1

Cinema and/as Poetry

L'Atalante's Apples as Poems

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> *"It is the essence of poetry that liberates us from the reality of the accepted and firmly established world, in which we believe we are living, to open up to us the multiform relations of other worlds which are possible, however evanescent."* (Leo Spitzer, 1963)

As the discussion of the development of the French film industry in the Introduction should make clear, the failure of the major French studios early on lay in their belief that "the classic Hollywood style" could be replicated in France.[1] The plethora of small independent producers that followed the big studios' demise also favored the rise of "auteurs" who were freed from the concerns of big-market popularization, and who, being French, immediately launched into a heated debate over the direction the seventh art was meant to take. From a fairground attraction, French film was transformed into "a work of art," a kind of "painting and sculpture developing in time."[2] Such was the euphoria surrounding this rebirth of cinema as "le film d'art," Jean Epstein would announce that "the cinema is poetry's most powerful medium," and predict that "within five years we will be writing film poems."[3]

From this position it was but a short step to see the "cinema as a language … a form of ideographic writing,"[4] and Jean Epstein set out "to establish the premises for a cinematic grammar or rhetoric … a grammar peculiar to itself."[5] This new "cinégraphie" would become, in Abel Gance's

words, "a new language, a mode of expression of rhythms and truth."[6] Throughout the 1920s, French critics and filmmakers increasingly advanced this idea of cinema as poetry with its own language. In this hotbed of debate, the filmmakers became "poets … working in the hope of raising the intellectual level of the cinema"[7] struggling against a tradition they abhorred, more outlaws than participants in an industry. Indeed, the filmmaker as outlaw was to become a favorite signature of French cinema for the next eighty years.[8]

As students of French cinema, we cannot jump unthinkingly into this debate without asking, "What is poetry?" – just as we began our meditation on Gallic film with the question, "What is cinema?" The answer would have been relatively easy in earlier times, when poetry was recognized as much by its adherence to formal conventions as by the elevation of its discourse. Until the advent of Baudelaire's prose poems in the mid-nineteenth century, no French poet would dream of writing verse that was not set in a standard form (the sonnet, for example, must have 14 lines, each line twelve syllables and each line rhymed with others in recognizable patterns). Poetry, for the most part, eschewed the vulgar language of the street in favor of a style whose vocabulary aspired to higher standards of elocution. This classic tendency is nowhere better captured than in Keats's lines:

> Beauty is truth, truth beauty, – that is all
> Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.

This attitude would persist until Victor Hugo famously debunked it in his *Préface de Cromwell* where he would argue that "the drama is the grotesque in conjunction with the sublime," that poetry must not limit itself to flattering its subject but must instead treat the entire range of human experience. To accomplish his aim, Hugo argues that the language of poetry can no longer be limited by esthetic rules, but must seek to break all rules. As a result of this evolution, through the realism of the nineteenth century and concluding in the relativism of the twentieth century, we no longer feel at ease in attempting to define poetry along formal lines.

How then should we go about it? By what means shall poetry be defined? Let's try an experiment that may help.

Suppose that on a given day in January, the 15th for example, we picked up the morning paper and read: "Yesterday, an automobile speeding down I 95 at a speed police estimated to be ninety-five miles per hour, hurtled into a sycamore tree. Its three occupants were pronounced dead on arrival

at St Lazarus's Hospital in Dedham." We would normally adopt what we might call a "referential" (*not* a reverential) attitude toward this news item, culling from it the needed information on this accident.

Suppose, on the other hand, we were to rearrange these same words in the following manner:[9]

HARD FACTS

Yesterday
An auto
mobile
speed
ing down
I
Ninety-five
at a
speed
police
estimated
TO BE
Ninety-five
Miles an hour
Hurtled into a
Syc
amore tree
Its three
Occupants were
pronounced
DEAD
on arrival at

St. Lazarus Hospital in

Ded
ham.

Milosh Afterman (translated from the French by Al Foreman-Smith)

Let's assume, for the moment that this second text is a poem – not because it strikes us as "poetic" but simply because the arrangement of the words on the page announces it as such. Take a few minutes, then, and jot down as many differences as you can find between these two sets of identical words differently arranged on the page.

You will have noticed that the "poet" has chosen to arrange his text vertically rather than horizontally, that he has created a bizarre arrangement of spacing, and that he has elected to capitalize some words and to break others into fragments. You would no doubt add that, were any journalist to present this form of the text to his editor, the former would either be summarily dismissed or sent home to sober up.

Now if I were to ask you to tell me the difference in the *function* of the word "yesterday" in each text, you might have more difficulty in answering. Certainly the function of "yesterday" in the news item is purely referential: it tells us that the accident happened on January 14. But in the poem? There being no dateline, we are forced to conclude that the text has a timelessness about it which is disconcerting. The word beckons to us, urges us to consider its various possibilities. Indeed, from this perspective, we can now see that each of the words in the poem is waving to us like so many circus clowns, each vying for our attention, each disguised behind a mask whose significance escapes yet fascinates us. The frustrating conclusion (which drives so many readers away from poetry) is that the meaning is no longer evident, unambiguous, easy to grasp. If these words no longer point to a real event, what *do* they point to? What are they *up* to? As Joyce's Molly Bloom would say, "Tell us in plain words!"

