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### A NEW ALPHABET FOR THE CINEMA : the Tragic Irony of *Napoléon* (Abel Gance, 1927)

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In the present-day period, on the eve of destruction of analogue cinema, there seems to be a remarkable interest in the last gasps of silent film. Encouraged by this fascination, this article delves into an analysis of the highly formally innovative *Napoléon, vu par Abel Gance* (Abel Gance, 1927). This film will be discussed as an oblique variant within the relatively new genre of the historical reconstruction film in France. Addressing four paradoxes and an irony, the article will examine the tensions between Gance's attempt to create a historical biopic and his ambition to delineate a new aesthetics of cinema. It will do so, among others, by contrasting Gance's ideas of both the cinema as a visual Esperanto and as the 'music of light' with the theatrical trans-historicity of *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc* (Carl-Theodor Dreyer, 1928), produced as a complement to *Napoléon*.

There is a remarkable interest among both present-day filmmakers and film/media scholars in the era of late silent cinema. This interest had a kick-off in 2001 with the publication of *The Language of New Media* by Lev Manovich. In countering the idea that new media are to be considered as brand-new, he started to examine to what extent the history of cinema had a legacy on offer that was to be adopted by new media. It tempted Manovich to introduce a daring proposition: the silent avant-garde documentary *Man with a Movie Camera* (Dziga Vertov, 1929) had unwittingly sown many seeds which only came to full fruition in our current digital era. Stills from Vertov's film are used in Manovich's study to provide a 'dataset' for new media, consisting of no less than twenty principles (vi-xxvi). To name a few of these principles: the

way millions of computer users communicate with each other seems to fulfil the promise of a visual Esperanto from the silent era. Computer games rely upon the mobility of the film camera, as it was practised in the 1920s. Just like the new media aim to overcome the limits of human vision, Vertov's film explores the full range of possibilities offered by the camera in mounting a camera on moving cars, slowing down and speeding up the tempo of film, superimpositions, temporal montage, split screens, montage in the shot. Avant-garde cinema like Vertov's film used a strategy of collage that the digital media can connect to. Because of such similarities in principles between *Man with the Movie Camera* and new media practices, Manovich advocates the relevance of a return to the latest phase of the silent cinema, implying that, in retrospect, Vertov's film is perhaps the key title in movie history. The recurrent references to this title in *The Language of New Media* imply that if one were to ignore this film, one would miss a seminal link in the transition to digital culture.

Manovich's study is a strong reminder that a film from the late 1920s which is preoccupied with a formal renewal of cinematic language still can speak to us, today, not to say that it perhaps even speaks louder to us than to its contemporaries. The relevance of both the movies and the intellectual climate from that period also seems to be acknowledged in some quite successful films of a recent date. The list of nominees for Best Picture at the Academy Awards 2012 contained films like Woody Allen's *Midnight in Paris* – including trips down memory lane to the 1920s of Gertrude Stein, Luis Buñuel and Ernest Hemingway – Martin Scorsese's *Hugo* – highlighting the rediscovery of old master Georges Méliès around 1930 – and the ultimate winner Frenchman Michel Hazanavicius' *The Artist* on the conversion to sound which resulted into the downfall of a silent film artist. These titles are pervaded with a sense of nostalgia for the death-knell years of silent film. Is the fascination with the period of the 1920s in films like *Midnight in Paris* and *The Artist* just a mere coincidence or is it somehow to be linked to the lament among many filmmakers that celluloid is rapidly becoming extinct? To offer a clear-cut answer would definitely go a bridge too far, but I restrict myself to noting that the nostalgic sentiment strikes a chord with us at the very moment we seem to have arrived at the eve of destruction of analogue cinema.

Encouraged by this fascination, I go back to the last amazing gasps of 'deaf' cinema. I will do so by analysing a film which is at least as highly formally innovative as Vertov's film has turned out to be. *Napoléon, vu par Abel Gance* (Abel Gance, 1927) is to be categorized as incredibly idiosyncratic in stylistic terms. Gance's silent masterpiece is a pictorially virtuoso epic

spectacle that hinges upon a poetics informed by the idea that the cinema is the 'music of light'. The film belongs to a newly developing genre of the historical reconstruction film which in France had only come into existence after the first World War. *Napoléon* is, however, an oblique variant within this genre, in the sense that it provokes a particular question: Is the ambition by Gance to delineate a new aesthetics of cinema not strangely at odds with the accuracy demanded of the writing of history? Do his cinematic experiments not sit very uneasily with the conventions of the historical reconstruction genre? In this article I aim to reflect upon 'four paradoxes and an irony' that Gance's representation of Napoléon confronts us with. These paradoxes and the one irony pivot around the question whether his enterprise is to be regarded as the re/writing of history or rather as the re/writing of film history in an attempt to vie for, with a wink to Hazanavicius' triumph, the unofficial honorary title of 'the artist' of the silent era.

