



## *L'Atalante* Lost and Regained

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Review: Michael Temple (2006) *Jean Vigo (French Film Directors)*

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Michael Temple's *Jean Vigo* provides a well-documented reference to the life and work of the young French director who died in the prime of his talent. The book starts with a short biography which enables the reader unfamiliar with the work of Jean Vigo to understand the traumatic events that may have influenced his films as well as his real love and empathy with cinema. Jean Vigo was born in Paris in 1905, the son of a well-known anarchist who called himself Miguel Almeyreda (a pun for 'il y a de la merde'). He died in prison in suspicious circumstances. Jean Vigo's life as a film director was very short and was haunted by the death of his father. At the time of his death of tuberculosis in his 20s, he had made exactly four films amounting to two hundred minutes of film: two short experimental pieces: first a documentary satirising the resort crowd in Nice: *A propos de Nice* (1929). This was an avant-garde critique of Nice middle-class society which, although quite limited, was actually well-received. He then produced a documentary about a famous French swimmer *Taris et la natation* (1930). His first long film was the surreal *Zero de conduite* (1933) about a boys' boarding school. It allowed Vigo to explore new aspects of cinematography. Actors were children, friends or relatives and there was no famous star apart from the dwarf Delphin who played the part of the headmaster. It is this sense of authenticity that gives the film all its credibility. However, the film was banned by the official censorship board until 1946, because it was regarded as intolerable that the education establishment and its teachers should be portrayed as ridiculous. Besides, the symbol of authority was played by a dwarf. Vigo's last film was the legendary *L'Atalante* (1934). Shooting *L'Atalante* required a lot of energy of Vigo. Like all directors, he had to

find financial backing, a cast and a crew, but most of the film had to be shot and edited fast, and scenes recorded in a single take, as Vigo not only had little financial support but he was fighting for his life. He was indeed very ill when he made the film and sometimes had to direct it from a stretcher. The latter has become a testament to Vigo's short life. Therefore, Jean Vigo is often regarded as a *poete maudit* (Temple: 2005, p.145), who, like romanticists Shelley, Keats or the French poet Rimbaud, died prematurely. Temple presents each film and chronologically, first giving a general overview and then going into more depth in his analysis of the narrative of each individual scene. Prominence in this study has rightly been given to *L'Atalante*, often considered to be a masterpiece.

Like most films of the late 1920s and early 1930s, such as Rene Clair's *Sous les toits de Paris* (1930), in the transition from silent films to talkies, *L'Atalante* interweaves sound and silent moments. In the first years of sound, film directors were still ill at ease with the intrusion of sound into cinema. Music is therefore everywhere in the film, from the scratches of the phonograph, the static of the radio and the sound of Pere Jules's accordion played in an approximate and dislocated manner. A bit like Pere Jules's shambles in his cabin, music appears and disappears. It is allusive, interrupted, fugitive. This is the symbol of the fragmentation of an ideal, a kind of mosaic to reconstruct, in other words, this is an invitation to a spiritual voyage.

Strangely, there is something of a correlation between the intrinsic meaning of the film (a fragmented and often surreal collection of images reminiscent of Bunuel's dream sequences) and the destiny it would have from its first release in 1934 in a mutilated version where Jaubert's music was replaced by that of music-hall singer Lys Gauty - *Le Chaland qui passé* - and the peregrinations which would follow. In 1990, an almost intact copy of the original was retrieved by chance in the archives of the BFI. If the film story is about love lost and regained, the critical desuetude into which it fell led to an incredible 'odyssey of loss and restoration' (Temple 2005: 105)

Music is used as a driving force drawing characters together in *Zero de conduite* as well. Vigo wrote a waltz theme which he had an orchestra play and record in reverse, and then re-recorded it backwards during the editing. The result is striking. The background music when it suddenly appears emphasises the dreamlike, mysterious quality of the atmosphere.

One of Vigo's most surreal scenes, reminiscent of *Taris et la natation*, is from *L'Atalante* when the desperate Jean dives into the canal. He swims with his eyes open in search of his lost wife and sees a mirage of Juliette in her wedding dress, a diaphanous image in superimposition turning round and round. The object of desire appears all in white, performing a graceful ballet in the water, but there is something mechanical about her movements. This deepwater scene, which lasts almost eight minutes, is rich in intensity and tinged with poetry and a new form of aesthetics. Juliette brings to mind not only Eurydice but Shakespeare's Juliet and Dante's Beatrice. In a long

white dress, she sometimes seems throughout the film to float in the air, to hover like a tightrope walker in the void and her ghost-like white silhouette on a black backdrop seems to be printed as a watermark in Jean's mind as well as on the film celluloid.