As we search for answers, our eye moves up and down the page trying to make some "sense" of this jumble. What begins to emerge is a pattern of repetitions (which formerly might be called rhymes): the word "speed" is isolated in such a way that its repetition becomes a kind of uncanny theme for the poem as a whole. The words "DEAD" and "Ded" are also paired suggesting a connection between the two sets of rhymes. And now the connection between the *capitalized* "TO BE" comes into play with the *capitalized* word "DEAD." "Speed TO BE DEAD" would seem to be one of the subliminal messages this poem is *trying simultaneously to hide and to express*. But then the capitalized "I" re-emerges to join itself to this set. "I speed TO BE DEAD" hauntingly whispers to us from among the words on the page, now drawing other fragments into its nexus. The word "syc" [sick] now adds its infectious connotations to this message. Does the repetition of "ninety-five" suggest a date or an age?

Other uncanny messages begin to appear. Certainly when we read the news item, we do not linger over the fact that the car was not driven into but, seemingly of its own volition, "hurtled into a tree." In the poem, however, the emphasis caused by the fracturing of the AUTO mobile makes a case for some HAL-like machine[10] which, having discovered its own robotic power, has elected to run amok. (In the process the poetic car

and tree have been typographically shattered and its three allegorical passengers separated violently from each other and their lives).

Now we might wonder why the poet has chosen to begin his poem with "yesterday," a word unanchored from any specific historical moment and left afloat in our consciousness. If you say the word a few times, you might, as many of my students have done, find yourself humming the Beatles song, "Yesterday, all my troubles seemed so far away." Or you might, as still others of my students have done, find yourself remembering Macbeth's celebrated soliloquy:

> Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow
> Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
> To the last syllable of recorded time;
> And all our *yesterdays* have lighted fools
> The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
> Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
> That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
> And then is heard no more: it is a tale
> Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
> Signifying nothing.[11]

In other words, because it is a *poetic* text, it is likely to call up memories of other poetic texts we have encountered, and to gain new meanings by its association with them. In this case, the word "yesterday" evokes both the possibility of innocence and dreadful foreshadowing.

Happily, again because it is a poem, we do not necessarily have to choose between these two different possibilities. Like the contents of our own unconscious, both meanings may entertain an uneasy coexistence. The poem, in all its mystery, neither demands nor allows us to be sure of a single interpretation. When, over the years, I have asked my students to give me their interpretation of this "poem", many different and entirely plausible possibilities have emerged:

- The poem alludes to the increasing mechanization of our lives and warns us of impending disaster. But, given the allusion to Lazarus, perhaps it is not too late!
- The poem alludes to our sick tendencies toward self-destructive behavior.
- Because of the allusion to Lazarus, the poem is a modern retelling of Christ's miraculous power to save us from the jaws of death.
- Because it was translated from the French, the poem may allude to the death of Albert Camus and two companions who, in 1960, were killed

as they were driving along a French national road and crashed into a sycamore tree.
- And, perhaps stretching the limits of interpretation, the poem may allude to the discovery in 1895 of the cinema, in which movement was introduced, allowing the actions of the past to survive forever on celluloid.

You may have found other interpretations of your own! Whichever one(s) we choose, we shall nevertheless have noticed that a number of important characteristics of poetry have emerged from our experiment:

- Poetry asks us to adopt an attitude quite opposed to the one we employ when reading journalistic or informational material. We do not look for its words to refer to or narrate events in the real world but instead to imagine or interpret events.
- A poem presents us with a rebus, an enigma, a riddle to be solved and its pleasure derives, as in sudoku, crosswords or jigsaw puzzles, from making the pieces fit in a comprehensible way. Unlike the other puzzles we have mentioned, however, there may be more than one possible solution.
- The words in a poem (unlike those in the newspaper) demand to be read individually and then linked by association with other words in the poem and those in other poems.
- Whereas a news item is to be read once, from left to right, from beginning to end, to gather information, a poem is to be read repeatedly, forwards, backwards and intermittently to seize the multiple connections between words.
- Words in poems are assumed to be dense, to have the possibility of meaning several different things; that is, they are metaphorical and allow meanings to move (the original denotation of the Greek word μεταφορά) from one sign to another.
- The poem is timeless and is both complete unto itself and never entirely finite (because it can allude to other texts).
- Whereas journalism should be unequivocal and straightforward, poetry seeks to be multivalent and metaphorical.
- In almost every respect, poems and dreams are to be interpreted by like means.

Whether poetry takes a particular form, voice, stance or rhythmic arrangement is no longer a defining characteristic of the genre. What *does* seem to define it, in modern times, is rather the set of attitudes and approaches we bring to it.

