BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie

The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie
(Le Charme discret de la bourgeoisie)
Director: Luis Buñuel
©/Production: Greenwich Film Production
Uncredited Production Companies:
Dean Film, Jet Films, Madrid
Presented by/A film produced by: Serge Silberman
Accounting Administrator: Jacqueline Oblin
Production Manager: Ully Pickard
Unit Production Manager: Jean Lara
Assisted by: Jean-Jacques Schpoliansky
Location Manager: Pierre Lefait
Assisted by: Jean Revel
Administrator: Jacqueline Dudilleux
Production Secretary: Marie-Jane Ruel
Assistant Directors: Pierre Lary, Arnie Gelbart
Script Girl: Suzanne Durrenberger
Scenario: Luis Buñuel
With the collaboration of: Jean-Claude Carrière
Director of Photography: Edmond Richard
Camera Operator: Bernard Noisette
Camera Assistants: André Clément, Alain Herpe
Key Grip: René Menuset
Gaffer: Marcel Policard
Stills Photography: Yves Manciet
Editor: Hélène Plemiannikov
Assisted by: Gina Pignier
Art Director: Pierre Guffroy
Assistant Decorator: Albert Rajau
Furniture: Knoll
Chairs: Steiner
Furniture: Neff-Dami
Table Decoration: Snaidero
Gold/Silver: Christofle
Properties: François Sune
Costumes: Jacqueline Guyot
Assisted by: Olympe Watelle
D. Seyrig's Wardrobe by: Jean Patou
Furs: Henri Stern
Make-up: Odette Berroyer, Fernande Hugi
Hairstyles: Lorca
Titles: CTR
Laboratory: GTC
Music Edited by: Galaxie Musique
Sound Recording: Guy Villette
Assisted by: Daniel Brisseau
Sound Mixing: Jacques Carrère
Assisted by: Claude Villand
Sound Re-recording: J. Porel
Sound Effects: Luis Buñuel
Studio/Auditorium: Paris Studios Billancourt
Cast:
Fernando Rey *(Rafael de Acosta, the ambassador)*
Paul Frankeur *(François Thévenot)*
Delphine Seyrig *(Simone Thévenot)*
Bulle Ogier *(Florence)*
Stéphane Audran *(Alice Sénéchal)*
Jean-Pierre Cassel *(Henri Sénéchal, businessman)*
Julien Bertheau *(Monsieur Dufour, bishop)*
Miléna Vukotic *(Inés, Sénéchal's maid)*
Maria Gabriella Maione *(terrorist girl)*
Claude Piéplu *(colonel)*
Muni *(peasant woman)*
Pierre Maguelon *(chief of police)*
François Maistre *(Superintendent Deplus)*
Michel Piccoli *(home secretary)*
Ellen Bahl
Christian Baltauss
Olivier Bauchet
Robert Benoît

A contemporary review

If *Le Charme discret de la bourgeoisie* registers as the funniest Buñuel film since *L'Age d'or*, probably the most relaxed and controlled film he has ever made, and arguably the first contemporary, global masterpiece to have come from France in the Seventies, this is chiefly because he has arrived at a form that covers his full range, permits him to say anything – a form that literally and figuratively lets him get away with murder. One cannot exactly call his new work a bolt from the blue. But its remarkable achievement is to weld together an assortment of his favourite themes, images and parlour tricks into a discourse that is essentially new. Luring us into the deceptive charms of narrative as well as those of his characters, he undermines the stability of both attractions by turning interruption into the basis of his art, keeping us aloft on the sheer exuberance of his amusement.

Seven years ago, Noël Burch observed that in *Le Journal d'une femme de chambre*, Buñuel had at last discovered Form – a taste and talent for plastic composition and a 'musical' sense of the durations of shots and the 'articulations between sequences'; more generally, 'a rigorous compartmentalisation of the sequences, each of which follows its own carefully worked out, autonomous curve.' *Belle de Jour* reconfirmed this discovery, but *Le Charme discret* announces still another step forward: at the age of 72, Buñuel has finally achieved Style.

Six friends – three men and three women – want to have a meal together, but something keeps going wrong. Four of them arrive at the Sénéchals' country house for dinner, and are told by Mme Sénéchal that they've come a day early; repairing to a local restaurant, they discover that the manager has just died, his corpse laid out in an adjoining room – how can they eat there? – so they plan a future lunch date. But each successive engagement is torpedoed: either M and Mme Sénéchal (Jean-Pierre Cassel and Stéphane Audran) are too busy making love to greet their guests, or the cavalry suddenly shows up at dinnertime between manoeuvres, or the police raid the premises and arrest everyone. Still other attempted get-togethers and disasters turn out to be dreams, or dreams of dreams. At one dinner party, the guests find themselves sitting on a stage before a restive audience, prompted with lines; another ends with don Raphael (Fernando Rey) shooting his host; still another concludes with an unidentified group of men breaking in and machine-gunning the lot of them.

