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# IMMORAL TALES

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## CAST

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**LISE DANVERS** as Julie  
**FABRICE LUCHINI** as André  
**CHARLOTTE ALEXANDRA** as Thérèse  
**SIRPA LANE** as Romilda de l'Esperance  
(five-part version only)  
**PALOMA PICASSO** as Erzsébet Báthory  
**PASCALE CHRISTOPHE** as István  
**FLORENCE BELLAMY** as Lucrezia Borgia  
**JACOPO BERENIZI [MARIO RUSPOLI]** as Pope Alexander VI  
**LORENZO BERINIZI [FABRIZIO RUSPOLI]** as Cesare Borgia  
**PHILIPPE DESBOEUF** as Friar Girolamo Savonarola  
and  
**NICOLE KAREN**  
**THOMAS HNEVSA**  
**MATHIEU RIVOLIER**  
**ROBERT CAPIA**  
**GÉRARD TCHERKA**  
**KJELL GUSTAVSSON**

## CREW

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**Written, directed, designed and edited by**  
**WALERIAN BOROWCZYK**

**Produced by**  
**ANATOLE DAUMAN**

**Cinematography by**  
**BERNARD DAILLENCOURT, GUY DURBAN, NOËL VÉRY,**  
**MICHEL ZOLAT [WALERIAN BOROWCZYK]**

**Costumes by**  
**PIET BOLSCHER**

**Assistant Director:**  
**DOMINIQUE DUVERGÉ**

**Original music by**  
**MAURICE LE ROUX**

**Featuring works by Guillaume de Machaut,**  
**ancient Spanish and Hungarian music**

**Argos Films (Paris)**

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# A PLATE FULL OF CUCUMBERS

by Daniel Bird

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By 1972, a procession of dazzling short films and a handful of inventive features had established Walerian Borowczyk as a major talent on the international film festival circuit. Nevertheless, his livelihood hung in the balance. For a start, the market for short films as supporting features had all but dried up. What is more, Borowczyk's early feature films, *Theatre of Mr & Mrs Kabal* (1967), *Goto, Isle of Love* (1968) and *Blanche* (1971), all of which were met with critical acclaim, had little impact at the box office.

Around this time, Anatole Dauman, the Polish-French producer who gave Borowczyk his first professional filmmaking opportunity outside of Poland (*Astronauts*, 1959), had an idea. The French government was beginning to relax the laws concerning film censorship. Dauman suspected that, if Borowczyk's unique approach to filmmaking was coupled with sexually explicit subject matter, then audiences would be more receptive to his talents. Eroticism was, of course, far from absent from Borowczyk's earlier films (the voyeurism in *Astronauts* and *Theatre of Mr & Mrs Kabal*, the bald bound nude in *Angels' Games*, not to mention the public brothel in *Goto, Isle of Love*). In 1973, Dauman set about producing a number of short films by Borowczyk all of which had explicit sexual themes. The following year, *Immoral Tales* was released in French cinemas. Borowczyk's career would never be the same again.

Each of the four episodes<sup>1</sup> that makes up *Immoral Tales* deals with a form of sexual 'transgression' (fellatio, masturbation, lesbianism and incest). The first episode, 'The Tide' ('La Marée'), is based on a short story by the surrealist writer André Pieyre de Mandiargues. This story, included in Mandiargues' collection of short stories, *Mascarets* (1971), was originally conceived as a contribution to a surrealist exploration of eroticism. *From Here to Eternity* (1953) famously featured Burt Lancaster embracing Deborah Kerr on a beach as they are engulfed by waves. The sequence, conceived as an acceptable surrogate for a sex scene in the source material, bluntly correlates the incoming tide with sexual climax. In 'The Tide', our 'hero' seeks to come in the mouth of his younger cousin at precisely the same time the tide swallows their bodies. He achieves this through a plan (as



