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Eric Rohmer's "Marquise of O." and the Theory of the German Novella

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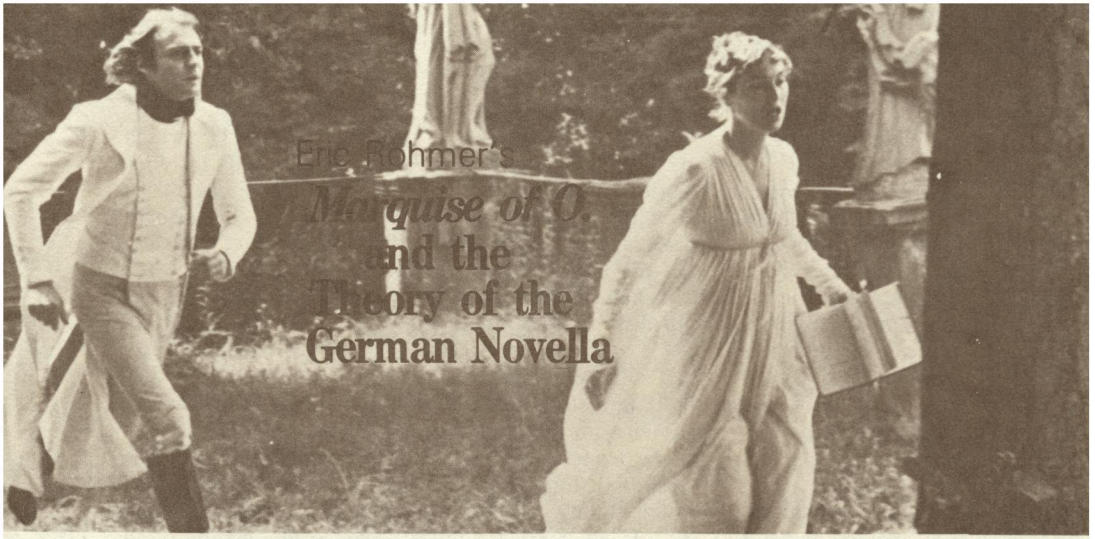


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As a classical philologist and professor of film, Eric Rohmer is eminently suited for the task of giving cinematic expression to Kleist's *Marquise of O*. It was his intention to be painstakingly true to the text,¹ and for this purpose, he even learned the German language. In directing the film, he wanted to get a sense of the period. From the novella, we gather that this must have been the era of the Napoleonic Wars in Europe.² There was a prerequisite that the novella deal with real events, that is, contemporary events, and thus be "news" to the audience.³ For this reason, we must assume that the events of the *Marquise* coincide with the time during which Kleist "records" them. It is assumed that Kleist wrote the novella while he was a prisoner of war of the French and brought it with him on his return to Germany in 1807, submitting it to the literary magazine *Phoebus* in 1808.⁴

It is important to remember that the novella was originally narrated for a contemporary audience and that the norms by which that audience lived were in contrast to the extraordinary events of the novella, so that a certain tension was created by the opposition of the two. If one posits the origin of the novella in the Renaissance period,⁵ a time of increasing individual consciousness, the crisis situation as the central event of the novella⁶ takes on special significance. By confronting stress situations in which the security of the self is jeopardized, the individual learns to assert himself against a fate which in surprising, unexpected, unpredictable, and incomprehensible form has entered his life, thus growing in self-awareness and attaining greater self-consciousness.

The norms by which the Patricians of Tuscany lived gave them a certain secure position from which the events of a novella could be judged, and it provided them with a certain distance towards those events. This distance derived from the conviction that the central event was, after all, out of the ordinary and the fate which was operative in the novella could not touch the audience.⁷

As the social and religious order changed with the course of history, such confidence was no longer possible. In the late eighteenth century, the social frame was often omitted,⁸ as is the case in Kleist's *Marquise of O*. The tension then, no longer exists explicitly between the novella and the audience of the frame in which it is narrated,⁹ but implicitly between the novella and Kleist's reading audience, or in Rohmer's case, between the audience and the film. The moral frame of reference provided by a narrative frame with possible commentary on the content of the story has fallen away and must be replaced by the individual moral code of the viewer, more than 170 years removed in time from Kleist's novella.

