

Appreciating Jean Vigo



"There are stranger things than playing a record with your finger."

Jean Vigo, director and screenwriter, is one of the great revelations in cinema.

Jean Vigo's career and output have no parallel. He worked in cinema for a mere five years, 1930 to 1934, and made a mere four films, only one of them feature-length, and yet he indelibly expanded the possibilities of film.

That is, for one thing, Jean Vigo left us passages of imagery, humor, empathy, lyricism, ambiguity, tenderness, and sheer fun and magic that are unmatched in their vigor.

Jean Vigo, an issue of rebel France and rebel Spain, combines aspects of Rimbaud, Baudelaire, Balzac, Cervantes, Velasquez, Picasso, and Bunuel. He has a novelist's perspicacity, a poet's whimsy, and a painter's touch. He has the quickness of fellow-feeling that D. H. Lawrence named as distinguishing genius. Jean Vigo also was empowered by a wife of comparable sensitivity and friends who were his peers in that admirable generation of iconoclasts taught by the horrors of World War I.

Jean Vigo was born in 1905 to Emily Clero and a famous/'notorious' Catalan Anarchist writer and newspaper-publisher. Jean Vigo's father's given name was Eugeni Boneventura de Vigo i Salles and chosen name was Miguel Almereyda. The father's chosen surname can be translated as "there's the shit". In 1917 Miguel Almereyda was arrested for opposing the Leon Daudet-fronted prolongation of France's part in World War I and the slaughter of millions for bankers' profit of billions. Almereyda died in Fresnes Prison, strangled by a shoe-lace, and authorities termed the father's death a 'suicide.' Jean Vigo had to leave Paris and go to school under an alias. Five years later he reunited with his mother. In 1926, then 21, Jean met Elisabeth "Lydou" Lozinska, 19, daughter of a Polish industrialist, at the Font-Romeu sanatorium nearby France's border with Spain. Both young people were tubercular. Both also, however, inclined to jumping into water. Together thereafter, married in 1929, parents to a daughter, Luce, in 1931, they infused and inspired each other.

Lydou was Jean's personal assistant for his last two films. More intimately, the couple fed each other's flames.



About the Films

"A propos de Nice"

A 25-minute documentary, co-directed in 1930 by Vigo and Boris Kaufman (brother of Dziga Vertov and later cinematographer for Elia Kazan's "On the Waterfront" and Sidney Lumet's "The Pawnbroker").

Aerial views of the Mediterranean city. Rooftops of a patchwork of housing whose assembly dates from the Crusades, their blocks of boxes now becoming a modern grid.

Who lives here? Who are they here? Oh, what a variety! Washerwomen. Cart-pullers. Cart-pushers. Hawkers of newspapers and hawkers of scarves. Bicyclists. And bourgeoisie at their leisure--so many who can afford to repeat themselves at rest. Men asleep under derbies in their

Promenade des Anglais chairs. Men squinting at newspapers over their coffee. And ladies lounging with their ankles crossed. So many swollen ankles crossed! Inside so many stockings! And that lady in couture of successive dresses and pearls, her legs crossed under a presumable umbrella--now she's nude, bare-breasted, on screen, but no less inert in her pose.

"All this repetition." The recreations of affluence on vacation. Sailboats vying on their course. Race-cars digging round their corners. Red carpets rolling out without end before Hotels.

But then--life again! Always life breaks out. Swimmers stroke out from the desolate beach. Someone takes up a tune. Carnival is coming, too. Ah, a season for creativity and vivacity, escape and freedom. The amazing parades! The amazing masks! The papier-mache caricatures big as boulders? More impressive than any Hotel's pristine neo-Roman facade! Where do they come from? How are they made? No matter--people somehow make them and people somehow parade with them, proud and smiling all the while.

The dancers! One can never forget the dancers Vigo and Kaufman bring us in Nice. Kicking their legs and laughing and raising their skirts for the camera beneath them, this coterie of partying ladies. They won't stop! They won't stop their dancing and laughing and raising their skirts! Why should they? They're having fun! Now is their time and today is their stage and the music (unheard in the originally silent 'A propos ...') must be good.



