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Nine-year-old Arnaud ponders a leading question: "It's hard to believe anything so fascinatingly weird was ever telecast."

He-e-ere's Jean-ee: TV à la Godard

J. Hoberman

Anyone other than Jean-Luc Godard might be satisfied simply being the single most influential figure in film post-1960, pre-Steven Spielberg. But Godard, as always, is after bigger game—amazing stories broadcast to your home.

Godard was speaking wistfully of TV as early as 1968, but video technologies have seriously infiltrated his work (and vice versa) only since he teamed up with Anne-Marie Miéville. The pair's prescient *Numéro Deux* (1975) was shot mainly on videotape, set entirely inside a video editing studio, and played out almost exclusively on two TV monitors. The film even took a sitcom theme—namely the effect of late capitalism on the sex lives of a working-class family, but, unlike *The Honeymooners*, it's barely been recognized here as the masterpiece it is.

Godard spent the latter half of the '70s trying to crack French TV. Now, years after their original telecast, the Film Forum is giving his two series, *Six Times Two/On* and *Beneath Communication* and *France/Tour/Detour/Two/Children*, their New York premieres, along with *Scénario du Film Passion* and *Soft and Hard*, the more recent TV specials made for Britain's Channel Four. Showing these programs as projected video in a movie theater has the effect of turning extremely radical TV into marginalized movies. Still, in some ways, Godard's work is all one piece. Made between *Numéro Deux* and his 1980 "comeback" *Every Man For Himself*, *Six Times Two* and *France/Tour* at once elaborate *Numéro Deux*'s juxtaposition of factory and landscape and anticipate the opposition of work and love explored in *Passion*. *France/Tour* uses the analytic slo-mo that gave *Every Man For Himself* its original English title (*Slow Motion*), while the inspiration for *Hail Mary* might be found in *Six Times Two*'s interview with a schizophrenic woman who speculates on impregnation by the Holy Ghost.

Conversation is one of television's most

durable spectacles, and, in a sense, both series are variations of TV interview shows. Of course, the assortment of interviewees (including children and schizos, unemployed laborers and working women, a mathematician and an amateur filmmaker, as well as various communications professionals) is no less purposefully eccentric than the usually off-camera interviewer, Jean-Luc Godard. Godard may be an insufferable know-it-all, but—his mind bursting with ideas and associations—he can be a brilliantly dogged questioner. No one is better at making the ordinary seem unfamiliar; Godard interrogates his subjects as though he's just

is with an amateur filmmaker. Who, Godard asks, is paid to take a picture? Who is paid to have their picture taken and who is not—why Christie Brinkley and not a napalm-burned Vietnamese peasant girl? At one point, a prize-winning newsphoto of a barbaric military execution monopolizes the screen for 20 minutes while the photographer discusses the technical difficulties he encountered in producing this particular and, as it turns out, staged image of violent death. To underscore the philosophy of photo opportunity (or opportunism), the following segment has French Communist Party leader Georges Marchais denouncing

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arrived from Ork. As Gilles Deleuze noted in an enthusiastic critique of *Six Times Two*: "Generally speaking, you can only be a foreigner in a language other than your own. Here's a case of being a foreigner in one's own language... [Godard] has even perfected his Swiss accent for this purpose."

At once modest and self-aggrandizing, Godard simply called *Six Times Two* "an attempt at doing television differently." *Vive la différence*. Not since Ernie Kovacs has anyone made so madcap a try. Weighty it may be, but TV à la Godard defies the *Masterpiece Theater* treatment. (I would subscribe to Channel 13 simply for the pleasure of watching Alistair Cook peer earnestly out from his armchair and attempt to make Godard intelligible. "In the last episode, a pair of invisible café philosophers discussed problems of signification while Godard dangled expressively over the image. This week, Godard himself is inter-

television for the TV cameras.

Godard's position is radical, but it's not naive. As Frederic Jameson once observed at an academic conference devoted to "rethinking" TV, "Abolishing television as we know it would involve the abolition of the middle-class family as well." In "Before and After"—the first part of the final show, a critique of the entire series and the response it inspired, interspersed with segments from "real" TV—Godard suggests that, unlike the movies, television is watched *en famille*: "Television is a family business." The program ends with a speculation on the relationship between adults and children, precisely the subject of *France/Tour/Detour/Two/Children*.

These 12 half-hour programs—the series title a play on that of a popular 19th-century French primer—were completed in 1978. Although Godard wanted them to be shown in prime time over a two-week period, they weren't telecast until

viewed—his back strategically to the camera....") Watching this blitz of explicated advertisements, outré interviews, reflexive woolgathering, and electronic puns-and-anagrams, it's difficult to believe that, even in the land of Jacques Lacan and *Apostrophe*, anything so fascinatingly weird and blatantly demanding was ever telecast (however grudgingly) into anyone's living room.

Basically, *Six Times Two* sets out to explore the political economy of the media image. Like any self-respecting TV show, it adheres to a strict formula. The six programs are each divided into two 50-minute segments—the first elaborating a field of inquiry (work, women, history) and intended to be shown during the day, the second, an interview meant to be telecast that night. In the episode "Photography and Company," Godard focuses on the nature of professionalism while the corresponding interview, named "Marcel" for its subject,

more than a year later and then, three programs at a time, in the late Friday night spot traditionally reserved for the films of great auteurs. Superficially closer to conventional television than *Six Times Two*, each episode of *France/Tour* follows an interview with either 11-year-old Camille or nine-year-old Arnaud (almost always shown in tight close-up) with instant analyses by two ostentatiously telegenic stand-ins for Godard and Miéville.

