

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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THE AGE OF GOLD / L'Age d'Or (1930)

Luis Buñuel (1900-1983)

OVERVIEW

Auteur Luis Buñuel is known as one of most influential surrealist filmmakers of the mid-twentieth century. Although he was born and raised near Zaragoza, Spain, he spent a large portion of his life and career as an exile in Paris and Mexico City. One of his earliest short films, *Le chien andalou* (1929), or the *Andalusian Dog*, became an iconic representation of eerie surrealist art in which Buñuel presented the audience with a series of unsettling, violent, and even erotic images plucked from a dream. Buñuel would continue in his surrealist style with such films as that of this essay, *L'Age D'or* (1930), or the *Age of Gold*. Later in his career, the director adapted novels and short stories to film and used the narratives to criticize the Francoist regime and expose the Catholic repression of the era. Buñuel's middle period was characterized by several satirical and allegorical dramas based on Biblical stories and nineteenth-century Spanish novels. Buñuel's production in Mexico in the 1950s and 60s included *Nazarín* (1959), in which the eponymous priest attempts to administer to a rural Mexican community, and *The Exterminating Angel* (1962), a masterful critique of the bourgeoisie. The last phase of Buñuel's career was characterized by a series of hyper-erotic French satires such as *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* (1972) and *That Obscure Object of Desire* (1977).

Film *The Age of Gold* (1930) is an hour-long, black and white film that juxtaposes numerous jarring and nightmarish images in a non-linear sequence, with the result that there is not a discernable plotline. The film is composed of five sections: a documentary about scorpions, a rebel meeting on the sea shore, a brief travelogue about Rome, a "story" about a couple's failed attempts to have sex, and a loose adaptation of a portion of the novel *The 120 Days of Sodom* (1785) by the Marquis de Sade. In all five sections, Buñuel leaned into his burgeoning surrealist style and the themes that would characterize all his films: eroticism, satire of the bourgeoisie, critique of the Catholic Church, and bestial symbolism. Notably, *The Age of Gold* was one of the first sound pictures to be shown in Paris, although the film did include title cards and the acting style of silent films.

Background *The Age of Gold* was a natural sequel to Buñuel's groundbreaking short *Andalusian Dog* (1929). In addition, this film was a product of multiple collaborations within the surrealist community of 1920s and 1930s Paris. The film's producers, the Vicomte and Vicomtesse Noailles, were a noble couple who regularly backed avant-garde films and patronized modern art. It is hardly surprising, then, that the painters Max Ernst and Josep Llorens Artigas made cameos as actors as the rebel bandits in the shack. The screenplay and style of shooting was also a result of the continuous collaboration between Buñuel and Salvador Dalí, the most recognizable Spanish surrealist painter. Buñuel and Dalí influenced each other's style, and we see this distinctly Spanish surrealism in *Andalusian Dog* and *The Age of Gold*. When the film premiered at Studio 28 in Paris, it provoked a violent reaction. Right-wing protestors disrupted the premiere, vandalized the cinema, and destroyed the surrealist art exhibited in the lobby. A few days later, the police chief Jean Chiappe managed to have the film banned all together. Despite the initial backlash to the film, *The Age of Gold* has stood the test of time as an exemplar of European surrealist cinema.

SYNOPSIS

The opening sequence is a mini-documentary about scorpions. The title cards explain their movements, habitats, and the complexity of their tails. The shots include the scorpions fighting each other and digging, but the documentary is cut short when a rat grabs and eats two of the dominant males.

The second section of the film begins with a seemingly hopeless man wandering around a craggy shore. Later, the film introduces a group of rebel bandits who live together in seaside shack. Although they stay

inside and play with their weapons and rope, the news of an invasion incites them to join the rebel forces. They march to the shore but die en route.

Meanwhile, the rich bourgeoisie have sailed to the shore to commemorate the foundation of the city. When they arrive, they find the two lovers writhing and kissing in the mud. The lovers are separated, and the male lover is carried away to the city. Later at the Marquis X's party, the two lovers attempt to have sex in the garden several times, but are constantly interrupted. The last interruption occurs when the conductor of the orchestra stops mid-performance and walks into the garden.

