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THE WORK OF JOHN CASSAVETES: SCRIPT, PERFORMANCE STYLE, AND IMPROVISATION

MARIA VIERA

The first version of John Cassavetes' *Shadows* evolved out of improvised dramatic workshop exercises, but the actors rehearsed for weeks before shooting and some of the film was partially scripted by Cassavetes. Over half of the second version (the current release print) contains re-shot and re-edited material in which dialogue was rewritten and entire scenes re-staged. Although this second version retains the end title card from the first version, "The film you have just seen was an improvisation," it is not strictly accurate if we use the term improvisation to mean making it up as you go along (and in the case of film, doing so in front of a running camera). In the case of *Shadows* Cassavetes meant that it was improvised only in the sense that there was no written script (Carney 57).

All of Cassavetes' films following *Shadows* have well-thought-out, fully-formed, carefully detailed scripts with all lines of dialogue in place. Yet this end title card ("the film you have just seen was an improvisation") clings to the rest of Cassavetes' works. The question is, why? What screenwriting and directing strategies did Cassavetes use that have linked much of his work to the notion of improvisation? The project here is to explore how and in what ways his films are (or are not) improvised and to look at the similarities between theatrical improvisations and Cassavetes' construction of scenes which contributed to his creation of films with a surface of apparent improvisation.

Improvisation as an acting strategy in theatre takes three forms: an actor training method (one method of The Method), a casting procedure, and a rehearsal technique. There are also specialized theatrical performance situations (non-literary theater, experimental, avant-garde, comedy improvisation ensembles) where "improvs" occur in front of an audience.

In acting classes improvs are used as skill-building exercises during which participants work on their ability to act upon impulse and intuition as well as to develop inventiveness. An improv is a kind of game which takes place in an empty space without props or costumes (with perhaps only some rehearsal furniture), where actors are asked to play various situations providing their own dialogue as they go. Exercises can range from simple, solo explorations, such as trying to convey the shape, action, and sounds of a dripping faucet or a can opener, to very complex collective creations where each participant has been assigned a specific character type (pregnant woman, claustrophobic, drunk) to develop within a highly dramatic situation (an elevator stalled between floors after an earthquake, a hi-jacked plane, a police lock-up, a tent revival meeting). Improvs can be designed to explore emotions and relationships, or to find ways for the actor to draw upon personal experi-

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ences to create honest reactions to new situations.

As a casting procedure, improvisation is used to free the actor from line interpretation and to allow the director to see how resourceful and inventive an actor can be. By leading the actor through a series of actions, the director can see how well the actor takes direction and how an actor moves when there is no script in hand. Some excellent actors are not good at cold line readings; their potential can only be revealed through improvisation.

Improvisation, as a rehearsal technique, is used to work on dead places, uninteresting places, places in the script that are not working. For example, when a cast is unable to generate the necessary emotion, energy, or meaning for which the scene calls, improvs can be used to work on the problem. The purpose of the improv is to work on the main issue in the scene, freeing the actors from the letter of the text.

The words and notions associated with improvisation as a acting strategy (such as freedom, freshness, exploration, creativity, spontaneity, inventiveness, release, imagination) are the very words most commonly used in the critical discourse on Cassavetes by those who admire his films. Those critics who dismiss him describe his films as too long, too boring, and too talky (and sometimes self-indulgent) which in general are characteristics of improvs, and why they are usually considered a tool and not a performance to be witnessed by an audience.

What Cassavetes takes from the theatrical improv is its values and assumptions, and its style, if you will, but he uses improvisation no more than many other film directors whose work is not considered improvisatory.[1] Cassavetes' work is not, in fact, improvised; but improvisation is what his work is about.

Improvisation as a Normal Procedure in Filmmaking

Filmmaking is a particularly fluid process susceptible to re-thinking and re-working throughout the entire production process. A director will rewrite lines in rehearsal and improvise on the set for reasons as varied as weather changes, equipment failure, or actors' moods. Intentions which have been in place since the beginning of production are routinely abandoned in the editing room. These are the creative conditions of filmmaking. No matter how meticulously planned, circumstances arise which force a director to improvise on the set or in the editing room.

