Unsynched: the contrapuntal sounds of Luis Bunuel's L'Age d'Or.

I think that the 100% talking film is a stupidity, and I believe that everyone is of my opinion. But the sound film is a thing of great interest and the future belongs to it.

—Sergei Eisenstein

Two Notes on Sound

Two years after Alan Crosland's The Jazz Singer (1927) broke the sound barrier with four synchronized musical passages and Al Jolson's now-historic line, "You ain't heard nothing yet," the Vicomte de Noailles commissioned Luis Bunuel to direct a feature film with synchronized sound—as a birthday present for his wife, Marie-Laure, painter, poet, and granddaughter of the wife of Marquis de Sade. The Noailles apparently wanted something along the lines of Un Chien Andalou (1929) with sound. The film Bunuel made became simultaneously a critical success and the subject of public outcry. (1) For although L'Age d'Or (1930) was instantly hailed as a Surrealist masterpiece, the public was not so receptive. Ado Kyrou recalls that its first screening at Studio 28 took place in "glacial silence" (165). Shortly afterward, however, things were not that quiet. Although it had received approval from the censors, Bunuel's film was denounced as a Bolshevik endeavor to corrupt the French. At a screening on October 3, 1930, demonstrators representing the Patriots' League and the Anti-Jewish League interrupted the showing. "Stink bombs exploded, spectators were manhandled, the screen was splashed with purple ink," Kyrou notes, "and pictures by Dali, Max Ernst, Man Ray, Miro, and Tanguy which were hanging in the theater lobby were slashed" (162). Mass demonstrations followed, and L'Age d'Or was officially banned. (2) Its supporters praised, and its detractors condemned, the film's oneiric images, its unapologetic irreverence, and its capacity to visually assault the bourgeois viewer. Although it was one of the earliest French talkies, Bunuel's film has mainly been seen in visual terms, as the perfect Surrealist juxtaposition of the sacred and the profane as well as the decisive attack on the twin authorities of church and state. Indeed, despite all the commotion about the film's revolutionary energies, L'Age d'Or's sounds have gone virtually unheard. (3)

Sound came relatively late to French cinema. Unlike their American counterpart, the French film industry was not as eager to convert to sound, fearing that the transition would partly end the silent film aesthetic. In the late 1920s, even though there existed a healthy number of skeptics in their ranks, American studios were busily converting to sound, recognizing the clear financial benefits in what Sam Goldwyn's wife had reportedly deemed "the most important event in cultural history since Martin Luther nailed his theses on the church door" (qtd. in Berg 173). But the Europeans were not quite as embracing of the new technology. Many felt that the introduction of sound, especially in the form of the spoken word, to what was essentially a visual medium would destroy the image. Hugo Munsterberg, one of the earliest proponents of a genuinely silent cinema, had declared that cinema is "a work of art composed of pictures" (89), and any attempts to add sound would destroy its integrity. For Munsterberg, the absence of sound did not suggest that cinema was incomplete; instead, he claimed that the "photoplay cannot gain but only lose if its visual purity is destroyed" (87). Similarly, Bela Balazs argued for the primacy of the image, and Rudolf Arnheim suggested that the cinema sans sound could communicate more deeply, noting, "[t]he universal silence of the image, the fragments of a broken vase could 'talk' exactly the way a character talked to his neighbor" (227). (4)

Moreover, as Alan Williams has argued, the resistance to sound was partly a resistance to standardization; unlike Hollywood, where filmmaking was already standardized in the vertically integrated studio system, in Europe, "the coming of sound brought relative stylistic uniformity to a diverse set of textual strategies produced by a remarkable variety of art movements, tendencies, and stubborn individualists" (Williams 135). Many independent filmmakers could not afford the investment in sound equipment. In France, in particular, where film theory had guided film practice, sound was not readily welcomed by the cinephiles. As Richard Abel points out, with film theory trying to keep up with technological developments, "[t]he theoretical positions that had been nurtured throughout the 1920s were now shaken" (8). Therefore, in the late 1920s, assuming that sound would threaten the progressive development of an essentially visual medium, many European filmmakers were reluctant to convert to sound.

