

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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LAST TANGO IN PARIS 1972

Bernardo Bertolucci

OVERVIEW

One famous (female) critic called this the ‘most powerfully erotic movie ever made, and it may turn out to be the most liberating movie ever made.’ Its depiction of raw sexual violence outraged many viewers and led to its being banned for ten years in Italy and having to be severely cut in the United States. The Italian courts convicted the director and the two main actors (Marlon Brando and Maria Schneider) of obscenity. Even after its release, it generated controversy when Schneider said that she ‘felt raped’ during the famous sodomy scene. Brando was nominated for Best Actor and Bertolucci for Best Director at the Academy Awards in 1974.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Paul	Paul is a forty-four-year old American who has ended up in Paris, where his wife has just committed suicide.
Jeanne	Jeanne is a young French woman who comes from a bourgeois family.
Thomas	Thomas, her fiancé, is a film-maker.
Rosa	Rosa is Paul’s dead wife.
Marcel	Marcel was Rosa’s lover.

SYNOPSIS

This highly sexualised and controversial film follows the love affair between Paul, an older American man, and Jeanne, a young French woman in Paris. Paul’s wife has just committed suicide, while Jeanne is engaged to a French film-maker named Thomas. Without giving any reason, Paul insists that their relationship remain anonymous, with no names or references to the past. The film consists mainly of scenes, both sexual and conversational, of the two lovers in an unoccupied apartment, leavened by flashbacks to Paul’s life with his wife, Rosa, and to Jeanne’s life with her parents. One day, Jeanne sees that Paul has packed up and left the apartment without telling her. Later, they meet on the street and he attempts to renew their relationship. Now, the anonymity is gone, and he tells her about his wife’s death and that he wants to marry her. When she flees, he follows her into her parents’ house, where he asks her name. She tells him and then shoots him dead. The dynamic contrast between Jeanne’s ‘pop’ life-style and Paul’s brooding silence propels the action, while the explicit, unconventional sex strikes a blow against bourgeois moral codes.

STORY

Chance encounter The film begins with a distraught Paul, an American, wandering the streets of Paris after his wife’s suicide. He is passed on the street by a young French woman, Jeanne, who is on her way to look at an apartment for rent. The atmosphere of the building, including the concierge, is unwelcoming and eerie. When Jeanne enters the empty and spacious apartment, she finds a strange man already there. He is Paul, who is also interested in the apartment. They walk about the deserted flat, exchange a few words, and they make passionate love on the floor. They leave separately, without even knowing the each other’s names.

‘It’s a film.’ Jeanne meets Thomas, her fiancé, at a railway station. When they kiss, it is filmed, making Jeanne angry, but Thomas explains that ‘it’s a film.’ They talk of their love, how they missed each other during his absence, but it is not clear whether they are speaking lines from a script or their heart.

Reconstruction At Paul's flat, where his wife killed herself, a woman is cleaning up the blood. She is the manageress of the hotel that Paul and Rosa owned and in which they had their own flat. She explains that the police made her go through a reconstruction of the suicide scene because she was the one who found the body. We learn that Paul had wandered the world, as a boxer, journalist and musician before arriving in Paris, where he married his wealthy wife, Rosa. They had no children, and now she is dead.

Anonymity Jeanne moves into the apartment, where she is joined by Paul. She wants to know who he is, but he insists on anonymity. He says they should forget everything and everyone they know. They continue their energetic love affair.

Mother-in-law Paul's mother-in-law comes to his old, marital apartment after hearing of her daughter's suicide. In shock, she searches for answers, but Paul says there aren't any. She has brought cards and flowers in preparation for the funeral, but an angry Paul forbids any priests. Paul flies into a violent tantrum, saying that Rosa was not a believer and wouldn't want a religious funeral. 'The church doesn't want a suicide, does it?' he says with menace. 'Priests don't like suicide.' The mother-in-law insists on Absolution and a Mass.

