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ORPHEUS TRANSCENDING: BERTOLUCCI'S
LAST TANGO IN PARIS

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- Remember the first day? 'Madame will you give me the pleasure of this dance?'
- 'But, sir, I don't know how to dance the tango.'
- 'Nothing simpler, madame. I hold you in my arms. You've only to let yourself go.' . . . Ah, the uncertainty, the delicious disturbance of that first day of days. The searching, the awareness, the groping toward the unknown . . .

JEAN ANOUILH, *Eurydice*

Amid all the heated debate concerning *Last Tango in Paris*—whether or not Mailer is right about Schneider's underwear, whether Brando emerged with irreparable psychic scars; whether butter is really better—much of the basic structure and message of the film have been overlooked. Despite its intensely personal references and its apparent looseness of construction, the film embodies an unusually coherent structure based on an intricate series of allusions to the ancient Orpheus-Eurydice myth, on the masterful interweaving of this myth with Bertolucci's already tested (in *Partner* and *The Spider's Strategem*) theme of the double, and on the psychological meaning which emerges from their confrontation.

According to the myth, Orpheus' wife Eurydice was fatally bitten by a serpent while fleeing the advances of her lover, Aristaeus. Inconsolable at her death, Orpheus managed to obtain permission from the gods of Hades to descend into the world of the dead to retrieve her. The infernal deities, softened by his poetry and music, allowed her to return to earth on condition that Orpheus precede her the entire way without looking back. Orpheus broke this command, turned to look back and instantly lost Eurydice forever. Orpheus was subsequently set upon by the Thracian *maenads* during a Bacchanalia and was dismembered and devoured.

Although a first viewing of the film may not immediately convince one of the parallels between Paul (played by Brando) and Orpheus

—especially since, like the transcriptions of the myth by Cocteau, M. Camus and Tennessee Williams, Bertolucci's version is as much a perversion as a restatement—recourse to the basic structure of the film will elucidate the parentage.

Tango, in simplest terms, presents a man, grief-stricken at the death of his wife (Rosa) who died apparently to escape an impossible situation with her husband (Paul) and her lover (Marcel). The man expresses a desire to get her back (in both senses of the term), fails, and is finally killed by an avenging female.

Paul's apostrophe to Rosa's corpse provides one of the keys to understanding the mythic structure. Although occurring late in the film, the apostrophe to Rosa's body is crucial: it retroactively elucidates Paul's relationship with Rosa and provides a comprehensible underlying motive for his otherwise inexplicable search for an apartment and his complex affair with Jeanne. Beside her beflowered bier, he intones a lament which gradually becomes a terrible but impotent accusation: Rosa was a 'goddam fucking whore' and a 'pig-fucking liar', her suicide (accomplished with her lover Marcel's razor!) was a betrayal. Paul pleads, cajoles and raves at her inert remains, vowing, 'I'd do it too, if I knew how, I just don't know' (Bertolucci & Arcalli, pp. 166-67). What bothers him most about Rosa is her inaccessibility:

Even if the husband lives two hundred fucking years, he's never going to be able to discover his wife's true nature. I mean, I might be able to comprehend

the universe, but I'll never discover the truth about you, never. I mean, who the hell were you? (pp. 165-66).

It would take an eternity to get to know a woman. Yet Paul clearly rejects eternity as his refusal to allow her the rites of the Church makes clear: 'No one believes in the fucking God here!' (p. 63). Paul must thus search elsewhere for communion, understanding and vengeance. He chooses for his purposes one of Bertolucci's favourite themes, the double. The love-aggression ambiguity between Paul and Jeanne can therefore be understood as the displaced frustrations of the Paul-Rosa relationship. Indeed, it is remarkable that the first moments of the scene beside Rosa's bier lead us to believe that Paul is addressing Jeanne—only after several sentences does the camera shift from Paul to the dead woman.

The film opens with a series of highly symbolic and deliberately allusive camera shots. Our first view is of Paul, then of Jeanne, who overtakes and passes him. The camera then pans to a shot of the bridge and the river, deliberately emphasizing their transition. (It will, of course, be remembered that according to Greek mythology one was obliged to cross the river Styx to reach the gates of the world of departed spirits.) Jeanne thus precedes Paul on to the Quai de Passy (whose very name constitutes an allusion to death: *passy* 'passage' - *trépasser* 'to die') from a most dramatic visual of the tressle become cavernous tunnel. The camera quickly cuts to groups of riot-police who appear to be guarding the far bank, in what I believe to be an early allusion to another well-known interpretation of the Orpheus myth. (Bertolucci has insisted not only on his own early immersion in film, but also his propensity to refer constantly to other films in his own work, see Michener, 1973.) In Cocteau's film, *Orphée*, the same aggressively militaristic, uniformed French police deliberately represent the personal guardians of death's kingdom.

