

# A Critical Analysis of Ridley Scott's *Napoleon*

## Ridley Scott'in *Napoleon* Filminin Eleştirel Bir Analizi

Scott, R. (Director). (2023). *Napoleon* [Film]. Apple Studios, Scott Free Productions.

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### Introduction

Ridley Scott, known for his grandiose cinematic endeavors such as *Gladiator* (2000) and *Kingdom of Heaven* (2005), has built a reputation for producing visually impressive films. Consequently, *Napoleon* was eagerly awaited as one of the major box office releases in 2023. With a staggering budget of 200 million dollars, the renowned director Ridley Scott, collaborating with screenwriter David Scarpa, and featuring the acting skills of Joaquin Phoenix alongside Vanessa Kirby, set exceptionally high expectations. This review aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of Scott's *Napoleon* using the classical narrative cinema technique by offering both a historical context and a detailed critique of the film's characterization, acting, screenplay, and historical accuracy, revealing the extent of its fidelity to historical events.

### A General Overview of Ridley Scott's *Napoleon*

Ridley Scott's *Napoleon* remains ambiguous in terms of its genre. While many sources categorize it as a historical film, its classification is a subject of debate due to the

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absence of several distinct characteristics commonly associated with biographical films. The film lacks clear character development and fails to evoke attachment or empathy, constituting a significant shortcoming. Another issue arises from the fragmentary screenplay of the film. It comprises disjointed narrative segments that appear largely disconnected from one another. The scenes abruptly leap forward from one historical event to another without proper context or development. While fragmentation is a commonly used storytelling technique in biopics, *Napoleon's* use of the technique mainly results in disconnection and an absence of meaningful character development. Viewers witness Napoléon's quest from artillery captain to emperor, whose portrayal is superficial and unengaging. Instead of an actual biopic, the film offers an impression of a compilation of Napoléon's life events. The audience is left with numerous unanswered questions, such as why Napoléon went to Egypt, why he formed an alliance with the Russian Czar, and why he chose to invade Russia. The film neglects any form of cause-and-effect relationships, leaving these and many other inquiries unresolved. In addition to these, the film includes several scenes such as the cannon shots fired at the Great Pyramid of Cheops, inconsistent dialogues, and absurd sex scenes involving Napoléon and Joséphine. Furthermore, the film lacks any French elements, despite its focus on a French historical figure, its predominantly French setting, and its reflection of French history. The sole connection to France is represented by a tricolor flag, which is prominently visible throughout the movie. Apart from this visual symbol, there are no associations with French culture or language. As a result, viewers do not experience or perceive any cultural elements associated with France and its culture. These seemingly minor yet significant details are either omitted or disregarded in this movie. Scott's portrayal of Napoléon Bonaparte is not only questionable but also presents a distinctly "Anglo-American" interpretation of this figure. The following table reveals the major missing French elements and the Anglo-American elements in Scott's *Napoleon*.

Anglo-American Elements Present	French Elements Missing
Focus on individualism: Napoleon's heroic, larger-than-life character.	Revolutionary Ideals: Emphasis on French Revolutionary values.
Simplified and Fictionalized History: Emphasis on military conquest and personal ambition.	Historical complexity: A focus on French policies and societal context.
Action-Driven Spectacle: An intensive focus on battles and visual effects.	Nuanced Filmmaking: Introspective storytelling and character development.
English Language & Casting: American actors and English dialogues. (Pronunciation of "France" in American English by Phoenix)	French Language and Casting: French-speaking actors, French dialogues and terms.
Grandiose Settings: Dramatic depictions of battlefields and palaces, favoring spectacle over historical fidelity.	Cultural and Social Settings: Authentic French locations, depictions of French society and revolutionary landmarks.
Linear, Heroic Narrative: Conventional rise-and-fall storytelling.	Philosophical Depth: Moral uncertainty and power relations.

