

This is a post-print version of the article, uploaded for non-commercial research and education use. It incorporates referee's comments but changes resulting from the publishing process, such as copyediting, structural formatting, may not be reflected in this document. It is not the version of record and therefore has different page numbers.

A definitive version was subsequently published in Clemente, A. y J. Rivero, eds. *El erotismo en la modernidad: estudios sobre el erotismo en la literatura y las artes*. Madrid: Cersa, 2012.

Contact: [cmmendez@ucm.es](mailto:cmmendez@ucm.es)

**The Complications of the Erotic:  
Eroticism in *Last Tango in Paris* and *Une liaison pornographique***

Carmen M. Méndez-García

**Abstract**

Even more so than in other arts, film has tried to draw an artificial but clear line between eroticism and pornography, nonetheless perpetuating moral judgments about movies marketed as “erotic”. The explicit and repeated portrayal of sex in such films would place them dangerously near the vortex of the pornographic, and thus, since they are not concerned with transcendental issues, they would require little or no critical attention.

I will however try to argue, using *Last Tango in Paris* and *Une liaison pornographique*, that many of these “erotic” films conclude that a relationship based solely on sex (i.e. “pornographic”), which ignores the complexities of individual identity and the interpersonal is doomed to fail. Also, I would like to show how these films ultimately conceive of sex as something that goes beyond the merely physical and walks the grounds of such transcendental issues as despair, loneliness, death, or love.

Keywords: film, eroticism, pornography, existentialism, covert, overt.

\*\*\*\*\*

**Las complicaciones de lo erótico:  
erotismo en *El último tango en París* y *Una relación privada***

**Resumen**

Más aún que en otras artes, el cine ha intentado dibujar una frontera clara aunque artificial entre erotismo y pornografía, perpetuando simultáneamente juicios de valor respecto a las películas consideradas o comercializadas como “eróticas”. La representación explícita y repetida del deseo sexual haría que dichas películas se sitúen peligrosamente cerca de la esfera de lo pornográfico y no merezcan por tanto atención crítica, dado que no se preocuparían por cuestiones realmente trascendentes.

Es mi intención analizar, utilizando *El último tango en París* y *Una relación privada*, cómo en muchas de estas películas “eróticas” se concluye que una relación únicamente basada en el sexo (“pornográfica”), que ignore las complejidades de la propia identidad y de lo interpersonal, es imposible, y cómo el sexo se concibe en ellas como algo que trasciende lo físico y se adentra en aspectos trascendentes como la desesperación, la soledad, la muerte, o el amor.

Palabras clave: cine, erotismo, pornografía, existencialismo, cubierto, descubierto.

\*\*\*\*\*

All art, since its inception, has been preoccupied both with issues dealing with pure instinct and also with those complex emotions that set human beings apart from other species on the planet. As Gustav Klimt once said, “all art is erotic”, and thus, in a highly visual age as ours, the debate as to what are the limits of the erotic and what is directly pornographic comes up frequently and strongly in all arts, but maybe more so in film. We

could, therefore, also rightfully extend Gertrude Stein's statement that "literature – creative literature – unconcerned with sex, is inconceivable" to film, as an art that is often analyzed using critical instruments at least partially akin to those used in literature. Maybe due to its wider audience, its availability and success as a leisure activity, or because we cannot escape the visual allure of the moving image and its combination with words, the debates as to what pornography is seem to be more alive and charged when it comes to film than with almost any other form of art. As Rouquet has stated,

plus vite vus que ne sont lus les livres, touchant donc plus d'individus, les films proposent si ce n'est des représentations univoques, du moins projettent des images qui sont autant de sources d'illusions pour un large public qui y puise rêves, sujets de conversation, goût de s'habiller, tics de langages, parfois manières d'être, d'agir ou d'aimer. Cette relation peut certes être inverse; le cinéma n'est lui-même que de son temps. (Rouquet 2002: 157)

Thus, to him, films not only "touch", i.e. affect more people, but also do so more rapidly. Also, he claims that "au cinéma, l'expression du désir est un thème central. Qu'est-ce du reste que le cinéma sinon la projection d'un désir collectif?" (Rouquet 2002: 157). Where, could we ask, but in such a projective art could instinctual collective desires be better represented?