Once past these guardians of the other bank (which include a mysterious Neptune-like sweeper who appears to attempt to sweep Jeanne away and an old hag who literally bares her teeth at the young woman) Paul and Jeanne find themselves in the rue Jules Verne, an apparently innocuous detail until one realizes

that the geography of Paris has been deliberately, and therefore presumably purposefully, scrambled. The actual rue Jules Verne is situated far from the Quai de Passy, in the heart of the Eleventh Arrondissement. Once again Bertolucci alludes to Cocteau's celebrated film of 1950 in which he effected the creation of an imaginary city out of Paris. In that earlier film Orpheus got out of his car at Grenelle, walked up the Buttes-Chaumont and arrived at the Place des Vosges. The choice of rue Jules Verne constitutes in itself an allusion to the fantastic voyage of self-discovery Paul is about to undertake and to which I shall return below.

Just before entering the heavy iron gates Jeanne pauses very insistently to consult her watch, another allusion to Cocteau's film in which the Princess repeatedly stops to consult her watch as Orpheus follows her through Paris. Both gestures, of course, allude to Lewis Carroll's White Rabbit who is also preoccupied by time immediately prior to his plunge down the hole leading to Wonderland.

Once inside the heavy iron gates of the apartment building, Jeanne suddenly encounters the sinister West Indian concierge who raspily intones, 'Some funny things going on around here'. Refusing at first any knowledge of the vacant apartment, refusing to visit it because of the 'rats up there' and then only grudgingly producing a *double* of the missing key, she suddenly seizes Jeanne's hand and holds her prisoner for several anguished moments. One remembers that, according to Greek legend, the vestibule of hell is traditionally guarded by the Erinyes/Eumenides, who sit in cages and harass every new arrival. Robert Alley's 'novel' based on the film describes her voice as 'immensely old. It was as if Jeanne was attempting to gain entrance to some shadowy and threatening netherworld, and the gatekeeper was bent on preventing her. This old woman, like Charon at the gates of Hades, demanded payment before admitting supplicants; Jeanne wondered if she would disappear in the depths of the building', and the place becomes a 'place out of time, where there were no real people doing the things real people did, just the deformed and the almost-dead' (Alley, 1973, pp. 13-14). Similar witch-like figures can be

found in both Camus's *Orfeu Negro*¹ and Tennessee Williams's play, *Orpheus Descending*, filmed as *The Fugitive Kind*.

Jeanne's entry into the apartment (the living-room of which is a perfect Dantesque circle) becomes yet another allusion to previous recent versions of the myth. As she passes through the doorway of the apartment, the camera shifts from a direct to a mirror-reflected shot of Jeanne, so that she appears to pass through the looking-glass to enter. Cocteau's Orpheus had also to pass through the mirror of his bedroom in order to visit Hades, and in that film, 'Mirrors are doors through which death comes to get souls.' Thereafter, each time the two return to the apartment, they are projected on to it by means of jump-cuts which break the normal time-space continuum in a most disconcerting way.

The rest of their first meeting continues the mirror's allusion to an almost infernal world, removed from yet somehow parallel to accepted reality. This parallelism is further reinforced by the fact that Paul leaves behind in his hotel a double of himself in Marcel. Bertolucci himself referred to the apartment as '*un espace privilégié*' (Godard, 1972). The series of homing rituals which follow (discussion of where the chair should be placed, use of the toilet and telephone), begin to establish Jeanne's role as Rosa's surrogate. Significantly, too, in the later scene in which mysterious movers carry in unannounced and never-to-be-explained furniture, one of them addresses Jeanne as if she was Paul's wife.

The unexpectedly abrupt sexual encounter which terminates this scene further contributes to the Jeanne-Rosa doubling, both in identifying the former as Paul's mate and in typing her as whore, the accusation Paul will later level at the dead Rosa. In that Jeanne's relations with Paul constitute a betrayal of her boyfriend (Tom), she also imitates Rosa's betrayal of Paul.

Further, when Paul tells the unknown telephone caller, 'There is no one here', he is

announcing their symbolic death and finalizing the separation from their normal social roles and identities, preparing the intricate relationship they are to share within the 'privileged space'.

Both of the succeeding scenes serve primarily to insist on the presence of doubles in the film. Jeanne's 'real' boyfriend, Tom (played by Jean-Pierre Léaud), emerges from a train and attempts to capture Jeanne with a violence equal to Paul's but displaced here on to the camera. Throughout the film we are to witness the same explicit parallelism of behaviour between Paul and Tom with, in each case, Tom's version of Paul's behaviour expressed in terms of a displacement from a sexual or active to a photographic or 'distanced' form of interaction. Frustrated by his voyeuristic ebullience, Jeanne sarcastically mimics his romantic excesses, but Tom's distance permits even this sarcasm to be treated as a cinematographic element equally as functional as her other emotions. 'Magnifique!' he cries, 'Cut!' (p. 45).

Bertolucci does and Rosa has. He cuts to a bloodstained room where a maid languidly describes and re-enacts for Paul Rosa's suicide. Following her description of the wrist-slashing, she explicitly reintroduces the theme of the double, saying, 'I did everything like her' (p. 46). Paul angrily seizes her wrists and neck, but quickly pushes her aside and leaves. This momentary anger at an explicit double of Rosa suggests Paul's real emotions about the dead woman. In his own hotel, however, he is frustrated in his attempt to express his anger; a frustration which throws him back on the other double or surrogate, Jeanne.

