

JOHN CASSAVETES: AT THE LIMITS OF  
PERFORMANCE

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## Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	1
Abstract.....	2
Introduction.....	3
Chapter One: Performative Opposition: <i>A Woman Under the Influence</i> .....	20
Chapter Two: A New Kind of Acting: <i>Shadows</i> .....	52
Chapter Three: Documentaries of Performance: <i>Faces</i> .....	90
Conclusion.....	122
Bibliography.....	134
Filmography.....	141

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## Abstract

This thesis examines the central role of performance in three of the films of John Cassavetes. I identify Cassavetes' unique approach to performance and analyze its development in *A Woman Under the Influence* (1974), *Shadows* (1959) and *Faces* (1968). In order to contextualize and define Cassavetes' methodology, I compare and contrast each of these films in relation to two other relevant film movements.

Cassavetes' approach was dedicated to creating alternative forms of performative expression in film, yet his films are not solely independent from filmic history and can be read as being a reaction against established filmic structures. His films revolve around autonomous performances that often defy and deconstruct traditional concepts of genre, narrative structure and character. Cassavetes' films are deeply concerned with their characters' isolation and inability to communicate with one another, yet refrain from traditional or even abstract constructions of meaning in favour of a focus on spontaneous, unstructured performance of character.

Cassavetes was devoted to exploring the details of personal relationships, identity and social interaction. In his films, acting and the creation of character depicts the blurred divide between artifice and reality that exists within much social performance in lived experience. The filmmaking process itself was crucial in the generation of improvisatory performances in Cassavetes' films. His work displays an intertwining of creative process and the final filmic form.

## Introduction

A film is not life, its merely film stock! That's why a film always has to force itself to be extremely "real" – so people can accept it and react. (42)

- John Cassavetes, *Positif* 205 (April 1978)

John Cassavetes had a passion for film, but was aware of its limitations and consistently pushed against them. Cassavetes recognized film as an artificial medium, but treated that as its strength. Traditional cinema's tendency to be fixed, representative and linear could be opposed; its ability to restrain could be tested and subverted. Cassavetes believed that actors' performances were central to a film's ability to achieve a sense of subversive vitality against the restraints of narrative filmmaking (*Cassavetes on Cassavetes* 44-45). The director disdained terms such as "playing a role," he viewed the creation of character as an imperfect alliance of personal self and fictional situation (*Cassavetes on Cassavetes* 210). The key to forcing film to be "real" is to acknowledge the artifice inherent within its construction.

The following thesis will examine the central role of performance in three of the films of John Cassavetes. I will analyze Cassavetes' approach to encouraging and representing his actors' performances, which often transgressed established performative and filmic boundaries. At the same time, I will investigate how the results of Cassavetes' approach to acting relate to his films' ongoing themes concerning performance in everyday life.

Although Cassavetes allowed his actor's to perform in a central and creatively free position, they are always framed or "forced" into filmic methods. This thesis will aim to explore how Cassavetes merges his focus on performance with his use of the filmic medium. I will examine how Cassavetes subverts and challenges filmic form by focusing on performance as fundamentally unstable, complicating narrative, dramatic interaction and

character. As a part of this process I will theoretically position each chapter's main film of interest between two other related filmic movements, in order to distinguish Cassavetes' techniques and intentions regarding performance, and to elucidate the development of his practice and thematic outlook.

*Shadows* (1959), *Faces* (1968) and *A Woman Under the Influence* (1974) all reflect Cassavetes' passionate belief that the actor, not the director, should be the primary creative force during the production of a film. This attitude drastically affected these films' dramatic interactions and the visual style used to represent them. In the introduction to his biography of the director, *John Cassavetes: Lifeworks*, Tom Charity asserts that Cassavetes "developed a non-aesthetic aesthetic structured around the freedom of the actor" (xi). During interviews, the filmmaker went to great pains to describe the methodology used to allow his actors the freedom he desired them to have, but is perhaps best explained by his simple observation that "The actor has to conform to the camera positions and the lights, and it should be the other way around" (*Cassavetes on Cassavetes* 151).

His film sets were lighted generally, rather than using specific marks that dictated an actor's movement. A combination of hand-held camera and fixed long shots were favored, again giving actors freedom of movement and the ability to concentrate solely on their performance (*Cassavetes on Cassavetes* 153). Finally, whilst dialogue and events were, for the most part, scripted, actors' interpretation of character and their delivery was autonomous and, according to Cassavetes, often spontaneously improvised. The director himself effectively summarized this approach when he stated that within his films "The *emotion* was improvisation. The lines were written. The *attitudes* were improvised" (*Cassavetes on Cassavetes* 161).

Cassavetes' opinions and beliefs concerning filmmaking originate in his unhappy early career as a working actor within Hollywood, where he was unable to gain a sense of

creative satisfaction due to what he saw as Hollywood's institutional tendency to "fight creativity" (*Cassavetes on Cassavetes* 41-42). The frustration Cassavetes experienced as a working actor contributed to his decision to open "The Cassavetes-Lane Drama Workshop," an acting school that enabled the creative gestation of his first film, *Shadows*, to occur (*Cassavetes on Cassavetes* 47-49). After the release of *Shadows*, Cassavetes was offered a position as a producer-director for Paramount Pictures, where he made *Too Late Blues* (1961) and *A Child is Waiting* (1963). However both films were creatively compromised, with the studio refusing his casting and location suggestions and insisting on the insertion of extra scenes for *Too Late Blues* (Charity, *Lifeworks* 39), and re-editing a "more sentimental" version of *A Child is Waiting* without Cassavetes' permission (*Cassavetes on Cassavetes* 122-123).

These negative experiences resulted in Cassavetes' films being reactively oppositional to the interfering methods of the Hollywood production line. By 1963, Cassavetes had been creatively stifled and controlled as both an actor and a director. His films reflect an attempt to create a constructive middle ground between both roles that encouraged constant autonomy and creative fulfillment.

Cassavetes' policy of non-interference even went so far as to define his own role as simply setting up an "atmosphere" in which his actors could perform freely, without feeling pressured or self-conscious (*Cassavetes on Cassavetes* 153-154). At the end of this particular elucidation Cassavetes concludes with his view that "You must charge the atmosphere constantly, and you must do it honestly" (*Cassavetes on Cassavetes* 154).

However, this quote is a telling one. Behind the director's cultivated policy of passive non-interference hid an intention and methodology that "charges" his films with a tendency to deconstruct existing performative structures. Cassavetes' directorial spontaneity, his willingness to encourage and allow actors to experiment and test their limits (*Cassavetes on*

*Cassavetes* 167-168), resulted in a two-way creative bond between the director and his actors. Cassavetes' use of the word "honestly" is also significant. Throughout his filmography the director created an evolving dramatic dialogue between truth and artifice, specifically in terms of social behavior and interaction. For Cassavetes, an actor's performance in a film could parallel and illuminate the mechanics and nature of social performance in reality.

Scholarly work on Cassavetes has consistently recognized the director's preoccupation with notions of truth and artifice. Films such as *Shadows* and *Faces* have narratives that can be read as long-form studies on the difficulty of social roles and expectations. They feature characters who endlessly take on personas and put on acts in order to survive in their social environment, whilst also sometimes attempting to defy those roles and break free. This kind of reading is relevant but also restrains other possible interpretations of how the dynamic between truth and artifice operates in Cassavetes' films.

Ray Carney, a leading scholar in the study of John Cassavetes, wrote the first book-length study on the director, *American Dreaming: The Films of John Cassavetes and the American Experience*, and has subsequently published five other works orientated around Cassavetes' life and films. In *American Dreaming*, Carney's position on Cassavetes is rooted firmly in American Studies, describing the agitated and strained performances in films such as *Shadows* as extensions of a national American struggle for the "freedom of the individual" (19).

Carney's interpretation of Cassavetes is relevant, as all of his films are reflections of American experience, but reductive in that they only illuminate his films in one very specific light. Ray Carney most effectively summarizes his interpretation of the director's vision in the introduction to *American Dreaming*:

Cassavetes' films are, in the largest sense, inquiries into the trajectory of the American dream in the local and inevitably hostile environments in which it is

forced to express itself in modern America. They are explorations of the challenges and burdens of the essential American imaginative situation. (5)

For Carney, Cassavetes' films depict characters engaged in constant struggles against repressive systems that seek to limit their expressive, performative potential. *American Dreaming* acknowledges the importance of Cassavetes' encouragement of partial improvisation within a freer model of film production, as a means to viscerally portray fictional characters fighting internal and external threats to their freedom and aspirations.

Thus *Shadows* is interpreted as a film about the "creation of character" in the multifaceted "hostile environment" of New York City (40). All three of the main characters perform and experiment with social roles that they are inherently unconfident in, leading to multiple breakdowns or "crises of identity" (40). Carney goes on to depict *Faces* as a thematic development of *Shadows*. Whilst the characters in *Shadows* are still young enough to learn from their ways, and have a sense of optimism for the future (82-83), *Faces* explores an older generation who are "trapped" within social roles and structures that have "no exit" (84). Carney argues that whereas the characters of *Shadows* desperately attempt to perform themselves into roles they cannot sustain, *Faces* depicts men and women who, just as desperately, attempt to act themselves out of stagnation.

*American Dreaming* argues that starting from *Minnie and Moskowitz* (1971), the director also began to deepen his "dialogue with the forms of Hollywood experience," most noticeably his films began to evoke various Hollywood genres (142). Carney observes that Cassavetes' seventh film, *A Woman Under the Influence*, engages in a relationship with the genre of domestic melodrama (142). For Carney, the film emphasizes performance and expressivity as a means to combat social entrapment, but now within a narrative that depicts "the home as a theater battleground in which domestic performance needs to fight to not be

smothered” (195). Carney also notes that there is a “feminist power” in Mabel’s ongoing conflict against her own family’s efforts to stifle her dynamic personality (211).

*American Dreaming* is an insightful study of Cassavetes’ films as struggles for “imaginative freedom and free self-expression” (5), both in terms of the characters and situations that are diegetically depicted, and in relation to the films existing within the “hostile environment of American bureaucratic filmmaking” (5). Carney recognizes the centrality and unique nature of performance in Cassavetes’ films, but only as a starting point to engage in a study that instead focuses on philosophically linking the films to what he sees as an “imaginative tradition” (5). This American tradition is one that connects freedom of expression to the impulsive spontaneity seen in the performances of Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton, and to the ingrained romanticism in the films of Frank Capra (6).

By focusing so avidly on the thematic context of these films, Carney refuses to acknowledge the complex nature of how performance is actually generated and its overall function in Cassavetes’ improvisatory model of production. Carney is also the preeminent biographer of Cassavetes, having compiled the highly informative *Cassavetes on Cassavetes*. Yet the illuminating historical information on the performative context of these works, developed in Carney’s biographical work on Cassavetes, is often missing from his own critical interpretation of the films.

For example, at one point in *American Dreaming*, Carney chastises critics of *Shadows* for noting the “unpolished, unfinished, improvisatory quality” of the film, countering that “they were watching the improvisations not of actors acting but of characters living” (42). This statement summarizes how unwilling Carney is to analyze the complex relationship between an actor and the character they perform, preferring generalizations that portray dramatic fictions as glorified truth. The performances in *Shadows* are complex and

fluid, frequently demonstrating the unstable divide and interchangeability of notions of truth and artifice. They cannot be reduced to simplified demonstrations of one or the other.

Carney assumes that because the performances within *Shadows* are oppositional to the well rehearsed and smoothly executed acting seen in much of Hollywood cinema, Cassavetes' actors are somehow true to life. Yet the origin of *Shadows* came from repeated improvisatory exercises with amateur actors at Cassavetes' own acting workshop (*Cassavetes on Cassavetes* 54-55). Cassavetes remarked that during the production of *Faces* "every single person on the picture, in the crew, was an actor. It makes a great difference. Actors really understand actors, and they're really rooting for them" (*Cassavetes on Cassavetes* 154).

Through referencing biographical information, it becomes clear that these films are the result of a celebration of the creativity of the individual actor, produced in an environment that encouraged new ways of creating characters. Whilst the approach that Cassavetes and his actors adopted might be considered "authentic" in terms of an adherence to instinctual spontaneity through improvisation and collaboration, *Faces* and *Shadows* do not represent a victory of truth over artifice but a deconstruction of the perceived difference between the two concepts. The acting in *Shadows* and *Faces* is not "characters living," but an acknowledgement of how performing is a form of living.

Carney's second major critical work on Cassavetes, *The Films of John Cassavetes: Pragmatism, Modernism, and the Movies*, continues along the same line of thought, but is even more impassioned and ambitious in scope. Carney does make some effort to detail the unstable nature of performance within the director's work, describing how the acting "pushes away" from a style that would complement any kind of stable interpretation of character (102). However Carney's observations function as groundwork for a larger, less focused argument.

Throughout *Pragmatism, Modernism, and the Movies*, Carney is most interested in comparing Cassavetes' filmography to notable examples of classical Hollywood filmmaking, describing films such as *Citizen Kane* (1941) and *Psycho* (1960) as easily understandable, symbolic texts. Carney deems these films "a celebration of knowing," describing how they are designed to eliminate any sense of mystery concerning the characters and their subjective experience, ultimately placing the viewer in a superior and satisfied position (272). Carney insists that Cassavetes' films are fundamentally opposed to this kind of cinema. Instead he argues that the films plunge the viewer into "the turbulence of experience," refusing to be reduced to "expressive formulas" (273).

By using such a term as "expressive formulas," Carney evokes genre, the filmic medium's most obvious and efficient means of placing expression within a formula. However Cassavetes did frequently engage with genre. *Minnie and Moskowitz*, *A Woman Under the Influence* and *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie* (1976), as stated in *American Dreaming*, all utilize conventions of various different genres, only to stretch their limits primarily through their actors' performances, which refuse to adhere to the inherent character types, narrative structures and ideologies present in the romantic comedy, the melodrama or the film noir respectively (142). Carney claims that Cassavetes' narratives "are almost always about going out of control" (273). This statement explains why Cassavetes would engage in an "expressive formula" such as genre in the first place. Genre provides a stable and familiar reference point for Cassavetes and his actors to actively rail against, a system of control to measure and prove their waywardness.

The use of the term "turbulence of experience" is also important. A main distinction Carney has with the work of Cassavetes and films that facilitate the "known" is that the latter are fully organized, structured, planned and then executed. In contrast, Cassavetes' films are testament to the experience of the present, the actuality of the process of filmmaking, through

actors' improvisation and the filmmaking choices that they inspired (276). For Carney, an actor's spontaneous discovery of character is a more authentic approach than the perceived artifice of systematic and planned means of expression. Yet films such as *A Woman Under the Influence* place both modes within the same filmic world, resulting in a viewing experience where each approach is more visible due to the presence of the other.

In his book, *Where Does It Happen? John Cassavetes and Cinema at the Breaking Point*, George Kouvaros challenges Ray Carney's "highly prescriptive" reading (24). For Kouvaros, Carney's positioning of Cassavetes' films as "beyond the reach of debates involving cinematic representation" is far too dismissive and contradicts his own view of the films as highly exploratory and dynamic texts (27).

Instead *Where Does It Happen?* offers a more specific line of enquiry. In his introduction, Kouvaros describes a photograph of Cassavetes and his co-star and friend Ben Gazzara during the making of Cassavetes' fifth film, *Husbands* (1970). Kouvaros notes his inability to decipher whether the picture was taken whilst the two men are in character or simply on set (xii). This observation is used as a starting point to discuss the unstable divide between character and actor in Cassavetes' films, with Kouvaros stating that his goal is to "find a way around the biographical and toward a more direct connection with the films as cinematic and social texts" (xiii).

Kouvaros positions *Shadows* as a "rethinking of performance codes concerning the actorly versus the nonactorly, the cinematic versus the everyday" (29). He identifies how the film's unprofessional actors are often placed under deliberate pressure, invoking "unsure" performances (7) that test the limits of "narrative tradition" (38). Kouvaros then links the way in which *Shadows* "redefines" its own narrative through performance to other filmmakers such as Jacques Rivette, Terrence Malick and Monte Hellman (38). In all of these directors' films actors' performances are intensified by physical and psychological means to

the point that they verge upon breaking down, ultimately “testing the limits of cinematic form” (38). Kouvaros assures the reader that this “testing” is far from “avant-garde abstraction” (38). Instead these directors all share a practical dedication and obsession with depicting the painstaking maintenance of character in unplanned and unstable environments.

Kouvaros’ observation that scenes in *Shadows* are often on the verge of breaking down applies to the uncontrolled performances of the actors, who he describes as testing the limits of “cinematic form” (38). In *American Dreaming*, Carney makes a similar point but differs from Kouvaros with a wider reaching claim that Cassavetes is “repeatedly attracted to moments when conventional, automatic roles, rules, and codes of behavior break down” (40). This moment of intersection highlights the difference between the two writers’ approaches. Whilst Kouvaros’ observation is specific and deals with formal aspects of Cassavetes’ work, Carney’s use of the term is rooted in a schematic stance that continues to analyze the films in a thematic context.

Kouvaros continues to locate Cassavetes’ films as “cinematic and social texts” by drawing comparisons between *Faces* and “new forms of cinema” (43) such as Direct Cinema and Cinéma Vérité. Kouvaros does this in order to illuminate how actor, character and camera relate to one another in the “open process of filming” that he recognizes in both *Faces* and the new documentary forms of the 1960s (71-74). Building upon the writings of Jean-Louis Comolli, Kouvaros puts forward that Direct Cinema is an “epistemology of the way cinema brings itself into being” (61) by influencing the events and subjects it films. Just as Cassavetes engages in a two-way relationship with his actors, Direct Cinema relies on the filmmaking process itself to generate the events it depicts.

For example, the intrusion of the filmmakers Albert and David Maysles into the lives of “Little” and “Big” Edie Beale in the Direct Cinema documentary *Grey Gardens* (1975) results in interactions, performances and events that would undoubtedly have been different

without the presence of a film crew. *Grey Gardens* is not only a study of two women living together in isolation, but also a study of how these two women react to the attention of the camera, and the effect it has upon their self-awareness and relationship with one another.

Unlike Ray Carney's writings, *Where Does It Happen?* is a precise study that refuses to portray Cassavetes' as an indefinable individualist. Instead Kouvaros labors to find connections or "points of exchange" (xiv-xv) between pre-existing film theory and concurrent filmic tendencies. However Kouvaros is often too reliant on merely identifying similarities without necessary development and filmic analysis that might complicate these "points of exchange" further. Kouvaros states that Cassavetes' work possesses "on one hand, an uncertainty of meaning and signification that unsettles stable categories and distinctions and, on the other hand, a responsiveness to the material conditions under which each film is made" (xiv). In an effort to steer away from the biographical, Kouvaros does not actively include the specifics of *Shadows* and *Faces*' "material conditions" of production into his analyses, or indeed the films that he desires to use for comparison, leading to a highly theoretical debate that falls short of confidently positioning Cassavetes within history.

*Where Does It Happen?* often parallels Sylvie Pierre and Jean-Louis Comolli's appraisal of *Faces* in *Cahiers Du Cinema*, published in 1968, the same year as the film's release. Unlike Kouvaros and Carney's distanced retrospectives, "Deux visages de Faces" is a dynamic initial reaction to Cassavetes' approach. Ultimately both Pierre and Comolli revel in *Faces*' fundamentally inconsistent nature. Pierre notes how the very structure of the film orientates itself around the performances of the actors, and observes the directionless quality of the film's narrative and characters (324). Comolli further develops Pierre's view on the film, identifying the actors as essential to the film's creative process, describing them not only as actors but also as "authors" (325), and noting the "self-generating" momentum of the film (327). "Deux visages de Faces" defines performance in Cassavetes' films not as a means

of presenting character, but as the production of character in the moment, influenced by the filming process itself (326).

Cassavetes' films encourage two separate schools of analysis. Therefore for Carney, the films are examples of a new form of filmic language, one that resists order and systematic analysis (*American Dreaming* 2-3). Carney's approach looks within the films, analyzing them as unique but fixed texts with established characters and situations that nonetheless communicate a brave ideological stance for individual expression. He builds a highly literary interpretation that above all emphasizes thematic content. On the other hand, Comolli, Pierre and Kouvaros view Cassavetes' work from an exterior position, focusing on actor over character, and how the mechanics of improvised performance can destabilize and influence the filmmaking process.

Other writings on Cassavetes continue to be separated in the same manner. In his article focusing upon *A Woman Under the Influence*, "Director Under the Influence," David Degener describes Mabel's uninhibited behavior, and its perception by other characters as madness, as an example of how free performative behavior is faced with constant attempted repression in Cassavetes' work. Degener argues that *A Woman Under the Influence* questions perceptions of madness. Mabel's performance is not a demonstration of madness but a fight against the madness of a restrictive society (4-8). In Degener's analysis, the plight of characters and conflicts of ideology are represented as being of most importance, aligning this interpretation with Carney's thematic approach.

Maria Viera also notes the constant social conflicts that take place in a film such as *Woman Under the Influence* in her article "The Work of John Cassavetes: Script, Performance Style, and Improvisation." However Viera interprets Cassavetes' narratives as less to do with communicating a consistent ideological message but as being created to

encourage improvisation above all things. Viera notes that Cassavetes' films depict a constant stream of "transactions or 'problems,'" perfectly suited to a freer mode of performance (38).

Viera, like Comolli, Pierre and Kouvaros, sees the actors' partially improvised performances as the dominant force in these films, with any attempt to attach an ideological message reducing the fluid power they have over the films' form and direction. In *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, Gilles Deleuze also finds *Shadows*' unorganised, spontaneous form to be of most interest. He describes how *Shadows* seems to "overflow" the boundaries of traditional filmic representation, consisting of a "double reality" resulting from the merging of the "real" actor and his fictional character (149).

Both approaches offer valuable insight yet have obvious limitations. Carney's focus on the ideological, his preoccupation with "ideals of independence and self-expression" (*American Dreaming* 306), leads to a neglect of the methodology in Cassavetes' films. On the other hand, Comolli and Kouvaros represent an unwavering focus on how performative technique and Cassavetes' approach to filmmaking destabilizes narrative form and the concept of fixed, definitive characters. This approach rarely considers the ideological implications of "unravelling the economy that holds together the performance of narrative and character" (Kouvaros, *Where Does It Happen?* 38). My approach will consolidate this critical divide by emphasizing how the performative techniques within Cassavetes' films undo accepted formulas of acting, genre and narrative in an effort to present an alternative mode of expression that embodies the ideals that Carney interprets in Cassavetes' work.

Cassavetes' films carry consistent thematic threads that concern performance as both a pathway to free expression and a form of social bondage that restricts true knowledge and desire. These opposing views are not presented separately but are intertwined throughout his films. Improvisation and collaboration form the essential substance of how these ideas are

both generated and communicated. Thus I will explore performance in the cinema of John Cassavetes as both a practical concern and a thematic one.

I will compare and contrast three of Cassavetes' films with examples of recognised film movements, demonstrating approaches to performance that are both related and oppositional to his own views and methodology. In the various interviews and statements of intent that are compiled in *Cassavetes on Cassavetes*, the director is frequently impassioned and opinionated but often intentionally simplistic and general. Whilst *Cassavetes on Cassavetes* shows the director to be considerably mindful of his intended thematic subject matter for each of his films, he continuously implies that the films themselves, and, most importantly, the actors' performances within them, provide the final nuance and detail.

A film such as *Faces*, with its very form relying so heavily on the actors' creative interpretation of role, can be easily framed as an isolated and unique filmic text that defines itself without outside influence. Cassavetes encouraged this view when simplistically summarizing the nature of the in-the-moment creative process of the film with the statement "When we started this film none of us really had very much to say. And now, here, it took us over three years to make *Faces*, and at the end of the film we have many things to say!" (*Cassavetes on Cassavetes* 178). A statement such as this reinforces the concept that Cassavetes' methodology was highly reliant on incorporating experience and spontaneity.

By providing sustained and text-specific analysis and comparison, I will make the director's viewpoint and his films' practical and philosophical position tangible and defined. I will argue that *Shadows*, *Faces* and *A Woman Under The Influence* create their dynamic performative worlds by reacting to, and being concurrent with, existing performative models, trends and innovations. Ray Carney's insight and prior biographical work, as noted in the preceding literature review, will be essentially utilized throughout my thesis, often as a

starting point from which to create a more detailed appraisal of Cassavetes' position within filmic history.

I will also continue on from Kouvaros' efforts to discover "points of exchange between film theory and Cassavetes' films" (xiv-xv). In *Where Does It Happen?* Kouvaros not only evaluates Comolli and Pierre's initial appraisals of both Cassavetes' *Faces* and the concurrent film movement of Direct Cinema, he also creates new lines of connection. For example Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's interpretation of the unity of mind and body in *A Thousand Plateaus* is paralleled with the physical way in which Cassavetes' actors portray anxiety and insecurity (171-173). Kouvaros also separately compares and contrasts Cassavetes' films to Peter Wollen's concept of Counter Cinema, best exemplified by the films of Jean-Luc Godard.

Whereas these "points of exchange" are relevant and illuminating they are aptly described as "points"; moments of connection that exist as brief summaries that allow Kouvaros to prove a larger point that Cassavetes' films *can* be connected to a myriad of pre-existing debates and theories. I will also utilize film theory and philosophy to aid analysis of Cassavetes' films, but with a focus upon a continuous line of argument that incorporates research concerned with the nature and limits of performance within social interaction, and how this is reflected and practically adapted into acting and filmic representation.

For this reason Chapter One will act as an overview of Cassavetes' approach to performance and filmmaking, using *A Woman Under The Influence*'s relationship to the normative Hollywood system and the art cinema of Europe to foundationally define Cassavetes' independent position. *A Woman Under The Influence* is a film that evokes the classic Hollywood melodrama only to challenge that genre's values and ideology, primarily through the character of Mabel Longhetti, played by Gena Rowlands. I describe how Rowland's performance of Mabel deconstructs established narrative form and the

melodrama's representation of the maternal woman. I will also compare *A Woman Under The Influence* to art films of the 1960s, in order to demonstrate how performance as a means unto itself replaces the abstract symbolism favoured by directors such as Jean-Luc Godard and Michelangelo Antonioni.

