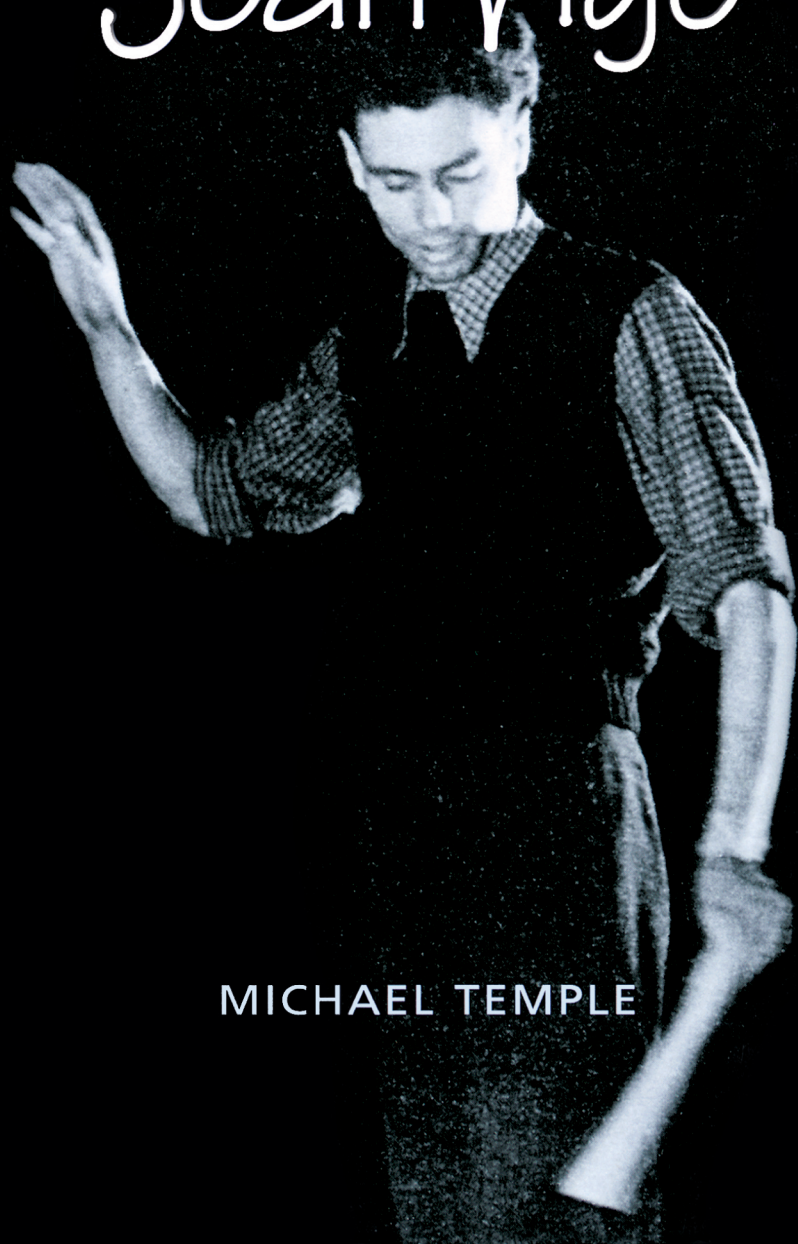


FRENCH FILM DIRECTORS

Jean Vigo



MICHAEL TEMPLE

Jean Vigo

MANCHESTER
1824

Manchester University Press

FRENCH FILM DIRECTORS

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Series editors' foreword

To an anglophone audience, the combination of the words 'French' and 'cinema' evokes a particular kind of film: elegant and wordy, sexy but serious – an image as dependent on national stereotypes as is that of the crudely commercial Hollywood blockbuster, which is not to say that either image is without foundation. Over the past two decades, this generalised sense of a significant relationship between French identity and film has been explored in scholarly books and articles, and has entered the curriculum at university level and, in Britain, at A-level. The study of film as an art-form and (to a lesser extent) as industry, has become a popular and widespread element of French Studies, and French cinema has acquired an important place within Film Studies. Meanwhile, the growth in multi-screen and 'art-house' cinemas, together with the development of the video industry, has led to the greater availability of foreign-language films to an English-speaking audience. Responding to these developments, this series is designed for students and teachers seeking information and accessible but rigorous critical study of French cinema, and for the enthusiastic filmgoer who wants to know more.

