

## Document Citation

Title	<b>La belle noiseuse</b>
Author(s)	Jonathan Rosenbaum
Source	<i>Sight and Sound</i>
Date	1992 Dec
Type	article
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	
Film Subjects	La belle noiseuse (The beautiful troublemaker), Rivette, Jacques, 1991

# La Belle Noiseuse

## Certificate

15

## Distributor

Artificial Eye

## Production Company

Pierre Grise Productions

## Producer

Pierre Grise

## Associate Producer

Martine Marignac

## Production Manager

Janou Shammas

## Location Manager

Thomas Pitre

## Assistant Directors

Lorraine Groleau

Anne Billiotte

## Screenplay

Pascal Bonitza

Christine Laurent

Based on the story

*Le Chef d'oeuvre inconnu*

by Honore de Balzac

## Director of

### Photography

William Lubchansky

In colour

### Editor

Nicole Lubchansky

### Art Director

Emmanuel

de Chauvigny

### Set Decorator

Valerie Segond

### Music Extracts

"Agon", "Petrouchka"

by Igor Stravinsky

### Wardrobe

Laurence Struz

### Make-up

Susan Robertson

### Sound Editor

Florian Eidenbenz

## Cast

**Michel Piccoli**

Frenhofer

**Jane Birkin**

Liz

**Emmanuelle Béart**

Marianne

**David Bursztein**

Nicolas

**Marianne Denicourt**

Julienne

**Gilles Arbona**

Porbus

**Bernard Dufour**

The Painter

**21,450 feet**

**239 minutes**

## Subtitles

## France 1991

### Director: Jacques Rivette

● Nicolas, a promising young painter and his mistress Marianne, a writer, staying at a country inn near Montpellier, are met by art dealer Porbus, who takes them to meet the famous but long-inactive painter Frenhofer at the latter's nearby château. Frenhofer lives there with his wife and former model Liz, who now spends much of her time stuffing birds. While the guests are being shown around Frenhofer's windowless studio, Liz alludes to "La Belle Noiseuse", an unfinished painting that Frenhofer abandoned a decade ago.

Frenhofer denies its existence, but later in the evening, spurred on by the encouragement of Porbus and Nicolas, he decides to make another stab at this crowning masterpiece (which Porbus agrees to buy), securing Nicolas' permission for Marianne to serve as his model. Furious with Nicolas when she hears about this arrangement, Marianne none the less arrives at the château for her appointment, and Frenhofer devotes the day to sketching her, mainly in the nude, in various difficult poses.

The next day he begins painting her; Nicolas meanwhile visits Liz at work to confide his worries about Marianne's growing estrangement from him... As the painting nears completion, and the work grows in intensity, both couples teeter on the brink of a crisis: Liz feels betrayed when she discovers Frenhofer has painted Marianne over an earlier painting of herself, and Marianne's estrangement from Nicolas is brought to a head when his sister Julienne arrives at the inn for a visit.

When Marianne and Liz separately view the finished work (unseen by the audience), they are appalled. Unbeknownst to the others, Frenhofer covers the painting and permanently buries it behind a new brick wall in his studio and, before the return of Porbus (who, it transpires, is a former lover of Liz's), quickly executes a more conventional work to take its place. When the work is successfully unveiled to Porbus, Liz is delighted by the substitution, and Marianne, now showing more independence from Nicolas, seems to have been permanently changed by her experience as a model.

● 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 nineteenth-century perspective on 60s counter-culture, 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 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**



Life and art struggle: Michel Piccoli