But you must be asking, "Of course, this is all well and good for poetry written with words whose meanings and arrangements are accessible to the reader, but what is the corresponding message delivered in film? How can we possibly 'read' a film the way we read poetry?" Indeed, we must discover how a film makes meaning. For the most part, we tend to restrict our understanding of film's meaning to the events of the story and the lines spoken in the dialogue. In this respect, film operates much as literature does, through narrative codes (What happens? Who wins? Who loses?) and/or through sociological codes (What is the setting? What is the social class of the characters at the outset? Does their situation change or remain static? Does the film carry a social or political message that we should take away with us?). *On the Waterfront*, for example, presents a situation in which individual freedoms are being threatened by the strong-arm tactics of the corrupt dockworkers' unions in New York in the 1950s. The film tells the story of a heroic individual who dares to stand up to the union bosses and liberate his co-workers from these oppressive conditions. The director Kazan's message seems utterly American, pitting the heroic individual against the oppressive machine that would crush him. His revolt against the bosses – even against his own family – is undoubtedly inspirational, and is doubly so given the performance of the iconic Marlon Brando. And yet the film was produced at a time when unions were struggling on behalf of workers who had faced equally catastrophic conditions when they opposed corporations unfettered by union representation. The "classic Hollywood style" promotes a single interpretation (the heroic individual's defeat of the corrupt unions), itself unfettered by the very complicated political situation of the time.

Narrative and sociological codes, however, can themselves be complicated by cinematic ones – and this will be especially true of a cinema that seeks to maximize poetic style. To appreciate these other cinematic codes, then, we must ask what in film corresponds to the "poetic effects" of our illustration of poetry. Fiction film does, of course, work through narrative, costume, scenery, and dialogue to produce a story. But none of these elements are specific to the cinema. If, instead, we ask, as the French were doing throughout the 1920s, "what elements of film are, in fact, *specific* to the medium?" we arrive at another entirely different set of potential meanings.

Specific to the cinema is the *combination* of codes that are produced by the set of properties of the apparatus that has recorded and arranged the "events" we see: the camera, the composition of the shot, the lighting, the soundtrack and of course, the editing. Each of these elements is capable of producing a multitude of different effects: *the camera* can remain stationary

or travel. While stationary, it can pan horizontally or vertically, or can zoom toward or away from its object. It can vary its focus to capture one or another aspect of the scene. In every one of these camera effects we can discover a different meaning. When it "travels," it can be moved horizontally on wheels or tracks, or vertically on a crane or a plane. It can also be carried, and the hand-held camera usually produces a very immediate sense of being in the action of the scene rather than experiencing it as an observer.

Because we see the film on a rectangular screen, any given shot is framed like a painting. Each of these *compositions* can communicate something about the scene, whether the space is ordered or not, whether the space feels open or restricted, whether the image feels symmetrical or not. All of these elements are carefully arranged to produce specific ideas in the spectator's mind.

Likewise, *the lighting* of the scene can produce different interpretations according to the source, power, and coloration of the lighting. Harsh frontal lighting would create an entirely different interpretation of events than would a soft bath of diffused light. Back lighting can produce a halo. Points of light can draw our attention to various elements in the scene before us.

The possibilities of *the soundtrack* are also infinite: sound can originate directly from the fictional world we are watching (called diegetic sound), or can have its source outside that world as, for example, the music that thrills us into the first images of *Star Wars*, or in the extra-diegetic voice that announces that Truffaut's *The Story of Adele H.* is taking place in Halifax during the American Civil War. Sounds "off," originating in the world of the film but not yet visible, can produce relief or terror.

The uses of *editing* are also so complex and varied that we can only suggest their range here. Rudolf Arnheim, who authored *Film as Art*, and Sergei Eisenstein, the great Russian director and theorist, both argued that editing is the primary source of poetry in cinema since, through rapid juxtapositions of elements, the cinema can replicate poetic metaphor. A crowd descending the stairs of the Paris Metro followed immediately by the image of a flock of sheep leaves little doubt as to the poetic possibilities of the seventh art. Beyond such juxtapositions, much meaning can be derived from the use of an overlap dissolve in which one image fades gradually into another, as opposed to the use of a fade to black which can either serve as mere punctuation, or, in the hands of Jim Jarmusch, be felt as an eerie loss of consciousness from which we awaken uneasily. Special editing effects such as the iris (where the image is erased by a shrinking circle, imitating the closing of the human eye) or a wipe (where one image

"chases" the next across the screen) add to the stock of techniques available to the film's editor. When the French began to experiment with editing in the 1920s they produced films which included shots of merely two to three frames, accelerating the pace of the film so dramatically that the spectators experienced a degree of vertigo. The Japanese, on the other hand, especially Ozu, derive enormous power from extremely long takes of a scene with little action. The effects of editing, so minimized in the classical Hollywood style, with its emphasis on continuity, will become extremely important to the French as they maximize the poetic rather than the narrative aspects of their art.

Once aware of the multiplicity of possibilities that await us as we sit down in the darkened space of the theater, we should feel alarmed. If meaning is to derive from so great a number of different elements, how can we possibly keep track of all of them, much less integrate them into an interpretation of what we have seen?

