

Document Citation

Title	L'age d'or
Author(s)	Jean-Paul Dreyfus
Source	<i>Publisher name not available</i>
Date	
Type	book excerpt
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	3
Subjects	Buñuel, Luis (1900-1983), Calanda, Spain Surrealism in motion pictures
Film Subjects	L'âge d'or (The golden age), Buñuel, Luis, 1930

foliage and the waves; let them be torn to pieces so that we can reconstruct them into voices more true to life than natural sounds! The human voice possesses accents which have not yet been revealed; from these the cinema will produce its own style. We will draw out and extend unexpected words until they acknowledge they are lying. We will uncoil cyclones in the cradle, and every child will hear the grass growing.

JEAN EPSTEIN (1897–1954) had been a leading French film theorist and filmmaker in the 1920s. With the transition to sound, he tried to maintain his independence with several personal films set in Brittany—*Mor-Vran* (1931) and *L'Or des mers* (1933)—but was forced to make a half-dozen *chansons filmées* [short films whose images were selected and arranged to accompany popular songs] (1931–1932) and then commercial films such as *L'Homme à l'épave* (1933) and *La Chateleine du Liban* (1934).

A reference to some of the technical innovations and stylistic features associated with the films of Abel Gance, Marcel L'Herbier, Jean Grémillon, and Epstein himself in the late 1920s.

"Puss-in-the-corner" is a village children's game. The reference to the steeple may be to a sequence in Epstein's *Finis terrae* (1929), where a feverish boy on the island of Bannec is linked miraculously to the villagers of Ouessant through a church spire and its tolling bell.

This reference suggests that the history of the French newsreel, particularly the early sound newsreel, demands further study. Moreover, it raises a question about the contribution of Germaine Dulac (1882–1942)—the former avant-garde filmmaker, theorist, and ciné-club leader—who directed GFFA's weekly newsreel during the early 1930s.

JEAN-PAUL DREYFUS, "L'Age d'or"

From "L'Age d'or," *La Revue du cinéma*, 17 (December 1930), 55–56.

IF . . . you quickly discount the fadish curiosity of a certain clique of people who were astonished at the very least by *Un Chien andalou*—which upset the small-minded notions of their artistic and contemplative universe (you know: that eye split open by a pitiless razor!)—we alone were the ones who awaited *L'Age d'or* with all the trusting and revealing anticipation which those words can bear.

After *Un Chien andalou*, *L'Age d'or* confirms that we don't yet need to complain about the bankruptcy of the cinema or to give way to the blackest pessimism.

It seems futile here to rehash the empty, exhausted quarrels over *Un Chien andalou*. *L'Age d'or* proclaims itself a "Surrealist film," and that is how it has to be judged and understood. As such, it must endure the usual attacks by the official adversaries of Surrealism or receive the full support of all those for whom Surrealism is their private or public *raison d'être*.

Let's not then speak here of poetry, art, plasticity, picturesqueness, "human values," *oeuvres*, and other such formulas appropriate to the rest of the

world. They are as out of place as the idiotic conviction of certain people that they are being "put on," those who fail to fathom the real irony of this expression.

If *L'Age d'or* has not freed unconscious feelings in you, if it has not filled your eyes and ears with enough broad occult power to reveal the virtual, certain meaning of things, the liberation, the humor which reaches the point of intolerable torture, then you cannot be recognized as one of us.

It's too bad if the implacable logic of the absurd remains strange, if the antiharmonic, antipoetic lucidity of the dream and the unconscious remains alien to you.

I don't want to try to "recount" *L'Age d'or*, being too afraid of making a "story" out of this desperate pursuit of a wonderful love across the ferocious and cunning snares of social life and of grossly betraying thereby the private personality of Buñuel.

