

# The Anarchism of Jean Vigo

**Jean Vigo**

**The innocent eye of  
Robert Flaherty**

**The tragic eye of  
Luis Bunuel**

**Two experimental films  
discussed by  
their makers**



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ZÉRO DE CONDUITE



L'ATALANTE

# ANARCHY 6

ANARCHY & CINEMA

A JOURNAL OF ANARCHIST IDEAS

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Drawings by: Rufus Segar, Dick Williams and Denis Lowson.		

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When Shirley Clarke made her screen version of *The Connection* in New York a few months ago, she financed the production by methods familiar in the theatre but almost untested in the cinema. A couple of hundred small investors took shares in the enterprise; they were given no guarantee that they would ever see their money again, and there was no advance commitment to a distributor. John Cassavetes' *Shadows* was only completed after money had been raised through a broadcast appeal. Lionel Rogosin went into the business of running a cinema to ensure that *On the Bowery* and *Come Back, Africa* got a showing in New York. In France, some young directors have been able to finance their films out of legacies, money lent or given by parents or friends.

Nothing like this has yet happened in England—nor does it seem very likely to happen. The hazards dogging the steps of young film-makers are too well known to need elaboration: costs of production, difficulty of getting a distribution guarantee, and so on. But these are largely the problems of an industry geared to the production of commercial pictures; and people who are prepared to approach the cinema in a different way—who have, that is, a passionate and desperate concern—have found overseas that it is possible not to fight an industrial system from within, but as nearly as possible to disregard it.

—SIGHT & SOUND, Summer 1961.

## A future for the cinema?

THE FILM AS MASS-ENTERTAINMENT HAS PERISHED. Its place has been taken by television, which has captured the middle-brows with BBC and the low-brows with ITV. That leaves only the high-brows, and they're no mass-market. Cinemas are being pulled down, or converted into bowling-alleys, warehouses or bingo-dives all over the country. Even the Empire, Leicester Square is coming down to make way for an office block with an economically-sized cinema in the basement. Six thousand people petitioned the House of Commons on July 10th against the closing of the only cinema in Welwyn. Their time would have been better employed in starting their own film society. The State Cinema, Leytonstone has turned itself into a club and film society which sells shares to members. With four paid employees, the rest of the work is done by volunteers.

Speaking under the double-breasted eagle in Grosvenor Square, Dwight Macdonald recently pronounced the funeral oration for Hollywood, and even if this was a little premature, it is true that the low-cost non-Hollywood film instead of being a cinderella, is becoming a welcome product, if only because it helps to keep down cinema overheads. More and more of the surviving small cinemas are turning over to 'classics', showing old films, foreign films, off-beat films, becoming in fact what are called in America (with a suitable sneer) 'art houses'. This, as well as the proliferation of film societies, and the existence of the National Film Theatre fortifies the makers of films which would never find an audience in the old days of the mammoth super-cinema, and emboldens managements who find it is not necessary to insult the public's intelli-

gence to get them into the cinema. Like a man under sentence of death, the cinema is becoming bolder in its behaviour and thought.

The Rank Organisation with its near monopoly of large-scale distribution, is slow to grasp the changed situation, the big production companies still dream of colossal epics, like the ill-fated *Cleopatra*, but it is still true that the amateur or near-amateur low-budget film (*Come Back Africa*, *The Savage Eye*, *The Day*) has a far greater chance today of getting distributed and covering its costs, than it did ten years ago.

In the United States the average weekly cinema attendance fell from 85 millions in 1946 to less than 45 millions in 1958, but the number of 'art houses' rose from about a dozen after the war to about 450 in 1959. In France, the 'new wave' films, according to Jacques Siclier, "were really designed for the art houses, where the price of seats is lower than in the circuit cinemas and where audiences are looking for something more than entertainment".

Ten years ago you may remember, Bernard Miles had to fight a battle with the Rank Organisation through the Film Selection Committee to get a showing for his film *Chance of a Lifetime* (about a factory taken over by its workers), which had been refused exhibition since it was "bad box office". It wasn't a remarkable film but it was a good deal better than *The Angry Silence*, and would have had more success today.

Someone described the present trend in the newspaper industry as "Gresham's Law in reverse"—the good driving out the bad, for a change: the small-circulation 'quality' newspapers and weeklies gaining in circulation, while all but a few of the mass-circulation ones dwindle and disappear. This is happening in the film press too; the fan magazines have gone out of business, but serious magazines devoted to the cinema grow in number: *Sight and Sound*, *Definition*, *Films and Filming*, *Film*, *Motion*, they all have something to say, and they are all serious about it. Perhaps the same thing is going to happen in the industry itself. If it does, it will be thanks to that small minority of film makers and film goers who have already taken the cinema seriously.

This issue of ANARCHY is about some of them. It is not an essay in film criticism. It is an attempt to describe the background and ideas of three great directors, Vigo, Buñuel and Flaherty, all of whom are likely to have a particular interest to readers of this journal by virtue of the quality of the assumptions on which they acted. All three, you will notice, throughout their working lives have suffered from the censorship, both of governments and of distributors. If it were not for the film society movement in different countries and for the minority cinemas and 'art houses', most of us would never have seen their films.

We have too, articles by the makers of two recent non-professional films, about their aims and the difficulties they encountered in realising them. These difficulties are so immense, and the prospect of financial recompense so slender, that such films can only be conceived as works of love. The *rigor mortis* of professionalism has not touched them.



## The Anarchism of Jean Vigo

JOHN ELLERBY

drawings by Rufus Segar

FILMS, WHEN THEY LEAVE THE HANDS of those who make them, begin a life of their own. The life of most is extensive (on the cinema circuits) but short, and their influence is shallow. The life of a few is intensive (in the specialised cinemas and film societies) but long, and their influence is deep, and can be seen as successive new generations get an opportunity to make films. Jean Vigo's *Zéro de Conduite* and *L'Atalante*, the first banned by the French government after its first showing in 1933, the second mutilated when it appeared in 1934, started a new life after the war, and have left traces in every new movement in the post-war cinema. We saw it in the Italian 'neo-realist' school (*Bicycle Thieves*), in 'free cinema' (*Together*), in the 'Polish school' (*The Last Day of Summer*), and in the French 'new wave' (*Les Quatre Cents Coups*).

The revival of Vigo's films together in the same programme at the National Film Theatre last month, provided an opportunity to look at them in a new light, that of the origins and personal life of the man who made them. For when we saw them at the Academy Cinema in the autumn of 1946 it was still said regretfully that "extremely little is known of his life", but a few years ago the results of the patient research of a Brazilian critic P. E. Salès Gomès were published,\* and apart from satisfying our curiosity about Vigo, they add considerably

\*Jean Vigo by P. E. Salès Gomès (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1957).

to our understanding of the films, which require from the audience something more than a passive receptiveness.

\* \* \*

We have to begin, not with Vigo, but with his father. Miguel Almercyda (Eugène Bonaventure de Vigo) was born in the French Pyrenees in 1883. His father died of tuberculosis at the age of 20, and he was brought up by his grandparents until he rejoined his mother and stepfather (Gabriel Aubès, a photographer), whom he knew as 'aunt' and 'uncle', at the age of fifteen. Soon after, he left alone for Paris and was unemployed and hungry before finding work as a photographer's assistant. He frequented anarchist circles and found a close friend in Fernand Desprès, and his name was added to the files of Police Commissioner Fouquet of the *Troisième Brigade*. After being imprisoned for two months for the alleged theft of twenty francs, he adopted the name Almercyda (an anagram of 'y a (de) la merde'), and following the discovery of an unexploded 'bomb', a little box of photographic magnesium, in a public urinal, he was again arrested. The official chemist declared on 26th June, 1901 that the explosive in the box was an unknown formula of devastating power, and Almercyda was sentenced to a year's imprisonment in the Juvenile Prison of La Petite Rocquette. The greater part of this sentence was served in silence, semi-darkness and isolation. Almercyda, (writes Salès Gomès)

was never to forget the warders who would pretend to go away so as to surprise the kids trying to talk to each other, and then hit them with their enormous bunches of keys which they used as knuckledusters. One of them, named Cornua, would move noiselessly past the open spy-holes in the cell doors, and bash the youngsters' faces as they appeared.

His imprisonment did not go unnoticed. Laurent Tailhade wrote an article about him, and Fernand Desprès sought the aid of a young anarchist painter Frances Jourdain, who in turn went to Séverine, widow of the Communard Jules Vallès, and together they launched a campaign for his release but were only successful a month before the end of the sentence. A few months later Almercyda's name reappeared in *Le Libéraire*, at the foot of an anti-militarist manifesto, beside those of Sebastien Faure, Pierre Monatte, and others. In the spring of 1903 he met a couple, Phillipe Auguste, a sculptor and Emily Cléro. Emily, who had several children who died in infancy, fell in love with Almercyda and left Phillipe for him. In June 1904, the Dutch anarchist Domela Nieuwenhuis organised an international anti-militarist congress at Amsterdam at which Almercyda was one of the French delegation, and out of this congress came the *Association Internationale Antimilitariste*, the French section of which organised a congress at Sainte-Etienne in the following year.

In the middle of the preparations for it, Jean Vigo was born, on April 25th, 1905: the son, wrote Jourdain, "of undernourished parents, in a dirty little attic full of half-starved cats" (which were a mania of Almercyda's). They nicknamed the child Nono, after the hero of a children's story by Jean Grave, and he was carried around as a baby

from meeting to meeting. After the congress, Almercyda and Gustave Hervé were tried and imprisoned at Clairvaux for calling on conscripts to revolt, and when liberated by an amnesty in July 1906, they founded, with Eugène Merle, the weekly *La Guerre Sociale*, with socialist, anarchist and trade-unionist editors. The paper's constant appeals to soldiers led to a stream of arrests, and Almercyda was sentenced in April 1908 to two years' imprisonment for his praise of the mutiny at Narbonne, a further year for an article attacking the Moroccan expedition, and a few weeks more for his insults to Clemenceau.

