



Program Notes: *Zéro de conduite* (1933)

Director, Producer, Editor, Scenarist: Jean Vigo

Cinematographer: Boris Kaufman

Music: Maurice Jaubert

Actors: Gérard de Bédarieux, Louis Lefebvre, Gilbert Pruchon, Coco Golstein, Jean Dasté

French, B&W, 44min.

“We shall have to apply ourselves increasingly to studying how, by means of the house, the warm substance of intimacy resumes its form, the same form that it had when it enclosed original warmth” – Gaston Bachelard

Our five-film series at the French Institute, titled “Interiors: Cinema & the Home”, takes its inspiration from Gaston Bachelard’s seminal treatise, *The Poetics of Space* (1958), whose first Hebrew edition has come out recently, through the loving translation of Mor Kadishzon. In his study, Bachelard stressed the role spatial experience plays in constructing our sense of a home. This experience, for the philosopher, is not restricted to the physical facets of space, but exists in an imaginative relationship with them. For that reason, Bachelard looks for the home in poetic and literary renderings, rather than in concrete buildings. We, in turn,

will continue the same pursuit, not on the page, but on the screen.

Fundamental to Bachelard’s argument is a connection between home and belonging. “For our house is our corner of the world,” he writes. “[I]t is our first universe, a real cosmos in every sense of the word.” Each house that is “really inhabited bears this essence of the notion of home,” which comes to the fore “whenever the human being has found the slightest shelter.” In this position, “the sheltered being gives perceptible limits to his [or her] shelter,” letting “imagination build ‘walls’ of impalpable shadows, comfort itself with the illusion of protection.” Safe in the world to which I belong, this corner that is my home, I can finally and truly experience the house in its multifaceted nature, “in its reality and its virtuality, by means of thought and dreams.”

Our experience of “the refuge, in its most simplified form,” is marked by what Bachelard describes as a “concentration of intimacy” – a quality of encounter with actual space that is both incredibly open and remarkably close. For Bachelard, “our adult life is so dispossessed of the essential benefits [of such intimacy], its anthropocosmic ties have become so slack, that we do not feel their first attachment to the universe of the house.” Unsurprisingly, he relates this “first attachment” to earlier stages of mental development – that is, to the mind of a child. To be a child is to carry a keen sense of



homelessness, derived from being thrown into a world not of his or her making, and being forced to rely on the kindness of others for survival. Hence the impetus for finding refuge in space is particularly strong in infancy, as are the faculties used to answer it – those of a thriving imagination unbound by the rules of adult society. Imaginary prowess allows the infant to see a home in whatever nook that appears to invite, like a small cabin calling upon a traveler through the baren wilderness. Importantly, in Bachelard’s formulation, childlike seeing is both active and passive: the child, uninformed by the blinders of adulthood, can passively absorb a world of potentialities within any given space; yet by seeing, certain potentialities are activated over others, and are imaginatively created as a shelter, a nest, a home. This creative capacity is suppressed as the child grows older, and is schooled in the reasoned perspectives of adulthood. For his part, Bachelard asks us to relearn a forgotten mode of seeing that is innocent of such adult lessons. For this reason, according to Kadishzon, the French philosopher’s writing operates as a kind of “school for naïveté.”

A film on the repressive conditions of an all-boys school, *Zéro de conduite* seems a less-than-obvious exemplification of Bachelard’s ideas about home and the “concentration of intimacy”; yet it offers important ways to open up these ideas, and pose challenges to them,

