

## The Captive Lover

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## An interview with Jacques Rivette

by Frédéric Bonnaud  
 Translation by Kent Jones



*La Belle noiseuse*

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For a Jacques Rivette filmography, click [here](#).

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I guess I like a lot of directors. Or at least I *try* to. I try to stay attentive to all the greats and also the less-than-greats. Which I do, more or less. I see a lot of movies, and I don't stay away from anything. Jean-Luc sees a lot too, but he doesn't always stay till the end. For me, the film has to be *incredibly* bad to make me want to pack up and leave. And the fact that I see so many films really seems to amaze certain people. Many filmmakers pretend that they never see anything, which has always seemed odd to me. Everyone accepts the fact that novelists read novels, that painters go to exhibitions and inevitably draw on the work of the great artists who came before them, that musicians listen to old music in addition to new music... so why do people think it's strange that filmmakers - or people who have the ambition to become filmmakers - should see movies? When you see the films of certain young directors, you get the impression that film history begins for them around 1980. Their films would probably be better if they'd seen a few more films, which runs counter to this idiotic theory that you run the risk of being influenced if you see too much. Actually, it's when you see too *little* that you run the risk of being influenced. If you see a lot, you can choose the films you want to be influenced *by*. Sometimes the choice isn't conscious, but there are some things in life that are far more powerful than we are, and that affect us profoundly. If I'm influenced by Hitchcock, Rossellini or Renoir without realizing it, so much the better. If I do something sub-Hitchcock, I'm already very happy. Cocteau used to say: "Imitate, and what is personal will eventually come despite yourself." You can always try.

*Europa 51* (Roberto Rossellini, 1952)

Every time I make a film, from *Paris nous appartient* (1961) through *Jeanne la pucelle* (1994), I keep coming back to the shock we all experienced when we first saw *Europa 51*. And I think that Sandrine Bonnaire is really in the tradition of Ingrid Bergman as an actress. She can go very deep into Hitchcock territory, and she can go just as deep into Rossellini territory, as she already has with Pialat and Varda.

*Le Samourai* (Jean-Pierre Melville, 1967)

I've never had any affinity for the overhyped mythology of the bad boy, which I think is basically phony. But just by chance, I saw a little of *L'Armée des ombres* (1969) on TV recently, and I was stunned. Now I have to see all of Melville all over again: he's definitely someone I underrated. What we have in common is that we both love the same period of American cinema - but not in the same way. I hung out with him a little in the late '50s; he and I drove around Paris in his car one night. And he delivered a two-hour long monologue, which was fascinating. He really wanted to have disciples and become our "Godfather": a misunderstanding that never amounted to anything.

*The Secret Beyond the Door* (Fritz Lang, 1948)

The poster for *Secret Défense* (1997) reminded us of Lang. Every once in a while during the shoot, I told myself that our film had a slim chance of resembling Lang. But I never set up a shot thinking of him or looking to imitate him. During the editing (which is when I really start to see the film), I saw that it was Hitchcock who had guided us through the writing (which I already knew) and Lang who guided us through the shooting: especially his last films, the ones where he leads the spectator in one direction before he pushes them in another completely different direction, in a very brutal, abrupt way. And then this Langian side of the film (if in fact there is one) is also due to Sandrine's gravity.

*The Night of the Hunter* (Charles Laughton, 1955)

The most seductive one-shot in the history of movies. What can you say? It's the greatest *amateur* film ever made.



*Dragonwyck*

*Dragonwyck* (Joseph L. Mankiewicz, 1946)

I knew his name would come up sooner or later. So, I'm going to speak my peace at the risk of shocking a lot of people I respect, and maybe even pissing a lot of them off for good. His great films, like *All About Eve* (1950) or *The Barefoot Contessa* (1954), were very striking within the parameters of contemporary American cinema at the time they were made, but now I have no desire whatsoever to see them again. I was astonished when Juliet Berto and I saw *All About Eve* again 25 years ago at the

Cinémathèque. I wanted her to see it for a project we were going to do together before

