

# Sight and Sound **ff**

A Fiftieth Anniversary Selection

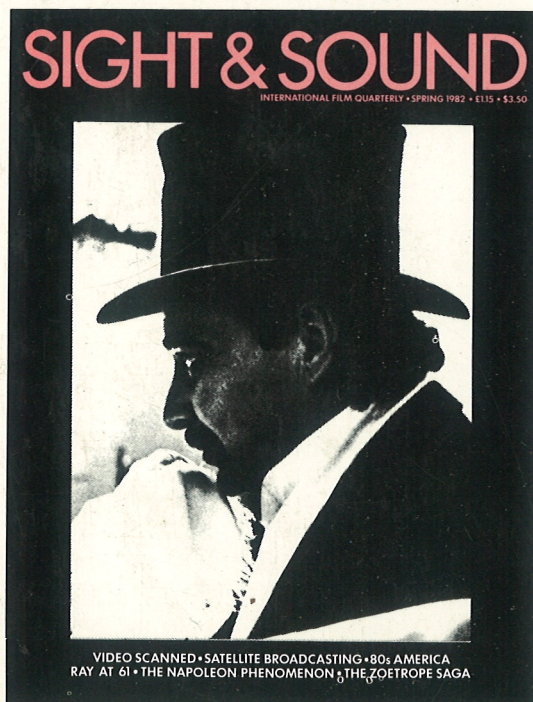
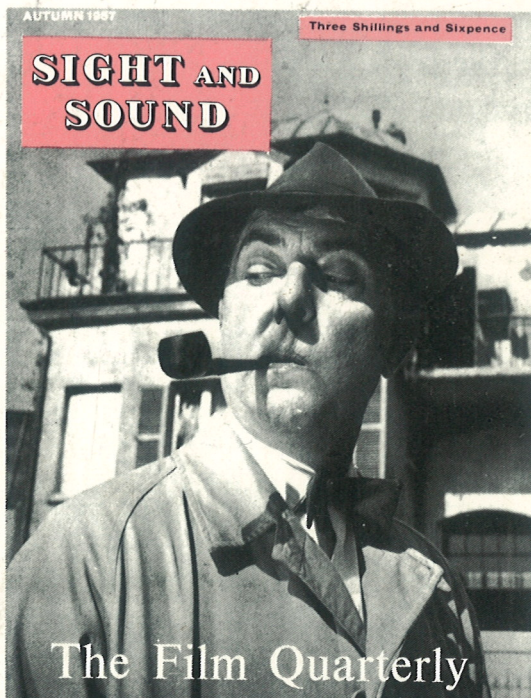
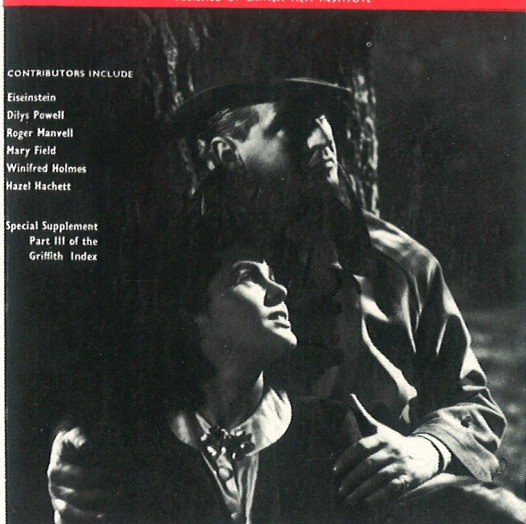
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# Bertolucci and the Dance of Danger

