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Rochefort and Godard: Two or Three Things about Prostitution

by Mary Jean Green, Lynn Higgins and Marianne Hirsch

When we come to the limits of the city
my face must have a meaning . . .

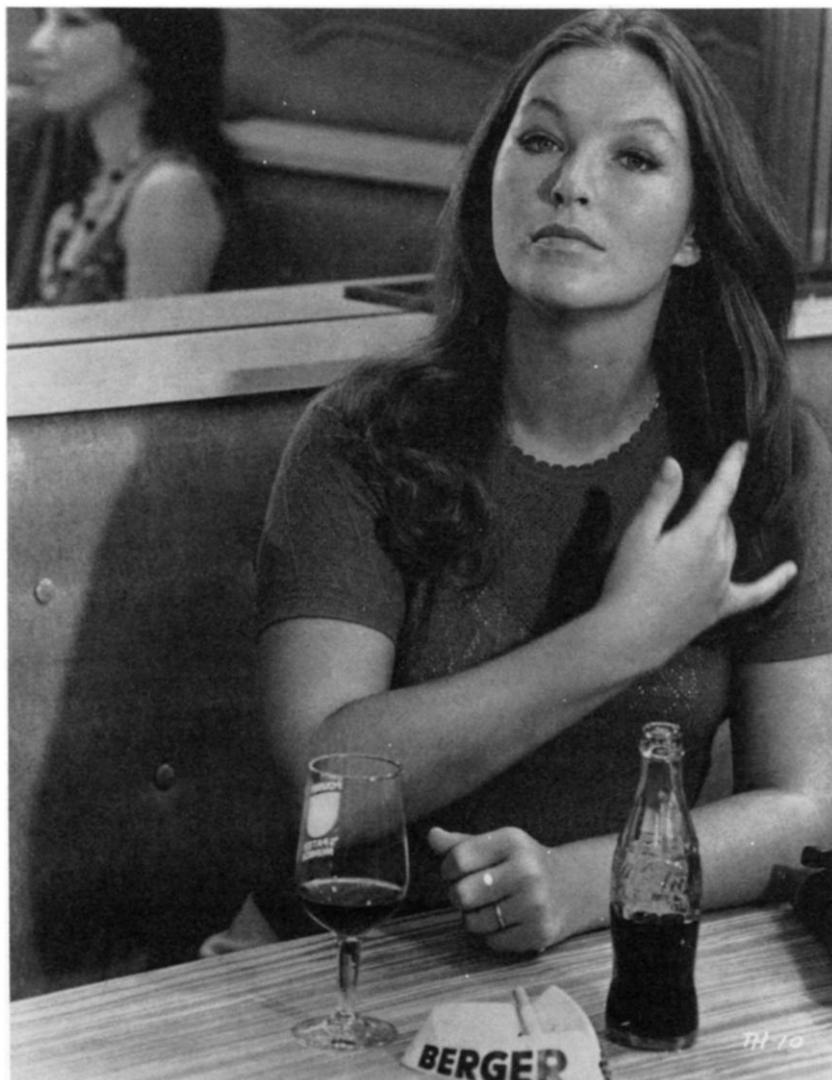
Adrienne Rich, "Images for Godard"

CHRISTIANE ROCHEFORT's *Les Petits Enfants du siècle*, because of its distinctive narrative voice, has thwarted several attempts at cinematic adaptation. Yet Rochefort herself recognized that the essence of her novel had been captured in an entirely different film: "Une fois j'ai vu une adaptation des *Enfants du siècle*, avec remise à jour, c'est *Deux ou Trois Choses que je sais d'elle* de Godard, qui n'a pas regardé mon livre mais les choses posant les mêmes questions à peu près."¹ At first glance, Rochefort's 1961 novel and Godard's 1966 film seem light years apart. Their numerous formal differences point to the fact that the two works belong to totally divergent narrative traditions. *Les Petits Enfants* is, in fact, a conventional first-person *Bildungsroman*, while *2 ou 3 choses que je sais d'elle* can be seen as a variant of the documentary film. On closer examination, however, it becomes apparent that the two works do indeed raise the same issues.

