Soon after Abel Gance’s “Napoleon” had its premiere in Paris in 1927, he wrote a letter to his audience, soliciting open eyes and hearts. “I have made,” he wrote, “a tangible effort toward a somewhat richer and more elevated form of cinema.” He had created a film towering in ambition, scale, cost, narrative and technical innovations, and believed that nothing less than “the future of the cinema” was at stake. His audacity had merit. The origins of the widescreen image can be traced to “Napoleon,” which also featured hand-held camerawork, eye-blink-fast editing, gorgeous tints, densely layered superimpositions and images shot from a pendulum, a sled, a bicycle and a galloping horse.

The film was an astonishment, and it was doomed. One hurdle was its length — his early versions ran from 3 hours to 6 hours 28 minutes (down from 9 hours) — while other difficulties were posed by Gance’s advances, specifically a process later called Polyvision that extended the visual plane into a panorama or three separate images and that required three screens to show it. Partly as a consequence, distributors and exhibitors took harsh liberties: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer cut it down to around 70 minutes for the American release, a butchering that seemed to encourage bad reviews. Gance continued to rework the film, adding sound for a 1935 version and, decades later, new material. Yet even as he was taking it apart, others — notably the British historian Kevin Brownlow — were trying to restore “Napoleon” to its original glory.

In truth “Napoleon,” as it was initially hailed, no longer exists, which raises ticklish questions about authorship. In his book on the film, Mr. Brownlow lists 19 versions of “Napoleon” — including those created by distributors, Gance and Mr. Brownlow himself, who for decades has tried to restore the long-lost full version. Mr. Brownlow’s latest restoration (Version 20?), will play four times at the San Francisco Silent Film Festival starting next Saturday. But unlike in 1981 — when an earlier, abridged Brownlow restoration played around the country — no tour is planned. Yet while this may be the last time this particular iteration is screened in the United States, Francis Ford Coppola’s company, American Zoetrope, and the preservationist Robert A. Harris, who own most of the rights, are quietly working with Mr. Brownlow’s company and the Cinematheque Francaise on still another restoration.

By the time Gance, who died in 1981 at 92, started on “Napoleon” he had already been anointed a cinematic pioneer, primarily for his touching 1919 romance “J’Accuse,” set against World War
I, and his frenzied 1922 tragedy “La Roue,” about desperate desire in a poor railroad family. Both were successes and inspired feverish acclaim. The Cubist painter and future filmmaker Fernand Leger said that with “La Roue” Gance had “elevated the art of film to the plane of the plastic arts.” Jean Cocteau declared that “there is cinema before and after ‘La Roue’ as there is painting before and after Picasso.” Gance answered this praise with the even more ambitious “Napoleon,” calling it “the greatest film of modern times.”

Gance envisioned making six films about Napoleon. He directed (if revisited) just the one, and it ends in 1796 with the 26-year-old Napoleon (Albert Dieudonne) leading the French Army into Italy for what became known as the First Italian Campaign. What Gance was after wasn’t a melodramatic tale, say, about Napoleon and his lady love, Josephine — “I have made the minimum concession to the romantic” — but something more psychologically evolved. What interested him was History, capital H. Napoleon, he said, was a “paroxysm in his time just as his time was a paroxysm of history.” It’s hard not to think Gance was also talking about himself.

Budget woes forced him to settle for an abridged telling of Napoleon’s life, but this was about the only limitation that he allowed. Cinema was young, and so was he, and he burned with ambition for both the art and his film. He wanted viewers not simply to watch “Napoleon,” but also to become participants in a revolution of his making. To that end he liberated the camera, setting it in almost constant motion. For a schoolyard snowball fight during Napoleon’s childhood, the camera was attached to a cameraman’s body, which allowed Gance to thrust the viewer into the melee. He sought a similar immersion with Polyvision, which tripled the image size. For one critic these enlarged visuals meant that the “spectators suddenly become a crowd watching a crowd”; they also helped inspire Henri Chretien to invent CinemaScope.

“Napoleon,” under its full title “Napoleon Vu par Abel Gance,” had its admirers when Gance rushed an edit of three or so hours into the Theatre National de l’Opera for the premiere, where, as Mr. Brownlow writes in his book, the audience included the future enemies Marshal Petain and Charles de Gaulle. Gance’s problems during production, including budget shortfalls and on-set calamities, were as well known as his brilliance. Perhaps because of the buildup, and because of some technical mishaps during the premiere, the reviews were strong but conditional. A few critics attacked its spectacular advances; one labeled the film “a Bonaparte for apprentice fascists.”

“Napoleon” was brutally received in the United States when it, or rather the MGM hatchet job, was released here in 1929. In one review a wisenheimer at Variety wrote that it was “made by the French for the French.” The film “doesn’t mean anything to the great horde of picture house goers over here,” he continued. “Nap wasn’t good looking enough and they didn’t put in the right scenes for the flaps here.” Then, because of a series of untimely events — including the advent
of sound — the full “Napoleon” disappeared, becoming one of cinema’s most elusive objects of desire, alongside Erich Von Stroheim’s nearly 10-hour version of “Greed.”

