The case of *Last Tango in Paris*
and the ethics of producing and consuming filmed depictions of sexual violence

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Abstract: This master's thesis is concerned with the ethics of producing and consuming filmed depictions of sexual violence, degradation, and humiliation. The starting point of the analysis is the 1972 film, *Last Tango in Paris*, and the recent controversy surrounding its filming conditions. The film received widespread media attention in December 2016, after an earlier interview resurfaced where director Bernardo Bertolucci admitted that he and actor Marlon Brando had intentionally kept actress Maria Schneider in the dark on the details of an infamous rape scene prior to its filming. The aim of this paper is to find and define some of the major ethical problems involved in the case of *Last Tango in Paris* in particular, and in the production and consumption of scenes that depict sexual violence against women in general. The theoretical framework of this study is grounded in ethics and moral philosophy, film studies, cultural studies, and feminist theory. In its analysis of the ethics of producing and consuming filmed depictions of sexual violence, this paper relies heavily on the feminist critiques of pornography of Andrea Dworkin, Catharine MacKinnon, and, more recently, Gail Dines.

The analysis is divided into two parts: part one looks at ethical problems that arise in the film production process, while part two explores problems with film consumption. The former focuses on the power imbalance between the woman who is filmed and the man who is in charge of the filmmaking process; the latter, on the role and ethical responsibility of the film viewer who consumes sexually violent content. The analysis begins with the issue of the female performer's consent, which was also the main focus of the most recent *Last Tango in Paris* controversy. From there, it moves on to consider some of the ethical problems that were largely missing from that public conversation. Presented at the end of each section are some ethical questions for the reader to consider on the basis of the issues discussed in the analysis. The goal is to inspire the reader to examine critically the viewpoints being expressed here, and to come up with their own solutions to the problems raised in this paper.

This study concludes that the performer's consent does not erase or adequately address the ethical problems involved in the production and consumption of scenes that depict sexual violence against women. Crucially, emphasizing the issue of consent serves to divert attention from the inherently exploitative nature of staging sexual violence for the camera. The analysis focuses particularly on the demands and expectations that both filmmakers and viewers place on the women who appear in sexually violent scenes, as well as on the potential impacts of the ubiquity and ready availability of sexually violent content on viewers' perceptions of reality and ethical behavior. Finally, this paper suggests that undoing these problems begins with an increased awareness and honesty about what is actually happening on screen, and, specifically, who is doing what to whom. It is only on the basis of giving serious consideration to such questions that we, as individuals and as a collective, can develop new, more ethical and responsible ways of approaching the problems that arise when sexual violence becomes a popular source of entertainment.

Tiivistelmä: Tämä pro gradu –tutkielma käsittelee seksuaalista väkivaltaa ja nöyryytystä esittävien elokuvien kuvaamisen ja katsomisen etikkaa. Analyysin lähtökohtana on vuonna 1972 ilmestynyt elokuva *Viimeinen tango Pariisissa* sekä sen kuvausolosuhteisiin liittyvä taannoinen kohu. Elokuva sai runsaasti mediahuomiota joulukuussa 2016, kun esiin putkahti aiempi haastattelu, jossa ohjaaja Bernardo Bertolucci myönsi hänen ja miespääosaa esittäneen Marlon Brandon jättäneen tarkoituksella kertomatta naisnäyttelijä Maria Schneiderille elokuvan kuuluisan raiskauskohtauksen sisällöstä ennen sen kuvaamista. Tämän tutkielman tavoite on löytää ja määrittää keskeisimmät eettiset ongelmat, joita liittyy sekä tähän yksittäiseen tapaukseen että naisiin kohdistuvaa seksuaalista väkivaltaa esittävien elokuvien kuvaamiseen ja katsomiseen yleensä. Tutkielman teoreettinen viitekehys pohjautuu etiikkaan ja moraalifilosofiaan, elokuvatutkimukseen, kulttuurintutkimukseen, sekä feministiseen teoriaan. Tutkielman lähestymistapa seksuaalisen väkivallan elokuvallisiin esityksiin perustuu pitkälti Andrea Dworkinin, Catharine MacKinnonin ja Gail Dinesin kaltaisten feministien esittämään pornografian kritiikkiin.

Analyysi on jaettu kahteen osaan: näistä ensimmäinen käsittelee elokuvan tuotannossa ilmeneviä eettisiä ongelmia ja jälkimmäinen elokuvan kulutuksen ongelmia. Ensimmäisen osan keskiössä on kuvatun naisesiintyjän ja miespuolisen elokuvantekijän välinen valtasuhde, kun taas jälkimmäinen osa keskittyy seksuaalista väkivaltaa esittävää materiaalia kuluttavan katsojan rooliin ja eettiseen vastuuseen. Analyysi alkaa kysymyksellä väkivallan uhria esittävän naisesiintyjän suostumuksesta, joka oli viimeisimmän *Viimeinen tango Pariisissa* –kohun keskeisin kiistakysymys. Tutkielman myöhemmissä osissa tarkastellaan eettisiä ongelmia, jotka jäivät kyseisen kohun yhteydessä vähäisemmälle huomiolle. Pitkin tutkielmaa lukijan pohdittavaksi esitetään analyysin pääkohtiin pohjautuvia eettisiä kysymyksiä. Tavoitteena on saada lukija ajattelemaan kriittisesti tutkielmassa esiin nostettuja näkökulmia sekä löytämään omia ratkaisujaan siinä esitetyille ongelmille.

Tutkielman lopputulos on, että esiintyjän suostumus ei riitä poistamaan naisiin kohdistuvan seksuaalisen väkivallan kuvaamisen ja katsomisen myötä ilmeneviä eettisiä ongelmia. Mikä tärkeintä, esiintyjän suostumukseen keskittyminen vie huomiota suuremmilta vallankäytön ongelmilta, joita seksuaalisen väkivallan elokuvallisiin esityksiin väistämättä liittyy. Keskeisimmäksi näistä ongelmista analyysissä nostetaan väkivallan uhria esittävään naiseen kohdistetut paineet ja vaatimukset niin elokuvantekijöiden kuin katsojienkin osalta, sekä seksuaalisesti väkivaltaisen materiaalin runsauden ja saatavuuden mahdolliset vaikutukset katsojan todellisuus- ja moraalikäsityksiin. Ongelmien ratkaisemisen edellyttää ennen kaikkea aiempaa suurempaa tietoisuutta ja rehellisyyttä siitä, mitä ruudulla oikeastaan tapahtuu ja kuka tekee mitä kenelle. Näiden kriittisten pohdintojen pohjalta voidaan alkaa muodostaa uusia, eettisempiä ja vastuullisempia tapoja suhtautua seksuaaliseen väkivallan viihteellistämiseen ja sen moniin ongelmiin, niin yksilöllisellä kuin yhteisölliselläkin tasolla.

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1. Introduction

Four years before she died, French actress Maria Schneider gave an interview to the British tabloid newspaper the *Daily Mail*, where the then 55-year-old spoke candidly about her experiences working in the film industry as a young woman in the early 1970s. The interview, published in July 2007, focused mostly on the production of *Last Tango in Paris*, the film Schneider remains best known for to this day. On the filming of a particularly infamous scene where the man played by co-star Marlon Brando rapes Schneider's character, she gave the following description:

> Marlon said to me: 'Maria, don't worry, it's just a movie,' but during the scene, even though what Marlon was doing wasn't real, I was crying real tears. I felt humiliated and to be honest, I felt a little bit raped, both by Marlon and by Bernardo Bertolucci. (Das)

Six years later, Bertolucci, who directed *Last Tango in Paris*, provided his own account of what had happened on the set of the film. In a televised interview, he said, in part:

> I feel guilty, but I do not regret. You know, to make movies, sometime, to obtain something, I think that you have to be completely free. I didn't want Maria to act her humiliation, her rage. I wanted Maria to feel, not to act, the rage and the humiliation. ("Bertolucci over Maria Schneider")

Last Tango in Paris was always a controversial film. For years after its initial release in 1972, the film was widely condemned for its explicit sexual content, and even outright banned in many places around the world, including the director's native Italy. Over the ensuing decades, as mainstream culture became increasingly sexualized and—as sociologist Gail Dines demonstrates in her book *Pornland: How Porn Has Hijacked Our Sexuality*—both saturated with and influenced by online pornography, this would change. By the early 2000s, *Last Tango in Paris,* along with most films of its era, had lost most if not all of its initial shock value. So, when the film suddenly made the news again in late 2016, it was perhaps unsurprising that the latest controversy had less to do with the actual content of the film and more to do with the conditions under which it was produced; this time around, it was revelations about the reality behind the rape scene referred to above—which, again, was notorious enough to begin with—that caught the media's attention.

This master's thesis is concerned with the ethics of producing and consuming filmed depictions of sexual violence, including degradation and humiliation. The intention is to find and define some of the key ethical issues that arise—for filmmakers, performers, and viewers alike—when sexually violent, degrading, or humiliating acts against women in particular are staged for the camera. My approach to this topic is to focus on the specific case of *Last Tango in Paris* we discussed above. Through an analysis of what happened on the set of that film, and how these events were covered in the media more recently, I hope to shed some light on the power relations involved in and enforced by the creation of sexually violent content, as well as on the broader implications the ever-increasing availability and accessibility of this material has, both for individual viewers and society as a whole. In the process, I address bigger questions of moral responsibility and the line we draw between fantasy and reality that go far beyond the world of film itself. The ultimate goal here is to inspire the reader to reflect critically on the impact the very ubiquity of this type of material—regardless of whether we as individuals specifically seek it out or not—has on our ideas of what constitutes ethically acceptable behavior, and, moreover, on how we view, treat, and relate to others around us in the real world.

The need for serious discussion on the ethical problems related to how films are made has certainly become increasingly clear in recent times. Less than a year after Bertolucci's comments on Schneider and the rape scene in *Last Tango in Paris* made the news, revelations of endemic sexual abuse and harassment of women in the film industry perpetuated by producer Harvey Weinstein along with a whole host of other powerful men in Hollywood and beyond began to receive global media attention in October 2017, initiating what has since come to be known as the #MeToo movement.[1] But even before these more recent developments, individual actresses had been speaking for years about their experiences of mistreatment and sexual exploitation at the hands of male filmmakers. Some of these accounts—including Maria Schneider's, as well as, for instance, actress Tippi Hedren's claims about the controlling and harassing behavior of the late British director Alfred Hitchcock—concern incidents that took place decades ago but had, thus far, been largely unknown to the general public. Other allegations of such cruel or unprofessional conduct—made against men like Abdellatif Kechiche, who directed the controversial 2013 drama *Blue Is the Warmest Color*, or against Danish director Lars Von Trier by a number of actresses who have worked with him over the years—are based on

[1] For the first articles on Weinstein that inspired the #MeToo movement in 2017, see Kantor and Twohey, and Farrow.

more recent events.[2]

Notably, for our purposes, a common theme connecting a lot of these examples is the tendency of these films to include graphic depictions of sex and nudity—and female nudity in particular—as well as scenes that depict sexual violence against women. It is precisely this connection between the content of films and what their production might entail on the basis of that content that tends to be missing from the public conversation on these issues. My goal with this paper, then, is to broaden that conversation, so that, hopefully, we can begin to draw those connections between the sexual violence and exploitation we see on screen, and what the realization of those exploitative scenarios means for the people who are expected to act them out, as well as for those of us who witness the results. In other words, the idea here is to take the vital and necessary discussion on the more ethically problematic aspects of film production sparked by famous cases like *Last Tango in Paris* and the broader #MeToo movement, and to expand that discussion to include considerations of what role the consumers of film, as well as the sexually violent content itself play in creating and aggravating these problems.

The paper begins with an overview of film and ethics as a subject of study in chapter 2, where I present the theoretical framework and overall approach adopted in this paper. This is followed, in chapter 3, by a more thorough introduction to the case of *Last Tango in Paris*. The analysis that follows in chapters 4 and 5 considers what was emphasized as well as what was missing from the public conversation surrounding the events on the set of that film. The purpose is to find and define the main ethical problems that inevitably arise when men's sexual violence against women is turned into mass entertainment. First, chapter 4 examines the production side, focusing mostly on issues stemming from the power imbalance between the women in front of the camera and the men who control it. Then, chapter 5 moves on to consider what responsibility the film viewer, who has no direct involvement in the filmmaking process, has over the sexually violent content they consume. I explore these issues and more in light of examples such as *Last Tango in Paris*, which demonstrate how our common assumptions about everything we see on screen being, to use a popular phrase, "just a fantasy" can be terribly misguided.

[2] For Hitchcock's treatment of Hedren, among several other actresses he directed, see Hedren, and Spoto. For the accusations of inappropriate conduct—and, more recently, sexual assault—against Kechiche, see Rubin and Peltier. For a summary of some of the allegations against Von Trier, see Sweet.

2. Studying film and ethics

To talk about film and ethics is to talk about fantasy, reality, and the line between the two; that is to say, about what is and is not really real. Basically, a live action film (as opposed to an animated or computer-generated one) tells us two stories: 1) the particular narrative—fictional or not—being presented to the viewer, and 2) the fact of what is actually going on in front of the camera while that narrative, however lifelike or fanciful, is being turned into a film. These are what Melinda Vadas calls the "depictionary scene" and the "material scene," respectively (367). The former is the one we as viewers are intended to invest in, emotionally and intellectually, while the latter is the one that we are, more often than not, supposed to forget about or pretend not to notice.

To a great extent, knowing if, when, and how to draw a line between these two stories is arguably where the true difficulty of understanding the relationship between film and ethics has always lain: on the one hand, we as viewers know better—or, at any rate, like to think that we do—than to trust or take as fact everything we see on screen. On the other hand, this very distrust, while both healthy and necessary, may leave us overly eager to dismiss all filmed content as fantasy—and, as such, essentially harmless—which, in turn, has the effect of rendering us blind to harm and abuse that is in fact real and taking place right in front of our eyes. One of the primary purposes of this paper is to bring attention to this tension and to try to uncover some of its more troubling implications.

The present chapter introduces the theoretical framework adopted in this study. First, in section 2.1, I present the type of literature, including specific authors, and prior research I shall be drawing from throughout the analysis. Section 2.2 moves on to outline the approach and structure of the analysis to follow in chapters 4 and 5. What I hope to achieve with this chapter overall is to clarify the primary goals of this study, as well as to give the reader some idea of the form and content of the paper before we delve any deeper into the production and consumption of filmed depictions of sexual violence in general, and the case of *Last Tango in Paris* in particular.

2.1 Background

The theoretical framework of this paper is grounded in philosophy—ethics, to be precise—and film studies, two of the fields I am most familiar with as a scholar. Other fields I draw from include, most prominently, cultural studies and feminist theory. Each of these disciplines has obvious relevance to the case of *Last Tango in Paris*, which I reference throughout the analysis: first, any discussion on the events on the set of that film has to address—more or less consciously—very basic questions about what constitutes ethical and unethical behavior (ethics and moral philosophy); understanding those events and their ethical implications requires a familiarity with the medium of film, and how and why it differs from other forms of art and entertainment (film studies); it further requires an awareness of the broader culture context, specifically with regards to how mass media is produced, consumed, and analyzed in general (cultural studies); and, finally, in order to make sense of that one case, and to appreciate the power relations involved whenever sexually violent or degrading acts are filmed and the footage made available for others to consume later on, we need to consider how the sex of each of the people involved affects their roles, status, and moral responsibility in that situation at every step of the way in our analysis (feminist theory). The rest of section 3.1 is devoted to outlining the relevance of each of these fields of study in general, and of certain scholars and authors working within them in particular to the topic at hand.

Whenever studying film, one of the first and most important decisions you have to make is to choose where, exactly, to place your focus: on the content of a specific film or group of films, on the mechanics of the filmmaking process, on audience reception, or on some combination of the three. For practical reasons, these types of studies tend to center on just one or two of these areas. While this type of narrow focus may be necessary in many cases, the downside of its common employment is that it leaves us with a rather one-sided view of what film is, why a particular film or films in general are the way they are, and how audiovisual media affects people in the real world. Certainly, such a narrow approach will not give us an idea of how these different aspects of film—its production, consumption, and content—all relate to and affect one another. This is a particularly important point to keep in mind when we are talking about film and ethics, since whichever aspect of film we choose to focus on is bound to have a decisive impact on whose particular perspective

and interests—those of the viewer, the filmmaker, or the performer—we end up prioritizing, both on an individual and collective level.

One solution to this particular problem comes from the field of cultural studies. Scholar Douglas Kellner, among others, has argued that in order to understand any product of the mass media—such as a film, for instance—our analysis of it has to take into account just this complexity. Kellner suggests that we adopt what he describes a "threefold project of analyzing the production and political economy of culture, cultural texts and the audience reception of those texts and their effects," arguing that such an approach "avoids too narrowly focusing on one dimension of the project to the exclusion of others" (8). While he acknowledges that media analysis can and often does focus on just one of these areas—that is to say, on production/political economy, textual analysis, or audience reception—Kellner argues that his "multiperspectival" approach is ultimately superior in terms of providing a richer, more comprehensive understanding of how mass media in general and the specific cultural texts it produces function (14). A further advantage of his approach is that it enables us to draw the vital connections between these different areas: to see, for example, how audience reactions shape our interpretations of particular film texts, or how the popularity of certain types of movies can end up changing how films are made in the future. A more narrow focus on just textual analysis, for instance, does not enable or encourage us to make these connections, or provide us with that richer understanding referred to above.

In Kellner's view, then, cultural analysis of the mass media should not limit itself to a specific perspective or area of interest, but rather strive for a broader view that takes into account the context in which various products of the mass media are both created and consumed. The ideal result of this threefold project, as Dines and Humez put it in their introduction to Kellner's essay, is that we gain a) an appreciation of the "socioeconomic context" in which a particular text or product is created, b) the ability to decode and analyze its "constructed meaning(s)," and c) an awareness of the role different types of audiences play in the "meaning-making process" in the real world (1). In other words, we are left with an understanding of the production, reception, and content of the text or product in question. Robert Jensen, who has applied this approach in his own research on pornography and masculinity, offers what is perhaps the most clear and concise summary of the central idea behind Kellner's project. In Jensen's words, the way we should

approach any product of the mass media is "by studying what messages it contains, how it is produced and how it is used by people in everyday life" (47).