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1. *Immoral Tales* won the 1974 Prix de l'Âge d'Or, named after Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí's 1930 film masterpiece and intended to commemorate the spirit of surrealism. However, the version screened for the jury (which included the veteran surrealist painter Max Ernst) differed from the final release in one crucial respect: in addition to the four episodes included in the official release, this version included a fifth, *The Beast of Gévaudan* (*La Bête de Gévaudan*). Prior to the film's release, Borowczyk removed this fifth episode, which subsequently became the basis of the dream sequence in his 1975 feature *The Beast*. However, the recent discovery that this fifth episode survived in its original form has enabled a reconstruction of the five-part version, which is presented on this Arrow Video release as an alternative viewing option.

meticulous as that of Grozo in *Goto*) which features a combination of tide tables and patriarchal authority. Cousin Julie is complicit in her cousin's plan to elevate this sex act to a cosmic level.

Of all the *Immoral Tales*, the second episode, 'Thérèse Philosophe', is the one that most resembles conventional pornographic film in terms of its focus on the drama of a singular, sexual act. The title derives from a novel attributed to the Marquis d'Argens, which, in the tradition of de Sade, intersperses pornographic episodes with philosophical instruction. In Borowczyk's film, a pious young girl (played by the English actress Charlotte Alexandra, who would go on to star in Catherine Breillat's debut, *Une vraie jeune fille*, 1976) transforms both food (a plate full of cucumbers) and religious paraphernalia into sexual stimuli. In many ways, 'Thérèse Philosophe' must count as a further development of Borowczyk's object tales (e.g. *Renaissance* and *Rosalie*). Crucial in this respect is Borowczyk's framing, which, like *A Private Collection*, prioritises objects over the human body which handles them.

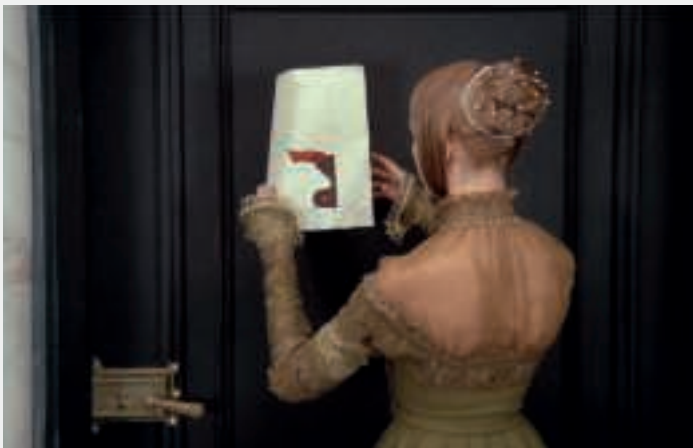
Arguably the most impressive (and disturbing) episode of *Immoral Tales* is 'Erzsébet Báthory'. It is based on the legend of the Hungarian Countess who is reputed to have bathed in the blood of virgins as part of a bid to preserve her youth. Báthory is name-checked in Bataille's final work, *The Tears of Eros* (*Les Larmes d'Éros*, 1959), and was the subject of a warped biography (which reveals more about the author than its subject) by the surrealist poet Valentine Penrose (*Erzsébet Báthory - la Comtesse sanglante*, 1962). Like Pasolini's *Salò* (which *Immoral Tales* predates by a year), 'Erzsébet Báthory' begins with a round up of helpless peasants (here only female). Like *Goto*, Borowczyk deprives us of any establishing shots of the Countess's castle, thus rendering it all the more labyrinthine. In a resoundingly negative review, Clancy Sigal characterised the 'Erzsébet Báthory' episode as a concentration camp nightmare with a sexual veneer, and

likened Borowczyk to Polanski in terms of his identification not with the victims, but the murderous perpetrators. Of course, the erotic was not absent in the concentration camp experience, something evident not just in Liliana Cavani's *The Night Porter* (*Il portiere di notte*, 1974), but also Tadeusz Borowski's 1959 short-story collection *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentleman* (*Pożegnanie z Maria*), not to mention Borowczyk's own *Angels' Games*. Borowczyk's scenes of showering girls are squirm-inducing because we are invited to revel in the beauty of girls whom we already know are destined for the chop (the Brechtian title card that prefaces the episode gives the game away).