Miguel Almercyda remained in prison until August 1909. In spite of his bad health he immediately threw himself into the campaign in support of Francisco Ferrer, the teacher who had been condemned to death in Barcelona. For several days *La Guerre Sociale* became a daily and Almercyda played a prominent part in the demonstrations which culminated in a cortege of 500,000 people, led by Jean Jaurès.

Nono, meanwhile, was sent to Montpellier, (where Gabriel Aubès had opened a photographer's shop), and was given a respite from the hectic life which was ruining his parents' health. Almercyda was imprisoned again during the railway strike of 1910, and in the following year he had his head cut open by a policeman's sabre. Although his paper had been started with the aim of uniting the left wing in France, there was a rift, first with the revolutionary syndicalists and then with the anarchists. Salès Gomès remarks that "as is usual in France, it slid from the social left to the political left". The rupture between *La Guerre Sociale* and most of the anarchists was complete by October 1912, and in December Almercyda joined the Socialist Party, and in March 1913, he and Merle left *La Guerre Sociale* to start a new paper *Le Bonnet Rouge*, which became a daily a year later.

War broke out. Jaurès was assassinated. The socialists, the syndicalists and the anarchists were all divided. Among the syndicalists, Pierre Monatte resigned from the central committee of the CGT in protest against the allegiance of the leaders to the "Union Sacrée" of national unity, but Gustave Hervé, hitherto the most militant of the anti-militarists, went to the opposite extreme of bellicose chauvinism. Among the anarchists, Jean Grave of the *Temps Nouveaux*, supported the war, Sebastien Faure of the *Libéraire*, opposed it. *Le Bonnet Rouge* adopted an equivocal position of "republican defence", and, according to Salès Gomès, received a secret subsidy from Malvy, the Minister of the Interior, as well as from a mysterious individual who made frequent visits to Switzerland to bring back reports on German affairs for the Surete—and was later executed as a German spy. Confidential documents were passed to the *Bonnet Rouge* for use in press campaigns for the military policy favoured by Malvy's faction in the government. Almercyda's style of life became more opulent. His enemies began to speak of his cars, houses, and mistresses. His anarchist friends no longer visited him. Emily and Nono were installed in a villa at Saint-Cloud, where the boy was sent to school, but he saw little of his parents. Almercyda's health became worse and he had

frequently to resort to morphine. His articles became short and few, but the tone of the *Bonnet Rouge* became more and more pacifist, in the sense of supporting the various interests, left and right, which sought a negotiated peace. It published the appeals of Romain Rolland, and Wilson's demand that the combatants should make known their peace terms as a prelude to negotiations were received with enthusiasm, as was the March revolution in Russia. Meanwhile, at the front,

from the end of April to the end of June 1917, the situation became revolutionary. Officers were shot, red flags raised, the soldiers sang the Internationale. It was learned at the front that Indo-Chinese soldiers had been ordered to fire on striking women workers in Paris, and mutineers were about to march on Paris . . . These facts did not become generally known until much later.

(They are still not generally known, and according to a book to be published next year, *The French Army Mutinies*, 1917, by John Williams, which describes the events and the massacre of the mutineers by Petain, there is a "strict official censorship on the whole subject which is still in force"—44 years later).

Almeryda was arrested at Saint-Cloud on August 6th. On the 13th August he demanded to see a lawyer on the following day. But in the morning he was found strangled in his cell. The autopsy showed that he was already dying of peritonitis. An official statement said that he died of a haemorrhage, a second statement a week later said he committed suicide. Examining the extensive literature of the case, Salès Gomès concludes that there is little doubt that he was murdered by a common-law prisoner. But on whose orders? Jean Vigo was always convinced that his father's death was on the orders of Clemenceau in the course of his campaign against Caillaux and Malvy. The usual hypothesis was that it was instigated by Caillaux and Malvy because of the damaging secrets held by the victim. Salès Gomès suggests that a simpler explanation was the long-standing hatred between Almeryda and the police, who had been unable to settle their score with him while he was protected by Malvy, but who now had him, sick and defenceless in their hands.

In the posthumous execration of Almeryda as a traitor, only one voice was raised in his defence, that of Gustave Hervé. Called as a witness in the Malvy case, Hervé, now a bombastic nationalist, nevertheless denied the accusations levelled at his former comrade.

\* \* \*

Jean Vigo was twelve years old. The young pacifist writer Jean de Saint-Prix (who himself had not long to live) saw him in a café, "pale, sickly and taciturn" and wrote to a friend, "We write articles about 'Jean Vigo' and the atrocious death of his father, without really thinking of this poor unhappy child. A lack of imagination". Fernand Desprès took the boy to the house of Gabriel Aubès at Montpellier, where he began to keep a diary, writing at the time of the Malvy trial, "*J'ai lu la deposition de mon Tonton Hervé sur mon pauvre petit pere, elle m'a fait plaisir*", and he wrote to thank Gustave Hervé. Prudence

made it impossible for M. Aubès to send him to school at Montpellier, the lycée at Nîmes refused to accept him, so he was sent under the name of Jean Salles to the lycée at Millau, lodging at the week-end with the innkeeper, and working in the holidays in the photographer's shop, though Gabriel Aubès told him that there was more future in the job of cinema projectionist. In 1922 he went to live with his mother in Paris, attending the lycée at Chartres under his real name.

Vigo set about gathering information about his father "seeking not only to demonstrate that Almeryda had not been a traitor, but that he had never ceased to be a revolutionary", but he only sought out the friends of his father from the anarchist period before 1911. When he read Albert Monniot's book about his father he was not disconcerted, for since the account given there of Almeryda's life from the period of *Le Libertaire* to that of *La Guerre Sociale* was pure fantasy, he concluded that the rest of the story was also. Vigo became estranged from his mother because of her refusal to participate in this cult of his father's memory.

He left Chartres in 1925 for the Sorbonne, where he read ethics, sociology and psychology. Depressed and in poor health, and worried about the question of military service which he was determined to avoid, he read in the published correspondence of the young philosopher who had observed his misery in 1917, the letter about himself, and felt that he, his father and Jean de Saint-Prix were brothers in misfortune. He made the acquaintance of the Saint-Prix family, confiding in them his interest in the cinema, and his reflections on a remark of the film director Jean Epstein that "This photography in depth reveals the angel that exists in man, like the butterfly in the chrysalis".

At a sanatorium in Switzerland, where he was sent (thanks to the same Fernand Desprès and Francis Jourdain who had come to the aid of his father) he met another patient Elisabeth Lozinska, the daughter of a Polish manufacturer, who became his wife, Lydou. They settled at Nice, where Vigo had been promised a job as assistant cameraman in the *Franco-Film* studios, and they moved into a house called *Les Deux Frères*, furnished by an anarchist veteran of the penal settlement of Devil's Island, Eugène Dieudonné. The job did not last, but Vigo continued to hang around the studios, until Lydou's father lent them some money and bought them a ciné camera. Vigo planned a documentary film about Nice, which he made with the cameraman Boris Kaufman who came to live with them at *Les Deux Frères*. The film they made *A Propos de Nice* was first shown in Paris in May 1930. The method of the film, much of which was made with the camera concealed, was to contrast the life of the rich visitors at the casino with that of the poor inhabitants of the old city, the well-nourished limbs of the holiday-makers playing on the beach with the stunted and crippled limbs of the slum children, the carnival with the cemetery ("a bitter comment", Dudley Shaw Ashton remarks, "on the unpopularity of funerals in



money-making holiday resorts"). Speaking in Paris on the theme *Vers un Cinéma Social*, Vigo declared that

In this film, by interpreting the significant facts of the life of a town, we are spectators of the trial of this particular world. Indeed, by displaying the atmosphere of Nice and the kind of lives lived down there—and, alas, elsewhere—the film . . . (illustrates) the last gasps of a society whose neglect of its responsibilities makes you sick, and drives you towards revolutionary solutions.

He started a film society in Nice, *Les Amis du Cinéma*, and in the following year became a member of the committee of the Fédération Française des Ciné-Clubs. He was commissioned by Gaumont to make a short documentary, for a sports series, on a champion swimmer, Jean Taris: it was made in a swimming-bath with port-holes in the sides, and the principle interest of the film is in the under-water shots made through these. After this, Vigo and his friend the Belgian director Henri Storck sought in vain for work at the studios, and he had to sell his camera to pay for Lydou's confinement. Their daughter was born in June 1931, and in the following winter he was asked to submit a script for another sports film, on the tennis champion Cochet. Salès Gomès describes the scenario which Vigo and Charles Goldblatt prepared, in which crowds of children invade the tennis court with a variety of improvised ball games, ending with a satire on the adulation of sporting heroes.

The subject became simply a point of departure to which Vigo attached a theme which was close to his heart: respect for a child and its freedom. He liked sport but suspected all discipline imposed from outside and saw group gymnastics simply as military training. In his eyes sport consisted in a harmonious development from children's play, (as in the scenario where Cochet shows the children how to strike the ball with more economy of effort and skill), and must be self-selected by the child in complete freedom.

The script was accepted by Gaumont, but at the last minute was turned down again.