Differences between the modes of portraying desire, between eroticism and pornography, depend on socially constructed moral or legal grounds, and may have considerable aesthetic and economic impact. In the case of film (and also, to some extent, with publishing houses) the industry itself needs often to "censure" itself to get products to reach wide audiences, and thus make money that would be lost if the film ended up in the marginal and shady world of the distribution of porn (now primarily on the internet). It is often difficult for producers to find the balance between satisfying a certain desire to see sex onscreen and avoiding an X rating that would keep a film away from mainstream theaters.

The many nuances in the cinematic representation of sex could lead us to draw an unstable continuum from romantic love to pure instinctual sex. Sabbadini clearly sees a

difference between what he calls “romantic” films and “erotic” films, the difference lying in how “sexuality, while constantly present, remains implicit in the former and explicit in the latter”<sup>1</sup> (Sabbadini 2009: 1441). Aware that the difference between erotic and pornographic is much more difficult to elucidate, he turns to how it may reside in “the most general and subjective terms of what, in a particular place and time, may be considered to be in ‘good’ as opposed to ‘bad’ taste, or aesthetically pleasing as opposed to morally offensive” (Sabbadini 2009: 1441).

One way in which we could further differentiate between what is pornography and what is eroticism onscreen would be the way it relates to the story. While I would not like to fall into clichés about pornographic films having “no story line,” it must be acknowledged that said story line (in those cases where it exists) is usually at the service of the sexual encounters portrayed onscreen. The “porn” movie that could survive a serious critique in terms of plot or characterization is rare indeed, while clearly many “erotic” films have been analyzed using critical instruments from literary analysis and film studies. I would like to suggest that “erotic” films (including the wide variety of categories labeled “erotic thrillers”, “erotic dramas”, or “erotic horrors”, and even “teen sex comedies”), may revolve around a story heavily marked by sex and show this onscreen, but since the story line is not simply scaffolding for the portrayal of sex as would be the case with a pornographic film, they may show some depth and are, thus, worthy of critical attention. In other words, I am arguing against the position, explicitly or implicitly held by some reviewers and many audience members, that the explicit and extensive portrayal of sex necessarily “cheapens” a film, making it less serious or less valuable. But, above all, my analysis will be concerned with how some films considered to be erotic portray the impossibility of such a thing as a solely sexual relationship, which is the main assumption underlying the very idea of the pornographic. Pornography relies on the idea that there can be such thing as just sex, completely disconnected from the emotional intimacy with the other person that sex establishes and foregoing any interaction beyond the physical, and,

---

<sup>1</sup> We find much less convincing Sabbadini’s assertion that “perhaps romantic films . . . [may be] simply what is left behind after you have removed the pornographic scenes from them” (Sabbadini 2009: 1443). As I will argue below, many romantic films, as they are recently marketed, barely touch upon serious issues that some films labeled as “erotic” may dwell on.

furthermore, completely cut off from the deep feelings and beliefs of each of the individuals involved. I would like to argue that many “erotic” films ultimately reinforce the idea that relationships that are defined explicitly or implicitly as “pornographic” are ultimately doomed to either evolve or fail, crumbling with the fluidity of what the erotic is, and with the complexity of human beings in connection to each other.

I intend to argue this point by also using a contrast between what I would like to call “overt” (i.e. explicit) and “covert” (implicit) eroticism in film. To do so, I will be addressing two well-known films that have been labeled as “erotic” (albeit one of them is much more well-known than the other, especially to a Spanish audience): *Last Tango in Paris* (Bertolucci 1972) and *Une liaison pornographique* (Fonteyne 1999). Of course I will also take into consideration that there is a difference of almost three decades between the two films, which might also raise a discussion on how the portrayal of eroticism has changed in the last decades.

*Last Tango in Paris* is one of those movies whose deeper layers of meaning have been hidden, or buried, by a few iconic scenes that have stayed with the collective imagination, even for those who may not have seen the movie. Episodes such as what has been termed the “butter” scene, frequent full frontal nudity by the female protagonist, Maria Schneider, or the well-known still where both protagonists seem to be having an orgasm, which was profusely used to publicize the film on ads and billboards, often make viewers forget, in the long run, what the movie is really about. Eroticism in *Last Tango in Paris* is a conduit for Bertolucci to reflect upon such serious (and arguably non-erotic) subjects as love, death, age, the economic and social models of modernity, and existentialism. Thus though Canadian journalist Arnold Edinborough called it “a savage, brutal movie [involving] realistic grapplings simulating sex, sodomy, fellatio, and mutual masturbation” (Nowlin 2003: 108), Lev has argued that “[its] complexity separates it from

the discourses of pornography and links it with the ambiguous discourse of the European art film”<sup>2</sup> (Lev 2000: 84).

