Jean Vigo, L'ATALANTE (1929, 89 min)

Directed by Jean Vigo
Scenario by Jean Guinée
Adaptation by Albert Riéra and Jean Vigo
Dialogue by Albert Riéra and Jean Vigo
Produced by Jacques-Louis Nounez
Original Music by Maurice Jaubert
Cinematography by Jean-Paul Alphen, Louis Bergerand Boris Kaufman
Film Editing by Louis Chavance
Art Direction by Francis Jourdain
Lyrics by Charles Goldblatt
Michel Simon...Le père Jules
Dita Parlo...Juliette
Jean Dasté...Jean
Gilles Margaritis...Le camelot
Louis Lefebvre...Le gosse
Maurice Gilles...Le chef de bureau
Raphaël Diligent...Raspoutine, le batelier
Claude Aveline
René Blech...Le garçon d'honneur
Fanny Clar...La mère de Juliette
Charles Dorat...Le voleur
Paul Grimault
Genya Lozinska
Gen Paul...L'invité qui boite
Jacques Prévert...Extra at Station
Pierre Prévert...Le voyageur pressé
Albert Riera


He is the younger brother of Russian filmmakers Dziga Vertov and Mikhail Kaufman.


JEAN DASTÉ—Jean (b. Jean Georges Gustave Dasté, August 18, 1904, Paris, France—October 15, 1994, Saint-Aubès, a photographer who had married his grandmother a summer he often stayed at Montpellier in the south, with Gabriel Aubès, a photographer who had married his grandmother after his grandfather died of tuberculosis. Vigo was twelve when his own father died: a pale, delicate, and taciturn child, precocious in revolutionary activities, but his changing political allegiances and alliances led him in time to a more moderate socialism. In 1913 he became editor of the satirical daily Le Bonnet Rouge. The paper grew increasingly respectable and Almereyda the starving revolutionary became an elegant devotee of the high life, with automobiles, mistresses and several residences. Various scandals and the machinations of political opponents led to the suppression of Le Bonnet Rouge in 1917. In August of the same year Almereyda was arrested, accused of treasonous dealings with the Germans, and a week later he was strangled to death with his own bootlaces in Fresnes prison. A violent debate followed, but the truth of the charges against Almereyda and the real reason for the assassination were never established.

Except during his infancy, Jean Vigo had seen little of his busy parents. He had spent the later part of his childhood mostly at a villa in Saint-Cloud, cared for by servants. During the summer he often stayed at Montpellier in the south, with Gabriel Aubès, a photographer who had married his grandmother after his grandfather died of tuberculosis. Vigo was twelve when his own father died: a pale, delicate, and taciturn child, precocious in his libertarian political views and his anticlericalism. Aubès, who was fond of the boy, adopted him. It was necessary to conceal the identity of this “son of the traitor,” and as soon as his precarious health allowed, Vigo was enrolled pseudonymously at a school in Nîmes, not far from Montpellier.

In 1918, for the sake of his health, Vigo was moved to another boarding school at Millau, in the mountains. He hated the regimentation he encountered there, and his authoritarian teachers, but grew stronger. He learned to fight to defend himself, earned a reputation as a troublemaker, and made some

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equally rebellious friends, including GeorgesCaussatandJacquesBrue, who, like him, often received “Zéro for conduct.”

His vacations he spent at Montpellier with Gabriel Aubès, who taught him photography (as he had taught Vigo’s father). Aubès was impressed by the soundness of Vigo’s eye and, having a poor opinion of photography as a career, suggested the boy might consider cinematography.

Vigo’s mother was living in Paris, and in 1922, at her request, Aubès moved Vigo to a boarding school at Chartres so that he could be nearer to her. Their relationship was never a close one and deteriorated rather than improved. At Chartres, however, Vigo became a conscientious student. He showed talent in philosophy and French composition and distinguished himself as an athlete. By the time he left school in 1925, he had committed himself to work for the rehabilitation of his father’s reputation as a revolutionary hero, and had decided on a career in the cinema.

About this time Vigo became ill, and in 1926 it was discovered that he had tuberculosis. He was sent to a sanatorium at Font-Romeu, near the Spanish border, and made a partial recovery but had to return there the following year. It was at the sanatorium that he met Elisabeth Lozinska—“Lydou”—daughter of a Polish industrialist who became his fiancée. They left Font-Romeu together in 1928, apparently cured but weak and penniless.

With help from his father’s old friends and others (including Claude Autant-Lara and Germain Dulac), Vigo found a job with the production company Franco-Film and went to its new studio at Nice. He and Lydou were married in 1929. Vigo had his first assignment that year as assistant cameraman on a movie called Vénus, but no further work (or income) followed. Then a gift of 100,000 francs from Lydou’s father enabled him to buy a second-hand Debrie camera and to consider making a film of his own. He decided on a documentary about Nice, the gambling and resort town where he lived, largely because he could tackle such a film without expensive studio work.

Vigo was planning this film in the fall of 1929 when he met the young cinematographer Boris Kaufman, younger brother of Mikhail and Denis Kaufman (the famous pioneer of the “cinema-eye” who called himself Dziga Vertov). They became friends and Kaufman joined Vigo in Nice to work as his cameraman on À Propos de Nice. By March 1929 they had shot 13,000 feet of film, though some of it was very poor quality. This was edited down to about 2,600 feet and Vigo’s first movie had its premiere at the Vieux-Columbier in Paris in May 1930.

À Propos de Nice opens with fireworks and superimposed aerial views of the city, dissolving to a roulette wheel. We see dolls arriving on a toy train (a sequence substituted for the original actuality footage which was too poor to use). The doll “tourists” are promptly raked in by a croupier. After more aerial shots we move on to the preparations for the carnival and views of the Promenade des Anglais, peopled with old and ugly rich women. A younger woman at a terrace café repeatedly changes her clothes, appearing finally naked except for her shoes. These opulent scenes are contrasted with the patient misery and hard work of the old city—washerwomen, sewers, garbage, a fingerless child. The carnival follows: giant masks and puppets, military pomp, women frenziedly dancing, intercut with shots of trampled flowers and cemetery effigies. The dancers move more slowly; a phallic factory chimney becomes a revolutionary cannon.

Introducing À Propos de Nice at its second screening before the Groupement des Spectateurs a’Avant-Garde, Vigo said that “in this film by showing certain basic aspects of a city, a way of life is put on trial. In fact, as soon as the atmosphere of Nice and the kind of life lived there—and not only there, unfortunately—has been suggested, the film develops into a commercialized view of the vulgar pleasures that come under the sign of the grotesque, and the flesh, and death. These pleasures are the last gasps of a society so lost in its escapisms that it sickens you and makes you sympathetic to a revolutionary solution.”

