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Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.**

Abstract

Review of Paul Cuff. *Abel Gance and the End of Silent Cinema: Sounding Out Utopia*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. xxxii + 241 pp.

Keywords

Abel Gance, silent cinema, early sound cinema

Paul Cuff. *Abel Gance and the End of Silent Cinema: Sounding Out Utopia*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. xxxii + 241 pp.

Paul Cuff is carving a niche for himself: like his first monograph, *A Revolution for the Screen: Abel Gance's 'Napoléon'* (Amsterdam UP, 2015), his second, *Abel Gance and the End of Silent Cinema*, is focused on not just a single director, but that same director with a concentration on a single film. In the more recent case, the primary object of study is Gance's much maligned and willfully neglected first sound film, *La Fin du monde* (*The End of the World*) of 1930. *Abel Gance and the End of Silent Cinema* is perhaps best characterized as a work of auteurist film history. It will be most appreciated by those who believe (deeply) that the work of Abel Gance needs (re)visitation in increased detail—those who do not care to explore the minutiae of a narrow slice of the director's work should seek their bliss elsewhere. That being said, the book has a greater scope than such a characterization might suggest, engaging the intellectual and philosophical context and influences of Gance's artistic and writerly production from the late '10s through the early '30s in detail that scholars of late nineteenth and early twentieth-century French literary and cultural studies could find very engaging—and perhaps unexpected in a work that is also intensely film historical.

The book is divided into three parts. The first of these parts, which is made up of the most chapters (four), is dedicated to the context from which *La Fin du monde* emerged. Since this single film was essentially over ten years in the making, part one deals with a relatively broad time span; because of Gance's eclectic interests, it covers a broad range of texts. Cuff draws upon Gance's writings, (unpublished correspondence as well as published writings and interviews), of course, but he also draws upon texts/artworks of many genres by writers and artists such as Henri Barbusse, Blaise Cendrars, Ernest Bloch, Richard Gelling, Émile Zola, Camille Flammarion, Robert Delaunay, Gabriele d'Annunzio, Maurice Maeterlinck, Richard Wagner, Alexander Scriabin, Ricardo Canudo, and many others. Across these chapters Cuff demonstrates the vast web of artistic and philosophical production with which Gance engaged throughout the 1920s, showing direct influences upon his silent filmmaking and writings as well as how those intersections carried seeds of what would be actualized in *La Fin du monde*. Throughout these chapters, Cuff paints a picture of Gance's philosophical priorities—his attraction to androgynous prophetic heroes, his well-known pacifism, his mysticism. I particularly enjoyed the attention paid to the science-fiction writing of Camille Flammarion (whose 1894 novel *La Fin du monde* was the primary literary inspiration for Gance's film) and the intertextual relationship with Cendrars's "film-novel" *La Fin du monde, filmée par l'ange de N.-D.* ('The End of the World, Filmed by the Angel of N.D.') of 1919. As he does throughout the book, Cuff provides not only clear analysis of how Gance essentially

synthesized disparate influences, but a wealth of quotations grant the reader direct and immediate access to all primary texts, resulting in a rich experience of the conceptual layers of the decade. My only frustration was not having original French (at least in notes), because both in literary sources and in Gance's own essays, there were occasionally turns of phrase that I would have liked to verify in the original (I of course recognize that this may not even have been the author's choice, as publishers can have inflexible policies on the inclusion of translations and/or original citations).

The book's second part deals with the very practical and material context of the film: one chapter is devoted to the arrival of sound and the other recounts the film's production history and immediate reception. The thrust of these two chapters is to show how material realities frustrated Gance's ambitions for the project. As in the rest of the book, Cuff draws heavily upon Gance and others' contemporary writings, as well as extensive archival materials. Part three is dedicated to *La Fin du monde* itself. This is a very challenging task: the film exists in no "complete" version, and because of complications in the production and distribution history it would be difficult to pinpoint what exactly the authoritative version would be (Gance essentially repudiated the film as it was released in 1930). Cuff maintains that in spite of the extremely problematic status of the film as a historical object, it merits textual analysis, which he carries out by treating the scenario, screenplay, and the longest extant copy as a whole. This is less of a *génétiq ue du texte* methodology that interrogates and compares changes between versions, and more a conditional discussion of what the film would have been. The majority of the book's illustrations are concentrated in these three chapters, which is very helpful.

It is a little bit difficult to envision *Abel Gance and the End of Silent Cinema* as a book with a broad public. While it touches many broader issues, the focus is resolutely upon Gance as auteur, whose films tend to be exceptional rather than exemplary. With that caveat, many scholars could find the story Cuff tells, about how *La Fin du monde* fits into Gance's vision of the world in a highly fraught era for both French film and society, to be an engaging read.

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