Godard's opening shots of bleak concrete surfaces punctuated by loud construction noises are a cinematic equivalent of Rochefort's verbal descriptions of the new Parisian housing projects. Both works are visions of the modern city as seen through the experiences of a woman—in Godard's case seen as a woman, the "elle" of his title referring explicitly to both Juliette Janson and "la région parisienne." Sharing a Marxist perspective, Godard and Rochefort both attack the social system which produces these subsidized housing projects fostering a lifestyle degraded by consumerism, boredom, alienation: a society of objects rather than people. Rochefort must also have recognized in Godard's film a mood—a climate, as she would call it—of indignation sometimes giving way to despair. In the face of the contemporary urban disaster—Rochefort insists she is writing in the midst of a shipwreck—both Rochefort and Godard have felt the need to explore the ideological responsiveness of language and art.

The dehumanizing social conditions portrayed in both works are ap-

¹ *C'est bizarre l'écriture* (Paris: Grasset, 1970), p. 55.



Marina Vlady in *2 ou 3 choses que je sais d'elle*, by Jean-Luc Godard. Courtesy New Yorker Films.

proached through the notion of prostitution. Thus it is prostitution in the various forms it takes, both literal and metaphorical, that offers the best point of comparison between the two works. *2 ou 3 choses* was based on a 1966 *Le Nouvel Observateur* report about housewives in the Parisian housing projects who engage in part-time prostitution to supplement their income.² Juliette, Godard's housewife-heroine, has a dress held for her in a fashionable shop while she procures the necessary funds by picking up a young man in a bar. Juliette's husband boastfully suggests that she acquired their red Austin sports car through her mysterious talent for finding bargains. Another episode, about a mother of three whose husband sends her out on the streets to help round out the budget, is also drawn from the article.

Prostitution is not an overt theme in *Les Petits Enfants du siècle*. (Rochefort does mention in passing a phenomenon that anticipates the *Nouvel Observateur* article: in the new city of Sarcelles, bored housewives receive construction workers during the day.) The novel, narrated by the oldest daughter of a working-class family, portrays her efforts to avoid repeating the cycle of courtship, marriage, children and low-income housing which has trapped her mother. Although there are no prostitutes in the traditional sense in *Les Petits Enfants du siècle*, prostitution becomes a strategy which organizes the social relationships of the novel. As soon as Josyane learns that her sexuality can be exchanged for the goods her poverty denies her, she willingly offers herself to the neighborhood boys for the use of a coveted motor scooter. But her action only repeats on a smaller scale the pattern of her mother's life. The institution of marriage, as described by Rochefort, is itself a legalized form of prostitution.³ All the working-class wives in the novel prostitute themselves, not to their husbands, who earn barely enough to make such an enterprise rewarding, but to the government, which offers them, in the system of *allocations familiales*, the means to buy consumer goods in exchange for each baby produced. This process, like all prostitution, robs the ever-pregnant women of their human characteristics (they are variously described as balloons, hens, mussels, and horses), even of their personal pronouns (Josyane scornfully refers to them as "ça"). Despite her lucidity, Josyane's efforts to escape a similar fate fail. Her relationship with her fiancé Philippe, which she perceives as real love, is only the final

² Catherine Viminet, "Les Etoiles filantes," *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 23 March 1966, and "Prostitution dans les grands ensembles?" *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 4 May 1966.

³ Rochefort's understanding of marriage is consonant with classical Marxist theory, which equates marriage in capitalist society with prostitution. A major statement of this theme is found in Engels's discussion of "bourgeois marriage": "This marriage of convenience turns often enough into the crassest prostitution—sometimes of both partners, but far more commonly of the woman, who only differs from the ordinary courtesan in that she does not let out her body on piecework as a wage worker, but sells it once and for all into slavery" (*The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, ed. Eleanor Burke Leacock [New York: International Publishers, 1975], p. 134). In *Les Petits Enfants*, Rochefort presents her own updating of Engels's theory, showing how the French system of family subsidies has changed the economic relationships within the working-class family, which Engels had seen as relatively free from the distortions of "bourgeois marriage."

step in her apprenticeship as a prostitute in the style of her mother.