In my classes, I ask my students to form seven different groups, each group responsible for one single "code" in the segment we are seeking to analyze: one group looks at the camera work, another the lighting, a third the composition, a fourth the soundtrack, a fifth the editing, and a sixth is asked to examine whether the segment contains any direct messages to the viewer (audience address).[12] From all of these various elements, we will patiently "construct" together a sense of the messages that are being projected before us. As a test of how much will be learned from paying attention to the *specifically cinematic* events before us, I also ask the seventh group to report on what happens in the scene, absent of any cinematic analysis. This will allow us to measure the difference between watching the film for its story and the appreciation that should come from seeing the many meanings that are "added" by the director in his choice of the specifically cinematic codes at his disposal.

(As readers of this book, you might want to gather a group of friends and rent a DVD, then, with each person responsible for a specific cinematic code, look at the opening segment of the film. I believe you will be amazed and delighted at the results of your collaborative effort! I will wager that the film in front of you will open up its "secrets" in a remarkably dramatic way.)

Such an approach should allow us to appreciate the specifically *cinematic* effects of a particular scene. When we then apply the other lessons of our literary poetic exercise, we can begin to appreciate such elements as repetition, rhyme, rhythm, and theme when we read the film (as we read the poem) backwards and forwards. Because the cinema was originally invented and intended by its inventors to provide a scientific document of the world

around us, it always has some aspect of journalism to it – that is, it likely seems, by its very photography to begin, like the newspaper article, as a purely referential document. Just as we can rearrange the journal article poetically, so we can see that, in every fiction film, what initially appears to be merely referential has a multitude of poetic effects that, when analyzed, can become visible and can greatly enhance our reading of the words/images before us. Let us, then, bolstered by this appetite for poetic analysis, turn from the poem to Jean Vigo's *L'Atalante* to discover in its *specifically cinematic poetics* the world of meanings that awaits us.

The Poetry of Jean Vigo's *L'Atalante*

"There is no way of completely understanding the films of Jean Vigo," wrote the celebrated French film critic, André Bazin, "unless we try to discover … what particular kind of tenderness, of sensual or sentimental affection they reflect." Bazin invites us to pause for a moment to reflect on Vigo's life – and to do so is to become convinced of how absolutely miraculous it is not only that he managed to overcome extraordinary adversity to create his films, but that *L'Atalante* should have survived.

Jean Vigo was born on April 26, 1905, making him a contemporary of Jean-Paul Sartre. It didn't help his start in life that his father, Miguel, a poor but committed anarchist, lived in drafty, unheated rooms, ate rarely and badly, and dragged his son to one smoke-filled meeting room after another – nor that Jean celebrated his third Christmas in his father's jail cell. Luckily he was frequently exiled to his grandparents' home in Montpellier in the south of France. On August 6, 1917, the twelve-year-old Jean watched as gendarmes searched his house and dragged his father off to jail. One week later, Miguel was found assassinated in his cell. Left virtually orphaned, since Miguel's wife Emily had never professed motherhood to any observable degree, Jean spent his teenage years in various boarding schools where he suffered from a variety of arbitrary regimes that would be exposed in his film, *Zero for Conduct*.

By age 21, Jean had developed what was to be a lifelong passion for the cinema and hoped to sign on with Abel Gance for his production of *Napoleon*, but tuberculosis brought Vigo back to Montpellier and from there to a sanatorium in the nearby mountains. There he met Elizabeth Lozinska ("Lydou"). On their return to Nice in 1928, they married and used Lydou's father's wedding gift of 100,000 francs to buy a Debrie movie camera. After some preliminary shots of the Nice zoo, the two decided to make a "surrealist documentary" about Nice, which initially

got good reviews at its premiere in Paris, but was a commercial failure and quickly slipped from view.

By July 1932, Vigo had met the financier, Jacques-Louis Nounez, who helped produce Jean's first fiction film, *Zero for Conduct*. Of this short film, shot under impossible conditions in the dead of winter, Vigo said, "I deliberately made *Zéro de conduite* a realistic film,"[13] but Vigo's sense of "realism" is clearly closer to surrealism than to the more commonly accepted meanings of the term realism.[14] When it was first shown, Vigo announced, "I wanted *Un Chien Andalou* to be projected here today because … the directing is meticulous, the lighting skillful, the images and visual associations perfectly coherent, the dreams impeccably logical. It is a marvellous confrontation between the rational world and the subconscious … These are rare qualities indeed in a film."[15] Vigo sounds remarkably like an orthodox surrealist in his praise of Buñuel's film and even more like the visionary father of Surrealism, André Breton.[16] Immediately after *Zéro*'s opening in Paris in April 1933, however, the Catholic Church called for it to be banned and the board of censors took action, deeming it "a threat to civil order." The film wouldn't be shown again until its rediscovery after the Second World War.

As if knowing he was running out of time, Vigo went to work immediately on his only full-length fiction film, *L'Atalante*. Sadly, once again, production was delayed until winter had set in, which meant that Vigo's health would be fatally compromised, and he took to his bed almost immediately after completing the editing. He rose only twice before his untimely death a few days after the film ended its short run at the Coliseum Theater in Paris. His first full-length fiction film was to be his last, and was then to be cut apart, "massacred," to appeal to more popular taste by his producers at Gaumont, and was only rediscovered and reassembled in its original form 25 years after its release.

