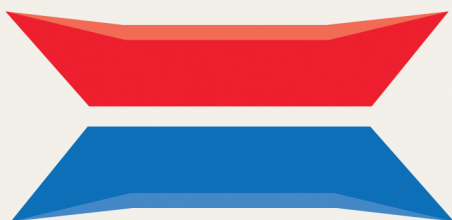


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BARGE
LIFE

On Jean Vigo's *L'Atalante*

BARGE LIFE

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Fig. 1. Detail from Hieronymus Bosch, *Ship of Fools* (1490–1500)

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<https://punctumbooks.com>

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ISBN-13: 978-1-68571-192-4 (print)

ISBN-13: 978-1-68571-193-1 (ePDF)

DOI: 10.53288/0480.1.00

LCCN: 2025939058

Library of Congress Cataloging Data is available from the Library of Congress

Editing: Eileen A. Fradenburg Joy and SAJ

Book design: Vincent W.J. van Gerven Oei

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Acknowledgments

This book started in 2019 while I was studying at The New School for Social Research, supported by a grant from the Fulbright Commission in Brussels. I'd like to thank Melissa Monroe and Dominic Pettman for their help and advice on an early version. Much of the final chapter was inspired by a seminar on mysticism taught by Simon Critchley and Eugene Thacker. I'd also like to thank Noah Isenberg for showing me new ways to write about film, and Rosemary O'Neill for introducing me to the visual culture of the French Riviera.

Special thanks to Pernille Kaufmann and Frank Vande Veire who read the manuscript as it was coming together. Floris Baekke, Sam Ooghe, and Lennart Soberon kindly offered suggestions, and Asbjørn Nordentoft, Tom Ward, and Kato Trieu kept me company in New York. Many thanks to Eileen A. Fradenburg Joy, Vincent W.J. van Gerven Oei, and all the staff of punctum books for their support and exceptionally careful editing. Finally, thanks to Nona Demey Gallagher for practicing what this book hopes to describe.

for Pernille Kaufmann and Asbjørn Nordentoft

PREFACE

Life Adrift

Waves washing up against the hull, a bed, and a small stove, the deck hatch sealed shut — the vessel is the ultimate dwelling. As a mobile nest, it may be superior to the house. A boat can move around freely: it is not attached to some fixed environment, it is unrooted, autonomous. The attraction of a boat to the imagination lies less in its possibilities of exploration than in the promise of a self-sufficient retreat. Everything we need is nearby, enclosed in a watertight shell. Life aboard evokes the fantasy of autarky, as we imagine ourselves taking stock of some treasured belongings, establishing a daily rhythm, and enjoying the company of a few close allies, unbothered by outside pressures and power.

With Noah's ark as the archetype, the ship has been one of the most alluring settings of the free group that doesn't need anything it doesn't already possess. "The ark concept is the most suggestive model for the human turn away from the apparent precedence of the environment," writes the philosopher Peter Sloterdijk, adding that it is "the most convincing metaphor for the self-harboring of a group in its radically artificial independ-

ent casing.”¹ This book aims to understand this allure by studying one fictional vessel: the river barge of Jean Vigo’s 1934 film *L’Atalante*. In the pages that follow, I explore how this dream vessel is so appealing because it is a construction that promises to shelter, against a hostile environment, a way of life that is both self-sufficient and intimate because it is lived together with others. I also look into Jean Vigo’s own life — a short one, marked by periods of intense cohabitation — not so much as a key to interpret his work but as a parallel script that helps develop the questions raised by *L’Atalante*. This book, then, is about boats, about a film that anticipated the Nouvelle Vague, about a French director in the interwar years, but above all about the promise and problems of living together, apart from the rest.

Why turn to images of people stuck in the same boat? Scenes of life adrift can be mined not just for suggestive metaphors but also for simulations of individuals figuring out how to live collectively, with no solid ground beneath them. If the commonplace that we live in “liquid times”² is true and if the pandemic taught us that “the whole world is an infectious, claustrophobic cruise-ship,”³ then it may be worthwhile to reconsider nautical fictions.

In his pamphlet *Down to Earth*, Bruno Latour instead chooses the image of a drifting airplane to characterize our historical moment, in which the ideals of globalization have evidently receded from the horizon.⁴ After announcing that the plane has turned around because it can no longer land at its planned destination, the one promised by the trajectory of modernization,

1 Peter Sloterdijk, *Spheres*, vol. 2: *Globes: Macrospherology*, trans. Wieland Hoban (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2014), 249–50.

2 Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Times: Living in an Age of Uncertainty* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007).

3 Dominic Pettman, “Netflix and Chills: On Digital Distraction During the Global Quarantine,” *The b2o Review*, April 29, 2022, <https://www.boundary2.org/2020/04/dominic-pettman-netflix-and-chills-on-digital-distraction-during-the-global-quarantine/>.

4 Bruno Latour, *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Polity, 2018), 32.

the captain tells the terrified passengers that the emergency runway, the local past, is inaccessible as well. “Where to land,” when the familiar coordinates have disappeared? Latour orients us to “the Terrestrial,” an attachment to the land that nonetheless resists borders.⁵ But he is at pains to distinguish this from a very different kind of soil politics: one that longs to return to authentic roots, to some retrospectively invented ancestral land, to strictly policed national and ethnic boundaries.⁶

Ship tales such as *L'Atalante* have the advantage of not relying on territorial language and imagery. When they negate the hope of returning to dry land altogether,⁷ they also restate the problem in an admittedly more pessimistic, but more modest and pragmatic way: “How do we stay afloat together?” The scope of this study is similarly modest. Its scale is that of a small group. And the small group that lives on the barge of *L'Atalante* is not looking for some gleaming port on the horizon, some grand new continent where they can dock at in the future, but is struggling to harbor each other in the present, in a miniature world, when the surrounding environment has become inhospitable.

5 Ibid., 40.

6 Ibid., 30, 53.

7 A hope that Friedrich Nietzsche already recognized as misplaced nostalgia: “Woe, when homesickness for the land overcomes you, as if there had been more freedom there — and there is no more ‘land!’” Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, ed. Bernard Williams, trans. Josefine Nauckhoff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 119.

INTRODUCTION

Sunbaths

Jean Vigo had been confined to his bed for seven months before he died of complications from tuberculosis. At his boarding school in Millau, he had always stood out as a weak and sickly child, but the lung disease that would eventually kill him really flared up at the beginning of 1926. The twenty-two-year-old was by then considering a career in cinema, even if he had been taking courses in sociology and philosophy at the Sorbonne in the months leading up to his army physical. He had already postponed the examination once. Given his antimilitarist stance and anarchist affiliations, the prospect of spending time in a barracks, serving the French state, repulsed him. Vigo wrote to a friend that he would do anything to avoid military service, and it is possible that he deliberately made himself ill just before the examination.

In any case, Vigo's lungs were soon discovered to be affected. At the time, direct exposure to natural sunlight was recommended as a cure to clear bacteria from tubercular lungs. After undergoing ultraviolet ray treatment in Montpellier, Vigo was ordered to take sunbaths at Palavas-les-Flots. In August, he was sent to Doctor Capelle's sanatorium *Espérance* (Hope) in Font-Romeu, a mountain retreat close to the border of Andorra, where his great-grandfather had been a magistrate before shoot-

ing himself in 1886, and only thirteen kilometers away from Latour-de-Carol, the small village in which his grandfather Eugène had passed away from tuberculosis at the age of twenty.

Vigo would remain at Font-Romeu for more than two years, interrupted only by a few returns to Paris and Montpellier. The site's high altitude, dry Mediterranean winds, and abundant sunshine created a benevolent microclimate that was presumed to have revitalizing and antitubercular effects. Doctor Capelle's sanatorium specialized in heliotherapy, and when Vigo was not exposing his body to the sun's rays, he spent most of his time reading books, including some key texts of early film criticism such as Léon Moussinac's *Naissance du cinéma* (1925) and Jean Epstein's *Le Cinématographe vu de l'Etna* (1926). He also maintained a regular correspondence with the family of Jean de Saint-Prix, a young pacifist who had known his father and died of the Spanish flu in 1917. As he read Saint-Prix's philosophical works, plays, stories, and letters, it seems Jean Vigo began to identify Saint-Prix with his father Miguel Almercyda, editor of the satirical weekly *Le Bonnet rouge* and a prominent anarchist-turned-socialist who had been murdered in prison when Jean was twelve. "I would have indeed liked to have Jean de Saint-Prix as a friend," he confessed to Madame de Saint-Prix, before adding, "— no — he is my friend (understand me: my father is my best friend)."¹

Vigo led a solitary life in the clinic, but he eventually took up with the editor and writer Claude Aveline. It was during one of their long walks together in the snow and among the region's creeping pines that Vigo would tell him all the information he had managed to gather about his father, and it was then, too, that Aveline would first discover a will to succeed in Vigo's eyes which, as he would later relate, "burned like a flame and that I saw extinguished only an hour before his death."²

1 Paulo Emílio Salles Gomes, *Jean Vigo* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1972), 47.

2 "brûlait comme une flamme et que je n'ai vu s'éteindre qu'une heure avant sa mort." Claude Aveline, "Présentation de Jean Vigo," *Ciné-Club* 2, no. 5

Vigo's sinking morale at Font-Romeu would improve after he met the daughter of a Jewish industrialist from Łódź, Poland. Elisabeth Lozinska, known as Lydou, had been studying in Switzerland before she was brought to the Espérance clinic near the end of 1926 to recover from tuberculosis of the bones. The nineteen-year-old was so dispirited, however, that she spent most of the first year of her stay in bed. It appears that she and Vigo only met around the end of 1927, when they immediately fell in love. By July, their health improving, the two had moved into a chalet nearby to sit out the last months of their cure in more private quarters. In the fall, they decided to get married and settled in Nice on the French Riviera, where the moderate climate was supposed to help them maintain their newly regained strength. After buying a second-hand Debie camera with the money Lydou's father had sent as a wedding gift, Vigo would make his first documentary about the atmosphere of death and decay that pervaded Nice, a glamorous tourist destination that could barely hide its past as a final refuge for the hopelessly ill.

Years later, in the spring of 1934, Vigo was again bedridden, this time breathing in the less warm and less pure air that wafted into his Paris apartment on the rue Gazan in the fourteenth arrondissement. "I killed myself with *L'Atalante*," he confided to a friend.³ This was not far from the truth. Vigo's health had started deteriorating while shooting the outdoor scenes of this project, his first and only full-length feature. Filming had begun in November 1933 on a barge that navigated the waterways of France. Winter had set in unusually early that year and the crew faced low temperatures, rain, snow, and blocks of ice floating through the canals.⁴

Within a week, Vigo was ill. But work couldn't be suspended, and he continued leading the shoot while coughing constantly and fighting off bouts of fever, eventually directing from a

(1949): 3. All translations are my own, unless otherwise noted.

3 "Je me suis tué avec *L'Atalante*." Pierre Lherminier, *Jean Vigo* (Paris: Pierre Lherminier/Filméditations, 1984), 176.

4 Bernard Eisenschitz, "Vie de Vigo: Quatre films," in *Jean Vigo: L'Intégrale* (booklet) (Gaumont, 2018), 65.

stretcher. Exhausted, he finally collapsed four months later, with only one aerial shot left to film. Boris Kaufman, the brother of Dziga Vertov and Vigo's regular collaborator, did the shot alone. Louis Chavance, the film's editor, finished the planned first montage, consulting the director in bed whenever needed. The studio was not happy with the film, however, and fearing a box office failure, the producers at Gaumont suggested major changes. As his condition worsened, Vigo couldn't put up much of a fight to prevent them from butchering the final cut. In a hasty attempt to make the film more commercially palatable, Gaumont even changed the title to *Le Chaland qui passe* (*The Passing Barge*), after a hit song by Lys Gauty that they crudely inserted into the new version. Despite their efforts, the film still had an unsuccessful two-week run at the Colisée cinema on the Champs-Élysées. A few days after the film closed, and most likely believing it had been a complete failure, Vigo died on October 5, 1934 at the age of twenty-nine. His biographer Paulo Emilio Salles Gomes claims that a street musician was playing "Le Chaland qui passe" outside his bedroom window when he died.⁵

It is somewhat ironic that the script of the flopped film had been chosen specifically for its conventional and apolitical storyline. Vigo's previous, mid-length film *Zéro de conduite* (1933), about a group of rebellious boarding school students, had been banned in France for its carnivalesque attack on the educational system and other symbols of institutional authority. His producer, Jacques-Louis Nunez, now set him to work on a story about a *péniche* (barge) traveling up and down France's many canals and rivers.⁶ The generic premise of *L'Atalante* was by no means original. In fact, canal boats, the vessels that transported bulk goods throughout the mainland, were a popular theme in

5 Salles Gomes, *Jean Vigo*, 197.

6 This inland network had been greatly expanded in the first half of the nineteenth century. See Reed Geiger, "Planning the French Canals: The 'Becquey Plan' of 1820-1822," *The Journal of Economic History* 44, no. 22 (1984): 330.

France at the time. The decade before 1934 saw the development of a veritable subgenre of “barge films,” including productions such as Jean Epstein’s *La Belle Nivernaise* (1923), Jean Renoir’s *La Fille de l’eau* (1924), Harry Lachman’s *La Belle Marinière* (1932), and Jean Choux’s *L’Ange gardien* (1933).⁷ On the radio, songs like the “Chanson de halage” (“Song of Towing”) sketched the peculiar hardy life of these “freshwater sailors” (“marins d’eau douce”) passing through the country’s artificial waterways “without purpose and without whims” (“sans but et sans caprice”), as the *chansonnière* Damia sings in her 1934 recording. While the inland fleet still numbered more than 12,000 boats that year, it faced fierce competition from the railways and seemed to represent a vanishing, romantic conveyance.⁸ “Our sea views are pastoral” (“Nos marines sont pastorales”), Damia croons, and perhaps barge life also fascinated Vigo’s contemporaries because it fused two seemingly incompatible elements: water and land. These rustic mariners didn’t cross the open sea but drifted past the backwoods and riverbanks of France, past odd villages and semi-industrial zones of warehouses and woodyards. Cruising the inland waterways, the barges weren’t far away but resided in the interstices of ordinary life ashore.⁹ “We drag our homes,” the song goes, “all along the canals” (“Nous traînons nos maisons” / “Tout le long des canaux”).

Today, even favorable critics tend not to attach much importance to the plot of *L’Atalante*. The film opens with the marriage

7 Colin Crisp writes that in France, “The romance of the waterways did not survive the early thirties, though the canal-side streets of Paris retained a picturesque quality in later films.” Colin Crisp, *Genre, Myth, and Convention in the French Cinema: 1929–1939* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 95.

8 For more on the social crisis facing around 19,000 French boaters in the 1930s, see Nicolas Neiertz, *La Coordination des transports en France: De 1918 à nos jours* (Vincennes: Institut de la gestion publique et du développement économique, 1999), 31–35.

9 See Brian Hunt, “Cinematic Borderlands: Jean Vigo’s *L’Atalante* and the Allure of *entre-deux*,” *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies* 21, no. 3 (2017): 267, and Margaret C. Flinn, *The Social Architecture of French Cinema, 1929–1939* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2014), 120, 135.

of the eponymous barge's skipper Jules, a role given to Jean Dasté, and a young woman from the countryside, Juliette, played by the German actress Dita Parlo.¹⁰ What follows is a conventional tripartite narrative structure of marital union, separation, and reunion: small frustrations on board escalate into fights, Juliette secretly disembarks in Paris, the couple quickly start missing each other, and they are finally reunited in a tumbling embrace.¹¹ Vigo, however, twisted the original script by Jean Guinée,¹² a morality tale of female obedience, to his liking—cutting and changing scenes, rewriting dialogue, adding new parts, characters, and details—until the bare skeleton of the plot was filled with his own concerns: Guinée's conservative model of marital submission was replaced by the ideal of a loving relation between equals.

