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European Sensibility

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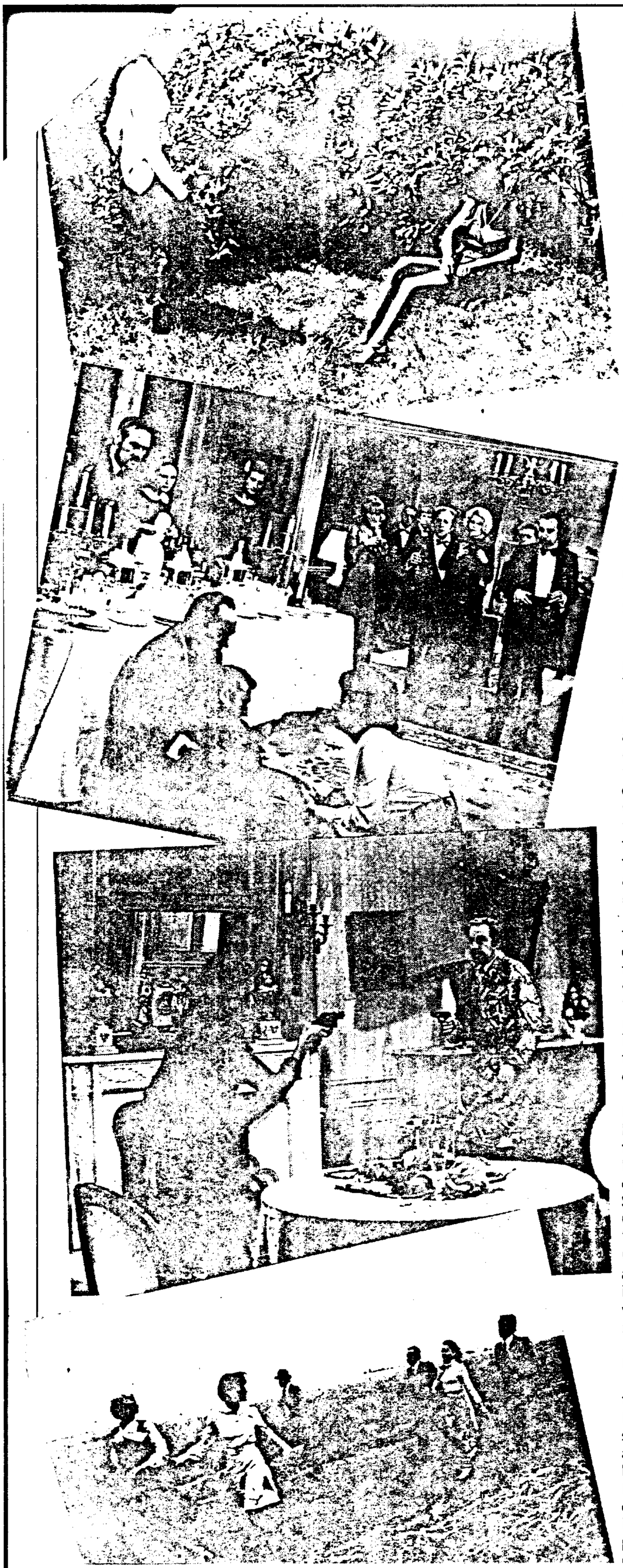
The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie

Bunuel's new film opens this week (Bloomsbury Cinema), for once soon after its general release in Europe and the States. Its title proves to be a major irony in a film built on a series of massive ones. The film consists of a number of episodes, apparently straightforward, un-obscure, highly amusing, accessible. Six friends meet for dinner but someone has the day wrong: and preciously bourgeois characters they are too—Delphine Seyrig, brittle, faintly sinister with a rictus smile that goes beyond mere charm: Stephane Audran all suave and polished sincerity, Paul Frankauer and Jean-Pierre Cassell. And in there too is the Ambassador of a South



American Republic (Fernando Rey) one eye on the heroin trade—his 'business', and a fair comment on capitalism of all shades—and the other on the Godardesque assassin waiting by his window. And Florence, small chaotic sister to Seyrig not averse to vomiting graphically out the window of a luxury limousine. The friends adjourn to a restaurant but find they are sharing it with a corpse. Further attempts to meet are foiled or interrupted—once because host and hostess are hectically screwing in the shrubbery, once due to the incursion of an army platoon on local manoeuvres. A bishop turns up and insists on working as their gardener 'you've heard of worker priests . .'

