

Opening the Door to French Film

by

Hugh Fox

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INTRODUCTION

Entre vous. In *Opening The Door Into French Film*, Hugh Fox invites us into the world of French film through an examination of each film-maker's position on the spectrum of realism versus surrealism, attitudes toward sexuality, experimentalism, etc. Based in a lifetime of watching these films, Fox, a Professor Emeritus of writing at Michigan State University & a widely published poet, critic, archaeologist, etc. lends his always keen, observant eyes & ears to both the main currents & the meaningful undercurrents of French film from the 1930's to the contemporary present. This book is of particular value to the reader who needs an accessible entry point into the fascinating & challenging world of French films. Over eighty of the most significant French films are covered, from internationally famous titles like Truffaut's *Jules And Jim*, Clouzot's *Diabolique*, Malle's *My Dinner With Andre*, Lelouch's *A Man And A Woman* & Tavernier's *Round Midnight* to more obscure cinematic masterpieces such as Cocteau's *Blood Of The Poet* & Demy's *The Umbrellas Of Cherbourg*. More recent films like Hanche's *The Piano Teacher* & the prototypical *Amelie* by Jean-Pierre Jeunet are also featured in the concluding chapter.

But this is no academic exercise or existential mystery tour. No, this is more like going to the movies with your pal Hugh & discussing it afterward, over a cup of Irish coffee. Yet, the philosophy is here, gently woven into the narrative, painless but persistent. Without lapsing into open didacticism, Fox nonetheless reveals the tricks, techniques, and world-view philosophies used by each director.

Fox keeps it human & fun, achieving a clarity that film critics & historians often lack in their desire to reveal levels of meaning at the expense of plot, character & imagery. They hope to teach, but Fox teaches through sharing. Each film is thoroughly discussed. Their plots are explicated & their evocative effects are noted too.

To go to the movies with Hugh Fox is to see a whole new movie in & of itself. His writing creates a mind-meld with the reader. We get to see each film through his eyes as well as our own. His descriptions of the films form little mental-movies, making the reading an enjoyable experience in visualization, for Fox is always & above all a poet.

Fox identifies each director's quintessential films & shows each director's range, from best to worst. Often French film-makers have tended to present us with

a collage of loosely related images, creating a fragmented effect. Fox identifies the best & the worst films that use this approach, profusely illustrating his points.

The light-hearted nonsense-fun of Jean Vigo, the social realism of Marcel Pagnol, the film-noir intensity of Henri-Georges Clouzot, the magic surrealism of Jean Cocteau, the depressive minimalism of Robert Bresson, the animated impressionism of Jean Renoir, the melancholia of Alain Resnais, the social criticism of Luis Buñuel, the naturalism of Louis Malle, the nihilism of Jean-Luc Godard, Eric Rohmer's documentary style, Claude Lelouch's film-collages, Claude Chabrol's dark visions, François Truffaut's killer women, Bertrand Tavernier's representation of the class struggle, Jacques Demy & Agnes Vardas' collaborations, André Techine's upside-down abnormal psychology, the new international direction of contemporary French films—it's all here, through this door. Entre vous. We'll be joined tonight by Catherine Deneuve, Brigitte Bardot, Juliette Binoche & Jeanne Moreau, if you're in need of further inspiration. A splendid time is guaranteed for all. The curtain is up. Dim the lights. The show is about to begin.

Eric Greinke
1/23/07

AN OVERVIEW OF FRENCH FILM

Let me start out by saying what this book *isn't* about! It's not about the influences of the first and second world wars on the French movie industry, the economics of the French versus the Hollywood film industries or psychoanalytical probing into the minds of French directors. It also *isn't* an attempt to be all-encompassing and encyclopedic, which tends to turn the art-life of the film industry into statistics.

It's a very personal book built on more than half a century of swimming in the seas of French film. There's history behind it, of course, and there is an historical structure behind the whole structure of the book, but mainly it goes into the films themselves, watches them, reacts to them, discusses them, attempts to bring the reader not inside film *history* but film *aesthetics*.

The very center of French film is neurosis verging on psychosis. Everyone wants "something" outside themselves, some sort of release, some sort of heaven, some sort of state of total fulfillment, but there's always another anti-fulfillment thesis inside everyone that prevents them from ever reaching out and grabbing what they want. Which I see as a rather realistic presentation of the French, in fact, the universal modern psyche.

Take, for example, Eric Rohmer's *Les Nuits de la Pleine Lune*, usually translated *Full Moon in Paris*, but more accurately translated as *Full Moon Nights*. We begin with a neurotic woman who works in Paris, lives with this guy in the suburbs, but stays in Paris a lot because, as she tells this guy who goes to her Paris home with her, *she loves to be alone*. And goes on and on about her aloneness.

It's more of a class in psychology than any kind of entertainment. Realism, perhaps, is a bit too boringly realistic. Life isn't art and art isn't life. Art is life manipulated, rearranged, intensified. This is realism at its most tedious capturing of The Real. But you still wonder what happens next. There's *still* a touch of narrative art up Rohmer's sleeve.

The brunette and her crabby boyfriend are full-time at odds. She wants alone-time, but he wants her around full-time, mainly, it seems, to torture her.

There's this other guy who's married to this blonde who goes to concerts alone, and likes the brunette. Sexual attraction between the two of them. But she

refuses to react. Ms. Alone-ness. The movement never goes hyper but stays low key. It's a quiet Debussyian nocturne, not Ravel's piano concert in G. Does Rohmer *work* at making everything quotidian, work at turning everything to meditations on the edge of psychotherapeutic counseling? You always feel you're watching a TV monitor set in the ceiling of a psychologist's office.

Discussion, discussion, discussion. The brunette and her boyfriend go on and on. She tells him she loves him more than he knows, but (again) needs her alone-time. But when she *is* alone in her Paris apartment, she starts calling up all the men she knows. No one is available.

The next day she goes out and buys her boyfriend a new teapot, then goes out with her writer friend, sees the boyfriend with another woman, makes sure he doesn't see her. So it seems that neither of them wants to be "faithful," they're full of talk but are bored with each other, want someone else.

It really *is* like sitting at a cafe and listening to the conversation at the table next to you, it's that (tediously) realistic. And that in spite of the fact that by this time you are involved with the characters up there on the screen. The involvement *is* there, but it doesn't make them any more sparkling. They're like sparklers, alright, after all the sparkle's been burnt out.

So it looks like the boyfriend's going out with another woman, who is a friend of hers. She asks her the next night about it but her friend says it couldn't have been *her* in the nightclub; she was coming back from Rome.

Are her friend and boyfriend cheating on her or not?