**Table 1:** Anglo-American elements present vs. missing French elements in the movie

## Historical Background vs. Fictionalized History

When a film portrays a historical figure, there is a justifiable expectation that it will adhere to a requisite degree of historical fidelity. However, Ridley Scott and David Scarpa do not adhere to this convention in their portrayals. This underscores the significant shortcomings in historical fidelity in Ridley Scott's portrayal of Napoléon, which is below an acceptable standard. Additionally, the film omits many significant events from Napoléon's lifetime, further contributing to the disconnected narrative. Napoléon's childhood and upbringing in Corsica, his years as a military cadet, the Italian Campaign (1796-1797), the Battle of Jena (1806), the Battle of Wagram (1809), and the Battle of Leipzig (1813) are some of the historical events left out in this film. In addition to the vital Italian Campaign, the Franco-Spanish alliance of 1796, which forced the British Royal Navy to leave Gibraltar (Fremont-Barnes, 2012, pp. 11-12), was also unmentioned in this film. The film also fails to acknowledge Napoléon's major failure in Egypt against Ottoman/Turkish forces. Scott's depiction simplifies a complex historical event and misattributes Napoléon's actions to personal motives rather than the broader political context (Fremont-Barnes, 2012, p. 13). Several moments in the film, such as Napoléon's horseback charge, his encounter with Wellington, his slapping of Joséphine, and the exaggerated, vulgar sex scenes, did not occur in reality (Keslassy, 2023). These additions contribute to the fictionalized and sensationalized nature of the movie.

Additionally, the scene in which Napoléon returns from Elba to regain power and reclaim his throne in Paris has historical fidelity but is ineffectively performed. This

scene is one of the most unconvincing in the entire film, lacking credibility and authenticity. The portrayal of Napoléon's speech, leadership, and charisma is executed in such a contrived and ineffective manner that it fails to convincingly capture the qualities for which he is known, thereby undermining the significance of a pivotal historical moment in the narrative. The powerful speech he delivered to his soldiers: "Soldiers of the Fifth, you recognize me. If any man would shoot his Emperor, he may do so now!" ("Napoleon Bonaparte," n.d.) demonstrated Napoléon's courage to all the soldiers who rushed to arrest him but were eventually mesmerized by his charismatic speech and determination. To observe a well-executed scene of Napoléon's comeback from Elba, viewers could refer to *Waterloo* (1970 – Directed by Dino De Laurentiis) and the *Napoléon* miniseries (2002 – Directed by Yves Simoneau). The contrast in the scene's execution between these productions with Scott's *Napoleon* is noteworthy.

Napoléon was a leader who brought stability and success during a time of upheaval following the French Revolution. As a matter of fact, he immediately gained recognition as a hero and savior whom the revolutionaries (Republicans) successfully used in their favor to gain public opinion (Dwyer, 2004, p. 380). Napoléon successfully built a good "Republican warrior-hero cult" (2004, p. 380), which had a vast contribution on his fame and success. Philip G. Dwyer highlights the point that Napoléon did not create an image of the revolutionary hero; rather, it was created by the revolutionaries to mobilize the French people in support of their cause (2004, p. 384). Nevertheless, Napoléon did not possess total control over this constructed image because it was severely influenced by the artists and journalists who wrote articles, newspapers, and pamphlets to promote his image (Dwyer, 2004, p. 402). This particular savior-hero image, though meeting resistance at some points by royalists alike, was well received by the French people in the long run. Napoléon fulfilled the people's longing for a savior-hero, and that is one of the reasons why he was admired by the public, the army and by the ruling, revolutionary elite. Despite these, the film does not display any of the above-mentioned sentiments. Napoléon is a lifeless, bland character who has no relationship with his people, goes to war, and returns to his palace. Historically, Napoléon is known as the man who granted France "a rigid Civil Code, the hierarchy of a pyramidal administration, foundation of the central bank of France, laws on dowry, inheritance and equal division of the land among all children, fixed-interest bonds and the sacrosanct diploma" (Peyre, 1960, p. 26). With its emphasis on plainly expressed and easily understandable legislation, the development of the code represented a significant shift in the character of the civil law legal system. Adopted across much of Continental Europe, only in the territories he

conquered, the Napoleonic Code persisted even after Napoléon's downfall (Sultana, 2017, p. 192). In sum, it is discernible that *Napoleon*, while not constrained by an imperative for absolute historical precision, should have upheld at least some degree of historical representation. The conscious choice to deviate from this standard is a noteworthy issue in this production.

