DARIUSZ CZAJA

Le Chef-d'oeuvre inconnu. Balzac and Rivette

The times may be bad, but we can still have some talk about art!
H. Balzac, *Le Chef-d'oeuvre inconnu*

1.

Almost 200 years after being written Balzac's *Le Chef-d'oeuvre inconnu* still radiates a mysterious glow.[1] The text is enveloped in a curious aura and the extraordinary rays produced by the backdrop are discernible in numerous fields. This is not merely a literary phenomenon, which I envisage as consisting of its fictional character, but also enclosure within a world of literature circulation and purely textual analyses. The short story distinctly leans towards life and in assorted ways transcends the limits of the world of fiction. For years *Le Chef-d'oeuvre inconnu* has been an important point of reference for numerous significant painters. The reflections contained therein, focused on creativity, the artist and art,[2] became an ideological programme and road-sign, and the attitude represented by Maître Frenhofer is an ideal of an artist selflessly devoted to art and seeking perfection. Balzac's story left the domain of literary fiction, becoming a strong and permanent myth for artistic consciousness.

Certain painters regarded the text as surety and an outright talisman. Paul Cézanne discovered himself in the Frenhofer character. This gesture of a serious attitude towards an, after all, fictional character denotes something more than mere confirmation of superficial similarity; it comprises total identification. In his reminiscences Emil Bernard recalled how one evening he mentioned the text by Balzac, and the painter *got up from the table, planted himself before me, and, striking his chest with his index finger, designated himself – without a word, but through this repeated gesture – as the very person in the story. He was so moved that tears filled his eyes.*[3] Picasso too admired the novel and identified himself with Frenhofer, although apparently for different reasons. He was commissioned by the art dealer Vollard to illustrate the story and the drawings were shown at a separate exhibition. By an incomprehensible coincidence while renting an atelier in Paris he lived in the same street and house as Balzac's protagonist! Balthus in a conversation with Constantini recalled: *Par une mystérieuse coincidence, le protagoniste de la nouvelle, le peintre Frenhofer, avait son atelier dans la maison même ou Picasso avaint le sien, au 7, rue des Grands-Augustins. C'est Dora Maar qui lui avait trouvé…*[4] It was here that in 1937 Picasso painted *Guernica*.[5] The story also became the object of many critical dissertations analysing its assorted aspects: historical, literary, aesthetic, and ideological.[6] Their number is so great that as one of the methodical commentators maintained *Le Chef-d'oeuvre inconnu* is next to *Sarrasine so buried in critical discourse that it is hard to write about them at all.*[7] At the beginning of the 1990s it served as the basis for Jacques Rivette's film: *La Belle Noiseuse*, an improvised variation on a theme described with enormous expertise and inner fire by Balzac.[8]

Already this brief summary shows clearly that *Le Chef-d'oeuvre inconnu* is not only a "capacious form" but extremely so. Balzac's text was treated as a convenient and almost practical collection of instructions for a good film, and its lead character played the part of an exemplary artist. The story functioned as an experimental testing field for assorted schools of interpretations. Ultimately, it became a source of inspiration and a prolific point of departure for a film scenario. Indubitably, *Le Chef-d'oeuvre inconnu* contains some sort of semantic excess offering much food for thought. Depending on the questions addressed to it the text demonstrates an ever-new side in the manner of a kaleidoscope whose slightest movement reveals a different pattern. In the commentary presented below and constructed so as to resemble a diptych I resigned from totalising ambitions and concentrated only on a single issue – that of the image.

First, I shall take a closer look at the way in which the text tells the story of the phenomenon of the painting, the significance attached to it, and the aesthetic controversies it involves. Next, I shall confront this knowledge with the film narration proposed by Rivette. In other words, at the onset we shall see how the image appears in the text and later how this (painterly) image functions in an (film) image. Right away, however, it is worth stressing that although I place the two types of discourse alongside each other this is not a study inclined towards problems associated with film adaptation. I am interested, predominantly, in the rhetoric of a conversation about the ontology of the image: not only what it is but also the manner in which it exists and, more extensively, the differences between the image in the text and the film as well as the consequences of its comprehension for understanding the tasks and essence of art in general. Since the image, mentioned to such a great extent in the text and the film, remains a mystery in itself then

talking about it cannot follow merely simple intellectual trajectories.

2.

Balzac situated his story in the distant past (conceived as such by him and even more so by us), i.e. the year 1612. This renders its subsequent impact even more interesting. We see clearly that although the story is precisely placed in time, as is usually the case with Balzac's texts, the conclusions drawn from it certainly transcend the historical *milieu*. The general framework is a passionate – in every meaning of that word – dispute on the nature of art. This literary discussion about painting conducted by various participants, about the meaning of painting, the elementary principles and rigours of the craft also concerns dangerous connections between life and art. The prime protagonists are three artists: old Frenhofer, Probus in his prime, and the youngest: Nicholas Poussin, resembling three personifications of the spirit of time: past, present and future.[9] These characters belong to different worlds of painting and represent three dissimilar approaches to painting. But this is not all: in the background of the "masculine" dispute about the tasks of art there are two women with a different, so to speak, ontological status: the "lifeless" Catherine, Frenhofer's former model, existing as a painted character immobilised on canvas, and the "living" young and attractive Gilette composed of a beautiful body and unconcealed emotions. Although they occupy the backdrop of the story their role is not limited merely to being extras. On the contrary: it is exactly around the two women that meanings essential for the story are construed. The yardstick of the force of Balzac's literary work is the fact that we react to the fictional figure of Frenhofer as much more real than those of Probus and Poussin, who, after all, possess concrete, historical models! It is also quite possible that such a reaction is, as Arthur Danto wrote, homage paid to the fact that the highly Romanticised vision of art, and in particular painting, from whose viewpoint Balzac conceived Frenhofer and his *chef-d'oeuvre*, continues to remain even in an age of cynicism and deconstruction the strongest component of our comprehension of art and certainly of painting.[10]

