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Last Tango in Paris (Blu-ray)

(MGM Home Entertainment, 2.15, 2011)

Bernardo Bertolucci's *Last Tango in Paris* is one of the films that made the 1967-1977 period the most exciting ever for many cinephiles. The 1972 film does not seem quite as revolutionary as it did at the time, and it did not, as Pauline Kael and others insisted it would, change narrative cinema forever. Yet it is still an excellent film, rivaling [The Conformist](#) as the director's best. Paul (Marlon Brando) and Jeanne (Maria Schneider) meet while apartment hunting and immediately launch a passionate affair. Paul's wife has just committed suicide, and Jeanne's boyfriend (Jean-Pierre Léaud) is a self-centered film director. The two use sex as an escape and, because Paul initially insists they remain anonymous, as a substitute for communication. The considerable amount of nudity and sex seems rather tame, but it was shocking at the time, earning an X rating and fierce opposition to its exhibition in some American cities. Most notorious is Paul's use of butter to penetrate Jeanne anally. Sex, however, is merely one component of Bertolucci's look at the emptiness of modern lives. The film works best as a psychological drama with Brando giving one of the most emotionally raw performances ever, arguably this great actor's best. Although many cite Paul's casket-side talk with his wife's corpse as Brando's highlight, even better is a postcoital scene with Jeanne in which Paul reflects upon his lost youth, supposedly drawn from Brando's own memories. While this Blu-ray may be too grainy for some (excavations of the soul shouldn't look pretty), it ably conveys what Bertolucci and cinematographer Vittorio Storato were trying to achieve. Many scenes are shot beside windows with what appears to be natural light pouring in to illuminate the actors' faces, this yellow glow suggesting a brighter world from which Paul and Jeanne are trying to escape. *Last Tango in Paris* is far from perfect, with the scenes between Schneider and Léaud a tad tepid and arbitrary, and it's depressing, but in a strangely bracing way because of the relentless means with which it engages the viewer's intellect and emotions. Best of all is Brando giving a master class in Method acting, film acting, well, hell, acting, slowly peeling away Paul's self-protective layers to reveal a tormented soul just like those in the Francis Bacon paintings in the opening credits. What did Bacon think of it, you ask? Well, there are no extras to tell us that or anything else.—Michael Adams