Vigo had subtitled his film “point de vue documenté”—“a documented point of view”—and in his speech he made it clear that he had in mind something close to Dziga Vertov’s “cinema-eye.” He said: “I don’t know whether the result will be a work of art, but I am sure it will be cinema. Cinema in the sense that no other art, no science can take its place....Social documentary is distinct from the ordinary short film and the weekly newsreel, in that its creator will establish his own point of view....It will dot its own i’s. If it doesn’t involve an artist it involves at least a man. Conscious acting cannot be tolerated; the character must be surprised by the camera.... We shall achieve our aim if we can reveal the hidden reason for a gesture, if we can extract from an ordinary person, quite by chance, his interior beauty—or a caricature of him—if we can reveal his complete inner spirit through his purely external manifestations.”

In the same speech Vigo praised Buñuel and Dalí’s Un Chien Andalou as an example of the proper approach, and this may account for the tendency to place him with the surrealists, where he does not really belong. There is evidence in the film itself that he has also learned from Von Stroheim, René Clair, and perhaps the German avant-gardists Richter and Kittmann. As well as from Boris Kaufman and his famous brother. However, Vigo’s biographer, P.E. Sally Gomes, suggests that in his case “one senses a sort of joyous personal rediscovery of the cinema’s means, rather than any influence from his predecessors.”

In fact, À Propos de Nice has few of the slick and gratuitous effects favored by the contemporary avant-garde, and is indeed often rough and naive. As Gomes says. “When Vigo
tries to use facile techniques...he fails. When the beauty or ugliness of a palm tree or of a woman dazzles us, it springs from the discovery-creation of Vigo’s eye (later to become almost infallible).” Carl Vincent agreed, writing that the film “mingles a romantic evocation...with ferocious social caricature. Sarcasm exists side by side with poetry, and human absurdity with a tender love of light. His sharp, brutal vision reveals an acute sense of cinema.” Such encomiums came later, however; in 1930 the picture’s two Paris showings produced only a handful of reviews which, though favorable and encouraging, did nothing to arouse the interest of the commercial distributors.

A large part of Vigo’s capital had sunk with À Propos de Nice, and he had been counting on a sale to finance a planned documentary about Lourdes. He put this project aside and began another long-considered idea—the establishment of a film club in Nice that would specialize in works banned or mutilated by the censors. His plans were delayed by a decline in his health, but Les Amis du Cinéma opened in September 1930 with Lydou as treasurer and Vigo’s old school friend Georges Caussat as secretary and errand boy. The first program was screened in a disused chapel, with an inaugural speech by Germaine Dulac. Later shows were given in suburban movie theatres on Sunday evenings, and the club slowly built up a loyal following, though at first it broke even at best.

Meanwhile, Vigo was trying to find a job as assistant to an established director. He reputation within the industry was enhanced when the famous Ursuline theatre in Paris programmed À Propos de Nice in October 1930, and at the end of the year he was called to Paris to direct a short film for Gaumont. The company was initiating a series of documentaries about sport, and Vigo was assigned to make a film about swimming, centering on the French champion Jean Taris. Much of the picture was shot at the Automobile Club de France, where the swimming pool had glass portholes through which underwater shots could be taken. Taris is devoted mainly to the champion’s demonstration and explanation of the Australian crawl, but there are many whimsically inventive touches, as when we see Taris apparently walking on the water, or the sequence in which a woman practices swimming strokes in her own house, lying across a stool—with a lifeguard in attendance. Vigo himself thought very little of the movie, except for some of the underwater shots—a resource he remembered when he came to make L’Atalante.

Though many admired Taris far more than Vigo did, the assignment brought in very little money. Vigo was soon penniless and in debt, but unable to accept offers of work that involved leaving Lydou. She was by now pregnant and very weak and ill. He decided to sell his old Debric camera—an appalling sacrifice for him—but was cheated, receiving only enough to pay off his most urgent debts. After their daughter was born in June 1931 they were in desperate straits until a little more money arrived from Lydou’s father. Even then they were sunk in a depressive lethargy that made it difficult for Vigo to concentrate. After a rest at a sanatorium, Vigo began work on a second sports documentary for Gaumont, this time about tennis. It was to have been a much more poetic piece than its predecessor, but in the end the script was rejected. The Vigos were saved once more by Lydou’s father, who visited them in Nice, and to some extent by the growing success of Les Amis du Cinéma.

Ignoring the advice of their doctors, Vigo and Lydou went to Paris. Lydou’s health failed again, however, and she had to be sent to the mountains for another ‘cure.’ Vigo explored a whole series of film projects, but all of them fell through. His spirits were at their lowest when in July he met Jacques-Louis Nouniez, a rich and enlightened businessman who had developed an interest in the movie business. Nouniez liked Vigo and they discussed a variety of possibilities, eventually deciding that Vigo would make a medium-length film based on his own bitter experience of boarding school.

Zéro de conduite (Zéro for Conduct) was filmed in December 1932 and January 1933 on a modest budget of 200,000 francs and with a cast made up almost entirely on nonprofessionals—friends, friends of friends, boys spotted on the streets of Paris. Vigo served as scenarist, director, editor, and producer. He had Boris Kaufman as his cinematographer, Maurice Jaubert as composer, and his friend Henri Storck as production manager and general assistant. The four principal child characters are Caussat and Bruel, named for and based on Vigo’s real-life friends at Millau; Colin, based on someone he had known at Chartres; and the frail Tabard, who more or less represents Vigo himself.

The film’s adult characters are savage caricatures of the teachers he hated at school. Vigo imbues these petty tyrants with some of the mannerisms of the guards at La Petite Roquette, the children’s prison where his father had once been incarcerated, and Gomes says that “he had come to identify one childhood completely with the other. This resulted in Vigo’s extreme sensitivity to anything concerning a child’s vulnerability in the adult world.” Elsewhere, Gomes writes that “respect for children and for their freedom” was very close to Vigo’s heart and that “to him...children are symbolic of mankind, and especially the weak and the wretched.”