Les Petits Enfants and *2 ou 3 choses* go beyond this simple form of prostitution, however. Both authors seek to expose the functioning of the capitalist system, for which prostitution serves as a global metaphor. More complex than a direct exchange of sexual services for payment, prostitution is often a system of exploitation manipulated by a third party. The role of a third party, the pimp, was explored by Godard in his earlier film on prostitution, *Vivre sa vie*. The question of who profits is central to the social criticism in both *2 ou 3 choses* and *Les Petits Enfants*. Rochefort's family produces children to fight in France's colonial wars (here, the Algerian conflict) and to consume the products of French industry, while Godard's Juliette is as much a victim of American-style imperialism (through advertising) as the Vietnamese, whose oppression is evoked throughout the film. It is not accidental that works which protest Western colonialism also concern themselves with prostitution, a similar means of exploitation and dehumanization. Godard makes the connection explicit through his American photographer who says: "Ils sont bêtes et fous là-bas. Alors, un Vietcong mort, ça coûte un million de dollars au Trésor américain. Le président Johnson pourrait se payer vingt mille filles comme ces deux-là pour le même prix."⁴

As Rochefort has said in an interview, "Exploitation . . . doesn't begin when somebody works, but when that work gives profit to another person. When somebody exploits somebody else, there is a totally false relationship between the two."⁵ Recognizing this "false relationship," Godard uses prostitution as a metaphor for all forms of work in a capitalist economy. As he puts it, "In order to live in Parisian society today, at whatever level or on whatever plane, one is forced to prostitute oneself in one way or another, or else to live according to conditions resembling those of prostitution."⁶

This structure of prostitution, always involving the introduction of a third term into the binarity of exchange, perhaps reveals one of the meanings of Godard's title. The hesitation between two and three becomes a major organizing theme of the film, as does the semantic hesitation of the pronoun "elle." The fact that "elle" clearly refers to both Juliette and the city of Paris suggests an equivalence of person and thing. The intersection of both these hesitations in the film's title is the word *choses*—which, taken in its most literal sense, points to the primacy of objects in the film.

It is significant that the most frequently cited image in *2 ou 3 choses* is a shot of a cup of coffee. Godard's lingering closeup of the bubbling and swirling surface brings the object to life, forcing the spectator to apprehend the coffee cup in a new way. This is a technique of alienation already familiar to readers of Sartre and the New Novel. Its result is to blur the boundaries between objects and even between objects and people. While the camera

⁴ *2 ou 3 choses que je sais d'elle* (Paris: Films/Points, 1971), p. 77.

⁵ "A Conversation with Christiane Rochefort," conducted by Mary Jean Green, Lynn Higgins and Marianne Hirsch, April 1977; forthcoming in *L'Esprit Createur*.

⁶ *Godard on Godard*, ed. Jean Narboni and Tom Milne (New York: Viking, 1972), p. 239.

focuses as intensely on Juliette as it does on the cup, Godard's voice-over makes this phenomenon explicit: "Les objets morts sont toujours vivants. Les personnes vivantes sont souvent déjà mortes" (pp. 67–68). The reduction of the human to the level of object even becomes a point of ironic self-criticism in Godard through the figure of the American photographer, John Bogus, whose aggressive camera is an instrument of dehumanization. He pays nude women to put airline flight bags over their heads, erasing their human faces.⁷ He then transforms them into celluloid representations, to be offered for sale like the strip-teaser key ring on which Godard's own camera lingers. Of course, in the same way, Godard himself participates in the dehumanization of Juliette and the many other women in the film.

Godard's camera is similarly attracted to other colorful emblems of a consumer mentality: cigarettes, Lustucru noodles, Omo and Pax detergents, Coca-Cola, Juliette's red Austin, magazines, travel posters, comic books, and even scholarly publications. Shots of these products constantly interrupt Juliette's story, to such an extent that the film comes to resemble a series of those very advertisements which it seeks to expose.