The 'Lucrezia Borgia' episode features Mario Ruspoli as Alexander VI, under the pseudonym Jacopo Berenizi. Ruspoli was a major figure in documentary cinema, whose work was also produced by Dauman. Ruspoli was particularly close to Chris Marker, who provided the commentary for *Les hommes de la baleine* (1956), under the pseudonym of Jacopo Berenizi. Ruspoli's real-life son, Fabrizio, plays the son of Alexander VI, Cesare. The incestuous *ménage à trois*

between Alexander, Lucrezia and Cesare is intercut with shots of the heretical Dominican friar, Girolamo Savonarola, denouncing clerical corruption. While the tone of 'Lucrezia Borgia' is one of wry indignation rather than outrage, it nevertheless bears comparison with the infamous 'rape of Christ' sequence originally envisaged by Ken Russell for *The Devils* (1971). Immediately prior to their threesome, Lucrezia lies down, her arms outstretched, in a position which recalls Christ's body on the cross. This image in particular evokes *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* (1878) by the Belgian symbolist painter Félicien Rops (1833-1898). 'Lucrezia Borgia' is also notable for two other details that, like 'Thérèse Philosophe', link back to *A Private Collection* (1973). First, a bible which opens to reveal a space hollowed out to conceal cookies, and a series of drawings of horses and their genitalia. Two of these images constitute a sort of flick book revealing a horse's erection, which anticipates the infamous opening of *The Beast* (1975)<sup>2</sup> but also underlines Borowczyk's parallel career as an animator, not to mention his fascination with the origins of cinema.



2. *The Beast* is available as a separate Arrow Video release

The inherent problem of portmanteau films is that their constituent episodes are invariably compared in terms of relative merit. However, in the case of *Immoral Tales*, these episodes, with their disparate casts, settings and stories, are conceived by Borowczyk as four 'panels', like a tetrptych. In this respect, a key work in Borowczyk's filmography is his 1967 short, *Diptych*. Here, two seemingly opposite sequences of film (one is documentary reportage featuring an old farmer and his working dogs, the other a studio bound study of arranged flowers and playful kittens) are resolved through being programmed 'against' one another. By juxtaposing these four episodes, *Immoral Tales* illustrates the La Rochefoucauld epigram that serves as a preface. *Immoral Tales* may titillate through its displays of (mostly) female flesh, but Borowczyk's real concern is the manner in which human sexuality has been (and is) suppressed and how it manifests itself in various cultures (past and present) throughout the ages. If one takes into account Borowczyk's designated supporting documentary feature, *A Private Collection* (which at one point was envisaged as an episode of *Immoral Tales*), then *Immoral Tales*, with its mixture of verbal commentary, title cards and fiction makes an interesting companion piece to with Dušan Makavejev's *WR - Mysteries of the Organism* (*W.R. - Misterije organizma*, 1971). Upon its release, the French listings magazine *Pariscopes* categorised *Immoral Tales* as 'érotique', but Eisenstein no doubt would have recognised it as an example of 'intellectual cinema' — a work not so much concerned with story as ideas.

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## IMMORAL TALES

by Philip Strick

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The Borowczyk archipelago is composed of many islands, among them those of *Goto*, the Kabals, and the remote castle home of *Blanche*. With *Immoral Tales*, the dark cartographer introduces us to another four examples of isolation, tiny communities of adventure formed as if by specimens trapped at random in the circle of a microscope, or by exotic animals caged in a private zoo. Despite the prudish label, the four tales, plucked from history in reverse chronological order (as how else by the maker of *Renaissance?*), turn out to leave questions of morality resolutely to the eye of the beholder; the behaviour of their characters is not being challenged, merely observed. One can pick out hints here and there of Borowczyk's own opinion, not that he would regard it as important; it's expressed in the vernacular of editing and emphasis, in the images repeated often enough during the performance of his quartet to suggest an inclination behind the detachment, a preference behind the impartiality. But as with the merciless Madame Kabal, the people of *Immoral Tales* are assertively independent of their creator, and live by their own rules in total disregard of ours or his.