In Chapter Two I explore the precise historical origins and ideological reasons behind Cassavetes' approach to the creation and representation of performance in his films. Utilizing the essential biographical information provided by Carney in *Cassavetes on Cassavetes*, I will position *Shadows* as a direct response to the structured and internal approach of Lee Strasberg's "Method" school of acting, most evidently seen on film in Elia Kazan's *On The Waterfront* (1954) and Nicholas Ray's *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955). I also detail how the performances of the amateur cast of *Shadows* are utilized to demonstrate Cassavetes' opinions on the "artificiality of emotion" in both acting and real behaviour (*Cassavetes on Cassavetes* 51).

In *Shadows*, the performance of character is an imperfect process, one that merges actor and character to form a dynamic representation of insecurity and the formation of identity. A similar form of performance is present in the use of non-actors in Lionel Rogosin's *On the Bowery* (1956), yet through comparison I will distinguish *Shadows* approach from the instantaneous performance of self within Rogosin's docudrama.

An analysis of *Shadows*, a film in which two characters who are black consistently "pass" for white, would not be complete without acknowledging the pervading presence of racial identity in the film. Like any subject in a film by Cassavetes, race is intricately tied into other concerns about the presentation of self. I will explore this merging of the personal with the political, using Kent Mackenzie's *The Exiles* (1961) as a comparison, a film from the same era that also deals with racial identity. I have selected both *On The Bowery* and *The Exiles* due to their close proximity to Cassavetes' creative approach, with the director himself

having expressed great admiration for Lionel Rogosin in particular (*Cassavetes on Cassavetes* 160).

In Chapter Three I address *Faces* as a continuation and solidification of Cassavetes' preoccupation with social performance and the relationship between artifice and reality, interests that were avidly shared with two aesthetically similar but ideologically opposed documentary movements of the Sixties. I compare *Faces* to the Direct Cinema movement, which applied a non-interventionist policy that denied the camera's influence upon its subjects, and the French documentary movement of Cinéma Vérité, which worked to actively collaborate with subjects in constructing their own performances. The comparison of *Faces* to issues concerning documentary theory allows an exploration of how performance in Cassavetes' cinema is fuelled by the filmmaking process itself, destabilizing the boundaries between character and actor.

I will conclude the thesis by reflecting upon the way in which Cassavetes' use of performance developed and changed throughout four decades of filmmaking. I will briefly address his later films, *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie* (1976) and *Opening Night* (1977), demonstrating how they achieved a new perspective on performance that allows for a clearer understanding of the director's earlier, formative output.

John Cassavetes made films as a means to engage and form a dialogue with real experience. Cassavetes' need to frame his unconventional performances in filmic practice originates from a desire to elevate those performances to a level beyond what they can achieve alone. Therefore what can be seen as opposing elements of performance and film language in Cassavetes' films can also be viewed as reliant and collaborative with each other. This thesis will explore the changing relationship between performance and the filmic medium, focusing upon Cassavetes' films as fascinating contradictions of process and final form.

## Chapter One: Performative Opposition: *A Woman Under the Influence*

*A Woman Under the Influence* is one of John Cassavetes' most renowned films, having received two Academy Award nominations in 1975, for Gena Rowlands as Best Actress and Cassavetes as Best Director (Charity, *Lifeworks* 135). The film represents a middle ground in Cassavetes' filmography, shared with *Minnie and Moskowitz* and *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie*, in that Cassavetes' dominant concern with his actors' performative freedom is merged with narrative situations that connote a populist cinematic sentiment.

In *A Woman Under The Influence*, Mabel Longhetti, a wife and mother to two children, displays what her family deems to be erratic and bizarre behavior. This behavior escalates until she is finally committed to a psychiatric institution, where she stays for six months, a period which the film bluntly omits, until she finally returns home. *A Woman Under the Influence* is explicitly concerned with the limits of free performative expression and communication within social interaction, providing, through contrasting Mabel against the repressive systems around her, a perfect introductory example to Cassavetes' own philosophy and tendencies as a filmmaker.

Whilst made independently (Carney, *Cassavetes* 317), *A Woman Under The Influence* is a film that acknowledges Cassavetes' close proximity to Hollywood and his past experiences of working within its constraints. Geoff King notes how Independent Cinema "adopts formal strategies that disrupt or abandon the smoothly flowing conventions associated with the mainstream Hollywood style" (2). This chapter will detail how *A Woman Under The Influence* disrupts the "smoothly flowing conventions" of Hollywood cinema.

I will focus throughout on the narrative development of *A Woman Under The Influence*, describing how Cassavetes creates the impression of adhering to Hollywood

convention only to subvert its intentions. The film will also be situated in relation to the genre of Melodrama in order to illuminate Mabel's interior conflict. I will argue that the "influence" mentioned in the film's title refers to patriarchal systems of thought, and that the film's evocation of melodrama, a female-orientated genre in which the woman often suffers and sacrifices in order to protect her family, is in fact a subversive method of drawing a connection between Mabel's repression and the ideology of much of Hollywood film. I will therefore utilize the concepts of a number of feminist writings on the subject of melodrama and the presentation of women in Hollywood produced film.

I will also compare Cassavetes' approach to that of certain European art cinema auteur directors, arguing that whilst certain similarities exist, Cassavetes remains in a unique position due to his constant focus on performance as a means of breaking away from any form of definite established meaning, even if it is abstracted, such as in the work of Michelangelo Antonioni and Jean-Luc Godard.

The philosophical works of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari will supply one of the main theoretical frameworks in this chapter. In his introduction to *Anti-Oedipus*, Michel Foucault summarizes their primary goal as to "develop action, thought and desire by proliferation, juxtaposition, and disjunction" (8-9). Although Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy is often radical and separatist, it relies on utilizing preexisting systems of thought in order to illuminate itself, in a similar manner to the way in which Cassavetes manipulates preexisting systems of cinema.

Ray Carney defines the director's post-*Faces* output as "explorations of the possibility of escape from the confinements, isolation and failures of expression that *Faces* documented" (*American Dreaming* 120). This analysis suggests that Cassavetes' subsequent films move away from focusing on the negative aspects of social demographics, the young and conceited in *Shadows* and the middle-aged and jaded in *Faces*, and begin to concentrate upon

characters that are still trapped but no longer unable to take action. In *A Woman Under The Influence* this idea is manifested within the character of Mabel Longhetti, played by Gena Rowlands. A woman who is trapped within the confinements of her position as both wife and mother, yet desperate to individualize these roles and create a way of life that is uniquely enjoyable to her. This individualization, as Carney states, shows itself in Mabel's attempts to "improvise into existence a style of personal performance that will maintain its sensitivity and responsiveness in a world everywhere threatened and trivialized by mechanical inherited, repetitive and unexamined forms of discourse" (*American Dreaming* 172).

In *A Woman Under The Influence*, Mabel's individualistic form of "improvisation" always plays with social rules and involves some kind of performance. Carney's description is oppositional in tone, facing the values of "sensitivity and responsiveness" off against a "mechanical" and "inherited" relationship system. Significantly, the catalyst for this opposition is always the notion of a freer performative quality in Cassavetes' films.

In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari detail a similar oppositional situation, whereby an existing system is threatened and subsequently denies a unique performance. In their example, they describe a young boy, Little Richard, being examined by the psychoanalyst Melanie Klein. The writers note how the analyst "is content to make ready made tracings – Oedipus, the good daddy and the bad daddy, the bad mommy and the good mommy – while the child makes a desperate attempt to carry out a performance that the psychoanalyst totally misconstrues" (13). In the book, the term tracing is a metaphor for structured and nonnegotiable systems of thought, often exemplified by the concepts of psychoanalysis (12-13).

Deleuze and Guattari are against such systems, instead they favor desire put into production or "desiring machines" (*Anti-Oedipus* 3). Best defined in *Anti-Oedipus* as a fragmented, contradictory and unpredictable flow that can also "break" other flows (5),

Claire Colebrook clarifies the meaning of their use of the term, labeling desire “a process of striving and self-enhancement. Desire is a process of increasing expansion, connection and creation.” (xxii). Therefore not only is desire a primary initiator of creative activity, it can also “break” other flows. Mabel is not only individual in her expression, she also attacks and parodies. This chapter will aim to connect *A Woman Under The Influence* with this concept of desire-fuelled performance opposing controlling systems of thought.

### **The Manipulation Of Classical Hollywood Narrative**

Mabel is introduced after a sequence that focuses upon her husband Nick and his work crew. The film then proceeds to crosscut to a scene that depicts Mabel stressfully saying goodbye to her children, who are leaving to stay with Mabel’s mother for the weekend. When Mabel is left alone we follow her back into the house. She mutters to herself, a sign of her supposed mental instability, and the camera stays fixed on the other side of the foyer in a long shot, entrapping her within the interior and domestic surroundings. She peers out of a window and proceeds to pace and make unexplained movements, pointing and gesturing.

This scene provides an example of the way in which Cassavetes would contrast his frequent use of handheld camera by introducing long, static shots, limiting the camera’s expressivity. Ray Carney describes these shots as a way of “enlarging the social and visual space” of the films (*American Dreaming* 188). Whilst the social interaction between characters becomes an important aspect of the long takes in *A Woman Under the Influence*, here Mabel is isolated not only within her house but also by the shot itself. Paradoxically however her movements still maintain spontaneity and expression, even whilst becoming slightly skewed due to the *mise-en-scène*’s mundane sense of confinement.

These movements are the primary focus of attention during this long static take, forming an example of Cassavetes' desire for the actor to maintain a central role in the creation of character (Carney, *Cassavetes on Cassavetes* 33). Here, what Carney describes as the "visual space" becomes accentuated. The shot incorporates all of Mabel's actions within the frame. No individual part of her performance is singularly focused upon, with all movements intrinsically linked to one another and part of a whole. The shot only changes once or twice for seconds at a time, in order to incorporate mid-shots of more rapid movement fleetingly captured, creating the impression that the performance holds control above anything else.

In his article "Entertainment and Utopia," Richard Dyer describes how Hollywood films that include introductory scenes of quiet domestic existence create a "utopian sensibility" (473). Specifically defined as being "contained in the feelings it embodies," and more concerned with "what utopia would feel like rather than how it would be organized" (468), this kind of sensibility concerns itself with the reinforcement of "intensity" over "dreariness" and "community" over "fragmentation" (473). However within the scene at hand, Cassavetes merges utopian values with the oppositional examples that Dyer uses to define his concept.

For example, Mabel appears to be isolated throughout the scene from any form of social interaction. She is confined within the house and by her cryptic behavior, which seems to form a physical interior monologue that is expressive yet unintelligible, the definition of a sense of "dreariness" mixed with an inexplicable personal "intensity." Through her isolation and behavior, her state of mind is shown to be fragmented.

Cassavetes further complicates this representation by previously depicting Mabel as a woman in the center of her own personal community, that of her family. In the scene prior to Mabel entering the house alone, she helps her mother gather the children for a weekend

away, in order to give Mabel and her husband some time alone. However, rather than providing a comforting and whole experience, this sequence is also troublingly fragmented.

Unlike when Mabel is alone, the camera refuses to remain still and cuts frequently on movement in a disorientating fashion. She constantly berates, questions and worries over her children, who are then harassed into her mother's car and clumsily driven away. The location of the scene, a sunlit and idyllic suburban front yard, clashes with the pervading sense of anxiety and loss of self-consciousness that can be seen in Mabel's actions and dialogue. Her care for her children seems to border on morbidly excessive.

At one point the camera hovers over the far side of a car roof. This roots the mise-en-scène with a practical and mundane sense of reality and gives sober weight to Mabel's panicked verbal imaginings of a scenario where her children "lie bleeding," while Mabel's mother is too scared to call for help. Thus, through a focus on anxious movement and expression, the community itself is fragmented, and utopian sentimentality appears to be only a surface image.

Cassavetes references imagery of idyllic suburbia often perpetuated by Hollywood films, whilst simultaneously deconstructing their inherent values of wholeness and stability. This is achieved through a dedicated focus upon performances that are completely oppositional in tone. The fact that this scene is also an introduction to Mabel's character serves as a critique of another trend of Hollywood film. By throwing the spectator into the middle of a scene that casts doubt upon the comfort and certainty of the familial unit, *A Woman Under The Influence* positions itself as a text that questions mainstream cinema's tendency to present what David Bordwell, in *Narration In The Fiction Film*, describes as the initial "undisturbed stage" of a narrative (157). The scene provides enough context for the viewer to make a connection to classical Hollywood tradition, yet also creates a frenetic and skewed version that is more disturbed than "undisturbed."

After this frantic scene and the following sequence inside the house, the film moves its focus back to Mabel's husband, Nick, who is the leader of a work crew fixing a broken water main. The perspective of Mabel as a troubled and unknown "other" is reinforced here. In a moment of frank insecurity, portrayed in intimate close-up, Nick confides to his work friend that he doesn't know "what she will do" when he has to cancel their date, hinting that she is capable of anything, even burning down the house.

In the following scene when Nick tells Mabel that she will be alone for the night, her disappointment and sadness is articulated subtly but devastatingly. Nick talks straight toward the camera, in a direct and blunt manner. Mabel is then shown in side profile subdued and seemingly exhausted, heavily reliant on her cigarette. Upon putting down the phone Mabel gets up yet the camera stays focused on her middle, robbing her of any identity, leaving the audience unable to determine any sense of what she really thinks and feels, creating a sense of emptiness.

Up to this point the film's narrative has continuously shifted focus back and forth from Nick at work to Mabel at home, a style of narration that utilizes a parallel structure, creating a form of Hollywood's continuity system. Richard Maltby describes this form of editing as "constructing space in which action unfolds as a smooth and continuous flow across shots" (312). However this system has been routinely interrupted by moments of languor and fragmented anxiety within Mabel's world, and undermined masculinity and trepidation in Nick's.

Through this structured system Cassavetes is invoking a sense of Dyer's "Utopian Sensibility" in order to criticize its shortcomings. If Hollywood cinema presents an idea of what utopia would "feel like rather than how it would be organized" (468), then Cassavetes demonstrates how easily this agreeable façade can be broken down.

## A Critique Of Melodrama

Dyer observes that seemingly negative qualities that Hollywood seeks to deny such as “fragmentation” and “exhaustion” are not the only “inadequacies” of society, but merely distracting symptoms of “class, patriarchal and sexual struggles” (474), issues that are at the root of *A Woman Under The Influence*. Mabel’s effort to be a part of a prescribed set of social behaviors, a thwarted desire to become Claire Johnston’s “eternal and unchanging” woman (32), who only lives for her family, is mirrored by an unnaturally structured editing system.

After a sequence in which Mabel has a one night stand with a man she meets at a bar, Nick and his work colleagues come home the following morning with the expectation of being fed a home cooked meal. This development is in alignment with Teresa de Lauretis’ thoughts on the role of the woman being utilized as a device for “narrative closure” (584-585). She states, “The female position, produced as the end result of narrativization, is the figure of narrative closure, the narrative image in which the film comes together” (584-585). Mabel must perform the role of the accommodating wife and to provide “closure” to the mens’ work shift. The scene, with the obvious disruption of Mabel’s infidelity, is designed with the narrative expectation of alleviating the frantic tension and disturbed state of the plot. Instead it amplifies tension and further disturbs a domestic harmony that has never been fully established.

Just as Cassavetes subtly undermined both Nick’s masculine assurance and Mabel’s idealistic domesticity in the opening sequences of the film, he continues to destabilize traditional signifiers. This begins within the middle of the tender reconciliation between the couple, when Mabel, lying submissively on the bed, asks Nick if he’s hungry. Nick, de-personalized due to the wide brim of his hat completely concealing the upper half of his face, monotonously answers that he is, and so is his entire work force, who are waiting on the other

side of the house. Mabel, sick from fatigue but deliriously glad to be of use, springs up from the bed and emphatically declares that she will “be right out,” whilst Nick dolefully smiles in approval.

The scenario, played out in a completely deadpan and serious manner, is an example of what would occur in what Molly Haskell damningly labels “The Woman’s Film” (20). Referring to the melodramas of the 1930s and 40s, Haskell notes, “The domestic and the romantic are entwined, one redeeming the other, in the theme of self-sacrifice” (22). Ray Carney claims that *A Woman Under The Influence* “opens a dialogue” with the Hollywood melodrama (*American Dreaming* 142), and Mabel’s delirious response to Nick’s demand provides a straightforward representation of the entwinement of the domestic and romantic that Haskell recognizes as a convention of the genre. However, in light of Mabel’s unstable state, foreshadowed in narrative terms by her distressed behavior and lapses in awareness, the final impression is not a sense of utopian harmony but an impression of inherent unbalance and denial in the relationship.

Thomas Elsaesser notes that melodrama can be defined as “a particular form of dramatic mise-en-scène, characterized by a dynamic use of spatial and musical categories” (500-501). When considering this quote, it becomes notable how absent a non-diegetic soundtrack is within scenes of dramatic tension in Cassavetes’ filmography. The absence is stark in *A Woman Under The Influence*. Scenes such as the reconciliation, which appear to be explicitly melodramatic in content, lack a musical accompaniment that would add a sense of sentiment to the proceedings. A consequence of this stripping back is that Mabel’s sense of self-sacrifice is presented in a much less heroic light, and more as a related effect of her anxious demeanor.

Her betrayal of Nick with Garson Cross, a man she met the night before in a bar, also affects the overall perception of this scene. Throughout her encounter with Cross in the

previous scene, Mabel appears disorientated, even calling him Nick the morning after he spends the night. The ambiguity of Mabel's awareness and the intentions of her infidelity further increase the fundamental insecurity between Mabel and her husband.

Later in the film Mabel desperately exclaims that she will "be anything" Nick wants her to be. This statement, along with evidence from the beginning of the spaghetti breakfast scene, can be placed in alignment with John Mercer and Martin Shingler's statement that melodramas use "the family and the social position of women as their narrative focus" (2). Mabel's self doubt and anxiety towards fitting in socially is reminiscent of the plight of Stella in King Vidor's 1937 Hollywood Melodrama, *Stella Dallas*.

In *Stella Dallas*, the character of Stella Martin, played by Barbara Stanwyck, meets, falls in love and marries Stephen Dallas. Whilst Stella is from a humble working class background, Stephen is an upper class mill executive. After they have their first child, Laurel, together, Stella and Stephen eventually separate due to Stella's inability to adjust to what Stephen perceives to be his more refined lifestyle and friends. Eventually, Stella also leaves Laurel's life due to her belief that she is holding Laurel back from marrying into wealth and the upper class.

Both films utilize ritualized environments such as meals and birthdays in order to emphasize unrest. Henry Bial notes that "Rituals are performances that provide structure and continuity to our lives," and furthermore "exemplify and reinforce the values and beliefs of the group that performs them" ("Ritual" 87). In both *Stella Dallas* and *A Woman Under the Influence* social rituals are challenged by female characters unable to play their prescribed role. The spaghetti breakfast scene in *A Woman Under the Influence* is a ritualized event that can be seen as patriarchal in origin. After a day of work, a husband brings his work mates home in order to introduce them to his wife and have her cook them breakfast. However Mabel appears uneasy with her role in this ritualized action. She emerges from behind sliding

screen doors that separate the Longhetti house in two, a divide between the public and private that is ritualistically adhered to. Cassavetes' camera lingers behind the group of men and watches with them as Nick nervously introduces her. The sliding doors act as a stage curtain and her behavior is hesitant and unsure, almost as if she is playing a role she is uncomfortable with, that of the quiet and subservient housewife.

However, her meek demeanor begins to gradually change into something more transgressive as the scene develops, defying the boundaries of the ritualized event. Mabel spends a large majority of the scene individually asking everyone's name and introducing herself. Whilst on face value this behavior could be considered needlessly thorough, a recurring mid-shot that depicts her friendly yet determined expression conveys that this is in fact a considered act that serves a desire to authentically connect with everyone at the table. Mabel desires to connect not just in the ritualized fashion in which she is initially introduced, as a passive wife on show to a male majority. If Mabel's behavior appears to be odd or frustrating during this scene, it is only due to the way in which she devalues polite, non-invasive social interaction.

In his article on Cassavetes, "Director Under the Influence," David Degener states that in society the difference between madness and a large personality is whether the behavior is "socially permissible" or "acceptable". Degener insists that "Madness is a social not clinical category" (5). Within this scene that viewpoint becomes explicit. Mabel finds herself labeled with many terms that signify illness by the characters around her, including "crazy" and "delicate," yet the behavior provided as examples of this usually takes place within social situations, and involves the committed and conscious reversal of formal and patriarchal "structures and continuity" (Bial, "Ritual" 87). Mabel's perceived abnormality is merely the ability to perform against the grain of a ritualized social situation.

Whilst Mabel's disruptive behavior goes unexplained, Stella's difference in *Stella Dallas* is explicitly defined by a scene near the beginning of the film that depicts her initial working class environment. A tight medium shot emphasizes the cramped and basic abode she and her family live in, as they squabble about what to have for lunch in a coarse, regional dialect. When the argument has died down Stella turns and looks at a mirror, gazing upon her image affectionately. Top lighting instantly glamorizes her appearance, in direct contrast to her surroundings, and obviously foreshadows her ambition, both in terms of causal action and the character's tendency to "play" a role in order to achieve her goal.

Stella's lower class in relation to her husband, Stephen, and his social circle is an essential component of what Bordwell calls Hollywood's need for "character centered causality and the definition of the action as the attempt to achieve a goal" (*Narration in the Fiction Film* 157). This scene acts as causal motivation for the rest of the film's narrative. Her desire to court Peter, and to provide a better life for their daughter all emanate from her initial lower social standing, but also provide the cause of her eventual downfall as cracks in her performance begin to show.

Richard Maltby's distinction between "autonomous" performance in film, and "integrated" performance can define the main differences between Mabel and Stella, and a large part of Cassavetes' separation from the Hollywood model. Maltby clarifies that all acting in the integrated style is at the service of "invisibility," in other words the actor is to make perfectly clear all aspects of the characters' motivations and psychology relevant to progression of narrative, over any extra details of character (389). On the other hand, autonomous performance is a style that favours "visibility," "excess" and "action" over the structured concerns of the integrated performance (389).

In his description of these two acting styles, Maltby is quick to insist that autonomous and integrated acting rarely exist completely separate from one another. He states:

Hollywood's most common strategy is to synthesize them, simultaneously generating the pleasures of spectacular display and those of a more realist characterization. Even the most integrated performance contains an element of display, even the most autonomous routine contributes something to our understanding of a character's motivation. (389)

In *Stella Dallas*, after returning home from the hospital, having given birth to her first child, Stella convinces her husband to take her out to the country club for dinner and dancing. King Vidor uses long and medium shots when showing Stella dancing energetically and laughing heartily with her new friend, the gambler Ed Munn. It could be reasoned that this choice of shot and the actor's energetic behavior on the dance floor is an example of autonomous behavior; Stanwyck's performance shows signs of looseness and spontaneity, her flagrant disregard for the higher-class etiquette of the country club is emphasized by the expressions on the faces of the dancers around her and Ed. However, Stella's autonomous performance becomes gradually integrated into the overarching narrative.

Ed Munn captivates Stella; they clearly share an affinity for one another. Vidor films them together, close to each other in tight mid-shots, positioning them in a unified subjectivity. Stephen is left out of this relationship and is positioned as an onlooker; close-ups of his face emphasize his disapproval. All three viewpoints serve the narrative, developing a relationship between Stella and Ed, creating a divide in the marriage of Stephen and Stella and advancing the narrative and defining their conflict. In essence the whole scene has the purpose of neatening and smoothing an overarching narrative.

By contrast, Gena Rowland's representation of Mabel is fully autonomous. The term, according to Maltby, initially described the performances of comic actors such as Buster Keaton or Charlie Chaplin, that favor impulsive action over execution of plot, of display and spectacle over causal development (*Hollywood Cinema* 389). Like Mabel's actions, an

autonomous performance is disruptive in nature. For example, when Mabel by chance hears music from the ballet *Swan Lake* on the radio during a children's party, she halts everything that was happening in order to conduct the children in a show of "dying." The camera obliges this disruption and hangs back in long shot in order to capture the action in its entirety. With cutting minimized and Mabel's autonomous spontaneity in full focus, the desire to create a spectacle for the sheer joy of creating something, is celebrated. In a Deleuzian sense, that desire is what drives the autonomous performance.

We have discussed how Mabel's tactics appear to resemble a deliberate deconstruction of the effects of patriarchal ritual, yet they are still causally undefined. Mabel's behavior is motivated by desires that are often unexplained and seemingly random. These desires do not advance planned narrative structure. Desire is defined in *A Thousand Plateaus* as "a process of production without reference to any exterior agency" (154) and this appears to be in complete alignment with the notion of autonomy.

As described in *Anti-Oedipus*, desire "constantly couples continuous flows and partial objects that are by nature fragmentary and fragmented. Desire causes the current to flow, itself flows in turn, and breaks flows" (5). However, within classical Hollywood narrative this description does not apply. From the beginning of *Stella Dallas*, Stella's path is set out. Her desire to marry into wealth is motivated by her poor background, just as her behavior is representative of her past. Her supposedly unrefined manner causes Stella to be ostracized from her husband and eventually leads to her sacrificing her motherhood so her daughter can become everything she could not. Stella's failure to be a perfect wife and mother is an example of a flow that is, as Deleuze and Guattari state, fragmented.

However these developments are typical of the traditional melodrama. Conflict is essential in order to create what Bordwell describes as the "critical commonplace" of the genre, which "subordinates virtually everything to broad emotional impact" (70). Stella's

multiple failures are needed in order to provide a sense of emotional catharsis for the audience. They are purposeful and concluded in a satisfactory manner. In the case of *Stella Dallas*, even though the protagonist is ostracized, her legacy lives on through her daughter.

*A Woman Under The Influence* puts great emphasis on the lead female character as a mother, a convention shared with *Stella Dallas* and the sub-genre of maternal melodrama. Linda Williams writes that “the device of devaluing and debasing the actual figure of the mother while sanctifying the institution of motherhood is typical of the “woman’s film,” she goes on to note that “frequently the self-sacrificing mother must make her sacrifice that of the connection to her children – either for her or their own good” (727).