The adoption of a director-based approach raises questions about *auteurism*. A series that categorises films not according to period or to genre (for example), but to the person who directed them, runs the risk of espousing a romantic view of film as the product of solitary inspiration. On this model, the critic's role might seem to be that of discovering continuities, revealing a necessarily coherent set of themes and motifs which correspond to the particular genius of the individual. This is not our aim: the *auteur* perspective on film, itself most clearly articulated in France in the early 1950s, will be interrogated in certain volumes of the series, and, throughout, the director will be treated as one highly significant element in a complex process of film production and reception which includes socio-economic and political determinants, the work of a large and highly skilled

team of artists and technicians, the mechanisms of production and distribution, and the complex and multiply determined responses of spectators.

The work of some of the directors in the series is already known outside France, that of others is less so – the aim is both to provide informative and original English-language studies of established figures, and to extend the range of French directors known to anglophone students of cinema. We intend the series to contribute to the promotion of the informal and formal study of French films, and to the pleasure of those who watch them.

DIANA HOLMES
ROBERT INGRAM

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1

The cinema incarnate

Tous les cinéastes cherchent le Cinéma et le découvrent partiellement.
Vigo est le Cinéma incarné dans un homme.¹ (Langlois 1986: 283)

This superlative assessment of the films and reputation of Jean Vigo was written in 1956 by no less a figure than Henri Langlois, the historic founder of the Cinémathèque française and one of the most influential personalities in twentieth-century film culture. It is possible that Langlois's words, composed for the celebration of the Cinémathèque's twentieth anniversary, may now sound somewhat extreme, excessive, even slightly absurd. For how can a single artist, man or woman, be said to embody in such a mysterious way the essence of an art form? Is it the legendary story of Vigo's tragic life that Langlois is evoking here? Or is it the exemplary nature of Vigo's work that Langlois seeks to identify with the very secret of cinema? Perhaps he means to suggest both these ideas, in other words, that through a mixture of the life and the art into a cultural emblem, such as 'Shakespeare' standing for Literature, 'Mozart' for Music, or 'Picasso' for Painting, the name of 'Jean Vigo' has come to evoke a certain idea of cinema, which Langlois has then projected onto a universal scale? Even if we allow for a degree of exaggeration, however, Langlois's identification of 'Vigo' and 'Cinema' must surely still seem paradoxical. After all, when this young French artist died in 1934 at the age of 29, he bequeathed just four films to his small group of admirers, and to a largely indifferent public. Two short documentaries – *À propos de Nice* (1930), *Taris ou la natation*

1 'All filmmakers are searching for Cinema and discover it partially. Vigo is Cinema incarnate in one man.'

(1931) – one short fiction – *Zéro de conduite* (1933) – and one full-length feature – *L'Atalante* (1934). The total running time of Vigo's slim filmography is less than three hours, and his complete works are reproduced in Gaumont's two-DVD box set, *L'Intégrale Jean Vigo* (2001), with plenty of room for extra features. And yet the most remarkable aspect of Langlois's paradox is that for several generations of film-lovers in the second half of the twentieth century, particularly in France but also more generally across the world, this bold claim that 'Vigo is Cinema incarnate' would have sounded neither shocking nor unreasonable. Indeed, it would more likely have been received as rather an elegant formulation of a commonly held belief.

Our aim in this book is to convey to the contemporary reader, especially the film student coming to Jean Vigo for the very first time, a sense of the awe and enthusiasm that those four films – *À propos de Nice*, *Taris ou la natation*, *Zéro de conduite*, and *L'Atalante* – have inspired among filmmakers, critics, historians, archivists and fans, ever since the tragic death of their creator in 1934. As a vital part of that story, we shall start in this first chapter by presenting the key biographical features of Vigo's early life, in particular the traumatic events of his childhood and the violent death of his father. In the following chapters, we shall focus on the quartet of films one by one. In [Chapter 2](#), 'On the subject of documentary', we shall discuss how the two short documentaries, *À propos de Nice* and *Taris ou la natation*, were an experimental apprenticeship in the art of filmmaking. In [Chapter 3](#), 'The personal and the political', we shall analyse his semi-autobiographical fiction *Zéro de conduite* as a fable of libertarian revolt. And in [Chapter 4](#), entitled 'An unknown masterpiece', we shall examine how Vigo attempted the transition to mainstream cinema with *L'Atalante*, his only full-length feature film. For each work we shall relate the circumstances in which it was made, from conception through to exhibition, and discuss some of the most significant reactions that it provoked at the time and in later years. We shall also explore the structure, themes, technique and style of the work, drawing on Vigo's handful of theoretical writings, where these are appropriate (see the Select bibliography). The final chapter, 'Visions of Vigo', will situate in post-war French film culture the exceptional critical fortune of *À propos de Nice*, *Taris ou la natation*, *Zéro de conduite* and *L'Atalante*, which has transformed the slender corpus of a once almost unknown filmmaker into one of French cinema's greatest names.