### **The concept of *photogénie***

In the early years of the 1910s, some Italian filmmakers had been fairly successful with films inspired by classical antiquity, such as *Quo Vadis?* (Enrico Guazzoni, 1912), *Gli Ultimi Giorni di Pompeii* (Eleuterio Rodolfi, 1913) and, in particular, *Cabiria* (Giovanni Pastrone, 1914). These films not only displayed the grandiosity of Italian history, but they also worked to put the cinematic medium into high gear. In its early years, film had been popular among the working class, but in the 1910s, filmmakers had the ambition to attract a middle-class audience. One way to live up to this aim, the idea ran, was by offering prestigious pictures, in line with respectable narrative models (Gunning, 339-40). In addition to cinematic adaptations of classic novels and plays, biblical and historical subjects became a logical option to show off the cinema as a magnificent medium, worthy of awe. The fact that the respectable author Gabriele d'Annunzio had written the intertitles for *Cabiria* was advertised prominently to enhance the impression that the cinema was apt for a more general public. The films about Italian history were not only popular in Italy, but they were exported to America. As it became clear that Americans, probably out of lack of a rich history themselves, were intrigued by the depictions of good old European/Italian history, including its wealth and decadence, the French film industry came to realize that films of a glorious past could offer the best opportunity to enter the American market (Abel, 161).

Except for a gamble on an American interest in French historical cinema, Richard Abel notes a second reason why after the Great War, which ended in 1918, the genre of the historical reconstruction film gained popularity in

France. The war had a devastating effect on both morality and the sense of a national identity. Films which recalled great national achievements might help to remedy and to overcome the general mood of defeatism (Abel, 161, 164). By depicting sumptuous sets, aristocratic milieus and sweeping action in films such as *Le Comte de Monte-Cristo* (Henri Pouctal, 1918), *Les Trois Mousquetaires* (1921) and *Vingt Ans après* (1922), both directed by Henri Diamant-Berger, *Koenigsmark* (Léonce Perret, 1923), and *Kean* (Alexander Volkoff, 1924), the primary value of the genre became escapist. Though successful at the box-office, these well-crafted films have received little recognition in film history, because they do not tally with a tendency that the French cinema of the 1920s has been acknowledged for by film scholars. A specific narrative avant-garde, which later came to be known as French Impressionism, has entered film history as perhaps the very first movement which offered a body of 'theory'. I write 'theory' between quotation marks, since, as David Bordwell has suggested, theory is perhaps too big a word for the collection of 'scattered unsupported pronouncements on film aesthetics' (1980, 92).

Nevertheless, from the many essays, written by critics and filmmakers alike – Jean Epstein, Louis Delluc, Ricciotto Canudo, Germaine Dulac, Abel Gance and Marcel L'Herbier are foremost among them – there is some underlying position detectable, which is to be divided into two strands. The very first phase of Impressionism, beginning around 1918, puts an emphasis on pictorial purism and advocates the quite vague and mystic concept of 'photogénie.' According to this notion, film images should not just reproduce things from reality, but they have to present familiar objects in a totally fresh way so that the spectator can "experience a certain otherness about the content" (Bordwell 1980, 106-07). The photogenic quality of a sequence presumes that, paraphrasing Epstein, moving images can 'animate' an object and if this is the case, the 'soul' or 'essence' of the said object can be revealed (cit. in Bordwell 1980, 111). This 'soul' can not be addressed in a realist manner, and hence the filmmaker is not presumed to show the world as it is (its raw nature). For those filmmakers who adhere to the concept of *photogénie*, the 'essence' of things resides in what exceeds the human eye and never in an objective rendering of things. *Photogénie* refers to the potential of moving images to express a realm beyond appearance and immediate sense experiences. A filmmaker can only lay bare the hidden meanings in material reality by creating a split between the recording of the material reality (the shooting of what happens in front of the lens) and an explicit reworking of it. All films have at least some measure of *photogénie*, since it is already intrinsic to the medium, but the goal of Impressionists was to flaunt this quality by way

of a deliberate manipulation of sequences. Thus, they celebrate attempts to explore the properties which are unique to the film medium and they are relatively careless whether optical effects are merely used for decorative ends. Taking this train of thought into account, it will come as no surprise that the Impressionists excel in playing with optical devices, such as slow-motions, fast-motions, unorthodox camera angles and movements, blurred images, dissolves, superimpositions, irises, close-ups, and so on. The Impressionist theory can be couched in terms of a law of interconnected vessels: the more such cinematic techniques are utilized and the more moving images are manipulated, the more the cinema can testify to its power to reveal an intensified reality.