Like the news item of our "experiment," *L'Atalante* could easily be reduced to its storyline and then dismissed as a slow-paced realistic chronicle of the marital difficulties of a bargeman (Jean Dasté) and his new bride (Dita Parlo). After the briefest of marriage ceremonies in Juliette's rural village, Jean whisks her off to a very restricted life on his barge, punctuated by episodes of drunkenness of Jules and the mate (Michel Simon), and furious outbursts of Jean's jealousy. Jean consents to one brief outing at the Café des Quatre Nations, where a young traveling salesman (Jules Margaritis) invites Juliette to dance with him and inflames her imagination with visions of Paris. As a result of this interloper's behavior, the interlude ends up serving as yet another excuse for her jealous husband to confine his new bride to her dreary quarters. Juliette escapes from the barge, however,

and flees to Paris where she is fascinated by store windows full of magical scenes. Soon, however, she loses her purse to a pickpocket and wanders disconsolately around the city. After her disappearance, Jean grows despondent and old Jules must take over captaining the barge. Things grow so bad that Jules finally decides to head to Paris to look for Juliette. He discovers her in a record store, listening to sea shanties, brings her back to the barge and restores her to her husband. In the final shots of the film, Jean and Juliette appear to be happily reunited.

Not much of a plot, you are no doubt thinking – and you're right. Several viewings of this film make it abundantly clear that Vigo's talents did not lie in the art of clever plot construction. It should doubtless come as no surprise to learn that the story was based on a lamentably artless novel by Jean Guinée, and this choice was imposed on Vigo by his producers at Gaumont. In fact, Vigo was to direct much of his creative energy to circumventing the banality of Guinée's story by any means he could. Despite those impositions, most film scholars agree that Vigo's film is among the dozen greatest French films, some would even argue that this "may be the greatest film ever made."[17] How can we understand this "greatness?" Clearly Vigo's talents lay more in *how* the story is told than in *what* happens and his art, as we shall appreciate, lies in his ability to transform a rather drab story into poetry and to translate graphic into cinematic writing.

If we take another look (or several looks) at *L'Atalante*, many of the characteristics that we discovered in our discussion of poetry begin to emerge. Already in the first scene of the film, for example, a series of very *enigmatic* elements bleed through the somber realism of the wedding procession. You might take a few minutes to take another look at this scene which opens the film and runs until the couple boards the barge and the captain waves goodbye to the wedding party. Using the set of codes we introduced at the outset of this chapter, let's look at the way Vigo uses sound, camera angles, montage, and composition to create an unusual set of expectations for his viewers. Significantly there is almost no dialogue in this first sequence.

A quick establishing shot of the barge, prominently baptized as *L'Atalante*, greets the viewer at the opening of the film and is followed by a shot of the village church identifying the source of the bells we hear chiming – a natural association between the wedding that has just taken place and the barge on which the newlyweds will live. This would not be an unusual piece of montage except for the fact that two "problems" present themselves almost immediately. The first is the burst of smoke emanating from an unidentifiable source and whose purpose seems to be



Plate 1.1 The wedding procession goes haywire

to over-cloud an otherwise perfectly clear day. (Those familiar with Vigo's earlier film will remember that a similar mist arises in the opening minutes of *Zero for Conduct*). The second is that Vigo's montage suggests a close proximity (visually and auditorily) between river bank and church. This proximity is natural enough when we consider that one of the village's "industries" is logging, given the pile of logs adjacent to the barge later in the scene. Naturally one would assume that village and river are spatially connected for commercial and other reasons.

The procession we are to witness, however, continues not along a short roadway from village to river port, but out of the village left to right *away from the viewer*, then quite abruptly (the result of a jump cut) from right to left *moving now toward the viewer* without any explanation of the overall geography. Our "map" of events is further confused when the next shot has the couple (all alone now) weaving in and out among a set of three giant haystacks which dwarf and isolate them. The rest of the wedding party has been hopelessly lost from view, so accelerated is the married couple's pace. Apparently never discovering any thoroughfare, the young couple now struggles through a patch of very tall weeds, emerging at the top of a high hill which has the effect of lending them an otherworldly

separateness. From there they descend onto a recently plowed and visibly muddy field, are next discovered in woodland, and finally emerge from yet another wooded area to pick their way through the scattered logs that obstruct their path. As they arrive, finally, at the barge, they are magically reunited with the rest of their party. As if this radically disjunctive voyage were not confusing enough, Vigo's editing moves back and forth between shots of the mournfully subdued married couple to another, very disturbing twosome. Through this use of what is called parallel montage (because the back-and-forth cutting emphasizes the connections between two different series of events assumed to be taking place at the same time), Vigo establishes the uncomfortable sense that these two couples are uncanny doubles of each other. This doubling, though not at first explicit, becomes unmistakable late in the sequence when the boy returns from his search for a bouquet looking like nothing so much as a bride crowned with an "aura" of weeds and wild flowers. What is most disturbing about this parallelism is that the couple Old Jules and the boy emerge from the church *before*, i.e. *in lieu of*, the newlyweds and proceed to perform a wild burlesque of marital relations, Jules constantly abusing his more feminine partner, pushing him, dragging him, shouting orders to him and sending him off to replace the flowers he has lost. Not only do these two violently pop up (through Vigo's montage) in the serenity of the wedding procession but, ironically, lend to it the only vitality we are to witness. In addition, through this editing technique we can surmise that Vigo has "rhymed" two different (and deeply opposed) elements, thereby (as we saw in the "poem" above) creating a fundamental ambiguity. Specifically, the suggestion that Jean and Jules are but versions of "the husband" allows us to perceive a pattern in the film that is not immediately evident and that tends to be overshadowed by the plot of the film.

