

ON ARTISTS, MODELS AND ARTWORKS: BALZAC'S *THE UNKNOWN MASTERPIECE* AND IBSEN'S *WHEN WE DEAD AWAKEN* IN JACQUES RIVETTE'S ART THEORY

SOBRE ARTISTAS, MODELOS Y OBRAS DE ARTE: LA OBRA MAESTRA DESCONOCIDA DE BALZAC Y EN EL DESPERTAR DE NUESTRA MUERTE DE IBSEN EN LA TEORÍA ARTÍSTICA DE JACQUES RIVETTE

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Abstract: The artistic theory that French director Jacques Rivette (1928-2016) developed throughout his long career is concentrated in a very singular way in *La Belle Noiseuse* (1991). His reflection on issues such as the nature of the artist, the traumatic process of creation and the very essence of the artwork draws from many sources, most of them literary, which he links together very suggestively. Among the literary sources, Balzac's famous story *The Unknown Masterpiece* (*Le Chef-d'œuvre inconnu*, 1831), of which the film is a very free adaptation, and Ibsen's last drama, *When We Dead Awaken* (*Når vi døde vågner*, 1899), stand out most notably. Rivette's fruitful connection of both texts is a matter that has barely been addressed by critics, despite its crucial importance for the interpretation of the film's artistic theory. This article analyzes this connection, focusing on the reasons that led Rivette to choose one of Ibsen's most obscure and least known plays and on the subtle way it is interwoven with Balzac's text.

Keywords: intertextuality; cinema; literature; painting; art theory; *La Belle Noiseuse*.

Resumen: La teoría artística desarrollada por el director francés Jacques Rivette (1928-2016) a lo largo de su extensa carrera se concentra de manera muy singular en *La Belle Noiseuse* (1991). Su reflexión acerca de asuntos como la naturaleza del artista, el traumático proceso de creación y la esencia misma de la obra de arte bebe de numerosas fuentes, muchas de ellas literarias, que Rivette conecta muy sugerentemente. Entre las fuentes literarias, destacan especialmente el célebre relato de Balzac *La obra maestra desconocida* (*Le Chef-d'œuvre inconnu*, 1831), del que la película es una adaptación muy libre, y el último drama de Ibsen, *En el despertar de nuestra muerte* (*Når vi døde vågner*, 1899). La fructífera conexión de ambos textos que Rivette lleva a cabo es un asunto que la crítica apenas ha abordado, pese a su importancia determinante para la interpretación de la teoría artística que se expone en la película. El artículo analiza precisamente dicha conexión, con especial atención a las razones que llevaron a Rivette a elegir uno de los textos más oscuros y menos conocidos de Ibsen y a la sutil manera en que se imbrica con el de Balzac.

Palabras clave: intertextualidad; cine; literatura; pintura; teoría artística; *La Belle Noiseuse*.

1. Introduction

In his long career, Jacques Rivette (1928-2016), one of the most singular members of the French Nouvelle Vague, developed a complex theory about the nature of art. In films such as *Paris nous appartient* (1961), *L'amour fou* (1968), *Céline et Julie vont en bateau* (1974) or *La Bande des quatre* (1988) Rivette thoroughly explores his interest in theater, improvisation and staging; his mixture of fiction and documentary-like sequences; his fascination with clues and cabalistic signs; his somewhat paranoid conception of fiction and settings; and his thoughts on the creative process. Of all his films, *La Belle Noiseuse* (1991) largely stands as his great discourse on art, the creative process and the artwork itself¹. Its complexity lies not only in the elaborate reflection on pictorial and artistic creation, but also in other important elements such as the *mise-en-scène*, the symbolic use of space and the prolific network of literary and artistic intertexts connecting, among others, Balzac, Henry James, Poe, Zola, Bellmer, Balthus and Ibsen, whose specific presence is the focus of this study. In its four-hour running time, Rivette unfolds a theoretical reflection that largely encapsulates his artistic and filmic theory, while offer-

1 Rivette's film must be placed in the context of the interest of other contemporary filmmakers for the exploration of art and the figure of the artist. One might consider Maurice Pialat's *Van Gogh* (1991) and Jean Luc Godard's *Histoire(s) du cinéma* (1988-1998), in which he addresses extensively the relationship between cinema, painting and literature.

ing the viewer an absorbing practical exhibition of those very same theoretical foundations through the painting, almost in real time and by the actual hand of painter Bernard Dufour, of the canvas giving the film its title. It is, in short, a work that fully meets Rivette's concern that his films should have "at least two or three interpretations—not fixed, but shifting" (Johnson 35).

Despite this challenging semantic uncertainty, the fact is that its theoretical grounds are based on a complex philosophy of art partially resting on several literary sources, among them Balzac's *Le Chef-d'œuvre inconnu* (*The Unknown Masterpiece*) and Ibsen's *When We Dead Awaken* (*Når vi døde vågner*). These literary grounds are not at all surprising considering Rivette's productive relationship with literature from his early works to the very end of his career and his belief that "le roman du XXe siècle . . . a échoué à prendre la succession de celui du XIXe; on sait aussi que cette succession, c'est le cinéma qui l'a assurée" (Rivette, "*Cahiers 'Gallia'*" 46)². This essay does not propose an analysis of *La Belle Noiseuse* in specifically filmic or intermedial terms, but rather focuses on arguing that a significant part of the film's semantic wealth derives from the subtle blending of Balzac and Ibsen's intertexts as an essential component of its intellectual construction.

