

## Before Tonight is Over

Most discerning filmgoers have seen the films of pre-1968 Czech New Wave directors such as Miloš Forman, Jan Němec, Jiří Menzel, Ivan Passer, and Věra Chytilová. Though Slovakia was united with the Czech Republic at that time, and many of their directors had graduated from the same film school, FAMU, there was even then a separate Slovak film industry. Slovak director Peter Solan's satire *Before Tonight is Over* (1966) was initially rejected for production by the commissars in charge because of its supposed subversive content. The film follows the interactions of several characters—men and women—in a mountain resort bar. Generally unfulfilled and unhappy, they drink heavily, and try to connect with each other. Most of the characters—including plumbers and typists—don't have the money to live the high life, but they strain to have an evening of pleasure. A middle-aged big spender passively-aggressively forces drinks on everybody until we discover he has stolen the money from the wage packets of his work force. Nothing explicitly political occurs in the film, but it skillfully conveys a jaundiced view of human nature and Slovak society where the characters indulge in petty corruption and live joyless lives. They also can be comically inept, "buffoons," not the sturdiest models for the new world being created of socialist men and women. Solan improvises some of the scenes by using direct sound and multiple cameras—making for interactions that are natural and alive. It's a Slovak film worthy of inclusion in repertory with the Czech New Wave masterworks. The Blu-ray includes a knowledgeable, perceptive essay by Peter Hames on Slovak cinema and Peter Solan. (A Second Run DVD region-free Blu-ray, [www.secondrundvd.com](http://www.secondrundvd.com).)—**Leonard Quart**

## Love Rites

*Love Rites* (1987) sounds like a 1980s pop song title and doesn't really match the grandeur of *Cérémonie d'amour*. For what Walerian Borowczyk shows in his final feature (based closely on a novel by Pieyre de Mandiargues) is truly ceremonial: a woman (Marina Pierro) attracts a man (Mathieu Carrière) and, as the saying goes, "leads him astray" from his daily life and work. Although she straight-facedly utters such submissive sentiments as "Your wish is my command," what follows is a ritual of slow degradation visited upon the man's assumed sense of superiority. Although the cult movie crowd has recently reclaimed Borowczyk (died 2006), a full appreciation of his art has yet to be reached. Was he a cinematic voyeur, a mere fetishist stuck in an outmoded, male-centered code of Euro-erotica? His films effortlessly transcend those uncharitable categories; they are a world away from the likes of David Hamilton or Just Jaeckin. *Love Rites* is a hypnotic work, and its detailed texture is greatly enhanced in this gorgeous 4K restoration. In the bonus materials, the remarkable 1976 short *Brief von Paris* offers a clear sketch for how the director would approach, capture, and frame the same city in

*Love Rites*; and a candid interview with a nonsensical Carrière is delightful. Daniel Bird's superb audio commentary begins with a discussion of Borowczyk's unusual cutting strategy, and never lets up on the insights: it offers a model that should be closely studied by the many rank amateurs who now populate this field of DVD/Blu-ray production. (A Kino Lorber Blu-ray or DVD, [www.kinolorber.com](http://www.kinolorber.com).)—**Adrian Martin**

## Onibaba

Mask up for a classic Japanese horror film, now available in a pristine high-definition transfer from The Criterion Collection. Amidst civil war in the fourteenth century, "Older Woman" (Nobuko Otowa) and "Younger Woman," her daughter-in-law (Jitsuko Yoshimura), waylay and kill soldiers adrift in the spooky, swaying reeds of their

