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Dead Poets and Go-Go Ninjas

VANITY FARE

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THE DISCREET CHARM OF THE BOURGEOISIE

Directed by Luis Buñuel

Written by Buñuel and Jean-Claude Carrière

A Rialto rerelease

Lincoln Plaza Opens May 12

Released in a fine new print, Luis Buñuel's 1972 *Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* boasts one of the best titles in movie history and a cast to match. Three divas of the post-*nouvelle vague* French cinema—Delphine Seyrig, Bulle Ogier, and Stephanie Audrane—are supported by the suavest of Buñuel regulars Fernando Rey, the comic Jean-Pierre Cassel, and the veteran secundario Paul Frankeur. They form a sextet, four of whom arrive a night early for dinner at the other two's home. This faux pas sends the universe reeling. Subsequently thwarted by a combination of narrative digressions and outrageous plot devices, the six never manage to consummate their meal.

Buñuel invites us to savor their endless frustration and feast on their irrational impulses.

Blithely discontinuous, *Discreet Charm* has echoes of Buñuel's early surrealist films, although its episodic, interlocking stories suggest the influence of *The Saragasso Manuscript* and Godard's *Weekend*. In populating his movie with blatant bourgeois piggies and bedeviling them with third world terrorists, Buñuel was—more than usual—responding to the moment. (It's mildly amazing that this movie won an Oscar—but that was back in the heyday of the New Hollywood. Typically, the filmmaker told a credulous Mexican journalist that his producers had bribed the Academy.)

The European art cinema that *Discreet Charm* epitomized may be a relic, but in some ways Buñuel's movie feels oddly contemporary. The smug consumption notes by which his protagonists define their personalities, their hyperawareness of caste, and the way they address their social inferiors all suggest *American Psycho* (as does the violence that surrounds them). Buñuel, of course, not only is funnier than Bret Easton Ellis but also has a more developed social critique. A bishop insinuates himself into the group as their self-appointed servant; the army drops by for dinner; the three men are cocaine smugglers.

Buñuel populated *The Exterminating Angel*, an early variant on this story, with actors drawn from Mexican telenovelas, and it's amusing to reimagine *Discreet Charm* remade with the cast of *Friends*. (Though insulting, the movie was a crowd pleaser.) This is the closest Buñuel ever came to situation comedy. Put another way, *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* is the statement to which the final episode of *Seinfeld* aspired.