When Pauline Kael objects to Rohmer's "even-toned method," which "precludes animal passion,"¹⁰ she is criticizing his style, which by its distance is entirely appropriate for the novella: Objectivity of presentation was one of the main prerequisites.¹¹ What she considers a lack of passion because of Rohmer's own concerns actually is a conscious effort on Rohmer's part to maintain the objectivity of the narrative style of the novella. If Rohmer, like Kleist, as a critic of his own society, intends to tell a moral tale, it is necessary for him to create a certain distance between the events of the narrative and the movie audience.

The Marquise of O., as Pauline Kael observes, is a story about passion, but one must not forget that it is a story of illicit passion, whether by Kleist's standards, those of his audience in his own time, or by our own. The claim that the story is archaic or irrelevant today¹² misses the point: that the events of the novella are as disturbing today as they must have been to the Marquise when they were happening to her. It is the story of her pregnancy, her anguish and her victory over her mystifying situation when in spite of all adversity, she finds her center within herself and: "Having learned how strong she was . . . , she was suddenly able to raise herself, as if by her own bootstraps out of the depths into which fate had cast her."¹³ It is a story about rape; and that the woman in this case is unconscious when it happens only makes it more disturbing.

This is not a fairy tale, as Pauline Kael imagines: "He's Prince Charming with a rape for a kiss, and she's too repressed to know it."¹⁴ Her admiration for the Count as "a whole man," whose "passion hasn't been bred out of him"¹⁵ is somewhat misplaced. If Rohmer "has treated the Count's first appearance, when he bounds from a parapet during the group assault on the Marquise, as his only moment of glory,"¹⁶ that is because it is his only moment of glory. It is hardly dashing to take a woman when she is unconscious, depriving her of her right to struggle against the violation in self-defense.

And Rohmer's concept of the Count includes remorse and at times, an abject attitude, because Kleist indicates this attitude, if not verbally, then by telltale emotional signs: His blushing, his stammering may seem to be signs of love or humbleness in the face of praise for his "rescue" of the Marquise; yet to the reader who has understood the emotional plight of the Count, they indicate his embarrassment and guilt. And though he makes every effort to rectify the situation, he does so by deceiving the world.

Even if we grant him his feeling of love for the Marquise, he proposes to her, in order to cover up his deed. By refusing him, the Marquise creates tremendous tension for him, because he is in a race against time: He must win her consent before the telltale physical signs of what he has done become evident. As Jack Kroll points out, Kleist was beyond his time in his knowledge of the human psyche.¹⁷ Having given in to his passion, the Count, nevertheless, has to reconcile his action to the norms of the society in which he lives.

Because of the rape, which happened without her knowledge, the Marquise, in turn, is forced to overstep the boundaries of propriety by advertising in the newspaper for the father—an outrageous occurrence even in the eyes of our own liberalized society. This is hardly an archaic story, and Jack Kroll has understood that Rohmer, in order to convey this "rationally irrational story . . . captures Kleist's almost surreal effect of a grenade whose exploding fragments somehow arrange themselves into a classically formal pattern."¹⁸

Rohmer does not overlook the irony of Kleist's tale: "His aristocrats are elegant puppets manipulated by instinctive drives that are far more dangerous than the sloppy assaults of lustful marauders."¹⁹ And he renders this irony in the style of his film. The Count is a metronome-like character²⁰ only inso-

far as he follows the dictates of society: by adhering to the code of honor on the surface. He becomes free only when he frees himself of the constraint of convention, not by committing the rape, but by coming forward and confessing his guilt.

At the core of the Count's deception is the concept of honor, of which Kleist, as descendant of a long line of Prussian officers and himself reluctantly trained for a military career, was clearly critical. The Count has committed a crime, yet he pretends to be an honorable man, in order to avoid a fate similar to that of the soldiers who molested the Marquise and died facing a firing squad. Ironically, the actual crime of rape goes unpunished and is rewarded by marriage with the Marquise. This event is the result of the Father's code of honor: The Marquise had promised to marry the man who appeared at the appointed time in response to her newspaper ad, and her father binds her to this promise. He is concerned not with his daughter's happiness, but with a legalistic solution to the situation. He draws up a marriage contract in which the Count agrees to accept all the responsibilities of marriage and promises to forego all the privileges. Rohmer pointedly shows the Count left standing alone at the Church door after the wedding ceremony has taken place.