In the case of *Stella Dallas*, this observation is accurate. Stella is frequently “devalued and debased” in terms of social judgment, as a key scene involving her being laughed at for her outrageously gaudy outfit demonstrates. However, Stella’s maternal love for Laurel is never questioned, and their affection is often portrayed in an almost religious light. One scene involving an embrace between mother and daughter casts Stella in a saintly context, cradling her child whilst looking into the upper distance like a depiction of a saint.

The final scene of *Stella Dallas* shows how her status as a mother redeems her. She makes the ultimate sacrifice, giving up her daughter, enabling her to have a better life. At the same time whilst making this sacrifice she is debased, forced to look at Laurel’s marriage ceremony within the family home from outside a window. She walks towards the camera in the rain with an expression that is torn, proud but full of sorrow, sanctified as a mother yet exiled as a member of the family.

Mabel’s attachment to her children is just as prevalent, maybe even to the point of fanaticism. We have already noted how in Mabel’s introductory scene, her pervading anxiety around her children shatters the utopian sensibility of the scene’s idyllic suburban setting. This scene appears to be mirrored later on in the film when Mabel waits at a school bus stop

for her children to arrive. Instead of leaving her children she is collecting them, yet she is even more distressed than in the previous scene. Her actions are initially shocking. She aggressively harasses female passers-by, demanding the time, and then abuses them verbally and impersonates them. This shock is emphasized by the distant, perspective Mabel is filmed from, which calls attention to the public space she is in and subsequently her eccentric actions. The unstable camera movements, coupled with Gena Rowland's anxious performance, make it clear that Mabel is not comfortable with her surroundings.

The arrival of the children on the bus comes with a non-diegetic sound track, meditative acoustic guitar strums, which bestow the scene an otherworldly atmosphere upon the scene. Mabel becomes ecstatic and rushes to greet her children. At first it seems this scene is attempting to create the same effect as the final scene of *Stella Dallas*. Firstly Mabel is devalued and debased, the camera detachedly observing her distressed behavior. Until the institution of motherhood is redeemed with the spiritual depiction of the arrival of her children, thus making Mabel whole again. However, Cassavetes refuses to allow Mabel's status as mother to be defined simply as redemptive.

It is important to note that one of Cassavetes' primary ideas in *A Woman Under The Influence*, is "the problem that Mabel has no self" (*Cassavetes on Cassavetes* 368). Thus she defines herself by her relationship with her family. In her own words, after she races back home with her children, she exclaims "I never did anything in my whole life that was anything except make you guys." Thus Cassavetes widens the "self-sacrifice" theme of the maternal melodrama to include a non-specific entity, Mabel's individuality, as opposed to a specific event in the narrative that could be utilized as a causal development or poetic conclusion.

Therefore what is slightly off-kilter about the bus stop scene is Mabel's fixation on her children, a desperate need that disposes her own sense of self. Mabel's distressed

behavior is a result of this sacrifice, portrayed by Cassavetes not as heroic, but as a form of neurosis. Alternatively in *Stella Dallas*, Stella's self-sacrifice involves her complete removal from the family. Whilst Stella's individuality was the cause of her self-imposed exile from her daughter, she is, unlike Mabel, able to assert herself as independent in the final moments of the film.

Throughout the film Cassavetes continues to subvert melodrama's depiction of the self-sacrifice by replacing its heroic representation with a focus on the psychological damage done to the mother. Following Mabel's return from a psychiatric institution, she is reunited with her children. The scene is potentially one of the most emotionally fraught in the entire film, due its extensive use of close-up. From the moment Mabel enters the room the camera is fixated with her face, which changes slowly from stoic to pained to exhausted as she reacts to her children's greetings. Cassavetes refuses to relent to what Noël Carroll describes as "Point/Object" shots, whereby the close-up of a face is utilized as a reaction to something else, what Carroll describes as the "focuser," which identifies the object of the character's emotion (125-138).

Here, Mabel's intense reaction and Cassavetes' complete focus on her face reduces her own children to disembodied voices, even though they are clearly the objects of her emotion. The infants whisper dialogue such as "I love you" and "Did you miss us?" with a needy and specifically infantile inflection, cutting through the ambient diegetic soundtrack sharply. All the while the shot of Mabel's face continues. Mabel's expression and the children's voices coalesce together to create the impression of Mabel as a receiver of emotional pain at the hands of the children. Cassavetes further emphasizes the damage of the familial unit upon Mabel's state of mind by revoking the Point/Object system, thus eliminating any form of straightforward sentimentality from the reunion of mother and children.

Following the traumatic reunion, Mabel exits the room, while the family again watches silently. The sliding doors that lead into the dining room and back recall the front stage/backstage divide of the spaghetti breakfast scene. Nick's work friends from the spaghetti breakfast scene have been replaced by family members who now sit on chairs and look expectantly at Mabel as she leaves the room.

Deleuze and Guattari use the example of the Kachin Marriage system in order to develop their argument on the damaging and repressive effects of the familial unit. They describe how a calabash is placed on the woman before marriage in order for her to be "physically saturated with the signs of procreation," a "savage inscription process" which they label the "ritual of affliction" (*Anti-Oedipus* 187-190). In *A Woman Under The Influence* Mabel also undergoes a kind of inscription. Cassavetes' refusal to cut away from Mabel's face during her reunion places Mabel in complete, undivided focus.

The audience is given no respite from the emotional effect of separation. The result being the distinct impression that Mabel, instead of the willing participant in the melodramatic tradition of "sacrifice" for the "sanctification of motherhood" (Williams 727), is being traumatically inscribed with a role she cannot cope with. She emerges from the room under the watchful glare of the family, and taking off her coat reveals a dour housewife's dress that contrasts with her previously colorful and unconventional smocks, thus receiving the "stamp of the sign" (*Anti-Oedipus* 187) of passive motherhood.

One of Deleuze and Guattari's primary motivations is the illumination of what they call "schizoanalysis," which is the exploration of how "desire can be made to desire its own repression" (*Anti-Oedipus* 105). This form of analysis is an alternative to what the writers deem to be one of society's ultimate repressors, the practice of psychoanalysis, whose concepts merely restrain agents of desire. Psychoanalysis, through concepts of sexuality such

as the Oedipus complex, reinforces the role of the family, or as Deleuze and Guattari describe it in *A Thousand Plateaus*, the “de-facto state” (12).

The schizoanalytic reading of the notion of family in *Anti-Oedipus* ends with the claim that “the family is the delegated agent of psychic repression” (119). Deleuze and Guattari reason that family, which acts as a “social indicator,” creates a form of “social alienation that is believed to ‘organize’ mental alienation in the mind of its own members or its psychotic member” (95). Thus, the role of “mother” and “wife” that Mabel is attached to not only defines her but also restrains and limits her potential. Cassavetes said that “Mabel’s not behaving herself, but you can’t behave yourself when you’ve been pushed so far from your own way of being” (*Cassavetes on Cassavetes* 368). What pushes Mabel away, what organizes her mental alienation, is the familial unit.

She is, as Deleuze and Guattari would conclude in *Anti-Oedipus*, a victim of “psychic and social repression imposed on desiring-production by social reproduction by means of the family” (129). Mabel’s sacrifice is not for the familial unit as in conventional melodrama. The familial unit, or the re-involvement with it and acceptance of its rules, is the sacrifice itself. Whilst in a film such as *Stella Dallas*, the heroine sacrifices her involvement in the family in order to save it, Mabel sacrifices her own complex character by reuniting with the family’s ritualized forms of repression and definition. This fundamental difference reveals *A Woman Under The Influence* to be a deliberate, subversive representation, an attack on the value system of traditional Hollywood narrative.

Molly Haskell postulates that Stella’s act of sacrifice is a coded form of “wish fulfillment” for women who have “deep inadmissible feelings of not wanting children, or not wanting them unreservedly” (28). Therefore the fact that Stella’s act of “giving up” her children is conducted through morally “approved channels” allows them to engage in a cathartic enjoyment of this separation, yet not acquire further feelings of guilt from enjoying

watching (28). Haskell goes on to explain that “the purpose of these fables is not to encourage ‘woman’ to rebel or question her role but to reconcile her to it, and thus preserve the status quo” (22-23). Therefore, by depicting the “reconciliation” over the fantastical and cathartic “moral” separation, *A Woman Under The Influence*, refuses to indulge in the Hollywood style of coded, fantastical wish fulfillment. Instead he confronts the reason why this cathartic desire to witness separation exists, by depicting the familial unit as the primary cause of Mabel’s oppressed state.

In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari describe the concept of “Strata.” These are systems that aim to capture and sometimes restrict social development in service of other preconceived systems of thought. Strata is described in the text as “imprisoning intensities or locking singularities in systems of resonance and redundancy” (40). Therefore with these terms we can look upon the reinforcement of a utopian suburban setting, the convention of a domestic and romantic entwinement, and the concept of maternal self-sacrifice in melodramas as an act of stratification on society. They all specifically attempt to convince a female audience that the best means of conveying love is domestic servitude, thus, in the language of Deleuze and Guattari, they imprison the intensity of femininity within a patriarchal thought system. This stratification is then proliferated and repeated within the melodrama genre, leading to a locking in of the “singularity,” meaning ideology, in this case a patriarchal ideology.

Later in *A Thousand Plateaus* Deleuze and Guattari provide methods of how to “destratify,” or how to eliminate social restrictions placed on natural flows. Emphasis is put on replicating elements of the Strata, by keeping “small supplies of significance and subjectification, if only to turn them against their own systems when the circumstances demand it” (160). They end this thought concisely with the statement, “mimic the strata” (160). *A Woman Under The Influence* attempts to “destratify” by using conventions of the

Hollywood melodrama as tools of “subjectification” in order to present the imprisoning nature of the patriarchal society the genre represents in a clearer light. This is achieved through the manipulation of methods of bestowing “significance” upon events that are favorable to patriarchal ideology. Coupled with an increased focus on raw performance, *A Woman Under The Influence* places greater emphasis on the negative emotional ramifications of being a wife and mother within an uncompromising patriarchal society.

### **Differentiation From The Art Film**

Is Cassavetes’ style therefore more in alignment with art film processes?

Michelangelo Antonioni’s *Il Deserto Rosso* (1964) seems to be, on the surface, similar to *A Woman Under The Influence*. They both feature central female characters that become increasingly overwhelmed and distressed by forces that are not entirely clear to the audience. However, *Il Deserto Rosso* begins to gradually introduce a sense of pervading causality into the proceedings.

The film’s stark industrial surroundings create a sense of pollution, of unnaturalness, that suffocates the female lead character, Giuliana (Monica Vitti). Her environment encourages a kind of emotional numbness, in her and those around her. A machine like detachment takes hold, and all that is left to cling to is a story she tells her daughter. The story is depicted visually, a shimmering fantasy involving a boy swimming in a beautiful, natural coral reef, seemingly a metaphor for the protagonist’s desire to escape her claustrophobic surroundings.

Bordwell states that art films are “a cinema of psychological effects in search of their causes” (“The Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice” 561). *Il Deserto Rosso*’s industrial mise-en-scène and metaphorical dream sequences are cryptic cause and effects. They are

presented in a less straightforward way than the linear Hollywood system, utilizing stylistic techniques such as experiments with sound design, the prolonging of landscape shots to emphasize the influence of environment, and abstract metaphoric imagery to cryptically code the main characters' longing desire to escape. These are all examples of stylistic options that Bordwell describes as "violations of classical conceptions of time and space," that serve to represent "the intrusion of an unpredictable and contingent daily reality or as the subjective reality of complex characters" ("The Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice" 562).

Therefore the subjective realism of *Il Deserto Rosso* is utilized in order to explain the protagonist's viewpoint in a more thorough way than she herself can. Monica Vitti's performance in the film is deliberately blank and restrained, allowing Antonioni to inflict his own sense of the character's reality onto her through the abstract use of film language.

Jean-Luc Godard's *Le Mépris* (1963) also utilizes a sense of abstraction in order to convey its character's isolated psychology. The visual identity of *Le Mépris* is particularly clinical in tone. A protracted scene in the middle of the film involving the central couple, Paul and Camille, is thematically significant. The camera slowly follows the characters around their home, pausing for minutes at a time to watch as they exchange finely tuned, cutting lines of dialogue. At one point the camera moves across a table between them, predicting in advance who will talk next, the definition of directorial control.

Camille and Paul are more often than not alone together; even when they are surrounded by other people they are somewhat removed, either by language or social position. They are isolated, subjected to intensively analyzing one another. It is these analyses that draw the scenes of *Le Mépris* out for so long, and make them aimless. The characters of art films are the complete antithesis to Bordwell's "Hollywood Example" which features straightforward "psychologically defined individuals who struggle to solve a clear-cut problem or to attain specific goals" (*Narration in the Fiction Film* 157). The art film is

unable to psychologically define its characters, leading to prolonged and lengthy abstraction instead.

This sense of abstraction is a hallmark of Bordwell's concept of art film narration's tendency to "employ film techniques to dramatize mental processes" (*Narration in the Fiction Film* 208). The performances in *Il Deserto Rosso* and *Le Mépris* dramatize interior psychology by acknowledging its obtuseness. By limiting and controlling movements and dialogue, performances are restrained to the point of being emotionless. The actors incorporate calculated movements, lacking in spontaneity, and behave in a self-conscious, distracted manner.

The art film is known for abandoning any form of structured story. Bordwell states that "the art cinema defines itself explicitly against the classical narrative mode" ("The Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice" 560-561). However, in its place is an even stricter sense of structure, the director's vision, which influences every aspect of the film completely, and results in cold and controlled performances, in the case of *Il Deserto Rosso* and *Le Mépris*, that are as calculated as the tight camera movements that document them. Cassavetes' lack of structure is similar to the art film in its oppositional nature to Hollywood, but different in its execution and ultimately what results from it.

Maria Viera states that Cassavetes' prioritization of the actor's creative input is based on the director's background in theatrical improvisation. Scenes are played out like "an endless series of transactions or 'problems' which is what a theatrical improvisation is" ("John Cassavetes: Script, Performance Style, and Improvisation" 38). Cassavetes says much the same thing when he claims that dramatic interactions in *Shadows* are built upon "people having problems that were overcome with other problems" (*Cassavetes on Cassavetes* 68). The result is a series of expansive scenes that build upon each other and are structured and focused around the performances of the actors. Unlike the films of Antonioni and Godard,

which eschew human representations of emotion in favor of artful languor, Cassavetes' approach is the complete opposite. His films rely on the actor's performance alone, within the moment, to generate emotion that does not necessarily have to be psychologically defined in terms of where it came from. This reliance on the actor's autonomous performance is also what truly differentiates Cassavetes from the auteurist art cinema of Antonioni and Godard. Cassavetes sense of creativity and artistic intent originates from collaboration with the actor, disregarding the creation of abstract meaning dictated solely by the director.

### **A Film Reliant on Spontaneous Performance**

One of the clearest examples of performance and collaboration dominating Cassavetes' films occurs when Mabel returns from the psychiatric institution near the end of *A Woman Under The Influence*. After a nervous reunion with her family Nick aggressively pulls Mabel away from the room into the stairway, almost as if she is unable to stay on-script, an unruly performer who refuses to solidify her relationships at the end of the narrative. The couple are shot facing each other on the dark stairway, in opaque shadow, as Nick shouts at Mabel to "be herself," and then proceeds to engage her in a game of shouting "baa baa," presumably in order to give her some semblance of decisiveness.

Nick's strong desire to define and control Mabel contrasts with both his own behavior and the mise-en-scène, which utilizes close-ups and fragments of both the characters' silhouetted faces to create a sense of futility against Nick's bizarre plea. Even here, in a moment of face-to-face and honest confrontation, interaction is obscured from the audience, fragmented and abstracted against Nick's contrasting desire to achieve unity and a sense of normality.

Nick's "baa baa" game is a rare case of dialogue improvisation on the part of an actor that Cassavetes thought suitable to include in his film (Carney, *Cassavetes on Cassavetes* 339). Its improvised nature is obvious, bearing distinct similarities to Sanford Meisner's repetition exercise, as described by David Krasner:

His repetition exercise developed a sense of self through communication: We become the role and the self in the actual moment of performance. The other actor is granted intrinsic integrity, so that in seeing the face and hearing the voice of the other, the performer responds to the exterior gaze and sound rather than carrying on an internal conversation. The actor does not merely create self/character from memory, imaginary circumstances, or the author's story, but rather encounters the words and actions of the other actor and responds to them. In the process of reacting, character is formulated as a dynamic of being-with-another. (25)

This improvised exercise occurs in the stairway, an area that Andrew Klevan, in his analysis of Douglas Sirk's *There's Always Tomorrow* (1956), labels "a transitional place, where the family meet and pass in transit between their private domains" (55). Here, as with the sliding doors in the previous scene, the stairway acts as a space that separates the private and the public, and is suitable for the transitional nature of Nick and Mabel's exchange.

The "baa baa" game is a largely performative event through which Nick attempts to create a definitive sense of self in Mabel. In trying to make her react to his own gesticulations and demands he seeks to draw her into the immediacy of a spontaneous performance.

It is an unpredictable and strange moment, due mainly to its legitimately improvised nature, and because of its eventual pointlessness. Despite Nick's determination, Mabel is unable to match his enthusiastic "baa baas." The couple return to the family leading to a somewhat anticlimactic moment where Nick ludicrously exclaims, "Let's enjoy ourselves."

The whole scene is fuelled by Nick's inherent desire for his family to enter into a relaxed, natural and enjoyable state; ironically however, his enthusiasm and determination to achieve this state ultimately drives the scene further away from this desired outcome.

The concept of desire sabotaging itself has much in common with Deleuze and Guattari's writings on desiring-production in *Anti-Oedipus*. Desiring-production is defined as "production of production" (8) that is created by the many parts of society labeled "desiring machines" who produce desire that is "by nature fragmentary and fragmented. Desire causes the current to flow, itself flows in turn, and breaks flows" (5). The "baa baa" game that takes place is an example of true desiring-production onscreen. Whilst Peter Falk's performance as Nick is a production in itself, it also spontaneously drives another improvisational production on the part of Peter Falk. Falk utilizes an acting exercise in order to create a representation of Nick's desire to create a dynamic connection with Mabel, played by Gena Rowlands, who is also compelled to produce her own reaction to Falk's primal repetition exercise.

Therefore the production of Nick's character manifests another production, creating what Deleuze and Guattari call "production of production" that is "inherently connective in nature" (5). However fragmentation occurs when Mabel is unable to match Nick's gusto, leading to the anti-climax already described. This matches Deleuze and Guattari's theories when they state that the "connective or productive synthesis" that is a result of desiring-production "couples production with anti-production" (8). This willing creation of "anti-production" is what makes Cassavetes' films unique. They utilize a narrative structure that deliberately draws out and obscures social interaction, incorporating a freer model of performance that includes the improvisation of lines and delivery, in order to create a sense of production being created literally in the moment the scene is filmed.

However, this sense of production is not created with the goal of audience entertainment, as in the Hollywood model, or abstraction, as in the art film model, but to

literally disrupt these concepts through eventual “anti-production.” Nick’s desire to impose a “sense of self” upon Mabel results in further disintegration of their relationship. Mabel’s reaction is tragically timid and resigned and only illuminates the slow and gradual breakdown of the familial unit. Therefore the use of production in this scene has only contributed to its sense of anti-production.

### **The Liminal Becomes the Permanent**

A trend of “anti-production” continues as the family move into the dining room for tea. The large group of people sitting around the dinner table is reminiscent of imagery from earlier in the film. However, instead of the repressed atmosphere of the spaghetti breakfast scene, with its extreme close-ups of tense masculine faces and outbursts of anger, a reconstitution of this scene takes place. Instead of Nick glaring from the other side of the table, he is now supportively at Mabel’s side. The camera calmly fixes itself in one corner of the room, panning slightly to cover small movements, as unsure as the characters themselves who move only slightly and furtively. The rest of the family represent Victor Turner’s concept of the “communitas” that he describes as:

A moment in and out of time, and in and out of secular social structure, which reveals, however fleetingly, some recognition (in symbol if not always in language) of a generalized social bond that has ceased to be and has simultaneously yet to be fragmented in a multiplicity of structural ties. (90)

The “generalized social bond” that “has ceased to be” includes Nick’s status as the dominant head of the family. He is now unsure and racked with guilt over his role in his wife’s institutionalization. Margaret, Mabel’s mother-in-law, is similarly unsure, hesitantly asking the family doctor, Zepp, if Mabel is “okay.”

Ivone Margulies interprets Cassavetes' film *Husbands* (1970) as a representation of Victor Turner's "Liminal Communitas," equating the lack of social duties the three main characters enjoy with a liberating "stripping away of public identity" (290). Following the traumatic event of their friend's death and funeral, Archie, Harry and Gus reject social rules and regulations in order to "play up" and test their own personal limitations. Margulies' application of this theory works well with *Husbands*, but within *A Woman Under The Influence*, the communitas is much less active in the revolutionary and experimental sense that the characters in *Husbands* exemplify.

Whilst Archie, Harry and Gus are active and utilize the liminal conditions that surround them for their own gains, the extended Longhetti family is passive and hesitantly attempt to operate as normal within this vastly changed atmosphere. Their disorientation is apparent, conversational themes such as the details of Mabel's incarceration are brought up, then inexplicably abandoned, jokes are started and ended without punch lines. Cassavetes occasionally cuts to isolated mid-shots that capture small moments of this kind of confusion, notably when Margaret looks as if she is about to laugh and then stops, seemingly forgetting what was funny.

The Longhetti's are truly liminal in the way they are caught between the third act of the rites of passage ritual, what Van Gennep describes as the "reaggregation or reincorporation" (89) of the subject into the "customary norms" of the prevailing social system, and a slow realization that this reintegration will not be successful. As in the previous scene, whereby Nick unsuccessfully attempts Mabel's reintegration by performative means, a sense of Deleuze and Guattari's concept of "anti-production" pervades.

The family actively analyzes the state of their social situation, breaking surface value niceties whenever Mabel says something that is apparently unsuitable. Nick proceeds with a ludicrous speech about how things are going to "get better and better" that clashes with the

tense atmosphere and lacking any kind of answers to how they will improve. Geoff King describes the classical Hollywood narrative arc as having an “initial state of equilibrium” that is “disrupted, and after various complications eventually restored or reinstated in a different form” (70). In *A Woman Under The Influence*, the disrupted state is prolonged and refuses restoration. The liminal becomes the permanent.

## **Conclusion**

Following the most harrowing action of the scene, when Nick slaps Mabel to the ground and threatens to kill his own family, a final scene is inserted, jarring in its change of modality. George Kouvaros links the last scene of the film, where Nick and Mabel suddenly retain amicability toward one another and work together to put the children to bed and tidy the house, as “the moment of exhalation when the actors pass imperceptibly out of their roles and back into what they were before” (*Where Does It Happen?* 82).

Undoubtedly the scene does have the effect of releasing tension. Cassavetes’ tight shots and fast edits are replaced with calm and lucid medium shots, that pan slowly to cover action that has utilitarian purpose, rather than embodying expressive, fraught emotion. However the most noticeable aspect of this change of tone is the nature of its complete and sudden appearance. A depiction of tranquil familial wholeness comes straight after a scene of such traumatizing effect as to make it almost seem ludicrous.

Kouvaros is correct to note the way in which the actors suddenly seem to breathe out their character’s frantic nature and bring the narrative to close in a calm and subdued manner. However labeling this striking change of atmosphere as merely the product of emphasis on the process of performing emotional states reduces its ideological implications.

It is critical to note what brings about this change in tonality. After Nick hits Mabel to the ground with their children present, there is a cut to medium shot of Nick smiling as he says, “they want to know if you’re alright.” This shot triggers the tonal change. Next comes a lengthy shot that depicts Mabel in side profile and follows her through the living room as the children cling to her. Her presence and position as mother seems to calm the space around her, with Nick dutifully following in tow and the children silenced, finally allowing her to become Teresa de Lauretis’ womanly “figure of narrative closure” (584-585). Under her explicitly feminine and maternal guidance, the children are lovingly put to bed, leaving Nick and Mabel to quietly and efficiently rectify their own relationship. This is a considerably bittersweet development considering the physical and mental trauma she has endured in order to perform this role. It could be argued that Cassavetes is mocking the “arbitrary readjustment of that world knocked awry” (Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* 159) that takes place at the end of a classical Hollywood narrative.

*A Woman Under The Influence*’s somewhat automatic rendering of a happy ending utilizes Hollywood convention for an art film agenda. Cassavetes paradoxically uses an ending that, whilst conventionally conclusive, does not make thematic sense when placed in context with the rest of the scene, fulfilling the art film’s tendency to “reduce clarity or resolution and in some cases to increase narrative self-consciousness” (King 63). *A Woman Under The Influence*’s ending is a hybrid of Hollywood and art film models, taking aspects of each whilst differentiating itself through the medium of performance, in this case the sudden emotional turn that the actor’s make halfway through a previously frenetic scene. However Cassavetes’ tender treatment of the narrative turnaround complicates the issue further.

Instead of critiquing the concept of Mabel’s maternal power, which brings to a close her conflict against the repressive familial unit, Cassavetes seems to celebrate it. Reveling in the behavior of the children as Mabel puts them to bed, through extended close-ups that

explicitly focus on the children, he distances himself from any kind of judgment and instead presents the final scene as a separate coda to the rest of the film. After the children are put to bed, Mabel turns to Nick on the stairway, the place of so much conflict and hysteria in the last scene, and exclaims “you know I’m really nuts?” to which he replies “tell me about it.” After this dialogue, and within this charged location, the characters turn their back to the camera and walk away, an image that seems to depict a willingness, on both the characters, and Cassavetes’ part, to forget the past and move on.

In *A Thousand Plateaus* Deleuze and Guattari state that “Multiplicities are rhizomatic, and expose arborescent pseudomultiplicities for what they are” (8). For Deleuze and Guattari, multiplicities are the many different methods of connecting within a lateral system of thought. The final ten minutes of *A Woman Under The Influence* are truly rhizomatic in the way they “ceaselessly establish connections” (6-7) between classical Hollywood and art film models to jarring effect, rejecting concrete political implications in favor of an affectionate representation of the short-sightedness and contradictory nature of human relationships. The film’s conclusion exposes the “pseudo” complexity of the other models, such as the art film or the classical Hollywood narrative, which sacrifice undivided concentration on the creation of character through performance, for the presentation of a fixed ideological meaning.

