

The Scorpion Man: Posthumanism in Buñuel's *L'âge d'or*

AUTHOR

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AFFILIATIONS

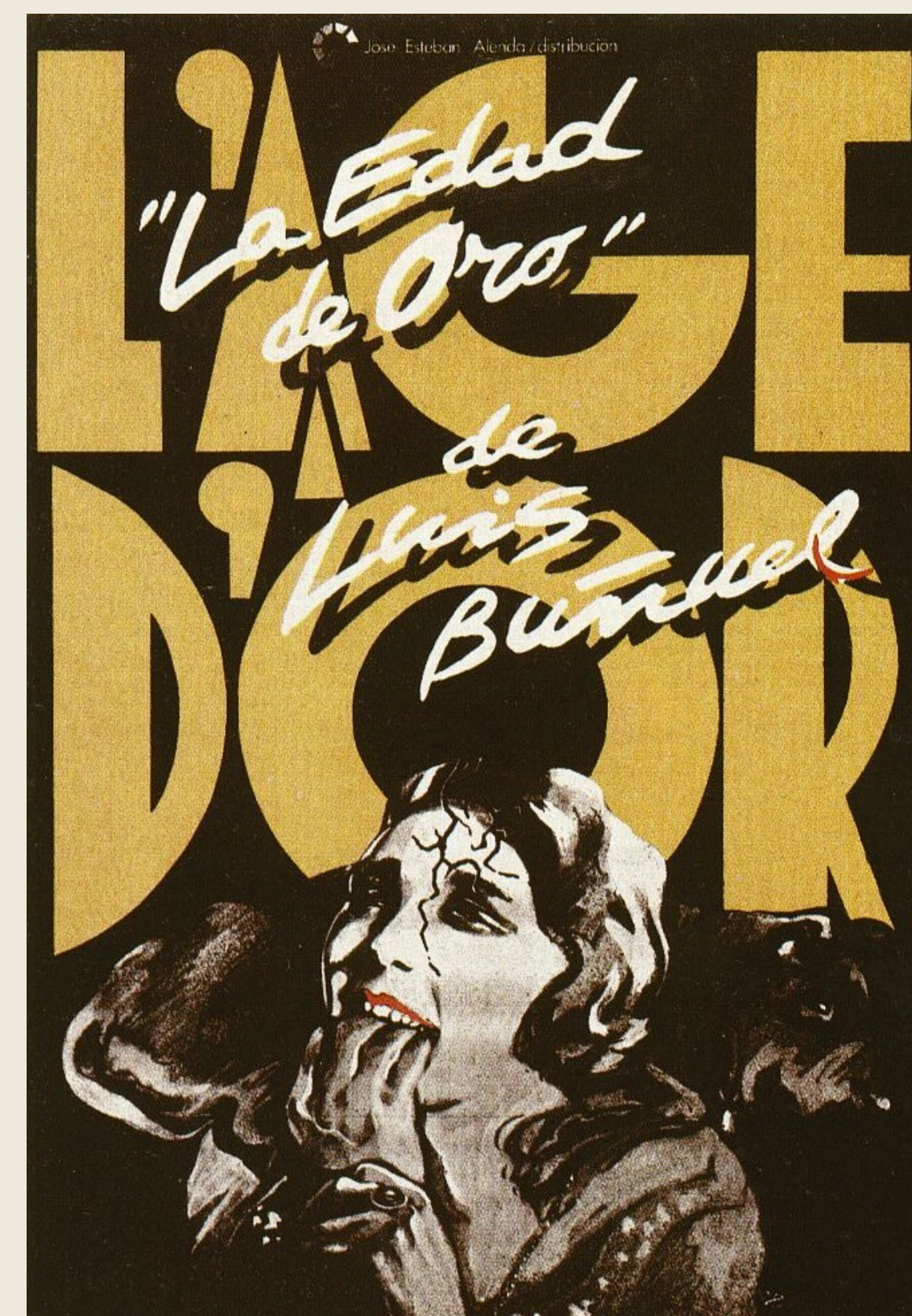
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01. Abstract

This paper takes as its starting point the overlooked inclusion of André Bayard's little-known nature documentary *Le scorpion languedocien* (1912) at the beginning of Luis Buñuel's iconic surrealist film *L'âge d'or* (1930). I argue that the inclusion of scenes from Bayard's documentary throws into sharp relief a distinctly surrealist interest in posthumanism. Following Breton's first manifesto, I study surrealists Suzanne Césaire's and Roger Caillois's theories about nature-culture and human-nonhuman hybridity and argue that *L'âge d'or* presents the "pure psychic automatism" of hybridity. To this end, I focus on the historical and cultural significance of the scorpion as a combined symbol of duality and hybridity. I further consider the human-nonhuman binary by reading it through the ethology-anthropology binary (Caillois), demonstrating that Buñuel's film breaks both by articulating a human-scorpion hybridity at the levels of narrative and form. I therefore consider scenes from the film that reflect a deconstruction of the anthropological notion of "Man." By way of conclusion, I refer to Rosi Braidotti and explain how *L'âge d'or*—and surrealism, writ large—could be read as a posthumanism *avant la lettre* in its desire to move beyond the humanism organized according to the nature-culture and human-nonhuman binaries.



