

LA
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FILM CLUB



Great Directors
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John Cassavetes
1929-1989

Faces
(1968)

A Woman Under the Influence
(1974)

The Cinematic Life of Emotions: John Cassavetes: George Kouvaros Interviewed

Needeya Islam • April 2000

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With every passing year, the films of John Cassavetes are becoming more and more central to debates on cinema. Moving uneasily between Hollywood and independent American cinema traditions, Cassavetes created a body of work which was sometimes difficult but which has also had a lasting influence on the way independent filmmaking is conceived.

Much has been made of Cassavetes as a biographical figure. His memorable acting roles and labelling as a “maverick” director (he usually worked with the same troupe of actors including his wife Gena Rowlands, Peter Falk, Ben Gazzara and Seymour Cassel) have perhaps generated as much interest in Cassavetes himself as in his films. American academic Ray Carney, for example, who was brought to Australia to introduce the Cassavetes retrospective at the 1999 Sydney Film Festival, engaged the festival audience with numerous personal anecdotes and reflections.

This focus however leaves a number of the more complex issues such as the exact nature of performance in his films, his relation to the development of film studies and the difficulties involved in analyzing the films unaddressed. Ironically, these are the very issues which local writers such as Adrian Martin, Jodi Brooks and George Kouvaros have dealt with in numerous publications. In order to highlight some of this work, I spoke to George Kouvaros, who has taught and

written extensively on the work of Cassavetes, about the nature of performance, the preoccupation with the everyday and the rendering of the cinematic object itself in Cassavetes work.

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Needeya Islam: Why do you think there has been a renewed interest in critical discussion of Cassavetes’ films over the past decade?

George Kouvaros: I think there are a number of reasons for this. The first thing to note is that nearly all the films are now able to be accessed on video. For a long time, the only films available on video were *A Child is Waiting* (1963), *Gloria* (1980), *Love Streams* (1984) and *Big Trouble* (1986, credited to but disowned by Cassavetes). In the early ’90s, a ‘Cassavetes collection’ became available in France, the US and Great Britain that included *Shadows* (1959), *Faces* (1968), *A Woman Under the Influence* (1974), *Opening Night* (1977) and *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie* (1978 version). The British critic Richard Combs, who, along with Tom Milne and Jonathan Rosenbaum, was one of the few English language critics to pay close attention to Cassavetes’ films during the ’70s, wrote a very interesting short article celebrating their release on video in *Sight and Sound*, and since then there has been a trickle rather than a flood of critical interest.

But that doesn’t tell us the full story of course. An important but more complicated factor is that the study of film has changed and so too have the concerns of a number of key film journals. To tell this story properly would take much more space than we have here. But it is worth sketching some of the key points.

The first thing to remember is that Cassavetes’ most prolific period as a filmmaker was during the decade of the ’70s. (Five of his eleven films were released during this decade.) Now a lot of work has been done on this decade within film studies and some of this work has been quite critical of the prescriptive nature of certain writings that came to shape the agendas of serious film theory journals. I don’t want to replay what often comes across as a clichéd view of a very important period within the development of film studies. For the sake of argument and

brevity, however, it is possible to identify a narrowing of focus in terms of the range of films and also the range of cinematic issues that came under scrutiny. Much of the writing in film journals with an explicit interest in theory tended to cluster around either a highly loaded understanding of the classical Hollywood narrative cinema or a model of a politically motivated avant garde.

Cassavetes' relation to both these models of cinematic form is complex and, in some ways, contradictory. His films are highly experimental in that they are constantly rethinking what the cinema can do, the kinds of situations, stories and relationships it is able to bring into being. Yet having said this, Cassavetes' films ultimately fail to fit the criteria for a radical cinema developed during the '70s in at least two key respects: first, the films do not incorporate a theoretical language that echoes the concerns of film theory itself and, second, the relation of Cassavetes' films to Hollywood narrative cinema is never simply oppositional.

Perhaps the most important and interesting work done on Hollywood narrative cinema during the '70s was concerned with understanding film as a textual system. I'm thinking here of Raymond Bellour's writings on the formal structures, dominant paradigms, and narrative patterns that we can use to understand the logic and fascination of Hollywood narrative cinema. Cassavetes' work, which for a long time seemed to be the most informal of objects, didn't fit into this project of situating and understanding the textual operations of narrative cinema. His films are governed by a much more unruly economy of narrative and action which pressures the possibility of locating and accounting for a textual system. The late '70s and '80s saw a shift in the nature of textual analysis to include a focus on the disruptive potential of cinema itself – the way film form constructs not a stable system of meaning and engagement but an affective landscape open to a range of disruptions. This shift in focus brought film studies much closer to the possibility of critical discussion with the kind of cinematic form found in Cassavetes' work.