*Stella Dallas* is an example of the classical Hollywood narrative, relying on planned positioning of character in order to develop a tightly causal plot. On the other hand *Il Deserto Rosso* is an example of art film narrative, whereby abstract imagery and calculated performances emphasize an “impersonal and unknown causality” (Bordwell, *Narration In The Fiction Film* 206). *A Woman Under The Influence* stands in opposition to both. Cassavetes deliberately avoids planned character and narrative by filming isolated performances that are created spontaneously within the moment and refuse to develop coherently. Thus they are oppositional to Hollywood, but unlike the detached Art Film,

which aims to convey an impersonal and random world through restrained performances and a reliance on visual symbolism, Cassavetes focuses upon frustrated performances produced within the moment to convey the inconsistency of personal, human relationships.

## Chapter Two: A New Kind of Acting: *Shadows*

In this chapter I will place Cassavetes' first film, *Shadows*, between two separate approaches to film and performance, the studio films of Elia Kazan and Nicholas Ray, which feature "star" performances by Method actors such as Marlon Brando and James Dean, and the independent cinema of Lionel Rogosin and Kent Mackenzie, which make use of non-actors. I will demonstrate how elements of both echo the gestation of Cassavetes' approach to performance in film, yet are fundamentally different from the end result of *Shadows*. After discussing Cassavetes' use of spontaneous performance to deconstruct traditional and experimental cinematic structures in Chapter One, this chapter will detail the historical and technical origins of Cassavetes' creative beliefs and methodologies.

I will argue that Cassavetes' first film is a much more direct response to newer approaches to acting in American film in the 1950s. Cassavetes' vocal opposition to Strasberg's school of Method Acting essentially informs the style, structure and ideology of *Shadows* and in turn his approach to performance throughout the rest of his career as a director.

Cassavetes' pronounced criticism of the Method, along with his own philosophy and approach to acting, as described in interviews transcribed by Ray Carney in *Cassavetes on Cassavetes*, will form the fundamental basis of the first part of this chapter. In interviews, Cassavetes stated that he saw the act of creating an "atmosphere" in which performances could be truly uninhibited and creative as his most important role as a director (*Cassavetes on Cassavetes* 154). By utilizing Sanford Meisner's central concept of performance within the moment, and various theories on play behavior, I will argue that during the making of *Shadows* John Cassavetes created an "atmosphere" that incorporated spontaneous movement

and interaction in order to create an oppositional approach to the structured, internal Method style.

Cassavetes was not the only independent filmmaker operating in opposition to mainstream film in America in the 1950s. In this chapter I will also compare *Shadows* to Lionel Rogosin's *On the Bowery* (1956), a film made three years prior to *Shadows* that shared a similar spontaneous ethic. Whilst *Shadows* and *On the Bowery* both share what Jonas Mekas described as a desire for "immediacy" (56), the second part of this chapter will attempt to contrast the two film's perspectives in terms of performance and capturing a sense of 'truth'. *On the Bowery*'s use of what Siegfried Kracauer defines as "non-actors" (98-99), in this case real men of the Bowery playing themselves in a written narrative, contrasts with *Shadows*'s origin as an improvisatory exercise within an actor's workshop.

In his book *Where Does It Happen?*, George Kouvaros argues that there is an "in-between space where actor and character neither have completely fused or can easily be separated," a process he terms "perpetual ghosting" (x). *Shadows*' use of amateur actors playing a version of themselves demonstrates a choice that contributes to Kouvaros' observation. In this chapter, I will argue that the blurring of the divide between actor and character emphasizes the working process of performance in a way that symbolizes the creation of a presentation of the self to others.

I will also compare *Shadows* to Kent Mackenzie's film *The Exiles* (1961), a film that also features themes of racial identity. I will argue that whilst *The Exiles* deals with its characters' status as an ethnic minority explicitly, *Shadows* utilizes a unique approach to performance that complicates and deepens the characters of Benny and Lelia and their choice to "pass" as white in the film. By comparing Cassavetes to his peers, this chapter will aim to illuminate how *Shadows* attains an individual position through the film's constant focus on performance, not only as a method of production but as a theme in itself.

## Cassavetes and the Method

The genesis of *Shadows* lies in acting classes conducted by Cassavetes at The Cassavetes-Lane Drama Workshop in 1957 (*Cassavetes on Cassavetes* 49, 55). Ray Carney documents how the workshop defined itself as oppositional to The Actor's Studio and Lee Strasberg's Method, the prevailing trend in acting at the time (*Shadows* 12-13). The Method builds on Constantin Stanislavsky's theory that an actor "creates an organic and imaginative performance by 'experiencing' or 'living through' the role" (Krasner 5). Strasberg interpreted this aim predominantly through encouraging his students to focus on "internal and analytical action" (Krasner 5); the actor creates a representation of their character with their own similar emotional experiences.

Cassavetes and Burt Lane, the co-owner of the workshop, believed that the Method actor's performance became too inward and self-obsessed to accurately portray a character separate from them. Just as importantly, in such an inward state the Method actor could not interact sensitively and dynamically with other performers in a scene (Carney, *Cassavetes on Cassavetes* 53). Their response was to create an atmosphere whereby the actor was compelled to act "naturally" with an emphasis on extroverted expression (Carney, *Cassavetes on Cassavetes* 51-52).

Despite Cassavetes and Lane's aversion to the Actor's Studio, their views on performance coalesce remarkably with Strasberg's colleague Sanford Meisner, who placed constant emphasis on production of identity within the moment, or "the doing" (101 Stinespring). Cassavetes desired his actors to "live" their character not by referring to their own lives in the past, but by creating authentic emotion in the present.

Virginia Wright Wexman notes that within the decade that *Shadows* was made Hollywood had begun an "appropriation" of Method acting in order to lay claim to "a certain

realist effect” (127). Films such as *On The Waterfront* (1954) and *Rebel Without A Cause* (1955) cast male leads with Method backgrounds such as Marlon Brando and James Dean who came to “delineate a new type of male romantic hero” within Hollywood (127). *Shadows* is a film that reflects these views by building upon the trend for a greater focus on the performance of character that the Method helped introduce to film. However Cassavetes also believed that the popularity and influence of their films had led the Method into stagnation by the mid fifties; the acting style and the films that featured them had become “rigid, unimaginative and boring” (Carney, *Cassavetes on Cassavetes* 52-52). Therefore *Shadows* also attempts to differentiate itself from a focus on the star roles that continued in Hollywood, now featuring Method actor lead players and the inward performances they were known for.

In *On the Waterfront*, Terry Malloy, played by Marlon Brando, dominates every scene he is in, not only because of his role’s importance within the narrative, but through the way he is visually centralized. In a shot early in the film, the gangster thugs who pressure Terry into luring an informer to his death line up along a wall with Brando standing at the end, enforcing their collective focus upon him, and emphasizing his reaction to their cajolement. At the beginning of *Rebel Without a Cause*, Jim, played by James Dean, goes towards and then takes up most of the frame, lying in the road with a toy wind-up monkey, intoxicated and vacant, while the credits and title of the film, which specifically describes his character, are imposed in front of him.

The focus on star performance evident in these scenes was not new; however the way in which *On the Waterfront* and *Rebel Without a Cause* emphasize the inner emotional conflict of their lead players can be ascribed to the Method’s influence. Richard Dyer explains that “although in principle the Method could be used to express any psychological state, in practice it was used especially to express disturbance, repression, anguish, etc., partly

in line with a belief that such feelings, vaguely conceptualizable as the ID and its repression, are more ‘authentic’ than stability and open expression” (*Stars* 161).

*Shadows*, like *Rebel Without a Cause*, begins by introducing a troubled and disenchanted male protagonist. However, unlike Jim, Benny (Ben Carruthers) is not given central focus. As the titles and credits are imposed he is shown entering a cramped house party in a crowded mid-shot, off to the left of the frame and insignificant amongst the mass apart from his sunglasses.

The shades act as a visual signifier for a closed off and aloof character, a simple representation of the kind of anguished male that the Method, due to its focus on inner conflict, specialized in. Over his shoulders Ben carries a pair of bongos, as he clumsily maneuvers through the room. The bongos act as a signifier for Beat culture, and transform Ben into a walking stereotype for the kind of “Beat Generation jazz” that he so spitefully declaims against in a later scene.

Other elements of the scene clearly undermine the new tormented image that Benny tries to perform. His moody entrance is edited between close-up shots of the isolated limbs, hands and faces of the dancing youth that are packed in around him, robbing Carruthers of the kind of gravitas associated with the entrance of a star performer. These shots, coupled with a soundtrack of loose rock ‘n’ roll and loud disembodied whooping, display an entirely different mode of performance to Carruthers’ stiff posturing.

The soundtrack and intervening shots emphasize a spontaneous physicality that undermines Benny’s self-important presence. In terms of Sanford Meisner’s approach to acting, the quick shots of fragmented body parts in motion represent “emotional impulse,” the true manifestation of “spontaneous instinct” (Stinespring 101). In comparison, Carruthers’ performance has a foundation built upon “emotional memory” (Stinespring 101). His

withdrawn and stiff body language connotes a pre-established inner turmoil, clashing with the performers that are reacting to the party and music around him.

The psychological state of anguish that Ben exudes does the opposite of creating a sense of what Dyer calls “authentic” emotion; instead the scene constructs a critique of the idea of authenticity itself. The dancers recognize that they are taking part in a cultural activity, one that they are interacting with in the present. They represent a perfect example of Meisner and Cassavetes’ aim of capturing natural, self-generating performance.

The way in which the scene cuts from one face to the next, each reacting in differing ways to the music, de-emphasizes Ben’s role. In an interview with Needeeya Islam for the online journal *Senses of Cinema*, George Kouvaros notes that films by Cassavetes display “a kind of attentiveness . . . to those gestures that in other films may seem marginal but in Cassavetes’ work are absolutely essential.” The frantic yet familiar behavior of the dancers reminds the viewer that all the people within the room are engaged in performance. Despite their “marginal” status in the forthcoming narrative they overwhelm the lead character in the scene, forcing the audience to pay attention to them.

In comparison Ben appears foolish, calculated and in denial of creating his own performance. The opening of *Shadows* creates a parody of the new withdrawn romantic male hero, engulfing him in an interactive setting where he cannot distinguish himself from the supporting cast which conflicts with his own internal and isolated performance style. His outfit and demeanor bring to mind James Dean’s own star performance in *Rebel Without a Cause*. Benny appears to be positioning himself as a special and individual player, a character as pivotal to the people around him just like Terry in *On the Waterfront*, yet his sense of entitlement is vastly undermined.

Cynthia Baron and Sharon Marie Carnicke state that “the presumption that performances arise from star personalities stems from the notion that cameras capture natural

behavior, in this case the natural behavior of idealized personalities” (66). Benny’s behavior is denied idealization, specifically because it fails to appear natural. This is achieved by the framing of shots in the scene that refuse to centralize the character, coupled with editing that contrasts Benny’s behavior with performances that interact spontaneously with the environment they are located in.

In *Cassavetes on Cassavetes*, Ray Carney describes how during an early interview at The Cassavetes-Lane Drama Workshop prior to the making of *Shadows*, Cassavetes distinguished the workshop’s method of inducing “natural” acting rather than “staged” or “artificial” performance. The director went on to claim that the “artificiality of the expression of emotion was more than a dramatic problem. It was a problem in life” (51).

Carney accurately pinpoints this linking of the dramatic with the real as a major cornerstone in Cassavetes’ philosophy and interprets the thought as “a daring leap: lived experience could be as much a product of convention as dramatic experience, and in fact the one sort of convention could be the subject of the other” (51). Carney’s observation identifies a crucial technique that Cassavetes utilizes throughout *Shadows*, the use of an actor’s self-conscious performance as a representation of the “artificiality” of the expression of self in real life.

When dealing with the subject of performing identity it is useful to refer to Erving Goffman’s *The Performance of Self in Everyday Life*. Goffman’s book uses dramatic terms in order to describe how humans perform versions of themselves to each other in social situations. In his book, Goffman introduces the concept of a “social front” which he defines as “expressive equipment of a standard kind intentionally or unwittingly employed by the individual during his performance” (32). In the opening scene of *Shadows*, Benny’s “expressive equipment” consists of a replication of the stereotypical Method actor’s conveyance of a tormented inner life. The main purpose of the social front is to help the

individual in “projecting a definition of himself” (24), a stance that could easily describe a Method actor’s creation of character through utilizing a “definition” of their own identity.

*Shadows* deconstructs how a star performance that draws upon the Method is centrally represented in films such as *On the Waterfront* and *Rebel Without a Cause*. Cassavetes eliminates the importance given to a star like Marlon Brando or James Dean in order to show how representation and performance are intrinsically linked. The opening party scene not only serves the purpose of undermining Benny’s performance, but also the Method technique of utilizing pre-experienced personal emotion to create a character. Both are cases of what Cassavetes calls the “artificiality of expression of emotion” (*Cassavetes on Cassavetes* 51). *Shadows* knowingly references the withdrawn Method performance of a “star” actor such as Marlon Brando or James Dean in order to highlight a character’s artificiality in the film’s own dramatic diegesis, intrinsically linking what is for Cassavetes both a “dramatic” and “real life” problem.

Benny only moves to the center of the frame towards the end of the opening sequence. A series of shots depict him as he maneuvers the room, and eventually takes a fall into some dancers. This sudden loss of control makes Benny spread his arms out in an effort to gain balance. It is a move that also doubles as a spontaneous expression of panic, the first example of Benny losing his artificial mask of coolness.

After his fall the scene continually returns to a medium shot of Benny leaning against one of walls, glasses off, looking increasingly unsure of himself. He is now the focus of the scene, but because of the cracks that have appeared in his performance. Ivone Margulies writes that in a film by Cassavetes “delays and breakdowns are as important as the play or show that is finally staged” (281). In this first scene, the focus shifts wholly to Benny only when his staged “show” is disrupted, in order to study the aftermath of his minute, yet important “breakdown” in character.

A reoccurring trend in *Shadows* is the sudden appearance of similar moments of uncontrolled physicality, whether they are violent or playful, interrupting the performances of the actors and making them react within the moment. This aspect of *Shadows* has its origins in the acting workshop where the idea for the film was conceived. Cassavetes would physically interrupt actors delivering lines, jumping on and pinching them in an effort to “loosen them up” (Carney, *Cassavetes on Cassavetes* 50). This technique was employed in an effort to incorporate spontaneous and uncalculated movement in their performances. In *Shadows*, remnants of this unpredictable environment remain.

Immediately after the opening party, another scene follows that focuses upon Benny. He strolls quickly down a busy New York street, shades on and shoulders hunched, once again in control of his appearance and cool demeanor. It is not long before he is accosted by a mob of his close friends, who grab and jostle him, at one point even picking him and turning him upside down. The action is shown in a series of quickly edited tight shots that fleetingly depict the exerted faces and fast moving limbs of Benny and his friends, in much the same manner as the dancers in the previous scene. Benny ends the struggle by further escalating the excitement, yelling “forward!” like a child playing army, before the group run down the pavement away from the camera, which continues to watch from the site of the playfight.

Like the opening party, but in a more specific form, the tussle has the effect of dissipating Benny’s sullen performance by merging him with a playful group. Henry Bial defines play as “the force of uncertainty which counterbalances the structure provided by ritual. Where ritual depends on repetition, play stresses innovation and creativity. Where ritual is predictable, play is contingent” (“Play” 135).

Cassavetes incorporates these moments of playful contingency precisely because of the way they encourage “innovation and creativity.” The playfight is a physical group exercise that creates action and movement, defining character in a way that is not

predetermined by the director or even the actor, but by the play itself. When Benny is picked up and flipped he is no longer simply an actor performing a role, but a body amongst other bodies, caught in the midst of a physical event that he has no control of.

Another group struggle appears in *On the Waterfront*. A sober and static medium shot depicts a group of dockworkers fighting amongst themselves for loose coins thrown to the ground whilst Edie (Eva Marie Saint), Brando's love interest, looks on in shame and embarrassment. Without changing shot the focus suddenly shifts to Marlon Brando, as Terry Malloy, who enters into the foreground from the left. His physical prowess stands out amongst the other huddled longshoremen as well as his demeanor, which is lighthearted, treating the struggle as a game.

Brando's quick, exact body movements and effortless delivery of dialogue reveal a performance that determinedly and efficiently projects a lead character who dominates the scene, reducing the scramble to a mere background for his own appearance. Terry's entrance is a moment of action that complies with pre-established motion picture acting technique in Hollywood, what Cynthia Baron describes as the "dominant view that an actor's instrument necessarily colours a performance, and that as a consequence an actor must take conscious control of it" ("Crafting Film Performances: Acting in the Hollywood Studio Era" 90).

Whilst Brando does "colour" his performance with a playful, carefree attitude, he is nevertheless in full control of every detail of his delivery. Terry's playfulness is a momentary affectation, designed to create an impression of a cocksure, childlike male showing off for a female love interest, projected by a performer in complete "conscious control" of creating a nuanced character. Brando's performance is so distinct that Virginia Wright Wexman describes the actor as "competing" with the film his character is in, ignoring "Stanislavsky's ideal of actors as collaborators in the process of creating a text and fully merging his psyche with that of the character" (134). Wexman's observation highlights how *On the Waterfront* is

often more focused on Brando's dexterous performative capabilities than on the circumstances that surround and inform his character. In this scene, just as Terry shows off to Edie, Brando is also flaunting his abilities to the audience. In the typical Method style, actor and character are interchangeable in their behavior.

Although Brando's performance is playful to some extent, it is individualistic in nature, a playfulness derived from a desire to "revolt against a constraining structure" (Wexman 134) of scripted narrative and character in an effort to distinguish itself. In *Shadows*, performances emphatically lack the "conscious control" flaunted by Brando in *On the Waterfront*. The tussle in the street is an example of a scene that bases itself on a different kind of physical play; one that does not value the final individual accomplished performance but is focused on the act of working through, in the moment. Cassavetes' editing reflects the collaborative and spontaneous nature of the scene, joining in with the chaos through quick, fragmented cuts that desire to capture every nuance of the brief ribbing.

In the opening scene of *Shadows* actors interrupt and sabotage one another, encouraging what Meisner would call a style of acting that is "firmly rooted in the instinctive" with "no mentality" (qtd. in Stinespring 101). The second scene of *Shadows* is a continuation of the "loosening up" that Cassavetes subjected his students to at the workshop prior to the making of the film, merging techniques associated with rehearsal into the final film, situating the performances within as an ongoing process.

*Shadows* repeatedly establishes a particular performative atmosphere and then introduces a form of interruption. In a scene midway through the film Lelia (Lelia Goldoni), a light-skinned African American like her brother Benny, and Tony (Anthony Ray), Lelia's white suitor, are interrupted by the arrival home of Lelia's older and darker skinned brother Hugh (Hugh Hurd) and his agent Rupert (Rupert Crosse). The arrival of her brother and friend reveals Lelia's ethnicity to an unknowing Tony. The scene originated within a

situation that Cassavetes described and then encouraged his students to improvise around as an exercise, the results of which formed the inspiration for *Shadows* (Carney, *Shadows* 16).

The scene consists of two distinct parts. It begins as a conventional montage sequence set to romantic music as Lelia and Tony dance together and kiss each other in various locations around Lelia's apartment. The montage acts as a conclusion to Tony's courtship of Lelia, which has been characterized by similar intentionally stereotypical moments of seduction. The dance is abruptly interrupted by a close-up shot of Hugh's finger pushing the doorbell. The shot signifies a dynamic change in the scene, shifting from the escalating romance of the dance to an awkward social standstill when Tony's shock and distress reveal an underlying racial prejudice. In this scene Cassavetes' change in directorial style is as much of an interruption in tone as Hugh and Rupert's entrance. In contrast to the slow and clichéd montage that comes beforehand, his editing and shooting strategy here becomes as dynamic and sensitive as the actors' performances.

The slow succession of dissolving mid-shots that previously characterized the scene are replaced with a series of close-ups that scrutinize each player's reaction. These shots are often focused on actors who are not talking, forcing the audience to engage visually with one character whilst hearing another. This enables a detailed and minute analysis of the characters' reactions to one another but it also fragments the scene, making it difficult to decipher which character is speaking and whom they are addressing. The audience views the scene as a complex myriad of interaction that is undefined and unstable in nature.

The refusal to portray the initial four-way conversation in a traditional shot/reverse shot format emphasizes the clashes in subjectivity within the scene. While the camera focuses on Tony watching Hugh uneasily, Hugh can be heard bickering with Rupert concerning his singing performance the previous night, revealing the character's separate topic of insecurity. When Tony suddenly announces to Lelia that he ought to leave to go to an "appointment,"

two shots in quick succession show Hugh's suspicious reaction to this tell-tale excuse and then Lelia's heartbroken one, communicating the multiple sub-texts within the scene, a complex entanglement of romantic interest and racial prejudice that does not coalesce into one thematic whole, or prioritize one performance.

The absence of a shot/reverse shot structure is a repeated stylistic choice in much of Cassavetes' filmography, a choice that Ray Carney defines as part of a "democratic representational system" that eschews the viewpoint of a central protagonist in search of "an ideal in tension within social systems" (*American Dreaming* 106). The concept of equal representation is accurate within the scene's structure with no character given a central role, but it is a choice that also betrays the scene's origin as an improvisation that was continually analyzed, repeated and changed, a product of a collective performance that was not planned in its development. The result is a scene that shows an intensive interest in the minutest of reactions, and refuses to come to a pre-established climatic moment.

Cassavetes created a purposefully freer style of delivery in his performers that was distinctly oppositional to Strasberg's school of thought. The Method based itself heavily on the initial approach of acting theorist Constantin Stanislavski, who encouraged that "the given circumstance of a play, motivations of the character, and intentions of the scene were examined in depth" prior to performance. (Blum, *American Film Acting* 3-4). This kind of intense analysis resulted in scenes being "systematically and comprehensively broken down into the author's thematic objective ('superobjective'), units of dramatic action ('beats'), and through lines of action for the character" (Blum, *American Film Acting* 3-4).

The influence of the Stanislavakian approach can be seen in a pivotal scene of Nicholas Ray's *Rebel Without A Cause*. After confessing to his parents that he took part in a "chicky run" that led to the death of a fellow teen, Jim is coaxed into a hysterical and violent state by his mother's reproaches and his father's submissive demeanor. Dean appears visually

central and dominant on a staircase above the two supporting performers, who act out two distinct roles, one active, one passive, that serve the single purpose of intensifying Dean's star performance.

The "superobjective" within this scene is clearly to reveal how parental roles in Jim's family have become confused, leading to the protagonist's anguished state of mind. Each actor has clear "through lines" that serve the purpose of illuminating this thematic subject, lines of action that are distinctly divided into different stages of dramatic "beats." Dean's "beats" comprise of an initial muted confession of guilt, followed by a second "beat" of developing anguish, which feeds into a final explosive outburst. Jim's repeated, and denied, demand for his father to "stand up for me" not only serves as a line that builds up a sense of frustration within Dean's character, but also accurately conveys the overriding "superobjective" of the text, that of his father's inability to "stand up" to his role as a dominant male being a main reason for Jim's troubled behavior.

Dean is placed in a centralized star role where every aspect of the scene revolves around his character's angst, yet whilst his behavior is coded as wild and unpredictable, the performance is meticulously planned, fulfilling Stanislavski's goal for character and theme to be "intricately and psychologically interwoven" (Blum, *American Film Acting* 3-4). The scene culminates with Dean angrily kicking his foot through a portrait of a woman bearing a distinct similarity to his mother before storming out of the door. The destruction of the portrait clearly represents one of the hallmarks of a Method performance, what Wexman defines as the "use of emotionally charged objects" (128). By kicking through the painting, Dean is able to metaphorically define his character as drawn to destruction by his tormenting family, ending the scene on a definite thematic note.

The climax of the race revelation scene in *Shadows* also ends in a violent manner, yet lacks the definite structure and meaning of *Rebel Without a Cause*. In her article "Playing

with Performance: Directorial and Performance Style in John Cassavetes' *Opening Night*," Maria Viera uses Stanislavski's concepts of "superobjective" and "line of action" in order to explain how characters in Cassavetes' films will often have motivations and objectives that are "aimed in different directions" from their fellow players, rendering the scene unable to "form a solid unbroken line" of objective. Viera concludes that the director's "unique style of performance" was formed by his actors "creating double and sometimes triple subtexts played out simultaneously" (162).

Viera's reading of Cassavetes' approach contrasts drastically with the singular focus on Dean's character in *Rebel Without a Cause*, and can help to explain the disjointed nature of Tony's tense expulsion from Lelia's apartment by Hugh in *Shadows*. Like *Rebel Without a Cause*, the scene ends with the emotional exit of one character. In *Rebel Without a Cause* a panning mid-shot captures Jim's rejection of his mother, destruction of the painting and escape through the door in quick succession, all set to a climatic orchestral soundtrack in clear melodramatic tradition. In *Shadows*, Tony dismisses himself and the film cuts to a shot of the doorway from outside the apartment. The fixed nature of the shot reflects the subsequent protracted and undetermined performances that take place.

The first exchange takes place between Tony and Lelia, who follows her lover out of the room after he excuses himself. The shot begins to again resemble the romantic agenda of the first part of the scene. Lelia's insistence that she loves Tony and his desperate attempt to organize a date the following day are throwbacks to their previous social performance. However, after Hugh and Rupert's interruption, their delivery of these lines appears strained and false. Cassavetes also continually reminds us of the underlying racial and familial conflict that has emerged by repeatedly cutting back to a shot of Hugh watching the conversation with disapproval, culminating in his interruption of the conversation and physical replacement of Lelia in the frame. Directly facing Hugh, Tony's shame at his own

prejudice is increasingly apparent. Ray Carney notes that the emotion of embarrassment is a reoccurring aspect of much of the director's work (*Shadows* 81), and here it is used to deconstruct Tony's previously immaculate social front, causing him to become agitated, as he stammers his words and repeats sentences.