L'Age d'Or reflects the tensions of this liminal audiovisual moment. If, as Rick Altman has argued, sound "represented the return of silent cinema's repressed" ("Evolution" 52), then in Bunuel's film, the repressed returns with a vengeance. Paul Hammond suggests that Bunuel even considered making two versions: "one silent, for the many cinemas not yet equipped for sound," and the other with sound (L'Age d'Or 18). He settled on what the opening credits call a film sonore et parlant, an almost illogical combination of terms. As Charles O'Brien points out, during the conversion era, film sonore and film parlant were actually distinct terms, with the former representing "a sync-sound film whose dialogue had been recorded simultaneously with the image, whereas [the latter] had been shot silent and then supplemented with a separately recorded soundtrack" (68). But this would be no conventional sound film. In fact, it represents a compromise between silence and complete synchronization. Elsewhere Hammond proposes that we might see the film as "a sort of sound remake of Un Chien Andalou" ("Lost and Found" 15). The film's sound track is in fact an admixture of talking heads, unsynchronized sound effects, and silence alleviated by music. Inssofar as it disrupts naturalistic representation provided by sync sound, the sound track echoes the image track's heterogeneous collage of dislocated time, space, and causality. Early film reviewers, however, considered Bunuel's play with sound a sign of "technical poverty," criticizing the film for not mimicking reality consistently. Jean-Paul Dreyfus, for instance, seemed willing to accept its "implausible logic of the absurd" (69) and yet considered the sound track a technical failure. Except for a few passing references to Bunuel's ironic treatment of classical music, especially Wagner's Tristan und Isolde, (5) even the majority of recent scholars have been silent about the sound track, and they have missed the implications of Bunuel's use of non-synchronous sounds. Rather than providing a stable point of audition, L'Age d'Or's sound track constructs an alternative sound-image relationship. Instead of echoing what the eye sees, the sound track disperses the harmonic relation between the senses. What this essay investigates is the effect of Bunuel's non-synchronicity. Released only three years after the invention of sync sound, L'Age d'Or provides an early example of experimental work with sound, where the image track is consistently ruptured by the denaturalized sound track.

As mentioned earlier, many received the coming of sound with apprehension. But there was another group of theorists and filmmakers, who saw sound as an opportunity, not a threat. (6) In France, Rene Clair began to champion the use of sound, but in a
non-synchronous fashion. He famously praised an early American musical, Harry Beaumont's The Broadway Melody (1929), for not imitating the naturalistic theater. Clair argued that "[i]t is the alternate use of the image of a subject and the sound produced by this subject—and not their simultaneous use—that creates the best effects in the sound and talking picture" (139). Instead of matching every sound to its onscreen source, Clair preferred the creation of juxtapositions between on-screen images and off-screen sounds. In a statement published in Zhizn Iskusstva, the Soviet filmmakers Sergei Eisenstein, Vsevolod Pudovkin, and Grigori Alexandrov offered an even more radical way of using the sound track in avant-garde cinema. They conceded that at first "sound-recording will proceed on a naturalistic path, exactly corresponding with the movement on the screen, and providing a certain 'illusion' of talking people, of audible objects, etc." (258). However, sound did not need to be naturalized or subordinated to the image. In fact, the Soviets were the first theorists to make an argument for "experimental work with sound" that would be "along the line of its distinct non-synchronization with the visual image" (258). Setting up the image and sound tracks in juxtaposition with each other, they argued, would make sound an element of montage. For this purpose, they advocated the "contrapuntal" use of sound in relation to visual montage. Instead of using dialogue, music, and other sound effects as redundant accompaniments to the visuals, the Soviet manifesto envisioned sound as a non-synchronous counterpart to the image. (7)

In what follows, I argue that Bunuel adapts the notion of contrapuntal sound, producing in L'Age d'Or a creative counterpart between the image and sound tracks. Bunuel resists the theatrical naturalism of sync sound, with its illusion of coherent bodies operating in rational worlds. In a conventional talkie, synchronization identifies the source of each sound and anchors the image. Thus, each sound provides the viewer aural clues that enable the recognition of distance, direction, and depth—the definition of a realistic space and thereby a coherent world. In Bunuel's world, sound creates the opposite effect. Through meaningless dialogue, unsynchronized sound effects, and sudden silences, Bunuel destabilizes the "natural" relationship between sounds and images, thus shifting the emphasis from the meaning of sound to its material qualities. But L'Age d'Or, which is widely considered a key Surrealist film—even "the surrealist film," as Michael Richardson asserts (31)—is much more than an audiovisual experiment. Although Bunuel's use of sound is contrapuntal, it is not necessarily Eisensteinian. Whereas the Soviet manifesto on sound was more concerned with constructing dialectical effects within a coherent diegetic world, Bunuel's contrapuntal sound results in a revolt against the very notion of a stable diesis, a revolt that enhances the Surrealist experience. Bunuel regarded Surrealism as a revolutionary movement. "Although the Surrealists didn't consider themselves terrorists," he argued, "they were constantly fighting a society they despised. Their principal weapon wasn't guns, of course; it was scandal" (107). In L'Age d'Or, that scandal reverberates through a contrapuntal clash between its shocking images and equally jarring sounds that revolt against harmony, creating unhinged bodies in unsynched worlds.