More ambiguity, but she starts to go crazy, picks up a guy at a party, the next night, has sex with him. a very sexy scene when she first meets him, lots of black-nyloned legs as they dance and she dances like they're making out. She's cold to her writer friend; she's Ms. Confusion. To screw or not to screw, and with whom...and why? The fact that her boyfriend may be screwing around with someone else pushes her into a frenzy of desperate sexuality.

We're moving from talk into black nylon legs, bare (tiny) breasts...moving just on the edge of becoming a porn flick. Out of the classroom into a sex-fest.

The ending, though, is so logical, expected, predictable, that it hurts.

Our brunette goes home to the apartment where she lives with her boyfriend, expecting to surprise him. Only, he's not there. She falls asleep and he shows up two hours later, says he spent the night with one of her friends, not the one she expected, but the other one, and that he's in love with her, wants to live

with her. Our brunette calls up her writer friend and says she'll meet him that night in Paris. She leaves. No more fight. No more anything. She's on the street, walking to the station for the Paris train. End of film.

I feel a little cheated by Rohmer. I want at least a *little* action. At least our brunette cries when her boyfriend says he has another woman. There are tears. Some beautiful legs. Some hormones and heartbeats, but in general Rohmer's world is the literalness of pure, unadulterated reality, more documentation than creation. He wants to capture the world precisely the way it is, and he's a master at his trade. But when we approach art don't we want to *escape* from the world the way it is? Isn't that what "art" is all about? Not for super-realist Rohmer who in many respects is a perfect example of what *most* French film (art, music, and history) is about. Except for (as we shall see) the rebels who reach back into *ancient* philosophy, religion, art for a sanity that not only accepts, but embraces the magic Now.

And you know that when Ms. Frustration reaches Paris and starts living with the other guy, then love-sex-fulfillment will end, and she'll want to go back to "aleness" again. It's basic, this terrible war going on inside everyone between solitude, sexlessness, and some sort of animal need for companionship and love. As if the French have been schooled to ignore the "natural," the "normal," the "instinctive." I keep thinking of the heresy of Catharism/Albigensianism that was so widespread in medieval France, a heresy that taught that the flesh was evil, that this life is nothing but transitory, that all we are here to do is shun the flesh, live out our lives and after death move into an eternity of perfect (sexless) bliss. Is *that* what is behind 99.9% of French films?

The only time French filmmakers seem to escape this Albigensian slant is when they go back to the remnants of pre-Christianity, back to pagan France, before Christianity was introduced.

Like in Renoir's film *Dejeuner Sur L'Herbe/ Dinner on the Grass* (1960), a high comedy set in Provence, full of hills, trees, rivers. A delightful mixture of scenes and people.

There's this professor who preaches artificial insemination and a young woman who seeks him out in order to be artificially inseminated, avoid men altogether.

That's the core of the plot. Plus a farm family whose son has a bunch of kids, doesn't want to work at all. Plus a convention of feminists involved with the scouts, and the chief scoutmaster is a German woman engaged to the artificial insemination professor.

The girl who wants to meet the professor is given a job as family maid. Will

she ever meet the professor or not?

Satire here directed against feminists, artificial insemination, whatever departs from Nature—and Renoir underlines his pro-Nature approach with the gorgeousness of all the sets, trees, trees, hills and more trees.

Someone points out that here in Provence is where they used to worship Diana and the worship always ended in orgies. An old peasant, sitting in the ruined temple of Diana with his goat, starts to play his magical flute and stirs up a storm, wind like crazy.

A bunch of tourists go crazy and the old orgy-worship—satyr—and-Diana—worship Begins to reassert itself, as if the spirit of the ancients suddenly has revived.

The girl who wanted to meet the artificial insemination specialist meets him and he still goes on about science versus old myths and misconceptions. but we know, don't we, that the old pagan ways are going to triumph, the return to Nature, taking the things of nature and turning them into gods, goddesses, rites and rituals.

Again, Renoir Père/ the father, is present everywhere, all the nature scenes are pure, impressionistic magic. Science versus primordial instincts, primitive impulses, and we know what's going to win out, don't we? Nature takes over and the screen itself becomes a vital, refreshing impressionistic painting, grasses in the river, twisting in the currents, the river itself, shots of ancient, gnarled trees.

The scientist and the country girl get together, he keeps telling her she's beautiful, they spend the night sleeping on a grassy spot in the forest and the next day he moves into her father's house, escaping from his fiancée, his work, all the theorizing. Nature *does* take over and it's a total immersion in being natural, no artificial anything.

The scientist becomes Mr. Take-It-Easy, begins to really enjoy just being. And then his cousin and another friend come looking for him, tell his girlfriend that Alexis is going to be the next president of Europe...and besides that, once he's in the presidency, artificial insemination will take over, jobs will be created, but at the same time there will be all sorts of homeless people.

“Homeless?”

The girlfriend starts to cry, leaves.

Only Alexis follows after her, is kidnapped by his cousin and his gang (a blanket thrown over his head, bound with rope) just as he's going to kneel down

and ask the magic goat (the flute-player's goat) where his girlfriend is.

That's too much.

So off he goes to this hotel where he's going to marry the German scoutmistress, and it seems for a while that he *is* going to marry her, only he finds his old peasant girlfriend working there washing dishes in the hotel. She's pregnant with their child and he goes into the room where the press and everyone else is waiting for him to get married—and marries the peasant girl.

Love triumphs.

This is one of the most rewarding, uplifting films ever made, not just sheer fun but fun with a very positive message—*the primitive is superior to the modern, instinct is more important than thinking things logically out, go with your feelings.*

And it's also almost a tourist film for Provence where Renoir's camera fanatically dwells on the beauty of the Provencal landscapes. You come away feeling Renoir is right, surrounded as we are with everything *but* the instinctive.

Truffaut's *Men Who Loved Women* is a perfect example of just that—instinct that never quite makes it into the forefront through layers of thinking, rethinking and then rethinking again. It's about a man who loves women, chases after them full time until he's hit by a car chasing after one of them...and dies. Truffaut's *Jules and Jim* is about a kind of *ménage a trois* about Catherine, Jules and Jim, more *ménage a deux*, though, between Catherine and Jim, until Jim gets involved with another woman and Catherine takes him for a ride out on this wrecked bridge and kills the both of them, leaving Jules behind, *ménage a un*. All obsessiveness, never fulfillment, just disaster. Abnormal psychological case histories.

Take a film like Louis Malle's *My Dinner with Andre* (1981). Pure talk, no action; and what does André talk *about*? Basically that our modern world is an escape from reality into the deification of the trivial. He wants to be like the Buddhists in Tibet, more into the real away from the trivial.

Shades of Renoir's glorification of the primitive. Anything but dealing with the horrible now. And all this talk about the deification of the trivial in a sense, in its own way, sums up the core of French film—an attempt on the part of the filmmaker to show just how trivial the modern world is, wrapped in neurosis, never reaching for a combination of instinctive and the transcendental.