Of course, it can be, difficult to sustain the argument for the “existentialist” quality of *Last Tango in Paris* when the collective memory of the film for a Spanish audience is, precisely, how many Spaniards went all the way to Perpignan to watch it, since the Spanish censors under the Franco dictatorship had kept it from showing in Spain, and how it was advertised, by word of mouth in the last months of open film censorship in Spain, as an erotic film, as were other productions of the 70s such as *Emmanuelle* (1974), *The Story of O* (1975), *In the Realm of the Senses* (1976), or *The Night Porter* (1974). To make it even more attractive, the film conjoined explicit sex onscreen, a conception of sex for sex’s sake with apparently no moral judgment (with the protagonists insisting on anonymity in their arranged, merely sexual encounters) and a cross-generational relationship of 25 years, which perpetuated expectations of morbid sexuality where an experienced, disenchanted, older man was showing the ways of brutal sex to, and thus perverting, an apparently naïve young woman. In fact, the film suffered obscenity charges in Italy (where Bertolucci, Brando, Schneider and the producer were all judged and found guilty) and Canada.

Moving beyond the strongly charged connotations of the film for Spanish audiences, critic Pauline Kael (in what is not only one of the best known reviews of the movie, but also one of the best known reviews in the history of film), claimed in *The New Yorker* that *Last Tango in Paris* “must be the most powerfully erotic ever made” (Kael 1972: 130). Obviously Kael was not distracted by the overt eroticism shown onscreen to the point of being oblivious of what such eroticism meant – the layers of meaning under the surface, what she called the acting out of a “fantasy of ignorant armies clashing by night” (Kael 1972: 130). She, however, pointed out at the expectations that Marlon Brando as a male protagonist, in a film that was advertised as erotic, set for the audience. Brando, no

---

<sup>2</sup> Also, Lev points out that “despite the film’s theme of liberation, Schneider is the only cast member who appears nude onscreen. She thus becomes, at least in part, the traditional object of the male gaze” (Lev 2000: 86). Again, the laws of censorship in most countries differ as to full frontal nudity depending on whether it is male or female nudity, but pornography as a product has been overwhelmingly, till very recently, addressed to men.

longer a young man, was portrayed in *Last Tango in Paris* with no attempt to glamorize his character, but he still bore the suggestions of aggressive masculinity and sexuality that the audience had come to associate with his portrayal of young Stanley Kowalski in *A Streetcar Named Desire* (Kazan 1951). It was partly from Brando's magnetism that the film got what Kael called its "primitive force" and its "thrusting, jabbing eroticism" (Kael 1972: 130).

The eroticism in the film is, however, nothing but a flimsy cover (as the skin covers the soul, one could say), for a series of thrusting, "serious" subjects such as obsession, grief, psychic breakdown, existential angst, dependence, betrayal, and murder. Even sex and love stories, however unconventional, can be seen as politicized if one recognizes that they work "by displacing the assault on bourgeois ideology to the exploitation and destruction of the love object" (Loshitzky 1995: 69). Sex in the movie would then be "essentially political and therefore potentially subversive" (Loshitzky 1995: 70), as it functions to contrast Paul's search for authenticity and Jeanne's bourgeoisie, sheer surface, "pop" lifestyle. The references to pop in the movie (as a "new" way of life defined by superficiality and lack of transcendence) could be contrasted with the use, in the opening credits, of two works by Francis Bacon: *Double Portrait of Lucien Freud and Frank Auerbach* (1964), and *Study for Portrait (Isabel Rawsthorne)* (1964). Bacon's disturbing portraits shine with eroticism, albeit with an apparently twisted and perverted kind. As Ficacci has suggested, "for the . . . existential sensitivity of Francis Bacon, love is a struggle, sexual coupling is a struggle, and in its formal expression, the figure is a struggle between opposing elements" (Ficacci 2003: 48). This affects the way in which, in Bacon, "the act of painting is carried out . . . in consequence of the original impulse received from an indistinct complex of vital sensations" (Ficacci 2003: 49). The Bacon portraits thus set the tone for one of the recurrent ideas in the film: where Jeanne is superficial, playful pop, Paul is Baconian, transcendental turmoil. Sex is the place where the two meet.