which are the ultimate goals of this screening program as a whole. Though less than an hour in length, *Zéro de conduite* has gained widespread recognition as one of the four films that make up Jean Vigo’s illustrious oeuvre, and whose unruly spirit has influenced a variety of subsequent works, ranging from Francois Truffaut’s *The 400 Blows* (1959) to Talya Lavie’s *Zero Motivation* (2014). It is also the director’s most autobiographical work, and is therefore shaped by the turbulence of his short and tragic life. Vigo was born in 1905 to a Parisian family with militant anarchist tendencies. His father was a well-known journalist for *La Guerre sociale*, who went by the *nom de plume* – and *nom de guerre* – of Miguel Almeyda, a play on “il y a de la merde”. During World War I, Almeyda (née Eugène Vigo) was arrested under the charge of being a German agent, and died in prison, supposedly after hanging himself by his shoelaces. In the aftermath, so as to avoid further persecution, the young Jean finished his secondary education under an assumed name, in cheap boarding schools reserved for the lower classes. He began his university career at the Sorbonne, yet had to discontinue due to contracting tuberculosis. During his recovery, he met Elisabeth Lozniska, the daughter of a Polish industrialist, who would later become his wife. The couple settled in Nice, and established a local cine-club there, which sparked Vigo’s interest in filmmaking. In 1930-1931 he authored two documentaries: *À propos de Nice*, about his adoptive



city, and *Taris*, about a famous French swimmer. In 1933 he moved to fiction filmmaking with the medium length *Zéro de conduite*, and then the feature-length *L'Atalante*. The significant effort invested in making these last two films took a toll on Vigo's financial situation, and eventually his health. He died in 1934, at the tender age of 29, only a month after *L'Atalante* was released, and without tasting the fame that in subsequent decades would be associated with his name.

Out of the two fiction films which retrospectively cemented his reputation as the *poète maudit* of cinema, *L'Atalante* seems to mirror the melancholy and fatalism of Vigo's end; *Zéro de conduite*, on the other hand, is far more representative of his anarchist beginnings. Focusing on a group of kids who rebel against their masters at a provincial boarding school, the film interlinked Vigo's youthful memories and diaries with his father's utopian aspirations about a free and egalitarian society. He based the student protagonists on former classmates, and the teachers on wardens of a juvenile detention center where his father was once an inmate. He reconstructed the space of classrooms and common areas in his old school to mirror his past experience of institutional repression; and for his child actors – actual school pupils – Vigo afforded the opportunity to let loose, and even participated in their

raucous behavior, thereby enacting a yet-unrealized fantasy of wild abandon.

Fantasy is essential to *Zéro de conduite*, for as much as its rendering of school life relies on authenticity, it also leans heavily into the imaginary and the dream-like. The two impulses complement each other in that the film aims to capture the world through a child's eyes – the authentic outlook of those whose powers of imagination and reverie have not yet been suppressed by the demands of adulthood. Vigo preserves this outlook through his use of a liberated style: via his grotesque and surreal characterization of school staff members, his expressive application of visual effects (such as slow motion), and his structuring of a fluid and fragmented narrative. The unconventional vision created by these devices serves to remind us that the world we know is only one amongst many co-existing possibilities. Concurrently, it also asks us to acknowledge that such possibilities are not visible to those who do not see the world through the eyes of a child.

So powerful is the openness of an infant's mind, that it can carve out a precarious sense of home even in the most repressive social spaces. This effort, however, requires acts of resistance against the institutional demand that children forgo their faculties of imagination and spontaneity. The young pupils in the film are aware of this painful fact, and therefore do not acquiesce to the



frameworks thrust upon them by school officials. Instead, they actively seek their own protective shelter, their own refuge, in the cracks of regulation, and through increasingly rebellious gestures, allow these cracks to grow even wider, and be filled with “the warm substance of intimacy”.

No wonder, then, that *Zéro de conduite* was censored after its first showing, having been found derisive of French educational institutions and detrimental to children’s mental health. This aggressive backlash reveals how much the standards of cultural normativity were threatened by Vigo’s innovative challenge. Yet the director’s goal was not only to challenge, but also to educate. In this respect, *Zéro de conduite* offers its own anarchic brand of “school for naïveté”, teaching audience members to awaken a long-forgotten vision, and through it, to discover a new sense of home on the silver screen.

Dan Chyutin, PhD

Curator