It is worth emphasizing that the focus of the Impressionists on specifically cinematic techniques is so rigid that they do not value distortions of set design or peculiar actor performances very dearly. For them, these elements are too closely affiliated with the theatre, and according to them, cinema can only develop into a distinct art on the condition that film opposes itself to any dramatic or literary form. If there was an art which could function as a model for cinema, then music was the best candidate, because of its rhythmic qualities. In the second phase of Impressionism, roughly from 1923 to 1928, the ultimate challenge for filmmakers became to imitate the effects of music – an art of “immediate sensation and of pure form” (Greenberg, 304) – and so distance cinema further from the narrative pressure of conventional films. The immediate cause for this change, as Bordwell notes, was Gance’s *La Roue*, which had a private screening in December 1922, but only a public one in 1923 (1980, 232). Gance described cinema as the “music of light,” and when he was editing *La Roue*, he did it without any aids, without an editing machine, and “I cut absolutely as if one image was a violin, another was a flute, a third an oboe, that’s to say, everything was organized in my head according to this concept of the musicality of light” (cit. in Abel, 322). According to this aesthetic principle, pictorial shots had to be reassembled as if musical chords were resonating.

Unlike several ‘abstract films’ like *Ballet Mécanique* (Fernand Léger, 1924) or *Anémic Cinéma* (Marcel Duchamp, 1925), made by avant-gardists who employed rhythmic editing to create ‘pure’ graphic patterns, the Impressionists did not turn away from narrative entirely, but a story was no more than secondary to the formal experiments. Characters often travel at high speed, in a fast car or on horse-back, in order to ‘motivate’ blurred shots, spectacular mobile framing and rhythmic editing to stress the sense of the pace of an experience. Moreover, an overriding purpose for directors like Gance,

L'Herbier and Epstein was to express a character's emotional mood or psychological attitude by all optical effects possible. Gauzy focus shots, negative shots, superimpositions, freeze-frames were used to articulate the character's subjectivity.

### **First paradox: A pacifist making a film of 'enjoyable butchery'**

In defining the medium as the 'music of light' that has to be kept aloof from literary and theatrical influences, the French directors of the 1920s were keen on searching for the aesthetic uniqueness of cinema. If there is quite some stylistic homogeneity in the films of the Impressionists, then their choices of subject and theme can nonetheless work as distinguishing marks. Both L'Herbier and Epstein were relatively indifferent to the subjects of their films. For his *L'Inhumaine* (1924), L'Herbier had no qualms about revising the scenario according to the demands of his leading lady, implying that the story itself is just a backbone for the film's experimental play with modern decorative arts. A simple love story like *Coeur fidèle* (1923) could suffice as a motive for Epstein, because the superficiality of the narrative enabled him to focus all his attention on the formal aspects of the film. One can argue that Gance opted for a different rhetorical strategy than his two Impressionist colleagues. For a film which was meant to be unsurpassed in scope and above all without comparison in testing numerous optical devices, none other than a towering figure, figuratively speaking, like Napoléon would do for Gance. In contrast to Epstein who took a banal theme for his optical innovations, Gance selected a grandiose subject to match his stylistic tour de force.

Even though it may seem logical to choose a statuesque leader as main protagonist for a large-scale enterprise, Gance's *Napoléon* can only be discussed as a paradoxical project, as will be made clear below. I will not give an in-depth account of its troublesome production history, partly because that has been examined thoroughly by both Abel and Kevin Brownlow and partly because it does not really serve the sake of my argument. Some curious details have to be pointed out, nonetheless. Charles Pathé had always been generous to Gance and he donated the sum of 1,5 million francs in 1924, but the principal investors in Gance's project were a White Russian and a German industrialist, who organized themselves in the Consortium Westi. The German connection enraged the French, because the investment with money by a former 'enemy' galvanised their national spirit. Westi soon dissolved after the sudden death of the German investor, and it was merely thanks to the initiative of Jacques Grinieff, from Georgia, that delay did not become shooting denied. Realizing the national sentiments Grinieff contacted some

wealthy Frenchmen and changed the name of the Russian small firm Rodina to the thoroughly French name Société Générale des Films, to be abbreviated as S.G.F. He also sought partnership with the influential motion-picture executives Pathé and Léon Gaumont. Grinieff made it into a mission of S.G.F. to produce unique French films by granting the director total control. Unfortunately, the first two titles which S.G.F. financed – *Napoléon* and *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc* (Carl-Theodor Dreyer, 1928) – were so extremely costly that the company only managed to support two more films before it ceased to exist.

