

Napoleon: Military Genius, Despot, and Lover

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Larry Bernstein:

Welcome to What Happens Next. My name is Larry Bernstein. What Happens Next is a podcast which covers economics, history, and culture.

Today's topic is Napoleon: Military Genius, Despot, and Lover.

Our first speaker is David Bell who is a Professor of History at Princeton and the author of Napoleon: A Very Short Introduction.

I want to learn from David about the continuing relevance of Napoleon as a historical figure. I want to know how he shaped Europe, the institutions he built, and his influence on warfare.

I chose this topic because of the recent release of the movie Napoleon that is directed by Ridley Scott. I wanted to hear whether the film was historically accurate and whether the film's description of Napoleon's relationship with his wife Josephine was realistic.

Our second speaker will be Darren Schwartz who is the What Happens Next film critic. I want Darren to comment on Joaquin Phoenix's and Vanessa Kirby's performances as well as Ridley Scott's direction. Most importantly I want to find out if our audience should make the investment to watch this 2 hour and 38-minute epic.

Let us get started.

David, please begin with your opening six-minute remarks.

David Bell:

Thanks to the new film by Ridley Scott, Napoleon Bonaparte is very much on people's minds this holiday season, but in truth, he has rarely been off the radar screen. Very few individuals have had as great an impact on world history as Napoleon, and while his impact was very destructive, he was not a cruel monster like Hitler or Stalin.

His life story was entirely improbable. It was also extremely well-documented, and when you put all these things together, you get somebody who's really going to be an inexhaustible source of interest. I think it's no surprise that so many great authors, especially from the 19th century, wrote about Napoleon: Balzac, Stendhal, Victor Hugo, Goethe, Hegel, Nietzsche, Byron and Walter Scott, Pushkin and Tolstoy. Very few, if any historical characters have been portrayed so often on film from Abel Gance's silent film classic, Napoleon, in 1927 to Ridley Scott this year.

It is hard not to think about Napoleon in mythical terms. He's Hercules defeating all his enemies. He's Icarus, ambitiously swooping too close to the sun. He's Prometheus, trying to bring fire and illumination to mankind and being punished with exile to a barren rock gnawed on by vultures, in this case his English jailers on St. Helena. Eight years ago, I published a concise biography of Napoleon for Oxford University Press' "Very Short Introduction" series. Most of the great biographies of Napoleon are multivolume works, they often run to thousands of pages. I wanted to tell the man's basic life story and to offer a brief overall interpretation. The story into just 35,000 words, which is the limit of the Very Short Introduction series.

Napoleon was born in 1769 on the island of Corsica. The island had been annexed to France the year before, and this gave his family the chance to send him to military school on the French mainland when he was still a boy. He trained as an artillery officer. He was commissioned in 1785, but at the time opportunities for Corsicans in the French army were limited, and he wanted to be a writer. But everything changed with the French Revolution. The fact that so many people in the officer corps either resigned or were dismissed, created new opportunities for people like Napoleon.

This was in 1793, so he went back to France and quickly distinguished himself by helping to recapture the port of Toulon from the British. A couple of years later, he helped the authorities in Paris resist a counter-revolutionary insurgency. In 1796 when 27 years old, he found himself already a major general in control of a French army charged with invading Northern Italy. From there, things moved very quickly. In Italy, he showed himself to be an authentic military genius. He had a brilliant capacity for strategy, for tactics, for organization, and for inspiring his soldiers, and he was no less brilliant at publicizing his successes with propaganda. He then followed that up in 1798 by conquering Egypt and making it a French colony.

At the time, the French revolutionary government had become weak and corrupt, and that opened-up the possibility for an ambitious general to seize power. Napoleon was that general. He staged a coup d'état in November of 1799, becoming First Consul of France. Five years later, he crowned himself Emperor of the French in the Cathedral of Notre Dame.

His rule was one of the most eventful in all of history. He reorganized French government. He promulgated a hugely important law code. He spread the French revolutionary principles of civic equality and religious toleration across Europe. At the same time, he was a dictator, he suppressed political freedoms and free speech. He also restored slavery where he could in France's overseas colonies. He was alternately unwilling and unable to end the wars that France had been fighting since 1792 against virtually all of Europe.

These wars kept growing in scope and intensity as Napoleon himself was struggling to close off the entire European continent to his greatest enemy the British. Ultimately, the wars as a whole

and the individual battles grew too large for him to control. His armies were bled white in Spain starting in 1808 and then in Russia in 1812, they were decimated and while he fought a strong rear-guard campaign over the next couple of years, he could not prevent his ultimate defeat. He was defeated and then exiled in 1814. A year later, he did stage an amazing return to power. The so-called Episode of the Hundred Days, but his army was defeated at the Battle of Waterloo in June of 1815, and he was forced into exile again this time for good. These wars cost the lives of upwards of 5 million people.

My book sets Napoleon closely within the context of the French Revolution. It emphasizes how the revolution made his career possible, both because of the principle of equality that it espoused and also because of the newly intensive and uncontrollable wars that it unleashed. Napoleon was first the product, then the master, and finally the victim of the first total war. In the book, I acknowledge the incredibly destructive things he did, but I also try to recognize why he's inspired so many people over the centuries, why he still offers us a symbol of sheer human possibility, which is why of course he remains so incredibly popular as a subject of films. Right down to Ridley Scott this year.