Certainly in the last ten years these concerns have shifted once again. There has been a lot more consideration of addressing questions to do with performance and acting in the cinema – those things which are certainly part of the cinema's textual operations but which are perhaps the most difficult things to discuss in that they are to do with gesture, the body and a relationship to the cinema in which our identification is never straightforward but always moving between actor and character. For me, these concerns with performance and acting are important as they open up an understanding of cinema as more than just an image, more than just a text.

To continue the issue of critical engagement and Cassavetes' films, at first glance his films don't seem to lend themselves to being written about. What kind of pressures and challenges do Cassavetes' films pose for critical interpretation?

I think it is true to say that his films demand a different set of analytical and descriptive skills to those most students, or my generation of film students at least, cut their teeth on at university. Rather than concentrating on obvious formal manipulations in terms of point of view, editing patterns, spectator positions and relating these to broader ideological structures, our attention has to be on a shifting surface of bodily gesture, human relation and emotion. I think Kent Jones articulated this shift of attention very nicely in a recent issue of *Film Quarterly*. He makes the point that in *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie* the way the "Chinese bookie closes his eyes and mouth tightly, tilts his chin and shakes his head. . . just before he is shot by Ben Gazzara is as much a structural event as a change of angle in Hitchcock". To get back to your original question, one of the other reasons why there has been a renewed interest in Cassavetes, is because I think film studies has found itself coming back to the question of formal description via a renewed interest in *mise en scène* – that somewhat elusive term which calls our attention back to the materiality of the filmic image and the way in which human figures are brought into being, positioned and put under pressure through the process of filming, through the articulation of the cinematic image.

Critical discussions of Cassavetes' films keep coming back to his concern with everyday people and situations. It seems to me that his films treat the everyday in a particular way that encourages the viewer to look for subtleties and nuances that somehow embellish or complicate it.

While we certainly can say that Cassavetes' work is about the emotional life of the everyday, it is an everyday rendered dramatic through the act of filming. The mundanities and mysteries of day-to-day life (in *A Woman Under the Influence*, for example, a spaghetti breakfast, a children's party, a day at the beach) become subject to a process of amplification and transformation that opens up these events (spatially and temporally) and subjects

them to a process of crisis whereby we are no longer sure how things come together or what the proper order of things is.

And the instigator for this crisis is an explicit engagement – on both formal and thematic levels – with the issue of performance and acting out. In terms of their narratives, his films continually return to the question of how to act. Performance serves as a way of unleashing a figurative energy specific to cinema that renders the everyday larger than life or operatic.

To come at this from another angle, Cassavetes' films not only give us back the everyday, they set about to constantly reinvent it through the act of cinema. Each film seems to mark a process of starting from scratch. Although a script may be in place or a generic point of reference already established (*The Killing of a Chinese Bookie*, *Gloria*), each film constantly negotiates its own coming into being: the step by step, gesture by gesture process through which character, identity and narrative come together and fall apart. Adrian Martin is absolutely correct when he describes Cassavetes' work as a "cinema which is a kind of documentary event where the energies of bodily performance, of gesture and utterance and movement collide willy-nilly in ways not always foreseen or proscribed, with the dynamic, formal, figurative work of shooting, framing, cutting, sound recording". The camera is never just a recording device but more like a provocateur or catalyst setting off a performance, scrutinising it, looking for the possibility of something never seen before but which emerges with striking clarity through the act of cinema. Each film serves as testimony to the plasticity and fundamental mystery of human emotions as they engage and are provoked into being by the cinema.

Could you talk a little more about the particular understanding of performance in Cassavetes' films? It seems that what is being marked out in Cassavetes' work is a situation where performance is not just a matter of re-production of a script or predetermined character but serves to generate its own meanings and affects.

Olivier Assayas recently put this very well when he wrote: 'Films take their meaning suddenly. At a given moment, one understands that one has accomplished what one wanted, that is the concrete elements transcend and reveal something which is a little indescribable, that one could not formulate for oneself, but which is suddenly what one was looking for from the very beginning'. Like Assayas – who admires Cassavetes' films very much – 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. Interestingly, both directors talk about the actor as a generator of a sovereign meaning that only arises or comes forth through the work of fiction-making and performance. Hence the importance of allowing the actor a certain degree of freedom in terms of their movements and blocking and also in terms of their responses in a scene. But this freedom places the pressure back on the actor to endure and call upon a set of responses to a situation that may not be predetermined. In *Faces* and *A Woman Under the Influence* this pressure is manifested through the use of two cameras filming the same scene from different positions, the preference for long takes and the interest in capturing those gestures and expressions that float uncertainly within a situation. So we see not only the most obvious dramatic events and gestures, but those expressions and gestures that may be *to the side* of what would normally be considered the dramatic action of a scene. This strategy is crucial to opening up the everyday, situating the everyday within a different kind of dramatic space, a dramatic space open to ambiguity and the most subtle nuances of meaning.

