

Document Citation

Title	Golden oldie
Author(s)	J. Hoberman J. Hoberman
Source	<i>Village Voice</i>
Date	1994 Aug 16
Type	review
Language	English English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	
Film Subjects	L'âge d'or (The golden age), Buñuel, Luis, 1930

By J. Hoberman

L'Age d'Or

Directed and edited

by Luis Buñuel

Written by Buñuel
and Salvador Dalí

Produced by Charles de Noailles

At the Metropolitan

Museum of Art

August 13 and 16 through 19

Among his achievements, dubious and otherwise, Salvador Dalí can lay claim to collaborating on the most notorious opening sequence in movie history. *Un Chien Andalou*, which Dalí and Luis Buñuel first sprang on the world in fall 1929, begins with the image of Buñuel stropping a razor. An actress sits facing the camera and, after several cutaways (including one to a sliver of cloud crossing the full moon), Buñuel enters the frame and appears to slice his razor across her eye. Tight close-up of socket, wound, and viscous fluid plopping out.

That slit eye, as any first year film student can tell you, belonged to a sheep. Still, *Un Chien Andalou* (An Andalusian Dog), shown these days as a video installation in the Metropolitan's current exhibit, "Salvador Dalí: The Early Years," was the first film that sought to assault, rather than please, the spectator—and thus remains the founding gesture of cine-transgression.

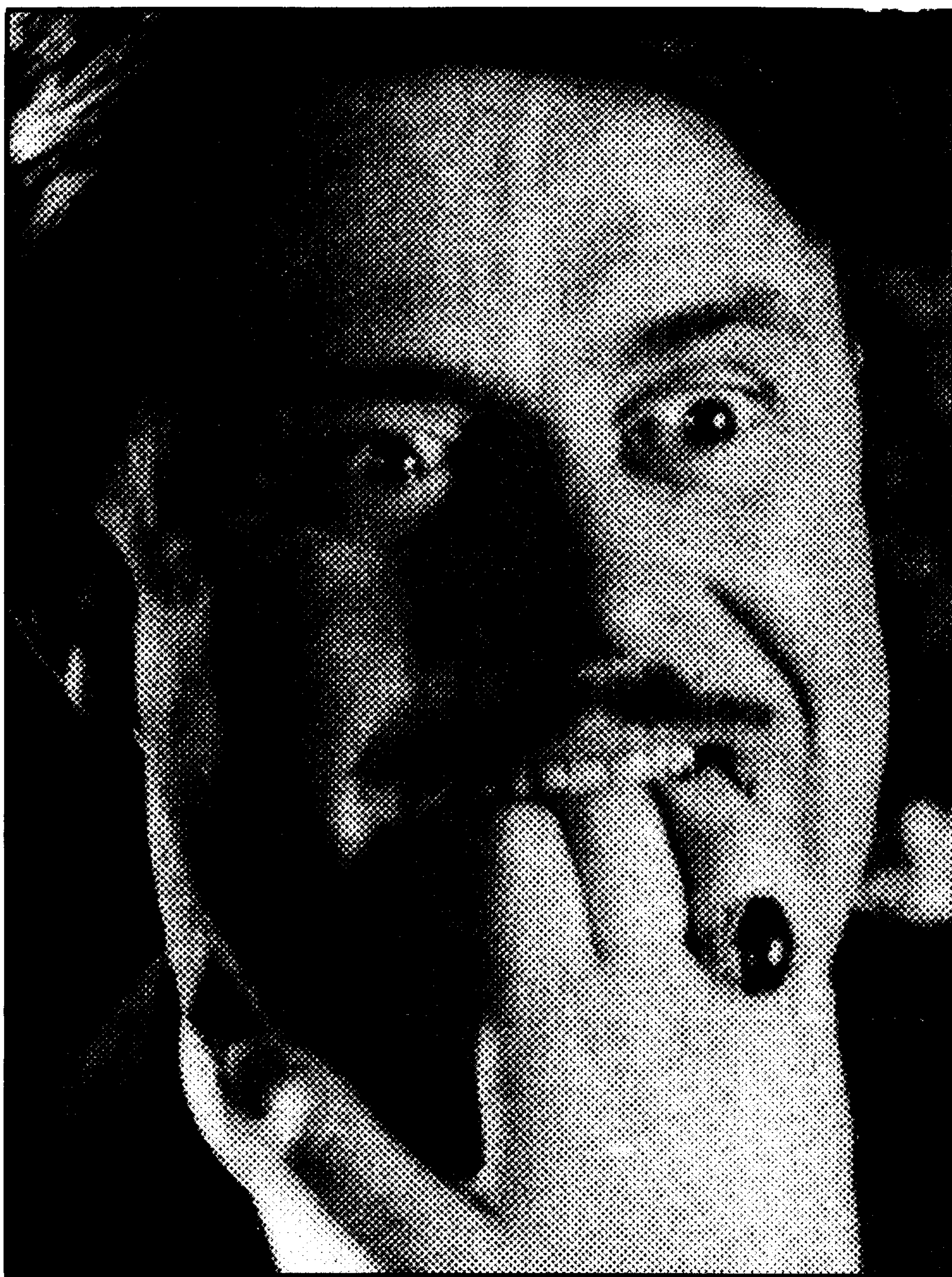
Punks when they made the film (down to Dalí's mohawk), Dalí and Buñuel met at the University of Madrid. (The Met show includes Dalí's austere straightforward 1924 portrait of Buñuel.) As would-be hipsters, both followed the adventures of Surrealism from afar and, in January 1929, began work on their own surrealist scenario. Many, if not most, of the visual ideas came from Dalí, although the theoretical framework was supplied by Buñuel. Dalí had only a limited role in the shooting, involved mainly in the scene where the male protagonist is harnessed to a grand piano tricked out with dead donkeys and live priests.

