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The Cinema as Time Machine: Temporality and Duration in the Films of Abel Gance

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Abel Gance seemed to warp peoples' perception of time, just as his work embodied the durational extremes of cinema. On the one hand, he was "an apostle in cinema's Middle Ages" (*Cinéa*, 1 September 1923) – a builder of vast celluloid edifices that stretched over multiple hours and took days or weeks to project. Contemplating these films, Jacques Thévenet felt the same sense of "wonderment" as he did when standing before a gothic cathedral (*Comœdia*, 25 December 1922); religious images were often used about creator and creations. "Abel Gance is becoming God", the arts columnist Bing remarked: "At his command, light is let loose and a world is fashioned according to his will." To encounter the filmmaker was to fall out of step with time. His Paris apartment was saturated in Renaissance décor and visitors were transfixed by Gance's "misty eyes, lost in a luminous dream" and his "long, flowing hair which seems to flutter in the breath of some distant chimera" (*Fantasio*, 1 December 1930). Yet, at the other end of this experiential scale was the modernist freneticism of Gance's editing, which could accelerate to the rate of one frame per shot – the filmstrip's maximum unitary velocity. While this revolutionary technique was deeply influential on other directors, satirists joked that it caused "neuralgia and nervous fits" among innocent spectators (*Cyrano*, 26 February 1928). Critics likewise deemed Gance a "barbarous" artisan who "irritates and exhausts us with [his] virtuosity" and "the ceaseless movement of [his] images" (Bardèche and Brasillach 1935, 242-3). Here was a creator of "immoderate, chaotic, monstrously uneven" films that consumed "hectometres of celluloid" and ruined all his producers (*L'Action française*, 17 May 1935). Faced with a temporal admixture of the gigantic and the minuscule, it is no wonder Emile Vuillermoz felt Gance's cinema was nothing less than a kind of "time machine" (*L'Impartial Français*, 19 March 1926).

While the saga of this director's longest creation – the ten-hour *Napoléon, vu par Abel Gance* (1927) – has been well documented elsewhere (Brownlow 2004, Mourier 2012, Cuff 2017), considerably less attention has been paid to the two features that preceded it: the four-hour *J'accuse!* (1919) and the eight-hour *La*

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Roue (1922). This essay explores how duration was an essential consideration for their production, exhibition, and reception. I begin by outlining the evolution of Gance's early career in relation to contemporary modes of film distribution, highlighting the importance of long-format features to commercial success – especially that of *J'accuse*. After exploring how the issue of duration became central to critical debate on *La Roue*, I offer a detailed analysis of the final part of the film in relation to its overarching timeframe. I argue that *La Roue* seeks to engage spectators' contemplation through its protracted form, and that the ending of Gance's narrative relies upon the cumulative impact of a multi-hour experience.

Exploiting duration

The rise of the feature film in the 1910s was part of a much wider transformation of cinema. Filmmakers and filmgoers alike were outgrowing the short-format productions and small venues that dominated cinema's cultural landscape in the 1900s. In the US, this early era was epitomized by the "Nickelodeons": cramped storefront theatres that relied upon a rapid turnover of short films shown in 30-minute programmes. By 1910, longer narratives were being developed across multi-episode serial films – cheap productions that could fit into restricted schedules, yet draw audiences back on a weekly basis. Works of literary and historical adaptation were beginning to inspire the first feature films, but these longer productions were more often exhibited as "roadshow" presentations in theatres than as part of the standard cinema circuit. Conditions at such special events allowed for more sophisticated musical accompaniment and (accordingly) a sense of prestige mostly absent from Nickelodeon-style filmgoing (see Bowser 1990, 191-216). The boom in feature production in the 1910s was accompanied by a massive increase in cinema construction. As exemplified by the 6000-seat Gaumont-Palace cinema in Paris (opened in 1911), new "movie palaces" provided audiences with greater comfort, better quality projection, and improved musical presentation. By offering spectators a more sustained and immersive aesthetic experience, cinema was placing itself on a level with theatre and opera.

The first years of Gance's directorial career coincided with this tremendous expansion of the medium, and from the outset he proclaimed the potential for cinema to become a new form of religion and "spread the artist's faith across the world" (*Ciné-journal*, 9 March 1912). His early productions grew steadily in temporal length, from one-reel morsels like *Le Masque d'horreur* (1912) to four-reel features like *Les Gaz mortels* (1916). Given the camera speed of approximately 18 frames per second for these films, each reel would last less than twenty minutes when projected. Yet because long-duration productions were still something of a novelty in the early

1910s, even films of comparatively modest length were often exhibited with short intervals between each reel. Gance's features of the 1910s adapted to this structural expectation, selling themselves to theatres and audiences as multipart dramas. For example, his *L'Héroïsme de Paddy* (1915) was advertized as a "terrific topical drama [...], complete in three parts" (*L'Echo d'Alger*, 27 February 1916). In more high-brow theatrical terms, Gance's *L'Énigme de dix heures* (1915) was described as a "great mystery drama in three acts" (*L'Echo d'Alger*, 30 January 1916). As their quality and length increased, these productions were exhibited in more elaborate ways. Gance's *Barberousse* (1916) was first shown as an "exclusive event" with a large orchestra at the Cinéma des Nouveautés Aubert-Palace in the summer of 1916, when it was advertized as a "remarkable [film with] first-rate acting and direction" (*L'Intransigeant*, 11 August 1916). Yet this production was not released generally until the following spring, whereupon it became "a great adventure-drama in four parts" (*Le Film*, 26 March 1917) to be screened in episodes alongside Louis Feuillade's serial *Les Vampires* (1915-16) (*La Presse*, 22 June 1917).

