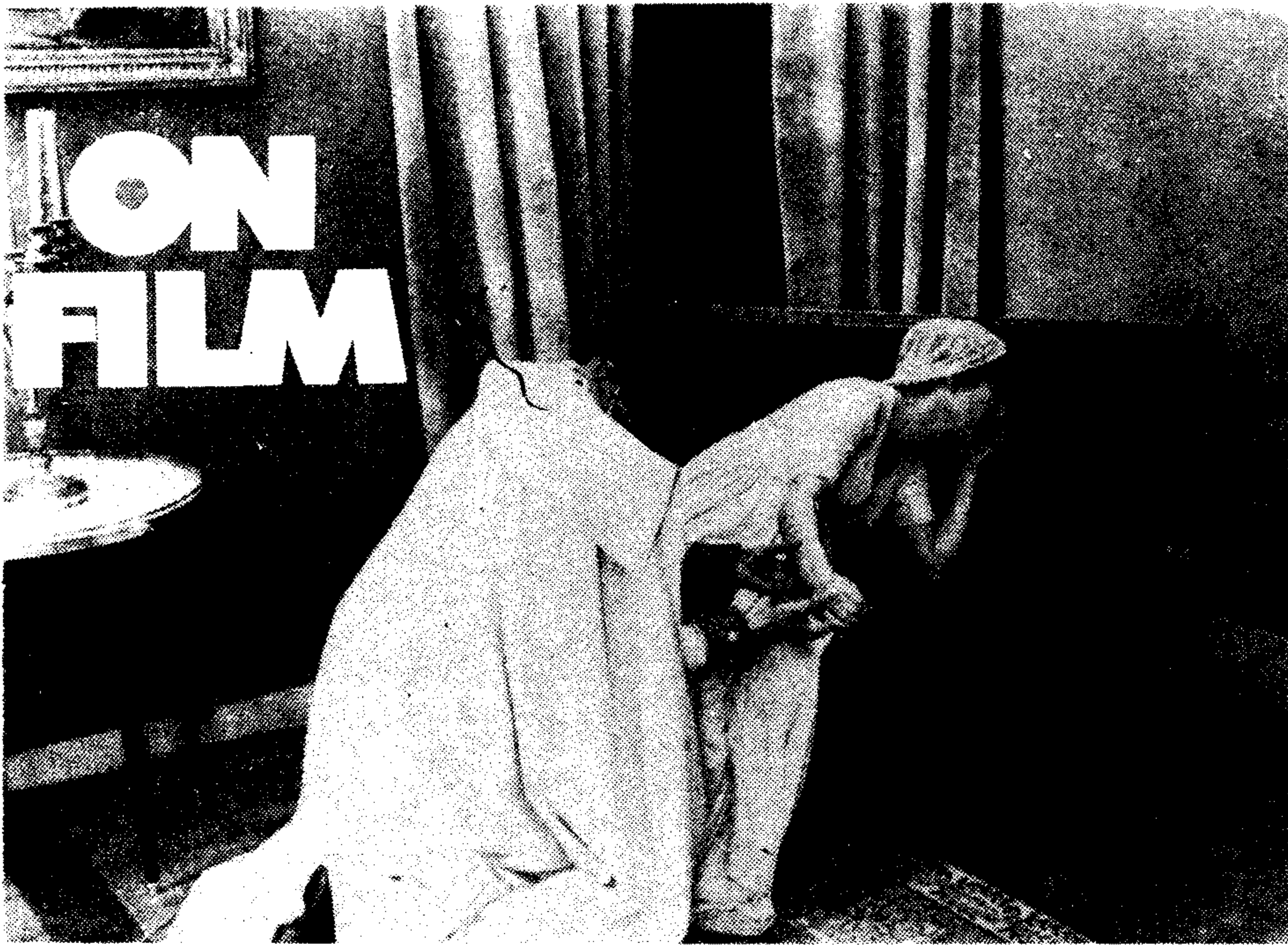


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Frozen postures, flowing passions in Eric Rohmer's *The Marquise of O*

Women Corsetted In Time

Tom Allen

Story of Sin
RKO 59th St. Twin #1
The Marquise of O
68th St. Playhouse

Walerian Borowczyk's *Story of Sin* and Eric Rohmer's *The Marquise of O* are two of the minority films that recently played the New York Film Festival and that quickly found a commercial release in New York theaters. Both highly controlled, mannered exercises are taken from Continental novels published at the turn of the 20th and 19th centuries respectively and both deal with strong heroines buffeted more by masculine societies than by occupying Russian armies.