So let us now begin with some basic biographical information about Vigo's extraordinary childhood, as well as some historical background to the key formative events of his early years.

A brief life

On écrit des articles, on parle de 'Jean Vigo', sans penser que c'est un pauvre petit bien malheureux.² (Salles Gomes 1988 [1957]: 37)

Jean Vigo was born 26 April 1905 at 25 rue Polonceau in the 18th arrondissement, not far from Montmartre in the North of Paris. He died on the other side of town, 5 October 1934, at 23 rue Gazan in the 14th arrondissement, opposite the Montsouris park. Expressed in such simple terms, just twenty-nine years between two dates and two places, this is indeed a brief life. Film history rightly remembers Vigo for his short and remarkable career as a filmmaker, from 1929 to 1934, and we celebrate the artistic legacy of his intriguingly unfinished work. But the story of his life before cinema, especially his family circumstances and childhood experiences, is no less extraordinary, and it throws an interesting light on the creative years that followed. His parents were Émilie Cléro and Eugène Bonaventure de Vigo, although his father was more commonly known by his pseudonym of Miguel Almereyda. They had met as political activists, committed to the anarchist cause and the revolutionary overthrow of the French Third Republic at the turn of the twentieth century. This regime was an essentially conservative parliamentary democracy, built on the fragile social consensus that had come into being in 1870 after the loss of the Franco-Prussian War, the fall of Emperor Louis Napoléon, and the bloody suppression of the Paris Commune. Although the final decade of the nineteenth century and the opening years of the twentieth tend to be remembered in popular culture as the 'Belle Époque', an age considered beautiful no doubt in contrast to the inconceivable horrors that were unleashed by the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, this period of French history was in fact marked by dramatic social conflict and considerable

2 'People write articles and talk about "Jean Vigo" without realising that he's a poor unfortunate kid.' The phrase comes from a letter by Jean de Saint-Prix, October 1917.

political uncertainty. After the sacrifices and losses of the Great War, it is understandable that the comforting images of peaceful stability and progressive reform evoked by the term 'Belle Époque' should be preferred retrospectively to the ugly memories of the era's 'Guerre Sociale' (as Miguel Almereyda had entitled the weekly newspaper that he founded in 1906). This social war was fought against a background of regular economic crises and political controversies; frequent strikes, street battles and police repression; the profoundly divisive Dreyfus affair and the separation of church and state; above all, the constant ideological pressure and revolutionary threats exerted on the Third Republic from the extreme right (nationalist, monarchist, catholic) and extreme left (socialist, syndicalist, anarchist). It was into this turbulent world of radical politics that Vigo was born in 1905, the year of the foundation of the French socialist party, or SFIO, by Jean Jaurès (whose assassination at the Café du Croissant in July 1914 Almereyda and son would later witness at close hand). There exist several contemporary accounts of the young 'Nono', as he was known as a child, being passed around anarchist meetings from comrade to friend, or left with neighbourly sympathisers while Jean's parents were otherwise politically engaged. The intense yet informal solidarity of these bohemian circles was later to be reproduced in the filmmaking community of faithful accomplices that formed around Vigo during his creative years.