On location At Jeanne's flat, Paul and Jeanne continue their anonymity, playfully using animal sounds for their names. Paul grunts like a gorilla and says, 'That's my name.' Later, Jeanne and Thomas meet on his movie set, where he films a bio-pic of her, again confusing real-life dialogue with a film. The camera follows Jeanne as she goes back to her childhood home, where she greets Olympia, the old housekeeper. 'A compendium of domestic virtues: faithful, admiring and racist,' Jeanne says. Olympia and Jeanne's father, a military officer in French Algeria, hated Arabs and taught her dog to recognise their smell.

The past Thomas urges Jeanne to take him (and the camera) deeper back into her childhood, her school books and diary. This leads to Jeanne describing her cousin, also named Paul, who was her first love. He plays the piano while she wanders around in the garden, sits among the trees and reminisces about the past. Suddenly, the filming is interrupted by a group of young Arab children who are urinating in the garden. 'Good. Film it!' shouts the inspired Thomas.

Masturbation Jeanne and Paul meet again in her flat. Although he doesn't want to remember the past, Paul talks at length about his unhappy childhood in America with his alcoholic parents. She reciprocates and tells him about what we have just seen: her childhood and her cousin. When the American Paul asks when she first masturbated, she describes how her cousin taught her and then re-enacts it.

Marcello Back in his hotel, Paul talks with Marcello, who was Rosa's lover. The two men share a drink and confide in each other about their lives, their aging and their health as if they are best friends. At one point, Paul says to Marcello, 'You can't believe that Rosa killed herself. It's hard for me to believe, too.' But Marcello doesn't respond; he is busy doing his daily exercise. Paul then leaves him and the hotel for the last time.

Rape In Jeanne's flat, Paul rapes Jeanne from behind and forces her to repeat his blasphemous words against the Church.

Marriage On location, Thomas tells Jeanne that he has a secret. 'Dirty secret or about love?' she says. 'I'm going to marry you next week,' he says. Jeanne announces this news to her widowed mother. She then leaves a film set, where Thomas is planning to film their wedding, and returns to Paul. Coily, she tells Paul that she has fallen in love with another man. He scoffs at this and warns her that she will never be able to realise her dream of security. 'Not until you look death in the eye will you ever find that man,' he says. 'But I've found that man,' she says. 'It's you.'

Talking to the dead Paul speaks to his dead wife, lying on a bed that is covered with flowers. He says he never understood her. 'Even if a husband lives with his wife for two hundred years,' he says, 'he'll never know her true nature.' As he rambles along, he becomes angry that he was considered beneath her and that he 'lacked the guts' to ask her lover (Marcel) if he had sex with her the way he

(Paul) did. Then he curses her for taking 'the easy way out of their lousy marriage' by using a cheap razor. He breaks down in tears but rouses himself when the doorbell rings down stairs. A prostitute, with her client, wants a room for half an hour. It's four o'clock in the morning. 'Rosa and I were old friends,' she says. 'Let me in or I'll tell your boss.'

Departure Jeanne finds that Paul has left the flat without telling her. She telephones Thomas and invites him to the flat. When she suggests that it would be perfect for them after their marriage, Thomas says the virtually unfurnished apartment isn't right for him and leaves to search for another one.

Renewal Jeanne also leaves but is confronted on the street by Paul, who says he wants to renew their affair. She is reluctant, but he says that he's ready to fall in love and get married. They go to a nightclub, a tango bar, where he again says he wants to live with her. They drink and laugh, like a perfect pair of lovers in a romantic comedy, except that it's played like a parody. Paul dances the tango, his last in Paris.

Named He gets drunk, and she runs out of the bar and onto the streets. He chases her to her parents' flat, where he again tries to convince her that he really loves her. 'I want to know your name,' he says as he caresses her hair. 'Jeanne,' she says and shoots him dead, with her father's pistol.

THEMES

SEXUALITY

Sex as language In speaking about his film, Bertolucci said, 'Sex is simply a new kind of language that the actors invent in order to communicate. They use sexual language because it is liberated, from the subconscious...an opening up.' Indeed, the sex in the film is not especially salacious or sensationalised; it is sometimes violent and kinky and shown in full nudity, but it functions as a pretext for Bertolucci to examine other, 'more serious' themes, such as freedom, anonymity and death. All three are linked with sex.

