



Maria is a young, struggling actress with promise. When an emerging Italian director casts her to headline a new film alongside an American superstar, her dreams are coming true. But what seems like a big breakthrough turns out to be the start of a living hell. That movie is **THE LAST TANGO IN PARIS**. The actress is Maria Schneider.

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Interview with JESSICA PALUD

MARIA is a loose adaptation of Vanessa Schneider's book, «YOU WERE CALLED MARIA SCHNEIDER» (Grasset Editions). But in your film, you shift the perspective, it's Maria Schneider's point of view that punctuates the story.

In her book, Vanessa Schneider approached her cousin Maria through the prism of the intimate, through the lens of familial witness. For the film, I wanted to shift this perspective and focus on Maria. To be in her gaze and never abandon it, to journey with her. The film is therefore told solely through the eyes of Maria Schneider. She is present in every scene. There was something about her that deeply touched me, her freedom, her choices, and their consequences.

Maria is one of the first actresses to have spoken out, she denounced abuse, and no one listened to her. She spoke out early, whether in Delphine Seyrig's documentary «Be Pretty and Shut Up», or in her interviews («films are written by men for men...»). This voice emerged in a time when it was impossible to question the word, the position of certain directors, of the all-powerful artist. The place of women in cinema was not discussed, nor were the abuses that were silenced in the name of art. Can creation emerge from humiliation, pain, and contempt? What the film questions are the limits of art, violated integrity, the use of a young actress, and the betrayal she feels. And these questions, which the film proposes to raise, are posed through Maria's perspective.

This is your second feature film and your producer Marielle Duigou is once again by your side.

Yes, our director/producer relationship is precious, and this subject resonates particularly with us. She immediately agreed with me on how I wanted to approach Vanessa's book.

You know the film sets perfectly, you were a long-time assistant director before becoming a director...

At the same age as Maria Schneider during the filming of *Last Tango in Paris*, at 19, I met Bernardo Bertolucci: I was an intern on *The Dreamers*. Admiring Bertolucci's work greatly, I often wondered how he had directed Maria in *Last Tango in Paris*. Maria Schneider's story struck me, perhaps because it echoed my experience on film sets when I worked as an assistant. Even a decade ago, there were few women on set. I was often the youngest and always surrounded by men. I witnessed complicated scenes, actors and actresses humiliated, and I myself felt the control some directors abused. I experienced situations that today I would describe as abnormal, without being able to express myself. So, it's true that Maria Schneider's story moved me. I'm not trying to accuse or judge, but to deal with the legacy and to offer a portrait of this society, through a new perspective, that of Maria Schneider.

The structure of your film is very precise, you play with temporal ellipses which you articulate with the moments of rupture in Maria's life.

I wanted an elliptical dramaturgy with Maria as the guiding thread. To focus on her, never to let her go: to be in her skin, in her breath, to feel in her place. With my co-writer Laurette Polmanss, we worked on capturing



pivotal periods of her life; her adolescence and her chaotic relationship with her parents, her explosive debut in cinema with the filming of *Last Tango in Paris*, her descent into hell, and then her encounter with Noor, this young woman who will cast a new light on her.

Tell us about your collaboration with Sébastien Buchmann, the director of photography.

I wanted a very worked image but not too aesthetic. It's a film about cinema and an iconic actress. With Sébastien, we sought a raw beauty, in service of the actors. The photos of American photographer Nan Goldin were an inspiration, her work is imbued with freedom, her images are true while being very beautiful... I imagined a pure and frontal staging in the frames to highlight Maria at every moment and create a universal identification with the character.

Your film is very well documented, although it is a work of fiction, one feels that the screenplay was nourished by encounters...

I exchanged with many people who crossed Maria Schneider's life. I found it necessary to confront multiple points of view to uncover her truth.

The testimony of one person in particular was precious to me. It allowed me to delve into Maria's intimacy, as she lived through the filming of *Last Tango in Paris* and was Maria's friend for 17 years. Furthermore, I read and watched numerous interviews with Maria in French and foreign media. What struck me is that each time she said things that no one seemed to hear. Her words appear in 2024 as very contemporary even though they date back to the 1970s!



