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CARLOS CLARENS

Comment Ça Va

Directed by Jean-Luc Godard and
Anne-Marie Miéville

25, Fireman's Street

Directed by István Szabó

Wasn't That a Time!

Directed by Jim Brown

IN the years that followed *Tout Va Bien* (1972), Jean-Luc Godard settled down in the provincial city of Grenoble to collaborate with Anne-Marie Miéville on a series of projects combining the techniques of film and video. Of these, *Numero Deux* (1975) is the best-known and most enjoyable, a blueprint of sorts for Godard's return to the more orthodox style of *Every Man for Himself* two years ago. Some of the others, including *Ici et Ailleurs* (*Here and Elsewhere*) and *Comment Ça Va*, which had been conceived as workshop efforts, found their way nonetheless into television, semiological seminars, the occasional Godard retrospective, and finally into the Bleecker. *Comment Ça Va*, now in its U.S. premiere at the James Agee Room, is not exactly the sort of movie that one can drop in on casually.

Sternly critical of his earlier, commercial pictures, Godard has yet to disown these heavily didactic, analytic exercises, made — quite appropriately — under the banner of his (and Miéville's) company, Sonimage (Soundimage). Godard, like his spiritual mentor Roberto Rossellini, would much rather enlighten than entertain. To explore the various (and to him, defective) ways in which we perceive information through the various media has been an obsession with Godard at least since he completed *Le Gai Savoir* in 1968, the year of the May student uprising in Paris, an event he had anticipated, almost prophesied, in *La Chinoise* and *Weekend*, both made the (halcyon) year before.

Comment Ça Va — which could be translated as *How's It Going*, without a question mark, or as *How It Goes*, or as a number of deadpan variations that suit Godard's well-known taste for bad puns — is mostly a static dialogue between a sheepish-looking, mustachioed communist (who resembles Pep-pone, the communist mayor in the *Don Camillo* movies) and a woman union representative whose face is never seen (she's played, or rather spoken, by Miéville) and who, in matters semiological, is light years ahead of him. She's also something of a pill, constantly urging the man (and by extension, us the viewers) to unlearn the process of reading words and pictures that has become standard since the rise of photojournalism in the '30s.

Both are supposedly working for a provincial communist newspaper and have made a video documentary on how a communist publication should work, as opposed, one assumes, to its capitalistic counterparts. To set up the obvious opposition, our man is still hung up on the old codes and handles information in the usual way. The video film is too tidy and fails to convey opposite viewpoints among members of the collective. Godard plays, not too spiritedly, with images within images, the couple watching themselves on a TV monitor, before settling down for much of the film's length to read and decode two specific photographs and one caption. Much of it is a retread of *Letter to Jane* and by now peculiarly *démodé*. But in all fairness to Godard, he has since made a TV series, *France/tour/detour/deux/enfants*, which seems to me a perfect companion piece to Bruno Bettelheim and Karen Zelan's *On Learning to Read* — witty, nonsectarian, and truly explorative of the (mis)uses of television, a medium that in the past decade has rendered printed information almost archaically ineffectual.