

# Zero de conduite

**Director:** Jean Vigo  
**Country:** France  
**Date:** 1933

**A review by Jeffrey Anderson for *combustiblecelluloid.com*:**

When most people see Jean Vigo's two feature films, *Zero for Conduct* and *L'Atalante* (1934), they tend to prefer *Zero for Conduct* at first. It's Vigo's most personal work, more unrefined, reckless, and sloppy. It's no more poetic than *L'Atalante*, it's just that it's more potent, having to cram its ideas into a scant 43 minutes.

*Zero for Conduct* is basically the story of three boys stuck in a boys' school. The school is wretchedly bad. They serve nothing but beans (everyone calls the cook Mrs. Bean), the teachers are inept, and the dean is a dwarf with a huge beard who keeps his hat under glass. Sometimes this stuff plays like Bunuel's *Un Chien Andalou* and sometimes it's goofy, like a *Little Rascals* short. These three boys (whom I could never keep track of from among the other boys) dream up a plan to take over the school on Alumni day, which happens in a miraculous sequence in the last 10 minutes.

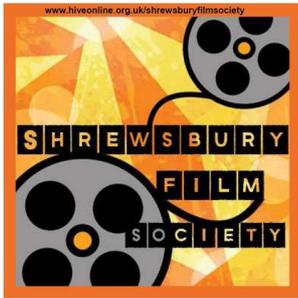
The boys begin by ripping up their bedding, throwing white feathers everywhere. Then Vigo takes the film into slow motion, as the boys line up for a parade. The floating feathers surround them, hanging in the air. Then our three heroes (plus one more) climb up on the roof, and begin pelting teachers with all kinds of debris. Then, they hop-frog along the rooftop to their escape, and run off into the sunset.



The print I saw of *Zero for Conduct* was very bad, and I had to watch it twice to try and make any sense of it. I found that it doesn't make any sense. You just have to let the weirdness and anarchy wash over you, and enjoy it like a fresh dip in a lake. The key thing about the movie is that Vigo is able to let his anxieties, passions, dreams, and feelings come out lucidly on the screen. He wasn't hiding anything. He was a great poet. (He died at the age of 29 of tuberculosis, having only completed 2 short films and 2 features.) Many filmmakers have been inspired by Vigo, including Jean Renoir, Francois Truffaut (whose *The 400 Blows* was a tribute to this film), Lindsay Anderson (whose *If...* was a remake), and even Neil Jordan, who must have seen *Zero for Conduct* in order to make *The Butcher Boy*.

It's amazing how influential these two films are to have been remembered for more than sixty years, especially when they were barely released in their time. How many other filmmakers would have been remembered half a century later after only two films? Maybe Orson Welles and a few others. It goes to show the power of these images. Anyone who really loves the movies should see *Zero for Conduct* and *L'Atalante* and learn what film poetry really is.

From: <http://www.combustiblecelluloid.com/zero.shtml>



# Fires were started

**Director:** Humphrey Jennings  
**Country:** UK  
**Date:** 1943

From an article by Derek Malcolm of *The Guardian* for his *Century of film*:

Most people, if asked to name the finest British director, would probably plump for Hitchcock, Lean or Powell. Some, however, would say Humphrey Jennings, once described by Lindsay Anderson as the only true poet of the English cinema. *Fires Were Started* is his most celebrated film, and undoubtedly a masterpiece. Jennings was a poet and a painter too - a man, in fact, of the widest possible culture. When he died young in 1950, he had only worked for 17 years as a film-maker, all of them in what we would now call docu-drama. *Fires Were Started* is his longest work, made in 1943. But it was not the only extraordinary film he made, for the GPO Film Unit before the last world war and for the Crown Film Unit and the Ministry Of Information during it. In other hands, many of these films would have been mere propaganda made to stiffen the national mood. But in his, the images of Britain were often so powerful and so moving that people would be in tears watching them. The nature of the images available to him are perfectly expressed in a poem he wrote, in the same year as he filmed *Heart Of Britain* and *Words For Battle*, two superb shorts:

*I see a thousand strange sights in the streets of London  
I see the clock on Bow Church burning in daytime  
I see a one-legged man crossing the fire on crutches  
I see three negroes and a woman with white face-powder reading music at half-past three in the morning  
I see an ambulance girl with her arms full of roses  
I see the burnt drums of the Philharmonic  
I see the green leaves of Lincolnshire carried through London on the wrecked body of an aircraft*

He called his films "camera poems" and the characters in *Fires Were Started* were the firemen and firewomen of the Auxilliary Fire Service working in the most heavily bombed docks of London. The film's early scenes introduce us to the eight characters we follow - each are fictional but all are played by real firemen. One 24-hour period is dramatised. In the morning, the men leave their homes and ordinary occupations to start their tour of duty. A new recruit arrives and is shown the ropes. There is a full moon due and warning comes that a heavy attack is anticipated. Night falls and the sirens begin to wail. The unit is called out to a riverside warehouse where fire threatens an ammunition ship at anchor by the wharf. The fire is fought and finally mastered, though one man is lost and others are injured. The ship finally sails with the morning tide.

The way the story is structured provides a portrait of what was then a besieged Britain that is astonishingly intimate. Jennings' firemen are not treated in the patronising way servicemen were often depicted in post-war films of the stiff-upper-lip variety. True, the observation is affectionate and matter-of-fact, in a typically British manner. But there is humour and irony too, as in the sequence when the firemen enter their recreation room in turn as Barrett, the pianist of the group, strikes up *One Man Went To Mow* and other popular songs of the day. The fire fighting scenes and their aftermath are remarkable, shot and edited with no melodramatics whatsoever. Jennings had founded the Mass Observation movement which collected information on the British way of life much as Malinowski had documented the behaviour of the South Sea islanders. He put this to good effect in *Fires Were Started* and other films, notably the equally famous *Listen To Britain* and *Diary For Timothy*. But, though ineffably patrician, he transcended the class clichés of the time by recognising the way war can unite disparate people and by making us think about what would have been lost if the conflict had gone the other way.

From: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/1999/feb/25/derekmalcolmscenturyoffilm.derekmalcolm>