
CINEMA

Minimal Relationships

By John Weightman

NOT THE LEAST INTERESTING detail about *Last Tango in Paris* is that the first act of copulation between the hero and heroine occurs within minutes of their initial meeting, when they know absolutely nothing about each other and are both fully dressed. It is the first time I have seen a lady in a hat being vigorously assailed by a gentleman in an overcoat. Moreover, the *prise de possession*, as the French call it, is carried out almost absent-mindedly. Marlon Brando hardly looks at Maria Schneider; he just moves towards her, as a cock would sidle up to a hen in a farmyard in the good old pre-battery days; there is a loud squawking, a few feathers fly and the deed is done. Then, having fluffed out their plumage again, craned their necks and looked beadily to left and right, the two participants walk off in opposite directions. Being human, however, they get into the habit of coming back to the same place for more anonymous animality. But, since this is a film, and basically no doubt a commercial one, the pact of bestiality has to go wrong and the story ends with a shooting, like any *crime passionnel*; that is, there is an attempt to maximalise the minimal relationship according to the neo-romantic clichés of the cinema world.

Last Tango compares rather unfavourably, I think with another film about minimal relationships; this is *Heat*, the third Warhol/Morrissey product after *Flesh* and *Trash*, which also ends in a shooting. Bertolucci and/or Brando have no doubt borrowed from Warhol/Morrissey, in the sense that they allow themselves a sexual explicitness that was hardly possible before *Flesh*, but they set this explicitness in a stagey Parisian framework, whereas the weirdies of *Heat* all seem quite credible in the sunlit psychological desert of their part of California. *Heat* has the same modest yet persuasive *cinéma-vérité* atmosphere as *Flesh* and *Trash*. *Last Tango* is much more ambitious and seems to be trying to do for Paris what Antonioni's *Blow-Up* did for London. But, in my view, it doesn't come off. It is a curious film in that the core is sincerely nasty and the outer layers made up of phoney aestheticism.

Appropriately enough, the credit titles are accompanied by two typically frightening nudes by Francis Bacon; Bacon's canvases, when seen from a distance, glow like pretty jewels and it is only at close quarters that the nightmarish twists become apparent.

Actually, there is no real reason why *Last Tango* should be set in Paris, apart from the nostalgic ring of the name in the title, and the Parisian associations of Henry Miller and Ernest Hemingway. We are presumably meant to take Brando as a sort of Miller-cum-Hemingway, the clapped-out American who has had an adventurous life all over the world and who finds himself, in middle age, on the verge of a breakdown in this most prestigious of European cities where, according to legend, all good Americans prefer to come to die. He has been married to a Frenchwoman, a beautiful hotel-keeper, who has been unfaithful to him and has committed suicide with a razor in the bloodiest manner possible. This part of the story is handled melodramatically and incomprehensibly by means of flashbacks. Why was the wife unfaithful? Why did she commit suicide? Why did she, the daughter of respectable provincials, keep *un hôtel borgne*, used by prostitutes, drug-addicts and other drop-outs? Presumably so that Bertolucci can work in some Miller/Hemingway Parisian local colour and Brando can do an embarrassing bed-side scene during which he weeps and curses over his wife's dead body, laid out among a riot of flowers. Unfortunately, none of this is properly motivated; Brando could have been brought to middle-aged despair by much more delicate and convincing means.

We have to accept, then, that he is wandering moodily around Paris and brooding on his middle-aged plight, when he strays into an empty flat, which is also being visited by Maria Schneider, a girl of twenty, who is looking for some place in which to set up after her marriage with her young film-director fiancé. In Paris, where flat-hunting is like trying to find a spare ledge in a gull colony, this large vacant apartment

is available for the asking in a smart area near the Passy Métro station, in a block looked after by an improbable picturesque figure, a mad, Créole concierge. Neither the clapped-out American nor the girl of twenty makes any enquiries about the presumably colossal rent, and they are able to bring along some sticks of furniture and to camp out there for several days, without anybody asking questions. Moreover, in this high-class block, a rat dies conveniently on the bed, thus allowing Brando to make a macabre speech, full of black humour. The speech fascinates by its disgustingness, but the rat is an obvious stage property.

A LOT OF *Last Tango* must, I fear, be classed as unrealistic nonsense. However, there remains the central theme: a middle-aged, nondescript American and an upper-middle-class French girl have sex together in a vacuum, without knowing anything about each other. He, in his despair, is appropriating the girl as a simple point of human contact; he works off his resentment against life by treating her as a pure sex-object, against which he can rub his ego into forgetfulness; as the cynical Chamfort said, love is not a relationship, it is only *le frottement de deux épidermes*. The hero mutters his filthy, sadistic musings into the heroine's ear and sodomises her energetically without so much as a by-your-leave. She, for her part, enjoys a holiday from respectability and from the pseudo-poetic fancies of her fiancé, who is trying to make her the central figure in a silly film about *la jeune fille française*. No *jeune fille* she, but an unpaid whore associating with an unknown man in degradation therapy. No flowers, courtship or even compliments (instead, he comments in the crudest possible manner on the exceptional size of her breasts). Just a bed, a floor, a lavatory pan, a bath and a packet of Normandy butter, the traditional folk lubricant, which has caused a lot of surprising surprise, even in France; perhaps the French themselves are forgetting their fundamental traditions and no longer read Céline. All this seems sincere enough, and the two partners go at it with such a will that they don't seem to be acting the characters, but living them. Brando gives the impression of improvising out of his personal situation as an ageing international sex-symbol, while Maria Schneider comes over powerfully as a quite shameless young *tempérament*, even more direct than Mme Bardot was in her prime. One wonders, in fact, if this sort of permissive film does not allow the actors to go beyond acting and to engage in a truth game, a public ritual of narciss-