\* \* \*

Then in the summer of 1932 he met a businessman and horse-breeder Jacques-Louis Nounez who was an admirer of Chaplin and René Clair,

and wanted to produce middle-length comic and fictionalised documentary films. Vigo prepared at his request, a script about the Camargue which was abandoned, but the next choice was the film which Vigo wanted to make about school children, which became *Zéro de Conduite*—"nought for conduct." The film was made, working against time over the Christmas holiday in a Gaumont studio hired for a fortnight and the exterior shots were done at the school at Saint-Cloud which Vigo had attended. As to the 'story' of the film, let us borrow the summary from Roger Manvell's book:

This film has a theme rather than a story. The theme is the revolt of a number of boys against the repression of narrow discipline and evil living conditions in a sordid little French boarding-school. It is realistic in so far as these conditions (the dormitory, the classrooms, the asphalt playground with its sheds and lavatories, and leafless trees) are faithfully observed. But it is non-realistic (or, more surely surrealist) in its presentation of human relations. The masters are seen from the distorted viewpoint of the boys themselves; the Junior Master is a 'sport', so he develops into an acrobat who stands on his head in the classroom, imitates Charlie Chaplin and, when he takes the boys out for an airing, leads them in the pursuit of a girl down the street.

The Vice-Principal is tall, darkly dressed, and elaborately sinister in his broad-brimmed hat. He sneaks round the school, purloining and prying. He minces round the Principal, who is represented as a dwarf with a big black beard and a bowler hat. He is a dwarf because they fear him and his final authority over them. An interview with one boy culminates in a ferocious scream and melodramatic lighting, for the Principal possesses, or seems to possess, the magical powers of a witch-doctor.

The plan for the revolt passes through various phases or episodes, culminating first of all in the major revolt at night in the dormitory and then later in the shambles on Speech Day, which is a celebration attended by local officials dressed either like ambassadors or firemen. The dormitory revolt has the beauty of a pagan ritual touched with imagery which the boys have learned from the Catholic Church. It begins with a pillow fight, then passes into a processional phase shot in slow motion as the boys move in formation, their nightshirts looking like vestments and the feathers from their torn pillows pouring over them in ritual blessing. And it ends finally in the morning, when the ineffectual dormitory master is strapped to his bed, which is tilted on end so that he leans forward in sleep like the effigy of a saint put over an altar . . . The revolt in the playground on Speech Day closes the film with a riot of schoolboy anarchy.

Vigo used only three professional actors. The boys were mostly children from the 19th *arrondissement*, an intimate 'East End' district of Paris, and other parts were played by painters and poets of his acquaintance. The Prefect of Police was played by Gonzague-Frick, an anarchist poet, friend and executor of Laurent Tailhade the defender in 1901 of the young Almereyda. The fireman was played by Raphael Diligent, cartoonist of *La Guerre Sociale*, Henri Storck played the priest, the assistant directors were Albert Riéra and Pierre Merle (son of Almereyda's colleague). The music was written by Maurice Jaubert.

Salès Gomès relates the episodes in the film to the incidents of Vigo's schooldays at Millau and Chartres. The boy's names are those of his own school friends, their individual sorrows and persecutions were those of the son of Almereyda. But there are also reminders of

the life of Vigo's father and the experience of the Children's Prison of La Petite Rocquette, which Almereyda had described in *Le Libertaire* and in *L'Assiette au Beurre*. And when the persecuted boy Tabard turns and bursts out "*Monsieur le professeur, je vous dis merde!*" he echoes a famous challenge addressed to the government which Almereyda had published in *La Guerre Sociale*, headed in large type, *Je Vous Dis Merde*.

Some critics have emphasised the allegorical character of the film, noting the significance of the pulling down of the national flag and the hoisting by Tabard of the skull and crossbones. André Bazin observed that "for Vigo the school is nothing less than society itself," and George Barbarow wrote:

The Conspiracy about hidden marbles is transformed into the whole routine of revolt. The dormitory aisle becomes a public square, the Proclamation is read to the assembling mob, the mob turns into a riot and battle with the police (the pillow fight).

Others have seen it as a film about childhood entirely bereft of the usual sentimentalities, but at the same time full of a lyrical tenderness. Salès Gomès notes the completely different tone of the critics of 1933, when after a few showings the film was banned from public performance in France, and those of 1945 when the ban was lifted. The key adjectives in 1933 were words like hateful, violent, destructive, perverse, obscene, scatological. In 1945 and the succeeding years the phrases used were 'intense poetic force', 'delicious poetic satire', 'incredible richness of invention'. You would not think they were talking about the same film.

\* \* \*

While *Zéro de Conduite* was still in the course of production, Nounez and Vigo were discussing what to make next. Vigo thought of a film to be called *Le Métro*, about a man who worked in a room overlooked by the overhead railway, who spent his Sundays travelling by train so as to see his room from the outside. He wrote the shooting script of a film to be adapted from a circus story by Georges de La Fouchardière, an old anarchist and pacifist novelist. But the project which he most cherished, and for which preliminary arrangements were made was the film about the penal colony, based on the life of Eugène Dieudonné, the anarchist who had been sentenced to death before the war and whose sentence had been commuted to one of life imprisonment. (After twelve years he had been released thanks to the efforts of Albert Londres). Meanwhile *Zéro de Conduite* had appeared and had been banned. Nounez had lost the money invested in it and there was no more question of the Devil's Island film. Indeed a journalist, interviewing the secretary of the film control commission asked whether *I am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* (Mervyn Leroy's film which had just appeared) would have been permitted had it been made in France, and received the answer "Probably not. The representative of the Minister of Justice would have been opposed to its presentation." The next

proposal was a scenario about an international congress of tramps, but this idea "would have given too much encouragement to Vigo's non-conformism, and this no doubt was the reason why it was discarded". The final choice was an original scenario by Jean Guinée, with the title *L'Atalante*.

Vigo kept the bare bones of this story—a typical French film script of the period, about the skipper of a motor barge on the Seine and his village bride, who is attracted by the bright lights of the city, where her unimaginative husband will not stay long enough for her to see the shops and impetuously embarks without her until, after grief and loneliness they are re-united. But he added immensely to this slight and sentimental story with two splendidly realised characters—Père Jules the mate, played by Michel Simon, who comes to life in quite a different way from the platitudinous homely philosopher of the original script: and the peddler, played by Gilles Margaritis, who, as magician, trick-cyclist, one-man-band and tumbler, attracts the bride with the promise of the glitter and wonder of the world of the city. The film is full of strange and beautiful episodes, right from the opening shots when Jean and Juliette, the newly-married couple, walk from the village, along fields and unmade roads to the place where the barge is moored, with the relations following two-by-two at a disapproving distance. Or the scene where Père Jules and the ship's boy are in the cabin and Père Jules is trying to operate the gramophone he has assembled from bits and pieces. He puts his finger-nail on the record idly and it appears to play, (the boy is playing the accordion on his knee). He stops, more intrigued than astonished, and the boy stops. He stops again but the boy does not stop in time. The deception dawns on Père Jules and he turns to the boy: "There are plenty of more remarkable things than playing a record with your finger. Take electricity: do you know how that works? Or the radio?" And the scene where, miles apart, Jean and Juliette turn and toss in their beds, full of desire and remorse. Or where Jean, remembering the bit of country lore she has told him, that if you open your eyes under water you see your lover's face, dives into the river and swims (like Taris) below the surface, while the image of Juliette in her long bridal dress, floats, out of reach, around him. Or the sad, grey beauty of the riverside scenes in the half industrial, half agricultural region of northern France, reminiscent, as Elie Faure noted, of the landscapes of Corot.

Most of the technicians and some of the cast of *L'Atalante* were Vigo's friends from *Zéro de Conduite*. Jean Dasté who played the skipper had been Hugnet, the 'sport' among the schoolmasters of the earlier film, Louis Lefèvre, the ship's boy was the "terror of the 19th arrondissement" who had played Caussat in *Zéro*. Again he drew upon old friends of Almereyda, like Diligent and Fanny Clar of *La Guerre Sociale* for the small parts. Francis Jourdain, the painter and faithful friend of Vigo's father, designed the sets; even the film's editor Louis Chavance, was a young technician of anarchist sympathies. Two well-

known players were employed: Dita Parlo as Juliette, (she later played the peasant woman in Renoir's *La Grande Illusion*), and Michel Simon whose Père Jules was the finest performance of his career. When Simon was asked by Albert Riéra to take the part, he was asked who Vigo was, and on being told he was the maker of a film banned by the censorship, replied, "Oh! Bravo, je suis très content."



In the script Père Jules had a mongrel, but Vigo replaced it by a dozen of the stray cats beloved by Almereyda. Père Jules has a cabin full of bizarre souvenirs ("trouvé a Caracas pendant la révolution") at which Juliette stares wide-eyed with wonder. His conversation with her, half-boasting, half-seducing, his evocation of exotic placenames, his expertise with her sewing-machine which astonishes her (though we guess where he learned to use it) suggest that he is a man with a past. Inscribed among the nudes tattooed on his body are the initials of the slogan *Mort-aux-Vaches*, the old war-cry of the downtrodden, taken up by the anarchists in the eighteen-nineties.

Some critics see a diminishing of Vigo's social criticism in this film, but this simply reflects the habit of labelling films as "social comment" or "love story", a habit which blinded critics to the tenderness of *Zéro de Conduite* as much as to the social awareness of *L'Atalante*. Vigo did not see the troubled heart as a separate thing from the struggle for existence. When Juliette has her purse snatched and cannot buy a ticket back to the barge, the pitiful half-starved thief is chased and half-lynched by the well-nourished citizens in a scene which as Salès Gomès notes "curiously recalls the illustrations by anarchist artists like Steinlen, Grandjouan and Gassier in the years before 1914". When she looks in vain for a job in Paris, we see the real queues of unemployed standing in the snow with the police ever on hand to prevent disorder. Jean is sent for at Le Havre by the barge owners and would have lost his job but for Père Jules who blusters and frightens the bureaucrat in the shipping office.

