

Review of Last Tango in Paris by Roger Ebert
October 14, 1972

Bernardo Bertolucci's *Last Tango in Paris* is one of the great emotional experiences of our time. It's a movie that exists so resolutely on the level of emotion, indeed, that possibly only Marlon Brando, of all living actors, could have played its lead. Who else can act so brutally and imply such vulnerability and need?

For the movie is about need; about the terrible hunger that its hero, Paul, feels for the touch of another human heart. He is a man whose whole existence has been reduced to a cry for help—and who has been so damaged by life that he can only express that cry in acts of crude sexuality.

Bertolucci begins with a story so simple (which is to say, so stripped of any clutter of plot) that there is little room in it for anything but the emotional crisis of his hero. The events that take place in the everyday world are remote to Paul, whose attention is absorbed by the gradual breaking of his heart. The girl, Jeanne, is not a friend and is hardly even a companion; it's just that because she happens to wander into his life, he uses her as an object of his grief.

The movie begins when Jeanne, who is about to be married, goes apartment-hunting and finds Paul in one of the apartments. It is a big, empty apartment, with a lot of sunlight but curiously little cheer. Paul rapes her, if rape is not too strong a word to describe an act so casually accepted by the girl. He tells her that they will continue to meet there, in the empty apartment, and she agrees.

Why does she agree? From her point of view—which is not a terribly perceptive one—why not? One of the several things this movie is about is how one person, who may be uncommitted and indifferent, nevertheless can at a certain moment become of great importance to another. One of the movie's strengths

comes from the tragic imbalance between Paul's need and Jeanne's almost unthinking participation in it. Their difference is so great that it creates tremendous dramatic tension; more, indeed, than if both characters were filled with passion.

They do continue to meet, and at Paul's insistence they do not exchange names. What has come together in the apartment is almost an elemental force, not a connection of two beings with identities in society. Still, inevitably, the man and the girl do begin to learn about each other. What began, on the man's part, as totally depersonalized sex develops into a deeper relationship almost to spite him.

We learn about them. He is an American, living in Paris these last several years with a French wife who owned a hotel that is not quite a whorehouse. On the day the movie begins, the wife has committed suicide. We are never quite sure why, although by the time the movie is over we have a few depressing clues.

The girl is young, conscious of her beauty and the developing powers of her body, and is going to marry a young and fairly inane filmmaker. He is making a movie of their life together; a camera crew follows them around as he talks to her and kisses her—for herself or for the movie, she wonders.

The banality of her "real" life has thus set her up for the urgency of the completely artificial experience that has been commanded for her by Paul. She doesn't know his name, or anything about him, but when he has sex with her it is certainly real; there is a life in that empty room that her fiancé, with all of his *cinéma vérité*, is probably incapable of imagining.

She finds it difficult, too, because she is a child. A child, because she hasn't lived long enough and lost often enough to know yet what a heartbreaker the world can be. There are moments in the film when she does actually seem to look into Paul's soul and half-understand what she sees there, but she pulls back from it;

pulls back, finally, all the way—and just when he had come to the point where he was willing to let life have one more chance with him.

A lot has been said about the sex in the film; in fact, *Last Tango in Paris* has become notorious because of its sex. There is a lot of sex in this film—more, probably, than in any other legitimate feature film ever made—but the sex isn't the point, it's only the medium of exchange. Paul has somehow been so brutalized by life that there are only a few ways he can still feel.

Sex is one of them, but only if it is debased and depraved—because he is so filled with guilt and self-hate that he chooses these most intimate of activities to hurt himself beyond all possibilities of mere thoughts and words. It is said in some quarters that the sex in the movie is debasing to the girl, but I don't think it is. She's almost a bystander, a witness at the scene of the accident. She hasn't suffered enough, experienced enough, to more than dimly guess at what Paul is doing to himself with her. But Paul knows, and so does Bertolucci; only an idiot would criticize this movie because the girl is so often naked but Paul never is. That's their relationship.

The movie may not contain Brando's greatest performance, but it certainly contains his most emotionally overwhelming scene. He comes back to the hotel and confronts his wife's dead body, laid out in a casket, and he speaks to her with words of absolute hatred—words which, as he says them, become one of the most moving speeches of love I can imagine.

As he weeps, as he attempts to remove her cosmetic death mask (“Look at you! You're a monument to your mother! You never wore makeup, never wore false eyelashes!”), he makes it absolutely clear why he is the best film actor of all time. He may be a bore, he may be a creep, he may act childish about the Academy Awards—but there is no one else who could have

played that scene flat-out, no holds barred, the way he did, and make it work triumphantly.

The girl, Maria Schneider, doesn't seem to act her role so much as to exude it. On the basis of this movie, indeed, it's impossible to really say whether she can act or not. That's not her fault; Bertolucci directs her that way. He wants a character who ultimately does not quite understand the situation she finds herself in; she has to be that way, among other reasons, because the movie's ending absolutely depends on it. What happens to Paul at the end must seem, in some fundamental way, ridiculous. What the girl does at the end has to seem incomprehensible—not to us; to her.

What is the movie about? What does it all mean? It is about, and means, exactly the same things that Bergman's *Cries and Whispers* was about, and meant. That's to say that no amount of analysis can extract from either film a rational message. The whole point of both films is that there is a land in the human soul that's beyond the rational—beyond, even, words to describe it.