Reminding us that this love story remarkably begins *after* courtship and marriage, the French director François Truffaut observed that *L'Atalante* deals with a subject that is rarely treated seriously in cinema:

[T]he beginnings of a young couple's life together, their difficulty in adapting to each other, the early euphoria of coupling (what Maupassant calls "the brutal physical appetite that is quickly extinguished"), then the first wounds, rebellion, flight, reconciliation, and finally acceptance.¹³

As Truffaut goes on to note, it is also a work that "smells like dirty feet," since Vigo pushes our faces directly into the messy,

10 While both are called "*L'Atalante*" in French, for clarity's sake I will refer to the film as *L'Atalante* and to the barge as the *Atalante*. Incidentally, the name of the ship is not a deliberate reference to Atalanta, the figure of Greek mythology, but was named after a frigate commanded by an ancestor of scriptwriter Jean Guinée.

11 For a detailed breakdown of the plot, see Michael Temple, *Jean Vigo* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 110–13.

12 The pen name of Roger de Guichen.

13 François Truffaut, *The Films in My Life*, trans. Leonard Mayhew (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1978), 25.

imperfect, and sticky contours of the barge.¹⁴ The director films the inhabitants with what André Bazin called an “almost obscene admiration [...] for the human skin,” suggesting that Vigo’s oeuvre is not only a cinema of smell but of touch as well.¹⁵ *L’Atalante* is full of rough and gentle contact: a head is shoved underwater, a cat scratches a face, a belly is pricked with a sewing pin, a warm towel is pressed against a freezing chest.

Vigo also anchored *L’Atalante*’s formulaic romance in the everyday life of working-class people during Depression-era France, which he depicted not with the trite paternalism of his contemporary Marcel Pagnol, but in an unpolished and detailed way. The development of the plot, which resembles a folk tale as it moves from crisis to resolution, is set against a decidedly modern backdrop of train tracks and telegraph poles, derricks and smokestacks, strangely beautiful banks dotted by the bleak infrastructure of haphazard industries. In their documentary *À propos de Nice* (1930), inspired by the experimental cinema of Soviet filmmakers, Kaufman and Vigo had already developed their approach of letting a free-floating camera capture its own “documented point of view.”¹⁶ Without resorting to overt didacticism or novelistic character psychology, this roving, independent camera eye was to record commonplace reality, producing what Vigo called “a social cinema” that dealt with “provocative subjects, subjects that cut into flesh.”¹⁷ The documentary-like quality of *L’Atalante* may be less obvious to contemporary viewers, who tend to praise Vigo’s “poetry,” but its effect certainly

14 Ibid., 27.

15 “cette admiration presque obscène qu’il a pour la peau humaine.” André Bazin, “Jean Vigo: Numéro spécial de *Positif*,” *Cahiers du cinéma* 26 (1953): 63.

16 Stuart Liebman’s translation of Jean Vigo’s speech on *À propos de Nice* was first published in *Millennium Film Journal* 1, no. 1 (1977): 21–24. I have consulted a revised version, published online as Jean Vigo, “Toward a Social Cinema,” trans. Stuart Liebman, *Sabzian*, June 22, 2015, <https://www.sabzian.be/article/toward-a-social-cinema>. For the original, see Jean Vigo, “Vers un cinéma social,” in *Jean Vigo: Œuvre de cinéma*, ed. Pierre Lherminier (Paris: Cinémathèque française/Pierre Lherminier, 1985), 65–67.

17 Vigo, “Toward a Social Cinema.”

struck critics at the time. Vigo's directorial style was considered to be a raw one. "Humanity among the poor. In a sweater and a smock. No dazzling crystal on the tablecloth," the art critic Élie Faure observed,¹⁸ while another commentator criticized "a deliberate reaching out for the ugly and the vulgar."¹⁹ The trials that the archetypal lovers undergo are peppered with night shifts, fog horns, pulleys and levers, and constant manual labor, carried out in greasy overalls, tattered trousers, and rain-soaked hats.

From the very beginning of the film, it is clear that the fate of Jean and Juliette's cohabitation on the barge also depends on their bonds with the other crew members. *L'Atalante* concerns not just the relationship of a couple but the life of a group, even though it remains, as we will see, a story about romantic love. Once aboard, Juliette must learn to live with her new and sometimes possessive husband, but also with his bacchanalian first mate, Père Jules (Michel Simon), the young cabin boy (Louis Lefebvre), a group of smelly cats, and the various machines and artefacts that Père Jules has collected across the globe, from a broken phonograph to a fetish necklace that wards off bad spirits.

If *Zéro de conduite* attacked the French establishment, then *L'Atalante* probes the difficulties and possibilities of building a life outside of it. It is possible to watch the film as the difficult sequel to the schoolboys' youthful revolt, who must figure out what happens *after* they leave their doomed society behind and make their way up the school roof toward freedom. Vigo is navigating the trickier terrain of world-building here, an exercise associated for him with a strain of late-nineteenth-century anarchism, memorialized by his father's friends, that sought to construct communes, or counter-sites, after having attacked the status-quo with discouraging results.²⁰

18 Faure's piece, "Un Cinéaste-né: Jean Vigo, l'auteur de *L'Atalante*," appeared in issue 289 of the film magazine *Pour Vous* on May 31, 1934. Quoted in Salles Gomes, *Jean Vigo*, 186.

19 Jean Pascal of the Agence d'Informations Cinématographiques, quoted in Salles Gomes, *Jean Vigo*, 187.

20 See *ibid.*, 133.

More specifically, I want to approach *L'Atalante* as an account of a group trying to establish what Roland Barthes calls “idiorrhymy”: a way of living together that is flexible enough to not stifle the different rhythms of particular individuals, and that recognizes and integrates the values of living alone.²¹ In his 1976–1977 lecture course at the Collège de France, Barthes explains that the “idiorrhhythmic cluster” is something like “the utopia of a socialism of distance,” embodied by a small group and rooted in a detailed setting.²² It is a fantasy that remains just that: a dream vision, “a resurgence of certain desires, certain images that lurk within you,” of which we catch glimpses in the lives of other people, in literature and film.²³ In a cramped space, *L'Atalante* stages a nautical version of this compelling fantasy: to secure a free life together with and through a few other people, animals, and things. Vigo, however, also confronts the difficulties that haunt such a fantasized community. The dramatic question driving the action of *L'Atalante* is whether this river barge can in fact become a vessel that accommodates a group existing harmoniously outside of a terrain that is felt to be uninhabitable.²⁴ Just after the wedding procession, and right before she is hoisted over the threshold with a wooden cargo boom, the cabin boy welcomes Juliette with the wish: “A happy life aboard the *Atalante!*” (“Heureuse vie à bord de *L'Atalante!*”). The rest of the film then asks if, and how, this is possible.

21 Roland Barthes, *How to Live Together: Novelistic Simulations of Some Everyday Spaces*, trans. Kate Briggs (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 7–9. In his course summary, Barthes characterizes “idiorrhymy” as “the ‘living together’ of very small groups, in which cohabitation does not exclude individual freedom” (“le ‘vivre ensemble’ de groupes très restreints, dans lesquels la cohabitation n’exclut pas la liberté individuelle”). See Roland Barthes, “Comment vivre ensemble: simulations romanesque de quelque espaces quotidiens,” in *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 5: 1977–1980, ed. Éric Marty (Paris: Seuil, 2002), 362.

22 Barthes, *How to Live Together*, 6.

23 Ibid.

24 Manuel L. Grossman similarly argues that the film “again takes up Vigo’s basic theme of the need to create a personal universe.” Manuel L. Grossman, “Jean Vigo and the Development of Surrealist Cinema,” *Symposium: A Quarterly Journal in Modern Literatures* 27, no. 2 (1973): 117.



It was only after the Second World War that *L'Atalante*, partially restored to its original cut, started garnering critical acclaim. As it spread through French cinema clubs and was rereleased in New York in 1947, moviegoers discovered Vigo's distinctive combination of melancholic lyricism, searing realism, and flights of fantasy, mixed so seamlessly that it is still hard to understand how he managed to make a work resembling something like a gritty daydream. When the American critic James Agee saw the film, he was struck by its "half mad, strangely majestic kind of poetry" and wrote that no other director since Vigo had come close to his "vivid communication of the animal emotions, the senses, the inanimate world, and their interplay."²⁵ Siegfried Kracauer, writing for Basel's *National-Zeitung* in 1940, similarly pointed out that *L'Atalante* upends the usual division of things into dead objects and living subjects. Vigo, Kracauer explains, effectively exploits "the fact that the camera does not discriminate between [...] animate and inanimate nature," so that "the material components of mental processes" become visible and all objects "become fetishes in *Atalante*."²⁶

Meanwhile, in France, Vigo's work was beginning to be appreciated as a bridge between the avant-garde experiments of the Surrealists and the more fatalistic sensibility of the poetic realism that flourished after his death.²⁷ Like the otherworldly fog shrouding the barge, a delicate strangeness permeates the activities and artifacts of *L'Atalante*. As the critic Lucien Wahl already noted in 1934, the film is "neither realistic nor fantastic,

25 James Agee, *Agee on Film* (New York: McDowell, Obolensky, 1958), 265–66.

26 Siegfried Kracauer, "Jean Vigo," trans. William Melnitz, *Hollywood Quarterly* 2, no. 3 (1947): 262–63.

27 Graham Fuller, "Artist of the Floating World," *Sight and Sound* 22, no. 2 (2012): 43. Also available at: <https://www.bfi.org.uk/sight-and-sound/features/l-atalante-jean-vigo-1934-greatest-films-poll>.

but a sort of fantasy rooted in everyday life.”²⁸ There is straightforward social critique — of the period’s commodity fetishism, unemployment lines, and class hierarchies — but what also caught the attention of budding filmmakers was how Vigo captured a riveting vitality in very ordinary things like doing the laundry or whispering into someone’s ear. As he himself claimed in “Toward a Social Cinema” — a speech given in 1930 before the second screening of *À propos de Nice* and which rings with the echoes of the Surrealist manifestos — he believed the camera could make one see with different eyes, and with such a force that “the world, which we, indifferent, have heretofore passed by, will be presented to us, in spite of itself, over and above its outward appearances.”²⁹ It is as if Vigo, so often on the cusp of losing life, wanted to reveal to his viewers a sensuous vitality present in the ordinary people, things, and places that they would normally overlook with the dulled perception of a jaded eye.

Of course, dying young helps to consolidate a reputation. As his films circulated among *ciné-clubs*, Vigo was hailed as one of cinema’s first lost heroes, its very own *poète maudit*. By 1956, the founder of the Cinémathèque Française, Henri Langlois, could confidently declare that “Vigo is Cinema incarnate in one man.”³⁰ Langlois presented Vigo as the embodiment of the *auteur*, the filmmaker as a visionary with a distinctive artistic signature: “He sees, he dreams, he thinks, he writes, he lives cinema [...]. If the cinema is an art of sleep, there’s only one man who holds the key to dreams: Jean Vigo.”³¹ Vigo’s approach to the medium became a waypoint for those seeking something between classical narrative cinema and experimental recordings of “two pairs of lips that take 3,000 meters to come together and almost

28 Wahl’s review was published in *L’Œuvre* on September 21, 1934. Quoted in Salles Gomes, *Jean Vigo*, 190. For more on the “lyrical” and “grotesque” modes in Vigo’s work, see David Baldwin, “‘L’*Atalante*’ and the Maturing of Jean Vigo,” *Film Quarterly* 39, no. 1 (1985): 22.

29 Vigo, “Toward a Social Cinema.”

30 Temple, *Jean Vigo*, 111.

31 *Ibid.*, 151111.

as long to come unstuck,” to quote Vigo’s speech again.³² The violent energy, libertarian themes, and lewd humor of Vigo’s oeuvre made the director especially beloved among the young cinephiles of the Nouvelle Vague. Truffaut repeatedly quoted *Zéro de conduite* in his own debut film about adolescence, 1959’s *Les Quatre cents coups*.³³ In 1963, Jean-Luc Godard dedicated *Les Carabiniers* “à Jean Vigo,” while his last film, 2018’s *Le Livre d’image*, included haunting close-ups of Juliette.

L’Atalante has come to be seen as Vigo’s masterpiece, and many scholars have by now praised its “powerfully sensual politics of the image,”³⁴ “astonishingly fresh and vivid”³⁵ camera angles, and “fascinating mélange of the imaginary and the real.”³⁶ The film ranked thirty-fourth in *Sight and Sound*’s 2022 critics’ poll of the best films of all time.³⁷ In October 2018, I joined a long line of people waiting to see a new 4K version of *L’Atalante*, Gaumont’s latest restoration, at New York’s Film Forum.³⁸ In an article called “Dreaming of Vigo,” Michael Temple has traced the legend surrounding the French director, whose three syllables have come to have a mythical ring.³⁹ Reading the recollections of Vigo’s friends, it is easy to start imagining how Jean and Lydou might have spent an afternoon at their villa “Les Deux Frères” in Nice, together with Boris Kaufman and his wife, and how, at night, after a screening at his cinema club “Les Amis du cinéma,” he may have driven off on the back of his friend

32 Vigo, “Toward a Social Cinema.”

33 Temple, *Jean Vigo*, 159.

34 Dudley Andrew, *Mists of Regret: Culture and Sensibility in Classic French Film* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 68.

35 Baldwin, “Maturing of Jean Vigo,” 26.

36 Grossman, “Development of Surrealist Cinema,” 117.

37 See *Sight and Sound*, “The Greatest Films of All Time,” *British Film Institute*, 2022, <https://www.bfi.org.uk/sight-and-sound/greatest-films-all-time>.

38 Since the first restoration in 1940, there have been several versions of *L’Atalante*. The one used here is the most recent restoration, released on DVD (BluRay) in 2018 as part of Gaumont’s box set *Jean Vigo: L’Intégrale*, which restores the film to the original 1934 cut by Chavance and Vigo. Salles Gomes, *Jean Vigo*, 197.

39 Michael Temple, “Dreaming of Vigo,” *Sight and Sound* 8, no. 11 (1998): 14–16.

Georges Caussat's motorcycle while plotting the next of his notorious pranks.⁴⁰

But the daydream that has dogged me the most since first seeing *L'Atalante* is the conceit of boarding a boat, loading it up, sealing it shut, and drifting down a river. What has dogged me, and what I try to describe and confront in the following pages, is the fantasmatic force of the living arrangement evoked by *L'Atalante's* barge. I begin by considering the boat's movement of withdrawal, before discussing the pleasures of the barge as a shelter and its ark-like promise of total self-sufficiency. For this atypical cohabitation to work out, however, the barge's different inhabitants must learn how to accommodate each other, to forge and sustain the kind of bonds traced in the final section. This is followed by a short epilogue on the aftermath of Vigo's death. For there comes a point when one has to leave the intimacy of a warm enclosure, when the oneiric bubble bursts. There is a touching passage in Vigo's boarding school diary, later turned into a scene for *Zéro de conduite*, that anticipates the brusque, if inescapable, pain of that cold moment:

It was 8:30, everyone was asleep, when a laugh responded to a sound... Who laughed? Me. Then the junior master lifted the curtain of his bed and said, "Whoever was laughing come over here." Oh! it hurt to have to get out of bed when I felt so warm. But I got up and felt my way to the junior master's bed.⁴¹

40 Gyula Zilzer, "Remembrances of Jean Vigo," *Hollywood Quarterly* 3, no. 2 (1947–1948): 126.

41 Salles Gomes, *Jean Vigo*, 38.

Withdrawal

The decision to board a ship is often a decision to withdraw. It is no different with Juliette: the grumbling crowd of her wedding procession lets us know that “she always had to be different” (“Elle a jamais rien pu faire comme tout le monde, celle-là”), is “tired of village life” (“Oh, ça se plaît plus au village”), and wants nothing more than to leave the oppressive environment of the countryside. The dramatic low-angle shot of the village church establishes the towering presence of tradition here, crushing all ambitions for a freer existence. The skipper is Juliette’s lover, but he is also a way out, the promise of a life beyond the endless gossip, boredom, and narrow-minded restrictions of the village. To carve out a space for another way of life, the *Atalante* secedes from two symbolic sites of interwar France, the country and the city, and rural France is the first target of Vigo’s social critique.

