

Kevin Brownlow

speaks with Mark Trompeteler about
Gance and Cinerama,
'The Artist', and Digital Cinema



Last year, 2012, was a tremendous year for the celebration of all that silent cinema has bestowed on modern cinema and culture. **Academy Award winning film historian, film restorer, producer, director and author, Kevin Brownlow**, kindly agreed to an interview with regular CT contributor Mark Trompeteler at last year's Bradford International Film Festival. When they met they discussed some recent cinema culture and exhibition topics.

In modern film history, some might consider 2012 as a pinnacle for both the public and the film industry, celebrating and acknowledging the fundamental contribution that silent film made to modern cinema and contemporary visual culture. For many years regular silent film festivals had already been firmly established all over the world, as had the regular exhibition of silent films in all size auditoria, often with full orchestral accompaniment. In 2012 not only was "The Artist" the first silent film to win an Academy Award since 1929, scooping the Best Picture Oscar, but it also won another four Oscars in various categories. Two other contemporary films of 2011 and 2012 also prominently highlighted silent film production and exhibition - "Louis" and, the in part quasi silent film, "Tabu". Martin Scorsese's film "Hugo", which celebrated the life and work of silent film pioneer Georges Méliès, also won five Oscars.

March 2012 saw the spectacular screening of the BFI and Kevin Brownlow restored version of "Napoleon" at the San Francisco Silent Film Festival. After decades of not being able to see this restoration of the film in North America, cinemagoers not only flew in from all over America to see this, but flew in from all over the world. It was also the North American premiere for Carl Davis's epic score for "Napoleon". The film was shown at four "all day" screenings at the



magnificent art deco 3000 seat Paramount Theatre in Oakland. Mick LaSalle of the San Francisco Chronicle wrote "Unlike anything I've ever experienced in a movie theatre. You walk out exhilarated. It's a day you will remember for the rest of your life". Also echoing what, many critics and cinemagoers seemed to be communicating via modern media such as twitter and blogs etc., about these four performances, was Lou Lumerick of The New York Post who simply wrote "The film experience of a lifetime". It was a particularly opportune time to be able to briefly discuss a number of topics with Kevin Brownlow.

Gance & Cinerama:

A French person said: "It is so wonderful, I have to kiss someone!"

I (MT) started by asking Kevin Brownlow (KB) - "With so much being made in 2012 of celebrating not only silent cinema, but also the 60th anniversary of the ground breaking premiere of "This Is Cinerama" in 1952, using a giant panoramic screen filled by three projectors, and the huge public acclaim this received - what does your research tell us about the audience reception that the premiere of Gance's "Napoleon" received in 1927 at The Paris Opera?"

He (KB) replied - "The reception was absolutely wild. Charles de Gaulle was present - it must have been extraordinary - I have a feeling that Pétain was there too. There is an account of someone rushing out at the end and saying "It is so wonderful I have to kiss someone!" - typically French. The trouble is that the picture did not maintain that impact because the longer the picture gets the better it gets, which is something we have just proved and seen in San Francisco. The problem is that once it got into the hands of exhibitors they began to mess around with it and chop it and reduce its running time."

MT: "With the 2012 Cinerama celebrations at Bradford, and at The Dome in Los Angeles, a lot of film enthusiasts are discussing the longevity and then the demise of the



Cinerama process involving exhibition using three projectors. What was the original longevity of Gance's exhibition of the triptych using three projectors in cinemas?"

KB: "Well Gance's triptych was so successful that he added an extra triptych which was of non panoramic scenes for a short version. He then made what I think were three more that were shown at an art cinema which were mostly abstract scenes and shots of Napoleon which included a seascape and dancing – the Baldi routine (*Baldi – a district of Paris commissioned by Napoleon.*) The Baldi routine was in fact in its entirety turned into a triptych but was never included in the finished film and I think I found it. The Cinémathèque Française (above) has it buried amongst all the footage but you cannot do anything with it unless you show it on its own, because it was not originally part of the film, and this would be a slightly odd thing to do – to reconstruct - which is what the Bambi Ballard restoration did. (*In 1991/1992 Bambi Ballard undertook a restoration of "Napoleon" with the Cinémathèque Française.*) What Ballard did was to find somebody who saw it and then tried to reconstruct it based on what they said they saw – I am not sure how anyone can base a reconstruction on something that was seen

so very many years before. Such a technique opens itself to the worry that you are not sure what you will be seeing is accurate and I do not think it's a legitimate way."

MT: "So the longevity of the original three projector exhibition of Gance's "Napoleon" was relatively short? Was it a matter of just months?"

KB: "Oh no – it was being shown somewhere or another using three projectors to exhibit the triptych until about 1929. In 1955 Gance revived "Napoleon" at the Studio 28 - an art house theatre and he utilised the three projector triptych, but you have to remember this was the sound version which I have to confess was not a success, and he put the silent triptychs on at the end. That is when the "new wave" film makers went to see it."

MT: "The decision to mount the three cameras vertically and not horizontally - was that a Gance decision or the French camera manufacturer Debrie's decision?"

