

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
J. Zimmerman, MA

Sexuality in Cinema

Submission (1976)

Salvatore Samperi (1944-2009)

OVERVIEW

Director Samperi was born into a wealthy Northern Italian family amid the final months of World War II. It was his upbringing in this affluent middle-class lifestyle that would guide his film career as an adult: the conservative social norms and hypocrisies of upper-middle-class politics were clear to him even as a youth. He enrolled in the University of Padua in the early 60s, studying literature and philosophy, though he never completed his studies, seeking a film career in Rome. His focus on erotic comedy and middle-class taboos made him simultaneously a box office dynamo and a frequent target of critics who thought his films were nothing but pure smut. In his later career, he would work mostly in television.



Film As a foreign erotic exploitation film from the 1970s, there isn't a lot of information about *Submission* available in English, and most of the preserved Italian writings are critical reviews. The film is titled *Scandalo* in Italian (lit. 'Scandal'), with the English transliteration opting for a somewhat more titillating title. Much like in his other historical dramas, Samperi chooses to use a limited setting, the film taking place entirely in and around the Michoud home and pharmacy. Removed from the front lines until the very final moments of the film, we are shown a typical French pre-war existence only disrupted by the air raid sirens, nighttime blackout orders, and radio broadcasts about the encroaching German forces. Samperi skillfully uses this as a foil to Eliane's growing sexual obsession, which accelerates at a similar pace to the war. In this way, we are given a hauntingly macabre yet not entirely unbelievable portrayal of the way societal threats like war lead people into addiction, escapism, and revocation of human rights for some feeling of security or control.



MAIN CHARACTERS

Armand – A man frustrated by his inability to join the army who works in Eliane's pharmacy

Eliane Michoud – a pharmacist who becomes ensnared by Armand's sexual desires

Prof. Henri Michoud – Eliane's inattentive husband

Juliette – Eliane's pharmacy assistant who cheats on her husband with Armand

Justine Michoud – Eliane's teenage daughter

SYNOPSIS

The story begins in France in May 1940, as the threat of German invasion looms. Eliane, a pharmacist in a French town, leads an orderly life with her reserved husband and their teenage daughter. She runs both her business and household with strict discipline, suppressing personal desires in favor of routine and subservience to her husband. One evening, a misunderstanding in the dark leads an employee, Armand, to make an unexpected advance toward her. Instead of reprimanding him, Eliane becomes drawn into a secret relationship that disrupts her upper-middle-class existence.

As the affair develops, Armand begins to assert increasing dominance over Eliane, making a series of escalating demands that challenge her sense of authority and self-control. What begins as a private

indiscretion gradually turns into a situation where she yields more and more of her independence. Her professional environment and personal life become intertwined with his influence, and she finds herself unable to resist his expectations. She falls fully under Armand's control after being forced to parade outside her store in the nude, barely hesitating when he demands that Eliane give him her teenage daughter. Dutifully, she prepares her daughter and sends her to Armand before heading to bed. In the night, German bombs fall, destroying the family home and pharmacy, killing all inside.

PLOT

Marching to war – People clap and cheer as a band of soldiers marches through a French town square singing marching songs about glory on the battlefield. They march past a pharmacy where a man works outside, sweeping. Someone calls him "draft dodger," and he reacts angrily, holding up his middle finger. The woman with him laughs, and he gives her a playful pat on the rear. "Don't touch, draft dodger!" she mocks, and he tells her to meet him in the back of the pharmacy in five minutes. "Juliette!" a woman calls from within the pharmacy, and the woman rushes inside. Deep in the bowels of the pharmacy, Juliette finds her boss. She asks Juliette to deliver a letter. The janitor peeks around a corner before disappearing into the dark. Before leaving, Juliette wanders around the back, whispering, "Armand? Armand?" He doesn't hear her.



Around the house – The pharmacist, Eliane, manages her house upstairs, telling the maid their food needs more seasoning. Dutifully tidying up the house, she finds that her daughter, Justine, has left numerous lights on despite wartime rations and common sense. After turning off the lamps, she finds her daughter in her husband's study. Justine's father instructs her on the finer points of Roman glassware, and Eliane interrupts them, telling them dinner will be ready and scolding Justine for leaving so many lights on. After subtly adjusting the table setting, Eliane heads downstairs and finds Juliette putting on her coat. Outside, a man honks a horn and shouts for Juliette. Eliane comments on how he comes earlier each night, asking Juliette to inform him of the shop's hours.



Juliette—hoping to have a private moment with Armand—tries to cook up an excuse to lock up, but the pharmacist insists that she head home.

Locking up – Eliane closes the shutter outside the pharmacy's front door and starts locking up. When she moves into the back, shrouded in darkness, she's grabbed by Armand, who covers her mouth. Thinking Eliane is Juliette, Armand asks, "You don't want madame to hear, huh?" Without a word, he starts to feel her up before forcing her hand into his pants. Eliane slaps him, Armand releasing her and asking, "Hey, are you crazy?" Frustrated, he steps outside and hops on his bicycle as Eliane runs upstairs.



"Nothing important" – From the dining room, Eliane can hear her daughter and husband running through lines from a play: "Ah," says Justine, "into what dark abyss love hurled my mother!" "Ah, Queen," the father recites, "forget, and for all time to come, eternal silence seals this memory." This mirrors Eliane's response to Armand's assault as she interrupts them, asking if she and her husband could speak about "something amusing" that just happened. The husband blows her off, unwilling to interrupt the poetry. Later, as they get ready for bed, the husband asks Eliane what she wanted to talk about earlier. "Nothing important, darling," Eliane says before climbing into bed. As they turn off the lights, air raid sirens begin to howl. In the street below, drunkards stumble from a nearby bar, joking about what an overreaction the war preparations and blackout orders are.