Kellner’s three-part project informs the basic approach of the present study as far as the focus and structure of the analysis is concerned. Ultimately, my intention here is to draw attention to the connections between, first, what we as the viewing audience observe on the screen, and, second, what the realization of scenes and images like that actually entails in the real world. My basic premise is that drawing these connections between the content of films, how they are made, and what we ourselves make of them is a vital and necessary part of any project that aims to understand the relationship between film and ethics. In other words, it is not enough that we consider each three of these issues separately; the really crucial step is to recognize how they all affect and are affected by one another.

Once we have this basic framework in place, we can start looking at the more specific theoretical requirements relevant to the topic at hand. As I have indicated above, this is a study about the ethics of producing and consuming particular kinds of films: ones that depict men’s sexual violence against women. By "ethics" in this context, I mean, as Elisabeth Porter puts it, "the practical study of moral choices" (ix). She goes on to clarify that ethics "examines the situations, rationales and justifications in which choices are good or bad, right or wrong, decent or indecent, worthy or unworthy, desirable or undesirable, moral or immoral," and "explores the principles we draw on to deliberate on options; why some options seem right and others do not; the actual choice made; consequences; and personal accountability." The specific moral choices examined in this paper are those made by the people who produce, consume, and perform in films that depict sexual and sexualized violence where men are the perpetrators and women the targets of aggression.

To be precise, I am less concerned with the details of the depiction itself than I am with the real world conditions and consequences of creating and viewing this type of content in general. Quite naturally, this focus places certain limits on what kinds of ethical issues can be addressed at all within the limited scope of this paper. At the same time, it provides this study with a clearer sense of purpose and more direct set of goals. It also creates the need for a very particular kind of literature and prior research to draw from. And this is where film studies and feminist theory come in.

There is no shortage of writing, both scholarly and non-scholarly, on the topic of film and ethics, and the philosophy of film more broadly.[3] Unsurprisingly, the specific focus and angle of these studies varies greatly. Some common themes include, for example, the depiction of specific moral dilemmas or social issues in film, the eternally controversial issue of film censorship, and the aesthetic value of cinema compared to other, more traditional forms of art and creative expression. At times, the way films are made is taken into consideration in addition to the finished product itself; at others, the emphasis is on the ethical role and responsibility of the viewer who consumes and helps create the demand for certain types of films.

As far as the present study is concerned, issues related to film censorship, aesthetics, as well as depictions of specific social issues all come up at various points in the analysis. However, since I am most concerned with the ethics of producing and consuming scenes that depict sexual violence rather than the details of the scenes themselves, it is those studies that explore how films are made and later received by audiences that are ultimately the most relevant here. As an illustrative example, I refer to the work of film historian David Thomson, whose insights into the cultural significance of *Last Tango in Paris* specifically, as well as his analysis on the individual and societal impacts of the prevalence of screens and audiovisual media more generally played a crucial role in shaping the direction of the analysis. Another key figure is writer Susan Sontag, whose essays on the ethical dimensions of still photography proved useful in the context of our current discussion on the ethics of moving images as well.

Some of the most insightful and comprehensive analysis on the connections between sexually violent and exploitative content, the conditions of its creation, and the consequences of its public availability in the real world comes from feminist authors and activists who have written extensively on the subject of pornography. These feminist critiques of pornography, which first gained momentum in the latter half of the 20th century, during what is widely known as the "second wave" of feminism, were perhaps most notably represented by the work of Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon, who famously collaborated on a proposed anti-pornography civil rights ordinance in the United States in the 1980s (see Dworkin and MacKinnon; Vadas). More recently, a small group of

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[3] See e.g. Carroll and Choi, Jarvie, and Teays for three very different perspectives on the relationship between film, ethics, and philosophy.

authors and academics, including the abovementioned Gail Dines and Robert Jensen—both of whom cite Dworkin as an influence—have continued to provide a specifically feminist critique of pornography as an inherently exploitative industry and institution. What distinguishes these more recent critiques from the earlier works is that they tend to focus on the vast technological changes and subsequent exponential growth of the pornography industry in the decades since feminists first became vocal about this issue in the 1970s and 1980s.

To be clear, by drawing on this feminist work on pornography, I do not intend to suggest that the ethical issues involved in that context are exactly the same as in the case of sexually violent scenes in mainstream films, such as *Last Tango in Paris*. The significant difference is, of course, that in the latter instance, the sex acts are simulated; in the former, they are not. Clearly, when we are talking about the ethics of producing and consuming filmed depictions of sexual violence against women, this is no minor detail. The reason I deem it important to draw these parallels nonetheless is that, if anything, recognizing the problems that arise even when the filmed performers are only pretending just serves to amplify how serious these issues become when the painful and humiliating acts we see are really real. For this reason, it seems not only strange but also dishonest to talk about the sexual exploitation of actresses in mainstream films without acknowledging the fact that there is a whole multi-billion-dollar industry[4] built on un-simulated acts of sexual aggression against women presented as entertainment.

Throughout the analysis, I quote some of these authors and others, often at some length. My intention is to present the relevant ideas of these writers and thinkers in their proper context, to the extent that I am able. Moreover, the idea here is to bring attention to the fact that most if not all of the ethical questions raised in this paper have in fact been acknowledged and addressed for decades by a diverse group of authors from a variety of different fields. This makes it all the more conspicuous that much of the public discourse

[4] According to Dines, "Though reliable numbers are hard to find," as of 2006, "the global industry has been estimated to be worth around $96 billion … with the U.S. market worth approximately $13 billion," which means that "pornography revenues rival those of all the major Hollywood studios combined" (47). The revenue figures cited by Jensen are $57 billion for the global pornography industry, and "$10 billion or higher" for the United States (80). However, he goes on to add that, "Because there is no way to chart the amount of money generated by pornographic websites, and other segments of the industry are almost as difficult to track, any estimates of the industry's revenues are rough and may well be low." For more on the business of pornography, see Dines 47-58, and Jensen 79-82.

around the recent #MeToo movement, as well as individual cases such as *Last Tango in Paris* has, for the most part, ignored a lot of these same issues, as though this rich body of theory and analysis did not exist. By bringing the insights of these very different writers and thinkers together in this one paper, I hope to help facilitate a deeper, more comprehensive discussion on this topic—one that is not afraid to draw the connections between the sexual violence we see on the screen and the exploitation involved in the creation of such content, and that will not shy away from addressing the implications of the prevalence of filmed sexual violence against women in our culture, from online pornography to much of mainstream entertainment. All too often, these issues are treated—if indeed they are acknowledged at all—as though they are wholly separate and unrelated to one another.

2.2 Approach

Before we take a closer look at the case of *Last Tango in Paris*—which in itself serves as an introduction to the analysis to follow in chapters 4 and 5—it seems appropriate to provide a brief outline of the approach to the topic of film and ethics adopted in this study. This should give the reader some idea of the overall structure and main focus of the analysis, as well as clarify how and why this present study both overlaps with and differs from some of the prior ones we have just discussed in the previous section. Outlining the approach further allows us to re-establish the primary goals of this paper, which I briefly hinted at in the introduction above.

This thesis is a study on the ethics of producing and consuming filmed depictions of men's sexual violence against women. My main concern is with the connection between the (supposedly) fictional violence we see on screen and the reality of what the creation of scenes that depict sexually degrading or abusive situations asks of the real human beings who are expected to act them out on camera. I consider these issues from the perspectives of those directly involved—the filmmaker and the performers—as well as of the viewer who consumes sexually violent or degrading content. The goal is to find and define the central ethical problems involved both in the production and the consumption of filmed depictions of sexual violence. Through this study, I hope to inspire the reader to think critically and consider new questions about the real world conditions and

consequences of presenting sexual degradation and violence against women as harmless entertainment and fantasy.

My approach to this topic is to analyze one famous example of a rape scene in light of what we now know about how it was made. The scene in question is from the 1972 film *Last Tango in Paris*, and the story behind it concerns the male director and lead actor's treatment of the actress before, during, and after the filming of that scene. The analysis in this paper focuses on the controversy surrounding these events. I start by looking at how much of the media reporting on this story chose to frame the absence of the actress's consent as the single biggest ethical problem involved in the case, before moving on to consider what was largely missing from that public conversation. By exploring one famous example of a rape scene and its filming conditions, I hope to identify some of the larger underlying issues that arise when filmed depictions of sexual violence against women are created and consumed in general, not just in the case of *Last Tango in Paris*. Furthermore, I encourage the reader to continue to reflect on these issues for themselves by presenting them, at the end of each section, with various ethical questions related to all the major themes covered during the course of the analysis.

Thus, on one level, this paper comprises an attempt to make sense of what happened on the set of *Last Tango in Paris*; specifically, to establish who did what to whom, what were the conditions that allowed these events to occur in the first place, and, finally, what the broader social and ethical implications of all of this ultimately might be. Here, I start with the premise that an individual case such as *Last Tango in Paris* reveals something crucial about the conditions and consequences of producing and consuming this type of content in general. At the same time, this or any other individual example can itself only be made sense of when we understand what film is, exactly, and how it functions as a medium; how films and audiovisual media in general shape our perceptions of fantasy and reality; and how each of us is implicated in the various ethical problems discussed in this paper as producers, performers, and consumers of sexually violent and degrading content. In short, with this paper, I am concerned with the general and the specific, as well as the connection between the two.

In addition to sexual violence, I talk a lot about degradation and humiliation in this study, often interchangeably. The reason for this becomes clear in chapters 3 and 5 where we take a closer look at the rape scene in *Last Tango in Paris*; as we shall see, humiliation of

the fictional female character within the story of the film, as well as of the real woman portraying her in real life, is, to a large extent, what made the film and the rape scene in particular so controversial in the first place. In other words, it was not just the fact that the scene depicted a rape that a) made Bertolucci want to film it the way he did, b), made the scene so notorious among audiences, and c) made Schneider so upset about being essentially coerced into filming it; it was that additional aspect of humiliation that was as least as important as the rape itself. Part 3 of chapter 4 explores the meaning and significance of humiliation in particular, specifically in the context of sexually explicit and violent content. I argue that it is not only justified but also necessary to include degradation and humiliation in our discussion on the ethics of producing and consuming filmed depictions of sexual violence because, as we shall see, even when the actual physical violence is simulated, the humiliation is real. It is worth noting, however, that the connection and distinction between sexual violence and degradation is highly contested, not least among scholars.[5]

I should also clarify that this is not a study on the portrayal of rape in film. What this means as far as the approach is concerned is that I shall not be analyzing any specific scenes or films—including *Last Tango in Paris*—to determine what type of messages they send about the perpetrators or the victims of rape, or about the act itself. Thus, if we go back to Kellner's three-part approach to media analysis outlined in section 2.1, the main focus of this paper is on the production and consumption of film, more so than on textual analysis. Needless to say, however, that in order to talk about sexually violent scenes at all—or, indeed, about filmed footage of any kind—the specific content of those scenes has to be taken into consideration. My intention is, then, is not to imply that the depictions themselves do not matter; instead, I simply wish to examine what the production of any graphic and/or extended scenes that depict sexual violence, degradation, and humiliation means in the real world—for those who produce and perform in these scenes, as well as those who watch or simply live surrounded by them—quite apart from the details or perceived artistic value of this or that individual scene or depiction.

It is also worth noting that this paper is not and does not purport to be a work in psychology or sociology; I am not attempting to, for example, discover the motivations of

[5] For more on this topic, see Bridges et al. 1066-68.

men who exploit women under the guise of filmmaking, or the psychological effects of that behavior on the women involved, or to show the impact witnessing scenes depicting sexual violence against women has on any particular groups or individuals in the real world. In fact, this paper is not really trying to prove anything, per se, about the individual case of *Last Tango in Paris*, or about the conditions and consequences of filming and viewing sexually violent content in general. My intention instead is to formulate and ask questions that, hopefully, inspire the reader to think critically about the ethical implications of a widely publicized incident that most of the mainstream media chose to frame in such a way that, as I argue, leaves little room for such deeper considerations. At the same time, I fully recognize that this is just one of many possible approaches to this one case and this overall topic, and would certainly welcome any future studies that adopt a drastically different theoretical framework and methodology.

3. *Last Tango in Paris* and the "non-consensual rape scene"

To keep any discussion on big philosophical or ethical questions from becoming too abstract and theoretical, real world examples are both useful and, I would argue, necessary. Furthermore, considering that the one of the main concerns of this entire paper is our perceptions of reality and how the media we consume shapes those perceptions, the importance of concrete examples seems particularly relevant here. As we have already discussed above, the primary example referred to throughout this study and serving as the starting point to the analysis is the 1972 drama *Last Tango in Paris* (original French title *Ultimo tango a Parigi*), and the controversy surrounding director Bernardo Bertolucci and actor Marlon Brando's treatment of actress Maria Schneider during the filming of a rape scene. Section 3.1 of this chapter introduces that film in context, while section 3.2 delves deeper into the more recent controversy concerning its filming conditions. The latter section in particular offers some insight into what makes *Last Tango in Paris* especially relevant to the main concerns of this paper, as well as some indication of the direction the analysis in chapters 4 and 5 will take.

It should be noted, again, that the purpose of this study is not to provide an in-depth analysis of that—or any other—individual film, or to pick apart its storyline, performances, and aesthetic merits, for example. Instead, the point of using this example is to draw attention to the connection between the abuse in the fictional story of the film and the exploitation involved in its realization for the screen. For this reason, no detailed, scene-by-scene plot synopsis of the film is necessary here, and would, if anything, end up derailing rather than advancing the conversation on the ethics of producing and consuming sexually violent scenes specifically. With *Last Tango in Paris*, our focus stays mostly on just one, particularly infamous scene; more specifically, on those recent revelations about its filming conditions, which single-handedly managed to make the once scandalous film newsworthy again, over four decades after its first premiere.

One last thing to point out before we get into the film itself is that the details of what happened on the set of *Last Tango in Paris* are neither trivial in themselves nor irrelevant in the context of this present study in particular. What I mean by this is that everything, from the details of the plot and the particular demands those details placed on the performers, to the respective role and status of the two men and the one woman involved, and, finally, the way each of them spoke and were themselves spoken of in the press in

relation to these events later on, is in itself significant and worthy of our serious consideration. As we shall see, it is precisely the details such as this that ultimately enable us to take an individual case like *Last Tango in Paris* and see it as part of a wider, predictable pattern of systemic exploitation of women, in and outside of the film industry. Without drawing these connections, what we are left stuck with is an apparently endless list of seemingly isolated—though curiously similar—incidents, with no way to make sense of them, or, crucially, to keep them from happening, over and over again, in the future.

3.1 The film

Last Tango in Paris tells the story of Jeanne (played by Maria Schneider) and Paul (Marlon Brando), a young French woman and an American widower some 20 years her senior, respectively, who have sex within minutes of first meeting each other in a vacant Paris apartment in Paris. Two complete strangers, they part ways not knowing anything about the other, not even their names. Most of the rest of the film's over two-hour running time is devoted to a number of similar anonymous encounters between Jeanne and Paul in that same apartment where they first met. As the audience, we also get a glimpse of their separate lives: Paul grieving the loss of his wife who has recently committed suicide and had been having an affair of her own, and a less-than-enthusiastic Jeanne preparing for her own marriage to a young French documentary filmmaker. However, on Paul's insistence, the two agree not to reveal any such details of their past or present lives to each other, or to disclose their affair to anyone else.

From the start, his manner is controlling and domineering, even sadistic towards the much younger Jeanne. As the film progresses, the sex he imposes on her grows more and more degrading and abusive. In a particularly harrowing scene during the second half of the film, he pins her down and rapes her on the floor of the Paris apartment. This, however, does not mark the end of their encounters. Eventually, it is Paul who leaves Jeanne, only to return shortly thereafter, eager to keep the affair going. Suddenly, he wants to share all the dark details of his own life with her, though he still insists they should not reveal their names. After some hesitation, she, in turn, tells him it is over between them. Paul refuses to accept this. In the final scene of the film, he follows Jeanne home to her apartment, where she picks up a gun and shoots him. Just before he dies, she lets him know her name. Paul, for his part, never does reveal his own name.

When it was first released in 1972, *Last Tango in Paris* was what Morandini refers to as a "clamourous *succès de scandale*" (44). The main selling point of the film—its sexual explicitness and multiple scenes of female nudity—was also the source of much controversy at the time and for many years afterwards. In the United States, *Last Tango in Paris* was granted the notorious adult-only X rating—in Lyons's words, "the designation for hard-core pornography and extreme violence" (69)—while in Bertolucci's home country of Italy, it was banned for 15 years, in addition to the director having his civil rights revoked for a time on account of the film (Morandini 44, Thomson 377). Such efforts to suppress the film, however, did not prevent *Last Tango in Paris* from becoming a commercial success (Lyons 202).

Far from being an isolated example in this sense, *Last Tango in Paris* is, if anything, representative of a trend in both Hollywood and world cinema at a time when the rules of what could and could not be shown on screen were being seriously rewritten. Perhaps the single most indicative example of these broader cultural developments is the fact that 1972 was also the year that saw the release of *Deep Throat*, which was, as film scholars Linda Williams and David Thomson among others have pointed out, one of the very first hardcore pornographic films to achieve significant mainstream success (Williams 98–100, Thomson 426–427). As with *Last Tango in Paris*, what that film in all the years since has become known for—at least as much as for the sexual content itself—is the abuse and exploitation of its lead actress, Linda Boreman (better known as Linda Lovelace), by the men who produced and profited from the film, most notably her then-husband, Chuck Traynor (Dworkin and McKinnon 69, Thomson 427).[6] This is another example of how the issues brought to wide public attention by the recent #MeToo movement are, in fact, anything but new.