Larry Bernstein:

In the Ridley Scott movie, Napoleon's relationship with his wife Josephine plays a critical role. What did the film get right and wrong about their marriage?

David Bell:

The relationship was definitely central to his life, although perhaps not quite as central as the film makes it. He and Josephine met in 1795. She was a widow with two children. She was quite seductive and sophisticated. She also was very close to people in power in France. There are a lot of reasons why he fell for her. He was still quite young, quite callow. He was 26. She was 32. The film gets that wrong because Vanessa Kirby, the actress who plays Josephine in the film, is 14 years younger than Joaquin Phoenix who plays Napoleon, and they did not try to adjust for this at all. Certainly, the relationship was passionate and was very performative on his side.

He tended to write a great deal of purple prose, and that was certainly the case for his love letters to Josephine. He was putting on an act for her. But he did care about her enormously. They married in 1795. They remained married until 1809. She was very much the love of his life, but he did end up divorcing her because she was not able to bear him an heir to the throne of the French Empire. She was 32 when they married and was no longer capable of having children. The film gets a lot of things wrong about Josephine. There is a very crude scene right at the beginning where she seduces him in one of the most overt sexual ways, which somebody who was born into the French nobility certainly would never have behaved in that way.

It does not portray the way he thought about the marriage. It does not give any sense of the letters. It portrays him as being in heat for her most of the time. Then it has this weird back and forth where he says to her, "you are nothing without me." And then she repeats it back to him and says, "you are nothing without me," and makes him repeat that as if it is a game of domination.

She also had affairs. This pained him greatly. But the other thing that the film gets wrong is that it makes the relationship into the central driving force of his major decisions, when in fact he had many other reasons to make those decisions. For example, it suggests that when he takes power back, this return from exile in 1815, it was basically out of a desire to see Josephine again. She had been dead for 10 months at the time. I thought that the love scenes were both unconvincing and the duller part of the film, whereas the battles and the political stuff was much more interesting.

Larry Bernstein:

Tell us about Napoleon's long-term impact on French institutions.

David Bell:

Napoleon did want to pose as a civilian leader. Although he was a general and took power in a coup d'état, he did not create a military government. He was always careful to keep it as a civilian government. While he did preside over a militarization of French society, he did try to say, "this is not the army taking power. I am not Julius Caesar." And he did create civilian institutions. He created the Napoleonic code. Now, this was not entirely his creation. He was not a lawyer by training. The French had been trying since the French Revolution to reform what had been an incredibly Byzantine set of law codes for France.

He brought people together and he was clear about outlining the principles he wanted, which was that the code should be extremely simple, it should be easy to follow. It should also be emphasizing the family and property as the building blocks of French society. And the code which he promulgated was incredibly influential. It remains the law code of France and scores of countries around the world and is an inspiration for any system that works on a civil law, which is not the United States and not Britain. There is only one part of the United States that uses the Napoleonic code, and that's Louisiana because of its French heritage. But our law code and the British Law Code work on very different principles from the French one.

In addition, he regularized the French administration, building upon the reforms of the French Revolution. And he brought the principle of civic equality and religious toleration across Europe. His armies not only occupied large parts of Germany; they created all these satellite kingdoms, including the Confederation of the Rhine, the Kingdom of Westphalia, the Duchy of Warsaw, the

Kingdom of Naples. Spain was ruled for a time by his brother Joseph, and everywhere that had been conquered by France, he brought the Napoleonic code.

He brought the principle of revolutionary equality. He took lands away from the Catholic church. He broke down the walls of the ghettos that had kept the Jews isolated and extended civil equality to the Jews as well. In France, he created the institution known as the State Council, which exists to this day and is one of two courts in France, which is the equivalent of the American Supreme Court. He created the Bank of France, the first central bank in French history. He was an enormously important as a political figure and as an institution builder.

Larry Bernstein:

Was Napoleon good for the Jews?

David Bell:

His record on the Jews was very mixed in France. Jews had lived under severe prohibitions in France. Most of the Jews lived in Alsace in eastern France, a smaller number of Sephardi Jews in the southwest. The Revolution had given them full civil rights. Napoleon continued this. He also created something called the Consistory, which still exists to this day, which is a central organization of the Jews to mediate between the Jewish community and the French state. He created a body which he called the Sanhedrin as a supreme court for the Jews.

Across Europe he freed the Jews from restrictions. But in 1808, he issued what were called the infamous decrees, whereby he charged that the Jews of Eastern France and Alsace had been carrying out exorbitant money lending and extorting the people of Alsace. He was doing this in response to local pressures and unilaterally canceled debts that had been owed to Jews. He fined Jews in this area and placed the Jewish communities under severe restrictions as to business they could be involved in. So that was not a very good thing he did there.

Larry Bernstein:

The film begins with the execution by guillotine of Marie Antoinette and then quickly turns to Robespierre and the reign of terror. How should we think about the end of the monarchy and the resulting reign of terror with the rise of Napoleon?