Two rapid jump-cuts, one to the Styx-Seine as symbolic recrossing and a second to the door of the apartment, bring us back to Passy. Jeanne enters simultaneously with the mysterious group of movers, and then she and Paul continue symbolically to re-enact Paul's home life. The intimacy which this appears to create leads Jeanne to ask Paul his name and thereby

¹ I believe that, in the context of this discussion, a later scene in the hotel in which Paul demonstrates his power with light by pulling the fuse can be considered a further allusion to Camus's film. In that earlier work, Orpheus' poetry is portrayed as having the power and responsibility of raising the sun. Paul's darkening of the

hotel elicits, moreover, a spectral group of Blacks in almost carnival costume and carrying musical instruments. Furthermore, Paul is a bongo player himself, and the entire film score is underscored with recurrent hot bongo and steel drum sounds.

elicits the sacred law governing their continued existence together. Paul proclaims furiously,

You don't have a name, and I don't have a name, either. No names here . . . We don't need names here . . . We're going to forget everything we knew . . . All the people, all that we do wherever we lived . . . Everything! (pp. 55-56).

This absolute interdiction to consider each other's indentity (which is a direct function of the past) metaphorically parallels the divine command to Orpheus not to look back. Paul's subsequent violations of his own operating rules will fatally doom their relationship as inevitably as Orpheus' disobedience.

During their third meeting, Paul exclaims: 'Let's just look at each other . . . It's beautiful without knowing anything' (pp. 68-69). But moments later Jeanne-Eurydice tricks Paul into turning back to some bitterly nostalgic revelations about his youth. Although no separation immediately follows this violation of the code, a more subtle rupture occurs. Henceforth we do not witness a single fecund act of love between the two. After Paul's monologue Jeanne masturbates while Paul looks on in tears. Their next encounters are punctuated by violent acts of sodomy, obviously sterile and painful exercises.

Their final and irrevocable separation occurs late in the film when Paul, like Orpheus, cannot resist the temptation to look back. After, significantly, recrossing the river, Jeanne emerges from the tunnel (the first visual reference to the tunnel since their original 'descent') and is suddenly overtaken by Paul who brazenly reveals his name and profession. Jeanne's answer can only be: 'It's over.' From that moment Jeanne quits her role as Eurydice and becomes instead a castrating *maenad*.

She leads him first to a cheap dance hall, where they parody both a Bacchic orgy and their own sexual rituals. Jeanne then manipulates him to a climax only to desert him, an unmistakable gesture of castration.

In Tennessee Williams's *Orpheus Descending* filmed as *The Fugitive Kind*, Orpheus (played, significantly, by Marlon Brando!) is castrated with a blow torch. Jeanne takes up a com-

parable instrument in the closing moments of the film to fire at close range into Paul's lower abdomen.

The structure and development of the film thus parallel to a remarkable degree those of the myth. And yet, the mere presence of these allusions does not in itself provide an explanation of the meaning of the film. To translate these mythic figures into interpretation we must search behind the myth, as Freud did with the Oedipus legend, recognizing that myths are actually paradigms of mental processes, namely 'distorted vestiges of the wishful phantasies . . . the secular dreams of youthful humanity' (Freud, 1908, p. 152). Since the Orpheus myth is most obviously the re-enactment of a rescue-fantasy, we should first seek deeper understanding of the work in that aspect of mental functioning. But first we must ask, who is being rescued?

By his insistent allusions to Cocteau's use of the Orpheus myth, and particularly through insistence on the passage through the mirror, Bertolucci suggests an answer to this question, for obviously in Cocteau's films, *Orphée* and *Le Sang d'un poète*, the mirror serves primarily to reflect oneself and to pass through the mirror represents a fantasy of self-exploration. Michel Serres (1974) has demonstrated how, in another version of the Orpheus myth alluded to in this film, Jules Verne's novel *Le Château des Carpathes*, the Orpheus figure pursues his own image into a 'sacred space', perceives the image of his loved one (i.e. himself) on a screen and plunges through the screen causing an explosion of the entire inner space (i.e. goes mad).

To what extent is *Tango* similar? The key to Paul's self-recuperation lies not only in the use of mirror-imaging (to which I shall return) but also in the correct identification of the Rosa-Jeanne figure. Rosa, we must remember, functioned primarily as a mother-wife figure for Paul. She had 'adopted' him and supported him for years, but had never completely satisfied him. She becomes an object of intense ambivalence—a desired love-object and a hated betrayer (because of her lover Marcel).² This mother-role

as their subject the mother's sexual activities under the most diverse circumstances, and the consequent tension leads particularly readily to his finding relief in masturbation.'

is reiterated visually when the chambermaid, a remarkable look-alike of Rosa's mother, re-enacts Rosa's suicide in the manner described above. Moreover, Paul vents his ambivalent feelings both on to this surrogate (by grabbing her wrists and throat) and directly on to Rosa's mother at several points in the film. Indeed, he says to his mother-in-law after biting her hand, 'Rosa was a lot like you, . . . People must have told you often . . . Isn't that right mother?' Rosa's mother answers, ' . . . two sisters' (pp. 107-08).