The three painters meet in Probus' studio. Frenhofer, an outstanding artist, is a legend among painters, while the young Poussin takes part in the gathering somewhat by chance. Probus presents his work to the master who without sparing his friend's feelings openly and methodically criticises it. During the visit at the studio Poussin finds out than the old man has not been painting for years. More, he had abandoned work on a canvas that he had been executing for ten years: *La Belle Noiseuse*, which he intended to be his masterpiece. Now, he frenziedly conceals the canvas and no one has even seen it. Poussin experiences a powerful wish to view the masterpiece-to-be but Frenhofer guards it jealously and refuses all requests. Poussin thus devises a plan for ignoring the prohibition and conducts a curious transaction. His beautiful fiancée, Gilette, is to become the master's model so that he could complete the painting and in return allow Poussin and Probus to see the finished work. Gillette agrees, mainly due to her feelings for Poussin although with certain reservations. Several months later, Probus appears in the master's atelier with the proposal. The enraged Frenhofer refuses to hear anything about *his* work and *his* woman being tainted by the eyes of another man. At that very moment enter Poussin and Gillette. Frenhofer ultimately capitulates, aware that this is probably the last possible opportunity for completing the canvas. He has been seeking a suitable model for years, but to no avail. A few minutes later Probus and Poussin appear in the studio and stand in front of *La Belle Noiseuse*. To their great astonishment they see nothing but a chaotic tangle of lines and unidentified shapes. The irritated painter throws them out and on the next day they learn that Frenhofer died that night. Before passing away he managed to burn all his works.

The entire story depicts a battle for understanding the nature of painting, the essence of the art of depiction. The prime protagonist is Frenhofer and the other two painters mainly listen, with only Probus at times joining the dispute. Frenhofer not only creates art but is also its self-proclaimed theoretician. His exalted reflections show that he is totally convinced that he is right. This is not purely discoursive "intellectual" knowledge; its legitimation is the whole *oeuvre* of the great Frenho and in particular his last, unfinished work. But what did Frenhofer really have in mind while speaking about painting? What did he regard as the "perfect painting"? What properties of painting are decisive for being worthy of inclusion into the domain of art? What is a masterpiece? Time for a closer look.

Frenhofer, as has been mentioned, was, above all, a practician testing a painting with his hand and eye.[11] At the Probus studio he examines a canvases entitled: *Saint Mary of Egypt* by his younger colleague. An outstanding work, more: considered by his contemporaries to be a masterpiece. For a few moments Frenhofer penetrates it with his keen glance but the verdict he pronounces is far from commonplace admiration. His ruthless assessment of the work by another artist is, however, an excellent directive for finding out which traits the master considered to be contemptible and which deserving his praise.

Your good woman is not badly done, but she is not alive. You artists fancy that when a figure is correctly drawn, and everything in its place according to the rules

of anatomy, there is nothing more to be done. You make up the flesh tints beforehand on your palettes according to your formulae, and fill in the outlines with due care that one side of the face shall be darker than the other; and because you look from time to time at a naked woman who stands on the platform before you, you fondly imagine that you have copied nature, think yourselves to be painters, believe that you have wrested His secret from God.[12]

Elementary skills of anatomical drawing, sensitivity to colour, technical adroitness, ability to apply the rules of composition – all are conditions necessary for creating an outstanding work but, apparently, insufficient. Frenhofer's opinion is cruel towards those painters who are convinced that workshop skills are adequate to enter the land of art. *You may know your syntax thoroughly and make no blunders in your grammar, but it takes that and something more to make a great poet*; it is not enough to be acquainted with the basics of painting and the fundamental rules of the grammar of creation to paint a great masterpiece. Furthermore, taking a closer look at the canvas Frenhofer notices a serious, disqualifying fault:

Look at your saint, Probus! At a first glance she is admirable; look at her again, and you see at once that she is glued to the background, and that you could not walk round her. She is a silhouette that turns but one side of her face to all beholders, a figure cut out of canvas, an image with no power to move or change her position. I feel as if there were no air between that arm and the background, no space, no sense of distance in your canvas. The perspective is perfectly correct, the strength of the coloring is accurately diminished with the distance; but, in spite of these praiseworthy efforts, I could never bring myself to believe that the warm breath of life comes and goes in that beautiful body. It seems to me that if I laid my hand on the firm, rounded throat, it would be cold as marble to the touch. No, my friend, the blood does not flow beneath that ivory skin, the tide of life does not flush those delicate fibers, the purple veins that trace a network beneath the transparent amber of her brow and breast. Here the pulse seems to beat, there it is motionless, life and death are at strife in every detail; here you see a woman, there a statue, there again a corpse.

Ignore at this point comments about the instruments of poetic ecphrasis used brilliantly by Balzac in this fragment (and not only here). We are dealing with a lucidly outlined ideal of Frenhofer's aesthetics. If a painted body is to become something more than a faithfully copied shape it must come alive. From the flat depiction that it invariably is it has to change into a quasi-three-dimensional object. The two-dimensional surface must become a spatial solid, a shape that is to produce the effect of warm, living reality pulsating with blood. To put it differently: the ideal of the female body shown on canvas is to be a spatial sculpture. This, as it follows unambiguously from the cited argument, belongs to the alchemy of art: thanks to skill and talent (genius?) two dimensions are to become three. The illusion is to be complete and should not require any sort of appeal. It is to hypnotise the viewer, to wield absolute power over him, to become the reason why the depicted figure is not solely a source of aesthetic pleasure but also "leaves the frame", materialises itself right in front of the viewer and becomes part of life. And *vice versa*: if such directives are ignored then a painting will "be not quite right"; true, it could possess well executed particular parts but as a whole it will be dead, lifeless, just as *Saint Mary of Egypt*, a *colorless creature*.

Just to make things clear: according to Frenhofer the canvas under discussion was not bad or totally devoid of values; on the contrary: *(...) this picture of yours is worth more than all the paintings of that rascal Rubens*, but it lacked something extremely essential. What? *Yes, truly, a woman carries her head in just such a way, so she holds her garments gathered into her hand; her eyes grow dreamy and soft with that expression of meek sweetness, and even so the quivering shadow of the lashes hovers upon her cheeks. It is all there, and yet it is not there. What is lacking? A nothing, but that nothing is everything. There you have the semblance of life, but you do not express its fullness and effluence, that indescribable something, perhaps the soul itself, that envelopes the outlines of the body like a haze (...)*. Yes, that "nothing" makes the difference, and in the domain of art – a colossal difference. In the brutal painting lesson given to Probus and Poussin three things appear to be clear. First, the difference between ordinary painting and true art is not measured only by the degree of mastery of the workshop. It belongs to another domain and corresponds exactly to the difference between life and death. Secondly: a person who can boast that he has captured the resemblance of the portrayed sitter does not deserve to be called an artist. The true artist possesses the gift of bringing the dead to life. Thirdly: it is evident that the thus comprehended art of painting transcends far beyond the skill of an artisan and becomes an occupation on the borderline of magic, in a word: theurgy.

