just as in music when you have fifty instruments playing: you cannot distinguish the sound of each instrument, but it’s the orchestration which counts, as you’re surrounded by it.” Elsewhere he split his screen into multiple sections, as many as nine for the pillow fight at Brienne (reworked by Vigo for Zéro de conduite). And in the spectacular Double Tempest sequence, oscillating shots of Bonaparte’s tiny boat, tossed by a raging storm, were intercut with, and overlaid on, the wild uproar in the Convention as Jacobins oust Girondists, Gance’s camera swinging vertiginously above the brawling throng.

Most dramatic of all Gance’s innovations were the triple-screen sequences, filmed in a process he named Polivision. (He also, it seems, shot sequences in color and 3-D, but suppressed them as too distracting.) At two points in the narrative, curtains rolled back on each side of the main screen to produce huge triptychs: For the Bal des Victimes the screens showed three separate pictures, but for the grand finale of the Army of Italy the image extended into a full panorama; and in the closing shots the outer panels turned respectively blue and red, transforming the screen into a giant Tricolor. “The audience, “Emile Vuillermoz reported, “feels miraculously liberated. Reality and dream no longer appear through a tiny casement; a whole wall grows transparent like crystal and opens up another universe. The spectators suddenly become a crowd watching a crowd. The onrush of this magical world cause an emotional shock of rare intensity.”

Once the original excitement had subsided, critical
response was more mixed. Many reviewers, while hailing the triptychs with enthusiasm, found Gance’s mobile camera an irritation. “The camera oscillates, shakes, slips,” wrote Raymond Vilette in *Mon Ciné*, in short, bounces around, which has an unpleasant effect on the retina.” Others objected, as always, to the all-too-frequent lapses of taste, the bombast, sentimentality, and crude attempts at humor that marred the grandeur of the overall conception.

Much of the controversy centered—as it still does—on the political implications of the film’s romanticized view of its hero. In some quarters it was greeted with unabashed jingoism. “Glorification of France on the screen!” rhapsodized *La Semaine à Paris*. “Abel Gance’s *Napoléon* is the most marvelous hymn to France—the Marseillaise of the image....The whole world will say: ‘It is true, the French are not as other men: if they were, they would not possess a living epic!’” On the left, if the verdict was similar, the tone was very different. In *L’Humanité* Léon Moussiaçac praised the film as “a major step forward for cinematography,” but condemned its content as “not only false but dangerous....A Bonaparte for apprentice fascists.” More recent critics have reached similar verdicts. Peter Pappas, writing in *Cinéaste* (Spring 1981), called *Napoléon* “the greatest—and certainly the most profound—fascist film in the history of the cinema....It strives to make the presentation and understanding of history an unintelligible act—or rather, an act intelligible only to a few seers privy to the mystery of an arcane universe. *Napoléon* is a testament to the capacity of fascism to function as the great equalizer, capable of reducing all humanity to one massive and common denominator of received intelligence....We are compelled to confront an esthetic strategy whose singular intention is to superimpose the ‘authentic’ truth on what, according to Gance, is only the apparent, but quintessentially fallacious, fact of history. *Napoléon*, all roads are paved with the same intention: the apotheosis of distortion.”

Gance always maintained that his view of Napoleon was essentially democratic: that Bonaparte derived his power from the support of the people and stood as the embodiment of the popular will, “direct heir” of the Revolution. Even so, the standpoint is basically elitist: the people are never shown as taking charge of their own destiny. Nor can Gance’s description of Napoleon as a man who “does everything he can to avoid [war]” easily be reconciled with the film’s final exultant vision of a conquering army on the march. “To adorn the figure of a despot with romantic traits, to decorate the statue of a tyrant with flowers, is heinous work both historically and philosophically,” Émile Vuillermoz wrote in *Cinémagazine*. “To ennoble the technique of massacre through romanticism, to make killing respectable or simply enjoyable is to assume...a great responsibility towards mothers whose children will be gunned down tomorrow.”

For all the éclat of its premiere, *Napoléon* received only a sparse and spasmodic release. Gaumont-Metro-Goldwyn, who had bought the distribution rights preferred to concentrate their attention on the latest blockbuster from Culver City, *Ben-Hur*. The triptychs caused problems; with talkies imminent, and exhibitors nervously reckoning the cost of installing sound equipment, nobody wanted further complications in the shape of triple projectors and expandable screens. Shortened versions, minus the triptychs, were shown here and there, but the original (running some eight hours) was rarely to be seen. British and American showings were disastrous; the film was ruthlessly truncated (in New York it ran about eighty minutes), with the triptychs projected across the middle of as single screen, leaving the audience peering at midget figures as if through a mail slot.

