

“A Masterpiece or Nothing”: Balzacian and Jamesian Elements in Jacques Rivette’s *La Belle Noiseuse*

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Abstract

The complexity of Jacques Rivette’s *La Belle Noiseuse* (1991) rests largely on a rich intertextual framework in which both Balzac’s *Le Chef-d’œuvre inconnu* and Henry James’s *Notebooks* and several of his short stories play a key role. Besides a series of evident plot elements drawn from Balzac’s story, the pictorial and artistic theory discussed in the film shows significant links with Frenhofer’s well-known speeches about art and painting, as well as with the conviction that what really distinguishes art is the creation process and not its final result. On the other hand, the reasons why Rivette approached James’s work have much to do with his priest-like reverence for literature and art, his reflection on the deep joys and sorrows of the creative process and his taste for the projection of those intimate reflections in short stories such as “The Madonna of the Future”, “The Liar” and “The Figure in the Carpet”. By bringing Balzac and James together, Rivette proves the complementarity of two authors who focused their powerful gaze on the mystery of artistic creation, a key topic in *La Belle Noiseuse*.

We had been talking about the masters who had achieved but a single masterpiece—the artists and poets who but once in their lives had known the divine afflatus and touched the high level of perfection.¹

In Jacques Rivette’s long life (1928–2016) and career, *La Belle Noiseuse* (1991) holds a particularly important place, as it presents some of the most outstanding features of his artistic views.² Drawing on one of Balzac’s most famous and influential works, *Le Chef-d’œuvre inconnu* (1837),³ Rivette uses the semantic and hermeneutic flexibility of Balzac’s short story to make a four-hour film that, when considered thirty years later, proves to be a testamentary synthesis of his ideas as a filmmaker. In *La Belle Noiseuse* there is a narrative complexity and a manipulation of spatial-temporal categories linking it to his most experimental cinema; this film also displays Rivette’s recurrent blurring of the

¹ Henry James, “The Madonna of the Future”, in Leon Edel (ed.), *The Complete Tales of Henry James*, vol. 3 (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1962), pp. 11–52 (p. 11).

² Jacques Rivette, *La Belle Noiseuse*, 2 DVDs (New York: Cohen, 2018). All references to disc number, minutes and seconds after quotations from Rivette’s film are from this DVD edition.

³ Honoré de Balzac, *Le Chef-d’œuvre inconnu*, ed. René Guise, in *La Comédie humaine*, vol. X, *Études Philosophiques*, ed. Pierre-Georges Castex et al. (Paris: Gallimard, La Pléiade, 2001). All page references to Balzac’s text are from this edition.

limits between reality that is almost documentary and fiction, as well as his theatrical approach to cinema. Moreover, the film is one of the three pillars of his much acclaimed Balzacian trilogy, together with *Out One, noli me tangere* (1971), based on *Histoire des Treize*, and *Ne touchez pas la hache* (2007), a version of *La duchesse de Langeais*. In these three films Rivette adopts Balzac's fusion of classicism and modernity and his practice of realism as a fundamental basis of the former's cinema aesthetics.⁴ These three film also constitute examples of a distinctive work of free adaptations of literary texts specific to Rivette's career (*La religieuse* and Diderot, 1966; *L'amour fou* and Racine, 1969; *Hurlevent* and Emily Brontë, 1985; *Va savoir* and Pirandello, 2001). Such is also the case of other *nouvelle vague* directors like Truffaut, Rohmer and Chabrol, whose films abound in literary citations "which form a vast network of allusions, quotes, borrowings and rewritings that attest to New Wave directors' grounding in and passion for the literary medium."⁵

La Belle Noiseuse best encapsulates Jacques Rivette's fruitful creative relationship with literature, since the intertextual complexity of the film goes beyond the most obvious source, Balzac's story, into a deep assimilation of a wide variety of intertexts including Poe, Wilde, Zola, Ibsen and Henry James. Rather than propose an analysis of the film in specific filmic or intermedial terms, this article aims to show that a large part of the semantic wealth of *La Belle Noiseuse* comes from the assimilation and integration of Balzac's and James's works in a solid intertextual fabric underpinning the intellectual architecture of the film.

La Belle Noiseuse

Despite being a free adaptation, *La Belle Noiseuse*'s narrative clearly reveals close links to the story told in *Le Chef-d'œuvre inconnu*. Rivette is not only well aware of "how the translation from book to screen requires insight into particular characteristics that propel plot and action"⁶ but also adheres

⁴ Zahra Tavassoli Zea, *Balzac Reframed: The Classical and Modern Faces of Éric Rohmer and Jacques Rivette* (Cham: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2019), p. 20. See also Francesca Dosi, "Balzac et Rivette: L'énigme d'une rencontre", *L'Année balzacienne*, vol. 12 (2011), pp. 337–363; Francesca Dosi, *Trajectoires balzaciennes dans le cinéma de Jacques Rivette* (La Madeleine: LettMotif, 2014).

