

Notes on Godard's Videotapes

at the Kitchen symposium: "Television, Society, Art"
October 24-26, 1980

I. Notes on Seeing Godard's Tapes at The Kitchen

I am putting down some initial thoughts on seeing two sections ("Mouvement 9" and "Mouvement 10") from Jean-Luc Godard's six-hour videotape made (with the collaboration of Ann Marie Miéville) for French television, *France Tour Detour Deux Enfants*. Unfortunately the viewing circumstances inhibit writing about these tapes in the greater depth that they deserve. I saw only two sections from what was obviously a much longer work and had to rely on a transcription of the sound track during the viewing. But because Godard's tapes are so good and bring to bear issues in which I am vitally interested, I need to give them some time and say what I am able.

Before examining the tapes themselves, though, I want to mention the circumstances surrounding their screening at the conference. No other tapes were shown there, which meant that the only work screened was by a European filmmaker, a decision which excluded all American video artists. Therefore, the screening was the focus of controversy and dissatisfaction with the conference organizers. At the end of the conference, Mary MacArthur, director of The Kitchen, acknowledged the decision not to screen other tapes due to the difficulties of the selection process and the economics of paying the video artists. The decision was perhaps understandable; yet, by the decision to show the Godard tapes, the issue was opened, and I for one must suggest alternative possibilities which the organizers of the conference could have followed:

(1) The Kitchen viewing room could have been opened in a non-selective manner to all those artists willing to screen tapes without remuneration, in keeping with Godard's generosity in lending an hour of his tape for the screening.

(2) If this were found unsatisfactory, one selection could have been made to give a contrast to the European-produced tapes—perhaps tapes Nam June Paik has produced for television, which I am quite sure many of the conference attendees had not seen; or perhaps the tapes of Steina Vasulka,

a founder of The Kitchen and a participant in the conference. A viewing of her tapes could have given credence to the importance of her statements on the Television and Art Panel.

(3) If this alternative were also deemed unacceptable, information on the video art being shown in New York concurrent with the conference could have been printed on the schedule or on a separate sheet. In fact, during the weekend, the Collective for Living Cinema was exhibiting Robert Wilson's tapes commissioned by German television; Shirley Clarke's video could be seen in the revival of *The Connection* at the Henry St. Settlement Theater; the winners of the Ithaca Video Festival were being exhibited at Anthology Film Archives; and Terry Fox's installation was on view at MOMA. (I talked to one conferee who was unaware of the Frank Gillette installation at The Kitchen itself.)

Nevertheless, apart from the surrounding circumstances, the event of the screening of the Godard tapes was invaluable in itself. Thanks are due Godard for lending the tapes, to Elizabeth Lebovici and Berenice Reynaud for arranging the loan, and to The Kitchen staff for the organization and set-up of the screening itself. The tapes were particularly pertinent to the title of the conference: "Television, Art and Society." In fact, the tapes were the only sustained, cogent examination of the theme that I experienced during the conference. The vague verbal rhetoric of the majority of the panelists I heard and written material I read were in dire contrast to the pointed, razor-sharp words of Godard's sound track and the clarity and simplicity of his visual material.

The tapes bring a filmmaker's sensibility to the medium of television and the materials of video. They are validly "cinematic," have an intensity, a concentration of focus, a "look" we associate with film; yet they clearly use video and are very different from Godard's films. They are not "video art" or "T.V." or "film" or "commercial" or "non-commercial"—which I find wonderful. This crossing of categories works because the tapes are

both simple (selecting the exact means of craft needed to accomplish their intent) and complex under the surface (operating simultaneously on several levels).

Each of the two sections I saw begins with a child holding a microphone, followed by a shot of a second child operating a slowly panning television camera. The children are in control of the T.V. instruments (but are, of course, placed there by the adult director). These shots are visually beautiful. Indeed the camera we see is itself beautiful because it was taped by what was obviously the finest of video cameras. These shots don't have the "non-professional" look of small-format video, the intensely personal use of technology in video art, or the flat, unnatural hyped-up color of the "professional" T.V. image. The whole tape has the look of what may be called "video-cinema." In fact, the next shots of "little girl in slow motion" were first filmed, then videotaped. The slow motion Godard uses looks like the sort of digital stop-motion obtained by using a video digital frame storer, but the time seems controlled filmically. So there is a confluence here of the two media which creates its own haunting quality. (I believe it is the same kind of stop action/slow motion which Godard uses to visualize the inner states of his characters at certain points in *Every Man for Himself*.)