# Staff Recommendations

## Cineaste Editors Tout Favorite Recent DVD & Blu-ray Releases

marshland home, concealing their bodies in a deep pit. The arrival of a deserter (Kei Sato), who lusts after Younger Woman, upends their dog-eat-dog existence, dispassionately observed by writer-director Kaneto Shindo (*The Naked Island*). Trying to maintain their murderous partnership, Older Woman slays a lost samurai (Jukichi Uno) and dons his robes and mysterious mask for scare tactics that go disastrously awry. Dismissed as sensationalistic in 1964, *Onibaba* ("Demon Hag") has grown considerably in stature, and its combination of an earthy survival saga and elements of Buddhist fables make for still-shocking viewing. Shindo, whose career stretched from the Thirties to 2010 (he died in 2012, at age one hundred) is in full command of his alarming vision, aided by lustrous black-and-white widescreen cinematography by Kiyomi Kuroda and a score by Hikaru Hayashi paced by relentless *taiko* drums. The Blu-ray retains an interview with Shindo and silent Super 8 footage (some in color) of the unusual and challenging location shoot from an earlier DVD; new to disc are a booklet essay by film writer Elena Lazic about "the twinned human drives of sexuality and the will to survive" in the story and a commentary track, recorded in 2001, featuring Shindo, Yoshimura, and Sato. (A Criterion Collection Blu-ray or DVD, [www.criterion.com](http://www.criterion.com).)

—**Robert Cashill**

## The Signifyin' Works of Marlon Riggs

Marlon Riggs contains multitudes. In a career cut tragically short by AIDS, Riggs passionately tried to express a multiplicity of points of view—Black, gay, educator, poet, and AIDS activist. Riggs's video essays work through the complexities of these different identifications. Criterion's new box set, generously loaded with extras, provides a welcome opportunity to appreciate his work and legacy. Riggs gained notoriety when Jesse Helms and Pat Robertson attacked his work in the debates over NEA funding that were part of the begin-

ning of the culture wars that continue to plague us. Tying together personal perspectives, a pedagogical impulse, and an interest in artistic expression are the hallmarks of Riggs's work. In early works such as *Ethnic Notions* and *Color Adjustment*, Riggs critiques African American representation in film and television. These films seem more conventional now, though they were pioneering in their time. Riggs's work took a turn to the more personal and experimental with the onset of the AIDS crisis and his own HIV diagnosis. The films for which he is best known, including his masterpiece, *Tongues Untied*, explore what it means to be both gay and Black—facing discrimination both from within and without the African American community. They explore mortality, celebrate the Black gay body, and poetic voice. Riggs features intimate portraits of himself, the poet Essex Hemphill, and many others. The films are a moving document of their time and a memorial to those lost to the AIDS

pandemic. They also continue to be vital, relevant, and well worth a look on this thoughtfully curated release, where Riggs speaks for himself, and current filmmakers and scholars discuss and analyze his legacy and relevance. (A Criterion Collection Blu-ray or DVD, [www.criterion.com](http://www.criterion.com).)

—**Rahul Hamid**

## Sparrows

Using a conceit that Charles Dickens would have envied, *Sparrows* (1926) centers on a "baby farm" in a foul Southern swamp, where an evil couple keep a trove of parentless "orphans" for sale to illegal purchasers. Producer and star Mary Pickford plays an older waif who looks after the little ones and engineers a daring escape when a kidnaping scheme involving Mr. Grimes goes wrong and they find themselves in mortal danger. Although it was directed by William Beaudine, famous today as the corner-cutting auteur of a gazillion B pictures, the production is ambitious and abundant, proffering battles with quicksand, a schlep through a teeming alligator nest—the alligators were real, although accounts differ about their proximity to the imperiled actors—and a high-speed boat chase shot with miniatures on a sea of flaxseed and aluminum powder. Beaudine worked with no fewer than three top-flight cinematographers, Charles Rosher, Karl Struss, and Hal Mohr, all known for illustrious work in the Twenties and beyond. Mohr shot the alligator sequences, with help from a pulley system that opened their gaping maws at appropriate moments; its studio settings notwithstanding, the action looks real even when sentimentality and religiosity bog the story down. *Sparrows* underperformed at the box office, perhaps because Pickford plays against her trademark cuteness, wearing a single ragged dress throughout the picture. But it won praise from Ernst Lubitsch and Charles Chaplin and remains impressive today, enhanced by the Graves Brothers' music in VCI's double-format edition. Silent-film aficionados should welcome it. (A VCI Blu-ray and DVD, [www.vciertainment.com](http://www.vciertainment.com).)

—**David Sterritt**