In Cassavetes' films there is a sense of a cinematic world continually being re-made. Human figures, situations and emotions in his films are continually undergoing a kind of transformation. This is not about improvisation. A script is in place. There might even be a generic framework, for instance, in *Killing of a Chinese Bookie* the gangster film, in *Minnie and Moskowitz* the screwball comedy, in *Gloria* the chase film. But these structures and generic frameworks are subject to the same kinds of transformative qualities that arise through Cassavetes' attention to the way in which the camera works upon the body, the way light falls on a face, the way that speech sounds when it is not in the service of dialogue, the textures that it makes when there is uncertainty about which direction to take.

In each case what is valued is the performative quality that is part of that moment of enunciation when cinema gives the impression of watching itself coming into being. There is a kind of attentiveness at work within the film by the filmmaker, the cameraman, the performers that requires from the audience an equal measure of attention to those gestures that in other films may seem marginal but in Cassavetes' work are absolutely central.

Perhaps the transformative nature of the performances in Cassavetes' work is related to a certain indiscernibility of narrative intention that arises from each character seeming to act out of their own internal logic. By this I mean as characters primarily, rather than as conduits in the service of plot.

I think what you're trying to describe here is the way that the films withhold access to an interiority that often functions to explain a character's behaviour. The performances certainly create a powerful sense of inner turmoil and psychology depth. But the impact is due to the fact that the films never psychologise the characters. Sylvie Pierre puts it best when she describes Faces as giving the impression of "being a thorough investigation which, however, reveals nothing at all". She goes on to note that Faces 'makes us aware of one of the weaknesses of the cinema: its right and proper inability to explain the inner world, since all it can literally grasp are external signs as being not unrelated to inner turmoil'. What Pierre points to is cinema's unsurpassed ability to record and capture the fluctuations of emotion as they pass across the surface of a face. Cassavetes' work is distinguished by a highly sophisticated understanding of how cinema engages with emotion via the image, an image that draws its meaning from the skin, the face and light, rather than some false interiority.

I have this sense of each of his films being an exploration of a particular world, despite the spilling over of each film into another through the ongoing exploration of character. I'm interested also in what is suggested by his almost Hawksian shifts from one generic space to another, from the gangster film to the screwball comedy to the family melodrama etc.

I think that his antipathy to Hollywood narrative may have been overplayed. I think that Hollywood is too much a part of Cassavetes experience for it to simply be renounced. And this can be seen in how he takes up certain genres, like the gangster film in *Killing of a Chinese Bookie*. At the same time that he takes up these genres he is interested in what happens to these conventions and situations when they are subjected to a different kind of performative rhythm and narrative logic. For instance, in *Bookie*, it is those detours, obstacles and stumbles on the way to the hit that are made central. The encounters Cosmo (Ben Gazzara) has as he's trying to arrive at the house are given as much play and time as what happens when he gets there. So this continual process of taking up and detouring is crucial to Cassavetes work. In *Minnie and Moskowitz* (1971) he renders the emotions of the screwball comedy and expands them, opens them up to all sorts of uncertainties, doubts and questions. So the relation to genre in Cassavetes' films is very much about emotional expansion and transformation.

Perhaps there is a Cassavetes system that we are identifying here, a kind of performative energy or system that identifies the work. Richard Combs has written about this in relation to *Gloria*. He argues that at the beginning of the film one can see two kinds of performative systems at work: one that is familiar, involving the establishment of certain generic conventions, for example, the blowing away of the family, the quick elaboration of the central scenario. And at the same time there's another more subtle kind of logic of performance whose style and temporality is not so much at odds with the first but engages with it in a way that forces an expansion of the first. This is something one can identify immediately with Cassavetes' work.

Cassavetes seems to have been positioned outside of any cinematic tradition, as though his methods emerged without a history and he worked with his ensemble in a vacuum. What other influences played a part in the formulation of Cassavetes' approach to cinema?

A key influence (one that Cassavetes' himself acknowledged many times) is the work of Shirley Clarke, who along with Lionel Rogoson, formed part of a maverick strand of American direct cinema that was very concerned with the line between fiction and documentary styles and the figurative capacities of the cinema. This was particularly the case with Shirley Clarke's films *The Cool World* (1963), *The Connection* (1961) and *Portrait of Jason* (1967). In each of these films the camera is never just a recording device, it is a provocateur, a catalyst, working on performers, provoking them, engaging them but also being effected by them. This is the other side of the question of what happens to the Cassavetes camera, what it does. It isn't just an instrument effecting the performers, it too is open to a passage of affect that comes back, that is drawn out of the situation. It can take on an uncertainty, almost an intoxication at times. It is a question of the circulation of affect in Cassavetes' work – never simply recording or manipulation; but something that flows between the characters and between camera and actor, maybe even character and actor.