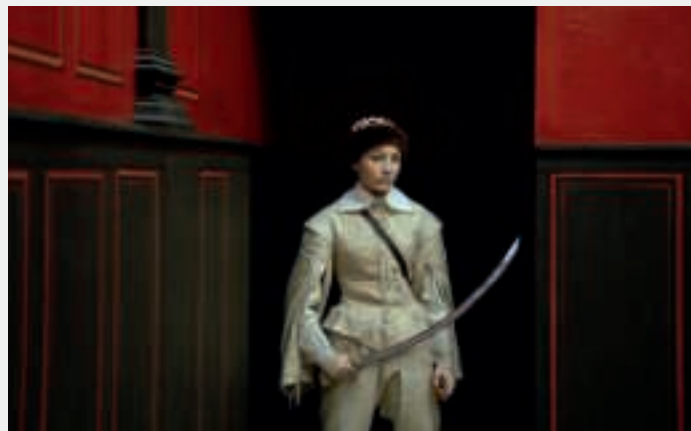
Their independence, however, does not give them freedom. Borowczyk's islands are habitually penal colonies, and his four contes are alike in their atmosphere of confinement. The tone is set by the Mandiargues story 'La Marée', in which a pontificating youth arranges to be trapped with his 16-year-old cousin on a tiny strip of beach at high tide. Their release from this predicament can only be achieved sexually, after which the tide retreats, of course, and can be expected to return in due time. Similarly, the girl has learned her lesson and will be required to revise it periodically.

While initiation of this sort into relationships of increasing complexity is a theme of the quartet as a whole, the theme of captivity also goes beyond the geographical, the political or the punitive. As illustrated by 'La Marée', the tides of sensuality beat on the shores of every human being; he may record them, like the youth with his watch and his timetable, but they are controlled by other forces and he is ultimately helpless in their grasp. Thus the initiations hold no traumas for their participants; the girl on the beach shows every sign of having been there before, and her successors in the film demonstrate a like complicity. They are prisoners partly because they have no choice, and partly because they relish their imprisonment. It's like a re-run of *Les Jeux des Anges*, Borowczyk's animated fable of a hideous alien world of victims and sacrifices — except that all the horror has gone. But the beauty, the rituals and the organ pipes have remained.



The second tale, of the Normandy girl Thérèse (Charlotte Alexandra) who was elected a saint in the 1890s after having been raped by a tramp, concentrates on the ecstasy of the girl's devotion to God, and has been locked away for coming home late from Mass. The hapless instrument of her solitary initiation is a cucumber, its suitability for the task in view of shape, symbolism and fecundity being noted by Borowczyk with an equal amount of humour at what might be termed its shortcomings (the thing falls apart and gets trodden into the carpet). When this tide has ebbed, the girl escapes through the window of her prison into a meadow; a tramp promptly materialises to make gleeful assault upon her piety. Whether gaoler, demon or animated cucumber, he's the key to her future.

The pattern continues in the third and fourth episodes (as, for that matter, it did in the fifth, *La Bête*, which Borowczyk sensibly extracted for astonishing expansion into a separate feature). From the casually coital enclosure of a farmyard, Hungarian peasant girls are rounded up in 1610 to be taken to the Castle of Csejta, there to be processed, after much soaping and fondling, into bathwater for the Countess Erzsébet Báthory (Paloma Picasso). Destined to notoriety for her habit of soaking in the blood of young girls, the Countess maintains a charmingly appointed residence of cubicles, spy-holes and split-level bedrooms (the designer, naturally, is Borowczyk himself), and it forms an elegant trap for her rapacious and submissive victims. The initiation ceremony for this flock of giggling nudes is part sexual, part masochistic and totally fatal, the tide of their deaths leading or to the rejuvenation of their Mistress, who lives on in beauty to bathe again. Yet she too is trapped — by the need for fresh victims, by the passion for her page-boy (who not surprisingly is female), and by the laws of both the land and of sex. As Thérèse was captured by the tramp, so the Countess is arrested by soldiers, her immaculate castle invaded at last by militant masculinity.



