



UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS
Advancing Knowledge, Driving Change

"Every Sexual Relationship Is Condemned": An Interview with Bernardo Bertolucci
Apropos "Last Tango in Paris"

Author(s): Gideon Bachmann and Bernardo Bertolucci

Source: *Film Quarterly*, Spring, 1973, Vol. 26, No. 3 (Spring, 1973), pp. 2-9

Published by: University of California Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1211339>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



University of California Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Film Quarterly*

JSTOR

GIDEON BACHMANN

“Every Sexual Relationship Is Condemned”

AN INTERVIEW WITH BERNARDO BERTOLUCCI APROPOS “LAST TANGO IN PARIS”

“The Italian Communist Party, I feel, ever more faithfully expresses the reality of the proletariat, and thus of Italian culture. I feel it allows space for the intellectual and serves as a link between him and those aspects of existence which he has often avoided.

“But I no longer feel the same need for the political element in my films; not in the same way. Not like we all used to need it: like an element of clear conscience, of programmed engagement . . . ”

Bernardo Bertolucci, 32, director of *The Conformist* and *Last Tango in Paris*, is talking in his Rome apartment. Clearly divided on the shelves that surround him are his main interests: Mayakovsky, Gramsci, Goethe, and Tolstoy along one wall; Hitchcock, Bogdanovich, a complete set of *Les Cahiers du Cinéma* and things that have been written about him a few steps up on a steel shelf. In between, abandoned, perhaps, in mid-script, magazines on interior decoration, mostly French. The objects in the room are all 1900-



Bertolucci
in Rome.
(Photo:
Gideon
Bachmann)

1925; a Goodwin painting from the last auction at Christie's, solid, satisfying colors, Jugendstil without Mucha's flabby pastels. Like his political views, Bertolucci's taste seems decisive; he appears to take from literature, art, and society that which he can employ.

Cosmopolitan origins, a rarity for Italy. His poet father, Attilio from Parma, lover of Proust, Conrad, and Svevo, wrote film criticism and dragged the schoolteacher Zavattini to the cinema until the latter, enflamed, changed the texture of the art by authoring the classics of neo-realism; his mother Ninetta, of Irish-Italian parents and born in Australia where her revolutionary father had sought refuge, wrote a thesis at the University of Bologna about Catullus. English, French, and ideas went flying about his head as far as he can think back; he received the Viareggio poetry prize for a slim volume at the age of 21. The same year he made his first feature film, *La Commare Secca*, scripted by a friend who lived in the same house in Via Giacinto Carini in Rome: Pier Paolo Pasolini, author of *The Ashes of Gramsci*, a book about the man who founded the Italian Communist Party. The circle closes.

Prima della Rivoluzione, his second feature, brought him his first acclaim: Talleyrand supplied the title, Italy's bourgeois revolutionaries, ten years after liberation, the subject. The sweetness of life in Emilia, where Bernardo was born; the poplars with their tops in the mist, the flow of enthusiasm and resignation, the useless parades and the incest of relationships and ideas; his pessimism even then founded in personal experience, mixture of intellect and earthiness, a deep sensuality of concept, sound, and vision. He seemed destined, even then, to become a cult hero.

His next film, *Partner*, form and failure à la Godard, and then psychoanalysis, some documentaries, and a protest film: in close-up, a typewriter, letter by letter, types a script they wouldn't let him shoot. After three years of stagnation and soulsearching, rescue by Jung and Italian TV, which commissioned two fea-

tures: *The Spider's Stratagem* and *The Conformist*.

"Man is self-destructive, and destructive of his partner. In nature, it is usually the female that devours. Genetically, over the centuries, some males have understood her mechanisms, have understood the danger. Some spiders just approach the female, but stay within safe distance. Exciting themselves with her smell, they masturbate, collect their sperm in their mouth and wait to regain their strength after orgasm. Because that is how they get devoured, when they are weak after ejaculation. Later, they inseminate the female with a minimal approach, and thus she cannot attack them in the moment of their weakness."

The end sequence of *Last Tango in Paris* starts with a reversal of the roles from this Borges theme: Maria Schneider, the victorious snip, masturbates Marlon Brando under a table in the dark corner of a dance hall where his drunken prancing has convinced her of the end of their anonymous, sexual tango; weakened, he staggers after her as she escapes, through the streets of Paris with the wasted semen, breathless, up the stairs of her mother's home and into the study of her dead, military father; his strategy failed, he dies foetally from her bullet. The mantis, the while, recites what she will tell the police.