“Everything will be fine” – Outside the pharmacy the next morning, a young boy silently lifts the pistol off a nearby officer. The man is distracted by his partner, a woman who dotes over him, fearing for his life. “Everything will be fine,” he says. “We’re only on alert for now... don’t worry.” The boy’s mother catches him with the pistol and gives it back to the soldier. A nearby man approaches Armand, who sweeps the pharmacy’s entryway, and claps him on the back. Armand calls the old man “colonel” and thanks him for helping him “with the army.” With chiding slaps to the young man’s cheeks, the colonel tells him he’s serving his country by protecting the public health. When the colonel leaves, Armand complains about his job and being bossed around by a woman to Juliette. Juliette then talks about having to leave early the night before, allowing Armand to realize it was his boss he’d felt up the night before.



A day at work – A man in a military uniform enters the pharmacy, and Armand groans before closing the door behind him. It’s business as usual in the shop as the camera follows Armand around while he mops. At one moment, Armand’s and Eliane’s eyes meet, and she gives him a strange look, confirming his suspicions that she was the one who slapped him the night before. A bit later, Armand grills Juliette for more information as they eat lunch. She seems more interested in sex, however, teasing him with her feet and pulling her skirt aside. Later, an afternoon rain falls as Eliane listens to the radio, hearing reports of the Soviets’ military campaigns on the other side of Europe. She gives Armand another odd glance. Juliette gives Eliane a stack of bills, and she moves into the back where she collides with Armand, dropping them. Armand apologizes and picks them up for her.



Dreams of military service – Eliane leaves the responsibility of closing up to Juliette before heading to the family home upstairs. Nearby, Armand asks Juliette what their boss said, pretending he couldn’t hear her and complaining about being treated like an ‘invisible man.’ Outside, Juliette’s husband honks his motorcycle horn. Armand continues complaining: “Why doesn’t she fire me? Then she wouldn’t owe the colonel any favors, and I’d be on the front line!” Realizing Juliette has left, ignoring him, he blows a frustrated raspberry in her direction as the motorcycle puts away. Upstairs, Eliane listens to a radio report of German incursions along the French front, but she turns off the radio, listening to her daughter delivering another poem to her father in the next room.



Goosing – The next day, the pharmacy is filled with people, and Eliane does her best to help everyone. When she moves to fill a prescription, Armand squeezes behind her. Stopping for a moment and thinking to himself, he decides to move back, this time pinching her rear as he passes. A worried look crosses Eliane’s face, but she quickly regains her composure. In the back of the pharmacy, Armand brags to Juliette that he will be fired soon, but she doesn’t understand what he’s talking about. A bit later, Armand spies on Eliane while she speaks with Juliette. “It’s like nothing happened,” he says. “Maybe she liked it after all.” Timing his exit so that he physically runs into Eliane, Armand over-apologizes and strokes the wrinkles from her overcoat. Again, Eliane doesn’t say anything despite the overly intimate touching, confirming Armand’s supposition.



Letter – The next day, Eliane bandages a person’s head. Armand cleans the decorative glass nearby, looking through it at her with a strange, longing expression. She returns the eye contact, forgetting her work, and Juliette seems to notice. Later, Eliane works on her



typewriter. She stops, noticing Armand hovering nearby, looking at her. "What are you doing?" she asks. "Nothing, madame," he replies. He asks if she'll turn out the lights, and she says she will, saying further that he should head home. Armand starts to say something but changes his mind, simply bidding her good night and leaving. When the Eliane moves to lock up, she finds a letter folded and placed in between the light switches. She reads it, muttering a frustrated "fool" when she realizes it was left by Armand. She shows the letter to her husband, who dismisses her entirely, saying it was likely meant for Juliette, and if she thinks it's Armand, she should fire him.

Private talk – The next day, Eliane tells Armand to tidy the storeroom, and he responds with barely-contained frustration, following her orders. While closing up that night, Eliane tells Juliette to tell her husband to "spare us this concert every evening" as he honks up a storm outside. Armand says he's leaving too, and Eliane tells him to stay so they can speak. Outside, Juliette and her husband rib one another before driving away. Eliane sits at her desk when suddenly the room is thrown into darkness. Armand apologizes, saying he threw the wrong switch. In a long-winded, upper-class, roundabout way, Eliane confronts Armand about the letter he left, telling him he's fired. Armand begs for his job, promising not to bother her anymore. He mentions his mother's poor health, and Eliane insults him for "hiding behind her coattails."



Assault – Suddenly, Armand confesses his love. Frustrated, Eliane shakes her head and turns away from him. "I'm not that kind of woman," she says. "I am married and respectable... If some day, for some reason or another, I were to do what you were thinking of, you would never be the one." This visibly angers Armand, his face twitching. "Want to see what your interests really are?" he asks menacingly as he strides toward her. Lunging at Eliane, he covers her mouth and pushes her to her knees, where he forces her to perform oral sex.



Play – Eliane's husband sits in a courtroom, laying out a case suspiciously similar to what we've just seen between Armand and Eliane. The camera shifts perspective, and we see Juliette, attempting to refute the accusations. In the crowd sits Eliane, watching the play her husband and daughter have been preparing for. She tries to keep a look of horror from washing over her face as her family describes something very similar to what has just happened to her, and the court finds the woman to bear the burden of responsibility. The play ends on a patriotic note, a man standing and singing the French national anthem and the audience standing and joining in.



Under the counter – The film's theme plays as Eliane examines a bottle of cough syrup for clarity. Beside her, Armand grabs her arm and forces it beneath the counter, where he forces her to fondle him. He smirks as she struggles, and they watch Juliette work nearby. As Juliette takes a box into the storeroom, Eliane quickly covers for their clandestine activity by giving Armand a note to take to her desk.



Unexpected customer – Later that evening, Juliette's husband performs another symphony on his motorcycle horn as Armand locks up. Inside, Eliane prepares a package of medicine for Juliette to ship the next morning. All the while, Juliette's husband keeps honking. Letting her hair down after a long day's work, Eliane walks through the rear of the pharmacy where she finds Armand lurking. She tries to run upstairs, but Armand blocks her path and chases her into the front



of the shop. Quick on his feet, Armand is able to block her exit through the front door. He grabs her, and she begs for him to stop, but he forces himself on her, laying her down behind the counter. As they have sex, Eliane forces herself to be silent when the colonel enters, hoping to catch her after hours for a quick remedy. Not seeing her, he creeps toward the counter but decides against it and leaves after stealing a few items from the countertop.