Take Jean-Luc Godard's film *Contempt/ Mepris* (1964) with Brigitte Bardot. All she feels for her husband is *mepri*s/ contempt, she falls in love with an American, they go off together into what looks like Happiness with a capital H....and

the two of them are killed in an automobile accident.

So, even if you *do* go with your instincts, the evil world is always out there to screw everything up.

There are exemptions to this rule, though, mainly in the films of Jacques Demy, especially in *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg/ Les Parapluies de Cherbourg* where the right girl gets the right guy and they live happily ever after. All sung. All in dream-colors....I mean they even painted some of the buildings in the streets in Cherbourg to turn it all into a happy-ever-after dream.

And that, in general is the thrust of Demy's films....the only director I can come up with who is a total exception to the rule that *all French films deal with irrationality and neurosis pushing everyone to never become what they really should be.*

At the same time, though, *all* of French history is involved, going back to pagan times, medieval times (Albigensianism/Catharism), the Inquisition, the wars involving the establishment of the French monarchy, the French Revolution, the establishment of the Republic, eighteenth century intellectualism....up through the first and second world wars, the colonial problems, the contemporary economic problems and colonial problems come home.....

Demy pushes it all aside and turns life into a fairy tale (sometimes literally, as in his *Donkey's Skin/ Peau d'Ane*), but he is the exception. The rest of French film is for the most part a beautifully dramatized series of lectures on just how horrible, frustrating, twisted and despair-filled life was in the past, is in the twentieth century and will continue to be in the future. Although there is a new twist beginning to emerge in the latest-latest French films as France itself moves toward greater internationalism and the French world-view is literally becoming more a universal, super-national world-view.

I myself find French films like a series of Buddhist meditations that force me to look hard at myself and my life and change, change, change in the direction of light...and enlightenment. So in a sense this whole book is a series of meditations on meditations, moving toward a personal grasping of LIGHT, CHANGE, ENLIGHTENMENT.

Hugh Fox
Le Massif Central
2004

Chapter I

Marcel Pagnol

Let me start with *Marius* (1931), one of Pagnol's earliest films. It began as a play, like most of Pagnol's films, and then was turned into a film with the help of Alexander Korda. Like all of Pagnol's films, for all its cinematographic know-how, it still maintains a theatrical sense.

Marius works in his father's bar, is in love with Fanny (who he's always giving away free coffee, much to his father's chagrin), and his father is forever asserting his fatherhood, treating his son like he should remain forever a little kid.

But Marius has other dreams. We're in Marseilles, after all, and Marius knows all the boats in the harbor by the sounds of their whistles. He's an incorrigible romantic...and Pagnol (and Korda) make a point of painting (in black and white) the romance of Marseilles as a seaport.

Nicely filmed, kind of black and white impressionism, but the real concentration is on the interactions of the main characters. It never loses its almost Ibsen-like sense of stage (d) reality. Which draws you nicely into it. No tricks, just *The Human Comedy*.

Slowly the whole play...oops...film...begins to turn around Fanny, who is in love with Marius, Marius, who is in love with Fanny, and Panisse, the sail maker who is much older than Fanny, but who wants to marry her anyhow. And then there's Caesar, Marius father, a widower who is pursuing his own romantic interests.

And you *do* keep thinking of Ibsen; or, even more, Tchekov, although the streets and people of Marsailles serve nicely as a backdrop. It's like still photos set in motion, impressionistic, heightened realism.

And always funny, like Caesar and Panisse fighting, Caesar starting to strangle (pseudo-strangle) Panisse, then a cork popping on a bottle of champagne.

Crisis. Forget the strangling, and Caesar says he's going to put the next bottle in the well to keep it cold.

The comic never leaves the screen for a moment. Pagnol's message is very clear--basically life is absurd.

Slowly it comes out that, yes, Marius loves Fanny, and, yes, she loves him, but he also has this uncontrollable, irresistible love for the sea and wants to leave Marsailles and become a sailor. Period.

All of which makes for great drama, Fanny declaring her love for him, him telling her that *if* he was going to marry anyone, it would be her. Very moving in its theatrical way.

The acting always superbly realistic. Verisimilitude from head to toe. The same way that the comic is delightfully comic. Like Caesar looking at Panisse's tight shoes and when he walks comparing him to a ballerina, then telling him not to play football. Everyday-ish humor. You're not watching a film but *The Everyday* up there on the screen. One of the most ingratiating things about Pagnol--his total accessibility, his ability to convincingly portray the Human Condition.

The whole film gets deliciously romantic.

Marius confesses to Fanny--quite eloquently and poetically--that for years he has wanted to get on a boat and sail off into ports unknown.

Fanny, in response, dramatically swears her eternal love for Marius, Marius and no one else but Marius. He *was* going to leave that night on a ship, but Fanny's drama convinces him to stay. At least for the time being.

Comic relief keeps bubbling by Caesar and Paniffe playing cards, Caesar telling Paniffe that he's breaking his heart...a little code-talk to tell one of the other players to play his heart. Always lots of Britishy TV-ish, Monty Python-ish comedy to offset the overwhelming seriousness of Fanny's love for Marius...which is always very convincing and moving.

Marius is sleeping with Fanny, her mother finds out, goes and complains to his father, Caesar. Marius has been *pretending* he has been sleeping in his room at home, and there's a delightful conversation between father and son in which the *father* pretends he thinks Marius is still sleeping at home...behind a locked door. And Marius contributes his lies to the fun, says he is so worn out because he stays up all night, *reading* no less.

Lots of this sort of irony, game-playing; but, at the same time, every time a boat whistle sounds, Marius gets dreamy-eyed, the sea calling and calling and

calling. Fanny sympathizes. Will she let him go?

Back and forth it goes, like a pendulum, the sea versus love, the sea versus love, the sea versus love. And finally Fanny convinces Marius to leave, convinced that if he *really* loved her, he couldn't *be* convinced. Although, yes, he really loves her. But still goes. Final image, the ship with its giant sail, sailing off into the sunset.

The actors are almost all the same actors that performed the play on stage before it became a film, and excellent they are. You really feel you're peeking through a keyhole into a real world instead of watching a film. Pagnol wrote the script and Alexander Korda directed it, but that sort of thing happens a lot to Pagnol, as we shall see when we discuss the much more recent films based on his scripts/ideas.

Pagnol is at the center, though, bringing Marseilles and its people alive, alive, alive. The core of any great art, to make The Real even more "real" than it is in "real" life.

The next film in the trilogy, *Fanny*, came out in the year I was born—1932. Black and white, technically primitive, but a real classic. Again, it's hardly a film at all, but like walking into the reality of Marseilles in the mid 1930's.

