

ARTICLES

Encapsulating *L'Atalante*

This essay models an approach to film analysis that explores and auditions capsule characterisations, by which I mean standalone adjectives ventured to convey the prevailing character of a work. The idea is to unpack a chosen term, thinking through what it implies and entails as a critical designation, and test it against the evidence of the film. To help gauge for aptness, the term is contrasted with a range of synonyms and alternate descriptors. The aim is to develop precision in attributing character traits and obtain a better understanding of the film.

My case study is *L'Atalante* (Jean Vigo, 1934), partly because it has received an array of characterisations in the near century since release, yet remains surprisingly difficult to pin down. It is most commonly associated with 'poetic realism', itself a conjunction of two descriptors. 'Realism' is notoriously difficult to define since it is capacious. Nowadays 'realist' tends to invoke an art-historical category as distinct from 'realistic', which contains a more direct appeal to truthfulness or accuracy of depiction. However, the label of 'realism' has been used to refer to so many different movements, modes, styles and representational tendencies that it is a rather indeterminate attribution. Preceding it with 'poetic' is meant to help with that, naming a distinct mode of realism. However, that term is scarcely better, suffering as it does from the same problems

as 'theatrical' and 'cinematic' in its reliance on received (often narrow or hackneyed) ideas about a medium, i.e. the features and moods that are supposedly definitive of poetry. 'Poetic realism', then, is not necessarily going to be helpful as a characterising term. Although it does allude, in a roundabout way, to aspects of the film's character, and certainly responds to them, its function is principally as a critical tag, a way to locate a work within wider movements and groupings.

Dudley Andrew informs us that *L'Atalante* was not marketed as 'poetic realism', nor did this expression appear in artistic manifestos circulating at the time. Instead, it was formulated decades later by critics looking to connect various films of the period: '[A]djectives like "romantic", "moody", "pessimistic", cropped up. Understandably, poetic realism

became a concept to latch on to' (Andrew 1995: 12). What is curious, however, is that the list of adjectives given above seems only marginally or parenthetically applicable to Vigo's film. This begs the question as to what aspects of the film's character might have warranted *L'Atalante*'s status as 'the classic instance of "poetic realism"' (Durgnat 1990: 54). Perhaps the most useful clue lies in the near-oxymoronic construction of the term, which points to the film as an amalgam of conflicting impulses and divergent characteristics.

I consider four characteristics below, selecting terms used in critical commentary on the film that I felt would benefit from elaboration. Before proceeding, a synopsis may be helpful. The film follows newlywed Juliette (Dita Parlo) as she adjusts to married life aboard the barge *L'Atalante*,



captained by her husband Jean (Jean Dasté). The crew consists of an unnamed cabin boy (Louis Lefebvre) and a dishevelled and uncouth mariner, Père Jules (Michel Simon), whose obtrusive presence aboard the cramped vessel quickly starts to sour the honeymoon. Bored and frustrated by the monotony of barge life, tantalised by the promise of a wider world, and exasperated by Jean's lack of attention to her needs, Juliette longs to go ashore in Paris and have some fun. Eventually she sneaks off by herself, and Jean makes the impetuous decision to abandon her, something he quickly comes to regret. Finding his skipper in an uncooperative and rueful trance, Père Jules takes it upon himself to go ashore and search for Juliette.

Messy

When *L'Atalante* was first released, a representative of the *Agence d'Informations Cinématographiques* reported finding 'some beautiful, very human scenes here and there... drowned in a mishmash of absurdities and redundancies' (quoted in Salles Gomes 1972: 186). Admittedly, the version seen by this anonymous reviewer in 1934 would have been rather different to what we see today. The film that Vigo turned in – approximations of which have since been restored – was immediately and severely re-edited by Gaumont. It was even given a different title and a theme song was shoehorned in a desperate bid to inject some commercial appeal.¹ This hasty reassembly may partly account for the reviewer's critical mauling of the film as 'confused, incoherent, wilfully absurd, long, dull, and commercially worthless' (quoted in Salles Gomes 1972: 186). And yet, according to the foremost chronicler of *L'Atalante's* production history, 'even before the film was cut, it was not very well proportioned' and that Vigo's tendency to use improvisation and absorb momentary inspiration while shooting meant there was limited oversight of continuity and narrative consistency (Salles Gomes 1972: 182). Problems seem also to have arisen from the chaotic nature of the film's shoot. Reliant on fair weather for the many planned exterior scenes, it was supposed to begin in the summer of 1933 but didn't get underway until late November. P. E. Salles Gomes offers an indicative anecdote:

All the missing exterior transition shots were left until the end so that they could be done at the same time. But when the time came, there was so much snow that the only possible background was the sky; which explains the presence in the film of certain low-angled shots which do not seem to have any precise function. (Salles Gomes 1972: 174)

Our anonymous reviewer's abundance of complaints is perhaps encapsulated in the term 'mishmash'. A related term would be 'hotch-potch', but the original French is '*méli-mélo*', a kind of fruit salad. There are several related ways in which the term might apply. One is to characterise the film as being the product of a lack of skill or sophistication (as a fruit salad might be assembled). Another facet is to picture the film as a jumble of elements.

