

Document Citation

Title	Godard's 'Passion' plays with love and work
Author(s)	Dave Kehr
Source	<i>Reader (Los Angeles, Calif.)</i>
Date	1984 May 25
Type	article
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Passion, Godard, Jean Luc, 1982

Godard's Passion Plays With Love and Work

★ ★ ★

PASSION

Directed and written by Jean-Luc Godard
With Isabelle Huppert, Hanna Schygulla,
Michel Piccoli, Jerzy Radziwilowicz,
and Lazlo Szabo.

By Dave Kehr

Jean-Luc Godard is at once the most confiding of film makers and the most elusive. I don't know of another director who seems so anxious to speak directly to the audience, who seems so desperate to communicate. And yet communication is always the central problem in a Godard film.

In *Passion*, a 1982 feature that is having its delayed Los Angeles run at the Nuart this week, Godard has cast Jerzy Radziwilowicz, the Polish star of Andrzej Wajda's *Man of Iron*, as a film maker much like himself (he wears Godard's glasses, as Jacques Dutronc did in 1980's *Every Man for Himself*). Jerzy's French isn't so great, but it's at least as good as his co-star's: Playing opposite him is Hanna Schygulla, Rainer Werner Fassbinder's icon of feminine cunning, as the wife of a factory owner. For the native French speakers in

the cast, Godard has imposed equivalent handicaps: a monumental stutter for Isabelle Huppert, who plays a factory worker, and a ferocious hacking cough for Michel Piccoli, who appears as Huppert's boss and Schygulla's husband. Radziwilowicz has also been given an Italian producer and a Hungarian assistant, but the theme finds its poetic culmination in the figure of a beautiful deaf-mute girl, a niece of Piccoli's who is working as a nude model in the movie Radziwilowicz is making.

Godard's anxiousness to speak is what stops him. Like Huppert with her stutter, he's never able to finish a sentence, never able to bring a scene to dramatic completion. Huppert stumbles because she can't find the right word; Godard stumbles—as Radziwilowicz says—because he can't find the right light. *Passion* proceeds in fits and starts, through scenes that seem to begin too quickly (before we've had the chance to recognize the characters or the situation) or end too soon (before the rhythm of the sequence has been fully played out, or before the dramatic payoff has been delivered). The Italian producer wanders through the chaos of Radziwilowicz's set, demanding to know what the story is (is this Godard's tribute to Carlo Ponti, who produced his *Contempt* in 1963?). It's a question that Godard's audiences have always asked, yet the fact is that this time there is a story, and even a fairly classic one: a romantic triangle that isolates Jerzy (the actors' own names are used for the characters) between Hanna of the calculating ruling classes and Isabelle of the virginal proletariat.

We never seem to encounter the story at its key moments, however: Godard has left out the climaxes—the conflicts felt and the decisions made—that give the story its tension and shape. *Passion* is a movie that always feels “in between”—moving away from some crucial point we haven't seen and toward another we never will. The film is composed of those moments that most directors will strive to minimize: the moments of transition, of modulation between one emotion and another, of dramatic suspension. Of course, it is exactly these moments that are the most realistic—the closest to the ambiguity and uneventfulness of lived experience—in a conventional film. They seem strange because we aren't used to seeing them on a screen, because they aren't satisfying in the way movies are supposed to be. By showing these moments, Godard makes every other movie seem false. But at the same time he makes his own movie seem foreign and mute. Godard wants to tell the truth, but this truth isn't easy to tell. It emerges in fragments, hesitations, confusions. He stutters because he can't find the right word, but also because he suspects the right word doesn't exist—that no word is sufficient to express the complexity of the world.

And yet the right word, the right light, did once exist. It can be seen in the art of the past, to which Godard, the modernist artist par excellence, now longingly looks. The movie that Jerzy is working on appears to be an elaborate attempt to reconstruct a series of classic paintings—beginning with Rembrandt's
continued on page 18