The death of around 1,400,000 French soldiers during the First World War had caused national anxiety about dwindling populations and low birthrates. Following the Treaty of Versailles, the general *rappel à l’ordre* was coupled to moralizing calls for large families, fertile mothers, and healthy sons who could defend the nation against the far more populous Germans still looming over the border. Hopes for such regeneration dovetailed with the idealization of the French countryside, which,

set apart from the corrupt city and dirty industry, now emerged as the resilient locus of the nation's identity and a reservoir for healthy offspring.

Like Weimar Germany, then, the interwar French Third Republic—a parliamentary democracy that emerged out of the Franco-Prussian War and the suppression of the Paris Commune—saw a resurgence of nostalgia for peasant life and calls for a “return to the soil” to counter the actual exodus from the countryside. By the mid-1920s, more French citizens were living in cities than in rural areas.¹ Defending the quality of life over demographic quantity, French anarchists attacked these pronatalist pressures with the slogan “Your Body is Yours,” and with them, Vigo pushed back against the rural idealization now co-opted by the family-state nexus.² The traditional countryside and its people have few redeeming qualities in *L'Atalante*: the village's houses and sleepy streets are shown in all their unglorified bleakness, while the film's plodding opening echoes the lifelessness and inhospitality of this place. Juliette's fellow villagers are only heard complaining, bickering, and disapproving of any deviation from established custom. Even her mother's potentially moving farewell cries are turned into comedy by Père Jules's antics.

Walking at a considerable distance from the rest of the wedding procession, which advances at a funereal pace, the newlyweds' detachment from the rural villagers is evident as they make their way to the *Atalante*. Père Jules fires the engine and heaves Juliette onto the barge like a piece of cargo in a menacing shot that only shows her silhouette floating across an empty sky. On board, her white wedding dress stands out against the gray hull of the boat. Clearly, Juliette has crossed some significant boundary; she will inhabit a different space from now on. Yet

1 Kristen Stromberg Childers, *Fathers, Families, and the State in France, 1914–1945* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 72.

2 See Richard David Sonn, “‘Your Body Is Yours’: Anarchism, Birth Control, and Eugenics in Interwar France,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 14, no. 4 (2005): 415–16, at 422.

the occasion is more solemn than joyous: “The entire atmosphere evokes a funeral, not a wedding,” Marina Warner writes in her study of the film, noting the “coffin-like box of the barge, the expressionless guests.”³ The gravity of the newlyweds’ break with life on land continues to be emphasized as the barge drifts off. From the river, the camera films the wedding party staring silently on the bank and a mysterious woman artificially lit in an apocalyptic glow. She makes the sign of the cross as the barge passes by, as if Juliette is leaving the protection of God.

If the countryside is not a suitable habitat, then maybe the city is. The provincial Juliette fantasizes about urban life and the appeal of Paris’s novelties and consumer attractions will put a strain on her relationship with Jules. Clinging to the barge’s radio—a new technology that could engineer desires from afar—she listens, like a 1930s Madame Bovary, to news of a more exciting and fashionable existence in the capital: “Paris calling! Here’s the latest news. [...] Beret hats are being worn dashingly with the left side tilted up” (“Ici, Paris! Veuillez écouter les dernières informations. [...] Les chapeaux se portent en béret, coquettement relevés sur le côté gauche de la tête”), the broadcaster announces. Jean’s authoritative dismissal of these desires, as when he briskly turns off the radio, only fuels them. Juliette’s longing for Paris on the sometimes claustrophobic vessel evolves into a longing for independence, for everything outside the barge.⁴ As a new crew member of the *Atalante*, Juliette faces the problem of boredom as she adjusts to the routine existence on the canals. The phantasmagoric city glimmers in the navigable distance, promising excitement, action, events.

The city also had a strong hold on the surrealist movement that influenced Vigo as a director.⁵ It was Paris that served as a roaming ground for the French group around André Breton, who frequented its seedy flea markets and cabarets in search

3 Marina Warner, *L'Atalante* (London: Palgrave, 2015), 27.

4 *Ibid.*, 40.

5 See Manuel L. Grossman, “Jean Vigo and the Development of Surrealist Cinema,” *Symposium: A Quarterly Journal in Modern Literatures* 27, no. 2 (1973): 111–25.

of visionary moments when the imagination merged with the evocative materials furnished by the capital: old stones, flashy advertisement, urban greenery. In *Le Paysan de Paris* (1926), Louis Aragon pursues the “marvelous suffusing everyday existence,” taking the reader on a nighttime stroll through the Parc des Buttes-Chaumont or into the faded glory of the arcades, where enchanting merchandise beckons from behind shop windows.⁶ In *Nadja* (1928), another surrealist classic, Breton writes that Nantes and Paris are cities “where I feel that something worth while [*sic*] can happen to me,” where “the rhythm of life is not the same as elsewhere, where certain beings still nourish a spirit of supreme adventure.”⁷ If living together requires adjusting to a certain *rhythm* of life, then Juliette struggles to keep pace with the slow glide of the barge, desiring instead the action-packed sights and frenetic pulse of the city.

So we return to Juliette, lying alone in her bed, clutching an elegant scarf purchased from a traveling salesman at “Aux 4 Nations,” a riverside tavern just outside the capital. Like a benevolent fetish, the scarf conjures up an entire world of urban gratification. As Juliette fondles it, she hears again the flirtatious invitation of the peddler, who sells every imaginable product, to join him for a thrilling night out in Paris. But her visit is disappointing. After jumping ship, Juliette heads to the illuminated shop windows of the department stores showcasing their enticing wares. Vigo ingeniously shoots this scene of consumer desire and identification, first catching a glimpse of Juliette’s reflection in the glass that separates her from the store’s moving puppets and then, in a reaction shot, the eerie reflections of the automata as they look out to Juliette from behind the storefront.

In a famous passage from *Le Paysan de Paris*, the erotics of such window shopping are transformed into a surreal experience. Looking at the display of a cane vendor, Aragon is aston-

6 Louis Aragon, *Paris Peasant*, trans. Simon Watson Taylor (Boston: Exact Change, 1994), 11.

7 André Breton, *Nadja*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Grove Press, 1960), 28–31.

ished to see that it has turned into a miniature ocean, bathed in a submarine light: “The canes floated gently like seaweed. I had still not recovered from my enchantment when I noticed that a human form was swimming among the various levels of the window display.”⁸ While clearly fascinated by them, Vigo was more ambivalent about the city’s optical spectacles.⁹ With *À propos de Nice*, he had already made a satirical city symphony that deflated that genre’s celebratory gestures. In *L’Atalante*, Juliette appears as a dupe of commercialism’s seductive pull, longing to possess clothing and jewels she cannot afford. When the camera superimposes the reflection of Juliette’s head onto a headless mannequin, it suggests that this pull threatens to make humans as stiff and controlled as the dressed-up puppets mechanically moving in the other display.¹⁰

After discovering that Jean has sailed off without her, Juliette experiences the darker side of the capital. Like the gendering of consumerism as a feminine indulgence, the dangerous lure of the city for women was a common trope in interwar cinema. Vigo handles it with a certain nimbleness, choosing to stress the plight of the city’s underclass rather than moralize about urban vice. In under five minutes, Vigo sketches a bleak picture of Depression-era Paris: unemployment lines, police brutality, sexual harassment, industrial degradation, a petty bourgeois mob beating up a hungry thief. As elsewhere in the film, the harsh realism of these scenes stems from Vigo’s decision to use real, outdoor locations whenever he could. The wide shots of a penniless Juliette walking along train tracks, looking for a job, make painfully clear that she is not at fault here, but at the mercy of market forces. *L’Atalante* makes the grim conclusion that the city’s consumer entertainments and precarious wage labor produce a form of life in which the individual is alone in facing the

8 Aragon, *Paris Peasant*, 22.

9 Richard Porton, *Film and the Anarchist Imagination* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2020), 183.

10 Michael Wutz, “A propos the Puppeteer — Jean Vigo and the Cinema of Automata,” *Mise Au Point* 11 (2018): 13, <https://journals.openedition.org/map/3110>.

necessity to make and sustain a living.¹¹ The metropolitan subject appears in the film as someone who is not integrated into a coherent unit, an individual among other solitary individuals, who share no common arrangements, no bonds of solidarity.

In Vigo's film, the urban playground championed by the heroic surrealists has largely disintegrated into an inhospitable wasteland. Perhaps by 1934, the avant-garde optimism that a new mythology could be built on the modern divinities of "Texaco motor oil, Esso, [and] Shell," had lost much of its credibility.¹² Industrial production and trade were down. In 1935, around one million workers were unemployed in France.¹³ We see Juliette looking at a poster that reads: "All in solidarity with the boaters" ("Tous solidaires des bateliers"). Social unrest in the city led to strikes, demonstrations, and violent street battles between left- and right-wing militants.¹⁴ After a deadly clash between far-right activists and the police on February 6, 1934, just after the filming of *L'Atalante* had wrapped up, Vigo joined other artists in signing a document that called for the formation of a unified left-wing front to prevent a fascist coup.¹⁵

Even though the city is an important source of attraction in the film, it is not really central to it. The majority of *L'Atalante's* outdoor scenes do not take place in the heart of Paris (a planned shot of the Eiffel Tower never materialized), but in its periphery, in the suburban zones to the north, south, and east of the

11 As Steven Ungar writes, "Visually, *L'Atalante* consistently associated the city of Paris with a dehumanizing capitalism at odds with daily life on the barge." Steven Ungar, "Jean Vigo, *L'Atalante*, and the Promise of Social Cinema," *Historical Reflections/Réflexions Historiques* 35, no. 2 (2009): 73.

12 Aragon, *Paris Peasant*, 117.

13 Julian Jackson, *The Politics of Depression in France, 1932–1936* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 29.

14 Philippe Bernard and Henri Dubief, *The Decline of the Third Republic, 1914–1938*, trans. Anthony Forster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 221–22.

15 Paulo Emilio Salles Gomes, *Jean Vigo* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1972), 216.

capital.¹⁶ The barge and the film itself move around the Île-de-France, on the Canal Saint-Denis and the Canal de l'Ourcq, on the Seine and the Oise rivers, never really arriving in the city center.

Precisely because it drifts in between the countryside and the city, the barge can weigh the rural past against the modern city and reject both. No pastoral nostalgia, yet no mandatory dive into the urban flux either. The inhabitants of the *Atalante* can withdraw from a place that is too assimilative, whose rhythm is too inflexible, and also from a place where people all move at their own pace, where there is no shared life.

Perhaps now we begin to understand the mysterious allure of this barge, or any vessel for that matter. It creates its own habitat, "a small private universe."¹⁷ Of course, the interior of the *Atalante* is still caught up in a dialectic with the exterior, and not just because it is porous, as the radio receiver has reminded us. The barge is distinctive precisely because it contests the ordinary spaces further up the bank: one wants to live in the warmth of the ship *because* the outside feels so uninviting. Only in its oppositional relation to the inhospitable terrestrial locations does the barge acquire its significance and appeal as a contained counter-dwelling. The *Atalante* is a small domestic pact against the outside world.

16 Michael Temple, *Jean Vigo* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 96–97.

17 "un petit univers privé," Pierre Lherminier, *Jean Vigo* (Paris: Pierre Lherminier/Filméditations, 1984), 31.

The Vessel

In the prose poem “Panama, or the Adventures of My Seven Uncles,” Blaise Cendrars wrote that “The Panama Canal is intimately linked to my childhood... I used to play under the table.”¹ These lines were composed, if we are to believe the Swiss-born writer, somewhere between June 1913 and June 1914, the final month of peace in Europe. After the war, Cendrars turned his back on poetry. His experiences with the French Foreign Legion had cost him his right arm and convinced him that this kind of literature was too detached from life. Without much success, he turned for a short time to the cinema industry, which explains why, toward the end of 1933, he was asked to revise Vigo’s script for *L’Atalante*. Cendrars found nothing to correct in Vigo’s sparse dialogue, for whom he had also written the scenario *Contrebandiers*, a collaboration planned after the completion of *L’Atalante*.² If the two ever met, they may have talked about their respective childhoods and Cendrars would have discovered

1 Blaise Cendrars, “Panama, or the Adventures of My Seven Uncles,” in *Complete Poems*, trans. Ron Padgett (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 33.

2 See Blaise Cendrars, “Contrebandiers,” in *Jean Vigo: Œuvre de cinéma*, ed. Pierre Lherminier (Paris: Cinémathèque française/Pierre Lherminier, 1985), 395–410.

that, as a boy, Vigo also had a habit of crawling under the table and hiding for hours behind the folds of tablecloth.³

Whoever can still recall their childhood may recognize, perhaps somewhat sentimentally, this innate passion to build shelters. The womb-like construction can take on many forms. Outdoors, there is the tent, illuminating everything inside with a cool green or tacky orange light, making you sweat in the summer. Resting against the trunk of a willow or squirming deep into a rhododendron bush can produce the same effect with minimal means. There are more options indoors. Besides the table, there is the cellar and the attic to hide in, wooden closets and chests in which to tuck yourself away, the retreat of the bedroom, and finally, the bed, with its covers that can be pulled over your head to create a “second skin.”⁴

In his lectures on living together, Barthes devotes an entire section to this “closing off—enclosure—of living spaces,” in which the demarcation of a safe, private territory functions not only to protect but also to define its occupants.⁵ Enclosure forms a complex “sign-system” with its own meanings, rituals, and affective movements.⁶ Throughout Barthes’s lectures, a modest pleasure returns as the main affect and motivator of enclosure: the sense of comfort produced by a milieu that is familiar to the body and thus experienced in a highly subjective way. The pleasurable intimacy created by enclosure can indeed be measured by following how it extends outwards from the body, as the bed—with nightstand, book, and lamp within arm’s reach—becomes the extension of the limbs, expanding into the bedroom, and so on, forming concentric mantles of warm, enclosing shells that offer shelter from the bare open.

The French philosopher Gaston Bachelard detailed these procedures of nesting extensively in his book *The Poetics of Space*,

3 Francis Jourdain, “Une Enfance,” *Ciné-Club* 2, no. 5 (February 1949): 4.

4 See Roland Barthes, *How to Live Together: Novelistic Simulations of Some Everyday Spaces*, trans. Kate Briggs (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 61.

5 *Ibid.*, 57.

6 *Ibid.*, 59.

and he also described how such interior spaces are permeated by the imagination, since the dwelling's protection against hostile elements outside simultaneously "shelters day-dreaming" and other acts of fantasy.⁷ Bachelard, like the surrealist poets whom he regularly cites, also recognized the connection between oneiric "*felicitous spaces*" and the child's ease in infusing reality with intense images and emotions.⁸ "It is perhaps childhood that comes closest to one's 'real life,'" Breton writes in his first manifesto, announcing that "the mind which plunges into Surrealism relives with glowing excitement the best part of its childhood."⁹ From *Zéro de conduite*, we know that Vigo shared this sense of respect, rather than simple nostalgia, for the energetic imagination of children. In the film's opening sequence, two schoolboys on a steam train play a series of illusion tricks and pretend that the man sleeping in their compartment is dead. Their ability to act out their fantasies eventually culminates in a very physical revolt against the school headmaster, which Vigo famously shot like an otherworldly procession in slow motion, with a musical theme that was scored "backwards" and is eerily played in reverse.¹⁰

In a different way, Vigo brought this juvenile spirit to his next film, for *L'Atalante's* barge resembles one of those childhood spaces of intimate refuge. Even its inhabitants behave like fickle children, by turns sweet and bratty, clingy and aloof. Strangely, only the Hungarian painter Gyula Zilzer seems to have noticed this in an article in memory of his late friend: "A barger lives in confined quarters without much horizon—and still, every child dreams about living on a barge. Vigo, too, must have had

7 Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (New York: Penguin Books, 2014), 28.

8 *Ibid.*, 19, 36–38.