Probus, however, does not admit to defeat and claims that all that he had accomplished on the canvas was executed in accordance with the inalienable rigours of art. At the same time, he complains that Nature is prone to changes and that there exist such natural phenomena that cannot be rendered on canvas. Frenhofer responds instantly and in a manner that leaves no illusion as regards such a barren approach to the tasks of painting:

The aim of art is not to copy nature, but to express it. You are not a servile copyist, but a poet! (...) We must detect the spirit, the informing soul in the appearances of things and beings. Effects! What are effects but the ac-

cidents of life, not life itself? (…) Many a painter achieves success instinctively, unconscious of the task that is set before art. You draw a woman, yet you do not see her! Not so do you succeed in wresting Nature's secrets from her! You are reproducing mechanically the model that you copied in your master's studio. You do not penetrate far enough into the inmost secrets of the mystery of form; you do not seek with love enough and perseverance enough after the form that baffles and eludes you. Beauty is a thing severe and unapproachable, never to be won by a languid lover. You must lie in wait for her coming and take her unawares, press her hard and clasp her in a tight embrace, and force her to yield. Form is a Proteus more intangible and more manifold than the Proteus of the legend; compelled, only after long wrestling, to stand forth manifest in his true aspect.

These comments appear to be the *clou* of Frenhofer's arguments. Painting that attains the dimension of art does not *copy* anything, does not transfer onto the canvas "the way it is" in a manner in which a comparison of the real and the painted resembles two concurrent sides of an algebra equation, but fulfils itself in the function of *expressing*. What does this mean precisely? Here, the noun "poetry" is undoubtedly a metaphor and signifies, presumably, a special ability to transpose life, reality – regardless of its nature – into the matter of the artwork but in such a mode so that that, which is painted would not turn into a simple replica of the obvious but would become equipped with the earlier mentioned "effluence". Admittedly, this is not an excessively precise formulation but it is probably a cryptonym for the extraordinary aura and force of *sui generis* surrealism emanated only by masterpieces, which all other paintings lack. Remarks about the form, in particular its intangibility, are also noteworthy. Capturing it, Frenhofer declared avidly, is extremely difficult and calls not so much for ordinary talent and enormous work but also something more: the creation of special conditions in order to offer hope for seizing it better. Thanks to the patient effort of looking the artist creates only space in which form could then reveal itself. Form seems to appear at special moments preceded by mighty endeavours, at moments of some sort of a flash, intuition, possibly clairvoyance. In the language of religion: at moments of grace. This is perhaps the reason why Frenhofer executing on Probus's canvas humiliating corrections that will enable it to slowly "come alive", and, explaining patiently where the author had committed errors, says at the end: *Do not look too long at that canvas, young man (…). You would fall a victim to despair*. This probably means that in his opinion the author had not been granted the grace of seeing and that the extraordinary talent that he without doubt has at his disposal makes it possible to copy reality but certainly not to create a masterpiece. *Beauty is a thing severe and unapproachable...*

There is no better opportunity for testing the value of the master's arguments than to refer them to his works. The difficulty, however, lies in the fact that Frenhofer hid the painting that could have disclosed his mastery and the secret of the qualities of a masterpiece. More, the reason why he does not want to show it is rather strange, but apparently stems, at least to a certain degree, from earlier remarks. Recall: his painting depicts the nude courtesan Catherine Lescaut. Its tabooisation comes directly from a conviction, expressed by the artist, about the essential identity of the image and the person! In other words, the point is not to conceal the secrets of art or the canvas from ineligible eyes but to withhold from the eyes of painters (men, after all!) the naked body of a woman dear to the artist:

But this picture, locked away above in my studio, is an exception in our art. It is not a canvas, it is a woman – a woman with whom I talk. I share her thoughts, her tears, her laughter. Would you have me fling aside these ten years of happiness like a cloak? Would you have me cease at once to be father, lover, and creator? She is not a creature, but a creation. Bring your young painter here. I will give him my treasures; I will give him pictures by Correggio and Michelangelo and Titian; I will kiss his footprints in the dust; but make him my rival! Shame on me. Ah! ah! I am a lover first, and then a painter. Yes, with my latest sigh I could find strength to burn my Belle Noiseuse*; but – compel her to endure the gaze of a stranger, a young man and a painter! – Ah! no, no!*

The unquestionably insane vision of the brilliant painter produced an overlapping and total merge of a real person and her depiction, the physical body and the painterly sign. In this situation, the painter abdicated from his profession and became a jealous lover. If this is the case then evidently the game of hide and seek no longer involves aesthetics but life itself. The issue at stake is not the canvas but the woman. No one has the right to look at her nude body because this would mean presenting it to obscene and pre-emptive gazes. Actually, it would be tantamount to putting it up for sale. Ultimately, however, Frenhofer, similarly to the young Poussin, traded body for body although in both cases the direction of this transaction, so to speak, was different. Poussin sold part of his life in the name of art, while Frenhofer acted precisely on the contrary. Relegate to the margin the assessment of this artistic prostitution and see how *La Belle Noiseuse* was viewed. Unusually excited – *his face aglow with a more than human exaltation, his eyes glittered, he breathed hard like a young lover frenzied by love* – Frenhofer led both painters to his canvas:

Aha! he cried, you did not expect to see such perfection! You are looking for a picture, and you see a woman before you. There is such depth in that canvas, the atmosphere is so true that you cannot distinguish it from the air

that surrounds us. Where is art? Art has vanished, it is invisible! It is the form of a living girl that you see before you. Have I not caught the very hues of life, the spirit of the living line that defines the figure? Is there not the effect produced there like that which all natural objects present in the atmosphere about them, or fishes in the water? Do you see how the figure stands out against the background? Does it not seem to you that you pass your hand along the back? But then for seven years I studied and watched how the daylight blends with the objects on which it falls. And the hair, the light pours over it like a flood, does it not? … Ah! she breathed, I am sure that she breathed! Her breast – ah, see! Who would not fall on his knees before her? Her pulses throb. She will rise to her feet. Wait!