Ten years ago, when I first met Bernardo, his concerns were more directly cinematic, less literary. The camera itself as a subject of a film still seemed a possibility to him, the camera as an instrument of self-comprehension. And he didn't want to interfere with it too much; he was jokingly suggesting a law against montage. Films, he then thought, might well be divided into Pasolini's categories of poetic and prose works; he felt that because his work was primarily personal, it belonged in the first category.

The changes in the man are notable. The few years of inactivity and analysis seem to have left a mark: his eyes shift constantly and his tongue flicks from side to side in his mouth as he talks; his smile in secure moments is ironic, in others

—more frequent—questioning. He continually speaks of his latest film as if he had discovered its meaning now, after it has been shown, in discussing it with friends. “*Mi sono accorto . . .*” “I realized . . . that the couple in my film are not isolated from the world as I had planned for them to be. You cannot escape to an island: even your attempt to do so is part of our social reality. It turns out that my characters are profoundly symptomatic. You can’t hide in a room; reality will come in through the window.”

The discovery of what he was really doing in making *Last Tango in Paris* came to him, Bertolucci says, after he had started shooting:

Originally, I wanted to make a film about a couple, about a relationship between two people. As I began to work and felt the film taking shape, *mi sono accorto . . .* I realized I was making a film about solitude, I think. I believe that this is its most profound content: solitude. It’s the opposite of what I had set out to describe.

I let reality take over, most of the time. I set up a situation, and then make a sort of *cinéma-vérité* about the characters, the real characters I find in front of my camera. In the case of *Tango*, I felt as if I was interviewing Brando and Maria, seen within the narrative context of the film. Thus what results on the screen always represents the fruit of the relationship I develop with the characters, and of the relationship I develop with the things and the spaces I find myself filming. It is through the camera that I begin to understand the things and the people. That is why I am constantly open to learning and absorbing into the film that which the filming itself reveals, even if that should be in contradiction with what I have written into the script.

With Brando and Maria my subconscious relationship was extremely intense, but I think I managed not only to drop most of my defenses, but that I helped them drop theirs as well. I felt, finally, that this first film I was making about the present was being made without any sort of defenses, without excuses, of either a historical, narrative, or even a political nature. It seems to

me now, that in this sense it’s quite a liberated film.

In what way, then, do you consider the two characters as profoundly symptomatic?

The encounter of these two ends up being an encounter of forces pulling in different directions; the kind of encounter of forces which exists at the base of all political clashes. Brando, initially rather mysterious, manages to upset the girl’s bourgeois life-style, at least at the beginning, by force of his mystery and obvious search for authenticity. His way of making love to her is practically didactic. Didactic in the sense that he seeks the roots of human behavior in that moment, the moment after his wife’s suicide, when he has reached a peak and a dead end at the same time. He believes that he must seek absolute authenticity in a relationship, and this, I feel, gives the encounter its political sense.

A political sense, then, that you hadn’t planned?

Absolutely not. In fact, I had been somewhat preoccupied by what seemed to me an absence of political terms in the script. I was beginning to get worried that I was being faithless with myself and was, perhaps, making a mistake. Because in me, too, there existed a certain conventional mental structure that demanded the use of a direct, political statement in every work. I was saying to myself, watch out! You’ll end up making another *Love Story*! But I quickly realized, shooting, that when you show the depths, when you drown yourself, as it were, in that feeling of solitude and death that attaches to a relationship in our Western, bourgeois society, and when you begin to identify the reasons for this feeling of death, you inevitably make a political statement.

Do you consider the search for “didactic,” anonymous sex an antidote for this feeling of death in our society?

In the film, sex is simply a new kind of language that these two characters try to invent in order to communicate. They use the sexual language because the sexual language means liberation from the subconscious, means an opening

up. In no way, on the other hand, do I mean to identify sex with the feeling of death, either. I am not setting up any eros-thanatos theory. I am simply saying that when you describe a relationship thirsting for authenticity, you discover all that surrounds it, all that hampers its expression.

In any case, you link the concepts of sexual expression and personal liberation. Do you feel that self-liberation must be a conscious process?

Self-liberation in the sense I employ the term is a first step towards living better, towards the finding of an equilibrium with your subconscious, towards the finding of a peaceful relationship with your subconscious. These first steps can often be very dramatic, since we tend to suppress our own attempts at making them. We suppress our aggressions and frustrate our souls. Since that which is between Marlon and Maria is a sort of *amour fou* that continually devours itself, I had been afraid it would seem isolated. Instead it became a centrally symptomatic affair for our times.