If Kleist had ended the story here, it would have been a tale of crime and punishment more severe than any imposed by a judge in a court of law, especially if one believes the Count's repeated avowal of love for the Marquise. Instead, Kleist ends the novella on a note of reconciliation: After courting his wife for a year following the birth of his son, a second marriage is celebrated, in which the Marquise accepts the Count as her husband. The courtship, however, is initiated in Kleist's version by the Count's baptismal gift of 20,000 rubles to his son and a will declaring the Marquise the heiress of his estate.

The ending of Kleist's almost perfect novella suffers from this materialistic and legalistic motivation for the resolution. With a stroke of genius, Rohmer transposes the story of Thinka, the swan, from the beginning of the novella to the end, perfecting the novella with this anecdote which takes on the nature of a parable by which the Marquise gains insight into her own attitude, as the Count perceives it: When he was wounded in the battle in which he was believed to have died, delirious with fever, "he kept confusing her image with that of a swan that he had seen as a boy on his uncle's estate; . . . he was especially moved by the recollection of a time when he had spattered the swan with mud and it had dived silently under the water to rise up pure and shining again; . . . the Marquise in the shape of the swan, was always swimming about on a flaming flood and he had called out Thinka, which was the name of the swan from his boyhood, but had not been able to make her come to him, for all her pleasure lay in gliding up and down and haughtily puffing out her breast— . . ." (p. 54).

With sudden recognition and understanding, the Marquise throws her arms around the Count in an embrace that symbolizes the second marriage without convention of a ceremony. The image points beyond the ritual in Rohmer's film, as it does in the last lines of the novella, where it is accompanied by the Marquise's statement that she had fled from the Count as if from the devil on the day he came to reveal himself as the culprit, because "he wouldn't have looked like a devil to her then if he had not seemed like an angel to her at his first appearance" (p. 84). The Marquise understands that, although victimized in the rape and by his concealment of the truth, she has also been a victim of her own illusions, expecting the Count to live up to her image of him (one which he would have liked to preserve by his deception of her), instead of accepting the truth about him when he does offer it to her.

What for the Count is a problem of conscience is for the Marquise a problem of consciousness. The image of the pure and shining swan is an apt allusion to the state of innocence from which she has fallen unconsciously. In the dream, though splattered with mud, the swan rises from the water un-sullied. The paradoxical analogy of the rape with immaculate conception²¹ hinted at humorously by the midwife in the novella (p. 63) is entirely appropriate. The mother, without irony, refers to her daughter after her test of innocence as "purer than the angels" (p. 75) and the doctor, when asked how her pregnancy was possible jocularly retorts that "he didn't really see any need for him to tell her about the ultimate causes of things" (p. 58).

Whereas the Count has to reconcile the disparity between what he is and what he seems to society and particularly to the Marquise, the story of the Marquise herself is clearly connected with the discovery of ultimate things. By its structure, the novella is a mystery in that the events leading up to the Marquise's pregnancy announced in the opening newspaper advertisement have to be discovered, as in a detective story.

The opening lines of the novella immediately catch the reader's attention: "In M—, a large town in northern Italy, the widowed Marquise of O—, a lady of unblemished reputation, and the mother of several well-bred children, published the following notice in the newspapers: that, without her knowing how, she was in the family way; that she would like the father of the child she was going to bear to report himself; and that her mind was made up, out of consideration for her people, to marry him" (p. 41).

The derision to which she subjects herself with this step is evident in Rohmer's opening scenes, where the announcement, read out loud, elicits laughter. The Marquise is compromising her honor, in order to solve the riddle of her pregnancy, which for Kleist has metaphysical significance. The reason the Marquise places the newspaper ad is the thought "that the young being whom she had conceived in the purest innocence and whose origin seemed more divine to her than other people's just because it was more mysterious, should bear a stigma in society" (p. 65). This third child appears to her a gift of God (p. 65), and it gives her the courage to brave public ridicule.

