

Oppositional and Stigmatized

program four

Blasphemy

Curated by Janis Crystal Lipzin and Caroline Savage

Sunday, April 29, 2007 — Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco

Since the origins of cinema, this medium has been under attack by censors, government, religious groups, and conformists that fear its potent influence. This series, ***Oppositional and Stigmatized Cinema***, has presented some notable examples of the aesthetically, sexually and politically subversive films that have emerged from diverse eras and cultural identities. These remarkable works have, at one time or another, been identified as oppositional or stigmatized by the mainstream. Many have been the source of heated controversy or censorship. Some actually have been banned or subjected to efforts at suppression.

The first recorded public protest against the exhibition of an erotic movie occurred in April 1894 in New York. Only two weeks after Thomas Edison's kinoscope motion picture machine first appeared in New York, angry citizens demonstrated against the exhibition of an erotic Edison film, *Dolorita in the Passion Dance*. Since this early moment in film history, filmmakers have been under pressure to refrain from producing or exhibiting controversial films. Nevertheless, San Francisco Cinematheque has, since its founding over forty-five years ago, demonstrated a courageous exhibition stance in the face of omnipresent censorious efforts of the disapproving.

Amos Vogel asserts in *Film as a Subversive Art*, "We are inundated by ambiguity, allegory, and complexity, by an existential humanism devoid of certainty or illusion. The committed artists of our day, [have] the most nakedly sensitized antenna extended toward our collective secrets." The artists included in this four-part series illuminate these secrets with works providing radical challenges to typical cinematic modes of presentation, production and representation, cinema that is forbidden, shocking, blasphemous, extremist, defiant.

Targeting and skewering bourgeois complacency, religious hypocrisy, patriarchal authority and European moral conventions, tonight's films continue to challenge and confront the audience. Irreligious and scandalous, Luis Buñuel's *L'Age D'Or* attacks the Church, the State, the family, not simply to shock for shock's sake but also to argue the case for the surrealist belief in giving our unconscious irrational desires free reign. As Buñuel states: "It is love that brings about the transition from pessimism to action: Love, denounced in the bourgeois demonology as the root of all evil. For love demands the sacrifice of every other value: status, family and honor." Although *La Coquille et le Clergyman (The Seashell and the Clergyman)* by Germaine Dulac, is often regarded as the first Surrealist film and is based on Antonin Artaud's scenario, it was Dulac's passion for "films made according to the rules of visual music" that ignited Artaud's narrative about a clergyman struggling against his own eroticism and desire. In 1927, the British Board of Film Censors banned this film, citing "the film is so cryptic to be almost meaningless; if there is a meaning, it is doubtless objectionable".

La Coquille et le Clergyman (The Seashell and the Clergyman) (1928) by Germaine Dulac; Screenplay: Antonin Artaud; Cinematography: Paul Parguel; screened as 16mm, b&w, silent, 41 minutes, print from Em Gee Film Library.

"By far the most important and the most prolific filmmaker of the [1920s] was Germaine Dulac, whose film style proceeded from psychological realism and symbolism through surrealism to documentaries and formal attempts at transposing musical structures to film; her ultimate goal was that film at its highest level of achievement should be a visual symphony. Yet Dulac has been largely overlooked or else slandered by most film historians. One reason might be that Dulac cannot be put into categories: for example, she was making films before the [...] surrealists, and she was still making films in the 1930s, when most of the Surrealists had stopped. Another reason might be that Dulac's films have never received wide distribution. Either in France or elsewhere. This second reason is linked with a third reason, perhaps the most important reason of all: Germaine Dulac was intensely interested in the image of women in film. (William van Wert, "Germaine Dulac: First Feminist Filmmaker," *Women and Film*, vol. 1, nos. 5-6)

“...There’s no real doubt about [this film’s] general thrust. It’s all about sex – in particular, one man’s inner battle against his lustful thoughts. The images range from the explicit (a wide-eyed priest tearing off a woman’s bra to reveal a heaving female bosom) to the obvious Freudian metaphorical (a man unlocking an endless series of doors) to the bewildering yet suggestive (a head split open, a suddenly expanding cassock, etc.). Even today, the film appears daring and occasionally shocking. When it was released, its portrayal of a man of the church as a turbo-charged bra-fondling lecher could only have been seen as dangerously subversive, anti-Clerical feminist propaganda of the worst kind.” (James Travers, *Films de France.com*)

