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In comparison with Cocteau's Blood of a Poet, the quality of sound in L'AGE d'or seems rather poor and amateurish. Cocteau stated in his Entretiens sur le Cinématographe that he had conducted many experiments before adding the soundtrack to Blood of a poet seeking among other things to avoid what he calls "musical synchronism." MUSICAL SYNCHORNISM was to be avoided because it was excessively redundant and overloaded the images of the film already far too redudant for his taste. In order to avoid it, he sought to create or use what he calls "accidental" musical synchronism. This was done by altering the order of the musical pieces as originally composed (which annoyed Auric) or by introducing a slight decalage (i.e. having the music off sync, to use current jargon) and various other devices intended to take maximum advantage of chance. He notes in passing that the most satisfying use of this concept was the ballet Le Jeune homme et la mort. It is comforting to see that Cage and Cunningham are after all a bit dated since Cocteau was already using this idea 40 years ago; some people may think that this is rather distressing.

Cocteau's use of accidental synchronism is obviously an important innovation in the use of sound in film. Although its primary function may have been to flatten the image -- Cocteau was very aware of the peculiar nature of the filmic image and the strong "impression of reality" that it conveys and much of his approach to filmmaking is explained by his desire to reintroduce what he called "poetry" in film through the use of unexpected juxtapositions -- it also introduces a tension between sound and image, if not an overt contradiction, "struggle" as Godard would put it, between the visual and the auditory modes of perception. It should be pointed out that Cocteau's use of sound was in direct opposition with the commercial films where it was considered intimately linked to the image. The range of experiments Cocteau conducted in order to perfect his trucages is impressive, and again well ahead of its time.

(for a simple description of the technical aspect of sound synchronization see the articles on "les raccords" no. 6 and 7 in the Montage series of essays published in Cinéma pratique, soon to be put in the file in the Fr. lib.; for a discussion of sound editing and its historical development see Reisz and Gavin Miller The Technique of Film Editing; see also the standard texts on film, Arnheim, Kracauer, Balasz, Bazin, Lindgren and especially Burch).

Bunuel's use of sound seems at first sloppy and technically inferior to Cocteau's. We must remember however that the copies of the film available are very old and very inferior to the original. It is also possible that Bunuel did not have access to the right equipment (obviously much of the film was not shot in studio like Cocteau's).

On the whole, it seems that Bunuel used very little sync sound. Lip sync is used in the bandits sequence, the dedication ceremony, the seq. with Lya and her mother, and very little during the concert seq. although there is some voiceover during the Death of Tristan, imitating typical pillow talk of lovers. Sync sound is used intermittently throughout the film for all kinds of special effects:

the sound of the waves (at the beginning of the bandits sequence)  
various noises (knocking etc.) during the refuge seq.  
sound of crowds (the procession and later on before the start of the concert)  
the mumbling of the bishops on the rocks (much louder than it should be in relation to the focal length of the shot);

natural sounds;

Lya Lys's scream (during the dedication seq.) and the girl at the very end of the film (one could consider it part of the sync sound of the entire seq. because the crowd's shouts, the dog barking and the governor's speech are still heard in the background although clearly certain sounds are "privileged" by being given special emphasis at certain moments in the film (the dog being kicked, the battle squished);

During the dedication seq. there is the "réalité de coincidence" Modot's thoughts while in the mud and especially the "whole" in the sound track because of the unexpected interruption of the musicover and the sudden insertion of the toilet flush; another similar use of dissociation is the small seq. showing the man crushing the violin (the violin then stops when the sound of crushing is heard);

During the Rome seq. the most striking use of sync sound is of course the explosion "Parfois le dimanche..."

During the modot seq. sound is used in a number of extremely interesting ways: there is the cow bell heard long after it has left the room, the dog barking while Modot is walking along the fence and the very effective use of faux raccord by showing Lya hearing the same dogs barking miles away from where they actually are (an ingenious use of voiceover superimposed on the cow bell sound and then the wind blowing heard also in the shot of Modot intercut with those of Lya in her room); This is a variation of the "realite de coincidence used earlier in the bathroom insert and especially the third insert with the photograph of the girl in the shopwindow. Somehow the sexual excitement of the two lovers is clearly (if indirectly) shown. In addition, the barking of the two dogs behind the fence links that sequence with the mud seq. earlier and Modot's kicking of the small white dog here clearly associated in Lya Lys's mind. The wind blowing is such an obvious sexual image that it is almost obscene, another example of a typical Buñuelian literal image.

In the next sequence, there are sounds of car engines (the taxi heard twice, before and after the flashback); there is the ceremony showing the award of merit by the high official in the government for his generous actions — that seq. amusingly is in sync sound, although it is a flashback; there is then the sound of the blindman being kicked and falling against the wall followed by the sound of the taxi departing.

In the reception seq., there is first the sound of car horns amusingly used in counterpoint with the music. During the reception, inside, as soon as the governor and his wife have arrived, the sound of the cart crossing the room is very loud although no one in the room notices it.

In the next seq. the sound of fire is very distinct followed by the seq. of the child and the blast of the gunshot. Again, as in earlier seq. the music stops and starts as if to underline the dramatic moments of the action curiously reduced to a parodic mode of commentary. In effect, structurally it functions exactly like the other sounds and provides the primary linearity necessary to create a rupture in the narrative progression of the film.

