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BUNUEL'S L'AGE D'OR

Never before in a film, and with such force and such contempt for social mores, have society and its accessories, the police, the Church, the armed forces, the family, the State even, received such a kick in the ass...

To judge from the public's reaction to the first showing of L'AGE D'OR, Moussinac's assessment of the impact of Buñuel's second film is fairly accurate. The sequence of events beginning with the riot during the premiere on December 3, 1930, at the Studio 28 in Paris, and ending with the banning of the film and the seizure of the print by the police 9 days later gives us a good idea of the violence of the public's outrage. The Viscount of Noailles, the producer of the film, proud of having made a film -- he also produced Cocteau's Blood of a poet the same year -- but totally ignorant of its content, had invited Parisian high society. However, there were also a number of uninvited guests in the theater.

The riot began with the shot of the monstrance being removed from the one of the cars bringing the guests to the reception given by the Marquis of X ... at an elegant estate near Rome. The car stopped in front of the door. The chauffeur opened the door, picked up the monstrance which was standing on the floor in the back of the car. He put the monstrance on the ground to allow the occupants to step out of the car. This shot was followed by a close-up of the lady's sensual legs briefly seen next to the monstrance. This shot was the signal for the beginning of the demonstration. There were shouts of "Death to the Jews!" "We'll show them that there still are Christians in France!" Some stinck bombs (some reports say bombs) exploded in the theater, the screen was smeared with ink, the audience beaten up, the furniture destroyed, and the paintings by Dali, Man Ray, Tanguy, Ernst exhibited in the lobby were lacerated. Members of the League of Patriots, and of the Anti-Jewish League interrupted the projection of the film and fled.

The next day, right-wing papers began a campaign to demand that drastic steps be taken against the film. The league of Patriots sent a note protesting "the immorality of this bolchevist spectacle" claiming that the audience had provoked the scandal. A city councilman asked the Prefect of Police to take measures against the "surrealist smut". The management of the Studio 28 was requested to cut two shots of the bishops seen at the beginning of the film standing on coastal rocks mumbling some vague prayers. The showing of the film resumed on December 5. On December 8, the Prefect of Police requested the deletion of the sentence at the end of the film : "The Count of Blangis is obviously Jesus-Christ (because of the obvious reference to the Marquis de Sade). The next day, Mauclair the theater manager, was informed that a board of censors would screen the film on the 11th. The next day, he was officially informed of the action taken against him (a fine which could go as high as 500F and the temporary closing of the theater). L'Age d'Or has never been shown commercially.

Although Dali is mentioned in the credits for his work on the script, his contribution was minimal. He complains in The Secret Life of Salvador Dali that he was left out of the shooting, and says that he was terribly disappointed when he saw the film because he felt that Buñuel had made a caricature of his ideas: "What I had in mind was to express the violence of love permeated by the splendor of the achievements of the Catholic myths..." He found Buñuel's attack on Catholicism vulgar and sophomoric.

L'Age d'Or is generally considered one of the most successful of the surrealist films produced between the two wars. The Surrealist had quickly recognized the potential of the new medium "It is the impossible, the unexpected, dream, surprise, the kind of lyricism that cleanses the soul of its vulgarity and sends it bursting with enthusiasm on the barricades and in adventures that we ask of cinema; we ask of cinema what love and life refuse us, mystery and miracle." Written in 1927, Desnos' remark pretty much sums up their attitude towards cinema. It also implies a certain indifference, not to say contempt, for the cinematic virtuosity of the contemporary avant-garde film, what was then called "pure cinema," the films made by Gance's followers: Delluc, Epstein L'Herbier.

For the surrealists the frantic search for new cinematic forms -- the language of cinema -- was the very antithesis of what cinema should be: free from literary and theatrical effects, spontaneous, a genuine manifestation of the Marvellous. Yet, too often, Surrealism restricted its use of cinema to the projection of private images, imitations of dream-like images and rather contrived visual effects which rarely succeeded in communicating the Mystery and the Beauty of life they sought to express. They conceived of the visual language more of an equivalent or a translation of written language. Artaud alone must be given credit for insisting that cinema must devise means "to project the very essence of language and to transpose the action on a plane where any translation would become unnecessary and where this action would operate on the mind almost intuitively." He believed that cinema had a language of its own and that better than the theater it can act directly on the spectator's mind, so much so that the distance between it and the audience can be totally "The cinema is endowed, particularly, with the power of an innocuous and direct poison, a sub-cutaneous injection of morphine. That is why the object of the film cannot be inferior to the power of the film's action -- and must be connected with the marvellous."

