Program for Tuesday January 28th, 1958.

"ZUR CHRONIK VON GRIESSHUUS" ("The Chronicle of the Grey House")


Our print, being both a 45 minute condensation and a blow-up from a 9.5mm print, hardly does justice to either the dramatic or the pictorial content of the original version. Dramatically, the loss of values are not too tragic in that most of the incident is still there, and only mood has been sacrificed. (The use of the word "only" is perhaps unfortunate, mood of course being of supreme importance in these German films of legend and fantasy.) Certainly the original film - and a complete print can be seen at Eastman House in Rochester - was one of the slowest-paced films ever created; even Carl Dreyer's work seemed fast and lively in comparison. For much of the footage, the cameras lingered lovingly over the architecture, furniture and wooden carvings, and seemed almost to forget about the plot. However, the photography was a thing of real beauty, and once in a while you do get more than a hint of this beauty in our print. It would be hard to find a more Germanic story than "Grey House"; one could compare it - loosely - to Sweden's "Saga of Gosta Berling", or England's "Lorna Doone" -- but with mysticism supplanting the romanticism of the former, and the sweep of adventure of the latter. In almost every respect it contains all the elements of tragedy and impending doom to dear to the hearts of German audiences. Unlike other German films of the same period, "The Chronicle of the Grey House" moves into the open air, and is unconfined by deliberately artificial studio sets. The warm and rich camerawork, in the original prints at least, gave a truly remarkable picture of the Prussian heath and expensive landscapes.

The climax provides a unique blend of the touching and the bizarre; the mother's ghost appearing to protect her child achieves the near impossible by introducing both beauty and horror into one scene. Incidentally, outside of Germany this supernatural element was often edited out completely, an alternate version finishing the story off in a more "reasonable" but far less effective manner.

Since our print has only French subtitles, it may be as well to outline the plot: On the great Prussian heath is the castle of Grieshhuus, where lives an old Prussian junker and his elder son Hinrich. The younger son, Detlev, returns, having married a noblewoman, and finds that the property has been willed to Hinrich. Hinrich is in love with Barbara, a lovely bondswoman, and refuses to give her up. Before the father can change his will, he dies suddenly. Hinrich marries Barbara in typical heavy-handed German style, at his dead father's bier, and in marrying her forfeits his right to the estate. Detlev and Hinrich fight on the heath, and Detlev is killed. At the same time, Hinrich's bride gives birth to a son, Enzio. Hinrich flees the country, unaware that his wife has died in childbirth. Years later he returns, and sees his now ten-year-old son who has inherited the estate. During the night, Detlev's widow has Enzio kidnapped in order to gain the estate for herself. But the ghost of Barbara warns Hinrich. Gliding over the heath, the spirit leads Hinrich in pursuit of the kidnappers. During a violent storm, Hinrich rescues the boy, but is mortally wounded. He carries the lad to the castle, where the boy learns that his rescuer is actually his lost father. Hinrich dies and joins the spirit of his wife.
"SAPPY SERVICE" (Paramount, 1929) Produced by Al Christie, directed by Eddie Baker, written by Sid Herzig; starring Bobby Vernon, with Vera Steadman, Tom Dempsey. One reel.

Since tonight's program is a somewhat heavy one, we're slipping in this little comedy as an extra. Without being particularly brilliant, it's fast, bizarre, and pleasantly sadistic -- one of the joys of so many silent comedies. Bobby Vernon, erstwhile boy friend to Gloria Swanson in "Teddy at the Throttle", "The Danger Girl" and other early Sennettts, still looks remarkably youthful as the hero.

"NAPOLEON"

A film by ABEL GANCE 1923 - 1927

Since Kirk Bond and Charles Shibuk have kindly undertaken to supply detailed notes on the film's background, and on Gance's career in general, I will limit myself to a few comments before turning the floor over to them.

Of course, it is difficult to be objective about a version of a film that is so far removed from the original, both in terms of length and presentation. However, since it does contain most of the sequences listed by Georges Sadoul as being, in his opinion, the highlights of the film, presumably one may regard it at least as being a fair cross-section of the picture.

The flaws, and there are many, are in both conception and direction. Napoleon is presented throughout as a completely God-like figure -- far more so than Washington, Lincoln and other great leaders (who were not tyrants) have ever been. This reverence is re-stressed to a degree where it not only becomes distasteful but also, and more important, boring. The second major flaw is that far too much of the early development seems to consist of closeups of people talking. Possibly, in the original version, these talking closeups occupied the middle one of the three screens, and may have been bounded on either side by more visual material. Thus, the criticism may be invalid. However, a reliance on closeups to tell his story has characterized Gance's later work too (over the past few years I have looked at Gance's "The End of the World", "Beethoven" and "Jerome Perau", all of which have this failing -- "Jerome Perau" especially).

