

In *Being Maria*, French director Jessica Palud revisits one of the most notorious scenes in cinema history to return the power of the gaze to the woman it violated.

Without consent

French filmmaker Jessica Palud. Marie Rouge / Unifrance



Arts editor: Alison Croggon

“When the actor pulled down her jeans, when he pinned her down, and she cried and they filmed that, it’s filming an assault, not directing an actor. For me, that’s not cinema.” — Jessica Palud

Philippa Hawker

writes on film and is working on a book about Jean-Pierre Léaud.

In 1972, 19-year-old Maria Schneider was cast in her first lead role, opposite Marlon Brando. After the film’s premiere, one of America’s best-known critics proclaimed it a masterpiece for the ages. For Schneider, the trauma she experienced on the set of *Last Tango in Paris* was only the beginning.

For French filmmaker Jessica Palud, Schneider’s story needed to be told, but not as it had been in the past. It was time for a different perspective. She is the writer-director of *Being Maria*, one of the highlights of this year’s Alliance Française French Film Festival, currently in cinemas throughout Australia, which stars Anamaria Vartolomei as Schneider and Matt Dillon as Brando.

The film is not a biopic, Palud is quick to say. She regards it as a portrait, an evocation of crucial moments in a life. Most of all, she says, it’s a film that returns the power of the gaze to Schneider.

For Palud, *Being Maria* is about more than a single scene: it’s about all the things that fed in to that moment. “It’s a film about work conditions, about a system, it’s also about a cinematic system of humiliation.” It’s also, she says, about the gaze and its impact: about how you are seen, whether you are believed, whether people will stand up for you.

Bernardo Bertolucci’s *Last Tango in Paris*, which premiered on the closing night of the 1972 New York Film Festival, was an immediate, polarising sensation. Critics raved, none more than Pauline Kael in *The New Yorker*. She hailed it as a masterpiece, saying that the date of the first screening would go down in history, just like the date of the first performance of Stravinsky’s *The Rite of Spring*. It also provoked condemnation, legal battles and censorship rows.

In *Last Tango*, Brando plays Paul, a middle-aged American whose wife has just died by suicide. He crosses paths with a young woman, Jeanne (Schneider), when they are both looking at an apartment to rent. They begin an intense sexual relationship that revolves around anonymity and compulsion.

Bertolucci pushed Brando to improvise monologues and recall some painful memories from his childhood, something the actor felt deeply uncomfortable about. He joined forces with Bertolucci, however, to set up a scene of sexual violence that was not in the script and that Schneider was not prepared for: a simulated rape, in which Brando uses butter as a lubricant. Schneider felt violated. It was a turning point for her.

For Palud, there were challenges in how to treat the shooting of this scene in *Being Maria*. “It was hard. We asked ourselves the question, how do we transform the moment when everything was transformed for Maria? Do we re-create the scene? Do we not do it?” In the end, she says, “the idea was to change the point of view of the scene, to flip it around, and to relive that scene through Maria’s eyes. It doesn’t look like the scene that Bernardo

Bertolucci filmed. The camera is with Maria Schneider.”

At the same time, the emphasis is on the process, on the before and after of this scene and the presence of the crew witnessing and recording a scene that involved Schneider in obvious distress. “You can see people were shocked by what happened, but there was a bit of ‘the director is all-powerful’ and no one else could say, ‘Cut,’” Palud says. Schneider runs off in tears.

They break, but in no time everyone is told to come back for the next scene. A devastated Schneider returns. An assistant gets her to lie face down, then, for continuity, carefully pulls down her jeans a bit more. Bertolucci had got what he wanted: a spontaneous reaction. Schneider had no one on set to support her. She was very much alone.

Being Maria gives a sense of Schneider’s chaotic childhood. Her father was Daniel Gélín, a French film star who had an affair with her mother and barely saw his daughter until her teens. She was 18 and a minor when she was offered the part. Her mother, with whom she had a difficult relationship, had to sign the contract on her behalf. Bertolucci, who was 31, had a wealth of experience and authority to draw on. He had already directed three features, including the much-acclaimed *The Conformist* (1970).

Kael, who spent most of her rapturous review on a paean to Bertolucci and Brando, was very taken with Schneider. She wrote about her as if she were a kind of charming, unthinking presence. “She has a movie face – open to the camera, and yet no more concerned about it than a plant or a kitten.”

Brando, as was his habit, shunned the press. Schneider was left to do most of the publicity for *Last Tango*, weathering the storm of controversy, the media frenzy, the legal pressure, the snide remarks, the public abuse. She became a punchline, a target for “pass the butter jokes” and the focus of moral outrage. Many of the scripts she received in the wake of *Last Tango* were full of nude scenes. One of the few roles she felt happy with, and one of her more successful, was Antonioni’s *The Passenger* (1975), with Jack Nicholson. She turned down some parts, walked off some sets, was fired from others. She developed a heroin habit: it was, she said, a consequence of the trauma she suffered on the set of Bertolucci’s film.

In *Being Maria*, Palud includes these aspects of Schneider’s story, but she didn’t want to chronicle the entirety of her life or to overemphasise its extremes. One of the things that struck Palud during the research was how articulate Schneider was about the film industry and its pitfalls: the dominance of male directors and writers and their points of view; the vulnerability of actors, above all women. *Being Maria* has several examples, sometimes delivered in different contexts, but they are all things Schneider said.