To no avail. The admiration of the old master for his work proved to be premature. Both expert painters standing in front of the canvas did not demonstrate enthusiasm of any sort. Worse: they declared that the painting showed nothing! They saw only a chaotic composition and *confused masses of color and a multitude of fantastical lines* expressed in the original in even stronger terms: a wall of paint, *une muraille de peinture*.[13] With a single exception: in the corner of the canvas they noticed a fragment worthy of attention: *un pied delicieux, un pied vivant*[14] (the Polish translation unfortunately has: "leg", thus destroying the whole fetishistic context of the fragment). This fraction of the masterpiece was, however, embedded in total chaos, shapelessness and indetermination. Both men, forced by Frenhofer to express their opinions, confirmed the initial examination. The old man did not give up: he either sobbed over his hapless impotence or obstinately claimed that under this external, visible chaos there is a discernible, despite all, shape of a woman, the emanation of true beauty.

What is this poignant scene about? Who is really wrong? What can be seen in the painting? What is the *une muraille de peinture* that shocks and violates the aesthetic habits of the viewers? Nothing here is quite certain. Danto was right when he wrote that reading this fragment we are left guessing: was it the old painter who had lost his senses or the young artists who had lost their sight?[15] One more thing: why did Frenhofer burn his canvases? Before we try to cast some light on those questions and, at the same time, reveal at least part of the puzzle of the painting let us take a look at the way in which the initial plot scheme from Balzac's story has been transposed into the film. Let us see to what sort of transformations a literary discourse about painting literary has been subjected.

3.

Rivette shifted Balzac's story into contemporary times (the early 1990s) but the basic outline of the plot remains unchanged. A renowned painter, Edouard Frenhofer, leads a prosperous life together with his family in a country residence in the south of France. This is retirement of sorts, life after life, since he has not created anything of importance for quite some time with the exception of several insignificant self-portraits. He had abandoned painting ten years earlier, not completing (being unable to complete? not wishing to complete?) a painting to which his wife, Liz, posed. On a certain hot summer day there arrives at his home a young painter, Nicholas, brought over by a popular art dealer Balthazar Probus, together with the artist's girlfriend, Marianne. Nicholas is delighted with the opportunity to make the acquaintance of the master whom he had admired for long. Nonetheless, he will not become the prime participant of a discussion about art. Frenhofer is enchanted with the beauty of the girl, not merely her external features but also some sort of an undefined force that she radiates. Faced with a proposal formulated by the dealer, who mentions that this is an exceptional chance to complete the painting, Nicholas agrees in her name, without asking Marianne about her opinion. He is obviously extremely proud that his girl will become Frenhofer's new muse. In other words, that he too will play a part, however slight, in the future masterpiece. Frenhofer agrees to the terms of this curious transaction. Having found out about the agreement the girl becomes upset and realises that art means more for her partner than she does. Ultimately, however, she agrees to pose. The old project is revived and there is a chance that *La Belle Noiseuse* will be completed. The outstanding painter initiates his work and the old artist and the young model spend the next few days alone in the solitude of the atelier. Day after day and hour after hour they share physical torment, with Frenhofer attempting to realise the impossible. After two days of posing Nicholas demonstrates signs of impatience and (after all!) jealousy; Liz too becomes anxious. But matters had already gone too far and the players are no longer performing their parts but obviously have started acting according to supra-individual rules. All the main protagonists are outfitted with a certain curious ambiguity, gradually revealing the originally concealed aspects of their personalities. Only Probus, the art expert and influential dealer, appears in the role of an unambiguous villain; at the same time, everything seems to suggest that he is Liz's former lover. It is he who commissioned Frenho to complete the painting and who will enjoy priority in purchasing it. For him the value of the canvas is measured with figures. It has a price also for the remaining *dramatis personae* but paid in perhaps a less measurable but certainly more painful currency: that of real life.

Let it be said straight away: Rivette's film is different from Balzac's story but it is also partly *about* something else. While stressing this dissimilarity I do not have in mind that the film treats literary matter in an-

other way or that it introduces solutions missing in the text. I rather emphasize the radical divergence of both media because it is exactly that feature, which proves to be essential for the basic configuration of meanings. That, which in the case of Balzac is only talked about (although his vocabulary possesses a creative force and affects the imagination extremely strongly) in Rivette's film is shown. In Balzac's novel we read about the paintings and in Rivette's film we actually see them (although not the most important canvas). More: the film offers us an opportunity to watch the painter working. As has been stressed upon numerous occasions, no other film about a painter's life, with painting as a theme, had ever placed such strong emphasis on the process of painting as such and its purely physical aspect. *La Belle Noiseuse* is possibly, first and foremost, not so much a film treatise about the essence of painting as about laborious, unattractive work brimming with errors and numerous stumbles and aimed at the ultimate achievement of an artistic effect, i.e. it deals with that, which in the technical vocabulary of aesthetics is known as the "creative process". There is less of the "metaphysics" of painting and much more of its "physics". Sketches, preliminary work, changes, repetitions, retouching and then everything once again, from the beginning. This is what successive stages of the origin of a painting look like. The director's extraordinary accomplishment consists of bringing the spectator close to all those operations by concentrating attention on the very process of painting: multiple close-ups of a hand drawing lines on paper, placing colour on canvas, extracting the first shape out of nothing. We closely observe the painter's hand (in this "part" the hand of the artist Bernard Dolour, who lent it to Michel Piccoli in the scenes of sketching and painting) using a pencil, a piece of charcoal, a feather, and a paintbrush. The plot takes place in complete silence, additionally enhanced (yes!) by sounds coming from the background, the sort of acoustic effects usually not heard in a film: the scratching of a feather on paper, the rustle of a pencil, the sound of a piece of paper being folded or cardboard being pinned on a board, etc. The sketching scenes and the initial studies of the figure are shown in almost real time and take up practically half of the film. Long takes, few cuts, slow motion, lengthy silence. No music wadding the scenes. An image of the intimate activity of creation. A true non-action movie. All this produces the impression of participating in the emergence of a painting. Gradually, step-by-step, the viewer becomes drawn into the game. In the course of the four-hours long – and in places outright hypnotic – spectacle (and here the word is not misused since the film is clearly and, I believe, intentionally theatralised) we take part in the birth of an artwork. The exhaustion of the spectator watching *La Belle Noiseuse* appears to be only slightly lesser than that of the actors participating in the undertaking. Observing for countless minutes a hand drawing a line on paper we are just as irritated as fascinated! But such is the intentional strategy deployed by Rivette and maintained to the very end.