*Céline and Julie Go Boating* (1974). Except for Marilyn Monroe, she hated every minute of it, and I had to admit that she was right: every intention was underlined in red, and it struck me as a film without a director! Mankiewicz was a great *producer*, a good scenarist and a masterful writer of dialogue, but for me he was never a director. His films are cut together any which way, the actors are always pushed towards caricature and they resist with only varying degrees of success. Here's a good definition of *mise en scène* - it's what's lacking in the films of Joseph L. Mankiewicz. Whereas Preminger is a pure *director*. In his work, everything *but* the direction often disappears. It's a shame that *Dragonwyck* wasn't directed by Jacques Tourneur.

*The Big Sleep* (Howard Hawks, 1946)

It's Chandler's greatest novel, his strongest. I find the first version of the film - the one that's about to be shown here - more coherent and "Hawksian" than the version that was fiddled with and came out in '46. If you want to call *Secret Défense* a policier, it doesn't bother me. It's just that it's a policier without any cops. I'm incapable of filming French cops, since I find them 100% un-photogenic. The only one who's found a solution to this problem is Tavernier, in *L.627* (1992) and the last quarter of *L'Appât* (1995). In those films, French cops actually *exist*, they have a reality distinct from the Duvivier/Clouzot "tradition" or all the American clichés. In that sense, Tavernier has really advanced beyond the rest of French cinema.

*Vertigo* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1958)

Of course we thought about it when we made *Secret Défense*, even if dramatically, our film is *Vertigo* in reverse. Splitting the character of Laure Marsac into Véronique/Ludivine solved all our scenario problems, and above all it allowed us to avoid a police interrogation scene. During the editing, I was struck by the "family resemblance" between the character of Walser and the ones played by Laurence Olivier in *Rebecca* (1940) and Cary Grant in *Suspicion* (1941). The source for each of these characters is Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights*, which brings us back to Tourneur, since *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943) is a remake of *Jane Eyre*.

I could never choose one film by Hitchcock; I'd have to take the whole oeuvre (*Secret Défense* could actually have been called *Family Plot* [1976]). But if I had to choose just one film, it would be *Notorious* (1946), because of Ingrid Bergman. You can see this imaginary love affair between Bergman and Hitchcock, with Cary Grant there to put things in relief. The final sequence might be the most perfect in film history, in the way that it resolves everything in three minutes - the love story, the family story and the espionage story, in a few magnificent, unforgettable shots.

*Mouchette* (Robert Bresson, 1966)

When Sandrine and I first started talking - and, as usual, I didn't know a thing about the film I wanted to make - Bernanos and Dostoyevsky came up. Dostoyevsky was a dead end because he was too Russian. But since there's something very Bernanos-like about her as an actress in the first place, I started telling her my more or less precise memories of two of his novels: *A Crime*, which is completely unfilmable, and *A Bad Dream*, a novel that he

kept tucked away in his drawer, in which someone commits a crime for someone else. In *A Bad Dream*, the journey of the murderess was described in even greater length and detail than Sandrine's journey in *Secret Défense*.

It's because of Bernanos that *Mouchette* is the Bresson film I like the least. *Diary of a Country Priest* (1950), on the other hand, is magnificent, even if Bresson left out the book's sense of generosity and charity and made a film about pride and solitude. But in *Mouchette*, which is Bernanos' most perfect book, Bresson keeps betraying him: everything is so relentlessly paltry, studied. Which doesn't mean that Bresson isn't an immense artist. I would place *Trial of Joan of Arc* (1962) right up there with Dreyer's film. It burns just as brightly.

*Under the Sun of Satan* (Maurice Pialat, 1987)

Pialat is a great filmmaker - imperfect, but then who isn't? I don't mean it as a reproach. And he had the genius to invent Sandrine - archeologically speaking - for *A nos amours* (1983). But I would put *Van Gogh* (1991) and *The House in the Woods* (1971) above all his other films. Because there he succeeded in filming the happiness, no doubt imaginary, of the pre-WWI world. Although the tone is very different, it's as beautiful as Renoir.

