À Propos de Jean and Boris

By Robert Polito

I wanted Un chien andalou to be projected here today because, although it describes an internal drama in poetic terms, I still think it has all the qualities of true social cinema. Un chien andalou is a very important work for all kinds of reasons. The directing is meticulous, the lighting skillful, the images and visual associations perfectly coherent, the dreams impeccably logical. It is a marvelous confrontation between the rational world and the subconscious.

For his beautiful essay on Vigo in Film Biographies, Stan Brakhage styled the first strain—call it the Vortov strain—of À propos de Nice “realism,” and the second—call it the Buñuel-Dalí strain—“fantasy.” Even more provocatively, Brakhage appropriated the contrary qualities across the Vigo and Kaufman partnership: “Vigo and Kaufman acted catalytically to each other . . . The ‘split’ in their personalities—Boris’s ‘fix’ on scenes of Nice rock-steady, as if he himself were a tripod . . . Jean’s selection-of-scene and cutting creating the whole sense of Nice erupting—a schizophrenic perspective on everything they put their four entangled eyes to depict . . . accomplishing the visual ‘marriage’ of ‘fantasy’ and ‘realism’ as never before.”

Kaufman, who would go on to shoot On the Waterfront (1954) and Baby Doll (1956) for Elia Kazan and 12 Angry Men (1957) and The Flim feeling Broke (1964) for Sidney Lumet, recalled no such intrinsic personality opposition. “Looking back at that period, it was collaboration at its best, when respective efforts fused together for the good of the picture. I can hardly remember filmmaking as free of wasted motions and words . . . The period Vigo in life was the most daring, unrestrained, and creative. Still, the wonder of 2007 of Nice is that Vigo and Kaufman discovered subtle and persuasive cinematic strategies to render the fantastic as if it were the everyday, and the everyday as though it comprised a vision of the end of the world.

When Vigo and Kaufman came together to start filming around Nice early in 1930, Kaufman was living in Paris, after a stint at the Sorbonne, and already had worked on at least four movies—among them Eugene Desaln’s La marche des machines (1927) and Jean Lods’s city symphony 24 heures en 30 minutes (1928). Like so many of the lounging rich they would observe with Kaufman’s concealed Cinéma camera along the Promenade des Anglais, Vigo was in the Mediterranean resort city for his health, following a stay at the Espérance sanatorium at Font-Romeu, where he’d met his also ailing wife, Elisabeth “Lydia” Lozinski. Prior to encountering Kaufman through Lods in the autumn of 1929, Vigo likely would have served just a few weeks as an assistant studio cameraman, and probably shot some zoo footage with the Debut Parvo he purchased with a wedding gift from his father-in-law. But Vigo impressed the impeccable pedigreed youngest brother of Vertov (born Denis Kaufman) and cinematographer Mikhail Kaufman with his “miraculous” filmic savvy. As Kaufman noted to Édouard L. de Lauron and Jonas Mekas:

He came to Paris, called me up, and asked me to show him some of my films. Then he invited me to come down to Nice with him to make a satire on the futility of idle existence . . . This was Vigo’s first experience in the movie field. Yet he was intuitively so well prepared for the cinema that his grasp of the medium seemed to be miraculous. His maturity of understanding, which confirmed itself a couple of years later in Zéro de conduite, made him capable of directing actors—both amateur and professional—without any difficulty at all. He had a perfect ear, a perfect sense of the dramatic.

Kaufman memorialized the film here as “quite carefully planned ahead of time.” During other interviews, however, he dismissed any hint that À propos de Nice was the outcome of premeditation, instead rooting the vitality of the film in their alertness to chance and accident:

The structure of the film evolved from the shooting itself. We would often improvise and would sometimes
let ourselves be surprised by the screen when the rushes came to us. The ideas continually developed. It was very much improvised. Let me give you an example.

The focal point of Nice is of course the Promenade des Anglais, where you can be pushed along to take tea.

When I used the chair for invalids—the wheelchair—to hold the movie camera as Jean was pushing me, while I was shooting cracks in the ground, [those around us] were talking about Russia. It was very amusing. . .

. . . Many inspirations were dictated by what we actually found. We didn’t set up anything, you know. We took the life as it was. One of the most amazing things was the cemetery of Nice, which was in a very rococo style. It permitted us to film the statuary, which was very expressive. In the case of where a child was buried, there was a statue of a mother tearing her hair and breasts.

And we actually found a way of using parallel montage to relate the people on the Promenade des Anglais with the statuary in the cemetery.