Further Napoleonic films were out of the question. Originally Gance had estimated twenty million francs for all six; *Napoléon* alone had cost around seventeen million. SGF was in deep financial trouble. (Its other major venture, Dreyer’s *Passion de Jeanne d’Arc*, had also attracted much critical interest and very little revenue). Gance sold the rights to the final episode to the German actor-director Lupu Pick, who made it as *Napoleon auf St. Helene* (1929), with Werner Krauss in the title role.

The future of cinema. Gance believed, lay in his Polyvision process, in which he saw “the creation of visual harmonies, the transporting of the spectator’s imagination into a new and sublime world.” To help popularize it, he put together three “Polyvised” episodes from *Napoléon: Galops* (1928), Bonaparte’s horseback escape across Corsica; *Marines* (1928), the storm at sea; and *Danses* (1928), the Bal des Victimes. To these he added *Cristaux*, a Polyvised version of a Dutch documentary (*Kristallen*, 1925, directed by J.C. Mol). They were shown at Studio 28, one of the few Paris cinemas fitted with triple screen, along with *Autour de Napoléon* (1927), a filmed record of the making of the epic.

*Napoléon*’s financial failure did nothing to curb Gance’s soaring imagination. In 1928 he sent a 57-page memorandum to the League of Nations, setting forth the means of harnessing “Universal Psychological Forces” in the cause of world peace. To this end, he would establish a World Cinema Corporation to make a series of films entitled *Les Grands Initiés*, planned to “bring to the screen the epic of human religion, to pour floods of light upon the summits of that immense mountain chain, on...the founding heroes of religions—Moses, Jesus, Mohammed, Buddha, Luther, etc.—who on each occasion have expanded the human heart and invented new forms of goodness. This vast symphony would embrace our modern world, extend into the beyond, and culminate in a personal revelation of which I hold the secret.”

The league was polite but noncommittal, so instead Gance revived an earlier project: *La Fin du monde*, originally planned as the third of the Apocalyptic trilogy of which *Ecce Homo* was to be the first. ...

A saintly visionary, Jean Novalic (played by Gance himself) preaches the message of universal love but is reviled and relegated to an asylum. Before disappearing, he entrusts his task to his brother Martial, an astronomer, who has just discovered a comet on collision course with Earth. News of the coming catastrophe causes panic; some throw themselves into a frenzy of pleasure-seeking, while others, inspired by Jean’s message, come together in newfound solidarity. At the last moment the comet turns aside, and all the nations join in peace and brotherhood.

*La Fin du monde* (*The End of the World*, 1930) was announced as “The first great spectacle of the French talking cinema.” Unlike many silent-era filmmakers, Gance welcomed the coming of sound, seeing its potential not only to echo the image, but to add further dimensions of meaning. To what extent he put these theories into practice in *La Fin du monde* is hard to tell, given the mutilation suffered by the film prior to release Gance’s 5,250-meter version was taken from him and cut by [producer] Ivanoff (with the help of his janitor, Gance alleged) to 2,800 meters of jerky, muddled, and often incomprehensible melodrama.

...The crucial reason—which may have motivated the mutilations—was a fundamental error less in the conception than in the execution of the dialogue...Faults such as lack of psychological depth, overblown sentiments, were amplified to a ludicrous degree by strained, exaggerated performances—starting
with Gance himself—unused to the requirements of the sound cinema. In his silent films, where these faults were already to some extent latent, they could be overlooked in the irresistibly lyrical surge of the images.”

With this debacle, Gance’s career collapsed with appalling suddenness. From being the standardbearer, the far-sighted pioneer boldly leading the French cinema over Alpine peaks towards its glorious future, he found himself dismissed, almost overnight, as an outdated relic, embarrassingly out of tune with the new age. A new generation of directors—Clair, Renoir, Feyder—were gaining recognition, and beside them Gance’s style of cinema seemed irrelevant. ...

With one or two exceptions, Gance’s films of the 1930’s present a depressing picture of drastically diminished expectations. He told an interviewer in 1936; “I had to work, so I began to accept whatever was offered me—the most worn-out plots, the most undemanding projects....I don’t think my producers can complain: my films these days are commercial successes. I don’t go to see them....that’s a different matter.”....