But I really believe that Bernanos is unfilmable. *Diary of a Country Priest* remains an exception. In *Under the Sun of Satan*, I like everything concerning Mouchette [Sandrine Bonnaire's character], and Pialat acquits himself honorably. But it was insane to adapt the book in the first place since the core of the narrative, the encounter with Satan, happens at night - black night, absolute night. Only Duras could have filmed that.

*Home from the Hill* (Vincente Minnelli, 1959)

I'm going to make more enemies...actually the same enemies, since the people who like Minnelli usually like Mankiewicz, too. Minnelli is regarded as a great director thanks to the slackening of the "politique des auteurs." For François, Jean-Luc and me, the politique consisted of saying that there were only *a few* filmmakers who merited consideration as auteurs, in the same sense as Balzac or Molière. One play by Molière might be less good than another, but it is vital and exciting in relation to the entire oeuvre. This is true of Renoir, Hitchcock, Lang, Ford, Dreyer, Mizoguchi, Sirk, Ozu... But it's not true of all filmmakers. Is it true of Minnelli, Walsh or Cukor? I don't think so. They shot the scripts that the studio assigned them to, with varying levels of interest. Now, in the case of Preminger, where the direction is everything, the politique works. As for Walsh, whenever he was intensely interested in the story or the actors, he became an auteur - and in many other cases, he didn't. In Minnelli's case, he was meticulous with the sets, the spaces, the light...but how much did he work with the actors? I loved *Some Came Running* (1958) when it came out, just like everybody else, but when I saw it again ten years ago I was taken aback: three great actors and they're working in a void, with no one watching them or listening to them from behind the camera.

Whereas with Sirk, everything is always *filmed*. No matter what the script, he's always a real *director*. In *Written On the Wind* (1956), there's that famous Universal staircase,



and it's a real character, just like the one in *Secret Défense*. I chose the house where we filmed because of the staircase. I think that's where all dramatic loose ends come together, and also where they must resolve themselves.



*Secret Défense*

*That Obscure Object of Desire* (Luis Buñuel, 1977)

More than those of any other filmmaker, Buñuel's films gain the most on re-viewing. Not only do they not wear thin, they become increasingly mysterious, stronger and more precise. I remember being completely astonished by one Buñuel film: if he hadn't already stolen it, I would have loved to be able to call my new film *The Exterminating Angel*! François and I saw *El* when it came out and we loved it. We were really struck by its Hitchcockian side, although Buñuel's obsessions and Hitchcock's obsessions were definitely not the same. But they both had the balls to make films out of the obsessions that they carried around with them every day of their lives. Which is also what Pasolini, Mizoguchi and Fassbinder did.

*The Marquise of O...* (Eric Rohmer, 1976)

It's very beautiful. Although I prefer the Rohmer films where he goes deep into emotional destitution, where it becomes the crux of the *mise en scène*, as in *Summer*, *The Tree*, *the Mayor and the Mediathèque* and in a film that I'd rank even higher, *Rendez-vous in Paris* (1995). The second episode is even more beautiful than the first, and I consider the third to be a kind of summit of French cinema. It had an added personal meaning for me because I saw it in relation to *La Belle noiseuse* (1991) - it's an entirely different way of showing painting, in this case the way a painter looks at canvases. If I had to choose a key Rohmer film that summarized everything in his oeuvre, it would be *The Aviator's Wife* (1980). In that film, you get all the science and the eminently ethical perversity of the Moral Tales and the rest of the Comedies and Proverbs, only with moments of infinite grace. It's a film of absolute grace.

*Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me* (David Lynch, 1992)

I don't own a television, which is why I couldn't share Serge Daney's passion for TV series. And I took a long time to appreciate Lynch. In fact, I didn't really start until *Blue Velvet* (1986). With Isabella Rossellini's apartment, Lynch succeeded in creating the creepiest set in the history of cinema. And *Twin Peaks, the Film* is the craziest film in the history of cinema. I have no idea what happened, I have no idea what I saw, all I know is that I left the theater floating six feet above the ground. Only the first part of *Lost Highway* (1996) is as great. After which you get the idea, and by the last section I was one step ahead of the film, although it remained a powerful experience right up to the end.