The film was shown to the press and the distributors in Paris on April 25th, 1934. Gaumont, alarmed by the unenthusiastic reception by the trade, urged Nounez to make alterations, and the film was re-edited with a popular song *Le Chaland qui Passe* tacked on, the film was re-named with this title, and Jaubert's music mutilated. Jean Vigo only saw the film once. He died later in the year at the age of 29, and his wife, whose health had been as precarious as his own, died in 1939.

The film was not restored to its original form until 1940.

His last public act was to sign a manifesto circulated after the fascist riots of February 1934, and signed by supporters of all factions of the left. Beside his signature were those of Pierre Monatte who had signed an earlier revolutionary manifesto with Miguel Almereyda in 1902, and Elie Faure who had helped to pay Almereyda's fare to Amsterdam in 1904.

\* \* \*

Vigo left four films, with a total running time of no more than 3½ hours. All his work was done in a hurry, working against the clock, and against continual ill-health, and always short of money. "One somehow feels," Roy Edwards remarked, "that despite the devotion of his friends and his wife, not only Vigo's childhood but his whole life was a sort of improvisation". But generations of directors have learned from the films, ignored by the big distributors and circulated by the film societies and ciné clubs. Seeing once more the scene in *L'Atalante* when Jean rushes blindly out to the sea at Le Havre, we are reminded of Fellini's use of similar imagery in *La Strada* and more recently in *La Dolce Vita*, or of Truffaut's in *Les Quatre Cents Coups*, or Konwicki and Laskowski's in *The Last Day of Summer*. Seeing *Zéro de Conduite* once more, we think above all of Vittoria de Sica's *Sciuscia*, *Bicycle Thieves*, and *Miracolo a Milano*.

And reading the biography by Salès Gomès we are struck by the fidelity of Jean Vigo to the anarchist milieu which his father frequented before he was stifled in the cess-pool of French politics. Following the author's hint I looked up the old collection of articles *Les Feuilles de Zo d'Axa* with Steinlen's illustrations. Here is the barefoot child gazing in the shoe-shop, like the contrasts in Nice, or like Juliette looking wistfully in the luxury shops of Paris, here is the hungry thief chased and half-lynched by the good citizens, here are the lines of workers outside the factories guarded by police, here the imprisoned children.

The earlier critics of Vigo saw in him a certain prurience or disgust at the physical world of sex and bodily functions. Later they discovered instead an extreme tenderness and lyricism, which they regarded as a development from his anarchism. Dudley Shaw Ashton for instance, writes that "*L'Atalante* has a warm adult attitude to sex which I have not found in any other film. In *L'Atalante* there is no longer anarchy, the revolution which it advocates is a constructive one."

But isn't this anarchy too?

# Making Circus at Clopton Hall

**ANNIE MYGIND**

drawings by Denis Lawson



CIRCUS AT CLOPTON HALL is a film about three children who live on an old abandoned farm in East Anglia; in this world of empty barns and overgrown cart-tracks where the sound of the wind in the corn and grasses is broken only by jets overhead, they create their own world of the circus. Their friends come from the village and join them in acts of skill and daring: clowns and acrobats with made-up faces, grotesquely inspired clothes and attitudes, contrasting with the world they live in, and yet very much of it, because of their joy in fantasy and make-believe. This filmic shaping of an actual event is achieved partly through the commentary and music. In the commentary the eldest girl, now grown up, remembers her childhood and with a mature child's eye, understands that time. The musical themes again interpret and counterpoint her realisation.

Ask any artist why he writes, paints, composes, acts, dances or plays an instrument and he will reply "Because through this medium which I love and sometimes hate, I can master what I have to say." There is an element of compulsion, like climbing Everest because it's

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*ANNIE MYGIND and DENIS LAWSON made the film Circus at Clopton Hall which was shown twice in the programmes of experimental films at the National Film Theatre last May. The BBC made an offer for it, but it is now being blown up to 35mm, and will be distributed by Gala Films.*

there, but more than Everest: the artist's material is life, human relations in society as it is and as it might be, understanding of the forces that shape us, transcending them with a vision of inner reality as against imposed realities.

Now we had a theme on our very doorstep. Clopton Hall was once typical of the Suffolk scene: a small farmhouse surrounded by barns, stables and granaries, the land around farmed with horses, the occupants centred on themselves and self-sufficient. The character of the landscape (mixed farming, gently wooded) and the pattern of living remained unchanged until mechanisation replaced horses, made larger farms possible, extended the fields and with modern machinery scraped every penny out of the soil. Agriculture became fully industrialised, and now depended on large capital accumulation for further progress, and with the ruthlessness inherent in such a situation, trees were blasted, ditches filled, and products of the chemical industry upset the balance of nature. Clopton was the shell of the old order: its land was merged with an expanding farm, but the old yellow house still remained, surrounded by high black barns, stables and outhouses. Now the old equipment rusts away, the waggons rot, the obsolete ploughs and cultivators lie deep in nettles, tall weeds and cowparsley invade the granaries, but the silence is piercingly torn by the Vulcan and Vampire jet planes that shriek across the sky, now and then, unexpectedly.

This was the setting of the children's games: a strange microcosm of nostalgic beauty and ruthless destruction. But given the chance, children are makers. The piggeries and harness-rooms become fortresses, palaces, magic caves. Nettles and weeds and the stalking cat became impenetrable jungles full of wild animals, the pond an ocean to be conquered. An improvised trapeze became . . . a circus, and that game in particular grew and developed. All the resources of the old house were drawn upon, a battered top-hat, ostrich plumes, an old gramophone horn became an elephant's trunk. With such materials and later with their friends from the village school, clowning, daring and grotesque 'acts' that so vividly reflected their reaction to the world around them, became a constant theme in their games. And thus the Circus was born.

This was a visual theme all right, but painting (our medium) couldn't wholly contain those elements that were most poignant and telling: it was more than a moment of time in perspective, it was a whole moving sequence—a developing theme like music, with antithesis and counterpoint and resolution. So by a bit of luck and a little previous experience with a camera, the *theme* determined the *medium*. The luck was meeting Lindsay Anderson. His reaction was immediate: "For Christ's sake, man, artists are needed in films; if this moves you, make something of it. Don't be afraid because you lack experience—just shoot whatever you damn well like yourselves; don't give a bugger for continuity: above all don't let the professionals intimidate you." Then help sprang up on all sides, like the lush weeds around Clopton; a Bolex (Walter Lassally's); reduced rate stock from the British Film Institute, John

Fletcher as a cameraman, and with a capital of £40 (insurance money on a lost heirloom) we started.

## Production Diary

*May 1957.* Prepared a treatment which stated the theme: the landscape, children on the farm, birth of circus, climactic circus sequence, end at dusk, children trailing up to house. Darkened landscape. No concept of soundtrack.

*June 1957.* Selection of setups, much drawing, puzzling out elementary continuity, *i.e.* child going left-right in one shot must continue that way next shot if seen from same angle. Prepared shooting script—and breakdowns.

*July 1957.* John Fletcher and his wife arrive for 10 days shooting, mainly opening shots of landscape, children alone on farm and village children arriving. We realised the nail-biting patience needed in the English summer—the high North Sea clouds scudding across the sun sent stomachs into knots. Handling the children's flow of enthusiasm, which might evaporate just as the sun showed a steady course. Time allowed only brief contact with the circus sequence itself—enough to realise that it would be much, much more difficult to capture than we first thought. Total footage shot: 1,000 ft.

Rushes viewed in London. Comment from Karel Reisz: "The best 16mm rushes I've seen." (Good for John Fletcher). Murmur from group during projection, "They will pan, these beginners." Reisz again says, "You people should stop being painters and become film makers." But how to interpret *that*?

All money spent. Advised to send just one reel of rushes with treatment and still photographs to the British Film Institute Experimental Committee, in the hope that they would help us to finish.

*Sept. 1957.* B.F.I.E.C. met and refused help.

*Christmas 1957.* Alex-Jacobs viewed the material on a moviescop, became tremendously enthusiastic—long discussions on how to present it again to the Committee. Should have been edited in the first place. Decided to do that.

*February 1958.* Committee met, and made a grant of £70 to finish the shooting.

*March 1958.* Long search for a new cameraman (Fletcher being in India by now). Finally met John Armstrong who was prepared to put in twelve days shooting.

*Easter 1958.* Late spring—not a leaf on the trees. Decided to concentrate on Circus sequence taking care to avoid any background that would reveal the bare branches. Shot act upon act upon act. Children highly co-operative and prepared to repeat 2-3 times—flattery played its part. More definite division of labour between us—one with the children cooking up new ideas, one with cameraman. Moments of rebellion on children's part gave excellent material. Results showed that acts

consciously devised were worthless—lacked their own spontaneous spark. But we got the Circus in the can.

*June and July 1958.* The wettest, stormiest and most thundery summer. Louis Wolfers, our third cameraman came up weekend after weekend and no shooting possible. Started cutting the circus material and fell into the trap of becoming literal in assembly. Lindsay Anderson advised us to look at *Zéro de Conduite*, which we projected four or five times (without sound) and this dispersed all fears. Constant destruction of our own material gradually revealed the joys of editing—and achieved the state where shots wove in and out of the moviscop like magic, and the response of movement to movement showed the essence of film: it is visual music.

*August 1958.* Request from British Film Institute for material to show Committee at one day's notice—at the point where we had just peeled the whole thing apart for the fourth time. Assembled prize shots in rough sequence, working through the night. Informed three days later that they could support us no further.

*Sept. 1958.* One fine weekend got the rest in the can—audience reactions, end shots, a few reconstructions of circus acts to amplify the original material.