It's also worth mentioning Cassavetes' relation to the tradition of American experimental cinema. A tradition that we have to be careful about locating Cassavetes work within because of his falling out with Jonas Mekas and *Film Culture* in the late '50s because of the re-editing of *Shadows*. It is well known that Mekas branded the second version of *Shadows* as a betrayal or, more damning, as "a bad Hollywood film". The standard line for so long has been to oppose Cassavetes to the work of American experimental cinema – thus replaying the same logic of oppositions that positions Cassavetes at odds to Hollywood. I think it's more productive to see that Cassavetes may have also been influenced by filmmakers like Stan Brakhage, Robert Frank, Jonas Mekas in this concern with creating an affective space between camera and subject.

This affective space between camera and subject is given further complexity and depth by the way the films are always setting up allusions to previous films. So what is in question is always a body of work, never just an individual film. But this body of work is one that is continually spilling over into real life through Cassavetes' use of family members and his own home. He is undoing the notion of film as a discrete entity or practice, in other words, the idea of film as 'a reserved area in space-time, a privileged enclave. . .'. (Jean-Louis Comolli.) The performance we see in a particular film is one which has a history of other performances, and in itself is not a final rendition, but part of a continual movement of repetition and difference.

So there is a sense of it always being in process. It's a very theatrical concept. What do you think Cassavetes was trying to do by transferring this idea to cinema?

He's drawing from theatre this notion of performance being always contingent, never being a final act. Film theorists have always pointed out that one of the key divergences between film and theatre is that once a performance is given, recorded and edited into film, it's fixed, it never changes, except in terms of how the audience responds to it. Cassavetes seems to pressure this cinematic idea of performance by going back over the situations, by returning to certain scenarios, but also in his tendency to re-edit, circulate different versions of his films. (The two versions of *Bookie* for instance.)

This seems particularly true in terms of how *Opening Night* approaches the question of theatre.

It is important that when Cassavetes seems to be closest to reflecting on his own work he is actually looking at the theatre – and in *Opening Night*, but also in *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie*, he actually turns to a much more impure form of theatre: the striptease and burlesque show. *Bookie* also marks a shift from the figure of the female performer in crisis found in *Opening Night* to a specifically masculine form of performative crisis. In both *Bookie* and *Opening Night* we're never quite sure how chaotic things are or whether it's controlled chaos. *Bookie* is one of the great films about how performance operates through a process of disfigurement. There is a thread, a logic to the show that we and Cosmo seem to be struggling to put together. Cosmo is always checking up on the show, and every time he does this he finds that something else is taking place, something other than he expected. He is always referring to style – he tells the loan shark that he has no style. This whole question of style is very interesting because it's one based on impurity, different traditions of theatre that are blended, confused, disrupted.

He says at one point that this is not your average stripshow.

Mr. Sophistication (Meade Roberts) – Cosmo's on-stage double – is continually saying we're going to take you somewhere special. He sees the strip show as a space of art. Like Cosmo he has a total commitment to the performance. But he's also completely vulnerable at the same time to the chaos that surrounds him. After Cosmo finally kills the bookie, he succeeds in getting the show back on the road. But the film doesn't end on Cosmo, it goes back to the performance and to Mr. Sophistication. At the end of the day, not even Cosmo can determine or have the final word in terms of performance. The film's ending says something about how performance can't be contained within a single figure or entity.

How do you think this relates to the idea of reinvention and the performative, both on a micro and a macro level? I was thinking particularly of the opening scene in *Faces* where you're not really sure of what is going on, who the Gena Rowlands character is and what her relation to these two men is. It's as though the characters and situations are always becoming, always one thing and then something else. So both the character and the situation are whatever they fleetingly seem to be; we are not privy to any sense of authenticity but rather a playfulness. I was wondering about how this operates also in terms of

the recurring themes or preoccupations in Cassavetes work, how they are perhaps reinvented with each film.

I think that micro level is the level of role; in Cassavetes' work role is never fixed, it's always open to be reworked. In the opening scene of *Faces*, you're not sure what the relation between the characters are; we're not sure what the roles are, what roles they have. Role is something that is contingent and also relational; it is something that is always being refigured. It's like emotion; it resides in the spaces between characters.