Before proceeding any further, it is worth recalling the plot of the film. It features the painter Édouard Frenhofer (Michel Piccoli), who lives in southern France with his wife Liz (Jane Birkin). There he is visited by his friend and former love rival, the chemist and art dealer Porbus (Gilles Arbona), who is accompanied by Nicolas (David Bursztein), a young admirer of his work, and his girlfriend Marianne (Emmanuelle Béart). The secret devouring Frenhofer soon comes to light: he hardly paints anything anymore and, above all, he has been unable to finish in ten years what was to be his masterpiece, *La Belle Noiseuse*, with Liz as his model. Encouraged by Porbus, Frenhofer decides to take up the painting again and Marianne reluctantly agrees to be the new model, spurred on by Nicolas, who is most of all eager to behold the final painting. After a series of strenuous posing sessions, Frenhofer finally concludes the work. During these sessions we have closely and for a long time contemplated Marianne's naked body as well as the subsequent preliminary sketches of the painting, first on paper and then on canvas, while witnessing the revelation of the characters' painful experiences and of the unexpected dangers resulting from the ongoing birth of an artwork. Once the painting is finished, Marianne looks at it in apprehension, if not in awe, and Liz draws an enigmatic black cross on the back of the frame. At the end of the film, the relationship between Frenhofer and Liz is strengthened,

2 "The novel of the twentieth century . . . failed to replace that of the nineteenth century; we also know that this replacement was ensured by the cinema" (my translation).

while that of Nicolas and Marianne, deeply shaken by the intensity of the experience they have lived, comes to an end. The artwork, fully beheld only by a privileged few, is forever withheld from all other gazes as Frenhofer himself walls it up in his studio.

2. The Balzacian intertext: *Le Chef-d'œuvre inconnu*

Critics have pointed out the intertextual presence in the film of works by Zola (*L'œuvre*), Poe (*The Oval Portrait*), Henry James (*The Liar*, *The Madonna of the Future* and *The Figure in the Carpet*) and Wilde (*The Picture of Dorian Gray*). However, the main source is Balzac's well-known short story *Le Chef-d'œuvre inconnu* (1831), of which *La Belle Noiseuse* is a "freely inspired" version, as explicitly stated in its credits. Unlike most Nouveau Roman authors, who erected Balzac as "epitome of an outmoded narrative tradition" (Schmid 28), for Rivette, as for other Nouvelle Vague filmmakers such as Truffaut, Chabrol and Rohmer, Balzac is a reference. As early as 1971, in *Out One. Noli me tangere*, he already adapted *Histoire des Treize*, and in 2007, with *Ne touchez pas la hache*, an adaptation of *La Duchesse de Langeais*, he completed a trilogy that is at the very core of his career. It cannot be argued that *La Belle Noiseuse* is a classical-type adaptation of *Le Chef-d'œuvre inconnu*. Rivette himself, for whom "chaque mot est important chez Balzac" (*L'art secret*)³, unambiguously assumes the "inadaptability" of his work (Rivette, *La Belle Noiseuse*). It is quite clear, however, that the Balzacian story not only provides much of the film's plot structure, but also, and above all, the theoretical underpinnings on artistic creation and the role of the creator, matters on which critics have dwelt at length (Dosi; Tavassoli). In this sense, since "the representation of painting, through cinema, is . . . the rarest motif and one of the greatest accomplishment of his [Rivette's] cinematic career" (Tavassoli 165), there are very convincing reasons to believe that, of all the works in the huge edifice of *La Comédie humaine*, *Le Chef-d'œuvre inconnu* was the perfect story to make a film that, although focused on painting, could easily be projected on other expressions so much to Rivette's taste such as theater or, metafilmically, the very process of filmmaking.

Despite claiming to be a free adaptation, the fact is that Balzac's short story is reflected in the film through many plot elements that allow the viewer to easily recognize the original source. What is most relevant, however, is that the film also picks up the theoretical gauntlet thrown down by Balzac through Frenhofer's famous speeches. The comparison of these speeches with the artistic reflection found in *La Belle Noiseuse*, which will be addressed in this article, shows that Rivette closely follows

3 "Every word is important in Balzac" (my translation).

them, thus succeeding in solidly placing his film in the wake of the influential artistic reflection spawned by the Balzacian story since its publication in 1831.

3. The Ibsenian intertext: *When We Dead Awaken*

Henrik Ibsen's drama *When We Dead Awaken* (1899) is one of the most elusive intertexts in *La Belle Noiseuse*, for its brevity in such a long film is misleading in relation to its real relevance, as this study aims to illustrate. Here, it should be noted that Rivette, who jokingly admitted his pleasure in "inserting traps for the critics" (Johnson 34), is a director fond of playing with critical confusion and delusion through the insertion of a wide variety of intertextual elements. That is why it is always advisable for the critic to approach them very cautiously in order not to offer an exegesis that, as Johnson rightly states, moves "from the probable to the possible and . . . into the pointless" (34). What will be argued in the following pages is that the presence of Ibsen's work in *La Belle Noiseuse*, although explicitly limited only to a few brief moments in the four-hour film, is by no means a playful Rivettian trap to confuse the critics, but a conscious, substantial insertion, semantically connected to Balzac's intertext and contributing to strengthen the basis of Rivette's profound reflection on art.