⁵ Marion Schmid, *Intermedial Dialogues: The French New Wave and the Other Arts* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), p. 26. For all these matters, see also Mary M. Wyles, *Jacques Rivette* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012).

⁶ Homer B. Pettay and R. Barton Palmer, "Introduction: Screening French Literature", in Homer B. Pettay and R. Barton Palmer (eds), *French Literature on Screen* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019), p. 3.

to the *nouvelle vague* practice of adaptation that “fully exploited the expressive powers (mise-en-scène, editing, lighting, framing, music) of the cinematic medium”.⁷ The script by Pascal Bonitzer, Christine Laurent and Rivette himself portrays a painter, Édouard Frenhofer (Michel Piccoli), who lives with his wife Liz (Jane Birkin) in what is easily identified with French Provence. In his château he is visited by Nicolas (David Bursztein), a young admirer of his work, and his girlfriend, Marianne (Emmanuelle Béart), both guided by the art dealer Porbus (Gilles Arbona), a friend of Frenhofer’s and Liz’s former lover. Soon the great secret of Frenhofer’s life and art is revealed: he is almost unable to pick up a brush and, most importantly, in ten years he has not been able to complete what was to be his ultimate masterpiece, *La Belle Noiseuse*, for which Liz had posed. Encouraged by Porbus’s venal interest, by Marianne’s bewitching and disturbing beauty and by Nicolas’s yearning to see the work finished, Frenhofer resolves to return to his creative work, with a reluctant Marianne as Liz’s substitute. After a series of physically and psychologically exhausting sitting sessions, Frenhofer finally brings the painting to a close.

In the process of the film the viewer witnesses the thorough exposure of Marianne’s naked body and the preparatory phase of the painting through the observation of the many sketches created by the painter Bernard Dufour (1922–2016). Likewise, as viewers, we gradually witness the deep changes the making of the work of art causes in the four main characters of the story. The final contemplation of the painting by Marianne and Liz brings about a mixture of fascination, apprehension and even horror. The film closes with a strengthened bond between Frenhofer and Liz, which is in stark contrast to the split between Nicolas and Marianne, whose relationship is devastated by the intense experience they have undergone. The work of art, only fragmentarily glimpsed by the viewer, is eventually hidden by Frenhofer and thus concealed forever from any other possible gaze.

In *La Belle Noiseuse*, Rivette ponders the nature of artwork. In fact, the representation of painting through cinema is considered one of his greatest accomplishments.⁸ The film is a critical dissection mainly focused on the complexities of the creative process, and not so much on its

⁷ Schmid, p. 20.

⁸ Tavassoli, p. 165.

outcome. The suggested concept of creation is thus linked to that of poetry in its original Aristotelian sense. It is highly revealing that, when Frenhofer brings the process to a close, the work remains hidden and unknown forever, except to the very few who have been allowed to behold it. In contrast to Liz and Marianne, who gain access to its full contemplation, the only thing the viewer can do is try to recompose an image of the mysterious painting mentally from the fragments observed in the successive posing sessions, without knowing the place they may or may not have had in the final work. Thus, the film hides the complete ekphrasis from the viewer at all times, as Balzac also does in his story.⁹ Despite the film ending in uncertainty, this feeling reinforces the underlying idea that what is relevant in art is not the work itself as a finished product but rather the strenuous creative process involved and the role of the artist as a demiurge.

Indeed, Frenhofer embodies a Platonic, romantic idea of the artist as a demiurge possessed by a madness from which the work of art is ultimately born. Rivette's Frenhofer thus owes much to that of Balzac character and is, to a large extent, the type of mysterious and monomaniacal creator much loved by the French author, in line with characters such as Balthazar Claës in *La Recherche de l'absolu*. The Rivettian character also takes from Balzac the elitist and misanthropic attitude that makes him reject as spurious the vulgar conception of art held by the masses as elaborated through Balzac's opposition between Frenhofer in *Le Chef-d'œuvre inconnu* and Pierre Grassou in the homonymous story of 1839. The masterpiece, then, can only be born of the artist's isolation and his intimate creative relationship with the model, a connection Rivette thoroughly explores in his film. While Balzac sidesteps analysis of the private encounter between Frenhofer and Gillette to show it only indirectly, Rivette makes a detailed study of Frenhofer's creative connection with Marianne and Liz, his wife and former model, who has been replaced by Marianne. In this respect, the film suggests that a work of art is engendered not only by the artist's creative capacity but also by the significant contribution of the model to this capacity. It thus posits her as an active creative entity and not merely a passive figure limited to the posing sessions.