After these sections, each tape shows a large title: "POUVOIR" in "Mouvement 9," "ECONOMIE" in "Mouvement 10." Each corresponding section then has a visual "story" in a particular environment with "announcers" speaking over the visuals—in one tape a supermarket with women shopping; in the other, a bookstore with two people asking for books on "money, sex, and politics." The announcers talk of "monsters" (adults?), money, commodities, a general sense of people being ruled. But still the clear-cut visual *look* Godard gives does not define a negative world. The video color and manipulation of time somehow celebrate the dailiness of these scenes and make T.V. poetry out of them.

Then, with a new title, "TRUTH," the tapes break away from this concentrated manipulation of words and image that is cinematic in its sharp, jagged control of time and sculpted control of the shape of the screen. They shift to *uncontrolled* time, to the single-shot real time of videotape. We see, simply, a child sitting with face profile to the camera. In "Mouvement 9" it's a girl, in "Mouvement 10," a boy. The near-closeup of the children's faces in profile is back and side lit,

bringing into play the full range of video color. (This is cinematic, whereas T.V. technicians light flat with overhead and front lighting, giving as the unjustified reason for this ugliness that it is "electronically correct" for television.) The light of these tapes, in relation to the electronic surface, brings out the clear translucency of childhood that has been celebrated by Anaïs Nin.

During these single-takes, Godard, off-screen, "interviews" the children. Without getting into the complexities of the text, this simple visual set-up in relation to the text brings up issues of allure and pleasure, of truth and repression in the T.V. image and of social context. Godard is using the beautifying image of T.V. to subvert that image, using the directness of words to put into question the kind of message given through television. For all the beauty of the children's faces, *they* do not face the viewer, ever; they just stay fixed there. The relentlessness of their presence on the screen, and the relentlessness of the authority of the interview, creates a kind of low-level disturbance. This, in relation to the clarity and beautification, creates a feeling of poignancy.

By always having the children in profile, the usual magnet of attention (the subject addressing the viewer through the glass screen) is deflected toward more purely visual values such as the light and translucent color, the children's fates, the small movements of their dual state of attention and inattention. But even more, viewer attention is deflected toward the source of the sound, which the children are literally facing. The fact that they continually face the off-screen sound makes the locus of the sound very concrete. The locus of sound *is* more concrete in video than in film due to the concreteness of the television set, with its specific volume and placement in a room. Godard capitalizes on this concreteness to point attention toward the concreteness of the words and their subversive questionings. The director controls the interview through these located words, while the child visually controls the area of the television screen. These spheres of control, of "placedness," are seen as single, long takes, as uncontrolled time.

The employment of uncontrolled real time, while used by video artists for years, when placed in a clearly T.V. context, is subtle, less noticed, yet operative as a narrative means. Here, the invisible adult interrogating the child, who must continually sit on-screen without relief and answer the questions, mirrors the repressive situation of the traditional European (French) schoolroom. (At first I only intuited Godard's intentions in this regard,

THE KITCHEN

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THE DOWNTOWN REVIEW
FALL 1980

page 3

but my insight was later confirmed after I spoke with Berenice Reynaud.) In fact, Elizabeth Lebovici later told me that the tape was loosely inspired by the schoolbook which was designed to interest children in their subjects during The Third Republic, when school in France was first made obligatory. But of course, the kinds of questions being asked in the tape by Godard subvert the kinds of questions which could be asked in a school or on T.V. (yet Godard made them for T.V. and they were shown in France at late-night hours). On a less obvious level, the situation in the tapes undermines the classroom (or any other social) situation because the child is not expected to give a right or wrong answer. He or she is simply expected to answer. Period. There is a freedom here from an end beyond the answer itself and a freedom for the children to think for themselves *within* a precisely-structured set-up of image and sound. It is a set-up which seems obligatory, yet it was chosen by Godard and entered into individually by each child. And are we, the viewers, obliged to sit through the tape, or do we simply stay and watch the screen, as the child stays seated within the parameters of the screen?

Perhaps because I couldn't respond directly to the French sound track, I am left with this strong visual memory of the children. And I feel increasingly, in retrospect, the great visual sympathy with which Godard has treated each child's presence in the tape—the translucency of the back-lit faces, the clear color of their clothes, the utter care with every technical aspect of video to enhance their presence. And so I think the viewer senses Godard's conscious love—even seduction—of his subjects with a poignancy which seems to refer back to himself while he stands aloof and fires questions. Here is a double edge of sympathy and critical intelligence, defined by the double edges of film and video, video and T.V. Whether it is video, television, or cinema, I find the simplicity, clarity and subtlety of Godard's "Mouvements," with their balance of closeness and distance, allure and meditation, to be very important.

II. Notes written after seeing/hearing Godard in a Dick Cavett interview

Many things Godard said gave insight into what I have written about *France Tour Detour Deux Enfants*. The "double edge" sensed in the tapes was described in the Cavett interview as the "justice" of his newly found balance between distance and closeness. Did his work in video help him toward a less distanced stance?