With the collapse of SGF in 1933, rights to the negative of Napoléon reverted to Gance. He took the opportunity to rework it as a sound film, recutting and shortening it, dubbing the voices, and shooting additional scenes, including a cumbrous prologue and epilogue; released as Napoléon Bonaparte (1935), it ran some two and a quarter hours. Dialogue and sound effects were processed through “Perspective Sonore,” a forerunner of multitrack stereo which Gance and André Debrie had invented for La Fin du monde. This sound system was found highly impressive the film less so....

Frustrated in his bid for rehabilitation, Gance returned to making films “with my eyes closed”—trivial studio projects, adaptations of fashionable stage hits or popular novels, executed “not in order to live, but in order not to die.”

In later years, Gance counted Un Grand Amour de Beethoven (The life and loves of Beethoven, 1937) the only one of his sound films worth preserving. A thoroughly fictionalized account of the composer’s later life, focusing on his affair with Juliette Guicciardi, it was rated by Marcel Martin “without doubt Gance’s most perfect film, the one which leaves itself least open to critics irritated by his usual excesses and bombast. Graham Greenem reviewing it in The Spectator, thought otherwise “Terrific storms blow out his characters’ cloaks, enormous chords bellow from the microphone: the actors gesture and moan and wrench their hands in gargantuan griefs, and the banal symbols of blossom and thunder and dawn, all shot with fine pictorial sense, magnify still further the human emotions....This film never rises above the level of a cheap novelette.” He was impressed, though, by Harry Baur in the tile role: “That roughly carved monumental face never fails to convey a great reserve of power and when it drops into the hands it is as if a statue were to weep.”

In the most famous sequence, the onset of Beethoven’s deafness, Gance made striking use of expressionist sound technique: we first hear the various natural sounds that the compose can no longer detect, then see them being made (as he does) without hearing, and finally hear them once again as he recalls them, playing them over to himself in the tormented isolation of his brain....

One of the ironies of Gance’s career was that, while films he threw off as commercial chores were released with scarcely a frame altered, those he cared about were invariably chopped and mangled. Beethoven was cut by its producers by nearly half to make it fit a double bill. A similar fate overtook his sound remake of J’accuse (That They May Live, 1938), cut by a third for release, and further shortened on re-release in 1947.

The sound J’accuse is the more powerful of the two versions....Norman King found the sound version “much more strident in its indictment of war and of the capitalists who stood to gain from it. In contrast to Renoir’s benign humanism [in La Grande Illusion], Gance’s message was urgently and aggressively pacifist....It was widely admired, except in the right-wing press where it was attacked for “defeatism.”

Encouraged by the partial revival of his reputation, Gance began to plan various large-scale projects, in particular a color epic on the life of Christopher Columbus, to be shot in Spain....The outbreak of war disrupted all cinematic activity.

Gance may have been playing it safe [by dedicating La Vénus aveugle to Marshall Pétain at Vichy]. His name apparently featured on a Nazi blacklist in Paris—partly for his membership in the early 1930s in the International Committee for the Defense of the Soviet Union, and partly because he was suspected of being Jewish. His next film (possibly also out of prudence) was a French-Italian co-production: Le Capitain Fracasse (1943), a swashbuckler based on a Théophile Gautier novel, with passages of rhymed dialogue à la Rostand. Soon after it was completed, Gance and his wife slipped across the border to Spain.

Gance’s political attitudes have given rise to a good deal of debate. His consistently professed democratic, and on occasion socialist, beliefs hardly square with his boyish enthusiasm for autocrats: not only past figures like Napoleon, but Mussolini, DeGaulle, Mao Tse-tung—and Franco, whom in May 1938, with the Civil war still raging. He addressed as “the foremost Paladin of our time.” Sympathetic commentators have explained this as naive and often misguided idealism; others have seen it as blatant opportunism. At all events, once in Spain Gance made assiduous efforts to ingratiate himself with the authorities, whose cooperation he sought in making his long-planned Christophe Colomb....After the liberation Gance returned to France to find himself virtually ostracized. For nearly ten years he directed nothing. He devised numerous projects and even traveled to London to try and interest J. Arthur Rank in a film to be called Birth of an Empire, a panegyric to the civilizing mission of British imperialism. The only one of his plans to come anywhere near fruition was La Divine Tragédie, a treatment of the life of Christ backed by the Office Familiale de Documentation Artistique, an anti-communist Catholic organization.