⁹ Alexandra Wettlaufer, *Pen vs. Paintbrush: Girodet, Balzac and the Myth of Pygmalion in Postrevolutionary France* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), p. 227.

Le Chef-d'œuvre inconnu

As the leading intertext, *Le Chef-d'œuvre inconnu* is embedded in Rivette's film, which is certainly an atypical adaptation, justifying the claim of the credits that it is a story "freely inspired" by the Balzacian tale. However, such claim does not prevent Rivette from allowing the viewer to recognize the Balzacian source easily as the intertextual framework of the film. The title itself, *La Belle Noiseuse*, already points to the first edition of the story (1831) and advances the focus not only on the mysterious painting but also on Marianne as the creator's "troublemaker" (*noiseuse*). This idea is apparent from Frenhofer's own words when he exclaims, "[V]ous amenez le trouble et la perturbation" (I, 22:15), and when he agrees with Marianne in linking the unusual French adjective *noiseuse* with the notion of *querelle* (I, 25:33). Furthermore, Rivette keeps the basic names and functions of the three central characters of the original story: the young admirer (Nicolas) who, thanks to the mediation of an acknowledged public figure (Porbus), gains access to the exclusive creative circle of the great master (Frenhofer).

Just as the plot design of *La Belle Noiseuse* allows the viewer to identify the Balzacian elements mentioned above easily, so does Rivette's reception of Balzac's pictorial and artistic theory. It is therefore convenient, at this point, to consider briefly the theory outlined in *Le Chef-d'œuvre inconnu*. The brevity of the story makes it a rarity for the *Comédie humaine*. This brevity has favoured a semantic ambiguity largely accounting for its pervading influence in the field of modern art and painting theory.¹⁰ The text was first published in 1831 in *L'Artiste*, a magazine whose title unequivocally points to the professed aim of serving as a mouthpiece for the latest artistic trends. However, in 1837 Balzac decided to use the story as a vehicle for conveying his own theories about art and artistic creation and to make it part of a future trilogy together with *Gambara* (1837) and *Massimila Doni* (1839). Despite the variety of alterations included in this final edition, it is the insertion of two extensive theoretical speeches by Frenhofer that laid the foundations for the later significance of the story in the history of modern art.

¹⁰ See Georges Didi-Huberman, *La Peinture incarnée* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1985); Françoise Pitt-Rivers, *Balzac et l'art* (Paris: Éditions du Chêne, 1993); Marc Eigeldinger, *La Philosophie de l'art chez Balzac* (Geneva: Slatkine Reprints, 1998).

The first speech appears shortly after the beginning of the story (pp. 416–420) and can be divided into three clear sections. The first (pp. 416–417) is Frenhofer’s response to Porbus’s curiosity about the great master’s opinion of his painting *Marie égyptienne*. Balzac establishes a subtle contrast between the critical judgement of the narrator, who praises the work as a chef-d’œuvre and places it in competition with Frenhofer’s unknown painting, and the verdict of the master, who, while acknowledging the value of Porbus’s work, issues a severe criticism based on its lack of vitality. Frenhofer compares the painting to a lifeless marble statue, thus foreshadowing the contrast with the breath of life characterizing his Catherine Lescault, “La Belle Noiseuse”. According to him, only from full creative consciousness can life emerge, and his verdict of Porbus’s painting is clear: “Le flambeau de Prométhée s’est éteint plus d’une fois dans tes mains, et beaucoup d’endroits de ton tableau n’ont pas été touchés par la flamme celeste” (p. 417).

It is Porbus’s desire to grasp this frustrating comparison with Prometheus that propels the second section of Frenhofer’s first speech (pp. 417–418), which takes on a more abstract and theoretical quality. The two pictorial systems that Frenhofer distinguishes, the design (‘le dessin’), typical of German masters such as Holbein and Dürer, and the colour (‘la couleur’), characterizing the Italian school of Titian and Veronese, only merge in the work of the very greatest masters. The failure of Porbus’s painting is thus due to his inability to achieve the fusion of the two systems and his indecision in adhering to one of them.

Porbus’s frustration at having failed to achieve effects that he only believes are possible in nature is, in Frenhofer’s eyes, an unworthy surrender on the part of a genuine artist. This verdict triggers the much more passionate third section of Frenhofer’s speech (pp. 418–420) about the ultimate mission of art: the creation of life by the painter-poet. As noted above, this is a very romantic vision of the creative genius who manages to force the arcanum of nature until beauty’s ultimate secret is revealed.

