

ROBERT DESNOS, "Fantômas, Les Vampires, Les Mystères de New York"

From "Fantômas, Les Vampires, Les Mystères de New York," *Le Soir* (26 February 1927), reprinted in Desnos, *Cinéma* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), 153–55. © Editions Gallimard 1966.

GENERATIONS are born under a sign: love, liberty, life, poetry, and even the parabolic curve of an era are subject to it. Some were born under the cockades of '89, to the clamor of '93 (in the bitterness of Thermidor, Brumaire, or December), or in the enthusiasm of '48.¹

We were born under the sign of the [1900] International Exposition. The Eiffel Tower had dominated Paris for eleven years, opening an era which some called a renaissance and which was merely an eccentric spirituous endeavor and a condemnation of the triumph over the spirit.

They were carefully upholding the spirit of revenge in the schools; Déroulède spoke annually in front of a bronze statue of Jeanne d'Arc, MacMahon was no more than an *image d'Epinal*; Panama was a far off reef disemboweling shameful ships; our fathers were still gasping for breath after having battled over Dreyfus; on certain nights, our childhood sleep was troubled by cries of "Down with the clergy!" and resounding blows breaking down the church doors; the Fédérate wall was already welcoming the people of Paris; the empty terrain of Villeneuve-Saint-Georges was getting ready to soak up blood; they invented the automobile for tragic bandits; they raced from Paris to Peking; Europe had no more than fourteen years to forge its arms.²

We came to be born. We learned to read with *Les Misérables* and *Le Juif errant*. A tremendous desire for love, revolt, and the sublime tortured us. We weren't vicious; we were precocious. We hid copies of *Claudine* in our desks. We dreamed, in turn, of shipwreck in the *Vengeur*, of the Moulin Rouge, of Cléo de Mérode. For us and us alone, the Lumière brothers invented the cinema. There we were at home. Its darkness was like that of our bedrooms before going to sleep. The screen perhaps might be the equal of our dreams.³

Three films lived up to this mission: *Fantômas*, for revolt and liberty; *Les Vampires*, for love and sensuality; *Les Mystères de New York*, for love and poetry.

Fantômas! Such a long time ago! . . . It was before the war. But the vicissitudes of this modern epic were already fixed in our memories. At every corner of Paris, we rediscovered an episode of this terrific work; and, in the depths of our dreams, we reenvisioned the bend in the Seine where, under a red sky, a barge exploded, right next to a newspaper with headlines telling of the latest exploits of the Bonnot gang.

Musidora, how beautiful you were in *Les Vampires*! Do you know that we dreamed of you and that when evening came you entered our bedrooms without knocking, dressed in your black tights, and on awakening the next morning we searched for a trace of the disconcerting "hotel mouse" that had visited us.

Meanwhile, across the deserted streets of Paris, then in the grip of a bellicose madness, under a sky lacerated by searchlights and artillery shell explosions, as we sought the privilege of shadowy adventures of love, did you know that, in our desire for escape and evasion, we rediscovered that privilege in the wake of Pearl White, in the touring cars of *Les Mystères de New York*, and the mock battles between bogus policemen and stupendous bandits?

We have not read *Faublas*,⁴ yet, despite failures and disillusionments, we will not let the image of love that we once nurtured fade away, not the cinema either, where for the first time woman appeared to us with all her wiles, her charms, and her splendor, to become, under the yoke of multiple censures, the expression of a common, lawful morality.

There are only vices for the powerless; sensuality, on the contrary, is a justification of all forms of life and expression. To the first belong literature, art, and all the manifestations of reaction: tradition, classicism, the obstacles to love, the hatred of liberty. To the sensual, instead, belong the deepest revolutionary pleasures, the legitimate perversions of love and poetry.

That's why we refuse to consider the spectacle of the screen other than as the representation of the life we desire, with the same status as our dreams; why we refuse to believe that any rule, any constraint, any realism could relegate it to the low level to which writing has fallen ever since the novelists, as good businessmen, threw public discredit on the poets; why we demand that the cinema exalt what is dear to us and only what is dear to us; why we wish that the cinema would be revolutionary.

¹ These are references to the revolutions of 1789, 1793, and 1848 in France.

² Paul Déroulède (1846–1914) was a polemical political writer, poet, and leader of the right-wing Ligue des patriotes. In 1899, Déroulède attempted to lead a coup against the Republic, for which he was banished for six years.

General MacMahon (1808–1893) was President of the French Republic from 1873 to 1879. His support of the Royalist forces in their struggle with the Republicans led by Léon Gambetta (1838–1882) was not enough to counteract the victory of the latter in the 1877 elections.

The Fédérate wall was where the leaders who briefly established the Paris Commune of 1871 were executed.