David Bell:

This is one thing that the film gets entirely wrong. It makes it seem as if Napoleon is horrified by the terror and by the French Revolution, that he sees it as a bloody mess and that he needs to bring order back to France as a result, and that he lies with some of the more corrupt members of the French ruling body, the National Convention, in pursuit of his own ambition. That was not really the case at all.

Napoleon, in part because of his younger brother, Lucian Bonaparte, was early on associated with some of the more radical factions in the French Revolution. When Napoleon first came to the attention of important politicians, it was because of Maximilian Robespierre's brother, Augustin, who was a representative on mission in the South and recognized what Napoleon had done at Toulon. He wrote back a long list of officers who deserved praise for what they had done. But he said of Napoleon, "this is an officer of transcendent merit." And so, Napoleon was originally associated with Robespierre, and in fact, he was arrested after the fall of Robespierre. In 1795, the film depicts him shooting down a crowd in the streets of Paris, and these are royalists who want the king back, and he is siding with the revolution against these royalists two years later. Something that the film does not actually mention, but he participates in an earlier coup in which the more liberal revolutionary faction purged some of their enemies from the French government. He very much fighting to preserve the French republic and the gains of the revolution. Even after taking power, he is still insisting that all he is doing is bringing back order and security, but that he wants to respect the revolutionary principles of liberty and equality.

In early 1800 just after he is taken power, he has memorial services for George Washington who had just died in the United States. And he uses this to draw the comparison between himself and Washington and to say to the French people, I am basically, your Washington and like Washington, I'll respect democracy, I'll respect the republic. And it is only as he eases into power that he can become much more absolutist and authoritarian in his rule. But it takes some time.

Larry Bernstein:

The film details Napoleon's invasion of Egypt. It shows an absurd cannon fire that blows up a pyramid. How important was his role in Egypt? Did he successfully expand the French Empire?

David Bell:

It is often said that he did this to block Britain's routes to India. That was not important because the Suez Canal was not yet built at the time.

Larry Bernstein:

The invasion of Egypt was in 1799 and the Suez Canal opened in 1858.

David Bell:

Most of the traffic from Britain to India went around the southern coast of Africa. But Egypt would be important for controlling the eastern part of the Mediterranean and for expanding France's overseas role. France had lost most of its overseas empire to the British several decades before in the Seven Year's War of the mid-18th century. He also took with him a large expedition of scientists and scholars.

We owe the discovery of the Rosetta Stone to this expedition. He was able to defeat the local Egyptian rulers. But even as he was doing this, one thing happened, which essentially doomed the expedition from the start, which was that the British under Lord Nelson beat the French fleet terribly in the battle of the Nile, and basically the British then took control of the Eastern Mediterranean. This meant that Napoleon could not reliably reinforce his colony in Egypt. There was no way to actually get men in material from France there. In addition, the Ottoman Empire marched down through what was then Palestine to Egypt, and Napoleon marched up into Palestine and beat the Turks in some important battles. But he knew that he couldn't hold onto the colony without the fleet in the Mediterranean. So, he did something which was not particularly honorable, which is that he simply snuck out in 1799, he got onboard a ship, he was able to sneak past the British and went back to France, basically abandoning the colony to its fate. It eventually had to surrender to the British and to the Ottomans.

Larry Bernstein:

In the film, they explained Napoleon's decision to leave Egypt because Josephine was having an affair.

David Bell:

I mean, she had been having an affair. He knew about it. He was anxious to get back to France to confront her. Was this reason number one? No. Was it reason number three? Maybe.

Larry Bernstein:

The French Revolution executed the French King. This regicide upset the other monarchs in Europe. Napoleon was a man of his times. He wanted his heirs to take over his reign after his death. He needed a son, but his wife was barren.

David Bell:

Napoleon came slowly to monarchy. France was as a republic, as a democracy, fighting wars against the conservative European monarchies throughout the 1790s. When he took power, he initially did not want to try to become a king or an emperor. He became first consul. A very important stage was passed three years later in 1802 when he decided to become consul for life. It was the problem of succession that obsessed him. He was concerned that if the government of the republic was going to be become increasingly concentrated in its own person, then he would need to be able to pass it on to somebody else.

His brother, Lucian, very much wanted to be a successor. Napoleon didn't always get along with Lucian, didn't trust him, didn't think this was a good idea. There was also a time when he thought he might pass it on to his stepson, Eugène de Beauharnais, whom he had adopted, Josephine's son, and whom he loved and trusted a great deal. He made Eugene the Viceroy of Italy. But he became convinced that he would need to have a direct blood successor because this was the

principle that governed almost every country at the time. In 1804, he decides to create the empire, although interestingly, if you look at the law which formally creates the empire, it says, “the government of the Republic has confided to an emperor who will take the title of Emperor of the French.”

So, in other words, the republic in theory never actually ended. It simply confided its authority to an emperor. In 1812, he is in Russia and the rumor comes to Paris that he is dead.

