1 • THE FUSE IS LIT

I shall never forget my first encounter with Abel Gance's *Napoleon*. I was not one of those fortunate enough to see the film as it was meant to be seen, with the magic of three screens and a vast orchestra. I saw it under the most unpromising circumstances – fragments of the great original, shown on a home projector, twenty-five years after its original release. Yet those fragments changed my life.

I was fifteen, still at school in Hampstead, and already obsessed by the cinema. I was lucky enough to have parents who encouraged my obsession. They had given me a projector for my eleventh birthday, and I had become an avid collector of films. Since the only films available to me were silent films, I found myself immersed in the rarefied atmosphere of a forgotten art. As small boys become experts on stamp collecting or locomotives, so I became an expert on the films of Douglas Fairbanks or the Vitagraph Corporation of America. And I was particularly enamoured of the French cinema.

The films were on 9.5mm, a gauge invented in France purely for the home. A large number of silent films were released on 9.5mm, nearly all heavily abridged so that home movie enthusiasts could afford them. The most interesting had long been withdrawn, so I spent my spare time tramping round London looking for junk shops or old film libraries which might still have a few. Since home movies were being abandoned in favour of television, I found a surprising number of rarities. Among the best were the French silents – de Baroncelli's *Pêcheurs d'Islande* ... Raymond Bernard's *Joueur d'échecs* ... Jacques Feyder's *Visages d'enfants*. I greatly admired the rapid cutting of the dramatic episodes. And there was an atmosphere and an emotional quality about these films which impressed me.

I was so impressed that I set out to make one myself – on 9.5mm – hoping to capture something of the same mood. I chose a story by de Maupassant, and I cast it from people I knew, and from the few Gallic-looking people in the neighbourhood. The part of the forester I gave to Liam O'Leary, who was acquisitions officer at the National Film Archive.

Liam had written a book called *Invitation to the Film*. He was in his forties, extremely Irish (which appealed to my Irish father) and he had an infectious enthusiasm for the silent era. He, too, had started with a 9.5mm projector and he shared my admiration for the French silents. I had met him at the British Film Institute, where I did my research. He proved an indispensable guide, suggesting books I might have overlooked, and inviting me to screenings of rare films I would never otherwise have seen.

My admiration for the French silent cinema was subject to the occasional shattering blow. One of these was delivered by a director called Jean Epstein, a revered name of the period. When I was offered a print of his *Lion des Mogols* (1924), I bought it at once. It featured the great Russian émigré actor Ivan Mosjoukine in a story of a Tibetan prince who flees his country, joins a ship at Bombay, and becomes the star of a film being made on board. It sounded fascinating; it proved abysmal, the sort of silent film which parodies the whole period. Depressed, I phoned the film library in Bromley from which I had bought it and asked if they would exchange it. They agreed and suggested I chose an alternative.

I examined their list with care. There was nothing much of interest. One of the 2-reelers was called *Napoleon Bonaparte and the French Revolution*, but who wanted a classroom film, full of textbook titles and static engravings? Nevertheless, the list contained nothing more promising, and not wanting to be stuck with the Epstein film, I sent off for it.

Meanwhile, I telephoned the British Film Institute and asked if they could find a review. They had nothing under the title, which gave me hope; perhaps it wasn't an educational film, but a dramatic epic?

'I know nothing about it', I said, 'but it might be French, made in the 1920's.'

'There was a silent film of 1927, directed by Abel Gance. Could it be that?'

'It could be ...'

And so I heard my first review of *Napoleon* over the telephone. It came from the English trade paper, the *Bioscope:*

'The film cannot be regarded as convincing either in historical accuracy or as a study of character ... Here we have a theatrical and sentimental figure strutting about with the futile bombast of a turkey cock. The most convincing aspect is that showing his youth at school ... Josephine may have had the faults that historians impute to her, but these faults are out of place in the heroine of romantic drama, and therefore Napoleon's love affairs are entirely lacking in interest ... There is far too much use of photographic trickery and mechanical devices. Napoleon's eagle, played, alternately by a real bird and a synthetic understudy, is at times nearer the ridiculous than the sublime. There is much fine imagination and many impressive scenes in the production, and judicious and drastic cutting might result in a film of more logical sequence and greatly enhanced interest.'[1]

After that review, I was not optimistic about the film – even if it proved to be the Gance version. But any new film was irresistible – and the moment the parcel arrived, I set up my projector and summoned my parents. On January 18th, 1954, I saw scenes from *Napoléon vu par Abel Gance* for the first time.