My favorite example of this is in *Love Streams* with the character of Margarita (Margaret Abbot), the mother of Robert Harmon (John Cassavetes)'s first girlfriend Susan (Diahnne Abbot). In the first half of the film she is situated as Susan's mother, but what happens during the course of the film, during the dance with Robert, is that she becomes something else. The key thing is the flux and movement of becoming which is constituted across the film and effects each role. A lot of it has got to do with the question of relations. There is the sense that role is not understood on an abstract level of narrative, but in the to and fro of relations that are always open to transformation and the passage of affect and emotion.

Do you have any thoughts on the significance of *Love Streams* as Cassavetes 'last' film?

Referring to *Love Streams* as a last film is a problem as it negates any consideration of *Big Trouble* and its place within the body of work. This is something which, along with Ray Carney, I have been guilty of doing in the past. *Love Streams* is for me Cassavetes' greatest film and his most mysterious. My attachment to this film may have something to do with the sense that something has changed by the time that you get to this film.

Through the relationship of Robert and Sarah (Gena Rowlands), Cassavetes is returning to the bond between siblings – the very thing with which he begins his filmmaking career. As with *Shadows*, *Love Streams* is about the mysteries of a familial connection where the mother and father are absent. And like *Shadows*, *Love Streams* is a film in which the question 'what is a family?' is being asked in each encounter, in each shot. Robert's family life is in tatters. Sarah's family has also fallen apart. Whereas the earlier films seem to deal with the moment of crisis within a marriage or relationship, there is a sense that in *Love Streams* Cassavetes is dealing with what happens after things have fallen apart. *Love Streams* is about the effort of recovery, a belated effort, rather than an attempt to hold something together.

And there is also a sense that the energy associated with Cassavetes' characters is also quite different. *Love Streams* is a film where energy is spasmodic, where performances seem to stall at the very point where they are about to begin. Nearly every performance in the film is interrupted. The dance between Robert and Sarah in front of the jukebox is broken off by Robert just when there's this sense that they are coming together. Robert's dance with Margarita is interrupted by the arrival of Susan. There are other instances of these short circuits. In Cassavetes' earlier films there is a tendency for performance to become elongated, for example, Mabel (Gena Rowlands)'s terrifying breakdown in *A Woman Under the Influence*. By the time we get to *Love Streams*, things are much more truncated. This might have something to do with Cassavetes' illness at the time. Something is passing across from the body of the actor to the body created within the film (two things impossible to separate). The kind of energy that we associate with his other films can no longer be sustained. And that lends a certain sense of things being post-facto.

But this of course is not the full story. What makes the film so mysterious is that the energy previously associated with his central characters now seems to be transferred to the world around them, and this leads to the creation of a kind of magical space where anything is possible. I'm reminded of the flow of taxis coming up Robert's driveway, the stream of visitors, the collection of animals Sarah brings home and the hallucination. The sense of magic also marks the grandeur of Sarah's dream of reconciliation. The final image of Robert/Cassavetes standing behind the window looking out onto an environment which is storm ridden, doffing his hat and exiting the frame echoes the final image of Cosmo in *Chinese Bookie*. In both instances there is a suggestion that performance is something that can't be contained within the individual figure. It is much more poignant in *Love Streams* because of the sense of exhaustion that hangs over the film.

Works discussed:

Olivier Assayas, 'Apropos of Maggie', Metro No. 113/114 1998.

Richard Combs, 'Hell Up in the Bronx', Sight and Sound, vol. 50 no. 2, Spring 1981.

Richard Combs, 'As Time Goes By', Sight and Sound. Vol. 1 no. 12. 1992.

'Movie Mutations: Letters from (and to) Some Children of 1960', Contributions by Jonathan Rosenbaum, Adrian Martin, Kent Jones, Alex Horwath, Nicole Brenez and Raymond Bellour, Film Quarterly vol. 52, no. 1, Fall 1998.

Sylvie Pierre, Jean Louis Comolli 'Two faces of Faces' in Jim Hillier (ed.), Cahiers du cinéma: 1960-1968: New Wave, New Cinema, Reevaluating Hollywood, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1986.

Performing the Everyday: Time and Affect in John Cassavetes' *Faces*

Effie Rassos • September 2001

Senses of Cinema: http://sensesofcinema.com/2001/john-cassavetes/cassavetes_faces

In a static frontal long shot, a man and four women stand in and around an entrance to a living room. The man, who is occupying the left-hand side of the frame and with his back to the camera, is placing a record on the record player. The women are almost completely still. As the record crackles, the man turns and looks at the women. For a brief moment, all sound and movement seem to have dissolved away. And yet they have not. Here the image tentatively sits between stillness and motion, silence and sound. It is almost as if the smallest thing could tip it either way-it is as if the image has the potential to become permanently and silently fixed or surrender to an unceasing state of motion and sound. At this point of stillness and silence, there is a feeling of uncertainty, of anticipation, of possibility, of a need for some kind of release. What I am faced with here is something like the moment one encounters after the steady and uneasy climb of a roller-coaster at the point just before its downward plunge. At this point, of both the roller-coaster and the film, there is an acute sense of time. All at once I become aware of the time that this seemingly brief moment is taking.