These productions proved highly popular and profitable, to the extent that by early 1917 Gance was being declared "the revelation of the season" (*Hebdo-Film*, 24 February 1917). Yet Guillaume Danvers was not alone in wishing that "the evident talent of Abel Gance would exercise itself on less fantastical subject-matter" (*Le Film*, 2 April 1917). The chance came when Gance caught the attention of Charles Pathé, one of the most powerful figures within the industry. By building a strong relationship with Pathé, the aspiring director saw his chance to move away from the cheap, quickly-made films that Louis Nalpas demanded for his Le Film d'Art company – and to realize projects worthier of his cultural ambitions. In this endeavour, he was also influenced by the latest cinematic imports from America. D.W. Griffith's *Intolerance* (1916) had been shown privately in Paris in October 1917 (the French public release was not until 1919), and Gance drew tremendous inspiration from this film and its famous author. Griffith impressed him not merely with the boldness of his statement on human history, but in the sheer size and scope of his film: *Intolerance* was nearly three hours long, split into two "acts" which were themselves the duration of a standard feature. In 1917, Gance followed suit by planning a trilogy of epic war films – as well as a triptych of esoteric religious films. Only one title listed among these giant schemes was ever realized, but *J'accuse* proved to be Gance's greatest commercial success.

This extraordinary blend of family drama and war drama – part nationalist, part pacifist, part realist, part supernatural – had been personally endorsed by Charles Pathé and was released through his company's extensive commercial network. It needed the kind of financial support and mercantile ballyhoo that Pathé's organization

could provide, for *J'accuse* was far larger than any project Gance had previously handled. The film premiered in March-April 1919 in a version consisting of four parts, totalling 5250 metres; projected at 18 fps, this equates to 253 minutes of screen time. For general release within France in the spring of 1919, *J'accuse* was reduced to 4350m (209 minutes) and reorganized into three parts. By contemporary standards, these were abnormal dimensions. *J'accuse* had cost Pathé 525,000 francs at a time when the average budget for a French feature film was 100,000-200,000F (Abel 1984, 17) – and its temporal length was accordingly oversized. A typical urban cinema relied upon two- to three-hour programmes, which might contain a feature film (usually 60-90 minutes), a serial episode (up to 30 minutes), and a mixture of short comedies, newsreels, or musical items. While *J'accuse* fitted neither the standard model of a serial nor that of a feature, it sought to exploit the popularity of episodic exhibition and of long-duration narratives. The model of the "roadshow" feature presentation from the early 1910s could be financially risky, as demonstrated in the US by *Intolerance*. Griffith had withheld his epic from a conventional general release in 1916-17 to retain absolute control over the mode of its exhibition across a long run of special screenings – but by doing so, he lost any opportunity of commercial profit (see Merritt 1990). Given the production cost of *J'accuse*, it was essential to get the film shown in as many venues as possible.

Pathé's publicity began by trumpeting *J'accuse* as an "immense edifice of cinematic Beauty and Art", stating that their product matched in quality what it boasted in quantity (*Le Petit journal*, 25 April 1919). Adverts for each successive instalment added new layers of hyperbole to the campaign:

> Can Abel Gance realize his dream with a perfection that exceeds that of the first part of J'ACCUSE? Can he render life itself with greater force? – make it more beautiful? – testify yet further to the power of art? No?
>
> Yes! – he can! Go to the Pathé-Palace and watch the second episode of this incredible, unique film:
>
> **J'ACCUSE**
>
> The author surpasses himself. This is more than cinema: it is Beauty itself. It is a stunning fresco worthy of an illustrious painter. And the action is no less engaging than its setting and décor. Truly: you're gripped, seized, dazzled. You must see:
>
> **J'ACCUSE**
>
> (*L'Homme libre*, 1 May 1919)

The extended run of *J'accuse* also allowed Pathé to promote their new range of purpose-built film venues. On the Place Clichy, the Artistic theatre's plush spectatorial environment was highlighted as part of the cinematic experience: "the elegant interior of this ravishing cinema on the Rue de Douai" was the ideal space in which the

film could "cast its spell" (*L'Intransigeant*, 3 May 1919). *J'accuse* was thus connected to a broader cultural experience and a duration that extended beyond its time on screen: this film was not just a multi-hour entertainment, but a month-long spectacle. In this way, the final part was the culmination of several weeks of expectation; it revealed itself to be "the most magnificent, the most disturbing, the most tragic of works committed to the screen", and the memory of this ultimate "chapter" would remain "imperishably etched into the memory" of everyone who saw it (*Le Figaro*, 9 May 1919).

The film's format also had advantages for the momentum of its national distribution. *J'accuse* was released in Paris during April-May 1919, then rolled out to the provinces in the following months. This generated a perpetually-growing mass of press coverage, which built expectation and enticed new audiences: "It's a certainty that Paris, and then the whole of France, will rise to acclaim this brilliant work of cinema" (*L'Intransigeant*, 25 April 1919). When Gance's production reached the southwest of France, Pathé filled local papers with references to the saga of foregathered success. Remote towns in the forests of Les Landes and on the Atlantic coast were confronted by adverts in which *J'accuse* is suffixed by three exclamation marks – echoing the triple excitement of "three gala shows" as each episode arrived at nearby theatres. Audiences in Arcachon were about to see the most "sensational revelation ever to emerge from the cinema", a film that had already "been acclaimed throughout the whole of France" (*L'Avenir d'Arcachon*, 27 July 1919). Local press reports indicate that provincial theatres were subdividing Gance's episodes into even smaller parts. Like many establishments keen to clothe their products in the respectable terminology of theatre, Arcachon's cinemas referred not to multiple reels of celluloid but to successive "acts" of drama within each episode. In expectation of this kind of compartmentalizing, preparatory lists of the film's intertitles had been created that divided *J'accuse* into nine "parts" (Pathé 1919). Gance's long-duration format allowed a large degree of flexibility for individual exhibitors.