At the same time, sex and eroticism are, and not only in *Last Tango in Paris*, linked to death, and this is something we were told by another Freud – Sigmund. Eros and Thanatos: Eros is one side of the coin, the other being death. Paul tries to encounter Eros to

escape Thanatos, but it is precisely his erotic relationship with Jeanne that brings his death: Thanatos seems to lie, expectantly, in the arms of Eros.

Following along the lines of an admittedly oversimplified psychoanalytic reading, sex can be interpreted as “the return of the repressed”, i.e. as an activity that allows the repressed to return. The “butter scene”, where Paul sodomizes Jeanne while making her repeat (or “ejaculate”) a series of slogans against the Church, became famous for its portrayal of a taboo practice onscreen (and for the flat delivery of Marlon Brandon’s “Go get the butter” that sets off that specific sexual encounter). The real depth of the scene, however physically violent, lies in the slogans Jeanne is forced to repeat as Paul is forcing himself on her: “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. You fucking family” (Bertolucci 1972). This is Paul’s anguished cry against the social conventions and institutions that, among other things, keep him from burying his wife because she committed suicide. After being denied absolution and transcendence by a society dominated and controlled by organized religion, Paul searches for a meaning for life in sex and violence. At the same time, in the fantasy that is the room, Paul attempts to separate sex from everything else in their lives, exaggerating aspects of sex such as animality<sup>3</sup> and introducing extreme, disgusting and nauseating elements in their encounters, using degrading fantasies in what we could call an anti-bourgeois gesture.

Erotic fantasies are often linked to a specific place. In the case of *Last Tango in Paris*, this place is very much Paris (with all the romantic connotations the city had already developed as “La ville de l’amour”, which play ironically against the un-romantic sex being portrayed), but, more specifically, it is the hired room where the two characters meet: run down, almost empty, slightly filthy, completely apart from the protagonists’ daily lives, it feels like the perfect venue for an anonymous, against-the-grain, strictly sexual relationship. We, as spectators, see at least something of both protagonists in their normal lives, but they

---

<sup>3</sup> The two characters engage in foreplay that includes animal grunts and movements: these are mirrored by or played off against cuts to scenes with animals (ducks, pigeons) while Jeanne is going about being recorded by her fiancée in her “pop” daily life.

do not see each other's. Strangely enough, since Paul has forbidden any unveiling of their real life to each other, the spectator feels a strange kind of voyeurism in these scenes, sometimes even more so than when explicit sex is being shown. What we get to see partially explains, to us, their sexual desperation and hunger but the characters lack this insight about each other.

Talking about his film, Bertolucci asserted that "sex is simply a new kind of language that these two characters try to invent in order to communicate. They use the sexual language because the sexual language means liberation from the subconscious, means an opening up" (Bertolucci 2000: 94). However, even if sex is a language for both characters to express their different drives, they never get to understand each other. In a scene in the flat, when Paul is being emotional and trying to let Paul into his life, Jeanne prefers to focus on the merely sexual, playing with herself, but they don't see each other during this sequence, even if they are in the same room: the lack of communication is not only verbal as they either do not talk or seem to be engaged in two monologues that never interlock, but also visual as they do not look at each other.

Even though some critics complain that the final scene, where Jeanne murders Paul, seems unrealistic in terms of the way she has behaved so far, the truth is that, as she is portrayed as all surface, Jeanne does not allow the spectator to foresee what her actions may be. We do realize that, as Paul seems intent in having a relationship beyond the flat, Jeanne seems uninterested or even menaced by the depth that she can sense in Paul's nature (and also by the way it could affect her "real" life). Actions escalate, but we had already been given hints of Jeanne's contradictory behavior: she had claimed to be "disgusted" by a rat found by Paul in the flat, but we do not know if she is in fact disgusted by the rat or by Paul himself when she claims she is disgusted, as she immediately tells him that "you're old and you're getting fat" (Bertolucci 1972). Then, Jeanne is also capable of claiming, just a few minutes later, that he's the man she wants to "make love" to. When Paul tries to get their affair out of the room and take it beyond their physical fantasy, Jeanne escapes: while she is racing up to her parents' house, their early fantasy of Little Red Riding Hood, which

we had witnessed as part of their erotic encounters, takes on a menacing hue. When Paul finally tells Jeanne “I wanna know your name” (Bertolucci 1972), a request that is far less violent and menacing than his usual sex advances on her, Jeanne shoots and kills him, murdering, we could argue, what is not solely erotic. As she is making up a story to tell the police, Jeanne repeats