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02. Background

Surrealist scholars have spent a century breaking apart the many layers of the *L'âge d'or*. The bishops on the rocks, the sexual fetishes, the giraffe statue being thrown out of the window of Lya Lys's room: there is plenty to navigate to attempt to understand what Buñuel is trying to decipher about humans, society, classicism, and sexual desire.

"One of the most influential existing surrealist films" - André Breton (Kovács 183)

03. Thesis

Buñuel implements André Bayard's Le Scorpion Languedocien into the debut of his film to promote a rising surrealist interest in posthumanism avant-la-lettre.

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04. Human/Animal Hybridity

The surrealists were fascinated with animal behavior. The founders would often exemplify it as a representation of the bare, innate nature in humans, ultimately fracturing the human-animal binary that dominates humanism.

The human/nonhuman hybridity is a recurrent idea in many of surrealists' obsessions with animals.

Charles Darwin

Darwin's analysis of polymorphism and the vestigial traces between animal and human anatomy were "aberrant signs of species hybridity that crossed the human/animal divide" (Kalaidjian).

Sigmund Freud

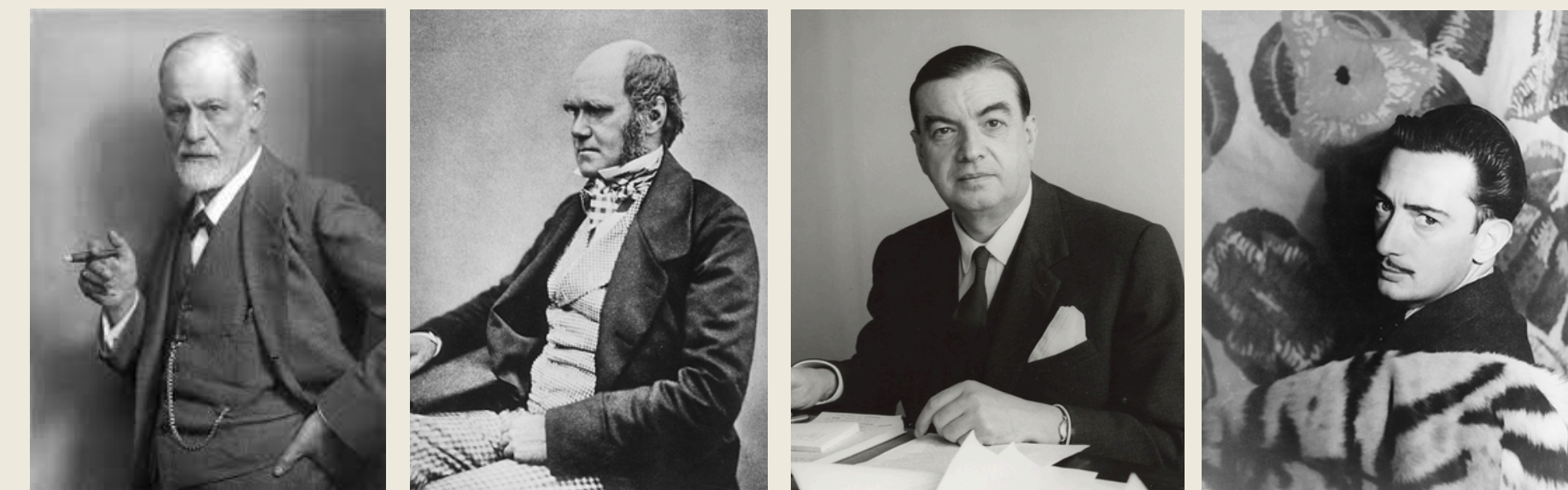
Surrealists looked to Freud for his interest in the untapped contents of the "unconscious," one of the fundamental elements of surrealism dating back to Breton's manifesto.

Roger Caillois

Caillois was intrigued by the mating ritual of grasshoppers, examining it as the nonhuman's connections to the "erotic violence lurking in the darker recesses of the human mind" (Pressly, 600).

Salvador Dalí

Dali, who co-authored Buñuel's 1929 *Un Chien Andalou* found horror and sexual desire in ants, and viewed their symbolism of "death, decay and filth" as "an expression of the guilt connected with carnal thoughts" (Kritsky, 31).