Immediately in Paris, people start wondering, what the hell are we going to do? And there's a general named Malet who wants to take power. They start thinking about forming a provisional government. The one thing nobody thinks of doing is crowning his son as Napoleon II. The son is two years old, but the empire is simply not firmly enough established by this point. Napoleon abdicates in 1814, he very much wants his son to become emperor, but nobody will agree to this. The same thing in 1815. His son goes off with his mother dies young without an heir of his own. And so, it is Napoleon's nephew who takes over much later. First elected president of the French Republic in 1848 and then becomes emperor in 1852.

Larry Bernstein:

The highlight of the Napoleon movie are the spectacular battle scenes. Why are they important?

David Bell:

The battles are incredibly important. Napoleon always believed in the decisive battle that would rout the enemy sufficiently so that he would be able to dictate terms to them. Napoleon was not particularly interested in territorial conquest. He was not a Hitler. In fact, he rather reluctantly took over more territory simply to be able to control and tax it better. But he was not interested in France's territorial expansion. He was not interested in conquering Russia. What he wanted to do was force Tsar Alexander to cooperate with him. He needed to crush the Russian army. What Napoleon had hoped to do was enter Russia, meet the Russian army quickly, beat it thoroughly, and then be able to dictate terms to Tsar Alexander.

Instead, the Russians kept retreating. He finally caught up with him at Borodino outside of Moscow, but it was not a sufficiently decisive victory, so we had to go on and take Moscow. But he never wanted to take Moscow. It was the last thing on his mind. He did not intend to go that far into Russia. His army was already being decimated by typhus and by the Russian summer long before it got finished off by the Russian winter.

Napoleon was a master of fighting the big, complicated battle. And these battles were incredibly dramatic. They were colorful, they were brutal. The movie does really capture the drama of these battles, particularly the Battle of Austerlitz in 1805. It captures one scene, which was a minor

part of the Battle of Austerlitz, where the French fired some cannon into a frozen lake to cut off the Russian retreat.

Ridley Scott makes it the centerpiece of the battle with hundreds if not thousands of Russians be crashing into the ice that the cannonballs had broken. And you see these incredible shots of people flailing in the water, which is turning red with their blood. It's incredibly dramatic and beautifully filmed. Not exactly accurate. The thing which the film does not try to capture is the scope of these battles. It makes it seem like these battles are very up close and personal.

These battles involved huge numbers of people. The biggest battle of the Napoleonic period was the Battle of Leipzig in 1813. There were 500,000 soldiers. It involved masses of men marching in all directions, an incredible degree of coordination. One of the reasons Napoleon was so successful is he was such a master of organization. He was an authentic military genius. He could keep all these things in his head and be able to figure out exactly how to maneuver. He was really a master administrator of war, working out complex battle plans, knowing the strength of the different units. There was a lot of paper involved here. I don't think there's a single piece of paper in the entire movie.

Although he observed part of the battlefield himself, he was safely removed from the battlefield by the time he was emperor. He would attend the battles in person, but he was not fighting himself with a sword. They have the Battle of Waterloo in which Napoleon, in the film leads a cavalry charge. It's ridiculous. He was terrible on horseback. He was not trained as a cavalry man. He was an artillery officer. He had terrible hemorrhoids, did not make him comfortable on a horse.

But that's artistic license. Ridley Scott is interested in the close tight shots of individual combat of the men waiting for the enemy to attack, of Napoleon looking at the battlefield. So, he captures the emotions, but he does not capture what the battles were like.

Larry Bernstein

In Christopher Nolan's movie Dunkirk, we see the British retreat from the perspective of the ordinary soldier and not from the vantage point of its military leadership. Similarly, the famous military historian John Keegan in his book *The Face of Battle* describes what it was like to be in the trenches. The movie *Napoleon* gives a sense of the enormity of the battlefield but misses what it was like to participate in it.

David Bell:

It does not give you their soldiers' perspectives at all. Most of the French soldiers were long serving professionals. They were very tough. Napoleon was able to make them to march close to 30 miles a day with 80 to 100-pound packs. They had a lot of experience. They were drilled.

Fighting on an 18th or 19th century battlefield is complicated. They had to move into these different formations, whether stretched out on a long line or organized into a column, to form squares to repel enemy cavalry. This required a lot of training, and they had to be able to stand under fire.

These battles would often involve long lines of soldiers blasting at each other with muskets, and to stand there while a line of enemy may be just a couple of hundred yards away blasting you with muskets, that is not easy. Every possible human instinct says, just get the hell out of there. So what made them stand? Well, one was simply discipline. They knew that if they broke and ran, they would, they could be flogged or even killed. Obviously, the respect of their comrades meant an enormous amount. But the drill mattered enormously just to get them to practice again and again and again.

Loading a musket was not an easy thing. It would take as much as 20 to 30 seconds, even for a well-trained soldier to load the musket and to shoot. It involved doing things like taking a cartridge with a bullet in it, which was basically a bag with gunpowder and a bullet. Biting off the bullet into your mouth, getting a mouthful of gunpowder, then spitting the bullet into the end of the musket. One other thing that the armies always did is they gave out rum to the soldiers to get them partly drunk, to give them Dutch courage.

A soldier might be in a few battles over the course of his career, and those battles were extremely dangerous and very deadly. This is before the age of smokeless gunpowder. So as soon as they start firing, there are these huge clouds of gray, greasy smoke that are everywhere. They had not slept. They would be marching through the night.