The act of painting, on par with preceding laborious portrait studies, is shown as a genuine cognitive process. Here, painting is not by any means a domain of aesthetic pleasure but a distinctly cognitive activity. Marianne takes off her bathrobe and stands naked in front of the painter. Much time will pass before he finds that one pose that reveals her concealed interior (afterwards, the girl tries to assist him in this task). He treats his model in the same manner as a sculptor approaching clay: no sentiments, only the wish to grant a suitable shape. Bending and almost breaking the girl's limbs Frenhofer helps her to find a pose that will be more than mere sophisticated corporeal decoration. The goal is to discover a pose that will freeze in the function of expression. These activities at time resemble acts of refined sadism. The arrangement of a body in unusual shapes unambiguously brings to mind torture. The painter clearly hurts the girl but she, initially resisting, assumes the complicated poses, including those that result in physical and psychic exhaustion. All those inconveniences and physical struggles possess, however, a clearly delineated objective. Frenho expresses this unmistakably, turning to his model: *I'll break you to pieces… get you out of your carcass*.[16] It would be difficult to express more lucidly the conviction that the truth about man does not lie on the surface nor is it contained within that, which is seen directly or better still: visible. On the contrary: it is *ex definitione* hidden and constitutes the reality, which it is necessary to disclose. The target is not accomplished by just undressing a person; no "naked truth" will emerge in this fashion. Evidently, this is not the point: here, nudity is not a synonym of truth, because clothes are not a simple form of concealment. After all, long-term contact with the model's nudity (both in the case of the painter and the spectator) demonstrates just how easily nakedness becomes a form of clothes. It is necessary to struggle for the sake of the truth by resorting to all available artistic methods. More: at this stage there is no mention of art or painting of any sort. The reason for this state of things lies in the fact that for the time being it is necessary to make certain cognitively fundamental discoveries so that the very process of painting a nude would have any meaning at all!

The truth about the portrayed person is not revealed by a certain extraordinary fragment, because it discloses itself within the phenomenon of the w h o l e: *The whole body, not just some pieces… I want more. I want everything. The blood, the fire, the ice… AII that's inside your body. I'II take it all. I'II get it out of you and*

put it into this frame. Here! In this blank. Like that. I'll get to know what's inside under your thin surface... I want the invisible. No, it's not that! I want... It's not me who wants... It's the line... the stroke.... Nobody knows what a stroke is. And I'm after it. Where am I going? To the sky? Why not? Why wouldn't a stroke burst the sky?

The painterly glance is not concerned with merely sliding on the surface. Nor does it focus on nudity or the bodily sheath as such. The target is total decomposition (naturally: formal) of the perceived body and its re-arrangement, but already in a different order: *No more breasts, no more stomach, no more thighs, no more buttocks! Whirlwinds! Galaxies, the ebb and the flow… Black holes! The original hubbub, have you never heard of it? That's what I always wanted from you. I'm going to crumble you, you're going to break up. We'll see what's left of you when you forget everything. Don't worry, you'll get it back if you still want it.* It is necessary, therefore, to cast aside the haphazard and the unnecessary and to leave only the essential form. It is requisite to break through the shell of appearance, that static illusion, which is the outcome of the habitual glance so as to discover the "centre" pulsating with life. Next – and this is the most difficult stage – to find suitable instruments in order to insert this stereoscope depth into the two dimensions of the flat canvas.

The whole time the painter's thought is organized by the opposition: surface and interior, outside and inside. In his eyes, truth is on the side of that, which is not given directly, i.e. the "interior" and "depth". The surface lies. Consequently, if the painting is to possess a cognitive asset then the painter's glance is to, first of all, resemble a detector and should be akin to an X-ray (*I want the invisible*). It is precisely this sort of sensitive perception that has a chance to extract from a static configuration its inherent potential, pulse, dynamic, emotions, in a word: life. Only then that, which is seen can be transposed into a differed dimension and render painted reality. Another noteworthy comment made by Frenhofer maintains that the painter controls the created work only to a certain degree. He intentionally produces a certain composition but at a given moment it starts to heed its own logic. Frenhofer probably had in mind the form created by the painter, which at a certain moment assumes strange autonomy and emanates some sort of an unclear but nonetheless absolutely real creative imperative. Not only is it impossible to oppose it, but, on the contrary, it is mandatory to succumb to this inner necessity. This is precisely the above-mentioned "entity", which definitely is not a simple sum of parts but a subtle quality built as if above them.

At an extremely interesting moment Frenhofer in an act of self-reflection reveals to Marianne the reason why years earlier he embarked upon a nude portrait of Liz: *Anyway, at first I wanted her, before wanting to paint her.* This primeval impulse, which forces to paint, is known as desire. It was desire with its erotic sources that compelled him to render immobile a loved person in a painting, to keep her depiction for himself. We shall return to this essential motif, closely connected with Balzac's story. The same fragment of the artist's statement contains also a record of creative fever, a strongly metamorphosed but nonetheless credible description of work on a painting: *For the first time, I was scared. The fear became the driving force behind what I did. A change of speed, like a whirlwind. I became blind. A tactile painting. As if it were my fingers that saw and commanded themselves. That's what I'm looking for. That's what I want. Yes, that's it! It was then, maybe that I became a real painter*. The usually restrained Frenho speaks with open and unconcealed fascination and the described moments appear to bring not only creative fulfilment. More: he recalls those moments of the grace of seeing (how else should we call them?) and the gift of an intuitive certitude of painting with direct jealousy and hope that perhaps now he will be able to repeat them. He is right – something of the former outburst appears to reappear in his work with Marianne. The totally exhausted artist and model conduct a dialogue:

M: You're rotten..

F: I want nothing, I told you. It's the painting… You and I, we're just involved. It's going to be a whirlwind, a cataract, a maelstrom… Faster, faster. Until you see nothing, feel nothing. Your ears aren't buzzing?

M: I've no more ears, I can't feel my body.

F: Very well, neither can I. That's almost it… almost.