As for the reputation of *Last Tango in Paris*, rumors persisted for years that the sex scenes between Schneider and Brando were un-simulated, despite consistent accounts to the contrary by Bertolucci and the actors themselves (see Das, Thomson 373-379); in his 1994 autobiography, Brando mentions the rape scene specifically when he says: "Bernardo wanted me to make love to Maria Schneider to give the picture more authenticity. But it would have completely changed the picture and made our sex organs

[6] For a detailed account on Boreman's experiences, see Lovelace with McGrady.

the focus of the story, and I refused. Maria and I simulated a lot of things, including one scene of buggering in which I used butter, but it was all ersatz sex" (Brando with Lindsey 425).[7] The star power of Brando, who earlier that same year had managed to resurrect what was by then a veining career by appearing in the enormously successful first *Godfather* film, was sure to increase public interest in *Last Tango in Paris*, which otherwise may well have remained an obscure oddity of European art-house cinema of the early 1970s.

Also key to understanding the international success of the film is the fact that despite it being a French-Italian co-production, *Last Tango in Paris* was mostly an English-language film (with a fair amount of French dialogue) whose budget and profile received a significant boost from the involvement of some American funding via the United Artists production company (Balio 64); Gomery argues that the film was really an example of what he refers to as a "Hollywood-sponsored cross-bred work," because the supposedly French partner, Productions Artistes Associes, was actually a subsidiary of United Artists, a Hollywood company (183). For our purposes, this is worthy of note not just because of the role the financing played in the film's eventual success, but also because it means that the problems involved in the production of the film cannot be easily categorized or explained away as belonging strictly to a specific cultural context, and, as such, being unrepresentative of how films are made elsewhere, outside of that narrow context. As for what those problems were, exactly, we shall now explore in more detail.

3.2 The controversy

Maria Schneider was 19 years old in 1972, and largely unknown. *Last Tango in Paris* was the film that made her famous, and would remain by far her best-known work until the end of her life in 2011. In the decades in between, Schneider would make no secret of the fact that both the filming and release of *Last Tango in Paris* were highly unpleasant experiences for her. The fact that the film had made her a celebrity meant, among other things, that forever after she would be associated with an experience and a role she was

[7] In his book, Brando goes on to say, "*Last Tango in Paris* required a lot of emotional arm wrestling with myself, and when it was finished, I decided that I wasn't ever going to destroy myself emotionally to make a movie. I felt I had violated my innermost self and didn't want to suffer like that anymore" (426). Brando does not mention his and Bertolucci's treatment of Schneider during filming.

determined never to repeat or play again. For years in interviews she would speak frankly of her disillusionment with the film industry in general and her *Last Tango* director in particular. With regards to her experiences of working with Bertolucci, the filming conditions of the most infamous scene in the most famous film either of them ever made, as well as her own subsequent personal breakdown, a 2007 interview she did with Lina Das of the British tabloid newspaper the *Daily Mail* remains particularly revealing.

In the interview, she discusses the scene where Paul, the Marlon Brando character, rapes Jeanne, the part played by Schneider herself. The scene, which comprises the culmination of increasingly degrading sexual acts he subjects her to throughout the film, involves him pinning her down to the floor of the vacant apartment where the two have conducted their entire affair, and using a stick of cold butter as a lubricant before he anally rapes her, almost fully clothed. According to Schneider, this particular scene was Brando’s idea and did not appear as such in the script of the film. In other words, she came to the scene unprepared. She goes on to describe the experience in more detail:

> They only told me about it before we had to film the scene and I was so angry. I should have called my agent or had my lawyer come to the set because you can’t force someone to do something that isn’t in the script, but at the time, I didn’t know that. Marlon said to me: ‘Maria, don’t worry, it’s just a movie,’ but during the scene, even though what Marlon was doing wasn’t real, I was crying real tears. I felt humiliated and to be honest, I felt a little raped, both by Marlon and by Bertolucci. After the scene, Marlon didn’t console me or apologise. Thankfully, there was just one take. (Das)

On her decision to accept the role, Schneider comments, "I was so young and relatively inexperienced and I didn’t understand all of the film’s sexual content. I had a bit of a bad feeling about it all." She also talks about her discomfort with the instant fame that came with all the media frenzy surrounding the film. According to Schneider, it was this unhappiness that ultimately led to her to the serious problems with drug addiction, suicide attempts, and other self-destructive behavior she struggled with for years after the release of *Last Tango in Paris*. She goes on to say that while she and Brando did manage to develop and maintain a friendship that lasted until his death in 2004, she never forgave Bertolucci, who, alongside Brando, "made a fortune from the movie," while the then unknown Schneider earned "about £2,500."

When Schneider herself passed at the age of 58 in 2011, the obituaries invariably focused the film that had made her famous 40 years earlier: some of the headlines included, "'Last Tango in Paris' Star Maria Schneider Dies" (Saperstein), "Maria Schneider, Actress in 'Last Tango,' Dies at 58" (Grimes), and "Maria Schneider dies at 58; actress in 'Last Tango in Paris'" (McLellan and Los Angeles Times). Notably, many of the pieces written mentioned the *Daily Mail* interview and other similar ones she had given over the years, thus making Schneider's low opinion of the film and its director—who was nearly 70 at the time of her death and still working[8]—abundantly clear. At the same time, these obituaries helped cement the fact that the very film she so hated making and that had brought her so much personal hardship over the years would be just about the only thing she would be remembered for, even in death.

In 2013, there was another interview, this time with the director rather than the star of *Last Tango in Paris*. As a guest on *College Tour*—a Dutch television show where prominent national and international figures from many different fields are interviewed by host Twan Huys in front of a live audience of college students—Bertolucci talked about Schneider, who by then had passed, and the infamous scene that had irrevocably destroyed what was already a strained relationship between the two. In this televised interview, Bertolucci gave the following account of the events:

> Poor Maria. She died two years ago, I think. And I was incredibly sad. After the movie we really didn't see each other because she was hating me. The scene you have just seen before, which is called the sequence of the butter, is an idea that I had with Marlon in the morning before shooting it. It was in the script that he had to rape her in a way. And we were having, with Marlon, breakfast on the floor of the flat where we were shooting. And there was a baguette and there was butter, and we looked at each other and without saying anything, we knew what we wanted. But I've been in a way horrible to Maria because I didn't tell her what was going on, because I wanted her reaction as a girl, not as an actress. I wanted her to react humiliated… if it goes on, she shouts, "No, no…" And I think that she hated me, and also Marlon, because we didn't tell her, and there was that detail of the butter used as a lubricant. And I still feel very guilty for that. ("Bertolucci over Maria Schneider")

[8] Bertolucci himself died in late 2018. He was 77 at the time (Izadi).

When asked whether he regretted filming the scene the way he did, Bertolucci responded:

> No, but I feel guilty. I feel guilty, but I do not regret. You know, to make movies, sometime, to obtain something, I think that you have to be completely free. I didn't want Maria to act her humiliation, her rage. I wanted Maria to feel, not to act, the rage and the humiliation. Then she hated me for all her life.

Although Bertolucci's remarks got some press coverage in his native Italy, they received little in the way of international media attention back in 2013; this was also the case with other, similar interviews he gave around this time to newspapers such as *The Guardian* in the UK (Macnab). Three years later, this would change. In early December 2016, the portion of the *College Tour* interview where the director discusses the filming of the rape scene resurfaced, and was quickly picked up by various media outlets across the globe. Now, Bertolucci and Brando's conduct towards Schneider was being almost universally condemned as not only unprofessional and inappropriate, but as completely unacceptable and inexcusable.

The angle in these articles was invariably the same: that the director and male star had neglected to obtain the actress's consent to film the rape scene as they envisioned it, and that this lack of consent on her part was what ultimately made the whole matter so shocking and worthy of our collective attention and outrage. This emphasis on the issue of consent was made clear enough by the headlines alone: "The Rape Scene in Last Tango in Paris Was Not Consensual" (Evans), "'Last Tango in Paris' Rape Scene Was Not Consensual, Director Bernardo Bertolucci Admits" (Kelley), "Last Tango in Paris director suggests Maria Schneider 'butter rape' scene not consensual" (Malkin), and "Bertolucci Admits He Conspired to Shoot a Non-Consensual Rape Scene in 'Last Tango in Paris'" (Kahn), just to give a few representative examples.

The *Daily Mail*, the very same tabloid that nine years earlier had published an interview where Schneider herself discussed these very same events in detail, now ran the headline, "Last Tango in Paris rape scene WAS non-consensual: Director admits in newly unearthed interview that he wanted actress Maria Schneider to feel "rage and humiliation" (Michallon), which had the effect of implying—intentionally or not—that her account only became credible once Bertolucci confirmed it, more or less, with a public statement of his own. As for the whole notion of the "non-consensual rape scene," referred to over and

over again by the media—we shall come back to this phrase and explore its implications in more depth later on in the analysis.

For his part, Bertolucci was quick to defend himself against his critics, claiming that the story had been spun to make his actions appear more sinister than they actually were. The director now wished to "clear up a ridiculous misunderstanding," insisting that Schneider had in fact known "everything because she had read the script, in which it was all described," and that the one thing she had intentionally been kept in the dark on was "the idea of the butter," which was also the thing, as he later learned, "that upset Maria, and not the violence that was in the scene and was envisaged in the script of the film" (A. MacKinnon). He went on to add that, "It is both consoling and distressing that anyone could be so naive to believe that what happens on the cinema screen actually takes place."

What Bertolucci failed to acknowledge was the fact that what people were reacting to with such alarm and disgust was not just how journalists and other commentators were interpreting his words, but rather what he himself had actually said, on camera, in a televised interview basically anyone could now easily access online; indeed, a YouTube video clip of the *College Tour* interview containing his remarks on Schneider has, as of April 2019, been viewed over 3.5 million times ("Bertolucci over Maria Schneider"), while a later upload of the same interview clip by Spanish nonprofit organization El Mundo de Alysia has received over 2.6 million views ("Bertolucci sobre Maria Schneider / Bertolucci admits rape scene was non-consensual"). According to *The Washington Post*, it was this later upload—which was published just in time for International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women with the precise intention of raising public awareness of Bertolucci’s comments and calling attention to the fact that the director had, thus far, faced no real repercussions for his actions—that really ignited the controversy and renewed interest in the film in 2016 (Izadi).

Meanwhile, there were some who, while denouncing Bertolucci’s behavior, also called into question how the incident had been given such widespread media attention at this particular moment in time, years after both Bertolucci and Schneider had first spoken publicly about these very same events. Chief among these critics was Matthew Dessem who, writing for the online magazine *Slate*, pointed out that none of the information that had sparked the controversy in late 2016 was actually new, and had in fact been publicly

available since at least 2007, when Schneider spoke about her experiences filming *Last Tango in Paris* to the *Daily Mail*. Dessem's conclusion was that the outrage was more performative than genuine in its concern for how Schneider was treated by her director and co-star—or for the treatment of women by male filmmakers in general, for that matter. Dessem suggested that the whole controversy was, ultimately, a case of an old story being cynically recycled and presented as something new. He went on to predict that soon enough, the story would be forgotten about, only for it to resurface—yet again—in a few years time, and be met with the same reactions of shock and outrage. This remains to be seen, and seems perhaps less likely now than it did in 2016, thanks to the lively public debate on these issues inspired by the #MeToo movement just a year later. In case, it seems fair to say that one of the results of the latest *Last Tango* scandal was that, once again, her genuine feelings of, as Bertolucci put it, "rage" and "humiliation" ("Bertolucci over Maria Schneider") became titillating entertainment for other people to consume and condemn with equal fervor.

4. What we can get her to do: Problems with film production

If we are seeking to gain any deeper understanding of the ethical issues involved in the production and consumption of filmed content of any kind, it is crucial that we do not lose sight of what is observably there on the screen in front of us. I say this because with film, there appears to be a common tendency and perhaps a temptation to emphasize the abstract and the subjective: to, for instance, endlessly speculate on the director's intentions, or dissect the viewer's own interpretations of the meaning and aesthetic merits of a particular film. While there is certainly a time and a place for such discussions, this focus on the subjective is arguably not the most appropriate or meaningful one to adopt when approaching film from an ethical perspective.

With this in mind, this paper is less concerned with the meaning or value of a particular film or genre, and more concerned with what is actually happening between the people we as the audience observe on screen. With regards to the ethics of film production, I am particularly interested in one, simple question that media scholars by the likes of George Gerbner—whose considerable work in this area we shall be returning to later on in chapters 4 and 5—have been asking for decades: *who is doing what to whom*.

The analysis is shaped and guided by the case of *Last Tango in Paris* we discussed above. However, the intention here is not to portray this one famous incident as some exceptional, isolated example of unethical behavior on a film set. The analysis below also does not purport to comprise a complete list of all the possible ethical issues one could name with regards to this particular case, let alone with the production and consumption of sexually violent content in general. What I am trying to do here instead is to find and define the larger underlying problems and to formulate the questions that, as I argue, we ought to be asking whenever we encounter scenes that depict sexual violence against women. I do this by analyzing the individual case of *Last Tango in Paris*, in order to establish what exactly happened on the set of that film, how the incident was framed in the media, and what were some of the things that were largely missing from the conversation around these events.

In chapter 4, we look at ethical problems involved in the filming of scenes that depict men's sexual violence against women. Of the three levels of media analysis outlined by Douglas Kellner (8) and discussed in chapter 2 of this paper, the present chapter is most concerned

with the level of production. What this means is that here, the content and consumption of sexually violent scenes are, for the most, discussed only in relation to how films are made. More specifically, the focus stays mostly on the role and responsibility of two people involved in the filmmaking process: the filmmaker who oversees that process behind the camera, and the woman who portrays the target of men's sexual violence and aggression.

First, section 4.1 picks apart the concept of *consent*, so central to the latest *Last Tango in Paris* controversy, and relevant—to a greater or lesser extent—whenever one person films another, especially in a degrading situation. The latter parts of the chapter move on to explore questions that tend to be left unaddressed when so much attention is placed on the presence or absence of the woman's consent. Section 4.2 compares film to other forms of art and entertainment, and emphasizes the significance of the involvement of human performers, particularly when it comes to the production of scenes that depict sexual violence against women. Finally, section 4.3 considers the broader ethical implications of the fact that so many women at least apparently willingly participate in their own degradation on camera. At the end of each section there is a brief summary of the key issues raised in the section in question, followed by a list of questions for the reader to consider on the basis of what we have just discussed. Throughout the chapter, one central theme is the power imbalance and conflicting interests between those who are exposed and documented in a vulnerable position or degrading situation, and those who conceive of these scenarios and get to remain hidden behind the camera.

4.1 Consent

The first part of chapter 4 explores:

–The issue of the performer's consent in the context of filming sexually violent scenes in general and the case of *Last Tango in Paris* in particular

–The limits of *consent* when it comes to adequately addressing the ethical problems involved in the production and consumption of sexually violent content

One of the questions this paper is most concerned with is how we—as individuals and as a collective—view, treat, and relate to others we observe from a distance, on a screen or anywhere else. Indeed, in a world littered with screens, where we are constantly being placed in that position of the distant observer whether we like it or not, this question takes

on a special meaning and significance. At the same time, it is worth remembering that the particular ethical problems posed by film were not created but rather exacerbated by, first, the invention, and, later, the increasing ubiquity and normalization of film and other related technologies in our daily lives. What this means as far as the present study is concerned is that ethical issues we are talking about here are not, in fact, unique to film. As such, I argue that they neither can nor should be separated from the various moral choices and dilemmas we are faced with constantly in everyday life, quite apart from the direct influence of screens and images.

That being said, in the context of this study, my interest in specific familiar concepts—*fantasy*, *reality*, *responsibility,* and *consent* chief among them—is mostly limited to how each of these relates to the production and consumption of film in general, and scenes that depict sexual violence in particular. For this reason, I shall be unable to—and, in fact, will not even attempt to—address the full range of ethical problems and questions related to any one of these concepts. Still, and despite these necessary limitations, it is important to keep in mind that the issues we discuss in this paper are, at the end of the day, far bigger than the movies.

All of this brings us to the main topic of section 4.1: the issue of the female performer's consent. As we observed in chapter 3, the lack of consent on the part of actress Maria Schneider to participate in the filming of a rape scene was at the core of the most recent *Last Tango in Paris* controversy. Generally speaking, the question of whether the person being filmed gave his or her informed consent—or was in a position to do so in the first place, as Schneider was not—is one that comes up again and again in discussions on the ethics of filmmaking, regardless of whether the people involved are professional actors and filmmakers or not. This first part of the analysis explores the meaning and significance of the concept of consent in the context of filming sexually violent scenes specifically. Here, we consider some of the limitations and dangers of focusing so much on the exploited person's consent in our evaluations of what does and does not constitute unethical behavior. The specific problems that are left largely unaddressed when we adopt such a narrow focus—and, indeed, were largely absent from the public discourse around what happened on the set of *Last Tango in Paris*—are the topic of the later parts of this chapter.

Unsurprisingly, when it comes to the issue of sexual exploitation and violence against women in particular, feminists have long been some of the most vocal critics of *consent* as the term is commonly used and understood in this context. The argument goes that the concept of consent all too often conceals more than it reveals by taking the attention away from the fact of who is actively doing what to whom, and putting too much emphasis on how the victim or target of the abusive behavior reacts to what is being done to them by a person or entity whose identity is often not named or specified at all.

In an essay titled "Liberalism and the Death of Feminism," lawyer and legal scholar Catharine MacKinnon provides a concise summary of the feminist critique of consent: "When force is a normalized part of sex, when no is taken to mean yes, when fear and despair produce acquiescence and acquiescence is taken to mean consent, consent is not a meaningful concept" (4). From this perspective, the question of whether or not the female target of male sexual aggression agreed, for whatever reason, to participate in her own degradation and abuse is not the one we ought to be asking. What we should be more concerned about instead is, first of all, what would drive someone to agree to endure such harmful behavior, and, second of all, who or what encourages and enables *him* to do these things to her in the first place. The feminist argument, then, is that since it is his coercive behavior that is the problem and not her reaction to it, whatever choices she as an individual makes in that situation—to consent or acquiesce to his demands, for example—will not make the problem go away. And what MacKinnon is suggesting is that we need to be looking for the answers to these questions and the solutions to these problems in the broader social context within which these individual choices—his as well as hers—are made.