The dynamic “parallel montage” editing they used was a signature of 1920s city symphonies, whether Alberto Cavalcanti’s Rien que les heures (1930), Walter Ruttmann’s Berlin: Symphony of a Great City (1927), or Vertov’s Man with a Movie Camera (1929). Because of Vigo’s accent on individual point of view—“The fellow who makes a social documentary clearly states his personal point of view and commits himself one way or another,” he continued in “Towards a Social Cinema”—A propos de Nice managed an improbable advancement: a city symphony that resisted any modernist celebration of the city. Over and over, Vigo and Kaufman summoned the illustrative gestures and tropes of the city symphony—motion, machinery, work, sports, and leisure—only to deflate or negate them. Here, the familiar dawn preparation-for-the-day actions, such as sweeping gutters, picking up papers, and wiping down restaurant tables, soon tip into absurdity as workers beautify trees, brush palm leaves, and refurbish gothic masks. The typical mighty vehicles of locomotion are other toys—the train that deposits the miniature tourists on a casino gaming table at the start of the film—or enervated, as parodied by the ancient newspaper vendor propelling his invalid carriage. The accelerating, often frantic movement exhibits impetuus interspersus—amphibious planes struggle to lift off from the Mediterranean like insects stuck in honey; tennis players and bowlers play poppy, one-sided games; sailboats and race cars never cross a finish line; limousines drop the fashionable on carpeted runways that lead nowhere. Few among the crowds are dashing to work; they only stroll vacantly along the Promenade des Anglais. The old Nice, domain of the poor who sustain the hotels, casinos, and dance halls of the seaside resort, may as well be a remote, if teeming, isolation ward. For Cavalcanti, Ruttmann, and Vertov, factory or park, laborer or tycoon, industry or holiday, all differences melded into a single, organic urban flow; for Vigo and Kaufman, each undertaking they witnessed through their cameras exhibited the stouter steps of an isolate.

Instead of celebrating Nice and modernity, then, A propos de Nice disposes a mordant clarification, a caustic reduction to elemental—the effect William Burroughs named “naked lunch,” a “frozen moment when everyone sees what is at the end of every fork.” Vigo recurrently referenced the strippling away at the crux of his film during his lecture at the Vieux-Colombier:

The aim of the social documentary is achieved when it succeeds in revealing the hidden meaning of a gesture, when it shows up the hidden beauty or the grotesqueness of an ordinary-looking individual. The social documentary must lay bare the mechanism of society by showing it to us in its purely physical manifestations.

And it must do this so forcefully that the world we once looked at with such indifference now appears to us in its essence, stripped of its falsehoods. The social documentary must rip the blinkers from our eyes.

“Hidden,” “lay bare,” “stripped,” “rip the blinkers”—vivid jokes abound regarding this cinematic exposure, especially the trick transformations of the bootblack who rubs away a shoe to disclose the naked foot, and the elegant woman whose sparkling clothes “dissolve” through rapid costume changes until she is nude. But resourcefully, mercilessly, Vigo and Kaufman indicate that there is a city inside the city that the city will not acknowledge. Some of this revelation of secrets is economic—what looks like playful pleasure at the carnival turns out to be big business, as they jump-cut from the stylized Battle of the Flowers to the working women doggedly harvesting the blossoms, and then to the crushed, soiled blooms on the streets. The Nice of the poor within the tourist rendezvous is at once antipode and mirror. By turns, warships in the harbor and giant blackface minstrel heads in the procession intimidate the militarism and racism backing the city’s fortune. The darkest secrets, however, prove more existential.

People reduce to animals—an ostrich, dogs, alligators, and flocks of birds. Humans also tilt toward the inanimate—dolls, masks, and hollow or freakish cemetery statues—much as Nice itself is full of cracks and inevitably will revert to rocks and sea.

Llittle in A propos de Nice is as it appears, and implores partake of their opposite. If that pre-Lenten carnival signals the annual explosion of the city’s repressed libidinous energy, the frenzy also emerges as a furious manifestation of a collective suicide hysteria, “the last gasp of a society in its death throes,” as Vigo concluded in “Towards a Social Cinema.” If those menacing smokestacks at the denouement embody the “revolutionary symbols” (Kaufman’s nostalgic Soviet phrase) of a future apocalyptic democracy, they’re also the furnaces where, on Shrove Tuesday, King Carnival will be raucously burned—and also perhaps the fires of everlasting damnation.

The original feat of A propos de Nice remains this nuanced, complex, and elusive tone—as T. S. Eliot once defined wit, as a “recognition, implicit in the expression of every experience, of other kinds of experience which are possible,” it is a witty work of art. For all that, Vigo and Kaufman’s documented point of view rarely is as distant as those initial heavenly fireworks and sensational aerial shots of the Nice coastline promise. By the time of L’Atalante, just four years later, Vigo’s skills would embrace a radical empathy that surpassed friendship and love, but now his gifts are for implication, his own human entanglement in the situations he is unveiling. For isn’t that carnival clown among the gyrating, leggy dances Vigo! And always I’m struck by the brisk frames of a seaside man cranking his movie camera. Occasionally, he is mistaken for Kaufman, yet he could be almost anyone who in 1930 happened to be shooting on the Promenade des Anglais. What did he film that sunny winter day in Nice?

Robert Polito’s books include the poetry collection Hollywood & God & as well as Farber on Film: The Complete Film Writings of Manny Farber. Savage Art, his biography of noir novelist Jim Thompson, received the National Book Critics Circle Award.