The movie opens in the train taking Caussat and Bruel back to school after the summer vacation—an inventive and charming scene in which the boys show off the (often reprehensible) skills they have acquired during the holidays. They alight at a small provincial station and we meet the new boy, Tabard, and supervisor Parrain, known as Dry-Fart. Later, in Dry-Fart’s dormitory after lights-out, the supervisor punishes Caussat, Bruel, and Colin—inventive troublemakers—by ordering them to stand for two hours by his bed while he sleeps. Colin develops a stomachache, and all three beg Dry-Fart to let him go to the lavatory. They repeat the information about Colin’s stomachache in a strange kind of litany—a form of dialogue that is used a good deal in this film and also by Père Jules in L’Atalante. Vigo apparently devised the technique to make his dialogue understood in spite of the poor diction of his actors and the inadequacy of his sound equipment, but it has an oddly haunting, poetic quality of its own that is very much a part of the unique flavor of both films.

In the dormitory scene, at any rate, the boys’ variations on the theme of Colin’s sufferings have the desired effect—Colin departs to the lavatory and the ailing Dry-Fart abandons the punishment. “These scenes in the dormitory,” Gomes wrote, “show Vigo in a moment of complete control over the cinema,
which bends obediently to his desire to recreate the sense of delicious intimacy he had dredged out of his childhood memories. Here, the editing, the camera movements, the composition and inner rhythm of the images, the dialogue, the lighting is all fused into a harmonious whole which was probably one of Vigo’s most ambitious dreams.”

Next day, Caussat, Bruel, and Colin are plotting something with a map. When one of the supervisors approaches, the new young teacher Huguet covers their retreat, and later delights the children by imitating Charlie Chaplin in a scene which becomes a “respectful parody” of one in Easy Street. The supervisor known as Gas-Snout, by contrast, searches the boys’ desks, hoping for pornography. Caussat responds by pouring glue where Gas-Snout might be expected to encounter it. Later, in the study hall, Huguet further demonstrates his goodwill by standing on his hands and drawing a caricature of Gas-Snout.

Huguet then leads the boys on an excursion into the town, dreamily wandering on without them but picking up the whole party again later without ever realizing that they had gone, and then leading them all in pursuit of a young woman who has taken his fancy. This scene is intercut with a meeting between Gas-Snout and the school principal—a heavily bearded dwarf—which establishes their (misplaced) anxiety about the growing friendship between Bruel and Tabard. We also learn that there is to be a school fête, at which no bad behavior can be tolerated, before proceeding to a scene in which the dwarf principal gives Tabard an incoherent and humiliating lecture on the supposed dangers of his relationship with Bruel.

In the scenes that follow, the dreadfulness of the school is further emphasized. The cook complains that she is has to dish out yet another meal of beans, but unaware of her concern, the boys blame her for their miserable diet (to the bitter shame of Colin, who is her son). Then Tabard becomes the subject of the tentative sexual advances of the most revolting of all the teachers, and responds by saying “shit on you”—directly quoting a famous headline once addressed by Miguel Almereyda to the governments of the world. Brought before the entire staff and “given another chance,” Tabard repeats the phrase, this time addressing it to the principal himself.

The battle lines are drawn, and Tabard, returning to his companions in misery, calls fo

singing up the roof into the freedom of the sky.

As Gomes says, “in addition to being a real school, with its source in Vigo’s childhood memories, the school in Zéro de conduite is also society as seen by the adult Vigo. The division into children and adults inside the school corresponds to the division of society into classes outside: a strong minority imposing its will on a weak majority.” Vigo was still a novice working with a small budget, and he became seriously ill during the making of the film. The sound quality is bad and there are a number of loose ends and bewildering inconsistencies in the narrative, as well as clumsy transitions and much poor acting. In his best scenes, nevertheless, Vigo’s instinctive mastery of camera movements, his willingness to sacrifice clarity to style, and Jaubert’s splendid score combine to achieve effects of miraculous freshness and beauty.

Zéro de conduite was first shown at a Paris movie theatre in April 1938. Many members of the audience were shocked, and there was much hissing, drowned out by the applause of Jacques Prévert and his friends. The critics were equally divided, some dismissing the film as “simply ridiculous” or “lavatory flushings,” others praising it as the “fiery, daring” work of “a Céline of the cinema.” A Catholic journal described it as a scatological work by “an obsessed maniac,” and soon afterwards the film was banned. It is widely believed that the banning was ordered by the Ministry of the Interior—not on moral grounds but for fear that it might “create disturbances and hinder the maintenance of order.” Apart from film club showings, it was not until 1945 that Zéro de conduite was seen again in France. At that time some reviewers were disappointed, tending to attribute the movie’s inadequacies to (nonexistent) cuts by the censors. Others, however, recognized it as an imperfect but “magnificent poem of childhood,” and its reputation has continued to grow. Truffaut refers to this film in Les Quatres Cent Coups (1959), and it was the acknowledged inspiration of Lindsay Anderson’s If (1968).

Even before this film was finished, Vigo and Nounez were discussing a full-length feature about prison life, to be based on the unjust imprisonment of the anarchist Eugène Dieudonné, whom Almereyda had defended. The banning of Zéro de conduite alarmed Nounez, but he wanted to give Vigo another chance, and looked for a thoroughly innocuous script. He found it in an original scenario by Jean Guinée (R. de Guichen). As adapted by Vigo, it tells the story of Jean, the young captain of a motorized barge called L’Atalante, which plies the inlands waterways of France. Passing through Normandy, Jean marries a country girl named Juliette and brings her aboard. They live on the barge with the mate, an old mariner named Père Jules, a cabin boy, and Jules’ army of stray cats. A charming young peddler tempts Juliette away from the monotony of barge life to visit the wonders of Paris. In a fit of rage, Jean sails without her; Juliette is robbed and has to take a job; both are miserable. When the barge returns to the area, Père Jules goes in search of Juliette, finds her by a miracle, and reunites her and Jean.
The production plan for *L’Atalante* was the same as for *Zéro de conduite*. Nounez was to serve as producer, while Gaumont supplied studio facilities and arranged distribution. Boris Kaufman was cinematographer and Jaubert wrote the music and songs. In addition, Almeryda’s old friend Francis Jourdain was taken on as art director. This time, with a budget of almost a million francs, Vigo could afford some well-known actors: Michel Simon was cast as Père Jules, Dita Parlo as Juliette. Jean Dasté, who had played Haguet, was Jean. The film was shot partly at Gaumont studios, where a replica of the interior of the barge had been built, partly on location.