The references to *When We Dead Awaken* in the film are made at precisely the moment when the artistic relationship between Frenhofer and Marianne, between painter and model, begins to take on a depth that will prove crucial to the genesis of the masterpiece:

FRENHOFER. Do you know Rubek? The sculptor... [*Marianne shakes her head*] Dead now. Died in an avalanche in Norway... With his only model...

MARIANNE. Never heard of him.

FRENHOFER. He did two or three things that weren't bad. In marble. A Resurrection. He could've been great... It's a pity. You get stuck inside of what you're searching for. Possession. They're all after possession. They don't know it's impossible. Giving up everything is frightful [*contorting Marianne into several poses*]. Her name was Irene. Rubek and Irene. A strange girl. A little crazy, I think. I'd known her before him [*placing Marianne for a pose*]. This way you look a bit like her. I must have painted her exactly in this pose. One of my first paintings. So disconcerting, their death... Almost all the girls, the models before Liz, ...there were so many... I forgot them all. I picked them up in the street. Every time a torture. (Rivette, *La Belle Noiseuse*, disc 1, 01:46-01:55)⁴.

When We Dead Awaken is one of Ibsen's most peculiar and enigmatic works, not only because it is his very last play, but also because of its striking subtitle, "dramatic epi-

⁴ Quotations are taken from the English subtitles of *La Belle Noiseuse*. Minutes and seconds refer to the same edition.

logue". This subtitle hints at Ibsen's own perception of his last play not so much as an ending to his career but rather as a turning point from which his creative work would take a new course that he wished closer to poetry. In fact, *When We Dead Awaken* can largely be considered "poetic theater", a quality that can already be found in some of Ibsen's earlier works. In any case, as Moi (35) rightly sums up, the label "dramatic epilogue" is very ambivalent and its meaning as intended by Ibsen is not entirely clear. Despite being one of his least known and least performed dramas, it is a play that introduces many of the most outstanding issues of Ibsen's theater while offering features which may enlighten the reasons why Jacques Rivette chose such a peculiar text to insert in *La Belle Noiseuse* the short but very significant references referred above.

When We Dead Awaken introduces us to the renowned sculptor Arnold Rubek and his wife Maja, who return to their native Norway after a long period abroad. Despite his worldwide fame, Rubek has deeply realized that his genuine artistic inspiration vanished when he finished *Resurrection Day*, the sculpture that made him world-famous. In the work, through the ideal representation of the awakening, on the day of her resurrection, of a virginal young woman in the full splendor of her beauty and sensuality, Rubek sought to convey not only his artistic views, but also his longing for transcendence and perfection. After his great work, Rubek lives on trivial projects that nevertheless bring him significant financial wealth. Meanwhile, his marriage is falling apart, prey to boredom and routine. At the spa where they are staying, Rubek is attracted to a mysterious, almost spectral woman dressed in white. In fact, it is his former model, Irene, the muse who inspired his exceptional sculpture. Rubek admired her naked, as a sublime and unique model, but he never even touched her. After finishing the famous work, he abandoned her in search of other similar models that he never found. Irene, in turn, ended up on the verge of madness. Their reencounter reopens the old wounds of their intense past together and rekindles their stormy relationship, culminating in the play's shocking final scene, when they both climb a mountain only to consciously entomb themselves in the snow of an avalanche.

The peculiar subtitle "dramatic epilogue" can be connected, on the one hand, with this striking ending, in which the avalanche burying Rubek and Irene would be a symbol of the ending of an old time and the beginning of a new one. The title of the play itself, *When We Dead Awaken*, and even the title of the masterpiece, the sculpture *Resurrection Day*, would also be pointing in this very same direction. They are examples of the extensive Christological symbolism that critics have already noted. In this sense, Thomas states that "using the same words as the Devil to Christ, Rubek promised both Maja and Irene to take them up a high mountain and show them all the glory of the world,

provided they would fall down and worship him” (132) and Northam insists on the symbolic importance of Rubek and Irene’s upward movement in the work, “derived from the same source, St. Matthew’s gospel narrating Christ’s temptation by the devil” (106). As Fuchs points out, these Ibsenian metaphors particularly emphasize the motif of Christ’s death and resurrection, since “in three acts, it traces a three-day journey from light to dark to dawn, from low to higher to highest, mirroring the emancipatory death and resurrection pattern of the Christian narrative” (399). Rivette must have found such Christian symbolism to be very stimulating if we consider that equivalent images, which certainly do not derive from Balzac, operate as a key leitmotif in *La Belle Noiseuse*. The film is indeed punctuated by many such scenes, as a few selected examples show: Marianne, upon first entering Frenhofer’s workshop, links it to a church; her poses sometimes recall either a crucifixion or the Christian representation of the Pietà; the action unfolds in an upward movement from the village to Frenhofer’s *château* and takes place over three days, not by chance one being Good Friday. In short, the film hints at a symbolic artistic transposition of the Christian idea of the resurrection of the flesh happening in Frenhofer’s mysterious painting.

On the other hand, the subtitle “dramatic epilogue” could also be connected to the play’s shifting time perspective. This perspective includes the interaction between Rubek and Irene as they relive the turmoil of their intense past together and its repercussion in the present as well as the impact of that very present, in which artist and model meet again, on the perception of that past. Not surprisingly, critics have noted the striking treatment of time categories in Ibsen’s play. While we are certain that not many years have passed between Rubek and Irene’s separation and their present reencounter, we also feel the projection of that specific time into an indefinite eternity. In addition, as Gerland points out, “the present appears as . . . an empty receptacle in which the past is disgorged” (456), an idea that is clarified by Sorensen when he states that “throughout the play, the characters constantly refer to time, especially *past* time, to the extent that the past almost overshadows the play’s present” (27). In any case, what is revealed is that, since their intense relationship, Rubek and Irene have lived and still live as prisoners of a condensed time and space that only ends with the symbolic final avalanche.