How did you construct the famous sequence where everything changes?

I had access to the original script of Last Tango in Paris, the copy used on set and annotated by the script supervisor. The scene wasn't in the script. As written, this sequence was supposed to end with a violent gesture. But on the day of filming, the script supervisor made annotations in the margin, to record everything that was added. Before filming, Bernardo Bertolucci only told Maria that it would go further. He used to add scenes, to encourage improvisation, to seek the «accidental» that nourishes cinema. But with the butter, a limit was crossed. When Marlon Brando pulls down Maria's pants and takes the butter, it's not written. The young woman is taken by surprise and thrown to the ground. Bernardo Bertolucci himself, in his subsequent statements, clearly acknowledged this. He said he wanted Maria's real tears, a real humiliation.

By being in Maria's perspective and feelings, the staging was not about showing the stratagems used by Bertolucci and Brando, that's not the subject. I wanted to stay with Maria, and only her, to feel her experience as an actress dominated by two male gazes. It had to be felt that the scene shifted from acting to violence towards Maria and without anyone saying anything.

For this sequence, an intimacy coordinator was present on set: someone who doesn't intervene in the staging but watches over the actors. I also had a stuntman because in this sequence, it's a 90 kg man violently throwing a 19-year-old woman to the ground.

And you end this sequence with a panning shot, during which the viewer is facing the film crew behind the camera, silent...



We see and feel what she experiences, that is, a physical assault in front of everyone, creating discomfort but no intervention. Today, in 2024, it seems impossible. But at the time, it was like that. What to say in front of the greatest actor in the world, in front of a honored director? Maria Schneider was 19, she was a minor (the legal age was set at 21 until 1974), and there was no one to protect her. At the end of filming this scene, we were a reduced team and we were seized by the violence that had occurred, swift and cutting violence, without recourse.

To embody Maria, you needed an extraordinary actress. Anamaria Vartolomei's performance is impressive beyond resemblance, her interpretation is magnetic. Was this choice present from the writing of the screenplay?

The main challenge of this film - a frontal portrait - lay in the choice of the actress. The character of Maria is complex, there are several roles in one: the young girl, the actress, the drug addict, the wounded woman... I looked for my actress after writing the screenplay. Anamaria has a very strong screen presence, and also some panache: she wasn't afraid to do things. And then, to play Maria Schneider, you have to shine on screen. After choosing her, I discovered that she was Romanian, like Maria through her mother. We saw each other a lot, we worked, rehearsed in advance, and created our Maria together for several months. I wanted her to know the story by heart, to free herself from it during filming. I knew that for Maria's voice to finally be heard, she had to fully embrace the character. I didn't seek a perfect resemblance, I wanted an evocation, but she had to have dark eyes (Anamaria has very blue eyes), and the right hairstyles at each stage. Initially, Maria had straight hair, it was Bertolucci who made it curly, and then she kept these curly hair for the rest of her life. And then, the few referenced outfits from



photos of Maria depicted a modern woman: the bomber jacket and jeans, the white suit in interviews...

And Matt Dillon to embody the character of Marlon Brando?

There were two solutions: either find an actor who was Marlon Brando's doppelganger. Or someone who could evoke him in what he represented: fascination, the Hollywood myth. Matt Dillon is Rusty James, the actor whose poster was displayed in his teenage room. He told me that, like Brando, he used to reenact the monologue from Last Tango in Paris when he was young. Like Maria, he became an actor very early and wasn't prepared for this sudden immersion in the industry. What happened to Maria could have happened to him.

There was something beautiful in the relationship between Maria and Brando, a sincerity in Marlon's kindness. In one scene, they talk to each other as equals, and he confides in her how disturbed he feels by this very particular shoot. But at some point, it went too far. I believe that after filming the scene, Matt Dillon said about Marlon Brando, his idol: how could you do that?

In its second part, the film tells the descent into drugs of Maria Schneider, and then a romantic encounter with Noor (Céleste Brunnquell). How did you approach the aftermath of Tango?