Rudmer Canjels has discussed the growth of the early 1920s French "film à époques", relating how such productions sought to distinguish themselves from the low-brow format of the episodic serial ("film en séries") that had proved immensely popular in the 1910s (2011, 156-79). Yet *J'accuse* already exhibits the traits of the long-duration "film à époques", not least because all the adverts cited above use the term "époque" in the original French. Though the most literal English translation of this word – "epoch" – denotes a far longer stretch of time than that of a feature film, it at least suggests the durational difference that distributors wished to convey with the term. The episodes of a "film en séries" were often only one reel long and featured a narrative that began and ended within the confines of this timespan. Films "à époques" offered considerably longer

stretches of narrative and envisaged themselves like "an act in a play", rather than a one-off adventure (ibid., 159). The marketing of *J'accuse* may mimic the attention-grabbing language of sensational serials, but it does so to create a sense of narrative continuity that spans the film's multiple episodes.

By the time *J'accuse* was ready for export to the UK and the US in 1920-21, another distribution phenomenon had been pioneered for the release of Griffith's *Broken Blossoms* (1919). A wide-ranging press campaign preceded its premiere, and the director went to enormous lengths to offer a spectacular mix of live performance and special audiovisual effects for theatrical exhibition (see Kepley Jr. 1978). The general release of *Broken Blossoms* was then staggered to create a ripple-effect of interest from theatres and audiences, maximizing publicity and profit as the film journeyed from urban centres to rural provinces. This tactic was so successful that major studios began to utilize Griffith's methods for their own products. The 1920s were dominated by evermore elaborate campaigns: "roadshow presentations", "specials", "super-specials", and "super-films" flooded the marketplace in America and threatened to overwhelm European screening schedules (Hall and Neale 2010, 41-61). Even when such films grew to titanic proportions and consumed enormous sums (as in the famous examples of Erich von Stroheim's *Foolish Wives* (1922) or Fred Niblo's *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* (1925)), the excesses of production proved to be excellent fuel for public expectation. In some ways, the release of *J'accuse* within France predicted these tactics. While preparing prints for export to the UK, Gance encouraged Pathé's marketing department to "launch [the film] like *Broken Blossoms* as a Super-film in its integral length" (1920a). The strategy paid off: within four years, *J'accuse* had earned over 3,510,000F (*Cinémagazine*, 3 August 1923). This success encouraged Gance to believe the model of the super-production could preserve the duration of his work while maximizing its commercial potential.

Challenging duration

In December 1919, Gance and Charles Pathé signed a contract for a film called "La Rose du Rail" that would occupy six reels of celluloid – ideally between 1500 and 2000m (at 18 fps, 72-96 minutes). Yet Gance had only a rough outline of his project, and he began production in January 1920 with only the beginning of a shooting script. In fact, he carried this manuscript with him and added to it as the filming continued into the spring when he shot in the railyards around Nice, and then the summer when the production moved to the Alps near Mont Blanc.

Gance quickly recognized that what he was making far exceeded the length and budget of his contract. Already in June 1920, he wrote to one of Pathé's agents that publicity for his forthcoming

production "must concentrate on super-films" – referring to *J'accuse* as "the prototype for this genre" (Gance 1920b). By adopting the successful method of distribution for his previous film, Gance hoped to justify the enormous effort and expense he was now costing Pathé. By the time the filmmaker signed-off on his screenplay in November 1920, he had written 1800 scenes split into three "parts". The novelistic dimensions of his script demanded unprecedented consumption of filmstock, but this was turned into a boast for bemused (or concerned) onlookers in the trade and press. In February 1921, the director proudly informed correspondents that he had by then exposed 150,000m of celluloid – equating to over 120 hours of screen time (Gance 1921). Yet the film was not seen for nearly two years, as Gance broke off his editing for extended trips to the US (April-October 1921) and Sweden (November-December 1921). On his return to France, his first task was to re-edit *J'accuse* into a version of 3200m – 154 minutes – for rerelease. Gance only resumed work on *La Roue* (as "La Rose du Rail" was now called) in mid-1922, and it took him until the end of the year to finish shaping his mountain of celluloid into a coherent form.

For its premiere at the prestigious Gaumont-Palace in December 1922, *La Roue* was divided into a prologue and six parts – totalling 10,730m (at 18 fps, 517 minutes). For general release in Paris cinemas in February-March 1923, Gance reduced the film into a version of a prologue and four parts that amounted to 9200m (443 minutes). In 1924, Pathé released a reduced copy of 4200m (202 minutes) in a prologue and two parts. All of these versions were designed to be shown across multiple screenings (though the 1924 edition allowed the possibility of a single séance, with a halfway interval). The premiere took place across three successive Thursday afternoons, while the general release staggered each episode over four weeks. In provincial (especially rural) areas, the film was distributed as a serial – using the premiere version as its basis, but (as with *J'accuse*) subdividing episodes into one- or two-reel parts.

This multiplicity of editions puts critics and historians in a difficult position. As with so many of Gance's films, none of the above versions of *La Roue* survive in their entirety. Any meaningful evaluation must therefore contend with the immense problems of access and availability (an issue explored in Cuff 2011). For example, the only complete list of intertitles for any one edition of the film relates to the 1924 version – and this presents English translations, rather than the original French text. Synopses of how *La Roue* was divided into episodes for the 1922 premiere are either vague or contradictory, while press reports (and even Pathé's own catalogues) are likewise inconsistently detailed for the 1923 version. Gance's script and the various literary adaptations it inspired either pre-date the editing process or post-date the film's initial release and therefore have no exact (or at least, no complete) celluloid equivalent. The

most accurate guide for the overall structure of *La Roue* can be found in the list of music-cues compiled by Paul Fosse and Arthur Honegger for use in Paris cinemas in February-March 1923 (see Fosse 1911-1928). Unlike Gance's screenplay or Pathé's press material, this document refers to (and was created by means of) a specific copy of the film. Accordingly, it provides by far the best record of how *La Roue* was divided into four *époques* for its presentation in 1923. The film's narrative in this form can be reconstructed as follows:

In the "prelude" of the first episode, "La Rose du Rail", engine driver Sisif (Séverin-Mars) rescues the orphan Norma from a train crash. He decides to adopt her and destroys the only evidence of Norma's origins. Fifteen years later, Sisif's son Elie (Gabriel de Gravone) and Norma (Ivy Close) live as brother and sister, but their intimacy drives Sisif to despair. He forbids the adolescents from spending time together, but Elie and Norma share fantasies of an alternate life in which they are married. Sisif's erratic behaviour (drinking, gambling, brawling) is brought to the attention of Jacques de Hersan (Pierre Magnier) – his exploitative, materialistic employer. In the last sequence of "La Rose du Rail", Sisif confesses to Hersan his "kidnap" of the infant Norma – and reveals that he has fallen in love with her.