What he allows of himself to show through in his film, which is contemptuous of symbols and marvelous interventions, is his obsession with sacrilege at the expense of the church, Christ, and concupiscent curates, an obsession which reveals a mind not yet completely free of a deep faith and mysticism, of a childhood far too long submissive to the clever discipline of the Marist fathers. It seems to me a bit "shady" from the intellectual point of view to bring together four people around a table to eat a caper sauce of consecrated wafers. There is something also suspect in gorging oneself on beef on Friday, with the doors and windows shut, while eating in moderation on other days, or in passing under ladders or opening umbrellas in houses out of personal bravado and antisuperstition. Faith is far from dead in the mind of a man who sets his features in a frightful grimace and cries out in blasphemy: "If a God exists in heaven, let me stay this way until I die!"

Do me the honor of not taking all this as a reproach to the antireligious side of Buñuel's film. The tranquil impudence of prelates and priests, the shameful, deceitful commerce of a legion of hypocrites in the shadows of Christianity, the symbol of moral repression, all this ultimately deserves to be combated, unquestionably and mercilessly.

And that naturally leads me to speak of the "offspring" of Buñuel's film and the influence it may have from the standpoint of liberation. In order to assume its true meaning and separate itself from a suspect mysticism, sacrilege has to explode in broad daylight. If you spit in a basin of holy water, don't wait to do so unnoticed, or else the gesture as well as the moral and personal satisfaction it produces will be lost along with their full value. The satisfaction which the defilement of veneration creates can and must only come from the stupefied and menacing censure which it produces. In such occasions, it is a veritable blessing to provoke reactions of confusion,

shame, and even aggressive anger in one's adversary. That's why I am grateful to *L'Age d'or* for the stupefaction, the mute and hostile panic into which it will plunge hundreds of spectators; that's why I am grateful to Buñuel for having ended his film on an image of the cross decked out in grotesque, hairy ornaments, to the sound of a happy carnival tune.

Many people have expressed surprise at the persistent presence of an irresistible humor [in this film], which they didn't know whether they should give way to or resist. Numerous images and phrases and often entire episodes contain the ferocious and liberating seeds of a "comedy" unknown to the "humorists," a distraught and disturbing humor whose wellsprings adjoin those of anguish and terror. But let those who laughed open-mouthed before *Un Chien andalou* not be deceived here!

One of the things people have reproached Buñuel with quite readily in his new film is its technical poverty. Once and for all, let's not go on worrying about technique! Let's grant it its place, which is completely mechanical and artificial. It's not the unsurpassed technical perfection of American films that, to my mind, determines the quality of the American cinema; and, for that reason, it has never touched me very deeply. Once more *L'Age d'or* verifies this opinion—that one willingly overlooks a deficiency in technique in order to follow a wonderful "story" impatiently. If it's true of certain parts (notably, the soundtrack added after the shooting), if it's true that *L'Age d'or* smells of cardboard, if the photography is poor, if the silent scenes follow the sound scenes in the disagreeable style of *Sous les toits de Paris*, if there are one or two slow sections in this feature-length film, none of that can harm or prejudice the spiritual perfection of the film.¹

Masking its true intentions under a sordid aspect, it comes unveiled for those who know how to see the Surrealist anguish which is its true nature. So what if *L'Age d'or* has neither the marvelous unity nor the formal perfection of *Un Chien andalou*! Those who will complain about such things, those who will admit being embarrassed by certain deficiencies, at the same time will be confessing that they have been outdistanced by *L'Age d'or* or have been left here below (with the *talkies*).

JEAN-PAUL DREYFUS (1909–1985) or Jean-Paul Le Chanois (after 1940) was a Paris journalist, film critic for *La Revue du cinéma*, actor in Jacques Prévert's *Groupe Octobre* (1931), founder and director of the *Fédération des Théâtres Ouvriers de France* (1933), and assistant director on several films, notably Jean Renoir's *La Vie est à nous* (1936) and *La Marseillaise* (1938). In the 1940s and 1950s, he became a representative filmmaker of what the *Nouvelle Vague* critics called the "cinema of quality."

¹ I don't want to forget to mention the quality of the acting and the admirable couple which Gaston Modot and Lya Lys form out of a love which, without being especially *happy*, nevertheless provokes a very natural disorder. Nor forget the disturbing voice of Pierre Prévert and his unrebelling misery.—AU.

