

*Last Tango in Paris* was released in 1972, and is considered a landmark film, as it was intended to usher in a cinematic movement of adult-themed films, the goal of which was not to titillate the audience with sexual imagery, but to deal with sexuality in a mature and reverent fashion. Of course, it wasn't without a firestorm of controversy, from both feminists and conservative critics, many of which deemed the film pornographic and demeaning. Granted, there are scenes in Bernardo Bertolucci's film that remain quite potent and disturbing to this day. However, it remains an incredibly powerful character study – complex and rewarding, featuring two unapologetically raw performances from the Marlon Brando and Maria Schneider.

*Last Tango in Paris* is about a man named Paul, who has recently lost his wife to suicide. When we first meet him, he has closed himself off to the world. He drifts through Paris, weeping, cursing God, and carrying a burden of guilt so heavy, it threatens to crush him at any moment – and if that were to happen, he would probably welcome it. Horror, pain, and confusion are written all over his face. He may never know exactly why his wife chose to take her own life. Then again, maybe he does. It is this terrible mystery that haunts Paul, which drives him to act on his darkest impulses. His behavior is often destructive and unpredictable. During a visit from his mother in law – who keeps questioning him about the suicide – Paul shuts off all power in the apartment building, shrouding the room in darkness as he spouts obscenities, frightening the poor woman and bringing her to tears.

One day, Paul meets a young Parisian woman named Jeanne in an empty apartment. The two of them are interested in renting the space, and engage in a bit of small talk. In an unexpected moment of passion, Paul and Jeanne have sex with one another, and then casually go about their business. Jeanne is engaged to an aspiring filmmaker who follows her around with a documentary crew, in order to capture moments in her life that he considers cinematic. Jeanne doesn't share his passion for the cinema, but she awkwardly complies nonetheless.

Paul ends up renting the apartment, and the next day, Jeanne returns with the key. The two make love again, and decide to carry on an affair. Paul only asks that the two of them refrain from sharing any kind of personal information – no names, no background stories, nothing at all. They will use one another to fulfill their sexual fantasies – nothing more.

As time moves on, Paul's demands become increasingly degrading, but Jeanne willingly does what he asks of her, no matter how humiliating. In many ways, she has become his slave. Paul has pulled Jeanne into his personal hell, trapping her. Obviously, this begins to take a toll on the relationship, as Jeanne longs for an authentic, human connection. In rare moments of vulnerability, the two bare their souls to one another. In these moments, Paul springs back to life, before quickly shutting down once again.

A situation such as this can only end in tragedy, and we will watch helplessly as Paul and Jeanne's arrangement ultimately leads them on a downward spiral into madness. The last few moments of the film are unforgettable and terribly sad.

There are scenes in this film that are incredibly moving, namely because of Marlon Brando's incredibly personal performance. In a sense, Marlon Brando *is* Paul, and it is obvious that elements of Brando's life influenced Bernardo Bertolucci's screenplay. There is a pivotal scene in the film, in which Paul sits by the bed where his wife's lifeless body lies, and ruthlessly curses her before finally breaking down into sobs, pleading for her forgiveness. This is among the most powerful moments in the history of cinema, and a master class of acting in and of itself. Marlon Brando is a revelation.

The late Maria Schneider, who was only nineteen at the time of filming, holds her own next to Brando in an equally demanding role. The naiveté of her character shines through, making her character's difficult journey all the more effective.

Bernardo Bertolucci's direction is perfect, and he brings an intelligence to the material that heightens the emotional impact of the film. Gato Barbieri's jazzy score is one of the best of its kind and accentuates seemingly ordinary moments in the film, heightening them.

*Last Tango in Paris* is not an easy film to digest; however, patient audiences will find much to ponder over and discuss as the credits roll. With the exception of Steve McQueen's recent *Shame*, it is hard to find a film in these times which handles sexuality in such a manner worthy of respect.