Jean Vigo's cinema is above all a cinema of imagination. He was once described as 'the man who holds the keys to dreams' (Temple 2005: 152). This is in line with Rene Clair's idea of cinema which should be 'a medium of dreaming' (Warner: 1993, 10). According to the cameraman, Boris Kaufmann, all weather conditions were exploited during the screening such as sun, mist, snow or night. Vigo was a man of intuition. The fog was increased with smoke. The rain was accentuated with spotlight. Natural light was mixed with artificial light to create a world of fantasy. As well as changes in lighting, Vigo played with different changes in angles, abrupt changes of frames and screen directions, dislocating the rhythm and breaking down the narrative to create what Truffaut referred to as 'this dense daydream' (1978: 28).

The film first takes place in a closed environment, a microcosmic stage for the conflicts, debates, paradoxes, taboos and tensions of the young couple. On the barge, where there seems to be no way out, one feels asphyxiated. Juliette feels herself trapped as there is no exit except the city of Paris. In many fairy tales, the young princess finds herself imprisoned by her husband in a strange place and the barge is itself a bit like the castle in *Beauty and the Beast*, where Beauty is imprisoned. Juliette is a prisoner of the barge and the river.

In 1930's films, there was a general predilection for water such as in the films by L'Herbier or Gremillon. With the water image being omnipresent, the film is a form of *regressum ad uterum*, both a process of birth and a voyage into the origin of life. It is in the water that love is revealed. The water is reminiscent of the amniotic fluid in which the foetus rests in its mother's womb. Michael Temple analyses Jean's passionate dive into the canal as a plunge into 'desire and erotic imagination' (2005: 128). For Jean, when he throws himself overboard, it is in symbolic terms a 'watery death' (Temple 2005: 128) as well as a form of transfiguration. The French philosopher Gilles Deleuze highlights the importance of the water metaphor in Vigo: 'there is not the same movement in the sea and in the land' and the state of perception is completely different. On land, movement is always 'in perpetual disequilibrium' (1983: 43), but in water the movement is slowed down and imbued with grace.

Water, the symbol of absolute freedom, is associated with gargoyle-like Pere Jules's universe. The character is actually reminiscent of Boudu the tramp in Renoir's *Boudu sauve des eaux* (1932), also played by Michel Simon. Simon was already a star when the film was shot in 1933. Contemporary French critics describe the part he played in 1930's cinema: "plus que tout autre comédien, Michel Simon représente, au debut du parlant, ce que le cinema peut avoir de meilleur. Le film d'auteur le sollicite autant que le cinema populaire. Il triomphe au theatre comme au

cinema [en jouant] les bourgeois ou les vagabonds. Michel Simon prend, lui, possession de l'espace cinématographique avec une aisance sans appel, happe la bande-son avec une excentricité volubile qui écrase le reste du film" (Binh 2005: 43). It is Simon who gives the character of Pere Jules its force and its singularity.

Pere Jules's role is 'salvational' (Temple 2005: 118) in retrieving Juliette, but it is also again thanks to music, the music of the phonograph, that the newly wed couple are led to each other as if they were following a kind of imaginary Ariadne's thread through the labyrinth of love. The encounter between Jules and Juliette is again like the contrast between Beauty and the Beast or a courtship display for Jules trapped in a triangular relationship with Juliette. Jean, Juliette, Jules all start with 'j' and constitute Vigo's Holy Trinity. From the character of Jean to the actor Jean Dasté and to the director Jean Vigo, the link is easy to make. In the film, le Pere Jules is often 'reduced to a barely comprehensible babble', or 'a poetic nonsense' (Temple 2005: 132) that guides us or misleads us through Vigo's imaginary world, but above all, he functions as a catharsis or a *deus ex machina* which will bring equilibrium and harmony. He is the spring that will bring the final happy ending to the mechanism of the film. His cabin is full of curiosities, memories, fantasies gathered from all his different peregrinations around the world. Just like in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*, Jules's treasure chest opens into another dimension, the realm of imagination. The poetry of Jean Vigo and his inventiveness is based on an heterogeneity which conveys a multiplicity of impressions and different layers of reading for the film: Pere Jules's exuberant and multi-dimensional personality, the diversity of objects crammed in his cabin, cats tossed swiftly onto the screen at all times (Andrew 1984: 61).