The singular perception of space-time coordinates is also a prominent feature of *La Belle Noiseuse*, since Rivette extensively explores this interaction of past and present in Frenhofer’s complex and enigmatic relationships with both Liz, his wife and former model, and Marianne, the new model. In addition, the film clearly distinguishes between the viewer’s perception of chronological temporal-

ity in the action outside Frenhofer's studio and the timelessness derived from the intense creative relationship between the painter and his model inside the artist's atelier. Considering all this, one may well think that, in his reception of *When We Dead Awaken*, Rivette could not help but notice Ibsen's striking treatment of these space-time categories.

Through the use of techniques echoing those of symbolist theater, such as minimal action, static scenes and symbolic dialogues, Ibsen explores the creative nature of the artist and its embodiment in a unique artwork, very much in line with Balzac, James and Zola's reflections on the subject, all of which are likewise important sources for Rivette's film. Furthermore, he ponders the very nature of art and its problematic interaction with the commercial concerns of bourgeois and capitalist society. These issues are also addressed by Balzac and Rivette. But, most of all, *When We Dead Awaken* is an exploration of the highly problematic bond between artist and model. Irene is thus portrayed as a slave-like character who consciously or unconsciously yields to the sculptor's dreamlike vision and surrenders her own self into his hands. All in all, there are in Ibsen's play both a portrait of the leading characters and a deep meditation on the nature of art and the artwork which, together with the elements coming from Balzac's story, could not but be of great interest to Rivette, as will be further discussed in the next three sections.

4. The artist

The portrayal of the artist that Rivette unfolds by means of the pivotal character of Édouard Frenhofer is largely shaped on that of Balzac's. However, the complexity of Rivette's character is also provided by elements coming from Henry James' image of the full artist as expressed in his *Notebooks*; from Rivette himself, who, just like Balzac, mirrors himself in his own character; and, most particularly, from Ibsen's Rubek, as this study argues.

In any case, the character of Frenhofer epitomizes a romantic conception of the artist as a demiurge and, in a Platonic sense, as a creator whose madness eventually gives birth to the artwork. In this sense, as mentioned, Rivette's Frenhofer owes much to Balzac's and is, in a broad sense, the type of mysterious, obsessive creator so dear to the French novelist, in line with characters like Balthazar Claës in *La Recherche de l'absolu*. Furthermore, Rivette's character is indebted to Balzac's for the elitist and even misanthropic attitude leading him to scorn the bourgeois view of art, an issue that Balzac clearly addresses through the confrontation between Frenhofer's ideas in *Le Chef-d'œuvre inconnu* and those of Pierre

Grassou in the eponymous 1839 story. As a demiurgic, maniac being, the artist's obsession is focused on the search for a unique masterpiece encapsulating the quintessential mystery of art. Frenhofer's monomania, in both Balzac and Rivette, is also defined by a keen awareness that the act of achieving the ultimate masterpiece entails a particularly intense vital suffering. More precisely, Rivette's character links this suffering to the extreme risk that only exceptional creators must be willing to take in order to create something new and unique that will unveil the unknown and uncharted. The revelation of that mystery by the visionary artist is the grail pursued by both Balzac and Rivette's characters as well as by Ibsen's Rubek. The quest for this ideal is so intense that the artist, somewhat unexpectedly, may come up against an opposite and potentially fatal outcome: the exhaustion of the required creative drive. This is the state of the artist at the beginning of both *Le Chef-d'œuvre inconnu* and *La Belle Noiseuse*: a mature being, weakened and overwhelmed in all aspects of his life by the unhappiness and frustration resulting from an abandoned or, at least, unfulfilled ideal.

Such is also Rubek's condition at the beginning of Ibsen's drama, a condition that fully justifies Rivette's interest: a mature, life-weary artist who, just like Frenhofer, believes he has lost genuine inspiration forever. In his case, the distance from his native Norway has resulted in a sort of vital isolation that has creatively annihilated him, a fact that his wife Maja repeatedly emphasizes: "You've been away so much, much longer than I have" (240); "And I think it's so sad that you've lost all appetite for work" (242); "You've got this look in your eyes now, something so tired, so resigned" (264). However, unlike Rivette's Frenhofer, who exhausted his creative power merely in the sketch of a masterpiece that, at the beginning of the film, lies buried in oblivion, Ibsen portrays an artist whose inspiration vanished after having achieved that very ideal of the one and only masterpiece. Thanks to an original intertextual game whereby the fictional Rubek and Irene become "real" characters in the fiction of *La Belle Noiseuse*, Rivette succeeds in making the viewer grasp the intimate connection between his Frenhofer and the Ibsenian sculptor. In fact, in both Rubek and Frenhofer can be found a thorough analysis of the artist and his innermost nature as a creator. On the one hand, such nature unfolds through their relationship with a unique, irreplaceable model, be it Irene or Marianne; and, on the other, through the embodiment of that relationship in a work that is also unique and irreplaceable: the sculpture for Rubek, the painting for Frenhofer. The explicit references to Ibsen's drama in *La Belle Noiseuse* are aimed precisely at drawing a parallel between the Rubek-Irene couple and the problematic (*noiseuse*) relationship between Frenhofer and Marianne as well as with the disturbing (again *noiseuse*) artworks resulting from the intensity of such encounters.