Gance's anti-war fervor, so pronounced in "J'Accuse" and other films, comes through here too, though less convincingly in view of the hero-worshipping attitude taken towards Napoleon. Certainly however, despite its flaws, "Napoleon" is a tremendous picture, and re-confirms what a real giant among film makers Gance was. There are of course many signs of influence from other directors - most notably Griffith, and occasionally, in certain groupings and patterns of editing, Eisenstein - but "Napoleon" is throughout an individual film, with no obvious or lazy borrowings. Much of it has never been surpassed by anyone. The wonderful horseback chase, which Sadoul dismisses far too casually as being "directly inspired by the Western", is one of the most flawlessly constructed and completely rhythmic sequences we've ever seen. It's not just a question of smoothly photographed running inserts well put together; the sequence is one of sheer poetry -- as is Napoleon's flight to sea. Another
memorable image is Napoleon's reviewing of his troops: done via a fast, quite beautifully angled trucking shot. Basically it is such a simple scene — and yet off-hand I cannot think of another scene quite like it in all the thousands of movies, silent and sound, that I have seen. (The nearest to it were trucking shots in "The Birth of a Nation" and the silent "Ramona", and even these fell somewhat short of it in overall effect). Pictorially, certainly, the film is superb, and I won't spoil your enjoyment of these visual delights by singling out all these scenes in advance. The print quality, by the way, is first-rate, although since this particular print was carefully compiled from different source material, it is not always constant.

Sadoul has commented: "Historically and psychologically, the film was third-rate or worse, and it unconsciously caricatured both Napoleon (of whom Gance was a great admirer) and the Revolution (which he abhorred). But again we find these deficiencies carried off by the sheer ebullient temperament of the director. (There are) passages of almost epic force, the work of a master".

Our print runs for approximately 75 minutes, the highlights of which are the afore-mentioned chase sequence, the flight to sea and the storm, and the enormous scale battle scenes in which over 5000 soldiers and Marines of the 11th French Army Corps took part. Incidentally, much of this footage turned up in a Swedish film of the late 40's, "The Talisman". (So far it has not been released in the U.S.)

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Wm. K. Everson ---

A program note by Charles Shibuk

Technically and aesthetically, "Napoleon" is an important film in the history and art of the cinema. This film, a revolutionary one in many ways, was one of the first two films to use the device of the triptych (triple screen), and antedated Cinerama by a quarter of a century. Claude Autant-Lara's "Pour Construire Un Feu" (1925) was the other triptych film which, although released before "Napoleon", was started some time after Gance's well-publicized project was undertaken in 1923. In "Napoleon", Gance used his two extra screens only at moments when he wished to heighten the power and emotional effect of his image on the central screen. As in Cinerama, there were broad panoramic views, but often the side images differed from the central image. They were duplicates at times, but they might be the reverse of each other, or even bear no relationship at all so that the three screens would contain three separate images. "The film's unusual qualities were realized only by mechanical enlargement. Then their effect was sometimes overwhelming. Not through sheer size, but from enhanced suggestiveness" (James Shelley Hamilton). Gance's advanced views on the flexibility of screen size and dimension are well known today. It is unfortunate that Cinerama - the modern version of Gance's triptych - has failed to approach Gance's use of the medium in its first four efforts, nor given us anything that would remotely resemble "content".

Gance remade "Napoleon" in 1932. He used many of the same actors, plus generous portions of stock footage from the original. He also employed directional speakers to heighten the realism of his sound-track, thus anticipating Disney's use of stereophonic sound in "Fantasia" (1940) by almost a decade. Mention must also be made of Gance's use of the camera. Far from being a static pageant on the life of a historical figure, the film contained an unprecedented use of the mobile camera. (Examples are quoted by Sardoul, and Bardeche and Brasillach). Gance also made much use of the subjective camera, a device used by Karl Freund in "The Last Laugh" and "Variety", and exploited to the fullest by Robert
Montgomery in "The Lady in the Lake", with considerably less artistry. Gance's controversial and costly film was four years in the making, and was to have formed the first part of a trilogy on the life of Napoleon. Unfortunately, Gance was unable to obtain financial backing for the remainder, in spite of the fact that "Napoleon" is reported to have made money.