Once again it is Porbus who, by suggesting the possibility of Frenhofer showing his enigmatic painting, sparks off the master’s second great speech (pp. 424–425). On the one hand, Frenhofer dissects the complicated relationship between shadows and whiteness in painting and even boasts of having averted the defects made by the great masters of the past; and, on the other hand, he

labels line, stroke and drawing as unnatural tools that a painter is forced to use to perceive the effect of light on objects. Balzac contrasts Frenhofer's theory with that of Porbus, a steadfast believer in drawing and line: "[L]e dessin donne un squelette, la couleur est la vie, mais la vie sans le squelette est une chose plus incomplète que le squelette sans la vie" (p. 427).

Despite the very significant influence of the Jamesian intertexts that will be addressed below, the pictorial and artistic theory advocated by Frenhofer in *La Belle Noiseuse* is much more closely rooted in the Balzacian speeches than has hitherto been suggested. Frenhofer's prolonged artistic sterility is driven by a monomaniacal ambition to create the definitive painting, unparalleled by any other: "un chef-d'œuvre ou rien", he categorically states in *La Belle Noiseuse* (I, 40:22). He firmly believes that a masterpiece must always be singularized by a breath of life, in contrast to the deadness characterizing works generally considered to be artistic. The work of art will only be alive if it contains blood in a metaphorical sense. This [belief](#) is emphasized by Balzac's Frenhofer: "Vous faites à vos femmes de belles robes de chair, de belles draperies de cheveux, mais où est le sang qui engendre le calme ou la passion et qui cause des effets particuliers" (p. 419) and, not coincidentally, by Rivette's: "Il y a pas le sang. Si je vais au bout, il y a le sang sur la toile [...]. Dans *La Belle Noiseuse* on voit le sang" (I, 24:42).

The references to life and blood are connected in both the story and the film to the concept of the vampirizing painting that sucks the model's and painter's life (blood) to ensure its own existence as a masterpiece, a motif in *La Belle Noiseuse* also deriving from sources as diverse as Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Poe's "The Oval Portrait" and some of James's stories such as "The Liar" and "The Madonna of the Future". In this context, it is not irrelevant at all that the viewer's quick glimpse of *La Belle Noiseuse* once it is finished is limited to some reddish fragments that would symbolically point to the presence of blood in Frenhofer's painting, as attested by Marianne's and Liz's intense reactions when they contemplate it.

Frenhofer's monomania, in both *Le Chef-d'œuvre inconnu* and *La Belle Noiseuse*, is dominated by a keen awareness that the creation of the ultimate masterpiece entails deep vital suffering. The Rivettian character binds that suffering to the extreme risk that only exceptional creators must be willing to take in order to create something new and unique. In a more than probable tribute to

Baudelaire's famous "Au fond de l'inconnu pour trouver du nouveau" in "Le Voyage", Frenhofer compares this risk to "un saut dans l'inconnu" (I, 1:06:50). The artist is thus placed at a point of no return. This is why, for Frenhofer, the true creator is always unaware of the paths along which the artwork will lead him. Rivette confronts Frenhofer's belief with that of Nicolas's, who somewhat naively claims that all artistic creation always entails a high risk, something that is beyond Frenhofer's comprehension, as he can only concede that common artists can at most help to clear the path that only true creators will eventually tread.

The theoretical disagreement between Nicolas and Frenhofer also concerns their painting techniques. Whereas in the Balzacian story this divergence between master and admirer is only slightly revealed when the young painter becomes upset by the master's severe judgement on Porbus's *Marie égyptienne*, in *La Belle Noiseuse* Nicolas firmly confronts his somewhat naive theory with Frenhofer's fuzzy ideas. For the master, art in general and painting in particular must seek the revelation of truth, despite all the suffering and cruelty involved in the process: "Nous voulons la vérité dans la peinture et la vérité est cruelle" (I, 30:11). In Frenhofer's elusive theory, painting is identified with what he vaguely describes as "le bruit fossile" and with an overwhelming desire to reach the essence. This lack of precision and the inability to put his theory into practice are evident at different moments in the film, such as when he confides to Marianne that "c'est pas vous et c'est vous" (II, 0:06), a statement that echoes the impotence behind Frenhofer's "c'est cela, et ce n'est pas cela" when discussing Porbus's *Marie égyptienne* in *Le Chef-d'œuvre inconnu* (p. 419). Despite the fact that Nicolas's painting is based, like Frenhofer's, on a figurative technique that also focuses on the human body—"On s'en fout bien du paysage", the master tells the young admirer (I, 20:00)—to Frenhofer's complex theoretical formulation, Nicolas opposes the simple theory that painting must be based on clean, defined lines (I, 38:36), in keeping with the position advocated by Porbus in *Le Chef-d'œuvre inconnu* (p. 427).