We see this dynamic at play in the most recent *Last Tango in Paris* controversy and how it was framed by the media. As we observed in chapter 3, media outlets from gossip blogs (*Jezebel*), trade magazines (*Variety*), and tabloids (the *Daily Mail*) to more serious newspapers (*The Guardian*) chose some variation of "non-consensual" to describe the Schneider's participation in the rape scene in the very headlines of the articles. What is more, across the board, these articles and headlines juxtapose the word "non-consensual" with the word "rape." Of course, they also include the word "scene," which is there to indicate that we are talking about a fictional rape, not an actual one. Even so, what this particular choice of words implies is that there is also such a thing as a "consensual rape

scene"—hence the need for the qualifier "non-consensual" in the first place. Obviously, if you are familiar with the details of the case, you will be able to infer that the phrase "non-consensual rape scene" is referring to the way a scene depicting rape was filmed—that is to say, without the actress's consent—and that it is, presumably, not meant to imply that the rape itself could be anything but "non-consensual."

It is also true, however, that many of the people encountering a headline like "The Rape Scene in Last Tango in Paris Was Not Consensual" (Evans), will not be aware of this context. What this means is that their first introduction to the case will be the juxtaposition of the words "rape" and "not consensual." With this in mind, it should be noted that it is not at all clear from the headline alone that this article is about the *filming conditions* of a rape scene, not the rape itself. This is just one example of how, by blurring the line between fantasy and reality, film makes it more difficult for us to determine, first of all, whether we are talking about fiction or real behavior with consequences in the real world, and, second of all, how seriously we ought to take any of it. This gets particularly complicated with a case like *Last Tango in Paris* where, on the one hand, we are talking about a fiction film with a script and professional actors and so forth, but, on the other hand, we know that the abuse in the fictional story of the film was reflected in the treatment of the actress in real life while the film was being made. We shall return to these issues and explore the relationship between film, fantasy, and reality more thoroughly in chapter 5 to follow.

Of course, when it comes to the issue of consent in the context of film acting, there is another important aspect to consider. What I am referring to here, specifically, is the permanence of film, and how the meaning and significance of that permanence has shifted over time on account of what have often been rapid changes and developments in the technology. Almost from the start, the direction of that development has been towards increased availability and accessibility of filmed content of all sorts: from nickelodeons and movie palaces to television sets and home media (VHS tapes, DVDs, and so forth) to, most recently, the Internet, video streaming services, and smart-phones, just to name a few key developments.[9] What this means as far as our interest in the case of *Last Tango in Paris* is considered is that when Maria Schneider was making the film in the early 1970s, she had no way of knowing that even those sexually explicit scenes that she did

[9] For critical analysis on some of these technological changes and their implications, see Thomson 503-525, and Rafferty.

willingly agree to participate in at the time would one day be just a click of a button away and available for basically anyone to see, at any time. In this sense, she—nor, for that matter, any of her contemporaries, let alone anyone who stepped before the camera before her—was not really in a position to give her fully informed consent to appear in these scenes to begin with. It is worth noting that this is the case even if we did not take her director and co-star's efforts to intentionally keep her in the dark on the details of the rape scene into consideration.

To put it simply, the problem is that the person being filmed does not and cannot know how the footage taken of them will be used in future, or who will be able to access it and under what circumstances in years to come. This particular uncertainty over the future use and availability of the footage, brought about by the abovementioned speed of the drastic technological changes the medium has already undergone during its relatively short history thus far—some 120 years, roughly speaking—is yet another reason why the concept of consent is insufficient when it comes to adequately addressing the ethical issues that arise whenever someone is captured by the camera in a vulnerable position or degrading situation like Schneider—along with countless of other women—famously was.

Overall, when it comes filmed depictions of men's sexual violence against women in general, the primary problem with focusing on the woman's consent is that it places disproportionate attention on the choices of the most vulnerable person involved in that situation. It would be hard to dispute that in these instances, that vulnerable person is the actress who portrays the victim or target of that violence. And what makes her vulnerable, first and foremost, is the fact that she is a woman who is being expected to act out that role of the target of sexually violent or degrading acts perpetuated by men much bigger and stronger than she is. In other words, what I am arguing is that any woman in this situation would be in a vulnerable position, even if the actress in question was not—like Schneider was—also being paid significantly less than her older, more famous and powerful male co-star and director.

What I would suggest, then, is a shift of focus from the choices and actions of the woman who is expected to consent to being sexually degraded and humiliated on camera to the choices and actions of the people who conceive of, consume, and create the demand for this type of footage. The rest of this paper is dedicated to highlighting some of the major ethical questions facing individual viewers, filmmakers, and, more broadly, whole societies

where entertainment depicting sexual violence against women is not only more ubiquitous, but more easily accessible and readily available than ever before. As far as the role of the women who perform in these films is concerned, in the third section of chapter 4 we consider the question of the performer’s responsibility as an often—though not always, as the case of *Last Tango in Paris* clearly demonstrates—more or less willing participant in the creation of sexually violent and exploitative content, albeit from a very different angle than all those articles on Bertolucci, Schneider, and the "non-consensual rape scene." Ultimately, the goal here is to move beyond the issue of consent and to address more complex, uncomfortable questions about what we should and should not be asking and expecting other people to do for our pleasure and entertainment in the first place.

4.1.1 Summary and questions

The first part of the analysis explored the issue of consent, which was at the core of the most recent *Last Tango in Paris* controversy. We considered the meaning and significance of consent in the context of filming scenes depicting sexual violence against women, and explored some of the reasons why placing so much emphasis on the woman’s consent is in itself part of the problem. I made the case that the central ethical issue in this scenario is not, in fact, her consent or lack thereof, but rather the inherent power imbalance between the woman who portrays the target of sexual violence, the man who portrays the perpetrator, and the male filmmaker who orchestrates the scene. The deeper meaning and ethical implications of this imbalance of power are the topic of the latter two parts of this chapter.

As promised, I now leave the reader with a few questions to consider on the basis of our discussion on the issue of consent. A similar list of relevant questions can be found at the end of each section of the analysis in chapters 4 and 5. It should be noted that the types of questions presented here and elsewhere in the paper are, by their nature, ones to which there are no clear, conclusive answers; certainly, they are not going to be resolved within the bounds of this study. What these questions should do, however, is demonstrate the depth and complexity of the issues under discussion, and, hopefully, help facilitate a deeper, more thorough and thoughtful conversation on the ethics of filming and watching sexual violence against women than the one that has been had thus far in the context of the *Last Tango in Paris* controversy and, more recently, the #MeToo movement.

–Why did most if not all media outlets reporting on Bertolucci's comments on the filming of *Last Tango in Paris* choose to focus so much on the issue of consent? What other aspects of the incident could or should have been highlighted instead?

–Why might one take issue with the phrase "non-consensual rape scene"? Would such concerns be valid? Why / why not?

–If Bertolucci had informed Schneider on the details of the rape scene before they filmed it, would there have been anything unethical about the situation, or his and Brando's behavior regardless? Why / why not?

4.2 Censorship

The second part of chapter 4 looks at:

– How film censorship differs from other forms of censorship, and why this matters from an ethical perspective

– How, in order to realize whatever sexually violent, degrading, or humiliating scenario he has in mind, the male filmmaker requires some woman to act it out for him on camera

The second and third sections of chapter 4 explore ethical problems that are both the cause and consequence of the power imbalance between the person being filmed, those who do the filming, and, finally, those who consume the final product. As was indicated above, these are all problems that *consent*—or the lack thereof—does not cover or adequately address. Part 4.2 stays focused on the women who perform in and the men who produce films that depict sexual violence against women. Here, we consider the meaning and significance of the fact that the latter needs the former to express or realize his[10] vision in film form at all, no matter how violent, degrading, or humiliating that vision may be and, often enough, actually is.

[10] I use the male pronoun here deliberately, to reflect the reality that most film directors and producers are male (see e.g. Lauzen). Another reason is that since this thesis is concerned with filmed depictions of men's sexual violence against women specifically, the sex of the person behind the camera—or in front of it, for that matter—needs to be taken into consideration at every step of the way in the analysis.

This requirement for "live fodder," as Catharine MacKinnon puts it in *Only Words* (9), her book on pornography and free speech, is one of the distinct features of film that differentiate it from most other forms of art and entertainment (writing, music, other visual arts, and so forth). However, the ethical implications of this difference are often downplayed or ignored entirely. This part of the paper aims to highlight the importance of acknowledging these implications, and of seeing how they connect to the ever-controversial topic of film censorship, and the idea of film as speech in general. The role and responsibility of the viewer in all of this will be explored more fully in later parts of the analysis.

It is important to note that the controversy concerning Bertolucci, Schneider, and the issue of consent is by no means the first one to be associated with *Last Tango in Paris*; as we have seen, the film has a long history with running into trouble with the censors in a number of countries. In chapter 3 we talked about how long before the details about Bertolucci and Brando's treatment of Schneider were ever revealed to the public, the film itself was considered so scandalous, it was granted the adult-only X rating in the United States, and was banned from release altogether in other places, including the director's native country of Italy (Morandini 44, Thomson 377). However, by the time Bertolucci's comments about Schneider made the news in late 2016, the issue of censorship was no longer considered relevant to the conversation, and mentioned only to provide historical context for the film. With this in mind, what I now wish to do is to bring these two controversial topics associated with this one film at different points in time together, as interconnected rather than separate issues. To be more precise, my intention is to establish how the issues of film censorship and the treatment of female performers relate to and affect one another, especially in the context of filming scenes that depict sexual violence against women.

As the term is commonly used and understood, *censorship* is a prohibitive practice—usually exercised by organizations that wield institutional power—that restricts the public of expression of ideas. This is what Annette Kuhn refers to as the "prohibition/institutions model" of censorship, and though, as she points out, it is not the only or even necessarily the most accurate or useful way to define and think about censorship, it has often been the most common, in film scholarship and elsewhere (2-4). If this is indeed how we understand the concept, then it makes sense that most discussions on censorship tend to focus on

two key questions: first, what the creators of a particular text or other cultural product should and should not be permitted to say, show, and express through their work, and second, what kind of words, images, and ideas different segments of the population should and should not be exposed to in the art, entertainment, and other media they consume. The former question concerns the production process, while the latter relates more closely to the consumption side and the issue of audience reception.

Certainly, these are relevant and important questions to ask, whether we are talking about a film, or any other type of text or cultural product. With live action film, however, it is not just a question of the moral acceptability or desirability of particular ideas or scenarios; it is also—and at least as importantly—a matter of giving concrete form to those abstract ideas through the presence of the human performer. In this context, the human performer is the person who, by acting out the vision of the so-called author (usually, the director and/or producer) of the film, comes to embody all manner of abstract ideas and fantasies that would otherwise exist solely in the minds of individual audience members and, of course, the filmmaker himself. A live action film, then, is not just a collection of words or ideas; it is also a recording of what actually happened in the real world—even if we are talking about professional actors on a film set, as in the case of *Last Tango in Paris*. The problem is that, as I mentioned above, the meaning and significance of this aspect of film tend to get overlooked when film censorship is approached in the same way as those forms of censorship where either the involvement of real living performers or the permanence of the finished work is not a consideration.

Of course, the ethical implications and importance of any of these issues may appear trivial, even irrelevant if the particular acts and scenarios being depicted are fairly benign or banal. Considering, however, that our current topic is filmed depictions of sexual violence and degradation, such descriptors hardly seem to apply. In this instance, the acts themselves are exploitative; at the very least—and as we saw in the first part of this chapter—they place the person portraying the target of the violent, degrading, or humiliating treatment in a highly vulnerable position. It is in such a situation, then, that the requirement for real living human performers becomes, from an ethical perspective, not only a relevant but also, as I would argue, a necessary consideration in the broader conversation on film censorship.

One area of theory and activism where the ethical implications of expecting real people to perform demeaning or painful acts on camera have been taken seriously is the feminist anti-pornography movement that flourished in the late 1970s and 1980s.[11] Among the best-known and most influential representatives of this movement are the abovementioned Catharine MacKinnon, as well as her sometime collaborator, feminist author and activist Andrea Dworkin. The latter's text, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*, first published in 1981, proved particularly influential in its analysis of pornography as "the debasing of women;" as not only an inherently exploitative industry, but also, and on a more fundamental level, a central component of "the system of male sexual domination" (201). According to Dworkin, pornography is most accurately defined as "depictions of women as vile whores."[12] And, as she notes, while the existence of pornography far precedes the development of camera technology and the pornography industry as we know it today, "With the technologically advanced methods of graphic depiction, real women are required for the depiction as such to exist" (200).

Elsewhere, Dworkin calls attention to the implications of regarding such filmed depictions of real women in the same way as so-called obscene writings and drawings. In a speech later published as "Pornography and Male Supremacy," she succinctly puts the problem, as it relates to depictions of sexual violence against women:

> When pornography was in fact in writing, etching, or drawing, it was possible to consider it something exclusively cultural, something on paper not in life, and even partly esthetic or intellectual. Such a view was not accurate, but it was possible. Since the invention of the camera, any such view of pornography is completely despicable and corrupt. … It is important to note that men have not found it necessary—not legally, not morally, not sexually—to make distinctions between drawing and writing on the one hand and the use of live women on the other. … Where is the visceral recognition, the *humanist* recognition, that it is impossible and inconceivable to tolerate—let alone sanction or to apologize for—the tying and hanging and chaining and bruising and beating of women? I am saying what no one should have to say, which is simply that one does not do to human beings what is done to women in pornography. (241)

[11] For a partial account of the history of the feminist anti-pornography movement in the United States, see Lyons 53-80.

[12] Here, she refers to the etymology of the word. According to Dworkin, "The word *pornography*, derived from the ancient Greek *porne* and *graphos*, means "writing about whores"" (199).

The problem with pornography, then, is not just the messages it conveys, about men, women, sexuality, or anything else; it is the very real, dehumanizing treatment of actual women—the women in the pornography, for sure, but also every other woman who lives in a culture saturated with pornographic imagery—in its name.

Now, if we turn our attention back to the example of *Last Tango in Paris*, certain differences need to be recognized. Crucially, for all the exploitative treatment she was subjected to on set by her male director and co-star, Maria Schneider, unlike the women in pornography, was never actually penetrated on camera. Generally speaking, we as viewers of mainstream entertainment do not expect any of the people we see having sex on screen—let alone, committing sexual assault—to be actually doing these things in front of the camera in real life. (We shall get back to this issue of which of the things we see on screen are and are not really real, and how we as viewers are able to tell the difference later on in chapter 5.)

The relevance of Dworkin's analysis of pornography to our present topic of filming scenes depicting sexual violence in general really starts to become clear when, again, we recognize that live action films, whether pornographic or not, require real people to perform inherently exploitative and degrading acts on camera just so other people can watch it; in other words, "real women are required for the depiction as such to exist" (Dworkin, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* 200). To put it simply, what this is means is that if a male filmmaker like Bernardo Bertolucci wishes to include a rape or any other sexually violent, degrading, or humiliating acts in his film, he needs someone, usually a woman, to act out that scenario for him on camera. The same does not apply, of course, to actual speech or writing, no matter how morally objectionable the acts or scenarios being described in words may be. If we fail acknowledge this difference, and, especially, if we ignore its ethical implications, then it seems accurate to say that the women who are used in these films in these ways are indeed being seen and treated as, as Catharine MacKinnon puts it, "men's speech" ("Liberalism and the Death of Feminism" 12).

So, with this in mind, the question we ought to be asking is not so much what filmmakers should and should not have the right to *say* or *express* in their work; such phrasing is—intentionally or otherwise—vague and misleading, for the reason that film is not, in fact, an abstract collection of words and ideas. Of course, films—as all other texts and cultural

products—do convey various messages and ideas, and typically use words to do so. However, it is also true that films not only benefit from but also, more often than not, *require* the involvement people other than the director or other driving creative force behind the film in order for the finished product to exist at all. And not only that, but some of those other people—the performers—become the ones who actually speak and embody those words and ideas that, in most cases, they did not choose or come up with themselves. For this reason alone, films cannot be accurately described as a form of speech, or a form of creative self-expression in that sense. This needs to be not only acknowledged but also analyzed in our discussions on film censorship, particularly when it comes to filmed depictions of sexual violence, degradation, and humiliation.

The question we do need to be asking then becomes that when there is a conflict, whose perceived rights and interests should and actually are being prioritized: a) those of the filmmaker who wishes to express particular ideas and present certain sexually explicit acts and scenarios in film form, b) those of the film consumer who wants to have the ability to watch this type of footage, or c) those of the woman who is expected to embody someone else's degrading vision, on camera or not. Recognizing that how we choose to prioritize these things, both on a personal and societal level, is indeed a choice—not inevitable, in other words—would seem to be the first step towards addressing this particular problem.

Ultimately, the purpose of this paper is not to take a stance on film censorship, for or against. Rather, the point of this section in particular has been to highlight some of the ways in which film fundamentally differs from many other forms creative expression—writing being perhaps the most obvious example—because of the fact that the filmmaker—unlike the poet or novelist—requires actual human beings to express the ideas he wishes to express, and, specifically, to turn whatever sexually violent, degrading, or humiliating scenario he has in his head into a live action film at all. It is only after recognizing this concreteness of film that we can have a meaningful discussion on the kinds of things filmmakers do and do not have a right to show or "say" in their work on the one hand, and what film viewers are and are not entitled to see other people do or endure on screen on the other.

4.2.1 Summary and questions

While all forms of censorship involve, on some level, putting limits and restrictions on the free expression of ideas, there are certain additional considerations that we need to take into account when we talk about film censorship specifically. The particular aspect of film we have focused on in section 4.2 is, of course, the involvement of human performers, and how that involvement affects the conversation on film censorship. What I have been arguing for is the importance of making a clear distinction between a) thoughts (private and abstract), b) speech and words (public and abstract), and, finally, c) filmed images (public and material) when we approach the issue of censorship. The true significance of making that distinction only starts to become clear when we talk about a topic that is in itself controversial and potentially exploitative—sexual violence against women being a prime example of just such a topic. As far as the ethical problems involved are concerned, it is one thing to image a rape, for example, another to describe it in a published piece of writing, and yet another to have actual men and women act it out on camera and make the footage publicly available for others to consume in the real world.