Abel as well as Brownlow have documented extensively how Gance's project was supposed to be much bigger than he would be able to execute. Originally, he had in mind to make a series of six to chronicle the story of Napoleon's rise and fall, but he only succeeded in making one. This one film opens with a snowball fight of Napoleon as a young boy, it shows his attachment to his pet eagle, his flight from Corsica in a tempest, the siege of Toulon in 1793, his affairs with Josephine de Beauharnais, and it ends with his proclamation to his troops to prepare them for a military campaign in Italy in 1806. The film stops when the career of Napoleon, aged 27 by then, is only about to begin. Initially, Gance was supposed to have completed his first episode by December 31<sup>st</sup>, 1924, and the total series of six by March 31<sup>st</sup>, 1926. The estimated budget for the entire project was about 20 million francs, but only the first film already had cost 17 million francs, when it premièred in April 1927 for 2.300 people attending. Moreover, Gance was forced to reduce his film of about six hours to half its length, because it would not be cordial to have the many dignitaries sit for more than three hours in the theatre. Making adjustments to the very last minute of his long-awaited film, Gance finally delivered a version which was well over four hours long (Brownlow, 150).

Word limits hinder me to offer a full summary of the divided press reviews, and henceforth I will only focus on some telling opinions. Gance's film depicted, as Abel mentions, Bonaparte as "the legendary fulfilment of the French Revolution – 'the soul of the Revolution'" (196). Since Napoleon was represented, as the influential critic Léon Moussinac sneered, as the embodiment of 'military dictatorship,' he disapproved of the film on political grounds. For Moussinac, the portrayal of the Corsican came "frighteningly close to the image of the emperor then held by the political groups of the extreme right" (cit. in Abel, 196). Even more intriguing is contemporary critic Émile Vuillermoz's declaration that he was willing to defend Gance as a filmmaker against all attacks, but he was puzzled by the impression that massacres "seemed noble by romanticizing" them and "butchery [was made]

respectable or simply fresh and enjoyable" (Vuillermoz 1988b, 406). Brownlow calls this one of the enigmatic paradoxes of *Napoléon*: how could the man who had made the pacifist *J'accuse* (1919) – an indictment of the atrocities of the Great War – make less than a decade later a glorifying film about France's greatest warrior?

In the eyes of Gance, Napoléon was first of all a tragic figure, who had sacrificed his peace of mind, his happiness and future for a greater cause (Brownlow, 288). And to add a cultural sensitivity to this reading of Napoléon as a pitiful leader, in his history classes at an English school, Brownlow had only been taught about Napoléon's defeat at Waterloo and his banishment to St. Helena, while all his victories had been glossed over (16). The discrepancy between the crude emphasis in his classes on Napoléon's failures and the angle provided by the film was one of the motivations for Brownlow to spend many years on restoring the complete version of Gance's masterpiece, which had soon been lost and would continue to exist in a number of re-edited variants. After the première of a shortened version in April 1927, there were ten more screenings of the film for huge audiences. Despite the box office success, a further release of *Napoléon* was postponed, because S.G.F. had signed a contract with Gaumont-Metro-Goldwyn for screenings in France and abroad. There was a showing of the film for the press and the trade, and though this was not the version as it was intended by Gance because it lacked the wonderful technical invention of the triptych effects – having three screens juxtaposed to one another to expand the usual 4:3 format – it was considered far more superior than the première.<sup>1</sup> The Americans of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, however, decided to put the film on the shelf, for they preferred to take a chance on the by that time most expensive film ever made, Fred Niblo's *Ben-Hur*. And when *Napoléon* finally opened in November, seven months after its first screening, it was once again an adjusted version, with only the final triptych as novelty. It would be the fate of Gance's epic that it was to circulate in many different versions. Whereas the definitive version was shipped to America, G-M-G severely mutilated the original copy for commercial purposes, transforming it into just one of those historical pictures. This manoeuvre would turn out to be box-office poison.

### **Second paradox: The lengthier the version, the more riddled with contradictions**

Up to the year 2000 no less than twenty different versions circulated, which brings me to a second paradox. Abel had based his interpretation of *Napoléon* in his 1984 study on Brownlow's second reconstruction of the silent classic in

1983 which comes, as was then unanimously presumed, closest to the authentic version. Spectators who had attended an abridged screening, like the original audience had only seen a shortened version, were often 'aghast' how Gance had rewritten Napoléon as "a nationalistic messiah who saved France from the Revolution's destructive excesses" (Abel, 432). This was also the case in the re-edited 'Coppola' version from 1981, which had omitted the more sentimental scenes of the relationship between Napoléon, Josephine, and her maid Violine. Brownlow's reconstruction makes clear, however, how a lengthier version represents the hero as riddled with contradictions. The quite sentimental episodes illustrate that the two women poke fun at Napoléon during a game of blind man's bluff. If he is so short-sighted in love affairs, Abel argues, does this not also nuance his capacities as a larger-than-life leader? (436). And does this framework not slightly ridicule his arrogant declaration: 'I am the Revolution!?' If one starts to see signs of Napoléon as an overweening character, one might see confirmation of this suggestion during the long moment his shadow falls ominously over 'The Declaration of the Rights of Man.' Taking such shots into account, it is only a thin line between seeing Napoléon as the saviour of the Revolution or as its despot, as Abel contends. In spite of the celebratory ending, he is represented as an ambiguous character, with the proviso that such a reading of Napoléon as 'paradoxical' (Abel, 441) hinges upon the duration of the version the spectator has seen, which I would qualify in my listing as paradox number two. If one wants to understand Napoléon as a multifaceted character, one had to see a version which had not removed the seemingly trivial scenes with Josephine and Violine as only a 'sentimental digression' (Abel, 436).