Raymond Durgnat invokes something like the latter sense, in more positive appraisal, when he characterises *L'Atalante* as a 'meld of modes and genres' (Durgnat 1990: 54). However, while 'mishmash' conjures the idea of a sloppy mixture, 'meld' suggests a composite. With its echoes of metalwork, it implies solidity, but also random elemental construction, an agglomeration. Unlike 'mishmash', which implies destructive pulping and the loss of definition, 'meld' conceives of combination and cluster as generative. Here is Durgnat's sketch of an early sequence in *L'Atalante* which contains numerous examples of what our anonymous reviewer might have cast as 'absurdities and redundancies', but which Durgnat sees as eclecticism:

Its opening features: a bourgeois procession, of comic silhouettes, like René Clair; a village street whose curving brick walls seem saturated with uncanny forces, like Feuillade; moody luminosities of silk and mist, lace and earth (L'Hérbier); canal compositions with the *sachlichkeit* angularity of Pabst; and a peasant sensuousness (and fertility symbolism) evoking the Russian (as distinct from Soviet) roots of Dovzhenko (a festoon of leaves, a field of bare earth, surging up against skylines). (Durgnat 1990: 54)

This virtuosic list emphasises the diversity of moods, implications, and styles as an accumulation, one thing next to another next to another, in bold juxtaposition, almost like patchwork – except that the emphasis is on duration, so it is not just an

assortment but a succession. The different 'modes and genres' are not so much combined as given one after another, without preparation or segue. This lurching quality is what leads Durgnat to describe *L'Atalante* in terms of 'stylistic volatility' (Durgnat 1990: 54). One moment the film is 'comic', the next 'uncanny'; 'angularity' gives way to 'sensuousness'; and so forth. The term 'volatility' implies unpredictability, but goes further to suggest that the film is almost out of control, reactive and unstable (perhaps thrillingly so).

All of this may start to explain how the critic Terrence Rafferty could respond to the 1990 restoration of the film (a version closer to what Vigo submitted to Gaumont) by saying that 'the best thing about this [new version] is that, for all the restorer's diligence, the film is still messy...' (Rafferty 1990: 138). On the face of it, such curious acclaim would seem to run counter to Monroe Beardsley's General Criterion Theory, which holds that certain characteristics must be considered 'primary criteria' in that they 'always contribute positively to the value of a work' (Beardsley 1962: 483, 485), or always negatively, in the case of primary negative criteria. An elaboration of the idea cites Paul Ziff:

Some good paintings are somewhat disorganized; they are good in spite of the fact that they are somewhat disorganized. But no painting is good because it is disorganized... (Ziff, quoted in Beardsley 1962: 486)

It is difficult to argue with that in the abstract, and it may seem to follow that Rafferty's celebration of *L'Atalante* being messy must be perverse or nonsensical. On the other hand, we might observe that 'disorganised' and 'messy', while synonyms, are not quite the same thing. For example, 'disorganised' tends to be directed towards the structural and systemic, while 'messy' tends to refer to more superficial disorganisation, affecting surface appearance. Moreover, 'disorganised' negates 'organised', whereas 'messy' can negate a range of antonyms, and can therefore mean 'not clean', 'not tidy', 'not straightforward' (as in a process), even 'not amicable' (as in a divorce). Perhaps the closest variant to 'disorganised' would be when 'messy' is used to mean 'not orderly' (as in a scattily arranged paragraph).

Both 'messy' and 'disorganised' carry the implication (or accusation) of carelessness, even if this is not where

Rafferty wishes to place the emphasis. To avoid this, we might consider an alternative term like 'scruffy' to characterise the way many sequences in *L'Atalante* are constructed. One advantage of 'scruffy' over 'messy' is that it is easier to grasp scruffiness as a style choice. While it is possible to be intentionally messy, that seems to entail a deliberate violation, whereas being scruffy in personal presentation may simply reflect a laissez-faire approach to appearance. Alternatively, we might consider a term like 'choppy' (with its nautical resonances) as a register of the film being both unsettled and rather rough-hewn, with the potential advantage over 'messy' and 'mishmash' of avoiding the implication that the film is uniformly slapdash. 'Choppy' has the additional benefit of conveying the film's somewhat lurching rhythm, exemplified most by its disregard for conventional continuity editing.

