

Zero for Conduct

A Manifesto of Anarchist Cinema and Poetic Realism

Phronrhutēr

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A masterpiece born from Vigo's cold view of authority and the oppressive state. This work is one of the important legacies in anarchist cinema with its poetic realism. *Zéro de Conduite* brings us to witness the rebellion of boarding school students against rules that constrain them.

The film was once banned in France due to its subversive criticism of institutional power. After World War II ended, the film received more attention and praise. *Zéro de Conduite* combines surrealism, autobiographical elements, and political allegory.

Narrative Structure

Vigo introduces a non-linear narrative that embodies the concept of a game without structure—a game that emerges spontaneously and emphasizes the aspect of chaos, ultimately ending sweetly, through episodic scenes of the students' rebellion. We are led to see the students' conspiracy to stage a coup and disrupt a commemorative ceremony, reflecting their undirected and fragmented energy. In *Zéro de Conduite*, Vigo prioritizes atmosphere over causality in the episodic narrative he creates. The chaos in the dormitory and the pillow fight scene signal a game that disrupts authoritarian rules, accompanied by a parade-like procession of defiance that affirms Vigo's stance against restrictive schools. Maintaining sentiments from his film *À propos de Nice* (1930), Vigo portrays the teachers in *Zéro de Conduite* with full grotesqueness. This reinforces Vigo's attitude toward the school institution that treats students unjustly, further clarifying his resistance by pitting rules against creative anarchy.

Surrealism and Bodily Freedom

Vigo offers a visual style that blends poetic realism with touches of Buñuel's surrealism. Scenes like the pillow fight are captured in slow motion, creating chaos from feathers flying like snow, transforming the dormitory into a dreamlike landscape. It seems Vigo attempts to subvert Bazin's realism by not merely depicting reality as seen on the screen; Vigo refines it with tilted angles and dynamic shots to express the students' subjectivity. The *mise-en-scène* contrasts the oppressive school through gloomy corridors and rigid regulations with the grotesque actions of teachers and nudity, affirming bodily liberation as a political act. Compared to *L'Atalante*, Vigo reveals a sustained interest in fluid movement and anti-establishment lyricism.

An Anarchist Manifesto on Autonomy, Solidarity, and Liberation from Hierarchy

Zéro de Conduite is a visceral manifesto of anarchist resistance, embodied through the character played by Gérard de Bédarieux (Tabard), emphasizing individual autonomy, mutual roles, and the dismantling of controlling hierarchies. Vigo depicts Tabard as a rejection of institutional domination and spontaneous collectivity over life.

Vigo offers an anarchist understanding reflected through the organic solidarity of the students, emphasizing collective response in their rebellion against the school's tyranny. Tabard, based on Vigo himself, becomes the emotional pivot of defiance and inspires liberation from institutional dominance. The students' procession after the pillow fight is an explosion of chaotic yet harmonious energy, replacing rules with shared joy.

The headmaster and teachers symbolize the state apparatus that Vigo critiques as authoritarian poison. Additionally, Vigo describes the state's obsession with control and surveillance through the headmaster and teachers. The scene of Caussat, Colin, Bruel, and Tabard on the rooftop reveals liberation from hierarchy and the establishment of an autonomous zone, as well as a symbol of the destruction of the restrictive system.

Resistance to Institutional Autonomy

Through psychosocial lenses, Vigo channels the students' instinctual desires against the moral apparatus of the school. Psychosocial stages also provide the backdrop for the students' resistance to autonomy. The pillow fight scene serves as a cathartic release of suppressed energy, Tabard's attitude that sparks suspicion among his peers also stems from his anxiety, and the dream sequences in the film signify escapism, a psychological refuge from institutional trauma.

Existential Freedom

The celebration of chaos depicted by Vigo aligns with Nietzsche's Dionysian ethos, prioritizing creativity over obedience. The students' rebellion reflects existentialist ideas of authenticity against bad faith. The final scene, where Caussat, Colin, Bruel, and Tabard seize the school's rooftop, symbolizes existential freedom, rejecting social determinism.

Jean Vigo as an auteur always held a stance in the works he created, making him a major influence on French New Wave cinema. At the end of his very young life, Vigo provided a broader perspective on poetic realism that later greatly influenced the works of directors after his time.

Vigo also influenced Truffaut in making *The 400 Blows*. Truffaut saw *Zéro de Conduite* as a work with experimental aspects, with many ideas boldly integrated into the script, adopting a "let's try it and see what happens" approach.

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