
COLIN MACCABE

'SLOW MOTION'

A naked prostitute lies on the floor of a hotel room with a man straddling her, his boss sits at a desk while another prostitute stripped from the waist down stands next to a telephone. 'Can I use the 'phone before we start? – Hello, I'm calling about the advertisement for the flat in the paper. It's already gone? Sorry to bother you.' Godard's new film *Slow Motion* (*Sauve Qui Peut (la vie)*) continues his relentless investigation into the divorce between sound and image but this investigation is now, for the first time in over ten years, integrated into a narrative as the telephone conversation clashes farcically and revealingly with the scene in the hotel room. And with the return to narrative cinema, Godard also returns to what may prove to have been his most enduring theme: prostitution. Godard has always been at least one step ahead of his public image but with *Slow Motion* he accomplishes, for most of an English audience, two steps at once. Those who think about the topic at all, think of Godard as locked into a sectarian Maoist politics making didactic films which are never given a commercial release. They will thus be surprised at the lack of

politics in the plot of *Slow Motion*. A woman working in television (Nathalie Baye) wants to leave both her lover (Jacques Dutronc) and the city for a tranquil life in the countryside; he pursues a tormented life in the city, unable to make her stay, unable to take up again a relationship with his wife and daughter. One of his encounters is with a prostitute (Isabelle Huppert) and the film then follows her through a series of encounters with clients and pimps. The final section of the film rounds off the narrative with the prostitute renting Nathalie Baye's flat and Dutronc dead, run over by a car as his wife and daughter walk on the other side of the road.

In fact it is not the absence of explicit politics in Godard's film which is surprising but the relatively straightforward use of narrative. It could be argued that Godard's explicit political commitment came to an end as early as 1970. At that stage Godard had spent two frantic years filming with Jean-Pierre Gorin under the name of the Dziga-Vertov group. The work was financed by television companies on the strength of Godard's name but the results, a

112 combination of dogmatic Maoism and an extraordinary investigation of the language of film, were deemed too political or too difficult to ever reach the small screen. The culmination of these experiments was to be a film entitled *Jusqu'à La Victoire* which would celebrate and explain the victory of the Palestinian revolution in Jordan, but the editing of the film was brought to an abrupt halt by the events of Black September which ridiculed the confident analysis of the film. After this Godard and Gorin abandoned the name of the Dziga-Vertov group and explicit Maoism to make the only film with stars released by Godard in the 1970s *Tout Va Bien*. This film, which starred Jane Fonda and Yves Montand, is probably the most accurate film on the events of '68 and its aftermath produced in France. But if it was made from a political viewpoint, its emphases on the intermeshing of the personal and the political threatened to render the political element vacuous. Politics, as was perhaps endemic to Western Maoist thinking, became less a question of specific demands and projects than continuous opposition to the alienating effects of industrial society and particularly to the division of work and love effected by an ever-increasing division of labour.

It is this divorce and its relation to the circulation of the image in our society which has been the explicit object of Godard's enquiries since 1973 when, after breaking with Gorin, he set up a company, Sonimage, with Anne-Marie Miéville, first in Grenoble and then in the tiny Swiss town of Rolle. It is the work of Sonimage which constitutes the missing step for a British audience. Godard and Miéville have produced three films and eighteen hours of television programmes over the past six years but only one of these films, *Numéro Deux*, is

available in England. If there was one lesson that Godard was to keep from the Maoist period it was its emphasis on production – its collective nature and the importance of control of each and every stage of filming. Video seemed to offer both the possibility of total control and a crew small enough for collective work to be more than a fiction. Sonimage is fully equipped with video and most of their work over the last seven years has been produced on videotape with the results being transferred onto film at the final stage.

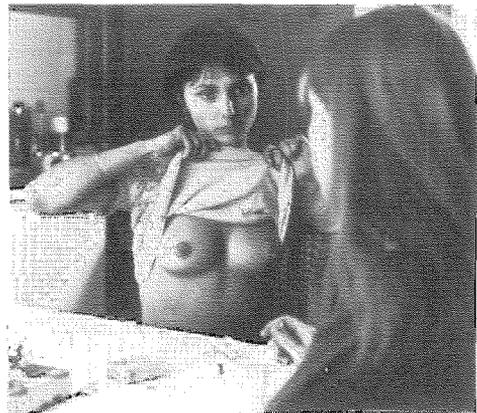
The work at Sonimage has abandoned the impersonal rhetoric of Maoism in favour of a much more directly personal approach. In particular, the interviews which Godard conducts have none of that spurious 'objectivity' which marks the television interview, rather they circulate around Godard's own obsessions and concerns; it is Godard's own interest in the answers that keeps the interview going. Perhaps Sonimage's finest work is a series of twelve half-hour television programmes completed just before *Slow Motion*. Entitled *France/Tour/Detour/Deux/Enfants*, they are remarkable both for their use of the technological resources of video and for their interrogation of the form of the documentary. Two children provide the focus for Godard's investigation. Each programme interrupts one of the children in the course of their day's activities (dressing, going to school, watching television) and these activities are investigated both visually and in the course of a series of interviews in which the children talk to Godard. Some of the terms produced in these preliminary investigations are then further analysed in the rest of the programme. There is no claim that we are being shown the reality of the child's experience, rather we learn how opaque that experience is for that

most clear of media: television. The opacity of the child's world is used to reflect on the 'clarity' of the adult experience and the ways in which that clarity is dependent on the forms of television. The programmes can thus be considered, as one reading of the title suggests, as a tour of France by the detour of two children.