An example of both 'scruffy' and 'choppy' can be found in the early scene in which Juliette and Jean depart on the eponymous canal boat, just after their wedding. While disappointed villagers stand in attendance high on the riverbank, Jean is down at the water's edge, instructing Père Jules to prepare for launch. The film then cuts to Juliette, in her bridal gown and veil, looking exceedingly glum. This close up is surprising, since mere seconds earlier we saw her beaming with delight as the cabin boy presented her with a bunch of flowers.² There doesn't seem to be an obvious reason for such a sudden mood swing. This might lead us to wonder whether



it is Juliette or the film that is capricious here. The puzzle arises because, while Juliette's offscreen look is sustained in a slightly downwards angle, the film doesn't confirm what has prompted her sudden dismay. Initially it may seem that she is gazing, perhaps with impatience, towards the figures at shoreline. This is undermined, however, when the film cuts again, without any shift in her attention, to a shot of Jean, looking up at him against a sky background, suddenly up on deck and getting changed into his overalls. Normal practice with eyeline cutting would be to adjoin a shot of someone looking out of frame with another shot showing the consistent object of their attention. Instead, Jean seems momentarily to be in two places at once. The only reliable solution would be to re-interpret the shot of Juliette's offscreen gaze as a solemn gaze into space. At any rate, the scruffiness of the editing here seems to compel some interpretive guesswork.

It's not just the mismatched eyeline that makes the cut to Jean feel jarring. It also seems to play fast and loose with time. The duration of Juliette's close-up, no more than a couple of seconds, is patently an insufficient interval for Jean to have boarded the vessel and already laced his foot halfway through the trouser leg of his overalls. This could be construed as an (unorthodox) ellipsis were it not for the soundtrack, which is contradictory in its insistence on temporal continuity, giving an uninterrupted peal of church bells from the nearby village. There is another example seconds later. From the shot of Jean getting dressed, the film cuts to a brief (three second) group shot of the assembled wedding party, and then to a quick (two second) high angle shot of the cabin boy retrieving the mooring ropes, before returning to Jean – whom we find, a mere five seconds after he was beginning to change clothes in the sunshine, now fully dressed and inexplicably located in some darkened space below deck, presumably an engine room (a space that we have never seen before and never see again).

Little jolts and jumps like these are part of what gives the film its uneven texture. Quite possibly, this roughness and the violation of continuity 'rules' in this kind of sudden acceleration and ellipsis (an antecedent of the jump cut, perhaps) appealed to the French New Wave directors and critics who discovered Vigo's work in the 1950s. A factor in the choppi-ness here is the absence of devices that would have clarified

the relative positions of characters. For example, a master shot of the boat would have served as an anchor (no pun intended) for the scene. Alternatively, spatial contiguity could have been confirmed via the placement of objects that bridge shot and counter-shot, or over-the-shoulder shots, such as if the image of Jean on deck showed Juliette watching in the foreground. Instead, the sequence bounces from detail to detail and keeps geographical and temporal relations no more than approximate. Finally, a sense of unevenness results from the variable qualities of the image. The close-up of Juliette is luminous and crisp, using shallow focus to pick out her features, and classically composed, almost like a portrait. Moments later, however, a shot of Jean beckoning from the helm is markedly blurry, out of focus.

It is not necessarily clear, however, whether we should think of such features as errors. As mentioned above, it is possible to be intentionally messy, and certainly to embrace or accept (perhaps as a consequence of other choices) a scruffy or uneven aesthetic. Several years before making *L'Atalante*, Jean Vigo denounced what he saw as the contemporary regime of glamour (surrealistically evoked as the aim 'to liberate oneself from the two pairs of lips that take 3,000 meters to come together and almost as long to come unstuck') and derided 'the overly artistic subtlety of a pure cinema' (Vigo 2014 [1930]: 449). Perhaps avoiding the standard conventions of good aesthetic taste was an aim. On the other hand, the film was undoubtedly afflicted by the various troubles of production, and made messier still by an iterative history of restoration, some of which was forced to rely on abandoned and decaying footage, including outtakes. If such factors amplified the film's rough appearance, perhaps they went, after all, with the grain of its project – hence Rafferty's relief that the film was reconstituted with its messiness intact.

Unruly

While on paper he sounds like a narratively peripheral or supporting character, the figure of Père Jules is central to the character of *L'Atalante*. I suggested briefly above how the film's apparent capriciousness coincides with Juliette's trait of capriciousness (exemplified by her impetuous



decision to leave the boat alone for Paris). A similar kind of correlation might pertain to Père Jules. We might find his disorderly cabin, for example, crammed with objects that have taken his fancy over a lifetime on the high seas, and which fill Juliette with wonder, to strike an affinity with the film's bric-à-brac style, its own aesthetic of clutter and astonishment. David Baldwin finds similar overlap between the character of the film and the character played by Michel Simon, when he says that 'Père Jules, a character almost as anarchic and beast-like as Boudu the tramp in Renoir's film [...] is presented in scenes as rough-edged, abrupt, and unruly as himself' (Baldwin 1985: 23).