First, we accompany Maria in the release of this film which is impossible for her to assume, linked to a trauma. From the beginning of the promotion, Maria is summed up in a single scene. She is seen as a universal prostitute. The gaze on her is unhealthy... But the gaze, it damages... It would have even damaged balanced

people. That's what I wanted to show. All her life, she had an immense demand for love and respect, without ever finding them, except in her relationship with this student. Someone who looks at you differently can lift you up. We needed a charismatic young woman, something powerful and gentle at the same time, and Céleste Brunquell has these qualities.

To address the heroin addiction, with Anamaria, we met a former heroin addict who helped us understand and work on withdrawal symptoms, the moment when you can break everything, nervousness, excessive sweating... And also the stomach ache, kidney pain, shortness of breath.

Benjamin Biolay signs the film's music...

The first time we met, at his place, there was a photo of Maria Schneider on his piano. It was quite powerful. Benjamin doesn't do many film scores and only accepts films after seeing them. When he saw Maria, he was very moved. He told me: I'll do it. I had precise ideas of a string score, he brought a certain necessary violence, something also deconstructed. He captured the spirit of the film and above all Maria's disorders.

How do you perceive the echoes between Maria Schneider's story and that of contemporary actresses who denounce the violence they have suffered on film sets, and in the world of cinema?

In writing and directing this film, I wanted to make people feel the slow poison of trauma, and in a universal way. I couldn't have expected what is happening today, the extent of the debate and testimonies. With Maria's story, we understand that we need to protect young people who enter this world unprepared.

That betrayal and manipulation are not necessary tools for directing cinema. Everyone - myself included - seeks magic on set, accident, emotion that arises. But I am certain that it is possible to achieve this without humiliation. I even think that this form of directing actors is all the more exciting: to seek and achieve together, without resorting to any form of violence whatsoever. Things are evolving and that's a good thing. Recognizing dysfunctions is already a first step. But there is still work to be done.

You dedicate your film to Maria Schneider...

With this shoot, I feel deeply connected to Maria. I hope that now, finally, she is listened to. Only our collective gaze can restore her.

Are we capable, even today, of approaching this story through her eyes and hers alone? So that her «No,» finally, is heard.



JESSICA PALUD

BIOGRAPHY

Jessica Palud was born in 1982 in Paris.

She started working early on film sets, first in production, then as an assistant director (on films by Sofia Coppola, Bernardo Bertolucci, Eric Lartigau, Philippe Lioret...).

In 2017, she directed a short film called MARLON, which was selected in over 150 festivals worldwide (including Toronto and Clermont-Ferrand) and won 40 international awards, as well as being nominated for the César Awards.

REVENIR, her first feature film starring Niels Schneider and Adèle Exarchopoulos, was released in 2020 and won the Best Screenplay Award at the Venice Film Festival (Orizzonti).

MARIA is her second feature film.

CAST

Maria Schneider ANAMARIA VARTOLOMEI

Marlon Brando MATT DILLON

Bernardo Bertolucci GIUSEPPE MAGGIO

Noor CELESTE BRUNNQUELL

Daniel Gélin YVAN ATTAL

CREW

Directed by	JESSICA PALUD	Sound	JEAN-MARIE BLONDEL RYM MOUNIR DEBBARH VINCENT VERDOUX
Writers	JESSICA PALUD LAURETTE POLMANSS		
Loosely adapted from the novel written by Vanessa Schneider Tu t'appelais Maria Schneider – Éditions Grasset		Casting	STÉPHANIE DONCKER (ARDA)
Director of Photography	SÉBASTIEN BUCHMANN (AFC)	Production manager	PATRICK ARMISEN
Editor	THOMAS MARCHAND	Music	BENJAMIN BIOLAY
Set design	VALÉRIE VALERO (ADC)		
Costume	ALEXIA CRISP-JONES	Produced by	MARIELLE DUIGOU LES FILMS DE MINA
Script	LOUISE ALBON	Coproducer	ALEX C. Lo
First Assistant Director	NATHALIE NOUAILI	Coproduced par	KRISTINA ZIMMERMAN CHRISTIE MOLIA

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