Winnicott (1967, p. 27) has noted the mother's function as mirror in child development: 'What does the baby see when he or she looks at the mother's face? . . . himself or herself. In other words the mother is looking at the baby and what she looks like is related to what she sees there.' Such a function is normally greatly transformed in adult behaviour, and would be overinterpretative in this instance were it not for several factors: the insistent presence of mirrors in the film—especially in scenes weighted with problems either of self-definition or regression; the emphatically regressive sexual behaviour of Paul in the apartment and the allusion to Francis Bacon which opens the film.

The two Bacon paintings occupying the split screen at the outset of the film constitute both a call for identity and a reference to the mirror, for ' . . . to look at a painting by Bacon is to look into a mirror and to see there our own afflictions and our fears . . . ' (Rothenstein, 1964, p. 15). Rothenstein also notes that Bacon's preference for glazing his paintings derives from 'his belief that the fortuitous play of reflections will enhance his pictures. His dark blue pictures in particular, I heard him observe, gain by enabling the spectator to see his own face in the glass.' Winnicott (1967), in his essay on the mother's mirror-role, insists on Bacon's allusion to the mirror and identity:

Francis Bacon . . . the exasperating and skillful and challenging artist of our time who goes on and on painting the human face distorted significantly . . . is seeing himself in his mother's face, but with some twist in him or her that maddens both him and us . . . Bacon's faces seem to be far removed from perception of the actual; in looking at faces he seems . . . to be painfully striving towards being seen, which is at the basis of creative looking (p. 29).

Winnicott further relates Bacon and mirroring to a more fundamental historical process (which seems to be so central to Paul's experience with Jeanne and to have been so absent from his life with Rosa):

I am linking apperception with perception by postulating an historical process (in the individual) which depends on being seen. When I look I am seen, so I exist. I can now afford to look and see. I now look creatively and what I apperceive I also perceive . . . (ibid.).

Winnicott quotes one of his patients as having said, 'Wouldn't it be awful if the child looked into the mirror and saw nothing!' (p. 31). The only glimpses we have of Paul's relationship to Rosa are characterized by this same fear and frustration. In her bier she is an expressionless (embalmed) mask, incapable of returning any image whatsoever. Her mother (whose resemblance to Rosa Paul notes) wears a similar mask in life. And there is a further allusion to Rosa's blindness while alive. As Paul leaves the room of his double, Marcel, he muses, 'I wonder what she ever saw in you.' By condensing this expression of anxiety here displaced on to an explicit double, we must understand, 'I wonder what she ever saw in me?' These feelings may explain why, in the hotel lobby with Rosa's mother, Paul instinctively extinguishes the lights.

The Orpheus rescue fantasy, then, would respond to the thoroughly ambivalent retrieval of Rosa, using Jeanne as surrogate: to get her back in both recuperative and vengeful terms, where the need for recuperation is, as I have suggested above, most tellingly revealed by the mirrors and the mother-role to be one of rediscovery of identity, i.e. *self-rescue*. Also, to the degree that Jeanne performs simultaneous roles as sex object and mother-surrogate for Paul, we must realize that there is another level of self-rescue at work here:

The mother gave the child life, and it is not easy to find a substitute of equal value for this unique gift. With a slight change of meaning, such as is easily effected in the unconscious and is comparable to the way in which in consciousness concepts shade into one another, rescuing his mother takes on the significance of giving her a child or making a child for her—needless to say, one like himself. This is not too remote from the original sense of rescuing, and the change in meaning is not an arbitrary one. His mother gave him a life—his own

² Freud (1910a, p. 171) notes of the natural development of ambivalence toward the mother, 'If these impulses do not quickly pass, there is no outlet for them other than to run their course in phantasies, which have

life—and in exchange he gives her another life, that of a child which has the greatest resemblance to himself. The son shows his gratitude by wishing to have by his mother a son who is like himself: in other words, in the rescue phantasy he is completely identifying himself with his father. All his instincts, those of tenderness, gratitude, lustfulness, defiance and independence, find satisfaction in the single wish *to be his own father* (Freud, 1910a, p. 173, Freud's italics).

Bertolucci himself terms the entire relationship for Paul an 'obvious search for authenticity' (Bachmann, 1973). Practically every detail of their secret life together reinforces this interpretation.

In this privileged space, womb-like in shape and colour, undoubtedly serving as a representation of the unconflicted part of the ego, Paul announces the Orphic command of refusal to look back, thereby attempting to eliminate memory, culture and civilization and all that they mean in terms of taboos, inhibitions, repressions and defences. Just as in primitive language or in the language of dreams, where 'contradictory concepts have been quite intentionally combined, not in order to produce a third concept, . . . but only in order to use the compound to express the meaning of one of its contradictory parts' (Freud, 1910b, p. 157), this command simultaneously prohibits (on the explicit level) and permits (on the unconscious level) a particular mode of behaviour. We must bear in mind here that, according to Bachmann (1973), Bertolucci has explicitly stated that the film is 'a form of dream' and that 'Brando . . . feels, in a way, that he is as much the son of his wife as he is the father of this girl . . .'. Paul is thus free (with Jeanne mirroring and approving him) to experiment in regression to earlier stages of sexual development; pure oedipal desire, onanism (Freud, 1910a), anal-eroticism and even bestiality (with the dead rat). The ultimate expression of this regressive and thoroughly narcissistic desire occurs during their last moments together in the apartment, when Paul exclaims (ironically, as it turns out, describing himself):

You want this gold and shining powerful warrior to build you a fortress where you can hide in . . . Well, then it won't be long until he'll want you to build a fortress for him out of your hair and your smile—and it's someplace where he can feel—feel comfortable enough and secure enough so that he

can worship in front of the altar of his own prick (p. 159).