Very simple plot. Marius, Caesar's son, and Fanny's boyfriend, has just sailed off to the South Seas for five years.

Fanny didn't want to stop him because that's what he *really* wanted to do, so she told him she didn't love him any more. But it broke his heart. And his father's heart as well.

Most of the film is talk. Caesar owns a bar and a lot of the film takes place there, talk, talk, talk...mainly about "feelings." Realism at its most realistic. Maybe a bit more dramatic than "real" reality, but not much. No sense of "plot," no sense of suspense, nothing like what comes later in French film, complication within complication. Here it's simply a girlfriend and a father feeling rotten about having the favorite person in their world take off and disappear.

Caesar gets a letter from Marius, writes back, dictates the letter to Fanny, and which she censors. Panisse, the wealthy sail maker in town, goes to Fanny's mother and asks for her hand in marriage. No tricks. It's like I was transported back to Chicago in the thirties surrounded by uncles, aunts, parents and my Czech (Jewish) grandmother. It's all small-talk, people-talk, concerned with the pulse and movement of the everyday.

Although not without humor.

Like when Panisse is walking down the dock dressed in a fancy outfit, top hat and all (he's just coming from a wedding), someone throws a piece of fruit at the top hat, knocks it off, Panisse gets all furious until the guy who knocked it off says "I didn't know it was you, I thought it was an American." And Panisse is suddenly all pleased. He looks like an American no less.

It turns out that Fanny is pregnant, but Panisse, the fifty year old sail-maker, still wants to marry her.

Lots of great scenes revolve around the pregnancy (Marius, of course, is the father), like when Fanny tells her mother and the mother wants to throw her out on the street, until she faints, and then all of a sudden she's Mom's little baby again.

Or when she tells Panisse she's pregnant, he still wants to marry her, has been waiting for a son for years, even has the letters *Panisse and Son* for the sign for his shop, hidden away in a drawer. Now he can turn Fanny's and Marius' son into his. He's overjoyed.

All very human, all of this. It's a film you want to never stop, you're *there*, it's part of you, you're part of it. Film before it became cinematographic, while it was still trying to record life the best it could.

I think of the French impressionists. Get it down on the canvas as close to The Real as possible.

The interacting continues, Panisse and Fanny *do* get married. He *wants* the baby, will make the baby his.

Marius' father comes along and blows up at Panisse, claiming that Fanny is Marius' bride, in spite of the fact that he's off on the high seas. Fanny comes in and makes Panisse tell Caesar the whole truth. At first he wants the child as his grandson, period, but Fanny reasons with him, tells him the child will always be considered a fatherless bastard unless she marries Panisse. And it turns out that Panisse is a millionaire. That doesn't hurt either.

So the marriage takes place and seven months later the baby is born.

What is especially rewarding here is the dialogue, Caesar arguing with Panisse, Fanny arguing with Caesar, talk, scream, cry, always very accessible, identifiable with, nothing remote or weird, just human nature up there alive on the screen. Very rewarding. You want it to go on forever.

Finally, we have *Caesar* (1936), topping off the trilogy.

Panisse dies.

By this time we're old friends of all the characters. Caesar goes and tells the Parish priest that Panisse is dying and to go see him, but not to tell him that's why he's there.

But Panisse, full of the lucidity of the dying, as if it were some sort of final gift, sees right through him, confesses, puts everything right.

Very touching, all of it.

Panisse dies and Fanny tells her (and Marius') son, now a grown man, that the guy he thought was his father wasn't really his father at all, and he knew it before he married her. Finally tells him that his real father was Marius, Caesar's son.

They did a great job on Fanny's makeup. She looks twenty years older. Looks, acts, and walks twenty years older. A beautiful job of acting too. Not just her but Panisse and Caesar too. Again the screen disappears and we're in real time with real people.

Once Marius' son finds out Marius is his real father, off he goes to meet him.

You'd expect him to be somewhere on the high seas, right? But not, he works in a garage in Toulon. No high sea adventures, but his son finds him under a car.

Again all beautifully done. I kept asking myself "How did they ever make Fanny so old-looking?" The same for Caesar.

Lots of real tears from Fanny while she's confessing. Very convincing. And you keep thinking of all the mistakes the characters made, all the painful lies, not in film or drama terms, but lined up against the mistakes you made in your own life. The film is so real that it becomes didactic, a regular Sermon on the Mount.

A bit of a problem, though, after Marius' son meets Marius and some of Marius' friends start fooling around, saying they're all part of a gang of opium smugglers. The son believes them and sees Marius as a low-life crook, comes home, tells Fanny he wasn't much impressed.

There's also a scene where Marius and his son go fishing, but Marius doesn't know who the son is, talks about his son, *How can you love your son if you've never seen him?* But when the son talks to Fanny about her feelings, *her* love is still there. It's a bit of a diversion from the main plot-line. I kept thinking of the

sub-plot games in, say, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. But I would have preferred it to have gotten to a high dramatic level and simply stayed there. No sub-plot games.

A few minutes after I got dissatisfied with the film, though, I began to feel it was as if Pagnol inserted the distractions as just that, a little "intermission" before major events, because before you know it, Marius' son finally tells Marius who he is; a beautiful scene beautifully done. the love between father and son, Marius holding his son's arm, but, true to character, never ever just giving into emotion...especially love.

Next, Fanny confesses her love to Marius, said she just "put up" with Panisse, but never fell out of love with Marius. Marius says he's not worthy of her, she's too rich, he wants her poor. She says okay, she'll do anything to have him.

And then Marius' father, Caesar (after eavesdropping on their conversation) tells them that their son would *love* to see them married. It all begins to come together, we can see where it's going, but it never goes corny, always is full of a painfully self-conscious authenticity that really gets to you.

Caesar blesses the marriage between Marius and Fanny, and even if the *first* child of their will always bear Panisse's name, Caesar winks as he says, "The others won't."

A whole next generation is waiting in the wings.

This trilogy is one of the great classics in (pardon the redundancy) classic film because, in a sense, by transferring theater on to the screen in this realistic way, combining wit, tragedy and romance, it brings the screen alive in ways that too many other too "film-ish" films never do.

It really is a glance into *lives*, not a Gordardian game with the avant-garde, and whatever theatrical tricks there may be that tumble along in the process, basically what we're dealing with is something we can all identify with: romantic career dreams, children born outside of marriage, final copings with The Real and leaving the theoretical and escapist behind.

Lettres de Mon Moulin/ Letters from My Windmill (1954) was written and directed by Pagnol. The writer, Alphonse Daudet, goes to a village in Provence where he hears three stories, and the film is a dramatization of these three stories (originally written by Daudet).

No Fanny, Caesar, Marius, Panisse, nothing "personal," really, all very "staged" and "theatrical," stories as stories, not slices of life.

