



# L'Atalante

No one achieved more in less time than Jean Vigo – how would the history of cinema be different if he had lived past 29? *L'Atalante* remains raw, strange, radical and singular. You don't watch it so much as you are immersed in it, swimming through visions like the lovesick barge captain when he plunges into the river in search of his lost bride. No film embodies more fully and purely the inherent fluidity, surrealism, realism, eroticism and ghostliness of cinema.

**Imogen Sara Smith, *Sight and Sound*, Winter 2022-23**

If *Battleship Potemkin* is the flagship of Bolshevik montage, the motorbarge *L'Atalante* is the classic instance of 'poetic realism'. Both films mix avant-gardism with 'big' cinema: the Russian film, cineformalism with epico-lyrical heroic agit-prop; Vigo's, an eclectic French modernism with 'bourgeois' (popular) drama. Each Vigo film constitutes a different meld of modes and genres, though sharing their authorial genre. *A propos de Nice* is a social-critical impressionist montage documentary (the antithesis of Dziga-Vertov's Socialist Realist rhapsodic formalism). *Zéro de conduite* fuses impressionism, expressionism, stream-of-consciousness, Symbolism, Chaplinesque (that is to say, profound) caricaturalism, and the poetic evocation of a stifling, grinding, everyday. *L'Atalante* synthesises elements from these earlier films with a mainstream movement which received as many labels (all unsatisfactory) as it had cross-currents: 'poetic realism', 'psycho-social realism', 'populism', 'ordinary-people films', 'slice-of-life films'...

Appropriately, this barge stops at the Canal St. Martin and Le Havre, the sites of two Carné films, *Hotel du Nord* (from the best-known *roman populiste*) and *Quai des Brumes* (an adaptation, by a 'proletarian' poet, Prévert, of a low-life one, MacOrlan). But *L'Atalante*'s wider-ranging style achieves a mercurial diversity. Its opening features: a bourgeois procession, of comic silhouettes, like René Clair; a village street whose curving brick walls seem saturated with uncanny forces, like Feuillade; moody luminosities of silk and mist, lace and earth (L'Hérbier); canal compositions with the *sachlichkeit* angularity of Pabst; and a peasant sensuousness (and fertility symbolism) evoking the Russian (as distinct from Soviet) roots of Dovzhenko (a festoon of leaves, a field of bare earth, surging up against skylines). This unique stylistic volatility makes *L'Atalante* a crucial instance for examining Jean Mitry's expansion of the term 'poetic realism', from a primarily French trend, to embrace Donskoi (at its Socialist Realist end), Borzage (at its Hollywood-Catholic end), *Brief Encounter* (at its Woman's Film end), and *It Always Rains on Sunday* (at its Mass Observation end).

As for Populist cinema, a wide interwar tendency, *L'Atalante* is very near its heart. Movie Populism stressed 'ordinary people', *les petits gens*, as distinct from 'the masses'; their mosaic of individualities as distinct from 'solidarity'; and the irascible coexistence of its classes (petty bourgeoisie down to lumpen), as distinct from class war. Vigo's skipper is labour aristocracy; 'Mrs. Skipper', peasant bourgeois; the Mate, a lower level of labour aristocracy (though his rolling-stone life has lumpen vibes); the Cabin Boy, unskilled labour. The story traces the friction/integration of family and crew into a unity

which, though exploited, is also contented. Its brutal schedule (no honeymoon, all hours at the wheel) stresses capitalism less than the harshness of living-in-the-world. And Père Jules personifies the class-unclassifiability of so many existences. Such Populism permeates most popular Socialisms, and *L'Atalante* stands as a left-Populist film and, by augury, a Popular Front one, on the Socialist rather than Communist side.

Its common ground with so many other 'realist' films comes not from borrowing their conventions, but from its original (and corroborative) inventions. Every affinity with another style is equally a difference from it, so that art historian Elie Faure was honouring Vigo's mobile, almost feverish, delicacy when he spoke of its Rembrandt shadowings, Goyaesque saturninity (Père Jules' mementoes), and canalside trees like a Corot. Another reviewer cited, amazingly, Chagall, yet Vigo does indeed invest the domestic and everyday with a 'floating fantastication': a bride pacing along the roof of her moving home, a twisting swimmer seeing visions underwater, the hawker's case hugely overhanging his swerving bike. Vigo's *fauve* diversity repays endless study for, far from exhibiting disparateness, it fuses into a variable atmospheric.

