François Truffaut on Abel Gance’s *La Tour de Nesle* (1955)

There is nothing very original left to say about *La Tour de Nesle*. Everyone knows it is a film that was made to order on an absurd budget, the best part of which remained in the distributor’s till. *La Tour de Nesle* is, if you will, the least good of Abel Gance’s films. But, since Gance is a genius, it also is a film of genius. Gance does not possess genius, he is possessed by genius. If you gave him a portable camera and set him in the midst of twenty other newsreel makers outside the Palais Bourbon or at the entrance to the Parc des Princes, he alone would deliver a masterpiece, a few hundred inches of film in which each shot, each image, each sixteenth or twenty-fourth of a second would bear the mark of genius, invisible and present, visible and omnipresent. How would it have been done? Only he would know. To tell the truth, I think that even he would not know how he did it.

I observed Abel Gance during the making of *La Tour de Nesle*. He gave it eight hours of work a day. There is no doubt that the films on which he spent twenty-four hours a day are better. Still eight hours is eight hours. I remember the closeup of Pampanini gazing at herself in the mirror, at first talking to herself, then silent. Seven inches separated the mirror from the face, the face from the lens. Seven inches from the mirror and the face and the lens, off camera, stood Abel Gance. Leaning toward the motionless woman, Gance mouthed the words that a French substitute would dub for the Italian actress: “Look at yourself, Marguerite of Burgundy, look at yourself in the mirror; what have you turned into? You are nothing but a slut!” (I paraphrase from memory.) Gance read this absurd monologue in a kind of lyrical whisper. This was no longer direction, it was hypnotism! As I watched the film later, I waited for this scene. The result was magnificent—her face distorted, her eyes bulging, her mouth open in a gaping scar, the lines of nightly dissipation etched on her face, she was the greatest actress in the world, like Sylvie Gance in *Napoléon*, Micheline Presle in *Paradis Perdu*, Ivy Close in *La Ronde*, Line Noro in *Mater Dolorosa*, Jany Holt in *Beethoven*, Viviane Romance in *Vénus aveugle*, and Assia Noris in *Fracasse*. Go and see Pampanini in *La Tour de Nesle* and then go see her in something else and if you don’t see immediately that Gance was a genius, you and I do not have the same notion of cinema (mine, obviously, is the correct one). People have said to me, “Pampanini? All I see is grimaces!” I will permit Jean Renoir to reply, “A well-done grimace can be magnificent.”

When a great director has been without work for twelve years and is forced to make a movie based on such a scenario, there are two possible solutions: either parody or melodrama. Gance chose the second—a more difficult solution but also the more daring and, in the last analysis, more intelligent and profitable. “I wanted to make a cloak-and-dagger Western,” the director admitted.

That aside, the film is extraordinarily sound and youthful. Gance moves *La Tour de Nesle* with hell-for-leather speed. There is a steady pace, sustained first of all within scenes and then from one scene to the other, thanks to very skillful editing. The shots that were made with the help of a pictograph are very beautiful, and recall the miniatures in Laurence Olivier’s *Henry V*. 
The Centrale Catholique, which takes upon itself the duty of rating the morality of films, was in a complete uproar.Erotically, *La Tour de Nesle* went far beyond what people were used to seeing. They had to invent a new code to warn parents whose children might wander in by accident. Recently, answering a question on eroticism, Gance said, “If we had had a free hand in terms of eroticism, we would have made the most beautiful films in the world.” It is regrettable that once again censorship showed itself so stringent. The film does not fulfill the promises of the photos posted at the entrance to the movie theater. Our expectations are frustrated, we are deceived in our hopes. Surely cinema is also eroticism.

Gance has been spoken of as “failed,” and recently even as a “failed genius.” But we know that “failed” (raté) means “bitten and spoiled by rats.” The rats swarmed around Gance but they were as unable to absorb his genius as they were to destroy it. The question now is whether one can be both a genius and a failure. I believe, to the contrary, that failure is talent. To succeed is to fail. I wish to defend the proposition that Abel Gance is the failed *auteur* of failed films. I am convinced that there is no great filmmaker who does not sacrifice something. Renoir will sacrifice anything—plot, dialogue, technique—to get a better performance from an actor. Hitchcock sacrifices believability in order to present an extreme situation that he has chosen in advance. Rossellini sacrifices the connection between movement and light to achieve greater warmth in his interpreters. Murnau, Hawks, Lang sacrifice realism in their settings and atmosphere. Nicholas Ray and Griffith sacrifice sobriety. But a film that succeeds, according to the common wisdom, is one in which all the elements are equally balanced in a whole that merits the adjective “perfect.” Still, I assert that perfection and success are mean, indecent, immoral, and obscene. In this regard, the most hateful film is unarguably *La Kermesse héroïque* because everything in it is incomplete, its boldness is attenuated; it is reasonable, measured, its doors are half-open, the paths are sketched and only sketched; everything in it is pleasant and perfect. All great films are “failed.” They were called so at the time, and some are still so labeled: *Zéro de Conduite, L’Atalante, Faust, Le Pauvre amour, Intolerance, La Chienne, Metropolis, Liliom, Sunrise, Queen Kelly, Beethoven, Abraham Lincoln, La Vénus aveugle, La Règle du Jeu, Le Carrosse d’Or, I Confess, Stromboli*—I cite them in no particular order and I’m sure I’m leaving out others that are just as good. Compare these with a list of successful films and you will have before your eyes an example of the perennial argument about official art.

It’s good to go back and again see Abel Gance’s *Napoléon* upstairs in Studio 28. Each shot is like a bolt of lightning that illuminates everything around it. The spoken scenes are marvelous and not—as is still being said today in 1955—unworthy of the original silent scenes. “Sir Abel Gance,” as Jacques Becker says! We won’t find again very soon in the world of cinema a man of his breadth, ready to take on the whole world, to mold it like clay, to fashion his own witnesses out of sky, sea, clouds, earth, and hold all in the hollow of his own hand. To put an Abel Gance to work, you have to look for a backer in the class of Louis XIV.

—1955 (translated by Leonard Mayhew)