He tried to rape me. He’s a lunatic. I don’t know what he’s called. I don’t know his name. I don’t know who he is. He tried to rape me. I don’t know. I don’t know him. I don’t know who he is. He’s a lunatic. I don’t know his name.  
(Bertolucci 1972)

Alas, in a non-literal sense (one that Jeanne may not be used to), all of this is true. What had been the premise of an erotic fantasy, total anonymity, and what was considered acceptable within the four walls of the room (a kind of consensual rape, and behaviors verging on lunacy when applied to sex) becomes a rationale for murder. Again, Eros and Thanatos meet.

We can find a different treatment of an erotic, apparently merely physical relationship in *Une liaison pornographique* (1998). The titles for both the American (*An Affair of Love*) and Spanish versions (*Una relación privada*) both completely give away and distort the underlying meaning of the relationship portrayed. Provided that titles create expectations about content, the French title suggests pornography, i.e. overt sex shown onscreen, something the film actually does not portray until very late, and when it finally does, we get a sex scene that is conventional, and even awkward in its intimacy, with no pornography involved whatsoever. The American title, however, makes the spectator conceive of the relationship, from the very moment he or she meets the characters as, deep down, an affair of love, while the Spanish title wrongly emphasizes the privacy of the relationship (which is one of its characteristics, albeit not the most important one) and, by calling it a “relationship”, also manipulates the expectations of the spectator, as it is a common cultural assumption that relationships have depth beyond sex. One has to wonder what the reason might have been behind such clumsy translations, and one cannot help but think that maybe it was a question of marketing, since the very appearance of the word

“pornographic” in the title may have kept many theaters from showing the film, and perhaps condemned the film to the “adult” section in video stores. In any case, in the French version the idea that the spectator is going to find pornography in the story is a fundamental expectation when approaching the film. Just as the “tango” in the title of the former film might make us reminisce of an almost ritual, erotic, extremely stylized dance, but the film instead gives us the explicit and anonymous sex the protagonists indulge in, so in *Une liaison pornographique* we expect overt sex, of the kind we found in *Last Tango in Paris*, but we are given, on the contrary, only covert suggestions of sexuality<sup>4</sup> that are not shown onscreen. As Sabbadini suggests, “the word ‘pornography’ literally refers to the *representation* of sexuality” (Sabbadini 2009: 1443) – however, while Sabbadini explicitly says that he disapproves of what he regards in the case of this film as “an incorrect choice of the word ‘pornography’ ”, I would like to argue that the word is not only used, as he suggest, because “it is the film’s protagonist herself who describes her affair as ‘pornographic’ ” (Sabaddini 2009: 1443), but rather because it creates expectations in the audience which are left unfulfilled. This arousal of expectations only to thwart them is therefore central to the message of the film.

*Une liaison pornographique* is, in its essence, a movie not at all about pornography, but about the opposite – about covering and the covert. We are never told explicitly what it is the two characters do behind the closed door of the hotel room in Paris (Paris, again), other than that it is “a fantasy”. We never know the character’s names (even in the end credits, they are only identified as “elle” and “lui”), or anything about their lives beyond their encounters, and the spectators are deliberately excluded from knowing what the fantasy, according to Sabbadini, ultimately a “truth about themselves” (Sabaddini 2009: 144), is. Indeed, the premise of the affair for Paul in *Last Tango in Paris* is, as far as naming is concerned, realized in *Une liaison pornographique*. Paul insisted

---

<sup>4</sup> Interestingly enough, Sabaddini connects *Une Liaison Pornographique* to “a Gallic tradition of post-Nouvelle Vague, post-existentialist romantic films which explore . . . the nooks and crooks of close relationship” (Sabaddini 2009: 1444), just as Lev had defined, as we have earlier noticed, *Last Tango in Paris* as connected to the “ambiguous discourse of the European art film” (Lev 2000: 84).