In the first story this young guy comes to his grandmother's place at night.

He's supposed to be serving mass. His grandmother looks at him. He's transparent, she asks him what happened, and it turns out he was gambling with the devil and lost his soul and the devil went to serve mass instead. So it's not the total him who is visiting his grandmother, just his soul.

Very difficult to relate to. It's horror, comedy, fantasy, almost Wizard of Oz-ish, but without the special effects and music.

The devil possessing the body of the altar boy starts turning the pages of the prayer book faster and faster, speeding up/ screwing up the whole mass.

There's a big feast set up after mass and the devil creates visions of the food being cooked to appear to the priest so he skips key parts of the mass...one, two, three, four, the mass is finished, and the feast begins.

The priest who was saying the mass begins gorging himself on a huge drumstick and chokes to death.

The devil leaves and the wandering soul of the altar-boy returns to his body. The devil stole the gold pieces that the little boy had on his belt. And that's the end of story one.

Story two is also all about priests and their problems, but takes a long time to get focused. Lots of priests, lots of movement, but where is it all *going*?

The priests (monks) keep complaining about starving. Fasting is one thing, famine is another. But there's no income, no food. One monk comes up with the idea of getting sick children and curing them, putting them to work as farmers and then selling produce, turning the whole monastic thing into a kind of farming co-op.

Eventually, though, they come up with an "elixir" that supposedly has curative powers, and one of the priests finds someone in town to market it. There's a big discussion about percentages of profits and they finally come to a conclusion

It's a not too subtle satire on the imitation of Christ versus food and money. They're supposed to be self-negating, totally spiritual, anti-flesh, but what they *really* are is hungry capitalists.

And Daudet *loves* to ridicule hungry priests, doesn't he? The trouble is that this whole topic nowadays is *very* remote, esoteric, arcane, nothing much to do with our times at all.

So they get a bunch of poor children into the monastery, start manufacturing their "elixir," whatever *it* is. The "brother" who is in charge of the operation is elevated to "father" and allowed to wear a white priest's robe, he gets

drunk, disturbs services one night...and goes on and on and on. The message: all the mitres and croziers, all the vestments and chants are nonsense hiding the same old greed that drives everyone else.

The monks pray for the brother/priest who got drunk on the elixir he is manufacturing with the help of the young (poor) boys they've brought into their world. They are praying for indulgences, have set up one monk to watch the sinner. And (expectedly) he starts to drink again. The "spy" tells the abbot, "The demon has come." End of story.

A non-ending end. Up in the air, and very esoteric, that business of prayers and constantly mentioning St. Augustine and indulgences and demons. Even for someone who has spent their life inside the Catholic church and knows the whole story, it's rarefied, but what about the "outsider" who doesn't have a hint as to what it's all about?

The next story is a bit more accessible. About a miller who goes into the forest every day with two sacks of flour, and returns with two sacks of wheat. Where does he go? Where does the wheat come from?

This young guy (Gautier, the author?) gets interested in the story, goes and visits the miller at his mill, the miller and his beautiful, charming daughter.

At least we're not inside arcane theology, but in a kind of Wizard-of-Oz-ish mystery world.

Then the miller's daughter reveals the whole secret to the young guy who is probing into all this business about the miller and his mysteries. He was put out of business eighteen years earlier (when she was born) by the new steam mill in the village, only instead of just giving up and quitting, he started putting on his show, taking two bags of dust out into the forest every day, then putting the bags in other (lighter) bags, bringing them back. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. No wheat at all.

The daughter swears the young guy to secrecy, but instead of keeping it secret he tells the whole town and everyone pities the miller, brings wheat to him to grind, even the guy who owns the steam-driven mill.

It's very touching, the music, the countryside and the miller bringing the wheat, very lyrical, upbeat, moving. You can't help but be moved, one of the great scenes in world film.

And it gets even better. As the miller finally gets the mill going, the old windmill finally turning in the wind, grinding the wheat, there are a bunch of drummers and flutists (primitive, whistle-like flutes) who start playing folk music,

and the village people start folk-dancing around the windmill.

Very Renoir-like, a paean to the old, the pre-industrial, romantic past. You almost forget the windmill *is* a machine. It almost feels like ancient times, that's the kind of feeling that fills the air, man at his "natural" best.

Pagnol in a way saw film as a minor art. His films were, after all, made when film was very elementary/ primitive. He was primarily a playwright/writer, but ironically his autobiographical volumes were later turned into films that capture the essential Pagnol even more than his own films, the Pagnol of the country, the soul of Provence.

Pagnol was born 1895 and died in 1974. Between 1957 and 1977 four volumes of his memoirs were published, and in 1990 Yves Robert turned the first volume, *La Gloire de Mon Pere/ The Glory of my Father* into a film.

Suddenly, we move from Pagnol's own black and white, somewhat primitive film-world into a dramatization of his own life in brilliantly done Technicolor. No tricks, but superbly "oiled," nicely paced, realistically romantic, a re-creation of Pagnol's childhood, first in the mountains of central France (that look more like Colorado or the Atacama desert in Chile, than anything French at all), then in Marseilles.

Pagnol's father was a schoolteacher and Pagnol himself learned to read very, very early on, surprising everyone, even frightening his aunt, who thought it was too much for his young brain. Yves Robert does a beautiful job of bringing Marseilles alive, the river, the parks, Pagnol's aunt and the rich guy she meets in the park when she's with her little nephew. A brilliant portrait of Pagnol's anti-Catholic/anti-religion father. Finally we're inside Pagnol's very soul...the ridiculing of religion in *Letters from My Windmill* suddenly makes sense, *n'est pas?* But the father eventually "softens" a bit, and every time he starts to ridicule Catholicism, his wife and sister-in-law scream "It's time to eat!" so he never gets a chance to really sermonize...or perhaps I should say *anti*- sermonize.

Slowly the focus moves to the family's getting a place in the country, on the edge of a desert, and the young Pagnol stands looking out at the landscape and says, '*This is the place I will always love and remember*'. Very important, as in the case of Renoir, the crucial key, falling in love with the land itself.

The two brothers go out hunting butterflies, meet a vagabond-ish old guy who claims the butterflies belong to him, but the locusts no. And he teaches the boys how to hunt locusts, *Wait until the locusts get used to your presence and they start to sing again, then grab them*.

The boys end up with pockets full of locusts which, unexpectedly, keep singing as long as there's any light, even if it's the light on the patio table in back of the house at night.

There's lots of street bowling (*boule*), and the father of the two boys is a very good bowler, and when he makes a particularly good hit, all the guys hanging around bowling applaud him, he starts to become a kind of local hero.

All sorts of small things that add up, the country-people, the country itself, the closeness of the family...watching Pagnol's father and mother and the mother's sister and her husband is like watching a couple of Adams and a couple of Eves in Paradise before the Fall.