In 1953 Gance was invited to give a tribute to his late friend Jean Epstein. “If my voice is broken, my thoughts wild, and my poor words unsure, it is because I too have earth in my mouth—I too have been killed by the French cinema. This is one dead man speaking to you of another.”

He was rescued from this despair by Nelly Kaplan, newly arrived from Argentina. Kaplan, later to become a considerable director in her own right, constituted herself Gance’s collaborator, muse, and cheering section. In particular, she urged the virtues of Polyvision, the subject of her Manifeste d’un art nouveau: la Polyvision, published in 1957. At her suggestion Gance, regaining his enthusiasm, made a ten-minute polyvised documentary on the July 14th festivities in Paris, Quatorze juillet 1953 (1953) to demonstrate the system’s potential. The next year he returned to feature films, thanks to Fernand Rivers (repaying the favor of twenty years earlier) who offered him an adaptation of a Dumas play, La Tour de Nesle (The Tower of Lust, 1954). This “cape and sword Western,” as Gance described it, his first film in color, was a period adventure generously laced with eroticism; it was shot in...
two versions, Italian (clothed) and French (rather less so). Gance shrugged off clerical complaints of indecency: “I simply evoked in images what is conveyed by the words, but I didn’t tell anybody anything they didn’t already know.” François Truffaut reviewed it in Cahiers du Cinéma: “La Tour de Nesle is, if you like, the least good of Abel Gance’s films. But, since Gance is a genius, it is also a film of genius. Gance does not possess genius, he is possessed by genius.”

For French television he directed an adaptation of Victor Hugo’s play Marie Tudor, broadcast in April 1966, and a year later the first of three programs on the Napoleonie battle of Valmy. Despite his enthusiasm for the medium, no further commission were forthcoming. “TV gives me tributes, but never commissions,” he remarked sardonically. He was equally dismissive of the honors and retrospectives that came his way in later years—the Légion d’Honneur, a César, an International Grand Prix du Cinéma: “so many baubles for an empty stomach!”

Even at this stage Gance was still obsessively tinkering with his silent masterpiece. In 1971, with financial support from Claude Lelouch, he released Bonaparte et la révolution—a ramshackle patchwork which included footage from the original silent Napoléon, some from the 1934 sound version, extracts from Austerlitz and the television programs on Valmy, stills of documents and engravings, and some newly shot continuity. Voices were dubbed where necessary; Dédonné, now eighty years old, dubbed himself, and Gance, at eighty-two, appeared on the screen as Saint-Just. Press reaction was generally respectful, but for those familiar with the silent version it was a sad experience.

By now, an increasing number of people did know the silent Napoléon or at least a good deal of it. This was thanks to Kevin Brownlow, who put in years of work painstakingly reconstructing the film. Ancient prints were salvaged; footage long thought lost was recovered; conflicting versions were pieced together and reconciled. Brownlow also devoted to Gance the long final chapter of his book on the silent cinema, The Parade’s Gone By, and a documentary film The Charm of Dynamite (1968). In 1970 the reconstruction, still missing several key scenes and minus the triptychs, was shown at the National Film Theatre in London and hailed as a revelation. After a further nine years of reclamation Brownlow’s version, now some five hours long, was shown at the Telluride Festival in Colorado, complete with the final triptych sequence. (The earlier two triptychs seem to be lost for good; Gance claimed that he burned them in 1940, in a fit of despair.)

The next year Napoléon was screened in London, accompanied by a full symphony orchestra playing a newly composed score by Carl Davis. It sold out, with tickets changing hands at blackmarket rates; the reviews were ecstatic and almost entirely uncritical. Showings in New York, presented by Francis Ford Coppola (with a score by his father Carmine Coppola), met with similar reactions. Napoléon was acclaimed, in terms far more glowing than any expressed on its first release, as a supreme masterpiece of the cinema, an unqualified triumph.

From now on, it seems likely that Gance’s reputation will rest almost entirely on this one film, out of the fifty or so he directed. Perhaps rightly so—not only is Napoléon, as Bernard Eisenschitz noted, “technically...one of the richest films in the history of the cinema,” it also represents, in its sprawling vitality and narrative bravura, the climax of Gance’s greatest period, a summing-up of his silent cinema achievements before the decline of his sound films.

