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Review by: Alex S. Hill

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POLARIZATION, IMPRISONMENT, AND AMBIVALENCE IN *THE LAST TANGO IN PARIS*

The Last Tango in Paris, 1973, Screenplay by Bernardo Bertolucci,
Directed by Bernardo Bertolucci.

Reviewed by Alex S. Hill

Editor's note: This review was written in the early 1970s, just
after the release of the film.

Never in my memory, which spans three decades of premiere films, has the showing of a movie been so anticipated as has been *The Last Tango in Paris*. This phenomenon is primarily attributable to the mythological status of Marlon Brando within the USA and the feeling that, *The Godfather* notwithstanding, his comeback as a reputable actor rests on the judgment of his performance in *The Last Tango*. This is not to underplay the twin leitmotifs of the directing ability of Bernardo Bertolucci and the current attempt in the face of relaxed censorship to elevate pornography to true cinematographic art.

No sooner had *The Last Tango* appeared in this country than critics and ordinary moviegoers alike became dramatically polarized as to the relative merits of the film. If you see *The Last Tango* with your lover or spouse, it is said to be a general rule that you will quarrel with one another shortly after leaving the theater. Indeed, polarization is perhaps the most central and powerful theme of *The Last Tango*. It is the main beam of a complex and intricate ceiling of symbolism that, in the final analysis, hangs together above the alienated and anonymous machination of Paul and Jeanne.

But polarization of what? Of the sexes? I think not. That old hackneyed theme hardly bears a new perspective. *The Last Tango* is one step removed. One criticism of the film is that the moviegoer cannot identify with the central characters as real people. I think that, like Meursault in *The Stranger*,¹ Paul and Jeanne were not intended to be real people but metaphysical characters, each a bearer of a force generally common to the human condition—but specifi-

cally molded, formed, and shaped by centuries of Western culture. These forces, for want of a better name, I shall call masculinity and femininity. It is important on the one hand to recognize that these forces, principles or archetypal energy sources are not to be confused with men and women as nouns essentially anatomical and physiological in definition. On the other hand, to appreciate these forces as they appear in the characters of Paul and Jeanne, they represent the imagistic-affective state of being in Western culture in the early 1970s and not the pure archetypal force.

Paul and Jeanne bear the masculine and feminine principles of our day, but they are not it; they are its prisoner, willing but ambivalent, yet prisoners all the same. Which brings me to the two remaining central themes, the twin leitmotifs of *The Last Tango*—imprisonment and ambivalence. Prison symbolism, affective ambivalence, abounds in a tightly coordinated and unobtrusive way in *The Last Tango*. It dances between the words of every act of every spoken word between Paul and Jeanne.

Paul, a bearer of a decadent tradition of super-masculinity—ex-boxer, revolutionary, bongo player, journalist, and renaissance failure—is a willing and ambivalent prisoner of a larger feminine superstructure concretely symbolized by the hotel owned and operated by his former wife Rose, who has just killed herself with a straight razor as the movie opens. For five years he has been a privileged guest in his wife's flophouse hotel, her family's dowry in a matrilineal descent. The hotel guest list is an extension of Rose's many-faceted and unintegrated character: black saxophone players, dope addicts, prostitutes, pimps, her lover whom she molds in the same image out of which she modeled Paul. The hotel is her legacy, her dominance, and her script. Within this larger superstructure Paul, the masculine prisoner of a decadent and ultimately self-destructive feminine principle has his own space, the long unused garret apartment. Within this space, which is the literal extension of Paul's compensatory fantasy, Jeanne is a willing and ambivalent prisoner. In this room she can be only his idea of femininity—yielding, ingenuous, fearful and soft, she moves to his touch, whether brutal or soft. He directs and she plays, he leads and she follows, not without imagination or her own infusion to the contrary, but within the tango context someone must lead and that someone within this room is definitely Paul, the masculine. Jeanne's coming and going to and from this room is the record of her emotional ambivalence toward her imprisonment, her giving over of herself to the masculine image

of her which Paul controls. Yes, it is a veritable hall of mirrors, the feminine imprisoned within the masculine imprisoned within the feminine, but the symbolic lexicon of age and decay serve as guide by which we dead reckon our way.

I have already mentioned the hotel, an old building in an old city, the most important city so far as the romantic tradition of post-renaissance Western culture is concerned, but as the movie begins its matron has self-destructed.

Then there is Paul. One can hardly imagine a more decadent performance than Marlon Brando's interpretation of Paul. Indeed, it is a role played with heart. It is Stanley Kowalski revisited, and what has happened to Stanley between the early 1950s and the early 1970s is the record of the alteration of affective image of the masculine principle through the alteration of collective consciousness within the Western culture in those very years. Between 1950 and 1970, immense changes in the cultural consciousness of Western culture have taken place. Indeed, it could be said that never before in history has the consciousness of a single culture expanded so rapidly as in the USA between these years. This expansion has included an overview of history and cultural anthropology which at the beginning of this era was highly esoteric, but is now so widely disseminated in the American consciousness that even the previous overshadowing event of the birth and life and death of Jesus Christ can now, for a rather large subculture of American youth, take its proper relative place within the panorama of history.

It is this consciousness that has transformed the principle underlying both Stanley Kowalski and Paul from the former to the latter, and it is excruciatingly apt (to borrow a phrase from William Faulkner) that Marlon Brando himself should return to make up the difference. It can be said and has been that *The Last Tango* of Paul, alas Stanley Kowalski revisited, trapped in the body of Marlon Brando, happened in a cultural context for which he, like Clark Gable and Humphrey Bogart before him, was born to be and has chosen all the consciousness that any actor can muster to play. It is what he knows best. It is as we know him best. It is his destiny, his karma, his fate (in the tradition of the American actor who is chosen out of cultural context unlike the British actor who is chosen because he plays the roles intended by the playwright), and he has chosen to glorify the death of the very thing he in his professional and private life exemplifies. He has chosen to glorify that death by embedding it in the most awaited movie of our time, that death

which is the death of a cultural hero born out of five thousand years of tradition. It is the ultimate self-sacrifice and stands at the end of a long line of masochistic degradations on screen, of brutal beatings, of public floggings, being bitten by deadly scorpions, and castrated (but always before he lived) and finally now shot by the very force whose attraction to him is the source of his power and at the same time the object of the brutality of which he cannot relent.

Yes, Paul is older, dissipated, and decadent. He has none of the promise of Kowalski that sex, that pleasures of the body can sustain a lifetime of relationships, can overlook all that is left out, and he is pathetic as Kowalski never was, but he is still predatory and tainted and crude and closed and seminal, and you cannot deny it and he will not let you forget it. He fucks with his clothes on while Jeanne is exposed. In the initial sex scene, when she is willingly raped in the garret, one can only presume an instantaneously powerful erection that impales Jeanne and sends her climbing up the wall.

It is the last stand of the dying but potent force of the patriarchal culture that has, with all its considerable prowess, dominated Western culture for four or five millennia. It may know that it is doomed. It (he) may be murdered in a moment of irrevocable but still highly ambivalent action, but he (it) will not relent. He is what he is to the very end and that is precisely the instrument of his own imprisonment. He bends but he does not open and in the end he must be shot before the other, the opposite, can be liberated, for she is the young, the fresh feminine spirit of our time—vulnerable, exposed, ingenuous, frightened, and ambivalently attracted to the very spirit, force, principle, image, man which is her prisoner and the launching pad of her transcendence.

One of the initial scenes of the movie shows Jeanne shortly after she has entered the old hotel attracted by the apartment vacancy sign on the front door. She has already confronted the large black woman (a great mother symbol we have seen used by Fellini in *Satyricon*) whom she later declares to be crazy. However, Jeanne procures the key from the black woman, and the camera, then catches the figure of Jeanne ascending in the lift to view for the first time the garret room where Paul awaits her. A large light globe hangs from the ceiling of the first floor and as the lift disappears in the ascension the camera lingers pointedly upon the light. The key, the ascension, and the light—all positive growth-oriented symbols are associated with Jeanne and cluster around her person and her ambivalent coming and going from Paul's domain as a swarm of

bees cluster around honey. Yes, she is used, violated, abused and—with her ultimate permission—impressed in the hard, coarse, cynical and dying world of Paul's fantasy life, she dares, despite her fear and trembling to be exposed, to walk naked, to be opened and penetrated, to fill the vacancy left by the self-destructive Rose, in the abode of the Great Mother—the house of all hope and all despair—to enter into this transgression where opposites unite and feed for a few ecstatic moments on the final crumbs of the once powerful and still seminal force to which she is attracted as a moth to light.

She is fresh and open, instinctive and supple, always exposed, nymphishly seductive, while she carries the torch of eternal youth from which any rebirth must emerge. She is innocent, not because she does not know, but because that is her role and her willing but ambivalent imprisonment. She yields and above all she dares, and true philosophers of feminine liberation should wear her ingenuous face as an armband, for she dares to put her head in the lion's very mouth. She dares to drink the dregs of the enemy, that anonymous force ("I did not know his name, he followed me on the street, he wanted to rape me. He was crazy. I did not know his name ...") that is the attraction and the imprisonment of Western femininity.

Yes, she does not talk about the problem in a closed room from which the enemy is excluded, write in high-flown sentences, or from the standpoint of one who has identified with the aggressor in order to escape. She faces the problem as a feminine creature, personally, sexually, instinctively, and passively. It is the Night Sea Journey; she does not slay the dragon as a masculine hero, she enters the enemy to know it and then when the time is right (and this is most important) she slays it from within that knowledge and thus liberates herself.

ENDNOTES

¹ Albert Camus, *The Stranger*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1989. Originally published in French as *L'Étranger*, Paris, Librairie Gallimard, 1942.

ABSTRACT

Alex S. Hill, "Polarization, Imprisonment, and Ambivalence in *The Last Tango in Paris*, THE SAN FRANCISCO JUNG INSTITUTE LIBRARY JOURNAL, 2005, 24:2, 85–89. This review attempts to look beneath the surface of a highly anticipated and controversial movie with the goal of elucidating the underlying psychodynamics, in particular the relationship between the masculine and the feminine during its transition during the early 1970s.

KEY WORDS

The Last Tango in Paris, men and women.