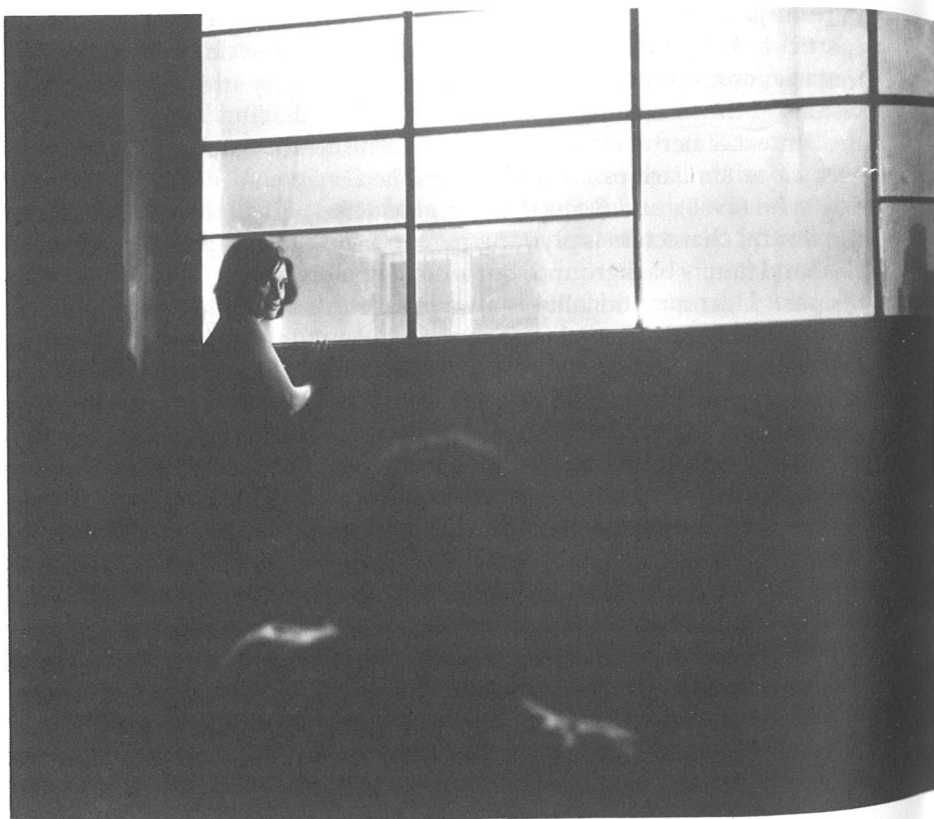
MARSHA KINDER and BEVERLE HOUSTON

*Last Tango in Paris* is a disturbing film that causes a lot of arguments. Fury at the disgruntled vulgarians who came to see a *Deep Throat* and want everyone around them to know 'they didn't get their money's worth'. Disagreement with companions who see Brando only as a sexist pig or romantic ideal. Our own confusion when we see the film again and respond to everything differently. These encounters release the powerful emotions evoked by the film, but they also grow out of its richness. Bertolucci's confrontation of the issues is profound; the performances (particularly Brando's) are amazingly authentic; and our own needs and fantasies concerning sex, love and death pull us very strongly into private visions of the film. One way of understanding the film itself is to see it in the context of Bertolucci's earlier works. The central conflicts in *Last Tango* bear close similarities with those in *The Conformist* (1970), *The Spider's Stratagem* (1969), and *Before the Revolution* (1964). In all these films, one of the central characters is a young person trying to escape from his social class and family background, but who inevitably lives out the values from his past. Unconventionality is always associated with left-wing politics. In *Before the Revolution*, Fabrizio joins the Communist Party but ultimately rejects it for its imperfections and returns to his bourgeois family. The young hero of *The Spider's Stratagem* is unwillingly drawn into the mystery surrounding the death of his father, who was supposedly assassinated by the Fascists. In trying to avenge the murder, the son's identity almost merges with that of his father. In *The Conformist*, Marcello Clerici tries to escape his father's insanity and his mother's eccentric decadence. In order to appear 'normal', he joins the Fascist Party; but when Mussolini falls, he renounces the Fascists and retreats into madness like his father. In *Last Tango*, Jeanne, daughter of a French army colonel, delights in shocking her conventional mother with her liberated life style. But later she destroys her outrageous lover and chooses a conventional marriage. In all these cases, the gap between conventionality and rebellion, between outward appearance and inner emotional reality, makes the person frightened and dangerous, particularly to those who love him.

In *Revolution*, *Conformist* and *Last Tango*, each of these characters chooses between a conventional marriage and a dangerous love affair



associated with childhood. In rejecting the romantic lover (who is neurotic or deviant by society's norms), and entering the marriage, each destroys the potential for growth and, as if to ensure that the decision is final, each destroys the loved one. In *Revolution*, Clelia was destined from childhood to be Fabrizio's bride. He temporarily abandons her for a stormy, incestuous relationship with his aunt Gina, who is neurotic and promiscuous, dislikes adults and tries to remain a child. She is the one who leaves first, but Fabrizio makes the break permanent when he marries. The film ends with the wedding; as the bride and groom drive off, Gina is sobbing and smothering Fabrizio's younger brother with kisses. In *The Conformist*, Marcello marries Julia, a sensuous but shallow member of the middle class, who offers him a superficial respectability. But he really loves Anna, the wife of the liberal professor whom he is trying to assassinate. Marcello visits Anna at her dancing school where she is instructing little girls in ballet, associating her with children. In their final scene, he, like Fabrizio, sits inside a car with the windows rolled up



59. *Before the Revolution*

as Anna sobs hysterically outside; Marcello not only rejects her as a lover, but also abandons her to the assassins.

In *Last Tango*, Jeanne must choose between her fiancé Tom, whose passion is focused on directing a film about her and her family, and Paul, a stranger, who insists on knowing nothing about her background or outside life. She meets Paul in an empty room where they play like children and explore the extremes of sexual fantasy. With Tom she can have a 'pop marriage' where the smiling youths, dressed in overalls, work on their relationship as if it were an automobile. But Jeanne acknowledges that love is not pop. For love, 'The workmen go to a secret place, take off their overalls, and become men and women again.' This is what she has experienced with Paul, but when he tries to bring their love outside their secret room, she flees in terror.