Buñuel had worked at the margins of the French film industry and *Un Chien Andalou* was distinguished from earlier avant-garde movies by its use of professional actors, standard lighting, and classic editing—all put in the service of dreamlike disjunctions, further abetted by deceptive captions. To the degree that the movie had a plot, it concerned a thwarted seduction, but its characters were no more stable than the narrative space.

When the surrealists heard that two unknown Spaniards were showing a "surrealist" film, they were naturally suspicious—but maximum leader André Breton was given a preview and found the description warranted. The premiere was held in a small Latin Quarter ciné and attended by tout-Paris—a few avant-aristos, Picasso, Le Corbusier, Cocteau, and the entire Surrealist group. According to Dalí, *Un Chien Andalou* "plunged like a dagger into the heart of Paris... Our film ruined in a single evening 10 years of pseudo-intellectual postwar avant-gardism."

In short, then as now, *Un Chien Andalou* was a total crowd pleaser, and this immediate success helped boost Dalí's career; he had his first Paris solo exhibition during the film's lengthy run at Studio 28, a still existent movie house in the foothills of Montmartre, not

Golden Oldie



Dalí would: Gaston Modot in Buñuel and Dalí's *L'Age d'Or*

far from a Dalí boutique that gives kitsch a bad name. Buñuel, however, had wanted to embarrass spectators. "Before the show, I'd put some stones in my pocket to throw at the audience in case of disaster... After the film ended, I listened to the prolonged applause and dropped my projectiles discreetly, one by one, on the floor behind the screen."

What to do for an encore? In late 1929, Dalí and Buñuel were commissioned to write a script for a wealthy nobleman, Vicomte Charles de Noailles. Again, working together for a week, Dalí provided Buñuel with a number of fantastic images and outrageous notions. Once more, Buñuel shot and edited the movie himself. But this time, however, he raised the stakes by making *L'Age d'Or* (The Golden Age) at once more banal and more shocking than *Un Chien Andalou*—privileging politics over poetics.

A collage of modes, *L'Age d'Or* begins as a documentary on scorpions and soon shifts to an entropic costume drama in which four archbishops take possession of the same barren landscape. Events turn blatantly allegorical when a flotilla deposits a sizable cast of diplomats, soldiers, and members of the clergy. (Buñuel more than

doubled the film's original 350,000 franc budget.) The newcomers found Imperial Rome on the archbishops' remains but their ceremony is disrupted by the sounds of lovemaking. The passionate couple, played by Gaston Modot and Lya Lys, is dragged apart—thus setting up a continuous interplay between repressive civilization and rampant impulse behavior. (Modot manages to break away from his captors long enough to kick a fox terrier.)