*Nouvelle Vague* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1990)

Definitely Jean-Luc's most beautiful film of the last 15 years, and that raises the bar pretty high, because the other films aren't anything to scoff at. But I don't want to talk about it...it would get too personal.



*Beauty and the Beast* (Jean Cocteau, 1946)

Along with *Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne* (1945), it was the key French film for our generation - François, Jean-Luc, Jacques Demy, myself. For me, it's fundamental. I saw *Beauty and the Beast* in '46 and then I read Cocteau's shooting diary - a hair-raising shoot, which hit more snags than you can imagine. And eventually, I knew the diary by heart because I re-read it so many times. That's how I discovered what I wanted to do with my life. Cocteau was responsible for my vocation as a filmmaker. I love all his films, even the less successful ones. He's just so important, and he was really an auteur in every sense of the word.

*Les Enfants terribles* (Jean Cocteau, 1950)

A magnificent film. One night, right after I'd arrived in Paris, I was on my way home. And as I was going up rue Amsterdam around Place Clichy, I walked right into the filming of the snowball fight. I stepped onto the court of the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre and there was Cocteau directing the shoot. Melville wasn't even there. Cocteau is someone who has made such a profound impression on me that there's no doubt he's influenced every one of my films. He's a great poet, a great novelist, maybe not a great playwright - although I really love one of his plays, *The Knights of the Round Table*, which is not too well known. An astonishing piece, very autobiographical, about homosexuality and opium. Chéreau should stage it. You see Merlin as he puts Arthur's castle under a bad charm, assisted by an invisible demon named Ginifer who appears in the guise of three different characters: it's a metaphor for all forms of human dependence. In *Secret Défense*, the character of Laure Mersac probably has a little of Ginifer in her.

Cocteau is the one who, at the end of the '40s, demonstrated in his writing exactly what you could do with *faux raccords*, that working in a 180-degree space could be great and that photographic unity was a joke: he gave these things a form and each of us took what he could from them.

*Titanic* (James Cameron, 1997)

I agree completely with what Jean-Luc said in this week's *Elle*: it's garbage. Cameron isn't evil, he's not an asshole like Spielberg. He wants to be the new De Mille. Unfortunately, he can't direct his way out of a paper bag. On top of which the actress is awful, unwatchable, the most slovenly girl to appear on the screen in a long, long time. That's why it's been such a success with young girls, especially inhibited, slightly plump American girls who see the film over and over as if they were on a pilgrimage: they recognize themselves in her, and dream of falling into the arms of the gorgeous Leonardo.

*Deconstructing Harry* (Woody Allen, 1997)

*Wild Man Blues* (1997) by Barbara Kopple helped me to overcome my problem with him, and to like him as a person. In *Wild Man Blues*, you really see that he's completely honest, sincere and very open, like a 12-year old. He's not always as ambitious as he could be, and he's better on dishonesty than he is with feelings of warmth. But *Deconstructing Harry* is a breath of fresh air, a politically incorrect American film at long last. Whereas

the last one was incredibly bad. He's a good guy, and he's definitely an auteur. Which is not to say that every film is an artistic success.



*Happy Together*

*Happy Together* (Wong Kar-wai, 1997)

I like it very much. But I still think that the great Asian directors are Japanese, despite the critical inflation of Asia in general and of Chinese directors in particular. I think they're able and clever, maybe a little *too* able and a little *too* clever. For example, Hou Hsiao-hsien really irritates me, even though I liked the first two of his films that appeared in Paris. I find his work completely manufactured and sort of

disagreeable, but very politically correct. The last one [*Goodbye South, Goodbye*, 1996] is so systematic that it somehow becomes interesting again but even so, I think it's kind of a trick. Hou Hsiao-hsien and James Cameron, same problem. Whereas with Wong Kar-wai, I've had my ups and downs, but I found *Happy Together* incredibly touching. In that film, he's a great director, and he's taking risks. *Chungking Express* (1994) was his biggest success, but that was a film made on a break during shooting [of *Ashes of Time*, 1994], and pretty minor. But it's always like that. Take Jane Campion: *The Piano* (1993) is the least of her four films, whereas *The Portrait of a Lady* (1996) is magnificent, and everybody spat on it. Same with Kitano: *Fireworks* (1997) is the least good of the three of his films to get a French release. But those are the rules of the game. After all, Renoir had his biggest success with *Grand Illusion* (1937).