The word mystery derives from the Greek *mystikos* (Latin *mysticus*), which means "secret," and aptly describes the concern of the Count up to the turning point of the novella: to keep his identity as perpetrator of the crime a secret. When his impetuous proposal of marriage meets with resistance in the form of a request for closer acquaintance and thus an unfortunate delay, the Count confesses "that the only dishonorable act he had ever committed was a secret from the world and he was already on the way to making it good . . ." (p. 49). The Marquise's pregnancy is a mystery to her: "She spoke frankly to her mother about her condition and said she did not know what to make of it" (p. 58).

The dynamics of the novella derive from the opposing efforts of the Count and the Marquise: While she is seeking the truth, he is concealing it from her. When he is ready to reveal the truth, she refuses to listen to him. The movements connected with their efforts and the reversal of each come together through the ad in the newspaper. Thus, the opening of the novella actually coincides with the turning point.²² The announcement makes it possible for the Count to come forward openly, admitting to his deed, thus enabling the Marquise to know, if not to accept the truth.

However, the Count is not motivated by this external mechanism. Upon hearing from the Forest Warden about the fate of the Marquise while he was detained on business in Naples, he rushes to the Marquise's retreat, "ready to explain himself to her directly" (p. 69), but finds her door closed to him.

Again, he must resort to deviousness, trespassing in her garden against her will.

In the novella, he enters the garden through an open gate (p. 67), while Rohmer has him climb in over the garden wall. In the love scene, where he wants to whisper in the Marquise's ear, she refuses to hear him out. The translator, somewhat more explicit than Kleist, renders this scene as follows:

"Only let me whisper one secret to you!" begged the Count as he grabbed clumsily at the smooth arm slipping through his hands. "I won't hear a word," the Marquise retorted, gave him a push against his chest, fled up the slope, and disappeared. He was halfway up the slope in pursuit, determined to make her listen to him at whatever cost, when the door banged shut in front of him and he heard the bolt shoot home in rattling haste. (p. 68)

Not having been able to confess to her in this way, he sees in the ad another opportunity to set things right. Hearing from the Forest Warden about the ad the Marquise placed, and reading it for himself, he comes to the recognition: "Now everything is all right! Now I know what I have to do!" and he went away "fully reconciled to his fate" (p. 69). When he appears at the appointed time, however, the Marquise and her mother bolt the door to him, believing that he cannot be the man they are expecting.

It is the Mother, earlier described as being "in the dark about so many things in the whole affair" (p. 70), who first sees the light: "After all, whom were we waiting for—?" The Marquise continues to deny the truth: "Oh, surely not for him!" (p. 81). The man who, as her saviour, had appeared to her as an angel, now seemed the devil incarnate, and crying that she could not marry this man, she "thrust her hand into a vessel of holy water fastened behind the door, with a sweep of her arms sprinkled her father, mother and brother with the water, and disappeared" (p. 82). It is the mother, who is first capable of forgiveness, taking the Count's hand and pleading with her husband: "Don't ask any questions. This young man is sincerely sorry for what he has done; give him your blessing, come, give it to him, and all will be well." (p. 82) The Father, not quite so generous, can bless the union of his daughter with the Count only in the negative: "May God's curse avoid this head!" (p. 82).

The secret of each of the protagonists is connected with the self, and the process of uncovering it leads to personal growth for both the Count and the Marquise. He learns to tell the truth, no matter how compromising, and she—after a period of justified outrage—learns to forgive. The pregnancy for Kleist is more than the tension coil and focus of the novella: It is a hyperbolic statement about the disruption of the order of the world, which is restored only in the second marriage of the Count and the Marquise. Through love and forgiveness, at least a seeming sense of harmony prevails.

By remaining true to the text, Rohmer can hardly go wrong, since Kleist's novella is in itself a masterpiece. Not only does it contain the dramatic tensions necessary to maintain the interest of the audience; it is full of realistic imagery which Rohmer transfers to the screen. Kleist was by his very nature a dramatist, and for this reason, his novella is tightly structured like a play,²³ full of dialogue and descriptions which approach the precision of printed stage instructions. By translating the visual realism of the novella into film images, Rohmer follows Kleist's own vision, moving into Heinrich von Kleist's novella "like a spirit into an apt form."²⁴ Using the novella as his filmscript, Rohmer fixes "on the drama that we understand rather than the matters that we actually see."²⁵

Rohmer has been criticized for neglecting the kinetic potentialities of his medium. In *The Marquise of O.*, the movement within the story is more important than the fluid motion of the film, interrupted by titles indicating

the lapse of time and occasionally containing Kleist's metaphysical remarks. At the same time, the titles link the pictorial sequences of the narrative, which unfolds as a series of *tableaux* inspired by a study of the paintings of the period,²⁶ through which Rohmer gained insight into the era he depicted.

