



### **Jean Vigo**

b. April 26, 1905, Paris, France.

d. October 5, 1934, Paris, France.

by Maximilian Le Cain

Of all cinema's illustrious martyr figures, none is more romantic than Jean Vigo, poet maudit of '30s French cinema, dead at 29 after a long struggle with tuberculosis, leaving a filmography that can be screened in just over three hours and which, during his lifetime, showed every sign of vanishing into oblivion. But the ethereal beauty and earthy anarchism that permeate his two masterpieces *Zéro de conduite* (1933) and *L'Atalante* (1934) are still enveloping audiences in their hypnotic atmosphere today and leaving them sure in the knowledge that Vigo was more than a filmmaker - he was a moment in film history that will never be repeated.

The son of noted militant anarchist Miguel Almereyda, who died in prison in suspicious circumstances in 1917, and Emily Clero, Vigo was born in an attic that was constantly swarming with cats like the barge 'L'Atalante' in his 1934 film. The ill health that plagued him throughout his short life was already evident in childhood. His father's anarchism exerted a lasting influence on his artistic sensibility. Due to his father's reputation, however, he grew up under an assumed name, Jean Sales, often staying with family friends and at boarding school. In 1922 he rejoined his mother in Paris, attending the Lycee Marceau in Chartres and subsequently the Sorbonne under his real name. In 1926 he met and later married Elisabeth 'Lydou' Lozinska, the daughter of a Lodz manufacturer.

Already entertaining cinematic ambitions, Vigo was briefly employed by the Franco Film studio as a camera assistant. A gift from his father-in-law allowed the destitute filmmaker to purchase a second-hand camera and begin work on what would become his first movie, the satirical film essay *A propos de Nice* (1930). It was around this time he met his close collaborator Boris Kaufman, a Russian cinematographer. The brother of both cameraman Mikhail Kaufman and director Dziga Vertov (real name Denis Kaufman), whose masterpiece *Man with a Movie Camera* (1928) influenced *A propos de Nice*, Boris Kaufman later enjoyed a distinguished career in Hollywood, shooting *On the Waterfront* (1954) for Kazan and several of Lumet's early films.

*A propos de Nice* constructs around the central motif of the carnival a savage, frenetic vision of a superficial society in a state of putrefaction. As bold in its formal experimentation as it is in its gleefully morbid fascination with ugliness, the grotesque humour of its portraits of the holidaymakers that swarm over the Promenade des Anglais (sometimes suggestively intercut with shots of animals!) is brutally undercut by images of distressing poverty. The uneasy atmosphere of

indolence and boredom boiling over into lustful frenzy while willfully ignoring the encroaching sense of death and decay that surround it makes this Vigo's darkest film. While *Zéro de conduite*'s satire is balanced with a lyrical celebration of the forces of revolution and renewal, *A propos de Nice* limits itself to the death dance of caricatures, caricatures all the more startling for being stolen from life with a hidden camera. As Vigo stated in an address to the *Groupement des Spectateurs d'Avant-Garde*, "In this film, by showing certain basic aspects of a city, a way of life is put on trial. The last gasps of a society so lost in its escapism that it sickens you and makes you sympathetic to a revolutionary solution."

What is already present in *A propos de Nice* is Vigo's ability to capture the natural beauty of a real, non-studio setting and spontaneously elaborate on the impression, transforming the commonplace into the magical. His eye for atmosphere and detail would grow from film to film, but from the outset it was rooted in a documentary practice that simultaneously transcended the documentary.

Vigo's next film was also a documentary, a short commissioned on the strength of *A propos de Nice*. *Taris* (1931) applies some of the techniques of the avant-garde to a demonstration by swimming champion Jean Taris. Vigo had no interest in swimming and professed to have little fondness for the finished film. The opportunity of creating a more substantial work presented itself soon afterwards in the form of a sympathetic independent producer and cinephile, Jacques-Louis Nunez, who was interested in financing a series of low budget, medium length films. Based on his father's prison experiences and his own time in school, *Zéro de conduite* dealt with a subject close to its director's heart - the attempted suppression of childhood by adults. It took the form of a story of a rebellion at a boys' boarding school.

In making the film Vigo had exceeded the agreed running time, obliging him to trim it back. Faced with this painful task, he had two options. One was to respect narrative clarity and the other was to favour the most poetic moments. That he chose the latter course helped give *Zéro de conduite* the form that makes it seem so exciting today. Every image and scene is a surprise, appearing half-formed at its most expressive moment, giving the impression of a film overheard or even spied upon rather than addressed directly to the audience. This creates an uncommon alertness in the viewer, a slight sense of disorientation as if he were wandering in someone else's dream. In the context of the story of a gang of conspiratorial children, it evokes a hauntingly vivid sensation of gaining access to a world that is secret and unique to them. This childish universe obeys a logic all of its own which we cannot hope to fully understand but are privileged to observe with the deep respect Vigo obviously accords it.