Gance's version of a part of the life of Napoleon was undoubtedly the best film on this subject. Other notable attempts were "Conquest" (Garbo & Boyer), "Desiree", Karl Grune's "Waterloo", the late Sacha Guitry's "Napoleon", "Mlle Desiree" and "Pearls of the Crown", and Laryu Pick's "Napoleon at Santa Helena", which used a portion of the latter sections of Gance's own original script.

A shortened version of Gance's film was screened at the 1953 Venice Film Festival as part of a French retrospective series. The trip typh sections were projected on a CinemaScope screen. The response of the festival audience, composed of professional film makers and critics, was enthusiastic. "Napoleon" was soon revived in Paris, where it easily outshone Sacha Guitry's aforesaid sumptuous production of "Napoleon", which has yet to be released in New York.

Bardeche and Brasillach sum the film up thus: "Never had the very incarnation of an epic been so magnificently transferred to the screen... it is the only French film wherein history does not appear stiff and lifeless like a waxwork show. With all its errors and omissions, this epic of Abel Gance marks the height of his achievement".

"Napoleon" was the first and only film to be presented at the Paris Opera House. It was shown on three screens and accompanied by the Opera's orchestra and chorus. It ran between five and six hours, and represents the longest film ever placed on public exhibition. By the time "Napoleon" had reached London, it ran between two and two-and-a-half hours. The U.S. version released by MGM was "snipped to mediocrity" (James Shelley Hamilton) and ran for 72 minutes. Of the few reviews I have seen, all appear to be unfavorable. They also mention that in all versions of "Napoleon", the print quality varies from screen to screen, and that the three screens have never been in perfect synchronization.

-- "NAPOLEON" -- by -- KIRK BOND

Production: Westi (Wangeroff and Stinnes), later Société générale de films. Scenario and direction: Abel Gance; camera: Jules Kruger and others; sets: Alexandre Benois and others.

Cast: Napoleon - Albert Dieudonné; Danton - Koubitsky; Robespierre - Edmond Van Dael; Marat - Antonin Artaud; Barras - Maxudian; Salicetti - Philippe Hérit; Tristan Fleuri - Nicolas Kolbe; Saint-Just - Abel Gance; The Boy Bonaparte - Roudenko; Joséphine de Beauharnais -- Gina Manès; Violene Fleuri - Annabella; Charlotte Corday - Marguerite Gance.

Date of premiere: April 7, 1927, at l'Opéra in Paris.

Length: Original showing at l'Opéra estimated at from five to six hours.

To write anything comprehensive about the legendary "Napoleon" in a short space is all but impossible. I can only hope to say something beyond the obvious facts.
The preceding credits are not intended to be at all complete. They give only
the basic information, information too which is relatively certain. The
production is under two names because of the failure of Westl in the general
collapse of the Stinnes financial empire. The French company came to the
rescue and after a considerable period of delay, production on the film was
resumed. Gance got down to serious planning on the film about 1924. By May
of 1925 he had finished shooting the prologue, "Youth of Napoleon''.
Presently there followed the collapse of Westl. Production was resumed in
1926 and shooting probably stopped around the end of the year. The premiere
was announced for February and finally took place April 7, 1927, at l'Opera
before the President of the Republic and numerous other dignitaries.

The film so presented was the first part of what was to be a five part history
of Napoleon. There is no indication that Gance ever made an attempt to begin a
second part. The film as Gance made it consisted of the prologue, "Youth of
Napoleon'', and the main section, "Napoleon Under the Terror''. This began with
the young Napoleon in Paris in 1792 and followed him through scenes in Paris
and Corsica, the siege of Toulon, and finally the beginning of the Italian
campaign in 1796.

It is difficult to determine just how long the film ran originally. Of two
contemporary accounts, one says five hours, the other six. On the other hand,
Pierre Leprohon in a recent discussion in his "Presences Contemporaines -=
Cinema'' gives 5,000 meters for the l'Opera length, which would at even full
silent speed come to only about four hours. Of course, several leisurely
intermissions would have lengthened the time considerably. In addition, a
"first cut'' has been estimated at from 12,000 to 15,000 meters, but whether
there actually was a cut version of this inordinate length is perhaps open to
question. The figure of 15,000 meters takes the film actually beyond the
forty reels of the original "Greed''. It is not out of keeping with the
reputation of the director, and the elaborate scenario which Gance published
offers material for it, but it still seems wise to reserve judgement on the
problem.