After a temper tantrum of jealousy on the part of the male lover, the camera cuts to a castle on a snow-capped mountain. The title cards describe an orgy in which four dukes have kidnapped and debased many young women. The organizer of the orgy, the Duke of Blangis, emerges from the castle dressed in a white robe. He and the other dukes walk to and from the castle on the drawbridge as the camera cuts to a close up of a cross with hair on it.

CHARACTERS

<i>The Rat</i>	Predator who eats the scorpions and ends the documentary
<i>Weary Vagabond</i>	Disheveled man who finds the ocean shack
<i>Blond Rebel</i>	Bandit leader who assembles the rebel army
<i>Peman</i>	Wounded bandit who stays in the shack
<i>Mallorquin Mayor</i>	Rich man who gives the speech on the foundation site
<i>Male Lover</i>	Bureaucrat on a secret mission
<i>Female Lover</i>	The Marquis X's daughter and party hostess
<i>Minister of the Interior</i>	Leader who entrusts the male lover with a secret mission
<i>Female Lover's Mother</i>	Marquis's wife and party host
<i>Marquis X</i>	Rich host of the party
<i>Man with Rifle</i>	Father who shoots his son
<i>Murdered Boy</i>	Playful son of man with rifle
<i>Conductor</i>	The director of the small orchestra at the party
<i>Duke of Blangis</i>	The leader of the castle orgy

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

THE MALE LOVER

The Man, as he is named in the credits, is the male lover and arguably the protagonist of the middle section of the film. Along with being charged with a secret mission by the Ministry of the Interior, the male lover is motivated by and acts on his desire to have sex the female lover, or the Marquis's daughter.

Obsessive Even though intercourse is always interrupted, the male lover keeps returning over and over to engage in foreplay with the female lover. He is so driven by his desire that he devises creative ways to escape those who hold him or prevent him from sex. In addition, the male lover keeps having visions that propel him forward.

Violent Because he is so driven by his sexual desire, the male lover frequently commits violent acts against the other characters. He kicks the blind man in order to jump in the taxi, and he strikes the female lover's mother at the party. When the male lover learns of the massacre of children and the results of ignoring his mission, he feels no guilt and returns immediately to the garden.

Perceptive The male lover is tuned into his own psychology and that of the female lover. Unlike other Buñuelan Don Juans, the male lover does not attempt to dominate, infantilize, or rape the female lover, but rather engages in reciprocal foreplay and arousal. Throughout the film, the lovers seem to vibrate on a similar erotic wavelength.

THE FEMALE LOVER

The female lover is eventually revealed to be the daughter of the Marquis X, the rich host of the party. Although she is clearly of the upper class, the young woman pursues sex and erotic foreplay with the male lover.

Lustful Like the male lover, the female lover is obsessively fixated on sex with the protagonist. Because intercourse never occurs, she uses masturbation and oral sex as substitutes. She is frequently aroused by erotic looks and caresses. Near the end of the film, the female lover kisses the conductor right in front of the male lover.

Sadomasochistic Although she behaves “properly” at the party, the female lover becomes titillated by violence. She is aroused when the male lover slaps her mother, and she experiences an almost orgasmic joy at the thought of infanticide (and the male lover’s bloody face). Her injured finger is a source of pain and pleasure.

Rebellious Although she helps plan the party, the female lover openly defies the social norms of her class and surroundings. She sneaks off to the garden with the male lover to have sex in public, and she ends up sucking the nipple of a marble statue. At the end, she kisses and caresses the orchestra conductor—another act of rebellion that arouses jealousy in the male lover.

THE REBEL BANDIT LEADER

The leader of the rebels in the shack is the blond man who organizes the journey and rebellion against the Mallorquins. Like most of the characters in this film, the leader is not well developed (nor does he have a name), but he does speak some of the few lines early in the film. In addition, this part was played by the renowned surrealist painter, Max Ernst.

Commanding Even before the bandits decide to join a rebellion, it is the leader who mandates their actions in the shack. He frequently tells them to stop what they are doing, and he bosses them around. He also tries to convince Peman to join them on their march.