Everyday life in Imperial Rome mixes aerial shots culled from newsreels with vignettes of houses collapsing and a man using a violin for a football. Meanwhile, Lys and Modot are reunited at an aristocratic lawn party that suggests the missing link between Mack Sennett's slapstick and Jean Renoir's *The Rules of the Game* (in which Modot would play a crucial role): A peasant cart rolls through the soiree, the kitchen catches fire, the gamekeeper shoots his naughty son, but only one incident causes a stir: The hostess spills a drop of wine on Modot's hand and he slaps her—an offense far worse than murder.

Although Buñuel would write that *L'Age d'Or* was about "the irresistible force that thrusts two people together [and] the impossibility of their ever becoming one,"

he scarcely idealizes the lovers, who, having been introduced rolling in the mud, are no less self-absorbed than their fellow bourgeois. As the guests gather in the garden for a recital of Wagner's *Liebtestod*, Lys and Modot resume their lovemaking with thrilling ineptitude—biting each other's hands, falling off the lawn furniture. When Modot is called away to take a telephone call from the minister of the interior, Lys consoles herself by fellating the toe of a marble statue.

After interpolated newsreel shots imply Rome's collapse, the lovers move to a new plane of affection, tenderly hugging as they communicate telepathically in sleepy pillow talk. (In an exchange proposed by Dalí, Lys exclaims "What joy to have murdered our children!" as the blood-spattered Modot croons "Mon amour!") It's all too much for the orchestra conductor who, clutching his head and abandoning his podium, approaches the couple to be embraced by the curious Lys. Now, to the sound of heavy drum rolls, Modot's head explodes; he leaves the garden to trash his lover's boudoir, ripping up her feather mattress and throwing a giraffe out the window.

"At that exact moment but very far away," a title informs us, four

libertines have concluded a season of unspeakable sexual orgies. The reference is to the Marquis de Sade's then banned *120 Days of Sodom*; the depraved Duke of Blangis emerges as a bleary-eyed Jesus (played by an actor who specialized in the role). The intimation of an offscreen sex crime is capped by a burst of jaunty music, the brief image of a wooden cross festooned with scalps, and the end title.

L'Age d'Or climaxes with murder rather than sexual release, but despite this and several instances of blatant scatology, it refuses to be as visceral as *Un Chien Andalou*. Thanks to his mastery of montage, Buñuel naturalizes Dalí's images into a duplicitous rhythm of normality and outrage, suggesting instances of sex and violence far more extreme than any he represents while contriving ef-

Film

frontiers so offhanded you can't believe you've actually seen them.

Buñuel hoped to open *L'Age d'Or* at a glitzy theater on the Champs Elysées. He was fortunate that the more modest Studio 28 managed to get it past the censors—if only temporarily.

Un Chien Andalou had played at Studio 28 from November 1929 through May 1930 with only intermittent complaints. But a week after *L'Age d'Or* opened in late October 1930, a screening was disrupted by two groups, the Patriots League and the Anti-Semitic League. Crying "Down with the Jews!" (the producer's mother-in-law was of Jewish descent), the rightists detonated stink bombs, hurled inkpots, trashed the seats, smashed the windows, and slashed the lobby exhibition of surrealist paintings. (The Met show includes photos of these desecrated Dalí, Ernst, Man Ray, Miro, and Tanguy canvases.)

The police took action—against the film. Censors first asked for the elision of two sequences that featured the archbishops and another showing a man with an unbuttoned fly. Then, after an open letter appeared in *Le Figaro* objecting to "Bolshevik excrement on the screen," they demanded the elimination of the utterly superfluous title "The Duke of Blangis is obviously Jesus Christ." Then the Italian embassy complained and a front-page *Figaro* article demanded the film be banned—which it was, for over 50 years.

Two of the extant three prints were impounded—although versions of the third were shown, under clandestine circumstances, in London, Barcelona, New York, and the outskirts of Paris. Expelled from his clubs and threatened with excommunication, Noailles asked Buñuel to withdraw the film. The negative was locked under seven seals and only presented, by the vicomte's heirs, to Centre Georges Pompidou in 1989; it's their print (sans subtitles) that the Met is showing.

Dalí had no problem with scandal; censorship on the other hand was counterproductive. He would later write that *L'Age d'Or* left him "terribly disappointed... The film was a caricature of my ideas. Catholicism was attacked in an obvious way, and quite without poetry." ■