Although Rochefort does not use techniques borrowed from advertising, she is as eager as Godard to point out its effect: the creation of artificial needs for consumer products which come to dominate the characters' lives. In fact, the advertising in Rochefort's world is more subtle. What is really being promoted –through the women's culture of pulp magazines and gossip—is a lifestyle which supports the consumer economy: a "package deal" which Josyane finally "buys."⁸

Rather than highlighting advertising *per se*, Rochefort emphasizes the underlying consumerism and its interdependence with the institution of the family. When Josyane gets pregnant, she and Philippe enter the rising spiral of expectations in which children create the need for household products, which in turn require further children (with their state subsidies). In Rochefort's vision, "les petits enfants" become exchangeable for material objects, as is clear in her description of a pregnant woman: "Paulette . . . sortit pleine de dignité le ventre en avant son frigidaire dedans, et derrière la machine à laver qui trépignait en attendant d'être fécondée."⁹

Not only are people reified in this exchange economy, but the only way they can relate to each other is through objects. As Rochefort has said about

⁷ In "A Conversation with Christiane Rochefort," Rochefort refers to a photograph by Man Ray which represents a beautiful woman with a wastepaper basket on her head as an example of the surrealists' reification of women.

⁸ Both Godard and Rochefort are particularly interested in the advertising carried by popular weekly magazines. *L'Express*, from which Juliette quotes a pantyhose ad in *2 ou 3 choses*, seems to be a favorite target for Godard, as it is for Georges Perec in his 1965 novel *Les Choses*. Rochefort is critical of women's magazines in particular, whether of the pulp variety or the more sophisticated *Elle*, which she attacks specifically in *Les Stances à Sophie*. The series of bra ads which Godard features in *Une Femme mariée* also seems to have its source in *Elle*. In fact, as our colleague Nancy Vickers has suggested, *Elle* magazine may be yet another intended meaning of the "elle" in the title of *2 ou 3 choses*.

⁹ *Les Petits Enfants du siècle* (Paris: Grasset, 1961), p. 86.

Les Petits Enfants, "There are no other links but commercial ones for these people" ("A Conversation"). Objects provide the main content for conversation. When their television is repossessed (because one baby died), Josyane's family is reduced to bickering; on vacation, where there is no television, the men compare their cars. Conversation has been replaced by empty talk. Similarly, in *2 ou 3 choses*, when communication between Juliette and her husband reaches an impasse, other exchanges replace the verbal:

Juliette: ". . . alors qu'est-ce que c'est?"

(Ils se regardent.)

Robert, lisant: "Je sais pas."

Juliette: "Bon, puisque tu sais pas, donne-moi une cigarette." (p. 109)

It is ironic that in Godard's film objects themselves provide the only hope for contact between people: "Peut-être qu'un objet est ce qui permet de relier . . . de passer d'un sujet à l'autre, donc de vivre en société, d'être ensemble" (pp. 49–50). As we will see, the film thus becomes trapped in its own images.

As a form of language, objects fill the blank spaces where language fails. When Godard says, "Le langage, c'est la maison dans laquelle l'homme habite" (p. 30), he equates the breakdown of communicative language with the failure of the new city to provide a home for the human soul. "Peut-être . . . le rôle créateur et formateur de la ville sera assuré par d'autres systèmes de communications . . . peut-être . . . Télévision, Radio, Vocabulaire et Syntaxe, sciemment et délibérément. . . . Un nouveau langage devra être construit . . ." (p. 40). While Godard looks to the future for the invention of a new language, Rochefort's Guido represents nostalgia for a golden age of communication and wholeness which might restore what the housing projects have severed: "L'homme est composé d'un corps et d'une âme, le corps est quadrillé dans les maisons, l'âme cavale sur les collines. Où?" (p. 142). Separated from the soul, the body can be sold, and the person is degraded; separated from meaning, language falls apart.