They would have to contend with the fact that sometimes if they are fighting on dry soil, the battlefield itself might catch fire. There are stories of people urinating to put out the fires. Their muskets would get usually hot from continuous firing. They would urinate on the musket barrels to cool them down. They would be literally too hot to handle.

The film is really looking at it from Napoleon's point of view and does not capture much of this.

Larry Bernstein:

Napoleon's worst defeat was the Russian invasion. The graphic design artist Charles Joseph Minard shows a figurative map of Napoleon's army invading Russia and the very few that returned. Statistician Edward Tufte called the map the best statistical graphic ever drawn. Tell us about Napoleon's ill-fated Russian adventure.

David Bell:

The Russian campaign, one of the greatest disasters in military history. Certainly, Napoleon did not want to go all the way to Moscow. He wanted to invade Russia with an overwhelming military force, most of whom were not French. There were more Germans than French in his army. It was an international army.

He intended to cross the frontier, catch the Russian army, defeated decisively, and forced terms upon the Czar. Instead, the Russians retreated ahead of him, basically with scorched earth tactics, Napoleon kept trying to pursue the Russians, and this was in the summertime, and the conditions were bad in the summer. The Russian winter was preceded by the Russian summer where the troops could not find enough to eat. They could not find safe drinking water, and getting typhus, getting dysentery, which in a large army without proper latrine, simply spreads the disease. So huge numbers of people are dying already long before they get to Moscow.

Then he finally catches up with the Russians at Borodino. He defeats them, but just barely. They are able to retreat in good order, and then a large portion of the population does abandon Moscow. If you read the novel War and Peace, there are these dramatic and quite accurate scenes of Russians fleeing Moscow ahead of the arrival of the French, but it is not completely abandoned. Napoleon occupies Moscow. He goes and sleeps in the Kremlin, and then the city is torched. It is still a lot of debate about exactly what happened, the extent to which this was done deliberately. It was a very largely wooden city. I mean, cities did burn spectacularly in the early modern period. Look at London in the 1660s. It is probably not a coordinated sabotage. Even if there was sabotage, there was really nothing for him there. The army was already terribly weakened, so it was really a question of when he would leave. The fire probably does not do that much to accelerate it. He decides to retreat, and then the winter comes early, and the winter is ferocious.

You can read accounts of the retreat. There is a wonderful memoir written by a soldier named Jakob Walter, a German soldier. It is translated, it's available in paperback, just horrific accounts of people basically dying where they stood freezing to death. Of horses being soaked, frozen, that people could carve meat off their rumps, and the horses would not even notice because they were frozen. Everyone getting frostbite of these horrific scenes. Finally, they reached the Berezina River and the bridges had been destroyed. There are these Dutch engineers who essentially build these wooden bridges while standing in this freezing water, and many of them dying as a result. And the French start to retreat over these bridges, and then at one point, one of the bridges collapses sending people into the water. It is just these horrific scenes. You can read Victor Hugo's great poem called The Expiation.

And these scenes are all true of people trying to warm themselves by opening-up the bellies of dead horses and basically climbing inside. That was a scene that George Lucas stole in the

Empire Strikes Back for Star Wars when Luke Skywalker does the same thing. But if you must save your life, that is what you are going to do. And by the time they get back across the border back into Poland, which is under French control, they lost probably 450,000 men.

Larry Bernstein:

In the movie, Napoleon's greatest antagonist are the British. Why were they the cause of his downfall.

David Bell:

One of the most ridiculous lines in the film is when Napoleon shouts at the British Ambassador. He says, "you think you're so great because you've got boats." For one thing, it makes him sound like a five-year-old, which he definitely wasn't, and he wouldn't talk like that. But even so, there is something to the line. I mean, the British were so great because they had ships, and it's why they were able to defeat him. That and a small little thing, which is ignored in the film, called economics. Britain was France's longest lasting enemy. It was in large part, an economic battle, which depended upon naval strength.

Napoleon came around to the idea that the only way to defeat Britain was to close off the entire European continent of British trade, but that would strangle the British economy. Britain bankrolled all the continental European resistance to Napoleon.

Napoleon created the Continental System to do this, but this required controlling the entire European continent. When you ask why the French kept the battles and the wars kept expanding, it is because of Napoleon's frenetic desire to get the entire European continent, including Russia, under sufficient control to cut off British trade. It led to huge overstretch and ultimately led to his defeat.

Larry Bernstein:

The greatest French court painter was Jacques-Louis David. He painted during the French Revolution and then of Napoleon. In the movie, they show David drawing during Napoleon's coronation ceremony which he made into his famous painting that hangs in the Louvre. Tell us about David's success in enhancing Napoleon's persona.

David Bell:

Artists were incredibly important in putting Napoleon on a pedestal. The images that they did see by huge numbers of people, and there were engravings done based on the paintings that reached an even wider audience. So, these shaped the public image of people like Napoleon. Napoleon had great luck with his artists. Jacques David had been the great artist of the French Revolutionary period. Then he worked for Napoleon. He painted probably the single most famous image of Napoleon on this great rearing horse in the Alps in 1800. Funny because

Napoleon crossed the Alps on a mule wrapped in a blanket. The artistic license is a wonderful thing.