When Schneider talked about what happened to her on *Last Tango*, she was often not believed, Palud says, or she was dismissed as being crazy. Over time, however, the tide began to turn. In 2007, Schneider gave an interview to the *Daily Mail* in which she spoke

frankly and in detail about the shooting of the scene and the subsequent effect on her, and it was reported more widely. She said she felt she had been “raped a little”. When she died in 2011, aged 58, the interview was quoted in many obituaries.

Last Tango has not acquired the status that Kael predicted for it. It still attracts controversy but not in the same way. A new book, *Le Culte de l’Auteur* by Geneviève Sellier, has a chapter about young women used and discarded by the French film industry. Her first example, the most emblematic, she says, is that of Schneider.

Last year, the Cinémathèque Française in Paris programmed a Marlon Brando retrospective, but a scheduled screening of *Last Tango* did not go ahead in the wake of protests focused on Schneider’s experience. As Palud understands it, many of those who raised objections wanted “to give some kind of context to the screening, not to stop the film being shown”. And yet, Palud says, there is still a resistance in some quarters to hearing about Schneider. “I was naive about this. But it made this film very hard to finance.”

Movie sets have been part of Jessica Palud’s life since childhood. Her father, Hervé Palud, is an actor and director, and she has no doubt that this influenced her desire to become a filmmaker. She didn’t go to film school but sought out entry-level jobs on set. At 19, she was an intern on Bertolucci’s 2003 film, *The Dreamers*. This was when she first heard talk of another Bertolucci set, many years before.

Palud was a first assistant director at 24. She did small indie films and high-profile features such as Sofia Coppola’s *Marie Antoinette* and the big-budget spectacle of *Astérix at the Olympic Games*. “I saw many sets and different directors’ ways of shooting, sometimes in ways that didn’t respect the actor. I saw different ways of functioning.” She was usually one of only a few women in a crew, often the youngest on set.

She had always wanted to write, but it was hard to find the time, so she started doing advertising gigs and refusing films, “even interesting ones”, to work on her own projects. Her third short, *Marlon* (2017), about a teenage girl marking her first visit to her mother in prison, was selected for festivals worldwide and was nominated for a César, France’s Oscar equivalent. Her first feature, *Revenir* (*Back Home*), about a young man returning to the family farm, was chosen for the Orizzonti section of the 2019 Venice Film Festival and won the screenplay award.

About that time, she came across the book that was the catalyst for *Being Maria*, a 2018 memoir by Schneider’s cousin, Vanessa Schneider, a journalist and novelist who was a child when *Last Tango* was released. Reading the recollections made Palud think back to the stories she had heard as an intern. “I decided to get in touch with people who’d known Maria, to get to know a little bit more about this story.”

The process of research continued when she cast Anamaria Vartolomei as Maria. Vartolomei made her feature debut at 10, starring opposite Isabelle Huppert in *My Little Princess* (2011). She was riveting in Audrey

Diwan’s *Happening* (2021) and has just made her English-language debut in Bong Joon-ho’s new movie, *Mickey 17*.

They worked together, Palud says, in a collaborative way, delving deep into the emotional state of Schneider at any given moment. Vartolomei watched footage and listened to recordings, but Palud never wanted Vartolomei to be unduly focused on the notion of resemblance. She was very happy, nevertheless, when Vanessa Schneider and her mother came to an early screening and the mother said, “She’s the ghost of Maria.”

To play Brando, Palud turned to actor Matt Dillon, a young star in the 1980s (*Rumble Fish*, *The Outsiders*, *Drugstore Cowboy*) who has built up an interesting body of work over the years, turning more recently towards European directors. “He was my first choice,” Palud says. “I sent him the screenplay and he got back to me. He looked at my first film, I met him, we spent three hours together. He told me when he was young he was a massive Marlon Brando fan, he acted out scenes from his films.” He had another perspective too, she says. “He told me he’d do the film for Maria because he was very touched by what had happened to her. And for him, a young actor who came from the streets, he, like her, could have been completely damaged.”

The *Last Tango* sex scene was choreographed and an intimacy coordinator worked with them. Most important of all, Palud says, the process always involved collaboration. “Bertolucci is a great, great director and he could have filmed that sequence without betraying her. But from the moment she didn’t consent, when the actor pulled down her jeans, when he pinned her down, and she cried and they filmed that, it’s filming an assault, not directing an actor. For me, that’s not cinema.”

Palud has just worked again with Vartolomei, directing her in *Merteuil*, a French television series currently in post-production. It is the origin story of the central characters from *Les Liaisons dangereuses* (*Dangerous Liaisons*), the 18th-century epistolary novel about desire, deceit and betrayal that became a celebrated 1988 drama starring Michelle Pfeiffer, John Malkovich and Glenn Close. In this version, Palud says, the young Marquise de Merteuil (Vartolomei) is not the manipulative schemer that Close portrayed, at least not at the beginning.

Being Maria has had an impact, she believes. Just recently she received a letter from an extra working on *Merteuil* – she wrote that *Being Maria* had helped her make the decision about something that had happened to her, and to press charges. ●

Philippa Hawker travelled to Paris with the assistance of Unifrance. The Alliance Française Film Festival is screening nationally during March and April.