“As in *Zéro de conduite*,” writes Gavin Millar, “Vigo’s acute sense of movement is what clearly fills in the banal outlines of the story, as much as the richness of invention he brings to the characters. The boat moves all the time upon the water, and on the boat’s deck the people move too, back and forth, with or against the current, with or against the direction in which they are travelling. The sense that Juliette is exchanging a fixed landlocked life for hazardous movement is announced in one extraordinary shot from the wedding scene. Taken from low down on the bank, it frames only empty sky when suddenly Juliette sweeps across it, clinging to the end of a boom which has swung her from the shore to the deck. The sexual symbolism is overt but not coarse, and it is deepened by what follows.”

Others could have written with equal enthusiasm of the scene where Père Jules boasts to Juliette about his colorful and somewhat shady past as a sailor, shows his skill with her sewing machine, models the dress she is making, and demonstrates an international medley of dances. According to Gomes, “it seems that Vigo’s direction of Michel Simon was as amazing as the scene itself. Explaining all his intentions to Simon, acting out all the movements himself, and speaking all the lines, the directors made the actor run through the scene several times until it was perfect. Then the sequence was broken down into several shots and filmed. The result was sensational. It is perhaps the high point of their careers for both Vigo as a director and Michel Simon as an actor. Or rather, it is the most spectacular *tour de force* in their respective careers, and the sequence in *L’Atalante* where the continuity and rhythm achieve perfection.”

Most critics agree that *L’Atalante* lacks overall unity, being an assemblage rather of brilliant scenes. Two of these occur during the unhappy period when the two lovers are parted. Juliette has told Jean that if you dunk your head in a bowl of water and open your eyes, you will see your beloved. Delighted by this game, Jean plays it repeatedly. When he believes that he has lost her, he plays it more seriously, diving into the canal and swimming (like Taris) underwater, his face distorted by despair, until he is magically rewarded by a vision of Juliette in her wedding dress.

“There is magic on board too,” writes Gavin Millar. “Père Jules has miraculously succeeded in getting an old phonograph to work again and it plays a haunting waltz. There then occurs a moment of inexplicable beauty which is one of the cinema’s great triumphs. Père Jules and the [cabin] boy decide that playing the phonograph to *le patron* might cheer him up. He has just climbed from the water where he has been searching for the image of Juliette. Proudly the boy, bearing the phonograph and its huge horn, like some precious gift, leads Jean and Père Jules along the whole length of the boat to the prow, where the camera awaits them. The waltz continues to sing out across the water. A long vista down the shining canal shows trees reflected on the surface and, in the distance, a factory chimney silently smoking. Jean stares, rapt, at the rebirth of the phonograph. As the waltz plays on, a remote and secret smile begins to steal across his face. There seems no question that he will find Juliette again.”

Filming for four months in bitter cold weather, Vigo became ill again. Exhausted and feverish, he went on working until the actual shooting was virtually completed and a first rough cut had been made. At that point he took a vacation, but his condition did not improve and he was confined to bed. The final cut was made by the editor, Louis Chavance, and the film was previewed in April 1934. The distributors in the audience were not impressed and the Gaumont officials demanded changes.

A few reviews appeared at that point. Jean Pascal said the film was “a confused, incoherent, wilfully absurd, long, dull, commercially worthless film,” in spite of its “undeniable qualities.” The art historian Elie Faure was much more appreciative—he was reminded of the painter Corot as he watched “these landscapes of water, trees, little houses on peaceful banks, and boats slowly threading their way ahead of a silver wake: the same impeccable composition, the same power invisibly present because so much a master of itself, the same balance of all the elements of a visual drama in the tender embrace of complete acceptance, the same pearly, golden veil translucently masking the sharpness of composition and the firmness of line. And perhaps it was this simplicity of composition, entirely devoid of flourishes or decoration—classical, in a word—that made me appreciate all the more the pleasure of savoring the very spirit of Vigo’s work, almost violent, certainly tormented, feverish, brimming with ideas and truculent fantasy, with virulent, even demonic, and yet constantly human romanticism.”

Pascal’s review apparently carried more weight than Faure’s or the other favorable notices, and by now Vigo was too ill to defend his film. Gaumont took over. They cut the picture mercilessly and retitled it *Le Chaland qui passe* (*The Passing Barge*). This was the title of an extremely popular song of the time by C.A. Bixio. Part of Jaubert’s magnificent score was lopped out and replaced by Bixio’s song. The result was a commercial failure, the film being so mutilated as to be incoherent. Most of the critics were as hostile as the general public. The movie was called amateurish, self-indulgent, and morbid, though even in this version a few recognized its mastery. Shortly after *Le Chaland qui passe* ended its first Paris run, on
October 5, 1934, Jean Vigo died. He was twenty-nine and had been making films for five years.

Throughout the seven months of his final illness, Vigo’s spirits never wavered—he joked, spoke of the future, described the streptococcus that afflicted him as “a little fat man in a top hat.” Lydou nursed him and was holding him in her arms when he died. Outside, a street musician was playing “Le Chaland qui passe.” When Lydou understood what had happened, she had to be restrained from jumping out of the window. Vigo was buried in Paris at the Bagneux cemetery, in a grave next to that of Miguel Almereyda. Lydou joined him there in April 1939.

Various attempts have been made by film clubs and historians (including Gomes) to reconstitute the original version of L’Atalante and, though Gomes will go no further than to say that “some progress has been made, and more is always possible,” the film is almost universally recognized to be Vigo’s masterpiece. During the late 1930s, Vigo was almost forgotten, though an at least partially restored version of L’Atalante was shown in Paris in 1940 and attracted some attention. A revival of interest began in France in 1945 and rapidly spread. In Britain, Roger Manvell wrote that Vigo was “perhaps the most original and most promising of the greater French directors.” In the United States, James Agee called him “one of the very few real originals who have ever worked in film.” The Italian director Luigi Comencini showed L’Atalante to his friends, and the opinion was that they were confronted with a masterpiece capable of shaking up any notions about cinema the average spectator might have.” And Glauco Viazza said that “the handful of films that he had made at the time of his death placed him in a position of eminence not only in French cinema along with René Clair and Jean Renoir, but in all contemporary art....The discovery of a poet is not something that happens every day.”

Jean Vigo’s L’Atalante (1934) tells such [to be able to live happily ever after you have to be able to live at all] a love story. It is on many lists of the greatest films, a distinction that obscures how down-to-earth it is, how direct in its story of a new marriage off to a shaky start. The French director François Truffaut fell in love with it one Saturday afternoon in 1946, when he was fourteen: “When I entered the theater, I didn’t even know who Jean Vigo was. I was immediately overwhelmed with wild enthusiasm for his work.” Hearing a critic attack another movie

...
because “it smells like dirty feet,” Truffaut considered that a compliment, and thought of Vigo and the pungent life he evoked on a French canal barge.