Outside of France there was apparently no great enthusiasm for the full scale
epic. In London it ran some two and a half hours, and in New York (at the
decidedly unGancian Fifty-fifth Street Playhouse) a total of seventy-two
minutes! In both Paris and London it was shown with the famous three
screens, in New York with only one. Again there is some uncertainty about
just what Gance did with the three screens. Apparently the general technical
arrangement was fairly close to Cinerama -= that is, three projectors with
three images that more or less fitted together. The result, according to
contemporary critics, was not ideal. There was an embarrassing jump between
images during which figures might momentarily disappear as they went from
one section of the triple screen to another, and because of faulty laboratory
work the images had different degrees of brightness.

It seems clear that Gance at different times used his "triptych'' for both
whole scenes and for three contrasting scenes. Besides he describes how he
also used composite shots (which may or may not have been on the triple
screen) with many small bits following each other in a carefully planned
design. Various stills give the impression that the triple screen was
used for a variety of scenes, but the published scenario specifically
mentions "The Tempest'' (the storm at sea cut with the excitement in the
Assembly) and "The Entrance into Italy'' as places where the triple screen is
used. At all events, it has been generally understood that the triple screen
was used for a relatively small number of scenes, and it seems reasonable to assume that this was the case.

In addition to the triple screen and the composite shots Gance experimented with numerous ways of making the camera more mobile, such as fastening the camera to the back of a horse and strapping it to the body of a cameraman in the famous snowball battle. Of course it must be remembered that this is in 1925 and 1926, and directors in general were then becoming fascinated by the seemingly endless possibilities of the moving camera.

The chief actor is the not very well-known Albert Dieudonné. Originally Gance wanted Mosjoukine. One can easily see Mosjoukine's intense, almost mystical face, slightly roundish in the way of Napoleon's, giving us Napoleon from the Paris of 1792 to the St. Helena of 1821. But it was Dieudonné who played the part. At the time he was not exactly unknown. He had just finished directing the film that is generally ascribed to Renoir — "Catherine". Renoir wrote the script but Dieudonné directed the film, and to judge from the stills, the film is nothing less than a masterpiece — a marvellous evocation of lights and shadows amazingly advanced for its time.

If Gance did not continue his "Napoleon", there were two films which in a sense represented a continuation. One was the sound remake Gance brought out in 1935, using fragments from the original film. The sound parts were considered distinctly inferior to the parts from the original film. The other film was Lupu Pick's "Napoleon on St. Helena". This film of 1929 was written by Willy Haas and Pick "after motives by Abel Gance". It seems likely that Gance had at least something to do with the film since there was no published scenario of the later parts of Gance's projected film. The Pick cast is entirely different, with one exception. Philippe Hériat, the Salicetti of Gance, plays the Marshal Count Bertrand, a major role, for Pick. Werner Krauss plays Napoleon, Hanna Ralph the Countess Bertrand, and Albert Basserman Governor Hudson Lowe.

By the time Pick's film came out Gance was hard at work on "La Fin du Monde". It would be interesting to know just how the two celebrated films by Gance, one on the searing figure Napoleon, the other on Christ, ranked in the mind of their creator. Gance has told us that he was already planning his great epic of mankind early in the twenties. This would mean that "Napoleon" — all planned thirty hours of it — was something if a minor interruption. Once that was out of the way, Gance could return to his real work, the film at one time to be called "Foce Homo". But of course this is an exaggeration. "Napoleon" too meant a great deal to the artist. According to the scenario, it was "Napoleon Seen by Abel Gance". It was to be an epic poem too, an epic poem of the idealist from Corsica whose great aim was to found "the United States of Man... the Republic of the World". It is almost Blake, with with Bonaparte instead of the heroes of the American Revolution. And after all, "Napoleon" was in a measure achieved. The odds were all against Gance when he finally began his "Foce Homo" and what finally emerged at last was hardly what Gance had originally planned.

Is "Napoleon" Gance's greatest film? Weighing merit is never easy, and with a romantic artist such as Gance it is particularly difficult. Impressions count for so much where the classic rules are put aside. Without seeing all of either "J'Accuse" or "La Roue", the two great predecessors of "Napoleon", it is hard to say where they stand. The latter generally is regarded as the more important of the two, though certainly "J'Accuse" — the long version privately shown that is — was very warmly acclaimed in this country. Its story sounds more vital. But Gance matured slowly. It is certainly a reasonable guess that "Napoleon" should be considered Gance's masterpiece. At least any fairly full version of it should be. And while what we may have short of that is tragic and frustrating at least with whatever we have, we have something of the film, enough to give us some idea of what the original is like.

KIRK BOND.