While, in a sense, this privileged space is without taboos (i.e. without father or social presence) and Paul is free to act out his every fantasy, conflict is nevertheless hinted at and occasionally acted out. Jeanne is constantly verging on her more social role, frequently seeking to recall (by tricking him into revealing it) Paul's social identity and destroy his fantasies. In return Paul acts out his conflicts in the sodomy scene in which he simultaneously gratifies a thoroughly regressive sexual fantasy, punishes the mother-surrogate and attacks the whole institution of family, i.e. the system of lies perpetrated on the child by authority figures in order to repress or transform his wishes and fears.

The most explicit admission of both this regression and the conflict it arouses in Paul occurs in the following exchange:

JEANNE: It's funny, it's like playing grown-ups when you're little. I feel like a child again here . . . It's the most beautiful thing.

PAUL: It's the most beautiful thing to be . . . forced to admire authority . . . (p. 94).

The apartment thus satisfies to a high degree Paul's self-rescue fantasy, for the ever-increasingly regressive set of fantasies which retrieve his earliest desires as fixated on a mother figure and his punishment of the mother surrogate for her betrayal together constitute a recuperation of his earliest sense of identity.

Nor can we ignore the implications generated by this discovery of Paul's primarily narcissistic urge. At one point Jeanne screams at Paul,

Why don't you listen to me? You know, it seems to me I'm talking to the wall. Your solitude weighs on me, you know. It isn't indulgent or generous. You're an egoist (p. 97).

Narcissism is to some degree a constant in all creative work (Freud, 1908), in dreams and fantasies (Freud, 1917b, p. 421), and we know that, under stress, a narcissistic person may regress from socially transformed to primary forms of object relations (Freud, 1917a, pp. 138–139). What should impress us is the intricacy with which Bertolucci has woven the reflective aspects of narcissism (Orphic self-rescue and the mirror) together with the tendency towards morbidity and the death-wish that

commonly result from extreme narcissism (as we have learned from both psychoanalytic theory and previous literary expression). Following Paul's invocation to the altar of his own phallus (see above), he adds:

You're all alone. And you won't be able to be free of the feeling of being alone until you look death right in the face. I mean, that sounds like bullshit and some romantic crap. Until you go right up into the ass of death—right up his ass—till you find a womb of fear. And then, maybe, maybe then you can—you'll be able to find him (p. 160).

For Paul the association of love and self-love seems to lead to a confluent description of anality, the womb (mother) and death, which itself is merely a prefiguration of his own womb-like position as he dies,³ symbolically castrated by Jeanne. Bertolucci comments on this relationship between sex, solitude and death as follows:

I quickly realized when shooting, that when you show the depths, . . . you drown yourself, as it were, in that feeling of solitude and death that attaches to a relationship in our Western, bourgeois society . . . Sex is very close to death in feeling (Bachmann, 1973).

In his various versions of Orpheus, Cocteau repeatedly insists on the relation of primary narcissism and death. Mirrors, Cocteau tells us, are doors through which Death enters our souls, and through which Orpheus enters the kingdom of Death.⁴ Freud (1917b, p. 430) of course had long since noted a tendency in

narcissism detrimental to self-preservation which Lacan (1949, p. 454) was to develop, seeing narcissism related to 'instincts of destruction, even of death' and noting, 'the evident relation of the narcissistic libido to the alienating function of the I'.

Earlier Francis Bacon's allusion to the mirror was noted. Bertolucci extends that allusion as well to include a notion of decomposition and death: 'Marlon Brando resembles Francis Bacon's characters . . . his face has that same plasticity of life in decomposition;' and he quotes Cocteau, '*Faire du cinéma, c'est saisir la mort au travail*' (Godard, 1972).

Many of Bertolucci's statements on the film indicate how thoroughly personal a statement it is: 'In making *Last Tango* I was "worked on" by my unconscious; I wanted to become my unconscious' (Godard, 1972). He even claims that he cut a shot of Brando nude 'out of shame for myself. To show him naked would have been like showing myself naked' (Michener, 1972). That the film recapitulates much of his own history Bertolucci freely admits. Godard notes, 'He calls *Last Tango* a Freudian film, a film of exorcism: "By representing one's obsessions, one gets distance on them, dominates them"' (Godard, 1972, my translation). Bertolucci's parents were obviously models: 'In a couple, it's the man who sets the pace. I watched my mother all her life adapt to my father's pace. What more could a woman ask?' (Godard, 1972).⁵

³ Bertolucci's comments on this scene are particularly useful here:

'At the beginning of the film he is supervirile . . . but slowly he loses his virility. At a certain point he makes the girl sodomize him: going backwards, he has arrived at the anal stage. Let's say the sadico-anal stage. Then he goes back even further and arrives in the womb of Paris, dying with mother Paris all around him, her rooftops, TV-aerials, her grey, grabbing anonymity. Much of this feeling was born during the shooting of the film although I had planned for him to die an embryo even when we wrote the script. But now I find that all this comes out very specifically; that there is a clear departure and a clear arrival in death. When we were planning the film, all this was only in my subconscious. My camera research clarified it for me. The irrational becomes lucid' (Bachmann, 1973).