I don't want to know your name. . . You don't have a name and I don't have a name either. Not one name. I don't wanna know where you live or where you come from . . . I wanna know nothing . . . You and I are gonna meet here without knowing anything that goes on outside here. All the people, all that we do, wherever we live . . . We're going to forget that, everything, everything. (Bertolucci 1972)

And, in fact, the two characters in *Une liaison pornographique* never know each other's names. The unseen interviewer asks "lui": "Vous ne lui avez jamais demandé son nom? Son prénom, au moins"; "Je ne me suis meme jamais posé la question. Je n'avais pas besoin de tout ça. Je l'avais, elle", he answers (Fonteyne 1998). To further emphasize the agreed lack of communication between the characters, when interviewed years later, they even have different remembrances about how they met and about the exact outcome of the only encounter they have that does not enact their shared fantasy.

The spectator constantly expects to get overt sex scenes every time the couple goes into the hotel room, particularly because we know there is a fantasy involved, as the interviewer addressing the two protagonists separately, years later, tries to get them to confess. However, we are kept from watching what the fantasy is, and the two characters, both literally and symbolically, slam the door on us<sup>5</sup> in every encounter in the hotel. The beginning of *Hotel Honolulu*, by Paul Theroux, reflects on how "nothing to me is so erotic as a hotel room, and therefore so penetrated with life and death . . . The hotel bedroom is more than a symbol of intimacy; it is intimacy's very shrine, scattered with the essential paraphernalia and familiar fetish objects of its rituals" (Theroux 2001: 2). By denying us the knowledge of what happens inside the hotel room, the film repeatedly leaves unfulfilled and frustrated the voyeuristic fantasies that are the basis of an erotic (or even pornographic) movie. It is only when the pornographic affair becomes an affair of love that we are allowed to see a conventional, not especially erotic, clumsy and awkward love-making scene, which we must interpret as not related to what had been going on (the fantasy) behind the closed red door up to then. The relationship at this point has veered "from

---

<sup>5</sup> Forcing a psychoanalytic reading, Sabbadini refers to how the spectator "(like the curious child still alive and kicking inside all of us) . . . [is] left, in the company of Fonteyne's camera, discreetly waiting outside the parental bedroom" (Sabbadini 2009: 1445).

perversity to normality, from purely physical sexuality to requited love” (Sabbadini 2009: 1444).

Not only do we not know anything about the characters outside the encounters when they meet at the café and proceed to the nearby hotel, but we never really feel the still waters running deep that could be clearly seen in *Last Tango in Paris*, especially in the character of Paul. “Elle” and “lui” do not seem to be taking refuge in what they call “their fantasy” from existential questions about death, loneliness, rage, desperation, or aging. “Lui” defines their relationship as

sexuelle . . . C’est l’adjectif que j’utiliserais. Notre relation devait être purement sexuelle”; “elle” refers to it as “une liaison, purement, spécifiquement, pornographique . . . La pornographie: du sexe, rien que du sexe, rien d’autre que du sexe . . . Enfin, pour une particularité du sexe. (Fonteyne 1998)

The two characters are just trying to act out a fantasy, in a game that, eventually, has no consequences. The couple (if we are to qualify them as such, in non-romantic terms), does have one peripheral encounter with death, when one of the residents at the hotel suffers a heart attack and they have to take him to ER and then break the news of his death to his widow. Fleeting, and maybe as a result of their brush with the ultimate reality of death, the characters seem to be willing to embark in a relationship beyond the secret fantasy they have been living out, but eventually, in an intimate scene at the café<sup>6</sup>, a combination of cowardice and an unexpected pause at dialogue keeps both of them from confessing their intentions, making them unable “come to terms with . . . the unexpectedly intense, violent almost, emotional side of their relationship” (Sabbadini 2009: 1443). In *Last Tango in Paris*, sex is a disturbing language that nonetheless may be the only one connecting the two characters. Their words at any point might be lies (as, for example, in the scene where Paul tells Jeanne about his childhood), and they never meet at a place associated with quiet conversation as a café is. In *Une liaison pornographique*, we assume that we have been shown part of their relationship through words at least in their meetings