In the second episode, "La Tragédie de Sisif", Sisif attempts suicide by crushing himself under a train, but is rescued by his stoker Machefer (Georges Térof). Hersan subsequently blackmails Sisif and coerces Norma into marriage. While transporting Norma to Hersan in Paris, Sisif decides to crash the train, killing himself and the object of his obsession; however, Machefer's actions avert disaster. On the return journey, Sisif renames his engine "Norma" and transfers his affections to this machine. Months pass, and Sisif is gripped by depression – just as Norma is ever unhappier with her husband, who likewise suffers at her emotional distance. Elie accidentally discovers that Norma was never his sister, and realizes his long-standing romantic love for her. He confronts Sisif, but the two agree never to tell her the truth. One day, Sisif's sight is badly impaired in an accident; when Norma returns home soon after, she is devastated to be rejected by her family. Sisif once more attempts suicide, this time crashing his train "Norma" with only himself on board. The train is destroyed, but Sisif survives. He is demoted and ordered to the Alps to take charge of the funicular railway below Mont Blanc.

The third episode, "La Course à l'Abïme", reveals Sisif and Elie (together with their dog Tobie) living in a remote Alpine cabin. The name of Norma is taboo, but she soon arrives on holiday with Hersan. Elie discovers a violin varnish that he believes will make his fortune and arranges a public concert – where he sees Norma. Hersan's fortune declines and he is forced to return to Paris, leaving Norma free to spend time with Elie. She persuades Elie to make her a

violin, in which he secretly writes a note confessing his forbidden love. Hersan returns from Paris and is driven into a jealous rage by the presence of her family; he assaults Norma, who prepares to rejoin Elie and Sisif. Discovering his wife's plans and Elie's written confession, Hersan confronts Elie and the two men fight hand-to-hand above a precipice. Norma goes to Sisif's cabin, whereupon the mortally wounded Hersan arrives. He explains that he left Elie hanging above the abyss, but dies before he can reveal the whole truth. Sisif and Norma are guided by Tobie to Elie's location, but just as they arrive he plummets into the glacier's ravine. "La Course à l'Abïme" ends with Sisif furiously blaming Norma for his son's death.

In the fourth episode, "La Symphonie Blanche", Sisif returns to his cabin with Tobie and sinks into depression. Guides search for Elie's body, but to no avail. Hersan's death leaves Norma financially ruined, and she too drifts into poverty. Machefer visits Sisif and is shocked to discover the state in which his old friend lives. Soon after, Sisif wakes to discover he has lost his sight completely – he sees nothing but dim white light, as if his eyes are filled with snow. On the anniversary of Elie's death, Sisif climbs the mountainside to plant a cross at the site of his fall. Unbeknownst to him, Norma has also come here to lay flowers and she follows Sisif back to his cabin. There she hides and, over time, silently tidies and repairs the dilapidated dwelling. Sisif reacts angrily to the unknown presence in his house, but eventually acknowledges her presence. Soon after, it is the festival of the Alpine guides and Norma joins in their celebrations. Sitting at the window as Norma joins a round dance on the plateau below, Sisif dies peacefully.

As even this partial synopsis makes clear, the drama of *La Roue* is enormously protracted – the film is far longer than its small cast and localized settings would suggest. While the premiere in December 1922 received a degree of public acclaim that matched the success of *J'accuse*, the critical reaction to *La Roue* was more ambivalent. Though the film's expressive vocabulary (particularly its use of rapid montage) was greeted with rapt admiration, the melodramatic subject and extreme length were castigated in terms that were often quite brutal. Emile Vuillermoz authored multiple reviews of *La Roue*, which was evidently an object of deep fascination and frustration for him. He argued that the stylistic innovations within Gance's film were revolutionary, but that its distended drama considerably weakened their impact. After the premiere screenings, Vuillermoz wrote that each successive episode of *La Roue* seemed "to unfold at the same tempo, riddled with the same structural errors, and illuminated by the same flashes of genius" (*Comœdia*, 31 December 1922). Reflecting on his impressions of the film two months later, he refocused his ire at the commercialization of cinema – as evidenced so strongly in the way Pathé had advertized *J'accuse*. Vuillermoz claims that producers were to blame for the duration of *La Roue*, as they sought to

pad-out their product for the sake of mass appeal:

> We're told that Gance's film cost 3,000,000F. Apparently, this sum could only be recuperated by force-feeding an excellent production of 2000m until it became a grossly corpulent one of 10,000m. It seems to be the consensus that cinematic beauty is sold per kilo and that the genius of a filmmaker can only receive proper measurement with the aid of a surveyor's chain. This is where we are led by the pig-headedness of our celluloid-churning merchants who refuse to abandon their demagogic dreams. (*Cinémagazine*, 23 February 1923)