The launching of *La Guerre sociale* in 1906 marks the start of the second phase of Miguel Almereyda's career, both ideologically and in terms of his integration into the political caste. Between 1906 and 1912, when he joins the Socialist Party, Almereyda's earlier revolutionary anarchism changes into a republican socialism, in other words, his political philosophy evolves from a belief in the destruction of the state as the means to transform society, towards a belief in the transformation of society by means of the state. This new ideological pragmatism is accompanied by Almereyda's entry into the corridors of power and the world of finance, a move that draws money, influence and protection towards the cause, but also confirms his changing social status from political outlaw to rising left-wing entrepreneur. Indeed, *La Guerre sociale* triples its circulation to some fifty thousand copies a week between 1908 and 1913, when Almereyda leaves to start a new venture, the satirical *Bonnet rouge*. By this time, however, Almereyda's financial affairs (*Le Bonnet rouge* is soon receiving support in cash from private

businesses, government departments and possibly foreign sources) and personal life (several mistresses, houses, cars and increasingly ill health) have become so compromised and complicated that few of his erstwhile comrades-in-arms now recognise the young political prisoner of 1900, who had chosen his militant identity because it was an anagram of the anarchist slogan 'Y a la merde!' (literally, 'there's shit!'). But if many of his former friends consider Almereyda definitively lost to the revolutionary cause, it is unlikely that any of them could have imagined the dreadful circumstances of his impending political and personal downfall.

In August 1914, with the outbreak of the First World War, *Le Bonnet rouge*, and Almereyda in particular, soon became easy targets for the extreme right-wing press. For the next three years, Alphonse Daudet and *L'Action française* waged an unrelenting campaign against the supposedly 'defeatist' stance of Almereyda's pro-peace journal, constantly accusing 'Vigo the traitor' of unspecified, and therefore all the more terrible, crimes against France. Such persistent attacks eventually paid off, in July 1917, when the business administrator of *Le Bonnet rouge*, a certain Duval, was arrested coming back from one of his regular trips to Switzerland – with a cheque for 100,000 francs to be drawn on a German bank account! At this point, *Le Bonnet rouge* and Almereyda could no longer offer much resistance to the enraged criticism from the far right, nor to the more controlled assault from future national leader Georges Clemenceau. The latter, as part of his strategy to assume control of the flagging war effort, successfully exploited this murky affair, and launched a double attack on the two main political obstacles blocking his path to power: Louis Malvy, the Interior Minister, and Joseph Caillaux, the leader of the Radical party. Since both men had longstanding financial and political links with Almereyda, Clemenceau was able to accuse them of 'commerce with the enemy', by association with Duval and the 'affair of *Le Bonnet rouge*'. He thus succeeded in removing his opponents from the scene, at least until the end of the war. It is amidst this complex political manoeuvring that Vigo's father met his violent and mysterious end. Young Jean was in fact physically present when the police raided Almereyda's suburban villa at Saint-Cloud on 4 August 1917, then the offices of *Le Bonnet rouge*, where they found a number of compromising military documents in the safe. Almereyda was arrested, sent first to the Santé prison in the 14th arrondissement, then transferred for

reasons of bad health to the Fresnes prison outside Paris. On the night of 13–14 August, Almereyda was strangled against the bars of his cell with his own shoelaces, and the following morning when the body was found a verdict of suicide was hastily agreed. He was 34 years old; his son Jean was 12.

My life as a kid

Who can imagine what effect such terrible events must have had on the young Jean Vigo? As we shall see later in this book, the figure of Miguel Almereyda returns to haunt Vigo's films in a variety of guises: it is the journalist's satirical venom that flows through *À propos de Nice*; his anarchist idealism that inspires *Zéro de conduite*; and his left wing humanist values that inform the social realism of *L'Atalante*. Certainly Vigo was convinced all his life that Almereyda was innocent of 'commerce with the enemy', and that his father had been murdered in his prison cell as the victim of a political plot. It seems likely, however, that the son's sincere ambition to clear his father's name, through the legal process, was strongly discouraged by Almereyda's former anarchist comrades. They did not believe that their friend was guilty of treason, but rather they feared what else Jean might discover about Almereyda's private affairs and political entanglements, and that this information might tarnish the heroic image of his father that Jean had cherished throughout his adolescence.