⁴ Jean Matter notes: 'Narcisse amoureux de son propre Moi ne peut qu'être amoureux de la Mort, car la contemplation du Moi est fatalement liée à la pensée de la Mort. Le miroir conduit à la Mort par une pente inévitable. Si Orphée se recule pas devant la Mort, c'est qu'elle l'attire et qu'il l'aime. Il l'aime parce qu'il s'aime

lui-même. Il aime la Mort comme une mère qui a partie liée avec lui . . . Le narcissisme découle en effet le plus souvent d'une fixation. Le jeune homme aime en soi celui qu'aime sa mère . . . Orphée est, littéralement, plein de lui-même. C'est pourquoi il n'écoute personne sauf la Mort . . . La Mort est belle, toute-puissante et inaccessible . . . attributs de la mère aux yeux de l'enfant' (Matter, 1951).

⁵ Bertolucci's statements about women in general demonstrate some ambivalence on this point: 'In nature it is usually the female that devours. Genetically, over the centuries, some males have understood her mechanisms, have understood the danger. Some spiders just approach the female, but stay within safe distance. Exciting themselves with her smell, they masturbate, collect their sperm in their mouth and wait to regain their strength after orgasm. Because that is how they get devoured, when they are weak after ejaculation. Later, they inseminate the female with a minimal approach, and thus she cannot attack them in the moment of their weakness . . . What can develop (between a man and a woman) is only possessiveness, . . . the destruction of the loved object' (Bachmann, 1973).

Indeed, that it is an extremely personal work should be obvious. But Bertolucci further elucidates another facet of the work: 'On s'exprime toujours par ses défenses, non? Et puis il y a . . . une fascination pour l'auto-destruction' (Godard, 1972).

One of the most classic defences, Robert Rogers (1970) informs us, occurs in the process of doubling—and in this context we understand fascination with self-destruction in a more figurative sense, as a pulling apart of conflicting aspects of the psyche, and hence congruent with 'the inclination of the modern writer to split up his ego by self-observation into many part-egos, and in consequence to personify the conflicting currents in his mental life in several heroes' (Freud, 1908, p. 150). The theme of the double, to which I have several times alluded, thus further develops the regressive and ambivalent tendencies of the film's characters almost as repetition compulsion, but also and quite marvelously contributes to the coherence of the mythic structure. In addition to the previously discussed Jeanne-Rosa couple, Bertolucci provides Brando with a double, Marcel, who lives in a nearly identical room, who wears an identical bathrobe and stocks the same Bourbon. We learn from their conversation that Rosa had turned to Marcel to reconstruct her experience with Paul. In an effort to make the two experiences as close as possible, she had even attempted to strip the wallpaper from Marcel's walls so that his room should resemble Paul's exactly. As a model (almost a mannequin) of Paul, Marcel recreates syntagmatically (or *in extenso*) rather than paradigmatically (or in depth) Rosa's first experience—and failure—with Paul. There is no enrichment, only repetition. As surface reflexion, Marcel remains impenetrable, merely another source of despair ('I wonder what she ever saw in you'). What recourse for Rosa but to end this series of shallow permutations rather than to prolong them absurdly.

Marcel is, in a sense, the key to the presence of doubles in the film, but the Paul-Tom parallel is by far the most interesting and intricate of the double arrangements.

This doubling is established visually, metaphorically and metonymically. In the scene of Tom's arrival in Paris, the arched metal-work

of the Gare Saint Lazare (Lazarus can again be assumed to be a choice and therefore a further allusion to return from the dead), repeats the visual effect of Jeanne's first meeting with Paul under the Passy tressle. In this first encounter, a technician thrusts a phallic-shaped microphone into Jeanne's path, while Tom declaims on love. Each time Tom and Jeanne meet, this sadly artificial phallus (always proffered by one of Tom's 'zombies') replaces Paul's 'hap-penis'. She even has to remind Tom in the proposal scene, 'I'm supposed to marry you not the camera' (p. 188). But ironically it is to Tom and not to Paul that Jeanne complains: 'You should have asked my permission. . . . You take advantage of me and make me do things I've never done before. I'm tired of being raped!' (pp. 44, 118).

Each of Paul's interdictions against turning to the past is countered by Tom's enthusiastic insistence on capturing the woman and her past, but only on celluloid. Following Paul's manifesto 'It's beautiful without knowing', the camera jump-cuts to Jeanne's country house where Tom's camera makes its symbolic but impotent descent: 'The camera is high . . . It slowly descends toward you. And as you advance, it moves in on you . . . It gets closer and closer to you . . .'. Here Tom not only parodies the mythical descent of Orpheus (nor are we surprised to remember that Léaud played in Cocteau's *Testament d'Orphée*!) but also contrives (as always) a displacement of sexual aggression on to the camera. As if instinctively applying Paul's rule to this other space, Jeanne discourages Tom's probing with the warning, 'It's melancholy to look behind you', but Tom will not understand and shouts,

It's marvellous . . . It's your childhood—everything I want . . . I'm opening all the doors . . . Reverse gear! . . . Close your eyes. Back up, keep going, find your childhood again . . . You are 15, 14, 13, 12, 11, 10, 9 . . . (p. 79).

