



## Big Screen Classics

# The Swimmer

### Taris

*Directed by:* Jean Vigo  
*Production Company:* Gaumont-Petersen-Poulsen  
*Production Companies:* Franco-Film \*, Aubert Film \*  
*Presented by:* Franfilmidis  
*Producer:* M. Morskoi \*  
*Assistant:* Ary Sadoul  
*Script:* Jean Vigo \*  
*Photography:* Boris Kaufman \*  
*Camera Operators:* G. Lafont, Lucas  
*Editor:* Jean Vigo \*  
*Narrator:* Jean Taris \*  
France 1931  
10 mins  
Digital

### The Swimmer

*Director:* Frank Perry  
*©/Production Companies:* Horizon Pictures, Dover Productions  
*Executive in Charge of Production:* Joseph Manduke  
*Producers:* Frank Perry, Roger Lewis  
*Production Assistant:* Florence Nerlinger  
*Additional Director:* Sydney Pollack \*  
*Assistant Director:* Michael Hertzberg  
*Script Supervisor:* Barbara Robinson  
*Casting:* Alan Shayne Associates  
*Screenplay:* Eleanor Perry  
*Based on the short story by:* John Cheever  
*Director of Photography:* David Quaid  
*Additional Photography:* Michael Nebbia  
*Key Grip:* Al Stetson  
*Gaffer:* Richard Falk  
*Editors:* Sidney Katz, Carl Lerner, Pat Somerset  
*Art Director:* Peter Dohanos  
*Scenic Artist:* Stanley F. Cappiello  
*Props Master:* Thomas Wright  
*Wardrobe Design:* Anna Hill Johnstone  
*Swimwear:* Elizabeth Stewart  
*Make-up:* John Jiras  
*Hairstyles:* Ed Callaghan  
*Music:* Marvin Hamlisch  
*Orchestrations:* Leo Shuken, John Hayes  
*Sound Mixer:* Willard Goodman  
*Sound Editor:* Jack Fitzstephens  
*Dialogue Coach:* Thom Conroy  
*Cast:*  
Burt Lancaster (*Ned Merrill*)  
Janet Landgard (*Julie Hooper*)  
Janice Rule (*Shirley Abbott*)  
Tony Bickley (*Donald Westerhazy*)  
Marge Champion (*Peggy Forsburgh*)  
Nancy Cushman (*Mrs Halloran*)  
Bill Fiore (*Howie Hunsacker*)  
John Garfield Jr (*ticket seller*)  
Kim Hunter (*Betty Graham*)  
Rose Gregorio (*Sylvia Finney*)  
Charles Drake (*Howard Graham*)  
Bernie Hamilton (*chauffeur*)  
House Jameson (*Mr Halloran*)  
Jimmy Joyce (*Jack Finney*)  
Michael Kearney (*Kevin Gilmartin*)  
Richard McMurray (*Stu Forsburgh*)  
Jan Miner (*Lillian Hunsacker*)  
Diana Muldaur (*Cynthia*)  
Keri Oleson (*Vernon*)  
Joan Rivers (*Joan*)  
Cornelia Otis Skinner (*Mrs Hammer*)  
Dolph Sweet (*Henry Biswanger*)  
Louise Troy (*Grace Biswanger*)  
Diana Van Der Vlis (*Helen Westerhazy*)  
Alva Celauro (*Muffie*) \*

**SPOILER WARNING** The following notes give away some of the plot.

### A contemporary review

Leaves rustle and twigs snap, sending a rabbit scurrying to its burrow and a deer into the foliage, as a man treads his way through autumnal woods in Connecticut. But in this case the intruder in nature is also an intruder in civilisation; as Ned Merrill (finely played by Burt Lancaster), with his healthy, tanned body clothed only in a pair of bathing trunks, emerges on to the concrete pool-side patio on the exurban estate of some one-time friends, he seems as out of place among the paunchy executives with their Sunday hangovers as he did among the deer and rabbits. Like his physique, his determination to swim in the pool that serves merely as a status symbol and backdrop for open-air cocktails marks him out – as a god or as a freak – from the wealthy world into which he has wandered.

But his friends are delighted to see him again after so many years, and enquiring after his wife are reassured to learn (in the phrase that will become a kind of litany) that ‘Lucinda’s just fine and the girls are at home playing tennis.’ And as Merrill sips a ritual drink with them, looking across the country with its lush vegetation punctuated by tiny, chemical blue pools, the project for his minor odyssey takes shape: he will swim home to his wife via the chain of pools which he sentimentally christens the Lucinda river.