Phone call – Eliane’s husband speaks on the phone about some Roman antiquities he wants to purchase for study. We see he’s speaking to Eliane downstairs as he explains that he must be away for a few days to finalize the purchase. She’s distracted by Armand, who kisses and gropes her as she tries to remain calm. She manages to find a beat to hang up and pulls away from Armand, calling him a pig. “Why?” Armand asks wryly. “What did I do?”



“On duty” – Armand watches Eliane and her husband leave in a taxi. He turns around to find Juliette touching up her lipstick in a pocket mirror. She says Eliane won’t be back before closing, and she’s thinking of leaving early. “You can go home whenever you like,” says Armand. “I’m on duty.” Juliette mocks his phrasing, calling him a shop boy and reminding him he can’t sell medicine without the training she or Eliane possesses. “Once a cunt,” Armand says with anger in his voice, “always a cunt.” He forces himself on Juliette, running his hand up her skirt and kissing her. When he pulls away, Juliette laughs, enjoying herself.



Window – In her kitchen, Eliane does the dishes. She’s interrupted by a persistent knock on her window: It’s Armand. He motions for her to unlock the nearby door, and she shakes her head. Armand begins pounding the windows with both hands, and Eliane quickly opens the door to make him stop. He feigns politeness, asking if he may enter the home. Eliane tries to get him to leave, saying he’ll wake her daughter. “Not if you’re quiet,” Armand says with menace in his voice. He starts to rattle the door and moves back to pounding on the window, and Eliane pleads with him to stop. He does, and she leads him inside where they have sex in her bed. Justine wakes up in the middle of the night to find the kitchen flooded. In seeking out her mother, she almost discovers Armand. Justine and Eliane clean up the kitchen together for a moment before Eliane demands her daughter go back to bed. Mopping up the dishwasher, Eliane cries to herself. Armand watches from a cracked door.



Scandal – Eliane walks behind the counter in the pharmacy, and Armand emerges from the storage room with a tank of gas. Eliane complains about it being in the way, but Armand ignores her and begins messing with the valve. Justine walks in and tells her mother she didn’t receive her allowance from her father before he left. “What’s the hurry?” Eliane asks. As Justine explains, Armand uses a hose to blow the gas up Eliane’s skirt. She struggles to keep her composure as she dismisses her daughter. Justine leaves, and Eliane turns off the gas. “Wasn’t it funny?” Armand asks. Eliane shakes her head before begging Armand to leave her alone. “Is it what you want?” she asks eventually. “A scandal?” Armand stands and moves into the storage room. Eliane follows, trying to figure out what he wants from her. “And you, madame?” He responds. “What do you want?” Afterwards, Eliane goes upstairs and sorts things out with Justine’s allowance.



Stormy night – Armand and Juliette spend another lunch together. Juliette speaks about her inability to practice as a nurse because her husband is disgusted by sick people, bedpans, enemas, and the like. Armand makes a joke that her husband is just looking out for his health while making a sideways comment about their affair, and Juliette speaks at length about how her husband gets jealous. Hearing Eliane coming down the stairs, Armand pushes Juliette onto the cot in the back room and starts having sex with her. Lightning strikes and thunder claps as Eliane catches them in the throws of lovemaking. Juliette starts to apologize when Armand interrupts her, putting on a display of power by groping and undressing Eliane. Threatening to hurt Juliette if she doesn't listen, he forces Eliane to strip before forcing Juliette to grope her. Juliette is able to wrest control from Armand, slapping him and calling them both "animals" before fleeing through the downpour.



Breakdown – In the aftermath of his strange display, Eliane breaks down, screaming and sobbing as Armand hurls misogynistic insults at her and demands she shut up. In the throes of her breakdown, she tells Armand to leave and never come back. He tries to manipulate her, saying it's all her fault. It doesn't take much more to convince him to leave, however, as Eliane can't calm down.



Talk of the war – "Six splendid pieces," says Eliane's husband as he walks with her down the street in a heavy snowfall, discussing the coming shipment and proper storage of the antiquities. "Coming back on the train, I was sitting with three soldiers," he continues. "It's funny. They said that war is nothing but a bore!" He reports about the lack of action on the Maginot Line and tells a story of a sheepdog popular with the soldiers on both sides. When asked how things were while he was gone, Eliane simply says, "Fine." Her husband presses for more details, and she says that work is more difficult with Armand gone. Thinking it was because of the letter, Eliane's husband mocks her overactive imagination. "My God!" he concludes, chuckling. "The stupid shop boy, in love with my wife!"



Justine sees Armand – Another radio report hints at the war escalating with Britain conscripting retired soldiers. Eliane stops listening, lost in thought. The report goes on to say that the French parliament is more concerned with repressing duly elected Communist Party representatives than it is preparing for a possible invasion. In the background, Justine and her father put tinsel on a Christmas tree. Later, Eliane cries to herself in bed. The next evening, Justine tells Eliane that she saw Armand hanging around her school. Later still, Eliane asks Juliette to deliver Armand's last check, and Juliette tries to apologize for the awkward stormy night, offering to quit. "No," Eliane says, "please, stay."



"Anything you want" – "Good morning, madame!" Juliette says, walking into the pharmacy. Eliane asks if she gave the final check to Armand and asked if he said anything. Juliette excuses herself to go open up the shop, avoiding the questions. After hours, Eliane sits in the front of the store, staring out dreamily at the street. As if snapping back to reality, she rubs the wedding ring on her finger. She looks down for a while, and when she looks back up, Armand is there. He enters the shop without a word, Eliane moving to embrace him. "My love!" she says. "You're right here, thank you!" She kneels down and kisses his crotch, but he pushes her away. In a roundabout way, he tells her to prove her love and devotion by parading in front of her store naked. After a lengthy discussion, Eliane agrees. As a drunkard exits the bar, Armand traps Eliane



outside and shines the store lights for a moment. When the man returns to the bar to tell his friends, Armand pulls Eliane inside and shuts off the lights, making the man look delusional.