Later he tops off the Last Rites with a bullet through the brain of his suppliant—turns out the man has murdered his employers (the Bishop's parents) years before. Disaster follows disaster. The six find themselves on a stage ridiculed by an audience, in a cafe that has run out of everything. Some disasters are more deadly. And some are dreams. And all are metaphors for segments of our past and our present. The question that arises is whether these dreams contain the seeds of the destruction of this class. Bunuel's answer? The recurring motif that ends the film of the six, blank faced, hurrying along a bleak country road . . from where to where . .? At points during the film, just as some crucial information is to be revealed, the soundtrack is wiped with the sound of a jet or a siren, and our ignorance remains total.

A broad black comedy, then, from a director whose consistency and lack of compromise continues in a daunting line from 'Un Chien Andalou' in 1928 and 'L'Age d'Or' in 1930 through any number of films that have become, in their way, institutions, right through to this latest at the age of 72.

Bulle Ogier and Bunuel

Bulle Ogier plays Florence, one of the less discreetly charming of Bunuel's characters. She was also, of course, in 'The Salamander'. She studied in Paris with the Marc O Theatre Group, joining them in '63 when she worked with Pierre Clementi, among others. In '67, after they broke up, she starred in Rivette's 'L'Amour Fou': that was followed by several more movies including ones directed by Rene Allio, and Claude Chabrol. In '70 she completed her part in Rivette's legendary 'Out One' and the next year worked with Delvaux in 'Rendezvous a Bray'—still unseen here. Since then, apart from the Bunuel movie, she's been in films by Molinaro and Damiano Damiani. She is critical of the commercial cinema—finding it bearable in the States, less than promising in France. She has been quoted as saying that 'The films that I'm in should contribute to change. The important thing is to be a realist, to choose your realism: the star system with its commercial values, or the narrow path, trying to criticise, to reveal the mechanisms of which the public, more or less consciously, is the victim, and accepts as fate.'

Bulle Ogier: 'In 'Discreet Charm' everything was in the script, and Bunuel's work consisted of bringing the script to the screen as closely as possible. He wasn't at all interested in the motivation of his characters and never gave us any indication about them as rounded psychologically persuasive characters. But he directed us very precisely as to our gestures, and where we should stand and so on. He'd tell us when to speak, whether we should eat first, or after but he would never give any reason. To direct he used a small closed circuit television which gave him a camera eye view of the complete scene so that he could position the actors very precisely. The shots, too, took a long time. We rehearsed only for the technicians, not for our performances, and sometimes took a whole day for a single shot—it was so complicated, but it is done so easily that you don't notice it on the screen. For instance, we spent nine weeks around the dinner table and sometimes we would get very tired and nervous and there would be Bunuel behind his TV screen watching everything that went on between his actors. He loved it, sometimes almost, it seemed, insanely.

'But he's a very charming man and he used his charm a lot to get what he wanted from us. He's deaf, so he doesn't like conversations but for me personally he expressed a lot through his eyes and smile alone. He's like a poet. He is very intuitive in his relationships with people.

'My role as Florence was a little like a comment on the other characters in the film. She is in reaction against everything going on around her, like the character in 'The Salamander'. Though Bunuel never explains. The last shot was the most important—where we just walk along the road—and no-one was told what it means.'

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The Salamander

Alain Tanner's 'The Salamander' (Academy) is a small budget (£26,000) black and white feature made with a crew of six, 'often in my own kitchen'. An odd film to emerge from Switzerland's non-existent film industry, it turned out to be a neat revitalisation of the old, and supposed dead and gone, New Wave that survived a second viewing with most of its points of fascination—and