You don't feel, then, that the individual must necessarily be rationally aware of his search in order to find that equilibrium?

No. One can also become conscious of the meaning of one's actions in a completely irrational manner. In fact, "becoming conscious" seems to me to be too limited a definition for what we are talking about. This does not mean that I reject psychoanalysis or other systems of reaching consciousness, but I feel the system must be different for each one of us. I, for example, walk this road towards self-liberation in a very unorthodox manner. I feel myself becoming conscious, but in an extremely emotional, instinctive fashion.

Does your intuition lead you to an understanding of the feeling of solitude and death in our society beyond our conventional answers found in Marx and Freud?

Both of these are still very important to me in my work. But I refuse to limit my reading of their meanings to the conventional interpretations. But certain references in this direction



have been useful to me in understanding the characters of my film. For example, how an encounter turns into a clash. Or, to quote Maria, how the casual becomes destiny.

I cannot deny a certain educational structure and background, of which Marx and Freud form part, but I try and see them in a political, existential way. In making *Last Tango*, I found that what I had considered points of arrival were in reality points of departure; I mean to say that understanding my characters with the help of conventional psychology or politics gave me only a beginning glimpse of their complicated, personal structures, but it did help me in accepting them as living beings in front of the camera, and in accepting their contributions to the film.

I find that I must live through the relationships that a film creates in a direct way, without logical or rational references. You could say, of course, that the film is a form of dream, that the whole story is an oedipal projection on the part of the girl; after all, she is 19 and Brando 48. And his story could be another oedipal projection—he feels, in a way, that he is as much the son of his wife as he is the father of the girl—but I prefer not to define things in this way. After all, the film is meant to mean different things to different people; the final, personal significance of a work always depends on the viewer.

The viewer, then, for you becomes an essential component of the work?

Absolutely; as essential as the lights, as the

sets, as the man who pushes the camera dolly. Even when an audience is not overwhelmed by a work, in its distance from the work it remains an essential component. But I cannot think about it when I am shooting. After all, every conversation one undertakes—and a film is a conversation—presupposes the presence of a partner. In the case of poetry, my interlocutor is the reader, in the case of the cinema it is the public. I do not like to talk alone, and I do not talk alone. I do not talk for myself, I mean. This, by the way, is how the cinema becomes a way of weighing reality, that is, it becomes an instrument for understanding the world. And I think this is true for both creator and viewer.

In a way, then, you are exploiting the public?

I exploit it by giving myself, but I am also exploited. It's a two-way relationship. By the way, I find more and more that there is no such thing in human congress as innocence and guilt. There is only supply and demand, something offered and something requested, indistinguishably intermingling. And you can't even say that he who offers is innocent and he who demands is guilty, or vice versa. And this applies to personal, sentimental relationships as well: there are never faults. And as far as the public is concerned, the only sure thing I know is that I seem to be seeking an ever larger one.

Have you changed your demands, then, since you were writing poetry?

No, perhaps the offer has changed. I also feel, by the way, that my films, deep down, are quite generous, that I make no excessive demands. Perhaps part of my process of liberation was the acceptance of the fact that I had always wanted to create a *spettacolo*. It took me a long time to accept this idea, although even my first 8mm films, made with my cousins when we were children, told stories, rather than just documenting the death of a pig or the vain search for an abandoned cable car in a forest. But I think that only with *The Conformist* I really accepted the role of author of story films. [*Autore di film - spettacolo*] cannot really be translated; "*spettacolo*" essentially means a demonstration

for a public, a notion situated somewhere between entertainment and spectacle.—GB]

Your difficulty is accepting this idea derived from the fact that you felt your political concerns could not be well expressed in the spectacular form, or because you found it difficult to give up the idea you expressed ten years ago, of the camera itself being the most important subject of your work?

I haven't really given it up. I had arrived at a point of rupture when I made *Partner*, the film in which I most violently went against my own nature of being a showman. Besides the fact that this film caused me a tremendous psychological trauma, because nobody, almost nobody, accepted it. Paradoxically I now find—now, after having finished and discussed it—that *Last Tango* is, of all my films, the one most closely related to *Partner*. Now that I have fully accepted my showman role I find I can return safely to a whole series of questions, obsessions, discussions over the meaning of the camera, of research and of experimentation which in the making of *The Spider's Stratagem* and *The Conformist* I had deftly avoided as if they were the devil. This means that now, with the security I derive from the show element, I can start afresh. That is why I find *Tango* very close to *Partner*, because in *Tango* there is a continual enquiry in filmic terms, a research on the use of the camera, an attempt to question the structures of cinema.