So, the question then becomes, how should those aspects of film that distinguish it from other, less concrete forms of expression be taken into consideration when we talk about the things that should and should not be graphically depicted in a live action film specifically. In later parts of this paper, we shall consider the meaning and significance of the involvement of human performers not just from the perspective of the performers themselves, but from that of the film viewer and society as a whole as well.

–Should live action film be considered a form of speech akin to writing? Why / why not?

–Is the involvement of human performers a relevant consideration in the debate on film censorship? Why / why not? Consider these questions from the perspectives of film viewers and the general public, as well as the performers themselves.

–Are there ideas or scenarios that should rarely or never be realized for the screen by human performers, even if those same ideas could still be expressed or presented in writing, for example? What might those ideas or scenarios be, specifically, and why?

4.3 Pretending

The third and final part of chapter 4 examines:

–The ethical implications of the performer's apparent willingness to be sexually degraded and humiliated on camera

–The problem with becoming the face of someone else's degrading vision, for individual performers as well as the social group those performers represent

So far, we have talked a lot about the issue of consent. As we have seen, it was the lack of consent on Schneider's part that brought the rape scene in *Last Tango in Paris* back to the headlines. We further saw that a case such as this was almost universally condemned, as basically anyone could see the obvious ethical problems with manipulating someone—especially a young, relatively inexperienced and powerless woman—into filming a rape scene without letting her know what the scene would entail beforehand. In other words, for people other than Bertolucci himself, this was an easy issue to take a moral stance on. This paper, however, is at least as concerned with those ethical questions we rarely address as I am with those that tend to be front and center in public discourse on these issues. What this means in the context of our discussion on filmed depictions of sexual violence is that we must go beyond the relatively easy or straightforward matter of the presence or absence of the performer's consent and start asking those more difficult, uncomfortable questions about what it means that so many people are expected to participate in exploitative situations on camera in the first place, and that countless of others are so eager to watch the results.

We touched on some of these issues in section 4.2; there, we talked about the ethical implications of the fact that live action film requires actual living participants, willing or unwilling, who then become the faces of someone else's vision—even when that vision entails sexually degrading or humiliating acts. The final section of chapter 4 explores those instances where the performer does—or appears to, as far as the viewer can tell—consent or agree to pretend on camera in a particular way, especially when the scene in question involves sexual violence or degradation. Specifically, in section 4.3, I am concerned with the role and responsibility of the woman who is the target of the degrading or humiliating

treatment we see on screen.[13] As we saw in chapter 3, the term *humiliation* is one that was used by both the actress and the director to describe her role in the rape scene in *Last Tango in Paris*: not only did Schneider herself feel "humiliated" as a consequence of shooting the scene (Das), but the whole reason why Bertolucci chose to film it the way he did was because, as he put it, "I didn't want Maria to act her humiliation, her rage. I wanted Maria to feel, not to act, the rage and the humiliation" ("Bertolucci over Maria Schneider"). Here, we shall consider the meaning and significance of *humiliation* as it relates to filmed depictions of sexual violence against women in particular.

Earlier in this chapter, I have repeatedly drawn attention to the power imbalance between the person being filmed and those who do the filming, and made the argument that the fact of being filmed in itself puts one in a vulnerable position that is not always recognized as such, not even when we talk about filmed depictions of sexual violence specifically. The obvious objection to any such arguments is that, at the end of the day, what we are talking about is "just a movie"—the same words that, as you may recall from chapter 3, Maria Schneider said Marlon Brando had used to reassure her when she was distressed over the filming of the rape scene (Das). Or, to put it another way, that as disturbing as the things we witness on our screens may often be, we should not worry too much about it since the people we are observing—professional actors in many cases—are only pretending and not really doing these things, for our pleasure and entertainment as the viewing audience. Notably, whenever such points about it all being an act are raised, the power imbalances mentioned above—or, indeed, the exploitation they entail and are used to justify—tend to get left out of the equation.

Though the conversation does often get framed that way—and the case of *Last Tango in Paris* is just one, particularly clear example of this—this question of power is not just about

[13] I focus mostly on the role and responsibility of the woman who is the target rather than the man who is the perpetrator of aggression in order to continue to explore the problems with emphasizing the female performer's consent we discussed earlier in relation to the case of *Last Tango in Paris*. For its part, the moral responsibility of the male performer who portrays the perpetrator of sexual violence is an issue at least as controversial as our current topic. To give just one example, actor Malcolm McDowell, who played one of the most infamous rapists in film history in the 1971 film, *A Clockwork Orange*, decades later had this to say: "But how ridiculous, to point to an actor. I mean, was I supposed to turn down the part of a century? Is one responsible morally? You are responsible for your own life, not for parts you accept. I've played many murderers, serial killers. God knows what else. It's not to say I'm anything like that" (93). The questions he raises in this one brief statement alone are certainly worthy of further exploration, and could surely be the subject of a whole separate study.

whether or not the performer knew what was going to happen before filming and did in fact consent to participating in the scene in question; it is also, and more importantly, a question of *who is doing what to whom*, on screen and off. Noted communication theorist and media critic, the late George Gerbner—who spent decades researching media violence and its effects—spoke often of the importance of this very question. In a 1998 interview, he explained:

> I don't believe that either frequency or explicitness of violence are the primary issues. Violence is a demonstration of power, and the real issue, once again, is who is doing what to whom. If time and again you hear and see stories in which people like you–white males in the prime of life–are more likely to prevail in a conflict situation, you become more aggressive, and if you are in the same culture, and a member of a group or a gender that is more likely to be victimized, you grow up more insecure, more dependent, more afraid of getting into a conflict, because you feel your calculus of risk is higher.
>
> That is the way we train minorities. People aren't born a minority, they are trained to act like a minority through that kind of cultural conditioning. And women, who are a numerical majority of humankind, still are trained to act like a minority. The sense of potential victimization and vulnerability is the key. ("Telling Stories: An Interview With George Gerbner")

Gerbner here is talking about the patterns of how members of different social groups are portrayed in the media, particularly when it comes to the issues of aggression and victimization. His central argument is that the kinds of media representations an individual sees again and again of people who look like them, over time, has a significant impact on that person's self image and confidence, as well as on their sense of security, vulnerability, and dependence on authority figures. This, again, is especially true when we look at depictions of violence and victimization, which play a crucial role in essentially training large segments of the population—mainly, women, people of color, and the working class—to assume or accept their low status position in society.

Gerbner's argument has obvious relevance to our current discussion on sexually violent content, where most often women are seen victimized by men in a particularly brutal manner that makes the sex differences and the related power imbalance between the two

parties uniquely difficult if not impossible to ignore. In the context of this study, however, there is another crucial aspect of this dynamic to consider, beyond or in addition to the message or idea behind the sexually violent scene or image itself. Yet again, I draw attention to the fact that with live action film, we are not just observing "representations" in some abstract sense, like words or drawings on a page; we are watching real men and women—professional actors or not—taking on those roles of victim and victimizer. What this means is that the film viewer is not just being presented with the *idea* that members of a particular group are a certain way; the viewer is seeing—often, though not always—an actual member of that group acting out that role, apparently willingly, thus giving that role or idea concrete form and a real human face. This holds true quite regardless of whatever may actually be going on in the head of the person in front of the camera, or whether that person is indeed only pretending and would never behave in such ways in any other context, outside of a film set. At any rate, the viewers watching have no way of knowing any of these things, certainly not with any certainty; what they know is what they can actually see happening, right there on screen.

Now, if we consider each individual scene or film we encounter in isolation, none of this seems to matter all that much. However, as Gerbner observed, it is not really a question of this or that particular film, or a few isolated scenes here and there; the problem lies with the patterns, those scenarios and power dynamics that we are presented with, "time and time again" ("Telling Stories: An Interview With George Gerbner"). When it comes to media depictions of sexual violence specifically, that dynamic typically involves female victims and male perpetrators: to give an example, a 2010 content analysis of some 300 scenes in popular pornographic videos found that not only did 88.2% of the scenes contain physical aggression, but that most acts of both physical and verbal aggression (70.3%) were committed by men, while the targets of aggressive acts were "overwhelmingly female;" 94.4% of all aggressive acts were targeted at women (Bridges et al. 1065, 1076). Studies such as this help give us some idea of the broader cultural context in which individual rape scenes and depictions of sexual violence—regardless of their perceived artistic merits, entertainment value, or significance to the plot of this or that particular film—

exist. And, of course, this is before we even begin to consider the prevalence of sexual violence against women in the real world, outside the screen.[14]

All of this brings us back to the issue of consent. If the media coverage of *Last Tango in Paris* is any indication, the general assumption seems to be that the women who appear in scenes where they are the targets of sexually violent or degrading acts are there by choice; if this were not the case, then the revelations about Schneider's lack of consent surely would not have been considered newsworthy in the first place. What happened to her, the media coverage suggested, was exceptional. With this in mind, the question becomes: what does it means that so many women, first of all, are expected to agree to be sexually used and abused for the entertainment of others, and, second of all, that so many women—professional actresses and others—actually do so, apparently voluntarily in many cases. As we have seen, these are precisely the kind of questions that, for the most part, were not being asked, either in relation to the latest *Last Tango in Paris* controversy, or to any of the other famous cases involving the sexual exploitation of women in the entertainment industry that have captured the media's attention in recent years.

What is notable here—in addition to the media silence around these issues—is the fact that since we are talking about film, none of these things are strictly private matters or personal choices that only impact those who are directly involved in the production of a particular scene or film; once this footage becomes publicly available, it also affects the lives of those who consume it, as well as, more broadly, those who live in a society where sexually violent and degrading content is both ubiquitous and readily available. What this means is that the individual woman who performs in these films then becomes partly responsible for participating in the creation of those harmful media images that, as Gerbner described it, have the cumulative effect of making members of oppressed groups in particular "grow up more insecure, more dependent, more afraid of getting into a conflict, because [they] feel [their] calculus of risk is higher" ("Telling Stories: An Interview With George Gerbner"). Now, if we take into consideration both the prevalence of female objectification in art, entertainment, and popular culture in general, as well as the reality of men's violence against women I referred to earlier, it is images of sexual violence, degradation, and

[14] Gathering anything like accurate data on this, globally or locally, is incredibly difficult, of course. The World Health Organization estimate from 2017 says that "about 1 in 3 (35%) of women worldwide have experienced either physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence or non-partner sexual violence in their lifetime" ("Violence against women").

humiliation that seem particularly likely to inspire these types of reactions in women and girls specifically.

To be clear, when I talk about the performer's responsibility, I do not mean to suggest that the woman who acts out the role of the target of men's sexual violence and aggression on camera is to blame for the existence of such material, or for any of the negative consequences its public availability may have on other women; as the case of *Last Tango in Paris* alone all too clearly demonstrates, it is the female performer who is the most powerless and vulnerable person involved in the production of this content. What I do wish to bring the reader's attention to is the fact that whilst the woman herself is being exploited or, at the very least, captured for posterity in a highly vulnerable position, that same woman is made to be complicit in the creation of yet more images of sexualized male violence against women. In that sense—though her personal experience is important in and of itself—it is ultimately not just a question of how the individual woman feels about whatever sexually violent, degrading, or humiliating scenario she is being expected to act out; it is also a question of the broader social context in which any one sexually violent scene or film exists, and of the culture each individual woman who performs in them is being asked to participate in—in such a public, wide-reaching way, no less—by her agreeing to be sexually degraded and humiliated by men on camera.

And of course, it is not just the viewer on the other side of the screen who may be negatively affected by the seemingly voluntary or consensual humiliation inflicted on the professional screen performer; we also need to consider the consequences of this particular form of pretending on the woman who engages in this behavior herself. One recent study that helps shed light on this issue is a 2016 paper by Rebecca Whisnant titled "Pornography, Humiliation and Consent." In the paper, Whisnant argues that it is not the absence but the *presence* of the humiliated pornography performer's consent that—alongside the fact that sexual humiliation is filmed or photographed and the footage made available for public consumption—particularly severe. She backs this argument by referencing a wide range of studies on the psychological effects of torture, particularly when that torture is documented, it involves humiliation, and the victim is made somehow complicit in what is being done to them. As she notes, all three criteria apply to the

treatment of women in contemporary pornography, though this is rarely acknowledged.[15] In summarizing the harms of this particular kind of documented humiliation, Whisnant draws the connection between the harm that is done to the individual woman herself and those broader negative consequences for women as a group that we discussed above:

> Images of women accepting and even welcoming their own debasement and humiliation are profoundly destructive, not only for the particular women so depicted, but for women generally. After all, pornography purports to reveal the down-and-dirty truth—not about men, or capitalism, or patriarchy, but about *women*, who we are and what we are for. And like all propaganda, it uses individuals as stand-ins for entire targeted groups.

If we apply this analysis of pornography to the depictions of sexual violence and humiliation we see in mainstream films such as *Last Tango in Paris*, certain crucial differences have to, again, be taken into account. For one thing, sexually explicit scenes in narrative films—unlike in much of contemporary pornography—are just one part of the overall story the film is trying to tell; in other words, they are not the sole reason why the film exists in the first place. Crucially, this tends to be the case even when these scenes are vital to the plot, as in the case of *Last Tango in Paris*—which, as you may recall, is a film about a relationship that is supposed to be purely sexual. In any case, when we as viewers are following a plot of some complexity, we tend to be much more aware that we are watching specific characters behave in certain ways for particular reasons; that we are not, in other words, just watching some random, largely interchangeable men and women performing various sex acts devoid of any deeper meaning or context.

All of that being said, the question still remains: what are the impacts of agreeing to be sexually humiliated on camera, both for the women who appear in these films, and for those who witness it on screen. For either of these groups, that impact is bound to be different than with humiliating scenes in pornography, for the reasons stated above. Still,

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[15] One illustrative example of this is the torture of Iraqi prisoners by U.S. soldiers at the Abu Ghraib prison, which became a major international scandal when photographs documenting the abuse were leaked in 2004. Whisnant, as many others before her, points out the striking similarities between the sexualized torture and humiliation of the male prisoners and the routine treatment of women in pornography. Notably for our purposes, and as Whisnant observes, much of the public discourse around the Abu Ghraib scandal framed the women's apparent consent as the main reason why their treatment was morally justifiable while that of the male prisoners was obviously wrong and completely unacceptable.

the fact remains that in the case of both pornographic videos and sexually violent scenes in mainstream films, it is mostly women who are seen being abused and humiliated by men who are more powerful—physically, socially, and economically—than themselves. And, in both cases, the women are paid performers who have presumably—though by no means certainly, as the case of *Last Tango in Paris* demonstrates—consented to at least some of this degrading or humiliating treatment. Thus, both types of filmed content, in different ways, ultimately send the message that not only will women agree to be sexually humiliated in such a public fashion, but that it is reasonable and ethically acceptable to ask and expect them to do so, repeatedly, just so others can watch it.

What I am suggesting, then, is that neither the fact that the women who appear in sexually violent or degrading scenes of one kind or another may have—again, *if* they actually have—given their consent at the time of filming, or the fact they are only pretending—if only pretending to enjoy it, as in the case of pornography, where the sex acts themselves are un-simulated—is sufficient to render the production or consumption of this material problem-free from an ethical perspective. We also—and, I would argue, more importantly—need to be asking what the creation and public availability of this type of content does in the long run, to the individual women who are humiliated in them, to all women who now have to live with surrounded images of women being apparently willingly humiliated and abused by men on camera, to the men who go to this material for sexual excitement, and to society as a whole. What we have to remember here, again, is that when we are talking about a publicly available product such as a film or a video, it is not just the individual performer, filmmaker, or viewer who is affected, positively or negatively, by its existence. Next, we shall delve into some of those questions that relate to the role and responsibility of the film viewer specifically in chapter 5.

4.3.1 Summary and questions

The ethical questions addressed in section 4.3 are among the most complex and challenging ones raised in this entire paper. This time, we considered how being sexually degraded or humiliated on camera negatively impacts not just the individual woman herself, but also other female performers and actresses who are then expected to agree to appear in similar scenes, and, more broadly, women as group. Now, to try to summarize

some of the main problems that arise in this context, I refer to the words of the late feminist academic and philosopher, Mary Daly.

Feminists have long understood the power implications of getting someone to pretend for you, particularly when that someone belongs to a relatively powerless social group to begin with. In her book *Gyn/Ecology*, one of the seminal texts of the second wave of feminism first published in 1978, Daly writes:

> The Myth Masters are able to penetrate their victims' minds/imaginations only by seeing to it that their deceptive myths are acted out over and over again in performances that draw the participants into emotional complicity. Such re-enactment trains both victims and victimizers to perform uncritically their preordained roles. Thus the psyches of the performers are conditioned so that they become carriers and perpetrators of patriarchal myth. *In giving the myth reality by acting it out, the participants become "living proof" of the deceptive myths.* (109; emphasis added)

It should be noted that Daly here is not in fact talking about film acting or performance in that sense; she is referring to the various roles and rituals women are expected to take part in and act out in a patriarchal society in general, rather than in some specific, more narrowly defined cultural context. That being said, her words do carry a special resonance in the context of our current discussion on the role and status of women who are professional performers and the men who control those performances. For one thing, the myths and rituals Daly speaks of were not thought up or designed by women themselves, and they ultimately serve the interests of men, not women. However, the endless repetition of these social rituals, both on an individual and collective level, ensures that, eventually, women come to embody those male myths about who women are and should be anyway. This is a dynamic we see at play in a particularly clear and stark manner in the male director–female performer relationship, especially when we are talking about scenes that involve sexual degradation and violence against women. So, in that sense, the professional screen performer becomes as a particularly clear example of how, as Daly's puts it, women become "living proof" of male myths about women by acting out those very myths, over and over again, in front of an audience.

This brings us back to a crucial point about film as a medium: how, because of the technology involved, film—as opposed to writing, painting, or music, for example—gives

permanent, concrete form and real human faces to ideas and scenarios that would otherwise remain abstract or theoretical as far as the general public—many of whom would never witness such things in their ordinary lives, outside the screen—is concerned. By itself, this aspect of film remains fairly unremarkable from an ethical perspective; its deeper implications only really begin to crystallize when we start talking about filmed depictions of violence and degradation. This is especially true when the acts being depicted involve the kinds of power imbalances that we see at work in a case like *Last Tango in Paris*—that is to say, in situations we would or should recognize as unethical regardless of the presence or absence of a camera.