## Characterization and Acting in *Napoleon*

In addition to the fragmentary screenplay and fictionalized history, other debatable aspects of Ridley Scott's *Napoleon* are the characterization and acting. Every character in the movie, including Napoléon and Joséphine, lacks depth and complexity, making them predictable and oversimplified. There is a notable absence of character development throughout the film. The film's extensive coverage of Napoléon's life raises concerns, and the absence of realistic character development is even more controversial. These factors deteriorate realism and consolidate the sentiment of artificiality.

The film focuses on Napoléon and Joséphine's relationship in detail, but despite their significant screen time, their portrayal lacks credibility and emotional nuance. Napoléon is depicted only as a soldier and a womanizer, ignoring his multifaceted identity as a leader, strategist, and even poet. However, in the film, this complex figure is portrayed as a two-dimensional man who only possesses two identities; soldier and womanizer. Napoléon appears to be a skilled general, consistently victorious in battles; however, the film provides no insights into his relationships with soldiers, commanding staff, or marshals. He is depicted as a stern and indifferent commander, merely covering his ears whenever a cannon is fired, offering no insight into his interactions or connections with those under his command. In addition, Joséphine is depicted as a promiscuous woman who enjoys deceiving Napoléon. Despite the long-lasting screen time, the relationship between Napoléon and Joséphine is not deep. There exists no romance, the sex scenes are exaggerated, and in overall, their love relationship lacks passion and credibility. Other characters, such as Wellington, Paul Barras, and Czar Alexander, receive very little screen time and are also flat and unrealistic.

In addition, characterization and acting are also disputable. Although Joaquin Phoenix is a noteworthy actor, it is debatable whether Joaquin Phoenix was the right person to play Napoléon. It can be claimed that this was not one of his best performances, as the actor was bland, uncharismatic, and void of emotion. Nevertheless, Vanessa

Kirby has performed a more realistic depiction of Joséphine than Phoenix has, as her character reflects emotion and personality in a more credible style. Furthermore, the film spans the majority of Napoléon's and Joséphine's lifetimes, encompassing their youth to their early fifties; however, both characters show no signs of aging, maintaining the same appearance throughout the years. This undermines the film's credibility, prompting viewers to question its plausibility. Another controversial issue is the senseless lines uttered by Napoléon and Joséphine. Lines such as: "You think you're very great because you have boats. Destiny has brought me this lamb chop" (Scott, 2023), leaving the spectators with a puzzled look. These lines are particularly ironic and thought-provoking, given that Napoléon Bonaparte was an iconic figure who delivered some of the most sublime quotes in Western history. Celebrated quotes such as: "Never interrupt your enemy when he is making a mistake"; "Glory is fleeting but obscurity is forever"; "History is a set of lies agreed upon"; "He who fears being conquered is sure of defeat" (Quotes of Napoleon Bonaparte: On politics and power, n.d.) belong to none else but Napoléon. Therefore, it is worth questioning why a figure as influential and inspiring as Napoléon is portrayed in such an overwhelmingly contentious manner.