*Oct.-Nov. 1958.* Fully concentrating on editing—it could now take shape as a whole. Seen by Jimmy Burns Singer the writer and poet, who asked to write the commentary. Then he fell ill and disappeared from England for several months. Secretary of the B.F.I. promised support when plans for sound were made.

*December 1958.* Wrote to Benjamin Britten in Aldeburgh hoping he might advise on music—special interest of Suffolk scene and children's creative effort. Our highly-beloved secondhand projector broke down, but he had seen enough to say he liked it and had ideas of using his own childhood compositions. Arranged further meeting with hired projector.

*January 1959.* Britten too fell ill—commitments, including our tentative one, cut.

*February to September 1959.* Moved to London and searched for the commentary writer and composer. Many meetings with no results. Finally Philip O'Connor and Roy Teed appeared. Here a curious intuition was at work: one felt with them both that they understood what we had said visually, would be able to interpret, amplify and guide with their own media: it was now or never. Words and music by now on paper. No response to letters from B.F.I.

*November 1959.* Rehearsed commentary with an actress friend. When ready to record, Bob Allen, the sound technician was called abroad.

*March 1960.* Finances very shaky, so far all the work had been done on a very thin shoestring. Unexpected legacy from an aunt put things on a firmer basis—inner conviction that this film might get a wider viewing could now be indulged—and we went the whole hog on sound. First-rate musicians and professional studio for the music recording.

September 1960. Laid the tracks in professional cutting room with help from friendly professionals. No great difficulties as it had all been planned to the half-second with a stopwatch. Mounting tension—it is not possible to see and hear the thing as a whole till the moment it is being recorded on to one final track in the 'dubbing' session, after which it cannot be changed anyway. Was our concept of the three interacting elements—visual, words and music going to come off? Immediate reaction was one of enormous relief.

October 1960. The whole lot to the laboratories for negative cutting and production of the final print. Many headaches—inaccurately cut negative, scratches, bad printing. But they were solved in the end.

November 1960. Party to celebrate, inviting all those who had made the film possible, many probably thinking they would never see an end result. A good party: they liked the film.

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Now what after all this is our evaluation of our concept and its final result? Two apparently contradictory discoveries were made. First that in spite of necessary changes in the making, the original idea remained constant. But secondly, we discovered the reality of the idea in the film medium itself, during the actual making—perhaps mostly in the cutting. The relation of child to environment, of child to child, the rhythm and pace of ideas that resolve conflict. We made mistakes and are ourselves highly critical of some aspects of the film. Never mind! For we were not concerned to record a series of events, however colourful, with a camera, to explain it with words, give it body with music. No, one must do more than that. And next time, do it better!



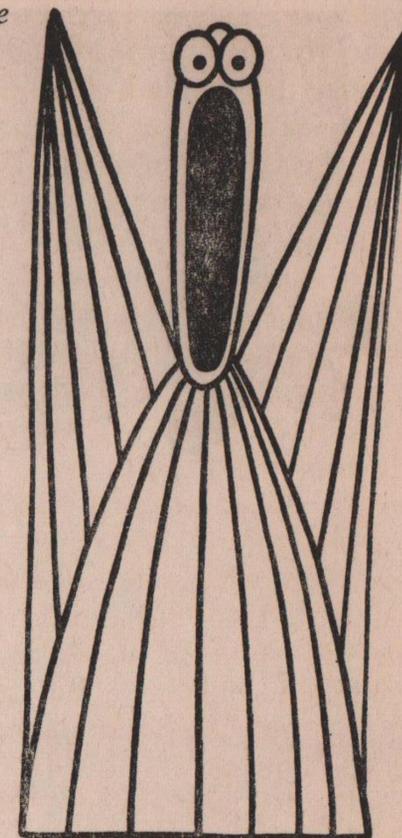
"What am I? Who am I? What do I feel and how do I look? Am I as right as the girl in the book? Once you get the right perspective you can be sure of the right directive: I mean if you're upside down there's only one thing right and that's the . . . CLOWN".

Good—Early Stage

## The animated film grows up

PHILIP SANSON

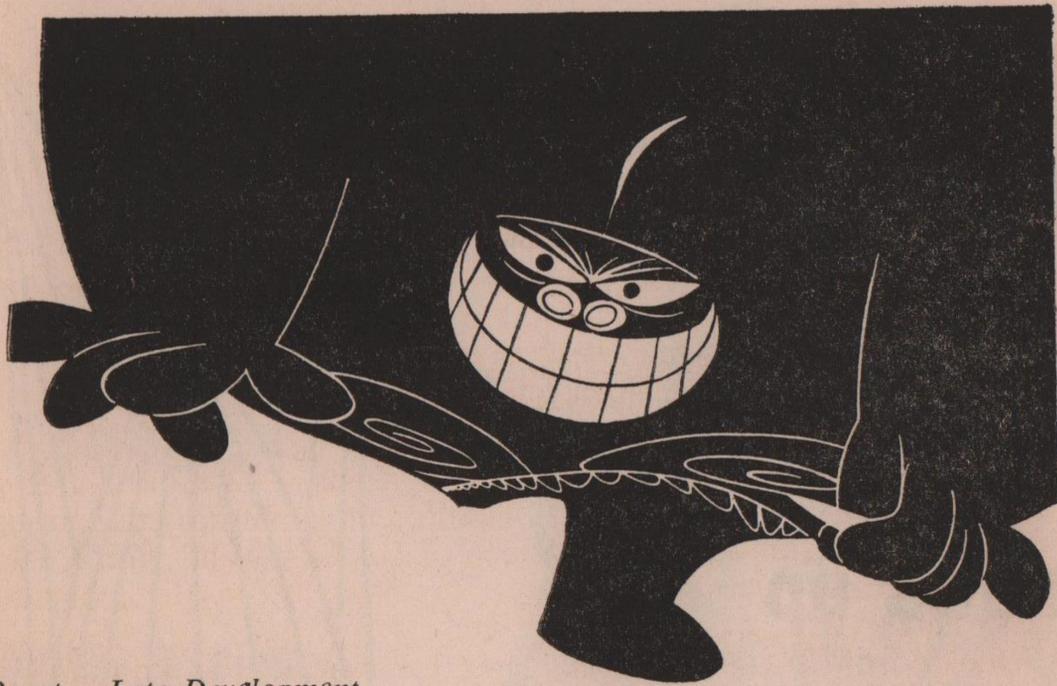
drawings by Dick Williams



HAVE YOU EVER HEARD an English cinema audience applaud *and boo* a film? It is extremely unlikely that you have, for the films which would provoke such an un-English demonstration are few and far between. The usual audience reaction as a film ends is a relieved silence—relieved because either the boy has got the girl in spite of all the misunderstandings and there is a happy ending, or, if the film finishes 'unhappily', the release of tension and the end of a harrowing experience is a relief.

Rarely, however, is a film strong enough to call for opposition as well as applause from the audience. The fact that *The Little Island* produced that effect, at least on the occasion when I saw it at the Curzon cinema, is an indication of its power. *The Little Island* is a cartoon film, but if that makes you think of Disney, Bugs Bunny, or even UPA, I must hasten to tell you that the only thing in common between them is that they have all been drawn by hand and do not employ live actors for the visual image. One may as well think of Annigoni and Picasso as having something in common because they both use paint and canvas.

*The Little Island* runs for half an hour, which is long for a cartoon, and tells the story of three men who land on an island and proceed to have an argument. Simple enough, except that they represent Good, Truth and Beauty and into that half-an-hour is packed, in symbolic form, a statement of man's accumulation of knowledge and the struggle between goodness and beauty—both of which become transformed in



*Beauty—Late Development*

the course of their conflict into monstrous machines of destruction. That is all the film is—a statement. Dick Williams, who made it, assures me that it has no message; it was something he wanted to say. There can be few statements which have been made so forcibly.

For sheer invention in colour, pattern, form and movement (the fourth [abstract] graphic dimension which only the cine camera can offer an artist), this must be one of the wittiest serious statements ever made, with biting comments on art collectors and the babel of art criticism, on the church with its prudery and readiness to resort to violence, and on the detached and objective scientist who realises too late what he has done and settles the argument once and for all. The tension and the terror built up in this last section is the equal of any I have ever felt in the cinema.

Dick Williams who made *The Little Island* is a twenty-eight-year old Canadian who came to this country in 1954. He worked day and night, accumulating heavy debts, and when things got too bad produced TV commercials to buy more time for *The Little Island*. He could obviously make a fortune the easy way in TV advertising, but preferred to make his statement the hard way. It took him two and a half years to pay off the debts he incurred in making the film.

Yet although his was obviously the drive and conviction which has made *The Little Island* what it is, he would be the first to admit how much he owes to a handful of good friends who worked with him or helped and encouraged him through the three years of labour on this film; the dark despairing days as well as the days of hilarity and high enthusiasm. Most important among these for the finished result and the success of the film is Tristram Cary who provided the brilliant musical score which matches in wit and invention the visual imagery.

## Making The Little Island

DICK WILLIAMS

WITH FEW EXCEPTIONS, the animated cartoon has always been used as a sort of comic-strip illustration. The recent sophisticated cartoons are just the same—only precious instead of vulgar. Mind you, I enjoy these cartoons; but it would never enter my head to consider animation by these standards as a “serious” medium.

I mean, with a tradition of this kind it is very hard to stop thinking in terms of what has been done in the past—and suddenly to see the artistically unexplored possibilities. Instead of realising that you can move *any* mark you make in *any* way that you want and put *any* sort of sound or music with it to get exactly the effect you need—you tend immediately to think of sentimental Valentine card animals or pop-eyed horrors bashing each other to bits or clever-clever animated Steinberg illustrations with “Design-for-living” backdrops.