Which leads us to Lucrezia Borgia, her hair plaited fetchingly under her chin to frame her face in echo of Blanche, Glossia, Rosalie and many others. Willing accomplice to the relaxations of her brother the Cardinal and her father the Pope, she is enclosed in a Vatican antechamber, her unmourned husband removed by scuttling guards and attentive clerics. Stirred, as was her counterpart in *La Bête*, by the spectacle of a well-endowed stallion, Lucrezia (Florence Bellamy) joins zestfully with her relatives in an assortment of unions; she's in no position to argue, but she has no evident regrets. Later, her son is baptised by his Papal parent, and the film ends on the infant's cheerful face. Borowczyk claims the ending was insisted upon by his producer (Anatole Dauman, who has sponsored so much of his career) in order to establish the normality of this offspring of incest. Whatever, it's the perfect conclusion. Not only does it complete the cycle of rebirth and resurrection, it also leaves us with an expression of seraphic innocence, an eagerness to study the world's perpetual repetitions without prejudgement. That eagerness is Borowczyk's own, reinforcing the point that morality is irrelevant in the stories we've been shown. They provide information, nothing more.



Nothing less, either. From his earliest films, Borowczyk has contemplated the energy of the inanimate — the dolls, the photographs, the phonographs, the furniture of the past. Scattered relics of other times, these memorabilia still speak with the moods and motives of their former owners. With his reverence for textures, colours and juxtapositions, Borowczyk allows the icon as much life as its user, and logically he now examines the icons of eroticism with the same mingling of respect, curiosity and affection. His *Immoral Tales* are compiled from a succession of such 'erotic' images as gulls, candlesticks, tapestries, breasts, jewels, lace, rough wood and tangled triangles of hair. Dusky red patterns slide across glowing flesh as the Countess takes her blood-bath, immediately followed by the patterns of water gliding down the steel cover of her tub. For Borowczyk, the fascination of both images is the same, yet he's aware that we all tend to make an automatic distinction between them. With a seductive attempt at innocence — a little forced, but only a little — he'd like us to wonder why. Fellow-prisoners, we're surely entitled to our own share of ecstasy.

(*Sight & Sound*, Summer 1977)

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## ABOUT THE RESTORATIONS

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*Immoral Tales* is presented in its original aspect ratio of 1.66:1 with mono 1.0 sound. This master was produced by Argos Films. The film was transferred and restored from the 35mm Interpositive, and the 'Thérèse Philosophe' sequence was transferred from a 35mm low contrast print made from the 16mm reversal original element. The picture was graded and restored in High Definition and the sound was remastered from the original magnetic reels. All work was carried out at Scanlab under the supervision of Isabelle Raindre of Argos Films.

### PRODUCTION CREDITS

Disc and booklet produced by: Daniel Bird and Michael Brooke  
Executive Producer: Francesco Simeoni  
Technical Producer: James White  
Production Assistants: Louise Buckler and Liane Cunje  
QC and Proofing: Michael Brooke and Anthony Nield  
Authoring: David Mackenzie  
Subtitling: IBF Digital  
Design: Jack Pemberton, Emily Fordham

## SPECIAL THANKS

Alex Agran  
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Edwin Carels  
Michel Chion  
Maurice Corbet / Musée Château d'Annécý  
Tony Crawley  
Philippe d'Argila  
Florence Dauman / Argos Films  
Sam Dunn / British Film Institute  
Jean-Baptiste Garnero / CNC Archives Françaises du Film  
Javier Guerrero / LTC Patrimoine  
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The Quays  
Isabelle Raindre / Argos Films  
Ula Śniegowska  
Katrina Stokes-Cave / British Film Institute  
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David Thompson  
Pete Tombs  
Noël Véry  
Rob Winter / Sight & Sound  
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