Though *L'Atalante* is 'realist' cinema, it's also 'irrationalist' cinema; its characters are pre-rational temperaments, poorly rationalised by education or routine. Skipper and his woman are primarily *passional* beings, erotic or obsessive; the crew are deep dark impulsives; conspicuous is man's 'sleepwalking' side, as in *Zéro de conduite*. Surreal, comic, anguishing is this human instability. Catholic humanists Bazin and Agel thought *L'Atalante*'s heavy eroticism exhaled a 'horror of the flesh'; for the Marxist-Surrealist Kyrrou it exalted *l'amour fou*. Either way, this household/collective evokes a flux of impulses, chaotic, extrovert, and generous but with teeth. In Epstein's 'navigational' films, the life force ceaselessly destabilises wind and waves; here, it permeates the people: Jean Daste's yearning virility; Dita Parlo's soft vivacity and blonde-helmet face; Juliette's 'effeminisation', with skirt and jabs from a pin, of Père Jules; his playful response, a parodic exhibitionism, encapsulating an eerie, melancholy, robust existence. The plot emphasises a paradoxical even-handedness: Jules sabotages the marriage, but also saves it; Jean stifles Juliette, but his interventions avert her sudden falls from curiosity to sexuality.

Père Jules is a poetic profile, without psychology, albeit his trip to the dog barber is teasingly perverse. Michel Simon's vein of grotesquerie is arguably expressionist, certainly *fauve*. The pedlar is another bringer of fetishes – his wares, his trombone, even his patter, whose quick insincerity only enhances its seduction. Gilles Margaritis gives this salesman the soul of a faun. Vigo, like Buñuel, is fascinated by fetishes, as vortices in the flow of life. But whereas Buñuel's fetish catalogue (insects, crutches ...) stresses impairments (of mind or movement), Vigo's fetish-bearers are creatures of mischief, of Pan: Margaritis leaping, clambering, and collapsing in split-second limpness on the dance floor; Simon's crablike athleticism and vigorously gleeful accordion playing; the Cabin Boy's thick mischievous eyes, like an apprentice satyr's; Daste's soft eyes and clumsy-yet-crisp movements, at once vulnerable and virile. However 'consequential' the film's narrative outline may read, it sees as a string of lyrical moments, of durations cut free from time. It links the Bergson agenda, so important in intellectual French cinema, with the sensibility of a certain pre-educated, non-rationalist, folk-proletariat, a sensibility inspiring three other 'irrationalist realists', Renoir, Pasolini and Dovzhenko.

It's highly relevant to *L'Atalante's* atmospheric alchemy that Boris Kaufman had filmed for Dziga-Vertov, his brother, and later shot *On the Waterfront* and *The Pawnbroker*. Antithetical to Vertov's steely purity are these funkily poetic images: two plumped pillows reeking of sensuality, a kitten jumping from a closet jammed with unwashed linen, Jean ducking his head under the oily river surface to 'see' his bride. Different again is the New York films' prosaic, social-critical funk. Maurice Jaubert's music is the epitome in sound of 30s populist melancholy, more complexly textured than Weill or Eisler; even the popular song, added by Gaumont in a vain effort to boost the film's (minimal) box-office appeal, is a classic of its kind. Vigo's film remains a wonderful testimony to its time, to a temperament, and to textural style.

**Raymond Durnat, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, February 1990**

#### L'ATALANTE

*Director:* Jean Vigo  
*Production Companies:*  
 Gaumont-Franco-Film-Aubert, Argui-Film  
*Producer:* Jacques-Louis Nunez  
*Unit Manager:* Henri Arbel  
*Assistant Directors:* Albert Riéra, Pierre Merle  
*Script Supervisors:* Jacqueline Morland, Fred Matter  
*Adaptation/Dialogue:* Jean Vigo, Albert Riéra  
*Based on a story by:* Jean Guinée  
*Photography:* Boris Kaufman, Louis Berger, Jean-Paul Alphen  
*Stills Photography:* Roger Parry  
*Editor:* Louis Chavance  
*Art Director:* Francis Jourdain  
*Assistant Art Director:* Max Douy \*  
*Michel Simon Make-up:* Chakoutouny  
*Music/Music Conductor:* Maurice Jaubert  
*Lyrics:* Charles Goldblatt  
*Sound Recording:* Marcel Royné, Lucien Baujard