### **Third paradox: A visual symphony rather than a historically correct epic**

The infelicitous existence of several versions leads us right into a third paradox. Gance's aim had been to give the spectators the ultimate picture of Napoléon, but the many re-edited versions had obstructed this ambition. Legend has it that only in some provincial towns in France the ultimate original had occasionally been projected in the Winter of 1927, but never in Paris, let alone abroad. Hence, this film for many years rivalled with Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*, also from 1927, for being considered by cinephiles as the 'holy grail' of film restoration. Thanks to the discovery of extra footage, Brownlow was able to make once more a reconstruction in 2000, this time lasting 5 hours and 30 minutes. But the apparent carelessness in the archival treatment of the film clashes with the meticulous approach by Gance. He had read several hundred books on Napoléon and told Brownlow that he was held

to a “rigorous historical accuracy” (34). Paradoxically, however, he did not only introduce many fictitious characters to spice up a ‘slavish recital of facts’ (35), but he also did not shy away from magnifying “the epic to fit the imagination of the crowd”, as he had written in the margins of one of the research books (34). It had to be a historical document, all right, but above all, it had to be his interpretation of Napoléon, which can explain why *vu par Abel Gance* was added to the title. Because of this addition, Vuillermoz observed that there is “as much in this adventure story, and perhaps more, of Abel Gance as there is of Napoleon,” ironically qualifying Gance in passing as ‘the “Little Corporal” of French cinema’ (1988b, 403).

Initially inclined to make a factual biopic, the title’s ultimate supplement indicates that Gance did not suppress his penchant to rewrite Napoléon’s life story according to his own insights. Taking into account Gance’s flamboyance and extravagance, it requires little imagination why he was attracted to the legendary general. Throughout the film, Napoléon’s incredible charisma is highlighted and in interviews Brownlow had with members of the cast and crew, time and again, Gance’s own rhetoric and contagious enthusiasm is likened to the effect Napoleon must have had on his troops. Vuillermoz mentions that the way Gance commanded the 10,000 extras during military scenes, he could also have “invaded the Palais-Bourbon or the Élysée and been proclaimed dictator” (cit. in Brownlow, 120). During shooting Gance expected his actors to become the people of the Revolution, just as he himself felt he had to rise to the level of his hero (Brownlow, 121). Gance eventually turned *Napoléon* into a deeply personal project, drawing a parallel between the warrior’s relentless pursuit of glory and his own irresistible fervour to write his name in big letters in film history. Although Gance, and this is the third paradox, was keen on making a historically correct biopic, *Napoléon* was better seen as a visual symphony, magnified to suit Gance’s self-image as a cinematic general.

#### **Fourth paradox: intertitles inhibiting the myth of a visual Esperanto**

From the perspective of Impressionist film theory, a filmmaker’s ambition to leave his mark was far from problematic. Besides privileging the subjectivity of characters in deploying cinematic means like frontal close-ups, superimpositions, split-screen effects which all abound in *Napoléon*, the filmmaker’s attitude was always already implied. He did not have to conceal his own viewpoint; on the contrary, the ‘inner life’ behind overt appearance could only be evoked in case the director was not reticent in offering his (highly) personal vision. In order to articulate the fourth paradox as well as the

tragic irony of the place of *Napoléon* within cinema history, it is helpful to contrast his *Napoléon* with that other (too) expensive and totally idiosyncratic historical film, produced by S.G.F., *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc*. If the first transcends the conventions of the genre, as Abel argues, the second deliberately inverts them so drastically that Dreyer's film is 'clearly an anti-historical reconstruction' (Abel, 198).

Dreyer was absolutely delighted that he was given a 'free hand,' when S.G.F. contacted him to make a historical film that would complement *Napoléon* (Abel, 486), but, unfortunately, S.G.F. had to re-cut the final result severely at the instance of the Archbishop of Paris. *La Passion* is a literal transcription of Jeanne's trial record at Rouen, and mainly consists of five separate interrogations by her captors. Since Jeanne refuses to revise the accounts of her mystical experiences, she will eventually be burned at the stake. Influenced by the tradition of the *Kammerspiel*, the genre of closed-space dramas, the tableaux in *La Passion* are minimal, basically a prison and the court. In this bare setting of white walls, irregular windows and unornamented arches, all attention is drawn to an intercutting of close-ups of Jeanne and close-ups of the faces of the male interrogators. By a restricted use of establishing shots and by keeping the images as simple as possible, refusing any colour tinting and displaying a preference for low angles, the characters seem positioned in "a kind of void or limbo of whiteness" (Abel, 490). Bordwell notes that there are hardly any shadows cast on the walls, making it impossible to read depth in the shots (Bordwell 1981, 67). This gives the impression that the characters seem to hover in "gravityless space" (68). Moreover, their faces are in several instances not centred, but either to the left or the right or at the bottom of the image. Due to such eccentric compositions, *La Passion* comes to border on the point of abstraction (Abel, 489), leaving the spectators hardly any clues how the characters are positioned in space.