Faces we've seen earlier in the autumnal bourgeois slumber of Nice re-emerge during Carnival. Faces of the old and the working-class receive the greatest attention and tenderness in "A propos ..." They are so singular! Faces misshapen and faces ravaged. Faces whose topography can come only from profound experience and irrepressible humor. That smallish, elderly dumpling/temptress from Grimm, so proud and gay, displaying and yet keeping her secrets, aboard her float.

What a surprise she was! And our view sweeps over the beach and its rocks.

Freedom!

"Taris"

A 9-minute work-for-hire about the French Olympic swimmer.

Jean Taris is a true amateur, a natural athlete, and an uneasy actor outside his element of

water.

He demonstrates his skills. The Crawl, the Backstroke, the Racers' dive ... How efficient, how powerful, how fluid himself, Taris is in water. And the camera that tracks him underwater is sympathetically empowered. Vigo takes delight in the swimmer's grace and power. Taris grows into his most natural and complete self, cutting through water like a whole-body blade or a painter's knife.



The athlete becomes artist.

Freedom! Freedom through passion and effort fulfilled. Freedom through doing the thing one loves.

"Zero de Conduite"

A 44-minute "medium-length" feature that was Vigo's first partnership with actor Jean Daste and producer Jacques Louis-Nounez.

The ripening of rebellion. The realization of skills and gifts through fiction's opening for

personal truths.

A story the artist Jean Vigo has lived to tell. A setting and cast of characters familiar and intimately affecting to the filmmaker, allowing him breakthroughs. A story, in short, close to Vigo's history and heart.

The focus of "Zero ..." is on four boarding-school rebels. Bruel, Caussat, Colin and Tabard, ages about 14 to 10, invent ways OUT from their institutional obedience. The captive students are particularly afflicted by their cartoon-shaped and cartoon-perverse Monitors, Housemaster, and Headmaster. "You realize the enormity of our moral responsibility," says the Headmaster--a bearded midget in a coal-black suit--to his Housemaster. Nicknames for the Housemasters are "Old Tightass" and "Beanpole." They're quick to issue "Zero de conduite"--Zero for conduct--and consequent punishments.

One teacher, Huguet, is the rebels' ally. (Jean Daste). He overlooks their pranks, demonstrates his own walk-on-one's-hands-for-the-sport-of-it independence, and strolls around town as he pleases. Because he leads without force except that of his personality and his own choices, the students eventually come after him.

The quartet plot insurrection for Commemoration Day. Each of these rebels is distinctly individual and imperfect. The guffawing Caussat, the suspicious Bruel, the tentative Colin, the "sissy" Tabard. They have their own little drama of conflicts. When pressed by the bearded midget-high Headmaster to apologize before his "peers", the "sissy" Tabard declares: "I tell you: You are full of shit!"

Thus "the sissy" proves himself.

Rebellion is of course contagious as it gains strength. Food-fights and pillow-fights erupt. Bread flies. Soup flies. Feathers fly. The initial chaos of the boarders' pillow-fight becomes a triumphal procession, as one ring-leader springs from a hand-stand into the chair made by his peers' arms. Amid flying feathers the youth's "mess" is as if they begin a march to seize a city among doves released in flight. The floating exaggerations of Vigo's direction and Kaufman's camera make all the scene more animate and suggestive.



Tabard reads the rebels' manifesto. "War is declared! Down with monitors and punishment! ... Hoist our flag on the school roof! We'll bombard them with rotten old books, dirty tin cans, smelly boots, and all the ammo piled in the attic.... Onward!"

Revolt rains down on the officials' Commemoration. The four DO throw books and boots from their tile rooftop. Those in tophats take cover and then disperse in a rout. The court below belongs to the young and celebrant. Even the Housemaster "Beanpole", the ineffable hypocrite and humorously sneaking thief, smiles at the disarray.

Freedom! And "Zero de ..." became a model for "Breathless" and *Beatles*. It remains a profound, joyous model for much else that thankfully continues into our day.

