

Last Tango In Paris

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BBFC

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Bernardo Bertolucci's story about a purely physical relationship between two characters who meet in Paris (played by Marlon Brando and Maria Schneider) was submitted to the BBFC at the end of 1972.

It had already caused controversy at the New York Film Festival in October 1972 but had also received critical acclaim as a serious and important film. The New York screening was followed by several lurid and inaccurate articles in the British tabloids, claiming that the film contained 'a series of blistering sequences guaranteed to knock the bottom out of the backstreet porno market'.

The BBFC's concerns centred around two scenes - one involving some very explicit sexual dialogue and one involving an explicit scene in which the two characters employ butter as a sexual lubricant. Ultimately the BBFC decided that the explicit dialogue could remain because it could not be easily removed without damaging an important part of the film. However, it was decided that the problematic sex scene could be reduced in duration without any serious damage. The distributors agreed to make a cut lasting about 20 seconds but the cut was appealed against by the film's director and, following meetings between the film's producer and BBFC Secretary, Stephen Murphy, a compromise was reached in which only 10 seconds were cut. The film was therefore passed X after one cut on 16 February 1973. To a certain extent the BBFC's decision to cut the film was a political concession to those critics who had accused the BBFC of being too liberal over *The Devils*, *Straw Dogs* and *A Clockwork Orange*. However, the token cut was insufficient for those who wanted to see the film banned outright, and the BBFC's decision to classify the film was instantly attacked by certain sections of the press and by Mary Whitehouse's Festival of Light.

As was normal in the early 1970s some local authorities bowed to pressure and prohibited the film. However, it received favourable write ups from the film critics and played unopposed in most areas.

Events took an unprecedented turn, however, when Edward Shackleton, a 69 year old Salvation Army member, brought a private prosecution against the film's distributors for publishing obscene material. The case ultimately collapsed when it was found that the Obscene Publications Act (OPA) did not apply to film.

It was therefore rather ironic that when the OPA was applied to film, by the Criminal Law Act 1977, the BBFC's response was to waive its original 1973 cut and pass the film X uncut. According to the new Secretary of the BBFC, James Ferman, the application of the OPA to this film guaranteed that it must be considered as a whole and that a defence of artistic value was applicable. Therefore the film was not obscene in its complete version. The Board's decision to waive the cut provoked no comment and the film was subsequently passed 18 uncut for video release in 1988.