In short, Rivette's reception of *Le Chef-d'œuvre inconnu* is complex in as much as it involves not only the integration into his own story of the specific plot motifs outlined above, but also assimilation of the influential art theory defended by Balzac in the 1837 edition of his short story.

Henry James's *Notebooks* and short stories

Despite being overshadowed by the high relevance of the Balzacian story, Henry James's works play a major intertextual role in *La Belle Noiseuse*. It is Rivette who stresses their relevance and the lack of critical attention they have received: "On a d'ailleurs assez peu dit combien James comptait pour moi: par exemple, dans *La Belle Noiseuse*, il y a au moins autant d'éléments qui viennent du *Chef-d'œuvre inconnu* de Balzac que des *Carnets* de James".¹¹ In addition, the co-screenwriters Pascal Bonitzer and Christine Laurent have explicitly acknowledged the script's debt to "The Liar".¹² The film is also most likely connected to elements from two other James stories, "The Madonna of the Future" and the famous "The Figure in the Carpet". We are thus dealing with four works that are certainly representative of James's style, subject matter and intellectual reflection, all of them merging in *La Belle Noiseuse* to be in turn blended with the Balzacian story, as well as with other secondary intertextual references.

James's *Notebooks* are for Rivette, as has been pointed out, the other central intertext of *La Belle Noiseuse*.¹³ James always considered annotation to be an integral and conscious part of his artistic creation, an essential stage in the process of observation for any novelist. The notes that have been preserved provide us with fragmentary but privileged access to his theoretical reflections on art and literature and also to the ins and outs of the creative process that later took shape in his stories, in a sort of intimate confessional diary on the work and role of the artist. This direct, non-fictionalized account of the creative process must have represented for Rivette a source of inspiration for the essence of his film, centred to a large extent on the process of creating a work of art. It is therefore not by chance that Rivette based his film on *two* authors, Balzac and James, who turned reflection on art and the figure of the artist into recurring motifs in their works. The fact that James connected the art of annotation to any novelist's process of observation no doubt stimulated Rivette's theoretical interest in his notebooks, as the reflection on the artistic gaze and

¹¹ Jean-Marc Lalanne and Jean Baptiste Morain, "Entretien Jacques Rivette: l'art secret", *Les Inrockuptibles* (19 March 2007), <<https://www.lesinrocks.com/2007/03/19/cinema/actualite-cinema/entretien-jacques-rivette-lart-secret/>>, accessed 22 November 2020.

¹² Rivette, *La Belle Noiseuse*. The interview with Bonitzer and Laurent is available in the Special Features section of disc 2.

¹³ Henry James, *The Complete Notebooks of Henry James*, ed. L. Edel and L. Powers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987). All page references to James's *Notebooks* are to this edition.

its creative implications, already suggested in Balzac's story, are also at the base of his own idea of cinema and of Frenhofer's relationship with his models and with the creation of the enigmatic painting.

James's notes convey both the devotion to art of the artist-priest, isolated from the common people, and the transcendence he attributes to artistic creation, the supreme symbol of life. In such a context, it is not surprising that some notes are recurrently imbued with a prayer-like tone, as in the one of 10 August 1885: "O art, art, what difficulties are like thine; but, at the same time, what consolation and encouragements, also, are like thine? Without thee, for me, the world would be, indeed, a howling desert" (p. 31). It is worth remarking that Rivette, in addition to scattering his film with countless symbolic references to Christ's passion, death and resurrection, significantly links Frenhofer's workshop to a church, as Marianne stresses when she first enters it (I, 21:13). The silence of any holy place is only broken in *La Belle Noiseuse* by the repeated rasping sound of the brush on the canvas, just as one can imagine that the silent monastic retreat alluded to by James was only broken "by the scratching pen on those clean white sheets receiving the anchorite's confidences".¹⁴ In any case, what is conveyed by James's notes is a devotional obsession on the achievement of the ultimate masterpiece to which the artist painstakingly undertakes a supreme and constant effort highly reminiscent of the unspeakable suffering referred to by the Rivettian Frenhofer: "L'ŒUVRE, and L'ŒUVRE is, before God, what I'm going in for", he exclaims in the note of 21 December 1896 (p. 167).