Cassavetes' use of improvisation techniques in rehearsal, when the script has broken down, or on the set to keep things fresh, are not that radical a practice. However, he is more in line with independent filmmaking styles when he uses improvised scenes in the finished film. Parts of the famous drunk scene in *Husbands* are true inprovisation (Rowlands). The scene in *Faces* where Seymour Cassel (Chet) flirts with the four women in Maria's living room contains some improvisation on Cassel's part (Cassel). *Opening Night* ends with a back stage party where Peter Bogdanovich, playing himself, was told by Cassavetes to go out on stage, chat with people, and congratulate Gena (as Myrtle) (Bogdanovich).

Improvisation as a rehearsal strategy is a way to get more intense, more inventive, less predictable performances. It is used as a tool to get to the polished, perfected performance which follows all the codes of the performance style known as "realism." Cassavetes, however, is not interested in the "somewhere else," preferring the "working" performance, the performance in progress. This "rougher" performance style is certainly one of the key characteristics of a Cassavetes film and one of the reasons why his work is associated with improvisation.

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Gena Rowlands in *Gloria*. Courtesy: Museum of Modern Art.

Because improvs are collective creations and because they are tools for something else they usually do not have a centered point of view (unless performed in front of an audience, for example, by a group with a political directive). Because Cassavetes' films, as Raymond Carney points out, "aggressively put rival positions and attitudes at war with each other," though not in the sense of presenting "alternative points of view," they, like improvs, create a decentered spectator (290–91).[2]

However, Cassavetes uses improvisation not so much as a technique, but as an attitude. His films share with theatrical improvs the same assumptions about creativity, assumptions on which he makes directorial decisions which give his films a surface appearance of improvisation. His work with actors is considered phenomenal; he will always be remembered for the performance style he elicits from them, a style intimately linked to improvisation. However, a less examined connection, and maybe a more important one in giving his films an improvisatory appearance, is his use of characteristics common to improvised scenes in his scripts.

Script: Structure

Improvisations usually lack form and never have endings. When an improvisation bogs down or seems to proceed in an overly predictable direction, the director or teacher will introduce a new character into the situation (often whispering directions to the new participant). This technique is much in evidence in *Shadows*. An improvisation ends when the director/teacher says "cut" or when somebody calls "time." A group of actors improvising usually cannot orchestrate structural elements such as crises, climaxes, resolutions, or conclusions.

Because his films are often structured around a series of encounters, "problems," or in the case of *A Woman Under the Influence*, "family gatherings," Cas-

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savetes has trouble with endings, at least conventional endings which wrap up all lines of action in a neat package. In some of his films, after he has played through the material in which he is interested, he attaches a fantasy ending. For example, in *Minnie and Moskowitz* he cuts from the wedding to an idlyllic happy ending where Minnie, Seymour, and their mothers play in the backyard with the kids. Even in *Gloria*, which was made under conventional studio production circumstances, Cassavetes cheats the audience out of a pleasurable resolution by coding the happy ending as a probable fantasy.

Cassavetes also prefers not to elide time. The situations of his characters tend to work themselves out in real time. *Faces* is made up of eight long scenes with a story time of two hours, taking place late one night and roughly half an hour the next morning. In *A Woman Under the Influence*, the final hour of the film is one continuous scene. This is one of the reasons Cassavetes' films do not produce pleasure for those whose expectations are that a film shows only those things that are "important," that move the narrative forward, with all other action eliminated. Nor does a Cassavetes film produce aesthetic pleasure for those who feel a work of art is to be an organic whole, a construction where each element fits perfectly into place and nothing extraneous is allowed. A Cassavetes film defies entertainment and art, as do most theatrical improvs.

Script: Plot

Cassavetes' films explore predicaments of social interaction and crises of identity within very specific situations (often domestic) and with detailed characters (often seemingly ordinary). His films construct intensified psychological relations and in

Peter Falk, Ben Gazzara, and John Cassavates in *Husbands*. Courtesy: Museum of Modern Art.

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tensely personal situations without universal or transcendental applications. He is most interested in situations where conventional roles and models of behaviour are breaking down. For example, in *Lovestreams*, Robert Harmon (played by Cassavetes), in a state of flight from the dangers of emotional commitment, now cynically "plays" at social expression. His sister, Sarah Lawson (played by Gena Rowlands), has only defined herself in terms of her relations with others, similar to many of Cassavetes' female characters before her. Now cut adrift from these relations, she has no distinct self. Sarah's crisis of identity disrupts, but does not overthrow, Robert's self-imposed exile into his safe, self-contained world.