Pagnol's father and uncle go hunting, don't want to take the boy along, but he follows them...unseen. By chance flushes out a flock of rare partridges and his father shoots two. Instead of going home with them, he goes into the village and everyone is *amazed* at the sizes of the birds.

He was an all-star bowler, now he's an all-star hunter.

A lot here about a father becoming a hero in his son's eyes.

And always the countryside, the countryside, the countryside, visually the film a real poem to the beauty of wild nature.

Then suddenly vacation is over and Pagnol decides not to go back with his family, but to live in a grotto in the country...until he starts to escape the night before his family is going to leave, with the local friend he's made, only the dangerous hawks are out there waiting for him, and he's afraid of the microbes in the local spring. So he comes back just as his family is leaving, and his father promises to come back again the following summer, if everything works out.

On the way back through the local village the village priest runs after them in their carriage, carrying a photo of the father with his two partridges in hand.

Beautiful shot. And the last scene is Pagnol remembering that it was he who had gotten the two birds his father had shot, and held them up for his father and uncle to see. The glory of his father, the origin of the film's title. I think it captures the essential Pagnol more than he himself ever captured himself (on film).

Pagnol's films are great, no question about that, but the autobiography turned into film is much more the basic, essential *him*.

Yves Robert did two films based on Pagnol's memoirs, and the second one, *My Mother's Castle* (1990) is *pure romance*.

Centering mainly on the hills of Provence that Pagnol has fallen totally in love with. And slowly the viewer falls in love with them too.

Pagnol's father softens, still is a non-believer, but becomes much more tolerant of believers like Uncle Jules, his wife's sister's husband. The family starts to go to their magic house in the country during all vacations, summer, Christmas, Easter, and Uncle Jules always arrives with presents for the Pagnols. His father and Uncle Jules become close, close, close.

It's all love, romantic hills...and Pagnol even meets a rich young girl who is lost in the hills, and helps her get home, falls in love with her...even though they both are kids.

Vladimir Cosma's music works its own magic too. It's all mountains, trees, clouds, family, beautiful houses with beautiful interiors, beautiful people. It's a total immersion in romance.

The little girl Pagnol meets is a real pianist. It doesn't look like her playing is faked, and she's a real wonder. *But* she turns Pagnol into a slave, plays queen, and he's her dog, even gets him to eat a live grasshopper. Pagnol's mother and his local pal see the game the girl is playing, tell her parents, and that's it...it's over. Besides, she and her family leave.

But Pagnol's mother becomes friends with Pagnol's father's boss at the school where he teaches, and the superintendent changes the father's schedule so they can go to their place in the country every weekend, not just over major holidays.

For Pagnol it's heaven.

It's a long walk, though, until they meet one of the father's old students who is now in charge of regulating the water-flow of a canal that flows by the estates of some local big shots.

They're not supposed to be using the short-cut road, but they do it anyhow.

A little upper-class/ middle-class game here, not just pure romance any longer, but the introduction of the eternal class struggle. Which keeps the whole thing moving. You can't go on simply glorifying the hills, the hills, the hills forever, no matter how glorious they are. And *vraiment!* truly they *are!*

So they start going through all these luxurious, aristocratic estates every time they go to their country house, and one super-rich estate-owner confronts them one day, they are all worried, but he turns out to be all generosity and love, invites them to eat with him, tells the guy who works for him to help them with their

packages.

But then one day on another estate along the canal they meet a real son-of-a-bitch who takes their key away from them, calls them crooks, is nasty, nasty, nasty, and Pagnol's father is afraid he'll get reported for trespassing and lose his job.

Paradise suddenly moves into After the Fall.

But Pagnol's father's former student, who gave him the key to get into the rich estates along the canal, confronts the guard who is going to turn the father in as a trespasser. The guard has padlocked one of the gates along the canal route...which is very much against the law. And the former student is going to turn the guard in unless he destroys the complaints against Pagnol's father. Which he does.

The father gets a medal from his school, gets a raise, everything is up and singing. And then suddenly it all goes sadder than sad, one of the most tragic endings ever written.

Pagnol simply lets time pass. His mother dies in five years. His local buddy gets killed in World War I; he goes into the film business and ends up buying the estate his father was trespassing in. But time destroys everything, everything is gobbled up by the simple passage of the years.

Old age, death.

Fin.

Beautifully done, beautifully tragic.

Other films were made from Pagnol's other books. The French film world wouldn't let go of him, wanted to use everything that Pagnol had ever written.

Claude Berri in 1986 made a film called *Jean de Florette* based on Pagnol's work.

A beautiful film. Of course in the hills of Provence, *les colines, les colines, les colines/* the hills, the hills, the hills, the hills that Pagnol adored.

There's this old bachelor who owns a farm. Some water, not much.

He has this kind of retarded relative of his (never stated, at the beginning, exactly what the relation is, but later on we find out the young guy is the old guy's nephew) who wants to grow carnations. But the lack of water is a big problem.

So the old man goes to a neighbor and offers to buy his land. The neighbor is super-nasty, insulating, super-irritating, gets down out of the tree where he's sitting to fight with the guy who wants to buy his land, but the old guy grabs him by the feet, twirls him around, lets go, and the neighbor hits his head on a rock. Dies. Talking about plots, this is one book you can't put down...oops...one film you can't turn off. The setting may be Provence, but the concentration is very much on action, intrigue. Pagnol really knows how to plot, pull the reader/ filmgoer along.

The owner of the property is dead, the property should pass to his sister (once the girlfriend of the guy who killed her father), but she just died. So it goes to her son, an idealistic hunchback who moves into the house (although Ugolin, the nephew of the guy who killed his grandfather, has been breaking up the roof tiles), full of romantic notions of raising his own food. The evil neighbors have blocked the spring on the hunchback's land and now they fake it out, play nice guys, with the idea in the back of their minds to get rid of the hunchback so they can get the property after all

It's a masterful picture of evil in human nature in contrast to the airy idealism of the hunchback, his ex-singer wife, and their beautiful little daughter, Manon. Idealism versus land-hunger/ greed. And always the beauty of Provence humming in the background.

The problem always is drought. And the hidden spring is very well hidden.

The hunchback starts breeding rabbits, starts growing vegetables, there's some rain and everything looks great His two evil neighbors hate the way things are going. They want the hunchback to fail totally so they can gobble up his land.

And that's the way it starts to go.

No more rain. He dreams it's raining, wakes up, no rain. Day after day after day. His well dries up, he goes to a distant spring to bring back water on his mule, finally ends up on his back, totally exhausted, his evil neighbors quite happy to see his corn all dried out, his rabbits all dying from the drought too.