The image deriving from James's notes is largely that of the bipolar artist wavering, on the one hand, between utter confidence in his creative possibilities and recurring states of absolute psychological fatigue leading him to doubt, as expressed in the note of 11 March 1888:

Here I sit: impatient to work: only wanting to concentrate myself, to keep at it: full of ideas, full of ambition, full of capacity—as I believe. Sometimes the discouragements, however,

¹⁴ Leon Edel, "Introduction: Colloquies with His Good Angels", in James, *Notebooks*, pp. ix–xvii (p. xiii).

seem greater than anything else—the delays, the interruptions, the *éparpillement*, etc. But courage, courage. And forward, forward.

(p. 44)

On the other hand, he wavers between the unavoidable relationship with the world and the monastic seclusion necessary for artistic creation, an inner cleavage metaphorically worked out in stories such as “Benvolio” (1875) or “The Private Life” (1892).¹⁵ This cleavage is present as an intimate reflection in the note of 22 October 1891, sufficient evidence that some of James’s art stories are fictionalized narratives of his own intimacy:

The consolation, the dignity, the joy of life are that discouragements and lapses, depressions and darkneses come to one only as one stands *without*—I mean without the luminous paradise of art. As soon as I really re-enter it—cross the loved threshold—stand in the high chamber, and the gardens divine [...] the air of life fills my lungs—the light of achievement flushes over all the place, and I believe, I see, I *do*.

(p. 61)

Nevertheless, in the note of 12 May 1889 (pp. 52–53), he envisages money as not so much an unacceptable worldly constraint on the artist, but by making a virtue of necessity, a means to achieve a true, personal art. In Rivette’s film, the equivalent to James’s partial surrender to the material world can be seen in the lifeless “posthumous” painting mechanically produced by Frenhofer for the sake of his friendship with Porbus and as subtle payment for the transcendental service that the art dealer unwittingly bestowed on him by introducing him to Marianne and thus bringing about the genesis of *La Belle Noiseuse*.

In addition to the *Notebooks*, Rivette’s film draws plot elements from three short stories—“The Madonna of the Future” (1873), “The Liar” (1888) and “The Figure in the Carpet” (1896)—

¹⁵ Edel, “Introduction”, p. xii.

that are connected by a set of key motifs embedded in the film's script.¹⁶ "The Madonna of the Future" tells the story of the narrator's encounter with Theobald, an enigmatic painter obsessed with the greatness and artistic transcendence of Florence and Italian art in general. In the narrative, which is precisely focused on the question of painting, Theobald meets the Balzacian profile of the monomaniacal and self-absorbed artist living entirely for the achievement of the ultimate masterpiece that will condense the essential goal of every artist: to discover the arcane of beauty and eternity. This is a target that can only be reached far from the vulgarity associated with any materialistic conception of art: "I have never sold a picture! At least no merchant traffics in my heart [...] My little studio has never been profaned by superficial, feverish, mercenary work. It's a temple of labour, but of leisure!" (p. 16).¹⁷

Theobald's obsession plunges him into the highest theoretical reflection but, at the same time, it cripples him creatively to such a point that he never succeeds in painting a single stroke of that unique Madonna, a synthesis of the great masterpieces of the Italian Renaissance. That "non-work", marked by the appalling whiteness of the virgin canvas, clearly echoes *Le Chef-d'œuvre inconnu*, which is not at all surprising if we consider James's admiration for Balzac's œuvre.¹⁸ The allusion is straightforward in the assumption conveyed by Mrs. Coventry to the narrator:

There are people who doubt whether there is any picture to be seen. I fancy, myself, that if one were to get into his studio, one would find something very like the picture in that tale of Balzac's—a mere mass of incoherent scratches and daubs, a jumble of dead paint!

(p. 28)

¹⁶ Henry James, "The Madonna of the Future", in Leon Edel (ed.), *The Complete Tales of Henry James*, vol. 3 (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1962), pp. 11–52; Henry James, "The Liar", in Leon Edel (ed.), *The Complete Tales of Henry James*, vol. 6 (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1962), pp. 383–441; Henry James, "The Figure in the Carpet", in Henry James, *The Figure in the Carpet and Other Stories*, ed. Frank Kermode (London: Penguin Books, 1986), pp. 355–400. All page references to James's short stories are to these editions.

¹⁷ This quotation is also evidence of Browning's influential presence in James's story. See Michael L. Ross, "Henry James's 'Half-man': The Legacy of Browning in 'The Madonna of the Future'", *Browning Institute Studies*, 2 (1974), 25–42.