## The Favorable Aspects of Ridley Scott's *Napoleon*

There are some favorable aspects to Ridley Scott's *Napoleon* as well. First, the costumes are not only accurate but also impeccably designed. While Napoléon's famous uniform is shown as green instead of historically accurate blue, most details are skillfully preserved. The coronation scene is skillfully executed, featuring extremely realistic costumes in which even the smallest details are meticulously preserved by the costume designers. In addition to the costumes, the use of guns and artillery is depicted in an effective and impressive style, drawing a realistic portrait of 19<sup>th</sup> century warfare. Another appealing aspect of this film is the war scenes, a domain for which Ridley Scott is renowned. The expectation for impactful battle sequences in *Napoleon* is met, and overall, these scenes prove to be satisfying. Along with the costumes, the war scenes are the most gratifying elements of the film. The film depicts four main battles: the Siege of Toulon (1793), the Battle of Austerlitz (1805), the Battle of Borodino (1812), and the Battle of Waterloo (1815). Additionally, the war scenes, a domain in which Ridley Scott excels, are impressive and meet expectations. Austerlitz stands out as one of Napoléon's greatest triumphs, while the Battle of Waterloo includes well-executed square formations, despite the superficial dialogues. Nevertheless, the depiction of Napoléon's well-known paintings in the film is a creative and authentic idea.

## Napoléon in the Context of Historical Films

Historical films about Napoléon Bonaparte exhibit a broad and diverse range of representations. Many films and television series have been produced on Napoléon, including the very first Abel Gance's renowned *Napoleon* (1927), *Desirée* (1954) by Henry Koster starring Marlon Brando and the *Napoleon* TV mini-series (2002) starring Christian Clavier and Gérard Depardieu. Robert Rosenstone asserts that the historical film "does more than want to teach the lesson that history hurts; it wants you, the viewer, to experience the hurt (and pleasures) of the past" (2018, p. 15). Rosenstone emphasized the difference between written history and historical films. According to Rosenstone, history is far from a natural process like eating, breathing, or sleeping; rather, it is something that people learn and engage in (2018, p. 27). Additionally, the historian points out the differences between the natures of film and that of written history. The former is symbolic and metaphorical, while the latter is more literal and recorded (Rosenstone, 2018, p. 27). The historical film producer's main objective is to make the past relevant and meaningful to the present (2018, p. 34). This involves selecting the most effective historical events and characters. As a result, historical films are considered recreations and interpretations of past events. Rosenstone contends that film is beyond historians' control. This demonstrates that we do not possess ownership of the past. Film constructs a version of history that books cannot rival, at least in terms of popularity. It represents an unsettling emblem of a world moving beyond literacy, where people can read but choose not to (2001, p. 50). The historian offers a critique of the public for their lack of literacy and preference to acquire history through films. He goes a step further to argue that history itself is not an exact mirror of the past but rather a construction—a collection of data shaped by a broader project, vision, or theory, often unspoken yet inherent in how history is presented (2001, p. 52). Therefore, it would not be correct and just to expect accurate representation from historical films; nevertheless, for a historical film to be taken seriously, it must adhere to the established facts and interpretations of the past. Any alterations or creative additions should be relevant and appropriate to the truths within that historical context (Rosenstone, 2001, p. 67). This is a major debatable aspect of Scott's *Napoleon*. The film does not comply with the established conventions about Napoléon and the major events he experienced. Ridley Scott attempts to establish a new convention about this leader, one that is fabricated and imaginary. In addition, Robert Burgoyne acknowledges that historical films contain various subtypes, such as war, epic, biographical, topical, and evolving new, contemporary forms such as the metahistorical film (2008, p. 2). According to these, Scott's *Napoleon*

falls in between a war story and a biographical film as it conforms to the qualities of both. Burgoyne also adds that in recreating historical events, Hollywood films use various techniques to enhance authenticity and realism, resulting in a deeply captivating experience for audiences (2008, p. 8). This reenacting of historical films “does not consist in re-living but in rethinking, and rethinking already contains the critical moment that forces us to take the detour by way of the historical imagination” (Ricoeur, 1984, p. 8). Thus, historical film production involves rethinking, reimagining, and reenacting the historical past. Finally, Rosenstone identified three specific types of historical films:

Those that “vision” history — films that present a traditional, experiential representation of the past in a more or less realist framework; those that “contest” history and that challenge the metanarratives that structure historical knowledge; and those that “revision” history—films that reject the realism that purports to show the world “as it is” in favor of “expressive modes of representation that expand the vocabulary of the historian,” such as those in JFK. (1995, p. 11)

*Napoleon* aligns himself closer to the first type of historical film that offers a more or less realist framework due to the emphasis on dramatic storytelling, the focus on key moments such as his rise to power and his major battles, while simultaneously exploring his personal relationships, particularly with Joséphine. These elements are often dramatized for emotional impact and narrative cohesion. Though the film depicts significant historical events, it likely employs creative liberties with details for cinematic effect, simplifying complex historical facts to create a more engaging story for a wide audience. While *Napoleon* might have elements of an innovative or postmodern historical film, it largely adheres to the conventions of the traditional dramatic category, offering a visually spectacular yet dramatized version of history. As a product of the contemporary historical film, *Napoleon* conforms to its major characteristics, presenting spectacle, center and periphery (global appeal), remembering the nation (national elements), and the body in the epic (masculine emphasis) (Burgoyne, 2011, pp. 3-15). As one of the most prevalent features of *Napoleon*, spectacle is visible through the war scenes and action sequences and at the center and periphery of Napoléon’s campaigns in foreign territories. The nation is underrepresented through the presence of French banners, and the body is showcased mainly through the embellished uniforms of the soldiers and commanding leaders. *Napoleon* does not reach the level of other well-known historical films such as *Spartacus* (1960), *Braveheart* (1995), *Gladiator* (2000) and *300* (2007), unable to make use of compelling storytelling, impressive acting and the



exploration of essential themes. What makes *Braveheart* (1995) such a memorable film is its emphasis on themes like rebellion, freedom, loyalty, leadership, national identity, and the fight against oppression. *Gladiator* (2000) is a remarkable film not only because of its acting and special effects but also because of its representation of themes such as honor, revenge, the quest for freedom, corruption, leadership, and justice. Finally, *300* (2007) is still acknowledged because of its emphasis on liberty, heroism, sacrifice for freedom, glory, myths, and national unity. *Napoleon*, however, does not manage to present and deeply explore any specific themes, and this is one of the major issues of this production.

## Conclusion

The public expected a monumental film that would leave a lasting mark on cinematic history. Yet, despite a substantial budget and ample opportunities, *Napoleon* fell short. Scott's depiction of Napoléon Bonaparte as a historically fabricated personality is utterly cynical and lame, lacking any realistic character development and compelling qualities. Scott portrays Napoléon as a rude, impulsive, and ruthless leader. Scott's *Napoleon* does not manage to explore themes essential to historical films. In addition, Ridley Scott's *Napoleon* is quite un-French as the movie reflects the anti-French / anti-Napoleonic sentiment that was dominant in Britain in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Shusterman, 2005, p. 1). *Napoleon* is a mechanical work of cinema that is deficient in emotional depth and neglects any themes central to the character.

In conclusion, the closing credits of *Napoleon* reveal the total death count of the Napoleonic wars to have been three million. This ending highlights that Napoléon's leadership led to mass massacres and bloodshed throughout Europe. In an epoch of war and constant turmoil, many kings and political leaders have emerged to lead their country to war and ruination. Napoléon made various mistakes, and many people lost their lives due to his actions. Nevertheless, the film points to Napoléon as the sole belligerent leader, implying that he is the ultimate responsible figure for the resulting casualties. A deliberate emphasis is placed on the dictatorial identity, revealing a bias on the part of the producers toward this sophisticated and versatile historical personality. Scott's *Napoleon* is executed in black and white, restricted to two dimensions only, missing the essential third dimension and depth required to effectively depict and reflect a historical figure who is acknowledged as one of the greatest military and political leaders in world history. All in all, *Napoleon* is a product of Ridley Scott's revision

and attempt to create a blockbuster production whose historical flaws could have been compensated by the help of a well-executed, consistent screenplay and acting performances, which seem to miss the mark in the larger context of the historical film.

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