Evaluation of Abel Gance’s work is to some extent hampered by the impossibility of seeing any of his major films in complete prints—or even, in most cases, of establishing just what would constitute “a complete print.” La Roue, J’accuse (both versions), Un grand amour de Beethoven, La Fin du monde have survived only in truncated and mutilated form, and even Napoléon, despite Brownlow’s devoted work, is still missing at least two hours of footage and two of the three triptych sequences. All the same, the character of what remains is consistent enough to suggest that, even were the gaps to be filled, the final verdict on Gance might not be very different.

Almost everybody who has written about Gance’s work, favorably or otherwise, has agreed on one salient point: its disconcerting unevenness....

Some recent critics have been reader to accept Gance at his own estimate—as a visionary genius whose innovations, deliberately suppressed by a timid and pusillanimous industry, could have led to a greater, more glorious future. Kevin Brownlow asserted that “the motion-picture industry...was alarmed by Gance’s monumental talents, and frightened by his revolutionary ideas. They determined to control him, and to limit the length of his artistic leash. Unfortunately for all of us, they succeeded.” Similarly, Brooks Riley wrote in Film Comment (Jan-Feb 1982): “The history of cinema since Napoléon could be described as a narrowing process, one which gave way to rules, definitions, and the congealing requisites of the market.”...

Gance seems likely to find his place alongside Griffith as one of the great, flawed masters of silent cinema, unsurpassed in the zest and audacity of his visual imagination.

Napoleon Abel Gance’s Classic Film. Kevin Brownlow. Alfred A. Knopf NY 1983

I didn’t want to go to Radio City in January 1981 because I thought it would be an anti-climax. The London show had been so amazing I didn’t think it would ever be possible to top it. . . .

Radio City Music Hall did not look very imposing from the outside. A rather pinched marquee anticipated the return of the prisoners from Iran: ‘WELCOME EX-HOSTAGES! FRANCIS FORD COPPOLA PRESENTS ABEL GANCE’S NAPOLEON LIVE ORCHESTRA CONDUCTED BY CARMINE COPPOLA WELCOME EX-HOSTAGES!'

Inside the theatre foyer soared to the stars, and seemed larger on its own than any cinema in Britain. I was unprepared for the auditorium. You could store six Zeppelins in it, and still have room for the audience. Designed in 1930s style—High Kitsch—it seated 6,000. But the ticket sales were so encouraging that Coppolla’s company, Zozotrope, were considering extra shows. Tom Luddy, responsible with Bernard Gersten for staging the event, assured me Gance was coming. I said the poor man could hardly cross the room, let alone the Atlantic, but apparently Gance had told him, ‘I would rather die on the stage in New York than sit in my bed.’ Mme Salacroup had bought tickets on the Concorde, and planned to look after him herself....

Gene Kelly read a message from Gance: ‘When I came to New York two years ago, I fell in love with its excitement and grandeur, but I don’t have the pep for the journey. At the age of ninety-one, I don’t have enough confidence in my body. My spirit is with you, and I am deeply moved that my Napoléon is being shown to such a large enthusiastic audience. I hope that its images, although silent, will still have something to say to you.’
...Napoléon had never been seen by so many at one show, and the enthusiasm was almost tangible. People tended to have lost contact with shared enjoyment on a large scale; they now watched TV in small family units, or alone, and if they went to the movies it was to find the old picture palaces divided into cubicles not much larger than the rooms they had left. A sizeable proportion of the spectators that night had probably never seen a film with several thousand people before, had never experienced the electricity that passes between people and unites them.

If the atmosphere was highly charged, it soon grew positively explosive. When the single screen burst its boundaries, the audience was overwhelmed—and one could hear the gasps and ‘oh, wow!’ as the horses thundered past in the review. When the triptych was transformed into a tricolor, the audience erupted in wild applause. And as the orchestra rose into view on its elevator platform, the audience rose, too, and gave Coppola and Gance a deafening ovation. I had never heard 6,000 people react with such fervor to a film before.

‘That was no big deal,’ said someone, as we all filed out. ‘That was a miracle.’

It was seeing someone using a phone backstage that gave me the idea to place a call to Gance just before the finale of the second show so he could hear for himself that incredible ovation. Since the time difference meant that we would have to wake him early in the morning, Annette Insdorf checked with him: Gance said he would love to be wakened for applause at 6 a.m.!

