



MICHEL PICCOLI: A FEARLESS TALENT

La Belle Noiseuse

La Belle Noiseuse

Director: Jacques Rivette

Production Companies: Pierre Grise Productions, FR3 Films, George Reinhart Productions, Centre national de la cinématographie, Canal+, Investimage 2, Investimage 3

Producer: Martine Marignac

Associate Producer: Maurice Tinchant

Production Manager: Jean Talvat

Unit Manager: Janou Shammass

First Assistant: Lorraine Groleau

Assistant Director: Anne Billiotte

Scenario: Pascal Bonitzer, Christine Laurent, Jacques Rivette

Dialogue: Pascal Bonitzer, Christine Laurent

Based on 'Le Chef d'oeuvre inconnu' by:

Honoré de Balzac

Director of Photography: William Lubtchansky

Assistant Photographers: Christophe Pollock,

Léttia Masson

Stills Photography: Moune Jamet

Editor: Nicole Lubtchansky

Assistant Editor: Anne Mills

Art Director: Manu de Chauvigny

Frenhofer's Drawings/Paintings: Bernard Dufour

Costumes: Laurence Struz

Make-up: Susan Robertson

Titles: Euro-Titres

Music: Igor Stravinsky

Sound: Florian Eidenbenz

Assistant Sound: Brice Leboucq

Mixer: Bernard Le Roux

Cast:

Jane Birkin (*Liz*)

Emmanuelle Béart (*Marianne*)

Marianne Denicourt (*Julienne*)

Marie Belluc (*Magali*)

Marie-Claude Roger (*Françoise*)

Leila Remili (*servant*)

Daphne Goodfellow, Susan Robertson (*tourists*)

Michel Piccoli (*Edouard Frenhofer*)

David Bursztein (*Nicolas*)

Gilles Arbona (*Porbus*)

Bernard Dufour (*hand of the painter*)

France-Switzerland 1991©

238 mins + interval

The success of *La Belle Noiseuse* makes it plausible that audiences see in it a qualified but nonetheless comforting reaffirmation of the values not only of Art, but also of European art cinema. Indeed, perhaps Rivette (until now mostly an enigmatic outsider even in his own country) wanted to try his hand at the genre better known from Eric Rohmer: *La Belle Noiseuse* could well be one of those *contes moraux* which have become Rohmer's trademark. Rivette's tight plotting, the film's many formal symmetries and neat ironies, the division into clearly felt scenes and acts, the respect for the unities of French classical drama all recall Rohmer, both theme and setting making one think of *La Collectionneuse* (1966) or Rohmer's homage to Matisse, *Pauline à la plage* (1982). The opening of *La Belle Noiseuse*, with the young couple pretending to be strangers who succumb to lust at first sight in order to shock two dowdy tourists from England is pure Rohmer, if it wasn't also vintage Rivette (comparable to the opening of *L'Amour par terre*, 1984, where a solemn group of men and women are led through backstreets and courtyards up several flights of stairs into a Paris apartment to become eavesdropping witnesses to the infidelities and domestic complications of an executive with a wife and a mistress, before the spectator realises that these are down-at-heel actors who have invented not street theatre, but apartment theatre).

To be familiar with other Rivette films certainly helps to make sense not only of this opening. If there are still any auteurists out there, here is a chance to practise the old skills of recognising personal themes and formal obsessions, of spotting allusions and putting together the cross-references and inter-texts: in other words, precisely, to salute the artist and his inimitable signature. What in the earlier films had been the structuring principle – namely to use the theatre, a performance to be rehearsed, a show to be put on, in the course of which the characters find out some, inevitably painful, truth about themselves – is here the function of the painting, in each case setting off art versus life, the classical against the vagaries of personal relations, formal anger against the anarchies of *l'amour fou* and the destructiveness of self-obsession.

Thomas Elsaesser, *Sight and Sound*, April 1992

Not merely an exciting return to form, but also something of a personal testament, Rivette's masterpiece, a very free adaptation of Balzac's *Le Chef d'oeuvre inconnu*, can be read in part as an apologia for the narrative cautiousness that his work has shown since the dangerous experimentation of his richest period (roughly, from *L'Amour fou* in 1968 to *Noroît* in 1976). For all the distinction of most of his subsequent work, a backing away from the theme of madness – explicit in *L'Amour fou* and *Out 1*, rationalised in *Céline et Julie vont en bateau*, internalised in *Duelle* and *Noroît* – has placed most of his work since *Merry-go-round* at a lower risk level. Since *Out*, moreover, one can chart a nearly parallel retreat from the contemporary world: if the Balzac reference in *Out* offered an ironic 19th-century perspective on 60s counterculture, the Balzac reference in *La Belle Noiseuse* establishes that Rivette has fully adopted this perspective as his own.