David painted Napoleon in his study showing Napoleon the great workhorse capable of ruling the empire. Napoleon knew the importance of images both the visual and written. He sponsored newspapers. He controlled the press. He paid people to write plays about him and accounts of his victories. He was a great master of what we would now call propaganda.

Larry Bernstein:

I end each episode with a note of optimism. What are you optimistic about as it relates to Napoleon?

David Bell:

He has an incredible story. He was a symbol of sheer human possibility. But he was also a bad guy. He knew that his rule depended upon his military success, which was one of the reasons that he fought war after war after war, leading to millions of deaths. He ruled as a dictator. He restored slavery in the French colonies. The people in those colonies had freed themselves in the 1790s and Napoleon reimposed slavery where he could, which was a dreadful thing after fighting a vicious race war to try to take back the colony that we now call Haiti.

The most optimistic thing about Napoleon is that in the end, he was defeated, and was replaced by regimes that had the best things that he introduced like administrative reforms, the law code, the civil equality, the religious toleration, and eventually gave way to democratic regimes. But that was almost despite him. It is an incredible story, and it is a story very much worth telling, if not necessarily in exactly the way Ridley Scott did. But again, is he somebody to celebrate? I would say no.

Larry Bernstein:

Thanks David. We are now going to move to our second speaker Darren Schwartz who is the What Happens Next movie critic.

Larry Bernstein:

Darren your assignment for What Happens Next was to watch Napoleon. What happened?

Darren Schwartz:

Well, thanks Larry for having me back. It was quite an experience. It was close to three hours of Joaquin Phoenix, learning about history, and the entire time being amazed that they could not cast someone with a French accent.

Larry Bernstein:

Was Joaquin Phoenix miscast as Napoleon?

Darren Schwartz:

No, he was amazing. His expressions and his somber sullenness and the weird way he had sex and neighed like a horse, but you just could give him an accent.

Larry Bernstein:

Charlton Heston played Moses without a Hebrew accent and without a stutter. Did you want someone like Peter Sellers who played Inspector Clouseau with a French accent?

Darren Schwartz:

Yeah.

Larry Bernstein:

The actual run time for Napoleon was 2 hours and 38 minutes, which is pushing your limit Darren, what happened?

Darren Schwartz:

Well, so there have been times that I fall asleep in movies.

Larry Bernstein:

You mentioned that you fell asleep in a previous review. I remember that.

Darren Schwartz:

Yeah. I was about six minutes in Barbie. This time I went in with a different meal plan and at the Wayfair Theater at Highland Park, they actually have real butter. And then I did have about a half of a Coca-Cola, and I typically do not drink caffeine. So, I was just jacked, and I was super focused. I did not fall asleep at all. In fact, I was talking quite a bit and from the beginning, it was an extremely exciting movie to learn about stuff that I did not really know a lot about.

Larry Bernstein:

Napoleon conquers Europe, then loses it, and gets exiled. Were you rooting for him?

Darren Schwartz:

I was rooting for him. There were points where he seemed like a nice guy. There is a lot of parts where he was crying. Did that stick out to you? Crying at the annulment. They never really showed him despotic. They showed him gentle and kind while he was murdering his foes in the war.

Larry Bernstein:

They did show him shooting an unarmed Parisian crowd that supported the Royals.

Darren Schwartz:

Well, I think it's fair to say if you're not lining up against him, he's your guy. He's there for you. If you are going to take up arms against him, it is going to be problematic. He has got a temper.

Larry Bernstein:

Let's move next to his relationship with his wife Josephine. What did you make of their interactions?

Darren Schwartz:

Well, there was a very pivotal moment, where he was talking to her and in a domineering, sexual way as an emperor would to his lady friend. And she came right back at him with that aggressiveness, with that sexuality. And you could tell that he liked ...

Larry Bernstein:

Liked that kind of talk.

Darren Schwartz:

You dominate a little bit. Who doesn't? How about the neigh with the horse noises?

Larry Bernstein:

I did not understand why he had to be literally in heat.

Darren Schwartz:

But he was stomping around like a horse. Neigh, neigh.

Larry Bernstein:

I do not know. I have never heard about anybody behaving this way. It seemed completely ridiculous to me.

The battle scenes were the highlight of the movie.

Darren Schwartz:

I was incredibly impressed with the battle scenes. You had the closeup perspective, hand to hand. People just brutal killing, but in a way that's visceral. Then they pan out where you saw how the whole thing came together.

When you think of Waterloo, you never think about victory. The word that just comes to mind is defeat. But still, I was hoping, is he going to pull it off?

Larry Bernstein:

Tell us about the scene with the military scout.

Darren Schwartz:

In a war, you have scouts. They ride off towards the enemy. They figure out what is going on. They ride back. But in the movie, they showed each scout riding on a horse with another horse next to it holding the reins. And so, the question is, why was there another horse? And there are three scenarios. There is one, it is just a spare. Second is you want to transfer the weight. You want to switch every so often so you can go faster. And the third is it is like cover for the gunfire. But I thought it was fascinating. I have never seen that before.

