

THE DISCREET CHARM OF THE BOURGEOISIE (1972)

(Le Charme Discret De La Bourgeoise)

Cast: Fernando Rey (The Ambassador); Delphine Seyrig (Mme. Thévenot);
Stephane Audran (Mme. Sénéchal); Bulle Ozier (Florence);
Jean-Pierre Cassel (M. Sénéchal); Paul Frankeur (M. Thévenot);
Michel Piccoli (Home Secretary)

Director: Luis Buñuel (who also wrote the screenplay in conjunction with
Jean-Claude Carrière)

Luis Buñuel, the writer and director of tonight's film was born in Spain in 1900 and grew up in an atmosphere of violence, religious oppression and sexual suppression. That upbringing has set the pattern for his life and for his films.

It was not long before Buñuel was fighting back. At university in Madrid, where he first became friends with Salvador Dalí, he and a fellow student dressed up as nuns, and rode on the trams nudging the respectable office workers, and offering rather more than just spiritual assistance!

1925 saw Buñuel in Paris and with Dalí was a founder member of the surrealist movement. The anarchic antics of Laurel & Hardy and "The Three Lights" a film by German director Fritz Lang - inspired Buñuel to make his first film "Un Chien Andalou" in 1929 which achieved instant and lasting notoriety with its depiction of a girl's eye ball being slit with a razor. This was followed in 1930 by what has been regarded as the greatest surrealist work "L'age d'or". At its premiere, the police were called to clear the cinema following which it was widely banned for many years on the grounds of sacrilege and indecency.

Hollywood, as always, quick to exploit a situation snapped him up. Having got there, he spent most of his time playing tennis with Chaplin and Eisenstein. Subsequently he returned to Spain with a permanent distaste for the ballyhoo of commercial cinema and gradually slipped into obscurity. Then in 1950 Buñuel showed that he had lost none of his ability to shock with "Los Olvidados" - a documentary about juveniles brutalised beyond hope of recovery. This is regarded as the best of a number of films which Buñuel made in Mexico between 1948 and 1960. But it was "Viridiana" in 1961 that really put him on the international map. With evil triumphing over good and a blasphemous and blatant reference to Christ's Last Supper the film caused an uproar particularly in Spain where Buñuel had been allowed to make it.

Paris was again the base for most of Buñuel's remaining films. From "Belle de Jour" (1967 with Catherine Deneuve as the housewife / prostitute) onwards they have continued to have a dazzling visual impact but there has also been a lighter touch and a professional sheen which has undoubtedly made them more "accessible". "The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie" is one of the best of this bunch and in it he achieves an unsurpassable blend of surreal humour and devastating social comment. The old anarchist is at his most outrageous and his most honest as he wryly admits that in the last analysis our present state of law and order for all its faults, is preferable to utter chaos - besides which there's nothing he can do to change things anyway!

Tony Rozelaar

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