“I want your daughter” – Eliane and Armand laugh at the prank, Eliane having experienced a sexual thrill as well. Armand starts demanding to play strange, childish games with Eliane, and she plays her roles as ordered. She pretends to be serving a customer who needs an “oral” treatment. He then bosses her around in a perverse reversal of their usual roles, telling her to clean and dust. When asked if he wants to play another game, Armand thinks for a moment before saying, “I want your daughter!” Eliane laughs like it’s a joke, but Armand is deadly serious. “You’ve got to be kidding!” she says. “No... It’s not possible.” Eliane picks up a nearby blade and flings herself at Armand, but he quickly wrestles it from her hand and demands her daughter again.



Back on the job – Eating her lunch as usual, Juliette stares up at Armand with a strange expression. “Tell me what you did to get your job back,” she says. “Did you beg her pardon? Did you crawl on the floor and ask her to have pity on your poor, sick mother? Or did you just blackmail her?” Armand responds with coy sarcasm, but Juliette doesn’t care what he thinks, she just feels bad for Eliane. Acting like the cock of the walk, he “gives permission” for Juliette to touch him. She strokes his body at first, asking if he likes it. Then she grabs his genitals and squeezes as hard as she can, making him shout with pain. Eliane’s husband can make it out from upstairs, but Eliane says she can’t hear anything over Justine practicing on the organ. Once again, Eliane tries to micromanage her household, snapping at the maid and reminding Justine to turn off the lights.



Staying downstairs – That evening, Eliane goes downstairs and finds Armand setting up the cot in the pharmacy storage. “What are you doing?” she asks. “I’m sleeping here,” he responds. “I’m sleeping here tonight and tomorrow night and every night, in fact.” After a bit more pressing, he explains that he’s sublet his apartment to make some extra money, making it clear that this is another term of his blackmail. Air raid sirens roar as Eliane tries to push back but finds herself unable to get through Armand’s domination and determination. Later that night, in bed with her husband, Eliane hears a noise and goes to investigate. She finds Justine’s room, lights ablaze, empty. Panicking, she starts to check around the home only to find Justine heading back to sleep after visiting the water closet. In a makeshift attempt to keep Armand out, Eliane props a chair against the kitchen door. She has a small, impotent confrontation with Armand the next morning.



Planes overhead – Business is booming at the pharmacy, and the ladies work hard trying to serve every customer. Everything falls silent as the low drone of a bomber passes overhead. Everyone looks up. It soon passes, however, and everyone returns to their business. Armand slyly passes a note to Juliette, saying, “For the shop girl.” She brushes him off.



“Come out, Armand” – Late at night, Eliane leaves her bedroom and stands in the living room of the family home. “Come out, Armand,” she says. “I’m going to kill you!” Not finding him in the house, she heads downstairs, finding him feigning sleep, locked behind barred doors only he has the keys to. She shouts her threats at him, demanding he open the door so she can kill him. Eventually, she begs him to let her in, saying, “Please. I want you... I’ll do anything you want.” The next



morning, Juliette enters the pharmacy, a radio report talking about the French government's crackdown on communist organizing playing. She finds Armand there and is confused to see him living in the back room. She decides to take sick leave, realizing the mess Armand is making and not wanting to be around when things go south.

Bedtime confession – Armand closes up the shop as another radio report tells us of the skirmishes between Germany and Belgium. Eliane appears, grabbing his arm and asking, "Tonight?" "I already said no," Armand says firmly. When she begs, he tells her to go back upstairs. In her bed next to her sleeping husband, Eliane sits. She begins speaking to him, wishing he weren't so inattentive and clueless. "Henri," she says. "I'm unfaithful to you. It's Armand. I can't refuse him anything." Henri's eyes open just slightly, showing us he's awake. Eliane continues her confession: "I do the most shameful things for him, but I do them without shame. I'm a slave, understand?" She finishes her confession with a lament that Henri is too meek and inattentive to do anything about it. Henri lies with his eyes open, tears streaming.



Already a woman – Eliane touches up her daughter's hair in the girl's bedroom. "What a pretty young lady you are!" she says. "You're so grown up, you know that?" Seeing some dark circles under the girl's eyes, Eliane drags her into her bedroom and does her makeup. She then helps Justine into some of her clothes and stockings before they go to present Justine to her father. Henri simply tells Justine she'll be late for school if she doesn't head out soon. Justine leaves, and Eliane chastises her husband for his insensitivity. "She'll grow up by herself, Eliane. Why rush it? Is there some reason?" "Your daughter's already a woman," Eliane replies, "whether you like it or not."



Hopscotch – On her way to school, Eliane sees some children playing hopscotch poorly, and she puts down her books to show them how it's done. Armand watches Justine from inside the pharmacy. With a piercing wolf's whistle, he comments on how grown-up she looks, joking he'll have to call her "madame" soon. Eliane sees this exchange and blames her daughter, pulling Justine aside and shouting at her, calling her a tease and worse. A neighbor sees, and Justine rushes to the woman, teary-eyed. Eliane moves into the pharmacy to confront Armand.



Threat – Eliane tells Armand to keep away from Justine. Calmly cleaning the pharmacy's glassware, Armand replies, "Don't make me wait too long, or I'll just come up and get her... Think I'm not capable of it? Think I'm afraid? Of who? You? Or your husband?" Eliane casts her eyes down, unable to respond: she knows he's right and she'd be helpless to stop him. Later, upstairs, Eliane enters Justine's room and tries to apologize for being so cruel earlier, leaving her some cake. The girl remains silent, deeply hurt by her mother's behavior.



Party – Henri's co-workers dine, drink, and chat all throughout the apartment. Most of them debate the restrictions imposed by the government or the crumbling morality of society showcased by sex workers being allowed to roam the streets. Eliane's friends mock the people protesting on the behalf of sex workers, and she meekly agrees with them. Some men are vaguely discussing the rumors that Eliane has been seen walking the streets nude when she approaches, offering them chocolates. Air raid sirens wail as the lights flicker



before falling dark. The party continues by candlelight. Downstairs, Armand eyes a bottle of ether before uncorking it and taking a deep whiff. Soon, he appears upstairs, demanding to see Justine and causing a scene. Even in his altered mindset, Armand follows orders when Henri asks that he clean up the cake that Eliane dropped. Bomber engines drone, air sirens howl, and the lights come back on.