If we pay closer attention to the soundtrack throughout this procession, we will hear the wedding bells give way to a solemn tolling and observe the celebrants, uniformly dressed in a most funereal black, as they follow reluctantly along, "witnessing" the delivery (dare we say "sacrifice") of one of their young women to an alien. "Don't cry!" is the first voice we hear, and, now sensing we are privy to a funeral rather than a wedding (there will be no festivities), we end up, like the "mourners," helplessly standing by as a daughter is torn from her mother's side, thrown like a chattel onto a swinging beam and "hoisted" onto the barge. Viewers should take a good long look at the "dead" face of this sacrificial victim just before she is "tossed" aboard, for there have been few more mournful portraits in the history of cinema than Dita Parlo's distraught visage.[18] In retrospect, we can appreciate just how directionless was their wedding



Plate 1.2 Juliette's solemn visage

procession, how little it followed any sort of forward progress, route, or map and how it ends in the place where "crossing over" must inevitably allude to the river Styx rather than the Seine and how the undue speed of their progress might uncannily recall the "I speed TO BE DEAD" of our poetic experiment.[19] In this regard, notice how, in Vigo's editing, Jean and Juliette start off moving toward the future (left to right) but immediately find themselves walking away from any sense of progression (abruptly shifting direction from right to left) and then on to a vaguely circuitous, unmarked course. One is reminded of Dante and indeed, just as the dark forest – *selva oscura* – in which Dante finds himself at the beginning of *The Inferno* (1.2) is described in vague terms, perhaps as an indication of the protagonist's own disorientation, Vigo's portrayal of Juliette's disorientation is paramount. The psychological and spiritual nature of this disorientation stresses two very important elements of both poem and film: first, we are encouraged to understand these journeys to be symbolic; and second, film and poem are carefully structured so that we must read "backwards" from later events to gain a fuller understanding of this first scene.

Again, to recall our investigation of poetry, the film opens with *an enigma* to be solved: Why does a wedding ceremony devolve into a funeral

procession? What might it mean that Juliette's marriage joins her to some form of death? Would this be the death of her former self or some darker purpose? Part of our sense of that enigma derives from the possible *allusion* to Dante's *Inferno*. To solve this enigma we will have *to read the film forwards and then backwards* and to appreciate *through a process of association* the ways the film's different scenes can be connected into a highly *symbolic arrangement*.

One of the ways of understanding Juliette's "death" in the first scene, surely the most literal of the possibilities, is her absence from her native place, a meaning punctuated by her mother's tears as she leaves. An immediate second interpretation, perhaps no less obvious, is her entombment in the coffin-shaped barge. No doubt her expectations of escape from the confines of her native village are dashed not only by the reduced quarters that swallow her up in the bowels of the craft, but also by Jean's constrictions of her pleasures. He limits her activities to washing, sewing, and cooking, and angrily switches off the radio when she seeks news and music from Paris.

But Vigo is hardly content to limit his story to the limitations of her story. Instead, as director (and saboteur of Jean Guinée's very normative plot), he offers her a visit to another realm. Juliette arriving trance-like at the boat finds herself among a plethora of cats, one of whom is thrown abruptly into view. Thereafter, life on the barge takes on the elements of a dreamscape: scenes are shrouded in mist or mysterious light – in one scene she appears to be walking on water – and the multifarious and almost Halloween-like cats seem at times to rule this world, "seeking the silence and the horror of darkness … who seem to fall into a sleep of endless dreams" like some Baudelarian vision.[20] What seems to be at stake here is, I would suggest, a struggle pitting Jean against all of the others, indeed against *otherness itself*. What is truly carnivalesque[21] about this world is that, ironically, the straight-laced, rule-bound and severe Jean ends up symbolizing death whereas the decadent, grotesque Jules, almost daemonic in his eeriness, seems to represent life forces. Jean, who might have served Juliette's desire for freedom, seems to personify repression, whereas Jules, a man seemingly meant to follow the captain's rules, embodies the unleashing of the unconscious. In her descent into the forbidden Hades of Jules's cabin, she will encounter a world more separate in its exotic and erotic possibilities than any she might have imagined.[22]

Juliette seems to embody desire: desire for intimacy, desire for the forbidden, desire for the exotic. In her first moments on board, she lies longingly on the deck of the barge in her pure white dress as a personification of oxymoron: the collapsing of opposites, the erasure of contradiction

that Freud hypothesizes when he says "What, in the conscious, is found split into a pair of opposites often occurs in the unconscious as a unity."[23] In her scenes with Père Jules, we gradually understand that she has more than names in common with him: indeed Vigo has effected a remarkable condensation of these two characters. Of course, at first, nothing could seem more removed from possibility than this juxtaposition: she is so young, so pure, so beautiful; he so old, so filthy, so grotesque. Truly a case of beauty and the beast in which beauty and beast uncannily double each other. On the morning after her arrival on the barge, for example, she emerges wearing a shirt like Jules. Later he sits at her sewing machine, tries on her dress and dances provocatively, as if attempting to rob her of her femininity.