A sultry blues song then bursts out of the stereo releasing the man and the woman on the far right of the frame. The scene finally rushes headlong into sound and movement via the music and the dancing bodies of the couple. This dancing is quite suddenly interrupted by one of the other women-she turns off the stereo, pulls the couple apart, slaps the man's face and tells them all to sit down. With this interruption an edit appears-the static long shot that has up until now had the characters at a distance becomes a medium shot and then a series of close-ups. Bodies and faces begin to fill the empty spaces of the frame. All five sit down and begin an overly polite conversation covering such social niceties as the weather. But the conversation quickly becomes an uncertain game-the topics become disconcertingly personal, provoking outbursts of laughter as well as long and uneasy pauses. It is this uncertainty, of not only the direction of the scene but also of the man and the four women, that once again makes me overly conscious of time. Time here is both too much and too little. It tells me nothing. I do not know anything. I do not know this man or these women. I do not know where this will take them or me. Yet I realise that while I may not know I most certainly feel. I feel the time that this scene is taking. Time has become a material presence. This time is not only their time it is also my time.

In a scene from the second half of John Cassavetes' *Faces* (1968), Maria (Lynn Carlin) and three of her friends bring home a young man, Chet (Seymour Cassel), that they have picked up at a night club. The four women and the young man flirt, talk, argue and perform for one another. Yet the interaction between the characters in this scene, much like the entire film, is an unpredictable and often ambiguous game. All the talk, and more importantly, all the time that we are presented with here does not essentially explain these characters nor the way the scene will eventually play out. What we fundamentally encounter here is a 'non-event'; moments of confusion, unease and uncertainty. Moments filled with 'nothing of consequence.' Moments of the everyday.

On the surface, the everyday is commensurate with an experience of boredom and tedium: to speak of the everyday is to speak of 'nothing out of the ordinary,' an incessant routine that we encounter and reencounter

on a daily basis. Yet, the everyday in Cassavetes' work is not simply the ordinary, the routine, or the banal on the level of narrative. Here the everyday is likewise an experience of time. Within examinations of the everyday by theorists such as Henri Lefebvre and Maurice Blanchot, the everyday is an unwavering paradox. The everyday is, on the one hand, an experience of time as structured and structuring—a time that constructs and sustains the incessant repetition that characterises the logic of capitalism. On the other hand however, it is an experience of that structured time as phenomenally present and affective. As Blanchot writes, “[t]he everyday is platitude [.] but this banality is also what is most important, if it brings us back to existence in its very spontaneity and as it is lived-in the moment when, lived, it escapes every speculative formulation, perhaps all coherence, all regularity.” Here the everyday is an affective experience of time that pressures the coherence of meaning created by society, a meaning that is nonetheless constantly attempting to assert its presence. Consequently, the everyday ultimately becomes the constant and continual relation between temporalities that characterize both meaning and affect.

In this paper the everyday is a means of exploring the performance of time in Cassavetes' films. What seems to be at stake in the work of Cassavetes are the kinds of experiences that are produced and provoked in and by time. In *Faces*, what we see, or rather what we experience, is a very particular conception of time that is at once deficient and excessive. Time here begins to problematize an idea of classical narrative and character, and assumes a kind of materiality and agency that renders it an affective force for the characters within the film. In the scene involving Maria, Chet and other three women, time is not elided or compressed; the argument in this scene, between Chet and Louise (Joanne Moore Jordan), that erupts after Chet announces that the pair are making fools of themselves, is exacerbated by the amount of time that the scene is given. Louise eventually storms off into another part of the house and Chet follows in an attempt to placate her. Yet Cassavetes' camera does not follow Louise or Chet; at no point do we see or hear the conversation that transpires between the two. Rather, as Ray Carney suggests, Cassavetes' intensely mobile camera (and editing style) seems intent on generating an often unspoken unease and uncertainty. And at this moment, there is the sense that the emotions and affects that are provoked are not only a response to the situation but are likewise a response to time itself. At these points in the film, as George Kouvaros writes,

we are presented with ‘dead time’: an expenditure of energy and film stock that in narrative terms contributes little to our understanding of the characters, their motivations or problems. It is at this juncture, when, to borrow a phrase used by Antonioni, ‘everything already seems to have been said’, that [.] reveals itself as a deliberate attempt to open the performance of character up to resonances, questions and points of view which cannot be answered or contained by the narrative.