The opening title 'The Three Gods', jolted me to greater attention. The first shot faded in to reveal the leaders of the French Revolution – Marat, Danton, Robespierre. What struck me most (having tried to cast local people as Frenchmen) were the superbly chosen faces. I had no idea that the legendary Artaud was playing Marat. I simply responded to the brilliant casting, and felt the film blaze into life, like a masterly newsreel of the eighteenth century. This was no educational film!

Outside, in the revolutionary Club des Cordeliers, were more extraordinary, expectant faces – all chosen with uncanny skill. Danton orders Rouget de Lisle, a young army officer, to introduce his song La Marseillaise. I was exhilarated by the rapid cutting and the swirling camera movement. What daring, I thought, to make a song the highpoint of a silent film!

The magic of the visuals was especially apparent; the silvery sharpness of the print focused attention on the lighting and the composition. By the time Napoleon had been introduced, in no contrived, theatrical manner, but as an obscure artillery lieutenant on the edge of the crowd, I was in love with the picture. When the action moved to Corsica, and Napoleon was forced to flee, the furious storm at sea intercut with a storm in the Convention made me realise I was watching something exceptional; a film which proved the cinema capable of anything – a film I would have given anything to have made myself.

'That', said my mother, 'is a beautiful film. It's the best one you've got.' I had only two reels. I gathered that six had originally been released in Britain. I determined to find the remainder. I placed advertisements in *Exchange and Mart.* I continued combing London for junk shops and photographic stores. Every so often, another reel would turn up – to be pronounced by my parents as 'the best yet'.

I knew nothing about Napoleon as a historical figure. My history classes had glossed over his career. I was therefore deeply dismayed, at my O-Level exam in history, to be confronted by the question 'Describe the Fall of Napoleon'. I had heard of Waterloo and St Helena, but nothing else. In the hope of transforming defeat into victory, I wrote, 'One cannot understand the fall of Napoleon without knowing of his rise'. And I devoted several pages to a passionate description of the film. Whoever read my paper must have been entertained, if nothing else. But entertained or not, he failed me.

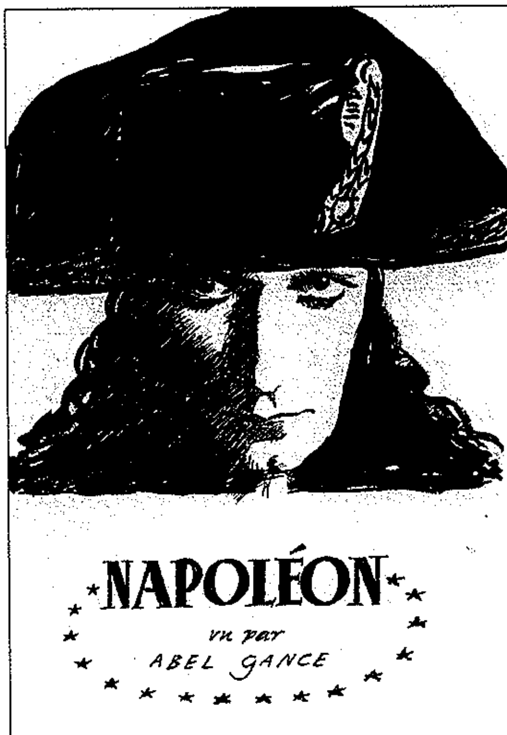
The last episode of *Napoleon* arrived soon afterwards. And when I took it out of its parcel, I was full of misgivings. In only two reels, how could it take the story from the siege of Toulon (1796), where the previous episode had left off, to Waterloo (1815)? The answer, of course, was that it couldn't. The film stopped as Bonaparte's legendary career began – with his campaign to liberate Italy from the Austrian occupation, and to spread the Revolution beyond its frontiers. I was disappointed with the invasion scenes. They were handled in a surprisingly desultory fashion, as though Gance had run out of money and had to finish the film in a hurry. Shot after shot of marching men retained the newsreel effect, but now it was rather a dull newsreel.

