L'Atalante

Director: Jean Vigo
Country: France
Date: 1934

A review by Indy Datta for *mostlyfilm.com*:

Jean Vigo turned in the first rough cut of L'Atalante from his deathbed: over the gruelling winter location shoot the young film maker – already frail, tubercular – had fallen fatally ill with pneumonia and septicaemia. He would do no further work on the film, or ever see it again, and would die at 29. The studio, Gaumont, took the film, re-edited it, and rescored it to prominently feature a popular song of the time, Le Chaland qui Passe – The Passing Barge – which also became the film's title. Initially a critical and commercial failure, the film remained obscure for a decade and more, before its rediscovery and adoption as a formative inspiration by the critics and film makers, most notably François Truffaut, who would go on to form the French new wave.

Vigo's only other narrative film (also for Gaumont) was the rambunctious, surreal boarding school rebellion short Zéro de Conduite, based on his own childhood experiences and strongly influenced by the ideas of his father, the notorious anarchist Miguel Almereyda. This fared even worse in the public sphere; its mocking disregard for authority led the censors to ban it after one screening. Even if it had, by some miracle, got past the censors, the bourgeois cinema owners would probably have been so shocked by that initial screening that it would never have been shown to paying audiences for fear of riots in the stalls. Gaumont, together with Vigo's loyal financier and producer, Jacques -Louis Nounez, felt that for Vigo's follow-up, they needed to find a safe project. The existing script for L'Atalante (written by Jean Guinée) was a bland, sentimental trifle, the safe-as-houses story of a young couple – a goods barge captain and his wife – being guided along the first shaky steps of their married life by a sage older man.

But Vigo was a man on a mission, who knew his time was limited. When, during the making of Zéro de Conduite, a sympathetic colleague had suggested in the face of one of his reckless provocations (possibly the casting of a dwarf as the school principal), that Vigo might choose to pick his battles and keep his powder dry for another day, Vigo was clear: no, he wasn't going to live to fight another day, he had to create as much as he could now. With his writing partner, Albert Riéra, he took a wrecking ball to Guinée's screenplay. Most significantly, they replaced the wise old man character with one who would be more of a disruptive influence on the romantic leads than a guiding one: the embodiment of Vigo's own anarchic sensibility.

Le père Jules, as the character was dubbed – re-envisioned as a crusty, irascible water rat with a chequered past – was played by Michel Simon, already ten years into his film career and best known, then as now, for playing the title role in Jean Renoir's classic Boudu, Saved from Drowning the year before. Even 80 years on, his presence in L'Atalante is dangerous and thrilling.

One of the most remarkable and enduring things about L'Atalante is the breadth of Vigo's aesthetic vision – just as the barge of the title is a vessel that tries (and fails) to contain the whole world in microcosm (like the new-minted marriage of Jean and Juliette), Vigo's ambition and impatience led him to produce a kaleidoscopic blend of documentary realism, swooning surrealism, knockabout comedy and

frank eroticism, bridging the gap between the film worlds of Jean Renoir and Jean Cocteau. Simon's skill and commitment as an improviser was in this context a gift to Vigo – introducing an element of radical unpredictability into the mix. One of the film's many signature sequences is the long, heavily improvised scene in Jules's cabin, overrun by the barely trained cats Vigo insisted on adding to the film, in which Juliette (a heartbreakingly open Dita Parlo) swings from a guarded disdain for Jules to fear, to a tenderness and intimacy that skirts the erotic. There are few moments more shiveringly fine and true in any film than Juliette involuntarily sticking out her tongue as if to lick up the blood Jules has drawn by cutting his own hand with a knife, in a display of obscurely motivated (or maybe not that obscurely motivated) bravado.

That moment mirrors a moment earlier in the film where Juliette kisses a fresh wound on Jean's cheek. Film history does not record whether that wound was real, but in the previous shot, Jean (Jean Dasté) had been seen to slip and fall on the deck of the barge, only to be set upon by a faceful of squalling cats, and we do know that Vigo and a colleague literally threw the cats in Dasté's face from just out of shot, so it's possible that it was. Vigo, in collaboration with cinematographer Boris Kaufman (who would go on to win an Oscar for On the Waterfront and was the brother of Dziga Vertov, the director of Man with a movie camera) uses visual echoes and poetic doublings like this throughout the film: the early shot of Juliette walking the length of the barge in the moonlight, glowing supernally in the dark, finds an echo later in one of the most famous images from the film, when Jean dives into the canal and sees the face of the true love from whom he has become parted.

This sequence is followed in short order by the film's most rapturous and frankly erotic sequence – a fever dream of the two separated lovers alone in their beds, made one on screen by the strength of their passion.

I should stop before I've talked about every sequence in the film – there's so much to discover here, and I envy anyone seeing L'Atalante for the first time during its extended run at the BFI. Even the film's many rough edges (some plot strands are vestigial, and some key shots don't come off, like the final overhead shot of the barge that's supposed to rise up to show the riverbanks, but doesn't, because the camera plane crashed) feel very much part of its aesthetic whole – an intermittently welcome side effect of Vigo's commitment to spontaneity. You can see the roots of the French new wave here, but also beyond: every American maker of quirky indie films is arguably trying to catch some of Vigo's lightning in their bottle.

It's fitting, by the way, that the BFI is showing this extended run of L'Atalante – after many years of incomplete restorations undertaken by Gaumont and others, it was only in 1990 in the BFI's Stephen Street archive that the print was found that forms the basis of the current official version of the film.

From: http://mostlyfilm.com/2012/01/19/latalante-at-the-bfi/

Further viewing:
Jean Vigo only made four films, three of which were shorts: *The Complete Jean Vigo* DVD set from Artificial Eye contains them all – *A Propos de Nice* (25 mins, 1930), *Taris* (9 mins, 1931), *Zéro de Conduite* (41 mins, 1933) and *L'Atalante* (89 mins, 1934) – together with a lot of supporting material.

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