The questions presented here, then, have to do with the moral responsibility and individual interests of the woman whom we see participating, apparently willingly—though, of course, we as viewers cannot know that for sure in most cases—in her own degradation on camera. As was indicated above, these are difficult issues to discuss, regardless of the specific approach adopted, for one simple reason: it is basically impossible to as much as broach the issue of the exploited person's responsibility without sounding like you are blaming—or, indeed, actually doing so—the victim for her own exploitation. With this in mind, what I would suggest is that rather than avoid the topic, the reader be conscious of this issue when considering the questions below, and the ethical implications of agreeing to be publicly degraded and humiliated in general. And, again, before we even get to the question of the female performer's responsibility, it is well worth asking how ethical it is for anyone else—including the people who watch these films, as well as those who produce them—to ask or expect another person to agree to be filmed in such demeaning situations in the first place.

–Do screen performers have a responsibility to consider how the public availability of the footage they appear in might affect the treatment, status, and actions of other people in the real world? Why / why not?

–When someone is captured on camera in a degrading situation, is the humiliation worse if that person actively participates in his/her own degradation, or if he/she has no control in that situation? How come?

–Is it either reasonable or intellectually honest to expect that there is always someone freely willing to be publicly exposed or humiliated on camera, especially considering just

how much sexually exploitative filmed content there is out there? Could or should the fact that the films exist in the first place be viewed as evidence that someone *did* agree to this treatment, because otherwise we would surely not be able to watch it? Consider this latter question in particular in light of what we now know about the filming conditions of *Last Tango in Paris*.

5. As real as I want it to be: Consequences of film consumption

On a very basic level, film is about capturing reality in motion for posterity; indeed, it is this capacity that has always made it distinct as a medium. In the previous chapter, I spoke of the importance of remembering that live action films are, on one level, recordings—or, at least, partial accounts—of what actually happened, even when the events or scenarios being presented are—as is so often the case—artificial in the sense of them being staged for the camera; that unlike with novels, for example, real people had to behave in certain ways in the real world in order for the films depicting any of these things to exist at all. I further argued that a major obstacle to overcome in appreciating the full range and depth of the ethical problems with film in general is the widespread inability or unwillingness to see and take seriously the notion that acting or pretending on camera has real world consequences, for the performers doing the pretending, the filmmakers overseeing that process, as well as those of us who witness the results on screen later on. Much of the time, what seems to be behind this reluctance is a preoccupation with the fantasy aspect of film, to the extent that acknowledging any meaningful connection between the real world and the staged artifice we see on screen is seen as a failure—at best, naive; at worst, dangerously misguided—to distinguish between fantasy and reality. The second half of the analysis focuses on the implications of this latter point in particular.

In chapter 4, the ethical issues we explored were rooted in the power imbalance between the male filmmaker and the female performer involved in the production of sexually violent content. While the role of the film viewer did come up at various points in that discussion, it was never the main focus of attention. Chapter 5, meanwhile, is dedicated to ethical problems facing the person who views and consumes filmed depictions of sexual violence against women. Here, we explore the question of the viewer's responsibility for the content they consume in light of the fact that they—unlike the producers and performers—are not active participants in the creation of that content. Considering that it is primarily as distant observers rather than as producers or performers that most of us engage with film and other audiovisual media in our daily lives, this chapter and the questions it poses ought to be of special, perhaps more personal interest to the reader than the ones we discussed above.

We begin in section 5.1 by exploring the issue of the line between fantasy and reality, and the role the viewer's ability and willingness to draw that line plays in their viewing habits.

Only then we move on, in section 5.2, to consider the question of the viewer's responsibility, and how both the violent content itself as well as the viewer's own desire to continue to consume it work to perpetuate the idea that there is nothing the viewer can or should do about the violence and exploitation they witness on screen. Finally, section 5.3 asks what happens when we as viewers fail to see the abuse we see on screen for what it is, as seemed to be the case with *Last Tango in Paris* for all those years before the details of its filming conditions finally became public knowledge.

Connecting each of these issues is not just the role and responsibility of the viewer, but also the bigger question of the relationship between film, fantasy, and reality we have come back to, again and again, throughout the paper. As confusing as it is contested, that relationship is crucial to gaining an understanding of the ethical questions confronting anyone who consumes or even just encounters the type of sexually violent and degrading content that is now both more abundant and accessible than ever before. Again, the lists of questions found at the end of each section will hopefully inspire the reader to reflect critically on these issues and how they relate to their own lives and viewing habits, as well as to the broader culture that continues to produce this material.

5.1 Reality

The first part of chapter 5 considers:

–How film in its various forms disrupts the viewer's ability and willingness to tell the difference between fantasy and reality

–Some of the problems that arise when we begin to treat (filmed) fantasy as reality, and reality as fantasy

One of the things we keep coming back to, again and again, is the point that film is not an abstract idea that exists primarily or solely in the heads of individuals—be they the people who make the films or those who watch them. In chapter 4, we saw why this seemingly simple, even obvious point is both so vitally important for us to acknowledge, and yet, at the same time, so easy and so tempting for us to overlook or ignore entirely. Throughout that chapter, the significance of the material reality behind the images we observe on our screens was approached from the perspectives of the woman filmed in a sexually degrading situation and the men who oversee that process. There, the crucial question

was what real people—the performers—are expected and required to endure in order for all those films and images depicting sexually violence and degradation to exist in the first place. Now, we turn our attention to the consumers of that content.

In chapter 5, we explore the film viewer's moral responsibility as someone who witnesses the sexually violent, degrading, or humiliating treatment of women without directly participating in any of the aggressive acts he sees on screen. Section 5.1 in particular is concerned with the viewer's perceptions of fantasy, reality, and the line between the two. Earlier in this paper, I argued that this particular debate concerning film, fantasy, and reality is at the core of just about any ethical issue related to film and our own consumption of it. Now, we take a closer look at some of the reasons behind this argument, and consider the ethical implications of the viewer's reluctance or inability to make a clear and consistent distinction between which of the things we see on screen are and are not really real. Ultimately, these are the kinds of questions we are going to have to confront and settle if we are to make sense of our own responsibility as viewers and consumers of films that depict acts and situations that we would find ethically unacceptable in any other context, outside the screen.

When I talk about the complexity of the relationship between film, fantasy, and reality, I am referring to the way live action films both document and depict reality as well as distort and distract us from it, often at the same time. At the core of that relationship, then, is the tension between live action films as entertainment on the one hand, and as recordings of what actually happened—on a film set of anywhere else—on the other. There are particular problems that arise whenever one of these two aspects of film—the entertainment/fantasy side, or the recording/reality side—either serves to obscure or becomes indistinguishable from the other one; that is to say, when we begin to treat the fantasy as reality, and the reality as fantasy.

These two phenomena, while obviously connected, have some notable differences as far as their ethical implications are concerned. Of the two, the problem of taking fantasy for reality tends to be the one that is more easily recognized and more often discussed, perhaps because it touches most if not all of us who live in a media-saturated culture on a very personal level. Generally speaking, people tend to be quick to reject any suggestion that they might be gullible enough to believe everything—or, indeed, anything—they see on screen. One common example of this would be the often-heard insistence that

advertisements have no impact on the individual speaking, which in turn implies, intentionally or not, that other people *are* impressionable enough to be impacted by those same images, since the advertising industry obviously continues to survive and thrive regardless of the individual's own purported immunity to their influence.[16] The problem of seeing reality as fantasy, on the other hand, can be more difficult to grasp, both in terms of its meaning and its ethical implications. It is with this latter type of problem that this paper—in this chapter and elsewhere—is mostly concerned, in part precisely because it is relatively rarely granted such serious attention, or even acknowledged as a problem at all.

In his book *The Big Screen: The Story of the Movies and What They Did to Us*, film historian David Thomson suggests it is precisely because of the fact that we are watching that we do not and could not ever fully trust that the things we see on screen are truly genuine, authentic, and spontaneous. Using a film no other than *Last Tango in Paris* as his example, Thomson argues that scenes depicting sexual activity invoke such skeptical responses particularly often, due to the highly intimate nature of the acts involved (377); that we, consciously or not, cannot accept or buy into the idea that professional actors—or anyone else, for that matter—would or could perform these acts in the presence of a camera without them doing so primarily *for* the camera. For this reason, Thomson argues, sex scenes in films are particularly likely to remind us that we are in fact watching a movie, not real life.

For our purposes, the thing that is really significant about Thomson's argument is his claim that, as far as the viewer is concerned, it ultimately does not matter whether the people on screen are only pretending or actually doing any of the things they appear to be doing. They may well be, but, as Thomson observes, the people watching would not be able to tell the difference, or to trust in the authenticity or spontaneity of the acts. The reason, again, is what Thomson refers to as "the unnatural intervention of us watching" (377). What he is suggesting, then, is that we as viewers learn not to trust—if still enjoy—what we see, often in graphic detail, right in front of our eyes. Of course, when it comes to the issue of not mistaking fantasy for reality, this is a vital and important lesson to take in. However, on the flipside, there is the danger that adopting such an attitude may leave us

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[16] This is an argument that Gail Dines, among others, has frequently made. For more on the influence of advertising and media images, see Dines 79-98, and Jhally.

too quick and eager to dismiss things we see as fake, even in cases when such judgments would, in fact, be badly misguided.

Overall, one of the main themes of Thomson's book is the increasing difficulty of people who are constantly surrounded by screens to genuinely believe that what we see on them is not being done just for the camera—that is to say, that it is not all an act. He talks about this in the context of what he perceives as an ever growing disillusionment on the part of the audience with the medium of film itself as the ultimate fulfillment of the viewers' deepest desires and most intimate fantasies.[17] What Thomson appears to be less concerned about are the implications this distrust of what we see with our own eyes might have on our readiness to witness actual atrocities, only to dismiss them as mere entertainment and fantasy—in other words, as not really real.

Others, meanwhile, have focused on the dangers of this very readiness to categorize what we see real people doing in films and photographs as fantasy. Andrea Dworkin—one the pioneers of the feminist anti-pornography movement whose work in this area we already talked about in chapter 4—identified this as a problem that is particularly prominent in common attitudes towards films and images that depict women being sexually degraded and humiliated. In a 1991 documentary film, she explained:

> People talk about pornography as a form of fantasy—they actually talk about prostitution as if it were an exercise in fantasy. And it is part of the pornographers' effort to hide what they really do in real life to encourage the use of the word 'fantasy' in place of actual behaviors that really happen in the real world. A fantasy is something that happens in your head. It doesn't go past your head. Once you have somebody acting out whatever that scenario might be in your head, it is an act in the world. It is real. It is real behavior with real consequences to real people. … And it has nothing whatsoever to do with fantasy; it has to do with a human being actually having happen to them what we see has happened to them. And I think that it's just the most extraordinary insult to the human conscience to continue to characterize these real acts to real people as if

[17] In the epilogue, Thomson writes: "You are seeing a superb, insolent attempt to mimic, steal, and tease life. … You are not watching life. You are watching a movie. And if, maybe, the movie feels better than life, then that is a vast, revolutionary possibility, and no one knows yet whether it is for good or ill, because the insinuation of dream does so much to alter or threaten our respect for life. Dissatisfaction and doubt grew in step with film's projection of happiness" (524).

> they only exist in the head of the male consumer. And what that means is that his head, his psychology, is more important than her life. (Dworkin, "Pornography Andrea Dworkin 1991")

Dworkin's argument is that to dismiss sexually violent and degrading images as fantasy is to prioritize the desires of the male consumer over any concerns about the actual harm done to the women he is looking at. What makes this particularly egregious is the fact that in the case of sexually violent or humiliating content, the evidence of the harm is not hidden, but rather on prominent display right there on the page or screen. For this reason, to ignore or downplay the harm is not just the result of the consumer's ignorance of the filming conditions, but also, and more importantly, a more or less conscious choice on the part of the viewer to not really see what is there.

We shall return to the issue of not seeing what is there and what it means as far as audience reactions to the rape scene in *Last Tango in Paris* in particular are concerned in later on in this chapter. For now, I wish to stress again the importance of reconsidering the relationship between film, fantasy, and reality. As we have seen, that relationship is not as simple or straightforward as it may appear on the surface. On one level, it is true that films and images are intended to distract and mislead us, and that, in that sense, they are indeed detached from reality; undoubtedly, the medium can be and very often is used to manipulate its viewers in ways both subtle and obvious. At the same time, it is also the case that these same films and images document what actually took place before the camera in real life; the fact that the people being filmed may be paid professionals who are only pretending and do not really mean any of the things we see them doing and saying does not change that basic reality.

Why all of this matters so much from an ethical perspective is fairly simple: in order to understand the ethical significance of our choices as producers and consumers of film, we must first determine whether the things we see on screen are really real or not. In other words, it matters a great deal whether we believe we are witnessing real people treating each other in particular ways in the real world, or observing a harmless fantasy that is clearly separate and separable from real life and its problems. As we have seen, in order to make that judgment, we must find a way to reconcile the two sides of film as a medium: first, the fantasy/entertainment side that is designed to manipulate and give us an incomplete, if not downright inaccurate, view of how the world works, and, second, the

reality/recording side that reflects the fact that in order to create live action film footage of even the most far-fetched idea or preposterous scenario, someone has to act it out on camera, and, in so doing, give the idea concrete form and a human face.

5.1.1 Summary and questions

"It is both consoling and distressing that anyone could be so naive to believe that what happens on the cinema screen actually takes place" (A. MacKinnon). This, as we saw in chapter 3, was one of the things Bertolucci said to defend himself against his critics after the interview containing his comments on Schneider and the rape scene resurfaced in 2016. His words also serve the unintended purpose of summarizing the problem at the core of the relationship between film, fantasy, and reality, which we have spent the first part of chapter 5 unpacking. He is correct in his suggestion that to take what we see on screen—the fictional narrative of a film like *Last Tango in Paris*, for instance—at face value would be, as he puts it, "naive," even distressingly so. At the same time, what he fails to recognize here is the extent to which the things we see in a live action film *do* have to "actually tak[e] place" in order for filmed depictions of that thing to exist at all.

In the case of the *Last Tango in Paris*, it is true that no actual woman had to be raped just so that a scene depicting the rape of a fictional character could exist. An actual woman did, however, have to be humiliated and degraded on camera so that Bertolucci's vision for the scene could be realized on screen in the first place. And, not only that, but it would be hard to argue how what *The Guardian* dubbed the "'butter rape' scene" (Malkin) could even hypothetically be filmed any other way, even if all the participants actually were fully informed on the details of the scene beforehand.

So, what section 5.1 is really concerned with is the question of how seriously we ought to take any of the things we see on screen, particularly when it comes to filmed depictions of sexual violence against women. As I hope to have shown here, answering this question is not as straightforward as it may appear on the surface. This latter point is especially true when we are talking about a fiction film like *Last Tango in Paris*; there, it is particularly easy, perhaps tempting as well, to assume that what we are watching—however disturbing or distressing it may be—is ultimately all a fantasy. From that perspective, the biggest challenge facing us as viewers is how to shield ourselves from naively accepting whatever

is presented to us on screen as an accurate representation of how the world really is; in other words, from treating filmed fantasy as reality. If, however, we consider the humiliating or otherwise exploitative treatment of the actual woman we see on screen to be real—even if the rape itself is simulated—then our concerns can begin to shift from the question of how viewing sexually violent content impacts us as individuals, to broader considerations of what the very existence and public availability of this type of material means for people other than ourselves—including those we see being sexually humiliated and exploited on screen.

–What might be some of the dangers of taking fantasy for reality when viewing a film like *Last Tango in Paris*, with regards to its sexual content in particular? Or when it comes to media depictions of sexual relationships and sexual violence in general? In your estimation, is this a common mistake that people make?

–How about the dangers of taking reality for fantasy, especially when it comes to filmed depictions of sexual violence and degradation? Is it the viewer's responsibility to consider such questions to begin with? Why / why not?

–Consider the Bertolucci quote at the beginning of section 5.1.1. Does he have a point here? Were the outraged reactions to how the rape scene was filmed overblown, considering that we are, after all, talking about a fiction film with professional actors? Why / why not?

5.2 Responsibility

The second part of chapter 5 discusses:

–The viewer's responsibility as someone who observes sexual violence against women from a distance

–The viewer's passivity and enjoyment of sexually violent content as two key obstacles to accepting that responsibility

Clearly, before we can even begin to approach the topic of the film viewer's responsibility, we first have to settle the question of whether films, first and foremost, depict fantasy or reality. If a film is indeed considered to be just a fantasy, and, as such, largely disconnected from and irrelevant to the real world and its problems, then there seems to

be little reason why we would or should take any questions about our own moral responsibility as viewers all that seriously. If, however, we think that films and images show us how real people are actually being treated in the real world—in the name of profit, or entertainment, or anything else—our attitude towards that question of responsibility is bound to be quite different. The question itself is complicated enough to begin with due to fact that, at least in the moment of consuming the finished product, viewers—unlike the filmmakers and performers whose role in and responsibility for producing sexually violent content we have already discussed elsewhere in the paper—do not directly participate in the creation of the content they help to create the demand for.

The middle part of chapter 5 explores the moral responsibility of the film viewer as a consumer of filmed depictions of sexual violence against women. Here, we examine critically the tendency and the temptation, briefly mentioned earlier at the beginning of this chapter, to downplay or altogether deny that responsibility. My main interest is with those obstacles that keep us as viewers from either critically examining, let alone actually changing our own behavior. As we shall see, these obstacles stem from the spatial and temporal distance from the abuse they observe on screen, and the passivity and helplessness that this distance, as well as the violent content itself, helps to create and perpetuate. I also discuss how the viewers' own enjoyment of this type of material plays into this reluctance to see themselves as morally responsible, even (or especially) as they seek out sexually violent or degrading content.