#### Cast

Michel Simon (*Père Jules*)  
 Dita Parlo (*Juliette*)  
 Jean Dasté (*Jean*)  
 Gilles Margaritis (*the pedlar*)  
 Louis Lefèbvre (*the cabin boy*)  
 Fanny Clar (*Juliette's mother*)  
 Maurice Gilles (*the head clerk*)  
 Raphaël Diligent (*Raspoutine, Juliette's father*)  
 Claude Aveline  
 René Bleck (*the best man*)  
 Genya Lozinska  
 Gen Paul (*guest with limp*)  
 Paul Grimault, Jacques Prévert, Pierre Prévert,  
 Lou Tchimoukoff (*at railway station*) \*  
 Albert Riéra  
 Charles Goldblatt (*the thief*) \*

France 1934  
 89 mins

\* Uncredited

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**Daughters of the Dust** Wed 1 Feb 18:15; Thu 16 Feb 20:30

**Sans Soleil** Wed 1 Feb 20:40; Fri 17 Feb 18:00

##### M (Mörder unter uns)

Thu 2 Feb 14:30; Thu 16 Feb 20:40; Wed 22 Feb 18:00

**Moonlight** Thu 2 Feb 20:45; Tue 14 Feb 20:30

##### Blade Runner: The Final Cut

Fri 3 Feb 20:40; Sun 5 Feb 20:40; Sat 18 Feb 18:10

##### Battleship Potemkin (Bronenosets Potemkin)

Sat 4 Feb 12:40; Sat 18 Feb 18:30

**La dolce vita** Sat 4 Feb 14:15; Sat 25 Feb 19:30

**Sherlock Jr.** Sat 4 Feb 17:20; Sat 11 Feb 11:45

**City Lights** Sat 4 Feb 17:20; Sat 11 Feb 11:45

**Goodfellas** Sat 4 Feb 20:10; Wed 15 Feb 20:10

**North by Northwest** Sat 4 Feb 20:20; Thu 9 Feb 18:00

**L'Atalante** Sun 5 Feb 12:15; Tue 14 Feb 18:30; Wed 22 Feb 14:30

**Rear Window** Sun 5 Feb 12:20; Fri 24 Feb 20:45

**Stalker** Sun 5 Feb 17:40; Tue 7 Feb 20:10; Sun 26 Feb 14:00

**Casablanca** Mon 6 Feb 20:30; Sun 12 Feb 13:20

**Psycho** Mon 6 Feb 20:45; Mon 20 Feb 14:30; Thu 23 Feb 20:40

##### 8 1/2 (Otto e mezzo)

Tue 7 Feb 18:00; Tue 21 Feb 14:30; Sun 26 Feb 12:50

##### The Battle of Algiers (La battaglia di Algeri)

Tue 7 Feb 18:10; Sat 25 Feb 11:50

**News from Home** Tue 7 Feb 20:45; Fri 17 Feb 18:20 (+ intro)

**Rashomon (Rashômon)** Tue 7 Feb 21:00; Thu 23 Feb 18:20

**The Piano** Wed 8 Feb 20:35; Tue 21 Feb 17:50

**Wanda** Thu 9 Feb 20:30 (+ intro by Jason Wood, BFI Executive Director of Public Programmes & Audiences); Sat 18 Feb 18:20

##### Fear Eats the Soul (Angst essen Seele auf)

Thu 9 Feb 20:55; Mon 27 Feb 18:00

**Ordet (The Word)** Fri 10 Feb 18:15; Sat 25 Feb 14:30

##### The 400 Blows (Les quatre cents coups)

Fri 10 Feb 20:50; Sun 19 Feb 18:40

##### Bicycle Thieves (Ladri di biciclette)

Sat 11 Feb 11:50; Mon 20 Feb 20:55; Thu 23 Feb 14:30

**Barry Lyndon** Sat 11 Feb 19:20; Sat 25 Feb 15:30

**Some Like It Hot** Sun 12 Feb 13:30; Tue 14 Feb 18:10

**The Third Man** Sun 12 Feb 18:30; Tue 21 Feb 20:40

**Killer of Sheep** Sun 12 Feb 18:40 (+intro); Sat 18 Feb 20:40

**Mirror (Zerkalo)** Mon 13 Feb 20:50; Tue 28 Feb 20:50

**Pather Panchali** Sat 18 Feb 20:30; Tue 21 Feb 20:35; Sun 26 Feb 15:45

**The Apartment** Wed 22 Feb 20:35; Sun 26 Feb 12:40

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