5. The artist and the model

As mentioned above, Rivette inserts the intertextual references from *When We Dead Awaken* just at the moment when the relationship between Frenhofer and Marianne is reaching a level of intensity that will prove decisive for the creative process and for the achievement of the masterpiece. These references clearly lead the viewer to establish a plausible and suggestive analogy between Rubek's relationship with Irene and that of Frenhofer with Marianne. In fact, it seems more than likely that Rivette approached the play because, in the story of Rubek and Irene, Ibsen thoroughly dissects not only their creative relationship, but also the boundaries of affectivity and sensuality between artist and model. The exceptional nature of his bond with Irene is made clear by Rubek's blunt response at his wife's insistence on knowing details of his relationships with his previous models: "Oh, no, my little Maja. I've only really ever had one model. One single model—for everything I've created" (249). And, when speaking of the sculpture he has created, he admits to Irene herself that "it was to be the world's most noble, pure, ideal woman, awakening. Then I found *you*. I was able to use you for everything" (258).

Here, it is worth noting that such a dissection of the artist-model relationship is something that Rivette certainly could not find in Balzac's story. On the whole, it is quite accurate to say that Balzac shows in *La Comédie humaine* a penchant for exploring the artist's relationship with love, as Guise rightly notes in regard to *Le Chef-d'œuvre inconnu*:

Deux fois déjà, en variant les effets, dans *La Maison du chat-qui-pelote* et dans *La Vendetta*, il l'a abordé par le biais du problème des rapports du peintre avec son modèle . . . Le regard de l'artiste se mue en regard de l'amoureux, et l'artiste connaît ainsi, provisoirement du moins, le bonheur de l'amour. Dans *Le Chef-d'œuvre inconnu* . . . Balzac inverse les données : Poussin découvre un modèle dans la femme qu'il aime et dont il est aimé; c'est le regard de l'amant qui se mue en regard de peintre. Et cette métamorphose lui vaut de perdre l'amour (408-409)⁵.

These are words that could easily be applied to the relationship between Nicolas and Marianne in *La Belle Noiseuse*. However, Balzac barely suggests the relationship between Frenhofer and Gillette and, in any case, it is not essential for a masterpiece that was almost finished before the encounter between them. In this sense, Gillette appears as the yardstick against which Frenhofer will confirm the exceptional greatness of his

5 "Twice already, by varying the effects, in *La Maison du chat-qui-pelote* and in *La Vendetta*, he approached it by the means of the problem of the relationships between painter and model . . . The artist's glance is transformed into the lover's glance, and the artist knows thus, temporarily at least, the happiness of love. In *Le Chef-d'œuvre inconnu* . . . Balzac reverses the data: Poussin discovers a model in the woman he loves and by whom he is loved; it is the lover's glance which is transformed into the painter's glance. And this transformation means the loss of love" (my translation).

work. But the reader never gets to grasp what really happened during the time that painter and model spent together in the studio and the real impact of that encounter on the mysterious painting.

Unlike *Le Chef-d'œuvre inconnu*, both *La Belle Noiseuse* and *When We Dead Awaken* clearly argue that the artwork is the result not only of the artist's creative power but also of the model's crucial contribution. In this way, she is claimed as an active creative agent and not as a mere passive subject. Thus, artist and model end up in a sort of "vampiric" relationship whereby the artwork gradually becomes "incarnated" (Didi-Huberman) and full of life in contrast to the symbolic death it causes to its creator(s). Like Marianne, Irene is torn between her utter surrender to the artist's will and her self-awareness of her decisive role for the creation of Rubek's great work:

IRENE [*without answering*]. And the child? The child too is well? Our child lives on after me. In honour and glory.

RUBEK [Smiles as though in a distant recollection]. Our child? Yes, that's what we called it—at the time (253).

And, as such child, the work bears the essence of its parents, especially that of its mother, the model. Without drawing on this particular filial image, Marianne, like Irene, also feels at a very disturbing moment in the film that something of her innermost essence has been transferred to Frenhofer's painting: "A thing which was cold and dry. It was me" (Rivette, *La Belle Noiseuse*, disc 2, 1:21).

Both in *When We Dead Awaken* and in *La Belle Noiseuse* we are presented with a deeply troubled relationship between artist and model, based as it is on a mutual and highly toxic interaction. On the one hand, the model faces the contradiction between her crucial status for the artistic creation and, at the same time, her complete surrender to the artist's demands; and on the other, the artist is well aware that, in the absence of the model, his inspiration will never happen. So it is with Rubek, who, after *Resurrection Day*, spends his life making busts with an artistic transcendence not even slightly comparable to that of his great masterpiece. In Frenhofer's case, the completion of the painting results in Marianne's disappearing and in his never again creating a work of such intensity.