Domination / submission The raw and sometimes unorthodox sex in the film (sodomy, her fingers up his anus, his violence and sadism) can be seen as an expression of freedom, a blow struck against the confines of conventional social mores and, especially, the teachings of the church. Many critics have analysed the violent sodomy scene for its erotic elements, but the true power of the scene comes not from Paul's physical violence. Rather, it lies in him forcing Jeanne to repeat his words, as he forces himself into her backside. 'Say it,' he screams. 'Repeat the words: "Holy family. Church of good citizens. The children are tortured until they tell their first lie. Where the will is broken by repression. Where Freedom is assassinated by egotism." Say it!' For her part, Jeanne is more or less happy to comply with Paul's sexual desires inside the room, but when he wants to take their relationship outside and into society, the world of her bourgeois family, she will not consent. Their unconventional and uninhibited acts should be kept secret. It is a freedom that she wants hidden from others. When he attempts to expose it, through marriage at the end, she kills him.

Anonymous sexuality with strangers Paul insists that sex with Jeanne be conducted anonymously. At first, Jeanne is reluctant to have intercourse without exchanging names but later accepts and revels in it. Paul wants to forget the past, with his many identities and (one presumes) failures, especially his dead wife and their joyless marriage. The room in which the nameless sex takes place is also impersonal, a rented and sparsely unfurnished space that belongs to neither of them. From one angle, anonymous sex is erotic in that it removes personal histories and guilt from the sexual act. That is why Paul says he would rather use animal grunts as a name, since animals have sex without knowing the name of their partner. This amuses Jeanne, who then playfully joins in his game of animal-grunting. In another scene, Paul and Jeanne experiment with touchless sex. 'Let's see if we can come without touching,' she says. They try but it doesn't work, which makes both of them laugh. That is the extreme of their (and Bertolucci's) experiment about anonymous sex as language: you may not need names, but you do need to touch. The anonymity of sex also creates a double voyeurism. The sex we see is secretive, behind closed doors, among people who are strangers not only to us but also to themselves.

Sex and Death Sex, as Freud told us, is linked to death. Eros and Thanatos are the opposite sides of the same coin of human energy. Freudians claim that sex is a response mechanism, a psychic coping mechanism for the inability to accept the finality of death by creating new life. In the film, we could argue that Paul is unable to grieve for his wife (no proper funeral, no actual understanding of what happened) and tries to cope by distracting himself through sex, a channelling of his pent-up grief into physical action. A much-quoted line is Paul's desire that Jeanne should 'go right up into the ass of death. . . and find the womb of fear.' When she does that, when she confronts the fearful finality of death, she will find real love and security, the very things that he also desires but is unable to have due to his repressed grief for his wife. Some critics have suggested that Paul did not have a satisfying sexual relationship with his wife, that he failed to please her (hence her lovers) and that his violent love-making to Jeanne is a post-mortem attempt to satisfy the dead. This substitution of Jeanne for Rosa is more credible when we watch Paul's angry rant at Rosa's dead body on the flower-strewn bed, during which he addresses her with the identical phrases he uses with Jeanne. Unable to join Rosa in life, Paul forces Jeanne to murder him so that he can reunite with her in death. Again, as Freud pointed out, sex (Eros) is the fundamental drive to procreate, to multiply ourselves, while death (Thanatos) is the reverse instinct that seeks to fold oneself back into a totality. That impersonal whole is the anonymity that Paul seeks and fails to achieve.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Paul Paul has travelled the world before settling in Paris, although we know little about his recent past. He had an unhappy upbringing, with irresponsible parents, although he has pleasant memories of the countryside. Paul is a moody and withdrawn person, psychically crippled by his wife's suicide. He can be both violent and tender, angry and playful, and his mood swings are unpredictable and sudden. He is a fierce critic of religious humbug and social convention.