The afore-mentioned artificiality or theatrical character of those phrases does not eject the impression that the heart of the matter concerns something truly essential. First, let us mention the importance in the creative process of a thread linking the painter and the model. This observation would have been simply trivial if it were not supplemented by a remark about a mysterious, undefined "third element": that of the overwhelming reality in which they both participate, because apparently it is that reality, which bestows importance and meaning to painting. The cited dialogue is aware of the fact that the artist is not the only person responsible for the ultimate shape of the painting. It says all too vividly that in the course of purifying the vision transpiring on the canvas something happens to the depiction that evades all control. It seems that the painting takes over all initiative and that the artist can at best adapt himself to the trend of the solutions proposed by the canvas.

The painter-model configuration is a natural and outright exemplary variant of the relation of power and subjugation. Seemingly, in this configuration the

model is from the onset in a lost position. The gaze of the painter (and the man!) is a look "from above" and subjectivizes. Marianne says angrily to Frenhofer: *Stop pretending. As a cat in front of a bird.* But she does not give up so easily. During the exhausting scenes of posing the two are engaged in curious psychomachy, a struggle for domination whose objective is the taming of the shrew. The very act of painting has something of an appropriation of the painted object. From the very beginning this is perfectly understood by Liz, the most important of the Frenhofer models. She warns Marianne, but the latter ignores her words. After a while, Nicholas becomes aware of the ambiguous procedure. His jealousy is devoid of fear about eventual sexual exploitation but is based on rather apt intuition that by painting Marianne, Frenhofer is taking her from him in a much profounder sense of the word. He is seizing all of her, and this means not only her cosmically magnificent body but also that, which it conceals: her spiritual interior. In other words: everything, her whole heretofore life together with all its moments. How is this feasible? In one of the conversations Liz cites a certain commonly held conviction, namely, that at the moment of drowning a person sees a film of his whole life:

Is it really possible to capture a whole life… on the canvas of a painting? Just like that… with a few traces of paint?

It seems unbelievable. but actually this is what Frenhofer was searching for.

You mean this is something shameless?

Yes, that's it… shameless.

It's not the flesh that's shameless, it's not the nudity… It's something else.

Frenhofer's comprehension of painting envisages depriving the model of all her outer layers in a quest for those deepest concealed particles, reaching the lowest strata of intimacy, i.e. shamelessness. It would be difficult to find a better formulation of the thought that painting, in its innermost core, fulfils such a denuding, revelatory function. This is why Liz says that it would be best if Marianne did not see the completed work: *Frenhofer won't protect her.*

It is symptomatic that both when we read Balzac's story and while watching Rivette's film we focus constantly on the convoluted relations between art and life. One of the most important questions asks why did Frenhofer resign from further work on *La Belle Noiseuse* with Liz as the model. We have at our disposal two replies:

Painter: *Why didn't I continue? I'd have died of it. Or else, she would have.*

Model: *First he wanted to paint me because he loved me, and then because he loved me. He didn't want to paint me. It was me or painting, that's what he said.*

If the first statement is understood only in categories of physical destruction then I find the second more interesting. It clearly says that there exists a disjunction between art and life, a permanent tension. To devote oneself wholly to art, to execute a portrait of one's beloved means burying the object of one's admiration and passion. There is always a price to be paid. In the case of such a solution that, which we gain in art we lose in life. In the case of the opposite solution we shall lose as artists but turn out to be winners in life. Both those objectives – if I understood the parable correctly – cannot be implemented simultaneously. Aware of this, Frenhofer ceased painting because he feared that he would lose Liz once and for all.

But had he not actually lost her? The facts are harsh. From the moment when he agreed that Marianne should pose for the once abandoned painting Frenhofer lives in the orbit of two women. Once again let us stress: this is not erotic rivalry. That would be too simple. The issue at stake is art and thus life. Is this so difficult to understand? Here is a fragment of a dialogue conducted by Marianne and Frenhofer:

M: *Why did you abandon it?*

F: Abandon what?

M: *The old painting with Liz.*

F: Why are you so interested? Liz is not you.

M: *But it's that one… It's that painting you wanted to start again.*

F: You can never start again….

M: *Why me? It was Liz then…? What are you using me for? It's not me you wanted to paint, you said.*

F: It's you and it isn't you. It's more than you. More of you than you can imagine. If the painting's true it will be you.

M: *I don't get it.*

F: Neither do I. AII the better!

This truly enigmatic exchange of opinions offers no clear-cut conclusions. Frenhofer seems to be somewhat evading an answer, although admittedly the very topic of the reflections makes it extremely difficult to propose concrete conceits. The problem remains: who will appear in the newly painted composition? Liz or Marianne? Or perhaps a third model, a hybrid of the two? What role does the young model play: is she the real subject of the composition or only an objective source of inspiration? Is it possible to replace the already depicted woman together with her characteristic traits and unique face by another body and face? And can that substitution of one woman by another be cognitively and ethically innocent? An angry conversation held by Liz and Frenhofer sheds some light on the question:

L: But tell me something… Since when for one work in progress you have to destroy another one? An old one,

O.K., abandoned, O.K., but there was my face there and I liked it. You had to wipe me out.

F: It's not you I wiped out.

L: What's the word for it? You replaced me, yes. You put some buttocks in place of my face…

F: 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. And believe it or not, it wasn't easy for me.

Earlier, Liz warned Marianne not to allow her face to be portrayed. Now we know why. She fears not only that the painting will deprive her of a part of her life but also expresses anxiety about a potential substitute. In the incomplete version of the painting Liz's face has been painted over and next to it the artist situated the body of Marianne seen from the back. At this particular moment relations between art and life, painting and existence are on knife's edge. Frenhofer does not perceive his gesture as something extraordinary and believes that by eradicating Liz from the painting he has merely opened space for a new world. By separating life from art he is certain that he has performed solely a gesture belonging to the domain of painting, while she, a believer in the permeability of the depiction and the person, is firmly convinced that by removing her from the painting he has also banished her from life. That he had betrayed their shared life for the sake of art. This muddle is symptomatic. Liz is clearly heartbroken by what she has seen. In a brief conversation with her husband she declares that she is no longer expecting anything and that her life has come to an end. She adds that when she saw him sleeping in the studio she thought that he had died, and she together with him. At night, she enters the studio and in silence looks at the finished painting. A moment later she picks up a paintbrush from the table and on the reverse of the canvas, on the wooden frame stretching it, she adds next to the inscription: "F. 90" her own silent commentary: a black cross. As if she were making it known that at the very movement when Frenhofer was capable of reanimating the painting he died in her eyes. The artist might have risen from the dead but he passed away as a person closest to her.