---

<sup>6</sup> The scenes at the café – a public space – seem to pulse with intimacy; they stand in contrast with the physical encounters which are not witnessed – a clear subversion of the expectations created by public and private spaces.

at the café, so we expect their last conversation to be meaningful, indeed to change the course of the story. But here, too dialogue fails, and the two protagonists will only confess, years later, to the unseen interviewer (who stands as a reflection of the spectator) what might have been but wasn't because they couldn't overcome the distance set by words. Sabbadini sees the film as “a profound meditation on intimate communication itself. How do I share my private thoughts and feelings with another person – a parent, a sister, a lover” (Sabbadini 2009: 1444). Ironically, however, even if there is more conversation between the characters here than there was in the Bertolucci film, we know less about them: we never see them in their daily lives, nor do they ever talk to each other about them. As “lui”, rather inconsistently, and mixing, perhaps deliberately, intimacy and importance reasons out,

Je ne savais pas grand chose sur elle. Enfin, si. Des choses intimes. Non. Pas intimes, des choses sexuelles. . . . Tout de suite, il y a eu une règle. Implicite: on ne parle pas de nos vies. Ce qu'on appelle, d'habitude, 'nos vies': l'âge, le nom, la profession . . . Ca n'avait pas tellement d'importance. (Fonteyne 1998)

*Une liaison pornographique* does not end up with murder, as *Last Tango in Paris* does, but rather with a nostalgic remembrance of “elle” seeing “lui” in the crowd a few months after they stop meeting at the hotel, and deciding it is better not to go over and talk to him: she has a fond memory that is preferably left undisturbed. “Lui” keeps the magazine where he found her ad as a nostalgic, romantic memento: “J'aime bien garder des souvenirs. Je suis un romantique”, he says (Fonteyne 1998). We are, thus, left not with closure of the relationship “in the open”, so to speak, but rather with covert memories (neither of the characters will, finally, confess as to what the fantasy was) that read as unsatisfactory. The only sense of closure we can get out of this lack of information is our interpretation that it was, indeed, an affair of love, and that the awkward scene we did witness was, after all, the most important one (where the love “really” happened), with the “pornographic” ones kept from us being finally unimportant when it comes to assessing what the relationship was about. But again, this could just be an attempt to apply the lesson we seemed to learn while watching *Last Tango in Paris* (and probably forgot because of its overt portrayal of sex and eroticism): sex is almost always a battlefield where every battle

is not only physical, but also connected to deeper emotions: despair, the fight against loneliness, the certainty of death, love.

## WORKS CITED

BACON, Francis (1964): *Double Portrait of Lucien Freud and Frank Auerbach*. Moderna Museet, Stockholm.

BACON, Francis (1964): *Study for a Portrait (Isabel Rawsthorne)*. Private collection.

BERTOLUCCI, Bernardo (1972): *Last Tango in Paris*. Perf. Marlon Brando, Maria Schneider. United Artists.

BERTOLUCCI, Bernardo, Fabien S. Gérard, Thomas Jefferson Kline, Bruce H. Sklarew (2000): *Bernardo Bertolucci: Interviews*. Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi.

FICACCI, Luigi (2003): *Francis Bacon 1909-1992*. Köln; Los Angeles: Taschen.

FONTEYNE, Frédéric (1998): *Une liaison pornographique*. Perf. Nathalie Baye, Sergi López. ARP Sélection.

HOFFMAN, J. (1965): "Prolegomena to a Study of Traditional Elements in the Erotic Film." *Journal of American Folklore* 78.308: 143-148.

KAEL, Pauline (1972): "The Current Cinema." *The New Yorker* 28 Oct.: 130.

LEV, Peter (2000): *American Films of the 70s: Conflicting Visions*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

LOSHITZKY, Yosefa (1995): *The Radical Faces of Godard and Bertolucci*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.

NOWLIN, Christopher John (2003): *Judging Obscenity: A Critical History of Expert Evidence*. Montreal; Ithaca, N.Y.: McGill-Queen's University Press.

ROUQUET, François (2002): "Projections de désirs fin de millénaire." *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d'histoire* 3.75: 157-165.

SABBADINI, Andrea (2009): "Between Physical Desire and Emotional Involvement: Reflections on Frédéric Fonteyne's film *Une Liaison Pornographique*." *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 90: 1441-1447.

THEROUX, Paul (2001): *Hotel Honolulu*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.