...who wants to decipher it?

By Robert Fourier

Sympathetic in its arts, movies in particular, can (and usually does) fail for a wide variety of reasons. Mostly, though, the problem is some combination of the two simplest ones: the symbol is too obvious, or too obscure. In the case of Teorema, the latest film by Pier Paolo Pasolini (of The Gospel According to St. Matthew), it is both, and the result is more than doubly unfortunate. To begin with, Teorema is a parable; so its strength must lie in its symbolism, and little else. The film opens, after a difficult introduction that becomes clear only later, as a young man (Terence Stamp) comes to visit a middle-class Italian family. All of them—mother, father, son, daughter, and maid—are mysteriously, and usually sexually, attracted to him; and he bemoaningly satisfies their desires. After treating them all in turn, he is suddenly required to leave (though the audience is never told why); and again, one by one, his hosts come to him, begging him to stay. Their themes are similar: he has changed their take on sex; he is suddenly required to leave (though the audience is never told why); and again, one Pasolini is working with material sexually, attracted to him; from brother, to sister, to son, to daughter, and wa...