Unsound Practices

L'Age d'Or is composed of five disjointed segments, each one a fragmented tale that disrupts the coherence of the whole. The first section begins with found footage documentation from a series of scientific pedagogical films. The intertitles narrate the seemingly factual account of the scorpion and the rat. The sequence develops with a shot of two scorpions with their tails entwined in an erotic clinch as a third arachnid breaches their union. The overture to Mendelssohn's "Scottish" Symphony provides the first disruption of this ostensibly realistic representation, because it is, as Priscilla Barlow points out, "at rhapsodic odds with the hot, dry weather we see on the screen, as well as the poisonous and fierce nature of the scorpions" (46). The overture not only undermines the documentary nature of the opening images but also foregrounds Bunuel's attempt at using classical music as a weapon against bourgeois propriety. Unlike D. W. Griffith's use of Wagner's opera, The Ride of the Valkyries, to underscore the heroism of the Ku Klux Klan in The Birth of a Nation (1915), this score does not confirm what the eye sees. Mendelssohn's symphony, after all, is meant to evoke Scotland in the ethos of Romanticism, and it was dedicated to Queen Victoria at its premiere. Its juxtaposition with the image is, as Raymond Durgnat suggests, "conspicuously ironical" (51). (8) The intertitle speaks of the scorpion's "lightning strikes" and "virtuosity of attack," evincing Bunuel's lifelong desire, as Peter William Evans argues, "to expose the horrors of contemporary living" (77). Thus, the initial sound track serves as a counterpart to the image track. If music violates the illusion of sync sound, it is the film's sparse dialogue that helps advance Bunuel's Surrealist impulse to subvert official discourse. Human voice is first heard during the second segment, which is announced by the switch in music to Mozart's Ave Verum and the satiric intertitle, "Some hours afterwards." The scene opens onto a rural landscape, with a medium shot of a wild-eyed, ragged, and armed bandit staring into the distance. There is no ostensible connection between the scene of the scorpion and the sign of the bandit. We see a close-up of his face, and the eyeline match indicates that he is staring at a group of archbishops in their ceremonial robes, seated by the shore. As the camera pans horizontally, one expects to hear more than the archbishops' dim, monotonous drone. Although they are visually present, they are not audibly defined. Linda Williams suggests that these early scenes establish Bunuel's critique of religion, as the archbishops are shown muttering "a mysterious liturgy from books on their laps" (Figures 113). They mumble incoherently, reciting not the Word but some unintelligible, meaningless words, and their ramblings make them appear to be "talking heads" rather than the authoritative spokesmen for western civilization.

Another way to think about the absence of coherent voices is that the archbishops are not given the authority that an individual is afforded through sync sound. Rick Altman argues that one of the fundamental differences between silent and sound narrative films lies in the latter's increased proportion of scenes devoted to people talking—devoted, that is, to moving lips" ("Moving Lips" 69). In L'Age d'Or, the archbishops speak, their lips do move, but no one can listen. They mumble incoherently, and their aural dissolve foreshadows their eventual visual disintegration into skeletons. Their later physical disintegration also demonstrates how Bunuel revises the relationship between the voice and the body. In her essay on the function of voice in cinema, Mary Ann Doane notes that synchronized human voice seeks to anchor the human body in cinematic space. "The phantasmatic visual space which the film constructs," she argues, "is supplemented by techniques designed to spatialize the voice, to localize it, give it depth, and thus lend to the characters the consistency of the real" (385). That is not the case with the archbishops in L'Age d'Or. Here, Bunuel seeks to dehumanize the human voice, especially the voice of power. The scene ends as it begins, with extra-diegetic music tracking the bandit's return to his hut. If the introduction of speech in conventional cinema enables the viewer's narcissistic identification with coherent human bodies in a naturalistic setting, Bunuel gives his characters the voice of authority in order to devalue the authority of voice.

