

So Different, Yet So Much the Same

By WALTER GOODMAN

The idea is to bring together, via satellite dishes, individuals from un-
like or opposing cultures in civil con-
versation. If that sounds like the lat-
est of those people-to-people, getting-
to-know-you efforts that pop up fairly
regularly under the wishful auspi-
ces of peace advocates or religious
groups or enlightened foundations,
that's no criticism.

A technical accomplishment of
"Vis-à-Vis," a series that has won
audiences in Europe, is the use of
high-speed digital video links. In to-
night's opening program, "Beyond
the Veil," they enable high school
teachers in Iran and the United
States to chat and share home videos
on television monitors.

In this hourlong synthesis of four
days of show and tell, Deborah Whit-
ley in suburban Washington and
Sima Daad in Teheran concentrate
on what they have in common —
their teaching (both are devoted to
poetry), their children (both have
three), their home lives (both have
supportive husbands) — and, ginger-
ly, a few issues that separate them.
When it comes to those, Ms. Daad is
the more assertive as she criticizes
the United States for its past intru-
sions into Iranian life and what she
sees as the current threat of a cultur-
al invasion.

Pressed delicately by Ms. Whitley
on the condition of women in Iran,
Ms. Daad says women need protec-
tion from the eyes of men. (She is
even telling her husband that the
American is "unconsciously prej-
udiced" on this subject.) Occasionally
her remarks seem borrowed from
the slogans on Teheran signboards.



Dale Riehl/"Vis-à-Vis"

Deborah Whitley talking to Sima
Daad, on monitor, on "Vis-à-Vis."

Declaring that she is prepared to
send her young son into battle, she
says, "Physical life is precious only
when you can keep your self-es-
teem." Her classroom explication of
the message of Orwell's "Nineteen
Eighty-Four" slips by fuzzily. She
justifies the death sentence passed
on Salman Rushdie on the grounds
that he has committed "intellectual
crimes" as well as violated her na-
tion's religion.

Choosing her words to be as non-
confrontational as possible, Ms.
Whitley comes out for free speech,
but this encounter is not meant as a

VIS-À-VIS BEYOND THE VEIL

PBS, tonight at 10
(Check local listings.)

Produced by Yerosia Productions in associa-
tion with Unitel Video, New York, for Inter-
news Network. Kim Spencer, executive pro-
ducer; Steven Lawrence, series producer;
Dale Riehl, senior producer; Susanne Ros-
tock, editor.

debate, and both women are evident-
ly more comfortable smiling over
domestic scenes. "If you don't
mind," Ms. Saad urges after the free-
speech remarks, "can we go to fam-
ily life?"

The program as edited accentu-
ates the positive, the quotidian de-
tails of life, although viewers may
wonder whether the apparently up-
scale Saads are as typical of Teheran
as the suburban style of the Whitleys
is of Washington.

Next week "Vis-à-Vis" introduces
two black police sergeants, David
Van from Philadelphia and Hendrick
Mohale from Soweto, in South Africa.
Both have experienced racism, but
as the program confirms, nothing
Mr. Van has suffered can compare to
what blacks, including black police-
men, had to endure under apartheid.
What brings them together in the
amiably inquiring exchanges of
"Blue and Black" is a shared profes-
sionalism, a realistic view of crime
and a commitment to their commu-
nities.

To judge by these two examples,
"Vis-à-Vis" is at its most illuminat-
ing when it does not strain for either
confrontation or reconciliation but
explores the professional and private
concerns that make for surprising
connections.



New York Times