Villeneuve-Saint-Georges was the Paris site where, in 1908, the Confédération Générale du Travail and the Fédération du Bâtiment held a rally protesting police action against a

quarrymen's strike at Draveil; an unprovoked police cavalry charge into the rally participants left four dead and sixty-nine wounded.

Most of these references provide clear evidence of the strong leftist position of the Surrealists in 1927.

³ The references are to Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* (1862), Eugène Sue's *Le Juif errant* (1830), Colette's *Claudine à l'école* (1900), and Cléo de Mérode, a famous ballet dancer from before the war.

⁴ The reference is to Louvet de Couvray's series of novels, *Les Aventures du Chevalier Faublas* (1787–1793).

ABEL GANCE, "My Napoleon"

Translated by Kevin Brownlow in *Napoleon*, Directed by Abel Gance (London: Thames Television, 1980), v. Reprinted by permission. The original French text first appeared as "Mon Napoléon" in a Théâtre de l'Opéra programme (April 1927).

NAPOLÉON is Prometheus.

I'm not thinking here of morality or of politics, but of art. What greater tragedy could there be than the story of a man who wrote: "All my life I have sacrificed everything, peace, profit, happiness to my destiny."

So it wasn't in order to make a mundane "historical film" that I tried to bring alive on the screen this epic figure who described himself as a fragment of rock thrown into space; but because Napoleon represents a microcosm of the world.

My first quest was for a cinematographic style capable of fulfilling my vision. Since *La Roue* I had realized that it was possible at all times to separate the emotional from the narrative element of the pictures appearing on screen. From this arose the necessity of finding new techniques of filming to bring the required flexibility.

One of these was the use of the triple screen. In part of my film I used the triple screen as a way of portraying simultaneously three elements: the physical, the mental, and the emotional. It requires considerable effort to understand and to fuse these three elements in the space of a single second; or should I say a sixteenth of a second. And I noticed that if I missed one image, the other two immediately became meaningless. Let's hope that viewers' hearts, minds, and eyes will at least bear with my self-indulgence.

In general, my approach in *Napoléon* was: (1) to make the spectator become an actor; (2) to involve him at every level in the unfolding of the action; (3) to sweep him away on the flow of pictures.

I conceived Napoleon as a man who is being dragged towards war by a strong web of circumstances and who is trying all the time and in vain to escape. From Marengo onwards, war had become his inescapable destiny. He tried his best to avoid it but was forced at every turn to succumb. Therein lies the drama.

Napoleon can be seen as the everlasting and recurrent conflict between the great revolutionary who wanted to bring about a Revolution in peace, and who went to war in order to establish that peace.

He confessed this in a letter to Fiévée: "I am pitting my strength against Europe. You are putting your strength against the spirit of the Revolution. Your ambition is greater than mine, and I have greater chances of success than you."

And, later, that terrible accusation: "War is an anachronism. One day victories will be won without cannon and without bayonets."

He was a man whose arms were not long enough to encompass something that was greater than himself: the Revolution.

Napoleon was a climax in his generation, which in turn was a climax in Time.

And the cinema, for me, is the climax of life.

EMILE VUILLERMOZ, "Napoléon"

Translated by Norman King in his *Abel Gance: A Politics of Spectacle* (London: British Film Institute, 1984), 42–43. Reprinted by permission. The original French text first appeared as "Napoléon" in *Le Temps* (9 April 1927), 3.

IT IS CHARACTERISTIC of the epic, whether it is poetic, pictorial, musical, theatrical, or cinematographic, to sweep along on its stormy waves all kinds of contradictory elements and to throw together in its violent rhythm the good, the mediocre, and the worst. In making his *Napoléon*, Abel Gance has not escaped from the law of the genre. His film has splendid qualities and strident defects; it is by turns dazzling and intensely irritating. If one examines this work in strictly critical terms, one cannot possibly approve of it. But it is self-evident that where the critical faculties dominate, there can be no more epics . . .

The fundamental limitation of this gigantic composition is that it is not essentially cinematic. Without being aware of it, Abel Gance has gradually distanced himself from the seventh art and made an unexpected return to literature, to the ode, to historical drama, official painting, state sculpture, and lyrical theater. I am not speaking simply of the perfectly legitimate interventions of the chorus, of the drums, of Koubitsky present on the stage, singing the "Marseillaise" while he was miming it on the screen, or even of the actor who lent his voice to Bonaparte to harangue the Army of Italy; it is rather in the whole conception of the work that I see a tendency which represents a very unfortunate step backwards in the history of the silent art. A reproach that is all the more serious in that Abel Gance is a filmmaker who has a real cinematic genius. And it is towards the cine-