Unlike the old Art Linkletter show, on which kids were encouraged to say the darndest things, here it's the interlocuter whose unexpectedly clever, if not downright wacky, sayings inspire yocks, admiration, and embarrassment. Godard's wildly inappropriate questions are alternately metaphysical or leading: "How do you know you exist?" he wants to know. "Instead of your going to school, couldn't we say the school goes to you?" A long discussion about music and choice grinds to a halt when Godard asks Camille if, assuming such a thing were available, she would purchase a recording of God's voice. The verbal realm belongs to Godard, while the children's eloquence is entirely negative: They're stolidly self-conscious, admirably resistant, painfully stunted, desperately rational, and totally humorless, responding with single-word answers and an occasional "I don't know."

That Camille and Arnaud are interviewed at bedtime, before school, in school, watching television—engaged, that is, by the very institutions that "construct" them as children—supports Godard's continual equation of their state with that of prisoners or proletarians. In one episode, we see, over Camille's shoulder, children frisking in a schoolyard. Are they free or in prison? Godard asks. "Neither," Camille replies, although her continual, nervous glances toward her classmates leave no doubt that their imprisonment is preferable to hers. Later, Camille's classroom activities are not simply linked to class struggle; Godard manages to inveigle out of her the complaint that it's unfair not to pay children to learn. (In another show, the more garrulous Arnaud is maneuvered into revealing that he's been bribed with a bicycle to submit to these interviews.)

Godard puts the children's recalcitrance in the context of a thoroughly alienated environment. Throughout, adults are referred to as "monsters," and each show begins with some invocation of their monstrous behavior. "It now appears that the monsters need oxygen and money," the Orkian Godard observes deadpan over sumptuously glacial footage of commuters exiting the subway. Elsewhere Godard and Miéville use slow-motion sequences of women working behind a restaurant counter to equate their bodies with machines. (The same point is made even more graphically in an office in which a very pregnant, stark naked secretary cheerfully takes dictation.)

Perhaps the most affectingly alienated sequence is the 11th program, subtitled *All*, whose centerpiece is a 10-minute static close-up of Camille at the dinner table, eating and grimacing while adult conversation swirls over her head. As Colin MacCabe observed in *American Film*, "In the heart of the family, the young girl inhabits an immense solitude." That this solitude may be the theme of the series is underscored off the last show's final sequence: a lengthy portrait set to a bombastic pop ballad in which a lonely middle-aged man in a toupee visits his gaudy neighborhood bar to drink "one for the road."

Although *France/Tour* failed to establish Godard as the French Norman Lear, he has since made two films for Britain's independent Channel Four. The first, *Scénario du Film Passion*, is Godard's version of a Disney documentary-cum-trailer like *The Making of 20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*—it even opens à la *Disneyland*, with Uncle Jean addressing the viewing audience: "Good evening to friend and foe." Like *Passion* itself, *Scénario* is filled with speculations about

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the cinema. Its most emphatic point is Godard's return to the image after his talk-heavy films of the '70s. Unlike TV newsreaders, whom he suggests are buggered by the images behind them, Godard covers his ass by taping himself looking at his film or else the white screen where it intermittently appears. *Scénario* is more ethereal than *Passion*, and also more sentimental (Godard kisses the image of Isabelle Huppert when it appears, speaks of turning a camera movement into a prayer, and offers an incantation to the empty screen).

The more ambitious *Soft and Hard* (A *Soft Conversation on Hard Subjects*) blandly describes itself as a "talk between two friends," namely Godard and Miéville. The first half of this dialogue is mainly visual, counterpointing images of the couple working around the house. The division of labor is pronounced: Godard talks to his producers

on the phone, while the chic and self-possessed Miéville threads something on the Steenbeck. Then she does the ironing, while he grabs a tennis racket and makes like John McEnroe. In the second half of the tape, Godard and Miéville discuss television and their work. But the subtext of the conversation is their relationship; in this sense, *Soft and Hard* is far more revealing than *First Name: Carmen* or *Hail Mary*, to cite two recent Godardian ruminations on the war between the sexes. In addressing their ostensible subject, Miéville starts out direct and pithy. Godard comes back aphoristic and vague. He waxes depressed. She cheers him up. "When you make a film it doesn't go unnoticed." "Yes," he agrees, "but for the wrong reasons."

Like Jean-Pierre Gorin before her, Miéville seems to function as Godard's guilty conscience. ("You know, your program about women was a bit weak," she

tells him in one of the segments of *Six Times Two*. "You set them up, you question them, you more or less tell them how to reply, and then you're surprised that you can't find anybody [there].") Here, she criticizes the dialogue in Godard's recent love scenes. In the midst of these comments, Godard upstages her by noisily brushing the crumbs off the arm of his chair. (Jean-Luc may have his back to the camera, but he surely knows as well as Miéville where the microphone is placed.) "A phantasmagoria of crumbs," he weakly jests after this deafening interruption. Obviously thrown off balance, Miéville begins to express her insecurity. "You never doubt that what you have to say is interesting," she tells Godard—and the statement has less to do with his individual (and undeniable) genius than with her wistful recognition of his male entitlement. Later, Miéville comes back to this in a different way, explaining that she's hampered in her work by an undue

respect for cinema. "How can you, knowing me, still think like that?" Godard asks in genuine surprise.

By the time Godard starts castigating TV as the "usurper" that has displaced the movies, you get the odd sense of a man playing George to his own Gracie. Cinema, he complains, is "the only means I have to understand and change myself." In television, however, he's found a superb means to dramatize his condition—and ours. If *The Jean-Luc and Anne-Marie Show* ever went weekly it could be the most amazing story of all. ■

SCHEDULE:

Soft and Hard and *Scénario du Film Passion*, April 16-20.

Six Times Two, Parts 1-3, April 21 and 23; Parts 4-6, April 22 and 24.

France/Tour/Detour/Two/Children, April 25-28.