9 André Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969), 39–40.

10 Of the fantastic elements of *Zéro de conduite*, James Agee writes: "I assume that he [Vigo] intended, as one of his main points, to insist that these several levels of reality are equal in value, and interpenetrative." James Agee, *Agee on Film* (New York: McDowell, Obolensky, 1958), 263.

this dream once, for he made the picture out of the elements of dreams: slowness, grayness, timelessness.”¹¹

Few children, however, grow up on a watercraft. At first, it would seem that images of sailboats and submarines promise them an escape from their sheltering, terrestrial homes, where they may suffer from extreme boredom. But the time spent in the cramped quarters of a ship can be even more uneventful than the time spent in an average house, and the fantasmatic power of the nautical vessel is in part explained by its promise to juxtapose the contradictory features of mobility and inaction. “You’ll have plenty of time here” (“Tu auras le temps ici”), Jean tells Juliette at one point. A child intuits, and Juliette quickly discovers this.

The monotony of passing along the same nondescript sea or riverbank can even diminish or eliminate the sense of time.¹² A ship is almost always moving, but this constant motion at an indistinguishable speed also creates the strange impression of immobility. Vigo captures this sensation when he films the newly boarded Juliette walking across the short length of the barge’s deck at night, like an incandescent phantom. During this long shot of the *Atalante*, seen from the riverbank at a slightly elevated angle, Juliette, clad in an ivory-white dress, walks to the right at almost the same speed that the barge moves to the left, the result being that she remains in the center of the screen for fifteen seconds, stationary despite her movement. Adding to the disorientation, a second shot shows the counter-movement of a passing barge, its trail of waves and wafting steam against

11 Gyula Zilzer, “Remembrances of Jean Vigo,” *Hollywood Quarterly* 3, no. 2 (1947–1948): 127.

12 Such an “absolute break with [...] traditional time” is a defining feature of Michel Foucault’s concept of heterotopia. Michel Foucault, “Different Spaces,” in *Essential Works of Foucault, 1954–1984*, vol. 2: *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, ed. James D. Faubion, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: The New Press, 1998), 182. Foucault ends his lecture on these “sorts of actually realized utopias” by arguing that the ship (“a piece of floating space, a placeless place, that lives by its own devices”) is the “heterotopia par excellence” (*ibid.*, 178, 184–85).

the barely visible riverbank heightening the suggestion that the *Atalante* is absolutely unreal, that Juliette is drifting through another realm.

Surrounded on all sides by featureless water, the barge quickly becomes a personal universe that is cut off from people and events more radically than a sanatorium or holiday home. In a short piece on Jules Verne's fictional submarine the *Nautilus*, Barthes anticipates his later lectures on enclosure. Likening this vessel to a house, he writes that "An inclination for ships always means the joy of perfectly enclosing oneself, of having at hand the greatest possible number of objects, and having at one's disposal an absolutely finite space."¹³ The mythical image of the ship, Barthes continues, is above all an "emblem of enclosure" and its many manifestations in legends and fiction promise, from this perspective, "a cherished seclusion [...] the enjoyment of a round, smooth universe."¹⁴ The pleasure of inhabiting a closed-off space can indeed reach new intensities with watercraft, for a ship is not only separated from uncongenial sites on land, but the element that separates this vehicle from land is itself hostile: murky, illegible water that carries the constant risk of drowning.

No matter how obvious, it is important to keep in mind that the thin shell of a floating dwelling is the only thing protecting seafarers from a potentially fatal substance. And the greater the hostility or vagueness of the outside, the better one can appreciate the lush familiarity inside. On this point, Bachelard writes that the effacing whiteness of a snowed-under landscape creates a "simplified cosmos," whose stark contrast with the variegated interior guarantees that the dweller experiences "all the qualities of intimacy with increased intensity."¹⁵ The flat sea or the steady flow of a river present a similarly undifferentiated exterior, while waves and storms heighten the awareness of the protection and comfort provided by the resistant shelter. The vivid drama of

13 Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill & Wang, 1972), 66.

14 *Ibid.*, 66–67.

15 Bachelard, *Poetics of Space*, 61–62.

a habitat besieged by bad weather is heightened when we see Jean steering the *Atalante* through dangerous fog banks or icy rainstorms.

Indeed, all of the emotionally rich contrasts between an exterior and an interior are magnified aboard a vessel, refracting into countless variations and nuances on the same theme of a wet, cold, dangerous, hostile, infinite outside and a dry, warm, safe, friendly, finite inside. The horror of penetration is enhanced as well, as evidenced by the countless movies about leaks, mutinies, and other “infiltrations” onboard water- and spacecraft (*The Poseidon Adventure* and *Alien*, to name just two examples from the 1970s). In the second volume of his *Spheres* trilogy, Peter Sloterdijk describes how historical representations of a sheltered life have often been characterized by images of a fixed terrain surrounded by fluids and fluidity. This border of water metamorphoses from the amniotic fluid of the womb to the moat of the city-commune, to the concept of the peripheral rivers and seas found in antique cosmographies, enduring today in the fantasy of the private island.¹⁶

While the history of literature and film is littered with symbolically charged shipwrecks,¹⁷ it is also full of people miraculously surviving in watercraft, or feeling soothed and happy in them.¹⁸ The limited dimensions of a ship, its curved shape, harboring a bound center, and its ability to be built by humans make it an ideal image and metaphor for protected human habitation amid fluid, unlivable surroundings. At the same time, the boat’s mobility holds out the possibility of communicating with

16 See the chapter “Vascular Memories” in Peter Sloterdijk, *Spheres*, vol. 2: *Globes: Macrospherology*, trans. Wieland Hoban (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2014), 187–236.

17 For a study of the metaphor of life as a perilous sea journey, see Hans Blumenberg, *Shipwreck with Spectator: Paradigm of a Metaphor for Existence*, trans. Steven Rendall (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997).

18 Bachelard himself, for example, describes how he imagines being in a boat when he has trouble falling asleep: “I dream an abstract-concrete daydream. My bed is a small boat lost at sea; that sudden whistling is the wind in the sails [...] you are safe in your stone boat.” Bachelard, *Poetics of Space*, 49.

the outside world, helping to keep the dread of claustrophobia and entrapment at bay.

Already in Virgil's *Aeneid*, ships are the refuge of Aeneas and his crew against different kinds of destructive external forces. The "floating forests of the sacred pine" secure the continuation of Troy and contain the germ of Roman civilization, safeguarding the idea of "home" itself.¹⁹ When the hero has transplanted his household to Latium, these "vessels molded by a mortal hand" lose their domestic function and turn into immortal nymphs.²⁰ In ship burials, an elite funerary rite practiced by the Vikings and Anglosaxons, the dead were conveyed to the afterlife through the safe passage symbolized by a ship. Magical vessels are scattered throughout medieval literature, including the lavish, self-propelling boat of Marie de France's *Guigemar*, where the wounded hero rests in a "bed of cypress wood inlaid with gold and ivory," covered with silk sheets and bathed in dim candlelight.²¹ The existential metaphor of the shipwreck in early modern works like *The Tempest*, *Robinson Crusoe*, or *Candide* could only dramatize that an individual's life is subject to a continual onslaught of vicissitudes if the destroyed ship was not experienced as a stable, sheltered existence in the first place.

By the late nineteenth century, the books of Jules Verne epitomized how the bourgeoisie's taste for encapsulation could reach a climax not only with bedrooms (as in the opening of Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*) but also with watercraft. The submarine *Nautilus* — which houses a small museum and a library containing 12,000 volumes — is a particularly acute manifestation of the era's cult of cocooning in a perfected interior.²² That this vessel

19 John Dryden, trans., *Virgil's Aeneid* (New York: P.F. Collier & Son, 1909), 295.

20 *Ibid.*, 296.

21 Marie de France, *The Lays of Marie de France*, trans. David R. Slavitt (Edmonton: Athabasca University Press, 2013), 9. See also Albrecht Clas- sen, "The Symbolic and Metaphorical Role of Ships in Medieval German Literature: A Maritime Vehicle That Transforms the Protagonist," *Medievalistik* 25, no. 1 (2012): 15–33.

22 See Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 212–27.

is a project to resist integration into structures of power is made explicit by its captain Nemo, who considers independence to be the ultimate ideal. He explains that “the sea does not belong to despots,” that men can still “fight each other, devour each other, and carry out all the earth’s atrocities” on its surface, but that underwater “their power ceases” and “perfect peace abides.”²³ “Here I recognize no master!” he cries, “Here I am free!”²⁴

Nemo is the archetype of the contradictory “homey” adventurer who is always shutting himself up in a domestic space to calmly survey the rich bounty of a shrunken world (and we recognize his legacy in Hergé’s *Tintin* or the oceanographer of Wes Anderson’s *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou*). Together, the ship’s finite size and isolation create the impression that it is very full but in a manageable and definitive way, which in turn sets the stage for the joys of making inventories, diagrams, models, and maps. These are exercises in developing an exhaustive inside knowledge of a given space and its objects, rather than being lost in that space without orientation. The fantasized ship offers a concrete image of the happiness of *inhabiting* a familiar world, of bathing in the center of one’s own atmosphere. The problems of neurotic control, loneliness, and madness, however, are the typical defects of those captains of mastery who fail to share this living space with others, as we will find the skipper of the *Atalante* struggling to do.

If the figure of the ship promises a retreat into a cloistered environment, then further possibilities of seclusion are, of course, locked away within the ship’s interior, the deepest one being the cabin. David Foster Wallace gave us a description of a ship’s “whole array of attractively enclosing options” while on a luxury cruise through the Caribbean in March 1995.²⁵ “The agoraphobe can choose not to leave the ship,” he writes, “or can

23 Jules Verne, *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Seas*, trans. William Butcher (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 68.

24 *Ibid.*, 69.

25 David Foster Wallace, *A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again: Essays and Arguments* (London: Abacus, 1998), 299.

restrict herself only to certain decks, or can decline to leave the particular deck her cabin is on, [...] or the agoraphobe can simply not leave her cabin at all.”²⁶ Wallace’s inventory of his small cabin illustrates the unnerving appeal of a private space contained within an already enclosed vehicle:

It is made of a fawn-colored enamelish polymer and its walls are extremely thick and solid [...]. The cabin is thirteen size-11 Keds long by twelve Keds wide, with a little peninsular vestibule protruding out toward a cabin door that’s got three separate locking technologies [...]. All the way across the cabin, there’s a deep enamel ledge running along the port wall under a window that I think is called my porthole [...] in terms of its *raison* it resembles a cathedral’s rose window. It’s made of that kind of very thick glass [...]. Cabin 1009’s dimensions are just barely on the good side of the line between very very snug and cramped.²⁷

I leave out the long description of the cabin’s bathroom and toilet but note Wallace’s emphasis on the qualities of closure (solid walls, thick glass, locks), how he begins to catalog the cabin’s contents, and the importance he ascribes to the port window. Its effect is to be able to intensify and even define the intimacy of the interior by looking out at its opposite. This explains Nemo’s otherwise nonsensical inclusion of an enormous window in his submarine, modeled after the bay window of a townhouse.²⁸ Wallace also registers the comfortable regression involved in entering a ship when he makes the connection between this vessel and the womb, a place where he was “floating, too, and the fluid was salty, and warm, but not too —, and if I was conscious at all I’m sure I felt dreadless, and was having a really good time.”²⁹

26 *Ibid.*, 299–300.

27 *Ibid.*, 300–301.

28 See Barthes, *Mythologies*, 67.

29 Wallace, *A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again*, 268.

To recreate this sense of enclosure, of “living in close quarters,” Jean Vigo had the studio sets of the barge’s interior built as an exact replica of the tiny cabins of the ship used for the exterior shots: the “Louis XVI,” a diesel-powered craft that dated back to the days of horses and towpaths.³⁰ The set was designed by the painter Francis Jourdain, an old friend of his father’s, who took pictures of the original interior and reconstructed three copies before being satisfied. According to Jourdain’s assistant Max Douy, who later became one of France’s most renowned production designers:

The cabin was entirely remade in a way identical to the original carpentry. Made with small grooved planks with moldings, the shape of the hull at the back had to be rebuilt. The cabin was a reconstruction, there was no invention to it.³¹

Jourdain’s careful eye furnished these interiors with the significant details of a space that actually feels inhabited, a place cluttered with clothes, a used stove, dirty dishes on which bacteria are starting to grow. The result is a décor that helps ensure the snug, slightly confined feeling one gets while watching much of *L’Atalante*.

Most of the film takes place on the barge, and each excursion to the outside world feels like an exposure to an inhospitable exterior. Entering and exiting the *Atalante* are highly symbolic acts that emphasize the special status of this site: one does not go in and out of it casually. Juliette’s first boarding is the beginning of a new life, her secret disembarkation in Paris breaks up the barge’s community, and her return onboard signals the final reunion, during which not a single world is spoken. Père

30 Paulo Emílio Salles Gomes, *Jean Vigo* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1972), 157.

31 “La cabine a été entièrement refaite à l’identique à la menuiserie. Faite avec des petites planches rainurées avec des moulures, la forme de la coque à l’arrière était à refaire. La cabine était une reconstitution, il n’y avait rien à inventer.” Bernard Eisenschitz, “Vie de Vigo: Quatre films,” in *Jean Vigo: L’Intégrale* (booklet) (Gaumont, 2018), 63.

Jules leaves the boat in a fit of anger, for a transgressive night of fortune-telling and sex, and to bring back Juliette. Except when he operates the canals' locks, Jean heads outside only for the disastrous visit to the riverside tavern "Aux 4 Nations" and, at his lowest point, in the port of Le Havre on the Normandy coast.

Vigo also marks the difference between the warm barge and the cold outside through purely cinematographic means. Exterior footage of the *Atalante* was often shot during foggy nights with eerie, artificial lighting that bathed the riverboat in a dreamy glow, separating it from the river and the surrounding banks. Most of the action onboard, however, takes place in dimly lit interiors, full of moody shadows and dark nooks. Inside the *Atalante*, Vigo makes use of almost claustrophobic close-ups — it's as if we can feel the character's breath and count their pores —, high angles that envelop the inhabitants, and tracking shots that hover over a shoulder. The small scale of the realistic interiors encouraged this intimate camerawork, and *L'Atalante's* cinematographer Boris Kaufman later recalled that the crew would sometimes even have to take away a closet or wall to film inside the set.

But even on the deck of the ship, the perspective is often above or near the characters, as in a memorable ground-level shot of a smiling Jean crawling toward Juliette on all fours along the cargo bays, up to and then over the camera. At first, it appears to be a rare example in the film of the camera assuming the first-person perspective of a character — in this case Juliette, who is looking out from the deck hatch. But Vigo then has Jean, who moves with a feline playfulness, clamber over this vantage point and out of the frame to reach his lover further up the deck. As Jean approaches and his magnified, dirty feet finally dangle in front of the unfocused lens, you almost expect his huge figure to crawl out of the screen; a particularly intense instance of the sometimes uncomfortable proximity of human bodies in *L'Atalante*.

In contrast to the intimacy onboard, Vigo mostly had the scenes on land filmed in the harsh natural light of overcast winter skies, whose cool reflections gleam on pavement, snow, and

sand. We are in the cold open here. We find ourselves on long roads and sprawling wharfs, with ominous cranes and thoroughfares in the background, filmed with medium and long shots that open to vistas deep and wide. Anticipating the deserted urban landscapes of Roberto Rossellini or Michelangelo Antonioni, the low camera angles capture small, silhouetted individuals against huge swaths of sky, establishing that our barge dwellers are out of their shelter here, insignificant and alienated. Otherwise, they are in public places, where they are threatened, mocked, or lost in chaotic, frenetic movement. In each case, Juliette and Jean become insignificant and silent bystanders, figures overpowered by the scenery, instead of the sensuous individuals that they embody on the *Atalante*, with individualizing features, visible skin, and audible voices. When they are outside, they are usually far away from the viewer, and they are also, and crucially, lonely.

This points to the critical fact that the *Atalante* does not promise solitude, as other ships may, but sociability, an ideal of living together with others. Two key scenes dramatize how the land, as opposed to the barge, is the site of loneliness in the film's thematic logic. After discovering that Jean has pulled up anchor without her, Juliette wanders along a desolate quay, unsure of where to go next. As she walks from the right to the left of the screen, we see only her dark contour, which is dwarfed by the steel beams supporting the off-screen roof of a monumental depot, a massive gantry crane looming in the background. Likewise, when Jean leaves the barge in Le Havre, driven mad by missing Juliette, he suddenly runs to the ocean, as if hoping to see her emerge out of the water. First, he rushes off on the edge of a seemingly endless dike, and then he sprints away from the camera on a completely empty beach, his silhouette in the center getting smaller and smaller until it is less than a twentieth of the height of the frame.