Unlike earlier surrealist films, L'Age d'Or is highly controlled. Some critics have argued that its extremely balanced structure is the very opposite of surrealist art which must be free and spontaneous, subject only to the laws of chance and the secret language of the unconscious. The same comment applies to Duchamp, de Chirico and Magritte. Psychic automatism is but one of the many techniques that can be used to free man's imagination. One could just as easily reverse the argument and point out that all films made in the twenties or more recently by the most gifted filmmakers of the American independent cinema achieve an effect which more like that of an illustration than a genuine transformation and transgression which are among the essential characteristics of surrealist art.

Unlike Un Chien andalou, L'Age d'Or is not the result of semi-automatic processes. Absurd or strange images occur frequently throughout the film but, unlike those of earlier surrealist films, they are carefully inserted in the structure of the narrative precisely to undermine its effectiveness. Juxtaposed with images depicting scenes from everyday life, they acquire a violence unparalleled in earlier films, including Un Chien andalou. This process of dissociation or displacement which is one of the major innovations of modern art, operates at every level in the film, within individual shots, matching shots, within sequences, the juxtaposition of entire sequences, and the major segments of the narrative. Artaud referred to this kind of juxtaposition as "l'imprevu objectif," inadequately translated as objective chance. Speaking of the theater he defined as "the unexpected, not in situations but in the things themselves, the sudden and untimely jump from a mental image to a real image; for example, a man cursing sees suddenly and realistically materialized before him the image of his curse." Artaud's "imprevu objectif" is essentially an extension of Breton's famous definition of the image in the first Manifesto of Surrealism. He too defined the value of the image on the basis of the intensity of the "spark" produced by the fortuitous juxtaposition to two different realities. "the value of the image depends upon the beauty of the spark obtained; it is, consequently, a function of the difference of potential between the two conductors.. When the difference exists only slightly, as in a comparison, the spark is lacking." Bunuel uses variations of this principle very effectively: the blending of

incompatible elements within individual shots -- the bishops on the rocks, the cow on Lya Lys's bed, the toilet paper burning, the Cart crossing the reception hall while the guests are sipping their drinks, Modot carrying the plow in Lya Lys's bedroom, the fire in the kitchen, Modot's bloody face at the climax of the love duet while the orchestra is playing Wagner's Tristan and Isolde, the death of Tristan specifically, or the women's hair pinned on the cross at the end of the film while the music is playing a paso doble.

At the level of the sequence there are numerous variations of the process of dissociation: the manipulation and mixing of time and space, anachronisms, the permutation of sequences out of their logical order, as, for example, the relationship established between the scorpions, the bandits, the bishops and the foundation of Rome, or later, the connection between Modot's frustration and the orgy scene of the Marquis de Sade; the careful selection of naturalistic and incongruous details reinforced by Bunuel's fetishism -- hands, legs, feet, hair, blood, pieces of clothing -- and the insertion of totally unexpected scenes, some incongruous like the bathroom shots and all the sexual allusions, some taken from newsreels like the riot scenes, the house exploding "sometimes, on a fine Sunday afternoon," as we are told blandly, or the views of Rome taken from the air. Finally whole sequences showing assorted forms of aggression are inserted, each bringing up each part of the film to a climax: the scorpion killing the rat, the gameskeeper killing his son, the girl's murder offscreen at the very end of the film by Jesus Christ here identified with the Marquis de Sade. In every instance we have an example of the process of dissociation forcing on the viewer associations which are usually censored and repressed. That alone would be enough to place L'Age d'Or very high among the "Oeuvres maudites" of modern art. However, it is not so much the content of Bunuel's film which distinguishes it from other similar expressions of revolt and disgust, but the perfect matching of the formal structure of the film to its content. One of Bunuel's major innovations is his use of the faux-raccord, the systematic inversion of one of the central narrative device of filmmaking. Alone he understood that the only way cinema could approximate the power and intensity of the "spark" resulting from the bringing together of two distant "realities" -- the prererequisite of any surrealist image -- achieved by poetry was through the manipulation of elements uniquely combined in film: time and movement. Thus, Bunuel's rendering of "objective chance" is the faux-raccord thereby finding the perfect formal technical translation of Artaud's ideas.