At three separate points in the film, including the final sequence, we see all six characters walking wordlessly down a road, somewhere between an unstated starting place and an equally mysterious destination – an image suggesting the continuation both of their class and of the picaresque narrative tradition that propels them forward. Yet if the previous paragraph reads like a plot summary, it is deceptive. The nature and extent of Buñuel's interruptions guarantee the virtual absence of continuous plot. But we remain transfixed as though we were watching one: the sustained charm and glamour of the six characters fool us, much as they fool themselves. Their myths, behaviour and appearance – a

Anne-Marie Deschott
Michel Dhermay
Georges Douking *(the dying gardener)*
Jean Degrave
Sébastien Floche
François Guilloteau
Claude Jaeger
Jean-Claude Jarry
Pierre Lary
Robert Le Béal *(tailor)*
Alix Mahieux
Bernard Musson *(manservant)*
Maxence Mailfort
(the sergeant who recounts his dream)
Robert Party
Jean Revel
Jacques Rispal
Amparo Soler-Leal
Diane Vernon
France-Italy-Spain 1972©
101 mins

seductive, illusory surface – carry us (and them) through the film with a sense of unbroken continuity and logic, a consistency that the rest of the universe and nature itself seem to rail against helplessly. Despite every attempt at annihilation, the myths of the bourgeoisie and of conventional narrative survive and prevail, a certainty that Buñuel reconciles himself to by regarding it as the funniest thing in the world.

Every dream and interpolated story in the film carries some threat, knowledge or certainty of death – the central fact that all six characters ignore, and their charm and elegance seek to camouflage. Ghosts of murder victims and other phantoms of guilt parade through these inserted tales, but the discreet style of the bourgeoisie, boxing them in dreams and dinner anecdotes, holds them forever in check. To some extent, Buñuel shares this discretion in his failure to allude to his native Spain even once in the dialogue, although the pomp and brutality of the Franco regime are frequently evoked. (The recurrent gag of a siren, jet plane or another disturbance covering up a political declaration – a device familiar from Godard's *Made in U.S.A.* – acknowledges this sort of suppression.) But the secret of Buñuel's achieved style is balance, and for that he must lean more on irony – an expedient tactic of the bourgeoisie – than on the aggressions of the rebel classes; when he sought imbalance in *L'Age d'or*, the revolutionary forces had the upper edge. An essential part of his method is to pitch the dialogue and acting somewhere between naturalism and parody, so that no gag is merely a gag, and each commonplace line or gesture becomes a potential gag. Absurdity and elegance, charm and hypocrisy become indistinguishably fused.

Undoubtedly a great deal of credit for the dialogue of *Le Charme discret* should go to Jean-Claude Carrière, who has worked on the scripts of all Buñuel's French films since *Le Journal d'une femme de chambre*: the precise banality of the small talk has a withering accuracy. Even more impressive is the way that Buñuel and Carrière have managed to weave in enough contemporary phenomena to make the film as up-to-date – and as surrealistic, in its crazy-quilt juxtapositions – as the latest global newspaper. Vietnam, Mao, Women's Lib, various forms of political corruption and international drug trafficking are all touched upon in witty and apt allusions. Fernando Rey unloading smuggled heroin from his diplomatic pouch is a hip reference to *The French Connection*, and much of the rest of the film works as a parody of icons and stances in modern cinema. Florence's neuroticism – as evidenced by her loathing of cellos and her 'Euclid complex' – lampoons Ogier's role in *L'Amour fou*; Audran's stiff elegance and country house harks back to *La Femme infidèle*; while Seyrig's frozen, irrelevant smiles on every occasion are a comic variation of her ambiguous *Marienbad* expressions. And as I've already suggested, Godard has become a crucial reference-point in late Buñuel – not only in the parodies and allusions, but also in the use of an open form to accommodate these and other intrusions, the tendency to keep shifting the centre of attention.

A few years ago, Godard remarked of *Belle de Jour* that Buñuel seemed to be playing the cinema the way Bach played the organ. The happy news of *Le Charme discret* is that while most of the serious French cinema at present – Godard included – seems to be hard at work performing painful duties, the Old Master is still playing – effortlessly, freely, without fluffing a note.

Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Sight and Sound*, Winter 1972/3