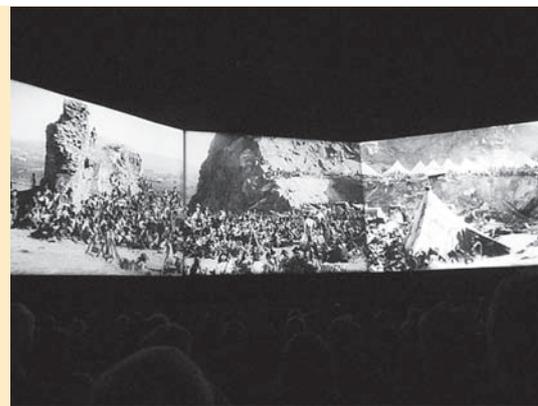
KB: "I am not certain who made the decision to mount them vertically but it has to be a decision that Debrie thought at the time was the best way or he would not have proceeded with it."

MT: "We know that Gance revisited the three camera process in the nineteen fifties with his "Magirama" – presumably this was because he had seen or heard of Cinerama by now?"

KB: "Yes I think that is undeniable and of course this time he used the three cameras horizontally."

MT: "In terms of who got to Cinerama first, Fred Waller or Abel Gance? – Admittedly Fred Waller introduced the deeply curved screen and had seven channel sound but with all due respect - a full orchestra in The Paris Opera is more than seven channel sound? What is your view on who got to the idea of Cinerama first?"

KB: "The fellow I work with, Patrick Stand-



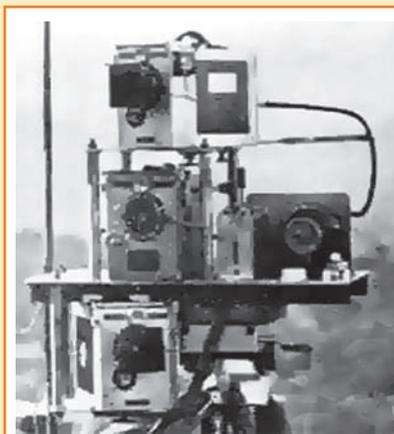
bury, who is mad about Cinerama – says that the Gance's triptych is NOT related to Cinerama. The method of projection is primarily different. Also there is the difference in the flatness of Gance's triptych screen. The irony is that in San Francisco we had to angle the screens (above) in order to get them into the auditorium area and I have to say it was very effective."

San Francisco 2012:
"I don't think I have ever experienced anything quite so successful."

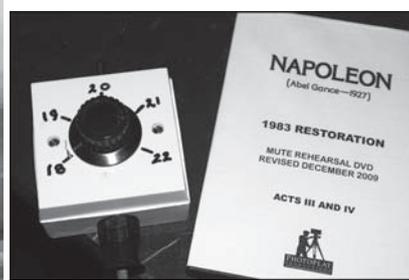
MT: "You must have been absolutely delighted by the response to the "Napoleon" screenings in San Francisco."

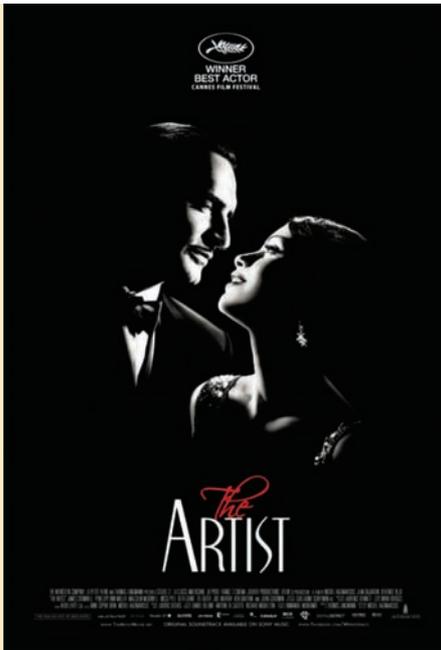
KB: "Well unfortunately I went over there ill and first I thought I wasn't going to make it and perhaps that I should have stayed at home. I had seen it hundreds of times and was not going to introduce it. But thank God I did because although we were there a week ahead and every morning I woke with a sweat at four in the morning thinking of all the things that could go wrong - and they all did - on the dress rehearsal. Thank God it all happened on the dress rehearsal. After that, the four shows were superb - they could not have been better and I don't think I have ever experienced anything quite so successful."

MT: "But in terms of the screenings at The



Left to right:
 Vertical three camera rig
 Napoleon speed controller
 Final reel spacer plus toned triptych print
 Triptych alignment loops





London Film Festival in 1980 - weren't they wildly successful?"

KB: "What you have to remember was that back then parts of the print looked awful - there was so much material blown up from 17.5 mm. It was all black and white with no colour tinting. In San Francisco the restoration looked as good as we can ever get it apart from one section. The tinting and improvements since 1980 help tremendously."

The "Artist" and other recent films: "... they will forget all about it I'm sure, and go on burning old movies."

MT: "So how do you feel about recent movies' celebration of silent film? There is of course the film "Louis", Scorsese's celebration of Georges Méliès in his film "Hugo" and of course "The Artist" winning the Best Picture Oscar."