*Face/Off* (John Woo, 1997)

I loathe it. But I thought *A Better Tomorrow* (1986) was awful, too. It's stupid, shoddy and unpleasant. I saw *Broken Arrow* (1996) and didn't think it was so bad, but that was just a studio film, where he was fulfilling the terms of his contract. But I find *Face/Off* disgusting, physically revolting, and pornographic.

*Taste of Cherry* (Abbas Kiarostami, 1997)

His work is always very beautiful but the pleasure of discovery is now over. I wish that he would get out of his own universe for a while. I'd like to see something a little more surprising from him, which would really be welcome...God, what a meddler I am!

*On Connaît la Chanson* (Alain Resnais, 1997)

Resnais is one of the few indisputably great filmmakers, and sometimes that's a burden for him. But this film is almost perfect, a full experience. Though for me, the great Resnais films remain, on the one hand, *Hiroshima, mon amour* (1959) and *Muriel* (1963), and on the other hand, *Mélo* (1986) and *Smoking/No Smoking* (1993).

*Funny Games* (Michael Haneke, 1997)

What a disgrace, just a complete piece of shit! I liked his first film, *The Seventh Continent* (1989), very much, and then each one after that I liked less and less. This one is vile, not in the same way as John Woo, but those two really deserve each other - they should get married. And I never want to meet their children! It's worse than Kubrick with *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), a film that I hate just as much, not for cinematic reasons but for moral ones. I remember when it came out, Jacques Demy was so shocked that it made him cry. Kubrick is a machine, a mutant, a Martian. He has no human feeling whatsoever. But it's great when the machine films other machines, as in *2001* (1968).

*Ossos* (Pedro Costa, 1997)

I think it's magnificent, I think that Costa is genuinely great. It's beautiful and strong. Even if I had a hard time understanding the characters' relationships with one another. Like with *Casa de lava* (1994), new enigmas reveal themselves with each new viewing.

*The End of Violence* (Wim Wenders, 1997)

Very touching. Even if, about halfway through, it starts to go around in circles and ends up on a sour note. Wenders often has script problems. He needs to commit himself to working with real writers again. *Alice in the Cities* (1974) and *Wrong Move* (1975) are great films - so is *Paris, Texas* (1984). And I'm sure the next one will be, too.

*Live Flesh* (Pedro Almodóvar, 1997)

Great, one of the most beautiful Almodóvars, and I love all of them. He's a much more mysterious filmmaker than people realize. He doesn't cheat or con the audience. He also has his Cocteau side, in the way that he plays with the phantasmagorical and the real.

*Alien Resurrection* (Jean-Pierre Jeunet, 1997)

I didn't expect it as I was walking into the theater, but I was enraptured throughout the whole thing. Sigourney Weaver is wonderful, and what she does here really places her in the great tradition of expressionist cinema. It's a purely plastic film, with a story that's both minimal and incomprehensible. Nevertheless, it managed to scare the entire audience, while it also had some very moving moments. Basically, you're given a single situation at the beginning, and the film consists of as many plastic and emotional variations of that situation as possible. It's never stupid, it's inventive, honest and frank. I have a feeling that the credit should go to Sigourney Weaver as much as it should to Jeunet.

*Rien ne va plus* (Claude Chabrol, 1997)

Another film that starts off well before falling apart halfway through. There's a big script problem: Cluzet's character isn't really dealt with. It's important to remember Hitchcock's adage about making the villain as interesting as possible. But I'm anxious to see the next Chabrol film, especially since Sandrine will be in it.

