

Film

JAKE WILSON



THE THRILL OF DISCOVERY

An art-world mystery inspired veteran French filmmaker Pascal Bonitzer.

When a group of valuers from Christie's auction house turned up at a Paris apartment in 2005 to inspect a painting that was long thought lost, they were stunned by what they found. Expecting to be shown a copy of Austrian artist Egon Schiele's *Wilted Sunflowers*, they found themselves face-to-face with the real thing.

Painted in 1914, Schiele's work was bought by a Jewish art collector in Vienna, then confiscated by the Nazis in the late 1930s.

It was presumed lost until the anonymous owner contacted Christie's for a valuation. This once-in-a-lifetime moment of discovery is the subject of *The Stolen Painting*, a new film by French auteur Pascal Bonitzer. Along with the discovery, the film examines the moral dilemma that follows. The find has the potential to be extremely lucrative but who deserves to profit?

For film buffs everywhere, Bonitzer is a name to conjure with. As a young man, he was a critic for the most influential of all film magazines, France's *Cahiers du Cinéma* (literally "cinema notebooks"), in its most radical, adventurous phase.

By the late 1970s, he had moved into screenwriting – and he's since been credited as the co-writer of around 40 features by a remarkable range of directors, including some of the most significant figures in modern French cinema and beyond.

His recent credits include Catherine Breillat's 2023 film *Last Summer*, in which a middle-aged lawyer has an illicit relationship with her teenage stepson, and the similarly provocative 2021 historical drama *Benedetta*, about a 17th-century lesbian nun.

In general, Bonitzer gravitates to non-conformists as collaborators. Most central to his career was his long association with the great French New Wave director Jacques Rivette, as part of the regular team who worked on a dozen-odd features, starting with *Love on the Ground* in 1984. No two Rivette films were alike, but they were all infused with a spirit of play.

In the 1990s, Bonitzer began to direct his own films; *The Stolen Painting* is his ninth. These are outwardly more modest and even conventional, judging from those that have made it to Australia (perhaps the best-known is the 1999 comedy *Rien sur Robert*, starring Fabrice Luchini as a critic who unwisely publishes a review of a film without watching it).

Yet there's something inscrutable about these films. They don't resolve the question of who Bonitzer himself really is – and the truth is I've never known much about him, except that his name in the credits holds the promise of something interesting.

But now here he is facing me across the table in a Paris hotel room, a courteous Frenchman in his late 70s, dressed in dark colours, very bald, very wry.

Bonitzer is here to talk about *The Stolen Painting*, not to look back over his career. Still, I can't resist asking him if he learned anything from Rivette that he's been able to apply to his own approach to directing.

Working with Rivette, he says, was an experience unlike any other. In essence, his approach was to make up the film as he went along, with help from Bonitzer and Christine Laurent, the other regular member of the writing team. "We were writing during the shoot, which is very unusual," he tells me.

Each Rivette film was a trip, Bonitzer says, using the English word. Does he mean a trip as in a journey, or the psychedelic kind? "Both at once." Guiding the filmmakers on their trip, however, was the sense of a clear goal. "With each film, there was a problem to be solved."

The Stolen Painting was made in a more traditional way, with a finished script before the start of the shoot. But as Bonitzer explains, here too it was a matter of solving a problem, in this case "to bring together two separate worlds".

The collision of these two worlds is the narrative engine of the film, which was born after Bonitzer's script collaborator, Iliana Lolice, uncovered the story of *Wilted Sunflowers*. While many details in the film are true to life, the characters are fictional: there's the sophisticated world represented by Andre Masson (Alex Lutz), the cynical but perhaps not totally unprincipled Parisian auctioneer who finds the painting.

Far removed from this in every sense is the workaday world of Alsace in north-eastern France, home to Martin Keller (Arcadi Radeff), a young factory employee who has come into possession of the painting but is ill-at-ease with his apparent windfall.

While Bonitzer says there's something of himself in all his characters, he admits that neither of these worlds are his own. Where the details of Andre's work were concerned, he relied on research done by Lolice. As for the life of Martin and his buddies: "I had to make it up."

But are there parallels between what the film shows

and his own experiences in the film industry, where even larger sums of money are routinely in play? Yes, Bonitzer says, but only to a certain extent. Andre and his colleagues are all about the bottom line – whereas in movie making, there's still some room for art for its own sake.

How true does this remain, though, in the streaming era, when film and TV are often understood as interchangeable forms of "content"? Again, Bonitzer grants the point but says this is the side of the industry he tries to steer clear of. Not that he has a problem with TV as such: he was a fan of *The*

Wire, for example, though there aren't many shows that have caught his attention lately.

Keeping Bonitzer's background as a film critic in mind, I'm curious about a line early in the film when Andre is lecturing his deceptively obliging intern Aurore (Louise Chevillotte) about the thrill of the art valuation game. "The fantastic part of this job is turning up a real rarity. You're Indiana Jones."

This cinematic allusion, it turns out, wasn't Bonitzer's invention but taken straight from life – something Lolice picked up from an interview with one of the actual art auctioneers who served as partial models for the character.

Still, I point out that the *Indiana Jones* films also invoke the Nazi era, providing a sombre backdrop for a relatively lighthearted story. Bonitzer nods benignly. "That is, unfortunately, the only connection between my film and Spielberg's."

Again, the sorrowful smile, which could be ironic in more than one direction, giving the impression that even now I've met him, Pascal Bonitzer still remains a mystery man.

The Stolen Painting is screening as part of the Alliance Française French Film Festival, running until April 9. The writer travelled to France courtesy of Alliance Française.



Pascal Bonitzer has worked with icons like Jacques Rivette, Chantal Akerman and Paul Verhoeven; (top) Lea Drucker and Alex Lutz in *The Stolen Painting*. MAIN PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

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