KB: "We haven't really had the opportunity to see "Louis" in the UK. Apparently the success of "The Artist" has increased the rentals of silent movies by some forty per cent. To what extent that is true I do not know because we all know that there is a lot of press agent work in this business and such a statistic needs to be checked. They are making a film on Valentino in Hollywood and a musical based on Chaplin. There is also a film being made on a silent film screen writer who died at the age of 111 recently. So it would be interesting to know what else is happening but with all these things, as soon as the original impact of "The Artist" fades, they will forget all about it I'm sure, and go on burning old movies."

MT: "So you do not think that 2012's celebration of silent film culture in modern films and at The Oscars will have led to any

greater urgency or re-prioritisation of film preservation work into more silent films being saved and restored?"

KB: "I think that is extraordinary that with all the fuss surrounding "The Artist" that no one had the enterprise - with all these multi screen multiplexes, to screen alongside "The Artist", some original silent films like "Show People" or a Chaplin or anything. It does go to show how insensitive exhibitors can be towards the possibilities of exhibiting silent films."

Digital Cinema: "Film can drive you nuts....."

MT: "Your life's work is associated with celluloid and the passing of traditional film prints passing through film projectors. I am curious to know your reaction to the very recent rapid mass digitisation of cinema - where film prints and traditional film projectors are fast disappearing?"

KB: "Look, I love film. But I can honestly say it is about time. I made a film in the seventies - it was sheer agony because the lab kept ruining the rushes. I remember then thinking - why in this age of tape could we not use a process where we could check our rushes the moment we had shot them? Now that you can - and that the price of "stock" has dropped in terms of the digital material and things like that - I think it's a godsend. I think we should be thrilled to bits with it and the fact that I can have the possibility of now not waking up at four in the morning sweating about what might go wrong - because I am going to screen in digital and it is going to be the same every time - it would be great if the "Napoleon" triptychs could be shown digitally and absolutely immaculately and not go out of synch."

MT: "So are you really excited about the possibility of the distribution of even silent films as digital cinema packages on a hard drive that can be ingested into a digital cinema projector?"

KB: "Oh I'm a little worried that suddenly it sounds as if I could be supporting The Third Reich. But seriously I think digital cinema is a great idea and the longer it goes on the better it will get."

MT: "I am so interested to hear such a positive support of digital cinema from your good self who is so associated with traditional film."

KB: "There is nothing much more to say about it. Film can drive you nuts in many respects much as I love it. As an example of the fragility of film and film equipment I can tell you a funny story. I was showing a Pabst film to my wife on the film projector when

the telephone rang. She was so engrossed in the film that she didn't move and it was left to me to leave the projector and answer the phone. What happened was the mains cable wrapped itself around my ankle, the projector was pulled right over and the whole thing exploded with the force of a hand grenade going off in the room. When I got to the phone the caller said "I am ringing on behalf of the Labour Party". I have voted Tory ever since."

MT: "With the digitisation of cinema exhibition are you beginning to get requests at your company Photoplay for digital versions of silent films on hard drives?"

KB: "We constantly get requests for the film prints. All the time. People love the idea that they will be seeing actual film. Whether or not an audience can tell the difference - I am not sure. Whether or not they are looking for any lack of sparkle or not, I don't know. Perhaps if they think they are looking



Honorary Film Academy Award 2010 ... Kevin was the first film preservationist to win one!

at film - perhaps that is enough? I do get annoyed with digital when people put in scratches and make it look old by degrading it – when old films are / were projected properly, even with carbon arcs, and everything else - they could look magnificent. Another story – I was at a Garbo Festival at The Ritz in London many years ago and I was seeing a Garbo film I had never seen before called “Susan Lenox – Her Fall and Rise” with Clark Gable and Garbo. It was three dimensional it was so beautiful, but it was being projected out of focus. So I called an usherette and asked her to get in touch with the projectionist and ask him to correct the focus. She called an usher who came to speak to me and he told me there was nothing they could do because it was an old film.”

MT: “One last question Mr. Brownlow - You made a number of wonderful documentaries for television about silent cinema and Hollywood and it never seems that any of these are ever available on DVD. Is that ever likely to change? Is it because of rights issues?”

KB: “Yes, it is always about rights issues. The company that owns the rights to the Hollywood series keep announcing its availability and then withdrawing it because they keep forgetting to clear the rights. Now they say it is not commercially viable.”

MT: “I’d like to thank you for allowing me to chat to you about a few things in this quite amazing year for celebrating silent cinema – thank you for your time.”

KB: “One thing – I think I might like to think about getting one of those little things that we seem to have been talking into ...

MT: “ Oh that – well it’s a tiny little digital recorder.....”

After our interview Kevin Brownlow and a small group of film fans and Cinerama experts retired to a nearby pub. We carried on with more enjoyable conversations about cinema for another hour and a half ably assisted by a pleasant drink or two. It was a good film festival encounter.

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Many thanks to Kevin Brownlow and the National Museum of Media Press Office.

Photos by the Author, Photos at the Paramount Oakland by Mark Lyndon.

Related Website: www.photoplay.co.uk
- features a regularly updated list of Photoplay’s worldwide screenings of silent and classic films.