Significantly, Orpheus' descent in Cocteau's film is accomplished backwards. Before the close of the scene, Jeanne has provided Tom with another symbolic warning: she holds up a portrait of another Paul drawn with his eyes closed. When they do get around to matters sexual, Tom appears to be satisfied with Jeanne's

rendition of the dictionary definitions of *menstruation* and *penis*.

Bertolucci also creates doubling metonymically by means of parallel cutting. Soon after we see Paul and Jeanne on their bed, which Paul terms their 'raft', we cut to Tom and Jeanne floating towards a small waterfall on the 'Atalante' in yet another parody of lover's relations. Whereas Paul and Jeanne have just discovered their real names in an expressive series of animal-like noises, Tom and Jeanne adopt the same position and mimic this exchange with an empty series of yesses and no's.

During Tom's descent into Jeanne's real Hades (the Jules Verne apartment) he finalizes his loss of his would-be bride by further insistence on examining her.

In Paul and Jeanne's privileged space Tom feels dwarfed: 'It's huge . . . It's too large . . . This apartment is not for us, absolutely not.' Instead of the passionate sexual encounters she has known here, Jeanne receives Tom's particular form of proposition: 'I want to film you every day. In the morning when you wake up, then when you fall asleep. When you smile . . .'. He senses Jeanne's exultation here: 'Take off, you're in heaven . . . Descend.' But he is unable to stand this 'turbulence'. 'We can't act like children [thus Tom instinctively rejects Paul's games]—we're adults . . . serious, logical, circumspect.' Suddenly, at the end of this scene Tom realizes that 'The film is finished.' Jeanne suddenly sends him away alone and they do not meet again.

This doubling receives its ultimate reinforcement during Jeanne and Paul's final encounter in the apartment. She enters in her rain-soaked wedding gown and proclaims her love for an ambiguously identified personage immediately assumed by Paul to be Tom. His misconception is shattered only by the revelation that the loved one is Paul himself. Each of her claims about the man she loves is deliberately contrived to refer equally well to either man, so that we are forced to consider once again the remarkable parallelism between them.

* Roy Huss's (1973) reservations about these categories are worth noting: 'The subjective-objective distinction of doubles virtually disappears when one realizes that intro-psyche conflict involves the introjection of a previously encountered object of love or

From the many indications of Bertolucci's own conflicts and by analogy with *Partner* (which, according to Bachmann, Bertolucci claimed of all his films 'the one most closely related' to *Tango*) and with *The Spider's Strategem*, we can easily see how Paul and Tom constitute 'subject doubles',⁶ i.e. decomposition of various conflicting aspects of the psyche in order to defend against conflict over impulses or orientations. The artist isolates these opposing tendencies by projecting them on to two separate autonomous entities. Such a doubling, in theory, does not simply make the representation of intrapsychic conflict possible, it allows for the potential development of that conflict in the most dramatic way possible, putting emphasis on the dynamic nature of mental processes (Rogers, 1970, pp. 64, 84, 145). Nor is the process of doubling separate from the mythic one, for Rogers notes that when an artist doubles a coherent psychological entity into two or more seemingly autonomous characters, he is 'thinking archaically', i.e. his mental processes resemble magical conceptions of primitive superstition as seen in myth and folklore (Rogers, p. 29).

We are not surprised to learn that the 'uncanny' experiences of doubles, instant wish-fulfilments and the return of the dead, all of which occur in *Tango* on an only slightly displaced level, are related to primitive ideas which we have 'surmounted'. Other phenomena producing similar reactions include repressed infantile complexes (e.g. pre-oedipal and castration complexes) which also figure in a similarly displaced arrangement in this film. Whereas, Freud (1919) argues, these two types of experiences (that which is 'surmounted' and that which is repressed) are not ordinarily confused, the boundaries are often blurred, if not obliterated, in art. Again we discover that Bertolucci has masterfully arranged 'mythic' and psychic material so as to harmonize with and reinforce each other.

In addition, the double arrangements mesh with the Orphic-narcissistic elements of the

hate. On the other hand, when one understands that the introjected image starts a process leading first to identification and finally to a notion of identity, then one sees that the role of double might be considerably more complex than merely that of a projected superego.'

work, both as 'reflections in mirrors' on the one hand (Brando often doubles himself) but more significantly because the double is

originally an insurance against the destruction of the ego, an 'energetic denial of the power of death' . . . sprung from the soil of unbounded self-love, from the primary narcissism which dominates the mind of the child and of primitive man . . . (Freud, 1919, p. 235).

But, as we have already noted in the development of narcissism and as we are to witness in this film (and in other arrangements of the Orpheus myth),

when this stage has been surmounted the 'double' reverses its aspect. From having been an assurance of immortality, it becomes the uncanny harbinger of death (Freud, 1919, p. 235).