Baldwin is right to note the influence of *Boudu sauve des eaux* (Jean Renoir, 1932), made just a year or so earlier, in which Michel Simon plays a grubby and uncouth outsider, in that case an archetypal tramp. Simon's subsequent performance as the seadog Père Jules has some of the same mannerisms – shambling walk and mumbling speech – but is less straightforwardly a comedic turn. In Renoir's film, the 'anarchic' characteristics embodied by the figure disturb and expose the patterns and hypocrisies of Parisian bourgeois life as represented by Monsieur Lestingois (Charles Granval), but the contrivance of the encounter and the idealism of Renoir's film frame him as a comic image of liberty. Père Jules, by contrast, is far more disturbing figure, someone who keeps the severed hand of a pal or lover locked in a jar for posterity,

an ambiguous kind of grotesque. He is impish, like Boudu, but without being charming, selfish without being liberated, obstructive without being innocent. Despite his honorific as "Père" Jules, he has few good fatherly traits. Although he ultimately resolves the narrative problem by finding Juliette, he is for the most part less of an enabler and more of a disruptor and irritant.

Baldwin's characterisation of the film as 'unruly' is closely related to Rafferty's 'messy' but contains some additional dimensions. Like 'messy', 'unruly' suggests a state of disorder but implies impudence and obstinacy. Disobedient children may be called unruly if they show a dogged refusal to submit to rules. This might be a stronger way of accounting for the film's disregard for continuity and consistency, without necessarily seeing it as strategically or maturely subversive. Baldwin elaborates along these lines:

Vigo seems to have been almost incapable psychologically of placing the camera in the positions dictated by conventional film-making. Asymmetrical compositions, seemingly random but in fact quite logical high-angle shots, [and] the refusal to let the camera follow the characters as they wander out of the frame – these are some characteristic features of his style' (Baldwin 1985: 26)

If Baldwin attributes these features to the director's constitutional stubbornness, they seem also to portray the film's character as wayward. It would be easy to go too far here in the desire to applaud an *enfant terrible*. Many of the film's scenes contain relatively long takes that quite patiently attend to characters and their activities, like Juliette's domestic chores and moments when she is ruminating alone. These features don't seem random or wilfully unconventional, exactly. It might be better, then, to think of unruliness less in terms of rebellion and more in terms of sovereignty. The film may not always 'follow the characters as they wander', but quite often it does – exhibiting, perhaps, the selective curiosity and independence of a cat, rather than the dutiful adherence of a dog. (And of course, cats are unruly in this sense, famously unherdable, like the many cats that prowl and slumber aboard *L'Atalante*.)

To develop the distinction, it might be helpful to consider an instance where the film does decline to follow a departing character. It comes just after Jean has found Juliette in Jules's cabin combing the sailor's hair while he sits half-naked on the bed. The discovery has sent Jean into a jealous rage. He confronts Jules about the disorder and stink of his quarters, throws a cat across the room, barks at Juliette for being there, and orders Jules to tidy himself up, before storming off, out of frame. Up to now, the camera had been panning left and right with Jean as he stalked about the cabin, but now it stays with Jules and Juliette, and indeed begins to move slowly towards them. The skirmish seems to have ended, and Jean seems to have left the scene. Juliette sits down on Jules's bunk, giggling



like a schoolgirl, and Jules begins to lower his body to join her. It seems like the film is moving into a new phase. The *mise-en-scène* seems to anticipate the development of some newfound intimacy between Jules and Juliette in the aftermath of the scolding. The camera's dolly-in peers through the X-shape of a table's supporting legs, creating the sense of Jules's bunk as a private zone where conspiracy may resume.

At this point the film does several perplexing things in quick succession. First is the choice to cut before the moving camera has come to a standstill, a highly unconventional choice. Just as it seemed we were settling into a new scene, the film abruptly changes tack. What it cuts to, moreover, is a shot that is highly disorientating for several reasons. Marina

Warner describes it as an 'incomprehensible shot... from the other side of the bed, showing the old man lifting himself away from her as she lies there' (Warner 2015: 49). Aside from the fact that it cuts almost 180 degrees, and so takes a beat to adjust to, there are stark mismatches in posture (Juliette is lying flat on her back in the new shot, and Jules is holding himself over her), movement (Jules was moving towards her in the previous shot, and is now pulling himself up away from her) and expression (Jules was audibly guffawing prior to the cut, but now looks suddenly serious or perhaps embarrassed).³ Most 'incomprehensible' of all is what the shot appears to show, the aftermath of an instant of sexual contact between the young wife and the old seadog, seemingly

confirmed by the bashful way Jules withdraws. The suggestion is there just fleetingly; both the suddenness and the ickiness makes it difficult to process.

Indeed, there is no time to process, because suddenly Jean is back in the frame. The film cuts to a high angle, and in another violation of continuity Jules has now entirely vanished and an incensed Jean replaces him next to the bed, preparing to drag Juliette from the bunk. So Jean had not left the cabin after all? The fact of the jealous husband's departure seemed to follow from the fact that Jules and Juliette felt comfortable enough to share a giggle and become briefly intimate on the bed. It hardly seems possible that they either knew him to be present, or, given the scale of the cabin, that they could believe he had left when really he was hanging nearby. Rational motivation seems almost to disappear at this point; the scene seems almost to abstract the coordinates of a melodramatic love triangle.