Cowards – Using an ether-soaked cotton wad to get high, Eliane joins Armand in his small bed. “I didn’t sniff enough when I went upstairs,” he says, puffing on a cigarette. “If I’d done it right, that would have been really something!” “I knew it!” Eliane laughs. “You’re a coward! You needed the ether to get up your courage.” He quips back a poorly timed joke about wetting oneself in fear, and Eliane responds that she’s a coward too. “We both are,” she says plainly. Armand leaves with a dissatisfied grumble and returns quickly with a knife, which he uses to cut and tear Eliane’s clothing. She simply stares at him, unmoving, even smirking occasionally. “If I wanted to torture you,” Armand says, holding the blade close to her heart, “I bet you’d like it.” He threatens to out her, but Eliane remains stoic, simply saying, “You can’t do that twice.”



“Where have you been hiding them?” – The next day, Justine walks outside the pharmacy. Inside, the radio reports on increasing German attacks closer to the French lines. Inside, she sees Armand eating his lunch, and she stops to look at him, clearly having developed a schoolgirl crush. Armand catches sight of her and gestures for her to join him with a nod. She shakes her head, rushing into the family home. Justine is surprised to find the house seemingly empty and even more surprised to find her mother rooting around her room. “Where are they?” she demands of Justine. “Just tell me where you’ve hidden them.” She thinks Armand has been sending Justine love letters and, once again, blames her teenage daughter for this transgression, not the predatory adult man who keeps her in sexual servitude. After tearing Justine’s room apart, Eliane storms out, telling Justine to clean up her “pigsty.”



Broken vase – Justine approaches her father, who works in his study. She says she has something important to tell him, but he asks for her to wait until he’s finished his correspondence. She says it’s urgent, but he ignores her, instead enlisting her help to carry crates when Eliane phones up to say his antiquities have arrived. Armand ends up helping too, ferrying the remaining crates as Justine and Henri unpack the contents, tossing paper and straw into a heap in the middle of the room. As they’re counting all the pieces, Justine moves a bit too quickly and sends a vase tumbling to the floor. Her father stands and strikes her, telling her to never come back into the room and saying she’s just like her mother. Distracted, Justine falls into Armand’s arms, weeping.



Locked Door – Later that night, Eliane goes to check on her daughter but finds Justine’s door locked. She rattles and pounds on it, demanding to be let in. In the other room, Henri looks like he’s having a panic attack. The air raid sirens begin to scream, and Eliane manages to break into Justine’s room. She accuses her of sneaking Armand into her room, calling Justine a liar and a slut, and slapping her. Justine falls to the bed, crying as Eliane shakes her. Unable to simply ignore them, Henri crosses his study and cranks his record player to maximum volume. Disguising her next words as an apology, Eliane tells Justine to go downstairs and tell Armand to leave her alone. “Everything will be fine,” Eliane says, leading Justine to the stairs.



Air raid sirens – The air raid sirens start again, the lights throughout the house flickering on and off. The lights go out as mother and child reach the end of the stairs: The only light is that from the searchlights outside. “I won’t leave you,” Eliane says, urging Justine to go speak with Armand. “It will be fine, darling.” Innocently, Justine enters Armand’s room, saying his name. He appears from the shadows, placing his hand on her face and stroking her hair. “Don’t hurt me!” Justine says. “Why would I hurt you?” Armand asks before carrying her to the bed. Outside, the drone of bomber engines thrum and distant, percussive booms grow closer. Armand removes Justine’s dress as planes pass overhead. Eliane appears, holding Justine’s hand as Armand begins to have sex with the girl. Unable to stomach her part in this, Eliane lets go of Justine’s hand and stumbles away.



Chaos – The colonel rushes outside with an armload of belongings. People scream and shout as they run too and fro. Everyone can hear the planes bearing down on them, and they all seek to flee. The colonel clutches a French flag as he barely holds on to a speeding horse cart that rushes out of the town center. In his study, Henri ignores the explosions and screams from outside, carefully piecing together the vase Justine broke as his house shakes around him. Outside, the chaos in the street dies down as those who can leave. The sound of the bombers is overwhelming now. Armand holds Justine in the bed. In the upstairs bedroom, Eliane brushes her hair, preparing for bed. Henri sets aside the glued-together vase before standing. In the bedroom, Eliane takes a fistful of sleeping pills and joins Henri in the bed. The lights flicker on and off as outside explosions light up the night. They lie together, holding hands as the camera backs out of their room, looks into each room, moves down the stairs, passes Armand and Justine, and finally moves outside. Flames erupt as a bomb lands on the pharmacy and family home, and the film comes to an end.



CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Eliane

Eliane is an upper-middle-class pharmacist in France. She dutifully manages her household and business, never deviating from schedules and expectations. However, after being mistaken for Juliette by Armand in the dark, she descends into a depraved affair with Armand.

Bored While it’s not explicitly stated at any point in the film, Eliane is the archetype of the bored housewife trope. She is skillful and prompt in her management of the home and pharmacy, but it’s clear her heart hasn’t been in it for a while. When she smiles, it’s clear it’s an expression of customer service. We see her smile most honestly after Armand returns and forces her to parade naked in front of her business. She expresses a bit of this boredom to her husband in her confession while she thinks he’s asleep. He doesn’t care enough about her to stop anything that’s happening, and he is too meek to even think of starting a fight over his wife. It’s Armand’s ambition—undeserved and pitiful as it is—compared to Henri’s lack of ambition that drives her into the affair.

Submissive We learn quickly that Eliane is a submissive woman. While she manages her business and household vocally and skillfully, in interpersonal interactions, she makes herself small. When approaching her husband—a man who seems to spend the money she makes running the pharmacy—she allows herself to be dismissed, made less important than rehearsing lines for a play. When he asks later what she wanted, Eliane again downplays the seriousness of her very serious issue with Armand. We see her submissive nature most clearly in her sexual interactions with Armand: even in the earliest interactions, she seems to enjoy what is happening in a perverse way. In the end, her submissiveness drives her to betray every value she holds to please Armand.