sistic self-revelation, which blurs the distinction between life and art. One certainly comes out of the cinema with the slightly uncomfortable feeling of having been put in the position of a *voyeur*, which is not the effect of average, artificial "porn."

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IN THE CASE of *Heat*, Mr Jimmy Vaughan, the English distributor, said at the press show that the performers were all "more or less acting themselves", and he added that the unbalanced young girl who is one of the main characters had committed suicide since the completion of the film. One can only feel relieved that she has escaped from the dilemma of being an alienated daughter, an unwilling, unmarried mother and a bisexual nymphomaniac with no earning power and nothing but hang-ups to her name.

Heat continues the black humour of *Trash*,¹ but in a rather more enjoyable form. Joe D'Allesandro is presented this time as a former Hollywood child star trying to get back into films after doing his military service. However, as in *Flesh* and *Trash*, he is still basically a prostitute, living from moment to moment according to the custom he attracts. He arrives at a motel containing a typical collection of Warhol grotesques, including the unbalanced girl already mentioned, a perpetually masturbating imbecile and a sadistic Lesbian who specialises in cigarette burns. This interesting house is run with discipline by a fat lady, Pat Ast, who promptly takes Joe to bed in lieu of rent. Soon he moves up the social scale by becoming the gigolo of an ageing, much-divorced film-star, Sylvia Miles, who lives in a vast mansion and is the mother of the unbalanced girl. When she fails to get him back into films and begins to have money troubles, he simply walks out on her and returns to the motel. She follows him and, parodying Gloria Swanson in *Sunset Boulevard*, tries to shoot him. But she has forgotten to load the gun, and the film ends with her throwing it crossly into the swimming-pool, to the accompaniment of the universal, excretory American swear-word, which would, perhaps, have made a better title for the picture than "Heat."

The virtue of the Warhol/Morrissey team is that they are almost completely honest about the shallowness, shoddiness and uncentredness of the characters in their films. Everything is ultimately related to money, of course, because the characters have to survive, at least at subsistence level (no romantic fantasy, for instance, like the flat in *Last Tango*), but they use the money only to go on living their footling, unstructured lives with the appalling amateurishness that most of us bring to the problem of existing. If Warhol and Morrissey are themselves decadent deviants

¹ See my comments in ENCOUNTER, June 1971.

—and this is certainly the image they seemed to be trying to project in the David Bailey TV film,² at least they are decadents being sincere about decadence, and therefore about general human nature, of which decadence is only the permanent sump.

The peculiar flavour of the film is due in part to the fact that the amoral Joe, although he is now, perhaps, beginning to put on a little weight, is still a monument of mindless physical beauty around which the other characters move, but with which they can establish no psychological contact, because there is no whole person inside the beautiful body to be contacted. Either he is afflicted with the numbness of the Absurd, which seems unlikely, or he is near to mental deficiency; and anyway, the other characters themselves are nearly as minimal. The fat lady, who has a sharp eye for a bargain, buys his favours at once, and there is a marvellously poetic love-scene, in

which the traditional sex-relationship of Beauty and the Beast is reversed. Either Warhol or Morrissey has an extraordinarily keen sense of the pathetic fragility of beauty and the aggressive beauty of ugliness. The ageing film-star rattles on about love, fidelity, art, and motherhood with the desperate loquacity of someone who has never understood anything about anything and, although herself an ex-beauty, shows that she has nothing like the fat lady's firm grasp on sexuality. The unbalanced young girl cries raspily for money, attention, and sexual satisfaction, like a damaged young bird that has fallen from a well-feathered nest and will never make a go of life at all.

The more I reflect on this trilogy of films—*Flesh*, *Trash* and *Heat*—the more I am convinced that, in spite of their haphazard nature and the occasional concessions to automatic obscenity, they have a curious quality which gives them a special place in the ephemeral world of the cinema. Let us hope that Warhol/Morrissey, having now broken into the big money, will not go the way of most flesh and lose the strange poetic flair they have exhibited so far.

² See *Warhol: David Bailey's TV Interviews*. Photographs by DAVID BAILEY. Bailey Litchfield/Mathews, Miller, Dunbar, £1.75.

Choral Song

We are not citizens
But victims of the city
To which the busy joys
Of civil life commit
Us willy nilly.

Witless artisans
Or instinctive builders,
Our business bewilders
Your repulsive pity;
Our insect kingdom

Knows no unemployment,
No loyal opposition,
No leisure and no merit.
Our architecture tells you
What enjoyment

Among the denizens
Of hive and anthill is:
The energetic ethic
And collective eros of
Your spineless neighbours.

Daryl Hine