But what did Frenhofer actually paint? What was the appearance of the canvas for which the protagonists of the story and we, the viewers, waited so long? We shall never find out and we learn about the canvas only from the reactions of those looking at it. Marianne gazes for long, attentively, and then suddenly runs out of the atelier. We already know Liz's reaction. The young daughter of a house servant, whom Frenhofer treats as his confidante, also examines the canvas but her reaction (*What you've done is beautiful!*) does not explain everything. Much seems to indicate that the artist succeeded and finally executed a masterpiece. But apart from the mentioned persons no one will ever see it. Having covered the painting with green fabric (a discreet allusion to Balzac[17]) he will wall it up in a niche in the studio. In its place Frenho executes a different work, subsequently sold to the dealer totally unaware of the exchange. Why was the canvas concealed from the eyes of strangers? Just as in the commentary on Balzac let us interrupt our tale of Rivette's film at this exciting point and once again return to the text in order to examine the mystery of the masterpiece, but now from the double literary-film perspective.

4.

Recall: in Balzac's story the outcome was a shocking *qui pro quo* brimming with consequences. First, Frenhofer for a long time did not permit anyone to come close to his *La Belle Noiseuse*. Later, having completed the transaction (body for body) he placed the painters in front of the, in his opinion, finished masterpiece but they reacted with surprise and negligence, maintaining that they did not see anything apart from chaos. Let us deliberate once again. What is painting for Frenhofer? Clearly, he is a supporter of a *sui generis* magical vision. His whole slightly insane project is clearly a continuation of the myth of Pygmalion.[18] Just as the Greek sculptor wished to animate a girl carved in stone (and partly succeeded) so he too, with the aid of illusionistic tricks and technical secrets of rendering three-dimensional effects on canvas (*I have succeeded in reproducing Nature's roundness and relief on the flat surface of the canvas*), attempted to force the painted body to live. Showing his Catherine to fellow painters Frenhofer obviously mixed up assorted orders. He clearly reminded them that they were standing in the presence of a woman and not a painting. Meanwhile, his colleagues appear to have turned this directive around and perceive only the surface of a canvas covered with tangled lines.

Today, this confusion of levels appears to be unacceptable. Nonetheless, the question it conveys is reasonable. If a painting is unable to realise its promise of expressing what is real, if it is incapable of bringing the lifeless to life, then this means that painters do not possess the sort of power that they ascribe to themselves. What is the sense, therefore, of the process of painting if the only thing that we may hope for is looking at a flat lifeless canvas. It is precisely becoming aware of this painful impotence that, as Danto suggested, was the reason why Frenhofer burned his works and then died.[19] He was unable to achieve a transformation of a painted woman into a living person. His observant colleagues made him aware of this frustrating circumstance. A truly thought-provoking act, never explained in the story. His failure also explains the reason why at a certain moment Catherine Lascaux ceased being his model. Danto wrote that

she died and the sole way of resurrecting her was *via* painting. Frenhofer was incapable of finishing his work because he was unable to bring her back to life. He perceived his achievements as a different sort of failure than the one noticed by Poussin and Probus. After some reflection, it could be suggested that Frenhofer's defeat was unavoidable due to the inner limitations of realism;[20] this was the period when modernism was on the verge of debuting. One simply has to note that the wall of paint intermixed with lines and a realistic fragment of a woman's foot was the first truly modernistic work of art![21]

Danto supported the thesis that despite the failure of the painter deduced from reading Balzac *La Belle Noiseuse* can be regarded as a masterpiece. But how are we to understand the expression that it was "unknown"? Naturally, in 1612 it could have not been recognised as a modernistic masterpiece for obvious reasons. The very term did not exist and modernism was a question of the future. In what sense was it "unknown"? The reason lies in the fact that only a few could understand anything of what they managed to see. Within the context of the Balzac novel an unknown masterpiece is "unrecognised" and thus did not match the aesthetic paradigm of the epoch. Its boldness preceded the historical moment of its origin. Its time was yet to come. Even such excellent painters as Probus and Poussin were incapable of comprehending this since the Frenhofer masterpiece exceeded their cognitive habits and that to which they were accustomed. They were simply unprepared to accept the work.[22] It seems that the great Frenho himself experienced difficulties in understanding that, which he had executed. Within the context of his concept of painting as theurgical art his canvas must have appeared as a serious mistake.

In the case of Rivette such drastic misunderstandings or artistic disappointments do not take place. The deluge is already behind us. No one, apparently, anticipates any longer, while fearing being charged with insanity, that a painting can suddenly come alive and no one mistakes the depicted image for the portrayed person. Nonetheless, the reality of the painting, and quite possibly the portrait in particular, still remains mysterious. We saw how Frenhofer also tried to steal the model's secret of her concealed intensity and to transfer this knowledge onto the canvas. This time, however, the issue does not pertain to the actual effects of such a gesture and remains totally in the domain of painterly form.[23] Does such a comprehension of the painting make it impossible, at least to a limited extent, to speak about "truth in painting"?[24] Is this the sort of truth that would not be conceived as simple (and indestructible) adequacy between the object and its depiction but would be located upon a level more subtle than mimesis? Why did Marianne flee in despair from Frenhofer's canvas? Because she saw herself! Not the mirror reflection that she was so familiar with. She perceived in the canvas some sort of an extremely real, previously unknown, hidden (from others and herself) particle. Reviewing the painting, she said: *A thing which was cold and dry. It was me,* and became afraid of the truth of such re-identification. Why did Frenhofer wall up his painting, thus echoing the gesture of his namesake from Balzac's story? In this case, the reasons were certainly quite different from those of the protagonist of *Le Chef-d'oeuvre inconnu*. It is quite possible that he had finally understood that he had committed a seriously inappropriate deed and noticed that the truth of the painting is much too cruel for the portrayed model. Or, well aware of the extent to which the canvas exceeds the aesthetic conventions of its epoch, he walled it up until the suitable moment would come when it would become possible to fully appreciate its artistry. More, he compared the painting to a child who needs time to grow up. To the public he leaves a conventional, smooth nude, keeping the reviewers convinced that this is his utmost attainment. Quite possibly these are not the only answers to the earlier posed questions. Rivette's greatness consists of the fact that he does not explain this, after all, most important puzzle to the very end.