Loyal/Disloyal The interplay of loyalty and disloyalty is critical to Eliane's story. She sees herself as a model citizen, a socialite, and a loyal wife and mother. Her strange desire for Armand, however, upends all of this. At first, she fights against it, but when Armand blackmails her, she gives in, becoming disloyal to her husband. She rationalizes this later in what she thinks is an unheard confession. Similarly, her loyalty to Armand grows, and again he blackmails her, so she prepares Justine for him to prove her love and loyalty. In becoming loyal to Armand, she abandons her family and her values.

Armand

We learn a few things about Armand's life throughout the film. His mother is sick, and their relationship with the colonel keeps Armand from being conscripted as German military activity ramps up, threatening France. In spite of feeling lucky not to be deployed to the front, Armand also feels emasculated by his position serving as the subordinate of a woman, and it's this frustration that leads him to dominate Eliane.

Frustrated Armand is perpetually frustrated. He's frustrated that he has a menial job in the pharmacy even though it's keeping him safely away from the front lines. He's frustrated at not being a soldier because people insult him as a draft-dodger even though this seems to be an accurate assumption. He is unhappy with his sex life even though Juliette seems to be very much attracted to him and more than willing to engage in sexual games and scenarios. He could have his cake and eat it too, but he ends up wanting a different cake at every turn. There is a perverse childishness to Armand's behavior that leaves him in a near-perpetual state of frustration.

Unfriendly It's not surprising Armand isn't particularly popular. He's just not friendly. He always has an ill-timed complaint or opinion, and he is always dissatisfied with his social position. We frequently see him insulting people behind their back, flipping the bird, and making rude noises at people. He desires social and economic prowess, but he refuses to act in a way that might earn him a leg up.

Dominant Armand's portrayal of dominance is unique among the films we've seen. Typically, powerful men abuse their power over women. In *Submission*, a man with little power uses his lack of position to blackmail a middle-class woman into a compromising and perverse relationship. His dominant attitude becomes most clear later in the film after Eliane falls fully under his spell. Doing nothing more than locking a door or barking an order, he forces Eliane to give him her teenage daughter in a perverse show of domination.

Juliette

Juliette is a trained nurse who works as the pharmacy assistant and cashier under Eliane. She is married to an impatient man who annoys Eliane and Armand each evening. Despite claiming to love her husband, she has a long-term affair with Armand.

Playful We see much of Juliette's playful side. This comes up with both Armand and her husband. With Armand, we see her sexually playful nature: she flashes him and teases his genitals with her foot and seems to partake in role-playing with him, allowing him to jump her in the dark. With her husband, we see a more vocally playful attitude: both rib each other for their behavior, and she frequently insults his love of his motorcycle. While there are insults thrown, we can tell from their expressions and attitude that this is playful banter.

Prompt At many points in the film, we see Eliane entrust Juliette with important deliveries or tasks. This is because she is always prompt. Similarly, she arrives to work at the same time every day, rain or shine. When issues arise, she is quick to deal with them, addressing the awkward sexual encounter with Armand and Eliane with her boss the next day and offering to quit if it makes her more comfortable. When she realizes what Armand is planning with Eliane and her family, she is prompt in simply removing herself from the situation, claiming her sick leave and going home.

Justine

Justine is a typical teenage girl. Daughter of Eliane and Henri, she spends most of her time at school. Eventually, she develops a schoolgirl crush on Armand.

Innocent This is Justine's most enduring and persistent trait. She is a young woman, just having really entered puberty. Life, the realities of war, and her mother push her toward maturity. The sad fact is, despite Eliane's frequent outbursts and accusations, Justine is completely innocent in a romantic and sexual sense and has done little more than smile at Armand. Even after being abused and beaten by her jealous mother, Justine trusts her every word, following her strange instructions to go to Armand and explain herself. It's this innocence and inexperience that Armand desires.

Henri

We're not told a lot about Henri. He is Eliane's husband and appears to be an antiquarian or art critic. There isn't a lot of characterization done for him outside of the clueless cuckold trope.

Disinterested This is the primary trait we see with Henri. He ignores his wife and child at just about every turn. When Eliane tries to talk to him about Armand groping her in the dark, he brushes her off, making her feel devalued. A similar thing happens when Juliette wants to speak with him about her mother's mistreatment and other odd behavior. Each time, his work and his vases take precedent. While he shows some reaction to overhearing Eliane's confession while pretending to be asleep, much as she predicted, he doesn't do anything to stop it. In his last moments, he ignores the bombs falling all around and the chaos in the street, tending to his vases as the apartment shakes around him.

THEMES

Society

Class Class is one of the most important themes in the film. Director Salvatore Samperi often critiqued and satirized the upper classes in his films, especially the way such families build facades around potentially embarrassing but ultimately normal events. In *Submission*, he examines how chauvinism and repressed perversion shatter one such family. Eliane's family has all the trappings of a fairly wealthy family, their position riding on the success of her pharmacy downstairs. Armand's lower-class existence causes him much frustration, and so he lashes out at Eliane, treating her like a sex toy and bank account before finally using her to get to Justine. What makes this film so tragic is how Eliane could have stopped the affair at any point, but she feared scandal and let her sexual desire come between her and being a good wife and mother.

Illustrative moment Toward the end of the film, we see a party held by Eliane and Henri. Many upper-class people come together to eat and talk at their apartment, often espousing unkind views of those less fortunate or spreading nasty gossip about one another. Midway through the party, the lights are cut after bombs begin to fall somewhere nearby. Instead of heading home, the people gathered simply light candles and continue as if everything were normal. In this moment, we see the power the desire for comfort and social power has on a populace even in wartime.