Truffaut saw Vigo’s life work that afternoon in Paris; it added up to less than two hundred minutes. Legends swirled around the director, who died of tuberculosis at twenty-nine, just a few months after the premiere. Already famous for Zéro for Conduct (1933), he was so ill when he made L’Atalante, during an unusually cold winter, that sometimes he directed from a stretcher: “It is easy to conclude that he was in a kind of fever while he worked,” Truffaut wrote, and when a friend advised him to guard his health, Vigo replied that “he lacked the time and had to give everything right away.”

The film premiered to polite responses in Paris and at the Venice Film Festival. London critics were its first great champions. It was seen for years in a butchered version, chopped down from eighty-nine to sixty-five minutes, and only in 1990 was it restored. That version is now available on video.

In outline, L’Atalante seems a simple story. It begins with the marriage of a young barge captain named Jean and a village girl named Juliette, “who always had to do things differently.” There is no wedding feast. Still wearing her wedding dress, she holds to a boom and swings on board the barge, to begin life not only with her husband but also with his massive and shambling friend Jules, a sailor who has been to Yokohama and Singapore but now plies the waterways between Le Havre and Paris. The barge is further crowded by a cabin boy and at least six cats.

Juliette makes the best of her situation. When a cat has kittens in her bed, she strips the sheets over the objections of Jules, who sees no need for such fastidiousness. One night on the radio she hears the magic words “This is Paris!” She has never been to Paris, or anywhere else. When the barge arrives in the city, Jean tells her to get dressed up for a night on the town—but Jules goes in search of fleshy pleasures, and they must stay with the boat. Eventually she slips off alone to the city, planning to be back before she is missed. Jean finds her gone and angrily swears the journey. The barge is missing when she returns...

These details fail to evoke the enchanted quality of L’Atalante, which is not about what lovers do, but about how they feel—how tender they are, how sensitive and foolish. The film is shot in a poetic way that sees them as figures in a myth; Atalante is not only the barge name but the name of a Greek goddess who, says Brewer’s Dictionary, “being very swift of foot, refused to marry unless the suitor should first defeat her in a race.” Can it be that Jean and Juliette were racing away from one another, and he did a better job of it?

The movie’s effect comes through the way it evokes specific moments in the life of the young couple, rather than tying them to a plot. ...

Their separation is painful for them both. Her early joy turns into fear; her purse is stolen, hawk-faced men make lewd suggestions, the city is no longer magical. Jean holds his head in anguish. And then Vigo releases all the pent-up loneliness with a bold gesture. Earlier, Juliette told Jean that when she put her face into water and opened her eyes, she could see her true love: “I saw you before I met you.” Now in desperation Jean plunges into the icy canal, and Juliette’s smiling presence swims up before him. “This must count as one of the most dazzling images of a loving woman in the history of cinema,” wrote the novelist Marina Warner. After Jean climbs back on the boat, the old man and the cabin boy try to cheer him with music, but he wanders off and, in a heartbreaking shot, embraces a block of ice as if it is his love.

Juliette is played by Dita Parlo, a legendary Berlin-born actress who made twenty-five films between 1928 and 1940, and one more each in 1950 and 1965. Her other famous role was as the farm woman who takes in the escaped convicts in Renoir’s Grand Illusion (1937). Madonna’s book Sex was inspired, she said, by Parlo in L’Atalante. Garboesque in the pale refinement of her face, she seems too elegant to be an untraveled country girl, but that quality works when it is set beside Michel Simon’s crusty Jules.

Simon, not yet forty when the film was made, looks sixty. Weathered by salt air and pickled in seaport saloons. Inspired by the sight of the two young lovers kissing, he has his best moment when he demonstrates how he can wrestle too—and grapples with himself on the deck, while Vigo dissolves between exposures to make him into two lonely ghosts fighting for the possession of the same body.

Jean Dasté, who plays Jean, conveys the helplessness of a young man who knows he is in love but knows nothing about the practical side of a relationship—how he must see Juliette’s needs and intuit what wounds her. ...

The movie’s look is softly poetic. Vigo and his cinematographer, Boris Kaufman, who years later labored for Otto Preminger in Hollywood, shot mostly on location, capturing the cold winter canal landscapes, the smoky bistros, the cramped living quarters, the magnificence of the muscular old barge as water pours into locks to lift it up to Paris. This is the kind of movie you return to like a favorite song, remembering where you were when you first saw it, and how it made you feel, and how its feet smelled.

from Cinema 1 The Movement-Image, Gilles Deleuze, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1986:
“Towards another state of perception: liquid perception”

Jean Renoir’s predilection for running water has often been discussed. But this predilection was common to all the members of the French school (although Renoir gave it a very special dimension). In the French school, it is sometimes the river and its course, sometimes the canal, its locks and its barges, sometimes the sea, its frontier with the land, the port, the lighthouse as luminous quality....
These are the two opposed systems: the perceptions, affections and actions of men on land, and the perceptions, affections and actions of men of the sea... But it is Vigo’s *L’Atalante* which was to bring this opposition to its peak. As J. P. Bamberger shows, on land there is not the same régime of movement, not the same ‘grace’ as on the sea, in the sea: terrestrial movement is in perpetual disequilibrium because the motive force is always outside the centre of gravity (the newsvendor’s bicycle); while aquatic movement is like the displacement of the centre of gravity, according to a simple objective law, straight or elliptical. (This accounts for the apparent clumsiness of this movement when it takes place on land or even on the barge—a crab-like walk, snaking or twirling—but this is like an other-worldly grace.) And on land, movement always takes place from one point to another, always between two points, while on water the point is always between two movements: it thus marks the conversion or counter-dive, which is found in the movement of the camera itself (the final fall of the entwined bodies of the two lovers has no end, but is converted into an ascending movement). Nor is it the same régime of passion, of affection: in one case dominated by commodities, the fetish, the article of clothing, the partial object and the memory-object: in the other case, attaining what has been called the ‘objectivity’ of bodies, which may reveal hideousness under clothing, but also grace under a coarse appearance. If there is any reconciliation between land and sea, this takes place in father Jules, but only because he knows how to impose spontaneously on the land the same law as the sea: his cabin contains the most extraordinary fetishes, partial objects, souvenirs and scrap; however, he does not make them a memory, but a pure mosaic of images, a record which works again. Finally a clairvoyant function is developed in water, in opposition to earthly vision: it is in the water that the loved one who has disappeared is revealed, as if perception enjoyed a scope and interaction, a truth which it did not have on land.