If the film is being wilful in its abandonment of narrative consistency here, this may open up a further sense of 'unruly'. As Warner's 'incomprehensible' shot shows, along with the various oddities surrounding it, *L'Atalante* intermittently poses a challenge to understanding the reasons why people act as they do. We are given just enough information and intrigue to be in a position to speculate, and just enough obstacles to make speculation challenging. When disobedient children are said to be unruly, it means that they are fundamentally ungovernable. An attribution of 'unruly' may be more pertinent for *L'Atalante* in this sense, giving a name to the features that make it difficult to manage or master.

Lyrical

In his article on *L'Atalante*, Baldwin identifies a core tension in the film's style between what he calls the 'grotesque and the lyrical, an opposition registered in conflicting tendencies towards expansion and extreme compression' (Baldwin 1985: 22). Baldwin finds the 'grotesque mode' in Vigo 'marked by a sort of caricaturing of the face of reality, using elliptical editing, disorienting camera angles and shock effects to exaggerate some inherently bizarre action or circumstance' (Baldwin 1985: 22). (The grotesque and the unruly often



go hand-in-hand, as for example in the case of the 'unruly woman' [Kathleen Rowe 1995].) Baldwin understands this characteristic to be held in tension with a countering attribute, which he defines as the film's 'lyrical mode', 'characterized by the expansion of a particular action in order to lend the mood created by that action its maximum emotional expressiveness and force' (Baldwin 1985: 22).

The adjective 'lyrical' is frequently used to characterise *L'Atalante*. Marina Warner, for example, in her book on the film, refers to the 'lyrical shot of Juliette in her wedding dress walking up the barge against its direction of travel' (Warner 2015: 9–10). We might dwell here to consider what is meant by 'lyrical' here. The OED (2017) definition, 'having the qualities or characteristics of lyric poetry', is not especially helpful, since it simply outsources the question. Moreover, Jonathan Culler in *A Theory of the Lyric* argues that the 'most widespread current models [of what comprises lyric poetry] [have] serious disadvantages: the model of lyric as intense expression of the subjective experience of the poet does not fit a great many poems, whether ancient or modern' (Culler 2015: 349). Whether or not Culler is right about lyric poetry itself, the notion of 'intense expression' indicates one facet of what 'lyrical' is meant to convey. Later in her book, Warner returns to the shot of Juliette walking along the barge and describes it as depicting 'a spectral figure alone on the grey-black fuselage of the boat against the dark pooling water of the canal' (Warner 2015: 31). What might support 'lyrical' in this evocative description is not the mood conjured by phrases like 'spectral figure' and 'dark pooling water' (words like 'ghostly' or 'ominous' might fit here) but rather the intensity of that mood. In other words, 'lyrical' is a kind of meta-characteristic that indicates emotional volume rather than specifying the particular characteristics being intensified.

Although Warner doesn't mention it, Maurice Jaubert's accompanying scored music is crucial. The shot contains no diegetic sound other than the chugging sound of the barge – or, rather, an orchestral facsimile of it as rhythmic undercurrent. At the prow of the boat, Juliette, anxious on her wedding night, is not quite ready to submit to her groom's amorous attentions. She takes her leave from Jean and heads towards the stern. This is the context for Warner's emphasis on her being

'alone' and for the idea of momentary resistance captured in the phrase, 'against its [the boat's] direction of travel'. The wide shot of her walking along the fuselage, with its elevated tonal contrast between black and white, is broken briefly by a return cutaway to Jean, watching her from the prow. When the film returns to Juliette's journey, a new melodic phrase is introduced on wind instruments, offering a surge of hopefulness and yearning, just as a barge in the background of the shot passes by and fills the top half of the screen with smoke. I think the emotional intensity to which Warner responds when she calls this shot lyrical in fact emerges from the heightened contrast between portentous fatefulness and youthful longing. Meanwhile, the combination of billowing smoke and blossoming music help create the 'expansion' noted by Baldwin in his definition of the lyrical mode, together with the wideness of the shot, and the prolonged duration of Juliette's movement right along the boat. It is as if narrative time has been momentarily suspended to serve the elaboration of feeling.

Raymond Durgnat conveys this very idea when he writes that 'however "consequential" the film's narrative outline may read, it sees as a string of lyrical moments, of durations cut free from time' (Durgnat 1990: 55). The italicised distinction between how the film 'reads' (on paper, as a plot outline) and how it 'sees' (or envisions) is mapped here onto another contrast, one that recalls the ancient division between narrative and lyric verse, between relaying a chain of 'consequential' events and more freeform ruminations on experience.



On the other hand, the lyrical and the poetic are not to be conflated. Durgnat's 'string of *lyrical* moments' are not identical in nature to the following catalogue of what he calls 'funky poetic images':

two plumped pillows reeking of sensuality, a kitten jumping from a closet jammed with unwashed linen, Jean ducking his head under the oily river surface to "see" his bride' (Durgnat 55).