Gender We're shown some complex ideas about gender throughout the film, though none are transgressive or experimental. In typical exploitation film style, the ideas of gender are those of society at large and turned up to eleven. Some see this as the characters acting in strange or unrealistic ways, but through the lens of camp, we can see these as satires of masculinity and femininity. While mostly cast as the typical unwitting cuckold, Henri comes to learn the truth, and he acts just as Eliane suspects he will: he does nothing. A meek man not interested in the more aggressive trappings of masculinity, Henri

ignores the fact that his wife is cheating on him. When he does hold power over Armand, it is that of an economic superior, not a more manly man. Justine represents a newly blossomed woman being just sixteen or seventeen. She is growing into womanhood, and—because of her perverse submission to Armand—Eliane wants her to grow up more quickly. Armand's masculinity is easily bruised. He frequently reacts with violent anger and rude outbursts to every little insult or challenge, especially in a sexual sense. Everything we see him do is an attempt to regain his manhood himself after being emasculated by his position under a woman and as someone who avoided combat.

Illustrative moment One of the clearest moments of gender as a theme quickly becomes disgusting as the film comes to an end. One morning, Eliane pulls Justine into her bedroom and does her hair and makeup before giving her some more adult clothes. Justine, a young woman just about to cross the threshold into adulthood, enjoys the process. Her father, however, sees something darker in it and ignores her when she displays herself to him. When their daughter leaves for school, Eliane says Justine is “already a woman,” and we soon learn this is a justification for giving her to Armand. Henri quips that she's not yet a woman, and Eliane shouldn't be forcing her to grow up so quickly.



Politics

War War is a backdrop to the film. Frequent updates through conversations or radio news reports inform the viewer how the war is going. While the characters dismiss the threat of war, the radio reports frequent losses and the German advance quickening. The inability to join others in the war weighs on Armand, making him feel traitorous and emasculated. Because of the war, Eliane is often seen giving medicine or basic medical treatment to soldiers. War is a surprisingly minor theme in this film set in the beginning of the Second World War.

Illustrative moment While the family and Armand ignore the falling bombs inside the pharmacy and adjoining apartment, pure chaos erupts in the streets. As air-raid sirens wail and explosions grow closer and closer, people scramble to flee. We see many unnamed characters pushing and shoving for places on horse carts. The colonel joins them, clutching a single handbag and a French flag. This moment more than any other shows the fear and disorder war can sow.



Relationship

Motherhood/Fatherhood We see this as a dual theme, as it is a lack of understanding and attentive parenting that creates the situation at the end of the film. Neither Eliane nor Henri give Justine the attention and care she really deserves. Both parents are wrapped up in their own private worlds, they consistently fail to care for Justine's emotional needs and protection. While this is most clear in the child abuse we see from both at different points in the film, beating her over suspicions or trivial accidents, it is also clear in the way Eliane gives Justine to Armand. Similarly, as others flee and the war escalates, both parents act as if everything is normal. This creates the situation at the film's end where they're all killed by a German bomb because, instead of fleeing, they were going about their normal lives.

Illustrative moment Several times in the film we see Eliane mistreat Justine out of misplaced jealousy, thinking the girl is trying to “steal” Armand from her. The most striking moment of parental mistreatment, however, comes when Henri reacts with pure rage when his daughter accidentally knocks a vase to the floor. He stands up, insults her, and strikes her, telling her never to enter his study again. In this moment, we see how both of Justine's parents see her as less valuable than their possessions and desires.



Psychology

Fear There is some interesting examination of fear in *Submission*. We mostly see fear through the lens of avoidance: No one seems willing to address the impending and worsening war. Eliane and her family all have avoidant behaviors that only strengthen as the threat becomes more and more pressing. We also see fear used as a sexual tool. It is the key thrill behind exhibitionism, the fear of being discovered. Armand uses fear like a knife, keeping Eliane afraid and unable to think clearly with his blackmail. Partway through the film, we see Eliane is in on this now, Armand already having exposed them to Juliette and weakening his power of blackmail. However, the fear of being exposed is still a part of their sexual thrill, as seen when Armand locks Eliane outside while she's nude.

Illustrative moment One of the clearest moments of fear happens when Armand demands Eliane have sex with him in the front of the pharmacy while she's closing up. While they writhe on the floor beneath the counter, the colonel enters, looking to pick up something at the last moment. He calls out for anyone, creeping closer to the counter. Eliane's eyes are wide with fear as Armand continues to have sex with her, covering her mouth to remain quiet. This moment clearly shows how fear can be used to heighten some people's sexual pleasure.



Sexuality

Domination Domination is one of the core themes of *Submission*. Armand's desires drive the plot and push it to its perverse end. He feels powerless and emasculated by being able to stay home and work while other men march off to war and also being forced to be a subordinate of a woman. Because of this, he desires married women, as shown in his ongoing affair with Juliette. While there is certainly an aspect of uniquely French sexuality in this arrangement (while not overtly accepted, affairs are considered normal and expected in French society), Armand takes it a step further, demanding obedience from his lovers, especially from Eliane. His domination of her is so complete that she even gives him her teenage daughter as a sign of devotion.

Illustrative moment There are many moments of domination throughout the film, but one of the more striking happens when Armand forces Eliane to watch him have sex with Juliette. Unaware that Armand and Eliane have been having sex, Juliette reacts as one might expect for an employee discovered in a compromising situation by an employer. To her horror, however, Armand begins stripping Eliane and speaking about the qualities of her body before forcing Juliette to grope the other woman. Juliette slaps Armand and flees, but Eliane breaks down, unable to reconcile her sexual desires and social position to herself.



Submission Believe it or not, submission is a key theme in this film. While the first couple of instances of sexual contact between Armand and Eliane are that of a man assaulting a woman (at first accidentally, then explicitly), their relationship becomes one between a dominant and submissive partner very quickly. Eliane's reaction to each moment of sexual contact is somewhere between disbelief and perverse pleasure: something about infidelity turns her on just as much as her eventual submission to Armand's every desire. Early in their relationship, a simple word to Armand or her husband could have saved Eliane from any scandal. Instead, she decides to submit to the sexual abuse, finding it arousing in a strange way.

Illustrative moment One of the most obvious moments of submission is when Armand gropes Eliane while she speaks with her husband on the phone. This is a fairly common sexual practice since the advent of telephones, forcing one on the phone to keep their composure while making a call. Instead of making a scene or admitting what's happening to her husband, Eliane simply remains as calm as she can as Armand kisses and gropes her.