Each of the characters has a parallel conflict about a male authority figure—an idealistic father surrogate who arouses ambivalent feelings and is ultimately rejected. This theme is central in *Spider's Stratagem*, where the son tries to discover whether his father was really a traitor or a hero. In *Revolution*, Fabrizio ignores his bourgeois father and idolises Cesare, his childhood teacher. Unlike Fabrizio, Cesare combines his communist ideology with humanity and realism. When Fabrizio abandons the Party and his youthful idealism to marry Clelia, the wedding scene is intercut with shots of Cesare reading from *Moby Dick* to a class of small children. It is the passage describing Ahab's obsessive pursuit of the white whale—the kind of mad but courageous journey on which the Brando character is embarked. But Cesare is an Ishmael, not an Ahab.

In *The Conformist*, Cesare is transformed into Quadri, the idealistic left-wing philosophy professor who has fled Fascist Italy and settled in Paris. Marcello had been one of his best students, doing his thesis on Plato's allegory of the cave. But he has rejected Quadri and adopted as his new guide Montanari, a Fascist whose physical blindness reinforces Quadri's interpretation that the Italians now see only shadows instead of the truth. On his way to the assassination, Marcello describes a dream in which, after having his eyesight restored by the professor, Marcello runs off with Quadri's wife (a reversal of the plot of *Oedipus*). Relating to Quadri as a father implies that Marcello's relationship with Anna is incestuous (as was the relationship between Fabrizio and Gina in *Revolution* and the potential sex between the son and his father's mistress in *Spider's Stratagem*). Instead of enacting this dream, Marcello watches Quadri and his wife being murdered, explicitly linking the rejections of the true love and idealistic father (only implicit in *Revolution*).

In *Last Tango*, the lover and surrogate father become the same person. Paul is old enough to be Jeanne's father; in the secret room she returns to her childhood where she can live out her incestuous desires. When she



says of her father: 'The Colonel—I loved him like a God', Paul shouts, 'What a steaming pile of bullshit. All uniforms are bullshit. Everything outside this room is bullshit.' But later, when he chases her to her parents' apartment, he puts on her father's military cap (simultaneously mocking his memory and embodying him) and clowningly says: 'How do you like your hero? Over easy or sunny side up?' She responds by killing him with her father's army pistol. Earlier, when she tried on the same cap and looked like Shirley Temple in *The Littlest Rebel*, she had said: 'How heavy it was when father taught me how to shoot it.' It is doubly heavy when she finally puts the gun to use.

In all the films the sexual and political conflict is expressed in a brilliant dance sequence where romantic joy and conventional sterility are polarised. In *Before the Revolution* Gina and Fabrizio, who have just become lovers, are celebrating Easter Sunday in the bosom of their bourgeois family. The lovers begin to dance, and finally kiss. The extraordinary eroticism of the scene is achieved by drawing us into their intense feelings, expressed in the music and the subtle detail of their faces, revealed through the lingering close-up. The excitement is heightened by the unseeing presence of the family, who have overeaten and are easing into somnolence. The father looks up briefly from his newspaper, momentarily aware, but lapses back into unconcern; the grandmother naps, her mouth agape. When Fabrizio's younger brother enters, his childish face registers awareness of the atmosphere generated by the lovers; Gina brings him into the dance, foreshadowing the film's ending. *Spider's Stratagem* presents a dance sequence which is the setting for one of the key flashbacks. The father, at his most heroically romantic moment, mocks the Fascists with his bold moves on the dance floor. In *The Conformist* the contrast is between the tight, controlled machinations of Marcello and his Fascist accomplice and the open, sweeping enchantment of the dance created by the two beautifully clad women. Even the bourgeois Julia is transformed, shouting 'This is Paris . . . I'm a New Woman.' But in *Last Tango* the forces of sterility are represented by the tango dancers, as they snap into ritualised postures and stylised grimaces to compete for a prize dispensed by the bourgeois establishment. It is in this context that Paul offers Jeanne a commitment of an older style, but his behaviour clearly shows that whatever he shares with the past, it is not the deadness. Although she is rejecting him, he succeeds in drawing her into the dance, which is their last fling of childlike, playful spontaneity. He carries her piggy-back and wiggles his ass defiantly at the outraged lady judge, who tells him, 'It's a contest. Where does love fit in? Go to the movies to see love!'

While all the films share an elaborately textured style, they also imply that style must express the politics of society and emotion in order to transcend an empty formalism. In *Revolution*, this point is made explicitly.

When his friend Agostino is in the grips of suicidal despair, Fabrizio urges him to see *Red River*, as if a good movie were all he needed. Later, when he is suffering as a result of Gina's infidelity, Fabrizio goes to see Godard's *Une Femme est une Femme*, and encounters a film buff who insists that Nicholas Ray's 360 degree pan is a 'moral fact', and that it is 'impossible to live without Rossellini'. The weakness that results from Fabrizio's bloodless idealism is contrasted with the boldness of Bertolucci's own style.