The project for him is an heroic one, and the distance of the nine-mile journey that formed the basis of John Cheever’s remarkable *New Yorker* story is left unspecified in the film, thus taking on the epic proportions that it acquires in Merrill’s mind. But as his pilgrimage gets under way, its peculiar pathos slowly becomes apparent. The nature to which the swimmer returns is itself the product of the synthetic society he is trying to transcend – earth-filtered water captured in tons of structural aluminium and clear plastic. His journey forward becomes a journey backward in time, the welcome that awaits him at each pool becoming less friendly as he gets nearer home. Echoes of unresolved grievances and encounters with former friends (an old lady who holds him responsible for her son’s death; a hostile hostess who hints that his daughters are alcoholic sluts; a pair of ageing nudists who refer obliquely to his bankruptcy; the ex-mistress who alludes to his wife’s frigidity; a grocer’s wife embittered by his unpaid bills) turn the voyage of discovery into one of self-discovery.

By the time Merrill has limped across the freeway (shades of *Lonely Are the Brave*) into the shrieking crowd at the municipal pool, his dream has become the nightmare confrontation not just of the plastic waste land of American civilisation but of his own failure. The ascent of his private Everest has become a descent into his private hell; until, with the darkening sky mirroring his visible disintegration, his efforts most resemble those of a salmon struggling upstream to die on the spawning grounds. Inevitably when the swimmer – in blinding rain – reaches his home, there is no smiling wife, no playing children: the tennis court, like the deserted house, is overgrown with weeds, and he beats in vain on the door.

As if in answer to those critics who objected to the tidiness of his first film (*David and Lisa*), Frank Perry’s *The Swimmer* deals deliberately in loose ends;

Lisa Daniels (*matron at the Biswangers' pool*) \*  
John Gerstad (*guest at the Biswangers' pool*) \*  
Marilyn Langner (*Enid Bunker*) \*  
Ray Mason (*Bunker's party guest*) \*  
USA 1968©  
95 mins  
Digital

\* Uncredited

The screening on Wed 2 Jul will be introduced by  
film critic Phuong Le

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and the different jigsaw pieces of Merrill's life never entirely fit together. The  
vagabond swimmer suffers throughout from a kind of emotional amnesia,  
believing his own lies about his family, with no recollection of what or where he  
has been for the past few years. There are hints of several possibilities that he  
has been leading a Rousseau-esque existence in the forest, has murdered his  
family, or escaped from an asylum – but the 'right' answer is never supplied.  
Though his film has all the ingredients of a whodunnit (or a who done what?),  
Perry tantalisingly withholds the final answer, showing one man's inability to  
face reality without specifying the particular form that this reality takes.

Whatever it is, Merrill's nostalgia for a heroism that has become unattainable,  
his desire to play Peter Pan in a land of Captain Hooks, is shown as something  
only children can understand. The lonely child selling lemonade by the roadside  
while his mother is abroad on yet another honeymoon manages for a moment  
to share the swimmer's dream; the teenage babysitter (a splendid, Lolita-ish  
first performance from Janet Landgard) joins for a while in the adventure,  
thrilled when Merrill quotes the *Song of Songs* at her, but recoiling when he  
strokes the belly he has likened to wheat, his words constructing a romantic  
fantasy while his actions – as throughout the film – betray the 'suburban stud'  
his brittle but vulnerable ex-mistress denounces in the final encounter.

According to Hollis Alpert in *The Saturday Review*, this sequence was originally  
made by Perry with Barbara Loden, and then re-shot, at producer Sam  
Spiegel's request, by Sydney Pollack with Janice Rule. Certainly it has a  
sharper edge than the rest of the film. For it is in spite rather than because of  
the direction – with its slow motion idyll, cigarette commercial photography,  
psychedelic shots of the sun, soft-focus verdure and heavy symbolism – that  
Cheever's story survives as a powerful and disturbing film.

Jan Dawson, *Sight and Sound*, Autumn 1968

## Taris

First of all, RESPECT, because in mid-July I will become a father. I don't yet  
know whether to a son or a daughter, but I shall let you know as soon as I do.

Secondly, have you seen *La Natation par Jean Taris* at Les Miracles?

Filmed above and below water. The creature and its environment are beautiful,  
but... Jean Vigo is not Jean Painlevé. And that's that!

Letter from Jean Vigo to Jean Painlevé, Nice, 28 May 1931

This film on swimming champion Jean Taris, commissioned from Vigo by  
Germaine Dulac and shot in the early months of 1931, is often considered,  
within the context of his work, a minor film; it is sometimes ignored. Instead, it  
has the name 'Vigo' clearly printed on it, even if the director himself only loved  
the sequences shot underwater. He would recall them when shooting  
*L'Atalante*. But there's more: the 'swimming in a room' scene is unusual and  
funny, as are Taris' tricks and his winks directed towards the viewer, when,  
completely dressed, he walks on water. It was Vigo's first experience working in  
sound, at a time when mixing did not exist. The filmmaker was able to create a  
counterpoint between the human voice and the sound of water in movement.

Luce Vigo, *Jean Vigo, une vie engagée dans le cinéma*, Cahiers du cinéma-CNDP, Paris 2002

With thanks to Bernard Eisenschitz, Il Cinema Ritrovato