Secretive Paul is a mystery from the very first scenes of the film, when Jeanne finds him inside the flat that she has come to see about renting. He is hidden in a corner. 'Who are you?' she asks, but he only gives a cryptic answer. He wanders ghost-like about the deserted flat, brooding in silence. Jeanne guesses, from his accent, that he is American, but she learns nothing more. He offers little comment on the flat, except to suggest that the armchair should be placed not beside the fireplace but in front of the window. At one point, he hides under a sheet, draped over some furniture, and appears to be hunting for something. If she asks a question, he answers with another question. The telephone rings and he picks it up. 'There's no one here,' he says in his flat-toned voice. 'I don't know,' he says and then hangs up. In fact, he lays the receiver on the table, as if to cut off any future communication. Nothing is divulged, nothing is explained. Something is bothering him, but we can't guess what it is.

Nostalgic In one of their rare moments of verbal intimacy, Paul lies on the bed, after sex with Jeanne, and plays a harmonica. An American sound and a sad tune of loss. She asks why he doesn't go back to America and he begins to open up. 'I don't know. Bad memories, I guess,' he begins. Then he describes his parents. His father was 'tough,' his mother was 'poetical' and both were drunks. He remembers his drunk and half-naked mother being arrested one night. Another time, his father forced him to milk the cow before going on a date which meant that his shoes were covered with manure that stank in the car. 'I can't remember very many good things,' he says, almost in tears. 'Not one?' she asks. Then he remembers open fields with wild flowers, a dog and rabbits. 'Very beautiful,' he says and closes his eyes. Paul does not want to live in the past, with his unloving parents and his dead wife, but that one moment of beauty breaks through his denial and gives him a moment of pleasurable recollection.

Cynical Paul, who has been damaged by his childhood and by his wife's death, is cynical about love and happiness. He has an existential belief in our loneliness, which he articulates in a famous scene that takes place in the bathroom when Paul dries Jeanne's wet, nude body. She tells him that she has found a man whom she loves, someone who will give her security and comfort. Paul mocks her, saying that her idea is to hide in a 'fortress of pretended love, where you don't have to feel afraid and lonely.' She says that is exactly what she wants, but he then speaks in an angrier tone and explains that this 'perfect man' will soon possess her like his own fortress, wanting to own her. She protests that she will find this man, but he tells her that is impossible. 'You are alone. All alone. And you won't be able to get rid of that feeling until you look death right in the face.'

Sexuality Similar to Marcello in *The Conformist*, Paul's sexuality is defined by his past, especially the recent suicide of his wife, who, we learn, was also unfaithful to him. Unlike the normality-obsessed Marcello, however, Paul seeks relief from his unpleasant memories through sex, often unconventional sex, including violent sodomy. But the key to his sexuality is his insistence that sex be anonymous, an emotional shutdown that is not unlike Marcello's retreat into obscurity. Paul's sex with Jeanne is not always violent or unorthodox—he is sometimes playful and gentle—but he is always the one in control.

Energy Paul's brooding presence suggests a powerful and pent-up energy, which is displayed in the first scene, when he meets Jeanne in the unoccupied apartment. Having talked about the apartment and who will 'take it,' he then suddenly takes her. There is no foreplay, no hesitation and no words. Instead, he walks up to her, throws away her hat and carries her to the window sill, where he rips off her tights and penetrates her. She responds with equal passion and the sex act is punctuated by his groans and her cries of delight. Losing themselves, they slump to the floor, where he continues his thrusts, and they both have an orgasm. Then, they roll off each other and lie separated, like two tigers in a zoo cage. Paul is still panting heavily, like a sated beast. The scene reveals his raw energy, his deep need to express himself sexually. He doesn't need words, and he doesn't need a bed. He speaks with his libido. This is a key scene because it challenges sexual norms: one shouldn't make love to a total stranger; one shouldn't just give in to sexual desire; we shouldn't have intercourse like animals because then society would break down. Paul's magnetism has swept all those injunctions aside and let him enjoy unconscious sensual pleasure.