Rebellious Along with dominating the men in the shack, the leader also seems to be preparing for battle. He is the most aggressive bandit when it comes to fighting the Mallorquins. His fighting spirit allows him to survive the journey, whereas the others die.

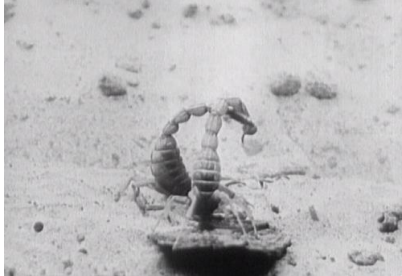
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Why is the film divided into multiple “stories” and genres? What is the purpose of the documentary opening and the travelogue transition scene?
2. As with almost all Buñuel films, there is a strategic / symbolic use of animals and bestial imagery. What is the possible symbolism of the flies on the face, the beetle, the cow in the bed, the barking dog, and the opening sequence with the scorpions and the rat?
3. Why do the characters lack names? What is the significance of the three—Marquis X, Duke of Blangis, and Peman—who do?
4. How is Buñuel’s style surreal in this film? Consider the multiple fades (as opposed to cuts).
5. Comment on the repetition of the classical piece “Liebestod”, or “Love Death”, from Richard Wagner’s opera *Tristan and Isolde*. What is the effect of cutting between the foreplay in the garden and the performing orchestra?
6. Aside from animal imagery, what other objects hold symbolic significance?
7. How does Buñuel use the new sound technology (as it talking pictures) in this film? How is the style similar to silent films of the late 20s and early 30s?
8. Why did the right-wing groups and police chief of Paris hate this movie?

SCENES

NATURE

Remarkable Scorpions The film opens with extreme close-ups of two scorpions walking around and digging in the dirt. There is jovial music underscoring a series of title cards that explain the unique features of the insect. The titles explain that the scorpions are fiercely “antisocial” and combative. They have a remarkably intricate tail with six points of articulation, as well as fierce pincers. The camera cuts between the encyclopedic descriptions and images of the scorpions fighting with each other and brandishing their tails.



The Rat's Dinner A rat appears looming over the two scorpions. The rat immediately devours the first scorpion before it can defend itself. The viewer watches the rat chew vigorously with the sped-up style of a silent film. The other scorpion does not flee but raises its tail as if it is going to strike the rat. The rat manages to grab it, but the second scorpion jumps out. However, the rat grabs it again and eats it quickly.

Roman Travelogue The title cards explain that the Mallorquins founded imperial Rome with that “foundation”—supposedly referring to the square platform from the previous scene. The camera cuts to an aerial shot of Rome including shots of the Vatican and city streets. The title cards remind the viewer that the ancient history of Rome is also the site of a modern city. We see shots of traffic and passersby, as well as crowded outdoor cafes. Then, the title cards say that “On Sunday...”, and the camera cuts to a street where a series of buildings collapse and turn to dust. The travelogue concludes with two men walking: one fop on the sidewalk who keeps kicking a violin as if it were a can, and another man walking through a park with a round stone slab on his head. The latter passes a statue of a saint who was sculpted with the same size and shape of the hat that the passing man wears.



Bishops Four bishops wearing pope-style hats and murmuring prayers. Due to the bishops' robes and hats, they blend into the rocks on the shore.



BANDITS

Man on the Shore The title card reads "A few hours later" and the camera cuts to a man standing by the ocean. He wears a faded hat and torn pants and sleeves, and he wipes his brow as if he had been walking for a long while. The man also carries a rifle. He looks out over the craggy shore and sees four bishops. The man climbs down slowly and spots a small shack at the bottom of a hill.



Poor Workers in the Shack The camera fades to the interior of the shack, where several disheveled men sitting in a row and an injured man (later revealed to be named Peman) lying on an elevated haybed. Two men stand and tie together pitchforks. A blond man wields a knife and keeps yelling "stop!" every time the others do any activity, including move towards the door. The man with crutches rises and approaches the injured man. He takes out a knife and begins to saw a rope at his side. Then, the man on crutches moves towards the door, and the blond man asks him to report on the Mallorquins. The other man replies that they have arrived, and the men assemble their weapons.



