Jean Vigo
By Michael Almereyda

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 undertcurrent, 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 easy films, additionally groundbreaking in its mix of staged elements and material shot with a hidden camera. Documentary truth gets 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.”

Zero 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 kids 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 him 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, inextinguishable, 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

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 Caravan descent, who took the nom de guerre Miguel Almereyda 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 testified 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 wrecked 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 “Lydia” Losinska, and they were together for the rest of his life. Lydie’s prosperous father supplied funds for the camera used to shoot A 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 Zero 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,” intises 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 Zero 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 overcame 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 white 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 an 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 intimate 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.

Jenni 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 sourfaced high spirits that link Dada to Sid Vicious. But by the time he made L’Atlantide, 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 Jauhère’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


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 brutes, poets, and provocateurs—the mostly marginal figures whose work is recklessly inventive, openhearted, and unmatchable. 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.

Michael Almereyda’s films include Another Girl Another Planet, Nadja, Hamlet, and Paradise. He is the editor of Night Wraps the Sky: Writings by and About Mayakovsky and William Eggleston: For Now, Thanks to Marina DeSousa for translations from the French.

(From The Complete Jean Vigo Blu-ray Collector’s Set by The Criterion Collection)