In spite of the many forces that undermine the power of language, there is some successful verbal contact in *Les Petits Enfants*. Josyane's entire monologue may be viewed as an attempt on Rochefort's part to explore the communicative potential of a language degraded by clichés and slang. There are rare instances of communication between characters as well. Josyane's twin brothers protect their intimacy by creating a "javanais à eux qu'ils s'étaient fabriqué pour qu'on ne les comprenne pas" (p. 54). Nicolas intuitively understands the cryptic fictions Josyane uses to tell him about her experiences. When Guido expresses his passion in Italian, Josyane, much to her own surprise, understands perfectly. Such languages are marginal to the general discourse, just as these characters and their relationships lie outside the social norms.

It is only because they arise from these particular relationships that these languages succeed in communicating. In contrast, the dominant forms of verbal exchange, exemplified by advertising, create only an illusion of communication. On vacation, where people are obliged to converse, Josyane's

father adopts advertising jargon to compete with his friends by praising the features of his car: "Bref en fin de compte le mieux c'était encore la bonne petite Voiture Française, qui réunit le plus de qualités sous le plus petit volume, et économique, cinq litres au cent la 4CV et tellement pratique avec son moteur derrière parce qu'on pouvait mettre les bagages devant" (p. 63). Recognizing this kind of talk as a degradation of language, Josyane prefers silence. Promoters of cars, cigarettes, detergents, Coca-Cola, etc. co-opt the power of words by turning conversation into an exchange of slogans.

Susan Sontag has identified prostitution as a metaphor for the degradation of language, which emerges as the main preoccupation in Godard's films.¹⁰ Throughout *2 ou 3 choses*, the characters experience a disorienting nausea, as opposite categories blend into each other and distinctions blur:

Tout à coup, j'ai eu l'impression que j'étais le monde et que le monde était moi. (p. 97)

Ces méchantes et gentilles filles sont, quand même, propres et dans l'ensemble gentilles . . . (p. 103)

In a milieu where words no longer make reference to the real, Juliette tries to fix names to her surroundings:

Juliette, pour elle: "Robert . . . Christophe." (Un temps) . . . "Des cahiers bleus à spirales. . . . Ce que je dis avec des mots, n'est jamais ce que je dis. Ça va, mais ils ne sont pas sages, tu sais." (pp. 59–60)

All forms of human exchange have been degraded in the society described by Rochefort and Godard, then. Love has become prostitution; language is no more than empty talk; the exchange of ideas is limited to the quotation of book titles in the "Idées" series; objects, the only stable means of exchange, can no longer be appreciated, but only consumed.

Yet both works betray a nostalgia for a "world where men and things would interrelate harmoniously" (*Godard on Godard*, p. 239). Whereas Godard's film ultimately becomes trapped in the degradation it criticizes, Rochefort's novel succeeds in suggesting the possibility of an alternate set of values. This difference is due to divergent orientations toward the characters, particularly the central female character, and toward the work itself: Godard and Rochefort exemplify two very different esthetics. Like much of Godard's work, *2 ou 3 choses* is an essay which situates itself in an abstract and intellectualized domain: it attempts to provide an inclusive analysis of capitalism. In spite of his modest title, Godard attempts to recreate in his film the multiplicity and variety of a newspaper: "During the course of the film—in its discourse, its discontinuous discourse, that is—I want to include everything, sport, politics, even groceries. Everything can be put into a film. Everything should be put into a film" (*Godard on Godard*, p. 239). In contrast, when speaking of *Les Petits Enfants*, Rochefort focuses on the

¹⁰ Susan Sontag, "Godard," in *Styles of Radical Will* (New York: Delta, 1969), p. 188.

characters and expresses her "compassion for Josyane, the little girl who had all the potentialities and hope" ("A Conversation"). A novel which traces the development of one character, *Les Petits Enfants* demands an emotional response.

The novel begins with Josyane's account of her own conception, immediately drawing the reader into her consciousness. Godard's film begins by drawing attention to itself as a film: "2 ou 3" is flashed on the screen, referring to the title, but imitating the form of the cueing numbers. While Rochefort is primarily interested in character, Godard's main preoccupation is with the making and structure of the film.