His formal approach set Dreyer apart from the overall aesthetic of silent cinema. Whereas the Impressionists avoided any theatrical influences, Dreyer considered cinema as a psychological art in the vein of theatre. The director only had to create the best conditions – staging, lighting, design – for an excellent performance of the actor. Unlike Gance who was the incontestable leader of the set, Dreyer did everything to ensure a quiet atmosphere on the set, even abjuring the use of a megaphone. He hoped that such intimacy would enable the actor to deliver a performance from within, "out of his own artistic strength" (Bordwell 1981, 22). For him, there was no better way to "record inner dramas' than by giving close-ups, for the 'face is the mirror of the soul" (ibid.). To stress his conviction, Dreyer forbade Renée Falconetti,

playing Jeanne, to wear any make-up for that was, he presumed, the best guarantee that the inner play of her feelings could be revealed (Abel, 488). Moreover, the effect of using close-ups, he presumed, was that the spectator would be as shocked as Jeanne was by the intimidating appearance of her interrogators (Nash, 53).

*La Passion* is to be seen as an anomaly in the genre of the historical film, because the film is stripped of any obvious markers of the medieval epoch. In fact, Dreyer was disinterested in creating recognisable historical period pieces. He yearns for a transcendental aesthetic, beyond national, class and ethnic differences and with timeless pretensions (Bordwell 1981, 23). Jeanne d'Arc did not strike him as a symbol of French history, but he wanted to elevate her story to 'a human cinema,' that any spectator from whatever geographical background should be able to identify with. The potential 'universality' of Jeanne attracted him. Her history may be unique, but as a person who had the courage to stick to her convictions at all costs, she has a trans-historical appeal, as if she could be saying: 'I am Every Wo/Man.' The fundamental trans-historicity of *La Passion* is confirmed by a perhaps apocryphal anecdote, told by Dreyer himself, that the drawing of matches had decided the subject of his film.<sup>2</sup> Hence, it is a matter of sheer coincidence that he happened to shoot Jeanne d'Arc and not Marie Antoinette.

If the quite theatrical *La Passion*, with its bleak mise-en-scène, consisting of naked faces, is meant to give the impression that Jeanne is just like one of us, then Dreyer's film and the colossal *Napoléon* are as different as chalk and cheese. The sparse use of cinematic devices in Dreyer's case was in total contrast to Gance's project, with its split-screens, superimpositions, rhythmic editing, its innovative triptychs and its dazzling camera work – he even had a camera panning in a circle all by itself and a portable camera mounted on a sledge, pushed downhill (Brownlow, 76). But above all, if the one S.G.F. production aimed to illustrate how an ordinary young woman unwittingly became part of history, then the other film showed a proud and exceptional man's wilful rise to the top, to inscribe himself into history. And as the mammoth, if not insane production of *Napoléon* seems to convey: if there ever was a man who can equal the legendary general's exceptional status, it could only be Gance himself.

Whereas Jeanne d'Arc was reputed to be a randomly selected protagonist for Dreyer, the idea to make a film on Napoléon had haunted Gance for many years. The idea to undertake such an enterprise already came to him in 1921, partly inspired by *Intolerance* (1916). At the time *Intolerance* was a film of unprecedented colossal proportions, made by the American director

D.W. Griffith, whom Gance admired tremendously. After Griffith had seen Gance's *J'accuse!* (1919), the respect was mutual and I use their kinship to suggest why *Napoléon* had to have a purport at least as ambitious as Griffith's three-and-a-half hour epic *Intolerance*, which was so audacious to juxtapose three totally different historical episodes with a present-day American tale.

All the stories end on a pessimistic note, except for the contemporary melodrama. Griffith resorted to a last-minute rescue from the gallows to prove that history could change for the better. Notwithstanding this happy ending, the overall effect of intercutting the narratives is to draw striking parallels between a Babylonian tale (from 539 BC), the Judean story of Christ, a French narrative of a massacre from 1572 and a contemporary melodrama. According to Miriam Hansen, the invocation of Babel is an 'overdetermined moment' because it opens up an "abyss of self-reflexivity" (184). Babel symbolizes both the ideal and the impossibility of a universal language, for the construction of its Tower is at the root of an irreducible confusion of tongues. Hansen claims that Griffith wanted to build a reputation for himself by founding a new language of images that was to "repair the ruins of Babel" (16). The fact that the relatively new medium of silent cinema, not (yet) corrupted by the ubiquity of verbalized words, 'speaks' by way of moving images was a historically unique opportunity to "recover a prelapsarian transparency" (185). Hence, Griffith advocated the idea of silent cinema as an Esperanto of the eye.