Trek Through the Rocks The men decide to walk as a group towards the battle with the Mallorquins. Peman, the injured man, refuses to leave. The blond man attempts to convince him, but Peman says that the others have supplies that he does not, including hippopotami and paintbrushes. The blond man scoffs and declares "Bullshit!" He leads the group on a trail leading from the shack to the ocean, and all follow except for Peman. However, they all collapse from thirst and fatigue as they walk through the craggy rocks. The blond man is the sole survivor who reaches the shore.



PILGRIMS

Dapper Pilgrims A group of rowboats approach the shore, and multiple people disembark—among them are policemen, politicians, priests, and other bourgeois spectators. All the visitors are dressed elegantly with suits and hats. After a short walk, the group sees the skeletons of the bishops whom the vagabond had spotted earlier. [The composition of the skeletons is an overt reference to the Baroque painting *Finis Glorae Mundi* by Juan Valdés Leal]. The men take off their hats to show respect but keep walking.



Mayor's Speech As the male lover is being carted away, a pompous politician begins a rousing speech on the beach. The lover attempts to escape the clutches of the “arresting men” and manages to briefly run back to the crowd listening to the speech. The camera closes in on the politician’s fiery speech and his frenetic hand movements.



LOVERS

The Lovers Are Separated The group spots a couple kissing and writhing erotically in the mud. The man wears a suit and the woman wears a fashionable flapper-style dress. They notice the approaching mob and separate, startled. Some of the men and nuns grab the woman and escort her down a trail away from her male lover. The man remains lying in the mud gazing after her. He has visions of the woman in a white dress, then a stark bathroom with a toilet and flushing rope above it, and then a pit of bubbling mud. The mud continues to roil as we hear the toilet flushing. The camera cuts back to the man's concerned face. Two men shake him, lift him up, and escort him away in an opposite direction of the female lover.

Crushing the Beetle The men manage to carry the male lover away from the crowd. He sees a black beetle crawling over a rock and runs over to it. The men tighten their grip on his arms, but the lover manages to stomp the beetle to death. Meanwhile, the dapper men at the speech site place a dollop of mud on a square platform.

Surrealist Posters on the Street The camera then cuts to a street in Rome where the two men are carrying the male lover down the street. He stops to look at poster advertisements and becomes transfixed by an ad for a wig. The poster features a woman's hand, and the hand starts to come alive and shake. The lover's suit is covered with white powder, and as he passes more posters, he looks at each one furtively. When the three men pass a display window, the man sees a poster of a woman in a black dress leaning back in a chair. The image dissolves into a similar image of the female lover in the same dress (and same position).



Male Lover Fights Back Back on the street, the male lover keeps resisting the two men holding him. They threaten him with violence, and when the man keeps resisting, the two men twist his arms. A blind man walks behind the trio. One of the arresting men finds an official document in the male lover's suit pocket, and when he unfurls it, there is a flashback to a bureaucratic meeting. In the flashback, the officials sit at a long table, and the head official gives the male lover the document. The head official declares that the "Society"—later referenced as the Ministry of the Interior—is entrusting him with a special goodwill mission that will require sacrifice, but there is no explanation of the nature of the mission.



Male Lover Escapes in a Taxi The male lover hails a taxi that passes by and runs up to it while the arresting men are distracted by the official document. The taxi has pulled up to pick up the blind man, but the male lover kicks him to the ground. He hops in, and the taxi driver pulls away. The blind man lies on the sidewalk with his cane askew.

PARTY

Female Lover Planning the Party The female lover rises from the chaise and walks to the living room. She thumbs through a book while her mother looks on from across the room. The mother notices that the female lover has bandaged her finger, and the daughter says that it is still hurting her. The female lover asks after her father, and the mother replies that he is at the pharmacy. The daughter describes the musicians that her father has hired, and she suggests that they also hire the priest to play the violin with the others. She also declares that a small sextet can be loud if they are close to the microphone. Her mother ignores her argument and tells her to get ready for the Mallorquins—who will arrive at 9:00.