Only 23 when he made this film, Bertolucci was able to integrate influences from Rossellini, Antonioni, and especially Godard, into a personal style marked by experimentation. Sometimes the results are gimmicky, as in the shift to colour in the *camera obscura* sequence, and the looped embrace between Fabrizio and Gina. But usually the innovations are effective vehicles for important ideas and feelings. In the lyric sequence at the riverside, the sweeping camera movement, greyed tones and romantic music powerfully express the sadness and beauty of Puck's feelings, which Fabrizio so callously discounts. The brilliant opera sequence, juxtaposed with the workers' parade, begins in a kind of satiric *cinéma vérité* with the arrival of the socialites. Inside the auditorium, the characters are seated according to social class. The music starts to build, preparing us for the powerful emotions soon to be experienced. When Gina's eyes meet Fabrizio's, the camera suddenly zooms back and pans round the opera house, dizzying us with the impact of her feelings. The opera house is also the location for the assassination and its re-enactment in *Spider's Stratagem*. But in the surrealistic scene where the townspeople sit in the square listening raptly to the opera being piped out to them, the aesthetic passion of these art lovers contrasts ironically with the cowardice and treachery that marked their behaviour under Mussolini.

In *The Conformist* the dazzling compositions and visual effects seem to comment on the concern for surface beauty; which parallels Marcello's desire for the appearance of normalcy. Thus Bertolucci uses empty visuals in order to mock empty visuals, ironically making them meaningful after all. In many scenes, the drama is played out against a background that is fascinating to watch, but which has little inherent relationship to what is going on. When Marcello gives Manganiello information for planning Quadri's assassination, they are standing in the busy kitchen of a Chinese restaurant. And if that weren't enough to distract our attention, a bright light swings back and forth on the left side of the screen. In the sequence where Julia and Marcello make love, the landscapes flash by, tinted blue and gold like a romantic backdrop; dreamlike, the reflected images are superimposed on their bodies. But ironically, all this romance decorates a vicarious eroticism that results from Julia telling how she was seduced by the fat lawyer Perpuzzio; further, Marcello does not love her, but has chosen her coldly, to enhance



60. *The Conformist*: self-mocking visuals

his apparent normality. Perhaps most bitterly ironic is the contrast between the bloody assassination and the romantic, hazy, snow-covered landscape in which it takes place. The film abounds with these self-mocking, dazzling visuals.

Although *Last Tango* also has a highly controlled visual surface and many of the same images as *The Conformist*—the elevated train, the frosted glass, the Hotel d'Orsay, the façades of Paris buildings, and images flashing through the windows of a moving train—the style is less self-consciously dazzling. The visuals enhance the romantic tone surrounding Jeanne and Paul rather than deflate or distract from its emotional impact. The stylistic parody is located primarily in the character of Tom the film-maker, played by Jean-Pierre Léaud, the actor used by Truffaut for autobiographical roles and by Godard in *La Chinoise* for the pseudo-revolutionary leader of the Rosa Luxemburg theatrical cell, who act out their political fantasies within the confines of an apartment. (Tom tells Jeanne he wants to name their daughter Rose for Rosa Luxemburg.)

Linked to the film buff in *Before the Revolution*, Tom is constantly translating real life into aesthetic principle. In contrast to the Brando character, Tom is aroused to passion and violence only when Jeanne threatens to withdraw from his movie. Pretending to himself that he is doing *cinéma vérité*, he actually needs to stage and control every movement and speech. He cannot conduct his romance without the help of film allusions. When he proposes to Jeanne, a life preserver marked



*L'Atalante* (the name of the Vigo film in which marriage is seen as a trap) is knocked into the water, and promptly sinks. As she models her wedding gown, he rhapsodises as he dances into the rain: 'You're better than Rita Hayworth and Kim Novak . . . than Ava Gardner when she loved Mickey Rooney.' Meanwhile, he has failed to notice that Jeanne has disappeared. As part of Paul's playfulness, he also alludes to movies. When Jeanne is about to reject him, he quips, 'Quo vadis, baby,' and later does a Cagney imitation. In their final encounter, he echoes the cliché line, 'It's the title shot, baby, we're going all the way.' Unlike Tom, who gets so caught up in the films that he loses touch with what is going on around him, Paul always transforms the allusion to a personal statement that expresses the dynamics of the specific context.

At worst, Tom offers a modern counterpart to the grotesque tango—a denial of love and spontaneity in the service of a sterile and ritualised art. At best, he offers a possibility for Jeanne that focuses on herself. Though he manipulates her into remembering her past, he gives her the gift of genuine recollections from her childhood. He rejects the apartment because it is too old and sad, the same reasons she uses in rejecting the tango ballroom. He wants to become adult, but in a creative way, saying that they must 'invent gestures and words'. He mocks his own inadequacies by defining adulthood: 'Adults are serious, logical, circumspect, hairy; they face problems,' and by admitting that his film has failed to fulfil his vision. Though his own pompous style and limitations make him ridiculous in comparison to Paul, Tom has not systematically denied the identity and needs of Jeanne as a whole human being. Yet in the *Métro* fight she accuses him of the very same things of which Paul is eminently guilty: 'You make me do things I've never done, you take advantage of me, you steal my time, you make me do what you want, I'm tired of having my mind raped, the film is over.'

