

L'Âge d'or: *faux-raccord* (false match)

by Sophy Williams

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L'Âge d'or (1930, France, 63 mins)

Source: CAC (35mm available from Sharmill Films) **Prod:** Le Vicomte de Noailles, (Pierre Braunberger) **Dir:** Luis Buñuel, Salvador Dalí **Photography:** Albert Dubergen **Editor:** Buñuel **Art Dir:** Schilzneck **Music:** Buñuel

Cast: Gaston Modot, Lya Lys, Max Ernst, Pierre Prévert, Cardidad de Laberdesque

In this age of so-called prosperity, the social function of L'Âge d'or must be to urge the oppressed to satisfy their hunger for destruction and perhaps even to cater for the masochism of the oppressor.

In spite of all the threats to suppress this film, we believe that it will win out in the end and open new horizons in a sky which can never match in beauty that sky it showed us in a mirror.(1)

As legend has it, Buñuel and production team collected fifty scorpions for the opening sequence of *L'Âge d'or*, however, they never actually managed to shoot the intended sequence which, on the final version, is made up of 'found footage'. This is taken from a documentary called *Le scorpion languedocien*, produced by the Éclair Company in 1912.(2) Buñuel had heard that scorpions commit suicide when surrounded by a circle of fire, and a shot of this appears in the original shooting script.(3) As an idea, though, it resonates through the entire film.

L'Âge d'or is a destructive and anarchic response to the strategies of containment and repression of what the surrealist movement of the late 1920s considered the corrupt technological age. The film was so scandalous in its first weeks that a group of incensed members of the League of Patriots and the Anti-Semitic League threw ink at the screen, assaulted members of the audience and destroyed art work by Salvador Dalí, Max Ernst and others on display in the foyer. The film was soon banned. Part brilliant social commentary, part rebellious schoolboy prank, the film

leaves us no choice but to pick through the fragments left by its explosive power.

Four bishops decompose on the rocks. The leader of a dilapidated group of bandits (played by Ernst) cries "To arms!" Yet instead of an invading army, subsequent shots reveal a seemingly benign horde of Majorcan civilians in smart street clothes swarming over the rocks like ants. We study humans as an entomologist would study insects. As our sorry band of delirious troops die one by one, the futility of their battle becomes apparent. What need of fighting when their enemy is self-devouring?

On the strength of their surrealist masterpiece, *Un Chien Andalou*, Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí were commissioned by Marie-Laurie and Charles de Noailles in 1929 to make another short film. The Noailles, owners of a private cinema on the Place des États-Unis, had previously helped in the productions of Jacques Manuel, Man Ray and Pierre Chenal. (4) This time they had sound to play with, thanks to Tobis-Klang. The result is a hybrid of silent and sound film, with some extraordinary experimentation. Wagner, Debussy and Mendelssohn are juxtaposed with the Good Friday Drums of Calanda. Buñuel speaks of this drumming in *My Last Sigh* (5):

When two groups beating two different tempi meet on one of the village streets, they engage in a veritable duel which may last as long as an hour - or at least until the weaker group relents and takes up the victor's rhythm. By the early hours of Saturday morning, the skin on the drums is stained with blood, even though the beating hands belong to hardworking peasants. (21)

Majorcans = corrupt nobility. Drums = working-class sincerity.

The couple, known as 'The Man' and 'The Woman' and played by Gaston Modot and Lya Lys, are torn apart by the Church, bourgeois social codes and dramatic oedipal conflicts within themselves. Throughout the film, the pair are forced to defer the consummation of their passion, which leads to all sorts of erotic displacements. The most famous example of this process of fetishisation is in the scene where Lys performs fellatio on the marble toes of the statue of Venus. However, my personal favorite is the sequence where Modot becomes transfixed by various advertising images in the street. In a Barthesian comedy of errors, these signs of commercial mass-production transform into highly-charged masturbatory images in the mind's eye of our anthropomorphite, Modot.

L'amour fou (crazy love) conflicts with decency.

In a sudden fit of rage, Modot, the frustrated lover, stamps on a humble beetle. Later, this action is mimicked by the passer-by who takes his rage out on a violin. The beetle and the violin are characterised by the carapace, the smashing of which was one of the optimum goals of surrealism. Smash the shell and let the demons spill out, the symptoms of insane logic.

Modot strikes Lys' mother, the Marquess of X, after she spills a drink on his hand. We are reminded of Dalí's 'Sometimes I Spit for Pleasure on my Mother's Portrait'. Freud out of control - misread - celebrated.

The Minister of the Interior's sudden death leaves his body inexplicably plastered to the ceiling. In an orgasmic moment, Lya Lys exclaims "What joy to have murdered our children!" We recall an earlier scene where a Gamekeeper cuddles his son, then following the boys misbehaviour, takes pot shots at him with a revolver.

The 'feudal' drummers hold their duel/ the scorpion devours the rat/Lya Lys-as-praying-mantis destroys Modot. Max Ernst's drawing of a praying mantis appears in the program of the screening at Studio 28.


Buñuel continually manipulates time, space and *mise en scène* to pervert the logic of narrative continuity (6). His structuring device is the *faux raccord*, mismatches that produce oneiric, transformed images of reality. However, Hollywood is not far away. In a homage to U.S. silent comedy, a toy giraffe comes flying out of a window, Modot kicks a small dog, who, incidentally, must have survived this trauma, as he remained a family pet at the Buñuels' house. His name, by the way, was 'Dalou'.

L'Âge d'or has shocked, repelled and scandalised cinema-goers for seventy years now. This kind of relentless assault on the repressive social strategies of the bourgeoisie can be seen more recently in films like *Dogme 1 - Festen/The Celebration* (1998). As we glimpse the beauty of a sky reflected, the film catapults us into the present day. Looking around, such impulses still seem cogent. While *l'amour fou* does not conquer all in *L'age d'or*, it is the possibility of this love forever deferred that continues to surface as resistance. Even now.


This film screened at the [Melbourne Cinémathèque](#) on April 26 at 7:00 p.m.

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Endnotes

(1) From the manifesto written and illustrated by the surrealist group included in the original programme of *L'Âge d'or*. See Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí. *L'Âge d'or and Un Chien Andalou: Films by Luis Buñuel*. Trans. Marianne Alexandre. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1968. 8. 

(2) Hammond, Paul. *L'Âge d'or*. London: BFI Publishing, 1997. 7. 

(3) Buñuel, Luis and Salvador Dalí. *L'Âge d'or and Un Chien Andalou: Films by Luis Buñuel*. 11. 

(4) See Hammond, p. 36. 

(5) Buñuel, Luis. *My Last Sigh*. Trans. Abigail Israel. New York: Vintage Books, 1983. 

(6) Lyon, Elisabeth H. "Luis Buñuel: The Process of Dissociation in Three Films." *Cinema Journal*. 8.1 (1973): 45-8. 

See also

The Surreal Feel: Luis Buñuel compiled by Bill Mousoulis

Un Chien Andalou by Michael Koller

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