Gance was extremely sleepy when the allotted time came round. ‘C’est Annette, à New York! Annette! À New York!’ At last she got through to him. ‘Who is this? Annette? He asked.

‘Yes. You will soon be hearing the applause—all for you.’

‘It is too late,’ he said bluntly. To soften the blow, he added: ‘It is never too late to do good.’

‘Here is the music now,’ said Annette, holding the receiver out. The orchestra broke into La Marseillaise; the audience into applause. Annette held the phone out to the wings. More applause, then the audience rose to its feet in another thunderous ovation. ‘They are on their feet now,’ said Annette. She put her hand over the mouthpiece and said that Gance was weeping. The orchestra played a reprise of the Josephine theme. Gance said, ‘I thank you all who did this beautiful thing—I don’t have to be there to see it with my eyes, Be sure to thank all the people who have brought the film to New York.’ The applause subsided as the audience listened to the music, so David Gill took the receiver and went right out on stage—stretching the cable until I feared it would be torn from its socket. He signalled for more applause, and the audience knew at once what was expected of them. They responded with everything they had. The publicist, Renee Furst, was crying. Annette too. ‘I don’t believe I’m hearing this,’ said Bob Harris. It was like telephoning heaven and waking Beethoven to hear what mortals thought of his work. David made the audience cheer again. Annette told Gance who the people were who were standing around the phone, and that we each sent him our fondest wishes, and the conversation came to an end.

Francis Ford Coppola came backstage and we were introduced: ‘Don’t you wish you could make a picture that would get a reaction like that?’ he said.

_Napoléon_ took New York by storm. Coppola's magnificent gamble paid off so handsomely that the film had to be held over for the following weekend—and the one after that. When New York takes up a cause, it does so wholeheartedly.

The rest of that trip is a delightful blur in my memory, a sort of rapid-cut Polyvision storm of praise and approval from some of the greatest names in the industry—including Lilian Gish who had been at _J’accuse_ sixty years before—and some of New York’s least-known citizens—hotel porters and cab drivers, who had seen the film and been as stunned by it as the great directors.

It proved to be the top box office picture in New York, and on the strength of that single weekend, number eleven in _Variety’s_ top grossing pictures in the whole country. The presscoverage was phenomenal. The _New York Times_ devoted an editorial to it, an honour they had apparently never accorded a film before. Vincent Canby, Richard Schickel and Jack Kroll gave it raves. CBS nationwide news devoted eleven minutes to the event....

Impressed by the show at Radio City, director Andrea Andermann staged the film in Rome, outside the Colosseum, with a screen 120 ft wide and a ninety-piece orchestra, in front of 8,000 people, thus fulfilling Gance’s dream of films being shown in huge arenas to vast audiences.

The French Minister for Cultural Affairs, Jack Lang, announced that the film would be shown in Paris on Bastille Day, July 14th, 1982, _Napoléon_ had established itself as a great work of art and a hot commercial property—a rare combination. Now it was all set to return home in triumph.

If all stories of endeavor could have such an ideal conclusion, the world would be a splendid place. But while the film industry purveys happy endings, it seldom encourages them in real life.

Had _Napoléon_ flopped at the box office, all would have been well. The trouble was that it was fantastically successful. News of the picture became a regular feature in _Variety_, whose Paris correspondent, Lenny Borger, bravely tried to make sense of everything with a chronology. The _Hollywood Reporter_ even announced ‘an Abel Gance biopic with John Philip Law’!

Thanks to the rights he had acquired from Gance, Claude Lelouch was now all-powerful. Even so, he claimed no one had informed him about Radio City. According to Bob Harris, Lelouch had given permission for the show, ‘even though he thought we were mad.’ In any case, Zoetrope flew him to New York to attend the second weekend. He admired the presentation but professed to seen no difference between _Bonaparte et la Révolution_ and _Napoléon_—‘the images are exactly the same.’ However, he appreciated the difference between their respective earning powers, and he left with a new financial agreement under which he would receive fifty per cent. He did not want the reconstructed version to be shown in France. The publicity for the Coppola shows aroused new interest in _Bonaparte_, which was exploited as though it was the original _Napoléon—with sound_.

Thames TV planned to record the Carl Davis score and prepare the film to open the new Channel 4, but nothing could be done until the UK rights were sorted out. The BFI, who had been given the rights by Images in exchange for their material, were dismayed to learn that Images had reassigned all rights in the UK version to Lelouch. ‘Lelouch will honour the agreement’ they were assured.