GEORGES ALTMAN, "Censorship in France: *L'Age d'or*"

From "La Censure en France," *Ça, c'est du cinéma* (Paris: Les Revues, 1931), 217–26.

THE FRENCH public accepts censorship with remarkable equanimity. . . . And the history of *L'Age d'or* offers us a comprehensive example of that censorship as political, moral, governmental, religious, diplomatic, etc.

From Buñuel's film we would prefer to remember only the dynamic quality of revolt and the ruthless satire of several images thrown roughly in the face of fashionable society. But its prohibition serves to expose the proceedings of a censorship which is as hypocritical as it is servile. Indeed, *L'Age d'or* was shown for the Censorship Commission during one of its usual screenings on 1 October. These men and women, among them M. Ginisty¹ and M. Benoît (Benoît d'Almazian), laughed a lot at Buñuel's work and found no reason to censor such a "joke." Beginning on 28 November, the film was then shown at Studio 28 in peace and quiet until, on 3 December, a remarkably well-organized provocation broke out: followers of the Anti-Jewish League (?) and the League of Patriots (according to official statements, at least) ransacked the hall and exhibition area of books and posters.² Although alerted, the police arrived a half-hour late. A violent campaign was launched in the press: *Figaro*, *Ami du peuple*, *Echo de Paris*, and *Liberté*,³ in their customary homilies, clamored for the prohibition of such a sacrilegious, blasphemous, wretched film. After these incidents, the censors timorously requested the excision of two images representing several bishops, at first living and then decomposed. Meanwhile, it seems, the Italian ambassador (!) lodged a complaint with Quai d'Orsay [the Foreign Affairs Office], noting that the film contained satirical allusions to the Vatican, the pope, and the priesthood, and that one little solemn man with a mustache was probably a caricature of the Italian sovereign, without his imposing presence! That was too much: at 10:00 A.M. on 10 December, the chief of police [Jean Chiappe] decided to ban the film.

. . . . An embarrassingly pompous statement from the Censorship Commission announced that *L'Age d'or* was banned, *after examination*. It was signed two months before. The censors allowed themselves to be persuaded with indignant French virtue: "We are certainly not puritans and we think that Paris would no longer be Paris if tomorrow this sort of fantasy, this spirit of liberty, which does have some charm after all, disappeared (*Ami du peuple*, 18 December 1930)." . . . But, all the same, Paris would no longer be Paris, France would no longer be France, as the song goes, and the French would no longer be French . . . if *L'Age d'or* had been allowed to follow its course with impunity. "Listen to what foreigners [in our

midst], come from who knows where," the paper continued, "are spreading about with glee: Golden Age, garbage age."¹ And, at least twice in the same diatribe, the writer "bore witness" to the "brave agents" of public order, the "brave policemen" who saved the cinema hall, suddenly now transformed into experts on the cinema, capable of judging whether or not *L'Age d'or* merited prohibition!

The articles in which *Ami du peuple*, *Echo de Paris*, *Figaro*, and *Liberté* laid the groundwork for the banning of Buñuel's film—plus the triumphant commentaries which followed the act of censorship in the same papers—exemplify the tone and sense of imperative which the French censors are bound to obey, without having to be asked twice. What about the Parisian sense of fantasy and spirit of liberty referred to by *Ami du peuple*? We know what kind of cinema that paper offers us and what kind it helps the censors keep from us. It's also probably in the name of combatting the "foreign cinema" that they totally ban Soviet films and that they shamefully emasculate the films of Pabst.² This spirit of liberty is defended carefully against all "foreign bodies" which would tarnish the pure qualities of the race. The cinema of *Liberté*, *Echo de Paris*, and *Figaro* is a cinema-of-lies, which the French screens offer us weekly, with its smug optimism, its digestive platitudes, its sex dramas and corny vaudevilles, which are all that we have of French *fantasy* today—and which allows them to say to the film suppliers: "We are not puritans . . ."