¹⁸ See Jeanne Delbaere-Garant, "Balzac", in *Henry James: The Vision of France* (Liège: Presses universitaires de Liège, 1970), pp. 99–114, <<http://books.openedition.org/pulg/914>>, accessed 22 November 2020.

The American patron's premise is eventually confirmed when the narrator, who as in Balzac's and Rivette's stories follows the model of the young man driven by the desire to know the master's secret work, is confronted with the dire emptiness of Theobald's unpainted canvas: "I can hardly say that I was surprised at what I found—a canvas that was a mere dead blank, cracked and discolored by time. This was his immortal work!" (p. 47).

Though this description somewhat echoes Nicolas's famous depiction of Frenhofer's painting in *Le Chef-d'œuvre inconnu* as "des couleurs confusément amassées et contenues par une multitude de lignes bizarres qui forment une muraille de peinture" (p. 436), some differences can be noted. Balzac leaves the reader with both an uncertain feeling about whether or not Frenhofer really believes he has achieved the great masterpiece he was after and the feeling that the groundbreaking work may exist though undetected by Porbus's and Nicolas's outdated artistic gaze. On the contrary, Theobald is fully aware of his failure, that all elements in his imagination do not find the right hand to transfer them to the canvas. In this way, James's is the prototype of a recurrent Balzacian character defined by a wasted talent (Raphaël in *La Peau de chagrin*, Lucien in *Illusions perdues*, etc.). Unlike Balzac's Frenhofer, Theobald does not take that plunge into the abyss of the unknown also alluded to, as previously noted, by the Rivettian painter. It can certainly be argued that, as a result of Marianne's arrival, Frenhofer achieves the creative impulse he needed to finish his great work. However, it is no less the case that *La Belle Noiseuse* is also a non-existent work insofar as Frenhofer hides it from any other gaze than those of Liz and Marianne. Therefore, in all three cases the unique masterpiece is unknown—either because it does not exist (James), or because it is probably misunderstood (Balzac) or because it cannot be admired (Rivette).

La Belle Noiseuse also borrows, from "The Madonna of the Future" and "The Liar", variations of the vampirizing-painting motif mentioned above. On the one hand, Theobald's "non-work" exhausts not only his creative power but also his reason and finally his own life, as is the case with Balzac's Frenhofer and, symbolically, with Rivette's, who will regard all his production after *La Belle Noiseuse* as posthumous. On the other hand, the film is closely connected with *The Liar* in its treatment of the painter's power to capture the most intimate essence of the model's character in a painting. In "The Liar", this painted incarnation that finally succeeds in grasping Colonel

Capadose's invisible and deceptive nature is what Oliver Lyon achieves with his portrait that so impresses the colonel's wife:

She had looked at it a few moments and then—apparently—what she saw in it had produced an explosion of dismay and resentment [...] The idea of triumph came a little later. Yet he could see the portrait from where he stood; he was startled with its look of life.

(p. 429)

Rivette's film focuses precisely on this process of vampirization that eventually transfers the model's most hidden secrets to the painting. This vampirization is a danger hinted at in Liz's warning to Marianne—"Faites attention [..., s]'il veut peindre votre visage, refusez" (II, 20:38)—and in Frenhofer's enigmatic remark to his model: "Si le tableau est vrai, ce sera vous" (II, 06:14). In their reactions when confronted with the final contemplation of the work (II, 1:15:52 and II, 1:18:30), Marianne and Liz recall Mrs Capadose in a moment of desperate epiphany that Marianne sums up in her disturbing confession: "Je l'ai vue. Une chose froide et sèche. C'était moi" (II, 1:21:15). In both cases, the work of art has taken on such a dangerous psychological dimension that it can only be destroyed, as in "The Liar", or hidden, as in *La Belle Noiseuse*.

Unlike "The Liar" and "The Madonna of the Future", both focused on pictorial creation, "The Figure in the Carpet" deals with the nature of literary work. It is one of James's most hermeneutically productive stories and shows a remarkable connection to *La Belle Noiseuse*. To a large extent, the unknown masterpiece of Balzac's and Rivette's stories finds a plausible parallel in that "pattern hidden in the carpet" pointing to the essential but unseen (and therefore also unknown) character of the work of art. As is the case with other James stories such as "The Turn of the Screw", in "The Figure in the Carpet" there is a conscious reluctance to be clearly and definitively interpreted.¹⁹

¹⁹ The complexity of James's ambiguity is insightfully addressed in Rachel Salmon, "A Marriage of Opposites: Henry James's 'The Figure in the Carpet' and the Problem of Ambiguity", *ELH* 47: 4 (1980), 788–803.