The problematic relationship between artist and model can be described as "agonistic" inasmuch as it is presented as a combat that eventually gives birth to the artwork. Accordingly, both Irene and Marianne angrily and even violently express their feeling of being or having been prostituted by the artist. The issue of the model's prostitution is already addressed in Balzac's story. There, "la Belle Noiseuse" is Catherine Lescault's nickname, a courtesan who, somewhat paradoxically, is the model for the virginal figure

in Frenhofer's painting and it is the painter himself who calls prostitution the mere possibility that eyes other than his own might behold the painting. In addition, Gillette feels betrayed and sold (in other words, prostituted) by Nicolas and finally loses her sincere love for him just when she realizes that the young painter is trading her body to fulfill a hidden ambition: the contemplation of the masterpiece. Nicolas himself will eventually share the feeling that he is prostituting Gillette when she finally enters Frenhofer's workshop. Another subtle reference to the prostitution issue can be detected at the beginning of Balzac's story, when Frenhofer masterfully retouches Porbus' *Marie égyptienne*, a portrait of the ascetic saint who withdrew to the desert after having renounced her life as a prostitute.

Rivette's reading of *Le Chef-d'œuvre inconnu* wisely identifies the symbolic relevance in Balzac's story of the topic and conveys it in different ways to his film. First of all, through the title itself, since he chooses the very nickname given to the courtesan Catherine Lescault in the Balzacian story. Besides, Liz, as the former model, complains about Frenhofer's disdain for having replaced her in the painting with Marianne: "You put some buttocks in place of my face" (Rivette, *La Belle Noiseuse*, disc 2, 01:06). Her bitter accusations suggest a feeling of an almost commercially humiliating transaction, a feeling further enhanced by the fact that, when she posed for Frenhofer, she was paid for it (*La Belle Noiseuse*, disc 1, 01:58). In addition, it is worth remembering that, in the aforementioned conversation about Rubek, Irene and the models that preceded Liz, Frenhofer blatantly admits to Marianne that "I forgot them all. I picked them up in the street" (01:55).

Last but not least, Marianne's case is particularly relevant when addressing the prostitution issue in the film. On the one hand, she feels betrayed and sold by Nicolas, to whom she says: "You sold my arse" (00:46); and, on the other, she considers herself used and somewhat treated as an object by Frenhofer, who, as if she were a doll, physically twists her in his desperate attempt to get the artistic essence he pursues. However, it should be remembered that, at a given moment in the film, Marianne gains some freedom of action and asserts her own presence: "Look me in the face . . . Let me be myself" (*La Belle Noiseuse*, disc 2, 00:24-00:31). She thus becomes an active being who will eventually control Frenhofer and guide him along the path leading to the achievement of the masterpiece.

The prostitution elements, already present in Balzac's story, also appear in Ibsen's drama. On the one hand, in the merely instrumental role that Rubek, like Rivette's Frenhofer, seems to have attributed to all his models, as he unambiguously admits to his wife:

MAJA [*sits up*]. Do you forget so easily, Rubek?

RUBEK [*curtly*]. Yes, extremely easy. [*Adds brusquely*] When I want to.

MAJA. Even a woman who's been your model?

RUBEK. When I no longer have any use for her, then (265).

And, on the other hand, in the character of Irene, who is deeply hurt by Rubek's abandonment after finishing the sculpture. In fact, she reproaches the sculptor for having considered her a mere "episode" (279), thus throwing her into a life where she ended up posing nude—and prostituted, we could say—for other minor artists:

RUBEK. Have you travelled round the world much?

IRENE. Yes. Travelled to many realms and lands.

RUBEK [*looks compassionately at her*]. And what have you been doing with yourself, Irene?

IRENE [*turns her eyes on him*]. Wait a moment; let me see. Yes, I have it now. I've stood on revolving platforms in variety-shows. Stood like a naked statue in *tableaux vivants*—made a lot of money. I wasn't used to do that when I was with you; you didn't have any. And I've been with men I could drive insane (255).

To this it should be added that Irene also feels belittled and sold out inasmuch as the original masterpiece, the unique "child" of her union with Rubek, was defiled by the sculptor himself when he modified its original design by replacing the model's centrality with his own.

In the relationship between artist and model, the latter's nude plays a key role, as it becomes a symbolic gateway to creative transcendence, the essence of which will eventually be incarnated in the tangible nature of the masterpiece. It can be argued with Wærp that "it is by means of the female naked body that he [Rubek, but also Balzac and Rivette's Frenhofers] claims to be able to allegorically portray his vision of a new life" (156). The matter is only sketched in Balzac's story, where the reader can only imagine what in the context of the fiction (the seventeenth century) and of the writing of the story (the nineteenth century) was clear: that Gillette poses naked for Frenhofer, a fact that Nicolas guiltily admits when Porbus tells him what is undoubtedly happening behind the closed door of the atelier: "Ah ! elle se déshabille. Il lui dit de se mettre au jour ! Il la compare !" (434)⁶. Here, it is worth mentioning that, at least until well into the nineteenth century, the studio operated as an exceptional place where the artist, an exceptional being himself, had the privilege of beholding the naked body of a woman, a privilege forbidden to most mortals. Besides, the ban on the female nude in the French Académie, which had the aim of preserving young artists from immoral influences and avoiding their collective gaze on the female body, shifted any possible sexual or merely

6 "Ah! she undresses. He tells her to get into the light! He compares her!" (my translation).

sensual tension to the private sphere of the studio (Wettlaufer 212). In the 1830s, when *Le Chef-d'œuvre inconnu* was written, the matter was still somewhat immoral, which is probably why Balzac sets the action in a far-off 1612. But Balzac's account does not challenge such convention and therefore the reader assumes that Frenhofer's claims are part of the privileges of the artist's unique social status at the time, be it the seventeenth or the nineteenth century. However, all of this does not prevent Gillette from feeling prostituted by Nicolas, who clearly prioritizes the contemplation of the artwork over his love for her.