Like Griffith, Gance also endorsed, keeping in with Impressionist film theory, the utopian belief in cinema as a carrier for a universal language myth. His idea was that 'intense technical experimentation' would enable him to "achieve a style stirring enough to shake the audience" (Brownlow, 52). He was optimistic that the cinema, the pantheon of all the arts, might be the medium par excellence to transform mankind. Hence, he pushed cinematic innovations to the edge, experimenting with different types of cameras and lenses, swirling images, with colour tinting and toning, and on top of that, the famous triptych scenes for panorama screen shots.<sup>3</sup> Gance sincerely believed he had created with *Napoléon* a 'new alphabet for the cinema' (Brownlow, 144). And here we touch upon a fourth paradox, addressed by Vuillermoz in a critical review of the film. According to him, *La Roue* had proven that Gance was more expert in a sublime film language than anyone else, but his felt necessity to show off his indebtedness to historical texts on Napoléon resulted into an overabundant use of dramatic intertitles. From a cinematic point of view, the many printed speeches are crimes of "high treason" (Vuillermoz 1988a, 402). This 'unexpected return' to literature and to historical drama seriously limits the cinematic quality of Gance's film, Vuillermoz claimed.

Moreover, the wordy explanations do not accord with the cherished ideal of a visual Esperanto, which Gance had approximated with the visually lyrical *La Roue*. For *Napoléon* he had selected a protagonist of great standing to underscore his attempt at a new cinematographic alphabet, but the fact that he was adamant to do justice to his interpretation of his hero required insertions of lengthy intertitles that, in turn, thwarted the ambition to repair the ruins of Babel.

### **Irony: the conservative becomes 'modern' – the innovator outdated**

Despite some critical notes regarding the use of intertitles and the historically questionable portrayal of the “unscrupulous conqueror” Napoléon as a “kind of Douglas Fairbanks,” most critics warmly welcomed Gance’s “liberation of the screen’s vocabulary”, as Vuillermoz put it (1988b, 405, 407). But these critics, like Vuillermoz, had been able to see the film during one of its too few screenings in 1927, unaware of the tragic irony that was to befall Gance’s epic. *Napoléon* suffered not only from its re-edited versions, but because of its postponed official release it was already outdated during its regular run at theatres. Notwithstanding its many innovations, it lacked the hottest novelty in tinseltown: sound. As a man who always had an eye on the future, Gance started to have try outs with sound for a new film, *La Fin du Monde* (1930) by having loudspeakers all over the theatre to create surround effects, but the technique was too poor to be successful (Hagener, 153-54). Gance did not shy away from producing sound versions of his silent masterpiece, but both *Napoleon Bonaparte* (1935) and *Bonaparte et la Révolution* (1971) fared badly. Whether the fact that he had always prided himself on a vanguard position, was used against him with some perverse delight, is difficult to say, but a new generation of critics regarded him as ‘passé’, as someone who had “burned himself out” (Brownlow, 176). The sound versions were so awful that they only encouraged Brownlow to reconstruct *Napoléon* as a brilliant relic from bygone days. Insofar as Gance considered himself as a man always looking ahead, the very future that awaited him in 1927 sealed the fate of *Napoléon* as a film that was to be relegated into the past. Any hope that cinema could be a kind of visual Esperanto was definitely crushed now that sound had introduced itself, perverting the medium with spoken words and dialogues.

A contrast between Gance and Dreyer imposes itself once again. Unlike Gance, Dreyer had not been concerned to keep speech at bay. On the contrary, he had already asked himself, before the advent of sound, whether it might have been possible to make *La Passion* as a spoken film, for the many dialogues – now shown in intertitles – in combination with Dreyer’s affinity with

theatricality would befit a talking picture.<sup>4</sup> Even though Dreyer himself never attempted to remake his *La Passion* into a sound version, another reconstruction, based upon the transcripts of the trial, was made by French director Robert Bresson in 1962 under the title *Le Procès de Jeanne d'Arc*. Despite the obvious differences between Dreyer's and Bresson's films – Jeanne as a tormented woman versus Jeanne reciting her lines in a non-theatrical, flat tone – there are clues to suggest that the critically acclaimed *Le Procès* can be regarded as the sound counterpart of *La Passion*, not least due to the reputation of both directors as ascetic, incorruptible and averse to commerce and modern whims.<sup>5</sup>

The ultimate irony here concerns the fact that Dreyer with his conservative aesthetic and drawn to pastoral, rural tales, happened to have relatively few problems adjusting to the 'modern times' of the sound era. Bordwell is correct in observing that Dreyer believed he was adhering to an 'aesthetic of modest realism' (1981, 24) with *La Passion*, but by pursuing this aesthetic in such a rigid fashion the film became on the rebound radically modern. Dreyer may have had a limited production of films, but this had to do with his refusal to compromise his vision. The four sound features he has made with a time lapse of no less than 32 years – *Vampyr* (1932), *Day of Wrath* (1943), *Ordet* (1955) and *Gertrud* (1964) – have secured him a rightful place in the pantheon of great directors.