In *Overhearing Film Dialogue*, Sarah Kozloff writes that "In narrative films, dialogue may strive mightily to imitate natural conversation, but it is always an imitation" (18). Kozloff goes on to claim that "Even when lines are improvised on the set, they have been spoken by impersonators" (18-19). *Shadows* overcomes Kozloff's observation by actively disrupting Tony and Lelia's romantic "imitation" in order to reveal them as "impersonators." In the same way that Cassavetes is fixated on how "artificiality" infiltrates social interaction (*Cassavetes on Cassavetes* 51), *Shadows* recognizes and attempts to reveal every character's inherent falseness.

George Kouvaros notes that by the end of the scene Tony's behavior is reminiscent of a "performance that has lost all its certainty" (*Where Does it Happen?* 7). In response to this loss, Tony becomes increasingly desperate. In an effort to stem his guilt and recover his lost confidence, he repeatedly tells Hugh to remember "that you told me to get out of here." This statement is repeated three times and with each recital Tony's delivery becomes more emotionally fraught until he screams the line at Hugh whilst physically pushing him back into the apartment.

Tony's motivation to save face and transplant his guilt onto Hugh could be described as a Stanislavakian "line of action," with the repetition of the same line being a "beat," in much the same manner as Jim's line of "stand up for me dad" in *Rebel Without a Cause*. However, Cassavetes shoots the actors in one static shot with the camera behind Tony, stripping the performance of any melodramatic sensibility and instead presenting the repeated

line as an improvisational tic, the actor's way of gathering, through repetition, the emotion required to convey the character's frustration with, and aversion to, his guilt.

Within this scene, Anthony Ray's performance as Tony is more akin to the notion of free play than to the structured analysis of Strasberg's Method. Erving Goffman details how within play "The sequence of activity that serves as a pattern is neither followed faithfully nor completed fully, but is subject to starting and stopping, to redoing, to discontinuation" ("The Frame" 26). Therefore, rather than placing focus on the faithful completion of a performance, Cassavetes films Tony Ray "redoing" the line in different ways. Ray refuses to complete his character's emotional reaction to his own shame, in turn conveying the character's confusion and denial about his own artificiality.

The scene is a good example of how Cassavetes' unique brand of improvisation worked. After making *Shadows*, the director later clarified that "the emotion was improvisation, the lines were written" (*Cassavetes on Cassavetes* 161). This process is exaggerated to an absurd point within Ray's performance, which stays faithful to the written line, but continually repeats it, changing the delivery or "emotion" each time. Kouvaros notes "Throughout *Shadows* and the films that follow, the simplest, yet most complicated acts of everyday social engagement are illuminated through an explicit engagement with performance" (*Where Does It Happen?* 8). In this scene, the complex emotional effects of confusion and shame generated by "social engagement" are manifested through Ray's semi-improvised performance.

The unpredictability of the scenes in *Shadows* was further enhanced by the deliberate lack of any group discussion of character, a rule that Cassavetes imposed in order to make the characters' interactions seem as spontaneous and unscripted as possible (*Cassavetes on Cassavetes* 65). In certain scenes this approach was amplified further when the director

would provide directions to one actor and “counter directions” to the other, creating a conflict in objectives that would then play out in front of the camera (Carney, *Shadows* 34-35).

An example occurs three quarters of the way through the film during a confrontation between Benny and his brother Hugh. Prior to shooting the scene Cassavetes had told Ben Carruthers to enter and exit the scene as quickly as possible, whilst informing Hugh Hurd to do anything possible to keep Benny within the apartment and elongate the scene. The sequence begins in a medium shot from across the living room table, capturing the two actors pushing and pulling each other as Benny tries to leave and Hugh attempts to keep him in the room. The camera pans slightly from left to right, compensating for the unpredictable movement caused by the actors’ jostling, and then moves to a series of closer shots and reverse shots of the brothers, as Hugh persuades Benny to reconcile with him.

This scene typifies the meaning of “improvisation” in *Shadows*. Although the film proudly proclaims itself to be completely improvised before the credits at the end, *Shadows*’ form of improvisation was in fact highly controlled. Although not scripted and finalized, plot details and dialogue were so extensively rehearsed that the participants formed a “script in their minds” (*Cassavetes on Cassavetes* 61). This left delivery undefined and presumably under the control of the actor, whilst Cassavetes’ approach to maintaining the restricted subjectivity of his performers, and method of providing counter directions helped to create an unpredictable environment.

Cassavetes’ tendency to provide counter directions to his actors was born from a desire to instead encourage a communal space. An anecdote told in *Cassavetes on Cassavetes* reveals how the director’s favorite acting teacher, Charles Jehlinger, would insistently repeat the criticism “you’re not talking, you’re not listening” whilst students rehearsed in order to remind them of the importance of authentically interacting with one another (16). A solution for Jehlinger’s criticism exists within Benny and Hugh’s argument.

Instead of relying on actors to move beyond their own character and communicate with one another, Cassavetes intervened with a deception that effectively blurred the line between performance and practical movement, forcing actors to legitimately respond to one another.

Improvisation was also encouraged in the Method, whereby the actor's "mood and emotion" were deemed more important than "stressing the interpretation of the language in the written script" (Wexman 128). However the performative actions made by an actor such as Marlon Brando in *On the Waterfront* are more cerebral and calculated in nature than those made by the performers in *Shadows*. Brando's improvisation of delivery was focused on creating a sense of inner "psychic conflict," primarily through "psychologically meaningful pauses, and the use of emotionally charged objects" (Wexman 128).

When Brando lovingly pushes his brother Charlie's gun away from him in the famous "contender" scene in *On The Waterfront*, the move is calm and deliberate in its execution, accurately conveying the deliberate nature of a reaction that is starkly opposed to a conventional threat of violence. The gentle dismissal of the gun neatly reflects Terry's inner conflict, his love for a brother caught in a violent world. In the shot Charlie (Rod Steiger) is filmed from behind in the foreground, with Brando's performance in focus. Like the gun he is holding, Steiger becomes just another "emotionally charged object" for the star of the film, acting as motivation that enables Brando to begin an isolated monologue. Despite its initially collaborative nature, the scene quickly becomes an example of the "more confessional than communal" nature of Method acting (Wexman 131).

Jean-Louis Comolli notes that Cassavetes uses film not "as a way of reproducing actions, gestures, faces or ideas, but as a way of producing them. The cinema is the motor, the film is what causes each event to happen and to be remembered" ("Deux visages de Faces" 326). Whilst actors such as Dean and Brando used structured self-analysis in order to create a reproduction of their own emotion, Cassavetes created an environment that denied

the structured analysis needed for reproduction. The director used the act of filming itself to encourage a breakdown in performance, highlighting his own personal preoccupation with the artificiality prevalent within both acting and real social interaction. The difference between the process of reproduction used in Method acting and the production of performance evident in *Shadows* defines how Cassavetes stands apart from the popular dramatic films of the 1950s.

### ***Shadows* and Lionel Rogosin's *On The Bowery***

Jonas Mekas, a leading figure in American avant-garde film, labeled *Shadows* as an example of “spontaneous cinema” (Watson 58). This description predicted a major trend of 1960s countercultural art which Paul Arthur defines as a “cult of presentness” (96), explaining the concept as “the idea of living in the present, and its concomitant celebration of creative spontaneity and the rejection of official history” (95). However, Cassavetes was not the only independent filmmaker to utilize “creative spontaneity” in order to reject the “official history” of performance-focused film that had developed into the rigid school of Lee Strasberg’s Method. Like-minded filmmakers, such as Lionel Rogosin and Kent Mackenzie were also active during this period.

In his book *American Dreaming*, Ray Carney repeatedly emphasizes Cassavetes’ unique position in the history of cinema, yet identifies the “pseudo documentaries” of Shirley Clarke and Rogosin with their “capricious, exploratory interrogative style” as the closest peers to the director’s films (29). Carney’s use of the phrase “pseudo documentaries” is a crucial distinction between Cassavetes’ films and Lionel Rogosin’s in particular. *On The Bowery*, a film that focuses on the homeless men who frequented the Bowery district of New York, predicted the loose narrative and unstructured performances that would characterize

*Shadows*, made two years later, yet differed greatly from that film's approach and ultimate intent.

Rogosin filmed *On the Bowery* on location in New York's Bowery neighborhood, with the resident homeless men portraying themselves in a narrative written about them. The film further aspired to a sense of unmediated reality through the use of "secret" filming, capturing the behavior of Bowery men unaware (Winston 145).

In "Notes on the New American Cinema," originally published in *Film Journal*, Jonas Mekas states that *On The Bowery* features "the use of real life scenes in an organized, planned drama" (55), an approach that is also superficially similar to early documentary filmmaker John Grierson's own desire to take "stories from the raw," utilizing the "native actor" (660). Grierson readily acknowledged the inherent contradictions in these terms by stating "with the use of the living article, there is also an opportunity to perform creative work" (660), a statement that paved the way for Rogosin's film, a clear dramatization that retains a sense of documentary credibility by crafting its fiction from the "raw" material of non-professional actors and location shooting, in much the same manner as the Italian movement of Neo-Realism in the late 1940s and early 50s.

Rogosin's merging of the "living article" with his own "creative work" is evident from the opening credit sequence of *On The Bowery*. The film opens with a series of still, aesthetically composed shots of the Bowery, set to an orchestral score. The music continues as these stately establishing shots give way to a series of close-ups and medium shots of the neighborhood's numerous homeless and often inebriated men. The continuation of the soundtrack links these men to the previously admiring depiction of their surrounding environment, portraying them as a tragic yet integral part of the Bowery.

The montage is particularly empathetic in nature, one shot pans across the body of a man sprawled on the front step of a building as he looks pleadingly up at the camera, and

then shyly away. The following shot documents a drunk being ruthlessly woken up and moved on by two policemen, his startled face vivid between the uniformed, depersonalized officers. These opening scenes pertain to Jonas Mekas' view that "Lionel Rogosin brought to the independent cinema a strong note of social consciousness" (20). Mekas' observation highlights how the montage coalesces into an empathetic view of the plight of the alcoholic homeless.

The provocation of an audience's empathetic consciousness is created not only through sound and editing, but also through the framing of these shots as being located firmly in reality. Rogosin uses a still, level camera to unflinchingly record the action on the street. Whereas the opening party sequence in *Shadows* uses frenetic camera movements, an abrasive soundtrack and a self-aware performance from one of the lead actors in order to draw attention to itself as a fictional construct.

Like *Shadows*, Rogosin also uses the opening scenes to subtly introduce the film's leading players, Ray Salyer and Gorman Hendricks. These were real men of the Bowery who Rogosin cast to play themselves in the film. However unlike *Shadows*, which places Benny in an environment that is antagonistic towards him, shots of Ray and Gorman are inserted seamlessly within the montage, portraying them as natural inhabitants of the environment around them.

Siegfried Kracauer notes that the use of non-actors is often employed to portray "not so much particular individuals as types representative of whole groups of people" (98-99). Salyer and Hendricks not only portray themselves but each represent a different type of social misfit. Salyer represents the young social misfit in a state of transition. Youthful and physically fit, he appears towards the end of the montage holding a trunk of belongings, looking apprehensively towards the Bowery's strip of bars and accompanying drunks. Gorman, glimpsed earlier in the montage leaning against a telephone pole before walking off

into the Bowery, portrays an older and more desperate barfly, who has no qualms about later stealing Ray's trunk when he passes out drunk on the street. Both are, as Kracauer would state, "types representative" of the men that inhabit the Bowery, but at different stages of development.

In the following scene, the two characters meet and converse in a bar. Both Salyer and Hendricks lacked any training or experience as actors and their amateur status as performers in front of the camera is evident. However their blunt and rushed manner communicate a similar sense of vulnerability and social inadequacy that was present in the opening montage of the film.

Rogosin explained his approach for using non-actors in an interview:

To capture reality spontaneously and to give it life, more is involved of course than simply casting people of the milieu. They must be allowed to be themselves, to express themselves in their own manner but in accordance with the abstractions and themes which you as the director must be able to see in them." (qtd. in Mekas 55)

It is true that Ray and Gorman "express themselves in their own manner" accurately enough, yet their expression is profoundly effected by the presence of the camera and their inability to portray themselves naturally in front of it. However, through their self-conscious performances, Rogosin is able to communicate what he sees as the "abstractions and themes" of their underlying nature as social misfits. Instead of simply portraying an example of bad acting, the amateur performances convey a heightened sense of the insecurity and dejected nature of the down and out. Salyer and Hendrick's inability to be at ease and "act" is part of the raw and living material that Rogosin utilizes for a creative interpretation of the real conditions and behavior of the social misfit within the Bowery.

As previously stated, the initial idea for *Shadows* originated during improvisation exercises conducted at Cassavetes' acting workshop, with the leading players all being the director's students and aspiring actors. Ray Carney notes how in *Shadows* there was a distinct "overlap with actors' and characters' lives" (*Shadows* 18). Like Ray and Gorman in *On The Bowery*, Benny, Hugh and Lelia all share their characters' names and appear to be in part playing themselves onscreen. All three actors, Hugh Hurd as Hugh in particular, play characters that aspire to successful careers in show business, yet are also crippled with insecurity about their ability. Where Rogosin adhered to the Griersonian principle of the "Native Actor" in casting real men of The Bowery to play themselves, so does Cassavetes, utilizing amateur actors to portray insecure performers.

An example comes early in the narrative of *Shadows*. After arriving in Chicago to perform a song during a nightclub variety show, Hugh, his agent Rupert and the show's piano player debate whether or not Hugh should tell a joke before his song. Cassavetes represents the conversation by editing between variations of the same close-up shot that incorporates Rupert and Hugh in the foreground, with the piano player always in the central background. From this perspective the audience watch as Hugh and Rupert take turns at rehearsing the same joke, only to give up halfway through in Hugh's case or be shouted down in disapproval by the piano player in Rupert's case.

The close-up scrutinizes the actor's delivery mercilessly, not only through the camera's close proximity to their faces but by the constant inclusion of the piano player's judgmental expressions. The emphasis here is on the character's inability to perform in a sufficiently relaxed and entertaining manner and also the frequency in which a person can slip in and out of a performed character.

Similarities between the environment encouraged within the acting workshop and scenes in *Shadows* are obvious when observing silent footage shot of the workshop prior to

the making of the film, available to view as an additional feature of the Criterion release of *Shadows*. Rehearsals and readings are never consigned to being just onstage, with parts often appearing to be performed from within the middle of an audience. Actors can be seen dropping in and out of character at random halting their lines and breaking into laughter, or holding a worried expression.

Overall the impression given is one of complete disregard for the boundaries between actor and character or performance and reality. When compared to this footage, the film can be interpreted as simply an extension of the initial environment of Burt Lane and Cassavetes' workshop. William S. Pechter notes that "The performance may be taken to represent life, but, here as in Cassavetes' subsequent films, it comes closer to a kind of allegory, a symbolic transposition of life into the realm of actors acting, than to a lifelike representation" (13). By actively investigating the process of Hugh developing a character to inhabit onstage, a "symbolic transposition" of the type that Pechter has described occurs. Whilst Rupert takes too long to tell the joke, Hugh gives up almost as soon as he has started telling it. Their tendency to unpredictably fall in and out of roles is an allegory for the instability of the self in offstage life.

*Shadows* denies that any kind of fundamental "truth" can be performed, unlike Rogosin's forgiving and calm depiction of the Bowery men, which puts faith in the camera and Ray and Gorman's ability to, as Mekas describes "record the truth of the situation through the lips of the people who actually live in that situation themselves" (55). *On the Bowery* attempts to deny the presence of performance with the "non-actor." *Shadows* presents a focus on the fragmented and difficult nature of performing as a means of creating a complex and authentic portrait of the unstable nature of self.

### ***Shadows and The Exiles.***

*The Exiles*, directed by Kent Mackenzie, is an American independent film produced in 1958, a year before the release of the second cut of *Shadows*, but released in 1961. Like *Shadows*, *The Exiles* also explores the subject of racial identity, but from the perspective of a group of young Native Americans, originally from a reservation, but now living in Los Angeles. However, unlike *Shadows*, which uses the concept of race to explore themes of personal insecurity and the instability of performance, *The Exiles* represents Native American culture and identity as an inescapable and solid entity. This is a fact that cannot and will not be covered up or avoided by *The Exiles*' characters.

The film emphasizes this solidarity from the beginning with its opening scene, an expressionistic montage that dissolves between images of tipis and black and white photo portraits of Native Americans in traditional garb by Edward Curtis. The sequence then changes to include stills of the main characters of *The Exiles*, and then changes again to a still of the final scene of the film, a long shot that locates these characters within the modern urban sprawl of Los Angeles. The whole sequence features a sound track of distinctive Native American tribal chanting and percussion.

A male voice narrates over this montage, providing an account of the formation of reservations and the following migration of young Native Americans from these reservations into the city. *The Exiles* opening scene anchors all that will come after it within the context of the cultural heritage of the Native American, the scene simultaneously laments the marginalization of Native American culture and identity and affirms its presence within the characters. *The Exiles*' immediate and explicit recognition of its characters ethnicity contrasts with Benny and Lelia's act of "passing" in *Shadows*.

The first character we are introduced to in *The Exiles* is Yvonne who, like the men in *On The Bowery*, plays herself in a narrative written by Mackenzie but based on the real lives of the Native Americans that the film follows. Unlike the comparatively dialogue-heavy performances of Ray and Gorman in *On The Bowery*, *The Exiles* rarely depicts Yvonne speaking or interacting with other characters. Even in company she remains somewhat isolated and non communicative. In this scene Mackenzie instead overlays a voiceover monologue, written and spoken by Williams, over footage of Yvonne in a market as she gazes at food being prepared and is amused by a toy monkey that blows bubbles in her path.

Her performance here is simple, she wears a hardly changing expression of melancholic observation. Her voiceover on the other hand is a detailed account of her own thoughts concerning her life. Yvonne talks candidly about her current loneliness and her excitement at the prospect of her first child being born, a child who she wants to be raised outside of the reservation, in order to give it “the chances she never had.”

The voiceover informs Yvonne’s performance onscreen, giving added meaning, an aura of both resignation and hopefulness, to her actions. The overlay of Yvonne’s monologue onto her image also suggests to the viewer that we are listening to her innermost private thoughts. The use of voiceover in *The Exiles* continues throughout as the film shifts focus from Yvonne to other young Native Americans; each time it is employed in the same manner, with the characters often discussing issues prevalent to their racial identity.

Cassavetes’ use of amateur actors and encouragement of free improvisatory play within *Shadows* contributed to the film’s representation of characters who use performance as a means of deflecting attention away from their true state of insecure selfhood. Carney summarises this concept in *American Dreaming* by noting that whilst play in Cassavetes’ films is often represented as an act of “freeing oneself” it is also a “form of evasiveness” (129). On the other hand *The Exiles* fragments the performances of its players, which are

noticeably sparser and less aware than both *On the Bowery* and *Shadows*, going so far as to detach voice from body, in the process illuminating the inner world of these characters in an highly open and intimate manner.

Whilst little is known about Benny and Lelia's true feelings about their status as an ethnic minority in *Shadows*, the use of voiceover in *The Exiles* gives the viewer a clear understanding of how Yvonne and Homer, her often absent partner, comprehend their identity as Native Americans. Yvonne's wish for her child to grow up in a modern city and speak English initially echoes Benny and Lelia's act of "passing" as white in their chosen social circles. However, in an interview with Sean Axmaker about *The Exiles*, the Native American filmmaker and novelist Sherman Alexie disagrees with what he insists is an overly simplistic interpretation of Yvonne's intention.

Alexie maintains that whilst the mass exodus of young Native Americans from the reservations to urban Los Angeles did contribute to the dispersion and weakening of the cultural heritage of the Native American, Yvonne's monologue and hope for her child is a reflection of relocation as "exciting for the individual Indian," an action of opportunity not of shame, of participation not assimilation.

Alexie's interpretation is supported by the scene's emphasis on Yvonne as an individual, isolated but intrigued by the environment around her, with a voiceover that provides a distinctly hopeful subjective viewpoint. Whilst Hugh and Tony in *Shadows* see relations between white and black as a taboo problem that is never directly addressed, *The Exiles* retains a small sense of optimism on the subject of integration.

In *American Dreaming*, Ray Carney emphasizes the importance of performance as a theme within *Shadows*. Whilst admitting that the social and racial context of a narrative involving a black brother and sister passing as white in 1950s America cannot be ignored, Carney surmises that the plot of *Shadows* is inextricably linked to Cassavetes' ongoing

preoccupation with social performance, artificiality, and most importantly an act's ability to "breakdown" into a "crisis of identity" (44). Carney goes so far as to claim that Benny and Lelia's tendency to "pass" could represent the director's own insecurities as a thespian at the time, "passing" as a professional actor in a commercial film industry he was wholly uncomfortable with.

Carney's downplaying of the significance of race in *Shadows* is understandable. After all a film directed by a white American male about an African American family lacks the experiential insight that a film such as *Killer Of Sheep* (1977), by the black independent filmmaker Charles Burnett, could offer. Yet to state that *Shadows* utilizes race as a mere metaphor for social performance downplays the complex racial themes that run strong and deep through this film, although they are often not explicitly addressed through dialogue.

In an interview with Needeya Islam, George Kouvaros states that "Cassavetes' interest is in how the unstable factors and experiences that surround a performance or that an actor brings with them to a role produce or transform a situation," and within *Shadows* this is evident. Although Benny and Lelia's insecurity about their ethnicity is never explicitly addressed, it appears to "surround" and inform their performance in a personal manner that is never didactic.

After Tony's tense expulsion from the apartment, a scene takes place the next morning that subtly explores the emotional ramifications of the racial rejection that Lelia experienced, and Hugh witnessed, the night before. Until now Lelia, Hugh and Benny have operated for the most part within separate scenes and narratives. This scene brings all three together within the cramped confines of Lelia's bedroom, which leads onto a communal bathroom. Cassavetes uses one shot that encompasses all of the characters, with Lelia stationary in the foreground lying in bed, while Hugh and Benny move in and out of the room as they shower and prepare for the day.

The gathering together of all three previously disparate main characters, within the same room and in one continuous shot, emphasizes their familial bond, and in turn their shared ethnicity. Yet the scene also reveals their clear discomfort and tenseness in each other's presence. The conversation points are trivial and of an everyday nature, mostly concerned with who gets to shower first, and whether the water will be hot. Lelia remains closed off and dismissive around her brothers, whilst Benny restlessly wanders the room, occasionally settling on the bed to tell a goofy directionless anecdote to Lelia, or to daydream out loud about joining a jazz band in Las Vegas. The characters seem to willfully avoid addressing the previous night's occurrence, apart from when Hugh half-heartedly and unsuccessfully attempts to coax Lelia into "talking about it."

The scene is an example of a typically directionless interplay between characters in *Shadows* that Jean-Louis Comolli describes as an exercise "in escalation and chain effects, in this case a never-ending stream of phases, a free-wheeling mode of discourse which soon robs words of their points of reference, which makes the meaning of words less important than the way in which they are spoken and the patterns they create" (327). This is an observation that is useful in explaining how a scene that excels in such trivial dialogue can at the same time effectively communicate a clear sense of frustration and crisis in identity.

Benny's anecdote about his friend's misadventures in a taxicab is told with him close to the camera in the foreground, clutching his trumpet whilst staring directly ahead, ignoring a clearly unimpressed Lelia in the background. Soon the point of Benny's rambling monologue becomes less about the details of the story, which features a cast of characters we are unfamiliar with, and more with the way in which his words "are spoken and the pattern they create." His fixed and determined speech, which maintains a definite manner of joviality and amusement, is sustained despite Lelia's clear preoccupation with her own doubts and insecurity. Unlike *The Exiles*, which centralizes its characters' ethnicity through direct and

intimate voiceovers, Benny's behavior in *Shadows* quickly forms into a pattern of denial and avoidance. His story and the way in which he tells it becomes a performance that acts as a shield against his surrounding environment, an environment that includes his sister, who has been profoundly hurt by a racial prejudice she herself has tried so hard to avoid.

Jean-Louis Comolli's observation that much of the character interplay in Cassavetes' films has a structure of "escalation and chain effects" (327) is realized when Benny inadvertently makes a comment about Lelia's tired appearance, causing her to storm out of the room. In a series of tight close-up shots Benny now demands to know what is wrong. Hugh attempts to maintain a relaxed and jovial disposition, until further questioning causes him to drop his relaxed front, curtly informing Benny about a "problem with the races." A problem that Hugh adds is nothing that Benny would be "interested in."

This scene is crucial to understanding how the subject of race manifests itself in the first half of *Shadows*. Despite influencing nearly every event in the narrative, race, specifically blackness, is treated as a taboo subject by the characters. Benny and Lelia's denial of their ethnicity is never made explicit due to it being so crucially embedded into their performance of character, and also being one of the core motivations for their social performances.

Lelia's privileged and naïve mannerisms help shield her from the possible social disadvantage that being black could cause, whilst Benny's "hip" persona and detached conduct is another form of denial. E. Patrick Johnson states that "blackness, however, is not only a pawn of and consequence of performance, but it is also an effacement of it" (446). For Benny and Lelia, who exist in a film that, according to Carney, revolves around the notion of social performance and "playing" the city, their ethnicity threatens to constrain their performances and limit their ability to "play" the different social circles that they move within (*American Dreaming* 44). Therefore in order to avoid what they perceive to be an

effacement of their individuality they allow themselves to “pass” as white. In *Shadows* race is not a metaphor for performance, rather the two are inextricably linked in a pattern of denial.

Benny and Lelia’s fears of effacement and a loss of individuality through ethnicity are further explored in the following scene. Hugh throws a party for his friends at the apartment and both siblings are paired with black partners. The scene begins with Lelia conversing with her friend Vicki, who is adamant that what Lelia needs is “security, a husband and babies” in order to find happiness. With this advice Vicki loudly shouts across the room for Davey, a young black man who will eventually become a new suitor for Lelia.

In this scene, Lelia becomes increasingly closed off and hostile towards Davey, the reverse of her open and warm manner with Tony, her previous white suitor. She sits between Vicki and Davey, enclosed within a matchmaking arrangement at least partially based on ethnicity. She responds by deflecting this perceived effacement of her individuality not only on the pretext of race but also, through Vicki’s prior encouragement of marriage, by gender, inhabiting one of her many social guises, that of the bored, aloof socialite.

