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# On the passing of Michel Piccoli and Jacques Rivette's *La Belle Noiseuse*



## Piccoli Paints

During these months of confinement, a number of countries experienced the confirmation of a cultural shift as iconic figures and symbols from cinema, literature, theater and visual arts passed away, some inevitably through covid-19 complications, while others went because the relationship between age and their body said it was time. At this particular historical moment, when much that survives of the left in France is expressed by some operating within the spheres of culture, the passing of figures such as actor Michel Piccoli, and screenwriter/lyricist/novelist Jean-Loup Dabadie, point to a time working in culture meant being left of center as the socialist party was ebbing its ways towards governing in 1981. Piccoli, who died at 94, had a career in film, theater and television that spanned seventy years. The list of filmmakers he worked with includes Luis Bunuel, Alfred

Hitchcock, Claude Sautet (several of which were written by Dabadie), Jacques Demy, and of course Jean-Luc Godard. While not a communist aristocrat like director Luchino Visconti, Piccoli came from a family of means yet embraced social militancy throughout his career. In the seventies, he excelled at playing middle-aged French upper bourgeoisie white collar males, who would often yield to the torment of romance (with Romy Schneider), passion (with Stephane Audran) and of course on the receiving end of contempt (from Brigitte Bardot). Calm yet always emanating a sense of menace, Piccoli's voice would move and rise from grace and good manners to a sudden thunderous rage. One might have imagined him in a film genre the French practice on rare occasion, the bio-pic, playing André Breton, the great poet and founder of the Surrealist movement.

He was both willingly and in spite of himself an example of a certain type of filmic French masculinity (apart from Jean-Paul Belmondo and Alain Delon, Piccoli is perhaps the other French actor who was required to display his chest during the seventies. A torso far more hirsute than those of his peers). These traits of 'maleness' were to attract another major figure of the Nouvelle Vague, Jacques Rivette. Piccoli worked with Godard, with Claude Chabrol, but never appeared in films by Truffaut or Rohmer (the latter probably too Catholic and too right of center). But he joined Rivette for two films, both adaptation of Balzac. *La Belle Noiseuse* and *Ne Touchez pas la Hache*.



Of all the Nouvelle Vague directors, all of whom have time and again placed female protagonists at the center of their films, Rivette's were often about women, including *La Religieuse*, *Céline et Julie vont en Bateau*, *Out Spectre One*, *Le Pont du Nord*, *La Bande des Quatre*, *Jeanne D'Arc*, and *Va Savoir*. His characters cohabit the space of the film with ghosts, apparitions and other spectral figures, residing in apartments and houses filled with rooms constituting a magical puzzle resolved through clues and the ingestion of various substances. Something must be offered or forfeited in order to enter. The filmmaker worked on occasion with 'celebrities', having constituted an ensemble of performers loyal to him, and relying for 25 years on the same writing duo for his screenplays, Pascal Bonitzer and Christine

Laurent.

In 1991, Emmanuelle Béart was already a star after her breakthrough role in Claude Berri's *Manon des Sources* (1986, adapted from Marcel Pagnol). As with a number of French actresses in the eighties and nineties, Béart's parts required her to appear nude, but early on she framed the narrative of her nudity, as wild girl of the Provence prairies, and in *La Belle Noiseuse* as a celebrated painter's model who doesn't submit. *La Belle Noiseuse* begins like several other Rivette films, with characters immediately staging the setting, introducing artifice and theatricality next to a more linear narrative until the spectator realizes he/she is caught in a maze. They are often young people with pressed chinos or jeans worn too high at the waist, with shirt or polo neatly tucked in and a sweater over the shoulders. Not unlike Rohmer in that respect. But something different happens in *Noiseuse*, there is a central space, an arena, a ring rather than a stage, which Béart could overwhelm. To Rivette's eyes, her power is such that he requires two mature male figures for support, Michel Piccoli as the painter who will find resolution in what the model generates, and artist Bernard Dufour, as the 'hands' of the artist. Rivette then proceeds to capture a choreography of desire and revelation between the hands of the painter molding Béart's body and the artist's masterful sketches, transmuted by what is given and pried from her.

Piccoli comes to the film with a history previously mentioned, that includes Bardot, Audran, Schneider. He is the incarnation of purpose rather than of seduction, as well as the chronicler of that purpose lost

and renewed. His painter becomes the last heir to a history of painting that had to be written in the South of France.

1- Through poet and art critic Alain Jouffroy, whom I knew well for a decade or so, I had the good fortune to meet Bernard Dufour, who would talk of how after years of working with female figures, the glance came to find immediate expression in the line. *La Belle Noiseuse* documents this.

S.



Jouffroy left, Dufour right. in the middle, je ne sais plus.