**Luc Sante: *L’Atalante: Canal Music (Criterion Notes)***

A man and a woman are married in a small town. The wedding procession follows them to a canal barge, of which he is the master. His crew, an old salt and a young boy, await them there. The couple adjust to married life uneasily: she doesn’t feel quite at home on the barge; he is jealous of anyone she talks to and anything she does that doesn’t involve him. There are a few terrible scenes. Then they are separated—partly by accident and partly by design. They both spend a difficult interval, and then they are reunited.

That is all that really happens in *L’Atalante* (1934), and yet the movie can feel as though it contains the whole world. The last film completed by Jean Vigo before his death from tuberculosis at twenty-nine—he died soon after the movie ended its first, commercially bleak run—*L’Atalante* took decades to receive its due. Vigo had made only one other feature, *Zéro de conduite* (1933), which was banned until 1945 for outrages to the educational system. As a consequence, his producer, the independent Jacques-Louis Nounez, while agreeing to finance another picture, insisted on selecting the property himself. He chose a banal story by one Jean Guinée that concerned the romance and hardship of the lives of barge dwellers. It was a topic in vogue just then, inspiring a number of popular songs, including Damia’s great “Chanson de halage” and Lys Gauty’s “Le chaland qui passe”—the latter of which the distributors insisted on wedging into Vigo’s picture, which they retitled after the song, although neither of those intrusions particularly enhanced its prospects.

Those songs came out of the réaliste surge that dominated French popular music in the 1930s—tough, unsparing narratives of crime, prostitution, life on the street and the waterfront. The decade, scarred at birth by the worldwide crash, was a hard time filled with labor strife, unemployment, political clashes, and fear of what was going on in Germany, Italy, and Spain. Popular culture in general tended toward the acerbic and fatalistic when it was not numbly saccharine. Movies, too, could be escapist and bland, but those that were not were stunning, an extraordinary run of pictures often retroactively herded under the banner of “poetic realism,” from René Clair’s *Under the Roofs of Paris* (1930) to Marcel Carné’s *Le jour se lève* (1939). Those movies combined a romantic outlook and a propensity for dreamy musing with an unblinking view of the torn social fabric. They reflected the twinned influences of surrealism and the Soviet modernist filmmakers in their coupling of transcendence and grit—their heady, plunging views and their insistent inclusiveness. They were made by people who truly inhabited their time, who could not separate public from private or subjective from objective.

*L’Atalante* stands right in the middle of this run. Its blending of the real and the fantastic is so silken it can almost pass unnoticed, which is what led early viewers to undervalue it. James Agee, who was agog at the daring of *Zéro de conduite* when both movies were released in the United States in 1947, could term *L’Atalante* merely “spasmodically great poetry applied to pretty good prose,” which in contrast to the freedom of the earlier picture “suggests the strugglings of a maniac in a straitjacket.” Viewers looking for shock could easily miss the radical restraint of *L’Atalante*, which in any other filmmaker’s oeuvre could have come a decade after *Zéro de conduite* rather than a year. When, for example, the couple are apart and the image cuts between them lying in their separate beds, the erotic charge is potent if ghostly—as if the film were a phenakistoscope, the early optical device that relies on persistence of vision to overlay two images, the illusion that they are in the same bed is both there and not. The outrageously lyrical sight of the bride swinging on the barge’s boom in her nuptial gown is handled with such matter-of-fact brevity that it almost slips by as another item in the boarding process. Meanwhile, all of Vigo’s anarchist dynamite is off-loaded onto Père Jules, the old mate who is at once the movie’s conscience...
and its comic relief.

Michel Simon, who plays Père Jules, had two years earlier appeared as the title character in Jean Renoir’s Boudu Saved from Drowning (1932), and his role here echoes that of the nature-boy tramp there, just more articulate and with a sailor’s life of place-names. He has experienced every sort of corruption of the flesh in his travels and emerged from it all wise, even parental, but lawless as an infant. Simon was only thirty-nine when L’Atalante was made, but he’d been playing much older men since at least Renoir’s La chiennne (1931). With Simon, you begin to think that only his good nature and his political convictions prevented him from walking off with every picture he appeared in; while the other actors act, here as everywhere else, Simon gives the impression that he alone is free to play. The other principals in L’Atalante are no slouches, though. Dita Parlo, as Juliette, the bride, was making her first movie in France after six years of popular success in her native Germany. Jean Dasté, as Jean, the barge master, who played Huguet the master in Zéro de conduite, had made only two movies before, that one and Boudu Saved from Drowning, but he was to go on to a long and distinguished career, including appearances in multiple films by Renoir, Resnais, and Truffaut. Both actors here are exquisitely tuned to the correct degree of intensity.

The cameraman was Boris Kaufman, Dziga Vertov’s brother, who shot all of Vigo’s pictures (save the short Taris), and you can see the Russian avant-garde eye of the time in every outdoor shot, constantly finding angles that throw the viewer into a new rapport with the setting but without a trace of gimmickry. The documentary aspect of the shooting isn’t overstated, but the picture clearly shows its kinship with movies by Joris Ivens and others covering labor and landscape between the wars. The surrealist aesthetic is pervasive—Père Jules’s curio collection could have been borrowed in toto from André Breton’s apartment—and its most overt manifestation, the underwater photography inspired by Vigo’s experience on Taris (1931, in which the French swimming champion of the title looks like the subject of a painting by Valentine Hugo, floating among the stars), is a beautifully realized conceit, at once mystically dreamlike and fabulously glamorous. But Vigo isn’t Man Ray—he pulls away from the lip of Hollywood to throw you back into the real world of weather and labor and money worries. Throughout, the interplay between the characters is even-handed; nothing is ever dramatized for the sake of drama. The realistic tone of the squabbling seems almost Russian, too, reminiscent of Soviet character pictures like Abram Room’s Bed and Sofa (1927).