The scene then cuts across the room to Benny, who is once again engaged in performing the role of the outsider, leaning against a wall, hunched and withdrawn. He is then approached by a black female partygoer who encourages Benny to “join in the party and forget about your mood for awhile,” informing him “you’re not kidding anybody but yourself.” Her dialogue suggests a definite awareness of the superficiality of Benny’s angst.

Throughout their discussion, close-ups of other black partygoers are edited in between Benny and the girl talking, which then cut back to Benny looking increasingly agitated and distressed. These cuts not only give the impression of Benny as an outsider of the party, but also depict Benny as clearly uncomfortable with the act of socializing with his own ethnicity. Benny’s phobia of blackness is emphasized further in the climax of the scene.

After telling the girl that “he prefers to be coaxed but don’t you coax me,” the girl disregards his warning and leans forward to give him some of her drink. It is then that Benny lashes out physically at the girl, triggering a series of tussles that lead to Benny fleeing the party. Benny’s violent reaction to the girl is not only a physical demonstration of his anxiety around people of his own ethnicity, but also a result of his performance, a social front constructed to avoid the “effacement” that he connects with blackness, being deconstructed.

Whilst Benny’s performance is deconstructed, Lelia’s is created, a cold and hard demeanor that creates a distance between herself and Davey. Lelia’s performance is later also cast aside during one of the final scenes of the film when Davey confronts her about her cold persona on their first date. However both of these events are far from cathartic or even positive for Benny and Lelia.

Benny seems to react to his own outburst by delving deeper into his street-hoodlum character, concluding in him and his friends being brutally beaten up in a fight with a group of rival men, a fight initiated by Benny and his group of friends, who drunkenly begin to talk to their rival’s girlfriends. After the fight Benny takes off down the street in his sunglasses, ending the film as he started it, blank and alone. On the other hand Lelia’s new man Davey, despite perceiving Lelia’s heartbreak over Tony and the relationship it had to race, also accuses her of being “masculine” and tells her to “just dance and be as lovely as you look.” In Lelia’s final scene it seems as if she has substituted Tony’s racial prejudice for Davey’s constrictive views on gender and the subservient role of women. This is a consequence that foreshadows *A Woman Under the Influence*’s fuller interrogation of gender roles and relations.

For Stephanie Watson, “*Shadows* observes the transformative nature of identity, in the context of social constructions and hierarchies of ethnicity” (61). Racial insecurity or “hierarchies of ethnicity” are certainly a dominant underlying theme throughout *Shadows*.

However, they are also interwoven with other “social constructions,” including the performances that Benny and Lelia use to mask their insecurity in order to submit to social hierarchies, such as gender and notions of authenticity.

Both Benny and Lelia come to realize the false way in which they represent themselves, but in no way does this recognition lead to a cathartic moment of personal harmony. They now merely have a heightened awareness of the social hierarchies that affect them. To reconcile these characters to a “true” sense of identity would undermine the suggestive power of the social influences that affect them.

In *Cinema 2: The Time Image*, Deleuze claims that *Shadows* constitutes a “double reality” (149). The diegetic world of the film, in which two characters “pass between white and black” in a “perpetual crossing” informs how *Shadows* also passes between “film and non film” (149). Benny and Lelia inhabit a space between black and white through the act of performance. Their identity is in constant flux and impossible to define or hold down. Lelia’s frequent mood shifts and character changes question her stability as a character at all, whilst Benny’s performance is frequently undermined and a product of his own insecurity. They are both exposed as actors, destabilizing *Shadows*’ status as a fictional film.

*Shadows*’ coded and often vague approach to its characters’ ethnicity contrasts again with *The Exiles* explicit representation of young Native Americans. After a night of bar crawling and partying, the “exiles,” with the exception of the pregnant and ostracized Yvonne, drive to a gathering of Native Americans on a remote hill overlooking Los Angeles. The mood is jubilant as a group of men gather around a drum and chant whilst various characters reunite, dance and drink. The gathering shows the characters reasserting their cultural and social identity, whilst at the same time becoming increasingly intoxicated.

For these characters alcohol is a method of reconnection with their heritage. In much the same way that Kouvaros asserts that alcohol is a “lubricant for drama” (xviii) in the films

of Cassavetes, for these characters alcohol is a method of loosening up in order to reconnect with their heritage. In *Shadows*, Benny refuses alcohol from the girl in the party scene, a slight that hints at his discomfort in the predominantly black social environment of the party. However in a later scene he is shown becoming increasingly intoxicated with his friends before the climatic fight with the rival gang of men.

For Sherman Alexie the “epidemic” of alcoholism that exists in Native American communities and is depicted in *The Exiles* is a “physical manifestation of colonial grief,” a coping mechanism that also enables them to assert their cultural identity in unison. The final sequence of *The Exiles* is an acknowledgement of the multi-faceted nature of the Native American dwelling in a predominantly white urban environment. Alcohol is incorporated here in a way that asserts the characters’ ethnic identity, whereas in *Shadows* alcohol acts as a tool to illuminate Benny’s denial of his racial background.

## **Conclusion**

*Shadows* and the studio films that drew from Strasberg’s Method shared a similar desire to emphasize the performance of the actor. Both approaches encouraged and celebrated the actor’s interpretation of character, but differed on how that interpretation should be created and executed.

Elia Kazan and Nicholas Ray cast actors with Method backgrounds such as Marlon Brando and James Dean, who created their characters by consciously drawing on their own personal experience and memory. Brando and Dean’s accomplished and personal takes on their characters were perfectly suited for the star roles they inhabited. Their technique of drawing upon emotional memory was coherent and structured enough to correlate with the cause and effect narratives and clear thematic content synonymous with studio filmmaking.

Films such as *On the Waterfront* and *Rebel Without a Cause* provided a new performance aesthetic for studio-made dramatic films, but essentially acted as a continuation of the kind of production line Hollywood filmmaking that came before them. This environment inspired the formation of an oppositional approach to acting and filmmaking that *Shadows* represents. Like Strasberg, Cassavetes also encouraged a merging of actor and character, but crucially this intertwinement arrived only during the scene itself. Unlike the carefully crafted and paced performances of Brando and Dean that have a clear cause within the actor's internal source of emotion, the actors of *Shadows* are subject to spontaneous effects during a scene without prior emotional or narrative causes.

In *Shadows*, the actor experiences a breakdown in performance within the moment, achieved through methods of sabotage, physical interruption and the extended use of improvisation in order to encourage a freer approach to the acting out of scenes. This set of methods encourages the extended play behavior that drives the performances of *Shadows*. For Gregory Bateson, play is a form of interaction that contributes to “the evolution of communication” (151). This is a view that is aligned with Cassavetes' use of play to inspire performances that genuinely interacted with one another as opposed to Method acting's obsession with individual accomplishment.

For Cassavetes, the Method actor's use of his own emotion to convey that of his characters was a dramatic example of the “artificiality” of the expression of emotion in life. Thus *Shadows* not only railed against the Method system by creating an oppositional approach to performance, but the film also directly addressed the subject of artificiality through its main characters themselves, who all have personas that mask and shield their true emotions and insecurities. These personas, as well as being performed, are also broken down by performance.

Whilst *Shadows*' aesthetic and style is reliant on performance being emphasized, Rogosin's *On The Bowery* attempts a different approach, utilizing non-actors to play themselves onscreen. Curiously the effect of seeing Ray Salyer and Gorman Hendricks rush through and stumble upon their dialogue indirectly communicates their socially dysfunctional personalities, in much the same way that Cassavetes uses the amateur actor's ability to segue in and out of different performative modes as a means of communicating their characters' confused and self-conscious state of mind.

Each text has a different intention but a similar outcome. Rogosin exhibits a documentarian desire to, in his own words, "capture life spontaneously" (qtd. in Mekas 55), yet in scenes where Gorman, Hendricks and friends deliver dialogue in front of a camera in the service of a narrative this aim can never be truly fulfilled. Cassavetes recognizes the effect of the camera on its subjects and takes advantage; "artificiality" in life and on film becomes interchangeable.

In *Shadows* race is also an aspect of the character's lives that is mediated through the act of performance or, in the case of Benny and Lelia, the decision not to perform their ethnicity. Benny and Lelia's desire to hide their status as African Americans is represented ambiguously and never referred to explicitly, manifesting itself in the nuance of Carruther, Goldini and Hurd's interactions with their friends, lovers and each other. However, their characters' fundamental rejection of their ethnicity only emphasizes their position as social actors, eventually fueling their breakdown in identity.

Cassavetes' treatment of race as subtext contrasts deeply with the open representation of young Native Americans in *The Exiles*. In *Shadows* characters use performance to mask their fundamental identity, but in *The Exiles* Mackenzie downplays the external behavior of characters, in favor of illuminating voiceovers that communicate their inner thoughts. In this

respect *The Exiles* achieves a more detailed account of its characters' emotional lives and their thoughts and feelings relating to their status as an ethnic minority.

*The Exiles* is a film that both negatively and positively clarifies the position of the modern Native American, fulfilling a distinct documentarian need to inform the viewer.

*Shadows* on the other hand uses race as a means of destabilization of character and of performance. *Shadows* is a film that critiques the contemporary fictional film as artificial, whilst at the same time as using performance as a means to cast doubt on any kind of truthful representation of character and emotion.

### Chapter Three: Documentaries of Performance: *Faces*

*Faces* (1968), John Cassavetes' second independent film, was a significant development from *Shadows* in terms of the director's continued focus on the "artificiality of the expression of emotion" (*Cassavetes on Cassavetes* 51). *Shadows* featured young characters, who each eventually experience moments of possible growth and change. However Richard and Maria Forst, the married couple who are the central characters of *Faces*, are "trapped – physically, emotionally, and imaginatively - in a situation from which there is no exit" (Carney, *American Dreaming* 84). The situation depicted is their unhappy marriage, and the social and sexual encounters they use to deny their emotional emptiness.

Unlike *Shadows*, which depicts its characters initial engagement with artificiality, *Faces* is a study of people who are long past that point of origin. The film's form and approach responds to the characters' loss of identity through a series of six sprawling, loosely connected scenes, which depict Richard, Maria and other lonely characters descending into a series of unresolved crises.

Cassavetes depicts these crises through interactions that rely heavily on extended performative posturing. These interactions are observed with a keen eye for changes and cracks in performances. Cassavetes' intense encouragement of improvisation and the nature of the characters he had written allowed for the sole focus of the film to become the invention of artifice itself.

In this chapter I will compare *Faces*, which straddles the line between documentation of free performance and the enactment of fixed, fictional characters in a narrative, with the Direct Cinema documentary movement of the 1960s. Bill Nichols defines Direct Cinema as one of the main originators of what he calls the observational mode of documentary (*Blurred Boundaries* 95). Typical observational documentaries focus upon "individuated characters,

psychological complexity, and virtual performances” (*Blurred Boundaries* 96). This focus on behavior, specifically the multiplicity of personality, enables a comparison between the depictions of subjects in Direct Cinema and the portrayal of frustrated identities by the actors of *Faces*.

The filmmakers of Direct Cinema sought to apply a strict policy of non-intervention, abstaining from interviews or pre-planning in an effort to avoid influencing their subjects. Stella Bruzzi notes how filmmakers such as Robert Drew, the Maysles brothers and D.A. Pennebaker pursued “professional performers” engaged in what she defines as an “inbuilt crisis structure,” in order to further ensure that the camera’s overall influence was limited (91).

*Faces* again shares common ground in this respect, also featuring performers who actively create characters. However, unlike the filmmakers of Direct Cinema, who utilized specific personalities in hopes the camera would become irrelevant, the actors of *Faces* embrace both the camera and the process of producing a film as an opportunity to act out, blurring the divide between undefined performance and character.

Bruzzi goes on to note how “Direct Cinema was founded upon an uncomfortable paradox, that whilst the films were putatively concerned with the unpredictable action not dictated by the filmmakers, they also desired and sought ways of imposing closure on their ostensibly undetermined action” (99). In the first section of this chapter I will analyze how the films of Direct Cinema, although avoiding any kind of dictation of events, define their subjects by portraying a sense of definite reality underneath the constructed performances of their subjects, bringing a sense of “closure” to the events and subjects they depict. I will then juxtapose this approach with the way the characters of *Faces* are realized, by both the actors of the film and the method by which Cassavetes represents them.

I will argue that the films of the Direct Cinema movement, such as Robert Drew's *Primary* (1960) and the Maysles brothers' *Salesman* (1968), often simplify their subjects' performances in a manner that services the filmmakers' own desired narrative, whereas the performers of *Faces* actively deconstruct any sense of meaning, and complicate the divide between artifice and reality.

I will also analyze sections of Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin's *Chronique d'un été* (1961), an example of Cinéma Vérité, in relation to *Faces*. Whilst the filmmakers of Direct Cinema subscribed to a policy of non-intervention and observation, Rouch and Morin actively involved themselves and the camera in the subject's lives. Thus *Chronique d'un été* observes its subjects not as independent from the filmmaking process but actively entwined within it. Bill Nichols defines *Chronique d'un été* as belonging to the interactive mode of documentary, whereby "images of testimony or verbal exchange and images of demonstration" prevail over uninterrupted observation (*Blurred Boundaries* 42). I will position *Faces* as an interpretation of this ideal into dramatic fictive space.

In *Faces* the creative process is actively incorporated into performative interaction. Whilst Rouch and Morin explore their subjects with a structured but responsive ethnographic method, Cassavetes investigates the performances of his actors through utilizing a fixed script that his actors can then influence through their own autonomous interpretation and delivery. This process is influenced in turn by the creative environment of the filmmaking process.

Jean Rouch saw the filmmaking process as "a sort of catalyst which allows us to reveal, with doubts, a fictional part of all of us, but which for me is the most real part of an individual" (qtd. in Aufderheide 53). In *Chronique d'un été*, the camera's presence and the filmmaking process is used upon non-actors as a method of inducing a form of performance that is assumed to reflect genuinely upon their own real, lived experience. I will compare this approach to *Faces*, a dramatic film that also actively utilizes the filmmaking process to

induce creative action, but, unlike *Chronique d'un été*, does so in order to mask and fracture the inner lives of its characters.

### **Direct Cinema's Myth of Non-Intervention**

In an interview with Mark Shivas in 1963, Richard Leacock who, along with Al Maysles and Robert Drew, made *Primary*, stated “just as the theatrical sense of drama stems from reality, people in real situations will produce drama if we’re smart enough to be able to capture it, if we’re smart enough and sensitive enough in our filming within the discipline that we have established and stick to – of never asking anybody to do anything” (254). This quote illuminates how Leacock and company swore by a policy of non-intervention whilst consistently ignoring the effect of their own and the camera’s presence on the subjects of their films.

Stella Bruzzi notes that many films of the Direct Cinema movement chose to film events that occurred within a “crisis structure,” in order to decrease the camera’s impact, and also use “professional performers” in an effort to reach a form of “unadulterated reality”(68). This was a goal that Stella Bruzzi claimed was ultimately “futile” (68). Instead of a crisis providing an air of invisibility for the filmmakers, it can be argued that camera instead amplifies a sense of crisis, of a unique and important event, thus vastly influencing the film’s subjects.

The same can be said of the use of professionals who are deeply embedded within the crisis, who are performing anyway and, in the eyes of the Direct Cinema directors, thus nullifying the camera’s influence. An argument against this view is that the camera’s presence instead authenticates and exaggerates the sense of showmanship in the subject. Thus the subjects in *Salesman*, who have a career that demands that they are charismatic and

persuasive in order to sell their product, are at once vindicated by the camera and also challenged to perform their job as flawlessly as they can.

Inversely the camera can also influence events by placing a negative pressure upon the subject. In *Salesman*, Paul often seems to be spurred on by the camera, performing jigs and putting on an Irish brogue. Yet during more frustrating moments the camera seems to add another layer of humiliation to his slow decline as a salesman. The camera's presence often forces excuses and facial grimaces from Paul that might not have been forthcoming in complete privacy. These effects are only assumed possibilities but, taking into account the invasive and obvious presence of a camera and film crew upon their subjects, they are likely, thus nullifying Leacock and company's assured stance of neutrality.

Films such as *Primary* and *Salesman* seek to limit the camera's influence in order to provide a definitive, meaningful window into their subjects' interior lives. *Faces* shares aspects of Direct Cinema's stylistics, but fundamentally differs in its approach to forming a representation of its subjects. *Faces* exists as a narrative fictional film in which the camera is not directly recognized. The filming process is paradoxically embraced and incorporated into the filmic world much more openly than any Direct Cinema documentary. *Faces* utilizes a crisis structure of improvised dramatic interaction and professional performers in a way that does not seek independence from the camera but is intrinsically connected to, and generated by, the filming process.

### **Reality and Artifice**

When questioned about the pervading theme of *Faces*, Cassavetes answered that the film is "about people's surfaces" (*Cassavetes on Cassavetes* 195). This statement enables the film to be read as a prolonged meditation on the often artificial nature of the presentation of

self. Paul Ward notes that one of the main goals of documentary is to explore what he defines as the “relationship between reality and artifice” (6). A film such as *Primary* concerns itself with what Jeanne Hall deems to be “the making of sounds and images for the purpose of political persuasion” (“Realism as a Style in Cinema Verite: A Critical Analysis of *Primary*.” 38). Hall notes that the film compares and contrasts the production of politically persuasive events such as photo shoots and the planning of radio interviews with their finished outcome (38).

For example a discussion of an interview prior to the event is followed by the interview being conducted on air, and in one scene the presidential candidate, John F. Kennedy, is filmed posing for a photograph to be used for campaign material, only for the film to cut to a similar photograph of his competitor, Hubert Humphrey. Both of these moments highlight the constructed nature of political campaigning and, as Hall adds, suggest that the observational documentary is a superior medium, one that is impartial and lucid enough to infer the “truth” of a situation better than any other (38-40).

*Primary* not only concerns itself with deconstructing the artifice of American politics, but also seeks to find glimpses of the proposed reality of its subjects. Kennedy is shown in his campaign office pacing the room nervously and sitting down on the couch only to spring back up again seconds later. In one contrasting scene earlier in the film, Humphrey is shown in a car on the way to another meeting, filmed in close-up and discussing with an unseen confidant how tired he is, unlike Kennedy who roams the mid-shot he is framed in. These scenes seek to present a backstage view of the candidates. They are endowed with a sense of private intimacy that clashes with the rest of the film’s relentless depictions of frozen public smiles, speeches and handshakes. They aim to present the definitive truth of their subjects in contrast to their separate political performances.

For Drew and company, the distinction between reality and artifice in *Primary* is simple; when the candidates are performing in public and attempting to convince the electorate to vote for them, they are predominantly acting in an artificial manner. It is the moments behind the scenes, during breaks between speeches and even rehearsals for interviews, when mistakes are made and questions asked, that reality is apparent, exposing the previous public events as artificial constructions. *Primary* not only seeks to explore notions of reality and artifice, the film also desires to provide definitive evidence of both.

Quoting William Rothman, George Kouvaros asserts that Direct Cinema attains meaning by the camera operating as “non-candid”, meaning that the camera actively influences the action it is trying to capture. Kouvaros goes on to explain that subjects in documentaries such as *Primary* are “trapped by the camera and thus in order to hide they perform.” Kouvaros sees these performances as metaphors for “particular anxieties” that are hidden under the surface of the subject’s persona (*Where Does It Happen?* 63).

In observational documentaries such as *Salesman*, subjects repeatedly either indirectly or directly enter into a performative state at the behest of the watching camera. *Salesman* follows four Bible salesmen as they call upon households in order to attempt to sell their wares. The film focuses especially upon one salesman called Paul Brennan, a man who used to be gifted at his profession, but appears to become increasingly less confident as the film proceeds.

Early in the film, Paul is shown in his car after a failed sales-call. He self-deprecatingly sings “If I Were a Rich Man” in a put-on Irish brogue, with the camera, positioned on the passenger seat, conspicuously embedded within the claustrophobic environment. The placement, in the words of Kouvaros, “traps” Paul into a performance that expresses his longing for a higher income through possibly another form of employment.

This is a possibility that Paul, displayed through the use of a hokey Irish immigrant accent, thinks to be so unlikely it is humorous.

The subtext of Paul's performance speaks volumes about his sense of self-worth in his vocation, but it is fully his own creation and an act that is carried out alone. The camera encourages a performance that reveals an aspect of Paul's personality, but it is controlled somewhat by the fact that the performance is concocted at Paul's own behest. The scene is dynamic and illuminating in its depiction of character, but the subject's isolation and domination of the two-way relationship between himself and the camera only allows for a simple and controlled depiction of his performance and the subtext it connotes.

*Faces* differs from Direct Cinema's formula of examining artifice in order to reveal a glimpse of a stable reality. George Kouvaros notes that *Faces* also focuses on the act of "constructing a fiction and piecing together a performance" (*Where Does It Happen?* 62), yet the divide between construction and the performance itself is rendered ambiguous. Kouvaros comments upon this in relation to Direct Cinema's tendency to search for a sense of definitive truth. He states that the "ongoing movement and evocation of character and identity" present in *Faces* "questions the fundamental tenet upon which Leacock, Pennebaker and others base their investigations of a distinct and essential self beneath or separate from the various roles and fictions one enacts in everyday life" (*Where Does It Happen?* 62-63).

The opening sequence of *Faces* introduces business colleagues and friends Richard (John Marley) and Freddie (Fred Draper). At a bar they meet Jeannie Rapp (Gena Rowlands), who Freddie later suggests is an escort, and go back to Jeannie's home to continue their night. Throughout this scene there is a distinct atmosphere of tension between Richard and Fred, who both desire Jeannie, although Fred is far more forthcoming than Richard.

The tension between Fred, Jeannie and Richard culminates with Fred and Richard snatching Jeannie back and forth between each other in order to serenade her with various

interpretations of the song “I Dream Of Jeannie.” This game, in which each characters’ performance of the song coincides with the rapid changes in emotion and connection that are occurring, contrasts with scenes in *Salesman*, where the meaning behind the performance of a song is contained and fixed in place.

In *Faces*, the singing begins in unison, with the camera following the characters as they dance and sing together in a jovial, excited manner, until Fred is excluded as Jeannie and Richard become more intimate. At this point differing interpretations of the song by each actor begin to become entwined, battling against each other in a manner that portrays multiple states of mind. This is particularly true in the case of Freddie, who attempts to combat Jeannie’s affection for Richard by becoming even more childish and animated, before slowing down his singing in dismay. Freddie’s next move however is to unexpectedly grab Jeannie from Richard and proceed to sing “I Dream of Jeannie” in a loud crooning voice, a complete departure from the beaten and dismayed character he projected only moments before.

During the “I Dream of Jeannie” dance sequence, the viewer witnesses all three actors alternating their deliveries in accordance with their changing or desired partners. Cassavetes’ camera remains intimately interested in Fred, Jeannie and Richard as they conduct this frivolous act, remaining close to the characters’ faces as they rotate around the room. During the scene, the players repeatedly clutch onto one another and croon the same repeated first line, which never develops into a full verse. The repetition of the opening line is significant; despite numerous attempted beginnings and different creative deliveries the song never develops. The line is a shallow token of hokey affection and its repetition brings the scene to the point of absurdity.

After Richard once again takes control of Jeannie, destroying Freddie’s romantic play for control, Freddie bluntly asks how much Jeannie charges, triggering one of the most

jarring dramatic changes in any scene of the film. Stuart Klawans defines moments such as these in Cassavetes' films as "unmaskings," explaining the sudden changes in mood as simple acting improvisational exercises given serious depth (19).

Klawans' observation is important as it brings to the forefront the idea that displays of acting proficiency effectively drive the action of the film. Rather than a structured depiction of the character's outer persona and the inner reality that hides behind it, as seen in *Primary* or *Salesman*, *Faces* relies on group interaction that celebrates artifice as the primary influence of social behavior. The film utilizes actors displaying an uncontrolled ability to create and interchange roles as a metaphor for what Sylvie Pierre saw as the thematic core of *Faces*, a phenomenon she labeled the "total loss of direction experienced by the individual American" (324).

The loss of direction that Pierre describes in *Faces* is represented through the actors in the film branching out in many directions consecutively and rapidly, improvising sudden changes in the emotional mindset of their character and the delivery of their performance. If characters such as Freddie Draper have lost any sense of true direction in their lives, they respond with multiple types of behavior that distract themselves and those around them from the inherent lack of meaning in their relationships.

In *Blurred Boundaries*, Bill Nichols observes that much documentary hinges on the figure of the "social actor", defining the term as "the degree to which individuals represent themselves to others" (42). The meaning of this term, connoting a subject's explicit control of their performance, is similar to Bruzzi's identification of the "professional performer" as a key player in most observational Direct Cinema of the 1960s (91). Nichols goes on to suggest that in documentary, "social actors take on the narrative coherence of a character; they approximate once more those forms of virtual performance that are documentary's answer to professional acting" (99).

In *Faces*, an inversion of this substitution of actors for “social actors” takes place. In order to represent the unstable nature of the interpersonal relationships represented in the film, and the insecure identity of each of the film’s characters, actors are encouraged to demonstrate a myriad of roles and ways of communicating emotion that exceed the limitations of a single role.

Following Freddie’s “unmasking,” the camera remains close to the actors’ expressions, but due to the scene’s sudden change in tone this proximity instead creates a sense of abjectness. Cassavetes is most interested in Freddie’s face as his expression slowly transforms from stern to gleefully sadistic as he sees the effect his words have had upon Jeannie. *Faces*’ fast paced and fragmented editing structure is also often broken up by prolonged long takes, shot in close-up. For the most part Cassavetes eschews a conventional shot/reverse shot editing structure during character interactions, in favour of more exploratory and focused investigations into the actors’ expressive facial reactions.

Paul Ward notes that the held close-up is also a common visual convention in much observational cinema, stating its use as being a “marker of authenticity par excellence” (43). Al Maysles, the co-director of *Salesman*, also expresses this attitude. In an interview with James Blue in 1964, he talks of the long take being a way in which a person “has to break down and reveal himself” (262).