He talked of the use of stop/slow motion as a confluence of film and video that is difficult to arrive at, difficult not only technically and aesthetically, but philosophically, because the people in film are conservative and don't want to be linked with video, and conversely, the people in video do not want to be linked with film. He obviously doesn't share this limited viewpoint.

It was an interesting contrast to have seen Godard himself being interviewed in a set-up where he apparently had the freedom to answer as he wished but within all the conventions of T.V., which made his answers entertaining in a way his tape is not. Would the same channel show all six (or even one) of his own videotapes?

III. Notes written after a second Cavett interview

In the second Cavett interview, Godard brought up two more subjects which put the tapes into further relation to the theme of childhood and the process of making the tapes.

In asking Cavett if it were difficult always to have to talk to people, Godard said that one of the most difficult moments for him was meeting the little girl who is in the tape. What could he talk to her about constantly for ten minutes? I now wonder if that first interview was in the final tape. I ask this because while viewing the tape, I thought that the questions Godard asked were pre-planned and tightly scripted. There was a "sure-firedness" to it, as if Godard knew exactly what he would ask, giving that feeling of a prepared school lesson but with no right or wrong answers and no rewards or punishments. His interviewing persona seemed the opposite of Cavett's. Now I wonder what the parameters of spontaneity and plan were.

Later (or perhaps earlier) in the interview, Godard said that *Every Man for Himself* is the first film he has made which he considers truly his own. He feels that his previous films came, relatively speaking, from outside of him. He feels now, finally, that he is able to speak from inside himself, directly into film, to the screen. He said he has finally reached this point because he was able to re-enter childhood as an adult, through a second-story

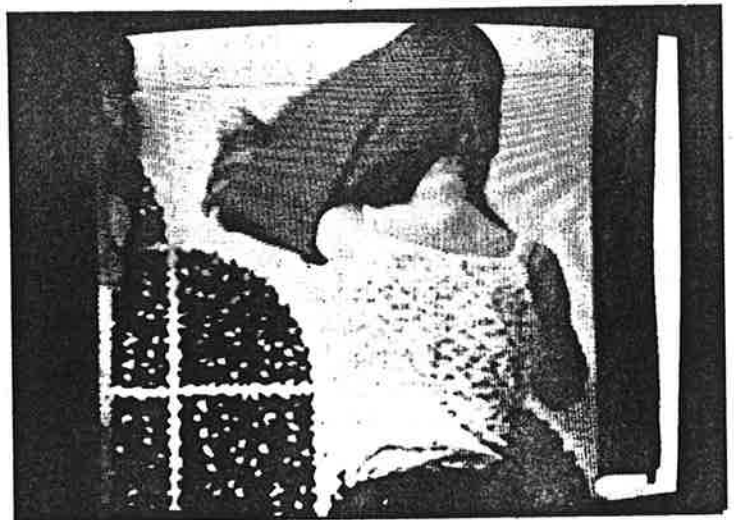
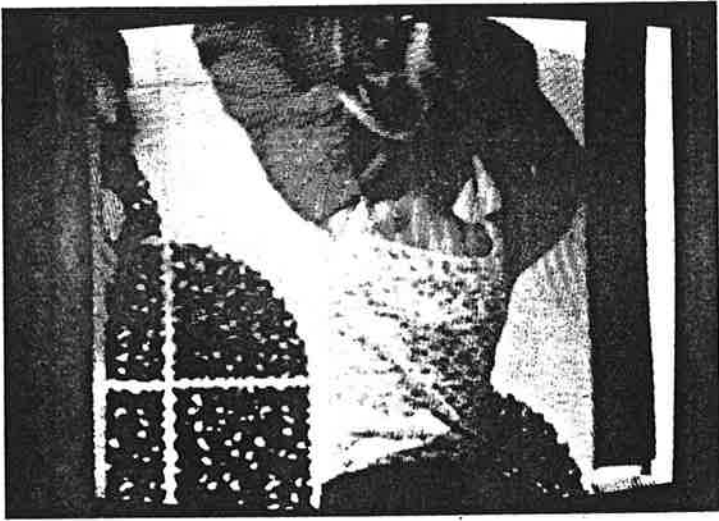
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window. The importance of the child, then, in the tape, seems to be that Godard is referring back to himself *through* the children, just as their facing the direction of the words refers their answers back to the meaning of the questions. Godard's coming to

Is Godard's coming to terms with himself the importance of the theme of a re-examination of childhood, which operates both over and under the subversive messages of the tape in the context of television?

Amy Greenfield



from *France Tour Detour Deux Enfants*