You don't mean in the spoofing sequences, where Jean-Pierre Léaud satirizes Godard?

Certainly not. Jean Pierre is not meant as a serious Godard character, rather as a character à la Jerry Lewis, perhaps. His part is superficial and strictly functional. He could also have been a carpenter. The reflections on the use of the camera are in all the rest. In that sense I don't think I have changed since we discussed all this ten years ago. I still feel I am looking for the very specific light that is typical and expressive of every feeling and of every epoch, and I still seek the very specific way of representing how time passes—that particular, psychological passage of time which gives a film its style. Perhaps

it is a matter of *percorso*, of how a man moves through time, in the historical and in the practical, daily sense. That, in fact, is what holds *Tango* together, as I see it now: Brando's retreat from being a man of 48 back to being an adolescent and finally dying like a foetus. Jean-Pierre, filming his life with Maria, at one point, pushing the camera at her and forcing her to retreat, says: "*Avance en reculant!*" Advance by going backwards. That is exactly the *percorso* of the character of Brando in the film.

At the beginning of the film he is supervirile, desperate but determined in his despair. Look at how he fucks the girl the first time. But slowly he almost loses his virility. At a certain point he makes the girl sodomize him: going backwards, he has arrived at the anal stage. Let's say, the sadico-anal stage. Then he goes back even further and arrives in the womb of Paris, dying with mother Paris all around him, her rooftops, TV-aerials, her grey, grabbing anonymity. Much of this feeling was born during the shooting of the film, although I had planned for him to die like an embryo even when we wrote the script. But now I find that all this comes out very specifically; that there is a clear departure and a clear arrival in death. When we were planning the film, all this was only in my subconscious. My camera research clarified it for me. The irrational becomes lucid.

In your script, I found the words of the scene where he lectures to the girl on the restrictive structures of the bourgeois family, but he does not have anal intercourse with her while he is talking. Why did you add this in the filming?

It seemed clearer to me, if he accompanied the oral lecture with suffering caused to her in a direct way, performing for her, by using her, the double-faced violence he was describing. It is a violence that wants to teach, the violence of the teacher, and on the other hand there is the violence of the family, the destructiveness of the idea of the family. Her drive to be free, when she screams and repeats "Liberty, liberty!" is very real and also double-faced: she wants to be free of what he is talking about but also free

of him. What he is doing to her, thus, is a sort of didactic savagery.

Do you mean to tell me that he uses perversion in the guise of anti-bourgeois teaching?

It's a moment of catharsis. He is conscious, but also divided, in that moment, between his consciousness and the pleasure of perversion. He immerses himself in perversion as personal catharsis, and also, partly, because perversion in that moment serves him as an escape.

Do you mean from impotence? Because he can never, obviously, live according to the principles he is talking about. Throughout the film you show him as a man who defends one principle and lives by another, or by none.

Partially yes, but also as an escape from the pain caused by his wife's suicide. There are many ways of getting over that kind of pain, perversion and sex are obvious ones. Sex is very close to death in feeling.

Certainly the metaphor you are suggesting seems to land the character of Brando in a duality of motivation. Your film, especially in America, where we tend to equate sexuality with liberation as you seem to do, has been hailed as an erotic masterpiece. To me it seems the opposite, and the sequence we are discussing, in its sadness and desperation, proves rather that you use sex as a symbol of the impossibility of relationships.

I didn't make an erotic film, only a film about eroticism. In any case, you can not separate "erotic" behavior from the rest of human action. It is almost always like this, that things are "erotic" only before relationships develop; the strongest erotic moments in a relationship are always at the beginning, since relationships are born from animal instincts. But every sexual relationship is condemned. It is condemned to lose its purity, its animal nature; sex becomes an instrument for saying other things. In the film, Marlon and Maria try to maintain this purity by avoiding psychological and romantic entanglement, by not telling each other who they are, etc., but it proves impossible, since dependencies of various types develop. Brando tries

in vain to defend himself from his innate sentimentality, which is why he goes to such extremes in putting down both himself and her precisely at the moment he discovers that the man she claims to love is he. He already knows, deep down, that he will give up his strong-man act, that he will put on his pointed shoes and his red tie and will, over champagne, tell her who he is and accede to her bourgeois ideals, fearing that they are in reality more his than hers. It is the last dance of his chaotic solitude, his last defense. Asking her to cut her nails and insert her fingers in his anus is like saying: Fuck me, break my virility, destroy it!