To begin with, it should be noted that here is nothing new about the suggestion that witnessing images of violence leads to passivity. Seeing violent imagery, so this line of thinking goes, does not make a person any more likely to take action against the injustice in the world; instead, it has a sort of numbing effect that makes real world atrocities seem, if anything, more distant and remote. One of the most influential formulations of this idea comes from 20th century American writer and intellectual, Susan Sontag. In *On Photography*, a collection of essays first published in the 1970s, Sontag explores the moral, social, and political significance of still photography in the modern, post-War world. Among a host of other topics, she discusses the effects of exposure to images of human misery and suffering. In an essay entitled "In Plato's Cave", Sontag writes:

> To suffer is one thing; another thing is living with the photographed images of suffering, which does not necessarily strengthen conscience and the ability to be compassionate. It can also corrupt them. Once one has seen such images, one has started down the road of seeing more—and more. Images transfix. Images anesthetize. An event known through photographs certainly becomes more real than it would have been if one had never seen the photographs … But after repeated exposure to images it also becomes less real. (15)

Sontag here is talking about the hypnotic quality of images of suffering and atrocity. Once you have been exposed to such images, Sontag suggests, you must see more, and the more you see, the less real the images become. Crucially, she links this sort of desensitization process to the weakening of our capacity for empathy. She is saying that as the photographs gradually lose their initial shock value, our moral conscience and capacity to be compassionate towards the suffering of others may become compromised in the process. Thus, the simultaneous familiarity and distance that is such a central part of watching images becomes a troubling, if not downright dangerous combination as far as our ability to be responsible, morally conscious human beings is concerned.

Sontag's main interest lies in still photography, not motion pictures; at one point, she suggests that, "Photographs may be more memorable than moving images, because they are a neat slice of time, not a flow" (13). Still, her ideas on the role and responsibility of those who consume images have an obvious relevance to the issues discussed in this paper. The quotation above in particular serves as a succinct summary of some of the biggest ethical questions confronting the viewer of scenes in films that depict sexual violence against women: how real are the events we see on screen, and how seriously should we take any of it; what are the long term impacts of being surrounded not just one or two, but countless of sexually violent and degrading images, both on an individual and collective level; and, finally, just what *is* the conscientious, compassionate response to witnessing example after example of documented abuse and exploitation?

These connections to our current topic become clearer still when Sontag goes on to add:

> The same law holds for evil as for pornography. The shock of photographed atrocities wears off with repeated viewings, just as the surprise and bemusement felt the first time one sees a pornographic movie wear off after one sees a few more. The sense of taboo

which makes us indignant and sorrowful is not much sturdier than the sense of taboo that regulates the definition of what is obscene. … The vast photographic catalogue of misery and injustice throughout the world has given everyone a certain familiarity with atrocity, making the horrible seem more ordinary—making it appear familiar, remote ("it's only a photograph"), inevitable. (15)

For our purposes, what is most notable about this juxtaposition of pornography and images of "misery and injustice" is that Sontag here does not consider the possibility that the two could sometimes be one and the same thing; instead, she brings up pornography in order to make the comparison between how both it and "photographed atrocities" lose their initial impact with repeated exposure. What I would add to this on the basis of our discussion in this paper thus far is the suggestion that the sexual violence and degradation depicted in pornography could itself be the "evil" thing that, at least initially, may make us "indignant and sorrowful," only to begin to seem "ordinary," "familiar, remote," and "inevitable" the more we are exposed—or expose ourselves—to this type of content over time.

Of course, Sontag is by no means the only one to acknowledge and analyze this capacity of images—and images of violence and atrocities in particular—to, as she puts it, "anesthetize" (15). We see similar ideas in the work of, for instance, George Gerbner, whose research into the effects of media violence we briefly discussed in chapter 4. Gerbner's work in this area, unlike Sontag's, is not purely theoretical; Gerbner's conclusions were based on decades worth of research conducted by his Cultural Indicators project, a long-term study on the media—especially television—and its effects that was first launched in 1967 ("Television Violence: The Power and the Peril" 551).[18] Among the research efforts undertaken by Gerbner and his collaborators was what he calls "cultivation analysis," by which he means the "assessment of the long-range consequences of exposure to television's systems of messages." As we saw in chapter 4, the role of media violence, and its effects on the perceptions and attitudes of its viewers were of particular interest to Gerbner. For our purposes, among the most significant findings of the Cultural Indicators project was that, as he put it:

[18] The essay cited here offers a comprehensive overview of the Cultivation Indicators project, which was based at the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School for Communication. For more on the goals, methods, and principal findings of the project, see 551-553 and 556 in particular.

> Whatever else it does, violence in drama and news demonstrates power. It portrays victims as well as victimizers. It intimidates more than it incites. It paralyzes more than it triggers action. It defines majority might and minority risk. It shows one's place in the "pecking order" that runs society. ("Television Violence: The Power and the Peril" 548)

How this analysis—as well as the notably similar conclusions reached by Sontag through a very different approach—relates to the topic of the viewer's responsibility is that it succinctly puts one the main problems facing the consumer of sexually violent content who is—at least on some level—troubled by what he or she sees on screen: mainly, that these images of violence and exploitation, especially over time and repeated exposure, have a significant impact on our *own* sense of safety, security, dependence, and readiness to take action and initiative in the real world. The question then becomes whether this insecurity and this passivity induced by the violent content itself could have the effect of muting or diminishing any concern we may have for the wellbeing of the people we see being actually harmed or victimized on screen.

The problem with passivity, then—as both Gerbner and Sontag suggest—is that the more films and images depicting violence and exploitation we encounter, the less likely we are to feel like we can or should do anything to change or challenge that violence and that exploitation itself. In simple terms, violent imagery creates a sense of helplessness, which, in turn, translates into inaction. Of course, there is another, perhaps even more obvious reason why many people would not make the effort to change their own behavior and viewing habits, let alone the broader culture that produces and presents all those images of sexual violence and degradation as entertainment in the first place: namely, the desire to continue to consume this material.

Certainly, the very prevalence of sexually violent imagery in mainstream entertainment—not to mention both the success enjoyed and the content produced by the pornography industry we discussed earlier—indicates that the demand for films and images depicting sexual and sexualized violence against women is very real indeed. With this in mind, the desire to continue consuming such content in itself must be acknowledged as a key reason why—since we are talking about male violence against women—male viewers in particular might feel tempted to or actually deny any personal responsibility for, first of all, helping to create the demand for the type of content that, as we have seen, requires the

exploitation and degradation of real women on camera, and, second of all, the long term effects his own consumption of this material might have on how he views and treats women in his own life.[19]

The problem, however, does not end with the anesthetizing effect of violent images, or, for that matter, with the viewers' reluctance to see themselves as in any way responsible for the various ethical problems involved in the creation and consumption of the sexually violent, degrading, or humiliating content that they consume. For even when we as viewers do acknowledge these problems and do see ourselves as at least somewhat responsible for the exploitation of women in the name of entertainment, the question remains what, exactly, can we do to address or challenge these injustices in a meaningful way. After all, not only was the actress herself already subjected to humiliating or otherwise exploitative treatment on the set of the film, but the footage documenting that degradation is now out there for people like us to consume and be influenced by, in both direct and indirect ways; the damage, in other words, has to a great extent already been done.

One thing we can do, of course, is to make a conscious choice to avoid such material in the future, which may well have an effect, even a dramatic one, on how we as individuals perceive ourselves and relate to the world and other people around us. What such individual choices alone cannot not do, however, is change the broader culture of which filmed depictions of sexual violence against women presented as art and entertainment are a part. Given this reality, such personal solutions—while important and valuable in many respects—can only ever have a very limited impact. With this in mind, it is easy to see how recognizing the sheer vastness of the problem can, in turn, become yet another tempting excuse to deny personal responsibility: if the material is going to exist anyway, and so many others are going to continue to consume it, then it can hardly make a difference whether you or I as an individual watch it or not. Hence, nothing changes.

Ultimately, what I hope to have illustrated here is the number and complexity of reasons not to, first of all, do anything about the degrading and exploitative treatment of women we see on screen, and, second of all, take seriously the idea that we should even have to in the first place. Some of these reasons have to do with the onslaught of violent imagery

[19] For recent peer-reviewed studies on the effects of pornography consumption specifically, see Foubert and Bridges, Sun et al., and Wright et al.

itself; the more of it we see, the more, as Sontag put it, "inevitable" it starts to appear (15). Related to this idea are the findings of Gerbner and his Cultural Indicators project on the effects of long-term exposure to violence in the media: how that violence, "intimidates more than it incites. It paralyzes more than it triggers action" ("Television Violence: The Power and the Peril" 548). At the same time, these very same violent images—and sexually violent images in particular—again, to quote Sontag, "transfix" (15); once we have been exposed to them, a lot of us continue to seek them out in ever-escalating amounts. And, to the extent that we come to enjoy consuming this material, our reluctance to critically reflect on what we are actually watching, where it came from, and what it is doing to us on an individual and collective level grows greater and greater.

Determining our moral responsibility as viewers and consumers of sexually violent and degrading content, then, requires that we are both willing and able to overcome not only the passivity-inducing effect of violent images, but also any desire on our part to continue consuming this type of material without being burdened by the kinds of critical questions that might challenge our own moral choices and behavior. Only by directly confronting these tendencies and temptations to deny there is anything we as individuals or, more importantly, as a collective could or should do about the degrading and exploitative treatment of women on screen—supposedly for our pleasure and entertainment—can we begin to view these depictions and the practices they document as something other than inevitable.

5.2.1 Summary and questions

Section 5.2 posed the question of what, if any, responsibility does the viewer who encounters or, especially, seeks out sexually violent or degrading content have, first of all, for any exploitation involved in the production, and second of all, for any possible harms caused by his or her own viewing habits, or by the ubiquity and public availability of such content in general. How we answer both this question and the ones below, inevitably depends on the conclusions we came to with regards to the issue discussed in the first part of this chapter: just how real the things that we are watching actually are, and how seriously we should take any of it. Answering these questions further requires that we contemplate the ethical implications of passivity—of looking, and doing nothing, essentially. As we have seen in this chapter, this lack of active participation can be viewed

either as a moral failing on the viewer's part, or, alternatively, as the very thing that absolves him or her of all responsibility. It is up to us, individually and collectively, to determine which is the more accurate—and ethical—alternative.

–Is the film viewer at all responsible for any of the exploitation involved in the production of the sexually violent or degrading content consume, considering that the evidence of the exploitation is not hidden but on prominent display and a key component of the entertainment itself? Why / why not?

–In case viewers do seem themselves as partly responsible, what kind of action can or should they take—both as individuals and as a collective—given that the woman in the film was already subjected to this treatment, and that the footage depicting it already exists and is publicly available?

–In your view, does watching screens in general and violent or otherwise exploitative content in particular make people more

a) passive,
b) insecure,
c) callous to the suffering of others?

What could or should be done both on an individual and a collective level to address any such problems?

5.3 Invisibility

The third and final part of chapter 5 addresses:

–The problem of viewers of sexually violent content failing to recognize actual harm and abuse when they see it
–The relevance of the earlier question, *who is doing what to whom*, to the viewer who consumes scenes that depict sexual violence against women

Above, we went through some of the reasons behind the widespread resistance to the idea of the viewer's moral responsibility, especially when it comes to filmed depictions of sexual violence against women. There is yet another, related tendency that is common among professional critics and scholars, as well as more casual viewers who are less well versed in the topic of film and ethics: the unwillingness and inability to take seriously, or

even give much thought to the idea that filming scene after scene of the type of "fantasy" abuse we have all grown so accustomed to—if never entirely comfortable with—as a regular part of our entertainment just might necessitate, enable, and be used to justify the abusive and exploitative treatment of real people by other, more powerful people in the real world. To be clear, here I am not referring to the question of whether or not onscreen violence causes or contributes to violence in real life—an important question to ask, for sure, but quite beyond the scope of this study. More relevant for our purposes are the parallels between the fictional assault we witness on screen and the power relations the repeated realization of such scenes by actual men and women entails and enforces in the real world.

The final part of the analysis asks what happens when we as viewers become so accustomed to encountering sexually violent and degrading films and images, that we longer see the harm in them. As I argue, this particular problem is exasperated by something we discussed earlier in this chapter, namely our readiness to dismiss such films and images—and, by extension, the acts they depict—outright as not really real. Clearly, this is an issue that closely relates to the process of desensitization to images of violence in media-saturated cultures in general—a topic that has, by this point, been well covered by decades worth of research, of which I hade provided examples elsewhere in this chapter. Here, I take a slightly different approach to the problem of becoming blind to the harm as it relates to filmed depictions of sexual violence against women. Drawing on all the major themes discussed in the analysis so far, I explore the dangers of so many of us being able to witness countless of scenes and images of women in particular being sexually abused and exploited, and yet fail to really see that abuse and exploitation for what they are. The specific case of *Last Tango in Paris* we have spent this entire paper examining is just one, particularly clear example of this.

Crucially, the evidence of the Brando and Bertolucci's exploitative and humiliating treatment of Schneider was right there on the screen for us to see all along. All the shock and controversy over the "non-consensual rape scene" essentially stemmed from the *lack* of disparity between what we saw—an older, powerful man sexually exploiting a young, relatively powerless woman—and what actually happened in front of the camera in real life, quite apart from any fictional story the film was trying to tell. And yet, when Bertolucci's account of the events made the news in 2016, few if any of the articles provided any

analysis of this connection between the male star and director's treatment of the actress, and the content of the rape scene itself; as we have seen, these stories focused almost exclusively on the issue of her consent. Now, it should be clarified that the point of this paper was never to suggest that either the lack of consent on Schneider's part, or—since she was never told what the scene would entail—her inability to even potentially give her fully informed consent under the circumstances are not problems in and of themselves. Instead, what I have been arguing all along is that what this particular emphasis on the woman's consent does—intentionally or otherwise—is it leaves little room for addressing the kinds of questions on power and responsibility we have been examining throughout this paper.

One of the things that makes answering such questions so difficult—even when we are willing to ask them in the first place—is the fact that there are so many things we as viewers do not, and often cannot, know about what we are watching. By this, I mean things like what happened just before filming started; what else was going on in the room while the scene was being shot; what was going on in the heads of the performers with regards to the things they were expected to do on camera; did the performers freely agree to do or have done to them the things we see them doing or being done to them on screen; were they in a position to say "no" if they had second thoughts about participating in the scene, and so on and so forth. Clearly, the relevance and urgency of these types of questions is tied to the content of the scene or film in question; in many cases, perhaps even most, they would hardly seem worth asking at all. When it comes to filmed depictions of sexual violence, however, I would argue that these are just the kinds of questions we should be asking, every time we encounter them.

What I am suggesting, then, is not that we pretend to know more than we actually do about the filming conditions, the motivations of individual filmmakers, or the thoughts and feelings of the performers who appear in these scenes and films, but rather that we acknowledge and accept the fact that we as viewers ultimately get but a glimpse of what actually happened while the scene was being filmed, and know even less about what went on right before or after. That is not to say, however, that not knowing these things automatically absolves us as viewers from all responsibility. On the contrary, I would argue that it is precisely at this point that the viewers' own moral choices become most significant; ultimately, it is up to them to decide what to believe about what they are watching, and on what basis.

With regards to sexually violent and degrading content in particular, the question then becomes: if the scene or film itself is exploitative, why should we automatically assume that no exploitation or abuses of power were involved in its production? Or, to put the problem a slightly different way, when we do not know all the facts, why is it more plausible to assume that no exploitation was involved, considering the power imbalance inherent in the scene itself? Here, were return to an issue raised in section 5.2, where we considered the role that the viewers' own potential desire to continue to consume sexually violent content plays not only in their readiness to categorize such films and images as pure fantasy, but also in their reluctance to critically examine—let alone change—their own viewing habits and behavior. Part of the power of these questions, then, is that they enable and urge us to engage in such self-reflection, and to seriously consider how much those desires and that reluctance may shape our own assumptions about what the production of this type of material actually entails, and what its consumption does to us on a individual and collective level.

The danger here is that these questions start to become too general, too abstract, and, as such, too easy to dismiss as unrelated or irrelevant to one's own life and moral decision-making. It helps if we can relate this back to a concrete example, such as *Last Tango in Paris*. We can look at the rape scene in that film again, and, for a moment, forget about what we have learned elsewhere about how it was filmed; for now, we can simply look at what is observably there. Here, I mean both the "depictionary scene" and the "material scene" we talked about earlier in chapter 2 (Vadas 367); that is to say, the events in the story of the film, as well as the reality of what is actually happening in front of the camera while that film is being made. And what is there is a young woman, not terribly famous, pinned to the floor under a much older man, who happens to be one of the most well known and respected an actors in Hollywood history. They are both dressed, though we have seen her, never him, fully nude at several points in the film. First, he pulls down her jeans, and inserts his fingers, covered in butter, into her anus. She tells him "no," repeatedly, and tries to physically resist him at first. He keeps going, and rapes her, talking all the while. She is crying. Some of this we witness from a distance, other parts in close up. What stands out is one longer, full body shot of him on top of her, thrusting. The scene is graphic, but not explicit—both their genitalia remain covered—or pornographic as such,

certainly not by today’s standards; we can quite safely assume, then, that the penetration at least is not real.

It is important to note that none of the things described in the paragraph above were revealed to us only after the relatively recent interviews given by first Schneider, then Bertolucci; these are all facts that were either known at the time the film was first released, or observably there on screen, then as well as now. Eventually, of course, we were informed by two of the individuals directly involved in the production that the actress who portrays the woman we have been able to watch a man sodomize with some butter all this time, was herself coerced and exploited by men on the set of the film, and that she felt, in her own words, "a little bit raped" (Das) as a result of filming this scene. Upon learning these details, many of us were shocked. The question is whether we should have been.

Here, we return to the idea I brought up earlier that—for better and for worse—we as viewers are constantly making choices about what to believe and not to believe as far as the authenticity of what we observe on screen is concerned. In fact, as viewers, we are basically forced to make these choices, whether we are conscious of it or not, because of the fact that, as we discussed, a) there is so much we do not and often cannot know about the actual filming conditions of this or that particular scene or film, and b) we are so aware that we are being manipulated, and that we cannot and should not take everything we see on screen as an accurate representation of what really happened or how the world truly is. So, with this in mind, what I suggest we do to begin to address this problem of not knowing what to trust and take as real is simple enough: be honest with ourselves about what is observably there, on the screen in front of us.