These scenes are very different from the experience of the *Atalante's* interiors. Because Vigo spends so much time documenting day-to-day life aboard the barge, viewers get to know its different compartments very well, each with its peculiar fea-

tures, and may even develop a sense of familiarity and comfort when the film transports them back to a given room. Below the steering deck is the cabin of Père Jules and the boy, who share a bunk bed decorated with the saw-like rostrum of a carpenter shark, and between its four wooden walls are crammed the memorabilia that Père Jules collected during his travels as a sailor. A deck hatch near the bow of the ship opens onto a short flight of stairs that lead to a small kitchen. Here, under a gas pendant lamp, all the barge dwellers can sit around a rectangular wooden table to drink wine and eat the shared meals that are cooked on a small stove set against the wall.

At the back of the kitchen, further toward the stern, a few more steps lead to a salon, where Juliette does her sewing and which is furnished with a small round table covered with a square, crocheted tablecloth and topped with a glass centerpiece. To the right, just before the built-in linen closet, we find the door to Jean and Juliette's tiny cabin. This little nook is made out of narrow pine panels and contains nothing more than a mirror, a mounted coat rack, a shelf, a small table, one chair, and a curiously high French bed which is built into a corner and covered with two very large pillows and some blankets. Enhancing the room's coziness, the door has a panel of textured, frosted glass and is flanked by a large, similarly frosted indoor window that begins below the head of the bed, gently letting in any light from the salon. A small portrait of a man, presumably Jean or one of his family members, is nailed to the window's wooden mullion and hangs just above the bed.

With the conjugal bed, we reach the intimate heart of the floating shelter.³² It is here that the *Atalante's* most sensual movements transpire, where its conflicts are ignited and worked out. The first marital tensions crop up when Juliette discovers that one of Père Jules's cats has given birth to a litter of kittens in her bed—a scene rife with the carnal overtones of their wedding

³² Beds are important in this film: they are not only used for sleeping but are also the places where people brood, talk, kiss, lie drunk, pet animals, smoke pipes, miss each other, and pretend to sleep.

night and the physicality of sex. This sparks an initial clash between the newlyweds and Père Jules, who is at first wary of Juliette's female presence on board. But it also brings out Juliette's irritation with the barge's close communal living, its squalor, its masculine atmosphere, and her marriage to the domineering Jean, which brought her into this odd group. The animal births between her sheets are also an affront to a conventional ideal of domesticity that requires the segregation of "dirty" animal from "clean" human living spaces.

So, after pulling the sheets from her feline-infested bed, one of the first things Juliette does on the *Atalante* is the laundry. "Do you do the washing once a year?" ("Dites, vous faisiez la lessive tous les ans?"), she asks sarcastically when a pile of dirty sheets tumbles out of a cupboard along with another cat. "Not always!" ("Pas toujours!"), Jean answers, to which she retorts, "That's going to change!" ("Eh ben, ça va changer!"). At first, both Jean — "Wait till tomorrow!" ("Attends, demain!") — and Père Jules — "I don't need you or her to wash my feet!" ("J'ai pas besoin de vous, j'ai pas attendu la patronne pour me laver les pieds!") — protest this change in the barge's habits and its perceived emasculation. Juliette is the source of transformation on the barge: her arrival disrupts the routine established by the three boatmen and initiates a new and differently gendered equilibrium. In the next sequence, we see the crew members already learning to tactfully adapt their behavior to the rhythm of another: the first mate and the cabin boy hand over their linen and Jean helps Juliette with the washing. What follows is one of *L'Atalante's* beautiful scenes of cohabitation: Jean rolls out the clothesline, Juliette stuffs the laundry in a large drum, and soon the damp clothes are drying in the sun all over the barge.

In these scenes of doing laundry together, the newlyweds discover the simple pleasure of taking care of things collectively, even more so because Juliette knows how to enchant the ordinary, drawing on her experiences as a child. "What! You closed your eyes?" ("Comment? T'as fermé les yeux?"), she cries after Jean washes his face in a tub, "Don't you know that in the water, you see the one you love [...] When I was little I saw lots

of things like that” (“Mais tu ne sais pas que dans l’eau on voit celui qu’on aime? [...] Quand j’étais petite, j’en ai vu des choses comme ça”). After she takes off her shoes, they run across the deck, laughing and wrestling among the sheets, and then sneak away downstairs, where Juliette warms Jean’s wet chest with a shirt that’s been hanging over the stove, and then they embrace, backing up all the way into the camera. This intimate domestic tableau introduces, in miniature, the entire micropolitical problematic of the *Atalante*: its atypical living arrangements, the mundane frustrations of living together, and how these may be overcome through small, everyday domestic acts of accommodation.

The Ark

We already know *where* we are aboard the *Atalante*. We find ourselves in a womb-like vessel made of iron and wood. It is an artificial construction, a technical feat through which the inhabitants shelter themselves from the cold water, the constrained banality of the countryside, and the cruelty of the city. They have withdrawn from these surroundings to create a small world for themselves, where a more comfortable and vital existence might be possible. The dream of secession requires a personal living space: a different way of life is only conceivable if one has an environment, a zone of one's own. The *Atalante*, however, is not one of the individual nests described by Bachelard but the self-sheltering of a group. The dreamed-of autonomy is not to be achieved alone but through an association with others. What must be figured out, then, is how to live together harmoniously in this barge, or put in more political terms, how to harmonize individual with collective life.

In Book VI of the *Republic*, Plato paradigmatically used the image of a ship to refer not to the course of an individual life, but to the fragile existence of a political group. His “Ship of Fools” — a vessel on which incompetent sailors fight each other for the captaincy while the qualified philosopher-pilot gazes at the guiding stars — likened the problems of navigation to the

challenges of governing the polis, a metaphor consolidated with the “ship of state” of Horace’s Ode I.XIV.¹ By the time Sebastian Brant published his humanist satire *The Ship of Fools* in 1494, foolishness referred to human error in general, and the ship to the entire contemporary world. But the metaphor could also be applied to a more specific community, and it would also be commonly used to denote an asylum for the “mad,” those who had no place in a supposedly “sane” society.

In Hieronymus Bosch’s famous painting, the “ship of fools” satirizes the dysfunctions of the clergy: in the middle of the boat, which has a tree for a mast and a wooden spoon for a rudder, we see a Franciscan monk and a lute-playing nun joining in on the drunken revelry. As early as the third century, the Church Father Tertullian compared the Church to a ship, a figure that would endure in Christian writing and art, with either Christ or Peter as its steady pilot.² The idea also found architectural expression in the very term of the church’s “nave” (from *navis*, the Latin for ship), as well as in vaulted wooden ceilings that resembled an upturned keel or pulpits modeled like a ship. This symbolism was of course associated with the biblical story of Noah’s ark, the archetypal vessel that contained a whole microcosm and preserved creaturely life itself.

The drama of *L’Atalante*, then, is the drama, on a miniature scale, of inhabiting a world together, even more so because the river barge resembles a veritable ark. Of course, this boat is much smaller than Noah’s (which was ordered to be built 300 cubits long, 50 cubits wide, and 30 cubits high) and not all of the animal species have been herded below deck. But three unstable poles of existence, whose connections and overlaps form what Dominic Pettman has called a “cybernetic triangle,” are

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- 1 Plato, *The Republic of Plato*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 2016), 168, and Horace, “Ode I.XIV,” in *The Complete Odes and Satires of Horace*, trans. Sidney Alexander (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 23.
 - 2 See Ulrike Weber, “Schiff (Das Schiff der Kirche),” in *Lexikon der christlichen Ikonographie*, vol. 3, ed. Engelbrecht Krischbaum (Rome: Herder, 1972), cols. 61–67.

all represented on board: humans, animals, and machines.³ This makes the *Atalante* a kind of simplified and microcosmic model of the Earth, in which different types of living and nonliving things brush into each other. For unlike Hippolytus of Rome's description of Noah's vessel — in which the wild animals are put in the lower deck, the birds in the middle one, and humans live on the upper level — the *Atalante* is a much less segregated and hierarchically structured ark.⁴ It is a messy model of a world, with cats sleeping in human beds, people crawling around as if they were animals, and machines imitating human movements and making all kinds of strange noises. They all exist side by side only in *degrees* of distinction and they are all in some way attached to and dependent upon one another, for without the diesel engine, the barge wouldn't move, without the human hand, the wheel wouldn't steer, and without the bestial presence of the cats fed by Père Jules, the people of the *Atalante* could not behave like animals in those occasional bursts when their personalities seem to dissolve and only their limbs and organs respond to violent currents of sensation.

One of these moments is when Juliette uncontrollably sticks out her tongue at the sight of Père Jules's gushing blood (the shot of him cutting his own hand recalls *Un chien andalou* [1929], a film Vigo greatly admired). Another is a scene in which Jean and Juliette's moving bodies merge in cross-dissolves that show them making love at a distance, as if metamorphosing into a single creature. "For the sake of decency and purity," Hippolytus writes, God had ordered the male and female animals on Noah's ark to be separated from one another "lest they should per-

3 Pettman uses the concept to denote "the unholy trinity of human, animal, and machine, including the various ways in which they have been figured, and reconfigured, conceptually over time: sometimes spliced together, other times branching off into different directions." Dominic Pettman, *Human Error: Species-Being and Media Machines* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 5.

4 Hippolytus, "Fragments from Commentaries on Various Books of Scripture," in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 5, eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, trans. S.D.F. Salmond (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1919), 196.

chance get intermingled with each other.”⁵ On the less pure vessel of *L’Atalante*, animals, humans, and things get intermingled in all kinds of physical and symbolic ways, establishing a much more intimate, but therefore also more delicate, cohabitation. These strange, “specific interdependencies” between things and living beings may well be the “magic” that critics like Agee and Kracauer detect at work in the film.⁶

Let’s try to pigeonhole and catalog the different inhabitants of this messy barge as if it really were an ark, a compendium of the entire world. First, the humans, present in their many ages, genders, and cultures. An entire human lifespan is represented on board, for a boy, a young man, and an older man help keep the barge afloat, each with their characteristic traits of naïveté, ambition, and worldly wisdom. They can break off into different generational configurations: Père Jules, for example, takes care of the boy like a mentor, while the stubbornness of Jean, lacking experienced judgement, clashes with the relaxed hedonism of his senior.

Because of the abundance of men on board, the female gender must be embodied by Juliette alone, who is therefore the most complex individual: “at once a shy country girl, an efficient housewife, a child making a poetic discovery of the world, a woman troubled by the sensuality of her discoveries, equally attracted by marital fidelity and the fierce pull of eroticism.”⁷ The omnisexual Père Jules, meanwhile, confounds every strict distinction between men and women, fluctuating from the hypermasculine to the deeply feminine. Flexing his muscles and grabbing a fortune teller’s thigh, he very much plays the macho sailor, but then he is also eager to prove that he can sew just as well as Juliette, calls a pin-up of a naked woman a picture of “me, as a kid” (“c’est moi, quand j’étais petit”), and loves to pose

5 Ibid., 197.

6 See Peter Sloterdijk, *Spheres*, vol. 1: *Bubbles: Microspherology*, trans. Wieland Hoban (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2011), 220.

7 Paulo Emilio Salles Gomes, *Jean Vigo* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1972), 161.

and belly dance in a skirt. The old mariner may boast about a certain Dorothy he met in San Francisco, but he is clearly more attached to an old friend who died three years previously: he keeps a bare-chested portrait of him in a closet that serves as a kind of shrine, for it also contains a jar of formaldehyde that preserves both of his hands — “all I have left of him” (“tout ce qu’il me reste”).

The film’s most fluid character, Père Jules’s very name signals that he is also the fatherly guardian of this chaotic ship of fools, a crazy household deity who watches over its inhabitants. Rather than a “twentieth-century Caliban,” as Agee suggests, he is more like a Tiresias figure: an uncanny elder who changes genders and possesses extraordinary perception.⁸ As we will see, his clairvoyance gives him the power to miraculously repair a broken Jean and find Juliette at the end of the film. In contrast to the young cabin boy and the couple training in love, Père Jules possesses almost all the lived knowledge on board. Before retiring to the position of the barge’s first mate, he was an adventurous mariner who traveled the world, and all of this worldly experience is marked physically by the souvenirs in his cabin and the tattoos that cover his body, including the initials “MAV” for a then-current anarchist slogan: “Mort aux Vaches” (“Death to the Cows,” meaning the police). Unlike the newlyweds, he is also erotically experienced, as we know from his recollections of past liaisons and his relaxed sexual encounter with the clairvoyant.

Over the course of the film, this reservoir of experience allows Père Jules to act as a mentor to all three of his shipmates. He is clearly training the cabin boy, but he also seems to be supervising Jean’s command of the barge and by resisting and grumbling about orders, providing a model for a less domineering and neurotic kind of seafaring. That the skipper’s wife is under the mentorship of the old sailor is suggested by their related names: “Juliette” is both a female equivalent and a smaller version of “Jules.” They share the same playful spirit, but it is under

8 James Agee, *Agee on Film* (New York: McDowell, Obolensky, 1958), 265.

Père Jules's guidance in his cabin that Juliette discovers that, like him, she desires the sensuality of music and flesh — and that it is not wrong to do so. The sight of a shirtless Père Jules is her initiation into the carnal perception of the body, briefly igniting a charged and taboo-breaking tension between Juliette and her fatherly companion.

As the crisis on the barge grows, Père Jules's character evolves from a somewhat overbearing adversary to a helper of the lovers, resembling a fairy godfather whose magic restores harmony to the realm.⁹ Initially, Père Jules's beastly physique can seem like a threat to Juliette (especially when he demonstrates to her how he once choked a man) or as a rival for her attention. But after she leaves the barge, he becomes the key player who determines all the major plot points that lead up to the film's happy, if not entirely settled, ending. While Jean sinks into catatonia and never assumes the expected role of a hero, it is the elder Père Jules who reanimates the husband's will, saves him from being fired by the company manager, and finally sets out on a quest to bring back Juliette. Guided by his intuition and superstitions, he accomplishes this with magical ease, reuniting the lovers and saving the barge's ménage, for this pilot, constantly mutating in response to changing circumstances, is, as Vigo himself explained, "good at fixing things."¹⁰

At first, it may seem that only France has sent human delegates to the ark. But when we descend with Juliette into Père Jules's cabin, we discover a dazzling array of countries, cultures, and people. While traveling the seven seas, Jules appears to have taken a small piece of every destination with him whenever he left port. His cabin is a multisensory *Wunderkammer*, a collection of curiosities that Renaissance scholars assembled to possess the marvels of an expanding world by constructing an idiosyncratic miniature of it, indoors. Père Jules shows Juliette, who has seen nothing beyond her small village, a puppet from Caracas, a picture from Havana, a Japanese hand fan, and an

9 Marina Warner, *L'Atalante* (London: Palgrave, 2015), 74.

10 Salles Gomes, *Jean Vigo*, 171.

Andalusian knife, and these are only a few of the countless souvenirs crammed into the room. Vigo searched the flea market of Saint-Ouen (the same one frequented by Breton) and a scrap-metal market to put together this eclectic collection, which also includes shells, masks, and nude photographs. He also asked his friends to provide any remarkable artifacts in their possession: the filmmaker Jean Painlevé, known for his avant-garde shorts on underwater life, supplied the bottled hands, while the photographer Roger Parry contributed materials from Tahiti.