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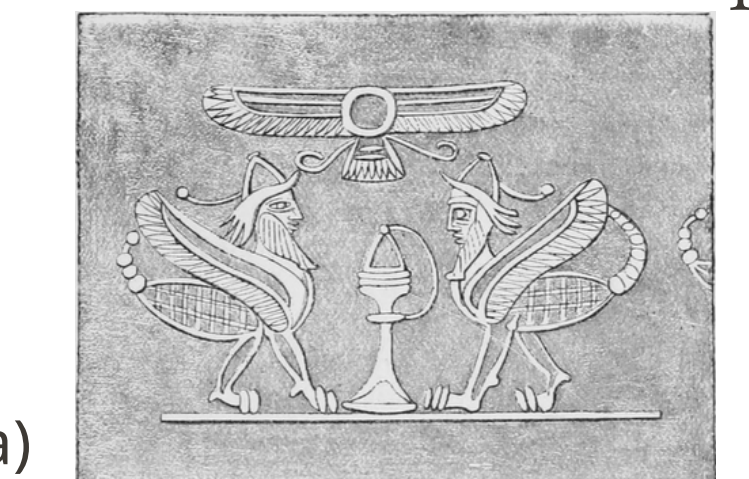
06. The Scorpion

Human Interaction (Pryke)

- 6,000-year-old Native Cave paintings in Tennessee (55-65)
- Epic of Gilgamesh (65-66)
 - Hybrid creature
- Scorpionidae vs. Buthidae (79)
- Scorpion and the Frog (Miranda)

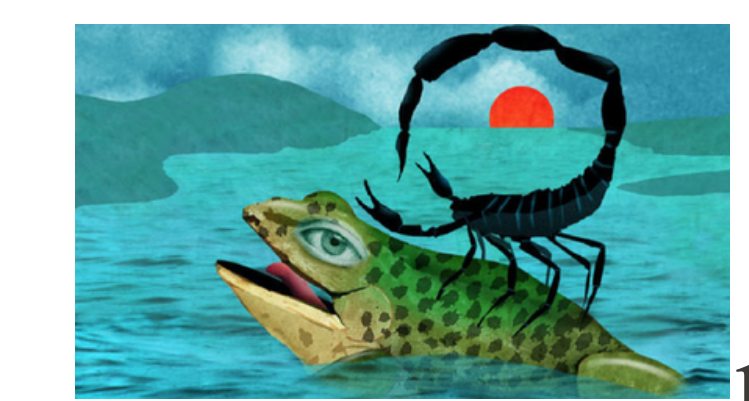


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Scorpions are defined by their Dual Nature and Hybridity



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07. "Le scorpion languedocien"

- Buñuel's Interest in the Scorpion Act of Suicide (Williams)
 - Psychic automatism of the scorpion
- André Bayard (1912)
 - Ethological approach to scorpions and its relations with other animals
- Provides the instinctual nature of the scorpion Natural violence



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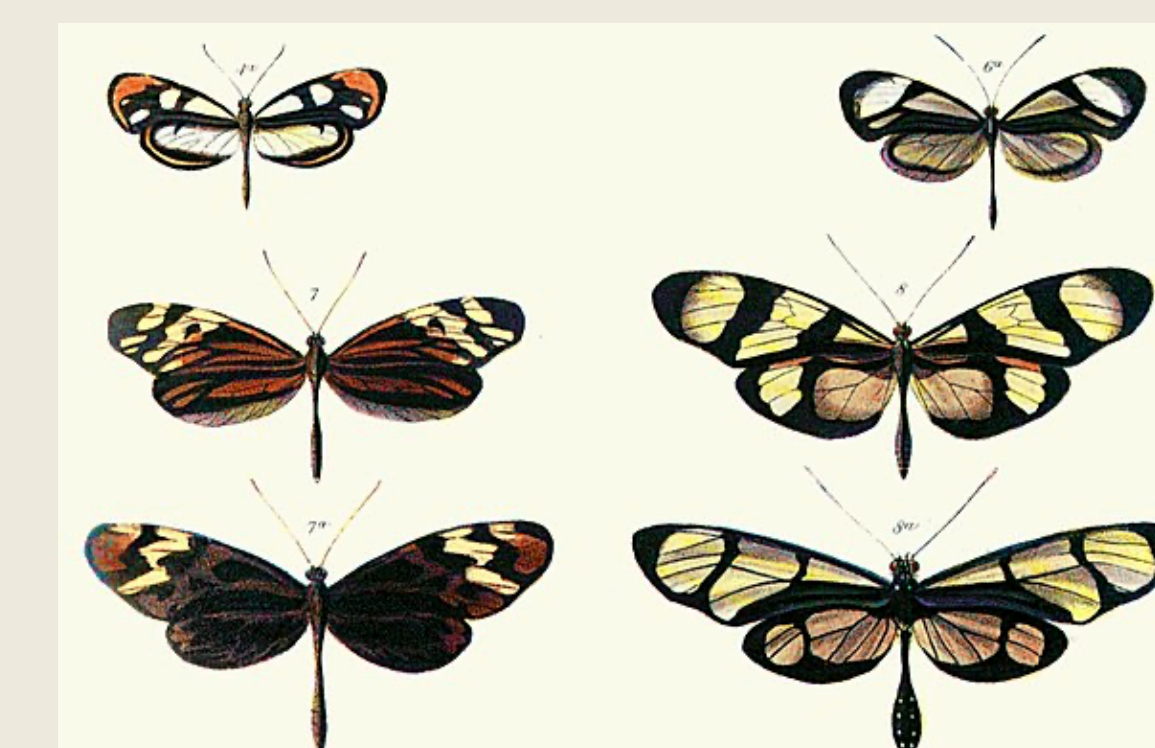
05. The "Pure Psychic Automatism" of Hybridity