Mainstream Hollywood narrative development dictates a central, psychologically coherent ego, usually male, often a "Hero," or, if an "Everyman," one who will be placed in extraordinary circumstances and discover inner heroic strength. His equilibrium is disrupted by some kind of extraordinary disturbance which gives him a goal, thus leading to a causally related series of events which conclude with the hero either winning or losing (most often winning) and equilibrium restored. There is often a parallel line of action involving a woman and romance which will close with either a successful coupling or a loss.

Being more interested in social complexities, personal relations, and psychological interiority, Cassavetes refuses this formula and lets his narrative stray. He minimizes the importance of plot, action, and linear movement, often replacing plot with a series of encounters. His films do not lead to conclusions, answers, or resolutions and, as in *Faces*, nothing has come from the suffering the characters have caused each other. Instead, a Cassavetes' plot is an endless series of transactions or "problems," which is what a theatrical improv is. A director or acting teacher will set up a dramatic problem which the participating actors will explore. One cannot predict where a scene will go in either an improv or a Cassavetes script. Improvs do not have action (no chase scenes, no fist fights), action which takes planning, working out, control; instead, improvs explore characters, the emphasis in all of Cassavetes' work.

Improvisation is often linked to the notion of play. When a scene bogs down in rehearsal, the director will say, "let's play with it," meaning try something new. In acting class, an improv is where an actor can give up his or her acquired technique and "loosen up" or "have fun with it." Cassavetes scripts this activity of "goofing-off" or "horsing-around" into his films. The narrative stops for the characters to play, as in various scenes in *Husbands*, or as in *Lovestreams*, where the exposition is disrupted when Robert playfully "interviews" Joannie in a scene which seems more improvised than the rest of the film. Playing is part of what an improv is and does.[3]

Script: Dialogue

Peter Bogdanovich once said that "John writes the best dialogue of anybody. It just doesn't seem like dialogue, that's why it all seems improvised." Cassavetes is noted for his brilliantly individualistic dialogue. His dialogue, delivered in the performance style he elicits from his actors—with stumbling hesitations, long pauses, and aberrant accelerations—gives a feeling of "authenticity," a feeling the characters are speaking as "real" people do or are making up their lines as they go along. Cassavetes likely wrote with this performance style, its rhythms and eccentric shifts, always in mind. There is a match of dialogue and performance style which makes his work seem improvisatory.

In *Lovestreams*, Cassavetes establishes a divorce proceeding where Sarah, along with her daughter Debbie and her lawyer,

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meet with her soon-to-be ex-husband Jack and his lawyer before a female judge. The discussion progresses as one would expect in an amicable divorce proceeding, where the question of child custody has already been agreed upon (Debbie will live with Sarah and Jack has visitation rights), and all that is left is the official signing of papers. Then Sarah speaks up.

> Sarah: I have immediate plans to take Debbie with me to Houston or New York. I don't know when we'll be back.
>
> Debbie: Mama . . .
>
> Jack: New York? Houston? Where did that come from?
>
> Sarah (to Debbie): We're not going to a funeral, Sweetheart, it's okay.

With the word "funeral" the scene takes an unpredictable trajectory. Sarah's stumbling explanation, which she seems to create on the spot, is skillfully executed by Gena Rowlands, who through slight hesitations and repetition of words reveals just how quirky, eccentric, and unstable Sarah is.

> Sarah: You see, we go to a lot of funerals. I go to . . . uh . . . to funerals and hospitals . . . and some weddings. You might say that's what I do. I visit sick people . . . mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, uncles . . . uh . . . nephews, aunts. I don't have any relatives myself but . . . but Jack does. Some of these are in Houston and Jack's aunt is in New York . . . which I would feel very uncomfortable going to if . . . if she wasn't there. But nobody died this time, thank God, just sick, you know. People . . . people like Debbie and me to be with them when they aren't feeling well because we're cheerful.

When the judge asks her if she hadn't previously agreed to Jack's visitation rights, she calmly explains her position.