During the concert there are other sounds, the orchestra tuning the instruments, the crowd noises, the baton of the conductor, and later the footsteps on the pebbles. During the oove scene one can also hear birds singing, kissing and whispering and of course the voiceover monologue said by Modot during the climactic moments of the scene. Sync sound is also used here for the telephone interruption, when the servant comes to call Modot to the phone and then for the conversation with the minister of the interior. Amusingly, the voice of the minister is still heard after Modot pulls the telephone wire, and we also hear the gunshot when the minister commits suicide, and the thud of his body falling, except we then see it on the ceiling (note that the sound is heard during a while the screen is black). Later on, we distinctly hear the conductor kissing Lya. From the moment Modot gets up and hits his head to the flower pot until the end of the Chateau de Selliny seq., the drums replace the music.

In the next sequence when Modot returns to Lya Lys's room, there are other sounds heard: the tree burning (the sound of the flames (like the sound with the maid)), the bust dropping on the floor, the splash of the giraffe falling in the water. These sounds are not exactly sync, or rather, the seq. is not shot in sync, but the sound was added to emphasize certain sounds against the background of the drums (the intensity varies, like the music throughout the film).

(I forgot the altar bells during the seq. showing the Marquis talking with his guests during the reception. This is important because it links this (and what it symbolizes, the specific part of the Catholic mass, coming interestingly enough right after the shot of the monstrance) with the cow bell heard earlier in Lya Lys's room and the clear suggestion of sexual perversion.

During the Chateau de Selliny sequence there is only one sound other than the drums and the paso doble at the very end: the young girl's scream after the Duke of Blangis returns to, in my opinion, murder her. This faint, lonely sound has a shattering effect, especially because of the sinister look of the images at this point and the purely imaginary reconstitution of the orgy suggested by Buñuel's description at the beginning of the sequence; the long description on the title without any other suggestion.

The musical pieces, the variety of sounds noises, and the dialogue are not used haphazardly in L'Age d'or. Almost without exception sound (speech, music and noises) are used ironically in relation to the images thus creating an additional level of displacement. Aside from the ironic and amusing selection of musical pieces accompanying the various scenes of the film (see separate list at the end of the list of the main articulations of the film), music is frequently used to enhance a dramatic action by injecting the dramatic or melodramatic effects for ridiculous or insignificant events, actions, gestures. This is one aspect of the use of incongruity musical. Another one, obviously more noticeable is the juxtaposition of incongruous noises with great musical moments (the toilet flush, the ridiculous pillow talk during Wagner's prelude and the segment of Tristan's death), the ridiculous speech of the governor during the dedication ceremony (with accent and almost totally incomprehensible), the explosions and the final paso doble, the only overtly ironic musical comment at the most poignant and offensive moment of the film.

Another most original aspect of the use of sound in the film is the extremely complex articulation of certain sequences in relation to the visual continuity -- the sequence with Modot and Lys Lys establishing temporal and by suggestion spatial continuity where it is visually impossible, or the extra superimpositions of several levels of sound during the concert sequence.

As in the case of the visual part of the film, sound operates on several levels: within the single shot and often against the image, to link segments of time and/or two disconnected shots or sequences, and to articulate the main parts of the narrative either like punctuation marks or through repetition (the bells, screams, dogs barking, gun shots). In every instance, the controlling device is the principle of displacement: displacement between individual sound, musical effects, screams, words or sections of dialogue and the broader context of music, silence or drums. In addition, the principle of displacement operates in relation to the images: single shots, sequences or subsequences, segments. In addition, they establish a double articulation with the few titles in the film and the implicit narrative voice which is present during the entire film imposing a central ironic viewpoint constantly undermining the thrust of the film turning into fiction or allegory.

Cocteau's use of sound was intended to diminish the literal quality (seduction) of the image in order to reintroduce mystery and expand his poetic language. Like de Chirico, he sought to reintroduce in film "le choc des images" not by using fantastic, or poetic or incongruous images, but by emphasizing the realistic aspect of film, its literality. In a sense, Cocteau's images like Bunuel's are extremely literal -- he would say realistic -- but in order to reintroduce mystery by a realistic rendering of the "invisible". Unlike de Chirico's images however, Cocteau's mystery reveals part of a secret, highly personal universe. "le choc" in these images functions anonymously in relation to the poetic experience of the poet. They do not produce the "spark" in the mind of the viewer's mind but rather seek to lead him to the center of the poet's experience. The images, settings, costumes everything is a distorted through literal realism, to bring out the inner reality of his experience. This "realisme irreal" is in effect a form of theatrical expressionism.

Bunuel's images have the opposite effect. They are first of all intended to destroy the whole worship of the Art images and the posture of the artist expressing himself. I think this is why the repertory of musical moments are so important in the film. They undercut the reality of the filmic experience by tricking the viewers in connecting things that he would not normally connect by fear of violating the great taboos of Western culture. They seek to use film to stir the viewer into action by sheer provocation in a relentless pattern of aggressions. Bunuel's film says exactly the opposite of Cocteau's. Along with all the institutions and values of Western culture, Art must also be destroyed and used to further the cause of the Surrealist revolution. Like so many of the "artistic" works directly or indirectly influenced by Romanticism, Cocteau's film is but another oratorical exercise. It conspires in seducing the viewer in admiring the beauty of the poet's efforts.