Larry Bernstein:

I assumed that they wanted to get back as fast as possible with the latest information and wanted to switch to a fresh horse that did not have the weight of the rider for the whole trip.

Darren Schwartz:

Option two. Yeah.

Larry Bernstein:

So, what did you think of the film?

Darren Schwartz:

For sure thumbs up. There were some issues, a three-hour movie and the lead who's not speaking with that accent and trying to fit that much information in.

Larry Bernstein:

This is the second long movie that you reviewed. Oppenheimer also was 3 hours and nine seconds. What's optimal for you? What makes Darren happy? Are you an 1:45 guy? Where is it appropriate?

Darren Schwartz:

1:45, 2:15. But if it's a good topic and I get a little caffeine, you're good. And by the way, you know what I heard? There is a director's cut of this movie that is over four hours long that is not out yet. It's going to come out I think on streaming.

Larry Bernstein:

Will you see it?

Darren Schwartz:

Yeah, but I'll just cut it up over a couple of days.

Larry Bernstein:

Why do you think they made this movie?

Darren Schwartz:

Scott's a great director. I think they made it to make money and entertain people.

Larry Bernstein:

What did you think of Napoleon's hat in the film?

Darren Schwartz:

A ridiculous hat sideways. Right? It is not even front ways, it's sideways, is to make him look taller.

Larry Bernstein:

I read that Napoleon was 5' 6" which was the median height at the time. He was slandered as being short, but it was not true.

Darren Schwartz:

They try to fit so much in, there were some transitions that were clunky. So, when he came into power, they did it like a triumvirate. There were three councils, which they replicated this off Rome, and they talked about that briefly. And then suddenly, he was the emperor. So, they did not really talk about what happened. Did they kill the other two guys? How did that transition into that?

Larry Bernstein:

The movie was long enough, the audience figure it out, I guess he got promoted or killed off the other two guys.

Darren Schwartz:

Yeah. I was also surprised that Josephine's lover.

Larry Bernstein:

Was never killed.

Darren Schwartz:

Never killed. Right.

Larry Bernstein:

He is always there. He is hanging out and observing their Emperor coronation. Maybe affairs were more acceptable back then.

Darren Schwartz:

It was interesting because he had taken lovers and when she asked him, he said, there is a funny line in here. So, there was humor in this movie. She said, did you take lovers? And he said, of course. And she said, were they pretty? He said some, yeah, but they cried less. Maybe they cried less than Josephine did. Do you remember that line?

Larry Bernstein:

What I took from that scene was that Napoleon did not have an emotional connection with his affairs. It was more about sex. And what upset him was he thought Josephine was so in love that she did not respond to his letters. And he wrote her every day when he was away in Egypt. Next topic, Napoleon wants an heir. He gets his mother involved and she finds a Polish teenager to sleep with him to see whether if he is fertile. This is not something my mom would never offer up. What did you make of that?

Darren Schwartz:

Well, it is a good mom.

To a mama's boy, this is the pinnacle. Your mom's looking out like, hey, Napoleon, obviously we are concerned. No one really knows. Is it you? Is it her? Who is infertile here? I have got an idea. We have got an 18-year-old young woman in your bed. Check it off. Would you? like have a cognac and have sex with her?

I will do it. Yeah. And it worked.

Larry Bernstein:

Pregnant, boom.

Darren Schwartz:

Yeah.

Larry Bernstein:

Josephine is infertile, divorce her, marry the great-granddaughter of the Austrian Empress Maria-Theresa, have a son, the heir, problem solved.

Next topic, did you ever see the comedy Napoleon Dynamite?

Darren Schwartz:

Yeah.

Larry Bernstein:

How was that?

Darren Schwartz:

It was a better movie.

Larry Bernstein:

And what made it better?

Darren Schwartz:

It was funnier and it was shorter, and the guy had the right accent.

Larry Bernstein:

You've gone back to that a few times.

Darren Schwartz:

An American accent. He was American. And if they had a French guy, that role of the guy in Napoleon Dynamite would not work.

Larry Bernstein:

Who would you have preferred to play Napoleon? Some guy who can speak English that I can understand with a French accent.

Darren Schwartz:

Gerard Depardieu.

Larry Bernstein:

That would be funny.

Darren Schwartz:

Well, no, he is not funny. I mean, he is a great actor.

Larry Bernstein:

He is, but he is a little overweight. He is a big guy and does not fit Napoleon's stature.

Larry Bernstein:

Napoleon has influenced rock music, and of course I am thinking of the song by the band ABBA called Waterloo, what are your thoughts on that?

Darren Schwatz:

So, Larry, I can categorically say that I have listened to the song...

Larry Bernstein:

A thousand times.

Darren Schwatz:

No. Well, I never knew that was what the name of the song was.

Larry Bernstein:

Well, what did you think it was?

Darren Schwatz:

I thought this meant nothing. And I will say that since seeing the movie and realizing it was pointed out that ABBA wrote a song, Waterloo, I have listened to it 5, 6, 7 times and there is nothing in the song that is any way connected to Napoleon. And I think it is just saying a woman saying, I'm defeated. You have won the war.