No one in town likes the hunchback or his wife or daughter. Too "fancy," too "citified." Not a very complimentary picture of the French villages, peasants, minor farmers.

The drought worsens and the hunchback decides to get some dynamite and blow up some rock at the bottom of a hole he has been digging for a cistern to catch the spring rains, if and when they ever come.

Only he runs to see the water rush out and is killed by a falling rock.

The monster neighbors buy the land from the widow and she leaves, but the little girl, Manon, is walking around on the neighbors' property and what does she see? The neighbors unplugging the spring they had plugged up.

A scream out of her that they think is a bird killing a hare. But the little girl has been a witness to the whole monstrous plan of the neighbors, and it's something she'll never, ever forget...or forgive.

End of Part I.

The only thing that bothered me was the horrible light that Pagnol painted the neighbors in. It's as if he were saying that all the farmers in Provence were monsters, nasty, greedy, beyond belief, and capable of *anything* for land....and a franc.

It certainly isn't tourist fare, and any romantic ideas you may have had about the romantic French south, especially the people, vanishes with this film. Although it is true, the younger of the two neighbors does cry when the hunchback dies, but he says "It's not me that's crying, it's my eyes," as if the essential *him* was totally incapable of any remorse, compassion, fellow-feeling.

Berri made a second film in 1986 based on Pagnol's work, a follow-up to *Jean de Florette—Manon of the Spring*.

Manon is the hunchback's daughter and she has stayed on in the little house that was on her father's property. The present owner, the younger of the bad guys, let her stay there. He wasn't interested in the house, just the land. Her mother is still singing, minor roles here and there, and writes cards to her daughter, who has become a goat-herder.

The two bad guys have unplugged the spring that they had plugged up to get rid of the hunchback, and they are thriving...growing carnations.

Only the aging guy tells his younger relative (the exact relation—uncle-nephew—still not quite clear) "You're getting old, you're the last of the Souberans, the last of the family, it's time you got married."

And it so happens that he is madly in love with Manon, has been watching her dance naked while playing the harmonica, has been following her over the hills, always watching her, lusting after her.

Only he doesn't tell his uncle who he is in love with. Not a word. For that would be just too bizarre, for him to marry the daughter of the guy that the two of them essentially destroyed.

Manon in a sense carries Pagnol's message about the beauty of Provence through in this film. *She loves les colines, les colines, les colines/ the hills, the hills, the hills. She is the nature-goddess, her and her goats like something out of ancient myth. I'm reminded of Renoir's goat-god in Lunch on the Grass.*

And Roland Petite's music carries the whole thing along beautifully. The screen sings. We're in the middle of an animated impressionistic painting.

Eventually the nephew falls *madly* (and I mean *madly*) in love with Manon and his uncle gives the union his blessing and the nephew follows her over the hills one day, declares his love for her, but she keeps running away. Remember, she saw the nephew and his uncle dam up the spring...and ultimately destroyed her father!

She even hears two villagers out hunting talking about the fact that César, the uncle, and Ugolin, his nephew, hid the spring from Manon's father. And she goes and sets fire to straw outside the nephew's house. Only the rain puts it out.

One other little revelation to keep in mind. When Uncle César is talking about how Manon *looks*, he says she's beautiful, *just like her grandmother, the only woman he was ever in love with*. N.B., the only woman César was ever in love with was the mother of the hunchback he and his nephew destroyed. Hint Hint. Can you see where this is all going?

Then one day Manon, the goat herder who spends all her time in the hills, has one goat that falls into a grotto where there's *the* spring that supplies *all* the water to the town.

She plugs it up. And all the water stops to everyone. There's a great scene where the parish priest gives a sermon saying that perhaps the spring dried up because of the sins of someone in the congregation, and Later Manon, in public with everyone around to hear, blames Ugolin and his uncle for having stopped up the spring that supplied the water to her father's land, so they could get the land cheap.

It's a great scene.

Emmanuelle Beart as Manon is *great*. Young, beautiful, passionately angry. Very convincing And Daniel Auteuil is great as Ugolin, the nephew; Yves Montand is a great evil uncle, a real villain.

Berri (with the help of Gerard Brach) has done a great job adopting the story for the screen.

They all flawlessly bring Pagnol's basically tragic view of life alive.

So the accusation is out in public. The uncle and his nephew stopped up the hunchback's spring. But the nephew declares his love for Manon, screams that he'll do anything and everything to make up for the past, and make her happy.

She rejects him. He goes and hangs himself from a tree.

And Manon marries the new schoolteacher

She's made it into happiness; all that's left for the old uncle is solitude and old age. And yet something more even worse.

There's an old blind woman who tells César that Manon's grandmother got pregnant after she had sex with him years and years before, wrote and told him, he didn't answer, so she married someone else.

Her child (*their* child) was the hunchback!

So Manon is his granddaughter.

Only César doesn't face her with the truth, wills everything to her and then dies alone in his bed just as Manon is giving birth to her child—César's great grandchild.

A really classic, this film, these *two* films. Berri does a miraculous job with Pagnol's work, brings it alive like no one else could.

Pagnol is one of the all-time greats in French film—and writing. Too bad he's not still around, still creating in the world of modern high technology. But, in a way, his classic trilogy *Caesar*, *Marius* and *Fanny* are better in black and white, primitive to match the primitivism of the times they are set in.

The fact that Pagnol's literary works can be well adapted into updated form, though, shows just how timeless his work is. Provence will never be the same after Pagnol touched it.

Chapter II

Jean Vigo

L'Atalante (1934), Vigo's masterpiece, is very much like Pagnol at his best, about common, quirky people, common, quirky, everyday things turned into high comedy, very much involved with love-sex...and the sea.

L'Atalante is about a young village girl who marries the captain of a barge, and off they go into the water, ending up in Paris.

The girl is kind of ugly-ish, the chief crewman is pure comic, and the husband is mainly sleek and "normal."

Full of songs and music by Maurice Jaubert.

They arrive in Paris, the blonde ends up in the cabin of the chief mate who has all kinds of little music-makers that you twist and turn and they play music. He even has a dummy conductor that he says he picked up in Caracas, Venezuela no less. He puts on some music, gets inside the dummy and starts to conduct the music. Very (grotesquely) hilarious.

The husband comes in, gets mad, breaks some dishes, they go out on the town, go to a club and meet a magician.

Just pure nonsense, pure fun, no high art, no big message, just the slobs and idiots of everyday and every night doing their everyday—every night things.

Engaging. Again, like Pagnol.

Later the captain and his bride go out into Paris again, meet another "clown" in a nightclub who starts dancing with the bride, the husband gets mad, there's a little "play-violence" and they leave. The guy comes around the next day with a trombone, cymbals. More fooling around, the husband gets a little violent again. But never any *real* violence. It's all fun, like frat party stuff, kid stuff. It says

“Movie! This is a movie!” full time, “This is farce, monkeying around.”