Incoherent speech not only undercuts the authority of the (Christian) voice but also any notion of a revolutionary subjectivity. After leaving the mumblino archbishops, the rauced bandit hobble back to his hut. Where the other wretched bandits await news about
interestingly, unlike the archetypes' voices are synchronized with their mouths. However, their speech is meaningless. Unlike the exuberance of Al Jolson's first words, which gesture positively toward the future of naturalistic sound, the first comprehensible words in L'Age d'Or, uttered by the leader of the exhausted bandits, are "Stop it," thus implicitly arresting synchronization in its tracks. When the first bandit returns from his observation post, he announces, "Yes, the Majorcans are here." Their leader makes a call to arms, apparently for a last stand against the invaders. They stagger out of the house, waving their weapons like zombies, when their leader notices that Peman (played by Jacques Prevost's brother Pierre) is not following. Their exchange, shot in conventional shot-reverse-shot, demonstrates Bunuel's subversive use of speech.

The leader asks Peman to "get going." but claiming that he is "done for," Peman refuses to join them. Here is his response: "Yes, yes, but you've got accordions, hippopotami, keys, mountain goats, and ... paintbrushes." Paul Hammond argues that "this isn't dialogue in the usual sense, but rather two monologues delivered at cross purposes" (L'Age d'Or 17). The exchange amounts to even less than that when we consider that the objects Peman lists remain inexplicable in relation to the image, since the bandits possess no more than a few sticks and swords. They also remain unexplained in terms of narrative meaning. Although the voice anchors the human body in this scene, that voice is meaningless. This dysfunctional interlocution assists Bunuel in establishing a kind of Surrealist "absolute dialogue," which assails the politeness of everyday speech, an attack that will be intensified near the end. Moreover, it destroys diegetic integrity. Direct address from one character to another is conventionally used to situate him/her diegetically, but L'Age d'Or denies such identification, drawing attention to the human voice as a mechanical recording. The figures on-screen appear strange—perhaps as strange as the scorpions in the first segment—not because they do not speak, but because they do not.

After the worn out bandits stagger outside their hut, presumably to make a last stand against the Majorcans, we see the arrival of the invaders in a fleet of boats. The invaders comprise of a parade of dignitaries, priests, and dutiful citizens who make their way to the ceremony marking the founding of the Golden Age. After paying his respects to the skeletal remains of the mumbling archbishops, they gather around an inaugural stone. The film cuts to a medium shot of the governor, who clears his throat before speaking. But Bunuel represses his official, celebratory speech. Only his cough is registered on the sound track, immediately followed by a woman's off-screen screams. This interruption is doubly disturbing. It is unclear whether the woman's shrieking sounds are of pleasure or pain. Her voice is terrifying, since its source is not on-screen, and especially mysterious in the midst of ceremonial proceedings. Rick Altman suggests that sound's capacity to introduce the mysterious and invisible "carries with it a concomitant danger--sound will always carry with it the tension of the unknown until it is anchored by sight" ("Moving Lips" 74).

Bunuel seems perfectly happy to defer that kind of anchoring by sight. As soon as the first screams are heard, the crowd begins to turn around. Then more screams are heard, and they grow louder. Bunuel cuts to a couple (Gaston Modot and Lya Lys) in a passionate embrace, rolling in the mud. The screams are attributed to the woman by the crowd, which assumes, as Linda Williams does, that the sounds "piercing the air [are] shrill cries of pleasure" (Figures 116). However, a close-up of the woman's face does not confirm that interpretation. Her lips move, but her mouth does not curve open in synchronicity with those orgasmic cries. There is a disjunction between the sound and its source, one that goes mostly unnoticed. The crowd quickly separates the two lovers--he is a government official, and she is an aristocrat's daughter. She is dragged away from his arms, as he looks forlornly after her. "Society, outraged and terrified by love," Kyrou argues, "mobilizes all its poison-spewing forces--its high functionaries, its priests, its families, its big words, its police, its sophisticates" (156). The scene is generally regarded as the triumph of bourgeois society. The lovers are torn apart, their pleasure is denied. But it is precisely this kind of simplistic narrative representation, of the lovers versus the bourgeoisie, that Bunuel resists. The screams do disrupt the imperial ceremony. But by leaving the source and meaning of that sound indeterminate, he allows the orgasmic screams to remain threatening. Although the scene returns to the governor's proclamations, supposedly founding Imperial Rome, Bunuel maintains the ambiguity of human voice.