Père Jules, however, not only collects things extracted and manufactured across the globe. In a way, he has also absorbed the variety of the human world into his fantastic body, quite literally in the case of his “exotic” tattoos, which “keep you warm” (“avec ça, on n’a pas froid”), as he explains. In another scene with Juliette, he shouts all the port cities he has visited (“Yokohama! Melbourne! Shanghai! Papeete! San Francisco! Singapore! San Sebastián!”), performs an obscene Algerian song that switches into a war cry, and bellows a vaguely African melody before showing off his Spanish bullfighting techniques. The fetishizing routine ends with a Cossack dance, but elsewhere he demonstrates that he is skilled in Greco-Roman wrestling and can play an Italian tarantella on his accordion as well. Père Jules is a one-man community, an incoherent assemblage of accumulated mimeticisms and cultural elements shamelessly appropriated from different civilizations. Why would Juliette ever need to disembark? On board the *Atalante*, there is no need to travel: the whole world can apparently be discovered down in Père Jules’s cabin. Again, the threshold between the inside and the outside of the ship proves to be porous: with the *Wunderkammer*, the external world erupts from the inner depths of its hull.

If we willfully continue pretending that the *Atalante* is actually exhaustive, then the cats have come aboard to represent the entire animal kingdom. In the original script, the barge’s inhabitants were accompanied by a single dog. Vigo instead contacted a woman from the French Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, who sent him a large crate filled with about ten cats. The decision to use cats appears to be a tribute to his father:

Almeryda had a passion for alley cats and Jean was born in a tiny attic littered with them. This trivial change of a detail in the script turned out to have far-reaching consequences: the cats are one of the most memorable aspects of the film, contributing to its distinctly creaturely atmosphere. Icons of a free physicality, their feline bodies move without restriction; they lounge, dangle, pounce, procreate, and are tossed around. Falling out of cupboards or balancing themselves on Père Jules's shoulders, they infest the barge with animal life and make it rife with creaturely sociality.

The visualization of such bodies, liberated from work and discipline, is a recurring obsession in Vigo's small oeuvre. We see it in the cancan of *À propos de Nice*, in the playful swimming of the short documentary *Taris ou la natation* (1931), or in the revolutionary procession of *Zéro de conduite*, when a boy summersaulting in reverse and in slow motion becomes "a body being carried along, floating among objects like seaweed," to quote Maurice Merleau-Ponty's description of this cinematic effect.¹¹ The animals are also the micromodel for the activity of nesting.¹² In one frivolous sequence, we see no less than six cats snuggling around a spinning phonograph, drawn to the music, getting comfortable, and curling up in the horn. They are not only "symbols of, and goads to, sexuality," but also totems of an openness to sensuousness, to tactile closeness and the reso-

11 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind," in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*, ed. Galen A. Johnson, trans. Michael B. Smith (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 145. See also Mauro Carbone, *The Flesh of Images: Merleau-Ponty between Painting and Cinema*, trans. Marta Nijhuis (Albany: SUNY Press, 2015), 54.

12 "Even in our homes," writes Bachelard, "our consciousness of well-being should call for comparison with animals in their shelters. [...] If we were to look among the wealth of our vocabulary for verbs that express the dynamics of retreat, we should find images based on animal movements of withdrawal, movements that are engraved in our muscles." Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (New York: Penguin Books, 2014), 112.

nance of music.¹³ These creatures are of course associated with Père Jules, who further blurs the line between man and beast by having his hair cut by a dog barber and warning the cats not to “stay with these animals” (“reste pas avec ces méchantes bêtes, là”) when Jean tries to throw them out.

Without the presence of machines, there would be no ark. For the river barge is ultimately a large life-support machine that contains and sustains all within.¹⁴ It is only through this wholly technical maritime construction that the humans can occupy a different space in the water: the barge is the diesel engine-driven incubator of their way of life. It also houses many smaller machines, and its slow movement, growling engine, ominous fog-horn, and steaming exhaust sometimes give the impression that it is an aquatic beast. Like much of the European avant-garde before him, Vigo was fascinated by different types of machinery, how they could mimic human gestures, and he explored the boundary that lay between human and machine life.¹⁵ In his films, automata and puppets can be a source of anxiety, like the mechanical humans of the department stores or the grotesque carnival puppets of *À propos de Nice*, but they can also produce childlike amazement, like the magnificent marionette of an orchestra conductor operated by Père Jules.

13 Dudley Andrew, *Film in the Aura of Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 63.

14 While Latour uses the image of a space station to illustrate Sloterdijk's concept of “spheres,” a barge could also serve as an analogy: “To define humans is to define the envelopes, the life support systems, the *Umwelt* that make it possible for them to breathe. [...] In the same way as a spacesuit or a space station is entirely artificially and carefully designed, so are all of the envelopes that constitute the fragile life supports of humans.” Bruno Latour, “A Cautious Prometheus? A Few Steps Toward a Philosophy of Design with Special Attention to Peter Sloterdijk,” in *In Medias Res: Peter Sloterdijk's Spherological Poetics of Being*, eds. Willem Schinkel and Liesbeth Noordegraaf-Eelens (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2011), 158.

15 For a survey of Vigo's interest in puppets, mannequins, and automata, see Michael Wutz, “A propos the Puppeteer — Jean Vigo and the Cinema of Automata,” *Mise Au Point* 11 (2018), <https://journals.openedition.org/map/3110>.

In *L'Atalante*, Vigo is especially interested in machines that can make and reproduce sound. The strange and powerful effects of sound—including its ability to bring people close together, to intimately conjoin people and things across distances—is one of the film's key motifs. When Juliette goes down to Père Jules's cabin, she first picks up a large conch to listen to the sound of the ocean but then discovers a series of equally marvelous musical boxes, from a simple, manual one with a twirling top-piece to a rattling cube and a disc-playing polyphon that produces a startling panoply of notes. Even stranger is the radio in the small salon, which can receive sounds from “far or near” (“loin ou près”), as Jean explains, and which provokes an early example of a domestic argument about which channel to put on.

The most important sound machine, however, is Père Jules's phonograph. In the beginning of the film, it is broken, and we gradually follow how the machine is made to work again: the tinkering Père Jules buys a new record from the vagabond Rasputin, steals a horn from a Parisian café, and after he yanks and oils some parts, the thing is suddenly operative. This repair happens at a critical moment in the plot and is the catalyst for the film's finale. Juliette has left the barge, and in a moment of desperation, Jean, missing her, jumps into the water, where, looking around with open and bewildered eyes, his hair swaying like sea grass, he finally sees the one he loves—as Juliette said he would. This occasions *L'Atalante*'s most famous sequence: beautifully superimposed on the underwater shots of an almost drowning Jean, an inexplicable vision of Juliette appears, dressed in her ghostly white wedding dress, dancing in slow motion, the lush fabric of her gown rippling and swirling as she spins around in front of him.

Subaquatic perception, dissolving imagination and reality, allows for the miraculous recognition of love at the depth of despair. But this visual revelation is paralleled by a second, sonic enchantment that Salles Gomes calls “the miracle of the phonograph”: the broken turntable is fixed and runs smoothly.¹⁶ After

16 Salles Gomes, *Jean Vigo*, 171.

drying and dressing an unresponsive Jean, Père Jules has the cabin boy bring up the phonograph and plays a waltz composed by Maurice Jaubert. Père Jules turns the horn toward Jean, who, upon hearing the music, breaks into an enigmatic smile and runs off. This auditory miracle sparks Jean's determination to find Juliette and propels the process of her return. It is as if the repair of the machine, and the music it produces, also fixes the catatonic Jean, who had withdrawn into a totally closed, uncommunicative inner fortress: his receptivity to sound reconnects him to the surrounding world and restores the ego that had disintegrated after being abandoned by his constitutive companion.

And so, it is not surprising that the communicative resonance of sound will also reunite the couple in the film's finale. A heartbroken Juliette now works at the "Palace Chanson," a music arcade. Longing for the warm atmosphere of the ship, she plays a recording of "Le Chant des mariniers," a song the crew members had played for her on her first morning on the barge. Père Jules, out searching for his *patronne*, hears the song being broadcast through an external speaker on a storefront and immediately recognizes it as Juliette's distress signal. He sweeps into the arcade, surprises Juliette, and lifts her over his shoulder to carry her back to Jean and their shared home. Disappointed by the city, Juliette decides to retreat from the outside world and make do with the barge. Or, more idealistically, she now really believes that everything she desires, everything she needs to live, is already enclosed in the microcosmic ark that is the *Atalante*.

Ultimately, this is the reason for the necessary, but impossible, fiction that the barge houses a complete world: it helps to ensure its autarchy. Without at least the *belief* that the *Atalante* contains a complete, integral aggregation of humans, animals, and (machine) things, all attached to one another, the feeling might soon arise that something is missing. The self-sufficiency of the barge—its minimal dependence on its surroundings—cannot be maintained if a lack is felt. The *fullness* of the *Atalante*, its "being enough," is what must secure the livability of this collective. The barge promises to provide its inhabitants

with everything they need, from animal companions and music to love and objects from the remotest corners of the world. This material and affective plenitude explains the alluring and jealousy-inducing contentment of a small group that seems to require nothing beyond each other and the internal life they share. “Autarky: strong intradependence + zero extradependence,” Barthes writes in his lecture notes.¹⁷ Its appeal is that of comfort, when everything can be found within and nothing is needed from without. This state of self-sufficiency is, of course, difficult to sustain. Historically, it has hinged on the self-limitation of needs and desires (as in some monastic communities) and on powerful yet fragile symbolic constructions of fullness, which risk an expansion into aggressive totalitarian visions that seek to devour all externalities with an imperialist appetite.¹⁸

Since he is the most controlling of the barge’s imperviousness, Jean is afraid of any contact or communication with the outside: the city, the stores, and the cheeky peddler’s promise of a consumerist utopia — “bikes, motorbikes, and convertibles for everyone” (“et des vélos, et des motos, et des autos à capots pour Toto Parigot”) — threaten to burst his satisfied bubble and its vulnerable fictions. In a way, the film stages a battle between the magnetic call of two songs: the rhapsody of the “Chant des Mariniers,” an ode to simple barge life, and the seductive tune that the peddler sings at the tavern, advertising “press studs to hold your pants up / jewelry with the prices cut / to brighten your day / always” (“Que c’bouton d’pression, / Ça soutient l’calçon; / Qu’avec ces bijoux / D’vingt sous, / On s’paie de beaux jours, / Toujours”).

17 Roland Barthes, *How to Live Together: Novelistic Simulations of Some Everyday Spaces*, trans. Kate Briggs (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 36–37.

18 Calling for a politics of withdrawal and self-sufficiency, the French collective Le Comité Invisible, for example, emphasizes both fullness (“It’s by virtue of their plenitude that forms of life will complete the destitution [of power]”) and the reduction of material need (“The commune addresses needs with a view to annihilating the being of need within us”). The Invisible Committee, *To Our Friends*, trans. Robert Hurley (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2015), 79, 214–15.

Jean aggressively tries to keep Juliette away from this siren song and, understandably, fails, pointing to the unsustainability of keeping all things external out of the barge. And yet, in the moments when the fantasy is in full force, happily living together aboard the *Atalante* only exists as a kind of homeostasis. Novelty and events must be repelled to maintain it, for these introduce drama, the angst of decision-making, mobilization, and drastic repercussions that break the spell.¹⁹ When happiness prevails, the fantasized milieu of the *Atalante* floats in a dream-like state in which all suspense is abolished.

L'Atalante is thus a "difficult" film in the sense that it often seems to be about nothing. We don't really know where the barge or a given scene is going. The entire voyage is steeped in purposelessness. "What is the point of this?" we wonder. The film responds by insisting that it is about what you are seeing *right now*: it is *about* the nonsense, the silly games, the running around, the eating, sulking, sleeping, washing, talking, and aimless singing aboard this ship of fools. Not particularly interested in causal plot development, Vigo seizes the simple fairy tale structure of *L'Atalante* as an opportunity to insert pauses in the narrative, to focus on inconsequential interactions, gestures, and the particularities of the setting. And it is only because of this vertical attention to trivial details and the texture of the surroundings that the film is able to render the ambience of routine communal life so well.

Already in the 1930s, critics noted *L'Atalante*'s "tendency to stress details,"²⁰ writing that "almost nothing happens," that it "baffles its audience by its contempt for style and the usual cinematic conventions."²¹ As Frédéric Pottecher concluded in his obituary for Vigo: "There was something about him that was new, a sensibility, a feeling for atmospheres that only he was able

19 "To fantasize Living-Together as an everyday reality: to refuse, repel, violently reject the event." Barthes, *How to Live Together*, 84.

20 Alexandre Arnoux's review in *Les Nouvelles littéraires* of September 29, 1934. Quoted in Salles Gomes, *Jean Vigo*, 190.

21 Jean Vidal writing in issue 305 of *Pour vous*, September 1934. Quoted in Salles Gomes, *Jean Vigo*, 192.

to rescue from nothingness.”²² It is the film’s nonevents that are the most memorable. It is precisely scenes like the laundry episode that stick with us because here we partake, through brief glimpses, in the pleasure of being in a specific atmosphere that people have arranged for themselves. The whole drama of Juliette’s lonely escape, its acceleration of events, instead feels like an inconvenient intrusion into the barge’s mesmerizing day-to-day existence, into the sense that life is simply but sufficiently “happening” in that enclosed space.

Which brings us to the goal of an ark, or the reason why its inhabitants have put it together. Its very weak purpose is as minimal as it is fundamental: to *preserve life*. Its group does not strive after anything it does not already contain, it assembles for the sake of its own existence. This makes the ideal ark, and the fantasized group it sustains, a “pure homeostatic machine that runs by itself,” to use Barthes’s phrase.²³

Even without the threat of a great flood, things are quite the same with the *Atalante*. Officially, of course, the purpose of the barge is to transport bulk goods across France, but its inhabitants are not interested in this productive endeavor, let alone occupied with it. If it weren’t for the satirical portrait of the company manager complaining about the *Atalante*’s poor performance, you would think the cargo bays have been empty all along. By now we should know the real *raison d’être* of this ship: it preserves a certain way of life against surroundings that, while not immediately lethal, are felt to be unlivable, for the kind of fragile existence within the barge could not survive outside it. As a utopian vessel, then, the *Atalante* promises to insulate a homeostasis of life and perpetuate sociability as an end in itself, generating in this way the basic comfort of being attached to others.

22 Pottecher’s obituary appeared in the magazine *Comœdia* on October 7, 1934. Quoted in Michael Temple, *Jean Vigo* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 140n4.

23 Barthes, *How to Live Together*, 46.

Accommodation

At times, I have proceeded as if the comfortable vessel of *L'Atalante* is just lying there before Père Jules and his cats crawl onboard. As if this barge exists separately from and prior to those who inhabit it. A dwelling is not a ready-made structure that you just walk into. Living spaces exist and evolve in tandem with the inhabitants that they enclose and shelter.¹ The *Atalante's* refuge is not just made of the barge's hull, though that is certainly part of it. It is created and maintained by all that it contains, by that mixed assemblage of materials and organisms that inhabit this ark. Which means that the question of whether the ship can accommodate this collective is connected to the question of whether *they* can accommodate each other. Since occupants can't help but shape the living space that encircles them, their habits and bonds will also determine whether the space is livable at all.

This is common sense to anyone who has ever shared a house with a group of people. Imagine spending a few weeks with six friends and four dogs in a remote house in the country. Then imagine going there with six very different friends, no dogs,

1 See Peter Sloterdijk, *Spheres*, vol. 1: *Bubbles: Microspherology*, trans. Wieland Hoban (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2011), 79, 422.

and finding that some rodents have chewed through the electrical wires and all the furniture has been cleared away. The atmosphere will be different. These houses, these rooms, will not be the same. And you will immediately realize that—besides questions of location, infrastructure, and appliances—the habitability of a space is also determined by the relations and interactions of the group of creatures that share it. When it comes to persons, things can quickly turn from a nice dream to the Sartrean nightmare of *No Exit* (1944). You could be enjoying walks together and getting enough distance to spend some time by yourself. Or you could face the prospect of being trapped for weeks on end in forced sociability with people who exasperate you and won't leave you alone.