Bertolucci develops this contrast early in the film. After Jeanne has totally abandoned herself to Paul at their first encounter, she runs to meet Tom at the station. Outraged at the presence of the film crew and his announcement that he is shooting a film for TV, she snaps: 'You should have asked my permission.' Jeanne is able to deny Tom's control because it is concerned largely with his art. But with Paul, her whole being is tyrannised in a way that activates her deepest fantasies. Thus the pop battle in the subway provides a kind of comic rehearsal for the deadly earnest showdown in the apartment.

Despite its close similarities to the other films, *Last Tango in Paris* is a unique artefact—significant in its aesthetic innovation, and almost overwhelming in its emotional intensity. Perhaps the most important reason for this heightened power is the conception and development of the Brando character. Whereas the other films centred on the young men who had to choose between the romantic and the conventional, this film

focuses on the exotic, dangerous lover (this time a man). In *Last Tango*, the opening shot confronts us with Brando at the moment of peak intensity, reeling with despair after the bloody suicide of his wife. Drawn to him like a magnet, the camera zooms in for a tight close-up of his face. This strange, intense figure also arouses the curiosity of the young girl passing by. Thus the opening shots establish that in this film Bertolucci will explore the extraordinary pull inherent in the romantic fantasy, far stronger in Paul than in Gina or Anna.

The power of the dream embodied in Brando results partly from the depth of experience and passion in both the character and the performance, giving Paul the symbolic resonance of an archetypal figure. Paul is old. His forty-five years have brought him full measure of suffering and humiliation; his hair is thinning and his waistline growing thick. Jeanne is young and naive; in the opening scene, she telephones her mother to report that she is about to rent her first apartment. When she tries to get the key, the black concierge warns her: 'The key has disappeared. Many strange things happen . . . I'm afraid of the rats.' Laughing wickedly, she says: 'You're very young, right?' Like a prophet, the black woman knows the truth, but tells it with a touch of madness. Jeanne hears the madness, but denies the truth.

The age difference is mirrored in the choice of players. Brando is the veteran actor in the middle of a comeback; Maria Schneider is making her film debut and holding her own. Within the film, the great difference in their experience is expressed in two recollections of childhood. Though Jeanne is charmed by her early essay on cows, it is merely a dictionary exercise, like those concerning 'menstruation' and 'penis'. Paul recounts the time his father forced him to milk the cows before taking a girl to a basketball game; in the car, he suffers from exquisite humiliation when he finds that his shoes smell from cowshit.

Jeanne, like Tom, has grown up in the conventional, fairly rigid class structure of French society. Their superficial rebellion is modelled after American pop culture. But Paul goes back to an earlier American tradition of rebellious individualism. Like Ahab, he has travelled the world, pursuing his vision in the face of repeated defeat and disaster. This pattern of dangerous self-fulfilment is loved by Americans even in cartoons, where creatures are dismembered or exploded, only to get right up and begin again. Perhaps this is the American comic vision of Sisyphus; since we must continue struggling, we might as well glorify the effort. In the bathtub scene, when Jeanne tells Paul that she has fallen in love, he makes a speech that is at the centre of this vision.

PAUL: Is this man going to love you, build a fortress to protect you so you don't ever have to be afraid, lonely, or empty? Well, you'll never make it. . . . It won't be long before he wants *you* to make a

fortress of your tits and your smile and the way you smell till he feels secure enough and can worship in front of the altar of his own prick. You're alone, you're all alone, and you won't be free of that feeling until you look death in the face . . . you have to go up the ass-hole of death, into the womb of fear. You won't be able to find him until you do that.

JEANNE: But I've found him—it's you. You're that man.

PAUL: Get me the scissors . . . I want you to put your fingers up my ass.

Although Paul begins by cynically denying love, he ends up affirming that it is possible—but only if one goes to the extremes of experience. Jeanne is understandably frightened by this vision, but at the same time she is drawn into the fantasy of total commitment. Through this ritual act, Paul engages Jeanne in his pursuit, as Ahab initiated his crew (the very passage read by Cesare in *Revolution*). Paul becomes her Moby Dick, but she is finally able to destroy her demon and escape from his power, allying herself to Tom, the Ishmael figure who records the story but can't get it all told.