Of course it *is* before Hitler and the Nazis and everything that comes after. A film-maker like Resnais has Nazi concentration camps always hanging over him, Hiroshima...the horrors of World War II. But here, 1934, it's still five years from the German invasion of Poland, with *La Vie Bohème*, nonsense as a way of life. Totally delightful, especially the in-the-streets, by-the-river way that Vigo brings it off. Call it “artless artfulness”—not an easy trick.

The husband is mad because his wife talked to this joker. He paces the deck all night, she eventually gets dressed, sneaks out just about dawn, walks around Paris and loves the stores, the mechanical puppets she sees in one store window, her husband discovers she has left and he leaves town, shoves off and sails down to Marseilles.

She wanders around, comes back to the boat, but it's gone, has her purse stolen, eventually makes it down to Marseilles too.

Her husband is half crazy with her absence. His first mate goes out looking for her.

Will they meet?

It's all so absurd, but at the same time simply “real,” that you really get *involved*; what's so intriguing about it is that, like Pagnol, the world is so confused, disheveled, out-of-joint, that's it's *reality* and not *art*.

The old guy mate goes off wandering around looking for the run-away (now lost) wife; she's in a media place listening to a song (record) she had to pay to listen to. About a sailor. It plays outside the store too, where her old friend is wandering around. He hears it, comes in, and actually bends down and throws her over his shoulder, takes her back to the boat, there's a moment of hesitation between her and her husband, a beautiful, touching moment of hesitation, then they fall into each other's arms, are down on the floor kissing and wrapped around each other.

So touching an ending that you don't want it to end.

Vigo died in 1934 at the age of 29. No question, he was/ would have become another Renoir or Pagnol.

But there's so little that has survived and you can even find. Like *Zero for Conduct* (first shown in Paris in April of 1933, issued on tape in 1947), 13 years after his death, a wildly bustling film about school kids coming back to school in the Fall, a virulent satire against the whole French educational system.

Two young guys are coming back to school on a train. Smoking in a non-smoking compartment. A guy in the compartment with them passes out, falls down and he's dead. Move to dorm, guys screwing around, faking stomach-aches, and one guy walking like he's hypnotized/ in a trance, morning, everyone sound asleep.

The principal comes in, the boys don't get up. Zero for Conduct!

Some boys decide to escape because they're punished every Sunday. Which sounds serious enough until one professor starts walking/ dancing like Chaplin, plays around with a volleyball. A professor steals kids' chocolate. Total confusion.

One teacher walks on his hands, while upside-down starts to draw, his drawing goes animated, comes alive.

The principal is a midget with a beard! He talks to one of the teachers about alumni day, insists that he doesn't want any "incidents." All the students are following one of the teachers. He sees a beauty, runs after her. They run after him.

Sunday, the bad guys still talking about their "plot." Beans for dinner. During dinner-time it's complete chaos with everyone throwing beans all over the place screaming "Down with Mrs. Bean." Anatomy class, the professor comes in with a skeleton on a chain following him. He's not amused. Night. Jumping around on beds, talking about revolution. They have their own flag. Pillow fights, feathers all over the place. A procession. The next morning they tie the sleeping principal in his bed and hoist him up vertically. Alumni Day, the governor arrives, there's military music. The boys start throwing garbage down from the roof.

It's total chaos, a total slap in the face of the meticulously strict French school system.

Just a fragment, really, a short sketch. Nothing quite like it anywhere else.

Vigo's first film, *A Propos de Nice/ About Nice* was supposed to be a kind of touristy "travel" film. 1930. Just four years before his death. Full of life. Toy trains filled with dolls, a woman at a terrace café changing clothes and changing clothes until she finally ends up naked except for her shoes, all sorts of documentary looks at the poor...sewers, garbage. A carnival full of sexy dancers, a factory chimney turning into a cannon. Vigo loved Buñuel and Dali's *Un Chien Andalou*, had all sorts of surrealistic seeds in him that never had a chance to sprout and flourish.

After *A Propos de Nice* he did a film called *Taris* (the end of 1930), which was supposed to be a kind of documentary about Jean Taris, a champion French swimmer, but is full of surrealistic tricky stuff like Taris looking like he's walking on

water.

It didn't help things that *Zero for Conduct* was banned after an article came out in a Catholic journal calling Vigo an obsessed maniac. April, 1933. One year before his death.

There's no touch of "amateurism" in Vigo's work. It's early filmdom, relatively "primitive," but you never think "primitive" when watching *L'Atalante* or *Zero for Conduct*. What you mainly do is *feel*. In *L'Atalante* you *feel* for the girl, the guy, the old man, lovers coming together, nonsense jealousies, an almost breakup, a return...all lively, funny, against a romantic montage of seascapes and cityscapes. Like at the end when the camera gets up in the air and scans down on the lovers' boat and then it's just water, water, water...fin.

Or like in *Zero for Conduct* where the film really goes nowhere, is chaos for chaos' sake. Just what it's supposed to be, the most horrific, total slapstick satire ever made.

Vigo, born in 1905, dead in 1934 from tuberculosis. What else might he have done if he had survived another thirty or forty years?

Chapter III

Jean Cocteau

Cocteau's first film, *Le Sang D'un Poete/ The Blood of a Poet* (1930) is one of the strangest films you ever see.

It's Godardish in a way, surreal, experimental but what makes it different is the totality of its experimentalism. There's no real plot, no real dialogue, a voice says something super serious from time to time, but the core of the film is images, images, images, black African angels with weird metal wings, a bleeding statue of a woman who later becomes human, then turns into a drawing.

You get through with the film and you walk away thinking about Cocteau's opium-addiction, his wild life in Marseilles and Paris, his working as a creator of ballets, his art, his ceramics...his whole life an immersion in the farthest out possible arts.

The film begins in what seems like the eighteenth century. An artist dressed in eighteenth century clothes comes into a room and pulls off his wig, his shirt, begins to paint. The mouth of the face he's painting begins to move. He rubs the mouth out, it stops.

Next we're on a street with someone looking into houses through keyholes. He sees a Spaniard getting shot, then coming back to life, then two hands doing something with what looks like a ball of yarn...door after door after door. Is this the poet perceiving life? Is the first part about the painter's painting coming alive, the idea of the poet making inanimate reality talk?

The poet goes through a thousand guises, the last scene is the poet on a stage shooting himself, falling down on the stage, blood coming out of a wound on his head, the woman who was a statue earlier walking away becoming all wind and almost featureless. Is this reality becoming "itself" again without the poet's encouragement? There's one final shot of a huge chimney falling down into huge pieces. End of film.

Opening the Door to French Film

by

Hugh Fox

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