Even after boarding school and the sanatorium, Vigo spent a lot of time living with others. Contrary to the myth of Vigo as a tragic outcast, he was in fact a sociable person, surrounded from an early age by his father's left-wing milieu and soon forming his own circle of friends. When Jean and Lydou first moved to Nice in December 1928, Jean's old school friend Georges Causat, working as an intern at the hospital, was constantly around the newlyweds, eventually moving in with them for some time. By the end of January, the couple had settled into a home on the Avenue Paderi. Francis Jourdain designed their furniture and Eugène Dieudonné, the old anarchist of the "Bonnot Gang," built it for them. While consulting with medical experts in Paris in the fall, Vigo happened to meet the cameraman Boris Kaufman and immediately persuaded him and his wife to move into his guest room so they could begin collaborating on their first project. The couple would live in Vigo's villa throughout the preparation, filming, and editing of *À propos de Nice*.

After seeing his antifascist drawings in a socialist magazine, Vigo also invited the struggling artist Gyula Zilzer to come live in the house. "I can never forget," wrote Zilzer, who began his career developing torpedoes for the Bolsheviks and ended up designing studio sets in Hollywood, "how he saved me from my poverty, inviting me to live with him and his family as his guest

for six months.”² Another guest was Jean Painlevé, who came to Nice to introduce one of his science films at Vigo’s film club “Les Amis du cinéma” and immediately struck up a lasting friendship with him, built on a mutual love for practical jokes.³ The first screening of the ciné-club, in September 1930, had been inaugurated by Germaine Dulac, the pioneer of avant-garde cinema who later helped Vigo get a commission for *Taris ou la natation*. The two would meet again in November that same year at the “Deuxième Congrès International du Cinéma Indépendant,” where Vigo also befriended the Belgian filmmaker Henri Storck after a screening of his *Images d’Ostende* (1929).

Through such cinephile ties and friendships, Vigo appears to have surrounded himself with a group of close friends and collaborators, a true *bande à Vigo*, with whom he lived and made films. They would still encircle him in the final months of his life, coming for visits and having loud political discussions in the room next to his bedroom. Already at Font-Romeu, the letters Vigo received from pen pals had convinced him that friendship gave him the greatest joy, and even earlier, he had adopted a motto of comradery from the Italian serial *I topi grigi* (1918) that he would use for the rest of his life: “You can absolutely count on me, in life as in death.”⁴

L’Atalante makes it clear, though, that this kind of solidarity does not arise spontaneously. How do the humans, probably the most intractable creatures on board, find a way to live together in this cramped space? How do they adapt to the presence and desires of other people and existents, who press up against them so insistently and who also need to adapt to them in turn?

Père Jules, the cabin boy, and Juliette already seem to have been inspired to make room for others by what the philosopher

2 Gyula Zilzer, “Remembrances of Jean Vigo,” *Hollywood Quarterly* 3, no. 2 (1947–1948): 126.

3 For a recent study of Jean Painlevé, see James Leo Cahill, *Zoological Surrealism: The Nonhuman Cinema of Jean Painlevé* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019).

4 Paulo Emilio Salles Gomes, *Jean Vigo* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1972), 44.

Simon Critchley describes as a “hewing and hacking away” at their selves, by attempting (for it is the *attempt*, not the outcome, that matters here) to quell their particular, egocentric interests until they are no longer “organized around individual identity and its self-regarding acts of will.”⁵ Through such loving self-abnegation, Critchley writes, “a transformed relation to others becomes possible, some new way of conceiving the common and being with others.”⁶ Throughout *L’Atalante*, we see how characters struggle to downsize their domineering will and acclimatize to those they share a space with. There are acts of egotism in *L’Atalante*, but there also acts of “reciprocal accommodation,” of people becoming “attuned to each other affectively,” to quote Sloterdijk’s spatial understanding of intimacy.⁷ Love is then a question of being accommodating and accommodated — of feeling at home with others.

Despite his colossal presence, Père Jules is arguably the group’s most hospitable member. He realizes when he has gone too far: “Never mind! Come back! I won’t yell at you” (“Ça fait rien! Viens donc! Je t’engueulerai pas”), he tells the cabin boy after he scolds him too harshly. He knows how to take care of Jean: he dries the captain when he is wet, repairs the phonograph when he needs music, saves him from being fired by the company manager, and brings back his companion. Though initially disturbed by Juliette’s arrival, the mutable Père Jules quickly accepts her as a crew member and announces his intention to adjust himself to her: “I’d do anything for the missus, even go shopping” (“Qu’est-ce qu’on ferait pas pour elle? Même que je vais aller aux provisions pour la patronne”).

The bond that goes beyond such stereotypes is established when he lets Juliette into his private cabin: the cliché of “letting someone in” is taken quite literally here. In the intimacy of his

5 Simon Critchley, *The Faith of the Faithless: Experiments in Political Theology* (London: Verso, 2012), 129, 139.

6 *Ibid.*, 153.

7 Peter Sloterdijk, “Talking to Myself about the Poetics of Space,” *Harvard Design Magazine* 30 (2009), <https://www.harvarddesignmagazine.org/issues/30/talking-to-myself-about-the-poetics-of-space>.

room, Père Jules shares with her the things that are dear to him and also reveals his tattoo-covered torso. It is a little uncomfortable to watch Père Jules and Juliette tenderly getting to know each other, as if we are privy to something we are not meant to see. Père Jules compliments Juliette's hair, she combs his. We witness a scene of mutual seduction that is thoroughly physical, even if it isn't obviously sexual. As they play together below deck, the two discover their shared fascination with material objects, until they recognize each other as their counterparts. The idea that Père Jules and Juliette are attuned to each other is literalized in two sequences that involve the mediation of sound technologies. First, when Juliette, playing a music box, follows the tempo of a conductor puppet handled by Père Jules, and later, when Père Jules magically hears the song that Juliette plays at the music arcade and immediately recognizes it as hers.

Père Jules also takes care of the cabin boy, with whom he shares a bunk, and he cooks meals for the cats that keep him company, sleep beside him, and likely help keep rodents off the ship. Always crawling across his body and room, these creatures are inextricable from Père Jules, and vice-versa. One image captures their interspecies coexistence especially well: a cat steadily bouncing along on Père Jules's back as he dances to a tune played on an old accordion, one of the many instruments cherished by the first mate. For Père Jules loves artifacts that others would throw away: this collector gives them a place. Stored in his cabin, the objects are all intimately *with* him, invested with personal meaning and a sense of vitality. "The piled-up treasures which crowd his cabin," Kracauer writes, "are depicted in such a manner that we feel they have literally grown together over him."⁸ Père Jules is "so much one with the '*Atalante*' that he seems carved out of its planks."⁹ This sentence sums up the process by which Père Jules inhabits a space so thoroughly that

8 Siegfried Kracauer, "Jean Vigo," trans. William Melnitz, *Hollywood Quarterly* 2, no. 3 (1947): 263.

9 *Ibid.*

it becomes his primal habitat, a life-support which, via his acts of accommodation, then accommodates others as well.

Though it takes time to adjust to the monotony of the barge, Juliette quickly becomes accustomed to her crewmates and the rhythms and habits, rather than schedules and laws, that are needed to maintain a supple living arrangement. For it is through simple, unwritten customs that a shared life can be established without the rigidity of fixed regulations, which introduce the unhappy cycle of infraction and punishment.¹⁰ Customs, responsive and adaptable to changing circumstances, can be freely taken up and modified with others. They hold out the possibility of what Barthes calls a common, yet “flexible, free, mobile rhythm” of life: an “idiorrhymy” that “allows for approximation, for imperfection,” for the idiosyncrasies of each individual member of the group.¹¹ To illustrate the opposite of this utopian rhythm, Barthes turns to an everyday image of asymmetrical power:

From my window (December I, 1976), I see a mother pushing an empty stroller, holding her child by the hand. She walks at her own pace, imperturbably; the child, meanwhile, is being pulled, dragged along, is forced to keep running, like an animal, or one of Sade’s victims being whipped. She walks at her own pace, unaware of the fact that her son’s rhythm is different. And she’s his mother! → Power — the subtlety of power — is effected through disrhythmy, heterorhythmy.¹²

Living together harmoniously, then, is a question of walking together at the same pace, of being attuned to each other. What is needed on the barge, and what love provides, is the attentiveness and tact of accommodation. In very material, mundane, but important ways, Juliette shows this consideration when she

¹⁰ See Roland Barthes, *How to Live Together: Novelistic Simulations of Some Everyday Spaces*, trans. Kate Briggs (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 118–19.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 35.

¹² *Ibid.*, 9.

heats Jean's shirt so it will be warm when he comes down to the kitchen or keeps Père Jules's plate of food on the stove so it won't be cold when he arrives late to the table. It is perhaps no coincidence that these activities revolve around warmth, suggesting that solidarity begins with the sharing of a fire, a hearth, or a stove on which food is cooked and around which the group of a communal meal develops.¹³

In a touching scene of domestic tact, we see Juliette silently pushing a chair next to the bed at night so she can carefully tiptoe over the body of the sleeping Jean and not wake him when she crawls into her corner. On a narrative level, it appears Juliette never intended to abandon the rhythm of barge life but just needed a short break from it. Père Jules, whose own excursions are already tolerated, realizes this, and tells Jean, in vain, to relax and stay put, explaining that Juliette will "be back any minute, or in an hour. Even if it's tomorrow" ("Mais elle va revenir, la patronne, d'une minute à l'autre. Dans une heure. Et même qu'elle reviendrait demain"). Juliette is obviously frustrated by Jean's dictatorial and tactless actions, never accepting a position of deferential service and demanding to be heard in turn. Yet we don't get the impression that her love for him has been shattered, and the bonds that she forges with Jean and Père Jules clearly make the *Atalante* a more habitable vessel.

It is mostly Jean, the controlling captain, who strikes a dissonant note against the harmony of the barge. While never irredeemably evil or ill-intentioned, here is a figure who gravitates toward power, toward the law, and toward the event. Jean has little feeling for custom, common sense, or the uneventfulness of leisure. "Jean? Are you coming down?" ("Jean? Tu descends?"), Juliette calls as she lies alone in their bed. "It's five in the morning. Are you going to stop? It's raining!" ("Il est cinq heures du matin. Tu vas bientôt t'arrêter? Il pleut!"). Jean just stays on deck. He looks obsessed behind the wheel. He wants to steer this ark blindly through the thick fog. He wants to get ahead,

13 See Peter Sloterdijk, *Spheres*, vol. 2: *Globes: Macrospherology*, trans. Wieland Hoban (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2014), 225–26.

for no clear reason, and abruptly shortens the crew's days off, when they are at anchor. His prohibitions and commands implement the law on the barge. "I forbid you to come in here" ("Je te défends de mettre les pieds ici"), he barks, or "You heard me? We're leaving!" (T'as compris? On part!") and "Why the hell are you here?" ("Qu'est-ce que tu fous là, hein?"). When Juliette gently tugs at his hair to kiss him, he warns her to be "Careful!" ("Ouh là là! Tu pourrais faire attention!").

As in a classic folk tale, such prohibitions disrupt the idyll and set the events in motion.¹⁴ The exercise of power on the *Atalante* brings into play the obverse phenomena of transgression and escape routes: Juliette secretly leaves for Paris only after Jean forbids her to go. Jean's law introduces the possibility of disobedience on board, and the captain must therefore also take on the role of police enforcer and judicial punisher. When he discovers that Juliette has entered Père Jules's room, and that attachments can exist outside of their marriage, he jealously reprimands her and penalizes Père Jules by wrecking his cabin. Juliette looks back at this policing in disgust, a look that is unbearable. "Don't look at me like that!" ("Ne me regarde pas comme ça!"), Jean shouts before hitting her. Equally devastating are the words that he speaks after dragging Juliette back from the tavern because she "didn't behave" according to his rules of conduct. "You're not taking me with you?" ("Tu ne m'emmènes pas?"), Juliette asks as he and the others are about to go outside again. "Non!" he replies, effectively turning the barge into a prison.

It seems that Jean does not really share his space with other people, that he does not give them enough breathing space beside him. Nor is he good at living with other species and things. He violently flings the cats around and suggests throwing the newborn kittens overboard. "He'd drown his own son" ("Il noierait son gosse, celui-là"), Père Jules cries in outrage. Notably, Jean punishes Père Jules by destroying the curiosities to which he is so attached, demonstrating his disregard for the material objects that *L'Atalante* tends to treat as very precious. The attack

14 Marina Warner, *L'Atalante* (London: Palgrave, 2015), 40.

on Père Jules's things is at once the destruction of his interior abode: an attack on a person's living space and the bursting of an individual bubble, which, as Vigo acutely registers, amounts to an attack on the person himself. Juliette knows this too, for she shouts, "It's not your place!" ("T'es pas tout de même chez toi, ici," in the more layered French), while we painfully witness—through close-ups of plates being smashed to pieces—how the first mate's carefully constructed world is demolished in a matter of seconds.

Infuriated by Jules's ramshackle and uniquely appointed cabin, Jean does not tolerate independently designed interiors. But what is needed, and what he is grappling with, is precisely a living arrangement in which different personal cells exist side by side even as they closely overlap into a larger, collective space. Jean cannot imagine what Barthes, invoking Friedrich Nietzsche, calls a *pathos of distance*: a relation of "tact" in which you do not impose yourself on other people, yet still retain bonds of affection with them.¹⁵ According to Barthes, this "distance that won't destroy affect," a "distance permeated, irrigated by tender feeling," is the key value to reconcile the individual's zone of independence with the sociability of collective life.¹⁶ Like all totalizing projects, Jean's worldview cannot bear the existence of different worlds and he imposes his sense of spatial order on others, cleansing their spaces of the presumed junk inside: "I told you time and again, none of this stuff on board!" ("Je t'ai répété cent fois que ces trucs-là sont défendus à bord!").

Clearly, Jean will have to train himself to live with others, to curb his imperious will in order to make a more tolerable form of cohabitation possible. Of course, I have somewhat exaggerated Jean's insensitivity. Throughout the film, we *do* witness moments in which affection inspires the captain to be attentive to others: when he welcomes Juliette aboard with a song, for instance, or crawls out from under the covers to help a terribly

¹⁵ Barthes, *How to Live Together*, 132.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

drunk Père Jules into bed. Still, *L'Atalante* tracks the difficulties of the collective as it shifts from being bound together by rules and prohibitions to being bound together by solidarity. In the film's logic, this solidarity begins with learning how to love. And as a love story, *L'Atalante* is thus unconventional in that it concerns not just a couple, but a concrete social group, somewhat furtively living on the margins. It is about a small community that spans generations but must be affiliated by something other than familial consanguinity or abstract laws.

This communal dimension tends to be overlooked by critics who stress themes of emancipation and individual liberty in *L'Atalante*. Comparing the film to *Zéro de conduite*, Marina Warner writes that “both make passionate statements about personal and emotional freedom and the expression of individual preferences and desires with an anarchic, antinomian *joie de vivre*.”¹⁷ There is certainly a rejection of oppression in the world outside the barge and of Jean's authority within, but some *other* constructive bond must take its place. That this does not come automatically or easily, or through mere vocal commitments or written declarations, is clear from the distinctly unheroic romance of *L'Atalante*, where love is a matter of everyday accommodation and the ties that support a shared life are never established once and for all but require constant maintenance and adaptation.

We have already seen how, in the end, love comes to Jean like a miracle of grace, but it is worth returning to this moment to appreciate how difficult even its initial arrival is. Earlier in the film, Jean fails to see Juliette when he jokingly sticks his head in the canal to test the theory that “the one you love” appears underwater. “You'll see it one day, when you do it for real” (“Tu vas le voir un jour, quand tu le feras sérieusement”), says Juliette, who saw Jean in the water before they met and thus recognized him when he first set foot in her family home. But before he truly loves her, Jean must undergo a subjective transformation in which his old, tightly enclosed self is worked away until it is

17 Warner, *L'Atalante*, 55.

empty enough to encompass others. Before love enters, nothing less than self-loss is needed.