When Juliette sneaks into Jules's cabin, she finds there a veritable *vitrine* (Jules's word, meaning a store window display) of objects whose fantastic juxtaposition has a distinctly surreal feel to it: a conch shell, a disquieting puppet of a musical conductor, a tusk, a broken record player, and even a pair of severed hands. "There is a story *behind* every object" says Jules, as if parroting the father of Surrealism, André Breton. The scene recalls Lautremont's text, used by Breton as *the* illustration of the surrealist image: "Beau comme la rencontre fortuite sur une table à dissection d'un parapluie et d'une machine à coudre [As beautiful as the chance encounter on a dissecting table of an umbrella and a sewing machine.]" Breton famously calls man "an inveterate dreamer, who has trouble assessing the objects he has been led to use, objects that his nonchalance has brought his way or that he has earned through his own efforts or what he calls his luck."[24]

And, as if sleepwalking through a surrealist milieu, Jules takes a knife and slices his finger while Juliette lasciviously licks her lips as she stares at the blood pulsing from his thumb.[25] As the personification of surrealism, Jules cannot fail to awaken Juliette's dreamy desires. She can virtually taste his exotic eroticism.

The uncanniest thing of all, in my view, is that Jules does not appear just once in *L'Atalante*, he reappears in the figure of the *camelot*, the traveling salesman-one-man-band. The actor, Gilles Margaritis, bears an uncanny physical resemblance to Jean Daste, who plays Jean, and to Jules's musical puppet. He seems to extend the dreamlike state of Jules's fantastic cabin off the barge and into the light of day. He first appears riding his bike in between the couple as they walk toward the *Café des Quatre Nations* (exactly as shots of Jules had interrupted the continuity of the wedding march!). Inside the café he opens a trunk that uncannily resembles Jules's cabin in its ability to spawn strange and wonderful objects. Like Jules, but



Plate 1.3 Jules slices his finger

now in a physically beautiful avatar, the *camelot* embodies a spirit of carnival and of the irruption of dream into the waking state. He performs magic tricks while singing hypnotic (almost Orphic) songs, and, like his bestial double, dances around wildly, pulling Juliette *through a latticed window*, a gesture that recalls Juliette's earlier descent into the "sacred space" of Jules's seductive cabin or Alice's headlong plunge into Wonderland. When, exasperated, the café owner tries to punch this sprite, Margaritis feigns a fainting spell that replicates exactly the collapse of the eerie marionette in Jules's cabin. After Jean wrenches Juliette from this enchanted place and returns her to the prison-like barge, this trickster will return (just as Freud predicted in his theory of the return of the repressed) to excite Juliette's desire for an exotic adventure.

We might pause here, to think again about the relationship between poetry and film. In retrospect, as we look at these two segments (Jules's cabin and the *camelot*'s café), we can appreciate how much they serve the function of poetic rhyme. Just as the repetition of the words "speed," "ninety-five," and "TO BE DEAD" in our poetic experiment function as rhymes to link up different moments of the "narrative" of the accident into more poetic meaning, Vigo's doubled scenes suggest versions of the

story of a couple on a barge that move us well beyond the film's realism to a mythopoetic level. The two doubles of Jean – Jules (the beast) and the *camelot* (as his beautiful double) – not only awaken Juliette's appetites for the exotic and the erotic, they point the way for Jean's own oneiric transformation. Juliette can no longer be contained in the straitjacket of her new husband's failed imagination and her revolt causes Jean to need to break out of his own death-like captaincy of the barge. Beautiful and sinister alternatives must be explored.

No wonder then that, invited by both of the figures of dream in her life, Juliette succumbs to her desire for the exotic and escapes to Paris in search of this newfound *otherness*.

Once in Paris she pauses before a store window (*vitrine*) displaying dolls that recall Jules's puppet, yet are uncannily distorted by Juliette's own image mirrored in the store window. Vigo's poem works constantly with this overlay of interior/exterior mindscapes. But along with this dreamy recall of Jules's cabin, Paris is the site of trauma. A pickpocket violently grabs Juliette's purse and his aggression will lead her from ecstasy to bewildered despair.[26]

Jean, likewise, doubling Juliette, gives in to despair. Growing increasingly despondent, he loses control of the boat and ultimately rushes off directionless in a symbolic replay of the wedding procession. His wanderings culminate in a desperate and chaotic rush to the sea – a "retour à la mer" (sea and mother are homonyms in French) that signals his capitulation to a "sea" of unconscious forces greater than reason.[27] We should notice what happens to reason, linear thinking and authority in the face of this loss of control: poetry and the dreamwork begin to operate in parallel processes – intuition, free association, and ambiguity.