Part of what seems to distinguish the poetic from the lyrical here is dense imagistic compression, rather than song-like, melodious expansion.

As discussed in the introduction to this essay, 'poetic' has become something of a label in discussions of *L'Atalante*. When Durgnat refers to *L'Atalante* as 'the classic instance of "poetic realism"' (Durgnat 1990: 54), he retains the scare quotes around the term (while omitting them for other named movements such as Bolshevik montage): a recognition of its currency but also, perhaps, its insufficiency. As we saw earlier, Durgnat is keen to locate the film in relation to an array of other art-historical movements and tendencies, and so is not content to let it rest under a single classification. However, if 'lyrical' invokes lyric verse, we would expect it to at least speak to whatever is 'poetic' in 'poetic realism'.

Perhaps the most justifiable example of 'poetic realism' in the film would be the location-shot sequence marking the barge's arrival at the outskirts of Paris, in which Jean and the cabin boy winch open the watertight gates and haul the barge into the lock chamber. As Marina Warner notes, the images here 'recall the social realism of contemporary photography' (Warner 2015: 44), with its impetus to honour the work of industrial labourers. However, we might add more specifically that their remarkably luminous qualities, especially the way figures in motion are briefly silhouetted by sunlight, evokes a specifically Parisian tradition of 'social fantastic' street photography from Eugène Atget to Henri Cartier-Bresson, as well as the more international 'poetic' mode of silent documentary. Indeed, it is like a fragment from a city symphony in its focus on the visual and rhythmic aspects of this everyday activity of navigating a boat through the locks, and, above all, in its diegetic silence: after an initial noise of water gushing

through the sluices, sound effects are omitted entirely, giving the images a somewhat free-floating, unmoored quality.

What might justify a term like 'lyrical' for this sequence would be the way that the realist imagery seems placed as an expression of Juliette's subjective experience: her joy at the boat's arrival in Paris, a place she has longed to visit her whole life. Indeed, the sequence has a song-like quality and is structured like a musical number, beginning with her emergence from the hatch into the early morning sunshine. A trumpet blare initially seems to sound an alarm as she pushes aside the cabin doors, its garish quality set against a cyclical tick-tock motif of individual notes on the xylophone, slightly trepidatious but with a hint of childlike expectancy. These xylophone

notes coordinate, in the next shot, with Jean's bounding motion up the quayside steps, and are joined by an ostinato rhythm of a suspenseful two-note piano motif as he traverses the sluice gates. This gives way, as he joins the cabin boy the other side of the walkway, to an accordion-led rendition of a bargeman's folk song (the same song with which we heard Jean, accompanied by his crew, including Père Jules on accordion, serenade Juliette earlier in the film, again as she emerged from the cabin). All these elements confer the dynamic images of lockside activity with a sense of new-day wonder channelled via Juliette, although, crucially, not necessarily limited to her field of vision or even the objects of her attention. She in fact seems much more taken with the skyline than with

the crew's labour. Yet her elation transfers to the film's character in this moment, as it shows the workers winching, tying, untying, hauling – most strikingly in the beautiful low-level shot, touched by early morning sunlight, in which we see the cabin boy bolt down the stone steps to help Jean shepherd the boat into the lock chamber. On the instant he emerges at the top of the steps, dashing to join the skipper with puppy-like enthusiasm, an accordion flurry attends his movement with a little shriek of delight.

If the 'poetic' and the 'realist' are allied in this moment, elsewhere they seem almost opposed. An example would be at the close of a sequence that Wendy Haslem describes as 'a juxtaposition of visually *poetic* shots that link the estranged





couple across disparate spaces as they dream of one another' (2006; italics added). As with the scene at the lockgates, diegetic sound is dropped for this sequence and a musical score takes prominence, making it feel like a tone poem rather than a narrative event as such. A bluesy waltz in strings and brass attends the images of the separated newlyweds as they writhe, stretch, and sink together in fantasised communion. Legato violins convey a sense of tender longing, while trombone slides carry erotic connotations, creating something of a languid, humid feel. The musical theme concludes with nightclub-style flourish, and Jean pulls himself into a sitting position on the bunk in his darkened cabin. Almost treading on the toes of the melodic resolution, however, on the instant

the music ceases, we hear the loud honk of a horn from a ship on the waters outside. This obtrusive noise carries over as a sound bridge into the next shot which exhibits a markedly different atmosphere. In the smoggy grey light of dawn, surrounded by cargo boats and industrial metal frames, bargemate and deckhand yell and bang for the skipper to join them on deck. Back to reality. Indeed, the relation between 'poetic' and 'realist' is starkly oppositional here, the transition from phantastic studio imagery to location realism having been marked as an interruption, a rude awakening.