My favourite library book, Bardèche and Brasillach's *The History of the Film*,

explained the reason; the film was to have included the Emperor's entire career, but Gance had, indeed, run out of money. However, far from sloughing off the final scenes, he had presented them with astonishing spectacle and imagination across three screens, a process later called Polyvision. The ordinary screen suddenly became a vast fresco, three times the normal size.

'Sometimes he used it simply to enlarge his image, to show the vast panorama of the Armée d'Italie being harangued by its leader. Sometimes he used it as a triptych, as in the unforgettable episode of the descent into Italy, where the central screen showed the front ranks of superb, ragged soldiers with women hanging about their necks as they bawl "Auprès de ma blonde" while the two side screens showed long shots of the great column of the army on the march. Never had the very incarnation of an epic been so magnificently transferred to the screen'[2]

How maddening that I would never be able to project this part of the film as it was intended to be shown! I considered mounting three projectors in a row, but the 9.5mm version included mere scraps of the triptychs, loosely cut together, giving no impression of the power and excitement suggested by Bardèche and Brasillach.



My father designed this programme for my first proper show of *Napoleon*

How would I ever be able to see *Napoleon* in Polyvision? I was particularly interested because a new invention had recently reached London: Cinerama. I went to see it, and was as exhilarated as everyone else by the roller-coaster ride. But a short history of the cinema which preceded it contained no mention of Gance. And as far as I could judge, the system was simply a revival of Gance's idea. It employed three projectors and three screens – just like Polyvision.

With Abel Gance as the fountainhead of so much modern technique, it seemed criminal that he was so little known. I couldn't even find out if he was alive, although since the film was only twenty-seven years old, there was a good chance that he was.

I felt it was up to me to do what little I could to revive Gance's reputation and that of *Napoleon*. But all I could think of doing was to show my modest 'rediscovered' version, of about 90 minutes, to as many people as possible. I set up twin turntables, selected a range of 78 rpm gramophone records, and presented the film with full orchestral accompaniment, the thunder of which was equal to any Napoleonic cannonade. My audiences were always stunned.

I produced my own film magazine, its circulation limited to visitors to my home cinema. In one issue, I devoted a long article to *Napoleon*, pointing out that Gance's career appeared to have ended with *Le Capitaine Fracasse* (1942).

'Since then, little has been heard from Gance. Why cannot prints be made from the copy of *Napoleon* lying in the Cinematique Francais [sic]? *Napoleon* had not dated at all, and it would be bound to draw the crowds even if they came out of mere curiosity to see the beginnings of cinemascope. The triptych could be shown on a CinemaScope screen, and *Napoleon* might be supported by a CinemaScope sub-feature, which would show how little we have advanced in the last thirty years!'

I discussed with Liam O'Leary the possibility of giving a show to the staff of the British Film Institute. Liam spoke to the curator of the National Film Archive, Ernest Lindgren, and reported back that he had turned down the idea.

By coincidence, Lindgren had just returned from a film festival in Brazil, where he had actually met Abel Gance and seen a version of *Napoleon*. He told Liam that he hardly thought it worthy of the name of a film.

When I met Lindgren, I was unlikely to be prejudiced in his favour. I found him an ice-cold individual, with a tortured face and a manner familiar to me from unsympathetic schoolmasters. It was hard to associate him with so pleasurable an activity as preserving film; he seemed as puritanical as our seventeenth-century Lord Protector, Oliver Cromwell, who had closed the theatres. At the top of Lindgren's list for immediate execution were film collectors. He refused to deal with them in any way, thus gaining for the Archive a reputation for incorruptibility which was to prove so valuable to the industry, and so disastrous with collectors. (Many priceless items, in private hands, were lost for ever).

For all his failings, he deserves the highest praise for starting the Archive in

the first place, in company with Harold Brown. And without his single-minded determination, it might never have survived, for the industry disliked collectors (of any sort) as much as he did. But he never overcame his distaste for *Napoleon*, and years later, when the film was being reconstructed on Archive premises, the job had to be done without his knowledge.