The act of love, Critchley writes, is “the daring that attempts to extend beyond oneself by annihilating oneself.”¹⁸ After Juliette leaves the barge, Jean’s sense of self is so obliterated that he ends up in a catatonic state. He stops speaking, stares blankly. Père Jules has declared him “totally mad” (“complètement fou”) by the time he dives into the canal again and the famous image of Juliette floats before his eyes. Jean may have already harbored desire for Juliette, but it is only through this transformation of the self that love takes its place. In Guinée’s original script, Jean does not welcome Juliette with a joyful embrace, but only accepts her back on the barge after she promises she hasn’t slept with anyone else. “Then, roughly,” the script reads, “he pulls her against him and says in a harsh voice, ‘Take off your clothes.’ His hands start undressing her.”¹⁹ Though Guinée may not have seen it that way, this moralizing mixed with frank sexual desire is of course why his synopsis ends with the line, “But Happiness had left the ship” (“Mais le Bonheur a fui le bord”).²⁰ A similar sophisticated pessimism about relationships would characterize films such as Marcel Pagnol’s *La Femme du boulanger* (1938) or Jean Renoir’s *La Règle du jeu* (1939). But Vigo scrapped Guinée’s ending, rejecting a false choice between idealistic affection and worldly cynicism, instead showing a way of loving as thoroughly material and sensuous as his filmmaking is.

Nowhere is this carnal love captured more stirringly than in a montage that is at once *L’Atalante*’s most tactile and dreamlike sequence. After shots of the separated lovers hoping to catch a glimpse of each other along the canals, we see Jean and Juliette preparing to go to bed that night, each in their own room. In the small cabin where they used to sleep together, Jean takes off his

18 Critchley, *Faith of the Faithless*, 153.

19 “Alors, durement, il l’attire contre lui, et d’une voix rauque: ‘Déshabille-toi.’ Ses mains commencent à la dévêtir.” Jean Guinée, “*L’Atalante*,” in *Jean Vigo: Œuvre de cinéma*, ed. Pierre Lherminier (Paris: Cinémathèque française/Pierre Lherminier, 1985), 349.

20 *Ibid.*, 329.

striped undershirt, while Juliette rolls down her stockings in an unfamiliar hotel before she tucks herself in and rests her head on her elbow. Deep in the night, both in that curious state between wakefulness and sleep, a camera hanging over the lovers films, in cross-fading cuts, how they begin to move restlessly, writhing in their beds, touching themselves, or, as it in fact appears, touching each other's bodies through the other's hands and fingers and lips. In this choreography accompanied by Jaubert's sweeping musical theme, the lovers' body movements react in turn, fall in sync, and complete one another, until each, melting into the other, becomes the recovered pole of a communicating pair, in this case, Jean-Juliette. When Jean kisses the soft flesh above his armpit, Juliette's body lifts upwards, her arms stretched back, an ascent that seems to push Jean down into his pillow as he clutches his chest. This image fades into Juliette's hand slowly moving to her breast, a touch that will make her curl up on her side before both look up at the camera, Jean on his knees and Juliette supine, eyeing the absent yet near other from a distance, their sultry eyes somewhat astonished but not surprised. We see how the lovers have become affectively and erotically attuned to each other, how they are sensitive and responsive to the other's rhythm, how love has set in. What is remarkable is that Vigo has filmed the two as if they are lying in the exact same space: the bodies of Jean and Juliette are covered in the unreal shadows of a dotted net that is draped over their bed, suggesting an enveloping, intersubjective interior that is here visualized materially. When the poles of a pair resonate, they breathe life into an intimate space that exists between them, even at a distance.

Intimacy is indeed what marks a room that is filled with accommodating love. It is an atmosphere that is not easy to film, but that Vigo was able to capture in some domestic scenes that are less intense than the couple's communion, even if they also exhibit a strong physicality. If the breakaway barge harbors the group project of intimate living together, then what does that look like in the end? Nothing more or less extraordinary than Père Jules playing with a pile of cards while the cabin boy sleeps peacefully in the lower bunk, undisturbed by the cat walking

over his face. A group sitting at a table, passing out wine and some food, content with only each other's company and the heat of the stove warming their backs while a cold draft runs across the river outside. Songs sung and words whispered in the morning, cats gathering around a spinning phonograph, inert things coming to life. A group carrying their mechanical shell around like a snail, oiling its parts, caring for it, taking it through the city's locks, pulling it with a rope when it cannot motor through the Canal Saint-Martin. A couple dressing up together for an outing or skipping on the quay. Juliette looking at herself in the mirror and messing up her hair. Jean finding something strange in his suit pockets and someone being around to explain to him that these things are moth balls. Nothing more or less than "comfortable living," the thing real estate agents and interior designers may promise but never provide because they don't furnish one with company.

After an aphorism announces that "we have forsaken the land and gone to sea!" the madman of Nietzsche's famous parable asks:

Are we not continually falling? And backwards, sideways, forwards, in all directions? Is there still an up and a down? Aren't we straying as though through an infinite nothing? Isn't empty space breathing at us? Hasn't it got colder?²¹

With the old assurances left behind, and against this cold outside, the *Atalante* provides a comfortable dwelling for modern humans to settle in, some shared warmth, the basic pleasures of residing in an interior, a sense of attachment, a modest grounding and orientation — a place to live. Ultimately, the mysterious allure of Vigo boils down to the insistent sense that he and his films affirm warm life against the deathly cold.



²¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, ed. Bernard Williams, trans. Josefine Nauckhoff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 119–20.

But isn't it getting a little too snug on the barge? Do we need some fresh air? A "relationship with the outside world"?²² Readers with claustrophobic or broader nomadic tendencies may have felt the impulse to run away in horror. Not a couple, but not a family either, the self-contained group of the *Atalante* may conjure up images of cults, closed prisons, or politically futile communes striving to preserve their sectarian purity. Having focused on the group's project of self-enclosure, it may seem as if the *Atalante* has cut off all externalities, that it is totally insulated.

Yet the barge is not some airtight capsule; it is characterized by an ongoing dialectic of the inside and the outside. On the one hand, the world on land is, as a negative site, a constitutive counter-element of the sheltered life inside. Central to the *Atalante's* project, as Juliette has learned by the end of the film, is the lived experience, memory, and rejection of both the countryside and the city from which the barge withdraws, against which it forms a counter-site. Ordinary French society—its drudgery, oppressiveness, and coldness—is integrated in the barge as a rejected element. Yet it is only Jean who really fixates on Paris as a source of danger, who makes opposition the main reason to stay on the barge. As we have seen, it becomes clear that solidarity on board cannot be based on the rote rejection of what the group negates but requires the difficult construction of positive internal ties between its members.

On the other hand, the many intrusions and reversals of outside and inside in *L'Atalante* also reveal the illusion of building a perfect, foolproof interior. The barge turns out to be a very porous vessel. If the *Atalante* is not regularly punctured, then claustrophobia sets in. The nearness of the riverbank, a constant presence, and the periodic dockings allow for short excursions and sporadic communication with life on land. Meanwhile,

22 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (London: Penguin Books, 2009), 2.

features such as the radio and Père Jules's collection draw the wider world into the very belly of the barge. In fact, the line between inside and outside is often blurred by the obsessive exploration of what Dudley Andrew calls *L'Atalante's* "cluster of motifs": certain objects, actions, sounds, images, and scenes that mirror each other throughout.²³ Musical instruments and songs are played both inside the barge and at "Aux 4 Nations" and the "Chanson Palace." There is wrestling on deck, but also in the tavern, when the peddler performs a dive drop into the crowd (later resonating with the beating up of a thief in the city). Water surrounds the ship, but the scenes on land are also enveloped by clouds, mist, snow, and steam, giving the film a distinctly damp quality.²⁴ Most obviously, Père Jules's marionette conductor returns as the moving puppets of the store, just as his cabinet of curiosities is mirrored first in the peddler's showy wares and later in the consumer paradise of the Parisian shops.²⁵ It becomes hard to discriminate, definitively, what belongs to the outside of the barge and what belongs to its interior, which spectacles, values, and emotions must be rejected and which are already incorporated within.

In order to work as an ark-like microcosm, the *Atalante* must absolutely withdraw from the external world *and* completely encapsulate it. It is exactly the barge's porosity that guarantees its breathability, that makes a comfortable collective life inside possible. But it also accounts for its fragility. Letting some air in ventilates the bubble, but it may also cause it to burst.²⁶ Introducing novelty keeps the group's routine from becoming rigid and stifling, but it may also throw the whole living arrangement

23 Dudley Andrew, *Film in the Aura of Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 62–65.

24 See Katherine Groo, "L'Atalante (1934)," in *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Films*, eds. Sarah Barrow, Sabine Haenni, and John White (London: Routledge, 2015), 51.

25 "Some display right?" ("Ah, vous parlez d'une vitrine, hein?"), Père Jules says as Juliette looks around, "Nothing but fine articles" ("Y a rien que des belles pièces").

26 On how the "membrane" of a microcosmic bubble "simultaneously provides and denies access to the world," see Sloterdijk, *Spheres*, 1:439.

out of balance. If it seems impossible to constantly reconcile these flows of exclusion and ingestion, if the barge sometimes seems to cater to opposite desires, to possess incompatible traits, then we forget that a fantasy is not worried about contradiction, that it is, as Barthes writes, “an absolutely positive scenario” in which “eudemonic visions coexist without contradicting each other.”²⁷ Just as Barthes constantly delays answering whether or not an idiorhythmic community can actually exist, *L’Atalante* is not necessarily out to prove the actual viability of the *Atalante*, does not continue to interrogate whether Juliette will soon feel trapped or bored again. The point is to resist the familiar maneuver of critiquing the fantasy, to resist burying the utopian impulse it contains, and to instead sustain that impulse by attending to it. When you see kids building a camp in the woods, you can attack their construction and tell them that those sticks won’t protect them from the rain, that everyone can see them anyway. Or you can go along with the daydream and pay attention to the desires that it speaks to.

The *Atalante* is a ship of fools and a dream ship—a vessel for the fantasy of a pleasant interior, the delicate life of a group. Shrouded in fog, gliding off to nowhere through a strange landscape, it is something that does not belong to this world. Fittingly, the barge never looks more unreal than in *L’Atalante*’s final shot. After the reunited couple falls to the floor, smiling, an aerial view shows the ship cutting upwards through the canal like an arrow. We don’t see the riverbanks. All we see is that the *Atalante* is drifting on, sheltering and sheltered, simply existing, nothing more, and that in this moment, that is enough. Then the camera flies ahead over the empty water.

27 Barthes, *How to Live Together*, 4.

EPILOGUE

Deathbed

There is a photograph of Jean Vigo taken a few days before his death. Lydou is at his side, wearing a beaded necklace and smiling stiffly, her characteristically voluminous hairdo merging with its shadow on the wall. Jean is tucked under the bedsheets and his head is propped up against a pillow so he can look directly into the lens. His blank expression is hard to decipher. From the scruffy patch of hair around his mouth, which is disconcertingly slack and open, you can tell that Jean has been immobilized for some time.

We get the impression that this is a familiar scene for the couple: one ill, the other tending at the bedside. The moments when both were in good health were rare. While visiting Jean and Lydou at a mountain retreat, where they were recovering again in August 1930, an old family friend described their condition: “She looks good, seems strong. He is still frail. One of them will win out. Isn’t that what always happens between sick people? I hope I’m wrong. After all, death is the supreme defeat.”¹ When they first met in Font-Romeu, Jean and Lydou were both gravely ill, and they would continue nursing each other back to health

1 Paulo Emilio Salles Gomes, *Jean Vigo* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1972), 75.

after they escaped the death-bound sanatorium together. Always fearing another relapse, they were constantly moving to better climates, storing up energy, looking after each other, mindful of death, trying to ward it off together as long as possible.

Those in fragile states often feel more strongly the importance of being attached to someone else. Writing to Henri Storck in June 1932, Vigo described the bleak process of their latest recovery in Hôtel Auda at Pélasque, a mountain town near Nice: "First, you freeze all your problems, all your debts; they can even increase. And if your kidneys hurt like hell, well, you just go on. The future gets no brighter."² To this chilly account, he nonetheless adds the one thing that remains and that counts: "But at least love does not suffer. A look is as sustained as it should be, and a caress too. A shoulder is always ready for your tired head, and the hand is never withdrawn."³ If the loving hand is withdrawn and what holds one together falls away, it can have disastrous repercussions for a life lived in a sphere of mutual support.

At first, holding Jean in her arms, Lydou did not realize that he had died just before nine o'clock. When she did, she ran past their friends, down the long corridor and into another room, where she tried to jump out of a window before the others could hold her back. On the day of Jean's funeral, Lydou was still interned in a clinic on the rue d'Alésia. After visiting her there, Storck recorded her words: "His heart is no longer beating," she said, "it's icy cold, making no sound."⁴ She then asked to be put in the grave next to Vigo and explained, "I want to die so I can sleep with him, like I used to."⁵ What has disappeared with Jean is the warmth of their intimacy, and Lydou longs to share a space with Jean again, if even beyond death. Rather than a straightforward death wish, she longs for a lost life support,

2 Ibid., 91. For the original letters, see Jean Vigo, "Lettere a Henri Storck," ed. Bruno Voglino, *Centrofilm* 18-19 (1961): 33-52.

3 Salles Gomes, *Jean Vigo*, 91.

4 Ibid., 200.

5 Ibid.

which has so painfully given way to the loss of life she experiences now.

Several months later, it seems Lydou was still struggling to reconstruct a life with others. A letter she wrote to Storck is an extraordinary document that reveals the world-shattering consequences of becoming solitary:

I feel like an object which has been left behind. I am as though petrified. I don't understand. I remain here and the only way I can live through each day is to tell myself that I'll be dead tomorrow. I can't grasp that Jean is no longer alive, that it is all *true*. Sometimes, I think Jean and Lydou are both dead and that I am Lydou-Jean, both of us in one body. But this feeling occurs only rarely and usually follows a period of extreme suffering, when my organism cannot put up with all the pain and a feeling of unreality results. My world has disintegrated and nothing has any meaning. [...] Worrying about my child keeps me here, but can I continue resisting for long? I really don't know, we'll see. He wanted so much to live, he believed in our life together so much. Do you realize, dear Henri, what has happened to both of us?⁶

Something catastrophic has happened, not to Jean or Lydou, but to the animated life of their pairing. When a self has accommodated a life partner, the death of this companion may feel like one's own death. The only way for Lydou to bear this half-life is to internalize the lost pole, to become the complete Lydou-Jean. When that fails, she experiences an excruciating cleavage in her sense of self and her relation to the world. She is no longer able to be "at home" anywhere. Lydou describes feeling as if she is already dead, "like an object," "as though petrified." She describes a draining of vitality, the loss of a cohesive subjectivity, the sense that everything has become unreal and that the world has somehow left her behind. There is no real human life, it seems, where

6 Ibid.

it is isolated, where it is not anchored through others and enveloped in a space of close, embodied attachments.

Not much is known about the rest of Lydou's life. She started calling herself Lydou Jean Vigo and appears to have found some footing while caring for her daughter Luce. Nevertheless, when she corresponded with Jean's old pen pal Madame de Saint-Prix in 1936, she still confided: "My little girl is growing up, she's fine. As for me, I seek to make myself useful to try to fill the terrible void of my life a little."⁷ In the years leading up to the war, Lydou was involved with her sister in organizations such as the Société des Amis de la Nation Polonaise, until she died at age thirty-three on April 24, 1939. This was just four days before Germany renounced the German-Polish Non-Aggression Pact and about four months before the invasion of her homeland ushered in a period of mass violence across Europe. Lydou was buried at the cemetery of Bagneux in the same family grave as Jean, who had already shared it with his father for almost five years.

Last May, I visited the grave, wondering if some special and spectral correspondence might materialize between myself and my objects of study. Wild grass was sprouting from the plot, and a blackbird hopped into a patch of soil, but the tombstone in front of me remained distant and cold. Still, while writing this book, it was hard to shake the impression that these names had drawn me into their sphere of influence. When this spell of familiarity became too strong, when it seemed I was projecting too much material from my own life onto Vigo's, I tried to install a degree of separation. To detach myself, without wiping out all feeling. Maybe this act of criticism also demanded that I walk the tightrope of tact: maintaining distance, remaining tender.



7 "Ma petite fille grandit, elle va bien. Quant à moi, je cherche en me rendant utile d'essayer de combler un peu le terrible vide de ma vie." Pierre Lherminier, *Jean Vigo* (Paris: Pierre Lherminier/Filméditations, 1984), 179n29.

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