It should be clear from the preceding account of the Tom-Paul parallel that, as in *Partner*, Bertolucci has experimented with his ambivalence about his past through a double regression split into a mind-body and voyeur-acteur (or Pentheus-Bacchus) dualism. Clearly, Tom seeks to reconstitute his own sense of identity through a double displacement of his own desires: his sexuality is entirely displaced on to the 'legitimate' elements of film making, microphone and camera (both so displaced as to be operated by others); his regressive desires are displaced through projection (Freud, 1908) on to Jeanne. His own regression is acted out only in such disjointed moments as his play among the skirts displayed in the dress shop, as well as in his feeling of such smallness in the Jules Verne apartment that he must immediately proclaim (as Paul did) an interdiction against (or censorship of) acting like children. His relationship with Jeanne devolves into pure form (whose extreme is again the disembodied 'bill-board marriage' he proposes in the dress shop). But pure voyeurism and purely intellectual games are punished ultimately with indifference and merely fade away.

Paul, as the active and corporeal side of the psychological split, ultimately fares no better. As pure physical regression in search of earlier modes of his identity, he encounters increasingly sadistic, vengeful and morbid tendencies in himself. When he tries to translate these tendencies into a social relationship, aggressivity is suddenly met with violence. When

Jeanne functions merely as a mirror of his regressive tendencies in the protected world of his fantasies, she is seen and felt as a supportive and loving element. When translated into a social context, this accepting mirror Eurydice no longer reflects, she reacts, for in the real world a mother figure cannot sanction such advances and represses them through violence (acted out in gestures of unmistakable castration). In the mirrored dance hall Paul attempts a recapitulation of their inner life, but succeeds only in a sad burlesque of the externals of their love accompanied by regressive exhibitionism. Jeanne manipulates him to a climax and flees—a thoroughly ambivalent gesture including encouragement and castration. When he pursues aggressively, the mirroring Eurydice becomes furious *maenad*. She dons the Captain-father's hat and makes the ultimate gesture of castration (annihilation) of Paul by firing a pistol into his lower abdomen. Paul staggers to the balcony and, as a reminder of his regression, childishly sticks his gum on to the balcony railing, curls into a foetal position and dies.

Bertolucci's Orpheus are masterfully conceived both as psychological and artistic complements. For Tom is the man Bertolucci might have been if he had not made *Tango*, and Paul is the man Bertolucci might have been if he had never been Tom's type. Their respective tragedies as well as the endopsychic conflict that is portrayed by their juxtaposition can be perceived dialectically as equally excessive reactions in whose synthesis (the film itself) lies some hope. 'Je commence à me réunir', said Bertolucci of this film (Godard, 1972), for the film represents a personal psychological triumph, an establishment of 'equilibrium of his subconscious' (Bachmann, 1973). In its revelation of both mind-body and voyeur-acteur conflict, as well as of the excesses of purely regressive attempts at resolution of that conflict, Bertolucci senses a more coherent, less conflicted self emerging.

The film's artistic triumph lies not only in the equilibrium achieved between the doubles themselves, between doubles and mythic structure and between archaic and contemporary paradigms, but also in the work's message to this viewer. In Bertolucci's previous films we are invited with good conscience to view passively his psychological conflicts and struggles. But *Tango*

contains not merely a spectacle for the viewer, it challenges his very status as viewer. The outraged, middle-aged dance hall judge shouts mindlessly to the mooning Brando: 'Where's love fit in? Go to the movies to see love!' (p. 189). And so we have! Voyeurs, we have swarmed to see *Tango* because the critics assured us it was 'the most powerfully erotic movie ever made' (Kael, 1972). While making us laugh at Tom's inadequate surface reflexions, Bertolucci has made us peeping Toms ourselves. If his previous films are mere appeals to our voyeurism (our own Tom-ism) this film makes us conscious of that role and invites us to involve our bodies as well as minds in our quest for equilibrium and happiness, to become more than a Pentheus, perhaps less than a Bacchus.

As I have suggested, not a little of this artistic triumph lies in the masterful interweaving of two archaic paradigms, Orpheus and the double, into a thoroughly contemporary world. And, just as O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra* and Sartre's *The Flies* reveal more through their departures from than adherence to their classical model, Bertolucci's observations on contemporary states of mind become clearer through the establishment of a difference from the prototype. Originally a demonstration

of the necessity of obedience to the gods (Orpheus' violation of the divine command instantly robs him of all he holds most dear), through patterns of doubling, condensation and displacement, Bertolucci provides his own revision of the archaic paradigm. Originally a rescue myth about temptation, abstinence and obedience, *Tango's* Orpheus (Tom and Paul) make their respective descents in quest of their own identities as reflected in the face of their Eurydice (Jeanne). For Paul, 'getting back' becomes as much a proposition of vengeance as of self-recuperation, and the refusal to look back: an empty command made to 'cover' his intensely regressive sexual activity. For Tom, any real recuperation becomes impossible when operated through such intense displacement. The film certainly is disturbing, as so many of its reviewers have pointed out, but for far more profound reasons than its forthright sexuality. It is not only a devastating comment on film as displacement of emotion, on the viewer as voyeur, but also on psychological conflict. Bertolucci may indeed congratulate himself on feeling more 'together' (*réuni*) after completing the film, but we as viewers have witnessed dispersion, displacement, regression and violence. We are, on the contrary, more likely to feel *ruinés* as well as *réunis*.

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