Because of censorship, marketing and distribution problems, Vigo’s early death, and other factors, his movies did not get the recognition they deserved until they were rereleased after the war, which was also when they were widely shown abroad. Their reputation was made in France by the young film fanatics of the ciné-clubs, a disproportionate number of whom would go on to become important critics and, eventually, filmmakers—virtually all of the New Wave directors traveled this route, and many of them paid tributes direct and metaphorical to Vigo in their pictures (most obviously, Truffaut in The 400 Blows). Another major heir of L’Atalante is the photography of Robert Doisneau, especially his first book, La banlieue de Paris (1949, with text by Blaise Cendrars). Part of the reason Doisneau’s pictures can feel as though they were taken just outside the frame of this movie is simply geographical. His territory included the location where much of L’Atalante was shot, Conflans-Sainte-Honorine, a country village in the 1930s but after the war absorbed into the suburban fringe of Paris, then half-built and raw. The wedding procession at the start of the film winds through a tile-roofed village that—it or its siblings—remains at the center of Doisneau’s world. But then you see in his pictures that the mix of oneric and workaday that rules the movie was not simply an artist’s whim. Doisneau’s own young marrieds, living it up at the shooting gallery in their wedding finery or having their first drink at the local alongside grime-encrusted laborers, aren’t making a point—they are simply living their lives, snatching pleasure and fully inhabiting it within the lath-and-stucco frame of the daily. Along with the protagonists of L’Atalante, they are part of the last generation in the West to experience life directly and not as consumers.

L’Atalante does contain the world—all of life in miniature: work and love and play, dream and lust and adventure, rapture and heartbreak and reconciliation, and birth and death by implication. You could think of it as made by a filmmaker who knew he was about to die and intended it as a last will and testament, stuffed to the corners with his love for the world. Then again, he left no fewer than twenty-six uncompleted film projects, seven of them his own scripts (as well as unproduced screenplays by Cendrars, Jules Supervielle, Jean Painlevé, and Henri-Pierre Roché, among others), as if he were intending to live to be ninety. Either way, L’Atalante combines the headiness of an ascent with the accrued wisdom of a terminal statement, a conjunction seldom found in movies, or anywhere.

Michael Almereyda: Jean Vigo

Let there be no trouble, no pranks . . . Do you realize the enormity of our moral responsibility? —Headmaster in Zéro de conduite

There is nothing in the history of movies that mirrors or matches the achievement of Jean Vigo. His four films can be watched in an afternoon—total running time: just under three hours. Each film is unique, separate from the others, but together they constitute a sustained attack on complacency and a supreme expression of freedom—freedom of feeling and freedom of seeing, experienced simultaneously.

Vigo’s work is rough-edged, mercurial, and reliably contains a political undercurrent, a barbed awareness of society as an imbalanced and divided system, unjust and absurd. The films were made on small budgets, produced at that threshold in movie history when the use of sound was definably, often awkwardly, new. They can have a rushed or unfinished feel, which makes them seem both vulnerable and age-resistant. They
are sophisticated and jagged, playful and incendiary, innocent and savage.

They resist easy summary or classification, but here’s a blunt inventory of the major works:

A propos de Nice (1930) is a sardonic city portrait, a mock travelogue, one of the first essay films, additionally groundbreaking in its mix of staged elements and material shot with a hidden camera. Documentary truth get supplemented by satiric sight gags, irony, surrealism, and outright burlesque. In Vigo’s words, his film presents “the last gasp of a society so lost in its escapism that it sickens you and makes you sympathetic to a revolutionary solution.”

Zéro de conduite (1933) is a fiction film, a dense forty-four minutes long, told in elliptical jolts and leaps, portraying a rebellion in a boy’s boarding school. Vigo’s empathy for the kid insurrectionists is heightened by his audacious, hilarious depiction of imbecile authority figures. One of the unmistakably great movies about childhood, it was banned by French censors and denied a public screening until 1945.

L’Atalante (1934) is Vigo’s longest and last film, reworked from a script the filmmaker did not originate, shot while he was ill, sometimes bedridden, with tuberculosis, which he’d struggled with for much of his life. Centering on a newlywed couple encamped on a barge before their marriage hits a breaking point, L’Atalante is Vigo’s most conventional movie but also, arguably, his most amazing—his most richly detailed and emotionally charged. Vigo died, age twenty-nine, a few weeks after the release of a mutilated version. (The distributor had trimmed it by ten minutes, changed the title, and imposed a pop song.)

The least you can say about these films is that they are exhilarating, inexhaustible, miraculous. Each is remarkable for its formal inventiveness, aligned with a quality of restless observation. Working with his friend Boris Kaufman (Russian-born brother of Dziga Vertov), Vigo developed an approach that opened direct links between documentary reality and a flow of shifting, elevated emotion. Water, steam, and glowing flesh are recurring motifs, with convulsive slow motion used to carry sequences into ecstatic dream states. This transformative spirit is even, or especially, present in Vigo’s one “minor” effort, the nine-minute Taris (La natation par Jean Taris, champion de France), a commissioned sports documentary completed in 1931 (the only directing job Vigo could get after A propos de Nice failed to make waves), wherein the eponymous subject, a somewhat gawky Olympic swimmer, becomes apotheosized by the camera—by means of rapturous underwater shots, a reverse-motion leap from splash to diving stance at pool’s rim, then a brisk double-exposed stroll across the water. It’s this fusion of sensation and imagination, the mundane and the magical, that sets Vigo apart, inflecting the vocabulary, the texture, and what might be called the inner life of his films. Somehow, he makes it seem spontaneous, alternately offhand and urgent. “Magic realism” is a pallid, inadequate way to describe the pillow fight and procession in Zéro de conduite, or the lovesick plunge into the water in L’Atalante, or the way, later in that film, the two lovers long for each other in separate beds while sourceless dots of light slide across their skin.

Shame on those who, during their puberty, murdered the person they might have become. —Jean Vigo, “Towards a Social Cinema”

Vigo was a special case from the start. His father, Eugène Bonaventure Vigo, was a militant anarchist, of Catalan descent, who took the nom de guerre Miguel Almeryda when he was seventeen and later transformed himself into a prosperous newspaper editor (alienating his revolutionary colleagues). His stance as a pacifist during the First World War prompted accusations of treason, and he was jailed and strangled in his prison cell when his son was twelve. (Suicide was the autopsy report’s conclusion.) Jean moved through his adolescence in the shadow of this disaster. Michel Simon testifies that “Vigo was eaten up by the personal drama which was his father’s… It was [like] Hamlet.”

But alongside this torment, his ill health, and nine wretched years of boarding school, young Vigo fell in love with movies. As François Truffaut pointed out, he was one of the first great film directors to convert a cinephile’s avidity into a conscious sense of vocation. Photographs of Vigo in his early twenties show him to be prim-featured, well-groomed, almost conventionally cute. Later on, on film sets and in a sickbed, he’s more angular, unkempt, the classic bohemian—the man you’d cast in a movie about a genius who died young, a beautiful loser, the maker of flops that turn out to be masterpieces.