As Kouvaros' remarks suggest, the performances within Cassavetes' films are informed by a very particular conception of diegetic time that runs counter to a classical temporal economy. These moments of ‘dead time’ in Cassavetes' work are in fact charged and dynamic, whereby the notion of performance is opened up to include both character and actor, film and life. For Kouvaros, like Jean-Louis Comolli, the temporality that Cassavetes constructs in *Faces* is one that directly animates the performances within the film. The characters “define themselves gesture by gesture and word by word as the film proceeds,” Comolli writes. In Cassavetes' work, the performance of character and identity is generated in the moment of filming, a moment that likewise leaves a trace on the performing body (of both character and actor). Time in these instances, is opened up to a possibility and uncertainty that is experienced by the performers within the film as excessive. I would argue that the diegetic time that Cassavetes constructs here is distended and affective, much like the everyday. Time on the level of the diegesis is comparable to the everyday as an affective experience of time.

This performance of the everyday is distinct from an idea of everyday performance addressed by Pamela Robertson Wojcik. Reading Cassavetes through Erving Goffman, Wojcik argues, “what we see most often are moments of failure in which everyday performance breaks down and characters experience [.] a split between the social front and the personal front.” Wojcik goes on to propose that the performances within Cassavetes' films exceed an idea everyday performance due to a collapse of social roles. However, I would argue that the affective and affected performances in Cassavetes' work become the everyday through time. Rather than exceeding the everyday, *Faces* seems to continually emphasize the tension between a ‘nothing happening’ (that ruptures an idea of classical narrative) and the possibility of anything happening (in time).

This idea seems to problematise an idea of closure for individual scenes as well as the film as a whole. In the last scene of the film where Richard (John Marley) and Maria sit on the staircase smoking, (after Richard has returned home from spending the night with a prostitute only to find Maria recovering from her own liaison with Chet), there is a decided ambiguity and uncertainty regarding their status as a couple. There is the sense that this scene could go on without end. But the film finally does end, or rather arrests; Maria eventually walks away into the kitchen and Richard walks into the upstairs section of the house, and with a frontal long shot of the staircase the film stops. Structurally, the film as a whole mirrors the openness of individual scenes. In this film there is no conclusion just a break in the drama.

What becomes apparent here is the tension between meaning and affect; meaning associated with narrative progression and resolution, and the affects and emotions that are provoked. It is this dialectical experience of time that, for me, stages the crisis and anxiety of the everyday that has been addressed by Jodi Brooks. The dead time that we encounter in Cassavetes' work, Brooks asserts, embodies modernity via the anxious relation between repetition and interruption.



But it is not time alone that enforces the tension of the everyday on to the image. In the scene at Maria's house with Chet and the other three women, the image is at one point on the verge of immobility. Sound and movement are drained away and for a moment the image gestures to the photograph. In *Faces*, this stillness is also associated with the close-up, particularly of the faces of Maria and Jeannie (Gena Rowlands), often at moments of anticipation and heightened emotion—at times emotional outbursts seem to enforce a formidable stillness. Coupled with a distended temporality, the facial close-up forces a kind of immobility that begins to pressure the divide between photography and the cinema. Moreover, this stillness seems to produce an affective experience of time that is associated with the photograph.

For André Bazin and Roland Barthes, the photograph is essentially an encounter with death. In his essay "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," Bazin argues the cinema has a memorial nature, a nature that is connected to the way the photograph preserves time via "the mummy complex." As Bazin writes, "photography does not create eternity, as art does, it embalms time, rescuing it simply from its proper corruption." Hence, the photograph is not only the representation of reality via the photographed object, it is likewise the preservation of the time in which the object existed. Photography then, is indexical, where the referent will always be time. Roland Barthes echoes these sentiments in *Camera Lucida*, where he recognises that the photographic referent, a time "that-has-been," facilitates an encounter with death that ultimately complicates the experience of viewing the photograph. This essentially arises from the co-presence of two opposing forces within the photograph: the *studium* (the elements in the photograph that are culturally coded and that render meaning transparent) and the *punctum* (the elements that disturbs cultural meaning via an affective experience of time that exceeds language).

In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes's conceptualisation of the *studium* and the *punctum*, that is meaning and affect, as well as the tension between these concepts, can be related to the tension within the everyday. What we find here is a comparable rupture of meaning by an affective experience of time. In Barthes's work, the *punctum* stages and unleashes a tension between meaning and affect that gestures towards the dialectic of the everyday. And although Barthes argues that the affective experience generated by the photograph is unavailable to the cinema,

his idea of the *punctum* in conjunction with Bazin's idea of time, reveal the possible connections between the photograph and a cinematic practice that addresses the immobilization of time and movement. Cinema here does not become photography, but rather cinema reveals the way the two mediums are "glued together, limb by limb, like the condemned man and the corpse." In *Faces*, the close-up image of Jeannie's face continually recalls this relationship. As the camera lingers on her face, what is most striking is the way this stillness gives us an overwhelming presence of time as past rather than immediate.