From this point on, Jean will have access to the absent Juliette only through means that are specifically *cinematic*: first in the remarkable parallel cutting of the two lovers in separate beds, each polka-dotted with an eerie lighting that signals the oneiric nature of their encounter. Next, Jean will dive beneath the barge to seek Juliette's image that is achieved by a superimposition (or dissolve) of two images, Juliette's "floating" body on the watery deep where Jean is swimming. This is a scene that can only be understood as a surreal union of dreaming and desire. We recall that in one of the first scenes on the barge, Juliette had told Jean, "Don't you know that you can always find your beloved by dousing your head in water? … You'll see me when you want to." It is as if she were paraphrasing Breton who wrote: "Everything tends to make us believe that there exists a certain point of the mind at which life and death, the real and the imagined, past and future, the communicable and the incommunicable,



Plate 1.4 Juliette's floating body

high and low, cease to be perceived as contradictions."[28] That "point of the mind", Freud would argue, occurs every night of our lives.[29] "In the dreamwork," Freud noted, "representation by the opposite plays a … great … part…. Dreams are not merely fond of representing two contraries by one and the same composite structure, but they … often change something in the dream thoughts into its opposite."[30] For Jean, as Vigo, Freud and Breton seem to be telling us in concert, can only reach happiness when he abandons his need for control. "Surrealism" wrote Breton, "aims quite simply at the total recovery of our psychic force by a means which is nothing other than the dizzying descent into ourselves, the systematic illumination of hidden places and the progressive darkening of other places, the perpetual excursion into the midst of forbidden territory."[31] And so, just as Juliette's desire has been awakened by the "poetry" of the exotic figures of Jules and the *camelot*, Jean's only means of retrieving his lost love is through recourse to a similar "point of the mind, where life and death, the real and the imagined" come into play. He must invent a "poetry" of his own.

It is important to emphasize that, for Vigo, it is the cinema that is best able to render the conflation of such "contradictions." Vigo was undoubtedly

drawn to the cinema precisely because it enabled him to "translate" such deeply poetic notions both through the use of montage as metaphor and by the superimposition of such powerful images as we encounter here in *L'Atalante*.

Ultimately the reunion of the estranged couple can only be effected by the "medium," Jules, who seems to know, as if he himself had already traced it, his feminized namesake's path into Paris. Uncannily, as if in a trance, he crosses the same bridge she had taken, and walks directly to the street, then to the store, then to the booth where she is playing "their song." Only when Jules and Juliette are themselves merged through this "medium of the unconscious" will she be able to return to her "legitimate" husband, who is himself now transformed through poetry.

What makes Vigo's cinema so remarkable is that he manages to tell his story without the overly disruptive style of Buñuel's *Andalusian Dog* or the too obvious recourse to mythic representation that we encounter in Cocteau's *Beauty and the Beast*. The genius of Vigo's poetic style lies, as we have seen, in his ability to transform realism (the news item or what the French would call "le fait divers") into a cinematic version of poetry in which we are forced to read backwards and forwards, to see deeper connections between people, various obscure objects of desire and several allusions to other poems and myths, all of which allows us to appreciate the ambiguity rather than the simplicity of experience. Moreover, by shifting the story of *Beauty and the Beast* to Ovid's tale, *Atalanta*,[32] Vigo allows us a (re)vision of the latter tale in which Ovid's *one* man bearing *three* apples (*trois pommes*) is cine-poetically transmogrified by Vigo into a vision of *three* men condensing into *one* poem (*un poème*) – a poem every bit as grotesque and sublime as *Beauty and the Beast*, but now stripped of its fantastic suspension of disbelief and disguised as a simple tale of everyday life. What appears to be a "fait divers" about barge life in 1934 is transformed through Vigo's ciné-poetic vision into a poem of despair, disintegration, and potential reintegration. Poetry is, at every turn, not only the *medium* but the *implicit subject* of this film. That duality of purpose is certainly the element that makes this film so *French*.

Ultimately we cannot know what the future holds for Jean and Juliette. Perhaps that is why the last shot of the film follows the *Atalante* moving enigmatically through a limitless expanse of water, onward into the night. The film offers no comfortable closure, only immense possibility. It also offers us a model for looking at other films, whether French or not, with a new appreciation of their many possibilities that seem, like the final bird's

eye view of the barge, to sail along at some distance beneath our eyeline level. The entire film seems to whisper to us, as Juliette does to Jean, "You can see me if you really want to" – in a place submerged *beneath* and *between* the real images, a space that comes into view only when we rewind or unravel the reel of images, reading – poetically – backwards and forwards to allow the visual rhymes to be seen and heard. In this space, too, we hear the whispered questions that are so insistently posed and so insistently *French*, 'What is cinema?' and its 'double,' 'What is poetry?' But neither Juliette nor Vigo, nor French cinema itself, for that matter, ever seem to be entirely satisfied with the answers.

Suggested Further Reading

Andrew, J. D. (1984), *Film in the Aura of Art*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Contains an excellent essay on Vigo's films.

Bordwell, D. and Thompson, K. (1990), *Film Art: An Introduction*. New York: McGraw Hill.

The best introduction to film analysis, Bordwell and Thompson provide an overview of the technology of film production and technique. There is also a useful section on French Impressionism and Surrealism that provides an excellent context for the present chapter.