It is in the next segment, set in Imperial Rome, where Bunuel's contrapuntal use of sound reaches its climactic boom. The sequence begins innocently enough, with a conversation about that evening's dinner party between Lyra Lys and her mother. Ironically, in the film's first meaningful synchronized dialogue, the subject is sound itself. Lys contends that they have hired enough musicians, since "six of them placed near the microphone will make more noise than sixty ten kilometers away." (9) Lys has a rational, almost mathematical attitude toward sound, but it is precisely the logical codification of sound, promoted by Hollywood talkies, that is challenged here. As Hammond suggests, the "Surrealist dialogue" in this exchange "pokes fun at the sound revolution" (L'Age d'Or 33). As the next scene will illustrate, unrestrained by standardization, sound can become unreasonable, and it can destabilize the diegetic world.

Leaving her mother in the living room, ostensibly to prepare for the evening's party, Lyra Lys enters her bedroom and is unfazed by the presence of a cow on her bed. As she shoves the cow away, as one might a dog, the sound track picks up the cow-bells, which continue even after their source disappears. Lys moves over to her dressing-table, where she fuffs her nails mechanically. A cutaway reveals Gaston Modot being led away by two police officers. The extra-diegetic cow-bells unite this exterior space with Lyra's bedroom, and the sound track now registers a barking dog. When Bunuel crosscuts to Lys, she is looking at the mirror, which becomes a virtual window, reflecting clouds moving across the sky as well as her face. Along with the cow-bells and the barking dog, we now hear the sound of wind, which is visually suggested through Lyra's ruffled hair, as she gazes into the mirror/window.

This sequence has been hailed by critics as the epitome of Surrealist achievement in cinema. The mirror, which doubles as a window on the world, is generally seen in classic psychoanalytic terms. As Wendy Everett puts it, "the unreflecting mirror reflects the unreflectable: the process of desire" (148). This time, the lovers' desire overcomes spatial and temporal barriers, triumphing over the repressive forces of the state. However, theirs is not a harmonious union. Bunuel's film is not a love story; it is a revolt. So it is the cacophony of diegetically unattributable sounds—the clanging bells, barking dogs, and gushing wind—which facilitate their virtual, albeit discordant, union. If Surrealism may be defined visually as the chance encounter of an umbrella and a sewing machine on a dissecting table, then this dissonant moment may be regarded as an ideal example of aural Surrealism. (10) They provide what Georges Hugnet called for in Henri D'Urse's art and crime film La Perle (1929): a series of countersounds or mistranslations. Through their contrapuntal clash with the image track, these sounds echo a world that is fragmented and unsynchronized.
It is not surprising, then, that when the lovers finally come together during the climactic concert in L’Age d’Or, their union remains disruptive rather than melodic. Significantly, starting with the evening reception, which leads to the discordant concert, Bunuel begins using sound minimally. But this is no homage to silent cinema. In fact, silence itself is employed in a contrapuntal conflict with sound after this point. At the reception, human voice is once again dehumanized. This time it is the dinner guests at “the magnificent Roman estate of Marquis of X” for whom speech is disallowed. With Wagner playing in the background, they mingle, unmoved by the music and indifferent to any other sounds. First, a horse-driven carriage with intoxicated, working-class men rolls through the salon, its rumbling audibly disrupting the ambient music. But it elicits no response. Then, a loud scream emanates from the kitchen. As the fire roars, a maid falls to the ground, but the denizens of high society remain unperturbed. Their oblivious merrymaking pauses only momentarily, when the music stops to register two shots fired outside by the gamekeeper at his son. We hear faint murmurs of concern from the guests, as they gather on the balcony to see what they have heard. As if to say that their concern is disingenuous, Bunuel lets his lips move, but no voice is heard. So the music picks up again, cuing the talking heads to return to their party.

Ultimately, the party moves outdoors, where, during the concert, Bunuel launches his most radical attack on sync sound. As the guests relocate to the garden, the lovers find a secluded spot for their rendezvous. Although the guests and the lovers are spatially adjacent, they are acoustically separated. While the audience settles in, we hear the musicians tuning their instruments. But when Bunuel cuts-cross to the lovers, they cuddle awkwardly to the sound of birds chirping, their oral sadism evident in their biting each other’s fingers. “[L]ove,” as Evans points out, “is an irresistible force, but one that invariably makes fools of lovers” (“An Amour Still Fou” 39). This foolish lovelmaking is soon interrupted; the first bar of music is heard just as they lean in for a kiss. But Tristan does not provide soothing, romantic mood music. It appears in sharp contrast to the lovers’ farcical lovelmaking, which resumes after they bump heads, only to be interrupted within a few moments by a different sound.

