

Ridley Scott's *Napoleon*: The problem of representing titanic events

George Marlowe, David Walsh
11 January 2024

The latest biopic of *Napoleon*, directed by 85-year old Ridley Scott, attempts to tackle the rise and fall of Napoleon Bonaparte, the military officer who rose on the crest of the French Revolution, orchestrated a coup d'état in 1799 and went on to crown himself Emperor in 1804. Napoleon was eventually defeated by the combined forces of a number of European powers at Waterloo (now Belgium) in June 1815. He died in exile, on the island of Saint Helena, in the Atlantic Ocean, six years later.

Bonaparte (1769-1821) was a complex, world-historical figure. The era of the Napoleonic Wars (1803-1815), which originated in the great revolution of 1789 and the revolutionary wars fought from 1792-1802, was critical in the development of modern society.

Scott, however, does not indicate in his public comments or in the body of the film itself any great interest in history and historical processes. His *Napoleon* is a shallow collection of impressions, “psychological” insight of the dime-store variety and brief battle scenes, which are not even presented so as to explain Napoleon’s military prowess.

Napoleon opens with the following titles: “1789—Revolution in France,” “People are driven by misery to revolution ... and brought back by revolution to misery.” This profound insight seems to sum up the filmmakers’ view, that the Revolution—and perhaps history in general—is rather a waste of time. The Revolution was a pointless event, everybody ended up just as badly off as they started out. All in all, they should have simply stayed in bed.

In any event, as the film’s action begins, the viewer is rushed headlong into a sequence depicting the execution of Queen Marie Antoinette (Catherine Walker) in October 1793. We see the bloodthirsty “mob” taunting the monarch as she stoically raises her head up in defiance walking to the guillotine, pelted by rotten vegetables. Where Scott’s sympathies lie here are evident. The young Bonaparte (Joaquin Phoenix) is an aloof and cold onlooker, his presence a taking of artistic liberty that has no basis in fact.

We then witness the Jacobin revolutionary Maximilien Robespierre (Sam Troughton) addressing the question of the queen’s execution before the National Convention. “Terror is nothing more than justice—prompt, severe, inflexible,” asserts Robespierre, portrayed unsympathetically.

Napoleon watches the Convention’s session. He meets with Paul Barras (Tahar Rahim), a powerful politician and later a member of the ruling Directory, who is seeking to recapture the southern French city of Toulon from the royalist forces aligned with the British. “Capture the fort that dominates the harbor and you have the city,” the young artillery officer tells Barras. After storming the city and routing the British navy, the success of Napoleon’s victory in Toulon elevates his

rank and stature.

Following the military triumph, Barras tells Napoleon that Robespierre is “unfit to rule” because of his “lawless terror.” Napoleon, previously a supporter of Robespierre, who helped promote the younger man to the rank of brigadier-general, swiftly moves to the side of reaction. Robespierre finds himself denounced and deposed in a turbulent gathering of the Convention in the Thermidorian Reaction of July 1794 (“Thermidor” was the 11th month in the new French Republican Calendar). He is sent to the guillotine, with a bloodthirsty mob cheering the execution on, just as it cheered the death of Marie Antoinette. Thus ends the radical phase of the French Revolution, and the consolidation of the new bourgeois state and society is set in motion.

The rest of the two-and-a-half hour film jumps along from one event or episode to the next, often with little dramatic or historical coherence. We follow Napoleon’s courtship of the aristocratic widow Joséphine de Beauharnais (Vanessa Kirby) and later his 1798 campaign in Egypt, a foreign escapade the Directory hoped would reduce his stature and popularity at home. The events in Egypt are somewhat ludicrously portrayed, with the French troops bombarding the Pyramids, an invention of the film.

Returning to France, Napoleon accuses the leaders of the Directory of corruption and incompetence: “I have returned to France to find her bankrupt.” He begins to conspire against the ruling group with figures such as Emanuel Sieyès (Julian Rhind-Tutt), Charles Maurice de Talleyrand (Paul Rhys) and Joseph Fouché (John Hodgkinson), the Minister of Police, who has previously helped plot Robespierre’s downfall.

The fateful coup of 18th Brumaire (November 9, 1799) is carried out, which leads to Napoleon’s coming to power. The film is relatively accurate here. Bonaparte apparently lost his nerve and nearly failed in the coup attempt against the Council of Five Hundred. The boisterous deputies derided Napoleon as an “outlaw” and a “power-hungry upstart,” and assaulted him. He was only able to succeed ultimately, with the help of his brother Lucien and soldiers armed with bayonets, in a bloodless coup. Napoleon becomes the First Consul of France.

Scott’s *Napoleon* proceeds to charge ahead through the rest of the principal events of its subject’s life. In 1804, he crowns himself Emperor, an act that famously enraged Ludwig van Beethoven, whose Symphony No. 3 (“*Eroica*”) was initially dedicated to Napoleon.

Over the course of the subsequent decade of war, the film provides glimpses of various battles, including the famed French victory over the Austrians and Russians at Austerlitz (1805).

Finally, there is Bonaparte’s fateful decision to invade Russia, and

its consequences. The Battle of Borodino (1812), a pyrrhic victory for Napoleon in which his army sustains colossal losses, is followed by the occupation of Moscow by French forces. The Russians largely abandon the city and set it ablaze, depriving Napoleon's forces, far from home, of food and other supplies.