Of course, this would not work if the scenes and images in question were less powerful than they are. From the opening, in which two of the boys meet on a train on their way to school and almost ritualistically compare the toys they have

acquired over the holiday to the famous final scene of their rising, in which they hurl various bric-a-brac from the school roof on to a sparse abstraction of a commemoration day celebration peopled mainly by dummies representing dignitaries, *Zéro de Conduite* presents its celebration of youthful rebellion through many of the most memorable moments in cinema. If his sympathies rest with the children, it is Vigo's extraordinary caricatures of the teachers that are most striking - the bearded dwarf headmaster, the malevolent creep of a supervisor who steals the boy's possessions during recess, the obese science master, the housemaster who ends up 'crucified' by being tied to his bed while asleep and placed in an upright position, the sympathetic young new teacher who imitates Chaplin, does handstands and draws pictures that magically come to life. Already seen as if through the eyes of the kids, in the final scene the substitution of dummies for authority figures concedes victory to the boys by depriving the adults of any claim on reality - only the young rebels' emotional perception, which has completely diminished their oppressors, still exists.

The most soaring manifestation of this perception occurs in *Zéro de conduite*'s finest scene. An epic, free-for-all pillow fight in the dormitory suddenly turns into a mock religious procession, the picture going into slow motion, the soundtrack playing Maurice Jaubert's memorable score backwards, a blizzard of feathers from the pillows floating in the background. With scenes such as this, it is not surprising that *Zéro de conduite* was greeted by many with outrage. Jean Vigo's first masterpiece was banned in France until 1945.

Nounez still had faith in Vigo and proposed to finance another film for him. However, he was unprepared to allow the director choice of material this time. From the banal love story he was given to work with, Vigo created a film that ranks with *Vampyr* (Carl Theodor Dreyer, 1932), *Morocco* (Josef von Sternberg, 1930) and *Une partie de campagne* (Jean Renoir, 1936) as one of the freshest and most startlingly beautiful of the '30s when looked at today. '*L'Atalante*' is a barge working on the Seine. Its skipper (Jean Dasté) marries a village girl (Dita Parlo) and she comes to live on the cat-infested boat. After a while, their relationship becomes strained and when the skipper refuses to allow her to explore Paris, she runs off. Enraged at her rebelliousness, he leaves without her but they soon come to realise the depth of their love for each other. He falls into a lethargic daze and the mate, Pere Jules (Michel Simon) sets out to find her. Ultimately, the couple is joyously reunited.

The constant jostling of images of documentary rawness with some of the most hauntingly ethereal visions of pure beauty the cinema has ever produced creates a passionate stylistic spontaneity that ideally matches the constantly surprising events that spring from practically every situation in the film. It is dominated by two contrasting iconic figures: on the one hand Pere Jules, the noisy, garrulous, earthy, loyal, decidedly larger than life sailor who has travelled the world and amassed a fascinating collection of souvenirs including his best friend's hands which he keeps in a jar. On the other, Juliette, the young bride, unforgettable in

the opening scene as the barge pulls away from her village, posed on deck, her wedding gown contrasting surrealistically with her surroundings, her face a frozen mask of doubt.

She is floating off into one of cinema's most moving, lyrical hymns to romantic love, but one which - unlike, say, Murnau's *Sunrise* (1927) or Hathaway's *Peter Ibbetson* (1935) - is firmly grounded in a realistic view of a couple who, at least initially, are not particularly idealised or archetypal. The strain of Juliette's adaptation to a new lifestyle on the marriage is realistically developed, as is the skipper's jealousy and frustration at her attraction to a flamboyant travelling salesman. It is only when they split up - she becoming lost in a sinister urban environment, he within his own despair - that their spiritual and sexual feelings for each other take flight, most notably in two famous moments. In the first the skipper and his wife, although in separate beds many miles apart, caress themselves in unison. In the second, the poetic highpoint of Vigo's cinema, the skipper has been told that one can see the woman that one loves underwater. He dives into the river (in underwater images inspired by the filming of *Taris*) and has a vision of Juliette floating happily in her wedding dress.

*L'Atalante* was cut to pieces by hostile distributors and retitled *Le Chaland qui passe* after a popular song that was subsequently inserted into the soundtrack. Vigo was past doing anything about this vandalism. Within days of the end of its commercially dismal first run he was dead.

