

## Document Citation

Title	<b>L'Atalante</b>
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Source	<i>Variety</i>
Date	1990 Jun 06
Type	review
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	
Film Subjects	L'Atalante, Vigo, Jean, 1934

# ARCHIVE FILM REVIEWS

## L'Atalante (FRENCH-B&W)

**Paris** A Gaumont restoration and release of a Jacques Louis-Nounez production, first released in Paris by Gaumont-Franco Film-Aubert Sept. 13, 1934 as "Le Chaland qui passe." Restoration supervisors, Pierre Philippe, Jean-Louis Bompont. Restoration labs, Darnes (image), Lobster Film/Ramses (sound), Exposure (special effects). Directed by Jean Vigo. Screenplay, Vigo. Albert Riéra, from an original scenario by Jean Guinée; camera (black & white), Boris Kaufman; editor, Louis Chavance; music, Maurice Jaubert; songs, Jaubert, Charles Goldblatt (lyrics); sound, Marcel Royné, Lucien Baujard; set design, Francis Jourdain; makeup, Acho Chakatouny; assistant directors, Riéra, Goldblatt, Pierre Merle. Reviewed at Gaumont, Neuilly, May 11, 1990. (In Cannes Film Festival, special presentation.) Running time: 89 MIN.

Jean . . . . . Jean Dasté  
Juliette . . . . . Dita Parlo  
Pères Jules . . . . . Michel Simon  
Cabin boy . . . . . Louis Lefebvre  
Peddler . . . . . Gilles Margaritis

■ Jean Vigo's "L'Atalante," one of the most magical (and most mangled) of French film masterpieces, has been restored in a new version which may cause some controversy among critics and archivists, but most certainly will provide a good deal more in cinematic pleasure and sense of rediscovery.

Restoration world-premiered May 13 at the Cannes fest, where it introduced a series of events devoted to film preservation. That was prior to its theatrical rerelease May 16 throughout France. The Cannes screening was apt, too, because one of the earliest champions of Vigo's artistic rehabilitation after World War II was Gilles Jacob, current fest general delegate.

"L'Atalante," an audaciously lyrical exploration of life and love aboard a Seine river barge, was butchered by its distrib, Gaumont, for its original 1934 release. Since then it has been seen (and admired) in various incomplete prints, though there were several attempts to restore cut material.

What that "original" version was may remain moot, since Vigo himself was too ill to edit the film (though he supervised from his sickbed). His death at age 29, just weeks after pic's catastrophic release, cut short a most promising incandescent career.

Now, 55 years later, Gaumont has made amends by investing some \$250,000 in the reconstruction of "L'Atalante" to a form as close as possible to that trade-screened for an icy audience of distributors and exhibitors in April 1934. Running time is now 89 minutes, apparent length of Vigo's definitive cut. There are some 10 minutes of restored footage, much of it lovely, all of it welcome.

Filmmakers Pierre Philippe and Jean-Louis Bompont are responsible for the restoration, admirable in most respects, though certain editorial prerogatives are likely to reopen the debate on ethics of film reconstruction. Restorers worked with Vigo's personal shooting script and several hours of rushes deposited at the Cinemathèque Française, plus the memories of the production's surviving participants.

Most important (and discovered only early this year) was an excellent nitrate print shown in Britain and preserved by the British National Film Archive. Copy clearly was prepared before the mutilation began, and, astonishingly, probably before the film was fully completed, since it's missing the breathtaking final shot (taken some time after filming ended officially): an aerial view of the barge, the "Atalante," plowing up the Seine to the accompaniment of Maurice Jaubert's unforgettable music.

Philippe and Bompont effected some 40 editorial interventions. They range from the insertion of single shots and of entire scenes and bits of dramatic business to the technical execution of effects Vigo intended, but, probably due to his health and existing lab constraints, did not carry out.

Many of the additions are isolated shots of wistful beauty, such as fleeting images added to the opening sequence of the village wedding, where the principals, the barge captain and his young peasant wife, lovingly embodied by Jean Dasté and Dita Parlo (later to play the lonely German war widow in "The Grand Illusion"), are introduced.

Michel Simon, in one of his most beloved roles as the bizarre, tattooed, cat-loving mate, Père Jules, benefits from other insertions, such as a legendary shot (known from surviving photos) in which he sticks a lighted cigarette in his navel.

Then there is the restorers' most surprising interpolation: a short series of dissolves highlighting Simon's comical demonstration of Greek wrestling on the barge deck.

Vigo's script is precise in this effect, but it was never executed. Is there justification for doing what remained a written intention? The debate is open, but the result delightful.

The scene in the riverside cabaret, famous in good part for Jaubert's jaunty java, is more complete and more enchanting. Restored are the entirety of the witty sales pitch song by the itinerant peddler played with ethereal charm by Gilles Margaritis, who whets the young bride's desire to see Paris. Her unauthorized departure to the city triggers the couple's climactic crisis.

Parlo's near-tragic excursion is announced by another sequence (never entirely filmed) found among the rushes and reinstated, which shows an early runaway attempt in a fogbound dock.

Philippe and Bompont were also faced with the enigma of the stunning surreal shot of Dasté licking a block of ice. Taking a clue from matching shot numbers, they inserted it in the famous gramophone scene in which Simon and the cabin boy try to boost the spirits of Dasté, after he abandoned his wife in Paris.

Assembled from the surviving rushes, the new negative does full justice to Boris Kaufman's sublimely melancholy images of river and city life, not to mention the powerful erotic charge that characterizes the Dasté/Parlo relationship.

Though early French talkies were notorious for their scratchy, defective sound recording, the renovation of pic's soundtrack is frequently sensational. Not only can one fully savor the pleasures of Jaubert's score, but Simon's inimitable diction (a sound man's nightmare) is no longer a barrier to understanding some of the script's most quirky bits of dialog. — Len.