Baldwin finds the lovemaking montage to be 'the most ambitious and best sustained... of all the lyrical sequences in the film' (Baldwin 1985: 25), and his elaboration of it shows again the kinship between the lyrical and the poetic:

Vigo illuminates the faces and bodies of the two actors through a kind of netting, so that they seem to be covered all over with black spots, as if they were suffering from some contagious disease. The arching of one back is echoed by the arching of another; the movement of one head wearily raising itself towards the camera is completed by its counterpart dropping back onto the pillow. The two characters seem to be groping towards one another, as if seeking some [...] fusion of being... (Baldwin 1985: 25).

Rhyming elements and syntactical counterparts, features one might expect from a certain kind of poetry, are conveyed by phrases like 'echoed by' and 'completed by'. Moreover, Baldwin finds the sequence filled with non-literal allusion, as indicated by his use of the conjunction '*as if*' ('as if they were suffering' / 'as if seeking...'). This '*as if*' characteristic – a quality of simile – might call for the term 'poetic', but it equally captures the sense of longing that seems habitually to accompany the 'lyrical', in its reaching to give expression to the unspoken.

Sensuous

Rather than characterising the above nocturnal montage as lyrical, Florian Deroo's account, in his recent book on *L'Atalante*, emphasises the erotics of touch, taking this sequence to exemplify the film's 'tactile' and 'sensuous' qualities (Deroo 2025: 81).



What 'sensuous' means here, I think, is a concerted attention to physical textures and attributes, and a vivid evocation of them, such that the film appeals to senses beyond sight and sound. The most familiar of these is touch. In 'What My Fingers Knew', Vivian Sobchack considers what it is to experience film sensuously (Sobchack 2000), but we might equally explore what features and aspects of character in a given film invite that kind of engagement. Not all films are equal in this regard. While *L'Atalante* is often categorised as 'realism', what that means in this particular case has only partly to do with filming in real locations or the like, and more to do with a certain kind of material vividness.

This seems to be roughly what François Truffaut means when he says, in a 1968 interview, that 'in terms of carnal realism, [Vigo] went further than anybody else'. Elsewhere he reiterates the idea: 'no one has filmed people's skin, human flesh, as bluntly as Vigo' (Truffaut 1985: 43). The suggestion is helpful. However, I think the adverb 'bluntly' (*crûment* in the original French, which can also be translated as 'crudely') is not quite right, or is limited, if we want to understand what it is about *L'Atalante* that might lead us to characterise as tactile and sensuous. Consider, for example, the scene after Jean has dipped his head into the Seine to test Juliette's contention that this is a way to have one's true love confirmed. They are now in their cabin. Jean remains topless. Juliette rubs his wet hair, calling him a 'silly one', and we see that she has hung a shirt over the stove for him. She takes it off and holds it to her chest



to feel the heat herself, then drapes it over her husband's chest, affectionately telling him "It's nice and warm". Moved by her gentleness, Jean stands and takes her in his arms. She runs her fingers up his arms and behind his bare shoulders. It's not just that the gestures are tender: the film is tender.

The tenderness partly comes from the use of long take and the fact that the camera has been placed a little above head height, from over Jean's shoulder, the angle a parent might have while fondly watching their child at the dinner table. It is close enough to dote on all the details of their interaction (the hair rub, Juliette's holding the warm shirt against herself, the draping of it on Jean's shoulders, the way he gently puts his arms under hers while embracing her) without the need for reverse-field cutting or conspicuous panning. This in turn allows the little adjustments made by the camera (for example, its slight movement to the left as Juliette goes past Jean and towards the stove) to convey attentiveness and care. What we see of the cabin is simple and restful (a jug on the table, a sugar jar on the shelf) and the view into the corner makes the scene feel cosy.

The characteristic of tenderness is what enables and encourages us to dwell on textural qualities and the materiality of bodies in space. This is assisted by, among other things, costuming choices. Juliette wears a striped T-shirt that is tucked in at the waist; the tightness around her midriff, when combined with the striped pattern, creates tangible fabric creases as she moves, visually registering every twist of her

torso and the motion of her shoulders as she reaches for the warmed shirt. Lighting is also crucial. As the pair embrace, for instance, the angle of key lighting amplifies the soft texture of Jean's bare back. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, our capacity to engage in virtual touch is awakened when characters themselves reach out with their fingers, or absorb the warmth of something, or are moved to touch. Delicate gestures, such as the way Juliette's fingertips run up Jean's arms and round to the back of his shoulders, are especially powerful stimulants for this.

Moving beyond the haptic, we might also consider appeals to the olfactory system as part of what 'sensuous' might encompass. Truffaut once characterised *L'Atalante* as 'a film that smells like dirty feet', wondering aloud 'whether it would be an exaggeration to speak of Vigo's work as the cinema of smells' (Truffaut 1985: 43). Joining hands with this idea, we might recall from the previous section Durgnat's list of 'funkily poetic images', including 'two plumped pillows reeking of sensuality' (Durgnat 1990: 55).⁴ 'Funkily' may suggest something bold or offbeat, but the primary sense of 'funky', according to the OED (2017), is 'having a strong or offensive smell, esp. smelling of sweat or other bodily excretions'. Meanwhile, 'reeking of sensuality' also conjures an idea of the pungent, and is itself a pungent phrase. If the pillows of the conjugal bed are voluptuously 'plumped', we might expect them to exude the aroma of fresh linen, but instead they reek (with a euphemistic allusion to copulatory sweat), or at least the image reeks – but not of something negative. 'Sensuality' is perhaps the lascivious twin sister of 'sensuousness': it also entails an appeal to the senses, but with more of a view to erotic pleasure. 'Reeking' is thus given a positive spin, abandoning its usual implication of something foul-smelling. Like Truffaut's remark about unwashed feet, it locates the film's permissive spirit as an invitation to sniff and savour.