For *Faces*, the long take close-up is often used to create the reverse effect. For example the use of extended close-up on the men of *Faces* is utilized not to strip back the protective outer persona of the character but to focus completely upon it. The extended shot duration is not used in an effort to “break down” and “reveal” some form of true self like the Maysles hope to do, but to highlight artificiality and repression as an unrelenting and dominating influence. The long close-ups are not attempts to see into the characters’ inner lives but are a method of emphasizing a problem Cassavetes saw within the American male,

and focused upon in *Faces*. He described this problem as “this need to prove – this bustling, bravura ego – that fatally wounds the people of the picture” (*Cassavetes on Cassavetes* 138).

Sylvie Pierre is quick to note the influence of alcohol in *Faces*, detailing that the film “has borrowed from the effects of alcohol – heightened awareness and lucidity, moments of emotion and flashes of insight – the very form, unsteady and rigorous, of its poetry” (325). During Richard, Freddie and Jeannie’s changing renditions of “I Dream of Jeannie,” the sentimental “moments of emotion” have given way to sudden “flashes of insight” through the camera’s distance and the characters’ changing understanding of the situation. Yet this insight is short lived. Fred begins a misogynistic rant concerning women and money, only to be rebuked by Richard and then Jeannie. Freddie then proceeds to once again fawn over Jeannie, apologizing tenderly before angrily turning upon Richard again and finally leaving the house.

Throughout this ever-changing performance, the camera alternates between a new detached stance and the old engaged and close position. Meanwhile Fred’s performance and delivery mirrors his previous singing of “I Dream of Jeannie.” A moment that should have become a revelation once again devolves into aimless and instinctive performative floundering.

In her article “Impromptu Entertainment: Performance Modes in Cassavetes’ Films,” published in the online journal *Senses of Cinema*, Pamela Robertson Wojcik also offers an analysis of this particular scene, describing the repeated rendition of “I Dream of Jeannie” as a replacement for conversation, which “both eases and induces tension.” Wojcik notes that when the music begins to “offend” Freddie, he halts the singing, demonstrating “both the power of these myths and how difficult they are to maintain.” Whilst it is true the characters’ performances of the song are induced with a sense of both power and weariness, Freddie’s

continued instability, even after the singing has halted, demonstrates how the performance does not simply halt but continues in another subtler form.

In Direct Cinema, filmmakers such as Robert Drew and the Maysles brothers strived to glimpse reality underneath artifice. On the other hand, Cassavetes, using drama and the ceaseless invention that improvisation encourages as his inspiration, relentlessly exposes any kind of revelation or stability as a temporary state within the compulsive denial of his characters' personas.

The women of *Faces* are represented in a marginally more favorable light. Cassavetes' tight close-ups of a character such as Maria (Lynn Carlin) harbor a sense of empathy and understanding lacking from the depiction of the often cruel, superficial behavior of characters such as Freddie. In a scene towards the end of the film, Maria and Chet (Seymour Cassel), a young male she meets in a bar, attempt to go to bed with one another.

The camera hovers around the couple slowly as Chet holds Maria in his arms while they kiss gently. Devoid of any of the incessant singing, dancing, empty laughter and chitchat that is so relentless in the rest of the film, the moment stands out as seemingly meaningful and romantic. The characters appear to be engaging with one another in a slow and physical way that has been lacking in the film's previously superficial and inconsistent interactions. However, the moment ends when Chet places Maria on the bed and a silent close-up of her blank expression commences. The spectator is forced to reconsider the previous moment as an empty one, its hollow actions promising a real connection but ultimately failing to deliver. The close-up reveals that Maria is just as lost with Chet as she is with her husband.

During this shot, the camera also slowly zooms in on Maria's face. A similar zoom occurs in the Maysles' *Salesman* during a sales pitch in which Paul attempts to persuade a woman to buy one of his Bibles for her family. Here, as in *Faces*, the zoom operates as a reaction to a psychologically significant moment for the subject by closing the distance

between the viewer and subject, implying that something significant but subtle is taking place. Along with the image of the woman's tense face and her unsure statements of doubt about being able to afford the Bible, the zoom in *Salesman* emphasizes the conflict between her desire to symbolically invest further in her and her family's identity as Catholics by buying the Bible, and her worries about financial stability. In short the zoom signifies the tension between the ideal and reality.

Ivone Margulies defines the use of the "active zoom" as an attempt to "follow the minute changes of reality" (298). Within *Salesman* that description is evident. The slow zoom reflects the sensitive nature of the woman's thought process, documenting not only a change in the dynamic of the situation from relaxed to tense and pressured, but also a change in her own personal reality, as financial worry supplants her need to prove her faith.

In *Faces*, Cassavetes uses a zoom on Maria in a similar moment, related instead to the conflict between an ideal of romantic fulfillment and the reality of her depression and mental isolation. Margulies also describes the zoom as used by Cassavetes as a "visual gauge of his emotional engagement" (299). Thus the camera zoom is an act of emphasis for Cassavetes, a move that demonstrates his overwhelming interest; it conveys what Margulies describes as the director's "emphatic register" (299).

Cassavetes empathizes with Maria above any other character in the film due to her own self-awareness. Unlike the frozen, false expressions of the men of *Faces*, Cassavetes portrays Maria as sensitive enough to eventually recognize her own reality underneath the distracting artifice of her rushed romantic liaison with Chet. However, this is certainly not represented as a revelation but merely the recognition of her own emptiness. This bleak hypothesis is further enforced when the film later returns to another shot of Chet holding Maria again. This time however she has taken an overdose off-screen.

The following scene after Maria's attempted suicide is harrowing in its content and method. After discovering Maria unconscious Chet attempts to, and finally succeeds at reviving her. In this scene, Lynn Carlin, the amateur actress who plays Maria, is physically manhandled and doused in water by Cassel, playing Chet. Cassel then proceeds to stick his fingers down her throat and slap her. In *Cassavetes on Cassavetes*, the director speaks of how he also assaulted Carlin in order to induce real, distraught behavior (171).

Both *Faces* and *Salesman* share a keen interest in moments when reality and fantasy conflict with one another. *Salesman* uses a single shot that slowly zooms in on its subject, a minimal demonstration of non-intervening "Truth-seeking" that merely hints at a deep and unresolved conflict in the subject. *Faces* is much more expressive, employing dramatic and romantic imagery only to subsequently undermine it with the documentation of a brutal form of physicality.

### **Performance as Avoidance**

*Faces* also avoids any kind of definitive conveyance of meaning or message in the manner in which characters interact with one another. In *American Dreaming* Ray Carney describes the repeated bouts of laughter and the telling of inane jokes that appear throughout every scene in *Faces* as a form of "abject avoidance" (113). Richard and Maria's marriage is based on this kind of avoidance. A sequence that depicts the couple together for the first time in the film communicates the way in which they use humor and laughter to avoid truly analyzing the insecurities of their relationship. In one sequence the couple become speechless with laughter when Maria tells a story to Richard concerning Freddie's supposed infidelity to his wife.

The scene develops into a manic series of abandoned sentences, mimed actions and self-generating laughter. Despite the serious undertone, that one of Richard's friends is unfaithful, the story contains a surreal and humorous context in that Fred has revealed his infidelity to his wife indirectly through sleep talking. In a way, Richard and Maria are sleep talking with each other in this scene also, relying on innuendo and jokes to mask Richard's own unmentioned infidelity.

The symbolism of sleep talking is reinforced even further in the following sequence, during which Richard and Maria roll around together in bed as Richard tells one hackneyed joke after another. The couple is in a similar state of elation as before until Maria suddenly about-turns with the statement "you're not all that funny." With this observation the jovial mood is dispersed, leaving a barely suppressed sense of underlying fatigue and disappointment between the couple. Just like Paul in *Salesman*, who slips in and out of his Irish persona randomly, often to avoid particular moments of embarrassment or frustration, the couple are oblivious to their dynamic of avoidance. *Faces* often frames performance as a harmful means of distracting oneself from damaging personal problems.

Later in the film the viewer is introduced to Chet, who is picked up by Maria and her friends at a club and ends up entertaining the group of women back home. Like Richard, Chet is prone to spontaneous moments of song and dance. Chet is first glimpsed dancing amongst the crowd at the club and trying in vain to get Maria's group to stand up. He continues to encourage the freedom of movement and expression throughout the rest of the scene. A memorable moment in *Faces* depicts Chet slowly walking into Maria's living room after he goes home with the group. He is watched by the women as he places a record on the turntable and begins to dance, until Florence, one of Maria's friends, gleefully joins in.

Unlike Richard who acts up in order to distract, Chet uses performance as means of loosening up the people around him and ultimately to confront previously unspoken issues.

Immediately after his dance, Chet sits down with the group of women and at their behest attempts to explain what motivates him. He is open in his desire to “make it” with women he has only just met in order to not “go crazy.” As a result of the increasing tension in the room, and at Florence’s behest, Chet begins to dance, again encouraging his hosts to join him. Throughout this sequence Chet constantly sings inane nonsensical rhymes, the most repeated being aimed at “Florence from Torrence.”

For Chet, meaningless performance is enacted in the service of breaking down social barriers and personal, social limitations. Trinh T. Minh-ha comments on what she defines as “irreality” and the “the play of non-sense” in modern documentaries, observing that they “relieve the basic referent of its occupation” (703). For Minh-ha, an attack on meaning can free documentary from the constrictions of ideology in favor of a purer representation of interaction and play. Much like Richard and Maria’s earlier conversation, Chet’s performance also halts. At one point, just as he has successfully inspired Louise, the group’s most conservative member, to dance, he stops her and suddenly says “I think we are making fools of ourselves.” Whilst Chet’s performance and his inspiration of those around him constitute the film’s most positive representation of performance as freedom from repression, it is not free from revealing his own human vulnerability and sudden loss of confidence.

In D.A Pennebaker’s *Don’t Look Back* (1967), the film’s subject, the musician Bob Dylan, also makes use of the “play of non-sense” in order to shed light on the limitations and absurdities of the interview and press conference framework he is often subjected to. When Dylan responds to a question about his “real message” with “keep a good head and always carry a light bulb,” he is disregarding preconceived concepts about the artist in favour of a humorous and nonsensical reply.

Dylan continues to deconstruct interviews and conversations with fans and admirers throughout *Don’t Look Back* in a manner that seems to combine both Chet and Richard’s

separate approaches to the “play of non-sense”. In one respect Dylan is using this form of play in an antagonistic manner that distracts the interviewers from shedding any light on his true thoughts and feelings but, on the other hand, the interviews are dynamic and wide-reaching enough to have their own performative merit.

At one point in the film, Pennebaker films Dylan and a self-identified “science student” verbally sparring off against one another backstage at a concert. Much like Richard and Maria’s interaction, the conversation held between the musician and the student is sprawling and full of non-sequiturs. When the student mentions that both of them are human beings, Dylan disagrees and responds with the statement “No I’m just a guitar player.” The conversation is uncomfortable and nonsensical throughout, with Dylan consistently rejecting any common ground proposed by the student. Dylan adopts this standoffish position on principle. Nonsensical speech and behavior are used by the musician here as a political weapon in order to avoid categorization.

*Don’t Look Back* forms a portrait of a conflicted performer put through the machinations of the Press industry and forced to defend himself, whilst also finding room to disrupt and play with its conventions. The film is Direct Cinema’s most obvious example of the professional performer as the central subject, one who refuses to engage in any kind of sincere dialogue with a culture that seeks to define and map him out. In her essay “‘Don’t You Ever Just Watch?’: American Cinema Verite and *Don’t Look Back*,” Jeanne Hall asserts that *Don’t Look Back* forms “a systematic critique of traditional newsgathering and reporting practices” (226).

For Pennebaker, Dylan is not only a talented musician with a penchant for illuminating the absurd in what he sees around him, but also because of these traits he is useful in pushing forward what Hall sees to be the film’s clear political agenda of critiquing the Press (236). Hall quotes Pennebaker in order to support her argument. In an interview

concerning *Don't Look Back* the filmmaker asserts that “It’s Dylan that breaks through, not me... I haven’t brought any great truth about Dylan to the stage, I just haven’t done it – Dylan does that. So if there’s any artistry in what I do, it is deciding who to turn this fearsome machinery on” (qtd. in Hall 261). In *Don't Look Back*, Dylan is represented as a dynamic and unpredictable performer both on and off the stage. Pennebaker harnesses this dynamism in a focused manner and for political ends.

*Faces* portrays the deconstruction of meaning as something inherently more personal and unfocused. Chet’s song and dance is inspired, but is flawed, halting, and lacks the barb and political drive of Dylan’s own brand of nonsensical deconstruction. Likewise Richard and Maria use absurdist humour not to reveal “truth,” like Pennebaker claims Dylan does, but to conceal clarity about their own relationship and how they view one another. There are political elements at play here also, concerning Cassavetes’ view on what he saw as the proliferation of loveless marriages in American society (*Cassavetes on Cassavetes* 136), but they are intrinsically connected to subtle, personal performances.

### ***Chronique d’un été* and the Contamination of the Subject**

In France the documentary movement of Cinéma Vérité, exemplified by the film *Chronique d’un été* (1961) by Edgar Morin and Jean Rouch, ran concurrently and counter to the Direct Cinema movement in the USA and Canada. Rouch and Morin differed from the filmmakers of Direct Cinema in their belief that in order to truthfully portray their subjects the filmmakers and filmmaking process had to be directly acknowledged, even participating in the action that was filmed. *Chronique d’un été* features extensive interviews, voiceovers and reconstructions, elements that Michel Marie claims “upset the boundaries between fiction film and document” (38). This interpretation of Cinéma Vérité allows for a comparison to be

made with the unstable nature of *Faces* as both a narrative fictional film and a documentation of improvised performance and creative process.

*Chronique d'un été* studies a number of individuals and the lives they lead in France over one summer in 1960. However, instead of presenting the subjects as independent of the filming process that they are involved in, as seen in the observational mode of much Direct Cinema, Rouch and Morin incorporate the filmmaking process as an integral part of their subjects' representation.

The first scene of *Chronique d'un été* consists of a voiceover proclaiming the film to be made “without actors, but lived by men and women who devoted some of their time to a novel experiment of ‘film-truth’” over footage of people on the streets of Paris, coming out of subways and walking past market stalls. The opening of *Chronique d'un été* explicitly sets down the parameters of the “experiment” that the film will conduct. This is an intentionally explanatory and artificial opening that contrasts with Direct Cinema's tendency to open in the midst of an event, a method that creates a sense of the natural experience of an impartial observer, thrown into a situation.

For Rouch and Morin, the only kind of truth that can be revealed in film is “film-truth,” the kind that actively recognizes the artificial and subjectively constructed nature of the medium itself. Jay Ruby notes that Rouch and Morin's use of the term “film-truth” is borrowed from Dziga Vertov, the director of the Russian experimental silent documentary *Man With a Movie Camera* (1929). Ruby explains that Rouch and Morin combined the “field methods” of Robert Flaherty with Vertov's “ideas of reflexivity and the construction of a filmic truth, which he called “Kino Pravda” (111).

After this opening montage the film cuts abruptly to Rouch and Morin positioned on either side of one of the film's main subjects, Marceline. Rouch and Morin discuss their worry that people are unable to act naturally and have normal conversations in front of a

camera, going on to ask Marceline if she thinks she can, a question to which she answers that “it will not be easy.” Morin then specifies that they desire to make a film on the subject “how do you live?” Upon asking this question of Marceline the film cuts to footage of her walking down the street with her answer carrying on in the form of a voiceover.

The edit seems to suggest that what the audience is now viewing is a demonstration of Marceline’s daily routine, until Rouch interrupts Marceline within the voiceover and sets her a task, to approach people on the street and ask if they are happy. Marceline and an accomplice then proceed to approach numerous pedestrians on the streets of Paris asking if they are happy and receiving a myriad of different reactions.

*Chronique d’un été*’s opening scenes are worth describing in full in order to appreciate the deft way in which the film positions itself as the ideological opposite to Direct Cinema’s non-interventional method of observation. In an article published in the online journal *Senses of Cinema*, Barbara Bruni notes that the film’s ultimate goal is “the contamination so painstakingly avoided by exponents of ‘direct cinema’”. This “contamination” is instantly brought to the forefront of *Chronique d’un été* when Rouch and Morin refer to the film as an “experiment” in the opening voiceover; the film exists not as an observational exercise but as an active attempt to provoke results. Morin and Rouch specify that the film is searching for “film-truth” because the only truth they hope to find would be within the context of the film itself, with the subjects working within specified parameters.

The “contamination” of the subject continues when the next shot reveals the directors interacting with Marceline. In this sequence *Chronique d’un été* achieves its self-imposed mandate to create a film “without actors.” By introducing Marceline engaging with the makers of the film directly, the viewer is deprived of the image of the subject as an independent self and the documentarians as uninvolved in the action they film. Here, Marceline is distinguished from the social actors that populate Direct Cinema, her purpose is

no longer to project a preferred version of her self, but to advance and facilitate the aims of Rouch and Morin's investigative "experiment."

The next cut supports this hypothesis as, at Rouch and Morin's bidding, Marceline becomes the onscreen agent of their intentions, wielding a microphone and asking passersby if they are happy. By approaching people on the street with a highly visible recording device in such an abrupt fashion, the filmmakers are actively deconstructing the conditions for performative behavior.

In an interview with James Blue in 1964, Rouch claimed that the presence of a camera caused subjects to react in a "more sincere" manner (268-269). The street interviews support this opinion, their immediacy and simplicity demanding a spontaneous but *genuine* response. However, whilst this response is determined by the selected subject, they are operating within the established realm of enquiry that Rouch and Morin have marked out. For the Direct Cinema filmmaker Richard Leacock, this was one of the shortcomings of Cinéma Vérité. In an interview in 1963 he described Rouch and Morin's film as "carefully thought out answers to problems" whereas Direct Cinema "gives evidence about which you can make up your own mind" (257).

*Chronique d'un été*'s opening establishes the film as a subjective investigation, driven by two visible filmmakers. Where Direct Cinema sets out to anonymously observe, and consequently reveal, Rouch and Morin aim to analyze, provoke and develop their subjects in a manner that forwards their own argument. *Chronique d'un été* does not hide its constructed nature instead making it the focus of the film.

Edgar Morin defines the film as "ethnological film in the strong sense of the term: it studies mankind" (232). The very structure and execution of *Chronique d'un été* is reminiscent of a purposeful visual study. The film utilizes the artifice of filmmaking processes such as editing, voiceover and the presence of the camera itself to aid an

investigation into how film can illuminate previously unseen opinions on how mankind interacts and lives.

According to Sylvie Pierre, *Faces* is also a “thorough investigation”, but one that “uncovers nothing at all” (324). Both *Chronique d’un été* and *Faces* have definite and similar thematic elements that were predetermined before the film began, but differ wholly in their approach to investigating them. *Chronique d’un été* concerns itself with “how we live” and, more importantly, how to act in relation to being deeply entrenched in a structured ethnological study and filmmaking process. *Faces* is also concerned about the minute details of lived experience but, except notably in its opening sequence, forgoes any formal, diegetic recognition of the filmmaking process, due to its status as a fictional narrative text.

The first scene of *Faces* initially appears to toy with the kind of self-aware reflexivity that Rouch and Morin engage with throughout *Chronique d’un été*. Richard Forst is introduced as a high-powered business executive who is about to be pitched a new film as an investment opportunity. The dialogue used is clearly preconceived to be satiric of the mainstream film industry in general. Before the screening the film is described as “the *La Dolce Vita* of the commercial field” and “an expressionistic document that shocks.” Richard replies to both statements with a sarcastic “Is that so?” Despite this sequence having a consistency of style with the rest of the film, the culturally self-aware nature of the dialogue that consciously satirizes the world of commercial film marketing jars with the rest of the film’s personal dramatic content.

At the conclusion of the scene, Richard demands to see the film and we follow the projectionist to the back of the room. The film then cuts to a frontal shot of Richard, his client and the businessmen seated and waiting and then to another frontal shot of the projector turning on. Following these two shots the title of the film scrolls upwards and the narrative, as it will continue for the rest of the film, begins. The image of the projector being switched

on and the emergence of the title creates a clear divide between what the audience has just seen and what will be the main content of the film. The first scene of the film-within-a-film then begins, with Richard, Freddie and Jeannie at a bar before quickly leaving for Jeannie's home.

Although the decision to theoretically frame the majority of *Faces* as a screened projection can be considered a highly reflexive choice, the sequence is never referred to again. A screening sequence also takes place in *Chronique d'un été* but occurs at the end of the film and, in contrast, is crucial to Rouch and Morin's interventionist ethic.

In *Chronique d'un été* the subjects of the film are invited into a film theatre and shown footage from the film. They are then asked to give "comments" on what they saw, with some participants supporting the "beautiful" and "truthful" subjects onscreen and others criticizing the "unnatural" and "indecent" behavior they have seen. The scene effectively bookends and concludes Rouch and Morin's search for "film-truth" by confronting their subjects with filmed footage of themselves and others who partook in *Chronique d'un été*. Rouch and Morin are able to incorporate their subjects' own opinions on whether the film has succeeded in creating any kind of "truth," taking the methodology of actively incorporating the filmmaking process to a logical end-point.

In comparison, the screening sequence in *Faces* is much less ingrained in the overall method and intent of the film. Whereas *Chronique d'un été* uses the screening process as a form of definite conclusion, a method of summoning the film into a public forum in order to be discussed and reflected upon, *Faces* only depicts the unexplained moments just before the film is projected. In these moments Richard's power and influence are emphasized. The scene features a shot from Richard's point-of-view as he walks into the screening room. The shot moves determinedly past the women, who all move to the side of the frame, each

individually greeting Richard with their own respectful “good morning Mr Forst” in vocal tones that are nearly identical, homogenized by his authority.

Here, Richard is centralized as an important and forceful figure, a position that will be consistently undermined by his own insecure behavior throughout the rest of the film. In *Faces*, the initial screening scene presents Richard’s powerful public persona. However the contents of the film reveal this to be a social front as the focus moves from his public life to his private behavior. *Chronique d’un été* uses the screening process as a means of further exploring its subjects’ self-image. *Faces*’ use of the film-within-a-film premise is much more ambiguous. The screened film exposes Richard’s initial persona as a front. In this scene *Faces* provocatively depicts the screening room and Richard’s public life as a false reality, with the contents of the screened film as a revelation of his “true” behavior.

In *Cassavetes on Cassavetes*, the director details how the script of the film was inspired by ruminations on the subject of marriage and developed into “a plea for returning to some kind of real communication” (136). Cassavetes goes on to state that “the whole point of *Faces* is to show how few people really talk to each other” (136). *Chronique d’un été* actively investigates and uses filmic technique and its presence and effect upon non-actors in order to deconstruct performance in favor of what Rouch saw as a form of sincerity. In contrast, *Faces* aims to facilitate performance through experienced, improvising actors operating in a structured environment, helping to push forward an agenda of demonstrating the failure of communication between people in modern society.

In the first part of *Faces*, Richard and Maria are a couple who fail to communicate with one another. Despite breaking away from their marriage and seeking other partners in the form of Jeannie and Chet, the concluding scenes of *Faces* do not resolve their problem but complicate and elucidate it.

Having spent the night together Richard and Jeannie appear comfortable, but continue to ceaselessly avoid any attempt at sincerity or real communication. Richard reverts to pacing through Jeannie's house with a towel around his head, remarking in a put-on foreign accent "I have been seduced," whilst Jeannie attempts to play the part of the domestic housewife. With her floating house gown and the tray of eggs that she brings to Richard, Jeannie has changed her role not on her own terms but in order to aspire to what she thinks is Richard's feminine ideal.

In an example of how characters in Cassavetes' films often mirror other characters lines and mimic behavior (Carney, *American Dreaming* 164), Jeannie and Richard's interaction is remarkably similar to how Richard and Maria behaved together in the second scene of *Faces*. They aim nonsensical sequiturs at one another, and constantly misunderstand and disagree with one another. The film starts to become a cyclical performance, not offering any sense of development but instead a cycle of artificiality and unresolved avoidant behavior.

At one point in the scene, Jeannie lays on top of Richard; we view the couple in close-up as Jeannie fires a series of questions at Richard that act as reminders of the previous night. She asks if Richard liked making love to her, if he enjoyed her company and if he said that he trusted her. Richard repeatedly answers, "Yes I did" to all of these questions. Jeannie's questions and Richard's answers are rapidly delivered in a playful and automatic fashion. They convey nothing but the characters' own insecurities and the confusion that they relentlessly project onto one another.

*Chronique d'un été* is far removed from the cyclical, inconclusive performative meanderings that make up so much of *Faces*' interactions. Marceline's repeated pointed question of "are you happy?" is an example of how open and focused Rouch and Morin are in coming to understand and effectively communicate with their subjects. The questions that

Morin and Rouch ask throughout the film maintain their sense of uncompromising absoluteness. The conversations that are filmed often concern concrete subjects such as French politics, race and the Algerian War. They are, in short, provocations that desire to initiate meaningful and sincere conversation and revelation.

On the other hand, *Faces* is a film that goes to great lengths to represent characters distancing themselves from any form of sincerity in favour of performances that aim to distract others from their own true feelings. Both Jeannie and Richard are examples of what Comolli labels as “character making characters”. For Comolli the performers in *Faces* are not just actors but also authors (“Deux Visages de Faces” 325), constantly reinventing themselves “gesture by gesture and word by word as the film proceeds” (“Deux Visages de Faces” 326).

Comolli describes *Faces* as an engagement in two forms of “spontaneous writing,” which he notes are “based on the extreme mobility of the cameras and framings on the one hand, and of speech on the other” (“Deux Visages de Faces” 326). These two forms of “writing” are clearly linked and reliant on one another, with the camera operator reacting to the actor’s performance, and in turn the actor reacting to the ever present movement of the camera, a piece of machinery that validates and engages with their own performance.

Thus, in *Faces*, the characters constant reinventions of themselves are equal parts a collaboration between Cassavetes as director and writer and the actors as skilled performers. Each draw upon the other in order to push forward a thematic agenda that seeks to demonstrate a lack of sincere behavior and communication, virtues that Rouch and Morin strive to represent in *Chronique d’un été*.