Unlike what happens with Gillette in *Le Chef-d'œuvre inconnu*, Marianne's nudity is placed in the very foreground of *La Belle Noiseuse*. Undoubtedly, this is a conscious and highly motivated decision by Rivette, who succeeds in exposing the model's nudity in a way that never appears as fetishist or lustful. In fact, unlike Nicolas, who is tormented by his "prostitution" of Marianne, the viewer never feels her prolonged nudity as a pornographic exposure, but rather as an artistic interpretation of the female body as a means to the accomplishment of beauty's highest ideal. It is thus clear that the artist interprets the model's nude in a way that is far removed from any kind of coarse sensuality or sexuality, as Rubek declares at his wife's insistence: "[nudity] means nothing—not to us artists" (265).

Rivette's treatment of the model's nude is an insightful exploration of a crucial issue that Ibsen addresses in *When We Dead Awaken*: the "aesthetic distance" between artist and model as a necessary condition for the creation of the longed-for masterpiece. In fact, Ibsen's reflection on aesthetic distance can be considered one of the main reasons for Rivette's interest in his play. Already in Balzac's *Le Chef-d'œuvre inconnu*, the incompatibility between art and loving affection is made clear in Gillette's bitter words to Nicolas: "Si tu désires que je pose encore devant toi comme l'autre jour, reprit-elle d'un petit air boudeur, je n'y consentirai plus jamais ; car, dans ces moments-là, tes yeux ne me disent plus rien. Tu ne penses plus à moi, et cependant tu me regardes" (428-429)⁷.

Such aesthetic distance implies an utter rejection of any affective or sexual bond between artist and model. As Knápek rightly explains, "Rubek did not in any way want to see Irene as an object of lust, but rather saw his work on 'The Day of Resurrection' as both aesthetically uplifting and morally liberating. The role of the woman was in his eyes exclusively in service to the artist and his project" (3). In Ibsen's drama, this question is crucial in the conversation between Rubek and Irene on the subject: "There *had* to be

7 "If you want me to pose in front of you again as I did the other day—she said with a sulky look—, I will never agree to it again, because, in these moments, your eyes do not tell me anything. You do not think of me anymore, and yet you look at me" (my translation).

a distance between us" (257). When Irene reproaches him for not having even touched her, Rubek's response is blunt: "I was an artist, Irene" (258). "An artist, just an artist—not a man!" (275) is her bitter complaint. For Rubek, this aesthetic distance calls for an utter annihilation of desire, a kind of ascetic renunciation that eventually defines the nature of the artwork. The artist's need to scrupulously observe this distance from the model only fuels Irene's resentment in her troubled and contradictory relationship with the artist.

The overexposure of Marianne's naked body in *La Belle Noiseuse* has the unexpected effect of the model's actual desexualization, a fact that highly emphasizes the aesthetic distance so necessary for Frenhofer's creative inspiration. What the brief but intense conversation between Frenhofer and Liz suggests is that, if Frenhofer gave up ten years before on the difficult task of accomplishing the masterpiece, it was largely because the aesthetic distance with his current wife and former model was either broken or never really achieved: "I couldn't do it differently. I can't go on with the work if I keep recollections, regrets... I just had to do it [*effacing Liz's face*]" (Rivette, *La Belle Noiseuse*, disc 2, 01:06-01:11). The emotional-sexual bond between them completely ruined the artistic process, as Liz well acknowledges: "First, he wanted to paint me because he loved me, and then... Then because he loved me he didn't want to paint me. It was me or painting" (01:13).

6. The masterpiece

The intensity of the creative symbiosis between artist and model is conveyed through the creation of a work that, being the fruit of such intensity, is matchless. Certainly, *Le Chef-d'œuvre inconnu* is Rivette's main source for the masterpiece motif, but he also draws on a variety of elements from the aforementioned works of Zola, Wilde, Poe, Henry James and, of course, Ibsen. All of them contain elements enriching the film's plot and contributing to the characterization of the unique masterpiece.

In Balzac's story, the masterpiece is referred to as "unknown", an adjective that proves to be ambiguous, since we never really know the exact reasons why the painting is unknown. Firstly, as Poussin and Nicolas' glances seem to suggest in the final pages of the story, the work does not really seem to exist except for a chaotic mixture of colors, the famous "muraille de peinture" (436), and the splendor of a magnificent foot emerging from such chaos, all of which seems to imply that the work could have existed, but has been almost erased by the alienated artist himself. It is also possible to guess that the masterpiece only exists in Frenhofer's mind or that it ceases to exist from the very moment it is sullied ("prostituted") by any gaze other than that of its own

creator. Eventually a simpler and more obvious reason could also be invoked: the work is unknown simply because it physically disappears, the victim of the fire that also kills its creator. In any case, Balzac's deliberate ambiguity allows for all these interpretations.

Rivette largely constructs the portrayal of the masterpiece in *La Belle Noiseuse* following Balzac's model. However, as has already been mentioned, unlike the painting in *Le Chef-d'œuvre inconnu*, that of Frenhofer in *La Belle Noiseuse* is, at the beginning of the film, a mere sketch which suggests that the creative process was interrupted, fatally affected by the emotional connection between artist and model and the lack of the required aesthetic distance between them. The mysterious painting in the film is also an unknown masterpiece not because its real existence is questioned, as it is in Balzac's story, but rather because its factual existence is not revealed beyond the small circle of four privileged people: Frenhofer himself; Liz and Marianne, the models; and little Magali, who, unaware of the painting's relevance, helps the artist to hide it forever. The enigmatic cross that Liz draws on the back of the painting's frame and its subsequent walling up suggest a symbolic burial. It is a burial that is felt as necessary so that the work, forever free from any defiling gaze, may preserve the intensity derived from the creative encounter between artist and model.