Vigo stands apart from any cinematic tradition, a political and artistic rebel who lived and worked in poverty on the margins of the film industry. While it is tempting to lament the brevity of his career, it must also be remembered that the vast majority of directors who made five, ten or even twenty times as many films as Vigo never created anything as exciting or unique as any given frame of *Zéro de conduite* or *L'Atalante*. His films, although at times technically rough, succeeded through his genius for bringing every idiosyncratic, beautiful and sometimes troubling detail of them to life, a rare gift that all the slick production values in the world cannot bestow and can often, in fact, stifle.

For these reasons it is logical that Vigo would become an important figure in the revolutionary pantheon of great directors proposed by the French New Wave at the end of the 1950s. Two New Wave films, Chabrol's *Le Beau Serge* (1958) and Godard's *A bout de souffle* (1959), received the Prix Jean Vigo set up by Claude Aveline in 1951 to honour exceptional first films. Two other directors notably influenced by Vigo to have emerged very soon after the New Wave were Bernardo Bertolucci, who quotes directly from *L'Atalante* in *Before the Revolution* (1964) and *Last Tango in Paris* (1973), and Lindsay Anderson whose *If...* (1968) is a loose adaptation of the themes and structure of *Zéro de Conduite*.

1990 saw a full restoration of *L'Atlante* which went on to rank fifth in the 1992 Sight and Sound international critics' top ten films poll. More recently a follow up to *A propos de Nice*, *A propos de Nice (la suite)* (1995), featured short films by seven directors including Ruiz, Breillat and Kiarostami, and British director Julien Temple made a much criticised English language biopic of Vigo, *Vigo: Passion for Life* (1998).

Among contemporary French directors, Léos Carax paid Vigo tribute at the end of *Les amants du Pont Neuf* (1991) when the drowning lovers of the title are fished out of the Seine by an elderly couple on a barge, presumably the skipper and his wife from *L'Atlante* grown old. Another tribute he paid involving Vigo was directed at another contemporary filmmaker. The preface he provided Thomas Lescure's book *Un camera a la place du coeur* (Admiranda/Institut de l'image, 1992) was a photograph of Vigo and his wife, Lydou, unaccompanied by any text. The subject of the book, Philippe Garrel, is, as Carax implies, probably the modern French cinema's purest embodiment of Vigo's rebel poet spirit.

But perhaps the most moving invocation of Vigo in recent cinema occurs in Godard's *Eloge de l'amour* (2001), an achingly melancholic exploration of love and memory, during which an ill-fated couple stand silhouetted in black and white beside the Seine. The man describes how a landscape can only be 'new' to one if one mentally compares it to a landscape already seen. As he explains this, Maurice Jaubert's *L'Atalante* theme plays on the soundtrack. This is an extraordinary literalisation of this idea, superimposing onto the sadness of Godard's new cinematic 'landscape' (a place suffused with mournful remembering and broken loves) the wistful memory of Vigo's joyful *elogue de l'amour*, *L'Atalante*, a 'landscape' we have previously experienced. In a film about the importance of memory, this means more than simply contrasting the despair that will engulf this couple with the ultimate happiness of Vigo's lovers. It is also the remembrance of a moment in film history. A moment in film history that will not be repeated

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### Filmography

*A Propos de Nice* (1930)  
*Taris* (1931)  
*Zero de Conduite* (1933)  
*L'Atalante* (1934)

Film about Vigo:

*Cinéastes de notre temps: Jean Vigo* (Jacques Rozier, 1964)

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Web Resources    Compiled by Michelle Carey

Jean Vigo

Nicely integrated site featuring biography, bibliography, filmography and reviews.

Cité Scolaire Jean Vigo - Millau

Informative site about the school Vigo attended and how it informed his work.

Jean Vigo - Une Galérie de Cinéastes [Le Cinéma autour du monde]  
French page with some wonderful poster reproductions.

Vigo/Jaubert  
Essay by Claudia Corbman.

Institut Jean Vigo  
Official website of this organisation dedicated to the study of the history of cinema. Whilst not primarily concerned with Vigo, it does features some nice pictures and some brief information on him.

Zero de conduite  
A study guide for this film, courtesy of Webster University, St Louis. USA.

L'Atalante  
Analysis of this landmark film and its production.

L'Atalante  
Review by Derek Malcolm.

L'Intégrale de Jean Vigo  
Purchase here the new DVD box set of the four Vigo films.

The Films of Jean Vigo from the New York Film Annex/NYFAVideo.com  
This great video resource site has L'Atalante and Zero de conduite videos for sale.

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