By contrast, Gance always wanted to be at the cutting edge on new devices, but in spite of this attitude, he had difficulties in assimilating to the requirements of sound cinema. That is to say, he continued making films, but they could not really affirm his renown from the silent period. If Gance's ambition had been to be as equally revolutionary in the history of cinema as Napoléon was in French history, then a peculiar coincidence can be noticed. According to Gance's interpretation, Napoléon's life was a sheer tragedy. He set developments into motion, which could no longer come to a standstill. As Gance himself wrote, Napoléon did all he could to avoid war, but he had to succumb. He was "being dragged towards war by a strong web of circumstances" and he failed to halt this irresistible process (Gance, 400). Caught into a maelstrom, Napoleon was led by the hand of fate, according to Gance. It is utterly ironic that a similar destiny was to await Gance himself. He was a high demanding director who tried to be in control of everything and was able to command a huge crowd. He had been sufficiently persistent to make his interpretation and he was in the front-line of re-inventing cinema. Hence, all conditions seemed to be met to create a new standard for cinema as

the 'music of light,' which could be seen on a par with Napoléon's victory at Austerlitz in 1805.

By 1927, Gance was considered a visionary artist by practically everyone, but, in retrospect, his silent masterpiece had better be compared to Napoléon's defeat in Leipzig in 1813, a loss which had, after a series of successes, only seemed like "bad luck" (Žižek). The arrival of sound in the cinema had dragged Gance, to paraphrase his vision on Napoléon, into an irresistible process which he had not envisioned and which he neither could have foreseen. The comparison to Leipzig 1813 is justified insofar Gance did not succeed in adapting his *Napoléon* into an acceptable sound version. He continued to make films, albeit at a relatively modest scale and not near the buzz or air of sensationalism that had surrounded him in the silent years. The comparison is not total, however, since two years after Leipzig, Napoléon had to surrender at Waterloo, which confirmed that he was really over the hill. By contrast, Gance could enjoy a belated triumph in the early eighties, when his silent epic was reconstructed for the greater part and met huge enthusiasm from a large audience. At the same time, this triumph is not without its irony. An elderly Gance owed this success to the continuing determination by people like Brownlow to reconstruct the original *Napoléon* – this swan song of silent cinema – as faithfully as possible. Brownlow wrote that he had been partly motivated to undertake the project in order to make up for the unworthy sound version from 1971, which he regards as one of his "worst experiences" (215). Nonetheless, the successful reconstruction is in fact no more than a pyrrhic victory for Gance. Whereas he had always tended to identify himself as a man of the future, he became celebrated as 'the artist' of bygone times, long past. Despite this sorry fate, *Napoléon* seems to have gained a new actuality in the digital era. If the film will perhaps not be worth remembering for the too laudatory representation of (the early years of) the famous general, the figure of Napoléon inspired Gance to an exploration of optical devices which, in turn, offer a toolkit for a present-day generation of new media aficionados.

## NOTES

1. Gance used the triptych for panoramic shots, but also to place three separate images next to each other (Brownlow, 144).
2. Dreyer told he had proposed three subject to the S.G.F. 'One on Marie Antoinette, another on Catherine de Medici, and the third on Joan of Arc. (...) we couldn't arrive at a choice of subject. Then someone said, "Let's take three matches, and draw." I agreed. We drew. I got the headless match: it was Joan of Arc.' (Nash, 52-53)

3. Gance had asked his cameramen to photograph the triptych scenes in 3D effects. Although the 3D effects were visually fascinating, Gance did not include them in the final cut, because he feared they would distract the spectator from the content and hamper reflection upon the story (143).
4. Nonetheless, the use of intertitles instead of sound has a twofold productive contradiction. First, the titles 'assist the breakdown of narrative space.' Second, since Jeanne is illiterate, the intertitles emphasize that she is totally subjected to her interrogators (Bordwell 1981, 91).
5. According to Paul Schrader, Dreyer and Bresson are among the few filmmakers to practice a so-called transcendental film style. Schrader indicates that this style in cinema 'strives toward the ineffable and invisible' in an attempt to 'express the Holy' (3) via a formally rigid approach. Schrader considers Dreyer and Bresson as kindred spirits, but he notes that Dreyer's choice for 'emotional empathy' with Jeanne is slightly at odds with the ideal of a 'spiritually elevating effect' (126), whereas Bresson has not compromised the transcendental style.

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