The film is constructed around some recurrent motifs. To use Gilles Deleuze's metaphor: 'the characters enter into a relationship of reduplication' (1983: 43). There is for instance the bridge metaphor: the bridge under which the barge flows, the bridge Jules crosses to look for Juliette and the bridging melodies of Jaubert's almost psychedelic music (Andrew 1984: 62). Pere Jules is himself a bridge between the young couple, a link between land and sea. The world of *L'Atalante* is haunted with superstitions which add to the mystery and bridge the real and the surreal ('the play of cards, the sign of the cross, the fear of the broken mirror' Andrew 1984: 76). The mirror image, another symbol of fragmentation, is also paramount to the film. In a fit of jealous rage Jean breaks Pere Jules's mirror. At the end, Juliette sees Pere Jules's reflection as if in a mirror. The mirror finally leads to a happy unravelling: the reconciliation of the characters.

The barge is a self-sufficient microcosm like the school in *Zero de conduite*, but also these are environments where one finds oneself trapped. The schoolboys try to escape from the uptight universe of the school, but there is only one way out, the escape upwards, towards the unknown and the surreal, as in the images of the pillow fight where schoolboys are seen floating in the air.

The image is prolonged as the picture goes into slow motion. The barge is first an escape for Juliette but like the school soon becomes a prison.

The film escapes at times any logic, any transition. It describes a fluid and liquid universe, a world of sensuality, where everything flows by, like time passing by and where the bizarre, the eerie is part of the natural. One can present it in terms of dichotomy: water and love, liquid and solid, earth and dreams, as well as Eros and Thanatos.

Released from the barge, released from love, Juliette finds herself faced with reality, a reality that is tempting but full of imperfections. Marvelling, apprehensive but metamorphosed, she finally goes back to the small still world of the barge. Paris echoes as a city of enchantments, the city of light and fashion, especially for a foreigner like Juliette played by the German actress Dita Parlo, but it proves to be a snare. Juliette is unhappy, but she remains faithful to her husband. In Paris, Juliette finds her own self. There is an image where she sees herself in the window of a shop, but the image sent back by the mirror is deceptive like the hallucination Jean has when he sees Juliette in the depths of the canal: it is that of mere narcissism and of blindness. Indeed, when looking at oneself in the mirror, one is only blinded by one's own self and does not see beyond the artificial. It is by going through the mirror, the looking glass, that one will plunge into the dream and the sensual. In Jean Cocteau's *Orpheus* (1950), his search for Eurydice goes through the mirror. Orpheus in the film, just like Jean, plunges into the water-like mirror or the mirror-like water of his imagination.

Vigo is beyond classification and is now regarded as the director of one of the most influential French films ever made, a director who, as shown by Temple, inspired generations of filmmakers such as Renoir, Truffaut and Godard. His ability as a film director was his sense of improvisation and ability, 'to take reality and push it to its limits and then to push it beyond its limits'. *L'Atalante* was for its time a modern film because of its surrealism, and a fascinating film because of the freedom of its tone. It is very audacious in a period when the scissors of censorship were very powerful and could lead to the interdiction of a film from being screened at any time. Above all it is a very sensual film. Truffaut was fascinated by the way the characters' skin was shot and the use of black and white lighting. The film was a masterpiece for Truffaut because Vigo achieved some moments of poetry that words alone cannot express. For the first time images of strong erotic components were shot. Truffaut did not want Vigo's legacy and Maurice Jaubert's music scores to be forgotten. Jaubert died during the Second World War, but his music was used 35 years later used by Truffaut for the soundtrack to his film *L'Histoire d'Adele H.* as a tribute to Jean Vigo. The *Prix Jean Vigo* continues the legacy and has become an award in France given annually since 1951 to a young film director for his/her independent spirit.

The final scene of *L'Atalante* is quite revealing: the film finishes on a scene of the barge seen from the air. There is no way out. Time flows as the river does, but the barge seems to stand still. Juliette is entrapped. The myth of Orpheus is reversed, Jean and Juliette are brought together, absence has become presence. The barge now becomes the 'magical space of safety and dreaming' (Warner 1993: 55) petrified in time for eternity.

Michael Temple's *Jean Vigo* is part of an interesting collection edited by Manchester University Press on French film directors mostly intended for students, and is a very good introduction to Jean Vigo's films. It is clearly written and well supplemented with photographs and a selected bibliography; film researchers will also find it of great interest in their understanding of Jean Vigo's mysterious and highly poetic imagery.

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