Ultimately opting for life over art – for saving his marriage rather than plunging into the void opened up by his painful masterpiece – Frenhofer, powerfully embodied by Michel Piccoli in the performance of his career, seems to be

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SIGHT AND SOUND

MICHEL PICCOLI: A FEARLESS TALENT

La Mort en ce jardin (Evil Eden)

Thu 1 Jun 20:35; Tue 6 Jun 18:15

Le Mépris (Contempt)

From Fri 2 Jun

The Diary of a Chambermaid

(Le journal d'une femme de chambre)

Fri 2 Jun 18:15; Fri 16 Jun 20:55

Belle de jour

Fri 2 Jun 20:40; Sun 25 Jun 18:45

Les Choses de la vie (The Things of Life)

Sat 3 Jun 12:30; Tue 13 Jun 20:45

Themroc

Sat 3 Jun 15:00; Wed 14 Jun 18:15

La Grande Bouffe (Blow-Out)

Sat 3 Jun 20:30; Mon 12 Jun 18:10

Ten Days' Wonder (La Décade prodigieuse)

Sun 4 Jun 15:20; Sat 17 Jun 20:40

Vincent, François, Paul et les autres

Sun 4 Jun 18:00; Sun 18 Jun 13:10

Beyond Good and Evil:

The Discreet Charm of Michel Piccoli

Mon 5 Jun 18:15

Passion

Tue 6 Jun 21:00; Fri 16 Jun 18:20

Spoiled Children (Des enfants gâtés)

Wed 7 Jun 18:10; Mon 12 Jun 20:40

Une chambre en ville (A Room in Town)

Wed 14 Jun 20:45; Sat 24 Jun 13:00

Mauvais sang (The Night Is Young)

Sat 17 Jun 15:15; Thu 22 Jun 20:40

Milou en mai (Milou in May)

Sun 18 Jun 16:00; Mon 26 Jun 20:40

Belle toujours

Wed 21 Jun 20:50; Sun 25 Jun 16:30

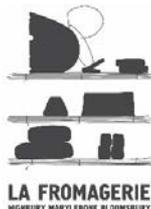
La Belle Noiseuse

Sat 24 Jun 15:20; Wed 28 Jun 18:10

Habemus Papam – We Have a Pope

Sun 25 Jun 14:00; Thu 29 Jun 20:45

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making a comparable choice. If *La Belle Noiseuse* suggests at times a remake of *L'Amour fou*, with Frenhofer's sketches and brush strokes and Marianne's alternating bouts of compliance and rebellion taking the place of the earlier film's theatre rehearsals, certain concerns remain constant: the material processes of work (including its duration and rhythms) and its profoundly collaborative nature. What seems new is an ironic perception of the art market (as embodied by Porbus) and a somewhat sadder but wiser perception of the perils that risky art-making entails.

It is both satisfying and just that the first commercial hit of Rivette's career should be four hours long. Despite much moaning over the years from critics about his running times – complaints which have indeed played a part in obliging him to make shorter films – the fact remains that, with very few exceptions, the longer his films run, the more disciplined and purposeful they turn out to be. As it happens, Rivette has also edited a two-hour version of *La Belle Noiseuse* for French TV using completely different takes, but it's no surprise to hear that he himself judges it inferior: in the three other cases where he has edited shorter versions of his films – *L'Amour fou*, *Out 1*, *L'Amour par terre* – the superiority of the longer version is irrefutable.

Duration and process are central to Rivette's concerns, and the viewer's changing perception of Emmanuelle Béart's nude body from pure erotic object to painterly material over the course of four hours is fundamentally linked to the mysterious changes undergone by all the major characters – changes occurring both in terms of the plot and in terms of the spectator's shifting relationship to the action. This isn't, moreover, an issue that can be reduced to long versus short takes: Rivette's jump cuts and other elisions are as central to his strategies as his use of real time.

The film's key scene features neither nudity nor painting but a confrontational dialogue between Liz and Frenhofer in their adjoining bedrooms and on a connecting terrace. Interestingly, this terrace recalls the ramparts where life-and-death struggles are waged in *Noroît*, and Rivette's musical sense of *mise-en-scène* has never been more masterful in charting both the literal movements of a couple and the 'stations' of their passion (in both the carnal and Christian senses).

Bracketing his tale with bantering dialogues and social poses that suggest Marivaux, Rivette seems more conscious than ever of art as a treacherous house of fiction planted within a wider world, in this case, a sensual rural setting that is beautifully captured in sound and image. The fact that we never catch more than a glimpse of Frenhofer's 'real' finished masterpiece – a flash of bloody red in the lower section – suggests both the mysteries and the terrors that the remainder of the film outlines, negotiates, and desperately contains.

Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Sight and Sound*, April 1992