For Bazin, the photograph and the cinema are inextricably connected by time and an experience of death. In the cinema, Bazin writes, "the image of things is likewise the image of their duration, change mummified as it were." For Bazin, the cinema's referent is also time, but it is an embalmed time in motion: it is the preservation of time as dead. Here, there is a sense that time is both arrested and mobile, an idea that gestures to the kind of time that we encounter in *Faces*. Time not only enforces a stillness of movement, but a stillness of movement likewise enforces an arrest of time. Time, so to speak, seems to stop dead in its tracks. Yet, as Bazin's ideas suggest, it does not. A seemingly immediate time is experienced as dead: time is concurrently materially present and absent. This idea gestures to the 'dead time' that characterizes Cassavetes' *Faces*. As I have suggested above, the distended temporality in the film continually animates a tension between meaning and affect, narrative progression and temporal excess. Moreover, this idea seems to suggest a tension between an idea of cinematic presentness and an experience of the past (as death and history), whereby time is affective and excessive. Nevertheless, for Bazin this idea of time is predicated on the relation between time within the film and the experience of time by the viewer.

The distended diegetic time that structures *Faces* implicates the viewer by creating temporal equivalence. The time that is occupied by the characters is likewise occupied by the viewer. Their time is my time. In much of the scholarship surrounding Cassavetes' work, this operation of time is often theorised as 'real.' Cassavetes, Maria Viera writes,

prefers not to elide time. The situations of his characters tend to work themselves out in real time. *Faces* is made up of eight long scenes with a story time of two hours, taking place late one night and roughly half an hour the next morning[.] This is one of the reasons Cassavetes' films do not produce pleasure for those whose expectations are that a film shows only those things that are 'important,' that move the narrative forward, with all other action eliminated.

While the use of an idea of 'real time' is somewhat reductive as it does not indicate the specific operation of time in film, Viera's comments gesture to a distinct viewing experience that is generated by a particular temporality. As Viera points out, time in the films of Cassavetes rupture a particular viewing position and experience that is associated with classical narrative cinema. Yet, I would like to take this idea a step further in order to suggest that Cassavetes' films rupture this position by generating an affective experience of time for the viewer: a time that becomes exorbitant on the level of reception, fundamentally problematizing an idea of equivalence, and creating a spectatorial position marked by crisis. Eric Rohmer says as much when he argues, "[w]e all know that cinematic time is not the same as time in real life. Films that have tried to show in an hour and a half an action supposed to last an hour and a half-*Rope* or *Cleo from 5 to 7*-seem to run much longer."

In Cassavetes' work, time allows us to take up questions surrounding the affective exchange between a specific filmic practice and performance, and the experience of viewing. The films of Cassavetes, Kouvaros writes, "make us look again at how the cinema constructs a sensory world of gestures, affects and meanings." What seems to be at the heart of an affective and sensorial cinema is time: an everyday time that provokes an often anxious affective experience for both the performer and the viewer. Yet, the very temporal structure of films such as *Faces* not only generate a performance of the everyday but more significantly actually perform the everyday. The distended temporality that frames the diegesis of *Faces* creates an overwhelming temporality that reanimates the inherent tension in the everyday, as well as problematizing the divide between the film and viewer. The result is a filmic and spectatorial practice marked by crisis and anxiety, one that is continual and never resolved, a crisis that may force a reconsideration of the everyday itself.

Filmography (Director)

- **Shadows** (1959)
- **Johnny Staccato** (1959-1960) TV Series
 - **Murder for Credit** (1959)
 - **Evil** (1959)
 - **A Piece of Paradise** (1959)
 - **Night of Jeopardy** (1960)
 - **Solomon** (1960)
- **Too Late Blues** (1961)
- **A Child Is Waiting** (1963)
- **The Lloyd Bridges Show** (1962-1963) TV Series
 - **A Pair of Boots** (1962)
 - **My Dady Can Lick Your Daddy** (1963)
- **Bob Hope Presents the Chrysler Theatre** (1966) TV Series
 - **In Pursuit of Excellence** (1966)
- **Faces** (1968)
- **Husbands** (1970)
- **Minnie and Moskowitz** (1971)
- **Columbo** (1972) TV Series
 - **Étude in Black** (1972)
- **A Woman Under the Influence** (1974)
- **The Killing of a Chinese Bookie** (1976)
- **Opening Night** (1977)
- **Gloria** (1980)
- **Love Streams** (1984)
- **Big Trouble** (1986)