I didn’t make *The Little Island* in order to rebel against these conceptions. On the contrary: the need of the film came by itself. I was a painter, and had long since given up any previous interest in animation. But, for me, the ideas in *The Little Island* could only really be expressed as I wanted through the cartoon medium. And in the course of working on the film the possibilities of the medium itself became so apparent that I couldn’t understand why I hadn’t seen them before.

*The Little Island* itself is a satire about three little men on a tiny island, each with his own fixed viewpoint. One believes in Goodness, the next in Truth, and the third in Beauty. They have great, involved fantasies of these ideals, and then start picking each other to pieces. I tried in a comic way to describe the horror of the complete lack of understanding among the three characters.

It is a traditional cartoon film in many ways, since the idea demanded “cartoon” sort of treatment. The difference, however, is

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*DICK WILLIAMS made the cartoon film The Little Island which is thought to be the longest animated film undertaken by one person. Highly praised at the Brussels and Cannes festivals, it gained first prize in the experimental section at the Venice festival before being shown at the Curzon Cinema.*

that I tried to get the elements in it to move and live in their own way, and not just to illustrate in a literal fashion some or other story conception. The music by Tristram Cary is never treated just as background music—and in some cases it comes forward and leads the visual. So that music and effects are clear-cut and have a meaning of their own: their function is *complementary*, not *illustrative*.

Certainly, for me, the most successful parts of *The Little Island* do this, while the parts I am least happy with drop back slightly into literalism. And I feel that the cleaner-cut the elements in a drawn film, the greater the possibility for carrying direct emotional power.

I feel that animation is not, as is usually considered, a primarily funny medium. I'm sure that when it is developed further it can be moving and satisfying.

The French critic André Martin says very nicely, "Animation is a great art which doesn't quite exist."

It is as if out of a whole field of possibilities, a couple of tiny furrows have been fantastically developed in craftsmanship, showmanship and technique, while the rest of the field has been almost completely neglected.

One thing we have really been given is a wealth of technical information. Now all we have to do is to *use it*. However, there are serious practical difficulties. There is the enormous amount of donkey work, the need for elaborate equipment and the terrific expense of production (in most cases, greater than for live action). And since the amount of work is so great, for anyone working alone or even in a small group, one is limited to fairly short films which at the moment are only "fillers" in cinema programmes.

Oddly enough, I feel that indirectly television offers a great deal of hope. Because of the terrific demand for TV animation (mostly advertising commercials), there are more cameras, rostrums and technical equipment available. In my own case, I financed and housed *The Little Island* solely on my travels through various TV production studios.

So, ironically, one can work on bulb-nosed characters in black and white for television in order to work in one's own way for a large cinema screen with excellent colour and sound facilities.

I think also that there will be a great development in animated film when the various artists and musicians working in it (usually by way of TV) stop considering in as an "applied art" and work seriously in it on its own terms, as a medium in its own right.

I hope personally that, aside from what I've tried to express in the film, *The Little Island* is a step in this direction.

# Luis Bunuel: reality and illusion

## RUFUS SEGAR

### 1. FACT

BUNUEL IS A MAN AS OLD AS THIS CENTURY. Thus the numbers below show both his age and the year.

- 00 February 22 born at Calanda, Zaragoza, Aragon.
- 12 "Bachillerato" Jesuit school, Zaragoza.
- 17 Madrid, Student Residence.
- 18 Agronomic Engineering School.
- 20 Literature and philosophy at Central University.
- 23 Degree and Paris.
- 24 Assistant editor in French film laboratories.
- 26 With Jean Epstein, assistant director *Mauprat* (George Sand), *La Sirene des Tropiques*, with Josephine Baker.
- 27 First assistant on *La Chute de la Maison Usher*/*The Fall of the House of Usher*.
- 28 First film as director UN CHIEN ANDALOU, Paris.
- 30 L'AGE D'OR, also written with Salvador Dali. Contract with Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, Hollywood, 1,000 pesos per annum. Incinerates the contract after three months, and back to France.
- 32 Spain, LAS HURDES/TERRE SANS PAIN/LAND WITHOUT BREAD, a documentary on poverty.
- 33 Paris, with Pierre Unik, a script for a surreal *Le Haute de Hurlevent*/*Wuthering Heights*. Fire at studios, produced:
- 35 *Don Quintin El Amargao*/*The Bitter Man* and *La Hija de Juan Simon*/*Juan Simon's Daughter*.
- 36 *Quien Me Quiere a Mi*/*Who Loves Me* and *Centinela Alerta*/*Alert Sentinel*.
- 37 Civil War. Edited newsreels including ESPANA LEAL EN ARMAS. A sound version of LAS HURDES in Paris.
- 38 to 41 Collaborated on documentaries at Museum of Modern Art, New York, including TEJIDOS CANCEROSOS/CANCEROUS TISSUES and AVES EMIGRATORIAS/MIGRATING BIRDS.
- 41 Six year contract with Warner Brothers, laboratory work.
- 47 Mexico, prepared *La Casa de Bernarda Alba*/*The House of Bernarda Alba*.

The list is designed to prod the sluggish memories of the lazy consumers of anarchist literature, to stir their murky minds, to throw up half digested reviews in all the posh Sundays they've read in the past fifteen years, to trigger their minds with misgivings over the films they missed and the ones they heard about and the ones they were glad they didn't see. Do you dimly remember that season of Buñuel's at the National Film Theatre in the Summer of '55? I am rather reluctant to advocate further passive consumption of entertainment and art, but in Buñuel's case I offer active participation, the scouring of *What's On* to find the odd fleapit or Classic or Odeon at Harlesden that might be showing a Buñuel on Sunday. An arduous three change trip by public transport into strange wastelands to see a film. As my mother used to say, only the things that you have to fight for are the things that you really enjoy.

As far as time goes, Buñuel has a thirty-two year lead on me, and I have very little qualification to be writing about him, except that I was a pre-television child and therefore a cinema kid, a particularly bad/good one, an avid consumer in fact. It all started when I left the Wolf Cubs owing 4s. 9d. subs, and I was precipitated into the nine-pennies and averaged one hundred and eighty visits a year, and all double features too. The addiction reached its height in the summer of 1948 when in one delirious week I saw nineteen films. I put myself on a cure and tapered off my shots, but even in my twenty-fifth year if I didn't get to a cinema every ten days I suffered withdrawal symptoms. Buñuel, Welles, Vigo, Chaplin and the Marx Brothers can bring on another jag right away (Ingmar Bergman was the monkey on my back the year before last).

I have laboured you with my own case history in order that you respect, and act on, my recommendation. I have refrained from the usual journalese of quoting some juicy passage from any one or all of the films to whet your flagging jaded palate. I have suffered and enjoyed countless (about 4,000 in fact) films, mostly Bones, and offer this saving in time. Approaches I haven't tried are those which take a psychological or national character view of the man, you can see how easy it would be to caricature Buñuel as a Spanish Hero of his Time. Another is the fate of art cinema *versus* Hollywood and the hard world of hard cash. Dwight Macdonald who is now writing on films in *Esquire*, is well worth pursuing in this connection and Orson Welles has gone through it and is highly articulate about it.

Even for the sake of ANARCHY and anarchy I cannot claim Buñuel for our side, but to raise my consumer's flag again, here is the only man of the cinema that I would be a one man procession for, a man that can make films that kick my guts, humble me, excite me, wet my eyes for me and fill me with compassion. There they all are, in CAPITALS above, the failures and triumphs. See them.

Vigo used only three professional actors. The boys were mostly children from the 19th *arrondissement*, an intimate 'East End' district of Paris, and other parts were played by painters and poets of his acquaintance. The Prefect of Police was played by Gonzague-Frick, an anarchist poet, friend and executor of Laurent Tailhade the defender in 1901 of the young Almeréyda. The fireman was played by Raphael Dilligent, cartoonist of *La Guerre Sociale*, Henri Storck played the priest, the assistant directors were Albert Riera and Pierre Merle (son of Almeréyda's colleague). The music was written by Maurice Jaubert. Sales Gomes relates the episodes in the film to the incidents of Vigo's schooldays at Millau and Chartres. The boys' names are those of his own school friends, their individual sorrows and persecutions were those of the son of Almeréyda. But there are also reminders of

The plan for the revolt passes through various phases or episodes, culminating first of all in the major revolt at night in the dormitory and then later in the shambles on Speech Day, which is a celebration attended by local officials dressed either like ambassadors or firemen. The dormitory revolt has the beauty of a pagan ritual touched with imagery which the boys have learned from the Catholic Church. It begins with a pillow fight, then passes into a processional phase shot in slow motion as the boys move in their torn pillows pouring over them in ritual blessing. And it ends finally in the morning, when the ineffectual dormitory master is strapped to his bed, which is tilted on end so that he leans forward in sleep like the effigy of a saint put over an altar. . . . The revolt in the playground on Speech Day closes the film with a riot of schoolboy anarchy.

This film has a theme rather than a story. The theme is the revolt of a number of boys against the repression of narrow discipline and evil living conditions in a sordid little French boarding-school. It is realistic in so far as these conditions (the dormitory, the classrooms, the asphalt playground with its sheds and lavatories, and leafless trees) are faithfully observed. But it is non-realistic (or, more surely surrealistic) in its presentation of human relations. The masters are seen from the distorted viewpoint of the boys themselves; the Junior Master is a 'sport', so he develops into an acrobat who stands on his head in the classroom, imitates Charlie Chaplin and, when he takes the boys out for an airing, leads them in the pursuit of a girl down the street.