So film censorship, in France as elsewhere, as an autonomous administrative organism, does not really have an independent existence and is, in fact, not at all in control of its decisions. Born out of the demands for moral, social, and political conservatism in a given form of society, film censorship is no more than one of the cogs of the general conformism into which the cinema—that powerful weapon of dream, revolt, and truth—is forced to fit. If 250,000,000 people did not go into the 60,000 cinemas across the world at least once a week, if the film had only the limited influence of the book or the theater, film censorship would scarcely exist. The more the cinema confirms its collective power, that ability which it alone possesses to bring together the masses of the world, the more the forces of conservatism and constraint will organize and nurture censorship. In France, the *L'Age d'or* affair is characteristic, as its title suggests: the lowly press campaign and the lordly maneuvers of the police force a supposedly independent Censorship Commission to play its "trump" card and pretend that it had been deceived, that if it had only known . . . Similarly, in Germany, the official Commission is forced to play its hand because of unfettered racism and Hugenberg's veto.⁶ Along with this censorship, it's the "spirit of the age" itself which conditions it and makes possible such attacks. And the acts of censorship at least have some utility in that they allow us to rediscover, in the glare of scandal, the eternal Baseness destroying

the Spirit. In the combat already joined against film censorship, furthermore, it is necessary to secure the greatest degree of publicity about the facts, motions, procedures, and decisions of different acts of censorship.

There is never anything in the current commercial film production which the censors attack, for we know that most French films enjoy a "favorable presumption" through their solid celebration of platitude and all their bourgeois virtues, that a little Parisian or American love story adds a bit of spice to life, without harming the genius of the race. All this production, which is a real and permanent insult to life and man and which unreels in bimonthly programs in the cinemas of Paris and its suburbs, is tolerated, encouraged, and praised by the very people who proclaim *L'Age d'or* "injurious to everything having to do with human dignity (*sic*)."

GEORGES ALTMAN (1884-?) was a literary editor for *L'Humanité* and then *Monde* in the late 1920s. As he turned to film criticism in *Monde* and *La Lumière*, Altman also took over Moussinac's position as film critic for *L'Humanité* for a few years in the early 1930s.

¹ Paul Ginistry (1855-1932), a minor dramatist and critic, was head of the Censorship Commission at the time. In 1932, Edmond Sée (1875-1959) was appointed head of a newly reconstituted Censorship Commission; previously Sée had been president of the Association of Dramatic Critics.

² The Surrealists had organized a special exhibition in conjunction with the screening of *L'Age d'or* at Jean Mauclair's Studio 28. According to other sources, it was the Jeunesse Patriotes (the youth organization of the older, anti-Dreyfusard Ligue des patriotes) as well as the Camelots du roi (the young "shock troops" of Action française) that perpetrated this riot—see, for instance, André Thirion, *Revolutionaries Without Revolution*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel (New York: Macmillan, 1975), 256-57.

³ Owner François Coty had taken over as political editor of *Le Figaro* in 1927, and shifted the paper further to the right. Coty also owned and directed *L'Ami du peuple*, which was then the second largest daily in circulation in Paris. Under the influence of General Castelnau, leader of the Ligue des patriotes, *L'Echo de Paris* (which had fallen badly in circulation during the 1920s) was now an unofficial organ of the National Catholic Federation.

⁴ The French phrase is *l'age d'or*, *l'age d'ordure*. Here Altman provides a good example of the xenophobic attitude toward so-called inferior and dangerous foreign "races" that increasingly marked the French press, especially but not exclusively the right-wing press.

⁵ Pabst's *Westfront 1918* (1930) and *Three Penny Opera* (1931) were both cut severely by the French censors.

⁶ A reference to Alfred Hugenberg, the former leader of the extreme right-wing Nationalist Party, who was chairman of the German film production company, UFA (among other media interests), and who would become the first minister of economic affairs in Hitler's government.

RENÉ CLAIR, "Le Million"

From "Le Million," *Cinémonde*, 124 (5 March 1931), reprinted in Roger Icart, "L'Avènement du film parlant," *Les Cahiers de la cinémathèque*, 13-14-15 (1974), 180-81.

THE SUBJECT OF *Le Million* is that of a musical vaudeville, which includes a great number of humorous situations and quite a lot of quick-