Music is again momentarily suspended as we hear a crunch on the gravel; a majordomo arrives to inform Modot that the Minister is on the telephone. Even this seemingly naturalistic exchange is an aural gag. For the telephonic interruption becomes an occasion to mock. Jean Epstein’s lament of the telephone’s capacity to activate the realistic narrative drive in cinema. (11) While we are focused on “the curtain at the window and the handle of the door,” Epstein Tourne, “[t]he telephone rings. All is lost” (242); the focus now turns to action and to the onward momentum of the plot. But in Bunuel’s world, the ringing telephone only leads to grotesque parody, not narrative momentum. When Modot takes the call, he is chastised by an irate Minister. Wagner is abruptly interrupted again, so we can hear their absurd exchange, where the Minister blames Modot for causing widespread destruction. As with the opening scissors, for visuals Bunuel resorts to stock footage that becomes a bizarre burlesque of expansive tragedy: “we see a Spartakist mob charge across a square and poor families fleeing a city threatened by flowing lava,” whereas the “lumpens come from Henry King’s The White Countess (1923), a Papist trampster starring Lilian Gish, shot in Italy” (Hammond, L’Age d’Or 49). Modot does not care about these scenes of devastation. These stock images, paired with Modot’s voice saying he couldn’t care for a “few brats,” are not meant to evoke sympathy for the masses. All we hear is a gunshot as the screen goes black.

When the image returns—a Langian shot of the dead Minister’s limp corpse—we hear no sound, not even the buzz of the telephone receiver left off the hook. Silence briefly takes over. Jean Mity has argued that “silence was meaningless, powerless” in the silent film era (151). “One of the marks of the sound-picture,” he suggested, “was that it gave a voice to silence” (151). Could we understand this curious silent moment in these terms? For within that instance of total absence of sound, Bunuel makes the presence of silence felt, suggesting that sound can be turned off just as easily as it can be turned on. Thus, Eisenstein’s notion of the contrapuntal use of sound may be applied to silence as well. Used in a “talkie,” as Bunuel does, silence itself becomes a potent source of audiovisual montage, something Pudovkin employs more deliberately in Deserter (1933), where, Kristin Thompson suggests, “the sudden switch to complete silence heightens and renews our perception of events” (122). Similarly, in L’Age d’Or silence serves not a diegetic but rather an emotional or perceptual function. This is not after all Bunuel’s sincere veneration of silent cinema. The silent-talkie draws attention to the apparatus of sound and denaturalizes the relationship between the subject or object and its voice.

As Modot returns to his lover in the Garden of Delights, Tristan resumes. What follows is a prepositional sketch of their reunion, where the sound track at first trivializes and then mocks their attempt at a bourgeois marriage. Before the interruption it was their awkward demonstrations of affection that thwarted them; now it is their dialogue. What begins as an inane conversation (presented as interior monologue), about turning out the lights and going to bed like a respectable married couple, turns into an absurd release of passions through what Dudley Andrew calls “verbal ejaculations” (119). Eros meets Thanatos in perverse consensual ecstasy, when Lys, alluding to the gamekeeper’s earlier exploits, asserts “what joy, what joy to have killed our children.” This exchange verbalizes what Stuart Liebman terms the “latent babble” beneath the strange spectacle of Un Chien Andalou, which he reads as a “talkie” because “its imagery and structure are intimately tied to the French language” (145, 149). Liebman argues that in Un Chien Andalou’s silences, we can “hear” in our inner ear a series of words, phrases and implied sentence-fragments that circle around themes of violence, eroticism and perversion (149), the prime premises of Bunuel’s visual assault on language (in this instance, on French). And language often came under attack from Surrealism due to its seeming insistence on the rules of grammar and logic. Liebman stretches his reading further, contending that the interpretation of the woman’s gesture of repeatedly sticking her tongue out near the end of Un Chien Andalou—at first at the man she is quarreling with and then directly at the audience—may also imply Bunuel and Dalí’s “tongue-wagging” at the French language. Tirer la langue. Liebman notes, also means to pull or stretch the language; “[just as she [the character] extends and contorts her tongue, they [Bunuel and Dalí] explore the outlying reaches of the French ‘tongue’—slang, idioms, figures of speech, etc.” through visual gags that become the film’s assaults (145). In their next film, that assault is vocalized, as we have seen, through the contrapuntal clash between sound and image. And we can stretch these attacks one step further. For what begins as a “stretching” in Un Chien Andalou becomes a “shooting” (the otherwordly Roman estate of Marquis of X) in L’Age d’Or where language is dissolved, such that language, “the language of the mind” is “nothing more than a desperate, passionate appeal to murder” would be applicable to L’Age d’Or as well. Interestingly, Modot responds by repeatedly calling Lys “mon amour” in a monotonous manner, as if he has lost his mind. After that, there will be no more words spoken—whether meaningful or meaningless—for the remainder of the film.