Similarly, Marianne Alby wrote that the mixture of "art and commerce" ruined the "cohesion" of Gance's film: "its nature is so powerful that he shouldn't seek to meld his precious metal with cheap lead" (*Cinéa*, 1 September 1923). Many critics demanded that *La Roue* be drastically shortened to improve its quality. Gaston Tournier wrote that the film would "benefit enormously from being reduced to three or four thousand metres": "the drama would no longer appear to languish and its subject would be more moving and more real" (*L'Écho de Paris*, 16 February 1923). In more strident terms, Vuillermoz said it was a matter of "cinematic honour" that the best elements of *La Roue* should be saved from their "uneven, incomplete, shambling, and stylistically incoherent" surroundings. He claims the film has the power "to open the eyes of the blind", but that for this reason its populist context must be jettisoned:

> Sadly, its beauties most often address themselves to the eyes and the sensibilities of those who are alien to the culture of the screen. [Therefore] it is essential that after *La Roue* has had its public release (in its most protracted form) it should be presented for the sake of select viewers in a version that reduces this masterpiece to its essentials (*Comœdia*, 31 December 1922)

Acknowledging the volume of criticism directed at the extreme dimensions of *La Roue*, Gance told Jean Mitry:

> More than being the result of commercial obligation, this long duration was intentional – and I am committed to creating work richer in nuances than in action. I could of course condense it; but even if the dramatic intensity were intensified, the film's psychological impact and style would be weakened. (*Cinéa-Ciné pour tous*, 15 December 1923)

The filmmaker also points to an interpretive problem with textual foreshortening. He argues that it had become the habit of audiences to reduce *La Roue* to a series of "moments" that serve as "a scale by which to measure the artistic and technical value" of the whole film (ibid.). Gance places this last phrase within inverted commas; he clearly felt that the impulse to diminish his film to convenient fragments distorted his overarching intentions and achievements.

Gance's suspicions were not without foundation. From the moment of its release, critical debate tended toward the

dismemberment of *La Roue* into its component parts: melodrama, montage, mechanization, psychology etc. Commentators who saw aesthetic progress or dramatic promise in one element wanted Gance to cut others that they regarded as inessential or detrimental. This vast (and often slow) film became known chiefly for its sequences of rapid montage – a reputation enhanced by the gradual erosion of its physical body into shorter editions and the archival dispersion of prints. Recent critics have shown little patience for *La Roue*, even in condensed editions. While praising its sequences of montage, Stuart Liebman objects to the film's "bloated plot and strange characters" – asserting that its storyline "evolves in ludicrous ways" and is "bogged down by trivial digressions". His comments echo those of Gance's contemporaries: "Less would have been more" (Liebman 2008, 69-70).

Thanks to the ongoing cultural and material restoration of *La Roue*, it is now possible to reconsider the film as a more coherent – more substantial – whole. After partial reconstructions by Marie Epstein for the Cinémathèque française (1979-80, in a print reaching 300 minutes) and Eric Lange/David Shepard for Flicker Alley/Film Preservation Associates (2008, 260 minutes), a definitive restoration is being undertaken by François Ede for the Fondation Jérôme Seydoux-Pathé. As the material body of *La Roue* once more expands, the issue of length again comes into critical focus.

Death and duration

While many critics have dismissed the expressive merit of Gance's long duration, I contend that the expansive slowness of *La Roue* is one of its most important dramatic qualities. In this last section, I want to concentrate on the film's final scenes – and suggest how one might more sympathetically understand their tempo.

As per the above synopsis, "La symphonie blanche" contains the least dramatic potential of any episode of *La Roue*. Gance deliberately avoids using a (literal) cliff-hanger to create suspense between the final two episodes of his film, allowing Elie's death to occur before the end of "La Course à l'Abïme". At the beginning of "La symphonie blanche", therefore, only two of the film's four main characters are still alive, and the sole source of tension is whether Sisif will welcome Norma back into his life. Despite these potential limitations, Gance proceeds to draw out his increasingly strange resolution for nearly two hours.

At least part of the reason for this extension can be found in the film's psychological context. Duration in *La Roue* is intimately associated with the progress from life to death – and of memorializing the departed. Just as Gance began work on *La Roue* in December 1919, his fiancée Ida Danis was diagnosed with tuberculosis and her deteriorating health motivated the production's move to the Alps in

1920. The film's fatalist narrative was tied to the duration of Ida's life: *La Roue* marked the boundaries of her survival. The fragmented lines of Gance's diary capture the curious time-warping effect he felt upon her passing: "*18 February 1893/ 9 April 1921/ at one in the afternoon./* Forty centuries of love./ *9 April:* four in the afternoon./ I finish editing *La Roue*." (1930, 194-95) A six-year relationship (overlapping his first marriage during 1915-18) contained the temporal equivalent of four millennia; death exploded the boundaries of time.

During production, Gance was also aware that his lead actor – and intimate friend – Séverin-Mars was gravely ill; he died in July 1921. Furthermore, just as Gance was beginning work on editing *La Roue* in April 1922, news arrived that his adoptive father Adolphe Gance had died. In his speech at Séverin-Mars' memorial service in October, the filmmaker addressed his threefold grief by citing cinema as a kind of luminous memory-scape in which the dead underwent continual resurrection. Gance even read out a letter that he claimed had been written posthumously by the spirit of the deceased Séverin-Mars. The actor calls *La Roue* the first film capable of "stopping death in its tracks", explaining, "I will return every evening upon the screens across the world, carrying on my shoulders the invisible weight of the cross of Fatality, which burdened before me the shoulders of Oedipus and of Prometheus." (*Comœdia*, 19 October 1922) It is an image Gance had already conjured in *J'accuse*, which climaxes with hundreds of dead soldiers returning to confront the living – before they depart, carrying their crosses towards the horizon.