Lindgren's attitude towards the film was shared by Paul Rotha in his *Film Till Now*, the film enthusiast's Bible of those days: 'Abel Gance is the *grand maître* of the French cinema, theoretically the apotheosis of great directors, but in practice always out-of-date with ideas. He spent five years on the production of *Napoleon*, a theme so vast that it defeated its own, Abel Gance's and everybody else's purpose. It was filled with imaginative technical devices and ramifications of complicated scenario work, needing three screens on which to exhibit its lumbering bulk. It was tediously cumbersome and hopelessly overweighted with symbolic references.' [3]

How could I change this attitude? Denied the opportunity to see the film itself, film enthusiasts could only derive opinions from those who had. So the best way was to find someone to write positively about it. I did not consider myself a candidate – after all, I was still at school. However, I had just seen my name in print for the first time, at the foot of a letter in *Amateur Cine World* describing my film, and one evening I received a visit from the assistant editor of the magazine.

Derek Hill proved to be a catalyst. He was the antithesis of Lindgren, short, young, with dark curly hair, a hilarious sense of humour and a perpetually worried expression. A brilliant raconteur, he was an equally brilliant writer, and his work ranged from film criticism to short stories in literary quarterlies.

He was so enthusiastic about *Napoleon* that he recommended it to a friend, another film critic called David Robinson, who was equally impressed. Gradually, word spread, and to my delight, several members of the staff of the British Film Institute came to see it. The praise that greeted it thrilled me as much as if I'd made the film myself.

Derek Hill urged me to write an article for *ACW* – a suggestion which would prove a turning point in my career. The editor commissioned a piece of 2,000 words, and dragging those words from my brain was like pulling teeth. In misery, I carried the article over to Derek Hill, and he patched it up and made it flow. He taught me the basic skills of journalism, enabling me eventually to spread my own propaganda about *Napoleon*.

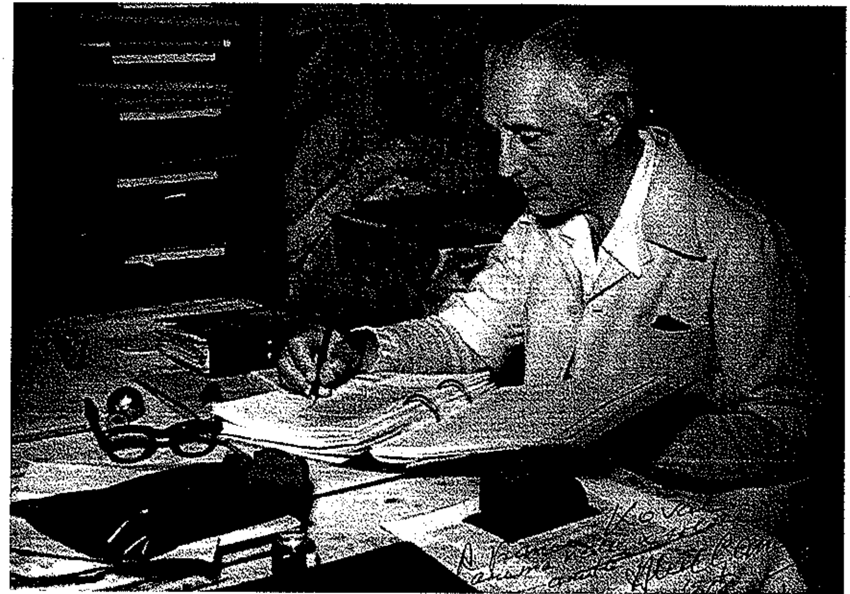
He also took me to press shows, and at one of them introduced me to a critic called Dr Francis Koval, a Central European with a lugubrious expression, but a kind and encouraging manner. He turned out to be a friend and admirer of Gance. Yes, Gance was still alive, and he had recently visited him in Paris. I invited Koval to see the film, and he brought a signed photograph. It showed Gance at sixty-five, still an astonishingly handsome man.

I wrote an effusive fan letter, but did not expect an answer. Few people bothered to answer letters from a schoolboy. But this one *was* answered – a brief paragraph, typed in French, but contact at last with the man who, for me, represented the best qualities of the cinema:

> July 23, 1954
>
> I was very touched by your letter of June 4, 1954, the sincerity of which struck me keenly.
>
> I thank you for the interest which you take in my effort.
>
> I will soon make some films in Polyvision which will create, I think, an international upheaval in the cinema world.