But still there is music. Wagner has provided an incredibly counterpoint to the lovers in this sequence.
Musicoologist Donald Grout has suggested that Wagner was highly emotionally evocative: "his music impressed itself on the late nineteenth century because it was able, by its sheer overwhelming power, to suggest or arouse or create in its hearers that all-embracing state of ecstasy, at once sensuous and mystical, toward which all Romantic art had been striving" (617). But since Bunuel would want to break the harmonies of Romantic art, he plays with his audience's desire for that "all-embracing state of ecstasy," only to frustrate that desire by suspending Wagner every time it reaches a crescendo. That suspension parallels the lovers' absurd rotus interruptus, which Andrew regards as a fine example of Bunuel's "cinema of cruelty," for he "snaps us out of our reverie" just when we expect some audiovisual closure (120). In fact, his use of Wagner is markedly different here than in Abelos de Pasion (1954), where it works as a unifying cadence. As Saviour Catania suggests, in the latter film, Bunuel "mak[es] his lovers cling to one another in emotional interplay with Wagner's twining appoggiaturas (whereby two notes strive to become one)," even though they ultimately "realize their Brontean equivalents' fate by failing to transcend their tragic twining of the self" (274, 278). In L'Age d'Or, there is no such coupling or twining; love, even mad love, is deliberately frustrated. The final abandonment of Wagner comes at the price of the lovers' relationship. Abruptly and inexplicably, the conductor walks away from the orchestra and into Lys's arms.

At this disruptive moment, Bunuel explores the disjunctive relationship not between the image and sound tracks but between two pieces of sound, by setting up a counterpart between Wagner and the drums of Calanda, which serve as the primary aural element until the end of the film. Initially, the drums of Calanda appear to complement Modot's rage, their beat exacerbating his defenestration of classic phallic objects, a bishop, a cigaña, a plow, and a burning pine tree, and marking, as Hammond suggests, his "revolt against the deathly Symbolic Order" (L'Age d'Or 51)—a very standard Surrealist stuff. But then the drums continue into the sixth and final prismatic segment, which transports us to the Chateau de Sellinya, the site of the most bestial orgies and debaucheries in Sade's 120 Days of Sodom. Now, the drums of Calanda perform their caustic function. Although we are primed to expect the Duc de Blangis, the leader of the degenerate libertines, the figure walking out of the chateau is Jesus Christ. Visually, we have the characteristic Surrealist clash of opposites in this figure, "a primal psycho-theological identification of God and the Devil, a typically ambivalent expression of love and hate, desire and detestation of the absolute figure of authority" (Weiss 167). Aurally, this assault on "the absolute figure of authority" is even more radical. For the drums of Calanda refer to the centuries-old ritual heard during Easter week in Bunuel's birthplace of Aragon, Spain. (12) Every year on Good Friday at noon, thousands in the region commence banging on snare drums and bass drums, together producing a booming din that continues through the religious weekend. Bunuel's use of these drums in the film's epilogue, in a scene about the rebellious expressions of desire, is deliberately sacrilegious, and it would have been even more so to contemporary French audiences, for whom "[g]iven the rightwing French hatred of meteques, or foreign residents, there could be no more provocative climax to a film by a Spanish director than a blasphemous scene accompanied by identifiably Spanish-sounding music" (Barlow 49).

And Bunuel isn't done yet. His final assault comes in the form of a scream, emitted by an off-screen, disembodied female voice. It occurs moments after the Christ figure escorts a young girl back into the chateau. As with Lys's scream earlier in the film, it is unclear whether this sound transmits pleasure or pain. It merely pierces the drums of Calanda fleetingly, although the audience when Lys, alluding to the gamekeeper's earlier exploits, asserts "what joy, what joy to have killed our children." This exchange when Modot takes the call, he is chastised by an irate Minister. Wagnerism in cinema with the introduction of the talkies, but with the clash of image and sound, Bunuel launched his most vociferous attack—not only on Surrealism's traditional enemies of church and state, but also on the family, art, and finally on love itself—that continues to be heard.

Works Cited

It should be noted that later sound theorists, especially Rick Altman and Michael Chion, have taken issue with these early remarks, the film “rumbled deep in the Parisian cinematographic unconscious for fifty years” (111). And when it was released, it remained as a tearjerker, a plow, and a burning pine tree, and marking, as Hammond suggests, “yes, but you’ve got accordions, hippopotami, keys, mountain goats, and ... paintbrushes.” Paul Hammond argues that “this isn’t experimental work with sound, where the image track is consistently ruptured by the denaturalized sound track.”


