

Brattle Theatre Film Notes: *Last Tango In Paris*

Italy/France, 1972. NC-17. 129 min. Cast: Marlon Brando, Maria Schneider, Maria Michi, Giovanna Galletti; Cinematographer: Vittorio Storaro; Producer: Alberto Grimaldi; Director: Bernardo Bertolucci

If you know anything about *Last Tango in Paris*, you know it's full of sex. You know its protagonist, Paul (Brando), and his young lover, Jeanne (Schneider), spend most of the movie locked up in a Paris apartment screwing; you know Jeanne is mostly naked throughout; above all, you know about the infamous butter scene. Such is the effect of controversy on art, offering notoriety even while tending to narrow the scope of its meaning - witness Nabokov's *Lolita*, or Robert Mapplethorpe's *The Perfect Moment* collection. But like those masterworks, *Last Tango in Paris* is more than just titillation: It is the high water mark for method acting.

Seeing a film years or decades after it was made, and thus out of its historical context, is always a compromised experience. Films that are an expression of the collective feelings of the time and place in which they were produced often see their meaning altered or obscured as those feelings change: The original *Nosferatu*, for example, remains an effectively creepy piece of chiaroscuro brilliance, but none of us will ever know how audience members in depressed, shamed and emotionally broken Weimar Germany responded to its dark undercurrents. Nonetheless, there can be a distinct advantage to seeing a film decades after its release.

Though just the title *Last Tango in Paris* still carries the whiff of illicitness, we are for the most part free of the hype and fuss, which surrounded it in 1973. We are, in a sense, able to see it with new eyes. By today's standard, of course, the sexual content of the film is tame. It's hard to imagine such a furor over a film offering nothing more visually overt than bare breasts, pubic hair and a good deal of non-explicit humping. Even the talk of anal sex pales when compared to the tone of the average teen gross-out comedy. Again, it is

impossible to know the impact of those images and themes on audiences perhaps more accustomed to Doris Day comedies, but regardless of *Last Tango in Paris*'s relatively shocking sexual frankness, I've always wondered if the real stir wasn't caused by the emotional violence of the film.

It is the palpable sense of anguish, rage and pain that drives the movie, brought home with almost unbearable vividness by Marlon Brando. Brando (it always bears repeating) is generally regarded, as the greatest film actor of his generation, perhaps of any generation, and his body of work is all but unparalleled. But his greatness and importance are measured less in individual roles, or even in their collective accomplishment, than in the way he and his peers changed our expectations of acting and even cinema itself.



As the foremost practitioner of "method" acting (Brando himself disdains the term), he did more to push American film toward realism than any other actor. Where classic stars like Clark Gable were required to do little more than look handsome and be themselves - or at least recreate their public personas time and again - the new breed of naturalist screen actors sought to actually become the characters they played, to create not the glossy, romantic parallel universe that was the Hollywood movie, but the grit and texture of the lives lived by the bulk of movie audiences.

More than a half-century after New York's famed New School began turning out method actors, this verisimilitude has become, for better or worse, the baseline criteria for all but the occasional mainstream film. And

Brando's performance as Paul is, simply put, the most excruciating and resonant depiction of human suffering ever committed to film; if there is a darker rendition of mourning and loss, I simply don't want to see it. Whatever Paul was before we meet him, his suffering and grief have turned him into a crude, ugly misogynist bastard, able to deal with his own confusion and pain only by humiliating and debasing Jeanne. Brando is by turns volcanic, as in the scene where he chases down a whore's John; slow burning, when he cruelly taunts his dead wife's mother; and above all utterly raw.

But as jarring as it can be to watch the film, Brando - who openly admits to an intermittent dedication to his profession - seems to have been scarred by the experience. If a performance like this was the inevitable result of a career spent plumbing the depths of his own trauma, it seems here he discovered his limits. Improvising most of his scene: with Bertolucci's encouragement he used his own childhood experiences to inform the character. Writing in his 1994 autobiography he confesses, "*Last Tango in Paris* required a lot of emotional arm wrestling with myself, and when I was finished, I decided that I was n't ever again going to destroy myself emotionally to make a movie. I felt I had violated my innermost self and didn't want to suffer like that anymore. ... *Last Tango in Paris* left me feeling depleted and exhausted, perhaps because I'd done what Bernardo asked and some of the pain I was experiencing was my very own. ... In subsequent pictures I stopped trying to experience the emotions of my characters as I had always done before, and simply to act the part in a technical way."

Indeed, Brando's work since has reflected his dedication to this maxim. Always an enigma, he has taken a series of roles in projects often shockingly beneath his talent. But watching him in *Last Tango in Paris* it is, if nothing else, easy to understand his choice.

- Lawrence Fahey