### The Dramatic Climax in *Chronique d'un été* and *Faces*

Morin in particular is straightforward in his questioning during *Chronique d'un été*. At one point he interviews an Italian immigrant called Mary Lou, who is in the midst of a depressive episode. The interview is long and emotional. Morin begins the scene by reading aloud to Mary Lou information about her life since she has moved to Paris. The film then cuts to a close-up of Mary Lou for the duration of the interview, only occasionally editing back to Morin when he interrupts with clear lines of enquiry.

Mary Lou's interview is the clearest evidence of Rouch's theory that the camera acts as a "psychoanalytic stimulant" (qtd. in Bruni). Mary Lou becomes more and more distraught until her interview begins to resemble a dramatic monologue, with pauses for emphasis, timely changes in physical positioning and a speech structure that is clear and powerful. For example Mary Lou describes her first experience of beginning her life and job in Paris and the satisfaction attached to it. In the next part of her dialogue however she repeats the elements that she identifies with Paris, only to dramatically denounce them:

"Now I'm sick of my room, sick of the cold. I'm sick of the subway at rush hour. I don't find human contact. I find it all unpleasant and pointless."

At this point the filmmakers would claim that Mary Lou has entered what they call a "cine-trance", meaning "an altered state of consciousness in which they self-consciously reveal their culture in ways unavailable to the researcher when the camera was turned off, creating "cine-people" (qtd. in Ruby 112). For Rouch and Morin this is the desired outcome that *Chronique d'un été* is constantly working towards, the sought after result of their experiment in "film-Truth."

Jean Rouch stated that he believed the filmmaking process to be "a sort of catalyst which allows us to reveal, with doubts, a fictional part of all of us, but which for me is the

most real part of an individual” (qtd. in Aufderheide 53). In this scene, Mary Lou demonstrates a median point between self-aware performance and real experience. The camera provokes Mary Lou’s self-consciousness, which, in turn, along with Morin’s astute questioning, acts as a “catalyst” for her to communicate personal truths she has not been able to in the past.

Mary Lou’s interview is filmed with few cuts and in close-up adding to the emotional effect of the scene. Her monologue feels like the culmination of a long period of thoughtful sadness, even though *Chronique d’un été* only focuses upon her for two scenes. In the final scenes of *Faces*, Jeannie and Chet also have momentary and climactic reflections on their state of being, although both characters are denied the kind of catharsis that we see in Mary Lou as she confesses her sadness to Morin.

Jeannie’s questioning is cut short by Richard when he tells her to “be yourself.” This statement is devastating to Jeannie, although she hides her offence by retreating to the kitchen. Here the camera stays close to her tear-stained and hurt face whilst she begins to sing “I Dream of Jeannie” in order to maintain a positive impression upon Richard. The shot is a powerful summary of Cassavetes’ desire to present a demonstration of failure in emotional communication. Whilst *Chronique d’un été* films Mary Lou in an extended close-up as she uses the influence of the camera to coherently communicate her emotions, the same technique is used to show the distance between Jeannie’s performance and her true feeling of overwhelming emptiness.

Like Mary Lou, Chet delivers a monologue that highlights the emotional numbness that he sees within himself and others around him. Chet begins his speech suddenly, after reviving Maria, and effectively distills the underlying thematic concern of *Faces* in his final moments in the film. The monologue comes across as a summary of Cassavetes’ own

concepts of the artificiality of emotion and lack of communication in society, filtered through the character's own performative flamboyance.

When Cassel suddenly launches into a robot impression halfway through his speech in order to demonstrate how everyone is “mechanical,” the move has an undeniably spontaneous quality. Carney documents how Cassel's “mechanical man” routine was a long running joke with the actor and Cassavetes. Cassel was prompted by Cassavetes to enact it halfway through the monologue when the director felt the scene was lacking in humour (*Cassavetes on Cassavetes* 175).

Kouvaros writes that Cassavetes and Rouch are similar in the way “performance is what comes between cinema and real life. It is what enables and disturbs the distinction between these two terms” (*Where Does It Happen?* 79). Cassel's monologue is an example of performance as a mediator between the real and the cinematic world of *Faces*. Just as Mary Lou's interview becomes both performative and a documentation of her emotional state of mind, Cassel's speech is inflected with both dramatic convention and a documentation of Cassel and Cassavetes' spontaneous, creative collaboration.

## **Conclusion**

*Faces* can be defined as a performative experiment within a narrative fiction; a highly personal game of sorts involving Cassavetes and his actors, in which the limits of performing as a character in a fictional narrative film are pushed and subverted. The film exists on two planes, one as fictional narrative and the other as an experiment or enquiry into the nature of performance beyond the narrative.

The parallels between *Faces* and the films of Direct Cinema are clear. Both favour an observational style that thrives on moments that can best be described as crises of identity.

Yet Direct Cinema seeks to define and compartmentalize its subjects in terms of definitive notions of artifice and reality. On the other hand, *Faces* encourages the proliferation of artificiality in the form of constant self-generating performance.

If Direct Cinema assumed it could “record ‘reality’ without influencing it (Cousins, McDonald 250) then Rouch and Morin achieve the exact opposite, utilizing the camera in order to “explore their subjects’ preoccupations” (Cousins, McDonald 250). Cassavetes also uses the camera’s influence, not to elucidate his characters, as in *Chronique d’un été*, but to complicate them. Whilst the subjects of *Chronique d’un été* welcome the camera as a reason to communicate and validate their thoughts and feelings through performance, the characters of *Faces* are constantly hiding behind their own individual and multiple performances.

*Faces* includes long sequences in which delivery is improvised and repetition of scenes encouraged in order to produce variety in the actors’ performance, whether motivated by frustration, boredom or a heightened sense of creativity brought about by an environment that centralized the actors performance. Consequently, as the film develops these restless characters begin to resemble actors engaging in a dialogue with their own profession, testing and pushing their craft beyond existing parameters.

Kouvaros notes that “the whole film is a lesson in how easily (and frighteningly) roles and lines can be put on or taken off, transferred and passed from one actor to another” (*Where Does It Happen?* 62). The use of the words “lesson” instead of story or narrative and “actor” instead of character in this quote are important. Here Kouvaros implies that *Faces*, whilst presenting itself as a fictional narrative film, is also constantly aware and focusing upon the process through which it is created. Sam B. Girgus seems to echo this concept when he states that “Arguably, even in a fiction film the photographic image constitutes a form of documentary representation, the classic Bazinian notion of the visual image of reality. A fiction film invariably becomes its own documentary” (5).

In much the same manner as *Chronique d'un été*, *Faces* is defined in the process of its own creation. In *Chronique d'un été*, the subjects' reactions and the communication of their personal experiences are not only influenced by the filmmakers and their deliberately intrusive methods, but also help to realize how the film will develop, thereby influencing Rouch and Morin's directorship.

*Faces* is a clear example of how a narrative fiction film can also be interpreted as a documentary. Cassavetes utilizes the camera's presence as a driving creative force whilst still remaining in the confines of fictive drama. If *Faces* can be viewed as a form of creative documentary it is one that is highly personal. Unlike Direct Cinema, which attempted to maintain a detached and impartial stance toward its subjects, Cassavetes, like Rouch and Morin in *Chronique d'un été*, was highly involved within the interaction onscreen. Although not physically present in front of the camera, the director's ideological intention and his encouragement of free performance are vital elements in making *Faces* such a visceral portrayal of social relationships in the midst of disintegration.

## Conclusion

Imagination is crazy . . . your whole perspective gets hazy.

- Mr Sophistication, *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie* (1976)

I seem to have lost the reality . . . of the reality.

- Myrtle Gordon, *Opening Night* (1977)

The purpose of this thesis has been to plot and define the nature of performance in the films of John Cassavetes. *Shadows*, *Faces* and *A Woman Under the Influence* each represent a specific point in Cassavetes and his actors' creative journey, but they are also part of an ongoing process that blurs the divide between performance and lived experience in his films. For Cassavetes, this divide was both the result, and the subject of, the films that he made.

The making of *Faces* was a demanding, all-encompassing creative experience, but one which was ultimately rewarding. For Cassavetes, film and performance could be a positive chance to "express ourselves, to do something important" (*Cassavetes on Cassavetes* 157). Yet the situations and characters portrayed in *Faces* also negatively illuminate how life itself can be acted, faked and avoided. Performance is a freeing experience, but can also be a restrictive and potentially damaging one. Both perspectives are present and intertwine with one another in both the production and final form of Cassavetes' films.

*A Woman Under the Influence* is Cassavetes' most accomplished depiction of the conflict between differing performative values. The film can be thematically read as a fundamental struggle between the desired freedom and expressivity of Mabel's character and the repressive conditions that surround her. By placing the character of Mabel within hostile and restrictive domestic environments, attention is drawn to the fixed roles available for

women within social, familial and gender relations. Yet Cassavetes manifests this conflict uniquely. The imagery and value system inherent within much of Hollywood melodrama is evoked only to be consistently undermined and deconstructed by Gena Rowland's performance as Mabel and Cassavetes' representation of her. In *A Woman Under the Influence* autonomous performance and the filmic medium elevate and elucidate one another.

The way in which *A Woman Under the Influence* becomes liminally static around three quarters of the way through its own narrative is also an example of how the filmmaking process, and most importantly the actors' improvisation, gradually overshadows and dominates the concept of the film as a contained and definite narrative fiction. Mabel's homecoming is a ritualistic event that is prolonged and gradually loses meaning, whilst actors begin to legitimately interact with one another spontaneously.

In the penultimate moment of the film Mabel achieves a morbid serenity. Standing on a couch above her husband and children, with blood on her hands after attempting to cut her wrists, she begins to sing to herself and make expressive movements. At this moment Mabel is canonized as a fully independent figure, sacrificing her own wellbeing, not for the good of the familial unit but in an act that resists it. The moment is not simply Mabel's alone, but is also Rowland's, whose exhausting and relentless performance is the realization of an alternative mode of expression in film that mirrors and reflects her own character's desire to break free. *A Woman Under the Influence* is the strongest example of Cassavetes' unique approach of pitting performance and film in conflict with one another in an effort to create a new form of visceral and challenging cinema.

After Mabel's attempted suicide, *A Woman Under the Influence's* concludes with a harmonious ending so sudden that it questions the film's logical integrity. Where Mabel's exhausting stance against her "influences" pitted a sense of truth against Hollywood's utopian dream-system, the closing sequence of the film questions that stance. Due to the

characters' improbable change in their interactions with one another they suddenly appear like actors, able to change their emotional direction unpredictably and at will. The closing scene not only defies expectations but harkens back to Cassavetes' formative films, revealing *A Woman Under the Influence* as an accomplished end-point formed by the evolving dramatic dialogue between truth and artifice that is seen in *Shadows* and *Faces*.

In *Shadows*, Cassavetes' focus on the relationship between performance and lived experience is less ambitious than *A Woman Under the Influence*, being more precisely oppositional to the pervading performance styles of the 1950s in American dramatic film. The actors in *Shadows* perform in a way that undermines and provides an alternative to the structured achievements of Method actors in Hollywood. Whilst Mabel in *A Woman Under the Influence* represents the realization of an autonomous performance that achieves independence from its restrictive surroundings, the characters of *Shadows* are formative versions of this mode of expression. The young cast of *Shadows* struggle with their roles in a manner that reflects their character's fundamental insecurities.

The actors' struggle in *Shadows* is essential to their characters. A comparison with Lionel Rogosin's *On the Bowery* reveals how each film's performance model, whilst initially seeming similar, are in fact crucially different. Whilst Rogosin's non-actors are expected to simply perform as themselves, Cassavetes' places actors in environments where their performance is encouraged to break down. The most emotionally crucial moments in *Shadows* have an effect due to the actors desperately trying to hold together their performance, in much the same way their characters vainly attempt to present a certain appearance and personality to the people around them. *Shadows* begins the trend in Cassavetes' work of acting paralleling social behavior. Whilst originating in *Shadows*, this trend continued much later into his work.

For Cassavetes, a crucial aspect of this paralleling is the rejection and abolition of planning and direction. Whilst scripted dialogue provided a scene's skeletal structure, actors were encouraged to interact with one another completely within the present. In *A Constant Forge* (2000), Charles Kiselyak's documentary about Cassavetes' life and work, the actor Peter Falk recalled that the director "stripped you of technique." The documentary includes footage of Cassavetes giving advice to Falk on the set of *Husbands*, and one of the strategies behind this "stripping" can be seen here. In the footage, Cassavetes talks to Falk about his character, saying "you want what you want but when you want it". These vague details are hardly clear. Cassavetes appears to be deliberately confusing Falk, destabilizing the actor so he will create a character that is confused and frustrated. Like the Method, Cassavetes attached importance to a relationship between the actor and character, with the crucial difference being that this was not necessarily a relationship that was consciously thought out. Cassavetes explained this approach in a typically cryptic, open-ended statement:

Say what you are. Not what you would like to be. Not what you have to be.  
Just say what you are. And what you are is good enough. (*Cassavetes on Cassavetes* 146)

Unlike the Method actor, who harnessed his own experience at the service of the role, or what he "had to be", actors in a Cassavetes' film reacted to their role in the present, as themselves. Kouvaros states that there is a "textual memory" that passes through Cassavetes' films with regards to actors playing similar characters again and again (*Where Does It Happen?* 154-155). Whilst a Method actor such as Marlon Brando could utilize his own emotions to create interpretations of a varied group of characters, Cassavetes' actors use themselves in a much less calculated manner, with the director casting their roles to fit their on-set behavior in every film, as with Peter Falk and Gena Rowlands, resulting in a sense of "memory" from picture to picture.

A comparison of *Shadows* to Kent Mackenzie's *The Exiles* was apt. Both films depict young city-dwellers who grapple with their racial identity. Yet whilst *The Exiles* provided its non-actors with a medium to effectively communicate their inner desires and fears, notably through the use of voiceover, *Shadows* achieved the opposite. The filmmaking process helps to initiate the performances in *Shadows*, but these performances are also confused and strained. Just as the actors work through their roles within the present, so does the film, resulting in an absence of any kind of definite ideological meaning.

*Faces* featured a different cast to *Shadows*, one that is populated with more experienced actors such as John Marley, but also still featuring amateurs such as Lynn Carlin. The film represents a solidification of the performance styles and approach that had their genesis in *Shadows*, and is the clearest representation of Cassavetes' returning interest in the unstable division between truth and artifice. A Direct Cinema film such as *Primary* contrasts the public performances of its subjects with their private behavior to delineate a divide between truth and artifice, *Faces* refuses to do the same. The film creates a vision of private, personal behavior that is just as self-conscious and falsified as the sales personas of the subjects in *Salesman*. As in much of Direct Cinema, performance in *Faces* is used as a distraction, but in Cassavetes' film it is relentless.

The presence of the camera and the filmmaking process itself was essential to fuel the actors improvised delivery in *Faces*. Through comparing *Faces* to the Cinéma Vérité of *Chronique d'un été* it becomes clear that whilst Rouch and Morin encouraged their subjects to appear on camera as a method of self-exploration, the performances in *Faces* reflect the actors as the characters they play, unwilling to engage in any kind of confrontation with themselves and the others around them, preferring to engage in numerous directionless gestures of acting up in order to distract. The play behavior seen in *Shadows* was often used to "loosen up" actors, and reveal moments of emotional and physical vulnerability. In *Faces*

that purpose has gone, the characters still act up but their behavior is now hollow and only further restricts them from communicating with one another.

In *Shadows*, breakdowns in performance, through physicality and play, were the closest moments to a kind of “truth” being depicted by the film’s characters. In *Faces*, such moments are almost entirely absent. What replaces them are shots that portray an inherent emptiness behind the performed facades of the film’s characters. In place of Tony’s repeated, frustrated stammerings in *Shadows* there is Richard’s frozen smiling expression as he bids goodbye to McCarthy. Where Lelia has a small moment of revelation on the dance floor with her new suitor, Davey, at the end of *Shadows*, the character of Maria in *Faces* has none, only a blank and empty expression after her attempted suicide. The ending of *Shadows* is ambiguous but at least slightly hopeful, with all three main characters moving into a new part of their lives.

Whereas *Shadows* ends in motion, *Faces* continues to be static. Even as the credits begin to scroll down the screen the final shot continues, showing Richard and Maria sitting upon their staircase; each emotionally dazed by the others betrayal. The film ends in a moment of inactivity with both actors’ performances on the verge of exhaustion. The ending of *Faces* does not offer any kind of resolution, only a sudden discontinuation. The next film that Cassavetes made after *Faces* was *Husbands*. In many ways *Husbands* is Cassavetes’ farewell to solely focusing on exhausting portrayals of actors pushing the performative limits of their dysfunctional, unsatisfied characters.

Cassavetes’ first three independent features dedicated themselves to crafting a new form of dramatic interaction in film. His next three films, *Minnie and Moskowitz* (1971), *A Woman Under the Influence* and *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie* (1976) began a new phase of development, in which his films reacted to social and cultural ideologies inherent in much mainstream cinema. Whilst *A Woman Under the Influence* has received extensive attention

in this thesis, *Minnie and Moskowitz* foreshadowed that film's new approach, harboring many of the recognizable characteristics of an existing genre, in this case the romantic comedy. The film focuses upon the relationship between Minnie Moore (Gena Rowlands) and Seymour Moskowitz (Seymour Cassel), two people with extremely different personalities who meet and fall in love. Despite their feelings towards one another the film relentlessly depicts numerous conflicts between them and others that are often remarkably and suddenly violent. The pair's relationship is consistently shown to be fundamentally unstable until a sudden ending which depicts the couple happily marrying and having children. The end of *Minnie and Moskowitz* evokes a utopian sense of closure that appears to question the viability of traditional narrative structures, in much the same manner that *A Woman Under the Influence* concludes.

*A Woman Under the Influence* evokes conventions of the melodrama, only to subvert them in an effort to highlight the repressive gender roles that the genre helped proliferate. Cassavetes' next film, *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie*, is a continuation of this method but from a new perspective, drawing upon imagery and representations of masculinity propagated by the genre of film noir (Carney, *American Dreaming* 142). Set in Los Angeles, the film focuses upon Cosmo Vitelli, a strip club owner played by Ben Gazzara. Cosmo is forced into assassinating a crime boss when he loses twenty three thousand dollars in a mob-run poker game. This synopsis initially gives the impression of a fast paced and narrative-driven film, but throughout *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie* action and movement is contrasted with long periods of frustration and metaphoric introspection.

In his article on the film, "The Raw and the Cooked," Phillip Lopate notes "Nowhere was the tension between Cassavetes' linear and digressive, driven and entropic tendencies more sharply fought out" (35). Cassavetes stages this conflict between style and disorder in a manner that questions the sleek, simplistic version of masculine identity that genres such as

film noir and the American crime film propagate. In the film, references are made again and again to the idea of “style.” Cosmo prides himself on his appearance, his ability to keep a calm head under any circumstance, his strip club and the women who work there and keep him company.

In order to reflect this superficiality, Cassavetes creates a vision of Los Angeles, and specifically the Crazy Horse West strip club, that is tired but desperate to be seen as glamorous. This is reflected in the club's blinding stage lights and rundown décor. In collaboration with Gazzara's restrained and melancholic performance, *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie* depicts an environment and people that are aware of their own artificiality but unable to break out of a cycle of instant gratification and denial. Whereas in *A Woman Under the Influence* Mabel is trapped in a repressive domestic environment, Cosmo is trapped by his own inability to see past his shallow social front of “style.” At one point in the film Cosmo defines his identity bluntly, saying, “I'm a club owner. I deal in girls.” This dialogue again reveals Cosmo's narrow view of himself and the women around him who are objects to be “dealt” in. *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie* acts as a continuation of ideas demonstrated in *A Woman Under the Influence*. Cosmo's hollow performance and value system is a symptom of the same restrictive patriarchy that Mabel alternately fights and gives into, perhaps most obviously demonstrated in her own most self-describing line of dialogue: “Tell me what you want me to be. How do you want me to be? I can be that.” In his later films, Cassavetes continued to represent the negative aspects of social performance, its tendency to restrict lived experience to merely acting out defined social and gender “roles.”

Starting with *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie*, Cassavetes also began to focus increasingly on theatrical imagery and motifs in order to further expand and complicate the performances in his films. The main attraction of Cosmo's strip club is a stage show that features female dancers in revealing costumes and focuses centrally on a clownish character

called Mr Sophistication. Ray Carney identifies Mr. Sophistication as “a running parody” of Cosmo’s “own dreams of sophistication, style and masculine self-sufficiency” (*American Dreaming* 232). Brief moments of the stage show are shown throughout the film, and have the effect of creating a symbolic, theatrical commentary on Cosmo’s worldview.

Mr. Sophistication is always at the centre of the stage, with his women, or “delovelies” as he calls them, parading around him, occasionally flashing parts of their bodies for the vocal crowd. Sophistication occasionally acts out skits with the women, and breaks into song in a low monotonous voice that is often out of key. The show is badly performed and inane, providing a metaphor for the performed life of masculine “style” that Cosmo leads, for an audience that inevitably sees him as a fool. Despite being meditations on the artificiality of social roles and performance, *Shadows*, *Faces* and *A Woman Under the Influence* are all solely representative of real lived experience and interaction. In *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie*, Cassavetes begins to fracture this sense of reality, incorporating a symbolic, staged version of events that draws further attention to the centrality of performance in his films.

The inclusion of theatrical elements introduced in *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie* is continued and reaches its zenith in Cassavetes’ next film, *Opening Night* (1977). In the film Gena Rowlands plays Myrtle Gordon, an actress who struggles creatively and personally with the play she is starring in. In the first sequence of the film Myrtle attempts to follow her script and collaborate with the other actors onstage. The clichéd dramatic dialogue and thought out movements of the actors, framed obtrusively by the stage, lighting and the visible heads of the audiences creates a sense of structure and predictability that Myrtle interrupts, deconstructs and ultimately does away with altogether throughout the course of the film.

As in *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie*, the theatrical is symbolic in *Opening Night*. Yet whilst the Crazy Horse West stage show acted as a metaphor for Cosmo’s identity, the

play in *Opening Night* is symbolic of the performance method and style that Cassavetes' showed himself to be firmly oppositional to from *Shadows* onwards. In *Where Does It Happen?*, George Kouvaros responds to the increasing theatricality in Cassavetes' films in the late 1970s by referring to Stephen Heath's concept that "the theatricalization of film refers to a process through which the film takes on and acknowledges its status as a performance" (*Where Does It Happen?* 134).

Throughout this thesis it has become apparent that the nature of social performance is a constant subject of interrogation throughout Cassavetes' filmography. Yet through its heightened focus on theatricalization, *Opening Night* shifts focus from social performance to the workings of dramatic performance. Kouvaros goes on to mention how a "critical distance" is created by the theatrical framing device in *Opening Night* (135). This new sense of detachment from the characters and their situations is not all-encompassing, Myrtle's personal insecurities and relationships are deeply entwined in the production of the play. However, the introduction of a play-within-a-film allows Cassavetes and his actors to begin to demonstrate, from a new self-aware position, the mechanics of performative improvisation, play and disruption.

As Myrtle becomes more determined to find a new way of acting in the play she begins to go off-script. The spectator then becomes privy to the process of improvisation and the mistakes and spontaneity that provide the tired dramatics of the play with a new expressive quality. *Opening Night* is a detailed study of a critical moment in an actor's life and career, where she must adapt and change her creative surroundings through a self-destructive form of sabotage. However Myrtle's action also serve as a metaphor and demonstration of how Cassavetes and his actors' own creativity operates. By briefly analyzing Cassavetes' later work it is clear that performative issues in formative films such as

*Shadows* and *Faces* continued to be relevant but are developed to become increasingly more self-aware and demonstrative.

Cassavetes use of the filmmaking process as creative inspiration, his questioning of, and obsession with, the way we perform versions of ourselves, and his initial disregard and evolving opposition to traditional filmic convention can be seen as an influence in much American independent cinema of the last forty years. Jim Jarmusch's *Stranger Than Paradise* (1984) has echoes of *Shadows* interest in the thin facade of the cool "beat" persona, although filtered through a much more detached and knowing style. Andrew Bujalski's *Funny Ha Ha* (2002) concentrates on the fragile relationships between a group of young college graduates, using handheld camera and a semi-improvised approach to performance which has origins that can clearly be seen in Cassavetes' work. Most recently Charlie Kaufman's *Synecdoche New York* (2008) sees its main character create a play that blurs the lines between art and life, in a manner that acts as a post-modern continuation of the themes of identity and the divide between artifice and reality discussed in this thesis.

These films share similarities with Cassavetes' work but are in no way essentially indebted to him. Cassavetes' cinema was a personal and complex one that refuses to be simplified or directly appropriated. His final, complete film, *Love Streams* (1984), stars Cassavetes himself as Robert Harmon, with Gena Rowlands as his sister Sarah. Whilst Robert and Sarah are siblings, their relationship is distant, yet hints at a past ill-defined intimacy. Throughout the film both characters make gestures and create situations that are difficult to comprehend or relate to. Evocative dreams that abstractedly depict Sarah's anxieties about her daughter and ex-husband are visually portrayed onscreen. Near the end of the film, to Robert's surprise and amusement, his dog transforms into a man.

*Love Streams* concludes a body of work that is often frustrating but always innovative and worthwhile. The film's enigmatic and often fantastical nature is unique in the

director's filmography, signifying that even near the end of his life, Cassavetes was determined to change the nature of his own creative approach to filmmaking. The final shot of *Love Streams* is an exterior shot of Robert's home in the pouring rain. We look through a window at Robert who is inside. At first he appears solemn, Sarah has just left after meeting a new lover, but then he puts on a large hat, takes it off again and seems to wave it in the direction of the camera. The last shot of the last Cassavetes' film shows the director himself, strangely half-recognizing the spectator's gaze, still using the filmic medium to engage with the limits of performance.

Cassavetes' desire and drive to centralize acting as the dominant creative force in filmmaking created a new form of narrative cinema. Films such as *Shadows* and *Faces* forgo deliberation and neat presentations of character in favour of a dedication to performance within the moment. These films show a blurring of the divide between actor and character, providing a veracious and ever-shifting impression of how performance operates in social interactions. This approach continued but became more serious and wide reaching in intention, resulting in uncompromising depictions of repressive social structures that drew on filmic history, further elucidating the crucial role that performance plays in not only film but also lived experience.

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