The honesty I refer to here goes back to the question we discussed earlier: *who is doing what to whom*. As we saw in section 4.3 in particular, this question ultimately has to do with power relations more than anything else; answering it, then, does not mean that we have to accept or assume that everything we see in a film really happened in real life exactly as it appears on screen. What keeping this question in mind does do when we look at sexual violent scenes in particular is that it forces us, first of all, to make a clear distinction between the perpetrator and the victim of sexual violence, and, second of all, to recognize the power imbalance between the two. Furthermore, the "what" part of *who is doing what to whom* urges us move beyond vague generalities such as "a woman is raped" (by whom?) or "they are having sex," towards naming and defining the specific acts

being depicted, and who is committing them. This added clarity and specificity, in turn, enables us to start to ask ourselves—and to take seriously the question—whether asking and expecting people to perform those specific acts on camera is inherently exploitative, even—or especially—if the individuals involved did consent to the humiliation.

The value of this approach is demonstrated by the example of *Last Tango in Paris*; even just the brief, not particularly detailed outline of what actually happens in the rape scene provided above serves as a clear illustration of a point I have been making throughout this entire paper: that the ethical problems with expecting someone to be sexually humiliated on camera as Schneider was—without even getting into the issue of how Bertolucci and Brando intentionally kept her in the dark on the details of the scene before it was filmed—neither begin nor end with her consent. Answering the basic question of *who is doing what to whom*, then, ideally leads to other types of critical questions about what it is that we actually see on screen—questions like, for instance, under what circumstances, exactly, could the above-described "butter rape" scene be realized in a way that is *not* exploitative, and, moreover, why is it so important to so many people to be able to watch it, and should they be entitled to do so in the first place. Different people will come to different answers to these questions, of course. But if indeed we are serious about not wanting any woman, on screen or off, to be treated as Maria Schneider was for other people's entertainment, we are going to start asking them at some point, both on a personal and societal level.

5.3.1 Summary and questions

In the final part of the analysis, we returned to the example of *Last Tango in Paris*. Summarizing many of the issues we have discussed throughout the analysis, section 5.3 considered the ethical implications of failing to recognize actual harm and exploitation for what they are, even or especially as the evidence of the harm is on prominent display our screens. With regards to the case of *Last Tango in Paris* specifically, it posed the question of whether we should have known about Bertolucci and Brando's exploitative treatment of Schneider just by looking at the film itself, and the rape scene in particular. On a more general level, it asked: why should we readily assume—as so many of us tend to—that no exploitation is involved either in the production or consumption of scenes and images that depict degrading and abusive acts committed by people with more power against those with less?

Which is not to suggest that the sorts of gross abuses of power we saw with the case *Last Tango in Paris* are inevitably involved whenever acts of sexual violence are depicted on screen. It is to suggest that we ought to stop and think about what it means to ask someone to be sexually degraded or humiliated—let alone be subjected to physically violent and painful acts—on camera, and to keep that question in mind each time we encounter a scene or image of this sort. Another thing to ask ourselves is that if indeed we are able to witness abusive or exploitative acts on screen only to dismiss them outright as pure fantasy, or be reassured by the (baseless) assumption that she—the victim or target—must enjoy or, at any rate, have freely agreed to be treated like this on camera, then what implications does that have for our ability to witness abuse and atrocities in other contexts—whether there is a camera present or not—and fail to recognize them as such. After all, in real life as on screen, there is always the possibility that she consented.

–Should we assume everything we see in a fiction film—including scenes depicting sexual violence and degradation—is, ultimately, all just an act, and, as such, nothing for us to worry about? Considering what we now know about the making of the rape scene in *Last Tango in Paris*, what might be some of the dangers of making that assumption?

–Can we as viewers infer anything about the filming conditions or the reality behind scenes that depict sexual violence against women solely on the basis of what is observably there on the screen in front of us? Is it wise or necessary for us to do so, from an ethical perspective? Why / why not?

–Is there a way to *show* (as opposed to suggest or imply) sexual violence in a live action film without it being exploitative? What, in your view, constitutes "exploitative" in this context? Consider these questions particularly from the perspective of the person who portrays the target of the violence, both in the moment of filming, and in the years to come after the footage has been made publicly available.

6. Discussion

In this paper, I have drawn attention to the connections between:

a) the sexual violence, degradation, and humiliation we see on screen,

b) what we as viewers know in some cases and can infer in others about the filming conditions required to create this type of content, and,

c) the real world consequences of the ubiquity and accessibility of this material, on individual viewers and society as a whole.

The important thing here is that none of the ethical issues we have been examining—whether we are talking about the performer's consent, the filmmaker's right to express himself, or the viewer's ability and willingness to distinguish between fantasy and reality, for example—are meant to be seen as wholly separate or isolated from one another. For the sake of clarity, the analysis was divided into two parts, one focusing on problems more closely related to the production of film, and the other on issues having to do with the consumption of sexually violent content. The former focused on the power imbalance between the male filmmaker and the female performer, and considered how that imbalance affects and plays into the pressures, demands, and expectations that are placed on the women who act out the role of the target of men's sexual aggression on camera. The latter, meanwhile, turned its attention to the film viewer, and asked what we as the audience should be able to tell about the reality behind the supposed fantasy abuse and exploitation we see in these films based purely on what is observably there on the screen in front of us. As we have seen, however, the same kinds of questions on power, responsibility, and the relationship between film, fantasy, and reality keep coming up, regardless of whether we are talking about a particular problem facing the producer, the performer, or the consumer of sexually violent content.

Ultimately, all of these problems are tied to and arise from the exploitative nature of the acts and scenarios being depicted themselves. And, since we are talking about films, any exploitation involved in the making of the finished product does not remain entirely hidden; certainly, in the case of pornography in particular and films that depict sexual violence against women in general, the exploitation is a key part of the entertainment itself, and displayed prominently as such. For this reason alone, it is hardly surprising that the types of moral choices and questions facing the film viewer are, ultimately, not entirely separate

or separable from those confronting the producers and performers who are directly involved in the production of this material.

Overall, my central argument with this paper is that producing and consuming scenes that graphically depict sexually violent, degrading, or humiliating acts against women is by its nature exploitative. I have further argued that framing the possible absence of the woman's consent as the primary or the only ethical problem involved in the creation and consumption of this type of content is a way of avoiding confronting that larger underlying issue. "Exploitative" in this context refers both to the treatment of the individual woman who is the target of the sexual aggression and degradation depicted on screen, as well as to the broader consequences that turning sexual violence against women into entertainment has on other women, men, children, and society as a whole.

The degree of the exploitation varies, and is dependant on a number of factors, which we have spent much of this paper exploring. These factors include but are not limited to:

–The length and graphicness of the scene in question

–The specific acts involved

–The coerciveness of the filming conditions

–The public availability and accessibility of the finished footage

–The sex, age, and overall status of the individuals involved in the production, including the people behind the camera

–How well the performers were informed beforehand of the details of the scene, as well as of the later use and public availability of the footage

–Whether the sex acts and/or any additional violence involved are simulated or un-simulated

You may notice that the word *consent* is missing from that list. This is deliberate. In fact, after analyzing the case of *Last Tango in Paris*, it is my conclusion that the preoccupation with the consent of Maria Schneider—the person who was in by far the most vulnerable position out of everyone involved in the filming of the rape scene—is a prime example of people avoid thinking—let alone talking—about the power imbalance that is inherent to acts of sexual violence, degradation, and humiliation, especially when a woman is the target and men the perpetrators. While the rape itself is simulated in mainstream films like *Last Tango in Paris*, both the public humiliation experienced by the woman, as well as the abuse of power exercised by the men behind and in front of the camera are real. That the

staging of acts of sexually violent or degrading acts against women for the camera would involve similar power imbalances and ethical problems that these same acts entail in any other context should perhaps come as no surprise. And yet, these issues are, for the most part, not being discussed, not even when famous cases of sexual exploitation on film sets that would seem to provide the ideal opportunity to have that conversation do surface. More alarming still is the fact that these problems are largely unacknowledged even—or especially—in the case of pornography, where the scenarios and the pleasured reactions may be very fake indeed, but the acts themselves are real.

For these reasons, I suggest that we need to shift our focus from the female performer's consent to the coerciveness of the filming conditions; that is to say, from the choices and actions of the person who is being asked to be sexually degraded and humiliated on camera to the choices and actions of the people who are placing those demands and expectations on her, and are in a position to do so to begin with. Once again, we return to the question of *who is doing what to whom*, this time by asking and taking seriously the question of what it is that real women—and not just the fictional characters they are playing—are expected to do, by whom, and under what circumstances.

The other central argument I have presented in this paper is that the types of questions I have posed throughout the analysis—on the ethics of asking someone to be humiliated on camera, for example, or on the viewer's own responsibility as a consumer of sexually violent content—are important and worthy of serious consideration. Moreover, I have argued that asking these questions is in itself our moral responsibility, as long as we as a culture and as individuals are going to continue to produce and consume media that routinely depicts women as the targets of sexual violence and degradation. At the same time, I have drawn attention to some of the ways in which we as individuals and as a collective tend to avoid confronting these very same, uncomfortable questions. The preoccupation with the woman's consent discussed above is one example of this; it seems to be easier for a lot people to think that there are all these women who are perfectly willing, even eager to be sexually degraded and humiliated on camera in these ways than to ask themselves why they consider it reasonable and ethical to expect any woman—let alone countless of them—to be put in that position just so they can watch it in the first place.

Another example would be the persistent insistence that film is—even at its most disturbing or distressing—ultimately just a fantasy, and, as such, should not be taken all that seriously. Certainly, there is some truth to this claim in the sense that most films and images we encounter do—and are designed to—manipulate us in any number of ways, for any number of reasons. That being said, the problem with this claim is that it fails to acknowledge the material reality of film as a medium: that in order for live action film footage of any scenario that involves human beings to exist at all, someone at some point has to act it out on camera. This does not necessarily mean that the exact same things that happen in the story of the film actually happened in real life while the film was being made; filming a rape scene, for example, does not require that an actual woman be raped on camera. However, it does require that an actual woman, first of all, be put in a highly vulnerable position while the scene is being filmed, and, second of all, for her to have to live with the consequences and knowledge of this footage being publicly available for anyone to see for the rest of her life and—as in the case of Maria Schneider—long after she is gone.

This particular problem is exasperated by the fact that it is not only the individual woman herself who has to deal with those consequences: it is every woman and girl who has to live surrounded by films and images of that depict the sexually violent, degrading, and humiliating treatment of women as harmless entertainment—as just a fantasy, in other words. Even if we accept the notion that an individual woman can freely consent to being degraded and humiliated on camera, that same woman—or all women who appear in such films, for that matter—certainly cannot consent on behalf of all those other women and girls. Another problem with this requirement for human performers is that it, in turn, creates the expectation that there are and will continue to be women ready and willing to be subjected to this type of treatment; hence the assumption that someone like Schneider would willingly participate in the "butter rape scene" and the shock that ensued when it turned out she, in fact, had not. The full implications of this expectation are, unfortunately, beyond the scope of this study. It stands to reason, however, that such expectations, pressures, and demands placed on women—off camera as well as on—would only grow more frequent and pronounced the more commonplace films and images that depict sexually violent and degrading acts against women themselves become.

It is just these kinds of broader consequences and ethical considerations that go beyond the personal interests of any particular individual—whether that individual be a filmmaker who likes to include sexually violent or degrading scenes in his work, a woman who earns her living performing in such films, or a viewer who finds watching them pleasurable—that we have to recognize if we are ever to move beyond surface-level issues such as the performer's consent. What I am arguing is that shift cannot happen unless we as individuals and as a collective are willing to confront the deeper, more uncomfortable question of why it is so important to so many people at this point in history to be able to watch women being sexually abused, degraded, and humiliated to begin with. Only then, do we have any hope of adequately addressing any of the problems we have been discussing in this paper.

7. Conclusion

Throughout this paper, I have raised the kinds of questions that were left largely unaddressed when the case of *Last Tango in Paris* made the news again in 2016. We have seen why the preoccupation with the woman's participation—consensual or nonconsensual—in her own documented humiliation is a problem in itself. For one thing, adopting such a focus keeps us from asking the larger—and, arguably, more important—critical questions about the inherent power imbalance between those women who are appear in these films and the men who decide what happens in them, as well as of our own responsibility as people who help create the demand for content that is degrading and humiliating towards these particular women, and women as a whole. The ultimate purpose of this entire discussion, of course, is not just to reframe the conversation around this one particular film and its production, but rather to indicate how the whole way we think and talk about the relationship between film and ethics in general needs to change and evolve in significant ways.

What I argue is that the tension between film as fantasy and entertainment on the one hand, and as recordings of what actually happened on the other that we talked about in chapter 5 needs to be front and center in all discussions on the relationship between film and ethics, in order for deeper implications of producing and consuming film to be recognized and understood at all. This is true quite regardless of the details of the specific film or ethical issue at hand, as that tension is built into the medium by virtue of the technology involved alone. In this paper, the elements of fantasy and reality film entails and entangles were explored through the case of *Last Tango in Paris* in particular. We saw how the fictional story of that film—the fantasy, in other words—could be, and, as it eventually turned out, actually was used to excuse and justify the mistreatment of an real woman by her male employer and co-star in actual reality. Much of the outrage that ensued from these revelations emphasized the fact that, since the actress was not fully informed on the details of the rape scene prior to filming, she—or some other woman—was not given the opportunity to willingly participate in a scene where she would be degraded and humiliated. Most of the people writing on these events deemed it less important to question what she was being expected to do and by whom in the first place. One of my primary goals with this paper was to bring attention to these kinds of questions

that—not just in this particular instance, but in general—tend to go unasked and unaddressed.

This study faced certain challenges from the beginning. Most of these had to do with the fact that since we are dealing with ethics and moral choices, there can be little hope of finding any conclusive, uncontested answers to the questions being raised. My solution to this problem was to put the emphasis on the questions themselves; that is to say, on the importance of giving them serious consideration, or be willing ask them to begin with. Of course, the very focus of the questions and the overall analysis itself could be called into question. There is, after all, always some degree of subjectivity involved in our moral evaluations; one can make the case but hardly prove that a particular issue or perspective deserves our attention more than some other one. That being said, the fact that another person writing on this same topic might choose to emphasize drastically different aspects of the ethics of filming and viewing sexually violent content does not mean that the issues raised in this paper are any less relevant or worthy of our consideration. Besides, I would argue that the value of these types of studies ultimately lies not with their ability to uncover some universally acceptable truths about right and wrong, but with their capacity to make us think and consider ideas and perspectives that we might otherwise leave unexamined.

As far as further research on this topic is concerned, many more examples of different scenes from different films could certainly be included. These might comprise scenes whose filming conditions are known to us—as in the case of *Last Tango in Paris*—as well as films where we know nothing beyond what is observably there on the screen in front of us. A study along those lines would allow us to consider more deeply the question of what we can infer about the filming conditions based on the exploitative nature of the scene itself, in the absence of any confirmed details about what actually happened on the set of the film. Beyond that, one important issue that I have not been able to address at all here is the ethics of depicting sexual violence without the use of real human beings as performers. Throughout the paper, we have obviously talked a lot about the ethical implications of the involvement of the real woman who is expected and required to perform and endure sexually violent, degrading, and humiliating acts on camera. A broader study on this topic would need to consider which of the ethical problems we have been discussing do and do not go away when human performers are replaced by computer-generated figures, lifelike dolls, or robot technology, for example.

Another obvious avenue for further research would be to focus more on the content of the scenes, and how rape and sexual violence against women is portrayed in them. It should be noted that studies on media depictions of rape have existed for a long time, which is one of the reasons I chose to focus more on the levels of production and consumption than content with this paper. A future study on this topic might, for instance, take into consideration the length or graphicness of the scenes in question, and how that affects the severity of the ethical problems involved in the creation and consumption of sexually violent content. Or, if we go back to the example of *Last Tango in Paris,* it might consider the messages the film sends about rape and its effects, considering how the rape of Schneider's character is never really discussed or even referred to as such in the film itself. In either case, the challenge there would be to find a way to do textual analysis without getting too caught up in the details of individual scenes and thus forgetting about those larger questions about the ethics of staging sexual violent or degrading acts for the camera in general, regardless of the specific context or details of this or that particular scene.

Finally, future studies could explore more fully the connections between sexually violent and degrading scenes in mainstream entertainment on the one hand, and the ones found in pornography on the other. With the case of *Last Tango in Paris* and its emphasis on the issue of the woman's consent in mind, it seems worth asking at which point the very degrading or painful nature of the acts themselves—in addition to the fact that the footage documenting them are permanently available online thereafter—renders the concept of consent, as Catharine MacKinnon put it, "not a meaningful concept" ("Liberalism and the Death of Feminism" 4). The reason this question is particularly pressing and important when we talk about the treatment of women in pornography in particular is that, there, not only are the acts being depicted degrading and humiliating, but the sex and the sexual violence themselves are un-simulated. As I have suggested at various points of this paper, these are conversations we should be having, and yet, for the most part, have neglected to have, even when famous cases such as *Last Tango in Paris*—not to mention the much wider public discussion on sexual harassment and exploitation since the #MeToo movement began in 2017—has provided us with the ideal opportunity to do so. Ideally, studies of this sort would be some small step in that direction.

At the end of the day, what got me interested in this topic and motivated me to write this paper was a desire to explore the connections between, a) the abuse on display on our screens, b) the toll the realization of such films takes on the real women who are being used and abused for other people's pleasure and entertainment in them, and c) the consequences of the public availability and wide accessibility of such footage on the lives of individuals and whole societies in the real world. By making these connections explicit and taking them seriously I also hope to have demonstrated the dangers of the common tendency to compartmentalize these issues. As I have argued throughout this paper, it is only through these connections—our ability and willingness to draw them, rather—that the ethical problems exposed and created in today's world by the sheer prominence of films and images that depict women as the more or less willing targets of sexualized violence, degradation, and humiliation can ever be either adequately understood or, ultimately, undone.

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