Godard's film is a search for a new cinematic language that might correspond to the multiplicity and disjointedness of modern life. His hesitation about the potentialities of his medium are reflected in the following statement: "Actually, when I come to think about it, a film like this is a little as if I wanted to write a sociological essay in the form of a novel, and in order to do so, had only musical notes at my disposal" (*Godard on Godard*, p. 242). The film is a mosaic of isolated shots and vignettes loosely held together by the chronology of Juliette's day. Juliette is merely one of many elements of the film, one who happens to be explored in somewhat more depth than the others. The main character is a composite of many "elles" (Juliette, Marianne, the city, a manicurist), seen from many angles, so much so that "she" becomes allegorized.

The narrative voice itself is fragmented and multiple. This multiplicity of point of view is designed to reflect Godard's stated desire to treat both objective and subjective reality (*Godard on Godard*, pp. 239-41). In his collage technique, he takes objective documentary elements (interviews with real people, episodes recounted in *Le Nouvel Observateur*) and incorporates them into a subjective vision through selection and organization. However, the only real subject of the film is the "I" of the title, Godard himself, and it is his own learning experience that constitutes the primary preoccupation of the film. The subjectivity and interiority of the characters are displaced by Godard's own authorial voice,¹¹ a weakness for which he will criticize himself in his 1975 film, *Numéro Deux*, where his female character demands to be allowed to speak and act for herself.

Liberated from the linear continuity of narrative convention, the form of Godard's film imitates the fragmentation that permeates his society. The esthetic Godard has developed in this film is a patchwork of techniques borrowed from Brecht, Sartre, the New Novel, object poetry, television, advertising, comic strips, etc. Godard thus exhibits the same compulsive consumerism in the intellectual marketplace as Juliette does in the actual one. But the cost of Godard's esthetic is high: in *2 ou 3 choses*, he renounces the attempt to pierce through the surfaces. Panning interchangeable surfaces—events, people, objects—Godard's camera participates in the exploita-

¹¹ One of Juliette's remarks ironically points out this displacement: "Je pensais à des choses. Je ne sais pas comment elles sont entrées dans ma pensée" (p. 72).

tion of the individual unit and its integrity. It succeeds in expressing the disjointedness of modern life; sadly, however, he does not go beyond it in this film.

Although she shares Godard's ideological outlook and his perception of a fragmenting environment, Rochefort does not adopt a technique which would mirror the disjunctive forces of the modern world. Instead, she chooses a traditional method of first-person narration, which reflects her interest in the wholeness of the individual. By positing that wholeness in the face of all that is alien to it in our society, Rochefort upholds the values she perceives as vanishing.

Nevertheless, the novel ends with Josyane's defeat. Rochefort is as unable as Godard to provide a believable escape for her character. Yet the elements of that escape are suggested in the figure of Guido and the brother-sister relationship of Josyane and Nicolas. For the reader who views Josyane's love affair and marriage from Rochefort's compassionate but ironic distance, the way to liberation is opened. Rochefort's novel reminds us again and again of an individual integrity of which we have been robbed, but which we must work to regain.

Their totally divergent attitudes toward character, especially female character, are ultimately responsible for the significant differences which do emerge from a comparison of these two works. In his films of the 60s, Godard tends to sympathize with women as a victimized group, but he makes no attempt to explore their subjective experience. Juliette, like most of the women in Godard's films, becomes just as much an object of his camera as of John Bogus's. The closeups of her face, the shots of her nude body, the mystery of her survival through prostitution, the whimsical nature of her questions and remarks—all reveal Godard's own wonder and curiosity at Woman, a strange and enigmatic being. As one of the many "elles" of the film, Juliette is stereotyped and allegorized.

In spite of his astute critique of the social implications of a capitalist economy, Godard in *2 ou 3 choses* has not yet been able to perceive the most basic dimensions of the exploitation experienced by women. This exploitation, which, as Rochefort sees, occurs in the context of the home and family as well as on the streets, is almost totally ignored in *2 ou 3 choses*. In this film Godard shows his awareness of the reification of women in a capitalist society. Through the manner in which he uses the cinematic medium, however, he risks becoming an accomplice to that form of exploitation. In his more recent films Godard has become more conscious of the dangers inherent in his esthetic. *Numéro Deux*, for example, represents a real attempt to explore the specific exploitation encountered by women and the reality of the female consciousness.

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