Paul is a protean hero who undergoes many transformations on his quest. Originally Bertolucci sought Jean-Louis Trintignant for the role; though he is a fine actor, he could not have brought the richness of implication evolving out of Brando's past performances. We learn that Paul has been a boxer, like Brando in *On the Waterfront* where he laments: 'I could've been a contender'; in *Last Tango*, even though he loses, he makes it to the 'title shot'. Paul has also been a revolutionary in South America, evoking Brando's role as Zapata; Paul then went to an island in the Pacific and later was a journalist in Japan, reminding us of Brando's adventures in making *Mutiny on the Bounty*, and his roles in *Teahouse of the August Moon* and *Sayonara*. Paul has also been a bongo player and actor, linking him with Brando's personal life. Finally, Paul went to France where he married a Frenchwoman and lived on her money, the fictional situation unique to this film.

At the last Academy Awards, in a brief homage to the movie hero, the film clips moved from Valentino, the master of the tango, to Brando as Stanley (in *A Streetcar Named Desire*) and as Zapata, combining the heroic forces of sexuality and rebelliousness which are central to his role in *Last Tango*. Ironically, Brando was offered the Oscar for his portrayal of corrupt power in *The Godfather*. Perhaps his refusal was 'cutting through the bullshit' in the spirit of the hero he has come to represent in some of his finest performances—*The Wild One*, *On the Waterfront*, *Viva Zapata!*, *Streetcar*, *One-Eyed Jacks* and *Last Tango*. In this way, then, Paul's character and Brando's performance epitomise the American dream of romantic heroism developed through the history of our cinema, and reiterated in Brando's own career.



Bertolucci strengthens the elemental appeal of the Brando character through the style of the film. In contrast to the earlier movies, *Last Tango* is developed through a relatively simple linear narrative, alternating between scenes of Paul and Jeanne in their secret space and shots of their lives in the complex city outside. An element of circularity helps to intensify the experience. Between Jeanne's discovery that Paul has abandoned the apartment and the tango sequence, many scenes from the opening encounter are repeated, but in reversed order: Jeanne alone in the room, her encounter with the black concierge, Jeanne walking outside the building, Jeanne phoning Tom from the booth where she earlier called her mother, her meeting in the room with Tom (whom she tries to substitute for Paul) and her reunion with Paul under the bridge where they first met. In the apartment, Tom tells her that his film is finished. 'I don't like things to finish. You should start something else right away.' In the next scene on the bridge when she tells Paul their relationship is over, he insists: 'It's over and then it begins again.'

This circular view of experience, in which new relationships merely repeat earlier encounters, is reinforced when we learn that Jeanne's first love was also named Paul, when Paul calls her Rose as she flees from the ballroom, and when Tom suggests to Jeanne that they name their daughter Rose. Perhaps Jeanne fears that Rosa's fate prophesies her own future: both women are trying to escape the stifling influence of a bourgeois mother; both are drawn into intense sexuality with strangers in the confines of a secret room; both are loved by two men; both help to destroy Paul who loves them. In the brilliant scene where Paul visits Marcel, his wife's lover, he discovers that Rosa had bought them the same bathrobes, and realises that she was trying to recreate another version of their relationship.

The fast movement and richly textured surface of the earlier films give way to other visual values. Nearly half of *Last Tango* takes place in the almost empty space of the apartment, which heightens the significance and intensity of what we are allowed to see. Within the apartment, the screen is filled with enormous close-ups of Jeanne and Paul, often bathed in golden light. Like the Francis Bacon paintings in the titles, the characters frequently appear alone in the empty space.

While Brando recounts the painful memories of his childhood, the camera remains fixed on an enormous close-up of his face, relying entirely on the emotional play of his features. Nothing changes except the light values as Jeanne moves between him and the window; the static camera affirms his humanity as a rich source of visual value. In one of the scenes where their playfulness and intimacy are most appealing, the camera cuts to an extreme close-up of their heads and shoulders as they embrace and look at each other tenderly. When Paul says, 'Now let's just look at each other,' the camera obeys, gradually drawing back to reveal their naked



61. *Last Tango in Paris*: Marlon Brando

bodies, entwined as they face each other. When Paul carries Jeanne through the apartment in her rain-soaked wedding dress, the shadows of the rain on the walls create subtle, flickering changes in the light. The light continues to shimmer as it reflects off the water in the bathtub scene a few minutes later. This soft, glowing light enhances the romantic quality of their relationship, but contrasts ironically with the ugly, bitter realities that he forces her to face throughout this sequence.

Outside the apartment, the camera is equally capable of conveying emotional intensity. In the first encounter between Paul and his mother-in-law, the subtle camerawork reveals the fluid movement between extremes of hostile distance and emotional sympathy. The sequence opens with the image of a pile of sheets, then cuts to unidentified hands rummaging through shelves filled with objects and then to a huge silhouette of Brando's profile. When the two figures are finally seen in the same frame, they are separated by a wide space. The camera moves in for a tighter shot of the empty space, eliminating both figures and focusing on the 'Privé' sign on the door. The woman is first to enter the frame; then Brando steps into the image and embraces her. After this contact, we see a close-up of his fingers tapping on the table, then a huge close-up of his face, revealing that he has withdrawn once more into

emotional distance; the next cut reveals the woman alone in the frame. Before any dialogue can identify this woman as his dead wife's mother, searching for a clue to the suicide, the emotional dynamics have already been expressed through the visuals.