The Vice-Principal is tall, darkly dressed, and elaborately sinister in his broad-brimmed hat. He sneaks round the school, purloining and prying. He minces round the Principal, who is represented as a dwarf with a big black beard and a bowler hat. He is a dwarf because they fear him and his final authority over them. An interview with one boy culminates in a ferocious scream and melodramatic lighting, for the Principal possesses, or seems to possess, the magical powers of a witch-doctor.

summary from Roger Manvell's book :

Vigo had attended. As to the 'story' of the film, let us borrow the and the exterior shots were done at the school at Saint-Cloud which over the Christmas holiday in a Gaumont studio hired for a fortnight —"nought for conduct." The film was made, working against time wanted to make about school children, which became *Zéro de Conduite* which was abandoned, but the next choice was the film which Vigo and wanted to produce middle-length comic and fictionalised document-

## Another look at Buñuel: the tragic eye

### TRISTRAM SHANDY

*His hatred of Catholic morality must not be taken as implying that he is without a moral sense. On the contrary he is obsessed by one. It is precisely his detestation of suffering, cruelty, injustice, and hypocrisy that made him judge life so severely. His criticisms of Spain are the most severe ever made by a Spaniard.*

THESE WORDS WERE SPOKEN, not of Buñuel but of the novelist Pió Baroja, and they remind us that without making Buñuel a Spanish *hero of our time*, it is possible to find, in his background, his teachers and his contemporaries, the clue to much that is puzzling in his work, and its intense and savage power. Towards the end of the last century, the Spanish government, dominated then as now, by the Church, dismissed the leading university professors. A few of them started a 'free' school for higher studies, the *Institución Libre de Enseñanza*, and around this arose the so-called "Generation of '98", the small group of intellectuals who sought, as a parallel to the growth of working-class movements, to diagnose the stifling inertia, hypocrisy and corruption of Spanish life—the art critic and teacher Manuel Cossío, the philosophers Unamuno and Ortega y Gasset, the economist Joaquín Costa (who summed up his programme for Spain in the words *school and larder*, the poet Antonio Machado, Pió Baroja. The *Institución* had an even more remarkable offspring, the *Residencia de Estudiantes*, or Residential College for Students, founded by Alberto Jiménez in 1910. Gerald Brenan gives us this fascinating glimpse of the *Residencia*:

Here, over a long course of years, Unamuno, Cossío and Ortega taught, walking about the garden or sitting in the shade of the trees in the manner of the ancient philosophers: here Juan Ramón Jiménez wrote and recited his poems, and here too a later generation of poets, among them García Lorca and Alberti, learned their trade, coming under the influence of the school of music and folksong which Eduardo Martínez Torner organised. Never, I think, since the early Middle Ages has an educational establishment produced such astonishing results on the life of a nation, for it was largely by means of the *Institución* and the *Residencia* that Spanish culture was raised suddenly to a level it had not known for three hundred years.

It was to this remarkable environment that Luis Buñuel came in 1917, born in a wealthy land-owning family which he despised, and educated in a Jesuit college which he loathed, with that intense hatred for the Catholic Church which is peculiar to a deeply "religious" people like the Spaniards (see M. L. Berneri's article in ANARCHY 5). At the

*Residencia*, Buñuel met his contemporaries Salvador Dalí and Federico García Lorca, as well as the older writers Rafael Alberti and Ramón Gómez de la Serna: Dalí, who was to write with Buñuel the scenarios of his first two films before declining into triviality; García Lorca, who was to become the greatest poet of his generation, and to write, before being murdered in Fascist Spain in 1937, the play which Buñuel was to turn into the film *The House of Bernarda Alba*; Alberti who is today a poet in exile denied an audience in Spain; and Gómez de la Serna, ten years older than Buñuel, who had already begun in 1910 to write his aphoristic *greguerías*, or attempts to define the indefinable (a surrealism which antedated that of Breton and Dalí).

Buñuel has remained singularly faithful to this generation and its teachers. Compare, for instance, with his work, the conclusion of Maragall's *La Espaciosa y Triste España*:

This, then, is the land of Spain. I have raised my eyes and seen the scraggy trees and the houses, the bushes, agaves and cactuses in the brown-red and wretched soil, all covered with the dust raised by wandering beggars as they pass along the roads . . . and I have felt within me, as my only reaction to all this, a deep and helpless disgust. . . .

Or Pió Baroja's declaration that

Every subversive instinct—and the natural is always subversive—carries with it its own policeman. There is no pure fountain which men have not trampled with their feet and dirtied.

Or finally, listen to the philosopher Miguel de Unamuno (who was to die under house arrest after being dismissed for the second time from the rectorship of Salamanca University), confessing his destructive faith, in *The Tragic Sense of Life*:

But it is my task—I was going to say my mission—to shatter the faith of the one, of the other, and of the third, the faith in affirmation, the faith in negation and the faith in abstention, and to do this out of faith in faith itself. It is my task to fight against all those who resign themselves, be it against Catholicism or Rationalism or Agnosticism. It is my task to make all live in unquiet and longing.

Here, for comparison, is Buñuel, answering in 1959 a questionnaire about the kind of film he would like to make:

If it were possible for me, I would make films which, apart from entertaining the audience, would convey to them the absolute certainty that they *do not live in the best of all possible worlds*. And in doing this I believe that my intentions would be highly constructive. Movies today, including the so-called neo-realist, are dedicated to a task contrary to this. How is it possible to hope for an improvement in the audience—and consequently in the producers—when every day we are told in these films, even in the most insipid comedies, that our social institutions, our concepts of Country, Religion, Love, etc., etc., are, while perhaps imperfect, unique and necessary? The true 'opium of the audience' is conformity; and the entire, gigantic film world is dedicated to the propagation of this comfortable feeling, wrapped though it is at times in the insidious disguise of art.

\* \* \*

It is a sobering experience to look at Buñuel's first two films thirty years after they were made. We reflect of course, that *Un Chien Andalou* and *L'Age D'Or* were conceived by two young men of bourgeois origins who came from a country which had escaped the first world war, but whose revulsion from their environment was so intense that they could describe their first film as "a despairing passionate call to the slaughter". Today, after the slaughter, we are not so impressed by gratuitous acts of violence. In the second film however, the revolting images develop a more coherent allegory and we notice as Georges Sadoul puts it, that "through the Surrealist extravagance and anarchic *scandale* comes the thin end of the wedge of social criticism", or as we would prefer to put it, the nihilism becomes tinged with anarchism. For, while Dali moved on to disintegrate his talents, Buñuel fortified his, and on the fall of the Spanish monarchy, returned to Spain to make, in the Year One of the Republic, *Land Without Bread*. García Lorca discovered the gypsies of Andalusia, but Buñuel discovered the deformed and monstrous inhabitants of the desolate region of *Las Hurdes*. "This then," he might say with Maragall, "is the land of Spain . . ." and to the charge that he got a sadistic pleasure from the display of its degradation, he would reply, as did the novelist Valle-Inclán, that the tragic reality of Spanish life could be conveyed only by a systematic deformation, "because Spain itself is a grotesque deformation of European civilisation". This, says Buñuel, is your liberal republic with its sacred principle of universal suffrage, and we see starving animals, cretinous beggars, cave dwellers and dead children: images with a good deal less surrealist *chic* than the artfully-arranged dead donkeys on Parisian grand pianos, of his first film.

There follows a great gap in what Buñuel himself would regard as his creative life, since he disclaims all his subsequent work until *The Forgotten Ones* of 1950. Transplanted to Mexico (the country whose art, in its preoccupation with suffering and death, most resembles that of Spain), he made his offering on that topic so equivocally precious to the cinema, juvenile delinquency. Why is the adult world so fascinated by this theme? Do we project on to the pointless viciousness of naughty children, the guilt we feel for the massive and purposeful delinquencies of our social and political life? Are we looking for microcosmic scape-goats for our defence programme? Buñuel does not indulge us by making us vicarious therapists; his anti-social innocents are not restored to the bosom of society, for society itself displays on a grand scale the pitiful petty cruelty and crime of the forgotten ones. Virtue is not rewarded: Pedro and Meche, the adorable children of this film, are as doomed as the vicious Jaibo and the spiteful old blind man, and Buñuel scorns to offer us any attenuating circumstances or comforting conclusions.

Two years later he made *Robinson Crusoe*. You can imagine the standard cinema treatment which Defoe's story would get: the resourceful castaway on Do-It-Yourself-Island, always ingenious in making the

best of things. ("Grand entertainment for all the family"). But Buñuel concentrates his power on the theological aspects of the novel, which the modern reprints leave out, or the modern reader skips. Defoe's Crusoe writes, "I am singled out and separated, as it were, from all the world to be miserable. I am divided from mankind, a solitaire, one banished from human society". And Buñuel's Crusoe rushes, panic-stricken out to sea, yells across deep valleys to hear a human voice in the faint echo of his own, and frantically searches the Bible to learn why he has been forsaken by God.

In these films the manipulation of symbols and dream sequences has been refined and controlled, so that they are neither arbitrary nor arty. What for Salvador Dali was transitory exhibitionism, becomes for Buñuel a tool of analysis and exposition.

\* \* \*

To everyone's surprise Buñuel returned to Spain early this year, and made, with the same cast as he used for *Nazarin*, the film *Viridiana* which was given the highest award at the Cannes festival in June, together with Colpi's *Une Aussi Longue Absence*. The most incredible thing about this film, writes John Francis Lane in last month's *Films and Filming*,

is that it was made in Spain. A film packed with erotic and blasphemous symbolism made in the country with the most rigid censorship in the Western world.

and he tells us as explanation,

It appears that General Franco wants to confound his critics by demonstrating his 'liberal' attitude to the intellectuals who stood out against his regime in the 'thirties. "Come home and you will be forgiven" is the message he has sent out. A Picasso or a Pablo Casals is obviously not interested. But Buñuel has taken up the challenge. Told he could make whatever film he liked, he has taken the Generalissimo at his word. The script of *Viridiana* was given official approval in Madrid. One would like to know, however, how much of the blasphemous material was in that script. I am sure, for example, that nobody expected a beggars' orgy to be turned into a pose of The Last Supper, or that this scene would conclude with an obscene gesture that will make censors all over the world sharpen their scissors feverishly as soon as they hear about it!