It is not surprising that Bunuel should be admired by as different filmmakers as Godard, Resnais, Franju, Makavejev or Oshima.

Sound too is used very effectively to provide additional variations on the process of dissociation (this at the very beginning of the talkies) -- the bishops mumbling their prayers, the insect being crushed, the burst of the shotgun, the lovers' dialogue against Wagner's music, the sound of the steps on the pebbles, the toilet flush, the car horns. Compared to the use of sound by his contemporary, Bunuel sound is clearly 30 years ahead of his time. Long before Godard and Resnais, he understood how sound could be used not only to provide an ironic foil to undermine the image, but also how it could be used to create an entirely new kind of tension between the visual representation of a scene and its acoustic equivalent. Very often there is a flagrant discrepancy between the distance of the sound shown on the screen and its loudness, something very far or very small makes a sound out of proportion with its apparent size or distance. Music too is taken out of its normal context and used as an ironic equivalent to the visual message. One of the most striking uses of music is found in the passionate scene between the lovers when the orchestra is playing the Death of Tristan. Not only is the image particularly repulsive but then Modot is heard whispering in a sort of voiceover "I love you, I love you. Another typical image is the final piece heard

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Another typical example is the final piece heard at the very end of the film.

Throughout the film selections from Mendelssohn, Beethoven, Mozart, Debussy, Wagner were played. Suddenly when the image of the cross with the women's hair nailed upon it appears on the screen the music switches to a paso doble in a final ironic defiance. Bunuel further experimented with music in his next semi-documentary film about famine in Spain, in 1932. In Land without Bread the entire film is narrated as if it were a travelogue against a background of romantic music while shot after shot reveals an intolerable human misery. Forty years later, the film remains one of the most savage indictment of political and religious tyranny. As in L'Age d'Or there is no sentimentality. Bunuel achieves its purpose through the tension between sound and image. Franju, Resnais, Godard, Makavejev were among the few contemporary filmmakers to recognize Bunuel's very innovative use of sound.

Finally, and perhaps most important for the development of modern cinema. L'Age d'Or is told from a quasi-scientific viewpoint; the tone and style of the narration, the precision of the images, the apparent objectivity of the descriptions which parody documentary films or scientific films (the first sequence of the film describing the scorpion, the views of Rome, the reception at the Marquis of X... 's residence) -- there are actual sequences made up of newsreels footage, the riot scenes for example -- all juxtaposed with outrageous images prevent the film from turning into another allegory of modern decadence. The juxtaposition of incongruous images with "realistic" images appear at first to be an extension of Eisenstein's "montage of attraction". However, unlike Eisenstein's juxtapositions, Bunuel's images do not fuse into a new whole expressing metaphorically an abstract idea or dramatizing an emotion. In Eisenstein, the conflict between the images is resolved through their very juxtaposition. Far from breaking away from the 19th c. esthetic conventions, those of symbolism in particular, the montage of attraction is their logical and most perfect outcome. If Eisenstein's montage can be compared to any art movement, it is Cubism not Surrealism. In many ways, it carries one step further Wagner's most ambitious dream of a fusion of the arts, and this was confirmed by the evolution of Eisenstein's esthetics as reflected in Ivan the Terrible (part I) for example. In L'AGE d'Or, the incongruous images [see separate sheets on the process of displacement], the juxtaposition of shots, sequences, the tension between the larger segments of the film, between sound and image, and between the explosive content of the images and their flat formal treatment are never resolved within the context of the film. They must be resolved by the viewer and in the context of his own experience. In this sense, Bunuel's film is probably one of the most subversive films ever made because, negating the very conditions of its creation it can only be resolved in terms of political action. In this sense, it is a perfect answer to the Surrealists call for Revolution.

Bunuel's violent denunciation of modern Western civilization has retained its violence and its power because alone among the surrealists he was able to translate the message of Surrealism into a language perfectly suited to modern sensibility. In so doing, he also freed cinema from the constricting conventions borrowed from literature and the plastic arts. L'Age d'Or is free from the preciousness which dates many of the surrealist documents and earlier films. By breaking away from the world of fantasy and transforming the concept of the Marvellous, Bunuel was able to create one of the most powerful expressions of the Surrealist art. The end of the Surrealist manifesto about L'Age d'Or is almost prophetic. [see separate sheet]. It is not surprising that Bunuel's message should be echoed in contemporary cinema, Godard's or Oshima's.

B. Augst