Age gap We see this idea in two different forms during the film. Armand and Juliette are close to each other in age, made clear by Armand when he speaks to her about Eliane's body. We see the idea first when it's made clear that Armand and Eliane are a couple of decades apart in age. The second time it emerges is when Armand demands access to Justine, a girl of but sixteen. While the first instance happens from time to time, it is a pairing between adults. A pairing between an adult man and a girl is something inherently disgusting to most, showing the depths of Armand's depravity and desire for sexual domination of the women around him.

Illustrative moment The most disgusting and impactful moment of this theme comes at the film's end. After being led downstairs by her mother as a perverse sacrifice to Armand, the man takes the teenage girl in his arms and carries her to the bed before removing her dress and having his way with her.



Sexual affair What starts off as a faux pas turns into a full-blown affair. In film, we typically see affairs between two people madly in love but paired with others. In *Submission*, however, the affair we see is clearly rooted in abuse. Without meaning to—having planned sexual play with Juliette, who is forced to leave—Armand sexually assaults Eliane. He keeps this up for the following days, testing the waters after Eliane says nothing about the encounter and finding that she's strangely willing. Eliane keeps up the affair, desiring Armand and the depraved sexual acts he demands of her. She admits the affair to her husband, who she assumes is asleep, and she places the blame on herself and her husband in nearly equal measure. It's his lack of attention that even makes her desire a relationship like she has with Armand.

Illustrative moment The moment that sets the affair in motion happens early in the film. Expecting to be continuing his affair with Juliette, Armand grabs and gropes Eliane in the dark of the pharmacy. Instead of making it clear she's his boss or physically fighting him off, Eliane finds herself bending to his will, even after he removes his hand from her mouth. While she is disgusted by Armand's actions, she finds herself wanting more and falls into an especially depraved affair with him.



Exhibitionism We are often shown a voyeur's perspective in films, directors like Hitchcock frequently play on the idea of voyeurism as a person watching a film. *Submission* shows us very clearly the thrills and practices of exhibitionism. Here the thrill comes from the near discovery or discovery of someone in a sexually exposed state. Armand and Eliane have sex while a man calls for Eliane and Juliette in the pharmacy, risking exposure. We also see this play out when Armand has sex with Juliette, hoping for Eliane to see them, which she does. He gets a sexual thrill in being exposed or nearly exposed, as well as using the behavior as a way to blackmail Eliane.

Illustrative moment One of the key sexual explorations of the film is that of exhibitionism. We see this most obviously during the long moment when Armand returns and Eliane offers to do anything he wants to prove her devotion. He orders her to strut around in front of her pharmacy in her underwear before ordering her to strip down and repeat the walk. This time, he locks her outside and turns on the shop



lights, illuminating her and letting a drunkard get a good look at her. Just after this experience, Eliane admits to experiencing a great sexual thrill.

Voyeurism While not as prevalent as the theme of exhibitionism, *Submission* also includes several moments of voyeurism. The voyeur gets pleasure from watching and is typically involved—either willingly or unwillingly—when exhibitionists perform sexual acts in public or in front of others. Eliane becomes an unwilling exhibitionist when she sees Juliette having sex with Armand. She takes a similar and disgustingly willing role later when she gives Justine to Armand. As the girl is shocked by what is happening to her, her mother appears by her side, holding her hand and encouraging her as Armand sates his sexual appetite.



Illustrative moment One of the most obvious moments of voyeurism happens about a third of the way through the film. Hearing Eliane coming down the stairs while he and Juliette eat their lunch, Armand pulls Juliette into the nearby room with a cot and begins having sex with her. Hearing something and wondering where her workers are, Eliane investigates. Shocked at what she sees, she only watches until Juliette sees her looking at them from the curtain that separates the rooms.

Ethics

Corruption The plot in *Submission* is one of corruption. Eliane is an affluent, powerful woman in her community laid low by perverse desire. Justine is a typical young woman who is corrupted by familial abuse and betrayal, turned into a sexual toy for an older man. We see Juliette react to the corrupting force Armand represents by running away and saving herself. She correctly judges that there is no good outcome to Armand's desires, which corrupt Eliane's family from the archetype of the successful upper-class lifestyle to a broken, dysfunctional mess. Eliane's sexual corruption is the most clear, as she gives up everything she loves and believes in just to sexually please a man who openly despises and dehumanizes her.

Illustrative moment Armand makes his corrupting influence clear midway through the film. After returning and forcing Eliane to parade around in the nude outside her pharmacy, he begins playing a series of sex games with her. When she asks to play another, he thinks for a moment before saying, "I want your daughter!" While in this moment Eliane is disgusted and frustrated by the request, she soon gives in, delivering Justine to Armand at the end of the film and even holding her hand as Armand begins to abuse her.



Patriotism/Duty A small but important theme is that of patriotism, specifically duty to one's country. Taking place in 1940 France, looming conflict and the specter of the First World War tint every behavior we see. Armand, especially, is both hurt and happy by his inability to go to the front. He fears military service, not wanting to die, but he also desires the respect and admiration such service earns one. The film begins with a military parade, and we also see a strangely out-of-place singing of the French national anthem at a play where the audience suddenly stands and sings with the actors.

Illustrative moment There are many small examples of patriotism and patriotic duty in this film, but the most important happens in the film's first moments. As a brigade of soldiers march through the town square and off to war, Armand watches. One of the soldiers spits in his direction and calls him "draft dodger." Armand reacts with impotent anger and is teased with the same words by Juliette just a second later. The idea that military service during war is the duty of all men is a strong one throughout the film, and—in spite of his fear of dying in combat—it causes Armand much frustration, leading to his domineering attitude and rash actions.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How does the escalating war play into the sexual elements of the story and vice versa?
2. Would you describe *Submission* as allegorical or simply perverse? Explain.
3. In what ways is this narrative accurate to the way people might deal with an impending threat such as war?
4. How does gender and emasculation drive the plot? List three examples.