Cow in Bed The female lover obeys her mother and retreats to her room. She finds a cow lying in her bed and tries to get it to leave by yelling at it. The cow stands on the bed with its hindquarters and udder facing her. It eventually jumps down and walks out of the room, but the cow bell keeps sounding long after the cow disappears. The female lover goes into a trance as her make-up mirror turns into a windy skyscape with clouds. Shots of the male lover struggling against the two men on the street is interspersed with shots of the female lover's trance. A small white dog barks continuously at the three men, and the dog's barks join the cow bell in a loud duet.



Guests at the Party The title cards explain that the Marquis is preparing the for the guests' arrival at his estate. One of the rich party guests pulls up to the Marquis's estate in his fancy model T. The camera cuts between the rich guests mingling inside and the arrival of various other guests outside. The Marquis has flies crawling on his face. Suddenly, a painted cart drawn by a huge horse rolls through the living room area. Two men on the cart drink heavily, but the party guests completely ignore the interruption.

Fire in the Kitchen Outside the estate, a man with a rifle walks by. The camera cuts to the interior of the party, where the female lover is looking around anxiously. The male servants are polishing wine bottles when suddenly, a female servant falls out of the kitchen with a plume of smoke, screaming. She lies unconscious while huge flames blow out of the kitchen. Neither the male servants nor the guests pay any attention.

Father-Son Exchange Meanwhile, outside, the man with the rifle is chatting with and cuddling with his son. He shows him his rifle. The son runs away playfully and rolls around in the weeds. When he pops up, his father watches him, enraged. He aims the rifle at his son, and the son claps and laughs as if it is a game. The boy runs across the open grounds, and the man shoots him in the back. He falls down, dead, and the father shoots him a second time.

Bourgeois Spectators The party guests hear the shots and move quickly out onto the balcony. The camera cuts to a high-angle shot (from the perspective of the balcony) of the father approaching his son's dead body. Two other servants rush over, alarmed. The female lover's mother watches for a few seconds with her guests until the police appear and start interrogating the father. Then, all of the guests file back inside.

Dress Procession The female lover mingles with the younger guests and sits down on a chair, wringing her hands. The camera cuts to a hallway where a man is dragging a white fancy dress along the corridor, then throwing it onto a chair. The camera cuts back and forth between shots of the dress in the chair and the female lover sitting in the chair at the party. When the man who dragged the dress turns arounds, we see that it is the male lover in an overcoat.



Titillating Violence at the Party When the female lover's mother returns with a drink for the male lover, she spills a bit on his hand. Infuriated, the male lover jumps up and violently slaps the hostess. The men at the party see the exchange and run over to confront the male lover. The female lover remains seated across the room, but watches intently. The hostess, faint, is placed on a chair. The men at the party throw out the male lover, who looks back longingly at the female lover as he leaves.



LOVERS AT THE PARTY

Male Lover Mingles at the Party The male lover takes off his hat and coat and enters the party space. The female lover sees him and they exchange excited looks across the room. The man approaches her but she is led away. The male lover decides to sit next to his lover's mother and converse. He sees a table that looks like a chemist's lab set with beakers and bottles. The hostess asks if he would like a drink and goes to fetch it.



Sneaking Out to the Garden The female lover checks on her mother but looks outside while the other party guests comfort the hostess. The male lover peers out from behind a curtain and signals to the female lover to meet him in the garden. She runs out ahead of him, and he follows surreptitiously. Meanwhile, the guests move into an atrium where the sextet prepares to start playing the finale aria from Wagner's opera *Tristan and Isolde*.

Foreplay in the Garden The camera cuts between shots of the conductor leading the concert indoors and the lovers in the garden. First, the lovers kiss and grope while standing up. Then, the lovers fall onto the gravel and roll around. Then, they sit up and suck each other's fingers in ecstasy. The male lover strokes the female lover's cheek with his right hand, which has turned into a nub with only a thumb. They continue kissing and caressing on the ground and sitting across from each other.



Intercourse Delayed and Interrupted Suddenly, the male lover is distracted by the foot of a marble statue. The toes of the statue seem to move, and the male lover has a vision of priests crossing a bridge in the forest. When he comes out of his trance, he strokes the woman's face in a melancholy way. After a few moments, he gets back in the mood and carries the female lover to the ground. The camera cuts to the sextet which now includes the two priests from the bridge playing violins. The lovers are close to intercourse when a butler walks out to the garden and tells the male lover that the Minister of the Interior is on the phone for him.