Buñuel's anguished view of a Catholic-dominated society is very similar to that of Fellini. *Viridiana* is a ruthless denunciation of the social and religious values in Franco's Spain. The atmosphere is so mediaeval that one is shocked to suddenly see a motor car or hear a pop song on the gramophone.

Only one Spanish newspaper, *El Pueblo*, reported the award of the prize to *Viridiana*. Subsequently the censorship has vetoed all mention of the film. Buñuel himself, talking about the film, in phrases that bring to mind that straining of the very limits of their medium which characterises Spanish painters and musicians, comments:

Octavio Praz says *but that a man in chains should shut his eyes, the world would explode*. And I could add *But that the white eye-lid of the screen reflect its proper light, the universe would go up in flames*. But for the moment we can sleep in peace: the light of the cinema is conveniently dosified and shackled.

## The innocent eye of Robert Flaherty

AN ANARCHIST CINEMA? Well, the first thing this suggests is the Marx Brothers, and the second, Chaplin, who at least has called himself an anarchist and who in some films like *Monsieur Verdoux* achieves a pretty savage degree of social criticism, and at the same time has reached every corner of the world with the character (much more like Schweik than the "little man" he is usually called), variously known as Charlie, Charlot, Carlos, Carlino and Carlitos, the innocent or 'holy fool' who has only his wits to fight authority with.

Or it suggests Vigo, Buñuel, or perhaps Georges Franju. Or fantasies like de Sica's *Miracle in Milan*, the most anarchistic, though not the best of his films.

But it also suggests a certain vision of life and of human dignity and integrity, that we are prone to see in simpler societies, which though they are more at the mercy of natural disaster than our own, but are, to our eyes, more free from the tyranny of arbitrary authority. The American critic Lionel Trilling writes of the "great modern theme" of "the child's elemental emotions and familial trust being violated by the ideas and institutions of modern life" and notes that

Haunted as we all are by unquiet dreams of peace and wholeness, we are eager and quick to find them embodied in another people. Other peoples may have for us the same beautiful integrity that, from childhood on, we are taught to find in some period of our national or ethnic past. Truth, we feel, must **somewhere** be embodied in man. Ever since the nineteenth century, we have been fixing on one kind of person or another, one group of people or another, to satisfy our yearning . . . everyone searching for innocence, for simplicity and integrity of life.

In terms of the cinema, this suggests one man, Robert Flaherty, who died ten years ago this month. Flaherty was a film director who had nothing at all in common with the 'motion picture industry'. He did not speak its language or obey its rules. He was concerned, not with finance, output or the supposed requirements of the box office, but with using the medium of film for enhancing our perception of human life and the land and water on which it is lived.

He began his working life as a prospector looking for iron ore in Northern Canada and then between 1910 and 1916 became an explorer, discovering a land mass bigger than England at the north of Hudson's Bay, where an island bears his name. On his last journey he took with

him a film camera, and after he brought back 70,000 feet of film to edit, he dropped a lighted cigarette on it, so he decided to return and make a better one about the life of the Eskimos. With seven thousand pounds from the fur traders Revillon Frères, he got together an expedition to Port Harrison, Hudson's Bay, where he took eighteen months to make the film which was first shown to the public in 1922 and has had welcome revivals ever since.

*Nanook of the North* is a story of man's life at its very hardest, a constant desperate struggle for food, a struggle which leads not to competition, but to all food being common to all. "It has to be so," said Flaherty, "an Eskimo family on its own would starve. If I went into an igloo, whatever food they had was mine . . . I often think of the Eskimo after a long journey, starving and with not even oil for his lamp, coming to the white man's store full of bacon and salt beef and tins of food and tons of flour, and yet the white man will not give him anything unless he has skins. That is something he cannot understand." Nanook died of starvation just two years after the film was finished. And yet, Flaherty concluded, "These people, with less resources than any other people on earth, are the happiest people I have ever known."

In 1923 Flaherty and his family went to the South Seas to make *Moana*, a film built around the ceremonial tattooing which marked the Samoan's coming of age. "As a matter of fact," Frances Flaherty wrote, "we had come only just in time to catch a fleeting ghost," the ghost of a way of life which was coming to an end.

The true Samoan does not know the meaning of private property; he does not know the meaning of gain. He does not know want nor the fear of poverty. If his house burns down, there is always his neighbour's house. If he gets no fish, there are always his neighbour's fish. Small wonder his inclination is for singing and dancing, for flowers and loving. Wherever he walks, it is 'Malie, Malie!—Beautiful, beautiful!'

But the film was not what its sponsors had expected, and when it appeared in 1926, it was introduced as "the love-life of a South Sea siren". Flaherty parted from Paramount and was sent by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer to make a film in Tahiti. But Mr. Goldwyn wanted an 'epic drama' and Flaherty tore up his contract, returning with the German director, F. W. Murnau, to make a film of a different sort. The film was made, appearing as *Tabu* in 1931, though it was more Murnau's than Flaherty's: Tahiti seen through the eyes of an imaginative European, rather than the real Tahiti.

After this, Flaherty came to Europe, and after making *Industrial Britain*, with John Grierson for the GPO, he went to the far west of Ireland and produced *Man of Aran* (1932-4) about the never-ending struggle of the islanders with the sea. Then Alexander Korda sent him to India to bring back in 1936 *Elephant Boy*, built around one of Kipling's stories. The story was not considered exciting enough, and new scenes were shot at the Denham studios, by other hands than Flaherty's, to make it more acceptable to the British film industry.

In the period of the New Deal in America, Pare Lorentz had made *The Plow that Broke the Plains* and *The River*, and their success had landed Lorentz with the job of director of the United States Film Service. He sent for Flaherty to make a film about soil erosion and the dust bowl. The film was made, *The Land*, but after one performance in 1941 the authorities neither showed it nor permitted it to be shown. It apparently did not fit in with the "new mood" of America, because of the bitterness with which it showed the squalor and misery resulting from the commercial exploitation of the soil.

His last film, *Louisiana Story*, began two years after the war and shown here first in 1949, is an exquisite elegiac evocation of the swamps and forests of Southern Louisiana, and the coming of floating derricks canoe by the son of a Cajun trapper. (The Cajuns descend from French settlers deported from Canada for sedition in 1750).

"Do it again and you will be immortal—and excommunicated from Hollywood, which is a good fate," wrote Charlie Chaplin to Flaherty, but he was never to make the films he planned about Burma and Ethiopia. Considering the thirty years he spent making films, they were few in number compared with those of the successful directors of the "industry", for he worked slowly, spending months in absorbing the life which he was to photograph and interpret, and working with a small team of enthusiasts. But his influence on other directors was profound, from Eisenstein who declared that "We wore out Nanook, studying it", to the pioneers of the documentary school.

The qualities which Flaherty gave to his films are a sense of the uniqueness of individual people, of the dignity of human activities and of the reciprocity between man and his environment, his home and family, and the tools with which he earns his living. Yet Flaherty's too, was a cinema of social comment and social protest. His friend Charles Siepmann writes:

Bob was one of the great protestants of his time. Nothing was small about him, and his indignation, like his love, fairly overflowed. His films are full of both, of the former—at least by inference. He hated the ugliness and impersonality of the urbanized, industrialised world he lived in, and he hated 'man's inhumanity to man' as expressed in one ugly word, exploitation . . . Bob was worldly enough, but he loathed the insensibility of the 'sophisticated'. He stood in the pathway of his own times and shouted "No!" to the callous and indifferent.

For his extraordinary perception of the delicate personal relationships of simple people, painstakingly interpreted to enlarge our vision also, we owe much to this passionate ecologist. C.

*"I am an anarchist. I wish governments would go away and leave people alone more. People can get along without governments. I can."*  
—CHARLIE CHAPLIN, 25/9/51.

## THE TRAGEDY OF AFRICA

This is the title of the tenth and latest annual volume of reprinted articles from the anarchist weekly FREEDOM. As in previous years, the title was chosen from among those of the hundred-and-two articles in this 253-page, 100,000-word volume, and among the African topics discussed are the boycott, Sharpeville, the attempt by David Pratt on the life of Dr. Verwoerd, and the wars in Algeria and the Congo.

Other overseas affairs include Cuba, the Cold War, the U-2 incident, the *coup d'etat* in Turkey, Franco, and the world food situation.

Reports on the anti-bomb campaign include anarchist views on the Harrington, Foulness and Aldermaston demonstrations, the Scarborough conference and the French nuclear bomb.

The fifteen articles on industrial affairs include discussions on transport as a business or a service, the crisis in the motor industry, and a long study of the situation of apprenticeship.

Take-over bids, the possibilities of local radio, capital punishment, flogging, the Carlton approved school riot, and the battle of St. Pancras are among the home affairs in the volume, and there are several articles on the crisis in the Labour Party.

Radical views on sexual behaviour are expressed in the articles on the birth control pill, artificial insemination, the sexual needs of youth and hypocrisy about venereal disease.

In fact the book contains something about practically everything, from an appreciation of Albert Camus to a debunking of the Siege of Sydney Street, and from a study of class, status and power in America to a passionate defence of Lady Chatterley.

If you enjoy the volume, there are nine previous ones still available, covering the years 1951 to 1959 (and if you are a subscriber to FREEDOM you can get them for the reduced price of five shillings each).

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