Humiliation Paul and Jeanne are in the bathroom, where Jeanne has a towel only half covering her wet body. When she tells Paul that he is the man she loves, the one who can save her from emptiness and with whom she can recover her bourgeois life-style, he humiliates her sexually. First, he tells her to cut the fingernails on her right hand. Then he orders her to stick her fingers up his ass. At first, she doesn't understand, or pretends not to, so he screams at her in anger. He faces the wall and pulls down his trousers and tells her, 'Go on.' As she does what he demands, he says, 'I'm gonna get a pig and have it fuck you and vomit in your face and you have to swallow the vomit. You gonna do that for me?' Jeanne slaps his back but says she will do it. He continues: 'I want the pig to die while you're fucking and you have to go behind it and smell the guts of the pig.' Jeanne, who is still pushing her fingers up his backside, is almost in tears, but Paul does not relent. 'You gonna do all that for me?' Paul does not put her through this ordeal for his own sexual pleasure; he doesn't find her anal penetration stimulating at all. Rather, he uses it and his description of her fucking the pig to degrade her and heap abuse on the bourgeois values that she represents. Here, Paul employs sex as a tool to humiliate and revile.

Rape In this scene, perhaps the most famous scene in this sensational film, Paul is on the floor of the flat, propped up on one elbow. As soon as Jeanne enters, he orders her to 'go get some butter.' She angrily flings the butter on the floor and speaks of his arrogance. Sitting on the floor, she knocks on a board that sounds hollow. 'Maybe there's something hidden there,' she says. Paul crawls over to her and strokes her thigh. 'Maybe there's something in here, too,' he says. 'Jewels, gold.' He looks at her with a hardened face and asks 'You afraid?' She says no, but he replies, 'You're always afraid.' Then he turns her on her stomach, rips down her trousers and applies the butter to her ass. He climbs on, eases himself into her and demands that she repeat his words, which denounce the church as an 'institution that tries to make civilised people out of savages.' At first, she struggles and refuses to obey him, but he becomes more insistent, pins back her arms and continues to thrust into her backside. She repeats his words through sobs until he has an orgasm. This infamous scene (whose controversy has only increased over time) is the reverse of the Jeanne's digital anal penetration of Paul (see the previous 'sexual scene'). Although Paul is in control in both scenes, in this 'butter scene', as it is called, he is the physical aggressor. The scene also corroborates the fact that rape is often driven by motives other than sexual desire. Paul does get some pleasure from his act, but his primary satisfaction derives from hearing his denunciation of the church repeated by Jeanne.

Jeanne Jeanne is young, perhaps nineteen or twenty years old. She is an unremarkable but spirited person born into a bourgeois family. She has a blasé attitude to life, something of a reflection of the 'pop' culture of the 1970s. She is mostly dominated by Paul, but asserts herself with Thomas, her fiancé. She could be viewed as the middle-class victim of the social-rebel Paul, but that characterisation ignores her agency in the sex scenes.

Adaptable Jeanne is adaptable. She can play parts, like a consummate actress, whether with Paul in the room or with her fiancé on the outside. She displays this quality in a scene on a railway station platform, where she has hurried to meet her Thomas after his return from some distant place. She runs to him. They embrace and kiss, and then she realises that they are being filmed. 'Do you know this people?' she asks with indignation, gesturing at the film crew. Thomas explains that it is a film, for television, and that she is the star. 'And you didn't even ask me?' she asks, even more angry than before. She pushes away the microphone that is held up in front of her. 'So, you kissed me because it was a film,' she cries. 'You bastard, you traitor!' He explains that it will be a love story and asks what she has been doing in his absence. She smiles sweetly and lies, 'Oh, I dreamt of you day and night. Darling, I can't live without you.' The unfaithful Jeanne, fresh from sex with Paul, slides seamlessly into the loving Jeanne.

Daughter One side of Jeanne that is only briefly revealed is her love and admiration for her father. That revelation comes as part of a sequence, in which her fiancé is filming her childhood. He encourages her to go back into her youth, which takes on a magical, fairy-tale atmosphere. She speaks of her father, a colonel in the French colonial army that controlled Algeria. She describes him as 'very handsome,' especially in his uniform. 'He had green eyes and shiny boots,' she says. 'I worshipped him.' Her eyes glow and her voice is reverential. As she revels in this description, the scene shifts from Thomas filming her to Jeanne walking naked in the apartment with Paul and then back to her childhood. This is Jeanne before Paul, the young girl, brought up in a bourgeois family, dominated by a manly father whom she loved. Some commentators have suggested she is a female Oedipal figure (an Electra), and that argument has some credibility. In any case, the scene is important because it shows Jeanne as the dutiful daughter, admiring her father and endorsing his life of disciplined morality.