Each film in its sensuous decor and ex-

quisite play of color textures confirms the overriding impression at the Festival of European directors working out of lofts, as contrasted to American directors, preferring a factory patina, and each film was representative of those Festival-endorsed directors who are more noted for their probing of private, aesthetic boundaries of form than for their plumbing of the latest popular taste.

If, despite the striking similarities of origin and theme shared by the films, I find *Story of Sin* to be frustrating artifice and *The Marquise of O*, rewarding artifice, then that decision is no doubt arrived at in the same personal, subjective mood in which the films were conceived.

The First Sinner

Borowczyk's tale of Eva ("I'm Eva, the first sinner") is the more promising narrative of the two films. As adapted from a

Stefan Zeromski novel, *Story of Sin* traces a young Polish girl from a prim bastion of Catholic, petit-bourgeois restraint through various postures from an angelic commune to a fiendish cover and ultimately to a florid death on an altar-like slab in a prison cell.

Eva is callow and innocent, an exploited clerk and seamstress, mad lover, murderer of her child and of her protector, hard-edged courtesan, repentant utopian, blowsy streetwalker—a heroine driven through virtually every social strata of the Continent because of a star-crossed love affair.

Borowczyk shows a baffling indifference to the crucial import of Eva's guilt or innocence, to her degree of implication in a giddy slide to personal and social degradation. His contemporary conception of Eva is that of a mechanistic pawn trapped in the hortatory warnings of a moral tale from another age. It is symptomatic of the film that the face of Eva (played by Grazyna Dlugolecka) is most frequently veiled from view, preventing identification of motive or empathy of feeling in each of the key scenes. Truffaut made an icon out of Adele H.'s mad love; Borowczyk makes a pinball out of Eva's.

Another annoying aspect of *Story of Sin* is the manner in which Borowczyk's florid sensibilities leap progressively out of the framework of the plot. The film is a series of widening gaps and character ellipses. Slight tears turn to gaping chasms as the naturalistic characters introduced at the beginning of the film return abruptly as fatalistic seers holding Eva's future in their hands.

Borowczyk is also perplexing in that while he works in an erotic ambience of passions, obsessions and fetishes, he most typically avoids confronting a scene in its immediate impact. Objects tend to over-

whelm the players and in a pivotal scene of orgasmic murder, one is distracted from Eva to the paraphernalia of her elaborate death trap—an ancient phonograph, an antique hyperdermic needle, a false wall, a fake bureau drawer.

Borowczyk's flamboyant expropriation of Zeromski's novel is full of audacious, passionately romantic passages only in theory. There is a disjointment in his attitude towards revealed actions that one never senses in Bunuel or Passer or other European creators of characters stewing in private, sub-surface passions.

Discrete, Chary, Compact

Eric Rohmer's *The Marquise of O* is a film incomparably more discrete in its character revelations, chary in its cinematic flourishes and compact in the scope of its plot. In fact, in feel it is a unique film of its kind pushing Truffaut's deviously deadpan treatments of Henri-Pierre Roche's novels to a new level of distanced austerity.

Rohmer has purportedly filmed an 1808 novella of Heinrich von Kleist paragraph by paragraph, and his scene transitions frequently incorporate quoted sections of the work. His characters filmed at stately medium distance inhabit a frame of mind and time supposedly frozen in print by von Kleist.

The transition for a director noted for delicately feeling his way through the moral sensibilities of living contemporaries and now assuming the fixed facade of a literary work is radical, but Rohmer's personal appreciation of characters caught in the moral throes of conscience carries over from his past works. Rohmer subsumes von Kleist's characters integrally in a new cinematic work unlike Kubrick who accepted Thackeray's plot in *Barry Lyndon* but not the 18th-century motivations of the characters.

The main title of the film fittingly linking Kleist-*The Marquise of O*-Rohmer in a collaborative triptych of equals announces a new, dream-like experience for viewers. This is a film to flow with and only occasionally, like Rohmer himself, to be ravaged by the fitness of the building blocks.

The travails of the Marquise (Edith Clever), a strong-minded widow with children made pregnant by an anonymous attacker during a night of war, are transposed into frieze-frames in an alternate kind of cinema. Rohmer has arrested time, but not the flood of sinewy passions flowing beneath a postured facade.



Grazyna Dlugolecka in *Story of Sin*.