Sonimage's previous work prepares one for many of the themes of *Slow Motion*. Most important of these is the opposition between town and country. When the character played by Dutronc meets his wife to pay her the monthly cheque, his daughter is struggling over an essay on the blackbird, describing how in one country after another it has changed its habitat and behaviour in order to become a city rather than a country bird. Dutronc suggests a final paragraph which claims that the history of the last two hundred years should be understood in terms of this change rather than any unimportant political changes. *Slow Motion* is an attempt to construct the terms of that understanding, providing a fictional form to grasp the opposition between town and country. Familiar, too, is the increased emphasis on the personal, the autobiographical. Dutronc's name in the movie is Paul Godard, an appellation which Godard enigmatically glosses: 'I borrowed my father's name for ninety minutes in order to be less afraid of women'. What is certain is that, in opposition to the films of the 1960s which focused on feminine sexuality, it is male sexuality which provides the neuralgic locus around which the film turns. 'Each time we touch we seem to bruise one another' says Dutronc and masculine attitudes to women are presented unequivocally in terms of a desire to hurt, abuse and, above all, control. The scenes in which the prostitute visits her clients

emphasise the fetishistic nature of male sexuality, constantly trying to fix female sexuality into an image which can be controlled. It is here that one can perhaps locate the central paradox of the film, for it is exactly such a fixed and fetished image which is offered by the commercial cinema, always keeping sound and image *in synch* to leave the spectator untouched by what happens. It is against such an organisation that Godard has consciously struggled for the last fifteen years and in some ways the film signals an admission of defeat.

For if its themes are a continuation of Sonimage's work, its form is radically different. Where the other work of Godard and Miéville turns around a constant dissection of the image, a refusal of that plenitude of vision always confirmed by an acquiescent sound, *Slow Motion* reluctantly and hesitatingly accepts a certain dominance of the image. The voice of Marguerite Duras and fragments of the soundtrack of her film *Le Camion* disrupts the self-sufficiency of the image, reminds us of a feminine alternative, but the film remains within a masculine world of vision, fixing the image of woman as relentlessly as the clients order Huppert to take up her positions. This equivalence is underlined in the scene where Huppert goes to an address given her by an old





schoolfriend where she may find alternative work. She discovers a man at an editing table who offers her huge sums of money to do nothing but travel about. The address is 15 rue du Nord, Sonimage's address, and Godard would seem to regard his work and the return to commercial cinema as equivalent to prostitution.

This dissatisfaction at the centre of the film was very evident to me on the occasions that I visited Godard last year in the course of preparing a book on him.¹ If he no longer raged at the institution of cinema as he had ten years before, his calmer view was not fundamentally more optimistic. He constantly likened himself to someone living in an occupied country and if he felt it necessary to go back into the cinema in order to understand its extraordinary resilience, the continued demand for a story and an image, he still felt that the economic and aesthetic constraints in the cinema went hand in hand. On one of the days when shooting finished early on *Slow Motion*, the dis-

cussion amongst the crew turned into an extraordinary impromptu lecture by Godard in which he insisted that the financing of a film determined its aesthetic choices. Time was what one was not allowed – from the moment stars were hired and money invested, a production schedule imposed its own rhythms on the work. Equally both he and Miéville were dissatisfied with the decision, forced on them by their co-producers, to use film instead of video for the actual shooting. Once again it was a question of losing control of time, in this case because the ability to shoot and reshoot with the same video-tape allows a much greater flexibility than film.

In the middle of the film Paul Godard reads out a quotation from Marguerite Duras: 'I make films to kill time. If I had the courage to do nothing, I'd do nothing. It's because I haven't got the strength to do nothing that I make films. For no other reason. That's the most sincere thing I can say about my activities.' 'That goes for me too' says the character played by Dutronc and it would seem, now, to go for Jean-Luc Godard as well. A further paradox, however, remains. What almost any account of the plot of the film must necessarily miss is the exhilaration of actually watching the movie. As Godard kills time he brings it alive for us.

1 Colin MacCabe, *Godard: Images, Sounds, Politics*, Macmillan, London 1980
Slow Motion is distributed in the UK by Artificial Eye, 211 Camden High Street, London NW1