"L'Atalante"

"L'Atalante" is Vigo's one feature-length movie and his complete masterpiece.



He made it in the Winter of 1933-1934 on the heels of a disastrous reception for "Zero du Conduite." Jean Daste recalled the uproar at the earlier film's premiere before distributors and a select public in Paris: "People couldn't take it. They were horrified--there was shouting and booing."

Pierre Prevert remembered: "People were shouting: 'This is shameful! Scandalous!' "

Vigo's producer, Jacques Louis-Nounez, stuck with him for the next project. "L'Atalante" was to be more conventional and commercial. It was adapted from a scenario by Jean Guinee. The source's story was simply: barge-man and village-girl marry--separate in their marriage's early months as he continues to work along the Seine--and then reunite.

Nounez summarized the source as "this indisputably syrupy script." Vigo responded to his

initial reading: 'What the hell do I do with this? This is Sunday-School fare. There's nothing there.'

Yet more was made. An entirely different, realistic yet magical world was created. First Vigo and co-screenwriter Albert Riera came up with a Mate, Pere Jules, for the barge's Skipper, Jean.

Pere Jules is a grizzled, libidinous salt and sot, one who's banged round the world since the late 19th century, picking up curios in Caracas, Singapore, Papeete, ... an accordion-player as apt to dance or lick his puffy lips as he is to repeat his interrogative sentences I ("The skipper jumped in the water? He jumped in the water?"). Pere Jules attracted the great actor Michel Simon, already a title character for Jean Renoir, to the role.



Further--and this a crucial magic that carries throughout Vigo's cinematic depictions of conventional realities--the movie transforms the newlyweds' marriage into something as fluid and surprising as turns of vibrant weather or vibrant music. The 1930s' world of blackened

bridges and canal-cranes in which the lovers are set is so wholly evoked by Vigo and Kaufman, so alive with sounds and smoke and vapors, that they and the viewer are both immersed and transported within it. Verisimilitude of mundane detail, poetic evocation and emotional truth blend into a whole of its own time and place. Maurice Jaubert's exact and sympathetic score assists in the entry and envelopment.

The newlyweds, Jean and Juliette, are played by Jean Daste and Dita Parlo. Seldom have lovers had such vivacity on screen. Nowhere else is the bristly but milky difficulty of a couple's early love shown with such boldness, nuance and affection. The uncertainty! The pull-and-push of attraction-and-aversion! The resistance to surrender! Juliette's eyes wander. Jean broods over his drink. Juliette leans into another's embrace. Jean jerks them apart. Separated, they long for each other. They act as if demented in their stupor and in their seeking. Juliette drifts along between her staring into display-windows. Jean sticks his head into a bucket of water and dives into the freezing Seine. "The skipper has jumped into the water?" Dots as if a gigantically spackling disease play over each lover as he or she tosses and turns and reaches for a lost embrace, apart in their separate beds. Reunited through Pere Jules' intuition, they poise for a moment and then tumble to the barge's floor.

"L'Atalante" is also rare unto supreme in its depiction of how blue-collar working-men get along. The japing and the joking. The grunts and glances instead of words. The inarticulateness that builds and leads to sudden, dramatic action. The acceptance of violence that can be passed over as an expression of inarticulateness not worthy of violent response. The affection that abides through knowing how the other feels and who (the quality of person) the other is. "Crazy as a loon," Pere Jules says about the skipper, Jean, after (1) a cat thrown by the Kid mate breaks up Pere Jules' and the skipper's game of checkers and (2) Jean dunks his head in the bucket of water.

Following Jean's and Juliette's tumble into each other's arms on the barge's floor, "L'Atalante" concludes with another aerial view, flying over the river's unending and enclosing length.

Freedom!--freedom within universal bounds--freedom again preceded by a kind of love.



About Jean Vigo

The Criterion Collection has a two-DVD edition, titled "The Complete Jean Vigo". The Criterion DVD 1 offers Jean Vigo's four films in restored versions. Its DVD 2 offers a 98-minute documentary that Jacques Rozier directed for French TV in 1964, a dialogue between interviewer Eric Rohmer and Francois Truffaut 1968, and reminiscences of Vigo and the making of "L'Atalante".