Notes

(1) This was meant to be Bunuel's second joint venture with Salvador Dalí, but although Dalí's name remains on the screen credits, he reportedly left the set after the first day of shooting, later claiming that the film "was only a caricature of [his] ideas" (qtd. in Kyrou 155).

(2) Ado Kyrou recounts in detail the trajectory of the scandal, from October 2 to December 11, 1930, that led to the banning of the film.

(3) Henry Miller, who was among the film's earliest admirers, called it "the only film... which reveals the possibilities of the cinema," yet his praise was limited to "the succession of images without sequence" (176, 173). Donald Richie also focused on Bunuel's "concrete but inexplicit images, drawn, one would suspect, from the director's own life, which disturb precisely because they remain mysterious" (115). And Carlos Fuentes, who regarded L'Age d'Or as "the greatest of the surrealist films," described the entire plot without reference to its sound track, as if it were a silent film (54-55). More recently, while Laura Martins acknowledges that Bunuel's films "are a contract of audiovisual reading," she continues to emphasize the power of their images, which "force us to review our perception" and "def[y] us by returning our gaze" (188).

(4) It should be noted that later sound theorists, especially Rick Altman and Michael Chion, have taken issue with these early theorists, who argued for the primacy of the image. Altman considers their position of placing image before sound, thereby seeing sound as "an add-on, an afterthought" ("Introduction" 35), to be an ontological and historical fallacy. Chion, on the other hand, argues that sound should be regarded as more important than the image, since it directs and influences our perception of the cinematic image.

(5) To my knowledge, until recently, only Ado Kyrou had commented on Bunuel's innovative use of sound. While Raymond Durgnat notes Bunuel's musical irony, he does not discuss the sound track in depth. Similarly, Paul Hammond does not pursue the implications of saying that "[w]ith L'Age d'Or Bunuel made it clear he'd heeded the Russians' words" ("Available Light" 19). For an account of aural Surrealism that focuses on the ironic use of classical music in L'Age d'Or, see Priscilla Barlow's "Surreal Symphonies."

(6) Of course, in a little over a decade, theorists like Andre Bazin would reverse the argument and suggest that cinema was in fact incomplete before the invention of sound. Bazin argued for thinking of cinema as an audiovisual totality, which was "a complete and total representation of reality [and] a perfect illusion of the outside world in sound, color, and relief" (20).

(7) Although the "Statement on Sound" is usually regarded as being of historic interest only, Kristin Thompson presents a comprehensive analysis of Soviet films made between 1930 and 1934 that put the notion of sound-image disjunction into practice. Although the theory of contrapuntal sound was not practicable in the Socialist Realist narratives that were gaining prominence at this time, Thompson shows how it functioned in such films as Alone (1931) and Deserter (1933), where "[c]ounterpoint worked fine for setting up the reactionary forces against which the character would struggle" (139). It should also be noted that the 1928 statement was not the first time Soviet filmmakers had focused on sound; Dziga Vertov established his "Laboratory of Sound" as
(8) There are other instances where Bunuel ruptures the sonic ambience with classical music. The film's first sound effect, a knock on the door of the bandits' hut in the second segment, is an ironic replay of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, whose opening section is called "Fate Knocking on the Door," which is playing in the background. Mozart's "Ave Verum Corpus," an anthem sung during the mass, is used in the film during the dead bishops scene. And Lya Lys sucks the toe of a statue with "Liebestod," from Wagner's Tristan und Isolde, playing on the sound track. Bunuel's selection is not merely obscene, but it also "explodes and reinforces the artificial, hierarchical divisions between mass and 'class,' serious and popular music" (Barlow 32).

(9) This notion will appear ironic later, for the musicians are to play Wagner's "Liebestod."

(10) Hammond sees this moment as an example of what he calls "transcendental synaesthesia" (L'Age d'Or 35).

(11) This mocking makes sense, as Andrew notes, "[t]he chief target of surrealist aggression was the chic Parisian avant-garde, represented in the cinema by Jean Epstein" (124).

(12) Bunuel was in fact so taken by these sounds that he began a film about them, The Drums of Calanda, which his son Jean-Louis Bunuel completed.

(13) Trinh T. Minh-ha's Reassemblage (1983) is an uncommon example of the use of contrapuntal sound, employed to critique the anthropological view of life in Senegal.