Within this context it is just as important that on a certain interpretation level *La Belle Noiseuse* appears to be not only a film about a painting but also about the nature of the film medium. It can be easily deciphered as a self-thematic work, a study on the potential of film searching for the "truth" of reality; does film, inevitably "visible", render indelible only physical appearance and touch the phenomenal stratum or can it penetrate the skin of the visible? Hence the intended and controlled formal asceticism of Rivette's work as well as the fact that it is deprived of all aesthetic beauty and narrating tricks emulating "real life". The formal severity and theatralisation of the message make it possible not only to take a close look at the Frenhofer painting but also at its nature within whose framework it appears. Balzac and Rivette produced two totally different masterpieces about the creation of a masterpiece. Everything has still not been said. After all, their nature means that they have much more to tell us than we are capable to say about them.

Endnotes

1 The first version of the novel appeared in 1831 in the periodical "L'Artiste" (two parts in two successive issues) under the title: *Maitre Frenhofer*, and in the same year it was issued once again with slight changes and under a different title: *Catherine Lescaut, conte phantastique*. After successive retouching it was published in 1837 in vol. XVII of the collection: *Études philosophiques* as: *Le Chef-d'śuvre inconnu*, and in 1846 it was included into *La Comédie humaine*.

2 Balzac's excellent familiarity with painting was noticed by the critics who indicated a number of possible sources of his knowledge, mentioning such names as Gautier and in particular Delacroix, cf. M. Gilman, *Balzac and Diderot: Le Chef-d'śuvre inconnu*, "PMLA", no. 4, vol. 65: 1950, p. 644.

3 D. Ashton, *A Fable of Modern Art*, University of California Press, Berkley 1991, p. 10. For relations between the depiction of nudity in Balzac's story and the problems experienced by Cézanne in connection with his *Grandes Baigneuses* see: J. Kear, *"Frenhofer, c'est moi": Cézanne's Nudes and Balzac's* Le Chef-d'śuvre inconnu, "Cambridge Quarterly", no. 35(4):2006, pp. 345-60.

4 *Balthus, à contre-courant - entretiens avec Constanzo Constantini*, transl. J.M. Kłoczowski, Warszawa 2004, p. 146. On the margin, he also recalled withn this context the name of Nicholas Poussin, his master (who in Balzac's fictional narration plays the role of a talented student) and characterised his painting. Upon this occasion he also mentionsed that it was Poussin who inspired the "magnificent story" by Balzac. Just like Poussin, Frenhofer sought in art the absolute that should be the goal of every genuine painter.

5 Lovers of round numbers drew attention to the fact that this took place a hundred years after the publication of *Chef-d'śuvre inconnu*.

6 Apart from the writings used in this text cf., i.a. J.-L. Bouget, *Balzac et le pictural*, "The Romantic Reviev", no. 11: 1973, pp. 286-295, E. Gans, *Balzac's* Unknowable Masterpiece *and the Limits of the Classical Esthetic*, "MLN", no. 90 (4):1975, pp. 504-16, H. Shillony, *En marge du* Chef-d'śuvre inconnu: *Frenhofer, Appelle et David* , "L'Année balzacienne", no. 3: 1982, pp. 288-90, A. Goetz, *Frenhofer et les maîtres d'autrefois* , "L'Année balzacienne", no. 15: 1994, pp. 69-89.

7 D. Knight, *From Painting to Sculpture: Balzac, Pygmalion and the Secret of Relief in* Sarrasine *and* The Unknown Masterpiece, "Paragraph", no. 1, vol. 27: 2004, p. 79. Evidently, this remark did not stop the author from writing yet another analytical sketch about Balzac.

8 *La Belle Noiseuse*, directed by J. Rivette, screenplay by P. Bonitzer, Ch. Laurent, music I.Stravinsky, cast: Michel Piccoli, Emanuelle Beart, Jane Birkin, Marianne Denicourt et al., 1991.

9 The Unknown Masterpiece by Honore Balzac, introduction by: Arthur C. Danto, translated from the French by Richard Howard, "New York Review of Books", 31 August 2000.

10 Ibid., p. 8.

11 G. Didi-Huberman drew attention that already the mysterious surname of Balzac's protagonist is connected with visibility. In addition, it resembles that of the German optician Joseph von Fraunhofer, the inventor of the spectroscope, who died only a few years before *Le chef-d'oeuvre inconnu* was written; cf. G. Didi-Huberman, *La peinture incarnée*, Les Editions de Minuit, Paris 1985, p. 35.

12 H. de Balzac, *Nieznane arcydzieło*, transl. J. Rogoziński, Warszawa 1951, p. 13.

13 H. de Balzac, *Le chef-d'oeuvre inconnu*, p. 154; I cite the text of Balzac's novel published as an appendix to G. Didi-Huberman's *La peinture incarnée*.

14 Ibid.

15 Danto, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

16 Cited film lines.

17 *While Gillette's words sounded in Poussin's ears, Frenhofer drew a green serge covering over his* Catherine… (in the original: *une serge verte*).

18 Cf. Knight, op. cit., p. 89. G. Didi-Huberman expands also another mythical track indicated in the text: Frenhofer-Orpheus sets off to the "infero of painting" following his Eurydice, *femme irreprochable*; G. Didi-Huberman, op.cit., pp. 66-67.

19 Danto, op. cit., p. 23.

20 In turn, G. Didi-Huberman maintained that Frenhofer's failure was that of the model of painting based on imitation: *Confronting Images: Questioning the Ends of a Certain History of Art*, transl. J.C. Goodman, Penn State Press, State College, 2004, p. 234.

21 Ibid.

22 Danto, op. cit., p. 25.

23 I propose a general understanding of the conceot of the form as in the interpretation of its contents by Wiesław Juszczak; cf. W. Juszczak, *Zasłona w rajskie ptaki, albo o granicach „okresu powieści"*, Warszawa 1981, pp. 49-55.

24 I intentionally mention the title of the study by Jacques Derrida, while resigning (due to insufficient space) from even the slightest attempts at referring to its theses: cf. J. Derrida, *Prawda w malarstwie*, transl. M. Kwietniewska, Gdańsk 2003.