*Starship Troopers* (Paul Verhoeven, 1997)





I've seen it twice and I like it a lot, but I prefer *Showgirls* (1995), one of the great American films of the last few years. It's Verhoeven's best American film and his most personal. In *Starship Troopers*, he uses various effects to help everything go down smoothly, but he's totally exposed in *Showgirls*. It's the American film that's closest to his Dutch work. It has great sincerity, and the script is very honest, guileless. It's so obvious that it was written by Verhoeven himself rather than Mr. Eszterhas, who is nothing. And that actress is amazing! Like every Verhoeven film, it's very unpleasant: it's about surviving in a world populated by assholes, and that's his philosophy. Of all the recent American films that were set in Las Vegas, *Showgirls* was the only one that was real - take my word for it. I who have never set foot in the place!



*Starship Troopers*

*Starship Troopers* doesn't mock the American military or the clichés of war - that's just something Verhoeven says in interviews to appear politically correct. In fact, he loves clichés, and there's a comic strip side to Verhoeven, very close to Lichtenstein. And his bugs are wonderful and very funny, so much better than Spielberg's dinosaurs. I always defend Verhoeven, just as I've been defending Altman for the past twenty years. Altman failed with *Prêt-à-Porter* (1994) but at least he followed through with it, right up to an ending that capped the rock bottom nothingness that preceded it. He should have realized how uninteresting the fashion world was when he started to shoot, and he definitely should have understood it *before* he started shooting. He's an uneven filmmaker but a passionate one. In the same way, I've defended Clint Eastwood since he started directing. I like all his films, even the jokey "family" films with that ridiculous monkey, the ones that everyone are trying to forget - they're part of his oeuvre, too. In France, we forgive almost everything, but with Altman, who takes risks each time he makes a film, we forgive nothing. Whereas for Pollack, Frankenheimer, Schatzberg...risk doesn't even exist for them. The films of Eastwood or Altman belong to them and no one else: you *have* to like them.

*The Fifth Element* (Luc Besson, 1997)

I didn't hate it, but I was more taken with *La Femme Nikita* (1990) and *The Professional* (1994). I can't wait to see his *Joan of Arc*. Since no version of *Joan of Arc* has ever made money, including ours, I'm waiting to see if he drains all the cash out of Gaumont that they made with *The Fifth Element*. Of course it will be a very naive and childish film, but why not? *Joan of Arc* could easily work as a childish film (at Vaucouleurs, she was only 16 years old), the Orléans murals done by numbers. Personally, I prefer small, "realistic" settings to overblown sets done by numbers, but to each his own. *Joan of Arc* belongs to everyone (except Jean-Marie Le Pen), which is why I got to make my own version after Dreyer's and Bresson's. Besides, Besson is only one letter short of Bresson! He's got the look, but he doesn't have the 'r.'

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See also

**Secret Défense (Jacques Rivette, 1998)** by Jared Rapfogel

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## Jacques Rivette filmography

*Va savoir!* (2001)

*Secret défense* (1998)

*Lumière et compagnie* (1995)

*Haut bas fragile* (1995)

*Jeanne la Pucelle 1. Les batailles* (1994)

*Jeanne la Pucelle 2. Les prisons* (1994)

*La Belle noiseuse, divertimento* (1991)

*La Belle noiseuse* (1991)

*La Bande des quatre* (1988)

*Hurlevent* (1985)

*L'amour par terre* (1984)

*Merry-Go-Round* (1983)

*Paris s'en va* (1981)

*Le Pont du Nord* (1981)

*Noroît* (1976)

*Duelle* (1976)

*Céline et Julie vont en bateau* (1974)

*Essai sur l'agression* (1974)

*Naissance et mont de Prométhée* (1974)

*Out 1: Spectre* (1972)

*Out 1: Noli me tangere* (1970)

*L'amour fou* (1968)

*Jean Renoir, le patron* (1966)

*La Religieuse* (1966)

*Paris nous appartient* (1960)

*Le Coup du berger* (1956)

*Le Divertissement* (1952)

*Le Quadrille* (1950)

*Aux quatre coins* (1949)



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