Image 1: The dead carrying their crosses in *J'accuse!* (Abel Gance, 1919)

If *La Roue* was to act as a repository for personal memories of the dead, there are also curious parallels to broader processes of historical loss. The film makes no mention of the Great War, even though this momentous event takes place in the midst of Gance's narrative. The family record book glimpsed in *La Roue* gives Sisif's birthday as 25 October 1868 (the date, but not year, of Gance's birth) and his son's as 3 March 1900. The film begins when Elie is only a few years old, so the title following the prologue that "fifteen years have passed" projects the remainder of *La Roue* into the present-day of its production. (Later in the film, we see a railway timetable displaying the year 1920.) Though its narrative leapfrogs the Great War via this ellipsis, the film was watched by a generation for whom the conflict was a raw memory. When Gance's friend Ricciotto Canudo saw the young Elie plummeting from a cliff on screen, he was irresistibly reminded of watching his comrades falling dead in the trenches (*Paris-Midi*, 23 February 1923). This experience was still horribly relevant: Canudo died of his war wounds in November 1923. In his diary, Gance wrote of Canudo much as he did of Séverin-Mars – through the collapsing of temporal continuity: "your death is not a death; it is already a resurrection because our eyes and ears of tomorrow are opening to your words of yesterday" (1930, 293).

La Roue uses extreme spans of time to explore the difficulty of letting go, and to suggest the necessity of doing so – something especially evident in "La symphonie blanche". Apparent from its outset is Sisif's obsession with the absence of his son's body. The episode begins with Sisif transporting Hersan's corpse down into the valley in the funicular train, but his only thoughts are for the missing Elie; when he arrives home, he stares towards the distant precipice before facing his empty cabin. The destitution of his life is both spatial and temporal: Sisif's funicular is tiny against the immense mountains, and its progress is visually compared (through superimposition) to that of a snail's millimetric advance. The old man's cabin is a small silhouette on the skyline, and Gance repeatedly emphasizes the slowness of his domestic life by cutaways to a dripping icicle. When Machefer – who is ignorant of all the events depicted in "La Course à l'Abïme" – visits Sisif, he asks about Elie. Sisif responds, "He will return in 27 years", explaining, "That's how long glaciers take to give up their dead." Though brief, this is an extraordinarily charged exchange – more so, as Gance superimposes the last text over a ghostly white vision of the distant glacier. This episode of *La Roue* deliberately reduces its tempo to that of a snail's pace or a glacial drift: we are forced to contemplate loneliness through the emphasis of desolate spaces and unfilled times. Furthermore, it is this sense of stasis that enables the sequences of rapid-montage that convey Sisif's memories of Elie to carry more power. The film's flashback sequences (here and elsewhere) summon recollections shared by characters and audi-

ence, linking together temporally disparate moments from previous episodes. These devices serve as ways of negotiating the great distances of *La Roue* and exploiting the film's experiential duration.

On the anniversary of Elie's death, Sisif is guided by Tobie up the steep mountain tracks to the place from which his son fell. This drawn-out sequence is united by the haunting vision of Sisif bent under the cross he carries. It is an image that Gance doesn't want to let go: he offers a series of still shots, each held for almost as long as it takes the figure to traverse them. We watch Sisif move across successive strata of the vast alpine landscape – from the sparkling expanse of a river, through the fog of a sloping pasture, alongside the jagged lip of the ice floe, and across the forbidding surface of the glacier itself. Sisif and his burden are often reduced to small silhouettes, but we never lose touch of their human dimensions – for Tobie is always there, and Sisif humbly clutches at the dog's lead with his one free hand as they ascend. The moment when Sisif stumbles and the cross seems as if it might drop from his grasp, possesses great emotional impact because it disrupts the laborious progress of the sequence; through this temporal judder, Gance makes us feel the weight of the cross – the subsequent relief of Sisif attaining the summit and planting his cross is palpable. By placing the entr'acte here, after he has achieved this task, the episode's structural midway point echoes the geographic summit.

Image 2: Guided by his dog Tobie, the blind Sisif climbs the mountainside in *La Roue* (Abel Gance, 1922) © Film Preservation Associates/Flicker Alley

Norma silently follows Sisif back to his cabin and, at night, appears trembling in the doorway in a swirl of ice and snow. It is this

scene that Kristen Thompson deems "downright silly" because after Norma "throws open the door" she fails to rush in and close it behind her (2009). Yet this literalist approach entirely misreads the scene's tempo and the significance of its motivation. Norma does not "throw open" the door – in fact, the door opens very slowly in response to her slight, seemingly reluctant touch (her arm is so minimally outstretched that it is easy to miss this gesture entirely). Furthermore, after lengthy medium and close shots of Norma, Gance cuts to the window of the cabin opening miraculously by itself.

The opening of these two frames is determined by something more than mere cause-and-effect. Throughout *La Roue*, Gance's *mise-en-scène* is inhabited by symbols that are both abstract and literal. Some of the more startling examples in earlier episodes include animate railway signals and engines (their faces dimly painted into the dirt that coats their metal), a talking train (its words spelt out onomatopoeically in smoke), talking flowers (who one-by-one tremblingly greet and bid farewell to Norma), and a violin that awakens "the ghost of Stradivarius". More subtle and persistent examples are the variations on wheel-like circular forms: train wheels and engine fronts; rail signals; the train interchange roundabout; the garden well; pots and mirrors mounted on the wall. Just as significant as these physical manifestations are in-camera effects: circular masking that shapes shots or scenes; enclosing irises that tighten around the characters; the medieval wheel-wrack design stamped onto intertitles. The window that opens on Norma's return in "La symphonie blanche" is one of many instances of a sentient *mise-en-scène* that seems to retain memory and express emotion: the house itself is ushering her in.