This summoning of virtual aromas may be exemplified by an early shot of Père Jules alone in his cabin (around 14 minutes into the film). He is leaning on his bunk, ornamented by the rostrum of a giant swordfish. He is keeping company with various cats. He says that he will fix them something to eat (implying that he and the cats will share a meal) and moves to tend a saucepan that is bubbling on the stove hob. The wisps





of steam that exude from the frothing pan (its vapour given body by a spotlight) are perhaps the closest one can get to the visualisation of an odour: fishy smells, no doubt, perhaps the starchy scent of river mussels, or boiled offcuts from yesterday's catch. The cabin boy steps into the cabin and says, "I'm here for your dirty wash". "My dirty wash?" Jules asks, and turns slightly, so that the fill light briefly picks out the tattered front of his overalls and his grubby face. The cabin boy then starts rifling, in the background, to unearth fetid rags from a nearby chest while Jules return to the pot, plucking through its hot contents with his unwashed fingers. Aside from the wafts of fishy smells, and despite a few fragile shafts of morning

sunshine creeping through the cabin's frosted window, the cabin feels stale and musty. One factor here is the placement of the camera at chest-level, giving prominence to black recesses and corners untouched by natural light. This airlessness contrasts starkly with a cut outside to the deck, where Juliette is underway with her wash. The camera shows her from above, spiritedly bundling sheets into a tub. Jean is whistling and walking around with bare feet while he unfurls a wire. After the steamy cabin, the atmosphere feels incomparably fresh, even if the foley sounds still locate it as an industrial setting. One can almost smell soap flakes in the morning breeze across the Seine, tinged by notes of petroleum and tar.

Conclusion

My discussion here has focused on four adjectives – 'messy', 'unruly', 'lyrical' and 'sensuous' – that have arisen in the critical literature on the film and has sought to explore and elaborate these as capsule characterisations. Of course, no single encapsulation, or even a handful of them, will 'capture' everything in or about a given film, and certainly not one as varied and mixed as *L'Atalante*. Many other characterising adjectives would be worth considering, and indeed the course of my discussion here has thrown up an array of adjacently pertinent terms. The point here is not so much to adjudicate and rank these descriptors but rather to use the process of weighing synonyms against the evidence of the film in order to better define what makes it distinctive.

Besides illuminating the individual film, this is also a good method for investigating terms and concepts. Testing attribution against a particular example helps deter reliance on hypothetical instances and the temptation to generalise. The essay has attempted to show how capsule terms can be broken open to see if they contain more specific ascriptions. J. L. Austin once voiced a wish that the field of aesthetics might 'forget for a while about the beautiful and get down instead to the dainty and the dumpy' (Austin 1956: 9). For *L'Atalante*, that might mean forgetting for a while about poetic realism and getting down instead to the tender and the scruffy.

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¹ An authoritative account of the film's production and early distribution history can be found in Salles Gomes: 1972.

² My analysis refers to the 2017 restoration, supervised by Bernard Eisenschitz, available on Criterion Bluray. After the initial studio mauling, there have been attempts to restore the film in 1940, 1949, 1990, 2001 and 2017. There are small but considerable differences between the three latest restorations. For example, the close-up of a beaming Juliette receiving the flowers is present in the 2017 but not the 2001 version (although we do have a more distant shot of her smiling, so the point still broadly pertains).

³ Although I'm not aware of any evidence for this, it wouldn't be surprising to learn that a shot, or perhaps an entire scene, is missing here, perhaps having been cut by an overly zealous censor. In the 2001 version, there is a brief cutaway to a cat between the shot under the table legs and the shot of Jules withdrawing. While this 'solves' the immediate continuity issues, it doesn't make the cut to Jules's withdrawal any less weird, and arguably makes it weirder by acknowledging an omission.

⁴ I think Durnat is referring to the shot of Juliette walking up in bed alone, immediately after the scene of embrace just discussed. These pillows are indeed appealingly plumped. The other prominent image of the pillows appears in the Criterion version when Juliette is exploring Paris, an unmotivated cutaway, sandwiched weirdly, and accompanied by lurid jazzy music, between a shot of Juliette disembarking a tram and a shot of her arriving at a jewellery store, an almost avant-garde insert reminding us of her reasons for pursuing pleasure alone. But there is only one white pillow in this shot, and it is crumpled and twisted, a sad register of dissatisfaction.