We were further dismayed to hear that Lelouch had thrown open the world distribution of _Napoléon_ to the highest bidder. According to _Variety_, from which we received most of our news from the front, he was offering three versions: Coppola’s, ‘when an agreement was finalised’; _Bonaparte et la Révolution_; and what was airily described as ‘an English version with music
by Beethoven.

More than twenty distribution companies scrambled for the rights. And what usually happens in such situations happened in this one.

‘A quarrel has developed over who has...Lelouch’s authorisation to pursue distribution rights in territories outside of France and the U.S.,” reported Variety. Independent distributors Alex Massis and Red Silverstein declared that they were the exclusive representatives worldwide, and threatened legal action against anyone who challenged their status.

David Gill and I went to the Telluride Film Festival in September 1981, and had several long and difficult meetings with Bob Harris and Tom Luddy. Now that so much money had been invested in what the press had hailed as the reconstructed version, the existence of another, longer version was an embarrassment. The fact that it had another score angered Tom Luddy, who declared that I had betrayed him by not informing him. ‘I wouldn’t have involved Carmine if I’d known,’ he said. David Gill pointed out that a silent seldom had an exclusive score—the music could differ every time you saw the film. There was absolutely no reason why the two versions could not co-exist as alternatives, the commercial version and the archive version.

But, on behalf of Zoetrope, Luddy resisted the idea of the Carl Davis version being shown outside the UK. We said this was tantamount to suppressing the most complete print. ‘Not at all,’ he said. ‘We’ll show it—and have Carmine write more music.’

He and Harris acknowledged BFI’s rights, but were worried about Thames’ involvement. Without that involvement, we explained, none of the English shows could have happened. Luddy and Harris were concerned about competition; in reality, there was little question of it. By the end of the Festival we had established an atmosphere of agreement, if not the agreement itself. The full version could exist, but we should avoid head-on competition. ...

In the midst of all this, Abel Gance died, aged ninety-two. I flew over for the funeral, and the man next to me in the church was introduced as Claude Lelouch, The French gave Gance an impressive funeral, with a guard of honour from the Garde Républicaine. French TV subsequently ran Austerlitz and Bonaparte et la Révolution. Many of Gance’s former associates saw Bonaparte and told me they thought it ‘shameful’. Ironically, they blamed Lelouch for destroying a masterpiece.

That an artist can so damage his work in an attempt at reviving it is a paradox that will probably never be explained. All we need to know, however, is that Abel Gance made the original Napoleon. While he earned virtually nothing from the original release, he did make some money out of the reconstruction. Images cabled him $10,000 from the Radio City show. Thames TV sent him a cheque from the London presentation and members of the audience contributed generously too. As a direct result of these events he received a French Academy award; an award from the British Film Institute; the highest honour the British film industry can bestow, a Fellowship of the British Academy; a mass of fan mail and the finest reviews any film-maker could hope to read.

Happily, Michelle Snapes of the British Film Institute had recorded Abel Gance’s last message to the audience:

‘What can I say to all these friends in London and New York, the men and women who share the great emotion I feel talking to them? They have allowed me to rediscover through cinema my true language and I shall never forget it. You are the luckiest of spectators to have been able to see the film in the way I had created it—that it to say with the same feeling I had. I am deeply moved by the knowledge that I am not forgotten and to see the importance my message can have across time.’

Buffalo Film Seminars XII, Spring 2006

Jan 17 Abel Gance Napoleon 1927
Jan 24 Wu Yonggang The Goddess 1934
Jan 31 Wolfgang Staudte The Murderers are Among Us 1946
Feb 7 Akira Kurosawa The Seven Samurai 1954
Feb 14 Stanley Kramer Inherit the Wind 1960
Feb 21 Gillo Pontecorvo The Battle of Algiers 1965
Feb 28 John Boorman Point Blank 1967
Mar 7 Fred Zinneman A Man for All Seasons 1966
Mar 21 Robert Bresson Au Hazard Balthazar 1966
Mar 28 Richard Brooks In Cold Blood 1967
Apr 4 Ousmane Sembene Xala 1974
Apr 11 Wim Wenders Wings of Desire 1987
Apr 18 Andre Konchalovsky Runaway Train 1985
Apr 25 Karel Reisz The French Lieutenant’s Woman 1981