Soon after its premiere “Napoleon” was almost immediately chopped up and reimagined, including by Gance. In 1935 he turned “Napoleon” into a 2-hour-15-minute sound film newly titled “Napoleon Bonaparte,” for which the original actors, including Antonin Artaud, who played Marat, dubbed their lines. In 1955 — a year after the 15-year-old Kevin Brownlow bought a two-reel, home-movie copy of the silent “Napoleon,” beginning an archival quest of a lifetime — Gance fiddled with the sound version. And then in 1970 he went back to both the silent and sound versions, shot new material, added narration and called the resulting 4 hours 45 minutes “Bonaparte and the Revolution.” That same year Mr. Brownlow showed his first reconstruction of the silent “Napoleon.”

Gance once said that “when you find yourself with a completed film, you are still far from having realized your dream.” Perhaps that explains why he kept returning to “Napoleon,” his last significant work and a haunting presence in his life. In 1928 he began a second feature about Napoleon, only to sell the script. He languished in the sound era and later fell on hard financial times. Francois Truffaut gave him money, and Claude Lelouch produced “Bonaparte and the Revolution” and also bought the rights to the silent “Napoleon.” As auteurism took hold and, especially, as Mr. Brownlow’s reconstructions were seen and loved — Mr. Coppola’s name on the 1981 release helped spread the word in America — Gance was discovered anew.

“Napoleon” never entirely disappeared, and those of us who were lucky enough to have seen the four-hour version at Radio City Music Hall in 1981 were thrilled to discover it. That edition, restored by Mr. Brownlow (originally to 4 hours 50 minutes) and presented by Mr. Coppola and Mr. Harris (who, partly to avoid union overtime, cut that restoration and played it at a faster speed), was the cinema event of the year, racking up ecstatic reviews and strong sales. After Radio City the four-hour cut — with the composer Carmine Coppola conducting his score with various orchestras — conquered America. As Variety put it, “Napoleon” “wows” them in New Orleans, and “Syracuse Is Also Hotsy.” By the end of 1981 it had pulled in $2.5 million and was one of the foreign film hits of the year.

Afterward this four-hour “Napoleon” was shown infrequently and never released on DVD in America, though it was put out on VHS and laserdisc. Mr. Brownlow’s complete restoration never made it over here, until now. The reasons are clouded, and in keeping with the film’s tortured history. In 2004, at the National Film Theater in London, Mr. Brownlow said Francis Ford Coppola had “suppressed the full version for the last 23 years.” Mr. Brownlow suggested that the problem was the score by Carmine Coppola (father of Francis) fit the four-hour cut shown in 1981 and not Mr. Brownlow’s restoration, which by 2000 had grown to its present 5 hours 31 minutes. At the time he said he hoped it could be sorted out, and clearly something has been agreed upon, although the details remain murky.

When I recently reached Mr. Brownlow, who spoke by phone from his London office, he declined to talk about Francis Ford Coppola’s past involvement with “Napoleon.” “No way we can go into that,” he said. James Mockoski, who works as an archivist at Zoetrope, was similarly reluctant to discuss the past. The presentation at the San Francisco Silent Film Festival, he said by phone, “is something that people wanted to see and has been long in coming.” Mr. Mockoski said the reason “Napoleon” hadn’t been shown in the United States came down to simple
economics: it’s expensive. “We are a small company,” he said. “It’s not like this is bringing a lot of money in.” He added, “Of course we want people to see it.”

“Napoleon” doesn’t come cheap, especially when accompanied by a full orchestra, as it will be at the festival, where Carl Davis will conduct his score with the Oakland East Bay Symphony. (The film is being shown at the 3,000-seat Art Deco Paramount Theater in Oakland because there isn’t a screen big enough in San Francisco.) These four shows, according to the festival’s executive director, Stacey Wisnia, will cost about $720,000. The print and its rights alone run about $130,000; the symphony, conductor and understudy eat up another $240,000. The festival is hoping movie lovers will be so tempted by “Napoleon” that they’ll pay $40 to $120 a ticket for an event that begins in the afternoon and incorporates three intermissions, including a dinner break.

For American cinephiles there’s an indisputable reason to see “Napoleon” now: film. “This print will probably never be seen again in the United States,” Mr. Harris said, given that a digital restoration is under way. (Version 21?) “Projectors are going away,” he said and, alas, so too is film. Mr. Harris agreed with the characterization of the festival screenings as a kind of a test run for the digital restoration, which suggests that he and Zoetrope have plans for future exploitation, including, maybe, a DVD and Blu-ray. Over its history “Napoleon” has been taken apart and pieced back together by so many hands, and it’s somehow survived distributor assaults, Gance’s tinkering, legal suits, rights claims and dueling restorations. In the end all that should matter is that this elusive, seemingly indestructible film — which, as Mr. Brownlow said, has “found its place again in world cinema” — be seen.