In the story of the unnamed narrator and his obsession with discovering the deepest secret of Vereker's work, there are traces of Frenhofer's obsession with the arcane of art, a mystery that, as in Balzac's and Rivette's cases, can only be accessed in a fragmentary way. Indeed, James's narrator only manages to read the "heartbreaking scrap" (p. 389) of the essay in which Corvick seemingly finally decided to reveal the key to the essence of Vereker's work. What the narrator sees—"the opening pages were all that existed; they were striking, they were promising, but they didn't unveil the idol" (p. 389)—is largely comparable to the viewer's sketchy knowledge of the painting in the film: a set of preliminary drafts and the fleeting glimpse of the female figure's feet (II, 1:24:15). These feet are the clearest element of Rivette's re-creation of the famous Balzacian passage in which Poussin and Porbus behold the pictorial chaos out of which a splendid foot emerges. Additionally, Rivette enhances his rendition of the ending of *Le Chef-d'œuvre inconnu* with other subtler but equally suggestive elements: Liz's footprint on a sketch of *La Belle Noiseuse* (II, 1:02:25); the green canvas Frenhofer uses to cover the painting, an evocation of Balzac's "serge verte" and, finally, the bricks used to wall up the painting's hiding place (II, 1:22:11 – 1:26:50), which leads us to Balzac's "muraille de peinture", as suggested by Dosi.²⁰

Conclusion

La Belle Noiseuse is a highly complex film on many levels. The intertextual dimension, which has only been partially addressed here, is a good illustration of this complexity. A more in-depth approach to the film would require analyzing the relevance of extraliterary referents such as Bellmer's *Doll* or Balthus's and Dufour's painting. On a strictly literary level, a detailed analysis of the dense influence of Ibsen's *When We Dead Awaken* would be very revealing both for the design of Frenhofer's character and his relationship with Liz and Marianne, as well as for far-reaching themes such as the association of life and death with art or the need of every great artist to avoid emotional closeness to his model in order to preserve the 'aesthetic distance' so essential for the birth of the artwork. As for other literary sources, *La Belle Noiseuse* is directly or indirectly connected

²⁰ Dosi, "Balzac et Rivette", p. 351.

to a wide range of works such as Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and Poe's "The Oval Portrait" for the vampirizing-painting motif, *L'Œuvre* de Zola for the matter of the ground-breaking work of art, and, for other reasons, Balzac's *La Peau de chagrin* and *La Grande Bretèche* as well as some of his stories about artists and their art.

Balzac is fundamental to Rivette's fruitful relationship with literature. As in the case of other *nouvelle vague* filmmakers such as Truffaut, Chabrol and Rohmer, the *Comédie humaine* is a major source of inspiration for Rivette's cinema, as his trilogy of freely adapted Balzacian works reflects. There are convincing reasons for believing that, of all the works in the huge edifice of the *Comédie humaine*, *Le Chef-d'œuvre inconnu* was the most suitable story to make a film focused on the process of artistic creation. Balzac's short story is reflected in Rivette's film in a number of elements that are more or less faithfully respected so that the viewer can easily recognize the original source. However, what has been also argued in the preceding pages is that, beyond these elements, the film largely takes up Balzac's theoretical gauntlet as reflected in Frenhofer's speeches. These are the speeches that accounted for the story's transition from "conte fantastique" to "étude philosophique". The contrast between such speeches and the artistic reflection in *La Belle Noiseuse* is evidence of Rivette's similar approach. The film is thus firmly placed in the wake of the abundant artistic reflection triggered by the Balzacian story and its powerful impact on twentieth-century art.

In addition, Rivette succeeds in increasing the semantic depth of *La Belle Noiseuse* by making the *Notebooks* and three short stories by Henry James the other major intertextual cornerstone of his film. Unlike the presence of Balzac's story, that of James's work would have gone unnoticed were it not for the statements of Rivette himself and his two co-writers claiming its relevance. The motivations for Rivette's approach to James's work are not difficult to understand. His priestly devotion to literature and art, his constant reflection on the joys and sorrows of the creative process and his penchant for the projection of those intimate reflections into literary stories help explain Rivette's decision to give James's work an intertextual significance comparable to that of Balzac.

Rivette's choice of Balzac and James cannot be seen as random. As has been shown here, the authors and their works are fully complementary. Indeed, despite their significant narrative differences, James pondered the literary technique of the *Comédie humaine* on several occasions and

always took pride in being part of Balzac's countless progeny. By bringing them together in his film, Rivette pays heartfelt tribute to the memory of two authors who, like him, turned their powerful gaze on the unfathomable mystery of artistic creation.

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