The Polyvision referred to so optimistically was the three-screen process of *Napoleon* revived, sadly, too late to hold its own against the much more heavily financed processes from America, Cinerama and CinemaScope.

Koval told me that Gance had acquired a new ally from an unexpected quarter. A girl called Nelly Kaplan had seen Gance's films, including *Napoleon*, when she was a child in Buenos Aires. At the age of twenty, she came to Paris and had recently met Gance. Amazed that this young girl from a distant country



The photograph lent me by Francis Koval which led directly to my first meeting with Abel Gance. (It was signed to Koval, but when I used it to illustrate an article in *Amateur Cine World*, the printers removed the signature. I was appalled, but eventually had Gance sign it again)

knew his films so well, he invited her to work on his next project. She came at just the right time, giving him the spur of encouragement he so desperately needed. He had been unable to find the money to make a film for twelve years. Now he was about to begin work on *La Tour de Nesle*, a Dumas romance.

That same year, an extraordinary coincidence occurred that enable me to realise my ambition and to meet Abel Gance myself.

It was March 1955. I was still at school, and the prospect of another year stretched before me. I was not the academic type, and the chances of moving on to a university were remote. I searched for excuses to leave. I could find none, and I was soon enmeshed in preparations for A-level examinations.

One day, I was undergoing a mock exam in German when the headmaster's secretary appeared at the door. 'Could Brownlow take a telephone call?' Only an appalling emergency would have caused me to be pulled out of an exam, albeit a trial exam. I was escorted to the headmaster's study. A telephone was thrust into my hand, and I heard my mother trying her best to sound calm.

'Liam's just rung to say Abel Gance is going to be at the NFT. Can you get there as soon as possible?'

I was allowed to leave without a word of explanation. I rushed home, grabbed some stills and a copy of the scenario (published in 1927, which I had just bought, brand new, from a French bookshop in Regent Street). I arrived at the National Film Theatre before anyone else, and I waited impatiently in the foyer.

Apparently, Abel Gance, unknown and unannounced, had flown to London to see the presentation of Cinerama at the Casino Theatre. Emerging from the theatre, Gance was strolling down Shaftesbury Avenue when he saw a nameplate at No. 164: BRITISH FILM INSTITUTE. He entered the building and found himself in the reception area.

By coincidence, Liam O'Leary walked into reception and saw a man with a mane of white hair and a familiar face. He had seen it before – in Dr Francis Koval's photograph.

Gance was both surprised and flattered at being recognised.

Liam reported to the director of the Institute, Denis Forman, who arranged a small reception at the NFT that afternoon, since Gance was flying back that evening. Liam was tied up at a meeting. Forman asked him if he knew anyone familiar with Gance's work, and Liam mentioned my name. Forman asked him to invite me.

Among the others at the reception were Karel Reisz, then employed by the BFI and later the well-known director, Basil Wright, the celebrated documentary film-maker, and Michael Balcon, the famous head of Ealing Studios.

At last, a taxi drew up, and the unmistakable figure of Abel Gance stepped out. He was smaller than I expected, but far less elderly. Having tried to translate some of his writing, I feared that his personality might match his rhetoric – a sort of de Gaulle of the film industry. Instead, he fulfilled all my youthful

ideals. His aquiline nose gave him the look of a poet, his hair, swept arrogantly back, suggested a medieval saint. His diabolically mischievous grin, however, dispelled all illusions of sanctity.

He had one major drawback – he spoke no English. I cursed the years I had spent 'learning' French; I had passed my exams, yet I could hardly speak a coherent sentence. I tried to put a few words together to convey my feelings about his work, but they wilted as some linguistic expert rattled away beside me. Gance was swept off to the bar to meet the establishment figures, and I sat forlornly, nursing a glass of cider, trying to forget my grammar and remember my French.

After half an hour, we were ushered into the theatre and Gance was shown an example of experimental English cinema – *London to Brighton in 4 minutes*, a speeded-up train journey. I have never been able to fathom why that was chosen; I assume it had something to do with the fact that Gance had once made a film about railways. A Norman MacLaren followed, and Gance said he had adapted one of MacLaren's cartoons to Polyvision.