Those teenage years were spent at a safe distance from Paris and the cruel spotlight of the 'Almereyda/*Bonnet rouge*' scandal. At first in semi-clandestinity, adopting the name 'Jean Salles' (after his paternal grandmother, Aimée Salles), Vigo pursued his secondary education from 1917 to 1925 at a number of locations across provincial France. He only returned to Paris occasionally in order to visit his mother, Émily Cléro. Immediately after Almereyda's death in 1917, Émily had decided to send her son away from Paris to Montpellier, where he was taken into the care of Almereyda's stepfather, Gabriel Aubès, whose family had already looked after Jean as a young child. We should note that it is Aubès, a professional photographer, who seems to have introduced Vigo to the art of images, teaching him the basic techniques of the craft, just as twenty years earlier he had trained the young Almereyda to be his photographic assistant. Together, Aubès and his wife Antoinette

now took charge of Vigo's future, and in early 1918 a certain 'Jean Salles' was sent to school in nearby Nîmes, where the sympathetic headmaster turned a blind eye to the real identity of the infamous traitor's son. The following academic year, the young 'Salles' changed schools, from Nîmes to the college at Millau in the Midi-Pyrénées region. It was believed that the purer climate there would benefit Jean's already fragile health (like Almereyda and Eugène de Vigo, his paternal grandfather, the boy was considered 'tubercular', although in those days the term was probably employed to cover a whole range of ailments and conditions). For the next four years, until the age of 17, Vigo was an intern at Millau, after which he was transferred to another boarding school in Chartres, so that he could be nearer Émile Clérou in Paris. However, it would appear that during this period Jean became increasingly estranged from his mother, probably because of a disagreement about Almereyda's reputation. In July 1924, 'Jean Vigo', as he then called himself once more, finally completed his baccalaureate certificate, thus bringing to a close his strange journey through the French educational establishment.

What traces of this remarkable childhood do we find in Vigo's later works? We know from the evidence of a diary written by Jean in 1918–19, as well as from the testimony of many of his former schoolmates, that a number of incidents and aspects of this college life were later reproduced dramatically in *Zéro de conduite* (Vigo 1953: 77–95). These include the scene with the sleep-walking boy, the famous 'Can he go now, sir?' dialogue, the quasi-homosexual relationship between the young 'girl' and the older boy, even the names of several of the characters (Bruehl, Caussat, Colin). At a more general level, Vigo's representation of the enclosed, heavily disciplined, semi-incarcerated existence of the children in *Zéro de conduite* retains such an odour of authenticity and anger about it that he must surely have been drawing on his personal recollections. The film captures perfectly the diffuse teen-spirit of boredom and rebelliousness that permeates such institutions (as Lindsay Anderson so compellingly illustrated in *If ...*, his 1968 British remake of the film). We shall return to this topic in Chapter 3, 'The personal and the political', but let us note in passing how closely these biographical and historical aspects of our study of Vigo's work are interlinked with its aesthetic qualities, as well as its ideological dimension. As Vigo once stated to a journalist who asked

him what *Zéro de conduite* was about: 'Ce film est tellement ma vie de gosse que j'ai hâte de faire autre chose'³ (Chardère 1961: 68).

Love and cinema

Upon leaving the college at Chartres in the summer of 1925, Vigo moved temporarily to Paris, apparently already inspired with the idea of pursuing a career in cinema. It may well have been the photographer Gabriel Aubès who first suggested to him that one might seriously earn one's living in this manner, but in any case Vigo's utter lack of contacts and experience would mean that for the time being this project was little more than a young man's dream. In the autumn, like many a future artist uncertain of his way, he enrolled as a student at the Sorbonne, opting for courses in sociology and philosophy. Rather than cinema or higher education, however, it was Vigo's poor health that was to set the rhythm and direction of his life for the next few years. Having fallen seriously ill, early in 1926, Jean left his mother in Paris once more for the Aubès family in Montpellier, where medical examinations confirmed his lungs to be in such a delicate state that a period of convalescence in the mountains was strongly recommended. Thus in August 1926, at the age of 21, Jean was sent to the 'Espérance' clinic at Font-Romeu in the Pyrenees mountains of south-west France, not far from the Spanish border and the Andorra region where the Vigo family has its historic roots. There he would remain until the autumn of 1928, occasionally returning to Paris or Montpellier, but spending the majority of this time at the clinic, no doubt experiencing the fluctuations of depression and hope that necessarily accompany the evolution of such a chronic illness.

Looking at the course of Vigo's existence up to this point, marked as it is by poverty, illness, death, violence and exile, one could easily understand if the young man had simply given up on life altogether. Two crucial factors, however, seem to have carried him through this difficult and potentially fatal period. They are cinema and love. Firstly, his commitment to film, his passion to learn more about his chosen craft, were strengthened by reading some key texts in the early history

3 'This film is so much my life as a kid that I'm in a hurry to do something else.'