

## Document Citation

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## FILMS

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### DWIGHT MACDONALD

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*Low life, high life, with notes on Cocteau, Cassavetes*

**T**HIS column is written from London, where I shall be living until next fall. London is my favorite city; it is to New York as New York is to Los Angeles.

#### *Shadows*

The great *succès d'estime* here this fall is John Cassavetes' *Shadows*, which has received great critical acclaim and is doing sensational business at the Academy Theatre. The excitement is justified. I found *Shadows* as refreshing as *Pull My Daisy*. (For some reason, *Daisy* hasn't caught on here. Like *Shadows*, it was first shown last summer at the National Film Theatre but it was ignored by the critics and hasn't been shown commercially.) *Shadows* is improvised, like *Daisy*. It differs in being feature length, in having a story, and in the excellence of the acting. Kerouac's narration swept along the stiff amateurs in *Daisy*; here we have professionals, young and unknown, but still professional; the girl, Lelia Goldoni, is especially good. The film, which cost \$40,000, grew out of some Stanislavsky improvisations at the Variety Arts Studio of New York, of which Cassavetes was then director. He gave the actors a situation and they just kept talking, feeling it out, pushing at each other, kicking it around. Because the students were white and colored, Cassavetes devised a story of racial relations, or rather unrelations.

This method results in a lyrical realism, fresh and spontaneous, that I haven't seen in a film since Donskoi's 1937-1940 Gorky trilogy, which achieved

(Indeed, there was no script at all.) Nor would any Broadway playwright have produced such inchoate dialogue; the closest analogy is O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night*. The actors interrupt each other, talk at the same time, repeat themselves, fumble for words, don't finish sentences and are in general as clumsy and inarticulate as everybody is in real life. Everybody except actors.

The first version of *Shadows* was shown a year ago at Cinema 16. I didn't bother to see it because, from reports, it sounded arty and obscure, like Maya Deren's high-class doodling: I'm told that his friends convinced Cassavetes that unless he made clearer what was happening—unless, in fact, something *did* happen—his film would never get commercial booking. So he raised more money and remade the film drastically. He has been accused of selling out by some of the far-out critics, but I'm glad he did. I wish our action painters would sell out a little (although then they probably wouldn't sell at all, that market differing from other cultural marts in that the buyers want things to be as tough as possible). Although obscurity is now often equated with purity, I have a sneaking prejudice in favor of communication and I think a reasonable amount of an extraordinary emotional truth by discarding those dramatic clichés we have become accustomed to. No Hollywood script writer of the slightest competence would have submitted a script like that of *Shadows*, in which nothing is "pointed up" and anticlimax reigns supreme. selling out is a good idea. On the Macdonald Test, *Shadows* reacted positively: when I came out it was Oxford Street that looked unreal and I was still inside the movie; for hours I kept repeating myself and addressing people as "man."