However, when compared to those of Balzac and Rivette, the masterpiece in Ibsen's drama appears to be very singular. *Resurrection Day*, Rubek's celebrated sculpture, is by no means unknown but quite the opposite, since it is its worldwide fame that largely underpins his artistic prestige. However, this fact is actually misleading once it becomes clear that what the world really knows is an extended, adulterated version of the original work, which at some point evolved from a representation of Irene to a sculptural group with the model's presence in the background, overshadowed by the addition of several other figures, including the sculptor himself in a central position. Therefore, what in fact the world knows is nothing but an adulteration of the intense, genuine work, which thus remains "unknown", since only the sculptor and the model shared their original knowledge. This prostitution of the artwork, of their only "child", is, as has been said, one of Irene's main reproaches to Rubek.

Finally, it is also worth noting that the masterpiece is equally unknown to the reader/viewer, who in all three cases only reaches a very partial and biased knowledge of it. In Balzac's story, the ekphrasis of the work is only indirectly constructed from Porbus and Nicolas' account of what they see. In *La Belle Noiseuse*, the viewers only reach a fragmentary knowledge of the mysterious painting. In Ibsen's play, the ekphrasis is also elusive and the only information that the reader/spectator gathers comes from the scattered allusions to the sculpture and from the intense scene in which Rubek and

Irene talk about the figurative evolution of *Resurrection Day*, which, to the model's great frustration, was eventually defiled by Rubek's utter worldliness:

RUBEK. I was young then. Completely inexperienced in life. I thought that the resurrection should be depicted in its most beautiful and lovely form, as a young, untouched woman—without any experiences of life on this earth—one who awakens into light and glory without anything ugly or impure to rid herself of.

IRENE [*hurriedly*]. Yes—and that is how I now stand there in our work?

RUBEK [*hesitantly*]. Not quite like that, actually, Irene.

IRENE [*in mounting tension*]. Not quite? Aren't I just the way I was when I posed for you?

RUBEK [*without answering*]. I became more worldly in the years that followed, Irene. I began to conceive of *Resurrection Day* as something more, something—something more complex. The small circular plinth where your image stood, solitary and erect—was too limited for everything I wanted to compose—

IRENE [*fumbles for the knife but leaves it be*]. So what did you add? Say it!

RUBEK. I added what I saw with my own eyes in the world around me. I had to include it all. Couldn't do otherwise, Irene. I enlarged the plinth—made it big and spacious. And on it laid a section of the bulging, heaving earth. And now, swarming up out of the cracks in the earth there are people, people with animal faces concealed beneath the skin. Women and men—just as I knew them in life (276-277).

At any rate, in all three cases the masterpieces, because of their extreme intensity, appear as highly complex, since they concentrate, as in an artistic black hole, all the creative energy arising from the unique encounter between artist and model.

7. Conclusion

In *La Belle Noiseuse*, Jacques Rivette unfolds a complex artistic theory that has only been partially addressed in the preceding pages. Attention has been paid exclusively to its connection with Balzac's ideas in *Le Chef-d'œuvre inconnu* and, in particular, to its complementarity with those of Henri Ibsen in his last work, *When We Dead Awaken*. However, a more in-depth approach to the film would require, for example, analyzing the relevance for the intellectual construction of the film of extra-literary references such as Bellmer's Doll or the paintings of Balthus and Dufour, whose real hands can be seen throughout the film. On a strictly literary level, although critics have discussed the obvious importance of the Balzac's intertext or the film's relationship with Henry James' *Notebooks*, it would also be worth analyzing the direct or indirect connection of *La Belle Noiseuse* with a broad group of works including, among others, Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Poe's *The Oval Portrait* and Zola's *L'œuvre*, as well as other texts by Balzac such as *La Peau de chagrin*, *La Grande Bretèche* and some of his stories centered on

art and artistic creation, for it is the combined influence of all these intertexts that contributes to the film's complex artistic theory.

What the preceding pages have attempted to illustrate is that Rivette fully succeeds when he increases the hermeneutic depth of *La Belle Noiseuse*, whose cornerstone is undoubtedly Balzac's *Le Chef-d'œuvre inconnu*, with the integration of Ibsen's drama. The analysis of *When We Dead Awaken* clearly shows that Rivette opted for such a little-visited text from Ibsen's repertoire because of the affinity of the Norwegian playwright's ideas about artistic creation with his own and because of their complementarity with those of Balzac's influential story. As has been shown, both texts thoroughly explore, through the figures of Frenhofer and Rubek, the nature of the artist, his triumphs and frustrations, and his obsession with the achievement of a unique masterpiece that eventually remains, to some extent, unknown. Furthermore, both *Le Chef-d'œuvre inconnu* and *When We Dead Awaken* address the model's role in the creative process. At this point, Ibsen's influence becomes more relevant for Rivette than Balzac's, since issues such as the required aesthetic distance for the culmination of the creative process and the model's active role are barely sketched in Balzac's story. Therefore, the choice of Balzac and Ibsen's works cannot be seen as random but as the happy result of Rivette's deep understanding of both authors and the integration of their ideas on art in his own complex artistic theory.

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