

# Abel Gance's *Napoleon* and the Cinémathèque Française: The Expert Appraisal of a Collection

Joël Daire

Joël Daire :Directeur délégué du Patrimoine, Cinémathèque française, Paris

Considered by many Abel Gance's masterpiece, *Napoleon* (1927) rightfully belongs to the world's cinema heritage. But few films so famous hide so many mysteries, or have given rise to so many questions from film historians and archivists. Ceaselessly reworked, the restoration of this legendary film still continues to reveal many surprises.

For many years, the Cinémathèque Française has maintained special ties to Gance's work, particularly to *Napoleon*. In spite of a frequently tumultuous relationship with Gance, Henri Langlois dedicated all his energy to saving the film. Thus, the Cinémathèque conserves numerous film elements related to *Napoleon* in its collections, as well as extensive paper archives. The film collection was the source for the main restorations carried out while Gance was still alive and after his death. Since 1989 the Cinémathèque Française has held the rights to *Napoleon* for France and certain French-speaking territories, a fact which confers an additional responsibility with respect to the film, which is one of the most frequently requested for screenings at festivals and foreign cinémathèques.

It was thus understandable that the Cinémathèque wanted to conduct a detailed analysis of its *Napoleon* material and evaluate its strengths and weaknesses. The 2007 merger with the Bibliothèque du Film finally enabled the bringing together in a single entity both the film collections and related materials (posters, photos, drawings, written archives, etc.). The moment was thus ripe to appraise one of our institution's most emblematic collections. This would not be an easy task, because our files listed no less than 250 cans of film material relating to – or seeming to relate to – Gance's film. It was rapidly evident that we could not carry out this work without the assistance of a specialist. Otherwise, we risked becoming lost in the maze of cans and boxes and the different versions of the film made since it was created in 1927.

Obviously, Georges Mourier was the person to call on to help us with this task. Familiar with Gance's work, to which he has dedicated a number of publications since his days as a cinematography student, he is also a personal friend of Clarisse Gance, the director's daughter, and of Claude Lafaye, Gance's faithful friend during the last years of his life. In the early 1990s Mourier had collaborated with Bambi Ballard on a restoration of *Napoleon* for the Cinémathèque. As a director, his films include a documentary about Gance, entitled *À l'Ombre des grands chênes* (In the Shade of Great Oaks, 2005). He has continued his research projects using the collections of the Cinémathèque, including a 2007 study of one of Gance's numerous technical inventions, the "Pictographe".

With Georges Mourier on board to pilot this long-term adventure, we also asked Laure Marchaut, one of our colleagues from the Cinémathèque's Service des Sauvegardes et Restaurations (Conservation and Restoration Service), to assist him in this task. In addition to her experience as an assistant editor, she had also worked on the 1992 restoration of *Napoleon* alongside Bambi Ballard.

This expert appraisal was carried out from 2008 to 2010, and attained the original goal of building a *Napoleon* "dossier d'œuvre" ("artwork dossier") modelled upon those used in fine arts institutions, which would be as well documented as possible. This collection is as complex as it is prestigious, and the dossier enables us to understand the film's history, as well as shedding light on its different aspects (technical, historical, and aesthetic). At the same time, it went beyond this goal by leading us, in a rather unexpected way, to decide to undertake a new restoration/reconstruction of *Napoleon*. Why and how? At our request, this is what Mourier explains in the following article, describing this extraordinary three-year project.



Albert Dieudonné, le Napoléon d'Abel Gance (portrait photographique de studio)  
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