This unusual arrival heralds the strangeness of what follows. Thompson is not alone in finding the film's final hour slow, but what she and numerous other critics fail to address is how this duration feeds the oddness of its atmosphere – Gance aims to produce (and surely succeeds) something increasingly otherworldly. In *La Roue*, the absent exist uncannily alongside the present. When Norma hides in plain sight in Sisif's home, the blind old man experiences her intrusion as a series of miraculous mishaps: self-lighting fires, self-mopping floors, disappearing and reappearing boots, untraceable sounds. It is as if he is living with a friendly spirit, an invisible presence that loves him, but dare not – cannot – show itself. Norma gently fixes the ramshackle house yet remains mute – just as Elie was earlier forbidden to say her name in his father's presence. Only Sisif's dog Tobie is kind to her and (as we are informed by an intertitle) the animal visits the site of Elie's death to communicate to his ghost that Norma has returned home. Gance draws out this extraordinary silent drama until the moment when Norma awakes at the touch of Sisif stroking her hair. After years of abuse and distance, the immense emotional barrier between them is broken with the gentlest of ges-

tures. It is a scene of exquisite peacefulness – slow, calm, still. Norma does not reach out to Sisif, but sheds tears of joy at her father's acceptance.

From this point, Gance allows his characters time to experience something close to contentment with one another, just as he offers the film's audience time to fall in synch with the quiet tempo of dramatic domesticity. Yet, the succession of scenes also prepares the ground for the final scene's ultimate transformation. Early in "La symphonie blanche", a title describes Sisif's blinded eyes as "filled with a dazzling snow-scape" – an image replicated visually by his iris-less sockets and the white masking of the frame's periphery. After their reconciliation, Norma repaints the whole interior of their cabin white. Sisif then arrives home with an armful of white pampas grass, their feathery seeds falling like snow around him. Their domestic space is transformed into an abstract blankness – a kind of renunciation of earthly materials.

Yet, the characters are still painfully aware of the passing of time. When Norma is asked to join in the dance of the guides along the mountain paths, she first childishly ties a bow in her hair and powders her face. In the mirror she sees a wrinkle and finds a grey hair. Her whole body droops in visceral recognition that she is no longer a girl. She slowly pulls the ribbon from her hair then, in a miraculous moment of performance, shivers herself back to life – shaking the doubt from her body and smiling once more. This half-second of time is tremendously moving precisely because it takes place within the context of such a long narrative – and reminds us that Norma has a life that will extend beyond the film's timeframe. She goes over to Sisif to say goodbye. He senses in her the nervous tremor that has inhabited her since Elie's death. "Tu n'es donc pas gaie aujourd'hui?" he asks. She replies: "Je ne suis pas gaie papa... je suis heureuse! Ce n'est pas la même chose... C'est plus doux et plus triste!"

The distinction between "gaie" and "heureuse" is difficult to render in English, but the "sweeter and sadder" qualities of happiness are made evident in the tone of Gance's ultimate scenes. Sisif waves goodbye to Norma from the window; he has hardly smiled in the whole film, but now grins with almost childish innocence. He listens to the sounds of the dance, but his body falls out of rhythm with its meter. Sisif's body untenses and he wearily lowers the pipe from his mouth – tracing, as he does so, the smallest circles with its stem. Finally, he slumps in his chair, but does not fall. We see smoke rings from Sisif's pipe dissolve in the air; outside, clouds encircle the peaks and Norma dances in a giant *ronde* on the snow-covered plateau beneath Mont Blanc. The final close-up of Sisif is a freeze-frame, his face arrested at the moment of death; in repeating and extending this static image uncannily forward through time, Gance makes manifest the cinematic afterlife of Séverin-Mars. The last movement within *La*

Roue is Tobie, who sits up and barks into the silence; Sisif's inert form continues to face the snowy nothingness through the window-frame – then, likewise, the cinematic frame through which we view him dissolves onto the blank image of a pale curtain.

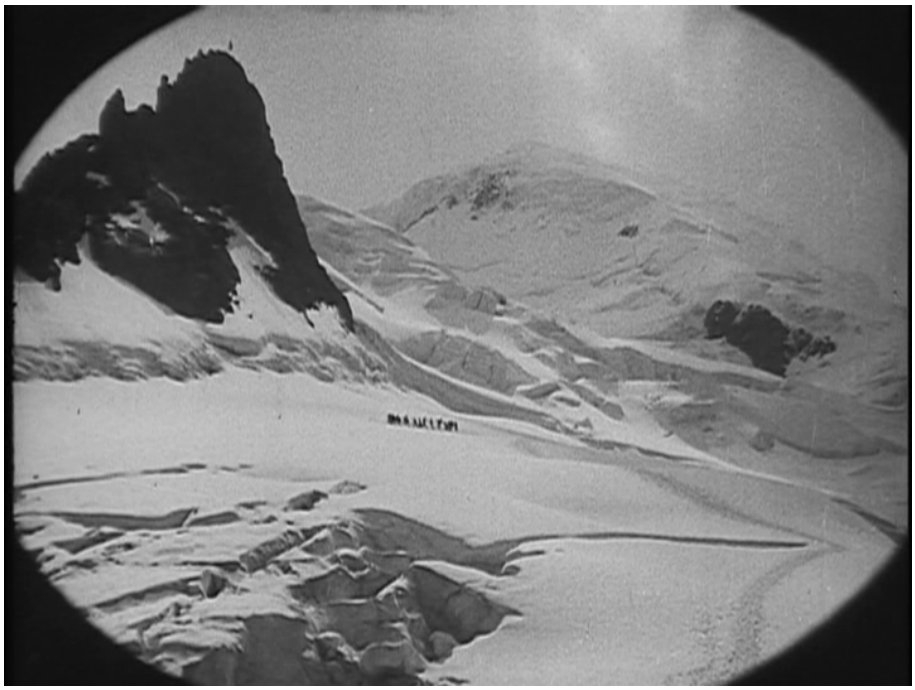

Image 3: The dance of the guides amid the sublime Alpine landscape in the finale of *La Roue* © Film Preservation Associates/Flicker Alley