Sucking and Playing The male lover leaves the garden. The female lover stays and caresses another marble statue. She sucks the nipple of the statue with gusto for several seconds while the orchestra continues playing "Liebestod" multiple times.



Reporting the Massacre The male lover gets on the phone with the Interior Minister, who berates him for his failures. The minister describes how women and children died in the massacre. The male lover asks why the minister is so worked up about “some brats.” During the minister’s condemnation speech, the camera shows aerial shots of a mob swarming the plaza during a battle. The camera cuts back to the male lover, who hangs up on the screaming minister. Seconds later, we see the minister’s office with the receiver hanging down. The camera pans up to the ceiling, where the minister “lays” dead alongside the black chandelier. We see a bullet hole in his temple as his body floats on the ceiling.



Closed Legs and Aging Face The male lover returns to the garden and starts kissing and caressing the female lover again. Her legs are somewhat open as she sits in the chair, but the male lover gently closes them and gazes up at her. As he looks at her, the female lover suddenly ages. He asks whether she is tired and where the light switch is. The female lover responds “Yes” and “At the foot of the bed.” The male lover gets up to sit alongside her again, and as he does so, the female lover returns to her “young” state.



Erotic Cuddling The lovers sit and snuggle up to each other. The female lover complains that his elbow is uncomfortable, and the man suggests that she lay on the “pillow” of his chest. The woman asks for his hand, and he caresses her cheek again. They continue snuggling and caressing each other, and the man asks if she is cold. She replies that she is falling. The camera cuts several times to the conductor directing the orchestra as it plays the same bars of music over and over.



Sadistic Revelry The female lover separates from the man's chest and smiles sadistically, declaring that it is joyous to "kill our children." The camera cuts to the male lover's face, which is covered in blood and looks as though he was shot in the left eye. Blinded, he murmurs "My love" over and over again.

Kissing the Conductor The camera cuts back to the concert, where the conductor suddenly throw up his arms and quits directing the ensemble. He holds his head in his hands and walks away towards the garden. The bourgeois audience murmurs. When the conductor appears next to the marble statue, the female lover runs to him and embraces him. The male lover watches, infuriated, as the two kiss passionately. The male lover gets up to protest but is distracted by the thunderous pounding of drums.



Male Lover's Rage The male lover walks to a bedroom and throws himself on a bed. He digs up the down feathers from the pillow and carries them around the room. He finds a canon and also carries it around the room. The drums sound again, and the male lover proceeds to throw various objects out of the bedroom window, including burning ashes, the cannon, and a bishop in full costume. The bishop falls but does not die—he gets up and walks away. The male lover then throws out a stuffed giraffe, which falls a long distance and lands in an ocean with a big splash. The camera cuts back to the window where the male lover has thrown out the down feathers. The title cards explain that the feathers reached the foot of the window but that the action is now turning to the castle Selliny outside Paris.



CASTLE

Orgy and Rape in the Castle The white pile of feathers turns into the snow-covered mountains of Selliny. The camera pans up to the castle. The title cards explain that “four scoundrels” were partaking in a debauched orgy at the castle. They kidnapped eight adolescent girls and hired four prostitutes to serve their needs and keep them interested, and they did not care about the lives of the women.

Exiting the Castle The camera cuts to the castle gate, and the title cards explain that the survivors are exiting—starting with the lead scoundrel, the Duke of Blangis. The duke emerges in a white robe, followed by the three companions in black period attire with tricornered hats. Behind them exits one of the abused women, who is wearing a white nightgown and is bleeding from the torso. The Duke of Blangis returns to help her up and escort her back inside. We hear a woman’s scream, and the Duke of Blangis exits again with an anguished look on his face.



Hairy Cross The Duke of Blangis passes the other scoundrels in the opposite direction on the castle bridge. The camera cuts to a close-up of a wooden cross. Clumps of hair hang from the points of the cross and blow in the wind.