Faced with a passage across that land, men make various kinds of accommodations. Some ignore it; some try to avoid it through temporary distractions; some are lucky enough to have the inner resources for a successful journey. But of those who do not, some turn to the most highly charged resources of the body; lacking the mental strength to face crisis and death, they turn on the sexual mechanism, which can at least be depended upon to function, usually.

That's what the sex is about in this film (and in *Cries and Whispers*). It's not sex at all (and it's a million miles from intercourse). It's just a physical function of the soul's desperation. Paul in *Last Tango in Paris* has no difficulty in achieving an erection, but the gravest difficulty in achieving a life-affirming reason for one.

Footnote, 1995

Watching Bernardo Bertolucci's *Last Tango in Paris* 23 years after it was first released is like revisiting the house where you used to live, and did wild things you don't do anymore. Wandering through the empty rooms, which are smaller than you remember them, you recall a time when you felt the whole world was right there in your reach, and all you had to do was take it.

This movie was the banner for a revolution that never happened. "The movie breakthrough has finally come," Pauline Kael wrote, in the most famous movie review ever published. "Bertolucci and Brando have altered the face of an art form." The date of the premiere, she said, would become a landmark in movie history comparable to the night in 1913 when Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* was first performed, and ushered in modern music.

Last Tango premiered, in case you have forgotten, on October 14, 1972. It did not quite become a landmark. It was not the beginning of something new, but the triumph of something old—the "art film," which was soon to be replaced by the complete victory of mass-marketed "event films." The shocking sexual energy of *Last Tango in Paris* and the daring of Marlon Brando and the unknown Maria Schneider did not lead to an adult art cinema. The movie frightened off imitators, and instead of being the first of many X-rated films dealing honestly with sexuality, it became almost the last. Hollywood made a quick U-turn into movies about teenagers, technology, action heroes and special effects. And with the exception of a few isolated films like *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1988) and *In the Realm of the Senses* (1976), the serious use of graphic sexuality all but disappeared from the screen.

I went to see *Last Tango in Paris* again because it is being revived at Facets Multimedia, that temple of great cinema, where the largest specialized video sales

operation in the world subsidizes a little theater where people still gather to see great film projected through celluloid onto a screen. (I am reminded of the readers in Truffaut's *Fahrenheit 451* (1967), who committed books to memory in order to save them.)

It was a good 35mm print, and I was drawn once again into the hermetic world of these two people, Paul and Jeanne, their names unknown to each other, who meet by chance in an empty Paris apartment and make sudden, brutal, lonely sex. Paul's marriage has just ended with his wife's suicide. Jeanne's marriage is a week or two away, and will supply the conclusion for a film being made by her half-witted fiancé.

In anonymous sex they find something that apparently they both need, and Bertolucci shows us enough of their lives to guess why. Paul (Brando) wants to bury his sense of hurt and betrayal in mindless animal passion. And Jeanne (Schneider) responds to the authenticity of his emotion, however painful, because it is an antidote to the prattle of her insipid boyfriend and bourgeoisie mother. Obviously their "relationship," if that's what it is, cannot exist outside these walls, in the light of the real world.

The first time I saw the film there was the shock of its daring. The "butter scene" had not yet been cheapened in a million jokes, and Brando's anguished monologue over the dead body of his wife—perhaps the best acting he has ever done—had not been analyzed into pieces. It simply happened. I once had a professor who knew just about everything there was to know about Romeo and Juliet, and told us he would trade it all in for the opportunity to read the play for the first time. I felt the same way during the screening: I was so familiar with the film that I was making contact with the art instead of the emotion.

The look, feel and sound of the film are evocative. The music by Gato Barbieri is sometimes counterpoint, sometimes lament, but it is never simply used to tell us

how to feel. Vittorio Storaro's slow tracking shots in the apartment, across walls and the landscapes of bodies, are cold and remote; there is no attempt to heighten the emotions. The sex is joyless and efficient, and beside the point: Whatever the reasons these two people have for what they do with one another, sensual pleasure is not one of them.

Brando, who can be the most mannered of actors, is here often affectless. He talks, he observes, he states things. He allows himself bursts of anger and that remarkable outpouring of grief, and then at the end he is wonderful in the way he lets all of the air out of Paul's character by turning commonplace with the speech where he says he likes her. The moment is wonderful because it releases the tension, it shows what was happening in that apartment, and we can feel the difference when it stops.

In my notes I wrote: "He is in scenes as an actor, she is in scenes as a thing." This is unfair. Maria Schneider, an unknown whose career dissipated after this film, does what she can with the role, but neither Brando nor Bertolucci was nearly as interested in Jeanne as in Paul. Because I was young in 1972, I was unable to see how young Jeanne (or Schneider) really was; the screenplay says she is 20 and Paul is 45, but now when I see the film she seems even younger, her open-faced lack of experience contradicting her incongruously full breasts. Both characters are enigmas, but Brando knows Paul, while Schneider is only walking in Jeanne's shoes.

The ending. The scene in the tango hall is still haunting, still part of the whole movement of the third act of the film, in which Paul, having created a searing moment out of time, now throws it away in drunken banality. The following scenes, leading to the unexpected events in the apartment of Jeanne's mother, strike me as arbitrary and contrived. But still Brando finds a way to redeem them, carefully remembering to

park his gum before the most important moment of his life.