Knowing that the human/animal hybridity is a topic of interest for the surrealists, we can further dive into the unconsciousness of this duality, specifically into "pure psychic automatism." André Breton, in his *Manifesto of Surrealism*, defines surrealism as "psychic automatism in its pure state ... dictated by thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern" (Breton, 26).

Caillois & Mimicry

Psychasthenia of mimicry (Caillois)

- Ineffective, insufficient: predator smell not sight (23)
- Really a temptation by space
 - Used for assimilation into the space around them
 - "Disguise seems like an act of pure automatism" or "legendary psychasthenia" (28)
 - Quite strong in the 'civilized' man" (27)
- *We are allowed to know, as we should, that nature is everywhere the same* - Pythagoras (32)



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Suzanne Césaire & Leo Frobenius

- "Foundational Paideuma" (Césaire)
 - "Superior force which predates humanity" (5)
- Two hybrid societies
 - Ethiopia: human-plant hybridity (5-6)
 - Hamitic: human-animal hybridity (5)
- Paideuma is "buried deep in the consciousness of the peoples" in Europe, Asia, and America. (6)
 - A psychic or automatic "force" -> evolution, connecting human and nature in the purest, deepest realms of our minds



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09. Posthumanism and Conclusion

Posthumanism is more than **Anti-Humanism**. Rosi Braidotti, author of *The Posthuman* identifies that Posthumanism brings forth the decline of Humanism, not to destroy man, but to rather view mankind in an alternative fashion (37). What Braidotti teaches us is that in Posthumanism there is essentially a pure life force, called *zoe* that is the pre-dated nature that exists amongst animals and non-humans and ultimately hybridizes the original humanistic duality. This life force, intelligence, and human/nonhuman nature is the "pure psychic automatism" of the hybrid: Césaire's Paideuma, Caillois' mimic psychasthenia. Thus, the surrealists ultimately examined posthumanism and Braidotti's *zoe* *avant-la-lettre* - before the existence of such phenomena. Therefore, the "psychic automatism" that Breton identifies as the critical action that defines surrealism is the central ideal of posthumanism. The surrealism/posthumanism binary is therefore also deconstructed by the same means as both surrealism and posthumanism scholars deconstructed the human/nonhuman, and nature/culture binaries. The character the "man" is named as such as a critique of the "renaissance" or "vesuvian" man of the age of Humanism. Rather than holding societal and humanistic ideals, Buñuel rather created his own posthuman: a hybrid of the human and nonhuman, who exhibits his own desires, his own "psychic automatism," Paideuma, psychasthenia, and *zoe*. The scorpion, a creature who is deemed as instinctive, who acts devoid of humanistic rationality, but also is a symbol of hybridity and duality is rather the key to evaluate the posthuman. Its violence, its fear, its psychasthenia are grounded in our minds, so that when we view the man in action, we consistently view him in a fashion that is scorpionic. The Scorpion-Man is a pure psychic automatic hybrid, a nonhuman human who is one with its nature, who does not idealize human rationality over his natural desires: a symbol of Posthumanism.

08. Buñuel and *L'âge d'or*

Both the man and the woman (the main protagonists of the film) although members of a textbook society, remain controlled by their instincts - a psychic automatic hybrid pair fluctuating between binaries of human/nonhuman and nature/culture.

Buñuel seems to be hinting that the two protagonists - more so the man - are personifications of the scorpion, and *vis versa*. Such as seen in the documentary, both the scorpion and the man are violent creatures, and use violence as a means to an end. Therefore, they share an unconscious instinct that is an automatic response to the world around them, a psychic response that is unconstrained by binary divisions, and which lives in the minds of all of nature. This is the psychic automatism of hybridity that Buñuel is replicating in his film.

The Man



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The Woman



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10. Bibliography

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