Just the same, it’s possible to grow impatient with portrayals of Vigo as a tragic martyr and poète maudit. All things considered, his short life contained an unusual concentration of luck. In 1926, while being treated in a sanatorium, he met his wife, the luminous Elisabeth “Lydou” Lozinska, and they were together for the rest of his life. Lydou’s prosperous father supplied funds for the camera used to shoot À propos de Nice. By all accounts, Vigo had a bright disposition and a gift for friendship, and friends frequently became collaborators. Notable among these were Charles Goldblatt, who supplied song lyrics for Zéro de conduite and L’Atalante, and Maurice Jaubert, whose triumphant scores for those films established him as one of the most talented composers of the era. “Vigo was not a sad man,” insists his daughter, Luce, born in 1931, now a Paris-based film critic. “People say, ‘Oh, he was ill, he lost his father in a jail.’ But he was full of desire, full of wit, and you feel it.” Jean Dasté, the magnificent actor who appears in both Zéro de conduite and L’Atalante, supplied similar testimony: “He made jokes all the time. Spending a day with him was wonderful and grueling, even a few weeks before his death. He was such a vivacious person.”

As Truffaut and others have commented, Vigo wasn’t expecting to live long, but, working at a fever pitch, he outmaneuvered tragedy. He created more indelible sequences, images, and characters in three hours of screen time than most filmmakers manufacture in the course of prolific, well-financed careers.

What is a rebel? A man who says no. —Albert Camus, The Rebel Vigo was an artist of his time and yet profoundly ahead of his time. Having died young, he qualifies as the Peter Pan of world cinema, the eternal whiz kid who earned a place at the grown-ups’ table without having to mature or sell out, the amateur who never had a chance to become a disappointing old pro, a compromised revolutionary, an accredited great man. He came of age during a desolate era, a worldwide depression, but it’s significant that he didn’t live to face the engulfing nightmare that became World War II (nor did Lydou, who died in 1939). There is a sunshine in Vigo’s work, for all its tartness and aggression, a spirit unclouded by the deep horror brimming up in the years
following his death. Various obituaries record Vigo’s status as a “promising” beginner, an unfulfilled experimenter, but time has granted a broader perspective, revealing him to be on equal footing with his most monumental contemporaries. He was, for instance, nine years younger than Jean Renoir, the French master with whom he is now routinely ranked as an equal in originality and depth, conviction and conscience. It’s stirring, too, to register that Vigo was born just eight years before Albert Camus, another precocious upstart and man of conscience, whose fiction and philosophy combine lyricism and dissent, and who also died young (though he was twenty years older than Vigo when a car crash took his life).

The essential radiance of Vigo’s work landed, like a chromosome that skips a generation, in a receptive era post—World War II, when his films were rediscovered and, by degrees, restored. (It’s another measure of Vigo’s strange, now posthumous, luck—which extended to the publication, in 1957, of an immensely rich and sympathetic biography by P. E. Salles Gomes, Jean Vigo, one of the holy books of film biography.) The dual New York release of Zéro de conduite and L’Atalante in July 1947 prompted rave reviews from James Agee, whose advocacy spilled into two consecutive columns in the Nation: Nobody has approached [Vigo’s] adroitness in handling reality, consciousness, and time on film (in Zéro), 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.

In France, the Prix Jean Vigo was established in 1951 in homage to the filmmaker (who, of course, never received a prize in his life). Early recipients included Alain Resnais, Claude Chabrol, and Jean-Luc Godard—confirming a link between Vigo’s pioneering work and the iconoclastic spirit of the French New Wave.

Jem Cohen once told me that seeing Zéro de conduite propelled him, decisively, toward becoming an independent filmmaker. “I suddenly felt like the door kicked open. It was like what had happened to me in high school with punk rock.” There is, indeed, a protopunk element to Vigo—a current of undeniable anger, madcap mockery, the scornful high spirits that link Dada to Sid Vicious. But by the time he made L’Atalante, Vigo had begun shifting gears. This final work reflects a movement from hostility to tenderness, from negation to acceptance. Which is to say that, despite his tormented background, his bad health, his Hamlet-like father issues and justification for bitterness and despair, Vigo defied Camus’ definition of the rebel. In the unique temper and flow of his films, in his actors’ faces and flesh, in the shimmering presence of water and light, in halting and fluent silences, and in Jaubert’s haunting music, Vigo found a way to say yes, emphatically and for all time.

Something of Vigo’s touch, his visual signature, was translated into Hollywood movies of the fifties and sixties in a very concrete way—through the active involvement of cinematographer Boris Kaufman, Vigo’s primary collaborator, who commenced an extraordinary second career when Elia Kazan hired him to shoot On the Waterfront in 1954. Kaufman won the Academy Award for his work on that picture, and went on to shoot Baby Doll (1956) and Splendor in the Grass (1961) with Kazan and seven movies for the late Sidney Lumet, beginning with Lumet’s debut, 12 Angry Men (1957). When Lumet was awarded an honorary Oscar in 2007, he cited Jean Vigo in his acceptance speech. It was not, for him, an obscure or incidental reference.

Indeed, Vigo’s legacy, his direct influence, has been coiled in the work of wildly talented filmmakers from all over the map. Truffaut’s The 400 Blows (1959) and Lindsay Anderson’s If… (1969) are conspicuous examples, nearly impossible to conceive of without Vigo’s precedent. Explicit quotations and tributes surface in Bernardo Bertolucci’s Last Tango in Paris (1972), Emir Kusturica’s Underground (1995), Leos Carax’s Les amants du Pont-Neuf (1991), Godard, in 2001, poured a song from L’Atalante onto the soundtrack of In Praise of Love, as his modern lovers speak, silently and in silhouette, by the river shared by Vigo’s barge—an invocation of lost innocence, an index for longing.

The international cast of this fan club, and its combined moral and aesthetic intelligence, testify to the scope of Vigo’s impact and appeal. But I’m inclined to make a broader case to recognize Vigo’s connection to all filmmakers of a certain stripe, the intransigent originals, the brats, poets, and provocateurs—the mostly marginal figures whose work is recklessly inventive, openhearted, and untamable. There are fewer of these than you may think—the true radicals, the outcasts and outlaws—but the breed will never be altogether extinguished, and Vigo will always be their blood brother and patron saint.

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