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"The Better To See. . .": Improbable Vision In *Last Tango in Paris*

Alan Barr

With *Last Tango In Paris*, Bernardo Bertolucci hit the jackpot; though why is not exactly clear. When it was first released in 1972, Pauline Kael eulogized it, likening the film's appearance to the premiere of *Le Sacre Du Printemps* and describing it as "the most powerfully erotic movie ever made," one that "altered the face of an art form."¹ Her panegyric became the cornerstone of United Artists' expertly choreographed advertising campaign. Initially, "the event" was a kind of cinematic talk of the town. The film was villified for being pornographic, lauded for its poignance and sophisticated artistry, and enjoyed for the uproar engendered. But the glitter of publicity and derring-do subsided, to be followed by a welter of responses and interpretations. A decade later the film remains a troublesome esthetic experience to integrate and resolve.

Last Tango In Paris is recognized as a major work of film art; viewers continue to find it powerfully and critically challenging. Unlike, however, such other classics of the art as *Citizen Kane*, *La Grande Illusion*, *Rashomon*, or *8½*, it continues to exist in an ether of uncertainty. Attempts to identify its theme have been at best transiently satisfying. For some reviewers it is a film about sexual control, for others it portrays the interconnectedness of love and death, for still others the constrictedness of bourgeois family life, or the fatal inescapability of the original Oedipal situation. Interpretations of individual events, characters, motivations, and relationships vary and even conflict. The significance of Jeanne's shooting of Paul at the end continues to be debated--as does the position of Paul's dead wife, Rose. Is the film sexist? Is it revolutionary--or even political? What

is the relationship between Bertolucci and his film, between Bertolucci and Brando? Finally, even the reception of the performances manifests this same kind of near-chaos. If for one viewer Brando's performance is the crowning point in an exceptional career, while Maria Schneider is the left-behind ingenue, then almost assuredly the next review will praise her freshness, conviction and talent, while lamenting the decline of the anyway-over-rated motorcyclist.

Bertolucci is dealing with profoundly disturbing subjects (our sexualities, the boundaries between people, contradictory desires and allegiances, and our tangled conceptions of ourselves) and he is addressing them reasonably unflinchingly. This inevitably compounds the difficulty of achieving a firm and settled view of the film. But a still more important problem in resolving *Last Tango*, I would like to suggest, is the primary concern of the film itself.

From Plato through Hume and the British empiricists, epistemological philosophy has long wrestled with the fallibilities of our senses, the limiting subjectivity of our perceptions. How can we claim to know the nature and reality of the world around us if we are like men undeviatingly pointed toward the inside of a shadow-lit cave? Literary and dramatic art has evolved its major theme from this philosophical insight: our human inability to distinguish between appearance or illusion and fact or reality. Bertolucci's thematic roots are in these traditions and with these concerns. He is struck by the unsureness of our perceptions, particularly by the very narrow capacity we have to know--ourselves and each other as well as the objects around us. The principal, unifying vision of *Last Tango In Paris*, the theme that subsumes all the others, is that we live in a world of people (including ourselves), events, things, and experiences that we can grope to comprehend, but that inevitably elude us and remain ambiguous and ill-defined. Every significant component of the film--the sex, the discussions about names and identity, the apartment and the way we see it, the mirrors and the motif of the double, the contention between civilization and savagery, the concern with creating a film (fiction), the split screens, tilt shots, and lighting, the allusions to Vigo and to "Little Red Riding Hood," the animals and animality, and the tango dance itself--all, as I shall endeavor to show, contribute directly to this theme.

More than most films, the individual parts of *Last Tango* have tended to deflect consideration away from the film as a whole. In an article that remains frustratingly general, "Blue Tango," Leo Braudy very usefully recognizes this oddity, indicates some of the issues that were debated soon after the film's release, and suggests, I think, a more effective approach to it:

It is paradoxical that *Last Tango in Paris* should have had all this attention directed at its parts: are its sexy scenes sexy? are Brando's monologues heartfelt or phoney? is the scene beside his wife's coffin the best or the worst in the film? was it a mistake to show her face or a masterful stroke? Paradoxical because the real

subject of *Last Tango* is the elusiveness of objects, images, and characters, the difficulty of making emotional connections, the elements of fraudulence and theatricality in everyone's attempt to create his identity for himself and the world.²

The first part of *Tango* to draw attention was its explicit treatment of sex. But as people, including Bertolucci himself, quickly began to comment, it is not really about sex; "sex becomes an instrument for saying other things."³ If Bertolucci is really displaying from beginning to end the ambiguity of experience, or, as Braudy phrases it, "the elusiveness of objects, images, and characters," the way he integrates the sexual content of the film certainly contributes. From the first sexual encounter between Paul and Jeanne, where he literally "takes her," clothing and bedlessness be damned (audibly ripping off the panties that the previous bathroom shot indicated she was *not* wearing) we are made to wonder if this is serious and if so, how much and how so.

Very quickly the significance of the sex moves beyond the immediate problem of how we perceive recorded events to the questions of personality and of how we deal with one another. *Last Tango* is obviously concerned with the nature of relationships and with the question of personal identity. Relationships are ostensibly determined by love, which in turn is manifested sexually. Sex, then, can be a clear way of expressing love, closeness, commitment, and communion with another person. But it can also be a very effective evasion of them all. The borderline between sex (or love) that is appropriately expecting or tyrannically demanding, passionate or wantonly sadistic, trustingly giving or masochistic, is often blurred and vague. Deciding exactly how to read what transpires between Paul and Jeanne--its implications and tone--is problematical because Bertolucci is reflecting the difficulties of making such determinations in our common experiences.

Similarly, a concern with the issue of personal identity quickly brings us to the shoals of our eroticism. To what extent are we genuinely erotic and "savage," or, rather, successfully "civilized" and bourgeois? Savagery versus civilization is a recurring motif in the film--Jeanne's father who "civilized" the Algerians, the maid's racist reaction to the defecating children in the yard, Paul's overt disregard for the usual amenities --and there is no more pertinent avenue into such a debate than our sexual behavior; the same overt act, coitus, can be either uninhibited, lusty, and passionate or pallidly decorous and genteel, and who can always reliably distinguish, including, sometimes, the participants. To understand the nature, intentions, and meaning of our sexual behavior is no less a task ultimately than the understanding of our basic motivations, drives, and attitudes.

Central to a comprehension of human nature or identity is the question of free will. Do we, as individuals choose our actions freely? Is our personal identity reflected, then, in the choices we make? That Jeanne continues to return to the apartment implies that she is willing

to be with Paul and that she is sexually consenting. At least the immediate suggestion is that she freely decides to be there and to participate. But the events and responses that occur once there, the ambivalence expressed, and the uncertain or wavering tone make things less clear. If part of Jeanne's (or anyone's) personal identity is reflected in her sexual behavior, attitudes, and decisions, and — more particularly — if her capacity to demonstrate her free will is reflected in her sexual choosings, then we are left with a very unresolved conception of her. Nor, for that matter, does any clear conception of Paul's sexual character emerge. The film does not allow us to decide if Jeanne is there willingly, helplessly masochistically, ultimately sadistically, or for a combination of reasons. Paul's action can likewise be interpreted as honestly probing and pushing, loving, self-indulgently sadistic, unconsciously suicidal, or a vacillating mixture of all of these. The sexual interactions of *Last Tango* are part of the film's exploration of the puzzle of self or identity, and, like the other dimensions of the film, resist any clear and fixed perception — of whether we are sexually honest, committed, healthy, whether we are aware and conscious, or whether we freely choose our actions.

Bertolucci's treatment of eroticism, with its impugning of human consciousness and deliberateness, is only one aspect of the confusion surrounding the search for identity. The film creates and sustains an often playful muddle around names. Paul and Jeanne make of the apartment a hamlet away from the inhibitions and demands of the polite social world outside. But it is also an attempt to reject an established, affixed identity and context, and to forge—even if provisionally—a new one. Paul is, of course, adamant (and brutal) that there be no names brought into the apartment. They will know each other by grunts and groans and by their actions. The only reality is to be that which occurs within their retreat; the rest, Paul tries to assert, is, like Jeanne's reverie about her father, “a steaming pile of bullshit.”

Love, at least as it is popularly conceived, depends upon two people's knowing each other. But the deflating irony pursued in the film is the ultimate impossibility of knowing another person. Paul and Jeanne remain anonymous to each other until the final sequence, where he demands her name, she responds, and then shoots him, validating his previous misgiving that to be known or to know someone is fatal.

Naming someone—or something—may represent a very superficial knowledge of that person or thing, but it is the socially customary beginning of a relationship, literally the introduction. Paul, however, makes it clear initially that he will tolerate no such knowing. Perhaps he is anticipating and underscoring the dubiousness of relationships, perhaps he sees names or labels as delusively superficial and is rejecting them in order more earnestly to deal with another human being; either way, there will be “no names” in this hermitage—in the same way that the past and the exterior world are proscribed. Paul's attitude suggests that names are superficial and therefore misleading, categorizing or defining and therefore imprisoning, and misguided to the extent that they encourage both the illusion that it is possible to

know someone and the judgement that such a possibility is even desirable.

Paul's rejection of names (like the disregarding of temporal and spatial contexts) is only part of the way--if the most important--that Bertolucci uses names to elaborate his image of ambiguity. If Paul, within the flat, is rigid in forbidding names, the director is gamey in the way he plays with them across those walls. The film locates us and the available apartment on Rue Jules Verne. Perhaps, as Joan Mellen suggests, "Like the submarine of Captain Nemo, [the apartment] will be an enclosed cocoon shut away from the harsh world, in which the soiled relations of the earth, the past, cannot enter. Like a womb, it is a place where Paul and Jeanne can express their rage and needs as infants."⁴ Perhaps, also, Bertolucci is implying that only in the fantastic world of science fiction can such a "cocoon" exist. When Tom is proposing marriage to Jeanne, they are on a boat called *L'Atalante*. Jeanne is disconcerted by the whirring cameras, wondering whether she and Tom are acting a role or living. But Tom interprets her response as acceptance and excitedly throws a lifesaver overboard. It sinks. Bertolucci's humorous homage to Vigo underscores the fuzziness of the boundaries that exist between fiction-art-film and life. It also ironically compares his story with *L'Atalante*, where the marriage manages to survive a kind of idyllic isolation--even if it does have to regroup after the wife is returned.

At least as playful and probably more pointed is the way Bertolucci bounces or echoes names in the story itself. Jeanne may not know that her co-habitant's name is Paul, but she does slip out the fact that her first love was a cousin called Paul. Tom wants to name the daughter they will have Rosa, ostensibly after Rosa Luxemburg, but unwittingly after Paul's dead wife. Using the same name to refer to more than one character questions our ability clearly to distinguish the identity of individuals or the borders between them. The names that appear on signs or are bandied about convey an unclear, illusory quality. When they are allusions, the relationship between their original reference and their present usage is ironic and uncertain (e. g., when Paul chases the prostitute's customer, he passes a cafe sign, *La Boheme*).

Bertolucci extends this confusion beyond the world of his film characters to include the tension that exists between an actor, who lives in the real world and has played other roles, and the figure he is now portraying. Almost any discussion of a film reflects a problem peculiar to the medium. A character in fiction, in drama, in opera, or in a narrative poem exists within the confines of that novel, play, opera, or poem, and is known by his fictional name. There is, however, in films an uneasy tension between a player and his or her film role. A well-known actor or actress (Chaplin, Bogart, Cagney, Wayne, Hepburn, Dietrich) inevitably plays against his or her previous screen image. Genre critics have long recognized how a familiar genre actor becomes one of the form's icons in, for example, gangster or western films.

Theoretically, in *Last Tango in Paris* it should be Paul we speak of. Because, however, Brando's existence--more accurately, his

renown--so overwhelms Paul's, we characteristically refer to the protagonist as "Brando." Even when scrupulously precise we are very conscious of our awareness of Brando as a person and actor beyond his playing of Paul. Bertolucci emphasizes this situation by taking one of the world's best known film personages and having him weave autobiographical references into Paul's dialogue. As was immediately recognized, the details of Paul's life, as he enumerates them, and the allusions to Brando's own past merge.⁵ So much is Paul's account of his life a fabric woven out of the remnants of Brando's life and legend--and delivered in so convincingly spontaneous a manner, that it has provoked comments attributing control and authorship more to him than to Bertolucci. Concentrating particularly on the figure of Brando in the film, Dotson Rader argues that,

Brando manipulates and exploits his career, his public legend. Brando as iconoclast, with himself as target. The movie is about the death of a stud, and it cannot be understood apart from Brando's life and movie image over the last twenty years. It was Brando laying siege to the image of superbitch, *macho*-tough, the image he had cultivated and enlivened in two decades of work. It was a youthful Brando as cultivated artifact, as symbol, which an older Brando was attacking in *Last Tango in Paris*. That is why I did not believe Bertolucci's claim to sole authorship, why I was convinced that the movie was Brando's invention, his extemporizing. Brando was unraveling a myth in which he had become trapped, like a fly in amber.⁶

Though I think Rader distorts and diminishes the film to see its subject as the death of a stud and though it is questionable whether or not Brando, by incorporating so many details on screen from his own career, is actually extricating himself from its meshes, his emphasis on the convergence of the figures of the actor and the character and of the merging of the roles of actor and author-director usefully highlights this dimension of ambiguity I have been asserting.

Maria Schneider as Jeanne presents an interestingly similar problem for opposite reasons. Although known to French audiences as the illegitimate daughter of Daniel G  lin, she had only played two minor parts--both in 1971--before making *Last Tango In Paris*. Bertolucci chose to cast a virtually unknown player alongside his American star. Maria Schneider does not play against a screen image with which we are familiar. She lives for us solely in her characterization, a characterization which if not exactly that of the ingenue is one of realistic spontaneity--so much so that she is very much "as if met on the street." For both figures, then, the abundantly familiar and freshly new, "it becomes," as Charles Michener remarks, "impossible to tell whether Brando and Schneider are playing 'Paul' and 'Jeanne' or themselves."⁷ Leo Braudy goes a step further in appreciating the

richness of interplay between Brando and his role and the contrast between the effects of what Brando and Schneider bring to the screen.

Brando's role in *Last Tango in Paris* was the first time an actor played against his screen image to comment on it, rather than as a source of comic reference. Through that self-consciousness Bertolucci could contrast the older double character and its self-induced repression with the newer self-delusions of the character played by Maria Schneider, while invoking as well the way stars like Brando have helped shape such images.⁸

Very closely related to the ambiguity created by the blurring of the on-screen and off-screen characters is the film's concern with the theme of fiction (fiction film-making) versus "reality." The film we, as the audience of *Last Tango*, are watching is structurally divided into two parallel sections, stories: worlds. One of these worlds, however, the presumably more socially connected, real or normal one, happens to be preoccupied with the issue and activity of making a film. If the question of whether Brando is playing Brando or Paul is curious and engaging, Tom's desire to film the story of a girl obliterates any firm demarcation between fiction and reality, for Jeanne even more than for the viewer. From the first time Jeanne encounters Tom on screen, at the train station, to his proposal on the boat and the selecting of her wedding vestments, she is constantly struggling against him to be real or actual as distinguished from a character Tom is moulding for a television film. He goes beyond muddling reality with art, subordinating the former to the latter in his dogged preference to see Jeanne as the protagonist of his love story rather than as a person who is alive and trying to deal with him, one who might even marry him. We see Tom retreat from the complexities and confusions of life by buffering it with a "lights, camera, action" stance. He is, as played by Jean-Pierre Leaud, a humorous parody of the early New Wave era defined by Truffaut and Godard, but that parody functions to emphasize the way in which life and art are tangled. His actions suggest he takes very seriously the notion that art is more real than life. He inclines to be on stage rather than spontaneous and vulnerably unprepared. Tom's very public response to the quagmire of fixing on personal (real) identity is the opposite of Paul's, who chooses to turn his back on the outside world, its names and past histories. But Tom, though less consciously than Paul, is also reacting to the precariously ambiguous nature of his world. Paul escapes it by retreating; Tom evades it by constantly interposing a movie camera. Even when not actually filming, he conceives of life in terms of art. He contains it by framing it. When he and Jeanne are shouting at each other across a metro station, Tom makes a film frame out of his fingers, through which to see her—an image facetiously repeated a moment later by the frame-like windows

of the passing train. If Paul has difficulty separating his life in the apartment from the world outside of it, Tom, one feels, is unable to distinguish between real life and the filmed reproduction of it.

Still further blurring occurs because of the film's deliberate inclusion of multiple doubles, mirrors, and echoes. Bertolucci's interest in doubles is obvious and precedes *Last Tango*. In *Partner* (1968), which freely adapts Dostoevsky's novel, *The Double*, the doubling of or split in Jacob indicates the schizoid battleground within him, the fragmentation of his identity, the difficulty of being whole. *Partner* anticipates *Last Tango in Paris* in its division of the world into inside (withdrawn, within Jacob) and outside (connected, political). In *The Spider's Stratagem* (1970), the theme of the double is similarly explicit. Athos periodically suspects he is more his dead father than himself — especially after hearing often enough from the townspeople of their identicalness. Visually, of course, the father and son are the same. *The Spider's Stratagem* anticipates *Last Tango's* attitude that experience and identity are ambiguous. The mysteries of the town and the ultimate nature of Athos Magnani — hero or traitor, and why — persist unfathomed.

Doubles, twins, and parings have existed as exciting figures in art since the days of Plato and Plautus, engaging the particular attention of novelists no less distinguished than Dostoevsky, Mann, and Nabokov. But it is basically in the last century that critics and analysts have responded to their richness and fascination. "Not until Freud revealed the importance of the irrational in man," Claire Rosenfield indicates at the outset of her useful survey of this phenomenon, "have we been willing to admit the possibility that each of us has within us a second or a shadow self dwelling beside the eminently civilized, eminently rational self, a Double who may at any time assert its anti-social tendencies."⁹ What Freud may have forced us to glimpse, Otto Rank kleig-lightened with his publication of *The Double* in 1914. Since then the literature about the literature of doubles has — if not burgeoned — solidly accreted.¹⁰ This "literature," as I hope to make evident, includes *Last Tango in Paris*.

"It is a serious game — this experiencing of doubleness, " Albert Geurard argues, because what could be more significant than our "sense of being sharply divided in our aim and inward being, or our flickering intuition that moral suppression of deep anti-social impulse may itself be immoral, a guilty act of mutilation, a destruction of vital energies?" If there are two sides of us, the socially decorous or civilized and the uninhibited or primitively spontaneous, then these tales express the longing to keep both selves alive. Geurard elaborates:

One of the recurrent preoccupations of double literature is with the need to keep a suppressed self alive, though society may insist on annihilation: to keep alive not merely a sexual self or a self wildly dreaming of power or a self capable of vagrant fantasy, the self of childhood freedom — not merely these, but also a truly

insubordinate perhaps illusory, original and fundamental self. . .¹¹

As much as this seems to be speaking to the issues of Bertolucci's film, perhaps Carl Keppler comes even closer to its core when he observes that the question of the "second self" (his preferred rendering of *doppelgänger*) is a part of the notably modern preoccupation with the problem of identity: "Who am I? — a problem which involves the additional one: How am I related to the Not-I?"¹² — problems at the core of *Last Tango*.

The one overtly declared instance of doubling in *Last Tango in Paris* is Rose's lover, Marcel. When Paul calls on him and notices that they wear identical robes, Marcel chides: "Be sincere. Didn't you know we had identical robes? We have lots of things in common." His impulse, after portraying how Rose, from the wall decorations to the brand of bourbon, had attempted to make their two rooms replicas of each other, is to hope they can "think back, understand together." He thought he "knew her as it is possible one can know." Paul is uninterested in any such project of mutual exploration. He leaves, not even understanding what Rose ever saw in Marcel. But he pursues the subject when he confronts the laid-out corpse of Rose: "For five years I was more of a guest in this fucking flophouse than a husband, with privileges of course. And then to help me understand you, you let me inherit Marcel. The husband's double whose room was the double of ours." Unlike Marcel, who naively sees the duplication as a road to understanding, Paul sees it as evidence of the impossibility of knowing. "Even if," he complains to Rose, "the husband lives two hundred fucking years, he's never going to be able to discover his wife's real nature. I mean, I might be able to comprehend the universe, but I'll never discover the truth about you, never. I mean, who the hell were you?" Creating the parallel refuge with Marcel becomes only an indication for Paul that to her their "marriage was nothing more than a foxhole." Robert Zeller may be right in suggesting that Rose was "carrying the *ménage à trois* to its ultimate absurdity by creating a second husband and household entirely 'faithful' to the first,"¹³ but surely its contribution to the theme of doubling and the attendant uncertainty is a more primary function of the episode.

From the legend of Narcissus to the tale of Snow White to the drama of Walden Pond to Cocteau's rendition of the story of Orpheus on even to Bob Fosse's elegy to immortal death, *All That Jazz*, reflecting surfaces have maintained their intrigue as images, symbols, and metaphors. Harry Tucker, in his essay, "The Importance of Otto Rank's Theory of the Double," isolates them as a central fixture in the literature of the double. "The most obvious example of the double in the physical world is one's reflection in a polished surface, such as the object made for just that purpose, a mirror."¹⁴ If the second *ménage* is the most explicit phenomenon of a double in *Last Tango*, surely the most frequent form it takes is in the seemingly endless variety of mirrors Bertolucci places throughout the film. They

assume a number of shapes, sizes, forms, and degrees of transparency or clarity, and they exist both inside and outside the apartment. The windows and mirrors in the apartment variously reflect Paul and Jeanne, often — especially in the initial sequence — conveying the strained attempt of one of them to discern the other — a motif that is intensified by the exaggerated number of frosted glass windows and doors that are translucent at best (the telephone closet door, the concierge's window, the shower glass across which Paul and the maid speak). As the film progresses, the mirror reflections tend to appear clearer. The most elaborate discussion of identity in the film takes place in the apartment bathroom, pointedly set against that room's unusual twin mirrors, which are sharply reflecting the naked Jeanne and the half-dressed Paul. The content of their discussion suggests that the clarity of the image is illusory. Jeanne has been searching Paul's pockets, "To find out who you are." He, only half-comically, says that if she'll look real close, she'll find him hiding behind his zipper. After another minute's badinage, the conversation turns more direct. Jeanne is furious: "You want to know why you don't want to know anything about me? Because you hate women! What have they ever done to you?" Anticipating what he will later rile against in Rose's funeral chamber, Paul returns, "Either they always pretend to know who I am, or they pretend that I don't know who they are, and that's very boring." But he will have none of Jeanne's willingness to announce who she is. He shuts her off, elliptically asserting, "The only truth is. . ." If we are to take our cue from his subsequent conversations about a dead rat's ass, pig slop, and anal insertion, presumably the only truth is death; all other attempts to secure identity are vain. The final, equally lucid, mirroring is, of course, in the tango hall, where the exaggerated clarity of the reflected images contributes to the surrealistic effects of the entire setting and sequence, at times making it uncertain whom (or which image) we are seeing and listening to. Whether the mirror images are realistically vague or clear but with a clarity that is belied by the surrounding dialogue or surrealistic setting, they — like the frosted glasses forever separating and obscuring people — reinforce the uncertainty of personal identity, the ambiguousness of character, the deceptiveness of names.

Beyond these relatively literal uses of doubles, Bertolucci invokes three other sets of parallels to enhance his theme. The apartment is designed to be a refuge from the outside world, suggesting a meaningful contrast between inside and outside. But that distinction gradually evanesces as the issues in each world begin to flow over into the other. By the time Paul and Jeanne meet outside their refuge, this illusion has been sufficiently undermined to be exploded.¹⁵ Inside and outside are basically the same; Rose's hotel is essentially similar to the flat — as the film's use of yellow and "uterine" shades conveys.

If one traditional aspect of the double is to represent the two sides of a person, the primitive and the civilized, this is reinforced by the animal imagery — generally within the apartment; the menagerie shown or mentioned includes ducks, a cat, crabs, a rat, rabbits, a wolf, dogs, pigs, cows. Paul is attempting to strip off the veneer of civility, a collage of bourgeois, stifling inhibitions. But his efforts to

get to the real core of their beings — root sexuality — is no more successful than society's addiction to nominalism and characterizing. At the end he bolts — from the apartment as well as from his anonymity. Ironically, this effort also fails, leading to his death. We may not be the proper robots that society would like to conceive of us as — the tango contestants, at the extreme — but neither are we the raw, uncivilized id-like figures of fantasy.

The third such element involves Tom's attempt to make a film. A film is, of course, a photographic reproduction of real images. Tom's inclination to replace the reality with this artistically controlled, unspontaneous copy or double becomes as irritating to us as it does to Jeanne. She is as ready to scream at it as she is — for opposite reasons — at Paul. Tom's inability to separate real life from an imitation of it leads him to prefer a marriage on and for film with a peer of Kim Novak and Rita Hayworth to actual dealings with a flesh and feeling Jeanne.

Similar in effect to these various forms of doubles is the multitude of images of visual and aural division that pervade the film. The split screen — of two Francis Bacon paintings — against which the credits are announced establishes a motif that Bertolucci pursues. In almost every imaginable way he fractures and divides his frame — by train rails, across doorways, by distinct fields of light and color — all of which echo the unsure boundaries of personal identity as well as its progressive isolation. As Zeller observes, "The metaphor of fissure extends to the characters. . . There is a constant play of the theme of divided, false, or missing identity."¹⁶ The tilt shots that characterize so much of the camera style, like the numerous quick cuts that leave us groping to determine where we are (as in the scene where we first discover Jeanne's mother searching the room and the one where Paul enters the funeral chamber) and the disparate sounds that are juxtaposed (the yellings of Tom and Jeanne merge with the cackling of the ducks; Jeanne's cries after anal intercourse fuse with the noise of the passing train), all reinforce this sustained sense of imbalance and dislocation.

I would not go so far as Joan Mellen, who argues that "*Last Tango* is about the elusiveness of our hold on the present," which, she continues, "remains the only means by which we can live with the past."¹⁷ Yet, the elusiveness not just of our hold on the present but of our sense of time, of existing within a coherent temporal frame of reference, is surely another way in which Bertolucci disorients. Not only are there a number of abrupt shifts within what is basically the present of the film, but its vainglorious quest for an understanding of personal identity shuttles us back and forth across Jeanne's and (to a lesser extent) Paul's past. If the understanding of personality involves coming to terms with one's childhood, then Jeanne's recollections of her early years, her father, and her youthful sexuality are properly germane. Perhaps more interesting is the basic movement — particularly overt with Paul — of regression back through adolescence even to infancy, a movement that is humorously capsulated by the instructions Bertolucci has Tom issue to Jeanne, "*Avance en reculant*," advance while going backwards. This might be fine and of noddingly

Freudian interest — except that it all does seem to be debunked in the final moments of the film where Paul deposits his gum under the railing and then curls up and dies in a fetal attitude. The regression into self-discovery is as illusory a route as any other — leading not to awareness but annihilation.

As Jeanne and Paul establish their refuge, the reversions to youthfulness abound. At first they seem merely the cooing, stripping and grunting of behavior divested of its assumed adulthood. The scant discussions of their pasts and parental figures are appropriate to the process of mutual discovery. Soon enough, however, the posturing and references begin to seem resonant of a less realistic, less sustainable regression — one that culminates in Paul's death. The inarticulate sounds, primitive behavior, references to adolescent sexuality and masturbation, and the allusions to their fathers all contribute to this. Even the extended bed-play around "Little Red Riding Hood," which may only take a minute or two of screen time, but is centrally situated, is marvelously fitting. It is, of course, children's stuff (the better to be spoofed and desecrated), but more than just any random fairy tale, this fable turns out to be a particularly appropriate choice to reflect the issues of the movie.

Bruno Bettelheim's *The Uses of Enchantment* is probably the standard general study of the psychodynamics of fairy tales. Its premise is that:

Fairy tales, unlike any other form of literature, direct the child to discover his identity and calling, and they suggest what experiences are needed to develop his character further. Fairy tales intimate that a rewarding, good life is within one's reach despite adversity — but only if one does not shy away from the hazardous struggles without which one can never achieve true identity.¹⁸

If fairy tales in general function to help a child discover his identity, Bettelheim's individual analysis of "Little Red Riding Hood" reads like a running marginalia to *Last Tango*. He sees it as a tale that "deals with the child's ambivalence about whether to live by the pleasure principle or the reality principle," a conflict very close to the one posed in the film between the proper social road (the one advised by Red Cap's mother) and the more alluring individualistic one of private indulgence and assertion (the doing as one likes of the wolf). Just as in the story, the male is "all-important, split into two opposite forms — the dangerous seducer. . . and the hunter, the responsible, strong, and rescuing father figure" — so, too, in *Last Tango* is there a clear opposition between the male roles of lover (one aspect of Paul) and the father (the hovering image of the military colonel, unfortunately assumed by Paul at the end, when he dons the army cap, and even Tom insofar as he is socially proper). Bettelheim continues:

It is as if Little Red Cap is trying to understand the

contradictory nature of the male by experiencing all aspects of his personality: the selfish, asocial, violent, potentially destructive tendencies of the id (wolf); the unselfish, social, thoughtful and protective propensities of the ego (the hunter). . . But the wolf is not just the male seducer, he also represents all the asocial, animalistic tendencies within ourselves. . . The story becomes the vehicle for expressing the daughter's unconscious oedipal longings, though with the wolf and savior-father neatly distinct. . . It has to be Little Red Cap who spontaneously plans what to do about the wolf and goes about doing it. If she is safe in the future, she must be able to do away with the seducer, be rid of him.

To the extent that the film portrays Jeanne's attempt to resolve the dilemmas of identity, the pivotally located parody of "Little Red Riding Hood" functions admirably. Both "heroines" are ambivalently excited by the "deathly fascination" of sex, with a remote father figure relegated to the wings, and both have to deal with contradictory pressures in order to develop a cohesive sense of self. The irony is that if in the fairy tale the happy result is Little Red Riding Hood's ability to conquer her anxiety represented by the attractiveness of the woods and the wolf, in the film Jeanne seems at the end to have made no such personal progress. She gives, in fact, the impression of regressing, having shot and reduced to infantilism the threat and then — for the sake of the expected police, those custodians of civilization — denied even knowing it-him. The film, in fact, tellingly closes on these lines of hers: "I don't know. I don't know him. I don't know who he is. He's a madman. I don't know his name."

Two figures — each in its own way inanimate or dead — that hover enigmatically over the action of the film serve to intensify the sense of prevailing uncertainty. The more important is Rose. Zeller even finds her possibly the most important personage in *Last Tango*. "It is her act that seals Paul's fate; it is her hotel, that mysterious honeycombed artifact, that is his tomb. Rose's presence haunts the film; the conundrum of her life is never solved. Paul's soliloquy beside her coffin is Bertolucci's ironic homage to the mystery of women, i.e., her impenetrability to man."¹⁹ Even more to the point, though, than her suggesting the mysterious impenetrability of women, it would seem, is her literally embodying or representing death — a primary piece in the puzzle of mortal human nature, one that can and will be reached, but never comprehended: to wit, Paul's grotesque and hyperbolic entreaties about looking up a dead rat's ass.

The other very similar — though more comically conceived — hulking figure is the covered shape that comes with the rooms. As Kinder and Houston comment, Bertolucci's ambiguity "is also visually expressed in the recurring image of the mysterious draped form in the smaller room of the apartment."²⁰ It sits there, drawing our curiosity, from the first time Jeanne and Paul survey the flat. And it remains

until, after Paul has vacated, Jeanne, as if to unlock the solution to a mystery, removes its covering. But the result is predictably anti-climatic. It explains or "is" nothing, apparently only junk. As with Rose's more prominent and arranged corpse, confronting it is of no avail.

Finally, the title image of the tango itself handsomely captures the ambivalence and whimsical or humorous causticness of Bertolucci's vision. Possibly derived from a West African dance, but clearly coming to Europe from Latin America — specifically from Argentina — the tango became a popular dance in the late teens and 1920s, popular not only in the ballroom but also with such contemporary artists as Stravinski, Cocteau, and Diaghilev. Originally it conveyed an aura of sensuality and abandonment; Colin Westerbeck calls the tango "the twenties prototype of something to do in lieu of fornication."²¹ Borges presumably described the tango as "a way of walking through life."²² But in *Last Tango* this initially rich, sensuous evocative dance has become the victim of social timidity and bourgeois propriety; it has been made decent and repugnantly acceptable, as in fact was the historical case in northern Europe, where a modest, enervated form of the dance became popular.

John Simon likens the sexual gymnastics of Paul and Jeanne to a form of tangoing; he finds them performing "an anti-tango, a travesty of that romantic dance of which Jorge Luis Borges wrote that its wantonness defies the routine years, that its libidinous melody outlasts man."²³ Bertolucci is not only reducing the original romantic dance to travesty, he is sardonically converging a number of the film's motifs around it: the stylized deadness of the impinging society, the tawdriness of all options, the vanity or juvenility of rebellious gestures, and the power of rituals. The late sequence in the dance hall is energetic and compelling; it catches both us and the characters up in it and gives momentum to Paul's urge toward self-expression and discovery. If, however, the tango is an invitation to sensuous expression — direct or vicarious — who are the real tangoists: the legitimate contestants or the scoffing Jeanne and Paul? Even on this level, Bertolucci confounds. The ritualized but socially acceptable mimicries of sensuality have become so debased and hollow that we — while marveling at their whirling, mannered stiffness — cry out for some liberating alternative. The dance — either dance — is not what it was heralded as; the dancers — either dancers — are not the genuine, free item; neither the questionings, the sexual expressions, nor their formalized imitations are salubrious. The pattern and harmony, like the hope for certainty or security, are illusory.

In the search for identity the only certainty is morality. The film — and the quest — are initiated by a death, Rose's, and conclude with a death — Paul's — one that in its particulars implies a kinship between birth and death. In between, there is a sexual story, a story that can be seen as an attempt to determine or assert an identity through sex. And the sexuality is revealing — of maturity versus immaturity, of sadism and masochism, of passion and its compelling nature as well as its sham imitation, and of the tensions between and within people. There can be seen a general movement from adult,

intense sexuality to an undifferentiated, regressed, childish sexuality. The progression is not straight-line and consistent, but it does work toward its conclusions where the totally assertive sex of the beginning has yielded to the images of Paul's being masturbated and baring his ass. If the first mentions of masturbation were serious attempts by Jeanne to recall her childhood experiences (when she tells Paul of running and of sitting under nearby trees with her cousin Paul) and if Paul's forcing himself anally upon her is in part an earnest attempt to confront issues of control, bestiality, and sordidness, then surely the sequence in the tango bar shows us debased, juvenile parodies of sexual expression. No room, including the bedroom, provides definition or clarification.

Bertolucci's theme is, of course, old hat; we vainly grapple with a world bent on evading us. Philosophically we discuss — often through elegantly constructed paradigms and verbal mazes — this dilemma; through our myths and art we express and hopefully resolve it. Few graduate students of literature, in fact, have not probed beyond tedium the conflict between appearance and reality (just as any further essay on it risks being another — My God! — article on illusion versus fact). And yet *Last Tango in Paris* continues to fascinate audiences and critics.

Perhaps the marvel of Bertolucci's achievement is that for him this great-grandparent of literary and philosophical concerns does not degenerate into a kind of bland academic exercise. Rather, he renders it with freshness, insight, and vitality. The avenues that the director invites us to pursue do not seem forced or contrived. Within the drama the sequence parodying "Little Red Riding Hood" and the motif of doubling are pertinent and unobtrusive; explored beyond "the text," they continue to fit — and enrich. The humor around Tom and his bumptious filmmaking, like the very different humor emanating from the apartment, is consonant with the tone and happenings of the film; each also encourages us to reflect, on the implications of the New Wave figures and on the solemnity with which we treat our sexual identities.

If the almost flamboyant energy and intrepidity of the film may leave us occasionally suspicious of its tautness and of Bertolucci's control, never does it seem hackneyed, tedious, or even without inspiration. Considering the issues, allusions, and subjects the film incorporates, it is striking how integrated *Last Tango in Paris* is, how nothing feels or is gratuitous. We are treated to the same old thing — in an attractive, imaginative, cohesive and sexy way.

Notes

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1. Pauline Kael, "Introduction," to Bertolucci's *Last Tango In Paris* (N. Y., 1973), p. 10. This is Kael's original review reprinted. It is where she compares the release of this film to the presentation of *Le Sacre du Printemps*.
2. Leo Braudy, "Blue Tango," *Partisan Review*, 40 (1973), 266.
3. Bertolucci, quoted from an interview with Gideon Bachmann, "Every Sexual Relationship Is Condemned," *Film Quarterly*, 20 (1973), 7.
4. Joan Mellen, *Women and Their Sexuality in the New Film* (New York, 1973), p. 129.
5. Although a number of critics have observed the parallel, Marsha Kinder and Beverle Houston recount it as usefully as anyone. "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 the 'title shot.' Paul has 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." In Bertolucci and the Dance of Danger," *Sight and Sound*, 42 (1973), 189.
6. Dotson Rader, "Death of a Stud," in *Close-Up: Last Tango In Paris*, (New York, 1973), p. 38.
7. Charles Michener, "The Hottest Movie," in *Close-Up: Last Tango In Paris*, p. 12.
8. Leo Braudy, *The World in a Frame*, (New York, 1977), pp. 255-56.
9. Claire Rosenfield, "The Shadow Within," *Daedalus*, 92 (1963), 326.
10. The primary studies of the Double include: Ralph Tymms, *Doubles in Literary Psychology*, (Cambridge, England, 1949), Robert Rogers, *A Psychoanalytic Study of the Double in Literature*, (Detroit, 1970), and C. F. Keppler, *The Literature of the Second Self*, (Tuscon, 1972). Albert Guerard's collection, *Stories of the Double*, (Philadelphia, 1967) contains an excellent introductory essay, "Concepts

of the Double,” and also reprints Rosenfield’s “The Shadow Within.”

11. Guerard, p. 2.
12. Keppler, p. 206.
13. Robert Zeller, “Bernardo Bertolucci, or Nostalgia for the Present,” *Massachusetts Review*, 16 (1975), 820.
14. Harry Tucker, Jr., “The Importance of Otto Rank’s Theory of the Double,” *Journal of the Otto Rank Association*, (1977-78), 60.
15. This same duality becomes part of Joan Mellen’s political interpretation of *Last Tango In Paris*. “It is after he symbolically becomes the bourgeois colonel who ‘civilizes savages’ that Jeanne shoots him in revolutionary rebellion, although throughout the film she has been Bertolucci’s vehicle for the bourgeois. At the very end the two exchange roles, recalling the duality in human nature which forces us to become the very thing we despise. That we are what we claim to hate, that we are always ambivalent, was equally the theme of Bertolucci’s *Partner*, based on the idea of the double.” In *Women and Their Sexuality in the New Film*, p. 136.
16. Zeller, p. 824.
17. Mellen, p. 128.
18. Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, (New York, 1977), p. 24. The Chapter on “Little Red Riding Hood” is on pp. 166-83.
19. Zeller, p. 827.
20. Kinder and Houston, p. 190.
21. Colin Westerbeck, Jr., “The Screen,” *Commonweal*, 97 (March 9, 1973), 15.
22. Attributed to Borges by Charles Michener in “‘Tango’: The Hottest Movie,” *Newsweek*, (Feb. 12, 1973), 58.
23. John Simon, “In France We Do It Horizontally,” in *Close-Up*, pp. 73-4.