Larry Bernstein:

Ok, here are the lyrics

At Waterloo, Napoleon did surrender
Oh yeah
And I have met my destiny in quite a similar way
The history book on the shelf
Is always repeating itself
Waterloo, I was defeated, you won the war
Waterloo, promise to love you forevermore
Waterloo, could not escape if I wanted to
Waterloo, knowing my fate is to be with you
Wa-Wa-Wa-Wa-Waterloo, finally facing my Waterloo

Darren Schwatz:

Yeah. But I don't think that's a really good way to have a relationship, say there's no winning and losing in a relationship.

Larry Bernstein:

There's love.

Darren Schwatz:

Yeah. There is only losing and losing. Whole idea that someone is going to lose. I think it is...

Larry Bernstein:

Absurd.

Darren Schwartz:

It is absolutely absurd.

Larry Bernstein:

I know it is early. But the Oscars will be here soon.

Darren Schwartz:

Smartly, this came out at the end of the year, and I think it goes through year end.

Larry Bernstein:

I know the Oscars nominates like 10 people for best actor but let us assume that the contestants are Ryan Gosling for Barbie, Cillian Murphy for Oppenheimer, and Joaquin Phoenix for Napoleon. Who do you think deserves it?

Darren Schwartz:

It's Joaquin Phoenix, but it's in the spirit of having the attention span of a fruit fly based on recency alone. Hands down. Joaquin Phoenix.

Larry Bernstein:

Come on. Ryan Gosling stole the show in Barbie.

Darren Schwartz:

He stole the show. It is almost like a career attainment. I think Joaquin might have already won Best Actor before anyway.

Larry Bernstein:

He won the Oscar for Best Actor for his performance in the Joker.

Darren Schwartz:

Okay, fine. Let me take a deep breath. Let me recalculate. By the way, all three of those will be nominated. A hundred percent. And I think partially because we reviewed them. We got the word out. And I am going to root for Ryan Gosling.

Larry Bernstein:

Who will win?

Darren Schwartz:
I think Cillian Murphy.

Larry Bernstein:
Oh, for Pete's sake.

In what category will Napoleon win an Oscar?

Darren Schwartz:
Cinematography.

Larry Bernstein:
How about Ridley Scott as director?

Darren Schwartz:
I think Ridley Scott gets nominated.

Larry Bernstein:
Does he win?

Darren Schwartz:
No.

Larry Bernstein:
How about Greta Gerwig for best director for Barbie?

Darren Schwartz:
It is nominated a hundred percent. Greta Gerwig wins.

I think costume design, again, it is going to come down to Barbie versus Napoleon.

I think Barbie wins. I think so. It is fantastic.

Larry Bernstein:
Is there an award for animal cruelty?

Darren Schwartz:
Not anymore.

Larry Bernstein:

If there were, would Napoleon win? Remember that artillery shell that spears Napoleon's horse?

Darren Schwartz:

Chest shot.

Larry Bernstein:

And just takes the horse down. And then, I cannot remember if it was Napoleon or one of his buddies gets in there. Reaches into the wound, which I would never do. Pulls out the artillery shell, drops it, and walks off.

Darren Schwartz:

No, he throws it to his brother. Says, give this to mother. So now I do want to clarify for you, but also importantly for the audience, that that was not real. They did not kill the horse. So that was fake. You know that.

Larry Bernstein:

I did not know that.

Darren Schwartz:

Best movie. Of the three that are nominated in the What Happens Next Movie Awards? I would say Barbie wins. If Joaquin Phoenix has an accent, then you got the weirdness and you got the sex and Josephine and the gambling and...

Larry Bernstein:

The horses.

Darren Schwartz:

But without the accent. I think it's not even close. I think Barbie takes it.

Larry Bernstein:

Barbie's best film. Barbie's Best Director. Margot Robbie wins Best Actress. Ryan Gosling wins Best Actor.

Darren Schwartz:

Costume Design.

Larry Bernstein:

Oh my God. Barbie is fantastic.

Maybe we should have our own What Happens Next movie awards?

Darren Schwartz:

Yeah, this is good. Yeah.

Larry Bernstein:

Come visit me in Miami. We can have a whole award show. We will get a room. I will get a DJ. I don't know.

Darren Schwartz:

I love it.

Larry Bernstein:

Thanks to David and Darren for joining us today.

If you missed last week's show, check it out. The podcast's topic was Making Cities More Walkable. Our speaker was Jeff Speck who is the author of the classic book now in its 10th edition entitled Walkable City: How Downtown Can Save America, One Step at a Time. We heard from Jeff why some cities are more walkable, and what design changes radically improve city life. Why bike lanes and active pedestrian traffic make cities more vibrant and speedy cars are so problematic.

I now want to make a plug for next week's podcast with Gerald Posner who is the author of the book Case Closed: Lee Harvey Oswald and the JFK Assassination. Gerald has spent years researching this book and interviewed all the major living players. On this 60th anniversary of the assassination, I want to find out who killed JFK and if there was a conspiracy.

You can find our previous episodes and transcripts on our website whathappensnextin6minutes.com. Please subscribe to our weekly emails and follow us on Apple Podcasts or Spotify.

Thank you for joining us today, good-bye.