“Historically Artaud’s scenario is of great importance. .. he deliberately delved into the ‘ugly’ depths of the subconscious and allowed his plot to embrace the full extent of the chaos he found there....The images have no narrative meaning, they are rather a series of visual stimuli intended to create a psychological drama within the viewer, ‘rousing the mind by osmosis without verbal transposition.’

When the film premiered at the Ursulines Club, Artaud apparently denounced Dulac’s production and was supported in his attack by his surrealist friends; but the circumstances suggest that this may have been more in anger at his exclusion from the cutting rooms than through any basic disagreement over the visual conception as has sometimes been suggested.” (David Curtis, *Experimental Cinema: A 50-Year Evolution*)

Other accounts suggest that Artaud was unhappy with the subjective perspective of the film and instigated a riot at the premiere claiming that Dulac “feminized” his script as an expose of male sexual fantasies.

L’Age D’Or (The Golden Age) (1930) by Luis Buñuel; Producer: Charles Vicomte de Noailles; screenplay: Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí; photography: Albert Duverger; editor: Luis Buñuel; production designer: Pierre Schilzneck; original music: Van Parys, montage of extracts from Mozart, Beethoven, Mendelssohn, Debussy, and Wagnerscreened as 16mm, b&w, sound, 60 minutes, print from Em Gee Film Library

“Although Dali compared it to American film (undoubtedly from a technical point of view), he later wrote that *his* intentions “in writing the screenplay” were to expose the shameful mechanisms of contemporary society. For me, it was a film about passion, *l’amour fou*, the irresistible force that thrusts two people together, and about the impossibility of their ever becoming one. The day after [the first screening], Charles de Noailles [the producer] was expelled from the Jockey Club. Apparently the Church also threatened to excommunicate him; his mother had to go to Rome to negotiate with the Pope. Like *Un Chien Andalou*, *L’Age D’or* opened officially at Studio 28 where it played to packed houses for six days. The Camelots du Roi, the Jeunesses Patriotiques, and the right-wing press, however, attacked the theatre in full-battle dress, lacerating the paintings at the surrealist exhibit in the foyer and smashing the chairs (In the annals of Parisian cultural history, the episode is still known as “the scandal of *L’Age d’Or*.”) A week later, Police Chief Chiappe closed the theatre; the film was censored and remained so for fifty years.” (Luis Bûnuel, *My Last Sigh* , 1983)

“A collage of modes, *L’Age d’Or* begins as a documentary, shifts to an entropic costume drama, turns blatantly allegorical, pretends to be a travelogue of imperial Rome, drops in at a snooty garden party, and winds up cribbing the conclusion of the Marquis de Sade’s *120 Days of Sodom*. Ten minutes into the action, *L’Age d’Or* declares its subject: A pompous nationalist religious ceremony is disrupted by the noisy lovemaking of a passionate couple who are forcibly separated and will spend much of the movie trying to get back together.

Buñuel scarcely idealizes the lovers, who, having been introduced rolling in the mud, are no less self-absorbed than their fellow bourgeois. Together at the garden party, they resume their lovemaking with thrilling ineptitude—biting each other’s hands, falling off the lawn furniture. When the man is called away to take a telephone call from the minister of the interior (a transmission from his unconscious?), the woman consoles herself by fellating the toe of a marble statue.

L’Age d’Or climaxes with murder rather than sexual release (inviting Jesus Christ to the orgy). Despite this and several instances of blatant scatology, however, the movie refuses to be as visceral as *Un Chien Andalou*. Thanks to his mastery of montage, Buñuel naturalizes Dalí’s images into a duplicitous rhythm of normality and outrage. The film suggests instances of sex and violence far more extreme than any actually represented while contriving effronteries so offhanded you can’t believe you’ve actually seen them.” (J. Hoberman, January 28 - February 3, 2004, *Village Voice*)