My opportunity came when we returned to the bar, and the linguists ran out of conversation. I moved in. Enthusiasm can cross any kind of barrier, and that is the only explanation I can think of for the long conversation I had with Gance. I'm sure someone interpreted. But I monopolised Gance for as long as I could, and I was quite enchanted by him. One could not have imagined a more eloquent, amiable or amusing character.

He had refused a drink since his arrival, but he suddenly emptied my glass, and, now that the room was almost deserted, he went round the bar emptying everyone else's.

'I thought you didn't drink', someone said.

'Only at times like these,' said Gance.

When I asked him how he got the idea for the three screens, he answered, 'I had so many extras at Nice that I couldn't fit them all into one frame.'

Despite his mischievous humour, he was not in the least patronising. And to a shy seventeen-year-old, who looked about twelve, that was a notable rarity. He expressed surprise that someone so young had ever heard of his work, let alone seen it. And he was sympathetic to my naïve enthusiasm. He told me of the harsh times he had experienced in the French film industry, and warned me against starting a career in the cinema. It was then that I heard that before *La Tour de Nesle* he had not worked for twelve years, except to make a film about his little girl. 'I enjoyed making that film more than any other,' he said.

I asked him what he thought of Cinerama.

'It's exactly the same as my idea. They haven't even solved the problem of the joins between the screens!'

He signed a still of *Napoleon:* 'Avec toute ma sympathie pour le jeune enthousiasme de Kevin Brownlow' – With all my appreciation for the youthful enthusiasm of Kevin Brownlow.' At least, that is what I thought it said – his

writing was not too clear – but now I realise the inscription was more typical of Gance: '... pour les yeux enthousiastes' – for the enthusiastic eyes ...'

As he was leaving, he delivered some professional advice: 'Keep your eyes straight ahead.' Then he checked himself, and making the gesture of someone looking at both ends of a wide screen, he said, 'Non! Les yeux Polyvision!'

2 • CHASSEUR D'IMAGES

I set out to discover all the facts I could about this remarkable man, but it was hard to find anything. Bardèche and Brasillach described him as 'unquestionably the most famous of all the directors of this period'[1], but when they detailed his career, the detail was not always very kind.

As for his early life, I depended on the fragments and rumour I found in obscure French publications at the British Film Institute's library. For the full story, I had to wait for a book by Roger Icart, *Abel Gance.*[2] According to this, Gance was born in Paris on October 25th, 1889. His father, a doctor, was ambitious for his son to become a lawyer, and he was sent to the Chaptal college. Here he developed a deep love for literature and philosophy, but he found school discipline too constricting. To assuage his unhappiness he turned to the world of poetry. Once he had passed his Baccalauré, his father arranged for him to enter a solicitor's office as an articled clerk – assigned to divorce cases. He found this even more depressing than school, and once again sought escape into the world of great authors at the Bibliothéque Nationale.

None of this seemed to me remotely unlikely, and I accepted it without question. What I did not realise was that Roger Icart was dissatisfied with his book, and being even more obsessive than I was, he embarked on further research. The research continued year upon year; just before I completed this book he revealed some of his results. He had found documents which proved that Gance had invented his bourgeois background.

This is the first of many links with another great director, Erich von Stroheim, also renowned for overlong masterpieces, and for his battles with producers. Von Stroheim invented a background of nobility and military grandeur; he was actually the son of a Jewish hat manufacturer. According to Icart, Gance's father *was* a doctor, but he was not married to his mother. The possibility of Jewish origin caused Gance problems during the Occupation. Abel lived in Commentry, Nivernais, until he was eight, when his mother married Adolphe Gance, a chauffeur-mechanic, who died in Neuilly in 1922. Gance passed no examinations – let alone the Baccalauréat – and he left school at fourteen. He was thus partly self-educated, which perhaps helps to explain his obsession with the great authors, and his insistence on referring to them at every opportunity.

Why should he seek to hide his humble origins? One can only guess. Today, his achievement would be hailed as a miracle of class mobility. But the world was a very different place in the early years of the century. French class consciousness, Revolution or not, persisted as strongly as in England, and one's background was of supreme importance to one's future.