The camera's handling of space to reveal states of being is also effective in the extraordinary scene between Brando and his wife's corpse. It opens with Paul entering the darkened room; while we can just see flowers on the left side of the screen, the camera stays on the right, concealing the room's other occupant. As he spurts out his anger ('You look ridiculous in that make-up, like a caricature of a whore!') the camera begins to move to the left, revealing more of the flowers, hinting at the bed's occupant. Only as his anger changes to grief does the camera arrive at the face of Rosa. Unlike those of the earlier films, these subtle camera techniques do not call attention to themselves, heightening our emotional response without creating an aesthetic distance that would be inappropriate in the scenes involving Paul.

Outside the apartment, cars, people and trains rush by, from all directions and at many levels; lighting is naturalistic or harsh, emphasising the fantasy quality of the interior scenes. Moving trains are always associated with extreme action and danger. In the opening scene Brando's despairing scream merges into the sound of the train passing overhead. After their first frantic sexual encounter Paul and Jeanne return to the street like strangers, going their separate ways, as the train again passes over them. Later, when Paul buggers her and makes her repeat an obscene litany, her cries merge with the sound of a train, as the camera cuts outside briefly to the rushing elevated (the only time in the film that the outside world intrudes into their secret room). In the Métro, through the windows of the passing subway cars, we see Tom and Jeanne fighting, just as in the final desperate chase we see, through the windows of passing automobiles, Paul pursuing Jeanne. The chase takes on symbolic dimensions as we are reminded of the opening shots of *Before the Revolution*, where Fabrizio is running madly through the streets of Parma to see a woman.

The camerawork and situation also evoke films from the French New Wave, especially the last scene of *Breathless*, where Belmondo is betrayed by the woman he loves (an American) and is gunned down as he runs through the Paris streets. This fast-paced style is close to that used by Tom's film crew. Bertolucci parodies their efforts to capture exuberance and spontaneity as a crewman spins around wildly, trying to point the camera at Jeanne's old nurse, who has just made an inconsequential remark; instead, his camera lights on a beribboned portrait of de Gaulle. In the tango sequence, the fast cutting also creates a sense of mockery by emphasising the mechanical movements of the dancers.

Certain recurring images unite the worlds within and outside the



apartment. Throughout the film, doors are opening into new experience or slamming shut in anger. Bertolucci is fascinated by frosted glass, which he uses to soften and romanticise, to distort, and to separate characters and settings. At key moments Jeanne must ride in a cage-like elevator. When she first looks at the apartment, the mood is ominous and the elevator gothic as it ascends out of camera range. When she tells her mother she is going to marry Tom, she mischievously escapes in the elevator as her mother and the camera look down with curiosity. After fleeing from Tom, Jeanne hides behind the elevator to wait for Paul, who tap-dances his way into the cage. In the final scene the desperate chase ends with the dizzying movements of a hand-held camera tracking Paul as he runs up the spiral staircase after Jeanne, who is fleeing from him in the elevator. The great variety of angles and tones makes it difficult to identify which is the real trap—the marriage with Tom or the love affair with Paul. This ambiguity is also visually expressed in the recurring image of the mysterious draped form in the smaller room of the apartment. After Paul has moved out, Jeanne vents her anger by pulling off the drape, discovering that what lies beneath is only a pile of junk.

The music also has a unifying function. Unlike the earlier films, which combined jazz, pop, classical and opera, *Last Tango* relies primarily on jazz saxophone music, composed and played by Gato Barbieri. The jazz is identified with Paul's values. Like the black concierge, the musicians are in touch with the kind of intense pain and suffering that Paul has experienced. An amateur at bongos and harmonica, Paul gets along with the musicians who stay in his hotel, but his bourgeois mother-in-law is threatened by their music and wants to make it stop. Like the close-ups and the film's simple structure, the unified music allows for an intense exploration within a very specific area of experience. When a shift in the music does occur, the contrast is all the more emphatic; as in the tango sequence, which presents a world from another era.

Another source of the film's intensity is the extraordinary handling of sex and death. Inside the room, sex is not merely the repetition of well-known steps (like the tango), but a genuine exploration, probing into every secret corner of mind and body. But at another level, the sex is not free, at least for Jeanne, because Paul is always in control. Though she has the power to come to the room when she chooses, once there, she seems always ready for sex; but it is Paul who dictates when and how. As their game confirms, she's Little Red Riding Hood and he's the Big Bad Wolf waiting to gobble her up. He orders her about: 'Get the butter,' 'Get the scissors,' and finally: 'I'm going to have a pig fuck you and vomit in your face, and you're going to swallow the vomit. Are you going to do that for me?' She submits adoringly: 'Yes, and more than that.'