Not surprisingly, the film's quasi-denouement takes place at Waterloo in 1815, where French troops are defeated by two armies, one of them a British-led force commanded by the Duke of Wellington (Rupert Everett). Napoleon is sent into a much more severe second exile, on Saint Helena, where he passes his final days.

As a whole, Scott's film leaves the viewer interested in history none the wiser for the experience. It provides little insight, aside from the most superficial, into Napoleon as a personality and historical figure, or the French Revolution—including its earthshaking intellectual sources in the Enlightenment—and its aftermath.

The work devotes a good deal of its time to the relationship between Napoleon and Joséphine, their sexual issues and jealousies, and her childlessness (and the couple's consequent splitting up), to no great effect. The focus feels forced, in part driven by contemporary gender politics. Joséphine is obliged by the latter to be a decisive force in Napoleon's life and career. This *Napoleon* even rather foolishly hints that Bonaparte's invasion of Russia was driven in part by his jealousy over his former wife's flirtation with the youthful Tsar Alexander I (Edouard Philippinat).

The acting in general is decent, although Phoenix is over his head attempting to play a substantial personality. The limitations of his performance are the limitations of the script and direction. He treats the character largely as a desperate loner and upstart, someone trying to prove himself to the European upper echelons, bumbling and mumbling—in unconvincing “method acting” style—his way through.

As noted, many of the events in *Napoleon* are rushed past, hardly giving the viewer the ability to register them or consider their significance. The technical elements, and the cinematography and spectacle, are all impressive, but they add little to one's knowledge.

Scott presumably admires Napoleon as a military genius, which he certainly was, but this was rooted in large part in the social transformations set in motion by the 1789 Revolution, which receives no discussion whatsoever. Frederick Engels observed that “the science of war created by the revolution and Napoleon was the necessary result of the new relations brought about by the revolution.” The two characteristics of Napoleon's “magnificent discoveries,” mass warfare and mobility, presuppose “the degree of civilisation of the bourgeois epoch.”

Ultimately, we gather, Scott views the French Revolution and the entire epoch as not much more than gigantic mistakes leading to millions of dead. *Napoleon* ends with a lengthy list of deaths in the various conflicts after 1789. History, according to this philistine conception, is just one pointless thing after the other.

The Napoleonic era has been the subject of serious literature and art in the past. Some of the most remarkable novels of the 19th century represent the period, including Stendhal's *The Charterhouse of Parma*, Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* and Hugo's unabridged *Les Misérables*, all of which treat the Battle of Waterloo, and, of course, Tolstoy's monumental *War and Peace*, which recounts Napoleon's invasion of Russia. All of these works, and many others, attempted to make sense of the events in relation to the existing European society and its dynamics.

Ridley Scott has never demonstrated such an interest or ability (*Alien*, *Blade Runner*, *Gladiator*, etc.), and doesn't demonstrate it

here. One even suspects that Scott may be nervous about the prospects of revolution today, however justified such an event might be as a response to widespread social misery.

Moreover, Scott, who favors spectacle over substance in his filmmaking, adopts a distinctly cavalier attitude in response to criticisms of the film's inaccuracies. Scott commented, “When I have issues with historians, I ask, ‘Excuse me, mate, were you there? No? Well, shut the f—k up then.’” Artistic liberties are inevitable, but the latter need to correspond in an important, constructive manner to the spirit and substance of the content under examination. Unfortunately, Scott is out of his depth here.

French director Abel Gance famously created his silent, 330-minute epic *Napoléon* in 1927.

Stanley Kubrick intended to tackle the life of Napoleon and carried out extensive research. He was unable to make the film, instead directing *Barry Lyndon* (1975), set in part during the Seven Years War. Kubrick's project has apparently been taken up by Steven Spielberg in the form of an HBO television series. Sergei Bondarchuk's *Waterloo* (1970), featuring Rod Steiger as Napoleon and Christopher Plummer as Wellington, with a brief appearance by Orson Welles as Louis XVIII, is also worth noting.

Napoleon Bonaparte's historical role has long been subjected to Marxist analysis, which has unraveled its contradictions, as both a figure of reaction in relation to the radical, egalitarian impulses of the French Revolution, and as a terrifying “Jacobin” abomination to feudal Europe and the British ruling class.

The French Revolution, Engels argued, was the victory “of the great masses of the nation, *working* in production and in trade, over the privileged *idle* classes, the nobles and the priests.” But that triumph “soon revealed itself as exclusively the victory of a smaller part of this ‘estate,’ as the conquest of political power by the socially privileged section of it—i.e., the propertied bourgeoisie.”

Bonaparte, Trotsky once wrote, halted the Revolution “by means of a military dictatorship. However, when the French troops invaded Poland, Napoleon signed a decree: ‘Serfdom is abolished.’ This measure was dictated not by Napoleon's sympathies for the peasants, nor by democratic principles but rather by the fact that the Bonapartist dictatorship based itself not on feudal, but on bourgeois property relations.”

On another occasion, Trotsky pointed out that “Robespierre sought his support among the artisans, the Directory among the middle bourgeoisie. Bonaparte allied himself with the banks. All these shifts—which had, of course, not only a political but also a social significance—occurred, however, on the basis of the new bourgeois society and state.”

These are complex, but not esoteric or inaccessible analyses. The artist who starts out by turning a deliberately blind eye to serious historical study and research, who decides “to fly by the seat of his pants” when taking on epochal events, is unlikely to come up with a compelling or enduring work. Scott's *Napoleon* is one such result.



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact