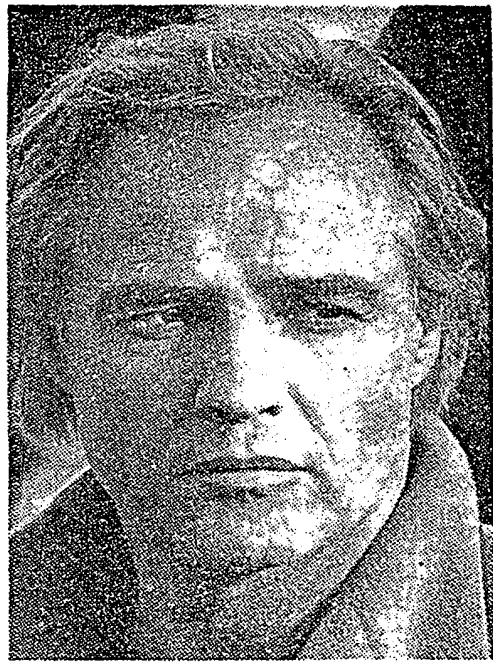


# 'Tango': Promising Premise, Confused Vision

By Gary Arnold

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Marlon Brando and Maria Schneider in "Last Tango in Paris."

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Although Washington is one of the first half-dozen or so American cities to get a commercial engagement of Bernardo Bertolucci's "Last Tango in Paris," I find myself imagining that today's opening at the Avalon 1 must be a revival. And, since I feel no enthusiasm for the movie itself, not exactly an eagerly awaited revival.

It's been a mere six months since the semi-legendary American premiere of "Last Tango" on the final night of the 1972 New York Film Festival, and the movie opened commercially in New York

less than three months ago. But between those two dates "Last Tango" had already become the beneficiary of an overwhelming amount of publicity, much of it sensationalistic. Assuming one followed the reviews and the mushrooming interviews and cover stories, it was virtually impossible to suppress a growing sense of skepticism and apprehension. What movie could possibly live up to this buildup?

Whether friendly, hostile or just mercenary in nature, the publicity has proved essentially misleading. It conditions one to expect a movie that simply isn't there. To take the most banal misconception, many people have been led to believe

that they will see parts of Marlon Brando's anatomy they never expected to see before. They will have to go away satisfied with a quick flash of bare buttocks in long shot. At a more sophisticated level of disillusionment, customers expecting emotional conflicts and revelations more naked than any ever dramatized on the screen may need to adjust to something more tentative and indecisive—a brooding and intriguing but also confused and opaque vision of modern sexual antagonisms.

The initial break for "Last Tango in Paris" was, of course, the advance rave review by Pauline

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# 'Last Tango in Paris': A Promising Premise, a Confused Vision

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Kael in the Oct. 28, 1972, issue of The New Yorker, in which she said, "The movie breakthrough has finally come. Exploitation films have been supplying mechanized sex—sex as physical stimulant but without any passion or emotional violence. The sex in 'Last Tango in Paris' expresses the characters' drives . . . This must be the most powerfully erotic movie ever made, and it may turn out to be the most liberating movie ever made . . ."

Far from being a powerfully erotic movie, "Last Tango" impressed me as one of the most oppressively anti-erotic movies I'd ever seen. If the movie possesses a comprehensive vision of sexual relationships at all, it is a despairing and somewhat self-pitying male vision of irreconcilable sexual conflict and misunderstanding in which the man, aggressive as he may be, is victimized, in part by his own humiliating behavior but also by the inscrutable perfidious behavior of women.

The premise of the film is interesting and promising, but the characters are thinly and sordidly conceived, and I don't think they support as much generalization about contemporary sexual roles and attitudes as they're intended to support. The combatants are Brando, as a middle-aged American failure residing in Paris and Maria Schneider as a compliant, ripe young Parisienne from the bourgeoisie. They meet by chance in an empty flat, have sex and spend several days in renewed sexual encounters.

The arrangement is initiated, controlled and sustained by the man, who insists there be no personal, emotional involvement—no names, no histories, no obligations, only sexual contact. This sexual retreat is his way of coping with a domestic tragedy: His wife, a Frenchwoman and the proprietress of a second-rate hotel, has just committed suicide for no apparent reason.

He takes out his frustration and anger and incomprehension on the girl, dominating her sexually, humiliating her and himself, insisting that she share his embittered, contemptuous perception of the world. At the end of a few days he appears to have passed his emotional crisis, exorcised the demons. He declares his love for the girl, but her initial fascination and submission have turned to fear. When he attempts to pursue her, the pursuit leads to homicide.

In Kael's opinion, Brando and Schneider enact "an intensified, speeded-up history of the sex relationships of the dominating men and the adoring women who have provided the key sex model of the past few decades—the model that is collapsing."

This may be the idea, but the enactment itself does not seem so clear-cut or convincing. One is compelled to take the thought for the deed. How representative are these particular sex-

ual antagonists and how significant is their particular conflict? One simply hesitates to draw sweeping conclusions from a relationship that is developed as ambiguously as this one, that leaves one holding so many loose ends of history and motivation.

For example, what is one to make of the mysterious figure of Brando's wife? Evidently, she was betraying him openly with one of her tenants. From what we can infer, Brando's character, called Paul, must have been in a humiliating, subservient position domestically. What variety of bitch was this woman? What held Brando to her emotionally? Why, indeed, would she take her own life? Why is a man in such a bizarrely masochistic, dependent situation a definitive symbol of the Last Aggressive Man?

Brando attempts to fill out the character with bits of his own experience and with the force of his personality, and he's often fascinating to watch, amusing or brilliantly intense in isolated scenes. The problem is that those isolated moments don't add up to a whole, comprehensible character. Brando is a powerful presence, but I was not convinced in the reality of Paul as a human being.

When it comes to Schneider's character, called Jeanne, one again goes begging for adequately articulated motives. The sheer sexual tension in that flat doesn't seem compelling enough to hold her. I think Bertolucci fails to create a persuasive feeling of impending or ongoing sexual activity in these scenes. Far from achieving a new kind of intimacy and realism, his style seems terribly mannered and deliberate. The film is suffused with a heavy, languorous art film atmosphere and it

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"Marlon Brando and I happen to be the exact same age."

robs the action of immediacy and tension. If this is an explosive film, it's inordinately fond of slow fuses and some of the explosions are duds.

Maria Schneider suggests not a bourgeoisie but a pert, earthy little bohemian (and her interviews revealed that she was the year's most uninhibited bohemian). One doesn't feel that Brando's sexual power games truly surprise or sensitize and enthrall her. If anything, they seem to be relatively compatible low-lives, and it's difficult to understand why this girl needs to reject this man. It's not as if she were a convincing embodiment of a perfidious bourgeois girl, like Jean Seberg in "Breathless," and it's not as if her fiancé, an asinine movie nut played by Jean-Pierre Leaud, were a more attractive and compatible mate than Brando's Paul.

One needs to accept the fatal nature of this relationship on faith, and Bertolucci has an unusually awkward time setting up the fatal moment, dragging the characters half-way across Paris in order to get them in the same room with the murder weapon. One understands the inevitability of tragedy in this conception, but the circumstances are clumsily managed. Paul might make more sense as a suicide than a murder victim.

Too little and too much seem to be made of these romantic antagonists. Brando and Schneider often improvise pleasantly, but fully realized characters haven't emerged from these improvisations. The tentative figures we get are required to tote a lot of metaphorical weight, but does the failure of an affair between a humiliated, expatriate bum and a carnal little bohemian signify so much? The traditional

Kael's review of "Last Tango" will probably become as famous and legendary as James Agee's defense of Chaplin's "Monsieur Verdoux." It's another glorious refutation of the idea that criticism can never be a creative form of writing. On the contrary, these pieces demonstrate that our most gifted and responsive critics may be a little too creative for comfort. Their own imaginative responses to a film may turn out to have more impact, coherence and emotional reverberation than the film itself. People drawn to "Last Tango" initially by the Kael review may feel, as I did, that more movie can be found in her appreciation than in the images Bertolucci places upon the screen.

While performing a service for works of art, critics may perform a disservice to the audience by minimizing the flaws and ambiguities in the works, by underestimating the difficulties or presuming common bonds of experience and attitude that don't really exist. One may not share the fatalistic view of sexual relationships expressed in "Last Tango," but even if one grants it, the principal characters may appear to be inadequate or equivocal spokesmen for that view.

To some extent the Kael review may have also created the impression that the sex scenes are more stimulating and unprecedented than they actually happen to be. She claimed the opening "sex act" had "a boldness that had the audience gasping, and the gasp was caused—in part—by our awareness that this was Marlon Brando doing it, not an unknow actor." Perhaps the scene carried a special surprise impact that first night in Lincoln Center, but coming to it after the gigantic buildup, one feels rather detached. The initial coupling is preceded by a tedious stretch of preliminary stalking and staring, and Bertolucci employs a technique that takes the shock out of the sex—he keeps the camera lingering so

long that one ceases to believe in the actors' simulated gyrations.

Brando is, of course, pretending to do it rather than "doing it," and Bertolucci's camera style tends to accentuate the pretense. The dialogue is frequently profane, and some of the ideas of the sex scenes are startling. But visually the scenes are quite innocent of pornographic influence or appeal. In my opinion they are equally innocent of erotic appeal. Bertolucci prolongs most of the sex scenes beyond the breaking point of credible eroticism.

I assume most people will remain curious to see "Last Tango" whether they anticipate greatness or something rather less. The typical reaction will, I think, be neither exaltation nor contempt but a sort of respectful confusion and indecision; this is a transparently serious but ambiguously elaborated and resolved work of art. It seems to be getting at something, but you may never know quite what.

I am afraid that people who go with great expectations, particularly great erotic expectations, will come back keenly disappointed. To guard against a letdown, it's advisable to anticipate an exploratory movie rather than a lucid or pleasurable one. Instead of altering the face of an art form, "Last Tango" seems likely to repeat the fluke success of "I Am Curious (Yellow)," which attracted a mass curiosity audience, became rapidly passe and inspired no discernible increase in the audience for other foreign films.

Unlike "Cesar and Rosalie," for example, "Last Tango" is not the sort of import likely to make people glad they went to the movies, particularly when the price is \$4 for a reserved seat (all seats must be reserved).

I think "Last Tango" falls far short of becoming a quintessential drama of sexual conflict, but it is a quintessential art movie, and that realization may come as an arduous, annoying surprise to many unsuspecting patrons.