> Sarah: Well, you see, Judge, when someone is temporarily insane, like Jack here is . . . and . . . and he's a wonderful guy . . . but, you see, when someone is like that they don't want to see the people they really love. Okay, I understand that . . . a person who is sick has to get well before he can be normal. Right? So when . . . when Jack finishes his . . . his sleeping around everywhere and he wants to assume his responsibilities, he wants to be a real father to Debbie, he can see her. And if Debbie is a very old lady when he makes up his mind that's when he'll see her. Okay?

The erratic shifts in this dialogue, which are paralleled in Rowland's movements and pacing, not only make Rowland's performance seem improvised (which it isn't), but set up Sarah's character as infinitely more interesting and complex than we had anticipated. These radical shifts in character motivation also identify Sarah as one of Cassavetes' quirky, some say crazy, female characters, but because Cassavetes' dialogue is so skillfully written he manages to make each one of these women highly individualistic. Gloria talks differently than Mabel, who talks differently than Minnie and Jeannie. Unlike Woody Allen's films, where the speech patterns and rhythms of the Keaton/Farrow characters are not only the same, but become female variations of the Allen character(s), Cassavetes' characters are neither contaminated by his own acting (when he is in the film) nor contaminated by each other.

The improvisatory quality of Cassavetes' dialogue comes out of its ordinariness. Just as he avoids the "beauty shot," he avoids the "beauty line," the clever, well-turned phrase. One does not feel like Cassavetes has stored the *bon mot*, as one imagines a Woody Allen or Neil Simon to do. Nor do Cassavetes' characters ana-

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lyze their feelings as characters do in, say, a Bergman script.

Cassavetes is, in fact, not afraid to create an inarticulate character. Like Renoir, Cassavetes uses ordinary language, though not to make a statement about society, but to produce a succession of shifting relationships between different characters. The banality, awkwardness, and general inarticulateness are the point of the scene.

Conclusion

Cassavetes' work appears improvisatory because of the complex play between his scripting, directorial choices, and the type of content in which he is interested. A key result of improvisation is a rhythm which lacks dramatic focus and tension; some would say improvs are more like "real life" (they are, after all, coming from an acting method premised on uncompromising "realism").

Cassavetes is careful not to let the "filmmaking" process interfere with what he wants to capture on film. His use of non-actors, a hand-held camera, cinema-verite style extreme close-ups, body microphones to allow actors freedom of movement, and refusal to cut at the "proper" (conventional) cutting points, all contribute to making his work look improvised. The pacing of his scenes derives not from editing, but from the timing of the characters' emotional development within the scene. Cassavetes' rhythms are the rhythms of human interaction, of people talking, negotiating, struggling to understand. But mainly his films are an exploration, which is the essence of improvisation.

Notes

[1] Speaking of Cassavetes' work, Peter Bogdanovich says that it is just good directing technique to throw actors off a bit by changing the lines on the set. Bogdanovich relates a conversation he had with Orson Welles: ". . . and he [Welles] said, you know, the trouble with movies is they're canned. I said, what? He said, they're canned, you know, they come in cans. I said, okay. He said, well, anything that's canned isn't exactly fresh, is it? I started thinking about that and it led me to the thought that the idea of canning things, is to can them when they are just at their freshest. That led me to the thought, that I am sure John [Cassavetes] came to many years before, which is to not let the acting get too set so that it remains fresh when it's canned" (Bogdanovich).

[2] Raymond Carney argues that Cassavetes' ambivalence, his refusal to endorse or affirm, puts him not "anterior to [n]or outside his text," nor "at the aesthetic distance" from it, but in it; his "personal passions, confusions, explorations, doubts, and questions are embedded and embodied everywhere" in his films (290). Carney points out that "the enormous energy of Cassavetes' films comes precisely from the fact that their attitudes are not decided and worked out in advance, and presented to the viewer in a *fait accompli* of intricate visual patterns, metaphors, or structures" (290).

[3] In his discussion of this type of scene, Carney says, "Playing a scene or a role, playing with, or against another character, playing with imaginative possibilities, while still playing within certain rules and boundaries, is a way of momentarily freeing oneself from the tyranny of habit and of releasing oneself to possibilities of discovery" (125).

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