Jacques Rozier's documentary is the source of most of the quotes below. Vigo's friends convey humor and fellow-feeling comparable to the qualities they recount about him. They come across as ones with whom one could pleurably talk and drink for hours.

Their memories echo one another. "I loved the mischievous twinkle in his eyes. So full of life." "A great prankster." "A great sense of humor." "He loved having fun." "He and Daste came to

my mother's house dressed as old ladies."

Jean Daste: 'He made jokes all the time. Spending a day with him was both wonderful and grueling, even a few weeks before his death. He was such a vivacious person.'

Friends also speak of a tenderness in Jean Vigo that could be rigorous and bracing. "He was very tender, even if it was a cruel tenderness at times." "He made an extraordinary impression on you of vitality, tenderness, and kindness, but also of cruelty toward whatever he disliked." "He was full of life and tenderness for others. Very tolerant of others' ideas."

Jacques Louis-Nounez, producer of "Zero ..." and "L'Atalante", recalled: "My immediate impression was of a deeply idealistic and extremely sensitive man. He was also a man of great subtlety. He made a remarkable impression on you, something not many people do."

Michel Simon (Pere Jules) recognized a brother iconoclast: "We realized the moment we met that we felt the same way about filmmaking, and that our views were in complete opposition to how 'upstanding citizens' thought cinema should be."

Dita Parlo (Juliette) appears to wistfully treasure associations: "He was charming and had exceptional charisma, a natural quality you just can't explain.... I got the feeling that Vigo was always open to surprises."

Friends speak of how Vigo refused to be morbid during the months he was bed-ridden, attended by his also tubercular wife Lydou, after "L'Atalante".

"His wife would say, "His life is hanging by a thread", and Jean would say, "A cable!" His black humor was extraordinary."

Gilles Margaritis (Camelot, the showman/peddler in "L'Atalante"): "That's what kept him going: his spirit."

Charles Goldblatt: "He had such vitality that he couldn't accept he was dying."

Decades after 1934, critics and fellow artists regarded Vigo with reciprocal wonder and esteem.

James Agee wrote in *The Nation*, 1947, following the dual debut in New York City of "Zero de Conduite" and "L'Atalante": 'Nobody has approached Vigo's adroitness in handling reality, consciousness, and time on film (in *Zero*), or has excelled his vivid communication of the animal emotions, the senses, the inanimate world, and their interplay (in *L'Atalante*); nor have I found, except in the best work of the few masters, a flexibility, richness, and purity of creative passion to equal his in both these films.'

Francois Truffaut said in 1970: "What was Vigo's secret? Probably he lived more intensely than most of us.... Vigo seems to have worked continuously in this state of [intense, fevered, tremendous, sublime] trance, without ever losing his clearheadedness."

Jonathan Rosenbaum reviewed a more restored "L'Atalante" for the *Chicago Reader* in 1991 and gave a more comprehensive perspective: 'But the fact that Vigo still remains one of the key figures in the history of cinema based on a total oeuvre that runs less than three hours gives some hint of how indestructible his talent remains.'

Finally, we look back on the work with gladness that its improbable magic came to be.

Pere Jules explains to the Kid in "L'Atalante" the reason behind one of his fancies: "There are stranger things than playing a record with your finger."

Belief again makes the impossible possible. Don Quixote and Uncle Toby and Marie Laveau would have understood.

Resources

"The Complete Jean Vigo", Criterion Collection two-DVD edition, with revealing articles by Michael Almereyda, Robert Polito, B. Kite, and Luc Sante.

Jean Vigo website, <http://recollectionbooks.com/siml/library/vigo.html>

Maximilian le Cain's essay at <http://www.sensesofcinema.com/2002/great-directors/vigo/>

Review of "L'Atalante" by Jonathan Rosenbaum,
<http://www.jonathanrosenbaum.com/?m=199103>

Julien Temple's feature, "Vigo: Passion for Life."

Jean Vigo by P. E. Salles Gomes