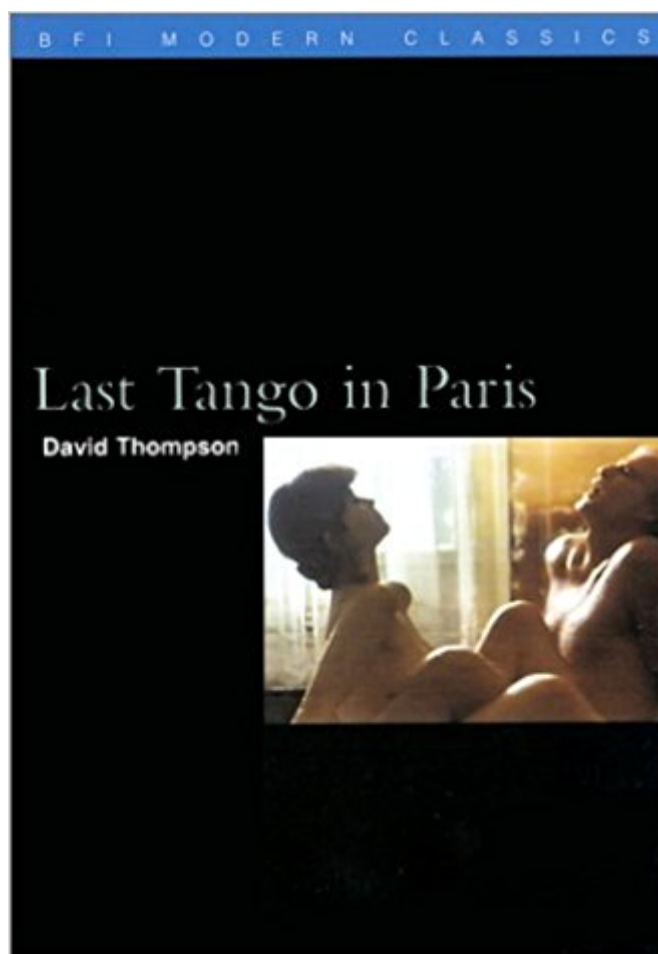


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Last Tango In Paris (BFI Modern Classics)



Synopsis

"Last Tango left me depleted and exhausted. Some of the pain I was experiencing was my very own. Thereafter I decided to make my living in a way that was less devastating emotionally." Thus Marlon Brando recalled, in his autobiography, making Last Tango in Paris. Bernardo Bertolucci's graphic and harrowing account of sexual obsession, grief, psychic breakdown, and murder premiered in 1972 at the New York Film Festival. The print was escorted to the screening by armed guards. On the film's subsequent release in Italy, Bertolucci, Brando, co-star Maria Schneider, and producer Alberto Grimaldi were indicted on obscenity charges and found guilty. Controversy and censorship dogged the film, but it was a great commercial and critical success. Venerated New Yorker critic Pauline Kael called Last Tango "the most powerfully erotic movie ever made." David Thompson's fluent account of Last Tango in Paris details the conception, production, and fortunes of the film. Drawing on a new and extensive interview with Bertolucci, Thompson shows how the film crystallized Bertolucci's interest in art, literature, and psychoanalysis, and how it was realized through the consummate skills of cast and crew. Ending with a discussion of how important this film is for an understanding of Brando, Schneider, and Jean-Pierre Leaud, Thompson unravels the brilliance of Last Tango in Paris' depiction of human behavior and emotion.

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Customer Reviews

David Thompson is a producer of arts documentaries at the BBC. He has made profiles of such

directors as Jean Renoir, Quentin Tarantino, and Milos Forman, and is the coeditor of Scorsese on Scorsese.

When 'Last Tango In Paris' was first shown at the New York Film Festival in 1972, an ecstatic Pauline Kael declared it a New Beginning, a seminal turning point in the history of cinema, as tradition-shattering and forward-looking in its implications for the medium as Stravinsky's 'The Rite Of Spring' was for music. This kind of hyperbole, together with the film's taboo-busting depictions of sexual relations, led to the film becoming an immediate, controversial legend. Now that 'Last Tango' has become a respectable art-house staple, we can now agree with Roger Ebert who sees 'Last Tango' as an End, the last major European movie to make an impact in America, one of the last dramas to deal honestly with adult themes, the culmination of a radical cinephile lineage that would be absorbed and defused by the Movie Brats. David Thompson is not interested in charting this decline. His book is a straightforward account of the film's genesis, context, production and impact. The film arose from Bertolucci's sessions with a psychiatrist, which probably accounts not only for the film's visual motifs, but the confessional monologues that litter it. Bertolucci saw in 'Last Tango' a fusion - of American and European cinema; of formal mise-en-scene with verité and improvisation, and Thompson sensitively draws out the film's tensions and contradictions. He discusses the film's visual influences (in particular, the paintings of Francis Bacon and the French films of the 1930s), and the contributions of significant crew members to the film's texture. His charting the story's development from Bertolucci's initial idea through financial considerations and crucial script changes and omissions to cuts made after the final premiere and the final release, not only shows us the adaptability and openness of Bertolucci's aesthetic, but also alerts us to the shifting nature of the film's meanings. His synopsis of the film itself, and analysis of key scenes, figures, techniques and the interaction of the two plots, is enlightening. The book concludes with essays on the three lead actors, Marlon Brando, Maria Schneider and Jean-Pierre L aud. Those on Brando and L aud in particular show how Bertolucci conflated the actors' iconic image (Hollywood; French New Wave), and their real-life histories with their roles, making the film both more intellectually detached and emotionally engaging. His chapter on Brando, on the personal traumas that fed into his characterisation, goes some way to illuminating the devastating power of his performance. Nevertheless, Thompson assumes that the reader knows 'Last Tango' is a classic, and so doesn't feel the need to defend it - his eliding the film's alleged misogyny is particularly troubling. Bertolucci says that he undertook psychoanalysis for artistic reasons as a way of stimulating and provoking himself and his actors in the search for those 'secret places' of the mind.

It reminds me of the story about Dali who showed Freud a painting he thought revealed his unconscious: 'No, Salvador, that's a painting of what you consciously think is your unconscious'. Doesn't the same problem bedevil 'Last Tango'?

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