Why do you feel every relationship is condemned?

Every relationship is condemned to change, anyway. Perhaps it can improve, but generally it deteriorates. It cannot remain just itself. Thus there is always a sense of loss. It is this sense of loss that makes me use the word "condemned" rather than saying "destined."

So you do not believe at all in the possibility of a romantic relationship?

Well, I am myself being a romantic when I say that first emotions cannot be repeated. But I do not believe that relationships can develop on a romantic level, because . . . well, because there isn't really a reason why they should: history, reality, are all but romantic. And a relationship must feed on reality in order to continue.

So what can develop between a man and a woman on a conscious level?

Not a very cinematographic question . . . What can develop is only possessiveness, which brings about the destruction of the loved object. That is the sadomasochism at the center of the relationship, a constant presence in all relationships. It is a component which in rare cases can be dominated and regulated and can find a channeling which instead of harming the relationship itself finds victims outside, a sort of centripetal instead of centrifugal sadomasochism. When we manage to channel and express our aggression outside of the relationship, the

relationship can be saved. But most of the time it works against ourselves.

What about man's other, less personal relationships? You have changed your emphasis away from social and political themes, at the same time becoming more contemporary. And yet you defend a single political party.

In a way, I feel an even stronger political obligation now. But I think more clearly. I feel that my political engagement is more mature, less linked to personal neurosis. I feel my presence is a historical continuity, in a cultural involvement. A modest presence, of course, but I perceive it in a more liberated way, probably because I am also less frustrated. At one time I could not distinguish between that which was rational and profoundly necessary, and that which, on the other hand, was more of an alibi, that is, linked to neurotic structures and the search for a clean conscience. In a way, I think, all of us European intellectuals have lived in this distorted political dimension for the past few years.

Do you feel there has been a lack of political clarity? We do not seem to have been able to give the most recent generations any background by which to judge their current political moment. They seem more rootless than we were.

This problem interests me greatly. The film I want to make next is, in fact, concerned with the rediscovery of roots. The film will be called *1900 (Novecento)* and tells the story of two children born in that year at a distance of a few hundred yards from each other, one in the house of the peasant and one in the house of the landowner, in Emilia. The film follows their lives through the century, living moments of Italian history with them. Friends at first, then enemies, with the rich one financing the first fascist clashes and the poor one in the Communist Party, navigating through the whole period of fascism in Italy. I want this to become a film about the agony of the culture of the land, of peasant culture, of a civilization that lasted thousands of years and has practically died in only 50-70 years of industrial "progress." It is a film I want to dedicate to the young generations; I want to carry them back to the rediscovery of their real

roots which are those of the peasant world. I want to carry the camera into the cornfields, into the furrows of earth during irrigation, into the ground itself; and in a less physical sense bring them to rediscover certain popular values which we, for imperialistic reasons, have completely throttled. It's for those who today are 25 or younger—that means for all those who know this kind of world only from literature (and that, too, is a privilege, after all), for all those of the great mass who know nothing at all about these values, who are perfectly ignorant of their own roots, which must still be there

somewhere—I just don't believe that a few decades can cancel out generations of genetic memory; in our nucleic acid there must be a memory of the values of the land. At least a sediment! Nobody has ever posed this problem.

Do you feel more clarity now, at least in being able to provide some guidance to this generation you are describing?

No, no. I have no clear lessons to impart. Personally, I do not see clearly, neither the problems nor the perspective. But I feel that within the party one is now given space to develop, perhaps, a clearer view.

JOAN MELLEN

Sexual Politics and *Last Tango in Paris*

Last Tango in Paris seems as if it is about sex, an inquiry into whether violent, "real" sex (the kind that makes Maria Schneider's hair curl by the middle of the film) is possible in a world of false values. The real significance of the film has been obscured and contained by the irrelevant furor over its purportedly explicit sex. What is particularly striking about the film, once we get over the sight of Marlon Brando performing anal sex, albeit with his clothes on, is that it is, in disguise, the most political of Bertolucci's films so far—his most ambitious attempt to integrate Marx and Freud. The means this time are not those of the superficial of external political behavior, as in *The Conformist*, but a startling visualization of the conflict between sexual freedom (conceived in *Last Tango* as license) and the psychological repression of which we are all victims.

The premise from which *Last Tango* begins, and which none of the American critics have

