
ABEL GANCE

Joining the team of Le Film d'Art¹ in 1915, the young Abel Gance, a talented, promising figure in the 'first wave' of French cinema, quickly drew attention for the formal and narrative ambition of his projects. He thus became the protégé of the house director, Louis Nalpas, and the official distributor of Le Film d'Art, Charles Pathé, who would subsequently produce his major works: *I Accuse* and *The Wheel*. Nonetheless, his perpetual experimentations were not always met kindly with his financiers who, throughout his career, attempted to restrain his wild inventiveness. Louis Nalpas, above all, was infuriated by the liberties taken by the young filmmaker whose films shot during the Great War brilliantly demonstrate the pioneering nature of his work.

On the *Bureau des rêves perdus* radio programme², the director related as follows the reaction of Le Film d'Art's management to the discovery of his *Madness of Doctor Tube* (1915), a burlesque spoof on the decomposition of light beams in which Gance, using distorting mirrors, mistreated both the human form and that of his film. He recalled: 'I did everything that, technically, I imagined the audience would appreciate enormously because it had never been done, and when I showed this film to the managers and people who took an interest in me, they said to themselves: "He's a madman. We mustn't give him a penny. He's going to ruin us." I didn't understand their reaction right away. I was discouraged and I said: "So cinema isn't what I imagined, i.e., the way to show things as perhaps we would like to see them or, at least, less than we have ever seen them but which presents them in an unexpected, unusual and, in sum, quite interesting way".' Filed away, the film was projected only belatedly, thanks to the support of La Cinémathèque française. In fact, Henri Langlois contributed largely to the rediscovery of Gance's output when the filmmaker, on the decline, was beginning to be forgotten by his contemporaries.

The comparison between *The Madness of Doctor Tube* and *The Deadly Gases* (1915), a drama concerning the deadly threat of poison gases, enables us to appreciate the coherency of a poetic vision born in the cruel matrix of the Great War. These two dramas, dissimilar in their construction and tone, are in fact closely akin, centred on the figure of two mad inventors, whose research results in the original mastery of light phenomena, or the very matter of cinema, a prodigious tool for extricating, revealing or transcending the visible.

Regarding *The Madness of Doctor Tube*, Henri Langlois wrote³:

For the logic of the narrative, I am not angry that Braque, Picasso and [Léopold] Survage had to give way to Abel Gance, who belonged to nothing other than cinema. The Madness of Doctor Tube is doubtless a work that now seems isolated in its time, as if suspended in the void. It came too soon, at a time when the faithful did not yet form a group; and as Abel Gance was neither a Cubist, nor a Futurist, Orphic or Dadaist, he found no coterie to talk about it and receive him [...] Thus, the first manifestation of the avant-garde was neither a coterie or a revue, or a film club, a school or experimental cinema, but a film. What could be more normal? These are the films that made an avant-garde; it was not born from artificial insemination but from cinema itself, from its force and the content of its films. From the revelation of its masterpieces, its youth and future...

¹ Translator's note: founded by Paul Laffitte in 1908

² *Le Bureau des rêves perdus*, hosted by Louis Mollion and directed by Albert Riera, Radio-Télévision Française, Paris, 20 December 1958

³ Henri Langlois, *Écrits de cinéma*, texts collected by Bernard Benoliel and Bernard Eisenschitz, Ed. Flammarion / Cinémathèque française, 2014

THE FILMS OF THE SHOWING « ABEL GANCE »

Running time : 83 min.

The Madness of Doctor Tube / La Folie du docteur Tube

France, 1915 – 14 minutes

Direction and script: Abel Gance

Production: Le Film d'Art / Louis Nalpas

Photography: Léonce-Henri Burel

Cast: Albert Dieudonné, clown Di-go-mo

In his laboratory, the scientist Doctor Tube experiments with a powder that decomposes light beams and thereby alters vision and the physical appearance of beings.



'They have eyes to see but do not see,' says the Gospel. So lenses and all sorts of glass and crystal objects were invented for them. And heads distorted, grew longer or fatter and shrank before the examining magistrates⁴.

The Madness of Doctor Tube was restored by La Cinémathèque française in 2002 from the original elements preserved in its collections.

The Deadly Gases / Les Gaz mortels

France, 1916 – 69 minutes

Direction and script: Abel Gance

Production : Le Film d'Art / Louis Nalpas

Photography: Léonce-Henri Burel

Cast:

Léon Mathot, Emile Keppens, Doriani, Maillard, Jean Fleury, Germaine Pelisse, Maud Richard



At the beginning of the First World War, an old scientist is solicited by the French government to invent toxic substances to be used against the enemy.

A negative and nitrate print were deposited in 1944. Henri Langlois safeguarded the film in 1961. In 2010, La Cinémathèque française carried out a new safeguard, including the insert titles, and the duplication of a new print in 2012.

⁴ Henri Langlois, exhibition label relating to a showcase containing optical apparatuses for creating special effects, along with a photograph from *The Madness of Doctor Tube*. In the *'Images du cinéma français'* exhibition, Cantonal Museum of Fine Arts, Lausanne, September-October 1945.