He's the one who lays down the rules; then he wants to change them. When they first meet in the apartment and the phone rings, she asks: 'Do I

answer it or not?', establishing that she expects him to take over. This sado-masochistic sexuality reflects a dominant pattern in male-female relationships throughout the culture. The film explores a woman's attempt to escape it when her own pull toward it is very strong. Even though he can't relinquish his aggressive dominance, Paul tries to transcend the machismo of his 'whorefucker, barfighter, super-masculine' father and combine sex with love. Sex has been a survival technique for Paul (as it was with Gina), combating his despair and death wish; but it moves him towards a fuller commitment.

*Last Tango* is as much about death as about sex, linking these two forces at the centre of human behaviour. In *Revolution*, Gina, like Jeanne, has lost her father; Agostino's suicide is parallel to Rosa's, but death was never central in the earlier film. In *Spider's Stratagem*, the main question is whether the father's death was suicide or murder. Suicide is also an ambiguous possibility for Anna in *The Conformist*, who decides to travel with her husband, and for Paul, who promises his wife's corpse that he, too, can find a way to death. In *The Conformist*, Marcello, like Jeanne, strikes a pose with a gun. These playful killers mock our naive image of the gun, learned from movie gangsters, cowboys and aristocratic duellists. In both films, death is dealt by someone who has sought identity from the outside, who does not have an autonomous centre. But in *Last Tango*, Paul is offering the vision that in order to live and love, one must look directly into the face of death.

When the movie's over, two questions haunt us. Why does he try to move their love outside the room? And, why does she shoot him? Paul's offer of love can be seen in a variety of ways. He is a sadistic chauvinist who wants to extend his control over her in order to possess her entirely. He is a crazy masochist with a record of humiliations who wants to fail again. In pursuing her for the first time, he actually gives up control, perhaps in search of a way to die. He is a romantic dreamer who has bought the fantasy of ecstatic oneness, despite all the evidence of his past experience and acknowledgment to Rosa's corpse that: 'Even if a husband lives two hundred fucking years, he's never going to understand his wife's nature.' He is a courageous idealist, always willing to try again, no matter how many times he's failed, because love is the only thing that makes life meaningful. He is willing to take any risk, because it's the only way of growing. Each identity is true; each is partial. But his vision of love must be lived out with a woman like Jeanne, whose limitations preclude the success of the brave dream.

The final question remains: why does she shoot him? In courageous self-defence, or cowardly evasion? As Jeanne well knows, Paul's preoccupation has been with himself. After the intimate scene in which they trade memories of their childhood, he turns away from her to play distractedly with his harmonica. She accuses him: 'Why don't you listen

to me? You know it's like talking to the wall. Your solitude weighs on me. Your silence isn't indulgent or generous. You're an egoist . . . I can be by myself too, you know.' While he withdraws further into his private grief, Jeanne lies face down on the mattress and masturbates, then crouches, rocking like a child. Just a few moments before, she had romantically described her childhood experience with her cousin Paul, when the two of them masturbated together; but now this defiant attempt to retain her autonomy is sad and lonely. She also hates her helplessness in the face of his control. When Paul abandons the apartment, she grieves at the loss, but is angry because he has the power to end things and she does not. Earlier, when she came to him in her wedding dress, she humbly confessed: 'Forgive me. I wanted to leave you, and I couldn't. Do you still want me?' Finally, her intuition tells her that Paul is a woman-hater. She's righter than she knows, because his interactions with his mother-in-law, the hotel maid and the prostitute, as well as the fact of his wife's suicide, lend supporting evidence. Because her fantasies are not bound up with Tom's, she can resist his foolish attempts at control. But with Paul, like a trapped animal, she must kill her way out for survival and autonomy.



62. 'I don't know who he is': Maria Schneider in *Last Tango in Paris*



Her final act can also be seen as fear of risk-taking and involvement, a cowardice that Paul has recognised all along. When he first dictates the rules for their meetings in the room, he asks, 'Are you scared?' and she lies: 'No.' Later he tells her: 'You're always afraid.' When she describes the man she loves, she stresses his mystery and potency, but once outside the room, Paul becomes a vulnerable middle-aged man with a broken-down hotel, instead of a glamorous American sitting on the floor in the middle of a fantasy. She is afraid of the pain and humiliation that have brought him to this point; she's too young to take it on. So, she rejects him, despite her promises to endure anything for his sake. When she sees the reality that he is now presenting, she no longer knows him. Thus, in the end, as she stands bewildered, gun in hand, rehearsing her explanation for the police, the strange phrases that she utters are both true and false: 'I don't know who he is. He followed me on the street. He tried to rape me . . . He's a madman . . . I don't know his name. I don't know . . . I don't know who he is.'

All these interpretations of the final acts have validity in the work of art, combining forces that generate its richness and emotional intensity. But as the film's dark vision implies, they are not equally fruitful in life. Trapped in the conventions and fantasies of their culture, Tom is ridiculous, Paul is dead, and Jeanne is a killer.