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NOTES

1 William Johnson, "The Marquise of O . . .," *Film Quarterly*, No. 30 (Spring 1977), p. 50.

2 Nadja Tesich-Savage, "Rehearsing the Middle Ages," *Film Comment*, 14 (September 1978), p. 52. In this interview about his latest film *Perceval le Gallois*, Rohmer remarks that in *The Marquise of O*, he was interested in creating "a film according to the period's own conception of itself."

3 Josef Kunz, ed., "Einleitung," *Novelle* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1973), p. 2: According to Wieland, the central event of the novella has to be realistic, that is, something happening in the here and now for the audience of the novella. According to Goethe, (Kunz, p. 34), the novella is *eine sich ereignete unerhörte Begebenheit*, i.e., an event which has actually occurred and never been heard of before. The term *unerhört* (unheard of) may also be interpreted as meaning extraordinary, shocking. The novella differs from the story in that it must deal with an extraordinary event. Tieck (Kunz, p. 53) calls this event unique, strange, i.e., *wunderbar*. Paul Heyse (Kunz, p. 66) is of the opinion that it deals with an exceptional case: an *Ausnahmefall*.

4 Helmut Sembdner, ed., "Anmerkungen," *Heinrich von Kleist. Erzählungen* (München: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1964), p. 249.

5 Kunz, p. 8. The editor refers to Auerbach's theory. Eberhard Hermes in *Die Drei Ringe. Aus der Frühzeit der Novelle* (Göttingen: Van den Hoeck & Ruprecht, 1964) traces it origins to the Orient and the arabic *makame* of the tenth century (p. 7), which like the novella had didactic function. He claims that, even earlier, Herodotus learned the novellistic form of narration from the people of the Orient (p. 18).

6 Kunz, pp. 6, 8, 10.

7 Kunz, pp. 6-7.

8 Kunz, p. 15.

9 Kunz, p. 7.

10 Pauline Kael, "No Id," *The New Yorker*, 25 Oct. 1976, p. 67.

11 Kunz, pp. 8-9.

12 Johnson, p. 51, and Kael, p. 68.

13 Martin Greenberg, trans., *The Marquise of O. And Other Stories* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1973), p. 65. Subsequent references will be given in the text.

14 Kael, p. 67.

15 Kael, p. 67.

16 Kael, p. 67.

17 Jack Kroll, "Pride and Passion," *Newsweek*, 1 Nov. 1976, p. 83: "Kleist saw through the ordered surface of an age of reason into the psychic conflicts beneath. . . . Long before Freud, Kleist understood the underground forces that blast through the seams of society to ambush people unawares."

18 Kroll, p. 83.

19 Kroll, p. 83.

20 Kael, p. 68.

²¹ Colin L. Westerbeck, Jr., "Rohmer Renewed," *The Commonweal*, 104 (Jan. 7, 1977), p. 22: "From Kleist's story through Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*, seduction and rape are forever occurring as if they were really the opposite of seduction and rape—as if they were immaculate conceptions."

²² Kunz, p. 14. According to August Wilhelm Schlegel, Tieck, and Vischer, the turning point is related to the crisis situation of the novella: Not the whole development of the personality is to be depicted, but only a segment which has tension, a crisis, and pointedly shows what human life is. Kleist delineates the crisis situation in the opening of his novella, bringing into focus the problem and theme which give the novella its structure and the "silhouette" important to Paul Heyse (Kunz, p. 10).

²³ Kunz, p. 18. August Wilhelm Schlegel, Schleiermacher, and Theodor Storm, among others, regard the novella as the sister of the drama.

²⁴ Stanley Kauffmann, "The Marquise of O . . .," *New Republic* 175 (Nov. 6, 1976), p. 20.

²⁵ Kauffmann, p. 20.

²⁶ Stanley Kauffmann names Jacques Louis David as the "presiding visual genius," *New Republic*, p. 20.