Sexuality Jeanne's sexuality is an expression of her young and hip life-style. When a total stranger (Paul) makes love to her in the apartment that she is considering renting, she does not resist. She is surprised but enjoys it. Although Paul is clearly working out his psychological problems on her with physical menace, she is both excited and complicit in most of the sex (except the rape scene). Like Paul, her attitude to sex appears to have been influenced by her past, but the more distant time of her childhood. She emphasises her adoration for her 'handsome' father, who was an officer in the French colonial army. And she speaks of her cousin, also named Paul, who first taught her how to masturbate. Although she appears to be sexually liberated, she is actually conventional. While she enjoys the secretive sex life she has with Paul in the anonymity of the unoccupied apartment, she remains happily engaged to Thomas, the film-maker. The limits of her attitude to free sex are exposed when Paul wants to take their sex life out into open society and get married. That is too much for Jeanne, and she kills him to prevent it

Guilt-free Jeanne's sexuality is illustrated in the first scene in the unoccupied apartment when she finds a total stranger already there. He is an older, slightly scruffy but nevertheless handsome American. They exchange a few inconsequential words before he makes love to her. She is perhaps surprised by his swift and silent action, but she does not resist. In fact, within seconds she responds to him with a passion that is as savage as his. Her cries of pleasure express her unbound sexuality, her freedom to have sex with whomever she wants, whenever and wherever she chooses. Crucially, this scene establishes her 'agency,' as the jargon has it, that is, her ability to make her own decisions and to behave as she wishes. With the exception of the notorious rape scene, Jeanne cannot be called a victim. She is both fascinated and shocked by Paul's silent and violent sex, but she chooses to participate.

Playful Jeanne's carefree attitude toward sex includes a playful, experimental nature. This playfulness is on display in a rare moment of gaiety, when she and Paul are lying naked on a bed in the apartment. They are sitting up, facing each other, arms around the other's back. She suggests that they try something new. 'Let's see if we can come without touching each other,' she says. He's

incredulous but gives it a go, which fails miserably and predictably. When he says, again, that he doesn't want to use names and would rather use animal sounds, she immediately responds by issuing a shrill bird call. He grunts and she trills, back and forth, until she laughs. This scene lightens the otherwise heavy and dark moments of the love-making and reminds us that Jeanne is young, very young. She enjoys sex, in part, because it enables her to express aspects of herself that have been dormant.

Innocent pleasure Jeanne is a complex mixture of innocence and sexual desire, a young woman who is addicted to sexual pleasure. This side of her character emerges in a conversation with Paul, once more in the apartment. After he has spoken of his childhood, he asks about hers, and she tells him about her first love. He was her cousin, also named Paul. 'I was 13,' she says. 'It was dark...I fell in love with him when I heard him playing piano.' Paul suggests that he 'got into her knickers,' but she is adamant. 'No,' she says. 'No sex. I never let him.' She then explains that she and her cousin sat on two separate trees and both masturbated to see who could come first. He won the contest. Next, Paul wants to know when she first came on her own, and she tells him. 'I was really late for school. I started running down a hill and got a sensation here,' she says, touching her crotch...the faster I ran, the more I came.' Paul appears distracted and turns away, so she cries, 'Why don't you listen? Your solitude is egotistical.' He glares at her, and she cries, 'I can be by myself, too!' As he wanders around the room, preoccupied, she (who is naked to the waist) unbuttons her jeans, lies down on the mattress and masturbates. In this erotic scene, she grinds her hips and buttocks as she pleases herself. We recall that she learned the delights orgasm at an early age. She prefers a partner, but she will go it alone if she has to. The scene is central in establishing her agency as a sexual being.



(The controversial rape scene)



(Jeanne and Paul at the beginning)