It is difficult to articulate adequately the sadness and serenity of this ending, which seems to me all the more forceful because of its slowness and its silence. The emotional weight of the film's massive duration is lifted through the gentleness of these last scenes, and the conclusion is deeply affecting precisely because it takes its time to leave us. I cannot agree with Liebman's assertion that "the lack of narrative economy" in these sequences are "weighed down by unnecessary shots that simply extend their length" (2008, 70). Economy is surely not the point here. Nor does it seem fair to claim the image of fading pipe-smoke is a mere "stylistic tic" because of its status as the last in an extensive set of visual variations (ibid., 69). Indeed, the point of Gance's almost incessant repetition of wheel-like motifs is that they become inescapable rather than merely incidental. The rings of smoke dissipating into nothingness are a sublime evocation of release, their effectiveness enhanced by the sheer length of the preceding drama. It must also be remembered that the eight hours of cinematic time were partitioned over a month of viewing time: cinemagoers would continually revisit the inhabitants of Gance's film, and were provided with week-long intervals in which the memory of the film could linger. Recalling the late Séverin-Mars's comments, one could say that this was a kind of protracted séance in

which the departed live in perpetual suspension. The last scenes of *La Roue* are as moving as anything Gance realized, and possess a kind of ecstatic calm found nowhere else in his films. The sensation that we are relinquishing the past is as profound as it is cathartic.

Image 4: The final shot of *La Roue* © Film Preservation Associates/Flicker Alley

Conclusion

Gance's desire to create and manipulate huge stretches of cinematic time may have led to comparisons with the Almighty, but at least one journalist warned that "this God is subject to rigorous exigencies": "A director is a poet who must know the train timetable" (*Fantasio*, 1 December 1930). Despite critical equations of duration with commercialism, the length of *La Roue* continually proved the greatest obstacle for its international distribution.

Gance envisaged that the 4200m edition assembled in 1924 would serve as the standard export version, but even this abbreviation was too expansive for most markets. *La Roue* reached the UK two years after its general release in France, whereupon it was cut to a mere 2300m by the rental agency Springer Films. (Adverts cite the runtime as 85 minutes, which could only be achieved by projecting prints at the unflatteringly fast speed of 24 fps.) Springer reminded prospective exhibitors that Gance was "the producer of *J'accuse* and other sound box office attractions" – and boasted *La Roue* contained "A terrific railway smash – A life and death struggle on the heights of Mont Blanc – Emotional and dramatic situations of real heart appeal". Yet (as if responding in advance to negative comments) they showed *La Roue* at their trade show alongside the latest "Gumps" comedy,

saying this would be "a sure cure for the dumps" (*The Bioscope*, 12 February 1925). UK exhibitors bemoaned Gance's "very gloomy" and slow story, which had "very little light relief" and an unsatisfactory ending. It is hardly surprising that *Kinematograph Weekly* found the continuity "somewhat jerky" and numerous scenes "inconclusive" (26 February 1925) – Springer had excised three-quarters of Gance's narrative. *The Bioscope*'s complaint that the story was "artificial and heavily charged with rather unreal Continental passion" masked a more fundamental problem: *La Roue* was "an impossible production to classify" (26 February 1925). The film defied all efforts to categorize its form and content; its diverse material and long duration exceeded any simplistic commercial demand or critical interpretation. This textual misbehaviour continues to problematize modern revivals. Despite their successful exploitation of a reduced edition of *Napoléon* in the 1980s, Robert A. Harris and Francis Ford Coppola subsequently said they considered *La Roue* to be "an uncommercial property" (Welsh 1993, 152). The film never received a cinematic release in the US and was only released on DVD (in a severely truncated edition) in 2008.

In defending the value of *La Roue*'s "longueurs", Jacques Thévenet warns against "the superficial and insensitive viewer who, having followed only the plot, sees fit to dismiss as unattenuated style the scenes of long duration and scenic purity simply because they lack dramatic impact." (*Comœdia*, 25 December 1922) Likewise, Jean Epstein argued that critical fixation on the film's montage was detrimental to a more complete aesthetic appreciation. *La Roue* was "the formidable cinematic monument in whose shadow all French cinematic art lives and believes", but its frenetic editing was perhaps an "accidental" discovery. Epstein believed the film contains "elements which are far more noble, more pure, and more moral", citing the temporal otherworldliness of Gance's final scene as most impressive:

> I think again of *La Roue*. We watch Sisif's unhappy soul quit his body and glide over the snow, a shadow that follows the flight of angels.
>
> And here we border on the promised land, the country of great wonders. Matter here assumes the contour and profile of a character; the whole of nature and its every phenomenon appear as a man might dream them; the world takes shape however you imagine it; soft, if you think it so; harsh, if you think it so. Time advances or rewinds, or stops still for you to wait. (*Cinéa-Ciné pour tous*, 15 January 1925)

As I have suggested throughout this essay, the extreme duration of *La Roue* is essential to the impact it carries. The views of Thévenet and Epstein illustrate a more rewarding path for our understanding of Gance's film, and convincingly espouse the value of those episodes least understood by critics. More broadly, the discourse

around *La Roue* illustrates the historical lineage of critical debate around contemporary slow and long-duration cinema. Issues of artistic and commercial motivation, style and narrative form, and the relationship between audiences and exhibition were as fiercely contested in the 1920s as they are today. Tiago de Luca also argues that the films in this body of work are deeply concerned with the "collectivity of the theatrical experience" and require the space of the cinema "for their spectatorial contract to be fully met" (2016, 23). Likewise, I posit that the aesthetic and cultural dimensions of *J'accuse* and *La Roue* must be understood in relation to the shared experience of film. Gance saw in cinema a means of universal communion, and his desire for film to embody the "assimilation of personal drama into collective drama" (Véray 2000, 37) is nowhere more evident than in the spatial and temporal expanses of *La Roue*. Pathé's forthcoming restoration will offer the opportunity to see this remarkable creation in a format more closely resembling the duration of the 1923 edition, and (it is to be hoped) in the context of live theatrical presentations. *La Roue* will once again offer itself to our contemplation and have the chance to prove its enduring power.

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(Due to variable camera/projection speeds, stated runtimes are approximate and refer to the longest publicly-exhibited versions.)

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